

SIR JOHN DERING

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

BY
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HERBERT LONDON POPE

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK AS A SMALL TRIBUTE TO HIS
PATIENCE, FAITHFULNESS, AND UNFALTERING
LOYALTY: WITH THE EARNEST HOPE THAT TIME MAY
BUT KNIT US EVER MORE CLOSE

JEFFERY FARNOL

SUSSEX

SIR JOHN DERING

PROLOGUE

The light of guttering candles fell upon the two small-swords where they lay, the one glittering brightly, the other its murderous steel horribly bent and dimmed; and no sound to hear except a whisper of stirring leaves beyond the open window and the ominous murmur of hushed voices from the inner chamber.

Suddenly the door of this chamber opened and a man appeared, slender, youthful and superlatively elegant from curled peruke to buckled shoes, a young exquisite who leaned heavily, though gracefully, in the doorway, glancing back over his shoulder while the slim fingers of one white hand busied themselves to button his long, flowered waistcoat and made a mighty business of it.

“Dead?” he questioned at last in a tone high-pitched and imperious. “Dead ... is he?”

Receiving an affirmative answer, his lounging figure grew tense and, turning his head, he stared at the guttering candles.

Wide eyes that glared in the deathly pale oval of a youthful face, pallid lips compressed above a jut of white chin, nostrils that quivered with every breath, sweat that trickled unheeded beneath the trim curls of his great periwig; a face that grew aged even as he stood there. Presently, with step a little uncertain, he crossed to the open lattice and leaned to stare out and up into the deepening night-sky, and yet was conscious that the others had followed him, men who whispered, held aloof from him and peered back toward that quiet inner chamber; and, with his wide gaze still upturned to the sombre heaven, he spoke in the same high, imperious tone:

“He died scarce ... ten minutes ago, I think?”

“Aye, thereabouts, sir,” answered the surgeon, wiping podgy hands upon a towel. “I did all that was possible, but he was beyond human aid when I arrived. Æsculapius himself——”

“Ten minutes!... I wonder where is now the merry soul of him?... He died attempting a laugh, you’ll remember, sirs!”

“And thereby hastened his end, sir,” added the surgeon; “the hæmorrhage——”

“Aye ... aye,” quavered young Mr. Prescott. “Lord ... O Lord, Dering—he laughed ... and his blood all a-bubbling ... laughed—and died ... O Lord!”

“’Twas all so demned sudden!” exclaimed Captain Armitage—“so curst sudden and unexpected, Dering.”

“And that’s true enough!” wailed Lord Verrian. “’S life, Dering, you were close engaged afore we had a chance to part ye!”

“To be sure I ... have pinked my man!” retorted Sir John Dering a little unsteadily and with so wild a look that Lord Verrian started.

“Nay, Dering,” quoth he soothingly. “’Twas he drew first ... and you’d scarce made a push at each other—and both o’ ye desperate fierce—than poor Charles slips, d’ye see, and impales himself on your point ... a devilish business altogether—never saw such hell-fire fury and determination!”

“I’ faith, my lord,” answered Sir John, dabbing daintily at pallid lips with belaced handkerchief, “to hear you one might imagine that ... Charles and I were ... the bitterest enemies i’ the world rather than the ... best o’ friends—aye, the best! For it seems ... a

man may love a man and ... kill a man. So in yonder room lieth my poor friend Charles, very still and silent, freed o' debts and duns at last, and I——” Sir John checked suddenly as from the stairs without stole a ripple of laughter.

“By God—a woman!” gasped Lord Verrian. Young Mr. Prescott sank down into the nearest chair, head between twitching hands; Captain Armitage sprang to bar the door, but, as he did so, it swung open and a girl smiled in upon them—a tall, handsome creature, black-eyed, full-lipped, dominant in her beauty.

“Lord, gentlemen!” she exclaimed, glancing swiftly from one face to another; “I protest y’are very gloomily mum—as I were a ghost. Nay—what is it? Are you all dumb? Where is Charles?... He was to meet me here! You, my Lord Verrian ... Captain Armitage—where is Charles?”

Lord Verrian turned his back, mumbling incoherencies; Mr. Prescott groaned. And then her quick glance had caught the glitter of the swords upon the table. “Charles!” she cried suddenly. “Charles! Ah—my God!”

Captain Armitage made a feeble effort to stay her, but, brushing him imperiously aside, she fled into the inner room.

Ensued a moment of tense and painful stillness, and then upon the air rose a dreadful strangled screaming, and she was back, the awful sound still issuing from her quivering lips.

“Who ... who,” she gasped at last, “which of you ... which of you ... did it?”

No one spoke, only Sir John Dering bowed, laced handkerchief to lip.

