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The Duel

*An incident from the life
of the Venetian, G. C.*

*...animum rege! qui nisi paret,
Imperat: hunc frenis, hunc tu compesce catena.**

Horace, *Epistles* 1, 2, 62–63

A MAN BORN IN VENICE to poor parents, without worldly goods and without any of those titles which in cities distinguish the families of note from common people, but, by the grace of God, brought up like one destined for something different from the trades followed by the populace, had the misfortune at the age of twenty-seven to fall foul of the government, and at the age of twenty-eight was lucky enough to escape from the sacred hands of that justice whose punishment he was unwilling to bear. That criminal is indeed fortunate who can tranquilly suffer the penalty which he deserves, waiting with patient resignation for it to end; that criminal is unfortunate who, after having erred, does not have the courage to make up for his faults and blot them out by due submission to his sentence. This Venetian was an impatient man; he fled, although he knew that by taking to flight he was endangering his life, something which he had no use for without his liberty. On the other hand, perhaps he did not think about it so much, but merely fled, as the lowest animals do, in simple obedience to the voice of nature. If the rulers whose chastisement he was fleeing had wanted to, they could of course have had him arrested during his flight, but they did not bother to, with the result that this ill-advised young man found out by experience that in his desire for liberty a man often exposes himself to vicissitudes which are much more cruel than short-lived slavery. An escaped prisoner never arouses in the minds of those who have condemned him any feeling of anger,

but of pity rather, since by fleeing he blindly augments his own ills, renounces the benefits of his restoration to his homeland and remains a criminal, just as he was before he started to expiate his crime.

In short, this Venetian, overcome by his youthful ardour, left the State by the longest route, since he knew that the shorter route is usually fatal to those in flight, and went to Munich, where he remained for one month in order to regain his health and to provide himself with money and honest attendants; and then, after crossing through Swabia, Alsace, Lorraine and Champagne, he reached Versailles on the fifth of January in the year 1757, half an hour before the fanatic Damiens stabbed King Louis XV of happy memory.*

This man, who had by force of circumstances become an adventurer – for such anyone must be who is not rich and who goes through the world disgraced in his own country – had in Paris some extraordinary strokes of luck, which he abused. He passed into Holland, where he brought to a successful conclusion some business which produced a considerable sum of money, which he used up, and he went to England, where an ill-conceived passion almost made him lose his mind and his life. He left England in 1764, and through French Flanders he went into the Austrian Low Countries, passed over the Rhine and through Wesel entered Westphalia. He went rapidly through the lands of Hanover and Brunswick, and via Magdeburg he reached Berlin, the capital of Brandenburg. In the two months he remained there – during which he had two audiences with King Frederick (a favour which His Majesty grants readily to all those foreigners who ask for it in writing) – he realized that serving that King gave no hopes of making a fortune. So he left Brandenburg with one servant and a man from Lorraine, an expert mathematician, whom he took with

him as a secretary: since he intended to go and seek his fortune in Russia, he needed such a man. He stayed a few days in Danzig, a few in Königsberg, the capital of ducal Russia, and skirting the coast of the Baltic Sea he arrived at Mitau, capital of Courland,* where he spent a month being well entertained by the illustrious Duke Johann Ernst Biron, at whose expense he inspected all the iron mines in the Duchy. He then left with a generous payment for having suggested to the Duke, and demonstrated the means of arranging, some useful improvements in the mines. Leaving Courland, he stayed a short while in Livonia, went rapidly through Karelia and Estonia and all those provinces, and came to Ingria,* and then St Petersburg, where he would have found the fortune that he desired if he had gone there by invitation. No one should hope to make his fortune in Russia who goes there out of mere curiosity. "What has he come here to do?" is a sentence which they all utter and they all repeat: he only is certain of being employed and given a fat salary who arrives at that Court after having had the skill to introduce himself in some European court to the Russian Ambassador, who, if he becomes persuaded of that person's merit, informs the Empress, who gives the order to send him to her, paying the expenses of his journey. Such a person cannot fail to succeed, because no one would be able to say that money has been thrown away on the travel expenses of someone with no ability; this would mean that the minister who proposed him had been deceived, something that certainly could not happen, because ministers understand men very well. Ultimately the only man who does not have, and cannot have, any merit is the good man who goes there at his own expense. Let this be a warning to those of my readers who are considering going there uninvited in the hope of becoming rich in the imperial service.

