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Colonel Chabert

“A H! OUR OLD greatcoat again!”

Such was the exclamation that fell from the lips of a clerk belonging to the type known in law firms as “dogsbodies”, who at this moment was biting with a very hearty appetite into a hunk of bread; he pulled off a bit of the crust to roll it into a little pellet and flick it mockingly through the opening of a window he was leaning against. The pellet, unerringly aimed, rebounded almost back up to the level of the casement, after striking the hat of a stranger who was walking across the courtyard of a house on the rue Vivienne, where lived Monsieur Derville, solicitor.

“Hey, Simonnin, stop messing around with people or I’ll throw you out. However poor a client may be, he’s still a man, for Heaven’s sake!” said the chief clerk, stopping in the middle of totting up the bill for a memorandum of costs.

The dogsbody is generally, as was Simonnin, a boy of thirteen to fourteen years old, who in every law firm is under the special dominion of the chief clerk, whose little odd jobs and love letters keep him busy even when he is taking writs to bailiffs and requests for a hearing to the law courts. In his way of life he resembles a streetwise

Parisian lad, and in his destiny he belongs to the tribe of pettifogging lawyers. He is a boy almost always devoid of pity, unchecked, uncontrollable, quick with his tongue, jeering, avid and lazy. Still, almost every junior clerk has, living in some dingy room up on the fifth floor, an old mother with whom he shares the thirty or forty francs allocated to him per month.

“If he’s a man, why do you call him ‘old greatcoat?’” said Simonnin, with the expression of a schoolboy catching his teacher out.

And he went back to eating his bread and cheese, leaning his shoulder against the stile of the window, since he took his rest standing up, like the cab-horses of Paris, with one of his legs bent and propped on his other shoe’s toe.

“Think of the fun we could have with that old codger!” muttered the third clerk, Godeschal by name, as he paused in the middle of a line of argument he was developing in a petition to be copied out in a fair hand by the fourth clerk, the draft copies of which were made by two novices fresh from the provinces. Then he continued with his improvisation: “... But, in his noble and benevolent wisdom, His Majesty Louis the Eighteenth (spell it out in full, now, won’t you, Desroches you wise old thing, when you make the fair copy!), at the moment when he took up once more the reins of his kingdom, understood... (what did that old clown ever understand?) the lofty mission to which he was summoned by

Divine Providence!..... (exclamation mark for admiration, followed by six dots: they're devout enough in the law courts to let us have that many), and his first thought was, as witness the date of the below-mentioned ordinance, to repair the misfortunes caused by the terrible and lamentable disasters of our revolutionary period, by granting restitution to his faithful and numerous servants ('numerous' is a piece of flattery that should go down well with the law courts) all their unsold goods, whether they were in the public domain, whether they were in the ordinary or extraordinary domain of the Crown, or whether, finally, they were in endowments given to public establishments, for we are and consider ourselves competent to maintain that such is the spirit and the letter of the celebrated and most loyal ordinance delivered in... Wait a minute," said Godeschal to the three clerks, "this wretched sentence has gone on right to the end of my page. Well anyway," he continued, wetting with his tongue the back fold of the sheet so he could turn the thick page of its stamped paper, "well anyway, if you want to play a trick on him, just tell him that the boss can only speak to his clients between two and three o'clock in the morning: we'll see if the old rogue turns up!" And Godeschal went back to the sentence he had started: "Delivered in... Got it?" he asked.

"Got it!" shouted the three copyists.

Everything proceeded simultaneously – petition, conversation and conspiracy.

“Delivered in... Hey, Boucard old friend, what’s the date of the ordinance? We have to make sure all our *i*’s are dotted, for Christ’s sake! That adds a few pages.”

“For Christ’s sake!” repeated one of the copyists before Boucard, the chief clerk, could reply.

“What, you’ve written ‘For Christ’s sake?’” exclaimed Godeschal, peering at one of the newcomers with eyes that were at once severe and mocking.

