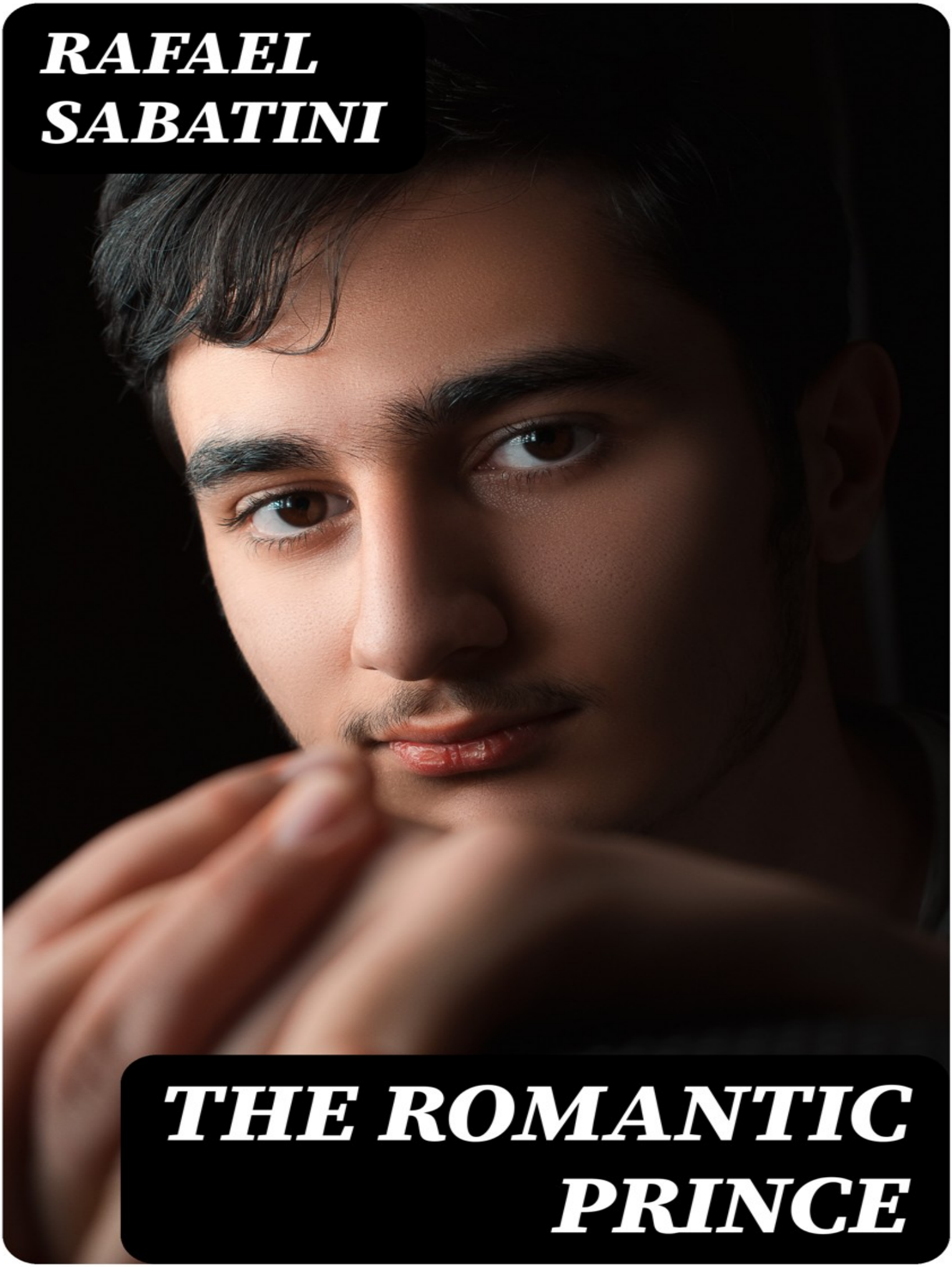
RAFAEL SABATINI



THE ROMANTIC PRINCE

Rafael Sabatini

The Romantic Prince

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
ON THE SUBJECT OF POETS
CHAPTER II
SEVERANCE
CHAPTER III
THE INDISCREET ZEALANDER
CHAPTER IV
THE SURETY
CHAPTER V
THE UNFOLDING OF THE SCROLL
CHAPTER VI
JOHANNA
CHAPTER VII
FRIAR STEPHEN
CHAPTER VIII
THE INTERRUPTION
CHAPTER IX
THE RETURN
CHAPTER X
THE KNIGHT OF THE TULIP
CHAPTER XI
BETROTHAL
CHAPTER XII
THE WIFE OF PHILIP DANVELT
CHAPTER XIII
PÉRONNE

