

Unpublished Passages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

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No. IX

The Conscript's Revenge

By: J.M.B

A FEW leagues from Nismes, in the late province of Languedoc, is the quiet and retired village of St. Perau. Standing some distance from the high road, it is rarely sought except by those having business with the inhabitants, or, at long intervals, by some pedestrian wandering out of the beaten track in search of those beauties of nature which the byways so often present, and are seen with more heartfelt enjoyment when bursting unawares on the sight of some wayworn searcher of the picturesque, than those more gorgeous views in the highroads, the description of which has raised the expectation to the highest pitch, merely to show that the reality always falls far short of the anticipation.

It was in this village that Pierre and Annette had passed their infancy; they were respectively the son and daughter of men who had began life together; had followed the same occupation, that of vine growers, and been for years neighbors and sworn friends; whose common wish too was for a future day to see that friendship more strongly cemented by the marriage of their children. It could not therefore be much a matter of surprise that betwixt their children there was more than friendship. Pierre saw with much delight that few girls for miles around could compete with his little wife, as he called her, either in face or form; and that to be considered like Annette of St. Perau was a compliment many a bright and blue-eyed girl was justly proud of. Annette, too, was never so happy as when in company with Pierre, her partner in the summer dance, or wandering with him beside the river Gardon, listening to his projects for the future, when they were man and wife.

When Pierre was about twenty, by the death of his father, he was left alone to cultivate his small "Terrein"; it was more than sufficient to keep him in comfort; and he could therefore carry into effect those plans of happiness he had so long looked forward to. What happiness could be greater than to have his dear Annette as his wife in the same village and very house where he had been born? Cares would not be likely to obtrude themselves; for if he were not rich, he could always command sufficient to live in comfort; the man, he thought, who would desire more did not deserve as much. When more than a year had elapsed, he proposed to Annette's father that their union should at once take place. He explained to him frankly his circumstances, and intimated it could be no secret that Annette was not altogether averse to such a match. The proposition on the part of Pierre, though not unexpected, was nevertheless unwelcome to the father of Annette. A year or two previous he had entered into some speculations, for the purpose of carrying on which he had borrowed money of a Mons. Tarnier, a person who had formerly been in trade, but, having amassed what he considered a sufficiency, had retired, and purchased a moderate-sized house at St. Perau, which he made his residence. The speculation of Mons. Dumont, much to his surprise, and I believe to the surprise of everyone who enters into them,

failed. It was very astonishing how it could have happened; and particularly unfortunate that he had not foreseen it, since he might have provided some means of repaying the money; but true it was that paying was entirely out of the question; for he had not only lost what he borrowed, but all his own besides; and as to the sale of his land, that would not be sufficient by one half. He put the best face on the matter; went to Mons. Tarnier, told him all the circumstances, that the speculation had failed, and that he had not wherewithal to repay the loan. Mons. Tarnier did not seem at all surprised that the speculation should have failed, and much less that, having so done, Dumont was unable to pay him what he had lent; he assured him that it was but a trifle; this Dumont denied, because, he could not see that when a man owed twice as much as he was able to pay, that it was to be called a trifle. Tarnier informed him that it was in his power to more than pay him twice over. Dumont could not at all perceive how; and the other explained, by saying that the charms of Annette had made such an indelible impression in his heart, that for her sake he would sacrifice everything; and if he were to become her husband, would not only release Dumont from all claims he had against him, but supply him with money to begin the speculation anew: to this arrangement the father acceded; and it was whilst he was debating in his own mind how to gain the consent of Annette, that Pierre inopportunately urged his suit. There was no other way to answer Pierre than by informing him of everything. What was the amount?—far, far more than Pierre, by the sale of everything, could hope to obtain. That he was obliged to admit; but with unusual ardor, he still urged his suit, and the folly as well as heartlessness of forcing the girl to marry one she could never love: it would be to her the source of never ending sorrows, and embitter the whole of a life which might otherwise be passed in content and happiness. Besides, how could he reconcile it to his feelings to sell his only child for money. Pierre was confident that he never loved his daughter, since he could barter her person and affections for gold, as if he were selling a beast of the field. Dumont remained inflexible; but promised that he would wait five years, as Annette was still young; and if, during that time, Pierre could raise sufficient money to release him from his present difficulties, the girl should then be his. This promise he made without the remotest intention of keeping; but the presence and importunities of Pierre became annoying and perplexing, and he was glad to get rid of him on any terms.

