

# The Castles of Ills

BY ARTHUR HENRY VESSEY  
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CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.  
The suite attendant was at the end of a gloomy corridor. I threw open one of the narrow windows. The noisy stream below, beating futilely against the walls, almost deafened the voice of the servant as he asked if he could be of assistance to me. I looked out. There was a sheer drop of some 50 feet.

That fact vaguely disconcerted me. The words of Dr. Starva, was a faring note that sobred my excitement. When I had dressed I was almost prepared to find the massive door of my chamber locked or barred. I had entered the epiderm's without any thought. To escape might be less simple.

The dinner was simply but well served in a small dining-room. Had my situation been less serious I might have felt some humor at the elaborate deference shown me by my companions for the benefit of the two servants who waited on us. Even Dr. Starva, followed the lead of Madame de Varner in solemnity of conduct.

But did Madame de Varner believe me so complaisant a fool, that I, like another Bottom, I was expected in this modern Midsummer Night's Dream to accept this glib and unconvincing conviction? I became more and more convinced that she did not. Once she even referred to the events of the night before in such a manner that I believed her not ignorant of my true condition. If she were persuaded that I had been acting a part then, that would account for her confidence in expecting me to continue acting that part. It would give her encouragement that I was the willing tool she looked for.

And suppose that she really believed that, did she think that I expected no reward? She had hinted that in serving her ends I was to serve myself as well. But Madame de Varner was not the kind of woman to believe that a man would be allured by a promise so vague. Then the reward?

She had protested that she had not expected me to fall in love with her. She had protested that, but in the same breath she had confessed a half-resolve to bring me to her feet. Now as she exerted every charm of coquetry she was giving the lie to her own words. Oh, the reward was obvious enough, if I chose to take it.

"We will smoke our cigarettes in my favorite music room. You must hear Dr. Starva play the piano. You have had the piano carefully tuned, Jacques?"

"All is in readiness," replied the servant, as he preceded us with candles.

Dr. Starva had pushed back his chair eagerly. For the first time since I had met him his face lost something of its heavy sullen expression.

"My fingers are not the practice," he said modestly. "The stamp with Madame de Varner—ah, that is worth while."

We were in the music room that Madame de Varner had described to me so enthusiastically the day before. Dimly lighted with wax candles, paneled in dark oak to the ceiling, the floor waxed and polished to a dazzling lustre, it was a room almost bare, but it had its melancholy charm. There was little furniture. At one end of the room was a row of carved seats built into the wall. There were no pictures or tapestries. The one touch of color was the vivid flame of blazing logs.

"The strife of the world, its lies and its shams, I leave behind when I enter here," said Madame de Varner sentimentally. "Look, I throw open this casement. The fresh air comes to my voice. Beyond, you see the moonlight on the valleys, and still beyond, the mountains. This is your seat. Once this was a chapel; in these carved seats the monks chanted vespers; in the seat of honor which you occupy drowsed the father superior. When you hear the enchanting melodies of Dr. Starva you will not have lived in vain."

This hour at least was innocent. Perhaps it was the lull before the storm, but why should I look for clouds when the heavens were clear?

The long, darkly lighted room, its shining floor seeming to rise and fall mysteriously in the flickering firelight, the white moonlight that struggled feebly through the casement windows—all had its charm. And these two adventurers, unscrupulous and conscienceless, had abandoned themselves for the moment to the joy of their music.

I looked over toward Madame de Varner. The shaded light of the candles fell on her white shoulders. The splendor of her beauty had never seemed more seductive.

content to forget the unpleasant task that was before me; to invest even the monster by her side in the garb of humanity.

The servant who had shown me to my rooms appeared at the door, looking warningly to him that he should not disturb them, and motioned that he bring the letters to me. He did so without either of the maudlin notices of his entrance.

The sonata of Beethoven swept to its glorious climax. I started to my feet to take the letters to Madame de Varner.

But without a pause Dr. Starva began a tender romance. The woman sat at the piano, her hands falling idly to her lap.

