

## *Blondel, the Millionaire*

William Russell

THE Paris insurrection of June, so mercilessly crushed by General Cavaignac was followed *selon l'usage*, by the wholesale deportation, without trial, not only of the actual Red insurgents, but of many who were simply “suspects,” and of a few who were “suspects d’être suspects,” (suspected of being suspicious persons,) to the regions of Cayenne and Africa. Permit me to observe that deportation, without trial, from France, to unhealthy colonies is not an *invention* of the second Empire. The honour of that invention belongs, of right, like that of passports, to the influential heroes of the French revolution. Napoleon the First, adopted, and liberally availed himself of it—the republic under Cavaignac did the same, and to Napoleon the Third only belongs the modest merit of having extended, systematised, elevated the exceptional invention, to the dignity of a permanent Bonapartean institution. A but slight feather, comparatively, in the gorgeous plumage of the imperial cap, but one there can be no question which the “Saviour of France” is fairly entitled to wear.

The triumph of General Cavaignac had other results than the overthrow of the Lamartine gimcrack government—one, videlicet—my own rehabilitation as a trusted Mouchard, in confidential communication with the police prefecture. Since that cursed duel, I had been under a cloud. Not because duelling is, or ever was a legal or moral crime in France, but that Le Moine was the favoured protégé of a very influential gentleman attached to the prefecture. That influential gentleman was extinguished, accidentally by Cavaignac’s cannon: his successor in office happened to be a friend of mine, and Theodore Duhamel had soon money in both pockets again.

Very soon. The bloodshed in the streets, alleys, churches of Paris had not yet dried into the ground, when a note from the newly-promoted friend of mine was placed in my hands. It briefly announced that I had been named to Monsieur Blondel, the millionaire, as a person who would render him efficient service in an affair he was deeply interested in. My official friend added, that immediately after hearing, and accurately noting M. Blondel’s facts and directions, I was to present myself at the Prefecture, where I should receive the instructions by which I was to be really guided in conducting the important affair with the management of which I was about to be entrusted. M. Blondel would probably call upon me in about an hour, after I should have received the note. There was added in red ink, and in the actual writing of my official friend:—“Beaucoup dépend, Duhamel, de cette affaire que je te confie en pleine confiance que tu y donneras toute ton énergie, tout ton zèle: comprenez bien que tu auras à compter avec moi, pas avec, M. Blondel.” (Much depends, Duhamel, upon this affair, which I confide to thee in full confidence that thou wilt bestow upon it all thy energy, all thy zeal. Understand well that thou wilt have to reckon with me, not with Monsieur Blondel.)

. . . . .

Monsieur Blondel—I rebaptize a world-known gentleman by that name—Monsieur Blondel, one of the magnates—it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say *the* magnate of the Bourse, was with me considerably within an hour after I received the note from the Prefecture. A lofty

personage, who from the height of his golden stilts looked down upon common mortals with a magnificent disdain, awkwardly imitative of the Faubourg Saint Germain. (The *genus* Blondel is not confined to Paris: I have, myself, seen some splendid specimens in London.)

“I am informed,” began the magnificent man, after condescendingly seating himself upon a chair, quite unworthy of the honour, and perusing my face through his gold-rimmed eyeglasses, as if I were a promissary note he was asked to discount. “I am informed that you may be useful to me—that you are intelligent—and when in the employ of a wellpaying patron, persevering—zealous?”

“I am dumb as to intelligence, monsieur; but persevering zeal in the service of a bountiful patron, I can answer for.”

“We shall see. You have heard of my son—of Monsieur Achilles Blondel?”

I was obliged to confess that I had *not* heard, distinctly of M. Achilles Blondel. M. Blondel, père, was, I need not say, world-known, but M. Achilles Blondel had not yet, within the scope of my limited vision, appeared above the horizon of the universe. Something, at least to that effect, I said. Nothing could be, I knew, too gross for the fat, fatuous self-esteem of the parvenu millionaire.

“Well then, I have first to say, that M. Achilles Blondel, my son, is going full speed to destruction—to the devil.”

“Ha! Yes, I comprehend: Rouge et Noir—Roulette—”

“You do *not* comprehend. Rouge et Blanc would be nearer the mark. The infatuated simpleton has been caught in the meshes of an actress at the Varietés. Persists that he will marry her!”

“Dam! That is serious. But how will my services avail in such a case?”

