

Jeffery Farnol



Sir John Dering

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A romantic comedy



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PROLOGUE

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The light of guttering candles fell upon the two small-swords where they lay, the one glittering brightly, the other its murderous steel horribly bent and dimmed; and no sound to hear except a whisper of stirring leaves beyond the open window and the ominous murmur of hushed voices from the inner chamber.

Suddenly the door of this chamber opened and a man appeared, slender, youthful and superlatively elegant from curled peruke to buckled shoes, a young exquisite who leaned heavily, though gracefully, in the doorway, glancing back over his shoulder while the slim fingers of one white hand busied themselves to button his long, flowered waistcoat and made a mighty business of it.

“Dead?” he questioned at last in a tone high-pitched and imperious. “Dead ... is he?”

Receiving an affirmative answer, his lounging figure grew tense and, turning his head, he stared at the guttering candles.

Wide eyes that glared in the deathly pale oval of a youthful face, pallid lips compressed above a jut of white chin, nostrils that quivered with every breath, sweat that trickled unheeded beneath the trim curls of his great periwig; a face that grew aged even as he stood there. Presently, with step a little uncertain, he crossed to the open lattice and leaned to stare out and up into the deepening night-sky, and yet was conscious that the others had followed him, men who whispered, held aloof from him

and peered back toward that quiet inner chamber; and, with his wide gaze still upturned to the sombre heaven, he spoke in the same high, imperious tone:

“He died scarce ... ten minutes ago, I think?”

“Aye, thereabouts, sir,” answered the surgeon, wiping podgy hands upon a towel. “I did all that was possible, but he was beyond human aid when I arrived. *Æsculapius* himself—”

“Ten minutes!... I wonder where is now the merry soul of him?... He died attempting a laugh, you’ll remember, sirs!”

“And thereby hastened his end, sir,” added the surgeon; “the hæmorrhage—”

“Aye ... aye,” quavered young Mr. Prescott. “Lord ... O Lord, Dering—he laughed ... and his blood all a-bubbling ... laughed—and died ... O Lord!”

“’Twas all so demned sudden!” exclaimed Captain Armitage—“so curst sudden and unexpected, Dering.”

“And that’s true enough!” wailed Lord Verrian. “’S life, Dering, you were close engaged afore we had a chance to part ye!”

“To be sure I ... have pinked my man!” retorted Sir John Dering a little unsteadily and with so wild a look that Lord Verrian started.

“Nay, Dering,” quoth he soothingly. “’Twas he drew first ... and you’d scarce made a push at each other—and both o’ ye desperate fierce—than poor Charles slips, d’ye see, and impales himself on your point ... a devilish business altogether—never saw such hell-fire fury and determination!”

"I' faith, my lord," answered Sir John, dabbing daintily at pallid lips with belaced handkerchief, "to hear you one might imagine that ... Charles and I were ... the bitterest enemies i' the world rather than the ... best o' friends—aye, the best! For it seems ... a man may love a man and ... kill a man. So in yonder room lieth my poor friend Charles, very still and silent, freed o' debts and duns at last, and I—" Sir John checked suddenly as from the stairs without stole a ripple of laughter.

"By God—a woman!" gasped Lord Verrian. Young Mr. Prescott sank down into the nearest chair, head between twitching hands; Captain Armitage sprang to bar the door, but, as he did so, it swung open and a girl smiled in upon them—a tall, handsome creature, black-eyed, full-lipped, dominant in her beauty.

"Lord, gentlemen!" she exclaimed, glancing swiftly from one face to another; "I protest y're very gloomily mum—as I were a ghost. Nay—what is it? Are you all dumb? Where is Charles?... He was to meet me here! You, my Lord Verrian ... Captain Armitage—where is Charles?"

Lord Verrian turned his back, mumbling incoherencies; Mr. Prescott groaned. And then her quick glance had caught the glitter of the swords upon the table. "Charles!" she cried suddenly. "Charles! Ah—my God!"

Captain Armitage made a feeble effort to stay her, but, brushing him imperiously aside, she fled into the inner room.

Ensued a moment of tense and painful stillness, and then upon the air rose a dreadful strangled screaming, and she

was back, the awful sound still issuing from her quivering lips.

