

The Vampire and the Devil's Son (French Horror Book 15)

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The Vampire and the Devil's Son (a.k.a. *The Baron's Dead Wife*) by **Pierre-Alexis Ponson du Terrail** translated, annotated and introduced by **Brian Stableford** A Black Coat Press Book

Introduction Pierre-Alexis, Vicomte de Ponson du Terrail, was born in 1829 into a minor aristocratic family that had fallen on hard times since the Revolution of 1789. He was the nephew of General Toscan du Terrail, and claimed descent from the illustrious Captain Pierre Bayard du Terrail (1473-1524). His family apparently intended him to make a career in the Navy, but his lack of the mathematical skills necessary for navigation made that impossible. His early literary ambitions were displayed in a manuscript composed and circulated in 1845, *Un amour à seize ans*, signed George Bruck. Ponson was in Paris when the Revolution of 1848 broke out, and volunteered for the *garde mobile* that attempted to defend Paris against the Revolutionaries—a task that swiftly proved impossible. When the members of the *garde* were offered dispersal into the regular army, under the command of the new government, he declined. Publication was difficult in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, but he started to publish short pieces in some profusion in 1850. His movement into the field of popular fiction was not immediate, but he began publishing his first newspaper serial in 1852 with *Les coulisses du monde* [*Society's Wings*, "wings" being understood in the theatrical sense]. French popular fiction had enjoyed a tremendous boom in the 1840s thanks to the success of the *romans feuilletons* serialized in newspapers, which had become an important aspect of fierce circulation wars fought by publishers competing for the attention and loyalty of a population moving towards universal literacy. The two brightest stars in that firmament were Alexandre Dumas and Eugène Sue, and their closest follower was Paul Féval. All three men had made a great deal of money from the production of *romans feuilletons*, but their works clustered around markedly different points of a political spectrum. Although Dumas often afforded monarchs and carefully-selected aristocrats relatively lenient treatment in his accounts of French history, and he was certainly no apologist for the excesses of the Terror, he was a fervent Republican, who saw the underlying pattern of French history as a progressive one. Sue was much further to the political left—an evolutionary socialist if not a revolutionary one—who fervently believed and asserted that all the past miseries of the French people had been caused by the twin curses of Royalty and Catholicism. Féval, on the other hand, was an ardent royalist, although a bourgeois one—he was the son of a lawyer—and his real affiliation was to a nostalgic affection for the legendary chivalric code that he imagined to have been embodied in the knighthood of feudal Brittany, his birthplace and adopted homeland. After the Revolution of 1848, the fortunes of these three writers diverged markedly. Sue accepted a post in the new government, while Dumas lent it his enthusiastic support—but both were undone by Louis-Napoléon's *coup d'état* in December 1851 and exiled from Paris. Both had just embarked upon works presenting vast panoramas of history, which they intended to be their respective masterpieces—Sue on *Les mystères du peuple* [*The Mysteries of the People*] and Dumas on *Isaac Laquedem*—but both works ran into trouble with the Emperor's censors. Sue eventually finished his, although its publication was inhibited, and died shortly afterwards in 1857. Dumas, who returned to Paris under an amnesty, aborted his when the censors interrupted its serialization, and returned to safer literary ground—but he was never the

same writer afterwards; his heyday was over. Féval, by contrast, merely waited out the lean times and picked up where he had left off; even though he was probably not entirely untroubled by the censors—in terms of anxiety if not actual interference—his political views made him far less likely to attract their attention. Although he could hardly regard the Second Empire as a desirable phase in French political life, he was far less inclined to rail against its retrogressiveness than Dumas or Sue, and his career thrived as theirs went into decline. Ponson must have observed all this with a certain amount of interest—and must have observed, too, that his own political stance was not unlike Féval's, with the added advantages of a certain authenticity and a blithe cynicism. Although Féval was related to aristocratic Breton families via his mother, he was not an aristocrat himself, but Ponson was; not only did he embody aristocratic ideals more plausibly, but he was well enough acquainted with aristocratic life, habits and pretensions to see through their various shams. The partial eclipse of Sue and Dumas had opened up a market space, and the possibility of colonizing that space alongside Féval evidently appealed to Ponson. Because he was a true aristocrat, though, and no mere pretender, he could not be content merely to imitate Féval; his objective had to be to outdo him, in every possible respect. That was, in essence, what Ponson appears to have set out to achieve. Féval was a prolific and flamboyant writer, who had found his *métier* in producing adventure stories and mysteries at high speed, making up for an inevitable lack of planning by ruthlessly exploiting an assortment of melodramatic tropes, often combining them with a wry humor that had proved not to detract at all from their sensational effect. Ponson did all of that, but exaggerated every single feature. Nor did he have the slightest trouble with the censors—a fact that did not help his reputation among opponents of the *régime*. Féval, at his peak, turned out approximately two million words a year, sometimes