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VOLUME 07**

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Edward Bulwer-Lytton

The Parisians — Volume 07

BOOK VII

CHAPTER I

It is the first week in the month of May, 1870. Celebrities are of rapid growth in the salons of Paris. Gustave Rameau has gained the position for which he sighed. The journal he edits has increased its hold on the public, and his share of the profits has been liberally augmented by the secret proprietor. Rameau is acknowledged as a power in literary circles. And as critics belonging to the same clique praise each other in Paris, whatever they may do in communities more rigidly virtuous, his poetry has been declared by authorities in the press to be superior to that of Alfred de Musset in vigour—to that of Victor Hugo in refinement; neither of which assertions would much, perhaps, shock a cultivated understanding.

It is true that it (Gustave's poetry) has not gained a wide audience among the public. But with regard to poetry nowadays, there are plenty of persons who say as Dr. Johnson said of the verse of Spratt, "I would rather praise it than read."

At all events, Rameau was courted in gay and brilliant circles, and, following the general example of French *litterateurs* in fashion, lived well up to the income he received, had a delightful bachelor's apartment, furnished with artistic effect, spent largely on the adornment of his person, kept a coupe, and entertained profusely at the cafe Anglais and the Maison Doree. A reputation that inspired a graver and more unquiet interest had been created by the Vicomte de Mauleon. Recent articles in the *Sens Commun*, written under the name of Pierre Firmin on the discussions on the vexed question of the plebiscite, had given umbrage to the Government, and Rameau had received an intimation that he, as editor, was responsible for the compositions of the contributors to the journal he edited; and that though, so long as Pierre Firmin had kept his caustic spirit within proper bounds, the Government had winked at the evasion of the law which required every political article in a journal to be signed by the real name of its author, it could do so no longer. Pierre Firmin was apparently a *nom de plume*; if not, his identity must be proved, or Rameau would pay the penalty which his contributor seemed bent on incurring.

Rameau, much alarmed for the journal that might be suspended, and for himself who might be imprisoned, conveyed this information through the publisher to his correspondent Pierre Firmin, and received the next day an article signed Victor de Mauleon, in which the writer proclaimed himself to be one and the same with Pierre Firmin, and, taking a yet bolder tone than he had before assumed, dared the Government to attempt legal measures against him. The Government was prudent enough to disregard that haughty bravado, but Victor de Mauleon rose at once into political importance. He had already in his real name and his quiet way established a popular and respectable place in Parisian society. But if this revelation created him enemies whom he had not before provoked, he was now sufficiently acquitted, by tacit consent, of the sins formerly laid to his charge, to disdain the assaults of party wrath. His old reputation for personal courage and skill in sword and pistol served, indeed, to protect him from such charges as a Parisian journalist does not reply to with his pen. If he created some enemies, he created many more friends, or, at least, partisans and admirers. He only needed fine and imprisonment to become a popular hero.

A few days after he had thus proclaimed himself, Victor de Mauleon—who had before kept aloof from Rameau, and from salons at which he was likely to meet that distinguished minstrel—solicited his personal acquaintance, and asked him to breakfast.

Rameau joyfully went. He had a very natural curiosity to see the contributor whose articles had so mainly insured the sale of the *Sens Commun*.

In the dark-haired, keen-eyed, well-dressed, middle-aged man, with commanding port and courtly address, he failed to recognise any resemblance to the flaxen-wigged, long-coated, bespectacled, shambling sexagenarian whom he had known as Lebeau. Only now and then a tone of voice struck him as familiar, but he could not recollect where he had heard the voice it resembled. The thought of Lebeau did not occur to him; if it had occurred it would only have struck him as a chance coincidence. Rameau, like most egotists, was rather a dull observer of men. His genius was not objective.

"I trust, Monsieur Rameau," said the Vicomte, as he and his guest were seated at the breakfast-table, "that you are not dissatisfied with the remuneration your eminent services in the journal have received."

"The proprietor, whoever he be, has behaved most liberally," answered Rameau.

