

The Amputated Hand
The Confession of a Greek Merchant.
by S.L. Finley

I was born in Constantinople. My father was a dragoman, uniting in addition to that occupation that of dealer in perfumes and silk stuffs. He gave me a good education, and being a man of learning, he assisted one of our priests in forming my young mind. His first intention was to leave me his business, but as I showed greater aptitude for study than he had given me credit for, by the advice of his friends he decided to make me a physician, for the reason that physicians make large fortunes in Constantinople.

A great many Frenchmen visited our home, and one of them persuaded my father to allow me to accompany him to Paris, where he stated I could learn the science of medicine at a small cost. My father, who had travelled in his youth, accepted this proposition, and the Frenchman told me that I might hold myself in readiness to leave in three months.

I was overjoyed at the idea of visiting a foreign country, and the time I had to wait appeared very long. At last my protector finished the business which detained him at Constantinople, and was ready to leave. The day so anxiously expected by me at length dawned, and my father called me into his bedchamber. I saw spread on the table handsome dresses, and various weapons. But what especially attracted my notice was a large pile of gold—more than I had ever seen before. My father embraced me, and said:

“You see, my son, that I have been occupied in making the necessary provisions for your journey. These weapons belong to you. They are the same your grandfather gave to me when I set out on my travels. Take them, but do not use them unless you are attacked—I ask that of you. My fortune is not large, but I have divided it into three portions—one belongs to you, the second I shall reserve for my own necessities, while the third I shall hold sacred and inviolable, that it may be useful to you in the hour of need.”

Thus spoke my poor old father, while the tears streamed from his eyes, at the presentiment, perhaps, that I should never see him again.

The journey was performed without any misadventure, and on the sixth day we reached Paris. My friend, the Frenchman, hired a chamber for me, and advised me to be sparing of my money, which did not amount to more than the sum of two thousand crowns.

I lived three years in the great capital, and learned all that it was necessary for a good physician to know; but I should not tell the truth if I were to state that my stay in Paris was an agreeable one to me, for the manners and customs of that nation did not please me. I made, however, some good friends, who were as young as myself, and possessed noble hearts.

The desire to see my own home again became irresistible. Since I had left Constantinople, I had received no intelligence of my father. An opportunity now occurred

for me to return home. I embraced it with avidity. An ambassador was on the eve of leaving France for the Porte. I joined him in the capacity of surgeon, and in due time reached Constantinople.

I found my father's house closed, and the neighbors, astonished to see me, informed me that my father had been dead for more than three months. The priest who had educated me brought me the key of the house, and then left me, and I entered the deserted dwelling. Everything remained just as my father had left it ; the gold only which he had promised to leave in reserve was missing. The priest when interrogated by me on this matter, bowed and said:

“Your father died like a good man, and left his money to the church.”

This was something that I could not understand, but what was I to do? I had no witnesses to gainsay the priest's statement, and I thought myself fortunate that he did not consider the house and merchandize belonging to my father, as a legacy to the church. This was the first misfortune that happened to me, but after that blow, trouble on trouble followed. My reputation as a physician did not spread, because I was ashamed to play the charlatan, and one thing especially was wanting, and that was my father's recommendation, which, had he been alive, would have served to introduce me into the richest and best families. But these families never cast a thought on poor Zaleucus. And then again, my father's merchandize hung on my hands. All his old customers disappeared after his death, and none showed themselves only at very rare intervals.

One day, while plunged in deep grief reflecting on my situation, the idea suddenly entered my mind that I had often seen in France people of my nation, travelling through the country, and offering their merchandize for sale through the markets of the various towns. I remembered that these foreign merchants always did a good business, from the simple fact that they were foreigners, from which I concluded that such an avocation must be a very profitable one.

My mind was made up in a moment. I sold my father's house, employed a portion of the funds in purchasing articles which are rarely met with in France, such as shawls, silks, pomades, oils, etc., and the rest of the money I confided to the care of a tried friend. Then I took a berth on board a ship just about to start, and for the second time was on my way to France. We had scarcely passed the Dardanelles when fortune appeared to change. Our passage was short and pleasant.

I travelled through France, from town to town, and everywhere sold my merchandize easily and to advantage. I ought also to mention one thing which brought me no little money, and that is the profit to which I put my medical knowledge. When I arrived in a town, I immediately announced by posters that a Greek physician had arrived who had performed numerous cures. And the fact is my balms and drugs brought me in many a sequin.

