

THE FRIENDS OF HECTOR JOUVET¹

by James Powell

The old man came up the path that sloped between the benches and flowerbeds, but he stopped short of the edge of the cliff where Brown stood waiting. Instead, he sat down on a bench a few yards away, drew a folded newspaper from his coat pocket, and began to read.

Brown hesitated. His French wasn't really that good and for a moment he couldn't think of the verb "to follow." When he remembered his chin started to tremble and, throwing his cigarette over the edge, he went up to the old man.

"Why are you following me? Is it good to follow people? I do not like being followed. Do you like being followed?" These were all the forms of the verb Brown could muster and rather than start over again, he stopped.

The old man, who had been listening attentively, slipped the newspaper back in his pocket and smiled. "I am afraid you are mistaken, young man. I am not following you." His English was meticulous and the quiet conviction of his words told Brown it was the truth.

"Oh," said Brown, and stepped back in confusion.

"Actually," said the old man, as if to cover the other's embarrassment, "I come here quite often. The sea is blue; the rocks are white. I have always thought that this would be the ideal place for a visitor like yourself to see our gay, carefree little principality for the first time. Regrettably that is impossible, for to come upon this prospect first, one would have to scale the cliff."

"Maybe a good place to see San Sebastiano for the last time, then," said Brown with a half smile.

"Ah, you are leaving us?" asked the old man sadly. "Well, I hope you have seen more of our happy, light-hearted city than the inside of the Casino."

"I guess that was about as far as I got," admitted Brown.

"But that is terrible, terrible," said the old man, throwing up his hands in mock horror. "But all is not lost and if you will permit me I can still point out a few highlights from here."

He led Brown back to the edge of the cliff. "Below us, of course, is the harbor and over

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there, the romantic old quarter. Its reputation is exaggerated, I assure you. Our women are not promiscuous. Songs have been written about that. On the left you have our celebrated Reptile Museum founded by Prince Adalbert, an ardent herpetologist and the grandfather of our present prince. My father had many stories of the misadventures of the good Prince Adalbert who prowled the streets of San Sebastiano at all hours hunting snakes with his forked stick, returning the salutes of the policemen and chatting quietly to himself.

“And there, behind the Cathedral, you can see the roof of the Casino into which, you are perhaps aware, the citizens of the principality are not allowed to enter. That is quite appropriate. A good host does not laugh at his own jokes.”

Brown took a wristwatch out of his pocket, looked at it, and put it back.

“Am I keeping you? I hope not,” said the old man. “Actually I can not stay much longer myself I must see a friend off on the train, the 4:45’

“You don’t have much time,” warned Brown.

“Enough for a bit more of our history,” said the old man, leading Brown back to the bench. “Were you aware, for example, that our mineral waters were held in high esteem as early as the days of the Romans? One might wonder why, since they are quite sulphurous and abominable. Perhaps they had more horrible diseases in classical times than we do today.

“Within the memory of my grandfather, the elderly and infirm flocked to San Sebastiano to take our waters. They sat on park benches and scowled at our pigeons; they let themselves be pushed along our promenades in wicker chairs; they pulled wry faces and sucked at our mineral waters. But we were more than a spa. We were renowned for personal sobriety and dignified compassion toward those who frequented our life-giving waters.

“Yes, believe it or not, the gay, carefree people of today’s San Sebastiano were all that. In the generation preceding the Franco-Prussian War acute depression of the liver was fashionable and our waters were highly recommended. Those were the fat years for us, years of building and, as it later turned out, of over-building. For with the close of the War an epidemic of disorders of the spleen swept across France and non-Germanic Europe. Less carbonated waters came into style and almost overnight our little city was as deserted and forlorn as an overgrown cemetery. Today one is at the top, tomorrow at the bottom.”

Brown’s mouth worked soundlessly. Then he said, “Life is a real double-crosser.”

“Why, that is quite philosophical for someone so young, and an American at that,” smiled the old man.

“Canadian,” said Brown.

“A Canadian, how delightful,” said the old man still smiling.

“You’re going to miss your train,” said Brown.

