

THE GOLDEN BOOK MAGAZINE*

for January, 1931

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Poetry

- The Cap and Bells
—W. B. YEATS 28
- Haroun's Favorite song
—FROM THE ARABIAN 50
- Woo Not the World
—MU'TAMID 51
- Poem —GELETT BURGESS 60
- I Sought the Wood in
Winter —WILLA CATHER 70

Also

- Who's Who in the Golden
Book —THE EDITORS 4
- Authors and Books —F. F. 8
- January. *An Etching*
—GEORGE SHOREY 20
- I Meet R. L. S.
—HENRY ADAMS 33
- The Theorist. *A Cartoon*
—C. A. VOIGHT 34
- New Year's Eve
—CHARLES LAMB 45
- Little Fable —BARRY PAIN 62
- With All Due Respect to Our
Ancestors. *The Classics*
stoop to slang 65
- The Prize Essay Contest 82
- Winter in Our Southlands
—ROGER SHAW 90

Stories

- The Fugitive VINCENT STARRETT 21
Drawings by John Alan Maxwell
- How the Roast Goose Vendor Was Paid. . . . RABELAIS 29
- Tobermory "SAKI" (H. H. MUNRO) 30
- Her Own Room THYRA SAMTER WINSLOW 37
Drawings by Dorothy McKay
- The Third Circle FRANK NORRIS 46
- Faith R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM 49
- A Piece of Red Calico FRANK R. STOCKTON 58
Cartoon by Gluyas Williams
- The Dowry GUY DE MAUPASSANT 63
- The Corduroy Road S. CARLETON 66
- When Hannah Var Eight Yar Old. . . . K. P. GIRLING 73
Prize Winning Essay of Carrie Barden
- Ashenden, the British Agent . . . W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM 78
The First of Two Parts

Special Features

- Buffalo! Buffalo! FRANCIS PARKMAN, JR. 54
A great American story of adventure
- Dialogue of the Dead. *A Play* LUCIAN 61
- Lives of Highwaymen—I. Sawney Beane 72
- Virgil in Modern Italy ROBERTO PARIBENI 75
Translated by Arthur Stanley Riggs
- O Happy Husbandman. *From The Georgics* . . . VIRGIL 76
In Latin, English, French, Italian, Spanish and German
- The 20 Best American Short Stories. . . F. L. PATTEE 82
- The New Ice Age LEONORA R. BAXTER 83
Art in Everyday Living
- So They Say 35
- Cover Design W. STUART LEECH

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Only aristocrats signed their names in the original Libro d'Oro of Venice from which the Golden Book Magazine takes its name. The world's aristocrats of letters—of all ages, from the oldest to the most modern—appear in these pages.

The Fugitive

By VINCENT STARRETT

A RED AFTERMATH of the sunset still bathed the crests of Tarantelle, as Duplessis struck downward from the heights. He paused for a moment beside the pool, cool, shadowy and solemn, and looked backward and upward at the frowning battlements of the prison he had left behind.

To the right of the great rock rose lesser peaks of a wild grace and symmetry, and from among the purple crags to the left tumbled the cloudy tumult of the waterfall, the roar of its onrush a part of the silence of the night. The sunset echo touched the turrets of gaol and rock with sanguinary fingers, which, as they receded, seemed to drip with sinister suggestion. Reluctantly, the shadows deepened.

The fugitive stretched his arms to the amazing landscape breathing deeply. With a sweeping gesture of adoration, he embraced the glory of the scene. Then, with excessive caution, he continued his journey down the winding trail toward the valley.

Far below him wound the river, whose course he was to follow, curving between black banks of meadow and forest. Pines grew thickly at the base of the ascent, and slender cypresses pricked half way up to meet him. The moon was climbing the sky, a dim, silver bubble, striving against darkening clouds and a sultry promise of rain.

The man smiled.

"An hour!" he murmured. "Seigneur Jesus, give

me a single, little hour!"