“Who ... who,” she gasped at last, “which of you ... which of you ... did it?”

No one spoke, only Sir John Dering bowed, laced handkerchief to lip.

“You—ah, ‘twas you?” she questioned in hoarse whisper.
“I ... do not know you.... Your name, sir?”

“I am called John Dering, madam.”

“Dering,” she repeated in the same tense voice—“John Dering—I shall not forget! And ‘twas you killed him—‘twas you murdered my Charles—you—you?”

And now she broke out into a wild farrago of words, bitter reproaches and passionate threats, while Sir John stood immobile, head bowed, laced handkerchief to lip, mute beneath the lash of her tongue. Softly, stealthily, one by one, the others crept from the room until the twain were alone, unseen, unheard, save by one beyond the open casement who stood so patiently in the gathering dusk, watching Sir John’s drooping figure with such keen anxiety.

“... God curse you!” she panted hoarsely. “God’s curse on you for the murderer you are! Aye, but you shall suffer for it, I swear! You shall rue this night’s work to the end of your life —” The passionate voice broke upon a gasping sob, and then Sir John spoke, his head still bowed:

“True, madam, I shall ... suffer and grieve for this ... to the end o’ my days for ... Charles was ... my friend—”

“And you are his murderer, John Dering—so am I your enemy!” she cried. “Your sin may be soon forgot—the world may forgive you—even God may, but I—never will! My

vengeance shall follow you, to end only with your last breath——”

Sir John coughed suddenly, the handkerchief at his mouth became all at once horribly crimson, and, sinking to his knees, he swayed over sideways; lying thus, it chanced that the long, embroidered waistcoat he had so vainly sought to button, fell open, discovering the great and awful stains below.

For a moment the girl stood rigid, staring down at the serene but death-pale face at her feet; and then the door swung violently open to admit a very tall man who ran to kneel and lift that slender form, to chafe the nerveless hands and drop hot tears upon the pallid cheek.

“John, John.... O John.... O lad—is this the end——”

Sir John Dering’s eyes opened, and he stared up into the square, bronzed face above him with a faint smile.

“Hector ... is’t you, Hector?” he whispered. “Tell her ... the lady ... that I think ... her vengeance will end ... to-night! Which is ... very well—”

“Woman,” cried the man Hector, lifting agonised face, “if ye be true woman run for the surgeon quick, ere he die!”

“Die?” she echoed. “Aye—’twere better he died, far better for him—and for me!” So saying, she turned and sped from the room, laughing wildly as she ran.

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES THE DOG WITH A BAD NAME

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Sir John Dering, at loss for a rhyme, paused in the throes of composition to flick a speck of dust from snowy ruffle, to glance from polished floor to painted ceiling, to survey his own reflection in the mirror opposite, noting with a critical eye all that pertained to his exquisite self, the glossy curls of his great, black periwig, the graceful folds of full-skirted, embroidered coat, his sleek silk stockings and dainty, gold-buckled shoes; and discovering naught in his resplendent person to cavil at, turned back to his unfinished manuscript, sighing plaintively.

“‘Soul’!” he murmured; “a damnable word, so many rhymes to’t and none of ‘em apt! Roll, coal, hole, foal, goal, pole ... a devilish word! Mole, shoal, vole—pish!”

It was at this precise juncture that the latch behind him was lifted softly and upon the threshold stood a man whose height and breadth seemed to fill the doorway, a man whose hard-worn clothes were dusty with travel, whose long, unkempt periwig, set somewhat askew, framed a lean, brown face notable for a pair of keen, blue eyes and the fierce jut of brow, cheek-bone and jaw: a shabby person, indeed, and very much at odds with the dainty luxury of the chamber before him.

Thus, Hector MacLean, or more properly, General Sir Hector Lauchlan MacLean, six foot four of Highland Scot, having surveyed painted walls, polished floor and frescoed

ceiling, folded mighty arms, scowled at Sir John's shapely, unconscious back and emitted a sound that none but a true-born Scot may ever achieve.

“Umph-humph!” exclaimed Hector MacLean; whereupon Sir John started, dropped his quill and was upon his feet all in a moment, modish languor and exquisite affectations all forgotten in eager welcome.

