The Covetous Knight

Translated by James E. Falen

Scenes from Shenstone’s tragicomedy The Covetous Knight

Scene I

A tower

ALBERT and JEAN

ALBERT:

Whatever be the cost, I must appear
At tournament. Let’s see my helmet, Jean.

(Jean brings him his helmet.)

It’s pierced all through, quite useless.
Not a chance Of wearing it. I’ll needs obtain another.
A mighty stroke! That cursed Count Delorge!

JEAN:

But you requited him right well, my lord.
And after you had dropped him from his horse,
He lay like death all day and night—I doubt
He’s well.

ALBERT:

And yet he suffered no great loss;
His fine Venetian armor’s still intact;
His breast’s his own—and cost him not a farthing,
Nor will he need to buy himself another.
I should have stripped his helmet where he lay!
And would have too, had I not been ashamed
Before the Duke and ladies. Cursed Count!

Far better had he gored my skull instead.
I need new raiment too. Last time the knights
Were all in satin and in velvet clad;
While I alone, among the ducal guests,
Sat clothed in coat-of-mail. I made excuse,
By claiming that I’d happened there by chance.
But what shall I say now? This wretched state!
How poverty humiliates the heart!
When that Delorge with his full-weighted lance
Did run my helmet through and gallop past,
And I, with all-uncovered head, did spur
My steed Emir and like a whirlwind rushed
Upon the Count and hurled him like a page
Full twenty steps; when all the ladies then
Uprose them from their chairs; when fair Clotilda,
Her eyelids closed, unknowingly cried out,
And all the heralds praised my mighty blow—
Oh, none of them had inkling of the cause,
The reason for my courage and my strength!
I went berserk to see my helmet crushed—
The parent to my deed was paltry meanness.
Oh yes, that foul disease attaches quick
When one resides beneath my father’s roof!
How fares my poor Emir?

JEAN:

Still lame, I fear.
You’ll not be riding him for some good time.

ALBERT:

There’s nothing to be done; I’ll buy the bay.
The asking price, at least, is nothing much.

JEAN:

Not much, perhaps, but money have we none.

ALBERT:

What says that worthless scoundrel Solomon?
JEAN:

He says that he no longer can afford
To lend you any funds without a pledge.

ALBERT:

A pledge! And what am I to pledge, the devil?

JEAN:

I told him that.

ALBERT:

What then?

JEAN:

He groaned and shrugged.

ALBERT:

You should have told him that my father's rich,
And like a Jew himself; that soon or late
His wealth will pass to me.

JEAN:

I told him so.

ALBERT:

And then?

JEAN:

He shrugged and groaned.

ALBERT:

What wretched luck!
JEAN:

He said he’d come himself.

ALBERT:

Thank God for that.
I’ll have a ransom ere I let him go.

(A knock at the door.)

Who’s there?

(A Jew enters.)

JEW:

Your humble servant.

ALBERT:

Ah, my friend!

Accursed Jew, most worthy Solomon,
Come in, come in! What’s this they tell me, friend:
That you mistrust a debt?

JEW:

Oh, noble knight,
I swear to you... I’d gladly... but I can’t.
I have no funds. I’ve made myself a bankrupt
By slavishly assisting all you knights.
For no one pays me back. I came to ask
If you could pay at least some part...

ALBERT:

You thief!
If I myself had funds, do you believe
I’d have the slightest intercourse with you?
Be not so obdurate, friend Solomon,
Release your gold. A hundred you can spare.
I’ll have you searched.
JEW: A hundred, did you say!
Oh, when have I had such a sum!

ALBERT: Take care...
You ought to be ashamed that you refuse
To aid a friend.

JEW:
I swear to you...

ALBERT:
Enough.
You want a pledge? What sort of rant is this!
What kind of pledge? A boar-skin, would you say?
Had I the merest trifle I could pledge,
I'd sold it long ere this. A knight's good word
Is not enough for you, you dog?

JEW:
Your word,
While you're alive, is worth a great, great deal.
It's like a talisman that can unlock,
For you, the chests of all the Flemish rich.
But if you then transfer that word to me,
A wretched Jew, and if you chance to die
(Which God forbid!), then in these hands of mine,
'Twould be no use... or like a key that fits
Some casket at the bottom of the sea.

ALBERT:
You think it true, my father will outlive me?

JEW:
Who knows? Our days are reckoned not by us;
The youth who bloomed last night today lies dead,
And four old men, on bent and burdened shoulders,
Now bear him in his coffin to the grave.
The Baron’s hale. He may yet live for ten,
       For twenty, twenty-five... for thirty years.

