

A MURDER, A MYSTERY & A MARRIAGE (continued)



E. G. Fabricant

CHAPTER 3.

The Frenchman emerged from Mrs. Sykes' rooming-house onto Deer Lick's dusty Main Street to trod the half-furlong to its *charade* of a Postal Office. In the four months since he had shaken off the ague, this was his routine--after swallowing as much of Mrs. Sykes' early provender as his constitution would permit. Her grits and rashers of bacon were the staples of his "hot" *cuisine* in this lonely place. Frequent trips to Carthage and, on occasion, Springfield, kept insanity at bay. It was a clear Monday morning, though, and late-spring plantings sold warrants of full yield. Drenching rains were less typical and throat-choking heat wasn't yet a genuine threat. This called forth his general *affection* toward the John Gray family, especially Sarah and Mary, and the village idiot called a physician who had ministered to him. He mused upon the memory of his eviction after Mary's fluttering, girlish fascination with him raised false alarms in old Gray's head.

He strode past Purcell's Dry Goods & Sundry, where the boardwalk parliament was already in session, entertaining old and new business.

"Weesh, if it ain't Lord All-Airs, alriddy," said Padraig O'Faolan, Speaker without benefit of election.

A shaving parted off Elijah Burch's shingle under his purposeless blade. "Wouldn't take on so ef he knew what folks thinks of him, hereabouts."

"What in Perdition kind of name is 'John Mercy A.'? Don't even sound Christian." Mose Duenweg spat, a regular form of punctuation.

Elijah nodded. "All folks' short name come in the middle. Man baptized that-a-way ain't to be trusted, I expect."

O'Faolan, again. "If he's baptized a'tall, that is. Nivver mind that he was borne in on a whirlwind, without so much as a hoof or a track. Wore old John Gray out with his fever and his mysteries, and what's he been up to since? Puttin' Doc Joplin off his kidneys with his grip full of potions, is what!"

"Look what he done with Mrs. Syke's oldest!" Mose said. "'Becca was in the childbirth, a-sufferin' from thet fever and Doc was tendin' her in the usual way, with the water-bath and all. John Mercy come in without a by-your-leave and put her straight into a trance! Hand o' the Creator all 'at saved her and the young 'un!"

Elijah said:

"And Seth Sherwood! Corn liquor ain't up to it when a tooth's gone bad and needs out – not according to the King of France!"

"Still and all," Mose recalled, "I ain't remembered ever seein' old Seth so quiet and pleased with his predicament, then or since."

"Wull, there was Caleb Preston, too, over to the mill. That thresher chewed his leg good and Doc was fixin' to take it off above the knee. Up come Mercy A. with his little jar of stump-water and stood against Doc! Tole him to close 'er up as best he could!" Elijah looked nearly thoughtful. "Still got the leg, though."

"'Tis the Divvil's work," said O'Faolan. This rill of recrimination nearly dry, he located another branch. "Nothin' is above him, not in Deer Lick. Forever cryin' about no tellygraph within a half-day's ride and aught but feed sacks to read – and him, not even first in the Queen's English! Brought the shame on Widow Bellows at her pianoclaver recital, call'n out his misery because Joe-hann Bock and George Bees A. ain't amongst 'em!"

Mose expectorated. "There's 'nother o' them 'A.' fellers. Reckon they travel in packs?"

Mercier was abreast of the Lone Elm saloon when the proprietor burst out, attached to a human form at the scruff of the neck and slack of the trousers. He launched his cargo into the street like a bale of calico.

"No more drink nor morsel for ye here, Hugh Gregory – not until your arrearages is retired! Not then, neither, less'n you

learn to hold your tongue about the Gray brothers and other good folk!"

Hugh labored to a knee, towsled, unshaved and freshly gritted. "Hah! A cold, old flint-heart and a common burglar at property," he slurred. "And Matthew Hurley, the freshly-polished apple of greedy John Gray's eye! A pox on 'em! O, my Mary –" He sagged and began weeping.

Mercier braced Hugh's elbow and, winching him to his feet, hove to, and towed him back toward Mrs. Sykes'. "Ah, *mon ami*, you must take yourself in hand if you are to win your *Marie's amour*."

Elijah clucked as they tottered by. "Young Hugh won't gain any purchase with John Gray in his sorry state, I'll wager."

"Ain't the least of it," Mose said. "What little traction he's got is owed to Dave Gray, anyway. Since John broke it off 'twixt him and Mary, he's gone to seed with his renters and accounts, too. If Dave didn't bail him out, buyin' up most of the Gregory holdings around, it ain't even Hickory Flat for his pap and a room for him, at that!"