having three serials running simultaneously, although he only managed to maintain that level of production by dictating much of his work to a series of secretaries. Ponson, at his peak, topped Féval's two million words per annum by a further half-million, once had five serials running simultaneously and seems to have written every word himself, with no other technological assistance than a steel nib. Although numerous other writers have since topped the two-million-words-a-year level of production for years at a stretch, none has done so without an amanuensis or an efficient typewriter, so Ponson would probably be entitled to be reckoned an all-time champion were it not for his august predecessor, Voltaire, who did as much, to a higher standard, using goosequills. When he was interviewed in *Le Journal* (June 19, 1861), Ponson informed his interlocutor that he rose between 4 and 5 a.m. every morning and did a five or six-hour stint of furious writing before taking a leisurely breakfast and delivering his copy—usually for publication the following day—in the course of a constitutional stroll. After that, he would spend his afternoons fencing—he claimed to be an expert swordsman—or doing what would nowadays be called “working out.” Allowing for a certain amount of hyperbole (to which he was always prone), this presumably does represent his ideal, if not his average, working day. In the same interview, he gave an account of his standard sales pitch: “*Prévenez-moi trois feuilletons à l'avance, si ça ennuie votre public, en un feuilleton je finirai.*” [Commission three episodes in advance; if that bores your readers, I'll finish it in one]. This too needs not be taken absolutely literally, but it summarizes his approach to his *métier*. The reverse also applied, of course; if a serial did prove popular, he was willing to spin it out indefinitely—the *Rocamboles* saga, a.k.a. *Les drames de Paris*, ran for 14 years from 1857 until Ponson's death in 1871 and was still left unfinished. The contents of Ponson's work exceeded Féval's in much the same fashion as his productivity. He never re-read his work, so he was rather prone to continuity errors, and was perfectly capable of losing his way in the middle of a sentence, let alone a plot. The oft-leveled accusation that he often reintroduced characters which he had killed off earlier, however, actually refers to a matter of deliberate strategy. Even though he recognized the melodramatic necessity of sometimes involving them in fatal climaxes, he was never one to waste a charismatic hero or villain, and was always willing to tell his readers, after a decent lapse of time, that earlier reports of deaths had been exaggerated, and that the character they remembered so fondly—or had loved to hate—was alive, well and back in business. Ponson understood perfectly well that such flaws did not distract significantly from his readers' enjoyment, and such contrivances enhanced it. He knew that the nature of serial fiction greatly favored story at the expense of plot—which is to say that, provided that the present chapter

of a narrative had sufficient excitement in itself to make readers avid to know what would happen next, the complexities of its relationship to some overarching textual scheme need not be taken too seriously. The principal keys to success as a *feuilletoniste* were the maintenance of melodramatic pitch and the management of narrative pace, and Ponson took both crafts to new extremes. His adventure stories acquired a flamboyance so vivid that the French language required a new adjective to describe it, and thus preserved the name of his most popular hero, Rocambole, in *rocambolésque*. His dialogue became extraordinarily streamlined—although his various innovative practices in that regard were taken up by so many subsequent writers that they now seem perfectly familiar and quite normal. What Ponson might have accomplished had he not died young, we can only guess, but his literary career was undone, just as his military career had been, by the intervention of political events. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out, he took part in another futile defense of Paris, then fled to an estate on the banks of the Orléans Canal, which he had acquired by a judicious marriage in 1857. There, he gathered a force of volunteers to engage the Prussians in guerilla warfare, but he was easily defeated, and the house he had used as a base was looted and destroyed; he died soon afterwards, in January 1871, at the age of 41. Although Ponson's career lasted less than two decades, he was amazingly prolific, and did everything he could to assist his own legend. *Le Journal* credited him, in awed tones, with having published 67 volumes in the two years 1858-59. We must remember, however, that an octavo volume of the period was not necessarily overstuffed with wordage. The present novel, *La baronne trépassée*, which appeared in three volumes, is little more than 65,000 words long, although the two other works he published in 1853—one in three volumes and one in four—and the five four-volume works he published in 1854-55 all had more words per volume. Such reported figures as the fact that his series devoted to *La jeunesse de roi Henri* filled 60 volumes, while the saga of Rocambole eventually filled 40, though correct, thus need to be regarded with a certain circumspection. The average wordage of an octavo volume of the period was probably about 40,000 words, so the 67 volumes he published in 1858-59 would have amounted to less than three million words—but we must remember, too, that not all of his work made it into volume form, so the 67 volumes observed by *Le Journal* would only have been a proportion of his actual output. The fact that *Les drames de Paris* ran in *La Patrie* for so long without that paper's readers ever tiring of it had much to do with its introduction of Rocambole, initially as a teenage *gamin*, although he grew up