

Baron Trigault's Vengeance

by

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Chapter 1

Vengeance! that is the first, the only thought, when a man finds himself victimized, when his honor and fortune, his present and future, are wrecked by a vile conspiracy! The torment he endures under such circumstances can only be alleviated by the prospect of inflicting them a hundredfold upon his persecutors. And nothing seems impossible at the first moment, when hatred surges in the brain, and the foam of anger rises to the lips; no obstacle seems insurmountable, or, rather, none are perceived. But later, when the faculties have regained their equilibrium, one can measure the distance which separates the dream from reality, the project from execution. And on setting to work, how many discouragements arise! The fever of revolt passes by, and the victim wavers. He still breathes bitter vengeance, but he does not act. He despairs, and asks himself what would be the good of it? And in this way the success of villainy is once more assured.

Similar despondency attacked Pascal Ferailleur when he awoke for the first time in the abode where he had hidden himself under the name of Maumejan. A frightful slander had crushed him to the earth--he could kill his slanderer, but afterward--? How was he to reach and stifle the slander itself? As well try to hold a handful of water; as well try to stay with extended arms the progress of the poisonous breeze which wafts an epidemic on its wings. So the hope that had momentarily lightened his heart faded away again. Since he had received that fatal letter from Madame Leon the evening before, he believed that Marguerite was lost to him forever, and in this case, it was useless to struggle against fate. What would be the use of victory even if he conquered? Marguerite lost to him--what did the rest matter? Ah! if he had been alone in the world. But he had his mother to think of;--he belonged to this brave-hearted woman, who had saved him from suicide already. "I will not yield, then; I will struggle on for her sake," he muttered, like a man who foresees the futility of his efforts.

He rose, and had nearly finished dressing, when he heard a rap at his chamber door. "It is I, my son," said Madame Ferailleur outside.

Pascal hastened to admit her. "I have come for you because the woman you spoke about last evening is already here, and before employing her, I want your advice."

"Then the woman doesn't please you, mother?"

"I want you to see her."

On entering the little parlor with his mother, Pascal found himself in the presence of a portly, pale-faced woman, with thin lips and restless eyes, who bowed obsequiously. It was indeed Madame Vantrasson, the landlady of the model lodging-house, who was seeking employment for the three or four hours which were at her disposal in the morning, she said. It certainly was not for pleasure that she had decided to go out to service again; her dignity suffered terribly by this fall--but then the stomach has to be cared for. Tenants were not numerous at the model lodging-house, in spite of its seductive title; and those who slept there

occasionally, almost invariably succeeded in stealing something. Nor did the grocery store pay; the few half-pence which were left there occasionally in exchange for a glass of liquor were pocketed by Vantrasson, who spent them at some neighboring establishment; for it is a well-known fact that the wine a man drinks in his own shop is always bitter in flavor. So, having no credit at the butcher's or the baker's, Madame Vantrasson was sometimes reduced to living for days together upon the contents of the shop--mouldy figs or dry raisins--which she washed down with torrents of ratafia, her only consolation here below.

But this was not a satisfying diet, as she was forced to confess; so she decided to find some work, that would furnish her with food and a little money, which she vowed she would never allow her worthy husband to see.

"What would you charge per month?" inquired Pascal.

She seemed to reflect, and after a great deal of counting on her fingers, she finally declared that she would be content with breakfast and fifteen francs a month, on condition she was allowed to do the marketing. The first question of French cooks, on presenting themselves for a situation, is almost invariably, "Shall I do the marketing?" which of course means, "Shall I have any opportunities for stealing?" Everybody knows this, and nobody is astonished at it.

"I shall do the marketing myself," declared Madame Ferailleur, boldly.

"Then I shall want thirty francs a month," replied Madame Vantrasson, promptly.

Pascal and his mother exchanged glances. They were both unfavorably impressed by this woman, and were equally determined to rid themselves of her, which it was easy enough to do. "Too dear!" said Madame Ferailleur; "I have never given over fifteen francs."

