McCarthy Justin Huntly

# The Duke's Motto: A Melodrama

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# Содержание

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## DÉDICACE

### A VICTORIEN SARDOU

Maître,

Voilà un mélodrame que j'ai fait, le dernier de plusieurs mélodrames anglais qui ont Lagardère pour héros. Des mots remplacent l'action, des mots remplacent le décor, les costumes, et les accessoires; mais enfin ce pastiche n'est qu'une pièce et non un roman. Je l'ai fait pour Lewis Waller, acteur romantique s'il en fut, et grandement doué des qualités qui appartiennent par tradition à Lagardère. J'ai su, il y a longtemps, grâce à M. Jules Claretie, que vous étiez le vrai createur de ce paladin, Lagardère, pair de d'Artagnan, pair de Cyrano, pair presque de Roland et d'Olivier. Et si je ne l'avais pas su, j'aurais pu l'apprendre dernièrement en lisant ce livre aussi plein de charme que d'érudition, "Les Anciens Théâtres de Paris" de M. Georges Cain. Mais je crois que cette vérité est connue de peu de monde

dans les pays où se parle la langue anglaise, que quand on loue "Le Bossu" de Féval on doit aussi louer "Le Bossu" de Sardou.

XIV-I. – MCMVIII.

# I
# THE SEVEN DEVILS

It was very warm in the inn room, but it was so much warmer outside, in the waning flames of the late September evening, that the dark room seemed veritably cool to those who escaped into its shelter from the fading sunlight outside. A window was open to let in what little air was stirring, and from that window a spectator with a good head might look down a sheer drop of more than thirty feet into the moat of the Castle of Caylus. The Inn of the Seven Devils was perched on the lip of one rock, and Caylus Castle on the lip of another. Between the two lay the gorge, which had been partially utilized to form the moat of the castle, and which continued its way towards the Spanish mountains. Beyond the castle a bridge spanned the ravine, carrying on the road towards the frontier. The moat itself was dry now, for war and Caylus had long been disassociated, and France was, for the moment, at peace with her neighbor, if at peace with few other powers. A young thirteenth Louis, a son of the great fourth Henri, now sat upon the throne of France, and seemingly believed himself to be the ruler of his kingdom, though a newly made Cardinal de Richelieu held a different opinion, and acted according to his conviction with great pertinacity and skill.

Inside the Inn of the Seven Devils, on this heavy day of early

autumn, seven men were sitting. It was an odd chance, and the men had joked about it heavily – there was one man for each devil of the Inn's name. Six of these men were grouped about a table furnished with flagons and beakers, and were doing their best to alleviate the external heat by copious draughts of the rough but not unkindly native wine which Martine, the plain-faced maid of the Inn, dispensed generously enough from a ruddy earthenware pitcher. A stranger entering the room would, at the first glance, have taken the six men seated around the table for soldiers, for all were stalwart fellows, with broad bodies and long limbs, bronzed faces and swaggering carriage, and behind them where they sat six great rapiers dangled from nails in the wall, rapiers which the revellers had removed from their sides for their greater ease and comfort. But if the suppositious stranger were led to study the men a little more closely, he would be tempted to correct his first impression. The swaggering carriage of the men lacked something of the stiffness inevitably to be associated with military training in the days when the levies of the Sun-King were held, or at least held themselves to be, the finest troops in Europe, a cheerful opinion which no amount of military misfortune could dissipate.

Each of the drinkers of the inn had his own individuality of swagger, his truculent independence of mien, which suggested a man by no means habitually used either to receive commands or to render unquestioning obedience. Each of the men resembled his fellows in a certain flamboyant air of ferocity, but no one

of them resembled the others by wearing that air of harmonious training with other men which links together a company of seasoned soldiers. With their long cloaks and their large hats and their high boots, with their somewhat shabby garments stained with age and sweat and wine, in many places patched and in many places tattered, with their tangled locks and ragged mustachios, the revellers had on closer study more the appearance of brigands, or at least of guerillas, than of regular troops. As a matter of fact, they were neither soldiers nor brigands, though their way of life endowed them with some of the virtues of the soldier and most of the vices of the brigand.

There was not a man in that room who lacked courage of the fiercest kind; there was but one man in the room with intelligence enough to appreciate the possibility of an existence uncoupled with the possession of courage of the fiercest kind. There was not a man in the room who had the slightest fear of death, save in so far as death meant the cessation of those privileges of eating grossly, drinking grossly, and loving grossly, which every man of the jack-rascals prized not a little. There was not a man in the room that was not prepared to serve the person, whoever he might be, who had bought his sword to strike and his body to be stricken, so long as the buyer and the bought had agreed upon the price, and so long as the man who carried the sword felt confident that the man who dandled the purse meant to meet his bargain.

These were the soldierly virtues. But, further, there was not a man in the room who would have felt the smallest compunction

in cutting any man's throat if he had full pockets, or shaming any woman's honor if she had good looks. These were their brigand's vices. Fearless in their conduct, filthy in their lives, the assembled rogues were as ugly a bunch of brutalities as ever sprawled in a brothel, brawled in a tavern, or crawled from some dark corner to cut down their unsuspicious prey.

The six fellows that sat around the wine-stained, knife-notched table of the Inn of the Seven Devils had little in them to interest a serious student of humanity, if such a one had chanced, for his misfortune, to find his way to that wicked wine-house on that wicked evening. There were differences of nationality among the half-dozen; that was plain enough from their features and from their speech, for though they all talked, or thought they talked, in French, each man did his speaking with an accent that betrayed his nativity. As the babbling voices rose and fell in alternations of argument that was almost quarrel, narrative that was sometimes diverting, and ribaldry that was never wit, it would seem as if the ruffianism of half Europe had called a conference in that squalid, horrible little inn. Guttural German notes mixed whimsically with sibilant Spanish and flowing Portuguese. Cracked Biscayan – which no Spaniard will allow to be Spanish – jarred upon the suavity of Italian accents, and through the din the heavy steadiness of a Breton voice could be heard asserting itself. Though every man spoke in French, for the purposes of the common parliament, each man swore in his own tongue; and they all swore briskly and crisply, with a

seemingly inexhaustible vocabulary of blasphemy and obscenity, so that the foul air of that inn parlor was rendered fouler still by the volley of oaths – German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Biscayan, and Breton – that were fired into its steaming, stinking atmosphere. So much for the six men that sat at the table.

The seventh man in the room, although he was of the same fellowship, was curiously unlike his fellows. While the others were burly, well-set-up fellows, who held their heads high enough and thrust out their chests valiantly and sprawled their strong limbs at ease, the seventh man was a hunchback, short of stature and slender of figure, with a countenance whose quiet malignity contrasted decisively with the patent brutality of his comrades. The difference between the one and the others was accentuated even in dress, for, while the swashbucklers at the table loved to bedizen themselves with an amount of ferocious finery, and showed in their sordid garments a quantity of color that likened them to a bunch of faded wild flowers, the hunchback was clad soberly in black that was well-worn, indeed, and grizzled at the seams, but neatly attended. He sat in the window, reading intently in a little volume, and, again unlike his associates, while he read he nursed between his knees a long and formidable rapier. Those at the table paid him no heed; most of them knew his ways, and he, on his side, seemed to be quite undisturbed in his studies by the noise and clamor of the drinking-party, and to be entirely absorbed in the delights of literature.

But if the hunchback student was quite content to let his

companions be, and to find his pleasures in scholarship of a kind, it came about that one of his companions, in a misguided moment, found himself less content to leave the hunchback student undisturbed. It was the one of the company that knew least about him – Pinto the Biscayan, newest recruit in that huddle of ruffians, and therefore the less inclined than his fellows to let a sleeping dog lie. He had been drinking deeply, for your Biscayans are potent topers, and in the course of his cups he discovered that it irritated him to see that quiet, silent figure perched there in the window with its wry body as still as if it had been snipped out of cardboard, with its comical long nose poked over a book, with its colorless puckered lips moving, as if the reader muttered to himself the meaning of what he read, and tasted an unclean pleasure in so doing. So Pinto pulled himself to his feet, steadied himself with the aid of the table edge, and then, with a noiseless dexterity that showed the practised assassin, whose talent it is to pad in shadows, he crossed the room and came up behind the hunchback before the hunchback was, or seemed to be, aware of his neighborhood.

"What are you reading?" he hiccoughed. "Let us have a peep at it." And before the hunchback could make an answer Pinto had picked the book quickly from the hunchback's fingers and held it to his own face to see what it told about.

Now it would have profited Biscayan Pinto very little if he had been given time to study the volume, at least so far as its text was concerned, for the little book was a manuscript copy

of the *Luxurious Sonnets* of that Pietro Aretino whom men, or rather some men, once called "The Divine." The book was illustrated as well, not unskilfully, with sketches that professed to be illuminative of the text in the manner of Giulio Romano. These might have pleased the Biscayan, for if he had no Italian, and could, therefore, make nothing of the voluptuousness of the Scourge of Princes, he could, at least, see as well as another savage the meaning of a lewd image. But the privilege was denied him. Scarcely had he got the book in his fingers when it was plucked from them again, and thereafter, while with his left hand the hunchback slipped the booklet into the breast of his doublet, with his right hand he dealt Pinto such a buffet on the side of his head as sent him reeling across the floor, to bring up with a dull thud at the table against the backs of his nearest companions.

Instantly all was tumult. Pinto, black with anger, screamed Biscayan maledictions and struggled to get at his sword where it hung against the wall, while his comrades, clinging to him and impeding him, were trying in every variety of bad French to dissuade him from a purpose which they were well enough aware must needs end disastrously for him. For they all knew, what the raw Biscayan did not know, how strong was the arm and how terrible the sword of the hunchback whose studies Pinto had so rudely and so foolishly interrupted. As for the hunchback himself, he stood quietly by his chair, with his hands resting on the pommel of his rapier, and a disagreeable smile twisting new hints of malignity into features that were malign

enough in repose. Now it may be that the sight of that frightful smile had its effect in cooling the hot blood of the Biscayan, for, indeed, the hunchback, as he stood there, so quietly alert, so demoniacally watchful, seemed the most terrible antagonist he had ever challenged. At least, in a little while the Biscayan, drinking in swiftly the warnings of his companions, consented to be pacified, consented even to be apologetic on a whispered hint, that was also a whispered threat, from his leader, that there should be no brawling among friends.

