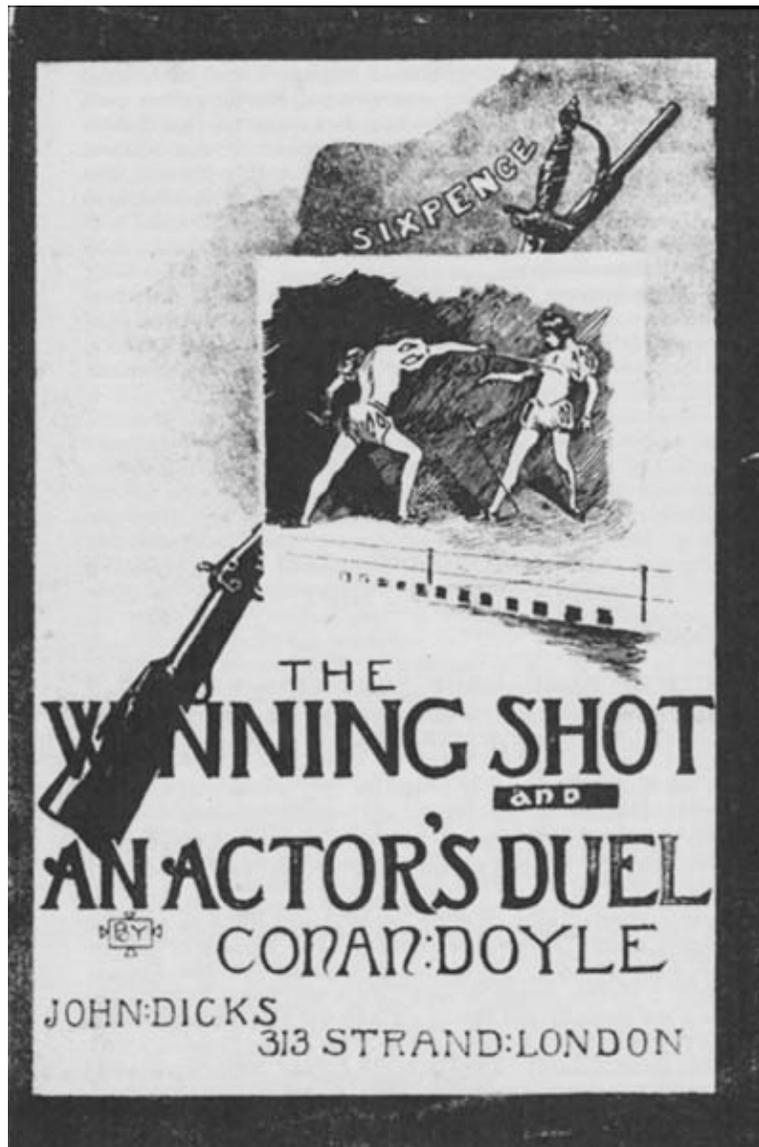


The Tragedians

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THE TRAGEDIANS

I

Night had fallen on the busy world of Paris, and its gay population had poured out on to the Boulevards; soldier and civilian, aristocrat and workman, struggled for a footing upon the pavement, while in the roadway the Communistic donkey of the costermonger jostled up against the Conservative thoroughbreds of the Countess de Sang-pur. Here and there a café, with its numerous little tables, each with its progeny of chairs, cast a yellow glare in front of it, through which the great multitude seemed to ebb and flow.

Let us leave the noise and bustle of the Boulevard des Italiens behind us, and turn to the right, along the Rue D'Egypte. At the bottom of this there lies a labyrinth of dingy little quiet streets, and the dingiest and quietest of them all is the Rue Bertrand.

In England, we should call it shabby-genteel. The houses are two-storied semi-detached villas. There is a mournful and broken-down look about them, as if they had seen better days, and were still endeavouring to screen their venerable tiles and crumbling mortar behind a coquettish railing and jaunty Venetian blinds.

The street is always quiet, but it is even quieter than usual to-night; indeed, it would be entirely deserted but for a single figure which paces backwards and forwards over the ill-laid pavement. The man—for a man it is—must be waiting or watching for someone, as the Rue Bertrand is the last place which the romantic dreamer would select for his solitary reverie. He is here with a purpose, no doubt, and what that purpose may be is no business either of ours or of the gendarme who comes clanking noisily round the corner.

There is a house just opposite the spot where the watcher has stationed himself, which exhibits not only signs of vitality, but even some appearance of mirth. The contrast, perhaps, has caused him to stop and gaze at it. It is neater and more modern-looking than its companions. The garden is well laid out, and between the bars of the green persiennes the warm light glows out into the street. It has a cheery, English look

about it, which marks it out among the fossils which surround it.

If the outside gives this impression, it is confirmed by the appearance of the snug room within. A large fire is crackling and sparkling merrily, as if in playful defiance of the stolid lamp upon the table. There are two people seated in front of the blaze, both of the gentler sex, and it would take no very profound student of humanity to pronounce at a glance that they were mother and daughter.

In both there is the same sweet expression and the same graceful figure, though the delicate outlines of the younger woman are exaggerated in her plump little mother, and the hair which comes from under the matronly cap is streaked with traces of grey.

Mrs. Latour has had an anxious time since her husband, the Colonel, died, but has battled through it all with the uncomplaining patience of her race. Her second son, Jack, at a university in England, has been a grief to her, for Jack is sowing his wild oats, and vague reports of the process are wafted across the Channel, and startle the quiet household in the Rue Bertrand.

There is Henry, too, with his great talent for tragedy, and no engagement for more than six months. It is no wonder that the bustling, kind-hearted little woman is sad at times, and that her cheery laugh is heard less frequently than of old. The sum which the Colonel had left behind him is not a large one; were it not for the supervision exercised by Rose it would hardly have met their necessary expenses.

This young lady would certainly never be expected to have the household virtues, if it be a fact that ornament and utility are seldom united in her sex. It is true that she was no regal beauty; her features had not even the merit of regularity; yet the graceful girl, with her laughing eyes and winning smiles, would be a dangerous rival to the stateliest of her sex.

