

Derues

By

Alexander Dumas, Pere

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One September afternoon in 1751, towards half-past five, about a score of small boys, chattering, pushing, and tumbling over one another like a covey of partridges, issued from one of the religious schools of Chartres. The joy of the little troop just escaped from a long and wearisome captivity was doubly great: a slight accident to one of the teachers had caused the class to be dismissed half an hour earlier than usual, and in consequence of the extra work thrown on the teaching staff the brother whose duty it was to see all the scholars safe home was compelled to omit that part of his daily task. Therefore not only thirty or forty minutes were stolen from work, but there was also unexpected, uncontrolled liberty, free from the surveillance of that black-cassocked overseer who kept order in their ranks. Thirty minutes! at that age it is a century, of laughter and prospective games! Each had promised solemnly, under pain of severe punishment, to return straight to his paternal nest without delay, but the air was so fresh and pure, the country smiled all around! The school, or preferably the cage, which had just opened, lay at the extreme edge of one of the suburbs, and it only required a few steps to slip under a cluster of trees by a sparkling brook beyond which rose undulating ground, breaking the monotony of a vast and fertile plain. Was it possible to be obedient, to refrain from the desire to spread one's wings? The scent of the meadows mounted to the heads of the steadiest among them, and intoxicated even the most timid. It was resolved to betray the confidence of the reverend fathers, even at the risk of disgrace and punishment next morning, supposing the escapade were discovered.

A flock of sparrows suddenly released from a cage could not have flown more wildly into the little wood. They were all about the same age, the eldest might be nine. They flung off coats and waistcoats, and the grass became strewn with baskets, copy-books, dictionaries, and catechisms. While the crowd of fair-haired heads, of fresh and smiling faces, noisily consulted as to which game should be chosen, a boy who had taken no part in the general gaiety, and who had been carried away by the rush without being able to escape sooner, glided slyly away among the trees, and, thinking himself unseen, was beating a hasty retreat, when one of his comrades cried out--

"Antoine is running away!"

Two of the best runners immediately started in pursuit, and the fugitive, notwithstanding his start, was speedily overtaken, seized by his collar, and brought back as a deserter.

"Where were you going?" the others demanded.

"Home to my cousins," replied the boy; "there is no harm in that."

"You canting sneak!" said another boy, putting his fist under the captive's chin; "you were going to the master to tell of us."

"Pierre," responded Antoine, "you know quite well I never tell lies."

"Indeed!--only this morning you pretended I had taken a book you had lost, and you did it because I kicked you yesterday, and you didn't dare to kick me back again."

Antoine lifted his eyes to heaven, and folding his arms on his breast

Dear Buttet," he said, "you are mistaken; I have always been taught to forgive injuries."

"Listen, listen! he might be saying his prayers!" cried the other boys; and a volley of offensive epithets, enforced by cuffs, was hurled at the culprit.

Pierre Buttet, whose influence was great, put a stop to this onslaught.

"Look here, Antoine, you are a bad lot, that we all know; you are a sneak and a hypocrite. It's time we put a stop to it. Take off your coat and fight it out. If you like, we will fight every morning and evening till the end of the month."

The proposition was loudly applauded, and Pierre, turning up his sleeves as far as his elbows, prepared to suit actions to words.

The challenger assuredly did not realise the full meaning, of his words; had he done so, this chivalrous defiance would simply have been an act of cowardice on his part, for there could be no doubt as to the victor in such a conflict. The one was a boy of alert and gallant bearing, strong upon his legs, supple and muscular, a vigorous man in embryo; while the other, not quite so old, small, thin, of a sickly leaden complexion, seemed as if he might be blown away by a strong puff of wind. His skinny arms and legs hung on to his body like the claws of a spider, his fair hair inclined to red, his white skin appeared nearly bloodless, and the consciousness of weakness made him timid, and gave a shifty, uneasy look to his eyes. His whole expression was uncertain, and looking only at his face it was difficult at first sight to decide to which sex he belonged. This confusion of two natures, this indefinable mixture of feminine weakness without grace, and of abortive boyhood, seemed to stamp him as something exceptional, unclassable, and once observed, it was difficult to take one's eyes from him. Had he been endowed with physical strength he would have been a terror to his comrades, exercising by fear the ascendancy which Pierre owed to his joyous temper and unwearied gaiety, for this mean exterior concealed extraordinary powers of will and dissimulation. Guided by instinct, the other children hung about Pierre and willingly accepted his leadership; by instinct also they avoided Antoine, repelled by a feeling of chill, as if from the neighbourhood of a reptile, and shunning him unless to profit in some way by their superior strength. Never would he join their games without compulsion; his thin,

