

The Second Francis the First

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NOT three weeks after the fashionable physician, Bourdelet, read in the Paris papers that his American friend Herker had purchased the historic château of Valplaisan—which is in Touraine—a buff envelope, gay with the Herker crest, topped the doctor's morning mail. The enclosed note was worded in part as follows:

"My wife is quite convinced that I'm not well and stand in need of your care again. As a matter of fact, I'm feeling fine, but I see a chance to calm Mrs. Herker's fears and at the same time have the pleasure of showing you Valplaisan. Couldn't you vacation with us, instead of making your usual dash for one of the Picardy beaches . . .?"

The Frenchman's friendship with Herker, dating from their school-days in Switzerland, and the reports that had reached him recently of the millionaire's "nervous condition" (which is putting it mildly), impelled him to accept the invitation.

So, just as the day was melting exquisitely into night, the doctor's tan roadster, journeying leisurely in the wake of a telegram, scuttled under the arched gateway and mounted the hedge-lined drive at the end of which loomed the château, its tapering towers etched strongly against the sky.

Valplaisan is all the picture post-cards and railway brochures claim it to be—a jewel of the Renaissance, a sonnet in stone. At the rear, terraced gardens go down to the broad-bosomed Loire, a fat, triple-chinned dowager of a river, waddling majestically seaward; and from the topmost terrace one commands a wide sweep of the verdant vales and gentle, wooded hills of that mellow province called Touraine.

As Herker hastened down the steps to meet him, Bourdelet was amazed at the look of worry easily seen through the host's mask of geniality.

"Good old Bourdelet," Herker began. "You've lightened Mrs. Herker's cargo of care considerably—but—as far as my health is concerned, I've never felt better."

The lovely Mrs. Herker gave the doctor an uneasy glance, and insisted on showing him up to his room herself, taking advantage of this opportunity to inform him of her husband's real condition.

When they had first taken possession of Valplaisan, Herker was immoderately happy. His newly acquired domain was a source of continual delight; the up-keep and restoration of the château occupied his days, and he began an exhaustive study of Valplaisan's history. But presently his old enemy, that horrible hypochondria Bourdelet thought he'd conquered for him years ago, had him in its clutches again. Out of the welter of worries that beset a man, be he lord or laborer, Herker's wife was unable to put her finger on the precise cause of the relapse. Herker evaded all questions, and rebuffed every effort of those about him. She was counting on Bourdelet to draw from him the confession that would clarify matters.

The doctor promised to set to work at once.

A few minutes before dinner Herker and Bourdelet, impeccably tuxedoed, lounged in a small sixteenth-century salon. The doctor did his best to get the patient to talk. After steadily denying that aught was distressing him, Herker finally admitted that there *was* something . . . something very slight, though . . .

"What is it?" asked Bourdelet.

"This is—between ourselves, eh?"

Reassured, Herker went on. "You know, I've only had Valplaisan a few weeks, but I've had my eye on the place for several years, along with a number of other gentlemen. This long rivalry for the possession of the château is the cause of my present worry. Old man—I got Valplaisan for a song!"

"Really?"

"Because the place is reputed to be haunted!"

Herker smiled as he said this—and his smile was no more pleasant to see than an electrocution.

"The story is going the rounds," he continued, "that I caused this report to be spread prior to the purchase, so as to frighten away nervous competitors and depreciate the value of the place. . . ."

"But, Herker," put in Bourdelet, "that's just malicious chatter. Surely people don't believe . . ."

"You bet they do! And there are a good many people ready to get their knives into me—particularly the chaps who expected to buy the château for a still lower price. How they'd laugh if I had to resell it! That's the way matters stand. But I swear to you that I didn't start this haunted-house story!"

Sighting a feverish glint in the eyes of his host, the doctor remarked eagerly:

"Haunted? Valplaisan? You know how I like ghost-stories. Give me the details!"

But Herker motioned him to silence with a long, pale hand.

"No cross-questioning, Bourdelet. . . ."

"Far be it from me to cross-question you," interrupted the irrepressible doctor, "but you can't expect a man to display complete indifference when you've hit upon his favorite topic. How does your pet phantom behave?"

Shrugging his shoulders in the Gallic manner, Herker replied: "Oh, the old stuff—heavy footsteps in the hallways at night, accompanied by a clanking of chains. It's hardly credible that a yarn of that type could run the price of the place so low. Wait till you see Valplaisan by daylight, old fellow! It's a gem!"

Bourdelet watched him shrewdly.

"Care to travel a bit, Herker?"

"No, thanks—I'm satisfied here!"