Again she smiled across the room at me. But now it was no longer spontaneous. The lips held something of that indefinable cruelty of that woman of the Renaissance made famous by De Vinci. I frowned; I refused to meet that smile.

Then, as I looked down deliberately, I felt myself turn pale. A shudder convulsed me.

I was gazing in horror at an en-



His Hairly Hand Closed over the Letter.

velope that bore the interlarded stamp of Bulgaria, the death-mask.

Did she know the ghastly significance of that double stamp? Was she one of the desperate band that had doomed Ferdinand?

I resolved to play a hazardous experiment. I would thrust that stamp under her eyes without warning. Conscienceless as she thought she was, she would find it difficult to repress a tremor if she were guilty.

Dr. Starva's head was still bent lowly over his 'cello. I reached the piano without disturbing him.

I placed the letters in front of Madame de Varner, the envelope that bore the death-mask on the top of the little pile. I watched her closely.

She took the letters carefully in her hands. The stamp at once arrested her attention. She regarded it with a frank curiosity. She even called my attention to it.

"How much do you know?" his blazing eyes asked. "And if I do know?" mine answered.

Slowly Madame de Varner opened her eyes. Equally anxious, Starva and myself watched her recover consciousness.

I was quite convinced now that she had not been aware of the significance of that stamp. The horror that had deprived her of her reason for the time being proved that. The servant whose with which Dr. Starva had snatched the letter from her lifeless hand and had concealed it, bore out my conviction. Then if my surmises were correct, would she communicate to Dr. Starva her newly acquired knowledge?

"It was the heat, I think, and the fatigue of the journey," were the first words she spoke. I heard them with relief. Beyond question she wished to conceal from Starva that she had seen the death-mask.

Whether he was satisfied with her reasons was less certain. He paced the length of the room, his head bent in thought; his interlarded fingers, moving agitatedly, betrayed his concern. Madame de Varner carefully

avoided my gaze and played idly. But I noticed that if Dr. Starva had been enraged that she had seen the letter with its death-mask, Madame de Varner was anxious that he should not know of the existence of the letter that had excited her. It had fallen to the floor. When his back was turned she had stooped swiftly and placed it in the bosom of her dress.

Was the letter she was so careful to hide from him merely personal? Or was it an message of moment? If so, if it were concerned with the strange games these two were playing, it meant that either mistrusted the other.

I welcomed such a possibility. That fact might simplify my own action. At least it showed that Madame de Varner was not abjectly the creature of this infamous second.

The strained situation was happily relieved by the entrance of the servant who had brought in the letters. Instinctively the three of us assumed a certain unconcern as to the manner of the world before servants.

He brought a card to Madame de Varner. She took it from the saucer quietly, but her hand trembled as she read the name engraved on it.

We had all three heard that name before. Its crisp, Anglo-Saxon nomenclature gave one the impression of a strong, dogged personality that pursued and yet pursued.

"Captain Reginald Forbes!"

"That was the name she read in a low voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

Captain Forbes intrudes.

There was a silence lasting several seconds. Paule was written on both their faces. Evidently they had looked for so much intrusion as this—shores all for no visitor—so incontinent as the king's messenger. They had confidently counted on a clear field for the execution of their plans. That

they should have been crossed in the chateau so easily and so quickly threw them into consternation. Dr. Starva was the first to recover his presence of mind.

"When does he wish to see this time?" he demanded harshly.

"He asks for his Excellency, the English ambassador," replied the servant, looking at me askance. "But if he is engaged, or not, we will be anxious to speak with madam."

At first I was surprised that the man had not brought the card directly to myself. It was strange that he should ignore me. It was not until I understood that I was Sir Mortimer. But if he were in the confidence of Madame de Varner he would do precisely what he did.

Frankly, the coming of Captain Forbes at this time was a surprise scarcely less disagreeable for me than for them. To-morrow, or the day after, he would have been perhaps only a welcome guest. But the intrusion was premature. It interfered with my own plans as well as theirs.

More than that, I could have wished him in that position to forewarn him, to explain my tactics. It looked as if he were again in danger of being caught red-handed in a criminal deception. More than ever would Captain Forbes be surprised if I was one of the conspirators if he discovered at this moment that I was not Sir Mortimer.

