

# The Flambeau Bracket

By Edward Lucas White

Gentlemen, calm yourselves, there is no occasion for an uproar. Be seated again, be seated, all of you, I beg. Honor me with your attention for a moment. Signor Orsacchino has called me a murderer. He need not repeat the epithet. We have all heard it. Some of you gentlemen—I did not recognize the voices—so far forgot yourselves as to suggest that I should cross swords with Signor Orsacchino here and now, or that I should call him out and fight him at once. Gentlemen, I brook no suggestions as to what I should or should not do upon any point of honor. I permit no man to school me as to when or to what extent I should consider myself offended. Still less would I fail to resent any question of the propriety of my ignoring what other men dare not ignore. Signor Orsacchino has shown his courage by applying to me, before so many of you, a term of such serious import. He can incur no dishonor by hearing out in silence what I wish to say before we proceed to a final settlement. As victor in some score of duels I pray your indulgence if for once in my life I depart from my habits, and instead of fighting at once and keeping silence, talk first and fight afterwards, or not at all. You, as my friends, will do me the honor to listen to me. Signor Orsacchino, as my enemy, will do himself the honor to hearken. A young man, and one who has never yet taken part in a serious combat, he has exhibited his conscientious conviction of the justice of his views, and proved his valor and daring by bearding a master of fence who, in fifteen years, has never failed to kill his man. As a skilled swordsman I should feel myself a murderer indeed were I to take upon my soul his blood in haste. The Signor is young; the wine has passed rather freely; we are heated. I say earnestly—let no man interrupt me—that if Signor Orsacchino to-morrow in cool daylight chooses to reiterate his words, I shall take them as a deadly insult and shall challenge, meet, and slay him without compunction. If, on the other hand, after I have told my story, he does not repeat his accusations, I shall regard them, all of them, as not merely withdrawn, but as things never said at all.

Signor Orsacchino has called me a murderer because I killed in a duello his kinsman, General della Rubbalda. That was more than fifteen years ago, and it was my first formal duel. So far from being a seasoned fighter who butchered a feeble and heartbroken old man, I was then a boy, very raw, and to a great extent unpracticed, pitted against a cool, dexterous, and evenenomed adversary. In the many encounters through which I have since passed I recall not one which taxed me more severely or in which I ran a greater risk. In fact, the General would assuredly have killed me had he not chosen to fight with a sword, a perfect mate of my own, which I knew and recognized a sword the sight of which converted me from an excited lad into a being strung far beyond the reach of any personal or paltry emotions; a thing all muscle, nerve and will, perfectly coordinated an infallible supernaturally accurate incarnation of unhurried, predestinate vengeance. We met in the meadow outside of the river gate. Our seconds are all alive, men of unimpeachable integrity, nobles of the loftiest traditions, of the most honorable lineage. There were other witnesses of the fight which was scrupulously fair, and which I won by mere force of right and justice. I believe that, when I have had my say, all of you and Signor Orsacchino not least, will admit that I had just cause, more than just cause, for any vengeance upon the General—that to treat him as a man of honor and meet him sword to sword was a condescension upon my part. So far from having forced him to meet me, his challenge to me was simultaneous with mine to him. Signor Orsacchino has insinuated what, if he were ever to put into words—no,

Signor, hear me out, you may then say what you please—I should resent far more bitterly than the epithet of murderer. You will all recall the sudden and lamented death of Signora della Rubbalda, more than two years after that of her husband. You will all remember that she, the most beautiful woman of our city, who was mourned by unsuccessful suitors beyond any count, left behind her a reputation for saintliness, such as few women have ever attained to. I had, indeed, seen the Signora before my combat with her husband, but I say solemnly that until the Carnival ball I had never spoken to her, that until the morning after, just before the duel, I had not known whom I so admired. I admit that he challenged me upon her account, but his jealousy was as insensate as the spleen that drove him, whose household had escaped loss, to press an imaginary grievance upon me, whose house was most desolate of all, upon a morning of general sorrow and desolation.

If the story of my grievance—all too weak a word—against him, has never before been told by me, it is not because I have any reason to be ashamed of it, but rather chiefly that I was not willing to smirch the name of della Rubbalda with a tale of villainy so cynical, and, after the custom of our family, I reserve everything involving penitence or repentance for my confessor. You shall judge whether I am right in confessing to you all. I shall detain you but a few moments longer.