"Well, why not try the treatment we

used with such success a few years ago—plenty of golf and tennis, brisk walks, sufficient social activities to provide a change for you . . .?"

The American gave a grimace of distaste.

"I'm perfectly content to get away from people. I find a lot of enjoyment in studying the historic past of Valplaisan, trying to visualize it as it used to be. . . ."

"Do you mean to say you've cut yourself off from every one?"

"Yes."

"That's bad for you, my friend—and it's no way to stifle the rumors you spoke of, for people will say you're afraid to show yourself since the 'deal.'"

Bourdelet watched Herker's expression with intense interest. Had his arguments hit home?

"That's so," admitted Herker. Then he added hastily:

"We haven't cut ourselves off from every one. My wife's sister, Mrs. Bancroft, is staying with us, and quite frequently her fond suitor rides over from Tours for dinner. Nice fellow!"

"Mrs. Bancroft is going to marry again?" asked the doctor with surprise.

"What's so bizarre about that? A twenty-three-year-old widow! Yes, my sister-in-law is going to marry the Count de Roncroy, lieutenant in a cuirassier regiment of the Tours garrison. He's here to-night, and I'll have you meet him."

"Well," said the eager Bourdelet, "don't you think you should give a fête in honor of the coming marriage? What a splendid opportunity to meet your neighbors!"

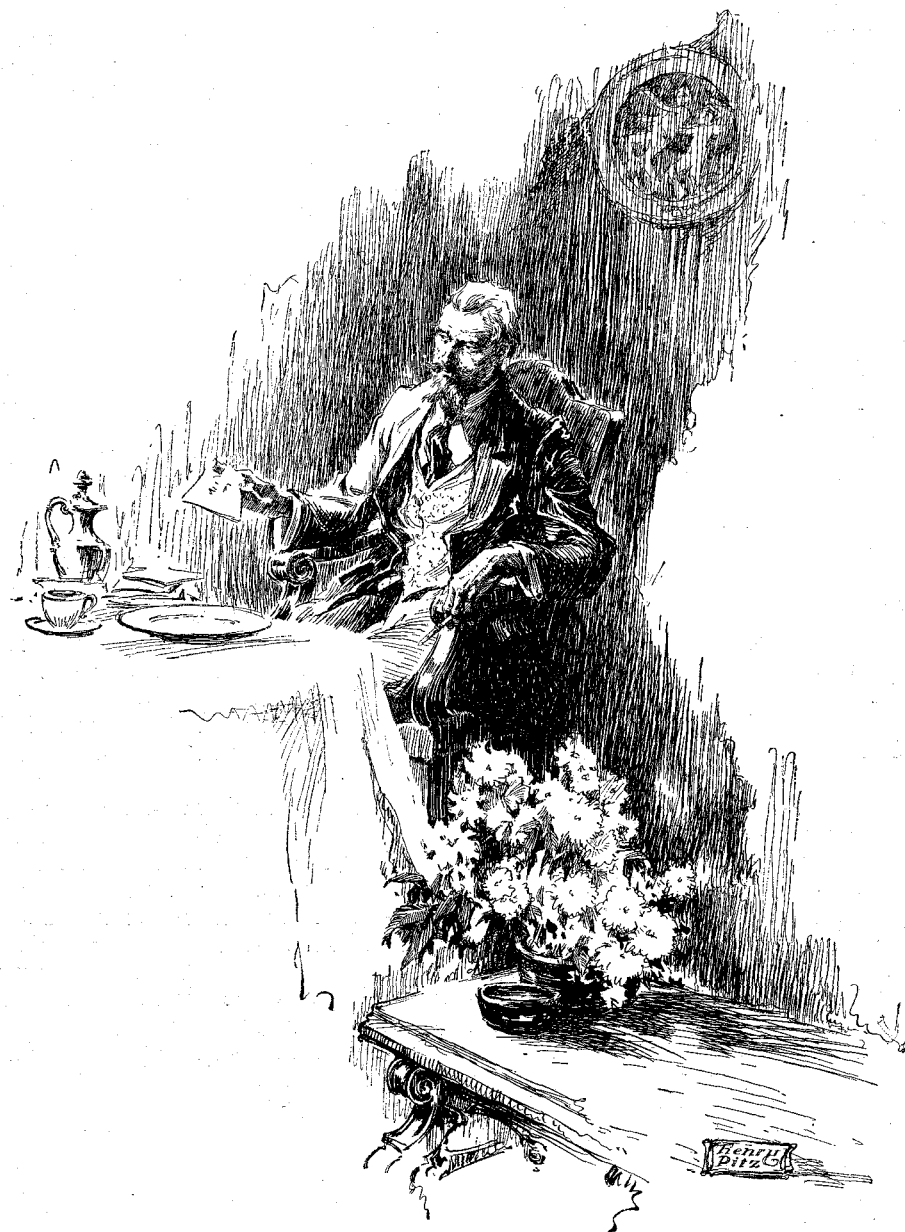
"But I . . ."

