

The Black Robe

by

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Before The Story.....	3
The Confidences	29
The Jesuits.....	35
The Introduction To Romaine.....	40
Father Benwell Hits	46
Father Benwell Misses.....	50
The Order Of The Dishes.....	56
The Influence Of Stella.....	62
The Priest Or The Woman	66
The Public And The Pictures	74
Father Benwell's Correspondence.....	76
Stella Asserts Herself.....	82
The General's Family	87
Father Benwell's Correspondence.....	96
The Sandwich Dance	98
The Question Of Marriage	104
The End Of The Ball.....	110
In The Small Hours	114
The Honeymoon.....	121
Events At Ten Acres	124
Father Benwell And The Book	130
The End Of The Honeymoon.....	136
Father Benwell's Correspondence.....	143
The Breach Is Widened.....	161
A Christian Jesuit.....	164
Winterfield Returns.....	172
Father Benwell's Correspondence.....	178
Bernard Winterfield's Correspondence	182
The Saddest Of All Words	184
The Impulsive Sex	189
Father Benwell's Correspondence.....	195
Mrs. Eyreco Urt's Discovery.....	196
The Seed Is Sown.....	202
The Harvest Is Reaped	205
On The Road To Rome	213
After The Story	220

Before The Story

FIRST SCENE.

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER.--THE DUEL.

I.

THE doctors could do no more for the Dowager Lady Berrick.

When the medical advisers of a lady who has reached seventy years of age recommend the mild climate of the South of France, they mean in plain language that they have arrived at the end of their resources. Her ladyship gave the mild climate a fair trial, and then decided (as she herself expressed it) to "die at home." Traveling slowly, she had reached Paris at the date when I last heard of her. It was then the beginning of November. A week later, I met with her nephew, Lewis Romaine, at the club.

"What brings you to London at this time of year?" I asked.

"The fatality that pursues me," he answered grimly. "I am one of the unluckiest men living."

He was thirty years old; he was not married; he was the enviable possessor of the fine old country seat, called Vange Abbey; he had no poor relations; and he was one of the handsomest men in England. When I add that I am, myself, a retired army officer, with a wretched income, a disagreeable wife, four ugly children, and a burden of fifty years on my back, no one will be surprised to hear that I answered Romaine, with bitter sincerity, in these words:

"I wish to heaven I could change places with you!"

"I wish to heaven you could!" he burst out, with equal sincerity on his side. "Read that."

He handed me a letter addressed to him by the traveling medical attendant of Lady Berrick. After resting in Paris, the patient had continued her homeward journey as far as Boulogne. In her suffering condition, she was liable to sudden fits of caprice. An insurmountable horror of the Channel passage had got possession of her; she positively refused to be taken on board the steamboat. In this difficulty, the lady who held the post of her "companion" had ventured on a suggestion. Would Lady Berrick consent to make the Channel passage if her nephew came to Boulogne expressly to accompany her on the voyage? The reply had been so immediately favorable, that the

doctor lost no time in communicating with Mr. Lewis Romaine. This was the substance of the letter.

It was needless to ask any more questions--Romaine was plainly on his way to Boulogne. I gave him some useful information. "Try the oysters," I said, "at the restaurant on the pier."

He never even thanked me. He was thinking entirely of himself.

"Just look at my position," he said. "I detest Boulogne; I cordially share my aunt's horror of the Channel passage; I had looked forward to some months of happy retirement in the country among my books--and what happens to me? I am brought to London in this season of fogs, to travel by the tidal train at seven to-morrow morning--and all for a woman with whom I have no sympathies in common. If I am not an unlucky man--who is?"

He spoke in a tone of vehement irritation which seemed to me, under the circumstances, to be simply absurd. But my nervous system is not the irritable system--sorely tried by night study and strong tea--of my friend Romaine. "It's only a matter of two days," I remarked, by way of reconciling him to his situation.

"How do I know that?" he retorted. "In two days the weather may be stormy. In two days she may be too ill to be moved. Unfortunately, I am her heir; and I am told I must submit to any whim that seizes her. I'm rich enough already; I don't want her money. Besides, I dislike all traveling--and especially traveling alone. You are an idle man. If you were a good friend, you would offer to go with me." He added, with the delicacy which was one of the redeeming points in his wayward character. "Of course as my guest."

I had known him long enough not to take offense at his reminding me, in this considerate way, that I was a poor man. The proposed change of scene tempted me. What did I care for the Channel passage? Besides, there was the irresistible attraction of getting away from home. The end of it was that I accepted Romaine's invitation.

II.

