

My Steady Pupil

“Now, Mr. Baker, let us understand each other at once,” Lord Hunsdon had said, leaning back in his official arm-chair, and tapping the massive signet-ring on his fat finger with the official paper-cutter, “I have the great pleasure, as I have said, of intrusting to you the task of my nephew’s education. All I have heard of you and what little I have seen of you induce me to regard you as an excellent travelling tutor. It only remains for me to state my views, as briefly as I can,”—here a glance at the official clock,— “for I have to receive a deputation immediately. Cecil Manvers has a fortune of his own—his mother’s money—and will in all probability succeed me in the title and property. I don’t want the boy to turn out a bookworm, a milksop, or a scamp. Make him a well-informed, honorable English gentleman, with enough knowledge of the world to steer clear of its worst perils, and I shall be more than satisfied. And nothing could conduce better to this than two years on the Continent in such good hands as yours, Mr. Baker. I shall see you again, of course, before you leave England, but just now”—another glance at the clock—“my time is positively not my own.”

And I took the Under-Secretary’s hint, and retired, almost tumbling over the excited deputation as I made my way downstairs. Next week Cecil Manvers and I went abroad.

Our first year of continental travel passed off pleasantly enough. I found my pupil not merely intelligent and quick to learn, but bright, frank, and unassuming, and singularly docile for so spirited a lad. The duties of what is sometimes irreverently styled a bear-leader are not always enviable, but Cecil, to do him justice, was by far too generous a youngster to indulge in the sneers and slights that often fall to the lot of the roving instructor of gilded youth. He had the command of a good deal of money, for, it was a theory of his guardian’s that early stinting in this respect lays the foundation for subsequent extravagance; but he showed no inclination for the freaks and follies of his contemporaries, and over and over again did I congratulate myself on the good luck that had provided me with such a pupil. The Rhine, Switzerland, Tyrol, each and all of these we had visited in the pleasant Summer-time; we had Wintered in Italy, and the next Spring found us in Paris.

It was the time when the Grand Paris Exhibition—exhibitions had not as yet grown common enough to be classed as bores—attracted myriads to the then imperial capital of France. Emperor, Court, and Empire were in their first freshness, decked, too, with the prestige which success confers; for the great struggle with Russia was going on victoriously for the allies, and the cordial feeling between France and England was at its warmest. In 1855 people had not yet become ashamed of enjoying themselves, and whatever the merits of the show might be, it certainly secured the suffrages of the well-dressed, well-pleased crowds of holiday-makers. My pupil and I made the new Palace of Industry our daily lounge, and so did a French friend of ours, destined to play an important part in this story.

It was by accident that we had made acquaintance with Colonel the Baron Duplessis. Cecil had a walking-cane, with a handsome gold head, which had belonged to his father, and this cane he

chanced to leave on one of the marble tables of the Exhibition monster restaurant. Half an hour later, when my pupil discovered his loss, and went back in hot haste to seek for his missing property, it was courteously restored to him, with a bow and a smile, by a tall, elderly Frenchman, with the inevitable red ribbon adorning his tightly-buttoned frock-coat, and of what his compatriots designate as a distinguished appearance. This old officer had observed ourselves as the occupants of a table near his own, and had been prompt enough to prevent the costly walking-stick from [being] purloined by a light-fingered under-waiter. This little kindness led in time to a friendship which might be called intimate.

The colonel, as became a man of ancient lineage and reduced fortunes, lived in a gloomy old street on the left bank of the Seine, far away from the glare and glitter of the modern Paris. The Rue de Loches was the name of the street, and the colonel's house, number sixteen, was on the shady side of it—a big, dingy mansion, with a grass-grown courtyard, a walled garden, and windows into which the sun never seemed to shine. The ghostly pictures on the wall and the heavy furniture were in keeping with this dismal dwelling. The colonel's family consisted merely of his wife and daughter; the former haggard and nervous, the latter plain and stupid, with a frightened look, I thought, in her dull eyes. Madame la Baronne spoke little, and mademoiselle, like most well-brought up French girls, was as mute as a fish.