Unconsciousness of beauty is the strongest adjunct which beauty can have, and Rose Latour possessed it in an eminent degree. You could see it in every natural movement of her lithe form, and in the steady gaze of her

hazel eyes. No wonder that even in the venerable Rue Bertrand, which should have been above such follies, there was a parting of window blinds when the dainty little figure went tripping down it, and that the blasé Parisian lounge, glancing at her face, sauntered on with the conviction that there was something higher in womanhood than he had met with in his varied experiences of the "Mubille" and the Cafés Chantants.

"Remember this, Rose," the old lady was saying, emphasising every second or third word with an energetic little nod of the head, which gave her a strong resemblance to a plump and benevolent sparrow, "you are a Morton, and nothing but a Morton. You haven't one drop of French blood in you, my dear!"

"But papa was a Frenchman, wasn't he?" objected Rose.

"Yes, my dear; but you are a pure Morton. Your father was a dear good man, though he was a Frenchman, and only stood five feet four; but my children are all Scotch. My father was six feet two, and so would my brother have been only that the nurse used to read as she rolled him in the perambulator, and rested her book upon his head, so that he was compressed until he looked almost square, poor boy, but he had the makings of a fine man. You see, both Henry and Jack are tall men, so it is ridiculous to call them anything but Morton, and you are their sister. No, no, Rose; you haven't one drop of your father's blood in you!"

With which physiological deduction the good old lady dropped twenty stitches of her knitting and her ball of worsted, which rolled under the sideboard, with the strange instinct which all things dropped possess, and was only dislodged by Rose after ten minutes' poking in the dark with fire-irons.

This little interruption seemed to change the current of Mrs. Latour's ideas.

"Henry is later than usual to-night," she remarked.

"Yes; he was going to the Theatre National to apply for an engagement, you know. I do hope he won't be disappointed."

"I'm sure I can't conceive why they should ever refuse such a handsome young fellow," said the fond mother. "I think, even if

he could not act at all, they would fill the house with people who wanted to look at him."

"I wish I were a man, mamma," said Rose, pursing her lips to express her idea of masculine inflexibility.

"Why, what would you do, child?"

"What wouldn't I do? I'd write books, and lecture, and fight, and all sorts of things."

At which summary of manly accomplishments Mrs. Latour laughed, and Rose's firmness melted away into a bright smile at her mother's mirth.

"Papa was a soldier," she said.

"Ah, my dear, there is no such thing as fighting now-a-days. Why, I remember, when I was a girl in London, how twenty and thirty thousand people used to be killed in a day. That was when young Sir Arthur Wellesley went out to the Peninsula. There was Mrs. McWhirter, next door to us—her son was wounded, poor fellow! It was a harrowing story. He was creeping through a hole in a wall, when a nasty man came up, and ran something into him."

"How very sad!" said Rose, trying to suppress a smile.

"Yes; and I heard young McWhirter say, with his own lips, that he had never seen the man before in his life, and he added that he never wished to see him again. It was at Baggagh-horse."

"Badajos, 'ma."

"I said so, dear. The occurrence dispirited young McWhirter very much, and, indeed, threw a gloom over the whole family for the time. But England has changed very much since then in every way. Why, the very language seems to me to be altering in a marvellous manner. I doubt if I could make myself understood if I went back. There is Jack, at Edinburgh—he uses refinements of speech which you and I, Rose, have no idea of. We can't keep up to the day when we are living in a foreign country."

"Jack does use some queer words," said Rose.

"I had a letter from him to-night," continued the little old woman, diving first into her pocket, and then into her reticule. "Dear me! Oh, yes, here it is! I really can't understand one

word of it, my dear, except that the poor lad seems to have met with some sort of an accident or misfortune."

"Acident, 'ma?"

"Well, something unpleasant, at any rate. He does not enter into any particulars. Just listen, Rose, for it is very short. Perhaps you will be able to make out what it means; but I confess it has puzzled me completely. Where are my spectacles? It begins, 'Dearest mother,—that is intelligible enough, and very gratifying, too, as far as it goes—'I have dropped a pony over the Cambridgeshire.' What do you suppose your brother meant by that, dear?"

"I'm sure I don't know, mamma," said the young lady, after pondering over the mysterious sentence.

"You know he could not really have dropped a pony over anything. It would have been too heavy for him, though he is a strong lad. His poor dear father always used to say that he would be sure to have a very fine muscle; but that would be too much. It must be his way of saying that a pony dropped him over something, and no doubt he means that the accident occurred in Cambridgeshire."

"Very likely, mamma."

"Well, now, listen to this. 'It was a case of scratching, so I was done for without a chance.' Think of that, Rose! Something has been scratching the poor, dear boy, or else he has been scratching something; I'm sure I don't know which. I shouldn't think the pony can have scratched him, for they have hoofs, you know."

"I don't think it could have been the pony," laughed Rose.

"It is all very mysterious. The next sentence is a little plainer. He says, 'If you have any of the ready, send it.' I know what he means by that, but it is the only intelligible thing in the letter. He wishes to pay his doctor's fees, no doubt, poor boy! He adds in a postscript that he may run over very soon, so he cannot be much the worse."

"Well, that's consoling," said Rose. "I hope he will come soon, and explain what it is all about."

"We'd better lay the table for supper," said the old lady. "Henry must come soon."

"Never mind ringing for Marie," said the daughter. "I am what Jack would call 'no end of a dab' at laying a table."

The mother laughed as she watched her darling flitting about the room, and coming to endless grief over the disposition of her knives and forks.

"You have given the carver four knives," she said, "while his right-hand neighbour has nothing but the steel to eat with. Listen, Rose; isn't that your brother's step?"

"There are two people."

"One of them is he, I fancy."

"So it is!" cried Rose, as the key was turned in the latch, and a masculine voice was heard in the hall. "How did you get on, Harry? Did you get it?"

And she took a spring into the passage, and threw her arms round her brother.

