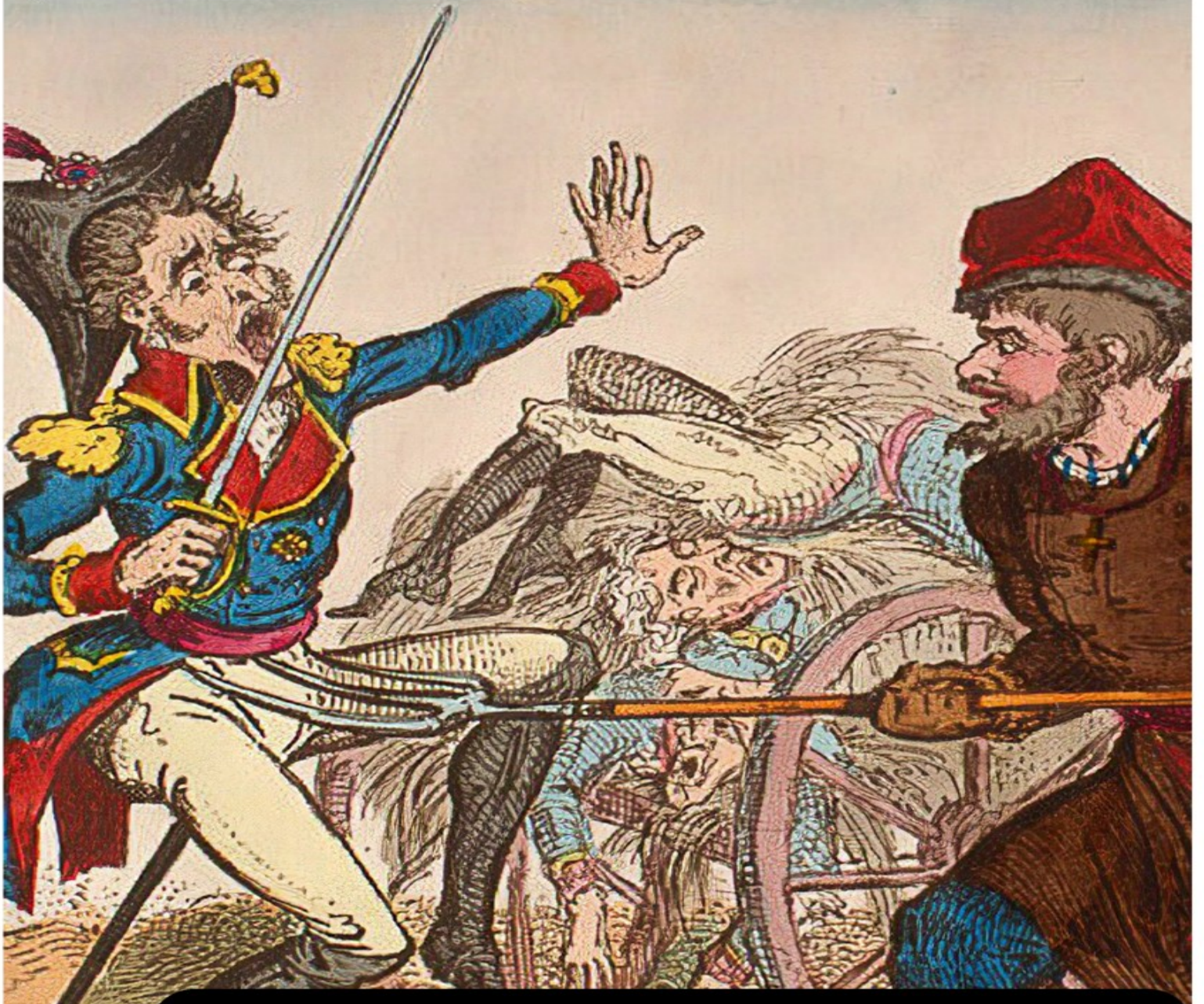


**AMBROSE
PRATT**



**FRANKS:
DUELLIST**

Ambrose Pratt

Franks: Duellist

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CHAPTER I.—A WINDFALL

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SATAN, I imagine, may be a contemplative old gentleman endowed with a fund of unlimited good humour and a capacity for tolerance truly astonishing. He is the scapegoat of five continents, the execrated bogey of innumerable religions, the accredited possessor of almost omnipotent powers for working evil, and yet who has ever heard of him doing a mean thing or troubled to prosecute him in a police court? The fact is, I privately believe he does not exist. If he does I should be glad to meet him and take his hand. I feel sure I should find him such a right good fellow as myself, who has perhaps been compelled into diverse false positions by the force of circumstance. Circumstance is your true Demon, and his twin brother is a little black imp called Opportunity.

