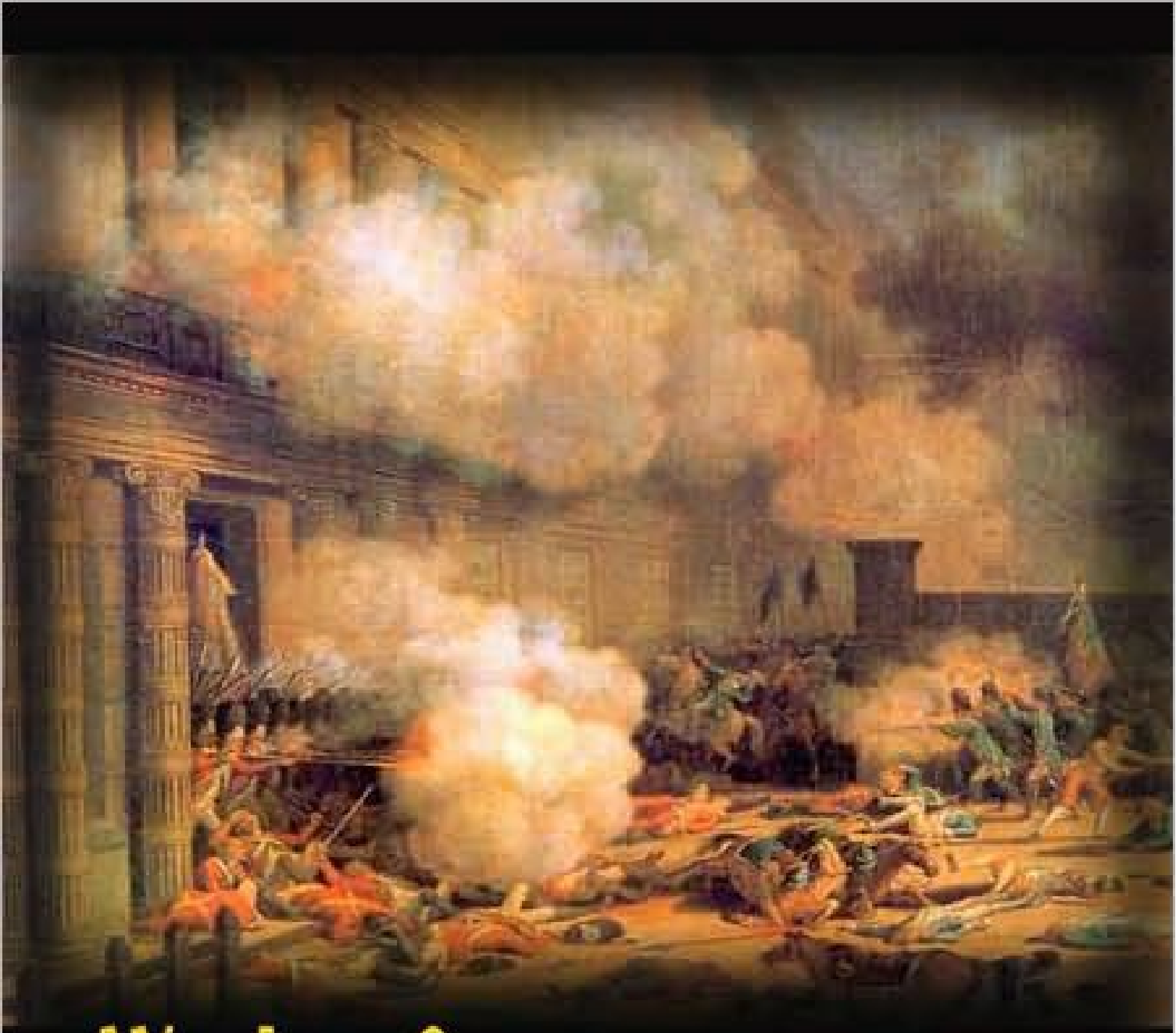

Works of

Rafael Sabatini

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Title: Collected Stories
Author: Rafael Sabatini
* A Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook *
eBook No.: 0701121.txt
Language: English
Date first posted: October 2007
Date most recently updated: October 2007

Collected Stories

Rafael Sabatini

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THE RED MASK

During the last year of his reign, it was a common thing for Mazarin to repair to the masques given by the King at the Louvre. In a long domino, the ample folds of which cloaked his tall, lean figure beyond all recognition, it was his custom to mingle in the crowd--all unconscious of his presence--in the hope of gleaning through the channels of court gossip some serviceable information. These visits

to the Louvre were kept a profound secret from all save Monsieur Andre, the valet who dressed him, and myself, the captain of his guards, who escorted him.

It was usual upon such occasions for the Cardinal to retire to his own apartments, under the pretence of desiring to be a-bed at an earlier hour. Once screened from the gaze of the curious, he would prepare for the ball, and when he was ready, Andre would summon me from the ante-chamber. On the night in question, however, I was startled out of the reverie into which I had lapsed whilst watching two pages throwing at dice and discussing the arts of the practice, by the Cardinal's own voice uttering my name:

"Monsieur de Cavaignac,"

At the sound of the rasping voice, which plainly told me that his Eminence was out of humour, one of the lads sat precipitately upon the dice, to hide from his master's eyes the unholy nature of their pastime, whilst I, astonished at the irregularity of the proceedings, turned sharply round and made a profound obeisance.

One glance at Mazarin told me there was trouble. An angry flush was upon his sallow face, and his eyes glittered in a strange, discomforting manner, whilst his jewelled fingers tugged nervously at the long pointed beard which he still wore, after the fashion of the days of his late Majesty, Louis XIII.

"Follow me, Monsieur," he said; whereupon, respecting his mood, I lifted my sword to prevent its clanking, and passed into the study, which divided the bedroom from the ante-chamber.

Suppressing with masterly self-control, the anger that swelled within him, Mazarin held out to me a strip of paper.

"Read," he said laconically, as if afraid to trust his voice with more.

Taking the paper as I was bid, I gazed earnestly at it, and marvelled to myself whether the Cardinal's dotage was upon him, for, stare as I would, I could detect no writing.

Noting my perplexity, Mazarin took a heavy silver candlestick from the table, and placing himself at my side, held it so as to throw a strong light upon the paper. Wonderingly, I examined it afresh, and discovered this time the faint impression of such characters as might have been written with a pencil upon another sheet placed over the one that I now held.

With infinite pains, and awed at what I read, I had contrived to master the meaning of the first two lines, when the Cardinal, growing impatient at my slowness, set down the candlestick and snatched the paper from my hand.

"You have seen?" he asked.

"Not all, your eminence," I replied.

"Then I will read it to you; listen."

And in a slightly shaken monotone he read out to me the following words:--

"The Italian goes disguised to-night to attend the King's masque. He will arrive at ten, wearing a black silk domino and a red vizor." Slowly he folded the document, and then, turning his sharp eyes upon me.

"Of course," he said, "you do not know the handwriting; but I am well acquainted with it; it is that of my valet, Andre." "It is a gross breach of confidence, if you are certain that it alludes to your Eminence," I ventured, timidly.

"A breach of confidence, Chevalier!" he cried in derision. "A breach of confidence! I took you for a wiser man. Does this message suggest nothing more than a breach of confidence to you?"

I started, aghast, as his meaning dawned upon me, and noting this, "Ah, I see that it does," he said, with a curious smile. "Well, what do you say now?"

"I scarcely like to word my thoughts, Monseigneur," I answered.

"Then I will word them for you," he retorted. "There is a conspiracy afoot."

"God forbid!" I cried, then added quickly; "Impossible! your Eminence is too well beloved."

"Pish!" he answered, with a frown; "you forget, de Cavaignac, this is the Palais Mazarin, and not the Louvre. We need no courtiers here."

"Twas but the truth I spoke, Monseigneur," I expostulated.

"Enough!" he exclaimed, "we are wasting time. I am assured that he is in league with one, or may be more, foul knaves of his kidney, whose purpose it is--well, what is the usual purpose of a conspiracy?"

"Your Eminence!" I cried, in horror.

"Well?" he said, coldly, and with a slight elevation of the eyebrows.

"Pardon me for suggesting that you may be in error. What evidence is there to show that you are the person to whom that note alludes?"

He gazed at me in undisguised astonishment, and may-be pity, at

my dullness.

"Does it not say, 'the Italian'?"

"But then, Monseigneur, pardon me again, you are not the only Italian in Paris; there are several at court--Botillani, del'Asta de Agostini, Magnani. Are these not all Italians? Is it not possible that the note refers to one of them?"

"Do you think so?" he inquired, raising his eyebrows.

"Ma foi, I see no reason why it should not."

"But does it not occur to you that in such a case there would be little need for mystery? Why should not Andre have mentioned his name?"

"The course of leaving out the name appears to me, if Monseigneur will permit me to say so, an equally desirable one, whether the party conspired against, be your Eminence or a court fop."

"You argue well," he answered, with a chilling sneer. "But come with me, de Cavaignac, and I will set such an argument before your eyes as can leave no doubt in your mind. Venez."

Obediently I followed him through the white and gold folding-doors into his bedroom. He walked slowly across the apartment, and pulling aside the curtains he pointed to a long black silk domino lying across the bed; then, putting out his hand, he drew forth a scarlet mask and held it up to the light, so that I might clearly see its colour.

"Are you assured?" he asked.

I was indeed! Whatever doubts there may have been in my mind as to Monsieur Andre's treachery were now utterly dispelled by this

overwhelming proof.

Having communicated my opinion to his Eminence, I awaited, in silence, his commands.

For some moments he paced the room slowly with bent head and toying with his beard. At last he stopped.

"I have sent that knave Andre upon a mission that will keep him engaged for some moments yet. Upon his return I shall endeavour to discover the name of his accomplice, or rather," he added scornfully, "of his master. I half-suspect--" he began, then suddenly turned to me, "Can you think of any one, Cavaignac?" he enquired.

I hastened to assure him that I could not, whereat he shrugged his shoulders in a manner meant to express the value he set upon my astuteness.

"Ohime!" he cried bitterly, "how unenviable is my position. Traitors and conspirators in my very house, and none to guard me against them!"

"Your Eminence!" I exclaimed, almost indignantly, for this imputation to one who had served him as I had done was cruel and unjust.

He shot a sharp glance at me from under his puckered brows, then softening suddenly, as he saw the look upon my face, he came over to where I stood, and placing his soft white hand upon my shoulder, "Forgive me, Cavaignac," he said gently, "forgive me, my friend, I have wronged you. I know that you are true and faithful--and the words I spoke were wrung from me by bitterness at the thought that one upon whom I have heaped favours should so betray me--probably," he added bitterly, "for the sake of a few paltry pistoles, even as Iscariot betrayed his Master."

"I have so few friends, Cavaignac," he went on, in a tone of passing sadness, "so few that I cannot afford to quarrel with the only one of whom I am certain. There are many who fear me; many who cringe to me, knowing that I have the power to make or break them--but none who love me. And yet I am envied!" and he broke into a short bitter laugh, "Envied. 'There goes the true King of France' say noble and simple, as they doff their hats and bow low before the great and puissant Cardinal Mazarin. They forget my fortes but they denounce my foibles, and envying, they malign me, for malice is ever the favourite mask of envy. They envy me, a lonely old man amid all the courtiers who cringe like curs about me. Ah; Cavaignac, 'twas wisely said by that wise man, the late Cardinal Richelieu, that often those whom the world most envies, stand most in need of pity."

I was deeply moved by his words and by the low tone, now sad, now fierce, in which they were delivered--for it was unusual for Mazarin to say so much in a breath, and I knew that Andre's treachery must have stricken him sorely.

It was not for me to endeavour by argument to convince him that he was in error; moreover, I knew full well that all he said was true, and being no lisping courtier, to whom the art of falsehood comes as naturally as that of breathing, but a blunt soldier who spoke but what was in my heart, I held my peace.

With those keen eyes of his he read what was in my mind; taking me by the hand, he pressed it warmly.

"Thanks, my friend, thanks!" he murmured, "you at least are true, true as the steel you wear and honour, and so long as this weak hand of mine can sway men's fortunes, so long as I live, you shall not be forgotten. But go now, Cavaignac, leave me; Andre may return at any moment, and it would awaken his suspicions to find you here, for there are none so suspicious as traitors. Await my orders in the ante-

chamber, as usual."

"But is it safe to leave your Eminence alone with him?" I cried, in some concern.

He laughed softly.

"Think you the knave is eager to enjoy the gibbet he has earned as Montfaucon?" he said. "Nay, have no fear, it will not come to violence."

"A rat at bay is a dangerous foe," I answered.

"I know, I know," he replied, "and so I have taken my precautions--unnecessary as I think them--voyez!" and as he opened his scarlet robe I beheld the glitter of a shirt of mail beneath.

"'Tis well," I replied, and, bowing, I withdrew.

In the dark and silent ante-chamber--for the pages and their ungodly toys were gone when I returned--I paced slowly to and fro, musing sadly over all that the Cardinal had said, and cursing in my heart that dog Andre. So bitter did I feel towards the villainous traitor, that, when at the end of half an hour I beheld him standing before me with a false smile upon his pale countenance, it was only by an effort that I refrained from striking him.

"Here is your domino, Monsieur de Cavaignac," he said, placing a long dark garment upon a chair back.

"Is his Eminence ready?" I inquired, in a surly tone. As my tone was usually a surly one, there was no reason why it should affect Andre upon this occasion; nor did it.

"His Eminence is almost ready," he replied. "He wishes you to wait

in the study."

This was unusual and set me thinking. The conclusion I arrived at was that Mazarin had not yet opened his campaign against the luckless servant, but wished to have me within call when he did so.

Without a word to Andre I unbuckled my sword, as was my custom, and begged him to take it to my room, since I should have no further use for it that night.

"I cannot, Monsieur de Cavaignac," he answered; "you will pardon me, but his Eminence desired me to return at once. He is feeling slightly indisposed, and wishes me to accompany him to the Louvre to-night."

I was surprised indeed, but I did not betray myself by so much as a look. The ways of the Cardinal were strange and unfathomable, especially where justice was concerned, and I was well accustomed to them.

"Indeed!" I replied, gravely. "I trust that it prove nothing serious."

"God forbid!" cried the hypocrite, as he held the door for me to pass into the study; "think, Monsieur de Cavaignac, think what a loss it would be to France if anything were to happen to Monseigneur."

He crossed himself devoutly and his lips moved as if in prayer.

And I, infected by his pious mood, offered up a prayer to heaven with him, a prayer as fervent as any that my heart had ever formed, a prayer that the torturers might have his weakly body to toy with, before it was finally consigned to the hangman at Montfaucon.

When he had left me in the study, I leisurely donned the domino that he had brought me, and judging by what I knew must be taking place

within the bedchamber that I should have to wait some little time, I seated myself and listened attentively for any sounds that might pierce the tapestried walls.

But strain my ears as I would, all that I caught was a piteous wail of the words: "Je le jure!" followed by the Cardinal's laugh--so dreadful, so pitiless, so condemning--and the one word, "Forsworn!" then all became silent again.

I accounted for this by the knowledge that the Cardinal seldom raised, but rather lowered his voice, when angered, whilst Andre, aware of my vicinity, would probably take pains to keep his expostulations from my ears.

At length the door opened, and a figure emerged, clad in a black domino, the hood of which was so closely drawn over his head that I could not see whether he wore a mask or not. Behind him came another similarly clad, and so completely does a domino conceal the outlines of a figure that I did not know which was the Cardinal and which the valet, since they were both, more or less, of the same height. Nor, for that matter, would it have been possible to discern whether they were men or women.

"Are you there, Cavignac?" said Mazarin's voice.

"Here, your Eminence," I cried, springing up.

He who had spoken turned his face upon me, and a pair of eyes flashed at me through the holes of a scarlet mask.

I stood dumbfounded for a moment as I thought of the risk he was thus incurring. Then, remembering that he wore a shirt of mail, I grew easier in my mind.

I glanced at the other silent figure standing beside him with bent

head, and wondered what had taken place. But I was given no time to waste in thinking, for as I rose--

"Come, Cavaignac," he said, "put on your mask and let us go." I obeyed him with that promptitude which twenty years of soldiering had taught me, and, throwing open the door of the ante-chamber, I led the way across to a certain panel with which I was well acquainted. A secret spring answered promptly to my touch, and the panel swung back, disclosing a steep and narrow flight of stairs.

Down this we proceeded swiftly, Andre first, for I cared not to risk being pushed, which would have entailed a broken neck. I followed close upon his heels, whilst the Cardinal brought up the rear. At the bottom I opened another secret door, and passing through, we emerged into the vestibule of a side and rarely-used entrance to the Palace Mazarin.

The next moment we stood in the silent and deserted street.

"Will you see if the carriage is waiting, Cavaignac," said the Cardinal.

I bowed, and was on the point of executing his command, when, laying his hand upon my arm...

"When we reach the Louvre," he said, "you will follow at a distance, lest by standing too close to me you should excite suspicion, and," he added, "on no account speak to me. Now see to the coach."

I walked rapidly to the corner of the Rue St Honore, where I found an old-fashioned vehicle, such as is used by the better bourgeoisie, in waiting.

With a whistle I aroused the half-slumbering driver, and bidding him

sharply hold himself in readiness, I returned to his Eminence.

In silence I followed the two masked figures down the dark, slippery street, for it had rained during the day, and the stones were damp and greasy. The old coachman stood aside for us to enter, little dreaming that the eyes that scanned him through the scarlet mask were those of the all-powerful Cardinal.

He whipped up his horses, and we started off at a snail's pace, accompanied by a plentiful rumbling and jolting, particularly distasteful to one accustomed, as I was, to the saddle.

It was not, however, a long drive to the Louvre, and I was soon relieved, as the coach came to a standstill in a bye-street, as usual.

Alighting, I held my arm to the Cardinal, but, disregarding it, he stepped heavily to the ground unaided, followed by Andre, on whom I kept a sharp eye, lest the knave should attempt to run.

I followed them at a distance of some eight yards, as I had been ordered, marvelling as I went what could be the Cardinal's plan of action.

We elbowed our way through a noisy dirty rabble, whom a dozen of the King's Guards could scarcely keep from obstructing the side entrance--used only by privileged individuals--in their curiosity to see the fanciful costumes of the maskers.

It was close upon midnight when we entered the ball-room. His Majesty, I learnt, had already withdrawn, feeling slightly indisposed; therefore I concluded that if there was any serious conspiracy afoot, the blow--which otherwise might have been restrained by the King's presence--could not be long in falling.

Scarcely had we advanced a dozen paces, when my attention was

drawn to a tall, thin man, of good bearing, dressed after the fashion of a jester of the days of the third or fourth Henry. He wore a black velvet tunic, which descended to his knees, with a hood surmounted by a row of bells; it was open in front, disclosing a doublet of yellow silk heavily slashed with red. In keeping with this he wore one red and one yellow stocking, and long pointed shoes of untanned leather.

The suit of motley admirably became his tall, lithe figure, and, in the light of that night's events, I have often marvelled why he had chosen so conspicuous a disguise. At the time, however, I thought not of the figure he cut, but watched uneasily the manner in which he followed the Cardinal with his eyes, and, strange to tell, Mazarin returned his gaze with interest.

For some moments I observed his movements closely, and, certain that he was the man to whom Andre had betrayed his master's disguise, I drew instinctively nearer to the Cardinal.

Presently I lost sight of him in the glittering throng; then, as the musicians struck up a gay measure, the centre of the room was cleared for the dancers, and we were crushed rudely into a corner among the onlookers, he appeared suddenly before us once more.

His Eminence was just in front of me, and within arm's length of the jester; Andre stood motionless at my side, so motionless that I thought, for a moment, that Mazarin must be mistaken.

There was a sudden lurch in the crowd, and, simultaneously, I heard a voice ring out loud and clear above the music, the hum of voices and the shuffling of the dancers' feet: "Thus perish all traitors to the welfare of France!"

At the sound of those words, which sent a chill through my blood, I glanced quickly towards the jester and beheld the glitter of steel in

his uplifted hand. Then, before any one could seize the murderer's arm, it had descended with terrific force, and the knife was buried in the Cardinal's breast.

Heedless of the soft low laugh which escaped the Judas beside me, I stood horror-stricken, yet confident in my mind that the shirt of mail worn by Mazarin would have resisted the poignard.

As I saw him, however, fall backwards, without so much as a groan, into the arms of a bystander; as I saw the red blood spurt forth and spread in a great shiny stain upon the black domino, a wild inarticulate cry escaped my lips.

"Notre Dame!" I shrieked the next moment, "You have killed him!" And I would have sprung forward to seize the murderer, when suddenly a strong nervous hand was laid upon my shoulder, and a well-known voice, at the sound of which I stood as if bound by a spell, whispered in my ear: "Silence, fool! Be still."

The music had ceased suddenly, the dancing had stopped and a funereal hush had fallen upon the throng as it pressed eagerly around the murdered man.

Contrary to my expectations, the assassin made no attempt to escape, but removing his vizor, he showed us the features of that notorious court bully, the Compte de St. Augere--a creature of the Prince de Conde. He folded his arms leisurely across his breast and stood regarding the silent crowd about him with a diabolical smile of scorn upon his thin lips.

Then, as a light gradually broke upon my mind, the masked figure beside me which I had hitherto regarded as Andre, moved swiftly forward and pulling back the hood from the head of the victim, removed the red mask.

I craned my neck and beheld, as I had expected, the pallid face of the valet set already in the unmistakable mould of the rigor mortis.

Presently a murmur went round the assembly breathing the words "The Cardinal!"

I looked up and saw Mazarin, erect, unmasked, and silent. From him I turned my eyes towards St. Augere; he had not yet met the Cardinal's gaze, and to him the whisper of the crowd had a different meaning; so he smiled on in his quiet scornful way until Mazarin awakened him to realities.

"Is this your handiwork, Monsieur de St. Augere?"

At the sound of that voice, so cold and terrible in its menace, the fellow started violently; he turned to the Cardinal, a look of pitiable terror coming into his eyes. As their glances met, the one so stern and steady, the other furtive and craven, St. Augere seemed as one suddenly smitten with ague; he darted a hurried glance at the victim, and as he beheld Andre, his face became as ashen as that of the corpse.

"You do not answer," Mazarin pursued; "there is no need, I saw the blow, and you still hold the dagger. You are I doubt not"--oh, the irony of his words! "you are, I doubt not, surprised to see me here. But I heard of this and it was my intention to foil your purpose and to punish you, false noble that you are. Methinks, Monsieur, that you have wrought sufficient evil in your life without culminating it by so dastardly a deed as this. That you should have stooped to stab a poor defenceless valet, whom you considered below the dignity of your sword, this--fallen as you are--I had scarcely expected from one whose veins are fed by the blood of the St. Augeres. And to think," he continued in accents of withering scorn, "that you should attempt to throw upon your deed the glamour of patriotism! What harm has

this poor wretch done France? Speak up! Have you naught to say?"

But rage, despair, and shame had choked the Count's utterance, and were fighting a mighty battle in his soul. So violent, that as the Cardinal paused to wait for his reply, his lips twitched convulsively for a moment, then, staggering forward he fell prone upon the ground, in a swoon.

"Call the guard, Monsieur de Cavaignac," said Mazarin to me. "That man has committed his last crime. A week in a dungeon of the Bastille and the companionship of a holy father, may fit him for a better life beyond the scaffold."

"You see," said his Eminence, an hour later, as we stood alone in his study, "if I had allowed the world to know for whom St. Augere's blow was intended, the world would have sympathised, as it always does, with a luckless conspirator; would, mayhap, have loved me less. Again, there are always fanatics ready to copy such acts as these, and had they known that what has ended in the death of an obscure valet was an attempt against the life of Mazarin--I am afraid that some murderer's knife would have cut short my existence before the appointed time."

"As it is," he went on, with a wave of the hand, "St. Augere meets the doom of a cowardly traitor; he dies, regretted by none, for a deed of surpassing loathsomeness. As for Andre, his death has been too easy."

"How comes it, Monseigneur," I asked, "that he gave no warning to his confederate, made no attempt to defend himself."

"Can you not guess?" he said, smiling, "When I had forced the confession of his treason from him I bound his arms to his side and pressed a gag into his mouth, which I removed together with his

mask."

"But the mask?" I cried.

Again he smiled.

"How dull you are; I changed it whilst you were seeing to the coach."

"Why did you conceal the fact from me, Monseigneur?" I cried. "Did you mistrust me?"

"No, no, not that," he said, "I thought it wiser; you might have betrayed my identity by a show of respect. But go, leave me, Cavaignac, it grows late."

I made my bow, and, as I retired, I heard him muttering to himself the words of St. Augere: "Thus perish all traitors to the welfare of France." And with a chuckle he added: "How little he guessed the truth of what he said."

THE CURATE AND THE ACTRESS

When I mention that Andrew Barrington was a saint, it is almost unnecessary for me to add that he had no pretentions to that emptiest of empty titles, "A Man of the World," for it is already an established and recognised fact that Sanctity is a quality not generally reckoned among the many accomplishments of such.

To thoroughly avoid evil it is necessary to be on intimate terms with it, and where a hardened sinner would have triflingly withstood its onslaught, the Reverend Andrew Barrington was conquered and laid

by the heels, despite his armour of piety and virtue, on the strength of which he had reckoned over confidently.

Now, when Andrew's landlady diffidently mentioned that a young lady of the theatrical profession had taken rooms, for a month or so, in her house, a man of the world would have said to himself, "Let us have a look at her." He would have availed himself of the first opportunity to submit the lady to his critical eye, remarking perhaps, "not bad," and then his blase spirit would have been at rest, and he would have thought of her no more.

But Andrew's mode of procedure was unfortunately a less wise, and, despite his sanctity, a less exemplary one.

He grew red in the face when the news was brought to him and worried over the event for two entire days--and the better part of two nights, which resulted in a certain pallor and seedy appearance settling upon his countenance, such as slanderous tongues--if there were any in the world--might set down to dissipation.

To have a woman, and a young one to wit, sharing the same roof was evil enough; but that this woman should be an actress!--a saintly shudder ran through his slender young frame at the mere thought, and for forty-eight consecutive hours he dared not venture forth lest he should chance upon this vulgar painted female, with straw-coloured hair and pencilled lashes, of whom he had caught a glimpse through the window on the day following upon that of her arrival.

He had been glad to come to Stollbridge, for it promised him freedom to pursue his studies in peace, and away from the world; and here, upon his retreat, the fates had flung a very substantial sample of that world which he sought to be rid of for a while.

For two whole days he revolved the painful matter in his mind, with the obvious result that when he awoke upon the third morning after the lady's advent, he was firmly resolved upon setting out that day in quest of new and uncontaminated quarters for his meditations.

His manner was scarcely genial when he apprised Mrs. Jones of his determination, but there are bounds even to the endurance of a curate, and there are times when a little warmth of expression may be justifiable in him.

His landlady was disconsolate, and a corner of her apron was called into requisition as an illustration of her grief and an ally to her protestations, but Andrew was obdurate.

"It was unkind of you, Mrs. Jones," he said, "to have done this. Moreover, it was injudicious and unbusinesslike--for seeing that there was every possibility of my remaining with you for the next year, I think that I might have been consulted before this er--ahem--lady"--and the saint's tones grew actually sarcastic over the word--"was admitted to the same house for a single month."

"I didn't know, sir, as you'd object!" whimpered the landlady.

The silent look which the curate bestowed upon her in reply contained more eloquence than could be found in all the orations of Cicero, and the manner in which he slammed the door after his departing self told of a resolve that no living thing could alter.

He walked down to the office of the biweekly, Stollbridge Chronicle, and, having handed in an advertisement, wherein he vain-gloriously announced himself as a young gentleman of quiet and studious habits, he set off at a brisk pace towards the river.

He hired a boat and was soon speeding up-stream, propelled by

long sweeping strokes that belied the apparent frailty of his slender figure.

Having sculled himself into a perspiration and into a quiet backwater, he tied the painter to the trunk of a tree, and stretching himself in the bottom of the boat, he produced a calf-bound copy of Hyland's "Advanced Psychology," and was soon lost in its metaphysical depths to the world in general and the haunting idea of the yellow-haired actress in particular.

"Excuse me, sir," said a sweet, melodious voice, breaking in upon Andrew's studies and dragging him from the dry abstract into a very interesting study of the concrete, "but could you direct me to Stolibridge?"

The young man's head went half-way round his Roman collar, and his eyes opened very wide, the better to behold the charming apparition standing on the bank close by, in a half-timid, half-respectful attitude.

So ecstatic was his admiration that he forgot to answer her question until she repeated it, whereupon he blushed like a girl and removed his hat.

"I know a short cut,"' he replied, "but if you are unacquainted with the country, I should advise you to keep to the river."

"Thank you. Is it far?"

"About four miles."

The girl gave a little frightened gasp. "Four miles," she echoed, "why it will be dusk before I get there. How annoying! This comes of exploring a country."

"Have you walked far?" he ventured timidly.

"Far!" she exclaimed, "I must have walked miles. I left Stollbridge at eleven this morning intending to visit Calvert Hall; I was told that there was a short cut across the fields which reduced the distance to two miles; I attempted to follow out the minute directions which I had received with the result that I lost myself hopelessly, and have been wandering about ever since."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Andrew, then added brilliantly, "You must be tired!"

"I should think I am," she answered; "wouldn't you be?"

Andrew confessed that such a contingency was probable, and then for a moment he pondered over something that had come into his mind. He noted that she was young, that she was very pretty, and very ladylike, both in dress and manner and this observation troubled him not a little. Had she been elderly or unattractive, his duty would have been clear to him. As it was--

He brought his reasoning to an abrupt termination by offering timidly to take her back to Stollbridge in his boat.

She hesitated at first, looked demure, and spoke of troubling and of not knowing him, but ended by accepting his invitation.

Of course, it could not be expected that these two would travel over those four miles of tranquil river in silence. They chatted affably, and the girl even displayed a certain spirit of innocent badinage which played sad havoc with Andrew's nerves.

He noticed that her eyes were dark and large, and had a trick of opening wide at times like those of a puzzled child; that her hair was of a bright auburn; that her complexion was as delicate as that of a peach; that her mouth was small and sensitive; and that her figure,

although petite, was well proportioned. By the time they had travelled a mile, it occurred to the curate that there was no reason why he should fatigue himself by over-vigorous sculling. They would reach Stollbridge quite soon enough. Of course, he told himself that it was not of the least consequence when they arrived, but down in his heart of hearts he knew that he was not telling himself exactly the truth, for--well--she was very pretty, and fresh, and innocent, and he was very young. "You are of course a visitor at Stollbridge?" he inquired presently, and he actually began to fear the conversational powers that he was displaying.

"Oh yes," she replied frankly, "I am only here for three or four weeks."

Andrew was burning to ask her how much of the three or four weeks might still be left, but he thought the question too bold, so, with a sigh, he stifled it and grew silent.

"Do you often come on the river?" the girl inquired after a pause.

"Almost every day, when it is fine."

"And do you often pity ladies who have lost their way and take them back to Stollbridge in your boat?"

"I?" he ejaculated in accents of the profoundest horror. "I--I assure you that I do not!"

"What a pity!" she answered archly.

Andrew felt uncomfortable as the suspicion arose in his mind that, despite his cloth, she was amusing herself at his expense and he muttered something about understanding why the circumstance should be a lamentable one.

It was not until he had assisted her out of the boat at Stollbridge that

she made her meaning clear to him.

"If it were a regular practice of yours," she said, and her eyes had a mischievous look in them like those of a kitten at play, "I might be tempted soon to lose myself again, for I never enjoyed the river so much as this evening. I wonder why?"

Andrew blushed up to the roots of his hair, and deemed her innocent outspokeness very embarrassing. Then, for the first time in his life, he became guilty of a gallant speech.

"No more have I," he replied in a whisper--for his sanctity was afraid that the innocent-looking boatman might have ears like other people--"and if you should contrive to lose yourself again--well--I should be happy to find you."

He realised that he had expressed himself clumsily, and yet he felt that he ought rather to be ashamed of his boldness. But then, as I have said already, he was very young, and she was very sweet and she had very wonderful eyes. Those eyes haunted him as he walked home alone, and he told himself a dozen times that he was a churl for not having seen her to the door of her dwelling in spite of her remonstrances.

For the next four days it rained almost incessantly, which kept Andrew indoors. Moreover, he was busy packing his belongings, for he had found suitable rooms near at hand, and he was preparing to move into them; this he eventually did, on the fifth day after his adventure.

He came across the lady with the straw-coloured hair once or twice before he left his old quarters, and his eyes scarcely contained upon such occasions that sympathetic benevolence which is supposed to be characteristic of churchmen.

At last he was installed in his new rooms, unpolluted by the presence of any painted ballet girl--for thus he now defined her.

The next day was Sunday, and, as principle forbade him from boating on that day of pious indolence, he was out of humour. He was especially concerned at not seeing his fair unknown in church, and at a loss how to account for her absence. But on the Monday, the weather being fine, he went out again and sculled himself into the same shady backwater by the old mill. Only he left his psychological volume behind him this time, and spent two solid hours watching the horizon and thinking of her lovely eyes. He was just beginning to despair, when suddenly the silence was broken by a voice, which, although he had heard it but once, was deeply graven on his memory.

"Please, sir, could you direct me to Stollbridge?"

He looked round to meet her laughing eyes, and laughing in return with pleasure and amusement, he rose as on the former occasion, to hand her into the boat.

And so it fell out that every day at about the same hour the syren's voice would come to ask the saint to show her the way to Stollbridge, until one day matters grew so bad that the Rev. Andrew Barrington actually allowed it to escape him, that he should be delighted not only to take her as far as Stollbfidge but a very considerable distance further.

As a matter of fact Andrew was in love and out of his senses, as a good many more young men have been, when too constantly thrown into the company of an attractive morsel of unchaperoned femininity.

And who can blame him? He was an idealist, and here, in Miss Ellialine de Vaud--for so she had told him that she was named--he

had found the incarnation of his ideal.

She was too innocent to understand the curate's gentle metaphor about a longer journey than that to Stollbridge, so she merely smiled and, taking him literally, told him that if he liked he might scull her up-stream as far as Widenham. And he had not the courage at the moment to put his metaphor into plainer language.

All this went on for the better part of a fortnight (during which the curate's studies and meditations were severely neglected) until at last the vicar, who was an intimate, although somewhat paternal friend of Andrew's, thought fit to administer a gentle remonstrance.

But Andrew flew as near a temper as his sanctity--rather rusty of late--would allow, and he told the vicar in plain and very much unvarnished language that he was quite old enough to choose his own companions.

"Yes, yes," replied the vicar, absorbing some of the heat which Andrew was giving out, "but it isn't that! A certain amount of example is expected from us, you know, and-well--you go out boating every day by yourself and come back accompanied, and--of course people are beginning to talk, which is very distressing!"

For a moment Andrew's sanctity deserted him wholly and the Evil One took possession of his heart, for bringing his fist down upon the table with unmistakable vehemence, he very roundly told the vicar that people might go to the devil.

The vicar's face was as interesting as a kaleidoscope at this unexpected rejoinder, and the tone in which he pointed out to Andrew that it was the earthly mission of the clergy to direct people in quite the opposite direction savoured strongly of pity.

Then he took up his hat and umbrella and with a sorrowful shake of the head, he sighingly wished Andrew good day and left him.

The saint was furious. "How dare the insidious world talk of me and my movements?" he asked himself indignantly. "And to think that even so right-minded a man as the vicar should be affected by what he heard!"

If he had been a man of the world, Andrew might have been justified in competing for a prominent place in the history of profane utterance--as it was, he could only do some remarkably strong thinking. The result was that half-an-hour later he was tearing down towards the river with a speed born of righteous indignation, and a burning desire to set matters right once and for all time.

Yes; it was the only thing to do. He was fortunately the possessor of a nice private income which would allow him to live in blissful independence, and he was determined upon asking Miss de Vaud to take him and his money to church, and marry the lot.

He found her, sitting on the grass, and looking demure in a white dress and a sailor hat--Madonna-like he thought her.

With an original comment upon the heat of the sun and the clearness of the sky, he assisted her into the boat--she accomplishing the embarkation with the orthodox display of ankle--and arranged her cushions with something more than his wonted solicitude.

Then, taking the oars again, he pulled vigorously away in the direction of Widenham. He had in his mind a certain picturesque bower formed by the overhanging boughs of a beech tree, and beneath the generous shade of this, it was his purpose to call a halt and broach the delicate subject. He could do nothing but think of what he should say--and never did a sermon give him half the trouble

and anxiety--so that naturally he was strangely silent and preoccupied.

She endured this for a while; but when she had asked him for the third time whether he felt the heat, and he had answered her with a fatuous smile that he thought them very charming indeed, she deemed it time to awaken him. So giving the right rope a vicious tug, she skillfully steered him into a hawthorn bush, which, if not in bloom, was very amply in thorn--a circumstance which he appreciated, without the aid of his eyes.

As he pushed the boat back, he remarked with a sweet smile, which made his scratches bleed, that it did not signify in the least. Then a bold idea entered his mind--evoked by memories of a novel or two read in those sinful days of his boyhood--and in words which if slightly lacking in veracity, were certainly rich in poetry and fervour, he protested that for her sake he would gladly shed every drop of blood in his veins. In fact, he almost appeared to suggest that blood had been given him for no other purpose.

She blushed in the most highly approved fashion, and applied herself to a careful study of her tan shoes. Noticing this favourable sign, and finding the ice fairly broken, Andrew left the nose of the boat in the hawthorn bush where it had caught, forgot the bower half a mile further up the river, and started forthwith upon the accelerated display of amorous rhetoric.

Pale and gasping, with thumping heart and twitching hands he told his story; now halting and stammering, now plunging headlong into a torrent of verbiage and incoherence.

And she, while contemplating the pattern of her dainty shoe, dimly realised that he was asking her to become his wife. And having guessed, her heart began to beat. Not so much out of sympathy as

out of dread lest he should capsize the boat before he had finished.

At last he stopped, and signified by mopping the perspiration from his forehead and the blood from his cheeks, that he had finished.

A crafty and designing woman of the world would no doubt have commented upon the suddenness of the proposal. The simple unsophisticated child before him did otherwise. Raising for a moment her soft dark eyes, and favouring him with a glance half coy half tender--

"I am so happy, Andrew," she murmured, "so happy!"

The enraptured lover would have fallen upon his knees had he not remembered in time the disastrous results which might follow upon so rash an act. He had to content himself with stretching across the boat and seizing the hand she half extended towards him.

"You love me? You really love me?" the poor boy whispered incredulously.

"More than I can tell you," she answered, casting down her eyes. Upon this followed many touching words, many sighs and many impassioned glances. But the sun will set, in spite of lovers, and presently with one more sigh, Andrew was obliged to release the boat from the bush and turn his way homewards.

He was more eager than ever to see her home, when they had landed at Stollbridge. But she insisted upon going alone, and despite his remonstrances and expressions of contempt for public opinion, alone she went.

Notwithstanding this, as Andrew Barrington made his way home, he felt himself indeed a happy man, and many were the thoughts of pleasant anticipation he bestowed upon the morrow. But the morrow

brought him a perfumed note containing a disappointment. She had been suddenly called to town, she wrote, by a telegram which informed her that her dear Aunt was dangerously ill. Would he write?

He put the note down on the table. Then snatched it up, and blushing furiously be crumpled it into his pocket as the maid-of-all-work entered with his breakfast tray.

He felt better when she had gone and began to think. He drew her note from his pocket and read it again. At the word "Aunt" he came to a full stop. It suggested a family. And with the suggestion came a sickening dread that her people--whoever they might be--should oppose their union. The anxiety was too awful to be borne. He must do something. Again his eye fell upon the note. "Will you write?" Yes, he would write at once. He got the necessary materials together, and, sitting down, he pondered deeply for perhaps half an hour. At last with a sigh he took up the pen and began. He worked assiduously for an hour, and the contents of his waste paper basket grew steadily during that time. But in the end his critical spirit was satisfied, and he appended his signature to one of the most richly tinted flowers of rhetoric that ever bloomed between the leaves of a parson's blotting- pad. What he had written might have been summed up concisely into three sentences. "I love you. I shall never love anyone else. If your parents forbid our marriage I shall be disconsolate."

But, as everyone versed in such matters must know, these three sentences afford very considerable scope for elaboration. It need not, therefore, cause great surprise that by a zealous regard for detail, Andrew was enabled to cover eight pages of notepaper with closely- written matter. Although there may be many who could do better, still, for a saint, Andrew did very well.

The reply came promptly, and set him in a fever of delight. She had

no parents, and therefore no wishes but her own to consult. Her Aunt was better, and she hoped to return to Stollbridge in a day or two. She loved him, and she trusted that he was devoting a little of his thoughts to her. Then came the signature "Ella"--a name which Andrew kept uttering aloud, until the maid-of-all-work disgusted him into silence by putting her head into the room and inquiring whether he had called her.

Ella would return in a day or two! And here again those novels read in early youth came to his aid, and he remembered what was expected of him. He had no time to lose, he must run up to town at once and buy the ring.

He put his hat on--a trifle jauntily for a saint--and went round to the vicarage to obtain his superior's sanction of the journey.

He had not seen the vicar since their somewhat unhappy parting of some three days ago, and it was not without a certain restlessness of mind that he entered the presence of that worthy man. The Reverend Mr. Ritson turned from the papers with which he had been occupied, to greet Andrew.

He was a man of medium height, with iron-grey hair and a rosy clean- shaven face. The levity suggested by a slight upward tilt of his nose was redeemed by the portly dignity of his figure.

"Ah, good morning, Andrew. Won't you sit down?"

Andrew sat down and dangled his hat between his knees in a nervous fashion. "I have come to ask you whether it would be inconvenient if I were to run up to town for a day or two."

"Certainly not," the vicar answered with a kindly smile. "Go by all means if you--"

Mr. Ritson stopped abruptly, and the smile died from his good-humoured lips. He suddenly remembered having learnt that Miss de Vaud had left Stollbridge two days ago. He was a man of some insight and some worldly experience, and the conclusion he arrived at by a simple process of deduction, was not flattering to Andrew. He turned his clear hazel eyes sternly upon the young man.

"Might I inquire," he said coldly, "what your motives are for going to London?"

"I was about to tell you, Sir."

"Oh!" The vicar concluded from this disposition to confess, that his apprehensions were certainly unfounded and he hastened to relax the rigorous position of his facial muscles, being anxious to make up in kindness to Andrew for the slight his imagination had for a moment cast upon the young man.

"You see, Mr. Ritson, I was twenty-four years of age I last birthday. And--and--I have been thinking about getting married." The vicar raised his eyebrows in surprise, and passing his hands under his coat tails, smiled again.

"You are thinking of marrying! Ah, well, well--a very praisewothy resolution."

Being a bachelor, the vicar was in a position to make an assertion of this character without any qualms regarding its veracity.

Andrew gathered courage from the words and explained the motive of his visit to London.

"Of course, of course," the vicar agreed, "but you haven't said anything about the lady of your choice, yet. Come, what is she like?

One of my parishioners?"

Andrew remembered their last conversation, and grew distinctly nervous.

"I think you know her, sir," he answered, "I had the misfortune to disagree with you the other day, about the conversational topic I was affording Stolibridge. I have decided to set matters right by marrying Miss de Vaud, whom I very dearly--for whom I have a very deep regard."

The vicar did not say much. But what he did say was pregnant with meaning of an eminently discourteous and even sinister character.

"But--but," stammered Andrew, "I don't understand."

"Great Heavens, sir," Mr. Ritson interrupted. "Have you taken leave of your senses, or has this woman ensnared you into--"

"Sir!" cried Andrew, rising indignant, and confronting him.

The vicar looked at him for a moment, then shook his head sorrowfully.

"So? It's so bad as all that, is it?" he murmured. "Well, well, I'm sorry for you, Andrew--you are a young man of great promise. But--think it over carefully, and come to me again."

"My mind is quite made up, sir."