“Oh yes,” said Desroches, the fourth clerk, leaning over to look at his neighbour’s copy, “he’s written: ‘We have to make sure all our *i*’s are dotted’, and ‘ferchris-sakes’ as one word.”

All the clerks burst out laughing.

“So, Monsieur Huré, you think ‘for Christ’s sake’ is a legal term, and you claim to be from Mortagne!” exclaimed Simonnin.

“Scratch that out!” said the chief clerk. “If the judge appointed to fix costs in the case could see such things, he’d say someone was taking the mickey! You’d cause the boss real hassle. Come on, stop messing about, Monsieur Huré! Someone from Normandy shouldn’t write a petition without due care and attention. It’s the ‘Shoulder arms!’ of m’learned friends.”

“Delivered in... in?...” asked Godeschal. “Go on, when was it, Boucard?”

“June 1814,” replied the first clerk, without pausing in his own work.

A knock at the door of the office interrupted the sentence in the prolix petition. Five clerks, all blessed with hearty appetites, alert and mocking eyes, and fine heads of hair, lifted their noses from their work and turned to the door, after all chorusing at once: "Come in!" Boucard remained with his face buried in a pile of papers, called red tape in the style of the law courts, and continued composing the memo of costs he was working on.

The office was a spacious room adorned with the classic stove that embellishes all the dens of pettifoggery. Its pipes crossed the chamber diagonally and converged on a blocked-up mantelpiece on whose marble top could be seen various scraps of bread, triangles of Brie, fresh pork cutlets, glasses, bottles and the chief clerk's cup of drinking chocolate. The odour of these foodstuffs blended so well with the stench of the excessively overheated stove, and with the smell characteristic of offices and bundles of paperwork, that the stink of a fox would have passed unnoticed in it. The floor was already covered with the mud and snow traipsed in by the clerks. Near the window stood the chief clerk's cylindrical writing desk, and right up against it was the little table for the use of the second clerk. The latter was at this particular moment at the law courts. It was maybe eight or nine o'clock in the morning. The only decoration in the office was those big yellow posters announcing distraint of goods, sales, auctions between majors and

minors, definitive or preparatory adjudications: all the power and glory of law firms! Behind the chief clerk was a huge set of pigeon-holes, filling the wall from top to bottom, each of them stuffed with bundles of paper from which there dangled countless labels and wisps of red thread of the sort that give a special appearance to the documents involved in legal proceedings. The lower rows of pigeon-holes were full of cardboard boxes yellowed by long use, and fringed with blue paper: on them could be read the names of the big clients whose juicy bits of business were being concocted at this very moment. The dirty window panes allowed little light to trickle through. In any case, in February there are very few offices where you can write without the help of a lamp before ten o'clock in the morning, for all such offices are, as you might expect, quite neglected: everyone goes there but nobody stays, and no personal interest can attach to such a humdrum place; neither the solicitor, nor the litigants, nor the clerks can be bothered to maintain the elegance of a spot which for some is a classroom, for others a passage and for the master a laboratory. The filthy furniture is handed down from solicitor to solicitor with such religious scruple that certain offices still possess boxes of amounts still owing, moulds for parchment lachets, bags that originated with the lawyers at the "Chlet", the abbreviated form of the word CHATELET, a jurisdiction which represented in a bygone order of things the present-day Court of First

Instance.* So this dingy office, greasy with dust, was, like all the others, quite repellent for litigants, and its dismal appearance made it one of the most monstrously hideous places in Paris. Indeed, if the damp sacristies where prayers are weighed and paid for like spices, and if the second-hand clothes shops where we see rags trailing around as a proof of the futility of all our illusions and a demonstration of where all our revels lead us – if these two cesspools of poetry did not exist, a solicitor's office would be of all social emporia the most horrible. But the same is true of gambling dens, law courts, lottery kiosks and places of ill repute. Why? Perhaps in these places the drama which unfolds in a man's soul makes his appurtenances seem a matter of indifference to him: and this would explain the single-mindedness of great thinkers and those who nurse great ambitions.

“Where's my penknife?”

