

***A Courier
of Fortune***

By ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

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A COURIER OF FORTUNE



"GERARD, GERARD," CRIED GABRIELLE IN DIRE ALARM

TO
RALPH STUART, Esq.

MY DEAR MR. STUART: I dedicate this book to you as a memento of our delightful hours of travel and work together in writing the play—"A Courier of Fortune"—founded upon this story. The circumstances of our joint literary work were as unusual to me as they were fascinating; for, although the play was commenced in London, the last "curtain" was not written until my wife and I had crossed the Atlantic and journeyed with you on a tour of over ten thousand miles of railway travelling, through so many of the marvels of this wonderful Continent. St. Louis; Denver; Salt Lake City; San Francisco; the Pacific Seaboard north to Puget Sound; the fertile Palouse Country; Washington, Idaho, and Montana—those wealthy States of boundless promise and marvellous scenic contrasts; the cities of the Lakes, Duluth and Superior; then the young giant twins, St. Paul and Minneapolis; and by way of Milwaukee and Chicago to New York. A tour of momentous interest and a collaboration of close-knit sympathy, cementing a friendship which, I assure you, is one of the pleasantest things of my life.

YOURS EVER,
ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT.

A COURIER OF FORTUNE

CHAPTER I

THE "TIGER OF MORVAIX"

THE hot noontide sun was pouring down into the market place of Morvaix and in the shadow cast by the great Cross of St. Jean in the centre, a handsome but very soberly dressed cavalier was sheltering from the fierce July heat and closely observing the townspeople as they clustered here and there to engage in eager animated discussion. Every now and then he cast sweeping impatient glances in all directions in evident search of some one whose delay irritated him.

It was plain even to a stranger's eyes that the townsfolk were greatly excited, and that the reason which had drawn the people from their houses was both urgent and disturbing. All classes were present—burghers, merchants, shopkeepers, workmen, 'prentices, down to the poorest of the labourers and peasants. Men, women and children alike were gathered there; the men set-faced and bitter, the women sad and anxious. Discontent, anger, fear and sorrow were the emotions evinced among all save the many soldiers who moved among the excited knots, with leers for the women and oaths for the men, and jibes and ribald laughter one to another.

The young cavalier's face darkened as he listened, and more than once he started as if he would interfere, but checked himself. His keen, quick blue eyes were everywhere; and presently catching sight of two closely-cowled monks clad in

the black habit of their order, who showed at a secluded corner of the square, he left his shelter and went toward them quickly but cautiously.

As he reached them one gave him a monkish greeting and the other a military salute.

“I half feared you had forgotten the appointment,” he said, in a tone of authority; “and you are certainly forgetting your part, Pascal. Monks don’t salute like soldiers.”

“Don’t I know it?” was the reply, laughingly spoken. “I haven’t trained all our tough fellows in the monkish drill for nothing. I’ll tell my beads against Dubois here for a stoup of wine”; and taking in hand the rosary which hung conspicuously at his side, he commenced to mumble a string of nonsense words, and laughed again.

“Peace, man, peace!” said the other monk, much older in years. “You’ll be overheard and ruin all.”

“Tush! they’ll only think it’s my priestly Latin.”

“I fear I ought to have left you in Paris, Pascal,” said the cavalier. “I was warned your unruly tongue would play the mischief with a scheme that calls for tact and silence.”

“Nay, my lord——”

“Not, my lord, here. I am not Gerard de Bourbon for a few days. I have borrowed the name of that dicing scoundrel, Raoul de Cobalt, and am Gerard de Cobalt. Remember that, and watch your words until you have learnt that lesson.”

“I shall not forget. This holy man here, Dubois, will keep me in order,” answered Pascal with a smile.

“Tell me the news, Dubois.”

“All has gone as you wished. The men have all arrived; and yesterday I sought an interview with the Governor and did all as you had directed.”

“He swallowed the bait?”

“Readily. I told him that the Cardinal Archbishop had sent him a hundred fighting men for his troops, and craved permission for the hundred begging friars to remain in the city until the pilgrimage southward could be resumed.”

“Good.”

“I brought the monks in,” interposed Pascal. “A hundred tough stalwarts, every man as sober as a begging friar should be; all telling their beads with unctuous unanimity, uttering ‘Pax Vobiscum’ with fervid zeal, and praying as only Bourbons can pray—for a fight.”

“Have a care, brother,” cried Dubois quickly, as a knot of the townfolk passed.

“Have I not always care, holy brother?” cried Pascal, taking his rosary in hand again and mumbling his Paternoster in tones loud enough to reach the passers’ ears. “A fine achievement, M. de Cobalt, but it will not last.”