“You—ah, ’twas you?” she questioned in hoarse whisper. “I ... do not know you.... Your name, sir?”

“I am called John Dering, madam.”

“Dering,” she repeated in the same tense voice—“John Dering—I shall not forget! And ’twas you killed him—’twas you murdered my Charles—you—you?”

And now she broke out into a wild farrago of words, bitter reproaches and passionate threats, while Sir John stood immobile, head bowed, laced handkerchief to lip, mute beneath the lash of her tongue. Softly, stealthily, one by one, the others crept from the room until the twain were alone, unseen, unheard, save by one beyond the open casement who stood so patiently in the gathering dusk, watching Sir John’s drooping figure with such keen anxiety.

“... God curse you!” she panted hoarsely. “God’s curse on you for the murderer you are! Aye, but you shall suffer for it, I swear! You shall rue this night’s work to the end of your life——” The passionate voice broke upon a gasping sob, and then Sir John spoke, his head still bowed:

“True, madam, I shall ... suffer and grieve for this ... to the end o’ my days for ... Charles was ... my friend——”

“And you are his murderer, John Dering—so am I your enemy!” she cried. “Your sin may be soon forgot—the world may forgive you—even God may, but I—never will! My vengeance shall follow you, to end only with your last breath——”

Sir John coughed suddenly, the handkerchief at his mouth became all at once horribly crimson, and, sinking to his knees, he swayed over sideways; lying thus, it chanced that the long, embroidered

waistcoat he had so vainly sought to button, fell open, discovering the great and awful stains below.

For a moment the girl stood rigid, staring down at the serene but death-pale face at her feet; and then the door swung violently open to admit a very tall man who ran to kneel and lift that slender form, to chafe the nerveless hands and drop hot tears upon the pallid cheek.

“John, John.... O John.... O lad—is this the end——”

Sir John Dering’s eyes opened, and he stared up into the square, bronzed face above him with a faint smile.

“Hector ... is’t you, Hector?” he whispered. “Tell her ... the lady ... that I think ... her vengeance will end ... to-night! Which is ... very well——”

“Woman,” cried the man Hector, lifting agonised face, “if ye be true woman run for the surgeon quick, ere he die!”

“Die?” she echoed. “Aye—’twere better he died, far better for him—and for me!” So saying, she turned and sped from the room, laughing wildly as she ran.

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES THE DOG WITH A BAD NAME

Sir John Dering, at loss for a rhyme, paused in the throes of composition to flick a speck of dust from snowy ruffle, to glance from polished floor to painted ceiling, to survey his own reflection in the mirror opposite, noting with a critical eye all that pertained to his exquisite self, the glossy curls of his great, black periwig, the graceful folds of full-skirted, embroidered coat, his sleek silk stockings and dainty, gold-buckled shoes; and discovering naught in his resplendent person to cavil at, turned back to his unfinished manuscript, sighing plaintively.

“‘Soul’!” he murmured; “a damnable word, so many rhymes to’t and none of ’em apt! Roll, coal, hole, foal, goal, pole ... a devilish word! Mole, shoal, vole—pish!”

It was at this precise juncture that the latch behind him was lifted softly and upon the threshold stood a man whose height and breadth seemed to fill the doorway, a man whose hard-worn clothes were dusty with travel, whose long, unkempt periwig, set somewhat askew, framed a lean, brown face notable for a pair of keen, blue eyes and the fierce jut of brow, cheek-bone and jaw: a shabby person, indeed, and very much at odds with the dainty luxury of the chamber before him.

Thus, Hector MacLean, or more properly, General Sir Hector Lauchlan MacLean, six foot four of Highland Scot, having surveyed painted walls, polished floor and frescoed ceiling, folded

mighty arms, scowled at Sir John's shapely, unconscious back and emitted a sound that none but a true-born Scot may ever achieve.

"Umph-humph!" exclaimed Hector MacLean; whereupon Sir John started, dropped his quill and was upon his feet all in a moment, modish languor and exquisite affectations all forgotten in eager welcome.

"Hector!" he exclaimed, grasping the Scot's two bony fists; "Hector man, what should bring you all the way to Paris—and me—after all this time?"

"Four years, John, four years and mair!" nodded Sir Hector. "Four years and they might be eight, judging by y'r looks. Lad, I'd hardly know ye ... sic a mighty fine gentleman an' sae pale——"

"A delicate pallor is the mode, Hector," smiled Sir John. "But what brings you to Paris?"

"Aye—what, John?" retorted Sir Hector, with a dour shake of the head. "Who but yourself! What's all this I'm hearing concerning ye, John?"

