

Weyman Stanley John

The Man in Black



Stanley Weyman
The Man in Black

«Public Domain»

Weyman S.

The Man in Black / S. Weyman — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

Weyman Stanley John

The Man in Black

CHAPTER I

The Fair At Fécamp

"I am Jehan de Bault, Seigneur of-I know not where, and Lord of seventeen lordships in the County of-I forget the name, of a most noble and puissant family, possessing the High Justice, the Middle, and the Low. In my veins runs the blood of Roland, and of my forefathers were three marshals of France. I stand here, the-"

It was the eve of All Saints, and the famous autumn horse-fair was in progress at Fécamp-Fécamp on the Normandy coast, the town between the cliffs, which Boisrosé, in the year '93, snatched for the Great King by a feat of audacity unparalleled in war. This only by the way, however; and that a worthy deed may not die. For at the date of this fair of which we write, the last day of October, 1637, stout Captain Boisrosé, whom Sully made for his daring Lieutenant-General of the Ordnance, had long ceased to ruffle it; the Great King had lain in his grave a score of years or more; and though Sully, duke and peer and marshal, still lived, an aged, formal man, in his château of Villebon by Chartres, all France, crouching under the iron hand of the Cardinal, looked other ways.

The great snarled, biting at the hem of the red soutane. But that the mean and Jacques Bonhomme, the merchant and the trader, flourished under his rule, Fécamp was as good evidence this day as man could desire. Even old burghers who remembered Charles the Ninth, and the first glass windows ever seen in Fécamp outside the Abbey, could not say when the price of horses had been higher or the town more full. All day, and almost all night, the clatter of hoofs and babble of bargains filled the narrow streets; while hucksters' cries and drunkards' oaths, with all raucous sounds, went up to heaven like the smoke from a furnace. The *Chariot d'Or* and the *Holy Fig*, haunts of those who came to buy, fairly hummed with guests, with nobles of the province and gay sparks from Rouen, army contractors from the Rhine, and dealers from the south. As for the *Dame Belle* and the *Green Man*, houses that lower down the street had food and forage for those who came to sell, they strewed their yards a foot deep with straw, and saying to all alike, "Voilà, monsieur!" charged the full price of a bed.

Beyond the streets it was the same. Strings of horses and ponies, with an army of grooms and chaunters, touts and cutpurses, camped on every piece of level ground, while the steeper slopes and hill-sides swarmed with troupes more picturesque, if less useful. For these were the pitches of the stilt-walkers and funambulists, the morris dancers and hobby-horses: in a word, of an innumerable company of quacks, jugglers, poor students, and pasteboard giants, come together for the delectation of the gaping Normans, and all under the sway and authority of the Chevalier du Guet, in whose honour two gibbets, each bearing a creaking corpse, rose on convenient situations overlooking the fair. For brawlers and minor sinners a pillory and a whipping-post stood handy by the landward gate, and from time to time, when a lusty vagrant or a handsome wench was dragged up for punishment, outvied in attraction all the professional shows.

Of these, one that seemed as successful as any in catching and chaining the fancy of the shifting crowd consisted of three persons-a man, a boy, and an ape-who had chosen for their pitch a portion of the steep hill-side overhanging the road. High up in this they had driven home an iron peg, and stretching a cord from this to the top of a tree which stood on the farther edge of the highway, had improvised a tight-rope at once simple and effective. All day, as the changing throng passed to and fro below, the monkey and the boy might be seen twisting and turning and posturing on this giddy

eminence, while the man, fantastically dressed in an iron cap a world too big for him, and a back-and breast-piece which ill-matched his stained crimson jacket and taffety breeches, stood beating a drum at the foot of the tree, or now and again stepped forward to receive in a ladle the sous and eggs and comfits that rewarded the show.

He was a lean, middle-sized man, with squinting eyes and a crafty mouth. Unaided he might have made his living by cutting purses. But he had the wit to do by others what he could not do himself, and the luck to have that in his company which pleased all comers; for while the clowns gazed saucer-eyed at the uncouth form and hideous grimaces of the ape, the thin cheeks and panting lips of the boy touched the hearts of their mistresses, and drew from them many a cake and fairing. Still, with a crowd change is everything; and in the contest of attractions, where there was here a flying dragon and there a dancing bear, and in a place apart the mystery of Joseph of Arimathæa and the Sacred Fig-tree was being performed by a company that had played before the King in Paris-and when, besides all these raree shows, a score of quacks and wizards and collar-grinners with lungs of brass, were advertising themselves amid indescribable clanging of drums and squeaking of trumpets, it was not to be expected that a boy and a monkey could always hold the first place. An hour before sunset the ladle began to come home empty. The crowd grew thin. Gargantuan roars of laughter from the players' booth drew off some who lingered. It seemed as if the trio's run of success was at an end; and that, for all the profit they were still likely to make, they might pack up and be off to bed.