quickly enough to take on the principal burden of the serial. *Les drames de Paris* was, in essence, a soap-operatic series, and it was broken up into convenient sections for book publication, appearing as a sequence of multi-volume novels. Rocambole's popularity was such that Ponson soon brought him back in *Le Petit Journal* in 1865, where *La résurrection de Rocambole* was said to have almost doubled that periodical's circulation to something over 280,000. The editor of *La Patrie* immediately commissioned *Le dernier mot de Rocambole*, which ran from 1866-68, boldly printing an extra 100,000 copies of the issue in which it made its debut. Several further sequels followed. Nor did the story end there—Rocambole's adventures were continued by Constant Guérault in *Le retour de Rocambole* and *Les nouveaux exploits de Rocambole* in *La Petite Presse* in 1875-76, and various 20th-century writers added further sequels. {1} It was in Rocambole's heyday that Ponson hit his peak; while Rocambole was the mainstay of *La Patrie*, Ponson was still producing serials on a daily basis for his other regular markets. For long stretches in this period, he was also the only serial-writer employed by *Le Petit Journal* and *La Petite Presse*; they were three of the outlets in which he once had five serials running simultaneously, the others being *L'Opinion Nationale* and *Le Moniteur du Soir*. To write a new episode of five different serials before breakfast every morning, six days a week, making all of them up as he went, was no mean feat, although his bouts of physical exercise presumably gave him abundant space for planning. Not everyone, of course, approved of what Ponson did, and the fact that he outdid Féval in all the key features of popular serial fiction meant that he bore the brunt of criticism leveled at the intrinsic defects of that kind of work. In particular, he attracted the vitriolic ire of the Comte Auguste Villiers de l'Isle Adam, whose satirical novella "*Claire Lenoir*" {2} (1867) features an anti-hero named Tribulat Bonhomet, supposedly an archetype of bourgeois crassness, who waxes lyrical on the virtues of the unnamed but easily recognizable Ponson, his favorite writer. Villiers' objection to Ponson was, however, as much

personal as literary. As an impoverished aristocrat, whose entitlement to bear a name made famous centuries before was more than a trifle dubious—he expended a great deal of time and effort in genealogical research trying to prove it—Villiers had very strong ideas about the prerogatives and responsibilities of aristocracy. He considered it beneath his dignity even to contemplate the possibility of writing for money rather than for art's sake—a position he took so seriously that he brought himself literally to the brink of starvation before accepting a compromise. Ponson, however, took exactly opposite position; he thought that the only excuse for a true aristocrat to do something as essentially bourgeois as literary work was financial need, and he appears to have taken as much pride in his total lack of artistic ambition as he did in his phenomenal productivity and his enormous sales. He gladly declared himself the most successful writer of his age, but flatly refused to hang out with other literary men. If he ever read "*Claire Lenoir*," we can be reasonably certain that he would have been quite unconcerned by Villiers' assault, regarding it as the spite of a mere poseur, and would not have felt the need to cry all the way to the bank. Villiers was not alone in his condemnation, but some of his contemporaries were moved to utter a few words in defense. Théophile Gautier, for instance, declared that there was much to be said for *Le chambrion*, one of Ponson's several novels redeploying Gothic imagery. Ponson had several admirers among his fellow *feuilletonistes*, especially Léon Gozlan, who adored *Rocambole*. The highest compliment of all, however, was uttered by Prosper Mérimée, in a letter to Stendhal written in 1865: "*Il n'y a plus qu'un homme de génie à présent, c'est M. Ponson du Terrail. Avez-vous lu quelque-uns de ses feuilletons? Personne ne manie comme lui le crime et l'assassinat. J'en fait mes délices.*" [There is but one man of genius at present, and that is Ponson du Terrail. Have you read any of his serials? No one handles crime and murder like him. I am delighted by them.] *La baronne trépassée* (1852) probably ought to be reckoned as Ponson's third novel, although its production overlapped that of its two "predecessors"—*Les coulisses du monde* and *La duchesse de Valséranges*—and it beat them both into volume form, thus becoming his first actual book. Although, like the other two titles named, *La baronne trépassée* is a historical novel, it contrasts sharply with them by introducing and foregrounding some striking Gothic elements. In choosing to resurrect such materials, Ponson was following a recent fashion. While newspapers and magazines had still been struggling against economic adversity in 1851, Alexandre Dumas had scored a massive hit with his play *Le vampire*,^{3} which was a comprehensive revision of a similarly-titled play that had caused a parallel sensation at the Porte-Saint-Martin theater 30 years before. That earlier play had been cobbled together by Achille de Jouffroy, the theater's manager, Jean Toussaint Merle, and the father-figure of French Romanticism, Charles Nodier,^{4} in order to cash in on the international *succès de scandale* occasioned by John Polidori's novella *The Vampyre*—a veiled attack on Lord Byron that was widely rumored to have been penned by the great man himself. The fashionability of Dumas' revamped version of *Le vampire*—whose run at the Porte-Saint-Martin extended throughout 1852—promoted a significant revival of interest in Gothic themes, which inevitably spilled over into the *roman feuilleton*. Paul Féval's most obvious response was to produce *Le livre des mystères*, serialized in *Le Pays* in May-July 1852.