“I still have a bit more time,” said the old man. “Now let me see. Where were we? Ah, yes. Now, as it happened, a modest, unassuming little casino had been established on an out-of-the-way street to accommodate the younger, faster set which frequented our little principality at the height of its popularity. A mere accommodation. Suddenly the old man clapped a hand to his forehead. “I have just thought of something I should have thought of before,” he said. “Perhaps you can help me. The Canadian and the American dollar are worth the same, are they not?”

Brown stared at him for a moment. “No,” he said finally.

“Then the Canadian dollar is worth more?” said the old man.

“Less,” said Brown.

“Ah, I am sorry,” said the old man. “Forgive me for dwelling on it but would you happen to know the exact..?”

“The Canadian dollar is worth between 92 and 93 cents,” said the young man.

“Let us say 93,” insisted the old man graciously. He pursed his lips and calculated. “Fine. Fine,” he said. “I have just had what you would call a false alarm. But let us get back to what we were talking about. Imagine the city fathers’ surprise when at the very time the attraction of our waters declined, the revenue from the Casino showed a healthy increase, due, in part, to our abundance of economical hotels and hungry waiters.

“It soon became obvious that San Sebastiano was at a crossroads. Should we wait, sober, compassionate, with tightened belts for the prodigal elderly and infirm to return? Or should we chart a new path for the history of San Sebastiano, expand the Casino, become gay, hurdy-gurdy and carefree?

“It was decided to have a referendum. Feelings ran high. A man walking down the street laughs with pure delight at some enchanting thing his daughter, a child of five, has said. He is jumped upon and severely beaten by a group of mineral-water supporters who believed him to be demonstrating in favor of the Casino. A crowd of Casino supporters, returning in an ugly mood

from amass rally, come upon a funeral procession in the Street and interpret it as a counter-demonstration by the mineral-water faction. The ensuing clash provoked three solid days of rioting. Et cetera. Et cetera. The outcome of the referendum you know, for it is as you see us now.”

“You know, you’ve missed your friend’s train,” said Brown.

“Why, then I’ll see him off on the next,” said the old man. “As I was about to say, San Sebastiano with its expanded gambling facilities entered what has been described as its ‘laughing years.’ In 5909 an entirely new Casino, constructed in the style of the Ottoman Turk, was opened amid fireworks, balloon ascents and a magnificent sailboat regatta.

“On the opening day Casimir Vaugirard in his tri-wing PrentisJenkins Hedgehog flew from Perpignan to San Sebastiano in a matter of hours. He circled the dome and minaret of the Casino dropping projectiles trailing the colors of the Vaugirards and San Sebastiano, then dipped his wings in a majestic salute to the cheering crowd and crashed into the side of this very hill.

“What might have spelled disaster for us --since tragedy was hardly the mood we hoped to associate with our little principality-- became instead a supreme gesture of love when, in the cockpit, his body was found locked in the embrace of his mistress, the celebrated beauty known as Lola.

“Well, missing one train is no excuse for missing the next,” said the old man, “and a few formalities still remain. I trust what I have said will enable you to appreciate what is about to happen.”

“Formalities?” said Brown.

“May I see your passport?” said the old man. Brown stared at the outstretched hand. Nodding toward it, the old man said, “I am the police, you see. Your passport, please.” Brown handed it over.

The man skimmed down the vital statistics, shook his head sympathetically over the photograph, then thumbed through the pages, turning the passport this way and that to read the frontier stamps.

“But I haven’t done anything wrong,” said Brown.

The old man shrugged genially and, without pausing in his examination of the passport, drew an envelope from his pocket and passed it to the young man.

“Mr. Brown, here you will find one second-class railway ticket, San Sebastiano to Paris, and banknotes to the sum of fifty new francs, ten of your dollars, more or less. I would appreciate your checking to see that this is exactly as I say, for I am required to ask you to sign a receipt.”

In the midst of counting the bills, Brown stopped. “But this is crazy. I haven’t done anything.”

The old man dosed the passport and handed it back. “Mr. Brown, let me say directly what both you and I know: your coming here this afternoon was for the purpose of doing away with yourself”

“A lie, an out-and-out lie,” said Brown indignantly.

“No, it is not,” said the old man calmly. “You are not being honest with me.”

“Honest?” shouted Brown. “You’re a fine one to talk about honesty. Didn’t I ask you if you were following me and didn’t you say” --he switched into a falsetto-- ‘I am afraid you are mistaken, young man’?”

