

**DUMAS**  
**ALEXANDRE**

DERUES

**Alexandre Dumas**  
**Derues**

*[http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio\\_book/?art=25202991](http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25202991)*

*Derues / Celebrated Crimes:*

# Alexandre Dumas

## Derues / Celebrated Crimes

One September afternoon in 1751, towards half-past five, about a score of small boys, chattering, pushing, and tumbling over one another like a covey of partridges, issued from one of the religious schools of Chartres. The joy of the little troop just escaped from a long and wearisome captivity was doubly great: a slight accident to one of the teachers had caused the class to be dismissed half an hour earlier than usual, and in consequence of the extra work thrown on the teaching staff the brother whose duty it was to see all the scholars safe home was compelled to omit that part of his daily task. Therefore not only thirty or forty minutes were stolen from work, but there was also unexpected, uncontrolled liberty, free from the surveillance of that black-cassocked overseer who kept order in their ranks. Thirty minutes! at that age it is a century, of laughter and prospective games! Each had promised solemnly, under pain of severe punishment, to return straight to his paternal nest without delay, but the air was so fresh and pure, the country smiled all around! The school, or preferably the cage, which had just opened, lay at the extreme edge of one of the suburbs, and it only required a few steps to slip under a cluster of trees by a sparkling brook beyond which rose undulating ground, breaking the monotony of a vast and fertile plain. Was it possible to be

obedient, to refrain from the desire to spread one's wings? The scent of the meadows mounted to the heads of the steadiest among them, and intoxicated even the most timid. It was resolved to betray the confidence of the reverend fathers, even at the risk of disgrace and punishment next morning, supposing the escapade were discovered.

A flock of sparrows suddenly released from a cage could not have flown more wildly into the little wood. They were all about the same age, the eldest might be nine. They flung off coats and waistcoats, and the grass became strewn with baskets, copy-books, dictionaries, and catechisms. While the crowd of fair-haired heads, of fresh and smiling faces, noisily consulted as to which game should be chosen, a boy who had taken no part in the general gaiety, and who had been carried away by the rush without being able to escape sooner, glided slyly away among the trees, and, thinking himself unseen, was beating a hasty retreat, when one of his comrades cried out —

“Antoine is running away!”

Two of the best runners immediately started in pursuit, and the fugitive, notwithstanding his start, was speedily overtaken, seized by his collar, and brought back as a deserter.

“Where were you going?” the others demanded.

“Home to my cousins,” replied the boy; “there is no harm in that.”

“You canting sneak!” said another boy, putting his fist under the captive's chin; “you were going to the master to tell of us.”

“Pierre,” responded Antoine, “you know quite well I never tell lies.”

“Indeed! – only this morning you pretended I had taken a book you had lost, and you did it because I kicked you yesterday, and you didn’t dare to kick me back again.”

Antoine lifted his eyes to heaven, and folding his arms on his breast —

“Dear Buttet,” he said, “you are mistaken; I have always been taught to forgive injuries.”

“Listen, listen! he might be saying his prayers!” cried the other boys; and a volley of offensive epithets, enforced by cuffs, was hurled at the culprit.

Pierre Buttet, whose influence was great, put a stop to this onslaught.

“Look here, Antoine, you are a bad lot, that we all know; you are a sneak and a hypocrite. It’s time we put a stop to it. Take off your coat and fight it out. If you like, we will fight every morning and evening till the end of the month.”

The proposition was loudly applauded, and Pierre, turning up his sleeves as far as his elbows, prepared to suit actions to words.

The challenger assuredly did not realise the full meaning, of his words; had he done so, this chivalrous defiance would simply have been an act of cowardice on his part, for there could be no doubt as to the victor in such a conflict. The one was a boy of alert and gallant bearing, strong upon his legs, supple and muscular, a vigorous man in embryo; while the other,

not quite so old, small, thin, of a sickly leaden complexion, seemed as if he might be blown away by a strong puff of wind. His skinny arms and legs hung on to his body like the claws of a spider, his fair hair inclined to red, his white skin appeared nearly bloodless, and the consciousness of weakness made him timid, and gave a shifty, uneasy look to his eyes. His whole expression was uncertain, and looking only at his face it was difficult at first sight to decide to which sex he belonged. This confusion of two natures, this indefinable mixture of feminine weakness without grace, and of abortive boyhood, seemed to stamp him as something exceptional, unclassable, and once observed, it was difficult to take one's eyes from him. Had he been endowed with physical strength he would have been a terror to his comrades, exercising by fear the ascendancy which Pierre owed to his joyous temper and unwearied gaiety, for this mean exterior concealed extraordinary powers of will and dissimulation. Guided by instinct, the other children hung about Pierre and willingly accepted his leadership; by instinct also they avoided Antoine, repelled by a feeling of chill, as if from the neighbourhood of a reptile, and shunning him unless to profit in some way by their superior strength. Never would he join their games without compulsion; his thin, colourless lips seldom parted for a laugh, and even at that tender age his smile had an unpleasantly sinister expression.

“Will you fight?” again demanded Pierre.

Antoine glanced hastily round; there was no chance of escape,

a double ring enclosed him. To accept or refuse seemed about equally risky; he ran a good chance of a thrashing whichever way he decided. Although his heart beat loudly, no trace of emotion appeared on his pallid cheek; an unforeseen danger would have made him shriek, but he had had time to collect himself, time to shelter behind hypocrisy. As soon as he could lie and cheat he recovered courage, and the instinct of cunning, once roused, prevailed over everything else. Instead of answering this second challenge, he knelt down and said to Pierre —

“You are much stronger than I am.”

This submission disarmed his antagonist. “Get up,” he replied; “I won’t touch you, if you can’t defend yourself.

“Pierre,” continued Antoine, still on his knees, “I assure you, by God and the Holy Virgin, I was not going to tell. I was going home to my cousins to learn my lessons for to-morrow; you know how slow I am. If you think I have done you any harm, I ask your forgiveness.”

Pierre held out his hand and made him get up.

“Will you be a good fellow, Antoine, and play with us?”