He stepped forward swiftly, filled with new assurance. He had counted upon the rain; it was to be his salvation. Pray that it come, and quickly! Yet, as he trod the black descent, his ear turned backward and apprehension prickled the edges of his scalp. Not long could his escape remain a secret . . . and then the great gun would thunder through the mountains and down across the valley, and the resounding arches of the great crags would roll the tumult, as from tongue to tongue, until the farthest villages caught the mutter of its anger, and knew the purport of its message.

An hour would bring him to Saint-Just, and there in a labyrinth of narrow, remembered thoroughfares, for a time he would be safe. A day or two was all he asked; enough time in which to perfect his plans, already vaguely charted. There was an Inn at Saint-Just, and a girl . . . who loved a thief. . . .

Ah, well! The Inn, no doubt, still would stand where it stood of old, and there were reasons why it would be to the advantage of its proprietor to conceal him.



Above and behind him roared the great gun of Tarantelle.

He began to hum softly, bouncing downward to the lilt of his refrain.

*J'ai perdu mon coeur volage,
Mon honneur, mon avantage.
De moi ne me parle plus. . . .*

His foot struck a stone, with a sharp impact, and sent it flying down the side of the mountain. He interrupted himself softly to curse its tiny commotion, recalling that safety for thieves lay yet some miles beyond.

The air became more sultry. The stars were fading out; the moon no longer strove. Blackness was falling over the silver ribbon of the stream. The trail became more uncertain.

The fugitive looked back. The formidable pile of his prison had receded, but was still dangerously close. Its bastions seemed to swell and bulge until it was as if the colossal structure would fall forward upon him and crush him against the rock. Pursuit at this juncture meant capture. . . . Again he pushed forward, picking his way with a more exaggerated caution. The closeness of the night became uncomfortable. The rain was long in coming.

Once more he burst into song, and stopped to curse his folly. He lifted his feet high to cross an imaginary obstacle, and blundered into a gully beside the trail, falling so that he scratched his wrists and scraped his elbows. He swore in low tones.

"Nature," said Duplessis, forgetting his earlier admiration, "is meretricious and highly colored. She is a hypocrite. She is indiscriminate and violent, extreme in likes and dislikes, and as full of inconsequences as a woman. Indeed, she is in all ways like a woman."

Pleased by his fancy, he picked himself up, and proceeded more slowly.

"Furthermore," he continued, "having regard to what we know of her history, she is assuredly a woman with a past." He chuckled and struck his breast. "*Moi! Je suis philosophe!*"

But when the rain suddenly fell, he welcomed this sign of nature's inconsistency with happiness, and quickened his stride.

Far down through the trees that now sentined his advance, a light glimmered and vanished. He was almost upon the level. To his left, then, was the main stream of the river, and beyond lay Saint-Just. He fell upon his knees, kissing the wet soil.

"It is escape!" he cried.

Simultaneously, above and behind him, the great gun of Tarantelle roared across the dripping night.

For a moment the fugitive's heart froze to ice. Then, with a cry of defiance, he was upon his feet and running through the fantastic arch of trees.

Behind him, at sullen intervals, the gun continued to shout its warning. Unheeding, he fled swiftly through the darkness toward the lights of the village. His eyes shone with furious joy: his feet spurned the road. He clattered across the stone bridge that spanned the river's arm, and flung panting into Saint-Just.

Two peasants, hastening homeward through the mist, received the shock of his final plunge, and were betrayed into picturesque profanity.

"A prisoner has escaped!" cried Duplessis, flinging his arm behind him. "Do not hinder me. I am from the castle."

They watched him vanish in the gloom.

"*Mon Dieu!*" said one. "He could not run faster if he were the prisoner himself!"

II.

FOR AN HOUR the rain fell; then without further trouble the moon finished her voyage up the sky, casting anchor above Saint-Just, to the delight of disappointed, strolling lovers driven to shelter by the downfall.

Thereafter, for a time, the gutters ran water, and the sloping narrow sidewalks offered a precarious foothold. Driven to the sharp cobbles of the street, the strollers endured with fortitude, and discussed the artillery message from Tarantelle.