CHAPTER XIV
CHECKMATE
CHAPTER XV
THE SEDITION IN WALCHEREN
CHAPTER XVI
DANVELT’S ARREST
CHAPTER XVII
THE FOOL’S PHILOSOPHY
CHAPTER XVIII
RHYNSAULT’S WOOING
CHAPTER XIX
THE FOOL ADVISES
CHAPTER XX
RHYNSAULT’S BUCKLER
CHAPTER XXI
IPHIGENIA
CHAPTER XXII
THE CHEAT
CHAPTER XXIII
CAMP AND COURT
CHAPTER XXIV
GRAND MASTER OF BURGUNDY
CHAPTER XXV
THE PETITIONER
CHAPTER XXVI
THE FOOL’S MISSION
CHAPTER XXVII
THE MEMORIAL
CHAPTER XXVIII

MARRIAGE BY PROXY
CHAPTER XXIX
JUDGMENT
CHAPTER XXX
BANISHMENT
CHAPTER XXXI
REALITIES
THE END

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

ON THE SUBJECT OF POETS

Table of Contents

ANTHONY OF EGMONT contemplated the world with disapproval. He had reached the conclusion that it was no place for a gentleman.

This happened in the year of grace 1467, amid the opulent surroundings of the Burgundian Court, when and where there were abundant grounds for his harsh assumption.

In common with his cousin, friend, and brother-in-arms, Charles of Burgundy, it was Anthony's bad or good fortune—who shall say which?—to have been born in the expiring days of the age of chivalry. Almost from birth he had been imbued with the lofty ideals of that age, and in early years he had taken for a pattern upon which to mould himself that very perfect and peerless knight, the Sieur Jacques de Lalaing, who was almost the last to uphold, in all its romantic effulgence, the chivalrous tradition. And Lalaing, who might have lived for deeds of high endeavour, had been stricken down and slain at the early age of thirty-three at Gaveren, in a battle whose sordid purpose was the imposition of a salt-tax upon the oppressed burghers of Ghent.

As a boy of ten, when newly appointed page to Philip the Good, Anthony had witnessed in the Feast of the Pheasant the last princely endeavour to fan the cooling embers of

chivalry into flame and to set on foot a crusade that should rid Christendom of the menace of the encroaching Turk, to whom Constantinople had lately fallen. He had seen that effort, sustained for a full year, languish and finally perish without a single knightly blow being struck, and there, it seemed to him, the spirit of chivalry had finally and utterly expired.

To be sure there were still joustings to be witnessed; but these were no longer of more significance than tennis or hawking or any other of the exercises in which nobility sought amusement. The language of chivalry still continued to be employed; but the meaning of its terms had changed. Great orders of chivalry still existed, of which perhaps the greatest was the Golden Fleece, which the late Duke Philip had founded, and of which Anthony himself wore the coveted collar. But when that same collar was hung about the neck of the twenty days' old Charles, a blow was struck at the very foundations of an institution which demanded that knighthood should be the acquisition of personal merit alone, to be attained only after a long and arduous physical and spiritual novitiate.

Anthony, with a considerable armed following out of Guelders, had been one of the allies who had lately fought on the Burgundian side in the War of the Public Weal, a war undertaken on the knightly grounds of abolishing extortionate taxation and setting free from its intolerable burden the 'poor oppressed people of France.' Because deceived by this pretext, Anthony's disillusion was the greater when the true aims of that war of rapacity became apparent. Burgundy's sole interest in that rebellion of the

French vassals against their King was the retention of Picardy and the cities of the Somme, which the crafty Louis was scheming to restore to the Crown of France, to which they rightly belonged.

Anthony had fought at Montlhéry beside his cousin Charles, and he accounted it an engagement reflecting little military and no knightly credit upon either side. At Charles's elbow he had been a witness of the protracted intrigues that followed; of the covetousness, discontent, and treachery among the allies. He had attended the parleys which at last wrung extortionate terms from the rascally little king of France, whom in a world of knaves he had been almost tempted to admire as the most perfect of his kind. He had revolted at the greed of the allies in the division of the spoils, and their complete oblivion in the hour of triumph of the 'poor oppressed people' on whose behalf the war had been undertaken.

