

Hope Anthony

Captain Dieppe



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CHAPTER I THE HOUSE ON THE BLUFF

To the eye of an onlooker Captain Dieppe's circumstances afforded high spirits no opportunity, and made ordinary cheerfulness a virtue which a stoic would not have disdained to own. Fresh from the failure of important plans; if not exactly a fugitive, still a man to whom recognition would be inconvenient and perhaps dangerous; with fifty francs in his pocket, and his spare wardrobe in a knapsack on his back; without immediate prospect of future employment or a replenishment of his purse; yet by no means in his first youth or of an age when men love to begin the world utterly afresh; in few words, with none of those inner comforts of the mind which make external hardships no more than a pleasurable contrast, he marched up a long steep hill in the growing dusk of a stormy evening, his best hope to find, before he was soaked to the skin, some poor inn or poorer cottage where he might get food and beg shelter from the severity of the wind and rain that swept across the high ground and swooped down on the deep valleys, seeming to assail with a peculiar, conscious malice the human figure which faced them with unflinching front and the buoyant step of strength and confidence.

But the Captain was an alchemist, and the dross of outer events turned to gold in the marvellous crucible of his mind. Fortune should have known this and abandoned the vain attempt to torment him. He had failed, but no other man could have come so near success. He was alone, therefore free: poor, therefore independent; desirous of hiding, therefore of importance: in a foreign land, therefore well placed for novel and pleasing accidents. The rain was a drop and the wind a puff: if he were wet, it would be delightful to get dry; since he was hungry, no inn could be too humble and no fare too rough. Fortune should indeed have set him on high, and turned her wasted malice on folk more penetrable by its stings.

The Captain whistled and sang. What a fright he had given the Ministers, how nearly he had brought back the Prince, what an uncommon and intimate satisfaction of soul came from carrying, under his wet coat, lists of names, letters, and what not – all capable of causing tremors in high quarters, and of revealing in spheres of activity hitherto unsuspected gentlemen – aye, and ladies – of the loftiest position; all of whom (the Captain was piling up his causes of self-congratulation) owed their present safety, and directed their present anxieties, to him, Jean Dieppe, and to nobody else in the world. He broke off his whistling to observe aloud:

"Mark this, it is to very few that there comes a life so interesting as mine"; and his tune began again with an almost rollicking vigour.

What he said was perhaps true enough, if interest consists (as many hold) in uncertainty; in his case uncertainty both of life and of all that life gives, except that one best thing which he had pursued – activity. Of fame he had gained little, peace he had never tasted; of wealth he had never thought, of love – ah, of love now? His smile and the roguish shake of his head and pull at his long black moustache betrayed no dissatisfaction on that score. And as a fact (a thing which must at the very beginning be distinguished from an impression of the Captain's), people were in the habit of loving him: he never expected exactly this, although he had much self-confidence. Admiration was what he readily enough conceived himself to inspire; love was a greater thing. On the whole, a fine life – why, yes, a very fine life indeed; and plenty of it left, for he was but thirty-nine.

"It really rains," he remarked at last, with an air of amiable surprise. "I am actually getting wet. I should be pleased to come to a village."

Fortune may be imagined as petulantly flinging this trifling favour at his head, in the hope, maybe, of making him realise the general undesirability of his lot. At any rate, on rounding the next corner of the ascending road, he saw a small village lying beneath him in the valley. Immediately below him, at the foot of what was almost a precipice, approached only by a rough zigzag path, lay a little river; the village was directly opposite across the stream, but the road, despairing of such a dip, swerved sharp off to his left, and, descending gradually, circled one end of the valley till it came to a bridge and thence made its way round to the cluster of houses. There were no more than a dozen cottages, a tiny church, and an inn – certainly an inn, thought Dieppe, as he prepared to follow the road and pictured his supper already on the fire. But before he set out, he turned to his right; and there he stood looking at a scene of some beauty and of undeniable interest. A moment later he began to walk slowly up-hill in the opposite direction to that which the road pursued; he was minded to see a little more of the big house perched so boldly on that bluff above the stream, looking down so scornfully at the humble village on the other bank.

But habitations are made for men, and to Captain Dieppe beauties of position or architecture were subordinate to any indications he might discover or imagine of the characters of the folk who dwelt in a house and of their manner of living. Thus, not so much the position of the Castle (it could and did claim that title), or its handsome front, or the high wall that enclosed it and its demesne on every side save where it faced the river, caught his attention as the apparently trifling fact that, whereas one half of the facade was brilliant with lights in every window, the other half was entirely dark and, to all seeming, uninhabited. "They are poor, they live in half the rooms only," he said to himself. But somehow this explanation sounded inadequate. He drew nearer, till he was close under the wall of the gardens. Then he noticed a small gate in the wall, sheltered by a little projecting porch. The Captain edged under the porch, took out a cigar, contrived to light it, and stood there puffing pensively. He was protected from the rain, which now fell very heavily, and he was asking himself again why only half the house was lighted up. This was the kind of trivial, yet whimsical, puzzle on which he enjoyed trying his wits.