"It was only a joke, comrade," he said, sullenly, and flung himself heavily into his empty seat. The hunchback nodded grimly.

"I like a joke as well as any man," he said, "and can make one myself if occasion serve."

Therewith he seated himself anew, and, pulling the book from his bosom, resumed his reading and his silent mouthing, while something of a gloom brooded over his fellows at the table. It was to dissipate this gloom that presently the man who sat at the head of the table, a bald and red-faced fellow who looked a German, and who seemed to exercise some kind of headship over the others, pushed back his chair a little from the board and glanced half anxiously and half angrily towards the inn door. Then he thumped his red fist upon the wood till the flagons clattered and rattled.

"Why don't the late dogs come to heel?" he grumbled, speaking with a strong Teutonic accent. "It is long past the hour,

and I like punctuality."

A Spaniard at his right hand, swarthy, not ill-looking, whom his friends called Pepe el Matador, grinned into the German's face.

"Will not this string of swords serve the turn?" he said, and pointed with a dirty, well-shaped hand to the six long rapiers that hung against the wall behind them.

The Italian, Faenza, began to laugh a little, quiet, teasing laugh; the sullen Biscayan, Pinto, patted el Matador on the back; Joel de Jurgan the Breton, stared stolidly; and Saldagno the Portuguese, refreshed himself with a drink. Encouraged by what he conceived to be the sympathy of his comrades, Pepe renewed the attack. "Come, Staupitz, come," he questioned, "are not those swords long enough and sharp enough to scare the devil?"

Staupitz struck the table again. "No, no, my children," he said, "not for this job. Monsieur Peyrolles told me to bring nine of my babies, and nine we must be, and nine we should be at this moment if our truants were at hand."

At this moment Saldagno set down his beaker. "I hear footsteps," he said. In the momentary silence which followed this remark, all present could hear distinctly enough the tramp of feet outside, and in another instant the door was flung open and the two men whom Staupitz had been expecting so impatiently made their appearance.

If the contrast had been marked between the six men who sat at the table and the seventh man who sat apart, the contrast

that existed between the two new-comers was still more striking. The first to enter was a big, jovial, red-faced, black-haired man with a huge mustache and a manner that suggested an ebullient admiration of himself and an ebullient appreciation of all possible pleasures. He was habited much like his predecessors, in that he was booted, cloaked, hatted, and sworded as they were booted, cloaked, hatted, and sworded, but everything with him, owing, it may be, to his flagrant Gascon nationality, tended to an extravagance of exaggeration that made him seem almost like a caricature of the others. His hat was bigger, his cloak more voluminous, his boots more assertive, his sword longer, his taste for colors at once more pronounced and more gaudy. If the others might be likened in their coloring to faded wild flowers, this man seemed to blaze like some monstrous exotic. He was a swashbuckler whom Callot would have loved to paint.

While he entered the room with his air of splendid assurance that suggested that the Inn belonged to him, and greeted those that awaited him with such a nod as a monarch might accord to his vassals, he was followed by one that showed in almost every particular his opposite. This one, that represented an extreme of Norman character as his ally represented an extreme of Gascon character, this one that seemed to shelter timidly behind the effulgence of his companion, was a lean, lanky, pallid fellow, clad wholly in black of a rustier and shabbier kind than that worn by the reader in the window. From beneath his dingy black felt hat thin wisps of flaxen hair flowed ridiculously enough about

his scraggy neck. While his Gascon comrade entered the room with the manner of one who carries all before him, the Norman seemed to creep, or rather to slink, in with lack-lustre eyes peering apologetically about him through lowered pink eyelids, while his twitching fingers appeared to protest apologetically for his intrusion into a society so far above his deserts. But if in almost every particular he was the opposite to his friend, in one particular, however, he resembled him, for a long rapier hung from his side and slapped against his lean calves.

In a further regard, moreover, the two new-comers, however different they might seem in build of body and in habit of apparel, resembled each other more closely than they resembled any of the earlier occupants of the Inn room. There are castes in rascality as in all other trades, classes, professions, and mysteries, honorable or dishonorable, and this latest pair of knaves belonged patently to the more amiable caste of ruffianism – a higher or a lower caste, as you may be pleased to look at it. In the bold eyes of the gaudily clad Gascon, as in the uneasy eyes of the sable-coated Norman, there was a quality of candor which might be sought for in vain among the rogues that greeted them. Certainly neither the Gascon nor the Norman would have seemed reassuring figures to a timid traveller on a lonely road, and yet there was, as it were, a kind of gentility in their composition which would have been obvious to a reader of men, and would have approved them as, in their way and of their race, trustworthy. Here, the reader of men would say, are a brace of assassins who hold a sort of honor

in their hearts, who would never skulk in a corner to stab an enemy in the back, nor wrong a wretched woman who plainly was unwilling to be wronged – a brace of heroes. And the reader of men would for once in a way, have been in the right.

# II
# THE THRUST OF NEVERS

At the sight of the two men, the ruffians at the table set up a roar of welcome and bumped their mugs lustily upon the board to a chorus of greeting, in which the names of Cocardasse and Passepoil were repeated in a variety of accents from German to Italian, from Portuguese to Biscayan, from Spanish to Breton, but in all cases with the same degree of enthusiasm and admiration. The big, gaudy fellow, patently pleased by the tribute, struck a magnificent attitude and extended a benedictory hand towards the drinkers. "Courage, chanticleers!" he shouted – "comrades all," and, advancing towards the table, gave Staupitz a lusty slap on the back, while Passepoil, following nervously behind him, whispered beneath his breath and behind his lifted hand a timid "Greeting, gentlemen," which was hardly audible in the buzz of voices. But while Cocardasse was busy engaging clasps of the hand with the men of many nationalities who had been waiting for him, the attention of Passepoil was entirely diverted by the appearance of the Inn maid, Martine, who at that moment appeared upon the scene with a fresh pitcher of wine in honor of the fresh arrivals. The lean and pale man blushed and sighed as he saw her. Those in the room that knew the Norman were well aware that love of woman was his weakness, and they paid

no heed to his attempted philandering, taking it, so far as they thought of it at all, as a matter of course and honest Passepoil's way.

Though Martine was as little comely as need be, she was still a woman, and a woman Passepoil had never seen before, and, sidling towards her, he endeavored to enter into amicable conversation, which was received but indifferently well. By this time Cocardasse had finished his greetings, and, drawing back a step or two, surveyed the company with a look of satisfaction not unmingled with astonishment.

"Why, Papa Staupitz," he said, "here we have many friends and all fine blades. This is indeed a pleasure party." His eyes travelled from the table to the window, where the man in black still sat and read quite unconcernedly. Something like surprise puckered Cocardasse's rubicund face. "You here, Æsop?" he questioned.

The man whom he called Æsop looked up for a moment from his book and shrugged his shoulders. "Devil knows why!" he said. "If they want me, they don't want the others. If they want the others, they don't want me."

His remarks were interrupted by a slight scuffle between Passepoil and Martine. Passepoil had so far conquered his natural timidity as to go to the length of soliciting a kiss from the Inn maid. She had successfully repulsed him with a slap on each of his cheeks, and had slipped from the room. While Passepoil was rubbing his face ruefully, Æsop went on, sardonically:

"What do you think of it, friend Cocardasse? Here we are, nine of us, nine picked swordsmen, and we are going to fight one man."

Cocardasse had returned to the table and filled himself a monstrous measure of wine. He was thirsty, an habitual state with him, and he eyed the rough wine lovingly.

"Who is the giant who is going to fight nine of us?" he asked as he lifted his cup from the board.

Passepoil, who, enjoying like his comrade an abiding drought, had followed his example, hoping to find consolation in wine for the disappointments of love, also expressed his surprise.

"Every man of us can fight three men at a time," he whispered, timidly, and he, too, lifted his glass.

"Who is the man, anyhow?" said Cocardasse, cheerfully, making the wine swing in the vessel; and Staupitz answered him, slowly:

"Louis, Duke of Nevers."

The effect of this simple speech upon the new-comers was exceedingly remarkable. Cocardasse seemed suddenly to forget his thirst, for he set down his untasted mug upon the table. Passepoil did the like. "Oh!" said Cocardasse, solemnly. "Ah!" said Passepoil, gloomily.

For a few appreciable seconds of strained excitement to those that watched them the pair remained rigid, staring at their rejected wine-cups, as if the liquor they contained had some monstrous Medusa-like property of stiffening into stone all those

that presumed to drink of it. Then the Gascon, slowly turning his head, gazed steadfastly at the Norman; and the Norman, slowly turning his head, gazed steadfastly at the Gascon, and then the pair, so gazing, both wagged their polls very solemnly indeed, and puckered their eyebrows and betrayed many other very visible signs of dissatisfaction, not to say of discomfort. Then Cocardasse muttered to his comrade the words "Louis de Nevers," as if they were not at all to his liking, and Passepoil, in his turn, repeated the words, as if they were not at all to his liking, and then they both sighed and grunted and were silent.

The look of stupefaction, not to say consternation, on the faces of the new arrivals was patent to every man in the room – most patent and most unpalatable to the leader of the gang. Staupitz thrust his red, Teutonic face forward with a mocking look and a mocking voice as he grunted: "Seems to me you don't relish the job."

Cocardasse nodded at him with perfect affability, and patted his shoulder with a massive, red hand. "Papa Staupitz," he said, good-humoredly, "you read me like a book."

"In the largest print," added Passepoil, who generally supplemented any remark of his comrade with some approving comment of his own.

Staupitz swung round in his chair, upsetting a tankard in his angry movement, as he glared, all rage, at the strangely assorted pair. "Are you afraid?" he asked, with guttural contempt.

Cocardasse grinned and showed his large, dog-like teeth. "I

am not afraid of you, Papa Staupitz," he said, quite cheerfully, "nor of any man in this room, nor of all the men in this room."

Passepoil added, stammering in his speech, blinking his pink eyelids rapidly: "If any gentleman doubts the point, there is a pleasant bit of kitchen garden outside where we can adjourn and argue the matter pleasantly together, as gentlemen should."

