

One

His Grace of Avon Buys a Soul

A gentleman was strolling down a side street in Paris, on his way back from the house of one Madame de Verchoureux. He walked mincingly, for the red heels of his shoes were very high. A long purple cloak, rose-lined, hung from his shoulders and was allowed to fall carelessly back from his dress, revealing a full-skirted coat of purple satin, heavily laced with gold; a waistcoat of flowered silk; faultless small clothes; and a lavish sprinkling of jewels on his cravat and breast. A three-cornered hat, pointed, was set upon his powdered wig, and in his hand he carried a long beribboned cane. It was little enough protection against footpads, and although a light dress sword hung at the gentleman's side its hilt was lost in the folds of his cloak, not quickly to be found. At this late hour, and in this deserted street, it was the height of foolhardiness to walk unattended and flaunting jewels, but the gentleman seemed unaware of his recklessness. He proceeded languidly on his way, glancing neither to left nor to right, apparently heedless of possible danger.

But as he walked down the street, idly twirling his cane, a body hurled itself upon him, shot like a cannon-ball from a dark alley that yawned to the right of the magnificent gentleman. The figure clutched at the elegant cloak, cried out in a startled voice, and tried to regain his balance.

His Grace of Avon swirled about, gripping his assailant's wrists and bearing them downwards with a merciless strength belied by his foppish appearance. His victim gave a whimper of pain and sank quivering to his knees.

'M'sieur! Ah, let me go! I did not mean – I did not know – I would not – Ah, m'sieur, let me go!'

His Grace bent over the boy, standing a little to one side so that the light of an adjacent street lamp fell on that white agonized countenance. Great violet-blue eyes gazed wildly up at him, terror in their depths.

'Surely you are a little young for this game?' drawled the Duke. 'Or did you think to take me unawares?'

The boy flushed, and his eyes grew dark with indignation.

'I did not seek to rob you! Indeed, indeed I did not! I – I was running away! I – oh, m'sieur, let me go!'

'In good time, my child. From what were you running, may I ask? From another victim?'

'No! Oh, please let me go! You – you do not understand! He will have started in pursuit! Ah, please, please, milor!'

The Duke's curious, heavy-lidded eyes never wavered from the boy's face. They had widened suddenly, and become intent.

'And who, child, is "he"?'

'My – my brother. Oh, please –'

Round the corner of the alley came a man, full-tilt. At sight of Avon he checked. The boy shuddered, and now clung to Avon's arm.

'Ah!' exploded the newcomer. 'Now, by God, if the whelp has sought to rob you, milor', he shall pay for it! You scoundrel! Ungrateful brat! You shall be sorry, I promise you! Milor', a thousand apologies! The lad is my young brother. I was beating him for his laziness when he slipped from me –'

The Duke raised a scented handkerchief to his thin nostrils.

'Keep your distance, fellow,' he said haughtily. 'Doubtless beating is good for the young.'

The boy shrank closer to him. He made no attempt to escape, but his hands twitched convulsively. Once again the Duke's

strange eyes ran over him, resting for a moment on the copper-red curls that were cut short and ruffled into wild disorder.

‘As I remarked, beating is good for the young. Your brother, you said?’ He glanced now at the swarthy, coarse-featured young man.

‘Yes, noble sir, my brother. I have cared for him since our parents died, and he repays me with ingratitude. He is a curse, noble sir, a curse!’

The Duke seemed to reflect.

‘How old is he, fellow?’

‘He is nineteen, milor’.

The Duke surveyed the boy.

‘Nineteen. Is he not a little small for his age?’

‘Why, milor’, if – if he is it is no fault of mine! I – I have fed him well. I pray you, do not heed what he says! He is a viper, a wild-cat, a veritable curse!’

‘I will relieve you of the curse,’ said his Grace calmly.

The man stared, uncomprehending.

‘Milor’ – ?’

‘I suppose he is for sale?’

A cold hand stole into the Duke’s, and clutched it.

‘Sale, milor’? You –?’

‘I believe I will buy him to be my page. What is his worth? A louis? Or are curses worthless? An interesting problem.’

The man’s eyes gleamed suddenly with avaricious cunning.

‘He is a good boy, noble sir. He can work. Indeed, he is worth much to me. And I have an affection for him. I –’

‘I will give a guinea for your curse.’

‘Ah, but no, milor’! He is worth more! Much, much more!’

‘Then keep him,’ said Avon, and moved on.

The boy ran to him, clinging to his arm.

‘Milor’, take me! Oh, please take me! I will work well for you! I swear it! Oh, I beg of you, take me!’

His Grace paused.

‘I wonder if I am a fool?’ he said in English. He drew the diamond pin from his cravat, and held it so that it winked and sparkled in the light of the lamp. ‘Well, fellow? Will this suffice?’

The man gazed at the jewel as though he could hardly believe his eyes. He rubbed them, and drew nearer, staring.

‘For this,’ Avon said, ‘I purchase your brother, body and soul. Well?’

‘Give it me!’ whispered the man, and stretched out his hand. ‘The boy is yours, milor’.

Avon tossed the pin to him.

‘I believe I requested you to keep your distance,’ he said. ‘You offend my nostrils. Child, follow me.’ On he went, down the street, with the boy at a respectful distance behind him.

They came at last to the Rue St-Honoré, and to Avon’s house. He passed in with never a glance behind him to see whether his new possession followed or not, and walked across the courtyard to the great nail-studded door. Bowing lackeys admitted him, looking in surprise at the shabby figure who came in his wake.

The Duke let fall his cloak, and handed his hat to one of the footmen.

‘Mr Davenant?’ he said.

‘In the library, your Grace.’

Avon sauntered across the hall to the library door. It was opened for him, and he went in, nodding to the boy to follow.

Hugh Davenant sat by the fire, reading a book of poems. He glanced up as his host came in, and smiled.

