

Brief Outline of a Blood-and-Thunder Romance

'Giuseppe Boro has arrived in Terst. Not having enough money for a long stay, he has introduced himself to the innkeeper Bittornelli as Count Ulrich von Eisenfels. The innkeeper's beautiful daughter Lucia falls in love with the fake Count, but Giuseppe Boro is being watched by Lorenzo, a villainous sailor from that town, who knows certain secrets from Boro's past, namely that in Rome, he killed the man who had seduced his sister, along with three other men who had aided and abetted the seducer. Greatly alarmed by this, Giuseppe Boro confides in Bittornelli, the two having drunk wine together and become bosom friends. The pair decide to poison Lorenzo, invite him round for a drink and put their plan successfully into operation. But since there is a great deal of work involved in getting rid of a body, they let the innkeeper's daughter Lucia into the secret as well. They put Lorenzo's body in a sack and carry it off at night into the mountains behind the town, where there are deep chasms. The plan is to throw the bag into one of these chasms and they are poised over just such a sheer drop when a gendarme takes them by surprise. Lucia comes to the rescue by plunging a dagger into the gendarme's heart at the very moment when he has just leapt down from his horse to see what all the commotion is about. They throw the bodies of Lorenzo and the gendarme into the chasm but as they are doing this, the riderless horse whinnies, they hear the thud of horses' hooves close by and a fresh gendarme appears on the scene. Giuseppe Boro shoots this one down with his pistol and they all go quietly off home. That's as far as I've got, Mr Toms.'

As he sat opposite Mr Toms, the publisher of blood-and-thunder romances, the young man looked sadly into the eyes of that kindly soul, who exclaimed: 'But this really is beyond a joke, Mr Krámský! What comes next? Where are you going to put all the other bodies? Your people should stay where they are, because the shot is bound to bring yet another gendarme patrol on the scene. It's a life-and-death struggle - that's how I see it - you wring the man's neck . . . do you understand what I'm saying, young man?'

'And by the way, you're very careless in your use of firearms. You let off a gun at night, when you're carrying a corpse off to throw it down a cliff, and when you've already killed one gendarme. That's a mistake, a big mistake: you're giving yourself clear away. If that Lucia of yours is so handy with a knife, why not stab the other gendarme as well?'

Mr Toms rose to his feet and leaning on a table in the half-full coffee-house shouted aloud in the passion of his argument: 'Why, I ask you yet again, did you not kill that second gendarme with a dagger? You could have shoved a dagger into his heart as well and that would have been an end of the whole charade.'

'As sure as eggs is eggs, young man, you just can't go on working with the old tried-and-trusted formulae. That's the youth of today for you! You ought to have known Charvát - he's dead now - he knew a thing or two about how to handle a dagger! That was in 1900 and he went on till 1905 - in Germany, it was - and he worked only with daggers and poison. Shooting at night creates a racket and if you go on like that, then I'd be grateful if you'd explain to me how you're going to get yourself out of trouble: you'll land yourself in a terrible mess!

'I'm talking to you like a father. You're quick on the uptake and I reckon that this isn't a complete write-off. What you've got to do now is seize your chance of making a getaway. Don't you see, it's just not on to go back to town after what has happened. Hit the road into the wide world. You'll have to start out as a robber. You kill some women and children and you get that Lucia female locked up and then you rescue her. You make your way, if necessary, to where she is being held and you overpower the guards. That's the main thing. I'd recommend a rubber cosh: certainly not a revolver, because a shot would raise the alarm and you'd be back in trouble again.'

'You have my word for it that there'll be no shooting,' answered the young man. 'I'm grateful for your advice. But can I go on using poison? Which poisons work without leaving a trace?'

'It's easy to see that you've not had the experience in the field that the late Charvát had. All poisons leave traces and then there's a post-mortem. Just let there be a post-mortem and the doctors will find strychnine, for instance. If you use poison, you should really go to town. Poison rich relatives in particular, and people like that. And do it slowly: you get the best results that way.'

'But before I forget, it'll be all right after you've killed the guards. And remember, in this day and age you're expected to rob every bank in sight. You knock out the attendants with chloroform or creep up on

them surreptitiously and inject curare into their bloodstream. A heavy iron safe, you blow it with dynamite. And then you *can* use revolvers. A revolver is fine on a bank-job; a Browning is a nice little number. A train-robbery would make a nice splash as well. And you can raid public places, too: theatres, restaurants, coffee-houses. And if anyone resists and refuses to hand over the money, then you shoot him down in cold blood like a dog – like a dog, I say! And now, young man, off you go and get cracking!’

They got up and found to their surprise that they were surrounded by a circle made up of the customers, the waiter, the waiter’s assistant and the proprietor of the coffee-house: all kneeling in an attitude of mute resignation to their fate and raising their clasped hands in a plea for mercy.