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The Duke's Motto A Melodrama

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THE DUKE'S MOTTO

A MELODRAMA

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

AUTHOR OF

"SERAPHICA" "IF I WERE KING" "THE PROUD PRINCE"

ETC. ETC.



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MCMVIII

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DÉDICACE

A VICTORIEN SARDOU

MAÎTRE,

Voilà un mélodrame que j'ai fait, le dernier de plusieurs mélodrames anglais qui ont Lagardère pour héros. Des mots remplacent l'action, des mots remplacent le décor, les costumes, et les accessoires; mais enfin ce pastiche n'est qu'une pièce et non un roman. Je l'ai fait pour Lewis Waller, acteur romantique s'il en fut, et grandement doué des qualités qui appartiennent par tradition à Lagardère. J'ai su, il y a longtemps, grâce à M. Jules Claretie, que vous étiez le vrai createur de ce paladin, Lagardère, pair de d'Artagnan, pair de Cyrano, pair presque de Roland et d'Olivier. Et si je ne l'avais pas su, j'aurais pu l'apprendre dernièrement en lisant ce livre aussi plein de charme que d'érudition, "Les Anciens Théâtres de Paris" de M. Georges Cain. Mais je crois que cette vérité est connue de peu de monde dans les pays où se parle la langue anglaise, que quand on loue "Le Bossu" de Féval on doit aussi louer "Le Bossu" de Sardou.

XIV-I.-MCMVIII.

I

THE SEVEN DEVILS

It was very warm in the inn room, but it was so much warmer outside, in the waning flames of the late September evening, that the dark room seemed veritably cool to those who escaped into its shelter from the fading sunlight outside. A window was open to let in what little air was stirring, and from that window a spectator with a good head might look down a sheer drop of more than thirty feet into the moat of the Castle of Caylus. The Inn of the Seven Devils was perched on the lip of one rock, and Caylus Castle on the lip of another. Between the two lay the gorge, which had been partially utilized to form the moat of the castle, and which continued its way towards the Spanish mountains. Beyond the castle a bridge spanned the ravine, carrying on the road towards the frontier. The moat itself was dry now, for war and Caylus had long been disassociated, and France was, for the moment, at peace with her neighbor, if at peace with few other powers. A young thirteenth Louis, a son of the great fourth Henri, now sat upon the throne of France, and seemingly believed himself to be the ruler of his kingdom, though a newly made Cardinal de Richelieu held a different opinion, and acted according to his conviction with great pertinacity and skill.

Inside the Inn of the Seven Devils, on this heavy day of early autumn, seven men were sitting. It was an odd chance, and the men had joked about it heavily — there was one man for each devil of the Inn's name. Six of these men were grouped about a table furnished with flagons and beakers, and were doing their best to alleviate the external heat by copious draughts of the rough but not unkindly native wine which Martine, the plain-faced maid of the Inn, dispensed generously enough from a ruddy earthenware pitcher. A stranger entering the room would, at the first glance, have taken the six men seated around the table for soldiers, for all were stalwart fellows, with broad bodies and long limbs, bronzed faces and swaggering carriage, and behind them where they sat six great rapiers dangled from nails in the wall, rapiers which the revellers had removed from their sides for their greater ease and comfort. But if the supposititious stranger were led to study the men a little more

closely, he would be tempted to correct his first impression. The swaggering carriage of the men lacked something of the stiffness inevitably to be associated with military training in the days when the levies of the Sun-King were held, or at least held themselves to be, the finest troops in Europe, a cheerful opinion which no amount of military misfortune could dissipate.

Each of the drinkers of the inn had his own individuality of swagger, his truculent independence of mien, which suggested a man by no means habitually used either to receive commands or to render unquestioning obedience. Each of the men resembled his fellows in a certain flamboyant air of ferocity, but no one of them resembled the others by wearing that air of harmonious training with other men which links together a company of seasoned soldiers. With their long cloaks and their large hats and their high boots, with their somewhat shabby garments stained with age and sweat and wine, in many places patched and in many places tattered, with their tangled locks and ragged mustachios, the revellers had on closer study more the appearance of brigands, or at least of guerillas, than of regular troops. As a matter of fact, they were neither soldiers nor brigands, though their way of life endowed them with some of the virtues of the soldier and most of the vices of the brigand.

There was not a man in that room who lacked courage of the fiercest kind; there was but one man in the room with intelligence enough to appreciate the possibility of an existence uncoupled with the possession of courage of the fiercest kind. There was not a man in the room who had the slightest fear of death, save in so far as death meant the cessation of those privileges of eating grossly, drinking grossly, and loving grossly, which every man of the jack-rascals prized not a little. There was not a man in the room that was not prepared to serve the person, whoever he might be, who had bought his sword to strike and his body to be stricken, so long as the buyer and the bought had agreed upon the price, and so long as the man who carried the sword felt confident that the man who dandled the purse meant to meet his bargain.

