

The Owl

Jeffery Farnol

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The Owl

By Jeffery Farnol

*Young Sir Roland fights a pistol duel
with Mr. Darvell—who had never been
known to miss*

Young Roland gazed haggard-eyed upon the dawn, viewing everything with an almost fierce intensity since he felt very sure this was the last dawn he would ever live to see ... vague trees rising from a pearly mist that brimmed every hollow, a somber sky lightening towards the east with promise of day; and from somewhere in this dimness, sudden and loud, an owl hooted dismally. Sir Roland shivered and, drawing the candles near, bent to finish the letter that had been worded with such painful care; he read it with haggard eyes, sighed, tore it up and, dipping quill, wrote again:

"Dear Heart:

"If I must go out into the unknown, I shall not fear because I know that the sweet spirit of your love will guide me through the dark to the light beyond, for thine own am I through death and the hereafter, ever and always,

"ROLAND."

Having sanded and sealed this letter he turned back to the casement and saw the sky shot with glory where the sun was rising. Presently on the door was a soft knocking and Captain Standish entered:

"Hey—dooce take me! Up and dressed already, Roly?"

"I haven't been to bed, Tom."

"Not? Oh the deyvil ... 'twill never do! Limp as a dem'd rag, Roly; hand shakes like cursed aspen and—er—so forth! Lie down, old f'low, compose, rest, breathe deep and—ah—so on—"

"No use, Tom, and no matter. There can be but one end; I know it and so do you. Darvell never misses and ... well, I'm prepared. But why aren't you asleep?"

"Well, I was, y'know ... at least very nearly but what with one dooced thing and another, I—oh dem!"

"I know, Tom, I know and thanks for your sympathy, it ... it makes matters easier for me."

"And that dem'd owl! Hooting, y'know, like an accursed dem'd soul! What a plaguey, desolate, infernal gloomy hole this old house o' yours is, Roly!"

"Why, I seldom come near the place," sighed young Roland, "indeed all too seldom ... and now—"

"Darvell couldn't sleep either, Roly. I heard him tramp, tramping ... chamber next mine, y'know, and once he stuck head out o' lattice and cursed every owl that ever was hatched ... that dem'd owl!"

"Yes, I heard it. But surely nothing could possibly shake Darvell's iron nerves, Tom."

"No, he's precious cool ... dem'd iceberg ... shoot a man and smile ... oh, curse! And yet, Roly," said the Captain, shaking comely head and seating himself on the unused bed, "I ain't so sure. Queer thing happened as we rode down here ... narrow lane and we riding three abreast, Darvell, Ponsonby and self in the middle, when we met a gypsy hag, stalwart old soul, stout and tall as a grenadier, dem'd fine, buxom creeter once—well, she stands aside but not quick enough for Darvell. The dam' f'low swears and flicks her with his whip—and Roly, b'Gad ... panthers, lions, tigers? Dooce take me but she's at him like 'em all in one, claws the

whip from him, tosses it over hedge, and demme—out flies a monstrous white owl....

"See you, ye gorgio dog!" she screams. 'An owl's your fate ... a black and bloody fate! When ye see or hear an owl, tremble and—beware!' says she. ... Well, I tossed her a crown and on we rode, making light on't, though Darvell showed mighty glum twixt whiles, and his hand so ripped and torn he lapped handkerchief round it to stay the bleeding.... And now, old f'low, lookee!" And the Captain laid a dueling pistol on the table. "How are you with the poppers?"

"Worse than bad, Tom," sighed Sir Roland, viewing the murderous thing askance.

"Oh demme!" wailed the Captain. "Then how shall you contrive?"

"Close my eyes probably and trust to fortune."

"But, Roly ... strike me purple, 'twill be murder!"

"Most duels are."

"Look now, for the love o' Gad! You've taken your ground, facing your man 'cross your right shoulder—thus! Your pistol 'gainst your right leg—so! At the word 'one' you raise it slowly—so! At 'two' you bring it to a level—so! At 'three' you depress a bit, say to the third button on—"

"Thanks, Tom, but 'tis no good. I shall forget everything the moment we are placed. Let's talk o' something else."

"But, Roland ... Roly, upon my perishing soul—" stammered the Captain aghast, "this ... this is monstrous, absurd ... too infernally preposterous!"

"It is!" nodded Roland drearily. "But then I struck the arrogant, foul-tongued beast and must abide the consequences."

"But to ... to walk out and be shot like a ... a poor, dem'd, defenseless lamb—"

"Nay, Tom, I shall shoot back."

"But have y'ever fired a pistol?"

"Once or twice. However, I've drawn my will, Tom, settled all my affairs—"

"Oh, rat me!" moaned the Captain. "This comes o' your Gentleman Jackson 'stead of Angelo—preferring fists to a gentleman's weapons—"

"Yes," answered Roland, clenching his fist and sighing over it, "were it honest naked mauleys I could thrash the fellow very handsomely; as 'tis, Tom, he will probably ... well, if I ... should the expected happen, pray bear me this letter to my ... to ... Deborah."