Pierre sought the object of his affections, and overwhelmed her with grief by informing her of the barrier that was raised against their union; she felt much for her father, who had inconsiderately plunged himself into difficulties, but more for him whom she had looked forward to as soon having the right of calling her by the fond name of wife. It was with sorrow she listened to his plans for the future; she could not combat them effectually, and yet strove to raise difficulties which she thought might prove insurmountable, though why she scarcely knew. Pierre's intentions were to sell his little plot of ground, place the money raised by the sale in the hands of some friend, and then throw himself upon the world, and endeavor, by the most frugal and parsimonious means, to raise the rest of the money which Dumont owed, long ere the time allowed him had passed. He thought that far from his native home and village, in the large towns and cities, where readier means of gaining wealth are to be found than in the quiet spot where he had passed his early years, some opportunity might present itself of gaining what he sought. His plans were soon carried into execution, at least so far as regarded the sale of his small plot of land, and placing the money in the hands of a friend; but his resolution almost failed him when the time came to bid adieu to his dear Annette. It was the first time it had been for more than a few hours that they had been apart; and those few hours had seemed like lengthened days, they crept so slowly on; but now it was an absence of years, perhaps forever, and all before him was

uncertainty; he might prosper, he might not. It was a venture in the lottery of life. Annette accompanied him until they reached the main road leading to Paris, and, leaning against a stump of a tree, remained watching him as the rise and fall of the road brought him at intervals to her view; nor was it until the turning of the road shut him from her sight, that she felt she was truly alone; her feelings almost mastered her; but striving to subdue them, she sought the village, which had now lost every charm, and could only bring to mind the remembrance of many happy hours.

Intelligence was occasionally received at the village respecting Pierre: the first they heard of him was, that being at Clermont during the time the Conscription was drawing, the son of a rich banker of the town had the misfortune to be drawn, and not being partial to a military life, particularly in the station assigned to him, had striven by every means to obtain a substitute; this was not an easy thing to do, the previous Conscription having taken most of those who were suitable, and the others held back, in hopes of being tempted by something considerable. The young man offered what to Pierre seemed a large sum, and he accepted it, transmitted the money to the friend who had the care of the rest, and became a soldier. The next intelligence they received was, that he had been draughted into a regiment of Hussars, and was one of those in the expedition to Russia; and the third and last was after a long lapse, and brought the news of the disastrous retreat from Moscow, and the death of Pierre, who had fallen a victim to the severity of the climate.

It was shortly after the news of Pierre's death arrived, that Mons. Tarnier declared, that as every means of raising the money by Pierre's endeavors was now at an end, that he must either be paid or receive the hand of Annette; and was incessantly talking to the poor girl about huissiers, arrets, and prisons, which would be her father's doom, unless she yielded her consent to become his wife. If she turned to her father praying not to be sacrificed to the man she abhorred and detested, who had been the cause of her own unhappiness and Pierre's death, still the same din of prisons and persecutions of the law rang in her ears; and finding no relief, no one to say a kind consoling word, the almost broken-hearted girl became as passive and spiritless as her admirer wished. There was but one thing she clung to with any degree of pertinacity, and that was for the marriage not taking place until the expiration of the five years; it wanted but eighteen months she had promised Pierre to wait; and if he were dead she did not feel absolved from her promise; it was but that one boon she asked; would they deny her; it could be of little consequence to them, whilst to her it would be the means of rendering her future years less bitter, to think she had not broken her faith with him whom she had so fondly loved. But at this they laughed; it was merely an idle scruple, there was no cause for postponing the marriage, delays were dangerous; and the result was, that Tarnier led to the altar the vestige of the once blooming Annette. Her bright sparkling eye had lost all its former lustre; her cheeks were blanched with an almost unearthly whiteness; and the faint and scarcely heard responses that fell from the bride, found the greatest difficulty in gaining utterance. It was a truly sad wedding; none seemed joyous; it was more like the ceremony of a young and fair creature taking those vows which forever shut her from the pleasures of the world she had scarce began to taste, and which she knew would immure her till death in the dark walls of a cloister.