"Be assured," said the son of an official, "he will remain in the mountains, where they cannot hope to look for him until the morning. A man who can escape from Tarantelle is no fool; he will not show his face in Saint-Just, where every citizen is known."

The friend of the official's son demurred.

"They are placing a guard at the bridge-head," he said.

"Let them," shrugged the offspring of officialdom. "He will not be taken tonight. It is as well. You have not forgotten that there is a pilgrimage tonight? It will be great fun!"

On the whole, the village of Saint-Just was taking the interruption of its routine with equanimity. After all, it was a matter for the authorities.

In a narrow street near the center of the village, the dark shops of the cutlers were lighted as with the glow of furnaces, and the air was filled with the hissing of grindstones. Within their black dens worked the members of the ancient craft, each at his division of the trade.

Along this busy highway slunk a dark figure, furtively slipping from obscurity to obscurity. It paused uncertainly near the end of the row, held captive by a little shop.

Through a low, arched window could be seen a young man, with pale face and long, lank hair, interminably filing. At the back and in a corner, lighted by the ruddy glow of a small furnace, a burly blacksmith was forging knife blades. As he blew the bellows, the fire leaped up, and the air was filled with flame dust. Against the glowing background was silhouetted the motionless profile of the young man, who sat with lowered eyes, filing.

"*Mon Dieu!*" muttered Duplessis, fascinated. "It is a living Rembrandt!"

The young man raised his eyes at the sound, and looked into those of the watcher. Then he laid aside his tool and sardonically smiled.

"Good evening," he said, with polite irony.

"It has turned out so," agreed the fugitive. "But a bad evening for some poor fellow! You heard the guns?"

"And shuddered," said the young man at the window. "I hear that they have sent for Lemieux. I had as soon be trailed by the devil as by Lemieux."



"Duplessis!" roared the knife maker. "He is in the crowd! Do not let him get away!"

This prisoner is not to be envied. I shall pray for him, at the Cathedral. You are making the pilgrimage?"

"Most certainly!" The fugitive's reply was prompt, although until that moment his destination had been uncertain to the point of distress.

The young man rose, smiling his cynical smile, and left the shop.

"We shall walk together," he said, adding: "My name is Merle."

"And mine is Simard. I am in temporary lodgings here."

The knife maker slipped an arm through that of the thief.

"Simard?" he echoed. "It is a good name. I trust it is not as temporary as your lodgings."

He laughed in high falsetto, while Duplessis stared. Startled, the fugitive considered the wisdom of his present course. This man beside him was either mad or a fool; in either case he might prove dangerous. Yet his piety seemed proved.

"You are a Churchman?" asked Duplessis, with

deep suspicion.

"Oh, sufficiently! I practice my religion as my father did. It is in the blood, you know. My father was a knife maker, as am I, and his father before him. We have followed the trade for generations. It is the same with other things."

"I see! I am not long in your village. That is why my name is unknown to you."

"Pardon!" cried Merle, with a winning smile. "It is not unknown to me."

They proceeded slowly through the streets.

"It is as well," argued Duplessis with himself, "that I should be seen with some one who is known. There is less likelihood of awkward questioning. But I must watch this fellow closely. Tonight when the streets are empty, I shall go to Paul and Marie."

"This prisoner who has escaped," said his companion, "must be a daring fellow. Did you hear his name?"

Duplessis shrugged.

"I believe no advice has been received," he made answer. "It is too early for a messenger from the castle, I think."

"Some cold-blooded murderer, perhaps," continued Merle. "I shall lock my doors and windows securely tonight."

"Surely there is little danger!" Duplessis was smiling as he replied. "No doubt this fellow thinks only of escape. Why should he molest us here in Saint-Just? It is much too close to Tarantelle. Of course, he may not be a murderer at all!"

