



THE SOCIETY WOLF

A COUNT OR TWO



MODEST STEIN

ONE WAS RAISING A TUNEFUL VOICE IN RIBALD SONG WHILE THE OTHER ALTERNATELY SWORE AND HELD HIS SULLEN PEACE

By LUKE THRICE
WHEN Carter saw him first he was executing a kind of elaborated breakdown about a lilac bush, with sundry wavings of the arms and incoherent murmurings. Carter watched him without approval. Apparently the exhibition was connected in some way with the celebration of obscure religious rites and the Virginian was chary of interfering. It was none of his business if a strange gentleman chose an open portion of the Sluyt Long island estate for the exercise of dervish dancing.

But the matter that held him was that the man was young—young and handsome and well dressed, and, except as to his actions, conventionally sane in appearance. His neat checked riding suit sat well to his trim, tall figure. His breeches were impeccable. He had the lithe, weedy build of the horseman breed. For the rest he was fair and blonde, and an upturned little yellow mustache gave him a rather distinguished air, or would have if he had stood still long enough. Having observed these facts with discerning eye Carter decided to continue at the performance.

But the ceremony did not try his patience, for it soon came to an abrupt close. The dancing gentleman, with a final stamp or two, came to a dramatic halt, folded his arms with unnecessary violence, and remained motionless and erect, glaring at the Sluyt mansion, which raised its white stone terraces and gables and turrets some quarter of a mile away. This maneuver brought his gaze almost in line with Carter, whom presently he perceived. He broke his pose long enough to raise his riding cap perfunctorily but with perfect courtesy.

"Good morning."
There was enough of a foreign flavor in the gesture and the voice to confirm Carter in the impression that the dancing gentleman was no native eccentric. The Virginian returned the salutation gravely.

"I trust I am not interrupting you," he said.
The other turned a very frank and clear eyed smile upon him. Evidently his ecstasy or his fanatical elevation, or whatever it was, had deserted him.

"Not at all. In fact, I was rather wishing that there was good company in the vicinity." He appeared to be quite unconscious that there was anything unusual in his recent display.

"Thanks," said Carter, guardedly. "Are you staying with the Sluys?"

"The Sluys? Ah, no, for example," returned the other, with a start and a grimace. For a moment the Virginian feared a relapse, but the smile broke through again. "And you?"

"Moi, non plus," said Carter, at a venture. "I was riding along the road when I noticed you here. I thought it might be Herbert Classan. So I walked over."

The dancing gentleman produced a little curved gold case and presented a small card without affectation. The Virginian, who was nothing if not adaptable, responded with a like formality. This is what he read on the stranger's card:
LOUIS FERNAND SAGRELE DE PARADEUX,
Comte de Garenne et de Thibault.

Having proceeded so far according to formula the two men spoiled the scene by exchanging an ordinary, plebeian handshake, quite lacking in unnatural angles. Carter found that he liked the chap immensely, apart from the fact of his title. Not that Carter had any objection to titles, but that he found the bearer of this one simple and straightforward. Meanwhile it contributed somewhat to his friendliness to know that the title was genuine. He had heard vaguely of De Garenne, though he could not exactly recall the connection.

TEARING THE COBWEBS
"I also have left my mount on the highway," said his new acquaintance. "Are you on a particular mission?"

"No, just riding. I'm staying with the Champneys, below here a bit."

"Ah, and I with the Mandewells. Shall we go on, then, together?"

"If you are quite—er, through," said Carter, a trifle maliciously, glancing at the lilac bush. De Garenne laughed, a sound, healthy, full toned laugh.

"You should not hold my peculiarities against me. Come. We shall tear the cobwebs loose with a gallop, yes?"

They tore several cobwebs and a fair number of miles loose during the afternoon. The Virginian, fully aware that it was very much to his advantage to cultivate the count de Garenne, discovered that the operation meant none of the difficulties, the tortured repartees, the labored approaches which he was accustomed to negotiate at times.

In a wide detour over roads and open country they improved their acquaintance rapidly. Carter found that the strange spectacle by the lilac bush had taken on, in retrospect, the semblance of a dream. The count de Garenne was eminently sane, clear minded and normal. Gradually a considerable curiosity gained Carter and he held a question ready until he felt that their relations had become friendly enough to warrant its intrusion.

"By the way, De Garenne," he said when he found his opening, "do you mind telling me what you were

doing when I met you, unless it's some dread and sacred secret?"

They had progressed almost in a circle and were approaching the Sluyt mansion again. While Carter was speaking they had rounded a turn that brought them within view of it once more. De Garenne frowned a little, but there was nothing morbid in his expression.

