LEVER CHARLES JAMES

PAUL GOSSLETT'S CONFESSIONS IN LOVE, LAW, AND THE CIVIL SERVICE

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Содержание

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MY FIRST MISSION UNDER F. O

I was walking very sadly across the Green Park one day, my hat pressed over my eyes, not looking to right or left, but sauntering slowly along, depressed and heavy-hearted, when I felt a friendly arm slip softly within my own, while a friendly voice said, – "I think I have got something to suit you, for a few months at least. Don't you know Italian?"

"In a fashion, I may say I do. I can read the small poets, and chat a little. I'll not say much more about my knowledge."

"Quite enough for what I mean. Now tell me another thing. You 're not a very timid fellow, I know. Have you any objection to going amongst the brigands in Calabria, – on a friendly mission, of course, – where it will be their interest to treat you well?"

"Explain yourself a little more freely. What is it I should have to do?"

"Here's the whole affair; the son of a wealthy baronet, a Wiltshire M.P., has been captured and carried off by these rascals. They demand a heavy sum for his ransom, and give a very short time for the payment. Sir Joseph, the youth's father, is very ill, and in such a condition as would make any appeal to him highly dangerous; the doctors declare, in fact, it would be fatal; and Lady Mary S. has come up to town, in a state bordering on distraction, to consult Lord Scatterdale, the Foreign Secretary, who is a personal friend of her husband. The result is that his Lordship lias decided to pay the money at once; and the only question is now to find the man to take it out, and treat with these scoundrels."

"That ought not to be a very difficult matter, one would say; there are scores of fellows with pluck for such a mission."

"So there are, if pluck were the only requisite; but something more is needed. If Sir Joseph should not like to acknowledge the debt, – if, on his recovery, he should come to think that the thing might have been better managed, less cost incurred, and so on, – the Government will feel embarrassed; they can't well quarrel with an old supporter; they can't well stick the thing in the estimates; so that, to cover the outlay in some decent fashion, they must give it a public-service look before they can put it into the Extraordinaries; and so Lord S. has hit upon this scheme. You are aware that a great question is now disputed between the Bourbonists of Naples and the party of New Italy, – whether brigandage means highway robbery, or is the outburst of national enthusiasm in favor of the old dynasty. The friends of King Bomba, of course, call it a 'La Vendée;' the others laugh at this, and say that the whole affair is simply assassination and robbery, and totally destitute of any political coloring. Who knows on which side the truth lies, or whether some portion of truth does not attach to each of these versions? Now, there are, as you said awhile ago, scores of fellows who would have pluck enough to treat with the brigands; but there are not so many who could be trusted to report of them, – to give a clear and detailed account of what he saw of them, – of their organization, their sentiments, their ambitions, and their political views, if they have any. You are just the man to do this. You have that knack of observation and that readiness with your pen which are needed. In fact, you seem to me the very fellow to do this creditably."

"Has Lord S. any distinct leanings in the matter?" asked I. "Does he incline to regard these men as political adherents, or as assassins, *purs et simples?*"

"I see what you mean," said my friend, pinching my arm. "You want to know the tone of your employer before you enter his service. You would like to be sure of the tints that would please him."

"Perhaps so. I won't go so far as to say it would frame my report, but it might serve to tinge it. Now, do you know his proclivities, as Jonathan would call them?"

"I believe they are completely with the Italian view of the matter. I mean, he will not recognize anything political in these scoundrels."

"I thought as much. Now as to the appointment. Do you think you could obtain it for me?"

"You are ready to take it, then?"

"Perfectly."

"And ready to start at once?"

"To-night."

"Come back with me now, and I will inquire if Lord S. will see us. He spoke to me yesterday evening on the matter, and somehow your name did not occur to me, and I certainly recommended another man, – Hitchins of the 'Daily News;' but I am sure he will not have sent for him yet, and that we shall be in good time."

