

The Notch on the Ax: A Story a la Mode

William Makepeace Thackeray

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I

Every one remembers in the Fourth Book of the immortal poem of your Blind Bard (to whose sightless orbs no doubt Glorious Shapes were apparent, and Visions Celestial), how Adam discourses to Eve of the Bright Visitors who hovered round their Eden—

'Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth,
Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep.'

"'How often,' says Father Adam, 'from the steep of echoing hill or thicket, have we heard celestial voices to the midnight air, sole, or responsive to each other's notes, singing!' After the Act of Disobedience, when the erring pair from Eden took their solitary way, and went forth to toil and trouble on common earth—though the Glorious Ones no longer were visible, you cannot say they were gone. It was not that the Bright Ones were absent, but that the dim eyes of rebel man no longer could see them. In your chamber hangs a picture of one whom you never knew, but whom you have long held in tenderest regard, and who was painted for you by a friend of mine, the Knight of Plympton. She communes with you. She smiles on you. When your spirits are low, her bright eyes shine on you and cheer you. Her innocent sweet smile is a caress to you. She never fails to soothe you with her speechless prattle. You love her. She is alive with you. As you extinguish your candle and turn to sleep, though your eyes see her not, is she not there still smiling? As you lie in the night awake, and thinking of your duties, and the morrow's inevitable toil oppressing the busy, weary, wakeful brain as with a remorse, the crackling fire flashes up for a moment in the grate, and she is there, your little Beauteous Maiden, smiling with her sweet eyes! When moon is down, when fire is out, when curtains are drawn, when lids are closed, is she not there, the little Beautiful One, though invisible, present and smiling still? Friend, the Unseen Ones are round about us. Does it not seem as if the time were drawing near when it shall be given to men to behold them?"

The print of which my friend spoke, and which, indeed, hangs in my room, though he has never been there, is that charming little winter piece of Sir Joshua, representing the little Lady Caroline Montague, afterwards Duchess of Buccleuch. She is represented as standing in the midst of a winter landscape, wrapped in muff and cloak; and she looks out of her picture with a smile so exquisite that a Herod could not see her without being charmed.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. PINTO," I said to the person with whom I was conversing. (I wonder, by the way, that I was not surprised at his knowing how fond I am of this print.) "You spoke of the Knight of Plympton. Sir Joshua died 1792: and you say he was your dear friend?"

As I spoke I chanced to look at Mr. Pinto; and then it suddenly struck me: Gracious powers! Perhaps you ARE a hundred years old, now I think of it. You look more than a hundred. Yes, you may be a thousand years old for what I know. Your teeth are false. One eye is evidently false. Can I say that the other is not? If a man's age may be calculated by the rings round his eyes, this man may be as old as Methuselah. He has no beard. He wears a large curly glossy brown wig, and his eyebrows are painted a deep olive-green. It was odd to hear this man, this walking mummy, talking sentiment, in these queer old chambers in Shepherd's Inn.

Pinto passed a yellow bandanna handkerchief over his awful white teeth, and kept his glass eye steadily fixed on me. "Sir Joshua's friend?" said he (you perceive, eluding my direct question). "Is not everyone that knows his pictures Reynolds's friend? Suppose I tell you that I have been in his painting room scores of times, and that his sister The has made me tea, and his sister Toffy has made coffee for me? You will only say I am an old ombog." (Mr. Pinto, I remarked, spoke all languages with an accent equally foreign.) "Suppose I tell you that I knew Mr. Sam Johnson, and did not like him? that I was at that very ball at Madame Cornelis', which you have mentioned in one of your little—what do you call them?—bah! my memory begins to fail me—in one of your little Whirligig Papers? Suppose I tell you that Sir Joshua has been here, in this very room?"

"Have you, then, had these apartments for—more—than—seventy years?" I asked.

"They look as if they had not been swept for that time—don't they? Hey? I did not say that I had them for seventy years, but that Sir Joshua has visited me here."

"When?" I asked, eying the man sternly, for I began to think he was an impostor.

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He answered me with a glance still more stern: "Sir Joshua Reynolds was here this very morning, with Angelica Kaufmann and Mr. Oliver Goldschmidt. He is still very much attached to Angelica, who still does not care for him. Because he is dead (and I was in the fourth mourning coach at his funeral) is that any reason why he should not come back to earth again? My good sir, you are laughing at me. He has sat many a time on that very chair which you are now occupying. There are several spirits in the room now, whom you cannot see. Excuse me." Here he turned round as if he was addressing somebody, and began rapidly speaking a language unknown to me. "It is Arabic," he said; "a bad patois, I own. I learned it in Barbary, when I was a prisoner among the Moors. In anno 1609, bin ick aldus ghekledt gheghaen. Ha! you doubt me: look at me well. At least I am like—"

Perhaps some of my readers remember a paper of which the figure of a man carrying a barrel formed the initial letter, and which I copied from an old spoon now in my possession. As I looked at Mr. Pinto I do declare he looked so like the figure on that old piece of plate that I started and felt very uneasy. "Ha!" said he, laughing through his false teeth (I declare they were false—I could see utterly toothless gums working up and down behind the pink coral), "you see I wore a beard den; I am shafed now; perhaps you tink I am A SPOON. Ha, ha!" And as he laughed he gave a cough which I thought would have coughed his teeth out, his glass eye out, his wig off, his very head off; but he stopped this convulsion by stumping across the room and seizing a little bottle of bright pink medicine, which, being opened, spread a singular acrid aromatic odor through the apartment; and I thought I saw—but of this I cannot take an affirmation—a light green and violet flame flickering round the neck of the vial as he opened it. By the way, from the peculiar stumping noise which he made in crossing the bare-boarded apartment, I knew at once that my strange entertainer had a wooden leg. Over the dust which lay quite thick on the boards, you could see the mark of one foot very neat and pretty, and then a round O, which was naturally the impression made by the wooden stump. I own I had a queer thrill as I saw that mark, and felt a secret comfort that it was not CLOVEN.

