The Gentleman in Black

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ADVERTISEMENT.

It will, doubtless, be in the recollection of many of the readers of "The Gentleman in Black," that a portion of the work appeared some years ago, in a periodical entitled "The Literary Magnet." That publication, however, having long since been discontinued, the greater part of this volume has never yet appeared in print. At the request of the Subscribers, who were anxious that the tale should be completed, it was the author's intention to have had it immediately republished in an entire form, but on applying for the remainder of the manuscript, he was informed that it was mislaid. He has, therefore, been under the necessity of entirely re-writing it, and now, having received his latest corrections, it is presented to the public.

Old Bond Street,
Nov. 25, 1830.
"What the devil shall I do?" exclaimed Louis Desonges: "not a sou have I in the world besides that solitary five franc piece! and where the next is to come from I cannot divine. What the devil must I do?"

"Did you call, Monsieur?" asked a gentle voice, which seemed to proceed from the more dusky corner of the apartment, in which Louis was sitting in his old arm chair, before a worm-eaten table covered with books and papers.

"Who, in the name of fate, are you?" responded the unhappy youth, looking round in search of the individual from whom the inquiry had proceeded.

"Precisely so, replied a stout, short, middle-aged gentleman, of a somewhat saturnine complexion, as he advanced from—we can't say exactly where—into the
middle of the room. He was clad in black, according to the fashion of the day; had a loose Geneva cloak, as an upper garment, of the same colour; and carried a large bundle of black-edged papers, tied with black tape, under his arm. Without the smallest ceremony, he placed a chair opposite our hero, bowed, seated himself, smiled, laid his papers on the table, rubbed his hands, and appeared altogether prepared for business. Louis felt somewhat embarrassed, but returned the stranger’s bow with all due civility; and, after a brief, awkward pause, ventured to inquire the name of the gentleman whom he had the honour of addressing.

“It is of little moment,” replied his extraordinary visitor: “you are in difficulties, and it is in my power to assist you;” and so saying, he began, in due form, to untie, and “sort out” his papers upon the table. Poor Louis looked on in silence, and sighing, bethought himself that if he had been as constant in his attendance at lectures, and in the courts, as at the billiard-tables and gaming-houses of the Palais Royal, he might have picked up law enough to have enabled him to involve a case, in which so many documents were necessary, in a yet deeper state of mystification. “As it is,” thought he, “the man will soon discover my ignorance —so, as I have not yet practised, I’ll be honest, and tell him the truth at once.”

“You need not trouble yourself to do that, Sir,” said the stranger.
"To do what, Sir?" interrogated Louis, "I did not say anything."

"I know that, my dear Sir," observed the gentleman in the cloak, still busying himself with his papers, "but it is just the same thing."

"What is just the same thing? I don't at all comprehend you!" exclaimed the youth.

"Precisely so," continued the stranger, "there, they are all correct, I believe—so, my dear Sir, as you were saying—"

"Excuse me, Sir," said Louis, "I was not saying anything."

"Pardon me, my dear young friend," quoth the gentleman with the black-edged papers, "you talked of telling me the truth at once."

"Not I, Sir, I only thought of doing so."

"Oh! that's all the same with us."

"Then you're no lawyer, I'm sure," replied the youth.

"Not I, my friend, but, really—I should be sorry to appear unpolite to a gentleman of your birth and talents; the fact, however, is, that my engagements are, just now, exceedingly numerous and pressing; therefore, allow me just to explain. This paper—"

"Confound this head-ache," thought poor Louis to himself, "If I had gone to bed last night, instead of watching over the rouge et noir table, and losing my"

"Pshaw! pshaw! smell this bottle," said the stranger,
politely handing a small, exquisitely cut black glass bottle, which he took out of a black ebony case.

The young gentleman did so, and felt “powerfully refreshed;” his head instantly appeared clearer, and his whole frame exhilarated.

“Mon Dieu!” he exclaimed, “Monsieur, where did you buy that wonderful specific?”

“Hist!” ejaculated the stranger, “Don’t swear, I entreat you. It is extremely disagreeable to me.”

“Well, then, I will not,” said Louis; but—pray inform me! Poor little Louise! and Adele! and the Comtesse! They’d adore me, if I could but procure for them such a specific. Pray, Monsieur, I conjure you, in the name of”—

“Stop!” cried the other, starting from his chair, “not a word more! There, there, I make you a present of the bottle, case and all. I manufactured it myself for the use of particular friends only.”

“I’ll give you a thousand francs for the recipe,” exclaimed Louis.

“Where will you find the money?” asked the stranger, coolly settling himself back in his chair, like a man who has found his vantage ground.

“Where, indeed!” groaned poor Louis. Then, having rested his head awhile upon his empty palm, he bethought him that something might be made of the stranger’s papers, and, therefore, addressed himself to business.

