

Quotes and Images From "Celebrated Crimes"

Alexander Dumas, Pere - Edited and Arranged by David Widger

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QUOTES AND IMAGES FROM DUMAS' "CELEBRATED CRIMES"

CELEBRATED CRIMES

By Alexandre Dumas (Pere)

A good novelist needs be a good historian. Alexandre Dumas was a novelist who knew his history. At least in his early works, he was meticulous in his research. This series of books are histories which place most romantic novels in the shade; they cover many centuries and many lands--those concerning the Renaissance Popes are especially intriguing.

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NOTE: Dumas's 'Celebrated Crimes' was not written for children. The novelist has spared no language--has minced no words--to describe the violent scenes of a violent time.

INTRODUCTION

The contents of these volumes of 'Celebrated Crimes', as well as the motives which led to their inception, are unique. They are a series of stories based upon historical records, from the pen of Alexandre Dumas, pere, when he was not "the elder," nor yet the author of D'Artagnan or Monte Cristo, but was a rising young dramatist and a lion in the

literary set and world of fashion.

Dumas, in fact, wrote his 'Crimes Celebres' just prior to launching upon his wonderful series of historical novels, and they may therefore be considered as source books, whence he was to draw so much of that far-reaching and intimate knowledge of inner history which has perennially astonished his readers. The Crimes were published in Paris, in 1839-40, in eight volumes, comprising eighteen titles--all of which now appear in the present carefully translated text. The success of the original work was instantaneous. Dumas laughingly said that he thought he had exhausted the subject of famous crimes, until the work was off the press, when he immediately became deluged with letters from every province in France, supplying him with material upon other deeds of violence! The subjects which he has chosen, however, are of both historic and dramatic importance, and they have the added value of giving the modern reader a clear picture of the state of semi-lawlessness which existed in Europe, during the middle ages. "The Borgias, the Cenci, Urbain Grandier, the Marchioness of Brinvilliers, the Marchioness of Ganges, and the rest--what subjects for the pen of Dumas!" exclaims Garnett.

Space does not permit us to consider in detail the material here collected, although each title will be found to present points of special interest. The first volume comprises the annals of the Borgias and the Cenci. The name of the noted and notorious Florentine family has become a synonym for intrigue and violence, and yet the Borgias have not been without staunch defenders in history.

Another famous Italian story is that of the Cenci. The beautiful Beatrice Cenci--celebrated in the painting of Guido, the sixteenth century romance of Guerrazi, and the poetic tragedy of Shelley, not to mention numerous succeeding works inspired by her hapless fate--will always remain a shadowy figure and one of infinite pathos.

The second volume chronicles the sanguinary deeds in the south of France, carried on in the name of religion, but drenching in blood the fair country round about Avignon, for a long period of years.

The third volume is devoted to the story of Mary Queen of Scots, another woman who suffered a violent death, and around whose name an endless controversy has waged. Dumas goes carefully into the dubious episodes of her stormy career, but does not allow these to blind his sympathy for her fate. Mary, it should be remembered, was closely allied to France by education and marriage, and the French never forgave Elizabeth the part she played in the tragedy.

The fourth volume comprises three widely dissimilar tales. One of the strangest stories is that of Urbain Grandier, the innocent victim of a cunning and relentless religious plot. His story was dramatised by Dumas, in 1850. A famous German crime is that of Karl-Ludwig Sand, whose murder of Kotzebue, Councillor of the Russian Legation, caused an international upheaval which was not to subside for many years.

An especially interesting volume is number six, containing, among other material, the famous "Man in the Iron Mask." This unsolved puzzle of history was later incorporated by Dumas in one of the D'Artagnan Romances a section of the Vicomte de Bragelonne, to which it gave its name. But in this later form, the true story of this singular man doomed to wear an iron vizor over his features during his entire

lifetime could only be treated episodically. While as a special subject in the Crimes, Dumas indulges his curiosity, and that of his reader, to the full. Hugo's unfinished tragedy, 'Les Jumeaux', is on the same subject; as also are others by Fournier, in French, and Zschokke, in German.