But Master Crafty Eyes knew better. Before his popularity quite flickered out he produced a folding stool. Setting it at the foot of the tree with a grand air, which of itself was enough to arrest the waverers, he solemnly covered it with a red cloth. This done, he folded his arms, looked very sternly two ways at once, and raising his hand without glancing upwards, cried, "Tenez! His Excellency the Seigneur de Bault will have the kindness to descend."

The little handful of gapers laughed, and the laugh added to their number. But the boy, to whom the words were addressed, did not move. He sat idly on the rope, swaying to and fro, and looked out straight before him, with a set face, and a mutinous glare in his eyes. He appeared to be about twelve years old. He was lithe-limbed, and burned brown by the sun, with a mass of black hair and, strange to say, blue eyes. The ape sat cheek by jowl with him; and even at the sound of the master's voice turned to him humanly, as if to say, "You had better go."

Still he did not move. "Tenez!" Master Crafty Eyes cried again, and more sharply. "His Excellency the Seigneur de Bault will have the kindness to descend, and narrate his history. *Écoutez! Écoutez! mesdames et messieurs!* It will repay you."

This time the boy, frowning and stubborn, looked down from his perch. He seemed to be measuring the distance, and calculating whether his height from the ground would save him from the whip. Apparently he came to the conclusion it would not, for on the man crying "*Vitement! Vitement!*" and flinging a grim look upwards, he began to descend slowly, a sullen reluctance manifest in all his movements.

On reaching the ground, he made his way through the audience-which had increased to above a score-and climbed heavily on the stool, where he stood looking round him with a dark shamefacedness, surprising in one who was part of a show, and had been posturing all day long for the public amusement. The women, quick to espy the hollows in his cheeks, and the great wheal that seamed his neck, and quick also to admire the straightness of his limbs and the light pose of his head, regarded him pitifully. The men only stared; smoking had not yet come in at Fécamp, so they munched cakes and gazed by turns.

"Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!" cried the man with the drum. "Listen to the remarkable, lamentable, and veritable history of the Seigneur de Bault, now before you! Oyez!"

The boy cast a look round, but there was no escape. So, sullenly, and in a sing-song tone-through which, nevertheless, some note of dignity, some strange echo of power and authority, that gave the

recital its bizarre charm and made it what it was, would continually force itself-he began with the words at the head of this chapter: -

"I am Jehan de Bault, Seigneur of-I know not where, and Lord of seventeen lordships in the County of-I forget the name, of a most noble and puissant family, possessing the High Justice, the Middle, and the Low. In my veins runs the blood of Roland, and of my forefathers were three marshals of France. I stand here, the last of my race; in token whereof may God preserve my mother, the King, France, and this Province! I was stolen by gypsies at the age of five, and carried off and sold by my father's steward, as Joseph was by his brethren, and I appeal to-I appeal to-all good subjects of France to-help me to-"

"My rights!" interjected Crafty Eyes, with a savage glance.

"My rights," the boy whispered, lowering his head.

The drum-man came forward briskly. "Just so, ladies and gentlemen," he cried with wonderful glibness. "And seldom as it is that you have before you the representative of one of our most noble and ancient families a-begging your help, seldom as that remarkable, lamentable, and veritable sight is to be seen in Fécamp, sure I am that you will respond willingly, generously, and to the point, my lord, ladies and gentlemen!" And with this, and a far grander air than when it had been merely an affair of a boy and an ape, the knave carried round his ladle, doffing his cap to each who contributed, and saying politely, "The Sieur de Bault thanks you, sir. The Sieur de Bault is your servant, madam."

There was something so novel in the whole business, something so odd and inexplicably touching in the boy's words and manner, that with all the appearance of a barefaced trick, appealing only to the most ignorant, the thing wrought on the crowd: as doubtless it had wrought on a hundred crowds before. The first man to whom the ladle came grinned sheepishly and gave against his will; and his fellows throughout maintained a position of reserve, shrugging their shoulders and looking wisdom. But a dozen women became believers at once, and despite the blare and flare of rival dragons and Moriscoes and the surrounding din and hubbub, the ladle came back full of deniers and sous.

The showman was counting his gains into his pouch, when a silver franc spun through the air and fell at his feet, and at the same time a harsh voice cried, "Here, you, sirrah! A word with you."