“I will tell you. I purchased a Château soon after the Northern Railway was completed, near Amiens. Not far from us was the modest domicile of a Madame Villebois, widow, and her daughter Estelle—a charming girl. I have never disputed that. Madame Villebois, the relict of a captain in the merchant sea service, vegetated with Estelle upon an annuity of about one thousand francs. Estelle was, nevertheless, well enough educated. She has, I was told, fine natural talents. One need not say that an ambitious mother, and an artful girl with a pretty face, would, opportunity occurring seek, to entrap and secure a rich young husband. The opportunity occurred. Achilles, who is as inflammable as tinder, fell in love, as the phrase goes, with the charming Estelle, and, *sacre bleu*, would have married the pretty pauper, had I not interposed a peremptory veto. Imagine such a folly—such a crime! And thousand thunders, this ‘Varietes’ affair is still worse! Still Achilles—an only child, and now made independent of me by a fortune derived from his mother’s maiden sister, recently deceased—Still Achilles, I say, is not yet irretrievably entrapped, ruined, lost! Chemists, I have heard, can neutralise one deadly poison by another. I propose to imitate the chemists. You follow me?”

“Yes, Monsieur, but blindly, as yet.”

“You will see plainly enough presently. Estelle Villebois, frenzied by failing to secure the rich prize she had so skillfully angled for—in consequence she was made, as I managed, to believe of her lover’s fickleness, threw herself into a river, but was rescued, and is now, I have been informed, a ‘fille de joie,’ resident in Paris.”

“A terrible fate, poor girl.”

“Yes; a terrible fate as you say. Achilles, upon the authority of a letter, which I contrived to have posted at Amiens—a bitterly reproachful one, pretendedly dictated by the girl’s mother—has no doubt that Estelle perished in the river. He was frantic for a time, and has never, been quite himself since. He has contracted, I grieve to say, dissipated, drinking habits; and I have no doubt that his present craze about the Varietés lady, a Mademoiselle Alix, has been caused, and is alimented by her likeness—a really striking one—to Estelle Villebois. You begin to perceive a little how your intelligence and zeal, your knowledge of Paris may be serviceable to me?”

“Not in the least, Monsieur Blondel. Your son and only child, independent of his father, has, goaded by regretful remorse, no doubt, for the supposed death of one Estelle Villebois, fallen into dissipated, drinking habits, is about to marry an actress of the ‘Varietés,’ because the actress is a striking likeness of the said Estelle; now you are informed ‘a fille de joie’ in Paris. Excuse me, Monsieur, but, que le diable m’ emporte, if I understand how a Detective Police Officer can help in such an imbroglio!”

“In this way. I cannot find the said Estelle Villebois. She has no doubt changed her name. I am, however, acquainted with several circumstances regarding her, which diligently worked out by an active officer, familiar with Paris, might lead to the discovery of the girl. She cannot have been in Paris more than three months. In that time she would not be much changed in appearance. Here is her portrait.”

A beautiful star-lit face, irradiated with the glory of an ineffable joy! As she looked, no doubt, when the lover first whispered his love.

“I told you Estelle Villebois was a charming girl,” said Monsieur le Millionaire. “A striking face,” he added, “which you would be sure to recognise.”

“Not after the beautiful Unfortunate has been exposed to the seven-times heated furnace of the Paris pavé! This divine painting will long before this have been effaced by the devil’s searing irons. But if I should meet with and recognise her—what then?”

“Your intelligence, Monsieur Mouchard,” said the great man, with some temper, “does not advantageously display itself today. Achilles Blondel, my son, could not *now*, by possibility, *marry* Estelle Villebois. True, but Estelle Villebois, fallen as she is, will have influence enough to extricate Achilles from the clutches of Mademoiselle Alix?”

“I understand now. That is not, however, the kind of commission which the note I received from the Prefecture led me to anticipate.”

Monsieur Blondel, in reply, observed that the simple duty of subordinate servants of the state was to carry out the orders of their superiors without questioning whether they were or were not the fittest agents for accomplishing the particular service required of them. In the actual case, it could not be doubted, supposing the praise he had heard of my general zeal and intelligence to be merited, that I was a proper person to search Paris for Estelle Villebois. That individual once found, a communication of the fact to M. Achilles Blondel would not be a difficult affair. The desired result would follow of itself. I admitted the correctness of Monsieur le Millionaire’s reasoning, and promised to use my best endeavours to discover the young woman. I stopped at that. Had I given expression to a thought—a hope which flashed across my brain with respect to the original of the charming portrait in my hand, M. Blondel would not have been so well satisfied or so liberal as he showed himself to be when, after mentioning two or three additional [circumstances] which might be of assistance to me, he, with lofty civility, wished me success, and went his way.