But Madame Vantrasson was not the woman to be easily discouraged, especially as she knew that if she failed to obtain this situation, she might have considerable difficulty in finding another one. She could only hope to obtain employment from strangers and newcomers, who were ignorant of the reputation of the model lodging-house. So in view of softening the hearts of Pascal and his mother, she began to relate the history of her life, skilfully mingling the false with the true, and representing herself as an unfortunate victim of circumstances, and the inhuman cruelty of relatives. For she belonged, like her husband, to a very respectable family, as the Maumejans might easily ascertain by inquiry. Vantrasson's sister was the wife of a man named Greloux, who had once been a bookbinder in the Rue Saint-Denis, but who had now retired from business with a competency. "Why had this Greloux refused to save them from bankruptcy? Because one could never hope for a favor from relatives," she groaned; "they are jealous if you succeed; and if you are unfortunate, they cast you off."

However, these doleful complaints, far from rendering Madame Vantrasson interesting, imparted a deceitful and most disagreeable expression to her countenance. "I told you that I could only give fifteen francs," interrupted Madame Ferailleur--"take it or leave it."

Madame Vantrasson protested. She expressed her willingness to deduct five francs from the sum she had named, but more--it was impossible! Would they haggle over ten francs to secure such a treasure as herself, an honest, settled woman, who was entirely devoted to her employers?" Besides, I have been a

grand cook in my time," she added, "and I have not lost all my skill. Monsieur and madame would be delighted with my cooking, for I have seen more than one fine gentleman smack his lips over my sauces when was in the employment of the Count de Chalusse."

Pascal and his mother could not repress a start on hearing this name; but it was in a tone of well-assumed indifference that Madame Ferailleur repeated, "M. de Chalusse?"

"Yes, madame--a count--and so rich that he didn't know how much he was worth. If he were still alive I shouldn't be compelled to go out to service again. But he's dead and he's to be buried this very day." And with an air of profound secrecy, she added: "On going yesterday to the Hotel de Chalusse to ask for a little help, I heard of the great misfortune. Vantrasson, my husband, accompanied me, and while we were talking with the concierge, a young woman passed through the hall, and he recognized her as a person who some time ago was--well--no better than she should be. Now, however, she's a young lady as lofty as the clouds, and the deceased count has been passing her off as his daughter. Ah! this is a strange world."

Pascal had become whiter than the ceiling. His eyes blazed; and Madame Ferailleur trembled. "Very well," she said, "I will give you twenty-five francs--but on condition you come without complaining if I sometimes require your services of an evening. On these occasions I will give you your dinner." And taking five francs from her pocket she placed them in Madame Vantrasson's hand, adding: "Here is your earnest money."

The other quickly pocketed the coin, not a little surprised by this sudden decision which she had scarcely hoped for, and which she by no means understood. Still she was so delighted with this denouement that she expressed her willingness to enter upon her duties at once; and to get rid of her Madame Ferailleur was obliged to send her out to purchase the necessary supplies for breakfast. Then, as soon as she was alone with her son, she turned to him and asked: "Well, Pascal?"

But the wretched man seemed turned to stone, and seeing that he neither spoke nor moved, she continued in a severe tone: "Is this the way you keep your resolutions and your oaths! You express your intention of accomplishing a task which requires inexhaustible patience and dissimulation, and at the very first unforeseen circumstance your coolness deserts you, and you lose your head completely. If it had not been for me you would have betrayed yourself in that woman's presence. You must renounce your revenge, and tamely submit to be conquered by the Marquis de Valorsay if your face is to be an open book in which any one may read your secret plans and thoughts."

Pascal shook his head dejectedly. "Didn't you hear, mother?" he faltered.

"Hear what?"

"What that vile woman said? This young lady whom she spoke of, whom her husband recognized, can be none other than Marguerite."

"I am sure of it."

He recoiled in horror. "You are sure of it!" he repeated; "and you can tell me this unmoved--coldly, as if it were a natural, a possible thing. Didn't you understand

the shameful meaning of her insinuations? Didn't you see her hypocritical smile and the malice gleaming in her eyes?" He pressed his hands to his burning brow, and groaned "And I did not crush the infamous wretch! I did not fell her to the ground!"

