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# **The Justice of the King**

Hamilton Drummond

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THE JUSTICE OF THE KING

by

HAMILTON DRUMMOND

Author of

"The King's Scapegoat," "Room Five,"

"The Houses," "Shoes of Gold," Etc.

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# THE JUSTICE OF THE KING

## CHAPTER I

### THE DESPATCH

All morning the King had been restless, unappeasable, captious, with little relapses unto the immobility of deep thought, and those who knew him best were probing deeply both their conscience and their conduct. Had he sat aloof, quiet in the sunshine, his dogs sleeping at his feet, his eyes half closed, his hands, waxen, almost transparent, and bird's claws for thinness, spread out to the heat, those about him would have gone their rounds with a light heart. At such times his schemes were thoughts afar off, dreams of some new, subtle stroke of policy, and none within touch had cause to fear.

But this May day he was restless, unsettled, his mind so full of an active purpose shortly to be fulfilled that he could not keep his tired body quiet for long, but every few minutes shifted his position or his place. If he sat in his great chair, padded with down to ease his weakness and the aching of his bones, his fingers were constantly plucking at his laces, or playing with the tags which fastened the fur-lined scarlet cloak he wore for a double purpose, to comfort the coldness of his meagre body, and that the death-like pallor of his face might be touched by its gay brightness to a reflected, fictitious glow of health. But to remain seated for any length of time jarred with his mood. Pushing himself to his feet he would walk the length of the gallery and back again, leaning heavily upon his stick, only to sink once more into his chair and fumble anew with shaking hands at whatever loose end or edge lay nearest.

So it had been all morning, but the restlessness had redoubled within the last half-hour. It was then that a post had reached Valmy, no man knew from whence, nor had the messenger been asked any questions. The superscription on the despatch was a warning against the vice of curiosity. It was in the King's familiar handwrit-

ing, bold and angular, and ran, "To His Majesty the King of France, At his Château of Valmy, These in great haste." A "Louis" in large letters was sprawled across the lower corner of the cover.

But though none asked questions it was noted that the horse was fresher than the man, and that whereas the one was streaming in a lather of sweat which had neither set nor dried, the other was splashed, caked, and powdered with mud and dust to the eyebrows: therefore the wise in such matters deduced that short relays had been provided, but that the rider had only halted long enough to climb from saddle to saddle. In silence he handed his letter to the Captain of the Guard, together with the King's signet, and in silence he rode away; but whereas he came at a gallop he rode away at a slow walk: therefore the wise further deduced that his task was ended.

With the King in residence not even the Captain of the Guard could move freely through Valmy, but the signet answered all challenges. Every door, every stair-head was double-sentried, but except for these silent figures the rooms and passages were alike empty. Loitering for gossip was not encouraged at Valmy, and least of all in the block which held the King's lodgings. Only in the outer gallery, where the King took the air with the pointed windows open to the south for warmth, was there any suggestion of a court. Here, at the entrance, and remote from the King alone at the further end, Saint-Pierre and Leslie were in attendance. Pausing to show the ring for the last time Lessaix unbuckled his sword, handed it in silence to Saint-Pierre, and passed on. In Valmy suspicion never slept, never opened its heart in faith to loyalty, and not even the Captain of the Guard might approach the King armed.

While he was still some yards distant Louis, gnawing his under lip as he watched him, suddenly flung out one hand, the palm outward, the fingers spread, and Lessaix halted.

"Well?" He spoke curtly, harshly, as a man speaks whose temper is worn to breaking-point.

"A despatch, sire."

"From whom?"

"There is nothing to show — —"

"From whom?"

"I do not know, sire."

"Have you no tongue to ask?"

"I asked nothing, sire."

"Um; hold it up." Leaning forward Louis bridged his dim eyes with his hand, and under the shadow Lessaix saw the thin mouth open and shut convulsively; but when the hand was lowered the King's face was expressionless. "What else?"

"Your Majesty's signet."

"Let me see! Let me see! Um; that will do. Put them on the table and go. Where is the messenger?"

"He left at once."

"Um; were the roads bad from Paris?"

"He did not say, sire; he never opened his lips."

"Silent, was he? Then there is one wise man in France. Thank you, Captain Lessaix."

With a salute Lessaix retired, but as he buckled on his sword again Saint-Pierre whispered, "Whence?"

"I don't know," replied Lessaix, also under his breath, "but not from Paris!"

