

The Historical Nights' Entertainment

by

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Preface

In approaching "The Historical Nights' Entertainment" I set myself the task of reconstructing, in the fullest possible detail and with all the colour available from surviving records, a group of more or less famous events. I would select for my purpose those which were in themselves bizarre and resulting from the interplay of human passions, and whilst relating each of these events in the form of a story, I would compel that story scrupulously to follow the actual, recorded facts without owing anything to fiction, and I would draw upon my imagination, if at all, merely as one might employ colour to fill in the outlines which history leaves grey, taking care that my colour should be as true to nature as possible. For dialogue I would depend upon such scraps of actual speech as were chronicled in each case, amplifying it by translating into terms of speech the paraphrases of contemporary chroniclers.

Such was the task I set myself. I am aware that it has been attempted once or twice already, beginning, perhaps, with the "Crimes Celebres" of Alexandre Dumas. I am not aware that the attempt has ever succeeded. This is not to say that I claim success in the essays that follow. How nearly I may have approached success - judged by the standard I had set myself - how far I may have fallen short, my readers will discern. I am conscious, however, of having in the main dutifully resisted the temptation to take the easier road, to break away from restricting fact for the sake of achieving a more intriguing narrative. In one instance, however, I have quite deliberately failed, and in some others I have permitted myself certain speculations to resolve mysteries of which no explanation has been discovered. Of these it is necessary that I should make a full confession.

My deliberate failure is "The Night of Nuptials." I discovered an allusion to the case of Charles the Bold and Sapphira Danvelt in Macaulay's "History of England" - quoted from an old number of the "Spectator" - whilst I was working upon the case of Lady Alice Lisle. There a similar episode is mentioned as being related of Colonel Kirke, but discredited because known for a story that has a trick of springing up to attach itself to unscrupulous captains. I set out to track it to its source, and having found its first appearance to be in connection with Charles the Bold's German captain Rhynsault, I attempted to reconstruct the event as it might have happened, setting it at least in surroundings of solid fact.

My most flagrant speculation occurs in "The Night of Hate." But in defence of it I can honestly say that it is at least no more flagrant than the speculations on this subject that have become enshrined in history as facts. In other words, I claim for my reconstruction of the circumstances attending the mysterious death of Giovanni Borgia, Duke of Gandia, that it no more lacks historical authority than do any other of the explanatory narratives adopted by history to assign the guilt to Gandia's brother, Cesare Borgia.

In the "Cambridge Modern History" our most authoritative writers on this epoch have definitely pronounced that there is no evidence acceptable to historians to support the view current for four centuries that Cesare Borgia was the murderer.

Elsewhere I have dealt with this at length. Here let it suffice to say that it was not until nine months after the deed that the name of Cesare Borgia was first associated with it; that public opinion had in the mean time assigned the guilt to a half-dozen others in succession; that no motive for the crime is discoverable in the case of Cesare; that the motives advanced will not bear examination, and that they bear on the face of them the stamp of having been put forward hastily to support an accusation unscrupulously political in purpose; that the first men accused by the popular voice were the Cardinal Vice-Chancellor Ascanio Sforza and his nephew Giovanni Sforza, Tyrant of Pesaro; and, finally, that in Matarazzo's "Chronicles of Perugia" there is a fairly detailed account of how the murder was perpetrated by the latter.

Matarazzo, I confess, is worthy of no more credit than any other of the contemporary reporters of common gossip. But at least he is worthy of no less. And it is undeniable that in Sforza's case a strong motive for the murder was not lacking.

My narrative in "The Night of Hate" is admittedly a purely theoretical account of the crime. But it is closely based upon all the known facts of incidence and of character; and if there is nothing in the surviving records that will absolutely support it, neither is there anything that can absolutely refute it.

In "The Night of Masquerade" I am guilty of quite arbitrarily discovering a reason to explain the mystery of Baron Bjelke's sudden change from the devoted friend and servant of Gustavus III of Sweden into his most bitter enemy. That speculation is quite indefensible, although affording a possible explanation of that mystery. In the case of "The Night of Kirk o' Field," on the other hand, I do not think any apology is necessary for my reconstruction of the precise manner in which Darnley met his death. The event has long been looked upon as one of the mysteries of history - the mystery lying in the fact that whilst the house at Kirk o' Field was destroyed by an explosion, Darnley's body was found at some distance away, together with that of his page, bearing every evidence of death by strangulation. The explanation I adopt seems to me to owe little to speculation.