"Yes, but it may change. I hope it will, for although it would give me very great pain, if you persist in your mad intention of marrying an actress--"

"Marrying a WHAT?" ejaculated Andrew.

"An actress, I said."

Andrew laughed curiously. "There is some misunderstanding, I didn't mention an actress."

He uttered the word "actress," as if it were an improper expression which contaminated his saintly tongue. Mr. Ritson gazed at the young man in undisguised amazement, and began to entertain a very deep concern anent his sanity.

"Did you, or did you not say that you were going to marry Miss de Vaud; Miss Elialine de Vaud; to make myself plainer still--the Miss Ellaline de Vaud with whom you have been philandering on the river, much to every right-minded person's disgust?"

Andrew might have taken objection at another time to the impropriety of the word "philandering." But the season was inopportune for any subtle diagnosis of English vocables. He merely allowed his parched lips to murmur an assent.

"Well then--" the vicar stopped abruptly, as new light broke in upon his mind.

"Do you mean to tell me that you did not know she was an actress? That she was the very woman on whose account you changed your rooms?"

Andrew gasped beneath the load of this revelation. He glanced wildly about him, and out through the window. Someone passing at that moment riveted his attention. Springing across the room, he drew aside the curtains.

"Who's that?" he asked excitedly.

The vicar looked out and beheld a woman crossing the road. She wore a gown of prismatic hues and her hair was of a golden yellow.

"That, I believe," he answered slowly, "is Miss de Vaud's maid, or dresser, or whatever they call such creatures."

"It is the woman I fled from--I understand it all now." And dropping into a chair, Andrew mopped his face.

Mr. Ritson laid his hand kindly upon the young man's shoulder, and sought to console him.

"Fortunately there is no real harm done, Andrew," he said presently. "I suppose you have not written to her?"

"Oh, but I have," cried Andrew wringing his hands. "And such a letter."

"Good Heavens, man! Oh, Andrew, how could you? Think--think of the disgrace to the cloth if this designing woman drags you into a breach of promise action!"

Andrew groaned, and the vicar--being unable to think of anything more appropriate--groaned to keep him company.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

A week went by without any fresh developments, saving the departure of the maid, which, the vicar contended, was a sign that Miss de Vaud was not returning to Stollbridge. Andrew received two letters from her. The first was a passionate appeal to his affections and a gentle chiding for his silence. He almost wept over it--and had not the vicar intervened in time, he might have gone the length of answering it.

The second one, which came four days later, was somewhat abusive, and contained a veiled menace. Andrew wept no more--he perspired.

Then another week followed, during which the poor errant saint lived day and night in a torture of apprehension.

His health was threatening to give way when at last the gods saw fit to turn their thumbs up, and his suspense was ended.

The vicar was the first to bring him the joyful and unexpected tidings that Miss de Vaud was Miss de Vaud no longer. She was married. Yes there was no doubt about it. Andrew read the announcement himself in the Telegraph, and the brief sketch of her career which was now supposed to have terminated.

He was able to smile, and to feel very thankful at his escape. The same day a letter bearing the London post-mark and in a familiar hand-writing was delivered to him. It ran:--

You will no doubt have learnt before this reaches you of the marriage of that woman for whom you professed such deep and lasting affection, and whom you were horrified afterwards to learn--as I gather from your silence--was nothing more than a designing, wicked actress. I am sorry if I have wounded your vanity or your heart, but I could not withstand the temptation of testing the mettle of the young curate who fled in pious horror from under the roof which had the misfortune to shelter an actress. I hope that I have succeeded in proving to you at least that the horror you felt was only inspired by a word, and that after all an actress may still be sufficiently a woman to cause even a saint to come down from his pedestal and woo her.

She concluded by informing him that she had told her husband everything there was to tell concerning their "flirtation"--he gnashed

his teeth at the word--and she enclosed the passionate letter which he had written her and for which she had no further use.

He had not the courage to read his own letter over again. But he took the immediate precaution of burning the two epistles in the same fire.

He has since become an ardent advocate of the celibacy of the clergy, and a trite aphorism which he is never tired of uttering is that appearances are extremely deceptive.

THE FOOL'S LOVE STORY

Chapter I.

Kuoni von Stocken, the Hofknarr of Sachsenberg, heaves a weary sigh and a strange, half-sad, half-scornful expression sits upon his lean sardonic countenance, as, turning his back to the gay crowd of courtiers that fills the Ballroom of the Palace of Schwerlingen, he passes out on to the balcony, and bends his glance upon the sleeping town below.

Resting his elbows upon the cool stone and his chin upon his hands, he may breathe the free, unpolluted air of heaven, out here; he may permit his face to assume what expression it lists; in a word, he may rest--if rest there be for one whose soul is full of bitterness and gall, whose heart is well-nigh bursting with the hopeless passion it conceals.

He is sadly changed of late, this nimble-witted fool! Time was when his jests were bright and merry and wounded none save the arrogant and vain who deserved no better; but now, alas! he has grown

morose and moody, and moves, listless and silent, deep in strange musings from which he but awakens at times, to give vent to such bursts of ghastly and even blasphemous mirth, as make men shudder and women cross themselves, deeming him possessed of devils.

His tongue, from which the bright and sparkling bon-mots were once listened to with avidity, is now compared, not inadequately, with the fangs of some poisonous snake. And many who have felt its stinging sarcasms, pray devoutly that his Majesty may soon deem fit to look about him for a new jester.

The young French nobleman, the Marquis de Savignon, in the honour of whose fiancailles with the lady Louisa von Lichtenau, to-night's fete is held, seems to have become in particular the butt for the jester's most biting gibes. This the Court thinks strange, for the young Frenchman has ever treated Kuoni kindly.

What is amiss? Some swear that he is growing old; but that is untrue, for he is scarce thirty years of age and in point of strength and agility- -though but a jester--he has no equal in the army of Sachsenberg. Others jestingly whisper that he is in love, and little do they dream how near the truth they are! Alas! Poor Kuoni! For ten years he has gloried in his suit of motley, but now of a sudden he seems to grow ashamed of his quaint black tunic with its cap and bells and pointed cape, and in his secret shame, at times he hangs his head; at times he curses bitterly to himself the fate which has made him the sport of courtiers, and which seems to forget that he is human, and that he has a heart.

As he stands upon the balcony, gazing aimlessly now up into the starlit summer sky, now down upon the sleeping city of Schwerlingen, his long, lithe figure bathed in a flood of light from the window behind him and his ears assailed by sounds of music and of revelry, the

wretched jester feels--as he has never felt until to-night-- the bitter ignominy of his position. In an agony rendered all the more terrible by the despair that fills his soul, he flings himself down upon a stone seat in a corner, and covers his face with his hands. Thus he sits for some few moments, his vigorous frame shaken by a fierce sobbing which no tears come to relieve, until a step close at hand bids him make an effort to overcome his emotion.

The tall, slim figure of a girl stands for a moment framed in the open casement, and as, raising his eyes, Kuoni beholds her, he springs suddenly to his feet and turns his pale countenance towards her, so that the light from the room beyond falls full upon it, revealing clearly the signs of the storm of agony that has swept across the jester's soul.

An exclamation of wonder escapes the girl at the sight of that distorted face.

"Kuoni!" she cries, coming forward, "what is amiss? Have you seen a ghost?"

"Aye, Madame," he answers, in accents full of bitter, bitter sadness, "I have indeed seen a ghost--the ghost of happiness."

"And is the sight then so distressing as your face and tone would tell me? Why, I should have deemed it otherwise."

"Yes, were it tangible, attainable happiness that I had beheld; but I said the ghost of happiness--in other words, the reflection of the joys of others--a shadow well calculated to strike despair into the hearts of those wretches who may not grasp the substance."

"And are you one of those wretches, Kuoni?" enquires the girl, her tone full of an interest and sympathy such as a wise man might have

misconstrued but which the fool does not. "Why, 'tis said," she continues, "that a jester's is a gay and careless life. I have even heard it said by some of those fine gentlemen yonder that it gives rise to envy in them."

"I doubt it not, I doubt it not," he answers with a laugh of scorn, "and I dare swear there are many of them whom a fool's cap would fit better than it does me!"

Then abruptly changing his tone and becoming earnest--

"Fraulein von Lichtenau," he says, scarce above a whisper, "this fete to-night is given in honour of your betrothal; will you deign to accept a poor jester's deepest, sincerest wishes for your happiness."

There is something so strange and curious in his tone that the girl feels herself unaccountably moved by it.

"I accept them and thank you, friend Kuoni, with all my heart," she answers kindly, giving him her hand.

"You call me friend Kuoni," he cries, drawing a step nearer. "You call the poor fool, friend! May God bless you for that word!"

"Kuoni! Kuoni!" comes a voice from within; but he heeds it not as, stooping, he raises her hand to his lips and kisses the slender fingers, as one might kiss a sacred relic.

"May God bless you, Madame, and if ever it should be your lot to need a friend, I swear it, by the Mass, that he whom you now honour with that proud title will be at hand."

Then, tearing himself away before she has time to answer, he enters the salon.

"Kuoni! Kuoni! Where are you?" cry a dozen voices.

"I am here," he answers sourly; "what is amiss? Are there not fools enough assembled in one room, but that you must clamour for me to swell your number?"

He has worn a mask too long to forget the part he plays in life, and as he stands now before them, all traces of his late emotion have disappeared from his face, albeit the natural expression, half-melancholic, half-scornful, remains.

With his dark eyes he sweeps the glittering throng of Court beauties and gay gallants waiting for some one to take up his challenge.

Where are Felsheim, Altenburg, Briedewald, and the other witty triflers of ready tongue? Silent! All silent--for they know the jester's virulence too well to expose themselves to its venom in open Court.

It is the debonnaire young foreigner, the Marquis de Savignon, who is rash enough to cross weapons with him.

"They tell me, Kuoni," he remarks with a complacent laugh, and in excellent German tainted but slightly by a foreign accent, "that you are thinking of abandoning the motley and turning courtier instead."

"That were easy," answers the jester with a shrug, "for 'twixt fool and courtier there lies but a difference of designation."

"Aye, aye," goes on de Savignon, "but ponder for a moment, my prince of fools, and think of what would become of Sachsenberg in your absence. His Majesty will never find such another fool!"

"Not unless he appoints you my successor," is the cool, sharp answer, whereat a titter arises among those who stand about, which makes the vain Frenchman turn pale with anger.

"You seem to forget, master fool," he says harshly, "that you are addressing the Marquis de Savignon and not bandying words with a fellow-clown!"

He has wounded the jester more deeply than he imagines, and Kuoni's proud spirit writhes and swells within him 'neath the stinging lash of the Marquis' scornful words, which remind him anew of the gulf that lies between their social positions. But naught of this is visible on his face, over which a bland, indulgent smile is softly spreading.

Only those who are well acquainted with him notice the slight compression of his thin lips, which, to them, forebodes a cutting retort.

His head on one side and his hand on his chin, he regards de Savignon for a moment through lids half closed, as it were, in languor. Then, slowly and almost wearily, he makes answer: "Nay, Monsieur de Savignon, forgetfulness, methinks, lies more with your family than mine. Was it not you yourself, my lord, who, whilst at the siege of La Rochelle--so the story goes--one day when the Rochellais made a fierce sortie, forgot where the battle was being fought? So that in your absent-mindedness you galloped madly south, and by nightfall you were found at Royan, a good ten leagues from the scene of action."

It is de Savignon's turn to tremble now, and as a great burst of laughter greets the jester's sally, his complexion is of a greyish tint and his teeth are clenched in anger, noting which, Kuoni continues pitilessly: "Do you not see the humour of it, my lord? Why look so glum? Bah! You weary me; there is no more wit in your soul than milk in an oyster!"

And with an easy laugh which contains almost a ring of contempt, the jester moves away to let others feel the sting of his tongue, from which none, save the King, are sacred.

For a moment, the Frenchman follows the tall symmetrical figure with his eyes, then, deeming it best to affect unconcern, he shrugs his shoulders and, giving vent to a mirthless laugh, passes out on to the balcony to seek balm for his wounded spirit at the hands of his betrothed.

II.

During the weeks that follow upon the night of the fete whereat Kuoni von Stocken so signally insulted the Marquis de Savignon, these two men are careful to shun each other's presence.

The proud and vain French cavalier is not likely to forget the humiliation to which he has been subjected, and the memory of it is wont to make his fingers close over the jewelled hilt of his toy dagger and black vows of vengeance arise in his heart, fostering the hatred in which he holds the jester.

But it is not his dagger alone that is ready to do murder. Ugly thoughts are running in Kuoni's mind, and one night when de Savignon sits, easy in spirit for the while, telling the lady Louisa something that he has already recited to her upon several former occasions, he little dreams that from the curtains at his back two great lustrous eyes are watching them, and that a nervous hand is gripping a keen Italian blade. Did he but know how near at hand is death, his laugh would be less gay, his manner less unconcerned, his mind less easy. But he knows naught of this, and some angel must be watching over him, for the armed hand, uplifted in menace, does not descend, the jester sheathes his poniard and departs noiselessly the way he came.

But as the weeks go swiftly by and the nuptials of the marquis are fast approaching, the strange and unaccountable moodiness of the whilom lighthearted jester grows more and more accentuated. Each day he seems to grow visibly thinner, as if some fell disease were gnawing at his vitals and slowly sapping his life and strength. Each day his pale cheeks appear paler and under his eyes there are deep black circles, suggestive of pain and suffering and sleepless nights.

A more wretched, woe-begone picture than the poor fool presents, when none are by to spy upon his feelings, it were difficult to conceive.

Meanwhile, however, there are other and graver matters to be considered in the kingdom of Sachsenberg than the secret agony of a lovesick jester. Rumours are abroad of a conspiracy to overthrow the Sonsbeck dynasty, organised, it is said, by many great lords, tired of their young King, Ludwig IV., who seems overmuch engrossed in imitating the vices of the Court of his French cousin to pay great heed to matters of state and the welfare of his people.

'Tis a weakness not uncommon to kings, especially young ones, for monarchs are but ordinary folk when stripped of their purple. Ludwig, however, is blessed with a character which, in some matters, is as firm and earnest as it is weak and frivolous in others; moreover, he is doubly blessed in the possession of an astute and far-seeing servant in the person of the Ritter Heinrich von Grunhain, the Captain of his Guards.

He has been forced to listen to the grave things which this gentleman has to relate, concerning the dissatisfaction of some of the nobles who are zealously inciting the people to open rebellion, and a drastic line of action has been drawn up.

The King is seated in his cabinet one night, about a month after the

fete dealt with in the preceding chapter, and a week before the day appointed for the wedding of the lady Louisa von Lichtenau.

Around the table five men are grouped; two are old and faithful servants of the late king, his father--the Duke of Ottrau and the Count von Horst; two are men still in the prime of life, Ritter von Grunhain, the Captain of his Guards, and Herr von Retzbach, his Minister; whilst the fifth is none other than the gay young Lord von Ronshausen, his favourite.

There is a solemn and anxious look upon the faces of these six men, for it is being decided that upon that very night Sachsenberg shall tear a gruesome page from the history of France--there is to be a parody of the St. Bartholomee in Schwerlingen before sunrise.

"It is better thus, my lords," says the King, and although his face is pale and haggard, his voice is calm; "for were we to publish the matter, and give the traitors open trial, who knows what might ensue? Men are ever ready to revolt against those who rule them, and who can say but that the trial of these rebels would swell the ranks of the disloyal--for treason is an infectious malady--and prove the signal for open revolt? As it is, when the news goes round, to-morrow, that ten noble lords have been found murdered in their beds, there will be much marvelling and much surmising--also, maybe, some grief--but those who have listened to the doctrines of these ten, and sharpened their weapons in anticipation of a fray, will understand, and will be stricken with terror at the awful fate which has overtaken their leaders. Believe me, gentlemen, they will be silent and they will disperse."

"Will not your Majesty consider--" began the grey-haired Duke of Ottrau; but the King cut him short.

"I have considered, my lords, and I have decided. What matters the

manner of these men's death? They have richly earned their fate, and if they were openly tried they could not escape the scaffold--so what difference does it make whether it be the dagger or the axe? None to them, but much to me."

The tone is too determined to permit of further argument. It but remains for Grunhain to receive his Majesty's instructions.

"Here is the list, Captain," the King continues, taking a paper from the table. "I will read out the names of those whom we have sentenced: Kervenheim von Huld, Nienberge, Blankenburg, Eberholz, Retzwald, Leubnitz, Hartenstein, Reussbach, and the French Marquis de Savignon."

"Concerning that last one, Sire," ventures Ronshausen, the favourite, "has your Majesty remembered that he is a subject of the King of France?"

"I have," answers Ludwig, "and I have also remembered that he--a foreigner to whom I have ever shown great favour and consideration, and who, were he to live, would wed one of the noblest ladies of my Court--couples ingratitude with his treason. No doubt he whom they intend to set up in my stead has bribed him richly; but he shall pay for his folly, as others are paying for theirs, with his life: and I fail to see how I am to be made accountable to the King of France for the chance assassination of a subject of his, in my capital. The matter is settled, gentlemen; Ritter von Grunhain knows how to see to its execution. There is no more to be said," he goes on, rising, "but when you hear midnight striking in the belfry of St. Oswald, say a prayer, gentlemen, for the repose of the souls of ten traitors whose knell it will be sounding. And now, let us join the Court."

One by one, they pass out after the King, and then, when the door has closed upon the last of them, a head peeps forth from the rich

damask drapery that curtains one of the windows, and a pair of dark eyes hastily survey the room: the next instant the curtains are parted and Kuoni von Stocken steps forth.

There is a look of fierce, almost fiendish exultation on his swart face, and the low mocking laugh that bursts from his thin lips can be likened to nothing save the chuckle of the Tempter in his hour of victory.

"So, my lord of Savignon, you have been meddling in politics, eh?" he murmurs, rubbing his lean, nervous hands together; "and to-night you die. Fool! Arch-fool! That you should be well-born, rich, high in favour at the Courts of France and Sachsenberg alike, did not suffice your greed, but you must wish to become a moulder of history besides, and like many another such before you, you have destroyed yourself! Oh, what a thing is man! Faugh!"

And with a sneer of contempt for the whole human race in general and the Marquis de Savignon in particular, Kuoni flings himself into the chair lately occupied by the King.

"To think," he goes on, "that a man about to become the husband of such a woman as the lady Louisa von Lichtenau should trifle and fence with death! By the Mass, Sire," he cries, raising his long arm and speaking as if the King were there to hear him, "slay him not! Spare him and clothe him in my suit of motley; he is too marvellous a fool to die!"

Then, of a sudden, the mocking smile fades from his face, to be replaced by a grave, sad look, as the thought occurs to him: "What will the lady Louisa think to-morrow, when the news is carried to her? How will she bear it?"

That she loves de Savignon with all her heart and soul the jester

knows full well, and as he thinks of it he grinds his teeth and drives his nails into the palms of his clenched hands.

His imagination pictures her as she will be to-morrow, and into his soul there comes a great overwhelming wave of sorrow and of pity for her, which cleanses and purifies it of the sinful joy which it harboured but a moment back. "She will pine away and die of it," he tells himself, "even as I am pining and dying for love of her! Alas! poor Louisa!" And he sighs heavily and sorrowfully. Then resting his chin upon his hands and his elbows on his knees, he sits there deep in thought, his eyes bent upon the floor.

And thus he sits on for nigh upon an hour, thinking strange thoughts in a strange manner, and revolving in his mind a strange resolve. At last, chancing to raise his eyes, his glance alights upon the gold and ivory time-piece. The sight rouses him, for springing suddenly to his feet--

"Himmel!" he cries. "It wants but half-an-hour to midnight--to the sounding of his knell."

He pauses for a moment, undecided, then walks swiftly towards the door and disappears.

III.

Now it chanced that, owing to a fire which had, a few days before, destroyed the Palais Savignon, in the Klosterstrasse, the marquis found himself the guest of his future father-in-law, the Graf von Lichtenau.

Upon the night in question--which a scarlet page of the Chronicles of Sachsenberg tells us was that of the 12th of August of 1635--de Savignon had retired to the room set apart in his suite as his

bedchamber, just as eleven was striking.

Feeling himself as yet wakeful, the Frenchman, whose mood is naturally a poetic one, takes down a French translation of the Odyssey, and, flinging himself into a luxurious chair, is soon lost in the adventures of Ulysses on the Island of Calypso. His heart is full of sympathy for the demi-goddess and of contempt for the King of Ithaca, when a rustling of the window-curtains brings him back to Sachsenberg and his surroundings, with a start. Glancing up, he beholds a dark shadow in the casement, and before he can so much as move a finger a man has sprung into the room, and Kuoni von Stocken stands before him with a strange look upon his face.

Imagining that the visit has no friendly purport, the Marquis draws a dagger from his belt, whereat the shadow of a smile flits across the jester's solemn countenance.

"Put up your weapon, Monsieur de Savignon," he says calmly, "I am no assassin, but there are others coming after me who deserve the title."

"What do you mean?" enquires the Marquis haughtily.

"I bring you news, Monsieur," replies Kuoni, sinking his voice to a whisper, "that the plot to overthrow the Sonsbeck dynasty is discovered."

The Frenchman bounds from his chair as if someone had prodded him with a dagger.

"You lie!" he shrieks.

"Do I?" answers the other indifferently, "then if it is not yet discovered, how comes it that I am acquainted with it?"

Then, as if blind to Savignon's agitation, he goes on in the same deliberate accents.

"I also bring you news that his Majesty is possessed of a list of the names of the principal leaders; that your name figures upon that list, and that it is the King's good pleasure that when midnight strikes from St. Oswald it will announce to ten gentleman that their last hour on earth is spent; for into the room of each there will penetrate three executioners to carry out the death-sentence which was passed upon them without trial, two hours ago, by the King."

The Frenchman is too dazed to reply for a moment; he drops back into his chair, his cheeks blanched with terror and his eyes staring wildly at the jester. The matter is too grave, Kuoni's manner too impressive, to leave any doubts as to the accuracy of his statement.

"And are you one of the three assassins to whom my end has been entrusted?" says de Savignon at length, a gleam of hatred in his eye and the memory of his feud with the jester in his mind.

"No," replies Kuoni simply.

"Then why are you here?" the other cries vehemently. "Why? Answer me! Have you come to gloat over my end?"

"I have come to make an attempt to save you," is the cold, proud answer.

"To save me? Did I hear you aright?"

"Aye, to save you. But come, my lord, there is not a moment to lose if I am to be successful. Off with your doublet. Quick!"

And as the Marquis mechanically proceeds to obey him, the jester goes on: "In front of the Rathhaus, at the corner of the Klosterstrasse,

you will find a carriage in waiting. Enter it without speaking; the driver has received his instructions and will convey you to the village of Lossnitz, three leagues from here. There is a suit of clothes in the coach, which you will do well to don. When you stop at the hostelry of the Schwarzen Hirsch, you will find a horse ready for you; turn its head towards the frontier; by sunrise you will be a good fifteen leagues from Schwerlingen, and beyond King Ludwig's reach when he discovers that you have not died; whilst to-morrow night, if you ride well, you should sleep in France. Come, take my coat." And, advancing, Kuoni holds out his long black tunic, which he has removed whilst speaking.

The livery of motley makes the Frenchman pause, and a suspicion flashes across his mind.

"This is not one of your jests, sir fool?"

"If you doubt me," cries Kuoni, with an impatient gesture, "wait and see."

"No, no, Kuoni, I believe you," he exclaims, "but why is this necessary?"

"Why?" echoes the other. "Oh thou far-seeing sage! What would the coachman who is to drive you think, did he behold a cavalier return in my stead? Besides, what if you chanced upon your assassins between this and the Rathhaus? Do you not see how my cap and bells would serve you?"

"True, true," murmurs the other.

"Then waste no more time; it wants but a few minutes to midnight now. Come, on with it!"

Savignon wriggles into the black velvet tunic and Kuoni draws the

hood, surmounted by the cock's comb, well over his head, so that it conceals his features, then, standing back to judge the effect: "By the Mass!" he ejaculates with a grim laugh, "how well it becomes you! Did I not always say it would! Here, take my bauble as well, and there you stand as thorough a fool as ever strutted in a Royal anteroom. Who would have thought it? de Savignon turned fool and Kuoni turned courtier! Ha! ha! 'tis a merry jest, a jest of that prince of jesters--Death!"

"Your merriment is out of season," grumbles the Marquis.

"And so is your chocolate hose with that tunic; but it matters not, 'tis all a part of this colossal jest."

Then growing serious of a sudden: "Are you ready? Then follow me; I will set you on your way."

Opening the door, the jester leads the nobleman, silently and with stealthy tread, out of his chamber and down the broad oak staircase.

He pauses by the wainscot, in the spacious hall below, and after searching for a few seconds, he alights upon a spring--which, fortunately, he knows of old. A panel slides back and reveals an opening through which he conducts the Frenchman.

They emerge presently into a courtyard at the back of the mansion, and through a small postern they pass out into the street.

Here they pause for a moment; it is commencing to rain; the sky is overcast and the night is inky black.

"Yonder lies your road," says Kuoni; "at the corner you will find the coach. Do as I told you, and may God speed you. Farewell!"

"But you?" exclaims de Savignon, a thought for the jester's safety

arising at last in his mind; "are you not coming?"

"I cannot. I must return to impersonate you and receive your visitors, for, did they find you gone, the pursuit would commence before you were clear of the city, and you would, of a certainty, be taken."

"But you will be in danger!"

"Have no concern on that score," is the reply, delivered in grim accents.

"But--"

"Enough of buts; begone before midnight strikes, or, by the Mass, your stay in Schwerlingen will be unpleasantly prolonged. Farewell!"

And, stepping back, the jester slams the door and de Savignon is left alone, shivering with cold. For a moment the idea again occurs to him that he is being victimised by Kuoni. But he remembers that were the plot undiscovered the jester would scarcely be in possession of the secret.

Next he begins to marvel why Kuoni should evince such solicitude for his escape and for his life, after having always shown himself so bitter an enemy in the past. However, fear overcomes his doubts; so, swearing that if the fool has duped him he will return, if it be only to wring his neck, he sets off briskly in the direction indicated.

Meanwhile, Kuoni has retraced his steps to the Frenchman's bedchamber: tricked out in de Savignon's clothes and with de Savignon's hat drawn well over his brows, so as to shade his face, he flings himself into the chair lately occupied by the Marquis--and waits.

Presently the deep-toned bell of St. Oswald's chimes out the hour of

midnight; scarce has the vibration of the last stroke died away on the silent night air, when his ear detects another and nearer sound.

He springs up, and turning finds himself confronted by three masked men, standing, sword in hand, by the open window through which they have entered. In an instant he has drawn de Savignon's rapier from its scabbard.

"How now, my masters," he exclaims, mimicking the Frenchman's foreign accent, "what do you seek?"

"The Marquis Henri de Savignon" says one, in a voice which the jester does not recognise.

"I am he," he replies haughtily; "what is your business? Are you robbers or assassins, that you come in this guise and penetrate at such an hour into my bedchamber?"

"We bear you news," says the former speaker, delivering the words after the fashion of a man who is reciting a lesson that he has learnt by heart, "we bear you news that your treason is discovered, and in the King's name we bid you prepare to die."

"A merry jest, gentlemen! An artful story! You are certainly no common footpads, but I fear me there is some slight mistake."

"I give you five minutes, by yonder time-piece, wherein to prepare your soul for the next world."

"It is considerate of you, my masters," retorts Kuoni, the mocking spirit of the jester asserting itself, "but the boon is unrequested, and, by your leave, I trust to have many years yet wherein to carry out your amiable suggestion."

"The man is laughing at us," cries one of the hitherto silent

assassins. "Let us end the business!"

His companions seek to detain him, but, going forward in spite of them, he crosses swords with Kuoni.

Seeing him engaged, the other two come forward also, and in a few minutes a terrible fight is raging. There is not, perhaps, in the whole of Sachsenberg a finer swordsman than this lithe and agile jester, but the odds are such as no man may hope to strive against victoriously. Before many minutes have elapsed, one of the assassin's swords has passed through his right breast.

With a groan he sinks forward in a heap, and the sword he lately held bounds with a noisy ring upon the parquet floor.

Hurrying steps are heard outside the room, and presently voices are discernible, as the household, disturbed by the clash of steel and the din of struggle, is hurrying towards De Savignon's room.

One of the assassins is on the point of going forward to make sure of their work, by driving his dagger into the heart of the prostrate man, when, alarmed by the approaching sounds and mindful of their orders not to allow themselves on any account to be taken, the other two drag him off through the window before he can accomplish his design.

"Come," says he who delivered the fatal blow, "he will be dead in a few minutes. That stroke never yet left a man alive."

An instant later the door of the room is burst violently open, and just as the murderers disappear into the night a curious group of half-clad men and women with frightened faces stand awe-stricken on the threshold, gazing at the spectacle before them.

"The Marquis has been slain," cries a voice, which is followed by a

woman's shriek, and as the crowd divides, the old, white-haired Count of Lichtenau enters the room followed by his half-fainting daughter.

Together they stand gazing at the body on the floor, and at the dark crimson stain which is slowly spreading about it.

Then suddenly--

"Henri!" shrieks the girl, and rushing forwards, she falls on her knees beside the unconscious Kuoni. Then, as her father gently turns the body over to ascertain the nature of his hurt, another and different cry escapes her. But the jester reviving, and opening his eyes at the sound, meets her gaze and whispers faintly--

"Hush, my lady! do not say that I am not the Marquis. As you value his life, keep silent and let all believe and spread the report that the Marquis is dying."

"What does it mean? what does it mean?" she wails, wringing her hands, yet, with quick instinct, understanding that serious motives have dictated Kuoni's words.

"Send them away--your father also--I will explain," gasps the jester, and at each word he utters the blood wells forth from his wound.

When all have withdrawn, and when she has raised his head and pillowed it in her lap, he tells her all, bidding her not to allow the real truth of the matter to transpire until morning.

"And you, YOU, Kuoni, of all men, who have ever seemed to hate him, you have so nobly given your life to buy his safety!" she exclaims.

"No, my lady, I have not," he answers; "I have given my life not for him

but for you. I wished to save him because you loved him. And because I wished to spare you the anguish of beholding his dead body, I have changed places with him. His life is valuable to some one--mine is worthless."

The girl can find no words wherein to answer fittingly, but her tears are falling fast and they are eloquent to him. She understands at last! "I am so happy," he murmurs presently, "oh, so happy! Had I lived my head would never have been pillowed on your knee. Had I lived, I should never have dared to tell you--as I do now, when in the presence of death all differences of birth and station fade away--that I love you."

The girl trembles violently; then for a second their eyes meet. She were not a woman did her heart not swell with fondness and pity for the poor despised fool, who to ensure her happiness has sacrificed his life.

Growing bold in the dread presence of the Reaper--

"Louisa," he gasps, his voice still fainter than before, "I am dying; there are none to witness, and none will ever know--kiss me!"

Weeping softly, the girl stoops until her loose flowing hair falls about his head and neck, and her lips, so rich with the blood of life and youth, touch his, upon which the chill of death is settling.

A quiver runs through his frame, his chest heaves with a long last sigh--then all is still, but for the gentle sobbing of the girl whose tears are falling fast upon the upturned face, which smiles upon her in death.

MR. DEWBURY'S CONSENT

I am the humblest-minded man in the world, but if you should wound my feelings my humility is at once transformed into pride and self-assertiveness, my habitual meekness converted into retaliatory arrogance.

Thus, when Mr. Dewbury pointed out to me--with that brutality for which he is notorious--that I was a young man of idle ways, that my means were too restricted to permit of idleness, and that consequently he would oppose my wedding his niece and ward, I did not adopt a humble or conciliatory tone, I didn't swear to achieve great things so as to become worthy of the union to which I aspired; I ate no humble- pie. I made no promises; I rose up in all the panoply of outraged pride, and turned to rend Mr. Dewbury.

I pointed out to him that to describe me as idle was to distort facts, and that if my means were restricted, they were at least sufficient to keep a loving couple from absolute want. Incidentally I threw it out that I belonged to the great aristocracy of genius--at which Mr. Dewbury audibly sniffed--and that my name was a name likely to be heard of presently.

But the rending of Mr. Dewbury was more easy to project than to achieve. Alas! The very stupidity of the man was an impenetrable bulwark, a demoralising array of chevaux-de-frise against which I hurled the onslaught of my logic and my eloquence, only to fall back baffled.

I could lure him into no fresh statement; like the dull-witted creature he was he took refuge in repeating the one odious sentence that he had coined to describe my condition--a sentence that gained in neither point nor effectiveness from being repeated. Mr. Dewbury's money was made for him in a factory, and from the rudeness he displayed on the painful occasion of which I write, I might reasonably

adduce that his manners were of like origin.

I may have been foolish to have adopted the attitude of retaliation--in short, to have lost my temper--for when you hope to become a man's nephew-in-law it is perhaps as well to conciliate him; when you have become his nephew-in-law you please yourself.

"The profession of letters, sir," said I, with the loftiness of the broad-minded man when drawn to dissent from one whose views are narrow, "is a profession that has been followed by men of an eminence which neither you nor I may hope to attain."

I was by no means sure that I should not attain it, but for politic reasons I thought it as well to couple myself with him.

"And as for my being idle," I repeated, "the statement is quite inaccurate. I am a student of men."

"You may study men as long and as closely as you please," said he. "That does not concern me. But I certainly intend to prevent your pursuing the study of woman in the person of my niece." He delivered himself of this with irritating smugness; to his benighted soul it may have commended itself as a witticism. "You are an idle young man," he said again with odious insistence, "and idle young men incline to vice."

"If a man incline to vice, Mr. Dewbury, he will be vicious whether idle or not."

"I do not wish to be drawn into an argument."

"That," said I, "is the last defence of one who has no argument."

It was not a wise thing to have said, perhaps. But then Dewbury was by no means an old man. He was under forty, and there was little

grey in his hair. There was, however, a devilishly truculent tongue in his head, and the brutal discourtesy with which he brought our discussion to a close left me in no doubt as to the hopelessness of my condition.

Perhaps I was unnecessarily despondent, for, after all, so long as the girl be true, what signify others? But that afternoon it seemed to me that mine was a poor, blighted young life. I resolved to leave Stollbridge at once and return to town. If I had remained so long in that little provincial place it had been solely because Mildred dwelt there. Now that I was to see Mildred no more the attractions faded.

But next morning I received a note from her--a hurried, panic-stricken scrawl--to the effect that if the weather were fine she would be on the river that afternoon. It fortunately was fine, and hot, even for July. So after lunch I took the canoe, and a couple of miles up-stream I came upon her punt made fast under a tree of very usefully overhanging branches.

I went alongside, and passing from the canoe to the punt I assisted her to make tea. She says that I only looked on while she made it. She is probably right. Mildred is a distinctly pretty girl, and I know of few pursuits more engrossing than the contemplation of her.

At last, when she had handed me a cup, and settled herself in the rainbow of her cushions, "Paddy," said she very sorrowfully, "the uncle has forbidden me to speak to you again."

"This disobedience," said I, "is very sweet."

"But what happened? What did he say to you?"

I told her, and she was a very angel in her indignation.

"But you are anything but idle, Paddy," she cried, and I felt that I had

never really loved Mildred until that moment. She was the one person in all the world who understood me.

"That is precisely what I told your uncle, and I confirmed it by arguments that no man in his senses could have failed to appreciate. He, however," and I waved my hand widely, "refuses to look upon my occupation in the light of serious work."

"Paddy, you must do something to prove him wrong."

"Mount Parnassus is lofty," I commented dolefully. "Its heights are steep and difficult to scale even for the stronger and better equipped than I. I may be years reaching the summit; I may never reach it; and, anyhow, I can't wait."

"What I mean," she explained, "is that you should do something really useful; something that he would consider useful. Go into business."

"I have no head for figures. I should only lose the little that I have."

"A profession then," she insisted.

"What professions are there? For the Church I have no vocation; law and medicine are already overcrowded; besides, they blunt a man's individuality."

"Is there nothing else?"

"There is hair-dressing and chiropody--both estimable professions in their way, only this is an age of prejudices, and perhaps you wouldn't care to marry me then."

"How can you laugh, Paddy?"

"Laughter," said I oracularly, "is one of sorrow's most terrible

expressions. My poor Millie, I was never meant to be useful in that sense. I am just a dreamer, and to wake me would be to spoil me, or else set me to spoil other things, which might be worse."

"You are the dearest madman in all the world."

"Thanks, Mildred," I sighed gratefully.

"I'll be of age in a year," she reflected.

"And you'll wait, Millie?"

I find a difficulty in chronicling her reply, for she expressed herself without the use of words. But it convinced me, and it was very comforting and fortifying even if we did nearly upset the punt.

So much consolation did I gather from that interview that I went up to town in a moderately cheerful spirit on the morrow, and in a cheerful spirit did I write to her twice in the ensuing week. But the second of these letters was returned to me enclosed in one of the most discourteous epistles that I have ever read, from her uncle. Now for all that I had every reason to be pleased with the composition of my letters to Mildred, I hardly desired for them such publicity as this, so I wrote no more.

It was while I was a prey to my fresh sorrows at this interruption of our correspondence, that Jessie Willoughby came to the rescue like a fairy godmother. I was wandering aimlessly down Piccadilly one sunny afternoon when she suddenly confronted me.

"Paddy!"

Now, although she was my sister's dearest friend and my sometime playmate grown into a sufficiently beautiful woman to rejoice the sight of any discriminating man, so dejected was my condition that her

appearance afforded me no pleasure. Still I was polite.

"I--I don't see the peacock," said I, looking round.

"Peacock?" she echoed, and her brows puckered, "What peacock?"

Then I laughed.

"Why bless me, it's you, Jessie. Your pardon; I mistook you for Juno."

"Oh?" And to get level she drew unflattering parallels between me and every god, demi-god and hero of the ancients, and wound up by asking me whither I was going.

"To the dogs," said I, mournfully.

"I mean this afternoon," she explained.

"Oh, anywhere. It doesn't matter."

"Come with me then."

I shook my head.

"You look too gay for me; I feel too sad for you. No doubt you are as anxious to preserve your gaiety as I am to harbour my melancholy. By association we should probably both suffer."

But she insisted, and when Jessie insists she is difficult to withstand. Five minutes later we were on our way to her studio in a hansom. She was expecting, she told me, some friends to tea. Jessie Willoughby was an artist--at least she believed herself one, as did also a few admiring friends; admirers, it must be confessed, of her delightful personality, her toilettes and her beauty, rather than of her art. Blessed with a sufficiency of this world's goods, Jessie could

afford to play at being a Bohemian, make nasty messes with colours and enjoy the emancipation from conventional trammels that is the prerogative of the class to which she claimed--by the slenderest of artistic rights--to belong.

Surrounded by the daubs that marred what otherwise might have been a handsome room, I took Jessie into my confidence before the others arrived. She heard me through patiently and sympathetically.

"My poor Paddy, what a sombre tragedy! Won't you tell me her name?"

"Millie," said I.

"How fresh and innocent," she rhapsodised, "how pretty, how sweet, how suggestive of buttercups and things."

"Jessie, you are laughing at me," I protested.

"Indeed, no. But what is her other name? Who is she?"

"Millie Dewbury."

"Of Stollbridge?" she asked, looking up with what seemed a new interest.

"Why, yes. Do you know her?"

"No, I don't know her," she replied. Her eyes danced with an amusement that I could not understand, and from her parted lips came a soft, cooing laugh.

"What amuses you?" I asked a trifle sulkily, for although we realise that our sufferings may prove a source of entertainment to the rest of the world, we hardly care for the friend to whom we expose them to

laugh in our face for answer.

"Paddy," she said gravely, "I remember that you used to have a poor opinion of a woman's wit. I am going to show you how very wrong you were. Be guided by me; follow my advice implicitly, and in a week your engagement to this Millie of yours shall receive her uncle's sanction."

I think that my stare was justified.

"How can you help me?" I asked at last, and then, before she could reply, the door was opened, and to my disgust her maid announced a visitor. On the heels of this one--a young man with a flowing necktie, straw-coloured hair and pince-nez--came a host of others, until her room was filled by as motley an assemblage of men and women as ever the gregariousness of human nature drew together. They were mostly Bohemians, some in stern reality, others mere make-believes like herself, and in a more placid frame of mind I might have found much to interest and amuse me in the observation of them. As it was I sat preoccupied, making abortive attempts at conversation with a fluffy-haired little girl--a musician, I think--who for her sins had been entrusted to me by our hostess. Jessie had told her that I was a young man of parts, a writer of some promise. From my general dullness she may have been justified in assuming me a humorist.

Of a sudden, however, my interest in my surroundings was vigorously aroused by the shock of surprise that I received when the maid announced--"Mr. Dewbury." He was certainly the last man in the world I expected to see, and this was the last place in the world in which I expected to see him.

He came forward now, the very incarnation of geniality and eagerness--a sort of transfigured Dewbury whom hitherto I had never

met--and as he shook hands with Jessie, I clearly heard her thank him for the flowers he had sent, whereat my wonder grew. She gave him some tea, and then leaving him in conversation with a struggling young painter--whether struggling to live or struggling to paint was not made clear to me--she came to sit beside me.

"Well?" she inquired, "Are you surprised?"

"Of course I am. I had no notion that he was in town, nor even that you knew him."

"To the observer," she murmured tritely, "life is a never-ending round of surprises. I may have one or two more for you before long. Paddy, I am your good angel."

She was smiling at me with eyes so full of adoration that but for the memory of Mildred they might have proved my undoing. I looked across at Mildred's uncle to find his glance riveted upon me. Where now was the geniality? Where now the eagerness? The Dewbury that sat there now was the Dewbury that I knew--scowling and malevolent. I smiled and nodded easily. He acknowledged my greeting without warmth, and turned to struggle into conversation with the struggling painter.

Jessie seemed to forget her guests. She drew me into a spirited conversation, consisting on my part of endless inquiries into the methods she intended to pursue to assist me, and on hers of endless, evasive persiflage, which, however amusing to her, was peculiarly trying to me. Ever and anon Dewbury would glance in our direction, his eyes eloquent with unrest. It occurred to me that he wished to speak to Jessie, but that my presence restrained him.

At last her guests began to depart, and little by little the number ebbed until only Dewbury and I were left. We carried on a

conversation for some moments--that is to say, Jessie talked, addressing her remarks mainly to me--until with an unconscious sigh Mr. Dewbury rose and murmured that he must be going.

"I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you at the Hampshire's to-night," said he. But Jessie shook her head.

"I am afraid not. Paddy has asked me to dinner," she added in her breezy way, "and we are killing the fatted calf in honour of his return to town."

Now I had done nothing of the sort, and I was aghast to hear her. But my feelings must have been as water to wine compared with Dewbury's. His eyebrows went up until they threatened to join forces with his hair, and in tones of unmistakable horror--

"You are having dinner with Mr. Holford?" he gasped.

She laughed, and as if to explain--

"Why Paddy and I are old friends," she cried, and he, forced to accept that explanation, withdrew.

She watched him depart, and her merry eyes became for a second quite serious. "Poor fellow," she murmured in a voice that was like a caress, and which set me thinking. Then she turned to me--

"Run along now, Paddy, there's a good child. You may come and see me in the morning. Eleven o'clock sharp. And if you would serve your interests you had better bring me some flowers."

"But are you not coming to dinner?" I inquired, more and more puzzled.

"I have changed my mind."

"Yes, but--"

The merriest of laughs rippled from her lips, and her grey eyes were a-dance with amusement.

"Oh, Paddy, Paddy, I always thought a writer was a professional observer. I am afraid you will never achieve greatness. But there--if you can't see what I'm doing for you, I am not going to explain. It's something I wouldn't do for anyone else, Paddy; and, anyhow, it is something that is going to lead you to buy an engagement ring this week for your little, rustic Millie."

It may be that I am, after all, a singularly dull-witted person; it certainly seems to me now that I should have understood it all along, but my mind was dense as a fog that evening. At least, however, the fog was pierced by the ray of hope she cast upon me with such encouraging assurance, and influenced by it, I grew sanguine and cheerful.

