

DUMAS
ALEXANDRE

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The Marquise de Brinvilliers / Celebrated Crimes:*

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Towards the end of the year 1665, on a fine autumn evening, there was a considerable crowd assembled on the Pont-Neuf where it makes a turn down to the rue Dauphine. The object of this crowd and the centre of attraction was a closely shut, carriage. A police official was trying to force open the door, and two out of the four sergeants who were with him were holding the horses back and the other two stopping the driver, who paid no attention to their commands, but only endeavoured to urge his horses to a gallop. The struggle had been going on some time, when suddenly one of the doors violently pushed open, and a young officer in the uniform of a cavalry captain jumped down, shutting the door as he did so though not too quickly for the nearest spectators to perceive a woman sitting at the back of the carriage. She was wrapped in cloak and veil, and judging by the precautions she, had taken to hide her face from every eye, she must have had her reasons for avoiding recognition.

“Sir,” said the young man, addressing the officer with a haughty air, “I presume, till I find myself mistaken, that your business is with me alone; so I will ask you to inform me what powers you may have for thus stopping my coach; also, since

I have alighted, I desire you to give your men orders to let the vehicle go on.”

“First of all,” replied the man, by no means intimidated by these lordly airs, but signing to his men that they must not release the coach or the horses, “be so good as to answer my questions.”

“I am attending,” said the young man, controlling his agitation by a visible effort.

“Are you the Chevalier Gaudin de Sainte-Croix?”

“I am he.”

“Captain of the Tracy, regiment?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I arrest you in the king’s name.”

“What powers have you?”

“This warrant.”

Sainte-Croix cast a rapid glance at the paper, and instantly recognised the signature of the minister of police: he then apparently confined his attention to the woman who was still in the carriage; then he returned to his first question.

“This is all very well, sir,” he said to the officer, “but this warrant contains no other name than mine, and so you have no right to expose thus to the public gaze the lady with whom I was travelling when you arrested me. I must beg of you to order your assistants to allow this carriage to drive on; then take me where you please, for I am ready to go with you.”

To the officer this request seemed a just one: he signed to his men to let the driver and the horses go on; and, they, who had

waited only for this, lost no time in breaking through the crowd, which melted away before them; thus the woman escaped for whose safety the prisoner seemed so much concerned.

Sainte-Croix kept his promise and offered no resistance; for some moments he followed the officer, surrounded by a crowd which seemed to have transferred all its curiosity to his account; then, at the corner of the Quai de d'Horloge, a man called up a carriage that had not been observed before, and Sainte-Croix took his place with the same haughty and disdainful air that he had shown throughout the scene we have just described. The officer sat beside him, two of his men got up behind, and the other two, obeying no doubt their master's orders, retired with a parting direction to the driver.

“The Bastille!”

Our readers will now permit us to make them more fully acquainted with the man who is to take the first place in the story. The origin of Gaudin de Sainte-Croix was not known: according to one tale, he was the natural son of a great lord; another account declared that he was the offspring of poor people, but that, disgusted with his obscure birth, he preferred a splendid disgrace, and therefore chose to pass for what he was not. The only certainty is that he was born at Montauban, and in actual rank and position he was captain of the Tracy regiment. At the time when this narrative opens, towards the end of 1665, Sainte-Croix was about twenty-eight or thirty, a fine young man of cheerful and lively appearance, a merry comrade at a banquet, and an

excellent captain: he took his pleasure with other men, and was so impressionable a character that he enjoyed a virtuous project as well as any plan for a debauch; in love he was most susceptible, and jealous to the point of madness even about a courtesan, had she once taken his fancy; his prodigality was princely, although he had no income; further, he was most sensitive to slights, as all men are who, because they are placed in an equivocal position, fancy that everyone who makes any reference to their origin is offering an intentional insult.

We must now see by what a chain of circumstances he had arrived at his present position. About the year 1660, Sainte-Croix, while in the army, had made the acquaintance of the Marquis de Brinvilliers, maitre-de-camp of the Normandy regiment.

