The Ordeal

Rafael Sabatini

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No one could deny that Lady Sutliffe was possessed of at least two devils. Both were devils who make feminine affairs their province, and neither was particularly malign. The first was the mischievous Imp of Coquetry, whose business it is slyly and playfully to clear the way for Satan himself, but who makes as many failures as successes in his undertakings; the second was the Demon of Perversity, one of the younger children of Pride, an insidious little fiend who keeps you amused by his drolleries what time he digs a pit for your destruction.

The first of these demons led her into encouraging the manifest admiration of the elegant and accomplished Mr. Gadsby; the second caused her to plunge further into that dangerous make−believe pastime when Sir George−her husband−remonstrated with her for want of circumspection.

Thus matters stood when one morning as Lady Sutliffe sat before the long mirror in her boudoir, and her maid was brushing from her ladyship's shimmering tresses some remains of last night's powder, Sir George intruded unannounced upon her toilet. He bore a letter in his hand; a frown sat between his brows.

It was in the mirror that her ladyship caught the first glimpse of his tall figure in its caped riding−coat.

“I did not hear you knock, sir,” said she, very pertly, for there was a sort of feud between them on the subject of this Mr. Gadsby.

“I have to speak to you, madam,” said he very quietly, disregarding her implied rebuke. “Will you be so good as to dismiss your maid?”

She regarded his reflection in the long glass wearily.

“Is so much necessary?” she drawled.

He laughed a little scornfully.

“Hardly, i' faith,” said he, “considering the publicity which your affairs have gained already.”

A delicate flush overspread the pretty face; a frown came to mar the smoothness of the perfect brow.

“Leave us, Francoise,” she said. And the French maid went out−to glue her ear to the keyhole.

“The last insult which it remained for you to offer me, you have now offered,” said she, when they were alone. “You have affronted me before my woman.”

Again he ignored her challenge, and came straight to the matter that brought him.

“I regret to reopen the topic,” said he, in deliberate, level tones that were habitual with him, for a more self−contained man than Sir George Sutliffe never lived, “but necessity is again thrust upon me of speaking to you concerning your friend Mr.−Gadfly.”

“I assume,” said she modelling her tones upon his own, “you mean Mr. Gadsby?”

“Oh, Madam,” said he, “I could wish that you had the same care for your own name that you have for his!”

She flushed under the hit, then smiled disdainfully.

“Is this an example of the wit for which, I am told, you cultivate a reputation?”

“Was 'reputation' the word you uttered, ma'am?” quoth he. “It is very timely, for it reminds me that I came to talk to you upon the subject of your own, an echo of which, it seems, has reached to Gloucester.”

She swung round on her seat with a swish of her flowered silken gown.

“What do you mean?” Anger quickened her voice.

“I have here a letter from Gloucester, from a Mrs. Gadsby−the wife, I understand, of this painter friend of yours. She appeals to me to rescue her husband from the wiles of my wife, to whose ways she applies certain epithets taught her, no doubt, by the lewd voice of common rumour. But read the letter for yourself, ma'am. It would be diverting, were it lm pathetic.” And he held out the written sheet.

For a moment she looked into his calm face with its urbane, inscrutable smile. Herself she was a little out of countenance now; a little alarmed at learning the extent of the scandal to which her foolish conduct had given birth. At last, almost with hesitation, she took the letter. In reading it she composed herself, for all that there was a deal to wound her in what was written. Having read it carefully through:

"Why," she protested, "what a poor scrawl of pothooks is this! Is it a letter, did you say? I vow you're very clever to have guessed it. And is it English, or have they a language of their own in Gloucester?" With a pretty pout of regret she offered it to him again. "I protest I can make out no word of it," she ended.

Sir George took the epistle gravely.

"I have written to this lady," he said, "the comforting and reassuring letter that her state of mind appears to require. I have assured her that I profoundly agree with every word that she has written−"

"You have dared!" blazed her ladyship, breaking in upon his deliberate speech. "You have dared put such an affront upon me, to humiliate me by agreeing with such expressions as that creature uses!"

"To what expressions are you referring, madam? Is it possible that the letter was not as illegible to you as you protested?"

"Let us have done with pretence, Sir George! " she clamored angrily.

"With all my heart, ma'am," said he, and laughed.

"Did you write in such terms as you say to this woman?"

"Should I say so if I had not? And I added a promise, in earnest of my respect and sympathy for her, to take the burden of this matter upon my own shoulders. Since Mr. Gadsby's lingering in town appears to be due to the friendship which your ladyship honours him, I undertook to set a term to this friendship, so that here there might be nothing to keep Mr. Gadsby from returning to Gloucester."

