

Unpublished Passages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

— — —
No. IV

The Bill of Exchange

JACQUES ST. JULIEN married Suzette de Vallois. The father of the former, who was one of the principal merchants of Lyons, had seen with unbounded satisfaction, that his son was passionately enamored with the amiable daughter of one of his oldest friends. It was a match in every way suitable for him. Monsieur de Vallois was a man of considerable wealth, though not engaged in commerce; he had at first been much averse to the union taking place, on account of the wild and reckless disposition of the young St. Julien; and strange accounts had reached Lyons, of his proceedings during a two years residence at Paris; but upon his return to Lyons, the charms of the fair Suzette had so worked upon him, that his irregularities were abandoned, and he sunk from the gay and dissipated man of fashion, into the staid and industrious merchant; and it is but justice to him to say, that it was not outwardly alone, that he had become an altered man. Some scenes in which he had borne a part at Paris, and his narrow escapes from infamy and destruction, had determined him to make a strong effort to effect a total change in his habits and dispositions; and the presence of his dear Suzette had strengthened these resolutions, until their practice had shown him, that during the eighteen months he had been at Lyons, after his return from Paris, he had been for the first time in his life, a happy and contented man. There was but one thing galled him, and that was, any allusion to his residence at Paris. It was clear there was something connected with it, which he could not drive from his remembrance, and since it seemed sensibly to annoy him, all mention of it was studiously avoided.

The change that had taken place, removed the only objection entertained by Monsieur de Vallois to the marriage, who willingly gave his consent to the union taking place; and on the appointed day, young St. Julien led to the altar the fair and blooming Suzette, and in the face of heaven, they interchanged their vows of constancy and fidelity.

Jacques St. Valois felt that he was now a truly happy man; possessed of the being he so fondly loved, enjoying the sweet communion of reciprocal affection, unclouded by the discontent of poverty, his course of life flowed on as gently and as calmly as the summer's brook that musically ripples on, without impediment.

He was one day sitting with his wife in their dining room, conning over some circumstances of domestic life, looking upon the busy groups that thronged the quay, and at times, upon the merry laughing tenants of the boats that shot along the Rhone's swift stream, whose loud joyous laugh gave token of their presence, even when the gloom of the closing summer's evening had begun to envelope them in its obscurity. He was holding one of his wife's hands, listlessly playing with her fingers, and felt that he was enjoying one of those moments of life, when the lightness of our spirits bids us feel for a short space, a sensation of true and pure happiness;—the door opened, and the servant announced a gentleman, who wished to speak with Monsieur "St. Julien."

“Did he mention his name?”

“He said his name was not of consequence, though his business was.”

“Oh, show him into the countinghouse, some of the clerks will attend to him.”

“I wished to have done so, sir; but he said he was no merchant, and that his business was with you alone.”

“Well, show him in, since he is desirous of seeing me.”

The person advanced; he was a man of middle age, with a countenance of a dark and sinister expression, and his clothes, which were covered with dust, showed that he had just completed a long journey. After cautiously looking to see the door was closed, he approached towards de Vallois, and gazing at him said—

“You have not forgotten me, have you?”

“Good heavens! it cannot be the Chevalier Arnaud!”

“The same.”

“Why is this? Why, sir, am I to be hunted down in this manner? Do you again seek to entangle me in your meshes?”

“Softly, softly, my good sir; you are alarming this lady without cause.”

“Suzette, my love, will you leave us a few moments? It is long since I have seen this gentleman, and we have something of importance to speak about.”

His wife obeyed with reluctance, pausing at the door, to say they were engaged to spend the evening at her father’s, and it was almost time they were gone. She scarce noticed the Chevalier’s attention in opening the door as she passed through, and left him and her husband together.

“Arnaud,” said St. Julien, advancing, “you have broken the compact betwixt us; when I furnished you with money, to begin the world as an honest man, you promised never again to obtrude yourself upon me.”

“I did.”

“Nay, more; you professed gratitude to me, for doing that you had no right to expect.”

“I did so, and felt it”

“Felt it,” echoed the other, with a bitter laugh.

“Yes, I say again, felt it.”

“And yet, yet you show it, by breaking the only promise I exacted from you.”

“Listen to me, and I will explain my conduct. You, of course, remember that night at Paris, when having lost at the Salons far more than you were enabled to pay, we passed a forged bill of exchange.”

“Oh! merciful heaven! after all the anguish I have suffered, must I still have my crimes thrown in my face by my very associates.”

“Be calm, and listen: you remember, too, it was a bill at three years’ date, and that a few days after we had passed it—you gave me the money to take it up.”

“I did! I did!”

“Of course you did, and I don’t deny it; and I was going to the person to do so, but somehow or other, passing by the Salons, I just looked in to see what they were about, and—and—I lost the money before—I knew I had been playing—I was afraid to tell you the circumstance, so I said the bill had been taken up, and that I had destroyed it—but it was all a fiction.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” said the agonised St. Julien, “now you are laughing at me; come, laugh and say it is all a jest.”

