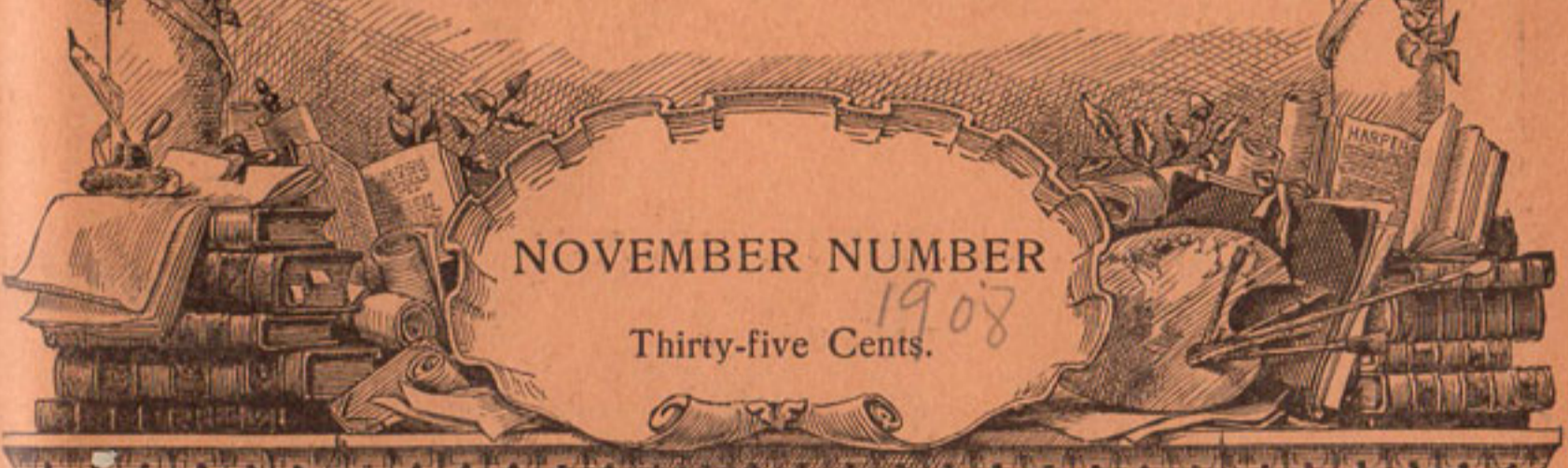


*Cabell*



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*Painting by Howard Pyle*

Illustration for "The Ultimate Master"

DIANA SHERLEY

# The Ultimate Master

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

I REMEMBER those two weeks at Treperro only as in recovery from illness a person might abhorrently remember some long fever dream which was all of an intolerable elvish brightness and of incessant laughter everywhere. They made a deal of me at Treperro; and day by day I was thrust into boisterous relations of mirth with many species of provincial gentry, being the while half light-headed through my singular knowledge as to how precariously Lord Frederick Mulkenan balanced himself, as it were, upon a gilded stepping-stone from infamy to oblivion.

I remember that I spent some seven hours of every day alone to all intent with Mistress Diana Sherley. There would be merry people within a stone's throw, it might be, about this recreation or another, but we seemed to watch aloofly, as royal persons do the antics of their hired comedians, without any condescension into open interest. We were together; and the jostle of earthly happenings might hope, at most, to afford us matter for incurious comment.

But I remember, also, when on my last night at Treperro, whilst we sat for the last time together, between the Marchioness of Falmouth and Lord St. Elwyn, and in our presence many boys enacted Mr. Marler's masque of *The Birth of Dionysos*, that I began to speak with an odd purpose, because my reason was bedrugged by the beauty and the purity of her, and perhaps a little by the slow and clutching music to whose progress the nymphs were dancing. I remember that when I had made an end of those harsh whisperings she sat for a long while in scrupulous appraisal of the floor. The music was so sweet it seemed I must go mad unless she spoke within the moment.