It was in this manner that I at last reached Florence. I proposed to remain there a long time, in the first place because the city pleased me, and secondly because I wished to recruit after the fatigues of my peregrinations. I hired a shop in the quarter of the Holy Cross, and not far from there a dwelling, two chambers of which opened on a balcony. At the same time I distributed my bills, which announced me both as a physician and merchant. I had scarcely opened my shop when purchasers came in crowds, and although my prices were somewhat raised, I sold more than I had ever done before, owing, I had but little doubt, to my polite and agreeable manners to my customers.

I had been four days in Florence, and everything had turned out exactly in accordance with my wishes, when in the evening just as I was about closing my shop, I found in a small box a note which I did not remember to have placed there. I opened it. It contained a request that I should repair that same night, at twelve o'clock, to the bridge known as the Ponte Vecchio. For a long time I turned over in my own mind as to whom the person could possibly be who made this request to me. I came to the conclusion that it was some one who wished to conduct me to a sick person's chamber. I therefore resolved to keep the appointment, still for precaution's sake I armed myself with the sabre given me by my father.

Midnight approached. I started off, and it was not long before I arrived at the Ponte Vecchio. The bridge was entirely deserted; but I determined to wait some time to see if any one would make his appearance. It was a cold night. The moon shone forth in all its brightness, and at my feet I saw the waters of the Arno sparkling in its rays. Suddenly the hour of twelve sounded from a church clock in the city, and there appeared standing before me a man of tall stature, enveloped in a red cloak, with one half of his face concealed by a black mask, and the other portion by a fold of his cloak which he held up to it. My first sensation was one of fear on account of the suddenness of the apparition, but I soon recovered myself, and was the first to speak.

"If you are he who invited me to visit this bridge this evening, tell me what I can do for you?"

"Follow me!" said the man in the red cloak, turning round and speaking slowly.

I did not much like the idea of going alone with this stranger, I therefore remained motionless, and replied:

"If you will not tell me what you want me for, you can at least show me your face, so that I may judge for myself if I can trust you or not."

The stranger appeared to take no notice of my remark.

"If you will not follow me, Zaleucus," said he, "you can remain." And he walked away from me.

I then grew very angry. "Do you imagine," I exclaimed, "that a man like me is to be made the sport of the first fool who makes his appearance, and that you can bring me out this cold night for nothing?"

I rushed forward and seized him by the cloak, and crying out still louder, I endeavored to hold him in my grasp; but the cloak remained in my hand, and the stranger disappeared round an angle of a neighboring street. By degrees my anger subsided. I had at least possession of the cloak, and that might hereafter give me some key to this extraordinary adventure. I wrapped myself in it, and started for my own home. I had scarcely gone a hundred yards when a man approached me, and whispered in my ear:

"Be on your guard, count, there is nothing to be done to-night."

Before I had time to turn round, the person had disappeared in the shadows of the houses. I asked myself a hundred times whether these remarks were addressed to me or to the cloak, but all my reflections could cast no light upon it. The next morning I was undecided what to do. My first idea was to have the garment cried by the public crier of the city, as if I had found it. But then I further reflected that this would give me no solution to the enigma.

I now examined the cloak a little more closely. It was a cloak of Genoa velvet, richly embroidered with gold. Its costly character suggested to me an idea which I resolved to put into immediate execution. I took it into my shop, and exposed it for sale, taking care, however, to put such a high price upon it that I was certain I should not find a purchaser for it. My purpose was to examine attentively every one who should come and price it, for I felt certain that I could recognize the person to whom it belonged among a thousand. As I expected, the cloak attracted a great deal of attention on account of its extraordinary beauty; but no one called who resembled the stranger, and no one felt disposed to give me the two hundred sequins which I asked for it. I asked several of my customers if they had even seen in Florence a cloak like it, they all replied in the negative, and affirmed that they had never seen anything so handsome before.

In the evening a young man entered my shop who had been there several times during the day, and who had made me several offers for the cloak. He threw on the counter a purse full of sequins, exclaiming:

"By Bacchus, Zaleucus, I must have that cloak!" So saying he began to count out his gold.

My perplexity was very great. My only motive in exposing the cloak was to attract the notice of the passers-by, and not to sell it. And here was a young fool who was determined to give me the exorbitant price I asked for it. What could I do? I accepted his offer, deriving some satisfaction from the fact that I was so amply rewarded for my nocturnal adventure.

The young man threw the cloak over his shoulder and left the shop. He had scarcely, however, crossed the threshold when he turned back, and unpinning a piece of paper which had been fastened to the cloak, threw it at me, saying:

“Zaleucus, here is something which does not belong to the cloak.”

I picked up the paper with an air of indifference, but what was my astonishment to read as follows:

“On this night, at the same hour, bring the cloak to the Ponte Vecchio, and four hundred sequins await you.”