Without penitence I cannot speak of my brother Ettore, at the thought of him I am convicted of ingratitude, that most universal, most unforgivable of the sins of youth. I failed to appreciate my brother Ettore. He was to me not merely a beloved comrade, he not only more than filled for me the place of the father I had lost, but also of the mother I had never known. His tenderness was as exquisite as his precepts were wise, his concern universal, his care constant. I loved him, loved him with the ardent adoration of an unproved boy for a young, handsome, accomplished cavalier who is and does all that the boy longs to be and do. Yet, although he stinted me in nothing, fulfilled for me all my reasonable desires, granted most of my wishes, humored my whims and bore with my moods, some malignant fiber of my heart drove me into perpetual opposition to him. His solicitude irked me; for, with a boy's folly I mistook stubbornness for resolution, recklessness for valor, and self-assertion for independence. I misconstrued supervision as espionage. Resenting it I began by evading perfectly natural questions as to my whereabouts and doings. From that I grew into a contemptible habit of petty and unnecessary concealment as to my outgoings, incomings, and occupations. He bore this patiently, not showing any change of his affectionate and kindly bearing. Presently my perversity drove me to run counter to his wishes in first one thing and then another. Because he had advised me to cultivate certain of my associates I drew off from them; because he had warned me against others I made cronies of them, although I liked them little or not at all. I felt myself manlier for this sort of folly. I consorted with persons of dubious character or manifestly beneath me, resorted to quarters of the town I should have avoided. When I should have been diverting and improving myself in the best company possible for a young cavalier of our part of the world, I was roistering—by no means enjoying it—with fellows I heartily despised. I lost much money gaming, yet Ettore refilled my purse without chiding me in words, his manner conveying the just disapprobation I would not heed. I came home many times so late or so early that I found our porter difficult to wake, and more than once was nearly compelled to find shelter elsewhere. Sometimes I returned so disordered that I shrank from ascending the grand staircase and slunk around the courtyard under the galleries to the servitors' stair. I became habituated to low taverns across the river, where I naturally became involved in wine-room quarrels and street brawls. I flattered myself that I comported myself well

in these senseless *melées*. I dealt some shrewd wounds and came off unscathed. I felt all the man, the man of pleasure.

Then one night I was entrapped, I never realized how, in a street fight with several rufflers. One of my comrades fell and the rest fled, and I was left alone, my back to a barred door, facing several blades which I barely kept off, when a tall man appeared behind my assailants, fell upon them without warning and promptly beat them off. After the sound of their fleeing feet had died away in the alleys I found myself face to face with Ettore, wearing a cap without a feather, and a plain brown cloak. He asked only:

“You are not wounded?”

“Not a scratch,” I replied.

“We will walk together, if you do not object,” he said. “Which way are you going?”

“Home,” I answered.

As we traversed the crooked streets, crossed the bridge and made our way home, he kept silence at first and then led me into some light gossipy talk, making no remark upon my silly foolhardiness, nor saying anything relative to his sudden appearance or my rescue.

I should have been touched by his solicitude, but with a boy’s folly, instead of being overwhelmed with gratitude to him for having saved my life, I was merely indignant at his having followed me and watched over me, and furious at the thought that he had felt that I, who aspired to be redoubtable, might be—as I was too headstrong to confess I had been—in need of assistance.

After this adventure my perversity was aggravated. I took the most sedulous precautions for my own hurt, doing all I could to preclude the possibility of Ettore’s ever again being able to protect me from any possible consequences of the dangers into which I needlessly thrust myself.

Throughout the carnival time I fairly lived away from home, mostly, and this, with Ettore’s full knowledge, at the Palazzo Forticello with wild Gianbattista and his wilder brother Lorenzo. I took perverse care that Ettore should not be able to recognize me, changing my dress often and wearing a variety of masks. Throughout the carnival I had been hoping to encounter a lady whom I had first seen the previous autumn, whom I had caught sight of but twice during winter, whom I had watched for in vain at the Cathedral, and in the search for whom I had fruitlessly haunted every church in the city. It had so happened that on each of the three times I had seen her I was alone. My descriptions had been unrecognizable to those of my friends whom I asked to enlighten me. When I had described her to Ettore he had maddened me by saying that he knew well who the lady was, but declined to tell me, advising me to think no more of her, as her husband was devoted to her and a spleenful, dangerous man. I spurned his advice, but my fevered efforts won me no success. I had no clue to her, and even during the delirium of the carnival time I had sighted no one whom I could take for her. This failure diminished my enjoyment of the week of revelry, but I had at least the satisfaction that I had not seen Ettore. No sense of his presence, of his hovering influence, dimmed the glow of my delight in feeling myself my own master and perfectly able to take care of myself, in getting into scrapes, as I did, and getting out of them as I might, untrammelled.

On the night of the great ball I was dressed as a troubadour and was very proud of my becoming costume. No sooner had Lorenzo and I entered the theater than I saw the lady of my dreams. She wore a very narrow mask, no more than an excuse for a mask, and was dressed in fanciful garb, the significance of which I did not try to guess, but with the effect of which I was enraptured. She was with a very young man, and after a word with Lorenzo, using the freedom of the festal time, we accosted them. Lorenzo engaged the attention of her escort, while I gained

possession of the lady. I may say that we spent the evening together, dancing countless dances, partaking of refreshments, strolling about, or seated on one or another of the benches in the corridors or loggias. So engrossed was I that it was only occasionally that I remembered to look about for Ettore. I never saw him, nor any figure at all suggesting his. But each time I looked among the crowd, the parti-colored brightness of which was accentuated by a liberal sprinkling of cavaliers in black dominoes, all alike slender, youthful, and tall, I saw somewhere one figure that, as it were, stood out among the rest—a tallish spare man of erect carriage, stiff bearing, and moving in a way not at all suggestive of youth, most absurdly and unbecomingly habited as a buffoon, not after the manner of our theater, but in the French fashion, all in white, with a tight-fitting cap and a full false face whitened with flour, a loose, white blouse, with huge, white buttons big as biscuits, loose, wide, white trousers, and white slippers with white rosettes. This costume, odd enough on a young and plump figure, had an uncanny effect preposterously hung about the leanness of an elderly and frigid form. It was so unpleasantly weird that more than once my gaze dwelt on it for an instant before it returned to peering through my dear comrade's mask at the half-revealed wonders of her dazzling eyes. Our conversation was very innocent, witty we thought, delightful we felt. It was near the unmasking time when, as we gave ourselves to the intoxication of one of the last dances, I heard Ettore's voice whisper in my ear.