‘Well, Justin?’ Then he saw the shrinking child by the door. ‘Faith, what have we here?’

‘You may well ask,’ said the Duke. He came to the fire, and stretched one elegantly shod foot to the blaze. ‘A whim. That dirty and starved scrap of humanity is mine.’ He spoke in English, but it was evident that the boy understood, for he flushed, and hung his curly head.

‘Yours?’ Davenant looked from him to the boy. ‘What mean you, Alastair? Surely – you cannot mean – your son?’

‘Oh, no!’ His Grace smiled in some amusement. ‘Not this time, my dear Hugh. I bought this little rat for the sum of one diamond.’

‘But – but why, in heaven’s name?’

‘I have no idea,’ said his Grace placidly. ‘Come here, rat.’

The boy came to him timidly, and allowed Justin to turn his face to the light.

‘Quite a pretty child,’ the Duke remarked. ‘I shall make him my page. So entertaining to possess a page, body and soul.’

Davenant rose, and took one of the boy’s hands in his.

‘I suppose you will explain, some time or another,’ he said. ‘For the present, why not feed the poor child?’

‘You are always so efficient,’ sighed the Duke. He turned to the table, on which a cold supper was laid, awaiting him. ‘Wonderful. You might almost have known that I should bring home a guest. You may eat, little rat.’

The boy looked up at him shyly.

‘Please, milor’, I can wait. I – I would not eat your supper. I would rather wait, if – if you please.’

‘I do not please, my child. Go and eat.’ He sat down as he spoke, twirling his quizzing glass. After a moment’s hesitation the boy went to the table and waited for Hugh to carve him a leg of chicken. Having supplied his wants, Hugh came back to the fire.

‘Are you mad, Justin?’ he asked, faintly smiling.

‘I believe not.’

‘Then why have you done this? What do you, of all men, want with a child of his age?’

‘I thought it might be an amusement. As you doubtless know, I am suffering from *ennui*. Louise wearies me. This’ – he waved one white hand towards the famished boy – ‘is a heaven-sent diversion.’

Davenant frowned.

‘You surely do not intend to adopt the child?’

‘He – er – adopted me.’

‘You are going to make him as your son?’ persisted Hugh incredulously.

The Duke’s eyebrows rose, rather superciliously.

‘My dear Hugh! A child from the gutter? He shall be my page.’

‘And what interest will that afford you?’

Justin smiled, and his glance travelled to the boy.

‘I wonder?’ he said softly.

‘You have some special reason?’

‘As you so sapiently remark, my dear Hugh, I have some special reason.’

Davenant shrugged his shoulders, and allowed the subject to drop. He sat watching the child at the table, who presently finished his repast, and came to the Duke’s side.

‘If you please, sir, I have finished.’

Avon put up his eyeglass.

‘Have you?’ he said.

The boy knelt suddenly, and to Davenant’s surprise, kissed the Duke’s hand.

‘Yes, sir. Thank you.’

Avon disengaged himself, but the boy knelt still, looking up into the handsome face with humble eyes. The Duke took a pinch of snuff.

‘My esteemed child, there sits the man you had best thank.’ He waved his hand towards Davenant. ‘I should never have thought of feeding you.’

‘I – I thanked you for saving me from Jean, milor’,’ the boy answered.

‘You are reserved for a worse fate,’ said the Duke sardonically. ‘You now belong to me – body and soul.’

‘Yes, sir. If you please,’ murmured the boy, and sent him a swift glance of admiration from beneath his long lashes.

The thin lips curled a little.

‘The prospect is no doubt pleasing?’

‘Yes, sir. I – I would like to serve you.’

‘But then, you do not know me very well,’ said Justin, with a slight chuckle. ‘I am an inhuman taskmaster, eh, Hugh?’

‘You are not the man to care for a child of his age,’ said Hugh quietly.

‘True, very true. Shall I give him to you?’

A trembling hand touched his great cuff.

‘Please, sir –’

Justin looked across at his friend.

‘I do not think I shall, Hugh. It is so entertaining, and so – er – novel, to be a gilded saint in the eyes of – er – unfledged innocence. I shall keep the boy for just so long as he continues to amuse me. What is your name, my child?’

‘Léon, sir.’

‘How delightfully brief!’ Always a faint undercurrent of sarcasm ran beneath the surface of the Duke’s smooth voice. ‘Léon. No more, no less. The question is – Hugh will of course have the answer ready – what next to do with Léon?’

‘Put him to bed,’ said Davenant.

‘Naturally – And do you think – a bath?’

‘By all means.’

‘Ah yes!’ sighed the Duke, and struck a handbell at his side.

A lackey came in answer to the summons, bowing deeply.

‘Your Grace desires?’

‘Send me Walker,’ said Justin.

The lackey effaced himself, and presently a neat individual came in, grey-haired and prim.

‘Walker! I have something to say to you. Yes, I remember. Walker, do you observe this child?’

Walker glanced at the kneeling boy.

‘Ay, your Grace.’

‘He does. Marvellous,’ murmured the Duke. ‘His name, Walker, is Léon. Strive to bear it in mind.’

‘Certainly, your Grace.’

‘He requires several things, but first a bath.’

‘Ay, your Grace.’

‘Secondly, a bed.’

‘Yes, your Grace.’

‘Thirdly, a nightgown.’

‘Yes, your Grace.’

‘Fourthly, and lastly, a suit of clothes. Black.’

‘Black, your Grace.’

‘Severe and funereal black, as shall befit my page. You will procure them. No doubt you will prove yourself equal to this

occasion. Take the child away, and show him the bath, the bed, and the nightgown. And then leave him alone.'

'Very good, your Grace.'

'And you, Léon, rise. Go with the estimable Walker. I shall see you to-morrow.'

Léon came to his feet, and bowed.

'Yes, Monseigneur. Thank you.'