He paused, and she rose and stood considering him. Her face was white, her beautiful eyes blazed, her bosom heaved rapidly under its flimsy silken garment. Then, quite suddenly, she sat down again and burst into tears.

"Madam," said he, "I am glad to see you penitent at last."

"Penitent!" she flared, her tears suddenly forgotten under the goad of that word. "Penitent! " she repeated, and swung with a furious swish, to face him anew.

"You have humiliated me as if I were a−a−" An adequate object of comparison failed to suggest itself.

"I think, madam, that you have humiliated yourself." And his grey eyes surveyed her with a wistful calm that was more exasperating than his words. "You have given your name to be the sport of this foul town."

"Leave my room, Sir!" she bade him, am arm outflung dramatically towards the door.

"As soon as you shall have promised me to comply with his wife's wishes and my own concerning Mr. Gadsby."

Her ladyship bit her lip, and considered the pattern of the French carpet, her daintily slippered foot tapping the floor the while.

"I shall promise nothing, sir," she said at length. Her voice was quite deliberate. The Demon of Perversity was in full possession of her now. "You have insulted and humiliated me."

He was the very incarnation of urbane patience.

"You shall promise me," he insisted, with a hint of insistence in his tone, "that you will dance no more Mr. Gadsby, nor saunter in the Ring with him, nor receive him here at your house, either alone or in the presence of others. In short, I desire that from this hour you shall not further pursue the acquaintance of Mr. Gadsby."

"And is that all?" quoth she, trilling, the faintest of ironical laughs.

"That is all," said he. "I will not have you the talk of the town."

She smiled scornfully. "And if I refuse?"

"It will be the worse for Mr. Gadsby."

The smile froze on her lips. She looked at him, and her eyes dilated.

"What do you mean?" And without waiting for an answer−for his meaning, after all, was plain enough−"That were indeed to cover my name with scandal!" she exclaimed.

"My only concern is for my promise to Mrs. Gadsby," he returned. "One way or the other it must be fulfilled. But you need fear no increase of scandal. Your name shall not be dragged into the affair."

He had startled her to some purpose. She advanced towards him in her alarm, flinging scorn and even dignity to the winds.

“You shall not do it, George! You shall not do it!” she cried.

Beholding her so white and scared, hearing the strident note of fear in her voice, Sir George felt a tightening at the throat. Was it for Gadsby that she feared? Was it possible, after all, that her relations with him were not purely foolishness? Hitherto he had attached no importance to the matter beyond resenting an indiscretion of conduct that afforded food to the foul maw of scandal. But was it possible that the thing was serious in itself? Was it possible that she cared for the fellow?

He rose, and set hands upon her shoulders. His keen, grey eyes intently scanned her face for the least sign of what was really in her heart.

“I shall refrain, ma'am, only if you give me the promise I am asking.”

She flung away from him, her anger, rising again at this restraint which he sought to impose upon her. She could not brook it. She resented it bitterly. Stamping her foot, she uttered what was in thoughts.

“You make a child of me!” she said. “I will not be the slave of your caprice!”

“Nor I the butt of yours,” he countered. “Will you promise?”

“No,” she answered, hurling the word at him as if it had been a material thing.

He fell back as from a blow. His lips tightened. Then, without another word, he bowed and left the room.

An hour later, his face placid, his soul in the dread torment of doubt, he lounged into a room at White's, where a considerable company sat at play about a faro−table. All were known to him, and of the company was Gadsby, the man he sought, who since coming to town and success was a rabid gamester.

Sir George put up his quizzing−glass to take a cool and insolent scrutiny of the artist. Gadsby flushed under that discomposing stare.

“Egad!” said the baronet, and he laughed unpleasantly, “you're a confiding company to sit down to faro with that flash cove!” The jerk of gold−rimmed glass towards Gadsby left no doubt as to the person at whom his insult was aimed.

There was a scraping of chairs. Men swung round in speechless amazement to stare at the speaker. Gadsby turning first scarlet, then white to the lips, considered the baronet with furious eyes.

“I'll trouble you, Sir George, to make your meaning clearer,” he said in a quivering voice.

“Is it to be more clear?” demanded Sir George, when he had recovered from his haughtily feigned surprise. “My meaning is that you're the most infamous rook that ever fingered a pack. Is that clear enough?”

“No, sir, it is not−not by half!” roared the other, upon his feet now. He was a handsome, swarthy fellow, with a certain raffishness of air which, whilst stamping him, was not altogether unprepossessing. “You lie, Sir George, and you know it!”

Sir George took snuff delicately. “You cheat, Mr. Gadfly, and you know it.”

“Gadsby's the name.”

