

Wheels of Anarchy

The Story of an Assassin; as Recited from the Papers and Personal Narrative of his Secretary, Mr. Bruce Ingersoll

By MAX PEMBERTON

CHAPTER XI (Continued).

There were five in all in the opposite room, three playing dominoes at a table in the centre, one asleep upon a crazy sofa, the third writing by the candle's light. Curtained at the sides, the lattice in the centre had no curtain for a reason presently to be disclosed. The men themselves were apparently of diverse nations, a Russian, a Spaniard, and three Germans; for so I placed them by sight, and my own sufficient experience. That they also dreaded espionage their quick movements and frequent questions made as plain as day. There were not two minutes together when one or other did not open the casement, and peer down very cautiously into the street below. I wondered now that Mr. Cavanagh had been able to come to this house at all; I could not understand it.

"My house, Ingersoll," he whispered, as he drew me toward the window— "do not so near that you can get an observation." The house I have owned while those gentlemen have honored this street with their presence. Do you recognize Jean Ferrers, sailmaker, and his son, Michael? Well, we are that pretty pair, the originals being where their friends will not soon discover them. There's a good reason to stop Schnapps before the Imp gets into our bones. Try some, Ingersoll; tell me that it keeps your spirits up, and that you are just as comfortable here as in your nice little room upon the Flabarrac; I will speak in this tone, but I came to see that some natural excitement of the situation prompted it, and I do not doubt that the bottle of Schnapps had really belonged to the old sailmaker from whom his agents took the house. Of course, we never opened it, or thought of opening it. Nor was I insane enough to think of smoking; but just sitting there in the black dark, I watched the men with him and waited. I knew not for what. If danger threatened us, I did not realize its presence. The very of the house itself, the clear figures of the hunted men—all this and our situation, the suspense and the oddity of it, kept me as engrossed as a man at a play. Why had he brought me here, and for what? That I might take a second lesson from him? Indeed it appeared to be that.

This view I had quite accepted when I settled down to watch the men and to try, of my own intelligence, to frame some answer to a riddle so perplexing. That the gang was connected in some way with the outrage I had read upon the Place Verte I never doubted. It even came to me that one of them might be the notorious anarchist Dubarrac; and this conviction growing, I put it bluntly to Mr. Cavanagh. "Which is Dubarrac?" I asked, the question escaping me almost involuntarily. Evidently it pleased him that I should have asked it.

"Ah, you are learning, I see," he exclaimed.

"Well, Dubarrac is writing a letter to his friends in Spain, telling them of this morning's success."

"Why did you not let the police know that he is here?"

"Because the police are not clever enough to catch him; or if they catch him, they would fail to connect the men and to try, of my own intelligence, to frame some answer to a riddle so perplexing."

He did not answer me. The man Dubarrac had ceased to write, and was listening intently as though his quick ear caught an echo of footsteps in the street below. Again he came to the window and peered down into the shadows. Then he whistled very softly, and the whistle was answered from some room above our own.

Here was a surprising discovery if you like! I had believed that we were quite alone in the house, and you may imagine what it meant to me, and to the others watching with us, but there must be Dubarrac's own friends; since they had answered his signal.

The discovery, I say, set my blood tingling as a blow might have done. I felt to a kind of panic which prompted me to fly the house at any cost; to escape to the light and the life of the street; or, failing that, to face the peril and have done with it. From this cowardice Mr. Cavanagh himself saved me. Not a thought came into my head that his amazing mind did not instantly anticipate.

"Is not the Chevalier musical, Ingersoll?"

"Then it was the Chevalier who whistled. What a fool I have been!"

"You did not think of it—that is all. The Chevalier can whistle very nicely, it appears, but his notes do not altogether please our friends opposite. Observe that they are far from being at their ease. Look at the man Dubarrac—he has actually forgotten to finish his love-letter, and is loading a pistol instead."

It was as he said. A whisper of alarm ran along the street, and brought these men to their feet in a flash. Away went the dominoes; out went the light. I had an instant's vision of five terror-stricken faces, and then the scene was hidden from me.

"Back, Ingersoll, back," Mr. Cavanagh whispered. "We have no longer the protection of their light. Did you bring the pistol that Edward bought for you? Very well; you may need it presently. Now wait and watch."

He drew me back into the darkness, and there stood at my side waiting. What was happening in the street, I cannot exactly say; but presently I heard the shouting of many feet, and quite suddenly, without any preparatory warning whatever, a great shout as though a mob had collected beneath our windows, and clamored for a prisoner. This feat cry, like the yell of a hundred human wolves, was dreadful beyond imagination to hear. I stood aghast at it; afraid of the sound of my own voice.

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My friends have often asked me how I came to be the silent witness of such a scene as this; why I neither uttered a protest, nor accused Mr. Cavanagh of dealing unfairly with me. The answer lies, perhaps, in the absolute justice of that which was done, and in my own conviction, not then understood, but latent in my mind, that he acted in the interests of humanity, and by his fellow men, must be judged.