Nevertheless our Venetian did not waste his time, since it was always his habit to be employed in some way or other. But he did not make his fortune. And so, at the end of a year, no better provided for than he usually was, except for letters of exchange with good recommendations, he went to Warsaw.

He left St Petersburg in his carriage drawn by six post-horses, and with two servants, but with so little money that, when in a wood in Ingria he came upon Maestro Galuppi, known as Buranello,* who was going there at the Tsarina's behest, his purse was already empty. Despite that, he covered the nine hundred miles, which was how far it was to the capital of Poland, successfully. In that land he who has the air of needing nothing can easily make money, and it is not difficult there to have that air, just as it is most difficult to have it in Italy, where there is no one who supposes that a purse is full of gold until he has first seen it open. *Italiam! Italiam!*

The Venetian was very well received in Warsaw. Prince Adam Czartoryski, to whom he introduced himself with a strong letter of recommendation, introduced him to his father, the Prince Palatine of Russia, to his uncle, the Grand Chancellor of Lithuania and a very learned juriconsult, and to all the great ones of the kingdom who were there at Court. He was introduced by no other name than the one which he took from his humble birth, and his situation could not have been unknown to the Poles, since many of those great ones had seen him fourteen years previously in Dresden, where he had served King Augustus III with his pen, and where his mother, brothers, brothers-in-law and nephews had been. The mendacious gentlemen of the press should hold their tongues. The poor wretches, however, do deserve some sympathy, since lying articles, particularly when they are slanderous, make their papers

more fashionable than true accounts do. The only foreign addition which decorated the exterior of the not badly set-up figure of the Venetian was the Roman Order of Knighthood, rather the worse for wear, which he wore on a bright red ribbon hanging round his neck *en sautoir*, as the monsignors wear their crosses. He had received that Order from Pope Clement XIII of happy memory, when he had the good fortune to kiss his sacred foot in Rome in the year 1760. An Order of Knighthood, of whatever kind, provided it glitters, is a great help to a man who, when he is travelling, has occasion to appear for the first time in a different city almost every month; it is an ornament, a respectable decoration which impresses fools, and so it is necessary, since the world is full of fools, and they are all inclined to evil; therefore, when a beautiful Order of Knighthood can calm them down and make them ecstatic, confused and respectful, it is well to flaunt it. The Venetian stopped wearing this Order in the year 1770 in Pisa where, finding himself in need of cash, he sold his cross, which was adorned with diamonds and rubies: he had been disgusted with it for a long time because he had seen several charlatans with the same decoration.

So, eight days after he arrived in Warsaw he had the honour to dine at the home of Prince Adam Czartoryski with that monarch of whom all Europe was talking, and whom he ardently longed to meet. At the round table, at which eight people were seated, everyone was eating a little or a great deal, except the King and the Venetian, since they were talking all the time both about Russia, which the monarch knew well, and about Italy, which he, although he was very curious about it, had never seen. Despite that, many people in Rome, in Naples, in Florence, in Milan have told me that they had entertained him in their homes; and I let them talk like this, and believe what they were

saying, since in this world a man runs into great danger if he undertakes the difficult task of disillusioning those who are deceived.

After that dinner the Venetian spent all the remainder of that year and part of the following year paying homage to His Majesty, to those princes and those rich prelates, since he was always invited to all the glittering festivities which were held at Court and in the magnificent houses of the upper classes, and particularly in those of the *family* (as the famous house of Czartoryski was pre-eminently known), where true magnificence, far superior to that of the Court, reigned.