As we walked back towards Downing Street, my friend talked on incessantly about the advantages I might derive from doing this thing creditably. They were sure to make a Blue Book out of my report, and who knows if my name would not be mentioned in the House? At all events, the newspapers would have it; and the Government would be obliged, – they could n't help giving me something. "You'll have proved yourself a man of capacity," said he, "and that's enough. S. does like smart fellows under him, he is so quick himself; sees a thing with half an eye, and reads a man just as he reads a book." He rattled along in this fashion, alternately praising the great man, and assuring me that I was exactly the sort of fellow to suit him. "He 'll not burden you with instructions, but what he tells you will be quite sufficient; he is all clearness, conciseness, and accuracy. There's only one caution I have to give you, – don't ask him a question, follow closely all he says, and never ask him to explain anything that puzzles you. To suppose that he has not expressed himself clearly is a dire offence, mind that; and now, here we are. Crosby, is my Lord upstairs?" asked he of the porter; and receiving a bland nod in reply, he led the way to the Minister's cabinet.

"I 'll ask to see him first myself," whispered he, as he sent in his card.

Now, though my friend was an M.P., and a stanch supporter of the party, he manifested a considerable amount of anxiety and uneasiness when waiting for the noble secretary's reply. It came at last.

"Can't possibly see you now, sir. Will meet you at the House at five o'clock."

"Will you kindly tell his Lordship I have brought with me the gentleman I spoke to him about yesterday evening? He will know for what."

The private secretary retired sullenly, and soon returned to say, "The gentleman may come in; my Lord will speak to him."

The next moment I found myself standing in a comfortably furnished room, in front of a large writing-table, at which an elderly man with a small head, scantily covered with gray hair, was writing. He did not cease his occupation as I entered, nor notice me in any manner as I approached, but went on repeating to himself certain words as he wrote them; and at last, laying down his pen, said aloud, with a faint chuckle, "and your Excellency may digest it how you can."

I gave a very slight cough. He looked up, stared at me, arose, and, walking to the fire, stood with his back to it for a couple of seconds without speaking. I could see that he had some difficulty in dismissing the topic which had just occupied him, and was only arriving at me by very slow stages and heavy roads.

"Eh!" said he, at last; "you are the man of the paper. Not the 'Times ' – but the – the – what's it?"

"No, my Lord. I'm the other man," said I, quietly.

"Ah, you 're the other man." And as he spoke, he hung his head, and seemed hopelessly lost in thought. "Have you seen Mr. Hammil?" asked he.

"No, my Lord."

"You must see Mr. Hammil. Till you see Mr. Hammil, you need n't come to me."

"Very well, my Lord," said I, moving towards the door.

"Wait a moment. You know Italy well, I am told. Do you know Cavour?"

"No, my Lord," said I.

"Ah! They say he over-eats; have you heard that?"

"I can't say that I have, my Lord; but my acquaintance with Italy and with Italians is very slight, indeed."

"Why did they recommend you, then, for this affair? I told Gresson that I wanted a man who could have ready access to their public men, who knew Balbi, Gino Capponi, Ricasoli, and the rest of them. Now, sir, how is it possible, without intimacy with these men and their opinions, that you could write such leading articles as I suggested in, their papers? How could you ever get admission to the columns of the 'Opinione' and the 'Perseveranza,' eh? Answer me that."

"I am afraid, my Lord, there is some grave misunderstanding here. I never dreamed of proposing myself for such a difficult task. I came here on a totally different mission. It was to take your Lordship's orders about the ransom and rescue of a young Englishman who has been captured by the brigands in Southern Italy – "

"That scamp, St. John. A very different business, indeed. Why, sir, they value him at one thousand pounds, and I 'll venture to assert that his friends – if that be the name of the people who know him – would call him a dear bargain at twenty. I'm certain his own father would say so; but, poor fellow, he is very ill, and can't talk on this or any other matter just now. Lady Mary, however, insists on his release, and we must see what can be done. You know the habits and ways of these rascals, – these brigands, – don't you?"

"No, my Lord; nothing whatever about them."

"Then, in Heaven's name, sir, what do you know?"

"Very little about anything, my Lord, I must confess; but as I am sorely pushed to find a livelihood, and don't fancy being a burden to my friends, I told Mr. Gresson, this morning, that I was quite ready to undertake the mission if I should be intrusted with it; and that, so far as bail or security went, my uncle Rankin, of Rankin and Bates, would unquestionably afford it."

"Ah, this is very different, indeed," said he, ponderingly, and with a look of compassionate interest I had not thought his face capable of. "Gone too fast, perhaps; have been hit hard at Doncaster or Goodwood?"

"No, my Lord; I never betted. I started with a few thousand pounds and lost them in a speculation."