colourless lips seldom parted for a laugh, and even at that tender age his smile had an unpleasantly sinister expression.

"Will you fight?" again demanded Pierre.

Antoine glanced hastily round; there was no chance of escape, a double ring enclosed him. To accept or refuse seemed about equally risky; he ran a good chance of a thrashing whichever way he decided. Although his heart beat loudly, no trace of emotion appeared on his pallid cheek; an unforeseen danger would have made him shriek, but he had had time to collect himself, time to shelter behind hypocrisy. As soon as he could lie and cheat he recovered courage, and the instinct of cunning, once roused, prevailed over everything else. Instead of answering this second challenge, he knelt down and said to Pierre--

"You are much stronger than I am."

This submission disarmed his antagonist. "Get up," he replied; "I won't touch you, if you can't defend yourself."

"Pierre," continued Antoine, still on his knees, "I assure you, by God and the Holy Virgin, I was not going to tell. I was going home to my cousins to learn my lessons for tomorrow; you know how slow I am. If you think I have done you any harm, I ask your forgiveness."

Pierre held out his hand and made him get up.

"Will you be a good fellow, Antoine, and play with us?"

"Yes, I will."

"All right, then; let us forget all about it."

"What are we to play at?" asked Antoine, taking off his coat.

"Thieves and archers," cried one of the boys....

"Splendid!" said Pierre; and using his acknowledged authority, he divided them into two sides--ten highwaymen, whom he was to command, and ten archers of the guard, who were to pursue them; Antoine was among the latter.

The highwaymen, armed with swords and guns obtained from the willows which grew along the brook, moved off first, and gained the valleys between the little hills beyond the wood. The fight was to be serious, and any prisoner on either side was to be tried immediately. The robbers divided into twos and threes, and hid themselves in the ravines.

A few minutes later the archers started in pursuit. There were encounters, surprises, skirmishes; but whenever it came to close quarters, Pierre's men, skilfully distributed, united on hearing his whistle, and the Army of justice had to retreat. But there came a time when this magic signal was no longer heard, and the robbers became uneasy, and remained crouching in their hiding-places. Pierre, over-daring, had undertaken to defend alone the entrance of a dangerous passage and to stop the whole hostile troop there. Whilst he kept them engaged, half of his men, concealed on the left, were to come round the foot of the hill and make a rush on hearing his whistle; the other half, also stationed at some, little distance, were to execute the same manoeuvre from above. The archers would be caught in a trap, and attacked both in front and rear, would be obliged to surrender at discretion. Chance, which not unfrequently decides the fate of a battle, defeated this excellent stratagem. Watching intently; Pierre failed to perceive that while his whole attention was given to the ground in front, the archers had taken an entirely different road from the one they ought to have followed if his combination were to succeed. They suddenly fell upon him from behind, and before he could blow his whistle, they gagged him with a handkerchief and tied his hands. Six remained to keep the field of battle and disperse the hostile band, now deprived of its chief; the remaining four conveyed Pierre to the little wood, while the robbers, hearing no signal, did not venture to stir. According to agreement, Pierre Buttet was tried by the archers, who promptly transformed themselves into a court of justice, and as he had been taken red-handed, and did not condescend to defend himself, the trial was not a long affair. He was unanimously sentenced to be hung, and the execution was then and there carried out, at the request of the criminal himself, who wanted the game to be properly played to the end, and who actually selected a suitable tree for his own execution.