“Possibly. But the other suits you better,” said Sir George.

“You'll find a sting in me, by gad!” swore the furious artist.

“'Tis what I am looking for,” said Sir George urbanely. “I shall expect your friends.” He bowed, and passed on, leaving a wild hubbub behind him.

Coming presently upon Lord Spawle, who was among his intimates, Sir George set a hand upon his shoulder.

“Will you act for me in this, Ned?” said he.

“Skewer my vitals!” quoth the lordling, “The fellow's only weapon is a mahlstick.

“I'll fight with mahlsticks, if he can use no others,” said Sir George indifferently.

Being a stranger to all weapons, Mr. Gadsby of course, chose pistols, since these at least offered him a slender advantage of chance. But it was the slenderest, as all the word knew, for Sir George was the deadliest shot in town or out of it: and the town opined that if Mr. Gadsby did not get himself measured for his coffin he was neglecting to provide for the inevitable.

“Poor devil!” sighed Spawle that night to Sir George. “Sink me into Hades, but you're no better than a butcher, Geordie! A Herod upon the slaughter of an innocent! Will you me, at least, that you'll no more than wing him.”

“I am told,” said Sir George, “that the ladies of the town are of the opinion that the fellow has a heart. It is my desire to ascertain the fact for my own satisfaction in the morning.”

His lordship groaned and took his leave, promising to call for his principal at six o'clock upon the following morning.

And scarcely had Spawle left Sir George's dining−room, where they had been sitting than Lady Sutliffe, a satin wrap flung over her night attire, entered by the chamber's other door. Sir George turned at the rustle of her approach.

“Ah, madam!” said he, and bowed. “ I thought you a−bed.”

“I overheard Lord Spawle,” said she, speaking quickly, her voice unsteady. “'Tis not, I trust, Lord Spawle's fault?” he answered. “Such things are not for gentle ears.”

“What he said is true,” she pursued. “You are a butcher, no better−a murderer. 'Tis what all the town will be saying of you tomorrow. You rant to me of my name, and of the scandal attaching to it. What manner of scandal, think you, will attach to yours? I tell you, sir, it will come to stink in the nostrils of all decent men!”

And, shaking from head to foot in her agitation, she sank into the nearest chair.

Again Sir George felt the tightening at his throat at his threat that he had experienced earlier that day when the prospect of his meeting Gadsby had seemed to alarm her. His horrible suspicions received confirmation from her present demeanour. He turned aside, that she might not observe the sudden pallor of his face. He clenched his hands behind him, and took a turn in the room to steady himself and regain his self−control, whilst she sat huddled in the chair, weeping softly, her spirit very bruised.

“Madam,” he said at last, “what you urge is very just.”

She looked up quickly, clutching the chair's edge.

“If I promise−If I promise as you wanted me?” she cried out.

A bitter little smile curled the fine lines of his mouth.

“It is a little late for that, madam,” he said. “You had your opportunity, and you cast it from you. In a few hours now, one way or the other, the promise will no longer be necessary.”

She made a sound in her throat. She put her hand to it gropingly, her eyes staring at him in ever−deepening horror.

“But what you urge is just, as I have said,” he pursued; and, as he spoke, he resumed his pacing. “It is not a duel that lies before me, but an execution; and, after all, it can do my honor little credit that I shall play at Mr. Ketch.”

“Indeed−indeed!” she assented eagerly, her voice a whisper.

“Madam,” he pursued, in the same level tones, which afforded her never a glimpse of the misery within, “I shall amend the terms so that, the chances be more even. We shall draw lots for the first shot, and it shall be permissible to aim. Thus should fortune favour Mr. Gadsby−faith, your lover may be spared you!”

“My lover,” she cried indignantly. “I have no lover!”

He raised his brows.

“I think, madam,” said he, with the delicatest sarcasm, “the observation is a little premature.”

She staggered to her feet, and stood pouring forth intercessions that he should forgo the duel.

“What, madam!” he cried. “Still not content? Why, I vow to gad I am most obliging. 'Tis not every husband would do the like. I pray you be satisfied with the concession that I make, for it is the utmost in my power. The affair is no in my hands.”

She held out her arms to him. She was exorcised by now of both her devils. “George, George,” she cried.

But he stood unresponsive, rendered pitiless by his doubts of her.

She swallowed hard.

“It was over cards you quarreled,” said she, more calmly, informing him how much she had overheard. “You branded him a cheat, knowing that you lied. Could you not admit that it was false? Could you not"−she boggled at the word; then flung it out in despair−"apologise? None would doubt your courage!”

“Apologize?” he echoed, but quite quietly. He smiled. “I commend to you, madam, the study of things within your comprehension.”

