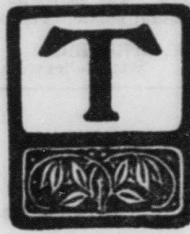


Monsieur Beaucaire

By BOOTH TARKINGTON,
Author of "The Gentleman From Indiana" and "The
Conquest of Canaan."

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CHAPTER I.



HE young Frenchman did very well what he had planned to do. His guess that the duke would cheat proved good. As the unshod half dozen figures that had been standing noiselessly in the entryway stole softly into the shadows of the chamber he leaned across the table and smilingly plucked a card out of the big Englishman's sleeve.

"Merci, M. le Duc!" he laughed, rising and stepping back from the table.

The Englishman cried out, "It means the dirty work of silencing you with my bare hands!" and came at him.

"Do not move," said M. Beaucaire, so sharply that the other paused. "Observe behind you."

The Englishman turned and saw what trap he had blundered into, then stood transfixed, impotent, alternately scarlet with rage and white with the vital shame of discovery. M. Beaucaire remarked, indicating the silent figures by a polite wave of the hand, "Is it not a compliment to monsieur that I procure six large men to subdue him? They are quite devote' to me, and monsieur is alone. Could it be that he did not wish even his lackeys to know he play with the yo'ng Frenchman who Meestaire Nash does not like in the pomp room? Monsieur is unfortunate to have come on foot and alone to my apartment."

The duke's mouth foamed over with chaotic revilement. His captor smiled brightly and made a slight gesture, as one who brushes aside a boisterous insect. With the same motion he quelled to stony quiet a resentful impetus of his servants toward the Englishman.

"It's murder, is it, you carrion!" finished the duke.

M. Beaucaire lifted his shoulders in a mock shiver. "What words! No, no, no! No killing! A such word to a such host! No, no; not mur-r-der; only disgrace!" He laughed a clear, light laugh with a rising inflection, seeming to launch himself upon an adventurous quest for sympathy.

"You little devilish scullion!" spat out the duke.

"Tut, tut! But I forget. Monsieur has pursue' his studies of deportment amongs' his fellow countrymen."

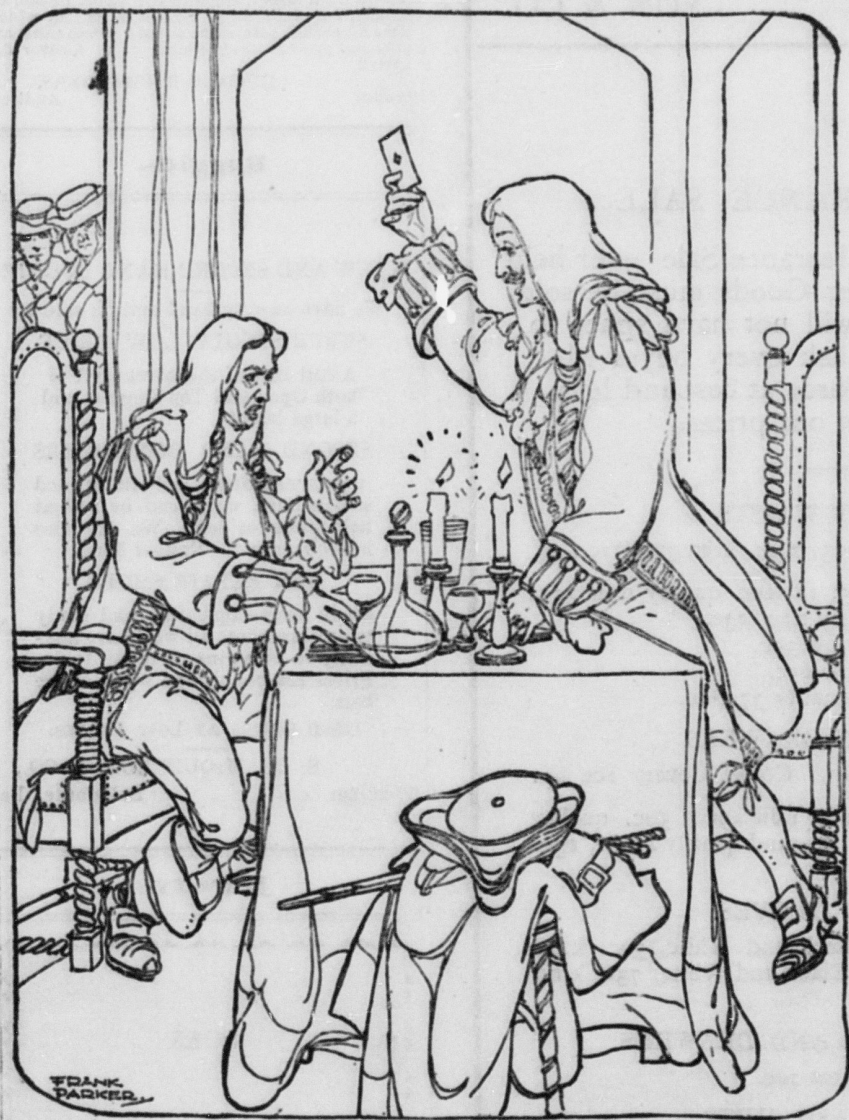
"Do you dream a soul in Bath will take your word that I—that I?"