“You are not being quite fair, Mr. Brown. Granted I did walk behind you from the Casino. But I was not following you. Except for my superiors’ primitive attitude regarding expenses, I could have come by taxi and arrived here well ahead of you.”

The old man shrugged at Brown’s look of disbelief “Mr. Brown,” he said, “have you ever considered the possibilities of suicide open to a tourist? He does not have a gun— his intention in coming abroad is rarely to shoot himself. Our pharmacies confuse him and he does not know the name in our language for the poison he might have used with every confidence at home. He distrusts our hotel furniture, and rightly so. Will a chair that looks as though Louis XIV sat in it hold his weight as he ties a rope to the chandelier? And in what store would he buy the rope?

“No, if you think about it, Mr. Brown, there is only one way: to throw oneself from a high place. Here in San Sebastiano there is really only one spot high enough to do the job without risking half measures. And here we are.

“Look,” said Brown with a facsimile of laughter, “you’ve really made a mistake. I came here to try my luck at the Casino and now I’m on to Florence or some place. I’m making a kind of grand tour.” The old man smiled patiently. “Look,” said Brown, “the whole trip is a reward for my graduating in dentistry from McGill University --that’s in Montreal. When the trip’s over

I go back home to Drumheller, Alberta, and go into practice with my father. A guy with his future all cut out for him like that would be the last person to commit suicide. What I mean is, you don't have any motive."

The old man sighed and took a notebook from his pocket. " 'On August 15 last,'" he read, " 'the Eighth Bureau of the Judiciary Police' --he half-rose and tipped his hat— " "was alerted by the local American Express office that one Brown, Norman, had that day cashed in the return portion of a first-class airplane ticket, Paris-Montreal-Calgary. Subsequent routine investigation revealed that on the preceding day the subject had checked into the Hotel de l'Avenir and the same afternoon at the Casino had lost chips amounting to \$520.

" "The afternoon following the subject's visit to American Express he lost chips amounting to \$450. That evening he sent the following cablegram to a Miss Annabella Brown, Drumheller, Alberta: DEAR AUNT BELLA, MONEY AND RETURN TICKET LOST IN FIRE THAT DESTROYED MY HOTEL. BEST NOT TO WORRY NORMAN SENIOR. \$1000 SHOULD COVER IT NICELY. NORMY.

" "August 16, subject loses chips amounting to \$1000.' Miss Brown is very prompt. 'Subject leaves Casino and walks to the Parc de la Grande Armée' ---which is where we are now-- 'and stands in contemplation at edge of cliff, then leaves park and sends following cablegram: DEAR AUNT BELLA, HOTEL FIRE NO ACCIDENT. HAVE STUMBLER ON VAST INTERNATIONAL PLOT LINKING JAPANESE BEETLES, DISAPPEARANCE OF AMELIA EARHART AND RADICAL CHANGES IN WEATHER THESE LAST FEW YEARS. CONFIRMS YOUR SUSPICION, WAS NOT SUNSPOTS. HAVE CONTACTED DISILLUSIONED FOREIGN AGENT. NEED \$5000 AS PROOF OF MY GOOD FAITH. LET'S KEEP THIS TO OURSELVES. NORMY.

" "August 17, subject's losses: \$5000. That evening sends following cablegram: DEAR AUNT BELLA, WE ARE REALLY ONTO SOMETHING. AGENT AGREES TO BE ON OUR SIDE AND SAP THEM FROM WITHIN. HE SAYS DOUBLE AGENTS GET DOUBLE PAY. SOUNDS FAIR ENOUGH. NEED ANOTHER \$5000. MUM, DON'T FORGET, IS THE WORD. NORMY.

" "August 18, subject's losses: \$5000. Sends following cablegram: DEAR AUNT DELLA, THINGS COMING TO A HEAD. NEED \$5000 FOR INCIDENTAL EXPENSES-

MICROFILM, INVISIBLE INK, SECRETARIAL HELP, ETC. ITEMIZED LIST TO FOLLOW. KEEP THIS UNDER YOUR HAT. NORMY.”

The old man looked up from his notebook. “Might I ask you about this Miss Brown?”

“She doesn’t happen to be any of your dam business,” said Brown, through clenched teeth. The old man waited. At last Brown said, “You might say that I’m her favorite nephew. You might say that the money was her life savings.”