“I should ask your pardon, Sir,” said he, “for talk-
ing of perfumes; I accept this bottle as a token of 
amity between us, and now if you please"—

"Good!" observed the gentleman in black, "that is 
what I wish. I am a plain man"—(somewhat plain, I 
must confess, thought Louis)—"well, that's nothing. I 
wish to act handsomely by you; I have taken a great 
fancy to you, and you are over head-and-ears in debt 
—have a hopeless love affair—have neglected your 
studies—offended your uncle—shattered your constitu-
tion"—

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed the youth.

"If you say that again, Sir," said the gentleman in 
black, "I shall take my departure. I told you before 
that I objected to swearing."

"Diable, then!" cried Louis.

"That's better," quoth his companion, smiling, and 
taking a pinch of blackguard, (which an Irish gentle-
man, in a passion, had given him,) out of a black tor-
toise-shell box, handed it politely to our hero.

"No, Sir," said the latter, sternly, "you and your 
snuff may go to h—together."

"Precisely so," calmly observed the stranger, return-
ning the box to his pocket, but not offering to move 
from his chair.

"This is a little too much," cried the enraged young 
Frenchman, starting upon his legs, "tell me, Sir, what 
you mean by intruding upon my privacy, and insulting 
me with the repetition of all my misfortunes? Who, 
and what the devil are you."
“Precisely so, as I told you before,” replied the unruffled stranger.

“Precisely what? I don’t understand you! You may be the devil himself, for aught I know.”

“Precisely so,” was the reply.

“You don’t mean to say you really are the”—

“Precisely so. We have an objection to plain yes and no.”

“Then you are a lawyer after all.”

“Not I, though I confess I have practised occasionally—but, pshaw! this is a waste of time. I know your troubles and difficulties; and would help you through them, if you will allow me. I have money to any amount at my disposal and immediate command, as you may satisfy yourself;” and he threw a large black morocco leather pocket-book upon the table; where it instantly burst open from the extension of (to poor Louis’s eyes) an innumerable quantity of billets de banque, for 500 francs each. “And as for gold,”—and he began to draw from his breeches’ pocket a black satin purse, to which Louis thought there would be no end, so singularly did it appear to elongate itself, as the stranger continued to tug it from its dark abode, till it had attained the full extent of a Flemish ell. Yet, in his hands, it appeared light as the cider-down, till having placed it carefully on the table, the weight of the gold within rent asunder its silken prison, and a large quantity of louis d’ors rolled out upon the table.

Louis looked first at the immense wealth before him,
then at his visitor; again at the gold and notes; and so on, alternately, about half a dozen times, ere he found himself capable of uttering even an exclamation of surprise. And each time his eyes rested upon the stranger's countenance, he discerned some new charm of feature and expression; and he at length decided that he had never before seen so perfectly elegant, agreeable, interesting, well-bred, and accomplished a gentleman; and wondered how he could for an instant have considered him a plain man.

"It's always the way," observed the gentleman in black, "strangers think me any thing but handsome; yet, as we get more intimate, my society becomes more and more agreeable, so that at last my friends are ever endeavouring to imitate me in all their actions and pursuits: but you'll know more about that bye and bye."

Poor Louis had by this time made up his mind that his visitor was no other than his Infernal Majesty, and would instantly have made application to his patron saint, and as many more as he could recollect the titles of, without looking into his calendar, upon the subject, had it not been for the dazzling gold, which he somehow instinctively apprehended would vanish from his sight at the sound of their names. If he had said his pater noster that morning, what now lay before him was not, most assuredly, the sort of temptation from which he would have dreamed of imploring deliverance. The dark, middle-aged gentleman saw the gold
“enter into his soul;” and let it work its way in silence for a short time, watching his victim’s countenance, and ever and anon looking disconcerted, as the youth’s guardian angel seemed to be whispering in his ear.

“Well, Monsieur le Baron!” ejaculated he at length, “perhaps the trifle you see on the table may be of some little service to you?”

“I am no Baron,” observed Louis.

“So much the worse.”

“I know that well enough,” rejoined Louis, testily, and heaved a sigh as he thought of the fair Emilie, and her most perpendicular father, the Comte de Tien a la Cour.

“It’s your own fault,” continued the gentleman in black, bustling up to the table, and opening a paper; “you have but to sign this document, and what you see on the table is but a trifle when compared with the riches you may command; besides uninterrupted health, and, indeed, whatever you wish for; since money you know, my dear friend, carries all before it.”

“And pray, Sir,” asked Louis, influenced, as he afterwards declared, merely by curiosity, but determined not to sign the paper upon any terms, “what may be the contents of that document?”

“A mere bagatelle; look it over yourself. Only to sin for a single second this year, two seconds the next; to double it the third, and so on with each succeeding year. I say the penalty amounts, in fact, to nothing; for the truth is, you will sin for a much longer period