^{5} Féval's *Le vampire* ^{6} was probably first published in the same year, although there is some dispute about that, some bibliographies dating its first publication a decade later. Ponson's novel is a response to the wave of fashionability rather than a direct riposte to any of Féval's works in this vein, but *Le livre des mystères* was undoubtedly one of the texts Ponson read before undertaking it, and from which he took some slight inspiration. If he had had the opportunity to read *Le vampire* too, he must have taken note of the striking quality of the remarkable hallucinatory scenes in which the eponymous character carries out her exotic depredations, and had them in mind when he wrote his own scenes of a parallel nature. Because *La baronne trépassée* is a mystery, whose plot—cursory though it is—hangs on the ambiguity of its seemingly-supernatural manifestations, it would be highly inappropriate to give away too much of the story in advance, so I shall postpone detailed analysis of its subgeneric nature and historical significance to an afterword, but it is probably worth making some observations regarding the literary-historical context of its two principal Gothic motifs—the female vampire and the Black Huntsman—and their various foreshadowings of literary things to come. A fairly detailed account of the history of French vampire fiction in the early 19th century is

provided in the afterword to *The Vampire Countess*, and there is no need to repeat all of it here. Of all her predecessors, Ponson's vampire most closely resembles Théophile Gautier's "*La morte amoureuse*" (1836; usually translated as "*Clarimonde*"), both in the conspicuous eroticism of her visitations and in the specific mode of her predation. (Something of a sideline was created by the plays spun off from Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which had de-emphasized the neck-biting aspect that is nowadays a core element of the motif, so Ponson's vampire, in contrast to Féval's, now seems much more central to the tradition whose stereotype was eventually consolidated by J. Sheridan le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.) Although Ponson's hero, the Baron de Nossac, correctly—but anachronistically—credits the popularization of Eastern European vampire folklore in France to Dom Augustine Calmet's treatise on the subject, first published in 1746, Ponson is perhaps more likely to have run across such material in a collection of Gothic folklore, *Infernaliana* (1822), which was subsequently attributed to Charles Nodier. *Infernaliana* recycles several of Calmet's "case studies," and it may be significant that its chapter on the "*Vampires de Hongrie*" is immediately followed by the "*Histoire d'un mari assassiné qui revient après sa mort demander vengeance*" [Story of a murdered husband who returned after his death to demand vengeance], that being what the Baron's dead wife appears to be doing. The anecdotes reproduced in *Infernaliana* do not include the legend of the *Grand Veneur* [Great Huntsman] of the forest of Fontainebleau, but Ponson was undoubtedly familiar with it, and may well have read an account of one of several royal encounters recorded by Pierre d'Etoile in his *Journal de Henri IV*, in which the phantom huntsman is said to be entirely dressed in black, save for a red feather in his cap (symbolic of his infernal genesis). By the time Ponson was writing, however, diabolical huntsmen had proliferated considerably in Gothic fiction, the most famous examples being German—the legend of the Wild Hunt, recapitulated in a famous ballad by Gottfried Bürger, *Der wilde Jäger* (1778), had presumably encouraged the development of similar figures—so it was entirely natural that Ponson should relocate his own example to Bohemia. The most famous literary Black Huntsman, of whom Ponson was almost certainly aware, is the one featured in the famous opera *Der Freischütz* (1826), with music by Carl Maria von Weber and a libretto by Friedrich Kind, based on a short story by Johann Apel. An English equivalent is featured in a short tale embedded in Alicia Le Fanu's Gothic novel *Henry the Fourth: a Romance*, published in the same year, but Ponson is far less likely to have been familiar with that. Kind's Black Huntsman is, in essence, the Devil in disguise, as is the Green Huntsman in Jeremias Gotthelf's *Die Schwartze Spinne* (1842; tr. as *The Black Spider*), but Ponson added a considerably more elaborate apparatus to his own character in making him the Devil's exotically-sired son. In this respect, Ponson went further than such celebrated German *schauer-romans* as Lawrence Flammenberg's *Der Geisterbanner* (1794; tr. as *The Necromancer*) and E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Die Elixire des Teufels* (1815; tr. as *The Devil's Elixirs*), albeit with his tongue somewhat in his cheek. French *romans noirs* of the 1790s and early 1800s, as produced by such writers as François Ducray-Duminil and Elizabeth Guénard, had never achieved the same level of popularity as the German *schauer-roman* or the English Gothic novel, even though translations of such fiction were very popular in France. French writers often preferred to embed their own Gothic motifs in fiction affiliated to the more playful tradition initiated by Antoine Galland's translation of *Les mille-et-une nuits* [*The Thousand-and-One Nights*]. French fantasies often displayed Gothic tales within some kind of sportive frame narrative, and represented their more earnest aspects as fundamentally foreign—often specifically German—and manifestly barbaric. Ponson's legendary pastiche of the Black Huntsman follows this pattern exactly; his character's subsidiary account of his remarkable conception has a quintessentially Gallandesque quality to it. It is possible that Ponson was familiar with the published fragments of what is nowadays the most famous of all Gallandesque Gothic constructions, the Jan Potocki novel known in English as *The Saragossa Manuscript*, which was originally written in French; the two major extracts from it in that language had appeared in 1814-15, and had attracted some subsequent attention by virtue of a debate regarding their authorship. The starkly conflicting explanations offered to the Baron of his experiences in the Castle of Holdengrasburg bear some resemblance to those offered to Alphonse van Worden by his tormentors in the first phase of his adventure. Ponson forsook the use of Gothic motifs for some years after writing *La baronne trépassée*, but he returned to them in a later phase