'That devil Franks,' was the title by which I was most generally misnamed—never, be it understood, to my face. But whispers crept to my ears none the less, and the mirror was often held to my eyes in odd nooks and corners.

When my brother, Lord Devenac, was set upon by poachers and half murdered in his own woods at Devon, quite half of London discerned my hand in the affair, and I am bound to confess my brother shared in this opinion.

When Florence d'Apice so theatrically quaffed that infernal mixture of champagne and prussic acid at Lady Gravesend's ball, there did not lack detractors who scandalised me as the cause of her disaster, because, forsooth, she had singled me out to be the object of her

barbaric and most unwelcome devotion. Then when her brother walked me out and my rapier unluckily pricked his jugular (I vow I only intended a petty flesh wound, but my foot slipped), quite half a score of idiots turned unseeing eyes in my direction, and two gentlemen of distinction paid for their discourtesy with their lives before the rest would be reasoned into charity.

It was not my fault that I was forced to live hard by the gaming-tables. Devenac had always refused to allow me a shilling from the day I reached majority, and a man must live in spite of Monsieur Talleyrand's assertion to the contrary. I vow besides that I never once cheated at cards in my life; I have certainly selected the individuals with whom I should play, but should I be discredited because my opponents were usually unskilful? They were not obliged to dice with me; moreover, they could well afford to lose. I have always made it a rule never to play with a poor man. In the first place, the game is not worth the candle; in the second, it is impossible to remain pleased with oneself should one win; and lastly, I have often noticed that if a man be poor enough, that fickle jade Fortune is very apt to smile in his direction. This *par-parenthèse*, but it might be inferred that a world so misinformed as to believe me capable of fratricide, and worse, would not hesitate to brand me as a card-sharp. Why in the name of Judas my contemporaries should have so combined to blacken my character I don't in the least know. I was not unpersonable, my manners were engaging, my conversation elegant (I avoided foul language on principle), and I dressed as well as Prince George himself, in spite of my lack of fixed income. It is even more

wonderful that any door in London remained open to me in consideration of the estimation wherein I was held. I can only explain, modestly as may be, that many ladies refused to believe me anything but a maligned innocent. God bless their kind hearts! They at any rate did not err as much as the rest, though that they erred I must confess. Lady Julia Gordon was my patron through all, chiefly, I believe, because she never heard me utter an oath under any circumstances, and she had never seen me drunk, habits which I believe were regarded as demoniacal affectations by her husband and my other male acquaintances.

Elfrida, Duchess of Powers, received me because she did me the honour to prefer my platonic regard to the affection or esteem of all other gentlemen, even including that of the duke, a namby-pamby whipper-snapper who hated me like the devil, but was too much the coward to invite me to walk, in spite of his smouldering jealousy. Lady Betty Primrose invariably welcomed my approach because it amused her to set her friends by the ears, and by this means she achieved her ambition without effort. She, however, took good care that her daughters should not be subjected to my evil influence. The Duchess of B—— occasionally invited me to her routs in order to annoy my brother Devenac, who had offended her. Several other great ladies regarded me kindly, and opened their doors to my advance for purely private reasons, which concern no one but their impressionable selves and me. These memoirs, I might remark, are by no means confessions.

It might be asked why should I trouble to visit at houses where my presence was not welcome to all? My answer to

such a question would be double-barrelled. My equivocal position afforded me a peculiar species of cynical amusement; and besides, the house of every leader of society at that time in London possessed its card-room, wherein gambling for high stakes was carried on from dusk to dawn. Sometimes my next day's dinner depended upon the hazard of the game.

After all I enjoyed myself in a fashion. I had the satisfaction of knowing that men wilted before my frown, and paid for their backyard sneers by exaggerated courtesy to my face. True it is that with a pistol ball I could break a wine glass in the stem at fifteen paces, and the memory of Captain Humphrey's fate deterred many from engaging me who fancied their own skill at fence. And yet there were times when I was wretched—times when only an intimate knowledge of the delight wherewith the great majority would acclaim my act prevented me from lodging a bullet in my brain. I lived on in order to spite a world which had utterly failed to appreciate me.

It was thus with me on the dawn of my forty-third birthday. I awoke with a racking headache and the knowledge that I owed Lord Francis Eveston the sum of six hundred pounds, lost to him at *écarté* the previous night. By the light of a penny dip I ransacked my possessions and discovered, after a laborious search, the sum of three shillings and sevenpence. I had quitted the card-room airily enough, and I am bound to say promised Lord Francis to pay him the money by noon next day. And now the morrow had arrived. My position was desperate enough. I had not a ha'porth of credit in all London, and by no means that I

could discover did it appear possible to transform three shillings and sevenpence into six hundred pounds. And the money had to be found. I had never had such a stroke of bad luck. Eveston was such a fool, too, he scarcely knew one card from another. The devil had surely given him his brilliant hands. I heartily cursed cards, luck, Eveston and myself, then kicked my lackey in the ribs until he awoke. 'It isn't daylight, my lord,' he grumbled sleepily.