In this desolate apartment in which Mr. Pinto had invited me to see him, there were three chairs, one bottomless, a little table on which you might put a breakfast tray, and not a single other article of furniture. In the next room, the door of which was open, I could see a magnificent gilt dressing case, with some splendid diamond and ruby shirt studs lying by it, and a chest of drawers, and a cupboard apparently full of clothes.

Remembering him in Baden-Baden in great magnificence I wondered at his present denuded state. "You have a house elsewhere, Mr. Pinto?" I said.

"Many," says he. "I have apartments in many cities. I lock dem up, and do not carry mosh logish."

I then remembered that his apartment at Baden, where I first met him, was bare, and had no bed in it.

"There is, then, a sleeping room beyond?"

"This is the sleeping room." (He pronounces it DIS. Can this, by the way, give any clew to the nationality of this singular man?)

"If you sleep on these two old chairs you have a rickety couch; if on the floor, a dusty one."

"Suppose I sleep up dere?" said this strange man, and he actually pointed up to the ceiling. I thought him mad or what he himself called "an ombog." "I know. You do not believe me; for why should I deceive you? I came but to propose a matter of business to you. I told you I could give you the clew to the mystery of the Two Children in Black, whom you met at Baden, and you came to see me. If I told you you would not believe me. What for try and convinz you? Ha hey?" And he shook his hand once, twice, thrice, at me, and glared at me out of his eye in a peculiar way.

Of what happened now I protest I cannot give an accurate account. It seemed to me that there shot a flame from his eye into my brain, while behind his GLASS eye there was a green illumination as if a candle had been lit in it. It seemed to me that from his long fingers two quivering flames issued, sputtering, as it were, which penetrated me, and forced me back into one of the chairs—the broken one—out of which I had much difficulty in scrambling, when the strange glamour was ended. It seemed to me that, when I was so fixed, so transfixed in the broken chair, the man floated up to the ceiling, crossed his legs, folded his arms as if he was lying on a sofa, and grinned down at me. When I came to myself he was down from the ceiling, and, taking me out of the broken cane-bottomed chair, kindly enough—"Bah!" said he, "it is the smell of my medicine. It often gives the vertigo. I thought you would have had a little fit. Come into the open air." And we went down the steps, and into Shepherd's Inn, where the setting sun was just shining on the statue of Shepherd; the laundresses were traipsing about; the porters were leaning against the railings; and the clerks were playing at marbles, to my inexpressible consolation.

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"You said you were going to dine at the 'Gray's-Inn Coffee-House,'" he said. I was. I often dine there. There is excellent wine at the "Gray's-Inn Coffee-House"; but I declare I NEVER SAID so. I was not astonished at his remark; no more astonished than if I was in a dream. Perhaps I WAS in a dream. Is life a dream? Are dreams facts? Is sleeping being really awake? I don't know. I tell you I am puzzled. I have read "The Woman in White," "The Strange Story"—not to mention that story "Stranger than Fiction" in the Cornhill Magazine—that story for which THREE credible witnesses are ready to vouch. I have had messages from the dead; and not only from the dead, but from people who never existed at all. I own I am in a state of much bewilderment: but, if you please, will proceed with my simple, my artless story.

Well, then. We passed from Shepherd's Inn into Holborn, and looked for a while at Woodgate's bric-a-brac shop, which I never can pass without delaying at the windows—indeed, if I were going to be hung, I would beg the cart to stop, and let me have one look more at that delightful omnium gatherum. And passing Woodgate's, we come to Gale's little shop, "No. 47," which is also a favorite haunt of mine.

Mr. Gale happened to be at his door, and as we exchanged salutations, "Mr. Pinto," I said, "will you like to see a real curiosity in this curiosity shop? Step into Mr. Gale's little back room."

In that little back parlor there are Chinese gongs; there are old Saxe and Sevres plates; there is Furstenberg, Carl Theodor, Worcester, Amstel, Nankin and other jimcrockery. And in the corner what do you think there is? There is an actual GUILLOTINE. If you doubt me, go and see—Gale, High Holborn, No. 47. It is a slim instrument, much slighter than those which they make now;—some nine feet high, narrow, a pretty piece of upholstery enough. There is the hook over which the rope used to play which unloosened the dreadful ax above; and look! dropped into the orifice where the head used to go—there is THE AX itself, all rusty, with A GREAT NOTCH IN THE BLADE.

As Pinto looked at it—Mr. Gale was not in the room, I recollect; happening to have been just called out by a customer who offered him three pound fourteen and sixpence for a blue Shepherd in pate tendre,—Mr. Pinto gave a little start, and seemed crisper for a moment. Then he looked steadily toward one of those great porcelain stools which you see in gardens—and—it seemed to me—I tell you I won't take my affidavit—I may have been maddened by the six glasses I took of that pink elixir—I may have been sleep-walking: perhaps am as I write now—I may have been under the influence of that astounding MEDIUM into whose hands I had fallen— but I vow I heard Pinto say, with rather a ghastly grin at the porcelain stool,

"Nay, nefer shague your gory locks at me,

Dou canst not say I did it."

