

Bardelys the Magnificent

By

Rafael Sabatini

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1. The Wager

Speak of the Devil," whispered La Fosse in my ear, and, moved by the words and by the significance of his glance, I turned in my chair.

The door had opened, and under the lintel stood the thick-set figure of the Comte de Chatellerault. Before him a lacquey in my escutcheoned livery of red-and-gold was receiving, with back obsequiously bent, his hat and cloak.

A sudden hush fell upon the assembly where a moment ago this very man had been the subject of our talk, and silenced were the wits that but an instant since had been making free with his name and turning the Languedoc courtship - from which he was newly returned with the shame of defeat - into a subject for heartless mockery and jest. Surprise was in the air for we had heard that Chatellerault was crushed by his ill-fortune in the lists of Cupid, and we had not looked to see him joining so soon a board at which - or so at least I boasted - mirth presided.

And so for a little space the Count stood pausing on my threshold, whilst we craned our necks to contemplate him as though he had been an object for inquisitive inspection. Then a smothered laugh from the brainless La Fosse seemed to break the spell. I frowned. It was a climax of discourtesy whose impression I must at all costs efface.

I leapt to my feet, with a suddenness that sent my chair gliding a full half-yard along the glimmering parquet of the floor, and in two strides I had reached the Count and put forth my hand to bid him welcome. He took it with a leisureliness that argued sorrow. He advanced into the full blaze of the candlelight, and fetched a dismal sigh from the depths of his portly bulk.

"You are surprised to see me, Monsieur le Marquis," said he, and his tone seemed to convey an apology for his coming - for his very existence almost.

Now Nature had made my Lord of Chatellerault as proud and arrogant as Lucifer - some resemblance to which illustrious personage his downtrodden retainers were said to detect in the lineaments of his swarthy face. Environment had added to that store of insolence wherewith Nature had equipped him, and the King's favour - in which he was my rival - had gone yet further to mould the peacock attributes of his vain soul. So that this wondrous humble tone of his gave me pause; for to me it seemed that not even a courtship gone awry could account for it in such a man.

"I had not thought to find so many here," said he. And his next words contained the cause of his dejected air. "The King, Monsieur de Bardelys, has refused to see me; and when the sun is gone, we lesser bodies of the courtly firmament must needs turn for light and comfort to the moon." And he made me a sweeping bow.

"Meaning that I rule the night?" quoth I, and laughed. "The figure is more playful than exact, for whilst the moon is cold and cheerless, me you shall find ever warm and cordial. I could have wished, Monsieur de Chatellerault, that your gracing my board were due to a circumstance less untoward than His Majesty's displeasure."

"It is not for nothing that they call you the Magnificent," he answered, with a fresh bow, insensible to the sting in the tail of my honeyed words.

I laughed, and, setting compliments to rest with that, I led him to the table.

"Ganymede, a place here for Monsieur le Comte. Gilles, Antoine, see to Monsieur de Chatellerault. Basile, wine for Monsieur le Comte. Bestir there!"

In a moment he was become the centre of a very turmoil of attention. My lacqueys flitted about him buzzing and insistent as bees about a rose. Would Monsieur taste of this capon a la casserole, or of this truffled peacock? Would a slice of this juicy ham a l'anglaise tempt Monsieur le Comte, or would he give himself the pain of trying this turkey aux olives? Here was a salad whose secret Monsieur le Marquis's cook had learnt in Italy, and here a vol-au-vent that was invented by Quelon himself.

Basile urged his wines upon him, accompanied by a page who bore a silver tray laden with beakers and Wagons. Would Monsieur le Comte take white Armagnac or red Anjou? This was a Burgundy of which Monsieur le Marquis thought highly, and this a delicate Lombardy wine that His Majesty had oft commended. Or perhaps Monsieur de Chatellerault would prefer to taste the last vintage of Bardelys?

And so they plagued him and bewildered him until his choice was made; and even then a couple of them held themselves in readiness behind his chair to forestall his slightest want. Indeed, had he been the very King himself, no greater honour could we have shown him at the Hotel de Bardelys.

But the restraint that his coming had brought with it hung still upon the company, for Chatellerault was little loved, and his presence there was much as that of the skull at an Egyptian banquet.

For of all these fair-weather friends that sat about my table - amongst whom there were few that had not felt his power - I feared there might be scarcely one

would have the grace to dissemble his contempt of the fallen favourite. That he was fallen, as much his words as what already we had known, had told us.