"Faith, and it'll be a long climb out o' the barrel – and longer than the Hurley lad will permit, sure." O'Faolan brimmed with confidence. "Oi'm an ixpert in these mathers."

Absorbed in piloting Hugh onto the boardwalk step, Mercier nearly broad-sided Dave Gray, just departing the Recorder's Office. Gray turned and regarded Mercier and his broken vessel contemptuously.

"So, 'Mon-soor'," Dave said. "I see you continue to repay the Grays' charity with your mortgaging of this--this wasted flesh, this lost cause! Don't you know that your interference heaps disgrace on my brother's and my sweet Mary's heads? I've not turned this wastrel out afore now, only out of respect for his failing father!"

Hugh emerged momentarily from his crooked stupor and waved his fist in Dave's direction. "Why, you merciless, conniving bastard --!"

The alien engaged Dave's eyes so deeply that he turned away. Mercier relented, and pushed his foundered packet inside.

CHAPTER 4.

The lamps flickered on a Saturday evening in John Gray's parlor. Matthew Hurley made good company for him, having taken up a chair next to John. Better company than for Sarah and Mary, who filled the corner by the mostly-superfluous fire. Sarah presented a passable interest, though the knitting in her lap occupied a higher peg. Mary tried no such pretense at all. The boy Tom had made good currency of a counterfeit ailment and fled to bed.

Matthew was twenty-nine, earnest, and as plain as a spinster's night-dress in every respect. He was expected to inherit the elder's presbyter's station at the appropriate time and thus was tolerably regarded as a "catch" by the old people. His estimation among Deer Lick's fillies in their own pastures was quite another.

"Mister Gray, it pleases me to say that the sows farrowed well this spring and I'm expecting a right good crop down at South Fork— I'm seeing tassels already. If fortune holds and prices this fall are fair, I could manage a tenant next year and come to Deer Lick to help my father."

Old Gray waved his hand. "No need to gild your prospects, young Matthew. Providence has already visited my Mary in that department, so your concern should be to pet her and cherish her into days like Sarah and mine. Be that your bond?"

Before he could answer, Mary leapt tearfully into the hallway toward where she and Tom slept. Sarah published a weak smile that failed persuasion, and followed.

John scowled. A commotion outside the house further eroded his plans.

"John Gray! Come and show yourself – and the whelp, Matthew Hurley! Account for my loss and my misery, as the price for your brother's benighted riches!" cried Hugh Gregory from outside, off his pins again.

John and Matthew came out, the elder into the yard and the youth on the porch behind him. Seeing them, Hugh spied and took up an idle hickory limb. He lurched toward them, flailing it with the pitiable menace that only a souse can conjure. Matthew moved forward.

"Inside, Matthew!" John thundered. "See to the women!" He strode to Hugh and pinned his arms to his sides with a bear-hug, thus breaking his purchase on the limb. Hugh's

head fell into the crook of his neck, his shoulders sagging and his breast heaving with buried sobs. John satisfied himself that Matthew was inside, and spoke in less martial cadence:

"By all that's holy, boy, it does me pain to see you in such a state, knowing of your true and tender feelings for my Mary. It's small comfort to ye, but there's that about her can't ever be told, while she and Sarah draw breath. All that remains is that they're cared for, which is past either of us now. It's up to the Diety, with my accursed brother in trust and me standing between."

Hugh subsided, tore himself away and gave John a vapored look that the old planter couldn't delve. Hugh scaled his horse and bobbed away into the moonlit dark.



"Pap! Pap!"

Tom burst into his parents' bedroom, a flagging kite in his billowing night-shirt.

"Mary's done gone, and some of her clothes, too!"

The veil of sleep was blasted to rags by Sarah's cries. "O husband! It's come to this, as I long have feared! Your scheme for prosperity has driven our Mary off! Take you and your soulless brother to Hades--!"

"Saddle the dun, Tom!" John cried as he hurtled into his trousers and swaddled himself in his cloak. "Be quick, boy!"

John mounted with the purpose of a much younger man, wheeled and galloped away. A scant hour later, he reined in his lathered steed as the curved drive gave way to the Gregory

homestead on Hickory Flat. Its two-storied *faHade* exhibited no light nor other token of occupancy. He hailed it.

"Halloo, Hugh! Hugh Gregory! This is John Gray and I've come for my Mary! Deliver her; nary the hair on her head is harmed will be your benefit, and hers!"