Their age was much the same, and so was their manner of life: their virtues and their vices were similar, and thus it happened that a mere acquaintance grew into a friendship, and on his return from the field the marquis introduced Sainte-Croix to his wife, and he became an intimate of the house. The usual results followed. Madame de Brinvilliers was then scarcely eight-and-twenty: she had married the marquis in 1651—that is, nine years before. He enjoyed an income of 30,000 livres, to which she added her dowry of 200,000 livres, exclusive of her expectations in the future. Her name was Marie-Madeleine; she had a sister and two brothers: her father, M. de Dreux d'Aubray; was civil lieutenant at the Chatelet de Paris. At the age of twenty-eight the

marquise was at the height of her beauty: her figure was small but perfectly proportioned; her rounded face was charmingly pretty; her features, so regular that no emotion seemed to alter their beauty, suggested the lines of a statue miraculously endowed with life: it was easy enough to mistake for the repose of a happy conscience the cold, cruel calm which served as a mask to cover remorse.

Sainte-Croix and the marquise loved at first sight, and she was soon his mistress. The marquis, perhaps endowed with the conjugal philosophy which alone pleased the taste of the period, perhaps too much occupied with his own pleasure to see what was going on before his eyes, offered no jealous obstacle to the intimacy, and continued his foolish extravagances long after they had impaired his fortunes: his affairs became so entangled that the marquise, who cared for him no longer, and desired a fuller liberty for the indulgence of her new passion, demanded and obtained a separation. She then left her husband's house, and henceforth abandoning all discretion, appeared everywhere in public with Sainte-Croix. This behaviour, authorised as it was by the example of the highest nobility, made no impression upon the Marquis of Brinvilliers, who merrily pursued the road to ruin, without worrying about his wife's behaviour. Not so M. de Dreux d'Aubray: he had the scrupulosity of a legal dignitary. He was scandalised at his daughter's conduct, and feared a stain upon his own fair name: he procured a warrant for the arrest of Sainte-Croix wheresoever the bearer might chance to encounter him.

We have seen how it was put in execution when Sainte-Croix was driving in the carriage of the marquise, whom our readers will doubtless have recognised as the woman who concealed herself so carefully.

From one's knowledge of the character of Sainte-Croix, it is easy to imagine that he had to use great self-control to govern the anger he felt at being arrested in the middle of the street; thus, although during the whole drive he uttered not a single word, it was plain to see that a terrible storm was gathering, soon to break. But he preserved the same impossibility both at the opening and shutting of the fatal gates, which, like the gates of hell, had so often bidden those who entered abandon all hope on their threshold, and again when he replied to the formal questions put to him by the governor. His voice was calm, and when they gave him the prison register he signed it with a steady hand. At once a gaoler, taking his orders from the governor, bade him follow: after traversing various corridors, cold and damp, where the daylight might sometimes enter but fresh air never, he opened a door, and Sainte-Croix had no sooner entered than he heard it locked behind him.

At the grating of the lock he turned. The gaoler had left him with no light but the rays of the moon, which, shining through a barred window some eight or ten feet from the ground, shed a gleam upon a miserable truckle-bed and left the rest of the room in deep obscurity. The prisoner stood still for a moment and listened; then, when he had heard the steps die away in the

distance and knew himself to be alone at last, he fell upon the bed with a cry more like the roaring of a wild beast than any human sound: he cursed his fellow-man who had snatched him from his joyous life to plunge him into a dungeon; he cursed his God who had let this happen; he cried aloud to whatever powers might be that could grant him revenge and liberty.

