

Unpublished Passages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

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No. I

Marie Laurent

It was a matter of surprise to everyone, how so amiable and well disposed a girl as Marie Dupin could ever become the wife of such a worthless man as Antoine Laurent. He had nothing to recommend him save his outward form; for his disposition and propensities were of the worst and lowest kind; and none of those persons in his native village, who stood fair with the world, were ever desirous of associating with him; and the small property his father left him consisting only of a few acres of land, was fast dwindling away, to meet his frequent necessities.

But the truth was, Marie loved him with sincere affection in early years; they had been much together—their parents having been neighbors; and long ere the vices of the man had shown themselves, she had learnt to call him her own Antoine, whilst he, in return, called her his dearest Marie. So often had they dwelt on the future that was to see them united, that it became too firmly fixed in her imagination ever to be removed. She could not, indeed, remain ignorant of the character he acquired as he grew in years, or that when any act of violence or daring was mentioned, he was sure to be named as the leader; but she thought the world was harsh—too quick in condemnation, and wrong in attributing those acts as the offspring of a bad heart, which were but the outbreakings of an ardent, youthful disposition. She had often heard that a reformed rake makes the best husband; but she did not look farther to see what a confirmed reprobate would be likely to make. She was all confidence in the success of her plans for his reformation, and being an orphan and without control, she gave herself and her little properly to the free possession of him who already had her heart.

The few first weeks of their union no one could be more attentive than Antoine; and Marie became confirmed in her opinion, that his acts had been too harshly construed by the world, and his youthful errors would soon merge in the fond husband. Poor Marie! she saw not in the calm the forerunner of the storm which was impending over her. He soon gave way to the true bent of his disposition; joined his former lawless associates; made long and frequent absences from home, and returned, generally in a savage and discontented humor, to find fault with everything, and would sit for hours wrapped up in his meditations, scarce noticing the anxious attentions of his wife.

In a few months time she found that poverty was fast gaining upon them. Antoine had sold all their property, and spent all the proceeds in riot and debauchery; and, to crown her unhappiness, her husband, joining some of his associates, left forever the place of his birth, bearing with him the ill wishes of all who knew him, save one—his forsaken wife, who, amidst all his unkindness and unrequited affection, still fondly loved him, and wished him well wherever his course might lead him.

Marie was too much a favorite in the village to have any doubt as to her being able to maintain herself by her industry, and gladly accepted the offer of a Madame Germain to become her own immediate attendant.

Madame Germain was the wife of a private gentleman, of some considerable property, who had resided many years in the midst of his estates, passing his time in endeavoring to ameliorate the condition of his tenantry, and enhance the value of his property by his own superintendence. Marie was much esteemed by all and would have lived truly happy had not her mind been clouded with evil forebodings of her husband's fate.

Years passed on and found Marie still with Madame Germain, who had removed to Paris, for the benefit of her children's education. She still remained ignorant of what had befallen her husband, or even of his existence and had gradually brought herself to the belief that they had parted forever.

She was one day witnessing a review in the Champ de Mars, and paying deep attention to the manœuvres of the troops, when suddenly she felt her reticule snatched from her hand; she turned round to see who had robbed her, but every body seemed attending to the scene before them. It was clear the bag was gone, but as there was little of consequence in it, she was too much of a Frenchwoman to be annoyed, and in admiration of a charge of cavalry, which was then taking place, quite forgot her loss.

“Bless my soul!” cried someone; “well, I declare, it is the oddest thing in the world! What! Marie, my girl! you haven't forgot me, have you?”

Hearing her name, she turned to see the speaker. There were three ill-dressed looking men standing together, one of whom she recognized as her husband.

“Ah! Antoine! is that you?”

“Yes, my dear, it is indeed me. I suppose you thought me dead?”

“I had feared as much, Antoine.”

“Aye, so many thought; I got through it, though; but bless my politeness; here, Le Coq and Petit Singe, allow me to introduce you to my wife.”

His friends lifted up their red nightcaps, and professed themselves much honored in being introduced to the wife of such a “brave enfant as Antoine Laurent.”

Much as Marie had wished to see her husband, she could not but feel that their meeting would be the source of much pain to her. His appearance, and that of his companions, was strongly indicative of their profession, and she had little doubt in her own mind, that one of the gentlemen had taken her bag. It was with feelings of sadness she accompanied Antoine and the Sieurs Le Coq and Petit Singe to a cabaret in the neighborhood.

Antoine's story was short. According to his own account he had been in the army, and left it, because he found a military life too irksome for a man of spirit like himself; and Le Coq had been a brother in arms. Petit Singe, to be sure, had not been in the army, but then he had a wish to go there, and that was the same thing. After he had told Marie all he had to say concerning himself and friends, he was very desirous to hear how she had done since misfortune, as he called it, forced him from a wife he loved more than all the world; and drew such a picture of the anguish he had felt in leaving her, that it moved Petit Singe even to tears, or at least to the occasional pressing the tassel of his night-cup, first to one eye and then to the other, at if he were much moved at his friend's sufferings.

When Marie had stated the truth, her husband became extremely anxious in his inquiries, as to whether Monsieur Germain was rich, kept many servants, and was regular in his hours. The answers, he said, were very satisfactory; because, though he had led a roving kind of life himself, yet he should have been extremely unhappy to think his wife was living in any other than a respectable family; and as Le Coq knew that he had often expressed himself most anxious that his dear wife might not be prejudiced in the good opinion of others, by his own follies. At the beginning of this speech Petit Singe had caught hold of his tassel, but not finding anything sufficiently sad for a tear, contented himself with a long drawn ah, and declared that he had heard him say so at least a thousand times; and Le Coq, who was a man of taciturn habits, bobbed his head in token of assent.