He had stood where he was for a few minutes when he heard steps on the other side of the wall; a moment later a key turned in the lock and the gate opened. Dieppe turned to find himself confronted by a young man of tall stature; the dim light showed only the vague outline of a rather long and melancholy, but certainly handsome, face; the stranger's air was eminently distinguished. Dieppe raised his hat and bowed.

"You 'll excuse the liberty," he said, smiling. "I 'm on my way to the village yonder to find quarters for the night. Your porch offered me a short rest and shelter from the rain while I smoked a cigar. I presume that I have the honour of addressing the owner of this fine house?"

"You 're right, sir. I am the Count of Fieramondi," said the young man, "and this is my house. Do me the favour to enter it and refresh yourself."

"Oh, but you entertain company, and look at me!" With a smile Dieppe indicated his humble and travel-worn appearance.

"Company? None, I assure you."

"But the lights?" suggested the Captain, with a wave of his hand.

"You will find me quite alone," the Count assured him, as he turned into the garden and motioned his guest to follow.

Crossing a path and a stretch of grass, they entered a room opening immediately on the garden; it was large and high.

Situated at the corner of the house, it had two windows facing on the garden and two towards the river. It was richly and soberly furnished, and hung with family portraits. A blazing fire revealed these features to Dieppe, and at the same time imparted a welcome glow to his body. The next minute a man-servant entered with a pair of candlesticks, which he set on the table.

"I am about to dine," said the Count. "Will you honour me with your company?"

"Your kindness to a complete stranger – " Dieppe began.

"The kindness will be yours. Company is a favour to one who lives alone."

And the Count proceeded to give the necessary orders to his servant. Then, turning again to Dieppe, he said, "In return, pray let me know the name of the gentleman who honours my house."

"I can refuse nothing to my host – to anybody else my name is the only thing I should refuse. I am called Captain Dieppe."

"Of the French service? Though you speak Italian excellently."

"Ah, that accent of mine! No, not of the French service – in fact, not of any service. I have been in many services, but I can show you no commission as captain."

For the first time the Count smiled.

"It is, perhaps, a sobriquet?" he asked, but with no offensive air or insinuation.

"The spontaneous tribute of my comrades all over the world," answered Dieppe, proudly – "is it for me to refuse it?"

"By no means," agreed his host, smiling still; "I don't doubt that you have amply earned it."

Dieppe's bow confirmed the supposition while it acknowledged the compliment.

Civilities such as these, when aided by dinner and a few glasses of red wine, soon passed into confidences – on the Captain's side at least. Accustomed to keep other people's secrets, he burdened himself with few of his own.

"I have always had something of a passion for politics," he confessed, after giving his host an account of some stirring events in South America in which he had borne a part.

"You surprise me," was the Count's comment.

"Perhaps I should say," Dieppe explained, "for handling those forces which lie behind politics. That has been my profession." The Count looked up.

"Oh, I 'm no sentimentalist," Dieppe went on. "I ask for my pay – I receive it – and sometimes I contrive to keep it."

"You interest me," said his host, in whose manner Dieppe recognised an attractive simplicity.

"But in my last enterprise – well, there are accidents in every trade." His shrug was very good-natured.

"The enterprise failed?" asked the Count, sympathetically.

"Certainly, or I should not be enjoying your hospitality. Moreover I failed too, for I had to skip out of the country in such haste that I left behind me fifty thousand francs, and the police have laid hands on it. It was my – what shall I call it? My little *pourboire*." He sighed lightly, and then smiled again. "So I am a homeless wanderer, content if I can escape the traps of police agents."

"You anticipate being annoyed in that way?"

"They are on my track, depend upon it." He touched the outside of his breast pocket. "I carry – but no matter. The pursuit only adds a spice to my walks, and so long as I don't need to sell my revolver for bread – ." He checked himself abruptly, a frown of shame or vexation on his face. "I beg your pardon," he went on, "I beg your pardon. But you won't take me for a beggar?"

"I regret what you have said only because you said it before I had begged a favour of you – a favour I had resolved to venture on asking. But come, though I don't think you a beggar, you shall be sure that I am one." He rose and laid his hand on Dieppe's shoulder. "Stay with me for to-night at least – and for as much longer as you will. Nobody will trouble you. I live in solitude, and your society will lighten it. Let me ring and give orders for your entertainment?"

Dieppe looked up at him; the next moment he caught his hand, crying, "With all my heart, dear host! Your only difficulty shall be to get rid of me."

The Count rang, and directed his servant to prepare the Cardinal's Room. Dieppe noticed that the order was received with a glance of surprise, but the master of the house repeated it, and, as the servant withdrew, added, "It is called after an old member of our family, but I can answer for its comfort myself, for I have occupied it until – "

"I 'm turning you out?" exclaimed Dieppe.