'Pray, do not thank me again,' yawned the Duke. 'It fatigues me.' He watched Léon go out, and turned to survey Davenant.

Hugh looked full into his eyes.

'What does this mean, Alastair?'

The Duke crossed his legs, and swung one foot.

'I wonder?' he said pleasantly. 'I thought that you would be able to tell me. You are always so omniscient, my dear.'

'Some scheme you have in mind, I know,' Hugh said positively. 'I have known you long enough to be sure of that. What do you want with that child?'

'You are sometimes most importunate,' complained Justin. 'Never more so than when you become virtuously severe. Pray spare me a homily.'

'I have no intention of lecturing you. All I would say is that it is impossible for you to take that child as your page.'

'Dear me!' said Justin, and gazed pensively into the fire.

'For one thing he is of gentle birth. One can tell that from his speech, and his delicate hands and face. For another – his innocence shines out of his eyes.'

'How very distressing!'

'It would be very distressing if that innocence left him – because of you,' Hugh said, a hint of grimness in his rather dreamy voice.

'Always so polite,' murmured the Duke.

'If you wish to be kind to him –'

'My dear Hugh! I thought you said you knew me?'

Davenant smiled at that.

'Well, Justin, as a favour to me, will you give me Léon, and seek a page elsewhere?'

‘I am always sorry to disappoint you, Hugh. I desire to act up to your expectations on all possible occasions. So I shall keep Léon. Innocence shall walk behind Evil – you see, I forestall you – clad in sober black.’

‘Why do you want him? At least tell me that?’

‘He has Titian hair,’ said Justin blandly. ‘Titian hair has ever been one of – my – ruling – passions.’ The hazel eyes glinted for a moment, and were swiftly veiled. ‘I am sure you will sympathise with me.’

Hugh rose and walked to the table. He poured himself out a glass of burgundy, and sipped it for a time in silence.

‘Where have you been this evening?’ he asked at length.

‘I really forget. I believe I went first to De Touronne’s house. Yes, I remember now. I won. Strange.’

‘Why strange?’ inquired Hugh.

Justin flicked a grain of snuff from his great cuff.

‘Because, Hugh, in the days, not so long since, when it was – ah – common knowledge that the noble family of Alastair was on the verge of ruin – yes, Hugh, even when I was mad enough to contemplate marriage with the present – er – Lady Merivale – I could only lose.’

‘I’ve seen you win thousands in a night, Justin.’

‘And lose them the following night. Then, if you remember, I went away with you to – now, where did we go? Rome! Of course!’

‘I remember.’

The thin lips sneered a little.

‘Yes. I was the – ah – rejected and heart-broken suitor. I should have blown my brains out to be quite correct. But I was past the age of drama. Instead I proceeded – in due course – to Vienna. And I won. The reward, my dear Hugh, of vice.’

Hugh tilted his glass, watching the candle-light play on the dark wine.

‘I heard,’ he said slowly, ‘that the man from whom you won that fortune – a young man, Justin –’

‘– with a blameless character.’

‘Yes. That young man – so I heard – *did* blow his brains out.’

‘You were misinformed, my dear. He was shot in a duel. The reward of virtue. The moral is sufficiently pointed, I think?’

‘And you came to Paris with a fortune.’

‘Quite a considerable one. I bought this house.’

‘Yes. I wonder how you reconcile it with your soul?’

‘I haven’t one, Hugh. I thought you knew that.’

‘When Jennifer Beauchamp married Anthony Merivale you had something approaching a soul.’

‘Had I?’ Justin regarded him with amusement.

Hugh met his look.

‘And I wonder too what Jennifer Beauchamp is to you now?’

Justin held up one beautiful white hand.

‘Jennifer Merivale, Hugh. She is the memory of a failure, and of a spell of madness.’

‘And yet you have never been quite the same since.’

Justin rose, and now the sneer was marked.

‘I told you half an hour ago, my dear, that it was my endeavour to act up to your expectations. Three years ago – in fact, when I heard from my sister Fanny of Jennifer’s marriage – you said with your customary simplicity that although she would not accept my suit, she had made me. *Voilà tout.*’

‘No.’ Hugh looked thoughtfully across at him. ‘I was wrong, but –’

‘My dear Hugh, pray do not destroy my faith in you!’

‘I was wrong, but not so much wrong. I should have said that Jennifer prepared the way for another woman to make you.’

Justin closed his eyes.

‘When you become profound, Hugh, you cause me to regret the day that saw me admit you into the select ranks of my friends.’

‘You have so many, have you not?’ said Hugh, flushing.

‘*Parfaitement.*’ Justin walked to the door. ‘Where there is money there are also – friends.’

Davenant set down his glass.

‘Is that meant for an insult?’ he said quietly.

Justin paused, his hand on the door-knob.

‘Strange to say it was not. But by all means call me out.’

Hugh laughed suddenly.

‘Oh, go to bed, Justin! You are quite impossible!’

‘So you have often told me. Good night, my dear.’ He went out, but before he had shut the door bethought himself of something, and looked back, smiling. ‘*A propos*, Hugh, I have got a soul. It has just had a bath, and is now asleep.’

‘God help it!’ Hugh said gravely.

‘I am not sure of my cue. Do I say amen, or retire cursing?’ His eyes mocked but the smile in them was not unpleasant. He did not wait for an answer, but shut the door, and went slowly up to bed.

Two

Introducing the Comte de Saint-Vire

Shortly after noon on the following day Avon sent for his page. Léon came promptly, and knelt to kiss the Duke's hand. Walker had obeyed his master's commands implicitly, and in place of the shabby, grimy child of the evening before was a scrupulously neat boy, whose red curls had been swept severely back from his brow, and whose slim person was clad in plain black raiment, with a starched muslin cravat about his neck.

Avon surveyed him for a moment.

'Yes. You may rise, Léon. I am going to ask you some questions. I desire you will answer them truthfully. You understand?'