Anon he had witnessed the Burgundian ruthlessness at Liège and the drawing up of the Piteous Peace, which had brought that hitherto independent little state virtually within the vast embrace of the Burgundian Duchy. And he had observed the horrors and abominations of the vengeance wreaked upon Dinant for its resistance, so that men said of it, as of old men had said of Carthage, *Cy fust Dinant*. He had returned from that campaign retaining few indeed of those bright illusions which throughout youth he had been amassing. Instead of the imagined high-souled pageantry of war, he had beheld war's stark and piteous realities. The gallant joust he had conceived it had resolved itself into sordid, bestial carnage. And since then, his vision of other

things, rendered keener and truer by that one terrible glimpse of truth, he had viewed the court and the great figures that composed it with a new perception of their real quality. Under a noble, glittering exterior which had hitherto deceived him, he now discovered mean faithlessness, vulgar mendacity, and sordid avarice. Yet despite all this, because of something within his own poetic spirit, he still clung to one illusion which lent a glamour to the world about him until the Lady Catharine of Bourbon robbed him of that, and brought him abruptly to the conclusion we have discovered.

Contemporary chroniclers have done rather less than justice to this cultured, sensitive gentleman, anachronistically chivalrous in his Burgundian setting. Mention of him by those writers is so scanty as to be almost contemptuous, and little would be known of him at all but for the comparatively obscure *Chronique Scandaleuse* left by André de La Marche, brother of the more famous chronicler Olivier de La Marche, who was steward of the late Duke's household. Neither the latter nor the equally famous Comines makes any mention whatever of this Count Anthony, leaving us to suppose that his younger brother, the infamous Adolph, was the old Duke Arnold of Guelders's only son.

Better perhaps this silence than the recklessly slanderous statement, penned, no doubt, out of sycophancy to Charles of Burgundy, with which Adrian de Budt dismisses the legitimate heir to the throne of Guelders.

'The extinction of the House of Guelders,' he writes, 'is no matter for honest men's regret. God will not long suffer that the welfare of a people should lie in the hands of

princes such as the weak and vacillating Duke Arnold or his wicked and almost parricidal son Adolph. As for that other son, known in the old Duke's lifetime as Count Anthony of Guelders, and since then happily vanished, no man knows how or whither, this prince combined, with the weakness of his father and the rascality of his brother, a hypocrisy so consummate that in early life he deceived the world, and won the countenance and affection of even such shrewd judges of men as our good Duke Philip and his noble son, that thunderbolt of war, that mightiest Prince of the Occident, Duke Charles. This Lord Anthony simulated a lofty idealism amounting to little less than saintliness, and for this was accounted an ornament to that greatest and most coveted of all orders of chivalry, the Golden Fleece, and was foremost in the councils of its chapter. Because of his rich endowment of mind and person, but more particularly because he pretended to observe a chastity such as is prescribed for, but seldom discovered in our clergy, he endeared himself to Charles of Burgundy, who in these matters practised an austerity oddly in contrast with the more joyous habits of his sire. Yet it is an odd irony of Fate's that by the lack of the very virtue to which he made the greatest pretence was this false Galahad undone. Inconstancy in an honourable attachment and an adulterous adventure in Zealand were between them the causes of his extinction.'

Never was truth more untruly told.

As to his having vanished, 'no man knows how or whither,' one man at least there was who knew the full tale

of it, and who has left that chronicle from which we may now reconstruct the event.

Already at the time of the War of Public Weal, Charles of Burgundy, who, owing to his father's failing health, had assumed the regency of the vast Burgundian dominions, was concerned with all those measures of statecraft by which a prince consolidates his power. His possessions extending over the two Burgundies, Artois and Flanders, Namur, Brabant, including Mechlin and Antwerp, Limbourg, Holland, Zealand, Hainault, and Luxembourg, rendered him the mightiest and wealthiest prince in Christendom—as the King of France had lately experienced to his bitter cost—one whose ducal coronet was ripe for conversion into a royal crown. Towards this coveted and merited kingship he already steered a course. With the title of King of the Romans, the Emperor should presently crown him to a kingdom mightier than any other in Europe, and to render his position unassailably secure, he was already buttressing it with desirable alliances. By marrying his sister-in-law, Catharine of Bourbon, to his dear friend and brother-in-arms, Count Anthony, he ensured himself the endurance of the alliance already existing between himself and the Duchy of Guelders, to which Anthony was heir.

The beauty of the Lady Catharine had conspired with Burgundian aspirations to melt the Lord Anthony's austerity. It was a beauty that had melted the austerity of many men, and was to melt that of yet more. In the case of Count John of Armagnac, that beauty was hardly required to accomplish so much. For John of Armagnac, as all the world knows, was entirely without austerity of any kind. Greed-begotten

disloyalty to his suzerain, Louis XI of France, had driven him into alliance with Burgundy in the War of Public Weal. The alliance had subsequently justified his seeking the relaxations offered by the Burgundian Court at Brussels, and the soft eyes of the Lady Catharine—blue, mysteriously tranquil pools, in which a man might drown his soul—had been responsible for keeping him there when his welcome, never too cordial, was wearing thin.