"Take care. Do not go home alone. You have been three hours with the wife of the most jealous man alive."

I turned my head, and as well as I could in whirling through the whirling crowd, I looked about for Ettore. I did not catch sight of him, nor of any costume such as he might be likely to wear. I saw only the everlasting parti-colored whirl, the iterated black dominoes, the inevitable misfit zany.

At the end of the dance the youth, whom Lorenzo had removed for me, claimed my partner so peremptorily that I could not but resign her—and she, addressing him as cousin, went off with him. They had scarcely more than disappeared when, as I stood leaning against a pilaster gazing across the press of dancers who thronged the floor at the dazzling parties which crowded every box of the seven tiers, a woman's shriek filled the hall. The next instant came the cry of "Fire," and almost before the boxes opposite me emptied the blaze ran across the ceiling. I took no part in the mad panic which ensued. I stood petrified, as did a few others, and recovered my senses only when the billows of smoke rolled to the floor. Then, from under dropping masses of blazing decorations, through doors empty save for the trampled shapes of dead or insensible victims of the rush, I made my way from the auditorium. How I so made my way out, and by which door I do not know, the spectacle of the trampled women so sickened me that I marvel I ever escaped at all. For, at the sight of a corpse not of my own making, I have always turned, I confess, utterly a coward. To gaze at a man dead by my sword does not disturb me. I see in it only the evidence that heaven's justice has made use of my hand to give a scoundrel his deserts. But a glimpse of a dead body, that of one not slain by me, makes my head swim, my eyes dazzle, my sinews loosen, my knees knock together. Before such a corpse I am—I may apply to myself what no other man would venture to hint—no better than a craven.

Therefore, I shall never know how I came out of that furnace. I was delirious with horror—a mere animal driven by the primitive instinct of the dread of fire.

The corridors and passageways were almost as full of smoke as the theater itself, and, it seemed to me, more aflame. I dare not venture to say how many stairways I seemed to find ablaze. The rush of the fire drove me in frantic flight hither and thither through several narrow doors and—for down every stair I saw climbing flames—up more than one stair. I realized that I

was quite out of the theater and on an upper floor of one or the other of the long-disused, deserted palazzos which flanked it. I could not guess which, and whichever it might be, it was certainly as much on fire as the theater. I recall rushing through room after room all filled with smoke, often turning back, finding no outlet and no way down. Several times I scrambled over heaps of what seemed to be old stage scenery. Once I stumbled and fell, jammed in a forest of broken laths and scantlings. I do not know how I reached the window at which I finally found myself, nor where I was joined by that sinister figure, in the white clown's dress, which I had remarked so often during the dancing. I was first aware of him beside me when I pushed vainly against the shut lattices of the window, and it was his strength, not mine, before which they gave way—not opening on their hinges, but carrying with them their crazy rotten frames, wrenched loose from the stone work of the window and falling altogether with a splintering smash upon the pavement below.

The noise of their crash struck our ears, while our eyesight was yet stunned by the impact of the hot brilliance with which, as the dislodged woodwork left the window aperture clear, we were flooded, diving upward, as it were, from the smoky obscurity of the interior into an intense ruby glare. We both scrambled upon the sill. There was no balcony outside. We were looking into a courtyard so filled with crimson radiance that not only were the walls opposite us bathed in an intense light, but the dark corners were penetrated by a weird carmine-tinted glow even in the deepest shadows. There was not a human being in sight—the court was deserted. It was of considerable size, paved with big square blocks of black-and-white stone. I could make out on the side opposite us the opening of a wagon archway, yawning like a black throat. No arcades flanked the courtyard, and every window I could see was shuttered fast. There were six stories of windows, and we were at one of the fifth story. The roof cornice beetled above us, the roofs above the court were silhouetted against the inflamed sky, and overhead poured the vast inverted cataract of sparks which streamed up from the holocaust we had not yet escaped. We spoke no word. He stood upon the left side of the window, I upon the right. My lute I had, of course, thrown away, my mask I had on no longer. I had lost both sword and poignard, my whole belt was gone. I had nothing in my hands, which were torn and bleeding. The buffoon had a naked dagger in his right hand, a piece of rope in his left. He leaned over and scrutinized the outlook, as I did. We were a frightful distance above the pavement, and even had we been lower, dropping to the pavement would have been certain destruction, for precisely beneath us was a long narrow area, about a yard wide, and how deep I could not guess, constructed to let light into some cellar. The coping along its edge, where the pavement ceased, showed as a line of dull light in the appalling illumination. There were no balconies to the windows below us, or to any of those immediately on the right or left of them. About halfway down the face of the wall, from just below the left of the window in which we were to the corner of the courtyard on that side, ran a broad stone cornice, wide enough for a lean man once standing upon it to walk along it without holding to anything. About halfway to the corner of the court a metal rain-spout ran down, making a conspicuous elbow over the jutting stone shelf. Once set on his feet upon this cornice, either of us was sure of escape. The end of it was not precisely below the left side of our window, but a little to the left.