Left alone Louis sat back in his chair, his thin lips mumbling nervously at his nails, his eyes fixed on his own handwriting: the ring, a passport to life or death, he had at once slipped upon his finger. Every moment he knew he was watched, every action weighed, and he was a little uncertain how far a judicious self-betrayal would further his purpose. His handwriting would tell them nothing but that he knew the writer of the letter, whence it came, and that it was important. To heighten the importance but conceal the cause seemed wise. Of course presently he must take some one into his confidence, and from the depth of his soul he regretted the necessity.

That was the curse of kingship—the brain which planned, reconciling discordant elements, must rely for execution on hands it could not always control. Yes, that was the vice of government, and the reason why so many well-devised, smoothly-launched schemes utterly miscarried. If the brain could only be the hands also! If the hands could only reach out from where the brain pondered and foresaw! But they could not, and so he must trust Commines. Trust Commines! A little gust of anger at his impotence shook him and he shivered, dashing his hands upon the table; it was never safe to trust any one—never! But he was helpless, there was no escape, and in turn Commines must trust one other: trust him with execution, that is, with blind performance, not with knowledge. Beyond Commines he would trust no man with knowledge, at least not as yet, nor Commines more than he must. Later it might be policy to let it be known publicly the great danger which had threatened him, and France through him, but not till all was over!

Till all was over! Again Louis shivered a little, but not this time with anger. The phrase was a euphemism for death, and he hated the word even when wrapped up in a euphemism and applied to another. Death was death, disguise it in what phrase one might; a horror, a terror, another vice of kings worse than the first. It said in plain words, "You can sow, but you may never reap; you can begin, but you may never finish. Some one else will reap: some one else will finish." Some one else! The thought was intolerable. He hated, he loathed the some one else as he hated and loathed death. With a sweep of his arm, as if he thrust some bodily presence from him, Louis leaned forward and caught up the despatch. Let him make an end to brooding, here was work to be done.

Having closely examined the seals securing the back to make certain they were intact, he ripped apart the threads which bound it round and round passing through the seals, and drew out the enclosure. It was a single sheet of stiff paper. This he unfolded, and spreading it flat upon the table bent over it eagerly. But before he could have read three lines he sank back in his chair with a cry, and so fierce was his face that Saint-Pierre and Leslie, at the end of the gallery, instinctively drew apart, each suspicious of the other. The King's wrath was like lightning, swift to fall, and where it fell there was the danger of sudden destruction to those near.

So he sat for a full minute, his brows drawn, his thin lips narrowed to a line, his head sunk between his shoulders, then with a sigh audible to the length of the gallery he again bent above the paper, resting his weight on both arms, as if utterly weary both in body and spirit.

This time the pause was while he might have read the page slowly twice over, weighing its sense word by word, and when at length he raised his head all passion had gone from him; he was a sorrowful old man, weary and worn and grey.

"Commines!" he said harshly, "send me Commines," and sat back, the paper crumpled lengthwise in his hand.

But he did not sit for long. Rising, he paced up the gallery, his head bent, his iron-shod stick striking the flags with a clang as he leaned upon it at every second step, the crumpled paper still caught in his hand. At the door he paused, looking up sideways.

"Commines? Where is Commines? Head of God! is there no one to bring me Commines?"

"We have sent for him, sire."

"Sent for him? Why is he not here when I need him? I am the worse-served king in Christendom. No one takes thought, no one cares, no one — — Who is on guard? Leslie? Ah! Leslie cares, with Leslie I am safe: yes, yes, with Leslie I am safe," and once more he turned away, the iron ringing from the pavement as before. Suspicion breeds suspicion, and it would never do to vex Leslie's blunt loyalty with any seeming distrust. Besides, it was true, he could trust Leslie. It was not the same trust as he had in Commines; Leslie would watch over him, would guard him at all costs, but Commines would obey and ask no questions.

Three times he had walked the length of the gallery, always with growing impatience, and three times turned before he heard the sound of whispering at the door, and the ring of rapid feet followed him. But he gave no sign, and went on his way as if he had heard nothing. He recognized the footfall, but preferred that Commines should reach him as remotely from the door as possible.

"Sire!"

"Ah!" Louis turned with a start. "You have come at last! At last! There was a time I was served better. But let that pass. Philip, I have had letters."

"Yes, sire, I know: Lessaix told me."

"You know, and Lessaix told you! You watch me—spy on me, do you?"

