

JOHN BLOUNDELLE-BURTON

# **SERVANTS OF SIN**

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# **John Bloundelle-Burton**

## **Servants of Sin / A Romance**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **MONSIEUR LE DUC**

Lifting aside the heavy tapestry that hung down in front of the window of the tourelle which formed an angle of the room—a window from which the Bastille might be seen frowning over the Quartier St. Antoine, a third of a mile away—the man shrugged his shoulders, uttered a peevish exclamation, and muttered, next:

"Snow! Snow! Snow! Always snow! Curse the snow!" Then he turned back into the room, letting the curtain fall behind him, and seated himself once more in a heavy fauteuil opposite the great fireplace, up the chimney of which the logs roared in a cheerful blaze.

"Hard winters, now," he muttered once more, still thinking of the weather outside; "always hard winters in Paris now. 'Twas so when I rode back here after the campaign in Spain was over. When I rode back," he repeated, "a year ago." He paused, reflecting; then continued:

"Ay, a year ago. Why! so it was. A year ago to-day. A year this very day. The last day of December. Ay, the bells were ringing from Notre Dame, St. Roch—the Tour St. Jacques. To welcome in the New Year. Almost, it seemed, judging by the events of the next few weeks, to welcome me to my inheritance. To my inheritance! Yet, how far off that inheritance seemed once! As far off as the love of those curs, my relatives, was then."

He let himself sink farther and farther into the deep recesses of the huge fauteuil as thus he mused, stretched out his long legs towards the fire, stretched out, too, a long arm and a long, slim brown hand towards where a flask of tokay stood, with a goblet by its side; poured out a draught and drank it down.

"A far-off love, then," he said again, "now near, and warm, and generous. Bah!"

Looking at the man as he lay stretched in the chair and revelling in the luxury and comfort by which he was surrounded, one might have thought there was some incongruity between him and those surroundings. The room—the furniture and hangings—the latter a pale blue, bordered with fawn-coloured lace—the dainty ornaments, the picture let in the wall above the chimney-piece, with others above the doorway and windows—did not match with the occupant. No more than it and they matched with a bundle of swords in one corner of it; swords of all kinds. One, a heavy, straight, cut-and-thrust weapon; another an English rapier with flamboyant blade and straight quillon; a third of the Colichemarde pattern; a fourth a viperish-looking spadroon; a fifth a German Flamberg with deadly grooved blade and long-curved quillons.

Surely a finished swordsman this, or a man who had been one!

Looking at him one might judge that he was so still—or could be so upon occasion.

His wig was off—it hung upon the edge of an old praying-chair that was pushed into a corner as though of no further use; certainly of none to the present occupant of this room—and his black-cropped hair, his small black moustache, which looked like a dab stuck on his upper lip—since it extended no further on either side of his face than beneath each nostril—added to his black eyes, gave him a saturnine expression, not to say a menacing one. For the rest, he was a thick-set, brawny man of perhaps five-and-forty, with a deeply-tanned complexion that looked as though it had been exposed to many a pitiless storm and many a fierce-beating sun; a complexion that, were it not for a whiteness beneath the eyes, which seemed to tell of late hours and too much wine, and other things that often enough go with wine and wassail, would have been a healthy one.

Also, it was to be noted that, in some way, his apparel scarcely seemed suited to him. The satin coat of russet brown; the deep waistcoat of white satin, flowered with red roses and pink daisies and little sprays of green leaves; the white knee-breeches also of satin, the gold-buckled shoes, matched not with the sturdy form and fierce face. Instead of this costume *à la Régence* one would have more expected to see the buff jerkin of a soldier, the brass spurs at the heels of long brown riding-boots, and, likewise, one of the great swords now reclining in the corner buckled close to his thigh. Or else to have seen the man sitting in some barrack guardroom with, beneath his feet, an uncarpeted floor, and, to his hand, a pint stoop, instead of finding him here in this highly-ornamented saloon.

"The plague seize me!" he exclaimed, using one of his favourite oaths, "but there is no going out to-night. Nor any likelihood of anyone coming in. I cannot go forth to gaze upon my adorable Laure; neither Morlaix nor Sainte Foix are likely to get here."

And, after glancing out at the fast falling snow, he abandoned himself once more to his reflections. Though, now, those reflections were aided by the perusal of a packet of letters which he drew forth from an *escritoire* standing by the side of the fireplace. A bundle of letters all written in a woman's hand.

He knew them well enough-by heart almost; he had read them over and over again in the past year; it was perhaps, therefore, because of this that he now glanced at them as they came to his hand; it happening, consequently, that the one he had commenced to peruse was the last he had received.

It was dated not more than a week back-the night before Christmas, of the year 1719.

"Mon ami," it commenced, "I am desolated with grief that you cannot be with me this Christmastide. I had hoped so much that we should have spent the last New Year's Day together before our marriage."

"Bah!" exclaimed the man, impatiently. "Before our marriage. Bah!" and he rattled the sheet in his hand as he went on with its perusal. "I imagine that," the letter continued, "after all which has gone before and has been between us it will ere long take place-."

"Ah!" he broke off once more, exclaiming, "Ah! you imagine that, dear Marquise. You imagine that. Ha! you imagine that. So be it. Yet, on my part, I imagine something quite the contrary. I dare to imagine it will never take place. I think not. There are others-there is one other. Laure-Laure-Laure Vauxcelles. My beautiful Laure! Yet-yet-I know not. Am I wise? Does she love me? Love me! No matter about that! She will be my wife; the mother of future Desparres. However, let us see. To the Marquise." And again he regarded his letters-flinging this one aside as though not worth the trouble of further re-reading-and took up another. Yet it, also, seemed scarcely to demand more consideration than that which he had accorded its forerunner in his hands, and was also discarded; then another and another, until he had come to the last of the little packet-that which bore the earliest date. This commenced, however, with a vastly different form of address than did the one of which we have seen a portion. It opened with the pretty greeting, "My hero." And it opened, too, with a very feminine form of rejoicing-a pæan of delight.

"At last, at last, at last, my soldier," the writer said, "at last, thou hast come to thine own. The unhappy boy is dead; my hero, my Alcides, is no longer the poor captain following the wars for hard knocks; his position is assured; he is rich, the inheritor, nay, the possessor of his great family title. I salute you, monsieur le-."

As his eyes reached those words, there came to his ears the noise of the great bell pealing in the courtyard as though rung by one seeking immediate entrance. Then, a moment later, the noise of lackeys addressing one another; in another instant, the sound of a footfall in the corridor outside-drawing nearer to the room where the man was. Wherefore he came out of the tower with the window in it, to which he had vainly gone, as though to observe what might be happening in the street-knowing even as he did so that he could see nothing, since, whoever his visitor might be, that visitor and his carriage, or sedan-chair, had already entered the courtyard with his menials.

Then, in answer to the soft knock at the door, he bade the person come in.

"Who is below?" he asked of the footman, thinking some friend had kindly ventured forth on this inclement night to visit him-perhaps to take a hand at pharaon or piquet.

"Monsieur, it is Madame la Marquise-"

"La Marquise?"

"Grignan de Poissy."

For a moment the man addressed stood still, facing his servant; his eyes a little closed, his upper eyelids lowered somewhat; then he said quietly:

"Show Madame la Marquise to this apartment. Or, rather, I will come with you to welcome Madame la Marquise." While, suiting his action to his words, he preceded the footman to the head of the great staircase and warmly welcomed the lady who, by this time, was almost at the head of it. Doubtless, she knew she would not be denied.

That this man had been (as the letter, which he had a few moments ago but glanced at, said) "a poor captain following the wars" was no doubt the fact; now, however, he was becoming a perfect courtier, and testified that such was the case by his demeanour. With easy grace he removed from her shoulders the great furred houppelande, or cloak, which the ladies of the period of the Regency wore on such a night as this, and carried it over his own arm; with equal grace he led her into the room he had but now quitted, placed her in the great fauteuil before the fire, and put before her feet a footstool, while he, with great courtesy, even removed her shoes, and thus left her silk-stockinged feet to benefit by the genial warmth thrown out by the logs.

"I protest it is too good of you, Diane," he whispered, as he paid her all these attentions, "too good of you to visit thus so idle an admirer as I am. See, I, a soldier, a man used to all weathers, have not dared to quit my own hearth on such a night as this. Yet Diane, adorable Diane, why-why-expose yourself to the inclemency of the night-even, almost, I might say, to the gossip of your-and of my-menials."

"The gossip of your menials!" the lady exclaimed. "The gossip of your menials? Will this fresh incident expose us to any further gossip, do you suppose? It is a long while since our names have been coupled together, Monsieur le Duc."

"Monsieur le Duc!" he repeated. "What a form of address! Monsieur le Duc! My name to you is-has ever been-Armand."

"Ay, 'tis so," she answered, while, even as she continued speaking a little bitterly to him, she shifted her feet upon the footstool, so that they should get their full share of the luxurious warmth of the fire. "'Tis so. Has been so for more years now than a woman cares to count. Desparre," she said, addressing him shortly, "how long have we known each other-how old am I?"

For answer he gave her a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders, as though it were impossible such a question should be asked, or, being asked, could possibly be answered by him; while she, her blue eyes fixed upon his face, herself replied to the question. "It is twenty years," she said, "since we first met."

"Alas!" with another shrug, meant this time to express a wince of emotion.

"Yes, twenty years," she continued. "A long while, is it not? I, a young widow then; you, Armand Desparre, a penniless porte-drapeau in the Regiment de Bellebrune. Yet not so penniless either, if I remember aright" – and the blue eyes looked steely now, as they gazed from beneath their thick auburn fringe at him-"not penniless. You lived well for an ensign absolutely without private means-rode a good horse, could throw a main with the richest man in the regiment."

"Diane," he interrupted, "these suggestions, these reminiscences are unseemly."

"Unseemly! Heavens! Yes, they are unseemly. However, no matter for that. You are no longer a poor man. Armand Desparre is rich, he is no more the poor marching soldier, he is Monsieur le Duc Desparre."

"More recollections," he said, with still another shrug. "Diane, we know all this. The world, our world, knows who and what I am."

"Also our world knows, expects, that there is to be a Duchess Desparre."

"Yes," he answered, "it knows, it expects, that."

"Expects! My God!" she exclaimed vehemently, "if it knew all it would not only expect but insist that that duchesse should be the woman who now bears the title of the Marquise Grignan de Poissy."

"It does not know all. Meanwhile," and his eye glanced towards the heap of swords in the corner of the room, "who is there to insist on what my conduct shall be-to order it to be otherwise than I choose it shall be? Frankly, Diane, who is there to insist and make the insistence good?"

"There are men of the De Poissy family," she replied, and her glance, too, rested on those swords. "Desparre is not the only master of fence in Paris."

"Chut! They are your kinsmen. I do not desire to slay them, nor, I presume, will they desire to slay me. And, desiring, what could they do? De Poissy himself is only a boy."

"He is the head of the house. He will not see the wife of the late head slighted." Then, before he could make any answer to this remark, she turned round suddenly on him and exclaimed, while again the blue eyes looked steely through their heavy lashes:

"Who is Laure Vauxcelles?"

This question, asked with such unexpectedness, startled even the man's cynical superciliousness, as he showed by the way in which he stammered forth an answer that was no answer at all.

"Laure-Vauxcelles! What-what-do you know of her? She is not of your-our-class."

"Pardon. Every woman who is well favoured is-of your class."

"What do you know of her?" he repeated, unheeding the taunt, though with a look that might have been regarded as a menacing one.

