

Castles in the Air

By

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Foreword

In presenting this engaging rogue to my readers, I feel that I owe them, if not an apology, at least an explanation for this attempt at enlisting sympathy in favour of a man who has little to recommend him save his own unconscious humour. In very truth my good friend Ratichon is an unblushing liar, thief, a forger--anything you will; his vanity is past belief, his scruples are non-existent. How he escaped a convict settlement it is difficult to imagine, and hard to realize that he died--presumably some years after the event recorded in the last chapter of his autobiography--a respected member of the community, honoured by that same society which should have raised a punitive hand against him. Yet this I believe to be the case. At any rate, in spite of close research in the police records of the period, I can find no mention of Hector Ratichon. "Heureux le peuple qui n'a pas d'histoire" applies, therefore, to him, and we must take it that Fate and his own sorely troubled country dealt lightly with him.

Which brings me back to my attempt at an explanation. If Fate dealt kindly, why not we? Since time immemorial there have been worse scoundrels unhung than Hector Ratichon, and he has the saving grace-- which few possess--of unruffled geniality. Buffeted by Fate, sometimes starving, always thirsty, he never complains; and there is all through his autobiography what we might call an "Ah, well!" attitude about his outlook on life. Because of this, and because his very fatuity makes us smile, I feel that he deserves forgiveness and even a certain amount of recognition.

The fragmentary notes, which I have only very slightly modified, came into my hands by a happy chance one dull post-war November morning in Paris, when rain, sleet and the north wind drove me for shelter under the arcades of the Odéon, and a kindly vendor of miscellaneous printed matter and mouldy MSS. allowed me to rummage amongst a load of old papers which he was about to consign to the rubbish heap. I imagine that the notes were set down by the actual person to whom the genial Hector Ratichon recounted the most conspicuous events of his chequered career, and as I turned over the torn and musty pages, which hung together by scraps of mouldy thread, I could not help feeling the humour--aye! and the pathos--of that drabby side of old Paris which was being revealed to me through the medium of this rogue's adventures. And even as, holding the fragments in my hand, I walked home that morning through the rain something of that same quaint personality seemed once more to haunt the dank and dreary streets of the once dazzling Ville Lumière. I seemed to see the shabby bottle-green coat, the nankeen pantaloons, the down-at-heel shoes of this "confidant of Kings"; I could hear his unctuous, self-satisfied laugh, and sensed his furtive footstep whene'er a gendarme came into view. I saw his ruddy, shiny face beaming at me through the sleet and the rain as, like a veritable squire of dames, he minced his steps upon the boulevard, or, like a reckless smuggler, affronted the grave dangers of mountain fastnesses upon the Juras; and I was

quite glad to think that a life so full of unconscious humour had not been cut short upon the gallows. And I thought kindly of him, for he had made me smile.

There is nothing fine about him, nothing romantic; nothing in his actions to cause a single thrill to the nerves of the most unsophisticated reader. Therefore, I apologize in that I have not held him up to a just obloquy because of his crimes, and I ask indulgence for his turpitudes because of the laughter which they provoke.

EMMUSKA ORCZY. Paris, 1921.

I. A Roland For His Oliver

1.

My name is Ratichon--Hector Ratichon, at your service, and I make so bold as to say that not even my worst enemy would think of minimizing the value of my services to the State. For twenty years now have I placed my powers at the disposal of my country: I have served the Republic, and was confidential agent to Citizen Robespierre; I have served the Empire, and was secret factotum to our great Napoléon; I have served King Louis--with a brief interval of one hundred days-- for the past two years, and I can only repeat that no one, in the whole of France, has been so useful or so zealous in tracking criminals, nosing out conspiracies, or denouncing traitors as I have been.

And yet you see me a poor man to this day: there has been a persistently malignant Fate which has worked against me all these years, and would--but for a happy circumstance of which I hope anon to tell you--have left me just as I was, in the matter of fortune, when I first came to Paris and set up in business as a volunteer police agent at No, 96 Rue Daunou.

