

## WASHINGTON IRVING

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It would be tedious to follow the devious course of the conversation as it wound through a maze of stories of the kind, until it was taken up by two other travellers who had come under convoy of the Procaccio: Mr. Hobbs and Mr. Dobbs, a linen draper and a green grocer, just returning from a hasty tour in Greece and the Holy Land. They were full of the story of Alderman Popkins. They were astonished that the robbers should dare to molest a man of his importance on 'Change, he being an eminent dry salter of Throgmorton Street, and a magistrate to boot.

In fact, the story of the Popkins family was but too true. It was attested by too many present to be for a moment doubted; and from the contradictory and concordant testimony of half a score, all eager to relate it, and all talking at the same time, the Englishman was enabled to gather the following particulars.

### *The Adventure of the Popkins Family*

It was but a few days before that the carriage of Alderman Popkins had driven up to the inn of Terracina. Those who have seen an English family carriage on the continent, must have remarked the sensation it produces. It is an epitome of England; a little morsel of the old island rolling about the world—every thing about it compact, snug, finished and fitting. The wheels turning on patent axles without rattling; the body hanging so well on its springs, yielding to every motion, yet protecting from every shock. The ruddy faces gaping from the windows; sometimes, of a portly old citizen, sometimes of a voluminous dowager, and sometimes of a fine fresh hoyden, just from boarding school. And then the dickeys loaded with well dressed servants, beef fed and bluff; looking down from their heights with contempt on all the world around; pro-

foundly ignorant of the country and the people, and devoutly certain that every thing not English must be wrong.

Such was the carriage of Alderman Popkins, as it made its appearance at Terracina. The courier who had preceded it, to order horses, and who was a Neapolitan, had given a magnificent account of the riches and greatness of his master, blundering with an Italian's splendour of imagination about the alderman's titles and dignities; the host had added his usual share of exaggeration, so that by the time the alderman drove up to the door, he was a Milor—Magnifico—Principe—the Lord knows what!

The alderman was advised to take an escort to Fondi and Itri, but he refused. It was as much as a man's life was worth, he said, to stop him on the king's highway; he would complain of it to the ambassador at Naples; he would make a national affair of it. The principessa Popkins, a fresh, motherly dame, seemed perfectly secure in the protection of her husband, so omnipotent a man in the city. The signorine Popkins, two fine bouncing girls looked to their brother Tom, who had taken lessons in boxing; and as to the dandy himself, he swore no scaramouch of an Italian robber would dare to meddle with an Englishman. The landlord shrugged his shoulders and turned out the palms of his hands with a true Italian grimace, and the carriage of Milor Popkins rolled on.

They passed through several very suspicious places without any molestation. The Misses Popkins, who were very romantic, and had learnt to draw in water colours, were enchanted with the savage scenery around; it was so like what they had read in Mrs. Radcliffe's romances, they should like of all things to make sketches. At length, the carriage arrived at a place where the road wound up a long hill. Mrs. Popkins had sunk into a sleep; the young ladies were lost in the "Loves of the Angels;" and the dandy was hectoring the postilions from the coach box. The alderman got out, as he said, to stretch his legs up the hill. It was a long winding ascent, and obliged him every now and then to stop and blow and wipe his forehead with many a pish! and phew! being rather pursy and short of wind. As the carriage, however, was far behind him, and moved slowly under the weight of so many well stuffed

trunks and well stuffed travellers, he had plenty of time to walk at leisure.

On a jutting point of rock that overhung the road nearly at the summit of the hill, just where the route began again to descend, he saw a solitary man seated, who appeared to be tending goats. Alderman Popkins was one of your shrewd travellers who always like to be picking up small information along the road, so he thought he'd just scramble up to the honest man, and have a little talk with him by way of learning the news and getting a lesson in Italian. As he drew near to the peasant he did not half like his looks. He was partly reclining on the rocks wrapped in the usual long mantle, which, with his slouched hat, only left a part of a swarthy visage, with a keen black eye, a beetle brow and a fierce moustache to be seen. He had whistled several times to his dog which was roving about the side of the hill. As the alderman approached he rose and greeted him. When standing erect he seemed almost gigantic, at least in the eyes of Alderman Popkins; who, however, being a short man, might be deceived.

The latter would gladly now have been back in the carriage, or even on 'change in London, for he was by no means well pleased with his company. However, he determined to put the best face on matters, and was beginning a conversation about the state of the weather, the baddishness of the crops and the price of goats in that part of the country, when he heard a violent screaming. He ran to the edge of the rock, and, looking over, beheld his carriage surrounded by robbers. One held down the fat footman, another had the dandy by his starched cravat, with a pistol to his head; one was rummaging a portmanteau, another rummaging the principessa's pockets, while the two Misses Popkins were screaming from each window of the carriage, and their waiting maid squalling from the dickey.