"Wait a bit, Rosey! Let me get my coat off before you begin to throttle me! It's all right this time, and I have got an engagement at the 'National.'"

"Didn't I tell you, Rose?" said the mother.

"Come in, do, and let us know all about it!" pleaded Rose. "We are dying to know!"

"I mustn't forget my politeness, though," said Henry. "Let me introduce Mr. Barker, an Englishman, and a friend of Jack's."

A tall, dark young man, with a serious face, who was standing in the background, stepped forward, and made his bow.

(I may remark, in parenthesis, before proceeding further, that I myself was that Mr. Barker, and that what follows in this startling narrative is therefore written from my own personal observation.)

We went into the snug little drawing-room, and drew up to the cheery fire.

Rose sat upon her brother's knee, while Mrs. Latour dropped her knitting, and put her hand into that of her son.

I leaned back in the shadow, at the other side of the hearth; while the gleam of the light played upon the golden tresses of the girl and the dark, stern profile of her brother.

"Well," said Henry, "to begin at the beginning, I went to a café after I set out, and it

was there that I had the good fortune to come across Mr. Barker, whose name I know very well from Jack."

"We all seem to know you very well," said the mother.

I smiled and bowed.

It was pleasant to be in this miniature England in the heart of France.

"We went together to the National," continued Henry, "firmly believing I hadn't the ghost of a chance, for Lablas, the great tragedian, has much influence there, and he always does his best to harm and thwart me, though I never gave him cause of offence that I know of."

"Nasty thing!" said Rose.

"My dear, you really musn't!"

"Well, you know he is, 'ma. But go on, do!"

"I didn't see Lablas there, but I managed to get hold of the manager, old Monsieur Lambertin. He jumped at the proposal. He had the goodness to say that he had seen me act at Rouen once, and had been much struck."

"I should think so!" said the old lady.

"He then said that they were just looking out for a man to play an important rôle—that of Laertes, in a new translation of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet.' It is to come out on Monday night, so that I have only two days to learn it in. It seems that another man, Monnier by name, was to have played it, but he has broken his leg in a carriage accident. You have no idea how cordial old Lambertin was!"

"Dear old man!" said Rose.

"But come, you must be hungry, Barker, and the supper is on the table. Pull up your chairs, and just have some water boiling afterwards, Rose."

And so, with jest and laughter, we sat down to our little supper, and the evening passed away like a happy dream.

Looking back through the long vista of years, I seem to be able to recall the scene; the laughing, blushing girl, as she burned her fingers and spilt the water in her attempts at making punch; the purring little bright-eyed mother; the manly young fellow, with his honest laugh!

Who could have guessed the tragedy which was hanging over them? Who, except that

dark figure that was then still standing in the Rue Bertrand, and whose shadow stretched across to darken the doorstep of number twenty-two?

II

It was the same night, or rather the following morning, for the cathedral clock had already struck three. The streets of Paris were deserted, save for an occasional gendarme or a solitary reveller hurrying home from some scene of pleasure.

Even in the Rue d'Anjou (the most dissipated of fashionable streets) there were but few houses which showed a light.

It is to one of these, however, that our story leads us.

In a large room, luxuriously fitted up, half a dozen men in evening dress were lounging and smoking. The great chandelier reflected its lustre cheerily in the mirrors around, and cast a warm glow on the red velvet of the furniture.

The carpet was so thick that hardly a footfall was heard, as one of the men rose from his seat and walked over to lean against the great marble mantelpiece.

Any habitué of the French theatres would have known at a glance who this man was. One could not easily forget the sinewy, upright form, and the dark, cynical smile of Lablas, the foremost tragedian of the Theatre National.

A follower of Spurzheim would have prophesied great things, of good or of evil, from that broad, low forehead and massive jaw; and another glance at the cold grey eye and the sensual lip would have warned the physiognomist that off the boards of the National this was a man to be shunned, a selfish friend and a vindictive foe.

Our theatrical habitué would have found some other, and possibly some more agreeable, old acquaintances here.

Over there by the little glittering cabinet was Grossière, from the Variétés, cleverest and most unscrupulous of actors, whose duels and intrigues were only less notorious than those of his host, Lablas.

Beside him was a blasé young officer of cavalry, and near him Turville, another well-known actor and "lion." Reposing on the couch, puffing at a meerschaum pipe, was Cachet, from the *Gaieté*; while one or two less known actors completed the group.

Lablas looked wearily at the table, all heaped with cards, dice, and odd pieces of coin.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "you must please yourselves. Shall we have another turn or not?"

"We have plenty of time yet," said one of the actors; "but I fear there is such a run of luck against the unfortunate Lieutenant, that he will hardly dare to try again. Positively it is cruel to ask him."

The young officer looked up, with a flush upon his beardless face. He was a very young bird to endeavour to hold his own among these seasoned old vampires. It was evident from the way in which they glanced round at him when Grossière made the remark, that he had been elected as the butt of the company.

"What if I have bad luck?" he said. "It's all fair play and the fortune of war. I'll try again."

And he drank down a tumbler of champagne to try and drown the vision of a little woman down at Montpellier, in the sunny south, who was scraping and saving in order to keep her handsome boy like a gentleman in Paris.

"That's right! Pluckily said!" went up the chorus of voices from around the table.

"Don't drink your wine like that, though," said Cachet. "You'll make yourself unsteady."

"I'm afraid our military friend is unsteady already," remarked Lablas.

"Not at all, monsieur," said the young Lieutenant. "My hand is as steady as your own."

"There is no hand in Paris as steady as my own, young man," returned Lablas. "Lallacourt, of your own regiment, could tell you as much. You were with me, Cachet, when I shot away his trigger finger at Vincennes. I stopped his pistol shooting for ever and a day. Do you perceive a little dark spot which is fixed in the centre of the white sheet at the other side of the room? It is the head of a fusee, a mark which I generally use for the purpose of practice, as

there can be no doubt as to whether you have struck it or not. You will excuse the smell of gunpowder, messieurs?" he continued, taking a small and highly-finished pistol from a rack upon the wall.

