

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

VAUTRIN: A DRAMA IN
FIVE ACTS

Оноре де Бальзак

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Honoré de Balzac

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

It is difficult for the playwright to put himself, five days after the first presentation of his piece, in the situation in which he felt himself on the morning after the event; but it is still more difficult to write a preface to *Vautrin*, to which every one has written his own. The single utterance of the author will infallibly prove inferior to so vast a number of divergent expressions. The report of a cannon is never so effective as a display of fireworks.

Must the author explain his work? Its only possible commentator is M. Frederick Lemaitre.

Must he complain of the injunction which delayed the presentation of his play? That would be to betray ignorance of his time and country. Petty tyranny is the besetting sin of constitutional governments; it is thus they are disloyal to themselves, and on the other hand, who are so cruel as the weak? The present government is a spoiled child, and does what it likes, excepting that it fails to secure the public weal or the public vote.

Must he proceed to prove that *Vautrin* is as innocent a work as a drama of Berquin's? To inquire into the morality or immorality of the stage would imply servile submission to the stupid Prudhommes who bring the matter in question.

Shall he attack the newspapers? He could do no more than declare that they have verified by their conduct all he ever said about them.

Yet in the midst of the disaster which the energy of government has caused, but which the slightest sagacity in the world might have prevented, the author has found some compensation in the testimony of public sympathy which has been given him. M. Victor Hugo, among others, has shown himself as steadfast in friendship as he is pre-eminent in poetry; and the present writer has the greater happiness in publishing the good will of M. Hugo, inasmuch as the enemies of that distinguished man have no hesitation in blackening his character.

Let me conclude by saying that *Vautrin* is two months old, and in the rush of Parisian life a novelty of two months has survived a couple of centuries. The real preface to *Vautrin* will be found in the play, *Richard-Coeur-d'Eponge*,¹ which the administration permits to be acted in order to save the prolific stage of Porte-Saint-Martin from being overrun by children.

PARIS, May 1, 1840.

¹ A play never enacted or printed.

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

Jacques Collin, known as Vautrin
The Duc de Montsorel
The Marquis Albert de Montsorel, son to Montsorel
Raoul de Frascas
Charles Blondet, known as the Chevalier de Saint-Charles
Francois Cadet, known as the Philosopher
Fil-de-Soie
Buteux
Philippe Boulard, known as Lafouraille
A Police Officer
Joseph Bonnet, footman to the Duchesse de Montsorel
The Duchesse de Montsorel (Louise de Vaudrey)
Mademoiselle de Vaudrey, aunt to the Duchesse de Montsorel
The Duchesse de Christoval
Inez de Christoval, Princesse D'Arjos
Felicite, maid to the Duchesse de Montsorel
Servants, Gendarmes, Detectives, and others

SCENE: Paris

TIME: 1816, after the second return of the Bourbons.

ACT I

SCENE FIRST. (A room in the house of the Duc de Montsorel.) The Duchesse de Montsorel and Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

The Duchess

Ah! So you have been waiting for me! How very good of you!

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

What is the matter, Louise? This is the first time in the twelve years of our mutual mourning, that I have seen you cheerful. Knowing you as

I do, it makes me alarmed.

The Duchess I cannot help showing my unhappiness, and you, who have shared all my sorrows, alone can understand my rapture at the faintest gleam of hope.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Have you come upon any traces of your lost son?

The Duchess

He is found!

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Impossible! When you find out your error it will add to your anguish.

The Duchess A child who is dead has but a tomb in the heart of his mother; but the child who has been stolen, is still living in that heart, dear aunt.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Suppose you were overheard!

The Duchess I should not care. I am setting out on a new life, and I feel strong enough to resist even the tyranny of De Montsorel.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey After twenty-two years of mourning, what possible occurrence can give you ground for hope?

The Duchess I have much more than hope! After the king's reception, I went to the Spanish ambassador's, where I was introduced to Madame de Christoval. There I saw a young man who resembled me, and had my voice. Do you see what I mean? If I came home late it was because I remained spellbound in the room, and could not leave until he had gone.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Yet what slight warrant you had for your elation!

