

A Legend of Marseilles

By Unknown

There is a tradition in Marseilles that on a particular night, about two hundred years ago, all the clocks in that city were put forward one hour—a tradition which is said to have had its origin in the following story—

There lived in the vicinity of that city a Monsieur Valette, a gentleman of ancient family and of considerable fortune. He had married Maria Danville, daughter of the mayor of the city, a young lady, who was, from her beauty, called 'the rose of Marseilles,' and who united to every personal charm the most amiable disposition and a most accomplished mind. He had the happiness of seeing himself beloved by the most charming of her sex. M. Valette was blessed with two sons and two daughters, the fair fruit of a happy union; and he dwelt in a beautiful villa in the vicinity of the city, commanding an extensive view of its fine bay—a seat which had been the favourite residence of his ancestors.

As his children grew up, however, he was induced to move to Paris, which place both he and Madame Valette conceived to be more suited to the education of their family, though he was himself fond of rural retirement. The removal of M. Valette and of his family was deplored by his tenantry, to whom he had been as a father, but particularly as M. le Brun, whom he had left factor on his estate, was, though a just man, of harsh manners and of a precise and unaccommodating temper.

M. Valette found it necessary in Paris, as all persons of distinction do, to mix with the gay and the fashionable. The time that had been given to the joys of domestic retirement was now consumed in the giddy round of fashion and of amusements, and his open and generous temper led him into a mode of life which but ill accorded with the moderation of his fortune. He made frequent demands upon his factor for renewed remittances; and this man was forced to use rigorous and oppressive measures to procure for his master the necessary means. The scanty vintage of the preceding year had made such demands doubly hard to be obeyed; and Le Brun became as odious to the tenantry as Valette himself had been respected and beloved.

These circumstances were but too little known to Valette, or his generous soul would have revolted from a manner of life which wrung from his tenants almost all their hard-earned substance. One night, as he slept in Paris, the form of his factor appeared to him, covered with blood, informing him that he had been murdered by the tenantry on M. Valette's estate for rigour in collecting his revenue, and his body buried under a particular tree, which it minutely described. The ghost of Le Brun requested, moreover, that he would immediately undertake a journey to Marseilles, and deposit his remains in the grave of his ancestors. To this request Valette assented, and the apparition at once disappeared.

The morning came to dissipate the gloom which the vision of the night had occasioned; and though he had been for some time astonished at the unusual silence of Le Brun, yet he could not help considering the whole as a mere illusion of the imagination. The stories of ghosts he had always considered as fit only for the nursery, and his manly and enlightened mind was wholly unimbued with the least tincture of credulity or superstition. To have taken so distant a journey on such an errand he knew would be interpreted as the height of superstition; and he concealed an incident the very relation of which must have subjected him to the ridicule of his acquaintance.

‘You are more thoughtful than usual, father,’ said one of his daughters to him next morning at breakfast.

‘I am thinking, my dear,’ said M. Valette, ‘why I have been so long in hearing from Le Brun. I need money, and my demands have not been met.’

Night now came again to usher in that period of reflection which the dissipation of the day had banished, and about the hour of midnight Le Brun again appeared to reproach him for his negligence. There was an evident frown on his countenance, and he inquired of Valette why he had delayed to fulfil his earnest request. Valette again promised immediate obedience, and the night was no longer disturbed by so unwelcome an intruder. Morning came again, the gaiety of which even the voice of sorrow could scarcely resist; and the same train of thoughts occurred to him as on the preceding day.

‘It must still be a dream,’ said he to himself, ‘though a remarkable one certainly. To-day will probably bring me the expected letters from Le Brun; and I must yet delay a journey which must subject me at once to ridicule and to inconvenience.’ The messengers from the dead seldom petition in vain; and the third night the expected vision appeared with a terrible frown on its countenance, and reproached Valette for his want of friendship to the man whose blood had been spilt in his cause, and for disregarding the peace of his soul.