If this be not so, and cowardice was at the root of it, cowardice and cunning, fear of him and fear of myself, then let the record stand, and with it, that appeal to circumstance which alone remains to me. For how could I have interfered? What could I have done? There we stood in the room, light anywhere, yells and hoots from the street below, my conviction firm that Jehan Cavanagh's agents were in this very house; there we stood and waited, and I knew that I was to mine either to save the assassins or to repulse them. As much as that of a man who, single-handed, would go out against an army; the strength of a child in the presence of a street full of authority of the humblest soldier who has heard his general's order and fears to obey it.

No, for a truth, I held my tongue as any man among us would have held it. The swiftly changing scene caught me in a potent grip of curiosity which no argument might shake off. I listened to those fearful yells and hoots with a dread and an expectation I may never define. My eyes seemed glued to the darkened windows opposite, as if I sought to avert my gaze even for an instant.

What was happening within that house? Had the men escaped, then, that they gave no sign? Were all our cunning plots vain? To this, I would have answered yes; but for the appearance, wholly unexpected, of one of them upon the window sill I had been watching. There he stood as plain to be seen as any nothing figure upon a theatre's stage. And I bear witness that it was awful to hear the yells with which the mob discovered him; a ghastly spectacle to look upon his face as he turned his eyes and his head up to the heavens, or across to that very room in which we were waiting. I discerned his purpose; a child would have guessed it. He would bridge the gap between the caves and the street, come across to us. So much evidently he and his had long contemplated doing, for willing hands aided him to do, and I am to pay you a thousand a year. Shall we say that it is a bargain?

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"I think that you will—from my point of view. Come now, could you not write to-day that article on the business at Antwerp—I mean something about the affair in the Place Verte? Give yourself up to it, and try to tell the English people exactly what happened. Don't mince matters; exaggerate. Neither would serve our purpose; but I want you to go a little deeper down than the descriptive writer who has headlines and dates; and you must ask your old question again as to the individual right where the State has failed. What am I, the individual, to do? What are my rights when the law is either powerless or afraid? Shall I let these madmen murder my children, or, being influential enough, shall I take up arms against them? You will not put it quite so bluntly for that; would be indiscreet. But encourage the idea of private initiative; build it abroad, let men discuss it. That is what I want for a beginning, and you will do it better than any other."

I reflected upon the matter for a little while, and did not hesitate to express my difficulties, as I had already expressed them to Mr. Cavanagh. "There would have to be altruistic assumption," I said at last; "you cannot glorify in a life in civilised countries. Mr. Cavanagh, you cannot give more power to the law and the right to be both judges and executioners. This would be the English view; I am sure of it. But I think you might very well, and I think you should, in the law of the land, and claim the individual right should those fail."

"Exactly, Ingersoll; and since it has been demanded, and they have failed, what is your authority against the man who is the head of the law and says to do what you have failed to do; I will be the master of these people: I will devote my life and fortune to that end; I will have my children from the blows that have been raised upon it. Thus it was, and thus the end came. For the man at length released his hold and fell; and the yells of the mob ceased upon that instant, and a dead silence ensued."

burghers of Antwerp have come to know why Dubarrac has killed their wives and children! They are good burghers and some of them have been in prison. If our friend over yonder falls into their hands, they will tear him limb from limb. I do not exactly know how much our friend the Chevalier has paid them, but it is a considerable sum, and—good God, what voices they have!"

The mocking tone, you see, could not support this new evidence of his own handiwork. The brief talk had told me much, but this was not the time to reflect upon it. There was a mob below our windows, and this mob waited to avenge the poor creatures who had been murdered on the Place Verte. There was a moment of an excitement surpassing anything I have ever known. The truth came upon us as a beam of light. We were here not to catch these men, but to kill them; not for the law's justice, but that of a rabble paid for their ferocity, lusting for blood. The fact was indisputable; as indisputable as it was inevitable.

My friends have often asked me how I came to be the silent witness of such a scene as this; why I neither uttered a protest, nor accused Mr. Cavanagh of dealing unfairly with me. The answer lies, perhaps, in the absolute justice of that which was done, and in my own conviction, not then understood, but latent in my mind, that he acted in the interests of humanity, and by his fellow men, must be judged.

If this be not so, and cowardice was at the root of it, cowardice and cunning, fear of him and fear of myself, then let the record stand, and with it, that appeal to circumstance which alone remains to me. For how could I have interfered? What could I have done? There we stood in the room, light anywhere, yells and hoots from the street below, my conviction firm that Jehan Cavanagh's agents were in this very house; there we stood and waited, and I knew that I was to mine either to save the assassins or to repulse them. As much as that of a man who, single-handed, would go out against an army; the strength of a child in the presence of a street full of authority of the humblest soldier who has heard his general's order and fears to obey it.

No, for a truth, I held my tongue as any man among us would have held it. The swiftly changing scene caught me in a potent grip of curiosity which no argument might shake off. I listened to those fearful yells and hoots with a dread and an expectation I may never define. My eyes seemed glued to the darkened windows opposite, as if I sought to avert my gaze even for an instant.

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