Because in all that concerned a lady to whom he was affianced, the romantic, dreamy idealist Anthony was at this stage incapable of thinking evil, it became necessary for the Duke, himself, to draw his attention to what was passing.

Now Charles of Burgundy was never remarkable for any gifts of mincing diplomacy. The downright, uncompromising bluntness which he used in the transaction of private and public affairs was equalled only by that headlong audacity in the field which has made him known to posterity as Charles the Temerarious.

He sought the apartments assigned to his cousin in the palace of Brussels one July evening, and found him, to his exasperation, at his studies in his closet, a small chamber whose walls were hung with tapestries from the looms of Arras. He drove out the single page who was in attendance, and came straight to business.

‘By Saint George, if I were betrothed as you are to a lady none too heedful of the honour, I’d at least make my betrothal respected. I would so, by Saint George!’

On the rare occasions when he felt moved to swear, Duke Charles commonly elected to do so by Saint George. This—like the device on his banner—by way of reminding his

audience of his English blood. Philip the Good, his father, took pride in being a Valois and French in every nerve of him. But it was one of the idiosyncrasies, almost one of the perversities of this son of Isabella of Portugal, who was of Lancastrian descent, that he must ever be affronting his subjects both French and Flemish by proclaiming himself a foreigner. Sometimes he insisted upon his English extraction. More commonly he boasted himself a Portuguese, which, indeed, his appearance confirmed. Short of stature, broad and powerful of frame, black of hair, and dark of eye, with a big-boned, swarthy countenance prominent of nose and jaw, there was about him nothing of the fair and delicately built Valois. He contrasted oddly, too, with the heir of Guelders, who leaned back now in his tall chair of crimson velvet, faintly startled by his visitor's abruptness. Their mutual affection dispensed with any ceremony between them when in private.

A Flemish wit of singular knowledge for his day, hearing them described on the score of their intimacy as Damon and Pythias, had retorted that they reminded him, rather, of Ormuzd and Ahriman, the powers of light and darkness. If the image is too grossly exaggerated in so far as concerns Duke Charles, it is not without justification in the case of Count Anthony. A creature of light he seemed, indeed; a radiant, joyous personality, with his tawny, golden hair which fell in a wavy mane about the nape of his shapely neck. Serenity sat upon his lofty brow and finely featured, square-chinned face; ardour glowed in his great dark eyes in which at times there was a hint of gold. They were the eyes of a visionary, of a poet, of a man of dreams rather than of

action, of one imbued with an energy that was spiritual rather than physical.

In his thirtieth year, and some three years younger than the Duke, there was still an almost stripling grace about his long limbs and slender frame, and this notwithstanding the mantle of dignity and reserve imposed by his lofty station and worn with incomparable ease.

He smiled now in tolerant amusement of the vehemence so habitual to his choleric cousin. He spoke in the even, deliberate tones of a voice that was singularly attractive.

‘Who is it that is lacking in respect?’

‘Who? The lady herself. Who else?’

Smiling still, Count Anthony sighed. ‘Well, well! Shall I blame her for that? It is for me to make myself well-considered. Then, perhaps, she will come to respect that for which I stand to her.’

‘It is what I urge!’ thundered the other’s impatience.

‘I am about it now.’ Count Anthony took up the quill which, upon his cousin’s advent, he had laid down and pointed with it to the sheet of parchment spread before him on the table, a square, solid table tautly covered with crimson velvet which was secured along the edges by ponderous gilt studs.

The Duke saw a deal of writing, most of it erased. This prodigality of ink meant nothing to him, and he said so with his glance. The younger man explained himself. The long, delicate fingers of his left hand touched an open volume beside the sheet.

‘I am assisted in my delectable labours by Messer Petrarch.’

‘Who’s he?’ quoth the Lord of Burgundy.

‘An Italian poet, lately dead.’

‘A poet!’ Contempt exploded in the word.

‘A greater than either of us, Charles.’

It was by no means the first time that Charles suspected in his cousin a streak of madness.

‘A maker of songs!’

‘His songs will be remembered when your laws are forgotten—great prince though you be. His name will be cherished when mine and even yours will have perished from the memory of man. His voice will still be heard in the world when your tongue and mine are so much scattered dust.’ Count Anthony sighed and smiled. ‘Who would be an emperor that might be a poet?’

‘I would, for one,’ said the Duke of Burgundy.

‘Only because you are without perception of what it means to be a poet. A maker of songs, you say. Do you conceive what vision is vouchsafed the man who can make songs, and what else he makes in making them, what spiritual discoveries he reveals to a benighted world, with what effulgence his songs dispel the darkness in which men grope? Could you make this contemptible thing, a song, Charles?’