Léon put his hands behind him.

'Yes, Monseigneur.'

'You may first tell me how you come to know my language.'

Léon shot him a surprised glance.

'Monseigneur?'

'Pray do not be guileless. I dislike fools.'

'Yes, Monseigneur. I was only surprised that you knew. It was at the inn, you see.'

'I do not think I am obtuse,' said Avon coldly, 'but I see naught.'

'Pardon, Monseigneur. Jean keeps an inn, and very often English travellers come. Not – not noble English, of course.'

'I see. Now you may relate your history. Begin with your name.'

‘I am Léon Bonnard, Monseigneur. My mother was the Mère Bonnard, and my father –’

– was the Père Bonnard. It is not inconceivable. Where were you born, and when did your worthy parents die?’

‘I – I do not know where I was born, Monseigneur. It was not in Anjou, I think.’

‘That is of course interesting,’ remarked the Duke. ‘Spare me a list of the places where you were not born, I beg of you.’

Léon coloured.

‘You do not understand, Monseigneur. My parents went to live in Anjou when I was a baby. We had a farm at Bassincourt, *auprès de Saumur*. And – and we lived there until my parents died.’

‘Did they die simultaneously?’ inquired Justin.

Léon’s straight little nose wrinkled in perplexity.

‘Monseigneur?’

‘At one and the same time.’

‘It was the plague,’ explained Léon. ‘I was sent to Monsieur le Curé. I was twelve then, and Jean was twenty.’

‘How came you to be so much younger than this Jean?’ asked Justin, and opened his eyes rather wide, so that Léon looked full into them.

A mischievous chuckle escaped Léon; he returned the piercing stare frankly.

‘Monseigneur, my parents are dead, so I cannot ask them.’

‘My friend –’ Justin spoke softly. ‘Do you know what I do to impertinent pages?’

Léon shook his head apprehensively.

‘I have them whipped. I advise you to have a care.’

Léon paled, and the laugh died out of his eyes.

‘Pardon, Monseigneur. I – I did not mean to be impertinent,’ he said contritely. ‘My mother had once a daughter who died. Then – then I came.’

‘Thank you. Where did you learn to speak as a gentleman?’

‘With M. le Curé, Monseigneur. He taught me to read and to write and to know Latin a little, and – and many other things.’

Justin raised his eyebrows.

‘And your father was a farmer? Why did you receive this extensive education?’

‘I do not know, Monseigneur. I was the baby, you see, and the favourite. My mother would not have me work on the farm. That is why Jean hates me, I think.’

‘Possibly. Give me your hand.’

Léon extended one slender hand for inspection. Justin took it in his, and surveyed it through his eyeglass. It was small, and finely made, with tapering fingers roughened by toil.

‘Yes,’ said the Duke. ‘Quite a pretty member.’

Léon smiled engagingly.

‘*Quant à ça*, you have very beautiful hands, Monseigneur, I think.’

The Duke’s lips quivered.

‘You overwhelm me, my child. As you were saying, your parents died. What then?’

‘Oh, then Jean sold the farm! He said he was made for greater things. But I do not know.’ Léon tilted his head to one side, considering the point. The irrepressible dimple appeared, and was swiftly banished. Léon eyed his master solemnly, and a little nervously withal.

‘We will leave Jean’s capabilities out of the discussion,’ said Justin smoothly. ‘Continue your story.’

‘Yes, Monseigneur. Jean sold the farm, and took me away from M. le Curé.’ Léon’s face clouded over. ‘Monsieur wanted to keep me, but Jean would not have it so. He thought I should be useful. So of course monsieur could do naught. Jean brought me to Paris. That was when he made me –’ Léon stopped.

‘Go on!’ said Justin sharply. ‘That was when he made you –?’

‘Work for him,’ said Léon lamely. He encountered a searching glance, and his big eyes fell before it.

‘Very well,’ said Justin at last. ‘We will leave it at that. *Et puis?*’

‘Then Jean bought the inn in the Rue Sainte-Marie, and – and after a time he met Charlotte, and – and married her. Then it was worse, because Charlotte hated me.’ The blue eyes flashed. ‘I tried to kill her once,’ said Léon naïvely. ‘With the big carving-knife.’

‘Her hatred is not incomprehensible,’ said Justin dryly.

‘N-no,’ replied Léon doubtfully. ‘I was only fifteen then. I remember I did not have anything to eat all day – besides the beating. And – and that is all, Monseigneur, till you came, and took me away.’

Justin picked up a quill and passed it through his fingers.

‘May I ask why you tried to kill this Charlotte – er – with the carving-knife?’

Léon flushed, and looked away.

‘There – there was a reason, Monseigneur.’

‘I do not doubt it.’

‘I – oh, I think she was very unkind and cruel and she – she made me angry. That was all.’

‘I am both cruel and unkind, but I do not advise you to try and kill me. Or any of my servants. You see, I know what the colour of your hair denotes.’

The long dark lashes lifted again, and the dimple showed.

‘*Colère de diable*,’ Léon said.

‘Precisely. You will do well to hide it with me, my child.’

‘Yes, Monseigneur. I do not seek to kill those whom I love.’

Justin’s lips curled rather sardonically.

‘I am relieved. Now listen to me. You will henceforth be my page; you will be clothed and fed, and well provided for, but in return I will have obedience from you. You understand?’

‘But yes, Monseigneur.’

‘You will learn that my word is law with my servants. And this is my first command: if anyone should question you as to who you are, or from where you come, you will answer only that you are Avon’s page. You will forget your past until I give you leave to remember it. You see?’

‘Yes, Monseigneur.’

‘And you will obey Walker as you would myself.’

The firm chin was tilted at that; Léon looked speculatively at the Duke.

‘If you do not’ – the soft voice, grew softer still – ‘you will find that I too know how to punish.’