"You tell me you are not Lord Frederick Mulkenan. You tell me you are instead the late Queen's servitor, the

fellow that stole the royal jewels—for whom entire England is searching—" she began at last; and still I could not intercept those huge and tender eyes whose purple made, somehow, the thought of heaven comprehensible.

"Faith, I am indeed that widely hounded Lambert Pierrot. The true Lord Frederick is the wounded rascal whose delirium we marvelled over only last Tuesday. Yes, at the door of your home I attacked him, fought him—hah, but fairly, madam!—and stole his brilliant garments and with them his papers. Then in my desperate necessity I dared to masquerade as your betrothed. For I know enough about dancing to estimate that to dance upon air must necessarily prove to everybody a disgusting performance, but preeminently so to the main actor; and two weeks of safety till the *London Merchant* sailed I therefore valued at a perhaps preposterous rate. To-night, as I have said, the ship lies at anchor off Penruan."

She observed, with a complete irrelevance, and without looking at me: "My father was for marrying us at once. And you, you alone, proposed any delays. Yet as Sir Henry Sherley's son-in-law—though married to a person in herself neither very witty nor very beautiful—"

"Queen Venus, madam, may have spoken thus to the waves of Cythera when she first rose among their billows; and I doubt not that the foaming waters, there more white than milk, just amorously clutched at her whiter feet, and gurgled their light derision, and lisped the protest I would make did I not know it to be so superfluous. Yet in common reason I could not let you marry an obscure marauder simply to preserve the shuffler's life."

She said an odd thing. "Oh, can it be you are a less despicable person than you are striving to appear!"

"Nay, rather I am simply a more un-

I would fling my honor at your feet, as I do now, and but in part with loathing entreat you to make of me your wife, your servant—and just because— Oh, I had thought that when love came it would be sweet!”

Strangely quiet—yes, in every sense—I answered: “It is very sweet. I have known no happier moment in my life. For you stand within arm’s reach, mine to touch, mine to possess and do with as I will. And I dare not lift a finger. I am as a man that hath lain a long while in some bleak dungeon vainly hungering for the glad light of day—who, being freed at last, must hide his faded eyes from the dear sunlight he dare not look upon as yet. Ho, I am past speech unworthy of your notice! and I pray you now speak harshly with me, madam, for when your pure eyes regard me kindly, and your bright and delicate lips have come thus near to mine, I am so greatly tempted and so happy that I fear lest heaven grow jealous!”

“Be not too much afraid—” she answered.

“Nay, should I then be bold? and within the moment wake Sir Henry Sherley to say to him, very boldly, *Sir, the thief all England is hunting has the honor to request your daughter’s hand in marriage?*”

“You sail to-morrow for that far land of Virginia. Take me with you.”

“Indeed the feat would be quite worthy of me. For you are a lady tenderly nurtured and used to every luxury the age affords. There comes to woo you presently a gallant gentleman, not all unworthy of your love, who will presently share with you a many happy and honorable years. Yonder is a lawless naked wilderness where desperadoes cheat offended justice of a mere existence. Yet you bid me aid you to go into this country, never to return! Madam, if I obeyed you, Satan would protest against pollution of his ageless fires by any soul so filthy.”

“You talk of little things, whereas I think of great things. Love is not sustained by palatable food alone, and is not served only by those persons who go about the world in satin.”

“Then take the shameful truth. It is undeniable I swore I loved you, and

with appropriate gestures, too. But, o’ my conscience, madam, I am in these specious ecstasies past master, for somehow I have rarely seen that woman who had not some charm or other to catch my heart with. I confess now you alone have never quickened it. My only purpose was through hyperbole to wheedle you out of a horse, and meanwhile to have my recreation, you handsome jade!—and that is all you ever meant to me. I swear to you that is all, all, all!” I sobbed, for it appeared that I must die. “I but amused myself with you, I have but tricked you—”

And she only waited with untroubled eyes which seemed to plumb my heart and to appraise all which I had ever thought or longed for since the day that I was born; and she was as beautiful as I suppose the untroubled, gracious angels are, and more compassionate.