SHORTLY after noon, on the next day, we were established at Boulogne--near Lady Berrick, but not at her hotel. "If we live in the same house," Romaine reminded me, "we shall be bored by the companion and the doctor. Meetings on the stairs, you know, and exchanging bows and small talk." He hated those trivial conventionalities of society, in which, other people delight. When somebody once asked him in what company he felt most at ease? he made a shocking answer--he said, "In the company of dogs."

I waited for him on the pier while he went to see her ladyship. He joined me again with his bitterest smile. "What did I tell you? She is not well enough to

see me to-day. The doctor looks grave, and the companion puts her handkerchief to her eyes. We may be kept in this place for weeks to come."

The afternoon proved to be rainy. Our early dinner was a bad one. This last circumstance tried his temper sorely. He was no gourmand; the question of cookery was (with him) purely a matter of digestion. Those late hours of study, and that abuse of tea to which I have already alluded, had sadly injured his stomach. The doctors warned him of serious consequences to his nervous system, unless he altered his habits. He had little faith in medical science, and he greatly overrated the restorative capacity of his constitution. So far as I know, he had always neglected the doctors' advice.

The weather cleared toward evening, and we went out for a walk. We passed a church--a Roman Catholic church, of course--the doors of which were still open. Some poor women were kneeling at their prayers in the dim light. "Wait a minute," said Romaine. "I am in a vile temper. Let me try to put myself into a better frame of mind."

I followed him into the church. He knelt down in a dark corner by himself. I confess I was surprised. He had been baptized in the Church of England; but, so far as outward practice was concerned, he belonged to no religious community. I had often heard him speak with sincere reverence and admiration of the spirit of Christianity--but he never, to my knowledge, attended any place of public worship. When we met again outside the church, I asked if he had been converted to the Roman Catholic faith.

"No," he said. "I hate the inveterate striving of that priesthood after social influence and political power as cordially as the fiercest Protestant living. But let us not forget that the Church of Rome has great merits to set against great faults. Its system is administered with an admirable knowledge of the higher needs of human nature. Take as one example what you have just seen. The solemn tranquillity of that church, the poor people praying near me, the few words of prayer by which I silently united myself to my fellow-creatures, have calmed me and done me good. In our country I should have found the church closed, out of service hours." He took my arm and abruptly changed the subject. "How will you occupy yourself," he asked, "if my aunt receives me to-morrow?"

I assured him that I should easily find ways and means of getting through the time. The next morning a message came from Lady Berrick, to say that she would see her nephew after breakfast. Left by myself, I walked toward the pier, and met with a man who asked me to hire his boat. He had lines and bait, at my service. Most unfortunately, as the event proved, I decided on occupying an hour or two by sea fishing.

The wind shifted while we were out, and before we could get back to the harbor, the tide had turned against us. It was six o'clock when I arrived at the hotel. A little open carriage was waiting at the door. I found Romaine

impatiently expecting me, and no signs of dinner on the table. He informed me that he had accepted an invitation, in which I was included, and promised to explain everything in the carriage.

Our driver took the road that led toward the High Town. I subordinated my curiosity to my sense of politeness, and asked for news of his aunt's health.

"She is seriously ill, poor soul," he said. "I am sorry I spoke so petulantly and so unfairly when we met at the club. The near prospect of death has developed qualities in her nature which I ought to have seen before this. No matter how it may be delayed, I will patiently wait her time for the crossing to England."

So long as he believed himself to be in the right, he was, as to his actions and opinions, one of the most obstinate men I ever met with. But once let him be convinced that he was wrong, and he rushed into the other extreme--became needlessly distrustful of himself, and needlessly eager in seizing his opportunity of making atonement. In this latter mood he was capable (with the best intentions) of committing acts of the most childish imprudence. With some misgivings, I asked how he had amused himself in my absence.

"I waited for you," he said, "till I lost all patience, and went out for a walk. First, I thought of going to the beach, but the smell of the harbor drove me back into the town; and there, oddly enough, I met with a man, a certain Captain Peterkin, who had been a friend of mine at college."

"A visitor to Boulogne?" I inquired.

"Not exactly."

"A resident?"

"Yes. The fact is, I lost sight of Peterkin when I left Oxford--and since that time he seems to have drifted into difficulties. We had a long talk. He is living here, he tells me, until his affairs are settled."

I needed no further enlightenment--Captain Peterkin stood as plainly revealed to me as if I had known him for years. "Isn't it a little imprudent," I said, "to renew your acquaintance with a man of that sort? Couldn't you have passed him, with a bow?"

Bolnayne smiled uneasily. "I daresay you're right," he answered. "But, remember, I had left my aunt, feeling ashamed of the unjust way in which I had thought and spoken of her. How did I know that I mightn't be wronging an old friend next, if I kept Peterkin at a distance? His present position may be as much his misfortune, poor fellow, as his fault. I was half inclined to pass him, as you say--but I distrusted my own judgment. He held out his

hand, and he was so glad to see me. It can't be helped now. I shall be anxious to hear your opinion of him."

