

The Castle Comedy

By THOMPSON BUCHANAN

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(Continued from last week.)

ing, the big door opened, and Sir John Wilmerding stepped quickly in. One glance showed all. Hate gave him wit. Springing to May Percy's side, he seized the girl and whipped out his short hunting knife. Raising it, he cried:

"Come back, you spy, or I'll stab her!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CAREFULLY St. Croix stepped back into the room.

"No, no! Go on, Gaston!" exclaimed Mistress Percy hysterically. But instead he closed the panel after him with elaborate attention, then turned and bowed deeply to Sir John.

"Monsieur has the advantage," sneered the Frenchman, "for he fights with weapons which are impossible for a gentleman to use." And, saying this, the man thus brought suddenly back to face a degrading death shrugged his shoulders and strolled to the window, where he stood drumming his fingers on the sill and straining his eyes against a murky outside through blue stained glass.

Sir John released the girl and put up his knife.

"I would thank Mistress Percy," he said, "for her valuable assistance in preventing the escape of so desperate a ruffian. But your father would like to see you. Will you go to him?"

He might have been a reptile, the girl drew back from him with such loathing, wiping her arm hard, as though his mere touch had defiled it. Without even a look for reply, she walked over and leaned against the mantel, a beautiful picture of collapsed defeat.

"As you will," sniffed Sir John, and, jaunty now in spite of his bandaged throat and generally dilapidated appearance, he strode over to the panel to block up the only remaining way of escape.

But, try as he might, the Englishman could not find the secret spring. All over the panel he fumbled, poking this way and that at every suspicious knob and smooth place, but still the secret point eluded his hardest efforts. From the window St. Croix watched him.

To the Frenchman, defeated now at every turn, with his last card of luck played out, it was the time for utter despair. Dejectedly he turned from Sir John and started toward the chair beside the table near the center of the room. As he moved he thrust one hand carelessly into the pocket of his coat—the coat once worn by Jacques Fournery, the spy.

May Percy, watching his face as only a loving woman watches, caught the sudden lightning look of joy that flashed upon it and was as quickly gone. With his eyes he told her to come to him, and, understanding, she began to glide slowly, cautiously toward the chair.

Sir John, fumbling at the panel, saw none of the byplay. The Frenchman was directly behind him now, still moving toward the chair.

"I hope his wound does not trouble monsieur extremely," ventured St. Croix over his right shoulder as he edged away. By this time the girl was close to him.

"Ah, mademoiselle," he exclaimed aloud, "you have dropped your handkerchief—permit me." Then, as their hands met over the dainty bit of lace, the girl felt her fingers pressed with sudden ardor.

"Trust me," he whispered low, and in a moment was away, bowing with mere politeness. Still, Sir John, angry at being baffled, struggled desperately with the panel. Now the Frenchman was turned that way.

"Yes," he said. "I tried only to disarm monsieur, but he was violent and," with his infinitely shrug, "I was forced to wound him slightly." The prisoner's tone expressed just a passing regret at having been compelled to perform a small, disagreeable duty.

"Lying comes easy to Frenchmen," blurted Sir John at the panel.

"And one must lie to catch a liar," retorted the other, "but—eh bien! as the French say—I'm glad the little comedy is played out."

The Englishman looked surprised. "Comedy played out?" he sneered, with British candor. "Not till you're hanged."

"I spoke of this comedy," said DuBarre, smiling with quiet amusement, sure in the consciousness of something yet to come.

Sir John turned toward him, puzzled now.

"I don't see that you have cause for laughter."

"Sir John does not see everything," answered the old dancing master gently, "but it is just as I have said." He unbuttoned his coat, took from the inside pocket the newspaper containing the story about "French Percy," and held it toward Sir John.

"Will monsieur read? Possibly this may explain many things."

Wilmerding came over quickly to take the paper. He stood beside the table on the Frenchman's right to read it. May Percy, eager, anxious, had stolen to his other side. As Sir John read, her eyes questioned her lover's, but his quick smile of encouragement told her only to be brave and wait.