These were the soldierly virtues. But, further, there was not a man in the room who would have felt the smallest compunction in cut-

ting any man's throat if he had full pockets, or shaming any woman's honor if she had good looks. These were their brigand's vices. Fearless in their conduct, filthy in their lives, the assembled rogues were as ugly a bunch of brutalities as ever sprawled in a brothel, brawled in a tavern, or crawled from some dark corner to cut down their unsuspecting prey.

The six fellows that sat around the wine-stained, knife-notched table of the Inn of the Seven Devils had little in them to interest a serious student of humanity, if such a one had chanced, for his misfortune, to find his way to that wicked wine-house on that wicked evening. There were differences of nationality among the half-dozen; that was plain enough from their features and from their speech, for though they all talked, or thought they talked, in French, each man did his speaking with an accent that betrayed his nativity. As the babbling voices rose and fell in alternations of argument that was almost quarrel, narrative that was sometimes diverting, and ribaldry that was never wit, it would seem as if the ruffianism of half Europe had called a conference in that squalid, horrible little inn. Guttural German notes mixed whimsically with sibilant Spanish and flowing Portuguese. Cracked Biscayan—which no Spaniard will allow to be Spanish—jarred upon the suavity of Italian accents, and through the din the heavy steadiness of a Breton voice could be heard asserting itself. Though every man spoke in French, for the purposes of the common parliament, each man swore in his own tongue; and they all swore briskly and crisply, with a seemingly inexhaustible vocabulary of blasphemy and obscenity, so that the foul air of that inn parlor was rendered fouler still by the volley of oaths—German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Biscayan, and Breton—that were fired into its steaming, stinking atmosphere. So much for the six men that sat at the table.

The seventh man in the room, although he was of the same fellowship, was curiously unlike his fellows. While the others were burly, well-set-up fellows, who held their heads high enough and thrust out their chests valiantly and sprawled their strong limbs at ease, the seventh man was a hunchback, short of stature and slender of figure, with a countenance whose quiet malignity contrasted decisively with the patent brutality of his comrades. The difference between the one and the others was accentuated even in dress, for,

while the swashbucklers at the table loved to bedizen themselves with an amount of ferocious finery, and showed in their sordid garments a quantity of color that likened them to a bunch of faded wild flowers, the hunchback was clad soberly in black that was well-worn, indeed, and grizzled at the seams, but neatly attended. He sat in the window, reading intently in a little volume, and, again unlike his associates, while he read he nursed between his knees a long and formidable rapier. Those at the table paid him no heed; most of them knew his ways, and he, on his side, seemed to be quite undisturbed in his studies by the noise and clamor of the drinking-party, and to be entirely absorbed in the delights of literature.

But if the hunchback student was quite content to let his companions be, and to find his pleasures in scholarship of a kind, it came about that one of his companions, in a misguided moment, found himself less content to leave the hunchback student undisturbed. It was the one of the company that knew least about him—Pinto the Biscayan, newest recruit in that huddle of ruffians, and therefore the less inclined than his fellows to let a sleeping dog lie. He had been drinking deeply, for your Biscayans are potent toppers, and in the course of his cups he discovered that it irritated him to see that quiet, silent figure perched there in the window with its wry body as still as if it had been snipped out of cardboard, with its comical long nose poked over a book, with its colorless puckered lips moving, as if the reader muttered to himself the meaning of what he read, and tasted an unclean pleasure in so doing. So Pinto pulled himself to his feet, steadied himself with the aid of the table edge, and then, with a noiseless dexterity that showed the practised assassin, whose talent it is to pad in shadows, he crossed the room and came up behind the hunchback before the hunchback was, or seemed to be, aware of his neighborhood.

"What are you reading?" he hiccoughed. "Let us have a peep at it." And before the hunchback could make an answer Pinto had picked the book quickly from the hunchback's fingers and held it to his own face to see what it told about.