"Well, well. I have no right to enter into these things. Go and see Mr. Temple, the financial clerk. Take this to him, and see what he says to you. If he is satisfied, come down to the House to-night. But stay! You ought to start this evening, oughtn't you?"

"I believe, my Lord, the time is very short. They require the money to be paid by the twelfth."

"Or they'll cut his ears off, I suppose," said he, laughing. "Well, he's an ugly dog already; not that cropping will improve him. Here, take this to Temple, and arrange the matter between you."

And he hurriedly wrote half a dozen lines, which he enclosed and addressed, and then returning to his seat, said, "*Bonne chance!* I wish you success and a pleasant journey."

I will not dwell upon the much longer and more commonplace interview that followed. Mr. Temple knew all about me, – knew my uncle, and knew the whole story of my misfortunes. He was not, however, the less cautious in every step he took; and as the sum to be intrusted to me was so large, he filled in a short bail-bond, and, while I sat with him, despatched it by one of his clerks to Lombard Street, for my uncle's signature. This came in due time; and, furnished with instructions how

to draw on the Paymaster-General, some current directions how to proceed till I presented myself at the Legation at Naples, and a sum sufficient for the travelling expenses, I left London that night for Calais, and began my journey. If I was very anxious to acquit myself creditably in this my first employment in the public service, and to exhibit an amount of zeal, tact, and discretion that might recommend me for future employment, I was still not indifferent to the delights of a journey paid for at the Queen's expense, and which exacted from me none of those petty economies which mar the perfect enjoyment of travelling.

If I suffer myself to dwell on this part of my history, I shall be ruined, for I shall never get on; and you will, besides, inevitably – and as unjustly as inevitably – set me down for a snob.

I arrived at Naples at last. It was just as the day was closing in, but there was still light enough to see the glorious bay and the outline of Vesuvius in the background. I was, however, too full of my mission now to suffer my thoughts to wander to the picturesque, and so I made straight for the Legation.

I had been told that I should receive my last instructions from H.M.'s Minister, and it was a certain Sir James Magruber that then held that office at Naples. I know so very little of people in his peculiar walk, that I can only hope he may not be a fair sample of his order; for he was the roughest, the rudest, and most uncourteous gentleman it has ever been my fortune to meet.

He was dressing for dinner when I sent up my card, and at once ordered that I should be shown up to his room.

"Where's your bag?" cried he, roughly, as I entered.

Conceiving that this referred to my personal luggage, and was meant as the preliminary to inviting me to put up at his house, I said that I had left my "traps" at the hotel, and, with his permission, would install myself there for the few hours of my stay.

"Confound your 'traps,' as you call them," said he. "I meant your despatches, – the bag from F. O. Ain't you the messenger?"

"No, sir; I am not the messenger," said I, haughtily.

"And what the devil do you mean, then, by sending me your card, and asking to see me at once?"

"Because my business is peremptory, sir," said I, boldly, and proceeded at once to explain who I was and what I had come for. "To-morrow will be the tenth, sir," said I, "and I ought to be at Rocco d'Anco by the morning of the twelfth, at farthest."

He was brushing his hair all the time I was speaking, and I don't think that he heard above half of what I said.

"And do you mean to tell me they are such infernal fools at F.O. that they 're going to pay one thousand pounds sterling to liberate this scamp St. John?"

"I think, sir, you will find that I have been sent out with this object"

"Why, it's downright insanity! It is a thousand pities they had n't caught the fellow years ago. Are you aware that there's scarcely a crime in the statute-book he has not committed? I'd not say murder wasn't amongst them. Why, sir, he cheated me, – me, – the man who now speaks to you, – at billiards. He greased my cue, sir. It was proved, – proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. The fellow called it a practical joke, but he forgot I had five ducats on the game; and he had the barefaced insolence to amuse Naples by a representation of me as I sided my ball, and knocked the marker down afterwards, thinking it was his fault. He was attached, this St. John was, to my mission here at the time; but I wrote home to demand – not to ask, but demand – his recall. His father's vote was, however, of consequence to the Government, and they refused me. Yes, sir, they refused me; they told me to give him a leave of absence if I did not like to see him at the Legation; and I gave it, sir. And, thank Heaven, the fellow went into Calabria, and fell into the hands of the brigands, – too good company for him, I 'm certain. I 'll be shot if he could n't corrupt them; and now you 're come out here to pay a ransom for a fellow that any other country but England would send to the galleys."