Sir John looked up from his reading. "Good! Good!" he cried. "We English can always fool you dull French spies. The government is awake."

"And, as usual, when awake it played the fool," broke in the Frenchman bitterly. "This, now—" He took the paper from Sir John. "It is safe to wager that 'French Percy' will fail in this, his last desperate undertaking, or, if he should get to the castle, will certainly be captured. The place is now being watched." The reader cast the paper down angrily. "Fools! Idiots! That's what spoiled it."

"Spoiled it?" questioned Sir John.

"Yes," blurted DuBarre, angry now clear through, "spoiled it, I said. Send a man down here to watch, then publish stuff."

"What's this? What do you mean?" interrupted the slower Englishman, while even Mistress Percy began to show some signs of uneasiness.

"Mean?" ejaculated DuBarre. "I mean that while I fooled with a country bumpkin over his pastoral love affair because of this paper 'French Percy' slipped through my fingers."

Sir John fell back to gaze at him in angry, blank amazement. "French Percy" gone? He blustered. "All know you are the renegade himself."

The other had recovered his temper by this time. Now he shrugged his shoulders.

"Only when it pleased me. I'm no more 'French Percy' than I am Gaston DuBarre." And with his old mocking laugh he looked at the two astonished faces before him. May Percy fell away from him with a little cry of horror.

"Who? What?" was all Sir John could mutter stupidly.

The self confessed stranger drew himself up and bowed to them both deeply. "Jacques Fournery, the government's private emissary, at your service," he said.

"Jacques Fournery! Wellington's spy? Stuff!" cried Sir John.

Mistress Percy looked for a moment at the Frenchman, fright and amazement in her eyes, then sank into the chair and buried her face in her arms upon the table. The acknowledged spy appeared nettled. He drew a small case out of his coat pocket and extracted therefrom a bit of oiled paper, which he spread out and offered to the Englishman.

"Read this, sir, and change your mind." Then as Sir John glanced at it he added aloud, "Mistress Percy might like to hear."

The girl who had rested in the man's arms so few minutes before heard Sir John read of her lover:

This is to certify that the bearer, Jacques Fournery, is a faithful, loyal and highly efficient officer in the British service. All soldiers and loyal subjects to whom he may appeal are hereby commanded to do everything in their power to aid him in whatever way he may desire, especially in the matter of the capture of the notorious outlaw and spy "French Percy." This order is to be considered a pass through all lines and is to serve as a requisition in case anything is needed by the bearer. All soldiers will see that it is duly honored. It will be shown only in case of grave necessity.

WELLINGTON,
General Commanding.

Up and down, back and forth, before the door of the waiting chamber paced Captain Thornecliffe and Sir Henry Percy, laboring in earnest argument.

"You, Captain Thornecliffe, you have fought the French, you have bled for England, yet you give such counsel. I cannot understand it."

Captain Thornecliffe dropped his hand with light touch on the old baronet's arm before replying seriously: "And believe me, Sir Henry, that is the very reason I advise you to permit his escape. The fighters are not the haters, Sir Henry."

The older one shook off the restraining hand angrily.

"But," he protested, "this man humbled you and the British arms in outrageous fashion. Do you forget the stealing of the headquarters papers that early morning in the Spanish pass?"

On the instant flashed back the soldier's question, "When came it the part of an English gentleman to bear against a gallant enemy?"

Sir Henry's face grew hard at the rebuke. His hands began to clench and unclench rapidly. He was working fast into a characteristic rage.

"Your duty, Captain Thornecliffe—"

"Will be in nowise evaded by letting this man go," broke in the soldier.

"He is counted one of the dangerous men in the French army."

"He is your cousin, a brave gentleman, here on private business and practically your guest," was the retort.

"He is an enemy to England, the minion of the Corsican spawn and practically a spy. Don't presume to teach me my duty, sir," roared the head of the Percys, advancing with threatening fist upon the soldier. But the man who had stood before the French Percy's sword did not fear the English one's anger. Instead—calm, contemptuous, accusing—he faced the old man down.