‘If it is your will that I obey this Walker,’ said Léon with dignity, ‘I will do it, *y-your-r-r Gr-r-race!*’

Justin looked him over.

‘Certainly you will do so. And I prefer that you call me Monseigneur.’

The blue eyes twinkled wickedly.

‘This Walker, he has told me that when I speak to you, Monseigneur, I must say “your-r-r” ah, bah! I cannot, *enfin!*’

For one moment Justin stared haughtily at his page. Instantly the twinkle disappeared. Léon stared back gravely.

‘Be very careful,’ Justin warned him.

‘Yes, Monseigneur,’ Léon said meekly.

‘You may go now. This evening you will accompany me out.’ The Duke dipped his quill in the inkhorn, and started to write.

‘Where, Monseigneur?’ inquired the page with great interest.

‘Is that your affair? I dismissed you. Go.’

‘Yes, Monseigneur. Pardon!’ Léon departed, carefully closing the door behind him. Outside he met Davenant, coming slowly down the stairs. Hugh smiled.

‘Well, Léon? Where have you been all the morning?’

‘Dressing myself, in these new clothes, m’sieu’. I think I look nice, *n’est-ce pas?*’

‘Very nice. Where are you going now?’

‘I do not know, m’sieu’. Perhaps there is something I may do for Monseigneur?’

‘If he gave you no orders there is nothing. Can you read?’

‘But yes! I was taught. Ah, I have forgotten, m’sieu!’

‘Have you?’ Hugh was amused. ‘If you come with me, child, I’ll find you a book.’

Twenty minutes later Hugh entered the library to find the Duke still writing, as Léon had left him.

‘Justin, who and what is Léon? He is a delightful child; certainly no peasant!’

‘He is a very impertinent child,’ said Justin, with the ghost of a smile. ‘He is the first page I have had who ever dared to laugh at me.’

‘Did he laugh at you? A very wholesome experience for you, Alastair. How old is the child?’

‘I have reason to believe that he is nineteen,’ said Justin placidly.

‘Nineteen! Faith, it’s not possible! He is a babe!’

‘Not entirely. Do you come with me to Vassaud’s tonight?’

‘I suppose so. I’ve no money to lose, but what matter?’

‘You need not play,’ said Justin.

‘If one does not play, why visit a gaming-house?’

‘To talk to the *monde*. I go to Vassaud’s to see Paris.’ He resumed his writing, and presently Hugh strolled away.

At dinner that evening Léon stood behind the Duke’s chair, and waited upon him. Justin seemed hardly to notice him, but Hugh could not take his eyes from that piquant little face. Indeed, he stared so hard that at last Léon stared back, with great dignity, and some reproach. Observing his friend’s fixed regard, Justin turned, and put up his glass to look at Léon.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Monseigneur, only looking at M. Davenant.’

‘Then do not.’

‘But he looks at me, Monseigneur!’

‘That is another matter.’

‘I do not see that that is fair,’ remarked Léon, *sotto voce*.

Some time after dinner the two men set out for Vassaud’s. When Hugh realised that Léon was to accompany them he frowned, and took Avon aside.

‘Justin, have done with this affectation! You can have no need of a page at Vassaud’s, and it’s no place for such a child!’

‘My very dear Hugh, I do wish you would allow me to know my own mind,’ answered Justin sweetly. ‘The page goes with me. Another whim.’

‘But why? The child should be in bed!’

Justin flicked a speck of snuff from his coat.

‘You force me to remind you, Hugh, that the page is mine.’

Davenant compressed his lips, and swung out of the door. Nonchalantly his Grace followed.

Vassaud’s was crowded, early in the evening though it was.

The two men left their cloaks with the lackey in the vestibule, and proceeded, with Léon in their wake, across the hall to the broad stairway which led to the gaming-rooms on the first floor. Hugh saw a friend standing at the foot of the stairs, and paused to exchange a greeting, but Avon swept on, bowing slightly to right and left as some chance acquaintance hailed him. He did not stop to speak to anyone, although several called to him as he passed, but went on his regal way with just a faint smile on his lips.

Léon followed him close, his blue eyes wide with interest. He attracted some attention, and many were the curious glances cast from him to the Duke. He flushed delicately when he encountered such a glance, but his Grace appeared to be quite unaware of the surprise he had created.

‘What ails Alastair now?’ inquired the Chevalier d’Anvau, who was standing with one De Salmy in a recess on the staircase.

‘Who knows?’ De Salmy shrugged elegantly. ‘He must ever be unusual. Good evening, Alastair.’

The Duke nodded to him.

‘I rejoice to see you, De Salmy. A hand of piquet later?’

De Salmy bowed.

‘I shall be delighted.’ He watched Avon pass on, and shrugged again. ‘He bears himself as though he were the king of France. I dislike those strange eyes. Ah, Davenant, well met!’

Davenant smiled pleasantly.

‘You here? A crowd, is it not?’

‘All Paris,’ agreed the Chevalier. ‘Why has Alastair brought his page?’

‘I have no idea, Justin is never communicative. I see Destourville is back.’

‘Ah yes, he arrived last night. You have no doubt heard the scandal?’

‘Oh, my dear Chevalier, I never listen to scandal!’ Hugh laughed, and went on up the stairs.

‘*Je me demande,*’ remarked the Chevalier, watching Hugh’s progress through his eyeglass, ‘why it is that the good Davenant is a friend of the bad Alastair?’

The salon on the first floor was brilliantly lighted, and humming with gay, inconsequent conversation. Some were already at play, others were gathered about the buffet, sipping their wine. Hugh saw Avon through the folding doors that led into a smaller salon, the centre of a group, his page standing at a discreet distance behind him.

A muttered exclamation near him made him turn his head. A tall, rather carelessly dressed man was standing beside him, looking across the room at Léon. He was frowning, and his heavy mouth was shut hard. Through the powder his hair glistened red, but his arched brows were black, and very thick.