Just at that moment, as though summoned by these words from the bowels of the earth, a man slowly stepped into the circle of blue light that fell from the window—a man thin and pale, a man with long hair, in a black doublet, who approached the foot of the bed where Sainte-Croix lay. Brave as he was, this apparition so fully answered to his prayers (and at the period the power of incantation and magic was still believed in) that he felt no doubt that the arch-enemy of the human race, who is continually at hand, had heard him and had now come in answer to his prayers. He sat up on the bed, feeling mechanically at the place where the handle of his sword would have been but two hours since, feeling his hair stand on end, and a cold sweat began to stream down his face as the strange fantastic being step by step approached him. At length the apparition paused, the prisoner and he stood face to face for a moment, their eyes riveted; then the mysterious stranger spoke in gloomy tones.

“Young man,” said he, “you have prayed to the devil for vengeance on the men who have taken you, for help against the God who has abandoned you. I have the means, and I am here to proffer it. Have you the courage to accept?”

“First of all,” asked Sainte-Croix; “who are you?”

“Why seek you to know who I am,” replied the unknown, “at the very moment when I come at your call, and bring what you desire?”

“All the same,” said Sainte-Croix, still attributing what he heard to a supernatural being, “when one makes a compact of this kind, one prefers to know with whom one is treating.”

“Well, since you must know,” said the stranger, “I am the Italian Exili.”

Sainte-Croix shuddered anew, passing from a supernatural vision to a horrible reality. The name he had just heard had a terrible notoriety at the time, not only in France but in Italy as well. Exili had been driven out of Rome, charged with many poisonings, which, however, could not be satisfactorily brought home to him. He had gone to Paris, and there, as in his native country, he had drawn the eyes of the authorities upon himself; but neither in Paris nor in Rome was he, the pupil of Rene and of Trophana, convicted of guilt. All the same, though proof was wanting, his enormities were so well accredited that there was no scruple as to having him arrested. A warrant was out against him: Exili was taken up, and was lodged in the Bastille. He had been there about six months when Sainte-Croix was brought to the same place. The prisoners were numerous just then, so the governor had his new guest put up in the same room as the old one, mating Exili and Sainte-Croix, not knowing that they were a pair of demons. Our readers now understand the rest. Sainte-

Croix was put into an unlighted room by the gaoler, and in the dark had failed to see his companion: he had abandoned himself to his rage, his imprecations had revealed his state of mind to Exili, who at once seized the occasion for gaining a devoted and powerful disciple, who once out of prison might open the doors for him, perhaps, or at least avenge his fate should he be incarcerated for life.

The repugnance felt by Sainte-Croix for his fellow-prisoner did not last long, and the clever master found his pupil apt. Sainte-Croix, a strange mixture of qualities good and evil, had reached the supreme crisis of his life, when the powers of darkness or of light were to prevail. Maybe, if he had met some angelic soul at this point, he would have been led to God; he encountered a demon, who conducted him to Satan.

Exili was no vulgar poisoner: he was a great artist in poisons, comparable with the Medici or the Borgias. For him murder was a fine art, and he had reduced it to fixed and rigid rules: he had arrived at a point when he was guided not by his personal interest but by a taste for experiment. God has reserved the act of creation for Himself, but has suffered destruction to be within the scope of man: man therefore supposes that in destroying life he is God's equal. Such was the nature of Exili's pride: he was the dark, pale alchemist of death: others might seek the mighty secret of life, but he had found the secret of destruction.

For a time Sainte-Croix hesitated: at last he yielded to the taunts of his companion, who accused Frenchmen of showing

too much honour in their crimes, of allowing themselves to be involved in the ruin of their enemies, whereas they might easily survive them and triumph over their destruction. In opposition to this French gallantry, which often involves the murderer in a death more cruel than that he has given, he pointed to the Florentine traitor with his amiable smile and his deadly poison. He indicated certain powders and potions, some of them of dull action, wearing out the victim so slowly that he dies after long suffering; others violent and so quick, that they kill like a flash of lightning, leaving not even time for a single cry. Little by little Sainte-Croix became interested in the ghastly science that puts the lives of all men in the hand of one. He joined in Exili's experiments; then he grew clever enough to make them for himself; and when, at the year's end, he left the Bastille, the pupil was almost as accomplished as his master.