"I left it yesterday." The Count frowned as he sipped his wine. "I left it owing to – er – circumstances," he murmured, with some appearance of embarrassment in his manner.

"His Eminence is restless?" asked the Captain, laughing.

"I beg pardon?"

"I mean – a ghost?"

"No, a cat," was the Count's quiet but somewhat surprising answer.

"I don't mind cats, I am very fond of them," Dieppe declared with the readiness of good breeding, but he glanced at his host with a curiosity that would not be stifled. The Count lived in solitude. Half his house – and that the other half – was brilliantly lighted, and he left his bedroom because of a cat. Here were circumstances that might set the least inquisitive of men thinking. It crossed Dieppe's mind that his host was (he used a mild word) eccentric, but the Count's manner gave little warrant for the supposition; and Dieppe could not believe that so courteous a gentleman would amuse himself by making fun of a guest. He listened eagerly when the Count, after a long silence, went on to say:

"The reason I put forward must, no doubt, sound ludicrous, but the fact is that the animal, in itself a harmless beast, became the occasion, or was made the means, of forcing on me encounters with a person whom I particularly wish to avoid. You, however, will not be annoyed in that way."

There he stopped, and turned the conversation to general topics. Never had Dieppe's politeness been subjected to such a strain.

No relief was granted to him. The Count talked freely and well on a variety of questions till eleven o'clock, and then proposed to show his guest to his bedroom. Dieppe accepted the offer in despair, but he would have sat up all night had there seemed any chance of the Count's becoming more explicit.

The Cardinal's Room was a large apartment situated on the upper floor (there were but two), about the middle of the house; its windows looked across the river, which rippled pleasantly in the quiet of the night when Dieppe flung up the sash and put his head out. He turned first to the left. Save his own room, all was dark: the Count, no doubt, slept at the back. Then, craning his neck, he tried to survey the right wing. The illumination was quenched; light showed in one window only, a window on the same level with his and distant from it perhaps forty feet. With a deep sigh the Captain drew his head back and shut out the chilly air.

Ah, there was an inner door on the right hand side of the room; that the Captain had not noticed before. Walking up to it, he perceived that it was bolted at top and bottom; but the key was in the lock. He stood and looked at this door; it seemed that it must lead, either directly or by way of another apartment between, to the room whose lights he had just seen. He pulled his moustache thoughtfully; and he remembered that there was a person whom the Count particularly wished to avoid and, owing (in some way) to a cat, could not rely on being able to avoid if he slept in the Cardinal's Room.

"Well, then – " began Dieppe with a thoughtful frown. "Oh, I can't stand it much longer!" he ended, with a smile and a shrug.

And then there came – the Captain was really not surprised, he had been almost expecting it – a mew, a peevish, plaintive mew. "I won't open that door," said the Captain. The complaint was repeated. "Poor beast!" murmured the Captain. "Shut up in that – in that – deuce take it, in that what?" His hand shot up to the top bolt and pressed it softly back. "No, no," said he. Another mew defeated his struggling conscience. Pushing back the lower bolt in its turn, he softly unlocked the door and opened it cautiously. There in the passage – for a narrow passage some twelve or fifteen feet long was revealed – near his door, visible in the light from his room, was a large, sleek, yellow cat from whose mouth was proceeding energetic lamentation. But on sight of Dieppe the creature ceased its cries, and in apparent alarm ran half-way along the passage and sat down beside a small hole in the wall. From this position it regarded the intruder with solemn, apprehensive eyes. Dieppe,

holding his door wide open, returned the animal's stare. This must be the cat which had ejected the Count. But why – ?

In a moment the half-formed question found its answer, though the answer seemed rather to ask a new riddle than to answer the old one. A door at the other end of the passage opened a little way, and a melodious voice called softly, "Papa, papa!" The cat ran towards the speaker, the door was opened wide, and for an instant Dieppe had the vision of a beautiful young woman, clad in a white dressing-gown and with hair about her shoulders. As he saw her she saw him, and gave a startled shriek. The cat, apparently bewildered, raced back to the aperture in the wall and disappeared with an agitated whisk of its tail. The lady's door and the Captain's closed with a double simultaneous reverberating bang, and the Captain drove his bolts home with guilty haste.

His first act was to smoke a cigarette. That done, he began to undress slowly and almost unconsciously. During the process he repeated to himself more than once the Count's measured but emphatic words: "A person whom I particularly wish to avoid." The words died away as Dieppe climbed into the big four-poster with a wrinkle of annoyance on his brow.