Eleven o'clock next morning found me on her doorstep, a bunch of red roses in my hand, and there, to my vast surprise, I was joined, as the maid admitted me, by Dewbury himself, also bearing a bouquet--a mass of orchids, any single bloom of which must have cost as much as all my roses put together. He appeared no less surprised to meet me, and his greeting could hardly have been more thorough in its surliness. It came to me then--as, indeed, it might have come to any fool--that Dewbury was in love with Jessie. And still I did not see light.

"She was all smiles to receive us. She took his bouquet first--he took excellent care that she should--and gushed over that costly collection of rare petals. Then she took up mine, and buried her face in the roses.

"I love roses," she vowed. "They are so warm, so sweet, so--so generous. I could surround myself with roses. Couldn't you, Mr. Dewbury?"

"I daresay," he temporised, writhing visibly.

"A rose always appeals to me as a flower with a soul--a great soul. Do you never feel like that towards it?"

"I am afraid I have never thought about it," he grunted.

"Haven't you," said she with as much horror as though he had confessed to never attending church. "Ah, but then you are not a poet," she added--which after all was not a great discovery.

"Indeed no," said I, seizing the opportunity to balance matters with him. "Mr. Dewbury follows no such useless vocation. He is no dreamer--not he. He is a utilitarian; believes in being useful in the world and all that; manufactures things."

St. Lawrence on the gridiron must have experienced sensations of positive delight when contrasted with Mr. Dewbury's feelings at that moment. Jessie took pity on him, and putting down the roses began to extol the beauty of the orchids until the smiles returned to his face.

We stayed half an hour and left together. But before we left Jessie slipped a note into my hand.

As we walked away from the house, Dewbury turned to me.

"Miss Willoughby seems to be a great friend of yours," he said sourly.

I nearly blurted out that we were "sort of brother and sister." But intuition came to the rescue.

"Oh, dear, yes," I assented, "Dear girl, Jessie, is she not?"

He looked at me in silence, and I thought there was a good deal of unnecessary contempt in his glance. Then he put up his hand to stop a passing hansom, and without displaying the manners to ask me whether he could give a lift, he bade me good morning.

When he was gone I opened Jessie's note. It suggested that I should get myself a stall at the Haymarket that night. She would be there with her cousins, the Sutfields, and she urged me to go up to their box. All this I did, and, standing behind Jessie's chair after the first act, I saw Dewbury's glowering eye raised to us from the stalls.

Two days later I again took tea at her studio. There was more or less the same crowd, and the by now inevitable Mr. Dewbury. Of course I was beginning to see light, and when I perceived that she really did like Millie's uncle--and, after all, I daresay that there was a great deal about him that was likeable and presentable--I understood what a thoroughly good sort Jessie was, and how deeply I stood in her debt.

It was a Saturday, and as I was leaving the studio, she audibly promised to meet me at Paddington at eleven o'clock next morning. Dewbury could not fail to hear and to gather, of course, that a day up the river had been planned. I left him there, and went out to dine with some friends that night. When later I got home there was a wire from Jessie commanding me not to leave my rooms on any account in the morning.

I puzzled over it, but the solution came at ten o'clock next day when Mr. Dewbury was announced.

He was very cold and very distant, and he addressed me as though I were one of the men whom he did business with.

"I have come to ask you, sir, whether you consider it consistent with honesty and dignity to write such letters as your last one to my niece while carrying on a very pronounced flirtation here with another lady."

"And may I ask you, sir," said I, in a tone that gave him back his iciness with interest, "whether you consider it consistent with the honesty and dignity to which you allude, to read letters that are addressed to somebody else?"

He bounded out of his chair at that.

"I did not read it," he exclaimed.

"Are you not rash then in passing judgement upon its contents?"

"A fool could guess them knowing the relations that existed between yourself and my niece. You don't doubt me?"

"Not for a moment," said I in tones which were meant to convey the very opposite. "May I ask, sir, how my behaviour can further concern or interest you? You have closed your house against me; you have forbidden me to see Mildred; you take care that I shall not write to her. Are you not satisfied, or is it that, taking a keen interest in my welfare, and having some notion that a literary man should be wedded only to his art, you wish to ensure for me a future of aesthetic celibacy?"

He was thoughtful for a moment. Then, instead of the anger with which I had expected him to answer me--

"It has occurred to me, Paddy," said he very mildly--and this return to the use of my sobriquet made me suddenly hopeful--"it has occurred to me that after all I may have been a trifle hasty over that Stollbridge affair."

"I daresay it was for the best," said I, whereat alarm spread itself upon his face.

"I mean that perhaps I had no right to separate you and Mildred. She will wait for you and--well, there's always a danger attached to a woman's waiting for a man. In a city like London there are so many distractions; so much may occur. I have been thinking it over, and do you know I have come to the conclusion that in matters of this kind perhaps young people themselves are the best judges, and that after all it might on the whole be wiser if I were to sanction your engagement."

"That is very good of you, sir," said I, in a perfectly colourless voice, which must have left him still uneasy.

"Supposing that I were to do so, Paddy--what course would you adopt?"

"I should return to Stollbridge and work there. As you say, there are rather many distractions in town, and a young man may find them militating against his work."

He was visibly relieved.

"My dear boy," said he, "if I have been hasty I am sure you will forgive me."

Of course I forgave him, for who could have withheld pardon under the circumstances. That very afternoon I travelled down to Stollbridge to bear Mildred the good news.

In the middle of the following week she had a wire from her uncle announcing his engagement.

"Isn't it droll?" she laughed, holding out the telegram to me, "Fancy

the uncle being engaged! I shall be one of Jessie's bridesmaids."

"I think," said I, "that that is about the least we can do for Jessie."

THE BAKER OF ROUSILLON

It was in Brumaire of the year 2 of the French Republic, One and Indivisible--November of 1793 by the calendar of slaves--that, whilst on my way to rejoin my regiment--then before Toulon--I was detained in Rousillon by orders of no less a personage than Robespierre himself, and billeted for three days upon a baker and dealer in wines of the name of Bonchatel.

This Bonchatel proved an excellent host. He was a man of whimsical and none too loyal notions concerning the Republic, and to me he expressed those notions with an amusing and dangerous frankness, explaining his indiscretion in so trusting me by the statement that he knew an officer was not a mouchard.

Had not Fate decreed that Bonchatel should have an enemy who gave him some concern, it is likely I had found him a yet pleasanter host-- though it is also likely that he had continued a baker to the end of his days. As it was, he would fall ever and anon into fits of abstraction; his brow would be clouded, and his good-humoured mouth screwed with concern. To the dullest it might have been clear that he nursed a secret sorrow.

"Citizen-Captain," said he on the second day of my sojourn at his house, "you have the air of a kind-hearted man, and I will confide in you a matter that vexes me not a little, and fills me at times with the gravest apprehensions."

And with that he proceeded to relate how a ruffianly cobbler, originally named Coupri, but now calling himself Scaevola to advertise his patriotism, who--by one of the ludicrous turns in the machinery of the Revolution--had been elected President of the Committee of Public Safety of Rousillon, had cast the eyes of desire upon Amelie (Bonchatel's only daughter) and sought her to wife. Ugly as the Father of Sin himself, old and misshapen, the girl had turned in loathing from his wooing, whilst old Bonchatel had approved her attitude, and bidden the one-time cobbler take his suit to the devil.

"I saved my child then," my host concluded, "but I am much afraid that it was no more than a postponement. This Scaevola swore that I should bitterly regret it, and since then he has spared no effort to visit trouble upon me. Should he succeed, and should the Committee decree my imprisonment, or my death even, upon some trumped-up charge, I shudder to think of what may befall my poor Amelie."

I cheered the man as best I might, making light of his fears and endeavouring to prove them idle. Yet idle they were not. I realised it then, knowing the power that such a man as Scaevola might wield, and I was to realise it yet more keenly upon the morrow.

I was visited in the afternoon of the next day by a courier, who brought me a letter from "the Incorruptible," wherein he informed me that he would be at Rousillon that night at ten o'clock. He bade me wait upon him at the Mairie, keeping his coming a secret from all without exception.

Now between my receipt of that letter and the advent in Rousillon of the all-powerful Robespierre there was played out in the house of Bonchatel a curious comedy that had tragedy for a setting.

Scarce was my courier departed, when into the shop lounged an unclean fellow in a carmagnole, who demanded a two-pound loaf of

bread. Misliking his looks, Bonchatel asked to see his money, whereupon, with a curse upon all aristo-bakers who did not know a patriot and a true man when they saw one, the fellow produced a soiled and greasy assignat for twenty francs, out of which he bade him take payment. But Bonchatel shook his head.

"If you will have my bread, my friend, you must pay money for it."

"Name of a name, citizen," roared the other, "what am I offering you?"

"A filthy scrap of worthless paper," returned Bonchatel, stung to so fittingly describe it by the other's insolence.

There was an evil gleam in the patriot's bloodshot eye.

"Now, by St. Guillotine, I would citizen Scaevola had heard those words, and you would have done your future baking in another oven, wherein you would have played the role of the loaf," he rejoined. "Do you, miserable federalist that you are, dare to apply such terms to an assignat of the French Republic?

"My friend," said Bonchatel, endeavouring to hedge, "I spoke hastily, maybe. But tell me: to whom shall I tender that paper in my turn? Who will accept it as money?"

"Why, any man that is not a traitor to the Nation."

"Then it must be that there are none but traitors in France. See you, my friend, I have upstairs a trunk full of these notes, which have been tendered me of late, and which I have taken, but which none will take from me."

"The Republic will cash them, failing all others," cried the customer.

"The Republic?" blazed Bonchatel, with fresh indiscretion. "Out of empty coffers?"

"Look you, citizen-baker," said the other, with that air of exaggerated toleration that marks a temper at its lowest ebb. "I am not come here to talk politics, but to buy bread. Will you or will you not sell it me?"

"I will gladly, for payment of coin."

"You definitely refuse this assignat?"

"Definitely."

The patriot gathered up the rejected note, folded it with ostentation, and moved towards the door. On the threshold he turned. "You will be sorry for this, citizen," he threatened, and was gone.

Poor Bonchatel looked at me out of a face that had grown very pale. "You see, Captain, how I am persecuted," he complained.

"I see that you have behaved in a very unwise and hot-headed manner," I answered, though not unkindly. "Surely you had done better to have given this fellow the loaf he wanted, rather than take the consequences of his complaint to the Revolutionary Committee."

"Give him the loaf?" returned Bonchatel. "But that would not have been all! I should have been forced also to give him change in silver for his twenty francs."

"Even that might be easier to suffer than--" I stopped.

"Than the guillotine, you would say, Captain. But, my faith, if I must die, I would as soon be guillotined as starved; and if this state of things is to continue I must assuredly come to penury ere long. I did not exaggerate when I told him that I had a boxful of assignats. They

have been forced upon me in this manner, and unless I am to be utterly ruined I must cry halte-la, once and for all, and refuse paper that I cannot in my turn convert into money without turning informer. Let them guillotine me and make an end of it," he concluded stoically, as he dropped into a chair.

"And your daughter?" I ventured.

"Ah, Bon Dieu, yes. What is to become of her, miserable that I am!"

The tyranny and injustice of the thing revolted me. Was there nought I might do? Then, in a flash, I remembered Robespierre's approaching visit. I would appeal to him. Yet when he came to learn the charge that was advanced against Bonchatel he would be little likely to pity him. I thought hard whilst Bonchatel sat cursing his fate and praying for the damnation of Scaevola, yet without at the moment arriving at any solution of the difficulty.

At eight o'clock that night there came a loud knocking at Bonchatel's door, and a moment later the baker, very pale and trembling, entered my room. "He is here, Captain," he cried. "Scaevola himself has come, and he has brought the whole Committee with him."

"Peste," I ejaculated, "he has himself well attended, this cobbler-president. You had best admit them, my friend," I added, and as I spoke I was thinking busily.

"My boy has gone to open. What shall I do, Captain? Can you give me no help?" In his despair he was rocking his arms to and fro.

"Tell me," I inquired, "is the Committee of Rousillon given to extreme measures?"

"The Committee of Rousillon is Scaevola. What he wills, the others do--and they call this liberty and equality. God help poor France!"

"What manner of men are they?"

"The very flower of the gutter--the very scum of Rousillon, else would they never have elected Scaevola their president."

"Are they men who would easily be tempted to a meal?"

"Aye are they--famished as rats, hungry as they are unclean."

"And thirsty?"

"Thirsty as the desert, and as drunken as France herself--poor, poor France!"

"Bonchatel," said I, "attend to what I am about to say." And in as few words as I could, I gave him sounder advice than ever a man purchased in the shop of an attorney. He listened to me with brightening eye; he chuckled when I had done, and softly rubbed his palms together; and when he turned to go below he had regained his composure, and walked with the elastic gait of a young man.

I followed him down, and in his shop I found the committee of ten--a dirty company that would have put to the blush even those wild, ragged brigands that marched from Marseilles to Paris in the summer of '92.

They greeted Bonchatel with sullen, unfriendly glances, that boded ill. Then, seeing me, Scaevola stood forward, and hailed me in the name of the Republic as choicely sent to witness how the Committee of Public Safety of Rousillon dealt with a traitor. He was, I think, the foulest-looking creature to which ever the name of man was applied. Certainly no pride of office had inspired in him a desire for cleanliness. He wore a blouse, greasy, patch-relieved breeches, wooden sabots, and the eternal red cap of the patriot. His waist was

untidily cinctured by the tricolor sash of office, which acted as belt for a rusty hanger and receptacle for a brace of horse-pistols. His brow was low, his eyes small and cunning, and the rest of his face enveloped in a coarse, straggling, iron-grey beard.

Clearly he set the fashions for his companions, who differed from him only in slight details; the general air was the same.

"Citizen Bonchatel," he began, in a voice of thunder, "know you the object of this visit?"

"You are not come, I take it, to buy bread?" Bonchatel inquired meekly.

"We do not buy bread--the children of France do not buy bread from traitors."

"Traitors?" echoed my host. "This to me? Citizens, you are come hither to make merry."

A sardonic grin spread on Scaevola's face. "We are come hither to do justice," he amended viciously. "Answer me, citizen: did you an hour ago refuse to accept, in payment for the loaf which he came here to purchase, the assignat tendered you by a citizen of the French Republic?"

"I--refuse an assignat?" gasped Bonchatel like an actor born.

"Did you, or did you not?"

"But what a question? If there is a form of money that takes my fancy, it is this paper-money of the Republic. It is so--so convenient, Citizen-President, so light, so--so eminently portable. Why, I have converted all my poor savings into assignats. I--"

"Enough lies!" burst out Scaevola, showing his fangs.

"Lies? Oh, citizen, what lie is it has been carried to you?--for I see now that you are in earnest. Assuredly some malicious, ill-disposed person would do poor Bonchatel an injury. And I mind me now that I lack not enemies in Rousillon, concerning whom it has for some time been my intention to appeal to our enlightened Committee, so that justice may be done me. I take this opportunity of your presence here, citizens, upon the investigation of a charge that is utterly unfounded, to lay before you my very serious complaint."

"Of what does he talk?" broke in the president, with a snarl of contempt. "What charge do you call unfounded? Tremble, fool, for the vengeance of the Nation is upon you. The man who came to you for bread was not the workman he seemed, but a spy sent out by this Committee. We heard of your refusal yesterday to accept an assignat, and mistrusting our informant--for how believe one whom was accounted a true patriot capable of so vile a conduct?--we sent an emissary of our own to-day to put you to the test."

Bonchatel smiled suavely, and suavely waved his hand, as if to put aside a trivial matter that vexed him not at all. "The falseness of the accusation you appear to have received against me is a matter which I shall have, I trust, no difficulty in making clear."

"Do so, then," bellowed Scaevola.

"A moment, citizen. I would first have you appreciate the magnitude of the injustice whereof I am a victim, and I beseech you hear my complaint. Certain malevolent and slanderous persons of Rousillon have spread it abroad that the bread I sell is coarse, and my wines green and undrinkable. You may conceive, citizens, how distressing to me is this complaint, and how damaging to my trade, since my customers, having given ear to that slander, have conveyed their

patronage elsewhere, and my trade is rapidly diminishing."

"How does this concern the assignat ?" demanded Scaevola impatiently.

"It does not; but it concerns me. It concerns a citizen of Rousillon, whom it is your sacred duty--as the trustees of the public safety and welfare--to protect. Now were I to have the voices of judges so impartial and honest as are you, and of so weighty an influence as is yours, citizens, to proclaim false those slanders, I should of a certainty confound my enemies and win back my customers."

"But the assignat?" roared Scaevola.

"Patience, Citizen President," returned Bonchatel calmly; and the president, shrugging his shoulders in his despair, resigned himself to the baker's irrepressible address.

"Now, citizens," pursued Bonchatel, "ere you can do me the justice I crave at your hands, you must satisfy yourselves that my complaint is not without grounds, and that my detractors have lied. For this there could be, citizens, no better occasion than the present, now that you are all here assembled. And to the end that you may pronounce judgment I invite you ail to sit down and taste my bread and my wine."

There was amongst that body of half-starved tatterdemalions a stir as of a breeze through a forest, and on more faces than one satisfaction was writ large. But Scaevola had that vengeance of his too prominently in his mind to permit himself to be so readily allured--for all that his throat grew dry, no doubt, at the very name of wine.

"This, citizen Bonchatel," he announced with great firmness, "is a matter that we may pass on to discuss after we have settled the

question of the assignat."

"Why, as for that trivial business," rejoined the baker brazenly, "I had thought we might discuss it at table. Have no care, citizens; it is a slander I shall easily confute."

"But yes: at table," cried one.

"Assuredly these are things that may be best discussed over a meal," protested another. And in the wake of these came other equally avid assents, born of their ill-fed condition and natural drought.

Scaevola swung round to face them with a snarl. "Name of a name, citizens," he fumed, "are we to observe no rules of procedure? No, no--" (he waved his hands frantically in his search for the word), "no natural sequence?"

"What need of it?" demanded one.

"Why, yes," put in another; "are we free men, or are we bound by the rules that bore the late tyrants to their destruction? The citizen desires our judgment upon his bread and wine; to refuse would be culpably to neglect our sacred duty to the Nation--it would be criminal, my friends. Why then delay it for the sake of a matter of twenty francs?"

Bonchatel watched the struggle with eager eyes. A happy thought occurred to him to heighten the attractions of his board. "Amelie," he called from the door leading to the interior, "bring that fine smoked ham from the kitchen, and the cold roast capon that was for our supper. Thus, citizens," he said, turning to them again, "you will be better able to judge how my bread tastes and how my wine drinks when taken with proper viands."

For Scaevola to rule them after that was an impossibility. He made the attempt, but at last tossed his arms to heaven in a gesture of helplessness and despair, as his committee tumbled pele-mele into the inner room, where a table was spread, bearing a dozen flasks of stout red wine, a basket of newly-baked bread, and an array of platters laden with pieces of capon and slices of succulent ham. Like a pack of famished wolves the Committee of Public Safety of Rousillon fell upon the fare provided, with never another thought for the business of the Republic and the rejected assignat which had been the cause of their coming.

Scaevola, however, as he passed in in the wake of his followers, found occasion to murmur through set teeth to Bonchatel, "For to-night you have tricked me, my friend, and you have gained a respite. To- morrow we will resume the matter of the assignat."

With a leer and a grim nod he passed on and took his place at table. And so, in the hour of his triumph, poor Bonchatel's victory was dashed again with fear. In trepidation he approached me to whisper what had passed.

It was half-past eight already. If by ten o'clock we could reduce that pack of sans-culottes--by my faith, the title applied to them almost literally--to a state of helpless intoxication, I had a notion that Bonchatel would be saved, not until the morrow only, but for all time.

"Trust to me, Bonchatel," said I, for I was sanguine of success, "and for your part see that they are well plied with wine--particularly our friend the president."

He looked at me inquiringly, but, taking my seat at table, I threw myself into the conversation, and saw to it that the president's glass was ever at the brim. And so things fell out as I had hoped. The overfeeding of stomachs that were more accustomed to a mild

starvation produced a torpor that was greatly aided by the wine. At half-past nine, when I rose from the table, I was--with the exception of Bonchatel himself--the only sober man present. Two members of the committee lay prone upon the board, snoring a hideous duet. Of the others, seven had slid from their chairs in quest of more ample quarters on the floor, whilst the eighth was still tippling bravely, and singing an old royalist song, for which he might have been guillotined had his companions been in a condition to have understood him. As for Scaevola himself, his head was propped against the seat of his chair, and with legs thrust under the table he slept, peaceful as a babe.

Enjoining Bonchatel on no account to disturb them till I should return, I repaired to the mairie. I roused the mayor and bade him hold himself in readiness to receive the Citizen-Deputy Robespierre, who might arrive at any moment.

It was ten minutes after ten when a berline rattled down the street, pulling up at the mairie and depositing the slight, elegant figure of the great man of the Revolution--the incorruptible Maximilien Robespierre.

"Captain Verignac?" he inquired; and when I had answered in the affirmative, he bade me follow him indoors.

His letter had intimated to me that one of his motives for keeping secret the imminence of his visit was his desire to take the Committee of Public Safety by surprise. He was on a tour of inquiry, and by coming thus, unannounced, he was the better able to judge of the efficacy of the committees he inspected. It was upon his arrival at Rousillon that night that I had built, in suggesting to Bonchatel the plan he had adopted.

"You are choicely arrived, citizen," said I, with meaning emphasis.

He looked up, inquiry in his mild eyes. "If you are not fatigued, citizen, I would ask you to accompany me to a house close by. You will be able to see the Committee of Rousillon in a rather effective manner."

"Why, certainly I will go with you. I like taking these bodies unawares. Are they sitting?"

"I left most of them lying, citizen," said I. "But you shall judge."

He took up the cloak he had doffed, and came with me, firing questions as we went, which I avoided, lest I should rob him of some of the shock that awaited him. I knocked softly on Bonchatel's door, and the baker came, himself, to open.

"Are they here?" I inquired.

"Yes, and likely to be till morning," he answered, as he admitted us, and never dreaming who it was came with me.

By the door of the inner room I paused, and turning to Robespierre--"In there, citizen, you will find the Committee of Rousillon at the business of the Nation in the manner in which it understands this business. Behold these patriots!" And throwing wide the door, I stepped aside that he might enter.

Amidst a chaos of empty bottles, fallen platters, broken glasses, and swinish sleepers, stood the Incorruptible in silence for some moments, his long, curious nose up-tilted, sniffing the air of that orgie chamber. Then he waved a daintily laced wrist towards those sans-culottes.

"Is this--is this the Committee?"

"It is, citizen--and I have the honour to present to you its president."

"This is no occasion for flippancy," he said, in cold reproof.

"I am not flippant," I cried--"I am afire with indignation."

"Is this the wonted method of their meetings?" he inquired.

"It would be a curious coincidence that it should be an exceptional one on the very night of your arrival at Rousillon, would it not?"

My evasion convinced him.

"Whose house is this?" he asked.

"That of Citizen Bonchatel, a baker upon whom I am billeted--which is how I come to know of this affair."

He looked up in surprise. "But how come they here?"

"Ah! that is the most outrageous characteristic of the whole affair. They came hither on a trumped-up matter of an assignat to institute an inquiry. This is how they discharge that duty. They have drunk an ocean of poor Bonchatel's wine."

A gleam of indignation flashed from his eye. "So! A matter of pretext to plunder a peaceable citizen," said he, catching at my insinuation. "Nothing less than tyranny."

"What else?" quoth I.

"We will soon set matters right. It were a pity to rouse them now. Have the National Guard called, and let them wake in prison. The new president of the new committee can deal with them upon a charge of negligence to the sacred interests of the Republic, and abuse of the position they occupied under it. What manner of man is this Bonchatel?"

I gave him a list of my host's virtues which more than satisfied him.

"I will see to it that he is appointed to the vacant presidency. It is well to have men of the people who are yet trustworthy. It emphasizes the new laws of equality, and shows also how virtue and merit may win any man promotion. To-morrow we will elect a fresh committee also."

When I returned from accompanying Robespierre back to the mairie, where he was to spend the night, I found that the National Guard had already executed his orders, and that the late Comite de Salut Public was sleeping itself sober in gaol. Bonchatel I found surveying the room wherein they had supped with sorrowful eyes.

"By my faith, Captain," he exclaimed, "I had been better advised had I taken that assignat."

"What now?" I asked, surprised.

"It would have been no more than a matter of twenty francs, whilst they have drunk more than I can reckon with dry eyes."

"But, sacre nom!" quoth I, "you forget that you are saved from Scaevola's toils and made President of the Committee of Rousillon in his place--practically you are the ruler of Rousillon."

"True," said he whimsically; "which means that I must now become a true patriot and a true republican, no matter what my feelings. Soit!" he sighed. "I think we might make a fair beginning by sending Scaevola to the national barber."

WIRGMAN'S THEORY

Whatever might be said against Roger Wirgman--and his intimates, had they been willing to speak, might have said a good deal--it was not to be denied that he was a man of marked individuality. And in this twentieth century world a man of individuality is like a rosebush in a bed of weeds. I don't know that my metaphor is exactly applicable to Roger Wirgman, for there was little about him, morally or physically, that suggested roses. He was lank of figure with the brow of a philosopher and the mouth of a satyr.

He was widely read, rather than well read; he had a passion for criminology, and murder was his study predilect. He contended--and facts offer no lack of justification for his contention--that the dictum "murder will out" was found, when tested, to be as fallacious as most proverbial tenets.

"Given," he would say in his cold-blooded manner, "a man of sufficient education, with an imagination wide enough to foresee all possible issues, and intelligence strong enough to provide capably for each and every one of those issues so as completely to cover up his tracks, and he may kill with impunity.

"Think of the hundreds--indeed, I might almost say thousands--of yearly undiscovered murderers. Why are their crimes not brought home to them? Because, possessed of the qualities I have mentioned, they have successfully effaced all traces of any implicating evidence.

"Now, what is the first question that is asked when an investigation is opened? It is: Who could have had a motive for doing this? To baffle research at the outset, therefore, we must arrange that no motives shall be apparent. So that when a man is noxious, and his removal becomes a desideratum or a thing that at some future time may be necessary, we must look to it that we do not betray those feelings by over inveighing against him and exposing our inimical sentiments.

On the contrary, let us feign and protest friendship and affection for him; let us court him, and make it appear that we are his dearest friend. Thus, when some day he is found dead, with a suggestion of foul play attaching to his end, and it comes to be asked who were his enemies, none shall think of naming us."

In this fashion would he pursue his pet theme, dilating upon the contriving of accidents by land and water in a horrible, cold-blooded, logical manner that made his audience shudder.

"To listen to you," said Pegram one night after Wirgman had delivered himself in this usual strain, "one might almost believe you had actual experience."

"On the contrary," rejoined Wirgman with a touch of whimsical regret, "I'm afraid that I am never likely to have an opportunity of applying my theories. Nevertheless, I am convinced that should the occasion arise I could prove them sound; though, for obvious reasons, I should unfortunately be unable to lay my results before you."

"Wirgman, you'd make a nasty enemy," laughed Pegram; "and I for one am glad to rank among your friends."

"Touch wood," muttered a humourist, "to avert the omen."

"Come to think of it, though," rejoined another, "it is really his friendship that is dangerous, for the first step according to his methods entails making a close friend of his proposed victims."

At that there was a fairly general and good-humouredly bantering laugh at Wirgman and his theory, and the topic was abandoned for others in better concert with a club smokeroom.

Little did Harry Pegram dream how soon that theory was to be put into practice against himself; and still less did Wirgman think how he

was to discover the gulf that lies between theories based upon human actions and their application.

The thing came about six months later. It arose from a sufficiently common cause--a woman, whom by an ill chance they had both elected to woo. She was a poor thing herself in every sense unworthy of the struggle that followed between the rivals; but then is it not in the tortuous way of things that such women as these shall have power to inspire great passions and stir up great strife?

A coolness, slight at first, but later more remarkable, fell between the two friends. They grew distant in their manner, and avoided each other in so marked a degree that their estrangement grew into matter for conversation. Then Pegram did a mean and foolish thing. He uttered a slander calculated to harm Wirgman. When it came to Wirgman's ears and he discovered the source of it, he flew into a violent rage--self-possessed though he ordinarily was--and swore to kill the fellow. The threat was voiced in that same club smokeroom, and loudly enough to be heard by its every occupant. That he would kill Pegram they looked upon as mere hyperbolical expression of his passion--a mere figure of speech. But that his anger was deep they realised, and they implored him to calm hinself. Outwardly he succeeded in doing so; but inwardly his rage boiled on, and the desire to do for that man's existence what that man had done for his character was unabated.

Had anything been needed to swell his rancour he had it a week later in the announcement of Pegram's betrothal to the lady. Wirgman had over-estimated his own attractions, her show of favour had lured him on, and perhaps justified him in building an elaborate castle in the air. He relied upon his marriage to mend his crippled resources--for the lady was well endowed. This castle of his now came toppling about his ears, and the financial crisis which he was compelled to face deepened his ill will towards Pegram, and carried him a step

farther in the contemplation of that gentleman's removal.

One night in the solitude of his elegant chambers he pondered the injury that had been done him. He cursed the moment of folly in which he had threatened Pegram's life. He recalled the theory he had been so fond of expounding, and he reflected bitterly upon how grievously he had neglected to be guided by it now that its application had become desirable. Gloomily he sat and thought. He was a man of stern, determined mind, without conscience and without any principles to speak of; and he found himself dwelling upon the contemplation of murder as calmly and coldly as he had been wont to dwell upon its theoretical aspect.

A dozen means suggested themselves to his fertile brain, any one of which he might have adopted with safety had he but refrained from alienating Pegram, and, above all from foolishly proclaiming his resentment and threatening his rival's life.

With brows knit he sat on through the night, and thought with all the intensity of his subtle intellect, until at length the frown lifted, and a smile gradually stole over his strong face, and relaxed the lines of his cruel mouth. He had found a way.

He realised that it was beyond his power--and the act he contemplated must render it doubly so--to win the woman, or, in fact, to reap any advantage beyond the satisfaction his enemy's destruction might afford him. But that satisfaction he deemed more than sufficient. Introspection showed him that he hated the woman now almost as bitterly as he hated the man; and he gathered pleasure from thought that the blow he intended to strike would be sufficiently far-reaching to wound her also. For this it was worth while abandoning England and his friends, even had not his creditors rendered such a step imperative in any event, now that he was not to have the assistance of her wealth to set him straight; and friends,

after all, were of very slight consideration to a man of such self-centred interests.

Pegram was at the time staying down at Port Wimbush with the lady-- whose name, by the way, was Miss Drummond--and her mother. No locality could have been better suited to Wirgman's projects than this little seaside resort.

His first step was to contrive a disagreement with his bankers, which afforded him the motive he sought for withdrawing his deposit, a matter of some three thousand pounds, representing all that he possessed.

On the morrow he left town. But before he went he took care to look in at the club, and announce to everybody likely to be interested that he was going down to Port Wimbush to administer to Harry Pegram the completest thrashing ever one gentleman visited upon another.

What he was about to do he knew. For the manner of it he must profit by such circumstances as should offer themselves. He put up at the Swan Hotel--having previously ascertained that Pegram and the ladies were staying at the Crown-and during the whole of the next day he kept his room.

After dinner, as dusk was setting in, he stepped across to the Crown Hotel, and, strolling into the bar, he called for a whisky-and-soda. Through the glass doors he peered into the smokeroom, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction as they lighted upon Pegram, sitting there with his paper and his post-prandial cigar. Wirgman was building heavily upon a slender foundation of probabilities. This, the first of the circumstances he had relied upon, proved as he had reckoned. He emptied his glass, and, moving over to the office, he inquired was Miss Drummond in the house. He received an affirmative reply. She was in her sitting room. Truly the gods of

chance were fighting on his side, for here was the second circumstance making good the combination he had hoped to find.

He gave his card to a waiter; then, treading closely upon the fellow's heels, he pushed into the sitting-room after him, and without waiting to be announced, for he had a shrewd suspicion that he might be denied.

As he entered he had a swift vision of Miss Drummond--a tall, fair, showy woman--standing with brows contracted in a frown, regarding his card. Her mother, he was glad to see, was absent.

"Mr. Wirgman!" she exclaimed, catching sight of him. "This is an intrusion!"

He bowed and smiled darkly.

"I confess it. But I was afraid you might hesitate to see me; and as the communication I wish to make to you is of an urgent and most important character, I am confident that you will ultimately absolve me--thank me, perhaps--for having forced my way in."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Possibly not. It was not with the hope of hearing you say anything that I came. But I have something to say to you that you may come to very bitterly regret not having heard if you deny me. I have come down from town and gone to the discomfort of putting up at that appalling hotel the Swan purposely to render you a service. Surely I deserve a hearing?"

She was only a woman, and curiosity got the better of her.

"What have you to say?" she inquired freezingly.

Wirgman glanced significantly at the interested waiter, whom she at once dismissed. When they were alone he unfolded his mission. He opened with an attempt to refute the slander she had heard against him and followed that up by most virulently maligning Pegram in his turn, dubbing him incidentally, a liar and a low person generally.

Miss Drummond checked his invective in full flow, and desired him to leave the room, whereupon, getting adroitly between her and the bell, he proceeded, with a readiness and elegance of diction that savoured almost of preparation, to tell her with a touching candour and honesty the opinion he had come to concerning herself. Much did he tell her that was scarcely true--but nevertheless fateful to hear--and much that was perfectly true--and therefore more hateful still. He spoke with smiling lips, which added venom to his utterance; and with a master hand he fanned the lady's spirit--an inflammable one at all times--into a very blaze of passion."

"Mr. Wirgman, you shall very bitterly regret this insolence before you are a day older!" she promised him. "Mr. Pegram shall hear of it at once."

Still smiling, Wirgman moved towards the door, leaving her a clear way to the bell should she wish to avail herself of it--as he hoped she might.

"He may hear of it, and welcome," said he, with studied offensiveness; "but if he has the effrontery to address me now or at any time, I shall receive him with the most picturesque thrashing that was ever bestowed."

She looked him over with quiet scorn. "It is like a brave man to tell a woman what he will do, is it not?" she inquired with withering sarcasm as she crossed to the bell.

"Madam, I do not tell you--I warn you. But send your preux chevalier to me by all means. You will save me the trouble of looking for him."

"You shall not have long to wait," she answered, and pressed the button.

Wirgman bowed and withdrew, well satisfied.

On the stairs be met the waiter hastening to answer her bell. "It will take her five minutes to tell 'Pegram her story," he reckoned; "five minutes for Pegram to console her and regale her with the promises of all the fine things he will perform. So that in ten minutes I may expect that gentleman to ask for me at the Swan Hotel."

He smiled quietly as he stepped out into the street.

"I may boast that I have cast my net with singular adroitness, and I am afraid you may find its toils exceedingly difficult to break through, my dear Pegram."

He stood for a moment on the steps of his hotel--a tall, conspicuous figure in his light drab overcoat and soft hat--and he leisurely lighted a cigarette. At that moment the landlord came out.

"A fine night Mr. Wirgman," said he.

"A very fine night," Wirgman agreed, adding idly: "Hardly a night to waste indoors. I think I'll take a stroll as far as the Head. See you later."

He moved away up the steep road that leads to Wimbush Head, with the conviction that he would very shortly be followed. Twice he paused on the way, and drew attention to himself by exchanging a remark upon the night, once with a couple of fishermen, and once with a policeman.

He had conjectured aright concerning Harry Pegram. Within a few minutes of his departure that gentleman was excitedly asking for him at the Swan, to receive from the landlord the information that he was gone toward Wimbush Head. After him, hotfoot and blind with fury, came Pegram now. But for all his haste he did not overtake him until he reached the edge of the cliff, where he saw him outlined against the sky.

"You blackguard!" was the greeting he had for Wirgman, as he rushed at him with stick upraised to strike.

The other caught his wrist as the blow descended, and, holding him for an instant in a crushing grip, he twisted the cane from his hand and flung it over the cliff. They heard it rattle on the shingle below. Then Wirgman spoke.

"Don't be a fool, Pegram," he said coldly, in his dominating way. "Suppose for a moment that you had struck me then as you intended? You might have killed me!"

"You would have been rightly served."

"Quite so, my dear fellow, quite so; but you would have hanged for it. And it can hardly be worth that to you."

Pegram cursed him and raved in an almost theatrical manner. But Wirgman's stronger mind gradually quelled his spirit, and soothed his anger into a mere dull, expressionless resentment.

"Now go home, Pegram," he said in the end; "and if, when you have slept on it, you still feel as you feel now, come to me in the morning. I have always found a deal of common sense blossoming in the morning sun. The night, I think, was made for poets, lovers, and other madmen whose ranting needs the cloak of darkness to disguise its

sentimentality."

Pegram still lingered a little while, but in the end, with a sulky threat to return to the matter on the morrow in cold blood, he turned away and was gone. Wirgman continued to stand where he was until the other had been assimilated in the night and the sound of his steps had died away. Then with a short laugh of satisfaction, he sat down and carefully thought out the situation as it stood.

By comparison with what he had achieved, his next step was simple, for it depended upon his own unaided efforts and nowise upon such fortuitous circumstances as had help him hitherto.

Satisfied after some few minutes' deliberation, he rose again, and, flinging down his hat--in which were the initials "R. W."--he slipped quietly, over the edge of the cliff, and cautiously undertook what even in broad daylight was a difficult descent. Carefully groping his way, he reached the little creek below, and stood at last upon the shingle which the receding tide had left moist. He saw something glimmering, and picked up Pegram's silver-mounted walking-stick. He almost chuckled as he weighed it in his hand.

"Another link," he muttered.

Very deliberately he drew out his penknife, and inflicted never so slight a cut upon one of the fingers of his left hand. He smeared the blood upon the stick, and threw it down where it would lie beyond the reach of the tide. That done, he climbed over the rocks that bounded the creek, and struck but briskly along the shore towards Alwyn Bay, a watering-place some five miles along the coast.

At a quarter to eleven he was in Alwyn Bay railway-station, having rid himself of his conspicuous light overcoat on the way, and wearing a soft, black hat, of a light texture that had rendered it easily portable in

the pocket of his discarded garment. He presented at the left-luggage office a ticket for a bag which earlier in the day he had left there in the name of Hodgson, and which bore the initials "C. S. H."

He caught the eleven o'clock train to Liverpool, secured a carriage to himself, and by, means of a safety razor he rid himself of his rather luxurious black beard and moustachios. Such other characteristic changes did he effect that he would have had keen eyes indeed who could have recognised Roger Wirgman in the man who at half-past two in the morning entered the name of Cyril S. Hodgson in the register of the Adelphi Hotel at Liverpool.

Towards noon next day--it was Wednesday--he drove down to the Cunard offices, and booked his passage by the liner sailing that afternoon for New York. This done, he returned to lunch at his hotel well pleased with the general trend of events.

Firstly, his disappearance from the hotel at Port Wimbush would be noticed, and it would he remembered that he had left word that he was going to the Head. The landlord of the Swan would give evidence how Harry Pegram, in an unmistakable state of excitement, had asked for him ten minutes later, and upon being informed whither he was gone, had followed like a man with purpose set. The cliff would no doubt be visited, and his hat would be found. This would arouse the suspicions of the police, and the creek below would be inspected. There they would find Pegram's stick smeared with blood and this would give their suspicions a definite goal. They would make inquiries, and discover the feud that existed between Pegram and himself. They would also hear of the stormy interview he had had with Miss Drummond that same evening. Thus his disappearance and the evidence of foul play, accompanied by the positive evidence that Pegram had been the last man known to have been in his company, and yet the evidence of motive on the part of Pegram, would draw an uncommonly tight net about his rival.

Miss Drummond--by virtue of what had passed, and knowing the spirit in which Pegram had set out--would be the first to believe in his guilt. So that even were he to escape hanging--which Wirgman doubted in view of the singularly heavy combination of circumstantial evidence--his life must become that of an outcast and a pariah, and Miss Drummond he could never marry.

In all this there was a certain sweet satisfaction. Yet Wirgman reflected with still greater satisfaction upon the fact that he had proven that pet theory of his to be correct. Under very exceptional circumstances, and finding himself heavily handicapped, he had accomplished the destruction of a fellow-creature in a manner that could not possibly implicate him.

In the morning and noon editions Of the papers there was no report whatever of any tragedy at Wimbush. As he was going on board at four o'clock that afternoon, he bought a late edition of an evening paper, and with this he stepped briskly toward the gangway. Already he had one foot upon it when suddenly a cheery voice somewhere behind him hailed him with: "Hallo, Wirgman!"

Utterly taken off his guard, he looked round. Then, suddenly recollecting himself and his changed identity, he sought to assume an air of naturalness, as though his turning as the name was called had been no more than a coincidence. But a burly individual in a serge suit confronted him, and laid a singularly significant and possessive hand upon his shoulder, murmuring into his ear: "Roger Wirgman, I arrest you!"

He started back, and his thoughts worked with the rapidity of lightning. Had Pegram by any chance suspected his conspiracy, and forestalled the discovery of his disappearance?

"In God's name, on what charge?" he blurted out.

"On the charge of murdering Henry Stanhope Pegram last night on Wimbush Head."

A ghastly pallor spread upon his lean face.

"Are you mad?" he choked.

"You had best not make a scene," murmured the detective, adding the formal reminder that anything he said would be taken as evidence against him.

Like a man in a dream, Wirgman allowed the detective and his companion to lead him away from the gathering crowd, and take him to the waiting-room, where they locked themselves up with him.

"Our train is due out in a quarter of an hour," he heard one say to the other.

Then he remembered the paper in his grasp, and, thinking that there he might find the solution of this marvel, be opened it with trembling hands, and was confronted by the headlines:

SHOCKING MURDER AT WIMBUSH. Flight of the Murder.

Swiftly his eyes devoured the bald, newspaper narrative that told how Harry Pegram's body had been discovered the night before on Wimbush Head, death being due to fracture of the skull. The dead man had been rifled of all money and valuables, and theft had at first been thought the motive of the crime. But the lady to whom Mr. Pegram was engaged had told the police a story--since corroborated-- which gave rise to the theory that the theft was a blind rather than a motive. It was known that a deadly enmity existed between the deceased and Mr. Roger Wirgman, of Copmore

Gardens, W. This latter gentleman had come down from town that day; and it was known that he and Pegram had been together on Wimbush Head that evening. A hat containing the initials "R. W.," and which was identified as belonging to Wirgman, was discovered a few hundred yards from the spot where the body, had been found, and, on the beach below, Pegram's stick, smeared with blood which the murderer had no doubt wrenched from his hand and used against him. He read how the police--by means beyond his understanding--had succeeded in tracking him to the left-luggage office at Alwyn Bay, and how they were on the spoor at the time of going to press. That powerful imagination which he had taken such pride in showed him now, as in a flash, how each item of evidence he had manufactured so sedulously to serve against Pegram would weigh a hundredfold more heavily against himself under the existing circumstances. In addition, there was his flight--that most damning incrimination--under an assumed name and in altered personality, to say nothing of the threats he had uttered against Pegram, and the purpose which he had announced was taking him to Port Wimbush.

He realised that he was indeed hoist with his own petard, doomed irrevocably, and for a crime that was none of his committing.

But even in that hour of supreme defeat and bitter agony he contended that his theory was still right. Here was a fortuitous circumstance which he could not have foreseen. The whole of his elaborate scheme had crumbled and collapsed because it had occurred to some vulgar thief to hit Harry Pegram over the head that he might rob him.

THE ABDUCTION

Mr. Granby ca me away from the Manor and his interview with his old friend, Squire Clifford, in anything but the most satisfied frame of mind. He was face to face with a very knotty problem--for a lover. However much the squire might favour his suit, the fact remained that sweet Jenny Egerton--the squire's ward--whilst very friendly disposed towards Granby, was obviously careful to be nothing more.

