

The Corrector of Destinies

Being Tales of Randolph Mason as Related by
His Private Secretary, Courtland Parks
A St. Valentine's Adventure
By Melville Davisson Post



The man took her in his arms.

On the night of the fourteenth of February, I came to New York from Philadelphia. The fast train from the South was late and did not arrive until nine o'clock. It was very cold, the windows of the cars were incrusting with ice, there were miniature snow drifts across the vestibules, and the steam pipes smoked. I was exceedingly hungry. The dining-car had been cut off at Philadelphia and my hope of dinner was beyond me, in New York. When the boat which carried us across from Jersey City to the Twenty-third Street ferry touched the dock, I jumped off and ran into the checking room to give directions about the transfer of my luggage. I was delayed by the oriental leisure of the man in charge. When I got out, finally, into the street not a cab was to be seen. The wind was driving past every moment with increasing fury, the frozen snow flakes cut one's face. I started to cross the street to a waiting street-car. I had hardly stepped out from the ferry house when a hansom pulled up and I hailed it.

As I put my foot on the cab step, I heard behind me a little smothered cry of disappointment. I took my foot down from the step and turned around. A little way behind me, under the eaves of the building, stood a woman wearing a long fur coat to her feet, and carrying in her hand a traveling bag. Her face above the fur collar of her coat was wrapped in a black veil. I went at once to her.

"Madam," I said, "did you call this cab?"

"No," she replied, in a voice low, musical, but greatly troubled; "I did not call it, but I hoped to get it."

Then she added with a flutter in her voice:

"I am alone. I cannot possibly walk in this storm, and I must get quickly to the Dresden."

"Madam," I said, "this hansom is at your service; pray take it."

"But you?" she answered.

"I shall get up-town some way," I said; "the elevated station is only a few blocks away."

I helped her into the hansom, then another tremendous gust came roaring down by the ferry house. I banged the doors and ducked my head to escape the fierce onslaught of the wind. When the gust passed I looked up to find the cab standing beside me. A little hand threw open the hansom door, the soft, musical voice said:

"I cannot leave you here in this terrible storm, get in."

I got in, howled to the driver to get over town to the Dresden and sat down by the unknown. As the hansom wheeled into the street, the woman leaned over me and looked back. I looked over her shoulder. Another boat had arrived and the passengers were coming out. I saw in the heavy snow, a man running toward us, waving a hand; then we were out of sight bowling over the Belgian blocks.

The woman tucked the fur coat around her feet, pulled the long sleeves over her hands and nestled up against her corner of the hansom.

"Pardon me," she said, " I thought I had stupidly left my bag on the curb, but here it is at my feet."

I smiled at the pretty lie.

"Madam," I said, "I am sure it is at your feet. There must be some trace of feeling even in alligator leather."

I think she was undecided whether to chill me with irony or laugh. The laugh prevailed, then came the irony.

"How stupid of me," she said; "perhaps you do not wish to go to the Dresden. We are approaching the elevated station, I notice."

Her tone was in that admirable middle pitch which reveals nothing.

I wished to answer that the Dresden seemed just then to be a fairy Mecca, and that if I were put out, I should probably trot after the cab like a faithful puppy; but were there not faint breaths of frost in the little voice? I might be put out after all, and I wished greatly to remain. At any rate, I must take no risks until the elevated station was behind us, so I laid before her the details of my discomfort.

"I shall be glad of the Dresden," I said. "I am cold, I am starving. My fingers are quite numb, and I could gladly eat the straps on the hansom."

She laughed.

"Have you gone so long, then, without dinner?"

"Long?" I echoed. "Why, madam, it has been eight mortal hours! Men have become cannibals in less time than that."

We were well past the elevated station now.

She shrugged her dainty shoulders.

"Observe," she said, "how I shudder."

We were getting on famously.

"And with reason," I answered; "was not the taste of the bear for the bee-tree known even to the ancients."

"One of the Gospels, I think," she said, "tells us how bad such food is for the digestion."

Then, fearing that she had been led too far into pleasantries, she turned it, after the manner of a woman.