Master Crafty Eyes looked up, and doffing his cap humbly-for the voice was a voice of authority-went cringing to the speaker. This was an elderly man, well mounted, who had reined up his horse on the skirts of the crowd as the boy began his harangue. He had a plain soldier's face, with grey moustachios and a small, pointed grey beard, and he seemed to be a person of rank on his way out of the town; for he had two or three armed servants behind him, of whom one carried a valise on his crupper.

"What is your will, noble sir?" the showman whined, standing bare-headed at his stirrup and looking up at him.

"Who taught the lad that rubbish?" the horseman asked sternly.

"No one, my lord. It is the truth."

"Then bring him here, liar!" was the answer.

The showman obeyed, not very willingly, dragging the boy off the stool, and jerking him through the crowd. The stranger looked down at the child for a moment in silence. Then he said sharply, "Hark ye, tell me the truth, boy. What is your name?"

The lad stood straight up, and answered without hesitation, "Jehan de Bault."

"Of nowhere in the County of No Name," the stranger gibed gravely. "Of a noble and puissant family-and the rest. All that is true, I suppose?"

A flicker as of hope gleamed in the boy's eyes. His cheek reddened. He raised his hand to the horse's shoulder, and answered in a voice which trembled a little, "It is true."

"Where is Bault?" the stranger asked grimly.

The lad looked puzzled and disappointed. His lip trembled, his colour lied again. He glanced here and there, and finally shook his head. "I do not know," he said faintly.

"Nor do I," the horseman replied, striking his long brown boot with his riding-switch to give emphasis to the words, and looking sternly round. "Nor do I. And what is more, you may take it from me that there is no family of that name in France! And once more you may take this from me too. I am the Vicomte de Bresly, and I have a government in Guienne. Play this game in my county, and I will have you both whipped for common cheats, and you, Master Drummer, branded as well! Bear it in mind, sirrah; and when you perform, give Perigord a wide berth. That is all."

He struck his horse at the last word, and rode off; sitting, like an old soldier, so straight in his saddle that he did not see what happened behind him, or that the boy sprang forward with a hasty cry, and would, but for the showman's grasp, have followed him. He rode away, unheeding and without looking back; and the boy, after a brief passionate struggle with his master, collapsed.

"You limb!" the man with the drum cried, as he shook him. "What bee has stung you? You won't be quiet, eh? Then take that! and that!" and he struck the child brutally in the face-twice.

Some cried shame and some laughed. But it was nobody's business, and there were a hundred delights within sight. What was one little boy, or a blow more or less, amid the whirl and tumult of the fair? A score of yards away a dancing girl, a very Peri-or so she seemed by the light of four tallow candles-was pirouetting on a rickety platform. Almost rubbing elbows with her was a philosopher, who had conquered all the secrets of Nature except cleanliness, and was prepared to sell infallible love-philtres and the potion of perpetual youth-for four farthings! And beyond these stretched a vista of wonders and prodigies, all vocal, not to say deafening. So one by one, with a shrug or a sneer, the onlookers melted away, until only our trio remained: Master Crafty Eyes counting his gains, the boy sobbing against the bank on which he had thrown himself, and the monkey gibbering and chattering overhead-a dark shapeless object on an invisible rope. For night was falling: where the fun of the fair was not were gloom and a rising wind, lurking cutpurses, and waste land.

The showman seemed to feel this, for having counted his takings, he kicked up the boy and began to pack up. He had nearly finished, and was stooping over the coil of rope, securing the end, when a touch on his shoulder caused him to jump a yard. A tall man wrapped in a cloak, who had come up unseen, stood at his elbow.

"Well!" the showman cried, striving to hide his alarm under an appearance of bluster. "And what may you want?"

"A word with you," the unknown answered.

The voice was so cold and passionless it gave Crafty Eyes a turn. "Diable!" he muttered, striving to pierce the darkness and see what the other was like. But he could not; so as to shake off the impression, he asked, with a sneer, "You are not a vicomte, are you?"

"No," the stranger replied gravely, "I am not."

"Nor the governor of a county?"

"No."

"Then you may speak!" rejoined the showman grandly.

"Not here," the cloaked man answered. "I must see you alone."

"Then you will have to come home with me, and wait until I have put up the boy," the other said. "I am not going to lose him for you or anyone. And for a penny he'd be off! Does it suit you? You may take it or leave it."

The unknown, whose features were completely masked by the dusk, nodded assent, and without more ado the four turned their faces towards the streets; the boy carrying the monkey, and the two men following close on his heels. Whenever they passed before a lighted booth the showman strove to learn something of his companion's appearance but the latter wore his cloak so high about his face, and was so well served by a wide-flapped hat which almost met it, that curiosity was completely baffled; and they reached the low inn where the showman rented a corner of the stable without that cunning gentleman being a jot the wiser for his pains.