"Come, Herker, it's your duty!"

"If you think I'm going to bring any jazz bands in here to disturb the slumbering memories . . ."

Noticing that his host had assumed the look of a somnambulist, and appeared to be talking to himself, Bourdelet decided not to press the point, especially since the dinner-gong had just sounded.

Arm in arm the men traversed the hallway and entered another salon, where Mrs. Herker and her sister were chatting with the Count de Roncroy. An effective group, that trio: the women, alert and alluring, had evidently given much thought to the selection of the few garments they



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were wearing, and the man, tall—as every cuirassier must be—slim-waisted and broad-shouldered, was a splendid, intelligent, pleasing specimen of humanity. Nor had the tailor who had cut his dinner clothes betrayed him.

“The Count de Roncroy . . . !”

“Doctor Bourdelet . . . !”

A door opened wide, disclosing a bowing butler.

“Madame is served !” he announced.

The entrancing costumes, the crisp napery, the costly service, the red roses

strewn over the table-top told Bourdelet that Mrs. Herker was mindful of his old prescriptions and was surrounding her husband with all the delights she could procure for him. The repast was indeed a triumph of conviviality. The rocket-like wit of M. de Roncroy, renowned throughout the French army for his exploits as a *bon vivant* quite as much as for his military prowess, was emphatically something to write home about. It proved contagious. Mrs. Herker tried to keep pace with him, likewise Mrs. Bancroft, abrim with joy over her fiancé's success. Several times the host was caught smiling, to the extreme satisfaction of Doctor Bourdelet, who was convinced that if a dinner *en famille* could check the march of his woes, a series of fêtes could rout them and effect a complete cure. And since Herker refused to leave Valplaisan, the doctor determined that Pleasure must pass beneath the raised portcullis and take up residence in the château.

Next day Bourdelet returned to the attack, impressing upon his neurasthenic patient the fact that it was immeasurably cruel to cloister those two young beauties—his wife and sister-in-law. But by this time Herker had stiffened his resistance again, and the spell of the previous evening was shattered.

"I'm not going to profane Valplaisan," he said irritably; then, in a more moderate tone, he added: "You'll agree with me when you've inspected the place. Let's start the grand tour!"

Herker, as guide, displayed a most thorough knowledge of the château's history. As room succeeded gallery, so did anecdote succeed commentary, and in this manner Bourdelet became familiar with the former châtelains of Valplaisan, particularly King Francis I, who had lived and loved there for several years. The host, who ardently admired this fascinating member of the House of Valois, seemed, indeed, to have centred his researching upon him.

The grand tour was drawing to a close, and Herker, like a clever showman, had reserved his finest effect for the finale. They had reached a dark, low-ceilinged anteroom, halting there a few minutes

while the American launched into a vivid description of a tourney beneath the walls of Valplaisan. He was well immersed in a dissertation on the bizarre and costly equipment used by the contending knights when suddenly, throwing open a door, he ushered his guest into a vast hall, flooded with sunlight. Its imposing height and vaulted ceiling recalled the nave of a church. Great beams traversed it at the level of the cornices. On one side a row of tall Gothic windows afforded glimpses, between their mullions, of the lush meadows that bordered the river; on the other, superb tapestries adorned the wall. But the chief glory of this Salle des Gardes was the array of armor, a double rank set against the tapestried wall, and two more lines, ranged back to back, running down the centre of the room. The latter contingent appeared to be under the leadership of a gigantic paladin, armed with a lance and mounted on an iron-sheathed saddle.

The little Frenchman gurgled his admiration as he trotted at the heels of his host, passing in review the silent, ghostly warriors.

"Somehow, I never feel quite at ease when I'm looking at these things," he confessed. "The ones in the Hôtel des Invalides give me exactly the same impression—that I'm viewing the remains of a vanished race. One might consider the men of that period a lot of crustaceans, and this armor the protective shells in which they lived."

Herker, intent on his own thoughts, ignored the interruption. His grasp of the science of armory bewildered the doctor. He overwhelmed his guest with technical terms, pointing out the beauties of the trappings in detail, explaining the value of the cubitière, or elbow-guard, lecturing on the use of the long-handled, scythe-shaped fauchard, and citing the names of the captains who had worn these ponderous costumes. Illustrious fellows, many of them!