“Hector!” he exclaimed, grasping the Scot’s two bony fists; “Hector man, what should bring you all the way to Paris—and me—after all this time?”

“Four years, John, four years and mair!” nodded Sir Hector. “Four years and they might be eight, judging by y’r looks. Lad, I’d hardly know ye ... sic a mighty fine gentleman an’ sae pale—”

“A delicate pallor is the mode, Hector,” smiled Sir John. “But what brings you to Paris?”

“Aye—what, John?” retorted Sir Hector, with a dour shake of the head. “Who but yourself! What’s all this I’m hearing concerning ye, John?”

“Evil beyond a doubt, Hector—evil, I’ll wager. But ‘tis no reason you should stand and scowl when you might sit and smile like the old friend you are—”

“Aye, always your friend, lad, if ‘twere only for your father’s sake!”

“And mine also, I hope, Hector?”

“Aye, John, though you’re no the man your father was!”

“I know it, Hector.”

“And ‘tis memory o’ him and the promise I made him to be ever mindful o’ your welfare hath brought me these weary miles to Parus—”

"And since you are here, you shall stay with me, Hector. Egad, 'twill be like old times!"

"No, no, John," sighed MacLean, glancing round the luxurious apartment; "you've grown too fine for me, these days! My dusty claes wad foul your dainty chairs and silken cushions. No, no, lad, you're become too grand a gentleman for a poor, rough, old soldier——"

"Tush and a fiddlestick!" exclaimed Sir John, forcing him down into the nearest chair. "My home is yours whenever you will, Hector."

"Hame, John?" retorted MacLean. "Hame, d'ye call it? Look at this room—all silken fripperies like a leddy's boudoir... And talkin' o' ladies—look up yonder!"—and he stabbed a bony finger at the painted ceiling where nude dryads sported against a flowery background. "Aye ... obsairve 'em!" snorted MacLean, forsaking precise English for broad Scots—a true sign of mental perturbation. "Gude sakes, regaird yon painted besoms wi' ne'er a clout tae cover 'em—'tis no' a sicht for decent eyes!"

"They were done by a famous painter, Hector, and represent the three Graces——"

"Dis-graces, I ca' 'em! Man, they're ... fair owerpowerin'!"

"Then don't heed 'em, Hector; regard me instead."

"Yourself, is it?" sighed MacLean. "O man, there's enough o' lace an' broidery aboot ye tae rig oot a' three o' y'r dis-graces frae top tae tae. Ah, Johnnie lad, when I obsairve a' y'r finery o' claes an' mind hoo y'r father was dressed the day he panted his life oot in my arrms wi' a French bayonet in his wame ... an auld tattered sairvice coat.... Aweel, aweel, he was a man, John ... dead before you were old

enough to ken him, mair's the peety ... aye, mair's the peety. An' to-day, lad, here's me wi' ane fut i' the grave, and here's yersel' vera prone tae a' manner o' follies an' sic by reason as you're wilfu' and over-young——”

“I'm twenty-seven, Hector!”

“Aye, a wilfu' bairn, John, and a'm an auld man ill able tae cope wi' ye, laddie, bein' vera feeble and bowed wi' years.”

“Sink me, Hector, but you're strong as a horse and straight as your sword, and can't be a day older than fifty-five or six——”

“Feefty-ane, John, fifty-one, whateffer! But I was ever a quiet, plain, simple body tae follow the skirl o' the war-pipes ... battle, skirmish an' siege ... juist a puir, God-fearin' sopher-body——”

“Though King William made you a knight and a General, Sir Hector!”

“Och aye ... but best of a'—I was y'r father's friend, his comrade an' brither-in-arms in camp an' field, y' ken!” Sir Hector was silent a moment; when next he spoke, his English was more precise than usual. “When your noble father died, John, he left you and your mother to my care.... So soon as the wars were over I hasted to take up this sacred charge and found your mother dying ... but you were alive enough—a bonnie, braw, wee thing.... And since then, John, since then——”

“You have been everything to me, Hector—my only true friend!”

“God knoweth I have tried to be faithful to the trust, to keep my word to your father and do my duty by his son——”

“And, sir, indeed you have!”