"Ha!" cried the knife maker. "What if he were Duplessis himself! That king of thieves! That prince of criminals! My friend, I almost love that fellow. Myself, I should hide him if he came to my door."

"I shall give him your address, if I see him," laughed Duplessis, and his companion joined him. "It would be like him, you know, to make this pilgrimage. He is said to be fond of a joke. And where better might he find safety than in a throng of worshippers?"

"It is true," said the knife maker, "and, too, he is said to be a pious fellow."

"I have no doubt that he is a better fellow than the President," admitted Duplessis. "But is not this the church?"

The church of assemblage was nearly dark, but candles burned on a distant altar where a low mass was being chanted; and they saw that many persons were kneeling about them in the gloom. There was an odor of incense and ecstasy, through which the companions pushed forward, groping.

Suddenly, Duplessis was looking down upon the white body of a woman, apparently a dead woman stretched upon her bier. Instinctively he drew back, as one who shrinks from the presence of death. But the calm face of the effigy told its story, and as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness beyond, within its niche he saw a gleaming crucifix. He sank to his knees. After a moment of silence, he raised his eyes to the cross.

"Seigneur Jesus!" murmured the fugitive, passionately, "if I had been there, they would not have dared to crucify You!"

A hand clutched his sleeve, and he rose to his feet. Merle was looking at him curiously in the darkness.

"You are a strange fellow," said the knife maker. "I am beginning to admire you so much that you might almost be Duplessis!"

The thief returned the stare, eye to eye.

"My friend," he said, "I am afraid you flatter me. Yet, if I am Duplessis, I shall remember your promise of sanctuary."

He laughed, suddenly and low.

"We are foolish," he declared. "I think that we both have this Duplessis on the brain."

They stood silent in the darkness until the service

had ended. The fugitive was thinking deeply.

"This fellow is too wise," he told himself. "He hints too much. Can it be that he has recognized me? And, if so, is he faithful? I dare not risk it! Certainly, I must get rid of him at once."

He looked around him. Flambeaux were being lighted at tall candlesticks in a grotto. The throng was moving and rustling in the gloom. Torches in hand, a group of priests advanced, and the pilgrims fell into line behind them, the men to the right, the women on the left. Persons were still entering the church, and the numbers grew with astonishing rapidity. As the uneven ranks moved forward, Duplessis estimated that no less than five hundred souls were in the assemblage. He congratulated himself upon the opportunity for escape offered by this phenomenon.

The procession moved slowly out of the church, with flaring, smoking torches, and a sonorous chant began to fill the night. Duplessis pushed boldly into the heart of the throng as it crowded through the doors, and when he had left his companion some feet behind him, executed a movement which brought him to the farther side of the press. He could no longer see Merle, and shrinking against the carved doorway he allowed the stream of men and women to flow past him.

Quickly he was aware of a commotion in the ranks. There were protests from the men and squealings from the women. A voice began to shout, and the chanting voices of the others died away. In the silence the single voice continued to bellow, and now he recognized the excited utterance of Merle.

"Duplessis!" roared the knife maker. "He is in the crowd! Do not let him get away! He is the escaped prisoner! Duplessis!"

A splendid oath trembled on the lips of the fugitive. He slid out of the door, and, rounding the corner of the church; plunged into a narrow alley. His fingers itched for the throat of his erstwhile companion, but vengeance was not of the moment. He ran. The voice behind him had become a hundred voices.

Turning corners at random, Duplessis plunged deeper into the heart of the village, grateful that the ceremonies of the evening had drawn most of the townfolk from their homes. . . . The streets were empty, and in time the clamor died away. . . . Once more he was free. He concluded that the search for him had begun elsewhere; probably in the church, into the black depths of which it might be assumed he had fled at the first outcry.

Gradually, he began to work his way toward the inn of Paul Despard. He was hungry. At least, Despard would feed him. He doubted, now, the wisdom of asking shelter. He must procure food, and leave the village at once.

And Marie?

He drew a long breath. Despard would give him word of Marie. He walked more rapidly, for it was growing late. He turned innumerable corners, exposing himself recklessly.