"Lady Carstairs? I will ... I will certainly. Trust me, Roly. To be sure. But ... let's hope—! Ha, curse it, another two

hours to wait ... two mortal, dem'd hours!"

"Only two!" sighed young Roland. "They'll soon pass, Tom! Look at the morning; how glorious! Let's out and walk before breakfast."

And a fresh, sweet world they found it—radiant with sun that set a myriad dewy gems a-sparkle, and glad with the joyous clamor of new-waked birds ... And to Roland as he gazed around with that same eager intensity, this familiar prospect took on new beauties he had never noticed until now; and since he was to lose all so dreadfully soon, he viewed all with a passionate yearning. The Captain, eyeing his friend's rapt features and sensing the reason, sank from gloom to a hopeless despondency; and thus they walked together in that silent communion only friendship may know.

"Aha, see yonder, Roly—trespassers, b'Gad!" Sir Roland started, glanced at the travel-worn van and dingy tent pitched in the little glade before them, and shook his head.

"No, Tom, gypsies," he sighed. "I let 'em camp hereabouts, like my father before me, and on the whole they behave surprisingly well, save for an occasional rabbit or—" he stopped suddenly, for the door of this van had opened and a tall old woman stood looking down on them—a handsome, stately creature despite her age, and crowned with a splendor of white hair and who, lifting hand in salutation, spoke soft-voiced:

"*Kosko divvus*, my gorgio rye! And God bless 'ee, young master, you as be's good to the Poor Folk. Shoot ye when the

owl hooteth! But, oh mark ye this—let it be nigh unto th' old tithe-barn, for thy safety shall be hid there ... th' old tithe-barn—remember!" Then she waved her hand again and vanished into the van.

"Dooce take me!" exclaimed the Captain. "But 'twas she Darvell struck ... and flew at him like a dem'd fury. A rare, handsome creeter once, Roly!"

"I wonder what she meant by the owl ... and tithe-barn?"

"Dooce knows! But when you fight—demme if I don't place you as near the barn as possible, Roly."

"As well there as anywhere else, Tom. And now come in to breakfast." Approaching the house, they beheld two elegant creatures sunning themselves on the terrace: one a tall, rosy, jovial personage, the other a smallish, slim gentleman, very languid yet extremely sinister. Perceiving them, these gentlemen paused to salute them, hats a-flourish.

"A delightful morning for our little affair, Sir Roland."

"Perfect, Mr. Darvell," answered the young baronet, contriving to meet the unwinking stare of the speaker's pale eyes. "You have breakfasted?"

"Thank you, yes. And, by the by, the ... surgeon has arrived." Young Roland blenched and, aware of this, flushed, bowed and turned away and entered his house to greet the

cheery doctor and thereafter to sit at table and make pretense of eating; hearing nothing, seeing nothing except the hands of the clock creeping remorselessly on and on to his death hour... He started violently to feel the Captain's friendly hand on his shoulder.

"It's the damned suspense!" Roland whispered. "So come, let's be done, Tom; let's have it over—now!" Arm in arm they went forth into the sunshine, but a sun this with no power to warm him. He followed dumbly whither he was led. He saw the old barn ... Surgeon Purdy laying out glittering instruments on a white cloth.... Then a pistol was thrust into his fingers, he saw Darvell take the other ... Mr. Ponsonby was speaking loud and high:

"Gentlemen, the word will be: One! Two! Three! Fire! On the word 'Fire' I shall drop my handkerchief. Are you ready?"

Roland heard Darvell's languid "yes" and nodded dumbly.

"One!" cried Ponsonby. Roland lifted his weapon, and then the air thrilled to the sudden fierce hooting of an owl. Darvell spun round upon his heel to glare round about him, crying: "Damnation! What was that?"

"Sounded like a dem'd owl," answered the Captain, staring round about also.

"But true owls don't cry i' the sun!" snarled Darvell. "Count again, Ponsonby."

So once more Roland heard that high-pitched, fateful voice: "One ... Two ... Three ... Fire—"

Even as Roland pulled trigger he was aware of something that wheeled heavily in the air above him, monstrous, silent, ghastly white ... then Darvell's gasping, agonized voice:

"'Twas the owl ... the damned white owl ... distracted my aim ..." He saw Darvell writhing in the arms that supported him, glaring at the dripping, red ruin of what had been his deadly pistol hand ... Like one a-dream he watched that twisted, pain-racked form carried away. Then, letting fall smoking pistol, young Roland drew a deep breath and glanced from earth to heaven like one awaking to a new and greater life.... A voice spoke softly behind him and, turning, he espied a white head nodding to him from the gloom of the old tithe-barn; the voice spoke again:

"The Hearn gives good for good!" Here she held up a large basket. "They likewise gives ill for ill!" Here she gestured fiercely towards where Darvell's blood spattered the grass. "And so, long life and happiness to 'ee, young master. *Kosko divvus!*"

[The end of *The Owl* by Jeffery Farnol]