(He pronounced it, by the way, I DIT it, by which I KNOW that Pinto was a German.)

I heard Pinto say those very words, and sitting on the porcelain stool I saw, dimly at first, then with an awful distinctness—a ghost—an EIDOLON—a form—A HEADLESS MAN seated with his head in his lap, which wore an expression of piteous surprise.

At this minute, Mr. Gale entered from the front shop to show a customer some Delft plates; and he did not see—but WE DID—the figure rise up from the porcelain stool, shake its head, which it held in its hand, and which kept its eyes fixed sadly on us, and disappear behind the guillotine.

"Come to the 'Gray's-Inn Coffee-House,'" Pinto said, "and I will tell you how the notch came to the ax." And we walked down Holborn at about thirty-seven minutes past six o'clock.

If there is anything in the above statement which astonishes the reader, I promise him that in the next chapter of this little story he will be astonished still more.

II

"You will excuse me," I said to my companion, "for remarking that when you addressed the individual sitting on the porcelain stool, with his head in his lap, your ordinarily benevolent features"— (this I confess was a bouncer, for between ourselves a more sinister and ill-looking rascal than Mons. P. I have seldom set eyes on)—"your ordinarily handsome face wore an expression that was by no means pleasing. You grinned at the individual just as you did at me when you went up to the cei—, pardon me, as I THOUGHT you did, when I fell down in a fit in your chambers"; and I qualified my words in a great flutter and tremble; I did not care to offend the man—I did not DARE to offend the man. I thought once or twice of jumping into a cab, and flying; of taking refuge in Day and Martin's Blacking Warehouse; of speaking to a policeman, but not one would come. I was this man's slave. I followed him like his dog. I COULD not get away from him. So, you see, I went on meanly conversing with him, and affecting a simpering confidence. I remember, when I was a little boy at school, going up fawning and smiling in this way to some great hulking bully of a sixth-form boy. So I said in a word, "Your ordinarily handsome face wore a disagreeable expression,"

"It is ordinarily VERY handsome," said he, with such a leer at a couple of passers-by, that one of them cried, "Oh, crickey, here's a precious guy!" and a child, in its nurse's arms, screamed itself into convulsions. "Oh, oui, che suis tres-choli garcon, bien peau, cerdainement," continued Mr. Pinto; "but you were right. That— that person was not very well pleased when he saw me. There was no love lost between us, as you say: and the world never knew a more worthless miscreant. I hate him, voyez-vous? I hated him alive; I hate him dead. I hate him man; I hate him ghost: and he know it, and tremble before me. If I see him twenty tausend years hence— and why not?—I shall hate him still. You remarked how he was dressed?"

"In black satin breeches and striped stockings; a white pique waistcoat, a gray coat, with large metal buttons, and his hair in powder. He must have worn a pigtail—only—"

"Only it was CUT OFF! Ha, ha, ha!" Mr. Pinto cried, yelling a laugh, which I observed made the policeman stare very much. "Yes. It was cut off by the same blow which took off the scoundrel's head—ho, ho, ho!" And he made a circle with his hook-nailed finger round his own yellow neck, and grinned with a horrible triumph. "I promise you that fellow was surprised when he found his head in the pannier. Ha! ha! Do you ever cease to hate those whom you hate?"—fire flashed terrifically from his glass eye as he spoke—"or to love dose whom you once loved? Oh, never, never!" And here his natural eye was bedewed with tears. "But here we are at the 'Gray's—Inn CoffeeHouse.' James, what is the joint?"

That very respectful and efficient waiter brought in the bill of fare, and I, for my part, chose boiled leg of pork, and pease pudding, which my acquaintance said would do as well as anything else; though I remarked he only trifled with the pease pudding, and left all the pork on the plate. In fact, he scarcely ate anything. But he drank a prodigious quantity of wine; and I must say that my friend Mr. Hart's port wine is so good that I myself took—well, I should think, I took three glasses. Yes, three, certainly. HE—I mean Mr. P.—the old rogue, was insatiable: for we had to call for a second bottle in no time. When that was gone, my companion wanted another. A little red mounted up to his yellow cheeks as he drank the wine, and he winked at it in a strange manner. "I remember," said he, musing, "when port wine was scarcely drunk in this country—though the Queen liked it, and so did Hurley; but Bolingbroke didn't—he drank Florence and Champagne. Dr. Swift put water to his wine. 'Jonathan,' I once said to him—but bah! autres temps, autres moeurs. Another magnum, James."

This was all very well. "My good sir," I said, "it may suit YOU to order bottles of '20 port, at a guinea a bottle; but that kind of price does not suit me. I only happen to have thirty-four and sixpence in my pocket, of which I want a shilling for the waiter, and eighteen pence for my cab. You rich foreigners and SWELLS may spend what you like" (I had him there: for my friend's dress was as shabby as an old-clothes man's); "but a man with a family, Mr. Whatd'you-call'im, cannot afford to spend seven or eight hundred a year on his dinner alone."

"Bah!" he said. "Nunkey pays for all, as you say. I will what you call stant the dinner, if you are SO POOR!" and again he gave that disagreeable grin, and placed an odious crook-nailed and by no means clean finger to his nose. But I was not so afraid of him now, for we were in a public place; and the three glasses of port wine had, you see, given me courage.