"Only," she answered, "that which most of those who are of your-our-class know. The gossip of the salon, the court, the Palais Royal. Armand Desparre, I have been in Paris two days and was bidden to the Regent's supper last night-otherwise I should have been still at the Abbaye de Grignan dispensing New Year hospitality with the boy, De Poissy. Instead, therefore, I was at supper in the oval room. And de Parabère, de Sabran, de Noailles, le Duc de Richelieu-a dozen, were there. One hears gossip in the oval room, 'specially when the Regent has drunk sufficient of that stuff," and she nodded towards Monsieur's still unfinished flask of tokay. "When he is asleep at the head of his table endeavouring to-well-sleep off-shake off its fumes ere going to his box close by to hear La Gautier sing."

"What did you hear?" Desparre asked now.

"Gossip," the Marquise answered. "Gossip. Perhaps true-perhaps idle. God knows. The story of a man," she continued, with a shrug of her shoulders, "no longer young, once very poor, yet always with pistoles in his pocket, since he did not disdain to take gifts from a foolish woman whom he had wronged and who loved him."

"Was that mentioned?"

"It was hinted at. It was known, too, by one listener, at least-myself-to be true. A man," she continued, "now well to do, able to gratify almost every desire he possesses. Of high position. The story of a man," she went on with machine-like insistence, "who, finding at last, however, one desire he is not able to gratify-the desire of adding one more woman to his victims, and that a woman young enough to be his daughter-is about to change his character. To abandon that of knave, to adopt that of fool."

"Also," interrupted Monsieur le Duc, "a man who will demand from Madame la Marquise Grignan de Poissy the name of her gossip. It is to be desired that that gossip should be a man. Otherwise, her nephew the Marquis Grignan de Poissy will perhaps consent to be Madame's representative."

"To adopt the rôle of a fool," she continued, unheeding his words. "To marry the woman-the niece of a broken-down gamester-who refuses to become his victim. A creature bred up in the gutter!"

"Madame will allow that this-fool-is subject to no control or criticism?"



"Madame will allow anything that Monsieur le Duc desires. Even, if he pleases, that he is a coward and contemptible."

## CHAPTER II

### LES DEMOISELLES MONTJOIE AT HOME

Outside the snow had ceased to fall; in its place had come the clear, crisp, and biting stillness of an intense frost, accompanied by that penetrating cold which gives those who are subjected to it the feeling that they are themselves gradually freezing, that the blood within them is turning to ice itself. A cold, hard night; with the half-foot long icicles cracking from the increasing density of the frost, and falling, with a little clatter and a shivering, into atoms on the heads or at the feet of the passers-by; a night on which beggars huddled together for warmth in stoops and porches, or, being solitary, laid down moaning in their agony on doorsteps until, at the end, there came that warm, blissful glow which precedes death by frost. A night when the well-to-do who were abroad drew cloaks, roquelaures, and houppelandes tighter round them as they shivered and shook in chariots and sedan chairs; when dogs were brought in from kennels and placed before the blazing fires so that their unhappy carcasses might be thawed back to life and comfort, and when horses in their stalls had rugs and cloths strapped over their backs so that, in the morning, they should not be found stretched dead upon their straw.

Inside, except in the garrets and other dwellings of the outcasts, who had neither fuel to their fires nor rags to their backs, every effort was made to expel the winter cold; wood fires blazed on hearths and in Alsatian stoves; each nook and cranny of every window was plugged carefully; while men, and in many cases, women as well, drank spiced Lunel and Florence, Richebourg and St. Georges, to keep their temperatures up. And drank copiously, too.

It was the coldest night of the winter 1719-20; the coldest night of that long spell of frost which had gripped Paris in its icy grasp.

Yet, in the salons of the Demoiselles Montjoie that frost was confronted-defeated; it seemed unable to penetrate into the warmed and scented rooms, over every door and window of which was hung arras and tapestry; unable to touch, and cause to shiver in touching, either the bare-shouldered women who lounged in the velvet fauteuils or the group of men who, in their turn, wandered aimlessly about.

"Confusion!" exclaimed one of the latter, a well-dressed, middle-aged man, "when is Susanne about to begin? What are we here for? To gaze into each other's fascinating faces or to recount our week-old scandals? The fiend take it! one might as well be at home and have been spared the encounter with the night air!"

"Have patience, Morlaix!" exclaimed a second; "the game never begins until the pigeons are here. Sportsmen fire not into the air, nor against one another. Do you want to win my louis-d'ors, or I yours? No, no! On the contrary, let us combine. So, so," he broke off, "there come two. The Prince Mirabel and Sainte Foix."

"Mirabel and Sainte Foix!" exclaimed the other. "Mirabel and Sainte Foix! My faith, all we shall get out of them will not make us fat. Sainte Foix cannot have got a thousand louis-d'ors left in the world, and those which he has Mirabel will attach for himself. Mon Dieu! that one of the Rohans should be one of us!"

The other shrugged his shoulders; then he said:

"Speak for yourself, mon ami. Meanwhile, I do not consider myself the same as Mirabel. I have not been kicked out of the army. I am no protector of all the sharpers in Paris. Speak for yourself, my friend. For yourself."

"Now, there," said the other, taking not the slightest notice of his acquaintance's protestations, which he probably reckoned at their proper value. "There is one who might be worth-

"Nothing! He would have been once, but his money is all gone. La Mothe over there has had some of it, Mirabel also; even I have touched a little. Now, there is none to touch. They even say he owes the respected Duc Desparre twenty thousand livres, and cannot pay them."

"Desparre will expect them."

"That is possible. But I have great doubts-as to his ever getting them, I mean. Yet he is a gentleman, this Englishman; it may be he will find means to pay. It is a pity he does not ask his countryman, John Law, for assistance. He might put him in the way of making something."

"He might; though that I also doubt. Law has bigger friends to help than dissolute young Englishmen; and they are not countrymen, the financier being Scotch. Meanwhile, as I say, Desparre will expect his money. He will want it, rich as he is, for his honeymoon."

"His honeymoon! Faugh! the wretch. He is fifty if an hour. And, frankly, is it true? Has he bought Laure Vauxcelles?"

"Ay, body and soul; from her uncle Vandecque. She is his, and cannot escape; she is in his grip. There is no hope for her. Vandecque is her guardian; our law gives him full power over her. It is obedience to the guardian's orders-or-you know!"

"Yes, I know. A convent; the veil. I know. Ha! speak of the angels! Behold!" and his eyes turned towards the heavily-curtained doorway, at which a woman, accompanied by a man much her senior in years, appeared at the moment.

A woman! Nay! little more than a girl-yet a girl who ere long would be a beautiful woman. Tall and supple, with a figure giving promise of ripe fulness ere many months should have passed, with a face of sweet loveliness-possessing dark hazel eyes, an exquisite mouth, a head crowned with light chestnut hair, one curl of which (called by the *roués* of the Regent's Court a "follow me, young man") fell over the shoulder to the fair bosom beneath. The face of a girl to dream of by night, to stand before by day and worship.

No wonder that Desparre, forty-five years of age as he really was, and a dissolute, depraved *roué* to whom swift advancing age had brought no cessation of his evil yearnings, was supposed to have shown good taste in purchasing this modern Iphigenia, in buying her from her uncle, the gambler, Vandecque-the man who entered now by her side.

In this salon there was a score of women, all of whom were well favoured enough; yet the glances they cast at Laure Vauxcelles showed that they owned their superior here. Moreover, they envied her. Desparre was thought to be enormously rich-had, indeed, always been considered so since he inherited his dukedom; but now that he had thrust his hand into the golden rain that fell in the Rue Quincampoix and, with it, had drawn forth more than a million livres-as many said! – there was not one of them who, being unmarried, would not have sold herself to him. But he had elected to buy Laure Vauxcelles, they understood; and yet Laure hated him. "She was a beautiful fool!" they whispered to each other.

The tables were ready by the time she and her uncle had made their greetings. The "guests" sat down to biribi, pharaon (*faro*), and lansquenet. It was what they had come for, since the Demoiselles Montjoie kept the most fashionable gambling-house in Paris-a house in which the Regent had condescended to play ere now. A house in which, many years later, a milliner's girl, who was brought there to exhibit her beauty, managed to become transformed into a king's favourite, known afterwards as Madame du Barry.

Soon the gamblers were at it fast and furious. The stockbrokers of the Rues Quincampoix<sup>1</sup> and Vivienne-not having had enough excitement during the day in buying and selling Mississippi shares-were now engaged in retrieving their losses, if possible, or losing their gains. Even the greater part of the women had left the velvet lounges and fauteuils and were tempting fate according to their means,

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<sup>1</sup> This street served as the Bourse of the period.

with crowns, louis-d'ors shares of the Royal Bank, or "The Louisiana Company"; gambling in sums from twenty pounds to a thousand.

And Vandecque, Laure's uncle, having now his purse well lined, though once nothing rubbed themselves together within it but a few beggarly coppers, was presiding at the lansquenet table, had flung down an important sum to make a bank, and was-as loudly as the manners of good society under the Regency would permit-inviting all round him to try their chance. While they, on their part, were eager enough to possess themselves of that purse's contents, though he himself had very little fear that such was likely to be the case.

Two there were, however, who sat apart and did not join in the play-one, the ruined young Englishman of whom Morlaix and his companion had spoken, the other, Laure Vauxcelles, the woman who was to be sold in marriage to Desparre. Neither had spoken, however, on Laure's entrance with Vandecque. The man had remained seated on one of the velvet lounges at the far end of the room, his eyes fixed on the richly-painted ceiling, with its cupids and nymphs and goddesses-fitting allegories to the greatest and most aristocratic gambling hell in Paris! The girl, on entering, had cast one swift glance at him from those, hazel eyes, and had then turned them away. Yet he had seen that glance, although he had taken no notice of it.

Presently, the game waxing more and more furious while Vandecque's back was turned to them (he being much occupied with his earnest endeavours to capture all the bank notes and the obligations of the Royal Bank and the Louisiana Company, and the little piles of gold pieces scattered about), the young man rose from his seat, and, walking to where Laure Vauxcelles sat some twenty paces from him, staring straight before her, said:

"This should be almost Mademoiselle's last appearance here. Doubtless Monsieur le Duc is anxious for-for his union with Mademoiselle. When, if one may make so bold to ask, is it likely to take place?"

For answer, the girl seated before him raised her eyes to those of the young Englishman, then-with a glance towards Vandecque's back, rounded as it bent over the table, while he scooped up the stakes which a successful deal of the cards had made his-said slowly:

"Never. Never-if I can prevent it."

She spoke in a low whisper, for fear the gambler should hear her, yet it was clear and distinct enough to reach the ears of the man before her; and, as he heard the words, he started. Yet, because-although he was still very young-the life he had led, the people he had mixed among in Paris, had taught him to steel himself against the exhibition of all emotion, he said very quietly:

"Mademoiselle is, if I may say it, a little difficult. She appears to reject all honest admiration offered to her. To-to desire to remain untouched by the love of any man?"

"The love of any man! Does Monsieur Clarges regard the love of the Duc Desparre as worth having? Does he regard the Duc Desparre as a man? As one whose wife any woman should desire to become?"

Monsieur Clarges shrugged his shoulders, then he said:

"There have been others."

"Yes," she answered. "There have been others."

"And they were equally unfortunate. There was one-"

"There was one," she replied, interrupting, and with her glance firmly fixed him, "who desired my love; who desired me for his wife. A year ago. Is it not so? And, Monsieur Clarges, what was my answer to him? You should know. Recall it."

"Your answer was that you did not love him; that, therefore, you could be no wife of his. Now, Mademoiselle, recall yourself-it is your turn-what he then said. It was this, I think. That he so loved you that, without receiving back any love from you in return, he begged you to grant his prayer; to believe that he would win that love at last if you would but give yourself to him; while, if you desired it, he would so show the reverence he held you in-that, once you were his wife, he would demand

nothing more from you. Nothing but that he might be by your side; be but as a brother, a champion, a sentinel to watch and guard over you, although a husband in truth. That was what he said. That was all he desired. Mademoiselle, will the Duc Desparre be as loyal a husband as this, do you think?"

