

**THE AMERICAN MARQUIS, OR,
DETECTIVE FOR VENGEANCE:
A STORY OF A MASKED BRIDE
AND A HUSBAND'S QUEST**

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The American marquis, or, Detective for vengeance: a story of a masked bride and a husband's quest by Nick Carter

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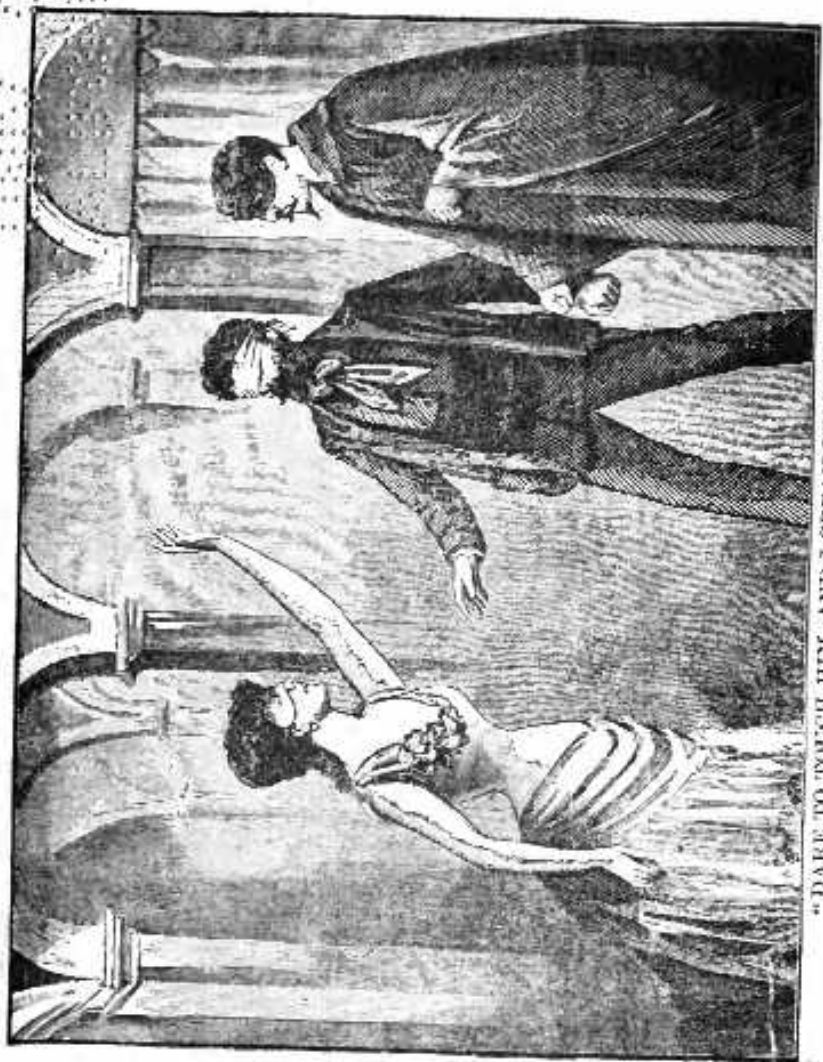
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NICK CARTER

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"DARE TO TOUCH HIM, AND I SPEAK MY NAME!"—(P. 284)

THE AMERICAN MARQUIS;
OR,
DETECTIVE FOR VENGEANCE.

A Story of a Masked Bride and a Husband's Quest.

BY NICK CARTER,

Author of

"THE OLD DETECTIVE'S PUPIL," "THE WALL STREET HAUL,"
"THE CRIME OF A COUNTESS," ETC.

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THE AMERICAN MARQUIS.

CHAPTER I.

A MASKED STRANGER.

A quaint old town is Morlaix, in Upper Brittany, and full of rambling streets and ancient houses.

Away at the end of the Rue Pèrelle, and standing in desolate solitude, as if waiting for the sleepy old town to catch up with it, is a dilapidated house.

It is abandoned now, and it ought to have been so half a century ago. But it was not.

Less than twenty years ago, had the townspeople been asked who lived there, they would have shrugged their shoulders and spread out their hands in good French fashion and said:

“An artist—an American. *Pauvre diable!*”

“That was all they knew. He was an artist, and an American; so, of course, he was a poor devil.

Clinton Hastings would have said something very like it, too, had his opinion of himself been asked.

More especially had he been asked, one wild November night, as he sat with his eyes intently fixed on the easel before him.

A young man, and a handsome one, too, in spite of the uncared for curling, brown beard which hid the whole lower part of his face. In spite of the threadbare clothes so carelessly worn; in spite of the half-reckless, half-gloomy, al-

most sneering expression hovering about the nostrils of his clear-cut nose and the corners of his clear gray eyes.