of his career, most notably in *Le trou de Satan* [*Satan's Hole*] (1863), *Le castel du diable* [*The Devil's Castle*] (1865), *Le chambrion* (1865), *La mare aux fantômes* [*The Pool of Phantoms*] (1865) and two further vampire novels, *L'auberge de la rue des Enfants-Rouges* [*The Inn in the Rue des Enfants-Rouges*] (1866) and *La femme immortelle* [*The Immortal Woman*] (1868). This later work does not, however, recover the same Gallandesque spirit; the hectic confusion of the network of conflicting accounts given to the Baron as explanations of the events of Part One remained highly exceptional, even within the pattern of his own work. *La baronne trépassée* thus remains a uniquely fascinating neo-Gothic endeavor. Although they both continued identifiable literary trends, the vampiric Gretchen and the diabolical Black Huntsman are both historically significant in anticipating routes that horror fiction was to explore avidly in the latter half of the 19th century. It is, however, arguable that the most significant precedents set by *La baronne trépassée* are in Part Two, which embraces melodrama of a very different kind. Ponson was, of course, active at a time when modern fictional genres had yet to be distinguished, and *romans feuilletons* were required to be all things to all readers, leaving no narrative hook untwisted. It may seem odd to a modern reader that Ponson blithely juxtaposes graphic horror motifs, whose usual appeal is to male readers, with accounts of feverish emotion that are nowadays confined to genre romances aimed at female readers, but it was a common strategy in *romans feuilletons*. The chapters of Ponson's narrative set in Brittany, therefore, represent a significant experiment in the depiction of heightened emotion whose results were to be so extensively recapitulated as to become significant clichés. In this respect, Part Three of the novel is a straightforward extrapolation of Part Two, although it betrays the exhaustion of Ponson's narrative energy in its cursoriness as well as its abrupt conclusion. Curt and cursory as it is, though, Part Three confirms the essential literary truth that Ponson discovered, and demonstrated more extravagantly than any other writer of his day that nothing succeeds like excess. Although Gretchen may seem to be a strikingly exceptional character in her amatory attitudes, certain key features of her character were to recur in a whole series of Ponsonian *femmes fatales* who combine or alternate fervent attraction with vengeful hatred, routinely seeking to torture the men they most ardently desire. Indeed, she is not unlike her rival, the Duchesse d'A*** in this regard. Rocambole's female counterpart and nemesis, Baccarat, is the most obvious and extreme of their successors, while Sarah in *Les Gandins* (1868-69) is perhaps the most refined. *Femmes fatales* are, of course, a common feature of French literature, amply reflected in *feuilleton* fiction by the descendants of Alexandre Dumas' Milady, but Ponson's characters in this vein—especially Gretchen—are the most explicit in formulating and tailoring their policies of cruelty in direct response to the arrogance and brutality of contemporary male posturing. To the extent that Ponson was a forerunner of generic romantic fiction, he was more uncompromisingly feminist than any other writer of that sort. Ponson's work poses problems for the translator because of the multiplicity of his mistakes, and such habits as extending sentences far beyond their natural length by the reckless accumulation of subclauses. Had he been writing in a different milieu, a copy-editor would undoubtedly have cleaned up his trivial errors and ameliorated the effect of some of his more profound eccentricities, and I have taken the liberty of doing a certain amount of petty labor in this vein, while also attempting to retain the unique flavor of Ponson's style. I have annotated a few instances where the decision to correct or refrain from correction was marginal, and have also used the textual notes to point out the most significant errors arising from Ponson's casual attitude. The text I have used for translation is the Marabout reprint published in Verviers (in Belgium) in 1975. The titles in the Marabout line are usually very reliable in their reproduction of the originals, so I assume that it is an accurate rendition of the primary text, and that the continuity errors in the text are Ponson's rather than resulting from the accidental omission of text.

Brian Stableford **THE VAMPIRE AND THE DEVIL** €™S SON *Prologue* I "Duchesse!" "Baron..." "Do you have news of Monsieur le Régent?" {7} "None since yesterday." "That worries me seriously, my poor Duchess, and I strongly fear..." "Fear not, Baron—your appointment must already be confirmed." "The Lord hears you, Duchesse!" "So you need this governorship desperately?" "Why, judge for yourself, Madame. I summoned my steward yesterday evening, and I demanded a clear and succinct statement of my business affairs..." "At a guess, you are ruined..." "Worse than that, Duchesse. I have debts of a million and no more credit." "You don't pay your debts, my poor