For the lady at the other end of the passage did not, to the Captain's mind, look the sort of person whom a handsome and lonely young man would particularly wish to avoid. In spite of the shortness of his vision, in spite of her obvious alarm and confusion, she had, in fact, seemed, to him very much indeed the opposite.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN BY THE STREAM

Apart from personal hopes or designs, the presence, or even the proximity, of a beautiful woman is a cheerful thing; it gives a man the sense of happiness, like sunshine or sparkling water; these are not his either, but he can look at and enjoy them; he smiles back at the world in thanks for its bountiful favours. Never had life seemed better to Dieppe than when he awoke the next morning; yet there was guilt on his conscience – he ought not to have opened that door. But the guilt became parent to a new pleasure and gave him the one thing needful to perfection of existence – a pretty little secret of his own, and this time one that he was minded to keep.

"To think," he exclaimed, pointing a scornful finger at the village across the river, "that but for my luck I might be at the inn! Heaven above us, I might even have been leaving this enchanting spot!" He looked down at the stream. A man was fishing there, a tall, well-made fellow in knickerbockers and a soft felt hat of the sort sometimes called Tyrolean. "Good luck to you, my boy!" nodded the happy and therefore charitable Captain.

Going down to the Count's pleasant room at the corner of the left wing, he found his host taking his coffee. Compliments passed, and soon Dieppe was promising to spend a week at least with his new friend.

"I am a student," observed the Count, "and you must amuse yourself. There are fine walks, a little rough shooting perhaps – "

"Fishing?" asked Dieppe, thinking of the man in the soft hat.

"The fishing is worth nothing at all," answered the Count, decisively. He paused for a moment and then went on: "There is, however, one request that I am obliged to make to you."

"Any wish of yours is a command to me, my dear host."

"It is that during your visit you will hold no communication whatever with the right wing of the house." The Count was now lighting a cigar; he completed the operation carefully, and then added:

"The Countess's establishment and mine are entirely separate – entirely."

"The Countess!" exclaimed Dieppe, not unnaturally surprised.

"I regret to trouble you with family matters. My wife and I are not in agreement; we have n't met for three months. She lives in the right wing with two servants; I live in the left with three. We hold no communication, and our servants are forbidden to hold any among themselves; obedience is easier to insure as we have kept only those we can trust, and, since entertaining is out of the question, have dismissed the rest."

"You have – er – had a difference?" the Captain ventured to suggest, for the Count seemed rather embarrassed.

"A final and insuperable difference, a final and permanent separation." The Count's tone was sad but very firm.

"I am truly grieved. But – forgive me – does n't the arrangement you indicate entail some inconvenience?"

"Endless inconvenience," assented the Count.

"To live under the same roof, and yet – "

"My dear sir, during the negotiations which followed on the Countess's refusal to – to well, to meet my wishes, I represented that to her with all the emphasis at my command. I am bound to add that she represented it no less urgently to me."

"On the other hand, of course, the scandal – " Dieppe began.

"We Fieramondi do not much mind scandal. That was n't the difficulty. The fact is that I thought it the Countess's plain duty to relieve me of her presence. She took what I may call the exactly converse view. You follow me?"

"Perfectly," said Dieppe, repressing an inclination to smile.

"And declared that nothing – nothing on earth – should induce her to quit the Castle even for a day; she would regard such an act as a surrender. I said I should regard my own departure in the same light. So we stay here under the extremely inconvenient arrangement I have referred to. To make sure of my noticing her presence, my wife indulges in something approaching to an illumination every night."

The Count rose and began to walk up and down as he went on with a marked access of warmth. "But even the understanding we arrived at," he pursued, "I regret to say that my wife did n't see fit to adhere to in good faith. She treated it with what I must call levity." He faced round on his guest suddenly. "I mentioned a cat to you," he said.

"You did," Dieppe admitted, eyeing him rather apprehensively.

"I don't know," pursued the Count, "whether you noticed a door in your room?" Dieppe nodded. "It was bolted?" Dieppe nodded again. "If you had opened that door – pardon the supposition – you would have seen a passage. At the other end is another door, leading to the Countess's apartments. See, I will show you. This fork is the door from your room, this knife is – "

"I follow your description perfectly," interposed Dieppe, assailed now with a keener sense of guilt.

"The Countess possesses a cat – a thing to which in itself I have no objection. To give this creature, which she likes to have with her constantly, the opportunity of exercise, she has caused an opening to be made from the passage on to the roof. This piece of bread will represent – "

"I understand, I assure you," murmured Dieppe.

"Every evening she lets the cat into the passage, whence it escapes on to the roof. On its return it would naturally betake itself to her room again."

"Naturally," assented the Captain. Are not cats most reasonable animals?

"But," said the Count, beginning to walk about again, "she shuts her door: the animal mews at it; my wife ignores the appeal. What then? The cat, in despair, turns to my door. I take no heed. It mews persistently. At last, wearied of the noise, I open my door. Always – by design, as I believe – at that very moment my wife flings her door open. You see the position?"

"I can imagine it," said Dieppe, discreetly.

"We are face to face! Nothing between us except the passage – and the cat! And then the Countess, with what I am compelled to term a singular offensiveness, not to say insolence, of manner, slams the door in my face, leaving me to deal with the cat as I best can! My friend, it became intolerable. I sent a message begging the Countess to do me the favour of changing her apartment.