. . . . .

My highly placed friend at the Prefecture listened attentively to my report of the conversation that had passed between me and Monsieur Blondel.

“It is very well,” said he, when I had finished. “You will endeavour to find Estelle Villebois, but your principal object will not be that. Listen. You know, by reputation, the Chevalier de Biron?”

“Certainly, I do.”

“Well, he died four days ago, of wounds received during the Insurrection. He fought, I hardly need say, against the Reds, and there was no man in France who more possessed the intimate confidence of the illustrious Prince, who, there can be little doubt, will be elected President of the Republic by the people.”

“Prince Louis Napoleon!”

“Without doubt, Prince Louis Napoleon. Well, the Chevalier de Biron was also an intimate acquaintance of M. Achilles Blondel, and this, spite of the very decided, honest republicanism of the Millionaire’s spoiled son. The Chevalier borrowed money of him, and died very considerably in his debt. Now, Le Biron, though poor, was a man of honour, of conscience, and finding that he could not live many hours longer, sent his friend M. Achilles Blondel the only valuable he possessed, a magnificent *écritoire*, worth, it is said, intrinsically, ten thousand francs. It was a present from the Emperor Napoleon to the chevalier’s father. The valet obeyed the dying man’s order; the *écritoire* passed into the possession of Blondel *fils*, who, a few hours afterwards, presented it to Mademoiselle Alix of the Variétés. Eh bien, in a secret recess of that *écritoire* are confidential letters addressed to the Chevalier de Biron, which, in the hands of an enemy would gravely compromise several individuals who stand high in Prince Louis Napoleon’s favour. It is of the first necessity, therefore, to obtain possession of those letters—exactly nine in number.”

“That will not be difficult. Mademoiselle Alix will be easily bribed or bullied into giving them up.”

“You are mistaken, my friend. She would be sure to mention the matter to her lover—her husband, that is to be, it seems, and he I have said is a Republican exalté. He would deem it a crime not to publish the traitorous correspondence, as he would deem it, and in twenty-four hours after we applied to Mademoiselle Alix, every salon, café, cabaret in Paris would be ringing with it.”

“How came it that the Chevalier de Biron, so devoted an Imperialist, did not order the letters to be destroyed.”

“He did not think of them till about an hour before he expired, when he despatched his valet to Count —, one of his correspondents, to apprise him of the unfortunate occurrence. The count immediately applied to me, well knowing,” said my facile friend, with a shrug and a smile, “that in politics I belong to the party of common sense, of the winning party, that is to say, and that I am shrewd enough to know that party will not be Cavaignac.”

“I count, therefore, upon you, Duhamel,” he went on to say; “I count, therefore, upon you, Duhamel, to obtain the letters quietly—*sans tapage*—without affording Mademoiselle Alix, or Achilles Blondel any ground for suspecting that such dangerous documents were ever in their possession.”

“*Sapristie!* that is a pretty task. Besides, may not Mademoiselle Alix herself discover the letters?”

“That is but too possible. The secret drawer is, however, very cleverly contrived. She cannot suspect the existence of such papers; and you, my friend, must be quick with your work.”

“Can you give me a hint as to how I can set about it.”

“Ah, yes; M. Blondel has lent you a portrait of Estelle Villebois, as I advised him to do. Very well, take that portrait to a clever artist, and have it copied with this difference, that the girl’s dress be not the same. Let also the copy be set in less expensive fashion than this, with which Blondel fils, is no doubt familiar. Eh bien, Estelle Villebois has an uncle, Jean Villebois, a sea-fairing man, whom Achilles Blondel never saw; Blondel, Senior, is quite sure of that, and of that uncle the young man has heard the girl speak with affection. It also fortunately happens that no letter has ever passed between Estelle’s mother and Achilles Blondel, who is, I must tell you, of a wonderfully plastic, tender, most effusive disposition. *Comprenez vous, un peu?*”

“I do not comprehend in the least. He will not be likely to conceive a tendresse for me, I suppose?”