Stillness prevailed, so John moved toward the step. Behind him, a figure coursed from the shadows and delivered a sharp blow across the nape of John's neck. His breath exploded in his throat and he fell into a mortal *pirouette*. As he turned, he looked upon the phantom, which readied another assault.

"YOU! Murderer!" he gasped, as more blows freed his soul.

Mary Gray stepped out onto the porch. The oil-lamp she bore crashed at her feet when she comprehended her father's lifeless form. She threw herself on his corpse, her fierce, innocent shrieks rending the night's curtain.

CHAPTER 5.

The dawn that normally preceded the fearful hosannahs and furtive wool-gathering of another round of Sabbath services in Deer Lick was splintered by the shouts of a mob of its citizens, led down Main Street by Dave Gray. Armed with implements of every gauge and caliber, and a length of stout rope, they supported in their midst Hugh Gregory, trussed to a rail. He looked to have already stood a good particle of the Wrath of God. Exhausted but driven by panic was Mary Gray, who staggered about the regiment's edges, mouthing unheeded pleas.

Calls for "Justice!" and "Thy Will Be Done!" from the throng roused Mercier, who dressed hurriedly and stepped into the street with his valise in hand.

"*Mon Dieu!* What is the purpose of this? Has *Monsieur* Gregory committed an offense?"

"Don't interfere, foreigner!" Dave said. "Young Hugh Gregory has taken the Laws of God and Man into his own hands, and the life of my brother to-day. We are apt to square him on all three!"

Mercier's temperature remained steady. "It would be a good service to our great-grandfathers to try Hugh Gregory at the Jasper County seat before he is executed, *mais non?*"

"A good hiding is what you'll get, Frenchman, if you endure in your care to blunt the Sword of the Almighty!" Dave responded, which set the mob and its tools into terrible motion again.

A sound split the air and echoed like thunder as Mercier dropped his case and clapped his hands above his head.

"Perhaps I should claim the powers that brought me here against my will to resolve the matter!"

Resolve melted into uncertainty. Seeing that most of the sand had gone out of the enterprise, he continued.

"Where, then, is the body of John Gray, *s'il vous plait?*"

"It's out at Hickory Flat," murmured Constable Webb.

"Would it not be well to make ready John Gray for Christian burial before we turn to his murderer?"

Reverend Hurley had labored near, struggling into his clothes of office. "Jean Mercier is right. Out of respect for the departed, his family and the Sabbath, our first charge is John Gray's remains."

Dave attempted to reclaim the pennant. "'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' I'll not rest until I've satisfied my dear brother's death by this murdering cur!"

"A day, *Monsieur* Gray – only a day. We will attend to him, his widow and his daughter. Tomorrow, with Reverend Hurley's assistance, we can come to congress and find the facts, yes? Then we will see . . ."

Its blood-lust defeated equally by reason and by superstition, the Army of Vengeance decamped, leaving its general in the street.



Against habit, the fields and sheds that ringed Deer Lick were empty after breakfast on Monday, but the pews of the Deer Lick Presbyterian Church were filled. Riot had replaced reverence in the precinct. Dave Gray had seen to it, and positioned himself at the head of the assembly. The furor multiplied as the constable led in a manacled Hugh Gregory and deposited him in the front pew on the left. Sarah and Mary Gray slumped together half-way back. Their faces were drawn as tight as drumheads and their eyes had shed all moisture. Reverend Hurley attached himself to the common wood pulpit. The cacaphony subsided an octave when Mercier entered, but crested once more when he seated himself next to Hugh.

As easily as he had raised the orchestra, Dave called for quiet. "My friends, the hour of reckoning for the death of John Gray has come. We are met to show how young Hugh Gregory has broken the holy covenants, 'Love Thy Neighbor' and 'Thou Shalt Not Kill,' and therefore must atone for his grave sin." He settled on Mercier. "Perhaps our guest, wise and schooled in the mysteries of the world, would lead these proceedings?"

"O, *non, Monsieur. Justice over fidelitē.* With his permission, I will speak for Hugh Gregory." Tumult. "Reverend Hurley should preside, I believe. It is against the Laws of God by which this deed is measured, yes?"

Caught unawares, the minister hesitated, but assented without more.

Dave tested his vexation against his claque, which seemed mostly satisfied at the second proposal, if perplexed by the first. "The forces have taken the necessary sides, at the least. Very well. Mrs. Delilah Sykes, come forward!"