Ah! if she had obeyed the impulse of her heart. Madame Ferailleur would have thrown her arms round her son's neck, and have mingled her tears with his, but reason prevailed. The worthy woman's heart was pervaded with that lofty sentiment of duty which sustains the humble heroines of the fireside, and lends them even more courage than the reckless adventurers whose names are recorded by history could boast of. She felt that Pascal must not be consoled, but spurred on to fresh efforts; and so mustering all her courage, she said: "Are you acquainted with Mademoiselle Marguerite's past life? No. You only know that hers has been a life of great vicissitudes--and so it is not strange that she should be slandered."

"In that case, mother," said Pascal, "you were wrong to interrupt Madame Vantrasson. She would probably have told us many things."

"I interrupted her, it is true, and sent her away--and you know why. But she is in our service now; and when you are calm, when you have regained your senses, nothing will prevent you from questioning her. It may be useful for you to know who this man Vantrasson is, and how and where he met Mademoiselle Marguerite."

Shame, sorrow, and rage, brought tears to Pascal's eyes. "My God!" he exclaimed, "to be reduced to the unspeakable misery of hearing my mother doubt Marguerite!" He did not doubt her. HE could have listened to the most infamous accusations against her without feeling a single doubt. However, Madame Ferailleur had sufficient self-control to shrug her shoulders. "Ah, well! silence this slander," she exclaimed. "I wish for nothing better; but don't forget that we have ourselves to rehabilitate. To crush your enemies will be far more profitable to Mademoiselle Marguerite than vain threats and weak lamentations. It seemed to me that you had sworn to act, not to complain."

This ironical thrust touched Pascal's sensitive mind to the quick; he rose at once to his feet, and coldly said, "That's true. I thank you for having recalled me to myself."

She made no rejoinder, but mentally thanked God. She had read her son's heart, and perceiving his hesitation and weakness she had supplied the stimulus he needed. Now she saw him as she wished to see him. Now he was ready to reproach himself for his lack of courage and his weakness in displaying his feelings. And as a test of his powers of endurance, he decided not to question Madame Vantrasson till four or five days had elapsed. If her suspicions had been aroused, this delay would suffice to dispel them.

He said but little during breakfast; for he was now eager to commence the struggle. He longed to act, and yet he scarcely knew how to begin the campaign. First of all, he must study the enemy's position--gain some knowledge of the men he had to deal with, find out exactly who the Marquis de Valorsay and the Viscount de Coralth were. Where could he obtain information respecting these two men? Should he be compelled to follow them and to gather up here and

there such scraps of intelligence as came in his way? This method of proceeding would be slow and inconvenient in the extreme. He was revolving the subject in his mind when he suddenly remembered the man who, on the morning that followed the scene at Madame d'Argeles's house, had come to him in the Rue d'Ulm to give him a proof of his confidence. He remembered that this strange man had said: "If you ever need a helping hand, come to me." And at the recollection he made up his mind. "I am going to Baron Trigault's," he remarked to his mother; "if my presentiments don't deceive me, he will be of service to us." In less than half an hour he was on his way. He had dressed himself in the oldest clothes he possessed; and this, with the change he had made by cutting off his hair and beard, had so altered his appearance that it was necessary to look at him several times, and most attentively, to recognize him. The visiting cards which he carried in his pocket bore the inscription: "P. Maumejan, Business Agent, Route de la Revolte." His knowledge of Parisian life had induced him to choose the same profession as M. Fortunat followed--a profession which opens almost every door. "I will enter the nearest cafe and ask for a directory," he said to himself. "I shall certainly find Baron Trigault's address in it."

The baron lived in the Rue de la Ville-l'Eveque. His mansion was one of the largest and most magnificent in the opulent district of the Madeleine, and its aspect was perfectly in keeping with its owner's character as an expert financier, and a shrewd manufacturer, the possessor of valuable mines. The marvellous luxury so surprised Pascal, that he asked himself how the owner of this princely abode could find any pleasure at the gaming table of the Hotel d'Argeles. Five or six footmen were lounging about the courtyard when he entered it. He walked straight up to one of them, and with his hat in his hand, asked: "Baron Trigault, if you please?"

