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*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow
and Other Ghostly Tales*

The Knight of Malta

To the Editor of the *Knickerbocker*

SIR: IN THE COURSE of a tour which I made in Sicily, in the days of my juvenility, I passed some little time at the ancient city of Catania, at the foot of Mount Etna. Here I became acquainted with the Chevalier L——, an old Knight of Malta. It was not many years after the time that Napoleon had dislodged the knights from their island,* and he still wore the insignia of his order. He was not, however, one of those relics of that once chivalrous body, who had been described as “a few worn-out old men, creeping about certain parts of Europe, with the Maltese cross on their breasts”; on the contrary, though advanced in life, his form was still light and vigorous; he had a pale, thin, intellectual visage, with a high forehead and a bright, visionary eye. He seemed to take a fancy to me, as I certainly did to him, and we soon became intimate; I visited him occasionally, at his apartments, in the wing of an old palace, looking toward Mount Etna. He was an antiquary, a virtuoso and a connoisseur. His rooms were decorated with mutilated statues, dug up from Grecian and Roman ruins, old vases, lachrymals and sepulchral lamps. He had astronomical and chemical instruments, and black-letter books in various languages. I found that he had dipped a little in chimerical studies and had a hankering after astrology and alchemy. He affected to believe in dreams and visions, and delighted in the fanciful Rosicrucian doctrines. I cannot persuade myself, however, that he really believed in all these: I rather think he loved to

let his imagination carry him away into the boundless fairyland which they unfolded.

In company with the chevalier, I took several excursions on horseback about the environs of Catania and the picturesque skirts of Mount Etna. One of these led through a village which had sprung up on the very tract of an ancient eruption, the houses being built of lava. At one time we passed, for some distance, along a narrow lane, between two high dead convent walls. It was a cut-throat-looking place in a country where assassinations are frequent, and just about midway through it we observed blood upon the pavement and the walls, as if a murder had actually been committed there.

The chevalier spurred on his horse, until he had extricated himself completely from this suspicious neighbourhood. He then observed that it reminded him of a similar blind alley in Malta, infamous on account of the many assassinations that had taken place there; concerning one of which, he related a long and tragical story that lasted until we reached Catania. It involved various circumstances of a wild and supernatural character, but which he assured me were handed down in tradition, and generally credited by the old inhabitants of Malta.

As I like to pick up strange stories, and as I was particularly struck with several parts of this, I made a minute of it on my return to my lodgings. The memorandum was lost, with several others of my travelling papers, and the story had faded from my mind, when recently, in perusing a French memoir, I came suddenly upon it, dressed up, it is true, in a very different manner, but agreeing in the leading facts, and given upon the word of that famous adventurer, the Count Cagliostro.*

I have amused myself, during a snowy day in the country, by rendering it roughly into English, for the entertainment of a youthful circle round the Christmas fire. It was well received by

my auditors, who, however, are rather easily pleased. One proof of its merits is that it sent some of the youngest of them quaking to their beds, and gave them very fearful dreams. Hoping that it may have the same effect upon your ghost-hunting readers, I offer it, Mr Editor, for insertion in your magazine. I would observe that, wherever I have modified the French version of the story, it has been in conformity to some recollection of the narrative of my friend, the Knight of Malta.

Your obt servt,

GEOFFREY CRAYON

The Grand Prior of Minorca, A Veritable Ghost Story

*“Keep my wits, heaven! They say spirits appear
To melancholy minds, and the graves open!”*

— FLETCHER *

ABOUT THE MIDDLE of the last century, while the Knights of St John of Jerusalem still maintained something of their ancient state and sway in the Island of Malta, a tragical event took place there, which is the groundwork of the following narrative.