"The Duc Desparre will never be husband of mine."

The Englishman again shrugged his shoulders. He had learnt the trick well during a long exile in Paris-an exile dating from the time when the Pretender's cause was lost by the Earl of Mar, and he, a Jacobite, had followed him to France after the "15."

"But how to avoid it now?" he asked. "The time draws near-is at hand. How escape?"

"Is there not one way?" she asked, with again an upward glance of those eyes.

"No no no!" he replied, his calmness deserting him now. "No! no! Not that! Not that!"

"How else? There is no other."

As they spoke the play still went on at the tables; women shrieked still, half in earnest half in jest, as a card turned up that told against them. Still Vandecque crouched over the board where he held the bank and where his greedy hands drew in the stakes, for he was winning heavily. Already he had twenty thousand livres before him drawn from the pockets of Mirabel, Sainte Foix, the stockbrokers of the Rues Quincampoix and Vivienne, and from the female gamblers. And, gambler himself, he had forgotten all else; he had forgotten almost that the niece whom he guarded so carefully until the time should come when he would hand her over to her purchaser, was in the room.

"It is an accursed law," the Englishman murmured; "a vile, accursed law which gives a father or a guardian such power. In no other country would it be possible. Yet Lau-Mademoiselle-that which you meditate must never be. Oh! to think of it! To think of it!"

He buried his head in his hands now as he spoke-he had taken a seat beside her-and reflected on the terror of the thing, the horror that she, whom he had loved so madly-whom, alas! he loved still, though she cared nothing for him-should be doomed to one of two extremes-marriage with Desparre, or a convent. Or, worse-a third, a more fearful horror! That which she meditated-death!

For that, if she had taken this resolve, she would carry it out he did not doubt. She would never have proclaimed her intention had she not been determined. She had said it was the only way!

But, suddenly, he looked up at her, bent his head nearer to hers, whispered a word. Then said aloud:

"There is your safety. There your only chance. Take it."

As he spoke, she started, and a rich glow came into her face while her eyes sparkled; but a moment later her countenance fell again, and she drew away from him.

"No! no!" she said. "No! no! Not that way. Not that. Not such a sacrifice as that. Never! never never!"

## CHAPTER III

### THE ROMANCE OF MONSIEUR VANDECQUE

An evening or so after the meeting between Laure Vauxcelles and Walter Clarges at the gambling hell kept by the Demoiselles Montjoie, Vandecque sat in the saloon of his apartments in the Passage du Commerce. Very comfortable apartments they were, too, if bizarre ornaments and rococo furniture, combined with the most gorgeous colours possible to be obtained, could be considered as providing comfort. Yet, since it was a period of *bizarrerie* and whimsical caprice in furniture, clothing, and life generally (including morals), it may be that, to most people—certainly to most people with whom the once broken-down but now successful gambler was permitted to associate—the rococo nature of his surroundings would not have appeared particularly out of place. And, undoubtedly, such a warm nest must have brought comfort to the heart of the man who paid at the present moment 250f. a week for the right of occupying that nest, since there had been a time once when he scarce knew how to find one franc a day whereby to pay in advance for a night's lodgings in a back alley. Also, he had passed, previously to that period of discomfort, a portion of his life away from Paris in a condition which the French termed politely (whenever they mentioned such an unpleasant subject) "in retreat," and had been subjected to a process that they designated as "*marqué*," which, in plain English, means that he had been at the galleys as a slave and had been branded. "For the cause of religion," he said, if he ever said anything at all on the subject; "for a question of theft and larceny with violence" being, however, written in the factum of the eminent French counsel who appeared against him before the judges in Paris.

His life had been a romance, he was in the habit of observing in his moments of ease, which were when the gambling hells were closed during the day-time, or the stockbrokers' offices in the Rues Quincampoix and Vivienne during the night-time. And so, indeed, it had been if romance is constituted and made up of robbery, cheating, chicanery, the wearing of blazing scarlet coats one month and the standing bare-backed in prison yards during the next, there to have the shoulders and loins scourged with a whip previously steeped in brine. A romance, if drinking flasks of champagne and iced tokay at one period, and water out of street fountains at another, or riding in gilt sedan-chairs one week and being flogged along at a cart tail another, formed one. For all these things had happened to Jean Vandecque, as well as the galleys in the past, with the carcan, or collar around his neck, and the possession of the gorgeous apartments in the Passage du Commerce at the present moment—all these, and many more.

With also another romance—or the commencement and foundation of one. That which has now to be told.

Struggling on foot along the great road that leads from the South to Paris, ten years before this story begins, Jean Vandecque (with the discharge of a liberated convict from the galley *Le Requin* huddled away in the bosom of his filthy shirt) viewed the capital at last—his face burnt black by the Mediterranean suns under which he had slaved for five years, and by the hot winds which had swept over his nakedness during that time. God knows how he would have got so far, how have traversed those weary miles without falling dead by the wayside, had it not been for that internal power which he possessed (in common with the lowest, as well as the highest of beasts) of finding subsistence somehow; of supporting life. An egg stolen here and there along the country roads; a fowl seized, throttled, and eaten raw, if no sticks could be found wherewith to make a fire; a child robbed of a loaf—and lucky that it was not throttled too; a lonely grange despoiled; a shopkeeper's till in some hamlet emptied of a few sous; a woman cajoled out of a drink of common wine; and Paris at last. Paris, the home of the rich and well-to-do; the refuge of every knave and sharper who wished to prey

upon others. Paris, into which he limped footsore and weary, and clad in dusty rags; Paris, full of wealth and full of fools to be exploited.

He found his home, or, at least, he found the home in which his unhappy wife sheltered; a garret under the roof of a crazy, tumble-down house behind Notre Dame-found both home and wife after a day's search and many inquiries made in cellars and reeking courts and hideous alleys, into which none were allowed to penetrate except those who bore the brand of vagabond and scoundrel stamped clear and indelible upon them.

Also, he found something else: A child-a girl eight years old-playing in a heap of charred faggots in the chimney; a child who told him that she was hungry, and that there was no food at all in the place.

"Whose is the brat?" he asked of his wife, knowing very well that, at least, it was not hers, since it must of a certainty have been born three years before he went "into retreat" on the Mediterranean. "Whose? Have you grown so rich that you adopt children now; or is it paid for, eh?"

"It is paid for," the patient creature said, shuddering at the man's return, since she had hoped that he had died in the galley and would never, consequently, wander back to Paris to molest her. "Paid for, and will be-

"Badly paid for, at least, since its adoption leads you to no better circumstances than these in which I find you. Give me some food. I have eaten nothing for hours."

"Nor I; nor the child there. Not for twenty-four hours. I have not a sol; nor anything to sell."

The man looked at his wife from under bushy black eyebrows-though eyebrows not much blacker than his baked face; then he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew forth five sols and weighed them in his hands as though they were gold pieces. He had stolen them that morning from the basket of a blind man sleeping in the sun outside St. Roch, when no one was looking.

"Go, buy bread," he said. "Get something. I am starving. Go."

"Bread-with these! They will not buy enough for one. And we are so hungry, she and I. See, the child weeps for hunger. Have you no more?"

"Not a coin. Have you?"

"Alas! God, He knows! Nothing. And we are dying of hunger."

"How is it you are not at work, earning something?"

"They will trust me no more. They fear I shall sell the goods confided to me. Who entrusts velvets, or silk, or laces to such as I, or lets such as I enter their shops to work there?"

"What is to be done, then?"

"Die," the woman said. "There is nought else to do."

"Bah! In Paris! Imbecile! In Paris, full of wealth and food! Stay here till I return."

And he went swiftly out. Some hours later, when the sun had sunk behind the great roof of the Cathedral, when the children were playing about beneath the spot where the statues were, and when the pigeons were seeking their niches, those three were eating a hearty meal, all seated on the floor, since there was neither chair nor table nor bed within the room; a meal consisting of a loaf, a piece of bacon, and some hard-boiled eggs. The woman and the child got but a poor share, 'tis true, their portions being the morsels which Vandecque tossed to them every now and again; while of a wine bottle, which he constantly applied to his mouth, they got nothing at all. Yet their hunger was appeased; they were glad enough to do without drink.

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The passing years brought changes to two of these outcasts, as it did to the wealthy in Paris. Vandecque's wife had died of the small-pox twelve months after his return; the adopted child, Vandecque's *niece*, Mdlle. Vauxcelles, was developing fast into a lovely girl; while as for Vandecque-well! the gallows bird, the man who had worn the iron collar round his neck and who bore upon his shoulders the brand, had disappeared, and in his place had come a grave, sedate person clad always

in sombre clothes, yet a man conspicuous for the purity of his linen and lace and the neatness of his attire. While, although he had not as yet attained to the splendour of the Passage du Commerce, his rooms in the Rue du Paon were comfortable and there was no lack of either food, or drink, or fuel—the three things that the outcast who has escaped and triumphed over the miseries and memories of the past most seeks to make sure of in the future.

He was known also to great and rich personages now, he had patrons amongst the nobility and was acquainted with the roués who circled round the Regent. He was prominent, and, as he frequently told himself, was "respected."

He was a successful man.

How he had become so, however, he did not dilate on—or certainly not on the earlier of his successes after his reappearance! — even when making those statements about his romantic life with which he occasionally favoured his friends. Had he done so, he would not, perhaps, have shocked very much the ears, or morals, of his listeners, but he must, at least, have betrayed the names of several eminent patrons for whom he had done dirty work in a manner which might have placed his own ears, if not his life, in danger, and would, thereby, probably have led to his once more traversing the road to Marseilles or to Cette—which is almost the same thing—to again partake of the shelter of the galleys.

Yet he would never have found or come into contact with these illustrious patrons, these men who required secret agents to minister to their private pleasures, had it not been for a stupendous piece of good fortune which befell him shortly after his return to Paris from the Mediterranean. It was, indeed, so strange a piece of good fortune that it may well be set down here as a striking instance of how the Devil takes care of his own.

From his late wife he had never been able to obtain any information as to who "the brat" was whom he had found playing about in the ashes on the hearth in the garret, when he returned from his period of southern seclusion; he had not found out even so much as what name she was supposed to bear, except that of "Laure," which seemed to have been bestowed on the child by Madame Vandecque on the principle that one name was as good as another by which to call a child. She had said herself that she did not know anything further—that, being horribly poor after Vandecque had departed for the south, she had yielded to the offer of an abbé—now dead—to adopt the girl, twenty-five louis-d'ors being paid to her for doing so. That was all, she said, that she knew. But, she added (with a firmness which considerably astonished her lord and master) that, especially as she had come to love the creature which was so dependent on her, she meant to carry out her contract and to do her best by her. To Vandecque's suspicious nature—a nature sharpened by countless acts of roguery of all kinds—this statement presented itself as a lie, and he believed that either his wife had received a very much larger sum of money in payment for the child's adoption than she had stated, or that she was surreptitiously receiving regular sums of money at intervals on its behalf. Of the two ideas, he inclined more to the latter than the former, and it was owing to this belief that he did not at once take steps to disembarass himself of the burden with which he found himself saddled, and send the child off at once to the Home of the Foundlings whence she would eventually have been sold to a beggar for a few livres and trained to demand alms in the street, as usually happened to deserted children in the reign of Louis the Great. Later on he was thankful—he told himself that he was "devoutly thankful" — that he had never done anything of the sort.