Mr. Granby strode through the dusk kicking the snow before him and making for the lights of the town at the foot of Manor Hill, and as he went his thoughts were very busy with what Squire Clifford had said. Jenny's nature was romantic, and if Mr. Granby would win her heart as well as her hand the squire opined that he might be well-advised to present himself romantically to her consideration. But Granby, for all that he was a stolid, unimaginative man, realised that, rising forty as he was and being a shade wider at the waist than at the shoulders, in aiming at the romantic he might achieve no more than the ridiculous.

Still brooding, with hands deep in the pockets of his riding-coat, whip under his arm, and three-cornered hat pulled down over his brows, he strode on through the town, where the snow was becoming slush under the traffic that was toward. He made his way up the High Street with ears deaf to the shouts of the busy shopkeepers and busier vendors at the booths of the Christmas fair, and, still deep at his thoughts, he turned into the King's Arms. He nodded carelessly to the drawer in the tap-room, and his ill-fortune guided his steps to the bar parlour and into the company of three graceless young neighbours of his, who sat with wigs awry and coats unlaced in a cloud of smoke over a bowl of punch.

He stood in the blaze of candle-light, the fine powder of snow that had gathered on the shoulders of his scarlet coat being rapidly transmuted by the warmth of the room into glittering diamonds of water, whilst those merry bloods hailed him noisily. Mr. Granby had long been a choice butt for the practical jokers of the country-side, though he had never yet perceived it.

They hailed him to the fire; they gave him punch to drink--a hot, delicious beverage of brandy, muscadine, lemon, and spices--which so warmed his heart and choked discretion that, when presently they toasted Jenny Egerton, and drank to her speedy union with Mr. Granby, he must needs pour out the whole story of his unprospering love affair and the quandary in which he now found himself, winding up with an appeal to those merry jesters for advice and guidance in the pursuit of the romantic.

Their response was prompt and hilarious. As with one breath, they urged him to carry his tale to Ned Pepper, who, they swore, was the very man to help him.

"You couldn't find a better man for your business in the whole country," one of them assured him. "Ned Pepper's the most romantic young dog in England."

"And he's upstairs now," added another, "drinking himself out of his senses in solitude." And so they urged him noisily to go up at once.

"But if I should intrude," he faltered. "Mr. Pepper and I are but slightly acquainted."

"Ned Pepper will give you a warm welcome," they assured him amid fresh laughter; and so, persuading and pushing, they got him above-stairs to the room where Ned Pepper sat wondering what might be

the source of the bursts of merriment that floated up to him through the floor.

Granby found Mr. Pepper--a comely young gentleman, with a good chin and a roguish eye--very much at his ease before a blazing fire. He was comfortably ensconced in a spacious oak chair, and rested the shapeliest silk-cased legs in Surrey upon a second one. There was a bowl of steaming punch at Mr. Pepper's elbow, a pipe between his fingers. His head was rested against one of the wings of his chair, his peruke--which he had doffed for greater comfort--was perched upon the other, his broidered vest was open, and he had undone the silver buckles of his lacquered shoes. As I have said, Mr. Pepper was very much at his ease.

At the foot of the stairs the young bloods stood grouped expectantly, with smirks and nudges and smothered guffaws. They knew Ned Pepper to be as peppery as his name implied, and they had reason to believe that he would presently be kicking Mr. Granby downstairs. Therefore they waited.

But they were disappointed. At sight of Mr. Granby hesitating in the doorway a flicker of interest had for a moment lighted Mr. Pepper's dark eyes; then he smiled lazily, and as lazily invited him to come inside.

"A cold night, Mr. Pepper," said Granby civilly.

"Ring for another glass," said Mr. Pepper, like a man taking a hint, and with the stem of his long pipe he pointed to the brew, thus clearing up any obscurity in his meaning.

The glass was brought, and, having helped himself, Granby drew up to the fire and took a pipe.

"I hope," said he, "I'm not intruding, though I must confess that I am taking a great liberty. I have come to you for advice. I have been advised to do so."

Mr. Pepper took the pipe from between his teeth, and gave his guest every encouragement to proceed. They were alone in that cosy parlour. The punch warmed and expanded Granby's simple nature, and he remembered the assurances he had received that Mr. Pepper was the very man to help him in his quandary. So out came the whole story, all but the names, which, with a remnant of discretion, Granby thought better to omit.

"And do you tell me you were sent to me for advice in this matter?" quoth Mr. Pepper, whose eyes had now lost all sign of drowsiness. "By whom?"

Granby told him, and Pepper nodded with a slow smile.

"I am sore perplexed," added the luckless lover earnestly. "I don't know whether you have ever been in the like position."

"I have, indeed," answered Mr. Pepper, "with this difference that with me the maid was willing, but the father, who accounted me a hairbrain, wouldn't hear of it. I carried her off; we were overtaken, and I was laid by the heels for a time. Her father was too friendly with the sheriff."

"You carried her off," mused Granby. "Now that was a romantic enough thing to do!"

Mr. Pepper stared at him. "If it's romance you want, you may do the same. As for me, I prefer to wait until the lady is of age. The county gaol cured me of any leanings towards romance."

"But our cases are hardly parallel," Mr. Granby reminded him. "I have

no pursuit to fear since her guardian is my friend."

"True," said Pepper with a roguish smile, "but, then, you say the lady isn't, and you'll hardly make her so by a display of violence."

"Ah!" sighed the unimaginative Granby, and his honest, rugged face grew clouded. Pepper puffed in silence for a moment or two; then spoke.

"To abduct her forcibly, and against her will, were to do a monstrous ill thing. Your suit thereafter must be hopeless and deservedly. But--" And be paused solemnly, raising a delicate white hand that sprouted from a cloud of lace, and poising it in line with Granby's suddenly uplifted eyes--"but if someone else were to do the thing, and you were to prove the heroic rescuer--"

"Gad!" cried Granby, and the pipe slipped from his fingers, and was shivered on the floor.

"You would reap the heroic rescuer's reward," concluded Pepper. "By your promptness of action you would inspire gratitude; by your ready courage--there might be a little sword-play in the comedy--admiration; and by your restraint and courtesy to the lady in her plight, you should awaken confidence and trust. These, my friend, are the compounds that go to make up that poison men call love."

"Yes, yes," gasped Granby, in some amazement at the other's fertility of imagination. "But how would you go about it, Mr. Pepper?"

Mr. Pepper pondered awhile, puffing vigorously. Then, setting down his pipe, he leaned forward, and propounded the result of his cogitations. On the morrow there was a Christmas dance to be held at Sir John Tyler's, two miles away, to which, no doubt, Squire Clifford and his ward would be going.

"Clifford?" gasped the startled Granby, leaping to his feet. "How guessed you I spoke of them? I never mentioned--"

"The whole country-side knows all about it," said Pepper shortly, and Granby sat down again. Pepper proceeded with his expounding. At Kerry's Corner Mr. Granby was to post some obliging rogue who would play the highwayman for him; he would hold up Mr. Clifford's coach, but at sight of the lady be so taken with the jewels that were her eyes, as to have no thought for other riches. The highwayman should request her to alight, and then make off with her on his crupper, the Squire being forewarned to offer no resistance.

"Away goes the amorous highwayman," Pepper proceeded, "whereupon the lady lets out a cry or two, which attracts the attention of a very staid and sober gentleman riding in the opposite direction. That gentleman is yourself. You call upon the ruffian to stand; he rides on, and you give pursuit. A pistol shot or two--in the air, of course--will add effect, and show the general earnestness of the affair. And now you are racing through the night, and the highwayman is racing ahead of you; the race must be protracted. To overtake him too soon would be injudicious. You must wait until the lady's feelings of terror have been wrought to their highest pitch. She knows a rescuer is behind, and when, towards dawn, that rescuer comes up, and compels the highwayman to mend his manners and deliver up the lady, lo! she discovers that it is the man to whose gallantry, courage, and resource she has so long and so foolishly been blind. If she does not promise to marry you there and then, you are the most hopeless bungler that ever tired of being a bachelor."

In a burst of enthusiasm Granby tore at the bell-rope; then he crossed the room, and grasped one of Mr. Pepper's slender hands in his own massive fist.

"You're a man of heart and brain, Mr. Pepper," said he; "a man I'm

proud to call my friend." Then, to the drawer who entered, "Another bowl of punch," he ordered. And with that the enthusiasm went out of him as suddenly as it had flared up.

"But, rat me!" he cried, "where am I to find a man who will play the highwayman for me?"

"Surely," said Pepper, "that should not be difficult. You'll have some friend--"

"But the task asks more than friendship. It asks tact, it asks resource, it asks--I scarce know what." And then he grew inspired. "Now, if you, Mr. Pepper--"

"Alas!" sighed Pepper. "It is just such a frolic as would sort well with my rascally instincts, such a night ride as I should relish. But, unfortunately, I am bidden, myself, to Lady Tyler's ball."

"If that be all, surely the difficulty might be overcome. But perhaps I make too bold, sir. I presume, maybe, when I consider that you might stand my friend. Our acquaintance is, after all, but slight."

"A misfortune which the years may mend," said Pepper pleasantly.

"You mean that?" quoth the simple Granby.

"If you need proof of it--why, I am your man in this affair."

Thus was it planned, and on the following night--or, rather, towards two o'clock of a sharp and frosty Christmas morning--was the plan put into execution.

Half a mile from Kerry's corner--which was a mile, or so, from Tyler Park--Mr. Granby walked his horse up and down in the moonlight, waiting.

A coach rolled past him, followed soon after by another, whereat, realizing that these were homeward bound guests from Lady Tyler's, Mr. Granby waxed impatient for the arrival of Mr. Pepper. Presently hoofs rattled in the distance, growing rapidly louder and nearer, and ringing sharp and clear on the still, frosty air. A horseman riding madly down the road loomed black in the moonlight, and Mr. Granby rode to meet him.

Affairs had sped well with Mr. Pepper. He had held up Squire Clifford's coach, and carried off Squire Clifford's ward, what time the Squire instructed in his role, bellowed and trumpeted, but took care to do nothing that might hinder the make belive highwayman in his task. The girl had not gone without a struggle, it is true. But in the end, masterful Mr. Pepper had swung her to the withers of his horse, and dashed off, his left arm embracing and supporting her, and her head-- for she seemed to have lapsed into a half-stupor--fallen back against his breast. Thus they rode until they came upon Mr. Granby ambling in the opposite direction. The girl struggled, and let out a cry or two for help as she was swept past that bulky figure, and Mr. Granby, taking his cue from that, wheeled about, and called upon the abductor to stand. Mr. Pepper laughed for answer, and rattled on. Shots went off in the night, with no hurt to anyone, and Mr. Granby flung himself into hot and gallant pursuit.

He gained on them too quickly at first, so he slackened his pace, mindful of Pepper's instructions that the chase should be a long one. Suddenly something stirred by the roadside; a third horseman loomed on that lonely road, barring Mr. Granby's path; a pistol barrel gleamed before him, and--

"Stand!" thundered a gruff voice.

Mr. Granby stood. He was not by nature foolhardy, and his common

sense told him that a man with a levelled pistol was a man to be obeyed. He slipped a hand towards one of his holsters, furtively, to withdraw it again as he remembered that he had discharged both pistols at the commencement of his chase of Mr. Pepper.

"If it's my purse you want--" he began, in haste to push on.

"I want more than that," came the answer, interrupting him. And then, in the politer manner affected by gentlemen of the road, "Sir, it grieves me vastly to put you to discomfort. But the messengers are after me, and my horse is spent. I'll trouble you to dismount."

"But--" began Granby in dismay.

"Dismount!" bellowed the highway man, dropping all courteous affectations. "Dismount this instant, or I'll blow your brains out."

Mr. Granby came quickly to the ground. In an instant the tobyman was beside him. Another moment, and he had swung himself into Granby's empty saddle, and was off at a gallop into the night.

There stood Granby--Granby, the heroic rescuer of distressed dames-- on the white, sparkling snow, in sore perplexity, anger, and chagrin. Then, in a spirit of philosophy determining to make the best of matters, he mounted the spent horse that had been left him, the sorriest nag that ever wore a saddle, and gave it a touch of the spur. After all, his loss amounted to no more than a horse, and Mr. Granby was wealthy enough to envisage that loss without great concern. But what of Pepper and the lady he was to rescue? Surely Pepper would lag behind, and wait for him. But soon--being unable to get more than a walk out of the animal he bestrode--he realized that unless Pepper came to a standstill, there was no chance of his being overtaken; and if he were so foolish as to come to a standstill to wait for Granby to come up with him, then the whole scheme would be

betrayed, and must miscarry. The horse staggered a quarter of a mile or so under the stimulus of Granby's frantic spurring; then it foundered altogether, and Granby was forced to dismount.

He pondered the matter as best his rage would let him. To take the horse farther was out of the question. There was no choice but to leave the beast and push on afoot, trusting to Mr. Pepper's ingenuity to afford him an early opportunity of coming to that pretty sword-play they had agreed upon. Mr. Granby set off at a run, taking the road that led to Guildford, for Guildford was the goal arranged. But Guildford was twenty miles away, and it was not until after eight o'clock of that Christmas morning that Mr. Granby dragged his weary body over the bridge that spans the Wey, and up the precipitous High Street of that ancient town.

He was a man utterly disillusioned, a man in whom the thought of his own physical discomforts had quenched all amorous aspirations, a man whose only remaining ambition was to dry his sodden boots in some comfortable inn parlour and mend his physical discomforts with an ample breakfast. If a thought he gave to any other matter, it was to curse the idiotic Pepper for having ridden on, as he appeared to have done, heedless of whether Mr. Granby was in pursuit or not.

He stamped wearily into the yard of the "Black Bull," swung into the inn, and making his way down a passage, opened the first door he came upon. A lady and a gentleman were at table there, and Mr. Granby, realizing that he intruded, was for withdrawing hastily, when a cheery voice hailed him.

"Mr. Granby! Gad! You're come at last!" Mr. Pepper had risen from the table, and was advancing towards him with a smile upon his pleasant young face. Granby gasped, and looked at the lady. It was Jenny.

"At least," cried slow-witted Granby, thinking that matters were to be righted after all, "it seems I am not come too late." And he put his hand to the hilt of his small-sword. But Pepper only laughed.

"If it's the pretty show of sword-play you're thinking of, you're too late altogether. Come in, man, and break your fast with us. I make no doubt you'll be nigh dead of hunger." And he drew Granby, despite himself almost, into the room.

"What--what do you mean?" he demanded, scowling, for he noticed now that Jenny's air was not such as her position should inspire; her cheeks were red, and she seemed a prey to laughter.

"Why," said Mr. Pepper airily, advancing a chair for his guest, "when you never came, what was I to do with this lady on my hands? I ask you, what would you have done in my place?"

The question quenched all Mr. Granby's vexation. Engrossed as he had been in his own calamities, he had given no thought to Mr. Pepper's quandary.

"You'll agree," continued Mr. Pepper, "that I could scarce ride on with her after daylight. We should have been stopped. Besides, there are limits to a horse's endurance, and to a man's. We must stop somewhere. At the first inn would be Miss Egerton's opportunity. She has but to call for help, and in what case should I find myself? I have been in gaol once, as I have already had occasion to inform you, and I have little fancy for repeating the experience. I hope, sir, that you realize my delicate position."

"Indeed, sir," murmured the confused and bewildered Granby, "I own it must have been trying!"

"You see, then," Mr. Pepper cut in, "that it was necessary to do

something that should put me in shelter from the law."

"And he did," Jenny explained, laughter sparkling in her eyes and dimpling her smooth, fresh cheek, "what you will agree was the only thing to do. He told me the truth. Oh, shame, Mr. Granby! Shame on you for setting such a scheme on foot and subjecting a poor girl to so much misery and discomfort."

"But, madam--," groaned Mr. Granby unable to say more.

"Mr. Pepper was wise to tell me the truth, and cast himself, as he did, upon my mercy," she concluded.

Mr. Granby said nothing. He sat nursing his hat, his gaze averted, abashed like a child caught in a naughty act. How different was all this from the brave plan they had made! "Miss Egerton very charitably forgave us," said Pepper, "and we determined to break our fast here whilst awaiting you."

Granby screwed up his courage to ask: "And now?" in a very sheepish voice.

"You see," Pepper explained confidentially, "even having made my peace with Miss Egerton, I felt myself far from secure. You'll remember why I was in gaol two years ago. I told you the reason." Granby nodded.

"Therefore," put in Jenny, "it became necessary for Mr. Pepper further to protect himself."

"In her mercy," Pepper resumed, "she realized how unpleasant it might be for me if I were discovered here--by her guardian, say--alone with a child upon whom I had no claim of kinship. Besides, the lady has a reputation, and I could not in honesty have called myself your friend if I had allowed the reputation of a lady whom you had

thought of making your wife to be placed in jeopardy. So while breakfast was cooking we stepped across the street, and were quietly married by the most civil parson in the world."

"Odso!" roared Granby. "You are fooling me, then?" And he got heavily to his feet, his face purple with indignation.

"Fooling you?" cried Pepper. "Not I. I am telling you the truth. I ask you what else was I to do? You yourself forced the situation upon me. What other way out of it had I? And, rat me, sir, where have you tarried all night that you never overtook me as we had arranged?"

"Bah!" said Granby, who was now beginning to understand things. "I have been walking a matter of twenty miles since the knave you hired deprived me of my horse."

He paused, summoning invective to his aid, his wits now penetrating to the very heart of this situation. It flickered in that moment through his mind that Squire Clifford had made some allusion to a spark for whom his ward was suspected of a fancy. This, then, was the sparking question, and Granby had been fooled by him. And it was into the keeping of this hair-brained young scapegrace--who had been gaoled already for running off with some girl or other--that Jenny had given her sweet young life! Granby felt naturally vindictive. He planted himself squarely on his feet, and dully eyed the couple at the table.

"Will you tell me," he asked with grim unction, "the name of the lady for whose abduction you were gaoled two years ago, Mr. Pepper?"

Mr. Pepper looked disconcerted, Granby thought with relish.

"It's something of an ordeal, sir, to be forced to confess to such follies in the presence of my wife, and--and on my bridal morning.

Still, if you insist--"

"I do," said Granby firmly. "She shall know what manner of man she had wed."

"It's two years ago, and that's a long time in a young man's life," said Pepper. "My memory may be at fault, but I believe it was a Miss Egerton, of whom you may have heard, sir." And from the ripple of laughter that broke from Jenny's lips, Granby knew that he was being mocked with the truth.

It was more than he could bear. He swung out of the room, and out of the inn, and tired, damp and hungry though he was, he determined to get a horse and ride back to Clifford Manor to tell the squire what had befallen. He realized with angry shame how those merry young gentlemen at the "King's Arms" had fooled him the night before when they sent him to Pepper for guidance in this delicate matter.

While he waited in the yard for a horse, he could not resist a peep through the window of the room where the bridal couple were at table. A bright firelight played upon walls and ceiling, and relieved the lingering gloom of that Christmas morning. Jenny, he noticed, sat with a kerchief to her eyes, and Mr. Pepper with an arm round her neck strove to console her. The sight affected Granby oddly. Maybe she was weeping out of pity for the treatment he had received; maybe she was thinking of her guardian and the trouble he would make for them. Mr. Granby was honestly fond of the child, and he felt a lump in his throat as he pondered the matter of her tears. Tears on her wedding-day! He noticed now how well-matched they were in youth and looks, and he realized how ill-matched would she have been had she wedded him as was intended. He remembered, too, now that his mood was softening, that, after all, Pepper was little to blame for what had happened. It was those rascally wags at the "King's Arms" who had fooled him rather than Pepper. In Pepper's

place he might himself have done just what Pepper had done.

And then a peal of joybells crashed suddenly upon the morning air to remind Granby of what day it was, and what the message of that day was.

He straightened himself. He may have been dull, podgy and unimaginative, but he was a good fellow at heart. Back into the inn and into their parlour he strode, and so full of purpose was his step that Jenny looked up in alarm as he thrust wide the door. He advanced, his face rather red, his eyes more sheepish than ever.

"I forgot," said he, "to wish you a merry Christmas, and I've come back to do it. If you'll ride to Clifford Manor with me, I think I can persuade the squire to let us all spend this bridal Christmas happily together." And he held out a hand to each of them.

MONSIEUR DELAMORT

I

In his outfit as a thorough-paced chevalier d'industrie, M. Delamort might be said to include all the more usual tools of his craft. He could tell your fortune by the cards, by your bumps, by the tea-cup, the crystal, or your hands; his legerdemain was a marvel of dexterity; he dabbled in hypnotism, and at times--where a particularly weak-minded individual was his subject--he achieved some slight measure of success. He practised medicine upon occasion, with results that were only a little more disastrous than those which frequently attend the efforts of duly qualified men.

Of all his accomplishments spiritualism was the one that afforded

him the deepest measure of pride. Thanks to an ingenious fraud, with which, by the aid of a confederate, he had imposed upon simple folk in almost all the rural districts of France, he had amassed a very considerable sum of money, which is an easy explanation of his predilection for that branch of his trickster's profession.

His confederate, unfortunately, took it into his head to apply to other ends the dishonesty acquired in his partnership with Delamort; and so clumsy was he that he got himself arrested for embezzling, and sentenced to a term of three years' imprisonment.

To Delamort the loss was incalculable; nor did he think it even worth while to take any steps to repair it, despairing of ever finding another who could so plausibly play the part. He found himself compelled to abandon spiritualism. He no longer held forth to gaping villagers upon the mysteries of the spirit-world, no longer talked of "psychic forces" and the "obsessing flesh." He fell back upon the more vulgar and less remunerative craft of fortune-telling, and had to be content to pocket silver, where before he had taken gold.

And then--quite by accident--it came to him how he might resume his trade in ghosts, single-handed though he was.

It happened at Soreau, one evening. He was sitting in the village inn, entertaining a little crowd of rustics with an exposition of sleight-of-hand, and leaving them amazed at his miracles, when the subject of spiritualism was introduced by old Grosjean.

"There was a man of your name could raise ghosts," said the villager.

Delamort flashed him a piercing glance of his black, solemn eyes as he answered impressively: "I am that man."

There was a momentary hush, followed by a babel of questions from those of the party who were not believers in spiritual manifestations. It was the sort of challenge to which Delamort was accustomed, and one for which he had often angled in the old days.

Sheer force of habit brought him to his feet, that he might reply with fitting impressiveness, and for the next few minutes he descanted in his sharp, metallic voice upon that vexed question, causing his audience to gasp at the boldness of his statements.

A tall, lean figure, dressed in clothes of faded black, aquiline of nose and clearcut of face, with long black hair brushed back from the forehead, fiery of glance and liberal of gesture, he imposed upon those simple men of Soreau as much by his presence, air, and voice as by the things he said.

Yet some materialists there were whom neither his manner nor his matter could impress, and among them was old Grosjean, who was, in his way, a man of fair education and some reading. It was this fellow whom Delamort singled out for his special prey upon this occasion.

A quick judge of character, he had read at a glance the cupidity so plainly advertised in Grosjean's close-set eyes, in the lines of his thin- lipped mouth, and in his lean, claw-like hands. To these very apparent characteristics of the old man did he owe the notion with which he was so suddenly inspired, and upon which he set himself at once to act.

"You may laugh, you fools!" he thundered, with a fine assumption of anger. "I have been laughed at before by men as ignorant. But I have changed their mirth to terror before I had done with them; and I will do as much for you if any here has the courage to submit to the trial."

Grosjean cackled contemptuously, whereupon Delamort swooped down upon him as does the hawk upon the sparrow.

"Derider!" he cried fiercely. "Dare you undergo the test?"

"Bah!" snarled Grosjean. "You are an impudent swindler. I have heard of you."

For a second Delamort's steady glance wavered. Then he recovered, and let it rest balefully upon the speaker.

"Insult," said he sententiously, "is a woman's argument, not a man's. I am no swindler."

"Prove it and I'll believe you," was the answer.

"Certainly I will prove it," returned Delamort promptly. "You have but to name the man whose spirit you would have me evoke, and I will undertake to render it visible and audible to your skeptic senses."

"Very well," quoth Grosjean, still derisive. "Let me behold my father's ghost and I will believe you, and withdraw the term I have applied to you."

His friends, and indeed they were all friends of his--for Grosjean was as well known in Soreau as the steeple of the village church--encouraged him in his attitude of defiance.

"You shall have your ghost," Delamort promised him grimly. "But, messieurs, I am not to be insulted in this fashion by a parcel of country clods without taking satisfaction for it. It is not my way to gamble over a matter so terrible as this which I am about to embark upon, but you have said so much that before I carry out M. Grosjean's demands I should like to know how much each of you is disposed to wager that I fail to do this thing?"

"I expected that," said Grosjean, with a senile chuckle, and he lacked not for chorus.

"Did you?" sneered Delamort in his turn. "And I suppose that, as it becomes a question of risking a little money, you would prefer not to submit, for fear that I should prove you wrong."

Grosjean's reply was to produce ostentatiously three napoleons and bang them on the table.

"I'll wager those," he cried, "that you fail to raise me my father's ghost or, indeed, any ghost whatsoever."

"Excellent," said Delamort. "And these other gentlemen--your friends--will they also manifest in gold their opinion that I am an impostor?"

"I'll wager a louis," cried one, and his example was followed by almost every member of the company, until a little pillar of twenty- six napoleons stood upon the wine-stained table.

Delamort quietly produced his purse, and counted out a like sum. Then, taking up also the money staked by the company, and having obtained a sheet of paper, he wrapped up the fifty-two napoleons and handed the package to the landlord, begging him to act as stakeholder.

"Now monsieur," said be, turning to Grosjean, "if monsieur l'hote will find us a room I am ready to commence my seance."

II.

Grosjean paled a little before the man's assurance, and in consideration of the confidence which had led him to wager a sum of

over six hundred francs. At heart, however skeptic, the old man was far from valiant, and he would certainly have backed out of the business had he seen a way of doing it without loss of prestige.

But he feared the derision of his friends. He braced himself with the assurance that there were no such things as ghosts, and that Delamort was an impostor, whom a sharp lookout on his part must baffle. With the determination to watch him very closely, and not permit himself to be fooled, he rose and announced himself ready.

The host conducted the pair to a room above, leaving the company in a state of mingled excitement and derision, to await the result of this odd experiment. Within the feebly lighted bedchamber which the landlord had assigned to them, Delamort bade his companion be seated, and approached him with eyes riveted on his, and hands busy at mesmeric passes. He had hopes of gaining sufficient influence over Grosjean to be able to mentally suggest to him that he saw the spirit of his dead father.

But it so happened that Grosjean, who, as I have mentioned, was educated above his station, had once read a book on mesmerism, and was acquainted with its methods. He recognized them in Delamort's antics and, with an indignant laugh, he rose to his feet.

"I think we have had enough of this foolery, M. Delamort," he said. "I half expected that you would resort to hypnotism to gain your ends."

"You are acquainted, then, with hypnotism?" quoth Delamort, a trifle crestfallen, slipping his hand into his pocket as he spoke.

"Sufficiently acquainted with it to see through you, my friend," answered Grosjean. "I think that I may fairly claim to have won my wager."

"One moment," Delamort implored him.. "It is an interesting topic--hypnotism. Doubtless you are aware of the effect produced by the contemplation of a bright disk or ring?"

"Yes," answered the other dubiously. "What of it?"

"I am about to have recourse to it in consequence of my failure with the mesmeric passes," was the cool rejoinder. "I beg that you will contemplate this."

Grosjean found himself staring at the bright rim of the barrel of a revolver, with which Delamort had suddenly covered him.

"Bon Dieu!" he ejaculated in affright.

"Ah!" purred Delamort, with manifest satisfaction. "By your face and manner I see that you are already coming under the influence. Now, be good enough to reseat yourself and listen to me."

Grosjean obeyed him with that alacrity which terror alone can impart.

"Excellent," murmured the occultist. "The hypnotic power of a pistol-nozzle has no equal. Now, sir, I think that you are sufficiently warned of the manner of man you have to deal with, to sit quietly and listen to what I have to propose."

"You don't mean to shoot me?" cried Grosjean interrogatively.

"Shoot you? By no means. You will be far too reasonable. I am exerting no more than a slight persuasion to induce you to listen to me."

"Then, will you--would you mind putting that thing away? You wouldn't believe how easy it is to have an accident with firearms.".

With the utmost affability, Delamort slipped the pistol back into his pocket.

III.

"Now, to business," said Delamort. "You may think, monsieur, that I am a rank impostor. I am not. I am a genuine spiritualist, as well as something of a hypnotist. Indeed, I have a reputation to maintain. Now, it occasionally happens that I come across a man so strongminded, of such determination and willpower that my art is defeated and baffled. Such a man, my dear M. Grosjean, are you. I confess it with regret, for it is never pleasant to find ourselves confronted by a stronger individuality, which will not bring itself under our control."

Grosjean, who was recovering from his fears, smiled, with the pleasure occasioned him by these elaborate compliments.

"While my failure, monsieur," Delamort continued, "makes you the gainer of a paltry three napoleons, it occasions me the loss of over six hundred francs. As you will readily perceive, there is no proportion in this. Besides, I am a poor man, M. Grosjean; and, in addition to the loss of all this money, there is the further loss of character and prestige, which will be nothing short of ruinous to me. You understand?"

Grosjean grinned until his yellow face was wrinkled into the semblance of a crumpled parchment.

"I understand, but I am afraid I cannot help you. It is the fortune of war." He endeavored to give his voice an inflection of polite regret, but the pleasure of gaining three napoleons was not so lightly to be suppressed by a man of Grosjean's grasping nature.

"Pardon," returned Delamort. "But you can help me, and by helping me you can help yourself. Now, if instead of three napoleons, your profit by my failure were to be six, would it not be worth your while to save my reputation?"

"What do you mean?" quoth Grosjean suspiciously.

"Just this. If you will acknowledge to your friends that you have seen your father's ghost, and consequently lost your wager, I will pay you nine napoleons--that is, the three you have staked and the six I am giving you in compensation."

Grosjean's eyes brightened with greed.

"It would be doing you a good service, would it not--saving your reputation?"

"Assuredly."

"Also, it would be making you a profit of the twenty-six napoleons staked by my friends, eh?"

"Why, yes. But not twenty-six, my friend. Seventeen napoleons will be my total profit after I have settled with you."

Grosjean reflected a moment; then a cunning smile spread on his face. "I admire your method of raising ghosts, M. Delamort," said he with jeering irony. He shook his head and laughed. "No, no, my friend. Such a service as you are asking of me is worth more than six napoleons. You are proposing a revolting course to me. I can't do it. I really can't."

"You are throwing away money, monsieur, by your refusal," Delamort reminded him. "Surely a gain of six napoleons is better than a gain of only three. And you are earning it without any trouble or

inconvenience. How much better would you be if I did raise your father's ghost? It would only scare you to death. I beg that you will seriously consider my proposal."

"I can't be a party to such a swindle. I really can't--not for six napoleons, anyhow. If I practise this wretched deceit upon my trusting friends, I must have half your profit. That is to say, I must have thirteen napoleons."

"I'll give you ten."

"Thirteen or I'll walk out and denounce you for an impudent impostor. Make your choice."

Some one knocked at the door. His friends were becoming anxious.

"Are you all right, Grosjean?" inquired a voice, to which the old man returned an affirmative reply.

"Has he raised the spirit yet?"

"Not yet." answered Grosjean, while Delamort added: "But I hope to do so in a moment or two, if you will refrain from interrupting me. Have the goodness not to disturb us again." Then to Grosjean, in a whisper: "Now, monsieur," said he, "what is it to be? Will you accept ten napoleons?"

"Thirteen," was the laconic answer, delivered with finality.

"Very well, then. Thirteen be it, provided that you will follow out my instructions."

"What are they?"

"You are to scream two or three times, and then fall down and

simulate a swoon as best you can, reviving only after I have admitted your friends."

"Parfaitement," said the old traitor, his greedy eyes shining with avarice. "Pay me the money now, so that my friends will have no suspicions."

Delamort produced his purse and carefully took thirteen napoleons from it, one by one. One by one he delivered them to his companion.

"See that they don't jingle," he admonished him; "for if any one were to hear it he would suspect."

Grosjean nodded that he understood, and pocketed each coin as he received it. When he had received the thirteenth he still put forth his hand, and upon being asked by Delamort what he wanted, he insolently replied that he wanted the return of his stake of three napoleons.

"That was included. It was to be thirteen altogether," the occultist protested. But Grosjean had not so understood it, and swore that he would not perform his part of the bargain until he received another sixty francs.

They wrangled for some moments, Delamort protesting that thus Grosjean was making more out of it than he was himself. In the end he was forced to give in and pay the further money demanded, which he did with the worst grace in the world.

IV.

"Now for your part, monsieur," said Delamort; "and see that you play me no tricks."

It was unlikely that he would, since were he to betray the occultist he

must forego the gain he was making. Rising from his chair, he awoke the echoes of the inn with a scream that was a masterpiece of blood- curdling vociferation.

"Excellent," Delamort approved. "Repeat it."

Obediently, Grosjean emitted a second shriek more dreadful than the first. There came an excited knocking at the door.

"Don't touch me--don't touch me!" screamed Grosjean, prompted by Delamort. "Mon Dieu! I am terrified. Oh!"

With that final moan he let himself fall heavily, and from his position he winked wickedly at Delamort. The occultist now turned to the door, which he opened immediately.

"What are you doing to him?" demanded half a dozen of Grosjean's friends as they sprang into the room.

"No more than I undertook to do," Delamort replied. "I think you had better attend to him. The sight of his father has frightened him a little, but he will be all right shortly."

They hastened to the prostrate man, and raised him tenderly.

"There. He is better now," exclaimed one.

"His color is returning," announced another.

"I feared that ill would come of it," put in a third. "It is an evil thing to tamper with the dead."

"As for you," snarled a fourth, angrily shaking his fist in Delamort's face, "you ought to be hanged, you wizard."

"I am no wizard," answered Delamort, truthfully enough. "As M. Grosjean there can tell you, I have worked by perfectly natural means."

Grosjean, now feigning to recover, was giving the company an awe-inspiring account of the apparition that had visited him.

"I am punished," groaned that old scoundrel. "Never again will I laugh at spiritualism." Then to the host: "You may hand the stakes to M. Delamort," he said. "He has certainly won his wager, curse him!"

It was with an extremely ill grace that the landlord handed the occultist the package containing the money. Delamort accepted it in silence, and slipped it into his pocket. His business being thus concluded, he was on the point of taking his leave of the company, when the landlord rudely accelerated his departure by a request that he should take himself off the premises.

"I've had enough of spiritualism in my house," he swore, with a vigorous oath.

"Monsieur is a bad loser," was Delamort's cold answer, as he took the hint and his leave without further delay.

It was after his departure that old Grosjean felt the need of a glass of cognac to revive him. That was natural enough, but that he should invite several of his friends to a glass of something, at his expense, was a departure from the ordinary grasping course of his existence which occasioned them some measure of surprise.

Seeing ghosts was evidently a salutary occupation, if it could instil generosity into so mean a heart as Grosjean's. They profited by his mood, and accepted with alacrity the offer he made; and while they drank his health he fished from his pocket a golden napoleon with

which to pay.

The landlord took the coin, glanced at it, and rang it on the table. It emitted a most unmusical timbre.

"It's cracked," some one suggested.

"It's bad,", the landlord stated as he handed it back to Grosjean.

"Bad?" echoed the old fellow, with a sudden pang of apprehension. "Bad? Impossible! Anyhow, here is another one."

While he was examining the coin the landlord had returned to him, he heard the second one give out the same false sound. Dim suspicion now became sickening certainty. With an oath he drew from another pocket a five-franc piece, to pay for the drink which in a moment of expansion he had offered his compeers.

"Wherever did you get those coins from, M. Grosjean?" inquired the host. "Surely some one has victimized you."

Deeper than words can tell were his rage and mortification. Yet deeper still was the old man's wisdom, for he held his peace touching the transaction by which those coins had passed into his hands.

THE FOSTER LOVER

Up the hill from Horsebridge, dust-clogged in every pore, jaded and saddle-worn, I urged my weary nag--the second that I had spent since leaving London at daybreak on my traitor's errand. On the hill's crest I drew rein, as much out of instinct and sheer habit as out of mercy for the poor beast that bore me.

On my left a long line of shadow, tall and black, stretched the trees of Dunstock Park adown the hill half-way to Romsey town. And yonder, through the thinning topmost branches, was a golden glory where the moon was rising, big as a millstone, yellow as a guinea. Here, close at hand, atop its flight of terraces, stood Dunstock House, holding the thing dearest to me in all the world; and Dunstock House, to my vast surprise, was now one blaze of light, its windows glowing like jewels in the setting of the cool, fragrant night.

Sir William entertained--that much was plain--and I had known nothing of it; but then, where was the wonder of that, since for three weeks I had lain close in London, waiting to receive and bear my lord the news for which all true lovers of King James, the exile, were now athirst? A ball, it seemed, was toward. The scrape of fiddles reached me there at the park gates; aye, and the shuffle of feet, I could have sworn, so calm and silent was the summer night.

I sat awhile, what time my horse, with pendent head and neck outstretched, breathed raucously in its greed for air. And as I waited there the gavotte came to an end, the fiddling ceased, and in its room arose a babble of many voices, touched off with frequent laughter, and out on to the terrace came by twos and threes Sir William's guests to breathe the grateful cool.

It occurred to me then that I need ride no farther. Here was my goal; for if Sir William entertained, there was little doubt--aye, and the thought was bitter enough, God knows!--that here I should find my lord. So I roused the mare and urged her through the gates and up the broad avenue, black now in the shadow of the elms. A truer motive lay, no doubt, in the hope of seeing another than my lord--Alicia, whom I never tired of seeing whom I sought every chance to see, although I knew that she was not for me. She was a matter that lay between Captain Percy, whom she loved, and my lord, whom she

detested, yet who was insistent and persistent, and being a great man, had, every hope of winning her, her detestation notwithstanding. As for me--But why say more of myself, who, afterall, am of small account--the foster-lover, no more--in this tale of that sweet lady's nuptials?

Erebus was not so black as were the shadows there beneath the elms, and when my horse had stumbled twice I thought I should be safer afoot. I tethered the brute to a tree and went on. Quitting the avenue, I struck a well-known shorter road, a pathway through the shrubbery, leading to the lower terrace; and Fate herself, I think, must have been leading me.

At the shrubbery's end I paused, however, on the edge of the gloom. The sweep of lawn before me was now alight from the risen moon, and I bethought me that I was proceeding a thought recklessly. How should I, charged with that secret business, present myself thus, all grimed and dusty from the road, to seek my lord among Sir William's guests? Such an advent must fire the train of much surmising; and all surmising was dangerous to my lord and me, and to the Cause itself. I paused then and pondered. Aye, I were better away to Romsey, to await my lord's coming. But since my lord would not yet be leaving--you see, I had no doubt touching his presence at that dance--there was time to spare, and it was sweet and fragrant in the shrubbery after the dust of the high road; sweet it was to know--although the stiffness and the impression of it still abode with me--that there was no horse between my knees; sweet to spy upon the merry-makers, what time I stretched my legs and snatched a brief rest, to which the great diligence I had made that day gave me the title; and there was the greatest sweet of all--and this may have been the real truth of my abiding--the chance of a glimpse of my dear Alicia.

And presently this glimpse I had and more. A couple descended the steps from the upper terrace, where other couples sauntered; a man,

tall and graceful in a lilac satin that gleamed silvery in the moonlight, and a lady, more graceful still though not so tall, a white ghost in that ghostly radiance. They were Alicia and Captain Percy, the man to whom her heart was given. A good fellow enough he was, a blundering, honest, good-natured lad, yet scarce worthy to be the custodian of that treasure. But then--where was the man of whom I should not think the same? Moreover, she loved him, as I knew, for she herself had told me. Was not I her friend--the sometime playmate of her childhood, who had now the confidence of her adolescence--and was it not to me she came for counsel when she had need of it? And that was scarce as often as I could have wished.

More than once as they advanced she looked behind her, and the impulse of that backward glancing was not to be mistaken. It was fear. Lest I should have played the eavesdropper on that pair of lovers, I had departed then, but those timid, over-shoulder glances argued trouble. The thought of my lord surged on the instant in my mind, and I decided to remain.

"Nay, nay, sweetheart," I caught his ardent murmur. "Never tremble. Let the ogre come and be--eaten."

"You'd not--" she began. "You'd never--"

"Aye, sweet, would I? More I will; it is the one clear way. Since 'tis not possible to unravel his vile knot, we'll cut it, as did Alexander that other Gordian one," spoke the man he was, direct and simple, with no mind for subtleties.

"Ah, no!" She clutched his arm, and her fears, 'twas plain, were all for him--so plain that I had some ado to choke down some certain bitterness that arose in me. "Ah, no!" she cried again, and added the anguished prayer. "Dear God, is there none to help me?"

"There is one at least very fain," said I, "did he but know in what case the help is needed."

They started back, and Percy claps hand to the hilt of his dress-sword. "Who's there?" he bellows, mighty fierce.

"Jocelyn! It is Jocelyn!" cried Alicia, and my soul was glad that she had been so quick to recognize my voice; glad, too, to catch in her accents a certain note of welcome. I acknowledged my identity, and gave good reason for not quitting my concealment.

"What do you here?" quoth Captain Percy.

"You were ever over-inquisitive, Percy," I answered him. "Take it that I am playing guardian angel to the pair of you. And now your story."

"What can you do, dear Jocelyn?" cried Alicia.

"I shall be in better case to say when I have heard what is your need. Is it my Lord Hedingham who troubles you?"

It seems I had put my finger on the plague-spot. "Much has happened since you went to town," says she by way of preface, and then Percy swore under his breath, and looking up to see the cause of it, I beheld a slim gentleman, all white and gold--like the Cupid on a bridal cake-- descending from the upper terrace. She saw that dazzling vision, too, and went on breathlessly: "I must speak with you ere I sleep, Jocelyn, for you may help me. You are ever wise." Which I swear is a compliment she had never paid her lover.

"Shall I await you here?" I asked her.

"Aye, do," said she. "I'll come to you as soon as may be."

My lord drew nigh as swiftly as aged legs allowed him; there was no

time for more; her arm in Captain Percy's she turned to meet him. He bowed, and I almost fancied I could hear the creak of his old joints--for it was a very senile Cupid--just as I thought I could see the leer upon his painted face.

"Madam," said he, and simpered. "La! You run a risk of chill. The night is so insidious, child, and the moonlight--Oh, I vow 'tis vastly unhealthy!"

"To your rheumatics, not a doubt, my lord," growls Percy.

Hedingham looked him over with an eye that glittered in a smiling face. "I have not the rheumatics, sir," says he, as one who would repulse an insult.

"Why, then," quoth Percy readily enough, "you'll be acquiring them if you come tripping it on dewy lawns o' nights. A foolish practice at all times, my lord; a deadly one at your age."

"What a physician was lost when they made you a soldier, Captain Percy!" simpers his lordship, with a giggle to mask his frenzy.

"Maybe," says Percy, very sweetly as they moved away. "But as it is, the trades go hand in hand, for a physician is sometimes needed to mend my work."

"Sometimes?" says my lord, with much depth of meaning. "Ah!"

"Aye, my lord--only sometimes," Percy explained, "for at others it is past mending."

The last I heard of them my lord was laughing a high-pitched senile cackle--and commending Captain Percy's wit; and so they passed up the steps, using defiance wrapped in pleasantry, like a gall pill smeared with honey.

On the upper terrace figures moved, the windows shone. And the music was taken up once more, to be silenced and again resumed ere I was disturbed. And when at last, nigh upon an hour later, a visitor I had, that visitor was not the Alicia for whom I waited, but Captain Percy. He came hot-foot and panting, as much from the haste that he had made as from the anger and excitement that were quickening his pulses.

"Jocelyn," he bawls, wildly. "She's gone! They've taken her!"

I quitted the trees and came out on to the lawn, heedless now of who might see me. "What a plague do ye mean?" quoth I. "Taken her? Who's taken her?"