My apartment in those days consisted of an antechamber, an outer office where, if need be, a dozen clients might sit, waiting their turn to place their troubles, difficulties, anxieties before the acutest brain in France, and an inner room wherein that same acute brain--mine, my dear Sir--was wont to ponder and scheme. That apartment was not luxuriously furnished--furniture being very dear in those days--but there were a couple of chairs and a table in the outer office, and a cupboard wherein I kept the frugal repast which served me during the course of a long and laborious day. In the inner office there were more chairs and another table, littered with papers: letters and packets all tied up with pink tape (which cost three sous the metre), and bundles of letters from hundreds of clients, from the highest and the lowest in the land, you understand, people who wrote to me and confided in me to-day as kings and emperors had done in the past. In the antechamber there was a chair-bedstead for Theodore to sleep on when I required him to remain in town, and a chair on which he could sit.

And, of course, there was Theodore!

Ah! my dear Sir, of him I can hardly speak without feeling choked with the magnitude of my emotion. A noble indignation makes me dumb. Theodore, sir, has ever been the cruel thorn that times out of number hath wounded my over-sensitive heart. Think of it! I had picked him out of the gutter! No! no! I do not mean this figuratively! I mean that, actually and in the flesh, I took him up by the collar of his tattered coat and dragged him out of the gutter in the Rue Blanche, where he was grubbing for trifles out of the slime and mud. He was frozen, Sir,

and starved--yes, starved! In the intervals of picking filth up out of the mud he held out a hand blue with cold to the passers-by and occasionally picked up a sou. When I found him in that pitiable condition he had exactly twenty centimes between him and absolute starvation.

And I, Sir Hector Ratichon, the confidant of two kings, three autocrats and an emperor, took that man to my bosom--fed him, clothed him, housed him, gave him the post of secretary in my intricate, delicate, immensely important business--and I did this, Sir, at a salary which, in comparison with his twenty centimes, must have seemed a princely one to him.

His duties were light. He was under no obligation to serve me or to be at his post before seven o'clock in the morning, and all that he had to do then was to sweep out the three rooms, fetch water from the well in the courtyard below, light the fire in the iron stove which stood in my inner office, shell the haricots for his own mess of pottage, and put them to boil. During the day his duties were lighter still. He had to run errands for me, open the door to prospective clients, show them into the outer office, explain to them that his master was engaged on affairs relating to the kingdom of France, and generally prove himself efficient, useful and loyal--all of which qualities he assured me, my dear Sir, he possessed to the fullest degree. And I believed him, Sir; I nurtured the scorpion in my over-sensitive bosom! I promised him ten per cent. on all the profits of my business, and all the remnants from my own humble repasts--bread, the skins of luscious sausages, the bones from savoury cutlets, the gravy from the tasty carrots and onions. You would have thought that his gratitude would become boundless, that he would almost worship the benefactor who had poured at his feet the full cornucopia of comfort and luxury. Not so! That man, Sir, was a snake in the grass--a serpent--a crocodile! Even now that I have entirely severed my connexion with that ingrate, I seem to feel the wounds, like dagger-thrusts, which he dealt me with so callous a hand. But I have done with him--done, I tell you! How could I do otherwise than to send him back to the gutter from whence I should never have dragged him? My goodness, he repaid with an ingratitude so black that you, Sir, when you hear the full story of his treachery, will exclaim aghast.

Ah, you shall judge! His perfidy commenced less than a week after I had given him my third best pantaloons and three sous to get his hair cut, thus making a man of him. And yet, you would scarcely believe it, in the matter of the secret documents he behaved toward me like a veritable Judas!

Listen, my dear Sir.

I told you, I believe, that I had my office in the Rue Daunou. You understand that I had to receive my clients--many of whom were of exalted rank--in a fashionable quarter of Paris. But I actually lodged in Passy--being fond of country pursuits and addicted to fresh air--in a humble hostelry under the sign of the

"Grey Cat"; and here, too, Theodore had a bed. He would walk to the office a couple of hours before I myself started on the way, and I was wont to arrive as soon after ten o'clock of a morning as I could do conveniently.