“I meant is she a bit --potty? Do you still say ‘potty’?” asked the old man.

“‘Peculiar’ might be better,” said Brown.

“I must jot that down,” said the old man, scribbling in his notebook. “And now where were we?”

“August 19, by 5 PM subject’s winnings total \$38,000; by midnight, \$88,000; by closing time, \$123,000. Subject returns to hotel where, in answer to inquiry, is informed that next train for Paris is at 1:47 PM.

“August 20, subject checks out of hotel at 10:37 AM, leaves bags at station, wanders through streets looking in store windows. Noon finds subject in front of Casino. Subject smiles as if pleasantly surprised and, with glance at wrist watch, enters Casino.”

The old man closed his notebook and looked up. “By 2:30 you had lost \$6,000, and by 3:30, \$123,000. And here we are. I must add in conclusion that San Sebastiano for several years now has requested in the most vigorous terms that the railway provide us with a morning service to Paris. Now perhaps we had better go,” he said, preparing to rise.

“Hold on a minute,” said Brown, and he began to slap the palm of one hand with the back of the other. “I have certain rights. You can’t just put me on a train and run me out of town. Nothing you’ve said would hold up in a court of law.”

The old man settled back on the bench. “Ah, now I can understand your hostility,” he said. “Believe me there was never a question of a law having been broken. Consider for yourself how odd it would look if gay, carefree, light-hearted San Sebastiano had a law making it a crime to attempt suicide. What would people say? Why would anyone even dream of committing suicide here?”

“You mean that technically speaking,” said Brown, “I could jump off this cliff this very moment, and you could do nothing?”

The old man nodded. "It would be perfectly legal. But law is a funny thing, Mr. Brown. If some future historian, for example, were to try to understand the people of the Twentieth Century from a study of their books of law alone, would he, do you think, see them as they were, or as they feared they were, or as they hoped they might be?"

"A particular case: what would this future historian of ours think of a certain law in force in San Sebastiano which says that our police must clean their revolvers daily —nothing unusual in that— but, the law continues, in a secluded yet public place in the open air? Legend has it that one Sub-Inspector Auguste Petitjean discharged his revolver as he was cleaning it while seated in his bath. The tub and walls, as it happened, were marble, and Sub-Inspector Petitjean was shot seventeen times in as many places by that single ricocheting bullet.

"By some miracle he recovered and returned to the force, only to be subsequently discharged when it was discovered that he had developed a psychological block against firing his revolver —or, as another version of the story has it, against taking a bath. Whichever version is correct, the law is there nevertheless. Were you to try to jump I would be obliged to clean my revolver in public and it might accidentally discharge, the bullet striking you in the left calf. Conveniently enough, the hospital is located right next to the railway station.

"I had intended, by the way, to say before that I am sorry your train ticket is second class. By all rights it should be first class, but the authorities view the situation otherwise. You see our Eighth Bureau, dealing exclusively in cases such as yours, is organized into three divisions based on the amount of money lost by the subject --not winnings that happen to be lost again, you understand, but his own personal investment.

"The first division, headed by Inspector Guizot, deals with amounts of \$5000 or less: the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. Traditionally his subjects travel third class.

"My own division, the second, deals with amounts of \$5000 to \$50,000. By the way, we use American dollars as a standard out of simple convenience. That was why I received quite a start a while back when I realized that in your case we were dealing in Canadian dollars. For a moment I was afraid, forgive me, that you might be in Guizot's division. In any event, traditionally my subjects go second class.

"The third division, under Baron de Mirabelle, deals with sums in excess of \$50,000. His subjects, of course, go first class.

“However, a few years ago the railways did away with third class. It was decided that Guizot’s would go second class. What else could they do? Fine, I said, but then I humbly submit that mine should go first class. But the authorities were blind to the justice of it, and de Mirabelle, though sympathetic, kept smiling in that cultured way of his.

“A very distinguished person, the Baron: always in evening dress and with a black patch, sometimes over one eye, sometimes over the other. I often tell the story of how the Baron acquired his eye patch. I like to think it makes my own subjects’ losses appear less significant.