I administered another kick, which reduced him to servility. 'Load one of my silver-handled pistols at once,' I commanded.

Richards evidently scented a meeting. He bustled about with sudden brightness, and in a few minutes had everything prepared. 'Who is it this time, my lord?' he queried curiously.

'Myself,' I answered grimly.

Richards appeared surprised. 'Eh! what, my lord?' he stammered.

'I am about to shoot myself,' I observed, taking up the pistol as I spoke.

'Your lordship is pleased to amuse himself with me,' said Richards, with pained dignity.

I smiled. 'No, my man, my time has come at last. I don't mind telling you, Richards, I owe Lord Francis Eveston six hundred pounds. I have promised to pay him by noon to-day. To meet his claim I have exactly three shillings and sevenpence. Under the circumstances, what is left for me to do?'

Richards shuddered, and watched me out of the corners of his eyes. 'I would bolt to furrun parts, my lord,' he

suggested nervously.

'How much do I owe you, Richards?' I asked, contemptuously regarding this advice.

'Fifteen pounds, my lord.'

'You may have my pistols for the debt afterwards; they will sell for that.'

Richards commenced to blub. 'D-don't kill yourself, my I-lord,' he entreated. 'What would Her Grace say?'

'Damn Her Grace!' I commented.

'What would Lady Betty say?'

'Damn Lady Betty!'

'What will I do without you?' Here the poor fellow fairly sobbed aloud. He was country bred—Richards—and I had never succeeded in kicking the heart out of him. I confess his tears touched me; they evidenced genuine affection, for by no stretch of imagination could I consider myself a good master to the lad.

'You fool,' I said roughly, 'you will get along a great deal better without me.' I considered here the advisability of giving the boy some good advice. 'See here, Richards,' I went on presently, 'a word with you. You are growing in years now (he was two years my junior) and after my death you will be thrown upon the world. You have always appeared to be a fool, but you have one virtue—obedience. I am giving you final orders, look to it you obey them. Never have anything to do with women, especially with married women; they play the devil with a man. If you feel yourself too utterly weak to follow my advice, marry some big, fat wench strong enough to keep you in order; it's better to be married than damned, as the Bible teaches us. Secondly, never dice

nor play cards. That's a habit that generally leads to either gaol or destruction. Thirdly, cheat each master you have according to your opportunities. In that case you will rarely be short in your wages, whatever happens.' I felt quite a glow of satisfaction steal over me in delivering such virtuous counsel. Truly virtue is its own reward. I had never been quite so disinterested before. 'Now, Richards,' I pursued, 'you had better retire to the next room. I presume you would not care to watch my dissolution.'

Richards raised a tear-wet face to my inspection.

'Don't do it yet, for Gawd's sake, sir!' he gasped.

'Why not, Richards?'

'There's no occasion,' pleaded the lad. 'You needn't, you know, not before noon—you said noon,' he cried. 'Let me get you some breakfast—I've got some bones—for Gawd's sake, sir!'

I reflected. True, there was no occasion for absolute hurry, and then—bones! Richards was a master at grilling bones. In fact, his skill in this direction amounted to positive genius. I discovered that I was hungry.

'Very well, Richards,' I assented with affected reluctance, 'get breakfast; meanwhile, I shall sleep. Call me at ten.'

I am proud to be able to truthfully record that the moment I laid head on pillow I slept profoundly. So much did the fear of certain death distract my nerves. I was awakened by the tramp of feet in my apartment.

'Richards with the bones,' I thought, and sleepily glanced at the timepiece. It was just ten.

'So you contemplate suicide,' suddenly observed a calm, deep voice that filled the room with a rich, throbbing music.

I started up amazed. Two paces off there stood regarding me a tall, elegantly-attired gentleman whom I had never seen before. He was singularly handsome, having magnificent brown eyes, which, however, were cold and cynical, and was clean shaved, save for a pair of sweeping black moustaches. From his fob dangled a small ivory skull perfectly carved, and it was the more noticeable because his dress was, save for that one spot of colour, entirely sombre.

'May I inquire your name and the reason of your intrusion?' I asked politely, for I was very angry, and when I am angry I am invariably most courteous.

'My name is Messidor—Carne Messidor; I intrude' (he shrugged his shoulders) 'because your servant stopped me in the street and begged me to accompany him here to prevent the committal of a foolish deed.'

'I beg your pardon,' I retorted sweetly, 'I have never contemplated a deed of greater wisdom; but permit me to make excuses, you have me at a disadvantage.'