‘If you will grant me my request,’ said the phantom, ‘I promise to give you twenty-four hours’ warning of the time of your own death to arrange your affairs, and to make your peace with God.’

M. Valette promised in the most solemn manner, that he would set off next morning for Marseilles to execute the awful commission; and, with a look of confidence in his words, the apparition of Le Brun disappeared from his sight.

Valette rose next day with the light, and alleging to his family that he had business of the most urgent necessity which called him immediately to Marseilles, he departed, accompanied by a few faithful domestics, to visit the seat of his ancestors after an absence of ten years. There, alas! he found that the murder of Le Brun was but too true. Under the tree that had been so minutely described to him, and which grew in a solitary corner of an adjoining forest, he found the mangled remains, which he caused to be decently interred in the family vault. He in vain, however, made every search for the murderers. The same cause which occasioned the death of the unfortunate Le Brun led the tenants to the most obstinate concealment of the manner of it, and Valette saw, with horror and regret, the misery they had suffered in times of extreme difficulty merely that he might be furnished with the means of extravagance.

‘Had I imagined,’ he exclaimed, ‘that my unsatisfactory pleasures would have cost so dear, I would long since have retired from fashionable life, and sought that happiness in the peaceful seclusion of a beautiful country which was always most congenial to the wishes of my soul. I shall return to my estate,’ continued he, ‘that my children may learn to relish its beauties, and acquire an attachment to its tranquil pleasures, and to its simple inhabitants. May the blood which has been shed prove a memorable lesson to my sons of the misery of extravagance and the guilt of oppression.’

Impressed with such reflections, M. Valette no sooner returned to Paris than he communicated to his wife the matured and unalterable resolution of his soul. Madame Valette, having accomplished the principal object of her residence in Paris—the education of her family—assented with pleasure to a return to those tranquil enjoyments which were ever dearest to her heart. In little more than a year they found themselves again in the chateau of their ancestors, and their return was hailed by a delighted tenantry—by the widow and the fatherless, by the indigent

and the afflicted. To relieve the distresses of the poor was neither the least important nor the least pleasant employment of this family, and on them -descended the blessings of those who had been ready to perish.

About eight years after their return from Paris, the family mansion demanding repairs, they found it necessary to remove for some time to Marseilles, where they resided in the house of M. Danville, the father of Madame Valette. Time, which wears away even the rocks of the earth, had effaced the impression of his dream from the mind of Valette, and cares of a more tender and domestic nature chiefly occupied his thoughts.

Sitting one night after supper in the midst of his happy family, a loud and sudden knocking was heard at the gate; but when the servant went to open it, he found nobody without. After a short interval the same loud knocking was again heard, and one of Valette's sons accompanied the servant to the gate to see who demanded admittance at so unseasonable an hour. To their astonishment no one was to be seen there. A third time the knocking was repeated still louder and louder, and a sudden thought darted across the mind of Valette.

'I will go to the gate myself,' said he. 'I believe I know who it is that knocks.'

His presentiment was too truly realised. As he opened the gate the factor appeared, and whispered to him that next night at the same time—for it was now the twelfth hour—he must prepare himself to leave the world. Then, waving his hand, as if to bid adieu, Le Brim disappeared.

M. Valette returned, pale and ghastly as the phantom he had seen, to the family circle; and, upon their anxious and urgent inquiries as to the cause of his uneasiness, related for the first time the incident of the dream, and the promised warning he had just received. A sudden gloom and melancholy was spread over the faces of all present. Madame Valette threw her arms round the neck of her husband and embraced him with tears, while his daughters clung round Isis knees in the utmost distress. M. Danville, however, obstinately declared his incredulity, and considered the whole as one of those unaccountable illusions to which even the strongest minds are sometimes liable. He declared his son-in-law must be the victim of some mental delusion, and although he could not account for—his dream, said that this last vision must be mere imagination. No sooner had M. Valette retired to his apartment than M. Danville endeavoured to impress the same opinion on the family of his son-in-law. Apprehensive lest the very imagination of the event might occasion it, or at least be attended by disagreeable consequences, he thought of a device which, as mayor of the city, it was in his power easily to accomplish. This was to cause all the clocks of Marseilles to be put forward one hour, that they might strike the predicted hour of twelve next night when it should be only eleven; so that, if there were really anything in the warning of the ghost, when the time should be believed by Valette to have passed over without any event supervening, he might be persuaded to dissipate the imagination with which he was so deeply impressed.

