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THE
HEADSMAN;
OR,
THE ABBAYE DES VIGNERONS.

A Tale.

BY J. FENIMORE COOPER.

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"How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds  
Makes deeds ill done."  
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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

—————
NEW EDITION.
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NEW YORK:
STRINGER AND TOWNSEND

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1856.

HEADSMAN.

Entered according to the Act of Congress, in the year 1842, by
J. FENIMORE COOPER,
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INTRODUCTION.

EARLY in October 1832, a travelling-carriage stopped on the summit of that long descent where the road pitches from the elevated plain of Moudon in Switzerland to the level of the lake of Geneva, immediately above the little city of Vévey. The postilion had dismounted to chain a wheel, and the halt enabled those he conducted to catch a glimpse of the lovely scenery of that remarkable view.

The travellers were an American family, which had long been wandering about Europe, and which was now destined it knew not whither, having just traversed a thousand miles of Germany in its devious course. Four years before, the same family had halted on the same spot, nearly on the same day of the month of October, and for precisely the same object. It was then journeying to Italy, and as its members hung over the view of the Leman, with its accessories of Chillon, Châtelard, Blonay, Meillerie, the peaks of Savoy, and the wild ranges of the Alps, they had felt regret that the fairy scene was so soon to pass away. The case was now different, and yielding to the charm of a nature so noble and yet so soft, within a few hours, the carriage was in remise, a house was taken, the baggage unpacked, and the household gods of the travellers were erected, for the twentieth time, in a strange land.

Our American (for the family had its head) was familiar with the ocean, and the sight of water awoke old

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and pleasant recollections. He was hardly established in Vévey as a housekeeper, before he sought a boat. Chance brought him to a certain Jean Descloux (we give the spelling at hazard,) with whom he soon struck up a bargain, and they launched forth in company upon the lake.

This casual meeting was the commencement of an agreeable and friendly intercourse. Jean Descloux, besides being a very good boatman, was a respectable philosopher in his way; possessing a tolerable stock of general information. His knowledge of America, in particular, might be deemed a little remarkable. He knew it was a continent, which lay west of his own quarter of the world; that it had a place in it called New Vévey; that all the whites who had gone there were not yet black, and that there were plausible hopes it might one day be civilized. Finding Jean so enlightened on a subject under which most of the eastern savans break down, the American thought it well enough to prick him closely on other matters. The worthy boatman turned out to be a man of singularly just discrimination. He was a reasonably-good judge of the weather; had divers marvels to relate concerning the doings of the lake; thought the city very wrong for not making a port in the great square; always maintained that the wine of St. Saphorin was very savory drinking for those who could get no better; laughed at the idea of their being sufficient cordage in the world to reach the bottom of the Genfer See; was of opinion that the trout was a better fish than the fêrâ; spoke with singular moderation of his ancient masters, the bourgeoisie of Berne, which, however, he always affirmed kept singularly bad roads in Vaud, while those around its own city were the best

in Europe, and otherwise showed himself to be a discreet and observant man. In short, honest Jean Descloux was a fair sample of that homebred, upright common-sense which seems to form the instinct of the mass; and which it is greatly the fashion to deride in those circles in which mystification passes for profound thinking, bold assumption for evidence, a simper for wit, particular personal advantages for liberty, and in which it is deemed a mortal offence against good manners to hint that Adam and Eve were the common parents of mankind.

“Monsieur has chosen a good time to visit Vévey,” observed Jean Descloux, one evening, that they were drifting in front of the town, the whole scenery resembling a fairy picture rather than a portion of this much-abused earth; “it blows sometimes at this end of the lake in a way to frighten the gulls out of it. We shall see no more of the steam-boat after the last of the month.”

The American cast a glance at the mountain, drew upon his memory for sundry squalls and gales which he had seen himself, and thought the boatman’s figure of speech less extravagant than it had at first seemed.

“If your lake craft were better constructed, they would make better weather,” he quietly observed.

Monsieur Descloux had no wish to quarrel with a customer who employed him every evening, and who preferred floating with the current to being rowed with a crooked oar. He manifested his prudence, therefore, by making a reserved reply.

“No doubt, monsieur,” he said, “that the people who live on the sea make better vessels, and know how to sail them more skilfully. We had a proof of that here at Vévey,” (he pronounced the word like *v-vais*, agreeably to the sounds of the French vowels,) “last summer

which you might like to hear. An English gentleman—they say he was a captain in the marine—had a vessel built at Nice, and dragged over the mountains to our lake. He took a run across to Meillerie one fine morning, and no duck ever skimmed along lighter or swifter! He was not a man to take advice from a Swiss boatman, for he had crossed the line, and seen water spouts and whales! Well, he was on his way back in the dark, and it came on to blow here from off the mountains, and he stood on boldly towards our shore, heaving the lead as he drew near the land, as if he had been beating into Spithead in a fog,”—Jean chuckled at the idea of sounding in the Lemman—“while he flew along like a bold mariner, as no doubt he was!”

“Landing, I suppose,” said the American, “among the lumber in the great square?”