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"What a pretty snuff-box!" he remarked, as I handed him mine, which I am still old-fashioned enough to carry. It is a pretty old gold box enough, but valuable to me especially as a relic of an old, old relative, whom I can just remember as a child, when she was very kind to me. "Yes; a pretty box. I can remember when many ladies—most ladies, carried a box—nay, two boxes—tabatiere and bonbonniere. What lady carries snuff-box now, hey? Suppose your astonishment if a lady in an assembly were to offer you a prise? I can remember a lady with such a box as this, with a tour, as we used to call it then; with paniers, with a tortoise-shell cane, with the prettiest little high-heeled velvet shoes in the world!—ah! that was a time, that was a time! Ah, Eliza, Eliza, I have thee now in my mind's eye! At Bungay on the Waveney, did I not walk with thee, Eliza? Aha, did I not love thee? Did I not walk with thee then? Do I not see thee still?"

This was passing strange. My ancestress—but there is no need to publish her revered name—did indeed live at Bungay St. Mary's, where she lies buried. She used to walk with a tortoise-shell cane. She used to wear little black velvet shoes, with the prettiest high heels in the world.

"Did you—did you—know, then, my great-grandmother?" I said.

He pulled up his coat sleeve—"Is that her name?" he said.

"Eliza—"

There, I declare, was the very name of the kind old creature written in red on his arm.

"YOU knew her old," he said, divining my thoughts (with his strange knack); "I knew her young and lovely. I danced with her at the Bury ball. Did I not, dear, dear Miss ——?"

As I live, he here mentioned dear gr-nny's MAIDEN name. Her maiden name was ——. Her honored married name was ——.

"She married your great-grandfather the year Poseidon won the Newmarket Plate," Mr. Pinto dryly remarked.

Merciful powers! I remember, over the old shagreen knife and spoon case on the sideboard in my gr-nny's parlor, a print by Stubbs of that very horse. My grandsire, in a red coat, and his fair hair flowing over his shoulders, was over the mantelpiece, and Poseidon won the Newmarket Cup in the year 1783!

"Yes; you are right. I danced a minuet with her at Bury that very night, before I lost my poor leg. And I quarreled with your grandf—, ha!"

As he said "Ha!" there came three quiet little taps on the table—it is the middle table in the "Gray's-Inn CoffeeHouse," under the bust of the late Duke of Wellington.

"I fired in the air," he continued; "did I not?" (Tap, tap, tap.) "Your grandfather hit me in the leg. He married three months afterwards. 'Captain Brown,' I said 'who could see Miss Smith without loving her?' She is there! She is there!" (Tap, tap, tap.) "Yes, my first love—"

But here there came tap, tap, which everybody knows means "No."

"I forgot," he said, with a faint blush stealing over his wan features, "she was not my first love. In Germ—in my own country—there WAS a young woman—"

Tap, tap, tap. There was here quite a lively little treble knock; and when the old man said, "But I loved thee better than all the world, Eliza," the affirmative signal was briskly repeated.

And this I declare UPON MY HONOR. There was, I have said, a bottle of port wine before us—I should say a decanter. That decanter was LIFTED UP, and out of it into our respective glasses two bumpers of wine were poured. I appeal to Mr. Hart, the landlord—I appeal to James, the respectful and intelligent waiter, if this statement is not true? And when we had finished that magnum, and I said—for I did not now in the least doubt her presence—"Dear gr-nny, may we have another magnum?" the table DISTINCTLY rapped "No."

"Now, my good sir," Mr. Pinto said, who really began to be affected by the wine, "you understand the interest I have taken in you. I loved Eliza ——" (of course I don't mention family names). "I knew you had that box which belonged to her—I will give you what you like for that box. Name your price at once, and I pay you on the spot."

"Why, when you came out, you said you had not six-pence in your pocket."

"Bah! give you anything you like—fifty—a hundred—a tausend pound."

"Come, come," said I, "the gold of the box may be worth nine guineas, and the facon we will put at six more."

"One tausend guineas!" he screeched. "One tausend and fifty pound dere!" and he sank back in his chair—no, by the way, on his bench, for he was sitting with his back to one of the partitions of the boxes, as I dare say James

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remembers.

"DON'T go on in this way," I continued rather weakly, for I did not know whether I was in a dream. "If you offer me a thousand guineas for this box I MUST take it. Mustn't I, dear gr-nny?"

The table most distinctly said "Yes"; and putting out his claws to seize the box, Mr. Pinto plunged his hooked nose into it, and eagerly inhaled some of my 47 with a dash of Hardman.

"But stay, you old harpy!" I exclaimed, being now in a sort of rage, and quite familiar with him. "Where is the money? Where is the check?"

"James, a piece of note paper and a receipt stamp!"

"This is all mighty well, sir," I said, "but I don't know you; I never saw you before. I will trouble you to hand me that box back again, or give me a check with some known signature."

"Whose? Ha, Ha, HA!"

The room happened to be very dark. Indeed all the waiters were gone to supper, and there were only two gentlemen snoring in their respective boxes. I saw a hand come quivering down from the ceiling—a very pretty hand, on which was a ring with a coronet, with a lion rampant gules for a crest. I saw that hand take a dip of ink and write across the paper. Mr. Pinto, then, taking a gray receipt stamp out of his blue leather pocketbook, fastened it on to the paper by the usual process; and the hand then wrote across the receipt stamp, went across the table and shook hands with Pinto, and then, as if waving him an adieu, vanished in the direction of the ceiling.

There was the paper before me, wet with the ink. There was the pen which THE HAND had used. Does anybody doubt me? I have that pen now,—a cedar stick of a not uncommon sort, and holding one of Gillott's pens. It is in my inkstand now, I tell you. Anybody may see it. The handwriting on the check, for such the document was, was the writing of a female. It ran thus:—"London, midnight, March 31, 1862. Pay the bearer one thousand and fifty pounds. Rachel Sidonia. To Messrs. Sidonia, Pozzosanto and Co., London."