Alderman Popkins felt all the ire of the parent and the magistrate roused within him. He grasped his cane and was on the point of scrambling down the rocks, either to assault the robbers or to read the riot act, when he was suddenly seized by the arm. It was by his friend the goatherd, whose cloak, falling open, discovered a belt stuck full of pistols and stiletos. In short, he found himself in the clutches of the captain

of the band, who had stationed himself on the rock to look out for travellers and to give notice to his men.

A sad ransacking took place. Trunks were turned inside out, and all the finery and frippery of the Popkins family scattered about the road. Such a chaos of Venice beads and Roman mosaics; and Paris bonnets of the young ladies, mingled with the alderman's night caps and lamb's wool stockings, and the dandy's hair brushes, stays, and starched cravats.

The gentlemen were eased of their purses and their watches; the ladies of their jewels, and the whole party were on the point of being carried up into the mountain, when fortunately the appearance of soldiery at a distance obliged the robbers to make off with the spoils they had secured, and leave the Popkins family to gather together the remnants of their effects, and make the best of their way to Fondi.

When safe arrived, the alderman made a terrible blustering at the inn; threatened to complain to the ambassador at Naples, and was ready to shake his cane at the whole country. The dandy had many stories to tell of his scuffles with the brigands, who overpowered him merely by numbers. As to the Misses Popkins, they were quite delighted with the adventure, and were occupied the whole evening in writing it in their journals. They declared the captain of the band to be a most romantic looking man; they dared to say some unfortunate lover, or exiled nobleman: and several of the band to be very handsome young men—"quite picturesque!"

"In verity," said mine host of Terracina, "they say the captain of the band is *un galant uomo*."

"A gallant man!" said the Englishman indignantly. "I'd have your gallant man hang'd like a dog!"

"To dare to meddle with Englishmen!" said Mr. Hobbs.

"And such a family as the Popkinses!" said Mr. Dobbs.

"They ought to come upon the county for damages!" said Mr. Hobbs.

"Our ambassador should make a complaint to the government of Naples," said Mr. Dobbs.

"They should be obliged to drive these rascals out of the country," said Hobbs.

"And if they did not, we should declare war against them!" said Dobbs.

“Pish!—humbug!” muttered the Englishman to himself, and walked away.

The Englishman had been a little wearied by this story, and by the ultra zeal of his countrymen, and was glad when a summons to their supper relieved him from the crowd of travellers. He walked out with his Venetian friends and a young Frenchman of an interesting demeanour, who had become sociable with them in the course of the conversation. They directed their steps toward the sea, which was lit up by the rising moon. The Venetian, out of politeness, left his beautiful wife to be escorted by the Englishman. The latter, however, either from shyness or reserve, did not avail himself of the civility, but walked on without offering his arm. The fair Venetian, with all her devotion to her husband, was a little nettled at a want of gallantry to which her charms had rendered her unaccustomed, and took the proffered arm of the Frenchman with a pretty air of pique, which, however, was entirely lost upon the phlegmatic delinquent.

As they strolled along the beach they came to where a body of soldiers were stationed in a circle. They were guarding a number of galley slaves, who were permitted to refresh themselves in the evening breeze, and sport and roll upon the sand.

The Frenchman paused, and pointed to the group of wretches at their sports. “It is difficult,” said he, “to conceive a more frightful mass of crime than is here collected. Many of these have probably been robbers, such as you have heard described. Such is, too often, the career of crime in this country. The parricide, the fratricide, the infanticide, the miscreant of every kind first flies from justice and turns mountain bandit, and then, when wearied of a life of danger, becomes traitor to his brother desperadoes, betrays them to punishment, and thus buys a commutation of his own sentence from death to the galleys: happy in the privilege of wallowing on the shore an hour a day, in this mere state of animal enjoyment.”

The fair Venetian shuddered as she cast a look at the horde of wretches at their evening amusement. “They seemed,” she said, “like so many serpents writhing together.” And yet the idea that some of them had been robbers, those formidable beings that haunted her imagination, made her still cast another fearful glance, as we contemplate some terrible beast of

prey, with a degree of awe and horror, even though caged and chained.

The conversation reverted to the tales of banditti which they had heard at the inn. The Englishman condemned some of them as fabrications, others as exaggerations. As to the story of the improvvisatore, he pronounced it a mere piece of romance, originating in the heated brain of the narrator.