

Monsieur Beaucaire

By BOOTH TARKINGTON,

Author of "The Gentleman From Indiana" and "The Conquest of Canaan."

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Mr. Nash, seeing them near him, came forward with greetings. A word on the side passed between the nobleman and the exquisite. "I had news of the rascal tonight," whispered Nash. "He lay at a farm till yesterday, when he disappeared; his ruffians too."

"You have arranged?" asked the duke.

"Fourteen bailiffs are watching without. He could not come within gunshot. If they clap eyes on him, they will hustle him to jail, and his cutthroats shall not avail him a hair's weight. The impatient swore he'd be here by 9, did he?"

"He said so, and 'tis a rash dog, sir."

"It is just 9 now."

"Send out to see if they have taken him."

"Gladly." The beau beckoned an attendant and whispered in his ear.

Many of the crowd had edged up to the two gentlemen with apparent carelessness, to overhear their conversation. Those who did overhear repeated it in covert asides, and this circulating undertone, confirming a vague rumor that Beaucaire would attempt the entrance that night, lent a pleasurable color of excitement to the evening. The French prince, the ambassador and their suits were announced. Polite as the assembly was, it was also curious, and there occurred a mannerly rush to see the newcomers. Lady Mary, already pale, grew whiter as the throng closed round her. She looked up pathetically at the duke, who lost no time in extricating her from the pressure.

"Wait here," he said. "I will fetch you a glass of negus," and disappeared. He had not thought to bring a chair, and she, looking about with an increasing faintness and finding none, saw that she was standing by the door of a small side room. The crowd swerved back for the passage of the legate of France, and pressed upon her. She opened the door and went in.

The room was empty save for two gentlemen, who were quietly playing cards at a table. They looked up as she entered. They were M. Beaucaire and Mr. Molyneux.

She uttered a quick cry and leaned against the wall, her hand to her breast. Beaucaire, though white and weak, had brought her a chair before Molyneux could stir.

"Mademoiselle!"

"Do not touch me!" she said, with such frozen abhorrence in her voice that he stopped short. "Mr. Molyneux, you seek strange company!"

"Madam," replied Molyneux, bowing deeply, as much to Beaucaire as to herself, "I am honored by the presence of both of you."

"Oh, are you mad!" she exclaimed contemptuously.

"This gentleman has exalted me with his confidence, madam," he replied.

"Will you add your ruin to the scandal of this fellow's presence here? How he obtained entrance?"

"Pardon, mademoiselle," interrupted Beaucaire. "Did I not say I should come? M. Molyneux was so obliging as to answer for me to the fourteen friends of M. de Winterset and Meestaire Nash."

"Do you not know," she turned vehemently upon Molyneux, "that he will be removed the moment I leave this room? Do you wish to be dragged out with him? For your sake, sir, because I have always thought you a man of heart, I give you a chance to save yourself from disgrace—and your companion from jail. Let him slip out by some retired way, and you may give me your arm and we will enter the next room as if nothing had happened. Come, sir!"

"Mademoiselle!"

"Mr. Molyneux, I desire to hear nothing from your companion. Had I not seen you at cards with him I should have supposed him in attendance as your lackey. Do you desire to take advantage of my offer, sir?"

"Mademoiselle, I could not tell you on that night!"

"You may inform your high born friend, Mr. Molyneux, that I heard everything he had to say; that my pride once had the pleasure of listening to his high born confession!"

"Ah, it is gentle to taunt one with his birth, mademoiselle? Ah, no! There is a man in my country who say strange things of that—that a man is not his father, but himself."

"You may inform your friend, Mr. Molyneux, that he had a chance to defend himself against accusation; that he said all!"

"That I did say all I could have strength to say. Mademoiselle, you did not see—as it was right—that I had been stung by a big wasp. It was nothing, a scratch; but, mademoiselle, the sky went round and the moon danced on the earth. I could not wish that big wasp to see he had stung me; so I must only say what I can have strength for, and stand straight till he is gone. Beside, there are other rizzons. Ah, you must believe! My Molyneux I see for, and tell him all, because he show courtesy to the young Frenchman, and I can trust him. I trust you, mademoiselle—long ago—and would have told you everything, except just because—well, for the romance, the fon! You believe? It is so clearly so. You do believe, mademoiselle?"

She did not even look at him. M. Beaucaire lifted his hand appealingly toward her. "Can there be no faith in—in—" he said timidly, and paused. She was silent, a statue, my Lady Disdain.