"Ah, but have I, John—have I so, indeed? Have I trained you up to be the honourable gentleman your father would have been proud of calling son? Have I, lad—have I?"

"I trust so, sir."

"And yet, John—and yet—" Sir Hector rose, his grim lips twitching strangely, and began to pace the floor in sudden agitation. Now, as he turned, it chanced that the scabbard of his long, broad-bladed Andrea Ferrara swept a dainty Sèvres ornament to the floor, whereupon he halted to stare down at the fragments with eyes of horrified dismay.

"Forgi'e me, John, forgi'e me!" he exclaimed, unheeding Sir John's reassurances; "but ye see, lad, a'm no juist the man tae be trusted amang sic dainty trifles as yon. Look at it—shivered beyond repair ... 'tis like a man's honour! An' talking of honour, John, your father was a noble gentleman, proud of his honourable name, who kept that name unsullied all his days.... Have you done as much, John? O lad, you that are my dead friend's son, you that I have bred from your youth up—have you done as much?"

"Do you doubt it, Hector?"

"Aye, I do, John. God help me, I must—unless report lies."

Sir John's pale cheek flushed, his sensitive nostrils quivered, but his air and tone were placid as usual when he spoke:

"To what do you refer, Hector?"

"To your wild doings and devilments, John, your godless life and riotous wickedness, your hell-fire and damnable practices generally—"

"Sit down, Hector. Pray sit down and fetch your breath," smiled Sir John. "Egad, you're so full o' news concerning me

that 'tis plain you have met some friend o' mine of late——”

“Look'ee, John, scarce have I set foot in Parus than I hear some scurrilous tale o' yourself and some Marquise or other ——”

“Ah, the Marquise?” sighed Sir John, turning to glance at his unfinished composition. “I was inditing an ode to her, but my muse halted for an apt rhyme to 'soul,' Hector.”

“'Twas a curst discreditable affair as I heard it, John!”

“Why, to be sure, Hector, my affairs are always discreditable. But the scandal being well-nigh a week old begins to grow stale, and the Marquise will be out o' the public eye already, poor soul, unless she hath contrived some scheme to revive it, and she's a clever creature, on my soul she is—ah, and that reminds me! What the deuce rhymes with 'soul,' Hector? There's roll and poll and dole and goal and——”

“Hoot-toot, man!” exclaimed MacLean. “The de'il awa' wi' y'r rhymes!”

“With all my heart, Hector, for they're bad enough, I fear,” sighed Sir John.

“Sic sinfu' repoorts as I've been hearin' o' ye, John!” exclaimed MacLean, striding up and down the room again. “Sic a gallimaufry o' waefu' wickedness, sic lug-tingling tales.... O man, John, y'r reputation fair stinks!”

“It does, Hector!” nodded Sir John placidly. “Indeed, 'tis a reputation I find something hard to maintain and live up to—though I do my best——”

“Your best, whateffer? Aye, wi' your gamblin', your duellin' an' your fine French hussies—like this Marquise—a feckless body and shameless——”

"And therefore fashionable, Hector! Remember, this is Paris!"

"Parus!" snorted MacLean; "O Parus! Edinb'ro's a sinfu' town, forbye it hath its savin' graces. Lon'non's waur, but—Parus! Man, I'm no' an archangel, y' ken, but—Parus! And this brings me back tae yoursel', John."

"And pray what have you heard concerning me particularly, Hector? Come, what are my latest sins? Whose wife have I lured from sorrowing spouse? What young innocent is my latest victim? What hopeful youth have I ruined at the gaming-table?... and in heaven's name—smile, man!"

"How, smile is it, and my heart waefu' for ye, lad? Repoort speaks ye a very deevil, John."

"Aye, but even the devil is never so black as he is painted, Hector!"

"Ha, will ye be for tellin' me repoort hath lied, John?"

"Let us rather say it hath not spoke truth."

"Whaur's the differ, lad?"

"Report, Hector, doth trumpet me forth a very monster of politely-vicious depravity. I am Sin manifest, perambulating Iniquity. Do I sit me down to the gaming-table I am bound to ruin some poor wretch, do I but kiss a woman's finger-tips she is forthwith a mark for every scandalous tongue. My sins, Hector, be all superlative and very pertinaciously come home to roost. Egad, I befoul my own nest with a persistency that amazes me! But then, it seems some are born to iniquity, some achieve iniquity, and some have iniquity thrust upon 'em——"

"How so, John lad, what d'ye mean?"

