

# ***A Question of Patronage***

## ***A Saint-Germain Story***

### **Chelsea Quinn Yarbro**

Outside it was dank and clammy; inside it was stuffy and over-warm. The clerks in the merchants' emporium office yawned as the afternoon ran quickly down to the early falling November night.

"Do you lock the door, John Henry," said the oldest of the clerks to the youngest, exercising his privilege. "No one will come at this hour."

John Henry Brodribb got off his stool and bowed to the senior clerk with a flourish that amused and annoyed the other clerks; John Henry was known for his lavish, theatrical manner. He pitched his voice to carry. "Whatever you desire, Mr Tubbs, it is my honour to perform for you." His accent was a curious mix of London public school flavoured with a broadness that might be Devon or Cornwall. He was long-headed and lanky with the last remnants of youth; he was three months shy of his eighteenth birthday.

Before he could reach the door, it opened suddenly and a man in a black, hooded cloak stepped into the office, looking like a visitor from another age; a monk from the Middle Ages, perhaps, or an apparition of a Plantagenet in disfavour with his cousins. "Good afternoon. Is Mr Lamkin available?" he asked in a pleasant, foreign voice, taking John Henry's startled surprise in his stride. There was a suggestion of a glint in dark eyes within the shadow of the hood.

"Is he expecting you?" asked John Henry, recovering himself adroitly, and doing his best to match the style of the man.

"Yes, but not necessarily at this time," said the stranger. "I have only just arrived in London, you see." He threw back his hood, revealing an attractive, irregular countenance, fine-browed and mobile if unfashionably clean-shaven; his hair was dark and waved enough to make up for his lack of mutton-chop whiskers or moustache. Although he was somewhat less than average height, he had a presence that was commanding no matter how amiable his demeanour; it originated in his dark, compelling eyes.

"Mr Lamkin has left for the day," said John Henry, glancing towards the door of the office of the man who handled the firm's overseas business. "He will not be back until Thursday next. He is bound for Southampton, to inspect the arrival of a cargo of muslin."

"From Egypt or America?" asked the foreigner with enough curiosity to require an answer.

"From Amer—" John Henry began only to be interrupted.

Mr Tubbs, the senior clerk, intervened, shoving himself off his stool and hastening towards the newcomer, prepared to take charge of the unknown gentleman. "I am Parvis Tubbs, the senior clerk; good afternoon. May I, possibly, assist you, Mr...?" He waited for the stranger to give his name.

"Ragoczy," he answered. "Count Ferenc Ragoczy, of Sain—"

John Henry cut him short with enthusiasm. "Ragoczy! Of almost everywhere." His eyes lit and he flung out one hand. "I've been copying your accounts, sir, and let me say you are by far the most

travelled gentleman of all those buying from us abroad. You have holdings in Bavaria, in Saint Petersburg, in Christiania, in Holland, in Italy, in Prague, in—"

Mr Tubbs stopped this catalogue. "I am certain Mr Ragoczy does not wish his affairs bruited about, John Henry."

The youngest clerk lowered his eyes and stifled himself. "No, Mr Tubbs," he said.

Ragoczy took pity on him. "It is good to know that at least one of your staff has my interests in hand." His smile was quick and one-sided, and held John Henry's attention as Ragoczy turned towards him, encouraging him. "Where else do I have property: can you tell me?"

Now John Henry faltered, upset by Mr Tubbs's covert glare. "In... in Hungary." He steadied himself and went on. "There are two addresses in Hungary, now I think of it; one in Buda and one in a remote area of the eastern sector. In the Carpathians. That place *is* in Hungary, isn't it?"

"Technically, yes, at present it is," he replied, and glanced up as the office clock struck the half hour. "Although it is closer to Bucharest than to Buda-Pest. Saint-Germain is on the current border of Hungary and Romania, but that has not always been the case. It is a very ancient estate." Ragoczy fell silent.

After an awkward pause, Mr Tubbs said, "Is that all you can tell Mr Ragoczy, John Henry? You are the one who has his ledger to copy. Show him you are not a laggard."

Stung by this reprimand, John Henry squared his angular shoulders

and continued. "You have holdings, Count, in Moscow, in Egypt, in Crete, in Persia, in Morocco, in Spain, in Poland, in Armenia, in Canada, and in South America: Peru, as I recall."

"Yes, and in Mexico, as well." He nodded his approval.

"You also have transferred goods to China and India, according to our records, during the last thirty years. I have not seen any entries before that time. The ledger begins thirty-one years ago." This last was John Henry's most determined bid to show his grasp of what he had recorded.

"You keep excellent records," Ragoczy said.

"It is necessary for merchants to do that, or they will not last long in business," said Mr Tubbs officiously.