It may be as well to premise that, at the time we are treating of, the order of St John of Jerusalem, grown excessively wealthy, had degenerated from its originally devout and warlike character. Instead of being a hardy body of “monk-knights”, sworn soldiers of the cross, fighting the paynim in the Holy Land, or scouring the Mediterranean and scouring the Barbary coasts with their galleys, or feeding the poor and attending upon the sick at their hospitals, they led a life of luxury and libertinism, and were to be found in the most voluptuous courts of Europe. The order, in fact, had become a mode of providing for the needy branches

of the Catholic aristocracy of Europe. "A commandery", we are told, was a splendid provision for a younger brother, and men of rank, however dissolute, provided they belonged to the highest aristocracy, became Knights of Malta, just as they did bishops, or colonels of regiments, or court chamberlains. After a brief residence at Malta, the knights passed the rest of their time in their own countries, or only made a visit now and then to the island. While there, having but little military duty to perform, they beguiled their idleness by paying attentions to the fair.

There was one circle of society, however, into which they could not obtain currency. This was composed of a few families of the old Maltese nobility, natives of the island. These families, not being permitted to enrol any of their members in the order, affected to hold no intercourse with its chevaliers; admitting none into their exclusive coteries but the Grand Master, whom they acknowledged as their sovereign, and the members of the chapter which composed his council.

To indemnify themselves for this exclusion, the chevaliers carried their gallantries into the next class of society, composed of those who held civil, administrative and judicial situations. The ladies of this class were called *honorate*, or honourables, to distinguish them from the inferior orders, and among them were many of superior grace, beauty and fascination.

Even in this more hospitable class, the chevaliers were not all equally favoured. Those of Germany had the decided preference, owing to their fair and fresh complexions, and the kindness of their manners: next to these came the Spanish cavaliers, on account of their profound and courteous devotion, and most discreet secrecy. Singular as it may seem, the chevaliers of France fared the worst. The Maltese ladies dreaded their volatility, and their proneness to boast of their amours, and shunned all entanglement with them. They were forced, therefore, to content themselves

with conquests among females of the lower orders. They revenged themselves, after the gay French manner, by making the "honorate" the objects of all kinds of jests and mystifications, by prying into their tender affairs with the more favoured chevaliers and making them the theme of song and epigram.

About this time, a French vessel arrived at Malta, bringing out a distinguished personage of the order of St John of Jerusalem, the Commander de Foulquerre, who came to solicit the post of commander-in-chief of the galleys. He was descended from an old and warrior line of French nobility, his ancestors having long been seneschals of Poitou, and claiming descent from the first counts of Angoulême.

The arrival of the commander caused a little uneasiness among the peaceably inclined, for he bore the character, in the island, of being fiery, arrogant and quarrelsome. He had already been three times at Malta, and on each visit had signalized himself by some rash and deadly affray.

As he was now thirty-five years of age, however, it was hoped that time might have taken off the fiery edge of his spirit, and that he might prove more quiet and sedate than formerly. The commander set up an establishment befitting his rank and pretensions; for he arrogated to himself an importance greater even than that of the Grand Master. His house immediately became the rallying place of all the young French chevaliers. They informed him of all the slights they had experienced or imagined, and indulged their petulant and satirical vein at the expense of the honorate and their admirers. The chevaliers of other nations soon found the topics and tone of conversation at the commander's irksome and offensive, and gradually ceased to visit there. The commander remained the head of a national clique, who looked up to him as their model. If he was not as boisterous and quarrelsome as formerly, he had become haughty and overbearing. He was fond

of talking over his past affairs of punctilio and bloody duel. When walking the streets, he was generally attended by a ruffling train of young French cavaliers, who caught his own air of assumption and bravado. These he would conduct to the scenes of his deadly encounters, point out the very spot where each fatal lunge had been given and dwell vaingloriously on every particular.

Under his tuition, the young French chevaliers began to add bluster and arrogance to their former petulance and levity; they fired up on the most trivial occasions, particularly with those who had been most successful with the fair, and would put on the most intolerable Drawcansir* airs. The other chevaliers conducted themselves with all possible forbearance and reserve, but they saw it would be impossible to keep on long, in this manner, without coming to an open rupture.

