

The Champdoce Mystery

By

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The Champdoce Mystery	2
A Ducal Monomaniac	4
A Dangerous Acquaintance	12
A Bold Adventure	17
A Financial Transaction	20
A Bad Start.....	27
The Count De Puymandour	31
An Unlucky Blow	45
The Little Glass Bottle	55
The Honor Of The Name	69
A Thunderbolt.....	81
Marriage Bells; Funeral Knells.....	88
"Rash Word, Rash Deed."	94
A Scheme Of Vengeance	105
False Friend, Old Lover	110
A Stab In The Dark.....	116
Husband And Lover.....	121
Blade To Blade	129
The Heir Of Champdoce.....	137
Mascarin Speaks	142
A Sudden Check	149
A Melancholy Masher.....	160
A Gentleman In Difficulties.....	164

Ringing The Changes.....	168
The Vanishing Bills	175
The Spy	181
Mascarin Moves.....	187
A Cruel Slur	190
The Tempter.....	195
The Tafila Copper Mines, Limited	203
The Veiled Portrait.....	209
Gaston's Dilemma	214
M. Lecoq.....	221
Through The Air	231
The Day Of Reckoning.....	237
"Every Man To His Own Place."	247

A Ducal Monomaniac

The traveller who wishes to go from Poitiers to London by the shortest route will find that the simplest way is to take a seat in the stage-coach which runs to Saumur; and when you book your place, the polite clerk tells you that you must take your seat punctually at six o'clock. The next morning, therefore, the traveller has to rise from his bed at a very early hour, and make a hurried and incomplete toilet, and on arriving, flushed and panting, at the office, discover that there was no occasion for such extreme haste.

In the hotel from whence the coach starts every one seems to be asleep, and a waiter, whose eyes are scarcely open, wanders languidly about. There is not the slightest good in losing your temper, or in pouring out a string of violent remonstrances. In a small restaurant opposite a cup of hot coffee can be procured, and it is there that the disappointed travellers congregate, to await the hour when the coach really makes a start.

At length, however, all is ready, the conductor utters a tremendous execration, the coachman cracks his whip, the horses spring forward, the wheels rattle, and the coach is off at last. Whilst the conductor smokes his pipe tranquilly, the passengers gaze out of the windows and admire the beautiful aspect of the surrounding country. On each side stretch the woods and fields of Bevron. The covers are full of game, which has increased enormously, as the owner of the property has never allowed a shot to be fired since he had the misfortune, some twenty years ago, to kill one of his dependents whilst out shooting. On the right hand side some distance off rise the tower and battlements of the Chateau de Mussidan. It is two years ago since the Dowager Countess of Chevanche died, leaving all her fortune to her niece, Mademoiselle Sabine de Mussidan. She was a kind-hearted woman, rough and ready in her manner, but very popular amongst the peasantry. Farther off, on the top of some rising ground, appears an imposing structure, of an ancient style of architecture; this is the ancient residence of the Dukes of Champdoce. The left wing is a picturesque mass of ruins; the roof has fallen in, and the mullions of the windows are dotted with a thick growth of clustering ivy. Rain, storm, and sunshine have all done their work, and painted the mouldering walls with a hundred varied tints. In 1840 the inheritor of one of the noblest names of France resided here with his only son. The name of the present proprietor was Caesar Guillaume Duepair de Champdoce. He was looked upon both by the gentry and peasantry of the country side as a most eccentric individual. He could be seen any day wandering about, dressed in the most shabby manner, and wearing a coat that was frequently in urgent need of repair, a leathern cap on his head, wooden shoes, and a stout oaken cudgel in his hand. In winter he supplemented to these an ancient sheepskin coat. He was sixty years of age, very powerfully built, and possessing enormous strength. The expression upon his face showed that his will was as strong as his thews and sinews. Beneath his shaggy eyebrows

twinkled a pair of light-gray eyes, which darkened when a fit of passion overtook him, and this was no unusual occurrence.