‘Saint-Vire?’ Hugh bowed to him. ‘You are wondering at Alastair’s page? A freak, is it not?’

‘Your servant, Davenant. A freak, yes. Who is the boy?’

‘I do not know. Alastair found him yesterday. He is called Léon. I trust Madame your wife is well?’

‘I thank you, yes. Alastair found him, you say? What does that mean?’

‘Here he comes,’ answered Hugh. ‘You had best ask him.’

Avon came up with a swish of silken skirts, and bowed low to the Comte de Saint-Vire.

‘My dear Comte!’ The hazel eyes mocked. ‘My very dear Comte!’

Saint-Vire returned the bow abruptly.

‘M. le Duc!’

Justin drew forth his jewelled snuff-box, and presented it. Tall as he was Saint-Vire was made to look insignificant beside this man of splendid height and haughty bearing.

‘A little snuff, dear Comte? No?’ He shook the foaming ruffles back from his white hand, and very daintily took a pinch of snuff. His thin lips were smiling, but not pleasantly.

‘Saint-Vire was admiring your page, Justin,’ Davenant said. ‘He is exciting no little attention.’

‘No doubt.’ Avon snapped his fingers imperiously and Léon came forward. ‘He is almost unique, my dear Comte. Pray look your fill.’

‘Your page is of no interest to me, m’sieur,’ Saint-Vire answered shortly, and turned aside.

‘Behind me.’ The command was given coldly, and at once Léon stepped back. ‘The so worthy Comte! Comfort him, Hugh.’ Avon passed on again, and in a little while was seated at a card table, playing lansquenet.

Davenant was called to another table presently, and proceeded to play at faro, with Saint-Vire as his partner. A foppish gentleman sat opposite him, and started to deal.

‘*Mon cher*, your friend is always so amusing. Why the page?’ he glanced towards Avon’s table.

Hugh gathered up his cards.

‘How should I know, Lavoulère? Doubtless he has a reason. And – forgive me – I am weary of the subject.’

‘He is so – so arresting,’ apologised Lavoulère. ‘The page. Red hair – oh, but of a radiance! – and blue, blue eyes. Or are they purple-black? The little oval face, and the patrician nose – ! Justin is wonderful. You do not think so, Henri?’

‘Oh, without doubt!’ Saint-Vire answered. ‘He should have been an actor. *Quant à moi*, I would humbly suggest that enough notice has been taken of the Duc and his page. Your play, Marchérand.’

At Avon’s table one of the gamblers yawned, pushing back his chair.

‘*Mille pardons*, but I thirst! I go in search of refreshment.’

The game had come to an end, and Justin was toying with his dice-box. He glanced up now, and waved to Château-Mornay to keep his seat.

‘My page will fetch wine, Louis. He is not only to be gazed upon. Léon!’

Léon slipped from behind Avon’s chair, from where he had been an intent spectator of the game.

‘Monseigneur?’

‘Canary and burgundy, at once.’

Léon withdrew, and nervously threaded his way between the tables to the buffet. He returned presently with a tray,

which he presented to Justin, on one knee. Justin pointed silently to where Château-Mornay sat, and blushing for his mistake, Léon went to him, and again presented the tray. When he had served each one in turn he looked inquiringly up at his master.

‘Go to M. Davenant, and ask him if he has commands for you,’ said Justin languidly. ‘Will you hazard a throw with me, Cornalle?’

‘Ay, what you will.’ Cornalle pulled a dice-box from his pocket. ‘Two ponies? Will you throw?’

Justin cast his dice carelessly on the table, and turned his head to watch Léon. The page was at Davenant’s elbow. Davenant looked up.

‘Well, Léon? What is it?’

‘Monseigneur sent me, m’sieur, to see if you had commands for me.’

Saint-Vire shot him a quick look, leaning back in his chair, one hand lying lightly clenched on the table.

‘Thank you, no,’ Hugh replied. ‘Unless – Saint-Vire, will you drink with me? And you, messieurs?’

‘I thank you, Davenant,’ said the Comte. ‘You have no thirst, Lavoulère?’

‘At the moment, no. Oh, if you all must drink, then so will I!’

‘Léon, will you fetch burgundy, please?’

‘Yes, m’sieur,’ bowed Léon. He was beginning to enjoy himself. He walked away again, looking about him appreciatively. When he returned he made use of the lesson just learned at Avon’s table, and presented the silver tray first to Saint-Vire.

The Comte turned in his chair, and picking up the decanter, slowly poured out a glassful, and handed it to Davenant. He poured out another, his eyes on Léon’s face. Conscious of the steady regard, Léon looked up, and met Saint-Vire’s eyes frankly. The Comte held the decanter poised, but poured no more for a long minute.

‘What is your name, boy?’

‘Léon, m’sieur.’

Saint-Vire smiled.

‘No more?’

The curly head was shaken.

‘Je ne sais plus rien, m’sieur.’

‘So ignorant?’ Saint-Vire went on with his work. As he picked up the last glass he spoke again. ‘Methinks you have not been long with M. le Duc?’

‘No, m’sieur. As m’sieur says.’ Léon rose, and looked across at Davenant. ‘M’sieur?’

‘That is all, Léon, thank you.’

‘So you have found a use for him, Hugh? Was I not wise to bring him? Your servant, Lavoulère.’

The soft voice startled Saint-Vire, and his hand shook, so that a little liquid was spilled from his glass. Avon stood at his side, quizzing-glass raised.

‘A very prince of pages,’ smiled Lavoulère. ‘How is your luck to-night, Justin?’

‘Wearisome,’ sighed the Duke. ‘For a week it has been impossible to lose. From the dreamy expression on Hugh’s face I infer that it is not so with him.’ He went to stand behind Hugh’s chair, laying a hand on his shoulder. ‘Belike, my dear Hugh, I shall bring you better luck.’