All this I took in in a moment, so, apparently, did the other man. There were many flambeau brackets projecting from the walls of the courtyard. There was one beside each lower corner of our window. The buffoon took his dagger in his teeth, kneeled down, reached over and fastened one end of his rope to the flambeau socket. He did not hurry, but made sure of his knots. Then he dropped the rope and, holding to the bracket with his left hand, shook the rope into undulations

with his right, peering down to descry its end. Its end was all of ten feet above the level of the cornice, too far for a man holding the extreme end of it to set his feet on the cornice top. To jump for that cornice, or to drop upon it from even a yard above, it would have meant the certainty of going down to be dashed to pieces on the cruel flagstones below. The buffoon pulled up the rope and stood up, his dagger still between his teeth, projecting from under the false face which it thrust away from his own, and through the eyeholes of which I seemed to feel his eyes fixed upon me. We could hear, above the roar of the fire, the confused hubbub of shouts from the crowds which thronged the square and the streets round about. I had called for help when first I reached the sill, but my bawling, lost in the steady deep, rumbling note of the fire and in the confusion of voices beyond, won no response. Now I yelled again, screamed, shrieked, but no one heard. The buffoon echoed my outcries, but not as if assisting them, not as if hoping against hope for rescue, not as if, like myself, merely giving way to terror and despair, but rather with derisive mockery in his rallying halloos. I felt totally helpless. If I were to escape at all it would be through him, yet I felt him as an inimical presence and feared him almost more than the fire behind us. He stood with the rope bunched inside his fingers, it seemed to me nervously knotting and unknotting it, then he let most of it go slack, a coil of a loop or two swinging back and forth in his left hand, his face toward me and his eyes I felt steadily on me. The tiny threads of lazy smoke that had been faltering out of the window under the lintel increased from a thin trickle to a continuous stream. Through the door of the room behind us was visible a faint blush of blurred brownish light. As I looked at it I saw the door darken suddenly. A man rushed through it, incredibly alive out of the throttling reek, crossed the room in a bound, and leaped upon the sill between us. He was all in black—black cap, black mask, black domino, black hose, and his sword in a black scabbard. So swift was his rush, so impetuously did he leap, that I wondered whether he had meant to set foot on the window sill or had expected to land on a balcony outside. As it was, he planted his feet fairly on the sill, but just missed pitching forward into space. He toppled, bent double, and saved himself only by touching the outer sill with the outstretched fingers of his tense arm.

At this instant, as the masked, black domino rocked unsteadily, head and shoulders into the outer air, the zany flung the noose—for it was by no means a snarl of rope, but a cunningly knotted slip-noose, which he had held inside his closed left hand—over the newcomer's head, and, with one lightning movement, half dragged, half hurled him from the sill. In the air the victim spread out arms, legs, and cloak, like a huge bat. His hands windmilled wildly, searching for the rope, and failed to touch it. For a horrid instant, as the rope checked its headlong dive, the inverted body gave a jolted bob upward before it turned, then it lurched over, the hands making one last clutch for the rope, and again missing. The cord drew up straight as a rapier blade and held. The body was violently and convulsively agitated once or twice, and its sword, tossed out of the upturned scabbard, struck the corner of the cornice with a sharp clang, bounded up, flashing in the red glare, and shot down a long line of light to the pavement. Its owner's corpse writhed sinuously and then merely gyrated limply at the end of the rope. Its feet were not much more than a man's height above the cornice. My abomination of the sight unnerved me so that my impulse to hurl myself upon the murderer was swallowed up in a physical sickness in which I nearly fell from the sill. As I clung to the stone jamb the malignant white shape, dagger in hand, addressed me:

"Sir, I know who you are. I was about to piece my rope with your carcass. Since this intruding stranger has spared me the necessity, and since the rope is now long enough to be useful, I offer you the courtesy of the first opportunity to descend."

Speechless with horror and loathing I tottered, a helpless jelly, against the jamb. He stood, his long dagger in his right hand, eyeing me through his whitened mask.

“Ah,” he went on. “You hesitate. You can pass me easily, descend by the bracket, the rope, the cornice, and the rain-spout. You will not? Then you will pardon me if I leave you. You will find it warm here before long. Nevertheless, if this place is more to your liking than the street, I do not dispute your right of choice. A good night to you. I am tempted indeed to put this dagger into you before I go. But I reflect that, though you do not look it, you might have the strength and sleight to avoid my thrust, and perhaps even throw me down. I shall not risk it. If you overcome your panic and are not burned here or killed by falling, if, in short, you get down alive and get home, you shall hear from me in the morning.”

He leaned over, tore off and threw away his false face and revealed to me a countenance I did not then recognize. Next, his dagger in his teeth, he dived for the bracket, caught it with both hands, swung himself off into space, gripped the rope, first with one hand, then with both, went down it, stood on the dead man’s shoulders, let himself down the rope till he clasped the corpse, wriggled down it, embracing it close, dislodging the cloak which sailed down the air like some huge bird and settled upon the pavement far out into the court near the sword.

The escaping villain finally gripped one ankle of the corpse with each hand, swung himself and all above him gently sideways until his feet found the cornice, steadied himself by the feet of the corpse, let go and stood up, edged gingerly along the cornice to the rain-spout, and slid down it smoothly. Once on the pavement he leaped into the air, clapping his hands and crowing, scampered briskly across the court, stopped to pick up his victim’s cloak and sword, turned to glance up at me, waved me a derisive farewell, and, after a hideous caper of joy, vanished into the black throat of the wagon archway, running like a fiend.