I stood as if I had been thunderstruck. I did not lose much time in reflection. I picked up the two hundred sequins which I had just received, and running after the young purchaser, exclaimed:

“Here are your sequins, my good friend; give me back the cloak, it is utterly impossible for me to part with it.”

At first the young man thought I was only joking; but when he perceived that I was speaking seriously he grew excessively angry, and treated me as if I were crazy, and we finally ended by coming to blows. I was fortunate enough, however, to snatch away the cloak in the scuffle, and hurried away with my precious treasure. The young man, however, called the police to his aid, and I was dragged before the tribunals. The judge was very much astonished at the complaint, and delivered up the cloak to my adversary. I then offered the latter twenty, fifty, eighty, and at last a hundred sequins in addition to the two hundred he had given me to restore it to me. What my prayers and entreaties could not effect, my gold brought about. He took my money, and I departed in triumph with my cloak.

I waited for night to come with the utmost impatience. At the same hour as on the previous evening I left my home, and with the cloak on my arm repaired to the Ponte Vecchio. The church clock had no sooner struck the hour of twelve, than the unknown of the previous night again rose up before me.

“Have you the cloak?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, “but it has cost me a hundred sequins.”

“I know it,” replied the unknown, “here are four hundred.” And advancing to the parapet of the bridge he counted out the same. There were really four hundred sequins, sparkling in the moonlight. How the sight of them filled my heart with joy! Alas, I little thought what was to follow! I put the gold into my pocket, and then attentively examined the

features of the generous unknown. But he wore a mask over his face, and his eyes gleamed on me with a strange lustre.

“I thank you for your kindness,” said I, “but what further do you desire of me? In the first place, however, I must tell you that I can do nothing wrong.”

“Have no fears on that head,” he replied, throwing the cloak over his shoulders. “I require your assistance as a physician; not for the living, but for the dead.”

“What can you mean by that?” I exclaimed, in a voice of astonishment.

“Follow me and I will tell you.”

I obeyed, and we soon reached a large and magnificent house. My guide entered a species of study, elegantly furnished, and bade me to be seated. He stood before me, still keeping on his mask, and spoke as follows:

“My sister and I came from a foreign country. We have been residing here some time with relatives of our family. Yesterday my sister died somewhat suddenly, after a short illness, and our friends insist on her being buried to-morrow. It is an old custom of our family that all its members should repose in the vaults of our ancestors; many who died in foreign countries have been embalmed, and thus conveyed to the family resting-place. But I wish to leave my sister’s body with my relatives here; it is absolutely necessary, however, that I should send to her father his daughter’s head, that he may see her once more.”

This custom of cutting off the head of one who was beloved inspired me with involuntary terror; but I did not dare to object for fear of offending the unknown. I told him that I would voluntarily undertake the embalming of the head, and begged him to conduct me to her. I could not help asking him, however, why he made such a mystery about it. He replied that his relatives were opposed to the execution of his project, but that when once it was effected they would say nothing. He now led the way up a staircase which opened into an obscure corridor; we then entered a chamber lighted by a lamp from the ceiling.

In this chamber there was a bed, on which reposed the corpse. The unknown turned away his head as if to hide his tears. He pointed to the bed, and bidding me finish my work as soon as possible, left the room.

I took out my pocket-case, which as a surgeon I always carried with me, and choosing the sharpest knife in it, approached the bed. The young girl’s head was alone visible; but she was so handsome that a feeling of deep pity took possession of me. Her long chestnut hair hung in curls on her cheeks; her face was pale, and her eyes were closed. I first of all made an incision in the skin, after the manner of surgeons when they dismember a limb. I then made a deep incision into the throat. But judge of my fright and horror when the supposed corpse opened her eyes, and then closed them again. A stream of blood escaped from the wound I had made, and I saw that I had killed the unfortunate girl. I remained

for a short time in a state of the most painful perplexity. Had the man in the red cloak deceived me, or was he himself deceived by the apparent death of his sister? This last supposition appeared to me the most plausible one. Conquered by terror I rushed like a madman out of the chamber, but the corridor was in utter darkness, the lamp having been extinguished. I could find no trace whatever of my guide, but by groping my way reached the staircase. At last I reached the threshold of the door. It was half open, and once more in the street I breathed more freely. I ran to my own house, and covering my head with the bedclothes, endeavored to forget the frightful scene in which I had been such a prominent actor. But it was all in vain, it was impossible for me to sleep. For I suddenly recollected something that gave me intense anxiety; I had lost my hat, my belt, and my case of instruments. Had I left them behind me in the fatal chamber, or had I lost them in my flight? If the first supposition were true, I could not avoid being arrested for an assassin. The next morning I opened my shop at the accustomed hour. A neighbor entered, as was his custom every morning.