‘I have never known you do that yet,’ retorted Davenant. He set down his emptied glass. ‘Shall we play again?’

‘By all means,’ nodded Saint-Vire. ‘You and I are in a sad way, Davenant.’

‘And shall soon be in a sadder,’ remarked Hugh, shuffling the pack. ‘Remind me, Lavoulère, that in future I only play with you as my partner.’ He dealt the cards round, and as he did so, spoke quietly to the Duke, in English. ‘Send the child downstairs, Alastair. You have no need of him.’

‘I am as wax in your hands,’ replied his Grace. ‘He has served his turn. Léon, you will await me in the hall.’ He stretched out his hand to pick up Hugh’s cards. ‘Dear me!’ He laid them down again, and watched the play in silence for a while.

At the end of the round Lavoulère spoke to him.

‘Where is your brother, Alastair? The so charming youth! He is quite, quite mad!’

‘Lamentably so. Rupert, for all I know, is either languishing in an English sponging house, or living upon my hapless brother-in-law’s bounty.’

‘That is Miladi Fanny’s husband, yes? Edward Marling, *n’est-ce pas?* You have only the one brother and sister?’

‘They more than suffice me,’ said his Grace.

Lavoulère laughed.

‘*Voyons*, it amuses me, your family! Is there no love between you at all?’

‘Very little.’

‘And yet I have heard that you reared them, those two!’

‘I have no recollection of it,’ said Justin.

‘Come now, Justin, when your mother died you kept a hand on the reins!’ expostulated Davenant.

‘But lightly, my dear. Enough only to make both a little afraid of me; no more.’

‘Lady Fanny is very fond of you.’

‘Yes, I believe she is occasionally,’ agreed Justin calmly.

‘Ah, Miladi Fanny!’ Lavoulère kissed his finger-tips. ‘Behold! How she is *ravissante!*’

‘Also behold that Hugh wins,’ drawled his Grace. ‘My compliments, Davenant.’ He shifted his position slightly, so that he faced Saint-Vire. ‘Pray how is Madame, your charming wife, dear Comte?’

‘Madame is well, I thank you, m’sieur.’

‘And the Vicomte, your so enchanting son?’

‘Also.’

‘Not here to-night, I think?’ Avon raised his glass, and through it surveyed the room. ‘I am desolated. No doubt you deem him too young for these delights? He is but nineteen, I believe?’

Saint-Vire laid his cards face downwards on the table, and looked angrily up at that handsome, enigmatic countenance.

‘You are most interested in my son, M. le Duc!’

The hazel eyes widened and narrowed again.

‘But how could it be otherwise?’ asked the Duke politely.

Saint-Vire picked up his cards again.

‘He is at Versailles, with his mother,’ he said curtly. ‘My play, Lavoulère?’

Three

Which tells of a Debt Unpaid

When Davenant returned to the house in the Rue St-Honoré, he found that although Léon had long since come in, and was now in bed, his Grace was still out. Guessing that Avon had gone from Vassaud's to visit his latest light o' love, Hugh went into the library to await him. Soon the Duke sauntered in, poured himself out a glass of canary wine, and came to the fire.

'A most instructive evening. I hope my very dear friend Saint-Vire recovered from the sorrow my early departure must have occasioned him?'

'I think so,' smiled Hugh. He rested his head back against the cushions of his chair, and looked at the Duke with rather a puzzled expression on his face. 'Why do you so hate one another, Justin?'

The straight brows rose.

'Hate? I? My dear Hugh!'

'Very well, if you like it better I will say why does Saint-Vire hate you?'

'It is a very old tale, Hugh; almost a forgotten tale. The – er – *contretemps* between the amiable Comte and myself took place in the days before I had the advantage of possessing your friendship, you see.'

'So there was a *contretemps*? I suppose you behaved abominably?'

‘What I admire in you, my dear, is your charming candour,’ remarked his Grace. ‘But in this instance I did not behave abominably. Amazing, is it not?’

‘What happened?’

‘Very little. It was really quite trivial. So trivial that nearly every one has forgotten it.’

‘It was a woman, of course?’

‘Even so. No less a personage than the present Duchesse de Belcour.’

‘Duchesse de Belcour?’ Hugh sat upright in surprise. ‘Saint-Vire’s sister. That red-haired shrew?’

‘Yes, that red-haired shrew. As far as I remember, I admired her – er – shrewishness – twenty years ago. She was really very lovely.’

‘Twenty years ago! So long! Justin, surely you did not –’

‘I wanted to wed her,’ said Avon pensively. ‘Being young and foolish. It seems incredible now; yet so it was. I applied for permission to woo her – yes, is it not amusing? – to her worthy father.’ He paused, looking into the fire. ‘I was – let me see! Twenty – a little more; I forget. My father and her father had not been the best of friends. Again a woman; I believe my sire won the encounter. I suppose it rankled. And on my side there were, even at that age, my dear, some trifling intrigues.’ His shoulders shook. ‘There always are – in my family. The old Comte refused to give me leave to woo his daughter. Not altogether surprising, you think? No, I did not elope with her. Instead I received a visit from Saint-Vire. He was then Vicomte de Valmé. That visit was almost humiliating.’ The lines about Justin’s mouth were grim. ‘Al-most hu-miliating.’

‘For you?’

Avon smiled.