They had the attention of the other four clerks now, and John Henry made the most of it. "If you would like to inspect the account books, Count, it would be my pleasure to show them to you."

Mr Tubbs looked askance. "John Henry!" he admonished the youngest clerk. "That is for Mr Lamkin to do."

"Well, but he is away, isn't he?" countered John Henry with a show of deference. "I have the records on my desk. I've been copying them for Mr Lamkin, at his request, of course. So long as Count Ragoczy is here, it would be practical to show him what our records show instead of requiring him to return when Mr Lamkin gets back."

"It is a late hour; Mr Ragoczy would have to come back in the morning, in any case, or at another, more suitable time." Mr Tubbs regarded the youngest clerk in consternation, then turned on Ragoczy with an obsequious gesture. "It is unfortunate that you

came at this hour. We do not wish to offend, but we will be closing business for the day shortly."

John Henry's expression brightened. "I don't mind staying late if that will make matters easier for you, Count." He made a point of emphasizing Ragoczy's title, as much for his own satisfaction as for the discomfort it gave Mr Tubbs. "If that would be convenient?"

"A very generous offer, I'm sure, John Henry," said Mr Tubbs, his jowls becoming mottled with colour and his manner more stiff and overbearing. "But such a man as Mr Ragoczy must have other claims upon his time. He will inform us of when he wishes to review the accounts."

Ragoczy favoured the two clerks with an affable look. "I have no plans for this evening until much later. I am bidden to... dine at ten."

"Then it's settled," said John Henry before Mr Tubbs could speak. He indicated his desk. "Yours is the oldest of the account books there." His gaze was speculative. "Your family must have a long tradition of enterprise."

"Um," said Ragoczy, a suggestion of amusement in his fathomless eyes.

Mr Tubbs, aware that he had been outmanoeuvred by his most junior clerk, began to dither. "It is not acceptable, John Henry. You have not worked here long enough to be entitled to lock the door." He cringed as he looked towards Ragoczy. "I am afraid that we will have to arrange another time, Mr Ragoczy."

Before John Henry could voice his objection, Ragoczy said smoothly, "You would not be adverse to entrusting a key to me,

would you? I have done business with this firm for longer than you have been employed here. Surely that makes me trustworthy, Mr Tubbs. I will return it tomorrow, if that is satisfactory to you?" He said it politely enough, but it was apparent he would not be refused. "I appreciate your concern and precaution, of course."

This was more opposition than Mr Tubbs was prepared to fight. He ducked his head. "It would be most acceptable. I will provide you with a key at once, Mr Ragoczy," he said, and moved away, casting a single, angry look back towards John Henry and the black-cloaked stranger.

John Henry paid no notice of his superior's disapproval; he motioned to Ragoczy to come with him, and hastened back to his desk, his face radiant with anticipation.

"I don't understand it," said John Henry, shaking his head at what he read in the old ledger. "There should be another two hundred pounds in this transfer. How can it have been overlooked? They can't have made such an error in arithmetic, can they?" The office was quite dark now, and the rumble in the streets had died to an irregular echo of hooves and wheels; the oil lamp on John Henry's desk and the lume of the dying fire in the hearth provided the only light. It was no longer hot in the office, but it remained stuffy in spite of the chill.

"They did not," said Ragoczy with a sigh of annoyance. He had shed his cloak and was revealed in a black woollen jacket cut in the latest French fashion. His shirt was silken broadcloth and immaculately white. He wore his cravat in the Russian mode: it was

silk, patterned in red and black. His trousers were also of black wool, expertly tailored so that the fullness never became baggy. Indeed, the only note that John Henry could find in the foreigner's ensemble to criticize was the thickness of the soles of Ragooczy's neat black boots.

John Henry's eyes widened. "But, Count, that would mean... that someone has... has..."

"Been stealing," Ragooczy supplied gently; he tapped the open ledger with the end of his pencil. "Yes, it would seem so."

"But... *why?*"

"For gain, I would suppose," said Ragooczy, making a worn attempt at a philosophical smile. "That is the usual reason people steal; for gain of one sort or another."

"Gain," repeated John Henry, as if the notion was unfamiliar to him. "In this firm?"

"Probably there are two of them: one here and one outside England." He hefted the old ledger. "It will take time to find out who has done it, and for how long." He put the ledger down and pulled a watch from his waistcoat pocket. "Look at the hour."

John Henry glanced up at the clock over the desks. "It is coming nine," he said, astonished that so much time should have passed. "I ought not to have kept you so very late, Count."

"I supposed *I* had kept *you*." Ragooczy held out his hand to John Henry. "I have to thank you for giving me so much of your time, Mr Brodribb. I am grateful to you for the attention you have shown me."