'On the contrary, at advantage,' corrected my visitor, pointing gravely at my bare arms. (I was almost nude.) 'Your hair, unpowdered, is of a very handsome colour, your face is in unison, perhaps too beautiful, too finely chiselled, for a man, but the chin redeems it from effeminacy. And then that chest! those arms! My dear sir, you are a veritable Hercules.'

I blushed—I confess it, I blushed with pleasure.

'I am delighted to make your acquaintance,' I cried. 'I feel grieved that circumstances forbid me a substantial use of it.'

My visitor shrugged his shoulders with a foreign gesture, which, more than anything about him, was exasperating.

'Then your servant was not lying?' he inquired.

'If he told you that at noon I intend to shoot myself,' I responded lightly, 'he confined himself to a statement of fact.'

'Ah, but why? Surely a debt of so paltry an amount as six hundred pounds—you appear a gentleman of distinction—surely your friends——'

'I am Lord Caryl Franks,' I answered drily. 'That information should also acquaint you with the reason that I have not a friend in the world.'

Messidor bowed low. 'I am deeply pleased to have the honour of meeting you, Lord Caryl, while inexpressibly grieved to find you in such a circumstance. I am again much pleased that it is within my power to relieve your difficulty, and yet again grieved and desolate that I unhappily cannot help you without previously exacting a condition.'

His words gave me a sudden hope, for I must confess the prospect of blowing out my brains by way of post-prandial exercise did not please me.

'You are very kind,' I murmured, 'and this condition?'

Mr. Messidor appeared to reflect, and during his meditation he eyed me with a glance that seemed to search and pry into the very bottom of my heart. At last he took from his pocket a small sheet of parchment, which he unfolded and placed before me.

'Read that,' he commanded.

I read and found the document to be a printed oath of allegiance to His Majesty Napoleon, Emperor of France. I

glanced up and met the eyes of Messidor fixed inquiringly upon me. 'Well?' he said.

'Well?' said I.

'I require you to subscribe your name to that document,' said monsieur, whom I now decided must certainly be a Frenchman.

'And doubtless take the oath therein prescribed,' I suggested.

'Undoubtedly.'

'In which case?'

'In which case,' said Messidor, 'I shall have much pleasure in advancing you the sum of a thousand pounds.'

The bait was tempting, but I did not hesitate.

'I refuse,' I said.

'Come, come,' said monsieur, 'a thousand pounds would be very useful to you just now.'

'I do not deny it, but you ask too much in return.'

'You mean that I do not offer enough. Let us say two thousand pounds.'

'I cannot be bought, monsieur.'

Messidor again shrugged his shoulders. 'Let me confess you are not unknown to me; your name was mentioned to me before my arrival here, and your antecedents. I know that in men's mouths your name is odious, but in the case of the other sex the reverse obtains, and pardon me, milord, having seen you I cannot wonder at that; the wonder would exist if it were otherwise. With you I have been given discretionary powers. Join me, my lord, and your fortune is assured; my Emperor will take your future into his special care. Within a month he will land in England with a vast and

unconquerable army; *pouf!* the month after that and your England will be a province of France, as it was seven centuries ago. Nothing can avert the march of the man of destiny, nothing can alter his intention; already a vast army stands awaiting his orders to embark; already a great fleet is prepared to bring his troops across; already I have approached a number of your peers, who are waiting with anxious hearts to greet the great Emperor. This oath of allegiance I now ask you to sign has been subscribed by members of your own Government, by members of your Church and State. I offer you the chance of a lifetime—it were madness on your part to refuse. I will, however, be entirely frank with you. You can do the great cause a more intimate service than other men, and for that reason I am empowered to offer you the greatest advantages. You shall be created a duke, with estates both in France and England, and in the meantime a pension will be granted you of a thousand pounds a month. In exchange you will be merely required to use your influence with the members of the gentle sex, the *belles dames* of your acquaintance, to inspire in their hearts an admiration, even a tolerance of the great Napoleon. The Emperor, the master of all the most subtle secrets of the universe, knows that the world is governed less by the mind of man than by the heart of woman, and he is prepared to richly reward those who by the kindness of Providence are in a position to assist his cause in this direction. More especially I am desirous you should gain to our side the Duchess of Powers, for the will of her husband is her will, and his widespread political influence once cast in our favour will henceforth determine

much. He has been approached by my agents and is at present wavering. I depend upon you to complete his conversion—by the method I have indicated. You perceive I conceal nothing from you. And now, milord, your answer?'

I listened to this amazing speech with the profoundest interest, unable to move or protest, so much overcome was I with surprise at the information disclosed and the astounding insolence of the concluding proposition.

'According to you,' I gasped at last, 'there is a widespread conspiracy on foot to betray England to your Emperor.'

