

Unpublished Passages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

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No. VI.

The Gambler's Death

by J.M.B.

“I am almost frozen to death, and my limbs will soon refuse their office. Oh, sir! for the love of heaven, bestow your charity, if it be the smallest pittance, in pity's sake, sir, I beseech you.”

There was something in the voice of the speaker so different from the husky half-cracked tone of the midnight mendicant that I turned to look at the object so imploring for charity. It was a poor half-clad female shivering in the blast of a cold February night, and who clearly showed that much as poverty and wretchedness had striven to do their worst, they had not completely wrecked the symmetry of a once beautiful form, or driven away every trace of beauty from the care-worn countenance of the supplicant. It was evident that the direst necessity could have alone forced her to the present employment, for she had scarce uttered her request, when she shrank back as if in dread of the sound of her own words; poor creature, thought I, you have known much misery, would to heaven it were in my power to alleviate it beyond the passing moment. I dropped something into her hand, and passed on; I had gone but a few steps when I heard her voice again— “Stay, sir, but for an instant.”

“Well, my good girl, what would you now?”

“You have made a mistake, sir, these are five franc pieces.”

“Indeed! I am not rich enough to be in the habit of giving such sums, but you are deserving of them, and may keep them as a reward for your honesty.”

She looked at me for a moment, whilst her tongue essayed to utter the language of gratitude, but her heart was too full for utterance, and seizing my hand, she would have pressed it to her lips, but dropped it again in hesitation, as if in remembrance that she had overstepped the limits prescribed by her calling; I could hear a deep drawn sigh as she turned from me, that spoke so forcibly to my feelings that I felt I ought to follow her and see if anything could be done to remove her from this lowest depth of poverty; she turned up a narrow court, and entering a mean looking house, ascended the stairs, and went into the back garret, leaving the door open. The room was misery itself; two broken chairs, and a ragged coverlet, serving for a bed, was the whole of the furniture; on the coverlet a child about two years of age was sleeping, whilst rocking himself to and fro on one of the broken chairs was a man about six-and-twenty, whose clenched teeth and fixed vacant stare bespoke a mind ill at ease with itself; his face was one that still bore the remains of much manly beauty, and which, in brighter days, and better circumstances, must have made a deep impression in many a woman's heart. He seemed to take

no notice of the woman's entrance, but still rocked himself to and fro as if ignorant of her presence, "Adolph, you are ill at ease."—"I am," was the only answer.— "Come, look cheerful."

"Cheerful!—cheerful, yes, when I look round me and see everything responding to such a sensation—cheerful, indeed!"

"But I have brought you money."

"Then buy bread for yourself and the child, I am not hungry."

"But here is enough, with prudence, to last us some time; look, ten francs."

"Ten francs, show them to me—how came you possessed of so much?—it matters not, give them to me, Adele, and I will buy something for our present wants."

"I will go with you, Adolph, or you will not spend them, you will—"

"What?"

"Lose them at the gaming table! Oh, Adolph, consider the many hours I have waited and watched in the cold blast with scarce covering for a summer's evening, and the snares and reproaches of those who made refusal doubly bitter by their taunts; I cannot go again; consider, the poor child has not tasted food for many an hour; you used to love me once, and think the covering for a winter's day too slight to protect me from a breath of summer wind. How often have you said I could not bear the fatigue of a few hours journey in my own carriage, with all the aid that luxury could invent, and now you let me stand as an outcast, hour after hour, to beg a boon from those—, oh, Adolph! Adolph!"

"Why throw this in my face? Your friends have offered again and again to allow you to live with them—you can then have all these luxuries you so covet."

"I cannot leave you, Adolph; I value your affections more than all the luxuries the world can bestow—I do not repine—I only ask you to give up this one passion, and your talents may yet support us; we have had a bitter lesson of how little dependence can be placed on the chances of the gaming table; we have lost all, all—even your friends have cast you off, and left you to starvation, and yet you are still the same, wanting but the means."

"Well, my dearest Adele, I promise you this shall not share the fate of the rest."

"You promise me."

"I do."

Saying which he left the room, and hastened downstairs without perceiving me, on account of the obscurity of the passage. I entered the room, she started on my entering, but when she perceived me, exclaimed—

“Oh, sir, I am afraid you have heard how likely your kindness is to be thrown away, but do not blame me; if you have heard all, I am sure you will not.”

I assured her I did not, for an instant, impute the least degree of blame to her, and had followed her solely for the purpose of rendering farther assistance, in case it had been in my power as one of the heads of the police, and was glad I had so done, since I had heard the sad recital of her sufferings. I left her something farther to purchase a supply for her immediate necessities, making her promise to come to my office on the following day, in order that I might arrange something to enable her, at least, to better her present condition, if she still persisted in refusing the offers of her friends.