"It is my pleasure," said John Henry, flushing as they shook hands.

Ragoczy's expression remained friendly, but he said, "I doubt it." And in response to John Henry's startled look, went on. "No doubt a young man like you has things he would rather do of an evening than assist in discovering a pattern of errors in a ledger."

"Most evenings, I study," said John Henry, for once not very forthcoming.

"Ah," said Ragoczy. "Then perhaps you will let me impose upon you a bit more. If you would be willing to continue this examination for another evening, I would be willing to pay for your time. Provided you do not feel you are compromised by helping me."

"Why would I feel that?" asked John Henry. "They are the ones who are taking from you. You are entitled to recover all that has been pilfered. I would be a poor employee indeed if I countenanced wrong-doing by my employer."

"Quite so. And all the more reason for you to accept money for your aid. I would have required much more time if you had not been willing to help me." Ragoczy looked pleased.

"Oh, that is hardly necessary." John Henry directed his gaze towards the dying fire. "Mr Tubbs allowed me to stay because I am the most junior of the clerks. He did not think I could uncover anything of significance."

"You assume he knows there is something to uncover," said Ragoczy, his expression remaining kindly but with a keenness in his eyes that was unnerving to John Henry.

"I doubt he would have let me remain if he feared you would learn... what you have learned." He lifted his hands. "And you



could have managed without me. I have done very little to earn—"

"Nevertheless, you will permit me to compensate you for the time you have lost." Beneath the elegant manner there was something unyielding; John Henry sensed it and nodded.

"Thank you, Count," he said. "I will stay tomorrow night, if that is suitable."

"Eminently," said Ragozy, and reached out for his cloak even while he slipped his hand into one of his inner jacket pockets. He drew out a five pound note and handed the flimsy to John Henry, who stared at it, for it represented more than a month's wages. "For your service. At this hour, I should take a cab home if I were you, Mr Brodribb."

"But five pounds..." John Henry could not find the words to go on.

"Considering the magnitude of the theft you have helped me to uncover this evening, it is a very poor commission. Had I retained someone to perform this task, he should have cost me much more. And who knows what success we would have? You are familiar with the ledger entries, which another might not be." Ragozy's swift smile lit his face again. "And he would have been much less entertaining."

John Henry looked up from the money in his hand and stared at Ragozy. "That's very kind, Count."

"Do you think so." Ragozy slipped his cloak on with a style John Henry swore to himself he would one day master.

"Tomorrow night, then," said John Henry as he watched Ragozy go to the door while he folded up his five pound note to a size small

enough to slip into his waistcoat pocket.

"You had better come with me," said Ragozy in amusement. "I have the key."

"Oh. Yes." Hurriedly John Henry grabbed his greatcoat, thinking it was sadly shabby next to Ragozy's splendid cloak. He extinguished the lamp, stirred the embers of the dying fire with the poker, and hurried out of the door and watched while the count set the locks.

"Please inform Mr Tubbs that I will keep the key another evening," he said, then reconsidered. "No. That will not do." He nodded decisively once. "I will send a note around in the afternoon, informing him that I will need the key one night longer. I will request you remain to assist me again. He will not have time to ask me to change plans."

"Do you think he would?" John Henry asked, shocked at the implication of Ragozy's instructions.

"I think it is possible," said Ragozy as he raised his hood. "Come. At the next corner we should find cabs about, no matter how late it is."

For an instant the five pound note in this waistcoat pocket seemed to emit a brilliant light; John Henry realized that such an extravagance would truly be a sensible, prudent act when he had so much money. "Right you are, Count," he said, and tagged after the black-cloaked foreigner.

"This is really most inconsiderate," complained Mr Tubbs as he lingered at the door the following evening, glaring balefully at the

thickening Thames fog. "Imagine! Putting you out this way twice! It is outside of enough, and so I will tell Mr Lamkin when he returns. What right does he think he has, making these demands?" He modified his indignation. "Well, foreigners never do know what is proper behaviour."

John Henry professed surprise that Ragoczy had not yet arrived, though he had anticipated the excitement when the count's note, written in a fine, small, sloping hand on cream-laid stationery, had been delivered a few minutes after four by an austere man of middle years and steadfast demeanour.

Mr Tubbs,

I find I cannot get away for another hour at least. Would you be kind enough to ask Mr Brodribb to wait for me? I realize this is an inconvenience for you and for him, and I regret the necessity of making this request of you. Believe me all contrition; the press of circumstances are such that my time will not be my own for a while.

Accept my thanks and the enclosed for any inconvenience I may have caused you.

Ferenc Ragoczy

Count Saint-Germain

(his seal, the eclipse)

Three shillings had accompanied the note; Mr Tubbs pocketed them with alacrity.

