

TALES OF THE JURY ROOM

By Gerald Griffin THE FIRST JURYMAN'S TALE

SIGISMUND

It was a beautiful summer evening, that fell on the mountains to the north-east of Poland, but those vast tracts of country lying at their base were then almost uninhabited, and the traveller, who on this evening found himself alone on the hill-side, felt sensations very different from those which might result from the beauty of the scene.

He was young and fair and habitually in the riding costume of Muscovy. A sword hung at his waist, which from the splendour of its scabbard seemed rather intended for dress than warfare, and although it had not the appearance of the youth who bore it would have acquitted it of any suspicion as to the latter design. His bright yellow hair was twisted up under his bonnet, and as he placed one hand over his brow, in order to shade his eyes from the sun, while he looked anxiously down into the plain, the dark stone of his sword formed a striking contrast to the sickly paleness of his cheek.

"He is not there," said the stranger, "and the night will have fallen before we have left these crags behind us. Mother, why have you advised me to this?" A loud and shrill "Ujju!" from beneath the cliff where he stood, made him start and rush towards it. "Clarin, is it you? Is there any hope? where are our horses? what shall we do?" said the youth.

The person whom he addressed now stood forward upon the point of a rock which jutted out from the base of the cliff, so as nearly to form an angle with that and its summit, and yet was itself no bigger than a spear-point in the eye of the distant valley-dweller. He leaned upon his gold-headed staff and waved his arm to the querist to descend, at the same time pointing out his left a safer path than that which the latter was about to choose. He continued, looking along the hillside and down the vale with a ludicrous expression of dismay painted on his broad countenance, and unceasingly shifting his bonnet from side to side, twirling his mustache between his finger and thumb, and muttering to himself as he did so:

"On! merry merry Castle! that into the head of poor Clarin that he might find a pleasanter spot on the earth than that of his birth. I was not content with good, without looking for better, and I have lost both. I would I had never heard of Muscovy when I was in Castle, or that I had never heard of Poland when I was in Muscovy."

the most trusty of his guards, and blind-folding them one after the other, placed the prisoner in chains between them, and conducted them himself at midnight to the entrance of the dungeon, or rather burling ground, which was no less than a mile from its interior. After his death, the secret for many years remained unknown, until in the reign of Eustor, King III., the young Prince Basilus, who was then devoting himself deeply to the study of the occult sciences, issued a proclamation offering a large reward for all the antique manuscripts of whatever kind they might be, which should be presented to him. The nobility of the kingdom were anxious by such a trifling sacrifice to procure the favour of the heir of Poland, and amongst many others who supplied him with the documents of their families for centuries, were the descendants of the cruel baron Basilus, among the writings of this house, discovered one giving a description of the site and manner of the building—the entrance to it—the date of its construction—and a long roll containing the names of those whom the builder had there compelled to work on their existence. The young prince having privately ascertained the truth of the scroll, was wise enough to conceal the discovery from all, (even his father) until he came to the throne, and he entrusted it only to his confidential friend and agent, the aged Clotaldus.

As Clarin and his companion, sitting on the brow of the cliff above them, anxiously into the chasm beneath them they observed the light again glimmer from the recess under the rock. The younger of the travellers was standing in an instant. "Clarin, there it is again—let us descend."

"How shall we descend over the rock," said Clarin, "and as for the way, I had as lief even wait here till it comes." "I see," said the other, "a little rill which drops from rock to rock, and flows across the centre of that small level space before the light; and look there is a stream at our feet."

"I can only bring us to the other," said Clarin, rising, "but we can neither burrow like conies, nor bound like the stream—nevertheless have a good heart—we will try it." They followed the course of the stream as long as it continued to flow on passable soil, and had nearly proceeded a furlong gradually descending, when a sudden turn it brought them before two large rocks, which meeting above, formed a kind of rude archway under which the water continued to gurgle onwards.