“Yes, I will.”

“All right, then; let us forget all about it.”

“What are we to play at?” asked Antoine, taking off his coat.

“Thieves and archers,” cried one of the boys...

“Splendid!” said Pierre; and using his acknowledged authority, he divided them into two sides – ten highwaymen, whom he was to command, and ten archers of the guard, who

were to pursue them; Antoine was among the latter.

The highwaymen, armed with swords and guns obtained from the willows which grew along the brook, moved off first, and gained the valleys between the little hills beyond the wood. The fight was to be serious, and any prisoner on either side was to be tried immediately. The robbers divided into twos and threes, and hid themselves in the ravines.

A few minutes later the archers started in pursuit. There were encounters, surprises, skirmishes; but whenever it came to close quarters, Pierre's men, skilfully distributed, united on hearing his whistle, and the Army of justice had to retreat. But there came a time when this magic signal was no longer heard, and the robbers became uneasy, and remained crouching in their hiding-places. Pierre, over-daring, had undertaken to defend alone the entrance of a dangerous passage and to stop the whole hostile troop there. Whilst he kept them engaged, half of his men, concealed on the left, were to come round the foot of the hill and make a rush on hearing his whistle; the other half, also stationed at some, little distance, were to execute the same manoeuvre from above. The archers would be caught in a trap, and attacked both in front and rear, would be obliged to surrender at discretion. Chance, which not unfrequently decides the fate of a battle, defeated this excellent stratagem. Watching intently; Pierre failed to perceive that while his whole attention was given to the ground in front, the archers had taken an entirely different road from the one they ought to have followed if his combination were to succeed. They

suddenly fell upon him from behind, and before he could blow his whistle, they gagged him with a handkerchief and tied his hands. Six remained to keep the field of battle and disperse the hostile band, now deprived of its chief; the remaining four conveyed Pierre to the little wood, while the robbers, hearing no signal, did not venture to stir. According to agreement, Pierre Buttet was tried by the archers, who promptly transformed themselves into a court of justice, and as he had been taken red-handed, and did not condescend to defend himself, the trial was not a long affair. He was unanimously sentenced to be hung, and the execution was then and there carried out, at the request of the criminal himself, who wanted the game to be properly played to the end, and who actually selected a suitable tree for his own execution.

“But, Pierre,” said one of the judges, “how can you be held up there?”

“How stupid you are!” returned the captive. “I shall only pretend to be hung, of course. See here!” and he fastened together several pieces strong string which had tied some of the other boys’ books, piled the latter together, and standing on tiptoe on this very insecure basis, fastened one end of the cord to a horizontal bough, and put his neck into a running knot at the other end, endeavouring to imitate the contortions of an actual sufferer. Shouts of laughter greeted him, and the victim laughed loudest of all. Three archers went to call the rest to behold this amusing spectacle; one, tired out, remained with the prisoner.

“Ah, Hangman,” said Pierre, putting out his tongue at him,

“are the books firm? I thought I felt them give way.”

“No,” replied Antoine; it was he who remained. “Don’t be afraid, Pierre.”

“It is a good thing; for if they fell I don’t think the cord is long enough.”

“Don’t you really think so?”

A horrible thought showed itself like a flash on the child’s face. He resembled a young hyena scenting blood for the first time. He glanced at the pile of books Pierre was standing on, and compared it with the length of the cord between the branch and his neck. It was already nearly dark, the shadows were deepening in the wood, gleams of pale light penetrated between the trees, the leaves had become black and rustled in the wind. Antoine stood silent and motionless, listening if any sound could be heard near them.

It would be a curious study for the moralist to observe how the first thought of crime develops itself in the recesses of the human heart, and how this poisoned germ grows and stifles all other sentiments; an impressive lesson might be gathered from this struggle of two opposing principles, however weak it may be, in perverted natures. In cases where judgment can discern, where there is power to choose between good and evil, the guilty person has only himself to blame, and the most heinous crime is only the action of its perpetrator. It is a human action, the result of passions which might have been controlled, and one’s mind is not uncertain, nor one’s conscience doubtful, as to the guilt. But

how can one conceive this taste for murder in a young child, how imagine it, without being tempted to exchange the idea of eternal sovereign justice for that of blind-fatality? How can one judge without hesitation between the moral sense which has given way and the instinct which displays itself? how not exclaim that the designs of a Creator who retains the one and impels the other are sometimes mysterious and inexplicable, and that one must submit without understanding?

“Do you hear them coming?” asked Pierre.

“I hear nothing,” replied Antoine, and a nervous shiver ran through all his members.

“So much the worse. I am tired of being dead; I shall come to life and run after them. Hold the books, and I will undo the noose.”

“If you move, the books will separate; wait, I will hold them.”

And he knelt down, and collecting all his strength, gave the pile a violent push.

Pierre endeavoured to raise his hands to his throat. “What are you doing?” he cried in a suffocating voice.

“I am paying you out;” replied Antoine, folding his arms.

Pierre’s feet were only a few inches from the ground, and the weight of his body at first bent the bough for a moment; but it rose again, and the unfortunate boy exhausted himself in useless efforts. At every movement the knot grew tighter, his legs struggled, his arms sought vainly something to lay hold of; then his movements slackened, his limbs stiffened, and his hands

sank down. Of so much life and vigour nothing remained but the movement of an inert mass turning round and round upon itself.

Not till then did Antoine cry for help, and when the other boys hastened up they found him crying and tearing his hair. So violent indeed were his sobs and his despair that he could hardly be understood as he tried to explain how the books had given way under Pierre, and how he had vainly endeavoured to support him in his arms.

This boy, left an orphan at three years old, had been brought up at first by a relation who turned him out for theft; afterwards by two sisters, his cousins, who were already beginning to take alarm at his abnormal perversity. This pale and fragile being, an incorrigible thief, a consummate hypocrite, and a cold-blooded assassin, was predestined to an immortality of crime, and was to find a place among the most execrable monsters for whom humanity has ever had to blush; his name was Antoine-Francois Derues.