"Has he done nothing worse, sir," asked I, timidly, "than this stupid practical joke?"

"What, sir, have you the face to put this question to me, – to H.M.'s Minister at this court, – the subject of this knavish buffoonery? Am I a fit subject for a fraud, – a – a freedom, sir? Is it to a house which displays the royal arms over the entrance-door men come to play blackleg or clown? Where have you lived, with whom have you lived, what pursuit in life have you followed, that you should be sunk in such utter ignorance of all the habits of life and civilization?"

I replied that I was a gentleman, I trusted as well educated, and I knew as well-born, as himself.

He sprang to the bell as I said this, and rang on till the room was crowded with servants, who came rushing in under the belief that it was a fire-alarm.

"Take him away, – put him out – Giacomo, – Hippo-lyte, – Francis!" screamed he. "See that he's out of the house this instant. Send Mr. Carlyon here. Let the police be called, and order gendarmes if he resists."

While he was thus frothing and foaming, I took my hat, and, passing quietly through the ranks of his household, descended the stairs, and proceeded into the street.

I reached the "Vittoria" in no bland humor. I must own that I was flurried and irritated in no common degree. I was too much excited to be able, clearly, to decide how far the insult I had received required explanation and apology, or if it had passed the limits in which apology is still possible.

Perhaps, thought I, if I call him out, he 'll hand me over to the police; perhaps he 'll have me sent over the frontier. Who knows what may be the limit to a minister's power? While I was thus speculating and canvassing with myself, a card was presented to me by the waiter, – "Mr. Sponnington, Attaché, H.M.'s Legation, Naples," – and as suddenly the owner of it entered the room.

He was a fair-faced, blue-eyed young man, very shortsighted, with a faint lisp and an effeminate air. He bowed slightly as he came forward, and said, "You 're Mr. Goss-lett, ain't you?" And not waiting for any reply, he sat down and opened a roll of papers on the table. "Here are your instructions. You are to follow them when you can, you know, and diverge from them whenever you must. That is, do whatever you like, and take the consequences. Sir James won't see you again. He says you insulted him; but he says that of almost every one. The cook insults him when the soup is too salt, and I insulted him last week by writing with pale ink. But you 'd have done better if you 'd got on well with him. He writes home, – do you understand? – he writes home."

"So do most people," I said dryly.

"Ah! but not the way he does. He writes home and has a fellow black-listed. Two crosses against you sends you to Greece, and three is ruin! Three means the United States."

"I assure you, sir, that as regards myself, your chief's good opinion or good word are matters of supreme indifference."

Had I uttered an outrageous blasphemy, he could not have looked at me with greater horror.

"Well," said he, at last, "there it is; read it over. Bolton will cash your bills, and give you gold. You must have gold; they 'll not take anything else. I don't believe there is much more to say."

"Were you acquainted with Mr. St. John?" asked I.

"I should think I was. Rodney St John and I joined together."

"And what sort of a fellow is he? Is he such a scamp as his chief describes?"

"He's fast, if you mean that; but we 're all fast."

"Indeed!" said I, measuring him with a look, and thinking to compute the amount of his colleague's iniquity.

"But he's not worse than Stormont, or Mosely, or myself; only he's louder than we are. He must always be doing something no other fellow ever thought of. Don't you know the kind of thing I mean? He wants to be original. Bad style that, very. That 's the way he got into this scrape. He made a bet he 'd go up to Rocco d'Anco, and pass a week with Stoppa, the brigand, – the cruellest dog in Calabria. He didn't say when he'd come back again, though; and there he is still, and Stoppa sent one of his fellows to drop a letter into the Legation, demanding twenty-five thousand francs for his release, or saying that his ears, nose, &c, will be sent on by instalments during the month. Ugly, ain't it?"

"I trust I shall be in time to save him. I suspect he's a good fellow."

"Yes, I suppose he is," said he, with an air of uneasiness; "only I 'd not go up there, where you 're going, for a trifle, I tell you that."

"Perhaps not," said I, quietly.

"For," resumed he, "when Stoppa sees that you're a nobody, and not worth a ransom, he 'd as soon shoot you as look at you." And this thought seemed to amuse him so much that he laughed at it as he quitted the room and descended the stairs, and I even heard him cackling over it in the street.