He was one day, about a year after his wife's death, mounting the rickety stairs which led to the garret in which he had found the woman on his return, when, to his astonishment, he saw a Sister of Charity standing outside the door of his room, looking hesitatingly about her, and glancing down towards him as he ascended to where she was. And it was very evident to him that the woman had been knocking at his door without receiving any answer to her summons. This was a thing certain to happen in any case, since it was Vandecque's habit on quitting his shelter during the day-time to send Laure to play with all the other vagrant children of the alley, and to put the key in his pocket.



At night, the plan was varied somewhat when he went forth, the girl being sent to her bed and locked into the room for safety.

"Madame desires-?" he said now, as he reached the landing on which the sister stood, while taking off his frayed hat to her with an inimitable gesture of politeness which his varied and "romantic" career had taught him well enough how to assume when necessary. "Madame desires-"

"To see the woman, Madame Jasmin," the sister answered, her grave solemn eyes roving over the man's poor clothes as she answered. Or, perhaps, since his clothes in such a spot as this would scarcely be out of place, examining his face with curiosity.

"Madame Jasmin!" he repeated to himself, but to himself only-"Madame Jasmin!" How long it was since he had heard that name! Ages ago, it seemed; ages. "Madame Jasmin!" The name his wife had borne as a young widow of twenty, the name she had parted with for ever, on the morning when she gave herself to him at the altar of St. Vincent de Paul. Yet, now, of late years, she seemed to have used it again for some reason, some purpose, and had probably done so during his retreat. Only-what was that purpose? He must know that.

"Madame Jasmin," he said in a subdued voice-a voice that was meant to, and perhaps did, express some sorrow for the worn, broken helpmate and drudge who had gone away and left him, "Madame Jasmin is dead. A year ago. My poor wife was delicate; our circumstances did not conduce to-"

"Ah! your wife. You are, then, Monsieur Jasmin? She doubtless, therefore-you-you understand why I am here? That I have brought what was promised."

Understanding nothing, utterly astonished, yet with those consoling words, "I have brought what was promised," sinking deep into his mind, Vandecque bowed his head acquiescingly.

"I understand," he said. "Understand perfectly. Will not Madame give herself the trouble to enter my poor abode? We can talk there at our leisure." And he opened the door and ushered her within.

## CHAPTER IV

### A SISTER OF MERCY

Some betterment of his circumstances must have come to Vandecque between the time when he had returned from the South and now (how it had come, whether by villainy or honest labour, if he ever turned his hand to such a thing, it would be impossible to say), since the garret, though still poor and miserable, presented a better appearance than it had previously done. There were, to wit, some chairs in it at this time; cheap common things, yet fit to sit upon; a table with the pretence of a cloth upon it; also a carpet, with a pattern that must once have been so splendid that the beholder could but conclude that it had passed from hand to hand in its descent, until it had at last reached this place. A miserable screen also shut off a bed in which, doubtless, Vandecque reposed, while a large cupboard was fitted up as a small bedroom, or closet, in which possibly the child slept.

In one of these chairs the owner of the room invited his visitor to be seated, in the other he placed himself, the table between them. Then, after a pause, while Vandecque's eyes sought again and again those of the sister's, as though their owner was wondering what the next revelation would be, the latter recommenced the conversation. She repeated, too, the purport of her former words, if not the words themselves.

"Doubtless Madame Jasmin told you that you might expect my coming. It has been delayed longer than it should have been. Yet-yet-even in the circumstances of my-of the person for whom I act-money is not always quite easy to be obtained," and she looked at Vandecque as though expecting an answer in assent.

"Naturally. Naturally," he made haste to reply, his quick wits prompting him to understand what that reply should be, while also they told him that this explanation, coupled with the presence here of the visitor, gave an almost certain testimony to the fact that the money mentioned had been now obtained. "Naturally. And-and-it was of no import. Since my poor wife passed away we have managed to struggle through our existence somehow."

Yet he would have given those ears which had so often been in peril of the executioner's knife to know from what possible source any money could have become due to his late wife. Her first husband had died in almost poverty, he recalled; they had soon spent what little he had had to leave his widow. Then, even as he thus pondered, the sister's voice broke in on him again.

"It is understood that this is the last sum. And that it is applied, as agreed upon with your late wife, to the proper bringing up and educating of the child, and to her support by you. You understand that; you give your promise as a man of honour? Your wife said that you were a 'sailor'-sailors are, I have heard, always honourable men."

"I-I was a sailor at the time she took charge of little Laure. As one-as a man of honour-I promise. She shall have nought to complain of. And I have come to love her. I-believe me-I have been good to her, as good as, in my circumstances, I could be."

And, knave as Vandecque was, he was speaking the truth now. He had been good to the child. These two, so strangely brought together, had grown fond of each other, and the vagabond not only found a place in his heart for the little thing, but, which was equally as much to the purpose, found for himself a place in hers. If he had ever seriously thought, in the first days of finding her in his garret, of sending her to the home for abandoned children, he had long since forgotten those ideas. He would not have parted with her now for that possible sum of money which it seemed extremely likely he was going to become the possessor of for having retained her.

"I do not doubt it. Yet, ere I can give you the money, there are conditions to be complied with. First, I must see the child; next, you must give me your solemn promise-a promise in writing-that you will conform to my demands as to the bringing of her up. You will not refuse?"

"Refuse!" said Vandecque. "Refuse! Madame, what is there to refuse? That which you demand is that which I have ever intended, not knowing that you were-not knowing when to expect your coming. Now you have brought the money-you have brought it, have you not?" speaking a little eagerly (for the life of him he could not help that eagerness) – "my dearest desire can be accomplished."

"Yes, I have brought it," the woman answered. "It is here," and she took from out her pocket a little canvas sack or bag, that to Vandecque's eyes looked plump and fat. "It contains the promised sum," she said, "and it is-should be-enough. With that the child can be fed, clothed, educated, if you husband it well. Fitted for a decent, if simple, life. You agree that it is so, Monsieur Jasmin?"

Vandecque bowed his head courteously, acquiescingly, while muttering, "Without doubt it is enough with careful husbanding." Yet, once more he would have given everything, all he had in the world-though 'twas little enough-to know what that small canvas bag contained. While, as for acquiescing in its sufficiency, he would have done that even though it contained but a handful of silver, as he thought might after all be the case.

"Take it then," she said, passing it across the table to him, while the principal thought in Vandecque's mind as she did so was that, whosoever had chosen this simpleton for his, or her agent, must be a fool, or one who had but little choice in the selection of a go-between, "and, if you choose, count the gold; you will find it as promised."

Count the gold! So it was gold! A bag full! Some two or three hundred pieces at least, or he, whose whole life had been spent in getting such things by hook or by crook, in gambling hells, or by, as that accursed advocate had said who prosecuted for the King, theft and larceny, or as a coiner, was unable to form any judgment. And they were his, must be his, now. Were they not in his own room, to his hand? Even though this idiotic Sister of Charity should decide to repossess herself of them, what chance would she have of doing so. Against him, the ex-galley slave. Him! the knave.

Yet he had to play a part, to reserve his efforts for something more than this present bag of louis'. If one such was forthcoming, another might be, in spite of what the foolish woman had said about it being the last; for were there not such things as spyings and trackings, and the unearthing of secrets; would there not be, afterwards, such things as the discovery of some wealthy man or woman's false step? Oh that it might be a woman's, since they were so much easier to deal with. And then, extortion; blackmail. Ha! there was a bird somewhere in France that laid golden eggs-that would lay golden eggs so long as it lived; one that must be nourished and fed with confidence-at least, at first-not frightened away.

He pushed the bag back towards the Sister, remembering he could wrench it from her again at any moment. With a calm dignity, which might well have become the most highbred gentleman of the Quartier St. Germain hard by, he muttered that, as for counting, such an outrage was not to be thought upon. Also he said:

"Madame has not seen the child. She stipulated that she should do so. Had she not thus stipulated, I must myself have requested her to see her."

Then he quitted the room, leaving the bag of money lying on the table, and, descending one or two of the flights of stairs, sent a child whom he knew, and whom he happened to observe leaving another room, to seek for little Laure and bid her return at once. At one moment ere he descended he had thought of turning the key (which he had left outside when he and his visitor entered the apartment) softly in the lock and thereby preventing her from escaping; but he remembered that he would be on the stairs between her and the street, and that he did not mean to go farther than the doorstep. She was safe.

He returned, therefore, saying that the child would be with them shortly. Then to expedite matters (as he said), he asked if it would not be well for him to sign the receipt as desired? The receipt or promise, as to what he undertook to perform.

"That, too, is here," she replied, while Vandecque's shrewd eye noticed, even as she spoke, that the bag of louis' lay untouched as he had left it. "Read it, then sign."

He did read it, laughing inwardly to himself meanwhile, though showing a grave, thoughtful face outwardly, since his sharp intelligence told him that it was a document of no value whatever. It was made out in the form of a receipt from Madame Jasmin—who had had no legal existence for twelve years, and was now dead—to a person whose name was carefully and studiously omitted from the paper (though that, he knew, would afterwards be filled up) on behalf of a female child, "styled Laure by the woman Jasmin." A piece of paper, he told himself, not worth the drop of ink spilt upon it. Or, even though it were so, not ever likely to be used or produced by the individual who took such pains to shroud himself, or herself, in mystery. A worthless document, which he would have signed for a franc, let alone a bag of golden louis.'

Aloud, however, he said:

"To make it legal in the eyes of his Majesty's judges, the name of my dear wife must be altered to that of mine. Shall I do it or will you?"

"You, if it pleases you."

Whereon Vandecque altered the name of "la femme Jasmin" to that of "le Sieur Jasmin," householder, since, as he justly remarked aloud, he was no longer a sailor, and then, with many flourishes—he being a master hand at penmanship of all kinds—signed beneath the document the words, "Christophe Jasmin." Christophe was not his name, but, as he said to himself saturninely, no more was Jasmin, wherefore he might as well assume the one as the other. Moreover, he reflected that should the paper ever see the light again, it might be just as well for him to be able to deny the whole name as a part of it.

As he finished this portion of the transaction, the door opened and little Laure came in, hot and flushed with the games she had been playing with the other *gamines* of the court, yet with already upon her face the promise of that beauty which was a few years later to captivate the hearts of all who saw her, including the Duc Desparre and the English exile, Walter Clarges. Only, there was as yet no sign upon that face of the melancholy and sorrow which those later years brought to it as she came to understand the life her guardian led; to understand, too, the rottenness of the existence by which she was surrounded. Instead, she was bright and merry as a child of her years should be, gay and insouciant, not understanding nor foreseeing how dark an opening to Life's future was hers. As for externals, she was well enough dressed; better dressed, indeed, than those among whom she mixed. Her little frock of dark Nîmes serge—the almost invariable costume of the lowly in France—was not a mass of rags and filth, her boots and thread stockings not altogether a mockery.

"Madame sees," Vandecque remarked, as the child ran towards him with her hands outstretched and her eyes full of gladness, until she stopped, embarrassed at the sight of the strange lady with the solemn glance; "Madame sees; she recognises that she need have no fear, no apprehension."

"I see." Then, because she was a woman, she called Laure to her and kissed and fondled the child, muttering, "Poor child; poor little thing," beneath her breath. And, though she would have shuddered and besought pardon for days and nights afterwards on her knees, had she recognised what was passing through her mind, she was in truth uttering maledictions on the mother who could thus send away for ever from her so gentle and helpless a little creature as this; who could send her forth to the life she was now leading, to the life that must be before her.

The interview was at an end, and the sister rose from her seat. As for Vandecque, he would willingly have given half of whatever might be in that bag of money still lying on the table—his well-acted indifference to the presence of such a thing preventing him from even casting the most casual glance at it—could he have dared to ask one question, or throw out one inquiry as to whom the principal might be in the affair. Yet it was impossible to do so since he was supposed to know all that his wife had known, while actually not aware if she herself had been kept in ignorance of the child's connections or, on the contrary, had been confided in. "If she had only known more," he thought; "or, knowing more, had only divulged all to me."