It was a vile, evil-smelling place they entered, divided into six or eight stalls by wooden partitions reaching half-way to the tiles. A horn lantern hung at each end filled it with yellow lights and deep shadows. A pony raised its head and whinnied as the men entered, but most of the stalls were empty, or tenanted only by drunken clowns sleeping in the straw.

"You cannot lock him in here," said the stranger, looking round him.

The showman grunted. "Cannot I?" he said. "There are tricks in all trades, master. I reckon I can-with this!" And producing from somewhere about him a thin steel chain, he held it before the other's face. "That is my lock and door," he said triumphantly.

"It won't hold him long," the other answered impassively. "The fifth link from the end is worn through now."

"You have sharp eyes!" the showman exclaimed, with reluctant admiration. "But it will hold a bit yet. I fasten him in yonder corner. Do you wait here, and I will come back to you."

He was not long about it. When he returned he led the stranger into the farthest of the stalls, which, as well as that next to it, was empty. "We can talk here," he said bluntly. "At any rate, I have no better place. The house is full. Now, what is it?"

"I want that boy," the tall man answered. The showman laughed-stopped laughing-laughed again. "I dare say you do," he said derisively. "There is not a better or a pluckier boy on the rope out of Paris. And for patter? There is nothing on the road like the bit he did this afternoon, nor a bit that pats as well."

"Who taught it him?" the stranger asked.

"I did."

"That is a lie," the other answered in a perfectly unmoved tone. "If you like I will tell you what you did. You taught him the latter half of the story. The other he knew before: down to the word 'province.'"

The showman gasped. "Diable!" he muttered. "Who told you?"

"Never mind. You bought the boy. From whom?"

"From some gypsies at the great fair of Beaucaire," the showman answered sullenly.

"Who is he?"

Crafty Eyes laughed dryly. "If I knew I should not be padding the hoof," he said. "Or, again, he may be nobody, and the tale patter. You have heard as much as I have. What do you think?"

"I think I shall find out when I have bought the boy," the stranger answered coolly. "What will you take for him?"

The showman gasped again. "You come to the point," he said.

"It is my custom. What is his price?"

The showman's imagination had never soared beyond nor his ears ever heard of a larger sum than a thousand crowns. He mentioned it trembling. There might be such a sum in the world.

"A thousand livres, if you like. Not a sou more," was the answer.

The nearer lantern threw a strong light on Crafty Eyes' face; but that was mere shadow beside the light of cupidity which sparkled in his eyes. He could get another boy; scores of boys. But a thousand livres! A thousand livres! "Tournois!" he said faintly. "Livres Tournois!" In his wildest moments of avarice he had never dreamed of possessing such a sum.

"No, Paris livres," the stranger answered coldly. "Paid to-morrow at the *Golden Chariot*. If you agree, you will deliver the boy to me there at noon, and receive the money."

The showman nodded, vanquished by the mere sound of the sum. Paris livres let it be. Danae did not more quickly succumb to the golden shower.

CHAPTER II

SOLOMON NÔTREDAME

A little later that night, at the hour which saw the showman pay his second visit to the street before the *Chariot d'Or*, there to stand gaping at the lighted windows, and peering into the courtyard in a kind of fascination-or perhaps to assure himself that the house would not fly away, and his golden hopes with it-the twelve-year-old boy, the basis of those hopes, awoke and stirred restlessly in the straw. He was cold, and the chain galled him. His face ached where the man had struck him. In the next stall two drunken men were fighting, and the place reeked with oaths and foulness. But none of these things were so novel as to keep the boy awake; and sighing and drawing the monkey nearer to him, he would in a moment have been asleep again if the moon, shining with great brightness through the little square aperture above him, had not thrown its light directly on his head, and roused him more completely.

He sat up and gazed at it, and God knows what softening thoughts and pitiful recollections the beauty of the night brought into his mind; but presently he began to weep-not as a child cries, with noise and wailing, but in silence, as a man weeps. The monkey awoke and crept into his breast, but he hardly regarded it. The misery, the hopelessness, the slavery of his life, ignored from hour to hour, or borne at other times with a boy's nonchalance, filled his heart to bursting now. Crouching in his lair in the straw, he shook with agony. The tears welled up, and would not be restrained, until they hid the face of the sky and darkened even the moon's pure light.

Or was it his tears? He dashed them away and looked, and rose slowly to his feet; while the ape, clinging to his breast, began to mow and gibber. A black mass, which gradually resolved itself, as the boy's eyes cleared, into a man's hat and head, filled the aperture.

"Hush!" came from the head in a cautious whisper. "Come nearer. I will not hurt you. Do you wish to escape, lad?"