"Bah!" he muttered, scornfully thrusting his hands deeper into the pockets of his blouse and stretching his legs out like a pair of compasses, "I do nothing but dream! I love a shadow! Another man's wife, it may be! Ye gods and little fishes! I see a woman once; I paint her picture from memory; I sit and dream. Ay, and starve, too. Clinton Hastings, you are an ass!"

The cloth covering was angrily thrown over the ravishing face, and the artist went on muttering:

"Better look at your rejected picture, Clinton, my boy."

He disdainfully threw the cloth from a large piece of canvas, disclosing a landscape view.

Silently he looked at it for several minutes, holding a lamp so as to throw the light upon it.

Suddenly he started, and turned his head to listen.

He heard a soft footfall on the creaking stairs.

A grim smile lighted the gray eyes as Clinton held a dialogue with himself.

"A thief?"

"Nothing to steal—except my picture——"

"A beggar?"

"Nothing to eat—except my picture."

"A friend?"

"*Mon Dieu!* I have none—except my picture."

The first two times he made his answer he nodded jeeringly at his landscape, but the last time he turned toward his portrait with a half-savage, half-ecstatic expression.

He was madly in love with a shadow!

A knock sounded on his door.

"Come in!"

The door opened wide, and a masked man, robed to his feet in a heavy cloak, stood framed in the door-way.

Whatever the young artist may have felt, he betrayed no emotion, but speaking with the utmost coolness and with ironical politeness, said:

"Ah! *Bon soir*, monsieur. What shall it be—my money or my life?"

"If I wanted money I would not come here. If I wanted your life I would wait a few days."

"Aha, Monsieur le Diable, I see you know me well. Who are you, then?"

"That is of no consequence."

"Is it not? Well, *mon ami*, let me say to you two things. First, I do not like masked strangers to come to me at night. Second, if they do come I throw them down stairs."

The prospect of an encounter seemed to give the artist positive pleasure, and his eyes sparkled as he made a quick step forward.

"Stop!" said the stranger, coolly; "I know you can throw me down stairs to-night. You are stronger than I am. But what good would it do you? I could come here again a week hence."

"Ah, yes, I see," cried Clinton, with a short laugh. "You mean that in a week from now I shall be so feeble from starvation that I cannot throw you down."

"Exactly."

"I admire your forethought, but not your wisdom. You only make me more anxious to take advantage of the golden opportunity. It will give me great pleasure to throw you down stairs."

The artist was still smiling, but the reckless humor in him was shown in the quick way in which he laid hold of the stranger.

"You don't know yet what I came for, monsieur."

On the point of being thrown down stairs, the man in the mask was nevertheless quite cool.

"True," ejaculated Clinton, releasing the man; "I can learn that first and remove you afterward. Business before pleasure, you know. Sit down."

"Thank you."

"Shall I take off your mask, or will you save me the trouble?"

"Neither, if you please. You must, in fact, promise that you will not seek to penetrate my disguise, or I will not reveal my business."

"That promise will not prevent me from dropping you over the balusters, will it?"

"Oh, no. You may do that afterward, if you wish."

"All right, monsieur. You have my promise, and I wait eagerly for the happy moment when our interview shall have ended."

With mock politeness the artist sat down. The stranger began as if telling a story:

"Your name is Clinton Hastings; your picture was rejected by the Academy; you are hungry now; unless you have aid you will starve to death; you have no friends—no hope."

Clinton bowed, smiled cheerfully, and said:

"As I have already partially suggested, you are, perhaps, the devil. I think I must use the window instead of the stairs. But go on; you interest me."

"To-morrow you may have ten thousand francs, if you will."

"Then you are really the devil, and it is my soul you want. Dear me! Now, I didn't suppose my soul was worth so much."

"Keep your soul; I only want your body for to-night."

"Ah, yes! I comprehend now; you wish me to kill somebody for you. Really, I am sorry the window is not higher."

"I am glad you can be so merry."

"So am I."

"My proposition is this: You are to marry a woman whose face you shall not see——"

"Your family was born masked, then?"

"Whose name you shall not know, and whom you must leave as soon as the marriage ceremony is over."

"What a charming mystery! Why, it is like the good old times. But go on; you begin to amuse me."

"You will let me blindfold you, and take you to the place where the bride is. After the wedding I will give into your hands the ten thousand francs, and bring you back here, still blindfolded."

"Are you ready now? Shall I open the window?"

"Do you refuse? Starvation if you do, and plenty if you do not."

"Positively, monsieur, you mortify me. I knew, myself, that I was a fool, but how on earth did you discover it?"

"I do not understand you, monsieur."

"Shall I explain, and then drop him out, or shall I drop him out at once?"

The young artist asked himself this question so calmly that the masked man was visibly affected by it, and moved uneasily in his chair. Evidently his proposition had not been accepted, as he had expected. He affected composure, however.