‘Could I?’ The Duke shrugged and laughed, between derision and impatience. ‘I can make the songs that become my station. I made some at Montlhéry to the music of the cannon.’ His smile broadened, displaying the big white teeth of his prominent upper jaw. ‘That was music enough for the King of France. It brought Picardy and the cities of the

Somme to the Crown of Burgundy. Could your poets have done that?'

'No more than they could have voiced the croak of the carrion crows that followed in your wake.'

But the Duke took no offence at this, perhaps not understanding. His contempt remained unabated and secure.

'I deal in realities, Anthony. Not in dreams.'

'Dreams! You despise dreams and vaunt reality! Will you tell me what reality in all the world was not first a dream? Are not all things of human fashioning the fruit of dreams? Were they not first conceived in the mind before they were given visible, tangible shape? Is not this very world in which we move and live the product of a dream? Where else was it all conceived but in the mind of a Creator?'

The Duke was scowling now. 'You go too fast and too deep. If you are to argue the Creator into a poet, you'd best carry your polemics to the bishops. It need not perturb you if they send you to the fire for heresy, since at the stake you can dream of water to put out the faggots.'

'Charles, I despair of you.'

'As I of you. Though I may despair a little less when you tell me what your Italian poet has to do with Catharine.'

'He lends my poverty a little of his wealth. I borrow from him. Thus:' and taking up the parchment he began to read.

'Cupid's right hand did open my left side ...'

But he got no farther; for here the Duke, now thoroughly out of patience, interrupted brutally.

'If Cupid's right hand would but open your eyes to what is happening he'ld find a better employment for your wits than

this lovesick caterwauling. The Lady Catharine is a thought too generous of herself. You do not make her sufficiently aware of you. And you give her leisure in which to become excessively aware of other men.'

Count Anthony stared at him, blankly indignant.

'Why, here's lewdness!'

'That is the word, though I hesitated to employ it.'

'I apply it to your mind, Charles.'

'Apply it to Catharine's conduct. It will be more apt.'

Count Anthony came abruptly to his feet, his head thrown back, the colour deepening in his face.

'In God's name, Charles, what are you saying?'

'Am I not plain enough?'

'Too plain, I think. You imply that the Lady Catharine, who is one day to be Duchess of Guelders and the mother of future dukes ...' He could not complete the expression of his ugly thought. But the Duke completed it for him.

'... Is very much a woman, and the subject of too much gossip. Wait!' He was suddenly of a harsh peremptoriness, and, weary of skirmishing about the subject, drove straight at the heart of it. 'It is being said quite openly that Catharine was the subject of Auxonne's quarrel with d'Épinal; and now there are rumours of bad blood between d'Épinal and Armagnac.'

'Armagnac!' Count Anthony's voice usually so musical was as harsh as the Duke's. 'Armagnac?' he repeated. 'For what is that vile dog in this?'

The Duke shrugged his massive shoulders. 'Catharine has smiled upon him, I suppose. She is prodigal of her

smiles. And Armagnac has never been known to resist the allurement of a woman's eyes. The fault, Anthony, is yours.'

'Mine?' Anthony laughed on a note of bitterness. 'My fault that the devil of wantonness is in your sister-in-law?'

'Your fault that, being affianced to her, you sit here with your dreams and leave the reality to others. Will you still prefer the dream? Will you still hug the shadow, while others consume the substance for you?'

Count Anthony stood tense a moment, his thumbs hooked into the belt of red velvet, studded with golden hearts as big as walnuts, that girt his crimson gown about him.

'If you will give me leave, Charles,' he said after a moment, 'I will seek the Lady Catharine at once.'

'I'll do more, Anthony. I will conduct you to her.'

Together they came to the gallery above the great hall, where a troupe of Flemish players were entertaining the assembled court. The Count, in his eagerness of suppressed anger, went a step ahead of his burly cousin. The latter, keeping close, already began to dread the mischief he might have set afoot. It was characteristic of him to act on the impulse of his mood and to reflect afterwards upon the consequences. Thus was his life made up of such occasions as the present. He mistrusted the purposeful set of Anthony's tall figure and the unusual grimness that had come to invest that fair and gentle countenance. He wanted no open scandals at his court; still less did he want anything in the nature of a breach between two such powerful princes as Anthony of Guelders and John of Armagnac. In any such quarrel, particularly if concerned with his own sister-in-law,

he must of necessity intervene, and on whichever side he intervened that intervention must result in setting the other against him and thus in the loss of a valued ally.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

SEVERANCE

Table of Contents

THE antics of the players on the dais at the end of the long hall so fully engaged the attention of the courtly audience that the arrival of the Duke and his cousin went unperceived. It went unperceived also by the Lady Catharine, for all that her attention was nowise bestowed upon the mummers. She occupied a chair by one of the pillars on the right of the hall almost immediately below the staircase by which our gentlemen had been descending, and where, since Count Anthony had perceived her, they now stood arrested midway in their descent, observing.