The boy clasped his hands in an ecstasy. "Yes, oh yes!" he murmured. The question chimed in so naturally with his thoughts, it scarcely surprised him.

"If you were loose, could you get through this window?" the man asked. He spoke cautiously, under his breath; but the noise in the next stall, to say nothing of a vile drinking song which was being chanted forth at the farther end of the stable, was such he might safely have shouted. "Yes? Then take this file. Rub at the fifth link from the end: the one that is nearly through. Do you understand, boy?"

"Yes, yes," Jehan cried again, groping in the straw for the tool, which had fallen at his feet. "I know."

"When you are loose, cover up the chain," continued the other in a slow biting tone. "Or lie on that part of it, and wait until morning. As soon as you see the first gleam of light, climb out through the window. You will find me outside."

The boy would have uttered his trembling thanks. But lo! in a moment the aperture was clear again; the moon sailed unchanged through an unchanged sky; and all was as before. Save for the presence of the little bit of rough steel in his hand, he might have thought it a dream. But the file was there; it was there, and with a choking sob of hope and fear and excitement, he fell to work on the chain.

It was clumsy work he made of it in the dark. But the link was so much worn, a man might have wrenched it open, and the boy did not spare his fingers. The dispute next door covered the song of the file; and the smoky horn lantern which alone lighted that end of the stable had no effect in the dark corner where he lay. True, he had to work by feel, looking out all the while for his tyrant's coming; but the tool was good, and the fingers, hardened by many an hour of work on the rope, were

strong and lithe. When the showman at last stumbled to his place in the straw, the boy lay free-free and trembling.

All was not done, however. It seemed an hour before the man settled himself-an hour of agony and suspense to Jehan, feigning sleep; since at any moment his master might take it into his head to look into things. But Crafty Eyes had no suspicion. Having kicked the boy and heard the chain rattle, and so assured himself that he was there-so much caution he exercised every night, drunk or sober-he was satisfied; and by-and-by, when his imagination, heated by thoughts of wealth, permitted it, he fell asleep, and dreamed that he had married the Cardinal's cook-maid and ate collops on Sundays.

Even so, the night seemed endless to the boy, lying wakeful, with his eyes on the sky. Now he was hot, now cold. One moment the thought that the window might prove too strait for him threw him into a bath of perspiration; the next he shuddered at the possibility of re-capture, and saw himself dragged back and flayed by his brutal owner. But a watched pot *does* boil, though slowly. The first streak of dawn came at last-as it does when the sky is darkest; and with it, even as the boy rose warily to his feet, the sound of a faint whistle outside the window.

A common mortal could no more have passed through that window without noise than an old man can make himself young again. But the boy did it. As he dropped to the ground outside he heard the whistle again. The air was still dark; but a score of paces away, beyond a low wall, he made out the form of a horseman, and went towards it.

It was the man in the cloak, who stooped and held out his hand. "Jump up behind me," he muttered.

The boy went to obey, but as he clasped the outstretched hand, it was suddenly withdrawn. "What is that? What have you got there?" the rider exclaimed, peering down at him.

"It is only Taras, the monkey," Jehan said timidly.

"Throw it away," the stranger answered. "Do you hear me?" he continued in a stern, composed tone. "Throw it away, I say."

The boy stood hesitating a moment; then, without a word, he turned and fled into the darkness the way he had come. The man on the horse swore under his breath, but he had no remedy; and before he could tell what to expect, the boy was at his side again. "I've put it through the window," Jehan explained breathlessly. "If I had left it here, the dogs and the boys would have killed it."

The man made no comment aloud, but jerked him roughly to the crupper; and bidding him hold fast, started the horse, which, setting off at an easy amble, quickly bore them out of Fécamp. As they passed through the fair-ground of yesterday-a shadowy, ghastly waste at this hour, peopled by wandering asses, and packhorses, and a few lurking figures that leapt up out of the darkness, and ran after them whining for alms-the boy shivered and clung close to his protector. But he had no more than recognised the scene before they were out of sight of it, and riding through the open fields. The grey dawn was spreading, the cocks at distant farms were crowing. The dim, misty countryside, the looming trees, the raw air, the chill that crept into his ill-covered bones-all these, which might have seemed to others wretched conditions enough, filled the boy with hope and gladness. For they meant freedom.

But presently, as they rode on, his thoughts took a fresh turn. They began to busy themselves, and fearfully, with the man before him, whose continued silence and cold reserve set a hundred wild ideas humming in his brain. What manner of man was he? Who was he? Why had he helped him? Jehan had heard of ogres and giants that decoyed children into forests and devoured them. He had listened to ballads of such adventures, sung at fairs and in the streets, a hundred times; now they came so strongly into his mind, and so grew upon him in this grim companionship, that by-and-by, seeing a wood before them through which the road ran, he shook with terror and gave himself up for lost. Sure enough, when they came to the wood, and had ridden a little way into it, the man, whose face he had never seen, stopped. "Get down," he said sternly.