Yet in my house I would strive that he should have no foretaste of that coldness that to-morrow all Paris would be showing him, and to this end I played the host with all the graciousness that role may bear, and overwhelmed him with my cordiality, whilst to thaw all iciness from the bearing of my other guests, I set the wines to flow more freely still. My dignity would permit no less of me, else would it have seemed that I rejoiced in a rival's downfall and took satisfaction from the circumstance that his disfavour with the King was like to result in my own further exaltation.

My efforts were not wasted. Slowly the mellowing influence of the grape pronounced itself. To this influence I added that of such wit as Heaven has graced me with, and by a word here and another there I set myself to lash their mood back into the joviality out of which his coming had for the moment driven it.

And so, presently, Good-Humour spread her mantle over us anew, and quip and jest and laughter decked our speech, until the noise of our merry-making drifting out through the open windows must have been borne upon the breeze of that August night down the rue Saint-Dominique, across the rue de l'Enfer, to the very ears perhaps of those within the Luxembourg, telling them that Bardelys and his friends kept another of those revels which were become a byword in Paris, and had contributed not a little to the sobriquet of "Magnificent" which men gave me.

But, later, as the toasts grew wild and were pledged less for the sake of the toasted than for that of the wine itself, wits grew more barbed and less restrained by caution; recklessness hung a moment, like a bird of prey, above us, then swooped abruptly down in the words of that fool La Fosse.

"Messieurs," he lisped, with that fatuousness he affected, and with his eye fixed coldly upon Chatellerault, "I have a toast for you." He rose carefully to his feet - he had arrived at that condition in which to move with care is of the first importance. He shifted his eye from the Count to his glass, which stood half empty. He signed to a lacquey to fill it. "To the brim, gentlemen," he commanded. Then, in the silence that ensued, he attempted to stand with one foot on the ground and one on his chair; but encountering difficulties of balance, he remained upright - safer if less picturesque.

"Messieurs, I give you the most peerless, the most beautiful, the most difficult and cold lady in all France. I drink to those her thousand graces, of which Fame has told us, and to that greatest and most vexing charm of all - her cold indifference to man. I pledge you, too, the swain whose good fortune it maybe to play Endymion to this Diana.

"It will need," pursued La Fosse, who dealt much in mythology and classic lore - "it will need an Adonis in beauty, a Mars in valour, an Apollo in song, and a very Eros in love to accomplish it. And I fear me," he hiccupped, "that it will go unaccomplished, since the one man in all France on whom we have based our hopes has failed. Gentlemen, to your feet! I give you the matchless Roxalanne de Lavedan!"

Such amusement as I felt was tempered by apprehension. I shot a swift glance at Chatellerault to mark how he took this pleasantry and this pledging of the lady whom the King had sent him to woo, but whom he had failed to win. He had risen with the others at La Fosse's bidding, either unsuspecting or else deeming suspicion too flimsy a thing by which to steer conduct. Yet at the mention of her name a scowl darkened his ponderous countenance. He set down his glass with such sudden force that its slender stem was snapped and a red stream of wine streaked the white tablecloth and spread around a silver flowerbowl. The sight of that stain recalled him to himself and to the manners he had allowed himself for a moment to forget.

"Bardelys, a thousand apologies for my clumsiness," he muttered.

"Spilt wine," I laughed, "is a good omen."

And for once I accepted that belief, since but for the shedding of that wine and its sudden effect upon him, it is likely we had witnessed a shedding of blood. Thus, was the ill-timed pleasantry of my feather-brained La Fosse tided over in comparative safety. But the topic being raised was not so easily abandoned. Mademoiselle de Lavedan grew to be openly discussed, and even the Count's courtship of her came to be hinted at, at first vaguely, then pointedly, with a lack of delicacy for which I can but blame the wine with which these gentlemen had made a salad of their senses. In growing alarm I watched the Count. But he showed no further sign of irritation. He sat and listened as though no jot concerned. There were moments when he even smiled at some lively sally, and at last he went so far as to join in that merry combat of wits, and defend himself from their attacks, which were made with a good-humour that but thinly veiled the dislike he was held in and the satisfaction that was culled from his late discomfiture.

For a while I hung back and took no share in the banter that was toward. But in the end - lured perhaps by the spirit in which I have shown that Chatellerault accepted it, and lulled by the wine which in common with my guests I may have abused - I came to utter words but for which this story never had been written.