"Noblest and best of women!" said Pinto, kissing the sheet of paper with much reverence. "My good Mr. Roundabout, I suppose you do not question THAT signature?"

Indeed the house of Sidonia, Pozzosanto and Co., is known to be one of the richest in Europe, and as for the Countess Rachel, she was known to be the chief manager of that enormously wealthy establishment. There was only one little difficulty, the Countess Rachel died last October.

I pointed out this circumstance, and tossed over the paper to Pinto with a sneer.

"C'est a brandre ou a laisser," he said with some heat. "You literary men are all imbrudent; but I did not tink you such a fool wie dis. Your box is not worth twenty pound, and I offer you a tausend because I know you want money to pay dat rascal Tom's college bills." (This strange man actually knew that my scapegrace Tom had been a source of great expense and annoyance to me.) "You see money costs me nothing, and you refuse to take it! Once, twice; will you take this check in exchange for your trumpery snuff-box?"

What could I do? My poor granny's legacy was valuable and dear to me, but after all a thousand guineas are not to be had every day. "Be it a bargain," said I. "Shall we have a glass of wine on it?" says Pinto; and to this proposal I also unwillingly acceded, reminding him, by the way, that he had not yet told me the story of the headless man.

"Your poor gr-ndm-ther was right just now, when she said she was not my first love. 'Twas one of those banale expressions" (here Mr. P. blushed once more) "which we use to women. We tell each she is our first passion. They reply with a similar illusory formula. No man is any woman's first love; no woman any man's. We are in love in our nurse's arms, and women coquette with their eyes before their tongue can form a word. How could your lovely relative love me? I was far, far too old for her. I am older than I look. I am so old that you would not believe my age were I to tell you. I have loved many and many a woman before your relative. It has not always been fortunate for them to love me. Ah, Sophronia! Round the dreadful circus where you fell, and whence I was dragged corpselike by the heels, there sat multitudes more savage than the lions which mangled your sweet form! Ah, tenez! when we marched to the terrible stake together at Valladolid—the Protestant and the J— But away with memory! Boy! it was happy for thy grandam that she loved me not.

"During that strange period," he went on, "when the teeming Time was great with the revolution that was speedily to be born, I was on a mission in Paris with my excellent, my maligned friend, Cagliostro. Mesmer was one of our band. I seemed to occupy but an obscure rank in it: though, as you know, in secret societies the humble man may be a chief and director—the ostensible leader but a puppet moved by unseen hands. Never mind who

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was chief, or who was second. Never mind my age. It boots not to tell it: why shall I expose myself to your scornful incredulity—or reply to your questions in words that are familiar to you, but which you cannot understand? Words are symbols of things which you know, or of things which you don't know. If you don't know them, to speak is idle." (Here I confess Mr. P. spoke for exactly thirty-eight minutes, about physics, metaphysics, language, the origin and destiny of man, during which time I was rather bored, and to relieve my ennui, drank a half glass or so of wine.) "LOVE, friend, is the fountain of youth! It may not happen to me once—once in an age: but when I love then I am young. I loved when I was in Paris. Bathilde, Bathilde, I loved thee—ah, how fondly! Wine, I say, more wine! Love is ever young. I was a boy at the little feet of Bathilde de Bechamel—the fair, the fond, the fickle, ah, the false!" The strange old man's agony was here really terrific, and he showed himself much more agitated than when he had been speaking about my gr-ndm-th-r.

"I thought Blanche might love me. I could speak to her in the language of all countries, and tell her the lore of all ages. I could trace the nursery legends which she loved up to their Sanscrit source, and whisper to her the darkling mysteries of the Egyptian Magi. I could chant for her the wild chorus that rang in the disheveled Eleusinian revel: I could tell her and I would, the watchword never known but to one woman, the Saban Queen, which Hiram breathed in the abysmal ear of Solomon—You don't attend. Psha! you have drunk too much wine!" Perhaps I may as well own that I was NOT attending, for he had been carrying on for about fifty-seven minutes; and I don't like a man to have ALL the talk to himself.

"Blanche de Bechamel was wild, then, about this secret of Masonry. In early, early days I loved, I married a girl fair as Blanche, who, too, was tormented by curiosity, who, too, would peep into my closet, into the only secret guarded from her. A dreadful fate befell poor Fatima. An ACCIDENT shortened her life. Poor thing! she had a foolish sister who urged her on. I always told her to beware of Ann. She died. They said her brothers killed me. A gross falsehood. AM I dead? If I were, could I pledge you in this wine?"

"Was your name," I asked, quite bewildered, "was your name, pray, then, ever Blueb——?"

"Hush! the waiter will overhear you. Methought we were speaking of Blanche de Bechamel. I loved her, young man. My pearls, and diamonds, and treasure, my wit, my wisdom, my passion, I flung them all into the child's lap. I was a fool. Was strong Samson not as weak as I? Was Solomon the Wise much better when Balkis wheedled him? I said to the king—But enough of that, I spake of Blanche de Bechamel.

"Curiosity was the poor child's foible. I could see, as I talked to her, that her thoughts were elsewhere (as yours, my friend, have been absent once or twice to-night). To know the secret of Masonry was the wretched child's mad desire. With a thousand wiles, smiles, caresses, she strove to coax it from me—from ME—ha! ha!