Nobody present seemed inclined to pick a quarrel either with the ebullient Gascon or the hesitating Norman. The six bullies at the table knew well enough, and savage, masterful Æsop at the window knew well enough, that the swaggering Gascon was the first fencing-master in Paris, and that his colleague, the Norman, for all his air of ineffable timidity, was only second to him in skill with the weapon and readiness to use it. There was a moment's silence, and then Cocardasse observed: "I'm afraid of just two men in the world."

"The same with me," added Passepoil, humbly.

Cocardasse resumed his interrupted speech: "And one of them is Louis de Nevers."

Staupitz's puzzled, angry face travelled round the room, ranging over the Gascon, the Norman, the Spaniard, the Portuguese, the Biscayan, the Breton, and the hunchback. "Thunder and weather!" he cried; "is not nine to one good enough odds for you?"

The others, with the exception of Æsop, who still seemed to read as peacefully in his book as if he were alone in the room, appeared inclined to applaud the question of their chief,

but Cocardasse was not in the least impressed by the retort. He replied to Staupitz's query with another – "Have you never heard of the secret thrust of Nevers?"

A new silence seemed to fall upon the company, and for the second time since the Gascon and the Norman had entered the room the hunchback took a part in the conversation, closing his book as he did so, but carefully keeping a finger between the pages to mark the place. "I don't believe in secret thrusts," he said, decisively.

The Gascon moved a little away from Staupitz and a little nearer to Æsop, whom he looked at fixedly. The hunchback sustained his gaze with his habitual air of cold indifference. Cocardasse spoke: "You will, if you ever face Louis de Nevers. Now, Passepoil, here, and I, we are, I believe, held in general repute as pretty good swordsmen – "

Passepoil interrupted, stuttering furiously in his excitement: "But he touched us with that secret thrust in our own school in Paris – "

Cocardasse completed his friend's statement: "Three times, here on the forehead, just between the eyes."

Passepoil labored his point: "Devil take us if we could find a parry for it."

Cocardasse summed up his argument, gloomily: "They say it has never been parried, never will be parried."

Again an awkward silence reigned. With a shrug of his shoulders, Æsop resumed his studies, finding Aretino more

diverting than such nonsense. Breton stared at Teuton; Italian interrogated Spaniard; Portuguese questioned Biscayan. The affairs of the party seemed to be at a dead-lock. The fact was that Staupitz and his little band of babies, as he was pleased to call them, were not really of the same social standing in the world of cutthroats as Gascon Cocardasse and Norman Passepoil. Cocardasse and his companion were recognized fencing-masters in Paris, well esteemed, if not of the highest note, whereas Staupitz was no better than an ordinary bully-broker, and his so-styled children no more than provincial rascallions. It was not for them, and they knew it, to display such knowledge of the great world as might be aired by Cocardasse and Passepoil, and when Cocardasse spoke with so much significance about the thrust of Nevers, and questioned them with so much insistence about the thrust of Nevers, it was plain that he spoke from the brimmings of a wisdom richer than their own. Staupitz, who was in some sense a son of Paris, if only an adopted son, and that, indeed, by process of self-adoption, knew enough of Olympian matters to be aware that there was an illustrious gentleman that was Duke of Nevers, whom he was equally willing to aid with his sword or slay with his sword, if occasion served. Now occasion seemed to demand that Staupitz should follow the latter course. He was employed to kill somebody, and Æsop had assured him that this somebody was Louis, Duke de Nevers. Staupitz had not cared who it was; it was all one to him, but honestly he was troubled now by the patent trouble of Cocardasse and his ominous mutterings about

the thrust of Nevers.

Passepoil broke the silence, surveying the puzzled faces around him. "No wonder there's such a crowd of us." And for the first time there was something like the sound of audacity in his voice and a glance of audacity on his visage.

"Faith," said Cocardasse, emphatically, "I'd rather face an army than face Louis de Nevers."

Again there was a silence. The gentlemen of the sword seemed to be at a loss for conversation. Again Passepoil broke the silence, this time with a question: "Why are we after Louis de Nevers?"

Nobody seemed to be able to answer him. Even Staupitz, who was responsible to the others for this gathering of the company, was baffled. He had been told to supply nine swords, and he had supplied them. He had been told by his employer the purpose for which the nine swords were wanted – he had been told by Æsop against whom those nine swords were to be drawn – and that was the extent of his knowledge. This time the hunchback, in his favorite character of know-all, took the lead. He put his book in his pocket, as if he perceived that further study was to be denied him that afternoon, with so much noise and bustle of curiosity about him, and rose from his chair. Holding his long rapier behind his back with both his hands, he advanced into the middle of the room, where he proceeded to harangue his fellow-guardsmen.

"I can tell you," he said, harshly, "if you would care to hear the story."

Now bravos, swashbucklers, spadassins, and such soldiers of fortune are like children in this regard – as indeed in many another – that they love a good yarn well spun. If something in the dominating, masterful manner of Æsop compelled their attention, something also in the malicious smile that twitched his lips seemed to promise plenitude of entertainment. A grave quiet settled upon the ragamuffins, their sunburned faces were turned eagerly towards the hunchback, their wild eyes studied his mocking face; they waited in patience upon his pleasure. Pleased with the humility of his audience, Æsop began his narrative.

"There are," he said, "now living three noble gentlemen in the first flush of youth, in the first flight of greatness, young, handsome, brilliant, more like brothers than friends. They are known in the noble world of the court as the three Louis, because by a curious chance each of these splendid gentlemen carries Louis for a Christian name. Humorists have been known to speak of them as the three Louis d'or. The first is none other than our good king's person, Louis of Bourbon, thirteenth monarch of his name; the second is Louis, Duke of Nevers; the third is his cousin, Louis of Mantua, Prince of Gonzague."

He paused for a moment, looking with the satisfaction of a tale-teller at the expectant faces before him, and as he paused an approving murmur from his audience urged him to continue. Æsop resumed his narration.

"You will ask how the Italianate Mantuan comes to be a cousin of our French Nevers, and I will tell you. Nevers's father, Louis

de Nevers, the twelfth duke, had a very beautiful sister, who was foolish enough, or wise enough, as you may choose to take it, to fall in love with a needy Italian nobleman that came adventuring to Paris in the hope of making a rich marriage. He made a rich marriage, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he thought he made a rich marriage. He married Mademoiselle de Nevers."

Again Æsop halted, employing one of the familiar devices of rhetoricians, who lure their hearers to keener interest by such judicious pauses in the course of their exposition. The listening ruffians were as attentive as babes at a day-school, and Æsop, with a hideous distortion of his features, which he intended for a pleased smile, went on with his story:

"Mademoiselle de Nevers had some fortune of her own, of course, but it was not large; it was not the feast for which the amative Mantuan had hungered. The Nevers's fortune was in the duke's hands, and remained in the duke's hands, for the duke married at much the same time as his sister; and the duke's wife and Gonzague's wife were brought to bed much about the same time, and each bore a son, and each son was named Louis after the twelfth duke, out of the affection his wife bore him, out of the affection his sister bore him, and out of the affection that sister's Mantuan husband pretended, in his sly Italian manner, to bear him."

A belated patriotism stirring vaguely in Faenza's muddled mind tempted him to resent the hunch-back's slights upon the

land which had been unlucky enough to mother him.

"All men of Italy are not knaves," he growled, huskily, and, half rising from his seat with crimsoned visage, he was busying himself to say more, when Staupitz, who was as interested as the others in Master Æsop's scandalous chronicle, clapped one bear's paw on Faenza's shoulder and another bear's paw across Faenza's mouth, and thus forced him at once, by sheer effort of brute strength, to a sitting posture and to silence. This action on the part of the man whom for the time being he had consented to accept as his general, combined with the cold glance of cruelty and scorn which Æsop gave him, served to cool Faenza's hot blood. He heard Æsop say, dryly, "Some men of Italy are fools," and might perchance have flamed again, to his misluck, but that Staupitz, breathing thickly in his ear, whispered: "Idiot, he mocks a Mantuan. Are not you Naples born and bred?" Faenza, recovering his composure, resolved himself swiftly from an Italian in general to a Neapolitan in particular, with a clannish antagonism to alien states. He spat upon the floor. "Damn all Mantuans!" he muttered, and did no more to interrupt the flow of Æsop's discourse.

"As I was saying, this princeling of Gonzague affected a great show of friendship for his ducal brother of Nevers, and this same friendship he left – it was, indeed, wellnigh all he had to leave – to his only son and only child, the present prince of Gonzague."

He made a momentary halt, as if he were observing curiously the effect of his words upon his hearers, then resumed:

"The young Louis de Gonzague and the young Louis de Nevers were almost of an age. Each was an only child, each was an only son, each was clever, each was courageous, each was comely, each was the chosen heart's friend of a namesake king, each was much a lover of ladies, each was much loved by ladies."

Æsop grinned hideously as he said these words, and his left hand fumbled lovingly at the little volume that lay hid in the breast of his doublet, but he did not delay the flow of his words.

"The chief difference between the two young men who were bound so closely by ties of blood and yet more closely by ties of personal affection was that while Louis de Nevers was the heir to all the treasures of his house, Louis of Gonzague was heir to little more than a rotting palace and a hollow title. And yet, by the irony of nature that seemed to deny long life to any of the stock of Nevers, Louis de Gonzague was the next of kin to his cousin, and the heir to all his wealth if by any ill chance the dear young duke should die unmarried."

Here Æsop deliberately shut his mouth for several seconds, while the listening bandits, persuaded that some thrilling news was toward, nudged each other with their elbows and riddled the watchful hunchback with imploring glances that entreated him to proceed. Thus mutely importuned, Æsop opened his mouth again:

"But the difference in the youths' fortunes never made any difference in their friendship. The purse of the rich Nevers was always open to the fingers of the poor Gonzague, and the poor

Gonzague had always too true an appreciation of the meaning of friendship to deny his heart's brother the privilege of ministering to his needs. And as the young Nevers did not hint at the slightest inclination to marry and settle down, but always declared himself and approved himself the most vagrant of lovers and the most frivolous of libertines, there seemed no reason for the good Gonzague to be uneasy as to his possible heritage. Moreover, the young Duke of Nevers was something delicate of constitution, as it would seem, for all his skill as a soldier and swordsman and his fame as a lady's man. Once when he was the guest of his cousin of Gonzague in Mantua he fell ill of a strange fever that came near to ending his days, and was only saved by his French physician, who tended him day and night and took him back to France in the first dawn of his convalescence."