On this memorable occasion of which I am about to tell you--it was during the autumn of 1815--I had come to the office unusually early, and had just hung my hat and coat in the outer room, and taken my seat at my desk in the inner office, there to collect my thoughts in preparation for the grave events which the day might bring forth, when, suddenly, an ill-dressed, dour-looking individual entered the room without so much as saying, "By your leave," and after having pushed Theodore--who stood by like a lout--most unceremoniously to one side. Before I had time to recover from my surprise at this unseemly intrusion, the uncouth individual thrust Theodore roughly out of the room, slammed the door in his face, and having satisfied himself that he was alone with me and that the door was too solid to allow of successful eavesdropping, he dragged the best chair forward--the one, sir, which I reserve for lady visitors.

He threw his leg across it, and, sitting astride, he leaned his elbows over the back and glowered at me as if he meant to frighten me.

"My name is Charles Saurez," he said abruptly, "and I want your assistance in a matter which requires discretion, ingenuity and alertness. Can I have it?"

I was about to make a dignified reply when he literally threw the next words at me: "Name your price, and I will pay it!" he said.

What could I do, save to raise my shoulders in token that the matter of money was one of supreme indifference to me, and my eyebrows in a manner of doubt that M. Charles Saurez had the means wherewith to repay my valuable services? By way of a rejoinder he took out from the inner pocket of his coat a greasy letter-case, and with his exceedingly grimy fingers extracted therefrom some twenty banknotes, which a hasty glance on my part revealed as representing a couple of hundred francs.

"I will give you this as a retaining fee," he said, "if you will undertake the work I want you to do; and I will double the amount when you have carried the work out success fully."

Four hundred francs! It was not lavish, it was perhaps not altogether the price I would have named, but it was vary good, these hard times. You understand? We were all very poor in France in that year 1815 of which I speak.

I am always quite straightforward when I am dealing with a client who means business. I pushed aside the litter of papers in front of me, leaned my elbows upon my desk, rested my chin in my hands, and said briefly:

"M. Charles Saurez, I listen!"

He drew his chair a little closer and dropped his voice almost to a whisper.

"You know the Chancellerie of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?" he asked.

"Perfectly," I replied.

"You know M. de Marsan's private office? He is chief secretary to M. de Talleyrand."

"No," I said, "but I can find out."

"It is on the first floor, immediately facing the service staircase, and at the end of the long passage which leads to the main staircase."

"Easy to find, then," I remarked.

"Quite. At this hour and until twelve o'clock, M. de Marsan will be occupied in copying a document which I desire to possess. At eleven o'clock precisely there will be a noisy disturbance in the corridor which leads to the main staircase. M. de Marsan, in all probability, will come out of his room to see what the disturbance is about. Will you undertake to be ready at that precise moment to make a dash from the service staircase into the room to seize the document, which no doubt will be lying on the top of the desk, and bring it to an address which I am about to give you?"

"It is risky," I mused.

"Very," he retorted drily, "or I'd do it myself, and not pay you four hundred francs for your trouble."

"Trouble!" I exclaimed, with withering sarcasm.

"Trouble, you call it? If I am caught, it means penal servitude--New Caledonia, perhaps--"

"Exactly," he said, with the same irritating calmness; "and if you succeed it means four hundred francs. Take it or leave it, as you please, but be quick about it. I have no time to waste; it is past nine o'clock already, and if you won't do the work, someone else will."

For a few seconds longer I hesitated. Schemes, both varied and wild, rushed through my active brain: refuse to take this risk, and denounce the plot to the police; refuse it, and run to warn M. de Marsan; refuse it, and-- I had little time for reflection. My uncouth client was standing, as it were, with a pistol to my throat--

with a pistol and four hundred francs! The police might perhaps give me half a louis for my pains, or they might possibly remember an unpleasant little incident in connexion with the forgery of some Treasury bonds which they have never succeeded in bringing home to me--one never knows! M. de Marsan might throw me a franc, and think himself generous at that!

All things considered, then, when M. Charles Saurez suddenly said, "Well?" with marked impatience, I replied, "Agreed," and within five minutes I had two hundred francs in my pocket, with the prospect of two hundred more during the next four and twenty hours. I was to have a free hand in conducting my own share of the business, and M. Charles Saurez was to call for the document at my lodgings at Passy on the following morning at nine o'clock.

