

DUMAS
ALEXANDRE

MARQUISE DE
GANGES

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Marquise De Ganges / Celebrated Crimes:*

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Celebrated Crimes

Toward the close of the year 1657, a very plain carriage, with no arms painted on it, stopped, about eight o'clock one evening, before the door of a house in the rue Hautefeuille, at which two other coaches were already standing. A lackey at once got down to open the carriage door; but a sweet, though rather tremulous voice stopped him, saying, "Wait, while I see whether this is the place."

Then a head, muffled so closely in a black satin mantle that no feature could be distinguished, was thrust from one of the carriage windows, and looking around, seemed to seek for some decisive sign on the house front. The unknown lady appeared to be satisfied by her inspection, for she turned back to her companion.

"It is here," said she. "There is the sign."

As a result of this certainty, the carriage door was opened, the two women alighted, and after having once more raised their eyes to a strip of wood, some six or eight feet long by two broad, which was nailed above the windows of the second storey, and bore the inscription, "Madame Voison, midwife," stole quickly into a passage, the door of which was unfastened, and in which

there was just so much light as enabled persons passing in or out to find their way along the narrow winding stair that led from the ground floor to the fifth story.

The two strangers, one of whom appeared to be of far higher rank than the other, did not stop, as might have been expected, at the door corresponding with the inscription that had guided them, but, on the contrary, went on to the next floor.

Here, upon the landing, was a kind of dwarf, oddly dressed after the fashion of sixteenth-century Venetian buffoons, who, when he saw the two women coming, stretched out a wand, as though to prevent them from going farther, and asked what they wanted.

“To consult the spirit,” replied the woman of the sweet and tremulous voice.

“Come in and wait,” returned the dwarf, lifting a panel of tapestry and ushering the two women into a waiting-room.

The women obeyed, and remained for about half an hour, seeing and hearing nothing. At last a door, concealed by the tapestry, was suddenly opened; a voice uttered the word “Enter,” and the two women were introduced into a second room, hung with black, and lighted solely by a three-branched lamp that hung from the ceiling. The door closed behind them, and the clients found themselves face to face with the sibyl.

She was a woman of about twenty-five or twenty-six, who, unlike other women, evidently desired to appear older than she was. She was dressed in black; her hair hung in plaits; her neck,

arms, and feet were bare; the belt at her waist was clasped by a large garnet which threw out sombre fires. In her hand she held a wand, and she was raised on a sort of platform which stood for the tripod of the ancients, and from which came acrid and penetrating fumes; she was, moreover, fairly handsome, although her features were common, the eyes only excepted, and these, by some trick of the toilet, no doubt, looked inordinately large, and, like the garnet in her belt, emitted strange lights.

When the two visitors came in, they found the soothsayer leaning her forehead on her hand, as though absorbed in thought. Fearing to rouse her from her ecstasy, they waited in silence until it should please her to change her position. At the end of ten minutes she raised her head, and seemed only now to become aware that two persons were standing before her.

“What is wanted of me again?” she asked, “and shall I have rest only in the grave?”

“Forgive me, madame,” said the sweet-voiced unknown, “but I am wishing to know – ”

“Silence!” said the sibyl, in a solemn voice. “I will not know your affairs. It is to the spirit that you must address yourself; he is a jealous spirit, who forbids his secrets to be shared; I can but pray to him for you, and obey his will.”

At these words, she left her tripod, passed into an adjoining room, and soon returned, looking even paler and more anxious than before, and carrying in one hand a burning chafing dish, in the other a red paper. The three flames of the lamp grew fainter

at the same moment, and the room was left lighted up only by the chafing dish; every object now assumed a fantastic air that did not fail to disquiet the two visitors, but it was too late to draw back.

The soothsayer placed the chafing dish in the middle of the room, presented the paper to the young woman who had spoken, and said to her —

“Write down what you wish to know.”

The woman took the paper with a steadier hand than might have been expected, seated herself at a table, and wrote: —

“Am I young? Am I beautiful? Am I maid, wife, or widow? This is for the past.

“Shall I marry, or marry again? Shall I live long, or shall I die young? This is for the future.”

Then, stretching out her hand to the soothsayer, she asked —

“What am I to do now with this?”

“Roll that letter around this ball,” answered the other, handing to the unknown a little ball of virgin wax. “Both ball and letter will be consumed in the flame before your eyes; the spirit knows your secrets already. In three days you will have the answer.”

The unknown did as the sibyl bade her; then the latter took from her hands the ball and the paper in which it was wrapped, and went and threw both into the chafing pan.

“And now all is done as it should be,” said the soothsayer. “Comus!”