“What mean you?” asked Gerard quickly.

“Soldiers are soldiers, and it takes more than a monk’s gabardine to change them. When pretty girls come buzzing round, craving ‘A blessing, holy father,’ and looking so sweet and piteous, it’s not in nature, at least in soldiers’ nature, not to kiss ’em. Cherry lips lifted in supplication are strong enemies of this new discipline. I know it myself.”

“For shame, Pascal!” cried Dubois sternly. “Are we to betray everything for a pair of laughing eyes?”

“Anything can happen when there’s a shapely nose, a kissable mouth, and two soft cheeks to complete the face. Let there be haste, I say, or, Bourbons or no Bourbons, those lips will get kissed; and then there may be the devil to pay.”

“There is reason in his madcap words, Dubois,” said Gerard after a pause.

“Aye, even a fool can tell the truth,” laughed Pascal.

“But we must wait till I have proofs. When the news of this governor’s evil doings came to my father’s ears he sent me to learn the truth; and while bidding me act as I would, enjoined me to do nothing until I had clear proofs. A Bourbon does not act on mere rumours.”

“Proofs!” broke in Pascal with a swift change to earnestness. “In the devil’s name, what better proof of the man’s deeds could you find than that which is writ large on the wretched, starving faces of the people? Look at them—faces that the devil grins to see when he would tempt men and women to sin.”

"I came in during the night only, and have seen little or nothing yet," said Gerard. "What is the meaning of this gathering?"

"This devil spawn of a governor has a new ordinance to proclaim, a new tyranny to enact," said Pascal. "He will tax afresh to half its value every ounce of foodstuff that comes into the city. As if the poor wretches were not already half-starving. And this tax will finish them. Look at them and say if the Governor is not justly dubbed the Tiger of Morvaix? They are waiting his coming now with the heralds. Of a truth I would as lief dwell in hell as in Morvaix under Bourbon sway though it be in name, and Bourbon as I am to the core."

"We have had other and weightier matters to occupy us than the troubles of a small province so remote," said Gerard, with a frown at Pascal's words. "But if the tale of wrongs be warranted, the Governor, Duke de Rochelle though he be, will answer to me for them."

"By all reports he will answer to no man but himself."

"Enough, Pascal," said Gerard, with a wave of the hand. "There appear to be over many soldiers, Dubois."

"And report says theirs are the only mouths that take enough food," broke in Pascal. "Your fighting man must be fed, of course; but when it comes to feeding him with the food for which all others starve, it is first cousin to cannibalism."

"The number of the soldiery has surprised me," said Dubois seriously. "They are far too many for our small band to do much. It is well your cousin's army lies so close to Cambrai. This governor will fight hard."

“If his soldiers are loyal to him, it argues in his favour,” replied Gerard thoughtfully. “We know to what lengths the burghers of a town may be driven by their jealousy of us soldiers. We must wait.”

“And if we wait but a little while there will be no grievances left. Those who have them will be dead,” cried Pascal with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I need no taunts of yours, Pascal, to stir me to do great Bourbon’s will,” answered Gerard with some sternness.

“I meant no taunt, and spoke only my mind as friend to friend,” said Pascal.

“The Governor is coming now,” put in Dubois.

“We had better not be seen longer together. Where shall I find you at need?”

“The Duke has lodged Pascal and myself in his castle,” answered Dubois, and the two were turning away when Gerard exclaimed, in a tone of excitement—

“See, Dubois, see, that man riding by the side of the Governor. Do you recognize him?”

“It is that villain, de Proballe.”

“The old rat, so it is,” declared Pascal. “If there is devil’s work to be done in Morvaix he’ll be in it. Paris was too hot for him. I thought he was in hell by now. By the saints, he is long overdue.”

Gerard did not wait to hear the conclusion of the speech, but mingling with the crowd watched the proceedings with close interest.

It was a very strong force of soldiery, both horse and foot, that gathered in the market place round the statue, large enough to brush away like so many flies the crowd of citizens, who fell back hushed and awe-stricken before the muskets and halberds which were used with much wilful violence.

The Governor of the city, the Duke Charles de Rochelle, seated on his charger, a magnificent coal black Flemish animal, drew up in the centre of the cleared space, and gazed with amused contemptuousness upon the shrinking burghers.

He made a striking centre-piece. Short and slight of figure, yet suggesting suppleness and strength, his fifty years sat lightly on him. His fair hair had scarce a touch of grey, and his pointed auburn beard and flowing moustache might have belonged to a man twenty years his junior. His features, strong and regular, would have been handsome but for the small close-set grey eyes, whose cold, hawk-like glitter was rendered additionally repulsive by a strong cast.