So far Mons. Tarnier considered himself a happy man. But men have different feelings as to what constitutes happiness; and many cannot know them without the object of their choice has

some kindred affection; but this was not his case. He never even thought if the poor sad creature he had made his wife had either feelings or affections. He had seen her when her heart was light and gay, the glow of health upon her cheeks, and the smile upon her countenance. Had he loved? No, not for an instant. It was partly brutal passion, but more the desire of possessing that which everyone admired. To effect his purpose, he had left nothing unturned, no lie, no deceit, everything that villainy could bring into play he had employed; and when he triumphed, what was it over? a poor broken-hearted girl. A great triumph truly.

It was towards the close of a beautiful summer's day that the comparative coolness of the evening had tempted Annette to stray some distance from home; she was alone, for her husband seldom offered to be the companion of her walk, nor did she wish it. There was no communion of feeling betwixt them; and her own musings were more congenial to her mind than the ill-timed remarks and sarcastic observations that he generally used when they were together. She had wandered, without being aware, to the turning of the road where she had parted with Pierre. It had often since her marriage been the place she had sought to wile away an hour in meditation, and always left with sadness to seek a home, the sight of which she abhorred. The stump of a tree was still there; and, leaning against it, she tried to forget the intervening time since she had last seen Pierre. Strange, she thought, that it should have been on this very day five years ago that we stood here together for the last time. Little did I then think it was forever we parted; that from thence I should have to date long years of misery; but I feel it cannot last much longer; forebodings come across my mind that I shall not long remain one of earth's creatures. I have nothing in life to wish the day far off, would it were here. Her attention was at that moment attracted by the approaching sounds of horse's steps. She looked towards the road; it was merely an officer and his servant, who seemed following the high road to Nismes; and she turned towards home. The officer at that moment pulled up his horse, and, dismounting, came towards her. Had she been strong enough, she would have increased her pace, but her weakness forbade it. "Unhand me, sir," she exclaimed, as he clasped her in his arms; "is it like an officer and a gentleman to insult an unprotected woman?"

"What, Annette!"

"Let me go, sir, I beseech you."

"Surely you do not know me."

"I do not, sir, nor do I wish."

"Not wish! Is it so, Annette; is this your welcome after years of absence; has time then wrought so great a change? I did not expect this."

"I do not understand this language. It is but adding to your insult. I say let me go, sir, I do not know you."

"Not know me!" said he; at the same time releasing her. "The Pierre of former days has then been forgotten. Well, well, I will not force myself upon your remembrance." Saying which, he turned away.

“Oh, sir, stay an instant. You spoke of Pierre: I will listen to you if you will speak to me of him. I have not heard that name for many a day, save when I have spoken it to myself.”

“Why should I speak to you of him. Surely it were better he should speak himself. Look, Annette,” said he, lifting off at the same time his military cap; “are these features so altered that you cannot recognise them?”

“Merciful heavens, what do I see! It cannot be; and yet that face—yes, yes, it must be; it is not to be mistaken.”

Saying which, she rushed into his arms, and remained for some moments, resting her head upon his breast.

“You are a strange girl, Annette; but you look pale and ill.”

“Do I, Pierre? I do not feel so. I am happy, very happy; but look at me, and tell me, am I dreaming?”

“Why, I almost think you are, or you would not have been so long ere you recognised me.”

“Oh, Pierre, I did not expect a moment such as this. I feel so light and gay, so happy I have not been for many a long day. Look, Pierre, there is the old tree where we parted; it has not yet been cut down. And look, farther on is the village; you must remember them.”

“Yes, Annette, indeed I do. They have been present to my mind full often. And how has the tedium of the night watch been beguiled when I have thought of thee. I have prospered in the world, Annette; I am rich and honored. I have been noticed by the Emperor, who has made me what I am. I rendered him some unexpected assistance at the retreat of Moscow; since which he has never forgotten me, and has kept me near his person; by which means I escaped the fate of my former unfortunate regiment. But what would all that I have attained, be without thee. No; I have but coveted them to share with you; we shall indeed be happy.

“Oh yes, Pierre, very happy.”