Æsop stopped and blinked at his hearers viciously, looking like some school-master that wonders how much or how little of what he has been saying his pupils have understood. Cocardasse was the first to show intelligence and to give it tongue.

"I'll wager," he cried, and swore a great Gascon oath, "that I can hazard a pretty guess as to the name of our employer in to-night's work."

Æsop leered at him with a pitying benignity.

"You were always a great brain for deduction, friend Cocardasse," he said. "And who should you say was the honest gentleman who wanted our swords for this present business?"

"Why," answered Cocardasse, shaking his head gloomily,

"though I hate to think it, and hate to say it, it seems to me that the man who has most to gain from this little meeting and its inevitable result is none other than the third Louis, your Italian of Gonzague."

Æsop nodded, and a ferocious smile illuminated his evil face.

"You have come to a very creditable conclusion, friend Cocardasse. It looks very much as if Jonathan wanted to kill David, as if Patroclus yearned to slaughter Achilles, as if Pythias wanted to extinguish Damon."

Master Æsop prided himself upon his scholarship and his felicity in classical allusion – a felicity wholly wasted upon his present audience.

Cocardasse was still curious. "Why does Louis de Gonzague want to kill his friend, Louis of Nevers, just at this particular moment, and why here in this heaven-forgotten hole of a place, in this heaven-forgotten corner of the world?"

Æsop explained: "Because Louis de Gonzague, having tried once, with good reason, and failed, tries again with better reason and means to succeed this time, believing much steel to do better than a little poison. Because, in a few words, Louis de Gonzague wants to marry the beautiful Gabrielle, daughter of old Caylus of the castle there, who is wealthy, too."

Passepoil, who was always interested in affairs of the heart, put in his word. "Why doesn't he marry her?"

Æsop was ready to explain that matter also: "Because Gabrielle de Caylus is already secretly married to Louis de

Nevers. They were married one year ago in the chapel of Caylus, and the only witnesses were Louis de Gonzague and his factotum, Monsieur Peyrolles, who has summoned us to this tryst."

"Why were they secretly married?" asked the amorous Passepoil.

Æsop answered him: "An old family feud between the houses of Nevers and Caylus. The marquis would rather kill his daughter than let her marry Louis de Nevers. So they were wedded secretly, without his knowledge, and Louis de Gonzague, that could deny his dear friend and cousin, Louis de Nevers, nothing, helped him to his wife."

"That was generous, at least," Passepoil sighed.

Æsop sneered. "He hoped, as he believed with reason, that there would be no issue of the marriage, and that by-and-by he would come to what he called his own. But three months ago a daughter was born to the nuptials of Nevers, and that is why we are here to-night. Monsieur Peyrolles would pretend that it is the old marquis who is using us, the old marquis who is suspicious of an amour between his daughter and Nevers. But I know better."

"How do you know all this?" Cocardasse inquired.

Æsop shrugged his shoulders. "My good fellow," he said, "it is my business to know everything that is worth knowing in my trade. There are very few noble houses in France that can hope to hold any secrets from me. You may take my word for it – that is how matters stand."

Staupitz and his five swordsmen sat silent and puzzled, leaving

the ball of conversation to be tossed between Cocardasse, Passepoil, and Æsop.

Cocardasse spoke next: "An ugly job. There's only one man alive to match Louis de Nevers."

Something almost approaching a human smile distorted the wrinkled face of Æsop and made it appear more than usually repulsive. "You mean me," he said, and the smirk deepened, only to dissipate quickly as Cocardasse replied:

"Devil a bit. I mean the little Parisian, Henri de Lagardere."

"The best swordsman in Paris!" Passepoil cried, enthusiastically.

"The best swordsman in France!" Cocardasse shouted.

Passepoil commented again: "The best swordsman in Europe."

Cocardasse, not to be outdone, put the final touch to the picture: "The best swordsman in the world."

The name of Lagardere seemed to make a marked impression upon the company. Every man seemed to have his contribution to make to the history of the little Parisian.

Faenza was the first to speak.

"I met your Lagardere once," he said, "at a fencing-school in Milan, where half a dozen French gentlemen met half a dozen gentlemen of my nationality in a match to test the merits of the French and Italian methods of fence. This Lagardere of yours was the only one whom I had any difficulty in overcoming."

Cocardasse gave an ironic snort. It was evident that he did not

in the least believe the latter part of Faenza's narrative. Joel de Jurgan took up the thread of reminiscence.

"If your Lagardere be the same as the man I am thinking of," he said, "I came across him a couple of years ago at the fair of Neuilly. We had a passage of arms, and I think I gave him a cut on the head, but it took me some time, I promise you."

Cocardasse glared at the speaker, but said nothing, though the word "liar" was plainly expressed in his scornful glance. Joel, impressed by his angry face, hastened to add, with the air of one that praises an adversary in the handsomest manner, "I swear he was the best fellow, second to myself, that I ever met with the rapier."

"I have met him," grunted Staupitz. "He touched me once in a bout of twelve points. That was a triumph for him, to my thinking."

Pepe added: "He fought with me once in Madrid, and got off without a scratch. That says a good deal for his skill, I'm thinking."

Saldagno and Pinto were silent. They looked curiously at Pepe, but they nodded their heads approvingly.

Thus each of the bravos had his eager tale to tell, and would have told more but that Cocardasse waved them into silence with his large hand. "There is only one Lagardere," he said, and looked as if the subject were ended.

Æsop yawned. "I should like to meet your Lagardere."

Cocardasse eyed him ironically. "Sword in hand?" he

questioned. "When that day comes, pray for your soul."

Æsop shrugged his shoulders, and with an air of indifference produced a watch and consulted its dial. "Friends," he said, "this is the hour fixed for the arrival of Monsieur Peyrolles, and I think I hear footsteps in the passage."

Instantly the Gascon seemed animated by a hurried purpose. He sprang to Staupitz's side, and, catching him by the shoulder, shook him vehemently. "We must be well paid to face the thrust of Nevers. Let me bargain for you. Back me up, and those that are alive to-night will have money in pocket to-morrow."

# III
# A BUYER OF BLADES

Staupitz and his companions seemed to place implicit confidence in the superior diplomatic powers of their Gascon comrade, and to have been seriously impressed by the gravity of his statement concerning the thrust of Nevers, so death-dealing, so unwardable, so almost magically fatal, for they readily agreed to his proposition. Places were rapidly found for Cocardasse and Passepoil at the table. Æsop returned to his seat and his little sinful book. It was deepening dusk by now, but the hunchback knew his Aretino by heart, and the open page was a pretence. So he mused by the window, and sat nursing his knee moodily. Those at the table seemed busy drinking, and heedless of all things save drink, when the side-door of the room, that led through the kitchen to the yard, opened, and the man they were expecting entered. It was characteristic of the man to make his appearance so slyly, surreptitiously, sidling, and roundabout, where another would have stepped in direct. At the heels of the new-comer tiptoed Martine, swinging, for precaution against the thickening dusk, a dingy lantern whose provision of fish-oil emitted a pitiful light that scarcely bettered the growing blackness. This lantern the girl set upon the head of an empty barrel that stood in a corner, and its fitful, shivering rays, faintly

illuminating the murkiness around, was at least strong enough to allow any philosopher among the bravos – and Æsop was in his way a philosopher – to observe and moralize upon the contrast between the appearance of this Monsieur Peyrolles who employed bravos and the bravos that this Monsieur Peyrolles employed.

Monsieur Peyrolles was a tall, thin, middle-aged man of pale complexion. Like Æsop and like Passepoil, he was dressed in black, as became the confidential servant of a master with many confidences; but, unlike the amorous Æsop and unlike the amorous Passepoil – though the two men were amorous after a very different fashion – his garments were of fine quality and fine cut, with much costly lace at his yellow neck, and much costly lace about the wrists of yellow hands that to a casual glance might, in their affected ease, have passed for patrician. Like Passepoil, he carried a sword, and, like Passepoil, he knew how to use it, although, unlike Passepoil, he was really of a timid disposition, and never engaged in any encounter in which he was not certain that his skill was far superior to that of his opponent.

He affected the manners of a fine gentleman, and modelled himself as much as he dared upon the carriage of his master, when his master was not by, and, like the most of such copying apes, he overdid the part. His face was curiously unpleasant, long and yellowish white and inexpressive, with drooping eyelids masking pale, shifty eyes, with a drooping, ungainly nose, and a mouth that seemed like a mistake of nature.

When Martine had placed her lantern to her satisfaction upon its Bacchic pedestal, she slipped from the room as quietly as she had entered it, answering as she went, with a glance of disdain, the passion of admiration that glowed in the eyes and twitched in the fingers of Norman Passepoil. The people that kept that evil Inn, the people that served that evil Inn, always left their sinister customers to themselves to kiss or kill, as best pleased them.

On the entrance of Monsieur Peyrolles the bravos rose and saluted him ceremoniously. If there was any hidden mockery, any latent contempt, any unconscious hate felt by the brave scoundrels for the cowardly scoundrel in their reverence, it was not evident to the new-comer, who took the greetings with offensive condescension, eying the bandits over the lace edges of his kerchief.

Staupitz advanced some few feet to greet him. "Welcome, Monsieur Peyrolles," he said. Then, pointing with an air of introduction to the fantastic, many-colored, huge-hatted, big-booted gang of ruffians ranged about the table, he added, "My children."

In the dim light Peyrolles peered derisively at the different members of the party. "They seem a choice set of ruffians," he observed, with the labored impertinence that seemed to him a copy of his master's nonchalance.

Staupitz laughed thickly. "No better blades between here and world's end." He pointed first at his comrades, as if to imply that he spoke allegorically; then he pointed to the row of rapiers

dangling against the wall, to prove that he also spoke practically and by the card.

"After all," said Peyrolles, "that is the important matter. I come to tell you how to earn your pay."

By this time Staupitz and the others had resumed their seats and were staring fixedly at Peyrolles, something to that worthy personage's embarrassment. Staupitz having said his say, dropped into silence, and Cocardasse leaned forward, asserting himself. "We are all attention," he declared; and Passepoil, faithful echo by his side, murmured, "We are all attention," and allowed himself to wonder what had become of Martine, and to regret that business did not permit him to go to look for her.