Baron. "I've already thought of that, Duchesse—but how does one run up more?" Child! You're going to be Governor of the Province of Normandy for his Majesty King Louis XV. "All well and good—but if not...?" And the Baron, who was still in bed, extended his slender and aristocratic hand towards the bedside cabinet, took up his golden casket, and coquettishly smudged the ruff of his shirt with the yellow powder known as Spanish snuff. The Duchesse, seated in a large and well-upholstered armchair, tapped the floor impatiently with the toe of her high-heeled shoe, and replied: "You're rather impertinent, you know, Baron. Pray tell me how, Duchesse?" "How—a fine question! Do you doubt my influence?" "Oh, Duchesse!" "Without a doubt—for you suppose that you might not be appointed..." "I may hope, then..." "Without the least anxiety." "And sleep peacefully..." "When I have departed, Baron." "Oh! Not before, Duchesse." "My God!" the Duchesse said, ingenuously. "You gentlemen are so discourteous since the death of the great King..." "Give me your fairy's hands, Duchesse, and come sit down here... Come closer..." "What a child you are!" "I'm going to tell you a secret..." "Bah! Some intrigue hatched in Porcherons {8} and unraveled..." "Nowhere, Duchesse. It's been suggested that I marry." The Duchesse, who had sat down on the edge of the bed, got up abruptly and went back to her armchair with a frown and a peevish attitude that elevated the Baron's self-esteem considerably. "Ah!" she said. "And... to whom?" "Oh, don't be jealous, Duchesse. It really isn't worth the trouble. She's the daughter of a tax-farmer..." The Duchesse's pretty face cleared immediately. "This might be serious if you weren't a Nossac, my dear Baron," she said. "My God!" said Baron de Nossac carelessly—he being the man we find lying abed—"I'm well aware that it will be a misalliance..." "An enormity!" "But what can you do? Misalliances have been all the rage for a century." "You think so?" said Madame d'A***, whose forehead became furrowed again as her face suddenly paled. "Without a doubt, Duchesse. Did not Queen Anne of Austria marry Mazarin?" {9} "Secretly, Baron." "Of course—but what does that matter? Did not *La Grande Mademoiselle* marry Lauzun and Louis XIV Maintenon? Has not Monseigneur le Régent similar peccadilloes within his family?" {10} "So," said the Duchesse, getting up angrily, "you would dare..." "I don't say that, Duchesse, since you've obtained a governorship for me. But then, if I don't have that... what the Devil can I do? My future father-in-law has enough money..." "To make you overlook her humble rank, no?" said the indignant Duchesse. "Truly, gentlemen will do anything!" "When they do not hold governorships, Duchesse..." "And who has proposed this marriage to you?" she said, adopting a disdainful and mocking tone. "Simiane, Duchesse. {11} He offers me a wife who is pretty, clever, well-mannered, and afflicted by I don't know how many millions." "Accept her, Monsieur," said the Duchesse, pursing her lips. "I would never stand in the way of your happiness..." "Now, Duchesse, don't sulk. I've refused." "Definitely?" asked the Duchesse, with a joyful gleam in her large blue eyes. "Almost. Simiane's coming back again today." "But you'll refuse again?" "Just so," Monsieur de Nossac replied. "If I get my governorship..." "That's fair," said the Duchesse. "But you'll have your governorship." "I ask for nothing else, Duchesse." "I shall hasten to the Duc." "Go, Duchesse." "And your letters patent will be dispatched in an hour." "I'm counting on it, Duchesse." Without compromising his imperturbability in the slightest, the Baron de Nossac pointed a finger at the clock. "I'll give you one hour more, Duchesse," he said. "It's noon; Simiane will be here at one o'clock; he'll remain here until two." "Well," said Madame d'A***, "if your letters of appointment have not arrived, you'll be free to give your word..." "I have not given it to her, Duchesse, but I give it to you." "One moment!" exclaimed Madame d'A***, rising to her feet. "I want you to make me another promise." "Which is?" "That if you get married..." "Oh, Duchesse, you don't expect that." "No, of course not—but can one foresee every eventuality?" A smile full of mockery glided over the Duchesse's cherry-red lips. "Bad girl!" "If you get married," she continued, "you promise to grant me another 24 hours after today." "With all my heart, my beloved." "Twenty-four hours of my own choice, you understand?" "What do you mean?" "I mean that, when I appear before you, by day or by night, and say to you Baron, my 24 hours are due, at that very moment, if we are in the street, you will climb into my carriage, and if we are in your house, you will take up your hat and your sword and follow me." "And if I'm somewhere else?" "Likewise, Baron." "On my faith!" Monsieur de Nossac exclaimed. "I see nothing inconvenient in that. Duchesse, I give you my word as a gentleman to be your slave for 24 hours, to follow you wherever you desire for that space of time,

and to obey you blindly." "To begin from the day when I learn of your marriage?" "So be it," said the Baron. Then he added: "That's not a very useful promise, Duchesse." "Who knows?" she said, extending her hand to him. "Adieu..." "Au revoir, Duchesse!" The Duchesse took a few steps towards a little door masked by the wall-hangings, opened it and disappeared. That door gave out on to a hidden stairway, which descended into the gardens—gardens that were located quite close to the place where the Rue de Helder and the Rue de Provence now stand. The townhouse where Monsieur le Baron de Nossac received the Duchesse d'A***, the mistress of the old Duc de Saint-Simon, who enjoyed his great favor, was, you see, his *petite maison*. {12} Monsieur le Baron Hector de Nossac was a young man of 26, of fine appearance, excellent nobility, high spirits and proven courage. At court, he enjoyed the reputation of a very lucky man; never had a reputation been better deserved. The Baron was handsome, magnificent, fickle, quarrelsome and fond of gambling. He had a slight weakness