"Sire, it is my business to know everything which touches— —"

"Yes! and what more do you know? Where did the post come from, you, whose business it is to know everything?"

"Lessaix thought from Paris."

"From Paris," and Louis raised his voice so that the affirmation in it might be clearly heard at the further end of the gallery. Then he turned to the silent group at the doorway, watchful to seize upon any clue to the King's mystery which might guide their feet clear of the pitfalls besetting Valmy.

"Let all men go from me but my friend Argenton," he said, with a wave of the hand which still held the paper crumpled in the grasp. "Let the guard remain beyond the door, but let no man enter till I give leave. Paris! Let them think Paris," he went on, lowering his voice, "but from you, Philip, I have no secrets. We are old friends, too old friends to have secrets one from the other, eh, Philip, eh? Give me your arm that I may lean upon it, for I grow tired. It is the heat, not that I am ill or weaker; the heat, the heat, and I grow tired. And yet I must walk: I cannot rest; no, not for a moment; this—this horror has unstrung me."

## CHAPTER II

### A LESSON IN OBEDIENCE

Passing his clenched hand through the crook of Commines' arm, and leaning heavily on the stick in the other hand, Louis turned slowly up the gallery, and for a time both were silent. They made a strange contrast. The King was shrunken, bowed, and bent, a veritable walking skeleton to whom the grave already imperiously beckoned nor would take long denial. With his bony head, his listless face, his lean, long neck thrust out from the fur of his upturned collar, he resembled a giant bird of prey. The skinny hand thrust through the crook of Commines' arm, and still grasping the crumpled despatch, was the claw of a vulture. Above him, head and shoulders, towered Commines, square-set, burly, muscular, and as full of life and vigour as his master was sapless. Just midway to the threescore years and ten, his bodily powers were at their highest, and in the ten years he had served Louis his mind had ripened so that few men were more astute, more shrewd to see and seize upon advantages, whether for himself or his master. In the King's service few scruples troubled him, the questionable act was Louis', his part was to obey.

"Then, sire, the post was not from Paris?"

"From Amboise," answered Louis, with sudden incisive vigour, his voice rasping harshly. "From Amboise, where the ungrateful son of a miserable father plots and plots and plots: and you, whose business it is to know everything, know nothing."

"The Dauphin? and plotting against you? But, sire, it is impossible. The Dauphin is barely thirteen years of age."

"The pity of it, Argenton, oh! the pity of it." As he spoke one who did not know him as Commines knew him would have sworn that tears were very near the dull, dry eyes. "No more than thirteen—no, not thirteen, and yet—ah! the pity of it."

"Oh, sire, some one has deceived you. The Dauphin is too young to plot, even if affection and common nature — —"

"Too young?" broke in Louis, halting in his slow walk to strike the pavement angrily with his stick. "At what age does a serpent grow fangs? Too young? Ill weeds grow apace, and then there may be those about him who egg him on, who sow wrong ideas in his mind that they may reap some gain to themselves. All are not as faithful as thou art, Philip. I have not always been merciful — not always. At times justice has rejoiced against mercy for the general good; yes, for the general good. There was Molembrais; men blame me for Molembrais; but if the King's arm be not strong enough to strike, who shall hold the kingdom in its place? And because the King's hand pulls down and raises up as God wills" — he paused, and bowed with a little gesture of his hand to his cap — "there are those who do not love me. But if they egg on, those others who should be loyal to their King and are not, if they suggest, it is my son — my son, Argenton — who is the very heart and centre; my son, who out of his little twelve years raises his hand against my threescore."

"If he has done that," began Commines, picking his words slowly (he had not as yet fathomed Louis' purpose, and feared lest he should commit himself in too great haste to the wrong policy), "if the Dauphin has truly so forgotten natural love and duty — —"

"If!" With a snarl which showed his gapped and yellow teeth Louis again straightened himself, and as he raised his head beyond the reflected glow of the scarlet cloak his face was grey with passion. "If? If? Head of God, man! do you dare talk to me in 'ifs'? Philip de Commines, when you were little in your own eyes, when you were the humble fetcher and carrier to that Bully of Burgundy whom I crushed, when you were the very hound and cur of his pleasure, fawning on him for the scraps of life, I took you up, I! — I! Now you are Lord of Argenton, now you are Seneschal of Poitou, now you are Prince of Talmont, and I have made you all these, I! — I! and you answer me with an 'if'! But the hand which raised you up can drag down, you who answer me with an 'if.' The hand which drew from the mud can fling into the ditch, you who answer me with an 'if.' And, by God! I'll do it! An 'if'? We say 'ifs' to fools. Was I a fool to turn the lickshoe of Charles the Bully into the Prince of Talmont?"