Twenty years had gone by since this horrible and mysterious event, which no one sought to unravel at the time it occurred. One June evening, 1771, four persons were sitting in one of the rooms of a modestly furnished, dwelling on the third floor of a house in the rue Saint-Victor. The party consisted of three women and an ecclesiastic, who boarded, for meals only, with the woman who tenanted the dwelling; the other two were near neighbours. They were all friends, and often met thus in the evening to play cards. They were sitting round the card-table, but although it was nearly

ten o'clock the cards had not yet been touched. They spoke in low tones, and a half-interrupted confidence had, this evening, put a check on the usual gaiety.

Someone knocked gently at the door, although no sound of steps on the creaking wooden staircase had been heard, and a wheedling voice asked for admittance. The occupier of the room, Madame Legrand, rose, and admitted a man of about six-and-twenty, at whose appearance the four friends exchanged glances, at once observed by the new-comer, who affected, however, not to see them. He bowed successively to the three women, and several times with the utmost respect to the abbe, making signs of apology for the interruption caused by his appearance; then, coughing several times, he turned to Madame Legrand, and said in a feeble voice, which seemed to betoken much suffering —

“My kind mistress, will you and these other ladies excuse my presenting myself at such an hour and in such a costume? I am ill, and I was obliged to get up.”

His costume was certainly singular enough: he was wrapped in a large dressing-gown of flowered chintz; his head was adorned by a nightcap drawn up at the top and surmounted by a muslin frill. His appearance did not contradict his complaint of illness; he was barely four feet six in height, his limbs were bony, his face sharp, thin, and pale. Thus attired, coughing incessantly, dragging his feet as if he had no strength to lift them, holding a lighted candle in one hand and an egg in the other, he suggested a caricature—some imaginary invalid just escaped from M. Purgon.

Nevertheless, no one ventured to smile, notwithstanding his valetudinarian appearance and his air of affected humility. The perpetual blinking of the yellow eyelids which fell over the round and hollow eyes, shining with a sombre fire which he could never entirely suppress, reminded one of a bird of prey unable to face the light, and the lines of his face, the hooked nose, and the thin, constantly quivering, drawn-in lips suggested a mixture of boldness and baseness, of cunning and sincerity. But there is no book which can instruct one to read the human countenance correctly; and some special circumstance must have roused the suspicions of these four persons so much as to cause them to make these observations, and they were not as usual deceived by the humbug of this skilled actor, a past master in the art of deception.

He continued after a moment's silence, as if he did not wish to interrupt their mute observation —

“Will you oblige me by a neighbourly kindness?”

“What is it, Derues?” asked Madame Legrand. A violent cough, which appeared to rend his chest, prevented him from answering immediately. When it ceased, he looked at the abbe, and said, with a melancholy smile —

“What I ought to ask in my present state of health is your blessing, my father, and your intercession for the pardon of my sins. But everyone clings to the life which God has given him. We do not easily abandon hope; moreover, I have always considered it wrong to neglect such means of preserving our lives as are in

our power, since life is for us only a time of trial, and the longer and harder the trial the greater our recompense in a better world. Whatever befalls us, our answer should be that of the Virgin Mary to the angel who announced the mystery of the Incarnation: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word.’”

“You are right,” said the abbe, with a severe and inquisitorial look, under which Derues remained quite untroubled; “it is an attribute of God to reward and to punish, and the Almighty is not deceived by him who deceives men. The Psalmist has said, ‘Righteous art Thou, O Lord, and upright are Thy judgments.’”

“He has said also, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,’” Derues promptly replied. This exchange of quotations from Scripture might have lasted for hours without his being at a loss, had the abbe thought fit to continue in this strain; but such a style of conversation, garnished with grave and solemn words, seemed almost sacrilegious in the mouth of a man of such ridiculous appearance – a profanation at once sad and grotesque. Derues seemed to comprehend the impression it produced, and tuning again to Madame Legrand, he said —

“We have got a long way from what I came to ask you, my kind friend. I was so ill that I went early to bed, but I cannot sleep, and I have no fire. Would you have the kindness to have this egg mulled for me?”

“Cannot your servant do that for you?” asked Madame Legrand.

“I gave her leave to go out this evening, and though it is late she has not yet returned. If I had a fire, I would not give you so much trouble, but I do not care to light one at this hour. You know I am always afraid of accidents, and they so easily happen!”

“Very well, then,” replied Madame Legrand; “go back to your room, and my servant will bring it to you.”

“Thank you,” said Derues, bowing, – “many thanks.”

As he turned to depart, Madame Legrand spoke again.

“This day week, Derues, you have to pay me half the twelve hundred livres due for the purchase of my business.”

“So soon as that?”

“Certainly, and I want the money. Have you forgotten the date, then?”

“Oh dear, I have never looked at the agreement since it was drawn up. I did not think the time was so near, it is the fault of my bad memory; but I will contrive to pay you, although trade is very bad, and in three days I shall have to pay more than fifteen thousand livres to different people.”

He bowed again and departed, apparently exhausted by the effort of sustaining so long a conversation.

As soon as they were alone, the abbe exclaimed —

“That man is assuredly an utter rascal! May God forgive him his hypocrisy! How is it possible we could allow him to deceive us for so long?”

“But, my father,” interposed one of the visitors, “are you really sure of what you have just said?”

“I am not now speaking of the seventy-nine Louis d’or which have been stolen from me, although I never mentioned to anyone but you, and he was then present, that I possessed such a sum, and although that very day he made a false excuse for coming to my rooms when I was out. Theft is indeed infamous, but slander is not less so, and he has slandered you disgracefully. Yes, he has spread a report that you, Madame Legrand, you, his former mistress and benefactress, have put temptation in his way, and desired to commit carnal sin with him. This is now whispered the neighbourhood all round us, it will soon be said aloud, and we have been so completely his dupes, we have helped him so much to acquire a reputation for uprightness, that it would now be impossible to destroy our own work; if I were to accuse him of theft, and you charged him with lying, probably neither of us would be believed. Beware, these odious tales have not been spread without a reason. Now that your eyes are open, beware of him.”