The man and woman conversed to gether excitedly in a barbaric tongue. Dr. Starva, who was now vehemently advocating some plan; Madame de Varner opposing it. But the shock to which she had been subjected previous to the coming of Captain Forbes had left her somewhat unbalanced. Hilbert the man had been sulkily sullen to the woman; now his animal strength fought for the ascendancy. He was brushing away her agitation, and he who he commanded the servant:

"Show this Captain Forbes to the armory. I shall see him myself."

Again he spoke fiercely to Madame de Varner. She listened to him in silence, her eyes cast down. He strode to the door, stood there a moment hesitating, then left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Madame de Varner remained where he had left her, trembling violently, her hands covering her face. This was my opportunity to appeal to the woman, and not the adventures. I took her unresistingly and led her to one of the carved seats.

"Madame de Varner, it is a desperate game you are playing," I said, sternly yet gently. "I don't know what the stakes are, but you are not going to win them."

A white hand clung to my coat sleeve. "Why do you say that?" she cried, staring at me with affrighted eyes.

I pointed silently to the card she still held in her hand.

"There is one factor to be reckoned with," I tossed her head in defiance.

"Dr. Starva has reckoned with him already, my friend. Perhaps not in the best way, but effectually at least. And the other?"

"Well, there is myself." "If you were an enemy that might be more serious. I admit. But I have reckoned with you. You are to be my friend. You are to help me."

"That remains to be seen. But the third and most serious factor is treachery," I added quietly.

"My God! Treachery!" "Do you trust Dr. Starva absolutely? Have you not noticed that the death-mask had as little meaning for him as for you, until I showed you that significance?"

"But you understood its meaning as well as he. Who are you that you should have this knowledge?"

"I know, perhaps, more than you think, Madame de Varner."

"It is incredible," she cried passionately. "The Countess Sarashov, should be in the dark, while an American tourist—"

The name had slipped out in her anger; she bit her lips.

I might as well need you no consternation. I might as well called you by that name several hours ago.

"Since you know so much," she said in bitter disgust, "perhaps you know the service I expect to ask of you."

That remark made a shrewd guess at even that.

She sank back, her fingers interlocked supporting her head. She remained some time in gloomy thought.

"I am a poor creature," I heard a faint sob; "I am a poor creature. Then there was quiet again. I was glistening at my companion. She was listening intently, her hands clutching the carved seat.

"Bah, I think I am a hysterical schoolgirl," She shrugged her shoulders in self-contempt. "Say that you know everything, monster, so much the better. It will save the trouble of explaining on the morrow. For I shall go on with my plan. There is danger, yes; but I have expected danger. It is too late to retreat. I have risked all on a single throw. I shall win. Say that there is no other way. I shall know how to deal with it. He is not indispensable. You, my friend, I have a plan that cannot fail."

"If you insist," I said obediently. "Your plan will fall because, if Dr. Starva is not necessary to its success, I am. And I—"

"You will perform the service I shall give you. I hope, I trust, that you will do it. Not for myself, perhaps, but that you may bring happiness and peace to a down-trodden people."

Age does not make us childish, as some say; it finds us true children—Gosche.

FINDS LONG LOST SON.  
Search of Mrs. Pebbles is Rewarded After Two Years.

Edinburg.—Mrs. Mary Pebbles' search of two years for her son, who had suddenly left home, has been rewarded. Mrs. Pebbles spent thousands of dollars in the search and traveled over many miles of the country. Finally, broken down with grief and in very poor health, Mrs. Pebbles departed for California to recuperate. She had been gone but a short time when notification was received from an elder son that the lost boy had been discovered by him on the streets of Lincoln, Cal. He had enlisted in the United States army.

SUPPOSED MURDER MYSTERY.  
Authorities Looking Into Death of a Woman Buried Without a Coffin.

Bloomington.—A supposed murder mystery of long standing is being investigated by the authorities of Grand County, while workers were making an excavation recently they unearthed the bones of a woman who, it is thought, was foully dealt with. The case is estimated at 40 years, at the time of death. No trace of a coffin could be discovered and it is generally believed the body was quickly buried after the commission of the crime.

