

Unpublished Passages
IN THE LIFE OF
Vidocq, The French Minister of Police

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Pierre Louvois

by J.M.B.

AT the time the French army held possession of Italy, the most strict and vigorous measures were put in force by them, to suppress the lawless habits of the inhabitants; which, under a weak form of government, had risen to such a height of crime as to require more than ordinary severity to check. These laws were not alone against the natives, for they fell with undiminished rigor on such of the French troops as were caught in the commission of any act contravening the strict code laid down for their observance, and punishment came so swiftly after the offence as to be attended with at least one salutary effect, that of taking place whilst its cause was yet fresh in the remembrance of the shuddering spectators.

In the northern part of Italy was quartered a small division, consisting of a few regiments of the line, under the command of General Duval. He was a man of a morose and stern disposition, a strict martinet, and one but little prone to pardon any offences committed by the soldiery under his command; but, on the other hand, he was just, and not slow in rewarding merit, when such fell under his observation. His notice had for a short time been attracted to a lad about eighteen years of age, for whom he began to feel some interest. Pierre Louvois, which was the youth's name, was a general favorite in the regiment to which he belonged, though his manners and dispositions were little in accord with those of his rank; there was a sort of dignity and lofty bearing not exactly in unison with the situation of a private, but yet it had never been the cause of his creating a single enemy amongst his associates. His mother, who said she was the widow of a soldier, had lived in the neighborhood of Montpellier, of which part of the country, however, she was not a native. She had maintained herself and son as a lace-worker, at which she was very expert, and from her upright conduct and modest demeanor was much esteemed. As Pierre grew towards manhood, many were the offers from the farmers and mechanics in the vicinity to give him employment, but this she always firmly but thankfully refused. To the often repeated inquiries as to what she intended to make of him, she could give no answer, and the neighbors exclaimed against a lad of such spirit and promise being brought up in idleness, with nothing to look forward to. Madame Louvois cared but little how hard she worked herself, but could not brook that Pierre should be obliged to submit to menial drudgery of any description; at times, sadness would come over her mind, when she thought how unable Pierre would be to support himself, alike ignorant of any business or profession, when she should cease to exist; but these thoughts had scarcely gained birth, when she received a pang but little expected; the Conscription had decided that Pierre should become a soldier. It was quite beyond her means to raise sufficient money to obtain a substitute, and she therefore decided on following him, in whom all her hopes centred, wheresoever his fortunes or his fate might lead him; provided she remained near him, she cared but little in what capacity, servile or otherwise; and Madame

Louvois the Sutler sounded as musically in her ears, as would the repetition of his title to a new made peer. About a year after Pierre had joined his regiment, he was one day sauntering listlessly along the road to Vicenza, without perceiving that he had passed the boundary of the camp; the view before him was so beautiful that it called to mind his former home in the south of France, which he had left with much regret, for there was more than one dark-eyed brunette that had looked upon him with other than the eyes of friendship; and there was one playful smiling girl that he had early learnt to love, with whom he would often wander forth beside some rippling brook, or through the rich vineyards, and conjure up together bright dreams of future days.

He was thus gazing on the scene before him, and associating it with places far away, when the sound of some person in distress burst upon his ear; it seemed to come from a cottage standing on the roadside; to which he hastened to render his assistance. The door was open, and the noise of a scuffle above stairs plainly indicated where help was desired. As he entered the room, he perceived a soldier in the French uniform, who no sooner saw that he was discovered, than, throwing open the back window, he leaped into the garden, and in an instant was flying across the country. A woman lay upon the floor, bearing the marks of recent ill usage, and apparently lifeless; the chamber was in the greatest confusion, some articles of small value and a little money lay scattered upon the floor, showing that the villain's intention had been that of robbery.

The piercing cries uttered by the woman had been heard by more than Pierre, for a small detachment which was marching from Vicenza to Verona, being within hearing at the moment, some of them ran to give their assistance, and were not a little surprised to find a French soldier in the act (as they supposed) of plundering. Pierre stated that the cries of distress had drawn him thither, and he had just arrived in time to see the villain escape from the window. The officer listened, but shook his head in doubt, at the same time giving orders that Pierre should be strictly guarded, and instantly marched off to the head quarters of his regiment.

The news flew swiftly through the regiment, that Pierre was under arrest, charged with an attempt at robbery; but there were none amongst those who knew him well that would give it a moment's credence; circumstances might be, as they were, strongly against him, but they were convinced he could rebut them; no, no! it was a more guilty heart that planned the commission of the deed.

Pierre himself was sanguine; he felt that the woman could exculpate him in an instant, and that the court-martial, which was appointed for the following morning, would order his instant liberation. The cell in which he was confined was not very agreeable to be sure, but then it had only terrors for those guilty beings who worked up hideous thoughts in their imaginations to fright themselves; he stretched himself upon his hard wooden bed, and slept as soundly and rose as much refreshed as if he had been again in France, without a single care to obtrude itself upon his mind.

In the morning the court-martial assembled with all the usual ceremony, and Pierre stood arraigned for a crime, of which he knew himself to be as guiltless as the Court about to try him; he was extremely glad that business had drawn his mother to Milan, from whence she would not return until the following day, when it would be too late to feel uneasiness, and they could talk it through together.

When called upon to affirm or deny his guilt, he briefly stated the circumstances, and said the woman could at once prove him innocent.