And upon that he set a term to their interview by ringing for her maid.

Next morning, in the chaise, he informed Spawle of the altered conditions which the latter was to propose to Gadsby's seconds.

“They'll snatch at it,” said his lordship. “'Tis their only chance of getting their man away alive. But−skewer my vitals!−ye're clean mad, I take it, Geordie!”

“Perhaps,” said Sir George; and he refused further explanation of his motives.

As Lord Spawle opined, so it fell out. Gadsby's seconds, who had been convinced that Gadsby's funeral must inevitably follow, were overjoyed by the proposal.

“Devilish handsome of him, 'pon honour!” pronounced Quentin, the beau, who was attending Gadsby. “Damned chivalrous, egad!”

And so swore Webster, the painter's other second.

After a brief consultation with Gadsby−a consultation which brought a ray of hope into the funereal gloom in which he was plunged−the four seconds went apart. Spawle span a coin; Quentin called, won the toss on behalf of Gadsby, and retired in decently dissembled glee to bear the good news to his principal.

At twenty paces the men took their stand, facing each other. The shortness of the distance, prescribed by Sir George, was a further point in favour of so indifferent a marksman as Gadsby.

The artist braced himself for the effort upon which his life depended. Quentin, with a damnable excess of zeal, had impressed upon him the necessity of hitting Sir George so as either to kill him or to maim him beyond the possibility of returning the fire.

“Remember,” he said at the last moment, “that if you miss him, your a dead man; so don't waste the chance your given!”

Quentin conceived this to be the very words calculated to tune up his principal to the requisite pitch of nerve and accuracy. Their effect was, of course, the very opposite. Realising how much−how very much−depended upon his steadfastness, Gadsby began to tremble. In this condition he faced his opponent, and levelled his pistol to take aim.

And when he found Sir George quite calmly surveying him through his quizzing−glass whilst awaiting the bullet, Gadsby's arm began to shake. A moment it quivered there in its horizontal position, an object of deepest to Sir George; then the hammer fell.

As the artist peered through the lifting wisp of smoke and saw his opponent still in the same position, apparently entirely unmoved, he turned sick and dizzy. The shot had gone wide, and it was now Sir George's turn. Gadsby mastered himself and stiffened perceptibly. For the sake of these gentlemen who stood by him, if not for his own, he must preserve a steady front whilst he received a fire that must bring death!

He watched Sir George's arm come slowly to the horizontal until he could see no more than the nozzle of his pistol across the twenty paces that separated them. Then, on the verge of physical sickness, unable to watch the approach of death, he closed his eyes.

Eternities passed, and still the shot did not come.

It seemed to Gadsby that he stood on that spot for a hundred years, so consciously felt had been every fraction of each of the few seconds that were sped. Then he heard Sir George's voice:

“Ned, will you ask Mr. Quentin if he will give me leave to speak a word with his principal?”

Gadsby looked up, startled, to see that Sir George had lowered his pistol, and he heard Quentin excitedly answering, without awaiting the formality of the words' repetition to him:

“'Tis most irregular, Sir George. 'Pon my honour it is! After you have fired your shot, if you please.”

“My difficulty,” said Sir George, “is that he may no longer be here to listen to me then.”

Quentin turned to Gadsby, and asked the question as he was bidden. Gadsby moistened his dry lips, eagerly to utter the words that should give him this last chance, whatever it might be.

A moment later Sir George was standing before him, his seconds, at the baronet's request, have drawn out of earshot, cursing Sir George's eccentricities.

Unquestionably it was most irregular, but Sir George cared nothing for that. He was in a quandary−tormented by a doubt, confronted by a riddle that he had almost hoped the painter's bullet would have solved. He could not take this man's life in that cold−blooded fashion until he had positive knowledge that the thing he feared was true. After all, it might not be. And all he hoped from life was centered in that.

“Sir,” he said, “I ask your pardon for proceeding so outrageously. But I have terms to propose, to which you may find it possible to accede. The fewest words will serve. You will have heard that I can hit a flying swallow, and you may conceive that if I fire to kill you your death will be as certain as only death itself can be. I am not going to fire to−day,” Sir George continued slowly. “In the agreement into which we have entered there is no stipulation that the second shot be fired within any given time. It is mine to fire when I please and where I please provided that at the time no less than twenty paces separate us.

"Now, sir, whether I ever fire that shot at you or not shall depend upon circumstances. If these circumstances prove favourable to yourself, I shall impose that you leave town this very day, and return to Gloucester; and that before you depart you return with me to King Street to take your conge of Lady Sutliffe. On my side, I undertake to afford you the fullest amends for the affront I put upon you yesterday at White's. I shall publicly declare that the charge I then brought against you was utterly unfound. As your shot has already afforded you all the redress to which you were entitled by the laws of honour, you will perceive that such an admission as this will be extremely generous on my part."

