

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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Advertising Agents for WEIRD TALES

*Do You Want a Slice of Life from the
Thirteenth Century? If so,
Don't Fail to Read*

THE AFFAIR *of the* MAN *in* SCARLET

By JULIAN KILMAN

TWO French peasants, the one young, the other old and hale and toothless, both carrying baskets and garbed in ragged breeches and tunics, gaped at the pair of horses struggling to haul the closed coach up the steep incline in Angoulême Wood.

At the instant it seemed as if the animals were about to fail. The driver, a sober youth in drab livery with undecipherable shoulder insignia, used his whip mercilessly. The lash cracked, the horses plunged frantically, while a stream of invective sped from the driver's lips.

"You pair of oafs!" he cried, finally. "Lend a hand."

The peasants willingly put shoulder to wheel. The coach gained way and topped the rise. As it did so, the two peasants set out at a run, their baskets bobbing, but a shout came from behind.

"Ware the road, ye clodhoppers!"

The clatter of horse hoofs was upon them, they were just able to fling themselves to the side as three horse-

men, presumably outriders of the equipage ahead, swept by.

The peasants gazed in admiration after the flashing figures.

"That'll be good King Philippe's riders," announced André, the younger. "Mark ye the emblems on their jackets?"

"I do that," returned Jacques, the light of understanding in his ancient eyes. "Methinks I know what brings them to the village of Peptonneau."

"And, pray, what is it that brings them to the village of Peptonneau?"

"They come to the Man in Scarlet."

At mention of the official headman, who years before had come from near Fontainebleau to reside in Peptonneau, Jacques' companion fell silent.

The old man chuckled.

"Ah! They were gay days when your old Jacques was a gardener at the royal palace. And be it known to you, lout of Peptonneau," Jacques' voice rose, "that my best friend then was old Capeluche, the very father of our neighbor headman, who to be sure is a man of ugly temper, and

hence giving easy understanding as to why he lost favor at Fontainebleau.

"Ah me!" sighed Jacques. "You, André, should have heard the rare stories told by old Capeluche, the son of the son of the son of a headsman, unto four generations. A proper man with the sword, forsooth! There was the Duc de la Trémouille whom old Capeluche led to the block and permitted to begin the Lord's prayer, but when the noble duke got as far as '*et nos inducas intentationem*' he had drawled it so slowly that the good Capeluche, losing patience, swung his blade and made such a clean stroke of it that the head, though severed, remained in exact place while from the lips the prayer continued—'*Sed libera nos a malo*'—until the faithful Capeluche nudged the body and the head toppled off.

"A wonderful arm, one may say," continued Jacques, "but a wonderful weapon, too, and the same one now resting with the Capeluche in Peptonneau. Old Capeluche told me that on one occasion, when Madam Bonacieux, a famous lady-in-waiting—now dead, may the Saints preserve her!—brought her baby to his house, the sword rattled furiously in its closet, which was an omen that the child would some day die by the self-same sword wielded by the right arm of a Capeluche unless then and there Madam Bonacieux allowed her baby's neck to be pricked by the point of the sword until blood showed."

"And did Madam Bonacieux permit it?" asked André, curiously.

"That she did not," replied Jacques. "She laughed in old Capeluche's face and ran out of his house, and thereat the old man was furious, vowing that the child would some day have its neck severed by the famous sword."

WHILE thus engaged in conversation, old Jacques had steadily led the way by a short cut through the wood, which presently brought

them out of breath to the village, ahead of the coach and horses.

The village of Peptonneau was small, having less than a thousand inhabitants, its houses being of stone, and built close together in the manner of the gregarious Latin. Most striking of these structures in their uniformity was one near the center square painted a brilliant red.

In the clear sunshine of that Thirteenth Century July day, the dwelling stood out like a veritable lighthouse, and thither, giving no heed to the leper who passed in the opposite direction, fingerless, noseless, the bell at his neck ringing dolefully, the two peasants complacently padded their barefoot way.

A tall, lean, but well-thewed individual in leather jerkin and girdle, lounged in front of the house of red. With cynical eyes he viewed the approach of the peasants.

"In five minutes, M. Capeluche," announced Jacques, a trifle breathlessly, "a coach and riders will arrive."

"And you, old cock, trot hither from your berry-picking to tell me that bit of famous gossip?"