"Young man," replied the president, "your story is well conceived, and told with a semblance of truth, but, unfortunately, there are discrepancies in it; and as the woman died during the night of the injuries she received, you may safely call upon her to assert that innocence, which I must say that for my own part I very much doubt."

The information of the woman's death staggered him; it was upon her evidence his safety entirely rested; the idea of her death had never once entered his imagination, and a cold shudder ran over him as he thought of the overwhelming weight of evidence, that could only be gainsaid by his simple assertion of innocence; the current set too strongly against him to be stemmed, and when proof was adduced that it was impossible, on account of the distance, that the cries of distress could have been heard within the bounds of the camp, he felt that he was a lost man.

The court were unanimous in their opinion of his guilt, and the following day, at noon, was named as that on which he was to close his short career of life. Pierre heard his sentence without showing any signs of trepidation; his cheeks blanched not for an instant; a faint smile played around his lips, which would have said, you are deceived, but still I blame you not.

The veterans of the regiment, when told of the result of the inquiry, swore a volley of oaths and insinuated that the officers did not deal justly by them; they could not see that any evidence was sufficient to find Pierre guilty of murder and robbery—"Bah! he couldn't do it if he would—a harmless lad like that; it was no use arguing the matter, it wasn't in his nature; spirits like his were not the ones that stooped to the crimes of rapine and bloodshed!"—and their belief in his innocence remained still unshaken.

When Madame Louvois arrived from Milan, the first intelligence that reached her was, that Pierre was waiting with the utmost anxiety to see her, since he was doomed at noonday to die.

"Die!" said she—"to die!—no, no! you are deceiving me. They could not—would not slay a child like that. Crime never yet entered his imagination—it must be others that have palmed their deeds of villainy upon him. Who is there could look upon his fair face and form, and say it was that of a guilty being?—none! I will be sworn."

The frantic mother flew to the guardhouse, to gain from his own lips the history of his misfortune; and with breathless anxiety did she listen to his brief recital.

"Truth," said she, when he had finished, whilst her loud sobs almost hindered the words from being heard. "Truth, indeed! is there not truth stamped on every word and action?—Does it seem like falsehood that he speaks?—No, no! falsehood never spoke thus. But, stay—yes! there is yet hope. Duval must and shall listen to me!—I will force that upon him shall make him feel him innocent, even should he have seen the commission of the deed itself."

General Duval was not a little surprised at finding the door of the room in which he was sitting suddenly burst open, and a half frantic woman rushing in to throw herself at his feet, at the same time exclaiming—

"Mercy! mercy! for the love of heaven, grant me mercy!"

"What is the meaning of this, my good woman?—Who, or what are you?" asked the General.

"I am the mother of the poor boy you have doomed to die. Oh, sir, but spare his life! On my knees I will pray to you—will worship you—but spare his life!—he is too young to die yet!—He is not a fit subject to wreak your cruel laws upon!—Indeed! indeed! he is innocent."

"Woman, it cannot be—he must die!"

"Oh, no! no!—you have but to say the word, and he is spared!"

"I say again, it cannot—must not be."

"Oh, sir, you have the power to save him, and may yet live to bless the day you did so; but spare his life?"

"This is trifling; woman, the law must take its course; I can stay and listen to you no longer."

"Not listen to me, Duval," said Madame Louvois, looking sternly at him; "not listen to a mother pleading for her son's life!—But I have known the time when that hard heart of thine could feel as tenderly as would a mother's watching her sick child. Years have passed, Duval, since that night, when, after many an anxious hour of travelling, you arrived near your chateau in Alsace, indulging in the fond hope of pressing in your arms your wife and infant child. Did your heart not bleed when you found the raging flames had destroyed your noble dwelling, and deprived you of a wife and child you fondly loved?—Ay, it felt then as mine does at this moment. Yes! you look at me now, and strive to bring me to your recollection. I was the foster-sister of your wife, and after you married her I still followed her as a servant, and when she became a mother, did I not nurse her child as though it had been mine own—for I loved it as much even as its mother could. Oh! it was a sweet, fair-haired child, that all must have loved. On the night the fire burst forth, the boy lay sleeping beside me; its mother was not well. I was watching its calm slumbers when the alarm of fire reached me; scarce knowing what I did, I caught the child in my arms, and, rushing into the open air, flew across the country. Tired and fatigued, I sought shelter where I was not known. I was soon informed that Madame Duval and her child had perished in the flames. The thought then dashed across my mind, that if I would not lose the child I so fondly loved, I must keep its existence a secret from you. The people who gave me shelter had forborne to question me. I told them some false tale of injuries and oppression, and privately left Alsace, seeking the south of France, where none knew me. I changed my name, and brought up the child as my own. I have toiled and worked for it until—"

"But, the child!" gasped forth Duval; "where is it now?—Is it—" and he faltered in bringing out the words—"Is it the—"

"It is the boy you have doomed to die."

"Orderly," exclaimed the General, in a voice of thunder, "fly this instant, and stay the execution—there has been some error."

The orderly gladly flew to obey his officer's commands on so joyous an errand; but scarce had he passed the threshold when the sound of musketry fell upon their ears.

"Oh, mercy! heaven grant me mercy!" exclaimed the general, hiding his face in his hands.

"Mercy!" cried Madame Louvois; "you can cry for mercy, who would grant none. You would execute your cruel laws, and who has been their victim?—your only child. Mercy, indeed!—you would be merciful now, were it in your power."

The orderly gently opened the door to say he was too late—the boy was no more!

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