"Your cousin disclosed himself to defend your daughter's honor, Sir Henry Percy, and, that done, he fought no more, though he might easily have got away. You seem to have forgotten that."

Sir Henry stood silent, overwhelmed with argument, too angry for coherent speech. With increase of the Percy stubbornness Thornecliffe's temper had been rising steadily; but now, fighting hard, he kept sufficient self control to resume his quiet, convincing argument.

He knew that behind that door he guarded two men, his friends, enemies to the death, faced each other before the woman they both loved. The door of heavy oak let through no sound. What was going forward within he could not surmise, only he knew there would be a tragedy should Sir Henry in his present mood cross the threshold or any one from within come forth. And so for the life of a brave enemy he had come to love the gallant English gentleman fought hard with his friends.

"Sir Henry"—the question came forth

sharp and clear. "Colonel Latapie were not in love with your daughter would you wish to see him meet a felon's end?"

That shot struck home. The father's eyes opened wide.

"By my soul, Captain Thornecliffe, you take strange liberties!"

The soldier diplomat went on, unheeding the interruption:

"And yet he is a brave gentleman and asked you for her fairly."

"Sir, I'll—How do you know that?" roared Sir Henry, taken quite off his guard.

Thornecliffe tried hard not to show his triumph.

"Because," he said simply, "Latapie is a French officer and a Percy. Besides a man does not often throw away his life needlessly for a woman he does not love. And—and"—as he said this the pleader watched the old baronet carefully—"she loves him much, Sir Henry."

Mistress Percy's father fairly exploded in rage and sorrow.

"What! What! My daughter—my little May—marry a Frenchman, a Johnny Crepad, a frog eater! Yes—yes—that is what the scoundrel asked me. I'll own up, Thornecliffe, I had decided to allow him to escape because—"

—because he is such a gallant rascal, and—and—with a burst of family pride—"after all, he is a Percy. You can't hunt the old stock, Thornecliffe, even with the weakening strain of the French blood. But marry May—my little May—take my only child over the water! Not that, Thornecliffe, not that. No one could ask that." The stern old voice trembled and broke.

A lump in his own throat, the soldier ventured to put his hand again, this time almost affectionately, on the shoulder of the older man.

"But why, old friend," he questioned gently, "merely because your cousin loves your daughter should you let the hangman's noose dangle over one branch of your family tree? Is that quite fair?"

The head of the house laughed aloud in sudden revulsion of feeling.

"I was mad, Thornecliffe—mad!" he cried. "The boy is a Percy. That was the reason. Do you think a Percy would give her up while he lives?"

Thornecliffe took a turn along the little passage and back again. It was the life of a brave man he wanted. The Frenchman must look out for his own love affairs, and besides his latent racial prejudice made the soldier feel that there was some justice in the father's words. Accordingly the pleader's next question was put carefully.

"Suppose—suppose, Sir Henry, Mistress May should marry Wilmerding? The Percys have two qualities—courage and honor. Your French cousin has proved that he possesses both. Marry her to Wilmerding tonight."

"Tonight?" murmured Sir Henry blankly. "I told him, DuBarre, Percy, that, but I did not mean it. Tonight—"

"Tonight," insisted Thornecliffe. "It must be tonight. The soldiers you sent for should be here now. Besides I recognized Wellington's spy, Fournery, in one of your French visitors yesterday. Now I know why he was here. Marry her to Wilmerding tonight, for not until she is married will the French Percy leave England. She will be safe from him then—and—God help her!" muttered the soldier.

Sir Henry Percy drew a long breath of relief; then, with sudden feeling, gripped the soldier's hands impulsively.

"Thank you, Thornecliffe—thank you. You have kept me worthy of my name. I'll start for Sir Harvey Johnston's at once and drive over tonight with the bishop. You—ah—you, with a wise nod, "you arrange things. And—may the good God speed the boy!" he ended softly.

Within the waiting chamber the self confessed spy stood laughing with cynical contempt at the girl he had won and the man he had conquered.

