A COURT INTRIGUE

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649036646

A Court Intrigue by Basil Thompson

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

BASIL THOMPSON

A COURT INTRIGUE

Trieste

Appletons'
Town and Country
Library

No. 201

A COURT INTRIGUE

A COURT INTRIGUE

BY

BASIL THOMPSON

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1896

A COURT INTRIGUE.

CHAPTER I.

In 1893 I took my annual holiday in Brittany. Time had been when I was content to wander on foot a few miles on either side of an English railway; but the advance of science has provided the lover of solitary travel with the means of gratifying his vicious passion for seclusion. Independent of trains and hotel omnibuses, unfettered by distance or time, for the first time in my life I wandered on the Continent at my pleasure, and enjoyed the contemplation of the works of God and man without the hindrance of a fellow-creature's sympathy; in short, I bestrode a bicycle.

It was the afternoon of my second day out. I was exploring new country, into which the penny-wise Compagnie de l'Ouest had not as yet ventured to penetrate. I had wandered from the

main road in search of a big château, whose very modern-looking battlements had awakened my curiosity as I was trundling along a lofty ridge commanding a view for many miles on either side. The road became worse and worse. There are three distinct classes of road in France, and this, which had begun in the second, now scarcely deserved to be classed at all. A few sharp flints tilted out of the ruts by heavy wagon wheels seemed to prove that the track had been at least once repaired within the experience of persons still living. In all other respects the soil might have been called virgin.

I began already to feel *blasé* with remote Brittany, its overrated ruins, its primitive cookery, and its outlandish talk, and I longed to have the rocks of Ploumanach labelled "Done," and to find myself again in a region where dinner was an event to look forward to, and where I could ask the way with a reasonable chance of being understood.

But the road, if primitive, was not altogether disused. Far off behind me I caught the jingle of harness bells, deadened by obstructing corners, but gaining always in intensity. They filled me

with uneasiness, for I had not as yet obtained such proficiency in riding as to be able to look behind me without tumbling off. The approaching carriage was certainly coming at a gallop—a reckless gallop: the road was soft and sandy, with deep ruts that were certain to compass my overthrow if I dared to leave the depression made by the horses' feet in the middle. For a few minutes I pounded at my pedals in the vain hope of increasing my lead and preserving my dignity, but the louder hoof strokes of the horses and the jingling of the harness warned me that the pursuing carriage was gaining upon me. The horses must be running away, for no coachman in France, where the cyclist is almost respected, would deliberately drive over me without even a warning shout.

Not a moment too soon I wrenched my steering bar to the left, made a plunge or two over the deep rut, and half jumped, half rolled out of the saddle as my machine imbedded its front wheel in the far side of the ditch. Then I turned to wither my assailant with a British glare. But the scowl into which I had creased my features faded before my wonder at the strangeness of the equi-

page. The carriage was a heavy, old-fashioned English brougham. The horses were a pair of chunky Norman cobs; though they were going at a hard gallop, blowing, and lathered with sweat, they were not running away, for their boring heads showed their distress; and as they dashed past me, I saw the whip came down like a flail across their quarters. Over the roof of the carriage, too, as it went swaying and rocking away from me, I could see the arm of the coachman flogging them mechanically at rhythmic intervals. Through the shut window I had seen that the seat was occupied, but so extraordinary was the figure of the coachman that I scarcely noticed his surroundings. He was clean-shaved, elderly and shrivelled, and he wore a cockaded hat and a blue livery coat, many sizes too large for him.

But it was the expression of his face rather than the misfit of his livery that made him so grotesque a coachman. Through a large pair of gold-rimmed spectacles eyes of the mild, pale blue that is common to very short-sighted people gazed mildly, rather sadly, at the pole chains, and the rest of his face wore the same expression of sheep-

like meekness. He sat crumpled up on the box, half buried in his hat and coat collar, holding the reins loosely in his left hand, like a deep-sea fisherman waiting for a bite, while, in ludicrous contrast to the chastened humility of his expression, his right arm flogged on with brutal indifference to the sufferings of his horses.

At a turn of the road the carriage rocked and jingled out of sight and hearing. I did not at once scramble into my saddle, for I had to consider my plans for the night. When I left Paimpol in the morning, my intentions had been most unadventurous—a *déjeuner* at Treguier, and a bed at Lannion, without ever leaving the main road. I had been warned by the waitress at the Hotel Lion d'Or to avoid cross-country roads if I valued my bicycle; and now, late in the afternoon I found myself the victim of my own improvident curiosity, somewhere midway between the main road and the coast, and beyond the reach of either. Still, I shrank from facing the steepness of the hill I had just descended, clinging to the belief that so considerable a building as the château I had seen must be connected with the outer world by a better road than this.