“Yes,” I said, “I am trying to lie to you. And even at lying I fail.”

She said, with a wonderful smile: “Assuredly there were never any persons so mad as we. For I must do the wooing, as though you were the maid, and all the while you rebuff me and suffer so that I fear to look upon you. Men say you are no better than a highwayman; and you confess yourself to be a thief; and I believe not one of your accusers. Lambert Pierrot,” she said, and ballad-makers have never fashioned since the world was shaped a phrase wherewith to tell you of her voice, “I know that you have dabbled in dishonor no more often than an archangel has pilfered drying linen from a hedgerow. I do not guess, for my hour is upon me, and inevitably I know! and there is nothing dares to come between us now.”

“Nay,—ho, and even were matters as you suppose them, without any warrant—there is at least one silly stumbling knave that dares as much. Saith he: *What is the most precious thing in the world?—why, assuredly, Diana Sherley’s welfare. Let me get the keeping of it, then. For I have been entrusted with a host of common and yet precious things,—with youth and health and honor, with a clean conscience and a child’s incurious faith, and so on,—and no person alive has squandered them more gallantly. So heartward ho! and trust me now, my timorous*



*Painting by Howard Pyle*

"GO, MADAM, AND LEAVE THE PRODIGAL AMONG HIS HUSKS".

*yokefellow, to win and squander also the chiefest jewel of the world.* Eh, thus he chuckles and nudges me with wicked whisperings. For, madam, this foul rascal that shares equally in my least faculty is a most pitiful, ignoble rogue! and he has aforetime eked out our common livelihood by such practices as your unsullied imagination can scarce depict. Until I knew you I had endured him. But you have made of him a horror. A horror, a horror! a thing too pitiful for hell!"

Her hand touched mine. "Oh, my dear, my dear! then slay for me this other Lambert Pierrot."

And I laughed, although not very mirthfully. "It is the common use of women to ask of men this little labor, which is a harder task than ever Hercules, that mighty-muscled king of heathenry, achieved. Nay, I, for all my sinews, am an attested weakling. The craft of other men I do not fear, for I have encountered no formidable enemy, saving only myself; but the same midnight stabber has unhorsed me long ago. And I had wallowed in the mire contentedly enough until you came. Ah, child, child! why needed you to trouble me! for I want only to be clean as you are clean, to-night, and that I may not ever be. I am garrisoned with devils, I am the battered plaything of every vice, and I lack the strength and, it may be, even the will to leave my mire. For always I have betrayed the stewardship of man and God alike that my body might escape a momentary discomfort; and loving you as I do, I cannot swear that in the outcome I would not betray you, too, to this same end. I cannot swear— Oh, now let Satan laugh, yet not unpitifully, since he is so wise that he and I, alone, know all the reasons why I may not swear! Hah, Mistress Sherley!" I cried, in my great agony, "you offer me that gift an emperor might not accept save in an awful gratitude; and I refuse it. Now, in God's name, madam, go, and leave the prodigal among his husks."

"You are a very brave and foolish gentleman," she said, "that chooses to face his own achievement without any paltering. To every man, I think, that must be bitter; but, oh! to the woman who loves him it is impossible!"

And I could not see her face, because I lay prone at her feet, sobbing, but without any tears, and tasting very deeply of such grief and vain regret as, I had thought, they know in hell alone; and even after she had gone, in silence, I lay in this same posture for an exceedingly long while.

And after I know not how long a while I propped my chin between my hands and, still sprawling upon the rushes, stared hard into the little, crackling fire. I was thinking of a Lambert Pierrot that once had been. In him were found fit mate for even her had the boy not died—and so long ago! . . . Well! it is no more cheerful than any other mortuary employment, this disinterment of the person you have been, and are not any longer; and so I found it.

Then I arose and looked for pen and ink. It was the only letter I ever wrote to Mistress Diana Sherley, and I have it now, for, as you will presently learn, she never saw it.