Now it would have profited Biscayan Pinto very little if he had been given time to study the volume, at least so far as its text was concerned, for the little book was a manuscript copy of the *Luxuri-*

ous *Sonnets* of that Pietro Aretino whom men, or rather some men, once called "The Divine." The book was illustrated as well, not unskilfully, with sketches that professed to be illuminative of the text in the manner of Giulio Romano. These might have pleased the Biscayan, for if he had no Italian, and could, therefore, make nothing of the voluptuousness of the Scourge of Princes, he could, at least, see as well as another savage the meaning of a lewd image. But the privilege was denied him. Scarcely had he got the book in his fingers when it was plucked from them again, and thereafter, while with his left hand the hunchback slipped the booklet into the breast of his doublet, with his right hand he dealt Pinto such a buffet on the side of his head as sent him reeling across the floor, to bring up with a dull thud at the table against the backs of his nearest companions.

Instantly all was tumult. Pinto, black with anger, screamed Biscayan maledictions and struggled to get at his sword where it hung against the wall, while his comrades, clinging to him and impeding him, were trying in every variety of bad French to dissuade him from a purpose which they were well enough aware must needs end disastrously for him. For they all knew, what the raw Biscayan did not know, how strong was the arm and how terrible the sword of the hunchback whose studies Pinto had so rudely and so foolishly interrupted. As for the hunchback himself, he stood quietly by his chair, with his hands resting on the pommel of his rapier, and a disagreeable smile twisting new hints of malignity into features that were malign enough in repose. Now it may be that the sight of that frightful smile had its effect in cooling the hot blood of the Biscayan, for, indeed, the hunchback, as he stood there, so quietly alert, so demoniacally watchful, seemed the most terrible antagonist he had ever challenged. At least, in a little while the Biscayan, drinking in swiftly the warnings of his companions, consented to be pacified, consented even to be apologetic on a whispered hint, that was also a whispered threat, from his leader, that there should be no brawling among friends.

"It was only a joke, comrade," he said, sullenly, and flung himself heavily into his empty seat. The hunchback nodded grimly.

"I like a joke as well as any man," he said, "and can make one myself if occasion serve."

Therewith he seated himself anew, and, pulling the book from his bosom, resumed his reading and his silent mouthing, while something of a gloom brooded over his fellows at the table. It was to dissipate this gloom that presently the man who sat at the head of the table, a bald and red-faced fellow who looked a German, and who seemed to exercise some kind of headship over the others, pushed back his chair a little from the board and glanced half anxiously and half angrily towards the inn door. Then he thumped his red fist upon the wood till the flagons clattered and rattled.

"Why don't the late dogs come to heel?" he grumbled, speaking with a strong Teutonic accent. "It is long past the hour, and I like punctuality."

A Spaniard at his right hand, swarthy, not ill-looking, whom his friends called Pepe el Matador, grinned into the German's face.

"Will not this string of swords serve the turn?" he said, and pointed with a dirty, well-shaped hand to the six long rapiers that hung against the wall behind them.

The Italian, Faenza, began to laugh a little, quiet, teasing laugh; the sullen Biscayan, Pinto, patted el Matador on the back; Joel de Jurgan the Breton, stared stolidly; and Saldagno the Portuguese, refreshed himself with a drink. Encouraged by what he conceived to be the sympathy of his comrades, Pepe renewed the attack. "Come, Staupitz, come," he questioned, "are not those swords long enough and sharp enough to scare the devil?"

Staupitz struck the table again. "No, no, my children," he said, "not for this job. Monsieur Peyrolles told me to bring nine of my babies, and nine we must be, and nine we should be at this moment if our truants were at hand."

At this moment Saldagno set down his beaker. "I hear footsteps," he said. In the momentary silence which followed this remark, all present could hear distinctly enough the tramp of feet outside, and in another instant the door was flung open and the two men whom Staupitz had been expecting so impatiently made their appearance.

If the contrast had been marked between the six men who sat at the table and the seventh man who sat apart, the contrast that existed between the two new-comers was still more striking. The first to enter was a big, jovial, red-faced, black-haired man with a huge mustache and a manner that suggested an ebullient admiration of himself and an ebullient appreciation of all possible pleasures. He was habited much like his predecessors, in that he was booted, cloaked, hatted, and sworded as they were booted, cloaked, hatted, and sworded, but everything with him, owing, it may be, to his flagrant Gascon nationality, tended to an extravagance of exaggeration that made him seem almost like a caricature of the others. His hat was bigger, his cloak more voluminous, his boots more assertive, his sword longer, his taste for colors at once more pronounced and more gaudy. If the others might be likened in their coloring to faded wild flowers, this man seemed to blaze like some monstrous exotic. He was a swashbuckler whom Callot would have loved to paint.