"Let us hope," she added, "that you will find something more substantial than the Baptist's meager fare at the Dresden. I would suggest a loin of beef, washed down with Burgundy, a dish of salad, a pot of coffee."

Then her voice slipped up into that dangerous, indeterminate note.

"We are crossing Broadway," she said; "perhaps you would get down here?"

"What!" I cried, "and leave the loin of beef, the Burgundy, the dish of salad? The suggestion is inhuman."

"Very well," she said, and there was no mistaking the indifference in the tone. In fact, it was rather too indifferent. I fancied it masking some aroused emotion.

We bowled along and turned into the Dresden. The porter helped us down from the hansom and into the hotel. Here I saw my companion clearly for the first time—and yet that statement is wholly inaccurate. I saw clearly only a splendid sealskin coat with a sable collar, a fashionable hat, two well-gloved hands and a thick, impenetrable veil. This chance acquaintanceship was about to end. I could not follow her, spying, to the clerk's desk, and yet I must act within the next thirty seconds before the house porter reached her bag if I wished ever to go a step further. He was passing the elevator now. I set my feet into the Rubicon.

"Madam," I said, "this is St. Valentine's night, sacred to the unknown. Its privileges have been respected since Claudius. I beg you to share my loin of beef."

The woman started perceptibly, glanced up and down the corridor and then hurried to the elevator. For a moment I was at a loss to account for this instant flight. Then I observed that a second hansom had arrived and a man was coming in with the porter through the door. The obsequious flunkey was in the midst of a reply.

"Just arrived, sir, in the first hansom, sir."

I glanced at the elevator, the door clicked; the escape was by a hair's thickness. I turned to follow the man. He was advancing to the clerk's desk, his back toward me. I observed that he was rather tall and wore a dark ulster with a strap across the back. The incident required no reflection. Here was the hurrying stranger of the ferry-shed, certainly one of several kinds of dragons to be found at the heels of escaping beauties. I should presently see to which type of dangerous beast he belonged. I strolled over to the big leather settle opposite the clerk's desk, planted myself in it and lighted a cigarette. The new-comer wrote his name in the register, took off his coat, and turned. I saw then that he was not an irate father, obviously. He was either the brother, or alas, the husband of this charming unknown. He was a tall young man, evidently from the South or West. His eyes were gray, he wore gold-rimmed spectacles, his nose was aquiline, his mouth and chin firm and well cut. He was evidently a person of determination and courage.

"Aha!" I said behind my cigarette; "there is here certainly snuffings of battle, but not afar off. However, before the shouting of the captains begin to arise, it might simplify matters if I knew whether the Nemesis is brother or husband."

I should arrive at the solution from his bearing; Monsieur Le Coque or Dupin would read it, instantly, like a weather report. I looked up at the man's face. He was smiling! Then the beast was not an avenging husband. Such a one does not smile when he pursues the faithless. I had all the reeking dramas as authorities for that. He might chuckle in his throat, or draw his lips into a sinister, foreboding curl; but he did not fall into facial sunshine. This man was grinning like a Cheshire cat; and, by the Lord Harry, he was off to the bar below for grog! He must be the brother then—and yet, no. He was too big-limbed for a brother, the types of the two were distant as the poles—nor would a brother be so bedecked with grins. He would have nothing to conceal, he would buzz like a hornet around the truant, stow her safely under his wing and then take his Scotch with his eye on her. This dragon was evidently less the brother than the husband; but was he not, indeed, the husband? Did Pinero draw always faithfully from life? A greater than he had written of those who smile and smile.

Look at it now; the first domestic wrenchings were old enough to be calloused to the fingers, the home was shattered beyond all hope of patching, the woman had gone out over bridges that straightway fell in behind her; the man followed like an Indian—not to win her back to his hearth but for some object more sinister. He had found her at the Twenty-third Street ferry and lost her, but here she was, run fast into a pocket,

and so he smiled and took a glass of grog. There was time a-plenty for the blow. I thought the husband theory had rather the better of the argument.

Meanwhile, I was ravenously hungry. I threw away the cigarette, went into the dining-room and ordered a somewhat elaborate dinner. Events were marching over me, the good St. Valentine slept. I must dine alone, while the unhappy truant trembled and went hungry, and, while, perhaps, tragedy knotted the tie strings of her mask.