He seemed hardly to glance along the sights; but as he pulled the trigger, there was a crack and spurt of flame from the other side of the room, and the fusee, struck by the bullet, was scattered in burning splinters upon the floor.

"I hardly think you will venture to state that your hand is as steady as mine for the future," he added, glancing towards the young officer, as he replaced the dainty weapon in its stand upon the wall.

"It was a good shot, sir," returned the other.

"Hang the shooting!" said Grossière, rattling up the dice. "If you want your revenge, Lieutenant, now is your time!"

And once again money began to change hands, while a hush in the talk showed how all interest was concentrated upon the table. Lablas did not play, but he hovered round the green baize like some evil spirit, with his hard smile upon his lips, and his cold eye bent upon the man who was at once his guest and his dupe.

Poor lad! No wonder he lost when all were combining to play against him. He pushed his chair back at last in despair.

"It is useless!" he said. "The luck is against me! But, gentlemen," he added, beseechingly, "if I can raise a little money tomorrow, even though it be only a little, you will not refuse to play the same stakes—you will give me a chance?"

"We will play just exactly as long as your little lasts!" said Turville, with a brutal laugh.

The young officer was flushed and excited. He sat apart from the others, and seemed to hear the talk which ensued as in a dream. He had an uneasy feeling that all had not been fair, and yet, do what he would, he could not give one proof to the contrary.

"Pass over the wine," said Grossière. "Where were you till one o'clock, Lablas?"

Lablas showed his white teeth in a smile.

"The old story, I suppose?" said Turville.

"Bah! It is becoming too old a story," resumed *Grossière*. "A story without change or variety is apt to become monotonous. One intrigue is as like another as a pair of small swords, and success is always the end of them."

"They are too easily won," assented *Cachet*.

"I promise you this will not be too easily won," said *Lablas*. "Though she is a quarry worth flying for, as she is as beautiful as an angel, she is strictly preserved too; and there is a six-foot brother acting as gamekeeper, so there is a prospect of some little excitement."

"Have you made any advance yet?" asked *Cachet*.

"No; I have taken a few preliminary observations, however," returned the *roué*. "I fear it must be done by force, and it will need both courage and tact."

"Who is the girl, *Lablas*?" said *Turville*.

"That I won't answer."

"Come, do tell us her name."

"Curiosity sometimes verges on impertinence," said *Lablas*, looking from under his eyebrows at his brother actor. "Take care that you do not cross the border, for I never tolerate a liberty."

Turville was a brave man enough, but he sank his eyes before the fiery glance of the practised duellist.

There was a moment's silence, and then *Lablas* stretched out his hand and said, "Come, *Turville*, forgive and forget. I didn't mean to speak hastily, but you know my cursed temper. There, I can say no more."

After all, there is no reason why I should not give you the name. I may need your assistance; and, in any case, you are men of honour, and would not thwart me in my plans. I don't suppose any of you know her. Her name is *Rose Latour*, and she lives in the *Rue Bertrand*.

"What? The sister of *Henry Latour*?" cried *Grossière*.

"Yes, the same. Do you know him?"

"Know him? Why he plays *Laertes* to your *Hamlet* on Monday night."

"The deuce he does!"

"Yes, old *Lambertin* closed with him last night. This will be a pretty complication! As good a fellow as ever breathed."

"I don't see that that affects the question of my carrying off his sister."

"I know the girl, too—as chaste as she is beautiful. You'll never succeed there, *Lablas*. She is an angel upon earth, and her brother is not the man to be trifled with."

"My dear fellow," said *Lablas*, "don't you see that every word you say is strengthening my resolution? As you said just now, intrigues become monotonous. There is some variety about an abduction."

"You will fail," said *Grossière*.

"On the contrary, I shall succeed."

"I would stake my head that you will fail."

"If you are willing to stake ten thousand francs, it will be more to the purpose. Shall it be a bet, and I claim twenty-four hours only in which to carry the little *Puritan* off."

"Done!" responded the comedian.

"You are my witnesses, messieurs," said *Lablas*, turning to the company, and entering the figures in an ivory writing-tablet.

There was a hush as he wrote, and then a youthful voice broke the silence.

"I will be no partner to this!" it said.

It was the young officer.

He had risen from his chair, and was standing opposite *Lablas*.

There was a murmur of surprise among the actors as their butt and plaything rose up and dared the arch-spirit of them all. They would have saved him if they could. *Cachet* grasped him by the sleeve, and half pulled him down.

"Sit down!" he whispered,—"*sit down!* He is the deadliest shot in France!"

"I will not sit down!" said the soldier. "I protest against this! If the young lady's helplessness and virtue are powerless to screen her, surely the fact that her brother is your fellow-actor should suffice to save her from your insulting wager."

Lablas never raised his eyes from the book in which he was writing.

"How long," he said, in the cold, measured voice which those who had heard it knew to be

more dangerous than the bully's shout,—“how long have you turned moralist, Monsieur Malpas?”

“I have not turned moralist. I simply remain a gentleman, a title which I regret to say that you have forfeited.”

“Indeed! You become personal.”

“I don't pretend to be immaculate; far from it. But, so help me Heaven! nothing in the whole world would induce me to be an accomplice in such a cold-blooded, villainous seduction!”

There was a brave ring in the lad's voice as he spoke, and all the fire of the chivalrous South sparkled in his eyes.

“I only regret,” he continued, “that your confiding your plans to our honour before revealing them will prevent my helping to frustrate them.”

“Dear, innocent youth!” sneered Lablas.

“I think I see the cause of your conversion to morality. You have some intentions in that quarter yourself, mon cher. Is it not so?”

“You lie, and you know that you lie!” said the soldier. “Here, hold him—hold his arms, Cachet! Pull him back! Don't let them brawl like roughs!”

“Let me go, I say!” yelled Lablas. “He called me a liar! I'll have his life!”

“To-morrow, my dear fellow—to-morrow,” said Grossière. “We will see that you have every satisfaction.”

