

The Reporter.

G. W. FOOTE, Editor and Publisher.

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STRANGE TRADITION.

It was a dreary winter night; the snow lay thick upon the ground and the wind went wandering through the narrow city streets...

The night that was to herald such a morrow was the very dreariest of the dreary winter. The wind had puffed out the tiny oil lamps that lit the streets with its first breath...

"Well, I don't suppose you've come here for the pleasure of looking at me, he said, with a ghastly grin. "That's your writing and your signing, I suppose?" He held forth a crumpled bit of paper as he spoke.

"You're curious, master, but I don't mind telling you. My price for the job is twenty golden pieces."

"Let me take your place and I'll make it ten times more," exclaimed his visitor. Richard, butcher, though he was, and fresh from the shambles of St. Ives, recoiled before the eager voice of the speaker.

"It is a plot to save the King," he said. "Save the King!" echoed his visitor, with a low laugh of bitter hatred.

"I'm sorry for your oath," replied Brandon; "you might have kept it time enow without waiting until now."

"Bah!" interrupted the man; "a blow in the park would have served your purpose, and the country would have been saved much cost and trouble; no one would have asked who struck the blow—"

"Man! I would be his executioner, not his assassin," exclaimed his visitor fiercely.

"You gentfolk draw nice distinctions," sneered Richard Brandon.

"Time flies," rejoined his visitor; there are no moments to waste in quibbling or useless argument. I make you an offer which will fill your purse and spare you an unpleasant task. It can be no pleasure to behead the King."

"But it would be an uncommonly unpleasant thing for me to put my head in his place."

"You run no risk," replied the other; "in case of any discovery or failure my head is in peril, not yours; but discovery is impossible. Your person is unknown to the prison authorities—unknown to the people outside—unknown even to Cromwell; in addition to which you are to be cloaked and masked. Who could tell what form or face is hidden by such disguise? It is but a few minutes work, then the execution is over, the executioner disappeared; no man will care to look upon his face or clasp him by the hand; they will shrink from him as though he were a pestilence stalking through the land. Decide quickly. There is the money."

"How know I that?" said Brandon, irresolute and sorely tempted. "I was chosen for my skill; you are no professional, and may be but a bungler at the work. I am only a butcher, a slayer of innocent beasts, and I would not be the torturer of a King."

His visitor glanced keenly round the room; there was a huge billet of wood lying in the corner. He took it up and placed it on the table.

"Give me an axe," he said, "and draw a chalk line where I shall strike." Without a word Richard Brandon rose up, took a piece of chalk, and drew a line across the wood. This done he produced an axe scrutinized it carefully, passed his finger over its keen sharp edge, and smiled, satisfied.

"It should be a rare tool for such fine work," he said. He balanced it for a moment in his hand, then lifted his arm and deviating not hair's breadth either to the right or to the left! As the wood fell on either side, with a heavy thud both started, drew a long breath, and looked on each other's faces. The professional slayer felt he was in the presence of a master hand.

The clock at Westminster Abbey was striking one as the mysterious stranger left the house, bearing with him the disguise, the credentials and the headman's axe.

Time turned his hour-glass and days and years fled past. The King's enemies had passed away, and generations of their children after them. More than one crowned King had laid his sceptre down at the door of mighty King Death.

The follies and the courtly vices of the Stuarts were fast fading into matters of history; and his Majesty King George II. occupied the English throne. The noble family of Stair had lost many of its valuable possessions during the political excitements of past times. At the present, the chief representative of the house of Stair had fallen into disfavour with the King, and contemplated withdrawing himself from the Court. He came of a proud and haughty race, and could not brook the idea of a formal dismissal, which might any hour befall him. He knew too well the character of his sovereign.

As he was walking along the Oxford road making a mental arrangement of his affairs, before retiring to his estates in Scotland, which he intended to do forthwith, a man stepped suddenly in front of him, and placed a letter in his hand. In some surprise at this mode of proceeding, he opened it and read as follows:—"My Lord—your bravery is well known; but will you have the courage to go to-morrow night to the entrance of Somerset House, where you will find one who (if you dare follow him) will conduct you to a part of the town not much frequented, but where you will find a man who is impatient to see you, and to discover secrets which are of more importance than you imagine, and which cannot be disclosed in a letter? If you are afraid this should be a plot on your part, bring nothing valuable about you, and come armed."

