Willa Cather

Death Comes for the Archbishop

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PROLOGUE

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AT ROME

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ONE summer evening in the year 1848 three Cardinals and a missionary Bishop from America were dining together in the gardens of a villa in the Sabine hills, overlooking Rome. The villa was famous for the fine view from its terrace. The hidden garden in which the four men sat at table lay some twenty feet below the south end of this terrace, and was a mere shelf of rock, overhanging a steep declivity planted with vineyards. A flight of stone steps connected it with the promenade above. The table stood in a sanded square, among potted orange and oleander trees, shaded by spreading ilex oaks that grew out of the rocks overhead. Beyond the balustrade was the drop into the air, and far below the landscape stretched soft and undulating; there was nothing to arrest the eye until it reached Rome itself.

It was early when the Spanish Cardinal and his guests sat down to dinner. The sun was still good for an hour of supreme splendour, and across the shining folds of country the low profile of the city barely fretted the sky-line—indistinct except for the dome of St. Peter’s, bluish grey like the flattened top of a great balloon, just a flash of copper light on its soft metallic surface. The Cardinal had an eccentric preference for beginning his dinner at this time in the late afternoon when the vehemence of the sun suggested motion. The light was full of action and had a peculiar quality of climax—of splendid finish. It was both intense and soft, with a ruddiness as of much-multiplied

candle-light, an aura of red in its flames. It bored into the ilex trees, illuminating their mahogany trunks and blurring their dark foliage; it warmed the bright green of the orange trees and the rose of the oleander blooms to gold; sent congested spiral patterns quivering over the damask and plate and crystal. The churchmen kept their rectangular clerical caps on their heads to protect them from the sun. The three Cardinals wore black cassocks with crimson pipings and crimson buttons, the Bishop a long black coat over his violet vest.

They were talking business; had met, indeed, to discuss an anticipated appeal from the Provincial Council at Baltimore for the founding of an Apostolic Vicarate in New Mexico—a part of North America recently annexed to the United States. This new territory was vague to all of them, even to the missionary Bishop. The Italian and French Cardinals spoke of it as *Le Mexique*, and the Spanish host referred to it as “New Spain.” Their interest in the projected Vicarate was tepid, and had to be continually revived by the missionary, Father Ferrand—Irish by birth, French by ancestry—a man of wide wanderings and notable achievement in the New World, an Odysseus of the Church. The language spoken was French—the time had already gone by when Cardinals could conveniently discuss contemporary matters in Latin.

The French and Italian Cardinals were men in vigorous middle life—the Norman full-belted and ruddy, the Venetian spare and sallow and hook-nosed. Their host, Garcia Maria de Allande, was still a young man. He was dark in colouring, but the long Spanish face, that looked out from so many

canvases in his ancestral portrait gallery, was in the young Cardinal much modified through his English mother. With his *caffè oscuro* eyes, he had a fresh, pleasant English mouth, and an open manner.

During the latter years of the reign of Gregory XVI, de Allande had been the most influential man at the Vatican; but since the death of Gregory, two years ago, he had retired to his country estate. He believed the reforms of the new Pontiff impracticable and dangerous, and had withdrawn from politics, confining his activities to work for the Society for the Propagation of the Faith—that organization which had been so fostered by Gregory. In his leisure the Cardinal played tennis. As a boy, in England, he had been passionately fond of this sport. Lawn tennis had not yet come into fashion; it was a formidable game of indoor tennis the Cardinal played. Amateurs of that violent sport came from Spain and France to try their skill against him.

The missionary, Bishop Ferrand, looked much older than any of them, old and rough—except for his clear, intensely blue eyes. His diocese lay within the icy arms of the Great Lakes, and on his long, lonely horseback rides among his missions the sharp winds had bitten him well. The missionary was here for a purpose, and he pressed his point. He ate more rapidly than the others and had plenty of time to plead his cause—finished each course with such dispatch that the Frenchman remarked he would have made an ideal dinner companion for Napoleon.