The only attraction in number sixteen, Rue de Loches, was the gay good-humor, tempered by the dignified shrewdness of an experienced man of the world, of its master. M. Duplessis, even to me, seemed singularly agreeable, and gained a still larger share of Cecil's regard. It so happened that my pupil had a turn for military subjects,—less, perhaps, for dress and drill than for the scientific side of a soldier's life,—and his boyish curiosity appeared to please the colonel, who himself was, as he said jestingly, merely a worn-out war-horse turned out to the grass, but ready to respond to the first twang of the trumpet. So it came about that Cecil and the baron made frequent excursions, now to be present at the trial of a rifled cannon, now to go over fortifications, see a review, or ramble through the arsenal, without my being of the party.

It often happened, too, after the expeditions I have described, that Cecil Manvers went to drink tea a l'Anglaise, and pass the evening at the baron's house. I felt, on this head, no misgivings, such as would have beset me had I allowed my charge to go out alone into gayer company. To theatre and opera, or to those balls and evening receptions of the Parisian great world to which Lord Hunsdon's letters procured us easy access, I always accompanied Cecil. But I was not sorry when he seemed to grow indifferent to dance and drama, and to prefer spending his hours in the Rue de Loches. Why not? I was thankful for the opportunity of finishing my versified translation of Horace,—a work from which I hoped to derive fame and fortune. And then, too, I had such complete confidence in Cecil and in his military mentor. What harm, in such company, could accrue to him? Mademoiselle's eyes were not bright enough to win his young affections, and the baronne's weak tea, and trictrac at four sous points, would not be likely to derange his nerves or empty his pockets.

“A monsieur,” hinted the concierge one day, thrusting his bald head into the room where I sat

cudgelling my brains, as I strove to convert Leslie and Chloe into honest English girls, “wishes much to see monsieur.” The stranger was not far off, as the janitor of our furnished hotel thus spoke, and perhaps was accustomed to the process of self-introduction. At any rate I soon found myself looking up from the oblong piece of pasteboard, on which were lithographed the words: “Jules Carnet, Sous-chef: Brigade de Surete,” at the owner of name and card, who stood bowing there before me, a glossy hat of the bell-crown pattern, affected by loyal followers of the new Emperor, in his gloved hand. There was nothing notable about my visitor,—a plump, middle-aged Frenchman, with tight coat, well-waxed moustache, and the imperialist chintuft,—nothing, except the feline quickness and keenness of his eyes, which I felt to be reading me as easily as if I carried my character, in large print, outside my waist-coat.

“I gather from this card,” said I, somewhat bashfully, “that you belong, M. Carnet, to the—”

“To the police!” rejoined my new acquaintance,—“yes, monsieur, I have the honor to belong to the police. It is now my duty, in compliance with instructions from headquarters, to apprise you that your pupil—Sir Manvers is deceiving you.”

“That Cecil Manvers—my pupil—is deceiving me?” I repeated, in utter incredulity. The subchief of the French detective department lifted his high shoulders in a shrug that Brasseur on the stage might have envied.

“It is my painful, my distressing duty,” he said, in a thick whisper, “to disturb, monsieur, your beautiful confidence in your youthful friend. What will you, sir? Young men will be young men. It is part of the herculean task of our superior police to drop a word of warning to parents and guardians who are hoodwinked. I do so now. Sir Manvers—that youth so discreet—he spends his evenings in a private gambling-house, full of the worst company, rive gauche, Rue de Loches, number sixteen.”

On me this very extraordinary assertion produced very much the effect of a sudden plunge into cold water. It fairly took away my breath, and I sat gasping and staring in blank amazement. Then I rallied my wits sufficiently to reply. There had, I said, been some preposterous mistake. Mr. Cecil Manvers passed his evenings in the society of a quiet French family, of good position,—that of Colonel the Baron Duplessis.

But here M. Carnet broke in, arching his eyebrows:—

“Eh, eh, the Baron Duplessis?” said he, dryly; “I was not aware that to his epaulettes of colonel he added the baronial coronet. Well, Monsieur Haker, I have dropped you a hint, well intentioned, for de Carnet! Watch more strictly over your pupil, for the intimacy of the Duplessis household is apt to prove costly to a neophyte. And”—this more seriously—“should you require help from the police to cut the knot of this imbroglio, you have only to ask me,—me, Jules Carnet, at your service. The address I have pencilled, see, on this card, seven, Rue Joachim. I replace, for the next few nights, the commissary at that bureau.”