"Chatellerault," I laughed, "abandon these defensive subterfuges; confess that you are but uttering excuses, and acknowledge that you have conducted this affair with a clumsiness unpardonable in one equipped with your advantages of courtly rearing."

A flush overspread his face, the first sign of anger since he had spilled his wine.

"Your successes, Bardelys, render you vain, and of vanity is presumption born," he replied contemptuously.

"See!" I cried, appealing to the company. "Observe how he seeks to evade replying! Nay, but you shall confess your clumsiness."

"A clumsiness," murmured La Fosse drowsily, "as signal as that which attended Pan's wooing of the Queen of Lydia."

"I have no clumsiness to confess," he answered hotly, raising his voice. "It is a fine thing to sit here in Paris, among the languid, dull, and nerveless beauties of the Court, whose favours are easily won because they look on dalliance as the best pastime offered them, and are eager for such opportunities of it as you fleeing coxcombs will afford them. But this Mademoiselle de Lavedan is of a vastly different mettle. She is a woman; not a doll. She is flesh and blood; not sawdust, powder, and vermilion. She has a heart and a will; not a spirit corrupted by vanity and licence."

La Fosse burst into a laugh.

"Hark! O, hark!" he cried, "to the apostle of the chaste!"

"Saint Gris!" exclaimed another. "This good Chatellerault has lost both heart and head to her."

Chatellerault glanced at the speaker with an eye in which anger smouldered.

"You have said it," I agreed. "He has fallen her victim, and so his vanity translates her into a compound of perfections. Does such a woman as you have described exist, Comte? Bah! In a lover's mind, perhaps, or in the pages of some crack-brained poet's fancies; but nowhere else in this dull world of ours."

He made a gesture of impatience.

"You have been clumsy, Chatellerault," I insisted.

"You have lacked address. The woman does not live that is not to be won by any man who sets his mind to do it, if only he be of her station and have the means to maintain her in it or raise her to a better. A woman's love, sir, is a tree whose root is vanity. Your attentions flatter her, and predispose her to capitulate. Then, if you but wisely choose your time to deliver the attack, and do so with the necessary adroitness - nor is overmuch demanded - the battle is won with ease, and she surrenders. Believe me, Chatellerault, I am a younger man than you by full five years, yet in experience I am a generation older, and I talk of what I know."

He sneered heavily. "If to have begun your career of dalliance at the age of eighteen with an amour that resulted in a scandal be your title to experience, I agree," said he. "But for the rest, Bardelys, for all your fine talk of conquering women, believe me when I tell you that in all your life you have never met a woman, for I deny the claim of these Court creatures to that title. If you would know a woman, go to Lavedan, Monsieur le Marquis. If you would have your army of amorous wiles suffer a defeat at last, go employ it against the citadel of Roxalanne de Lavedan's heart. If you would be humbled in your pride, betake yourself to Lavedan."

"A challenge!" roared a dozen voices. "A challenge, Bardelys!"

"Mais voyons," I deprecated, with a laugh, "would you have me journey into Languedoc and play at wooing this embodiment of all the marvels of womanhood for the sake of making good my argument? Of your charity, gentlemen, insist no further."

"The never-failing excuse of the boaster," sneered Chatellerault, "when desired to make good his boast."

"Monsieur conceives that I have made a boast?" quoth I, keeping my temper.

"Your words suggested one - else I do not know the meaning of words. They suggested that where I have failed you could succeed, if you had a mind to try. I have challenged you, Bardelys. I challenge you again. Go about this wooing as you will; dazzle the lady with your wealth and your magnificence, with your servants, your horses, your equipages; and all the splendours you can command; yet I make bold to say that not a year of your scented attentions and most insidious wiles will bear you fruit. Are you sufficiently challenged?"

"But this is rank frenzy!" I protested. "Why should I undertake this thing?"

"To prove me wrong," he taunted me. "To prove me clumsy. Come, Bardelys, what of your spirit?"

"I confess I would do much to afford you the proof you ask. But to take a wife! Pardi! That is much indeed!"

"Bah!" he sneered. "You do well to draw back You are wise to avoid discomfiture. This lady is not for you. When she is won, it will be by some bold and gallant gentleman, and by no mincing squire of dames, no courtly coxcomb, no fop of the Luxembourg, be his experiences of dalliance never so vast."