The Duchess Is not a revelation such as that more than sufficient warrant for the rapture of a mother's heart? At the sight of that young stranger a flame seemed to dart before my eyes; his glance gave me new life; I felt happy once more. If he were not my son, my feelings would be quite unaccountable.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

You must have betrayed yourself!

The Duchess Yes, perhaps I did! People doubtless noticed us; but I was carried away by an uncontrollable impulse; I saw no one but him, I wished to hear him talk, and he talked with me, and told me his age. He is twenty-three, the same age as Fernand!

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

And was the duke present?

The Duchess Could I give a thought to my husband? I listened only to this young man, who was talking with Inez. I believe they are in love with each other.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey Inez, who is engaged to your son, the marquis? And do you think the warm reception given by her to his son's rival could escape the duke's notice?

The Duchess Of course not, and I quite see the dangers to which Fernand is exposed. But I must not detain you longer; I could talk to you about him till morning. You shall see him. I have told him to come at the hour the duke goes to the king's, and then we will question him about his childhood.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey For goodness' sake, calm yourself; you will never be able to sleep this night. And send Felicite to bed, she is not accustomed to these late hours. (She rings the bell.)

Felicite (entering the room)

His grace the duke has come in with his lordship the marquis.

The Duchess I have already told you, Felicite, never to inform me of his grace's movements. (Exit Felicite.)

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey I should hate to rob you of an illusion which causes you such happiness; but when I see the height of expectation to which you have soared, I fear a terrible fall for you. The soul, like the body, is bruised by a fall from an excessive height, and you must excuse my saying that I tremble for you.

The Duchess While you fear the effect of despair for me, I fear that of overwhelming joy.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey (watching the duchess go out)

If she should be deceived, she might lose her senses.

The Duchess (re-entering the room)

Fernand, dear aunt, calls himself Raoul de Frescas. (Exit.)

SCENE SECOND

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey (alone) She does not see that the recovery of her son would be a miracle. All mothers believe in miracles. We must keep watch over her. A look, a word might ruin her, for if she is right, if God restores her son to her, she is on the brink of a catastrophe more frightful even than the deception she had been practicing. Does she think she can dissemble under the eyes of women?

SCENE THIRD. Mademoiselle de Vaudrey and Felicite

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Already here?

Felicite

Her grace the duchess dismissed me early.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Has my niece given you no orders for the morning?

Felicite

None, madame.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey A young man, named Monsieur Raoul de Frescas, is coming to call upon me towards noon; he may possibly ask for the duchess, but you must instruct Joseph to bring him to my apartment. (Exit.)

SCENE FOURTH

Felicite (alone) A young man for her? Not a bit of it. I always said that there was some motive in my lady's retired way of living; she is rich, she is handsome, yet the duke does not love her; and now the first time she goes out, a young man comes next day to see her, and her aunt wishes to receive

him. They keep me in the dark; I am neither trusted nor tipped. If this is the way chambermaids are to be treated under the new government, I don't know what will become of us. (A side door opens, two men are seen, and the door is immediately closed again.) At any rate we shall have a look at the young man. (Exit.)

SCENE FIFTH. Joseph and Vautrin. (Vautrin wears a tan-colored overcoat, trimmed with fur, over the black evening dress of a foreign diplomatic minister.)

Joseph That blasted girl! We would have been down in our luck if she had seen us.

Vautrin You mean *you* would have been down in your luck; you take pretty good care not to be caught again, don't you? I suppose then that you enjoy peace of mind in this house?

Joseph

That I do, for honesty I find to be the best policy.

Vautrin

And do you quite approve of honesty?

Joseph

Oh, yes, so long as the place and the wages suit me.

Vautrin I see you are doing well, my boy. You take little and often, you save, you even have the honesty to lend a trifle at interest. That's all right, but you cannot imagine what pleasure it gives me to see one of my old acquaintances filling an honorable position. You have succeeded in doing so; your faults are but negative and therefore half virtues. I myself once had vices; I regret them as things of the past; I have nothing but dangers and struggles to interest me. Mine is the life of an Indian hemmed in by my enemies, and I am fighting in defence of my own scalp.

Joseph

And what of mine?