A heavy respectability now invested the dwellings on either side and suddenly the familiar swinging sign was within view. A cheery light flung a welcome



Drawings by
John Alan Maxwell

The streets were empty . . . once more he was free

across the black sidewalk, less than a hundred yards ahead. Courting the shadows, Duplessis covered the distance, and slunk into a courtyard shaded by trees. Less than a dozen persons remained in the café. He flung himself down at an obscure table under the sky.

The fat figure of Paul Despard waddled toward him. As the innkeeper approached, the fugitive raised his face so that the light fell upon it for a moment. He laid a warning finger upon his lips. The fat man started nervously, then composed his features and continued his advance.

"*Mon Dieu!*" whispered Despard, hoarsely. "It is you, then! I did not think you would come. My friend, you are in danger. I heard the guns tonight, and an hour ago they were here to seek you. I sent them away."

"Be careful, Despard," said the thief. "I shall stay but a moment. You must not recognize me. Get me some food—or stay! I shall go indoors."

They crossed the courtyard and entered the house. "Now, food, Paul, as quickly as you can. I am famished. And while I eat, a little packet for my journey. Hasten, my friend!"

He ate and drank silently, consuming huge quantities of what was set before him. Then pushing back his chair, he lighted the pipe that had been brought him.

"I shall risk another five minutes," said Duplessis. "Tell me, Paul, do you know a fellow named Merle, hereabouts? A cutler, or a blacksmith, or something of the sort? Slim, handsome—an ascetic, I think."

"I know him," said Despard. "He was here this evening. He is popular—a favorite with the women, who adore his pale face. Why do you ask?"

"With excellent reason," smiled the fugitive, and related what had happened at the church.

Despard raised horrified eyebrows; then pity filled his eyes.

"No wonder he was here," he muttered. "Alas, my friend, that what I must tell you must make your heart yet more bitter. You have not yet asked about Marie."

"What of Marie?"

"You must ask that of Merle, my friend; only he can tell. I do not add that I have been told she has been seen on the streets of Paris, for I do not wish to believe it."

He quailed before the fierce eyes of Duplessis.

"Forgive me that I hurt you," he stammered. "It is only the truth I speak. And yet, bad as is this Merle, she is little better. He was not the first, Henri, you must forget her!"

Duplessis rose to his feet.

"I have been busy this evening," he smiled grimly. "I have lost a sweetheart and found an enemy . . . I must add, my Paul, that I have found also a friend." He extended his hand.

"But where shall you go?"

"I do not know. I think I do not care."

"Is it this Merle you seek?"

"Perhaps," said Duplessis, wearily.

Despard bent his lips close to the thief's ear.

"Tomorrow he goes to the Chateau Montaud! He is something of a poet. You know the place?"



"*Mon Dieu!*" whispered Despard hoarsely.
"It is you, then!"

"I know it," said Duplessis. "It lies toward Spain, which is my own direction."

"Heaven guard you!" said the innkeeper.

In the street, Duplessis threw back his shoulders with a vigorous gesture, and brushed a hand across his brow. He shuddered.

"To detest a woman thoroughly," he muttered, "it is necessary first to have loved her."

He smiled bitterly.

"*Je suis philosophe!*"

III.

FLEEING THROUGH the dawn, Duplessis again marveled at the splendor of God; but as the second night began to settle over the hills the mired roads made call upon his blasphemy. He climbed a series of minor elevations and fixed his eyes upon the faint outline of Mount Vanni and other mountain shapes, far to the south.

The road ascended in endless zigzags. At a distance he paused to admire the villas of the higher terraces, then, climbing higher, he came in time into the region of noble pines and olives.

A sound of bugles smote upon his ears. The road came out upon a mountain-ridge, unscreened by trees, and across a ravine, in the last rays of the dying sun, he saw a detachment of infantry marching rapidly. A military road stretched before the trampling feet, curving downward toward the villages he had left behind. The fugitive stopped until they had passed from view, doubting not that their presence was intimately connected with his flight. The attention touched him. He bowed deeply in the direction taken by the soldiers.

