

JOHN BUCHAN

SIR QUIXOTE
OF THE MOORS

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John Buchan

Sir Quixote of the Moors / Being some account of an episode in the life of the Sieur de Rohaine

PREFACE

The narrative, now for the first time presented to the world, was written by the Sieur de Rohaine to while away the time during the long period and painful captivity, borne with heroic resolution, which preceded his death. He chose the English tongue, in which he was extraordinarily proficient, for two reasons: first, as an exercise in the language; second, because he desired to keep the passages here recorded from the knowledge of certain of his kins-folk in France. Few changes have been made in his work. Now and then an English idiom has been substituted for a French; certain tortuous expressions have been emended; and in general the portions in the Scots dialect have been rewritten, since the author's knowledge of this manner of speech seems scarcely to have been so great as he himself thought.

CHAPTER I. ON THE HIGH MOORS

Before me stretched a black heath, over which the mist blew in gusts, and through whose midst the road crept like an adder. Great storm-marked hills flanked me on either side, and since I set out I had seen their harsh outline against a thick sky, until I longed for flat ground to rest my sight upon. The way was damp, and the soft mountain gravel sank under my horse's feet; and ever and anon my legs were splashed by the water from some pool which the rain had left. Shrill mountain birds flew around, and sent their cries through the cold air. Sometimes the fog would lift for a moment from the face of the land and show me a hilltop or the leaden glimmer of a loch, but nothing more – no green field or homestead; only a barren and accursed desert.

Neither horse nor man was in any spirit. My back ached, and I shivered in my sodden garments, while my eyes were dim from gazing on flying clouds. The poor beast stumbled often, for he had traveled far on little fodder, and a hill-road was a new thing in his experience. Saladin I called him – for I had fancied that there was something Turkish about his black face, with the heavy turban-like band above his forehead – in my old fortunate days when I bought him. He was a fine horse of the Normandy breed, and had carried me on many a wild journey, though on none so forlorn as this.

But to speak of myself. I am Jean de Rohaine, at your service; Sieur de Rohaine in the province of Touraine – a gentleman, I trust, though one in a sorry plight. And how I came to be in the wild highlands of the place called Galloway, in the bare kingdom of Scotland, I must haste to tell. In the old days, when I had lived as became my rank in my native land, I had met a Scot, – one Kennedy by name, – a great man in his own country, with whom I struck up an intimate friendship. He and I were as brothers, and he swore that if I came to visit him in his own home he would see to it that I should have the best. I thanked him at the time for his bidding, but thought little more of it.

Now, by ill fortune, the time came when, what with gaming and pleasuring, I was a beggared man, and I bethought me of the Scot's offer. I had liked the man well, and I considered how it would be no ill thing to abide in that country till I should find some means of bettering my affairs. So I took ship and came to the town of Ayr, from which 'twas but a day's ride to the house of my friend. 'Twas in midsummer when I landed, and the place looked not so bare as I had feared, as I rode along between green meadows to my destination. There I found Quentin Kennedy, somewhat grown old and more full in flesh than I remembered him in the past. He had been a tall, black-avised man when I first knew him; now he was grizzled, – whether from hard living or the harshness of northern weather I know not, – and heavier than a man of action is wont to be. He greeted me most hospitably, putting his house at my bidding, and swearing that I should abide and keep him company and go no more back to the South.

So for near a month I stayed there, and such a time of riot and hilarity I scarce remember. *Mon Dieu*, but the feasting and the sporting would have rejoiced the hearts of my comrades of the Rue Margot! I had already learned much of the Scots tongue at the college in Paris, where every second man hails from this land, and now I was soon perfect in it, speaking it all but as well as my host. 'Tis a gift I have, for I well remember how, when I consorted for some months in the low countries with an Italian of Milan, I picked up a fair knowledge of his speech. So now I found myself in the midst of men of spirit, and a rare life we led. The gentlemen of the place would come much about the house, and I promise you 'twas not seldom we saw the morning in as we sat at wine. There was, too, the greatest sport at coursing and hunting the deer in Kennedy's lands by the Water of Doon.

Yet there was that I liked not among the fellows who came thither, nay, even in my friend himself. We have a proverb in France that the devil when he spoils a German in the making turns him into a Scot, and for certain there was much boorishness among them, which to my mind sits ill

on gentlemen. They would jest at one another till I thought that in a twinkling swords would be out, and lo! I soon found that 'twas but done for sport, and with no evil intent. They were clownish in their understanding, little recking of the feelings of a man of honor, but quick to grow fierce on some tittle of provocation which another would scarce notice. Indeed, 'tis my belief that one of this nation is best in his youth, for Kennedy, whom I well remembered as a man of courage and breeding, had grown grosser and more sottish with his years, till I was fain to ask where was my friend of the past.