The result of this interview was a promise, on the part of Antoine, to see his wife on the following day, who engaged to supply him with money to enable him to look more respectable; and if he would reform she did not doubt being able, through Monsieur Germain's kindness, to procure him some situation, by which he might obtain an honest livelihood.

He did not fail to see his wife on the following day, and became very assiduous in his attentions, vowed his affection was undiminished, and scarcely allowing a day to pass that he did not look in at Monsieur Germain's to see her. He repeatedly declared, too, he had suffered so much in his wild way of life, that his only wish now was to settle down quietly with his dear Marie, and support themselves by honest industry.

One night, as I was going my rounds with some of my men, I perceived, loitering about at the corner of one of the streets, an old acquaintance of mine, the Sieur Petit Singe, and it was very evident that he could not be waiting about so late at night for any good purpose, and as he had not perceived me, I determined to watch him unobserved. In a few minutes he was joined by another acquaintance of mine, the Sieur Le Coq, when they walked together some way up the street, until they came to a large house, and Petit Singe, looking round to see if any persons were near, gave a gentle tap at the door, which, to my surprise, was instantly opened to him. This was strange! The house belonged to Monsieur Germain, and I could not believe that the two gentlemen, who had just gone in, were carrying on an intrigue with any of the servants, since nature had not moulded either of them in one of her most favorable moods. Le Coq was a most desperate character—and Petit Singe a most consummate villain, deficient only in one thing—courage, but which he generally contrived to make up for, by a quickness of invention, which rendered him a valuable ally to those who planned the commission of any desperate deeds.

On entering they had left the door ajar, for the purpose of facilitating their escape, in case they should find it expedient to depart in a hurry. I availed myself, therefore, of the opportunity to follow after them, with my men, and perceived them ascending the stairs, in company with Antoine Laurent; this soon explained how they had so easily obtained their admission. They had no sooner reached the first landing-place than they heard someone coming downstairs; this seemed to perplex them extremely, and Petit Singe, after hiding the light he was carrying, began to descend the stairs, three steps at a time, perhaps judging that a general always fights best in the rear. The person who had alarmed them was no other than Marie, who was coming downstairs with a light in her hand. She had no sooner reached the landing place, than Le Coq and Laurent darted forwards and seized her, one by each hand, whilst Le Coq pressed his hand over her mouth to prevent her screaming. When she had in some degree recovered from her alarm, Le Coq allowed her to speak. Her eye fell upon her husband, and she exclaimed—

“Oh, Antoine! how, in the name of heaven, did you get here? What is your purpose? And this man, too. Oh, let me beseech you to leave the house instantly; you will ruin me forever.”

“No; on the contrary,” replied he; “I mean to make your fortune.”

“Nay, Antoine, you shall not pass a step farther; pray leave the house; someone may awake, and if you are discovered, I shall be accused of having let you in.”

“I am not quite such a fool, after hiding in the log-house ‘till I am so stiff I can hardly move, to walk out at a woman's bidding; let me pass, and don't be so absurd.”

“Not a step.”

“Are you mad?”

“Mad or not, you shall not pass. If you attempt it, I'll alarm the house by my screams.”

They, however, tried to go on; Laurent telling Petit Singe to look to the woman, and if she made the least noise, to cut the matter as short as possible. Marie, faithful to her word, the moment she saw them advancing, uttered a piercing scream and cry for assistance, but was effectually silenced by a blow from the butt-end of Laurent's pistol. She fell instantly on the stairs, deprived of all motion, and, as I dreaded, at the instant, even of life. So thought Petit Singe, for he declared it would be a good night's work for Laurent to make himself a widower and a rich man at the same time. They went on to Monsieur Germain's private room, the situation of which they seemed to be well acquainted with, and forced open his escritoire, in which was lying a large quantity of notes, which I afterwards ascertained had been paid only a day or two before to Monsieur Germain, for an estate of some value he had disposed of. These Petit Singe lost no time in appropriating to himself, and was about to leave the room, when I thought it time to show myself.

“The Blessed Virgin!” exclaimed Petit Singe, the moment he saw me, at the same time running behind Le Coq for protection.

“Not exactly,” I said, “Monsieur Petit Singe, but another friend of yours.”

“The devil!” exclaimed Le Coq.

“No,” said I, “there again you are mistaken.”

The booty was too rich to be given up without a struggle, and Laurent swore he would blow out the brains of the first man who attempted to stop him, calling on Le Coq to assist him in making a dash for it.

I attempted to seize him, and he kept his word by firing at me; the ball went through my hat, and fractured a large glass which was behind. He then drew a dagger, with which he would have attacked me, had he not been at that moment shot by one of my men. Le Coq was soon disarmed, and Petit Singe pulled out from under the table, where he had crept the moment he saw Laurent was about to make resistance, and with the politest bow in the world, presented me with the money, expressing a hope that I did not feel any inconvenience from Laurent's precipitation.

The firing soon awoke the inmates of the house, who were not a little surprised at the scene which presented itself; and attention being paid to poor Marie, it was found that although she had received a severe blow across the face, which had completely stunned her, yet there was nothing to fear for her life.

Some months after this I heard that Marie, who had continued to live with Madame Germain, had yielded to the solicitation of one of her former admirers, and again become a wife. Experience having taught her that reformation was not so easy a task as she had imagined, she took the precaution of ascertaining that there would be little chance of having to try the success of her schemes in the present instance.

With regard to Le Coq and Petit Singe, they are at present on a visit to the “Bains de Rochefort,” which is likely to last until the end of their careers. Petit Singe complains most grievously, that at the other end of his chain is attached a gentleman of most powerful make, and withal so arbitrary in his movements that he cannot enjoy a moment's peace, night or day.

J. M. B.

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