And, with a flourish and a bow, he was gone.

Left alone, my reflections were very bitter. I could not doubt the truth or the timeliness of the warning that had been conveyed to me, and without loss of time I set out for the Rue de Loches.

It was very dark, and as I crossed the bridge a fine, chilly rain began to fall; but I scarcely heeded it, and pressed on. I reached the Rue de Loches, and, just as I had raised my hand to the bell-handle of number sixteen, I noticed that the gate was, contrary to custom, slightly ajar. Instinctively I pushed it open, passed in, and silently reclosed it behind me. No one observed me as I crossed the grass-grown court-yard, and, unchallenged, entered the big old house, the windows of which were now ablaze with lights, while strains of music reached my ears, mingling with the clink of glasses and the murmur of conversation. The well-known staircase, however, was clear, and I met with no impediment as I traversed two small rooms, and, myself screened by a heavy crimson curtain, commanded a view of the great gloomy salon and its occupants.

More than forty persons, as I judged, were present, and of this number, beside the colonel's wife and daughter, but three were women. One of these—a great professional performer, I should say—was seated at the piano. The other two, be-jewelled, painted, and with elaborate chignons and waving fans, were mere living decorations, as it appeared to me, of the scene. As for the male guests, there was the usual mixture of gulls and sharpers—the latter element predominating—to be found in such places. All were well dressed, and several were more or less intoxicated. Choice viands, varied wines and liquors were grouped, amid flowers and silver, on a buffet adjacent; and two lynx-eyed serving-men, with very evil countenances, and baggy blue liveries, that might have been supplied by the costumer of a third-rate theatre, were busy in ministering to the creature comforts of the company.

Some game, lansquenet or baccarat, was going on, and in it some eighteen or nineteen players were engaged. Near the head of the table, confronting the dealer, sat Cecil, his face flushed, his eyes sparkling, and a champagne glass in his hand, and a great heap of gold and notes lying on the velvet cloth before him. Most of other faces near him, including that of the Baron Duplessis, expressed annoyance, dismay, or savage ill-humor, and I saw at once that this was an instance of one of those extraordinary runs of luck which sometimes enables a tyro to conquer the wiliest practitioners at the gambling-table. Again and again the cards were dealt, and still fickle fortune befriended Cecil. The pile of gold before him swelled and swelled, until at last, with a muttered oath, the last stake of the bank was reluctantly pushed toward my pupil.

“Broke the bank, by Jove! I said I'd do it!” cried the lad, with boyish exultation, as he held out his glass to be replenished.

I was in the very act of rushing from my place of concealment to reproach my pupil with his duplicity, and to fling his ill-gotten gains broadcast among the harpies who surrounded him,

when I happened to observe one of the evil-visaged serving-men, in obedience to a nod from Colonel the Baron Duplessis add a few drops from a little vial that he carried, hidden in his sleeve, to the foaming contents of the broad glass of champagne which he presently placed in Cecil's outstretched hand. The lad swallowed the frothing wine at a draught, and again laughed in foolish triumph, as he passed his fingers through the gold coin and rustling notes. And then—so rapid, no doubt, was the action of the drug—his bright eyes swam and grew dim, he nodded drowsily, and sank forward in a sort of stupor, his head resting on his arm. Instantly there began to be a movement among the company, and with many a “Bon soir” and “Au plaisir,” the majority of the guests took their leave.

Tang! The sharp little hammer of the bronze clock on the chimney-piece, as it struck the hour of one, suggested to me the necessity of being prompt and cool, if I were to save Cecil Manvers from a worse peril than the mere loss of money. By this time only five persons, except my pupil, remained in the room, for even the baron's scared wife and dull-eyed daughter had disappeared, and of these five two were the serving-men in theatrical livery. The other three were the baron himself; a cadaverous little old fellow, with a hatchet face and a hard voice; and a big black-browed man, whose sharp white teeth, filed to a point like those of savages, looked disagreeably wolfish whenever he smiled or spoke. I grew seriously alarmed as I noted the significant glances which these worthies exchanged, as they surrounded the sleeping stripling. That they would allow the lad to carry off his winnings I had never thought probable, and now it seemed evident that something beyond commonplace knavery was in question.