"I'll use the time to study," said John Henry. "It's no matter to me if I do it here or elsewhere."

"That's generous of you," said Mr Tubbs. "You are aware, are you not, that if Ragozy fails to arrive, you will have to spend the night here? I cannot yet entrust a key to you, or I would do it." This last was patently false and both of them knew it.

"I will manage," said John Henry, going to draw the shades. "Hurry on, Mr Tubbs. You'll miss your tea."

Reluctantly Mr Tubbs backed into the street, his coat collar raised and his hat set low against the mizzle. After he pulled the door to behind him, he made a point of testing the lock when he had set it.

John Henry listened to Mr Tubbs's footsteps fade into the rest of the noise from the street. He finished the last of a cold, bitter cup of tea that stood on his desk, and then, with caution, he removed a small book from the locked lower drawer of his desk. He could not help grinning at the well-thumbed pages: *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare*.

He moved the chairs and made himself a small rehearsal area in the middle of the room, then set about his on-going memorization of Romeo.

Then plainly know my heart's dear love is set

On the fair daughter of rich Capulet:

As mine on hers, so hers is set on mine;

And all combined, save what thou must combine

By holy marriage: when, and where, and how,  
We met, we woo'd and made exchange of vow  
I'll tell thee as we pass; but this I pray,  
That thou consent to marry us today.

John Henry was so caught up in his performance that the spoken answer rattled him the more for being the words he spoke in his mind.

*"Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here!"* said Ragoczy. He was standing just inside the door, his cloak blending with the shadows. Looking around as if he feared he had a larger audience, John Henry said, "I didn't hear you knock."

Ragoczy held up the key.

"Of course," said John Henry, his manner now crestfallen. "You came in very quietly."

"You were preoccupied," said Ragoczy, indicating the script John Henry held.

"This." He sighed. "You know my secret, then. I suppose you'll tell Mr Tubbs."

"Why should I?" asked Ragoczy, taking off his cloak and revealing formal evening dress, including a glistening red silken sash over his shoulder with the diamond-studded Order of Saint Stephen of Hungary blazing on it. "What has Shakespeare to do with your work here?"

"They would turn me off if they knew that I am studying to be an

actor," said John Henry with a direct candour that was as unexpected to him as it was to Ragozy.

"Why?" Ragozy chose one of the pulled-back chairs, turned it to face John Henry, and sat down. "What reason would they have to turn you off?"

"Acting is not a very... honourable profession," said John Henry quietly.

"It was good enough for Shakespeare, and he ended up a baronet." Ragozy looked slightly amused. "But the Elizabethans were not so squeamish as you modern English are."

"Influence makes a difference," said John Henry, with a sigh. "And a clerk at a merchant's emporium has little to hope for in regard to advancement of that sort."

"They say Shakespeare himself began in the butcher's trade, in Warwickshire." He shook his head once. "He made his own advancement, and you can, as well. What do you want to do, Mr Brodribb?" asked Ragozy as he made himself more comfortable. "You may tell me without fear. I will keep your confidence."

"Finish up tonight, if we can," said John Henry at once.

"No," Ragozy responded. "In regard to your acting: what do you want to do?"

John Henry stared at Ragozy, thinking the answer was obvious.

"Why, be an actor, of course. To perform Shakespeare well for appreciative audiences. To introduce new plays of merit." There was much more to it, but he hesitated to voice these intentions, for that might jinx them.

"Is that all?" asked Ragozy blandly.

"No," John Henry admitted.

"Would you be willing to tell me of your aspirations?" He asked so casually but with a look of acceptance that broke through John Henry's reserve.

"You must not tell anyone," he cautioned Ragozy, his nerve all but deserting him.

"Of course," said Ragozy gravely. He gave John Henry a measuring look. "And how would you set about being an actor? Have you planned?"

As this very subject had taken up most of John Henry's dreams since he came to London, eight years before, he had an answer; over that time he had arrived at a plan that he was sure would succeed if only he could get the funds to put it into operation. "First," he said, launching into his scheme with gusto, "first I would arrange to act with a good amateur company, one where I can gain the basic experience, and meet those who know others in the profession. If I could afford to pay to play a leading role, that would be the best—"

"Pay to play a leading role?" Ragozy interrupted. "Is that usual?"

"It is," said John Henry, thrown off his stride. "It would be better to pay for a whole production, but that is wishing for the stars." He paused and regained his inner momentum. "I would outfit myself and take lessons in fencing and other skills. Once I had some favourable reviews, and a few introductions, I would find a touring company, probably in the north or the Midlands, and sign on to do small parts. That way I would master my craft and have the

advantage of experience in the process. Eventually, I would want to come back to London. And one day, I would like to have my own company." This last came out in a rush.