"This was Bonnivet's," he announced proudly. "This belonged to Bayard . . . and this was worn by the Constable de Bourbon. . . . All this armor over here dates from the reign of Francis I. . . . And now . . . we come to the king himself!"

"*Quel gaillard!*" exclaimed the doctor.

The king was the gigantic paladin at the end of the line, represented by a suit of black Italian armor damaskeened with gold, riding the lifelike image of a giant war-horse. One received the impression of a veritable Hercules, erect in the saddle, laughing silently through the single slit in the helmet, which was surmounted by the royal fleur-de-lis.

"Francis wore this armor at the battle of Pavia," claimed Herker.

Turning swiftly when they had reached the door, he urged the doctor to glance back at the wonderful room whence every vestige of modernity had been excluded.

"Do you think I'm going to have a lot of knickered golfers and flannelled tennis-players roaming about that place? Do you think I can endure the sight of bandolined dancing men bobbing around in the throes of a fox-trot with cocktail-guzzling, cigarette-inhaling women?"

Just then Doctor Bourdelet was all but drowned in a flood of inspiration that brought him the solution of the problem wherewith he had battled all night.

"My friend," he chortled, "permit me to annihilate your objections. I suggest that for one evening you people Valplaisan with the lords and ladies who once lived here. Give a costume ball, and have every guest dressed in the mode of the period you select!"

"Aha," murmured Herker. "*That's* an idea!"

And meanwhile the doctor was thinking: "That's only one fête—only one! Yet I'll wager that my dear friend Herker, who loves Old France so much, will be kept busy for at least three weeks preparing for it!"

"Awf'ly good idea," admitted the American. "I'll have to tell Mrs. Herker right away!"

Of course the two sisters were delighted, and when M. de Roncroy, who came over from Tours for dinner, learned of the project he roared his complete approval.

"You'll lead the grand march, Maurice," Herker informed the young count. "And I want every one to bear this in mind: nothing but the dances of the period—pavans, passepieds, chacones, sarabands. Those who won't take the trouble to learn them will have to join the wall-

flowers. Maurice, you're the committee of one in charge of the ball!"

"You may count on the count!" grinned the cavalryman.

"I'll manage the rest of the affair myself," announced Herker, with such a confident, competent air that his wife knew the first glow of happiness in months—and, womanlike, had to cry over it.

The doctor's calculation was correct. For three weeks Valplaisan was the centre of a social effervescence that spread for miles around.

Mrs. Herker and her sister made frequent trips to Paris, now frequenting the costumiers and the establishments of the Rue de la Paix, now haunting the libraries and museums. Old prints and venerable tomes littered the salons of the château. Herker was astoundingly active, arranging every detail from the orchestra—composed exclusively of instruments of the period—to the torches that were to provide the sole illumination of the Salle des Gardes. At least thrice an hour some one would say: "I'm going to Tours." As one motor shot away from the steps another arrived, bristling with bundles. The neighbors were incessantly bobbing up in search of information or to rehearse the ancient dances.

As the preparations went on, the little doctor—who had started it all—was extremely content, except for one thing. He would have to attend the fête, which meant that he must get into a costume, even as the rest of the guests. Herker urged him not to worry—he had already arranged the necessary disguise, and Bourdelet would appear as a sixteenth-century physician—than which none could desire a more modest garb.

The doctor was one of the few whose costume was revealed beforehand, most of the guests electing to maintain the strictest secrecy in the matter of their disguise. The Count de Roncroy, however, was similarly situated. His great height and tremendous strength, coupled with his selection as leader of the grand march, marked him as the one man fitted to fill the rôle of Francis I. Herker and the ladies assured him that he'd make a superb monarch with the aid of a false beard. He promptly consented, and his

face wore a dreamy and complacent expression as he took from the hands of his fiancée a fine engraving of the king's portrait by Titian, showing the gay, mocking monarch in profile, wearing a round felt hat edged with swan's-down and a silken doublet trimmed with fur.

Left to his own devices during the hurry of preparation, Bourdelet spent his days visiting friends in the neighborhood. He learned from them that a good deal of malicious gossip *had* gone the rounds after the American's purchase of the château. There were those who regretted seeing this jewel of France fall into the hands of the foreigner—but, as the fair-minded were quick to point out, the English Lord Walborough, who had vowed early in the year that he'd own the place by Christmas, was the only one to give the American serious competition.