“The eyes of a wild beast,” thought Gerard, who had been watching him intently. “Well named the Tiger.”

At a signal from the Governor, the herald stepped forward amid a blare of trumpets and read the proclamation. The people listened in dead silence; but at the close, loud murmurs broke out which even the presence of the soldiery could not wholly check.

"It means starvation to us," cried one lusty voice, and a powerful fellow, a smith, wielding the heavy hammer of his trade, broke through the ring of the soldiers and made as if to approach the Governor.

"What dog is this that dares to bay?" It was the Duke who spoke.

"I am no dog, my lord, but a burgher of Morvaix, and I do but speak what all here know," answered the smith sturdily.

The Duke fixed his keen eyes on the man's face, and without a word signed to some of those about him. Three soldiers sprang toward the smith, who faced them fearlessly, and lifted his hammer.

"I have done no wrong. No man shall touch me," he said threateningly.

"Down with the rebel dog," cried the Duke; and at the words the soldiers, who had hesitated, rushed upon the smith. Two went down with broken heads from blows of the terrible hammer; but the third got his halberd in, and as the man lay on the ground some others dashed forward and one of them thrust home to his heart.

"So perish all rebels," cried the Governor, in a ringing tone to the crowd; and at the threat and the sight of the smith's blood the people shrank together and cowered.

The Duke smiled coldly on the crowd, and without another word signed for the procession to reform and march on, the

people shrinking and cowering in silence from the troops as they passed.

Gerard's hot blood had fired at the scene, and he stood looking after the Governor with a heart hot with indignant anger at the foul injustice he had witnessed.

His two followers in monkish garb crossed to him and as the three whispered together, they were startled by the sound of a woman's wailing. It was the dead man's wife. She had heard the news and came rushing upon the scene in wild disordered distress, carrying her babe in her arms.

As she was nearing the body, a girl attended by a page, whose attire evidenced his mistress' high station, met her and with tender solicitude offered such consolation as was possible.

Gerard's gaze, attracted by the girl's beauty, followed the couple as together they approached the body, which had now been lifted by some of the sympathizing townfolk; and then with a cry of anger he dashed hotly toward them, followed by his companions.

There was indeed cause for his anger. Several of the brutal soldiers had rushed upon the men carrying the corpse, and with oaths and blows and threats of the Duke's anger, seized the body from them and flung it on the ground.

The girl, courageously placing herself between the soldiers and the frightened townfolk, had turned upon the former and ordered them away; but the bullies, strong in the protection of their tyrant master and presuming on their license to deal as they would with the people, first jeered at her coarsely and

then thrust her roughly aside while one of them ran and kicked the corpse with wanton brutality.

It was the attack on the girl which drove Gerard to interfere. He was by her side in an instant, flung the man who had touched her to the ground, and with eyes flashing and hand on his sword, dared the men to interfere further.

The soldiers were still present in the square in great force, however, and attracted by the tumult many came rallying to the side of their comrades. At the same time, inspired by Gerard's daring, a great crowd of the townsfolk closed up behind him; and it seemed impossible that a conflict could be avoided.

There was a moment of hesitation, however, while the two opposing bodies glared angrily at one another, and Pascal with ready wit seized it to step between them, and with uplifted crucifix threatened the soldiers with the ban of Holy Church if they attempted further violence to either dead or living.

While he was haranguing them in loud and vehement tones, a number of men in monkish dress appeared almost as if by magic, and pushing through the citizens ranged themselves at his side, thus giving an impressive background to his exhortation.

The soldiers, abashed by this strange opposition, hung back in doubt, and the citizens having in the meanwhile borne the dead body away, the trouble ended in nothing more serious than muttered threats and oaths from the soldiers and stern remonstrances from the monks.

When the soldiers had drawn off, Gerard turned to seek the girl the attack on whom had provoked him to interfere, but she had vanished.

With an eagerness which brought a smile to Pascal's face, Gerard plied those about him with questions regarding her, and learnt that she was Mademoiselle de Malincourt, and had gone away to comfort the trouble-stricken woman whose husband had been the victim of the morning's tragedy.

"You did shrewdly, Pascal," said Dubois, when the two were alone.

"Our good fellows won't thank me, for, like myself, their fingers were tingling to be at some of the rascals' throats. Where's the young lord, Gerard?"

"Gone in search of——" Pascal's laugh interposed to finish the sentence.

"Aye, aye. We can understand. There's a woman in the thing now, of course. And we shall hear more of her, or I am a monk indeed, and no soldier, which God forbend."

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