He caught me fiercely by the arm and let out his tale. "I had it from Mowbray, the footman, who saw the whole thing happen from an upper window. She was walking in the clearing with Hedingham. He had drawn her thither, away from all the others. Suddenly two men appeared from the bushes on the far side. They flung a cloak over her head, swung her up, and ran with her to a carriage that stood waiting at the top of the avenue. Hedingham jumped in after her and the carriage went off at a gallop."

I groaned an oath. "How long since?" quoth I.

"Some ten minutes, scarcely more," he answered. "I told Sir William the moment I had the news, and he answered me that I was in error--that Mistress Alicia was in her room; that she had withdrawn in consequence of a headache."

Now here was more villainy than I had feared. I dragged him with me across the lawns towards the house. "I'll fathom this," said I, and when we came to the clearing in front of the classic portico, I bade

him await me there. The next moment I stood in the hall of Dunstock House, all travel-stained as I was, demanding to see Sir William instantly. A lackey ushered me into small room that was Sir William's study, and thither he came to me at once.

"Back from London, Jocelyn!"

I cut him short. "Where is your niece, Sir William?" I demanded. A change swept over his great face; his pale eyes changed from vacuity that was their habit to one of mingled fear and malice. He snorted first, then informed me that Alicia kept her chamber.

"You have been misinformed, Sir William," answered I. "She does not keep her chamber. She has been carried off by that villain Hedingham."

Another change crept over his countenance. It grew livid. "You mistake," says he. "She is in her chamber."

I looked at him between the eyes a moment; then I took up my hat and whip, which on entering I had set upon the table. Abundantly clear it was that here I but wasted precious time. He watched my going with a face that told me nothing. I paused, my hand upon the doorknob.

"Sir William," said I, "I know not how my Lord Hedingham may have won over you the hold he very plainly has. But if this is the price at which you bought your freedom, I think you have paid over-dearly for it in parting with your honour."

"Sir--" he began.

"Spare yourself," I begged him. "The riddle is not difficult to read. You seek to use compulsion with Alicia. Alicia sets you at defiance, and so you give his lordship all opportunity for carrying her off. But

hark you, Sir William, in spite of you and of Lord Hedingham, Alicia marries where her heart is set, and that so soon as I shall have freed her from his lordship's clutches. In purchasing her freedom from him, it may be that I purchase yours. I mention it but to add that I do so of necessity, not intent; so that you may harbour no gratitude for me."

The change in his demeanour was amazing. "You would do that?" he cried, the blood mounting to his cheeks, a gleam of hope quickening his eyes. After all he was more fool than knave. Then he put the altered manner from him as swiftly as he assumed it. "Pshaw! What are you, fool, to pit yourself against Lord Hedingham? You'll not so much as gain admission to his house."

"I thank you, sir, at least for telling me where to look," said I, and left him.

Outside I found her lover fuming. "Get a coach," I bade the booby, "and follow after me. Use all dispatch and drive to Lord Hedingham's door. But do nothing further. There I will bring Alicia to you."

"Odso," he cried. "Are you mad? How are you to win into Hedingham's?"

"'Tis what Sir William is wondering," I answered him. "But I think I have a key to his door. See that you make haste!" And so I left him gaping after me, and sped down the avenue to my horse.

It was a nag as near dead as any that I had seen stand that I fetched up before his lordship's door that night. Before dismounting I transferred the pistols from the holsters to my own pockets; then with the butt of my whip I drummed a sharp tattoo upon the oaken panels.

"Who's there?" came from within, a voice which I recognised for that of his man Geddes.

"'Tis I, Jocelyn Talbot. Open!" I urged.

There was an exclamation from Geddes. Clearly he had received his orders to admit me at whatsoever hour of the day or night I should present myself, for a chain fell with a clank, the key grated in the lock, and the door stood open.

"Not yet abed," says I, as I stepped past him. "Where is my lord?"

"If you'll wait here, sir," he answered hurriedly, what time he fumbled with the door chain, "I'll tell his lordship."

With my knowledge of the house and of my fellow-traitor's ways, I made a shrewd guess that he was in his cabinet beyond the library. "I'll find him for myself," said I, and started to cross the hall.

"Nay, nay!" cried Geddes in alarm. "Wait, sir, wait!" But still he was fumbling with the chain. Leave the door open, knowing what he knew, he did not dare. I quickened my step and was in the library, the door closed behind me, ere he could start to follow.

The room was empty; but across it the door of his closet stood ajar, and even as I paused I caught Alicia's voice ringing with anger and contempt. I had run him down.

"You cannot use compulsion, my lord," she was saying, "and this man dare not marry us without my consent."

Soho! His thoughtful lordship had fetched a parson, it would seem.

"Dearest Alicia," he clucked most hatefully, "who am I to use compulsion. I faint, I expire, but I do not compel."

"Then let me go, my lord," came her impatient answer.

"Nay, not that either," answered he, his accents more detestably caressing. "Do not mistake me. I will not use compulsion. Shalt wed me to-night, to-morrow, or a week hence. Despite my impatience, it shall be as you please. Yet were you wiser to wed me now, and place your fair name within the shelter of mine."

"You mean, my lord?" she demanded angrily. "Swounds! but she was a girl of spirit!"

"Why," simpers he, "that Lord Hedingham does not bear the reputation of a--an anchorite; no--not quite, my dear." And he laughed in a mock deprecatory laugh. "And the world hath a way of talking--a vile, insidious way. But you shall choose. I'll never use compulsion."

I advanced, my step ringing on the paraquetry, my spurs a-jingle. Instantly my lord's face, startled and angry, appeared at the half-opened door. Seeing me it lightened to surprise.

"Give me leave a moment, Master Cave," said he over his shoulder, and came forward, closing the door.

Under the paint his face was livid, and there was an unhealthy flush beneath his eyes. He licked his lips a moment, then: "Why, Jocelyn!" says he in a subdued voice. "You took me by surprise. I have been awaiting you these ten days." His glance went past me. "Get you gone, Geddes," he bade the man, who at that moment opened the door behind me. Then turning to me again: "What news from London?" he inquired.

"Let that wait," said I, and I think my tone must have warned him, for he looked at me more sharply. "I am concerned to-night with the news of Hampshire."

"Ah? And what may that be?" quoth his startled lordship.

"That my Lord Hedingham is a satyr and a villain," I informed him.

"'Sdeath!" he cried, as if I had stung him, and stood before me, an evil glitter in his eye.

"Do you go down on your old knees, my lord, and thank Heaven that I am come in time to take this lady away from you, else it had been very ill for you, I think."

At that a spasm of fury crossed his face. "You fool!" he snarled at me, and then, "You shall be taught!" he croaked. "You shall be taught!" And stepping forward he made shift to reach the bell-rope.

"Stay where you are, my lord," I cried, drawing a pistol from my pocket, "or I'll rid this lady of you in another way."

He paused; his jaw fell; he looked like a corpse with red-raddled cheeks. "Would you do murder?" he quavered, fearfully.

"If need be," I answered pleasantly. "Stand away from that bell-rope, my lord. I have no mind to shoot the bullies you keep about you. So! That is better," said I, and pocketed the pistol. "And now, my lord, will you please to call the lady?"

He considered me a moment, regaining by an effort some of his composure. "You fool, Talbot," he said. "You pitiful fool! Tchah! Since you demand with threats and violence, I must needs accede. But what ends do you hope to serve?"

From the street I caught at that moment the faint rumble of wheels.

"I will tell you," said I. "Captain Percy, whom this lady loves, awaits her without to complete the elopement for which your lordship has so

thoroughly provided. The minister is yonder, and shall go with them. They shall be tight-bound by morning."

He shook his head, and his lips took on a mocking smile. "You reckon rashly, and without your host. I have but to summon Alicia and tell her the price I would exact from Sir William if she were to dare do this, and I dare swear she would not go with you. I hold Sir William in a springe which shall tighten and crush him unless his niece is my Lady Hedingham this month." He leered at me in factuous triumph. "So now, my cockerel, the cards are on the table. You shall suffer for this night's work, and that is all that shall come of it--your suffering."

He looked to see me taken aback, confused. But I smiled calmly, and, I hope, contemptuously. "You tell me nothing that I did not know," I informed him. "For I can make as good a guess as any man. Cards on the table, do you say, my lord? Cards on the table be it then. And here's my pack." And from my pocket I drew the letter from King James, of which I was the bearer.

"What's that?" quoth he, with a sudden sucking in of breath.

"The trumps, I think," said I, "and Dutch William for the King of them. My lord, I neither ask nor care what manner of hold is yours upon Sir William, but I tell you that you shall relinquish it even as you shall relinquish his niece. This is the letter you been awaiting from King James that was. There is enough treason in it to bring your hoary, sinful head to the block. The lady you shall set free at once. Her lover will be growing impatient out of doors. Sir William also you shall set free. When this is done you shall have your letter; not before."

I caught his faint sigh of relief. That, he thought, was to be the full extent of my threat. "And if I refuse?" says he. "If I refuse?"

"If within four-and-twenty hours Sir William fails to bring me word

himself that you have complied, I lay this letter before the nearest justice of the peace."

Great Jove himself never launched a deadlier thunderbolt than that. For an instant he beat about for air. Then, "You dastard!" he screamed. "You hound! You foul, infernal traitor! When the King comes to his own again--"

"We deal with the present, not the future," I cut in. "Your answer, my lord?"

He stared at me awhile, sucking at his nether lip, his face blank now as a mask. Thus a moment; then he exploded once more. "Fool, there is one thing you have forgotten. If you pull me down, you will be crushed in my ruins. You are as deeply in it as I am. How can you incriminate me without bringing yourself to the gallows? Resolve me that," he crowed in wicked triumph.

"It is a cost I have counted," I answered very quietly. "I am concerned to-night neither for myself nor you, my lord. But for my lady there. And she goes hence with me."

Surprise was not the only emotion on his face. He sank feebly to a chair. "Oh!" he cried. "You are mad."

"Of a most sweet madness, my lord," answered I. "Have I played trumps enough, or must I play King William?"

He rose as with an effort. Again he fell to reviling me for the double traitor and villain that undoubtedly I was. Then checking at last, he crossed the room, and threw wide the door of the inner chamber.

"Mistress Alicia!" he called. She came forward.

"Jocelyn!" she cried, and stood at gaze upon the threshold, her

hands clasped and held to her bosom, and in her eyes such a light of gladness as I'll swear not even the sight of Captain Percy--pretty fellow though he was--could have haled thither. And that I had for balm.

"I have come to fetch you, Alicia," I informed her. "Bid the parson to come too. He is no longer needed here."

A moment she stood there, her eyes wandering from me to the crumpled figure, all white and gold that was my Lord Hedingham, then back to me again. "What miracle have you wrought upon my lord?" she asked in sweet bewilderment.

"Shall I tell her, my lord?" I mocked him.

"Get you gone!" he snarled in a passion. "Get you gone!"

I opened the door to the hall, where Geddes waited. "Geddes--the door!" I ordered. "Mistress Alicia is leaving." Then, to the minister who had now come forward, too--a poor hedge-parson whom his lordship had suborned to do his vile work. "You shall not be disappointed of your fee," I comforted him, "nor need you soil your conscience in the work that's to be done. This lady is to wed; the mistake was in the groom. You'll find the right one waiting without with a carriage.

"Jocelyn?" quoth she, with parted lips and questioning eyes, a frown between them.

"Faith! 'tis Captain Percy," I informed her. "You were best elope with him, since your fate is to elope this night. Go, Alicia, and be happy! Tarry no longer here. The air of these rooms is foul and smirching."

"Dear Jocelyn!" she murmured, her hands outheld to me. "Dear, dear friend."

"You shall thank me another time," said I, "when we have greater leisure." I kissed her hand, and wrenched mine away from her when she would have kissed it, and so set a term to that pretty comedy.

When she was gone, and the minister with her, I still remained with my lord, and waited until the sound of wheels had faded in the distance. He never stirred, but sat there in his great chair, clutching its arms with his jewelled claws, a carrion fowl despoiled.

"Give you good night, my lord," I said at length, and turned to go.

"A moment, sir!" said he, his eye upon me with the dead glitter of a snake's. Bitterly he set me his last question. "Why have you crossed me in this?"

I looked him over quietly, reflecting. Then I turned from him with a shrug. "You would not understand," said I, and left the room.

As I reached the street a peal of bells went clanging through the house. He was rousing his bullies to the chase. So leaving my jaded horse, I relied upon my heels, and ran, forgetful of fatigue, and for greater safety I lay at the King's Head Inn that night. I lay there, but I did not sleep. The exaltation of my poor victory spent, I fell a prey to a bitterness of sorrow and self-pity, which I now hold to have been unworthy in me. For I had helped the lady of my heart to the man of hers, and what more than that can a true lover ask?

THE BLACKMAILER

Boscawen, dressed for dinner, stood, a tall, graceful figure of a man, before the fire in his study, one foot resting upon the fender. The

room was in darkness save for the glow of the fire, which played ruddily over the man's clear-cut, resolute face and abundant, prematurely whitened hair.

Somewhere in the flat an electric bell trilled briskly. He stirred at the sound, and looked at his watch, holding it to catch the firelight. Steps approached, muffled by the thick carpet in the corridor. He moved to the switch, and turned up the lights as the door opened.

"Mr. Loane, Sir," Smith announced. And--like the perfect servant that he was--observing, the surprised jerk of Boscawen's head and the shade of annoyance that crossed his face, he was quick to add: "Mr. Loane, Sir, said that you were expecting him."

The visitor thrust past him into the room. "To be sure you were expecting me, weren't you?" he blustered, to dissemble his doubts of the reception that might await him; and he proffered his hand to Boscawen.

Boscawen looked at the hand, looked at, the man's coarse, bloated face under the opera-hat which he had not troubled to remove, and then looked at Smith, dismissing him with a glance. The servant vanished, considerably perturbed. Loane continued to proffer his hand. Boscawen looked at it again, critically. It was a fatter hand than one would have expected from the general build of the man. It was yellowish in tint, and the skin was slightly crinkled; there were diamonds on two of its fingers. It reminded Boscawen unpleasantly of a jeweled toad.

"What do you expect me to do with that?" he inquired, coldly offensive. Loane flushed to his eyes, withdrew his hand at last, and uttered a sneering laugh to save his countenance.

"So that's your tone, then," said he. "What do I expect you to do with

it?"

He laughed shortly. "Well, that's for you to say. It can make or break you."

"Have you intruded here to tell me that?" wondered Boscawen, ice-cold in his anger. "Do you propose to recommence yesterday's arguments? I thought that we understood each other."

"Now, that's just what we don't do," said Loane; and, uninvited, dropped into an armchair.

"As much as is necessary, at least," Boscawen countered, and looked at his watch again. "I am afraid you are detaining me, Mr. Loane. I am dining out."

"Oh. Tosh!" said Loane elegantly. "That's not the way to come to terms."

"I'm not concerned to come to terms. I imagined that I made myself perfectly plain to you yesterday. You are at liberty to proceed in any way that commends itself to you. I don't see that there is anything to be gained by prolonging this interview." And with that Boscawen moved towards the bell. Loane thrust out a hand precipitately to restrain him.

"Now, don't be hasty," he implored. He considered Boscawen a moment with raised eyebrows, in a patient, tolerant fashion. "I am disposed to be more reasonable than I was yesterday--a deal more reasonable."

Despite himself, despite his nature and his resolve, Boscawen paused; nor could he entirely repress a gleam of interest from his eyes. Observing this, Loane followed up the advantage which he conceived that he had won. He threw back his dress overcoat,

revealing a white expanse of shirt and pique waistcoat underneath, garlanded by a massive watch-chain.

"Now, listen to me a moment. I've been looking into your affairs, and it has become plain to me now that you couldn't afford the price I asked yesterday. If I'd known as much then, I shouldn't have pressed you so hard. I don't want to ruin you, you know. All I want is to--well to--"

"To levy as much blackmail as you can," Boscawen suggested evenly.

The other scowled an instant, then smiled almost wistfully.

"Ah, well, words break no bones, you know. But all the same, I don't think there's any call for you to be unpleasant."

"Oh, none at all," Boscawen agreed. "When a perfect blackguard, such as yourself, who has served a term of imprisonment for fraud, and who has been expelled from a third-rate London club for cheating at cards, attempts to black-mail me, there cannot of course be the least possible occasion for me to be unpleasant. I must apologise, Mr. Loane, if my reception of you appears to lack that warmth to which your social status and your lofty attainments entitle you."

"If you think sarcasm's going to help you," said Loane, flushing heavily, "you're mistaken. I am a patient man. Mr. Boscawen, but you mustn't suppose that there are no limits to my patience."

"Why not? Since you appear to suppose that there are no limits to mine!" flashed Boscawen. "Come, Mr. Loane, I think you might be better employed else where."

Loane rose heavily, his anger mastering him for a moment.

"I think so myself," said he shortly. "But don't blame me afterwards." Then he recovered his impermeability to insult, and checked in the act of buttoning his overcoat. "I wish you had been reasonable," he said softly. "I want to behave well to you in this. It's no pleasure to me to hurt your interests. I give you my word of honour it isn't"

"With such security, who would not trust you?" wondered Boscawen.

"Very well," snapped Loane. "Since you are determined to be offensive, I'll say no more."

He turned as if to go; Boscawen advanced another step towards the bell. Then Loane checked again.

"Come now, Mr. Boscawen," he resumed in a wheedling tone. "Say five thousand pounds, and the letters are yours. Five thousand pounds--a thousand pounds a letter. Now that's reasonable, I'm sure."

"I'll take your word for it," Boscawen agreed with him. "You should know the value of the wares you trade in. But I am--not dealing with you, Mr. Loane."

"Why, it's only half what I was asking yesterday. And I wouldn't have come down a penny if it weren't that I don't want to go and break off this marriage of yours and spoil your chances in life."

"Your concern for me touches me profoundly, Mr. Loane."

The blackmailer's pale eyes grew narrow with suspicion as he watched Boscawen. He fancied that the man was too much at his ease. It might, of course, be assumed; he rather thought it was. Still, it was wonderfully well maintained.

"Look here," he broke out suddenly, "I don't want to be any harder on you than need be. Make me an offer."

Boscawen was trapped into a little gesture of helplessness and a deprecatory smile.

"Really, Sir," he said, "it you have been looking into my affairs, as you say, you should have learnt that I am not 'in a position to--"

"Ah, but wait," Loane cut in, "there am ways of raising money when a man is about to make such a marriage as you are making. Now, look here. I'll tell you what I'll do with you. You shall have the letters for four thousand pounds, and you shall have a week to find the money. Now I'm sure I can't be fairer than that. But that the lowest-absolute rock-bottom."

Boscawen pressed the bell, without answering.

"I'll wait till the last moment," said Loane, "before--well--you understand? So expect me here this day at about this time. And if you'll take my advice--"

"Spare me that, at least," Boscawen interrupted. "Ah, Smith, show Mr. Loane out, will you?"

"So long, then," said Loane genially. "This day next week, at about this time."

"Very well, then," said Boscawen, almost despite himself, and winced to hear the blackmailer's answering chuckle before the door closed between them.

The next moment Boscawen was an altered man. All the iron self-possession in which he had cased himself fell away from him, and he

dropped limp and beaten to a chair, betraying in full the defeat which already he had partly betrayed in his last words of consent to another interview with Loane.

For perhaps half an hour he sat there, staring into the fire, his chin resting on his clenched hands; and when, at the end of that time, came to remind him that he was dining out, the man found Boscawen so wild-eyed and haggard that he became solicitous for his master's health. Boscawen admitted readily that he was not feeling very well.

"I don't think I shall after all," he said. "Give me a telegram form."

He wrote the wire of excuse, and dispatched Smith with it. Then he sat down again to think, and his thoughts were black and evil. To have his life ruined by that social vampire Loane, armed with those letters betraying that bitterly repented folly of his adolescence, those dateless letters upon which malice could set any date it chose! It stirred him to a wild, phrenetic rage. He would kill Loane before he allowed the man to work his evil will. The thought shaped itself rapidly into a resolve, and Boscawen found himself rejoicing at the thought that Loane was to return in a week's time. That interview should be fateful.

Then he recoiled in sudden horror from his very thoughts, and their premeditation of murder. Was he mad? Was he to dash from Scylla into Charybdis? Was he to escape betrayal that he might be hanged, and hanged for such a thing as Loane?

A week later--three days before the date appointed for Boscawen's wedding--Isidore Loane again presented himself at Boscawen's flat in Hampton Gardens. He was admitted by a strange servant--a swarthy fellow of a certain portliness of bulk, with black glossy hair, black eyebrows and a square black beard, but shaven upper lip, who, in answer to his announcement of his name, informed him in a

nasal voice and in speech vitiated by a foreign accent that Mr. Boscawen was expecting him.

He conducted Loane to Boscawen's study, and then, instead of departing to announce the visitor to Boscawen, the man closed the door and set his back to it.

Loane stared at him across the room in surprise.

"What's the matter?" he inquired gruffly. "What are you waiting for? Why don't you fetch Mr. Boscawen?"

The man bowed profoundly, and the voice in which he answered was Boscawen's.

"I am here at your service, Mr. Loane."

As he stood up again, the black beard had vanished, and, despite the simulated embonpoint, the stained skin, and blackened hair and eyebrows, it was unmistakably Boscawen who stood there smiling with a calm that was almost sinister.

Loane stared at him, frowning and changing colour slightly. Then he recovered himself.

"Now, what's the meaning of this? What's your game, eh?" he asked, very ill at ease. "Out with it! Let me know what's expected of me."

"Certain letters of mine to which you do me the honour to attach some value, Mr. Loane." Loane stared again, and forced a laugh.

"I dare say! Oh, I dare say! And so long as you put up the four thousand pounds we agreed upon, they're yours. But I don't quite see the need for this--er--masquerade."

"But you shall, Mr. Loane. You shall."

"The sooner you make it clear, then, the better. I've no time to waste on you. Are you buying the letters, or are you not?"

"I am not--not buying them."

"Very well, then. There's no more to be said. You leave me no alternative but to take them elsewhere." His uneasiness was manifestly increasing every moment, and his assumption of bluster served to heighten rather than to dissemble it.

"I leave you the alternative of surrendering them of your own free will--an alternative I should advise you to adopt, for you shall have no opportunity of offering them elsewhere."

Loane disliked the tone, and disliked still more the tight-lipped smile with which the other was regarding him.

"What do you mean?" he snapped. He reversed his cane as he spoke, and, holding it firmly within a foot or so of the ferrule, he swung the loaded head, and took a step towards Boscawen. Scenting mischief, he was by now thoroughly alarmed.

"Stand away from that door!" he shouted, between rage and fear. "Stand away and let me pass, or I'll beat your brains out!"

"You're so very hasty, Mr. Loane," said Boscawen, and checked his advance by levelling a revolver.

Loane halted abruptly, paused a moment, then fell back again. He was visibly trembling now, his eyes glared fearfully, and his face was pale.

"Wha-what do you mean?" he demanded, endeavouring to make his

voice ring bold and challenging. "What are you going to do?"

Boscawen waved him to a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Loane. Compose yourself. In spite of appearances, there is not the least cause for excitement. The game, I think, has gone rather against you, but you have the advantage of being able to show yourself a good loser. It is in the manner in which we bear our losses, Mr. Loane, that we reveal our true nature. Please sit down again while I explain the situation to you. You'll not find it without a certain interest, I can assure you."

Loane's scared, unblinking eyes riveted on Boscawen, and mechanically, as if hypnotised by the other's smile and leveled weapon, he sank into the deep, comfortable chair to which his host invited him.

Boscawen lowered the pistol, and came to sit on the arm of another chair, he faced his visitor across the hearth.

"I have resolved," he announced in the most level and unemotional of tones, "to shoot you dead, Mr. Loane, since apparently there is no other way of saving my reputation and my future from being wrecked at your hands. Now do, please, sit still and don't interrupt me. I have always been a firm believer in the unwritten law. To me the thing that is commonly known as crime is perfectly justifiable and proper where it is committed to prevent an injury to honour, to property, or to life. It becomes, in short, self-defence; and self-defence is justified by law--save that the law imposes rather narrow bounds upon what may be considered self-defence.

"When you look back upon your past, when you consider your present, and speculate upon your likely future, you will, I am sure, agree that in--er--disposing of you, as I intend, I am not only serving

my own interests, but those of humanity at large. So that, from whatever point of view we regard this act of mine, we cannot. Unless blinded by narrow prejudice or personal interest, consider it anything, but meritorious."

"Are you mad?" gasped Loane, believing that, indeed, to be the clue to the other's extraordinary behaviour.

"Not consciously," answered Boscawen, smiling as if interested in the suggestion raised. "Has it occurred to you that my argument is illogical, or my conclusions ill-founded? Is not my reasoning soundness itself? Can you show me one single cogent cause why I should refrain from carrying out my intentions?"

"You'll hang for it!" spluttered the other, foaming at the mouth in his ever-increasing terror.

Boscawen calmly shook his head.

"You do my intelligence poor credit. Of all crimes, it has been shown that murder is the simplest to commit, the most difficult to trace to its perpetrator, it he be a man of sufficient intelligence, imagination and self-possession properly to handle the affair. Let me explain to you the reason for this disguise which I have assumed, that you may understand how very thoroughly I have laid my plans.

"A week ago, Mr. Loane, I dismissed my man, Smith--a most thorough and capable servant, who had been with me for five years. On the following evening a stoutish, swarthy, black-bearded fellow, speaking with a German accent and giving the name of Schuhmacher, asked the porter in the hall below to direct him to my chambers. I was that German, in the disguise which you have seen for yourself and failed to penetrate when I admitted you. It is fairly thorough, like the rest of my scheme.

"I left again after remaining up here--presumably with Mr. Boscawen--for half an hour; and, thoroughly to establish my identity, I engaged the porter in conversation before leaving, and made inquires regarding the ways and habits of this Mr. Boscawen, whose service I was entering that very night. The porter was inclined to be superior. I left, to return in an hour's time with my belongings--an artistic little collection over which I took considerable trouble.

"Since then, at least once a day I have gone out and returned as Boscawen, and every evening--artificial light being so much more friendly to a disguise--I have gone out and returned as Schuhmacher the servant. Thus, and in all other particulars, I can assure you that I have very thoroughly established two entirely different identities. As Schuhmacher I have dealt with Mr. Boscawen's trades-people; as Schuhmacher I have answered the door, and informed Mr. Boscawen's callers that my master was not at home. So that Schuhmacher has come to be a very real and living figure, to whom some dozens of people can testify.

"Let us come now to this evening. I went out two hours ago in the character of Boscawen. As I was leaving I informed the porter that Schuhmacher was out; that I was expecting a Mr. Loane in the course of the evening; and I begged him to inform Schuhmacher on his return that, should you happen to call before I was back, he was to ask you to wait for me. The porter promised to do so. What should he suspect? He had not seen Schuhmacher leave the house, but then he does not see everybody who passes in or out. So it was easy to establish in his mind the circumstance of Schuhmacher's absence. Presently, I returned as Schuhmacher, and I received from the porter the message which I had left as Boscawen. As Schuhmacher I permitted myself a sneer--a very evil, malicious sneer, Mr. Loane--at the mention of your name, which no doubt will leap up in the porteee memory later on."

Livid, horror-stricken, with beads of sweat gathering on his high, narrow forehead, Loane sat and listened to that clam, deadly, explanation.

"As Schuhmacher I admitted you to the flat. And it is known to the porter below that you are here at present alone with Mr. Boscawen's servant, awaiting the return of Mr. Boscawen, who happens to be absent. That brings us up to the present moment, Now for what is to come." He paused. "I hope I am not boring you, by the way," he inquired politely.

A grimace--its purport entirely impossible to read-twisted Loane's face. He emitted an incoherent growl.

"I interest you? Good!" Boscawen slightly shifted his position. "Now mark the sequel," he said. And as he spoke, he rose and moved round his chair, so that he placed it between himself and his visitor. The movement appeared to be idle and subconscious, but it was not. He leaned now upon the tall, padded chair-back, and thus the revolver-- apparently idly held--was without any effort on his part covering Loane.

"When our little transaction is over, Mr. Loane," he continued, "the servant Shuhmacher will walk out of this flat, and make a point of speaking to the hall-porter before he leaves the mansions. He will then take his departure, and make his way to a house in Soho, in which he rented a room on the ground-floor on the day before entering Mr. Boscawen's service. There he will carefully remove the dye from his hair and face, he will burn his beard, and deflate the air-cushion which now provides him with his embonpoint; and by a simple change of neck-tie and shirt-stud, Mr. Boscawen, the master, in the correct evening dress of a man-about-town, will emerge from the chrysalis of Schuhmacher, the servant, in the unfailing dress-clothes of his office.

"Being, then, myself once more, I shall have to see that I slip out of the house unobserved. My collar up and my face in a muffler, and shaded by the American slouch hat affected by Schuhmacher will all be of assistance. Before I reach Piccadilly, I shall have found some dark corner in which to complete the transformation, by unmuffling my face, pocketing the American hat, and replacing it by an opera-hat which I shall have with me for the purpose! Now, obviously myself again, I saunter into my club. I have already been seen there earlier in the evening and in various other places--purely superfluous precautions; still, I thought it as well to take them. A sort of alibi can be established should my whereabouts this evening come to be questioned, which is in the highest degree unlikely. I remain at the club for an hour or so; then I call a cab, and drive home. As I enter, I make a point of inquiring from the porter whether Schuhmacher is in. He will tell me that Schuhmacher went out to look for me as the gentleman I was expecting has arrived, and is waiting for me upstairs.

"Need I continue? Very well. I come up, and I discover that a murder has been committed in my absence. I find a shady character of the name of Loane lying on the floor of my study with a bullet through the heart or the brain, as the case may be. I raise the alarm. The police are sent for; a doctor is summoned. Both arrive. The doctor ascertains that the man has been dead at least an hour. The porter instantly accuses Schuhmacher, stating that he knows of the servant's movements. A hue-and-cry is raised, the man's description circulated, a reward is offered--all to no purpose. Schuhmacher has utterly vanished, leaving not a trace behind him. For a while the papers theorise upon the motive. Remembering Loane's shady antecedents, they have little difficulty in conjecturing one; they will circulate rumours of the murderer's capture, to contradict them in the next issue; the crime may have come to be known as 'The Hampton Gardens Murder,' or perhaps 'The Valet Mystery.' There will be

letters to the Press denouncing aliens, and all the usual thrillers. Then gradually the interest will subside; other and more immediate affairs will overlay it; the police, disheartened, will abandon the quest for Schuhmacher, and the entire affair will be relegated to the limbo of unsolved criminal mysteries.

"Meanwhile, Mr. Loane"--and Boscawen smiled pensively as he spoke--"I shall not have permitted this unpleasant event to interfere with my arrangements. I shall have been married in peace, assured that there will be no dirty, sneaking blackguard to interfere with me, to threaten my happiness, or wreck my future. What do you think of it all?"

The other's answer was something between a roar and a snarl, as he hurled himself forward, swinging his clubbed cane--Boscawen now proved the foresight that had caused him to lean over the back of the armchair. He had several times moved it, idly as it seemed, backwards and forwards; his intent had been to get the casters into line, so that at the slightest thrust it would roll forward lightly. He thrust it forward now, as Loane sprang at him. The edge of the low seat caught Loane on the shins, and, thrown off his balance, the fellow toppled forward into it. Instantly the round, cold muzzle of the revolver was pressed to his temple.

"It shall be in the brain, I think!" said the cold voice of Boscawen.

"Wait! Wait!" screamed the other. "Wait! I'll make terms! You shall have the letters!"

Boscawen drew back, covering his man. He came slowly round the chair, the other watching him and waiting. "If you move an inch without my permission, it shall be the last conscious movement you will ever make! Don't be a fool, Loane! I have you, and I shall need no great inducement to put a bullet through you! I'd prefer you dead! Do

you understand?"

"I am worth more to you alive!" cried the other, fighting desperately in the deadly trammels in which he was caught. "You know I am! You shall have your letters! What more can I do? What have you to fear from me, then?"

"I don't know. But I should have nothing to fear from you dead!"

"The letters would remain. They might be found."

"True," Boscawen admitted. "But I don't attach great importance to them if you are not at hand to use them!"

"Still, they will be very dangerous to you. Come, Mr. Boscawen," the fellow implored wildly. "I'm a married man. I have three children. You wouldn't have their lives ruined? You wouldn't have them thrown upon the world?"

"So! You have children?" said Boscawen sharply. "God help them! That is the greatest of all your crimes! And a wife! Poor, poor soul!" His tone changed abruptly. "Of course, you have not the letters on you?"

"Of course not. I--"

"Why, then--"

"But I can get them in a few minutes!" screamed the other, in abject terror now. "I have made arrangements in case you decided to buy them. If you'll send a messenger with a note from me, you shall have the letters at once. It isn't far."

Boscawen measured him with a contemptuous eye. He seemed to put aside his murderous project with the greatest reluctance.

"For your wife and children's sake, then!" he said slowly. "There! You'll find what you want at that desk. Write!" Loane obeyed, what time Boscawen stood over him, reading the fellow's message to his wife, bidding her deliver to bearer a letter-case which she would find in a drawer which he described, and of which he enclosed the key.

He handed the letter to Boscawen, who, unperceived by Loane, immediately touched the button of an electric bell. Almost instantly the door opened, and, to Loane's utter bewilderment, Smith, calm and correct, the perfect servant who, according to Boscawen's story had been dismissed a week ago, entered the room.

"Is the messenger-boy there?" inquired Boscawen.

"He is waiting, Sir," answered Smith, the suspicion of a grin lurking at the comers of his mouth.

"Let him take this letter to that address and await the answer." Smith received the letter from his master's hands, and turned to go. In that moment Loane woke from his stupefaction, and realised what was taking place.

With a strangled cry, he sprang after Smith. But as he moved Boscawen thrust out a leg, and the blackmailer pitched heavily forward. Boscawen knelt to pin him down. Smith turned and came to his master's aid with a pair of handcuffs. The business done, he withdrew. They heard his voice outside, and the boy's answer. A moment later the door of the flat closed with a slam on the departing messenger.

Loane, winded and pinioned, sat huddled in the great chair again, and again Boscawen faced him across the room.

"I regret to have to detain you, Loane, until the messenger returns,"

he said. "I trust I am not keeping you from any pressing engagement?"

A hideous smile writhed across the blackmailer's livid face. "Spoofed, by gad!" he swore. "Spoofed by a fool like you!"

"I'm afraid so!" said Boscawen, smiling.

THE JUSTICE OF THE DUKE

A trumpet blared beneath the walls of Fabriano, and its brazen voice reached the room of the Palazzo, where Cesare Borgia sat measuring distances on a map and casting up calculations. He laid down the compass at the sound, and raised his head, sharp interest written on his lofty countenance.

"Agabito," said he to the elderly man who had been writing diligently at another table, "that will be the Lord of Camerino."

"The same thought was in my mind Magnificent," answered the secretary. Cesare's brows grew knit in thought; his elbow rested on the carved arm of his chair, and his shapely white fingers tugged at his auburn beard. Presently he stirred and sighed.

"Please it God, we come to terms," said he. "I am over-weary of this situation."

"It grows, in truth, very wearisome," murmured Agabito, who considered it one of his duties to paraphrase whatever Cesare might deign to say to him.

The Duke of Romagna's clenched hand fell sharply on the map before him. "To be pinned here by this man whom I have stripped to

the last brick of his possessions, whilst I am urgently wanted in the North, whilst every day increases the danger of a coalition against me. Body of God! It is intolerable! We must make an end."

There was enough irony in the situation to have exasperated a more long-suffering man. Camerino was in Cesare's power, held by his soldiers. But Cesare himself was all but in the hands of the despoiled Lord of Camerino, who held him fast in Fabriano, together with the little band of soldiers that had been with him when he had been surprised. And whilst he was held there his cloud of mercenaries in the North were paralysed by the absence of the Duke, and the work of conquest upon which he had set out was at a standstill, which meant danger; for the Northern States, which singly could not hope to stand against him, might coalesce to his undoing ere he could prevent it, unless he shook the dust of Fabriano from his feet without delay. Thrice had he attempted to send for help to Camerino; but each time his messenger had been brought back with ironical courtesy by the vigilant besiegers.

A servant entered.

"An ambassador from the Lord of Camerino begs audience of your Highness."

Cesare frowned. Was a servant come in answer to the invitation he had sent the master?

"Admit him," he ordered coldly. And in obedience to his command, the attendant held wide the door, and beckoned someone forward. To the click of spurs and clank of scabbard, a middle-aged gentleman, of middle-height, very splendidly apparelled, stepped into Cesare's dread presence. He bowed profoundly, servilely almost; then straightened himself, and out of a grey, vulture face, a pair of shifty eyes met the stern glance of the Duke of Romagna.

"Is it thou, Malipiero?" quoth Cesare, his brows ever so slightly lifting. The man bowed again.

"I am your servant always, Highness."

"Thou art the servant of the Lord of Camerino," the Duke emended. "The fox that waits upon the wolf." And in his voice there was the faintest suspicion of a sneer. "I bade thy master attend me that we might adjust the terms on which he will grant me leave to quit Fabriano. He sends thee! I marvel that he did not send a lackey. Well, well, it is but a pin-prick in the wake of many sword-thrusts. I lay it to his score. Let him flout me now as he pleases, but let him beware the day of reckoning."

"My Lord of Camerino was afraid to come," ventured Malipiero, conciliatingly.

"Afraid?" cried the Duke, and his beautiful eyes flashed terribly. "By the Host! but this is an affront! Since when have I dealt in treachery?" His passion fell from him as suddenly as it had flared up. Indeed, it was not his wont outwardly to manifest such anger as he might feel. "Are you empowered to treat with me?"

"I am, so please you, Highness."

"Speak out, then. You know the thing that I would buy. Tell me the price this trader of Camerino asks."

"He will raise the siege and withdraw his men, leaving you free to depart, in return for your signed undertaking to recall your mercenaries from Camerino, and to reinstate and leave him unmolested lord of it, and his sons after him."

Cesare stared at the man, amazed by the effrontery of the proposal.

"Was he drunk, this fellow of Camerino, when he sent that message?" he asked coldly.

Malipiero quailed under the chill scorn of the Duke's eye. Agabito, at his desk in the background, smiled and nodded approval of the answer.

"My lord", said the ambassador respectfully, "it may be that my Lord Gian Paolo is rash. But he is very firm in his resolve. He has you, he swears, in the hollow of his hand."

"Has he so? Aye, but he shall discover that I am made of gunpowder, and, when I burst, that hand of his will be most sorely maimed. Go tell him so."

"You'll not accept his terms?" murmured Malipiero.

"Sooner would I sit in Fabriano till the crack of doom."

"The Northern States may coalesce," the other ventured. "Already Milan is--"

"If they coalesce from now to the Resurrection of the Flesh, that will not put Gian Paolo back on his throne of Camerino."

"I am not sure," began Malipiero.

"I know thou'rt not," broke in the Duke. "But I, who am, tell thee." He pushed back his chair and rose. "Agabito, reconduct me this messenger. See that he has refreshment ere he goes and courteous treatment."

And with that, as though he gave the matter no further thought, he sauntered toward the window, drawing from his pocket as he went a

little comfit-box in gold and blue enamel.

But Malipiero made no sign of departing. He shuffled uneasily for a moment, his foxy old eyes now on the young Duke, now on the secretary, who was holding the door for him.

"Highness, may I speak with you--alone?" he said at last.

"To what purpose?"

"The advancement of your interests, Illustrious."

Cesare's eyes were very narrow as they surveyed the bowing Malipiero. A moment he seemed to hesitate. Then--"Leave us, Agabito," he said quietly, and a faint smile was on his lips.

"Highness," murmured the ambassador, so soon as they were alone, "the Lord of Camerino is in earnest."

"Already thou hast said so," answered the Duke, raising the lid of his comfit-box. "What else?"

"Your Excellency was pleased to correct me when, upon entering here, I announced myself your servant."

"You were my servant once; now you are his. Would you be mine again?"

Malipiero bowed in silent acquiescence. The Duke's lips parted to speak, but he changed his mind and closed them again without uttering a word. He shifted his eyes back to his comfit-box, and with deliberation picked a coriander-seed.

"The Lord of Camerino's fortunes do not wear so prosperous a look, eh?"

Malipiero's glance shunned the Duke's; his fingers toyed nervously with his grey beard.

"It was I," he said, "who made Gian Paolo afraid to come, to the end that he might send me. I did this that I might lay my services at your disposal, for at heart I have ever been your Excellency's most devoted. My only son is in your service."

"A traitor who yesterday sought to compass my assassination," Cesare informed him coldly. "It is well I wear a shirt of mail. This precious son of thine lies in my dungeons awaiting my pleasure."

"My God!" gasped Malipiero. His face was turned ashen, his limbs trembled under him.

"Hadst not heard of it? How poor are the Lord of Camerino's spies! It is the common talk of Fabriano. But thou knewest it was to be attempted, and what the price the Lord of Milan--yet another master of thine--was to have paid him. Thou damned, infernal traitor, darest so boldly bear me messages from Gian Paolo? Aye, that thou darest, knowing that as an ambassador thou'rt safe."

"My lord!" cried Malipiero in an anguish of terror, "I knew naught of such a plot."

"I think," said Cesare, "that I hate a liar almost more than an assassin; certainly as much." And he cracked the coriander-seed between his strong, white teeth.

"Highness," exclaimed the other, eagerly, "I have it in my power to make amends for what my son has done. I can rid you of this Lord of Camerino. Shall it be a deal between us? My son's life against the raising of this siege?"

Cesare shut his box with a snap and dropped it into his pocket.

"It was to make me some such proposal, I think, that thou didst request to speak with me alone. Possibly there was some other bargain in thy mind, some other price to ask for the treachery thou'rt proposing?"

Malipiero flung dissimulation to the winds. His avarice, which had made him a constant traitor to his every master had been his only stimulus to offer his foul services to Cesare Borgia. But now that he heard of the failure of that plot which he had hatched for gold, and which his only son seemed likely to pay for with his neck, the life of his boy was the only recompense he asked. He frankly said as much.

"I will not bargain with thee," was Cesare's contemptuous answer.

The distraught man dropped on his knees. With tears in his eyes he implored clemency and urged upon Cesare how much it imported that he should rejoin his army in the North.

"There is not in all Italy a knave with whom I would so scorn to deal as thou, Malipiero. Man, thou art so steeped in the mire of treachery that the very sight of thee offends me, and I think I have endured it long enough."

"My lord," the other clamoured, "I can find you a way out of this as could no other man. Give me my son's life, and it shall be done--to-morrow. I will draw Gian Paolo away--back to Camerino. What are his men without him? Hirelings all, mercenaries every man of them. They would never stay to oppose your sally and deliver battle if Gian Paolo were not by to urge them."

Cesare was tempted. At all costs he must get out of Fabriano, and that soon, or he would suffer direly. Mistrust of Malipiero prompted

his next question.

"What means hast thou to perform so much?"

At this suggestion that the Duke was inclined to treat with him, Malipiero rose. He shuffled a step nearer, licking his lips, his eyes screwed cunningly.

"Gian Paolo loves his throne of Camerino dearly--so dearly that he has risked all upon his throw against your Highness. But there is one thing he loves still more--his honour. Let it be whispered to him that the lady his wife--" He leered horribly. "You understand, Magnificent. He would leave his camp out yonder, and dash back to Camerino, where she bides in the palace your Excellency has left her, as fast as horse could bear him."

Cesare felt his soul revolt. The thing was vile, the fruit of a vile mind uttered by a vile mouth, and as he looked at the leering creature before him a sense of nausea took him. But his calm, inscrutable face showed naught of this; his beautiful, passionless eyes betrayed none of the repulsion with which they looked on the creature before him. Presently his lips parted in a smile, but what that smile portended Malipiero could not guess until he spoke.

"Possibly there is in Italy a viler thing than you. Probably there is not. Still, it is for me to use thee, not convert thee. Accomplish me this thing, since thou'rt sure 'tis to be done."