But she was in her grave now, and, rascal though he had been, he could not bring himself to curse the poor drudge lying in that grave for having held her peace against such a man as he was, and knew himself to be. If she knew all, then, he acknowledged, it was best she should be silent; if she knew nothing-as he thought most likely-so, also, it was best.

But, still, he meant to know himself, if possible, something about the child's origin. He, at least, was under no promised bond of secrecy and silence; he had never been confided in. For, to know everything was, he felt certain, to see a comfortable future unroll itself before him; a future free from all money troubles-the only discomfort which he could imagine was serious in this world. The person who had sent that bag of louis'-the woman had said it contained gold! – he repeated to himself, could doubtless provide many more. He must know who that person was.

With still an easy grace which seemed to be the remnant of a higher life than that in which he now existed, he held the door open for his visitor to pass out; with equally easy politeness he followed her down the rickety stairs and would have escorted her to the end of the court, or alley, and afterwards, unknown to her, have followed the simple creature to whatever portion of Paris she might have gone, never losing sight of his quarry, but that, at the threshold, she stopped suddenly and bade him come no farther.

"It must not be," she said. "Monsieur Jasmin, return. And-forget not your duty to the child."

For a moment he paused dumfounded, perceiving that this simpleton was, in sober truth, no such fool as he had supposed her. Then he bowed, wished her good day, promising all required of him as he did so, and retired back into the passage of the house. Nor could any glance thrown through the crack of the open door aid him farther. He saw her pause at the entrance to the court, and, standing still, look back for some minutes or so, as though desirous of observing if he was following her; also, he saw her glance directed to the window of his room above, as though seeking to discover if he was glancing out of it; if he had rushed up there to spy upon her.

Then, a moment later, she was gone from out the entrance to the court. And, creeping swiftly now to that entrance, and straining his eyes up and down the long street, he observed that no sign of the woman was visible.

He had lost all trace of her.

Amidst the hackney coaches and the hucksters' carts, and, sometimes, a passing carriage of the nobility from the neighbouring Quartier St. Germain, she had disappeared, leaving no sign behind.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DUKE'S DESIRE

Vandecque never discovered who that woman was, whence she came, nor where she vanished to. Never, though he brought to bear upon the quest which he instituted for her an amount of intelligent search that his long training in all kinds of cunning had well fitted him to put in action. He watched for days, nay, weeks, in the neighbourhood of the Hospital of Mercy, to or from which most of the Sisters, who were not engaged in nursing or other acts of charity elsewhere, passed regularly-yet never, amongst some scores of them who met his eyes, could he discover the woman he sought. He questioned, too, those in the court who had been dwelling there when first his wife came to occupy the garret in which he had found her later, as to whether they could remember aught of the arrival of the child. He asked questions that produced nothing satisfactory, since all testified to the truth of that which the poor woman had so often told him-namely, that the child was brought to her before she came to this spot. Indeed, he would have questioned Laure herself as to what she could remember concerning her earliest years, only what use was it to ask questions of one who had been but an infant, unable even to talk, at the time the event happened.

At last-and after being confronted for months by nothing but a dense blackness of oblivion which he could not penetrate-he decided that the woman who had appeared to him as a simple and unsophisticated *religieuse*, capable only of blindly and faithfully carrying out the orders given to her by another person, was, in truth, no Sister of Charity whatever, but a scheming person who had temporarily assumed the garb she wore as a disguise. He came also to believe that she herself was Laure's mother, that she had bound herself in some way to make the payment which he had by such extreme good fortune become the recipient of, and that, in one thing at least, she had uttered the actual truth-the actual truth when she had said that those louis' would be the last forthcoming, that there could never be any more. Had she not, he recalled to mind, said that such a sum as she brought was not easily come by, as an excuse for her not having paid them before? Also, had she not wept a little over the child, folded her to her bosom, and called her "Poor little thing"? Did not both these things most probably point to the fact that, judged by the latter actions, she was the girl's mother, and, according to the statement which preceded it, that she was not a woman of extraordinarily large means? Had she been so, she would have been both able and willing to pay down more than five hundred louis' for the hiding of her secret, and would, to have that secret kept always safely (and also to possess the power of seeing the child now and again without fear of detection) have been prepared to make fresh payments from time to time.

For five hundred louis' was what the canvas bag had contained. Five hundred louis', as Vandecque found when, on returning to the garret after losing sight of the woman at the entrance to the court, he had turned them all out on to the table. Five hundred louis' exactly, neither more nor less, proving that the sum was a carefully counted one; doubtless, too, one duly arranged for. Louis' that were of all kinds, and of the reigns during which they had been in existence-the original ones of Louis the Just; the more imposing ones of Le Roi Soleil, with the great sun blazing on the reverse side; the bright, new ones but recently struck for the present boy-king by order of the Regent; all of which led the astute Vandecque to conclude that the pile had been long accumulating-that the first batch might be an old nest egg, or an inheritance; that the second batch was made up of savings added gradually; that the third had been got together by hook or by crook, with a determination to complete the full sum.

"Yet, what matters!" he said, to himself, as he tossed the gold pieces about in his eager hands, and gloated over them with his greedy eyes; tossing, too, a double louis d'or of the treacherous Le Juste, which he had come across, to the child to play with-"what matters where they come from, how

they were gathered together to hide a woman's shame? They are mine now! Mine! Mine! Mine! A capital! A bank! The foundation of a fortune, carefully handled! Come, child; come, Laure; come with me. To the *fournisseur's*, first; then to the dining rooms. Some new, clean clothes for both of us, and then a meal to make our hearts dance within us. We are rich, my child; rich, my little one. Rich! Rich! Rich!"

For, to the whilom beggared outcast and galley slave, five hundred louis' were wealth.

Time passed; in truth it seemed that Vandecque was indeed rich, or growing rich. The garret was left behind; four rooms in the Rue du Paon preceded by a year or so that apartment in the Passage du Commerce at which he eventually arrived. Four rooms, one a dining-room, another a parlour, in which at midnight there came sometimes a score of men to gamble-women sometimes came too-and a bedroom for each. He was growing well-to-do, his capital accumulating as capital will accumulate in the hands of the man who always holds the bank and makes it a stipulation that, on those terms alone, can people gamble beneath his roof.

Meanwhile Laure was fast developing into a woman-was one almost. She was now seventeen, for she was within a year of the time when the exile, Walter Clarges, was to whisper the words of suggested salvation in her ear in the saloon of the demoiselles Montjoie-suggested salvation from her marriage with Monsieur le Duc Desparre, from his embraces. A beautiful girl, too, with her sweet hair bound up now about her shapely head, her deep hazel eyes full and lustrous, calm and pure. Una herself passed no more undefiled amidst the horrors of Wandering Wood than did Laure Vauxcelles amidst the gamblers and the dissolute *roués* who surrounded the court of Philippe le Débonnaire, and who, ere the games began at night-when occasionally permitted to see her-found time to cast admiring glances at her wondrous, fast-budding beauty.

The name Vauxcelles was, of course, no more hers than was that of Laure, which had been given to her by poor Madame Vandecque when first she took the deserted and discarded waif to her kindly heart. But as Vandecque had elected to style her his niece, so, too, he decided to give her a name which would have been that of an actual niece if he had ever had one. He recalled the fact that he had once possessed an elder sister, now long since dead, who had married a man from Lorraine whose name was Vauxcelles, and, he being also dead, the name was bestowed on his *protégée*. It answered well enough, he told himself, since Laure had come to his late wife far too early in her life to remember aught that had preceded her arrival under the roof of the unhappy woman's earlier garret; and it formed a sufficient answer and explanation to any questions the girl might ever ask as to her origin. In sober fact, she believed that she was actually the child of his dead and gone sister and her husband.

She would have loved her uncle more dearly than she did-she would have loved the grave, serious man who had suffered so for his "religion," as he often told her, but for two things. The first was that she knew him to be a gambler; that he grew rich by enticing men to his apartments and by winning their money; that several young men had been ruined beneath their roof, and that more than one had destroyed himself after such ruin had fallen upon him. She knew, too, that others stole so as to be able to take part in the *faro* and *biribi* that was played there; to take part, too, in the brilliant society of those members of the aristocracy who condescended to visit the Rue du Paon and to win their stolen money. For there sometimes came, amongst others, that most horrible of young *roués*, the Duc de Richelieu and Fronsac, from whom the girl shrank as from a leper, or some noisome reptile; there, too, came De Noailles, reeking with the impurities of an unclean life; and De Biron, who was almost as bad. Sometimes also, amongst the women, came the proud De Sabran, who condescended to be the Regent's "friend," but redeemed herself in her own eyes by insulting him hourly, and by telling him that, when God had finished making men and lackeys, He took the remnants of the clay and made Kings and Regents. Laughing La Phalaris came, too, sometimes; also Madame de Parabère; once the Regent came himself; leaning heavily on the arm of his Scotch financier, and, under his

astute mathematical calculations, managed to secure a large number of Vandecque's pistoles, so that the latter cursed inwardly while maintaining outwardly a face as calm and still as alabaster.

An illustrious company was this which met in the ex-galley slave's apartments!

What to Laure was worse than all, however, was that her uncle sometimes desired her to be agreeable to occasional guests who honoured his rooms with their presence. Not, it is true, to the dissolute roués nor the Regent's mistresses-to do the soiled and smirched swindler of bygone days justice, he respected the girl's innocence and purity too much for that-nor to those men who were married and from whom there was nothing to be obtained. But he perceived clearly enough her swift developing beauty; he knew that there, in that beauty, was a charm so fresh and fascinating that it might well be set as a stake against a great title, an ancient and proud name, the possession of enormous wealth. Before loveliness inferior to Laure's, and purity not more deep-for such would have been impossible-he had known of, heard of, the heads of the noblest houses in France bowing, while exchanging for the possession of such charms the right to share their names. What had happened before, he mused, might well happen again.

Laure, the outcast, the outcome of the gutters and the mud, the abandoned child, might yet live to share a ducal coronet, a name borne with honour since the days of the early Capets. And, with her, he would mount, too, go hand in hand, put away for ever a disgraceful past, a past from which he still feared that some spectre might yet arise to denounce and proclaim him. If she would only yield to his counsel-only do that! If she only would!

Suitors such as he desired were not lacking. One, he was resolved she should accept by hook or by crook, as he said to himself in his own phrase. This was the newly succeeded Duc Desparre, the man who a year before had been serving as an officer on paltry pay in the Regiment de Bellebrune, and taking part in the Catalonian campaign-the man who, in middle life, had succeeded to a dukedom which a boy of eighteen had himself succeeded to but a year before that. But the lad was then already worn out with dissipation which a sickly constitution, transmitted to him by half-a-dozen equally dissipated forerunners, was not able to withstand. A cold contracted at a midnight fête given by the Regent in the gardens of Madame de Parabère's country villa at Asnieres, had done its work. It had placed in the hands of the soldier who had nothing but his pay and his bundle of swords (and a few presents occasionally sent him by an admiring woman), a dukedom, a large estate, a great rent-roll.

It was six months before that snowy night on which the Marquise Grignan de Poissy paid her visit to Monsieur le Duc, that Desparre, flinging all considerations of family, of an ancient title and a still more ancient name, to the winds, determined that this girl should be his wife, that he would buy her with his coronet, since in no other way could she be his.

