

Monsieur Beaucaire

By BOOTH TARKINGTON,
Author of "The Gentleman From Indiana" and "The
Conquest of Canaan."

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"Believe me," said Molyneux, "he's no barber! No, and never was!"

For a moment there was even a chance that M. Beaucaire might have the best of it. Two of his adversaries were prostrate, more than one were groaning, and the indomitable Frenchman had actually almost beat off the ruffians when, by a trick, he was overcome. One of them, dismounting, ran in suddenly from behind and seized his blade in a thick leather gauntlet. Before Beaucaire could disengage the weapon two others threw themselves from their horses and hurled him to the earth. "A moi! A moi, Francois!" he cried as he went down, his sword in fragments, but his voice unbroken and clear.

"Shame!" muttered one or two of the gentlemen about the coach. "Twas dastardly to take him so," said Molyneux. "Whatever his deservings, I'm nigh of a mind to offer him a rescue in the duke's face!"

"Truss him up, lads," said the heavy voice. "Clear the way in front of the coach. There sit those whom we avenge upon a presumptuous lackey. Now, Whiffen, you have a fair audience, lay on and baste him."

Two men began to drag M. Beaucaire toward a great oak by the roadside. Another took from his saddle a heavy whip with three thongs.

"A moi, Francois!" There was borne on the breeze an answer—"Monseigneur! Monseigneur!" The cry grew louder suddenly. The clatter of hoofs urged to an anguish of speed sounded on the night. M. Beaucaire's servants had lagged sorely behind, but they made up for it now. Almost before the noise of their own steeds they came riding down the moonlit aisle between the mists. Chosen men, these servants of Beaucaire, and like a thunderbolt they fell upon the astounded cavaliers.

"Chateaurien! Chateaurien!" they shouted, and smote so swiftly that, through lack of time, they showed no proper judgment, discriminating nothing between noncombatants and their master's foes. They charged first into the group about M. Beaucaire and broke and routed it utterly. Two of them leaped to the young man's side while the other four, swerving, scarce losing the momentum of their onset, bore on upon the gentlemen near the coach, who went down beneath the fierceness of the onslaught, cursing manfully.

"Our just deserts," said Mr. Molyneux, his mouth full of dust and philosophy.

Sir Hugh Guilford's horse fell with him, being literally ridden over, and the baronet's leg was pinned under the saddle. In less than ten minutes from the first attack on M. Beaucaire the attacking party had fled in disorder, and the patrician noncombatants, choking with expletives, consumed with wrath, were prisoners, disarmed by the Frenchman's lackeys.

Guilford's discomfiture had freed the doors of the coach. So it was that when M. Beaucaire, struggling to rise, assisted by his servants, threw out one hand to balance himself, he found it seized between two small, cold palms, and he looked into two warm, dilating eyes that were doubly beautiful because of the fright and rage that found room in them too.

M. le Duc Chateaurien sprang to his feet without the aid of his lackeys and bowed low before Lady Mary.

"I make ten thousand apology to be the cause of a such melee in your presence," he said, and then, turning to Francois, he spoke in French: "Ah, thou scoundrel! A little, and it had been too late."

Francois knelt in the dust before him. "Pardon!" he said. "Monseigneur commanded us to follow far in the rear, to remain unobserved. The wind malignantly blew against monseigneur's voice."

"See what it might have cost, my children," said his master, pointing to the ropes with which they would have bound him and to the whip lying beside them. A shudder passed over the lackey's frame. The utter horror in his face echoed in the eyes of his fellows.

"Oh, monseigneur!" Francois sprang back and tossed his arms to heaven.

"But it did not happen," said M. Beaucaire.

"It could not!" exclaimed Francois.

"No. And you did very well, my children"—the young man smiled benevolently—"very well. And now," he continued, turning to Lady Mary and speaking in English, "let me be asking of our gallants yonder what make them to be in cabal with highwaymen. One should come to a polite understanding with them, you think? Not so?"

He bowed, offering his hand to conduct her to the coach, where Molyneux and his companions, having drawn Sir Hugh from under his horse, were engaged in reviving and reassuring Lady Rellerton, who had fainted. But Lady Mary stayed Beaucaire with a gesture, and the two stood where they were.

"Monseigneur!" she said, with a note of raillery in her voice, but raillery so tender that he started with happiness. His movement brought him a hot spasm of pain, and he clapped his hand to a red stain on his waistcoat.

"You are hurt!"