“That is precisely what he will do for Jean Villebois, the uncle to whom Estelle was so much attached, and who brings him a letter from Madame Villebois, written on her deathbed with a

sadness, a grief of temper, softened by the mother's remembrance of poor Estelle's love for him to the last, and her, Madame Villebois's but recent discovery that he, Achilles Blondel, had not been to blame, but that, like her child, he had been the victim of a harsh father's cruelty. She consequently sends him her forgiveness and blessing, well-knowing that by so doing she expresses the sentiments which the daughter, whom she humbly trusts to meet in heaven before that letter meets his eye, entertained for him to the last.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed my friend, with almost a shout of gratulation at his own cleverness; "*Mon Dieu!* Achilles Blondel will take the uncle of his lost Estelle to his heart at once. You will embrace, weep, condole, carouse with each other. He assures you that it is Estelle whom he loves in Mademoiselle Alix, which it appears is a fact—you express a wish to see, to be introduced to her. He readily complies. You are charmed with the lady, who perceives that you are esteemed—have influence over her rich admirer. You visit at her lodgings, with him—without him in a few days, when the lady is at a morning's rehearsal, with a message from her lover, which you wait till she returns to be delivered, and *l'affaire est faite!* You obtain the letters: M. le Comte—is grateful, and if, *sacre bleu*, you can also succeed in finding Estelle Villebois, you will have gained a little fortune! *C'est gros jeu*, my friend, and you are sure to win."

"I don't know. I shall *try*, to win you may depend. There is one thing at all events of which I make sure. If I do succeed in finding Estelle Villebois, and not, I hope, in the position Blondel supposes (he has no proof that the betrayed girl has fallen into infamy,) but whether so or not, I shall acquaint her with the Millionaire's past conduct, and present plans regarding herself; tell her that Achilles Blondel, whilst mourning her as dead, cherishes her [memory] with undiminished tenderness. Estelle Villebois may be Madame Achilles Blondel. Who knows?"

"You have *carte blanche* in that respect. And now to the artist. The portrait, and Madame Villebois's letter, the composition of which, you, following the line I have traced out—will, I know, manage very well—let Adrienne copy it (Adrienne was the cleverest copyist attached to the Prefecture)—the portrait, I say, and Madame Villebois's letter, will be proof unquestionable that you are the genuine Jean Villebois. Try to bring me the letters—nine letters, remember—within a week. *Au revoir.*"

. . . . .

A young man of generous, even of noble impulses was Achilles Blondel. It was difficult to believe he could be the son of the Millionaire Blondel, to whom gold was God. Perhaps his mother was a woman of a fine nature, wedded to her husband, after the fashion of French marriages, by the fiat of her father and mother.

I found him in a billiard room, Rue de Chaillot, leading out of the Champs Elysées Avenue. He was sufficiently sober, but the ravages of intemperance were but too visible in his white, wasted face, which flushed scarlet whenever he caught the eye fixed upon him of anyone who knew what he had been—should then be.

He played worse than indifferently. His shattered nerves deprived him of all billiard skill. In truth a sad wreck. The supposed suicide of Estelle Villebois was killing him, soul and body! Yet

was he not so stricken, vitally, but if that black burthen could be removed, the depressed springs of life might soon regain their old elasticity and force.

He lost every game, and at the conclusion of one, I accosted him, and requested to speak with him for a few minutes privately. Drawing himself haughtily up, and scanning me *de haut en bas*, he demanded my name, and what possible pretence I could have for wishing to speak privately with him.

“I am Jean Villebois, the uncle of this beautiful unfortunat—” I answered in a low voice, showing him the portrait suspended round my neck.

The cue he held dropped from his hand; he staggered as if struck with a poniard, steadied himself by grasping the billiard table, whilst his quivering gaze rested, chained by an irresistible fascination upon the portrait.

“Have the kindness, M. Achilles Blondel,” I said, still softly and respectfully, and taking him by the arm, “have the kindness to pass with me into the adjoining apartment. I have a communication to make which may console you.”

He yielded silently, and we were presently together, alone.

I explained—the reader must bear in mind, or I shall fall very low in his or her estimation, that *I was acting a part, by command*—I explained why I had sought him; he listening like one in a dream, and I concluded by reading the letter pretendedly from deceased Madame Villebois.

Subdued, overcome by that voice from beyond the tomb, as he believed, Achilles Blondel, whose lymphatic, effusive temperament, my patron at the Prefecture had correctly described, broke into passionate, sobbing lamentations, cast himself on his knees, kissed my hands, and adjured all things holy to witness that he had never been unfaithful, even in thought to Estelle. After a while he grew calmer, and we talked together.

“But I had heard that he proposed to marry Mademoiselle Alix of the Variétés.” “Quite true, but solely because the lady resembled Estelle—faintly, imperfectly resembled her—as a dull, flawed mirror would reflect a purely beautiful image! I should like to make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Alix? He would introduce me that very afternoon—say at five o’clock precisely, one hour before she left for the theatre, and when she would certainly be at home.

