

The High Constable's Wife

Honore de Balzac

The high constable of Armagnac espoused from the desire of a great fortune, the Countess Bonne, who was already considerably enamoured of little Savoisy, son of the chamberlain to his majesty King Charles the Sixth.

The constable was a rough warrior, miserable in appearance, tough in skin, thickly bearded, always uttering angry words, always busy hanging people, always in the sweat of battles, or thinking of other stratagems than those of love. Thus the good soldier, caring little to flavour the marriage stew, used his charming wife after the fashion of a man with more lofty ideas; of the which the ladies have a great horror, since they like not the joists of the bed to be the sole judges of their fondling and vigorous conduct.

Now the lovely Countess, as soon as she was grafted on the constable, only nibbled more eagerly at the love with which her heart was laden for the aforesaid Savoisy, which that gentleman clearly perceived.

Wishing both to study the same music, they would soon harmonise their fancies, and decipher the hieroglyphic; and this was a thing clearly demonstrated to the Queen Isabella, that Savoisy's horses were oftener stabled at the house of her cousin of Armagnac than in the Hotel St. Pol, where the chamberlain lived, since the destruction of his residence, ordered by the university, as everyone knows.

This discreet and wise princess, fearing in advance some unfortunate adventure for Bonne--the more so as the constable was as ready to brandish his broadsword as a priest to bestow benedictions--the said queen, as sharp as a dirk, said one day, while coming out from vespers, to her cousin, who was taking the holy water with Savoisy--

"My dear, don't you see some blood in that water?"

"Bah!" said Savoisy to the queen. "Love likes blood, Madame."

This the Queen considered a good reply, and put it into writing, and later on, into action, when her lord the king wounded one of her lovers, whose business you see settled in this narrative.

You know by constant experience, that in the early time of love each of two lovers is always in great fear of exposing the mystery of the heart, and as much from the flower of prudence as from the amusement yielded by the sweet tricks of gallantry they play at who can best conceal their thoughts, but one day of forgetfulness suffices to inter the whole virtuous past. The poor woman is taken in her joy as in a lasso; her sweetheart proclaims his presence, or sometimes his departure, by some article of clothing--a scarf, a spur, left by some fatal chance, and there comes a stroke of the dagger that severs the web so gallantly woven by their golden delights. But when one is full of days, he should not make a wry face at death, and the sword of a husband is a pleasant death for a gallant, if there be pleasant deaths. So may be will finish the merry amours of the constable's wife.

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One morning Monsieur d'Armagnac having lots of leisure time in consequence of the flight of the Duke of Burgundy, who was quitting Lagny, thought he would go and wish his lady good day, and attempted to wake her up in a pleasant enough fashion, so that she should not be angry; but she sunk in the heavy slumbers of the morning, replied to the action--

"Leave me alone, Charles!"

"Oh, oh," said the constable, hearing the name of a saint who was not one of his patrons, "I have a Charles on my head!"

Then, without touching his wife, he jumped out of the bed, and ran upstairs with his face flaming and his sword drawn, to the place where slept the countess's maid-servant, convinced that the said servant had a finger in the pie.

"Ah, ah, wench of hell!" cried he, to commence the discharge of his passion, "say thy prayers, for I intend to kill thee instantly, because of the secret practices of Charles who comes here."

"Ah, Monseigneur," replied the woman, "who told you that?"

"Stand steady, that I may rip thee at one blow if you do not confess to me every assignation given, and in what manner they have been arranged. If thy tongue gets entangled, if thou falterest, I will pierce thee with my dagger!"

"Pierce me through!" replied the girl; "you will learn nothing."

The constable, having taken this excellent reply amiss, ran her through on the spot, so mad was he with rage; and came back into his wife's chamber and said to his groom, whom, awakened by the shrieks of the girl, he met upon the stairs, "Go upstairs; I've corrected Billette rather severely."

Before he reappeared in the presence of Bonne he went to fetch his son, who was sleeping like a child, and led him roughly into her room. The mother opened her eyes pretty widely, you may imagine--at the cries of her little one; and was greatly terrified at seeing him in the hands of her husband, who had his right hand all bloody, and cast a fierce glance on the mother and son.

"What is the matter?" said she.

"Madame," asked the man of quick execution, "this child, is he the fruit of my loins, or those of Savoisy, your lover?"

At this question Bonne turned pale, and sprang upon her son like a frightened frog leaping into the water.

"Ah, he is really ours," said she.

"If you do not wish to see his head roll at your feet confess yourself to me, and no

prevarication. You have given me a lieutenant."

"Indeed!"

"Who is he?"

"It is not Savoisy, and I will never say the name of a man that I don't know."

Thereupon the constable rose, took his wife by the arm to cut her speech with a blow of the sword, but she, casting upon him an imperial glance, cried--

"Kill me if you will, but touch me not."

"You shall live," replied the husband, "because I reserve you for a chastisement more ample than death."

And doubting the inventions, snares, arguments, and artifices familiar to women in these desperate situations, of which they study night and day the variations, by themselves, or between themselves, he departed with this rude and bitter speech. He went instantly to interrogate his servants, presenting to them a face divinely terrible; so all of them replied to him as they would to God the Father on the Judgment Day, when each of us will be called to his account.