Before I went to bed that night I studied the map of Calabria thoroughly, and saw that by taking the diligence to Atri the next day I should reach Valdenone by about four o'clock, from which a guide could conduct me to Rocco d'Anco, – a mountain walk of about sixteen miles, – a feat which my pedestrian habits made me fully equal to. If the young attache's attempt to terrorize over me was not a perfect success, I am free to own that my enterprise appeared to me a more daring exploit than I had believed it when I thought of it in Piccadilly. It was not merely that I was nearer to the peril, but everything conspired to make me more sensible to the danger. The very map, where a large tract was marked "little known," suggested a terror of its own; and I fell asleep, at last, to dream of every wild incident of brigand life I had seen in pictures or witnessed on the stage.

As that bland young gentleman so candidly told me, "I was a nobody," and, consequently, of no interest to any one. Who would think of sending out an express messenger to ransom Paul Gosslett? At all events, I could console myself with the thought that if the world would give little for me, it would grieve even less; and with this not very cheering consolation I mounted to the banquette of the diligence, and started.

After passing through a long, straggling suburb, not remarkable for anything but its squalor and poverty, we reached the seashore, and continued to skirt the bay for miles. I had no conception of anything so beautiful as the great sheet of blue water seen in the freshness of a glorious sunrise, with the white-sailed lateener skimming silently along, and reflected, as if in a mirror, on the unruffled surface. There was a peaceful beauty in all around, that was a positive enchantment, and the rich odors of the orange and the verbena filled the air almost to a sense of delicious stupefaction. Over and over did I say to myself, "Why cannot this delicious dream be prolonged for a lifetime? If existence could but perpetuate such a scene as this, let me travel along the shore of such a sea, overshadowed by the citron and the vine, – I ask for no more." The courier or conductor was my only companion, – an old soldier of the first empire, who had fought on the Beresina and in Spain, – a rough old sabreur, not to be appeased by my best cigars and my brandy-flask into a good word for the English. He hated them formerly, and he hated them still. There might be, he was willing to believe, one or two of the nation that were not cani; but he had n't met them himself, nor did he know any one who had. I relished his savagery, and somehow never felt in the slightest degree baffled or amazed by his rudeness. I asked him if he had heard of that unlucky countryman of mine who had been captured by the brigands, and he said that he had heard that Stoppa meant to roast him alive; for that Stoppa did n't like the English, – a rather strong mode of expressing a national antipathy, but one, on the whole, he did not entirely disapprove of.

"Stoppa, however," said I, assuming as a fact what I meant for a question, – "Stoppa is a man of his word. If he offered to take a ransom, he'll keep his promise?"

"That he will, if the money is paid down in zecchin gold. He 'll take nothing else. He 'll give up the man; but I 'd not fancy being the fellow who brought the ransom if there was a light piece in the mass."

"He 'd surely respect the messenger who carried the money?"

"Just as much as I respect that old mare who won't come up to her collar;" and he snatched the whip, as he spoke, from the driver, and laid a heavy lash over the sluggish beast's loins. "Look here," said he to me, as we parted company at Corallo, "you 're not bad, – for an Englishman, at least, – and I 'd rather you did n't come to trouble. Don't you get any further into these mountains than St.

Andrea, and don't stay, even there, too long. Don't go in Stoppa's way; for if you have money, he 'll cut your throat for it, and if you have n't, he 'll smash your skull for being without it. I 'll be on the way back to Naples on Saturday; and if you'll take a friend's advice, you'll be beside me."

I was not sorry to get away from my old grumbling companion; but his words of warning went with me in the long evening's drive up to St. Andrea, a wild mountain road, over which I jogged in a very uncomfortable barroccino.

Was I really rushing into such peril as he described? And if so, why so? I could scarcely affect to believe that any motives of humanity moved me; still less, any sense of personal regard or attachment. I had never known – not even seen – Mr. St. John. In what I had heard of him there was nothing that interested me. It was true that I expected to be rewarded for my services; but if there was actual danger in what I was about to do, what recompense would be sufficient? And was it likely that this consideration would weigh heavily on the minds of those who employed me? Then, again, this narrative, or report, or whatever it was, how was I to find the material for it? Was it to be imagined that I was to familiarize myself with brigand life by living amongst these rascals, so as to be able to make a Blue Book about them? Was it believed that I could go to them, like a census commissioner, and ask their names and ages, how long they had been in their present line of life, and how they throve on it? I'll not harass myself more about them, thought I, at last. I 'll describe my brigand as I find him. The fellow who comes to meet me for the money shall be the class. "Ex pede Herculem" shall serve one here, and I have no doubt I shall be as accurate as the others who contribute to this sort of literature.