"By Heaven!" said Duplessis, "I am flattered!" He added: "And shortly I shall be well pursued. The persistent hospitality of a French prison moves me to tears. Come then, my friend, a little spurt for freedom!"

He lengthened his stride.

"What holes! What bumps! What bruises! What language!"

Night found him on a gray and stony mountain

side, a sterile ascent where only heather, wild convolvulus and the busy cistus offered their pale, sparse bloom. The air was keen and intoxicating.

A silver mountain, jagged and cragged with fantastic spires and minarets, rose against the purple sky. He swung away to the right, traversing a bare and rock-ribbed pass, then emerged into the clear. Before him loomed an amphitheater of mountain peaks. Suddenly he looked downward into fairyland.

From the floor of the valley rose an escarped rock, crowned by the fortified Chateau of Montaud, towering above a village of red-roofed houses. A myriad of lights glittered, and, carried upward by the funnel-like walls of the mountains, there rose the faint drone of human voices and the remote pulsations of music.

For an hour the fugitive gazed downward in glamor; then quickly he began to descend.

With infinite care, he skirted the village, treading a road that seemed paved with broken tombstones. The descent had been accomplished in safety; but before him rose the rock of Montaud. Behind him lay Spain and freedom; but before him lay rich adventure and the coldly smiling face of Merle, the knife maker.

He mounted swiftly in the darkness, and in time found himself below the outer works of the castle. The lights of the village twinkled in the abyss as he looked downward. He chuckled softly.

"It is well," said Duplessis to himself, "that I am slender."

He writhed through the spaced bars of an iron gate set in massive masonry, and trod softly from one castellated terrace to another. Over cream-tinted garden walls poured cascades of blossom, scenting the night. From the uppermost terrace, he looked southward to the rugged mountain wall that separated him from Spain. . . .

Through the velvet blackness, a man came swiftly to his side.

"Well met, Duplessis!" said the voice of the knife maker, with ironic pleasantry. "But, indeed, we are always meeting. I see you look toward Spain. May I show the sights? To your left . . .!"

The fugitive turned slowly, and looked into the pale face.

"What is your pleasure, M'sieu?" he coldly asked.

The knife maker's light laugh responded.

"My greatest pleasure is our meeting," he replied. "Your greeting is not over warm."

"It shall be warmer if we meet a third time."

THE PALE FACE took on two spots of color. There was a moment of silence, in which the knife maker coughed.

"Look, now," he continued. "It is apparent that I have followed you—that I have found you. But I would not—"

"Your pardon," broke in Duplessis, speaking easily. "It is, by your leave, apparent that I have followed you." Merle shrugged.

"As you will! I was about to say that, although I am a poor man, I would not willingly do you an injury. I have told you I love you! Yet the reward for your capture, my friend, is large. Is there no alternative?"

It was the turn of Duplessis to shrug.

"I do not understand. Will you speak plainly, please?"

"With pleasure! It is reported that you have large wealth, M'sieu, hidden away awaiting your return to—shall we call it?—civilization. I do not suggest that it is dishonest wealth. Surely, you can pay for silence as well as the government can pay for talk."

"The morality of your suggestion," smiled the fugitive, "is as questionable as my reputed wealth."

The knife maker made a splendid gesture.

"Morality," he declared, "is like elementary education—all that is needed by the bourgeois."

"I had supposed that to be your idea," admitted Duplessis. He considered.

"How do I know that already you have not informed upon me?"

"You do not," confessed Merle. "You have only my word for it. Yet, I am speaking the truth when I deny it. Listen, Duplessis! Other than myself, one person suspects your whereabouts. The prison authorities still search the mountains near Saint-Just. Can you guess who that other is? *Lemieux!*"

Duplessis brightened.

"My dearest friend and enemy!" he said.