In the story of Antonio Perez - "The Night of Betrayal" - I have permitted myself fewer liberties with actual facts than might appear. I have closely followed his own "Relacion," which, whilst admittedly a piece of special pleading, must remain the most authoritative document of the events with which it deals. All that I have done has been to reverse the values as Perez presents them, throwing the personal elements into higher relief than the political ones, and laying particular stress upon the matter of his relations with the Princess of Eboli. "The Night of Betrayal" is presented in the form of a story within a story. Of the containing story let me say that whilst to some extent it is fictitious, it is by no means entirely so. There is enough to justify most of it in the "Relacion" itself.

The exceptions mentioned being made, I hope it may be found that I have adhered rigorously to my purpose of owing nothing to invention in my attempt to flesh and clothe these few bones of history.

I should add, perhaps, that where authorities differ as to motives, where there is a conflict of evidence as to the facts themselves, or where the facts admit of

more than one interpretation, I have permitted myself to be selective, and confined myself to a point of view adopted at the outset.

R. S.

LONDON, August, 1917

1. The Night Of Holyrood

The Murder of David Rizzio

The tragedy of my Lord Darnley's life lay in the fact that he was a man born out of his proper station - a clown destined to kingship by the accident of birth and fortune. By the blood royal flowing in his veins, he could, failing others, have claimed succession to both the English and the Scottish thrones, whilst by his marriage with Mary Stuart he made a definite attempt to possess himself of that of Scotland.

The Queen of Scots, enamoured for a season of the clean-limbed grace and almost feminine beauty ("ladyfaced," Melville had called him once) of this "long lad of nineteen" who came a-wooing her, had soon discovered, in matrimony, his vain, debauched, shiftless, and cowardly nature. She had married him in July of 1565, and by Michaelmas she had come to know him for just a lovely husk of a man, empty of heart or brain; and the knowledge transmuted affection into contempt.

Her natural brother, the Earl of Murray, had opposed the marriage, chiefly upon the grounds that Darnley was a Catholic, and with Argyll, Chatellerauld, Glencairn, and a host of other Protestant lords, had risen in arms against his sovereign and her consort. But Mary had chased her rebel brother and his fellows over the border into England, and by this very action, taken for the sake of her worthless husband, she sowed the first seeds of discord between herself and him. It happened that stout service had been rendered her in this affair by the arrogant border ruffian, the Earl of Bothwell. Partly to reward him, partly because of the confidence with which he inspired her, she bestowed upon him the office of Lieutenant-General of the East, Middle, and West Marches - an office which Darnley had sought for his father, Lennox. That was the first and last concerted action of the royal couple. Estrangement grew thereafter between them, and, in a measure, as it grew so did Darnley's kingship, hardly established as yet - for the Queen had still to redeem her pre-nuptial promise to confer upon him the crown matrimonial - begin to dwindle.

At first it had been "the King and Queen," or "His Majesty and Hers"; but by Christmas - five months after the wedding - Darnley was known simply as "the Queen's husband," and in all documents the Queen's name now took precedence of his, whilst coins bearing their two heads, and the legend "Hen. et Maria," were called in and substituted by a new coinage relegating him to the second place.

Deeply affronted, and seeking anywhere but in himself and his own shortcomings the cause of the Queen's now manifest hostility, he presently conceived that he had found it in the influence exerted upon her by the Seigneur Davie - that Piedmontese, David Rizzio, who had come to the Scottish Court some four years ago as a starveling minstrel in the train of Monsieur de Morette, the ambassador of Savoy.

It was Rizzio's skill upon the rebec that had first attracted Mary's attention. Later he had become her secretary for French affairs and the young Queen, reared

amid the elegancies of the Court of France, grew attached to him as to a fellow-exile in the uncouth and turbulent land over which a harsh destiny ordained that she should rule. Using his opportunities and his subtle Italian intelligence, he had advanced so rapidly that soon there was no man in Scotland who stood higher with the Queen. When Maitland of Lethington was dismissed under suspicion of favouring the exiled Protestant lords, the Seigneur Davie succeeded him as her secretary; and now that Morton was under the same suspicion, it was openly said that the Seigneur Davie would be made chancellor in his stead.

Thus the Seigneur Davie was become the most powerful man in Scotland, and it is not to be dreamt that a dour, stiff-necked nobility would suffer it without demur. They intrigued against him, putting it abroad, amongst other things, that this foreign upstart was an emissary, of the Pope's, scheming to overthrow the Protestant religion in Scotland. But in the duel that followed their blunt Scotch wits were no match for his Italian subtlety. Intrigue as they might his power remained unshaken. And then, at last it began to be whispered that he owed his high favour with the beautiful young Queen to other than his secretarial abilities, so that Bedford wrote to Cecil:

"What countenance the Queen shows David I will not write, for the honour due to the person of a queen."