"She declined point-blank. I determined then to change mine, and sent word of my intention to the Countess." He flung himself into a chair. "Her reply was to send back to me her marriage contract and her wedding-ring, and to beg to be informed whether my present stay at the Castle was likely to be prolonged."

"And you replied – ?"

"I made no reply," answered the Count, crossing his legs.

A combination of feelings prevented Dieppe from disclosing the incident of the previous night. He loved a touch of mystery and a possibility of romance. Again, it is not the right thing for a guest to open bolted doors. A man does not readily confess to such a breach of etiquette, and his inclination to make a clean breast of it is not increased when it turns out that the door in question leads to the apartments of his host's wife.

Finally, the moment for candour had slipped by: you cannot allow a man to explain a locality by means of forks and knives and pieces of bread and then inform him that you were all the while

acquainted with its features. Dieppe was silent, and the Count, who was obviously upset by the recital of his grievances, presently withdrew to his study, a room on the upper floor which looked out on the gardens at the back of the house.

"What did they quarrel about?" Dieppe asked himself; the Count had thrown no light on that. "I'll be hanged if I'd quarrel with her," smiled the Captain, remembering the face he had seen at the other end of the passage. "But," he declared to himself, virtuously, "the cat may mew till it's hoarse – I won't open that door again." With this resolve strong in his heart, he took his hat and strolled out into the garden.

He had no sooner reached the front of the house than he gave an exclamation of surprise. The expanse of rather rough grass sprinkled with flower-beds, which stretched from the Castle to the point where the ground dipped steeply towards the river, was divided across by a remarkable structure – a tall, new, bare wooden fence, constituting a very substantial barrier. It stood a few paces to the right of the window which the Captain identified as his own, and ran some yards down the hill. Here was plain and strong evidence of the state of war which existed between the two wings. Neither the Count nor the Countess would risk so much as a sight of the other while they took their respective promenades. The Captain approached the obstacle and examined it with a humorous interest; then he glanced up at the wall above, drawing a couple of feet back to get a better view. "Ah," said he, "just half-way between my window and – hers! They are very punctilious, these combatants!"

Natural curiosity must, so far as it can, excuse Captain Dieppe for spending the rest of the morning in what he termed a reconnaissance of the premises, or that part of them which was open to his inspection. He found little. There was no sign of anybody entering or leaving the other wing, although (as he discovered on strolling round by the road) a gate in the wall on the right of the gardens, and a carriage-drive running up to it, gave independent egress from that side of the Castle. Breakfast with the Count was no more fruitful of information; the Count discussed (apropos of a book at which he had been glancing) the question of the Temporal Power of the Papacy with learning and some heat: he was, it appeared, strongly opposed to these ecclesiastical claims, and spoke of them with marked bitterness. Dieppe, very little interested, escaped for a walk early in the afternoon. It was five o'clock when he regained the garden and stood for a few moments looking down towards the river. It was just growing dusk, and the lights of the inn were visible in the village across the valley.

Fishermen are a persevering race, the young man in the soft hat was still at his post. But no, he was not fishing! He was walking up and down in a moody, purposeless way, and it seemed to the Captain that he turned his head very often towards the Castle. The Captain sat down on a garden-seat close under the barricade and watched; an idea was stirring in his brain – an idea that made him pat his breast-pocket, twirl his moustache, and smile contentedly. "Not much of a fisherman, I think," he murmured. "Ah, my friend, I know the cut of your jib, I fancy. After poor old Jean Dieppe, are n't you, my boy? A police-spy; I could tell him among a thousand!"

Equally pleased with the discovery and with his own acuteness in making it, the Captain laughed aloud; then in an instant he sat bolt upright, stiff and still, listening intently. For through the barricade had come two sounds – a sweet, low, startled voice, that cried half in a whisper, "Heavens, he 's there!" and then the rustle of skirts in hasty flight. Without an instant's thought – without remembering his promise to the Count – Dieppe sprang up, ran down the hill, turned the corner of the barricade, and found himself in the Countess's territory.

He was too late. The lady had made good her escape. There was nobody to be seen except the large yellow cat: it sat on the path and blinked gravely at the chagrined Captain.

"Animal, you annoy me!" he said with a stamp of his foot. The cat rose, turned, and walked away with its tail in the air. "I'm making a fool of myself," muttered Dieppe. "Or," he amended with a dawning smile, "she 's making a fool of me." His smile broadened a little. "Why not?" he asked. Then he drew himself up and slowly returned to his own side of the barricade, shaking his head and

murmuring, "No, no, Jean, my boy, no, no! He 's your host – your host, Jean," as he again seated himself on the bench under the barricade.

Evening was now falling fast; the fisherman was no longer to be seen; perfect peace reigned over the landscape. Dieppe yawned; perfect peace was with him a synonym for intolerable dulness.