I arrived at St. Andrea as the Angelus was ringing, and saw that pretty sight of a whole village on their knees at evening prayer, which would have been prettier had not the devotees been impressed with the most rascally countenances I ever beheld.

From St. Andrea to Rocco was a walk of seventeen miles, but I was not sorry to exchange the wearisome barroccino I had been jolting in for the last six hours, for my feet; and after a light meal of bread and onions, washed down with a very muddy imitation of vinegar, I set forth with a guide for my destination. There was not much companionship in my conductor, who spoke a patois totally unintelligible to me, and who could only comprehend by signs. His own pantomime, however, conveyed to me that we were approaching the brigand region, and certain significant gestures about his throat and heart intimated to me that sudden death was no unusual casualty in these parts. An occasional rude cross erected on the roadside, or a painted memorial on the face of a rock, would also attest some bygone disaster, at the sight of which he invariably knelt and uttered a prayer, on rising from which he seemed to me, each time, but half decided whether he would accompany me farther.

At last, after a four hours' hard walk, we gained the crest of a mountain ridge, from which the descent seemed nearly precipitous, and here my companion showed me, by the faint moonlight, a small heap of stones, in the midst of which a stake was placed upright; he muttered some words in a very low tone, and held up eight fingers, possibly to convey that eight people had been murdered or buried in that place. Whatever the idea, one thing was certain, – he would go no farther. He pointed to the zigzag path I was to follow, and stretched out his hand to show me, as I supposed, where Rocco lay, and then unslinging from his shoulder the light carpet-bag he had hitherto carried for me, he held out his palm for payment.

I resolutely refused, however, to accept his resignation, and ordered him, by a gesture, to resume his load and march on; but the fellow shook his head doggedly, and pointed with one finger to the open palm of the other hand. The gesture was defiant and insolent; and as we were man to man, I felt it would be an ignominy to submit to him, so I again showed signs of refusal, and pointed to the bag. At this he drew a long thin-bladed knife from his garter; but, as quickly, I pulled out a revolver from my breast-pocket. The fellow's sharp ear caught the click of the lock, and, with a spring, he darted over the low parapet and disappeared. I never saw him more.

A cold sweat broke over me as I took up my burden and resumed my way. There was but one path, so that I could not hesitate as to the road; but I own that I began that descent with a heart-sinking and a terror that I have no words to convey. That the fellow would spring out upon me at some turn of the way seemed so certain that at each sharp angle I halted and drew breath for the struggle I thought was coming. My progress was thus much retarded, and my fatigue greatly increased. The day broke at last, but found me still plodding on in a dense pine-wood which clothed the lower sides of the mountain. In addition to my carpet-bag I had the heavy belt in which the gold pieces were secured, and the weight of which became almost insupportable.

What inconceivable folly had ever involved me in such an adventure? How could I have been so weak as to accept such a mission? Here was I, more than a thousand miles away from home, alone, on foot in the midst of a mountain tract, the chosen resort of the worst assassins of Europe, and, as if to insure my ruin, with a large sum in gold on my person. What could my friend have meant by proposing the enterprise to me? Did he imagine the mountain-paths of the Basilicata were like Pall Mall? or did he, – and this seemed more likely, – did he deem that the man who had so little to live for must, necessarily, care less for life? If I must enter the public service, thought I, at the peril of my neck, better to turn to some other means of living. Then I grew sardonic and malicious, declaring to myself how like a rich man it was to offer such an employment to a poor man, as though, when existence had so little to charm, one could not hold to it with any eagerness. The people, muttered I, who throw these things to us so contemptuously are careful enough of themselves. You never find one of them risk his life, no, nor even peril his health, in any enterprise.