Among the Spanish cavaliers was one named Don Luis de Lima Vasconcellos. He was distantly related to the Grand Master – and had been enrolled at an early age among his pages – but had been rapidly promoted by him until, at the age of twenty-six, he had been given the richest Spanish commandery in the order. He had, moreover, been fortunate with the fair, with one of whom, the most beautiful honorata of Malta, he had long maintained the most tender correspondence.

The character, rank and connections of Don Luis put him on a par with the imperious Commander de Foulquerre, and pointed him out as a leader and champion to his countrymen. The Spanish chevaliers repaired to him, therefore, in a body, represented all the grievances they had sustained and the evils they apprehended, and urged him to use his influence with the commander and his adherents to put a stop to the growing abuses.

Don Luis was gratified by this mark of confidence and esteem on the part of his countrymen, and promised to have an interview with the Commander de Foulquerre on the subject. He resolved

to conduct himself with the utmost caution and delicacy on the occasion, to represent to the commander the evil consequences which might result from the inconsiderate conduct of the young French chevaliers and to entreat him to exert the great influence he so deservedly possessed over them, to restrain their excesses. Don Luis was aware, however, of the peril that attended any interview of the kind with this imperious and fractious man, and apprehended, however it might commence, that it would terminate in a duel. Still, it was an affair of honour, in which Castilian dignity was concerned; beside, he had a lurking disgust at the overbearing manners of De Foulquerre, and perhaps had been somewhat offended by certain intrusive attentions which he had presumed to pay to the beautiful honorata.

It was now Holy Week, a time too sacred for worldly feuds and passions, especially in a community under the dominion of a religious order; it was agreed, therefore, that the dangerous interview in question should not take place until after the Easter holidays. It is probable, from subsequent circumstances, that the Commander de Foulquerre had some information of this arrangement among the Spanish chevaliers, and was determined to be beforehand, and to mortify the pride of their champion, who was thus preparing to read him a lecture. He chose Good Friday for his purpose. On this sacred day, it is customary in Catholic countries to make a tour of all the churches, offering up prayers in each. In every Catholic church, as is well known, there is a vessel of holy water near the door. In this everyone, on entering, dips his fingers and makes therewith the sign of the cross on his forehead and breast. An office of gallantry, among the young Spaniards, is to stand near the door, dip their hands in the holy vessel and extend them courteously and respectfully to any lady of their acquaintance who may enter; who thus receives the sacred water at second hand, on the tips of her fingers, and proceeds to cross herself, with all due

decorum. The Spaniards, who are the most jealous of lovers, are impatient when this piece of devotional gallantry is proffered to the object of their affections by any other hand; on Good Friday, therefore, when a lady makes a tour of the churches, it is the usage among them for the innamorato to follow her from church to church, so as to present her the holy water at the door of each, thus testifying his own devotion and at the same time preventing the officious services of a rival.

On the day in question, Don Luis followed the beautiful hono-rata to whom, as has already been observed, he had long been devoted. At the very first church she visited, the Commander de Foulquerre was stationed at the portal, with several of the young French chevaliers about him. Before Don Luis could offer her the holy water, he was anticipated by the commander, who thrust himself between them and, while he performed the gallant office to the lady, rudely turned his back upon her admirer and trod upon his feet. The insult was enjoyed by the young Frenchmen who were present: it was too deep and grave to be forgiven by Spanish pride and at once put an end to all Don Luis's plans of caution and forbearance. He repressed his passion for the moment, however, and waited until all the parties left the church; then, accosting the commander with an air of coolness and unconcern, he enquired after his health and asked to what church he proposed making his second visit. "To the Magisterial Church of St John." Don Luis offered to conduct him thither, by the shortest route. His offer was accepted, apparently without suspicion, and they proceeded together. After walking some distance, they entered a long, narrow lane, without door or window opening upon it, called the "Strada Stretta", or narrow street. It was a street in which duels were tacitly permitted, or connived at, in Malta, and were suffered to pass as accidental encounters. Everywhere else they were prohibited. This restriction had been instituted to diminish the number of

duels, formerly so frequent in Malta. As a further precaution to render these encounters less fatal, it was an offence, punishable with death, for anyone to enter this street armed with either poniard or pistol. It was a lonely, dismal street, just wide enough for two men to stand upon their guard and cross their swords; few persons ever traversed it unless with some sinister design; and on any preconcerted duello, the seconds posted themselves at each end to stop all passengers and prevent interruption.