DIDN'T THINK BIGAMY WRONG.  
Young Woman with Husband in Russia Marries Another in America.

Kewanee.—Mrs. Milka Bere, a country young woman, was sent to the county jail for bigamy. She came from Russia with relatives a year ago, leaving a husband there and subjecting her to a year's imprisonment in America. Recently she met Michael Tarbuck here and decided to marry him, when he told her she could marry again in this country without violating the law. Tarbuck had made an enemy of Paul Tamovovich by suing him for \$30 and the latter, knowing Tarbuck's sin had another husband, swore out a warrant against him. The woman admitted the charges but pleaded ignorance of the law. Tarbuck has disappeared, leaving her to face the matter alone. She could not furnish bonds so was taken to jail.

NEW EDIFICE FOR PIKE.  
Florence Dedicates a Handsome Church for the Methodists.

Pittsfield.—For 70 or more years, and before Pittsfield was in existence, Florence on the Illinois river, 11 miles from here, has been a place of note and of importance. The commercial mercantile, some of the great fortunes of this city having had their foundations laid in its mercantile business at that small river landing.

In all these years, Florence has never had a church edifice or place of worship, but she has at last awakened to a realization of her spiritual needs, and the Methodist people have dedicated a handsome new church to the service of God. The lot on which the building stands was donated to the society by Capt. Ross Matthews, a prominent banker of this city and is a beautiful event in the church structure is a neat and jarkly specimen of architecture.

Old Notes Turning Up.  
Litchfield.—Eight of the signers of the notes for the construction of the Belt railroad were summoned to appear before Squire Grassel in Hillsboro. The signers of the notes contained that the notes have gone by default to the Belt railroad has not been built. The notes date back to the beginning of the American Radiator company, when the proprietors asked the citizens to raise \$30,000 to build the Belt railroad.

Files a Will Contest.  
Clinton.—State's Attorney Miller has prepared a petition for letters of administration to be granted the public administrator of DeWitt county is the estate of John Danaher in order that the validity of the will made by Danaher may be tested. It is claimed that the dead man made a will, leaving about \$13,000 worth of property near Wapella to a Catholic priest of Bloomington.

Boy Beaten Until Inevitable.  
Danville.—Ola Bensley, a colored lad, has been taken in by the police authorities and will be declared dependent. Bensley, who has resided with a step-mother, has been beaten until insensibility was induced by her. His head contains many marks which are the result of injuries inflicted with a poker.

Telephone Company Buys Site.  
Decatur.—The Home Telephone company of this city, purchased property from J. R. Race on which they will erect a three-story building at an expense of \$10,000. The property bought was occupied by an old valueless building and \$12,000 was paid for the location.

Youth Stabs Another.  
Quincy.—Robert Reagan, son of Quincy's late city marshal, is being fatally injured in St. Mary's hospital, his child, suffering from knife wounds in his legs. The wounds are the result of the slaying of Thomas Clarke, Jr., aged 17 years.

New Church for McLeanboro.  
McLeansboro.—The contract for the construction of a new \$15,000 Methodist Episcopal church here has been awarded to Edward Bell, of Grayville.

Death in Aged Woman's Pipe.  
Rockford.—Mrs. Lavina Crosby, of Ridout, 94 years old, set fire to her clothing while lighting her pipe, and was burned to death.

Boys in Jail for Men's Death.  
Joliet.—Five boys who unwittingly caused the death of Thomas Driscoll, a trainman of the Santa Fe railroad, were fined \$100 each by Justice Howland and sentenced to the county jail to work out the fine. The boys appropriated a hand car to take them swimming. They left the car on the main track, where an engine ran into it. Driscoll was riding on the pilot of the engine and was killed. The boys held are Louis Dupichan, Andrew Kurtska, William Rankin, John Konover and Frank Novack.

Dragged by Runaway Horse.  
Carlinville.—Charles Seaman, of this city, was badly injured by being dragged by a runaway horse he attempted to stop.