Already the agitation over the famous ghost story had practically ceased, and those who continued to attribute it to Herker were frowned upon by their peers.

The doctor was now confident that he could cure his patient. He watched over his diet, and saw to it that he was spared excessive fatigue and excitement, seconded ably in the task by M. de Roncroy, who was on duty at the château whenever he was not on duty at the cavalry barracks. Prayers of gratitude went up from the lips of Doctor Bourdelet when he found that the fête coincided with a period of military inactivity, for when the brigade was called out for manœuvres on three successive days, leaving Herker to continue the work alone, the energetic host achieved such a state of nervous wrath over the erection of a platform for the orchestra that the doctor had to call a halt.

Came the Great Night!

Bourdelet, in a sober black soutane, white-edged stock, and square hat, was the first to enter the Salle des Gardes, where he was received by servitors costumed as German mercenaries. Four stalwart Swiss, armed with halberds, were placed on the steps leading down from the vestibule.

Here the doctor halted to survey the scene. The torches spilled a ruddy light

over the walls and floor, but left the lofty ceiling to the thick shadows. Musicians in multicolored doublets took their places on the platform. All the armor had been aligned along the wall, except that of the king, which loomed like an island in the middle of the sea of polished floor. The others, a phantom phalanx, seemed to be mounting guard against some equally ghostly marauders.

Just as the doctor prepared to advance, the door of the anteroom opened, giving passage to a figure so cleverly costumed that the Frenchman found himself murmuring "Charles V" before it occurred to him that he was facing his friend Herker.

What secret intuition had caused the millionaire to choose the severe garb and aspect of the emperor? Did he realize how accurately his whole mien and bearing blended with the sombre Spanish velvet of his disguise? Was he cognizant of the terrifying honor implied in such a startling resemblance to the maniac prince?

He approached his guest like a true sovereign, one waxen hand on his hip, the other on the pommel of his sword.

"Look!" he called, and Bourdelet turned to see a pair of beauteous princesses coming down the steps, occupying a prodigious amount of space with their immense ruffs, puffed sleeves, and vast skirts.

"The Duchesse d'Etampes and Marguerite de Navarre!"—otherwise Mesdames Bancroft and Herker. Before the doctor could get within congratulating range, a torrent of masqueraders surged into the room—Maximilian of Austria, Gaston de Foix, Doña Sol, Hernani, three doges of Venice, innumerable lords and ladies of the court. Many of the guests had merely to copy the portraits of their ancestors. The gay company displayed their attire with admirable ease, sauntering about to the music of the viola, the rebec, and the lute—until Bourdelet lost track of the centuries and wondered if modernity wasn't the dream and this the reality.

The entry of Henry VIII of England and his six wives caused a sensation, and great was the amusement of the throng when he was recognized as a portly captain of cuirassiers, accompanied by his



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bevy of graceful daughters. But the monarch bore a distressing message—Count de Roncroy was detained at the barracks to investigate an accident in the stables, and would be a little late. He urged the host not to wait for him.

Mrs. Bancroft pouted prettily at the

news, and Herker took on a bleak look. *He* would have to lead the dances now!

"I'm not properly prepared . . .," he told the guests dolefully. Then, taking up the gauntlet Misfortune had tossed at his feet, he achieved a smile, and in a voice that harbored no trace of an Ameri-

can accent called out the courteous old command:

"En place, messires, pour ce qu'il faut baller!"

Straightway the musicians played the charming airs of the period, and the company began the graceful, measured dances. By midnight Herker had exhausted his choreographic repertoire, and it became necessary to await the coming of M. de Roncroy. In the interim he entertained the guests with his choicest anecdotes concerning the armor of Bonnivet, the tricks of Tremoille, and the feats of Bayard at Brescia; suddenly, carried away by the demon of buffoonery, Charles V took his stand in front of the mounted French sovereign, Francis I, and began to address him in jovial mood. His monologue, witty and erudite, won as much hearty laughter as if it had been prepared in advance. Yet Bourdelet knew it was improvised on the spot, and he watched his host with not a little anxiety, fearing the effect of the mental effort. But the applause of the listeners stimulated the speaker, and, striking an attitude, he cried to the armor of Francis:

"O gentle king, my good cousin, in this hour I have much regret that I kept thee captive! Alas, thou shouldst be here, in flesh and blood, for thou hadst ever a love for feasting and merriment! What would I not give to hear thy clear laughter. . . ."