Other stories can be given only passing mention. The beautiful poisoner, Marquise de Brinvilliers, must have suggested to Dumas his later portrait of Miladi, in the Three Musketeers, the most celebrated of his woman characters. The incredible cruelties of Ali Pacha, the Turkish despot, should not be charged entirely to Dumas, as he is said to have been largely aided in this by one of his "ghosts," Mallefille.

"Not a mere artist"--writes M. de Villemessant, founder of the Figaro,--"he has nevertheless been able to seize on those dramatic effects which have so much distinguished his theatrical career, and to give those sharp and distinct reproductions of character which alone can present to the reader the mind and spirit of an age. Not a mere historian, he has nevertheless carefully consulted the original sources of information, has weighed testimonies, elicited theories, and . . . has interpolated the poetry of history with its most thorough prose."

THE BORGHIAS

Indeed, Caesar (Borgia) had the power of persuasion as a gift from heaven; and though they perfectly well knew his duplicity, they had no power of resisting, not so much his actual eloquence as that air of frank good-nature which Macchiavelli so greatly admired, and which indeed more than once deceived even him, wily politician as he was.

At a time when he was besieged on all sides by mediocrities....

Forgetfulness is the best cure for the losses we suffer.

The vice-chamberlain (a Cardinal) one day remarked in public, when certain people were complaining of the venality of justice, "God wills not that a sinner die, but that he live and pay."

The same day, the cardinal's mother sent the pope the 2000 ducats, and the next day his mistress, in man's attire, came in person to bring the missing pearl. His Holiness, however, was so struck with her beauty in this costume, that, we are told, he let her keep the pearl for the same price she had paid for it.

Roderigo, retired from public affairs, was given up entirely to the affections of a lover and a father, when he heard that his uncle, who loved him like a son, had been elected pope under the name of Calixtus III. But the young man was at this time so much a lover that love imposed silence on ambition; and indeed he was almost terrified at the exaltation of his uncle, which was no doubt destined to force him once more into public life.

THE CENCI

On the 11th of August, 1492, after the lingering death-agony of Innocent VIII, during which two hundred and twenty murders were committed in the streets of Rome, Alexander VI ascended the pontifical throne. Son of a sister of Pope Calixtus III, Roderigo Lenzuoli Borgia, before being created cardinal, had five children by Rosa Vanozza, whom he afterwards caused to be married to a rich Roman.

Having seen that Beatrice was sentenced to the torture ordinary and extraordinary, and having explained the nature of these tortures, we proceed to quote the official report:-- "And as in reply to every question she would confess nothing, we caused her to be taken by two officers and led from the prison to the torture chamber, where the torturer was in attendance; there, after cutting off her hair, he made her sit on a small stool, undressed her, pulled off her shoes, tied her hands behind her back, fastened them to a rope passed over a pulley bolted into the ceiling of the aforesaid chamber, and wound up at the other end by a four lever windlass, worked by two men."

MASSACRES OF THE SOUTH

The massacres went on during the whole of the second day, though towards evening the search for victims relaxed somewhat; but still many isolated acts of murder took place during the night. On the morrow, being tired of killing, the people began to destroy, and this phase lasted a long time, it being less fatiguing to throw stones about than corpses. All the convents, all the monasteries, all the houses of the priests and canons were attacked in turn; nothing was spared except the cathedral, before which axes and crowbars seemed to lose their power, and the church of Ste. Eugenie, which was turned into a powder-magazine. The day of the great butchery was called "La Michelade," because it took place the day after Michaelmas, and as all this happened in the year 1567 the Massacre of St. Bartholomew must be regarded as a plagiarism.

But from this period, each flux and reflux bears more and more the peculiar character of the party which for the moment is triumphant; when the Protestants get the upper hand, their vengeance is marked by brutality and rage; when the Catholics are victorious, the retaliation is full of hypocrisy and greed. The Protestants pull down churches and monasteries, expel the monks, burn the crucifixes, take the body of some criminal from the gallows, nail it on a cross, pierce its side, put a crown of thorns round its temples and set it up in the market-place--an effigy of Jesus on Calvary. The Catholics levy contributions, take back what they had been deprived of, exact indemnities, and although ruined by each reverse, are richer than ever after each victory.

