

# **Within an Inch of His Life**

by

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# Chapter I.1

FIRST PART: Fire At Valpinson

These were the facts:--

In the night from the 22nd to the 23rd of June, 1871, towards one o'clock in the morning, the Paris suburb of Sauveterre, the principal and most densely populated suburb of that pretty town, was startled by the furious gallop of a horse on its ill-paved streets.

A number of peaceful citizens rushed to the windows.

The dark night allowed these only to see a peasant in his shirt sleeves, and bareheaded, who belabored a large gray mare, on which he rode bareback, with his heels and a huge stick.

This man, after having passed the suburbs, turned into National Street, formerly Imperial Street, crossed New-Market Square, and stopped at last before the fine house which stands at the corner of Castle Street.

This was the house of the mayor of Sauveterre, M. Seneschal, a former lawyer, and now a member of the general council.

Having alighted, the peasant seized the bell-knob, and began to ring so furiously, that, in a few moments, the whole house was in an uproar.

A minute later, a big, stout servant-man, his eyes heavy with sleep, came and opened the door, and then cried out in an angry voice,--

"Who are you, my man? What do you want? Have you taken too much wine? Don't you know at whose house you are making such a row?"

"I wish to see the mayor," replied the peasant instantly. "Wake him up!"

M. Seneschal was wide awake.

Dressed in a large dressing-gown of gray flannel, a candlestick in his hand, troubled, and unable to disguise his trouble, he had just come down into the hall, and heard all that was said.

"Here is the mayor," he said in an ill-satisfied tone. "What do you want of him at this hour, when all honest people are in bed?"

Pushing the servant aside, the peasant came up to him, and said, making not the slightest attempt at politeness,--

"I come to tell you to send the fire-engine."

"The engine!"

"Yes; at once. Make haste!"

The mayor shook his head.

"Hm!" he said, according to a habit he had when he was at a loss what to do; "hm, hm!"

And who would not have been embarrassed in his place?

To get the engine out, and to assemble the firemen, he had to rouse the whole town; and to do this in the middle of the night was nothing less than to frighten the poor people of Sauveterre, who had heard the drums beating the alarm but too often during the war with the Germans, and then again during the reign of the Commune. Therefore M. Seneschal asked,--

"Is it a serious fire?"

"Serious!" exclaimed the peasant. "How could it be otherwise with such a wind as this,--a wind that would blow off the horns of our oxen."

"Hm!" uttered the mayor again. "Hm, hm!"

It was not exactly the first time, since he was mayor of Sauveterre, that he was thus roused by a peasant, who came and cried under his window, "Help! Fire, fire!"

At first, filled with compassion, he had hastily called out the firemen, put himself at their head, and hurried to the fire.

And when they reached it, out of breath, and perspiring, after having made two or three miles at double-quick, they found what? A wretched heap of straw, worth about ten dollars, and almost consumed by the fire. They had had their trouble for nothing.

The peasants in the neighborhood had cried, "Wolf!" so often, when there was no reason for it, that, even when the wolf really was there, the townspeople were slow in believing it.

"Let us see," said M. Seneschal: "what is burning?"

The peasant seemed to be furious at all these delays, and bit his long whip.

"Must I tell you again and again," he said, "that every thing is on fire,--barns, outhouses, haystacks, the houses, the old castle, and every thing? If you wait much longer, you won't find one stone upon another in Valpinson."

The effect produced by this name was prodigious.

"What?" asked the mayor in a half-stifled voice, "Valpinson is on fire?"

"Yes."

"At Count Claudieuse's?"

"Of course."

"Fool! Why did you not say so at once?" exclaimed the mayor.

He hesitated no longer.