Sainte-Croix returned into that society which had banished him, fortified by a fatal secret by whose aid he could repay all the evil he had received. Soon afterwards Exili was set free – how it happened is not known – and sought out Sainte-Croix, who let him a room in the name of his steward, Martin de Breuille, a room situated in the blind, alley off the Place Maubert, owned by a woman called Brunet.

It is not known whether Sainte-Croix had an opportunity of seeing the Marquise de Brinvilliers during his sojourn in the Bastille, but it is certain that as soon as he was a free man the lovers were more attached than ever. They had learned

by experience, however, of what they had to fear; so they resolved that they would at once make trial of Sainte-Croix's newly acquired knowledge, and M. d'Aubray was selected by his daughter for the first victim. At one blow she would free herself from the inconvenience of his rigid censorship, and by inheriting his goods would repair her own fortune, which had been almost dissipated by her husband. But in trying such a bold stroke one must be very sure of results, so the marquise decided to experiment beforehand on another person. Accordingly, when one day after luncheon her maid, Francoise Roussel, came into her room, she gave her a slice of mutton and some preserved gooseberries for her own meal. The girl unsuspectingly ate what her mistress gave her, but almost at once felt ill, saying she had severe pain in the stomach, and a sensation as though her heart were being pricked with pins. But she did not die, and the marquise perceived that the poison needed to be made stronger, and returned it to Sainte-Croix, who brought her some more in a few days' time.

The moment had come for action. M. d'Aubray, tired with business, was to spend a holiday at his castle called Offemont. The marquise offered to go with him. M. d'Aubray, who supposed her relations with Sainte-Croix to be quite broken off, joyfully accepted. Offemont was exactly the place for a crime of this nature. In the middle of the forest of Aigue, three or four miles from Compiègne, it would be impossible to get efficient help before the rapid action of the poison had made it useless.

d'Aubray started with his daughter and one servant only. Never had the marquise been so devoted to her father, so especially attentive, as she was during this journey. And M. d'Aubray, like Christ – who though He had no children had a father's heart – loved his repentant daughter more than if she had never strayed. And then the marquise profited by the terrible calm look which we have already noticed in her face: always with her father, sleeping in a room adjoining his, eating with him, caring for his comfort in every way, thoughtful and affectionate, allowing no other person to do anything for him, she had to present a smiling face, in which the most suspicious eye could detect nothing but filial tenderness, though the vilest projects were in her heart. With this mask she one evening offered him some soup that was poisoned. He took it; with her eyes she saw him put it to his lips, watched him drink it down, and with a brazen countenance she gave no outward sign of that terrible anxiety that must have been pressing on her heart. When he had drunk it all, and she had taken with steady hands the cup and its saucer, she went back to her own room, waited and listened...

The effect was rapid. The marquise heard her father moan; then she heard groans. At last, unable to endure his sufferings, he called out to his daughter. The marquise went to him. But now her face showed signs of the liveliest anxiety, and it was for M. d'Aubray to try to reassure her about himself! He thought it was only a trifling indisposition, and was not willing that a doctor should be disturbed. But then he was seized by a frightful

vomiting, followed by such unendurable pain that he yielded to his daughter's entreaty that she should send for help. A doctor arrived at about eight o'clock in the morning, but by that time all that could have helped a scientific inquiry had been disposed of: the doctor saw nothing, in M. d'Aubray's story but what might be accounted for by indigestion; so he dosed him, and went back to Compiegne.