This bruit found credit - indeed, there have been ever since those who have believed it - and, as it spread, it reached the ears of Darnley. Because it afforded him an explanation of the Queen's hostility, since he was without the introspection that would have discovered the true explanation in his own shortcomings, he flung it as so much fuel upon the seething fires of his rancour, and became the most implacable of those who sought the ruin of Rizzio.

He sent for Ruthven, the friend of Murray and the exiled lords - exiled, remember, on Darnley's own account - and offered to procure the reinstatement of those outlaws if they would avenge his honour and make him King of Scots in something more than name.

Ruthven, sick of a mortal illness, having risen from a bed of pain to come in answer to that summons, listened dourly to the frothing speeches of that silly, lovely boy.

"No doubt you'll be right about yon fellow Davie," he agreed sombrely, and purposely he added things that must have outraged Darnley's every feeling as king and as husband. Then he stated the terms on which Darnley might count upon his aid.

"Early next month Parliament is to meet over the business of a Bill of Attainder against Murray and his friends, declaring them by their rebellion to have forfeited life, land, and goods. Ye can see the power with her o' this foreign fiddler, that it drives her so to attain her own brother. Murray has ever hated Davie, knowing too much of what lies 'twixt the Queen and him to her dishonour, and Master Davie thinks so to make an end of Murray and his hatred."

Darnley clenched teeth and hands, tortured by the craftily administered poison.

"What then? What is to do?" he cried,

Ruthven told him bluntly.

"That Bill must never pass. Parliament must never meet to pass it. You are Her Grace's husband and King of Scots."

"In name!" sneered Darnley bitterly.

"The name will serve," said Ruthven. "In that name ye'll sign me a bond of formal remission to Murray and his friends for all their actions and quarrels, permitting their safe return to Scotland, and charging the lieges to convoy them safely. Do that and leave the rest to us."

If Darnley hesitated at all, it was not because he perceived the irony of the situation - that he himself, in secret opposition to the Queen, should sign the pardon of those who had rebelled against her precisely because she had taken him to husband. He hesitated because indecision was inherent in his nature.

"And then?" he asked at last.

Ruthven's blood-injected eyes considered him stonily out of a livid, gleaming face.

"Then, whether you reign with her or without her, reign you shall as King o' Scots. I pledge myself to that, and I pledge those others, so that we have the bond."

Darnley sat down to sign the death warrant of the Seigneur Davie.

It was the night of Saturday, the 9th of March,

A fire of pine logs burned fragrantly on the hearth of the small closet adjoining the Queen's chamber, suffusing it with a sense of comfort, the greater by contrast with the cheerlessness out of doors, where an easterly wind swept down from Arthur's Seat and moaned its dismal way over a snowclad world.

The lovely, golden-headed young queen supped with a little company of intimates: her natural sister, the Countess of Argyll, the Commendator of Holyrood, Beaton, the Master of the Household, Arthur Erskine, the Captain of the Guard, and one other - that, David Rizzio, who from an errant minstrel had risen to this perilous eminence, a man of a swarthy, ill-favoured countenance redeemed by the intelligence that glowed in his dark eyes, and of a body so slight and fragile as to seem almost misshapen. His age was not above thirty, yet indifferent health, early privation, and misfortune had so set their mark upon him that he had all the appearance of a man of fifty. He was dressed with sombre magnificence, and a jewel of great price smouldered upon the middle finger of one of his slender, delicate hands.

Supper was at an end. The Queen lounged on a long seat over against the tapestried wall. The Countess of Argyll, in a tall chair on the Queen's left, sat with elbows on the table watching the Seigneur Davie's fine fingers as they plucked softly at the strings of a long-necked lute. The talk, which, intimate and untrammelled, had lately been of the child of which Her Majesty was to be delivered some three months hence, was flagging now, and it was to fill the gap that Rizzio had taken up the lute.

His harsh countenance was transfigured as he caressed the strings, his soul absorbed in the theme of his inspiration. Very softly - indeed, no more than tentatively as yet - he was beginning one of those wistful airs in which his spirit survives in Scotland to this day, when suddenly the expectant hush was broken by a clash of curtain-rings. The tapestries that masked the door had been swept

aside, and on the threshold, unheralded, stood the tall, stripling figure of the young King.

Darnley's appearance abruptly scattered the Italian's inspiration. The melody broke off sharply on the single loud note of a string too rudely plucked.

That and the silence that followed it irked them all, conveying a sense that here something had been broken which never could be made whole again.