Mistress Percy, the proud gentlewoman, overcome at the disclosure of her lover, still sat beside the table, her face buried in her arms. Once she had looked up, but the sight of the contemptuous, sneering face of the spy bitterly baiting Sir John Wilmerding quickly brought her head down again.

The gentleman in disguise the girl had loved. Her hero cousin of Napoleon's guard, risking his life gayly in a gallant adventure and offering it gladly for her, she had adored. But this spy, by his own statement—this sneak, who laughingly confessed to trailing her hero cousin for blood money and loudly regretted fighting for her because it might have cost him the price of "French Percy's" life—she shrank from him in horror. Now at the thought of his kisses, at his every speech, the proud girl writhed with shame and loathing. There could be no mistake. She felt sure of that now, for not even the reckless, desperate "French Percy" could have dared the risk she had heard this man boasting to take.

"I've fooled too long already with a country bumpkin over his pastoral love affairs. Call Captain Thornecliffe. He will identify Wellington's own hand. A nice thing it would be to report to the commander in chief that the assinine stupidity of a country militia officer allowed the most dangerous scout in the French army to slip through our fingers."

"By God," roared Wilmerding, fingering his pistol, "if it were not for the slight chance I'd kill you now!"

The spy laughed in his face.

"And be hanged for it later. But I'll you the little chap of the pair here yesterday, the one with the gray eyes, was St. Croix. Now"—impatently—"call Thornecliffe."

Sir John walked over to the big door and knocked, and as he did so the spy stepped suddenly close to the table.

"Mistress Percy—"

A last unacknowledged hope shining in her eyes, she looked up.

"I'm sorry for the part I had to play with you—"

A gasp, and the dark head sank again as the girl burst into shuddering sobs.

"Come, Hal, come. And you, too, Sir Henry. Come block this French trickster's game. The scoundrel claims now to be not St. Croix at all, but some spy—Fournery. See—see the pass he has forged or stolen." And Sir John Wilmerding, at the door, thrust the paper into the hands of the astonished Captain Thornecliffe.

Dumb from amazement, Sir Henry Percy followed Captain Thornecliffe into the room. At the sight of his daughter sobbing over the table the old baronet was about to cry out, but the soldier, with a quick, warning grasp, restrained him. Smiling and easy, the spy bowed to them.

"What's this? What do you mean? Who are you anyhow?" blurted Sir Henry.

The prisoner bowed jauntily a second time.

"As my pass reads—Jacques Fournery, Wellington's spy, at your service, Captain Thornecliffe should know that signature."

After one glance at the self confessed Fournery the soldier had given all his attention to the pass. Now he looked up.

"It's genuine," he said. "There can be no doubt of that."

"And stolen, too, I wager," broke in Wilmerding angrily.

"It's scarcely possible, Jack. I saw this pass written in Spain. I recognize it by a crossed out word."

"And this fellow is"—gasped Wilmerding.

"He must be Fournery."

For quite a minute no one moved. The spy looked straight into the eyes of Thornecliffe and Thornecliffe straight into the eyes of the spy. But what each saw in the other was for those two only. Then impulsively the Frenchman thrust out his hand:

"Monsieur—captain—"

Thornecliffe turned his back.

"I think," he said slowly, "your trail, Fournery, leads toward France. Sir Henry Percy, in accordance with that pass, will give you a horse. You may catch your man before he reaches the sea coast."

With the first sound of her father's voice Mistress May had sprung to her feet. The Percy pride, strong in all the line, leaped to her rescue. Throughout Thornecliffe's identification of the spy she stood straight, with head held high, facing her father, and, although now and then her hands at her sides moved nervously and at the end her mouth was trembling, yet the big black eyes throughout showed brave and firm.

"Dad," she began, and just at first the trembling mouth made the tones to shake ever so slightly, though the look remained steadfast—"dad, you must be surprised to see me here. I want to confess something to you, dad. I came because I thought that man—that spy—my cousin from France, and—and—dad, I loved him. If he had been my cousin St. Croix, dad—and now her voice was proud and full—"nothing could have kept me from marrying him. But a Percy can't love a blood money spy, dad, and if you and John will forgive me I'll—"

"I'll marry John any time you say."