And now I come to that which brought on my departure and my misfortunes. 'Twas one night as I returned weary from riding after a stag in the haugh by the river, that Quentin cried hastily, as I entered, that now he had found something worthy of my attention.

"To-morrow, Jock," says he, "you will see sport. There has been some cursed commotion among the folk of the hills, and I am out the morrow to redd the marches. You shall have a troop of horse and ride with me, and, God's death, we will have a taste of better work!"

I cried out that I could have asked for naught better, and, indeed, I was overjoyed that the hard drinking and idleness were at an end, and that the rigors of warfare lay before me. For I am a soldier by birth and by profession, and I love the jingle of steel and the rush of battle.

So, on the morrow, I rode to the mountains with a score of dragoons behind me, glad and hopeful. *Diable!* How shall I tell my disappointment? The first day I had seen all – and more than I wished. We fought, not with men like ourselves, but with women and children and unarmed yokels, and butchered like Cossacks more than Christians. I grew sick of the work, and would have none of it, but led my men to the rendezvous sullenly, and hot at heart. 'Twas well the night was late when we arrived, else I should have met with Kennedy there and then, and God knows what might have happened.

The next day, in a great fit of loathing, I followed my host again, hoping that the worst was over, and that henceforth I should have something more to my stomach. But little I knew of the men with whom I journeyed. There was a cottage there, a shepherd's house, and God! they burned it down, and the man they shot before his wife and children, speaking naught to him but foul-mouthed reproaches and jabber about some creed which was strange to me. I could not prevent it, though 'twas all that I could do to keep myself from a mad attack.

I rode up to Quentin Kennedy.

"Sir," I said, "I have had great kindness at your hands, but you and I must part. I see that we are made of different stuff. I can endure war, but not massacre."

He laughed at my scruples, incredulous of my purpose, until at last he saw that I was fixed in my determination. Then he spoke half kindly:

"This is a small matter to stand between me and thee. I am a servant of the king, and but do my duty. I little thought to have disloyalty preached from your lips; but bide with me, and I promise that you shall see no more of it."

But my anger was too great, and I would have none of him. Then – and now I marvel at the man's forbearance – he offered me money to recompense me for my trouble. 'Twas honestly meant, and oft have I regretted my action, but to me in my fury it seemed but an added insult.

"Nay," said I angrily; "I take no payment from butchers. I am a gentleman, if a poor one."

At this he flushed wrathfully, and I thought for an instant that he would have drawn on me; but he refrained, and I rode off alone among the moors. I knew naught of the land, and I must have taken the wrong way, for noon found me hopelessly mazed among a tangle of rocks and hills and peat-mosses. Verily, Quentin Kennedy had taken the best revenge by suffering me to follow my own leading.

In the early hours of my journey my head was in such a whirl of wrath and dismay, that I had little power to think settled thoughts. I was in a desperate confusion, half angry at my own haste, and half bitter at the coldness of a friend who would permit a stranger to ride off alone with scarce a word of regret. When I have thought the matter out in after days, I have been as perplexed as ever; yet it

still seems to me, though I know not how, that I acted as any man of honor and heart would approve. Still this thought was little present to me in my discomfort, as I plashed through the sodden turf.

I had breakfasted at Kennedy's house of Dunpeel in the early morning, and since I had no provision of any sort with me, 'twas not long ere the biting of hunger began to set in. My race is a hardy stock, used to much hardships and rough fare, but in this inclement land my heart failed me wholly, and I grew sick and giddy, what with the famishing and the cold rain. For, though 'twas late August, the month of harvest and fruit-time in my own fair land, it seemed more like winter. The gusts of sharp wind came driving out of the mist and pierced me to the very marrow. So chill were they that my garments were of no avail to avert them; being, indeed, of the thinnest, and cut according to the fashion of fine cloth for summer wear at the shows and gallantries of the town. A pretty change, thought I, from the gardens of Versailles and the trim streets of Paris to this surly land; and sad it was to see my cloak, meant for no rougher breeze than the gentle south, tossed and scattered by a grim wind.