"I take that compliment to myself, *cher confrere*; for though the expenses of starting the *Sens Commun*, and the caution money lodged, were found by a friend of mine, that was as a loan, which I have long since repaid, and the property in the journal is now exclusively mine. I have to thank you not only for your own brilliant contributions, but for those of the colleagues you secured. Monsieur Savarin's piquant criticisms were most valuable to us at starting. I regret to have lost his aid. But as he has set up a new journal of his own, even he has not wit enough to spare for another. *A propos* of our contributors, I shall ask you to present me to the fair author of *The Artist's Daughter*. I am of too prosaic a nature to appreciate justly the merits of a *roman*; but I have heard warm praise of this story from the young—they are the best judges of that kind of literature; and I can at least understand the worth of a contributor who trebled the sale of our journal. It is a misfortune to us, indeed, that her work is completed, but I trust that the sum sent to her through our publisher suffices to tempt her to favour us with another *roman* in series."

"Mademoiselle Cicogna," said Rameau, with a somewhat sharper intonation of his sharp voice, "has accepted for the republication of her *roman* in a separate form terms which attest the worth of her genius, and has had offers from other journals for a serial tale of even higher amount than the sum so generously sent to her through your publisher."

"Has she accepted them, Monsieur Rameau? If so, *tant pis pour vous*. Pardon me, I mean that your salary suffers in proportion as the *Sens Commun* declines in sale."

"She has not accepted them. I advised her not to do so until she could compare them with those offered by the proprietor of the *Sens Commun*."

"And your advice guides her? Ah, *cher confrere*, you are a happy man!— you have influence over this young aspirant to the fame of a De Stael or a Georges Sand."

"I flatter myself that I have some," answered Rameau, smiling loftily as he helped himself to another tumbler of. Volnay wine—excellent, but rather heady.

"So much the better. I leave you free to arrange terms with Mademoiselle Cicogna, higher than she can obtain elsewhere, and kindly contrive my own personal introduction to her—you have breakfasted already?—permit me to offer you a cigar—excuse me if I do not bear you company; I seldom smoke—never of a morning. Now to business, and the state of France. Take that easy-chair, seat yourself comfortably. So! Listen! If ever Mephistopheles revisit the earth, how he will laugh at Universal Suffrage and Vote by Ballot in an old country like France, as things to be admired by educated men, and adopted by friends of genuine freedom!"

"I don't understand you," said Rameau.

"In this respect at least, let me hope that I can furnish you with understanding."

"The Emperor has resorted to a plebiscite—viz., a vote by ballot and universal suffrage—as to certain popular changes which circumstances compel him to substitute for his former personal rule. Is there a single intelligent Liberal who is not against that plebiscite?—is there any such who does not know that the appeal of the Emperor to universal suffrage and vote by ballot must result in a triumph over all the variations of free thought, by the unity which belongs to Order, represented through an able man at the head of the State? The multitude never comprehend principles; principles are complex ideas; they comprehend a single idea, and the simplest idea is, a Name that rids their action of all responsibility to thought.

"Well, in France there are principles superabundant which you can pit against the principle of Imperial rule. But there is not one name you can pit against Napoleon the Third; therefore, I steer our little bark in the teeth of the popular gale when I denounce the plebiscite, and *Le Sens Commun* will necessarily fall in sale—it is beginning to fall already. We shall have the educated men with us, the rest against. In every country—even in China, where all are highly educated—a few must be yet more highly educated than the many. Monsieur Rameau, I desire to overthrow the Empire: in order to do that, it is not enough to have on my side the educated men, I must have the *canaille*—the *canaille* of Paris and of the manufacturing towns. But I use the *canaille* for my purpose—I don't mean to enthrone it. You comprehend?—the *canaille quiescent* is simply mud at the bottom of a stream; the *canaille* agitated is mud at the surface. But no man capable of three ideas builds the palaces and senates of civilised society out of mud, be it at the top or the bottom of an ocean. Can either you or I desire that the destinies of France shall be swayed by coxcombical artisans who think themselves superior to every man who writes grammar, and whose idea of a common-wealth is the confiscation of private property?" Rameau, thoroughly puzzled by this discourse, bowed his head, and replied whisperingly, "Proceed. You are against the Empire, yet against the populace!—What are you for? not, surely, the Legitimists?—are you Republican? Orleanist? or what?"