ALBERT:

       You lie, you wretched Jew: in thirty years—
       I’ll be nigh fifty then! What use will wealth
       Avail me at that age?

JEW:

       What use, you ask?
       Why, wealth at any age can serve us well;
       But youth, in wealth, seeks nothing more than slaves
       And, pitiless, dispatches them all round.
       Old age, in wealth, sees good and worthy friends
       And guards them like the apple of his eye.

ALBERT:

       My father sees in wealth nor slaves, nor friends;
       He only sees the master whom he serves.
       And how he serves! Like some Egyptian slave
       Or chained dog. In his unheated kennel
       He lives on water and on crusts of bread;
       He never sleeps, but runs about and howls—
       While all his gold rests peacefully in chests.
       Be silent, Jew! The day will surely come
       When it will sleep no more, but service me.

JEW:

       The funeral of the Baron will unleash
       A great deal more of money than of tears.
       God grant you your inheritance ere long.

ALBERT:

       Amen!

JEW:

       Perhaps...
ALBERT:

What now?

JEW:

I had a thought,  
That maybe there's a way...

ALBERT:

What way?

JEW:

Well then—  
I have a friend, a little aged fellow,  
A Jew, a poor apothecary...

ALBERT:

Ha!  
A usurer like you. Or is he honest?

JEW:

No, knight, Tobias deals a different trade.  
He mixes potions... and his drops, in truth,  
Are wondrous things.

ALBERT:

And what are they to me?

JEW:

Three drops is all—into a glass of water;  
They have no taste, no color do they show;  
And he who drinks will have no writhing gut,  
No nausea, no pain... and yet will die.

ALBERT:

Your aged friend in poison trades.
JEW:

Ah, yes,

In poison.

ALBERT:

So? Instead of lending cash,
You offer me two hundred venomed vials,
A vial for a coin? Is that your game?

JEW:

You choose to laugh at me, my noble knight—
But no, I thought... perhaps that you... I thought...
The Baron's time to die might well have come.

ALBERT:

What's that!.. a son... give poison to his father!
 Arrest him, Jean! How dare you think that I!...
Do you not know, you Jewish thing, you dog,
You serpent, you! that I can hang you now
Upon these gateposts here!

JEW:

I did you wrong!

Have mercy, I but jested.

ALBERT;

Jean, the rope!

JEW:

A jest... a jest... I have the money... here!

ALBERT:

Away, you dog!

(The Jew leaves.)
Thus low have I been brought
By this my father's greed! See what the Jew
Has dared suggest! Bring me a glass of wine...
I'm all distraught... And yet... the money, Jean—
I need it! Follow that accursed Jew
And take his gold away. And bring me then
A pot of ink. I'll give the wretched rogue
A full receipt. But don't admit the man,
That Judas soul... But stay you, Jean...
I fear His gold will reek of poison evermore,
As did that silver of his ancestor... I asked for wine.

JEAN:

We haven't, sir, alas,
A drop of wine.

ALBERT:

But what about the crate
That Raymond sent me, as a gift, from Spain?

JEAN:

Just yesterday I took the ailing smith
Our final bottle.

ALBERT:

Yes, I do recall...
Well, pour me water then. This cursed life!
The die is cast. I'll get me to the Duke
And seek redress: let father be compelled
To treat me as a son... and not a mouse
Begotten in a cellar.
Scene II

A cellar vault

BARON:

The way a youthful rake awaits a tryst
With some licentious harlot or, perhaps,
Some foolish girl that he's seduced, so I
All day have marked the time till I might come
Down to my secret vault and trusty chests.
O happy day! This evening can I pour
In coffer number six (as yet unfilled)
Another gathered handful of my gold.
Not much, perhaps, but by such little heaps
Do mighty treasures grow. I read somewhere
That once a king commanded all his troops
To gather dirt by handfuls in a heap,
And thus, in time, a mighty hill arose—
And from that summit could the king with joy
Survey his valleys, decked in gleaming tents,
And watch his great armada ply the sea.
Thus I, by offering in tiny bits,
My customary tribute to this vault,
Have raised my hill as well—and from its height
I too survey the reach of my domain.
And who shall set its bounds? Like some great demon,
From here I can control and rule the world.
I need but wish—and palaces will rise;
And in my splendid gardens will appear
A throng of nymphs to caper and to sport;
The muses too will offer me their tribute,
And freedom-loving genius be my slave;
And virtue too, and unremitting labor,
Will humbly wait on me for their reward.
I need but whistle low—and, bowing, scraping,
Blood-spattered villainy itself will crawl
To lick my hand and look into my eyes
To read therein the sign of my desire.
All things submit to me, and I—to none;
I stand above all longings and all cares;
I know my might, and in this knowledge find
Enough reward...
(He looks at his gold.)