"That I have an enemy—nay two, rather! The one being myself—and he is bad enough o' conscience—but the other—ah, Hector, this other one is more implacable, more unrelenting and a thousand times more merciless!"

"Who is he, lad, a God's name?"

"'Tis no he," sighed Sir John.

"Aha!" exclaimed Sir Hector, coming to an abrupt stand; "you mean—her?"

"I do, Hector! 'Tis an ill thing to have an enemy, but if that enemy be a woman, young, beautiful, of high estate and very wealthy—the situation becomes desperate."

"A wumman!" repeated Sir Hector, rasping thumb and finger across bony chin. "You mean 'the Barrasdaile,' of course, John?"

"Aye, the Lady Herminia Barrasdaile."

"To be sure I mind weel how she raved and vowed vengeance on ye, lad, the night Charles Tremayne was killed ——"

"Poor, reckless Charles ... I can see him now, Hector, as he laughed ... and died——"

"Tush, laddie, forget it! 'Twas he drew first, and himsel' no better than——"

"He is dead, Hector! Sometimes I've thought you had been wiser, kinder, to have let me die also, rather than ha' dragged me back to this emptiness we call 'life'——"

"Emptiness, laddie? Hoot-toot—and yersel' the joy o' the leddies, the envy o' the men! 'The glass o' fashion an' mould o' form,' wi' every young sprig o' gallantry to copy the cut o' your waistcoats? And you think, John, you think

that my Lady Barrasdaile is actually carrying her threat into execution?"

"Well, these last few years, Hector, have proved singularly eventful to me one way or another. I have been involved so often in so many unsavoury affairs and had so many duels forced upon me that my reputation is grown a little threadbare, as you know, and myself notorious."

"And now it seems you've another duel on your hands."

"A duel, Hector? Egad, and have I so? With whom, pray?

"Losh, man, you should ken that weel enough."

"Hum!" quoth Sir John, pondering.

"I caught but a snatch of idle gossip concerning you, John, and some English Viscount or other—"

"An Englishman, Hector, mark that! Ha," mused Sir John, "I have a vague recollection of throwing somebody's hat out of some window some time or other—but whose hat, or what window, or when, I cannot recall for the life o' me. We must look into this, Hector. Let us summon the Corporal and hear what the perspicacious Robert hath to say."

"What, Corporal Bob? He's still with you, then, John lad?"

"To be sure, Hector," answered Sir John, ringing the small silver bell at his elbow. "He is my major-domo, my valet, my general factotum, and will never be anything but a grenadier to the day of his death. Here he is!" At this moment was a short, sharp double knock and the door opened to admit a very square-shouldered, sharp-eyed man extremely precise as to clothes, speech and gesture, who, beholding Sir Hector's stalwart figure, halted suddenly, whipped up right hand as if to touch neat wig but, thinking

better of it, bowed instead and immediately stood at attention.

“Stiff and straight as though on parade, Hector!” murmured Sir John, whereupon the Corporal flushed and immediately “stood easy.”

“Ha, Corporal Robert!” exclaimed Sir Hector. “Dae ye mind the day we stormed the barricades afore Maestricht, and me wi’ yon Frenchman’s baggonet through me arrm? If ye hadna been there, I shouldna be here—so, Corporal Bobbie, gi’e’s a grup o’ y’r hand.” The Corporal’s cheek flushed again and his eyes glowed as their fingers gripped, but when he spoke it was to his master.

“You rang, Sir John?”

“I did, Robert. I desire you to inform us if I was particularly drunk or no last night?”

“By no manner o’ means, Sir John.”

“You are ready to swear that?”

“Bible oath, Sir John!”

“I am not often drunk, I believe, Bob?”

“Never more than the occasion demands, sir—and then very genteelly!”

“When was the last occasion, Bob?”

“Two days ago, sir, being the night of the Marquise de Sauvray’s reception.”

“Was I—‘genteelly’ so, that night, Bob?”

“Maybe a leetle—elevated, sir.”