I have marked it often, and here I proved its truth, that man's thoughts turn always to the opposites of his present state. Here was I, set in the most uncharitable land on earth; and yet ever before my eyes would come brief visions of the gay country which I had forsaken. In a gap of hill I fancied that I descried a level distance with sunny vineyards and rich orchards, to which I must surely come if I but hastened. When I stooped to drink at a stream, I fancied ere I drank it that the water would taste like the Bordeaux I was wont to drink at the little hostelry in the Rue Margot; and when the tasteless liquid once entered my mouth, the disenchantment was severe. I met one peasant, an old man bent with toil, coarse-featured, yet not without some gleams of kindness, and I could not refrain from addressing him in my native tongue. For though I could make some shape at his barbarous patois, in my present distress it came but uneasily from my lips. He stared at me stupidly, and when I repeated the question in the English, he made some unintelligible reply, and stumbled onward in his way. I watched his poor figure as he walked. Such, thought I, are the *canaille* of the land, and 'tis little wonder if their bodies be misshapen, and their minds dull, for an archangel would become a boor if he dwelt here for any space of time.

But enough of such dreams, and God knows no man had ever less cause for dreaming. Where was I to go, and what might my purpose be in this wilderness which men call the world? An empty belly and a wet skin do not tend to sedate thinking, so small wonder if I saw little ahead. I was making for the end of the earth, caring little in what direction, weary and sick of heart, with sharp anger at the past, and never a hope for the morrow.

Yet, even in my direst days, I have ever found some grain of expectation to console me. I had five crowns in my purse; little enough, but sufficient to win me a dinner and a bed at some cheap hostelry. So all through the gray afternoon I looked sharply for a house, mistaking every monstrous boulder for a gable-end. I cheered my heart with thinking of dainties to be looked for; a dish of boiled fish, or a piece of mutton from one of the wild-faced sheep which bounded ever and anon across my path. Nay, I was in no mood to be fastidious. I would e'en be content with a poor fare, provided always I could succeed in swallowing it, for my desire soon became less for the attainment of a pleasure than for the alleviation of a discomfort. For I was ravenous as a hawk, and had it in my heart more than once to dismount, and seek for the sparse hill-berries.

And, indeed, this was like to have been my predicament, for the day grew late and I came no nearer a human dwelling. The valley in which I rode grew wider, about to open, as I thought, into the dale of a river. The hills, from rising steeply by the wayside, were withdrawn to the distance of maybe a mile, where they lifted their faces through the network of the mist. All the land between them, save a strip where the road lay, was filled with a black marsh, where moor birds made a most dreary wailing. It minded me of the cries of the innocents whom King Herod slew, as I had seen the dead represented outside the village church of Rohaine in my far-away homeland. My heart grew sore with longing. I had bartered my native country for the most dismal on earth, and all for nothing.

Madman that I was, were it not better to be a beggar in France than a horse-captain in any other place? I cursed my folly sorely, as each fresh blast sent a shiver through my body. Nor was my horse in any better state – Saladin, whom I had seen gayly decked at a procession with ribbons and pretty favors, who had carried me so often and so far, who had always fared on the best. The poor beast was in a woeful plight, with his pasterns bleeding from the rough stones and his head bent with weariness. Verily, I pitied him more than myself, and if I had had a crust we should have shared it.

The night came in, black as a draw-well and stormy as the Day of Doom. I had now no little trouble in picking out the way from among the treacherous morasses. Of a sudden my horse would have a forefoot in a pool of black peat-water, from which I would scarce, by much pulling, recover him. A sharp jag of stone in the way would all but bring him to his knees. So we dragged wearifully along, scarce fearing, caring, hoping for anything in this world or another.

It was, I judge, an hour after nightfall, about nine of the clock, when I fancied that some glimmer shot through the thick darkness. I could have clapped my hands for joy had I been able; but alas! these were so stiff, that clapping was as far from me as from a man with the palsy.

"Courage!" said I, "courage, Saladin! There is yet hope for us!"

The poor animal seemed to share in my expectations. He carried me quicker forward, so that soon the feeble gleam had grown to a broad light. Inn or dwelling, thought I, there I stay, for I will go not a foot further for man or devil. My sword must e'en be my *fourrier* to get me a night's lodging. Then I saw the house, a low, dark place, unillumined save for that front window which shone as an invitation to travelers. In a minute I was at the threshold. There, in truth, was the sign flapping above the lintel. 'Twas an inn at length, and my heart leaped out in gratitude.

CHAPTER II.

