

Excerpt  
from  
*The Eye of Phoebus*



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Summary: Sir Thomas Malory and Miss Alice Ellsworth strive against the  
Baron von Bernbaden to capture *The Eye of Phoebus*, a source of enormous power.

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My grateful thanks to Stephen  
*for his invaluable services as both editor and husband!*

To the memory of Rafael Sabatini  
*whose books are among my earliest and most enduring friends*



*Eye of Phoebus, burning bright,  
Rend the curtain of the night.  
Eye of Phoebus, seeing all,  
Reveal the secrets, great and small.*

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with Music and Illustrations by the Author

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# *The Eye of Phoebus*



## Prologue — A Wedge of Lemon



his man — let us call him Thomas Malory, for such is his name — but hardly glanced up from his book before returning to the engaging volume. That a pistol, the long barrel of which a gloved hand kept leveled at his head, had impressed itself upon this most intrepid reader remained in doubt to the one who wielded it. The latter cocked the hammer. Sir Thomas moistened a finger and turned the page. He brushed a lock of brown hair from the corner of his eye whilst continuing to read.

His tall, slim frame reclined upon a rude and carelessly carpentered wooden bench, shoulders propped against an ancient stone wall. Both feet knew cavalier boots of supple Arotyne leather, though these were well-worn (if in good repair) and in need of a brush to dispel the dust of the road. The heel of the one, his left, trailed upon the ground at the end of a long outstretched leg; his right leg he bent, heel to thigh, upon the old bench, with the book perched upon the knee of his fawn-colored breeches.

With his travel-stained cloak gathered behind his head as a serviceable pillow, his doublet partially unclasped, and his general resemblance to an uncoiled length of rope, he gave the impression that he owned the place.

He did not.

“You don’t care that I’m about to blow out your brains?” asked the man with the pistol, his voice poised between a somewhat grudging awe and ill-suppressed irritation.

“Who hath said I do not...?” Sir Thomas looked at his interlocutor, more engaged by the question than the gun.

“You continue to read!”

“’Tis a diverting book,” said the reader, bored with this conversation and returning now to his preferred pastime.

“You’re unlikely to finish it.”

“Then, I’d best read more swiftly — and without such prattling interruption.”

The man with the pistol leaned forward, peering at the top of a page, but failed of his effort to read the text. He rocked back on his heels, sliding his brimless farrier’s cap from his pate and scratching at his short-cropped hair — ever mindful to keep an eye, and the barrel of the pistol, trained upon Sir Thomas.

He wore no cloak himself, but a somewhat stained and weathered greatcoat of good woolen weave. Restoring the leathern cap, he fetched a generous kerchief from the waist pocket of his coat and blew his nose like a posthorn, before sidling up a bit and craning his neck to have another go at the book, this time from the side.

After a few seconds of this, Malory, without taking his eyes from the text, posed a polite question.

“Didst wish t’ borrow it?” wondered he.

“The book?”

“What else?” with an obvious shrug.

“Would you mind?”

“Whether I do or do not, yours is the hand that holds the pistol.”

The fellow, frowning, took the book, careful to keep the pistol on the lender. He peered at the text, squinting, even turning it over once or twice, but to all appearances failing of his efforts to make heads-or-tails of it.

“What language is this...?” he muttered.

“Turbanian,” replied Sir Thomas, holding out his hand for the book.

“And you can read it?!”

“Beseems.”

He watched Malory in silence for perhaps a minute before asking, “What’s it about?”

“... Pardon?”

“The book — what’s it about?”

“A flight from prison i’ faith!”

The man with the pistol immediately stiffened.

Sir Thomas glanced at him after a moment’s awkward silence. “Oh, you needn’t worry, gossip,” said he with the shadow of a laugh, “no doubt ’tis a fiction.”

He resumed reading.

The fellow with the pistol eyed him suspiciously as yet, but finding Sir Thomas absorbed once more in his reading, his curiosity remained piqued.

“How is it done?”

“... Hmmm...?” the half-conscious response.

“The escape. How is it done?”

“By the beard but you’re an inquisitive one! Well let us see...,” he glanced thoughtfully at the low vault ceiling as though collecting his thoughts. The book he now cradled with the fingers of his left hand, tapping the spine absent-mindedly against his thigh.

“Aye, indeed..., to begin with...,” but he lost his grasp of the book, which fell clattering to the floor. He leaned forward to retrieve it, just as the other man stooped to do likewise.