"Quick!" he said to his servant, "go and get me my clothes. Wait, no! my wife can help me. There is no time to be lost. You run to Bolton, the drummer, you know, and tell him from me to beat the alarm instantly all over town. Then you run to Capt. Parenteau's, and explain to him what you have heard. Ask him to get the keys of the engine-house.--Wait!--when you have done that, come back and put the horse in.--Fire at Valpinson! I shall go with the engine. Go, run, knock at every door, cry, 'Fire! Fire!' Tell everybody to come to the New-Market Square."

When the servant had run off as fast as he could, the mayor turned to the peasant, and said,--

"And you, my good man, you get on your horse, and reassure the count. Tell them all to take courage, not to give up; we are coming to help them."

But the peasant did not move.

"Before going back to Valpinson," he said, "I have another commission to attend to in town."

"Why? What is it?"

"I am to get the doctor to go back with me."

"The doctor! Why? Has anybody been hurt?"

"Yes, master, Count Claudieuse."

"How imprudent! I suppose he rushed into danger as usually."

"Oh, no! He has been shot twice!"

The mayor of Sauveterre nearly dropped his candlestick.

"Shot! Twice!" he said. "Where? When? By whom?"

"Ah! I don't know."

"But"--

"All I can tell you is this. They have carried him into a little barn that was not on fire yet. There I saw him myself lying on the straw, pale like a linen sheet, his eyes closed, and bloody all over."

"Great God! They have not killed him?"

"He was not dead when I left."

"And the countess?"

"Our lady," replied the peasant with an accent of profound veneration, "was in the barn on her knees by the count's side, washing his wounds with fresh water. The two little ladies were there too."

M. Seneschal trembled with excitement.

"It is a crime that has been committed, I suppose."

"Why, of course!"

"But who did it? What was the motive?"

"Ah! that is the question."

"The count is very passionate, to be sure, quite violent, in fact; but still he is the best and fairest of men, everybody knows that."

"Everybody knows it."

"He never did any harm to anybody."

"That is what all say."

"As for the countess"--

"Oh!" said the peasant eagerly, "she is the saint of saints."

The mayor tried to come to some conclusion.

"The criminal, therefore, must be a stranger. We are overrun with vagabonds and beggars on the tramp. There is not a day on which a lot of ill-looking fellows do not appear at my office, asking for help to get away."

The peasant nodded his head, and said,--

"That is what I think. And the proof of it is, that, as I came along, I made up my mind I would first get the doctor, and then report the crime at the police office."

"Never mind," said the mayor. "I will do that myself. In ten minutes I shall see the attorney of the Commonwealth. Now go. Don't spare your horse, and tell your mistress that we are all coming after you."

In his whole official career M. Seneschal had never been so terribly shocked. He lost his head, just as he did on that unlucky day, when, all of a sudden, nine hundred militia-men fell upon him, and asked to be fed and lodged. Without his wife's help he would never have been able to dress himself. Still he was ready when his servant returned.

The good fellow had done all he had been told to do, and at that moment the beat of the drum was heard in the upper part of the town.

"Now, put the horse in," said M. Seneschal: "let me find the carriage at the door when I come back."

In the streets he found all in an uproar. At every window a head popped out, full of curiosity or terror; on all sides house doors were opened, and promptly closed again.

"Great God!" he thought, "I hope I shall find Daubigeon at home!" M. Daubigeon, who had been first in the service of the empire, and then in the service of the republic, was one of M. Seneschal's best friends. He was a man of about forty years, with a cunning look in his eye, a permanent smile on his face, and a confirmed bachelor, with no small pride in his consistency. The good people of Sauveterre thought he did not look stern and solemn enough for his profession. To be sure he was very highly esteemed; but his optimism was not popular; they reproached him for being too kind-hearted, too reluctant to press criminals whom he had to prosecute, and thus prone to encourage evil-doers.

He accused himself of not being inspired with the "holy fire," and, as he expressed it in his own way, "of robbing Themis of all the time he could, to devote it to the friendly Muses." He was a passionate lover of fine books, rare editions, costly bindings, and fine illustrations; and much the larger part of his annual income of about ten thousand francs went to buying books. A scholar of the old-fashioned type, he professed boundless admiration for Virgil and Juvenal, but, above all, for Horace, and proved his devotion by constant quotations.