The Bishop laughed and threw out his brown hands in apology. “Likely enough I have forgot my manners. I am

preoccupied. Here you can scarcely understand what it means that the United States has annexed that enormous territory which was the cradle of the Faith in the New World. The Vicarate of New Mexico will be in a few years raised to an Episcopal See, with jurisdiction over a country larger than Central and Western Europe, barring Russia. The Bishop of that See will direct the beginning of momentous things."

"Beginnings," murmured the Venetian, "there have been so many. But nothing ever comes from over there but trouble and appeals for money."

The missionary turned to him patiently. "Your Eminence, I beg you to follow me. This country was evangelized, in fifteen hundred, by the Franciscan Fathers. It has been allowed to drift for nearly three hundred years and is not yet dead. It still pitifully calls itself a Catholic country, and tries to keep the forms of religion without instruction. The old mission churches are in ruins. The few priests are without guidance or discipline. They are lax in religious observance, and some of them live in open concubinage. If this Augean stable is not cleansed, now that the territory has been taken over by a progressive government, it will prejudice the interests of the Church in the whole of North America."

"But these missions are still under the jurisdiction of Mexico, are they not?" inquired the Frenchman.

"In the See of the Bishop of Durango?" added Maria de Allande.

The missionary sighed. "Your Eminence, the Bishop of Durango is an old man; and from his seat to Santa Fé is a distance of fifteen hundred English miles. There are no

wagon roads, no canals, no navigable rivers. Trade is carried on by means of pack-mules, over treacherous trails. The desert down there has a peculiar horror; I do not mean thirst, nor Indian massacres, which are frequent. The very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand. Up and down these stony chasms the traveller and his mules clamber as best they can. It is impossible to go far in any direction without crossing them. If the Bishop of Durango should summon a disobedient priest by letter, who shall bring the padre to him? Who can prove that he ever received the summons? The post is carried by hunters, fur trappers, gold seekers, whoever happens to be moving on the trails."

The Norman Cardinal emptied his glass and wiped his lips.

"And the inhabitants, Father Ferrand? If these are the travellers, who stays at home?"

"Some thirty Indian nations, Monsignor, each with its own customs and language, many of them fiercely hostile to each other. And the Mexicans, a naturally devout people, untaught and unshepherded, they cling to the faith of their fathers."

"I have a letter from the Bishop of Durango, recommending his vicar for this new post," remarked Maria de Allande.

"Your Eminence, it would be a great misfortune if a native priest were appointed; they have never done well in that field. Besides, this vicar is old. The new vicar must be a young man, of strong constitution, full of zeal, and, above

all, intelligent. He will have to deal with savagery and ignorance, with dissolute priests and political intrigue. He must be a man to whom order is necessary—as dear as life.”

The Spaniard’s coffee-coloured eyes showed a glint of yellow as he glanced sidewise at his guest. “I suspect, from your exordium, that you have a candidate—and that he is a French priest, perhaps.”

“You guess rightly, Monsignor. I am glad to see that we have the same opinion of French missionaries.”

“Yes,” said the Cardinal lightly, “they are the best missionaries. Our Spanish fathers made good martyrs, but the French Jesuits accomplish more. They are the great organizers.”

“Better than the Germans?” asked the Venetian, who had Austrian sympathies.

“Oh, the Germans classify, but the French arrange! The French missionaries have a sense of proportion and rational adjustment. They are always trying to discover the logical relation of things. It is a passion with them.” Here the host turned to the old Bishop again. “But, your Grace, why do you neglect this Burgundy? I had this wine brought up from my cellar especially to warm away the chill of your twenty Canadian winters. Surely you do not gather vintages like this on the shores of the Great Lake Huron?”

The missionary smiled as he took up his untouched glass. “It is superb, your Eminence, but I fear I have lost my palate for vintages. Out there a little whisky, or Hudson Bay Company rum, does better for us. I must confess I enjoyed

the champagne in Paris. We had been forty days at sea, and I am a poor sailor."

"Then we must have some for you." He made a sign to his major-domo. "You like it very cold? And your new Vicar Apostolic, what will he drink in the country of bison and *serpents à sonnettes*? And what will he eat?"