In the present instance, the parties had scarce entered the street when Don Luis drew his sword and called upon the commander to defend himself.

De Foulquerre was evidently taken by surprise: he drew back and attempted to expostulate, but Don Luis persisted in defying him to the combat.

After a second or two, he likewise drew his sword, but immediately lowered the point.

“Good Friday!” ejaculated he, shaking his head. “One word with you – it is full six years since I have been in a confessional: I am shocked at the state of my conscience; but within three days – that is to say, on Monday next—”

Don Luis would listen to nothing. Though naturally of a peaceable disposition, he had been stung to fury, and people of that character, when once incensed, are deaf to reason. He compelled the commander to put himself on his guard. The latter, though a man accustomed to brawl in battle, was singularly dismayed. Terror was visible in all his features. He placed himself with his back to the wall, and the weapons were crossed. The contest was brief and fatal. At the very first thrust, the sword of Don Luis passed through the body of his antagonist. The commander staggered to the wall and leant against it.

“On Good Friday!” ejaculated he again, with a failing voice and despairing accents. “Heaven pardon you!” added he. “Take

my sword to Têtefoulques and have a hundred masses performed in the chapel of the castle for the repose of my soul!" With these words he expired.

The fury of Don Luis was at an end. He stood aghast, gazing at the bleeding body of the commander. He called to mind the prayer of the deceased for three days' respite, to make his peace with heaven; he had refused it; had sent him to the grave, with all his sins upon his head! His conscience smote him to the core; he gathered up the sword of the commander, which he had been enjoined to take to Têtefoulques, and hurried from the fatal Strada Stretta.

The duel of course made a great noise in Malta but had no injurious effect upon the worldly fortunes of Don Luis. He made a full declaration of the whole matter before the proper authorities; the Chapter of the Order considered it one of those casual encounters of the Strada Stretta, which were mourned over but tolerated; the public, by whom the late commander had been generally detested, declared that he had deserved his fate. It was but three days after the event that Don Luis was advanced to one of the highest dignities of the Order, being invested by the Grand Master with the priorship of the kingdom of Minorca.

From that time forward, however, the whole character and conduct of Don Luis underwent a change. He became a prey to a dark melancholy which nothing could assuage. The most austere piety, the severest penances, had no effect in allaying the horror which preyed upon his mind. He was absent for a long time from Malta – having gone, it was said, on remote pilgrimages; when he returned, he was more haggard than ever. There seemed something mysterious and inexplicable in this disorder of his mind. The following is the revelation made by himself of the horrible visions, or chimeras, by which he was haunted:

“When I had made my declaration before the Chapter,” said he, “and my provocations were publicly known, I had made my peace with man; but it was not so with God, nor with my confessor, nor with my own conscience. My act was doubly criminal, from the day on which it was committed, and from my refusal to a delay of three days for the victim of my resentment to receive the sacraments. His despairing ejaculation, ‘Good Friday! Good Friday!’ continually rang in my ears. ‘Why did I not grant the respite!’ cried I to myself. ‘Was it not enough to kill the body, but must I seek to kill the soul!’”

“On the night of the following Friday, I started suddenly from my sleep. An unaccountable horror was upon me. I looked wildly around. It seemed as if I were not in my apartment, nor in my bed, but in the fatal Strada Stretta, lying on the pavement. I again saw the commander leaning against the wall; I again heard his dying words: ‘Take my sword to Têtefoulques and have a hundred masses performed in the chapel of the castle for the repose of my soul!’”