“Yes,” replied Madame Legrand, “my brother-in-law warned me three years ago. One day Derues said to my sister-in-law, – I remember the words perfectly, – ‘I should like to be a druggist, because one would always be able to punish an enemy; and if one has a quarrel with anyone it would be easy to get rid of him by means of a poisoned draught.’ I neglected these warnings. I surmounted the feeling of repugnance I first felt at the sight of him; I have responded to his advances, and I greatly fear I may have cause to repent it. But you know him as well as I do, who

would not have thought his piety sincere? – who would not still think so? And notwithstanding all you have said, I still hesitate to feel serious alarm; I am unwilling to believe in such utter depravity.”

The conversation continued in this strain for some time, and then, as it was getting late, the party separated.

Next morning early, a large and noisy crowd was assembled in the rue Saint-Victor before Derues’ shop of drugs and groceries. There was a confusion of cross questions, of inquiries which obtained no answer, of answers not addressed to the inquiry, a medley of sound, a pell-mell of unconnected words, of affirmations, contradictions, and interrupted narrations. Here, a group listened to an orator who held forth in his shirt sleeves, a little farther there were disputes, quarrels, exclamations of “Poor man!” “Such a good fellow!” “My poor gossip Derues!” “Good heavens! what will he do now?” “Alas! he is quite done for; it is to be hoped his creditors will give him time!” Above all this uproar was heard a voice, sharp and piercing like a cat’s, lamenting, and relating with sobs the terrible misfortune of last night. At about three in the morning the inhabitants of the rue St. Victor had been startled out of their sleep by the cry of “Fire, fire!” A conflagration had burst forth in Derues’ cellar, and though its progress had been arrested and the house saved from destruction, all the goods stored therein had perished. It apparently meant a considerable loss in barrels of oil, casks of brandy, boxes of soap, etc., which Derues estimated at not less than nine thousand livres.

By what unlucky chance the fire had been caused he had no idea. He recounted his visit to Madame Legrand, and pale, trembling, hardly able to sustain himself, he cried —

“I shall die of grief! A poor man as ill as I am! I am lost! I am ruined!”

A harsh voice interrupted his lamentations, and drew the attention of the crowd to a woman carrying printed broadsides, and who forced a passage through the crowd up to the shop door. She unfolded one of her sheets, and cried as loudly and distinctly as her husky voice permitted —

“Sentence pronounced by the Parliament of Paris against John Robert Cassel, accused and convicted of Fraudulent Bankruptcy!”

Derues looked up and saw a street-hawker who used to come to his shop for a drink, and with whom he had had a violent quarrel about a month previously, she having detected him in a piece of knavery, and abused him roundly in her own style, which was not lacking in energy. He had not seen her since. The crowd generally, and all the gossips of the quarter, who held Derues in great veneration, thought that the woman’s cry was intended as an indirect insult, and threatened to punish her for this irreverence. But, placing one hand on her hip, and with the other warning off the most pressing by a significant gesture —

“Are you still befooled by his tricks, fools that you are? Yes, no doubt there was a fire in the cellar last night, no doubt his creditors will be geese enough to let him off paying his debts!

But what you don't know is, that he didn't really lose by it at all!"

"He lost all his goods!" the crowd cried on all sides. "More than nine thousand livres! Oil and brandy, do you think those won't burn? The old witch, she drinks enough to know! If one put a candle near her she would take fire, fast enough!"

"Perhaps," replied the woman, with renewed gesticulations, "perhaps; but I don't advise any of you to try. Anyhow, this fellow here is a rogue; he has been emptying his cellar for the last three nights; there were only old empty casks in it and empty packing-cases! Oh yes! I have swallowed his daily lies like everybody else, but I know the truth by now. He got his liquor taken away by Michael Lambourne's son, the cobbler in the rue de la Parcheminerie. How do I know? Why, because the young man came and told me!"

"I turned that woman out of my shop a month ago, for stealing," said Derues.

Notwithstanding this retaliatory accusation, the woman's bold assertion might have changed the attitude of the crowd and chilled the enthusiasm, but at that moment a stout man pressed forward, and seizing the hawker by the arm, said —

"Go, and hold your tongue, backbiting woman!"

To this man, the honour of Derues was an article of faith; he had not yet ceased to wonder at the probity of this sainted person, and to doubt it in the least was as good as suspecting his own.

"My dear friend," he said, "we all know what to think of you. I know you well. Send to me tomorrow, and you shall have what

goods you want, on credit, for as long as is necessary. Now, evil tongue, what do you say to that?"

"I say that you are as great a fool as the rest. Adieu, friend Derues; go on as you have begun, and I shall be selling your 'sentence' some day"; and dispersing the crowd with a few twirls of her right arm, she passed on, crying —

"Sentence pronounced by the Parliament of Paris against John Robert Cassel, accused and convicted of Fraudulent Bankruptcy!"

This accusation emanated from too insignificant a quarter to have any effect on Derues' reputation. However resentful he may have been at the time, he got over it in consequence of the reiterated marks of interest shown by his neighbours and all the quarter on account of his supposed ruin, and the hawker's attack passed out of his mind, or probably she might have paid for her boldness with her life.

But this drunken woman had none the less uttered a prophetic word; it was the grain of sand on which, later, he was to be shipwrecked.

"All passions," says La Bruyere, — "all passions are deceitful; they disguise themselves as much as possible from the public eye; they hide from themselves. There is no vice which has not a counterfeit resemblance to some virtue, and which does not profit by it."