Vautrin

Yours? Ah! you are right to ask that. Well, whatever happens to me, you have the word of Jacques Collin that he will never compromise you.

But you must obey me in everything!

Joseph

In everything? But —

Vautrin There are no buts with me. If there is any dark business to be done I have my "trusties" and old allies. Have you been long in this place?

Joseph

The duchess took me for her footman when she went with the court to Ghent, last year and I am trusted by both the ladies of the house.

Vautrin

That's the ticket! I need a few points with regard to these Montsorels. What do you know about them?

Joseph

Nothing.

Vautrin (aside) He is getting a little too honest. Does he think he knows nothing about them? Well, you cannot talk for five minutes with a man without drawing something out of him. (Aloud) Whose room is this?

Joseph The salon of her grace the duchess, and these are her apartments; those of the duke are on the floor above. The suite of the marquis, their only son, is below, and looks on the court.

Vautrin I asked you for impressions of all the keys of the duke's study. Where are they?

Joseph (hesitatingly)

Here they are.

Vautrin Every time I purpose coming here you will find a cross in chalk on the garden gate; every night you must examine the place. Virtue reigns here, and the hinges of that gate are very rusty; but a Louis XVIII can never be a Louis XV! Good-bye – I'll come back to-morrow night. (Aside) I must rejoin my people at the Christoval house.

Joseph (aside) Since this devil of a fellow has found me out, I have been on tenter-hooks —

Vautrin (coming back from the door)

The duke then does not live with his wife?

Joseph

They quarreled twenty years ago.

Vautrin

What about?

Joseph

Not even their own son can say.

Vautrin

And why was your predecessor dismissed?

Joseph I cannot say. I was not acquainted with him. They did not set up an establishment here until after the king's second return.

Vautrin (aside) Such are the advantages of the new social order; masters and servants are bound together by no ties; they feel no mutual attachment, exchange no secrets, and so give no ground for betrayal. (To Joseph) Any spicy stories at meal-times?

Joseph

Never before the servants.

Vautrin

What is thought of them in the servants' hall?

Joseph

The duchess is considered a saint.

Vautrin

Poor woman! And the duke?

Joseph

He is an egotist.

Vautrin Yes, a statesman. (Aside) The duke must have secrets, and we must look into that. Every great aristocrat has some paltry passion by which he can be led; and if I once get control of him, his son, necessarily – (To Joseph) What is said about the marriage of the Marquis de Montsorel and Inez de Christoval?

Joseph I haven't heard a word. The duchess seems to take very little interest in it.

Vautrin

And she has only one son! That seems hardly natural.

Joseph

Between ourselves, I believe she doesn't love her son.

Vautrin I am obliged to draw this word from your throat, as if it were the cork in a bottle of Bordeaux. There is, I perceive, some mystery in this house. Here is a mother, a Duchesse de Montsorel, who does not love her son, her only son! Who is her confessor?

Joseph

She keeps her religious observances a profound secret.

Vautrin Good – I shall soon know everything. Secrets are like young girls, the more you conceal them, the sooner they are discovered. I will send two of my rascals to the Church of St. Thomas Aquinas. They won't work out their salvation in that way, but they'll work out something else. – Good-bye.

SCENE SIXTH

Joseph (alone) He is an old friend – and that is the worst nuisance in the world. He will make me lose my place. Ah, if I were not afraid of being poisoned like a dog by Jacques Collin, who is quite capable of the act, I would tell all to the duke; but in this vile world, every man for himself, and I am not going to pay another man's debt. Let the duke settle with Jacques; I am going to bed. What noise is that? The duchess is getting up. What does she want? I must listen. (He goes out, leaving the door slightly ajar.)

SCENE SEVENTH

The Duchesse de Montsorel (alone) Where can I hide the certificate of my son's birth? (She reads) "Valencia... July, 1793." An unlucky town for me! Fernand was actually born seven months after my marriage, by one of those fatalities that give ground for shameful accusations! I shall ask my aunt to carry the certificate in her pocket, until I can deposit it in some place of safety. The duke would ransack my rooms for it, and the whole police are at his service. Government refuses nothing to a man high in favor. If Joseph saw me going to Mademoiselle de Vaudrey's apartments at this hour, the whole house would hear of it. Ah – I am alone in the world, alone with all against me, a prisoner in my own house!