Malipiero drew a deep breath of relief. Insults were of no account to him so that he gained his end.

"Grant me my son's life, and I undertake that by to-night Gian Paolo shall be in the saddle."

"I make no bargain with thee," Cesare answered. "I'll not so smirch

my hands. Do thou this thing, then look to me for payment."

"You will be merciful, Magnificent?"

"It is said by the few who do not malign me that I am ever just. Rest content; thou shalt find me so." Then, more briskly, he continued: "Tell me, Malipiero, hast power in thy master's name to grant a safe-conduct?"

"I have, Highness."

"There is what thou'lt need on that table. Write me one for a company of twenty men from Fabriano, under the command of--anyone thou pleasest."

When Malipiero had drawn up and signed the document, Cesare called Agabito to reconduct the ambassador, and when the secretary returned he found the Duke at the table again, but lost in thought.

"Set me that window wide, Agabito," he cried. "Wider, man; the air is fouled by that creature that was with me. Now summon me Don Miguel."

Agabito withdrew with a serious face. When Cesare's Spanish captain was bidden to wait upon his master, it was wont to augur ill for someone.

As Malipiero promised, so did he perform; though in the performance he went near to being strangled by the powerful hands of Gian Paolo.

At the first hint of his vile meaning the passionate Lord of Camerino had flung into a fury, and, catching him by the throat, would have made an end of him, thus, with his hands, but that returning reason

awoke unreasoning jealousy and bade him stay until he had learnt what grounds this rascal had for bringing that foul charge.

When he had recovered breath Malipiero gasped out his story, and thanked his patron saint that he had bethought him of forging proofs to lend his accusation countenance, else he was likely to have fared ill. Those proofs he laid before his master. They purported to be letters purloined from the treasure-casket of Gian Paolo's wife, and they fired Gian Paolo's very ready jealousy. He strode to and fro within the narrow limits of his tent, tearing his hair and uttering foulnesses--a thing unusual in him--like a man demented. In that hour the fortunes of Italy weighed not a straw's weight with him; his throne of Camerino he cared for no more than had it been a dung-heap. The only thought then governing his mind was of this dishonour that had been discovered to him.

A furious hatred filled him, a feral thirst for the blood of that nameless one who had brought this shame upon him, and an almost equal hatred for the creature who had revealed the matter to him, and who was cowering now in a corner of the tent, appalled by the sight of the devil he had raised.

Suddenly he strode to the door of his tent, and, beating his hands together, called. Out of the dark surged the figure of his sentinel.

"Bid them saddle me three horses," he commanded, hoarse with passion, "and tell Ser Gustavo to prepare him for a journey." Then, swinging round again upon Malipiero--"You shall go with me," he threatened him, "and if it should please God that you have lied, it shall please God also that I stab you dead."

And now a great fear took possession of Malipiero, which it needed all his confidence in his resources to combat and quell. Like a man in a dream he obeyed Gian Paolo, and so came to find himself

mounted between his master and Gustavo da Trani.

The captain of the mercenaries drew nigh as they were departing. He had heard the rumour that Gian Paolo was leaving the camp, and, marvelling that he had received no orders, he went to seek them.

"Plague me not!" Gian Paolo had barked at him.

"But, Excellency," the man protested, "from whom shall we take orders in your absence?"

"From whom you like. From the devil, or from Cesare Borgia for aught I care. Malipiero, come on; forward, Gustavo." And, clapping spurs to his horse, he rode off in the summer night with his two companions.

By dawn they had scaled the hills above Camerino, by noon they were in the city. They had abandoned their horses some way out, and, that they might suffer no hindrance from the Borgia soldiery in possession, they entered quietly on foot, making their way to the Osteria del Sole--a quiet tavern in a poor quarter. Here they lay and waited for the night, by Malipiero's own suggestion, whose only object was to gain time, hoping meanwhile for some opportunity to escape. But towards evening there was a surprise for him. Gian Paolo, who had been absent a little while from the room they had taken, returned looking very white, his anger and his spirit all seeming to have died out of him. Between his fingers he carried a scrap of paper. His eyes rested sorrowfully on Malipiero.

"Malipiero," said he brokenly, "I prayed God all night, as we rode, that you might have lied to me. But--"--a sob cut the strong man's utterance--"there is no more pity in Heaven than on earth. What you told me is no more than true, it seems. I was recognised below," he

proceeded to explain, "and the fellow who recognised me wrote on this slip the confirmation of your shameful story. The--the man, he tells me here, is in the habit of repairing to my house at the Ave Maria, and leaves it again towards the second hour of night."

He paused, and, sinking into a chair, took his head in his hands and sat awhile like one bereft of his wits. His companions looked on in silence, Gustavo in pity to behold this man so broken, Malipiero in secret glee at the miracle which had been wrought for his salvation. Thus a full half-hour sped. Then a bell, somewhere in the neighbourhood, tinkled the Angelus, and the sound acted upon Gian Paolo as might have done a trumpet-call in the hour of battle. He rose abruptly, and, for all that his face was haggard, his eyes were stern and his mouth set hard.

"Come," he bade them, "it is the hour." His fingers rested caressingly a moment on the hilt of his sword, ere he girt himself with it.

They went forth as dusk was falling, out into the hot, scented evening-tide, bent upon a deed of blood.

They gained the gates of the palace, where, by the generosity of Cesare Borgia, Gian Paolo's wife was lodged, and at their approach a man detached himself from the shadow of the wall. The Lord of Camerino's hand went swiftly to his sword, but as swiftly fell back to his side at seeing who it was that came. It was his friend of the inn.

"Lord," said he softly, "I knew that you would come, for I can guess what has brought you back to Camerino. I have kept watch for you. He is within."

Gian Paolo's figure stiffened, suggesting the self-control which he was exercising.

"Let us go in," he said to his companions.

"You had best wait, my Lord, and take him as he comes forth," the man suggested, and to this Gustavo and Malipiero urged him also, so that in the end their counsel prevailed.

In a thicket commanding the main entrance, they concealed themselves and waited. An hour went by, and Gian Paolo's impatience grew such that it needed all the persuasiveness of his companions to prevent him from forcing an entrance. Another hour sped, and then, just as Gian Paolo was swearing that not a moment longer would he wait, the door swung open, and in a flood of light the black figure of a man came down the steps and briskly forward until he was within ten yards of the trees that concealed the watchers.

Gian Paolo had turned to his companions.

"Do you remain here until it is done?" he bade them. Then he stepped out, and ran to meet the fellow, sword in hand. The door had closed again.

"Betrayer, stand!"

At that harsh challenge and the sight of that sword gleaming in such light as there was, the other man stepped back a pace and whipped out his own blade.

"Who art thou?" he asked.

"The man thou hast most foully wronged, Gian Paolo, Lord of Camerino."

"Was it my fault--" the other began.

"No more!" snarled the maddened Gian Paolo. Rage and disdain

were choking him. "On guard!"

And with the words his sword leapt forward a quivering tongue of death. The other parried, and would have staid to parley, but in the dark he had more than enough to do to fight, nor did he do that long. In one of his parries he missed the resistance of his opponent's blade. In the gloom he never saw the point come at him over his guard, knew nothing of it till it was in his throat, and little then. Yet, ere he fell, Gian Paolo had withdrawn the blade and passed it through his body twice. He lay on his back with his three wounds, his glazing eyes staring up at the stars he would never see again, whilst Gian Paolo went forward to knock upon the door with the hilt of his reeking sword.

At the same time two figures crept from the thicket and advanced towards the fallen man. Gustavo da Trani stooped and put his hand to the fellow's heart.

"Dead," said he in an emotionless, colourless voice.

"And well he deserved his death," chuckled Malipiero, who could scarce realise the magnitude of this coincidence, nor sufficiently congratulate himself upon it.

The door opened, and they saw Gian Paolo pass in, whereupon they set themselves to pace the alley where the dead body lay, whilst they awaited their master's return.

After the gloom without Gian Paolo was half blinded by the brilliant light within. But as his sight grew clearer he found himself confronted by a tall man with a grave, dark countenance and a very martial bearing. To ask the man's name was his immediate impulse, but a second glance at his face removed the need.

"Don Miguel?" he gasped, recognising Cesare Borgia's famous captain. "What make you here? I am seeking my wife."

"Excellency," the other answered him, "she left Camerino this morning for her country house. Will you follow me, my lord? I have a message for you from the Duke of Romagna, my master."

Like one in a dream Gian Paolo followed him into the chamber that once had been his study. Don Miguel closed the door, then, coming forward, told his tale.

"My lord, you have been the victim of treachery; but not of the treachery you came hither to find. The traitor is that rogue Malipiero, a part of whose plot against you it was most foully to slander the fair name of Madonna your wife."

"It is not true, then?" cried Gian Paolo. "You swear it is not true?"

"I swear it readily, my lord. It is not true."

A great sob burst from Gian Paolo's breast, and the tears coursed down his war-worn cheeks. What did it signify to him that he had been betrayed in other matters? What signified losses or reverses so that his Eulalia was true?

A moment Don Miguel paused, then he gave Gian Paolo the details of Malipiero's plot to get him away from Fabriano, so that in his absence Cesare and his men might cut through the ungoverned ranks of the besiegers. Malipiero had intended to sell the service for gold, but, discovering that his son was under arrest for attempted assassination of the Duke, he sought to make that son's enlargement the price of the betrayal.

"Yesterday morning," pursued the Captain, "his Highness sent for me, and gave me a safe-conduct for twenty men signed by Malipiero

in your name. With that escort and one man whom the Duke entrusted to my keeping I rode ahead of you to Camerino. First I removed Madonna your wife, as I have told you. Then I established myself here, and sent a man of mine to meet you with messages that should confirm Malipiero's story."

"Be these the methods of your Duke?" cried Gian Paolo wrathfully.

"They were necessary steps in the accomplishment of his design, my lord," answered Don Miguel. "I waited this evening, with that individual whom Cesare had entrusted to me, until word was brought me that you were hiding in the garden. Then, in the Duke of Romagna's name, I bade the fellow go. He went, my lord, to meet your sword. I trust that he is dead."

"Cesare Borgia shall account to me for having put upon me the slaying of an innocent man," exclaimed the Lord of Camerino, springing up.

Don Miguel looked at him a moment. Then--"Come with me, Excellency," he said so impressively that without another word Gian Paolo followed him. In the hall he took a torch from an attendant, and with this he passed out of the house and led Gian Paolo down to the alley where the dead man lay and the living ones were pacing.

At the sight of Cesare's captain Malipiero's cheeks went a shade paler. To see Don Miguel was to become uneasy. What did the fellow here? Don Miguel beckoned him at that moment.

"Messer Malipiero," said he, "his Highness, the Duke of Romagna bids me say that, thanks to your betrayal of your master, he is now out of Fabriano and on his way to the army in the North. He bade you do the thing you proposed, and undertook that you and your son should find him deal justly with you. Yonder, Messer, will you find your

payment, meted out to you by the hand of the very Lord of Camerino whom you betrayed." And he pointed to the body, lying so quietly there, at peace with all men and recking naught of ambition or of factions.

With twitching lips and haggard face Malipiero stumbled toward that silent thing.

Don Miguel flashed the light of his torch on the dead face, and Malipiero saw it, and fell on his knees beside the body of his only son. A peal of strident, horrid laughter burst from his ashen lips.

"The justice of the Duke!" he screamed, and fainted.

THE ORDEAL

No one could deny that Lady Sutliffe was possessed of at least two devils. Both were devils who make feminine affairs their province, and neither was particularly malign. The first was the mischievous Imp of Coquetry, whose business it is slyly and playfully to clear the way for Satan himself, but who makes as many failures as successes in his undertakings; the second was the Demon of Perversity, one of the younger children of Pride, an insidious little fiend who keeps you amused by his drolleries what time he digs a pit for your destruction.

The first of these demons led her into encouraging the manifest admiration of the elegant and accomplished Mr. Gadsby; the second caused her to plunge further into that dangerous make-believe pastime when Sir George--her husband--remonstrated with her for want of circumspection.

Thus matters stood when one morning as Lady Sutliffe sat before the long mirror in her boudoir, and her maid was brushing from her ladyship's shimmering tresses some remains of last night's powder, Sir George intruded unannounced upon her toilet. He bore a letter in his hand; a frown sat between his brows.

It was in the mirror that her ladyship caught the first glimpse of his tall figure in its caped riding-coat.

"I did not hear you knock, sir," said she, very pertly, for there was a sort of feud between them on the subject of this Mr. Gadsby.

"I have to speak to you, madam," said he very quietly, disregarding

her implied rebuke. "Will you be so good as to dismiss your maid?"

She regarded his reflection in the long glass wearily.

"Is so much necessary?" she drawled.

He laughed a little scornfully.

"Hardly, i' faith," said he, "considering the publicity which your affairs have gained already."

A delicate flush overspread the pretty face; a frown came to mar the smoothness of the perfect brow.

"Leave us, Francoise," she said. And the French maid went out--to glue her ear to the keyhole.

"The last insult which it remained for you to offer me, you have now offered," said she, when they were alone. "You have affronted me before my woman."

Again he ignored her challenge, and came straight to the matter that brought him.

"I regret to reopen the topic," said he, in deliberate, level tones that were habitual with him, for a more self-contained man than Sir George Sutliffe never lived, "but necessity is again thrust upon me of speaking to you concerning your friend Mr.--Gadfly."

"I assume," said she modelling her tones upon his own, "you mean Mr. Gadsby?"

"Oh, Madam," said he, "I could wish that you had the same care for your own name that you have for his!"

She flushed under the hit, then smiled disdainfully.

"Is this an example of the wit for which, I am told, you cultivate a reputation?"

"Was 'reputation' the word you uttered, ma'am?" quoth he. "It is very timely, for it reminds me that I came to talk to you upon the subject of your own, an echo of which, it seems, has reached to Gloucester."

She swung round on her seat with a swish of her flowered silken gown.

"What do you mean?" Anger quickened her voice.

"I have here a letter from Gloucester, from a Mrs. Gadsby--the wife, I understand, of this painter friend of yours. She appeals to me to rescue her husband from the wiles of my wife, to whose ways she applies certain epithets taught her, no doubt, by the lewd voice of common rumour. But read the letter for yourself, ma'am. It would be diverting, were it Im pathetic." And he held out the written sheet.

For a moment she looked into his calm face with its urbane, inscrutable smile. Herself she was a little out of countenance now; a little alarmed at learning the extent of the scandal to which her foolish conduct had given birth. At last, almost with hesitation, she took the letter. In reading it she composed herself, for all that there was a deal to wound her in what was written. Having read it carefully through: "Why," she protested, "what a poor scrawl of pothooks is this! Is it a letter, did you say? I vow you're very clever to have guessed it. And is it English, or have they a language of their own in Gloucester?" With a pretty pout of regret she offered it to him again. "I protest I can make out no word of it," she ended.

Sir George took the epistle gravely.

"I have written to this lady," he said, "the comforting and reassuring letter that her state of mind appears to require. I have assured her that I profoundly agree with every word that she has written--"

"You have dared!" blazed her ladyship, breaking in upon his deliberate speech. "You have dared put such an affront upon me, to humiliate me by agreeing with such expressions as that creature uses!"

"To what expressions are you referring, madam? Is it possible that the letter was not as illegible to you as you protested?"

"Let us have done with pretence, Sir George!" she clamored angrily.

"With all my heart, ma'am," said he, and laughed.

"Did you write in such terms as you say to this woman?"

"Should I say so if I had not? And I added a promise, in earnest of my respect and sympathy for her, to take the burden of this matter upon my own shoulders. Since Mr. Gadsby's lingering in town appears to be due to the friendship which your ladyship honours him, I undertook to set a term to this friendship, so that here there might be nothing to keep Mr. Gadsby from returning to Gloucester."

He paused, and she rose and stood considering him. Her face was white, her beautiful eyes blazed, her bosom heaved rapidly under its flimsy silken garment. Then, quite suddenly, she sat down again and burst into tears.

"Madam," said he, "I am glad to see you penitent at last."

"Penitent!" she flared, her tears suddenly forgotten under the goad of that word. "Penitent!" she repeated, and swung with a furious swish, to face him anew.

"You have humiliated me as if I were a--a--" An adequate object of comparison failed to suggest itself.

"I think, madam, that you have humiliated yourself." And his grey eyes surveyed her with a wistful calm that was more exasperating than his words. "You have given your name to be the sport of this foul town."

"Leave my room, Sir!" she bade him, am arm outflung dramatically towards the door.

"As soon as you shall have promised me to comply with his wife's wishes and my own concerning Mr. Gadsby."

Her ladyship bit her lip, and considered the pattern of the French carpet, her daintily slippered foot tapping the floor the while.

"I shall promise nothing, sir," she said at length. Her voice was quite deliberate. The Demon of Perversity was in full possession of her now. "You have insulted and humiliated me."

He was the very incarnation of urbane patience.

"You shall promise me," he insisted, with a hint of insistence in his tone, "that you will dance no more Mr. Gadsby, nor saunter in the Ring with him, nor receive him here at your house, either alone or in the presence of others. In short, I desire that from this hour you shall not further pursue the acquaintance of Mr. Gadsby."

"And is that all?" quoth she, trilling, the faintest of ironical laughs.

"That is all," said he. "I will not have you the talk of the town."

She smiled scornfully. "And if I refuse?"

"It will be the worse for Mr. Gadsby."

The smile froze on her lips. She looked at him, and her eyes dilated.

"What do you mean?" And without waiting for an answer--for his meaning, after all, was plain enough--"That were indeed to cover my name with scandal!" she exclaimed.

"My only concern is for my promise to Mrs. Gadsby," he returned. "One way or the other it must be fulfilled. But you need fear no increase of scandal. Your name shall not be dragged into the affair."

He had startled her to some purpose. She advanced towards him in her alarm, flinging scorn and even dignity to the winds.

"You shall not do it, George! You shall not do it!" she cried.

Beholding her so white and scared, hearing the strident note of fear in her voice, Sir George felt a tightening at the throat. Was it for Gadsby that she feared? Was it possible, after all, that her relations with him were not purely foolishness? Hitherto he had attached no importance to the matter beyond resenting an indiscretion of conduct that afforded food to the foul maw of scandal. But was it possible that the thing was serious in itself? Was it possible that she cared for the fellow?

He rose, and set hands upon her shoulders. His keen, grey eyes intently scanned her face for the least sign of what was really in her heart.

"I shall refrain, ma'am, only if you give me the promise I am asking."

She flung away from him, her anger, rising again at this restraint which he sought to impose upon her. She could not brook it. She

resented it bitterly. Stamping her foot, she uttered what was in thoughts.

"You make a child of me!" she said. "I will not be the slave of your caprice!"

"Nor I the butt of yours," he countered. "Will you promise?"

"No," she answered, hurling the word at him as if it had been a material thing.

He fell back as from a blow. His lips tightened. Then, without another word, he bowed and left the room.

An hour later, his face placid, his soul in the dread torment of doubt, he lounged into a room at White's, where a considerable company sat at play about a faro-table. All were known to him, and of the company was Gadsby, the man he sought, who since coming to town and success was a rabid gamester.

Sir George put up his quizzing-glass to take a cool and insolent scrutiny of the artist. Gadsby flushed under that discomposing stare.

"Egad!" said the baronet, and he laughed unpleasantly, "you're a confiding company to sit down to faro with that flash cove!" The jerk of gold-rimmed glass towards Gadsby left no doubt as to the person at whom his insult was aimed.

There was a scraping of chairs. Men swung round in speechless amazement to stare at the speaker. Gadsby turning first scarlet, then white to the lips, considered the baronet with furious eyes.

"I'll trouble you, Sir George, to make your meaning clearer," he said in a quivering voice.

"Is it to be more clear?" demanded Sir George, when he had recovered from his haughtily feigned surprise. "My meaning is that you're the most infamous rook that ever fingered a pack. Is that clear enough?"

"No, sir, it is not--not by half!" roared the other, upon his feet now. He was a handsome, swarthy fellow, with a certain raffishness of air which, whilst stamping him, was not altogether unprepossessing. "You lie, Sir George, and you know it!"

Sir George took snuff delicately. "You cheat, Mr. Gadfly, and you know it."

"Gadsby's the name."

"Possibly. But the other suits you better," said Sir George.

"You'll find a sting in me, by gad!" swore the furious artist.

"'Tis what I am looking for," said Sir George urbanely. "I shall expect your friends." He bowed, and passed on, leaving a wild hubbub behind him.

Coming presently upon Lord Spawle, who was among his intimates, Sir George set a hand upon his shoulder.

"Will you act for me in this, Ned?" said he.

"Skewer my vitals!" quoth the lordling, "The fellow's only weapon is a mahlstick.

"I'll fight with mahlsticks, if he can use no others," said Sir George indifferently.

Being a stranger to all weapons, Mr. Gadsby of course, chose

pistols, since these at least offered him a slender advantage of chance. But it was the slenderest, as all the word knew, for Sir George was the deadliest shot in town or out of it: and the town opined that if Mr. Gadsby did not get himself measured for his coffin he was neglecting to provide for the inevitable.

"Poor devil!" sighed Spawle that night to Sir George. "Sink me into Hades, but you're no better than a butcher, Geordie! A Herod upon the slaughter of an innocent! Will you me, at least, that you'll no more than wing him."

"I am told," said Sir George, "that the ladies of the town are of the opinion that the fellow has a heart. It is my desire to ascertain the fact for my own satisfaction in the morning."

His lordship groaned and took his leave, promising to call for his principal at six o'clock upon the following morning.

And scarcely had Spawle left Sir George's dining-room, where they had been sitting than Lady Sutliffe, a satin wrap flung over her night attire, entered by the chamber's other door. Sir George turned at the rustle of her approach.

"Ah, madam!" said he, and bowed. "I thought you a--bed."

"I overheard Lord Spawle," said she, speaking quickly, her voice unsteady. "'Tis not, I trust, Lord Spawle's fault?" he answered. "Such things are not for gentle ears."

"What he said is true," she pursued. "You are a butcher, no better--a murderer. 'Tis what all the town will be saying of you tomorrow. You rant to me of my name, and of the scandal attaching to it. What manner of scandal, think you, will attach to yours? I tell you, sir, it will come to stink in the nostrils of all decent men!"

And, shaking from head to foot in her agitation, she sank into the nearest chair.

Again Sir George felt the tightening at his throat at his threat that he had experienced earlier that day when the prospect of his meeting Gadsby had seemed to alarm her. His horrible suspicions received confirmation from her present demeanour. He turned aside, that she might not observe the sudden pallor of his face. He clenched his hands behind him, and took a turn in the room to steady himself and regain his self-control, whilst she sat huddled in the chair, weeping softly, her spirit very bruised.

"Madam," he said at last, "what you urge is very just."

She looked up quickly, clutching the chair's edge.

"If I promise--If I promise as you wanted me?" she cried out.

A bitter little smile curled the fine lines of his mouth.

"It is a little late for that, madam," he said. "You had your opportunity, and you cast it from you. In a few hours now, one way or the other, the promise will no longer be necessary."

She made a sound in her throat. She put her hand to it gropingly, her eyes staring at him in ever-deepening horror.

"But what you urge is just, as I have said," he pursued; and, as he spoke, he resumed his pacing. "It is not a duel that lies before me, but an execution; and, after all, it can do my honor little credit that I shall play at Mr. Ketch."

"Indeed--indeed!" she assented eagerly, her voice a whisper.

"Madam," he pursued, in the same level tones, which afforded her

never a glimpse of the misery within, "I shall amend the terms so that, the chances be more even. We shall draw lots for the first shot, and it shall be permissible to aim. Thus should fortune favour Mr. Gadsby--faith, your lover may be spared you!"

"My lover," she cried indignantly. "I have no lover!"

He raised his brows.

"I think, madam," said he, with the delicatest sarcasm, "the observation is a little premature."

She staggered to her feet, and stood pouring forth intercessions that he should forgo the duel.

"What, madam!" he cried. "Still not content? Why, I vow to gad I am most obliging. 'Tis not every husband would do the like. I pray you be satisfied with the concession that I make, for it is the utmost in my power. The affair is no in my hands."

She held out her arms to him. She was exorcised by now of both her devils. "George, George," she cried.

But he stood unresponsive, rendered pitiless by his doubts of her.

She swallowed hard.

"It was over cards you quarreled," said she, more calmly, informing him how much she had overheard. "You branded him a cheat, knowing that you lied. Could you not admit that it was false? Could you not"--she boggled at the word; then flung it out in despair--"apologise? None would doubt your courage!"

"Apologize?" he echoed, but quite quietly. He smiled. "I commend to you, madam, the study of things within your comprehension."

And upon that he set a term to their interview by ringing for her maid.

Next morning, in the chaise, he informed Spawle of the altered conditions which the latter was to propose to Gadsby's seconds.

"They'll snatch at it," said his lordship. "'Tis their only chance of getting their man away alive. But--skewer my vitals!--ye're clean mad, I take it, Geordie!"

"Perhaps," said Sir George; and he refused further explanation of his motives.

As Lord Spawle opined, so it fell out. Gadsby's seconds, who had been convinced that Gadsby's funeral must inevitably follow, were overjoyed by the proposal.

"Devilish handsome of him, 'pon honour!" pronounced Quentin, the beau, who was attending Gadsby. "Damned chivalrous, egad!"

And so swore Webster, the painter's other second.

After a brief consultation with Gadsby--a consultation which brought a ray of hope into the funereal gloom in which he was plunged--the four seconds went apart. Spawle span a coin; Quentin called, won the toss on behalf of Gadsby, and retired in decently dissembled glee to bear the good news to his principal.

At twenty paces the men took their stand, facing each other. The shortness of the distance, prescribed by Sir George, was a further point in favour of so indifferent a marksman as Gadsby.

The artist braced himself for the effort upon which his life depended. Quentin, with a damnable excess of zeal, had impressed upon him the necessity of hitting Sir George so as either to kill him or to maim

him beyond the possibility of returning the fire.

"Remember," he said at the last moment, "that if you miss him, your a dead man; so don't waste the chance your given!"

Quentin conceived this to be the very words calculated to tune up his principal to the requisite pitch of nerve and accuracy. Their effect was, of course, the very opposite. Realising how much--how very much--depended upon his steadfastness, Gadsby began to tremble. In this condition he faced his opponent, and levelled his pistol to take aim.

And when he found Sir George quite calmly surveying him through his quizzing-glass whilst awaiting the bullet, Gadsby's arm began to shake. A moment it quivered there in its horizontal position, an object of deepest to Sir George; then the hammer fell.

As the artist peered through the lifting wisp of smoke and saw his opponent still in the same position, apparently entirely unmoved, he turned sick and dizzy. The shot had gone wide, and it was now Sir George's turn. Gadsby mastered himself and stiffened perceptibly. For the sake of these gentlemen who stood by him, if not for his own, he must preserve a steady front whilst he received a fire that must bring death! He watched Sir George's arm come slowly to the horizontal until he could see no more than the nozzle of his pistol across the twenty paces that separated them. Then, on the verge of physical sickness, unable to watch the approach of death, he closed his eyes.

Eternities passed, and still the shot did not come.

It seemed to Gadsby that he stood on that spot for a hundred years, so consciously felt had been every fraction of each of the few seconds that were sped. Then he heard Sir George's voice: "Ned,

will you ask Mr. Quentin if he will give me leave to speak a word with his principal?"

Gadsby looked up, startled, to see that Sir George had lowered his pistol, and he heard Quentin excitedly answering, without awaiting the formality of the words' repetition to him: "'Tis most irregular, Sir George. 'Pon my honour it is! After you have fired your shot, if you please."

"My difficulty," said Sir George, "is that he may no longer be here to listen to me then."

Quentin turned to Gadsby, and asked the question as he was bidden. Gadsby moistened his dry lips, eagerly to utter the words that should give him this last chance, whatever it might be.

A moment later Sir George was standing before him, his seconds, at the baronet's request, have drawn out of earshot, cursing Sir George's eccentricities.

Unquestionably it was most irregular, but Sir George cared nothing for that. He was in a quandary--tormented by a doubt, confronted by a riddle that he had almost hoped the painter's bullet would have solved. He could not take this man's life in that cold-blooded fashion until he had positive knowledge that the thing he feared was true. After all, it might not be. And all he hoped from life was centered in that.

"Sir," he said, "I ask your pardon for proceeding so outrageously. But I have terms to propose, to which you may find it possible to accede. The fewest words will serve. You will have heard that I can hit a flying swallow, and you may conceive that if I fire to kill you your death will be as certain as only death itself can be. I am not going to fire to-day," Sir George continued slowly. "In the agreement into which we

have entered there is no stipulation that the second shot be fired within any given time. It is mine to fire when I please and where I please provided that at the time no less than twenty paces separate us.

"Now, sir, whether I ever fire that shot at you or not shall depend upon circumstances. If these circumstances prove favourable to yourself, I shall impose that you leave town this very day, and return to Gloucester; and that before you depart you return with me to King Street to take your conge of Lady Sutliffe. On my side, I undertake to afford you the fullest amends for the affront I put upon you yesterday at White's. I shall publicly declare that the charge I then brought against you was utterly unfound. As your shot has already afforded you all the redress to which you were entitled by the laws of honour, you will perceive that such an admission as this will be extremely generous on my part."

Gadsby, who had been staring at the baronet out of a face that was woefully white, cleared his throat to reply.

"I do not think I apprehend you quite, Sir George," said he.

"I do not think it necessary that you should," was the cool answer. "I have--out of motives which I see no necessity to disclose--imposed certain conditions which may (for I do not promise absolutely that they will) save your life. For nothing less, I assure you, hangs in the balance. Reject these conditions, and I step back to my place yonder, and in twenty seconds you will be before your Maker. It is for you to make choice, sir."

Another man in Gadsby's place might have told Sir George to fire and be damned. But Gadsby was of no such fine temper, as Sir George had shrewdly judged. Indeed, the painter had a difficulty in dissembling the eagerness with which he accepted this unexpected

chance of life and the terms imposed.

Thus it fell out that a half-hour later Sir George and Mr. Gadsby came together in a chaise to the baronet's handsome house in King Street. Sir George gave his order to a lackey in the hall.

"You will inform her ladyship that Mr. Gadsby is here, and desires to take his leave of her before quitting town. And on your life," he added, too low for Gadsby to overhear, "you will say no word of my presence."

The servant bowed and departed, whilst Sir George ushered his still bewildered guest into the library to wait.

Thither came the lackey presently with a scared face.

"Sir George! Sir George!" he panted. "Her--her ladyship is talken ill. She swooned away when I--when I spoke your message."

Joy leapt in Sir George's heart at that announcement. But his face remained impassive. He begged the artist to give him leave, and went upstairs, four steps at a time, to his wife's room.

He found her still unconscious in tile arms of her woman, who was almost as white, and who gasped when she saw the baronet enter.

He took his wife into his own arms, bathed her brow tenderly, and bade the woman hold salts to her ladyship's nostrils.

Presently she revived. She opened her eyes, vacant at first, then quickening, with horror, and, lastly, stared in amazement at her husband, who was bending over her.

"George!" she cried. And again. "George!" Her fingers clutched his arm. "Oh, thank God!--thank God!" she burst out, in a shuddering

sob. "I thought you had been killed."

Thus had he wrested from her the truth which her perversity denied him. He was content; he was jubilant at the result of the ordeal to which he had submitted her. With a nod he dismissed her woman. Then he drew her to his heart, and kissed the face of her he loved above all worldly things.

"Oh, I did so fear for you!" she moaned. "I did so fear for you!" And when word was brought to me that Mr. Gadsby was here, I--I--"

"I know--I know, sweetheart. But all is well," he reassured her; "all is so very well."

Brokenly she begged his pardon for her wrong-headedness. But this he cut short.

"Mr. Gadsby is below, waiting to take his leave of you. Will you receive him?"

"How can I?" quoth she. "Beg him to hold me excused."

Begging her expect his immediate return, Sir George went to dismiss his guest.

"Mr. Gadsby," said he, "I present to you her ladyship's compliments and her regrets that as she is but newly risen she cannot in person receive your adieux. She desires me, further, to wish you a happy journey into Gloucester. I'll not detain you, sir, since you will be eager to set out."

Gadsby drew a breath of relief. Then he looked into the other's face, and marvelled at the change in it. Its impassivity had departed; there was a flush upon the cheek, and a sparkle in the eye. He wondered what it might portend, and he was plagued too, by a doubt, which

increased when Sir George stood, at parting, by the door of the chaise.

Then, as if answer the artist's unspoken thoughts, the baronet drew a pistol from his pocket.

"This is the shot I owe you, Mr. Gadsby," said he easly. "Lest you think I boasted to you this morning, please observe."

He raised the weapon, and fired at a swallow darting overhead. But as he pulled the trigger Mr. Gadsby seized his arm, and deflected his aim, so that the bird escaped the doom that had impended.

Sir George stared at him, frowning. The artist explained: "I would not have you, sir, destroy the life of an innocent creature to make good a boast."

Sir George's frown deepened; then it vanished, and he smiled quizzically.

"I would observe, sir, that by all the laws of honour you were wrong to touch my arm at such a moment. I might claim the right to another shot. But I shall not. Besides, I, too, was irregular, since I stood within the prescribed distance of twenty paces."

Then he laughed good-humoredly, for his relief had brought him a great happiness, and he loved all the world that morning, including Mr. Gasby.

"At least," he concluded, "I have served my purpose--to ascertain whether you have a heart, sir. And I am glad to discover that it seems you have."

THE TAPESTRIED ROOM "Very well, then," said our host reluctantly. "Since even the ladies insist, you shall hear it. But I warn

you again that it is not a pleasant story."

There was a drawing-in of chairs about the big fireplace in the long library. Outside, the wind clamoured piteously, and through the tall windows the scudding, eddying snow was just visible in the blue-grey twilight. It heightened our relish of the cosy gloom about those blazing yule-logs.

Sir James, with the firelight playing upon his ruddy, shaven face and silver hair, buried his square chin in his ample stock, and proceeded to respond to our insistence by dragging the family skeleton from its cupboard.

"Briefly, then," he began, "it happened in Christmas-week of 1745. My grandmother, Lady Evangeline Margatt, was living here alone at the time; her husband was dead, and her two boys were away from home.

"Three days before Christmas a man presented himself here at the hall and asked to see her. He was a fugitive Jacobite whom King George's men had been seeking for some three months--ever since Culloden, in fact--and who had wandered into England. He had known Lady Evangeline in happier days, and it is believed that at one time they had been betrothed. Knowing her circumstances here, and having got as far as Preston and being in most desperate straits at the time, he came to cast himself upon her mercy.

"To receive and shelter a rebel was a very dangerous thing; but when sentiment prompts them, women can be very reckless. She gave him the shelter he begged, and announced him as a cousin to her household. But it happened that the messengers were hot upon his scent, and on the following evening, as Lady Evangeline and her Jacobite were sitting down to supper, in comes a lieutenant with a posse of red-coats, and my fine Jacobite was carried off and lodged

in Preston Gaol.

"Whether her sometime lover believed that Lady Evangeline had betrayed him, or whether he acted from other motives, will never be known. What happened was that on Christmas Eve--that is to say, on the night after his arrest--he broke out of Preston Gaol whilst the guards were carousing. He made his way hither in the dead of night, scaled to the window of her ladyship's room, which is just over the porch; forced his way in, and brutally murdered her.

"He was taken at Lancaster on the day after Christmas, and he was hanged as he deserved. That is all."

A rustle went through the company as Sir James ceased. Then I sat forward to protest against this curtailing of the narrative we expected.

"But the sequel, Sir James--this haunting: what precisely is the traditional story of that?"

"The traditional story, my dear Dennison, is that on every anniversary of the crime the Jacobite is to be seen scaling to the window of the tapestried room--as Lady Evangeline's sometime bedroom has come to be called. It is said that he enters, and that the crime is committed all over again by a ghostly murderer upon a ghostly victim."

Edgeworth's laugh of frank contempt broke harshly upon the general awe. The story had left him undaunted. But then an Irishman who had landed at Lisbon as a lieutenant in 1810 and returned to England as a colonel a short five years later--just after Waterloo--is not easily daunted. "Of course you, yourself, attach no faith to any of this nonsense, James?" he exclaimed uncompromisingly.

As seen in the firelight, the baronet's face wore an expression of

doubt as to what he actually did believe. "I don't know," he answered slowly. "I don't think that I either accept or reject the story. I have no proof. That is to say," he added, as if to temper the statement, "no proof afforded me by my own senses.

"But others have both seen and heard the ghost," put in Philip--Sir James's nephew and heir.

Colonel Edgeworth laughed again, softly, in frank derision. A slight frown momentarily drew Sir James's brows together. It was plain that he did not relish the colonel's contemptuous scepticism, which I secretly shared. Sir James was a man of intense pride in the family and in all that appertained to it; and the ghost, by its relation to the family, was a thing to be treated--like the religious opinions of another--with deference even when not accepted.

"On three separate occasions," he said, "I have been awakened in the small hours of Christmas morning by terrified servants with the announcement that there was some disturbance in the tapestried room."

"Probably a Christmas-party of rats," was Edgeworth's ready explanation. But no one laughed with him, whilst widowed Mrs. Hampton--the sister who kept house for Sir James--mildly repulsed the soldier's suggestion.

"Indeed, no, Colonel Edgeworth," she said. "The tapestried room is by no means given over to rats, as you seem to suppose. Whilst precisely as it was in the eighteenth century, at the time of the event of which we are speaking, it is, nevertheless, in every way kept just as if it were being occupied to-day."

The door opened at this moment, and the butler ushered in a couple of footmen bearing lamps and candles. There was a sigh of relief

from the three ladies at the advent of lights--they came so very opportunely, to dissipate the eerieness which our topic had introduced into that darkening room.

Having drawn the curtains upon the ghostly weather outside, the servants noiselessly retired.

"It seems to me a little odd," I ventured then, "That you should never have been tempted to investigate this haunting for yourself, Sir James."

His ruddy face expanded in a smile. "Well--you see," he answered slowly, "it is said that to any member of the family the sight of the Jacobite is of evil omen--a warning, in fact, of approaching death. Now, I ride to hounds a good deal, and, well--." He caressed his neck affectionately, and one or two laughed softly with the amused indulgence which he seemed to solicit.

"That is a disappointing addition," I confessed.

"How?" he inquired.

"It brings your ghost-story down to the level of most other ghost-stories that I have ever heard. A household ghost's appearance to any member of the family invariably conveys a warning of approaching death. I am sorry, Sir James but you have shattered my faith in this Jacobite."

He looked so crestfallen that I began to regret my frankness. And then Edgeworth laughed again, and the crestfallen look on Sir James's face changed to one of annoyance, whilst the ladies looked at us with candid disapproval.

"But, Mr. Dennison," cried Philip's young wife, "Sir James has forgotten to tell you that his father saw the Jacobite on the day before

he died."

"A perusal of the theories of M. Puysegur will explain that," I answered, for I felt that I was committed now to a definite expression of opinion. "Sir James's father knew himself to be upon his deathbed, and he knew that it was usual for men of his house to see this Jacobite before they died; therefore he saw him."

"In imagination, of course," said Edgeworth, turning his bronzed face towards me.

"Of course," I answered. And then the idea occurred to me: "Anyway, the opportunity to investigate the matter is an excellent one. To-night is the anniversary. If you will allow me to spend the night in the tapestried room--"

"Oh, no, no! Please, Mr. Dennison!" exclaimed the baronet's sister, in agitation.

"But why not, Mrs. Hampton?" I insisted. "I am not afraid of ghosts."

"I really should prefer," said Sir James gravely, "that a guest of mine should not be subjected to any--any--" He fumbled for the word he needed and gave Edgeworth the opportunity of cutting in.

"Fudge!" said the soldier. "The fact of the matter is you're afraid of having this romantic bubble pricked."

For an instant our host's glance was almost choleric. Then, with a sudden smile, he turned to me again. "I will consent, Dennison," he said, "provided that you have a companion. Now, Edgeworth here, who professes to fear neither man nor devil, who sniffs at the very mention of ghosts--"

"Done with you," Edgeworth interrupted eagerly. "We'll hunt this

ghost together, Dennison--and, bedad! we'll lay it."

The ladies protested in a body, and Philip was their ally in this. But Sir James, thoroughly stung by the contemptuousness of Edgeworth's disbelief in the family ghost, encouraged the notion now that the colonel was to bear me company in that vigil.

We sat late at table that night. We had been joined by a couple of neighbours of Sir James's, and after the ladies had left the men settled down to the seasonable carouse, in which Edgeworth bore more than his share--for he was as hard-drinking as he was hard-riding and hard- fighting.

I ventured upon a reminder of what lay before us; but the colonel retorted with a laugh that having fought on the Douro for the preservation to England of the very wine we were drinking, it was unreasonable to desire him to stint himself under any circumstances.

At last we left the table and went to join the ladies for a little while before retiring. And then, towards half-past eleven, our host himself escorted us upstairs to the tapestried room, which had quickly been prepared for us.

A piled-up fire was burning brightly on the hearth. A round mahogany table and two arm-chairs stood immediately before it. On the table there was a silver candelabrum bearing four lighted candles, and a pack of cards, in case we should desire to while away the tedium of our vigil. Upon another table, in one of the recesses made by the fireplace, a tray with glasses, a decanter and a couple of bottles had very thoughtfully been provided.

But I must confess that despite these attempts to render the place cheerful, a chill of apprehension struck through me as I entered that long, low-ceilinged room; nor could the blazing fire and the light of the

four candles suffice to dispel the ponderous gloom and the shadows cast by the vast canopied bed of carved walnut. The chamber was partly panelled in oak, partly hung with old tapestries, and this added to its sombreness. The tall window--through which the murderer had entered on that night some eighty years ago--was concealed by faded hangings, and from the very moment that I entered the room I could not conquer the feeling that someone or something was lurking behind them.

By the head of the bed Sir James showed us a door so artfully contrived in the panelling we might have overlooked it altogether. He opened it and disclosed a small ante-room in startlingly pleasant contrast to the gloomy bedchamber.

Dimity curtains festooned the windows; little red roses blossomed at intervals upon the white background of the fresh-looking wall-paper; a couch and a couple of arm-chairs of the "grandfather" type--which, with a table, completed the little room's furniture--were similarly covered in dainty chintzes. An oval gilt-framed mirror adorned the white overmantel, and a fire burned cheerfully in the little grate and was reflected upon the burnished fender. The whole was lighted by a lamp standing upon the table. An air of freshness, and a delicate perfume as of lavender, pervaded the little room.

"It is more cheery in here," said Sir James, "and my sister thought it as well to have it prepared for you, in case you should wish to change your quarters."

"Has this room no connection with the murder?" I inquired.

"A slight connection," Sir James replied. "It was in here that the poor lady's maid was sleeping. She was awakened by her mistress's cries, and attempted to go to her, but found it impossible to open the door."

"It has no fastening," said Edgeworth, in the tone of one who unmasks an error.

"But it may have had then," said Sir James, "or perhaps she was prevented from opening it by her mistress's body which lay against it."

Although I liked the room less when I had heard of its association with that sinister deed, it remained infinitely preferable to the bedchamber; and when I came to sit alone with Edgeworth in this gloomy apartment, I sighed secretly for the cheerful cosiness of the little ante-room.

Edgeworth did not seem in the least to share my feelings. Reclining in his ponderous arm-chair, he stretched his long legs, in their tight, strapped trousers, and yawned. "This is a damned piece of foolery, after all," said he. "I wonder how long I shall be able to keep awake. Devilish heady, that port of James's," he added as if to explain his somnolence; and then with an increasing brogue--"Let's hope this ghost of a Jacobite won't kape us waitin' too long," he ended, and laughed.

I shivered at the sound of it, and at the eerie, hollow echo which the ceiling seemed to return. He took up the pack and began to shuffle it, suggesting a hand at ecarte for small points. I agreed, and we began to play.