The hamlet's landlady took her seat and her oath.

"Now, Mrs. Sykes, hasn't young Gregory regularly visited dark threats on me in your lodgings?"

"Yes, but –"

Dave glared. "Our thanks, Mrs. Sykes."

Reverend Hurley spoke. "Any questions of Mrs. Sykes, Mister Mercier?"

Mercier waved his hand and remained seated. Mrs. Sykes quit her post and the building, her eyes never leaving the floor.

Dave resumed. "I call Messrs. O'Faolan, Burch, and Duenweg."

Nerves bordering palsy, the trio shuffled up, hats in hand, and took to their usual position – three scruffy jays on a wire. Reverend Hurley patiently divided their right from their left hands and, after several rehearsals, got the former heavenward and the latter on the Good Book in formation. The Question of Divine Veracity needed repeating only twice to generate a satisfactory answer.

"Good gentlemen," Dave began. "Was it a scant week ago that you all observed Mister Gregory being thrown out of the Lone Elm?"

A conference was called; O'Faolan emerged as Chairman. "Yes, Yer Wership."

"And, at that time, did not young Hugh bring calumny upon my brother and me, and Mister Matthew Hurley as well?"

Another huddle – O'Faolan: "Beggin' yer pardon, Sir, we was wonderin'. What'd be a 'column-knee'?"

Titters.

"Put another way," Dave sighed, "Did Hugh Gregory curse John Gray, Matthew Hurley, and me?"

O'Faolan brightened. "O Yes, Sir, that he did, Sir!"

"And, immediately thereafter, did you see Mister Gregory raise his hand to me in a threatening manner?"

"Wull, the meetin' was down by Mrs. Sykes', and there's the matter of me specs bein' in me pocket at the time – and these two jabberin'--"

Dave stamped his foot and boomed, "Did you see Mister Gregory raise his fist to me?"

Back in column, O'Faolan replied, "Just as ye're sayin' it, Sir. Just so."

"Thank you, good Sirs!"

The presider: "Mister Mercier?"

Another wordless wave ensued.

The ragged platoon retreated. O'Faolan lingered, wringing Dave's hand. "On behalf of meself, Oi give t'anks to Yer Lordship for the bargain, not an evenin' ago, o' the price o' a drink and a new hat for a task well-completed. A foin t'ing, 'tis."

A wave of laughter rose out of the flat sea of noise and threatened to break over Dave, who faced it with a prophet's temper. It receded harmlessly.

"I call Mister Matthew Hurley."

Young Matthew recounted the events of Saturday evening last outside John Gray's house. Dave hung the righteous anger of his brother and the women's condition on the spar of Hugh's taking up the cudgel against the household. The audience's bile was replenished, and flowing.

Young Gregory was startled almost to speech when his advocate again demurred. Dave made capital of the growing whirlwind behind him.

"Reverend Hurley, the righteous and terrible evidence is in; our visitor has been unable to cast it into doubt. Unless he has a fragment of a case to offer, I submit the time is nigh for Hugh Gregory to face his Maker!"

Cries of "Yea!" and "Hang'm!" were interrupted by Mercier's unexpected urgency. "*Excusez-moi*, Reverend. *S'il vous plait*. I plead for the indulgence of a brief suspension. The early beginnings today interrupted my usual break-fast at *Madame Sykes*'. Could we not adjourn for an hour or two so I may recover?"

Reverend Hurley threw his aged arms at the gale without effect. The prosecutor, feeling anointed with advantage, was suddenly moved by the Christian spirit.

"Dominie, His Will shall be done before this day is out – of that I am certain. Whether it occurs in its best or its waning light matters not to me. Go, Mercier, revive yourself – to whatever purpose!"

Reverend Hurley declared a recess until two o'clock.



The murderous carnival reconvened at the appointed hour, and its constituents resumed their noisy thirst for spectacle. Mercier lingered until the first lull and arose.

"Reverend Hurley, I have but one person to bring testament."

He signaled to Constable Webb, who opened the vestibule doors and motioned.

Summoned forth was an apparition – a stranger to Deer Lick, but out-of-place in any quarter. He wore the long-coat of the Confederate Army and a patch concealed an empty left eye-socket. Much else was remarkable but, if good health and

prosperity had ever lived in him, they were mere squatters that had long since quit the premises.

Innocent fascination fell over every face in the church, save Mercier's and two others, as the harbinger seated himself. Reverend Hurley and the Bible remained where they were.