From Sir Henry there burst a great rushing sigh of relief.

"Then tomorrow it is, coz!" he cried, gathering the sobbing girl in his arms. "I'll bring the bishop over from Sir Harvey's tonight, and your old dad's the happiest man in England."

Without so much as a glance at the father and daughter or at the man who had won the girl he loved the spy turned and walked from the room, and as he passed Captain Thornecliffe he muttered, "Merci, monsieur, but I had rather you had not so paid that little debt."

CHAPTER XV.

CERTAINLY it is most irregular," objected the bishop.

The masked highwayman waved his big pistol with a careless, deprecating gesture that sent a cold shiver racing to the very quills of the prelate in the coach.

"But, worshipful sir, when a priest is so hard to meet, what is a poor devil of an outlaw bent on matrimony to do? Jack Ketch can't tie that knot."

Sir Henry Percy, seated beside his lord bishop in the coach, gave an involuntary snort of laughter at the armed highwayman's apologetic speech.

With the robber's first dash from the dark shadows of the overhanging elms beside the road Sir Henry had tried his pistols. The caps sputtered, but no balls came. "Powder wet!" exclaimed the baronet; then, realizing his helplessness, resigned himself to what must come.

When, the postboys having been knocked from their horses, the highwayman in a hoarse voice demanded no money, but a simple exercise of the bishop's churchy office, the good baronet chuckled loud in his surprise and delight. Was not the bishop even then on his way to the castle to marry Mistress May Percy to Sir John Wilmerding. One extra ceremony thrown in on the side could not hurt. Rather it would be just a breath to get the prelate in good trim for the big wedding to follow in the morning.

The bishop knew the service by heart of course, and it would take little time. Sir Henry had been a gay dog in his day, and the present adventure pleased him mightily. So, supremely content at the promised successful outcome of his own little schemes, the squire urged the bishop to quickness.

"It can do no harm, and perhaps it may do good," he said.

"Come, come, sir!" And now the outlaw's tone bore sharp command. He

put his horse beside the coach and, thrusting an arm through the window, brought the big pistol very close to the bishop's head.

"My lord, we are wasting time."

Then he who daily kept noblemen in his anteroom begging for some slight

beneath the dark shade of the overhanging elms they were married.

service climbed out with haste to marry an unknown gallows bird to his wench on the country road at midnight. The postboys forgot their shaking fear at the sight.

"May I be witness, Sir Gallowcheat?" chuckled the now gay Sir Henry.

"Yes, if you swear to be a true one and always to uphold what you see here done," returned the highwayman in a hoarse, throaty voice.

"Upon my honor," replied the knight, laughing. "But the lady—show us the lady. What a story it will be for Thornecliffe and the others!"

A black shadow detached itself from the trunk of a tree, and a slender girl rode out. The clouds had thickened, completely cutting off the moon, so through the darkness the witnesses could just make out the indistinct outlines of a slender, graceful figure. The bishop offered his hand, and she sprang lightly to the ground. Her lover was beside her. A postboy, grinning, now held the horses.

And so beneath the dark shade of the overhanging elms, under the eyes of the peeping stars, they were married. "John and Mary" the man in his hoarse voice gave their names, and at the strange coincidences Sir Henry Percy, the chief witness, almost forgot where he was. "John—Mary." How the names thrilled his old heart! Tomorrow morning in the library at The Oaks he would hear the bishop call those names again, and he would answer. Yes, there was the sentence, "Who gifted this woman to this man?"

And, thinking of the morrow and what it meant to him, Sir Henry from the darkness called forth in his deepest voice, "I do, with all my heart."

The slender bride gave a little sobbing cry of joy.

For the rest of the ceremony her answers were nods and indistinct murmurs through happy tears. It was the most solemn service of the bishop's life.

"And would you like a certificate?" he asked when John and Mary had pledged their troth.

"Certainly," replied the gallows bird groom.

By the dim light of the stars—for the highwayman in his first attack had smashed the carriage lamps—the certificate was made out and signed. Naught remained but to insert the full names of the contracting parties. The bishop held the goose quill poised expectantly. The old baronet was leaning forward in his interest.