In such terms I wrote:

"MADAM,—It may please you to remember that when Danish Anna and I were lately examined before Justice Doubleday I confessed the theft of our dead mistress's jewels. In that I lied. For it was my manifest duty to save the woman whom, as I thought, I loved, since it was apparent that the thief was either she or I.

"She is now in Holland, where, as I am told, her wealth is tolerably notorious. I have not ever heard she gave a thought to me, her cat's-paw. Oh, madam, when I think of you and then of that sleek, smiling Dane, I am appalled by my own folly. I am aghast by my long blindness as I write the words which no one will believe. For what need now to deny a crime which every circumstance imputed to me and my own confession hath publicly acknowledged?

"But you, I think, will believe me. Look you, madam, I have nothing to gain of you. I shall not ever see you any more. I go into a perilous and an eternal banishment; and in the immediate neighborhood of death a man finds little sustenance for romance. Take the worst of me: a gentleman I was born, and as a wastrel I have lived, and always very

foolishly; but without dishonor. I have never to my knowledge—and God judge me as I speak the truth!—wronged any man or woman save myself. Oh, my dear, believe me! believe me, in spite of reason! and understand that my adoration and misery and unworthiness when I think of you are such as I cannot measure, and afford me no judicious moment wherein to fashion lies. For I shall not ever see you any more.

"I thank you, madam, for your all-unmerited kindnesses, and, oh, I pray you to believe!"

Then at three o'clock, I suppose, one tapped upon the door. I went out into the corridor, which was now unlighted, so that I had to hold to Mr. Sherley's cloak as he guided me through the complexities of unfamiliar halls and stairways into an inhospitable night. There were here two horses, and presently we were mounted and away.

Once only I shifted in the saddle to glance back at Treperro, black and formless against an empty sky; and I dared not look again, for the thought of her that lay awake in the Marshal's Tower, so near at hand as yet, was like a dagger. With set teeth I followed in the wake of my taciturn companion. He never spoke save to growl out some direction.

Thus we came to Penruan and past it to a narrow sandy coast. It was dark in this place and very still save for the encroachment of the tide. Yonder were four little lights, lazily heaving with the water's motion, to show us where the *London Merchant* lay at anchor. It did not seem that anything mattered.

"It will be nearing dawn by this," I said.

"Ay," said Mr. Sherley, very briefly; and his tone evinced that he desired to hold no conversation with me. I was an unclean thing which he must touch in his necessity, but could touch with loathing only, as a thirsty man takes a fly out of his drink. I conceded it, because nothing would ever matter any more; and so, the horses tethered, we sat upon the sand in utter silence for the space of a half hour.

A bird cried somewhere, just once, and with a start I knew it was not quite so murky as it had been, for I could see a

broken line of white now where the tide crept up and shattered and ebbled. Then in a while a light sank slowly and tipsily to the water's level and presently was bobbing in the darkness, apart from those other lights, and ever growing in brilliancy.

I said: "They have sent out the boat—"

"Ay," he answered, as before.

And a sort of madness came upon me, and it seemed that I must weep, because everything fell out so very ill in this world. "Sir, you have aided me. I would be grateful if you but permitted it."

He spoke at last, and crisply. "Gratitude, I take it, forms no part of the bargain. I am the kinsman of Mistress Sherley. It makes for my interest and for the honor of our name that the man whose rooms she visits at night be got out of England—"

I said: "You speak in this fashion of your lady—of, perhaps, your future wife!"

"My wife!" he answered, with a laugh; "and what poor gull am I to marry an attested wanton?" Then with a sneer he spoke of Diana Sherley and in such terms as are not bettered by repetition.

I said: "I am the most unlucky man alive, as surely as you are the most ungenerous. For, look you, in my presence you have spoken infamy of Mistress Sherley, though knowing I am in your debt so deep that I have not the right to resent anything you may elect to say. You have just given me my life; and armored by the fire-new obligation, you blaspheme an angel, you condescend to buffet a fettered man—!" And with that my sluggish wits had spied an honest way out of the imbroglio.