“Yes,” nodded Sir John, “I’ve a dim memory of breaking my cane over the link-boy’s head!”

“Link-boy was insolent, sir. Link-boy deserved it.”

"I rejoice to know it, Robert. Was there aught else remarkable in my home-coming on this occasion?"

"Nothing at all, sir! Though to be sure—you sang—"

"Sang, did I?" sighed Sir John. "Anything else, Bob?"

"No, sir! Except for gentleman's perook stuffed into your honour's right-hand coat-pocket."

"A peruke, Bob? Oh, begad! If we have it still, show it to me!"

The imperturbable Robert vanished into Sir John's bedchamber and instantly returned with the article in question, turning it upon his hand for his master's inspection.

"A brown Ramillie!" mused Sir John. "No, Bob, I don't seem to know it—it calls up no memory of its erstwhile owner. What sword did I wear that night?"

"Your favourite dress sword, sir, with the gold hilt."

"Fetch it, Bob." The weapon was duly brought and, unsheathing it, Sir John eyed it keenly from pierced shell to glittering point. "Ha!" sighed he, returning blade and scabbard. "What has not been, will be, I fear! A gentleman's hat out of a window and a gentleman's peruke in my pocket would seem to indicate a meeting soon or late with some one or other!"

"With Viscount Templemore, sir, as I am give to understand.... Young gentleman has been taking of fencing lessons constant ever since," answered Robert imperturbably.

"Templemore!" exclaimed Sir Hector. "Viscount Templemore, is it? Man Jack, ye no can fecht wi' him, he's but a lad—a child—a bairn in breeks!"

"And but lately from England, eh, Bob?" questioned Sir John.

"He has been here scarce a week, sir, I am give to understand."

"Mark that, Hector!"

"Man John, what d'ye mean?"

"Robert, pray how many duels have I had forced upon me since we came to Paris five years since?"

"Twenty-three, Sir John."

"And most of 'em gentlemen newly arrived from England —mark that also, Hector! Gentlemen, these, who ha' scarce made my acquaintance than they discover an urgent desire to cross steel with me. Some day I may have an accident and kill one of them, which would grieve me, since he would die in evil cause, Hector."

"Man Jack, what cause are ye meaning?"

"The cause of my Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, Hector, beyond doubt!"

Sir Hector made a turn up and down the room.

"But save us a'," he exclaimed, halting suddenly, "the wumman must be a pairfict deevil!"

"Nay, she's merely a vengeful female, Hector."

"But this puir Templemore laddie. I kenned his father weel—man Jack, ye'll no' fecht the boy?"

"Pray, how may I avoid it, Hector? If he annoyed me t'other night—as he must ha' done, it seems that I affronted him in turn most flagrantly—there is his wig to prove it! How, then, can I possibly refuse him satisfaction? You have fought ere now and must appreciate the delicacy of my position."

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Sir Hector, and took another turn up and down the room.

"Do not distress yourself," sighed Sir John; "if we must fight I shall endeavour to disarm him merely——"

"And may accidentally kill the lad, swordsman though ye be, John ... remember Charles Tremayne! So, man Jack, ye'll juist no' fight the laddie."

"Not fight?" echoed Sir John.

"Having regaird tae his extreme youth and inexperience and y'r ain reputation as a duellist and man o' bluid...."

"But, Hector, you must see that if I refuse on account of his youth 'twill make him the laughing-stock of all Paris."

"Why then, Johnnie lad, ye maun juist rin awa'——"

"Run away, Hector?"

"Juist that, John; ye maun gi'e Parus a chance tae laugh at yersel'—howbeit you'll rin awa' fra' the puir lad as a man of honour should."

"Impossible, Hector."

"Man, there's naething impossible tae the son o' your father, I'm thinkin'!"

Sir John frowned and, crossing to the window, beheld a carriage drawn up in front of the house.

"Robert," said he, "we've visitors, I think; pray show them up here." Robert departed forthwith and presently reappeared to announce:

"My Lord Cheevely and Monsieur le Duc de Vaucelles." And into the room tripped two very fine gentlemen enormously bewigged and beruffled, who, having been duly presented to Sir Hector, flourished laced hats and fluttered perfumed handkerchiefs, bowing profoundly.