"He will eat dried buffalo meat and frijoles with chili, and he will be glad to drink water when he can get it. He will have no easy life, your Eminence. That country will drink up his youth and strength as it does the rain. He will be called upon for every sacrifice, quite possibly for martyrdom. Only last year the Indian pueblo of San Fernandez de Taos murdered and scalped the American Governor and some dozen other whites. The reason they did not scalp their padre was that their padre was one of the leaders of the rebellion and himself planned the massacre. That is how things stand in New Mexico!"

"Where is your candidate at present, Father?"

"He is a parish priest, on the shores of Lake Ontario, in my diocese. I have watched his work for nine years. He is but thirty-five now. He came to us directly from the seminary."

"And his name is—?"

"Jean Marie Latour."

Maria de Allande, leaning back in his chair, put the tips of his long fingers together and regarded them thoughtfully.

"Of course, Father Ferrand, the Propaganda will almost certainly appoint to this Vicarate the man whom the Council at Baltimore recommends."

“Ah yes, your Eminence; but a word from you to the Provincial Council, an inquiry, a suggestion——”

“Would have some weight, I admit,” replied the Cardinal, smiling. “And this Latour is intelligent, you say? What a fate you are drawing upon him! But I suppose it is no worse than a life among the Hurons. My knowledge of your country is chiefly drawn from the romances of Fenimore Cooper, which I read in English with great pleasure. But has your priest a versatile intelligence? Any intelligence in matters of art, for example?”

“And what need would he have for that, Monsignor? Besides, he is from Auvergne.”

The three Cardinals broke into laughter and refilled their glasses. They were all becoming restive under the monotonous persistence of the missionary.

“Listen,” said the host, “and I will relate a little story, while the Bishop does me the compliment to drink my champagne. I have a reason for asking this question which you have answered so finally. In my family house in Valencia I have a number of pictures by the great Spanish painters, collected chiefly by my great-grandfather, who was a man of perception in these things and, for his time, rich. His collection of El Greco is, I believe, quite the best in Spain. When my progenitor was an old man, along came one of these missionary priests from New Spain, begging. All missionaries from the Americas were inveterate beggars, then as now, Bishop Ferrand. This Franciscan had considerable success, with his tales of pious Indian converts and struggling missions. He came to visit at my great-grandfather’s house and conducted devotions in the

absence of the chaplain. He wheedled a good sum of money out of the old man, as well as vestments and linen and chalices—he would take anything—and he implored my grandfather to give him a painting from his great collection, for the ornamentation of his mission church among the Indians. My grandfather told him to choose from the gallery believing the priest would covet most what he himself could best afford to spare. But not at all; the hairy Franciscan pounced upon one of the best in the collection; a young St. Francis in meditation, by El Greco, and the model for the saint was one of the very handsome Dukes of Albuquerque. My grandfather protested; tried to persuade the fellow that some picture of the Crucifixion, or a martyrdom, would appeal more strongly to his redskins. What would a St. Francis, of almost feminine beauty, mean to the scalp-takers?

"All in vain. The missionary turned upon his host with a reply which has become a saying in our family: 'You refuse me this picture because it is a good picture. *It is too good for God, but it is not too good for you.*'

"He carried off the painting. In my grandfather's manuscript catalogue, under the number and title of the St. Francis, is written: *Given to Fray Teodocio, for the glory of God, to enrich his mission church at Pueblo de Cia, among the savages of New Spain.*

"It is because of this lost treasure, Father Ferrand, that I happen to have had some personal correspondence with the Bishop of Durango. I once wrote the facts to him fully. He replied to me that the mission at Cia was long ago destroyed and its furnishings scattered. Of course the

painting may have been ruined in a pillage or massacre. On the other hand, it may still be hidden away in some crumbling sacristy or smoky wigwam. If your French priest had a discerning eye, now, and were sent to this Vicarate, he might keep my El Greco in mind."

The Bishop shook his head. "No, I can't promise you—I do not know. I have noticed that he is a man of severe and refined tastes, but he is very reserved. Down there the Indians do not dwell in wigwams, your Eminence," he added gently.

"No matter, Father. I see your redskins through Fenimore Cooper, and I like them so. Now let us go to the terrace for our coffee and watch the evening come on."