for Spanish snuff and Ai wine. {13} The Duchesse du Maine had inducted him into the Order of the Honey-bee; he had steeped himself in the Cellamare conspiracy, and Dubois had had him imprisoned in the Bastille. {14} On the worthy Cardinal's death, Simiane had reconciled him with the Regent, and the Regent had given him a regiment. A wink from Madame de Phalaris had got him into trouble with the Duc d'Orléans again, and the Duc had withdrawn his commission. {15} An uncle, of the sort one no longer sees, had died the day after his disgrace, leaving him an annual income of 200,000 *livres*. The Baron had spent the aforesaid income, and more, within six months. Then he thought of returning to court, and, deeming it absolutely necessary for that purpose to have a suitable mistress, had conceived designs upon the Duchesse d'A***. The latter, at the outset of the story that we are about to relate, was on the point of obtaining for him the governorship of the province of Normandy. Now, the day when we have just seen the Baron de Nossac chatting from his bed with the Duchesse d'A*** was, to be precise, December 2, 1723. As the Duchesse was climbing into her carriage, which was waiting for her at a side-gate in the gardens, another carriage came in by the main entrance. A gentleman, who was tall but very thin, got down and asked to be taken to the Baron immediately. This gentleman was Monsieur de Simiane. "Ah. There you are, my dear chap!" the Baron said, negligently. "Yes," Simiane replied, excitedly. "My God, what a state you're in! What's happened, Marquis? Where have you come from? Has some jealous husband had you beaten by his servants?" "My dear chap," Simiane said, without replying to Nossac's rather impertinent question. "It's merely time to get you married." "What a pity, my dear chap! I shan't be getting married—I've got my governorship." "You think so, Baron?" "I'm perfectly certain of it." "Personally, I'm certain of the opposite. The Regent didn't have time to sign your letters." Monsieur de Nossac shrugged his shoulders. "What does that mean, Marquis? In what sense did he not have time?" "He didn't—because the Regent died last night." The Baron released a cry. "He died of apoplexy." "You're dreaming, Marquis—it's impossible. The Duchesse d'A*** has just left. She knew nothing about it." "There are many others who don't know, and won't know until tomorrow. Moreover, I'll wager that the Duchesse d'A*** will be arrested." "Why's that, Marquis?" "Because she's the sworn enemy of Madame de Prie." {16} "So what?" "So what?" Simiane exclaimed. "Where have you been, my dear chap? Don't you know that the Marquise de Prie is the Duc de Bourbon's mistress?" "Yes, of course." "Well, I have something to tell you: the Duc de Bourbon is Prime Minister." The Baron went pale. "Monseigneur de Fréjus," Simiane continued, "has generously stood aside. That gentle prelate is never in a hurry. Be tranquil, though—he will lose nothing by waiting." {17} "So my governorship..." "The wisest thing would be to don your mourning-dress." "And this marriage..." "It's necessary to conclude it immediately, or to forget it." "Why is that?" "Because Monsieur Borelli, the excise-farmer—who believes he is making a good bargain by giving you his daughter today, having had wind of your governorship—will retract the offer tomorrow, when he finds out that you're in disgrace." "But my dear Marquis, one cannot marry between one day and the next." "One can marry between evening and morning. Consent, and you shall be married this evening." "Truly?" "I'll see to it. I'll persuade Borelli that it will reflect well on him to give you his daughter in a spirit of complete disinterest, before your appointment as the Governor of Normandy." "Bravo!" "Then I can put the wheels in motion?" The Baron consulted the clock. "Wait ten minutes," he said. "If my commission hasn't arrived by two o'clock, you have my word." "Very well." "The Regent's death will not be made known

today, then?" "No, there are measures to be taken. You'll be married this evening, at midnight, and you can take your wife away to whatever château you might wish." "Not at all—I'll remain in Paris." "The marriage will take place in her father's house on the Île Saint-Louis, without pomp..." "Not at all—I want a splendid feast; I want to do things in broad daylight." "In complete darkness, at any rate." {18} "So be it. You'll be in charge of the invitations. Those who don't come will indicate how I'm to treat them in future." "Oh, don't worry; misalliances are so fashionable that everyone will come. Besides, your wife-to-be is rather beautiful..." "Really? Anyway, that's a matter of indifference. For what I want to do..." "She has a fine air about her, and a beauty unmatched anywhere. She'll provide us with a footstool after the storm." Two o'clock chimed; the door opened. "My God!" cried the Baron. "Here's my commission." The Baron was mistaken. It was merely Duc d'A***'s manservant, who was coming to warn him, confidentially, that the Duchesse had been arrested in her carriage an hour before, as it arrived back at her townhouse. "Poor Duchesse," said the Baron, philosophically. "What do you say, my dear?" asked Simiane. "I say, Marquis," the Baron replied, phlegmatically, "that you can get everything ready: I'll marry Mademoiselle Borelli tonight." III Mademoiselle Hélène Borelli, the daughter of the excise-farmer of that name, was 23 years old. She had a Grecian head, large black eyes bordered by long lashes—velvet eyes, as the saying has it—a fine figure, a little on the tall side, well-sculpted hands and dazzlingly white skin, so lusterless that when she stood still one could easily mistake her for a marble Madonna. At two o'clock in the afternoon, Monsieur le Baron de Nossac had not yet seen his bride; at four, he was introduced to her; at six, he dined with her in his future father-in-law's house; and at eleven, he climbed into a carriage to go to Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, where the Abbé de Morfrans, his cousin, was to celebrate the wedding mass. "Well," Simiane asked the Baron, as he led his bride to his carriage, "how do you like her?" "In truth, my dear chap," the Baron said, complacently, "she's beautiful enough. I believe I'll love her for an entire month, straight away." "Monsieur le Baron," Hélène said to him, in a soft voice, "I'd dearly like to talk to you privately for ten minutes. Would you please ask your friend the Marquis de Simiane to travel in my father's carriage?" "Marquis," said Monsieur de Nossac to Simiane, in a whisper, "it's the first, and doubtless the last, chance that I shall have to speak one-to-one with Mademoiselle before she becomes my wife..." "I understand, Baron—don't worry about it..." And Simiane got in with the tax-collector, who spread himself out in his gilt-embroidered coat on the brocade cushions of his carriage. The whole society of city and court had been invited to the wedding supper at Borelli's house, but the Marquis de Simiane had had the exquisite tact to invite very few people to the wedding mass, so there were only a dozen carriages behind that of the future spouses. "Monsieur le Baron," Hélène said to her husband, as they set off, just as eleven o'clock chimed, "we shall not be married until midnight." "That hour will be a century, Mademoiselle," the Baron replied, courteously. "Will you allow me a quarter-hour of serious conversation?" "I am entirely at your disposal." "And reply to me with complete frankness?" "On my honor as a gentleman!" "Well then, Monsieur le Baron, I will be frank too. My father wanted our marriage for reasons of ambition and pride. I, on the other hand..." The young woman hesitated. "You?" the Baron prompted. "If I were not so close to being your wife, I would not dare admit it—it is for love." "Ah, Mademoiselle!" said the Baron, joyfully. "You know me, then?" "I saw you once, two months ago. Now, Monsieur, I know perfectly well that you cannot say as much to me, and that this marriage is not, for you..." "This marriage," the Baron put in, "even yesterday, could only have been a speculation on my part. Today, everything is changed; I love you." "Are you telling the truth?" Despite the semi-darkness in which they were plunged, the young woman fixed an ardent gaze upon Nossac. "Can you doubt it? You are so beautiful!" "It's just that I don't want to deceive you," Hélène said, "and it's essential that you know me well..." "Oh!" "You tell me that you love me, and I believe it—but if you deceive me..." "Oh, fie!" "I shall never forgive you as long as I live." A spark of light flared up in Hélène's black eyes, which caused the Baron to shiver. "My God, yes!" the young woman continued. "I am not an aristocrat, my father is not even a military man, and there is no churchman in my family. We are poor bourgeois folk enriched, and I imagine that a gentleman who would deign to raise us up to his level would have no scruples about deceiving a woman of my sort." "I swear to you that the thought never entered my head." "I believe you again, Monsieur le Baron—but listen: we shall be

married in an hour, and there is still time to break the engagement." "What! What a thing to say!" "Will you swear to me that you will forsake the somewhat debauched existence that you have led until now?" "I swear it to you." "You will never give me the right to be anything other than an honest wife?" "Oh, never!" "If, one day, I should take a lover, will you have the courage to kill me?" "Yes," the Baron said, resolutely. "And will you give me the same right?" The Baron hesitated, but he darted a glance at the young woman, and found her so beautiful that he replied immediately thereafter, in a firm voice: "Yes, I give you that." "And you swear to me that you love me?" "I swear it to you." "Enough, Monsieur le Baron," H el ene said. "I shall be your wife in the eyes of men in a few minutes' time; I am already your wife in the eyes of God." And she offered him her ivory forehead, which he kissed. The carriage stopped at that moment beneath the porch of the old church. The Baron got down from the carriage first, then offered his hand to his wife. She leant on his arm with a noble leisureliness, and went up the temple steps with him. She paused on the last one. "There is still time, Monsieur le Baron," she said, looking him in the face. "Would you like me to release you from your promise?" "What madness!" "You will keep your oaths?" "Yes." "Be careful! They are burdensome for a man like you." "They might be, with regard to another woman, but not with regard to you. I've told you, H el ene, you're beautiful... and I love you!" "Very well," she said, while her velvet eyes shone with a chaste flame. "Let's go, then--I will be your wife!" The priest was at the altar; the spectators had already taken their places in the choir-stalls. Simiane and Villarceaux were the Baron's witnesses, the Chevalier de Mirbel and the Comte d'O*** the young bride's. [19] At half-past midnight, the nuptial blessing had been given to the spouses, and H el ene Borelli climbed back into the carriage as the Baronne de Nossac. "Whew!" murmured Simiane. "That's done! Old Borelli will no longer refuse me the 200,000 *livres* I asked to borrow from him, on my lands in Sault, which are already heavily mortgaged." "Whew!" murmured the Baron, at the same time. "They can now announce and lament the death of Monseigneur le R egent. I'm rich enough to do without the proceeds of my governorship of Normandy." "Whew!" murmured old Borelli, simultaneously. "They won't say that I'm no sort of a man any longer, I imagine. Nossac is my son-in-law, and we shall soon have the governorship of Normandy." He added, with a hearty laugh: "One more gentleman mixing with the riff-raff!" As for H el ene, she whispered to herself: "He's handsome; he loves me; I'm happy!"

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