I FARE BADLY INDOORS

I dropped wearily from my horse and stumbled forward to the door. 'Twas close shut, but rays of light came through the chinks at the foot, and the great light in the further window lit up the ground for some yards. I knocked loudly with my sword-hilt. Stillness seemed to reign within, save that from some distant room a faint sound of men's voices was brought. A most savory smell stole out to the raw air and revived my hunger with hopes of supper.

Again I knocked, this time rudely, and the door rattled on its hinges. This brought some signs of life from within. I could hear a foot on the stone floor of a passage, a bustling as of many folk running hither and thither, and a great barking of a sheep-dog. Of a sudden the door was flung open, a warm blaze of light rushed forth, and I stood blinking before the master of the house.

He was a tall, grizzled man of maybe fifty years, thin, with a stoop in his back that all hill-folk have, and a face brown with sun and wind. I judged him fifty, but he may have been younger by ten years, for in that desert men age the speedier. His dress was dirty and ragged in many places, and in one hand he carried a pistol, which he held before him as if for protection. He stared at me for a second.

"Wha are ye that comes dirlin' here on sic a nicht?" said he, and I give his speech as I remember it. As he uttered the words, he looked me keenly in the face, and I felt his thin, cold glance piercing to the roots of my thoughts. I liked the man ill, for, what with his lean figure and sour countenance, he was far different from the jovial, well-groomed fellows who will give you greeting at any wayside inn from Calais to Bordeaux.

"You ask a strange question, and one little needing answer. If a man has wandered for hours in bog-holes, he will be in no mind to stand chaffering at inn doors. I seek a night's lodging for my horse and myself."

"It's little we can give you, for it's a bare, sinfu' land," said he, "but such as I ha'e ye're welcome to. Bide a minute, and I'll bring a licht to tak' ye to the stable."

He was gone down the passage for a few seconds, and returned with a rushlight encased against the wind in a wicker covering. The storm made it flicker and flare till it sent dancing shadows over the dark walls of the house. The stable lay round by the back end, and thither poor Saladin and his master stumbled over a most villainous rough ground. The place, when found, was no great thing to boast of – a cold shed, damp with rain, with blaffs of wind wheezing through it; and I was grieved to think of my horse's nightly comfort. The host snatched from a rack a truss of hay, which by its smell was old enough, and tossed it into the manger. "There ye are, and it's mair than mony a Christian gets in thae weary days."

Then he led the way back into the house. We entered a draughty passage with a window at one end, broken in part, through which streamed the cold air. A turn brought me into a little square room, where a fire flickered and a low lamp burned on the table. 'Twas so home-like and peaceful that my heart went out to it, and I thanked my fate for the comfortable lodging I had chanced on. Mine host stirred the blaze and bade me strip off my wet garments. He fetched me an armful of rough homespuns, but I cared little to put them on, so I e'en sat in my shirt and waited on the drying of my coat. My mother's portrait, the one by Grizot, which I have had set in gold and wear always near my heart, dangled to my lap, and I took this for an evil omen. I returned it quick to its place, the more so because I saw the landlord's lantern-jaw close at the sight, and his cold eyes twinkle. Had I been wise, too, I would have stripped my rings from my fingers ere I began this ill-boding travel, for it does not behoove a gentleman to be sojourning among beggars with gold about him.

"Have ye come far the day?" the man asked, in his harsh voice. "Ye're gey-like splashed wi' dirt, so I jalouse ye cam ower the *Angels Ladder*."

"Angel's ladder!" quoth I, "devil's ladder I call it! for a more blackguardly place I have not clapped eyes on since I first mounted horse."

"*Angel's Ladder* they call it," said the man, to all appearance never heeding my words, "for there, mony a year syne, an holy man of God, one Ebenezer Clavershaws, preached to a goodly gathering on the shining ladder seen by the patriarch Jacob at Bethel, which extended from earth to heaven. 'Twas a rich discourse, and I have it still in my mind."

"'Twas more likely to have been a way to the Evil One for me. Had I but gone a further step many a time, I should have been giving my account ere this to my Maker. But a truce to this talk. 'Twas not to listen to such that I came here; let me have supper, the best you have, and a bottle of whatever wine you keep in this accursed place. Burgundy is my choice."

"Young man," the fellow said gravely, looking at me with his unpleasing eyes, "you are one who loves the meat that perisheth rather than the unsearchable riches of God's grace. Oh, be warned while yet there is time. You know not the delights of gladsome communion wi' Him, which makes the moss-hags and heather-bushes more fair than the roses of Sharon or the balmy plains of Gilead. Oh, be wise and turn, for now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation!"