Herker stopped suddenly, while the audience instinctively drew back, alarmed. A most extraordinary thing had happened. To the astonished eyes of all present, the armor of Francis I was seen to move. It brandished the lance, and, raising both arms on high, gave vent to a laughter that was terrifyingly mute. The slit in the visor gave the effect of a jeer. The awe-inspiring paladin swayed jerkily in the saddle, his taciturn hilarity causing a continual creaking of metal.

Then heavily—as might be expected—the figure dismounted.

Herker was white as a shroud. His extreme pallor alarmed a few of the women, for it seemed to disprove the prompt suggestion of a man in the background that this was a part of the performance. But for the most part the giant warrior was received with little screams of feigned terror, half-smothered laughs, and shouts of

"Bravo!" swelling to a thunderous ovation when the unknown saluted silently.

"How silly of us!" cried Mrs. Bancroft. "It's M. de Roncroy, of course!"

Of course! Hadn't he promised to come as Francis I?

Charles V went over to Henry VIII, and Bourdelet caught the corpulent captain's reply to the host:

"Ah, that's the sort of prank he revels in. He tricked me nicely with his story of the accident in the stables. Just look at him, will you—isn't he great!"

Mrs. Bancroft, clinging to her fiancé's arm, entered into the spirit of the game, calling him "sire" and presenting to him the lovely ladies in waiting. An attractive picture, surely—the delicate beauty of the little Duchesse d'Etampes contrasted with this rigid, mail-clad knight. How proud she was of her tall young lover, as he stiffly acknowledged the merry salutations, his sword clanking against his thigh-guard at every step.

The dancing started again, M. de Roncroy displaying a dexterity that was amazing when one gave thought to the tonnage of his costume. He continued to play his rôle conscientiously, never a word passing his lips, as he sought to keep alive a mystery that all had solved. His helmet, adorned with the royal fleur-de-lis, towered above the dancers, and, with Mrs. Bancroft as his perpetual partner, this armored Titan led all the rest.

Bourdelet, meanwhile, kept close to Herker—for the best of reasons. That trace of nameless terror had not yet left the American's face, and there were odd lights in his bloodshot eyes. The look of him made the doctor feel afraid.

"What's wrong with Diana!" exclaimed Herker, catching hold of Bourdelet's arm.

Indeed, the Duchesse d'Etampes was a bit too demonstrative. Her kingly lover matched her mood. M. de Roncroy was following history too closely, emulating Francis I in the matter of licentiousness. He was drawing every one's attention to his fair partner, but Diana—completely subjugated—seemed quite careless of what the rest might think. Her sister tried to check the exuberance, but Mrs. Bancroft's only reply was to cling a little closer. The hostess joined her husband.

"Lawrence," she said, "can't you say something to Maurice? Make him behave himself! I don't know what's got into him! Well . . . Lawrence . . . what's the matter?"

Herker had just gripped her wrist with one hand and caught hold of Bourdelet's with the other! The doctor looked at him.

"*Sapristi*, how he resembles the son of Jeanne la Folle!" thought Bourdelet. "It's uncanny—that distorted mouth, those staring eyes, that look of stark terror. . . ."

He noticed that Herker was gazing in the direction of the great door. What was the attraction? Ah . . .!

"*Tonnerre du ciel!*" snapped the little doctor.

Some one was standing motionless on the top step, some one in a gorgeous court costume of white velvet—some one who looked like Titian's portrait of Francis I, come to life! It was M. de Roncroy!

M. de Roncroy! Then there were two of them? No—the *other* must be an impostor, behind that metal visor and heavy armor! Who *was* he?

Herker looked from one Francis I to the other—from the Man in Iron to the Man in Velvet—and the keen eyes of the famous physician could see his patient's reason tottering.

"Just a practical joker—that fellow in armor," whispered Bourdelet hurriedly.

"Practical joker?" repeated Herker. "But—who is he? There's no one tall enough. . . . My God, Bourdelet, can you hear the weight of his tread—the clash of metal, every step he takes? And Diana—she doesn't realize . . ."

At that moment de Roncroy's powerful voice launched a call that rose above the music and the chatter of the dancers.

"Diana!"

The guests, turning at the sound, recognized him at once—and a sudden hush expressed the general amazement. The giant warrior had again become a mystery!

With his left arm encircling the waist of Diana Bancroft, whose flushed cheek was pressed against his cool cuirass, he stood apart from the rest, the centre of a gaping circle. The onlookers began to edge away from him—and from the other

suits of armor as well, lest these too concealed silent, mysterious beings.

"Diana!" called the count a second time.

Mrs. Bancroft turned her head—shuddered, gasped, and tried to get away from her partner. But he tightened his hold. She gave him battle, calling all her strength into play, only to be ground harder against his breast.