I was leaning over a cup of bouillon when a low, merry voice said,

"You are not very thoughtful of a guest."

I sprang up to confront a dainty figure in a gray traveling dress, two merry dark eyes, a trace of smiling scarlet above a defiant chin, and a mass of brown hair wound in loose coils.

"I beg you, madam," I said, "to lay this discourtesy to my meager knowledge of fairies. I thought you vanished."

"What!" she quoted, "and lose the loin of beef, the Burgundy, the salad?"

My tone was reproduced adorably. Then she sat down opposite me at the table, as bewitching a madcap as ever danced out of the kingdom of Queen Mab.

So, then, I had been mistaken. She had not seen the Nemesis after all. Or better, perhaps, the person who had arrived was not he, or there was no Nemesis except in my disordered fancy. I looked over the room for the man. If he were spying, he would be in some corner of the cafe with his eye on us, and so he was. I found him presently, a little behind a palm in a nook by the door, and such eyes! They burned like dull green lamps.

I could not eat much for all my boastings of hunger—no one could under those ugly eyes. They seemed now to glitter when the leaves of the palm threw little shadows on spectacle glass. That glass added a certain terror, the eyes became like one moving behind a screen, and there was something sinister in the smiles and laughter of this charming woman under an espionage she did not dream of. I held my place as carelessly as I could, under this menace like a cocked pistol. I fished a little for a clue.

"Madam," I said, tipping a little of my wine into the plate, "the king, your father, doubtless sends an invisible escort with you. I pour out a libation to it."

She put aside the bait.

"I am an orphan," she said, "not even a brother on the throne."

That lopped off one limb of the problem, if it were the truth.

"But, madam," I began.

She held up her ungloved hand, as bare of rings as my own good nose. That dismissed the husband—if the ring were not in her pocket.

"I beg your pardon," I continued. "How could one hope that you had escaped bondage for so long? The men of your land must resemble that foolish people railed at by the Prophet."

She lifted her little chin with a quaint challenge.

"Am I so old, then?" she said.

"Yes, Mademoiselle Inconnue," I answered, "quite eighty years old, I think. The letters to you have been published thirty years."

"Excellent, Monsieur Merimee," she said. "We are now supplied with names, we shall get on better."

I could have taken this promise with a greater joy had it not been for the sentinel behind the palm.

If it had been any other than St. Valentine's night, I should have set a doubt against this sudden geniality of my companion. She had not been so sunny in the hansom, but here she laughed like a brook. We might have been runaway lovers with no horses galloping behind us.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "in the corner yonder by that palm Madame Bernhardt recited for the disabled sailors; the spot is marked with a mosaic star."

She followed my eye boldly to the spot, held a level glance on the very glasses of the dragon without the flicker of an eyelid.

"How lugubrious!" she said. "There is such a star in the railroad station in Washington marking the place where a President was shot."

Then she shrugged her shoulders and looked me squarely in the face.

"Why should they mark with the sign of tragedy the spot where Madame Bernhardt recited—that place there by the palm?"

I tried to evade the directness of the query.

"Lay it," I said, "to the unimaginative nature of our people. A Latin would have marked one place with a mosaic of laurel, and the other with a black cross. Let us suggest it to the Players."

She looked at the palm again with a slow, heavy lidded glance and then back to me.

"No," she said, "now that I think it over, perhaps the mark of tragedy is fittest there." And then, "Does not Bernhardt indeed represent the embodiment of tragedy?"

I had new lights on the problem. The woman was perfectly aware that a sentinel watched. She knew when he entered with the porter. She knew that he sat behind that palm when she came in to dinner, and yet she came, and played with me a comedy of sweethearts crowded with suggestive incident, and overplayed it.

I had barely settled the matter to my satisfaction, when the man arose and came through the dining-room past our table to the door. He doubtless saw that the woman had discovered him and so deemed it wise to leave the cafe like an ordinary guest. I observed again that his face was strong, determined and very pale. Such a type of person did not become a detective in New York; but all manner of men came from the great west, and why not a spy with an open, honorable face? The next moment my last theory went to pieces.