My eyes came back to the dangling body, revolving slowly now. Its mask hung beside the neck and the back of the head was toward me. I felt myself doomed. I knew I could never sum mon up resolution to escape by that road. In fact, I am sure that from losing my bold, as I actually later descended, and being dashed to pieces on the pitiless stones, nothing saved me but the set fixed purpose of vengeance, which made me not a man, but an automaton.

I looked behind me. The glare of the fire was bright through the smoke, dense volumes of which poured out of the window above my head, and the heat of which I could feel.

At that instant came a terrific dragging crash, a brief darkness, and an agonized wail of groaning shouts. The roof of the theater had fallen in. The smoke sucked back through the window above me, and momentarily I felt cool air on my face. The next instant the volume and intensity of the light redoubled as the overarching stream of sparks became a firmament of fire. The court grew bright to the deepest, darkest corner, eddies of air swept past me, the corpse swung round, its mask blew away wholly. Hideously bowed the head was, the chin driven into the bosom. But I knew the face of my brother Ettore.

## **The Flambeau Bracket**

By Edward Lucas White

Killers 1906

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not recognize the voices—so far forgot yourselves as to suggest that I should cross swords with Signor Orsacchino here and now, or that I should call him out and fight him at once. Gentlemen, I brook no suggestions as to what I should or should not do upon any point of honor. I permit no man to school me as to when or to what extent I should consider myself offended. Still less would I fail to resent any question of the propriety of my ignoring what other men dare not ignore. Signor Orsacchino has shown his courage by applying to me, before so many of you, a term of such serious import. He can incur no dishonor by hearing out in silence what I wish to say before we proceed to a final settlement. As victor in some score of duels I pray your indulgence if for once in my life I depart from my habits, and instead of fighting at once and keeping silence, talk first and fight afterwards, or not at all. You, as my friends, will do me the honor to listen to me. Signor Orsacchino, as my enemy, will do himself the honor to hearken. A young man, and one who has never yet taken part in a serious combat, he has exhibited his conscientious conviction of the justice of his views, and proved his valor and daring by bearding a master of fence who, in fifteen years, has never failed to kill his man. As a skilled swordsman I should feel myself a murderer indeed were I to take upon my soul his blood in haste. The Signor is young; the wine has passed rather freely; we are heated. I say earnestly—let no man interrupt me—that if Signor Orsacchino to-morrow in cool daylight chooses to reiterate his words, I shall take them as a deadly insult and shall challenge, meet, and slay him without compunction. If, on the other hand, after I have told my story, he does not repeat his accusations, I shall regard them, all of them, as not merely withdrawn, but as things never said at all.

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was as insensate as the spleen that drove him, whose household had escaped loss, to press an imaginary grievance upon me, whose house was most desolate of all, upon a morning of general sorrow and desolation.

If the story of my grievance—all too weak a word—against him, has never before been told by me, it is not because I have any reason to be ashamed of it, but rather chiefly that I was not willing to smirch the name of della Rubbalda with a tale of villainy so cynical, and, after the custom of our family, I reserve everything involving penitence or repentance for my confessor. You shall judge whether I am right in confessing to you all. I shall detain you but a few moments longer.

Without penitence I cannot speak of my brother Ettore, at the thought of him I am convicted of ingratitude, that most universal, most unforgivable of the sins of youth. I failed to appreciate my brother Ettore. He was to me not merely a beloved comrade, he not only more than filled for me the place of the father I had lost, but also of the mother I had never known. His tenderness was as exquisite as his precepts were wise, his concern universal, his care constant. I loved him, loved him with the ardent adoration of an unproved boy for a young, handsome, accomplished cavalier who is and does all that the boy longs to be and do. Yet, although he stinted me in nothing, fulfilled for me all my reasonable desires, granted most of my wishes, humored my whims and bore with my moods, some malignant fiber of my heart drove me into perpetual opposition to him. His solicitude irked me; for, with a boy's folly I mistook stubbornness for resolution, recklessness for valor, and self-assertion for independence. I misconstrued supervision as espionage. Resenting it I began by evading perfectly natural questions as to my whereabouts and doings. From that I grew into a contemptible habit of petty and unnecessary concealment as to my outgoing, incomings, and occupations. He bore this patiently, not showing any change of his affectionate and kindly bearing. Presently my perversity drove me to run counter to his wishes in first one thing and then another. Because he had advised me to cultivate certain of my associates I drew off from them; because he had warned me against others I made cronies of them, although I liked them little or not at all. I felt myself manlier for this sort of folly. I consorted with persons of dubious character or manifestly beneath me, resorted to quarters of the town I should have avoided. When I should have been diverting and improving myself in the best company possible for a young cavalier of our part of the world, I was roistering—by no means enjoying it—with fellows I heartily despised. I lost much money gaming, yet Ettore refilled my purse without chiding me in words, his manner conveying the just disapprobation I would not heed. I came home many times so late or so early that I found our porter difficult to wake, and more than once was nearly compelled to find shelter elsewhere. Sometimes I returned so disordered that I shrank from ascending the grand staircase and slunk around the courtyard under the galleries to the servitors' stair. I became habituated to low taverns across the river, where I naturally became involved in wine-room quarrels and street brawls. I flattered myself that I comported myself well in these senseless *melées*. I dealt some shrewd wounds and came off unscathed. I felt all the man, the man of pleasure.