Peyrolles began to explain. "Wait in the moat to-night at ten o'clock."

Staupitz interrupted him. "Ten o'clock?" he cried. "The devil! it will be pretty dark by ten."

"I think there should be a moon about ten," Æsop observed, quietly, with his exasperating air of all knowledge.

"Yes, yes," Peyrolles went on, sharply, irritated at being stayed in his instructions, "there will be a moon, no doubt, but we do not want too much light for this business. Well, then, wait in the moat at ten. I do not think you will have to wait long. Then, or thenabouts, a cavalier coming by the mountain road will tie his horse to a tree beyond the bridge that spans the ravine. He will cross the bridge and walk to yonder window hard by the postern."

Peyrolles paused as if he had nothing more to say, and took it

for granted that his hearers understood his drift. But one of them seemed to desire more explicit information.

"Then," said Cocardasse – "then we are to accost him."

Peyrolles nodded. "Very politely – and earn your money." He turned upon his heel now, for he relished the Inn room little, and its company less, being a fastidious lackey, and made to go, as if the affair were settled.

But Cocardasse arrested him. "Who is the gentleman we accost politely?" he asked, very blandly, but behind this blandness of Cocardasse's there was something menacing to those that knew him well.

Peyrolles eyed the huge Gascon disdainfully. "That does not concern you," he said, sharply.

But the Gascon was not in the least abashed, and, while he grinned at the would-be great man with an air of veiled insolence that was excessively exasperating to Monsieur Peyrolles, he questioned again: "Who is our employer?"

Again Peyrolles retorted: "That does not concern you."

And again Cocardasse persisted: "It might concern us very much if we chanced to believe that our quarry is Louis de Nevers, and if we got it somehow or other into our heads that our employer is Louis de Gonzague."

As Cocardasse spoke these words, Peyrolles, now thoroughly alarmed and irritated, gave Cocardasse a glance that ought to have withered him, but Cocardasse was not withered, and smiled banteringly at his employer.

"Fellow," Peyrolles said, "you are inquisitive." As he spoke he flapped his kerchief reprovingly at the bravo, whose dilated nostrils greedily drank the delicate odors it discharged, and he again made as if to depart, and again Cocardasse delayed him, still with the same exasperating show of exuberant politeness.

"When it is a matter of our skins," he said, "I think we have a right to be inquisitive, and I think we had better have a little chat, Monsieur Peyrolles."

As he spoke he made a noble flourish of his right arm that was distinctly an invitation to Peyrolles to seat himself in their company, and Passepoil, rising with an air of great urbanity, placed a stool before Peyrolles.

"Pray be seated," he urged, suavely, blinking his pink eyelids and manifesting a deferential fear of the great man that he was very far indeed from feeling.

Peyrolles looked about him half angrily, half frightened. He would have been glad to make his escape from that accursed chamber, but he had astuteness enough to see that there was no escape for him. Cocardasse had somehow or other managed to get between him and the door, and the other ruffians seemed to be entirely in sympathy with the Gascon's conduct, and to have no regard whatever for Peyrolles's dignity or feelings.

With a smile that he intended to be amiable, Peyrolles sat down.

"Well," he said, with an air of one that swallows sour wine, "what have you to say to me?"

"Come," said the Gascon, "that is good. Now we can chat at our ease, and it will not take us many seconds to understand each other, I promise you." He turned to Staupitz. "What was the sum offered for our services?" He knew very well, for Staupitz had told him as they huddled together before, while the hand of Peyrolles was upon the latch, but he thought that it made the situation more impressive if he affected ignorance.

Staupitz answered: "Three hundred pistoles."

Now this was a fair market price enough as the tariff went for ambuscades and assassinations of the kind. It meant twenty-five pistoles each to the eight subordinates of the band, and a comfortable hundred pistoles for old Papa Staupitz to pocket as the patron of the enterprise. But Cocardasse held up his hands in well-affected horror and amazement. "Three hundred pistoles!" he echoed; "for ruddling the blades and risking the lives of nine of the finest swordsmen in Europe? Preposterous! – there must be some mistake! We won't haggle. We must have three thousand pistoles or – good-bye."

At this audacious proposal to raise their blood-wages exactly ten times, the eyes of the bravos glittered avariciously, and they drummed approval on the table with their fists. Cocardasse deprecated this display of interest with a gentle wave of the hand, and, leaning back in his chair, eyed Peyrolles coolly, sure that he plied him with a vise. And Cocardasse was right.

Peyrolles hesitated, but also Peyrolles reflected. It had been his wish to buy his bandits as cheaply as he could, but it was

evident that they were better informed about the night's business than he intended them to be. It was essential that the work must be done that night, and it was also evident that the gentlemen of the sword were quite prepared to take their leaves if their terms were not agreed to. He sighed and said, "You shall have the money."

Cocardasse nodded approvingly. He was enjoying himself immensely in this baiting of the valet of Gonzague, but he allowed no sign of entertainment to ripple over his crimson countenance.

"Good," he said, quietly, "but I take it that you have not got such a sum as three thousand pistoles about you."

Peyrolles shook his head. "I have brought with me the three hundred pistoles that were agreed upon," he said, sourly, with an emphasis upon the closing words of his speech. Cocardasse caught him up promptly.

"Agreed upon in ignorance of the services demanded," he corrected. "Well, good Monsieur Peyrolles, let us have that three hundred pistoles as earnest money for the larger sum."

Somewhat reluctantly Monsieur Peyrolles produced from his doublet a small canvas bag and threw it into the hollow of Cocardasse's extended palm. It chinked pleasantly as it fell, and Cocardasse weighed it tenderly.

"I will not affront your worthiness," he said, "by affecting to doubt the contents of this little bag, and putting it to the scrutiny of a count. I will take your word for the tale."

As he spoke he tossed the bag over to Staupitz, who caught it dexterously and put it in his pocket. On this Peyrolles made to rise, and again found that the hand of Passepoil, obedient to a glance from Cocardasse, descended upon his shoulder and nailed him to his place.

"Wait," said Cocardasse, amiably, "we must have some surety for the lave of the money."

"Is not my word enough?" Peyrolles asked, with an ineffective air of dignity. Cocardasse smiled very sweetly.

"The best of us may have a bad memory," he said, and sighed over the frailties of humanity. He turned to his nominal leader. "Papa Staupitz," he said, "will you not see if a pen and ink be available?"

Staupitz rose while Peyrolles glowered, and going to the door that led to the kitchen, summoned Martine. Martine, heedless of the adoring homage renewed in Passepoil's eyes, went to a cupboard in the wall and extracted from its depths a dingy ink-horn and a stubby quill, together with a page of fairly clean paper torn from the back of an old account-book. Setting these on the table, she departed as quietly as she came, wholly indifferent to the languishing glances of the Norman. Cocardasse waved a space for Peyrolles at the table.

"Be so good," he said, with a quiet insistence, "as to write a formal promise to pay Papa Staupitz two thousand seven hundred pistoles to-morrow. Date it carefully, and sign it with your excellent and honorable name, my dear Monsieur Peyrolles."

Peyrolles frowned, but there was no help for it; so he rose to his feet, untroubled this time by the restraining fingers of Passepoil, and, going to the table, wrote the demanded document, with every appearance of repugnance at the task and its conditions, for the pen was vile, the ink viler, and the paper vilest. When he had finished, Cocardasse took it from him and scanned it carefully.

"That is all right," he said, and placed the still wet writing on the table in front of Staupitz. Peyrolles made as if to move towards the door, but again Passepoil, who was watching intently the face of Cocardasse, read a meaning there, and, pouncing upon Peyrolles, persuaded him firmly back into the seat he had quitted.

"That is not all," said Cocardasse to the astonished and angry valet. "This night's work is a big night's work, and not to be paid for over the counter and done with. We want the money first, but afterwards we want the protection and favor of Louis de Gonzague."

Peyrolles frowned and made a vehement effort to assert his authority.

"You talk very freely and loosely of great names," he said, with as much sharpness as he could muster in the presence of that ring of rascality. "You should know very well, if you know anything at all about the scandals of grandees, that Monseigneur the Marquis of Caylus has every reason to dislike Monseigneur the Duke of Nevers, and to wish him out of the way."

Cocardasse laid a whimsical finger to the side of his jolly,

tropical nose and grinned impishly.

"We know what we know, Monsieur Peyrolles," he said, urbanely. "If it were merely necessary to kill the Duke of Nevers to gratify the hate of any private enemy, one place would do as well as another, and we might take him any time on his way here, instead of waiting till the precise moment when he enters the moat of Caylus. But you wish us to wait for that precise moment because you, and your master, wish it to seem patent to all the world that the deed was done by the Marquis of Caylus on his own ground, to defend his own honor. Once again, we demand hereafter the favor and protection of his highness the Prince of Gonzague."

This time Peyrolles needed no pause for reflection. So much was wise to promise to men who could draw conclusions so dexterously. "You shall have it," he said, and rose from his seat, this time unrestrained by the Norman's pressure. "There is my hand on it," he added.

Cocardasse appeared not to perceive the extended hand as he slapped the hilt of his sword. "Here is my rapier, which answers for me."

Peyrolles smiled sourly. "You had better place a sentinel in the moat," he said, addressing Staupitz. "He can give the signal when the mouse walks into the trap. Till then let the others keep in the background so as to cut off our gentleman's retreat."

Staupitz nodded sulkily. He had always held Monsieur Peyrolles in considerable respect, a respect that had been greatly

shaken by Cocardasse's audacious and insolent treatment of the satellite of Gonzague. Now the bravo seemed ready to resent receiving an order from his employer's go-between. Peyrolles prudently took no notice of his sullenness. "Good-evening, gentlemen," he said, and walked towards the door. As he reached it, he turned again and spoke significantly: "Remember – if you fail, no pay."

Cocardasse grinned impudently at him. "Sleep in peace, Monsieur Peyrolles." Peyrolles made a wry face and went out.

As soon as he had gone the bravos gathered about Cocardasse and patted him enthusiastically on the back. Only Æsop remained in his corner, apparently indifferent to the whole proceedings.

"Well done, comrade," cried Passepoil, wringing the hand of his brother-in-arms; and the others, whose pay had been so notably increased by the diplomacy of Cocardasse, were equally as effusive in their expressions of gratitude.