All that day the marquise never left the sick man. At night she had a bed made up in his room, declaring that no one else must sit up with him; thus she, was able to watch the progress of the malady and see with her own eyes the conflict between death and life in the body of her father. The next day the doctor came again: M. d'Aubray was worse; the nausea had ceased, but the pains in the stomach were now more acute; a strange fire seemed to burn his vitals; and a treatment was ordered which necessitated his return to Paris. He was soon so weak that he thought it might be best to go only so far as Compiegne, but the marquise was so insistent as to the necessity for further and better advice than anything he could get away from home, that M. d'Aubray decided to go. He made the journey in his own carriage, leaning upon his daughter's shoulder; the behaviour of the marquise was always the same: at last M. d'Aubray reached Paris. All had taken place as the marquise desired; for the scene was now changed: the doctor who had witnessed the symptoms would not be present at the death; no one could discover the cause by studying the progress of the disorder; the thread of

investigation was snapped in two, and the two ends were now too distant to be joined again. In spite, of every possible attention, M. d'Aubray grew continually worse; the marquise was faithful to her mission, and never left him for an hour. At last, after four days of agony, he died in his daughter's arms, blessing the woman who was his murderess. Her grief then broke forth uncontrolled. Her sobs and tears were so vehement that her brothers' grief seemed cold beside hers. Nobody suspected a crime, so no autopsy was held; the tomb was closed, and not the slightest suspicion had approached her.

But the marquise had only gained half her purpose. She had now more freedom for her love affairs, but her father's dispositions were not so favourable as she expected: the greater part of his property, together with his business, passed to the elder brother and to the second brother, who was Parliamentary councillor; the position of, the marquise was very little improved in point of fortune.

Sainte-Croix was leading a fine and joyous life. Although nobody supposed him to be wealthy, he had a steward called Martin, three lackeys called George, Lapierre, and Lachaussee, and besides his coach and other carriages he kept ordinary bearers for excursions at night. As he was young and good-looking, nobody troubled about where all these luxuries came from. It was quite the custom in those days that a well-set-up young gentleman should want for nothing, and Sainte-Croix was commonly said to have found the philosopher's stone. In his life

in the world he had formed friendships with various persons, some noble, some rich: among the latter was a man named Reich de Penautier, receiver-general of the clergy and treasurer of the States of Languedoc, a millionaire, and one of those men who are always successful, and who seem able by the help of their money to arrange matters that would appear to be in the province of God alone. This Penautier was connected in business with a man called d'Alibert, his first clerk, who died all of a sudden of apoplexy. The attack was known to Penautier sooner than to his own family: then the papers about the conditions of partnership disappeared, no one knew how, and d'Alibert's wife and child were ruined. D'Alibert's brother-in-law, who was Sieur de la Magdelaine, felt certain vague suspicions concerning this death, and wished to get to the bottom of it; he accordingly began investigations, which were suddenly brought to an end by his death.

In one way alone Fortune seemed to have abandoned her favourite: Maitre Penautier had a great desire to succeed the Sieur of Menneville, who was receiver of the clergy, and this office was worth nearly 60,000 livres. Penautier knew that Menneville was retiring in favour of his chief clerk, Messire Pierre Hannyvel, Sieur de Saint-Laurent, and he had taken all the necessary steps for buying the place over his head: the Sieur de Saint-Laurent, with the full support of the clergy, obtained the reversion for nothing – a thing that never happened before. Penautier then offered him 40,000 crowns to go halves, but Saint-

Laurent refused. Their relations, however, were not broken off, and they continued to meet. Penautier was considered such a lucky fellow that it was generally expected he would somehow or other get some day the post he coveted so highly. People who had no faith in the mysteries of alchemy declared that Sainte-Croix and Penautier did business together.