“We indulge in no illusions,” said Achilles Blondel, with extreme bitterness of tone; “we indulge in no illusions. Mademoiselle Alix is fully informed of Estelle Villebois’ tragic story, distinctly understands why I sought her society, why I have determined that my father, who destroyed your angel niece, shall not gain the reward of the inexpiable crime by allying himself, through his son, with the Faubourg Saint Germain. I shall live, die, a drunken, debauchee husband of a second rate actress at a minor theatre—*will* live the drunken, debauchee husband of a second rate actress of the Variétés! Ah! ah! that is revenge, if you like! You will agree it was scarcely worthwhile to murder Estelle Villebois to arrive at such a result as that!”

The last sentences were uttered in a hard, menacing voice, as if he were in present altercation with his father. The next minute subsiding into the imbecility, rather than the tenderness of tears, he wept aloud.

“I sometimes fancy,” he murmured, apologetically, after a while; “I sometimes fancy that drink, dissipation, has weakened my brain, never a very strong one. There is always a singing, a buzzing in my head, which explodes from time to time in sharp detonations, or I imagine so.”

“Evil symptoms, Monsieur. Precursors of paralysis—apoplexy! You are killing yourself.”

“*Tant mieux!* the farce will be the sooner played out. Ah! if I could believe, as did that tender mother who felt sure that she was about to find again, to rejoin the lost Estelle, to bask forever in the sunshine of her unfading loveliness! Illusion! Folly. The dream—a fast-fading dream now, of mankind when in their infancy. Estelle and her mother are now as they were a hundred years ago: their imaginary heaven is le Néant. A pitiless anathema has blighted the world from the beginning—if there ever was a beginning—and will blight it to the end, if there shall ever be an end.”

“Monsieur Achilles Blondel, excusing my frankness, will permit me to say that if that second, third, fourth, fifth hand rubbish, rhodomontade be not more affectation, there must be more foundation than I am willing to believe for the fear that dissipation has weakened his brain.”

“Perhaps. It is certainly true that I drink to excess—to terrible excess.”

“No one that sees you can doubt that. It is a sad vice, which Estelle would have despised you for—if she could have despised a man to whom she had once given her whole heart. There is a question I wish to ask,” continued I. “Were you rich, independent, as you now are, when you forsook Estelle, or—”

“I never *forsook* Estelle,” he interrupted, with explosive passion. “Have you already forgotten the letter you have read to me? True I was rich, independent when I was separated from Estelle—but I knew it not—I knew not till too late, too late! *Allons!*” said he, consulting his watch. “It is close upon five o’clock. Let us away to Mademoiselle Alix of the Variétés.”

. . . . .

Mademoiselle Alix of the Varietes, though young in years, was a thoroughly practised woman of the world. I could not help fancying that I had seen, conversed with her before, but concluded that that impression was caused by the patent fact that in form of features, in the colour of her hair and eyes, in all, but the expression of sweetness, purity, and candour which illumined that charming face, she strikingly resembled the portrait of Estelle Villebois. Her carriage conversation would, I dare say, be seductive, fascinating to novices, who could not recognise the stage mannerism of the one—the *coulisse* flippancy of the other. She had certainly managed to enthrall Achilles Blondel, and equally manifest was it that she despised the unobservant gull—that his sole attraction in her eyes was his wealth.



If I had little difficulty in correctly appreciating Mademoiselle Alix, Mademoiselle Alix had none at all in detecting Theodore Duhamel, mouchard, under the guise of Monsieur Jean Villebois, captain in the mercantile marine of France. The annoying fact was that about two years previously, Mademoiselle Alix had been implicated, not gravely, in a police affair, I was employed to investigate, and remembered me perfectly. My recollection of her—I think, I spoke with her only once, was, as I have said, uncertain, indistinct. And not only did Mademoiselle recognise me personally—but being cognisant of my vocation, she, for reasons to be presently developed, shrewdly guessed my motive in seeking an introduction to her.

It was not her interest to immediately unmask me. On the contrary, it instantly occurred to her that she might make effective use of Theodore Duhamel for the furtherance of a scheme on which her wits had been engaged for some days past.