Jehan obeyed, his teeth chattering, his legs quaking under him. He expected the man to produce a large carving-knife, or call some of his fellows out of the forest to share his repast. Instead, the stranger made a queer pass with his hands over his horse's neck, and bade the boy go to an old stump which stood by the way. "There is a hole in the farther side of it," he said. "Look in the hole."

Jehan went trembling and found the hole, and looked. "What do you see?" the rider asked.

"A piece of money," said Jehan.

"Bring it to me," the stranger answered gravely.

The boy took it-it was only a copper sou-and did as he was bidden. "Get up!" said the horseman curtly. Jehan obeyed, and they went on as before.

When they had ridden half-way through the forest, however, the stranger stopped again. "Get down," he said.

The boy obeyed, and was directed as on the former occasion-but not until the horseman had made the same strange gesture with his hands-to go to an old stump. This time he found a silver livre. He gave it to his master, and climbed again to his place, marvelling much.

A third time they stopped, on the farther verge of the forest. The same words passed, but this time the boy found a gold crown in the hole.

After that his mind no longer ran upon ogres and giants. Instead, another fancy almost as dreadful took possession of him. He remarked that everything the stranger wore was black: his cloak, his hat, his gauntlets. Even his long boots, which in those days were commonly made of untanned leather, were black. So was the furniture of the horse. Jehan noticed this as he mounted the third time; and connecting it with the marvellous springing up of money where the man willed, began to be seized with panic, never doubting but that he had fallen into the hands of the devil. Likely enough, he would have dropped off at the first opportunity that offered, and fled for his life-or his soul, but he did not know much of that-if the stranger had not in the nick of time drawn a parcel of food from his saddle-bag. He gave some to Jehan. Even so, the boy, hungry as he was, did not dare to touch it until he was assured that his companion was really eating-eating, and not pretending. Then, with a great sigh of relief, he began to eat too. For he knew that the devil never ate!

After this they rode on in silence, until, about an hour before noon, they came to a small farmstead standing by the road, half a league short of the sleepy old town of Yvetot, which Beranger was one day to celebrate. Here the magician-for such Jehan now took his companion to be-stopped. "Get down," he said.

The boy obeyed, and instinctively looked for a stump. But there was no stump, and this time his master, after scanning his ragged garments as if to assure himself of his appearance, had a different order to give. "Go to that farm," he said. "Knock at the door, and say that Solomon Nôtredame de Paris requires two fowls. They will give them to you. Bring them to me."

The boy went wide-eyed, knocked, and gave his message. A woman, who opened the door, stretched out her hand, took up a couple of fowls that lay tied together on the hearth, and gave them to him without a word. He took them-he no longer wondered at anything-and carried them back to his master in the road.

"Now listen to me," said the latter, in his slow, cold tone. "Go into the town you see before you, and in the market-place you will find an inn with the sign of the *Three Pigeons*. Enter the yard and offer these fowls for sale, but ask a livre apiece for them, that they may not be bought. While offering them, make an excuse to go into the stable, where you will see a grey horse. Drop this white lump into the horse's manger when no one is looking, and afterwards remain at the door of the yard. If you see me, do not speak to me. Do you understand?"

Jehan said he did; but his new master made him repeat his orders from beginning to end before he let him go with the fowls and the white lump, which was about the size of a walnut, and looked like rock-salt.

About an hour later the landlord of the *Three Pigeons* at Yvetot heard a horseman stop at his door. He went out to meet him. Now, Yvetot is on the road to Havre and Harfleur; and though the former of these places was then in the making and the latter was dying fast, the landlord had had experience of many guests. But so strange a guest as the one he found awaiting him he thought he had never seen. In the first place, the gentleman was clad from top to toe in black; and though he had no servants behind him, he wore an air of as grave consequence as though he boasted six. In the next place, his face was so long, thin, and cadaverous that, but for a great black line of eyebrows that cut it in two and gave it a very curious and sinister expression, people meeting him for the first time might have been tempted to laugh. Altogether, the landlord could not make him out; but he thought it safer to go out and hold his stirrup, and ask his pleasure.

"I shall dine here," the stranger answered gravely. As he dismounted his cloak fell open. The landlord observed with growing wonder that its black lining was sprinkled with cabalistic figures embroidered in white.