Cocardasse met their applause with an impressive monosyllable. "Wine," he said to Martine, who had peeped in to see if her services were needed, and in a twinkling the pannikins were filled again and lifted to eight thirsty mouths, and set down again empty of their contents. The first business was to share the contents of Monsieur Peyrolles's bag, which Staupitz duly divided according to the original understanding, giving each man twenty-five pistoles, and keeping the remainder for himself. By this time the ink on the promissory note was dry, and Staupitz

folded it up carefully and put it in his pocket.

After this for another half-hour the talk was all about the young Duke de Nevers and his secret thrust, and the woman he loved, and the Prince de Gonzague, his friend, who meant to kill him. Here, as before, Æsop dominated the party by his superior knowledge of all the individuals in the little tragedy in which they were invited to play subordinate parts. He told them of the life feud between the family of Caylus and the family of Nevers, a feud as bitter as that of the Capulets and Montagues of old time. He told them of Gonzague's passions, Gonzague's poverty. He told them all about Monsieur Peyrolles, Gonzague's discreet and infamous factotum. He told them, also, being as it seemed a very gold-mine of court scandals, much of the third Louis, the august friend of Louis of Nevers and Louis of Gonzague, the third Louis who was the king of France.

The bravos hung upon his words. In many ways they were simple folk, and, like all simple folk, they loved to be told stories, and Æsop prided himself upon being something of a man of letters, a philosopher, and an historian. It was, therefore, no small annoyance to narrator and audience when the narrative was interrupted, as it was nearing its conclusion, by the opening of the Inn door. Every face expressed astonishment as it was pushed sufficiently apart to admit the entry of a slender and graceful boy in the rich habit of a page. The boy came a little way into the room, looking cautiously about him. He acted as if at first he took the room in its dimness to be unoccupied, and he seemed

to be somewhat disconcerted at discovering that it contained so many occupants. He stood still while his bright eyes ran rapidly, and indeed fearfully, over the somewhat alarming features of the guests. Failing, apparently, to find among them the person, whoever it was, whom he had come there to seek, he turned to leave as quietly as he had entered, but his egress was barred by Æsop, who had slipped between him and the door, and who now questioned him, with a grin of malignant intelligence on his face.

"Whom are you looking for, pygmy?"

The page put a bold face on it and answered with a bold voice: "I have a letter for a gentleman."

Æsop pointed to the group at the table. "We are all gentlemen. Let's have a look at your letter." Then he added to his companions: "It may be useful. The imp wears the livery of Nevers."

Instantly the others approved by signs and grunts of Æsop's action, and the page, now really alarmed, made a desperate effort to escape. "Let me pass!" he cried, and tried to rush under Æsop's arm. But Æsop caught the boy in an iron grip, and, though the courageous page drew a dagger and tried to stab his assailant, he was disarmed in a second and seized by the others, who sprang from the table and clustered about him, fierce birds of prey about a helpless quarry. The lad cried for help, hopelessly enough. Strong, dirty fingers were tearing open his jerkin and fumbling for the concealed letter, when suddenly it seemed to the astonished swordsmen that an earthquake and a whirlwind had

combined for their undoing. Æsop rolled to one end of the room, Staupitz to another; Cocardasse and Passepoil, Saldagno, Pepe, Pinto, Faenza, and Joel were scattered like sparrows, and the little page found himself liberated and crouching at the feet of a man who was standing with folded arms surveying the discomfited bravos mockingly.

# IV
# THE LITTLE PARISIAN

The new-comer was a young man of little over one-and-twenty, of medium height, but with a well-built, well-knit figure that gave a promise of extraordinary strength and power of endurance, coupled at the same time with a scarcely less extraordinary suppleness. He had a face that was certainly handsome, though many handsomer faces were familiar in Paris at that day, but none more gallant, and, indeed, its chief charm was its almost audacious air of self-reliance, of unfailing courage, of changeless composure, and unconquerable humor. The eyes were bright and laughing. Even now, although the man was undoubtedly angry, his eyes still smiled in unison with his lips. His dark hair fell gracefully about his shoulders. He wore a somewhat faded white coat, girdled with a crimson sash – the white coat of a captain in the king's Light-Horse – and, though he carried himself with an easy dignity, the general condition of his dress showed he was one who was neither afraid of nor unfamiliar with poverty. Now he looked around him with a bright defiance, seemingly diverted by the havoc his single pair of arms and legs – for he had used both limbs in the brawl – had wrought among nine swashbucklers, and apparently prepared at any moment to repeat the performance, if occasion called for action.

It was curious to observe that, though the new-comer had worked such confusion among the bravos whom he had taken so roughly unawares, he did not show any sign of having passed through a scuffle with a number of men or having accomplished anything especially arduous in bringing them so swiftly to discomfiture. His breathing was not quickened, his comely young face was unflushed. As he stood there lightly poised in an easy attitude that might at any moment be resolved into an attitude of defence, he seemed, to such of his spectators as had sufficiently recovered their senses to look at him coolly, rather to resemble one that had come in on the heels of a tuss and was watching its result with unconcerned eyes than one that with no more assistance than his own agile limbs had been the cause of humiliation to so many powerful adversaries. Staupitz, blinking fiercely as he rubbed his aching head, which had rattled sharply against the table that arrested his flight across the room, was too bewildered to swear out the oaths that were frothing within him when he realized that the earthquake, the whirlwind, the cataclysm that had tumbled him and his companions about like so many nine-pins was no other and no more than the slim and pleasant young gentleman who stood there so composedly. While the bewildered ruffians were picking themselves up, and with some little difficulty recovering their breath, the young gentleman addressed them mockingly: "Are there quite enough of you to manage this adversary?" And as he spoke he pointed to the little page who was huddled at his feet.

Æsop was the first of the bravos to recover his troubled senses and to seek to retaliate upon his assailant. He whipped his long rapier from its sheath, and was making for the intruder when Cocardasse flung his strong arms around the hunchback and restrained him. "Be easy," he cried; "it is the little Parisian!" And at the same moment Passepoil, with the gesture of one who salutes in a fencing-school, exclaimed the name "Lagardere."

As for the other ruffians, they gathered together sulkily enough about the table, staring at the stranger. His face was familiar to all of them, and there was not one among them bold enough to follow the example of Æsop. Lagardere, who had taken no notice of the threatened attack of the hunchback, surveyed the group, and, glancing from them, addressed himself to Cocardasse and Passepoil.

"Why, my old masters," he asked, drolling them, "what are you doing in this desperate adventure? You ought to be careful. The boy might have hurt you." His eyes turned from the Gascon and the Norman back again to the fellows at the table. "Some of these scarecrows seem familiar." His glance rested on Staupitz, and he questioned him: "Where have we met?"

Staupitz saluted Lagardere very respectfully as he answered: "At Lyons."

Lagardere seemed to search his memory and to find what he sought. "True. You touched me once."

Staupitz made an apologetic gesture. "Only once in twelve times."

Lagardere turned to Saldagno, Pepe, and Pinto. "Ah, my bandits of Madrid, who tried me, three to one."

Saldagno was more apologetic than Staupitz, with a Latin profusion of gesture, as he explained: "That was for a wager, captain."

Lagardere shrugged his shoulders. "Which you did not win." He turned to Joel de Jurgan. "Does your head still carry my cut?"

The Breton lifted a large hand to his bullet head and fumbled through the thick hair for a familiar spot. "There is a scar," he admitted.

Lagardere turned to the Italian. "Do you still," he asked, "hold the Italian school to be superior to the French?"

Faenza shook his head. "Not when you practise the French method," he answered, politely.

There was a little pause, and then Æsop, who had by this time been released from the embrace of Cocardasse, and had sheathed his sword, came forward and faced Lagardere. "I desire acquaintanceship, Captain Lagardere. Men call me Æsop."

Lagardere gazed at the hunchback, and a look of displeasure banished the mirth from his eyes. "I have heard of you," he said, curtly. "A good sword and a bad heart. I don't like the blend. You may go to the devil."

He turned away from Æsop and bent over the lad, who still crouched at his feet. "Now, lad, you must promise not to hurt these gentlemen, for some of them are friends of mine."

While the bravos tried not to appear annoyed by Lagardere's

banter, which, indeed, in its simplicity vexed their simple natures greatly, the page rose to his feet and whispered softly to his rescuer, "I have a letter for you from the Duke de Nevers."

Lagardere extended his hand. "Give it," he said.

The page produced the letter, of which Æsop had been so anxious to gain possession, and handed it to Lagardere, whispering as he did so, "Save me from these ogres. I carry another letter to a lady."

Lagardere smiled. "To Gabrielle de Caylus, I'll swear," he murmured in a low voice which was calculated only to reach the page's ears. Then he turned again to the swordsmen. "Sirs, this lad, more fastidious than I, dislikes your society. Pray respect his prejudices." He pushed the page gently towards the main door. "Hop, skip, jump!"

In a moment the page had glided out of the room. Æsop made a movement as if he were inclined to follow, but any such intention was frustrated by Lagardere, who shut the door after the boy and stood with his back towards it. "Stay where you are, gentlemen," he said, and there was something so persuasive in the way in which he said it that the gentlemen stayed where they were. Then Lagardere, as if he had almost forgotten their presence, slowly walking down the room till he paused in the middle, opened the letter and began to read it. As he seemed absorbed by its contents, Staupitz on the one side and Æsop on the other came cautiously towards him with the intention of reading the letter over his shoulder, but Lagardere's seeming

forgetfulness of their presence instantly changed. He looked up sharply, glancing right and left, and Æsop and Staupitz fell back in confusion, while Lagardere spoke to them, mocking them: "You will dub me eccentric; you will nickname me whimsical; you will damn me for a finicking stickler, and all because I am such an old-fashioned rascal as to wish to keep my correspondence to myself. There, there, don't be crestfallen. This letter makes me so merry that you shall share its treasure. But, first, fill and drink with me, a noble toast."

To suggest drinking was to forge a link between the bravos and the man who down-faced them so masterfully. The big jug seemed to jump from hand to hand, every mug was full in a twinkling, and every face was fixed steadfastly on Lagardere, waiting for his words. Lagardere lifted his brimming beaker with a voice of joyous mockery that carried at once defiance and respect to a distant man. "The health of Louis of Nevers!" he said, and drained his green wine as cheerfully as if it had been the elixir of the gods.