Now, when the period for mourning was over, the relations of the marquise and Sainte-Croix were as open and public as before: the two brothers d'Aubray expostulated with her by the medium of an older sister who was in a Carmelite nunnery, and the marquise perceived that her father had on his death bequeathed the care and supervision of her to her brothers. Thus her first crime had been all but in vain: she had wanted to get rid of her father's rebukes and to gain his fortune; as a fact the fortune was diminished by reason of her elder brothers, and she had scarcely enough to pay her debts; while the rebukes were renewed from the mouths of her brothers, one of whom, being civil lieutenant, had the power to separate her again from her lover. This must be prevented. Lachaussee left the service of Sainte-Croix, and by a contrivance of the marquise was installed three months later as servant of the elder brother, who lived with the civil lieutenant. The poison to be used on this occasion was not so swift as the one taken by M. d'Aubray so violent a death happening so soon in the same family might arouse suspicion. Experiments were tried once more, not on animals – for their different organisation might put the poisoner's science in the wrong – but as before upon

human subjects; as before, a 'corpus vili' was taken. The marquise had the reputation of a pious and charitable lady; seldom did she fail to relieve the poor who appealed: more than this, she took part in the work of those devoted women who are pledged to the service of the sick, and she walked the hospitals and presented wine and other medicaments. No one was surprised when she appeared in her ordinary way at l'Hotel-Dieu. This time she brought biscuits and cakes for the convalescent patients, her gifts being, as usual, gratefully received. A month later she paid another visit, and inquired after certain patients in whom she was particularly interested: since the last time she came they had suffered a relapse – the malady had changed in nature, and had shown graver symptoms. It was a kind of deadly fatigue, killing them by a slow strange decay. She asked questions of the doctors but could learn nothing: this malady was unknown to them, and defied all the resources of their art. A fortnight later she returned. Some of the sick people were dead, others still alive, but desperately ill; living skeletons, all that seemed left of them was sight, speech, and breath. At the end of two months they were all dead, and the physicians had been as much at a loss over the post-mortems as over the treatment of the dying.

Experiments of this kind were reassuring; so Lachaussee had orders to carry out his instructions. One day the civil lieutenant rang his bell, and Lachaussee, who served the councillor, as we said before, came up for orders. He found the lieutenant at work with his secretary, Couste what he wanted was a glass

of wine and water. In a moment Lachaussee brought it in. The lieutenant put the glass to his lips, but at the first sip pushed it away, crying, "What have you brought, you wretch? I believe you want to poison me." Then handing the glass to his secretary, he added, "Look at it, Couste: what is this stuff?" The secretary put a few drops into a coffee-spoon, lifting it to his nose and then to his mouth: the drink had the smell and taste of vitriol. Meanwhile Lachaussee went up to the secretary and told him he knew what it must be: one of the councillor's valets had taken a dose of medicine that morning, and without noticing he must have brought the very glass his companion had used. Saying this, he took the glass from the secretary's hand, put it to his lips, pretending to taste it himself, and then said he had no doubt it was so, for he recognised the smell. He then threw the wine into the fireplace.

As the lieutenant had not drunk enough to be upset by it, he soon forgot this incident and the suspicions that had been aroused at the moment in his mind. Sainte-Croix and the marquise perceived that they had made a false step, and at the risk of involving several people in their plan for vengeance, they decided on the employment of other means. Three months passed without any favourable occasion presenting itself; at last, on one of the early days of April 1670, the lieutenant took his brother to his country place, Villequoy, in Beauce, to spend the Easter vacation. Lachaussee was with his master, and received his instructions at the moment of departure.

The day after they arrived in the country there was a pigeon-pie for dinner: seven persons who had eaten it felt indisposed after the meal, and the three who had not taken it were perfectly well. Those on whom the poisonous substance had chiefly acted were the lieutenant, the councillor, and the commandant of the watch. He may have eaten more, or possibly the poison he had tasted on the former occasion helped, but at any rate the lieutenant was the first to be attacked with vomiting two hours later, the councillor showed the same symptoms; the commandant and the others were a prey for several hours to frightful internal pains; but from the beginning their condition was not nearly so grave as that of the two brothers. This time again, as usual, the help of doctors was useless. On the 12th of April, five days after they had been poisoned, the lieutenant and his brother returned to Paris so changed that anyone would have thought they had both suffered a long and cruel illness. Madame de Brinvilliers was in the country at the time, and did not come back during the whole time that her brothers were ill. From the very first consultation in the lieutenant's case the doctors entertained no hope. The symptoms were the same as those to which his father had succumbed, and they supposed it was an unknown disease in the family. They gave up all hope of recovery. Indeed, his state grew worse and worse; he felt an unconquerable aversion for every kind of food, and the vomiting was incessant. The last three days of his life he complained that a fire was burning in his breast, and the flames that burned