"It is nothing," smiled M. Beaucaire. Then, that she might not see the stain spreading, he held his handkerchief over the spot. "I am a little—but jus' a trifling—bruise; 'tis all."

"You shall ride in the coach," she whispered. "Will you be pleased, M. de Chateaurien?"

"Ah, my beautiful!" She seemed to wave before him like a shining mist. "I wish that ride might last for a-ways! Can you say that, mademoiselle?"

"Monseigneur," she cried in a passion of admiration, "I would what you would have be, should be. What do you not deserve? You are the bravest man in the world!"

"Ha, ha! I am jus' a poor Frenchman."

"Would that a few Englishmen had shown themselves as 'poor' tonight. The vile cowards, not to help you!" With that, suddenly possessed by her anger, she swept away from him to the coach.

Sir Hugh, groaning loudly, was being assisted into the vehicle. "My little poltroons," she said, "what are you doing with your fellow craven, Sir Hugh Guilford, there?"

"Madam," replied Molyneux humbly, "Sir Hugh's leg is broken. Lady Rellerton graciously permits him to be taken in."

"I do not permit it! M. de Chateaurien rides with us."

"But—"

"Sir! Leave the wretch to groan by the roadside," she cried fiercely, "which plight I would were that of all of you! But there will be a pretty story for the gossips tomorrow! And I could almost find pity for you when I think of the wits when you return to town. Fine gentlemen, you; hardy bravos, by heaven, to leave one man to meet a troop of horse single handed while you huddle in shelter until you are overthrown and disarmed by servants! Oh, the wits! Heaven save you from the wits!"

"Madam."

"Address me no more! M. de Chateaurien, Lady Rellerton and I will greatly esteem the honor of your company. Will you come?"

She stepped quickly into the coach and was gathering her skirts to make room for the Frenchman, when a heavy voice spoke from the shadows of the tree by the wayside.

"Lady Mary Carlisle will, no doubt, listen to a word of counsel on this point."

The Duke of Winterset rode out into the moonlight, composedly untying a mask from about his head. He had not shared the flight of his followers, but had retired into the shade of the oak, whence he now made his presence known with the utmost coolness.

"Gracious heavens, 'tis Winterset!" exclaimed Lady Rellerton.

"Turned highwayman and cutthroat!" cried Lady Mary.

"No, no," laughed M. Beaucaire, somewhat unsteadily, as he stood, swaying a little, with one hand on the coach door, the other



FOR A MOMENT HE CUT THROUGH THE RING AND CLEARED A SPACE ABOUT HIM.

pressed hard on his side, "he only oversee. He is jus' a little bashful, sometime. He is a great man, but he don' want all the glory!"

"Barber," replied the duke, "I must tell you that I gladly descend to bandy words with you. Your monstrous impudence is a claim to rank I cannot ignore. But a lackey who has himself followed by six other lackeys—"

"Ha, ha! Has not M. le Duc been busy all this evening to justify me? And I think mine mus' be the bes' six. Ha, ha! You think?"

"M. de Chateaurien," said Lady Mary, "we are waiting for you."

"Pardon," he replied. "He has something to say. Maybe it is bes' if you hear it now."

"I wish to hear nothing from him—ever!"

"My faith, madam," cried the duke, "this saucy fellow has paid you the last insult! He is so sure of you he does not fear you will believe the truth. When all is told, if you do not agree he deserved the lashing we planned to"—

"I'll hear no more!"

"You will bitterly repent it, madam. For your own sake I entreat"—

"And I also," broke in M. Beaucaire. "Permit me, mademoiselle. Let him speak."

"Then let him be brief," said Lady Mary, "for I am earnest to be quit of him. His explanation of an attack on my friend and on my carriage should be made to my brother."

"Alas that he was not here," said the duke, "to aid me! Madam, was your carriage threatened? I have endeavored only to expunge a debt I owed to Bath and to avenge an insult offered to yourself through"—

"Sir, sir, my patience will bear little more!"

"A thousand apology," said M. Beaucaire. "You will listen, I only beg, Lady Mary?"

She made an angry gesture of assent.

"Madam, I will be brief as I may. Two months ago there came to Bath a French gambler calling himself Beaucaire, a desperate fellow with the cards or dice, and all the men of fashion went to play at his lodging, where he won considerable sums. He was small, wore a black wig and mustachio. He had the insolence to show himself everywhere until the master of ceremonies rebuffed him in the

(Continued on seventh page.)

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