She was of a fair and exquisite loveliness such as might well have served for a poet's incarnation of his ideal. Tendrils of her golden hair, in violation of fashion's law, escaped about her brow from the dark band at the base of the small pointed hennin with which she was coifed. A more daring violation of that same law was the extent of the *décolletage* of the close-fitting bodice of her gown of green and gold brocade, with its excessive revelation of the ivory perfections of her neck and breasts. Her sleeve, very tight in the arm, grew suddenly to such a fullness at the wrist that a foot and more of it hung below the fine jewelled hand which moved playfully, caressingly, as she spoke or listened, upon the black velvet sleeve of her companion. This was a tall,

loose-limbed, youthful fellow, arrogant of bearing, swarthy, black-browed, and handsome in a sinister, unpleasant way. Leaning upon the back of her chair, his cropped head of black hair was bowed as he talked until it almost touched her own; and when she looked up into his face, as she did ever and anon with wanton arts of coyness, their eyes were scarcely a foot apart.

The Duke, for all his usually imperturbable boldness, glanced with misgiving at his tall companion; nor were his misgivings lessened by the thin, baffling smile that was compressing Count Anthony's lips. He had intended that Count Anthony should observe for himself; but he had hardly expected that there would be quite so much to observe. The moment, he now considered, had been execrably ill-chosen.

Nor were these two upon the stairs the only observers. The dallying pair below were dividing with the players the attention of those more immediately about them. In their neighbourhood the Duchess of Orléans, Count Anthony's kinswoman, sat frowning, as ever and anon she looked sideways at the Lady Catharine; and beside the Duchess, frowning also, and manifestly ill-at-ease, stood the elegant, courtly Saint-Pol, at present in Brussels on a mission from King Louis. Raising his eyes, Saint-Pol perceived those two observing figures on the stairs, one tall and scarlet, the other short and black. He cleared his throat to attract attention and sound the alarm, and scowled warningly upon the pair. But they were deaf and blind to all but each other. The lady's delicate fingers continued their caressing, almost wanton movement upon her companion's arm, whilst

Armagnac, bending closer, and greatly daring, shifted his brown hand from the back of her chair and let it rest lightly upon her shoulder at a point where the audacious cut of her bodice left it bare.

Count Anthony resumed his descent of the stairs quite heedless of the Duke's restraining hand.

'Leave this to me,' his highness was muttering, regretting now that he had not taken matters into his own hands from the outset. 'Leave me to deal with Armagnac. He shall go home to-morrow, by Saint George!' And he repeated still more insistently: 'Leave him to me.'

Count Anthony, turning his head to regard him, still with that close-lipped smile upon his fair white face, puzzled him by his answer:

'Why, what is he to me, that I should dispute him with you? Madam Catharine is not yet my wife, for which on my knees I shall render thanks to Our Lady presently.' And he went on.

The comedy on the dais reached its end as the comedy in the hall below took its beginnings. The players had given good entertainment, and, on the closing lines of the epilogue spoken by their leader, applause had greeted them. Flowers, comfits, and money fell in a shower about them from their grateful audience, and then the noisy acclamations sank into the din of talk as the groups in the hall broke up, to re-form elsewhere and break again, and the movement became general.

The summer daylight was fading. Came servants with tapers, ushered by a chamberlain, to light the flambeaux and girandoles, and draw the great curtains, each a

masterpiece of Flemish art, vividly illustrating scenes from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. Men's thoughts began to turn to supper, but none supposed that it was of supper that the Count of Armagnac whispered just then in the Lady Catharine's ear, invisible under the band of her headdress. Of whatever it may have been, it provoked the lady's laughter, which rose above the general hum like a peal of little silver bells. At least, that is how yesterday Count Anthony would have described it. This evening he discovered no music in it. He found the sound detestable, the frivolous tinkle of a trivial, hollow mind.

Looking up and around at that moment, she beheld him, quietly smiling, at her side, and, beyond him, her brother-in-law, a thundercloud upon his ducal brow. Her laughter snapped in the grip of a sudden and instinctive fear; a fear rather of Count Anthony's vague smile than of the Duke's obvious displeasure.

The Count inclined his bare golden head; he bent a little towards her from his graceful, red-swathed height.

'Of your charity, madam, share with us the pleasantries of my Lord of Armagnac. Let us laugh with you, madam.'

M. de Saint-Pol, the Duchess of Orléans, Madame de Blaumont with the Duke's ten-year-old daughter, little Mary of Burgundy, and young d'Épinal were the more immediate witnesses of the scene, and their eyes, if we except the child's, were anxious.