SCENE EIGHTH. The Duchesse de Montsorel and Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

The Duchess

I see that you find it is impossible to sleep as I do.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey Louise, my child, I only rose to rid you of a dream, the awakening from which will be deplorable. I consider it my duty to distract you from your insane fancies. The more I think of what you told me the more is my sympathy aroused. But I am compelled to tell you the truth, cruel as it is; beyond doubt the duke has placed Fernand in some compromising situation, so as to make it impossible for him to retrieve his position in the world to which you belong. The young man you saw cannot be your son.

The Duchess Ah, you never knew Fernand! But I knew him, and in whatever place he is, his life has an influence on mine. I have seen him a thousand times —

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

In your dreams!

The Duchess Fernand has the blood of the Montsorels and the Vaudreys in his veins. The place to which he was born he is able to take; everything gives way before him wherever he appears. If he became a soldier, he is to-day a colonel. My son is proud, he is handsome, people like him! I am sure he is beloved. Do not contradict me, dear aunt; Fernand still lives; if not, then the duke has broken faith, and I know he values too highly the virtues of his race to disgrace them.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey But are not honor and a husband's vengeance dearer to him than his faith as a gentleman?

The Duchess

Ah! You make me shudder.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

You know very well, Louise, that pride of race is hereditary with the Montsorels, as it is with the Montemarts.

The Duchess I know it too well! The doubt cast upon his child's legitimacy has almost crazed him.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey You are wrong there. The duke has a warm heart, and a cool head; in all matters that concern the sentiments on which they live, men of that temper act promptly in carrying out their ideas.

The Duchess But, dear aunt, do you know at what price he has granted me the life of Fernand? Haven't I paid dearly for the assurance that his days were not to be shortened? If I had persisted in maintaining my innocence I should have brought certain death upon him; I have sacrificed my good name to save my son. Any mother would have done as much. You were taking care of my property here; I was alone in a foreign land, and was the prey of ill-health, fever, and with none to counsel me, and I lost my head; for since that time it has constantly occurred to me that the duke would never have carried out his threats. In making the sacrifice I did, I knew that Fernand would be poor and destitute, without a name, and dwelling in an unknown land; but I knew also that his life would be safe, and that some day I should recover him, even if I had to search the whole world over! I felt so cheerful as I came in that I forgot to give you the certificate of Fernand's birth, which the Spanish ambassador's wife has at last obtained for me; carry it about with you until you can place it in the hands of your confessor.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey The duke must certainly have learnt the measures you have taken in this matter, and woe be to your son! Since his return he has been very busy, and is still busy about something.

The Duchess If I shake off the disgrace with which he has tried to cover me, if I give up shedding tears in silence, be assured that nothing can bend me from my purpose. I am no longer in Spain or England, at the mercy of a diplomat crafty as a tiger, who during the whole time of our emigration was reading the thoughts of my heart's inmost recesses, and with invisible spies surrounding my life as by a network of steel; turning my secrets into jailers, and keeping me prisoner in the most horrible of prisons, an open house! I am in France, I have found you once more, I hold my place at court, I can speak my mind there; I shall learn what has become of the Vicomte de Langeac, I should prove that since the Tenth of August² we have never met, I shall inform the king of the crime committed by a father against a son who is the heir of two noble houses. I am a woman, I am Duchesse de Montsorel, I am a mother! We are rich, we have a virtuous priest for an adviser; right is on our side, and if I have demanded the certificate of my son's birth —

**SCENE NINTH. The same persons, and the Duc de Montsorel
(who enters as the duchess pronounces the last sentence)**

The Duke

It is only for the purpose of handing it to me.

The Duchess Since when have you ventured to enter my apartment without previously sending me word and asking my leave?

The Duke Since you broke the agreement we made. You swore to take no steps to find this — your son. This was the sole condition on which I promised to let him live.

The Duchess And is it not much more honorable to violate such an oath, than to remain faithful to all others?

The Duke

We are henceforth both of us released from our engagements.