As the sun shone out and lit up a magnificent landscape beneath me, where, in the midst of a wooded plain, a beautiful lake lay stretched out, dotted over with little islands, I grew in better humor with myself and with the world at large. It was certainly very lovely. The snow-peaks of the Abruzzi could be seen, here and there, topping the clouds, which floated lightly up from the low-lying lands of the valley. Often and often had I walked miles and miles to see a scene not fit to be compared with this. If I had only brought my colors with me, what a bit of landscape I might have carried away! The pencil could do nothing where so much depended on tint and glow. A thin line of blue smoke rose above the trees near the lake, and this I guessed to proceed from the village of Rocco d'Anco. I plucked up my courage at the sight, and again set forth, weary and footsore, it is true, but in a cheerier, heartier spirit than before.

Four hours' walking, occasionally halting for a little rest, brought me to Rocco, a village of about twenty houses, straggling up the side of a vine-clad hill, the crest of which was occupied by a church. The population were all seated at their doors, it being some festa, and were, I am bound to admit, about as ill-favored a set as one would wish to see. In the aspect of the men, and, indeed, still more in that of the women, one could at once recognize the place as a brigand resort. There were, in the midst of all the signs of squalor and poverty, rich scarfs and costly shawls to be seen; while some of the very poorest wore gold chains round their necks, and carried handsomely ornamented pistols and daggers at their waist-belts. I may as well mention here, not to let these worthy people be longer under a severe aspersion than needful, that they were not themselves brigands, but simply the friends and partisans of the gangs, who sold them the different spoils of which they had divested the travellers. The village was, in fact, little else than the receptacle of stolen goods until opportunity offered to sell them elsewhere. I had been directed to put up at a little inn kept by an ex-friar who went by the name of Fra Bartolo, and I soon found the place a very pleasant contrast, in its neatness and comfort, to the dirt and wretchedness around it. The Frate, too, was a fine, jovial, hearty-looking fellow, with far more the air of a Sussex farmer in his appearance than a Calabrian peasant. He set me at ease at once by saying that, of course, I came for the fishing, and added that the lake was in prime order and the fish plenty. This was said with such palpable roguery that I saw it was meant for the bystanders, and knew, at once, he had been prepared for my arrival and expected me. I was, however, more in need of rest and refreshment than of conversation, and, after a hearty but hurried meal, I

turned in and fell off to sleep as I had never slept before. Twice or thrice I had a faint consciousness that attempts were made to awaken me, and once, that a candle was held close to my eyes; but these were very confused and indistinct sensations, and my stupor soon conquered them.

"That 's pretty well for a nap. Just nine hours of it," said the Frate, as he jogged my shoulder, and insisted on arousing me.

"I was so tired," said I, stretching myself, and half turning to the wall for another bout.

"No, no; you mustn't go to sleep again," said he, bending over me. "He's come;" and he made a gesture with his thumb towards an adjoining room. "He's been there above an hour."

"Do you mean – "

"Hush!" he said cautiously. "We name no names here. Get up and see him; he never likes loitering down in these places. One can't be sure of everybody in this world." And here he threw up his eyes, and seemed for a moment overwhelmed at the thought of human frailty and corruption.

"He is expecting me, then?" said I.

"Very impatiently, sir. He wanted to arouse you when he arrived, and he has been twice in here to see if you were really asleep."

Something like a thrill ran through me to think that, as I lay there, this brigand, this man of crimes and bloodshed, – for, of course, he was such – had stood by my bedside, and bent over me. The Frate, however, urging me to activity, left me no time for these reflections, and I arose quickly, and followed him. I was eager to know what manner of man it was to whom I was about to make my approach; but I was hurried along a passage, and half pushed into a room, and the door closed behind me, before I had time for a word.

On a low settle-bed, just in front of me, as I entered, a man lay, smoking a short meerschaum, whose dress and get up, bating some signs of wear and ill-usage, would have made the fortune of a small theatre. His tall hat was wreathed with white roses, from the midst of which a tall feather, spray-like and light, stood up straight. His jacket of bright green, thrown open wide, displayed a scarlet waistcoat perfectly loaded with gold braiding. Leather breeches, ending above the knee, showed the great massive limb beneath to full advantage; while the laced stocking that came up to the calf served, on one side, as belt for a stiletto whose handle was entirely incrusted with precious stones. "You are a good sleeper, Signor Inglese," said he, in a pleasant, richly toned voice, "and I feel sorry to have disturbed you." This speech was delivered with all the ease and courtesy of a man accustomed to the world. "You may imagine, however, that I cannot well delay in places like this. Rocco, I believe, is very friendly to me; but where there are three hundred people there may easily be three traitors."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.