MARY STUEARE

Mary was a harmony in which the most ardent enthusiast for sculptured form could have found nothing to reproach. This was indeed Mary's great and real crime: one single imperfection in face or figure, and she would not have died upon the scaffold. Besides, to Elizabeth, who had never seen her, and who consequently could only judge by hearsay, this beauty

was a great cause of uneasiness and of jealousy, which she could not even disguise, and which showed itself unceasingly in eager questions.

Unfortunately for her honour, Mary, always more the woman than the queen, while, on the contrary, Elizabeth was always more the queen than the woman, had no sooner regained her power than her first royal act was to exhume Rizzio, who had been quietly buried on the threshold of the chapel nearest Holyrood Palace, and to have him removed to the burial-place of the Scottish kings, compromising herself still more by the honours she paid him dead, than by the favour she had granted him living.

NISIDA

The priests had already begun to sing the death hymn; the executioner was ready, the procession had set out, when Solomon the fisherman appeared suddenly on the threshold of the prison, his eyes aflame and his brow radiant with the halo of the patriarchs. The old man drew himself up to his full height, and raising in one hand the reddened knife, said in a sublime voice, "The sacrifice is fulfilled. God did not send His angel to stay the hand of Abraham."

The crowd carried him in triumph!

[The details of this case are recorded in the archives of the Criminal Court at Naples. We have changed nothing in the age or position of the persons who appear in this narrative. One of the most celebrated advocates at the Neapolitan bar secured the acquittal of the old man.]

KARL LUDWIG SAND

Fundamentally nothing is great, you see, and nothing small, when things are looked at apart from one another.

URBAIN GRANDIER

Danger of driving the vanquished to despair.

Let fall from the height of his superiority a few of those disdainful words which brand as deeply as a red-hot iron.

The more absurd the reports, the more credence did they gain.

....crowd of prejudices, which are sacred to the vulgar.

Fourneau having saluted Grandier, proceeded to carry out his orders, whereupon a judge said it was not sufficient to shave the body of the prisoner, but that his nails must also be torn out, lest the devil should hide beneath them. Grandier looked at the speaker with an expression of unutterable pity, and held out his hands to Fourneau; but

Forneau put them gently aside, and said he would do nothing of the kind, even were the order given by the cardinal-duke himself.

LA CONSTANTIN

Madly in love, which is the same as saying that he was hopelessly blind, silly, and dense to everything around him.

It is singular how very clear-sighted we can be about things that don't touch us.

There in semi-isolation and despoiled of her greatness lived Angelique-Louise de Guerchi, formerly companion to Mademoiselle de Pons and then maid of honour to Anne of Austria. Her love intrigues and the scandals they gave rise to had led to her dismissal from court. Not that she was a greater sinner than many who remained behind, only she was unlucky enough or stupid enough to be found out. Her admirers were so indiscreet that they had not left her a shred of reputation, and in a court where a cardinal is the lover of a queen, a hypocritical appearance of decorum is indispensable to success. So Angelique had to suffer for the faults she was not clever enough to hide.

DERUES

"All passions," says La Bruyere,--"all passions are deceitful; they disguise themselves as much as possible from the public eye; they hide from themselves. There is no vice which has not a counterfeit resemblance to some virtue, and which does not profit by it."

The whole life of Derues bears testimony to the truth of this observation. An avaricious poisoner, he attracted his victims by the pretence of fervent and devoted piety, and drew them into the snare where he silently destroyed them.

As soon as his head was covered, the executioner gave the signal. One would have thought a very few blows would have finished so frail a being, but he seemed as hard to kill as the venomous reptiles which must be crushed and cut to pieces before life is extinct, and the 'coup de grace' was found necessary. The executioner uncovered his head and showed the confessor that the eyes were closed and that the heart had ceased to beat. The body was then removed from the cross, the hands and feet fastened together, and it was thrown on the funeral pile. While the execution was proceeding the people applauded. On the morrow they bought up the fragments of bone, and hastened to buy lottery tickets, in the firm conviction that these precious relics would bring luck to the fortunate possessors!