“There is my card,” said the Lieutenant, as he threw it down upon the table. “You shall find me ready whenever it is convenient to you. Capitaine Haut shares my rooms; he will act as my friend. Adieu, gentlemen!—au revoir, monsieur!”

And the young fellow turned on his heel, and swaggered gallantly out of the room, leaving his money behind him.

In spite of his faults, the old lady in Montpellier would not have been ashamed of her son if she could have seen him then.

“You will call upon his friend to-morrow, Cachet,” said Lablas, grimly. “In the meantime, to business. Can I rely upon your help in the matter of the girl—and yours, Turville?”

“We will do all we can.”

“Well, I had a good look at the house to-night. It is a simple two-storey one, and she

sleeps alone in one of the upper rooms. So much I gathered, partly from observation, and partly from the servant. They go to bed early, and there is only the brother and the old lady in the house. They have no shutters to the bedrooms—only blinds.”

“What will be your mode of action?”

“It is easy enough. You know the street is a very quiet one. We'll take my closed carriage; one of us can drive. Then, as you know, I have a ladder in three pieces for such little affairs. It can be brought with us. We leave the carriage; put up our ladder, open her window, gag her in her sleep, carry her down, and it is done. If she is awake and screams, surely the three of us can knock her brother on the head. They will have no clue as to who we are, or where we have gone. It will be a splendid triumph.”

“So it will;” and the three men laughed heartily.

“The little prude! She will be tractable enough soon, I warrant. Well, I must be steady to-morrow, so I had better turn in for a few hours. I shall want you in the Rue Bertrand about two o'clock on Monday morning. They go to bed at eleven. Good night.” And, throwing his half-finished cigar into the fire, the profligate actor sauntered out of the room, leaving his associates to discuss the diabolical deed in which they were called upon to assist.

III

It is strange how naturally Englishmen adapt themselves to the customs of the country in which they happen to be placed—more especially when those customs happen to accord with their own inclinations.

At home I am a rigid Churchman enough; but on that Parisian Sunday, the still small voice of conscience was even stiller and smaller than usual, as I sauntered round to the Rue Bertrand to see if my new friend, Henry Latour, would have pity on my loneliness, and venture out for a stroll.

Possibly the fair Rose had more to do with my visit than her brother; but, if so, I was disappointed, as that young lady had just tripped

off to church, and I was compelled to put up with the male element of the household.

"You couldn't possibly have done better than come," said Henry, as he stretched his tall frame in a stupendous yawn. "I have been sitting in this confounded chair, making sure of my part, ever since breakfast, and I think I am right at last. I have been doing the quarte tierce business too with the poker, in preparation for the last scene. You know I used to be an excellent fencer, and it always brings down the house."

"I suppose your Hamlet can fence?" I remarked.

"He is notorious for it," Henry answered, as a dark shade passed over his handsome face. "But come, Barker; it's my last free day for some time to come, so we must make the most of it."

We certainly did make the most of it, and the young actor proved himself to be an admirable cicerone, doing the honours of picture galleries and museums with an amusing air of proprietorship. He was in excellent spirits about his engagement at the National, to which he often referred as being a splendid opening.

"There's only one drawback," he remarked, "and that is having to play second fiddle to that unmitigated scoundrel, Lablas. He is a profligate fellow, Barker. This very morning they say that he fought a duel in the Bois de Boulogne; shot a young officer of cavalry through the lungs. I shall have a quarrel with him, I fear; for, as Hamlet says, 'There is something sensitive in me,' and the man's manner jars upon me more than I can tell."

It was dark by this time, and we were both somewhat fatigued and hungry after our long peregrination.

"There's a café here," said Henry, "on the right-hand side, close to the railway station, where we can have a quiet little meal. That's it where the lights are. Shall we try it?"

"All right," I said. And we turned to enter.

Just at this moment, a tall young fellow, with a carpet-bag in his hand, who was coming out, ran against us.

"Pardon, messieurs," he said, turning half round and bowing, and was about to pass on, when Henry sprang forward, and caught him by the arm.

"Jack, my boy, where in the world did you come from?"

"Henry, and Barker, by all that is astonishing!" said the voice of my old college friend, Jack Latour, as he seized us alternately by the hand. "Why, what an extraordinary thing!"

"Extraordinary, indeed," cried his brother. "Why, we thought you were in Edinburgh, hundreds of miles away!"

"So I ought to be; but it struck me yesterday that a change of air would do me good. The insolent familiarity of the British tradesman was beginning to prey upon my mind. My tailor was exhibiting an increased hankering after his filthy lucre, so I thought I would deprive him for a few weeks of the refining influence of my society."

"The old game, Jack," said I.

"Yes, the old game; and I conclude you fellows are up to the old game, since I find you mooning about the first 'pub' I pass—I beg pardon, *café*. *Café* sounds better than 'pub'."

"How do you account for your own presence here?" laughed Henry.

"My dear fellow, you don't seriously suppose that I came in search of bibulous refreshment? No; it was a harmless eccentricity which led me within these walls. What do you fellows intend to do with yourselves? There is no use my knocking up Rose and the mother to-night, so I shall stay with you."

"We have nothing particular to do," I said.

"Then come up to the 'Anglais' with me. Two Edinburgh men are up there—Grant and Buckley. Will you come?"

"I am willing," said I.

"And I," said Henry.

So the bargain was concluded, and we all three repaired to the hotel, where we were introduced to Jack's friends, a couple of reckless, light-hearted medical students of his own kidney.

There is no reason why I should dwell upon the convivial evening which ensued. I have

only alluded to these things as influencing the dark events which were impending.

It was close upon one o'clock before Henry Latour glanced at his watch, and announced that it was high time to break up.

"I must run over my part again to-morrow," he said. "You come along with me, Jack, and we can sleep together without disturbing anyone. I have a key."

"I'll walk round with you," said I; "I want to finish my pipe."

I am afraid that the sight of a certain window was becoming dearer to me than all the tobacco Virginia ever grew.

The brothers were delighted that I should come, so we bade our fellow countrymen adieu, and set off together.