"Let me die, Sir John," piped Lord Cheevely. "'Od rabbit me, but 'tis pure joy to see ya', I vow 'tis! Pray forgive our dem'd sudden intrusion, but our mission is delicate, sir, dooced, infinite delicate, and admits o' no delay, as my friend Vaucelles will tell ya'!"

"Parfaitement!" quoth Monsieur le Duc, hat a-flourish.

"Briefly and to the point, m' dear Sir John," continued his lordship, "we come on behalf of our very good friend, Viscount Templemore, who, with the utmost possible humility i' the world, begs the honour of a meeting with ya' at the earliest possible moment."

"Templemore?" repeated Sir John, tapping smooth forehead with slender finger. "Templemore? I have met him somewhere, I fancy. He is but lately come to Paris, I think, my lord?"

"A week ago or thereabouts, m' dear Sir John."

"And he desires a meeting?"

"Most ardently, Sir John; the point in question being, as ya' remember, of a distinctly—personal nature."

"Indeed," nodded Sir John, "a brown Ramillie wig."

"Parfaitement!" answered Monsieur le Duc, with a flourish.

"Precisely, Sir John!" answered Lord Cheevely. "'Twill be small-swords, I presume?"

"No, my lord," sighed Sir John.

"Ah, you decide for pistols, then?"

"Nor pistols, my lord. I do not intend to fight with Viscount Templemore."

"Not—not fight?" gasped his lordship, while Monsieur le Duc started and dropped his hat.

“No, my lord,” answered Sir John. “I am returning Viscount Templemore’s wig with my sincerest regrets so soon as ‘tis combed and ironed——”

“D’ye mean, sir, that—that you actually refuse Viscount Templemore’s challenge?”

“Actually and positively, my lord!”

“But—but,” stammered Lord Cheevely. “Oh, demme, such action is impossible—was not—cannot be!”

“That is why I do it, my lord.”

“Oh, rat me!” murmured his lordship, goggling. “Oh, split me ... not fight! Dooce take and burn me—this from you, Sir John! You that ha’ never baulked ... had so many affairs ... gone out so frequently—oh, smite me dumb!”

“My lord,” sighed Sir John, “I have been out so very frequently that I am grown a little weary. You will therefore pray tell Viscount Templemore that I have given up duelling as a pastime for the present, and purpose rusticating awhile ——”

“If—if you are serious, sir,” exclaimed Lord Cheevely, rolling his eyes, “demme, sir, if you are serious, permit me to tell ya’ ya’ conduct is dem’d strange, devilish queer and most dooced, dem’d irregular!”

“Parfaitement!” added Monsieur le Duc.

Sir John smiled faintly, though his dreamy blue eyes grew suddenly very keen and piercing.

“Gentlemen,” he retorted, “I am about to leave Paris for an indefinite period; when I return, should you have any strictures to make upon my conduct, I shall be charmed to notice ‘em. Until then, sirs, I have the honour to bid you adieu.”

And so Sir John bowed, the gentlemen bowed and betook themselves away with never another word.

“Man Jack,” exclaimed Sir Hector, as the door closed, “leave Parus, is it? O John, laddie—d’ye mean it?”

“Aye, I do, Hector. What with one thing and another, I begin to find Paris a little wearing.”

“Is it hame at last, Johnnie—hame tae England?”

“Where else, Hector?”

“When dae we start, lad?”

“Sure, no time were better than the present. We ride to-day, Hector.”

“Ou aye—yet bide a wee! Wha’ bee’s in y’r bonnet, now, laddie?”

“I go to find my enemy, Hector.”

“Save us a’! D’ye mean the leddy?”

“Herminia!” nodded Sir John. “”Tis a pretty name! Indeed, Hector, ’tis a sweet, pretty name—though vastly difficult to find a rhyme for—”

“And what’ll ye be after wi’ the deevilish jade?”

“To exact a just and lasting vengeance, Hector.”

“Hoot awa’, Johnnie—hoot-toot, ye canna fecht a wumman—”

“I can do worse, Hector!”

“Man John, wha’ dae ye mean?”

“I can marry her, Hector.”