"If you had not believed me to be an impostor; if I had never said I was Chateaurien; if I had been just that M. Beaucaire of the story they told you, but never with the heart of a lackey, an honest man, a man, the man you knew, himself, could you—would you?" He was trying to speak firmly, yet as he gazed upon her splendid beauty he choked slightly and fumbled in the lace at his throat with unsteady fingers. "Would you—have let me ride by your side in the autumn moonlight?" Her glance passed by him as it might have passed by a footman or a piece of furniture. He was dressed magnificently, a multitude of orders glittering on his breast. Her eye took no knowledge of him.

"Mademoiselle, I have the honor to ask you: if you had known this Beaucaire was honest, though of peasant birth, would you?"

Involuntarily, controlled as her icy presence was, she shuddered. There was a moment of silence.

"Mr. Molyneux," said Lady Mary, "in spite of your discourtesy in allowing a servant to address me, I offer you a last chance to leave this room undisgraced. Will you give me your arm?"

"Pardon me, madam," said Mr. Molyneux.



"IF YOU HAD KNOWN THIS BEAUCAIRE WAS HONEST, THOUGH OF PEASANT BIRTH, WOULD YOU?"

Beucaire dropped into a chair with his head bent low and his arm outstretched on the table. His eyes filled slowly in spite of himself, and two tears rolled down the young man's cheeks.

"An' live men are jus'—names!" said M. Beaucaire.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the outer room Winterset, unable to find Lady Mary and supposing her to have joined Lady Rellerton, disposed of his negus, then approached the two visitors to pay his respects to the young prince, whom he discovered to be a stripling of seventeen, arrogant looking, but pretty as a girl. Standing beside the Marquis de Mirepoix, a man of quiet bearing, he was surrounded by a group of the great, among whom Mr. Nash naturally counted himself. The beau was felicitating himself that the foreigners had not arrived a week earlier, in which case he and Bath would have been detected in a piece of gross ignorance concerning the French nobility—making much of de Mirepoix's ex-berber.

"'Tis a lucky thing that fellow was got out of the way," he ejaculated under cover.

"Thank me for it," rejoined Winterset.

An attendant begged Mr. Nash's notice. The head bailiff sent word that Beaucaire had long since entered the building by a side door. It was supposed Mr. Nash had known of it, and the Frenchman was not arrested, as Mr. Molyneux was in his company and said he would be answerable for him. Consternation was so plain on the beau's trained face that the duke leaned toward him anxiously.

"The villain's in, and Molyneux hath gone mad!"

Mr. Bantison, who had been fiercely elbowing his way toward them, joined heads with them. "You may well say he is in," he exclaimed, "and if you want to know where, why, in yonder card room. I saw him through the half open door."

"What's to be done?" asked the beau.

"Send the bailiffs!"

"Fie, fie! A file of bailiffs? The scandal!"

"Then listen to me," said the duke. "I'll select half a dozen gentlemen, explain the matter and we'll put him in the center of us and take him out to the bailiffs. 'Twill appear nothing. Do you remain here and keep the attention of Beaujolais and de Mirepoix. Come, Bantison, fetch Townbrake and Harry Bakell yonder. I'll bring the others."

Three minutes later his grace of Winterset flung wide the card room door and, after his friends had entered, closed it.

"Ah!" remarked M. Beaucaire quietly. "Six more large men."

The duke, seeing Lady Mary, started, but the angry signs of her interview had not left her face and reassured him. He offered his hand to conduct her to the door. "May I have the honor?"

"If this is to be known, 'twill be better if I leave after. I should be observed if I went now."

"As you will, madam," he answered, not displeased. "And now, you impudent villain," he began, turning to M. Beaucaire, but to fall back, astounded. "'Od's blood, the dog hath murdered and robbed some royal prince!" He forgot Lady Mary's presence in his excitement. "Lay hands on him!" he shouted. "Tear those orders from him!"

Molyneux threw himself between. "One word!" he cried. "One word before you offer an outrage you will repent all your lives!"

"Or let M. de Winterset come alone!" laughed M. Beaucaire.

"Do you expect me to fight a cutthroat barber, and with bare hands?"

"I think one does not expect monsieur to fight anybody. Would I fight you, you think? That was why I had my servants that evening we play. I would gladly fight almos' any one in the world, but I did not wish to soil my hand with a—"

(To be continued next week.)

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