within seemed to blaze forth at his eyes, the only part of his body that appeared to live, so like a corpse was all the rest of him. On the 17th of June 1670 he died: the poison had taken seventy-two days to complete its work. Suspicion began to dawn: the lieutenant's body was opened, and a formal report was drawn up. The operation was performed in the presence of the surgeons Dupre and Durant, and Gavart, the apothecary, by M. Bachot, the brothers' private physician. They found the stomach and duodenum to be black and falling to pieces, the liver burnt and gangrened. They said that this state of things must have been produced by poison, but as the presence of certain bodily humours sometimes produces similar appearances, they durst not declare that the lieutenant's death could not have come about by natural causes, and he was buried without further inquiry.

It was as his private physician that Dr. Bachot had asked for the autopsy of his patient's brother. For the younger brother seemed to have been attacked by the same complaint, and the doctor hoped to find from the death of the one some means for preserving the life of the other. The councillor was in a violent fever, agitated unceasingly both in body and mind: he could not bear any position of any kind for more than a few minutes at a time. Bed was a place of torture; but if he got up, he cried for it again, at least for a change of suffering. At the end of three months he died. His stomach, duodenum, and liver were all in the same corrupt state as his brother's, and more than that, the surface of his body was burnt away. This, said

the doctors; was no dubious sign of poisoning; although, they added, it sometimes happened that a 'cacochyme' produced the same effect. Lachaussee was so far from being suspected, that the councillor, in recognition of the care he had bestowed on him in his last illness, left him in his will a legacy of a hundred crowns; moreover, he received a thousand francs from Sainte-Croix and the marquise.

So great a disaster in one family, however, was not only sad but alarming. Death knows no hatred: death is deaf and blind, nothing more, and astonishment was felt at this ruthless destruction of all who bore one name. Still nobody suspected the true culprits, search was fruitless, inquiries led nowhere: the marquise put on mourning for her brothers, Sainte-Croix continued in his path of folly, and all things went on as before. Meanwhile Sainte-Croix had made the acquaintance of the Sieur de Saint Laurent, the same man from whom Penautier had asked for a post without success, and had made friends with him. Penautier had meanwhile become the heir of his father-in-law, the Sieur Lesecq, whose death had most unexpectedly occurred; he had thereby gained a second post in Languedoc and an immense property: still, he coveted the place of receiver of the clergy. Chance now once more helped him: a few days after taking over from Sainte-Croix a man-servant named George, M. de Saint-Laurent fell sick, and his illness showed symptoms similar to those observed in the case of the d'Aubrays, father and sons; but it was more rapid, lasting only twenty-four hours.

Like them, M. de Saint-Laurent died a prey to frightful tortures. The same day an officer from the sovereign's court came to see him, heard every detail connected with his friend's death, and when told of the symptoms said before the servants to Sainfray the notary that it would be necessary to examine the body. An hour later George disappeared, saying nothing to anybody, and not even asking for his wages. Suspicions were excited; but again they remained vague. The autopsy showed a state of things not precisely to be called peculiar to poisoning cases the intestines, which the fatal poison had not had time to burn as in the case of the d'Aubrays, were marked with reddish spots like flea-bites. In June Penautier obtained the post that had been held by the Sieur de Saint-Laurent.