We were a hilarious party as long as we kept to the well-lit Boulevards, but when we got into the quiet streets which branch off from them, a curious feeling of depression stole over us, which affected even the irrepressible Jack.

We strode on together, each buried in his own thoughts.

Everything was very still—so still that we all looked up in surprise when a closed carriage rattled past us, going in our own direction.

"That fellow is driving at a deuce of a rate," remarked Jack. "Without lights either," I said.

"I wonder where he can be bound for? This is not much of a carriage neighbourhood, especially at such an hour."

"Well, anyway, he isn't going to visit us," laughed Henry; "so it's no business of ours."

And so saying, he quickened his pace, and we all three rounded the corner, and passed into the Rue Bertrand.

We were hardly round, before Jack stopped in amazement. "Why, Harry!" he said; "what on earth is this? They just exactly are visiting us!"

There was no doubt about it. The moon had just come from behind a cloud, and was pouring a flood of cold light upon the dingy little street. And there, away down opposite number twenty-two, was a dark blur, which could be nothing but the carriage. It had pulled up.

"What is it?" said Henry.

"There are a couple of men on the pavement!"

"One of them has a lantern!"

"What a lark!" cried Jack. "It's my Edinburgh tailor, for a dollar!"

"They can't be burglars!" I whispered. "Let us watch them for a bit."

"By Heaven, there's ladder against a window—against Rose's window!" hissed a voice which we could hardly recognise as Henry's it was so altered.

The light fell upon his face, and I could see that it was dark with wrath, and that his jaw was fixed and hard, while his features worked spasmodically.

"The villains!" he said. "Come after me, but quietly!" Swiftly and silently he started down the street.

Jack's rage was as great as his brother's, but he was of a less fiery disposition. He ground his teeth, and followed Henry with giant strides.

Had I been alone, I should have shouted my indignation, and hurried forward to the rescue. Henry Latour's was the leading mind among us, however, and it is on such occasions that mind asserts itself. There was something terrible in his very stillness.

We followed him implicitly down the road.

Rain had fallen during the evening, and the ground was very soft.

We made little noise as we approached the carriage. We might have made more without fear of detection, for the horses had been left to themselves, and the men we had seen were in the front garden, too much occupied with their own movements and those of their leader to be easily disturbed. The Rue de Bertrand was a cul de sac, and the possibility of being disturbed at their work was so slight as to be disregarded.

Henry slipped behind the carriage, and we followed him. We were effectually concealed, and commanded a view of all that was going on in front of us.

Two of the men were standing at the foot of a ladder which was reared against one of the upper windows.

They were watching the movements of a third who appeared at that moment at the open casement bearing something on his arms.

My blood seemed to run in a fiery torrent through my veins as I saw the man place his foot upon the upper step and begin to descend. I glanced at Henry, but he held up his hand as if to ask for one more moment's forbearance.

I could see that he knew as well as I did what the poor little white burden was which the man was claspng to his breast. I had lost sight of Jack, but a smothered curse from between the wheels showed me where he was crouching.

The leader came slowly and gingerly down the ladder. He must have been a powerful fellow, for the additional weight did not seem to inconvenience him. We could see that his face was covered with a mask. His friends below kept encouraging him in whispers.

He reached the bottom without an accident.

"Hurry her into the carriage!" he said.

Henry rose silently to his feet, with every muscle braced. The time for action had arrived.

And at this very moment the prisoner's gag must have slipped, for a sweet, piteous voice rang out on the still night,—"Harry! Brother! Help!"

Never, surely, was an appeal so promptly answered. The spring was so swift, so sudden, that I never saw him leave my side. I heard a snarl like a wild beast's and a dull thud, and my friend with the man in the mask were rolling on the ground together.

It all happened in less time than I take to tell it. Jack and I ran forward to assist Rose into the house; but we were confronted by the two confederates.

I would have passed my antagonist in order to help the lady, but he flew at me with a savage oath, hitting wildly with both hands.

A Frenchman can never realise the fact that a segment is shorter than an arc; but I gave my opponent a practical illustration of the fact by stopping him with a facer before he could bring his hands round, and then toppling him over

with what is known to the initiated as a Cribb's hit behind the ear.

He sat down upon a rose-bush with a very sickly smile, and manifested a strong disinclination to rise up; so I turned my attention to Jack.

I was just in time to see his adversary make a desperate attempt to practice the barbarous French savate upon him; but the student was a man of expedients, and springing aside, he seized the uplifted foot, and gave it a wrench, which brought the discomfited owner howling to the ground with a dislocated leg.

We led poor trembling Rose into the house, and after handing her over to her frightened mother, hurried back into the garden.

Neither of our acquaintances were in a condition to come up to time; but the struggle between their leader and Henry Latour was going on with unabated vigour.

It was useless to attempt to help our friend. They were so entwined, and revolving so rapidly upon the gravel walk, that it was impossible to distinguish the one from the other.

They were fighting in silence, and each was breathing hard.

But the clean living of the younger man began to tell. He had the better stamina of the two.

I saw the glint of the moonlight upon his sleeve-links as he freed his arm, and then I heard the sound of a heavy blow. It seemed to stun his antagonist for a moment; but before it could be repeated he had shaken himself free, and both men staggered to their feet.

The mask had been torn off, and exposed the pale face of the Frenchman, with a thin stream of blood coursing down it from a wound on the forehead.

"You infernal scoundrel! I know you now!" yelled Henry, and would have sprung at him again had we not restrained him.

"Ma foi! you'll know me better before you die!" hissed the man, with a sinister smile.

"You accursed villain! do you think I fear your threats? I'll fight you now if you wish; I have weapons! Run in for the pistols, Jack!"

"Quietly, old man—quietly," said I; "don't do anything rash."

"Rash!" raved Henry. "Why, man, it was my sister! Give me a pistol!"

"It is for me to name the time and place," said Lablas; for he it was. "It is I who have been struck."

"When, then?"

"You shall hear from me in the morning. Suffice it that you shall be chastised before all Paris. I shall make a public warning of you, my young friend."

And with the same hard smile upon his face, he mounted upon the box, and seized the reins.