My attention, however, was anywhere but upon the game. Beyond all doubt now there was something that was subtly disturbing in the atmosphere of that room. Two or three times I looked round, and it was with difficulty that I repressed a shudder; things seemed to be stirring in the shadowy corners, and the tapestried curtains before the windows again filled me with an enervating sense that they concealed something. I could swear that the lines in which they fell

had undergone a change.

"I wish to Heaven they had given us more light," I burst out nervously. "The gloom is a trifle uncanny when one thinks of the associations of the place."

"Then why the devil do you think of them?" said he. "Egad!" he chuckled, "I thought you were as full-blooded a sceptic as I could wish. But I do believe you've a sneaking belief in these old wives' tales."

I took up my cards in silence, and made a foolish lead. I dared not admit that what he said was true--that the room, or something in it, was acting indefinably but unpleasantly upon me. I played foolishly, and Edgeworth, who had not his match at ecarte, won the game with ease. I refused to continue, and he lounged back, yawning again.

"Faith, this is a damned unpunctual ghost," said he presently. "I wonder how much longer we shall have to wait."

He was answered upon the instant. Scarcely had he uttered the words when three distinct taps fell abruptly upon the window beyond the tapestry curtains.

We stared at each other. The faintest alarm showed in Edgeworth's face, whilst as for myself, I felt my skin turn cold and roughen.

"What was that?" I asked, scarcely above a whisper, and the very sound of my voice seemed to increase my fears.

He rose--a magnificently tall, soldierly fellow in his claw-hammer coat and black stock. He had recovered his composure instantly. "Some fool trying to scare us," he snapped. "I'll pepper him, by Gad!" And he stepped to the overmantel, where he had ostentatiously placed a

pistol whilst Sir James had still been with us. He snatched it up, and in that moment the treble knock was repeated, more loudly and insistently than before.

It checked his confidence, and again he looked at me with a blank expression in his eyes. Outside, the wind howled and shrieked; it boomed and eddied in the chimney.

Abruptly Edgeworth crossed the room, and flung aside the tapestry curtains. I followed him, for all that my heart was hammering in my throat.

He pulled open the casement windows, disclosing shutters beyond them.

And then, in the very instant that he set his hand to the latch of these, the treble knock came for the third time--quick now and impatient.

I laid a hand on his arm to restrain him; but he shook me off, and sent the shutters crashing back against the wall on either side, where they remained arrested by the catches provided there.

There was nothing to be seen. All was blackness outside--a blackness through which scudded the ghostly snowflakes. The idea of anyone having attempted a practical joke was out of the question, as even Edgeworth realised. Nor was there any tree within fifty yards of the house, whose branches might have accounted for the knocks.

But as the shutters were flung open an icy draught had struck me--colder it seemed to me than could be accounted for by the weather. The candle-flames were beaten over, and the wax made shrouds down the sides of the candles; the hangings of the bed quivered under the touch of that icy breeze, and I could not avoid the horrible feeling that in opening that window in answer to the knocking we had

admitted some awful, invisible presence.

Edgeworth closed the casement, and turned to me; his face had lost some of its colour. "Queer!" he said. "Damned queer!" He waited for me to speak; but seeing that I offered no explanation--"How do you account for it?" he asked me.

"I don't," said I; and I moved slowly back towards the table, looking about me with fearful eyes as I went, yet utterly, physically unable to direct my glance towards the bed. "I have no explanation unless--unless it was the Jacobite."

Suddenly something cold touched my face. I cried out hoarsely, in utter terror.

"What's the matter now?" demanded Edgeworth.

"Something touched my cheek," I said, and even as I spoke the touch was repeated. It was precisely as if an icy finger had stroked me from temple to chin.

Edgeworth peered at me, and burst into a laugh. "A snowflake on your hair--it's melting," he explained, and his assurance entirely returned.

Not so mine. This physical explanation did not quite satisfy me; and then just as, completely unnerved and trembling, I had sunk into one of the chairs, the windows flew open with a crash, and the candles were extinguished by the cold gust that enveloped me.

I cried out, whilst Edgeworth swore. He swung round in the firelit gloom, and closed the windows once more. I sat huddled in my chair, scarcely breathing, whilst he thrust a spill into the fire, and one by one, relighted the candles. His hand shook a little, and his face was undoubtedly pale. Nevertheless--

"Come, come, Dennison! What the devil ails you?" he cried. "It's a fine ghost-hunter you are!"

"Don't talk like that," I begged him.

"And why shouldn't I now?" he blustered. "What's happened, after all? I forgot to latch the window, and the wind blew it open and put the candles out."

Here again were physical explanations. Yet again they failed to satisfy me. Rather I began to form the notion that supernatural forces were employing natural, commonplace media in which to express themselves. And I could not dispel the rooted conviction that something was in this room that had not been here before--something supremely evil. For the tapping at the window, at least, no physical explanation was forthcoming or possible, and it was a significant and uncanny circumstance that since the window had been opened the tapping had not been repeated.

I mentioned this to Edgeworth; but he was entirely, almost angrily contemptuous.

"We don't know what the physical explanation is," said he. "That's all."

He replaced his pistol on the mantelpiece, then stooped to poke the fire. "Tell you what, my boy," he grumbled, "it's devilish cold in this room."

"What do you say to going into the ante-chamber?" I asked him. "We could leave the door open. It's--it's cosier in there."

His dark eyes mocked me. "You can go if you like, Dennison. I undertook to spend the night here, and here I'll spend it though the

spooks of all the Jacobites that were at Culloden should come to wish me a merry Christmas."

His mockery jarred upon me; it increased my fears; it seemed like a challenge to this evil thing to manifest itself. I could stand no more of it. Had the tapping at the window recommenced it would have reassured me, I think. But since it did not, my conviction grew firmer than ever that whatever the thing was that had knocked, it had already gained admission.

I got up, conscious that my knees were trembling, seeking in vain to steady them. "I am going, anyway," I grumbled. And without waiting for his answer I went down the room towards the door in the panelling. My eyes sought to avoid the bed; yet I caught a glimpse of the tapestried hangings, and I had a distinct impression that they moved. I checked, almost paralysed by fear, expecting some monstrous thing to leap out upon me as I passed. Then in a panic I dashed forward, wrenched open the door, and sprang into the light, fresh space of the ante-room, followed by Edgeworth's mocking laugh.

I dropped into one of the big chairs by the fire, and for a moment felt more at ease. Presently, however, my fancy began to people the dark space of the open door. The impression grew that someone, or something, was watching me thence.

"Edgeworth!" I called, and my voice was far from steady. "It's infinitely cosier in here. Do come along, and bring the cards with you."

He yawned for answer. "Too sleepy for cards. Besides, I'm all right here. But I wish you'd shut the door. There's an infernal draught."

You will say that I am a coward, and that a man of my temperament

has no right to undertake the investigation of supernatural matters. Perhaps so. Anyway, I did not need to be twice invited to shut that door. Had it remained open, I should no more have been able to stay in the ante-chamber than to return to the tapestried room now that I had left it.

So I closed the door, and returned to my seat by the fire. Soon, as my pulses grew calmer, I began to feel ashamed of myself. And then I heard Edgeworth's steps approaching the door of communication. The latch clicked, and he stood under the lintel, a wineglass in one hand and a decanter in the other. "Four fingers of brandy is your most urgent need, my boy. Your nerves have mutinied, and you've been imagining things."

"Did I imagine the taps on the shutters?" I asked him.

"The devil take the taps on the shutters!" said he. But for all his jauntiness, he spilled some of the brandy in pouring for me.

I drained the glass gladly enough.

"Another?" he questioned, raising the decanter again. "It's the very distilled essence of courage."

I refused, and again I begged him to remain with me. But he would not, and he explained his obstinacy.

"The fact of the matter is, Dennison, that it's frightened I am, myself. I am quite frank. I am scared--for the first time in my life. So you'll understand that it's quite impossible for me not to return to that room. You see, 'tisn't cowardly to be scared, Dennison, but it's infernally cowardly to run away when you're scared; and Jack Edgeworth isn't going to turn coward--not for all the disembodied Jacobites in the universe." And with that he swung on his heel, and marched back

into the tapestried chamber, slamming the door after him.

I heard him cross to the fireplace, and I heard the creak of his chair as he settled down. He had made the difference between us pitilessly clear. We were both frightened, but I was the only coward of the two. And a coward I must remain, for his confessing to his fears did not tend to give me courage. Rather it glued me where I was, determined that nothing should take me into the tapestried room again that night. It was a determination I was later to disregard. But for the moment I hugged it to myself.

Now the genial warmth of the fire, combining with the effect of the brandy I had drunk, induced a pleasant torpor. For a little while I resisted it; but in the end I succumbed to the extent of resting my head on the tall back of my chair. From that moment I remember nothing until I was very wide awake again, startled without yet knowing the reason for it, my pulses throbbing at the gallop, and my ears straining to listen for something that I knew must come.

I must have slept some hours, for the fire was burning low, and the room had grown chilly.

Suddenly the thing I instinctively awaited came.

Through the wall from the tapestried chamber I heard Edgeworth calling my name in a terrified, choking voice. "Dennison! Dennison!"

I sprang up at the sound, and I felt as if I had been suddenly plunged into cold water. Horror fettered me where I stood.

And then came the sound of a falling body--just outside the door of communication, just where the murdered lady had fallen. I distinguished a swishing, dragging noise, a groan, and, finally--and most terrific of all--a faint cackle of indescribably malicious laughter.

For a spell I continued to stand there, staring with wild eyes at the closed door, expecting I knew not what to make its horrible appearance. At last, as the silence continued, I shattered the trammels that paralysed me, and sprang forward. I lifted the latch, and pushed. But the door would not give. There was something against it.

And on the instant Sir James's words recurred to me: "Her maid attempted to go to her assistance, but found it impossible to open the door--. She may have been prevented by her mistress's body, which lay against it."

My hand fell from the latch, limp with fear. I backed away from the door, cursing my own and Edgeworth's folly in tampering with this dreadful matter.

Then I almost cried out in fresh terror. Something was coming under the door--something black and gleaming, and narrow as the blade of a table-knife. Fascinated and uncomprehending, I watched it. As it advanced it began to take a sinuous course, but when it reached an irregularity in the blocked floor it slowly spread there, and at last I began to understand its nature. It was fluid, and it was not black, but red--deep red. It was blood! At once it flashed through my mind that just so must the blood of the murdered woman have crept under the door which her maid could not open on that night eighty years ago, even as I could not open it to- night.

The murder was being re-enacted by ghostly murderer and ghostly victim, down to the minutest detail. But was the victim a ghostly one?

My fears for Edgeworth surged up again, and they conquered my horror to the extent of enabling me to take up the lamp and quit the room by the door leading to the corridor. Outside the tapestried room I hesitated for a moment. I rapped on the panels.

"Edgeworth!" I called. "Edgeworth!"

There was no answer--no sound. Realising that if I delayed, my courage might desert me again, I seized the handle and flung the door open.

From the threshold, holding the lamp on high, I beheld the disorder of the room. The table had been overturned and all light extinguished. The cards and the candles were scattered on the floor, and prone near the door in the panelling, his legs against it, lay Edgeworth. His right arm was flung straight out, and his head rested sideways upon it.

That he was dead the first glimpse of his livid face assured me. Further, there was no movement in the horrid, glistening puddle in which he lay; so that it was quite plain that the blood had ceased to flow from whatever wound had been dealt him.

All this I noted in the one brief glance I stayed to bestow upon the room. Then, still lacking the courage to enter, I fled shouting down the corridor, towards the servants' quarters.

Within five minutes I returned accompanied by the butler and one of the footmen, who had been aroused and had promptly responded to my call.

Thus reinforced, I led the way into that room of horror. They checked a moment at the sight that met them. Then the butler approached the body, whilst I held the lamp on high. He knelt a moment beside Edgeworth. I saw his broad shoulders tremble, and he looked up at me with a grin which at first I imagined to be of sheer horror, but to which was presently added a chuckle.

First in bewilderment, then in slowly dawning comprehension, I

stared at the thing he held up for my inspection. It was a broken Burgundy bottle. The blood upon the floor was blood of grapes.

An explanation is scarcely needed. Edgeworth, to bolster up his failing courage, had emptied the decanter of brandy. He must have been on the very point of succumbing to it when he took up one of the bottles of Burgundy. It would be at that moment that he stumbled against the table, and the crash of its fall was the sound that had awakened me. In the dark he had called out to me with the last glimmer of consciousness; he had even attempted to reach the door of communication; and then the brandy had felled him--utterly, inertly drunk. In falling he had broken the bottle, and it was almost a miracle that he had not hurt himself upon it.

He attempted next day to cover up his behaviour by a cock-and-bull story of a supernatural visitor. But the ridicule with which he and I were covered as ghost-investigators was not encouraging. In self-defence I cited the incident of the tapping on the shutter, and even succeeded in impressing them with it. But when the shutters were examined it was discovered that a long strip of iron from one of the hinges had become loose and had been used by the gale as a knocker.

And yet there are times when, thinking it all over again, I am not satisfied. I remember the uncanny eerieness of the place, and I catch myself wondering once more whether, after all, supernatural causes may not have been finding expression in natural effects.

THE WEDDING GIFT

Sir George Jeffreys, Lord Chief Justice of England, looked up from the papers before him, and fixed his melancholy eyes upon his

visitor, the Lady Mary Ormington.

"You have done the State a great service, ma'am," said he, his voice gentle, his utterance slow. "Of that there is no more doubt than that you'll be setting a price on't."

And his red lips--startling red in so pale a face--were twisted never so faintly in a sneer.

He was arrayed in his scarlet, ermine-bordered robes, for he was fresh from the court-house of Dorchester, where, pursuing the instructions of his Royal master, and venting a savage humour, sprung, perhaps, from the awful disease that ravaged him, he had horribly dealt out the dread, unsparing justice that was to make his name a by-word of blood-lust.

Yet you had looked in vain for a trace of the man's ferocious nature in that pale face, its oval outline sharpened by the heavy periwig that framed it. It was a countenance mild and comely; the eyes were large and liquid, and haunted by a look of suffering.

"My lord," said the Lady Mary, wisely. "I have not come to bargain, but to do my duty by my King. Were it otherwise, I would have begun by naming the price of my disclosures."

"Instead of ending by it?" he questioned drily.

She flushed under the humourously scornful glance, and fidgeted an instant with her riding-switch.

"In no case can there be a question of price," said she, "though there may be a question of rewarding a service, which your lordship has acknowledged to be great."

Sire George's smile broadened.

"I have no doubt that you will find His Majesty graciously generous. What is the reward you seek?"

Her increasing pallor was dissembled by the shadows of her wide, plumed hat; but the strained tones betrayed her anxiety.

"I seek a small thing--a small thing to His Majesty, though to me a great one--I seek the pardon of a misguided gentleman who has borne arms against His Majesty in the late rising--Stephen Vallancey is his name."

Having uttered the name, she watched him breathlessly.

"Stephen Vallancey!" he croaked, and then fell silent, frowning at the papers on the table.

Presently, he began to smile, and her fears grew, for the smile's significance eluded her swimming senses.

"Stephen Vallancey," he repeated. "Hum! His arrest is expected by tomorrow. We are informed that he is in hiding in the neighborhood of St. Mary Ottery; and a troop of dragoons set out to find him an hour ago. A very desperate and dangerous man."

He looked up to find her leaning for support against the table; her face was grey, her eyes wide with fear. He was moved to a pity that was unusual in him, and to a liking for the foolish young rebel whose life she begged.

It was her good fortune to have come to him in such an hour as this. The pain by which all day he had been tormented had receded half-an-hour ago, when the Court adjourned, and the reaction brought now a mood of kindliness. Besides, his petitioner was a woman of handsome shape and face, and to the appeal of beauty the libertine

Chief Justice was oddly, weakly susceptible.

Now it fell out that he gave full consideration to the circumstance that Lady Mary Ormington came of a family staunchly loyal to King James, and was staunchly loyal herself, as she had just proved by the service she had done the State in revealing the details of the plot against the life of His Majesty.

"You ask much," he said, as if demurring.

"I have given much," she answered, and pointed to the papers.

"True," he admitted. He put forth a hand, white and slender as a woman's, and took up a quill. "His Majesty, no doubt, will not find the price exorbitant. I will undertake its payment, but on condition that Mr. Vallancey shall withdraw from England, and remain absent during His Majesty's lifetime, or at least, during His Majesty's pleasure."

"I pledge his word for it," she cried in a glad tone.

He nodded, dipped his quill, and began to write.

"So much is not necessary. I am setting it for that if Mr. Vallancey is in England seven days from now, he will be hanged if taken. There!" He sealed the document, and thrust it across to her. "Mr. Vallancey is very fortunate in his advocate, and very enviable."

She thanked him with a simple and touching earnestness; dropped him a curtsey, and departed hurriedly.

At the stairs' foot she found her elderly servant awaiting her.

"Quick, Nat," said she, "the horses. We ride at once."

Half-an-hour later, in that same room in which he had received her,

the Lord Chief Justice, half drunk, was cursing himself for having paid the price too readily; another hour, and, racked by pain, he reviled himself for having paid the price at all.

Meanwhile, Lady Mary rode briskly amain in the cool of that September evening, attended by her single groom.

The news Sir George had given her, that the dragoons were ahead, bent upon Vallancey's capture, increased her haste. Accidents might occur. Vallancey at bay might offer a rash resistance, preferring a soldier's death to the hangman's rope that must await him were he taken. Therefore must she outpace the troops, and reach his hiding-place ahead of them.

She was well mounted, and she knew the country as she knew the palm of her own hand. Often had she ridden to hounds across it, but never quite at such a breakneck pace as she rode in the dusk of that September evening, to the great alarm of her attendant. She left the road, and seemed to him bent upon going to St. Mary Ottery as the crow flies, or as nearly so as might be possible for a woman on horseback.

Ahead of them the saffron of the sky grew paler; it became faintly violet, then grey. The stars came out, and the night deepened. Still she pounded on relentlessly, uphill, downhill, by meadow and moorland, over wall and hedge, across brooks and through fords. Twice did her horse stumble, unseating her on the second occasion. Yet undaunted, she pursued her headlong way.

A fearless, high-spirited woman was Lady Mary, as Nat, old groom, was fully aware; and she was as resourceful as she was spirited.

It was midnight when two reeking, steaming horses pulled up on the very borders of Devonshire, at an inn that stood on the left bank of

the Char. It was the last inn in England where you would have expected to find relays. But Lady Mary had provided for everything against the success of interview with Jeffreys, and a pair of stout nags were at once forthcoming, to dash Nat's hope that it might be her ladyship's good pleasure to lie the night in that hovel.

The saddles being transferred, they mounted the fresh horses, went splashing through the ford and on. By daybreak they had left Colyton behind them, and were breasting the slopes above the valley of the Otter. On the heights they paused to breathe their nags.

The mellow, golden light of the new-risen sun flooded the country at their feet. They beheld St. Mary Ottery still sleeping below them, and beyond it the gleaming river. For miles they could see the road that wound about the foot of the hills, and nowhere was there a sign of troops. In her reckless cross-country gallop she had outpaced them. She looked at the haggard old groom, and laughed, well pleased.

All fatigue fell from her in that moment of victory. There was no sign of weariness in her fine eyes, her cheeks were delicately flushed, and there was an uprightness in her carriage which made it seem incredible that she should have ridden fifty miles between sunset and sunrise.

Gently they ambled down the slope and through the township, heading for a homestead by the river, a mile or so beyond St. Mary. Across an old stone bridge, barred by a gate which Nat got down to unlatch, they came straight into the yard of the farm, scattering a cloud of poultry in clucking terror. A dog barked furiously, and then, before Nat raised his whip to knock, the door was opened, and a tall, heavy man came forth into the light to challenge them.

He was in grey homespun, with rough woollen stockings, and wooden-soled shoes. His face was bronzed and bearded, his hair

touched with grey. There was malevolence in his air, a truculence which vanished the moment his keen blue eyes lighted on this handsome woman in her riding-habit of brown velvet.

"Ye be early astir, ma'am," was his greeting, a lingering suspicion in his voice.

"There is occasion for it, Master Leigh," said she, giving the reins to Nat, and coming lightly to earth. "I am seeking Mr. Vallancey."

His face remained impassive.

"Whom did ye zay?" he inquired, as though the name uttered were one that he now heard for the first time.

She smiled as she advanced towards the porch.

"I said Mr. Vallancey," she replied, and explained: "I am Lady Mary Ormington. You will have heard my name from him."

"I have not, ma'am," said he. But he drew aside to make way for her, and she stepped airily past him into the hall.

It was a long, low-ceilinged chamber, paved in stone and panelled in oak that had all but blackened. In this was ruddily reflected a flickering light from the logs that burnt in the great cowled fireplace. There were leather cushions on the oak settle against the wall; a harpsichord stood open in the embrasure of the long window, and some sheets of music lay upon it. There were books on a table in mid- chamber, and a copper bowl filled with late roses, whose fragrance hung sweetly upon the air. For a rude homestead the place breathed a singular refinement.

On a side-table there was a tall white jug and a glass retaining a film of the milk that it had lately held.

"'Tis what I most need," cried her ladyship. "I have ridden all night, and neither bite nor sup have I had since Dorchester."

She took up the jug. It was half full of fresh milk. She looked doubtfully at the used glass, then set the rim of the jug to her dainty lips, and drank deeply.

The farmer's eyes never left her. But not the grace of her carriage, not the richness of her attire, not the noble beauty of her face was it that engaged his sole attention. His was the suspicious nature of a rustic, and of a rustic with something to hide--something that it would be dangerous for him to have it known he harboured.

What if she were a spy of Bloody Jeffreys? Queer tales of his wiliness abounded in the countryside, and Vallancey had been a notorious rebel. To capture him the King's men might adopt sly shifts. It was like them, thought Leigh, to send a woman on the business of discovering his whereabouts.

The lady set down the jug and broke in upon his musings.

"Come, Master Leigh, will you send to tell Mr Vallancey that I am here?"

"You know my name, ma'am," said Leigh woodenly.

"I have it from Mr. Vallancey--he told me in his letters."

He scratched his head, still dubious. Then there was an interruption.

The door leading to the interior was opened, and on the threshold a girl came to a sudden halt, checked at the sight of this splendid stranger.

Lady Mary considered her in a swift glance of some astonishment. She was slight to the point of frailness, arrayed in grey homespun, with a band of black silk at waist and hem, and a deep collar of white lawn descending to a point across her breast. A little quakeress she looked in that sober garb. Her face was delicately tinted; her red lips were parted now in the surprise reflected in her deep blue eyes--eyes that announced her kinship to Joseph Leigh.

From the crown of her golden head to the soles of her dainty shoes, she explained to Lady Mary the refinement of that chamber which was a setting proper for so fair a jewel.

Even as her ladyship looked, the surprise in the child's eyes turned to recognition. She advanced a step.

"Lady Mary!" she exclaimed.

Her ladyship's brows went up in quick astonishment.

"Why, child," quoth she, "how comes it that you know me?"

"I have seen your picture. Stephen has it in a locket," she explained, and left Lady Mary speechless with fresh and great surprise that the familiar manner in which the yeoman's daughter spoke of a gentleman of Mr. Vallancey's quality.

"Why, then, there's no more ado," said Leigh. "Your ladyship will forgive my caution, but a want on't might ha' put a nooze about my own neck as well as Mr. Vallanzey's."

"I understand," said she. "Now that you are reassured, pray summon Mr. Vallancey."

"I'll zend for him," said Leigh. "He rose betimes to go a-fishing." In that moment across the cobbles of the yard came a clatter of feet. A

shock-headed boy, breathless from running, flung himself into the room.

"Zoldiers!" he gasped out in terror. "There be zoldiers at St. Mary--and--and--they be a-looking for Master Vallanzey!"

There was a sharp cry from Leigh's daughter; the colour had perished in her cheeks; her eyes were full of fear and horror, and her hand had flown to her breast as if to repress its sudden tumult.

Lady Mary observed these signs of deep concern with a sickness of misgiving.

"Send for him at once," she bade the farmer, and her tone was one of cold authority. "He has nothing to fear. The soldiers will not harm him. Let him be told so from me. And as you go, Master Leigh, give a thought to my groom out there. He has ridden all night with me, and is still fasting."

The yeoman bowed. Her ladyship's tone and manner were such as compelled obedience. He turned and departed with the lad who had brought news of the military.

Her ladyship seated herself in a leather armchair by the table, and proceeded to draw off her embroidered riding-gloves.

Lucy Leigh approached her, between eagerness and timidity--eagerness to know more of the immunity which her ladyship had promised Stephen Vallancey, timidity of one so regal and commanding.

"Your ladyship said," she murmured, "that the soldiers will not harm your cousin?"

"My cousin?" quoth her ladyship, her fine brows again contracting.

As swiftly they regained their smoothness. "I said so--yes," she replied. But her tone was such as to discourage further questions, and for a moment Lucy stood hesitating betwixt fear of her ladyship and anxiety for knowledge.

In that moment Mary Ormington weighed the situation.

Why had Vallancey lied to this child, and told her that the lady whose picture he carried was his cousin?

Her ladyship had heard of Vallancey some of those things which are seldom heard by a man's betrothed. She had been told of his reputation for dalliance, his irrepressible gallantry, and she had striven loyally to disbelieve it all. Yet here it seemed was proof. And as she looked upon the gentle, trusting child before her she was moved to a great pity for her, to a great anger against Vallancey who could so unscrupulously lighten the tedium of his concealment, gathering a heart as lightly as one gathers a rose-bud, to wear it for a day and then leave it broken and wilted without another thought.

"Can your ladyship not tell me more?" Lucy implored "I am in an agony of fear for him."

Lady Mary observed that the child expressed herself like a person of some culture, in the musical rising and falling inflexion of the west country.

"Ye've grown fond of him, child, it seems," said her ladyship.

The girl's scarlet lips and averted eyes sent a stab through Lady Mary's heart. But there was worse to come.

"We are to be married when this trouble is over," said Lucy softly.

She never saw Lady Mary's sudden start. Nor when presently, after a

spell of silence, she raised her eyes to her visitor's face did she observe its deep pallor.

"It is a great honour for you," said her ladyship, her voice expressionless. "Does your father know of it?"

"Not yet. We have not told him. Stephen desired me to wait until matters should be easier for him."

"Ah!"

Her ladyship rose, her face marble-white and marble-calm. Her resolve at the moment was to call her groom and ride away as she had come, without seeing Vallancey, taking Jeffreys' pardon with her, and leaving her betrothed to his fast-approaching fate.

Nor was she obeying an impulse merely of jealousy or vengeance. It was an impulse of mercy to this poor child he had befooled for his entertainment. Better a thousand times for Lucy that Vallancey should be taken and hanged; better a thousand times than that he should ride gaily away, leaving a heart-breaking disillusion behind him. To mourn him dead would be a small sorrow by comparison.

Within a pace of the door her ladyship checked suddenly, smitten by a fresh notion; and Lucy, watching her, marvelled at the oddness of a bearing, which at last she noticed. Her ladyship's next words, she fancied, explained it.

"They are very long in coming."

"He may have gone some way downstream," Lucy explained, and added fearfully the question: "Is there danger in his delaying?"

"Why, no, child," said her ladyship.

She came slowly back to the table, sat down again, and engaged Lucy in talk of this fine lover.

Gradually and skillfully she drew out the tale of it--her manifest sympathy and the relationship in which Lucy believed her to stand to Vallancey, effectively inducing the girl to speak upon a topic that filled her soul.

She found it all precisely as she had feared. The child's love for Vallancey amounted to worship; her trust in him had become the very breath of her life. In her pity for Lucy Lady Mary almost forgot to be sorry for herself. Her resolve to act upon the inspiration that had come to her gathered strength with every word that Lucy uttered. For the child's frank and artless nature made no attempt to use dissimulation with Vallancey's "dear cousin."

Presently came a sound of steps and voices. Through the long latticed window they saw Vallancey crossing the bridge with Leigh and the shock-headed lad. He was shouldering a long rod, and a brace of golden trout swung from the butt of it.

Lady Mary stood up.

"Go child," she said. "Let me speak to--to Mr. Vallancey alone a moment. I will call you."

Lucy hesitated. It was clearly in her mind to protest against this. But overawed by her ladyship's manner, she ended by obeying her, though with obvious reluctance.

A moment later, when the door opened, and Vallancey, tall, lean and bronzed, appeared in the doorway, his betrothed was alone to receive him.

He greeted her with a joyous cry; a glad smile suffused his

handsome face; his bold, dark eyes beamed upon her.

"Why, Mary, dear!" he cried. "What is't I'm told--that you're the bearer of great tidings?"

He advanced towards her, and she was conscious, with a pang, of the melody of his voice, the grace and ease of his carriage, which not even the rough garb he bore could dissemble. Within a pace of her he halted, perplexed by the stiffness of her attitude, the coldness of her face.

"Mary--Mary!" said he. Then, a sudden alarm gripping him--"What is't? Was it not true--your message? Is there danger from the troopers at St. Mary?"

Her answer increased his perplexity.

"That shall be as you decide."

"As I decide?" he stared at her, frowning. Then he forced a laugh. "You greet me oddly, faith! monstrous oddly!"

"'Tis that I find you monstrous odd," said she; and the fool conceived her words to concern his clumsy apparel, and began to explain its expediency.

She cut him short.

"I have seen your host's daughter what time I waited for you," she announced.

"A sweet chit," he flung in.

"I have talked with her," said her ladyship, a thought more sternly.

"Have you so?" said he, beginning at last to take her meaning. "Odds my life!"

"And she tells me that you are to be wed--you and she."

He clucked impatiently.

"The little fool!" Then he checked her anger, and laughed. "Faith! It cannot be that the Lady Mary Ormington is jealous?"

"Jealous!"

She hurled the word at him as though it were a missile. Then a smile of scorn twisted her lovely mouth. "Could I be jealous seeing that this morning I discovered you to be a stranger to me--a man whose acquaintance I had never made? For that Stephen Vallancey to whom I was betrothed was surely not the gentleman who stands before me. He never had life save in my fancy, and with that fancy he perished in this room a little while ago."

Consternation overspread his face.

"Stay, Mary--stay! You go too fast. You do not know."

"I know how you have beguiled the weariness of your sojourn here. I have it all from Lucy, who trusted me, believing me your good friend and cousin, as you had falsely told her."

Still he sought to carry it with a high hand.

"Pshaw! Listen, Mary. Am I to blame in that the little fool should come to rash conclusions?"

"It is quite as I supposed," said she.

But he swept on.

"What harm has come to her? She is a sweet child, a sweet playmate. But no more, believe me, Mary. I may have wandered with her by the stream, and talked of love and moonshine, and haply snatched a kiss or two. But, on my soul, 'twas all in play."

"I nothing doubt it, sir. And you would break her heart, and that would be in play; and your fine gentleman's conscience would have nought wherewith to reproach you. But break her heart you shall not. It is my good fortune to prevent it."

He stared, crestfallen. She explained.

"The King's Dragoon are at St. Mary Ottery, seeking, ferreting, inquiring. Within the hour they will be here. Depend on't. They will find you, and it will be best so. Better for her--less anguishing a thousand times that she should mourn you dead than mourn you faithless. You'll leastways leave a fragrant memory behind you."

His face had paled under its healthy tan.

"God!" he gasped. "Did ye not send me word that I no longer stand in danger?"

She looked him straight between the eyes, her face merciless.

"I was mistook," said she. "Ye stand in imminent danger. Yet if you love your life it shall be yours so that you swear to use it for that child's happiness, and fulfil the promise you have made her."

"I have made her none," he thundered, angry now.

"Not in words, perhaps--though even that I doubt. But you have made her believe that you love her and that you are sincere."

"And so I do, faith! But if all love is to lead to marriage a man would- -"

She cut him short.

"Your philosophy needs no expounding, sir. I know its shamelessness. You stand 'twixt life and death, Stephen. I await your choice."

For the first time in his shallow, amiably irresponsible existence he was conscious of guilt, stung by the shame of detection; and he stood sullenly silent a moment. Then with a shrug that was boyish in its petulance he turned aside and moved towards the window. Then he faced her again, his countenance in shadow.

"Are you bidding me to marry her?" he asked, his voice charged with incredulity.

"I am bidding you do no more than fulfil your undertaking."

"But it is monstrous!" he protested.

"It is," she agreed.

"Besides, are we not betrothed, Mary, you and I?"

"I thought I had made it clear that you are free of that."

"But I do not want my freedom. Mary," he cried petulantly, "I love you. You are the wife for me. I have never ceased to love you. As for this little rustic child. Oh, sink me! Can't you understand?" he ended impatiently.

"I think I can," said she, her voice ice-cold.

"But consider," he begged her. "How could I marry her? How could I? Why, you must see 'twere midsummer madness."

And half-sullenly he turned his shoulder upon her and stared through the window across the bridge and up the long dusty road. Then he rapped out an oath. He swung around, and his face had undergone a woeful change. It reflected abject fear.

"They are coming, Mary. They are coming--the soldiers!" he cried, and halted, dismayed, angered, speechless before her icy calm that even his imminent peril could not conquer.

"You have the less time in which to determine," she informed him.

He looked at her, breathing hard; realized that she was immovable, and clenched his hands despairingly.

"Tell me where I stand," he asked, his voice thickening.

Briefly she announced the terms of the pardon she had obtained for him.

"You depart for Ireland with your bride," she ended, "or I suppress the pardon and you hang."

"You cannot do it!" he cried. "You cannot!"

"I can and will," said she; and as he looked deep into her stern eyes, he doubted no longer.

The thud of hoofs grew faintly audibly, and then the inner door opened, and Lucy stood regarding them from the threshold. Her face was ashen, and her blue eyes gleamed a smoldering anger. But they misread the signs, and supposed her pallor to spring from fear for her fine lover.

Moreover, Vallancey was more concerned with thoughts of himself at the moment. A cunning inspiration had come to his aid. Let him agree now to Lady Mary's proposal and obtain the pardon. He need not carry out his part of the bargain afterwards.

It was a knavish thing to do--to give his word without intending to fulfil it; but then, her ladyship forced it upon him, he reflected, resentfully. She gave him a choice of evils, and he must accept the lesser.

And as he stood there pondering this, Lucy's fierce eyes never left his face.

The hoofs came nearer.

"It shall be as you wish," he said suddenly.

"You pledge me your word?" quoth Lady Mary.

"On my honour, madam," he replied without hesitation. "And now the pardon."

From her bosom Lady Mary drew the document she had obtained from Jeffreys. He held out a trembling hand for it.

"No," she said. "I prefer to give it to your little bride."

Lucy saw him wince at the term before she turned her eyes to Lady Mary and received the paper.

"I hope he will make you happy, child," said her ladyship, but there was doubt and some pity in her eyes. "This is my wedding-gift to you."

Lucy glanced at the paper and uttered a short, hard laugh that

startled them.

"It is more than that, I think," said she. "It is the price at which I am to be wed; the price at which Stephen is to commit this mid-summer madness."

And she laughed again, whilst Lady Mary and Vallancey realised--the latter in utter dismay and fear--that she had overheard all that had passed between them.

"Lucy!" he cried, and checked there, not knowing what to add.

"But the price need not be paid, and so you will be saved, Stephen, from this monstrous wedding." As she spoke her fingers tightened over the paper and crumpled it into her palm. "And since there is to be no wedding, my lady the wedding-gift will not be needed."

And she flung the crumpled pardon into the blazing fire. Then her laughter shrilled higher with the hysteria of a heart surcharged.

With an oath Vallancey sprang to rescue that precious document. But a fluttering film of ash was all that remained--a symbol of the life which his wantonness had forfeited.

Hoofs rattled on the cobbles of the yard, and a heavy knock fell upon the door.

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

I

Ordinarily Dragut Reis--who was dubbed by the Faithful "The Drawn Sword of Islam"--loved Christians as the fox loves geese. But in that

summer Of 1550 his feelings acquired a far deeper malignancy; they developed into a direct and personal hatred that for intensity was second only to the hatred which the Christians bore Dragut.

The allied Christian forces, under the direction of their emperor, had smoked him out of his stronghold of Mehedia; they had seized that splendid city, and were in the act of razing it to the ground as the neighbouring Carthage had been razed of old.

Dragut reckoned up his losses with a gloomy, vengeful mind. He had lost his city; and from the eminence of a budding Basha in the act of founding a kingdom he had been cast down once more to be a wanderer upon the seas.

He had lost three thousand men, and amongst them the very flower of his fiery corsairs. He had lost some twelve thousand Christian slaves-- the fruit of many a desperate raid by land and water. He had lost his lieutenant and nephew, Hisar, who was even now a captive in the hands of his inveterate enemy, Andrea Doria. It is little wonder that he lost his temper, too. But he recovered it quickly, that he might set about recovering the rest. He was not the man to waste his days in brooding over what was done. Yesterday and to-day are but as pledges in the hands of destiny.

So he returned thanks to Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, that he was still alive and free upon the seas, with three galleasses, twelve galleys, and five brigantines; and bent his energetic, resourceful, knavish mind to the matter of making good his losses. Meanwhile, he had been warned by the Sultan of Constantiaople, the Exalted of Allah, that the Emperor Charles, not content with the mischief he had already wrought, had, in letters to the Grand Seignior, avowed his intent to pursue to the death "the pirate Dragut, a corsair odious to both God and man." He knew, moreover, that the emperor had entrusted the task to the greatest seaman of the day--to

the terrible Admiral of Genoa, Andrea Doria, and that the Genoese was already at sea upon his quest.

Now, once already had Dragut been captured by the navy of Genoa, and for four years, which it afforded him little satisfaction to remember, he had toiled at an oar aboard the galley of the admiral's nephew, Gianettino Doria. He had known exposure to heat and cold; naked had he been broiled by the sun, and frozen by the rain; he had known aching muscles, hunger and thirst; filthy crawling things, and the festering sores begotten of the oarsman's bench; and his shoulders were still a criss-cross of scars where the bos'ns' whips had lashed him to revive his flagging energies.

All this had Dragut known, and he was not minded to renew the knowledge. It behoved him, therefore, to make ready fittingly to receive the admiral.

And by way at once of replenishing his coffers, venting a little of his vengeful heat, and marking his contempt for his Christian pursuers, he had made a sudden swoop upon the south-western littoral of Sicily. Beginning at Gergenti, he carried his raid as far north as Marsala, leaving ruin and desolation behind him. At the end of a week he stood off to sea again with the spoils of six townships and some three thousand picked captives of both sexes.

He would teach the infidel Christian dog to allude to him as "the pirate Dragut, a corsair odious to both God and man." He would so, by the beard of Mahomet! He put the captives aboard a couple of galleys, in charge of his lieutenant, Othmani, and dispatched them straight to Algiers, to be sold there in the slave market. With the proceeds Othmani was to lay down fresh keels. Until these should be ready to reinforce his little fleet, Dragut judged it well to avoid encounters with the Genoese admiral, and with this intent he kept a southward course along the coast towards Tripoli. Towards sunset of

the day on which Othmani's galleys set out alone for Algiers, a fresh breeze sprang up from the north and blew into the corsair's range of vision a tiny brown-sailed felucca, as it might have blown a leaf in autumn. It was hawk-eyed Dragut himself who, lounging in the poop of his galley, first sighted this tiny craft.

He pointed it out to Biretta, the renegade Calabrian gunner, who was near him.

"In the name of Allah," quoth he, "what walnut-shell is this that comes so furiously after us?"

Biretta, a massive, sallow fellow, laughed.

"The fury is not hers, but of the wind," said he. "She goes wherever it blows her. She'll be an Italian craft."

II

"Then the wind that blows her is the wind of Destiny. Haply she'll have news of Italy."

He turned on his heel and gave an order to a turbaned officer below. Instantly the brazen note of a trumpet rang out, clear above the creak and dip of oars. As instantly the rowers came to rest, and from the side of each galley six-and-twenty massive yellow oars stood out, their wet blades glistening in the evening sunlight.

Thus the Moslem fleet waited, rocking gently on the little swell that had arisen, and its quality was blazoned by the red and white ensign charged with a blue crescent, which floated from the masthead of Dragut's own galley.

On came the little brown-sailed felucca, hopelessly driven by what Dragut accounted the breeze of Destiny. At last, when she was in

danger of being blown past them, Dragut crossed to meet her. As the galley's long prow ran alongside of her, grappling hooks were deftly flung to seize her at mast and gunwale, and but for these she must have been swept over by those gigantic oars.

From the prow, Dragut himself, a tall and handsome figure in gold-embroidered scarlet surcoat that descended to his knees, his snowy turban heightening the swarthiness of his hawk face, with its square-cut black beard, stood to challenge the crew of that ill-starred felucca.

There were aboard of her six scared knaves, something betwixt seamen and lackeys, whom the corsair's black eyes passed contemptuously over. He addressed himself to a couple who were seated in the stern-sheets--a tall and very elegant young gentleman, obviously Italian, and a girl, upon whose white, golden-headed loveliness the corsair's bold eyes glowed pleasurably.

"Who are you?" he demanded shortly in Italian.

The willowy young man answered for the twain, very composedly, as though it were a matter of everyday life with him to be held in the grappling-hooks of a Barbary pirate.

"My name is Ottavio Brancaleone. I am from Genoa on my way to Spain."

"To Spain!" quoth Dragut and he laughed. "You steer an odd course for Spain, or do you look to find it in Egypt?"

"We have lost our rudder," the gentleman explained, "and we were at the mercy of the wind."

"I trust you have found it as merciful as you hoped," said Dragut. He leered at the girl, who, in affright, shrank nearer her companion. "And

the girl, sir? Who is she?"

"My-my sister."

"Had you told me different you had been the first Christian I ever knew to speak the truth," said Dragut, quite amiably. "Well well, 'tis plain you're not to be trusted to sail a boat of your own. Best come aboard and see if you can do better at an oar."

"I'll not be trespassing on your hospitality," said Brancaleone with that amazing coolness of his.

Dragut wasted no time in argument. It was not his way. Of the grinning, turbaned corsairs who swarmed like ants upon the prow, he flung a half-score down into the felucca. Brancaleone had time to stab but one of them before they overpowered him.

The prize proved far less insignificant than at first Dragut had imagined. For in addition to the eight slaves acquired--and the girl was fit to grace a sultan's harem--they found a great chest of newly minted ducats, which it took six men to heave aboard the galley, and a beautifully chiselled gold coffer full of gems of price. They found something more. On the gold coffer's lid was engraved the owner's name--Amelia Francesca Doria.

Dragut snapped down the lid with a prayer of thanks to Allah the One, and strode into the poop cabin, where the girl was confined.

"Madonna Amelia," he called softly, to test her identity. She looked up at once. "Will you tell me what is your kinship with the Admiral of Genoa?"

"I am his granddaughter, sir," she answered, with something fierce behind her outward softness, "and be sure that he will terribly avenge

upon you any wrong that is done to me."

Dragut nodded and smiled.

"We are old friends, the admiral and I," said he, and went out again.

A mighty Nubian bearing a torch--for night had now descended with African suddenness--lighted him to the galley's waist, where, about the mainmast, lay huddled the seven pinioned prisoners.

With the curved toe of his scarlet slipper the corsair touched Messer Brancaleone.

"Tell me, dog," said he, "all that you know of Messer Andrea Doria."

"That is soon told," answered Brancaleone. "I know nothing, nor want to."

"Therein, of course, you lie," said Dragut, "for one thing, you know his granddaughter."

Brancaleone blinked, and recovered.

"True, and several others of his family. But I conceived your question to concern his movements. I know that he is upon the seas, that he is seeking you, and that he has sworn to take you alive, and that when they take you--as I pray God they will--they will so deal with you that you shall implore them of their Christian charity to hang you."

"And is that all you know?" quoth Dragut, unruffled. You did not, peradventure, sight this fleet of his as you were sailing?"

"I did not."

"Do you think that with a match between your fingers you might remember?"

"I might invent," said the Italian. "I have told you the truth, Messer Dragut. Torture could but gain you falsehood."

The corsair looked searchingly into that comely young face, then he turned away as if satisfied. But as he was departing Messer Brancaleone called him back. The Italian's imperturbability had suddenly departed. Anxiety amounting almost to terror sounded in his voice, "What fate do you reserve for Madonna Amelia?" he asked.