"Ay! I'm an old cock, and many years have passed o'er my head, Monsieur, but it is a head not destined to be removed by a Capeluche, nor yet by the son of a Capeluche."

"Sirrah! Daily I give thanks to the Holy Virgin," retorted the headsman, "that the delicate skill of a Capeluche is not for the hairy necks of such *canaille* as you."

"Who knows," sturdily replied Jacques, "as to the quality or quantity of hair on the neck of one who draws near in yonder coach?"

The grunt that left the headsman betrayed his interest. He peered down the road.

"What do you mean by that?"

Old Jacques permitted himself a toothless grin. It was not often that a Peptonneau villager could stir the equanimity of the great one, whose

prerogatives of office entitled him to tithes exacted from towns and monasteries as ruthlessly as those of prince or baron.

"The coach, Monsieur," the loquacious Jacques continued with satisfaction, "is accompanied by three outriders; they are men of the Divine Philippe's, Monsieur, recently returned from 'The Foolish Wars', and wearing on the shoulders of their tunics the sign of the cross, together with——"

"A falcon in full flight?" quickly broke in the headsman.

"Even so, M. Capeluche. A falcon in full— Now, *regardez vous*, the great man is himself in full flight!"

IF THE headsman had in truth rather precipitately taken himself into his dwelling, his absence was of short duration, for he returned in a moment, clad in a scarlet cloak that reached to his knees.

At the instant there sounded the call of a bugle, and into sight swung three horsemen, followed by the coach driven at breakneck speed.

M. Capeluche took a position midway of the road and presently caught the heads of the horses drawing the coach. His black eyes snapped fire as he noted the quivering flanks of the hard-driven animals.

"High honor you do me, M. le Headsman," cried the driver, leaping to the ground and clapping the palms of his hands against his breeches to relieve them of perspiration.

"No honor to you, you puling son of an ass," retorted Capeluche, crossly.

"Hear the Man in Scarlet!"

The tallest of the horsemen, a devil-may-care appearing young man whose finely-chiseled features and delicate raiment proclaimed him of noble blood, now stepped to the side of the coach and unlocked the door and opened it.

A surpassingly beautiful woman of perhaps twenty-two years, sat within.

She had the totally unexpected air of pretty surprise. As she descended, accepting with dainty grace the proffer of the gallant's arm, her wide-set blue eyes were dazzled by the brilliance of the midday light.

"Thank you, Comte de Mousqueton," she murmured.

With his charge, the Comte then approached the headsman, who stood with arms akimbo, his sharp eyes on the newcomers.

"M. Capeluche," said the Comte, graciously. "The Royal Master sends this day the body of Mlle. Bonacieux. These papers, sir, are your warrant. Please to scan them at once."

"The portent! The portent!" cried a voice from the crowd of rustics.

"Who shouts?" demanded Capeluche, looking about him fiercely, while a silence fell.

With a nod that gave scant heed to the etiquette of the occasion, the headsman accepted the beribboned parchment and ripped open the cover. The writ was of interminable length and inscribed in Latin. A glance, however, at the familiar "Now, therefore," clause at the end quickly apprised Capeluche of his commission, and without a word he turned to enter his house.

"One moment," said the Comte.

The headsman paused, scowling.

"Where, M. Capeluche, are we to lodge the prisoner in the interim?"

A sardonic smile suddenly played on the features of Capeluche.

"In Peptonneau, Comte de Mousqueton," he said, "you will please to understand that since the days of the plague there has been no inn."

The glance of the Man in Scarlet now shifted to the dilapidated, unoccupied structures on either side of his own dwelling.

"These are the only vacant houses in Peptonneau, their emptiness, of a truth, due to the fact that they stand next the dwelling of red. Of these two you may choose freely, sir."

The crowd dispersed.

“Ho! Ho!” broke in a familiar voice. “There’ll be no hair on the neck of Mlle. Bonacieux to dull the edge of M. Capeluche’s good sword.”

IT WAS near dark before the youthful Comte, after his discourteous reception by the headsman, was able to arrange suitable quarters in one of the deserted houses for his charge. As he was leaving her for the night, he seemed to reach a decision and was about to speak when she anticipated him.

“You are kind, indeed, M. le Comte,” she exclaimed, “to one in such misfortune.”

“Kindness, Mlle. Bonacieux, comes easily when one views beauty in distress.”

Mlle. Bonacieux shook her head reprovingly.