Was I a fool to grope in the mud for a Seneschal of Poitou? Am I a fool now — I, who have held the strings of all Europe in my hand for thirty years, and loosed or ravelled them as suited the greatness of France? God be my witness, all has been for the greatness of France! France comes first, always first. And now, when I say my son plots against me, that twelve-year boy who is of an age to be king, am I a fool and liar? Does this lie? Answer me, Argenton, does this lie?" And wrenching his hand free from Commines he shook the paper passionately above his head.

So sudden and so fierce was the attack, so full of bitter venom and raw rage, so brutally naked and perilous in its threat, that Commines fairly quailed. The florid ruddiness of his fleshy face faded to a pallor more cadaverous than the unhealthy grey of Louis' sunken cheeks as he remembered Molembrais. At the door stood the guards with crossed pikes, beyond these were Leslie and Saint-Pierre, watchful and alert. He was loved little better than his master, and he knew it. Let the King speak and there would be no hesitancy, little pity. In his rapid rise he had kicked many rivals from the ladder of Court favour, and climbed yet higher by trampling them underfoot, caring little what gulf of disgrace or worse swallowed them. And the King's threat was no idle boast; the hand which had raised could drag down, not only to irremediable disaster, but to the very grave itself. A hand? A beckoning finger to those who waited at the door would be enough, and Commines trembled.

"Sire, sire," he cried, his arms raised in protest and supplication, "how have I offended you? In what have I been ungrateful? I meant no more but that it seemed impossible a son could turn against so good, so great a father. That — that — staggered me for the moment. It beggared reason; it — it — but let me read the despatch for myself, sire. Not for belief, but for comprehension, and that we may meet the blow together, that we may turn it aside — may turn it back on — on — the hand that strikes."

"Aye!" said Louis drily, "that is more like the Commines of old, the Commines who served his master without an 'if.' And that is a good phrase of yours — turn back the blow on the hand that strikes! When that is done, and the time comes for reward, I will not forget that it was your phrase. And it was for that I sent for you: I knew

my friend Commynes would find a way to—to—guard his master effectually."

Before Louis ended all the harshness had gone from his voice, and it became marvellously gentle, marvellously kindly, almost caressing. A master student of the subtle trifles which unconsciously influence great events, he played upon men's minds as a skilled musician on his instrument, and they obeyed the touch. Nor was Philip de Commynes, opportunist, political adventurer, philosopher, soldier of fortune, diplomatist, exempt from the influence of that skilful mastery. As he had gloomed so now he gladdened: he squared his shoulders to his fullest height, filling his lungs with a deeper inspiration, and the colour ran back to his cheeks in flood. Nor was it all in pride; there was relief, and the lifting up of a burden which for one terrible moment had threatened to crush him to the earth itself.

But the life which gave its strength to the hand which lifted and dragged down was frail almost to extinction, and remembering that one day the Dauphin must step into Louis' place Commynes ventured to temporize.

"Yes, sire, but to turn back the blow I must know who aims the blow, whence it comes, where it will strike, and when. To fight in the dark is to waste strength. Have I your leave to read the despatch from Amboise?"

"Eh?" With the gesture of a natural impulse Louis held out the paper, then drew it back. "We will wait a little. I am tired, very tired. This shock has unnerved me. Let me sit down, Philip, and rest."

Slowly, with an arm on Commynes' shoulder, he turned and, sinking into the chair, leaned forward upon the table in an attitude of utter weariness, his hand still resting upon the despatch. So there was a pause for a moment, Commynes standing to one side, silent and ill at ease. Then with a sigh, which was almost a groan, Louis roused himself. Reaching out his hand he raised to his lips a little silver image of Saint Denis, one of a group which filled a corner of the table, some standing upright, some pitched upon their faces without regard to reverence or respect. Kissing it fervently he again sighed, his eyes raised to the groined roof, and shook his head sadly. If Saint Denis did not whisper inspiration he at least spun out the

time for thought. Commines' request was reasonable, and he was at a loss how plausibly to evade it.

"Have I your leave, sire?"