“Who sleeps, sups,” remarked the senior of the group, with a crackling laugh that chilled my blood as I heard it. “Your soothing syrup, Duplessis, did the trick well.”

“Ay,” replied the baron, as he passed the flame of a candle before Cecil's unconscious eyes; “it was time, comrades, to pour out something stronger than Clicquot; for, peste! what cards that English boy did hold, as if the devil had shuffled the pack; and, trust me, we'd not have found it easy to make him lose the good he won! Young as he is, he has sense, and spirit too, and he had the effrontery to tell me tonight that he was ashamed of playing tricks on his good-natured tutor, and that, win or lose, he'd gamble no more.”

The stout-built man responded with some brutal joke about a tender young pigeon that was ready for the spit.

“There is no risk, no risk at all,” said the eldest of the scoundrels; “what can they prove against us, hein? The young gentleman has won our money, not we his. He has drunk much wine. He insisted on returning home on foot, with his gold in his pockets. Is it our fault, M. le President, if those pockets were empty when the body, discovered in the Seine, was laid out on the wet slabs of the morgue?”

I shuddered, for there was something peculiarly hideous in the affection of the old villain's manner, as, drawing himself up, and extending one arm in forensic fashion, he pleaded his own

cause before an imaginary tribunal. But the two evil-visaged serving-men and the burly black-browed ruffian were of another mind, for they laughed with evident enjoyment of the jest.

“That for the Cour d’Assises!” retorted the big man, snapping his fingers; “and now, monvieux, if you like, I am ready to administer the coup-de-pouce to this young aristo;” and he stretched forth his brawny hands, half jocularly, toward Cecil’s throat.

“Not yet,” returned the baron, peremptorily; “not yet this hour to come. One o’clock is too early for our good friends, Jacques and Jean Baptiste here, to carry such a load through the riverside streets. Better wait till the last wine shop closes, and the last drunkard has reeled homeward.”

And then all five sat down together at the table, in familiar conversation, much of which was to me unintelligible, sipping Curacoa and Chartreuse the while with appreciative relish. The only one who looked careworn and anxious was the colonel himself. I did not, however, linger long to play the part of eaves-dropper. Clearly, if I would save Cecil, I must lose no time in summoning rescue. Noiselessly, cautiously, I threaded my way through the darkling antechambers and down the solitary staircase. I reached the court-yard. It was empty, and the porter’s lodge dark and deserted. Softly unclosing the gate, I glided out into the street, and, mindful of the address which M. Carnet had given me, flew rather than walked to number seven, Rue Joachim.

The Inspector of Police listened with eager interest to my story. Twice he interrupted me, with an urbane apology for the rudeness of the act, that he might apply his lips to the mouthpiece of a callpipe that communicated with the lower salle of the Bureau, and when I had finished he rubbed his hands and almost purred, in feline fashion, over the news I had brought.

“A great haul for the net of the law!” he murmured blandly; “Georges Le Moine—for your corpulent friend, Mr. Baker, can be no other—runaway forcat, burglar, and assassin, much wanted in his own quarters at Toulon; then old Vinet, of Lyons, dit ‘rompe-la-loi; then the Duplessis himself, who has a long score to pay to settle with Justice; and the two minor villains, Jacques Peach and Jean Baptiste Tellier, thrown in to complete the batch of jail-birds. Now, my children!” he added loudly, and the door opened, disclosing four gendarms and eight agents, armed to the teeth: “be quick and silent. This gentleman will guide us. Only one of this gibier-de-potence is likely to make serious resistance. I mean Lemoine. If he does—”

“Very well, inspector,” answered an agent of police, as he examined the lock of his pistol.

But there was no fighting. The whole rascally gang gave proof of the most abject cowardice, when pounced on by the police, and did not even attempt to use the weapons which four out of the five had concealed about their persons. In prison, each made a confession damaging to the defence of the remainder, and I believe all were ultimately sentenced to long terms of imprisonment at Toulon or Lambessa, while I received praises, unmerited I am sure, for the share I had taken in providing for the safety of my pupil. Cecil Manvers is Lord Hunsdon now, and has long since learned to profit by the follies of his youth; but we are fast friends, and my former

charge has never forgotten the debt of gratitude which he declares himself to owe me for my coolness on that night in the Rue de Loches.

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