If he had asked for the Grand Turk the valet would not have looked at him with greater astonishment. His surprise, indeed, seemed so profound that Pascal feared he had made some mistake and added: "Doesn't he live here?"

The servant laughed heartily. "This is certainly his house," he replied, "and strange to say, by some fortunate chance, he's here."

"I wish to speak with him on business."

The servant called one of his colleagues. "Eh! Florestan--is the baron receiving?"

"The baroness hasn't forbidden it."

This seemed to satisfy the footman; for, turning to Pascal he said: "In that case, you can follow me."

Chapter 2

The sumptuous interior of the Trigault mansion was on a par with its external magnificence. Even the entrance bespoke the lavish millionaire, eager to conquer difficulties, jealous of achieving the impossible, and never haggling when his fancies were concerned. The spacious hall, paved with costly mosaics, had been transformed into a conservatory full of flowers, which were renewed every morning. Rare plants climbed the walls up gilded trellis work, or hung from the ceiling in vases of rare old china, while from among the depths of verdure peered forth exquisite statues, the work of sculptors of renown. On a rustic bench sat a couple of tall footmen, as bright in their gorgeous liveries as gold coins fresh from the mint; still, despite their splendor, they were stretching and yawning to such a degree, that it seemed as if they would ultimately dislocate their jaws and arms.

"Tell me," inquired the servant who was escorting Pascal, "can any one speak to the baron?"

"Why?"

"This gentleman has something to say to him."

The two valets eyed the unknown visitor, plainly considering him to be one of those persons who have no existence for the menials of fashionable establishments, and finally burst into a hearty laugh. "Upon my word!" exclaimed the eldest, "he's just in time. Announce him, and madame will be greatly obliged to you. She and monsieur have been quarrelling for a good half-hour. And, heavenly powers, isn't he tantalizing!"

The most intense curiosity gleamed in the eyes of Pascal's conductor, and with an air of secrecy, he asked: "What is the cause of the rumpus? That Fernand, no doubt--or some one else?"

"No; this morning it's about M. Van Klopen."

"Madame's dressmaker?"

"The same. Monsieur and madame were breakfasting together--a most unusual thing--when M. Van Klopen made his appearance. I thought to myself, when I admitted him: 'Look out for storms!' I scented one in the air, and in fact the dressmaker hadn't been in the room five minutes before we heard the baron's voice rising higher and higher. I said to myself: 'Whew! the mantua-maker is presenting his bill!' Madame cried and went on like mad; but, pshaw! when the master really begins, there's no one like him. There isn't a cab-driver in Paris who's his equal for swearing."

"And M. Van Klopen?"

"Oh, he's used to such scenes! When gentlemen abuse him he does the same as dogs do when they come up out of the water; he just shakes his head and troubles himself no more about it. He has decidedly the best of the row. He has furnished the goods, and he'll have to be paid sooner or later----"

"What! hasn't he been paid then?"

"I don't know; he's still here."

A terrible crash of breaking china interrupted this edifying conversation. "There!" exclaimed one of the footmen, "that's monsieur; he has smashed two or three hundred francs' worth of dishes. He MUST be rich to pay such a price for his angry fits."

"Well," observed the other, "if I were in monsieur's place I should be angry too. Would you let your wife have her dresses fitted on by a man? I says that it's indecent. I'm only a servant, but----"

"Nonsense, it's the fashion. Besides, monsieur does not care about that. A man who----"

He stopped short; in fact, the others had motioned him to be silent. The baron was surrounded by exceptional servants, and the presence of a stranger acted as a restraint upon them. For this reason, one of them, after asking Pascal for his card, opened a door and ushered him into a small room, saying: "I will go and inform the baron. Please wait here."

"Here," as he called it, was a sort of smoking-room hung with cashmere of fantastic design and gorgeous hues, and encircled by a low, cushioned divan, covered with the same material. A profusion of rare and costly objects was to be seen on all sides, armor, statuary, pictures, and richly ornamented weapons. But Pascal, already amazed by the conversation of the servants, did not think of examining these objects of vertu. Through a partially open doorway, directly opposite the one he had entered by, came the sound of loud voices in excited conversation. Baron Trigault, the baroness, and the famous Van Klopen were evidently in the adjoining room. It was a woman, the baroness, who was speaking, and the quivering of her clear and somewhat shrill voice betrayed a violent irritation, which was only restrained with the greatest difficulty. "It is hard for the wife of one of the richest men in Paris to see a bill for absolute necessities disputed in this style," she was saying.