"Permit me, my dear friend," said a voice behind him, "to read you a little poem which I have beguiled my leisure by composing."

He turned to find the Count behind him, holding a sheet of paper.

Probably the poet had his composition by heart, for the light seemed now too dim to read by. However this may be, a rich and tender voice recited to Dieppe's sympathetic ears as pretty a little appeal (so the Captain thought) as had ever been addressed by lover to an obdurate or capricious lady. The Captain's eyes filled with tears as he listened – tears for the charm of the verse, for the sad beauty of the sentiment, also, alas, for the unhappy gentleman from whose heart came verse and sentiment.

"My friend, you love!" cried the Captain, holding out his hand as the Count ended his poem and folded up the paper.

"And you are unhappy," he added.

The Count smiled in a sad but friendly fashion.

"Is n't it the same thing?" he asked. "And at any rate as to me you are right."

Dieppe wrung his hand. The Count, apparently much moved, turned and walked slowly away, leaving Dieppe to his meditations.

"He loves her." That was the form they took. Whatever the meaning of the quarrel, the Count loved his wife; it was to her the poem was written, hers was the heart which it sought to soften. Yet she had not looked hard-hearted. No, she had looked adorable, frankly adorable; a lady for whose sake any man, even so wise and experienced a man as Captain Dieppe, might well commit many a folly, and have many a heartache; a lady for whom —

"Rascal that I am!" cried the Captain, interrupting himself and springing up. He raised his hand in the air and declared aloud with emphasis: "On my honour, I will think no more of her. I will think, I say, no more of her."

On the last word came a low laugh from the other side of the barricade. The Captain started, looked round, listened, smiled, frowned, pulled his moustache. Then, with extraordinary suddenness, resolution, and fierceness, he turned and walked quickly away. "Honour, honour!" he was saying to himself; and the path of honour seemed to lie in flight. Unhappily, though, the Captain was more accustomed to advance.

CHAPTER III

THE LADY IN THE GARDEN

It is possible that Captain Dieppe, full of contentment with the quarters to which fortune had guided him, under-rated the merits and attractions of the inn in the village across the river. Fare and accommodation indeed were plain and rough at the Aquila Nera, but the company round its fireside would have raised his interest. On one side of the hearth sat the young fisherman, he in whom Dieppe had discovered a police-spy on the track of the secrets in that breast-pocket of the Captain's. Oh, these discoveries of the Captain's! For M. Paul de Roustache was not a police-spy, and, moreover, had never seen the gallant Captain in his life, and took no interest in him – a state of things most unlikely to occur to the Captain's mind. Had Paul, then, fished for fishing's sake? It by no means followed, if only the Captain could have remembered that there were other people in the world besides himself – and one or two others even in the Count of Fieramondi's house. "I 'll get at her if I can; but if she 's obstinate, I 'll go to the Count – in the last resort I 'll go to the Count, for I mean to have the money." Reflections such as these (and they were M. de Roustache's at this moment) would have shown even Captain Dieppe – not, perhaps, that he had done the fisherman an injustice, for the police may be very respectable – but at least that he had mistaken his errand and his character.

But however much it might be abashed momentarily, the Captain's acumen would not have been without a refuge. Who was the elderly man with stooping shoulders and small keen eyes, who sat on the other side of the fire, and had been engaged in persuading Paul that he too was a fisherman, that he too loved beautiful scenery, that he too travelled for pleasure, and, finally, that his true, rightful, and only name was Monsieur Guillaume? To which Paul had responded in kind, save that he had not volunteered his name. And now each was wondering what the other wanted, and each was wishing very much that the other would seek his bed, so that the inn might be sunk in quiet and a gentleman be at liberty to go about his private business unobserved.

The landlord came in, bringing a couple of candles, and remarking that it was hard on ten o'clock; but let not the gentlemen hurry themselves. The guests sat a little while longer, exchanged a remark or two on the prospects of the weather, and then, each despairing of outstaying the other, went their respective ways to bed.

Almost at the same moment, up at the Castle, Dieppe was saying to his host, "Good night, my friend, good night. I 'm not for bed yet. The night is fine, and I 'll take a stroll in the garden." A keen observer might have noticed that the Captain did not meet his friend's eye as he spoke. There was a touch of guilt in his air, which the Count's abstraction did not allow him to notice. Conscience was having a hard battle of it; would the Captain keep on the proper side of the barricade?

Monsieur Guillaume, owing to his profession or his temperament, was a man who, if the paradox may be allowed, was not surprised at surprises. Accordingly when he himself emerged from the bedroom to which he had retired, took the path across the meadow from the inn towards the river, and directed his course to the stepping-stones which he had marked as he strolled about before dinner, he was merely interested and in no way astonished to perceive his companion of the fireside in front of him, the moon, nearly full, revealed Paul's Tyrolean headpiece mounting the hill on the far side of the stream. Guillaume followed it, crossed the river at the cost of wet boots, ascended the slope, and crouched down behind a bush a few yards from the top. He had gained on Paul, and arrived at his hiding-place in time to hear the exclamation wrung from his precursor by the sudden sight of the barricade: from the valley below the erection had been so hidden by bushes as to escape notice.