During his military career in the army of the Conde, he had received a sabre cut across his cheek, and the cicatrice imparted a strange and unpleasant expression to his face. He was not a bad-hearted man, but headstrong, violent, and tyrannical to a degree. The peasants saluted him with a mixture of respect and dread as he walked to the chapel, to which he was a regular attendant on Sundays, with his son. During the Mass he made the responses in an audible voice, and at its conclusion invariably put a five-franc piece into the plate. This, his subscription to the newspaper, and the sum he paid for being shaved twice each week, constituted the whole of his outlay upon himself. He kept an excellent table, however; plump fowls, vegetables of all kinds, and the most delicious fruit were never absent from it. Everything, however, that appeared upon his well-plenished board was the produce of his fields, gardens, or woods. The nobility and gentry of the neighborhood frequently invited him to their hospitable tables, for they looked upon him as the head and chief of the nobility of the county; but he always refused their invitations, saying plainly, "No man who has the slightest respect for himself will accept hospitalities which he is not in a position to return." It was not the grinding clutch of poverty that drove the Duke to this exercise of severe economy, for his income from his estates brought him in fifty thousand francs per annum; and it was reported that his investments brought him in as much more. As a matter of course, therefore, he was looked upon as a miser, and a victim to the sordid vice of avarice.

His past life might, in some degree, offer an explanation of this conduct. Born in 1780, the Duke de Champdoce had joined the band of emigrants which swelled the ranks of Conde's army. An implacable opposer of the Revolution, he resided, during the glorious days of the Empire, in London, where dire poverty compelled him to gain a livelihood as a fencing master at the Restoration. He came back with the Bourbons to his native land, and, by an almost miraculous chance, was put again in possession of his ancestral domains. But in his opinion he was living in a state of utter destitution as compared to the enormous revenues enjoyed by the dead-and-gone members of the Champdoce family; and what pained him more was to see rise up by the side of the old aristocracy a new race which had attached itself to commerce and entered into business transactions. As he gazed upon the new order of things, the man whose pride of birth and position almost amounted to insanity, conceived the project to which he determined to devote the remainder of his life. He imagined that he had discovered a means by which he could restore the ancient house of Champdoce to all its former splendor and position. "I can," said he, "by living like a peasant and resorting to no unnecessary expense, treble my capital in twenty years; and if my son and my grandson will only follow my example, the race of Champdoce will again recover the proud position that it formerly held. Faithful to this idea, he wedded, in 1820, although his heart was entirely untouched, a young girl of noble birth but utterly devoid of beauty, though possessed of a magnificent dowry. Their union was an extremely unhappy one, and many persons did not hesitate to accuse the Duke

of treating with harshness and severity a young girl, who, having brought her husband five hundred thousand francs, could not understand why she should be refused a new dress when she urgently needed it. After twelve months of inconceivable unhappiness, she gave birth to a son who was baptized Louis Norbert, and six months afterwards she sank into an untimely grave.

The Duke did not seem to regret his loss very deeply. The boy appeared to be of a strong and robust constitution, and his mother's dowry would go to swell the revenues of the Champdoce family. He made his recent loss, too, the pretext for further retrenchments and economies.

Norbert was brought up exactly as a farmer's son would have been. Every morning he started off to work, carrying his day's provisions in a basket slung upon his back. As he grew older, he was taught to sow and reap, to estimate the value of a standing crop at a glance, and, last but not least, to drive a hard bargain. For a long time the Duke debated the expediency of permitting his son to be taught to read or write; and if he did so at last, it was owing to some severe remarks by the parish priest upon the day on which Norbert took the sacrament for the first time.

All went on well and smoothly until the day when Norbert, on his sixteenth birthday, accompanied his father to Poitiers for the first time.

At sixteen years of age, Louis Norbert de Champdoce looked fully twenty, and was as handsome a youth as could be seen for miles round. The sun had given a bronzed tint to his features which was exceedingly becoming. He had black hair, with a slight curl running through it, and large melancholy blue eyes, which he inherited from his mother. Poor girl! it was the sole beauty that she had possessed. He was utterly uncultured, and had been ruled with such a rod of iron by his father that he had never been a league from the Chateau. His ideas were barred by the little town of Bevron, with its sixty houses, its town hall, its small chapel, and principal river; and to him it seemed a spot full of noise and confusion. In the whole course of his life he had never spoken to three persons who did not belong to the district. Bred up in this secluded manner, it was almost impossible for him to understand that any one could lead a different existence to that of his own. His only pleasure was in procuring an abundant harvest, and his sole idea of excitement was High Mass on Sunday.

For more than a year the village girls had cast sly glances at him, but he was far too simple and innocent to notice this. When Mass was over, he generally walked over the farm with his father to inspect the work of the past week, or to set snares for the birds. His father at last determined to give him a wider experience, and one day said that he was to accompany him to Poitiers.