The Duchess

Have you, up to the present day, respected yours?

² A noteworthy date in French history, August 10, 1792; the day of the storming of the Tuileries. — J. W. M.

The Duke

I have, madame.

The Duchess

Listen to him, aunt, and bear witness to this declaration.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey But has it never occurred to you, my dear sir, that Louise is innocent?

The Duke Of course you think so, Mademoiselle de Vaudrey. And what would not I give to share your opinion! The duchess has had twenty years in which to prove to me her innocence.

The Duchess For twenty years you have wrung my heart without pity and without intermission.

The Duke Madame, unless you hand me this certificate, your Fernand will have serious cause for alarm. As soon as you returned to France you secured the document, and are trying to employ it as a weapon against me. You desire to obtain for your son a fortune and a name which do not belong to him; to secure his admission into a family, whose race has up to my time been kept pure by wives of stainless reputation, a family which has never formed a single mesalliance —

The Duchess

And which will be worthily represented by your son Albert.

The Duke Be careful what you say, for you waken in me terrible memories. And your last word shows me that you will not shrink from causing a scandal that will overwhelm all of us with shame. Shall we air in public courts past occurrences which will show that I am not free from reproach, while you are infamous? (He turns to Mademoiselle de Vaudrey) She cannot have told you everything, dear aunt? She was in love with Viscount Langeac; I knew it, and respected her love; I was so young! The viscount came to me; being without hope of inheriting a fortune, and the last representative of his house, he unselfishly offered to give up Louise de Vaudrey. I trusted in their mutual generosity, and accepted her as a pure woman from his hands. Ah! I would have given my life for her, and I have proved it! The wretched man performed prodigies of valor on the Tenth of August, and called down upon himself the rage of the mob; I put him under the protection of some of my people; he was, however, discovered and taken to the Abbaye. As soon as I learned his predicament, I gave into the hands of a certain Boulard all the money I had collected for our flight! I induced Boulard to join the Septembrists in order to save the viscount from death; I procured his escape! (To the duchess) He paid me back well, did he not? I was young, madly in love, impetuous, yet I never crushed the boy! You have to-day made me the same requital for my pity, as your lover made for my trust in him. Well — things remain just as they were twenty years ago excepting that the time for pity is past. And I will repeat what I said to you then: Forget your son, and he shall live.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

And shall her sufferings during those twenty years count for nothing?

The Duke

A great crime calls for a great atonement.

The Duchess Ah — if you take my grief for a sign of remorse, I will again protest to you, I am innocent! No! Langeac never betrayed your confidence; it was not for his king alone he went to his death, and from the fatal day on which he bade me farewell and surrendered me to you, I have never seen him again.

The Duke You purchased the life of your son by making an exactly contrary declaration.

The Duchess

Can a compact dictated by terror be looked upon as an avowal of guilt?

The Duke

Do you intend to give that certificate of birth?

The Duchess

It is no longer in my possession.

The Duke

I will no longer answer then for your son's safety.

The Duchess

Have you weighed well the consequences of this threat?

The Duke

You ought to know me by this time.

The Duchess The trouble is that you do not know me. You will no longer answer for my son's safety? Indeed – but you had better look after your own son. Albert is a guarantee for the life of Fernand. If you keep watch on my proceedings, I shall set a watch on yours; if you rely upon the police of the realm, I have resources of my own, and the assistance of God. If you deal a blow at Fernand, beware of what may happen to Albert. A blow for a blow! – That is final.

The Duke You are in our own house, madame. I forgot myself. Pray pardon me. I was wrong.

The Duchess You are more a gentleman than your son; when he flies into a rage he begs no one's pardon, not he!

The Duke (aside) Has her resignation up to this time been nothing but a pretence? Has she been waiting for the present opportunity to speak? Women who are guided by the advice of bigots travel underground, like volcanic fires, and only reveal themselves when they break out. She knows my secret, I have *lost sight of her son*, and my defeat is imminent. (Exit.)

SCENE TENTH. Mademoiselle de Vaudrey and the Duchess

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Louise, you love the child you have never seen, and hate him who is before your eyes. Ah! you must tell the reason of your hatred for

Albert, if you would retain my esteem and my affection.