"Are we going to dine with Captain Peterkin?"

"Yes. I happened to mention that wretched dinner yesterday at our hotel. He said, 'Come to my boarding-house. Out of Paris, there isn't such a table d'hote in France.' I tried to get off it--not caring, as you know, to go among strangers--I said I had a friend with me. He invited you most cordially to accompany me. More excuses on my part only led to a painful result. I hurt Peterkin's feelings. 'I'm down in the world,' he said, 'and I'm not fit company for you and your friends. I beg your pardon for taking the liberty of inviting you!' He turned away with the tears in his eyes. What could I do?"

I thought to myself, "You could have lent him five pounds, and got rid of his invitation without the slightest difficulty." If I had returned in reasonable time to go out with Romaine, we might not have met the captain--or, if we had met him, my presence would have prevented the confidential talk and the invitation that followed. I felt I was to blame--and yet, how could I help it? It was useless to remonstrate: the mischief was done.

We left the Old Town on our right hand, and drove on, past a little colony of suburban villas, to a house standing by itself, surrounded by a stone wall. As we crossed the front garden on our way to the door, I noticed against the side of the house two kennels, inhabited by two large watch-dogs. Was the proprietor afraid of thieves?

III.

THE moment we were introduced to the drawing-room, my suspicions of the company we were likely to meet with were fully confirmed.

"Cards, billiards, and betting"--there was the inscription legibly written on the manner and appearance of Captain Peterkin. The bright-eyed yellow old lady who kept the boarding-house would have been worth five thousand pounds in jewelry alone, if the ornaments which profusely covered her had been genuine precious stones. The younger ladies present had their cheeks as highly rouged and their eyelids as elaborately penciled in black as if they were going on the stage, instead of going to dinner. We found these fair creatures drinking Madeira as a whet to their appetites. Among the men, there were two who struck me as the most finished and complete blackguards whom I had ever met with in all my experience, at home and abroad. One, with a brown face and a broken nose, was presented to us by the title of "Commander," and was described as a person of great wealth and distinction in Peru, traveling for amusement. The other wore a military uniform and decorations, and was spoken of as "the General." A bold bullying manner, a fat sodden face, little leering eyes, and greasy-looking hands, made this man so repellent to me that I privately longed to kick him. Romaine had evidently

been announced, before our arrival, as a landed gentleman with a large income. Men and women vied in servile attentions to him. When we went into the dining-room, the fascinating creature who sat next to him held her fan before her face, and so made a private interview of it between the rich Englishman and herself. With regard to the dinner, I shall only report that it justified Captain Peterkin's boast, in some degree at least. The wine was good, and the conversation became gay to the verge of indelicacy. Usually the most temperate of men, Romaine was tempted by his neighbors into drinking freely. I was unfortunately seated at the opposite extremity of the table, and I had no opportunity of warning him.

The dinner reached its conclusion, and we all returned together, on the foreign plan, to coffee and cigars in the drawing-room. The women smoked, and drank liqueurs as well as coffee, with the men. One of them went to the piano, and a little impromptu ball followed, the ladies dancing with their cigarettes in their mouths. Keeping my eyes and ears on the alert, I saw an innocent-looking table, with a surface of rosewood, suddenly develop a substance of green cloth. At the same time, a neat little roulette-table made its appearance from a hiding-place in a sofa. Passing near the venerable landlady, I heard her ask the servant, in a whisper, "if the dogs were loose?" After what I had observed, I could only conclude that the dogs were used as a patrol, to give the alarm in case of a descent of the police. It was plainly high time to thank Captain Peterkin for his hospitality, and to take our leave.

"We have had enough of this," I whispered to Romaine in English. "Let us go."

In these days it is a delusion to suppose that you can speak confidentially in the English language, when French people are within hearing. One of the ladies asked Romaine, tenderly, if he was tired of her already. Another reminded him that it was raining heavily (as we could all hear), and suggested waiting until it cleared up. The hideous General waved his greasy hand in the direction of the card table, and said, "The game is waiting for us."

Romaine was excited, but not stupefied, by the wine he had drunk. He answered, discreetly enough, "I must beg you to excuse me; I am a poor card player."

The General suddenly looked grave. "You are speaking, sir, under a strange misapprehension," he said. "Our game is lansquenet--essentially a game of chance. With luck, the poorest player is a match for the whole table."

Romaine persisted in his refusal. As a matter of course, I supported him, with all needful care to avoid giving offense. The General took offense, nevertheless. He crossed his arms on his breast, and looked at us fiercely.