“I'm having my breakfast!”

“Oh, just sod off, I've blotted my petition!”

“Shhhh, gentlemen!”

These various exclamations were all rattled off simultaneously at the moment the old litigant closed the door with the kind of humility which puts a crimp in the movements of every unhappy man. The stranger tried to sketch a smile, but the muscles in his face fell back into place once he had sought in vain any symptoms of affability on the inexorably apathetic faces of the six clerks. No doubt accustomed to weighing up men

at first glance, he addressed himself with considerable politeness to the errand-boy, in the hope that this drudge would give him a mild and gentle answer.

“Monsieur, can your superior be seen now?”

In reply to the poor man, the malicious errand-boy merely tapped his ear repeatedly with the fingers of his left hand, as if to say: “I’m deaf.”

“What do you want, Monsieur?” asked Godeschal, whose question emerged from a mouth munching a hunk of bread big enough to load a cannon with, as he brandished his knife and crossed his legs so that the foot that was up in the air came level with his eyes.

“This is the fifth time I have come here, Monsieur,” replied the suppliant. “I wish to speak to Monsieur Derville.”

“Is it on business?”

“Yes, but I can explain it only to Monsieur...”

“The boss is asleep. If you want to consult him about a particular problem, he only really works at midnight. But if you could tell us about your case, we could perhaps be of just as much assistance as him...”

The stranger remained impassive. He started to look modestly around, like a dog who, slipping into a kitchen where he should not be, fears he might be kicked out. By the grace attaching to their estate, clerks are never frightened by the prospect of thieves, and so these particular clerks harboured no suspicions regarding the man in the greatcoat, and allowed him to inspect their office,

where he looked in vain for a chair on which to rest, for he was visibly tired. Solicitors leave few chairs around in their offices, on principle. The common or garden client, weary of having to stand, goes off grumbling, but at least he doesn't take up any time that, in the words of an old lawyer, can't be claimed *on expenses*.

"Monsieur," he replied, "I have already had the honour of informing you that I can explain my business only to Monsieur Derville, and so I will wait for him to get up."

Boucard had finished adding up his bill. He smelt the odour wafting from his chocolate, rose from his wickerwork chair, crossed to the mantelpiece, looked the old man up and down, stared at the greatcoat and pulled an indescribable face. He probably thought that, however much they squeezed this client, it would be impossible to extract a single centime from him; then he intervened with a few brief remarks intended to rid the office of a waste of space.

"They're telling you the whole truth, Monsieur. The boss works only at night-time. If your business is serious, I recommend you return at one o'clock in the morning."

The client looked at the chief clerk with a stupid expression on his face, and remained motionless for a few moments. The clerks, used to every change in people's physiognomies and the strange whims produced by the indecision or daydreaming that are so characteristic of the whole brood of litigants, carried on eating, making as much noise with the chomping of their jaws

as horses doubtless make at their rack, and took no more notice of the old man.

“Monsieur, I will come this evening,” the old fellow finally said; with the tenacity peculiar to unhappy people, he wanted to show up humanity’s failings.

The only epigram permitted to Wretchedness is that of forcing Justice and Charity to reject them without just cause. When the unhappy have convicted Society of lying, they are all the more eager to throw themselves into the arms of God.

“My, isn’t he a *bold* one?” said Simonnin, without waiting for the old man to have closed the door behind him.

“Looks like a corpse they dug up,” replied the junior clerk.

“He’s some colonel or other chasing his arrears,” said the chief clerk.

“No, he’s a retired concierge,” said Godeschal.

“Bet you he’s a noble,” exclaimed Boucard.

“No, *I* bet he was a porter,” replied Godeschal. “Porters are the only ones to be endowed by Nature with worn-out, greasy greatcoats all tattered and torn at the edges like the one the old chap was wearing! Didn’t you even see his leaky, down-at-heel boots, or his cravat doing service as a shirt? He knows what it is to sleep under bridges.”

“He could be a noble who’s spent time as a doorman,” exclaimed Desroches. “It’s been known to happen!”