

Pierre Gascon

By Charles Kennett Burrow

PIERRE GASCON was old, so old that he seemed to have drifted into a backwater of time, and to lie there forgotten. His age had grown upon him imperceptibly. He had not felt its steady besiegement, like other men, in the waning of the vital fires of life ; it was only something more placid than his youth ; a time of less excursive contemplation, a season of calm more wholly personal than before. He had deliberately shut out the world, and knew it only by rumour as a place where people committed intolerable follies both of body and mind, rearing children to reap what they had sown, loving with preposterous fatuity and a devotion, Pierre Gascon in his blind soul believed, a hundred times more worthy than its object.

He lived in a great house surrounded by a beautiful and luxuriant garden, enclosed by high walls. It was not far from a busy city, and on silent evenings as he sat under his lime trees, the humming of the restless hive reached him in an unvarying undertone. Sometimes, on clear mornings, he caught the gleam of distant spires—the symbols, in his eyes, of a vain and idle worship. He argued with the almost divine assumption of lack of knowledge, and for many years had held himself the only true philosopher.

Pierre Gascon's face bore none of the marks that blazon a man's
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life to the seeing eye. It was the face of a child grown old in the smallest part of childishness, and the white hair that crowned it struck a note of curious incongruity. He hung upon the fringes of life as a cobweb may hang upon a briar; he breathed like ordinary men, but was divorced from the human impulses of the body; he had chosen his way and followed it almost to the end; and the end, he thought, because it still seemed far off, should be of a piece with the rest.

One only of the associates of his early youth ever visited him. He was a physician in the town which smoked on the horizon; and sometimes Doctor Carton, snatching a few hours from the persistent ardour of his occupation, would bring within the walls of Pierre Gascon's house the only manlike element that ever came there. The Doctor had watched the course of the man, whom he had known in his boyhood, with a growing wonder that at last had settled into a steady flame of scorn. He, coming fresh from the great city, where life and death jostled together on the footways, where crime and virtue lived side by side in apparent union, and where the passions of the soul broke loose in strenuous mastery, was amazed at this man who knew nothing of it all. Sometimes he found it in his heart to pity him, but it was less a pity of the emotions than of the mind, a mental exercise that left no good with the bestower. The Doctor was steeped in the mystery and strangeness of life, in the element which it was his task to nurture; and his familiarity with death but strung him to a higher note of purpose. In Pierre Gascon he saw a man to whom death meant nothing but dissolution, and he shuddered to think that this man had once been young.

The Doctor had not seen Pierre Gascon for many months, and one day, thinking of him as he hurried along the street, he dispatched his business at an earlier hour than usual, and, towards evening,

evening, turned his horse in the direction of the recluse's house. As he cleared the squalid suburbs of the city, and emerged into the pleasant country beyond, he breathed more freely, and looked about him with eyes that carried refreshment to his mind at every turn. It was late springtime, and the hedgerows were bright with dog-rose and convulvulus ; a gentle wind rustled in the tree-tops ; the sound of running water fell with a dreamy murmur on his ear, and the sky was flecked with white airy clouds that slowly moved from west to east. The Doctor himself was old ; his face was lined into a thousand wrinkles, and his back was bent with much watching and study ; yet there moved in his blood some strong and stirring memories of the past, and the ashes of his youth still held some living fire.

He found Pierre Gascon in his garden, sitting in his favourite seat beneath the limes. He rose to meet the Doctor slowly, with no hint either of pleasure or disapproval on his face. The hand with which he greeted him left no friendly pressure on the Doctor's palm.

"Still here," said the Doctor ; "no change ?"

"None," replied the other. "I am content. I have here all that I need. You have known me long enough to understand that I desire no change."

"Ah," said the Doctor. His quick eye observed a change of no small moment in Pierre Gascon's face ; the temples were a trifle sunken, the cheeks less full, the eyes less clouded. He knew the signs too well to doubt them, and Pierre Gascon was old. His scorn turned to instant pity, not only of the mind, but of the heart, and as they walked towards the house together he took the other's arm for the first time in many years.