"Monsieur, if you would favor these good people with the same story you told to me in Carthage a fortnight ago. S'il vous plait."

"Corp'l Zeb Magoffin's the name. Come from Carthage. Served the Rebel cause from the beginnin', startin' with the State Guard under Gov'n'r Jackson. We whupped them Yankees up near home – kil't or wounded 'most two hundert. J'ined up with Colonel Quantrill's boys in summer o' 'Sixty-three to get the Blue-Coats what raided Osceola. Must o' been three or four hundert of us, all told. We rode down on Lawrence in August. Kil't over a hundert-fifty, and torched most everythin'. Me and my Cap'n took a score ourselves, right in their houses. We come up on this one house and shot the man and his two boys, directly. Cap'n heer'd a ruckus in a closet and found a heifer and girl – kin, wife and daughter, I reckon. They was lyin' down together – most out o' their heads. Cap'n turned 'm out; he was fix'n' to kill 'm but I tole him that's ag'in' Colonel's orders. 'Men and boys only.' He thought on 't and said we was to hide 'm, then – someplace where they wasn't to be found. We broke away and rode hard three days up to just North o' here--both of 'm still crazy from the killin'. The woman tuck fever the second day and was powerful sick when we left 'm at that farm. Cap'n and the

man what tuck 'm argued fearsome. Cap'n pulled his cap'n'ball like he was goin' t' shoot; th' other give in, though."

"We j'ined up with Quantrill ag'in after that and staid on through October, where we kil't a mess o' Yankees over to Baxter Springs. Quantrill decided to winter in Texas; me 'n' Cap'n peeled off and hid out for a spell. I was a-feared that Cap'n might kill me for what I seen, so I run off in the night. Didn't come back 'til last summer, neither – figgered Cap'n be dead or caught by now."

An unearthly noise escaped from Reverend Hurley as his chin fell on his chest. He recovered, and said:

"It is as he says. In September of 1863, John Gray called me up to his place. He had a woman and her daughter there. The elder was seized of a delirium, and neither had memory of hearth nor kin. John swore on his oath that her husband was dead. We prayed on it. John decided to tell her that she was a widow, up from Springfield with her daughter after her husband had been taken in the War, and had married off to John before she took sick. I christened them both as Presbyterians and sanctified their union. We chose the names – " The old minister raised his eyes. "--Sarah and Mary, after John's grandmothers." Mercier returned to his witness.

"And, *Caporal* Magoffin, the name of your *Capitaine*?"

"Over yonder." He pointed. "Cap'n Dave Gray."

The breath went out of the congregation momentarily, as if a dull blow had struck its mid-section. The panic brewing in Dave boiled over, but the organism he had created surged

forward and seized him with one leg out a window. He struggled in its clutches, suddenly possessed.

"How can you – any of you – understand? O, my sweet Mary, my one and own! It was all for you, my only love! I had to do it! My up-right brother and that Blue-Coat whore of a mother stood in my way! We could never be together with them alive --!"

Mercier and Constable Webb wrestled Dave away from the monster, which fractured into pockets of disoriented burghers. Shafts of afternoon sun acquired the tint of stained glass and bathed Sarah and Mary Gray in their comfort. Reverend Hurley and Hugh stood guard.

CHAPTER 6.

Mercier stamped the dust from his boots and crossed Mrs. Syke's threshold into her dining room. He spied Hugh Gregory and Mary Gray, greeted them with satisfaction, and joined them. Hugh spoke first.

"Tell me, Jean. Did Dave Gray make a clean breast of it before he was hanged in Carthage, or did he continue to play the lunatic? Folks in Deer Lick need to know what the truth is – all of it, told out and finished."

Mercier sighed. "Ah, Hugh. *Vgracit*9. Truth. It is complicated. Many truths were told at *Monsieur* Gray's trial. There was the truth of the law – the prosecutor's, the defender of Dave's, and the magistrate's – all different, no? There was Reverend Hurley and the truth of God, against an old man bent under the truth of his terrible choice. There was the truth of the

assassin, which is clearer to him than any. His deeds became just and necessary, because his own sin hardened his loved ones against him."

Hugh was not mollified. "Don't you believe that Dave Gray deserved what he got – not just as Cain killing Abel, but for the pain his swindles and serpent's tongue brought on this town?"

"I cannot say. Does one brutality forgive another? *Monsieur* Robert Browning published a poem eight years ago, *en Anglais*, that examines this. You should take it up – there are many parallels."

Mary broke the pensive silence. "Jean, you must tell us more about yourself. Most in Deer Lick still think you a force of Nature – or worse!"