The young woman looked up from her coffee, smiled and spoke to him in as pleasant a voice as I have ever heard.

"Good-evening, Henry," she said.

The man bowed courteously and passed on through the door, a show of color mounting slowly to his cheeks.

I withdrew then from the field of Le Coque and Dupin. The mystery was beyond me. One did not speak thus cordially to a hired trailer, and where in Christendom was there a spy who blushed? The man went out into the lobby of the hotel, got a cigar somewhere and sat down in a leather chair by the wall where he could have a view of the dining-room. Still he watched, and my Lady Unknown knew that he watched.

When the dinner was ended, I went with her to the elevator, wondering if she would play it out with her fingers to kiss at the parting. But she only smiled alluringly and I stepped into the steel cage with her. Even the Hebrew Scriptures scorned the weakling who turned back.

"The parlors are on the next floor," she said.

Then the door clicked and the elevator began to rise. Instantly she changed as under some hideous sorcery. Her hands trembled, her face grew as white as a grave-cloth. When she spoke her voice clicked like a steel rail under an express.

"Get out here," she said, when the car touched at the next landing, "and manage to leave the hotel unobserved. You have done me a great favor. I thank you."

I got out. The car vanished. I started to go down the steps, when I saw over the rail the mysterious stranger coming up. I turned back and stepped quickly behind the elevator shaft. The man came slowly up the stairway and went into the public drawing-room. I got into the next car that came down. As it descended, I looked back through the wire net over the roof of the car. The man was coming out of the drawing-room door into the hall. His face was purple.

It was late when I got down-town the next morning. Pietro let me in and I went at once to my table in the front office. I was scarcely seated when I became aware of some one talking in the adjoining room. There was a familiar tone in the low voice that took my attention from the pile of letters before me. The door was not quite closed. I arose softly and looked through the crack. Randolph Mason sat in his chair, his fingers plucking impatiently at the heavy mahogany arms, his head held a little to one side, his eyes wandering aimlessly over the room. Opposite him, with her two elbows on the table, her face pressed together in her hands, and a long seal coat falling to the floor over the back of her chair, sat the woman with whom I had dined the night before at the Dresden. I could not see her face, but her voice was tense, vibrant, low, packed with emotion. If I had not been consumed with a special interest, I still had not been able to put away this espionage. The soft, quivering, overcharged tones held me like the droning of some incantation. I caught the words pouring hot as from a crucible.

"After that he was always at the door when I came out, heaping on me things that I did not want— flowers, bon-bons, the like. I was hideously poor. I mended with my own fingers the stockings in which I danced every Wednesday night at the Theatre Francais in the great ballet of the Fata Morgana. I needed warm clothes, good food, a fire. They said I had limbs like a fairy. I had, they were starved thin. An exquisite pallor, I had that too, but it came from sour bread, chocolate made with water and sweetened with sugar picked off with my nails from the bon-bons. I did not love the man, nor any man. I was a child. In the place of a mother, I had the warnings of an instinct. I feared the touch of a man's fingers as the beast of the field does; but

the old concierge who had kept life in me with hot soup every night after the ballet, took the thing in hand. She discovered, I know not how, that the young man's father was a rich American. So she bundled me off to Passe and handed me over to him, but under a ceremony of marriage set out fully on the records of Passe. She was the only friend I ever had, this old, crooked, evil-featured Madame Duroque. She could more easily have sold me to him at the door of her lodge for a hundred louis. After this, I was, at least, not hungry. My husband was little more than a boy. We lived over the Seine by the Luxembourg. I did not dance any more at the Theatre Francais, but I went every Monday morning to see Madame Duroque to tell her everything and to divide with her my handful of francs. My husband studied art under the usual masters, but it was every morning thrown away. He was indolent, utterly worthless, wholly given over to a life of pleasure.