"Yes," agreed Merle. "You see, he is familiar with the turn of your thought: he knows where to seek you. The suave, the subtle, the kind, the cold, the intelligent Lemieux! Believe me, without my assistance you cannot hope to evade him. Duplessis, he is here!"

The fugitive straightened with delight.

"Not really! It were an honor to fall into his hands!"

The knife maker's shoulders hunched.

"If that is your pleasure," he deprecated, "I have nothing more to say."

"That is strange, for much has been left unsaid. You do not speak of Marie—Marie Simard! Had you offered me tidings, now, of Marie, who can say but . . .?"

The knife maker's hand fluttered upon the thief's arm. When he spoke his voice was emotionless.

"It was your choice of her name that led me to suspect you," he said.

"Ah," cried Duplessis, enlightened. "Then *that* is explained. I confess it was foolish."

"Yes," agreed Merle, with a smile.

"I notice that you smile. Is it that you have good tidings for me of Marie?"

"My dear fellow!" said the knife maker. "She is well, I believe, and happy. But as she left the village long ago, I know little of her affairs." He spoke impatiently.

"And yet," mused Duplessis, "you should know much. You do not tell me," he murmured, "that she is now upon the Paris streets. Is it that you fear I shall suspect you of placing her there?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" whispered the knife maker, hoarsely. "What do you mean? Are you mad?"

"Seducer!"

Merle reeled against the rampart, with twitching fingers. The cold touch of the stone restored him.

The writhing fingers sought his belt. He sprang forward.

"Damn you!" he cried. "So you have been playing with me? It will be an expensive game, M'sieu Duplessis! Already it has cost you your liberty. As for Marie—the slut!—I shall tell her of you, when you are back in Tarantelle. You fool, did you think. . . . Ah!"

The body of the knife maker fell back against the rampart, with helpless widespread arms. After a moment, it silently slid in a limp heap to the floor.

Duplessis laughed softly in the darkness. Then, with an effort, he plucked the slight figure from the stones, hoisted it heavily to the brink, and balanced it across the rampart. It teetered horribly for a moment, then slid outward and downward. Leaning perilously forward, the fugitive tried to watch the descent into blackness, but a far sound was his only reward.

"By Heaven!" said Duplessis, "it is like a scene from a play!"

IV.

THE SILENCE of the chateau surprised him. The doorway stood open, as an invitation. A light beyond burned dimly. The simulation of a trap, the fugitive mused, was excellent. A slow grin distorted his lips as he entered.

Avoiding the lighted hall, he scurried into a side passage. By devious, breathless slinkings, he lost himself in a labyrinth of corridors off which opened deserted chambers. His eyes gleamed with the reckless joy of adventure.

Remotely, as he progressed, voices began to filter to him through the walls and down the long windings. Somewhere beyond lay a considerable activity. The lighted spots became more frequent. The danger became greater. His spirits rose with its proximity. He swaggered bravely.

He stumbled upon a narrow, climbing stair, and crept softly to its topmost extremity. A little door barred his passage. Beyond its barrier, the voices were loud and clear. It seemed, however, that he was above them.

Enlightenment came to him. This was the entrance to a balcony, overlooking the banquet hall. Within, below him, the guests were making merry. A splendid motley of odors was wafted to his nostrils. They smote his stomach with craving.

Very gently, he pushed open the door.

Happiness! The balcony was narrow, and barely a dozen feet in length, while screening it surely from the eyes below hung great curtains of red velvet. He pushed through and closed the door behind him.

As if upon a signal, a drawing voice floated up to him from the gorgeous pit.

"This Duplessis, Lemieux!" it said. "Is he indeed the remarkable fellow the journals would have us believe?"

The fugitive parted the curtains gently, and peered down at the brilliant scene. There were some forty persons at the long table. The dinner was nearing its close.

The detective's response was instant.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried, while the room listened. "I love the fellow! He is an artist, and he is a gentleman! He can turn a sonnet or paint a picture with the best of you; and he can steal a woman's heart with the worst of you!"