Ragoczy studied him, then said, "And you are learning Romeo as a starting point."

"Yes. I have learned Brutus and Henry V already, and I am working on Angelo. Eventually I will learn Macbeth. Not that I would be ready to play them yet, at my age." He laughed selfconsciously. "I can make myself up to appear older, but I haven't the training to carry it off, yet. When I try, I do too much and the results are laughable."

"Hence Romeo, since you are a young man," said Ragoczy.

"Oh, yes," said John Henry, his eyes bright. "But I have been studying people, trying to learn their characteristics so that I may use them at some future time." He strode across the floor in the ponderous roll Mr Tubbs affected. "That is but one example."

"Very well done," said Ragoczy. "You have caught his obsequious pomposity."

John Henry lowered his eyes. "Thank you."

Ragoczy continued to watch him in silence. Then he got to his feet. "Well, shall we give our attention to the ledger? The sooner we are finished here, the sooner you will be able to return to Romeo." He went to John Henry's desk and glanced at the page John Henry had set out earlier. "How bad do you think it is?"

Difficult though it was, John Henry set his own ambitions aside and gave his attention to the figures on the page. "I would have to say,



Count, that in the last decade alone, more than two thousand pounds have been... siphoned off your accounts. Between that and what appears to be a consistent pattern of overcharging, you are at a considerable disadvantage." He found himself wondering what it must be like to have more than three thousand pounds to lose.

"And you have no doubt that the pattern you have discovered is deliberate?" Ragoczy's voice was light but firm and John Henry knew that one day he would duplicate it on the stage.

"I wish I *did* have doubts," he admitted. "But today I have gone over all the records of the accounts in the ledger, not just the current ones but those going back some time. What disturbs me is that the same theft has been continuing for thirty years, or so I have come to suspect. I'll show you," he went on, proffering two large, neat pages of numbers. "This is what I was able to find today."

"What a great deal of work you have done on my behalf," said Ragoczy, looking down at the neat entries.

"It is as much for myself as for you," said John Henry. "I want the name of the firm restored, and it cannot be without these records."

"No one has exposed the firm yet," Ragoczy reminded him.

"It is enough that I know," said John Henry, standing straighter.

"And have you determined which of the London partners is the culprit on this end?" Ragoczy glanced swiftly at John Henry, all the while studying the pages.

"I... I cannot be certain, though Mr Lamkin is in the best position to do it," he said. "If the trouble comes from that part of the firm."

"So I think, as well," agreed Ragoczy, then perused the figures John

Henry had supplied him a third time. "How is it," he mused aloud, "that this can have gone on for so long without someone catching the errors? Do you know?"

John Henry had an answer for him. "I've been thinking about that, and I suppose it is because your ledger has not been copied until now. You are not often in London, and when you are, you rarely call here. The entries have been made with great correctness and regularity, and by a senior member of the firm, and so there would be no occasion to doubt what had been done, unless you were suspicious from the first. And since the errors could not be easily seen without extensive comparisons, I would imagine it would be surprising to have them found."

Ragoczy nodded. "But what possessed them to give you the ledger to copy, do you suppose?"

"It is an old ledger. Your family has long done business with us, or so I would suppose." He lowered his eyes. "The account has been here for a very long time. More than thirty years from the entries in the ledger, for there are figures that have been carried forward from earlier entries in what would have to be an older record-book."

"It is a reasonable assumption, Mr Brodribb," said Ragoczy. "And you doubt that I was signing documents thirty years ago?"

"Possibly not," said John Henry. "For you are not much more than forty, judging by your appearance." He wanted to say more, but could not bring himself to go on.

"What is it?" Ragoczy prompted in a neutral voice.

This time John Henry found it difficult to answer. "It is only... that

I observe people closely. It is what I must do if I am to be a good actor." He collected himself and said in a rush, "I have noticed something about your eyes. They are not as other eyes I have seen, except, occasionally, in the very old, who have kept their strength and their wits."

Ragoczy nodded. "I am older than I appear," he said without obvious emotion. "Those of my blood do not show their years."

John Henry made a nervous gesture, his burst of confidence deserting him. "I thought it might be... something like that. There is a world-weariness that... Foreigners are not as easily..." He began to flounder in a number of half-finished words.

"Let us return to these records," suggested Ragoczy. "There is much to finish, and I want it accomplished tonight, if that is possible."

"But you must—" John Henry broke off, indicating Ragoczy's finery.

Ragoczy smiled and shook his head. "I have come from a reception; there is a banquet in progress even now."