"If this gentleman whose joint I have had the pleasure of damaging considers himself aggrieved," said Jack, "he shall always find me ready to make any amends in my power."

"The same applies to my friend on the right," said I. "I refer to the gentleman with the curious swelling under his ear."

Our friends only answered our kind attentions by a volley of curses.

The patron of the savate was hoisted into the carriage, and the other followed him; while Lablas, still white with passion, drove furiously off, amid laughter from Jack and myself and curses from Henry, whose fiery blood was too thoroughly roused to allow him to view the matter in its ridiculous aspect.

"Nothing like evaporating lotions for bruises," was the practical piece of advice which our medical student shouted after them as the carriage rumbled away like a dark nightmare, and the sound of its wheels died gradually in the distance.

At this moment a gendarme, true to the traditions of his order, hurried on to the scene of action; but after jotting down the number of the house in a portentous note-book, he gave up the attempt of extracting any information from us, and departed with many shrugs.

My heart was heavy as I trudged back to my hotel that night. There is always a reaction after such excitement, and I was uneasy at the thought of what the morrow might bring forth.

The allusion which Henry had made in the early part of the evening to the duelling proclivities of Lablas, and in particular to the

sinister result of his encounter with the young French officer, had not been forgotten by me.

I knew the wild blood which ran in my friend's veins, and that it would be hopeless to attempt to dissuade him from a meeting. I was powerless, and must let events take their own course.

IV

When I came down to breakfast in the morning I found the two brothers waiting for me. Henry looked bright and almost exultant as he greeted me, but Jack was unusually serious.

"It's all right, old fellow," said the young actor.

"Yes; look here, Barker," explained Jack, evidently in considerable perturbation. "It's a most extraordinary business. The queerest challenge I ever heard of, though I confess that my experience of these things is very limited. I suppose we cannot get out of it?"

"Not for the world!" cried his brother.

"See here," said Jack; "this is the note I got. Read it for yourself."

It was addressed to the student, and ran thus:—

*"Sir,—On the understanding that you act as second to Mr. Henry Latour, allow me to state that in the exercise of his right M. Lablas selects rapiers as his weapon. He begs you to accompany your principal to the theatre to-night, where you will be admitted to the stage as a supernumerary. You can thus satisfy yourself that the final scene is fought according to the strict rules of the duello. The rapiers will be substituted for stage foils without difficulty. I shall be present on behalf of M. Lablas. I have the honour to remain very sincerely yours,"*PIERRE GROSSIERE."

"What do you think of that?" said Jack.

"Why, I think that it is a preposterous idea, and that you should refuse."

"It wouldn't do," said Henry. "They would try and construe it into cowardice. Besides, what does it matter where I meet the fellow so long as I do meet him? I tell you, Barker," he continued, laying his hand upon my arm, "that when I do, I intend to kill him!"

There was something resolute in the ring of my friend's voice. I felt that, in spite of his advantages, Lablas would meet with a dangerous opponent.

"If you should fall, Henry," said Jack, "I will take your place, and either lick the blackguard or never leave the stage. It would make a sensation to have Hamlet run through by a super-numerary, wouldn't it?"

And he gave the ghost of a smile.

"Well, write an acceptance at once, Jack," said Henry. "My only fear is that my sister's name should get mixed up in the matter."

"No fear of that," said I. "It would not be their interest to talk about the ridiculous fiasco they have made."

"You will come to the National to-night, Barker?" asked Henry. "You can get a place in the front row of the stalls."

"I will," said I; "and if you should both fail to avenge your sister, Lablas will have to reckon with me before the curtain falls."

"You are a good fellow, Barker," said Henry. "Well," he added, after a pause, "my private quarrel mustn't interfere with my duty to the public, so I'll go back and read my part over. Good-bye, old man! We shall see you to-night."

And the brothers left me alone to my coffee.

How they got through the day I do not know. I should think even imperturbable Jack found the hours hung rather heavily upon his hands.

As for myself, I was in a fever of suspense. I could only pace up and down the crowded streets, and wait for the evening to come.

The doors did not open until seven o'clock, but the half-hour found me waiting at the entrance to the National.

A knot of enthusiasts, eager to secure places, were already clustering round it. I spent the time in perusing a poster, which was suspended to one of the pillars.

"Lablas" was written across it in great capitals, while in smaller print below there were

a few other names, that of Henry Latour being one of them.

It seemed as if the door would never open. There is an end to all things, however, and the hour struck at last. We filed into the theatre one after another, in the orderly French fashion.

I was fortunate enough to secure what I wanted—namely, a centre seat in the front row.

Nothing but the orchestra intervened between me and the footlights. I would have given anything to have seen Jack now—to have had anyone with whom I could exchange a word on the topic which was nearest my heart; but my immediate neighbours were a stolid English manager, who had come over in the hope of picking up something worth imparting, and an enthusiastic young lady with her elderly mamma.

I had learned, even in our short acquaintance, to regard Henry as a dear friend; but I think it was the idea of his sister which gave me such a sinking at the heart, when I thought of the deadly science and diabolical vindictiveness of Lablas.

During the overture I was far too preoccupied to pay much attention to my neighbour the manager, who was pouring into my ears his views of the French stage.

"We can't approach them on 'touch-and-go' comedy," he said; "it's their strong point; but when it comes to Shakespeare, they are lost, sir—utterly lost. If you had seen the Hamlets I have seen—Macready, sir, and the older Kean—"

But here his reminiscences were providentially cut short by the rise of the curtain.

The first few scenes were tame enough. The translation lacked the rugged strength and force of our own glorious language. Old theatre goers became restless in their seats, and whispered that there was something amiss with their favourite actor.

His eye seemed to rest upon me with a dark and threatening scowl. The black, tight-fitting dress showed off his splendid figure to advantage, and was admirably adapted, as I could not help thinking, for the second and more tragic part which he was about to play.

My spirits revived when Henry entered. He looked cool and at his ease, though I could see a dangerous light in his eye when he glanced towards his brother actor.