"I desire her. I love her. I will possess her," he said to himself by night and day; "I will. I must marry her. Curse it, 'tis strange, too, how her beauty has bound me down; I who have loved so many, yet never thought of marrying one of them. I, the poor soldier, who had nothing to offer in exchange for a woman's heart but a wedding ring, and would never give even that. Now that I am well to do, a great prize, I sacrifice myself."

Yet he chuckled, too, as he resolved to make the sacrifice, recognising that it was not only his love for and desire of possessing this girl which was egging him on to the determination, but something else as well. The desire to retaliate upon his numerous kinswomen who had once ignored him, but who now grovelled at his feet. To wound, as he termed them, the "women of his tribe," whose doors were mostly shut to the beggarly captain of the Regiment de Bellebrune, but who, in every case, would have now prostrated themselves before him with pleasure-the elder ones because there was much of the family wealth which he might direct towards them and their children eventually, if he so chose, and also because rumour said that his acquaintanceship with the Regent and John Law was doubling and trebling that wealth; the younger ones because there was the title and the coronet and the great position ready to be shared with some woman. Yet he meant to defeat them all, to retaliate upon them for past slights. The only share which they should have in any wedding of his would be



the witnessing of it with another woman, and that a woman of whom no one knew anything beyond the fact that she belonged to the inferior classes, and was the niece and ward of a man who kept a gambling-house.

It would be a great, a stupendous retaliation-a retaliation he could gloat over and revel in; a repayment for all he had endured in his earlier days.

One thing alone stood in the way of the accomplishment of that retaliation. Laure Vauxcelles refused absolutely to consent to become the Duchesse Desparre-indeed, to marry anyone-as Vandecque told Monsieur after he had well sounded his niece on the subject.

"Refuses!" Desparre exclaimed. "Refuses! It is incredible. Is there any other? That English exile to wit, the man Clarges? If I know aught of human emotions, he, too, loves her."

"She has refused him also."

"Yet the cases are widely different. He is a beggar; I am Desparre."

"She avers she will marry no one. She has also strange scruples about this house, about the establishment I keep. She says that from such a home as this no woman is fit to go forth as a wife."

"Her scruples show that she, at least, is fit to do so. Vandecque, she must be my wife. I am resolved. What pressure can you bring to bear upon her? Oh! that I, Desparre, should be forced to sue thus!" he broke off, muttering to himself in his rage.

"I must think, reflect," Vandecque replied. "Leave it to me. You are willing to wait, Monsieur?"

"I must have her. She must be my wife."

"Leave it to me."

Monsieur did leave it to him, and, as the autumn drew towards the winter, Vandecque was able to tell his employer-for such he was-that all scruples were overcome, that the girl was willing to become his wife. One thing, however, he did not tell-namely, the influence he had brought to bear upon her, such influence consisting of the information he had furnished as to her being an unknown and nameless waif and stray, who, as he said, he had adopted out of charity. For, naturally enough, he omitted all mention of the bag of louis' d'or which he had received on her behalf, and also all mention of anything else which he imagined his wife had previously received. So, when his tale was done, it was with no astonishment that he heard Laure Vauxcelles announce that she was willing to become the Duchesse Desparre, since he concluded that, as she had now learnt who she was-or rather who she was not-she was willing to sink all trace of what she doubtless considered was a shameful origin in a brilliant future. It never dawned upon his warped and sordid mind that this very story, while seeming to induce her to compliance, had, in truth, forced her to a determination to seek oblivion in a manner far different from that of marriage; an oblivion which should be utter.

As for Desparre, he asked no questions as to how Vandecque had brought her to that compliance. It was sufficient for him to know, and revel in the knowledge, that the girl, who moved his middle-aged pulses in a manner in which they had never been stirred for years before by any woman, was now to be his possession; sufficient for him also to know that, in so becoming possessed of her, he would be able to administer a crushing blow to the vanity as well as the cupidity of the family which had so long ignored him; a blow from which he thought it was very doubtful if their arrogance could ever recover.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DUKE'S BRIDE

The Duc Desparre was making his toilette for his approaching marriage-about to take place at midday at the church of St. Gervais, which was conveniently placed between the streets in which his mansion and Vandecque's new apartments were situated.

Strange to say, Monsieur was in a bad temper for such a joyous occasion, and, in consequence, his valet was passing an extremely bad time. Many things had conspired to bring about this unfortunate state of affairs, the foremost of which was that there had been a great fall in the value of "Mississippians" or "Louisiana" stock, owing to the fact that adverse accounts were reaching France as to the state of the colony. Some of the settlers, who had gone out within the last two or three years, had but recently returned and given the lie to all the flourishing accounts so assiduously put about. There were, they said, neither gold mines nor silver to be found there, as had been stated; the Indians, especially the Natchez, were in open warfare with the French and slaughtering all who came in their way; the soil was unproductive, marshy and feverous-the colonists were dying by hundreds. Law, the great promoter of the Louisiana scheme, was a liar, they said, while, La Salle and Hennepin, the Franciscan monk who had sent home such flourishing accounts to the late king, were, they added, the same; and so were all who held out any hopes that Louisiana could ever be aught to France but a suitable place to which to send its surplus population, there to find death. It is true these wanderers had been flung into the Bastille for daring to return and promulgate such statements-but, all the same, those statements had their effect on the funds, and "Mississippians" had fallen.

Wherefore the Duc Desparre was a poorer man on this, his wedding morn, than he had been yesterday, by one-half his newly acquired wealth, and he was in a great state of irritation in consequence. While, also, he remembered at this moment that Vandecque had had a deal of money from him, none of which he was ever likely to see the colour of again. So that, altogether, he was in a very bad humour-and there were other things besides to annoy him.

"Have you sent this morning to enquire how Mademoiselle Vauxcelles is?" he asked of his valet, who at this moment was affixing a patch to his face. "She has not been well for four days, and has been invisible. I trust her health is restored. What is the answer?"

"Mademoiselle is better, Monsieur," the man replied, "much better."

"Is that the answer? No message for me?"

"None was delivered to me from her, Monsieur le Duc. But Monsieur Vandecque sent his compliments and said he expected you eagerly."

"Did he? Without doubt! Perhaps, too, he expects a little more money from me." This he whispered to himself. "Well, he will find himself disappointed. If he requires more he may go seek it at the gambling tables, or of the devil; he will get nothing further from me. Henceforth it will be sufficient to have to support his niece."

Then, his toilet being completed, he asked the valet if the company were below and the carriages ready to convey them to the church where the bride was to be met?

"They assemble, Monsieur le Duc, they assemble. Already the distinguished relatives of Monsieur are arriving, and many friends have called to ask after Monsieur's health this morning, and have proceeded to the church," while, as the little clock struck eleven in silvery tones, the man added, "If Monsieur is agreeable it will be well to descend now, perhaps."

"So," said Desparre, rising, "I will descend. Yet, before I go, give me my tablets, let me see that everything has been carried out as I ordered," while, taking from the servant's hand a little ivory notebook, he glanced his eye over it.

"Yes," he muttered. "Yes. Humph! Yes. Rosina's allowance to be paid monthly-ha! – curse her! – yet, otherwise, she would not hold her tongue. The exempt to sell up the widow Lestrangle if she pays not by the 31st. Good! Good! The outfitters to be told that I will not pay for the new furniture until the end of the year; ha! but I shall not pay it then, though." And, so, he read down his tablets until he had gone through all his notes. When, bidding his man perfume his ruffles and lace pocket-handkerchief, he descended to the salon to greet his relatives and guests; those dearly beloved relatives, who, he strongly believed and hoped, were cursing themselves and their fate at this very moment.

In spite of their intense disapproval of the union which Desparre was about to enter into, a union with the niece of a man whose reputation was of the worst-which really would not have mattered much had he belonged to the aristocracy! – those relatives had not thought it altogether advisable to abstain from gracing the impending ceremony with their presence. For Monsieur was the head of a great house, of their great house, he had interest unbounded. And he was the Regent's friend. He was almost one of the most prominent of the roués. What might he not still do for them, in spite of this atrocious misalliance he was about to perpetrate, if only they kept on friendly terms with him? Then again, he was, as they supposed, enormously wealthy, rumour saying that he had made some millions over Law's system-in which case rumour, as usual, exaggerated-and, above all, he was approaching old age; he was, and always had been, a dissolute man; there was little likelihood that he would leave any heirs behind him. And, if so, there would be some fine pickings for the others. Wherefore they swallowed their disapproval and disgust of this forthcoming mésalliance and trooped to his house to wish him that joy which they earnestly hoped he would never experience, notwithstanding that it was a cruel, bitter winter and that, unfortunately, wedding ceremonies took place at an hour when most of them were accustomed to be snoring in their beds.

These relatives formed a strange group; a strange collection of beings which, perhaps, no other period than that of the Regency, five years after the death of Louis XIV., could have produced. There were old women present, including his paternal aunt, the Dowager Duchesse Desparre, whose lives had been one long sickening reek of immorality and intrigue under The Great King; women who, as she had done, had struggled and schemed for that king's favours-or for what was almost as good, the reputation of having gained those favours. Women who had betrayed their husbands over and over again, women who had sinned against those husbands with the latters' own consent, so long as the deception had aided their fortunes. Yet, withal, their manners were those of the most perfect ease and grace which the world has ever known, and which are now to be found only amongst dancing mistresses and masters of ceremonies.

Amidst them all, however, the battered, half-worn-out roué moved with a grace equal to theirs, he having become a very prince of posturers; while bowing to one old harridan in whose veins ran the blood of crusading knights and-some whispered-even of Henry of Navarre; kissing the hand of another who had tapped the late Dauphin on the cheek with her fan when he asked her if she liked hunting, and had made answer that "innocent pleasures were not pleasure to her;" leering at a younger female cousin in a manner that might almost have made the Duc de Richelieu himself jealous, but which did not disturb the fair recipient of the ogle at all. And he kissed the hand of the Dowager Duchess with respectful rapture (though once she had refused to let the impoverished soldier into her house), while he regretted that such a trifle as his marriage should have brought her forth from her home that morning; he carried a glass of tokay to one aunt and ordered his servant to hand a cup of chocolate to another-the distinction being made because the rank of this latter was not quite so exalted as that of the former.

He was revelling in his revenge! And then, suddenly, his face dropped and he stood staring at the door. Staring, indeed, with so ghastly a look upon that face that a boon companion of his began to think that, after all, an apoplectic fit was about to seize him, and that leeches to his head and a cupping would more likely be his portion than a wedding on that day.

For, at the door, was standing Vandecque, alone-and on his face was a look which told the Duke very plainly that something had happened.

"What is it?" he muttered, as he came close to him, while lurching a little in his gait, as the boon companion thought-as though he had fetters about his feet-and while his words came from his mouth with difficulty. "Speak. Speak. Curse you! speak. Why are you here when-when-you should be with her-at-the-church?"

And all the time the eyes of the old and young members of his family were looking at him, and the Dowager Duchess was wondering if the bride had committed suicide sooner than go to his arms, while the battered hulk who had been drinking the chocolate was raising the wrinkles in her brow as much as she dared do without fear of cracking her enamel, and leering at the other worn-out wreck whose shaking hand held the glass of tokay.

"There is no Duchess yet," she whispered to a neighbour, through her thin lips, "and my boy, Henri, is second in succession." And again she leered hideously.

"Speak, I say," Desparre continued. "Something has happened. I can see it in your face. Quick."

"She-she-is-gone. Escaped. Married," Vandecque stammered. "Married!" And Desparre's face worked so that Vandecque turned his eyes away while he muttered. "Alas! Yes. This morning."

"To whom? Tell me. Tell me. I-did-not-know-she had a lover."

"Nor I. Yet it appears she had. She loved him all the time. That Englishman. Walter Clarges."