At that time there came to Warsaw a Venetian ballerina who with her grace and her charms captivated the minds of many, and among them that of the Grand Butler to the Crown, Ksawery Branicki. This gentleman, who today is a great general, was then in the prime of his life, a fine man who, being inclined from his adolescence to the profession of arms, had served France for six years. There he had learnt to shed the blood of his enemies without hating them, to take vengeance without any anger, to kill without discourtesy, to prefer honour, which is an imaginary good, to life, which is the only real good men have. The office of the Equestrian Order of Grand Podstoli to the Crown (*podstoli* is a word which signifies butler) he had obtained from King Augustus III; he was decorated with the famous Order of the White Eagle; and he was returning at that time from the Court in Berlin to which he had been accredited by the new King, his friend, to perform a certain *secret* commission known to everyone. He was this King's favourite, and to him he afterwards owed his good fortune, for he was overwhelmed with favours. It is true too that he had earned his great rise in favour by his own valour in war, by his loyal companionship some years before Augustus had been elected King, when Augustus had been at the Court of St Petersburg, where he became an

admirer of the eminent qualities, the spirit and the beauty of the Grand Duchess of Muscovy, now the most glorious Empress. This knight was truly worthy of the predilection of his friend the King, since, just as he had been when they were equals, so when the other arrived at the splendour of the throne, he was the ever ready and almost blind executor of his orders on every occasion, and not with any less fervour when it was a matter of exposing himself by his service to mortal danger. He was that bold man who fought and made the whole Polish nation his enemy, beginning with that considerable party of malcontents who took to arms when the Diet of Convocation decided to place the royal diadem on the head of Stanislaus, now regnant, whom he adored. Towards the middle of the year 1766 the King conferred on him the very useful title of Łowczy, or Grand Chasseur to the Crown, while he lay wounded by that dangerous pistol shot which the Venetian gave him in the duel of which we are about to speak. To obtain that title, he forewent that of Grand Butler, which, although it was two grades superior to the new title, was not lucrative: having money is something which many people prefer to any other kind of superiority.

The Venetian ballerina had no need of the protection of Branicki, Podstoli to the Crown, to make people respect her, because everyone loved her and she enjoyed also other more conspicuous protection; but the favour of the bold and brave Podstoli, a resolute knight who was not easy to get to know, augmented her reputation, and perhaps restrained those who, in theatrical factions that are at odds with each other, sometimes occasion the virtuous no little disgust.

The Venetian was by taste and out of a sense of duty a friend of the Venetian ballerina, but he had not, by applauding her dancing, become hostile to that of another prima ballerina, whom he was friends with before the Venetian ballerina arrived at the Court of Warsaw. She bore this with

bad grace. She thought that she could not quietly allow her only compatriot in Warsaw to be one of those who applauded her rival rather than simply one of her own supporters. A competitive woman of the theatre is so anxious for victory that she is the declared enemy of all those who do not lend a hand to subjugate whoever is in competition with her, and to enable her to triumph. This is how all theatrical heroines think: dominated by ambition and envy, they cannot pardon those who support their competitor, and there is no favour with which they are not ready to reward anyone who manages to escape from the other's fetters, if he can be supposed to contribute much to swinging the balance in their favour.

She had often complained to her Podstoli, who was then at the head of her faction, of the Venetian's ingratitude, but he did not know what to do; the only promise he made her was that, if the occasion presented itself, he would know how to humiliate him in the same way as in the past he had humiliated another who had not automatically felt able to side with her. The occasion, although it had to be dragged in by the scruff of its neck, was not long in presenting itself.

The 4th of March, St Casimir's Day, was celebrated by a fête at Court, because Casimir was the name of the Prince Grand Chamberlain, the King's brother. After the meal His Majesty told the Venetian that he would be glad to hear what he thought of the Polish theatre, since that day for the first time there was to be a performance on the Warsaw stage with Polish actors. The Venetian promised the King that he would be among the spectators, but begged him not to require his opinion, since he did not understand that language at all. The monarch smiled, which sufficed to show that the Venetian had received a great honour in that august assembly. When monarchs are being courted in public, in the crowded assembly of their ministers, of ambassadors and of foreigners, they take care to direct some question or other