John Henry was more startled than ever. "I would have thought you would prefer to attend the banquet than look over figures. It is an honour to be invited to such an event." He managed a quick, quirky smile. "Surely the fare at... so elegant a function is better than what you can purchase from the local publican, and that is likely to be your lot if we work much later."

"It is certainly more elaborate, and my needs, in that regard, are simple," said Ragoczy.

"Oh," said John Henry, hoping to imply he understood what

Ragoczy meant, though he knew he did not.

"How inconsiderate of me. I ask you to forgive my rudeness. Are you hungry?" Ragoczy enquired suddenly. "If you are, I will wait while you purchase something to eat."

"No," said John Henry quickly. "I made a good collation for tea, and it will suit me well enough. I want to continue with your records."

"Let us look at the records from Greece," Ragoczy recommended, opening the page in question. "As you have indicated, the entries there begin in 1828," he added as he ran his finger down the second page of the ledger. "It would appear that the first few years were without incident. All the entries tally, by the look of them. Would you agree?"

"Your family has traded in spices for a long time, haven't they, Count? The indication here is that your account with the spice traders in Arabia is an old one. And the entries from Egypt are of long standing," commented John Henry as he allowed himself to be drawn back into the haven of numbers.

"Yes," said Ragoczy. He inspected the pages closely and in silence for several minutes, and then looked over at John Henry. "I gather that the senior clerk was a Mr Boulton for many years."

"I've heard that," said John Henry, cautiously.

"And Mr Boulton was a relative of sorts of the founder?" asked Ragoczy.

"Yes, that is my understanding," said John Henry, his confidence again increasing. "He died more than twenty years ago; at least that's what I've been told."

"Yes," said Ragozy. "And the uncle of Mr Tubbs took his place. A Mr Harbridge. This looks to be the place where the trouble starts."

"So you think that Mr Tubbs is aware of what is going on?" asked John Henry, doing his best not to be shocked by this suspicion.

"It is possible. He certainly was not eager to have me review these accounts, as you will recall, which, under the circumstances, is significant," said Ragozy. "How long has he been senior clerk?"

"Mr Tubbs? About four years, I think. Four or five." He looked around the office as if he expected to be overheard. "He was given quick advancement through the graces of his uncle, or so two of the clerks say." He cleared his throat, and continued. "He was already the senior when I was taken on here."

"Perhaps the partners expected him to protect their interests, and perhaps his uncle advanced him in order to conceal his thefts," said Ragozy, his face growing sombre. "Whatever the case, I will have to put a stop to this, I fear."

"Certainly you must," said John Henry, astonished that Ragozy could sound so reluctant to protect himself from theft. "It cannot be overlooked or allowed to continue. If they have stolen from you, it may be that there are others who have been so lamentably—"

"Yes," said Ragozy, cutting him short. "No doubt you are right." He looked at the figures one last time. "Would you be willing to make a copy of these two pages for me? I will send my manservant to get them from you tomorrow, if that would suit you. He will also return the key to Mr Tubbs, with my apology for keeping it so long." There was a quality to his words that disturbed John Henry.

"I will do as you like, Count," he said, a chill tracing itself up his spine.

"That is very good of you," said Ragooczy. "All in all, it has been most interesting to meet you, Mr Brodribb."

"Thank you," John Henry said, and suppressed a shudder. Then, before he could master himself, he blurted out, "Are you Doctor Faustus?" Beginning to realize he had actually spoken his apprehension aloud, he stepped back, the enormity of what he had done coming over him; he could think of nothing to say that would be a sufficient apology.

Ragooczy looked faintly amused. "No, Mr Brodribb, I am not. Nor am I *'going to and fro in the earth and walking up in down in it'*, as Mephistopheles is said to do." He looked John Henry over carefully. "You will probably succeed very well at your chosen profession; you have a keen eye and an insightful nature, which should take you far."

"I did not mean... it was..." John Henry faltered.

"Do not fear," said Ragooczy with an ironic chuckle. "In my time I have heard worse."

"How old are you?" John Henry demanded, convinced that he was in too deep to attempt to escape now.

"If I told you," said Ragooczy at his most urbane, "you would not believe me."

"Oh, I would," said John Henry, too caught up to be frightened. He knew the terror would come later, when he was safe in bed and his imagination would have free rein.

"I think not," said Ragozy, closing the subject.

"Are you going to demand anything of me now? Order me to silence or face a terrible fate?"

Ragozy cocked his head. "This is not a performance. You are not playing a role now, Mr Brodribb. I rely on your discretion and good sense to keep your various speculations to yourself."

"Or I will suffer for it?" John Henry knew he had gone too far again, and for a second time could not arrive at an adequate apology.