The Duchess

Not a word on that subject.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey The calm way in which your husband remarks your aversion for your son is astonishing.

The Duchess

He is accustomed to it.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Yet you could never show yourself a bad mother, could you?

The Duchess A bad mother? No. (She reflects.) I cannot make up my mind to forfeit your affection. (She draws her aunt to her side.) Albert is not my son.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey Can a stranger have usurped the place, the name, the title, the property of the real child?

The Duchess No, not a stranger, but his son. After the fatal night on which Fernand was carried off from me, an eternal separation between the duke and myself took place. The wife in me was as cruelly outraged as the mother. But still I purchased from him peace of mind.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

I do not understand your meaning.

The Duchess I allowed the duke to present this Albert, child of a Spanish courtesan, as if he were mine. The duke desired an heir. Amid the confusion wrought in Spain by the French Revolution the trick escaped notice. Are you surprised that my blood boils at the sight of this strange woman's child occupying the place of the lawful heir?

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey Now I can deeply sympathize with your hopes; ah! how glad I should be if you were right in your suspicions and this young man were indeed your son. But what is the matter with you?

The Duchess He is, I fear, ruined; for I have brought him under the notice of his father, who will – But stay, something must be done! I must find out where he lives, and warn him not to come here to-morrow morning.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Leave the house at this hour! Louise, you are mad!

The Duchess

Come, we must save him at any price.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

What do you propose doing?

The Duchess Neither of us can leave the house to-morrow without being noticed. We must forestall the duke by bribing my chambermaid.

Mademoiselle de Vaudrey

Louise, would you resort to such means as this?

The Duchess If Raoul is the son disclaimed by his father, the child over whom I have mourned for the last twenty years, I must show them what a wife, a mother, who has been wrongly accused, can do!

Curtain to the First Act

ACT II

SCENE FIRST. (Scene the same as in preceding act.) The Duc de Montsorel and Joseph

The Duke Joseph, I am not at home excepting to one person. If he comes, you will show him up. I refer to Monsieur de Saint-Charles. Find out whether your mistress will see me. (Exit Joseph.) The awakening of a maternal instinct, which I thought had been utterly extinguished in her heart, amazes me beyond measure. The secret struggle in which she is engaged must at once be put a stop to. So long as Louise was resigned our life was not intolerable; but disputes like this would render it extremely disagreeable. I was able to control my wife so long as we were abroad, but in this country my only power over her lies in skillful handling, and a display of authority. I shall tell everything to the king. I shall submit myself to his dictation, and Madame de Montsorel must be compelled to submit. I must however bide my time. The detective, whom I am to employ, if he is clever, will soon find out the cause of this revolt; I shall see whether the duchess is merely deceived by a resemblance, or whether she has seen her son. For myself I must confess to having lost sight of him since my agents reported his disappearance twelve years ago. I was very much excited last night. I must be more discreet. If I keep quiet she will be put off her guard and reveal her secrets.

Joseph (re-entering the room)

Her grace the duchess has not yet rung for her maid.

The Duke

Very well.

SCENE SECOND. The preceding and Felicite. (To explain his presence in his wife's room, the duke looks over articles lying on the table, and discovers a letter in a book.)

The Duke (reading) "To Mademoiselle Inez de Christoval." (aside) Why should my wife have concealed a letter of such slight importance? She no doubt wrote it after our quarrel. Is it concerning Raoul? This letter must not go to the Christoval house.

Felicite (looking for the letter in the book)

Now, where is that letter of madame's? Can she have forgotten it?

The Duke

Aren't you looking for a letter?

Felicite

Yes, your grace.

The Duke

Isn't this it?

Felicite

The very one, your grace.

The Duke It is astonishing that you should leave the very hour your mistress must need your services; she is getting up.

Felicite Her grace the duchess has Therese; and besides I am going out by her orders.

The Duke

Very good. I did not wish to interfere with you.

SCENE THIRD. The preceding, and Blondet, alias the Chevalier de Saint-Charles. (Joseph and Saint-Charles walk together from the centre door, and eye each other attentively.)