"I had an apprentice—the son of a dear friend, who died by my side at Rossbach, when Soubise, with whose army I happened to be, suffered a dreadful defeat for neglecting my advice. The Young Chevalier Goby de Mouchy was glad enough to serve as my clerk, and help in some chemical experiments in which I was engaged with my friend Dr. Mesmer. Bathilde saw this young man. Since women were, has it not been their business to smile and deceive, to fondle and lure? Away! From the very first it has been so!" And as my companion spoke, he looked as wicked as the serpent that coiled round the tree, and hissed a poisoned counsel to the first woman.

"One evening I went, as was my wont, to see Blanche. She was radiant: she was wild with spirits: a saucy triumph blazed in her blue eyes. She talked, she rattled in her childish way. She uttered, in the course of her rhapsody, a hint—an intimation—so terrible that the truth flashed across me in a moment. Did I ask her? She would lie to me. But I knew how to make falsehood impossible. And I ordered her to go to sleep."

At this moment the clock (after its previous convulsions) sounded TWELVE. And as the new Editor* of the Cornhill Magazine—and HE, I promise you, won't stand any nonsense—will only allow seven pages, I am obliged to leave off at THE VERY MOST INTERESTING POINT OF THE STORY.

* Mr. Thackeray retired from the Editorship of the Cornhill Magazine in March, 1862

III

"Are you of our fraternity? I see you are not. The secret which Mademoiselle de Bechamel confided to me in her mad triumph and wild hoyden spirits—she was but a child, poor thing, poor thing, scarce fifteen;—but I love them young—a folly not unusual with the old!" (Here Mr. Pinto thrust his knuckles into his hollow eyes; and, I am sorry to say, so little regardful was he of personal cleanliness, that his tears made streaks of white over his gnarled dark hands.) "Ah, at fifteen, poor child, thy fate was terrible! Go to! It is not good to love me, friend. They prosper not who do. I divine you. You need not say what you are thinking—"

In truth, I was thinking, if girls fall in love with this fallow, hook-nosed, glass-eyed, wooden-legged, dirty, hideous old man, with the sham teeth, they have a queer taste. THAT is what I was thinking.

"Jack Wilkes said the handsomest man in London had but half an hour's start of him. And, without vanity, I am scarcely uglier than Jack Wilkes. We were members of the same club at Medenham Abbey, Jack and I, and had many a merry night together. Well, sir, I—Mary of Scotland knew me but as a little hunchbacked music master; and yet, and yet, I think she was not indifferent to her David Riz—and SHE came to misfortune. They all do—they all do!"

"Sir, you are wandering from your point!" I said, with some severity. For, really, for this old humbug to hint that he had been the baboon who frightened the club at Medenham, that he had been in the Inquisition at Valladolid—that under the name of D. Riz, as he called it, he had known the lovely Queen of Scots—was a LITTLE too much. "Sir," then I said, "you were speaking about a Miss Bechamel. I really have not time to hear all of your biography."

"Faith, the good wine gets into my head." (I should think so, the old toper! Four bottles all but two glasses.) "To return to poor Blanche. As I sat laughing, joking with her, she let slip a word, a little word, which filled me with dismay. Some one had told her a part of the Secret—the secret which has been divulged scarce thrice in three thousand years—the Secret of the Freemasons. Do you know what happens to those uninitiate who learn that secret? to those wretched men, the initiate who reveal it?"

As Pinto spoke to me, he looked through and through me with his horrible piercing glance, so that I sat quite uneasily on my bench. He continued: "Did I question her awake? I knew she would lie to me. Poor child! I loved her no less because I did not believe a word she said. I loved her blue eye, her golden hair, her delicious voice, that was true in song, though when she spoke, false as Eblis! You are aware that I possess in rather a remarkable degree what we have agreed to call the mesmeric power. I set the unhappy girl to sleep. THEN she was obliged to tell me all. It was as I had surmised. Goby de Mouchy, my wretched, besotted miserable secretary, in his visits to the chateau of the Marquis de Bechamel, who was one of our society, had seen Blanche. I suppose it was because she had been warned that he was worthless, and poor, artful and a coward, she loved him. She wormed out of the besotted wretch the secrets of our Order. 'Did he tell you the NUMBER ONE?' I asked.

"She said, 'Yes.'

"'Did he,' I further inquired, 'tell you the—'

"'Oh, don't ask me, don't ask me!' she said, writhing on the sofa, where she lay in the presence of the Marquis de Bechamel, her most unhappy father. Poor Bechamel, poor Bechamel! How pale he looked as I spoke! 'Did he tell you,' I repeated with a dreadful calm, 'the NUMBER TWO?' She said, 'Yes.'

"The poor old marquis rose up, and clasping his hands, fell on his knees before Count Cagl—— Bah! I went by a different name then. Vat's in a name? Dat vich ye call a Rosicrucian by any other name vil smell as sweet. 'Monsieur,' he said, 'I am old—I am rich. I have five hundred thousand livres of rentes in Picardy. I have half as much in Artois. I have two hundred and eighty thousand on the Grand Livre. I am promised by my Sovereign a dukedom and his orders with a reversion to my heir. I am a Grandee of Spain of the First Class, and Duke of Volomento. Take my titles, my ready money, my life, my honor, everything I have in the world, but don't ask the THIRD QUESTION.'

"'Godfroid de Bouillon, Comte de Bechamel, Grandee of Spain and Prince of Volomento, in our Assembly what was the oath you swore?' The old man writhed as he remembered its terrific purport.