A man's voice, with a strong Teutonic accent, the voice of Van Klopen, the Hollander, caught up the refrain. "Yes, strict necessities, one can swear to that. And if, before flying into a passion, Monsieur le Baron had taken the trouble to glance over my little bill, he would have seen----"

"No more! You bore me to death. Besides I haven't time to listen to your nonsense; they are waiting for me to play a game of whist at the club."

This time it was the master of the house, Baron Trigault, who spoke, and Pascal recognized his voice instantly.

"If monsieur would only allow me to read the items. It will take but a moment," rejoined Van Klopen. And as if he had construed the oath that answered him as an exclamation of assent, he began: "In June, a Hungarian costume with jacket and sash, two train dresses with upper skirts and trimmings of lace, a Medicis polonaise, a jockey costume, a walking costume, a riding-habit, two morning-dresses, a Velleda costume, an evening dress."

"I was obliged to attend the races very frequently during the month of June," remarked the baroness.

But the illustrious adorer of female loveliness had already resumed his reading. "In July we have: two morning-jackets, one promenade costume, one sailor suit, one Watteau shepherdess costume, one ordinary bathing-suit, with material for

parasol and shoes to match, one Pompadour bathing-suit, one dressing-gown, one close-fitting Medicis mantle, two opera cloaks----"

"And I was certainly not the most elegantly attired of the ladies at Trouville, where I spent the month of July," interrupted the baroness.

"There are but few entries in the month of August," continued Van Klopen. "We have: a morning-dress, a travelling-dress, with trimmings----" And he went on and on, gasping for breath, rattling off the ridiculous names which he gave to his "creations," and interrupted every now and then by the blow of a clinched fist on the table, or by a savage oath.

Pascal stood in the smoking-room, motionless with astonishment. He did not know what surprised him the most, Van Klopen's impudence in daring to read such a bill, the foolishness of the woman who had ordered all these things, or the patience of the husband who was undoubtedly going to pay for them. At last, after what seemed an interminable enumeration, Van Klopen exclaimed: "And that's all!"

"Yes, that's all," repeated the baroness, like an echo.

"That's all!" exclaimed the baron--"that's all! That is to say, in four months, at least seven hundred yards of silk, velvet, satin, and muslin, have been put on this woman's back!"

"The dresses of the present day require a great deal of material. Monsieur le Baron will understand that flounces, puffs, and ruches----"

"Naturally! Total, twenty-seven thousand francs!"

"Excuse me! Twenty-seven thousand nine hundred and thirty-three francs, ninety centimes."

"Call it twenty-eight thousand francs then. Ah, well, M. Van Klopen, if you are ever paid for this rubbish it won't be by me."

If Van Klopen was expecting this denouement, Pascal wasn't; in fact, he was so startled, that an exclamation escaped him which would have betrayed his presence under almost any other circumstances. What amazed him most was the baron's perfect calmness, following, as it did, such a fit of furious passion, violent enough even to be heard in the vestibule. "Either he has extraordinary control over himself or this scene conceals some mystery," thought Pascal.

Meanwhile, the man-milliner continued to urge his claims--but the baron, instead of replying, only whistled; and wounded by this breach of good manners, Van Klopen at last exclaimed: "I have had dealings with all the distinguished men in Europe, and never before did one of them refuse to pay me for his wife's toilettes."

"Very well--I don't pay for them--there's the difference. Do you suppose that I, Baron Trigault, that I've worked like a negro for twenty years merely for the purpose of aiding your charming and useful branch of industry? Gather up your papers, Mr. Ladies' Tailor. There may be husbands who believe themselves responsible for their wives' follies--it's quite possible there are--but I'm not made of that kind of stuff. I allow Madame Trigault eight thousand francs a month for her toilette--that is sufficient--and it is a matter for you and her to arrange together. What did I tell you last year when I paid a bill of forty thousand francs?"

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