Adolph, on leaving the house, hastened with the intention of purchasing some food for his famishing wife and child; as it was late, and the shops were, for the most part, shut up—he had to go a short distance to find those in the great thoroughfares that were not so early in closing; in his way was a house, that in his latter days he had often frequented, and where the smallness of the stake had been consistent with his little means; the door was open, and the lights shone from within, announcing that the deadly work was still going on. He paused for an instant at the threshold; might he not be in luck! fortune, which had so long been his enemy, might for once stand his friend; should he but gain a small sum to relieve him from his present dreadful state, and enable him once more to struggle with the world, he would forswear the gaming table forever; but then the thoughts of his poor wife, the misery she had endured for his sake, the remembrance of their fond affection before adversity had laid his hand so strongly on him, and what she had undergone to gain this small sum, on the other hand, warned him from entering. “But I cannot lose—I must win—she will be so pleased to see a little hoard to set us once more afloat”—and musing thus, he found himself at the door of the rooms, before he was aware that he had been mechanically ascending the stairs.

As he entered the room the last throw was just decided, and someone exclaimed with a loud voice, “rouge has gained three times, such a run cannot last, I’ll go on noir, this time, I have previously lost almost everything by rouge.” Adolph followed his example, and put down five francs on noir; there was a dead silence for a few seconds, everyone watching with breathless anxiety the result of the throw.

“Rouge has gained again! a thousand maledictions,” cried one, “this is the fourth time; it cannot happen forever. I will try noir once more, rouge cannot be thrown again.” This time nearly all backed noir to the highest amount allowed by the laws of the table; the chances being so strong against rouge coming up once more, Adolph put down his last five franc piece, and rouge, to the mortification of all but the bankers, came up for the fifth time.

“Try it once more,” said one of his quondam associates, “don’t be disheartened at a little bad luck in the beginning; come, play on noir again, there has been such an unusual run upon rouge.”

“I have nothing left to play with,” he said, “nor do I know where to look for sufficient to purchase a morsel of food for a starving wife and child—not a sous in the wide world, and none will lend or give—oh, this cursed infatuation, what might I not have been, and what am I now?”—his former “friend” fancying this to be a prelude to the request of a loan, for granting it

was quite out of the question, pretended to see an acquaintance at the other end of the room, and shuffled away with the greatest expedition.

In a few minutes Adolph found himself again in the street, but where to turn or go he knew not; could he return home to say he had again lost all—no, no, he could not go back empty handed; a few steps forward was a baker shutting up his shop, and a cabriolet coming by at the moment, slipped its wheel, the baker ran to give his assistance, and was soon busily employed with the cabriolet driver in searching for the lost lynch-pin; nobody was passing by, and those about the cabriolet were busily engaged. A loaf of bread would be to him, at that moment, almost as the treasures of the east; he crept towards the shop, and seized one of the loaves that was lying on the counter; in the next instant, the cry of stop thief resounded in his ears—the baker's wife from within had seen him; he grasped the loaf, and ran, pursued, by many, drawn together by the cry of "stop thief," expecting some amusement from the chase of a pilferer; his fears gave him speed, and he was fast distancing his pursuers, when he gained the Pont du Notre Dame, the patrol was going over at that moment, and he saw he should not be allowed to pass; he stopped; his pursuers were fast approaching, what was to be done—should he be taken as a midnight robber, be condemned to pass the rest of his days as a galley slave? There was no time for hesitation, the Seine was before him, and in he plunged; his pursuers reached the bridge only in time to see him throw himself off; there was a low hollow gurgle on the water, showing where he fell, which soon subsided, and the stream resumed its quiet glassy look above, whilst below, death was fast working its way; it was some time before the bystanders could procure the means of rescuing the body from the water, and when it was brought forth they soon perceived that their efforts for resuscitation would prove unavailing, and, with a shrug of the shoulders, and an ejaculation of "poor man," they left it in charge of the patrol, to be by them consigned to the Morgue.

I afterwards learned that Adolph was the only son of a rich merchant, who, at his death, had left him in the sole possession of all his wealth; he had married rather above his rank in life, a wife who loved him to excess; the world offered him all the pleasures that wealth and reciprocal affection could bestow, but it was not in his power to taste them; play was the reigning passion in his heart, and the result was his inevitable ruin; his own, and his wife's friends, had several times assisted him, and started him again and again in the world, with every prospect of success; but still the demon of gambling forced him from out of the path of rectitude, and he sunk deeper than ever; his friends refused again to assist him, and only offered an asylum to his wife, on condition that she lived apart from her husband. This, in all his distresses, she had refused to do, nor was it until death had separated them forever, that she sought a refuge with her family. She now lives in a small house near St. Cloud, and her every hope is centered in her only child, a boy, whose outward form and face strongly resemble those that made so deep an impression on her heart, and her daily prayer is that heaven may warn him of those dangers which wrecked his father in life's uncertain course.

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