The whole life of Derues bears testimony to the truth of this observation. An avaricious poisoner, he attracted his victims by

the pretence of fervent and devoted piety, and drew them into the snare where he silently destroyed them. His terrible celebrity only began in 1777, caused by the double murder of Madame de Lamotte and her son, and his name, unlike those of some other great criminals, does not at first recall a long series of crimes, but when one examines this low, crooked, and obscure life, one finds a fresh stain at every step, and perhaps no one has ever surpassed him in dissimulation, in profound hypocrisy, in indefatigable depravity. Derues was executed at thirty-two, and his whole life was steeped in vice; though happily so short, it is full of horror, and is only a tissue of criminal thoughts and deeds, a very essence of evil. He had no hesitation, no remorse, no repose, no relaxation; he seemed compelled to lie, to steal, to poison! Occasionally suspicion is aroused, the public has its doubts, and vague rumours hover round him; but he burrows under new impostures, and punishment passes by. When he falls into the hands of human justice his reputation protects him, and for a few days more the legal sword is turned aside. Hypocrisy is so completely a part of his nature, that even when there is no longer any hope, when he is irrevocably sentenced, and he knows that he can no longer deceive anyone, neither mankind nor Him whose name he profanes by this last sacrilege, he yet exclaims, "O Christ! I shall suffer even as Thou." It is only by the light of his funeral pyre that the dark places of his life can be examined, that this bloody plot is unravelled, and that other victims, forgotten and lost in the shadows, arise like spectres at

the foot of the scaffold, and escort the assassin to his doom.

Let us trace rapidly the history of Derues' early years, effaced and forgotten in the notoriety of his death. These few pages are not written for the glorification of crime, and if in our own days, as a result of the corruption of our manners, and of a deplorable confusion of all notions of right and wrong, it has been sought to make him an object; of public interest, we, on our part, only wish to bring him into notice, and place him momentarily on a pedestal, in order to cast him still lower, that his fall may be yet greater. What has been permitted by God may be related by man. Decaying and satiated communities need not be treated as children; they require neither diplomatic handling nor precaution, and it may be good that they should see and touch the putrescent sores which canker them. Why fear to mention that which everyone knows? Why dread to sound the abyss which can be measured by everyone? Why fear to bring into the light of day unmasked wickedness, even though it confronts the public gaze unblushingly? Extreme turpitude and extreme excellence are both in the schemes of Providence; and the poet has summed up eternal morality for all ages and nations in this sublime exclamation:

“Abstulit hunc tandem Rufini poem tumultum.”

Besides, and we cannot insist too earnestly that our intention must not be mistaken, if we had wished to inspire any other

sentiment than that of horror, we should have chosen a more imposing personage from the annals of crime. There have been deeds which required audacity, a sort of grandeur, a false heroism; there have been criminals who held in check all the regular and legitimate forces of society, and whom one regarded with a mixture of terror and pity. There is nothing of that in Derues, not even a trace of courage; nothing but a shameless cupidity, exercising itself at first in the theft of a few pence filched from the poor; nothing but the illicit gains and rascalities of a cheating shopkeeper and vile money-lender, a depraved cowardice which dared not strike openly, but slew in the dark. It is the story of an unclean reptile which drags itself underground, leaving everywhere the trail of its poisonous saliva.

Such was the man whose life we have undertaken to narrate, a man who represents a complete type of wickedness, and who corresponds to the most hideous sketch ever devised by poet or romance-writer: Facts without importance of their own, which would be childish if recorded of anyone else, obtain a sombre reflection from other facts which precede them, and thenceforth cannot be passed over in silence. The historian is obliged to collect and note them, as showing the logical development of this degraded being: he unites them in sequence, and counts the successive steps of the ladder mounted by the criminal.

We have seen the early exploit of this assassin by instinct; we find him, twenty years later, an incendiary and a fraudulent bankrupt. What had happened in the interval? With how much

treachery and crime had he filled this space of twenty years? Let us return to his infancy.

His unconquerable taste for theft caused him to be expelled by the relations who had taken charge of him. An anecdote is told which shows his impudence and incurable perversity. One day he was caught taking some money, and was soundly whipped by his cousins. When this was over, the child, instead of showing any sorrow or asking forgiveness, ran away with a sneer, and seeing they were out of breath, exclaimed —

“You are tired, are you? Well, I am not!”

Despairing of any control over this evil disposition, the relations refused to keep him, and sent him to Chartres, where two other cousins agreed to have him, out of charity. They were simpleminded women, of great and sincere piety, who imagined that good example and religious teaching might have a happy influence on their young relation. The result was contrary to their expectation: the sole fruit of their teaching was that Derues learnt to be a cheat and a hypocrite, and to assume the mask of respectability.

Here also repeated thefts insured him sound corrections. Knowing his cousins' extreme economy, not to say avarice, he mocked them when they broke a lath over his shoulders: “There now, I am so glad; that will cost you two farthings!”

His benefactresses' patience becoming exhausted, he left their house, and was apprenticed to a tinman at Chartres. His master died, and an ironmonger of the same town took him as shop-

boy, and from this he passed on to a druggist and grocer. Until now, although fifteen years old, he had shown no preference for one trade more than another, but it was now necessary he should choose some profession, and his share in the family property amounted to the modest sum of three thousand five hundred livres. His residence with this last master revealed a decided taste, but it was only another evil instinct developing itself: the poisoner had scented poison, being always surrounded with drugs which were health-giving or hurtful, according to the use made of them. Derues would probably have settled at Chartres, but repeated thefts obliged him to leave the town. The profession of druggist and grocer being one which presented most chances of fortune, and being, moreover, adapted to his tastes, his family apprenticed him to a grocer in the rue Comtesse d'Artois, paying a specified premium for him.

Derues arrived in Paris in 1760. It was a new horizon, where he was unknown; no suspicion attached to him, and he felt much at his ease. Lost in the noise and the crowd of this immense receptacle for every vice, he had time to found on hypocrisy his reputation as an honest man. When his apprenticeship expired, his master proposed to place him with his sister-in-law, who kept a similar establishment in the rue St. Victor, and who had been a widow for several years. He recommended Derues as a young man whose zeal and intelligence might be useful in her business, being ignorant of various embezzlements committed by his late apprentice, who was always clever enough to cast suspicion on

others. But the negotiation nearly fell through, because, one day, Derues so far forgot his usual prudence and dissimulation as to allow himself to make the observation recorded above to his mistress. She, horrified, ordered him to be silent, and threatened to ask her husband to dismiss him. It required a double amount of hypocrisy to remove this unfavourable impression; but he spared no pains to obtain the confidence of the sister-in-law, who was much influenced in his favour. Every day he inquired what could be done for her, every evening he took a basket-load of the goods she required from the rue Comtesse d'Artois; and it excited the pity of all beholders to see this weakly young man, panting and sweating under his heavy burden, refusing any reward, and labouring merely for the pleasure of obliging, and from natural kindness of heart! The poor widow, whose spoils he was already coveting, was completely duped. She rejected the advice of her brother-in-law, and only listened to the concert of praises sung by neighbours much edified by Derues' conduct, and touched by the interest he appeared to show her. Often he found occasion to speak of her, always with the liveliest expressions of boundless devotion. These remarks were repeated to the good woman, and seemed all the more sincere to her as they appeared to have been made quite casually, and she never suspected they were carefully calculated and thought out long before.