"Why, if you care to know," he began, and broke again into a smile. "It is in the race. You, most possibly, would swear and double the fist. I go through a motion here and another there. It is the impulse of my sentiment. You see, friend Carteret, I standing there by the lilac bush, had a disappointment, or, rather, I might say a severe shock."

"Ah!" said Carter gravely. "I think I should interrupt you to say that I seek no confidence. After all, you know, we are hardly what you would call bosom friends."

"What then?" returned the count with a shrug. "It is nothing but what is open to all if they care to know. I merely speak in reply to your natural question. I suppose you have heard at some time that I was once engaged to Miss Sluyt?"

Carter remembered now that this was what he had tried to remember concerning De Garenne. During the preceding spring there had been formal announcement of a match between Sylvia Sluyt and the count at Nice. About a month later it had been formally canceled. The affair had occasioned the usual comment, but interested circles in New York had been deprived of adequate material for gossip. The only comments he had heard were from Classan, and they had been bitter. But Classan was naturally prejudiced and jealous.

"Believe me when I say," continued De Garenne, with some heat, "that it was no seeking of mine that I found myself here near this house. I did not even know that she lived here. I was attracted by a late flowering plant, and since there was no hedge or other barrier at this point I dismounted and walked over to inspect it."

AN EYE ON THE CAVALIER

"Then, while I was standing at the spot I looked over," his sweeping arm energetically indicated the lofty porte cochere of the mansion. "Well. Perhaps you did not observe. I saw Miss Sluyt. She was mounting to her saddle and a cavalier was assisting her. As you will readily agree, friend Carteret, there are ways and ways of offering such assistance. I would not have spied, you understand; but I had an excellent view of the manner in which this cavalier rendered his devoir."

Carter was sure that if they had been on foot at that moment the count would have resumed his intricate breakdown. As it was, he grimaced violently. The Virginian smiled sympathetically.

"I see," he said. "Sylvia must have been starting out with Herbert Classan."

Remembering Classan's temper, his fists and his prejudices, he thought it most fortunate for the count that he had confined his emotions to waltzing around a lilac bush.

The count shrugged again. "It is a matter of indifference to me what his name may be. But this was where I saw for the first time. And it was hard, you know, friend Carteret. Um-m! Well, I was very near to a scene, you understand." At this juncture he raised his riding whip and cut the air viciously.

His mount shied and supplied the dancing steps he obviously required.

"I suppose you know that Sylvia is engaged to Classan?" suggested Carter.

"I know it now," cried the count, encouraging rather than suppressing the antics of his steed. "I tell you I saw—something that was like a thousand stings upon my brain. Ah-h! I was very near!"

"Hold on, there, old man," called Carter, warningly. "No need for dramatics after this interval."

The count reined in his horse and rode soberly, his excitement fading to the open smile again. "You are right, of course. Still I shall—perhaps—at some later time."

There was nothing vicious about his half expressed thought, but to the Virginian it held considerable significance. He was quite convinced that the count was capable of making a scene, honest and sincere enough, but uncomfortable for the others concerned and probably quite painful for himself. He saw that the count, once face to face with Classan, his successor, would precipitate trouble. Meanwhile, as the other seemed willing, he sought further information.

"The termination of your engagement was—ah, very sudden, was it not?"

But De Garenne had apparently reached the end of his confiding mood. He nodded and answered shortly, if inoffensively. They paced on soberly in silence, while the Virginian adjusted himself to the change. If the count could so easily share his intimate affairs on short acquaintance it was not to be wondered at if he as suddenly and unaccountably withdrew. Carter was not conscious of any diminution of regard for his new confidant, however. He decided that he had brought it upon himself by too rudely checking the other's extravagance.

They had reached the farther end of the level stretch of road which lay in front of the Sluyt place and were making a turn lined with elms that would take them out of sight of it. At that instant De Garenne turned in his saddle and looked back at the building. Carter, with eyes ahead, saw two figures riding toward them at a brisk trot. They were Herbert Classan and Sylvia Sluyt.

The whole situation flashed on Carter in a breath. The two parties must meet. He had had a glimpse of the purpose and nature of the Frenchman. Classan he knew even better. Herbert was a giant, heavy handed, hard muscled and not too critical. Like many slow witted men he was quick to anger. Carter had seen him once or twice in wrath, as on the occasion in the Greenbough country club when he had cracked a German army officer's skull with a billiard cue for being too clever at keeping his string. Carter could use a count in his business, but not a count with a broken head.

A breath—and he raised his riding whip for a slash.