Darnley shuffled forward. His handsome face was pale save for the two burning spots upon his cheekbones, and his eyes glittered feveredly. He had been drinking, so much was clear; and that he should seek the Queen thus, who so seldom sought her sober, angered those intimates who had come to share her well-founded dislike of him. King though he might be in name, into such contempt was he fallen that not one of them rose in deference, whilst Mary herself watched his approach with hostile, mistrusting eyes.

"What is it, my lord?" she asked him coldly, as he flung himself down on the settle beside her.

He leered at her, put an arm about her waist, pulled her to him, and kissed her oafishly.

None stirred. All eyes were upon them, and all faces blank. After all, he was the King and she his wife. And then upon the silence, ominous as the very steps of doom, came a ponderous, clanking tread from the ante-room beyond. Again the curtains were thrust aside, and the Countess of Argyll uttered a gasp of sudden fear at the grim spectre she beheld there. It was a figure armed as for a tourney, in gleaming steel from head to foot, girt with a sword, the right hand resting upon the hilt of the heavy dagger in the girdle. The helmet's vizor was raised, revealing the ghastly face of Ruthven - so ghastly that it must have seemed the face of a dead man but for the blazing life in the eyes that scanned the company. Those questing eyes went round the table, settled upon Rizzio, and seemed horribly to smile.

Startled, disquieted by this apparition, the Queen half rose, Darnley's hindering arm still flung about her waist.

"What's this?" she cried, her voice sharp.

And then, as if she guessed intuitively what it might portend, she considered her husband with pale-faced contempt.

"Judas!" she called him, flung away from his detaining arm, and stood forth to confront that man in steel. "What seek ye here, my lord - and in this guise?" was her angry challenge.

Ruthven's burning eyes fell away before her glance. He clanked forward a step or two, flung out a mailed arm, and with a hand that shook pointed to the Seigneur Davie, who stood blankly watching him.

"I seek yon man," he said gruffly. "Let him come forth."

"He is here by my will," she told him, her anger mounting. "And so are not you - for which you shall be made to answer."

Then to Darnley, who sat hunched on the settle:

"What does this mean, sir?" she demanded.

"Why - how should I know? Why - why, nothing," he faltered foolishly.

"Pray God that you are right," said she, "for your own sake. And you," she continued, addressing Ruthven again and waving a hand in imperious dismissal, "be you gone, and wait until I send for you, which I promise you shall be right soon."

If she divined some of the evil of their purpose, if any fear assailed her, yet she betrayed nothing of it. She was finely tempered steel.

But Ruthven, sullen and menacing, stood his ground.

"Let yon man come forth," he repeated. "He has been here ower lang."

"Over long?" she echoed, betrayed by her quick resentment.

"Aye, ower lang for the good o' Scotland and your husband," was the brutal answer.

Erskine, of her guards, leapt to his feet.

"Will you begone, sir?" he cried; and after him came Beaton and the Commendator, both echoing the captain's threatening question.

A smile overspread Ruthven's livid face. The heavy dagger flashed from his belt.

"My affair is not with any o' ye, but if ye thrust yersels too close upon my notice -

"

The Queen stepped clear of the table to intervene, lest violence should be done here in her presence. Rizzio, who had risen, stood now beside her, watching all with a white, startled face. And then, before more could be said, the curtains were torn away and half a score of men, whose approach had passed unnoticed, poured into the room. First came Morton, the Chancellor, who was to be dispossessed of the great seal in Rizzio's favour. After him followed the brutal Lindsay of the Byres, Kerr of Faudonside, black-browed Brunston, red-headed Douglas, and a half-dozen others.

Confusion ensued; the three men of the Queen's household were instantly surrounded and overpowered. In the brief, sharp struggle the table was overturned, and all would have been in darkness but that as the table went over the Countess of Argyll had snatched up the candle-branch, and stood now holding it aloft to light that extraordinary scene. Rizzio, to whom the sight of Morton had been as the removal of his last illusion, flung himself upon his knees before the Queen. Frail and feeble of body, and never a man of his hands, he was hopelessly unequal to the occasion.

"Justice, madame!" he cried. "Faites justice! Sauvez ma vie!"

Fearlessly, she stepped between him and the advancing horde of murderers, making of her body a buckler for his protection. White of face, with heaving bosom and eyes like two glowing sapphires, she confronted them.

"Back, on your lives!" she bade them.

But they were lost to all sense of reverence, even to all sense of decency, in their blind rage against this foreign upstart who had trampled their Scottish vanity in the dust. George Douglas, without regard for her condition either as queen or woman - and a woman almost upon the threshold of motherhood - clapped a pistol to her breast and roughly bade her stand aside.

Undaunted, she looked at him with eyes that froze his trigger-finger, whilst behind her Rizzio grovelled in his terror, clutching her petticoat. Thus, until

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