Introduced to the public room, which was over the great stone porch and happened to be empty, the traveller lost none of his singularity. He paused a little way within the door, and stood as if suddenly fallen into deep thought. The landlord, beginning to think him mad, ventured to recall him by asking what his honour would take.

"There is something amiss in this house," the stranger replied abruptly, turning his eyes on him.

"Amiss?" the host answered, faltering under his gaze, and wishing himself well out of the room. "Not that I am aware of, your honour."

"There is no one ill?"

"No, your honour, certainly not."

"Nor deformed?"

"No."

"You are mistaken," the stranger answered firmly. "Know that I am Solomon, son to Cæsar, son to Michel Nôtre-dame of Paris, commonly called by the learned Nostradamus and the Transcendental, who read the future and rode the Great White Horse of Death. All things hidden are open to me."

The landlord only gaped, but his wife and a serving wench, who had come to the door out of curiosity, and were listening and staring with all their might, crossed themselves industriously. "I am here," the stranger continued, after a brief pause, "to construct the horoscope of His Eminence the Cardinal, of whom it has been predicted that he will die at Yvetot. But I find the conditions unpropitious. There is an adverse influence in this house."

The landlord scratched his head, and looked helplessly at his wife. But she was quite taken up with awe of the stranger, whose head nearly touched the ceiling of the low room; while his long, pale face seemed in the obscurity-for the day was dark-to be of an unearthly pallor.

"An adverse influence," the astrologer continued gravely. "What is more, I now see where it is. It is in the stable. You have a grey horse."

The landlord, somewhat astonished, said he had.

"You had. You have not now. The devil has it!" was the astounding answer.

"My grey horse?"

The stranger inclined his head.

"Nay, there you are wrong!" the host retorted briskly. "I'm hanged if he has! For I rode the horse this morning, and it went as well and quietly as ever in its life."

"Send and see," the tall man answered.

The serving girl, obeying a nod, went off reluctantly to the stable, while her master, casting a look of misliking at his guest, walked uneasily to the window. In a moment the girl came back, her face white. "The grey is in a fit," she cried, keeping the whole width of the room between her and the stranger. "It is sweating and staggering."

The landlord, with an oath, ran off to see, and in a minute the appearance of an excited group in the square under the window showed that the thing was known. The traveller took no notice of this, however, nor of the curious and reverential glances which the womenfolk, huddled about the door of the room, cast at him. He walked up and down the room with his eyes lowered.

The landlord came back presently, his face black as thunder. "It has got the staggers," he said resentfully.

"It has got the devil," the stranger answered coldly. "I knew it was in the house when I entered. If you doubt me, I will prove it."

"Ay?" said the landlord stubbornly.

The man in black went to his saddle-bag, which had been brought up and laid in a corner, and took out a shallow glass bowl, curiously embossed with a cross and some mystic symbols. "Go to the church there," he said, "and fill this with holy water."

The host took it unwillingly, and went on his strange errand. While he was away the astrologer opened the window, and looked out idly. When he saw the other returning, he gave the order "Lead out the horse."

There was a brief delay, but presently two stablemen, with a little posse of wondering attendants, partly urged and partly led out a handsome grey horse. The poor animal trembled and hung its head, but with some difficulty was brought under the window. Now and again a sharp spasm convulsed its limbs, and scattered the spectators right and left.

Solomon Nôtre-dame leaned out of the window. In his left hand he held the bowl, in his right a small brush. "If this beast is sick with any earthly sickness," he cried in a deep solemn voice, audible across the square, "or with such as earthly skill can cure, then let this holy water do it no harm, but refresh it. But if it be possessed by the devil, and given up to the powers of darkness and to the enemy of man for ever and ever to do his will and pleasure, then let these drops burn and consume it as with fire. Amen! Amen!"

With the last word he sprinkled the horse. The effect was magical. The animal reared up, as if it had been furiously spurred, and plunged so violently that the men who held it were dragged this way and that. The crowd fled every way; but not so quickly but that a hundred eyes had seen the horse smoke where the water fell on it. Moreover, when they cautiously approached it, the hair in two or three places was found to be burned off!

The magician turned gravely from the window. "I wish to eat," he said.

None of the servants, however, would come into the room or serve him, and the landlord, trembling, set the board with his own hands and waited on him. Mine host had begun by doubting and suspecting, but, simple man! his scepticism was not proof against the holy water trial and his wife's terror. By-and-by, with a sidelong glance at his guest, he faltered the question: What should he do with the horse?

The man in black looked solemn. "Whoever mounts it will die within the year," he said.

"I will shoot it," the landlord replied, shuddering.

"The devil will pass into one of the other horses," was the answer.

"Then," said the miserable innkeeper, "perhaps your honour would accept it?"