'I would not use the word "betray,"' murmured Messidor; 'each of your countrymen who has joined us is in the truest sense a patriot, in that each desires ardently the best good for his country, and is convinced that such will only arrive under the glorious auspices of the great Emperor.'

'Words! words!' I cried hoarsely; 'they are damned traitors every one!'

Messidor started back abruptly. 'What!' he cried. '*Nom de diable*, you—you—'

I sprang to the floor and faced him. 'Who are the men who have joined you?' I demanded.

He frowned darkly and put his hand beneath his cloak. 'Your answer first,' he growled.

'There is my answer,' I cried, and dashed my fist in his face.

He fell to the floor, but even as he fell a bullet grazed my temple and I staggered back half stunned. In a second he was up and at my throat, but I grappled with him, and in the nick of time caught his right hand, which held an ugly-looking knife.

The door burst open, and Richards, trembling and white-faced, entered. Seeing the encounter the fool evidently imagined Messidor was attempting to prevent me from committing suicide, for instead of coming to my assistance he rushed to help the Frenchman, and actually tried to pinion my arms. However, Messidor did not know that, but thinking the reinforcement might be on my side, he wriggled like an eel from my grasp and fled to the door. With monstrous effort I threw myself upon him, swinging Richards off his feet, but the fool encumbered me with his weight, I fell short, and all I grasped was the skull which dangled from the Frenchman's fob. The door slammed in my face, and I sank down beside it, covered with blood and half fainting.

'Good Gawd! good Gawd!' howled Richards. 'Say you are not dead, my lord, say you are not dead.'

'I'll show whether I am dead or not, you idiot!' I growled, for the fool's emotion aroused me. I staggered to my feet, determined to inflict sound and memorable punishment, but as I raised my hand I saw for the first time the skull which I still clutched by the riband. At the other end of the riband swung a small case of green leather stamped back and front with a solitary golden bee. I paused, hesitated, investigated.

Within this case, which chanced to be a purse reposed English Treasury notes to the value of ten thousand pounds. Instead of beating Richards—and well the fool deserved exemplary castigation—I was magnanimous enough under the circumstances to embrace him.

CHAPTER II.—THE SHIRT OF MAIL

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AFTER the first sharp exuberance of my delight at the unexpected turn of fortune's wheel had passed, I questioned Richards closely and ascertained that the rascal, after assuring himself that I was actually asleep, had hidden my pistols and then crept out into the streets. He had hurried to the houses of most of my lady friends to implore their assistance in preserving my life, but the early hour had defeated his affectionate intentions. In every case he had been denied admission, and, finally driven desperate he had accosted half a score of strangers in the streets. These must have taken him for a drunken maniac, for they generally refused to hearken to his appeal, all save Messidor, who immediately, on hearing my name, heartily agreed to my lackey's proposition and made his way at top speed to my rooms. Beyond this Richards knew nothing of the man, and the encounter and subsequent adventure were the outcome of purest chance. It was a golden chance for me, however, and I found it hard to credit, that so great a sum was actually in my possession.

I breakfasted that morning with as light a heart as any man in the kingdom; then having sent Richards on a message, I concealed the bulk of the notes in a hiding-place so cunningly contrived that I would have defied Vidocq himself to discover it.

At noon, precisely, I waited upon Lord Francis Eveston at his rooms in Oxford Street. A dozen gentlemen were lounging there sipping a new liquor called whisky, which was

already achieving popularity by reason of its capacity for producing intoxication by express. A beastly draught, I call it, and unfitted to placate a refined palate, exuding as it does, moreover, a noxious odour of stale breath.

Lord Francis, who was fencing behind a mask with Egerton Bailey of the 10th Hussars, called to me over his shoulder as I entered,—

'I have been waiting for you, Franks; pour yourself out a glass of whisky.'

Now it seemed to me that I was punctual enough considering the hour had not commenced to chime.

'No, I thank you,' I murmured, 'but please inform me the reason of your expectation. It is not yet the hour; did you permit yourself to suppose that I would fail you?' My words and my frown brought the fencing to an abrupt conclusion.

'By no means, my dear fellow,' cried Eveston, with absurd haste. 'Damn the money! The fact is I have news for you.'

I raised my eyebrows, shrugged my shoulders, and drew from my pocket six hundred pounds. 'I presume you have no objection to be paid in Government notes,' I suggested. But I was utterly unprepared for the sensation my action caused.

The whole party clustered round me and stared at the notes as if they were the only documents of that nature in the world.

'Good heavens!' cried Bailey, trembling with excitement. 'Just as he said.'

'Good God!' gasped Eveston.

'What do you mean, sir?' I demanded sternly. 'Are you not satisfied? Here is your money.'

But Eveston fell back and refused to touch the notes, and the crowd gaped at me as though I had been suddenly transformed into a monster.