2.

I flatter myself that I conducted the business with remarkable skill. At precisely ten minutes to eleven I rang at the Chancellerie of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. I was dressed as a respectable commissionaire, and I carried a letter and a small parcel addressed to M. de Marsan. "First floor," said the concierge curtly, as soon as he had glanced at the superscription on the letter. "Door faces top of the service stairs."

I mounted and took my stand some ten steps below the landing, keeping the door of M. de Marsan's room well in sight. Just as the bells of Notre Dame boomed the hour I heard what sounded like a furious altercation somewhere in the corridor just above me. There was much shouting, then one or two cries of "Murder!" followed by others of "What is it?" and "What in the name of ----- is all this infernal row about?" Doors were opened and banged, there was a general running and rushing along that corridor, and the next minute the door in front of me was opened also, and a young man came out, pen in hand, and shouting just like everybody else:

"What the ----- is all this infernal row about?"

"Murder, help!" came from the distant end of the corridor, and M. de Marsan--undoubtedly it was he--did what any other young man under the like circumstances would have done: he ran to see what was happening and to lend a hand in it, if need be. I saw his slim figure disappearing down the corridor at the very moment that I slipped into his room. One glance upon the desk sufficed: there lay the large official-looking document, with the royal signature affixed thereto, and close beside it the copy which M. de Marsan had only half finished--the ink on it was still wet. Hesitation, Sir, would have been fatal. I did not hesitate; not one instant. Three seconds had scarcely elapsed before I picked up the document, together with M. de Marsan's half-finished copy of the same, and a few loose sheets of Chancellerie paper which I thought might be useful. Then I slipped the lot inside my blouse. The bogus letter and parcel I left behind me, and

within two minutes of my entry into the room I was descending the service staircase quite unconcernedly, and had gone past the concierge's lodge without being challenged. How thankful I was to breathe once more the pure air of heaven. I had spent an exceedingly agitated five minutes, and even now my anxiety was not altogether at rest. I dared not walk too fast lest I attracted attention, and yet I wanted to put the river, the Pont Neuf, and a half dozen streets between me and the Chancellerie of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No one who has not gone through such an exciting adventure as I have just recorded can conceive what were my feelings of relief and of satisfaction when I at last found myself quietly mounting the stairs which led to my office on the top floor of No. 96 Rue Daunou.

3.

Now, I had not said anything to Theodore about this affair. It was certainly arranged between us when he entered my service as confidential clerk and doorkeeper that in lieu of wages, which I could not afford to pay him, he would share my meals with me and have a bed at my expense in the same house at Passy where I lodged; moreover, I would always give him a fair percentage on the profits which I derived from my business. The arrangement suited him very well. I told you that I picked him out of the gutter, and I heard subsequently that he had gone through many an unpleasant skirmish with the police in his day, and if I did not employ him no one else would.

After all, he did earn a more or less honest living by serving me. But in this instance, since I had not even asked for his assistance, I felt that, considering the risks of New Caledonia and a convict ship which I had taken, a paltry four hundred francs could not by any stretch of the imagination rank as a "profit" in a business--and Theodore was not really entitled to a percentage, was he?

So when I returned I crossed the ante-chamber and walked past him with my accustomed dignity; nor did he offer any comment on my get-up. I often affected a disguise in those days, even when I was not engaged in business, and the dress and get-up of a respectable commissionnaire was a favourite one with me. As soon as I had changed I sent him out to make purchases for our luncheon--five sous' worth of stale bread, and ten sous' worth of liver sausage, of which he was inordinately fond. He would take the opportunity on the way of getting moderately drunk on as many glasses of absinthe as he could afford. I saw him go out of the outer door, and then I set to work to examine the precious document.

Well, one glance was sufficient for me to realize its incalculable value! Nothing more or less than a Treaty of Alliance between King Louis XVIII of France and the King of Prussia in connexion with certain schemes of naval construction. I did not understand the whole diplomatic verbiage, but it was pretty clear to my unsophisticated mind that this treaty had been entered into in secret by the two

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