“On the following night, I caused one of my servants to sleep in the same room with me. I saw and heard nothing, either on that night or any of the nights following, until the next Friday, when I had again the same vision, with this difference, that my valet seemed to be lying at some distance from me on the pavement of the Strada Stretta. The vision continued to be repeated on every Friday night, the commander always appearing in the same manner and uttering the same words: ‘Take my sword to Têtefoulques and have a hundred masses performed in the chapel of the castle for the repose of my soul!’ On questioning my servant on the subject, he stated that on these occasions he dreamt that he was lying in a very narrow street, but he neither saw nor heard anything of the commander.

“I knew nothing of this Têtefoulques, whither the defunct was so urgent I should carry his sword. I made enquiries, therefore,

concerning it among the French chevaliers. They informed me that it was an old castle, situated about four leagues from Poitiers, in the midst of a forest. It had been built in old times, several centuries since, by Foulques Taillefer (or Fulke Hackiron), a redoubtable, hard-fighting Count of Angoulême, who gave it to an illegitimate son, afterwards created Grand Seneschal of Poitou, which son became the progenitor of the Foulquerres of Têtefoulques, hereditary seneschals of Poitou. They further informed me that strange stories were told of this old castle in the surrounding country, and that it contained many curious relics. Among these were the arms of Foulques Taillefer, together with all those of the warriors he had slain; and that it was an immemorial usage with the Foulquerres to have the weapons deposited there which they had wielded either in war or in single combat. This, then, was the reason of the dying injunction of the commander respecting his sword. I carried this weapon with me wherever I went, but still I neglected to comply with his request.

“The visions still continued to harass me with undiminished horror. I repaired to Rome, where I confessed myself to the Grand Cardinal penitentiary and informed him of the terrors with which I was haunted. He promised me absolution after I should have performed certain acts of penance, the principal of which was to execute the dying request of the commander by carrying the sword to Têtefoulques and having the hundred masses performed in the chapel of the castle for the repose of his soul.

“I set out for France as speedily as possible, and made no delay in my journey. On arriving at Poitiers, I found that the tidings of the death of the commander had reached there, but had caused no more affliction than among the people of Malta. Leaving my equipage in the town, I put on the garb of a pilgrim and, taking a guide, set out on foot for Têtefoulques. Indeed the roads in this part of the country were impracticable for carriages.

“I found the castle of Têtefoulques a grand but gloomy and dilapidated pile. All the gates were closed, and there reigned over the whole place an air of almost savage loneliness and desertion. I had understood that its only inhabitant were the concierge, or warder, and a kind of hermit who had charge of the chapel. After ringing for some time at the gate, I at length succeeded in bringing forth the warder, who bowed with reverence to my pilgrim’s garb. I begged him to conduct me to the chapel, that being the end of my pilgrimage. We found the hermit there, chanting the funeral service – a dismal sound to one who came to perform a penance for the death of a member of the family. When he had ceased to chant, I informed him that I came to accomplish an obligation of conscience, and that I wished him to perform a hundred masses for the repose of the soul of the commander. He replied that, not being in orders, he was not authorized to perform mass, but that he would willingly undertake to see that my debt of conscience was discharged. I laid my offering on the altar and would have placed the sword of the commander there likewise. ‘Hold!’ said the hermit, with a melancholy shake of the head. ‘This is no place for so deadly a weapon, that has so often been bathed in Christian blood. Take it to the armoury: you will find there trophies enough of like character. It is a place into which I never enter.’

“The warder here took up the theme abandoned by the peaceful man of God. He assured me that I would see in the armoury the swords of all the warrior race of Foulquerres, together with those of the enemies over whom they had triumphed. This, he observed, had been a usage kept up since the time of Mélusine, and of her husband, Geoffroy à la Grand Dent, or Geoffrey with the Great Tooth.*

“I followed the gossiping warder to the armoury. It was a great dusty hall, hung round with Gothic-looking portraits of a stark line of warriors, each with his weapon, and the weapons