"One noon in May, his father arrived, handed me twenty-five napoleons and told me to go down into the street. I went with the money in my hand to Madame Duroque. She put her shawl over her head and hurried out. I did not see her again for five days. Then she came with the great American and took me to the Hotel Continental and to my husband. Madame Duroque kissed me at the door, put my certificate of marriage and the wedding ring in a silk bag and fastened it around my neck with a little gold chain. Then she took me to one side, and bade me remain with my husband and demand a hundred thousand francs before I would set foot out of Paris, after which she went back to her lodge.

"The father prepared then to return with us to America. I refused to go, and my husband, who was now aroused, refused also to go unless I accompanied him. I got finally the one hundred thousand francs and we arrived in New York. My father-in-law, who owned railroads in a Western state, took us there and installed my husband as the clerk of a court in a little town built along the side of a mountain above the fork of a river where three railroads joined. He was trying to make a man out of my husband, he said. At his urging, I invested the money which I had received in the bonds of a railroad which he was building through the county.

"We lived there five years in the smoke, the mud, the unutterable dreariness of this frontier village. One day my husband fell and broke his wrist. He went to a hospital in a neighboring town to have the bone set, and died under the influence of ether on the operating table. I found in his pocket this letter, which he had written to me before the operation."

She took one of her hands down from her face, unhooked, the bosom of her dress, took out a letter and read it. It was a meager note, a sort of memorandum to her, in

the event of any serious consequence attending the operation. It told her briefly that the money which she had invested was lost, that his father had wrecked the railroad, reorganized it and absorbed its assets; but that there were twenty-five thousand dollars in a tin box in the bottom of his trunk in her room. She should say nothing to any one and keep that money for her own. It was all the provision he could make for her.

She laid the paper before Randolph Mason, then she took a newspaper clipping out of her purse and held it in her hand.

"I found the money packed in big bills in the tin box. In a few days I knew where my husband had got this money."

Then she read the clipping. It was an ordinary newspaper notice, reciting the death of the clerk of the court, and the fact that a sum of twenty-five thousand dollars which had been paid into his hands could not be discovered anywhere on deposit in any of the banks. This money he had received under the following conditions: The main line of the railroad belonging to the clerk's father had condemned and taken the bottom lands of the town for a freight yard, and, the land owners refusing to take the money allowed in the condemnation proceedings and the circuit court not being in session, the railroad had paid it into the hands of the clerk of this court.

The woman crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it on the floor, set her elbow on the table, pressed her open hand once more against her face and hurried on with her story.

"My husband's office accounts were gone over and this money could not be found. He was presumed to have spent it. I said nothing. It was merely my one hundred thousand francs with its interest returned to me, and from the very one who, in his own fashion, had taken it. I was glad, glad of this settlement by the good God, glad to the very bottom of my heart. I made ready to return to Paris, to Madame Duroque, to life. Then I learned another thing."

She moved uneasily in her chair, her voice sank lower, her fingers tapped nervously on her face.

"There was one honorable man in this hideous village. From the very day on which we arrived he did incredible things to make life possible for us. He got a house, servants, everything that long patience could secure for our comfort. I came to regard him as an elder brother. My husband would have been a common drunkard but for him, and I should have been stark mad from dreariness. Well, he came to me and said that he

was the surety on my husband's bond as clerk of the court, that if the money could not be found the railroad would force him to pay it. He was not rich; it would take all he had. He did not believe that my husband had used the money; it ought to be on deposit in some bank, or locked up in a box in some trust vault. I set my teeth down on my tongue and made a pretense of helping in the search. Months passed. I remained in the village, unable to decide between this man's ruin and Madame Duroque."

For the first time in the torrent of words, the woman hesitated, her voice became almost inaudible.

"I learned also in this time a thing that I had not suspected—that the man loved me. Oh, I don't mean love as I have seen it all my life long, the passion of the hunter, a hunger to be fed. I mean something like a religion that carries your burdens for you and is glad of it, that thinks of itself last. A thing like the feeling of that old concierge. Mon Dieu! I was mad then! On the heels of it I learned that Madame Duroque was ill in a house of public charity in Paris. Then I took the money and ran away to New York. This man discovered that I had gone and followed me. I arrived last night. He came, too, just behind me to the Dresden. Oh, I was mad, wholly, utterly, hideously mad! Now that I had decided against him, I wanted to hurt him, I wanted to do him all the injury I could. I wanted him to believe me low, vile, common, vulgar. Fate helped me. I came to the hotel in a hansom with a man I did not know. I dined with him!"