"Your questions are very pertinent," answered the Vicomte, courteously, "and my answer shall be very frank. I am against absolute rule, whether under a Buonaparte or a Bourbon. I am for a free State, whether under a constitutional hereditary sovereign like the English or Belgian, or whether, republican in name, it be less democratic than constitutional monarchy in practice, like the American. But as a man interested in the fate of *le Sens Commun*, I hold in profound disdain all crotchets for revolutionising the elements of Human Nature. Enough of this abstract talk. To the point. You are of course aware of the violent meetings held by the Socialists, nominally against the plebiscite, really against the Emperor himself?"

"Yes, I know at least that the working class are extremely discontented; the numerous strikes last month were not on a mere question of wages—they were against the existing forms of society. And the articles by Pierre Firmin which brought me into collision with the Government, seemed to differ from what you now say. They approve those strikes; they appeared to sympathise with the revolutionary meetings at Belleville and Montmartre."

"Of course—we use coarse tools for destroying; we cast them aside for finer ones when we want to reconstruct.

"I attended one of those meetings last night. See, I have a pass for all such assemblies, signed by some dolt who cannot even spell the name he assumes—'Pom-de-Tair.' A commissary of police sat yawning at the end of the orchestra, his secretary by his side, while the orators stammer out fragments of would-be thunderbolts. Commissary of police yawns more wearily than before, secretary disdains to use his pen, seizes his penknife and pares his nails. Up rises a wild-haired, weak-limbed silhouette of a man, and affecting a solemnity of mien which might have become the virtuous Guizot, moves this resolution: 'The French people condemns Charles Louis Napoleon the Third to the penalty of perpetual hard labour.' Then up rises the commissary of police and says quietly, 'I declare this meeting at an end.'

"Sensation among the audience—they gesticulate—they screech—they bellow—the commissary puts on his greatcoat—the secretary gives a last touch to his nails and pockets his penknife—the audience disperses—the silhouette of a man effaces itself—all is over."

"You describe the scene most wittily," said Rameau, laughing, but the laugh was constrained. A would-be cynic himself, there was a something grave and earnest in the real cynic that awed him.

"What conclusion do you draw from such a scene, *cher poete*" asked De Mauleon, fixing his keen quiet eyes on Rameau.

"What conclusion? Well, that—that—"

"Yes, continue."

"That the audience were sadly degenerated from the time when Mirabeau said to a Master of the Ceremonies, 'We are here by the power of the French people, and nothing but the point of the bayonet shall expel us.'"

"Spoken like a poet, a French poet. I suppose you admire M. Victor Hugo. Conceding that he would have employed a more sounding phraseology, comprising more absolute ignorance of men, times, and manners in unintelligible metaphor and melodramatic braggadocio, your answer might have been his; but pardon me if I add, it would not be that of Common Sense."

"Monsieur le Vicomte might rebuke me more politely," said Rameau, colouring high.

"Accept my apologies; I did not mean to rebuke, but to instruct. The times are not those of 1789. And Nature, ever repeating herself in the production of coxcombs and blockheads, never repeats herself in the production of Mirabeaus. The Empire is doomed—doomed, because it is hostile to the free play of intellect. Any Government that gives absolute preponderance to the many is hostile to intellect, for intellect is necessarily confined to the few.

"Intellect is the most revengeful of all the elements of society. It cares not what the materials through which it insinuates or forces its way to its seat.

"I accept the aid of Pom-de-Tair. I do not demean myself to the extent of writing articles that may favor the principles of Pom-de-Tair, signed in the name of Victor de Mauleon or of Pierre Firinin.

"I will beg you, my dear editor, to obtain clever, smart writers, who know nothing about Socialists and Internationalists, who therefore will not commit *Le Sens Commun* by advocating the doctrines of those idiots, but who will flatter the vanity of the *canaille*—vaguely; write any stuff they please about the renown of Paris, 'the eye of the world,' 'the sun of the European system,' &c., of the artisans of Paris as supplying soul to that eye and fuel to that sun—any *blague* of that sort—*genre Victor Hugo*; but nothing definite against life and property, nothing that may not be considered hereafter as the harmless extravagance of a poetic enthusiasm. You might write such articles yourself. In fine, I want to excite the multitude, and yet not to commit our journal to the contempt of the few. Nothing is to be admitted that may bring the law upon us except it be signed by my name. There may be a moment in which it would be desirable for somebody to be sent to prison: in that case, I allow no substitute—I go myself.