"But, Pierre," said one of the judges, "how can you be held up there?"

"How stupid you are!" returned the captive. "I shall only pretend to be hung, of course. See here!" and he fastened together several pieces strong string which had tied some of the other boys' books, piled the latter together, and standing on tiptoe on this very insecure basis, fastened one end of the cord to a horizontal bough, and put his neck into a running knot at the other end, endeavouring to imitate the contortions of an actual sufferer. Shouts of laughter greeted him, and the victim laughed loudest of all. Three archers went to call the rest to behold this amusing spectacle; one, tired out, remained with the prisoner.

"Ah, Hangman," said Pierre, putting out his tongue at him, "are the books firm? I thought I felt them give way."

"No," replied Antoine; it was he who remained. "Don't be afraid, Pierre."

"It is a good thing; for if they fell I don't think the cord is long enough."

"Don't you really think so?"

A horrible thought showed itself like a flash on the child's face. He resembled a young hyena scenting blood for the first time. He glanced at the pile of books Pierre was standing on, and compared it with the length of the cord between the branch and his neck. It was already nearly dark, the shadows were deepening in the wood, gleams of pale light penetrated between the trees, the leaves had become black and rustled in the wind. Antoine stood silent and motionless, listening if any sound could be heard near them.

It would be a curious study for the moralist to observe how the first thought of crime develops itself in the recesses of the human heart, and how this poisoned germ grows and stifles all other sentiments; an impressive lesson might be gathered from this struggle of two opposing principles, however weak it may be, in perverted natures. In cases where judgment can discern, where there is power to choose between good and evil, the guilty person has only himself to blame, and the most heinous crime is only the action of its perpetrator. It is a human action, the result of passions which might have been controlled, and one's mind is not uncertain, nor one's conscience doubtful, as to the guilt. But how can one conceive this taste for murder in a young child, how imagine it, without being tempted to exchange the idea of eternal sovereign justice for that of blind -fatality? How can one judge without hesitation between the moral sense which has given way and the instinct which displays itself? how not exclaim that the designs of a Creator who retains the one and impels the other are sometimes mysterious and inexplicable, and that one must submit without understanding?

"Do you hear them coming?" asked Pierre.

"I hear nothing," replied Antoine, and a nervous shiver ran through all his members.

"So much the worse. I am tired of being dead; I shall come to life and run after them. Hold the books, and I will undo the noose."

"If you move, the books will separate; wait, I will hold them."

And he knelt down, and collecting all his strength, gave the pile a violent push.

Pierre endeavoured to raise his hands to his throat. "What are you doing?" he cried in a suffocating voice.

"I am paying you out;" replied Antoine, folding his arms.

Pierre's feet were only a few inches from the ground, and the weight of his body at first bent the bough for a moment; but it rose again, and the unfortunate boy exhausted

himself in useless efforts. At every movement the knot grew tighter, his legs struggled, his arms sought vainly something to lay hold of; then his movements slackened, his limbs stiffened, and his hands sank down. Of so much life and vigour nothing remained but the movement of an inert mass turning round and round upon itself.

Not till then did Antoine cry for help, and when the other boys hastened up they found him crying and tearing his hair. So violent indeed were his sobs and his despair that he could hardly be understood as he tried to explain how the books had given way under Pierre, and how he had vainly endeavoured to support him in his arms.

This boy, left an orphan at three years old, had been brought up at first by a relation who turned him out for theft; afterwards by two sisters, his cousins, who were already beginning to take alarm at his abnormal perversity. This pale and fragile being, an incorrigible thief, a consummate hypocrite, and a cold-blooded assassin, was predestined to an immortality of crime, and was to find a place among the most execrable monsters for whom humanity has ever had to blush; his name was Antoine-Francois Derues.