While he entered the room with his air of splendid assurance that suggested that the Inn belonged to him, and greeted those that awaited him with such a nod as a monarch might accord to his vassals, he was followed by one that showed in almost every particular his opposite. This one, that represented an extreme of Norman character as his ally represented an extreme of Gascon character, this one that seemed to shelter timidly behind the effulgence of his companion, was a lean, lanky, pallid fellow, clad wholly in black of a rustier and shabbier kind than that worn by the reader in the window. From beneath his dingy black felt hat thin wisps of flaxen hair flowed ridiculously enough about his scraggy neck. While his Gascon comrade entered the room with the manner of one who carries all before him, the Norman seemed to creep, or rather to slink, in with lack-lustre eyes peering apologetically about him through lowered pink eyelids, while his twitching fingers appeared to protest apologetically for his intrusion into a society so far above his deserts. But if in almost every particular he was the opposite to his friend, in one particular, however, he resembled him, for a long rapier hung from his side and slapped against his lean calves.

In a further regard, moreover, the two new-comers, however different they might seem in build of body and in habit of apparel,

resembled each other more closely than they resembled any of the earlier occupants of the Inn room. There are castes in rascality as in all other trades, classes, professions, and mysteries, honorable or dishonorable, and this latest pair of knaves belonged patently to the more amiable caste of ruffianism—a higher or a lower caste, as you may be pleased to look at it. In the bold eyes of the gaudily clad Gascon, as in the uneasy eyes of the sable-coated Norman, there was a quality of candor which might be sought for in vain among the rogues that greeted them. Certainly neither the Gascon nor the Norman would have seemed reassuring figures to a timid traveller on a lonely road, and yet there was, as it were, a kind of gentility in their composition which would have been obvious to a reader of men, and would have approved them as, in their way and of their race, trustworthy. Here, the reader of men would say, are a brace of assassins who hold a sort of honor in their hearts, who would never skulk in a corner to stab an enemy in the back, nor wrong a wretched woman who plainly was unwilling to be wronged—a brace of heroes. And the reader of men would for once in a way, have been in the right.

II

THE THRUST OF NEVERS

At the sight of the two men, the ruffians at the table set up a roar of welcome and bumped their mugs lustily upon the board to a chorus of greeting, in which the names of Cocardasse and Passepoil were repeated in a variety of accents from German to Italian, from Portuguese to Biscayan, from Spanish to Breton, but in all cases with the same degree of enthusiasm and admiration. The big, gaudy fellow, patently pleased by the tribute, struck a magnificent attitude and extended a benedictory hand towards the drinkers. "Courage, chanticleers!" he shouted — "comrades all," and, advancing towards the table, gave Staupitz a lusty slap on the back, while Passepoil, following nervously behind him, whispered beneath his breath and behind his lifted hand a timid "Greeting, gentlemen," which was hardly audible in the buzz of voices. But while Cocardasse was busy engaging clasps of the hand with the men of many nationalities who had been waiting for him, the attention of Passepoil was entirely diverted by the appearance of the Inn maid, Martine, who at that moment appeared upon the scene with a fresh pitcher of wine in honor of the fresh arrivals. The lean and pale man blushed and sighed as he saw her. Those in the room that knew the Norman were well aware that love of woman was his weakness, and they paid no heed to his attempted philandering, taking it, so far as they thought of it at all, as a matter of course and honest Passepoil's way.

Though Martine was as little comely as need be, she was still a woman, and a woman Passepoil had never seen before, and, sidling towards her, he endeavored to enter into amicable conversation, which was received but indifferently well. By this time Cocardasse had finished his greetings, and, drawing back a step or two, surveyed the company with a look of satisfaction not unmingled with astonishment.

"Why, Papa Staupitz," he said, "here we have many friends and all fine blades. This is indeed a pleasure party." His eyes travelled from the table to the window, where the man in black still sat and read quite unconcernedly. Something like surprise puckered Cocardasse's rubicund face. "You here, Æsop?" he questioned.

The man whom he called Æsop looked up for a moment from his book and shrugged his shoulders. "Devil knows why!" he said. "If they want me, they don't want the others. If they want the others, they don't want me."

His remarks were interrupted by a slight scuffle between Passepoil and Martine. Passepoil had so far conquered his natural timidity as to go to the length of soliciting a kiss from the Inn maid. She had successfully repulsed him with a slap on each of his cheeks, and had slipped from the room. While Passepoil was rubbing his face ruefully, Æsop went on, sardonically:

"What do you think of it, friend Cocardasse? Here we are, nine of us, nine picked swordsmen, and we are going to fight one man."

Cocardasse had returned to the table and filled himself a monstrous measure of wine. He was thirsty, an habitual state with him, and he eyed the rough wine lovingly.

"Who is the giant who is going to fight nine of us?" he asked as he lifted his cup from the board.