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK ironm10.txt or ironm.zip [Etext #2751]

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

Voltaire added a few further details which had been given him by M. de Bernaville, the successor of M. de Saint-Mars, and by an old physician of the Bastille who had attended the prisoner whenever his health required a doctor, but who had never seen his face, although he had "often seen his tongue and his body." He also asserted that M. de Chamillart was the last minister who was in the secret, and that when his son-in-law, Marshal de la Feuillade, besought him on his knees, de Chamillart being on his deathbed, to tell him the name of the Man in the Iron Mask, the minister replied that he was under a solemn oath never to reveal the secret, it being an affair of state. To all these details, which the marshal acknowledges to be correct, Voltaire adds a remarkable note: "What increases our wonder is, that when the unknown captive was sent to the Iles Sainte-Marguerite no personage of note disappeared from the European stage."

JOAN OF NAPLES

The next morning the people were beforehand with the executioner, loudly demanding their prey. All the national troops and mercenaries that the judicial authorities could command were echeloned in the streets, opposing a sort of dam to the torrent of the raging crowd. The sudden insatiable cruelty that too often degrades human nature had awaked in the populace: all heads were turned with hatred and frenzy; all imaginations inflamed with the passion for revenge; groups of men and women, roaring like wild beasts, threatened to knock down the walls of the prison, if the condemned were not handed over to them to take to the place of punishment: a great murmur arose, continuous, ever the same, like the growling of thunder: the queen's heart was petrified with terror.

That same evening the sentence, to the great joy of all, was proclaimed, that Joan was innocent and acquitted of all concern in the assassination of her husband. But as her conduct after the event and the indifference she had shown about pursuing the authors of the crime admitted of no valid excuse, the pope declared that there were plain traces of magic, and that the wrong-doing attributed to Joan was the result of some baneful charm cast upon her, which she could by no possible means resist.

MARTIN GUERRE mguer10.txt or mguer10.zip [Etext #2752]

MARTIN GUERRE

On the 10th of, August 1557, an inauspicious day in the history of France, the roar of cannon was still heard at six in the evening in the plains of St. Quentin; where the French army had just been destroyed by the united troops of England and Spain, commanded by the famous Captain Emanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy. An utterly beaten infantry, the Constable Montmorency and several generals taken prisoner, the Duke d'Enghien mortally wounded, the flower of the nobility cut down like grass,--such were the terrible results of a battle which plunged France into mourning, and which would have been a blot on the reign of Henry

II, had not the Duke of Guise obtained a brilliant revenge the following year.

This sentence substituted the gallows for the decapitation decreed by the first judge, inasmuch as the latter punishment was reserved for criminals of noble birth, while hanging was inflicted on meaner persons.

ALI PACHA

Albania was one of the most difficult provinces to manage. Its inhabitants were poor, brave, and, the nature of the country was mountainous and inaccessible. The pashas had great difficulty in collecting tribute, because the people were given to fighting for their bread. Whether Mahomedans or Christians, the Albanians were above all soldiers. Descended on the one side from the unconquerable Scythians, on the other from the ancient Macedonians, not long since masters of the world; crossed with Norman adventurers brought eastwards by the great movement of the Crusades; they felt the blood of warriors flow in their veins, and that war was their element. Sometimes at feud with one another, canton against canton, village against village, often even house against house; sometimes rebelling against the government their sanjaks; sometimes in league with these against the sultan; they never rested from combat except in an armed peace. Each tribe had its military organisation, each family its fortified stronghold, each man his gun on his shoulder. When they had nothing better to do, they tilled their fields, or mowed their neighbours', carrying off, it should be noted, the crop; or pastured their flocks, watching the opportunity to trespass over pasture limits. This was the normal and regular life of the population of Epirus, Thesprotia, Thessaly, and Upper Albania.

MURAT

On the 18th June, 1815, at the very moment when the destiny of Europe was being decided at Waterloo, a man dressed like a beggar was silently following the road from Toulon to Marseilles.