"'Though my heart was racked with agony, and I would have died, aye, cheerfully'" (died, indeed, as if THAT

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were a penalty!) "to spare yonder lovely child a pang, I said to her calmly, 'Blanche de Bechamel, did Goby de Mouchy tell you secret NUMBER THREE?'

"She whispered a oui that was quite faint, faint and small. But her poor father fell in convulsions at her feet.

"She died suddenly that night. Did I not tell you those I love come to no good? When General Bonaparte crossed the Saint Bernard, he saw in the convent an old monk with a white beard, wandering about the corridors, cheerful and rather stout, but mad—mad as a March hare. 'General,' I said to him, 'did you ever see that face before?' He had not. He had not mingled much with the higher classes of our society before the Revolution. I knew the poor old man well enough; he was the last of a noble race, and I loved his child."

"And did she die by—?"

"Man! did I say so? Do I whisper the secrets of the Vehmgericht? I say she died that night: and he—he, the heartless, the villain, the betrayer,—you saw him seated in yonder curiosity shop, by yonder guillotine, with his scoundrelly head in his lap.

"You saw how slight that instrument was? It was one of the first which Guillotin made, and which he showed to private friends in a hangar in the Rue Picpus, where he lived. The invention created some little conversation among scientific men at the time, though I remember a machine in Edinburgh of a very similar construction, two hundred—well, many, many years ago—and at a breakfast which Guillotin gave he showed us the instrument, and much talk arose among us as to whether people suffered under it.

"And now I must tell you what befell the traitor who had caused all this suffering. Did he know that the poor child's death was a SENTENCE? He felt a cowardly satisfaction that with her was gone the secret of his treason. Then he began to doubt. I had MEANS to penetrate all his thoughts, as well as to know his acts. Then he became a slave to a horrible fear. He fled in abject terror to a convent. They still existed in Paris; and behind the walls of Jacobins the wretch thought himself secure. Poor fool! I had but to set one of my somnambulists to sleep. Her spirit went forth and spied the shuddering wretch in his cell. She described the street, the gate, the convent, the very dress which he wore, and which you saw to-day.

"And now THIS is what happened. In his chamber in the Rue St. Honore, at Paris, sat a man ALONE—a man who has been maligned, a man who has been called a knave and charlatan, a man who has been persecuted even to the death, it is said, in Roman Inquisitions, forsooth, and elsewhere. Ha! ha! A man who has a mighty will.

"And looking toward the Jacobins Convent (of which, from his chamber, he could see the spires and trees), this man WILLED. And it was not yet dawn. And he willed; and one who was lying in his cell in the convent of Jacobins, awake and shuddering with terror for a crime which he had committed, fell asleep.

"But though he was asleep his eyes were open.

"And after tossing and writhing, and clinging to the pallet, and saying 'No, I will not go,' he rose up and donned his clothes—a gray coat, a vest of white pique, black satin small-clothes, ribbed silk stockings, and a white stock with a steel buckle; and he arranged his hair, and he tied his queue, all the while being in that strange somnolence which walks, which moves, which FLIES sometimes, which sees, which is indifferent to pain, which OBEYS. And he put on his hat, and he went forth from his cell: and though the dawn was not yet, he trod the corridors as seeing them. And he passed into the cloister, and then into the garden where lie the ancient dead. And he came to the wicket, which Brother Jerome was opening just at the dawning. And the crowd was already waiting with their cans and bowls to receive the alms of the good brethren.

"And he passed through the crowd and went on his way, and the few people then abroad who marked him, said, 'Tiens! How very odd he looks! He looks like a man walking in his sleep!' This was said by various persons:—

"By milk women, with their cans and carts, coming into the town.

"By roysterers who had been drinking at the taverns of the Barrier, for it was Mid-Lent.

"By the sergeants of the watch, who eyed him sternly as he passed near their halberds.

"But he passed on unmoved by their halberds,

"Unmoved by the cries of the roysterers,

"By the market women coming with their milk and eggs.

"He walked through the Rue St. Honore, I say:—

"By the Rue Rambuteau,

"By the Rue St. Antoine,

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"By the King's Chateau of the Bastille,

"By the Faubourg St. Antoine.

"And he came to No. 29 in the Rue Picpus—a house which then stood between a court and garden—

"That is, there was a building of one story, with a great coach door.

"Then there was a court, around which were stables, coach-houses, offices.

"Then there was a house—a two-storied house, with a perron in front.

"Behind the house was a garden—a garden of two hundred and fifty French feet in length.

"And as one hundred feet of France equal one hundred and six feet of England, this garden, my friend, equaled exactly two hundred and sixty-five feet of British measure.

"In the center of the garden was a fountain and a statue—or, to speak more correctly, two statues. One was recumbent,—a man. Over him, saber in hand, stood a Woman.

"The man was Olofernes. The woman was Judith. From the head, from the trunk, the water gushed. It was the taste of the doctor:—was it not a droll of taste?

"At the end of the garden was the doctor's cabinet of study. My faith, a singular cabinet, and singular pictures!—

"Decapitation of Charles Premier at Vitehall.

"Decapitation of Montrose at Edimbourg.

"Decapitation of Cinq Mars. When I tell you that he was a man of taste, charming!

"Through this garden, by these statues, up these stairs, went the pale figure of him who, the porter said, knew the way of the house. He did. Turning neither right nor left, he seemed to walk THROUGH the statues, the obstacles, the flower beds, the stairs, the door, the tables, the chairs.

"In the corner of the room was THAT INSTRUMENT, which Guillotin had just invented and perfected. One day he was to lay his own head under his own ax. Peace be to his name! With him I deal not!