"What the devil's that for?" exclaimed Paul de Roustache in a low voice. He was not left without an answer. The watcher had cause for the smile that spread over his face, as, peeping out, he saw a

man's figure rise from a seat and come forward. The next moment Paul was addressed in smooth and suave tones, and in his native language, which he had hurriedly employed in his surprised ejaculation.

"That, sir," said Dieppe, waving his hand towards the barricade, "is erected in order to prevent intrusion. But it does n't seem to be very successful."

"Who are you?" demanded Paul, angrily.

"I should, I think, be the one to ask that question," Dieppe answered with a smile. "It is not, I believe, your garden?" His emphasis on "your" came very near to an assertion of proprietorship in himself. "Pray, sir, to what am I indebted for the honour of this meeting?" The Captain was enjoying this unexpected encounter with his supposed pursuer. Apparently the pursuer did not know him. Very well; he would take advantage of that bit of stupidity on the part of the pursuer's superior officers. It was like them to send a man who did n't know him! "You wish to see some one in the house?" he asked, looking at Paul's angry and puzzled face.

But Paul began to recover his coolness.

"I am indeed to blame for my intrusion," he said. "I 'm passing the night at the inn, and tempted by the mildness of the air – "

"It is certainly very mild," agreed Dieppe.

"I strolled across the stepping-stones and up the hill. I admire the appearance of a river by night."

"Certainly, certainly. But, sir, the river does not run in this garden."

"Of course not, M. le Comte," said Paul, forcing a smile. "At least I presume that I address – ?"

Dieppe took off his hat, bowed, and replaced it. He had, however, much ado not to chuckle.

"But I was led on by the sight of this remarkable structure." He indicated the barricade again.

"There was nothing else you wished to see?"

"On my honour, nothing. And I must offer you my apologies."

"As for the structure – " added Dieppe, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes?" cried Paul, with renewed interest.

"Its purpose is to divide the garden into two portions. No more and no less, I assure you."

Paul's face took on an ugly expression.

"I am at such a disadvantage," he observed, "that I cannot complain of M. le Comte's making me the subject of pleasantries. Under other circumstances I might raise different emotions in him. Perhaps I shall have my opportunity."

"When you find me, sir, prowling about other people's gardens by night – "

"Prowling!" interrupted Paul, fiercely.

"Well, then," said Dieppe, with an air of courteous apology, "shall we say skulking?"

"You shall pay for that!"

"With pleasure, if you convince me that it is a gentleman who asks satisfaction."

Paul de Roustache smiled. "At my convenience," he said, "I will give you a reference which shall satisfy you most abundantly." He drew back, lifted his hat, and bowed.

"I shall await it with interest," said Dieppe, returning the salutation, and then folding his arms and watching Paul's retreat down the hill. "The fellow brazened it out well," he reflected; "but I shall hear no more of him, I fancy. After all, police-agents don't fight duels with – why, with Counts, you know!" And his laugh rang out in hearty enjoyment through the night air. "Ha, ha – it 's not so easy to put salt on old Dieppe's tail!" With a sigh of satisfaction he turned round, as though to go back to the house. But his eye was caught by a light in the window next to his own; and the window was open. The Captain stood and looked up, and Monsieur Guillaume, who had overheard his little soliloquy and discovered from it a fact of great interest to himself, seized the opportunity of rising from behind his bush and stealing off down the hill after Paul de Roustache.

"Ah," thought the Captain, as he gazed at the window, "if there were no such thing as honour or loyalty, as friendship – "

"Sir," said a timid voice at his elbow.

Dieppe shot round, and then and there lost his heart. One sight of her a man might endure and be heart-whole, not two. There, looking up at him with the most bewitching mouth, the most destructive eyes, was the lady whom he had seen at the end of the passage. Certainly she was the most irresistible creature he had ever met; so he declared to himself, not, indeed, for the first time in his life, but none the less with unimpeachable sincerity. For a man could do nothing but look at her, and the man who looked at her had to smile at her; then if she smiled, the man had to laugh; and what happened afterwards would depend on the inclinations of the lady: at least it would not be very safe to rely on the principles of the gentleman.

But now she was not laughing. Genuine and deep distress was visible on her face.

"Madame la Comtesse – " stammered the dazzled Captain.

For an instant she looked at him, seeming, he thought, to ask if she could trust him. Then she said impatiently: "Yes, yes; but never mind that. Who are you? Oh, why did you tell him you were the Count? Oh, you 've ruined everything!"

"Ruined – ?"