It hardly seems like much,
But oh what human woes, what bitter tears,
Deceptions, orisons, and imprecations
This heavy-weighted gold is token of!
I have an old doubloon... it's this one here;
Some widow brought it just this morn, but first
She knelt for half the day outside my window,
Three children at her side, and wailed aloud.
It rained and rained, then stopped, then rained again,
And still that hypocrite stayed on; I might
Have driven her away, but something whispered
That she had come to pay her husband's debt,
Afraid that on the morrow she'd be jailed.
And this one here was brought me by Thibault—
A lazy cheat who got it God knows where!
He lifted it, no doubt; or else outside,
Upon the highroad, late at night, in woods...
Ah yes! If all the tears, the blood and sweat
That men have shed for such a hoard as this
Should suddenly gush forth from out the earth,
There'd be a second flood!—and I'd be drowned
Inside my trusty vaults. But now it's time.

(He starts to unlock the chest.)

Each time I come to open up a chest,
I fall into a fever and I shudder.
It isn't fear (for whom have I to dread?)
I have my saber by; its trusty steel
Will answer for my gold), but all the same
Some strange and eerie feeling grips my heart...
Physicians claim that there are certain men
Who find a pleasure in the act of murder.
When I insert my key into the lock,
I feel what murderers must feel inside
As they plunge dagger into flesh:
Excitement... And horror all at once.

(He opens the chest.)

My paradise!
(He slowly pours in his coins.)

Go home, you’ve roamed the world quite long enough
In service to the needs and lusts of men.

Sleep well in here—the sleep of peace and power,
The sleep the gods in distant heavens sleep...
I will arrange tonight a solemn feast:
Before each chest I’ll light a candlestick,
And all of them I’ll open wide, and I
Will gaze in rapture at my dazzling hoard.

(He lights the candles and, one after the other, opens all the chests.)

I rule the world!... What magical refugence!
And all this mighty realm submits to me;
My bliss is here, my honor and my glory!
I rule the world!... But who, when I have gone,
Will reign in this domain? My wretched heir!
A raving madman and a spendthrift youth,
The comrade of licentious debauchees!
Before I’m cold, he’ll come! He’ll hurry down,
With all his crew of greedy sycophants,
To enter these serene and silent vaults.
He’ll rob my corpse and, when he has the keys,
He’ll cackle as he opens all the chests.
And all my treasured gold will quickly flow
To pockets satin-lined and full of holes.
He’ll desecrate and smash these hallowed vessels,
He’ll feed the regal balm to dirt and dust—
He’ll squander all! . . And by what proper right?!
Have I, indeed, attained all this by nought?
Or through a game, as if I were a gambler
Who rattles dice and rakes the booty in?
Who knows how many bitter deprivations,
How many bridled passions, heavy thoughts,
Unceasing cares, and sleepless nights I’ve paid?
Or will my callous son assert aloud
That my poor heart was all o’ergrown with moss,
That never did I know immortal longings,
That conscience never gnawed me, mighty conscience,
The sharp-clawed beast that rakes the heart, O conscience,
That uninvited guest, that dull companion,
That churlish creditor, that horrid witch

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Upon whose call the moon grows dark, and tombs
Explode... and send their dead to roam abroad?...
No! Suffer first! and earn the wealth you crave,
And then we'll see, if you'd allow some wretch
To squander all the treasure got by blood.
If only I could hide this sacred vault
From worthless eyes! If only from the grave
I might return and, like a watchful shade,
Secure my chests and from all living souls
Protect my treasured gold, as I do now!...

Scene III

At the palace
ALBERT and the DUKE

ALBERT:

Believe me, sovereign liege, I've long endured
The shame of bitter want. Were not my plight
Extreme indeed, you had not heard my plaint.

DUKE:

I well believe you, sir: a noble knight,
A man like you, would not accuse his sire
Except in deep distress. Such knaves are few...
So rest your mind; I shall appeal, myself,
In private, gently, to your father's heart.
I wait him now. It's long since last we met.
He was my grandsire's friend. I well recall—
When I was still a boy, your father oft
Would seat me on his stallion and, in jest,
Would place his heavy helm upon my head,
As if it were a bell.

(He looks out the window.)

Who comes here now?
Your father?
ALBERT:

He, my liege.

DUKE:

Then get you hence.  
I'll summon you when all's arranged.

(Albert leaves, the Baron enters.)