Derues carried dishonesty as far as possible, but he knew how to stop when suspicion was likely to be aroused, and though always planning either to deceive or to hurt, he was never taken

by surprise. Like the spider which spreads the threads of her web all round her, he concealed himself in a net of falsehood which one had to traverse before arriving at his real nature. The evil destiny of this poor woman, mother of four children, caused her to engage him as her shopman in the year 1767, thereby signing the warrant for her own ruin.

Derues began life under his new mistress with a master-stroke. His exemplary piety was the talk of the whole quarter, and his first care had been to request Madame Legrand to recommend him a confessor. She sent him to the director of her late husband, Pere Cartault, of the Carmelite order, who, astonished at the devotion of his penitent, never failed, if he passed the shop, to enter and congratulate Madame Legrand on the excellent acquisition she had made in securing this young man, who would certainly bring her a blessing along with him. Derues affected the greatest modesty, and blushed at these praises, and often, when he saw the good father approaching, appeared not to see him, and found something to do elsewhere; whereby the field was left clear for his too credulous panegyrists.

But Pere Cartault appeared too indulgent, and Derues feared that his sins were too easily pardoned; and he dared not find peace in an absolution which was never refused. Therefore, before the year was out, he chose a second confessor, Pere Denys, a Franciscan, consulting both alternately, and confiding his conscientious scruples to them. Every penance appeared too easy, and he added to those enjoined by his directors continual

mortifications of his own devising, so that even Tartufe himself would have owned his superiority.

He wore about him two shrouds, to which were fastened relics of Madame de Chantal, also a medal of St. Francois de Saps, and occasionally scourged himself. His mistress related that he had begged her to take a sitting at the church of St. Nicholas, in order that he might more easily attend service when he had a day out, and had brought her a small sum which he had saved, to pay half the expense.

Moreover, he had slept upon straw during the whole of Lent, and took care that Madame Legrand heard of this through the servant, pretending at first to hide it as if it were something wrong. He tried to prevent the maid from going into his room, and when she found out the straw he forbade her to mention it – which naturally made her more anxious to relate her discovery. Such a piece of piety, combined with such meritorious humility, such dread of publicity, could only increase the excellent opinion which everyone already had of him.

Every day was marked by some fresh hypocrisy. One of his sisters, a novice in the convent of the Ladies of the Visitation of the Virgin, was to take the veil at Easter. Derues obtained permission to be present at the ceremony, and was to start on foot on Good Friday. When he departed, the shop happened to be full of people, and the gossips of the neighbourhood inquired where he was going. Madame Legrand desired him to have a glass of liqueur (wine he never touched) and something to eat

before starting.

“Oh, madame!” he exclaimed, “do you think I could eat on a day like this, the day on which Christ was crucified! I will take a piece of bread with me, but I shall only eat it at the inn where I intend to sleep: I mean to fast the whole way.”

But this kind of thing was not sufficient. He wanted an opportunity to establish a reputation for honesty on a firm basis. Chance provided one, and he seized it immediately, although at the expense of a member of his own family.

One of his brothers, who kept a public-house at Chartres, came to see him. Derues, under pretence of showing him the sights of Paris, which he did not know, asked his mistress to allow him to take in the brother for a few days, which she granted. The last evening of his stay, Derues went up to his room, broke open the box which contained his clothes, turned over everything it contained, examined the clothes, and discovering two new cotton nightcaps, raised a cry which brought up the household. His brother just then returned, and Derues called him an infamous thief, declaring that he had stolen the money for these new articles out of the shop the evening before. His brother defended himself, protesting his innocence, and, indignant at such incomprehensible treachery, endeavoured to turn the tables by relating some of Antoine’s early misdeeds. The latter, however, stopped him, by declaring on his honour that he had seen his brother the evening before go to the till, slip his hand in, and take out some money. The brother was confounded

and silenced by so audacious a lie; he hesitated, stammered, and was turned out of the house. Derues worthily crowned this piece of iniquity by obliging his mistress to accept the restitution of the stolen money. It cost him three livres, twelve sons, but the interest it brought him was the power of stealing unsuspected. That evening he spent in prayer for the pardon of his brother's supposed guilt.

All these schemes had succeeded, and brought him nearer to the desired goal, for not a soul in the quarter ventured to doubt the word of this saintly individual. His fawning manners and insinuating language varied according to the people addressed. He adapted himself to all, contradicting no one, and, while austere himself, he flattered the tastes of others. In the various houses where he visited his conversation was serious, grave, and sententious; and, as we have seen, he could quote Scripture with the readiness of a theologian. In the shop, when he had to deal with the lower classes, he showed himself acquainted with their modes of expression, and spoke the Billingsgate of the market-women, which he had acquired in the rue Comtesse d'Artois, treating them familiarly, and they generally addressed him as "gossip Denies." By his own account he easily judged the characters of the various people with whom he came in contact.