Lord Stair's surprise at reading this strange requisition may be easily imagined. At first he took it for a trick of some secret enemy, or some affair of gallantry, the heroine of which had probably her own reasons for such a mysterious summons. However, he determined to go, to feel the risk he was taking. He buckled on his sword, and providing himself with a pair of pistols went to the place appointed. There he found a man evidently waiting for him, who without speaking, made him a sign to follow. After walking for about an hour they came into a dilapidated and deserted street. His conductor knocked at the door of a small house; on its being opened he stood aside and said, "Walk in, my lord," and the door closed behind them. Holding his sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, Lord Stair followed his conductor, and was shown into a room the furniture of which was scanty and belonged to a bygone age. At the far end of the apartment there was seated, or rather half buried, in a huge leathern chair a very aged and decrepit man; so old, he seemed as though Time had forgotten him, though the passing years had left their mark upon his face, and scored and rescored it over and over until scarcely a vestige of Nature's original handiwork remained. Flowing down almost to his waist was a long white beard; a pair of unearthly eyes gleamed from beneath his frostred brows. On a table by his side was a small old-fashioned lamp. So soon as he found himself alone with this uninviting figure he advanced cautiously and, glancing suspiciously round him, grasped his sword. The old man's dull eyes became fixed upon his face, and a small faint voice inquired if he were Lord Stair.

Lord Stair answered in the affirmative, adding, "It is you, I presume, who have sent for me in this mysterious fashion."

"Kneel down, that I may look upon your face." Strangely impelled by his authoritative tone, as well as some irresistible feeling in his own heart, Lord Stair obeyed. The old man seized the lamp, and throwing the light full upon his visitor's face, gazed at it eagerly, he then stretched forth his yellow, skeleton hand, and touched his visitor's cheek. The younger man almost recoiled from it he felt as though the hand of death were writing its sign manual upon his brow.

"I see—I recognise the features of my race—it is my own lost youth come back again. Now, lift up your eyes and look on me."

Amazed, half stupefied, and yet strangely affected, Lord Stair did as he was bidden; but he saw nothing there to stir his memory. It was a face of an utter stranger, seemingly belonging to another world.

"Your eyes do not recognise me," he said impatiently; "but your soul must, for it is akin to mine. Aye, you may start, but the blood that rushes flaming to your face now comes from the same fountain as that which stagnates and freezes in mine. For years, long years, I've yearned to look upon the face of my own race and blood; a little while and I shall be content to die; but not yet—not yet. I have two things to do. I should not lie quiet in my grave if I left undone."

Guided by his directions Lord Stair drew a heavy box from beneath a bed.

"There, there," continued the old man, you will find papers which will repair the losses you and your family have sustained; deeds which will restore you to estates enjoyed wrongfully by others. With the aid of these you will easily recover property which is yours by descent; and you will read the story of my life, it is written there."

Lord Stair hastily scanned the documents and found that they were precisely what the old man hinted, and he raised his eyes to him in wondering gratitude. He would have taken his long hand and pressed it to his lips, but the old man snatched it away, murmuring—

"There's blood upon it. I've tried to hide it, but it's always there."

Lord Stair recoiled a step, struck by the sudden gesture, no less than by the words, and the shuddering ex-

pression that came into his companion's face. The old man, observing the revision his words created, put forth his hands pleadingly, as he added—

"No, don't leave me yet; I am an old man—a very old man, and I have repented. Oh God! have I not repented? Yea, from the very hour that I shook my thirst for vengeance, my blood began to cool, and I felt the brand of murder—cruel, cowardly murder—on my soul. I had myself from the eyes of mine own kindred, from the eyes of all the world, and I would fain have hidden from myself; but I have the stain of Cain upon my brow. I meant my secret to be buried with me, but it will not let me rest—it will not let me die until it has escaped my lips. I have tried to die, but I could not; I was a coward and I dared not."

He paused a moment, overcome by mental pain as well as physical exhaustion; then, grasping his young kinsman's hand, he spoke again, almost in a whisper.

"You remember Charles Stuart—King Charles the First?"

"Charles the Martyr, as we call him now? Yes, historically I do remember him," replied Lord Stair, wondering at the question.

"I—but it is all written there," rejoined the old man, pointing to a bundle of manuscripts. "I cannot force my tongue to tell all—only this; it was I who stood upon the scaffold cloaked and masked; it was I who struck the ungodly blow that unkinged England, and sent a thrill of horror through the land—I, vindictive monster that I was. Even as the axe was falling, I hurled my name—his name into his ear; and as I lifted his bleeding head, his mild eyes seemed to roll towards mine. Yes, he heard me—heard me—and I knew that he forgave me."

Overcome by his terrible retrospection, the aged speaker seemed to sink into an unconscious state. Silently, noiselessly as a spectre, the guide who had conducted Lord Stair to the house appeared upon the scene, and motioned him to leave the room.

"Aye, go—go!" gasped the old man, rallying for a moment—"go, and return no more."

Here the manuscript breaks off abruptly. Of its truth or probability the reader must judge for himself. We all know the quest on of "Who beheaded Charles I?" has been often asked but never satisfactorily answered. Richard Brandon was engaged to play the part of executioner, but it is denied that he was the man who struck the blow.

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