Arrived at the entrance of the Gorge of Ollioulles, he halted on a little eminence from which he could see all the surrounding country; then either because he had reached the end of his journey, or because, before attempting that forbidding, sombre pass which is called the Thermopylae of Provence, he wished to enjoy the magnificent view which spread to the southern horizon a little longer, he went and sat down on the edge of the ditch which bordered the road, turning his back on the mountains which rise like an amphitheatre to the north of the town, and having at his feet a rich plain covered with tropical vegetation, exotics of a conservatory, trees and flowers quite unknown in any other part of France.

THE COUNTESS OF SAINT GERAN

"Could not, for instance," said the marquis, "a confinement be effected without pain?"

"I don't know about that, but this I do" know, that I shall take very good care not to practise any method contrary to the laws of nature."

"You are deceiving me: you are acquainted with this method, you have already practised it upon a certain person whom I could name to you."

"Who has dared to calumniate me thus? I operate only after the decision of the Faculty. God forbid that I should be stoned by all the physicians, and perhaps expelled from France!"

THE MARQUISE DE BRINVILLIERS

When the prayer was done and the doctor raised his head, he saw before him the executioner wiping his face. "Well, sir," said he, "was not that a good stroke? I always put up a prayer on these occasions, and God has always assisted me; but I have been anxious for several days about this lady. I had six masses said, and I felt strengthened in hand and heart." He then pulled out a bottle from under his cloak, and drank a dram; and taking the body under one arm, all dressed as it was, and the head in his other hand, the eyes still bandaged, he threw both upon the faggots, which his assistant lighted.

"The next day," says Madame de Sevigne, "people were looking for the charred bones of Madame de Brinvilliers, because they said she was a saint."

THE MARQUISE DE GANGES

The beginnings of this union were perfectly happy; the marquis was in love for the first time, and the marquise did not remember ever to have been in love. A son and a daughter came to complete their happiness. The marquise had entirely forgotten the fatal prediction, or, if she occasionally thought of it now, it was to wonder that she could ever have believed in it. Such happiness is not of this world, and when by chance it lingers here a while, it seems sent rather by the anger than by the goodness of God. Better, indeed, would it be for him who possesses and who loses it, never to have known it.

VANINKA

About the end of the reign of the Emperor Paul I--that is to say, towards the middle of the first year of the nineteenth century--just as four o'clock in the afternoon was sounding from the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, whose gilded vane overlooks the ramparts of the fortress, a crowd, composed of all sorts and conditions of people, began to gather in front of a house which belonged to General Count Tchernayloff, formerly military governor of a fair-sized town in the government of

Pultava. The first spectators had been attracted by the preparations which they saw had been made in the middle of the courtyard for administering torture with the knout. One of the general's serfs, he who acted as barber, was to be the victim.

Although this kind of punishment was a common enough sight in St. Petersburg, it nevertheless attracted all passers-by when it was publicly administered. This was the occurrence which had caused a crowd, as just mentioned, before General Tchernmayloff's house.

SOME FAVORITE QUOTATIONS

Air of frank good-nature which Macchiavelli so greatly admired
All passions are deceitful
Always in extremes, whether of enthusiasm or hatred
Besieged on all sides by mediocrities
Danger of driving the vanquished to despair
Determination to exact his strict legal rights
Disdainful words which brand as deeply as a red-hot iron
Doubting spirit which was unhappily so prevalent
Forgetfulness is the best cure for the losses we suffer
Fundamentally nothing is great, you see, and nothing small
God wills not that a sinner die, but that he live and pay
Influence he had gained over the narrow-minded
Interpolated according to the needs of the prosecution
Italy and Greece seemed to be mere suburbs of Venice
Jesus, Son of David and Mary
Knew how short was the space between a prison and a tomb
Let her keep the pearl for the same price she had paid for it
Madly in love-that is to say silly and blind
Method contrary to the laws of nature
More absurd the reports, the more credence did they gain
No vice which has not a counterfeit resemblance to some virtue
Prejudices, which are sacred to the vulgar
Put to the question ordinary and extraordinary
So much a lover that love imposed silence on ambition
The last thing I should desire would be to be as dead as he
To draw back was to acknowledge one's guilt
Too commonplace ever to arrive at a high position
Vanity and self-satisfaction
Very clear-sighted we can be about things that don't touch us
Without fear of being called to account

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