"Yes, yes; because now he 'll write to the Count. Oh, I heard your quarrel. I listened from the window. Oh, I did n't think anybody could be as stupid as you!"

"Madame!" pleaded the unhappy Captain. "I thought the fellow was a police-agent on my track, and – "

"On your track? Oh, who are you?"

"My name is Dieppe, madame – Captain Dieppe, at your service." It was small wonder that a little stiffness had crept into the Captain's tones. This was not, so far, just the sort of interview which had filled his dreams. For the first time the glimmer of a smile appeared on the lady's lips, the ghost of a sparkle in her eyes.

"What a funny name!" she observed reflectively.

"I fail to see the drollery of it."

"Oh, don't be silly and starchy. You 've got us into terrible trouble."

"You?"

"Yes; all of us. Because now – " She broke off abruptly. "How do you come to be here?" she asked in a rather imperious tone.

Dieppe gave a brief account of himself, concluding with the hope that his presence did not annoy the Countess. The lady shook her head and glanced at him with a curious air of inquiry or examination. In spite of the severity, or even rudeness, of her reproaches, Dieppe fell more and more in love with her every moment. At last he could not resist a sly reference to their previous encounter. She raised innocent eyes to his.

"I saw the door was open, but I did n't notice anybody there," she said with irreproachable demureness.

The Captain looked at her for a moment, then he began to laugh.

"I myself saw nothing but a cat," said he.

The lady began to laugh.

"You must let me atone for my stupidity," cried Dieppe, catching her hand.

"I wonder if you could!"

"I will, or die in the attempt. Tell me how!" And the Captain kissed the hand that he had captured.

"There are conditions."

"Not too hard?"

"First, you must n't breathe a word to the Count of having seen me or – or anybody else."

"I should n't have done that, anyhow," remarked Dieppe, with a sudden twinge of conscience.

"Secondly, you must never try to see me, except when I give you leave."

"I won't try, I will only long," said the Captain.

"Thirdly, you must ask no questions."

"It is too soon to ask the only one which I would n't pledge myself at your bidding never to ask."

"To whom," inquired the lady, "do you conceive yourself to be speaking, Captain Dieppe?"

But the look that accompanied the rebuke was not very severe.

"Tell me what I must do," implored the Captain.

She looked at him very kindly, partly because he was a handsome fellow, partly because it was her way; and she said with the prettiest, simplest air, as though she were making the most ordinary request and never thought of a refusal:

"Will you give me fifty thousand francs?"

"I would give you a million thousand – but I have only fifty."

"It would be your all, then! Oh, I should n't like to – "

"You misunderstand me, madame. I have fifty francs, not fifty thousand."

"Oh!" said she, frowning. Then she laughed a little; then, to Dieppe's indescribable agony, her eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered. She put her hand up to her eyes; Dieppe heard a sob.

"For God's sake – " he whispered.

"Oh, I can't help it," she said, and she sobbed again; but now she did not try to hide her face. She looked up in the Captain's, conquering her sobs, but unable to restrain her tears. "It's not my fault, and it is so hard on me," she wailed. Then she suddenly jumped back, crying, "Oh, what were you going to do?" and regarding the Captain with reproachful alarm.

"I don't know," said Dieppe in some confusion, as he straightened himself again. "I could n't help it; you aroused my sympathy," he explained – for what the explanation might be worth.

"You won't be able to help me," she murmured, "unless – unless – "

"What?"

"Well, unless you 're able to help it, you know."

"I will think," promised Dieppe, "of my friend the Count."

"Of the – ? Oh yes, of course." There never was such a face for changes – she was smiling now.

"Yes, think of your friend the Count, that will be capital. Oh, but we 're wasting time!"

"On the contrary, madame," the Captain assured her with overwhelming sincerity.

"Yes, we are. And we 're not safe here. Suppose the Count saw us!"

"Why, yes, that would be – "

"That would be fatal," said she decisively, and the Captain did not feel himself in a position to contradict her. He contented himself with taking her hand again and pressing it softly. Certainly she made a man feel very sympathetic.

"But I must see you again – "

"Indeed I trust so, madame."

"On business."

"Call it what you will, so that – "

"Not here. Do you know the village? No? Well, listen. If you go through the village, past the inn and up the hill, you will come to a Cross by the roadside. Strike off from that across the grass, again uphill. When you reach the top you will find a hollow, and in it a shepherd's hut – deserted. Meet me there at dusk to-morrow, about six, and I will tell you how to help me."

"I will be there," said the Captain.

The lady held out both her hands – small, white, ungloved, and unringed. The Captain's eyes rested a moment on the finger that should have worn the golden band which united her to his friend the Count. It was not there; she had sent it back – with the marriage contract. With a sigh, strangely blended of pain and pleasure, he bent and kissed her hands. She drew them away quickly, gave a nervous little laugh, and ran off. The Captain watched her till she disappeared round the corner of the barricade, and then with another deep sigh betook himself to his own quarters.

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