Sacré! what madman have I fallen in with, thought I, who talks in this fashion. I had heard of the wild deeds of those in our own land who call themselves Huguenots, and I was not altogether without fear. But my appetite was keen, and my blood was never of the coolest.

"Peace with your nonsense, sirrah," I said sternly; "what man are you who come and prate before your guests, instead of fetching their supper? Let me have mine at once, and no more of your Scripture."

As I spoke, I looked him angrily in the face, and my bearing must have had some effect upon him, for he turned suddenly and passed out.

A wench appeared, a comely slip of a girl, with eyes somewhat dazed and timorous, and set the table with viands. There was a moor-fowl, well-roasted and tasty to the palate, a cut of salted beef, and for wine, a bottle of French claret of excellent quality. 'Twas so much in excess of my expectation, that I straightway fell into a good humor, and the black cloud of dismay lifted in some degree from my wits. I filled my glass and looked at it against the fire-glow, and dreamed that 'twas an emblem of the after course of my life. Who knew what fine things I might come to yet, though now I was solitary in a strange land?

The landlord came in and took away the remnants himself. He looked at me fixedly more than once, and in his glance I read madness, greed, and hatred. I feared his look, and was glad to see him leave, for he made me feel angry and a little awed. However, thought I, 'tis not the first time I have met a churlish host, and I filled my glass again.

The fire bickered cheerily, lighting up the room and comforting my cold skin. I drew my chair close and stretched out my legs to the blaze, till in a little, betwixt heat and weariness, I was pleasantly drowsy. I fell to thinking of the events of the day and the weary road I had traveled; then to an earlier time, when I first came to Scotland, and my hopes were still unbroken. After all this I began to mind me of the pleasant days in France; for, though I had often fared ill enough there, all was forgotten but the good fortune; and I had soon built out of my brain a France which was liker Paradise than anywhere on earth. Every now and then a log would crackle or fall, and so wake me with a start, for the fire was of that sort which is common in hilly places – a great bank of peat with wood laid athwart. Blue, pungent smoke came out in rings and clouds, which smelt gratefully in my nostrils after the black out-of-doors.

By and by, what with thinking of the past, what with my present comfort, and what with an ever hopeful imagination, my prospects came to look less dismal. 'Twas true that I was here in a most unfriendly land with little money and no skill of the country. But Scotland was but a little place,

after all. I must come to Leith in time, where I could surely meet a French skipper who would take me over, money or no. You will ask, whoever may chance to read this narrative, why, in Heaven's name, I did not turn and go back to Ayr, the port from which I had come? The reason is not far to seek. The whole land behind me stank in my nostrils, for there dwelt Quentin Kennedy, and there lay the scene of my discomfiture and my sufferings. Faugh! the smell of that wretched moor road is with me yet. So, with thinking one way and another, I came to a decision to go forward in any case, and trust to God and my own good fortune. After this I must have ceased to have any thoughts, and dropped off snugly to sleep.

I wakened, at what time I know not, shivering, with a black fire before my knees. The room was black with darkness, save where through a chink in the window-shutter there came a gleam of pale moonlight. I sprang up in haste and called for a servant to show me to my sleeping room, but the next second I could have wished the word back, for I feared that no servant would be awake and at hand. To my mind there seemed something passing strange in thus leaving a guest to slumber by the fire.

To my amazement, the landlord himself came to my call, bearing a light in his hand. I was reasonably surprised, for though I knew not the hour of the night, I judged from the state of the fire that it must have been far advanced. "I had fallen asleep," I said, in apology, "and now would finish what I have begun. Show me my bed."

"It'll be a dark nicht and a coorse, out-bye," said the man, as he led the way solemnly from the room, up a rickety stair, down a mirk passage to a chamber which, from the turnings of the house, I guessed to be facing the east. 'Twas a comfortless place, and ere I could add a word I found the man leaving the room with the light. "You'll find your way to bed in the dark," quoth he, and I was left in blackness.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, half-stupid with sleep, my teeth chattering with the cold, listening to the gusts of wind battering against the little window. 'Faith! thought I, this is the worst entertainment I ever had, and I have made trial of many. Yet I need not complain, for I have had a good fire and a royal supper, and my present dis-comfort is due in great part to my own ill habit of drowsiness. I rose to undress, for my bones were sore after the long day's riding, when, by some chance, I moved forward to the window and opened it to look on the night.

'Twas wintry weather outside, though but the month of August. The face of the hills fronting me were swathed in white mist, which hung low even to the banks of the stream. There was a great muttering in the air of swollen water, for the rain had ceased, and the red waves were left to roll down the channel to the lowlands and make havoc of meadow and steading. The sky was cumbered with clouds, and no clear light of the moon came through; but since 'twas nigh the time of the full moon the night was not utterly dark.

