

# The Parricide Punished

By Anonymous

*The following very singular adventure is related as a fact in La Nouvelle Bibliothèque de Société; and is said to have happened in one of the provinces of France. It is related in a letter to a friend.*

The adventure which I am going to relate to you, my dear friend, is of so strange and dreadful a nature, that you are the only person to whom I must ever disclose the secret.

The nuptials of Mademoiselle de Vildac were celebrated yesterday; at which, as a neighbour, custom and good manners required my attendance. You are acquainted with M. de Vildac: he has a countenance which never pleased me; his eyes have often a wild and suspicious glare, a something which has given me disagreeable sensations for which I could no way account. I could not help observing yesterday, that, in the midst of joy and revelry, he partook not of pleasure: far from being penetrated with the happiness of his new son and daughter, the delight of others seemed to him a secret torment.

The feast was held at his ancient castle; and, when the hour of rest arrived, I was conducted to a chamber immediately under the Old Tower at the north end. I had just fallen into my first sleep, when I was awakened and alarmed by a heavy kind of noise over head. I listened, and heard very distinctly the foot-steps of some one slowly descending, and dragging chains that clanked upon the stairs. The noise approached, and presently my chamber door was opened; the clanking of the chains redoubled, and he who bore them went towards the chimney. There were a few embers half extinguished; these he scraped together, and said, in a sepulchral voice, 'Alas! how long it is since I have seen a fire.' I own, my friend, I was terrified: I seized my sword, looked between my curtains, and saw, by the glimmer of the embers, a withered old man, half naked, with a bald head, and a white beard. He put his trembling hands to the wood, which began to blaze, and soon afterwards turned towards the door by which he entered, fixed his eyes with horror upon the floor, as if he beheld something most horrible, and exclaimed with agony, 'God! God!'

My emotions caused my curtains to make a noise, and he turned affrighted. 'Who is there?' said he. 'Is there any one in that bed?'—'Yes,' I replied; 'and who are you? Contending passions would not for a while suffer him to speak; at length he answered, 'I am the most miserable of men. This, perhaps, is more than I ought to say: but it is so long, so many years, since I have seen or spoken to a human being, that I cannot resist. Fear nothing; come towards the fire; listen to my sorrows, and for a moment soften my sufferings.'

My fear gave place to pity; I sat down by him. My condescension and my feelings moved him; he took my hand, bathed it with tears, and said, 'Generous man! let me desire you first to satisfy my curiosity. 'Fell me why you lodge in this chamber, where no man has lodged before for so many years; and what mean the rejoicings I have heard? what extraordinary thing has happened to-day in the castle?'

When I had informed him of the marriage of Vildac's daughter, he lifted up his hands to heaven—'Has Vildac a daughter! and is she married! Almighty God grant she may be happy! grant she may never know guilt!' He paused for a moment: 'Learn who I am,' said he. 'You see, you speak to—the father of Vildac—the cruel Vildac! Yet, what right have I to complain?—Should I—should I call man or tiger cruel?'—'What!' exclaimed I with astonishment, 'is Vildac your son? Vildac! the monster! shut you from the sight of man! load you with chains! And lives

there such a wretch?’

‘Behold,’ said he, ‘the power, the detestable power of riches! ‘The hard and pitiless heart of my unhappy son is impenetrable to every tender sentiment: impenetrable to love and friendship, he is also deaf to the cries of nature; and, to enjoy my lands, has hung these eating irons on me.

‘He went one day to visit a neighbouring young nobleman, who had lately lost his father; him he saw encircled by his vassals, and occupied in receiving their homage and their rents: the sight made a shocking impression upon the imagination of Vildac, which had long been haunted with a strong desire to enjoy his future patrimony. I observed, at his return, a degree of thoughtfulness and gloom about him that was unusual. Five days afterwards I was seized during the night, carried off naked by three men masked, and lodged in this tower. I know not by what means Vildac spread the report of my death; but I guessed, by the tolling of the bells, and funeral dirges, more solemn than for inferior persons, they were performed for my interment. The idea was horrid; and I entreated most earnestly to speak, but for a moment, to my son, but in vain; those who brought me my food, no doubt, supposed me a criminal, condemned to perish in prison. It is now twenty years since I was first confined here. I perceived this morning that my door was not secured, and I waited till night to profit by the accident: yet I do not wish to escape; but the liberty of a few yards is much to a prisoner.’

‘No,’ cried I, ‘you shall quit that dishonourable habitation. Heaven has destined me to be your deliverer, defender, support, and guide. Every body sleeps; now is the time; let us begone.’

‘It must not be,’ said he, after a moment’s silence. ‘Solitude has changed my ideas, and my principles. Happiness is but opinion. Now that I am enured to suffer, why should I fly from my fate? What is there for me to wish in this world? The die is thrown, and this tower must be my tomb!’

‘Surely you dream!’ answered I. ‘Let us not lose time; the night is advanced: we shall presently’ have but a moment. Come!’

‘I am affected,’ replied he, ‘but cannot profit by your kindness. Liberty has no charms for my small remains of life. Shall I dishonour my son; or which way has his daughter given me offence, to whom I was never known, by whom I was never seen? This sweet innocent sleeps happily in the arms of her husband, and shall I overwhelm her with infamy? Yet, might I but behold her! might I but lock her in these feeble arms, and bedew her bosom with my tears!—‘Tis in vain! It cannot be! I never must look upon her!’

‘Adieu! Day begins to break, and we shall be surprised. I will return to my prison.’

‘No,’ said I, stopping him; ‘I will not suffer that. Slavery has enfeebled your soul, I must inspire you with courage. Let us be gone; we will afterwards examine whether it be proper to make the matter public. My house, my friends, my fortune, are at your service. No one shall know who you are; and, since it is necessary, Vildac’s crime shall be concealed. What do you fear?’

‘Nothing! I am all gratitude. But, oh, no! it cannot be! here I must remain.’

‘Well, act as you please; but if you refuse to fly with me, I will go immediately to the governor of the province, tell him who you are, and return, armed with his authority and his power, to wrest you from the barbarity of an inhuman child.’

‘Beware what you do! abuse not my confidence. Leave me to perish.—You know me not. I am a monster! Day and the blessed sun would sicken at my sight. Infamous I am, and covered with guilt—guilt most horrible!—Turn your eyes upon that wall; behold these boards; sprinkled with blood, a father’s blood;—murdered by his son; by me!—Ha! look! behold! do you not see him!’

he stretches forth his bleeding arms! he begs for pity! the vital stream flows out! he falls! he groans! Oh horror! madness! despair!

The miserable wretch fell convulsed with terror to the floor; and when fear and passion in part subsided, he durst not turn his guilty eyes towards me, where I stood transfixed with horror. As soon as he had the power, he approached the door—‘Farewell,’ said he, ‘be innocent, if you would be happy! The wretch who so lately moved your pity, is now become detestable to you, as well as to himself; he goes unlamented to the dungeon, whence alive he shall never return!’

I had neither the power to speak or move. The castle was become a place most abominable; and I departed on the morning. I must leave the neighbourhood; I cannot bear the sight of Vildac, nor the remembrance of this night.—How, my friend, is it possible that humanity can produce wickedness so intolerable and unnatural!