I said only: "Draw, sir! for as God lives, I may yet repurchase, though at the eleventh hour, the privilege of destroying you."

"Heyday! but here is an odd evincement of gratitude!" he retorted; "and though I am not particularly squeamish, let me tell you, my fine fellow, I do not ordinarily fight with lackeys."

"Nor are you fit to do so, Mr. Sherley. Hah, believe me, there is not a lackey in the realm—no, not a cutpurse—but would degrade himself in meeting you on equal footing. For you have slandered that which is most perfect in the world; yet

lies, sir, have short legs; and I design within the hour to insure the calumny against an echo."

"Rogue, I have given you your very life within the hour—"

"The fact is undeniable. And so I fling the bounty back to you, that we may meet as equals." I wheeled toward the boat, which was now within the reach of wading. "Gentlemen, the person that was to have accompanied you into Virginia is of another mind. You will have the kindness, if I may make so bold, to inform Captain Shawe of the unlooked-for change, and to tender that inestimable mariner every appropriate regret and the dying felicitations of Lambert Pierrot."

I bowed toward the landward darkness. "Mr. Sherley, we may now resume our vigil. When yonder vessel sails there will be no power on earth that can keep breath within my body two months longer. I will be quit of every debt to you. You will then fight with a man already dead if you so elect; but otherwise,—if you attempt to flee this place, if you decline to cross swords with a lackey, with a convicted thief, I swear upon my mother's honor! I will demolish you without compunction and as I would any other vermin."

"Oh, brave, brave!" sneered Mr. Sherley—"to fling away your life, and perhaps mine too, for an idle word—" But at that he fetched a sob. "How foolish of you, and—how like you!" he said.

"Hey, gentlemen!" cried Mr. Sherley; "a moment if you please." He splashed knee-deep into the icy water, wading to the boat, where he snatched the lantern from the prow and fetched this light ashore. He held it aloft, so that I might see his face, and I perceived I was irretrievably insane. It is odd I should remember most clearly of all the loosened wisp of hair the wind tossed about her forehead.

"Ay, look well upon me," it seemed that some one said. "Look well, poor ruined gentleman! look well, poor hunted vagabond! and note how proud I am. Oh, in all things I am very proud! a little I exult in my high station and in my wealth, and, yes, even in my beauty, for I know that I am beautiful,

but the chief of all my honors is that you love me—and so foolishly!"

"You do not understand—" one hoarsely answered, that seemed to have usurped my voice, somehow.

"Rather I understand at last that you are in sober verity a lackey, an impostor, and a thief, even as you said. Ay, a lackey to your honor! an impostor that would endeavor—and, oh, so very vainly!—to impersonate another's baseness! and a thief that hath stolen another person's punishment! Nay, I ask no questions; loving means trusting; but I would like to kill that other person very, very slowly! I ask no questions, but I dare to trust the man I know of even in defiance of that man's own voice; and dare protest the man no thief, but in all things a madly honorable gentleman. Oh, my poor bruised, puzzled boy," she said, with an odd mirthful tenderness, "how came you to be blundering alone about this miry world of ours! Only be very good for my sake and forget the bitterness; what does it matter when there is happiness, too?"

I answered nothing, but it was not because of misery. And through that instant I had seemed to see the heart of every woman that has ever lived; and they differed only as stars differ on a fair night in August. No woman ever loved a man except, at bottom, as a mother loves her child: let him elect to build a nation or to write imperishable verses, and she will only smile to note how breathlessly the boy goes about his playing; and when he comes back to her with grimier hands she is a little sorry, and, if she think it salutary, will pretend to be angry. Meanwhile she sets about the quickest way to cleanse him. They are more wise than we, and at bottom pity us more stalwart folk whose grosser wits require, to be quite sure of anything, a mere crass proof of it; and always they make us better by indomitably believing we are better than in reality a man can ever be.

"Come, come, will you not even help me into the boat?" said Mistress Diana Sherley. "Oh, please do!" she added, though she indignantly denied it only yesterday. . . . But, after all, that lovely plea was answered twenty years ago.