None of them knew the serious mischief which was at the bottom of these summary interrogations and crafty interlocutions; but from all that they said, the constable came to the conclusion that no male in his house was in the business, except one of his dogs, whom he found dumb, and to whom he had given the post of watching the gardens; so taking him in his hands, he strangled him with rage. This fact incited him by induction to suppose that the other constable came into his house by the garden, of which the only entrance was a postern opening on to the water side.

It is necessary to explain to those who are ignorant of it, the locality of the Hotel d'Armagnac, which had a notable situation near to the royal houses of St. Pol. On this site has since been built the hotel of Longueville. Then as at the present time, the residence of d'Armagnac had a porch of fine stone in Rue St. Antoine, was fortified at all points, and the high walls by the river side, in face of the Ile du Vaches, in the part where now stands the port of La Greve, were furnished with little towers. The design of these has for a long time been shown at the house of Cardinal Duprat, the king's Chancellor. The constable ransacked his brains, and at the bottom, from his finest stratagems, drew the best, and fitted it so well to the present case, that the gallant would be certain to be taken like a hare in the trap. "Sdeath," said he, "my planter of horns is taken, and I have the time now to think how I shall finish him off."

Now this is the order of battle which this grand hairy captain who waged such glorious war against Duke Jean-sans-Peur commanded for the assault of his secret enemy. He took a goodly number of his most loyal and adroit archers, and placed them on the quay tower, ordering them under the heaviest penalties to draw without distinction of persons, except his wife, on those of his household who should attempt to leave the gardens, and to admit therein, either by night or by day, the favoured gentleman. The same was done on the porch

side, in the Rue St Antoine.

The retainers, even the chaplain, were ordered not to leave the house under pain of death. Then the guard of the two sides of the hotel having been committed to the soldiers of a company of ordnance, who were ordered to keep a sharp lookout in the side streets, it was certain that the unknown lover to whom the constable was indebted for his pair of horns, would be taken warm, when, knowing nothing, he should come at the accustomed hour of love to insolently plant his standard in the heart of the legitimate appurtenances of the said lord count.

It was a trap into which the most expert man would fall unless he was seriously protected by the fates, as was the good St. Peter by the Saviour when he prevented him going to the bottom of the sea the day when they had a fancy to try if the sea were as solid as terra firma.

The constable had business with the inhabitants of Poissy, and was obliged to be in the saddle after dinner, so that, knowing his intention, the poor Countess Bonne determined at night to invite her young gallant to that charming duel in which she was always the stronger.

While the constable was making round his hotel a girdle of spies and of death, and hiding his people near the postern to seize the gallant as he came out, not knowing where he would spring from, his wife was not amusing herself by threading peas nor seeking black cows in the embers. First, the maid-servant who had been stuck, unstuck herself and dragged herself to her mistress; she told her that her outraged lord knew nothing, and that before giving up the ghost she would comfort her dear mistress by assuring her that she could have perfect confidence in her sister, who was laundress in the hotel, and was willing to let herself be chopped up as small as sausage-meat to please Madame. That she was the most adroit and roguish woman in the neighbourhood, and renowned from the council chamber to the Trahoir cross among the common people, and fertile in invention for the desperate cases of love.

Then, while weeping for the decease of her good chamber woman, the countess sent for the laundress, made her leave her tubs and join her in rummaging the bag of good tricks, wishing to save Savoisy, even at the price of her future salvation.

First of all the two women determined to let him know their lord and master's suspicion, and beg him to be careful.

Now behold the good washerwoman who, carrying her tub like a mule, attempts to leave the hotel. But at the porch she found a man-at-arms who turned a deaf ear to all the blandishments of the wash-tub. Then she resolved, from her great devotion, to take the soldier on his weak side, and she tickled him so with her fondling that he romped very well with her, although he was armour-plated ready for battle; but when the game was over he still refused to let her go into the street and although she tried to get herself a passport sealed by some of the handsomest, believing them more gallant: neither the archers, men-at-arms, nor others, dared open for her the smallest entrance of the house. "You are wicked and ungrateful wretches," said she, "not to render me a like service."

Luckily at this employment she learned everything, and came back in great haste to her

mistress, to whom she recounted the strange machinations of the count. The two women held a fresh council and had not considered, the time it takes to sing Alleluia, twice, these warlike appearances, watches, defences, and equivocal, specious, and diabolical orders and dispositions before they recognised by the sixth sense with which all females are furnished, the special danger which threatened the poor lover.

Madame having learned that she alone had leave to quit the house, ventured quickly to profit by her right, but she did not go the length of a bow-shot, since the constable had ordered four of his pages to be always on duty ready to accompany the countess, and two of the ensigns of his company not to leave her. Then the poor lady returned to her chamber, weeping as much as all the Magdalens one sees in the church pictures, could weep together.