“Ah, Comte, to one whose tenure of existence is limited by a bit of parchment to ten hours the occasion does not seem fitting for mere compliment.”

“The occasion, Mademoiselle, is not entirely unpropitious if one considers all the possibilities.”

The woman gave him a quick look.

“To just what, pray, does the Comte de Mousqueton refer?”

The young Frenchman paced the room, giving signs of a state of tension. Then he began to speak rapidly:

“The Mlle. Bonacieux, some of us feel at the court, has been ill treated both by the King and the Dauphin. The King, by his gratuitous harshness, and the Dauphin, by his, his—”

The Comte hesitated. The keenly intelligent gaze of the woman interrogated him.

“Proceed, M. le Comte,” she encouraged.

“Will it be permitted a mere Comte to speak frankly of the prince?”

“By all means.”

“Then I shall dare to say, by the lack of knowledge and perspicacity of the Dauphin.”

In spite of herself, a flush stole into the face of the woman.

“Ah! You are naïve!” she exclaimed, in pain. “Cruelly so.”

“Nay, Mademoiselle. It is not naïvete in the circumstances, for I have a definite plan to defeat the machinations of the Cardinal.”

In amazement the woman stared at her companion.

“But how—” she began.

“Listen, Mademoiselle. Everyone, it seems, including both the King and the Dauphin, have forgotten the ancient Merovingian statute, which provides that a woman sentenced to death may, if the headsman is ‘able and willing’ to marry her, be saved. Now, M. le headsman, if a boor, has at least the temporarily strategic advantage of being a celibate. It remains merely for you to captivate the gentleman’s fancy, and — who knows?”

The Comte now glanced with interest at his beautiful prisoner. She was smiling.

“Very prettily thought M. le Comte,” she said, “and your interest in my cause is flattering. But is not death itself preferable to life with yon crimson-handed churl as a wife whose only contact with her neighbors would be in the night-time, when they came stealing to buy from her horrid amulets with which to curse their enemies?”

“Ah, but who said that Mlle. Bonacieux would be compelled to endure life with a headsman?”

“Surely it is not to be expected,” remarked the woman, “that the headsman would be gallant enough to release me immediately after the ceremony?”

A short laugh broke from the Comte.

“No fear of that. My purpose is to relieve him of his bridegroom embarrassment within ten minutes after he has a wife.”

“Ah! A rescue! You, a King’s Messenger, would dare that for me?”

"And why not?"

"But why should you?"

The Comte's face flushed slightly.

"One who loves would not regard such an enterprise as a peril."

The eyes of the woman kindled. She approached the Comte. He caught her hand and kissed it.

"Trust in the Comte de Mousqueton," he breathed.

IT WAS late when the Comte came from the prison house. The village seemed asleep, but another than himself was abroad. The figure of a man in a cloak was issuing from the neighboring house.

"You walk late, M. Capeluche," said the Comte. "But it is well, for Mlle. Bonacieux wishes to speak with you."

The headsman stopped abruptly to peer into the eyes of the young nobleman. The act was insolent.

"Is M. le Comte," he inquired, coldly, "sufficiently in the confidence of his fair prisoner to advise me what it is she desires?"

"The man is steel," thought the Comte, hotly. "I'll kill him yet." Aloud, he said: "I have some idea, M. Capeluche. But I may not allude to it."

The headsman fell silent.

"Closer examination of the writ," he went on, finally, "shows that it is curiously indefinite in its recital as to the offense of which Mlle. Bonacieux has been guilty."

The Comte laughed easily.

"M. de Briseout will be pleased to hear that the discriminating Capeluche has so found it."

"And who is de Briseout?"

"The ingenious special pleader employed by the Cardinal to prepare the document. It is a work of art."

"Then I can not be mistaken in assuming that one as clever as the Comte de Mousqueton and so recently come from Fontainebleau will be able to tell me the real nature of the case."

The young nobleman was able to smile in the dark at the discernment of this strange man of blood.

"'Tis a proper question, M. Capeluche," he returned. "Be it known to you, therefore, that no less a person than the Dauphin himself entertains the liveliest of sentiments toward Mlle. Bonacieux. The Cardinal, however, through his spies, early learned of the infatuation of the prince and privately remonstrated with him on the score that the mesalliance would definitely imperil the consummation of his proposed nuptials with Katharine of Austria, which, in turn, might embroil the two nations in war.