“One day around the end of the last war a large burly soldier arrived in San Sebastiano. He had a system for roulette, as we all do, and \$200,000 --the accumulated combat pay and savings of his entire regiment, which he had promised to increase a hundredfold.

‘This he promptly proceeded to do. His system was based on what he called his ‘lucky lower-left bicuspid.’ He would survey the roulette table, from number to number, until his bicuspid throbbed. That number he would bet. And he would win astronomical sums, millions, night after night.

“Finally the day arrived when the Casino, short of a miracle, would open its doors for the last time. The soldier dined alone beforehand at Chez Tintin. At the end of the meal there was an altercation. The waiter accused him of over-tipping. The soldier threatened to ram a wad of banknotes down the waiter’s throat and moved toward him with a bobbing and weaving motion, the result, we were later to learn, of considerable experience in the ring, where he was known as-

The old man thought for a moment. “Breaker Baker, or something like that,” he said. “Politely but firmly the waiter struck him on the side of the head with a bottle, Chateau Pommefrit, 1938. The soldier regained consciousness to find his celebrated tooth on the floor in front of him. He rushed to the Casino and, with the tooth clenched in his fist, surveyed the table. Nothing happened.

“But then, as his eye passed number 14, something in his jaw throbbed faintly --his lower-right bicuspid! He bet and lost. Again the bicuspid throbbed, more insistently. He bet again and lost. And so on into the night. By closing time he was penniless and the’ right side of his jaw was swollen, throbbing as indiscriminately as any common toothache.

“The next day, when the soldier tried to take his life, Baron de Mirabelle, of course, was

waiting. But at the railway station the soldier grew belligerent and came at the Baron, bobbing and weaving, catching him with a right cross to the eye. Finally two Travelers' Aid people had to force the soldier onto the train. Not a moment too soon either, for at the news of his losses his regiment had mobilized and units had already reached the outskirts of San Sebastiano, thirsting for his blood. The Baron's eye had a fine bruise for a week. He fancied himself in the eye patch and has worn it to this day."

"Let's get back to me," said Brown. "What if your bullet didn't stop me? What if I crawled to the edge and with my last breath threw myself to my death?"

"Believe me," said the old man, "that is just not the way it is done. The suicide, above all others, wants to leave life erect, not on his hands and knees. He wants to savor that last moment. He stops to smoke a final cigarette, to gather his thoughts together into an epigram of one sort or the other, to —and this happens more frequently than you might imagine— to remove his wristwatch. Placing it where? Of course, in his pocket.

"How 'peculiar' we are and how lovable, eh, Mr. Brown. And here is something equally convenient for me in my work: how many turn to say, 'Why are you following me?' As if it should make any difference to them if I were to leap over this cliff right behind them. No, Mr. Brown, man always wants to pause a bit before spitting in life's eye, before jumping, before becoming both the spitter and the spittle."

Brown rested his head in his hands and, without looking up, said, "I guess you win." Then his chin began to tremble again. "I just want you to know that I can see right through you people," he said. "You don't give a darn if I kill myself or not as long as I don't do it here. I can lose my aunt's life savings in your Casino, oh, sure. But [can't jump off your gay, carefree little cliff." He rubbed his eyes. "Well, I say the hell with you all."

The old man moved to put his hand on the young man's shoulder, then thought better of it. He leaned forward. "Mr. Brown, we must all set a boundary on our compassion or we would turn our faces to the wall and not get out of bed in the morning. San Sebastiano's humble frontiers are the limits of mine. You must forgive me if I find that quite enough. Before, when I told you something of our history, I hoped to prepare you to understand why we cannot allow you and the others to carry out your little plans. For what would be the result? A suicide rate, a per capita statistic, so misleading and grotesque that it would reflect on the whole tenor of life in light-

hearted, hurdy-gurdy San Sebastiano.

“Besides, aren’t you being a bit severe? The railway ticket and the money will take you to Paris where your Embassy will arrange modest transportation home. Confess your little indiscretion. Give Aunt Bella the pleasure of forgiving her favorite nephew.”

“And what about my father,” said Brown. “Did I tell you he’s got fists like hams? Like hams!” Brown stared down at his shoes and shook his head back and forth.