A thousand thoughts and suspicions flitted through my brain. A nameless fear assailed my heart. I felt I was trembling on the brink of a precipice, but I had been too long a gambler to allow a trace of my emotion to appear.

'What is the meaning of this insult?' I demanded, my hand on my sword, and shooting a glance at each in turn.

My gesture was unmistakable, and I flatter myself I can always assume an expression formidable enough to extort reason from those who know me.

Young Cavanagh, who had been eyeing me with open disdain, allowed his glance to fall. Somerset turned pale. Carew tugged at his moustache. Bailey nudged Eveston with his elbow. 'Better tell him,' he whispered. Young Belmont swung on his heel, while of all present only Eveston returned my glance, assuming that severely judicial air for which he afterwards became noted on the Bench.

'A serious charge has been preferred against you, Lord Caryl,' he answered, 'and your offer to me of these Treasury notes imparts a certain amount of circumstantial evidence in support.'

With a flash of inspiration the whole matter became plain to me.

'First the charge!' I demanded, assuming my most insolent demeanour.

But Eveston fumbled with his hands and appeared anything but comfortable. 'Be assured first, Lord Caryl, that I in no way assumed the charge to be true. When you entered

I was about to mention the matter as a jest. It was only when you offered me Treasury notes that the affair looked serious.'

I stamped my foot. 'The charge first; afterwards your excuses—and satisfying excuses too, Lord Francis!'

'If they are needed,' he returned coldly. 'A gentleman, introduced here by no less a person than the Prince, informed us that he had early this morning been lured to your rooms and violently robbed by you of no less a sum than ten thousand pounds in Treasury bills. He further stated that you would visit me at noon and pay your last night's losses by means of a portion of those very bills.'

I smiled derisively. 'A very pretty story,' I commented; 'and this gentleman's name?'

'Here is his card—Jean Jacques Carondel, Marquis de Sevringen.'

'Then,' said I very coolly, 'Jean Jacques Carondel, *Marquis de Sevringen*, whom I presume is a Frenchman and a Royalist, among his other great accomplishments—for I have not the honour of the gentleman's acquaintance, and I can only judge of the rest by the evidence before me—is an expert—a remarkably expert, circumstantial and most rascally liar.'

A long sigh as of pent-up excitement suddenly given rein greeted my words, and with the speed of thought the gentlemen about me parted into a double line, leaving me standing between the rows. It was done with miraculous cleverness, like a stage play. I turned to inquire the reason and beheld facing me, the width of the room between us,

His Royal Highness Prince George, leaning upon the arm of my morning visitor, Carne Messidor.

Experiences such as this, and the manner in which I was able to carry myself through them, have reconciled me more than aught else to remember with philosophic resignation my long, and I fear not altogether reputable, attachment to the card-table. The professional gambler, his apprenticeship once served, is *par excellence* captain of his features. I declare that I fronted my new trial with visage calmly imperturbable. If possible I was too indifferent. My lips parted in a pleasant smile. I bowed profoundly to the Prince. 'How does your Royal Highness this morning?' I queried in a voice that contained no suspicion of tremulousness.

The Prince eyed me gravely, and barely nodded to my salute, then he turned to the Frenchman.

'Is this the man, marquis?' he asked.

'Yes, your Highness,' answered Messidor, or, as I suppose I should call him, the Marquis de Sevringen.

'I understand, sir,' said the Prince to me in his severest tones, 'that you deny all acquaintance with my friend here.'

'Pardon, your Highness, only with the Marquis de Sevringen; Monsieur Carne Messidor I know to my cost.'

'Carne Messidor!' repeated the Prince, puzzled.

'Your Highness's *friend*,' (I laid a nasty emphasis on the word) 'evidently possesses several names. Your Highness has listened to a grave charge made against me by this Frenchman——'

'Your Highness,' interrupted the marquis, very rudely to my thinking, 'is it necessary to bandy words with this

robber? Is it not rather a matter for your courts of law? I make the charge that this man has stolen from my person ten thousand pounds. From behind that curtain I perceived him offer to Milord Eveston some of the very notes which he this morning abstracted from my pocket; no doubt the remainder are still at his rooms. I implore your Highness's assistance to save my property. Should not this man be placed in custody?'

'Can you swear to the notes?' asked the Prince, with some hesitation.

'Undoubtedly.'

The matter commenced to wear for me a very black appearance, and this I was not slow to realise. Of course I knew this French marquis to be an agent of Napoleon and no Bourbon at all. But he evidently had acquired the friendship of the Prince by some devilish means, and he had been clever enough to discount any charge I might prefer against him by striking first and accusing me of robbery. I commenced to actually admire the man, but, as will no doubt be surmised, my admiration was largely mixed with other emotions. It was not long before I had resolved upon my course, and the gambler's spirit within me loudly acclaimed the determination to risk all on a single shuffle of the cards.