There was a click in the Chevalier's throat such as a clock makes ere it is about to strike, and Vandecque saw the cords twitching in that throat-after which Desparre gasped, "And I have called them here to see my triumph!" and then glanced his eyes round his great salon. Then he muttered, "Married!" and, controlling himself, walked steadily out into the corridor and to a chair, into which he sank.

"Tell me here," he whispered, "here. Where they cannot see my face, nor look at me."

"The woman found this in her room when she went to warn her the time was near. She had no maid; therefore, I had engaged one from the person who made the bridal dress. It was on her mirror. Look. Read."

Desparre took the paper in his hands; they were shaking, but he forced them to be still; then he glanced at it. It ran: -

"I refuse to be sold to the man who would have bought me from you. Therefore I have sought a lesser evil. I am gone to be married to another man whom, even though I do not love him, I can respect. An hour hence I shall be the wife of Monsieur Clarges. He has loved me for a year; now, his love is so strong, or, I should better say, his nobility is so great, that he sacrifices himself to save me. God forgive me for accepting the sacrifice, but there was no other way than death."

The Duke's hand fell to his knee while still holding the paper in it, after which he raised his eyes to the other's face.

"You suspected nothing; knew nothing of this?" he asked, his lips still twitching, his eyes half-closed in a way peculiar to him when agitated or annoyed.

"Nothing. I swear it. Do you think that, if I had dreamed of such a catastrophe, I would not have prevented it? It was to you I wished her married-to you."

"Ay," Desparre answered, "no doubt. We have worked together in other things-you-but no matter for that now." Then he raised his half-hidden eyes to the other. "Where does this man live?" he asked. "I do not know. Yet his address can be found. There are many to whom he is known. Why do you ask?"

"Why!" and now there was another look in Desparre's face that Vandecque did not understand. "Why! I will tell you. Yet, stay; ere I do so send those people all away. Go. Tell them-damn them! - there is no marriage to-day, nor-for-me-on any other day. Get rid of them. Bid them pack. Then return," while, rising from the antique chair into which he had dropped in the corridor, he went slowly into another room, feeling that his feet dragged under him, that they were heavy as lead.

"By night," he murmured, "it will be all over Paris-at Versailles and St. Germain-the Palais Royal. The Regent will laugh and make merry over it with La Phalaris-countless women whom I have cast off will be gloating over it, laughing at the downfall, the humiliation of Desparre-the fool, Desparre, who had boasted of the trick he was to play on his kinsfolk. *Dieu!* to be fooled by this beggar's brat. Yet. Yet. Yet-well! let Orleans laugh-still-he shall help me to be avenged. He shall. He must. Or-I will tell my tale, too. Sirac and I know as much as he about the deaths of the Duc and Duchesse de Bourgogne and the Duc de Bretagne-about the Spanish snuff. Ha! he must avenge me on these two-he shall."

Vandecque came back now, saying that the company was departing, but that some of the ladies, especially the Dowager Duchess, were very anxious to see him and express their sympathy. Would he receive them?

"Sympathy, faugh! Let them express their sympathy to the Devil, their master. Now, Vandecque, listen to me. There is but one way of re-establishing myself in the eyes of Paris. By retaliation, punishment-swift, hard, unceasing. You understand?"

Vandecque nodded.

"Good. If you did not understand I should have to assist your memory with reminders of other things-which would have been no more remembered had all gone well-and of several little matters in your past known to me. However, you need no reminders such as those, I think."

Again Vandecque showed by a nod that such was the case.

"Good. Therefore, you will assist me to rehabilitate myself. So. So. Very well. We must begin at once. Because, Vandecque, I am not well, this has been a great shock to me-and-and, Vandecque, I had a-perhaps it was an apoplectic seizure six months ago, when-when-I was falsely accused of-but no matter. I am afraid I may have another ere long. I feel symptoms. My feet are heavy, my speech is uncertain. I must not leave the thing undone."

"What," asked the other, "will you do?"

"What!" Desparre paused a moment, and again the twitching came to his lips; then, when it was over, he went on. "What! Vandecque," speaking rapidly this time, "do you love your niece at all?"

"Passably," and he shrugged his shoulders, "she was beloved of my dead wife, and she was useful. Also, I hoped great things from her marriage."

"Those hopes are vanished, Vandecque. So, too, for the matter of that, is your niece. Therefore, it will not grieve you never to see her again?"

"I shall never see her again. You forget she has a husband."

"No, Vandecque. No! I do not forget. It is that which I am remembering."

"What do you mean, Monsieur?"

"Later on you will know. Meanwhile," and he put a finger out and touched him, "do you love this Englishman, who has spoilt your niece's chances?"

"Love him!" exclaimed Vandecque. "Love him! Ah! do I love him!" while, as he spoke, he looked straight into Desparre's eyes.

## CHAPTER VII

### MAN AND WIFE

"This," said Walter Clarges, as he thrust open the door, "has been my home for the last four years. You will find it comfortable enough, I hope. Let me assist you to remove your cloak and hood."

It was a large room into which he led his newly-married wife, situated on the ground floor of an old street, the Rue de la Dauphine, in the Quartier St. Germain. A room in which a wood fire burnt on this cold wintry day, and which was furnished sufficiently well-far more so, indeed, than were the habitations of most of the English refugees in Paris after the "15." The furniture, if old and solid, was good of its kind; there were a number of tables and chairs and a huge lounge, an excellent Segoda carpet on the floor, and a good deal of that silver placed about, against the sale of which, for gambling purposes, a strangely stringent law had just been passed in France. On the walls there were some pictures-one of an English country house, another of a horse, a third of a lady.

"That is my mother," Clarges said. "My mother! Shall I ever see her again? God knows!"

She, following him with her eyes as he moved about the room, could think only of one thing; of the nobility of the sacrifice he had made for her that morning; the sacrifice of his life. He had married her because it was the only way to save her from Desparre, the only legal bar he could place between her and her uncle's desire to sell her to the best bidder who had appeared. The law, passed by the late King, which accorded to fathers and guardians the total right to dispose of the hands of their female children and wards, was terrible in its power; there was no withstanding it. Nothing but a previous marriage could save those children and wards, and, even if that marriage had taken place clandestinely, the law punished it heavily. But, punish severely as it might, it could not undo the marriage. That stood against all.

"Oh! Monsieur Clarges," Laure exclaimed, as she sat by the side of his great fire, the cloak removed from her shoulders, her hood off, and her beautiful hair, unspoilt by any wig, looped up behind her head. "Oh! Monsieur Clarges, now it is finished I reproach myself bitterly with the wrong I have performed against you. I-I-"

"I beseech you," he said, coming back to where she sat, and standing in front of her. "I beseech you not to do so. What has been done has been my own thought; my own suggestion. And you will remember that, when I asked you to be my wife a year ago and you refused, I told you that, if you would accept me, I would never force my love on you further than in desiring that I might serve you. The chance has come for me to do so-I thank God it has come! – I have had my opportunity. Whatever else may happen, I have been enabled to save you from the terrible fate you dreaded."

He stood as he spoke against the great mantel-shelf, gazing down at her, and she, while looking up at him in turn, recognised how great was the nobility of this man. She saw, too, and she wondered now why it struck her for the first time-struck her as it had never done before-that he was one who should have but little difficulty in gaining a woman's love if he desired it. She had always known that he was possessed of good looks, was well-made and graceful, and had clear-cut, handsome features. Now-perhaps because of what he had done for her that day, because he had wrecked his existence to save hers-hers! the existence of an abandoned child, a nameless woman-and had placed a barrier between him and the love of some honest woman who would make a home and happiness for him, she thought he seemed more than good-looking; indeed, he almost seemed in her eyes superb in his dignity and manliness. And she asked herself, "Why, why could she not have given him the love he craved for? Why not?"

"There was," she said aloud and speaking slowly, while, with her hands before her on her knees, she twined her fingers together. "There was no just reason why you should have made this sacrifice for me. I-I refused to give the love you craved, therefore you were absolved from all consideration of

me. I had no claim on you-no part nor share in your life. Oh! Monsieur," she broke off, "why tempt me with so noble an opportunity of escape from my impending fate; why tempt me to avail myself of so great a surrender by you of all that could make life dear? Especially since I have told you! – thank God, I told you! – that I am a nameless woman. That I have no past."

"Hush," he said. "Hush, I beseech you. I loved you a year ago, and I made my offer-even proffered my terms. You would not accept those terms then; yet, because the offer was made, I have kept to it. Do you think the story of your unacknowledged birth and parentage could cause me to alter? Nay! – if I have saved you, I am content."

Still she looked up at him standing there; still, as she gazed at him who had become her husband, she felt almost appalled at the magnanimity of his nature. How far above her was this man whose love she had refused; how great the nobleness of his sacrifice! And-perhaps, because she was a woman-even as he spoke to her she noticed that he never mentioned the love which had prompted him to the sacrifice as being in the present, but always as having been in the past. "I loved you last year," he had said once; not, "I love you."

"Now," he went on, seating himself in a chair opposite to her on the other side of the great fireplace. "Now, let us talk of the future. Of what we must do. This is what I purpose."

She raised her eyes from the fire again and looked at him, wondering if he was about to suggest that their life should be arranged upon the ordinary lines of a marriage brought about on the principles of expediency; and, although she knew it not, there was upon her beautiful face a glance which testified that her curiosity was aroused.

Then he went on.

"You know," he said, "that my own country is closed to me. For such as I, who, although little more than twenty at the time-for such as those who were out with the Earl of Mar-there is no return to England, in spite of the Elector having pardoned many. Nor, indeed, would I have it so. We Clarges have been followers of the Royal House always. My grandfather fell fighting against Fairfax and the Puritans; my father was abroad with King Charles II., and returned with him; I and my elder brother fought for the present King whom, across the water, they term 'The Pretender.'" He paused a moment, then said, "I pray I may not weary you. But, without these explanations, the future-our future-can scarce be provided for."

"Go on," she said, very gently. Whereupon he continued. "England is consequently closed to me-for ever. After to-day's work it may be that France will be, too-and then-"

"France, too!" she repeated, startled, "France, too! and 'after to-day's work.' Oh!" and she made a motion as though to rise from her chair, "what do your words mean? Tell me. Tell me."

Her suddenly aroused anxiety surprised him somewhat; he wondered, seeing it, if she feared that, even now, the relief against her fate which he had provided her with was not sufficient; if still she feared other troubles. Then, with a slight smile, he continued.

"I mean that-forgive me if I have to say so-I may be called to account for my share in saving you from the Duc Desparre. He is a powerful man-a favourite with the Regent and the Court-he may endeavour to revenge himself. I have seen an advocate; I took his advice yesterday so that what I did this morning I might do with my eyes open, and there is no possible doubt that I have committed an offence against the law in marrying a ward contrary to her guardian's will, for which I may be punished."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh! this, too," and he saw that she had grown very pale, whereupon he hastened to comfort her. "I beseech you," he said, "have no fear. You are, so the advocate tells me, perfectly free from any danger; nothing can happen to you-"

"Monsieur!" she cried. Then, under her breath, she muttered, "So be it! He imagines I fear only for myself. Alas! it is not strange he should."

As she spoke no more after that exclamation, he continued:

"Therefore, since France is now, perhaps, no longer likely to be more of a home to me than England, this is what I have decided to do. To leave France for ever-to find another home in another land. To begin a new life."

"To begin a new life! Yes?"

"Yes. A new life. As you know-who can help but know if they have been in France during the last year or so! – this country is colonising largely in America; there are great prospects for those who choose to go to the Mississippi; Louisiana is being peopled by the French; emigrants, planters are called for largely. If I go there, it is not at all probable that Desparre's vengeance will follow me; nay, a willing colonist can even get exemption for his sins committed in France. I intend to take steps for proceeding to the new world as soon as may be."