Then one night I was entrapped, I never realized how, in a street fight with several rufflers. One of my comrades fell and the rest fled, and I was left alone, my back to a barred door, facing several blades which I barely kept off, when a tall man appeared behind my assailants, fell upon them without warning and promptly beat them off. After the sound of their fleeing feet had died away in the alleys I found myself face to face with Ettore, wearing a cap without a feather, and a plain brown cloak. He asked only:

“You are not wounded?”

“Not a scratch,” I replied.

“We will walk together, if you do not object,” he said. “Which way are you going?”

“Home,” I answered.

As we traversed the crooked streets, crossed the bridge and made our way home, he kept silence at first and then led me into some light gossip talk, making no remark upon my silly foolhardiness, nor saying anything relative to his sudden appearance or my rescue.

I should have been touched by his solicitude, but with a boy’s folly, instead of being overwhelmed with gratitude to him for having saved my life, I was merely indignant at his having followed me and watched over me, and furious at the thought that he had felt that I, who aspired to be redoubtable, might be—as I was too headstrong to confess I had been—in need of assistance.

After this adventure my perversity was aggravated. I took the most sedulous precautions for my own hurt, doing all I could to preclude the possibility of Ettore’s ever again being able to protect me from any possible consequences of the dangers into which I needlessly thrust myself.

Throughout the carnival time I fairly lived away from home, mostly, and this, with Ettore’s full knowledge, at the Palazzo Forticello with wild Gianbattista and his wilder brother Lorenzo. I took perverse care that Ettore should not be able to recognize me, changing my dress often and wearing a variety of masks. Throughout the carnival I had been hoping to encounter a lady whom I had first seen the previous autumn, whom I had caught sight of but twice during winter, whom I had watched for in vain at the Cathedral, and in the search for whom I had fruitlessly haunted every church in the city. It had so happened that on each of the three times I had seen her I was alone. My descriptions had been unrecognizable to those of my friends whom I asked to enlighten me. When I had described her to Ettore he had maddened me by saying that he knew well who the lady was, but declined to tell me, advising me to think no more of her, as her husband was devoted to her and a spleenful, dangerous man. I spurned his advice, but my fevered efforts won me no success. I had no clue to her, and even during the delirium of the carnival time I had sighted no one whom I could take for her. This failure diminished my enjoyment of the week of revelry, but I had at least the satisfaction that I had not seen Ettore. No sense of his presence, of his hovering influence, dimmed the glow of my delight in feeling myself my own master and perfectly able to take care of myself, in getting into scrapes, as I did, and getting out of them as I might, untrammelled.

On the night of the great ball I was dressed as a troubadour and was very proud of my becoming costume. No sooner had Lorenzo and I entered the theater than I saw the lady of my dreams. She wore a very narrow mask, no more than an excuse for a mask, and was dressed in fanciful garb, the significance of which I did not try to guess, but with the effect of which I was enraptured. She was with a very young man, and after a word with Lorenzo, using the freedom of the festal time, we accosted them. Lorenzo engaged the attention of her escort, while I gained possession of the lady. I may say that we spent the evening together, dancing countless dances, partaking of refreshments, strolling about, or seated on one or another of the benches in the corridors or loggias. So engrossed was I that it was only occasionally that I remembered to look about for Ettore. I never saw him, nor any figure at all suggesting his. But each time I looked among the crowd, the parti-colored brightness of which was accentuated by a liberal sprinkling of cavaliers in black dominoes, all alike slender, youthful, and tall, I saw somewhere one figure that, as it were, stood out among the rest—a tallish spare man of erect carriage, stiff bearing, and moving in a way not at all suggestive of youth, most absurdly and unbecomingly habited as a buffoon, not after the manner of our theater, but in the French fashion, all in white, with a tight-

fitting cap and a full false face whitened with flour, a loose, white blouse, with huge, white buttons big as biscuits, loose, wide, white trousers, and white slippers with white rosettes. This costume, odd enough on a young and plump figure, had an uncanny effect preposterously hung about the leanness of an elderly and frigid form. It was so unpleasantly weird that more than once my gaze dwelt on it for an instant before it returned to peering through my dear comrade's mask at the half-revealed wonders of her dazzling eyes. Our conversation was very innocent, witty we thought, delightful we felt. It was near the unmasking time when, as we gave ourselves to the intoxication of one of the last dances, I heard Ettore's voice whisper in my ear.

"Take care. Do not go home alone. You have been three hours with the wife of the most jealous man alive."

I turned my head, and as well as I could in whirling through the whirling crowd, I looked about for Ettore. I did not catch sight of him, nor of any costume such as he might be likely to wear. I saw only the everlasting parti-colored whirl, the iterated black dominoes, the inevitable misfit zany.