Joseph (aside)

The look of that man is very distasteful to me. (To the duke) The Chevalier de Saint-Charles.

(The duke signs to Saint-Charles to approach, and examines his appearance.)

Saint-Charles (giving him a letter, aside)

Does he know my antecedents, or will he simply recognize me as Saint-Charles?

The Duke

My dear sir —

Saint-Charles

I am to be merely Saint-Charles.

The Duke You are recommended to me as a man whose ability, if it had fair scope, would be called genius.

Saint-Charles If his grace the duke will give me an opportunity, I will prove myself worthy of that flattering opinion.

The Duke

You shall have one at once.

Saint-Charles

What are your commands?

The Duke You see that maid. She is going to leave the house. I do not wish to hinder her doing so; yet she must not cross the threshold, until she receives a fresh order. (Calls her) Felicite!

Felicite

What is it, your grace?

(The Duke gives her the letter. Exit Felicite.)

Saint-Charles (to Joseph) I recognize you, I know all about you: See that this maid remains in the house with the letter, and I will not recognize you, and will know nothing of you, and will let you stay here so long as you behave yourself.

Joseph (aside) This fellow on one side, and Jacques Collin on the other! Well; I must try to serve them both honestly.

(Exit Joseph in pursuit of Felicite.)

SCENE FOURTH. The Duke and Saint-Charles

Saint-Charles Your grace's commands are obeyed. Do you wish to know the contents of the letter?

The Duke Why, my dear sir, the power you seem to exercise is something terrible and wonderful.

Saint-Charles

You gave me absolute authority in the matter, and I used it well.

The Duke

And what if you had abused it?

Saint-Charles

That would have been impossible, for such a course would ruin me.

The Duke How is it that men endowed with such faculties are found employing them in so lowly a sphere?

Saint-Charles Everything is against our rising above it; we protect our protectors, we learn too many honorable secrets, and are kept in ignorance of too many shameful ones to be liked by people, and render such important services to others that they can only shake off the obligation by speaking ill of us. People think that things are only words with us; refinement is thus mere silliness, honor a sham, and acts of treachery mere diplomacy. We are the confidants of many who yet leave us much to guess at. Our programme consists in thinking and acting, finding out the past from the present, ordering and arranging the future in the pettiest details, as I am about to – and, in short, in doing a hundred things that might strike dismay to a man of no mean ability. When once our end is gained, words become things once more, and people begin to suspect that possibly we are infamous scoundrels.

The Duke There may be some justice in all this, but I do not suppose you expect to change the opinion of the world, or even mine?

Saint-Charles I should be a great fool if I did. I don't care about changing another man's opinion; what I do want to change is my own position.

The Duke

According to you that would be very easy, wouldn't it?

Saint-Charles Why not, your grace? Let some one set me to play the spy over cabinets, instead of raking up the secrets of private families. Instead of dogging the footsteps of shady characters, let them put me in charge of the craftiest diplomats. Instead of pandering to the vilest passions, let me serve the government. I should be delighted to play a modest part in a great movement. And what a devoted servant your grace would have in me!

The Duke I am really sorry to employ such talents as yours in so petty an affair, my friend, but it will give me an opportunity of testing, and then we'll see.

Saint-Charles (aside)

Ah – We shall see? That means, all has already been seen.

The Duke

I wish to see my son married —

Saint-Charles

To Mademoiselle Inez de Christoval, Princesse d'Arjos – a good match!

Her father made the mistake of entering Joseph Bonaparte's service, and was banished by King Ferdinand. He probably took part in the Mexican revolution.

The Duke Madame de Christoval and her daughter have made the acquaintance of a certain adventurer, named —

Saint-Charles

Raoul de Frescas.

The Duke

Is there nothing I can tell you that you do not know?

Saint-Charles

If your grace desires it, I will know nothing.

The Duke On the contrary, I should like you to speak out, so that I may know what secrets you will permit us to keep.

Saint-Charles Let us make one stipulation; whenever my frankness displeases your grace, call me chevalier, and I will sink once more into my humble role of paid detective.

The Duke

Go on, my friend. (Aside) These people are very amusing.

Saint-Charles M. de Frescas will not be an adventurer so long as he lives in the style of a man who has an income of a hundred thousand francs.