"Evil beyond a doubt, Hector—evil, I'll wager. But 'tis no reason you should stand and scowl when you might sit and smile like the old friend you are——"

"Aye, always your friend, lad, if 'twere only for your father's sake!"

"And mine also, I hope, Hector?"

"Aye, John, though you're no the man your father was!"

"I know it, Hector."

“And ’tis memory o’ him and the promise I made him to be ever mindful o’ your welfare hath brought me these weary miles to Parus——”

“And since you are here, you shall stay with me, Hector. Egad, ’twill be like old times!”

“No, no, John,” sighed MacLean, glancing round the luxurious apartment; “you’ve grown too fine for me, these days! My dusty claes wad foul your dainty chairs and silken cushions. No, no, lad, you’re become too grand a gentleman for a poor, rough, old soldier——”

“Tush and a fiddlestick!” exclaimed Sir John, forcing him down into the nearest chair. “My home is yours whenever you will, Hector.”

“Hame, John?” retorted MacLean. “Hame, d’ye call it? Look at this room—all silken fripperies like a leddy’s boudoir.... And talkin’ o’ ladies—look up yonder!”—and he stabbed a bony finger at the painted ceiling where nude dryads sported against a flowery background. “Aye ... obsairve ’em!” snorted MacLean, forsaking precise English for broad Scots—a true sign of mental perturbation. “Gude sakes, regaird yon painted besoms wi’ ne’er a clout tae cover ’em—’tis no’ a sicht for decent eyes!”

“They were done by a famous painter, Hector, and represent the three Graces——”

“Dis-graces, I ca’ ’em! Man, they’re ... fair owerpowerin’!”

“Then don’t heed ’em, Hector; regard me instead.”

“Yourself, is it?” sighed MacLean. “O man, there’s enough o’ lace an’ broidery aboot ye tae rig oot a’ three o’ y’r dis-graces frae top tae tae. Ah, Johnnie lad, when I obsairve a’ y’r finery o’ claes an’ mind hoo y’r father was dressed the day he panted his life oot in my arms wi’ a French bayonet in his wame ... an auld tattered sairvice coat.... Aweel, aweel, he was a man, John ... dead before you were old enough to ken him, mair’s the peety ... aye, mair’s the peety. An’ to-day, lad, here’s me wi’ ane fut i’ the grave, and here’s yersel’ vera prone tae a’ manner o’ follies an’ sic by reason as you’re wilfu’ and over-young——”

“I’m twenty-seven, Hector!”

“Aye, a wilfu’ bairn, John, and a’m an auld man ill able tae cope wi’ ye, laddie, bein’ vera feeble and bowed wi’ years.”

“Sink me, Hector, but you’re strong as a horse and straight as your sword, and can’t be a day older than fifty-five or six——”

“Feefty-ane, John, fifty-one, whateffer! But I was ever a quiet, plain, simple body tae follow the skirl o’ the war-pipes ... battle, skirmish an’ siege ... juist a puir, God-fearin’ soger-body——”

“Though King William made you a knight and a General, Sir Hector!”

“Och aye ... but best of a’—I was y’r father’s friend, his comrade an’ brither-in-arms in camp an’ field, y’ ken!” Sir Hector was silent a moment; when next he spoke, his English was more precise than usual. “When your noble father died, John, he left you and your mother to my care.... So soon as the wars were over I hastened to take up this sacred charge and found your mother dying ... but

you were alive enough—a bonnie, braw, wee thing.... And since then, John, since then——”

“You have been everything to me, Hector—my only true friend!”

“God knoweth I have tried to be faithful to the trust, to keep my word to your father and do my duty by his son——”

“And, sir, indeed you have!”

“Ah, but have I, John—have I so, indeed? Have I trained you up to be the honourable gentleman your father would have been proud of calling son? Have I, lad—have I?”

“I trust so, sir.”

“And yet, John—and yet——” Sir Hector rose, his grim lips twitching strangely, and began to pace the floor in sudden agitation. Now, as he turned, it chanced that the scabbard of his long, broad-bladed Andrea Ferrara swept a dainty Sèvres ornament to the floor, whereupon he halted to stare down at the fragments with eyes of horrified dismay.

“Forgi’e me, John, forgi’e me!” he exclaimed, unheeding Sir John’s reassurances; “but ye see, lad, a’m no juist the man tae be trusted amang sic dainty trifles as yon. Look at it—shivered beyond repair ... ’tis like a man’s honour! An’ talking of honour, John, your father was a noble gentleman, proud of his honourable name, who kept that name unsullied all his days.... Have you done as much, John? O lad, you that are my dead friend’s son, you that I have bred from your youth up—have you done as much?”

“Do you doubt it, Hector?”

“Aye, I do, John. God help me, I must—unless report lies.”

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