to all those whom they wish to assure that their presence has been noted. Hence they have to think of some question which can be put to this person, or to that one, of those whom they wish to honour with conversation that will not be open to serious reflection, not equivocal, not such that the person questioned can reply that he does not know. Above all, monarchs speak straightforwardly and precisely, since it must never happen that the person, who is summoned by the royal voice to speak, has to reply: "Sire, I do not understand what Your Majesty has said to me." This reply would cause the assembly to laugh, because the idea it presents is absurd: either a king who was not understood because he did not know how to express himself, or a courtier who does not understand a king when he speaks. If it does happen that a courtier has not understood, either he lowers his head as a sign of his gratitude, or says whatever comes into his mind; whether it is to the point or not, it is always acceptable.

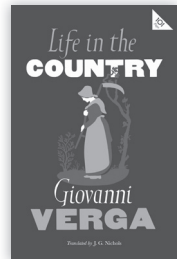
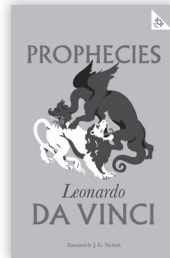
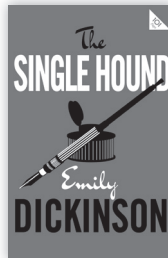
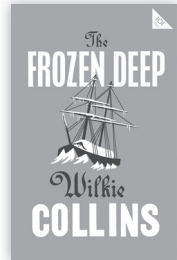
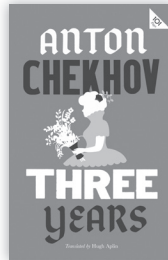
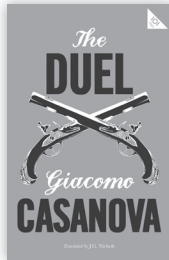
So the words that a sovereign says to anyone in public must be mere platitudes, but he must say something: if he does not, the matter is noticed, and the following morning the whole city knows that so-and-so is out of favour at Court, because at dinner the King did not address him. These trifles are very well known to all sovereigns – in fact they make up one of the most important articles of their catechism, because even their slightest gesture is carefully examined by the Argus-eyed onlookers, and their words, however little they are susceptible of such treatment, are subject to a hundred different interpretations.

In the year 1750 I found myself at Fontainebleau in the company of those present at dinner with the Queen of France, or rather (to put it better) of those watching her eat. The silence was profound. The Queen, alone at table, looked only at the food which was put in front of her by her ladies-in-waiting. Then, having tasted one dish and wanting

to indicate that she wished for a second helping, she raised her head majestically and, slowly turning her head to accompany her eyes – in contrast to certain injudicious gentlemen of our country, who, since they only turn their eyes and not their heads, look as though they are obsessed – she scanned the whole circle in an instant, then stopped at one gentleman, the greatest of all, and perhaps the only one to whom it suited her to do so much honour, and said to him in clear voice: “*Je crois, Monsieur de Loevendal, que rien n’est meilleur d’une fricassée de poulets.*” [“I think, Monsieur de Loevendal, that there is nothing better than a chicken fricassee.”] He (having already advanced three paces as soon as he heard the Queen pronounce his name) replied in a humble voice, seriously and gazing at her fixedly, but with his head lowered: “*Je suis de cet avis là, Madame.*” [“I am of that opinion, Madame.”] Having said this, he returned to where he had been before, keeping himself bowed and walking backwards on the tips of his toes, and the meal finished without another word being spoken.

I was beside myself. I stared at that great man, whom previously I had known only by name as the famous conqueror of Bergen op Zoom, and I could not conceive how he had been able to keep a straight face – he, a marshal of France – at that remark, suitable for a cook, with which the Queen had deigned to address him, and to which he had replied in the same serious tone and with the same gravity with which, in a council of war, he would have advised the death of a guilty officer. The more I thought about it the harder I found it to repress the burst of laughter which was choking me. Woe betide me if I had not managed to repress it! They would have taken me for a downright madman, and God knows what would have happened to me. From that day onwards – that is, for the whole month I spent at Fontainebleau – every day in every house where I dined, I found chicken fricassee. Cooks of

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