‘For me. The noble Henri came to my lodging with a large and heavy whip.’ He looked down as Hugh gasped, and the smile grew. ‘No, my dear, I was not thrashed. To resume: Henri was enraged; there was a something between us, maybe a woman – I forget. He was very much enraged. It should afford

me some consolation, that. I had dared to raise my profligate eyes to the daughter of that most austere family of Saint-Vire. Have you ever noticed the austerity? It lies in the fact that the Saint-Vire amours are carried on in secrecy. Mine, as you know, are quite open. You perceive the nice distinction? *Bon!*' Avon had seated himself on the arm of a chair, legs crossed. He started to twirl his wine glass, holding the narrow stem between thumb and finger. 'My licentious – I quote his very words, Hugh – behaviour; my entire lack of morals; my soiled reputation; my vicious mind; my – but I forget the rest. It was epic – all these made my perfectly honourable proposal an insult. I was to understand that I was as the dirt beneath the Saint-Vire feet. There was much more, but at length the noble Henri came to his peroration. For my impudence I was to receive a thrashing at his hands. *I! Alastair of Avon!*'

'But Justin, he must have been mad! It was not as though you were low-born! The Alastairs –'

'Precisely. He was mad. These red-haired people, my dear Hugh! And there was something between us. No doubt I had at some time or other behaved abominably to him. There followed, as you may imagine, a short argument. It did not take me long to come to my peroration. In short, I had the pleasure of cutting his face open with his own whip. Out came his sword.' Avon stretched out his arm, and the muscles rippled beneath the satin of his coat sleeve. 'I was young, but I knew a little of the art of the duello, even in those days. I pinked him so well that he had to be carried home in my coach, by my lackeys. When he had departed I gave myself up to thought. You see, my dear, I was, or fancied that I was, very much in love with that – er – red-haired shrew. The noble Henri had told me that his sister had deemed herself insulted by my court. It occurred to me that perhaps the lady had mistaken my suit for a casual intrigue. I visited the Hôtel Saint-Vire to make known mine intentions. I was received not by her father, but by the noble Henri, reclining upon a couch. There were also some friends of his. I forget. Before them, before his lackeys, he informed me that he stood

in – er – *loco parentis*, and that his sister’s hand was denied me. Further that if I so much as dared to accost her his servants would whip me from her presence.’

‘Good God!’ cried Hugh.

‘So I thought. I retired. What would you? I could not touch the man; I had wellnigh killed him already. When next I appeared in public I found that my visit to the Hôtel Saint-Vire had become the talk of Paris. I was compelled to leave France for a time. Happily another scandal arose which cast mine into the shade, so Paris was once more open to me. It is an old, old story, Hugh, but I have not forgotten.’

‘And he?’

‘He has not forgotten either. He was half mad at the time, but he would not apologise when he came to his senses; I don’t think I expected him to do so. We meet now as distant acquaintances; we are polite – oh, scrupulously! – but he knows that I am still waiting.’

‘Waiting . . .?’

Justin walked to the table and set down his glass.

‘For an opportunity to pay that debt in full,’ he said softly.

‘Vengeance?’ Hugh leaned forward. ‘I thought you disliked melodrama, my friend?’

‘I do; but I have a veritable passion for – justice.’

‘You’ve nourished thoughts of – vengeance – for twenty years?’

‘My dear Hugh, if you imagine that the lust for vengeance has been my dominating emotion for twenty years, permit me to correct the illusion.’

‘Has it not grown cold?’ Hugh asked, disregarding.

‘Very cold, my dear, but none the less dangerous.’

‘And all this time not one opportunity has presented itself?’

‘You see, I wish it to be thorough,’ apologised the Duke.

‘Are you nearer success now than you were – twenty years ago?’

A soundless laugh shook Justin.

‘We shall see. Rest assured that when it comes it will be – so!’

Very slowly he clenched his hand on his snuff-box, and opened his fingers to show the thin gold crushed.

Hugh gave a little shiver.

‘My God, Justin, do you know just how vile you can be?’

‘Naturally: Do they not call me – Satanus?’ The mocking smile came; the eyes glittered.

‘I hope to heaven Saint-Vire never puts himself in your power! It seems they were right who named you Satanus!’

‘Quite right, my poor Hugh.’

‘Does Saint-Vire’s brother know?’

‘Armand? No one knows save you, and I, and Saint-Vire. Armand may guess, of course.’

‘And yet you and he are friends!’

‘Oh, Armand’s hatred for the noble Henri is more violent than ever mine could be.’

In spite of himself Hugh smiled.

‘It is a race betwixt you, then?’

‘Not a whit. I should have said that Armand’s is a sullen detestation. Unlike me, he is content to hate.’

‘He, I suppose, would sell his soul for Saint-Vire’s shoes.’

‘And Saint-Vire,’ said Avon gently, ‘would sell his soul to keep those shoes from Armand.’

‘Yes, one knows that. It was common gossip at the time that that was his reason for marrying. One could not accuse him of loving his wife!’

‘No,’ said Justin, and chuckled as though at some secret thought.

‘Well,’ Hugh went on, ‘Armand’s hopes of the title were very surely dashed when Madame presented Saint-Vire with a son!’

‘Precisely,’ said Justin.

‘A triumph for Saint-Vire, that!’

‘A triumph indeed,’ suavely agreed his Grace.

Four

His Grace of Avon Becomes Further Acquainted with his Page

For Léon the days passed swiftly, each one teeming with some new excitement. Never in his life had he seen such sights as now met his eyes. He was dazzled by the new life spread before him; from living in a humble, dirty tavern, he was transported suddenly into gorgeous surroundings, fed with strange foods, clad in fine clothes, and taken into the midst of aristocratic Paris. All at once life seemed to consist of silks and diamonds, bright lights, and awe-inspiring figures. Ladies, whose fingers were covered with rings, and whose costly brocades held an elusive perfume, would stop to smile at him sometimes; great gentlemen with powdered wigs and high heels would flip his head with careless fingers as they passed. Even Monseigneur sometimes spoke to him.

Fashionable Paris grew accustomed to see him long before he became accustomed to his new existence. After a while people ceased to stare at him when he came in Avon's wake, but it was some time before he ceased to gaze on all that met his eyes, in wondering appreciation.

To the amazement of Avon's household, he still persisted in his worship of the Duke. Nothing could shake him from his standpoint, and if one of the lackeys vented his outraged feelings