The caressing condescendence of the lady towards Monsieur Jean Villebois, uncle to the amiable Estelle, whose sad history Achilles had made her familiar with, was somewhat overdone. Still no definite suspicion of her purpose could because of that caressing condescendence arise in my mind, and I accepted without misgiving her invitation to favour her with a call at any time I should be passing that way. If she should chance to be out, and it suited my convenience to remain till she returned, her servants would have orders, as in the case of M. Achilles Blondel, to defer to my wishes, obey my directions. I have since wondered I did not suspect that such an invitation, so exactly what I desired, might not be a trap.

• • • • •

I called the very next morning, fully prepared for *work*. Mademoiselle Alix, said a servant, is at rehearsal. Monsieur would, perhaps, rest himself in the salon still she returned? First, enquiring how long it was likely Mademoiselle would be absent, to which question the reply was, that nothing could be more uncertain—a quarter of an hour—two hours—it was impossible to say—Monsieur Jean Villebois selected to rest himself in the salon for about a quarter of an hour, since it was possible Mademoiselle might return in that time.

• • • • •

The *ecritoire*, a really magnificent affair, stood at about the centre of the salon, at one end of which was a recess, divided from the apartment by heavy curtains of violet coloured velvet. As soon as the servant had retired, I drew aside the curtain, and saw nothing in the recess but a heavy high-backed, velvet covered canapé, (sofa-bed.)

That ascertained, I set to work without loss of time, opened the *ecritoire*, and aided by the instructions I had received, quickly discovered the secret recess. An unsealed note was there, addressed Messire Jean Villebois; *autrement*, Monsieur Duhamel, Mouchard, who was informed that the letters he was commissioned to obtain were safe in the possession of a friend of Mademoiselle Alix. The words were still dancing in zig-zag lines before my eyes, the evidence of which I could scarcely believe, when a light hand was placed upon my shoulder, and a light laugh sounded in my ear. Whirling sharply round, I found that the hand, the laugh, were those of Mademoiselle Alix, who had softly entered the apartment, unheard by me, absorbed by my

pressing errand. Never, *sacre bleu!* was police agent, more confounded than I was, at that moment.

Mademoiselle Alix throwing herself into a *fauteuil*, burst into eclats of almost hysterical laughter.

“It is very amusing, no doubt, Mademoiselle,” said I, recovering my self-possession, and encasing myself in the brazen armour of official impunity. “It is very amusing, no doubt, but I, a police agent, which you knew yesterday, as well as you do at this moment, peremptorily demand the nine letters you found in this *ecritoire*, and have purloined.”

“Pardon, Monsieur Mouchard,” said she, with bursts of mocking merriment between almost every sentence. “Pardon, Monsieur Mouchard, who could *help* laughing? It is quite true, as you say, that I knew yesterday who Monsieur Jean Villebois really was—*pour ça*, who, having once had the privilege of seeing, could fail to recognise Monsieur Theodore Duhamel? —but nous autres comedians, always wait for the *cue* which calls us upon the scene at the proper time. In this tragi-comedy, and in, I believe, the last act, that proper time is now, and now, *en avant la grande musique*.”

“I must beg of you, Mademoiselle, to speak in language I can comprehend. Where are the letters?”

“The letters, Monsieur Mouchard, are in the possession of a faithful friend of mine. They are enclosed in a sealed envelope; and if my friend should hear that I have been arrested, that I have disappeared, his instructions, which will be promptly acted upon, are to forward them to General Cavaignac. That is checkmate to Monsieur le Comte —. Is it not?”

“I do not know that. General Cavaignac’s tenure of power will last but a few months.”

“That is my conviction, Monsieur Duhamel. But during those few months the writers of those letters may be sent to Cayenne. Few persons return, I am told, from that charming Cayenne. As for Blondel, *ainé*, the millionaire, to be but briefly divorced from his money bags, would be the death of him.”

“Do I understand you to say that Blondel, senior, is compromised by the correspondence you, Mademoiselle, have surreptitiously obtained possession of?”

“Gravely compromised. Well, Monsieur Duhamel, do you begin to understand that there must be compromise—*transaction* between the parties you represent and myself.”

“Admitting, hypothetically, that to be so—what then?”

“I will tell you frankly, candidly what with the cards I hold in my hand, is my game. First, I will describe the precise situation.

“You are employed by the Prêfecture of Police to get possession of nine letters, addressed to the deceased Chevalier de Biron, which letters have, very fortunately come into my possession. *Chut-chut*, do not affect surprise. No one should know better than you, that actresses, whether of the Variétés, or the Théâtre Français, generally know as much of what passes in the great offices, as the heads of the offices themselves—sometimes more.”