"God forbid!" the astrologer answered. And that frightened the other more than all the rest. "But if you can find at any time," the wizard continued, "a beggar-boy with black hair and blue eyes, who does not know his father's name, he may take the horse and break the spell. So I read the signs."

The landlord cried out that such a person was not to be met with in a lifetime. But before he had well finished his sentence a shrill voice called through the keyhole that there was such a boy in the yard at that moment, offering poultry for sale.

"In God's name, then, give him the horse!" the stranger said. "Bid him take it to Rouen, and at every running water he comes to say a paternoster and sprinkle its tail. So he may escape, and you, too. I know no other way."

The trembling innkeeper said he would do that, and did it. And so, when the man in black rode into Rouen the next evening, he did not ride alone. He was attended at a respectful distance by a good-looking page clad in sable velvet, and mounted on a handsome grey horse.

CHAPTER III

MAN AND WIFE

It is a pleasant thing to be warmly clad and to lie softly, and at night to be in shelter and in the day to eat and drink. But all these things may be dearly bought, and so the boy Jehan de Bault soon found. He was no longer beaten, chained, or starved; he lay in a truckle bed instead of a stable; the work he had to do was of the lightest. But he paid for all in fears-in an ever-present, abiding, mastering fear of the man behind whom he rode: who never scolded, never rated, nor even struck him, but whose lightest word-and much more, his long silences-filled the lad with dread and awe unspeakable. Something sinister in the man's face, all found; but to Jehan, who never doubted his dark powers, and who shrank from his eye, and flinched at his voice, and cowered when he spoke, there was a cold malevolence in the face, an evil knowledge, that made the boy's flesh creep and chained his soul with dread.

The astrologer saw this, and revelled in it, and went about to increase it after a fashion of his own. Hearing the boy, on an occasion when he had turned to him suddenly, ejaculate "*Oh, Dieu!*" he said, with a dreadful smile, "You should not say that! Do you know why?"

The boy's face grew a shade paler, but he did not speak.

"Ask me why! Say, 'Why not?'"

"Why not?" Jehan muttered. He would have given the world to avert his eyes, but he could not.

"Because you have sold yourself to the devil!" the other hissed. "Others may say it; you may not. What is the use? You have sold yourself-body, soul, and spirit. You came of your own accord, and climbed on the black horse. And now," he continued, in a tone which always compelled obedience, "answer my questions. What is your name?"

"Jehan de Bault," the boy whispered, shivering and shuddering.

"Louder!"

"Jehan de Bault."

"Repeat the story you told at the fair."

"I am Jehan de Bault, Seigneur of-I know not where, and Lord of seventeen lordships in the County of Perigord, of a most noble and puissant family, possessing the High Justice, the Middle, and the Low. In my veins runs the blood of Roland, and of my forefathers were three marshals of France. I stand here, the last of my race; in token whereof may God preserve my mother, the King, France, and this Province."

"Ha! In the County of Perigord!" the astrologer said, with a sudden lightening of his heavy brows. "You have remembered that?"

"Yes. I heard the word at Fécamp."

"And all that is true?"

"Yes."

"Who taught it you?"

"I do not know." The boy's face, in its straining, was painful to see.

"What is the first thing you can remember?"

"A house in a wood."

"Can you remember your father?"

"No."

"Your mother?"

"No-yes-I am not sure."

"Umph! Were you stolen by gypsies?"

"I do not know."

"Or sold by your father's steward?"

"I do not know."

"How long were you with the man from whom I took you?"

"I do not know."

"I do," the astrologer answered, in the same even tone in which he had put the questions. And the boy never doubted him. "Beware, therefore," the man in black continued, with a dreadful sidelong glance, "how you seek to deceive me! You can fall back now. I have done with you for the present."

I say "the boy never doubted him." This was not wonderful in an age of spells and *diablerie*, when the wisest allowed the reality of magic, and the learned and curious could cite a hundred instances of its power. That La Brosse warned Henry the Great he would die in his coach, and that Thomassin read in the stars the very day, hour, and minute of the catastrophe, no man of that time questioned. That Michel Nôtre dame promised a crown to each of Catherine de Medici's three sons, and that Sully's preceptor foretold in detail that Minister's career, were held to be facts as certain as that La Rivière cast the horoscope of the thirteenth Louis while the future monarch lay in his cradle. The men of the day believed that the Concini swayed her mistress by magic; that Wallenstein, the greatest soldier of his time, did nothing without his familiar; that Richelieu, the greatest statesman, had Joseph always at his elbow. In such an age it was not wonderful that a child should accept without question the claims of this man: who was accustomed to inspire fear in the many, and in the few that vague and subtle repulsion which we are wont to associate with the presence of evil.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.