I lingered for maybe five minutes in this posture, and then I heard that which made me draw in my head and listen the more intently. A thud of horses' hoofs on the wet ground came to my ear. A second, and it was plainer, the noise of some half-dozen riders clearly approaching the inn. 'Twas a lonesome place, and I judged it strange that company should come so late.

I flung myself on the bed in my clothes, and could almost have fallen asleep as I was, so weary was my body. But there was that in my mind which forbade slumber, a vague uneasiness as of some ill approaching, which it behooved me to combat. Again and again I tried to drive it from me as mere cowardice, but again it returned to vex me. There was nothing for it but that I should lie on my back and bide what might come.

Then again I heard a sound, this time from a room beneath. 'Twas as if men were talking softly, and moving to and fro. My curiosity was completely aroused, and I thought it no shame to my soldierly honor to slip from my room and gather what was the purport of their talk. At such a time, and in such a place, it boded no good for me, and the evil face of the landlord was ever in my memory. The staircase creaked a little as it felt my weight, but it had been built for heavier men, and I passed it in safety. Clearly the visitors were in the room where I had supped.

"Will we ha'e muckle wark wi' him, think ye?" I heard one man ask.

"Na, na," said another, whom I knew for mine host, "he's a foreigner, a man frae a fremt land, and a' folk ken they're little use. Forbye, I had stock o' him mysel', and I think I could mak' his bit ribs crack thegither. He'll no' be an ill customer to deal wi'."

"But will he no' be a guid hand at the swird? There's no yin o' us here muckle at that."

"Toots," said another, "we'll e'en get him intil a corner, where he'll no git leave to stir an airm."

I had no stomach for more. With a dull sense of fear I crept back to my room, scarce heeding in my anger whether I made noise or not. Good God! thought I, I have traveled by land and sea to die in a moorland alehouse by the hand of common robbers! My heart grew hot at the thought of the landlord, for I made no doubt but it was my jewels that had first set his teeth. I loosened my sword in its scabbard; and now I come to think of it, 'twas a great wonder that it had not been taken away from me while I slept. I could only guess that the man had been afraid to approach me before the arrival of his confederates. I gripped my sword-hilt; ah, how often had I felt its touch under kindlier circumstances – when I slew the boar in the woods at Belmont, when I made the Sieur de Biran crave pardon before my feet, when I – But peace with such memories! At all events, if Jean de Rohaine must die among ruffians, unknown and forgotten, he would finish his days like a gentleman of courage. I prayed to God that I might only have the life of the leader.

But this world is sweet to all men, and as I awaited death in that dark room, it seemed especially fair to live. I was but in the prime of my age, on the near side of forty, hale in body, a master of the arts and graces. Were it not passing hard that I should perish in this wise? I looked every way for a means of escape. There was but one – the little window which looked upon the ground east of the inn. 'Twas just conceivable that a man might leap it and make his way to the hills, and so baffle his pursuers. Two thoughts deterred me; first, that I had no horse and could not continue my journey; second, that in all likelihood there would be a watch set below. My heart sank within me, and I ceased to think.

For, just at that moment, I heard a noise below as of men leaving the room. I shut my lips and waited. Here, I concluded, is death coming to meet me. But the next moment the noise had stopped, and 'twas evident that the conclave was not yet closed. 'Tis a strange thing, the mind of man, for I, who had looked with despair at my chances a minute ago, now, at the passing of this immediate danger, plucked up heart, clapped my hat on my head, and opened the window.

The night air blew chill, but all seemed silent below. So, very carefully I hung over the ledge, gripped the sill with my hands, swung my legs into the air, and dropped. I lighted on a tussock of grass and rolled over on my side, only to recover myself in an instant and rise to my feet, and, behold, at my side, a tall man keeping sentinel on horseback.

At this the last flicker of hope died in my bosom. The man never moved or spake, but only stared fixedly at me. Yet there was that in his face and bearing which led me to act as I did.

"If you are a man of honor," I burst out, "though you are engaged in an accursed trade, dismount and meet me in combat. Your spawn will not be out for a little time, and the night is none so dark. If I must die, I would die at least in the open air, with my foe before me."

My words must have found some answering chord in the man's breast, for he presently spoke, and asked me my name and errand in the countryside. I told him in a dozen words, and at my tale he shrugged his shoulders.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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