She bent her head as though to signify that she heard all he said, yet, even as she did so, there coursed again through her brain the thought of how she had blasted this man's life. She was driving him forth to a place of which she had heard the most terrible accounts, a place overrun by savages who disputed every inch of their native ground against the white man-sometimes, too, with other white men for their allies-the very countrymen of him who sat before her. Of herself she thought not at all; if he could endure the hardships that must be faced, why, she, his wife, could endure them-must endure them-too. She-but his voice aroused her from her thoughts, and it showed that for her, at least, there was no likelihood of such endurance being required.

"I intend," he was saying, "to take steps for proceeding there as soon as may be. But, ere I go, your welfare has to be consulted-provided for. This is what I purpose doing," while, as he spoke, he rose and went towards a large, firmly-locked bureau that stood in one corner of the room, and came back bearing in his hand a small iron box which he proceeded to open. "This," he said, with a smile that seemed to her as she watched him to be a terribly weary one, "contains all that I have left in the world, except what my mother contrives at various periods to furnish me with. It is not much now-but something. There are some four thousand livres here; enough to provide you with your subsistence for the time being; to assist you in doing what I wish-what I think best for you to do."

"What," she asked, still with her eyes fixed on him, "is that?"

"It would be best," he continued, "that, when I am gone, you should endeavour to make your way to England-to my mother. I shall write to her at once telling her that I am married, that my future necessitates my going to Louisiana, and that, out of her love for me, her last remaining child-for my brother is dead-she will receive you as her daughter. And she will do it, I know; she will greet you warmly as my wife. Only," and now his voice sank very low, was very gentle, as he continued, "one thing I must ask. It is that you do not undecieve her about-the-condition we stand in to one another-that, for her sake-she is old, and I am very dear to her-you will let her suppose-that-there is love-some love, at least-between us. If you will so far consent as to grant me this, it is all-the only demand-I will ever make of you."

He lifted his eyes towards where she sat, not having dared to glance at her while he made his request, but they did not meet hers in return. Unseen by him, she had raised her hood as a screen to the side of her face which was nearest to the logs; that, and her white hand, now hid her features from him. He could not see aught but that hand. Yet she had to speak, to make some answer to his request, and, a moment later, she said from behind her hand in a voice that sounded strangely changed to him:

"As you bid me I will do. All that you desire shall be carried out."

Then, for a moment, no further word was said by either. Presently he spoke again. "Desparre is paid what I owe him-what I lost at play. It will reach him by a safe hand at about the same time he learns that you are-my wife, not his. And I owe no money now in Paris. All is paid; during the past two days I have settled my affairs. As for these apartments, when you desire to set out, do what you will with all that they contain, excepting only those," and he pointed to the pictures of the country house, the horse, and his mother. "Those I should not desire to part with. I will take them with me to a friend. Now, I will summon the concierge; she has orders to attend to all your wants."



She rose as he spoke and turned towards him, and he saw that there was no colour left in her face; that, in truth, she was deathly pale. Her eyes, too, he thought were dim-perhaps, from some feeling of regard or gratitude which might have been awakened in her-and as she spoke her voice trembled.

"Is this then," she asked, "our parting? Our last farewell?"

"Nay. Nay," he said, "not now. Though it will be very soon. But I shall not leave Paris yet. Some trouble might arise; your uncle may endeavour to regain possession of you-though that he cannot do, since you are a married woman and have your lines. I shall stay near you for some days; I shall even be in this house should you require me. Have no fear. You will be quite safe. And, when I am assured that all is well with you, we will part; but not before."

He went towards the hall to ring for the woman, but, ere he could cross to where it was, she stopped him with a motion of her hand.

"Stay," she said, "stay. Let me speak now. Monsieur-my husband-I have heard every word that has fallen from your lips. Monsieur, I think you are the noblest man to whom ever woman plighted her troth-a troth, alas! that, as she gave it, she had no thought of carrying out. Oh!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes, "God forgive me for having accepted this man's sacrifice. God forgive me."

Then, in a moment, before he had time to form the slightest suspicion that she meditated any such thing, she had flung herself at his feet, and, with hands clasped before her, was beseeching him also to pardon her for having wrecked his life. But, gentle as ever, he raised her from the ground and placed her again in the seat she had left, beseeching her not to distress herself.

"Remember this," he said; "what I did I did out of the love I bore you when first I sought yours; remember that, though you had no love in your heart to give me, I had plighted my faith to you. Remember that my duty is pledged to you; that, if I prosper, as I hope to do, you shall prosper too. Or, better still, if in years to come this yoke which you took upon yourself galls too much, and you have no longer any need of it, we will find means to break it. I will find means to set you free."

"To-set-me-free!" she repeated slowly.

"Yes. Now I will go and seek the concierge. Then I will leave you until to-morrow. You will, as I have said, be perfectly safe here-perfectly at liberty. Have no fear, I beg. No one can harm you."

The concierge came at his summons and took his orders, he telling her briefly that the lady would occupy his apartments for a few days, and that he would use some other rooms at the top of the house which she had for disposal. Then, when he had seen a light meal brought to her and the woman had withdrawn, he bade his wife good-night.

"In the morning," he said, "I will tell you how my plans are progressing. I am about now to visit one who is much concerned with the colonisation of Louisiana, and, indeed, of the whole of the Mississippi-doubtless I may obtain some useful knowledge from him."

"And it is to this exile-this life in a savage land-that I have driven you! You, a gentleman-I, God only knows what," she exclaimed.

"Nay, nay. In any circumstances I must have gone forth to seek my living in some distant part of the world. It could not have been long delayed-as well now as a month or a year later."

"At least, you would have gone forth free-free to make a home for yourself, to have a wife, a-

But he would listen to none of her self reproaches; would not, indeed, let her utter them. Instead, he held out his hand to her-permitting himself that one cold act of intimacy-and said, "Farewell. Farewell, for the present. Farewell until to-morrow."

"Not farewell," she murmured gently, "not farewell No, not that."

"So be it," he answered, commanding himself and forcing back any thoughts that rose to his mind at what seemed almost a plea from her. "So be it. Instead, au revoir. We shall meet again."

And he went forth.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE STREET OF THE HOLY APOSTLES

When Walter left his wife it was with the intention of proceeding to the offices of the Louisiana Company, known more generally as Le Mississippi, situated in the Rue Quincampoix. For, at this exact period, which was one of a great crisis in the affairs of the "Law System," as it was universally called, those offices were open day and night, and were besieged by crowds made up of all classes of the community. Duchess's carriages-the carriages of women who had made Law the most welcome guest of their salons, who had petted and actually kissed him-as often as not at the instigation of their husbands, when they had any-jostled the equally sumptuous carriages of the rich tradesmen's wives and *cocottes*, as well as those of footmen who had suddenly become millionaires; while country people, who had trudged up from provincial towns and remote villages, rubbed shoulders with broken-down gentlemen and ladies, who had hoped to grow rich in a moment by the "System." Broken-down gentlemen and ladies who, after a few months of mirage-like affluence, were to find themselves plunged into a worse poverty than they had ever previously known.

For, as has been said, the "System" was breaking down, and France, with all in it, would soon be in a more terrible state of ruin than it had even been at the time of the death of that stupendous bankrupt and spendthrift, "Le Grand Monarque."

The Bank of France had almost failed-at least it could not pay its obligations or give cash for its notes, which had been issued to the amount of two thousand seven hundred million francs, and the Mississippi Company was approaching the same state; it could neither redeem its bonds nor pay any interest on them.

Therefore all France was in a turmoil, and, naturally, the turmoil was at its worst in Paris. Law-the creator of the "System" by which so many had been ruined-had sought safety at the Palais Royal, where the Regent lived; the gates of the Palais Royal itself were closed against the howling mob that sought to force an entrance, the streets were given up to anarchy and confusion. Meanwhile, in the hopes of quelling the tumult, it was being industriously put about all over Paris that fresh colonists were required to utilise the rich products of the soil of Louisiana, and that, so teeming was this soil with all good things for the necessary populating of the colony, that culprits in the prisons were being sent out in shiploads, with, as a reward for their emigration, a free pardon and a grant of land on their arrival in America. And-which was a masterstroke of genius well worthy of John Law-since the prisons were not considered full enough, innocent people were being arrested wholesale and on the most flimsy pretences, and thrust into those prisons, only to be thrust out of them again into the convict ships, and, afterwards, on to the shores of America.

Many writers have spoken truly enough when they have since said that a light purse dropped into an archer's or an exempt's hands might be made the instrument of a terrible, as well as a most unjust and inhuman, vengeance. It was done that night in Paris, and for many more nights, with awful success. Girls who had jilted men, men who had injured and betrayed women, successful rivals, faithless wives; a poet whose verses had been preferred to another's and read before De Parabère or the Duchesse de Berri and her lover and second husband, the bully, Riom; an elder brother, a hundred others, all disappeared during those nights of terror and were never seen or heard of again. Not in France, that is to say, though sometimes (when they lay dying, rotting to death on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, and, in their last faint accents, would whisper how they had been trapped and sent to this spot where pestilence and famine reeked) those who listened to them shuddered and believed their story. For many of those who so listened had been victims of a similar plot.

Down the street which led to the Rue de la Dauphine-one which rejoiced in the name of the Rue des Saints Apostoliques-there came, at almost the same moment when Walter Clarges quitted

his wife, a band of men. Of them, all were armed, some, the archers and the exempts,<sup>2</sup> being so by virtue of their duty of arresting troublesome people, especially drunkards and brawlers of both sexes, while two others walking behind wore the ordinary rapier carried by people of position. These two were Desparre and Vandecque. Inclusive of archers and exempts the band numbered six.

"We may take them together," Desparre whispered in his comrade's ear, "in which case so much the best. I imagine the English dog will show fight."

"Without doubt! When was there ever an Englishman who did not? Yet, what matter! These fellows," and Vandecque's eye indicated that he referred to the attendants, "will have to seize on him, we but to issue orders. Now," and he turned to the fellows mentioned, "we near the street where the birds are. You understand," addressing the man who seemed to be the leader, "what is to be done?"

"We understand," the man replied, though the answer was a husky one, as if he had been drinking. "We understand. Take them both, without injury if possible, then away with them to the prisons. She to St. Martin-des-Champs, he to La Bastille. Ha! la Bastille. The kindly mother, the gracious hostess! My faith! Yes."

"Yes," answered Vandecque. "Without injury, as you say, if possible. But, remember, you are paid well for what you may have to do; remember, too, the man is an Englishman; he has been a soldier and fought against the King of England for that other whom he calls the King; he will show his teeth. He is but newly married-this day-he will not willingly exchange the warm embraces of his beautiful young wife" (and as he spoke he could not resist looking at Desparre out of the side of his eye) "for a bed of straw. You must be prepared-for-for-well, for difficulties."

"We are prepared-I hope your purse is. We are near the spot-we should desire to have the earnest before we begin. While as for difficulties, why, if he makes any, we must-"

"Kill him-dead!"

The man started and looked round, appalled by the voice that hissed in his ear. Yet he should have recognised it, since he had heard it before that evening, though, perhaps, with scarcely so much venom in its shaking tones then. And, as he saw Desparre's face close to his, he drew back a little, while almost shuddering. There was something in the glance, in the half-closed eyelids-the eyes glittering through them-that unnerved him.

"Dead," hissed Desparre again. "Dead." And he put forth his hand and laid it on the archer's sleeve, and clutched at his arm through that sleeve so that the man winced with pain, as a moment before he had winced, or almost winced, from a feeling of creepiness.

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<sup>2</sup> "Archers" were servants of the Provost Marshals and of a position between gendarmes and policemen, but in the service of the prisons. "Exempts" were a kind of Sheriff's officer.

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