Slowly drawing the notes from my pocket I made a low bow to the Prince. 'This Frenchman, your Royal Highness,' I observed with a fine assumption of scorn, 'declares that I have robbed him and states that he can identify the notes. Now this bundle of notes represents my worldly wealth, your Highness will discover, exactly nine hundred pounds.' Here I

handed the bundle to the Prince, who received them in astonishment. I proceeded with another low reverence: 'As an Englishman, your Royal Highness, and a loyal subject, I place myself unreservedly in your hands. If the Frenchman will identify those notes by the only certain means possible, and correctly state their *numbers*, their *numbers*' (I repeated),' to your Royal Highness, then——' I spread out my hands and shrugged my shoulders.

The marquis perceptibly changed colour. 'I am not a banker to keep the numbers of notes, but' (he snapped this out viciously) 'my notes are all marked on the back with a blue cross.'

I was equal to this emergency. 'The way your Royal Highness is holding the notes allows this fact to be readily perceived,' I observed with a gesture of contempt. 'I always mark my notes for luck.'

This was a common enough practice among gamblers, and I could see that the Prince, and in fact the whole audience, were wavering between us. I instantly made a hazard, the risk to me of which was infinitely more deadly than my other lucky shot, but I saw one chance, for it was reasonable to suppose that this rascal who had tried to bribe me to betray my country must have originally been supplied with French gold, and mayhap recently, in which case he would not dare to carry the matter further.

'There is a simple way of settling this dispute, your Royal Highness,' I remarked with splendid nonchalance. 'Your friend' (with a sneer) 'doubtless obtained his notes, if he ever possessed any, from some person or other, or from a bank. In either case the numbers must be easily obtainable.'

'Good!' cried the Prince, much relieved. 'What say you, marquis?'

But the Frenchman was biting his lips with rage.

'Ah!' he hissed, 'long before I can obtain the numbers the rest of my money will be gone.'

'Will your Royal Highness deign to accompany me to my poor rooms and allow this mad Frenchman to search for himself?' I asked politely.

'*Sang de Dieu,*' grated out the marquis; 'then you have disposed of your stolen goods already?'

It was exactly what I required, this speech.

I stepped back two paces to deliver the climax.

'Your Royal Highness and gentlemen,' I cried in a clear, ringing voice, 'I call you to witness how long I have submitted, in deference to your Royal Highness's presence, to this man's infernal insults.'

'He has come forward and gratuitously made a diabolical charge against me. Shielded by the protection of my Prince, this man, a Frenchman, and in my humble opinion a dastardly traitor to God and man, has dared to traduce an Englishman's dearest honour; I have defied him to prove his words; he has answered with fresh abuse. Your Royal Highness, I crave your pardon, but I am, after all, only flesh and blood; there is a limit to my self-control, and that boundary has been passed.' With a swift movement I advanced and deliberately spat in the Frenchman's face.

It appeared to me that for the moment I had actually—I, that devil Franks!—achieved a certain popularity. No doubt it was largely due to my artful accentuation of the opposing nationalities, but nevertheless a distinct hum of approval

greeted my action. Lord Francis Eveston went so far as to clap his hands. Even the Prince gave vent to a good-humoured oath. It was the first time in my life that I had been universally acclaimed. And now a word in apology for my brutality. It seemed to me absolutely necessary that I must kill this Frenchman. In the first place, it was a duty I felt that I owed my country to clip his capacity for working public ill. In the second, his money was undoubtedly in my possession, and only after his death could I feel perfectly at ease in spending it, for he was evidently a creature of infinite resource and daring, and he had reason enough to work hard for my downfall. Had I merely slapped his face he might have refused to fight me and his refusal have been upheld by the others while my innocence or guilt remained in doubt. It therefore became needful to adopt a course sufficiently provoking to force even a pig to fight.

I am bound to confess the Frenchman bore himself gallantly enough; he wiped his face with a dainty lace *mouckoir*, which he presently threw, with magnificent disdain, into the blazing fire. His cheeks had grown a queer fish-white colour, like to the pallor of a three days' corpse, but, by Saint John, his eyes were hotter and fiercer than live coals. He fronted the Prince with horrible composure and forced out words between clenched teeth by sheer physical effort.

'Your Highness,' he muttered in a whisper so low that none but my ears heard, 'has been good enough to accept certain gifts from me,' I pricked up my ears at this and recognised the cause of the Prince's complaisance to the marquis. 'I beg one favour in return.'

'Name it,' muttered the Prince.

'That your Royal Highness will condescend to witness a fencing match which I have the honour to propose should take place immediately between myself and this'—(his face went suddenly purple) 'this gentleman.'

The Prince turned red with vexation, and perhaps alarm.