The laughter of women rippled up to the fugitive on the balcony.

"I should like to meet him, this paragon of thieves," laughed a handsome brunette.

Duplessis on his balcony bowed gravely.

"That, Mademoiselle, is not an impossibility," answered the smooth voice of the detective. "He is an adept at imposture. So highly do I rate his talent that it would not surprise me if he were here amongst us, sitting at our table and listening to our praise."

An amused chorus took up the jest.

"Come, Villiers," roared a great voice from the end of the table. "You have always been a mystery. Confess that you are Duplessis!"

"My dear Lespinasse," smiled the man addressed. "If I were Duplessis I should instantly confess it, knowing that your shrewd attention already had unmasked me. Nothing escapes your vigilance, save only an original line."

The sardonic Lemieux came to the rescue.

"I will turn the tables on you, Villiers," he said. "This Duplessis is also an able critic. I do not hesitate to say that he is every bit your equal. You recall his theft of Madam Tridon's paintings? He took the genuine, and left the spurious. There was a dreadful scandal. I believe your opinions were questioned!"

The assailed critic laughed with great good nature. "Very well," he responded. "Then he is not here tonight, or our host's gallery by this is bereft of all but its frames."

"*Diable!* Yes!" cried Lemieux, "that would be a tempting bait for Duplessis. My dear M'sieu Montaud, what now is the number of your Van Dycks?"

The bearded giant at the table's head raised a deprecating hand.

"He may have them all," he said with generosity,



The body of the knife maker fell back against the rampart.

"so that he leaves me my great Rembrandt. You have not seen it, Lemieux. It is magnificent, and it is priceless."

"I hope also it is safe," said Lemieux, dryly.

"It is on the balcony above us," said Montaud. "You shall see it, when we have finished."

A cold sweat came out upon the brow of the fugitive. He turned slowly on his heels and looked upward. Shaded by the great curtain, the painted semblance of a courtier stared back at him, a dark and somber figure against a darker background. The canvas was large, the figure the height of a tall man.

Duplessis continued to stare upward. The gaze of the silent watcher fascinated him. But in a moment a little smile began to play about the thief's lips. His anxiety left him. Here was opportunity for a *coup* so brilliant that its echoes would follow him to Spain, and give him food for laughter.

The knife he took from his blouse was sharp and pointed, and upon its tip still clung a dull, red memory of the murdered Merle; he tried its edge with his thumb. The frame of the picture was of heavy metal; he tested it with his weight, hanging at full length. He estimated the height of the concealing curtain.

Then, with steel fingers, he pulled himself up within the great frame. He worked swiftly, but silently, his small sounds lost in the chatter from below. . . . The canvas came out easily, and he lowered it softly to the floor of the balcony.

A temptation to laugh surged within him. He



stood now within the empty frame, at full height. He turned carefully until he faced the curtain. Gripping the metal side pieces, he essayed a sardonic bow toward the concealed audience.

What a picture he made! The faces of the guests when they stared upward at the bereft balcony! The face of Lemieux! It was a picture to move the gods to helpless laughter! If only he could see it!—that droll scene! If only he might stand within the frame and laugh as the silly curtains were rolled apart! It would be worth a year of freedom! Five years!

He listened again to the voices, and quick panic seized him. . . . Montaud was speaking.

Mon Dieu! It was too late!

"The buttons are here, side by side," boomed the voice of Montaud. "If I push the first, the lights are flashed upon the painting. The second leaves us in darkness below. Gentlemen, Rembrandt himself is with us! The curtain is operated by a cord . . ."

Too late! Flight was impossible. Concealment . . . ?

A brilliant glow sprang out above him. The lights in the room below went out. Blinded, he stood upright within the frame.

What a catastrophe! What a failure! And yet, what a scene. By God, what a jest!

A roar of laughter swept upward from his lungs and burst the barrier of his lips. It pealed across the long chamber, and echoed in the rafters. He screamed with delight.

And suddenly the curtains sprang aside.