The dwarf came in.

“See the lady to her coach.”

The stranger left a purse upon the table, and followed Comus. He conducted her and her companion, who was only a confidential maid, down a back staircase, used as an exit, and leading into a different street from that by which the two women had come in; but the coachman, who had been told beforehand of this circumstance, was awaiting them at the door, and they had only to step into their carriage, which bore them rapidly away in the direction of the rue Dauphine.

Three days later, according to the promise given her, the fair unknown, when she awakened, found on the table beside her a letter in an unfamiliar handwriting; it was addressed "To the beautiful Provencale," and contained these words —

"You are young; you are beautiful; you are a widow. This is for the present.

"You will marry again; you will die young, and by a violent death. This is for the future.

"THE SPIRIT."

The answer was written upon a paper like that upon which the questions had been set down.

The marquise turned pale and uttered a faint cry of terror; the answer was so perfectly correct in regard to the past as to call up a fear that it might be equally accurate in regard to the future.

The truth is that the unknown lady wrapped in a mantle whom we have escorted into the modern sibyl's cavern was no other than the beautiful Marie de Rossan, who before her marriage had borne the name of Mademoiselle de Chateaublanc, from that of

an estate belonging to her maternal grandfather, M. Joannis de Nocheres, who owned a fortune of five to six hundred thousand livres. At the age of thirteen – that is to say, in 1649 – she had married the Marquis de Castellane, a gentleman of very high birth, who claimed to be descended from John of Castille, the son of Pedro the Cruel, and from Juana de Castro, his mistress. Proud of his young wife's beauty, the Marquis de Castellane, who was an officer of the king's galleys, had hastened to present her at court. Louis XIV, who at the time of her presentation was barely twenty years old, was struck by her enchanting face, and to the great despair of the famous beauties of the day danced with her three times in one evening. Finally, as a crowning touch to her reputation, the famous Christina of Sweden, who was then at the French court, said of her that she had never, in any of the kingdoms through which she had passed, seen anything equal to "the beautiful Provencale." This praise had been so well received, that the name of "the beautiful Provencale" had clung to Madame de Castellane, and she was everywhere known by it.

This favour of Louis XIV and this summing up of Christina's had been enough to bring the Marquise de Castellane instantly into fashion; and Mignard, who had just received a patent of nobility and been made painter to the king, put the seal to her celebrity by asking leave to paint her portrait. That portrait still exists, and gives a perfect notion of the beauty which it represents; but as the portrait is far from our readers' eyes, we will content ourselves by repeating, in its own original words, the one

given in 1667 by the author of a pamphlet published at Rouen under the following title: True and Principal Circumstances of the Deplorable Death of Madame the Marquise de Ganges:

[Note: It is from this pamphlet, and from the Account of the Death of Madame the Marquise de Ganges, formerly Marquise de Castellane, that we have borrowed the principal circumstances of this tragic story. To these documents we must add – that we may not be constantly referring our readers to original sources – the Celebrated Trials by Guyot de Pitaval, the Life of Marie de Rossan, and the *Lettres galantes* of Madame Desnoyers.]

“Her complexion, which was of a dazzling whiteness, was illumined by not too brilliant a red, and art itself could not have arranged more skilfully the gradations by which this red joined and merged into the whiteness of the complexion. The brilliance of her face was heightened by the decided blackness of her hair, growing, as though drawn by a painter of the finest taste, around a well proportioned brow; her large, well opened eyes were of the same hue as her hair, and shone with a soft and piercing flame that rendered it impossible to gaze upon her steadily; the smallness, the shape, the turn of her mouth, and, the beauty of her teeth were incomparable; the position and the regular proportion of her nose added to her beauty such an air of dignity, as inspired a respect for her equal to the love that might be inspired by her beauty; the rounded contour of her face, produced by a becoming plumpness, exhibited all the vigour and freshness of health; to complete her charms, her glances, the

movements of her lips and of her head, appeared to be guided by the graces; her shape corresponded to the beauty of her face; lastly, her arms, her hands, her bearing, and her gait were such that nothing further could be wished to complete the agreeable presentment of a beautiful woman.”