Next day the unhappy Valette made every effort to arrange his worldly affairs according to his wishes, had his will executed in due legal form, received the sacrament, and prepared himself with all decency and solemnity for the awful event he anticipated. The evening approached. From a large open window which looked into a beautiful garden, and commanded an extensive view into the surrounding country, he saw the sun go down, as he believed, for the last time. For the last time he beheld its blessed light irradiate the blue heavens and gladden the green earth. He thought the myrtles and acacias, as they bowed their limber heads to the breeze, waved him a last adieu. He imagined that the fountains, that threw their drizzling spray on high, played their music with a more plaintive murmur. Now came down upon the world the shadows of night which he

believed were to usher him into the darkness of the grave, he beheld the stars twinkle in the azure heaven with a milder radiance than usual. He viewed with tears of affection his wife and his children sitting around him with looks of concealed thoughtfulness and sorrow.

‘To leave you, the dearest objects of my affections,’ said he, within himself, ‘gives to death all its anguish. It were not heaven to be without you. But we part to meet again.’

He considered himself like a criminal doomed to death waiting the hour of his execution, and counting the few remaining moments he had to live.

The lamps were now lighted in the hall, and he sat in the midst of his family and partook of the last supper which, he believed, he was ever to eat upon earth. The clocks of Marseilles tolled the eleventh hour.

‘My dearest Maria’ said he to Madame Valette, ‘I have now only one hour to live. There is to me but one hour betwixt time and eternity.’

It approached. There was an unusual silence in the company. The twelfth hour struck, when, rising up, he exclaimed—

‘Heaven have mercy on me! My time is come.’

He heard the hour distinctly rung out by all the bells in Marseilles.

‘The Angel of Death’ said he, ‘delays his coming. Could all have been a delusion? No, it is impossible!’

‘The ghost’ said M. Danville, in a tone of irony, ‘has deceived you. He is one of the lying prophets of Ahab. Are you not yet safe? Consider the whole as a powerful illusion of the imagination, and banish, my friend, a thought which so completely overwhelms you.’

‘Well,’ rejoined Valette, ‘God’s will be done! I shall retire to my chamber and spend the night in grateful prayer for so signal a deliverance, for so I must always consider it.’

After having been nearly an hour in his chamber, M. Valette recollected that he had by mistake left unsigned in his library a document of importance to his family, to which it was necessary his name should be affixed. In passing from his bedchamber to the library he had to cross by the head of a flight of stairs, which led immediately down to the cellar where M. Danville kept his choicest wines. At this spot he heard a confused noise of voices below, and instantly ran down to the bottom of the stairs to ascertain the cause. No sooner had he descended than an unseen arm stabbed him to the heart. At this fatal moment the clocks in Marseilles struck one in the morning, or, as it really was, twelve at night—the exact time predicted by Le Brun.

The fact was, the cellar of M. Danville had at that time been broken into by robbers, who, perceiving themselves discovered, saw no other means of escape than by murdering the ill-fated Valette, by whom they had been surprised. These men were the unconscious instruments in the hand of fate. The dagger that stabbed Valette to the heart proved that the decrees of heaven are irresistible, and that there is an hour appointed for all the sons of Adam.

Such is the tradition in Marseilles of how, once upon a time, all the clocks in that city were put an hour forward.