“That may be true. Well?”

“You are also employed by Blondel, ainé, to discover Estelle Villebois, who his son believes has drowned herself in the Somme.”

“You are a witch; but, continue.”

“Mademoiselle being discovered, is to supplant me; which she could easily do with Achilles Blondel. That purpose accomplished I would be cast a worthless weed away.”

“You are a witch, I repeat. Go on.”

“I shall not surprise you when I say that except for his money I care nothing about Achilles Blondel?”

“A blind man might see that.”

“Achilles Blondel does not see it. Till I had lit upon those letters I took excellent care that he should not see it. Now he may wake to the truth as soon as he pleases.”

“Riddle follows riddle. Pray explain.”

“Willingly. To begin—Estelle Villebois is—is—guess! Come I will give once—twice—thrice, twenty times to rightly guess what.”

“I fear to guess aright the first time. Mademoiselle Villebois is one of the unfortunates, who with cruel irony are called ‘filles de joie.’”

“Calumny, M. Duhamel. Atrocious calumny. But it is not of Mademoiselle Villebois’ moral character, or actual position I was speaking. Estelle Villebois is—is—well, I must tell you, for you would never guess—Estelle Villebois *is my sister!*”

“You lift me off my feet. Estelle Villebois *your* sister?”

“My sister. My half sister, that is to say. We are daughters of the same mother. My actress name is an assumed one. That to which I am entitled is Lemaire—Estelle Villebois and my mother’s maiden name.”

“Estelle Villebois and your mother’s maiden name! That is a sad confession for a daughter to make.”

“*Point du tout*. Not at all! Marie Lemaire, you will please to understand was wooed, every body believed, pour le bon motif,—was married with the sanction of her friends—her relations, to Victor Brettel. They lived happily. My mother—not knowing—was the best, the tenderest of wives—as I have heard my father a hundred times, in gusts of remorseful rage, defiantly assert in the presence of his detested, but lawful wife.”

“His detested—*lawful* wife.”

“Oui Monsieur Duhamel—his detested, lawful wife. Ah! twenty one years have passed away since then, and I was but four years old, yet I well remember—”

“*Pardon*, Mademoiselle,” I interrupted, having a strong suspicion that I was being, for some reason or other, outrageously mystified. “*Pardon*, mademoiselle. Twenty-one and four make twenty-five; and you [cannot] be more than twenty, the age of Estelle Villebois, your *half* sister.”

“It is a compliment, Monsieur Duhamel, to my skilful care in preserving that, which frankly speaking, is the sole fortune of an actress, who is not de première force in her profession—her youth, and good looks. It is a sad verity, nevertheless, that the measure of my life is twenty-five years, bien sonnés. It is now the end of June, and I was born in January. That now is a confession,” added Mademoiselle Alix, with slighting irony, “which I should not make except to a person whose estimate of my age must, to me, be a matter of supreme indifference.”

“Mademoiselle Alix is right—of supremest indifference.”

“Precisely. Resuming, I repeat that I was four years old when a coarse Creole woman, the wreck of a beautiful, bad girl, whom Victor Brettel, intoxicated by youthful passion had married on the Island of Martinique, suddenly presented herself at our place near Amiens. Imagine for yourself that *coup de foudre*. I haste to finish with the painful topic. The Creole, whose legal right it was impossible to dispute, was at last forcibly expelled the house, and Victor Brettel left for Paris the same day, taking me with him in spite of my mother’s piteous supplications. His wife followed, and though he changed his name, she was not long in finding us out. There were powerful reasons, I understood, why my father should avoid public scandal. They sullenly agreed to cohabit, and chiefly by her, I, poor helpless waif, was educated—drilled for the stage. She died about six years ago, having long survived her husband. Enough of both. They live in my memory, combined with only hateful, repulsive associations.”

“You were not permitted to see or communicate with your mother whilst either of them lived, I presume?”

“And rightly presume; but the Creole, who had thoroughly subdued me to her tyrant-will, was not cold in her grave when I left Paris for Amiens. My mother, the recently widowed wife of Captain Villebois, who had married her with a full knowledge of the past, received me with the tenderest kindness. So did Estelle. I remained till I could no longer endure to share the stagnant monotony of their lives. Having vegetated with them for nearly a month, I came back, in fulfillment of my destiny, to Paris.”

“In presence of such remarkable frankness, I, *quoique* mouchard, feel myself compelled to follow so excellent an example, by asking why, for what purpose, Mademoiselle Alix, condescends to favour me with so interesting a chapter of family history?”