[Note: All her contemporaries, indeed, are in agreement as to her marvellous beauty; here is a second portrait of the marquise, delineated in a style and manner still more characteristic of that period: —

“You will remember that she had a complexion smoother and finer than a mirror, that her whiteness was so well commingled with the lively blood as to produce an exact admixture never beheld elsewhere, and imparting to her countenance the tenderest animation; her eyes and hair were blacker than jet; her eyes, I say, of which the gaze could scarce, from their excess of lustre, be supported, which have been celebrated as a miracle of tenderness and sprightliness, which have given rise, a thousand times, to the finest compliments of the day, and have been the torment of many a rash man, must excuse me, if I do not pause longer to praise them, in a letter; her mouth was the feature of her face which compelled the most critical to avow that they had seen none of equal perfection, and that, by its shape, its smallness, and its brilliance, it might furnish a pattern for all those others whose sweetness and charms had been so highly vaunted; her nose conformed to the fair proportion of all her features; it was, that is to say, the finest in the world; the whole shape of her

face was perfectly round, and of so charming a fullness that such an assemblage of beauties was never before seen together. The expression of this head was one of unparalleled sweetness and of a majesty which she softened rather by disposition than by study; her figure was opulent, her speech agreeable, her step noble, her demeanour easy, her temper sociable, her wit devoid of malice, and founded upon great goodness of heart.”]

It is easy to understand that a woman thus endowed could not, in a court where gallantry was more pursued than in any other spot in the world, escape the calumnies of rivals; such calumnies, however, never produced any result, so correctly, even in the absence of her husband, did the marquise contrive to conduct herself; her cold and serious conversation, rather concise than lively, rather solid than brilliant, contrasted, indeed, with the light turn, the capricious and fanciful expressions employed by the wits of that time; the consequence was that those who had failed to succeed with her, tried to spread a report that the marquise was merely a beautiful idol, virtuous with the virtue of a statue. But though such things might be said and repeated in the absence of the marquise, from the moment that she appeared in a drawing-room, from the moment that her beautiful eyes and sweet smile added their indefinable expression to those brief, hurried, and sensible words that fell from her lips, the most prejudiced came back to her and were forced to own that God had never before created anything that so nearly touched perfection.

She was thus in the enjoyment of a triumph that backbiters

failed to shake, and that scandal vainly sought to tarnish, when news came of the wreck of the French galleys in Sicilian waters, and of the death of the Marquis de Castellane, who was in command. The marquise on this occasion, as usual, displayed the greatest piety and propriety: although she had no very violent passion for her husband, with whom she had spent scarcely one of the seven years during which their marriage had lasted, on receipt of the news she went at once into retreat, going to live with Madame d'Ampus, her mother-in-law, and ceasing not only to receive visitors but also to go out.

Six months after the death of her husband, the marquise received letters from her grandfather, M. Joannis de Nocheres, begging her to come and finish her time of mourning at Avignon. Having been fatherless almost from childhood, Mademoiselle de Chateaublanc had been brought up by this good old man, whom she loved dearly; she hastened accordingly to accede to his invitation, and prepared everything for her departure.

This was at the moment when la Voisin, still a young woman, and far from having the reputation which she subsequently acquired, was yet beginning to be talked of. Several friends of the Marquise de Castellane had been to consult her, and had received strange predictions from her, some of which, either through the art of her who framed them, or through some odd concurrence of circumstances, had come true. The marquise could not resist the curiosity with which various tales that she had heard of this woman's powers had inspired her, and some days before setting

out for Avignon she made the visit which we have narrated. What answer she received to her questions we have seen.

The marquise was not superstitious, yet this fatal prophecy impressed itself upon her mind and left behind a deep trace, which neither the pleasure of revisiting her native place, nor the affection of her grandfather, nor the fresh admiration which she did not fail to receive, could succeed in removing; indeed, this fresh admiration was a weariness to the marquise, and before long she begged leave of her grandfather to retire into a convent and to spend there the last three months of her mourning.

It was in that place, and it was with the warmth of these poor cloistered maidens, that she heard a man spoken of for the first time, whose reputation for beauty, as a man, was equal to her own, as a woman. This favourite of nature was the sieur de Lenide, Marquis de Ganges, Baron of Languedoc, and governor of Saint-Andre, in the diocese of Uzes. The marquise heard of him so often, and it was so frequently declared to her that nature seemed to have formed them for each other, that she began to allow admission to a very strong desire of seeing him. Doubtless, the sieur de Lenide, stimulated by similar suggestions, had conceived a great wish to meet the marquise; for, having got M. de Nocheres who no doubt regretted her prolonged retreat – to entrust him with a commission for his granddaughter, he came to the convent parlour and asked for the fair recluse. She, although she had never seen him, recognised him at the first glance; for having never seen so handsome a cavalier as he who

now presented himself before her, she thought this could be no other than the Marquis de Ganges, of whom people had so often spoken to her.