The Cardinal led his guests up the narrow stairway. The long gravelled terrace and its balustrade were blue as a lake in the dusky air. Both sun and shadows were gone. The folds of russet country were now violet. Waves of rose and gold throbbed up the sky from behind the dome of the Basilica.

As the churchmen walked up and down the promenade watching the stars come out, their talk touched upon many matters, but they avoided politics, as men are apt to do in dangerous times. Not a word was spoken of the Lombard war, in which the Pope's position was so anomalous. They talked instead of a new opera by young Verdi, which was being sung in Venice; of the case of a Spanish dancing girl who had lately become a religious and was said to be working miracles in Andalusia. In this conversation the missionary took no part, nor could he even follow it with much interest. He asked himself whether he had been on the frontier so long that he had quite lost his taste for the

talk of clever men. But before they separated for the night Maria de Allande spoke a word in his ear, in English.

“You are *distrait*, Father Ferrand. Are you wishing to unmake your new Bishop already? It is too late. Jean Marie Latour—am I right?”

BOOK ONE
THE VICAR APOSTOLIC

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I
THE CRUCIFORM TREE

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ONE afternoon in the autumn of 1851 a solitary horseman, followed by a pack-mule, was pushing through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico. He had lost his way and was trying to get back to the trail, with only his compass and his sense of direction for guides. The difficulty was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather that it was crowded with features all exactly alike. As far as he could see, on every side, the landscape was heaped up into monotonous red sand-hills, not much larger than haycocks, and very much the shape of haycocks. One could not have believed that in the number of square miles a man is able to sweep with the eye there could be so many uniform red hills. He had been riding among them since early morning, and the look of the country had no more changed than if he had stood still. He must have travelled through thirty miles of these conical red hills, winding his way in the narrow cracks between them, and he had begun to think that he would never see anything else. They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare; flattened cones, they were, more the shape of Mexican ovens than haycocks—yes, exactly the shape of Mexican ovens, red as brick-dust, and naked of vegetation except for small juniper trees. And the junipers, too, were the shape of Mexican ovens. Every conical hill was

spotted with smaller cones of juniper, a uniform yellowish green, as the hills were a uniform red. The hills thrust out of the ground so thickly that they seemed to be pushing each other, elbowing each other aside, tipping each other over.

The blunted pyramid, repeated so many hundred times upon his retina and crowding down upon him in the heat, had confused the traveller, who was sensitive to the shape of things.

"*Mais c'est fantastique!*" he muttered, closing his eyes to rest them from the intrusive omnipresence of the triangle.

When he opened his eyes again, his glance immediately fell upon one juniper which differed in shape from the others. It was not a thick-growing cone, but a naked, twisted trunk, perhaps ten feet high, and at the top it parted into two lateral, flat-lying branches, with a little crest of green in the centre, just above the cleavage. Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross.

The traveller dismounted, drew from his pocket a much worn book, and baring his head, knelt at the foot of the cruciform tree.

Under his buckskin riding-coat he wore a black vest and the cravat and collar of a churchman. A young priest at his devotions; and a priest in a thousand, one knew at a glance. His bowed head was not that of an ordinary man—it was built for the seat of a fine intelligence. His brow was open, generous, reflective, his features handsome and somewhat severe. There was a singular elegance about the hands below the fringed cuffs of the buckskin jacket. Everything showed him to be a man of gentle birth—brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners, even when he was alone in the

desert, were distinguished. He had a kind of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree, before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing.

His devotions lasted perhaps half an hour, and when he rose he looked refreshed. He began talking to his mare in halting Spanish, asking whether she agreed with him that it would be better to push on, weary as she was, in hope of finding the trail. He had no water left in his canteen, and the horses had had none since yesterday morning. They had made a dry camp in these hills last night. The animals were almost at the end of their endurance, but they would not recuperate until they got water, and it seemed best to spend their last strength in searching for it.