Her voice went up strong again, almost defiant.

"There was no wrong in it, no actual wrong in it. I made the man get out at the first landing and return in the next car to the hotel office; but, don't you see, I made him think I was bad."

She brought her two hands down clenched on the table.

"I wanted him to see with his own eyes that I was bad!"

The words clanged like a bell.

I became aware then of some one breathing heavily behind me. I turned, expecting to see Pietro. Instead, at my back, looking over my shoulder, was the man who had sat watching at the Dresden. His face looked as though it were coated with chalk, his eyes stared over my shoulder into the next room. I saw, too, that the door of the house stood half open. He had come in unnoticed by Pietro.

The woman got her voice painfully in hand again.

"Here," she said, "here is the money." And she took up her traveling bag from the floor and threw it down on the table among the books.

"Send it back to him. You are a lawyer, you can do that somehow. I have kept only a thousand dollars for Madame Duroque. Let him arrest me for stealing that, if he likes. I should be glad of a cell."

The woman's face was set now in a distressing tension.

"Madame," said Randolph Mason, "you might have spared yourself this nonsense. You are guilty of no crime in taking this money; neither was your husband guilty of any crime in keeping it, nor yet is the bondsman of your husband liable for this money. This money was paid to your husband as clerk of the circuit court of his county, during the vacation of that court. It was not, then, money paid into court, to the clerk, as contemplated by the statute of the state in which he lived. It, therefore, did not come into his possession by virtue of his office, and his bondsmen are not liable for its misappropriation. Such bonds require only that the clerk shall account for and pay over, as required by law, all money which may come to his hands by virtue of his said office. It is no crime for you to keep the money since it was neither stolen nor embezzled, but merely entrusted to your husband under an incorrect idea of the law. The loss, madam, will fall on the railroad which paid this money into court—that is, your father-in-law, the one who should properly lose it."

I looked to see the woman grow suddenly radiant; but, instead, she buried her face in her hands and began to cry. The tears trickled through her fingers. She rocked, sobbing, in her chair. I caught the handle to the folding-doors between the two rooms and flung them open. The woman sprang up, stammering incoherently. The man took her in his arms.

Randolph Mason spoke then in his cold, even voice, but there was almost a smile on his lips.

"Parks," he said, "go out and engage a stateroom on the Kaiser Wilhelm for Cherbourg."

For the legal principle involved in this story see the case of *State to Use of Blake v. Enslow et al.* 41 W. Va.; 744.

Afterword

"A St. Valentine's Adventure" is one of Melville Davisson Post's thinnest stories. He fails to create suspense by introducing a mysterious woman and a mysterious man who lurks around the Dresden Hotel. Randolph Mason appears only in the final page to solve the woman's predicament by simply repeating a rule of law, then sending her to Europe and happiness. It is a romance, unlike Mason's other cases — "missions" may be a better word—that are complex and require him to use any means (unethical ones are preferred) to unravel a crooked scheme and reach the desired end. There is so little drama in this particular story that it makes one wonder how Post created his tales about Randolph Mason.

Every writer of fiction —novels, short stories, novellas or plays — faces the difficulty of how to create a believable end to the story (in real life, of course, conflicts and crises usually fade away and life goes on). Popular writers sometimes turn to death or some act of violence to bring their stories to a conclusion that is rarely credible. In his Randolph Mason stories, Post never faced this problem because he began with the ending. He read a court decision (usually from the Supreme Court of West Virginia) that rested upon a rarely cited rule of law, and from that he spun a tale of injustice which Mason ultimately "corrected" by a deft use of that obscure principle. By working backward, he avoided the dilemma every other writer faces. His stories are not always successful, but all are entertaining.

"A St. Valentine's Adventure" appeared on page 11 of *The Virginia Enterprise*, Virginia, Minnesota, on October 25, 1912. The box with the case citations is in the original. ■

<M>

Posted MLHP: July 1, 2015.