"Let her go," roared de Roncroy, "and lift that visor so I can get a look at you!"

A flash of lightning? The mysterious intruder had drawn his sword with martial ease of gesture; then, dragging the girl with him, he retreated toward the tapestried wall, the long blade whirling vengefully as some of the servants sought to close in on him.

M. de Roncroy leaped forward, brandishing a halberd snatched from a terrified footman. Spurred by his example, the other men tore the panoplied weapons from the wall and rushed to cut down this defiant rogue. The smoking torches gave the effect of a conflagration, and the hot air reeked of resin, pitch, and bergamot. Veiled in a reddish mist, the *mêlée* started, . . . crisp commands punctuating the clash of weapons. Now and then an oath was heard, and the howl of a wounded man. Already, blood began to spatter the floor. The helmet with the fleur-de-lis, outlined sharply against the tapestry, continued to dominate the milling mob, and the great, gleaming blade blocked every charge.

Across the vast hall the women fluttered about, biting their handkerchiefs, feverish, pale, their nerves on edge. The servants, breathless and quaking, huddled near the steps, and in a shadowed corner two men lurked, watching the progress of the battle. Bourdelet and Herker! The American was mumbling incoherent phrases:

"Midnight . . . the footsteps . . . in the hall . . . chains clanking . . . the king . . . the king! For God's sake, stop it! Oh . . . for the dawn!"

"It'll be all right," murmured the doctor. "They'll get him to surrender, and we'll find out who this spoil-sport is!"

The voice of the hostess reached them. "Doctor! Doctor! Come quickly . . . my sister . . ."



Drawn by Henry Pitts.

The mysterious intruder had drawn his



sword with martial ease of gesture.—Page 609.

Two servants were carrying Mrs. Bancroft up the steps. Not a little worried at leaving Herker, the doctor followed them.

Stretched out on a great four-poster bed, surrounded by anxious-eyed ladies in the garb of the distant past, Diana Bancroft slowly regained consciousness. Her sister held a phial of smelling-salts in readiness.

Afar, the muffled crash of conflict . . . suddenly it ceased . . . and then . . .

Herker entered the room, brushing past the doctor. Fear had made him almost unrecognizable, setting in his haggard face the look of a lunatic. None dared to question him.

He was followed a moment later by M. de Roncroy, liberally spattered with blood, clinging to a half-severed finger. . . . The count dropped into the nearest chair, with never a word to ease the tension of the eager bystanders.

Mrs. Herker could stand it no longer.

"Who was in the armor?" she cried.

"Oh . . .," groaned her husband, covering his eyes with his hands.

As the doctor commenced dressing his wound, M. de Roncroy fainted.

"Help me . . . stretch him out on the carpet!" called Bourdelet. And all the while he was thinking: "They've killed the man who was in the armor, and Herker, coming up and seeing him, imagined that the armor had *never* contained anything but a corpse!" But the more he thought the more he wondered. Odds and ends of legends crowded back to his mind. He could see the men lifting the visor and finding a skeleton in the armor—or a leering mummy—or a gorilla!

But the horror of these nightmares was not to be compared with the sickening sensation he experienced when M. de Roncroy, coming round again breathed these words:

"There was *nothing* in the armor!"

Dawn marched upon Touraine and made short work of the shadows. It found Doctor Bourdelet very busy. Having seen to M. de Roncroy and his fiancée, he had been compelled to concentrate upon the case of Lawrence Herker.

"We must get him away from here at

once," he told Mrs. Herker. "Valplaisan has tortured him enough."

That afternoon they were entrained for Switzerland—and a month later Bourdelet was able to leave the patient in the care of the local medico—without much hope, however, of a real cure.

For the better part of a year the little doctor cherished the mystery of Valplaisan and the second Francis the First. Then one day at his club an elderly baron whose estate bordered on the famous château had to destroy the illusion for him.

"Did you hear how it happened?" asked the baron. "No? Attend, while I tell you. . . . The guests, led by de Roncroy, crowded the mysterious intruder back to the portière. Turning on them with redoubled vigor, he cleared quite a space about him, then darted through the doorway. De Roncroy, well in the van, lunged at him, his sword piercing the swaying draperies that masked the exit—but before the attackers could get through the door a resounding crash was heard. When they *did* enter the anteroom, there was the black armor stretched out on the floor. They'd evidently 'got' the intruder. De Roncroy tore open the visor. The armor was empty!"

"Yes, I know," interpolated the doctor sharply.