Gadsby, who had been staring at the baronet out of a face that was woefully white, cleared his throat to reply.

"I do not think I apprehend you quite, Sir George," said he.

"I do not think it necessary that you should," was the cool answer. "I have−out of motives which I see no necessity to discose−imposed certain conditions which may (for I do not promise absolutely that they will) save your life. For nothing less, I assure you, hangs in the balance. Reject these conditions, and I step back to my place yonder, and in twenty seconds you will be before your Maker. It is for you to make choice, sir."

Another man in Gadsby's place might have told Sir George to fire and be damned. But Gadsby was of no such fine temper, as Sir George had shrewdly judged. Indeed, the painter had a difficulty in dissembling the eagerness with which he accepted this unexpected chance of life and the terms imposed.

Thus it fell out that a half−hour later Sir George and Mr. Gadsby came together in a chaise to the baronet's handsome house in King Street. Sir George gave his order to a lackey in the hall.

"You will inform her ladyship that Mr. Gadsby is here, and desires to take his leave of her before quitting town. And on your life," be added, too low for Gadsby to overhear, "you will say no word of my presence."

The servant bowed and departed, whilst Sir George ushered his still bewildered guest into the library to wait.

Thither came the lackey presently with a scared face.

"Sir George! Sir George!" he panted. Her−her ladyship is talken ill. She swooned away when I−when I spoke your message."

Joy leapt in Sir George's heart at that announcement. But his face remained impassive. He begged the artist to give him leave, and went upstairs, four steps at a time, to his wife's room.

He found her still unconscious in tile arms of her woman, who was almost as white, and who gasped when she saw the baronet enter.

He took his wife into his own arms, bathed her brow tenderly, and bade the woman hold salts to her ladyship's nostrils.

Presently she revived. She opened her eyes, vacant at first, then quickening, with horror, and, lastly, stared in amazement at her husband, who was bending over her.

"George!" she cried. And again. "George!" Her fingers clutched his arm. "Oh, thank God!−thank God!" she burst out, in a shuddering sob. "I thought you had been killed."

Thus had he wrested from her the truth which her perversity denied him. He was content; he was jubilant at the result of the ordeal to which he had submitted her. With a nod he dismissed her woman. Then he drew her to his heart, and kissed the face of her he loved above all worldly things.

"Oh, I did so fear for you!" she moaned. "I did so fear for you!" And when word was brought to me that Mr. Gadsby was here, I−I−"

"I know−I know, sweetheart. But all is well," he reassured her; "all is so very well."

Brokenly she begged his pardon for her wrong−headedness. But this he cut short.

"Mr. Gadsby is below, waiting to take his leave of you. Will you receive him?"

"How can I?" quoth she. "Beg him to hold me excused."

Begging her expect his immediate return, Sir George went to dismiss his guest.

"Mr. Gadsby," said he, "I present to you her ladyship's compliments and her regrets that as she is but newly risen she cannot in person receive your adieux. She desires me, further, to wish you a happy journey into Gloucester. I'll not detain you, sir, since you will be eager to set out."

Gadsby drew a breath of relief. Then he looked into the other's face, and marvelled at the change in it. Its impassivity had departed; there was a flush upon the cheek, and a sparkle in the eye. He wondered what it might portend, and he was plagued too, by a doubt, which increased when Sir George stood, at parting, by the door of the chaise.

Then, as if answer the artist's unspoken thoughts, the baronet drew a pistol from his pocket.

“This is the shot I owe you, Mr. Gadsby,” said he easly. “Lest you think I boasted to you this morning, please observe.”

He raised the weapon, and fired at a swallow darting overhead. But as he pulled the trigger Mr. Gadsby seized his arm, and deflected his aim, so that the bird escaped the doom that had impended.

Sir George stared at him, frowning. The artist explained:

“I would not have you, sir, destroy the life of an innocent creature to make good a boast.

Sir George's frown deepened; then it vanished, and he smiled quizzically.

“I would observe, sir, that by all the laws of honour you were wrong to touch my arm at such a moment. I might claim the right to another shot. But I shall not. Besides, I, too, was irregular, since I stood within the prescribed distance of twenty paces.”

Then he laughed good−humoredly, for his relief had brought him a great happiness, and he loved all the world that morning, including Mr. Gasby.

“At least,” he concluded, “I have served my purpose−to ascertain whether you have a heart, sir. And I am glad to discover that it seems you have.”