Passepoil, who, enjoying like his comrade an abiding drought, had followed his example, hoping to find consolation in wine for the disappointments of love, also expressed his surprise.

"Every man of us can fight three men at a time," he whispered, timidly, and he, too, lifted his glass.

"Who is the man, anyhow?" said Cocardasse, cheerfully, making the wine swing in the vessel; and Staupitz answered him, slowly:

"Louis, Duke of Nevers."

The effect of this simple speech upon the new-comers was exceedingly remarkable. Cocardasse seemed suddenly to forget his thirst, for he set down his untasted mug upon the table. Passepoil did the like. "Oh!" said Cocardasse, solemnly. "Ah!" said Passepoil, gloomily.

For a few appreciable seconds of strained excitement to those that watched them the pair remained rigid, staring at their rejected wine-cups, as if the liquor they contained had some monstrous Medusa-like property of stiffening into stone all those that presumed to drink of it. Then the Gascon, slowly turning his head, gazed stead-

fastly at the Norman; and the Norman, slowly turning his head, gazed steadfastly at the Gascon, and then the pair, so gazing, both wagged their polls very solemnly indeed, and puckered their eyebrows and betrayed many other very visible signs of dissatisfaction, not to say of discomfort. Then Cocardasse muttered to his comrade the words "Louis de Nevers," as if they were not at all to his liking, and Passepoil, in his turn, repeated the words, as if they were not at all to his liking, and then they both sighed and grunted and were silent.

The look of stupefaction, not to say consternation, on the faces of the new arrivals was patent to every man in the room — most patent and most unpalatable to the leader of the gang. Staupitz thrust his red, Teutonic face forward with a mocking look and a mocking voice as he grunted: "Seems to me you don't relish the job."

Cocardasse nodded at him with perfect affability, and patted his shoulder with a massive, red hand. "Papa Staupitz," he said, good-humoredly, "you read me like a book."

"In the largest print," added Passepoil, who generally supplemented any remark of his comrade with some approving comment of his own.

Staupitz swung round in his chair, upsetting a tankard in his angry movement, as he glared, all rage, at the strangely assorted pair. "Are you afraid?" he asked, with guttural contempt.

Cocardasse grinned and showed his large, dog-like teeth. "I am not afraid of you, Papa Staupitz," he said, quite cheerfully, "nor of any man in this room, nor of all the men in this room."

Passepoil added, stammering in his speech, blinking his pink eyelids rapidly: "If any gentleman doubts the point, there is a pleasant bit of kitchen garden outside where we can adjourn and argue the matter pleasantly together, as gentlemen should."

Nobody present seemed inclined to pick a quarrel either with the ebullient Gascon or the hesitating Norman. The six bullies at the table knew well enough, and savage, masterful Æsop at the window knew well enough, that the swaggering Gascon was the first fencing-master in Paris, and that his colleague, the Norman, for all his air of ineffable timidity, was only second to him in skill with the

weapon and readiness to use it. There was a moment's silence, and then Cocardasse observed: "I'm afraid of just two men in the world."

"The same with me," added Passepoil, humbly.

Cocardasse resumed his interrupted speech: "And one of them is Louis de Nevers."

Staupitz's puzzled, angry face travelled round the room, ranging over the Gascon, the Norman, the Spaniard, the Portuguese, the Biscayan, the Breton, and the hunchback. "Thunder and weather!" he cried; "is not nine to one good enough odds for you?"

The others, with the exception of Æsop, who still seemed to read as peacefully in his book as if he were alone in the room, appeared inclined to applaud the question of their chief, but Cocardasse was not in the least impressed by the retort. He replied to Staupitz's query with another – "Have you never heard of the secret thrust of Nevers?"

A new silence seemed to fall upon the company, and for the second time since the Gascon and the Norman had entered the room the hunchback took a part in the conversation, closing his book as he did so, but carefully keeping a finger between the pages to mark the place. "I don't believe in secret thrusts," he said, decisively.

The Gascon moved a little away from Staupitz and a little nearer to Æsop, whom he looked at fixedly. The hunchback sustained his gaze with his habitual air of cold indifference. Cocardasse spoke: "You will, if you ever face Louis de Nevers. Now, Passepoil, here, and I, we are, I believe, held in general repute as pretty good swordsmen –"

Passepoil interrupted, stuttering furiously in his excitement: "But he touched us with that secret thrust in our own school in Paris –"

Cocardasse completed his friend's statement: "Three times, here on the forehead, just between the eyes."

Passepoil labored his point: "Devil take us if we could find a parry for it."

Cocardasse summed up his argument, gloomily: "They say it has never been parried, never will be parried."