But the widow had certain suspicions which were changed into something like certainty by George's flight. A particular circumstance aided and almost confirmed her doubts. An abbe who was a friend of her husband, and knew all about the disappearance of George, met him some days afterwards in the rue des Masons, near the Sorbonne. They were both on the same side, and a hay-cart coming along the street was causing a block. George raised his head and saw the abbe, knew him as a friend of his late master, stooped under the cart and crawled to the other side, thus at the risk of being crushed escaping from the eyes of a man whose appearance recalled his crime and inspired him with fear of punishment. Madame de Saint-Laurent preferred a charge against George, but though he was sought for everywhere,

he could never be found. Still the report of these strange deaths, so sudden and so incomprehensible, was bruited about Paris, and people began to feel frightened. Sainte-Croix, always in the gay world, encountered the talk in drawing-rooms, and began to feel a little uneasy. True, no suspicion pointed as yet in his direction; but it was as well to take precautions, and Sainte-Croix began to consider how he could be freed from anxiety. There was a post in the king's service soon to be vacant, which would cost 100,000 crowns; and although Sainte-Croix had no apparent means, it was rumoured that he was about to purchase it. He first addressed himself to Belleguise to treat about this affair with Penautier. There was some difficulty, however, to be encountered in this quarter. The sum was a large one, and Penautier no longer required help; he had already come into all the inheritance he looked for, and so he tried to throw cold water on the project.

Sainte-Croix thus wrote to Belleguise:

“DEAR FRIEND, – Is it possible that you need any more talking to about the matter you know of, so important as it is, and, maybe, able to give us peace and quiet for the rest of our days! I really think the devil must be in it, or else you simply will not be sensible: do show your common sense, my good man, and look at it from all points of view; take it at its very worst, and you still ought to feel bound to serve me, seeing how I have made everything all right for you: all our interests are together in this matter. Do help me, I beg of you; you may feel sure I

shall be deeply grateful, and you will never before have acted so agreeably both for me and for yourself. You know quite enough about it, for I have not spoken so openly even to my own brother as I have to you. If you can come this afternoon, I shall be either at the house or quite near at hand, you know where I mean, or I will expect you tomorrow morning, or I will come and find you, according to what you reply. – Always yours with all my heart.”

The house meant by Sainte-Croix was in the rue des Bernardins, and the place near at hand where he was to wait for Belleguise was the room he leased from the widow Brunet, in the blind alley out of the Place Maubert. It was in this room and at the apothecary Glazer’s that Sainte-Croix made his experiments; but in accordance with poetical justice, the manipulation of the poisons proved fatal to the workers themselves. The apothecary fell ill and died; Martin was attacked by fearful sickness, which brought, him to death’s door. Sainte-Croix was unwell, and could not even go out, though he did not know what was the matter. He had a furnace brought round to his house from Glazer’s, and ill as he was, went on with the experiments. Sainte-Croix was then seeking to make a poison so subtle that the very effluvia might be fatal. He had heard of the poisoned napkin given to the young dauphin, elder brother of Charles VII, to wipe his hands on during a game of tennis, and knew that the contact had caused his death; and the still discussed tradition had informed him of the gloves of Jeanne d’Albret; the secret was lost, but Sainte-Croix hoped to recover it. And then there

happened one of those strange accidents which seem to be not the hand of chance but a punishment from Heaven. At the very moment when Sainte-Croix was bending over his furnace, watching the fatal preparation as it became hotter and hotter, the glass mask which he wore over his face as a protection from any poisonous exhalations that might rise up from the mixture, suddenly dropped off, and Sainte-Croix dropped to the ground as though felled by a lightning stroke. At supper-time, his wife finding that he did not come out from his closet where he was shut in, knocked at the door, and received no answer; knowing that her husband was wont to busy himself with dark and mysterious matters, she feared some disaster had occurred. She called her servants, who broke in the door. Then she found Sainte-Croix stretched out beside the furnace, the broken glass lying by his side. It was impossible to deceive the public as to the circumstances of this strange and sudden death: the servants had seen the corpse, and they talked. The commissary Picard was ordered to affix the seals, and all the widow could do was to remove the furnace and the fragments of the glass mask.

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