The Duke

Whoever he is you must pierce through the mystery which surrounds him.

Saint-Charles Your grace requires a very difficult thing. We are obliged to use circumspection in dealing with foreigners. They are our masters; they have turned Paris upside down.

The Duke

That's the trouble!

Saint-Charles

Does your grace belong to the opposition?

The Duke I should like to have brought back the king without his following – that is my position.

Saint-Charles The departure of the king resulted from the disorganization of the magnificent Asiatic police created by Bonaparte. An effort is being made nowadays to form a police of respectable people, a procedure which disbands the old police. Hemmed in by the military police of the invasion, we dare not arrest any one, for fear we might lay hands on some prince on his way to keep an assignation, or some margrave who had dined too well. But for your grace a man will attempt the impossible. Has this young man any vices? Does he play?

The Duke

Yes, in a social way.

Saint-Charles

Does he cheat?

The Duke

Chevalier!

Saint-Charles

This young man must be very rich.

The Duke

Inquire for yourself.

Saint-Charles I ask pardon of your grace; but people without passions cannot know much. Would you have the goodness to tell me whether this young man is sincerely attached to Mademoiselle de Christoval?

The Duke

What! That princess! That heiress! You alarm me, my friend.

Saint-Charles Has not your grace told me that he is a young man? Now, pretended love is more perfect than genuine love; that is the reason why so many women are deceived! Undoubtedly he has thrown over many mistresses, and heart-free, tongue-free, you know —

The Duke Take care! Your mission is peculiar, and you had best not meddle with the women; an indiscretion on your part may forfeit my good will, for all that relates to Monsieur Frescas must go no further than you and myself. I demand absolute secrecy, both from those you employ, and those who employ you. In fact, you will be a ruined man, if Madame de Montsorel has any suspicion of your designs.

Saint-Charles Is Madame de Montsorel then interested in this young man? I must keep an eye on her, for this girl is her chambermaid.

The Duke Chevalier de Saint-Charles, to order you to do this would be unworthy of me, and to ask for such an order is quite unworthy of you.

Saint-Charles Your grace and I perfectly understand each other. But what is to be the main object of my investigations?

The Duke You must find out whether Raoul de Frescas is the real name of this young man; find out where he was born, ransack his whole life, and consider all you learn about him a secret of state.

Saint-Charles

You must wait until to-morrow for this information, my lord.

The Duke

That is a short time.

Saint-Charles

But it involves a good deal of money.

The Duke Do not suppose that I wish to hear of evil things; it is the method of you people to pander to depraved passions. Instead of showing them up, you prefer to invent rather than to reveal occurrences. I should be delighted to learn that this young man has a family —

(The marquis enters, sees his father engaged, and turns to go out; the duke asks him to remain.)

SCENE FIFTH. The preceding and the Marquis de Montsorel

The Duke (continuing) If Monsieur de Frescas is a gentleman, and the Princesse d'Arjos decidedly prefers him to my son, the marquis must withdraw his suit.

The Marquis

But, father, I am in love with Inez.

The Duke (to Saint-Charles)

You may go, sir.

Saint-Charles (aside) He takes no interest in the proposed marriage of his son. He is incapable of feeling jealous of his wife. There is something very serious in these circumstances; I am either a ruined man or my fortune is made. (Exit.)

SCENE SIXTH. The Duke and the Marquis

The Duke To marry a woman who does not love you is a mistake which I shall never allow you to commit, Albert.

The Marquis But there is nothing that indicates that Inez will reject me; and, in any case once she is my wife, it will be my object to win her love, and I believe, without vanity, that I shall succeed.

The Duke Allow me to tell you, my son, that your barrack-room ideas are quite out of place here.

The Marquis On any other subject your words would be law to me; but every era has a different art of love – I beg of you to hasten my marriage. Inez has all the pliability of an only daughter, and the readiness with which she accepts the advances of a mere adventurer ought to rouse your anxiety. Really, the coldness with which you receive me this morning amazes me. Putting aside my love for Inez, could I do better? I shall be, like you, a Spanish grandee, and, more than that, a prince. Would that annoy you, father?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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