At his words blank astonishment spread over the faces of the Gascon and the Norman. "He said 'Nevers,'" Cocardasse whispered to Passepoil, and Passepoil whispered back, "He did." As for the other bravos, they had been as much surprised as Cocardasse and Passepoil by Lagardere's request, but they managed to conceal their surprise by lifting their mugs, and now as they nodded and winked to one another, they tilted their vessels and drank, shouting, "The health of Louis de Nevers!"

Cocardasse came nearer to Lagardere, and said in a voice that was almost a whisper, "Why do you drink the health of Louis de Nevers?"

Lagardere looked for a moment annoyed at the presumption of Cocardasse in questioning him, then the annoyance gave place to his familiar air of tolerant amusement. "I don't love questions, but you have a kind of right to query." He turned to the others. "You must know, sirs, that this pair of rapiers were my fairy godfathers in the noble art of fence."

The Norman looked at Lagardere with a very loving expression. "You were a sad little rag of humanity when first you came to our fencing-academy."

"You are right there," said Lagardere. "I was the poorest, hungriest scrap of mankind in all Paris. I had neither kin nor friends nor pence, nothing but a stout heart and a sense of humor. That is why I came to your academy, old rogues."

Cocardasse was reminiscent. "Faith, you looked droll enough, with your pale face and your shabby clothes. 'I want to be a soldier,' says you; 'I want to use the sword.'"

Lagardere nodded. "That was my stubborn law. The world laughed at me, but I laughed at the world, and I won my wish."

"Just think of it!" said Cocardasse. "Henri de Lagardere, a gentleman born, without a decent relative, without a decent friend, without a penny, making his livelihood as a strolling player in the booth of a mountebank."

While Cocardasse was speaking, Lagardere seemed to listen

like a man in a dream. He forgot for the moment the reeking Inn room where he stood, the beastly visages that surrounded him, the whimsy that had drifted him thither. All these things were forgotten, and the man that was little more than a boy in years was in fancy altogether a boy again, a shivering, quivering slip of a boy that stood on the gusty high-road and knuckled his eyelids to keep his eyes from crying. How long ago it seemed, that time twelve years ago when a mutinous urchin fled from a truculent uncle to seek his fortune as Heaven might please to guide! Heaven guided an itinerant mime and mountebank that tramped France with his doxy to a wet hedge-side where a famished, foot-sore scrap of a lad lay like a tired dog, trying not to sob. The mountebank was curious, the mountebank's doxy was kind; both applauded lustily the boy's resolve to march to Paris, cost what it might cost, and make his fortune there. The end of the curiosity and the kindness and the applause was that the little Lagardere found himself at once the apprentice and the adopted son of the mountebank, with his fortune as far off as the stars. But he learned many things, the little Lagardere, under the care of that same mountebank; all that the mountebank could teach him he learned, and he invented for himself tricks that were beyond the mountebank's skill. How long ago it seemed! Would ever space of time seem so long again? So the young man mused swiftly, while Cocardasse told his tale; but ere Cocardasse had finished, Lagardere was back in the tavern again, and, when Cocardasse had finished, Lagardere caught him up: "Why not?

Some actors are as honest as bandits. I was no bad mummer, sirs. I could counterfeit any one of you now so that your mother wouldn't know the cheat. And my master made me an athlete, too; taught me every trick of wrestling and tumbling and juggling with the muscles. That is why I was able to tumble you about so pleasantly just now. I should have been a mountebank to this day but for an accident."

Passepoil was curious. "What accident?" he asked.

Lagardere answered him: "A brawl over a wench with a bully. I challenged him, though I was more at home with a toasting-fork than a sword. I caught up an unfamiliar weapon, but he nicked the steel from my hand at a pass and banged me with the flat of his blade. The girl laughed. The bully grinned. I swore to learn swordcraft."

"And you did," said Passepoil. "In six months you were our best pupil."

Cocardasse continued: "In twelve you were our master."

Passepoil questioned again: "What became of your bully?"

Lagardere was laconic: "We had a chat afterwards. I attended his funeral."

Cocardasse clapped his hands. "Well begun, little Parisian."

Passepoil pointed admiringly at Lagardere. "Look at you now, a captain in the king's guard."

Lagardere laughed cheerfully. "Look if you like, but I am no such thing. I am cashiered, exiled from Paris."

"Why?" asked Cocardasse, and Lagardere replied with a

question: "Do you remember the Baron de Brissac?"

Cocardasse nodded. "One of the best swords in Paris."

Lagardere resumed: "Well, the late baron – "

Passepoil interrupted: "The late baron?"

Lagardere explained: "Brissac had a lewd tongue and smirched a woman. So I pulled his ears."

Cocardasse grinned. "The devil you did!"

"Yes," said Lagardere, "they were very long and tempting. We resumed the argument elsewhere. It was brief. Good-bye, Brissac! But as the good king, thanks to the good cardinal, now frowns upon duelling, I am exiled when I ought to be rewarded."

Cocardasse sighed. "There is no encouragement for virtue nowadays."

Lagardere's voice was as cheerful as if there were no such thing in the world as exile. "Well, there I was at my wit's end, and my nimble wits found work for me. 'If I must leave France,' I said, 'I will go to Spain, where the spirit of chivalry still reigns.' So I raised a regiment of adventurers like myself – broken gentlemen, ruined spendthrifts, poor devils out at elbow, gallant soldiers of fortune one and all. They wait for me a mile from here. We shall find work to do in Spain or elsewhere. The world is wide, and it has always work for good swords to do."

Cocardasse looked at him admiringly. "Your sword will never rust for want of use," he said, with approval.

Lagardere answered him, briskly: "Why should it? 'Tis the best friend in the world. What woman's eye ever shone as brightly

as its blade, what woman's tongue ever discoursed such sweet music?"

Cocardasse took off his hat and swung it. "Hurrah for the sword!" he shouted.

Lagardere's glance applauded his enthusiasm. "Iron was God's best gift to man, and he God's good servant who hammered it into shape and gave it point and edge. I shall never be happy until I am master of it."

Æsop joined the conversation mockingly. "I thought you were master of it," he said, with an obvious sneer.

Cocardasse and Passepoil looked horrified at the hunchback's impertinence, but Lagardere did not seem to be vexed, and answered, quite amiably: "So did I till lately." Then he said, addressing himself generally to the company: "Have any of you ever heard of the thrust of Nevers?"

A tremor of excitement ran through his audience. Cocardasse took up the talk: "We spoke of it but now."

"Well," said Lagardere, "what do you think of it?"

Æsop, the irrepressible, thrust in his opinion. "Never was secret thrust invented that cannot be parried."

Lagardere looked at him somewhat contemptuously. "So I thought till I crossed swords with Nevers. Now I think differently."

Cocardasse whistled. "The devil you do," he commented.

"I will tell you all about it," said Lagardere. "It happened three months ago. That secret thrust piqued me. Then people talked

too much about Nevers; that irritated me. Wherever I went, from court to camp, from tavern to palace, the name of Nevers was dinned in my ears. The barber dressed your hair à la Nevers. The tailor cut your coat à la Nevers. Fops carried canes à la Nevers; ladies scented themselves à la Nevers. One day at the inn they served me cutlets à la Nevers. I flung the damned dish out of the window. On the doorstep I met my boot-maker, who offered to sell me a pair of boots à la Nevers. I cuffed the rascal and flung him ten louis as a salve. But the knave only said to me: 'Monsieur de Nevers beat me once, but he gave me a hundred pistoles.'"

Passepoil sighed for the sorrows of his young pupil: "Poor little Parisian!"

Lagardere went on with his tale: "Now I am vainglorious enough to hold that cutlets would taste good if they were cooked à la Lagardere; that coats à la Lagardere would make good wearing, and boots à la Lagardere good walking. I came to the conclusion that Paris was not big enough for the pair of us, and that Nevers was the man to quit the field. Like Æsop yonder, I laughed at the secret thrust."

He paused, and Cocardasse questioned: "But you don't laugh now?"

Lagardere answered him, gravely: "Not a laugh. I waited for Nevers one evening outside the Louvre and saluted him. 'Sir,' I said, in my grandest manner, 'I rely upon your courtesy to give me a moonlight lesson in your secret thrust.' Lord, how he started. 'Who the devil are you?' says he. I made him a magnificent bow.

'I am Henri de Lagardere, of the king's Light-Horse. I am always in trouble, always in debt, always in love. These are misfortunes a man can endure. But I am always hearing of your merits, which is fretting, and of your irresistible secret thrust, and that is unbearable.'"

Lagardere paused to give dramatic effect to the point in his narrative.

"What did he say to that?" asked Passepoil.

Lagardere went on: "'Ah,' said the duke, 'you are the fellow they call handsome Lagardere'" (Lagardere interrupted the flow of his story with a pathetic parenthesis – "I can't help it, they do call me so"); "'people talk too much about you, and that wearies me'; which shows that he had a touch of my complaint. Well, he was civility itself. We went down by the church of St. – Germain, and had scarcely crossed swords when the point of his rapier pricked me here, just between the eyes. I was touched – I, Lagardere – and if I had not leaped backward I should have been a dead man. 'That is my secret thrust,' says the duke with a smile, and wished me good-evening."

# V
# THE PARRY TO THE THRUST OF NEVERS

There was a heavy stillness in the room when Lagardere came to the end of his tale. "This sounds serious," Cocardasse said, gloomily, and those about him were gloomily silent.

Lagardere resumed his story: "I pondered that thrust for a month. At last I mastered it. I tried it on the Baron de Brissac with perfect success."

A general laugh at this remark relieved the tension of the bravos' nerves. Æsop took advantage of the more cheerful atmosphere again to address Lagardere. "Matchless cavalier," he asked, with a wry assumption of politeness, "would you show me that thrust you esteem so highly?"

Lagardere looked at the speaker with a whimsical smile. "With pleasure," he said, and drew his sword. Æsop did likewise, and while the bravos drew back towards the wall to allow a free space for the lesson the two swordsmen came on guard. Lagardere explained while he fenced, naming each feint and lunge and circle of the complicated attack as he made it. With the last word of his steel-illuminated lecture his sword, that had illustrated the words of the fencer, seemed suddenly to leap forward, a glittering streak of light.

Æsop leaped back with a yell, and clapped his left hand to his forehead. "Damnation!" he cried.