Roused, like everybody else in the midst of his slumbers, this excellent man hastened to put on his clothes, when his old housekeeper came in, quite excited, and told him that M. Seneschal was there, and wanted to see him.

"Show him in!" he said, "show him in!"

And, as soon as the mayor entered, he continued:--

"For you will be able to tell me the meaning of all this noise, this beating of drums,--

'Clamorque, virum, clangorque tubarum.' "

"A terrible misfortune has happened," answered the mayor. From the tone of his voice one might have imagined it was he himself who had been afflicted; and the lawyer was so strongly impressed in this way, that he said,--

"My dear friend, what is the matter? Quid? Courage, my friend, keep cool! Remember that the poet advises us, in misfortune never to lose our balance of mind:--

'AEquam, memento, rebus in arduis,  
Sevare mentem.' "

"Incendiaries have set Valpinson on fire!" broke in the mayor.

"You do not say so? Great God!

'Jupiter,  
Quod verbum audio.' "

"More than that. Count Claudieuse has been shot, and by this time he is probably dead."

"Oh!"

"You hear the drummer is beating the alarm. I am going to the fire; and I have only come here to report the matter officially to you, and to ask you to see to it that justice be done promptly and energetically."

There was no need of such a serious appeal to stop at once all the lawyer's quotations.

"Enough!" he said eagerly. "Come, let us take measures to catch the wretches."

When they reached National Street, it was as full as at mid-day; for Sauveterre is one of those rare provincial towns in which an excitement is too rare a treat to be neglected. The sad event had by this time become fully known everywhere. At first the news had been doubted; but when the doctor's cab had passed the crowd at full speed, escorted by a peasant on horseback, the reports were believed. Nor had the firemen lost time. As soon

as the mayor and M. Daubigeon appeared on New-Market Square, Capt. Parenteau rushed up to them, and, touching his helmet with a military salute, said,--

"My men are ready."

"All?"

"There are hardly ten absentees. When they heard that Count and Countess Claudieuse were in need--great heavens!--you know, they all were ready in a moment."

"Well, then, start and make haste," commanded M. Seneschal. "We shall overtake you on the way: M. Daubigeon and I are going to pick up M. Galpin, the magistrate."

They had not far to go.

The magistrate had already been looking for them all over town: he was just appearing on the Square, and saw them at once.

In striking contrast with the commonwealth attorney, M. Galpin was a professional man in the full sense of the word, and perhaps a little more. He was the magistrate all over, from head to foot, and from the gaiters on his ankles to the light blonde whiskers on his face. Although he was quite young, yet no one had ever seen him smile, or heard him make a joke. He was so very stiff that M. Daubigeon suggested he had been impaled alive on the sword of justice.

At Sauveterre M. Galpin was looked upon as a superior man. He certainly believed it himself: hence he was very impatient at being confined to so narrow a sphere of action, and thought his brilliant ability wasted upon the prosecution of a chicken-thief or a poacher. But his almost desperate efforts to secure a better office had always been unsuccessful. In vain he had enlisted a host of friends in his behalf. In vain he had thrown himself into politics, ready to serve any party that would serve him.

But M. Galpin's ambition was not easily discouraged, and lately after a journey to Paris, he had thrown out hints at a great match, which would shortly procure him that influence in high places which so far he had been unable to obtain. When he joined M. Daubigeon and the mayor, he said,--

"Well, this is a horrible affair! It will make a tremendous noise." The mayor began to give him the details, but he said,--

"Don't trouble yourself. I know all you know. I met the peasant who had been sent in, and I have examined him."

Then, turning to the commonwealth attorney, he added,--

"I think we ought to proceed at once to the place where the crime has been committed."

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