"Now you have my most secret thoughts. I intrust them to your judgment with entire confidence. Monsieur Lebeau gave you a high character, which you have hitherto deserved. By the way, have you seen anything lately of that bourgeois conspirator?"

"No, his professed business of letter-writer or agent is transferred to a clerk, who says M. Lebeau is abroad."

"Ah! I don't think that is true. I fancy I saw him the other evening gilding along the lanes of Belleville. He is too confirmed a conspirator to be long out of Paris; no place like Paris for seething brains."

"Have you known M. Lebeau long?" asked Rameau. "Ay, many years. We are both Norman by birth, as you may perceive by something broad in our accent."

"Ha! I knew your voice was familiar to me; certainly it does remind me of Lebeau's."

"Normans are like each other in many things besides voice and accent— obstinacy, for instance, in clinging to ideas once formed; this makes them good friends and steadfast enemies. I would advise no man to make an enemy of Lebeau.

"Au revoir, cher confrere. Do not forget to present me to Mademoiselle Cicogna."

CHAPTER II

On leaving De Mauleon and regaining his coupe, Rameau felt at once bewildered and humbled, for he was not prepared for the tone of careless superiority which the Vicomte assumed over him. He had expected to be much complimented, and he comprehended vaguely that he had been somewhat snubbed. He was not only irritated—he was bewildered; for De Mauleon's political disquisitions did not leave any clear or definite idea on his mind as to the principles which as editor of the *Sens Commun* he was to see adequately represented and carried out. In truth, Rameau was one of those numerous Parisian politicians who have read little and reflected less on the government of men and States. Envy is said by a great French writer to be the vice of Democracies. Envy certainly had made Rameau a democrat. He could talk and write glibly enough upon the themes of equality and fraternity, and was so far an ultra-democrat that he thought moderation the sign of a mediocre understanding.

De Mauleon's talk, therefore, terribly perplexed him. It was unlike anything he had heard before. Its revolutionary professions, accompanied with so much scorn for the multitude, and the things the multitude desired, were Greek to him. He was not shocked by the cynicism which placed wisdom in using the passions of mankind as tools for the interests of an individual; but he did not understand the frankness of its avowal.

Nevertheless the man had dominated over and subdued him. He recognized the power of his contributor without clearly analysing its nature—a power made up of large experience of life, of cold examination of doctrines that heated others—of patrician calm—of intellectual sneer—of collected confidence in self.

Besides, Rameau felt, with a nervous misgiving, that in this man, who so boldly proclaimed his contempt for the instruments he used, he had found a master. De Mauleon, then, was sole proprietor of the journal from which Rameau drew his resources; might at any time dismiss him; might at any time involve the journal in penalties which, even if Rameau could escape in his official capacity as editor, still might stop the *Sens Commun*, and with it Rameau's luxurious subsistence.

Altogether the visit to De Mauleon had been anything but a pleasant one. He sought, as the carriage rolled on, to turn his thoughts to more agreeable subjects, and the image of Isaura rose before him. To do him justice he had learned to love this girl as well as his nature would permit: he loved her with the whole strength of his imagination, and though his heart was somewhat cold, his imagination was very ardent. He loved her also with the whole strength of his vanity, and vanity was even a more preponderant organ of his system than imagination. To carry off as his prize one who had already achieved celebrity, whose beauty and fascination of manner were yet more acknowledged than her genius, would certainly be a glorious triumph.

Every Parisian of Rameau's stamp looks forward in marriage to a brilliant salon. What salon more brilliant than that which he and Isaura united could command? He had long conquered his early impulse of envy at Isaura's success,—in fact that success had become associated with his own, and had contributed greatly to his enrichment. So that to other motives of love he might add the prudential one of interest. Rameau well knew that his own vein of composition, however lauded by the cliques, and however unrivalled in his own eyes, was not one that brings much profit in the market. He compared himself to those poets who are too far in advance of their time to be quite as sure of bread and cheese as they are of immortal fame.

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