At a very early hour in the morning they started in one of the low country carts of the district, and under the seat were small sacks, containing over forty thousand francs in silver money. Norbert had long wished to visit Poitiers, but had never

done so, though it was but fifteen miles off. Poitiers is a quaint old town, with dilapidated pavements and tall, gloomy houses, the architecture of which dates from the tenth century; but Norbert thought that it must be one of the most magnificent cities in the world. It was market day when they drove in, and he was absolutely stupefied with surprise and excitement. He had never believed there could be so many people in one place, and hardly noticed that the cart had pulled up opposite a lawyer's office. His father shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Come, Norbert, lad, we are there," said he.

The young man jumped to the ground, and assisted mechanically to remove the sacks. The servile manner of the lawyer did not strike him, nor did he listen to the conversation between him and his father. Finally, the business being concluded, they took their departure, and, driving to the Market Place, put up the horse and cart at an old-fashioned, dingy inn, where they took their breakfast in the public room at a table where the wagoners were having a violent quarrel over their meal. The Duke, however, had other business to transact than the investment of his money, for he wanted to find the whereabouts of a miller who was somewhat in his debt. Norbert waited for him in front of the inn, and could not help feeling rather uncomfortable at finding himself alone. All at once some one came up and touched him lightly on the shoulder. He turned round sharply, and found himself face to face with a young man, who, seeing his look of surprise, said,--

"What! have you entirely forgotten your old friend Montlouis?"

Montlouis was the son of one of the Duke's farmers, and he and Norbert had often played together in past years. They had driven their cows to the meadows together, and had spent long days together fishing or searching for birds' nests. The dress now worn by Montlouis had at first prevented Norbert from recognizing him, for he was attired in the uniform of the college at which his father had placed him, being desirous of making something more than a mere farmer of his son.

"What are you doing here?" asked Norbert.

"I am waiting for my father."

"So am I. Let us have a cup of coffee together."

Montlouis led his playmate into a small wine shop near at hand. He seemed a little disposed to presume upon the superior knowledge of the world which he had recently acquired.

"If there was a billiard-table here," said he, "we could pass away the time with a game, though, to be sure, it runs into money."

Norbert never had had more than a few pence in his pocket at one time, and at this remark the color rose to his face, and he felt much humiliated.

"My father," added the young collegian, "gives me all I ask for. I am certain of getting one, if not two prizes at the next examination; and when I have taken my degree, the Count de Mussidan has promised to make me his steward. What do you think that you will do?"

"I--I don't know," stammered Norbert.

"You will, I suppose, dig and toil in the fields, as your father has done before you. You are the son of the noblest and the richest man for miles round, and yet you are not so happy as I am."

Upon the return of the Duke de Champdoce some little time after this conversation, he did not detect any change in his son's manner; but the words spoken by Montlouis had fallen into Norbert's brain like a subtle poison, and a few careless sentences uttered by an inconsiderate lad had annihilated the education of sixteen years, and a complete change had taken place in Norbert's mind, a change which was utterly unsuspected by those around him, for his manner of bringing up had taught him to keep his own counsel.

The fixed smile on his features entirely masked the angry feelings that were working in his breast. He went through his daily tasks, which had once been a pleasure to him, with utter disgust and loathing. His eyes had been suddenly opened, and he now understood a host of things which he had never before even endeavored to comprehend. He saw now that his proper position was among the nobles, whom he never saw except when they attended Mass at the little chapel in Bevron. The Count de Mussidan, so haughty and imposing, with his snow-white hair; the aristocratic-looking Marquis de Laurebourg, of whom the peasants stood in the greatest awe, were always courteous and even cordial in their salutations, while the noble dames smiled graciously upon him. Proud and haughty as they were, they evidently looked upon his father and himself as their equals, in spite of the coarse garments that they wore. The realization of these facts effected a great change in Norbert. He was the equal of all these people, and yet how great a gulf separated him from them. While he and his father tramped to Mass in heavy shoes, the others drove up in their carriages with powdered footmen to open the doors. Why was this extraordinary difference? He knew enough of the value of crops and land to know that his father was as wealthy as any of these gentlemen. The laborers on the farm said that his father was a miser, and the villagers asserted that he got up at night and gazed with rapture upon the treasure that was hidden away from men's eyes.

"Norbert is an unhappy lad," they would say. "He who ought to be able to command all the pleasures of life is worse off than our own children."