Followed a long and awkward pause, at the end of which the Lady Catharine withdrew at last her fingers from Armagnac's arm, and he, straightening himself stiffly, shifted his hand from her shoulder to the back of her chair.

Whereupon Count Anthony cried out in a mockery of courteous chagrin:

‘But we discompose you. We intrude. We place a restraint upon you. We disturb fond attitudes. This must not be. Charles, why did you bring me? We are not wanted here.’

The unready Duke made a noise in his throat. His scowl deepened. An exponent ever of the direct attack, he understood nothing of his cousin’s enveloping movement. And meanwhile, as he found no words, his cousin prattled on quite pleasantly:

‘Madam Catharine is reluctant, then, to repeat the pleasantry which moved her laughter. The pleasantry being my Lord of Armagnac’s we can understand her reluctance. His pleasantries are seldom nice.’

Her ladyship’s lovely face, clear-cut in profile as a cameo, was going red and white by turns; her bosom rose and fell in its revealing corsage; her eyes were lowered in panic. And then at last, seeing her tongue-tied who usually was never short of pertness, the Lord of Armagnac, spurred by the glances of ever-increasing witnesses, swaggered to her rescue, to save her countenance and his own.

‘Do you talk at me, Lord Count?’ he challenged.

‘At you?’ Count Anthony’s tone suggested a faint wonder. His dark eyes grew dreamy as they surveyed the Frenchman. ‘I spoke of you, perforce. It was unavoidable.’

Armagnac ignored the subtle innuendo. ‘You will be wise, my lord, to avoid it in the future.’

‘Not wise. That is not the word at all. Fastidious. You are not a pleasant topic, sir.’

There was a movement among the spectators, an audible drawing of breath, and some one laughed outright. It was young d'Épinal, maliciously glad, through the torment of his soul, to see another—and one who had the right to do it—baiting the bully Armagnac. That laugh stirred the fuming Duke into instant action. Almost he shouldered his cousin aside, to take the stage and plant himself squarely before the foolish pair. By his very presence he checked the Count of Armagnac's retort.

'By Saint George, there's been talk enough. Are we playing in a comedy, Anthony?'

'Is tragedy your preference, Charles?'

The Duke disregarded him. He stormed upon that lovely fool, his sister-in-law, who in all her life had never looked lovelier or more foolish.

'You have leave to go, Catharine.' The dismissal was harsh, almost contemptuous. 'Away with you! To your room, madam.'

She rose abruptly, like a puppet whose strings he had rudely jerked.

Finding the Duchess of Orléans at his elbow, he impressed her into service.

'Take the little fool hence, Mary. Go with her.'

He seized the Lady Catharine's arm in his powerful grip, swung her round and flung her into the arms of the Duchess.

'Oh, cruelty!' cried Count Anthony. The Duke stared at him, his countenance almost purple. 'To part them,' the Count explained, and waved a hand from the Lord of Armagnac to the Lady Catharine, who was retreating now in

tears. ‘They were made for each other, expressly created for mutual joy. Do you not agree with me, M. d’Épinal?’

The young courtier glared at him, understanding nothing of this icy mockery where knighthood, as it seemed to his ingenuous mind, called for fiery indignation.

‘If it had been my honour to have been betrothed to that peerless lady, I ... I ...’ He faltered, at a loss.

‘Well, sir? Well? What would you have done? Instruct me. You perceive my need.’

‘I would not laugh.’

‘Ah, no! With the breath leaping in flames from your nostrils, like the dragon yonder in the tapestry, you’ld hurl your gauntlet down at the intruder. Indeed, I think I’ve heard that is your knightly way, even when your engagement does not go the length of a betrothal. You are in the romantic tradition, you suppose.’ Count Anthony shook his head in deprecation. ‘There is neither romance nor reason in it, unless stags at rutting time are reasonable and romantic.’

D’Épinal stiffened. It grew clear to him that metaphorically Count Anthony was slapping his face for his own adventure with M. d’Auxonne on the Lady Catharine’s behalf. And slapping it in such a way that open resentment must render him intolerably foolish. There was a force of truth in what Count Anthony said which stripped of all glamour and laid brutally naked the deed in which the young knight had taken a vainglorious pride.

He stood abashed, without answer, and the Count, with a smile and a nod, turned aside to bend over little Mary of Burgundy whom he found beside him. He talked and

laughed with her now as if he had no thought for any in the world but this child who loved him.

Meanwhile the furious Duke had gone off, dragging with him almost forcibly, by the arm, the scarcely less furious Armagnac. He designed to get him beyond the reach of Count Anthony's mordant tongue before irreparable damage should be wrought.

If Charles of Burgundy was no diplomatist, yet a certain rough diplomacy he used on this occasion.