The spirit and fire of his elocution seemed to captivate his hearers. From pit to gallery there was not one who did not sympathise with the gallant young Danish nobleman, and he was applauded to the echo.

Hamlet was forgotten in Laertes. I shall never forget the torrent of indignation which rang out in the words—

"A sister driven into desperate terms. Whose worth, if praises may go back again, Stood challenger on mount of all the age For her perfections. But my revenge will come."

"By Jove, sir!" said the manager, *sotto voce*; "those last words were nature itself."

Henry was called before the curtain at the end of the fourth act; but it was in the scene at Ophelia's grave that he surpassed himself. His howl of "The devil take thy soul!" as he sprang at Hamlet's throat, fairly brought down the house, and caused me involuntarily to spring to my feet; but he seemed to recollect himself in time, and shook himself clear of his rival.

Hamlet's invective, too was the strongest point in his character. The vast audience seemed to hang on every word which passed between them.

"You'll get an English actor to make more stage points," said the manager; "but there's a confounded naturalness about all this which is wonderful!"

His dramatic instinct had told him that, in spite of his forty years' experience, there was something here which he had never met before.

And now there was a great hush in the house as the curtain rose upon the final scene. It was magnificently put upon the stage. The rude, barbaric pomp of the Danish Court was pictured to the life. The king and queen were seated in the background, under a canopy of purple velvet, lined with ermine. The walls of the royal banquet-hall were gorgeous with strange trophies, supposed to have been brought from afar by Viking hands.

There was a clear space in the centre, and at either side a swarm of men-at-arms, courtiers, and all the hangers-on of the royal household.

Laertes was leaning carelessly against a pillar, while Hamlet stood with a smile of confidence upon his face, conversing with a courtier.

Beside Laertes I could see Jack Latour, got up in a suit of armour which was ridiculously out of proportion to his brawny limbs. There was a look upon his face, however, that would have forbidden a laugh at his expense.

To me the excitement was agonising, and all over the house a strange interest began to manifest itself in the proceedings.

Not a sound could be heard over the great theatre as Osric came tripping forward with the bundle of foils.

I surmised that the rapiers were lying among them, for Hamlet took some little time to satisfy himself, though Laertes seemed to choose his weapon without a moment's hesitation.

"Gad!" said the manager; "look at the man's eyes! I tell you it's unique!"

The salute was given, and the courtier with whom Lablas had been speaking drew up to his principal, while Jack took up his position behind his brother.

His honest face was pale with anxiety, and I could see that instead of the double-edged Danish sword, he had a delicate rapier slung to his side. I knew what was meant by that.

I turned away my eyes as the two men approached each other; but I glanced round again involuntarily as I heard a quick stamp, and the sharp ring of steel.

The silence was so profound that you might have heard the breathing of the combatants at the extreme end of the pit.

I caught a glimpse of the dark, savage face of Lablas, and the tall, lithe figure of his antagonist, and I turned my eyes away again from sheer nervousness.

Then there came a momentary cessation in the clash of the swords, and I heard the manager say, "The deception is admirable. You'd swear there was blood running down the leg of

Laertes. Capital! capital! The business is perfect!"

I shuddered, and looked up again as they sprang at each other for the second time, and my eyes were riveted upon the stage for the remainder of the conflict.

The combatants were very evenly matched; first one, and then the other, seemed to gain a temporary advantage. The profound science of Lablas was neutralised by the fire and fury of his antagonist's attack.

I could see from Henry's face that he had determined to bring matters to a crisis. To kill or be killed had become his one idea.

He rushed at his opponent so furiously that he drove him back among the crowd of courtiers. I saw Lablas give a deadly lunge under the guard, which Henry took through his left arm; and then I saw my friend spring in, and there was a groan and a spurt of blood as Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, tottered forwards to the footlights and fell heavily upon his face.

The effect upon the audience was electrical. There was a hush for a moment, and then, from pit to boxes, and from boxes to gallery, there went up a cheer so spontaneous and so universal, that it was like the mighty voice of one man. The whole house sprang to its feet with round after round of applause.

It was the finest illusion of the year—it was the best coup de theatre, and most realistic stage duel that had ever been fought. But the English manager shuddered as he caught me convulsively by the wrist, and said, in an awe-struck whisper, "I saw it come out at his back!"

Yes, it was the finest illusion of the year; and still the audience applauded and applauded.

Surely he will rise and bow his acknowledgments? One more cheer may do it. But no; he lies there stiff and stark, with a scowl upon his white face, and his life-blood trickling down the boards.

And now there is a hot, heavy smell in the orchestra, which was surely never caused by a stage illusion. Why is that young man gesticulating so? A little crimson pool has trickled upon his music book, and he sees that it is still dripping down, liquid and warm.

And a hush comes over the pit, while the boxes are still applauding; and then the boxes grow quiet, and strange whispers go about. Then the audience above become silent, too, and a great stillness falls upon the theatre, and the heavy brown curtain is rolled down.

"Well, my boy," said Jack, when I met him, "it was all very terrible, but it ended right."

"Won't there be an inquiry into the matter?"

"No, not a bit. The initiated know that it was all fair play, and the rest are under the impression that a button slipped, or a foil snapped. Henry's name as an actor is made for ever—that's some consolation."

"How is he?" I asked.

"Oh, well enough to see company. You must come along and dine with us. He has a slight wound in the leg, and is run through the biceps; but there is no damage done. Rose and the mother are terribly cut up, but, of course, they think it was all an accident. They shall never know the truth."

And now, before I conclude, let me sketch another scene. It is that solemn and orthodox ritual with which fiction usually, and fact occasionally, as in the present instance, terminates. A man and a woman are kneeling at the foot of an altar, while a clergyman is pronouncing the words that refute the commonly-received doctrine that one and one are two.

You will have no difficulty in recognising the pretty little girlish bride; she is altered but little since we saw her six months ago. The bride-groom is—No, most astute and sagacious reader, it is not myself; it is a young French officer of cavalry, with a boyish smile, and the scar of a bullet upon his left breast.