Cocardasse, who had been following the proceedings with the keenest attention, hurried out of the circle of spectators. "Splendid!" he cried. "What is the parry?"

"It is as clear as day," Lagardere answered. "This is how the trick is done," and again, as he spoke, his blade explained his text, gleaming and twisting in the cunning evolutions of the riposte.

Cocardasse, who had drawn his own sword, repeated Lagardere's words and parodied Lagardere's gestures faithfully. "I see," he said, and turned to the others, who had lost nothing of the lesson. "Have you caught it, boys? It might serve – "

Lagardere interrupted him, indifferent to the evil appreciation on the faces of the spectators. "It will serve at once. I am going to try it on its master."

"On Nevers?" queried Staupitz, hoarsely.

Lagardere nodded. "On no less a man. I should have told you that I plagued him until he promised me my revenge. When I was exiled I wrote to remind him." Lagardere drew a letter from his breast and held it up for a moment before returning it to its lodging. "In this letter he accepts my challenge, names the time, the place – "

Cocardasse interrupted: "What time?"

"To-night at ten," Lagardere replied.

"The place?" asked Passepoil.

"The moat of Caylus," Lagardere answered. He pointed to the

window at which Æsop had been sitting so long. "You can see it from that window."

There was a general look of astonishment on the faces of all the bravos. Passepoil, quick with his Norman caution, glanced at Staupitz and the group about him, and put his finger cautiously to his lips.

Cocardasse was still inquisitive. "Why there?" he questioned.

Lagardere explained, amiably: "Because such is the good duke's pleasure. When I sent him my cartel I made it plain that I had little time on my hands, as I was anxious, on account of the king's fire-new zeal against duelling, to cross the frontier as speedily as might be. I knew the duke was staying on his estates near by, and I suggested, with a fine show of gravity, that possibly his highness was acquainted with some quiet place in the neighborhood of the Castle of Caylus where we might settle our little difference. Oh, the words were solemnly couched, but I swear to you that I laughed heartily when I wrote them."

Lagardere laughed again in memory of that former mirth as he made an end of speaking. Cocardasse scratched an ear and glanced at Passepoil. Passepoil scratched an ear and glanced at Cocardasse. The rest of the bravos stared with a sullen curiosity at Lagardere, who paid no heed to their gaze.

"Why did you laugh?" Cocardasse asked, after a short pause.

Lagardere answered him affably: "Because I knew that my allusion to Caylus would fret my excellent enemy. There is, it seems, a beauty hidden in that gloomy castle, Gabrielle de

Caylus, whom my duke adores in spite of the ancient feud between the two houses of Caylus and Nevers. It should please him to fight under the eyes of his lady love, whom I can console if I win."

The idea seemed to please Lagardere, for he again began to laugh softly to himself after he had finished speaking. But Cocardasse did not seem to think it was a laughing matter, for his voice was almost solemn as he asked: "Did you speak of the lady in your letter to Nevers?"

Lagardere interrupted his mirth to reply: "Of course. The situation is so humorous. I suggested playfully that there was a lovely princess imprisoned in the castle of a wicked old ogre named Caylus, and I hinted that if things turned out as I hoped, I might be fortunate enough to carry solace and freedom to the captive damsel." He paused for a moment and then asked in wonder: "Why do you pull such long faces?"

For, indeed, the faces of the swashbucklers were almost funereal in their solemnity. Passepoil, relying upon his Norman cunning, took it upon himself to explain a ticklish situation. "It is lucky we are here to help you," he said, knowingly.

Lagardere's laughter became more pronounced. "To help me?" he cried, and he shook with amusement at the absurdity of the words.

Passepoil insisted: "It's no laughing matter. Nevers is the lady's husband."

He spoke with a portentous solemnity against which

Lagardere protested, laughing louder than before. "On the contrary, it is more laughable than ever. A secret marriage. A romance. Perhaps I shall have to soothe a widow when I hoped to woo a maid."

"Better have a sword or two to back you," Cocardasse suggested, cunningly.

Lagardere frowned. "No, thank you. I do my own fighting."

Passepoil whispered, insinuatingly: "Could I help to carry off the lady?"

Lagardere's frown deepened. "No, thank you. I do my own love-making. Clear out and leave me alone. That is all I want of you, my friends."

Cocardasse sighed. "I'd do anything in the world to oblige you, but – " He paused and looked helplessly at his former pupil, whom his faltering speech, his hesitating manner began to anger.

"But what?" said Lagardere, sharply.

Cocardasse made an apologetic gesture. "Every man to his trade. We also are waiting for some one."

Lagardere raised his eyebrows. "Indeed, and that some one?"

The bravos looked at one another uneasily, trying to seem devil-may-care and failing wofully. Nobody appeared to want to speak. At last Passepoil spoke. "That some one is Louis de Nevers," he said, and wished heartily that he did not have to say it.

Lagardere at first appeared to be puzzled by the answer. Then the full meaning of it seemed to fall upon him like a blow, and his

face blazed at the insult. "Nevers! You! Ah, this is an ambuscade, and I have sat at drink with assassins!"

Cocardasse protested: "Come, captain, come."

Lagardere's only answer was to spring back clear of the nearest swordsmen and to draw his sword again. The bravos gathered together angrily about Staupitz, buzzing like irritated bees.

Lagardere flung his comely head back, and his bright eyes flamed with a royal rage. His words came quick and clear in his anger: "It was for this you sought to learn Nevers's thrust, and I – Oh, it would make the gods laugh to think that I taught it to you! You have the best of the joke so far, excellent assassins, but if any one of you touches a hair of Nevers's head he will find that the joke is two-edged, like my sword. If Nevers must die, it shall be in honorable battle and by my hands, but not by yours, while Lagardere lives."

Æsop commented, sneeringly: "Lagardere is not immortal."

Staupitz grunted, angrily: "Shall one man dictate to nine?" and made an appealing gesture to his comrades, inciting them against their censor.

Lagardere faced their menaces with the contemptuous indifference with which a mastiff might have faced as many rats. He commanded, imperiously: "Pack off, the whole gang of you, and leave Nevers to me!"

The bravos still buzzed and grumbled: Cocardasse rubbed his chin thoughtfully; Passepoil pinched his long nose. The situation was becoming critical. Lagardere was Lagardere, but he was

only one man, after all, in a narrow room, against great odds. Truly, the odds would be diminished if the quarrel came to actual blows, for Cocardasse was resolved, and he knew that Passepoil was resolved also, to side with Lagardere in such an emergency. But even with the situation thus altered the result could only be unnecessary bloodshed, which would be bad, for, if Lagardere was their dear Little Parisian, the others were also their comrades. Further, it would mean the postponing, probably the abandonment, of their enterprise against Nevers, which would be much worse. Cocardasse plucked the Norman to him with a strong finger and thumb, and whispered in his ear: "Get the boys away and shift the keys."

Passepoil nodded, and glided discreetly among the bravos huddled together at the table, whispering the words of Cocardasse in the ears of each.

Lagardere frowned at this mystery. "What are you whispering?" he asked, angrily.

Cocardasse explained, plausibly. "Only that if you wanted to keep Nevers to yourself – "

Passepoil interrupted, concluding: "It mattered little who did the job."

By this time the bravos, who at the beginning of the quarrel had unhooked their rapiers from the wall, were now pulling their cloaks about them and making for the main door. The Italian, the Breton, the Spaniard, the Biscayan, and the Portuguese filed out into the passage, followed by Æsop, who turned to pay Lagardere

a mocking salutation and to say, tauntingly: "So good-night, gallant captain."

Staupitz, with an air of surly carelessness, sauntered down to the only other door in the room, the door that led to the domestic offices of the Inn. While he did so, Cocardasse held out his hand to Lagardere in sign of amity, but Lagardere refused it. "I am no precisian," he said. "I have kept vile company. I would not deny my hand to a hang-man. But the most tolerant philosopher has his dislikes, and mine are assassins."

Cocardasse sighed, and made for the main door, followed by Passepoil, who said, wistfully, "Adieu, Little Parisian," a greeting of which Lagardere took no notice.

Now, while Æsop had been saying his taunting farewell to Lagardere he had been standing with his back to the door, and with his left hand had dexterously abstracted the key. Also, while Cocardasse had been endeavoring to gain a clasp of the hand from Lagardere, Staupitz had quietly locked the door leading to the kitchen and put that key in his pocket. Now Staupitz, Cocardasse, and Passepoil went in their turn through the main door and drew it behind them.

Lagardere seated himself at the table with a sigh of relief as he heard the heavy feet trampling down the passage, but his relief did not last long. His quick ears caught a sound that was undoubtedly the click of a key in a lock, followed by the shuffle of cautiously retiring feet. He instantly sprang to his feet, and, rushing to the main door, caught at the handle and found the door

firmly locked.

"Damn them!" he cried; "they have locked the door." Then he began to shout, furiously, calling first upon Cocardasse, and then upon Passepoil by name to open the door immediately, knowing these two to be his friends among the gang of rascals. But no answer came to his cries, and, vigorous though he was, his efforts had no effect upon the solid strength of the door. Turning, he hurried to the door which led to the kitchen and tried that, only to find that it, too, was locked against him, and that it, too, was impregnable. He looked about him hurriedly. He knew it was no use calling for the people of the Inn, who would be sure to side with their truculent customers, and he knew also that, if he did not succeed in making his escape from the trap into which he had blundered, Nevers would be murdered.

He rushed to the window and looked out. The sight was not pleasing. The rugged rock on which the Inn was perched dropped beneath him thirty feet to the moat below, and, though his eyes eagerly scanned the face of the cliff, he could see no possibility, even for one so nimble as himself, of climbing down it successfully. To jump such a height would be to end as a jelly and be of no service to Nevers. For a few wild moments he cursed his folly in having been deluded by the bravos, and then his native high spirits and his native humor came to his assistance, reminding him that he always made it his business to look upon the diverting side of life, and that it was now clearly his duty to seek for the entertaining elements of the present predicament.

Undoubtedly, these were hard to find. The jest was decidedly a bitter one, and could only be turned to his taste if he succeeded in getting out. But how was he to succeed? He tried the door again, despairingly and unsuccessfully as before. He reflected that perhaps there might be a rope in the room, and anxiously he looked in every corner. No rope was to be found.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.