"But the Dauphin resented ecclesiastical interference. This aroused the ire of His Eminence, who straightway went to King Philippe. The net result is that the Dauphin has been dispatched on a tedious expedition to Sicilia, and I am ordered to convey the pretty person of Mlle. Bonacieux to you for decapitation."

The two men resumed their walking.

"And this, then, you think," came from the headsman, "accounts both for the ambiguity of the writ's phraseology as well as the fact that Mlle. Bonacieux is spirited hither instead of being left to the hand of the headsman at Fontainebleau?"

"Undoubtedly, M. Capeluche."

The headsman started away abruptly, in the manner of a man whose mind is suddenly made up. A light still burned in Mlle. Bonacieux's quarters and he tapped at the door.

"Who it it?" called the woman.

"One whom you wished to see."

"Please come in, M. Capeluche."

Mlle. Bonacieux was in truth chilled by the grim expression of the man who now stood composedly studying her; but she gave no sign. Instead, her eyes were sparkling and she was a vision of loveliness as she reclined on the couch that had been provided for her by the Comte.

"An unpleasant business—for both

of us, M. le Headsman," she commented.

"There are many persons in *your* position who would so regard it," bluntly agreed the headsman.

"I shall not dissemble, M. le Headsman. I do not desire to die tomorrow."

"Is it for this that you have sent for me?"

The woman laughed.

"Yes, and no, Monsieur," she returned. "It has but recently been mentioned to me that an ancient law is still in effect and has a certain bearing——"

She paused, glancing with studied carelessness at the headsman.

"The Comte de Mousqueton is a very clever fellow," remarked Capeluche, dryly. "What is it he has to say of this old law?"

"That it seems a pity to miss a perfectly legitimate opportunity both to accomplish a humanitarian act and so defeat the machinations of an interfering Italian Cardinal."

Capeluche's features for the first time relaxed into a smile.

"And Mlle. Bonacieux, therefore, of the two evils—death or a headsman—is willing to choose the latter?"

"You put it so bluntly, M. le Headsman," she sighed. "There can be compensations on either hand. If, for instance, the headsman surrenders his celibacy to a pretty woman, it is not inconceivable that she may reciprocate by surrendering her jewels to him."

"On condition?"

In sincere surprise, Mlle. Bonacieux glanced up.

"Your perspicacity is gratifying, Monsieur," she exclaimed. "The condition, suggested by you, is that immediately after the ceremony Madam Capeluche be released and permitted to journey back to Fontainebleau with the Comte de Mousqueton."

The gleaming eyes of the man told

much—or little. He approached the reclining beauty.

"Mlle. Bonacieux," he said. "The Merovingian statute is still law, being, in fact, the very writ that directs my hand in your case."

For an instant he stood over her.

"The Abbé Kérouec," he added harshly, "will wed us two tomorrow, five minutes before seven in the evening, the hour fixed by the writ for your death."

SHORTLY after six o'clock next evening old Jacques stole from the Angoulême wood and fell in step immediately behind a man garbed in a long close-fitting black coat with skirts that fell to his feet. This individual was making his way with painful slowness along the road to Peptonneau.

For the space of a minute Jacques followed in silence, his old nut-cracker face full of preliminary guile. Then he pushed forward.

"It is a fine day, good father," he shouted.

In surprise the old man surveyed him.

"Ay, a fine day, Jacques, you godless one," he replied in the toneless voice of the deaf.

"But the clemency of the weather is not for the delectation of the young beauty from Fontainebleau now lodged in Peptonneau."

The Abbé Kérouec inclined his head. He was exceedingly deaf and had not heard.

Jacques swore heartily. At the top of his lungs he shouted:

"Bad weather for her who dies at seven this evening by the hand of M. Capeluche."

The light of comprehension came into the features of the ancient Abbé.

"Ah, my good fellow, you mistake. I come to M. Capeluche's dwelling on a more gracious mission than to shrive the soul of one condemned by the King's Writ."

It was Jacques' turn to be surprised.

"Ha! Say you that Mlle. Bonacieux is not to die this eve?"

The Abbe's eyes showed that he understood.

"That I say, indeed, Jacques. You and I be old men and we have seen much, but never before has anyone in our generation in all France and her possessions witnessed that which is about to occur in modest little Peptonneau."

"And what is that?" sharply demanded Jacques.

