

THE HURLYBURLY'S HUSBAND

A NOVEL BY
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Translated from the French by Alison Anderson

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I.

On Saturday, 20 January 1663, at eleven o'clock in the evening, two young men burst out of the Palais-Royal where Monsieur, the King's brother, was hosting a great ball. Six others immediately followed. They began to heap insults upon one another, in a blaze of feathers and lace.

'Son of a priest!'

'Mewling vassal!'

A tall fellow in a flamboyant diamond-encrusted outfit, his lips stretched over his gums, shoved a short potbellied man in a black wig, who seemed to be standing on stilts so very high were his heels. In his many rings and bracelets, he staggered on his shoes and choked, 'Vassal? La Frette, how dare you compare me to a slave – me, the Prince of Chalais?'

'Prince of invert, you mean – sodomite! Like Monsieur,

you prefer a young squire to a chatty wench. And I have an aversion to that kind of vice. Let them indulge such things in Naples!’

‘Oh!’

During this altercation, the door to the well-lit ball-room, filled with music, fumes and the movements of the dancers, closed again, and the eight fine fellows found themselves in the icy darkness of the street.

A hunchback crouching against a column, holding a pole with a large lantern on the end of it, stood up, went over to them and called out, ‘A lantern-bearer to accompany you to your homes, Messieurs?’

He was limping and swaying, having one leg shorter than the other. His hair lay flat against his skull, tied at the nape of his neck like a well rope, and he circled around them, casting the light of his lantern.

Little Chalais slapped La Frette; his shaken head exuded a cloud of periwig powder. Humiliated, the tall fellow snapped his mouth shut over his teeth, which he had adorned in the Dutch style, plugging the cavities in his incisors and canines with butter. He had been stretching his mouth wide over his lips to keep his dairy plaster fresh and prevent it from melting but now, in his rage, he pursed his lips, puffing his cheeks out. He was burning with resentment. When he opened his mouth again, his teeth were oozing. ‘Did you see, Saint-Aignan? He slap—’

‘Did you smack my brother, vassal?’

A cruel-looking chevalier of nineteen years of age, with a hat decorated with very long feathers, and one eye ravaged by smallpox, planted himself before Chalais. The lantern-bearer scurried to offer his itinerant lighting services to them both, explaining, 'At night, gentlemen, there are rascals, purse-snatchers and rascalions who lie in wait for passers-by out late and hurrying to their homes . . .'

Divided into two groups, the eight bewigged youths cursed, scowled at each other and tore at the silks and ribbons of each other's garments. The lantern-bearer raised his luminous bladder. One of the youths, who had just been referred to as 'Flamarens, you filthy whore', was pale of face. With a paintbrush he had traced false lines of blue, the colour of nobility and purity of blood. The lantern-bearer lowered his beam onto the shining shoes and cobblestones. The oil of his lamp was smoking.

'Five *sols* to take you thither! What are five *sols* to gentlemen who wear the red heels of aristocrats, like your good selves!'

Chalais's friend Noirmoutier unsheathed a dagger; it flashed treacherously and left a wound upon a surprised face. The wounded gent's hand reached for his sword: he would stick Noirmoutier like a pig. The one Noirmoutier called d'Antin – 'D'Antin, don't meddle!' – intervened all the same in the fast-degenerating quarrel: 'Zounds, be reasonable!'

The lantern-bearer concurred wholeheartedly: 'Aye, be

reasonable . . . The darkest, most deserted forest in the realm is a place of safety compared to Paris . . .’

La Frette spat the rancid butter from his rotten stumps into Chalais’s face.

‘Fat harlot of a tripemonger, I will see you on the field of honour, tomorrow morning!’

D’Antin looked dumbfounded. ‘The field? Are you mad? The edicts—’

But the offended party, tall La Frette, standing next to Saint-Aignan, ordered, ‘Arnelieu, Amilly, we’re going now.’

Four of them left in the direction of the lighted windows of the Tuileries, and the other four headed the opposite way. As for the lantern-bearer, he shuffled and swayed along Rue Saint-Honoré. The light of his bladder cast a hunchbacked dancing shadow onto the walls, whilst he memorised the names: ‘La Frette, Saint-Aignan, Amilly, Arnelieu . . . and Chalais, Flamarens, d’Antin, Noirmou . . .’