"No," said Ragozy quietly but beyond any dispute. "You have nothing to fear from me: my word on it." He walked away from John Henry towards the fire, then stopped and turned back to him, asking in a different voice, "Tell me: how much would you need to put your acting plans into motion? Have you arrived at a figure for that in all your calculations?"

This change of subject jolted John Henry, but he did his best to answer. "Well, I would need wigs and beards and paint, and all the rest of that; and swords and costumes, too." He did not need to consult the pages of the notebook he kept in his waistcoat pocket.

"That would cost between forty and fifty pounds, all told. And then there would be the payment for the leading part. That would be another fifty pounds, if I am to do Romeo." He brightened as he said this, but his enthusiasm waned as he listened to himself, thinking that it would be impossible for him to earn enough to achieve his dreams.

Ragozy tapped his small, well-shaped hands together, fingertips to fingertips. "Suppose," he said, "I should settle a portion of what I

recover from this firm upon you for the service you have rendered me? From what you have discovered, the amount might be considerable."

Chagrined, John Henry shook his head. "It would appear that I have been bribed to show things in your favour, at least that could be claimed by the partners to the court. And the other clerks would probably believe the worst of me, because I am the newest of them. The partners might well have a claim against me, one that the courts would uphold."

"A legacy, then," said Ragoczy, undaunted by John Henry's protestation. "You must have a relative somewhere who might leave you an inheritance."

John Henry sighed. "Why should any of my family do that? Not that most of them have ten shillings to spare for anyone. And coming immediately after I have helped you, it would not be a useful ruse, in any case. Someone here would be bound to question how I came by it."

"Listen to me," said Ragoczy firmly. "Suppose that six months from now a distant... shall we say uncle?... of yours leaves you a hundred pounds. The money would be handled by a solicitor in the north, and there would be no question of compromising you, no matter what the courts might or might not do to the partners here. Could you then afford to start on your theatrical career?"

Little as he wanted to admit it, John Henry's pulse raced at the thought. He calculated what it would mean to him to have the money, and he set his prudence aside. "It might work, saying it was left to me, if it happened later." His excitement was building and he



could not contain the satisfaction he felt.

"Six months, then. My London solicitors should have made all the necessary arrangements for recovering what is owed me by that time." Ragozy watched John Henry with interest.

"Will things be unpleasant for you here when my claim against the firm has been filed? There could be police involvement, you understand."

"It is possible they could hold me to blame," said John Henry. "It is no secret that I have been copying your ledger. They will have to assume you had your information from me."

"But they need not know you discovered the theft," Ragozy said persuasively. "I could charge my London solicitors to review the ledgers; I could require a full disclosure of the state of my account. That would spare you the brunt of the partners' displeasure. I do not like to think you would be punished for being an honest man, Mr Brodribb."

"When I leave the company, it will not matter," said John Henry.

"You think it will not, but it will, you know," said Ragozy. "You do not want whispers following you, saying that you have abused the trust of your employer. Not even the theatre excuses such things, Mr Brodribb. Rumours are constant in the world of players, and you do not want to begin with a reputation that is tainted. Believe this."

John Henry could not help but agree. He realized that Ragozy was not only generous but more knowledgeable than he had suspected.

"All right. A distant relative could be invented. An uncle. In the north."

"You would do well to mention that you have heard the fellow is ailing, and dismiss any suggestion that you might benefit from his death," Ragozy recommended. "That way when you express your amazement at the legacy, none of the clerks will link your good fortune to the assistance you have given me."

As he slapped his hand on his thigh, John Henry burst out, "By all that's famous! You've hit on the very means to make this happen." He laughed aloud. "You are a canny man, Count, a complete hand; a peevy cove as the lower orders would say."

"A peevy cove. What a delightful expression," said Ragozy sardonically, his fine brows lifting. "Still, I have been called worse." For an instant a bleakness came over him; seeing it, John Henry was chilled.

He started to speak, coughed, and tried again. "I suppose you've learned, over the years, to guard yourself. That's why you're so quick to make the suggestions you have."

"There is some truth to that, yes," said Ragozy, his dark, enigmatic eyes haunted. With a gesture he dismissed the gloom that threatened to overcome him. "But you will think you've been caught in one of Mrs Radcliffe's dismal romances if I say much more, or that farrago of Maturin's."

"*Melmoth the Wanderer?*" asked John Henry, a little taken aback that Ragozy should know the work.

Ragozy did not answer. He glanced at the ledger one last time.

"Tomorrow a clerk from my solicitor will visit Mr Tubbs. He will say that I have asked to have my business here reviewed. Oh, never

fear. I will demand the same of the other merchants with whom I have done business. I will not single this firm out for the solicitors' attention." He took a rapid turn around the room; the lamplight danced and sparkled in the jewels on his Order. "I will do everything I can to make it appear that this is not an unusual request. Since I am a foreigner, I am certain that Mr Tubbs will be willing to think the worst of me for that."