The man with the pistol never even touched it.

Instead, he jerked his head back with a cry as he felt a stinging liquid in his eyes. That sensation lasted only but a moment, however, before utter blackness descended — a faraway voice apologizing, “’Tis passing grieved I am, but needs must, good my fellow....” — and he knew no more.





The room, though tolerably large, seemed small; this a result, doubtless, of the scarcity of furnishings and the presence of a man of quite prodigious girth, if unremarkable height, who now occupied — or rather say, engrossed — an otherwise capacious armchair. A thick carpet rug from an oriental loom kept the seeping cold of the stone floor somewhat at bay, whilst a pair of imposing and priceless medieval tapestries — the one a scenario of the hunt, the other a seeming history of the Tower of Babel — performed a similar service for the walls (these adjoining that of the entrance). The portal wall itself remained all but innocent of decoration and feature, saving the heavy door of black oak and ironmongery — now ajar. A single wood-crafted table-desk of solid-built, if inelegant, workmanship, squatting in vicinity astern of the armchair, completed the chamber's spare *accoutrements*.

“Where is that tomfool...,” growled the fat man, goading some angry embers with the ferrule of his ubiquitous cane. Five sausage-like digits smothered the sculpted platinum bear's head crowning the ash wood staff. The embers had spilled across the broad porch of a stone-wrought fireplace ablaze with three or four heavy pine logs. He stabbed the embers viciously, sending eruptions of sparks into the air, one of which flared and fell upon the short brindle coat of a great grey mastiff, who commenced yelping, leaping, and gnawing at his own hide.

“Shut that brute up!”

The servant who waited upon him had begun emitting some ineffectual soothing sounds and now hazarded to pat and stroke the singed dog, earning a few snarls and snaps for his efforts. The canine eventually managed to dislodge the offending ember through his manic gambols and found now a quiet corner — safely removed from the blaze — to nurse his wound.

“That idiot should have by now returned.... Does he think I don’t know how long a man to kill it takes?!”

“Your Lordship, I’m certain...,” the manservant began, but instantaneously fell silent, his eyes cast to the ground, at a terrible glance from his master.

“The effort of an instant — Mr. Malory to dispatch and to give account return....” The fat man repaired to his unhappy reverie.



Nature had amused herself, it seems, in bestowing the name “Kleinefeld” upon this vast specimen of humankind. Georg Kleinefeld, Baron von Bernbaden, came into the first two names at birth. The honorific came somewhat later, with the acquisition of wealth and property, and the influence they award. A threat here, a bribe there, and soon he no longer need cringe beneath the common address, “Herr Kleinefeld”, now owning the respectful greeting of “Your Lordship”, the title “Baron”, and coat of arms and lineage to prove it.

A successor — Sigismund — famously remarked, “I am King of the Romans and above grammar,” when taxed on some Latin misuse, but His Eminence the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV proved not above the misuse of other men’s *lands*, taking them and creating titles of nobility for his vassals to consolidate his power. Apparently, Emperor Charles himself had raised the House of Kleinefeld to the nobility, the barony dating even from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century — though Herr Kleinefeld senior would have scoffed at the notion. No one scoffed at the boot maker’s son, to be sure. No one called him “Georg” or “Herr Kleinefeld.”

No one, save Thomas Malory.

The title proved insufficient. Baron von Bernbaden's insatiable appetite for power, his unquenchable thirst for the fear and respect of others had moved his lips to speak any lie, and his be-daggered hands to find the back of any who impeded his way. He had taken his doting mother's deadly advice, "Follow your heart," and followed it to the ruination of countless lives and of his own immortal soul.

Yet Thomas Malory remained, a gadfly who frustrated every effort at swatting.

That Malory was true nobility — in mien and manner, bearing and blood — a cousin some generations removed of that eponymous 15<sup>th</sup> century knight of Newbold Revel, rankled Georg Kleinfeld of 36 Rübestrasse beyond every measure. Now would he quench the light of those laughing eyes; that impudent mouth would jest no more.

"Where — by a thousand devils! — that imbecile is?!" the Baron bellowed, heaving himself to his feet. Clad in a burgundy dressing gown trimmed in the fur of a silver fox, this simple gesture had the effect of a pavilion-raising, such was the corpulence of His Lordship.

"Fetch him here...! No, wait! I'll see to this myself.... Attend me!"

The manservant lowered his head until his master had passed — the great mastiff trotting beside him — then fell into step at a respectful and prudent distance to the rear.