“The concluding sentences, not yet recited, of that chapter, will furnish the explanation.

“When Madame Villebois, and poor Estelle, upon the fresh morning of whose life so dark a cloud had arisen, left Amiens to shelter, hide themselves in the multitudinous obscurity of Paris, they naturally called upon me. I received them, I hardly need say, with the greatest cordiality. Estelle’s rare beauty—her natural grace, which lessons could never teach, and docile aptitude would, I saw, be an acquisition to the stage. I proposed that career to her. She consented: but soon that pure, sensitive nature, recoiled from actual contact with the realities of a profession which I need not tell an individual of Monsieur Duhamel’s experience, could not but wound the susceptibilities of such a maiden, as Estelle Villebois. Eh! Mon Dieu, I admitted all that in my own mind. Still I was annoyed, piqued—enraged even. My amour-propre was outraged. There was a quarrel—a bitter quarrel—the bitterness, I confess, mine only. Estelle, with her, and my mother, left in anger, and with insulting insolence, as I considered it, and which a true child of my father, I cruelly resented, preferred semi-starvation in a garret to the comparative abundance they might have shared with me. At this moment they are earning scanty bread by needlework—embroidery, I am told. My intimacy with, as they believe, faithless, perjured Achilles Blondel, has made the gulf between us impassable till now. The conflict in my mind has been incessant, terrible,” added Mademoiselle Alix, with feeling, “and yet but for the thrice fortunate finding of those letters in the Chevalier de Biron’s *écritoire*, I fear—nay I am sure, I should have taken base advantage of the opportunity to enrich myself, which that intimacy, skillfully brought about, affords.”

“I am as far off as ever, Mademoiselle Alix. How in the name of all the saints in the calendar, can the possession of those letters influence the situation?”

“I will tell you in a few words. Achilles Blondel, by a formal deed, has secured to me—to me, the semblance of his lost Estelle—every franc he may die possessed of—and he will not, his dissipated habits persisted in, live long—the sole condition being, that I marry him! Egregious folly!—absurd infatuation! no doubt, but the truth nevertheless. Now, I love—ardently love—money.”

“That, *par exemple*, one can easily believe. I should like to know who does *not* love money!”

“Yes, and I love, truly love my mother and sister, and I do *not* love Achilles Blondel. I pity him, it is true, and I believe Estelle would rescue him from the abyss of degradation into which he has fallen.”

“I also believe she would.”

“Eh bien, Monsieur Duhamel, the possession of those letters—the power which nothing can take from me of placing them in the hands of the actual Dictator, General Cavaignac, enables me to

reconcile my love of money, my determination to, by almost any means, secure a competence—with my duty towards my mother and Estelle.”

“Indeed!”

“Indeed! Those letters, as you know very well, gravely compromise men who will have a splendid future before them, when the events which the writers plot for, namely, the accession of Louis Napoleon, first to the Presidentship, next to the Imperial throne of France, shall have been accomplished. The Millionaire Blondel is, perhaps, more deeply compromised than any other correspondent of the Chevalier de Biron. Well, for one hundred thousand francs—”

“One hundred thousand devils—”

“For one hundred thousand francs paid down in gold rouleaux—not one sou less, I write an order to deliver the packet of letters to you. My offer refused, the letters shall be in General Cavaignac’s possession before that refusal is an hour old. *Au revoir*, Monsieur Duhamel. I have said my last word.”

• • • • •

There was no help for it, and I was glad there was not. My influential friend at the Prêfecture, who, I afterwards knew, would have been gravely implicated had the letters not been recovered, instantly closed with the terms proposed, Blondel, the Millionaire, advanced the money (a bagatelle which the second Empire has enabled him and his friends to recoup a hundred times over.) Mademoiselle Alix received the coveted rouleaux—the letters were delivered up, and the curtain fell upon the “petite comédie,” as far as I was directly engaged therein.

I know, however, that within a week of the day when the actress of the Variétés so successfully achieved the “transaction,” as she pleasantly called the exchange of nine letters for one hundred thousand francs, two marriages were celebrated at the Church of Sainte Geneviève. One, that of Estelle Villebois with Achilles Blondel—the father—how prevailed upon, I cannot say—assisting; and Mademoiselle Alix, alias Lemaire, with Theophile Beaumont, a musical composer of about her own age.

From *Experiences of a French Detective Officer* by William Russell. New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1864. 258-88.

This collection was originally published in England in 1861.