That which was to happen, happened: the Marquise de Castellane and the Marquis de Ganges could not look upon each other without loving. Both were young, the marquis was noble and in a good position, the marquise was rich; everything in the match, therefore, seemed suitable: and indeed it was deferred only for the space of time necessary to complete the year of mourning, and the marriage was celebrated towards the beginning of the year 1558. The marquis was twenty years of age, and the marquise twenty-two.

The beginnings of this union were perfectly happy; the marquis was in love for the first time, and the marquise did not remember ever to have been in love. A son and a daughter came to complete their happiness. The marquise had entirely forgotten the fatal prediction, or, if she occasionally thought of it now, it was to wonder that she could ever have believed in it. Such happiness is not of this world, and when by chance it lingers here a while, it seems sent rather by the anger than by the goodness of God. Better, indeed, would it be for him who possesses and who loses it, never to have known it.

The Marquis de Ganges was the first to weary of this happy life. Little by little he began to miss the pleasures of a young man; he began to draw away from the marquise and to draw nearer to his former friends. On her part, the marquise, who for the sake

of wedded intimacy had sacrificed her habits of social life, threw herself into society, where new triumphs awaited her. These triumphs aroused the jealousy of the marquis; but he was too much a man of his century to invite ridicule by any manifestation; he shut his jealousy into his soul, and it emerged in a different form on every different occasion. To words of love, so sweet that they seemed the speech of angels, succeeded those bitter and biting utterances that foretell approaching division. Before long, the marquis and the marquise only saw each other at hours when they could not avoid meeting; then, on the pretext of necessary journeys, and presently without any pretext at all, the marquis would go away for three-quarters of a year, and once more the marquise found herself widowed. Whatever contemporary account one may consult, one finds them all agreeing to declare that she was always the same – that is to say, full of patience, calmness, and becoming behaviour – and it is rare to find such a unanimity of opinion about a young and beautiful woman.

About this time the marquis, finding it unendurable to be alone with his wife during the short spaces of time which he spent at home, invited his two brothers, the chevalier and the abbe de Ganges, to come and live with him. He had a third brother, who, as the second son, bore the title of comte, and who was colonel of the Languedoc regiment, but as this gentleman played no part in this story we shall not concern ourselves with him.

The abbe de Ganges, who bore that title without belonging to the Church, had assumed it in order to enjoy its privileges: he

was a kind of wit, writing madrigals and 'bouts-rimes' [Bouts-rimes are verses written to a given set of rhymes.] on occasion, a handsome man enough, though in moments of impatience his eyes would take a strangely cruel expression; as dissolute and shameless to boot, as though he had really belonged to the clergy of the period.

The chevalier de Ganges, who shared in some measure the beauty so profusely showered upon the family, was one of those feeble men who enjoy their own nullity, and grow on to old age inapt alike for good and evil, unless some nature of a stronger stamp lays hold on them and drags them like faint and pallid satellites in its wake. This was what befell the chevalier in respect of his brother: submitted to an influence of which he himself was not aware, and against which, had he but suspected it, he would have rebelled with the obstinacy of a child, he was a machine obedient to the will of another mind and to the passions of another heart, a machine which was all the more terrible in that no movement of instinct or of reason could, in his case, arrest the impulse given.

Moreover, this influence which the abbe had acquired over the chevalier extended, in some degree also, to the marquis. Having as a younger son no fortune, having no revenue, for though he wore a Churchman's robes he did not fulfil a Churchman's functions, he had succeeded in persuading the marquis, who was rich, not only in the enjoyment of his own fortune, but also in that of his wife, which was likely to be nearly doubled at the

death of M. de Nocheres, that some zealous man was needed who would devote himself to the ordering of his house and the management of his property; and had offered himself for the post. The marquis had very gladly accepted, being, as we have said, tired by this time of his solitary home life; and the abbe had brought with him the chevalier, who followed him like his shadow, and who was no more regarded than if he had really possessed no body.

The marquise often confessed afterwards that when she first saw these two men, although their outward aspect was perfectly agreeable, she felt herself seized by a painful impression, and that the fortune-teller's prediction of a violent death, which she had so long forgotten, gashed out like lightning before her eyes. The effect on the two brothers was not of the same kind: the beauty of the marquise struck them both, although in different ways. The chevalier was in ecstasies of admiration, as though before a beautiful statue, but the impression that she made upon him was that which would have been made by marble, and if the chevalier had been left to himself the consequences of this admiration would have been no less harmless. Moreover, the chevalier did not attempt either to exaggerate or to conceal this impression, and allowed his sister-in-law to see in what manner she struck him. The abbe, on the contrary, was seized at first sight with a deep and violent desire to possess this woman – the most beautiful whom he had ever met; but being as perfectly capable of mastering his sensations as the chevalier was incapable, he

merely allowed such words of compliment to escape him as weigh neither with him who utters nor her who hears them; and yet, before the close of this first interview, the abbe had decided in his irrevocable will that this woman should be his.