"Gascon," said the Doctor, "you say that you are now as you have always been. Think once more before you answer me."

"Why

"Why doubt it?" replied the other. "Your eyes see me, your hand touches me."

"I ask no idle questions. My life is too full of striving to find answers. Believe me, I ask you as a doctor and as a friend."

Pierre Gascon paused and glanced at the Doctor's face.

"You think me ill? Well, it may be so. My strength, perhaps, has seemed to fail a little. But what matter? I fear nothing."

"I see not only that you are ill, but that death is very near to you. His hand may at this moment be stretched out to touch you. I am familiar with the sight; but does it bring no fear to you?"

"None," replied the other. His voice was firm, but his face had taken a sudden tinge of grey.

They sat down together in a small room lined with books, which opened on the garden. Pierre Gascon gazed steadily through the open window. The Doctor watched him. They were silent for many minutes, and Doctor Carton's anger began to rise again.

"You say you have no fear," he said at last. "I know of one thing only that can save a man from that—the memory of a life spent with some purpose. Have you this memory?"

"I have lived my life," replied the other calmly.

"You have lived your life!" cried the Doctor, rising and pacing the room. "Lived! You have eaten, drunk, slept, moved and breathed, but that is not to have lived. What good action have you ever done, what bad impulse ever had the strength to carry into deed? I deal plainly with you. Here you stand upon the very brink of death; you say that you have lived. Are you so blind as not to see that the very words are false? Dare you go into eternity with a record absolutely blank?"

Pierre

Pierre Gascon followed the Doctor's figure with his eyes. The placid stream of his insane philosophy was rudely shaken by this unexpected storm. He wondered, for an instant, whether what he regarded as his self-control had been weakness of the basest kind. But the old habit of thought was strong upon him, and he slipped back to it again.

"You talk idly, Carton," he replied. "I choose my way deliberately with open eyes. Blame me if you will; I have at least been consistent in my course."

"True," said the Doctor, "hopelessly consistent; that is the only virtue of weakness. But will that avail you when you come to die? Were you born a sentient atom, with the means and strength of life, to be damned at last for this? In heaven's name do not flirt consistency in the face of God."

Pierre Gascon moved uneasily. The threads were becoming tangled, just when he was ready to tie the final knot.

"You have lived in the world, Carton; what have you done to give you the right to judge me now?"

"What have I done?" cried the Doctor. "I have grown old in lessening human suffering. That was my business, you may say. Good; I claim no virtue for it. I have sinned open-eyed, and sucked poison from strange flowers. I have burnt in the fierce fires of remorse, and thereby learnt charity. I have reared my children to face the world and fight through it, not to skulk in corners. I have only a few rags and tatters of self-conceit left, and I hope to strip myself of those before I die."

"Yes," said Pierre Gascon, "my life has not been like that. Which of us is right?"

"Ask yourself, not me. Have you ever loved a woman? Have you ever made children happy? Have you ever cheated the devil for an hour, and then compounded for your virtue with a greater crime?"

crime? That is the way with men for a time. Have you ever done any of these things? If so, there may be some shadow of hope to cling to yet."

"I have done none of these things, Carton."

Pierre Gascon sat with bowed head and trembled. He felt his strength ebbing from him with every heart-beat; his mind was confused and blurred with a hundred accusing images, but not one of them arose from any act of his. His condemnation flowed in upon him like a tide, and he had but a few hours to live. Could anything be done in so short a time to save him even in the eyes of one man?

"For God's sake," cried the Doctor, "if nothing else remains, at least commit some sin to be reckoned in your account as virtue. Show that you are still a man, though you have spent your life in hiding from the fact. Something may be done yet."

"I am too old," wailed Gascon, "I am too old. Is there no good that I can do? I have a nephew, my brother's son, can I do nothing for him?"