John Henry coloured. "He is one of those who thinks Jesus Christ spoke in English."

"He has that look to him," Ragozy agreed. He halted in front of John Henry and held out his hand. "It's settled then."

"Yes, all right," said John Henry as his large hand closed over Ragozy's small one. "It's settled."

In the private parlour of the pub, the company of actors were still exhilarated by the great success they had had with their new production of *Romeo and Juliet*. At the head of the long table, the young man who had paid for the Royal Soho Theatre production and for the privilege of playing Romeo, was still holding court, flushed with a heady combination of port and applause.

"You were quite wonderful, Henry," said the woman beside him, a cozy matron who had played Lady Capulet. "You'll go far, you mark my words."

Henry was willing to be convinced. "Ah, Meg, Meg. It's such a good play, that's what makes the difference." He frowned a little, wishing his family had been willing to come, but they were such

strict Christians that they rarely ventured out to public entertainments of any sort.

The director, who had also played Mercutio, was more than half drunk, and he swung around to face Henry, lifting his glass.

"So you think you'll... take the London stage by storm, do you?"

"One day I hope to," said Henry, already hungry for the time it would happen.

"That's what they all do," the director muttered, sounding bitter.

"You leave off baiting him," Meg ordered the director. "Just because he's a better player than you—"

"Better player!" scoffed the director, taking another long draught of dark ale. "Why, he's as green as... as..." He lost the direction of his thought.

"Yes, he's green," said Meg with some heat. "But he's got it in him. You can tell by what he does. He's got the touch." She beamed at Henry, her smile not as motherly as it had been. "You'll all see. I know Henry's going to go far."

Henry basked in her approval and watched as the rest of the company caroused themselves into fatigue, and then began to drift off into the night. Henry was one of the last to leave, pausing to tip the landlord for allowing them to hire the private parlour for the later hours.

As he stepped into the street, he paused, realizing it was very late; the windows were dark in the buildings that faced the road. No traffic moved over the cobbles. Only the skitter of rats attracted his attention as he pulled his coat about him and started towards his

home.

Then he heard a soft, crisp footfall, and with a cry of alarm he turned, expecting to see one of the desperate street thieves who preyed upon the unwary. He brought up his arm. "I have a pistol," he warned.

The answer out of the dense shadows was amused. "Do you really, Mr Brodribb." A moment later, Ferenc Ragozy stepped out of the darkness. He was wearing his hooded cloak, as he had been the first time John Henry had seen him. As he walked up to the young actor, he said, "Congratulations. That was a very impressive debut."

"You saw it?" asked John Henry.

"Yes." Ragozy smiled, the pallid light from the distant street lamp casting a sharply angled shadow over his features. "I am pleased your... inheritance was so well spent."

John Henry felt suddenly very callow. "I should have thanked you, I know, but with the trial and all, I didn't think it would—"

"What reason do you have to thank me? The legacy was from your uncle, wasn't it?" He started to walk towards the main road, motioning to John Henry to walk with him. "If anything I should thank you for the six thousand pounds my solicitors recovered from Mr Tubbs and Mr Lamkin."

"Everyone believed it," said John Henry, still marvelling at how easily the clerks had been convinced that so distant and unknown an uncle would leave a sizable amount to his nephew. "I never thought they would."

"People believe things they want to think happen. What clerk would

not like a distant relative to make them a beneficiary of his estate? So they are willing to think it has happened to you." He went a few steps in silence. "Tell me, was there some specific reason for taking the name Irving?"

"Yes," said John Henry. "There was. My mother used to read me the sermons of Edward Irving. He was a Scottish evangelist, and a powerful orator. And I admire the American author Washington Irving."

"And why Henry instead of John?" asked Ragozy. They were nearing Charing Cross Road and could see a few heavily laden wagons making their way along the almost deserted thoroughfare, and one or two cabs out to pick up what few shillings they might from late-night stragglers.

"It sounds more distinguished," said John Henry at once; he had given the matter much thought and was prepared to defend his choice if questioned.

But Ragozy, it seemed, was satisfied. "Then the best of good fortune to you, Henry Irving." He nodded to an elegant coach waiting at the corner. "This is where we part company, I think."

John Henry accepted this with a surge of embarrassment. "You should have come into the pub. We could have had a drink. They have decent port at the pub." He hated to see Ragozy walk away. "I want to thank you. To drink your health."

Ragozy paused, and bowed, and said in a voice John Henry would never forget, "You are very kind, Mr Irving, but I do not drink wine."