"We shall be buried alive," said Clarin, in answer to the proposal of the Muscovite youth that they should enter. "I shall never see the day but you again."

creatures that I see around me, punished for an offence of which they are no less guilty than I. The bird that visits me in my solitude no sooner feels the budding down upon its wings, than springing forward, it hurls like a winged flower upon the wind, now dividing the blue heavens in its rapid flight, and now returning to nestle in its former home, while I, with a greater capability of appreciating the joys of freedom, am doomed to chains and slavery. Nature has no sooner tinged with her magic pencil the soft and spotted fur of the beast that prowls among the crags and heath of yonder mountain than, starting boldly and fiercely from his lair, he flies to the free desert to shun the tyranny of man, more fierce than he. I have more cause to hate that tyranny, and less liberty to avoid it. The breath beneath me, the weeds and foam, no sooner sees his scaly sides reflected in the wave, than darting from the light he measures the vast profundity of its liquid centre, while I with more will to fly to the shelter of darkness, have less power to indulge it. I see the streamlet leave its bed and gliding like a serpent among the flowers, break its silvery side against the pebbles above, while, with a sweet murmur the meadow opens its painted bosom to receive it, and I with more need of such a friend have none to give me aid or succour. When I think of these things, my bosom swells and burns, as though a furnace were labouring at its centre, and I become in the anger of my soul to see the man, what justice, what reason is there in denying to man the sweet privilege the Almighty has given to the creatures of the air, the forest, and even to the inanimate waste of water?"

Have you heard him, Clarin? said the Muscovite, his appearance strikes me with terror, and yet his speech has filled me with compassion. The strange inhabitant of the dungeon here suddenly turned and exclaimed, "who heard my speech? Is that Clotaldus?" "Alas! no," exclaimed the terrified youth, "it is only a wretched being, whose ill-fortune has been conducted him to your vault, and who has unintentionally overheard your complaints."

"Then," said he rushing fiercely on and seizing him, "your fate is certain, for I will not suffer you to go hence with the story of my weakness." The youth flung himself at his feet. Mercy, mercy! said he, "do not torment me thus, do not despise the prayer of a stranger on your own threshold." Sigismund (for such was the name of the prisoner) paused and relaxed the sternness of his grasp. At the same moment the moonlight fell upon the upturned countenance of the kneeling stranger. It was the first sight which beauty he had ever known, and he wondered at the influence which he felt rushing to his soul.

"My voice," said he, "has moved me—my person astonishes me—my glance troubles my senses; who art thou? For I know so little of the world that this tower has been of thy birth, if this can be called life, I have only beheld this rude desert, where I drag on my wretched existence, a lump of inactive earth, a breathing corpse. I have never seen or spoken to more than one man who, alone, knows my misfortunes, and who, as if to make my slavery more intolerable, tells me daily and hourly of a free and glorious world without—of the wonders of the heavens, of the changes of kingdoms and empires, and of myriads of beings like myself, in all but my chains and dungeons, and yet, amidst all my griefs, and amidst all the wonders that have at times delighted and amazed me, thou art the first thing whose glances have calmed the fury of my rage. I look on thee and wonder, and look again and wonder still more—my eyes feel as though they would never be satiated with gazing on thee; yet the sensation which they convey to my soul resembles what I have been told of the thrill of death. I will not slay thee. Beautiful creature, arise and take thy way."

Clarin had not time to expostulate or explain, when Sigismund lifted him from the sand, and cast him into the fountain. He scrambled to the other side as quickly as he could, and made his way under the opposite cliff, grumbling at the knees of his captor, and of his captor's companion, being the cause, might share in its effect.

you took it in its height and arrested it, I look on you, and wonder; and at every glance I wonder yet more. Tell me what power have you? If I wished to hurt you, I could not do it now! Who are you? I thought myself," said the stranger as Sigismund suffered him to replace his bonnet, "the most afflicted wretch that ever knew mourning, until heaven directed my steps to your prison house for a lesson of thanksgiving and contentment. If it be indeed true that we are naturally so selfish, that not even the dew of compassion falls so soothingly on a wounded heart as the tears of a fellow sufferer, hear my grief and be pleased."

At this moment he was interrupted by a voice from within. "Guards of the tower!" it exclaimed, "Awake, ho! Your trust has either been neglected or betrayed. The precincts of our keeping are no longer safe. A wounded heart has a fellow sufferer, hear my grief and be pleased."

Clotaldus signed to an attendant, who walked toward the larger gate and touched a spring on the right. In an instant Sigismund was dragged by his chain within the tower, and the double gate shut to with a crash, leaving him within, frowning with rage. Clotaldus mocked at him. "I think," said he, "it were as well for your dependants that you did not boast so loudly; why do you not come forth and aid them. But he spoke of them. I see but one—guarda search the prison."

In a few minutes Clarin was dragged out to a light place, and brought before Clotaldus. Both travellers fell on their knees, and in one voice begged for mercy. He bade them surrender their arms; Clarin's staff was on the ground in an instant? The youth was silent, and did not even offer to ungrind the light sword which hung at his side. "Then," said Clotaldus, "you seem unwilling to submit, guarda, seek him!" "Hold!" said he, "to your chief alone will I submit my sword; then placing it in his hands he continued, "wretch that I am that I should be compelled to yield, that sword before I have proved its virtue. Take it; if I must die, I prefer it to a cowardly flight, and to your indignation trusting in that alone, to quit my honor of a deep offence."