“I wish it were, but the worst part of the story is that the bill being due, has been discovered to be a forgery, and is now in the possession of the police, who are tracing it through the hands of the different holders, until they will come upon you; now, as I felt I owed you a debt of, gratitude, I have travelled day and night from Paris, to give you notice to save yourself.”

“Then am I a lost and ruined man!”

“Not at all; the frontiers of Savoy are but a few leagues from hence, and there you are in safety.”

“I will not fly.”

“Not fly?”

“No!”

“Are you mad?”

“If I am not, I soon shall be.”

“This is folly.”

“Call it madness, desperation, or what you will. Oh, thou villain, you taught me first to play—led me on step by step, squandered my money, and then plunged me in the lowest depth of crime. I am lost forever,” saying which, he paced the room to and fro with quick and agitated steps, until a gentle knocking at the door attracted his attention, and his wife’s voice saying—

“St. Julien, shall you be much longer? I am dressed, and only waiting until you are ready.”

“Longer! Heaven only knows. I will follow you to your father’s—do not wait for me.”

“I cannot go without you,” replied his wife. “I’ll wait upstairs,” and she slowly turned away.

“Well, St. Julien,” said Arnaud, “are you determined not to seek your safety in flight?—come, think better of it, and be guided by me.”

“Yes, I have before trusted to your guidance, and what has been the result? I am a lost and ruined man—no, I will stand and face the danger. My reputation—my name—all blasted and destroyed. Oh!—guilt! guilt! when once a man has been contaminated by thee, thou wilt not be shaken off by him, but with the course of time, com’st rushing on to overwhelm him.”

“Well, I can see no use in moralizing! I shall not consider myself safe until I am at Chambery; I have horses waiting at hand—so, for the last time, will you accompany me?”

“I will not.”

“Then, fare thee well,” said the chevalier, leaving the room, muttering to himself about the folly of staying for the police, when he might so easily gain the start of them.

The night brought neither rest nor sleep to St. Julien; his wife, who perceived the agony of mind under which he labored, forbore to question him; she saw that she could not alleviate his sufferings, but determined in the morning to see his father, and mention the circumstance of the preceding evening to him, not doubting, that if anything were wrong, it was in his power to rectify it.

As St. Julien ascended the stairs in the morning, he was waiting in the breakfast room to speak to him; as he entered, he perceived a person dressed in black, who rose to return his salutation.

“I am speaking, I believe, to Mons. St Julien.”

“The same, sir.”

“I am sorry to say my business is of an unpleasant nature: I am the commissary of the town, and have this morning received orders from Paris, to arrest you. I am afraid there must be some mistake, but as your name and address are so particularly described, I have no alternative but obeying my instructions.”

“Heaven’s will be done,” said St. Julien, passing his hand across his eyes, and trying to suppress a rising sigh. “Oh that this had happened, ere I had mixed my wife’s fate with mine. Suzette! Suzette! I did not wrong thee willingly; as heaven knows all, I have striven to be an honest and an upright man; but the crimes of former days are marshalled against me, and cry out for justice.”

The commissary turned away, to avoid hearing the sentence uttered by St Julien; “My instructions, sir,” said he, “are simply to arrest you; they do not state the cause, but merely say, farther instructions will be sent; in the absence of these, I do not wish to act harshly; from the known respectability of your family, I am willing to run some risks, if you will promise me not to leave the town, I will not alarm your family by taking you from them, until I hear from Paris, that such a proceeding is absolutely necessary—have I your promise?”

“This is indeed kind; I can safely promise you, since my inclinations do not prompt me to avoid any charge that may be brought against me.”

The commissary rose to withdraw, after this assurance, expressing his belief that the charge against him arose from his having incautiously uttered some expressions against the government, and which a little explanation might set to rights.

St. Julien thought, and knew, otherwise; he saw that he was now lost, without the least chance of escaping the impending accusation; nothing would now avail him; not even the high character and respectability of his connections would have any influence; justice would have its victim, and he must be that victim.

As soon as she had risen, Suzette hastened to her father-in-law to inform him of the agony of mind under which her husband suffered, and to beseech him to ascertain the cause, if it were not in his power to alleviate it. The elder St. Julien was surprised at Suzette’s recital; he could not conceive that anything could have occurred to distress her husband, as she had told him their affairs were in a highly prosperous situation; he would walk over, however, and speak to him on the subject.

On arriving at the house, they entered the breakfast room—St. Julien was not there; they therefore ascended to his own room; it was true they found him, but what a sight for a wife and father! The body of St. Julien lay distended on the ground, whilst in one of his hands was grasped a pistol, the contents of which had been lodged in his head the blood oozing from his forehead, streamed down his face, working its way along the ground. The unhappy man, driven to desperation by seeing his character and prospects in life blasted forever, and unable to bear the dreadful images conjured up by his excited imagination, had, in a moment of frenzy, seized the pistol, and by his own hand closed his career of life.

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