“This is the last day of the five years. When I left I did not expect to return such as I am. What pleasure it will be for me to present you at Court when we are married.”

“Married did you say, Pierre?”

“Yes, Annette, I did say married; what is there to make you so shudder at the word?”

“Oh I have been deceived, cruelly deceived. I see through it now. It was all false they told me; and they knew it too. Oh Pierre, I have been wronged, cruelly wronged; I have been made to believe you dead, and—”

“And what?”

“To save my father from destruction, I became the wife of—oh, for mercy’s sake, do not look so upon me, I cannot bear it.”

“But my letters!”

“I have never received any.”

“There has been some foul villainy at work; and by it I have been robbed of that I have looked for many years so fondly to. Tell me, is it that man Tarnier whose wife you now are?”

“Yes, Pierre, it is indeed the same.”

“May the deadliest curse of man light on him, and sink him to perdition. But why do I use the weapons of a woman? I will have revenge, deep and bitter revenge; if he has the power to injure me, so has he to atone for it. Annette, it is not against thee I would hurl the passion my injury has called up. You look so weak and ill, you would disarm a madman of his fury. Lean upon my arm, and I will lead you to the village.”

When they had arrived nearly at her home she was almost exhausted; but, ere parting, she promised Pierre to meet him on the following day at the old tree; and, after folding her in his arms, and imprinting many a kiss on her pale cheeks, he hurried away, venting the deepest curses on the man who had robbed him of his heart’s dearest object.

On the following day Annette was in no condition to keep her engagement. The surprise she had received—the feelings of disappointment at the deceit which she found had been practised to induce her to become the wife of the man she detested, had proved too much for her; the mind had sunk beneath the overwhelming weight of despondency; she but gathered together the small remnant of her strength to vent it out in loud and incoherent ravings; and, as her weakness grew upon her, they subsided into prayers for forgiveness. Nature at length could bear no more; and looking up to heaven for that she had not power to ask, her spirit passed from earth.

On leaving Annette, Pierre had hastened to discover by what means his letters had been intercepted, and was not much surprised at finding that Tarnier had contrived to gain possession of them, and fabricated the news of his death, which he well knew had not taken place. He was on his road towards the village the day after, to keep his appointment, when he was informed of the death of Annette. The information staggered him at the moment; but he tried to suppress any outward emotion; the contracted brow and heaving breast, however, showed plainly that the feelings were striving to burst forth. It was but the promise of revenge that kept them down, then they might burst forth as they would.

Mons. Tarnier was standing in one of his rooms looking over some directions for his wife’s funeral, which he had just written down, when Pierre was shown into him. It was the day after that on which she died. He looked up, but could not recognise his visitor, who, much to his alarm, the moment he had entered turned the key in the door.

“Pray, sir,” said he, “what am I to understand by this?”

“What you will; I care not. Look sir, and see if you can recognise that Pierre you have so deeply injured. But I come not to talk with you; here are two swords, they are of equal length; choose—”

“The man is mad; you do not suppose I am going to fight with you.”

“By heavens, but you shall.”

“I am not a soldier, and fighting is not my trade; as it appears to be yours, if I have injured you the laws of the country will redress your grievance.”

“I will not talk with you thus. If you will not defend yourself, then let the crime of murder be upon my head; defend yourself I say for the last time.”

“Surely you will not murder me in cold blood,” exclaimed the other in the utmost trepidation; of the same time lifting up one of the swords to protect himself in some degree from the threatened attack; but his guard was instantly beat down, and Pierre’s sword passed through his body; he fell, saying he was a murdered man.

“That I cannot deny,” exclaimed Pierre, turning away; “his blood is upon my hand; but I am avenged, and so is poor Annette. Had you not stepped between us,” said he, looking towards the dying man, “and done that by the basest means you could not hope to do by fair, I had not become your murderer; you brought it on yourself.” Saying which he left the room; and mounting his horse, which, had remained without, he dashed right across the country, avoiding the bridle roads, but keeping always in the line towards the sea-coast.

I never could ascertain with any degree of certainty what subsequently became of Pierre. In the village it was reported that he was one of the French officers in the service of the Grand Seigneur, where he had risen to high rank. Whether there was any foundation for the report I know not; but he never afterwards was seen in France.

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