On a long caravan trip across Texas this man had had some experience of thirst, as the party with which he travelled was several times put on a meagre water ration for days together. But he had not suffered then as he did now. Since morning he had had a feeling of illness; the taste of fever in his mouth, and alarming seizures of vertigo. As these conical hills pressed closer and closer upon him, he began to wonder whether his long wayfaring from the mountains of Auvergne were possibly to end there. He reminded himself of that cry, wrung from his Saviour on the Cross, "*J'ai soif!*" Of all our Lord's physical sufferings, only one, "I thirst," rose to His lips. Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord. The Passion of Jesus became for him the only reality; the need of his own body was but a part of that conception.

His mare stumbled, breaking his mood of contemplation. He was sorrier for his beasts than for himself. He, supposed to be the intelligence of the party, had got the poor animals into this interminable desert of ovens. He was afraid he had been absent-minded, had been pondering his problem instead of heeding the way. His problem was how to recover a bishopric. He was a Vicar Apostolic lacking a Vicarate. He was thrust out; his flock would have none of him.

The traveller was Jean Marie Latour, consecrated Vicar Apostolic of New Mexico and Bishop of Agathonica *in partibus* at Cincinnati a year ago—and ever since then he had been trying to reach his Vicarate. No one in Cincinnati could tell him how to get to New Mexico—no one had ever been there. Since young Father Latour's arrival in America, a railroad had been built through from New York to Cincinnati; but there it ended. New Mexico lay in the middle of a dark continent. The Ohio merchants knew of two routes only. One was the Santa Fé trail from St. Louis, but at that time it was very dangerous because of Comanche Indian raids. His friends advised Father Latour to go down the river to New Orleans, thence by boat to Galveston, across Texas to San Antonio, and to wind up into New Mexico along the Rio Grande valley. This he had done, but with what misadventures!

His steamer was wrecked and sunk in the Galveston harbour, and he had lost all his worldly possessions except his books, which he saved at the risk of his life. He crossed Texas with a traders' caravan, and approaching San Antonio he was hurt in jumping from an overturning wagon, and had

to lie for three months in the crowded house of a poor Irish family, waiting for his injured leg to get strong.

It was nearly a year after he had embarked upon the Mississippi that the young Bishop, at about the sunset hour of a summer afternoon, at last beheld the old settlement toward which he had been journeying so long. The wagon train had been going all day through a greasewood plain, when late in the afternoon the teamsters began shouting that over yonder was the villa. Across the level, Father Latour could distinguish low brown shapes, like earthworks, lying at the base of wrinkled green mountains with bare tops—wave-like mountains, resembling billows beaten up from a flat sea by a heavy gale: and their green was of two colours—aspen and evergreen, not intermingled but lying in solid areas of light and dark.

As the wagons went forward and the sun sank lower, a sweep of red carnelian-coloured hills lying at the foot of the mountains came into view; they curved like two arms about a depression in the plain; and in that depression was Santa Fé, at last! A thin, wavering adobe town ... a green plaza ... at one end a church with two earthen towers that rose high above the flatness. The long main street began at the church, the town seemed to flow from it like a stream from a spring. The church towers and all the low adobe houses were rose colour in that light—a little darker in tone than the amphitheatre of red hills behind; and periodically the plumes of poplars flashed like gracious accent marks, inclining and recovering themselves in the wind.

The young Bishop was not alone in the exaltation of that hour; beside him rode Father Joseph Vaillant, his boyhood

friend, who had made this long pilgrimage with him and shared his dangers. The two rode into Santa Fé together, claiming it for the glory of God.

How, then, had Father Latour come to be here in the sand-hills, many miles from his seat, unattended, far out of his way and with no knowledge of how to get back to it?

On his arrival at Santa Fé, this was what had happened: The Mexican priests there had refused to recognize his authority. They disclaimed any knowledge of a Vicarate Apostolic, or a Bishop of Agathonica. They said they were under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Durango, and had received no instructions to the contrary. If Father Latour was to be their Bishop, where were his credentials? A parchment and letters, he knew, had been sent to the Bishop of Durango but these had evidently got no farther. There was no postal service in this part of the world; the quickest and surest way to communicate with the Bishop of Durango was to go to him. So, having travelled for nearly a year to reach Santa Fé, Father Latour left it after a few weeks, and set off alone on horseback to ride down into Old Mexico and back, a journey of full three thousand miles.