Dragut considered him, and smiled a little. He had no particular rancour against his prisoner; indeed, he was inclining to admiration for the cool courage which the man had shown. At the same time, there was no room for sentiment in the heart of the corsair. He was quite pitiless. He had been asked a question, and he answered it without malice.

"Our lord the Sublime Suleyman," said he, "is as keen a judge of beauty as any living man. I do the girl the honour of accounting her a gift worthy even of the Exalted of Allah. So I shall keep her safe against my next voyage to Constantinople."

And then Brancaleone's little lingering self-possession left him utterly. From his writhing lips came a stream of vituperation, expressions of his impotent rage, which continued even after the Nubian had struck him upon the mouth and Dragut had taken his departure.

Next day a slave on Dragut's galley who had been taken ill at his oar was, in accordance with custom, unshackled and heaved overboard. Brancaleone, stripped to his delicate white skin, was chained in the fellow's empty place. There were seven men to each oar, and

Brancaleone's six companions were all Christians and all white--or had been before exposure had tanned them to the colour of mahogany. Of these, three were Spaniards, two were Italian, and the other was a Frenchman. All were indescribably filthy and unkempt, and it was with a shudder that the delicately nurtured Italian gentleman wondered was he destined to become as they?

Up and down the gangway between the rowers' benches strode two Moslem bo'suns, armed with long whips of bullock-hide, and it was not long ere one of them, considering that Brancaleone was not putting his share of effort into his task, sent that cruel lash to raise a burning weal upon his tender flesh. He was sparingly fed with his half-brutalized companions upon dried figs and dates, and he was given a little tepid water to drink when he thirsted, which was often. He slept in his shackles on the rowers' bench, which was but, some four feet wide, and, despite the sheepskins with which that bench was padded, it was not long ere the friction of his constant movement began to chafe and blister his flesh.

In the scorching noontide of the second day he collapsed, fainting upon his oar. He was unshackled and dragged out upon the gangway. There a bucket of sea-water was flung over him to revive him, and the too-swift healing action of the salt upon his seared flesh was a burning agony. He was put back to his oar again with the warning that did he permit himself a second time the luxury of swooning he would have the whole ocean in which to revive.

On the third day they sighted land, and towards evening the galleys threaded their way one by one through the shoals of the Boca de Cantara into the spacious lagoon on the north-east side of the Island of Jerbah, and there came to rest.

It was Dragut's intent to lie snug in that remote retreat until Othmani should be ready with the reinforcements that were to enable the

corsair to take the seas once more against the Admiral of Genoa. But it would seem that already the admiral was closer upon his heels than he had supposed, and that, trackless as are the ocean ways, yet Andrea Doria had by some mysterious means, contrived to gather information as he came that had kept him upon the invisible spoor of his quarry.

IV

Not a doubt but that the folk on that ravaged Sicilian seaboard would be eager to inform the redoubtable admiral of the direction in which the Moslem galleys had faded out of sight. Perhaps even that empty felucca left tossing upon the tideless sea had served as an index to the way the corsairs had taken, and perhaps from the mainland, from Monastir, or one of the other cities now in Christian hands, a glimpse of Dragut's fleet had been caught and Doria had been warned. Be that as it may, not a week had Dragut been anchored at Jerbah when one fine morning brought a group of friendly islanders with the alarming news that a fleet of galleys was descending upon the island from the north.

The news took Dragut ashore in a hurry with a group of officers. From the narrow spur of land at the harbour's mouth he surveyed the advancing ships. What already he had more than feared became absolute certainty. Two-and-twenty royal galleys were steering straight for the Boca de Cantara, and the foremost was flying the admiral's ensign. Back to his fleet went Dragut for cannon and slaves, and so feverishly did these toil under the lash of his venomous tongue, and of his bosuns' whips, that within an hour he had erected a battery at the mouth of the harbour and fired a salute straight into the Genoese line as the galleys were in the very act of dropping anchor. Thereupon the fleet of Doria stood off out of range, and hung there, well content to wait, knowing that all that was now required on their part was patience. The fox was trapped, and the

sword of Islam was like to be sheathed at last.

Forthwith the jubilant Doria sent word to the Emperor that he held Dragut fast, and he dispatched messengers to the Viceroys of Sicily and Naples asking for reinforcements with which, if necessary, to force the issue. He meant this time to leave nothing to chance.

Dragut, on his side, employed his time in fortifying the Boca de Cantara. A fort arose there, growing visible under the eyes of the Genoese, and provoking the amusement of that fierce veteran, Doria. Sooner or later, Dragut must decide him to come forth from his bottle-necked refuge, and the longer he put off that evil day the more overwhelming would be the numbers assembled to destroy him.

Never since Gianettino Doria had surprised him in the road of Goialatta, off the coast of Corsica, on that famous occasion when he was made prisoner, had Dragut found himself in so desperately tight a corner. He sat under the awning of the poop of his galley, and cursed the Genoese with that astounding and far-reaching fluency in which the Moslem is without rival upon earth. He pronounced authoritatively upon the evil reputation of Doria's mother and the inevitably shameful destiny of his daughters and their female offspring. He foretold how dogs would of a certainty desecrate the admiral's grave, and he called perfervidly upon Allah to rot the bones and destroy the house of his arch-enemy. Then, observing that Allah remained disdainfully aloof, he rose up one day in a mighty passion, and summoned his officers.

"This skulking here will not avail us," he snarled at them, as if it were by their contriving that he was trapped. "By delay we but increase our peril. What is written is written. Allah has bound the fate of each man about his neck. Betide what may, to-night we take the open sea."

"And by morning you'll have found the bottom of it," drawled a voice from one of the oars.

Dragut, who was standing on the gangway between the rowers' benches, whipped round with an oath upon the speaker. He encountered the languid eyes of Messer Brancaleone. The repose of the last few days had restored the Italian's vigour, and certain thoughts that lately he had been thinking had revived his courage.

"Are you weary of life?" quoth the infuriated corsair. "Shall I have you hanged ere we go out to meet your friends out yonder?"

"You're very plainly a fool, Messer Dragut," was the weary answer. "Hang me, and you hang the only man in all your fleet who can show you the way out of this trap in which you're taken."

Dragut started between anger and amazement.

"Strike off my fetters, restore me my garments, and give me proper food, and I'll discuss it with you."

"You can show me a way out of this trap?" he cried. "What way may that be?"

Dragut glowered.

"We have a shorter way to make men speak," said he.

Brancaleone smiled, and shook his head.

"You think so? I might prove you wrong."

V

It was odd what a power of conviction dwelt in his languid tones. The

corsair issued an order and turned away. A half-hour later Messer Brancaleone, nourished, washed and clothed, once more the elegant, willowy Italian in his doublet of sapphire velvet and in pleasantly variegated hose of blue and white, stepped on to the poop-deck where Dragut awaited him.

Seated cross-legged upon a gorgeous silken divan that was wrought in green and blue and gold, the handsome corsair combed his square black beard with fretful fingers. Behind him, stark naked save for his white loin-cloth, stood his gigantic Nubian, his body oiled until it shone like ebony, armed with a gleaming scimitar.

"Now, sir," growled Dragut, "what is this precious plan of yours--briefly?"

"You begin where we should end," said the imperturbable Genoese. "I owe you no favours, Messer Dragut, and I bear you no affection that I should make you a free gift of your life and liberty. My eyes have seen something to which yours are blind, and my wits have conceived something of which your own are quite incapable. These things, sir, are for sale. Ere I part with them we must agree on the price."

Dragut pondered him from under scowling brows savagely. He could scarce believe that the world held so much impudence.

"And what price do you suggest?" he snarled, half-derisively, by way of humouring the Genoese.

"Why, as to that, since I offer you life and liberty, it is but natural that I should claim my own life and liberty in return, and similarly the liberty of Madonna Amelia and of my servants whom you captured; also, it is but natural that I should require the restoration of the money and jewels you have taken from us, and since you have deprived us of

our felucca, it is no more than proper that you should equip us with a vessel in which to pursue the journey that you interrupted. Considering the time we have lost in consequence of this interruption, it is but just that you should make this good as far as possible by presenting me with a craft that is capable of the utmost speed. I will accept a galley of six-and-twenty oars, manned by a proper complement of slaves."

"And is that all?" roared Dragut.

"No," said Brancaleone quietly. "That is but the restitution due to me. We come now to the price of the service I am to render you. When you were Gianettino Doria's prisoner, Barbarossa paid for you, as all the world knows, a ransom of three thousand ducats. I will be more reasonable."

"Will you so?" snorted Dragut. "By the splendour of Allah, you'll need to be!"

"I will accept one thousand ducats."

"May Allah blot thee out, thou impudent son of shame!" cried the corsair, and he heaved himself up in a fury.

"You compel me to raise the price to fifteen hundred ducats," said Brancaleone smoothly. "I must be compensated for abuse, since I cannot take satisfaction for it as between one honourable Christian gentleman and another."

It was good for Dragut that his feelings suddenly soared to a pitch of intensity that defied expression, else might the price have been raised even beyond the figure of the famous ransom that Barbarossa had paid. Mutely he stood glowering, clenching and unclenching his sinewy hands. Then he half-turned to his Nubian swordsman.

"Ali--" he began, when Brancaleone once more cut in.

"Ah, wait," said he. "I pray you calm yourself. Remember how you stand, and that Andrea Doria holds you trapped. Do nothing that will destroy your only chance. Time enough to bid Ali hack off my head when I have failed."

That speech arrested Dragut's anger in full flow. He wheeled upon the Genoese once more. "You accept that alternative?"

Brancaleone met his gaze blandly.

"Why not? I have no slightest fear of failure. I have said that I can show you how to win clear of this trap and make the admiral the laughing-stock of the world."

"Speak, then," cried Dragut, his fierce eyes kindling.

"If I do so before you have agreed my terms then I shall have nothing left to sell."

Dragut turned aside and strode to the taffrail. He looked across the shimmering blue water to the fortifications at the harbour's mouth; with the eyes of his imagination he looked beyond, at the fleet of Genoa riding out there in patient conviction that it held its prey. The price that Brancaleone asked was outrageous. A galley and some two hundred Christian slaves to row it, and fifteen hundred ducats! In all it amounted to more than the ransom that Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa had paid for him. Yet Dragut must pay it or count his destiny fulfilled. He came to reflect that he would pay it gladly enough to be out of this tight corner.

He came about again. He spoke of torture once more, but in a half-hearted sort of way; for he did not himself believe that it would be

effective with a man of Brancaleone's mettle.

VI

Brancaleone laughed at the threat and shrugged his shoulders.

"You may, as profitably hang me, Messer Dragut. Your infidel barbarities would quite as effectively seal my lips."

"We might torture the woman," said Dragut the ingenious.

On the words Brancaleone turned white to the lips; but it was the pallor of bitter, heart-searing resolve, not the pallor of such fear as Dragut had hoped to awaken. He advanced a step, his imperturbability all gone, and he spat his words into the face of the corsair with the fierceness of a cornered wildcat.

"Attempt it," said he, "and as God's my witness I leave you to your fate at the hands of Genoa--ay, though my heart should burst with the pain of my silence. I am a man, Messer Dragut--never doubt it."

"I do not," said Dragut convinced. "I agree to your terms. Show me a way out of Doria's clutches, and you shall have all that you have asked for."

Trembling still from his recent emotion, Brancaleone hoarsely bade the corsair to call up his officers and repeat his words before them.

"And you shall make oath upon this matter," he added. "Men say of you that you are a faithful Moslem. I mean to put it to the test."

Dragut, now all eagerness to know what plan was stirring in his prisoner's brain, unable to brook further suspense in this affair, called up his officers, and before them all, taking Allah to witness, he made oath upon the beard of the Prophet, that if Brancaleone could show

him deliverance, he, on his side, would recompense the Genoese to the extent demanded. Thereafter Dragut and Brancaleone went ashore with no other attendant but the Nubian swordsman. It was the Genoese who led the way, not towards the fort, as Dragut had expected, but in the opposite direction. Arrived at the northernmost curve of that almost circular lagoon, where the ground was swampy, Brancaleone paused. He pointed across a strip of shallow land, that was no more than a half-mile or so in width, to the blue-green sea beyond. Part of this territory was swampy, and part was sand; vegetation there was of the scantiest; some clumps of reeds, an odd date palm, its crest rustling faintly in the breeze, and nothing else.

"It is really very simple," said the Italian. "Yonder lies your way."

A red-legged stork rose from the edge of the marsh and went circling overhead. Dragut's face empurpled with rage. He deemed that this smooth fellow dared to mock him.

"Are my galleys winged like that stork, thou fool?" he demanded passionately. "Or are they wheeled like chariots, that I can sail them over dry land?"

Brancaleone returned him a glance that was full of stupefaction.

"I protest," said he, "that for a man of your reputation you fill me with amazement. I said you were a dull fellow. I little dreamed how dull. Nay, now, suppress your rage. Truth is a very healing draught, and you have need of it.

"I compute, now, that aboard your ships there will be, including slaves, some three thousand men. I doubt not you could press another thousand from the island into your service. How long, do you think, would it take four thousand men to dig a channel deep enough to float your shallow galleys through that strip of land?"

Dragut's fierce eyes flickered as if he had been menaced with a blow.

"By Allah!" he ejaculated; and gripped his beard. "By Allah!"

"In a week the thing were easily done, and meanwhile your fort there will hold the admiral in play. Then, one dark night, you slip through this canal and stand away to the south, so that by sunrise you shall have vanished beyond the skyline, leaving the admiral to guard an empty trap."

Dragut laughed aloud now in almost childish glee, and otherwise signified his delight by the vehemence with which he testified to the unity of Allah. Suddenly he checked. His eyes narrowed as they rested upon Brancaleone.

"'Tis a scurvy trick you play your lady's grandsire!" said he.

The Genoese shrugged.

"Every man for himself, Messer Dragut. We understand each other, I think. 'Tis not for love of you that I do this thing."

"I would it were," said the corsair, with in odd sincerity. And as they returned to the galleys it was observed that Dragut's arm was about the shoulders of the infidel, and that he spoke with him as with a brother.

VII

The fact is that Dragut, fired with admiration of Brancaleone's resourcefulness, deplored that so fine a spirit should of necessity be destined to go down to the Pit. He spoke to him now of the glories of Islam, and of the future that must await a gentleman of Brancaleone's

endowments in the ranks of the Faithful. But this was a matter in which Brancaleone proved politely obdurate, and Dragut had not the time to devote to his conversion, greatly as he desired it. There was the matter of that canal to engage him.

The Italian's instructions were diligently carried out. Daily the fort at the Boca de Cantara would belch forth shot at the Genoese navy, which stood well out of range. To the admiral this was but the barking of a dog that dared not come within biting distance; and the waste of ammunition roused his scorn of that pirate Dragut whom he held at his mercy.

There came a day, however, when the fort was silent; it was followed by another day of silence, in the evening of which one of the admiral's officers suggested that all might not be well. Doria agreed, laughing heartily in his long white beard.

"All is not at all well with that dog Dragut," said he. "He wants us within range of his guns. The ruse is childish."

And so the Genoese fleet continued well out of range of the empty fort, what time Dragut himself was some scores of miles away, speeding for the Archipelago and the safety of the Dardanelles as fast as his slaves could row.

In the words of the Spanish historian Marmol, who has chronicled the event, Dragut had left Messer Andrea Doria "with the dog to hold."

Brancaleone accompanied the Moslem fleet at first, though now aboard the galley which Dragut had given him in accordance with their agreement. And with the Genoese sailed the lovely Amelia Francesca Doria, his chest of gold, the jewels, and the fifteen hundred ducats that Dragut--grimly stifling his reluctance--had paid him. On the second day after leaving Jerbah, Messer Brancaleone

and the corsair captain parted company, with mutual expressions of goodwill, and the Genoese put about and steered a north-westerly course for the coast of Spain.

It was some months ere Dragut learnt the true inwardness of Messer Brancaleone's conduct. He had the story from a Genoese captive, the captain of a carack which the corsair scuttled in the Straits of Messina. This fellow's name, too, was Brancaleone, upon learning which Dragut asked him was he kin to one Ottavio Brancaleone, who had gone to Spain with the admiral's grand-daughter.

"He was my cousin," the man answered.

And Dragut now learnt that in the teeth of the opposition of the entire Doria family the irrepressible Brancaleone had carried off Madonna Amelia. The admiral had news of it as he was putting to sea, and it was in pursuit not only of Dragut, but also of the runaways, that he had gone south as far as Jerbah, having reason to more than suspect that they were aboard one of Dragut's galleys. The admiral had sworn to hang Brancaleone from his yardarm ere he returned to port, and his bitterness at the trick Dragut had played was increased by the circumstance that Brancaleone, too, had got clear away.

Dragut was very thoughtful when he heard that story.

"And to think," said he afterwards to Othmani, "that I paid that unconscionable dog fifteen hundred ducats, and gave him my best galley manned by two hundred Christian slaves that he might render himself as great a service as ever he rendered me!"

But he bore no malice. After all, the Genoese had behaved generously in that he had left Dragut--though not from motives of generosity--the entire glory of the exploit. Dragut's admiration for the impudent fellow was, if anything, increased. Was he not, after all, the

only Christian who had ever bested Dragut in a bargain? If he had a regret it was that so shrewd a spirit should abide in the body of an infidel. But Allah is all-knowing.

IN DESTINY'S CLUTCH (1921)

Chapter I: Corsair of the Seas

Ordinarily Dragut-Reis--who was dubbed by the Faithful "The Drawn Sword of Islam"--loved Christians as the fox loves geese. But in that fateful summer of 1550 his feelings toward them acquired a far deeper malignancy; they developed into a direct and personal hatred that for intensity was second only to the hatred which the Christians bore Dragut. The allied Christian forces under the direction of their emperor had smoked him out of his stronghold at Mehedia; they had seized that splendid city and were in the act of razing it to the ground as the neighboring Carthage had been razed of old.

Dragut reckoned up his losses with a gloomy and vengeful mind. He had lost his city, and from the eminence of a budding Basha in the act of founding a kingdom and perhaps a dynasty, he had been cast down once more to be a wanderer upon the seas. He had lost three thousand men, and among them the very flower of his redoubtable corsairs; he had lost some twelve thousand Christian slaves, the fruit of many a desperate raid; he had lost his lieutenant and nephew Hisar, who was even now a captive in the hands of his inveterate enemy, Andrea Doria. All this had he lost, and he was naturally embittered.

Yet Dragut was not the man to waste his days in brooding over what was done. Yesterday and today are but pledges in the hands of destiny. He returned thanks to Allah the Compassionate, the So-

Merciful, that he was still alive and free upon the seas with three galleases, twelve galleys, and five brigantines, wherewith to set about making good his losses, and he bent his energetic, resourceful knavish mind to the matter of ways and means.

Meanwhile he had been warned by the Sultan of Constantinople that the Emperor Charles, not content with the mischief he had already done him, had, in letters to the Grand Signior, avowed his intent to pursue to the death "the pirate Dragut, a corsair odious to both God and man." He knew, moreover, that the emperor had intrusted this task to the greatest seaman of the day, to the terrible admiral of Genoa, Andrea Doria, and the Genoese was already at sea upon his quest.

Now once already had Dragut been captured by the navy of Genoa, and for four years, which he cared but little to remember, he had toiled at an oar on board the galley of Giannetino Doria, the admiral's nephew. He had known exposure to cold and heat; he had been broiled by the sun and frozen by the rain; he had known aching muscles, hunger, and thirst, and the sores begotten of the oarsman's bench, and his shoulders were still a crisscross of scars where the bos'n's whip had lashed him to revive his flagging energies.

All this had he known, and he was not minded to renew the acquaintance. It behooved him therefore to make ready fittingly to receive the admiral when he should appear. And by way of replenishing his coffers at once, venting a little of his vengeful heat, and marking his contempt for Christian pursuers, he had made a sudden swoop upon the southwestern coast of Sicily.

Beginning at Gergenti, Dragut carried his raid as far north as Marsala, leaving ruin and desolation behind him. At the end of a week he stood off to sea again, with the spoils of six townships and some three thousand picked captives of both sexes. He would teach

the infidel Christian emperor to allude to him as "the pirate Dragut, a corsair odious to both God and man"--he would so, by the beard of the Prophet! He put the captives aboard one of the galleys in charge of his lieutenant, Othmani, and dispatched them straight to Algeria to be sold there in the slave market. With the proceeds Othmani was to lay down fresh keels. Until these should be ready to reenforce his little fleet, Dragut judged it well to avoid encounters with the Genoese admiral, and with this intent he steered a southward course along the coast toward Tripoli.

Toward evening of the day on which Othmani's galley set out alone for Algiers, a fresh breeze sprang up from the north, and blew into the corsair's range of vision a tiny brown-sailed felucca as it might have blown a leaf of autumn. It was hawk-eyed Dragut himself, who, lounging on the high deck of his galley, first sighted this tiny craft.

He pointed it out to Biretta, the renegade Calabrian gunner who was near him. "In the name of Allah," quoth Dragut, "what walnut shell is this that comes so furiously after us?"

Biretta, a massive, sallow fellow, laughed.

"The fury is not hers, but of the wind," said he.

"She goes where'er it bloweth her. She'll be an Italian craft."

"Then the wind that blows her is the wind of destiny. Haply she'll have news of Italy." Dragut turned on his heel, and gave an order to a turbaned officer on the gangway below.

Instantly the brazen note of a trumpet rang out clear above the creak and dip of oars. As instantly the rowers came to rest, and from the side of each galley six and twenty massive yellow oars stood out, their wet blades glistening in the evening sunlight.

Thus the Moslem fleet waited, rocking gently on the little swell that had arisen, its quality advertised by the red and white ensign displaying a blue crescent that floated from the masthead of Dragut's own galley.

II: Winds of Destiny

On came the tiny brown-sailed felucca, helplessly driven by what Dragut accounted the winds of destiny. At closer quarters they saw indications of the desperate effort that was being made aboard her to put her about. But they were lubberly fellows who had charge of her, and Dragut was content to wait. At last, when she was in danger of being blown past them, he crossed to meet her. As the long prow ran alongside of her grappling hooks were deftly flung to seize her at mast and gunwale, and but for these she must have been swept away by the oars of the galley.

From the prow Dragut himself, a tall and handsome figure in his gold- embroidered scarlet surcoat that descended to his knees, his snowwhite turban heightening the swarthiness of his hawk face with its square-cut black beard, stood to challenge the crew of the felucca.

There were aboard of her six scared knaves, something between lackeys and seamen, whom the corsair's black eyes passed contemptuously over. He addressed himself to a couple who were seated in the stern sheets--a tall and very elegant young gentleman, obviously Italian, and a girl upon whose white, golden-headed loveliness the corsair's bold eyes glowed pleasurably.

"Who are you?" he demanded haughtily in Italian.

The young man answered for the twain, very composedly, as though it were a matter of everyday life with him to be held in the grappling

hooks of a Barbary pirate. "My name is Ottavio Brancaleone. I am from Genoa on my way to Spain."

"To Spain?" quoth Dragut, and laughed.

"You steer an odd course for Spain, or do you look to find it in Egypt?"

"We have lost our rudder," the gentleman explained, "and were at the mercy of the wind."

"I hope you find it has been merciful," said Dragut, leering at the girl, who shrank nearer to her companion, fear staring out of her blue eyes.

"And your companion, sir, who is she?"

"My--my sister."

"Had you told me different you had been the first Christian I ever knew to speak the truth," said Dragut amiably. "Well, well, it's plain you're not to be trusted to sail a boat of your own. Best come aboard and see if you and your fellows can do better at an oar."

"I'll not trespass on your hospitality," said Brancaleone, with that amazing coolness of his. "You shall earn it, I promise you," the corsair reassured him. "So come aboard. I am Dragut-Reis."

It pleased his vanity to notice that his name was not without disconcerting effect upon that smooth young gentleman. In the end there was a short, sharp tussle. Dragut flung a half score of his corsairs into the felucca to capture her voyagers, and one of them was stabbed by Brancaleone ere they overpowered him.

The prize proved far less insignificant than at first the corsair had

imagined. For in addition to the slaves he had acquired, and the girl, who was fit to grace a sultan's harem, he found a great chest of newly minted ducats that it took six men to heave aboard the galley, and a beautifully chiseled gold coffer, full of gems of price. He found something more. On the inside of this coffer's lid was engraved its owner's name--Amelia Francesca Doria.

Dragut snapped down the lid with a prayer of thanks to Allah the One, and strode into the cabin where the girl was confined. "Madonna Amelia," said he.

She looked up instantly. Obviously it was her name, and the casket was her own.

"Will you tell me what is your kinship with the admiral?" Dragut asked.

"I am his granddaughter, sir," she answered, "and be sure that he will avenge terribly upon you any wrong that is done to me."

Dragut smiled. "We are old friends, the admiral and I," said he, and went out again. A mighty Nubian bearing a torch--for night had now descended--lighted him to the galley's waist, where about her mainmast lay huddled the seven pinioned prisoners.

With the curved toe of his scarlet slipper the corsair touched Messer Brancaleone. "Tell me, dog," Dragut commanded, "all that you know of Messer Andrea Doria."

"That is soon told," answered Brancaleone. "I know nothing, nor want to."

"You lie, as was to be expected," said Dragut. "For one thing, you know his granddaughter."

Brancaleone blinked and recovered. "True, and several others of his family. But I conceived your question to concern his movements. I know that he is upon the seas, that he is seeking you, that he has sworn to take you alive, and that when he does--as I pray he will--he will so deal with you that you shall implore them of their Christian charity to hang you."

"And that is all you know?" quoth Dragut, entirely unruffled. "You did not peradventure sight his fleet as you were sailing?"

"I did not."

"Do you think that with a match between your fingers you might remember?"

"I might invent," replied the Italian; "but I doubt it. I have told you the truth, Messer Dragut. Torture could but gain you falsehood."

Dragut looked searchingly into that comely young face, then turned away as if satisfied. But as he was departing Messer Brancaleone called him back. And when he spoke now the Italian's tone and manner were entirely changed. His imperturbability, real or assumed, had all departed. Anxiety amounting almost to terror sounded in his voice.

"What fate do you reserve for Madonna Amelia?" he asked.

Dragut looked down at the man's pale face, and smiled a little. He had no particular rancor against his prisoner. On the whole he was inclining to admiration for the fellow's almost philosophic courage. At the same time there was no room for sentiment in the heart of the corsair.

He was quite pitiless.

"Our lord the sublime Suleyman," said he, entirely without malice, "is as keen a judge of beauty as any man living. I account the girl to be a worthy gift even to the exalted of Allah; so I shall keep her safe against my next voyage to Constantinople."

And then Brancaleone's little lingering selfpossession left him utterly. From his writhing lips came a stream of vituperation, which continued even after the Nubian had struck him a blow upon the mouth and Dragut had taken his departure.

III: When the Galleys Came

Next day a slave on Dragut's galley having been taken ill at his oar, the wretch was unshackled and heaved overboard, and Brancaleone, stripped to the skin, was chained in the fellow's empty place. There were seven men to each oar, and Brancaleon's six companions were all Christians and all white--or had been before exposure had tanned them to the color of mahogany. Of these, three were Italians, two Spaniards, and one Frenchman. All were grimy and unkempt, and it was with a shudder that the delicately nurtured Genoese gentleman wondered if he were destined to become as they.

Up and down the gangway between the rowers' benches walked two Moslem bos'ns, armed with long whips of bullock hide, and it was not long ere one of them, considering that Brancaleone was not putting his share of effort into his task, sent that cruel lash to raise a burning wheal upon his tender flesh.

He was sparingly fed with his half-brutalized companions upon dried dates and figs, and he was given a little tepid water to drink when he thirsted.

He slept in his shackles on the rowers' bench, which was but some

four feet wide, and despite the sheepskins with which the bench was padded it was not long before the friction of his movements began to chafe and blister his flesh.

In the scorching noontide of the second day he collapsed fainting upon his oar. He was unshackled and dragged out upon the gangway.

There a bucket of water was flung over him. It revived him, and the too-swift-healing action of the salt upon his seared flesh was a burning agony to him. He was put back to his oar again with a warning that if he permitted himself the luxury of swooning a second time he would be given the entire ocean in which to revive.

On the third day they sighted land, and toward evening the galleys threaded their way one by one through the shoals of the Boca de Cantara into the spacious lagoon on the northeast side of the Island of Jerbah, and there came to rest. It was Dragut's intent to lie snug in that remote retreat until Othmani should be ready with the reenforcements that were to enable the corsair to take the seas once more against the admiral of Genoa.

But it would seem that already the admiral was closer upon his heels than he had supposed, and that trackless as are the ocean ways, yet Andrea Doria had by some mysterious means contrived to gather information as he came that had kept him upon the invisible spoor of his quarry.

There was not a doubt that the folk on that ravaged Sicilian seaboaid would be eager to inform the redoubtable admiral of the direction in which the Moslem galleys had faded out of sight.

Perhaps even that empty felucca left tossing upon the tideless sea had served as an index to the way the corsairs had taken, and

perhaps from the mainland, from Monastir, or one of the other cities now in Christian hands, a glimpse of Dragut's fleet had been caught, and Doria had been warned.

Be that as it may, not a week had Dragut been moored at Terbah when one fine morning brought a group of friendly islanders with the astounding news that a fleet of galleys was descending upon the island from the north.

The news took Dragut ashore in a hurry with a group of officers and from the narrow spur of land at the mouth of the harbor he surveyed the advancing ships. What already he had more than suspected became absolute certainty. Two and twenty royal galleys were steering straight for the Boca de Cantara, the foremost flying Andrea Doria's own ensign.

Back to his fleet went Dragut for cannon and slaves, and so feverishly did they toil under the lash of his venomous tongue and of his bos'ns' whips, that within an hour he had erected a battery at the harbor mouth and fired a salute straight into the Genoese as they were in the very act of dropping anchor. Thereupon the galleys of Doria stood off out of range, and hung there, well content to wait, knowing that the fox was trapped, that the sword of Islam was likely to be sheathed at last, and that all that was now required on their part was patience.

Forthwith the jubilant Doria sent word to the emperor that he held Dragut fast, and he dispatched messengers to the viceroys of Sicily and Naples asking for reinforcements with which, if necessary, to force the issue. He meant this time to leave nothing to chance.

Dragut on his side employed the time in fortifying the Boca de Cantara. A fort arose there, growing visibly under the eyes of the Genoese, and provoking the amusement of that fierce veteran Doria.

Sooner or later Dragut must decide to come forth from his bottle-necked refuge, and the longer he deferred it the more overwhelming would be the numbers assembled to destroy him.

IV: "Betide What May"

Never since Giannetino Doria had surprised him on the road of Goialatta off the coast of Corsica, on that famous occasion when he was made prisoner, had Dragut found himself in so desperately tight a corner. He sat on the deck of his galley, muttering imprecations against the Genoese with that astounding and far-reaching fluency in which the Moslem is without rival upon earth. He pronounced authoritatively upon the shamelessness of Doria's mother, and the inevitably shameful destiny of his daughters. He called perfervidly upon Allah to rot the bones and destroy the house of his archenemy, and he foretold how dogs would of a certainty desecrate the admiral's grave. Then, seeing that Allah remained disdainfully aloof, he rose up one day in a mighty passion, and summoned his officers.

"This skulking here will not avail us," he blazed at them, as if it were by their contriving that he was trapped. "By delay we but increase our peril. What is written is written. Allah has bound the fate of each man about his neck. Betide what may, tonight we take to the open sea."

"And by morning you'll have found the bottom of it." drawled a voice from one of the oars.

Dragut, who was standing on the gangway between the rowers' benches, whipped around with a snarl upon the speaker. He found himself gazing into the languid eyes of Messer Brancaleone. The rest of the last few days had restored the Italian's vigor, and certain thoughts that he had lately been indulging had restored his courage.

"Are you weary of life?" wondered the corsair. "Shall I have you

hanged before we go to meet your friends out yonder?"

"To do one or the other," said Brancaleone, "would be to render absolute the conviction which has been growing upon me during this week past."

"And what may that be?"

"That you're a dull fellow when all is said, Messer Dragut. Hang me, and you hang the only man in all your fleet who can show you the way out of this trap."

Dragut stared between anger and amazement. "You can show me a way out of this trap?" he echoed. "What way may that be?"

"Strike off my fetters, restore me my garments, and give me proper food, and I will discuss it with you."

Dragut glowered at him. "We have a shorter way to make men speak," he said. Brancaleone smiled and shook his head. "You think so? Another of your delusions."

It was odd what a power of conviction dwelt in his imperturbable tones. The corsair issued an order, and turned away. A half hour later, Messer Brancaleone, nourished, washed, and clothed, looking once more like the elegant Italian gentleman who had first been hoisted aboard the galley, stepped on to the deck, where Dragut-Reis awaited him in some impatience.

Seated cross-legged upon a gorgeous silken divan that was wrought in green and blue and gold, the handsome corsair combed his square black beard with fretful fingers. Behind him, stark-naked save for his white loin cloth, stood his gigantic Nubian, his body oiled until it shone like ebony, armed with a great curved scimitar.

"Now, sir," growled Dragut, "what is this precious plan of yours--briefly?" His tone was contemptuous.

"You begin where we should end," said the imperturbable Genoese. "I owe you no favors Messer Dragut, and I bear you no affection that I should make you a free gift of your life and liberty. My eyes have seen something to which yours are blind, and my brain has conceived something of which yours is quite incapable."

"These things, sir, are for sale. Before I part with them we must agree upon the price." Dragut stared from under scowling brows.

He could scarce believe that the world held so much impudence. "And what price do you suggest?" he snarled, by way of humoring the Genoese.

"Why, as to that, since I offer you life and liberty, it is but natural that I should claim my own life and liberty in return, and similarly the liberty of Madonna Amelia and of my servants whom you captured; also it is but natural that I should require the restoration of the money and jewels you have taken from us, and since you have deprived us of our felucca, it is no more than proper that you should equip us with a vessel in which to pursue the journey which you interrupted.

"Considering the time we have lost in consequence of this interruption," Brancaleone went on, "it is but just that you should make this good as far as possible by presenting me with a craft that is capable of the utmost speed. I will accept a galley of six and twenty oars, manned by a proper complement of Christian slaves."

"And is that all?" roared Dragut.

"No," said Brancaleone quietly. "That is but the restitution due to me. We come now to the price of the service I am to render you. When

you were Giannetino Doria's prisoner, Barbarossa paid for you, as all the world knows, a ransom of three thousand ducats. I will be more reasonable."

"Will you so?" snorted Dragut. "By the splendor of Allah, you'll need to be."

"I will accept one thousand ducats."

"May Allah blot thee out, thou impudent son of shame!" cried the corsair, filled with fury.

"You compel me to raise the price to fifteen hundred ducats," said Brancaleone smoothly. "I must be compensated for abuse since I cannot take satisfaction for it as between one Christian gentleman and another."

It was good for Dragut that his feelings suddenly soared to an intensity beyond expression, else might the price have been raised even beyond the famous ransom that Barbarossa had paid. Mutely he stood glowering, clenching and unclenching his hands; than he half turned to his Nubian swordsman. "Ali--" he began.

Brancaleone once more cut in. "Ah, wait," said he. "I pray you calm yourself. Remember how you stand, and that Andrea Doria holds you trapped. Do nothing that will destroy your only chance. Time enough to call in Ali and have my head hacked off when I have failed."

That speech arrested Dragut's anger in full flow. He wheeled upon the Genoese once more.

"You accept that alternative?"

Brancaleone smiled with almost pitying amusement. "Why not? I have no slightest fear of failure. I can show you how to win clear of

this trap and make the admiral the laughingstock of the world."

"Speak, then; let me know your plan!" cried Dragut fiercely.

"If I do so before you have agreed to my terms, then I shall have nothing left to sell."

Angrily Dragut turned aside, and strode to the taffrail. He looked across the shimmering blue water to the fortifications at the harbor mouth; with the eyes of his imagination he looked beyond at the fleet of Genoa riding out yonder in patient conviction that it held its prey.

The price that Brancaleone asked was outrageous--a galley and some two hundred Christian slaves to row it and fifteen hundred ducats. In all it amounted to fully as much as the ransom that Barbarossa had paid for him, yet Dragut must pay it, or fall into the power of his Christian foes. He came to reflect that he would pay it gladly enough to be out of this tight corner.

He came about again. He spoke of torture once more, but in a half-hearted sort of way; for he did not himself believe that it would be effective with a man of Brancaleone's temper.

Brancaleone laughed at the threat, and shrugged his shoulders. "You may as profitably hang me, Messer Dragut," he said, "for your infidel barbarities will but seal my lips for all time."

"We might torture the woman," said Dragut the ingenious.

Brancaleone, on the words, turned white to the lips; but it was the pallor of bitter, heartsearing resolve, not the pallor of such fear as Dragut had hoped to awaken. He advanced a step, his imperturbability all gone, and he sent his words into the face of the corsair with the fierceness of a cornered wild cat.

"Attempt it," said he, "and as God's my witness I leave you to your fate at the hands of Genoa--ay, though my heart should burst with the pain of my silence. I am a man, Messer Dragut; never doubt it."

"I do not," said Dragut, his piercing black eyes upon that set white face. "I agree to your terms. Show me a way out of Doria's clutches, and you shall have all that you have asked for."

V: Really Simple.

Trembling still from his recent emotion, Brancaleone hoarsely bade the corsair call up his officers and repeat his words before them. "And you shall make oath upon this matter," he added. "Men say of you that you are a faithful Moslem. I mean to put it to the test." Dragut, now all eagerness to know what plan was stirring in his prisoner's brain, unable to brook further suspense in this affair, called up his officers, and before them all, taking Allah to witness, he made oath upon the beard of the Prophet that if Brancaleone could show him deliverance, he on his side would recompense the Genoese to the extent demanded.

Thereafter Dragut and Brancaleone went ashore, with no other attendant but the Nubian swordsman. It was the Genoese who led the way, not toward the fort, as Dragut had expected, but in the opposite direction. Arrived at the northernmost curve of that almost circular lagoon, where the ground was swampy. Brancaleone paused. He pointed across a strip of shallow land, that was no more than a half mile or so in width, to the blue-green sea beyond. Part of this territory was swamp, and part sand; vegetation there was of the scantiest; some clumps of reeds, an odd date palm, its crest rustling slightly in the breeze, and nothing else.

"It is really very simple," said the Italian. "Yonder lies your way."

As he spoke, a red-legged stork rose from the edge of the marsh, and went circling overhead.

Dragut's face was purple with rage. He deemed that this smooth fellow had brought him there to make mock of him.

"Are my galleys winged like that stork, thou fool?" he answered passionately. "Or are they wheeled like chariots that I can sail them over dry land."

Brancaleone looked at him in stupefaction. "I protest," said he, "that for a man of your reputation for shrewdness, you fill me with amazement. I said you were a dull fellow. I little dreamed how dull. Nay, now, suppress your rage. Truth is a very healing draft, and you have need of it. I compute now that aboard your ships there will be, including slaves, some three thousand men.

"No doubt you could press another thousand from the island into your service. How long would it take four thousand men to dig a channel deep enough to float your shallow galleys through that strip of land?"

Dragut's fierce eyes flickered as though he had been menaced with a blow. "By Allah!" he ejaculated, and gripped his beard. "By the splendor of Allah!"

"In a week the thing were easily done,"

Brancaleone resumed, "and meanwhile your fort will hold the admiral in play and mask your labors. Then, one dark night, you slip through this channel, and stand away to the south, so that by sunrise you shall have vanished beyond the sky line, leaving the admiral to guard an empty trap."

Dragut laughed aloud, in almost childlike glee, and otherwise signified his delight by the vehemence with which he testified to the

unity of Allah. Suddenly he checked, and his eyes narrowed as they rested upon Brancaleone. "'Tis a scurvy trick you play your lady's grandsire!" said he.

The Genoese shrugged and, smiled deprecatingly. "Every man for himself, Messer Dragut. We understand each other, I think. 'Tis not for love of you I do this thing."

"I would it were," said the corsair, with an odd sincerity, and thereafter, as they returned to the galleys, it was seen that Dragut's arm was about the shoulders of the infidel, and that he spoke with him as with a brother.

The fact is that Dragut, fired with admiration of Brancaleone's resourcefulness, was cast down at the thought that so fine a spirit should of necessity be destined to go down to the pit. He spoke to him now of the glories of Islam, and of the future that must await a gentleman of his endowments in the ranks of the Moslem; he had of a sudden conceived so great an affection for him that he was filled with the desire to convert him to the true faith. But this was a matter in which Brancaleone was politely obdurate, and Dragut had not the time to devote to the conversation, greatly as he desired it. There was the matter of that canal to engage him.

Brancaleone's instructions were diligently carried out. Daily the fort at the Boca de Cantara would belch forth shot at the Genoese navy, which stood well out of range. To the admiral this was but the barking of a dog that dared not come within biting reach, and the waste of ammunition roused his contempt of that pirate Dragut whom he held at his mercy.

There came a day, however, when the fort was silent; it was followed by another day of silence, in the evening of which one of the admiral's officers suggested that all might not be well. Doria agreed

with him.

"All is not at all well with that dog Dragut."

Andrea Doria laughed in his white beard. "He wants us within range of his guns. The ruse is a little too obvious."

And so the great Genoese fleet remained carefully out of range of the empty fort, what time Dragut himself was some scores of miles away, speeding as fast as his slaves could row for the archipelago and the safety of the Dardanelles. In the words of the Spanish historian, Marmol, who has chronicled the event--although many of the details here recorded escaped his knowledge--"Dragut left Messer Andrea Doria 'with the dog to hold.'"

Brancaleone accompanied the Moslem fleet at first, though now aboard the galley which Dragut had given him in accordance with their agreement, and with him sailed the lovely Amelia Francesca Doria, his chest of gold, the jewels, and the fifteen hundred ducats that Dragut, grimly stifling his reluctance, had paid the Genoese.

On the second day of their voyage, the corsair was able to replace the vessel granted to Brancaleone. They met a royal galley from Naples, manned by Spaniards, and rowed by Moslem slaves. She was speeding to Andrea Doria with news that the viceroy was sending reenforcements. There was a sharp, short fight, and Messer Dragut added her to his fleet, liberating the Moslem slaves, and replacing them by the Spaniards who had manned the vessel.

Some hours later, Messer Brancaleone and the corsair captain parted company with many expressions of mutual good will, and the Genoese put about and steered a northwesterly course for the coast of Spain.

VI: That Impudent Genoese

It was some months ere Dragut learned the true inwardness of Messer Brancaleone's conduct.

He had the story from a Genoese captive, captain of a carack which the corsair scuttled in the Straits of Messina. The fellow's name chanced to be Brancaleone, upon learning which Dragut inquired if he were kin to one Ottavio Brancaleone, who had gone to Spain with the admiral's granddaughter.

"He is my cousin," the man answered. And Dragut now learned that in the teeth of the opposition of the whole Doria family, the irrepressible Brancaleone had carried off Madonna Amelia. The admiral had news of it as he was putting to sea, and it was in pursuit not only of Dragut, but also of the runagates, that he had come south so far as Jerbah, having reason more than to suspect that they were aboard one of Dragut's galleys. The admiral had sworn to hang Brancaleone from his yardarm ere he returned to port, and his bitterness at the trick Dragut had played him was increased by the reflection that Brancaleone, too, had got clear away.

Dragut was very thoughtful when he heard that story. "And to think," said he, "that I paid that unconscionable dog fifteen hundred ducats and gave him my best galley manned by two hundred Christian slaves for rendering himself as great a service as ever he was rendering me!"

He bore no malice, however. On the contrary, his admiration grew for that impudent Genoese, the only Christian who had ever bested Dragut in a bargain, and if he had a regret it was that so shrewd a spirit should abide in the body of an infidel. "In the service of Islam," he was wont to say, "such a man as Brancaleone might have gone far indeed. But Allah is all-knowing."

THE END