"Po' Cap de Dieu!" growled Cazalet, who was a Gascon captain in the Guards, and who swore strange, southern oaths. "Up, Bardelys! Afoot! Prove your boldness and your gallantry, or be forever shamed; a squire of dames, a courtly

coxcomb, a fop of the Luxembourg! Mordemon dieu! I have given a man a bellyful of steel for the half of those titles!"

"I heeded him little, and as little the other noisy babblers, who now on their feet - those that could stand - were spurring me excitedly to accept the challenge, until from being one of the baiters it seemed that of a sudden the tables were turned and I was become the baited. I sat in thought, revolving the business in my mind, and frankly liking it but little. Doubts of the issue, were I to undertake it, I had none.

My views of the other sex were neither more nor less than my words to the Count had been calculated to convey. It may be - I know now that it was that the women I had known fitted Chatellerault's description, and were not over-difficult to win. Hence, such successes as I had had with them in such comedies of love as I had been engaged upon had given me a false impression. But such at least was not my opinion that night. I was satisfied that Chatellerault talked wildly, and that no such woman lived as he depicted. Cynical and soured you may account me. Such I know I was accounted in Paris; a man satiated with all that wealth and youth and the King's favour could give him; stripped of illusions, of faith and of zest, the very magnificence - so envied - of my existence affording me more disgust than satisfaction. Since already I had gauged its shallows.

Is it strange, therefore, that in this challenge flung at me with such insistence, a business that at first I disliked grew presently to beckon me with its novelty and its promise of new sensations?

"Is your spirit dead, Monsieur de Bardelys?" Chatellerault was gibing, when my silence had endured some moments. "Is the cock that lately crowed so lustily now dumb? Look you, Monsieur le Marquis, you are accounted here a reckless gamester. Will a wager induce you to this undertaking?"

I leapt to my feet at that. His derision cut me like a whip. If what I did was the act of a braggart, yet it almost seems I could do no less to bolster up my former boasting - or what into boasting they had translated.

"You'll lay a wager, will you, Chatellerault?" I cried, giving him back defiance for defiance. A breathless silence fell. "Then have it so. Listen, gentlemen, that you may be witnesses. I do here pledge my castle of Bardelys, and my estates in Picardy, with every stick and stone and blade of grass that stands upon them, that I shall woo and win Roxalanne de Lavedan to be the Marquise of Bardelys. Does the stake satisfy you, Monsieur le Comte? You may set all you have against it," I added coarsely, "and yet, I swear, the odds will be heavily in your favour."

I remember it was Mironzac who first found his tongue, and sought even at that late hour to set restraint upon us and to bring judgment to our aid.

"Messieurs, messieurs!" he besought us. "In Heaven's name, bethink you what you do. Bardelys, your wager is a madness. Monsieur de Chatellerault, you'll not accept it. You'll--"

"Be silent," I rebuked him, with some asperity. "What has Monsieur de Chatellerault to say?"

He was staring at the tablecloth and the stain of the wine that he had spilled when first Mademoiselle de Lavedan's name was mentioned. His head had been bent so that his long black hair had tumbled forward and partly veiled his face. At my question he suddenly looked up. The ghost of a smile hung on his sensuous lips, for all that excitement had paled his countenance beyond its habit.

"Monsieur le Marquis." said he rising, "I take your wager, and I pledge my lands in Normandy against yours of Bardelys. Should you lose, they will no longer call you the Magnificent; should I lose --I shall be a beggar. It is a momentous wager, Bardelys, and spells ruin for one of us."

"A madness!" groaned Mironsac.

"Mordieux!" swore Cazalet. Whilst La Fosse, who had been the original cause of all this trouble, vented his excitement in a gibber of imbecile laughter.

"How long do you give me, Chatellerault?" I asked, as quietly as I might.

"What time shall you require?"

"I should prefer that you name the limit," I answered.

He pondered a moment. Then "Will three months suffice you?" he asked.

"If it is not done in three months, I will pay," said I.

And then Chatellerault did what after all was, I suppose, the only thing that a gentleman might do under the circumstances. He rose to his feet, and, bidding the company charge their glasses, he gave them a parting toast.

"Messieurs, drink with me to Monsieur le Marquis de Bardelys's safe journey into Languedoc, and to the prospering of his undertaking."

In answer, a great shout went up from throats that suspense had lately held in leash. Men leapt on to their chairs, and, holding their glasses on high, they acclaimed me as thunderously as though I had been the hero of some noble exploit, instead of the main figure in a somewhat questionable wager.

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