He had been warned that there were many trails leading off the Rio Grande road, and that a stranger might easily mistake his way. For the first few days he had been cautious and watchful. Then he must have grown careless and turned into some purely local trail. When he realized that he was astray, his canteen was already empty and his horses seemed too exhausted to retrace their steps. He had

persevered in this sandy track, which grew ever fainter, reasoning that it must lead somewhere.

All at once Father Latour thought he felt a change in the body of his mare. She lifted her head for the first time in a long while, and seemed to redistribute her weight upon her legs. The pack-mule behaved in a similar manner, and both quickened their pace. Was it possible they scented water?

Nearly an hour went by, and then, winding between two hills that were like all the hundreds they had passed, the two beasts whinnied simultaneously. Below them, in the midst of that wavy ocean of sand, was a green thread of verdure and a running stream. This ribbon in the desert seemed no wider than a man could throw a stone—and it was greener than anything Latour had ever seen, even in his own greenest corner of the Old World. But for the quivering of the hide on his mare's neck and shoulders, he might have thought this a vision, a delusion of thirst.

Running water, clover fields, cottonwoods, acacias, little adobe houses with brilliant gardens, a boy driving a flock of white goats toward the stream—that was what the young Bishop saw.

A few moments later, when he was struggling with his horses, trying to keep them from over-drinking, a young girl with a black shawl over her head came running toward him. He thought he had never seen a kindlier face. Her greeting was that of a Christian.

"*Ave Maria Purissima, Señor.* Whence do you come?"

"Blessed child," he replied in Spanish, "I am a priest who has lost his way. I am famished for water."

“A priest?” she cried, “that is not possible! Yet I look at you and it is true. Such a thing has never happened to us before; it must be in answer to my father’s prayers. Run, Pedro, and tell father and Salvatore.”

II
HIDDEN WATER

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AN hour later, as darkness came over the sand-hills, the young Bishop was seated at supper in the mother-house of this Mexican settlement—which, he learned, was appropriately called *Agua Secreta*, Hidden Water. At the table with him were his host, an old man called Benito, the eldest son, and two grandsons. The old man was a widower, and his daughter, Josepha, the girl who had run to meet the Bishop at the stream, was his housekeeper. Their supper was a pot of frijoles cooked with meat, bread and goat's milk, fresh cheese and ripe apples.

From the moment he entered this room with its thick whitewashed adobe walls, Father Latour had felt a kind of peace about it. In its bareness and simplicity there was something comely, as there was about the serious girl who had placed their food before them and who now stood in the shadows against the wall, her eager eyes fixed upon his face. He found himself very much at home with the four dark-headed men who sat beside him in the candle-light. Their manners were gentle, their voices low and agreeable. When he said grace before meat, the men had knelt on the floor beside the table. The grandfather declared that the Blessed Virgin must have led the Bishop from his path and brought him here to baptize the children and to sanctify the marriages. Their settlement was little known, he said. They had no papers for their land and were afraid the Americans

might take it away from them. There was no one in their settlement who could read or write. Salvatore, his eldest son, had gone all the way to Albuquerque to find a wife, and had married there. But the priest had charged him twenty pesos, and that was half of all he had saved to buy furniture and glass windows for his house. His brothers and cousins, discouraged by his experience, had taken wives without the marriage sacrament.

In answer to the Bishop's questions they told him the simple story of their lives. They had here all they needed to make them happy. They spun and wove from the fleece of their flocks, raised their own corn and wheat and tobacco, dried their plums and apricots for winter. Once a year the boys took the grain up to Albuquerque to have it ground, and bought such luxuries as sugar and coffee. They had bees, and when sugar was high they sweetened with honey. Benito did not know in what year his grandfather had settled there, coming from Chihuahua with all his goods in ox-carts. "But it was soon after the time when the French killed their king. My grandfather had heard talk of that before he left home, and used to tell us boys about it when he was an old man."

"Perhaps you have guessed that I am a Frenchman," said Father Latour.

No, they had not, but they felt sure he was not an American. José, the elder grandson, had been watching the visitor uncertainly. He was a handsome boy, with a triangle of black hair hanging over his rather sullen eyes. He now spoke for the first time.