"In a frame of mahogany, neatly worked, was a board with a half circle in it, over which another board fitted. Above was a heavy ax, which fell—you know how. It was held up by a rope, and when this rope was untied, or cut, the steel fell.

"To the story which I now have to relate, you may give credence, or not, as you will. The sleeping man went up to that instrument.

"He laid his head in it, asleep."

"Asleep?"

"He then took a little penknife out of the pocket of his white dimity waistcoat.

"He cut the rope asleep.

"The ax descended on the head of the traitor and villain. The notch in it was made by the steel buckle of his stock, which was cut through.

"A strange legend has got abroad that after the deed was done, the figure rose, took the head from the basket, walked forth through the garden, and by the screaming porters at the gate, and went and laid itself down at the Morgue. But for this I will not vouch. Only of this be sure. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy.' More and more the light peeps through the chinks. Soon, amidst music ravishing, the curtain will rise, and the glorious scene be displayed. Adieu! Remember me. Ha! 'tis dawn," Pinto said. And he was gone.

I am ashamed to say that my first movement was to clutch the check which he had left with me, and which I was determined to present the very moment the bank opened. I know the importance of these things, and that men change their mind sometimes. I sprang through the streets to the great banking house of Manasseh in Duke Street. It seemed to me as if I actually flew as I walked. As the clock struck ten I was at the counter and laid down my check.

The gentleman who received it, who was one of the Hebrew persuasion, as were the other two hundred clerks of the establishment, having looked at the draft with terror in his countenance, then looked at me, then called to himself two of his fellow clerks, and queer it was to see all their aquiline beaks over the paper.

"Come, come!" said I, "don't keep me here all day. Hand me over the money, short, if you please!" for I was, you see, a little alarmed, and so determined to assume some extra bluster.

"Will you have the kindness to step into the parlor to the partners?" the clerk said, and I followed him.

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"What, AGAIN?" shrieked a bald-headed, red-whiskered gentleman, whom I knew to be Mr. Manasseh. "Mr. Salathiel, this is too bad! Leave me with this gentleman, S." And the clerk disappeared.

"Sir," he said, "I know how you came by this: the Count de Pinto gave it you. It is too bad! I honor my parents; I honor THEIR parents; I honor their bills! But this one of grandma's is too bad—it is, upon my word, now! She've been dead these five—and— thirty years. And this last four months she has left her burial place and took to drawing on our 'ouse! It's too bad, grandma; it is too bad!" and he appealed to me, and tears actually trickled down his nose.

"Is it the Countess Sidonia's check or not?" I asked, haughtily.

"But, I tell you, she's dead! It's a shame!—it's a shame!—it is, grandmamma!" and he cried, and wiped his great nose in his yellow pocket handkerchief. "Look year—will you take pounds instead of guineas? She's dead, I tell you! It's no go! Take the pounds— one tausend pound!—ten nice, neat, crisp hundred-pound notes, and go away vid you, do!"

"I will have my bond, sir, or nothing," I said; and I put on an attitude of resolution which I confess surprised even myself.

"Wery veil," he shrieked, with many oaths, "then you shall have noting—ha, ha, ha!—noting but a policeman! Mr. Abednego, call a policeman! Take that, you humbug and impostor!" and here with an abundance of frightful language which I dare not repeat, the wealthy banker abused and defied me.

Au bout du compte, what was I to do, if a banker did not choose to honor a check drawn by his dead grandmother? I began to wish I had my snuff-box back. I began to think I was a fool for changing that little old-fashioned gold for this slip of strange paper.

Meanwhile the banker had passed from his fit of anger to a paroxysm of despair. He seemed to be addressing some person invisible, but in the room: "Look here, ma'am, you've really been coming it too strong. A hundred thousand in six months, and now a thousand more! The 'ouse can't stand it; it WON'T stand it, I say! What? Oh! mercy, mercy!"

As he uttered these words, A HAND fluttered over the table in the air! It was a female hand: that which I had seen the night before. That female hand took a pen from the green baize table, dipped it in a silver inkstand, and wrote on a quarter of a sheet of foolscap on the blotting book, "How about the diamond robbery? If you do not pay, I will tell him where they are."

What diamonds? what robbery? what was this mystery? That will never be ascertained, for the wretched man's demeanor instantly changed. "Certainly, sir;—oh, certainly," he said, forcing a grin. "How will you have the money, sir? All right, Mr. Abednego. This way out."

"I hope I shall often see you again," I said; on which I own poor Manasseh gave a dreadful grin, and shot back into his parlor.

I ran home, clutching the ten delicious, crisp hundred pounds, and the dear little fifty which made up the account. I flew through the streets again. I got to my chambers. I bolted the outer doors. I sank back in my great chair, and slept. . . .

My first thing on waking was to feel for my money. Perdition! Where was I? Ha!—on the table before me was my grandmother's snuff-box, and by its side one of those awful—those admirable— sensation novels, which I had been reading, and which are full of delicious wonder.

But that the guillotine is still to be seen at Mr. Gale's, No. 47, High Holborn, I give you MY HONOR. I suppose I was dreaming about it. I don't know. What is dreaming? What is life? Why shouldn't I sleep on the ceiling?—and am I sitting on it now, or on the floor? I am puzzled. But enough. If the fashion for sensation novels goes on, I tell you I will write one in fifty volumes. For the present, DIXI. But between ourselves, this Pinto, who fought at the Colosseum, who was nearly being roasted by the Inquisition, and sang duets at Holyrood, I am rather sorry to lose him after three little bits of Roundabout Papers. Et vous?