"Does this mean, gentlemen, that you distrust the company?" he asked.

The broken-nosed Commander, hearing the question, immediately joined us, in the interests of peace--bearing with him the elements of persuasion, under the form of a lady on his arm.

The lady stepped briskly forward, and tapped the General on the shoulder with her fan. "I am one of the company," she said, "and I am sure Mr. Romaine doesn't distrust me." She turned to Romaine with her most irresistible smile. "A gentleman always plays cards," she resumed, "when he has a lady for a partner. Let us join our interests at the table--and, dear Mr. Romaine, don't risk too much!" She put her pretty little purse into his hand, and looked as if she had been in love with him for half her lifetime.

The fatal influence of the sex, assisted by wine, produced the inevitable result. Romaine allowed himself to be led to the card table. For a moment the General delayed the beginning of the game. After what had happened, it was necessary that he should assert the strict sense of justice that was in him. "We are all honorable men," he began.

"And brave men," the Commander added, admiring the General.

"And brave men," the General admitted, admiring the Commander. "Gentlemen, if I have been led into expressing myself with unnecessary warmth of feeling, I apologize, and regret it.

"Nobly spoken!" the Commander pronounced. The General put his hand on his heart and bowed. The game began.

As the poorest man of the two I had escaped the attentions lavished by the ladies on Romaine. At the same time I was obliged to pay for my dinner, by taking some part in the proceedings of the evening. Small stakes were allowed, I found, at roulette; and, besides, the heavy chances in favor of the table made it hardly worth while to run the risk of cheating in this case. I placed myself next to the least rascally-looking man in the company, and played roulette.

For a wonder, I was successful at the first attempt. My neighbor handed me my winnings. "I have lost every farthing I possess," he whispered to me, piteously, "and I have a wife and children at home." I lent the poor wretch five francs. He smiled faintly as he looked at the money. "It reminds me," he said, "of my last transaction, when I borrowed of that gentleman there, who is betting on the General's luck at the card table. Beware of employing him as I did. What do you think I got for my note of hand of four thousand francs? A hundred bottles of champagne, fifty bottles of ink, fifty bottles of blacking, three dozen handkerchiefs, two pictures by unknown masters, two shawls, one hundred maps, and--five francs."

We went on playing. My luck deserted me; I lost, and lost, and lost again. From time to time I looked round at the card table. The "deal" had fallen

early to the General, and it seemed to be indefinitely prolonged. A heap of notes and gold (won mainly from Romaine, as I afterward discovered) lay before him. As for my neighbor, the unhappy possessor of the bottles of blacking, the pictures by unknown masters, and the rest of it, he won, and then rashly presumed on his good fortune. Deprived of his last farthing, he retired into a corner of the room, and consoled himself with a cigar. I had just arisen, to follow his example, when a furious uproar burst out at the card table.

I saw Romaine spring up, and snatch the cards out of the General's hand. "You scoundrel!" he shouted, "you are cheating!" The General started to his feet in a fury. "You lie!" he cried. I attempted to interfere, but Romaine had already seen the necessity of controlling himself. "A gentleman doesn't accept an insult from a swindler," he said, coolly. "Accept this, then!" the General answered--and spat on him. In an instant Romaine knocked him down.

The blow was dealt straight between his eyes: he was a gross big-boned man, and he fell heavily. For the time he was stunned. The women ran, screaming, out of the room. The peaceable Commander trembled from head to foot. Two of the men present, who, to give them their due, were no cowards, locked the doors. "You don't go," they said, "till we see whether he recovers or not." Cold water, assisted by the landlady's smelling salts, brought the General to his senses after a while. He whispered something to one of his friends, who immediately turned to me. "The General challenges Mr. Romaine," he said. "As one of his seconds, I demand an appointment for to-morrow morning." I refused to make any appointment unless the doors were first unlocked, and we were left free to depart. "Our carriage is waiting outside," I added. "If it returns to the hotel without us, there will be an inquiry." This latter consideration had its effect. On their side, the doors were opened. On our side, the appointment was made. We left the house.

IV.

IN consenting to receive the General's representative, it is needless to say that I merely desired to avoid provoking another quarrel. If those persons were really impudent enough to call at the hotel, I had arranged to threaten them with the interference of the police, and so to put an end to the matter. Romaine expressed no opinion on the subject, one way or the other. His conduct inspired me with a feeling of uneasiness. The filthy insult of which he had been made the object seemed to be rankling in his mind. He went away thoughtfully to his own room. "Have you nothing to say to me?" I asked. He only answered: "Wait till to-morrow."

The next day the seconds appeared.

I had expected to see two of the men with whom we had dined. To my astonishment, the visitors proved to be officers of the General's regiment.

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