At the end of the dance the youth, whom Lorenzo had removed for me, claimed my partner so peremptorily that I could not but resign her—and she, addressing him as cousin, went off with him. They had scarcely more than disappeared when, as I stood leaning against a pilaster gazing across the press of dancers who thronged the floor at the dazzling parties which crowded every box of the seven tiers, a woman's shriek filled the hall. The next instant came the cry of "Fire," and almost before the boxes opposite me emptied the blaze ran across the ceiling. I took no part in the mad panic which ensued. I stood petrified, as did a few others, and recovered my senses only when the billows of smoke rolled to the floor. Then, from under dropping masses of blazing decorations, through doors empty save for the trampled shapes of dead or insensible victims of the rush, I made my way from the auditorium. How I so made my way out, and by which door I do not know, the spectacle of the trampled women so sickened me that I marvel I ever escaped at all. For, at the sight of a corpse not of my own making, I have always turned, I confess, utterly a coward. To gaze at a man dead by my sword does not disturb me. I see in it only the evidence that heaven's justice has made use of my hand to give a scoundrel his deserts. But a glimpse of a dead body, that of one not slain by me, makes my head swim, my eyes dazzle, my sinews loosen, my knees knock together. Before such a corpse I am—I may apply to myself what no other man would venture to hint—no better than a craven.

Therefore, I shall never know how I came out of that furnace. I was delirious with horror—a mere animal driven by the primitive instinct of the dread of fire.

The corridors and passageways were almost as full of smoke as the theater itself, and, it seemed to me, more aflame. I dare not venture to say how many stairways I seemed to find ablaze. The rush of the fire drove me in frantic flight hither and thither through several narrow doors and—for down every stair I saw climbing flames—up more than one stair. I realized that I was quite out of the theater and on an upper floor of one or the other of the long-disused, deserted palazzos which flanked it. I could not guess which, and whichever it might be, it was certainly as much on fire as the theater. I recall rushing through room after room all filled with smoke, often turning back, finding no outlet and no way down. Several times I scrambled over heaps of what seemed to be old stage scenery. Once I stumbled and fell, jammed in a forest of broken laths and scantlings. I do not know how I reached the window at which I finally found myself, nor where I was joined by that sinister figure, in the white clown's dress, which I had remarked so often during the dancing. I was first aware of him beside me when I pushed vainly against the shut lattices of the window, and it was his strength, not mine, before which they gave

way—not opening on their hinges, but carrying with them their crazy rotten frames, wrenched loose from the stone work of the window and falling altogether with a splintering smash upon the pavement below.

The noise of their crash struck our ears, while our eyesight was yet stunned by the impact of the hot brilliance with which, as the dislodged woodwork left the window aperture clear, we were flooded, diving upward, as it were, from the smoky obscurity of the interior into an intense ruby glare. We both scrambled upon the sill. There was no balcony outside. We were looking into a courtyard so filled with crimson radiance that not only were the walls opposite us bathed in an intense light, but the dark corners were penetrated by a weird carmine-tinted glow even in the deepest shadows. There was not a human being in sight—the court was deserted. It was of considerable size, paved with big square blocks of black-and-white stone. I could make out on the side opposite us the opening of a wagon archway, yawning like a black throat. No arcades flanked the courtyard, and every window I could see was shuttered fast. There were six stories of windows, and we were at one of the fifth story. The roof cornice beetled above us, the roofs above the court were silhouetted against the inflamed sky, and overhead poured the vast inverted cataract of sparks which streamed up from the holocaust we had not yet escaped. We spoke no word. He stood upon the left side of the window, I upon the right. My lute I had, of course, thrown away, my mask I had on no longer. I had lost both sword and poignard, my whole belt was gone. I had nothing in my hands, which were torn and bleeding. The buffoon had a naked dagger in his right hand, a piece of rope in his left. He leaned over and scrutinized the outlook, as I did. We were a frightful distance above the pavement, and even had we been lower, dropping to the pavement would have been certain destruction, for precisely beneath us was a long narrow area, about a yard wide, and how deep I could not guess, constructed to let light into some cellar. The coping along its edge, where the pavement ceased, showed as a line of dull light in the appalling illumination. There were no balconies to the windows below us, or to any of those immediately on the right or left of them. About halfway down the face of the wall, from just below the left of the window in which we were to the corner of the courtyard on that side, ran a broad stone cornice, wide enough for a lean man once standing upon it to walk along it without holding to anything. About halfway to the corner of the court a metal rain-spout ran down, making a conspicuous elbow over the jutting stone shelf. Once set on his feet upon this cornice, either of us was sure of escape. The end of it was not precisely below the left side of our window, but a little to the left.

All this I took in in a moment, so, apparently, did the other man. There were many flambeau brackets projecting from the walls of the courtyard. There was one beside each lower corner of our window. The buffoon took his dagger in his teeth, kneeled down, reached over and fastened one end of his rope to the flambeau socket. He did not hurry, but made sure of his knots. Then he dropped the rope and, holding to the bracket with his left hand, shook the rope into undulations with his right, peering down to descry its end. Its end was all of ten feet above the level of the cornice, too far for a man holding the extreme end of it to set his feet on the cornice top. To jump for that cornice, or to drop upon it from even a yard above, it would have meant the certainty of going down to be dashed to pieces on the cruel flagstones below. The buffoon pulled up the rope and stood up, his dagger still between his teeth, projecting from under the false face which it thrust away from his own, and through the eyeholes of which I seemed to feel his eyes fixed upon me. We could hear, above the roar of the fire, the confused hubbub of shouts from the crowds which thronged the square and the streets round about. I had called for help when first I reached the sill, but my bawling, lost in the steady deep, rumbling note of the fire and in the