"That M. le Duc de Winterset had a card up his sleeve?"

"You pitiful stroller, you stable boy, born in a stable!"

"Is it not an honor to be born where monsieur must have been bred?"

"You scurvy footboy, you greasy barber, you cutthroat groom!"



"MERCI, M. LE DUC!" HE LAUGHED.

"Overwhelm'!" The young man bowed with imperturbable elation. "M. le Duc appoint' me to all the office' of his household."

"You mustachioed fool, there are not five people of quality in Bath will speak to you!"

"No, monsieur, not on the parade; but how many come to play with me here? Because I will play always, night or day, for what one will, for any long and al-ways fair, monsieur."

"You outrageous varlet! Every one knows you came to England as the French ambassador's barber. What man of fashion will listen to you? Who will believe you?"

"All people, monsieur. Do you think I have not calculate', that I shall make a failure of my little enterprise?"

"Bah!"

"Will monsieur not reseat himself?" M. Beaucaire made a low bow. "So. We must not be too tire' for Lady Malbourne's rout. Ha, ha! And you, Jean, Victor, and you others, retire. Go in the hallway. Attend at the entrance, Francois. So. Now we shall talk.

Monsieur, I wish you to think very cool. Then listen; I will be briefly. It is that I am well known to be all, entire' hones'. Gamblist? Ah, yes, true and mos' profitable, but fair—al-ways fair. Every one say that. Is it not so? Think of it. And—is there never a w'isper come to M. le Duc that not all people belief him to play al-ways hones'? Ha, ha! Did it almos' be said to him las' year, after when he play' with Milor' Tappin'ford at the chocolate house?"

"You dirty scandal monger!" the duke burst out. "Tut!"

"Monsieur, monsieur!" said the Frenchman. "It is a poor valor to insult a hapless captor. Can he retort upon his own victim? But it is for you to think of what I say. True, I am not reco'nize on the parade; that my frien's who come here do not present me to their ladies; that Meestaire Nash has reboff' me in the pomp room. Still, am I not known for being hones' and fair in my play, and will I not be belief', even I, when I lif' my voice and charge you aloud with what is already w'isper'? Think of it! You are a noble, and there will be some hangdogs who might not fall away from you. Only such would be lef' to you. Do you want it tol'? And you can keep out of France, monsieur? I have lef' his service, but I have still the ear of M. de Mirepoix, and he know' I never lie. Not a gentleman will play you when you come to Paris."

The Englishman's white lip showed a row of scarlet dots upon it. "How much do you want?" he said.

The room rang with the gay laughter of Beaucaire. "I hol' your note' for seven hunder' pound'. You can have them, monsieur. Why does a such great man come to play M. Beaucaire? Because no one else willin' to play M. le Duc—he cannot pay. Ha, ha! So he come' to good M. Beaucaire. Money—ha, ha! What I want with money?"

His grace of Winterset's features were set awry to a sinister pattern. He sat glaring at his companion in a snarling silence.

"Money? Pouf!" snapped the little gambler. "No, no, no! It is that M. le Duc, impoverish', somewhat in a bad odor as he is, yet command the entree any-where—unless I— Ha, ha! Eh, monsieur?"

"Ha! You dare think to force me!"

M. Beaucaire twirled the tip of his slender mustache around the end of his white forefinger. Then he said, "Monsieur and me goin' to Lady Malbourne's ball tonight—M. le Duc and me!"

The Englishman roared, "Curse your impudence!"

"Sit quiet. Oh, yes, that's all. We goin' together."

"No!"

"Certain. I make all my little plan'. 'Tis all arrange'." He paused and then said gravely, "You goin' present me to Lady Mary Carlisle."

The other laughed in utter scorn. "Lady Mary Carlisle, of all women alive, would be the first to prefer the devil to a man of no birth, barber."

"'Tis all arrange'; have no fear. Nobody question monsieur's guest. You goin' take me tonight!"

"No!"

"Yes. And after—then I have the entree. Is it much I ask? This one little favor, and I never w'isper, never breathe that—it is to say, I am always forever silent of monsieur's misfortune."

"You have the entree!" sneered the other. "Go to a lackeys' rout and dance with the kitchen maids. If I would, I could not present you to Bath society. I should have cartels from the fathers, brothers and lovers of every wench and madam in the place, even I. You would be thrust from Lady Malbourne's door five minutes after you entered it."

"No, no, no!"

"Half the gentlemen in Bath have been here to play. They would know you, wouldn't they, fool? You've had thousands out of Bantison, Rakell, Guilford and Townbrake. They would have you lashed by the grooms as your ugly deserts are. You to speak to Lady Mary Carlisle! 'Od's blood! You! Also, dolt, she would know you if you escaped the others. She stood within a yard of you when Nash expelled you the pump room."

M. Beaucaire flushed slightly. "You think I did not see?" he asked.

"Do you dream that because Winterset introduces a low fellow he will be tolerated—that Bath will receive a barber?"

"I have the distinction to call monsieur's attention," replied the young man gayly, "I have renounce' that profession."

"Fool!"

"I am now a man of honor!"

"Faugh!"

[Continued next week.]

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