CHAPTER II

WHICH DESCRIBES A FORTUITOUS BUT FATEFUL MEETING

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The Fates, those mysterious, unearthly sisters who are for ever busied upon the destinies of poor, finite humanity—the Fates, it seems, decreed that my Lady Herminia Barrasdaile, travelling full speed for Paris, should be suddenly precipitated upon the soft, resilient form of her devoted maid, Mrs. Betty, to that buxom creature's gasping dismay and her own vast indignation; wherefore, the huge vehicle coming to an abrupt standstill, down fell the window and out went my lady's angry, albeit lovely, countenance to demand instant explanation from coachmen, footmen and the world in general.

"Why, ye see, my lady," answered red-faced Giles, the coachman, his Sussex calm entirely unruffled, "it do so 'appen as our off-side rear spring's gone, mam."

"Gone, man, gone? Who's stolen it? What a plague d'you mean, Giles?" demanded her ladyship.

"I means broke, my lady, snapped, mam, parted-loike. We'm down on our back-axle—an' theer y'are, mam!"

"Why then, mend it, Giles; mend it at once and let us get on—I must reach Paris to-night if possible."

"Aye, we'll mend it, my lady, sure to goodness—in toime
—"

"How long?"

"Why, it du all depend, my lady—maybe an hour, maybe tu—"

Wide swung the heavy coach-door and forth sprang her ladyship, a slim and graceful fury who, perceiving the damage and necessary delay, swore as only a very fine lady might, with a tripping comprehensiveness and passionate directness that reduced Giles and the two footmen to awed silence.

“Hush, mam!” pleaded Mrs. Betty, as her lady paused for breath. “Don’t ‘ee now, there’s a duck——”

“But, zounds, wench,” cried her mistress, “you know ‘tis a case o’ life and death ... to be delayed thus....”

“Aye, I know, mem—but do ‘ee take a sniff at your vinaigrette, my lady——”

“Tush!” exclaimed her ladyship. “Hold your silly tongue, do!”

“Yes, my lady ... but there’s a light yonder among the trees—an inn, I think, mam——”

“Ha—an inn? Thomas, go, see—and bring help instantly—and order another coach if there be one! Run, oaf, run!” Away sped Thomas, a long-barrelled pistol protruding from either side-pocket, while my lady paced to and fro, fuming with impatience, until back he scurried with two chattering French ostlers at his heels, to say it was an inn, sure enough, but that no manner of conveyance was to be had.

“We’ll see about that!” exclaimed my lady. “Come, Betty!” And off she hastened forthwith, the meek and obedient Betty attendant. It was a small, drowsy inn, but at my lady’s advent it awoke to sudden life and bustle, its every chamber seemed full of stir, tripping feet and chattering voices; and all for the English Miladi’s comfort and welfare.

Insomuch that, embarrassed by attentions so pervading and multifarious, my Lady Barrasdaile caught up Betty's cloak of homespun, a hooded garment for country wear, and, muffled in its ample folds, went a-walking.

The road, bordered by shady trees, led up a hill, and, lured by the sunset glory, and joying, moreover, to stretch her limbs, cramped by the long journey, my lady ascended the hill and, reaching the top, had paused to admire the view, when she became aware of two horsemen approaching from the opposite direction, and instantly apprehending them to be highwaymen, she slipped aside into an adjacent thicket, waiting for them to pass.

Now as she stood thus, seeing but unseen, the mysterious Fates decreed that Sir John Dering, reaching the hilltop in turn, should rein in his horse within a yard of her, to glance round about him upon the peaceful countryside, little dreaming of the bright eyes that watched him so keenly, or the ears that hearkened so inquisitively.

"A sweet prospect, Hector!" he exclaimed; "fair and chaste and yet a little sad. 'Tis like looking deep into the eyes of a good woman—if there be such! It fills the soul with a sense of unworthiness and sorrow for the folly o' the wasted years."

"Aye, John! An' fower pistols in oor holsters an' twa in my pockets gi'e us six shot in case o' eeventualities."

"The wasted years!" murmured Sir John, musing gaze upon the distant horizon. "'Tis a night to grieve in, Hector, to yearn for better things."

"Aye! And though six shot is fair I'm wishin' ye carried a rale sword like my Andrew here,'stead o' yon bodkin!"