confusion of voices beyond, won no response. Now I yelled again, screamed, shrieked, but no one heard. The buffoon echoed my outcries, but not as if assisting them, not as if hoping against hope for rescue, not as if, like myself, merely giving way to terror and despair, but rather with derisive mockery in his rallying halloos. I felt totally helpless. If I were to escape at all it would be through him, yet I felt him as an inimical presence and feared him almost more than the fire behind us. He stood with the rope bunched inside his fingers, it seemed to me nervously knotting and unknotting it, then he let most of it go slack, a coil of a loop or two swinging back and forth in his left hand, his face toward me and his eyes I felt steadily on me. The tiny threads of lazy smoke that had been faltering out of the window under the lintel increased from a thin trickle to a continuous stream. Through the door of the room behind us was visible a faint blush of blurred brownish light. As I looked at it I saw the door darken suddenly. A man rushed through it, incredibly alive out of the throttling reek, crossed the room in a bound, and leaped upon the sill between us. He was all in black—black cap, black mask, black domino, black hose, and his sword in a black scabbard. So swift was his rush, so impetuously did he leap, that I wondered whether he had meant to set foot on the window sill or had expected to land on a balcony outside. As it was, he planted his feet fairly on the sill, but just missed pitching forward into space. He toppled, bent double, and saved himself only by touching the outer sill with the outstretched fingers of his tense arm.

At this instant, as the masked, black domino rocked unsteadily, head and shoulders into the outer air, the zany flung the noose—for it was by no means a snarl of rope, but a cunningly knotted slip-noose, which he had held inside his closed left hand—over the newcomer's head, and, with one lightning movement, half dragged, half hurled him from the sill. In the air the victim spread out arms, legs, and cloak, like a huge bat. His hands windmilled wildly, searching for the rope, and failed to touch it. For a horrid instant, as the rope checked its headlong dive, the inverted body gave a jolted bob upward before it turned, then it lurched over, the hands making one last clutch for the rope, and again missing. The cord drew up straight as a rapier blade and held. The body was violently and convulsively agitated once or twice, and its sword, tossed out of the upturned scabbard, struck the corner of the cornice with a sharp clang, bounded up, flashing in the red glare, and shot down a long line of light to the pavement. Its owner's corpse writhed sinuously and then merely gyrated limply at the end of the rope. Its feet were not much more than a man's height above the cornice. My abomination of the sight unnerved me so that my impulse to hurl myself upon the murderer was swallowed up in a physical sickness in which I nearly fell from the sill. As I clung to the stone jamb the malignant white shape, dagger in hand, addressed me:

"Sir, I know who you are. I was about to piece my rope with your carcass. Since this intruding stranger has spared me the necessity, and since the rope is now long enough to be useful, I offer you the courtesy of the first opportunity to descend."

Speechless with horror and loathing I tottered, a helpless jelly, against the jamb. He stood, his long dagger in his right hand, eyeing me through his whitened mask.

"Ah," he went on. "You hesitate. You can pass me easily, descend by the bracket, the rope, the cornice, and the rain-spout. You will not? Then you will pardon me if I leave you. You will find it warm here before long. Nevertheless, if this place is more to your liking than the street, I do not dispute your right of choice. A good night to you. I am tempted indeed to put this dagger into you before I go. But I reflect that, though you do not look it, you might have the strength and sleight to avoid my thrust, and perhaps even throw me down. I shall not risk it. If you overcome

your panic and are not burned here or killed by falling, if, in short, you get down alive and get home, you shall hear from me in the morning.”

He leaned over, tore off and threw away his false face and revealed to me a countenance I did not then recognize. Next, his dagger in his teeth, he dived for the bracket, caught it with both hands, swung himself off into space, gripped the rope, first with one hand, then with both, went down it, stood on the dead man’s shoulders, let himself down the rope till he clasped the corpse, wriggled down it, embracing it close, dislodging the cloak which sailed down the air like some huge bird and settled upon the pavement far out into the court near the sword.

The escaping villain finally gripped one ankle of the corpse with each hand, swung himself and all above him gently sideways until his feet found the cornice, steadied himself by the feet of the corpse, let go and stood up, edged gingerly along the cornice to the rain-spout, and slid down it smoothly. Once on the pavement he leaped into the air, clapping his hands and crowing, scampered briskly across the court, stopped to pick up his victim’s cloak and sword, turned to glance up at me, waved me a derisive farewell, and, after a hideous caper of joy, vanished into the black throat of the wagon archway, running like a fiend.

My eyes came back to the dangling body, revolving slowly now. Its mask hung beside the neck and the back of the head was toward me. I felt myself doomed. I knew I could never summon up resolution to escape by that road. In fact, I am sure that from losing my bold, as I actually later descended, and being dashed to pieces on the pitiless stones, nothing saved me but the set fixed purpose of vengeance, which made me not a man, but an automaton.

I looked behind me. The glare of the fire was bright through the smoke, dense volumes of which poured out of the window above my head, and the heat of which I could feel.

At that instant came a terrific dragging crash, a brief darkness, and an agonized wail of groaning shouts. The roof of the theater had fallen in. The smoke sucked back through the window above me, and momentarily I felt cool air on my face. The next instant the volume and intensity of the light redoubled as the overarching stream of sparks became a firmament of fire. The court grew bright to the deepest, darkest corner, eddies of air swept past me, the corpse swung round, its mask blew away wholly. Hideously bowed the head was, the chin driven into the bosom. But I knew the face of my brother Ettore.