'My lord,' he said, 'it will be better for all concerned, and for the preservation of the peace and amity so vital to us all, that you do not postpone your intended departure from Brussels.'

'Postpone?' quoth Armagnac, who had no thought of going.

'You have prepared, I understand, to leave to-morrow.'

The Frenchman paused at the Burgundian's side. He stared long at his host, cold and haughtily. Then at last, he laughed.

'You give me leave?' he said. 'It is a little ... abrupt.'

The Duke spread his hands, his face grave. 'In your interests and my own and those of others.'

'And that insolent cousin of yours from Guelders? Does he remain on the field?'

'Here is no field, my lord.' The Duke curbed with difficulty his rising anger. 'Nor have I perceived any insolence. There has been,' he added, warming as he proceeded, 'lack of discretion, which my cousin of Guelders is entitled to resent, and which I shall resent with him if carried further.'

Each stared into the eyes of the other, and the glances of both were hard. Armagnac was the first to bow, as perforce he must when reason prevailed.

Yet, when a few years later war flamed forth again between France and Burgundy, and Count John of Armagnac was found to have sold his sword to King Louis, the cause of this may well have been supplied on that July evening in Brussels.

‘Your wishes are my laws, Monseigneur, in this as in all matters.’

The Duke turned away to seek his cousin. But the Count had already departed. Eventually the Duke found him alone in his closet, leaning from the open casement and looking out into the turquoise sky of eventide and the mists that were rising above the great ducal park by which the vision to the north was limited.

It was while dreaming here that Count Anthony of Guelders had reached the clear conclusion that the world—his world, at least—was no place for a gentleman.

The Duke came to fling a vigorous arm about his neck.

‘All is most happily concluded,’ he announced.

‘I perceive the conclusion. Not the happiness.’ His tone was wistful and a little weary. It sowed distrust in the ducal mind. Then Count Anthony swung half-round from his contemplation of the eventide. ‘What are we, Charles?’ he asked. ‘Are we real, you and I? Do we live and breathe and act of our own independent wills; or are we but the creatures of a dream—the dream of some vast consciousness other than our own—in which we move, dimly

aware of the parts we are set to play, but only in a measure as we play them?'

'God save us!' the Duke ejaculated, accounting himself confronted by stark lunacy.

Count Anthony flung an arm outwards, towards the black mass of the park, the mists, and the sky above in which the stars were palely dawning. 'All that is real! It exists and is at peace. But we, Charles—you and I and Armagnac and the Lady Catharine and this court of yours in which all is greed and lechery—we are not real, for if we were and were masters of our wills we would shape things otherwise. Could Montlhéry have been, and all that went to it, before and after? Could Dinant have been, and the horrors that were wrought there in the name of knighthood? Could any of this be if we were real?'

'Does it profit you to ask if that which is could be?'

'Ah, but is it? Is it?'

'It is. You may take my word for it.'

'Your word, Charles? Your word against my consciousness? You are deceived. Or else it is the life of courts that's false, unreal, rendered so by all the ceremonial in which we trammel it and which creeps into the soul of each composing it; by the illusions of power which are its breath; by the traditions of birth and blood which are the empty bubbles in which it is reflected. Yes, that may be it. We are all actors in this world of courts, Charles; players of parts allotted to us at birth according to the names we bear. Natural we never are. Hence our unreality. And because we are not natural in ourselves, when Nature expresses herself through us despite our panoplies and mummeries, she

comes forth travestied and grotesque, stressing our unreality.'

The Duke breathed windily. 'It may all be as you say. But I'll hope it isn't.'

'While you are hoping, I will ascertain, Charles.'

'Let me know the result when you reach it,' the Duke mocked him. 'You read too much and you think too much. You are suffering from indigestion up here.' And he tapped his forehead. Abruptly he changed the subject. 'Armagnac returns to France to-morrow.'

'A pity,' said the Count.

'A pity? What the devil ails you to-night?'

'As I said below, he and your sister-in-law are excellently suited. In your place I'ld have played Providence to force a match between them.'

'God give me patience! Is there no sense in you at all?'

'Indeed, I hope so. Consider: A wife might make of Armagnac a man at least outwardly fit for decent company by rescuing him from the infamy of his incestuous life. Whilst such a husband as Armagnac would curb any wanton disposition in a woman. Thus these two who separately remain worthless might united become worthy. Is there no sense in that?'

The Duke recoiled before him. 'Is there sense,' he thundered, 'in speaking in such terms of the lady you are to marry?'

'Marry?' Count Anthony laughed a little. He shook his golden head. 'That dream at least is over and dispelled. And it leaves no pain, mirabile dictu. But I understand. I was in love with love. The Lady Catharine herself was naught; no