"Eh?" Down came the King's hand upon the paper, Saint Denis grasped, baton-fashion, by the feet. "No, Philip, no, I think not. It is in confidence, and above all things a king must respect confidence, or how could he be trusted?" A sentence which sounded strange from the lips of a man who never kept a treaty he could break to his own advantage, or, to give him his due, to the advantage of France.

"That I can understand," answered Commines, as gravely as if his master's tortuous road to the consolidation of the kingdom had not been strewn with ruptured contracts, unscrupulous chicanery, and solemn pledges brazenly evaded. "But how am I to act? How can I, in the dark, parry a blow from the dark?"

"Suspect every one," answered Louis, brushing aside Saint Denis as he turned sharply in his chair. The saint had served his turn. He had been invoked in a perplexity, and now that the way was clear, no doubt in answer to the invocation, he was flung aside without ceremony. "Suspect every one. To suspect all you meet is the first great rule of prudence, wisdom, success; and to suspect your own self is the second. Go to Amboise. Remember there is no if, and sift, search, find, but especially find."

"Find what, sire?"

For answer Louis clutched the paper yet tighter and shook it in the air, and if Commines could but have guessed it, there was a double meaning in the action and the words which accompanied it.

"Find this!"

"And having found?" Commines paused, conscious that the ground was treacherous under his feet. "Sire, remember he is the Dauphin and the son of France."



## CHAPTER III

### FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE

With a quick gesture, the arm thrust out, the hand open, the fingers spread, Louis shrank back, his other arm across his face. It was a movement eloquent of pathos, despair, and suffering; then, with another sigh, he straightened himself, his corpse-like face pinched with care.

"The son of France!" he repeated. "Yes! the son of France! but, Philip, my friend, my one friend, must the father perish for the son?"

"Oh, sire, sire," cried Commines, deeply moved, both by the words and the appeal in the voice. "Never that. And it is true—you are France, France itself as no King ever has been; France in its strength, France in its hope, and God knows what evil will befall— —" He checked himself sharply as a spasm twisted the King's sunken mouth. Carried away by his sympathy he had forgotten that it was an almost unforgivable offence to hint that Louis was not immortal. For him the word death was wiped from the language. If the dread shadow took form to strike, those near might say "Speak little," or "Confess," but nothing more.

But for once the offence passed without rebuke; it was even seized upon to point a moral, and nerving himself to face the thought the King completed the sentence.

"God knows what evil will befall France in a boy's hands! And within a year he will be of age; of age and yet a child. A puppet king of France!" Louis paused, drawing in his breath with a shudder like a man chilled to the marrow. "A puppet, a puppet, and in the hands of a puppet what must the end be? Ah! France! France! France! It is disaster, unless it can be turned aside. Philip, you must go to Amboise. Take with you some one you can trust, if in all Valmy there is such an one!"

"There is, sire; one I can trust as my King can trust me."

"Yes, yes, but not overmuch; do not trust him overmuch. Remember what I said—suspect, suspect."

"I am not afraid, sire, Stephen La Mothe owes everything to me."

"Gratitude? Is that any reason for faithfulness? Piff!" And the King blew out his thin lips in contempt. "To bind men to you, Commynes, to bind them so that you may sleep easy o' nights, you must hold them either by the fear of to-day or the hope of to-morrow. Gratitude! Thanks for eaten bread! How many are there who owe me everything, and yet have turned against me. But let that pass; may God and the Saints forgive them as I do." Louis paused, and a sardonic smile flickered for an instant across his face. If God and the Saints had no more forgiveness for his enemies than he had, then their prospects in the life to come were as miserable as Louis would have made the remnant of their days in this present world if they but fell into his power. "And this La Mothe," he went on, "there is no need to tell him all we know. To tell all you know is to lose your advantage. And why should he be faithful? Why does he owe you everything?"

"I promised his sister—it was years ago— —"

"A woman? Um, I do not like women. The ways of men I can follow, but the ways of women are beyond me. Seven devils were cast out of one, but not from the rest, and so there is no understanding them. No, I do not like women."

"Sire, she is long dead."

"Yes? That makes it safer, but I do not see that it is any reason for trusting the brother. Take him with you to Amboise if you think he is safe, but remember"—and the King's lean hand was shaken suddenly upward almost in Commynes' face, a threat as well as a warning—"I hold you responsible, you, you, you only. Let him be with you, but not of you; let him enter Amboise apart from you, and let him work out of sight like a mole, obeying orders without knowing why he obeys. Then if he fails, or blunders, or is fool enough to be caught spying, you can disown him, can wash your hands of him,