After watching him for a few moments, the old man looked down at his own shoes and said in a quiet voice, “You know, Mr. Brown, soon I will be retiring and I have often thought these last few years of all the people I have taken to the train. What are they doing? How ‘re they getting on? How many children do they have? Do they, I wonder, ever remember the day Hector Jouviet --that is to say, myself-- put them on the train? I am not being sentimental. I tell you this because I want to describe for you a silly daydream of mine, solely because it might amuse you.

“In my daydream it is the day of my retirement I enter my favorite cafe. Georges, the owner, stands behind the bar reading a newspaper. ‘Good day, Monsieur Jouviet,’ he says. ‘Would you step out back with me for a moment?’

“Puzzled, I follow him out to the back where they have the large room they rent out for banquets. Everything is dark. Suddenly the lights blaze on. I am taken aback. I am surprised. The room is filled with half-remembered faces --stockbrokers, bank tellers, church wardens, trustees of estates of widows and orphans. Across the front wall is a large banner: The Friends of Hector Jouviet. First Annual Convention.

“Amid applause and well wishes I take my place at the head table beside those special people, whoever they might be, who had gone on from their visit to San Sebastiano to positions of eminence in their own countries --a statesman, a bishop, a magnate or two, and —who knows, Mr. Brown?— perhaps even a famous dentist.

“We eat and at the end of the meal I am presented with a gold cigarette lighter. I could show you the very one in a shop window not far from where I live. They will have it inscribed: “To our friend Hector Jouviet from The Friends of Hector Jouviet.” Then in six different languages they will sing For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow and end by pounding on the tables.

“I stand up. I am deeply moved. I always feel this particular moment most vividly and how deeply I am moved. Then I speak. In my mind’s eye I see all this very clearly. But though my

mouth is moving I cannot hear what I am saying. I only feel my own astonishment at the wisdom and simplicity of my words. They are saying everything I had wanted to say to each person in the room on his particular day. But I cannot hear the words. I can only see their faces smiling and nodding.”

The old man stopped abruptly and cleared his throat. “But of course all this nonsense takes place only in my imagination. The people I have taken to the train do not know each other. Oh, one or two might meet by chance. Perhaps in his cups, while talking of youthful indiscretions, one might mention Hector Jouvét. ‘What?’ the other might say, ‘you knew Jouvét, too?’ And they might talk of afternoons at the cliff side in San Sebastiano or even of forming a club. But it would come to nothing because they were only one or two.

“How regrettable, Mr. Brown, because I have all their names and they wouldn’t be so hard to locate —except, you understand, it would be out of place for me to take the initiative. As a matter of fact, I carry the list with me should the same idea occur to someone or other as I take him to the train. You might be interested in seeing the list, Mr. Brown. I think I have it here somewhere.”

As the old man fumbled through his pockets, he laughed nervously and said, “I don’t imagine, Mr. Brown, that you would care to be the first president of The Friends of Hector Jouvét?”

Brown looked up from his shoes. “Did I tell you my father was heavyweight champion of the Canadian Army? Did I tell you what they called him because of those big fists of his?” said the young man with a shudder. “They called him The Buster.”

The old man looked puzzled. “Buster Brown. Buster Brown,” he said thoughtfully. “But of course, of course, it was Buster Brown, not Breaker Baker. How stupid of me and how delightful! Buster Brown was the name of the soldier who gave the Baron his eye patch.”

“You mean the one who lost all those millions was my father? The one with the lucky lower-left bicuspid?” said Brown with an astonished and broadening grin.

The old man nodded. “How appropriate he should have turned to dentistry. Your father was the man who almost broke the bank at San Sebastiano. A popular song was written about him at the time. As we walk to the station I will teach it to you, if you like.”

Brown jumped to his feet. “Boy, I’ll say I would,” he said. “Even just enough to hum the

tune every once in a while.”

“I’m sure that would be very useful, Mr. Brown,” smiled the old man. “Ah, it is a great day for the Eighth Bureau. First the father and now the son. And after that who knows, eh, Mr. Brown? A fine looking young man like yourself Well, come along or we will miss our train.”

He took Brown by the elbow and they started down the path. “Mr. Brown,” said the old man as they went, “do you recall my mentioning The Friends of Hector Jouvet? It occurs to me that if such a club were ever formed it might offer your father an honorary membership. I don’t imagine he’s being invited to many regimental reunions.”