Clotaldus took the sword, half drew it from the sheath, and placing its point against the earth, continued for some time gazing on the stranger's face. "If this be true," said he, "I shall be obliged to you, who have given this sword?" "A woman," replied the youth. "What is her name?" "That is a secret I cannot now reveal."

itself, was grand and inspiring; it was the sweetest time of the year—the close of the spring. The swell of the music, in its intervening pauses, contrasted with the gentle voice of the mountain rills, and the song of the wild birds that woke with the day—the waving of the banners in their pride of blazony and display—the marshalling of the troops in their shining armour—the covering of the spirited steeds that pranced and bounded beneath their riders as if they shared in their enthusiasm and in the jealousy of valour, all was glorious—all was elevating. Even the withered and hoary Clotaldus, accustomed as he was in the splendor of military show, paused on the hill-side, and leaned on Clarin's staff to enjoy it.

"Who is that," said Clarin to a soldier "with the hat and white plume, his casque hanging at his saddle-bow? I think I should know him—but who is he?" "Astolpho of Muscovy," replied the guard. The young traveller's eye had been fixed on the same object, but he dared not to ask the question; when he heard Clarin make it he turned yet paler than usual; and when he was answered, his cheek and brow were covered with a rushing tide of crimson.

Before Clotaldus had given orders to the guards to renew their march, both had resumed their sickly whiteness. They passed on and mingled with the general camp. "Princess," said Astolpho, after he had alighted, "I have sought this interview for many reasons; and I would not have sought it were I not aware that Estrella herself was not of a mind that could delight in the effect of causeless bickering among relatives. Will Estrella guess the means have to myself proposed, or will she insist on a detail?" he continued, laying his sword at her feet, and pausing for a reply.

There was a mixture of pride and meanness in his manner; it was an attempt at condescension, influenced by self interest, and checked at half-way by the lord of the ascendancy among all his affections. He would have succeeded better with Estrella had he either bowed him down entirely, or stood erect in his haughtiness; even as it was she did not despise him. "It is this not mockery, prince," said she, "what is such. You lay a sword at my feet, and you have thousands behind ready, at the raising of your finger, to shed the blood of my blood for steel!" "It only depends on you, lovely cousin, to say whether such shall be the case. One word, one look from you, will make this plain a scene of death or of joy."

Do you mean to woo, cousin?" said Estrella. "Do I look on you and speak with you?" replied Astolpho. "You have struck on an original mode. It is in order to commend your constancy, that while you address me you wear another on your heart." Astolpho quickly put his hand and found indeed a portrait which had escaped from his vest and hung loosely forward. He thrust it into his bosom, and muttering something between his teeth, and biting his lip with vexation, he said, "Alas! cousin," said he, "what a simple supposition you have made. This portrait I why you shall speedily be satisfied with this portrait is. Lisardo, look out and see if that dust is not caused by the advance of Basilus—yes, it is his troop—they now enter on the ground—"tis his train indeed."

their channels and rushed upon the tillage near their banks. Amidst this general confusion, and dismay, a cry from the chamber of my wife, told me the hour was come. I burst into the room, and beheld a terrible fulfillment of her fears. Before me, in the middle of the room, stood her offspring, darting his keen, and wondering glances all around. His hands were covered with gore, and his hair, shaggy and black, hung upon his shoulders. I started in horror and disgust from the monstrous creation, and turned my eyes on the unhappy mother. She was already dead. A matricide in his birth he had, at his entrance upon the world, sacrificed the life of the being who fostered him. He walked, and looked around him, as if he had been a creature of years, not minutes. Terrified and grieved at the event, I locked the room, and set my seat upon the door, while I proceeded to consult my mystic aids in another wing of the palace. After I had sufficiently empowered myself to begin my calculations, I found that Sigismund was born under that fatal horoscope where the sun and the moon meet in the middle heaven, and contend in hues of blood. That most deadly of all the horoscopic symbols, Canada Draconis of the fiery dragon, under whose influence scarce one in a million is born, was visible in the right house of his horoscope. From all my observations, I deduced—that Sigismund, if suffered to live in freedom, would cure Poland with his sword; would be deadly of all the horoscopic symbols, Canada Draconis of the fiery dragon, under whose influence scarce one in a million is born, was visible in the right house of his horoscope. 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