Outside the chamber, a sentinel in the undistinguished livery of loden green greatcoat, emblazoned merely with a palm-sized escutcheon embroidered upon the left breast, snapped to attention. He bore a holstered pistol opposite a dueling sword which he drew from the scabbard belted at his waist in a swiftly fluid motion of salute. The Baron von Bernbaden nodded curtly in passing and the sentinel restored the blade and joined the mirthless procession.

They moved through a short corridor, making a turn to the left, walked past a low archway from which issued yet another passageway, and took several further steps before a second sturdy door terminated their progress. The sentry then fitted key to lock, but found to his surprise and mis-giving the door already unsecured. Without commenting on this, he held it open for His Lordship.

Within, an otherwise bare chamber presently revealed a shirtsleeves-clad gentleman engaged in, to all appearances, a peaceful slumber. See, he reclined upon the sole article of furniture within the room, a rough-hewn wooden bench, and his back rested against the wall, head cushioned with a sort of makeshift pillow — a folded greatcoat, perhaps. A small book rested upon his lap. Really, he seemed most profoundly at peace.

His comrade could only regard with horror this severe infraction of duty, and moved to awaken the warder with dispatch, nor even awaiting a behest from His Lordship — momentarily struck dumb by the effrontery before him.

Herr von Bernbaden shook slightly, as an agitated jelly or, belike, an awakened volcano. With an uncommon and Olympian effort at self-mastery, he forestalled an explosion and merely growled, “What then is the meaning of this...? Where is Malory?”

The guard, staggering to his feet, his poor wits perfectly dazed with sleep got by a finger’s touch to a certain nerve, could but glance about the cell in confusion and dismay.

“What is that upon the bench?” enquired the Baron.

He took a step, only to find his slippered foot had trod upon a moist and displeasingly-squishy object. Lifting then his heel, a wedge of lemon fell with a little plop onto the flagstone. Meanwhile, the corridor sentinel retrieved the book, proffering the volume to von Bernbaden, whose eye rested upon the crushed lemon wedge, his lip curled in disgust. The valet hastened to remove the disagreeable rind.

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“He’s gone...,” whispered the as-yet befuddled guard. He put a hand to the key ring at his belt, but found all as it should be. “He must have used the keys and returned them...,” he said to himself.

His Lordship ignored this inane prattling, for he leafed through the pages of the volume he’d been handed.

“Devil take you! What is *this*?! Were my instructions unclear? The prisoner was to have nothing, *nothing*, to read!”

“It’s an old typing manual — in Turbanian,” the sentry feebly protested. Himself, he’d kept watch both earlier that day and during the three days preceding, and had wearied of the prisoner’s requests for reading material. “It’s just an old typing manual — in Turbanian...!” he lamely repeated. “Who speaks Turbanian...?”

“He told me it was about an escape from prison...,” the bewildered and still-dazed guard unwisely interjected.

“How could I possibly conceive he reads Turbanian?” pleaded the sentry. “Who even knows where Turbania is, by the Blessed Saint Adrian?!”

“Near Arabia, I shouldn’t wonder.... Or the Orient..., maybe...,” offered his comrade helpfully. “Where turbans are from I would think...”

“Aye..., there’s good sense to that...,” acknowledged the sentry, stroking his chin.

The volcano now erupted. “Blithering, brainless, grass-grazing morons!!!” screamed the empurpled Baron. “Addlepated, empty-bonneted, ass-imbeciles!!!”

*Prologue — A Wedge of Lemon*

A black torrent of colorful and obscene — if illogical — invective smote the ears of these pitiable men, whilst the heavy stick belabored their backs. They could only cringe and cover their heads as best they might while the tempest rained upon them. When the fury had finally spent itself His Lordship's flushed face streamed with perspiration, his diligently-dressed hair hung in lank dishevelment, and his chest heaved as it drew great draughts of air. Sentinel and sentry lay as veritable ruins upon the flagstones, bleeding and blackened with bruises.

“How... could you let... him escape...?!” von Bernbaden croaked between gasps.

After some few seconds, the guard managed to groan, “Something... in my eye.... It burned....”

The valet remembered the rind in his hand. He held it towards the Baron.

“... Sir Thomas was served tea this afternoon, if Your Lordship recalls.”

The Baron von Bernbaden glanced at the remnants of the lemon wedge and departed the prison cell in disgust.

“Shut the door,” he called after his manservant.

“Oh..., and leave the dog.”