"He died a year ago, in poverty, wasted by disease, but fighting to the last. You are too late. He left a wife and child; they too have vanished."

"But they can be found. Let us find them, Carton; let us set out at once. I am ready to go with you now." He rose, with eager outstretched hands, and crossed the room to Carton's side.

"Where shall we go?" said Carton; "it is already night. The streets of the city are full of pleasure-seekers; the noise would stun you, and you are near your end."

"Let us go," said Pierre Gascon again; "I can do nothing here. I cannot die here. Take me to the city. Let me see my kind again, for the love of God. There may be some chance yet!"

Carton

Carton watched him put on cloak and hat in feverish haste. Then he went to a safe and filled his pockets with gold. A few pieces fell, and lay like drops of light upon the floor. The Doctor smiled grimly—strange that even at the last he should count on gold to help him. He did not shrink from complying with Gascon's wish ; it could, at most, only shorten his life by a few hours.

Pierre Gascon said nothing as they were rapidly driven towards the city. The night was warm, with little wind, and the scent of the hedgerows and fields hung in the air. The moon at times was obscured by flying vapour, and again it would shine full upon the speeding carriage, drawing nearer and nearer to the city lights, and on Pierre Gascon's pallid, haunted face.

At last they were in the streets, and moving at a slower pace. The long lines of lamps, the swaying shadows, the roar of wheels, and continual beat of feet, above all the shifting faces of the crowd, bore in on Pierre Gascon's mind with a new terror. In any one of all these people might lie his hope of redemption—but how to choose ? The faces gleamed upon him and passed like shadows in a dream, some glad, some beautiful, some stern as fate, some stained with crime. The voices surged in his ears in a myriad conflicting waves of sound, with every now and then a cry or shrilling laugh rising above the clamour like a signal. He watched them all, as they went by, with impotent longing, and with every minute his agony increased.

A crowd of mingled men and women stood at the corner of a street, listening idly to a shrill-voiced preacher. As the carriage passed Pierre Gascon half rose from his seat, and, filling both hands with gold, cast it into the throng with a cry. They fought for it like maniacs, the preacher amongst the rest, and the sound of the turmoil followed them like an echo down the street.

“That

"That is not the way," said Doctor Carton. "It cost you nothing to do that. The time is short, and I cannot guide you to your last action. You must choose yourself. Let us get out and walk if you are able."

"Yes, yes," said Gascon, eagerly. The Doctor stopped the carriage and they alighted. Pierre Gascon leant heavily upon his arm, and his feet moved unsteadily upon the pavement. But he glanced at the faces as they passed with an awful curiosity, and hurried on.

After a time they reached a more open space, dimly lighted save near the pavement, where the crowd was thick. Here they paused, Pierre Gascon breathing heavily, with great drops of sweat upon his face. His terror had grown to an intolerable agony of dread ; he felt life slipping from him, and yet he had not accomplished one saving act.

Suddenly a woman started from the crowd and reeled into the road. She laughed loudly as she went, and flung up her arms as though in mock appeal. Her face still bore some signs of beauty, though sadly blurred and marred.

"There," said the Doctor, "that may be your chance. Who knows? She may be your nephew's wife."

Pierre Gascon heard only the last words. A sudden blinding flash darted across his brain. He started forward with a cry, and reached the woman's side, who stood half dazed in the full tide-way of the varying traffic. He seized her arm and cried :

"Are you his wife?"

"His wife?" she cried, with a bitter laugh ; "whose wife?"

A carriage turned the corner sharply and bore down upon them at a rapid pace. Pierre Gascon saw it, and, with all his remaining strength, flung the woman into safety. Then he staggered and fell, and the wheels passed over his body with a sickening jolt.

When

When Doctor Carton stood by the dead man in a hospital ward an hour later, the face seemed more resolute and stronger than it had ever been in life. It wore a look almost of triumph, and the lips seemed half drawn into a smile.

“Poor Pierre Gascon!” said the Doctor. “How many men would have done as much? His last act may have saved him, after all.”