"*Absolument! Un diable* who fell to Earth, speaking in tongues and practicing magic!" The Frenchman was merry. "I am an *aérostatier*; I fly in balloons. *Mon Père* is a wealthy chemist, a patron of *Monsieur* Thaddeus Howe's Union Air Corps. He brought me to America when I was fifteen and schooled me in flying and making the hydrogen gas. We returned to the Continent and I fly to many countries. I study them, their languages and their science. It is no *mystère!*"

"But," Mary continued, "what brought you to Deer Lick?"

More mirthful was Mercier. "*Méchante chance*—ill luck! I try to fly from Topeka to Saint Louis and the storms take me south and knock me out of the ship! My crew assumes I am lost until I recover and wire my father from Carthage last spring."

Mary persisted. "What took into your head to come a-tramping in the wilds of America?"

"My village is Barfleur, not far from *Monsieur de Tocqueville's*. You do not know of him? Forty-five years ago, he had as many years as I have now. He came to America and learned much from her. I read his accounts and I desire to ride the steamboat on your big river and learn, too." He slapped his thighs. "On the river they told him, 'The sands of the Mississippi are like the French and cannot stay a year in the same place!' *Itonnant!*"

"Can you not delay and remain for our wedding day, next month?" Hugh asked, as Mary blushed.

"Regrettably, *non*." Mercier retrieved his hat and gloves. "I have much to do. The winds and skies are friendly, my new *a Grostat* freights from Springfield tomorrow, and the generators soon thereafter. *Au revoir*."



By and by, the spreading word of Jean Mercier's departure put him at the center of a cavalcade of wonder again. Every creature on two legs but poultry alive in the county came to the meadow where the ascension was scheduled. Unlike his arrival, the day was brilliant; the sun gave silvery hue to the colossal silk bladder that lay spread upon the ground. Its sheath of netting was tethered to a formidable, caned cabin, which was laden with sandbags. The whole engine was tied to the earth. A half-dozen French and American crewmen busied themselves

preparing for the launch, and a freight-wagon groaning with provisions and a four-in-hand stood by to give chase. Two mule-drawn *caissons*, each mounted with a box-like apparatus, were parked near-by the *Deus ex Machina*.. Protuberant hoses snaked from the boxes into its mouth. Once the sulfuric acid and metal filings were mixed in them, a low hiss announced the manufactured vapor, which engorged the hoses and brought the balloon to life. Amazement grew in proportion to its height.

The Gaul summoned Doctor Joplin to his side. Opening his valise, he began handing him vials. "*Mon M^{adecin}*, my gift to you is *science*--knowledge. This is ether, for surgery and childbirth. There are two princes of England alive because of it. This one is chloroform, to bring quiet and relieve pain. This last one is bromine, to combat the gangrene. You have the gift of care, my friend; put aside your *eau d'hom^{opathique}*, your baths, and your poultices. Study these and learn to use them wisely."

Mercier threw his arms around Hugh and Mary. "First, I teach you the French good-bye." He kissed them both on each cheek, and Hugh was more *rouge* than his fianc^e. "Now, I give you Tocqueville, *en FranHais*. Perchance you will learn to read him and profit from seeing yourselves in his glass."

Presently the balloon dwarfed the town's granary and strained at its moorings. Mercier stood in a window of the gondola, already two stories above the ground.

"*Adieu, Deer Lick! Bon chance!*" he shouted as his denizens cast off. A cheer erupted, rising in the sky as his companion.

Mercier cupped his hands. "Hugh Gregory! Already I think you Americans understand *la vie* – life. All you must do is learn to live in it!"

Hugh watched as the great airship became a lone cloud and listened as hoof-beats faded into the lazy, buzzing calm. He glanced down at the book. A bit of foolscap protruded, so he opened the volume to where it lay. On it was a passage that his savior had translated:

When one considers the chastity of their morals, the simplicity of their manners, their habits of work and the religious and settle spirit which prevails in the United States, one is tempted to believe that the Americans are a virtuous people; but when one considers the commercial fervor which seems to devour the whole of society, the thirst for gain, the respect for money and the bad faith in business which appears on every side, one is soon led to think that this pretended virtue is only the absence of certain vices, and if the number of human passions seems restricted here, it is because they have all been absorbed in just one: the love of wealth.

Hugh Gregory was no less puzzled about what lay before him – in his environs, his dealings, and his coming marriage.

Nonetheless, his spirits were lifted.

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