As for the marquise, although the impression produced by her two brothers-in-law could never be entirely effaced, the wit of the abbe, to which he gave, with amazing facility, whatever turn he chose, and the complete nullity of the chevalier brought her to certain feelings of less repulsion towards them: for indeed the marquise had one of those souls which never suspect evil, as long as it will take the trouble to assume any veil at all of seeming, and which only recognise it with regret when it resumes its true shape.

Meanwhile the arrival of these two new inmates soon spread a little more life and gaiety through the house. Furthermore; greatly to the astonishment of the marquise, her husband, who had so long been indifferent to her beauty, seemed to remark afresh that she was too charming to be despised; his words accordingly began little by little to express an affection that had long since gradually disappeared from them. The marquise had never ceased to love him; she had suffered the loss of his love with resignation, she hailed its return with joy, and three months elapsed that resembled those which had long ceased to be more to the poor wife than a distant and half-worn-out memory.

Thus she had, with the supreme facility of youth, always ready to be happy, taken up her gladness again, without even

asking what genius had brought back to her the treasure which she had thought lost, when she received an invitation from a lady of the neighbourhood to spend some days in her country house. Her husband and her two brothers-in-law, invited with her, were of the party, and accompanied her. A great hunting party had been arranged beforehand, and almost immediately upon arriving everyone began to prepare for taking part in it.

The abbe, whose talents had made him indispensable in every company, declared that for that day he was the marquise's cavalier, a title which his sister-in-law, with her usual amiability, confirmed. Each of the huntsmen, following this example, made choice of a lady to whom to dedicate his attentions throughout the day; then, this chivalrous arrangement being completed, all present directed their course towards the place of meeting.

That happened which almost always happens the dogs hunted on their own account. Two or three sportsmen only followed the dogs; the rest got lost. The abbe, in his character of esquire to the marquise, had not left her for a moment, and had managed so cleverly that he was alone with her – an opportunity which he had been seeking for a month previously with no less care – than the marquise had been using to avoid it. No sooner, therefore, did the marquise believe herself aware that the abbe had intentionally turned aside from the hunt than she attempted to gallop her horse in the opposite direction from that which she had been following; but the abbe stopped her. The marquise neither could nor would enter upon a struggle; she resigned herself, therefore, to hearing

what the abbe had to say to her, and her face assumed that air of haughty disdain which women so well know how to put on when they wish a man to understand that he has nothing to hope from them. There was an instant's silence; the abbe was the first to break it.

"Madame," said he, "I ask your pardon for having used this means to speak to you alone; but since, in spite of my rank of brother-in-law, you did not seem inclined to grant me that favour if I had asked it, I thought it would be better for me, to deprive you of the power to refuse it me."

"If you have hesitated to ask me so simple a thing, monsieur," replied the marquise, "and if you have taken such precautions to compel me to listen to you, it must, no doubt, be because you knew beforehand that the words you had to say to me were such as I could not hear. Have the goodness, therefore, to reflect, before you open this conversation, that here as elsewhere I reserve the right – and I warn you of it – to interrupt what you may say at the moment when it may cease to seem to me befitting."

"As to that, madame," said the abbe, "I think I can answer for it that whatever it may please me to say to you, you will hear to the end; but indeed the matters are so simple that there is no need to make you uneasy beforehand: I wished to ask you, madame, whether you have perceived a change in the conduct of your husband towards you."

"Yes, monsieur," replied the marquise, "and no single day has

passed in which I have not thanked Heaven for this happiness.”

“And you have been wrong, madame,” returned the abbe, with one of those smiles that were peculiar to himself; “Heaven has nothing to do with it. Thank Heaven for having made you the most beautiful and charming of women, and that will be enough thanksgiving without despoiling me of such as belong to my share.”

“I do not understand you, monsieur,” said the marquise in an icy tone.

“Well, I will make myself comprehensible, my dear sister-in-law. I am the worker of the miracle for which you are thanking Heaven; to me therefore belongs your gratitude. Heaven is rich enough not to rob the poor.”

“You are right, monsieur: if it is really to you that I owe this return, the cause of which I did not know, I will thank you in the first place; and then afterwards I will thank Heaven for having inspired you with this good thought.”

“Yes,” answered the abbe, “but Heaven, which has inspired me with a good thought, may equally well inspire me with a bad one, if the good thought does not bring me what I expect from it.”

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