THE PURSUIT

The approaching couple looked up at the rattle and plunge of hoofs to see a man charging toward them through a cloud of dust. He was plainly a wretched rider and appeared to be in imminent danger. He had lost one stirrup. With hands clutching the animal's mane he held his seat awry. He came within an inch of being thrown before he reached them. They separated quickly to let the whirlwind pass and Classan, wheeling deftly, clattered off in pursuit with a parting shout to the girl. The thing had happened with startling suddenness,

and she stood staring over her shoulder after the galloping pair with her lips still formed on the phrase of quiet conversation that had occupied her but a second before. Then she caught the sound of hoofs again. She turned to the front. And there, with his horse thrown back gracefully, bowing low in his saddle, a gallant and handsome figure, was Louis Fernand Sagrele de Paradeux, Comte de Garenne et de Thibault.

Carter had time to congratulate himself upon having taken out one of the best mounts in the Champney stables while he was hurling the animal at full tilt down the road. Classan, he knew, was riding his famous black hunter, Rosemary, and the chase would have been all too short had the fugitive been any but Champney's Thorneycroft. As it was, the wily Virginian held his lead to a point far down the road where the road swept about a corner. Then, a safe half mile from Sylvia and the count, he slackened the pace somewhat and regained partial control, while Classan drew in upon him.

The pursuer had recognized the apparently helpless rider during the last hundred yards and showed a very red and very angry face as he came within hailing distance.

"Perhaps you think that's a sporting trick, Carteret," he yelled. "Perhaps you expected to have all kinds of a laugh on the chap who went out of his way to help you. I've a mind to bash your wretched head."

Carter in simple fact had not regarded the situation in this aspect. He required no diagram to see instantly that he had thrust himself into a difficult corner with the violent Classan. Meanwhile he continued to sprawl in a picturesque attitude upon his mount, turning an occasional agonized glance behind him, as if bewildered with terror.

"Aw, can it," roared Classan delicately. "A lively chance you've got to make me believe he bolted with you. Just wait." He spurred on Rosemary to close the gap, evidently with intent of bodily assault. But Carter's plans did not contemplate a personal combat with the savage, rough fisted young horseman. He checked his pace further, though evidently with great difficulty, and bawled his answer unsteadily, reeling from side to side.

"Hey, Classan! Whaz a matter? Say, help a chap—can't you?"

The pursuer, thundering down with furious expression and whip actually raised for a blow, dropped his arm and caught Thorneycroft's bridle. A look of abject and ludicrous amazement spread upon his heavy face.

"By the jumping Lord Harry!" he gasped. "Drunk as a fiddler. You chicken brained idiot! Here, get off that horse before you break your confounded neck."

"Classan, Classan," stuttered Carter, rolling his eyes. "Thought I was a goner, sure."

"Get off," snarled Classan, who had gradually brought the hunters to a halt. The Virginian shook his head solemnly and lurched to a dangerous angle as he strove unsuccessfully to regain his off stirrup. "Can't—can't be done, Classan. 'S—'s not mine, really."

Classan called him an evil name and glared back along the road. Sylvia, apparently, had not followed them, but had gone on home. He shrugged resignedly.

"Well, what I ought to do is to throw you off and leave you in a hedge to sober up," he growled. "But

I suppose I'll have to walk the floor with you. Heave ahead."

PLAYING HIS GAME

To the Virginian's immense relief his companion chose to "walk the floor" farther along the road instead of turning back, and his problem was simplified. It consisted now in keeping up the impersonation, and in this he felt perfectly safe. He took the natural mummer's delight in the game, and for the next hour Herbert Classan, wrathful, scornful and amused by turns, viewed as convincing an example of bibulous hilarity as Jan Steen himself could have wished. Carter was satisfied. He had saved his count and earned Sylvia's gratitude for preventing a scene.

Late wanderers from a peaceful Long island hamlet that afternoon reached their destinations with a tale of two horsemen, locked in brotherly embrace, who paced the winding road toward the setting sun. One was raising a tuneful voice in ribald song, while the other, holding the singer upright in his saddle, alternately swore and held his sullen peace.

As these horsemen, both undeniably sober, cantered down toward the Champney residence in the cool of the evening two other riders, a man and woman, were parting on the drive of the Sluyt mansion some miles to the east. No roaming rustic had passed along that road since the time of the runaway, and in consequence there was no one to record that the second couple had taken exactly two hours and a half to cover the short strip between the elm lined turn and the house.

Carter salved his conscience with regard to the trick played upon Classan by having him around to the Brockston country club for an excellent dinner, an attention that completely won the beefy young man. Before they entered the dining room Classan telephoned to the Sluyt home and talked with Sylvia. He came out of the booth grinning.