"Put in," said the highwayman, "John Percy Latapie, vicomte de St. Croix, and May Percy, daughter of Sir Henry Percy, his wife."

Then, lighting the tension that followed, the moon rushed out with sudden boldness from behind the clouds to show the father and daughter standing face to face.

"Dad, dear dad!" Her arms outstretched toward him, her eyes big and soft with love, the wayward girl made her tender appeal. "Forgive me, dad!"

Sir Henry Percy stood white, silent, too dazed for speech.

"I could not give him up when he offered his life for me, dad."

"May—my little girl—married to a Frenchman? The old man murmured it slowly, incredulously to himself.

The girl dared a step nearer, her husband and the bishop looking on.

"Not a Frenchman, dad, but Cousin Jack Percy's grandson, a Percy straight and true," she whispered.

Her father seemed suddenly to come to himself. "How dared you? How knew you he was not Fournery?" he cried. "Is he St. Croix?"

The girl laughed low, happily.

"Fie! I believe you knew it all the time. Captain Thornecliffe told Ethel and she told me," she said. "A lieutenant of cavalry rode up after you had started for Sir Harvey's. He brought us the news that 'French Percy' had been shot by his men on outpost yesterday morn at daybreak and in proof showed a ring, the St. Croix seal, taken from the clothes of the dead man. I recognized it as the one M. DuBarre had sometimes worn. See, here it is!" She held the ring toward her father. "I had to keep the horrid big seal in my mouth all during the wedding to change my voice," she

put his hand to his forehead.

"I am as dizzy as you are," she said.

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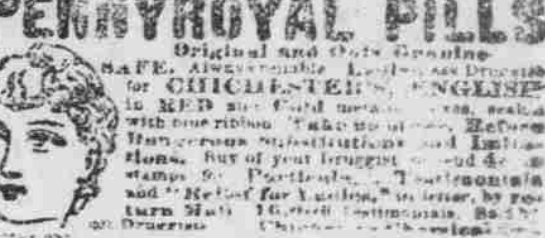
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Dr. B. K. Hays

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Physician and Surgeon, Oxford, N.C.

Having located in Oxford for the practice of medicine, I desire the patronage of the people.

Office at Hall drug store.

Executor's Notice.

Having qualified as executor of the estate of Abraham Evans, dec'd. All persons holding claims against the estate are notified to present the same for payment, all persons owing the estate are notified to come forward and settle the same before Jan. 30, 1908, else this notice will be plead in bar of their recovery.

W. A. SHOTWELL, Executor.
This Jan. 22, 1907.

Notice of Administration.

Letters of Administration upon the estate of J. B. Williams, dec'd, having this day been granted to me by the clerk of the superior court of Granville County, notice is hereby given to all persons indebted to said estate to come forward and make immediate payment to me, and all persons holding claims against said estate to present them to me on or before the 28th day of January, 1908, or this notice will be plead in bar of their recovery.

ADAM J. B. WILLIAMS, Adm'r.
Graham & Devin Attys.

Executor's Notice.

Having qualified as executor of Caroline S. Bullock, deceased, all persons having claims against said estate are notified to present them on or before 28th day of January, 1908, or this notice will be plead in bar of their recovery. All persons indebted to said estate are notified to make immediate payment.

SAMUEL A. FLEMING, Executor.
This Jan. 7, 1907.

Notice of Application.

Notice is hereby given that Geo. N. Heaton who was convicted of embezzlement at the November term 1906 of the Granville County Superior Court and sentenced to serve 12 months on the roads of Granville County on Feb. 24th, 1907 apply to the Governor of North Carolina for a pardon. This January 21st, 1907.

GEORGE N. HEATON.

Executor's Notice.

Having qualified as executor of the estate of M. D. Harris, deceased, I hereby give notice to all persons holding claims against said estate to present the same to me for payment on or before the 24th day of January, 1908, or this notice will be plead in bar of their recovery. All persons indebted to said estate are requested to make immediate payment.

This Jan. 22, 190