“What do you think of the dreadful occurrence of last night?” said he.

“What occurrence?” I asked, as coolly as I could.

“What!” cried he, “is it possible that you cannot have heard? Do you not know that the flower of Florence, Bianca, the daughter of the governor, was assassinated last night? O, if you had only seen her yesterday, as I did, walking the streets with her affianced husband, so gay and so happy! To-day her wedding was to have taken place.”

Every word that my neighbor uttered was a blow to my heart, and the martyrdom that I endured was repeated a hundred times, for all my customers told me the same story. Towards the middle of the day an officer of justice entered my shop.

“Zaleucus,” said he, showing me the things I had lost, “do these belong to you?”

At first I thought it would be better to deny that they were my property; but reflecting that they could easily be proved to belong to me, I resolved not to aggravate my situation by a falsehood. I therefore confessed they were mine. He then begged me to follow him, and led me to prison. The next day I was brought before the judges, the governor himself prosecuting the charge against me. When called upon for my defence, in a distinct and firm voice I told him all that I knew. During my recital I saw the governor turn pale and red by turns; when I had finished he was in a transport of fury.

“How, wretch,” he cried, “do you dare to impute to another a crime which your own cupidity made you commit.”

I was remanded to prison; but the next day I was again brought before my judges. I had hope in my heart, for one of the judges had treated me with some consideration on the pervious day. Several letters were on the table. The kind judge asked me if they were written by me. I examined them, and found that they were in the same handwriting as the two notes, which I had preserved. I expressed this opinion to my judges, but they paid no

attention to what I said, for it was suggested that I had written the letters and the notes which opinion appeared to be borne out from the fact that the signature to the letters was a “Z,” the initial letter of my name. These epistle contained threats addressed to the young girl on account of the union in which she was about to enter. The evidence was too strong against me – I was condemned to death. Yes, I was condemned to perish, in the flower of my age, under the axe.

On the evening of that frightful day I was sitting alone in my solitary dungeon, fixing my thoughts on my approaching doom, when the door of my cell opened, and a man entered, who regarded me for a long time in silence.

“Is it possible that I see you in this position, Zaleucus?” said he.

By the sombre light of my lamp I had not recognized who my visitor was; but his voice awakened in me a thousand recollections. It was Valetti, one of my most sincere friends, whose acquaintance I had made during my course of study in Paris. He told me that he had by chance visited Florence, where his father lived, who was one of the most prominent citizens. He had heard my history, and he determined to hear from my own lips if it could be possible I had been guilty of so fearful a crime. I told him by all my hopes of eternity that I had only told the truth.

“Then you really never knew Bianca?” he asked.

I assured him that I had never seen her before that fatal night. Valetti informed me that a deep mystery enveloped the affair, that the governor had singularly pressed for my condemnation, and that it was generally believed that I had known Bianca for a long time, and that I had assassinated her to revenge her approaching marriage with another. Valetti left me, promising to do all he could to save my life. I had but little hope, although I knew that my friend was a most successful lawyer. I remained for two long days in a state of horrible suspense. At last Valetti re-appeared.

“I bring you,” said he, “some consolation. You will live—you will be free—but you must consent to lose a hand.”

I thanked my friend, and learned that my new sentence was, that I should lose my left hand; that my property should be confiscate, and that I should be banished forever from Florence!

I shall not enter into any details of how on the place of public execution I placed my hand on the block, and it was severed from my wrist at one blow.

Valetti received me into his house until my wound had healed, he then generously provided me with money to leave Florence. I left for Sicily, and from there I took ship to Constantinople. I built my hopes on the sum I had left as a deposit with my friend, and I asked him to give me an asylum in his house; but what was my astonishment when he asked me why I did not take my possession of my own dwelling. He informed me that a

stranger had bought a house in my name in the Greek quarters. I immediately entered it, and was received by all my old friends with joy. An old merchant handed me a letter which had been left for me by the man who had bought the house in my name. The letter ran as follows:

“Zaleucus, here are two hands ready to work without ceasing, to make you forget that you have lost one. The house which you see belongs to you—also all that it contains—and you will receive each year as much money as will cause you to be classed with the richest in Constantinople. Cannot you forgive him who is more unhappy than you are?”

I could easily guess who had written this letter, even if the merchant had not informed me that he wore a red cloak. I found every convenience in my new habitation, together with a shop provided with more handsome goods than I had ever seen before. Ten years have elapsed since that period. Every year I receive a thousand pieces of gold; but all my wealth cannot still the anguish of my heart, nor blot out the image, the frightful image of the unfortunate Bianca, assassinated by me.

The Flag of our Union, June 1, 1861