He also recollected that one day, as his father was talking to the Marquis de Laurebourg, an old lady, who was doubtless the Marchioness, had said, "Poor boy! he was so early deprived of a mother's care!" What did that mean unless it was a reflection upon the arbitrary behavior of his father? Norbert saw that these

people always had their children with them, and the sight of this filled him with jealousy, and brought tears of anguish to his eyes. Sometimes, as he trudged wearily behind his yoke of oxen, goad in hand, he would see some of these young scions of the aristocracy canter by on horseback, and the friendly wave of the hand with which they greeted him almost appeared to his jaundiced mind a premeditated insult. What could they find to do in Paris, to which they all took wing at the first breath of winter? This was a question which he found himself utterly unable to solve. To drink to intoxication offered no charms to him, and yet this was the only pleasure which the villagers seemed to enjoy. Those young men must have some higher class of entertainment, but in what could it consist? Norbert could hardly read a line without spelling every word; but these new thoughts running through his mind caused him to study, so as to improve his education. His father had often told him that he did not like lads who were always poring over books; and so Norbert did not discontinue his studies, but simply avoided bringing them under his father's notice. He knew that there was a large collection of books in one of the upstairs rooms of the Chateau. He managed to force the lock of the door, and he found some thousands of volumes, of which at least two hundred were novels, which had been the solace of his mother's unhappy life. With all the eagerness of a man who is at the point of starvation and finds an unexpected store of provisions, Norbert seized upon them. At first he had great difficulty in dividing fact from fiction.

He arrived at two conclusions from perusing this heterogeneous mass of literature--one was, that he was most unhappy; and the other was, that he hated his father with a cold and determined loathing. Had he dared, he would have shown this feeling openly, but the Duke de Champdoce inspired him with an unconquerable feeling of terror. This state of affairs continued for some months, and at the end of that time the Duke felt that he ought to make his son acquainted with his projects. One Sunday, after supper, he commenced this task. Norbert had never seen his father so animated as he was at this moment, when all his ancestral pride blazed in his eyes. He explained at length the acts and deeds of those heroes who had been the ornament of their house, and enumerated the influential marriages which had been made by them in the days when their very name was a power in the land. And what remained of all their power and rank, save their Parisian domicile, their old Chateau, and some two hundred thousand francs of income?

Norbert could hardly credit what he heard; he had never believed that his father possessed such enormous wealth. "Why, it is inconceivable!" he muttered. And yet, as he looked round, he saw that the surroundings were those of a peasant's cottage. How could he endure so many discomforts and wounds to his pride? In his anger he absolutely started to his feet with the intention of reproaching his father, but his courage failed him, and he fell back into a chair, quivering with emotion.

The Duke de Champdoce was pacing up and down the room.

"Do you think it so little?" asked he angrily.

Norbert knew that not one of the neighboring nobility who had the reputation of being wealthy possessed half this annual income, and it was with a feeling of bitter anger in his heart that he listened to the broken words which fell from his father's lips. All at once the Duke halted in front of his son's chair.

"What fortune I have now," said he in a hoarse voice, "is little or nothing in times like these, when the tradesman contrives to make an almost unlimited income, and, setting up as a gentleman, imitates, not our virtues, but our vices; while the nobles, not understanding the present hour, are in poverty and want. Without money, nothing can be done. To hold his own against these mushroom fortunes, a Champdoce should possess millions. Neither you nor I, my son, will see our coffers overflowing with millions, but our descendants will reap the benefit of our toil. Our ancestors gained their name and glory by their determination; let us show that we are their worthy offspring."

As he approached the subject which had occupied his mind entirely for years, the old noble's voice quivered and shook.

"I have done my duty," said he, calming himself by a mighty effort, "and it is now your turn to do yours. You shall marry some wealthy heiress, and you shall bring up your son as I have reared and nurtured you. You will be able to leave him fifteen millions; and if he will only follow in our footsteps, he will be able to bequeath to his heir a fortune that a monarch might envy. And this shall and will come to pass, because it is my fixed determination."

The strange outburst of confidence petrified Norbert.

"The task is heavy and painful," continued the Duke, "but it is one that several scores of illustrious houses have accomplished. He who wishes to revive the fallen fortunes of some mighty house must live only in the future, and have no thought but for the prosperity of his descendants. More than once I have faltered and hesitated, but I have conquered my weakness, and now only live to make the line of Champdoce the most wealthy in France. You have seen me haggle for an hour over a wretched louis, but it was for the reason that at a future day one of our descendants might fling it to a beggar from the window of his magnificent equipage. Next year I will take you to Paris and show you our house there. You will see in it the most wonderful tapestry, pictures by the best masters, for I have ornamented and embellished it as a lover adorns a house for a beloved mistress, and that house, Norbert, is the home that your grandchildren will dwell in."

The Duke uttered these words in a tone of jubilant triumph.

"I have spoken to you thus," resumed he, after a short pause, "because you are now of an age to listen to the truth, and because I wished you to understand the rules by which you are to regulate your life. You have now arrived at years of

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