Twenty years had gone by since this horrible and mysterious event, which no one sought to unravel at the time it occurred. One June evening, 1771, four persons were sitting in one of the rooms of a modestly furnished, dwelling on the third floor of a house in the rue Saint-Victor. The party consisted of three women and an ecclesiastic, who boarded, for meals only, with the woman who tenanted the dwelling; the other two were near neighbours. They were all friends, and often met thus in the evening to play cards. They were sitting round the card-table, but although it was nearly ten o'clock the cards had not yet been touched. They spoke in low tones, and a half-interrupted confidence had, this evening, put a check on the usual gaiety.

Someone knocked gently at the door, although no sound of steps on the creaking wooden staircase had been heard, and a wheedling voice asked for admittance. The occupier of the room, Madame Legrand, rose, and admitted a man of about six-and-twenty, at whose appearance the four friends exchanged glances, at once observed by the new-comer, who affected, however, not to see them. He bowed successively to the three women, and several times with the utmost respect to the abbe, making signs of apology for the interruption caused by his appearance; then, coughing several times, he turned to Madame Legrand, and said in a feeble voice, which seemed to betoken much suffering--

"My kind mistress, will you and these other ladies excuse my presenting myself at such an hour and in such a costume? I am ill, and I was obliged to get up."

His costume was certainly singular enough: he was wrapped in a large dressing-gown of flowered chintz; his head was adorned by a nightcap drawn up at the top and

surmounted by a muslin frill. His appearance did not contradict his complaint of illness; he was barely four feet six in height, his limbs were bony, his face sharp, thin, and pale. Thus attired, coughing incessantly, dragging his feet as if he had no strength to lift them, holding a lighted candle in one hand and an egg in the other, he suggested a caricature-some imaginary invalid just escaped from M. Purgon. Nevertheless, no one ventured to smile, notwithstanding his valetudinarian appearance and his air of affected humility. The perpetual blinking of the yellow eyelids which fell over the round and hollow eyes, shining with a sombre fire which he could never entirely suppress, reminded one of a bird of prey unable to face the light, and the lines of his face, the hooked nose, and the thin, constantly quivering, drawn-in lips suggested a mixture of boldness and baseness, of cunning and sincerity. But there is no book which can instruct one to read the human countenance correctly; and some special circumstance must have roused the suspicions of these four persons so much as to cause them to make these observations, and they were not as usual deceived by the humbug of this skilled actor, a past master in the art of deception.

He continued after a moment's silence, as if he did not wish to interrupt their mute observation--

"Will you oblige me by a neighbourly kindness?"

"What is it, Derues?" asked Madame Legrand. A violent cough, which appeared to rend his chest, prevented him from answering immediately. When it ceased, he looked at the abbe, and said, with a melancholy smile--

"What I ought to ask in my present state of health is your blessing, my father, and your intercession for the pardon of my sins. But everyone clings to the life which God has given him. We do not easily abandon hope; moreover, I have always considered it wrong to neglect such means of preserving our lives as are in our power, since life is for us only a time of trial, and the longer and harder the trial the greater our recompense in a better world. Whatever befalls us, our answer should be that of the Virgin Mary to the angel who announced the mystery of the Incarnation: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word.'"

"You are right," said the abbe, with a severe and inquisitorial look, under which Derues remained quite untroubled; "it is an attribute of God to reward and to punish, and the Almighty is not deceived by him who deceives men. The Psalmist has said, 'Righteous art Thou, O Lord, and upright are Thy judgments.'"

"He has said also, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,'" Derues promptly replied. This exchange of quotations from Scripture might have lasted for hours without his being at a loss, had the abbe thought fit to continue in this strain; but such a style of conversation, garnished with grave and solemn words, seemed

almost sacrilegious in the mouth of a man of such ridiculous appearance--a profanation at once sad and grotesque. Derues seemed to comprehend the impression it produced, and tuning again to Madame Legrand, he said--

"We have got a long way from what I came to ask you, my kind friend. I was so ill that I went early to bed, but I cannot sleep, and I have no fire. Would you have the kindness to have this egg mulled for me?"

"Cannot your servant do that for you?" asked Madame Legrand.