However, Pere Cartault's prophecy was not fulfilled: the blessing of Heaven did not descend on the Legrand establishment. There seemed to be a succession of misfortunes which all Derues' zeal and care as shopman could neither prevent

nor repair. He by no means contented himself with parading an idle and fruitless hypocrisy, and his most abominable deceptions were not those displayed in the light of day. He watched by night: his singular organisation, outside the ordinary laws of nature, appeared able to dispense with sleep. Gliding about on tiptoe, opening doors noiselessly, with all the skill of an accomplished thief, he pillaged shop and cellar, and sold his plunder in remote parts of the town under assumed names. It is difficult to understand how his strength supported the fatigue of this double existence; he had barely arrived at puberty, and art had been obliged to assist the retarded development of nature. But he lived only for evil, and the Spirit of Evil supplied the physical vigour which was wanting. An insane love of money (the only passion he knew) brought him by degrees back to his starting-point of crime; he concealed it in hiding-places wrought in the thick walls, in holes dug out by his nails. As soon as he got any, he brought it exactly as a wild beast brings a piece of bleeding flesh to his lair; and often, by the glimmer of a dark lantern, kneeling in adoration before this shameful idol, his eyes sparkling with ferocious joy, with a smile which suggested a hyena's delight over its prey, he would contemplate his money, counting and kissing it.

These continual thefts brought trouble into the Legrand affairs, cancelled all profits, and slowly brought on ruin. The widow had no suspicion of Derues' disgraceful dealings, and he carefully referred the damage to other causes, quite worthy of

himself. Sometimes it was a bottle of oil, or of brandy, or some other commodity, which was found spilt, broken, or damaged, which accidents he attributed to the enormous quantity of rats which infested the cellar and the house. At length, unable to meet her engagements, Madame Legrand made the business over to him in February, 1770. He was then twenty-five years and six months old, and was accepted as a merchant grocer in August the same year. By an agreement drawn up between them, Derues undertook to pay twelve hundred livres for the goodwill, and to lodge her rent free during the remainder of her lease, which had still nine years to run. Being thus obliged to give up business to escape bankruptcy, Madame Legrand surrendered to her creditors any goods remaining in her warehouse; and Derues easily made arrangements to take them over very cheaply. The first step thus made, he was now able to enrich himself safely and to defraud with impunity under the cover of his stolen reputation.

One of his uncles, a flour merchant at Chartres, came habitually twice a year to Paris to settle accounts with his correspondents. A sum of twelve hundred francs, locked up in a drawer, was stolen from him, and, accompanied by his nephew, he went to inform the police. On investigation being made, it was found that the chest of drawers had been broken at the top. As at the time of the theft of the seventy-nine Louis from the abbe, Derues was the only person known to have entered his uncle's room. The innkeeper swore to this, but the uncle took pains to justify his nephew, and showed his confidence shortly after by

becoming surety for him to the extent of five thousand livres. Derues failed to pay when the time expired, and the holder of the note was obliged to sue the surety for it.

He made use of any means, even the most impudent, which enabled him to appropriate other people's property. A provincial grocer on one occasion sent him a thousand-weight of honey in barrels to be sold on commission. Two or three months passed, and he asked for an account of the sale. Derues replied that he had not yet been able to dispose of it advantageously, and there ensued a fresh delay, followed by the same question and the same reply. At length, when more than a year had passed, the grocer came to Paris, examined his barrels, and found that five hundred pounds were missing. He claimed damages from Derues, who declared he had never received any more, and as the honey had been sent in confidence, and there was no contract and no receipt to show, the provincial tradesman could not obtain compensation.

As though having risen by the ruin of Madame Legrand and her four children was not enough, Derues grudged even the morsel of bread he had been obliged to leave her. A few days after the fire in the cellar, which enabled him to go through a second bankruptcy, Madame Legrand, now undeceived and not believing his lamentations, demanded the money due to her, according to their agreement. Derues pretended to look for his copy of the contract, and could not find it. "Give me yours, madame," said he; "we will write the receipt upon it. Here is the

money.”

The widow opened her purse and took out her copy; Derues snatched it, and tore it up. “Now,” he exclaimed, “you are paid; I owe you nothing now. If you like, I will declare it on oath in court, and no one will disbelieve my word.”

“Wretched man,” said the unfortunate widow, “may God forgive your soul; but your body will assuredly end on the gallows!”

It was in vain that she complained, and told of this abominable swindle; Derues had been beforehand with her, and the slander he had disseminated bore its fruits. It was said that his old mistress was endeavouring by an odious falsehood to destroy the reputation of a man who had refused to be her lover. Although reduced to poverty, she left the house where she had a right to remain rent free, preferring the hardest and dreariest life to the torture of remaining under the same roof with the man who had caused her ruin.

We might relate a hundred other pieces of knavery, but it must not be supposed that having begun by murder, Derues would draw back and remain contented with theft. Two fraudulent bankruptcies would have sufficed for most people; for him they were merely a harmless pastime. Here we must place two dark and obscure stories, two crimes of which he is accused, two victims whose death groans no one heard.

The hypocrite’s excellent reputation had crossed the Parisian bounds. A young man from the country, intending to start as

a grocer in the capital, applied to Derues for the necessary information and begged for advice. He arrived at the latter's house with a sum of eight thousand livres, which he placed in Derues' hands, asking him for assistance in finding a business. The sight of gold was enough to rouse the instinct of crime in Derues, and the witches who hailed Macbeth with the promise of royalty did not rouse the latter's ambitious desires to a greater height than the chance of wealth did the greed of the assassin; whose hands, once closed over the eight thousand livres, were never again relaxed. He received them as a deposit, and hid them along with his previous plunder, vowing never to return them. Several days had elapsed, when one afternoon Derues returned home with an air of such unusual cheerfulness that the young man questioned him. "Have you heard some good news for me?" he asked, "or have you had some luck yourself?"

"My young friend," answered Derues, "as for me, success depends on my own efforts, and fortune smiles on me. But I have promised to be useful to you, your parents have trusted me, and I must prove that their confidence is well founded. I have heard to-day of a business for disposal in one of the best parts of Paris. You can have it for twelve thousand livres, and I wish I could lend you the amount you want. But you must write to your father, persuade him, reason with him; do not lose so good a chance. He must make a little sacrifice, and he will be grateful to me later."

In accordance with their son's request, the young man's parents despatched a sum of four thousand livres, requesting

Derues to lose no time in concluding the purchase.