"She gave me Ned for not coming straight back," he announced to the interested Virginian, "but I squared myself by telling her I had to chase you into the next county."

"Ah! Did she return home?"

"Sure. Went right on."

"All alone?" inquired Carter, innocently.

"Of course," returned the other.

"Ah!" said Carter.

"I tell you, she's a mighty fine girl," said Classan, rubbing his hands with sudden effusiveness.

"Very. You're to be congratulated," said Carter, absently.

They sat through the meal in perfect amity and the Virginian submitted to Classan's fussy dictation in the matter of drinks without a murmur. Classan discovered that his companion was really a decent chap when not intoxicated. He meditated a particular favor.

"I say, Carteret," he said. "I think I'll ride over and see her again tonight. Will you come?"

And Carter, who had grown exceedingly curious, assented. The count would surely be at a safe distance by now.

They galloped off together through the starlit countryside in good time for a short visit at the Sluys, retracing part of their meandering path of the afternoon. Classan congratulated the other gruffly upon his quick recovery from a bad case and the Virginian replied that that was one of his best points. Such was the extent of their conversation up to the time they reached the railroad crossing. To the left branched the road leading to the station a short distance away. The crossing was dimly lighted from four lamp posts.

As they started across the tracks two gleaming eyes shot around a curve in the road ahead and their horses pranced nervously. An automobile came snuffing at reduced speed toward them and bumped slowly over the rails. The riders drew a little to one side, holding in their mounts to let it pass.

"Say," Classan exclaimed suddenly, "that's one of the Sluys' cars. Maybe Sylvia's there."

IN THE TONNEAU

They pressed their horses nearer. Three figures were in the machine, one at the wheel and two in the tonneau. As the car came abreast of them they leaned forward and peered through the vague obscurity. In the faint glow from the crossing lamps they caught a brief vision. One of those in the tonneau was a man. The other was a girl. The man they could not see clearly, though Carter conceived instant suspicions as to his identity. But the girl was unmistakably Sylvia Sluyt.

"Hello!" bellowed Classan. "Sylvia! Hold on a moment!"

There was no possibility that she had not heard. But the automobile had passed them. It turned to the left with a crescendo grind of speed. "Well, I'm damned!" growled Classan, wheeling his horse. "What the devil does that mean? I'm going to have a look."

Pique and sharp jealousy spoke in his voice, and Carter remembered once more that he could use a whole count, but not a part of one. He whirled as quickly as his companion and bore in closely at his right side. They were in the center of the crossing. Before the other could get his horse in hand the Virginian pressed his right heel into the flank of his own mount. The nervous animal swung his quarters into the ribs of Classan's horse. At the shock Classan's horse shied violently, stumbling off the tracks into a ditch, which was strewn with loose stones. There the animal floundered an instant and went down with a crash. It was up almost at once, Classan standing at its head. He had not seen the rapid track.

"Here's a mess!" he roared.

"What's wrong?" asked Carter.

"Slipped a stifle," howled Classan. He led his useless, hobbling steed clear of the ditch and glared down the road at the departing bulk of the automobile. "By heaven! I don't like it. I'm going to follow anyway." And he broke into a lumbering run.

Carter, with one more reflection anent the possible value of a real live count, urged his mount into a gallop and pealed on ahead of the automobile. It was his purpose to smuggle De Garenne out of danger if he had been right in his suspicion. As he approached the station the evening train to the city pulled in. The automobile, its tonneau empty, was leaving the steps as he dashed up.

Carter flung himself from the saddle, threw his bridle reins over the hitching rail and rushed through the station. Two figures were entering the first car of the train and turned at his shout. They were Sylvia Sluyt and the count de Garenne. The count was carrying a suitcase.

"Oh, Miss Sluyt," called Carter anxiously as he hurried up. "Mr. Classan will be here in a moment."

"That is interesting, but not important," said De Garenne, taking the answer upon him. They were both smiling. The Virginian stared.

"If he does not hurry we shall not wait for him. We are going to Jersey City," said the count.

"Jersey City?" gasped Carter.

"Yes. To be married. Will you wish us good fortune, friend Carteret? Believe me, I shall never, never forget what you have done for us."

He was shaking hands with them again when the conductor gave warning and swung on the step and the train jarred into motion. A moment later he turned, still bewildered, from staring after the vanishing red lights to blunder into the breathless Classan.

"Where—where is she?" demanded the newcomer. Carter placed both hands upon his shoulders and, facing him about, marched him through the station to the road. "Come on, my son," he said. "We both need a drink, and a real one this time."

(Another Story Next Sunday)