"I gave her leave to go out this evening, and though it is late she has not yet returned. If I had a fire, I would not give you so much trouble, but I do not care to light one at this hour. You know I am always afraid of accidents, and they so easily happen!"

"Very well, then," replied Madame Legrand; "go back to your room, and my servant will bring it to you."

"Thank you," said Derues, bowing,--"many thanks."

As he turned to depart, Madame Legrand spoke again.

"This day week, Derues, you have to pay me half the twelve hundred livres due for the purchase of my business."

"So soon as that?"

"Certainly, and I want the money. Have you forgotten the date, then?"

"Oh dear, I have never looked at the agreement since it was drawn up. I did not think the time was so near, it is the fault of my bad memory; but I will contrive to pay you, although trade is very bad, and in three days I shall have to pay more than fifteen thousand livres to different people."

He bowed again and departed, apparently exhausted by the effort of sustaining so long a conversation.

As soon as they were alone, the abbe exclaimed--

"That man is assuredly an utter rascal! May God forgive him his hypocrisy! How is it possible we could allow him to deceive us for so long?"

"But, my father," interposed one of the visitors, "are you really sure of what you have just said?"

"I am not now speaking of the seventy-nine Louis d'or which have been stolen from me, although I never mentioned to anyone but you, and he was then present, that I

possessed such a sum, and although that very day he made a false excuse for coming to my rooms when I was out. Theft is indeed infamous, but slander is not less so, and he has slandered you disgracefully. Yes, he has spread a report that you, Madame Legrand, you, his former mistress and benefactress, have put temptation in his way, and desired to commit carnal sin with him. This is now whispered the neighbourhood all round us, it will soon be said aloud, and we have been so completely his dupes, we have helped him so much to acquire a reputation for uprightness, that it would now be impossible to destroy our own work; if I were to accuse him of theft, and you charged him with lying, probably neither of us would be believed. Beware, these odious tales have not been spread without a reason. Now that your eyes are open, beware of him."

"Yes," replied Madame Legrand, "my brother-in-law warned me three years ago. One day Derues said to my sister-in-law,--I remember the words. perfectly,--'I should like to be a druggist, because one would always be able to punish an enemy; and if one has a quarrel with anyone it would be easy to get rid of him by means of a poisoned draught.' I neglected these warnings. I surmounted the feeling of repugnance I first felt at the sight of him; I have responded to his advances, and I greatly fear I may have cause to repent it. But you know him as well as I do, who would not have thought his piety sincere?--who would not still think so? And notwithstanding all you have said, I still hesitate to feel serious alarm; I am unwilling to believe in such utter depravity."

The conversation continued in this strain for some time, and then, as it was getting late, the party separated.

Next morning early, a large and noisy crowd was assembled in the rue Saint-Victor before Derues' shop of drugs and groceries. There was a confusion of cross questions, of inquiries which obtained no answer, of answers not addressed to the inquiry, a medley of sound, a pell-mell of unconnected words, of affirmations, contradictions, and interrupted narrations. Here, a group listened to an orator who held forth in his shirt sleeves, a little farther there were disputes, quarrels, exclamations of "Poor man!" "Such a good fellow!" "My poor gossip Derues!" "Good heavens! what will he do now?" "Alas! he is quite done for; it is to be hoped his creditors will give him time! "Above all this uproar was heard a voice, sharp and piercing like a cat's, lamenting, and relating with sobs the terrible misfortune of last night. At about three in the morning the inhabitants of the rue St. Victor had been startled out of their sleep by the cry of "Fire, fire!" A conflagration had burst forth in Derues' cellar, and though its progress had been arrested and the house saved from destruction, all the goods stored therein had perished. It apparently meant a considerable loss in barrels of oil, casks of brandy, boxes of soap, etc., which Derues estimated at not less than nine thousand livres.

By what unlucky chance the fire had been caused he had no idea. He recounted his visit to Madame Legrand, and pale, trembling, hardly able to sustain himself, he cried--

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