Three weeks later, the father, very uneasy, arrived in Paris. He came to inquire about his son, having heard nothing from him. Derues received him with the utmost astonishment, appearing convinced that the young man had returned home. One day, he said, the youth informed him that he had heard from his father, who had given up all idea of establishing him in Paris, having arranged an advantageous marriage for him near home; and he had taken his twelve thousand livres, for which Derues produced a receipt, and started on his return journey.

One evening, when nearly dark, Derues had gone out with his guest, who complained of headache and internal pains. Where did they go? No one knew; but Derues only returned at daybreak, alone, weary and exhausted, and the young man was never again heard of.

One of his apprentices was the constant object of reproof. The boy was accused of negligence, wasting his time, of spending three hours over a task which might have been done in less than one. When Derues had convinced the father, a Parisian bourgeois, that his son was a bad boy and a good-for-nothing, he came to this man one day in a state of wild excitement.

“Your son,” he said, “ran away yesterday with six hundred livres, with which I had to meet a bill to-day. He knew where I kept this money, and has taken it.”

He threatened to go before a magistrate and denounce the thief, and was only appeased by being paid the sum he claimed

to have lost. But he had gone out with the lad the evening before, and returned alone in the early hours of the morning.

However, the veil which concealed the truth was becoming more and more transparent every day. Three bankruptcies had diminished the consideration he enjoyed, and people began to listen to complaints and accusations which till now had been considered mere inventions designed to injure him. Another attempt at trickery made him feel it desirable to leave the neighbourhood.

He had rented a house close to his own, the shop of which had been tenanted for seven or eight years by a wine merchant. He required from this man, if he wished to remain where he was, a sum of six hundred livres as a payment for goodwill. Although the wine merchant considered it an exorbitant charge, yet on reflection he decided to pay it rather than go, having established a good business on these premises, as was well known. Before long a still more arrant piece of dishonesty gave him an opportunity for revenge. A young man of good family, who was boarding with him in order to gain some business experience, having gone into Derues' shop to make some purchases, amused himself while waiting by idly writing his name on a piece of blank paper lying on the counter; which he left there without thinking more about it. Derues, knowing the young man had means, as soon as he had gone, converted the signed paper into a promissory note for two thousand livres, to his order, payable at the majority of the signer. The bill, negotiated in trade, arrived when due

at the wine merchant's, who, much surprised, called his young boarder and showed him the paper adorned with his signature. The youth was utterly confounded, having no knowledge of the bill whatever, but nevertheless could not deny his signature. On examining the paper carefully, the handwriting was recognised as Derues'. The wine merchant sent for him, and when he arrived, made him enter a room, and having locked the door, produced the promissory note. Derues acknowledged having written it, and tried various falsehoods to excuse himself. No one listened to him, and the merchant threatened to place the matter in the hands of the police. Then Derues wept, implored, fell on his knees, acknowledged his guilt, and begged for mercy. He agreed to restore the six hundred livres exacted from the wine merchant, on condition that he should see the note destroyed and that the matter should end there. He was then about to be married, and dreaded a scandal.

Shortly after, he married Marie-Louise Nicolais; daughter of a harness-maker at Melun.

One's first impression in considering this marriage is one of profound sorrow and utmost pity for the young girl whose destiny was linked with that of this monster. One thinks of the horrible future; of youth and innocence blighted by the tainting breath of the homicide; of candour united to hypocrisy; of virtue to wickedness; of legitimate desires linked to disgraceful passions; of purity mixed with corruption. The thought of these contrasts is revolting, and one pities such a dreadful fate. But we must

not decide hastily. Madame Denies has not been convicted of any active part in her husband's later crimes, but her history, combined with his, shows no trace of suffering, nor of any revolt against a terrible complicity. In her case the evidence is doubtful, and public opinion must decide later.

In 1773, Derues relinquished retail business, and left the Saint Victor neighbourhood, having taken an apartment in the rue des Deux Boules, near the rue Bertin-Poiree, in the parish of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, where he had been married. He first acted on commission for the Benedictine-Camalduan fathers of the forest of Senart, who had heard of him as a man wholly given to piety; then, giving himself up to usury, he undertook what is known as "business affairs," a profession which, in such hands, could not fail to be lucrative, being aided by his exemplary morals and honest appearance. It was the more easy for him to impose on others, as he could not be accused of any of the deadly vices which so often end in ruin – gaming, wine, and women. Until now he had displayed only one passion, that of avarice, but now another developed itself, that of ambition. He bought houses and land, and when the money was due, allowed himself to be sued for it; he bought even lawsuits, which he muddled with all the skill of a rascally attorney. Experienced in bankruptcy, he undertook the management of failures, contriving to make dishonesty appear in the light of unfortunate virtue. When this demon was not occupied with poison, his hands were busy with every social iniquity; he could only live and breathe in

an atmosphere of corruption.

His wife, who had already presented him with a daughter, gave birth to a son in February 1774. Derues, in order to better support the airs of grandeur and the territorial title which he had assumed, invited persons of distinction to act as sponsors. The child was baptized Tuesday, February 15th. We give the text of the baptismal register, as a curiosity: —

“Antoine-Maximilian-Joseph, son of Antoine-Francois Derues, gentleman, seigneur of Gendeville, Herchies, Viquemont, and other places, formerly merchant grocer; and of Madame Marie-Louise Nicolais, his wife. Godfathers, T. H. and T. P., lords of, etc. etc. Godmothers, Madame M. Fr. C. D. V., etc. etc.

“(Signed)

F. DERUES, Senior.”

But all this dignity did not exclude the sheriff's officers, whom, as befitted so great a man, he treated with the utmost insolence, overwhelming them with abuse when they came to enforce an execution. Such scandals had several times aroused the curiosity of his neighbours, and did not redound to his credit. His landlord, wearied of all this clamour, and most especially weary of never getting any rent without a fight for it, gave him notice to quit. Derues removed to the rue Beaubourg, where he continued to act as commission agent under the name of Cyrano Derues de Bury.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.