Well, Baron,  
I'm pleased to see you, and so hale and hearty.

BARON:

I'm overjoyed, my liege, to have the strength  
To come to court once more, at your command.

DUKE:

It's quite some time since last we parted, Baron.  
Do you remember me?

BARON:

Remember, lord?  
I see you even now as once you were  
A lively boy. The great deceased Duke  
Would say: "Well, Philip, friend," (he called me that;  
'Twas always Philip then) "what say you, eh?  
In twenty years or so, both you and I  
Will be but dotards in this stripling's eyes..."  
In yours, that is to say.

DUKE:

Well, let's renew  
Our friendship now. You've quite forgot my court.

BARON:

I've grown too old, my liege. And here at court  
What use am I? You're young and still delight
In tournaments and festive rounds. But I
Am little fit for such pursuits. If God
Should send us war, then I’d remain prepared
To mount, if groaningly, my horse once more;
I’d find the strength, although my hand might tremble,
To draw my ancient sword in your behalf.

DUKE:

Your valor, Baron, is well known to us;
You were my grandsire’s friend; my father too
Respected you. And I have ever found you
A brave and worthy knight... But come, we’ll sit.
You’ve children, Baron, yes?

BARON:

An only son.

DUKE:

Why is it that he hides from our regard?
The court for you is dull, but for your son
Both age and rank do call him to our side.

BARON:

My son dislikes the bustling, courtly life.
He has a shy and gloomy cast of mind—
All round the castle wood he ever roams,
As if he were a fawn.

DUKE:

It bodes no good
To shun the light. We’ll soon accustom him
To festive rounds, to tournaments and balls.
Assign him here to us, and do bestow
A maintenance upon him due his rank.
I see you frown—your journey, I do fear,
Has laid you low.
BARON:

    I am not weary, liege,
   But you have much confused me. I would fain
Not make confession to Your Grace... but now,
You force me to be frank about my son,
To tell you what I'd rather keep well hid.
My sovereign liege: my son, alas, deserves
No mark of your good favor or regard.
He wastes away his youth in brute excess,
In basest vice...

DUKE:

    The cause may be, good Baron,
   That he's too much alone. Great solitude
And idleness prove ruinous to youth.
Appoint him then to us, and he'll forget
Those habits that forsakenness cloth breed.

BARON:

    Forgive me, sovereign liege, but I protest;
   I cannot give consent to such a course.

DUKE:

    But, Baron, why?

BARON:

    Release a poor old man...

DUKE:

    I must insist, old friend, that you reveal
   The cause of your refusal.

BARON:

    Anger, liege,
Against my son.
DUKE:

For what?

BARON:

A wicked crime.

DUKE:

But tell me, knight, in what does it consist?

BARON:

Release me, Duke, I pray.

DUKE:

‘Tis passing strange...

Or feel you shame on his account?

BARON:

Yes... shame...

DUKE:

What was it, though, he did?

BARON:

He tried... he sought

To murder me.

DUKE:

To murder you! See here,

I'll have the wretched villain bound to court.

BARON:

I cannot offer proof, although I know
He greatly thirsts indeed to see me dead;
And well I know that he had dark intent
To...
DUKE:

What?

BARON:

To rob me.

(Albert rushes into the room.)

ALBERT:

Baron, that’s a lie!

DUKE (to the son):

How dare you, sir!...

BARON:

You here! And dare to speak,
To hurl at me, your father, such a word!...
To say—I lie! Before our noble Duke!...
To me... or am I knight no more!

ALBERT:

You lie!

BARON:

O God of justice, sound thy thunder now!
Pick up my gauntlet—let the sword decide!

(He throws down his glove, his son promptly picks it up.)

ALBERT:

My gratitude. Your first paternal gift.

DUKE:

What’s this I see? Before my very eyes?
A son takes up an aged father’s dare!
O woeeful times are these that I should wear
The ducal crown! Be silent, madman, you.
And you, you tiger cub, enough.

(to the son.)

Have done;

Relinquish me that glove.

(He takes it away.)

ALBERT (aside):

A pity that.

DUKE:

He's marked it with his claws! A monstrous son!
Begone; and keep thee, sirrah, from my sight,
Until such time as I, upon the need,
May summon you.

(Albert leaves.)

And you, unhappy wretch,

Have you no shame?…

BARON:

Forgive me, noble liege…
I feel unwell... my knees have turned to water...
I'm choking!.. choking!.. air!... the keys? The keys!
I want my keys!…

DUKE:

He's dead. O God in heaven!
What dreadful times are these, what dreadful hearts!

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