"The wedding of M. Capeluche, the headsman, to Mlle. Bonacieux, the condemned."

Jacques threw back his head and laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"That indeed is droll!" he shouted. "M. le Headsman weds a woman and then immediately cuts off her head."

The owl-like eyes of the Abbé regarded Jacques solemnly.

"You do not know the full import of what I have told you, Jacques."

The old peasant sobered instantly.

"What's that?"

"Then you have never heard of the Merovingian statute which provides that the headsman may marry a condemned woman, if he is able and willing, and thereby save her life?"

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" came from Jacques, his small eyes opening and shutting with lightning rapidity. "Thus it proceeds, eh? M. le Headsman surrenders to the charms of the beautiful Mlle. Bonacieux. He plans to take her to wife. Is not the situation amusing?"

Suddenly he shook the arm of the old Abbé.

"But it can not be, Abbé Kér-ouec," he exclaimed vociferously. "I knew the worthy M. Capeluche at Fontainebleau. He was a friend of mine, and the father of the headsman in Peptonneau, and he confided in me that on a certain occasion a lady-in-waiting one day brought her

child to the dwelling in red, whereupon the Capeluche sword rattled furiously in its closet, which meant, of an absolute surety, that the child, unless its neck was pricked by the point of the sword, would some day die by that sword. That woman bore the name of Bonacieux, and now, after eighteen years, old Jacques lives to see Mlle. Bonacieux, the child grown to womanhood, awaiting her death under the famous sword in the hands of a Capeluche."

Jacques paused for breath. The old Abbé had endeavored to follow the harangue of the peasant.

"Understand! A portent!" shouted Jacques, in desperation. "Mlle. Bonacieux is to die tonight by the sword of the headsman, Capeluche."

"Nay! Nay! Jacques," in turn exclaimed the Abbé. "I know not of what you prate, save that it be Godless. But there will be a wedding in Peptonneau this eve, and no woman will die by the hand of Capeluche."

A THRONG had gathered before the house in red by the time the Abbé and his companion Jacques made their way along the village street. The Comte met them. He was in doublet and hose of violet color with aiguillettes of same, having the customary slashes through which the shirt appeared. The dress was handsome, albeit it gave evidence of having been but recently taken from a traveler's box, which had left it in creases.

"We have little time," he said.

He left them, but returned presently with Mlle. Bonacieux, and at sight of her unusual beauty, accompanied by so graceful a figure as the Comte, a murmur of appreciation stirred the rustic spectators.

With the Abbé preceding them, the little party passed into the red dwelling. M. Capeluche, in the cloak of his office, stood awaiting them. The Abbé he treated with marked deference, a manner that sat oddly on him.

As a man beyond the pale of both church and society, because of his calling, Capeluche had experienced some doubt as to whether the worthy churchman would perform the ceremony.

As affairs went forward, his face retained its customary grim composure; but his eyes, resting on the entrancing creature who stood demurely at his side, held a light that fully signified his reaction to the potentialities of the occasion.

An hour passed, and old Jacques lay on his bed. He was fully dressed and wakeful and alert, despite the fact that his retiring-time had long since gone by. Presently there came to him the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

With the restless activity of a jack-in-the-box, he ran from his house and was in time to see the horseman dash up to the dwelling of Capeluche. The riders, of whom there were seven, wore masks. They pounded for admittance.

A light showed within, and old Jacques could see, through an open window, the headsman. He was making all secure against the attack. However, a window to the right—one

that had just been closed—was reopened unexpectedly, and a woman's hand extended. From it there fluttered a handkerchief.

Two of the horsemen started toward the open window. But the hand was withdrawn swiftly, and a terrible shriek followed.

A moment later the door gave way. The attacking party hurtled into the dwelling stumbling over one another.

An appalling sight was before them. In the center of the room stood Capeluche, a scarlet Mephisto. His hands held the cleanly severed head of Mlle. Bonacieux, her beautiful tresses of hair depending almost to the floor. At his feet lay the long weapon of his office.

He extended the head before him.

"Perhaps," he said grimly, "the Comte de Mousqueton would relish a kiss from the lips of Madame Capeluche, the wife of a headsman. She was very choice of those same lips—a Dauphin has felt them. And see! See how deliciously cupid they are!"

Suddenly Jacques' voice broke in.

"Before God!" exclaimed the old peasant, with tremendous satisfaction. "*The portent!*"