“Monsieur is mistaken. He broke his boat’s nose against that wall; and the next day, a piece of her, big enough to make a thole-pin, was not to be found. He might as well have sounded the heavens!”

“The lake has a bottom, notwithstanding?”

“Your pardon, monsieur. The lake has no bottom. The sea may have a bottom, but we have no bottom here.”

There was little use in disputing the point.

Monsieur Descloux then spoke of the revolutions he had seen. He remembered the time when Vaud was a province of Berne. His observations on this subject were rational, and were well seasoned with wholesome common sense. His doctrine was simply this. “If one man rule, he will rule for his own benefit, and that of his parasites; if a minority rule, we have many masters instead of one,” (honest Jean had got hold here of a

cant saying of the privileged, which he very ingeniously converted against themselves,) "all of whom must be fed and served; and if the majority rule, and ruled wrongfully, why the minimum of harm is done." He admitted, that the people might be deceived to their own injury, but then, he did not think it was quite as likely to happen, as that they should be oppressed when they were governed without any agency of their own. On these points, the American and the Vaudois were absolutely of the same mind.

From politics the transition to poetry was natural, for a common ingredient in both would seem to be fiction. On the subject of his mountains, Monsieur Descloux was a thorough Swiss. He expatiated on their grandeur, their storms, their height, and their glaciers, with eloquence. The worthy boatman had some such opinions of the superiority of his own country, as all are apt to form who have never seen any other. He dwelt on the glories of an Abbaye des Vignerons, too, with the gusto of a Vévaisan, and seemed to think it would be a high stroke of state policy, to get up a new *fête* of this kind as speedily as possible. In short, the world and its interests were pretty generally discussed between these two philosophers during an intercourse that extended to a month.

Our American was not a man to let instruction of this nature easily escape him. He lay hours at a time on the seats of Jean Descloux's boat, looking up at the mountains, or watching some lazy sail on the lake, and speculating on the wisdom of which he was so accidentally made the repository. His view on one side was limited by the glacier of Mont Vêlan, a near neighbor of the celebrated col of St. Bernard; and on the other, his eye could range to the smiling fields that surround Gene.

va. Within this setting is contained one of the most magnificent pictures that Nature ever drew, and he bethought him of the human actions, passions, and interests of which it might have been the scene. By a connexion that was natural enough to the situation, he imagined a fragment of life passed between these grand limits, and the manner in which men could listen to the never-wearied promptings of their impulses in the immediate presence of the majesty of the Creator. He bethought him of the analogies that exist between inanimate nature and our own wayward inequalities; of the fearful admixture of good and evil of which we are composed; of the manner in which the best betray their submission to the devils, and in which the worst have gleams of that eternal principle of right, by which they have been endowed by God; of those tempests which sometimes lie dormant in our systems, like the slumbering lake in the calm, but which excited, equal its fury when lashed by the winds; of the strength of prejudices; of the worthlessness and changeable character of the most cherished of our opinions, and of that strange, incomprehensible, and yet winning *mélange* of contradictions, of fallacies, of truths, and of wrongs, which make up the sum of our existence.

The following pages are the result of this dreaming. The reader is left to his own intelligence for the moral.

A respectable English writer observed:—"All pages of human life are worth reading; the wise instruct; the gay divert us; the imprudent teach us what to shun the absurd cure the spleen."

THE HEADSMAN

CHAPTER I.

Day glimmered and I went, a gentle breeze
Ruffling the Leman lake.

ROGERS.

THE year was in its fall, according to a poetical expression of our own, and the morning bright, as the fairest and swiftest bark that navigated the Leman lay at the quay of the ancient and historical town of Geneva, ready to depart for the country of Vaud. This vessel was called the Winkelried, in commemoration of Arnold of that name, who had so generously sacrificed life and hopes to the good of his country, and who deservedly ranks among the truest of those heroes of whom we have well-authenticated legends. She had been launched at the commencement of the summer, and still bore at the fore-top-mast-head a bunch of evergreens, profusely ornamented with knots and streamers of riband, the offerings of the patron's female friends, and the fancied gage of success. The use of steam, and the presence of unemployed seamen of various nations, in this idle season of the warlike, are slowly leading to innovations and improvements in the navigation of the lakes of Italy and Switzerland, it is true; but time, even at this hour, has done little towards changing the habits and opinions of those who ply on these inland waters for a subsistence. The Winkelreid had the two low, diverging masts; the attenuated and pic-

turesquely-poised latine yards; the light, triangular sails; the sweeping and projecting gangways; the receding and falling stern; the high and peaked prow, with, in general, the classical and quaint air of those vessels that are seen in the older paintings and engravings. A gilded ball glittered on the summit of each mast, for no canvass was set higher than the slender and well-balanced yards, and it was above one of these that the wilted bush, with its gay appendages, trembled and fluttered in a fresh western wind. The hull was worthy of so much goodly apparel, being spacious, commodious, and, according to the wants of the navigation, of approved mould. The freight, which was sufficiently obvious, much the greatest part being piled on the ample deck, consisted of what our own watermen would term an assorted cargo. It was, however, chiefly composed of those foreign luxuries, as they were then called, though use has now rendered them nearly indispensable to domestic economy, which were consumed, in singular moderation, by the more affluent of those who dwelt deeper among the mountains, and of the two principal products of the dairy; the latter being destined to a market in the less verdant countries of the south. To these must be added the personal effects of an unusual number of passengers, which were stowed on the top of the heavier part of the cargo, with an order and care that their value would scarcely seem to require. The arrangement, however, was necessary to the convenience and even to the security of the bark, having been made by the patron with a view to posting each individual by his particular wallet, in a manner to prevent confusion in the crowd, and to leave the crew space and opportunity to discharge the necessary duties of the navigation.