I went to his assistance. 'You see, your Highness,' I cried gaily, 'we each fancy our own style of sword-manship, and the only method open to find the master is a match, with buttons on the foils, of course.'

'Of course,' grated the marquis.

Everybody acclaimed this proposal, and the Prince, though much against his will, presently agreed, only strenuously insisting that the buttons should be firmly placed.

In two minutes we were ready and the swords crossed. Then a strange thing happened! The marquis's foot tripped and he fell to the ground. As if such accidents were infectious I followed suit, and when we arose each of our blades had glittering points.

'The buttons are off! Stop!' cried the Prince, angrily.

I stared at my blade, the marquis stared at his.

'Your Royal Highness is surely mistaken,' I ventured humbly.

'Surely,' echoed the marquis.

The Prince appealed to the others. 'The foils are bare!' he cried.

One and all assured him of his mistake, and presently, with a soul-comforting curse, he sank back in his chair and

shaded his eyes with his hand. 'The devil take you all!' he growled.

For the first time in my life I paraded before a sympathetic audience. Though no word in my favour had been spoken I felt it in my bones, and I knew that every man there ardently desired me to beat the Frenchman. The feeling gave me additional strength, confidence and composure. Hitherto I had invariably fought in the presence of those who would have welcomed my defeat with thankful hearts, and the knowledge of that disposition had ever nerved me to a recklessness irreconcilable with a display of perfect skill. But now I was at my best. I determined to kill my opponent, and with all the assurance of destiny I marked the spot on his shirt front where my blade should enter to search his heart. The marquis was a fine exponent of one style of fence and one style only—that of the Italian school. In that I admit he was near perfect. But I had mastered all schools and styles, and very soon he perceived that his life was at my mercy.

I paid him many compliments as we proceeded, but he never relaxed from a fixed, dog-like grin. His blade once slipped past my head, only a swerve saved me. I pierced the lobe of his left ear by way of return. His blade passed between my left arm and my body; in exchange I cut his lower lip in two. One thing, however, I could not fail to notice in his fence. He left his breast entirely unprotected. Suspecting a ruse I feigned in such a manner as to lead him to expect a fatal thrust. He actually courted the disaster, for throwing up his sword he made no counter thrust. I was confounded with surprise, for no tyro could have been so

foolish. I reasoned as I played with him, and presently hazarded a guess. To make sure I forced a smart rally, and in the midst of it pricked at his heart. My blade grated on steel armour, and without doubt, had I thrust hard enough I should have been left with a broken and useless sword. Thereafter he fought like a fiend incarnate, and only my skill and activity saved me from several vicious thrusts, but at last, with a swift lunge and turn of wrist, I sent his blade spinning from his grasp and he stood at my mercy, my point at his throat, his life mine to take or give.

His face, pallid before, was livid as a ghost, but I marked another emotion in him now. Fear—craven fear! He could not speak for fear, and his teeth rattled like castanets. I gently pricked his throat; he fell back step by step, I following him, until brought up by the wall he was constrained to pause. The silence in that room was the silence of a charnel house—intense, ghastly, full of horrid mystery. I was the god in the machine. I broke the silence.

'Undress, monsieur,' I commanded.

He actually snivelled.

'Undress, monsieur,' I icily repeated, 'or die.'

As I said these words a gleam of craven hope crept into his bloodshot eyes. His teeth still chattering, he drew off his shirt, and there, manifest to all, the coward stood revealed, for from neck to brisket he wore an undershirt of chain steel impenetrable by sword or dagger.

I stood over him, believe me, magnificent in my scorn. 'This, your Royal Highness,' I said, 'is the creature who would assail the honour of an Englishman. I will not defame

by his death a sword which as yet has only drunk gallant blood.'

Then with a gesture of disdain I sent my rapier rattling back into its scabbard.

The marquis caught up his clothes and hurried to the door. There he paused an instant and stared at me, hungrily, hungrily, yet gave utterance to no word. For long afterwards the memory of that glance haunted me. It was the look of a lost soul who gazes on the objective cause of its damnation. It was the glance of a demon full of venom and most poisonous ill-will. When the door closed I stared blankly at the panels, half regretting the impulse which had made me spare a life.

But a heavy hand on my shoulder aroused me to the present, and Prince George's uncouth but merry voice rang in my ear.

'For Gad! Franks, I wouldn't like to stand afore your sword, man. Well, we've done a good morning's work between us: you've bowled out a blackguard, I've paid off a long score—Gad! yes, a long score indeed. Well, what say, shall we lunch together?'

There ensued the marvellous spectacle of the First Gentleman of England walking arm-in-arm down Piccadilly with 'that devil Franks.'

Every face we met in our march went yellow with curiosity. Men stopped, stared and rubbed their eyes.

Truly, to more than me the world seemed turning topsy-turvey.