"Ah, but the rest is the best. It seems there were two suits of armor, exactly alike—one that was found on the floor of the anteroom, and one that encompassed the man who danced and fought. He had ordered the duplicate suit for that night's work."

"But how . . .?"

"Listen well, my dear Bourdelet. There was a secret door in the anteroom, standing open for this man's escape. While the others are disentangling their weapons from the folds of the portières, he darts across the anteroom and through the secret door, which he closes after him. Then two servants of Monsieur Herker's, well bribed and posted at the door leading from the anteroom to the library, toss in the second suit of armor, the empty one, which lands with the crash the others heard. They, too, flit away before the crowd pours in. Good?"

Bourdelet nodded grudgingly.



In a shadowed corner two men lurked, watching the progress of the battle. Bourdelet and Herker!—Page 609.

“And the motive?” he asked wonderingly.

“When I tell you the result of my recent visit to Valplaisan, you’ll see,” said the baron. “I had the honor to meet the new owner, Lord Walborough, a handsome young Englishman over six feet tall—a captain in the Horse Guards. Such an air of distinction, but he has the reputation of a man who’ll stop at nothing to get what he wants. He’d sworn to get

Valplaisan for his American bride by Christmas—and, returning from a yachting trip, he found Monsieur Herker had snapped up the place. But Herker hadn’t taken possession yet, and milord had time to study the château very thoroughly. Then and there he made his plans, knowing the nature of the malady from which his rival suffered. Now you understand?”

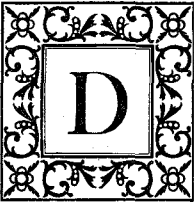
“I do,” grumbled Bourdelet.

Style

BY W. C. BROWNELL

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II. PRESENT-DAY USES—SOCIAL AND PERSONAL



INSTINCTLY through its appeal to the disposition to relax rather than to stiffen, into which our rather pallid, however rigid, Puritanism has developed in an era of expansion, considerably relieved of its poetry and, generally, in light marching order, Rousseauism has entered in triumph the citadel of our Philistinism. No doubt a frontal attack on this position would be quixotic, but if anything like an undermining transformation may intelligently be hoped for, it can hardly be that the spirit of style, considering its apt and manifold applicability, would fail to prove a promising agency. The æsthetic need of the "natural" man, and of the day in which he flourishes so generally and so luxuriantly as quite to dwarf by contrast the green bay-tree of the erstwhile wicked, is to have their energies, so vast and in many respects so beneficent, "shaped up." And to that end an ideal of style, running as it does through both life and art, and thus admirably calculated to compass precisely this result, is so much the primary as to be in effect a preliminary consideration in the practical æsthetic philosophy of both.

The first step, because the most fundamental, that it would take would undoubtedly be the displacement, so far as possible, of the cordial belief in the sacrosanct character of "naturalness" as a subjective manifestation natural in an egoistic age—plainly a herculean stride at the outset. But "naturalness" as such, however temperamental its sanctions, has certainly no immunity from critical analysis. And the first thing about it remarked by analysis is the distinction, often lost sight of, between the natural and the normal. The normal is quite the

last thing our revolutionists deal in or, for that matter, believe in. Subtracting the poetry from Rousseauism, they worship nature only as will—one's own, of course. Abstractly they as well as everybody else would admit the normal to be the legitimate—or, if the word is suspect, the laudable—end and aim of all our activities. And, abstractly, no one advocates the unnatural, any more than the abnormal. But concretely it is quite as apparent that the merit and value of naturalness depend on the nature expressed or exhibited in it, not on any nature's acting in accordance with its instinctive impulses, since it is so very perfectly possible for these impulses to prove deplorably abnormal. Even those "friends of man" to whom Doctor Watts extended the privilege of delighting to bark and bite because such is their nature, confer more, and perhaps experience no less, delight for being subjected to some restraint of these expressional energies. And a similar discipline in natural demeanor is effective as a civilizing agent in the social development of man himself. Nor is the usefulness of social pressure of the kind limited to the primitive community, though the individual who is a group-leader in some circles would certainly be what is known as a "group-breaker" in others of higher differentiation on account merely of being insufficiently "broken in" himself. Every one has remarked the conjunction of the unknown face and the familiar manner noted by Mr. Herford. Of course coltishness in the colt is appropriately natural. Even so, it is much modified before he is ready for human society. But man's nature should, because it can, aspire higher—to be born again, for example, in various respects. Much of his conduct, his nature thus transformed, belongs in the æsthetic field and aptly responds to æsthetic sanctions. To justify it by those