With a vessel stowed, sails ready to drop, the

wind fair, and the day drawing on apace, the patron of the Winkelried, who was also her owner, felt a very natural wish to depart. But an unlooked-for obstacle had just presented itself at the water-gate, where the officer charged with the duty of looking into the characters of all who went and came was posted, and around whom some fifty representatives of half as many nations were now clustered in a clamorous throng, filling the air with a confusion of tongues that had some probable affinity to the noises which deranged the workmen of Babel. It appeared, by parts of sentences and broken remonstrances, equally addressed to the patron, whose name was Baptiste, and to the guardian of the Genevese laws, a rumor was rife among these truculent travellers, that Balthazar, the headsman, or executioner, of the powerful and aristocratical canton of Berne, was about to be smuggled into their company by the cupidity of the former, contrary, not only to what was due to the feelings and rights of men of more creditable callings, but, as it was vehemently and plausibly insisted, to the very safety of those who were about to trust their fortunes to the vicissitudes of the elements.

Chance and the ingenuity of Baptiste had collected, on this occasion, as party-colored and heterogeneous an assemblage of human passions, interests, dialects, wishes, and opinions, as any admirer of diversity of character could desire. There were several small traders, some returning from adventures in Germany and France, and some bound southward, with their scanty stock of wares; a few poor scholars, bent on a literary pilgrimage to Rome; an artist or two, better provided with enthusiasm than with either knowledge or taste, journeying with poetical longings towards skies and tints of Italy; a *troupe* of street jugglers, who had been turning their Neapolitan buffoonery to

account among the duller and less sophisticated inhabitants of Swabia; divers lacqueys out of place; some six or eight capitalists who lived on their wits, and a nameless herd of that set which the French call bad "subjects;" a title that is just now, oddly enough, disputed between the dregs of society and a class that would fain become its exclusive leaders and lords.

These with some slight qualifications that it is not yet necessary to particularise, composed that essential requisite of all fair representation—the majority. Those who remained were of a different caste. Near the noisy crowd of tossing heads and brandished arms, in and around the gate, was a party containing the venerable and still fine figure of a man in the travelling dress of one of superior condition, and who did not need the testimony of the two or three liveried menials that stood near his person, to give an assurance of his belonging to the more fortunate of his fellow-creatures, as good and evil are usually estimated in calculating the chances of life. On his arm leaned a female, so young, and yet so lovely, as to cause regret in all who observed her fading color, the sweet but melancholy smile that occasionally lighted her mild and pleasing features, at some of the more marked exuberances of folly among the crowd, and a form which, notwithstanding her lessened bloom, was nearly perfect. If these symptoms of delicate health, did not prevent this fair girl from being amused at the volubility and arguments of the different orators, she oftener manifested apprehension at finding herself the companion of creatures so untrained, so violent, so exacting, and so grossly ignorant. A young man, wearing the roquelaure and other similar appendages of a Swiss in foreign military service, a character to excite neither observation nor comment in that age, stood at her

elbow, answering the questions that from time to time were addressed to him by the others, in a manner to show he was an intimate acquaintance, though there were signs about his travelling equipage to prove he was not exactly of their ordinary society. Of all who were not immediately engaged in the boisterous discussion at the gate, this young soldier, who was commonly addressed by those near him as Monsieur Sigismund, was much the most interested in its progress. Though of herculean frame, and evidently of unusual physical force, he was singularly agitated. His cheek, which had not yet lost the freshness due to the mountain air, would, at times, become pale as that of the wilting flower near him; while at others, the blood rushed across his brow in a torrent that seemed to threaten a rupture of the starting vessels in which it so tumultuously flowed. Unless addressed, however, he said nothing; his distress gradually subsiding, until it was merely betrayed by the convulsive writhings of his fingers, which unconsciously grasped the hilt of his sword.

The uproar had now continued for some time: throats were getting sore, tongues clammy, voices hoarse, and words incoherent, when a sudden check was given to the useless clamor by an incident quite in unison with the disturbance itself. Two enormous dogs were in attendance hard by, apparently awaiting the movements of their respective masters, who were lost to view in the mass of heads and bodies that stopped the passage of the gate. One of these animals was covered with a short, thick coating of hair, whose prevailing color was a dingy yellow, but whose throat and legs, with most of the inferior parts of the body, were of a dull white. Nature, on the other hand, had given a dusky, brownish, shaggy dress to his rival, though his general hue was relieved by a few

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