"Alas!" said she, "my lover must then be killed, and I shall never see him again! . . . he whose words were so sweet, whose manners were so graceful, that lovely head that had so often rested on my knees, will now be bruised . . . What! Can I not throw to my husband an empty and valueless head in place of the one full of charms and worth . . . a rank head for a sweet-smelling one; a hated head for a head of love."

"Ah, Madame!" cried the washerwoman, "suppose we dress up in the garments of a nobleman, the steward's son who is mad for me, and wearies me much, and having thus accoutered him, we push him out through the postern.

Thereupon the two women looked at each other with assassinating eyes.

"This marplot," said she, "once slain, all those soldiers will fly away like geese."

"Yes, but will not the count recognise the wretch?"

And the countess, striking her breast, exclaimed, shaking her head, "No, no, my dear, here it is noble blood that must be spilt without stint."

Then she thought a little, and jumping with joy, suddenly kissed the laundress, saying, "Because I have saved my lover's life by your counsel, I will pay you for his life until death."

Thereupon the countess dried her tears, put on the face of a bride, took her little bag and a prayer-book, and went towards the Church of St. Pol whose bells she heard ringing, seeing that the last Mass was about to be said. In this sweet devotion the countess never failed, being a showy woman, like all the ladies of the court. Now this was called the full-dress Mass, because none but fops, fashionables, young gentlemen and ladies puffed out and highly scented, were to be met there. In fact no dresses was seen there without armorial bearings, and no spurs that were not gilt.

So the Countess of Bonne departed, leaving at the hotel the laundress much astonished, and charged to keep her eyes about her, and came with great pomp to the church, accompanied by her pages, the two ensigns and men-at-arms. It is here necessary to say that among the band of gallant knights who frisked round the ladies in church, the countess had more than one whose joy she was, and who had given his heart to her, after the fashion of youths who put down enough and to spare upon their tablets, only in order to make a conquest of at

least one out of a great number.

Among these birds of fine prey who with open beaks looked oftener between the benches and the paternosters than towards the altar and the priests, there was one upon whom the countess sometimes bestowed the charity of a glance, because he was less trifling and more deeply smitten than all the others.

This one remained bashful, always stuck against the same pillar, never moving from it, but readily ravished with the sight alone of this lady whom he had chosen as his. His pale face was softly melancholy. His physiognomy gave proof of fine heart, one of those which nourish ardent passions and plunge delightedly into the despairs of love without hope. Of these people there are few, because ordinarily one likes more a certain thing than the unknown felicities lying and flourishing at the bottommost depths of the soul.

This said gentleman, although his garments were well made, and clean and neat, having even a certain amount of taste shown in the arrangement, seemed to the constable's wife to be a poor knight seeking fortune, and come from afar, with his nobility for his portion. Now partly from a suspicion of his secret poverty, partly because she was well beloved by him and a little because he had a good countenance, fine black hair, and a good figure, and remained humble and submissive in all, the constable's wife desired for him the favour of women and of fortune, not to let his gallantry stand idle, and from a good housewifely idea, she fired his imagination according to her fantasies, by certain small favours and little looks which serpented towards him like biting adders, trifling with the happiness of this young life, like a princess accustomed to play with objects more precious than a simple knight. In fact, her husband risked the whole kingdom as you would a penny at piquet. Finally it was only three days since, at the conclusion of vespers, that the constable's wife pointed out to the queen this follower of love, said laughingly--

"There's a man of quality."

This sentence remained in the fashionable language. Later it became a custom so to designate the people of the court. It was to the wife of the constable d'Armagnac, and to no other source, that the French language is indebted for this charming expression.

By a lucky chance the countess had surmised correctly concerning this gentleman. He was a bannerless knight, named Julien de Boys-Bourredon, who not having inherited on his estate enough to make a toothpick, and knowing no other wealth than the rich nature with which his dead mother had opportunely furnished him, conceived the idea of deriving therefrom both rent and profit at court, knowing how fond ladies are of those good revenues, and value them high and dear, when they can stand being looked at between two suns. There are many like him who have thus taken the narrow road of women to make their way; but he, far from arranging his love in measured qualities, spend funds and all, as soon as he came to the full-dress Mass, he saw the triumphant beauty of the Countess Bonne. Then he fell really in love, which was a grand thing for his crowns, because he lost both thirst and appetite. This love is of the worst kind, because it incites you to the love of diet, during the diet of love; a double malady, of which one is sufficient to extinguish a man.

Such was the young gentlemen of whom the good lady had thought, and towards whom she came quickly to invite him to his death.

On entering she saw the poor chevalier, who faithful to his pleasure, awaited her, his back against a pillar, as a sick man longs for the sun, the spring-time, and the dawn. Then she turned away her eyes, and wished to go to the queen and request her assistance in this desperate case, for she took pity on her lover, but one of the captains said to her, with great appearance of respect, "Madame, we have orders not to allow you to speak with man or woman, even though it should be the queen or your confessor. And remember that the lives of all of us are at stake."

"Is it not your business to die?" said she.

"And also to obey," replied the soldier.

Then the countess knelt down in her accustomed place, and again regarding her faithful slave, found his face thinner and more deeply lined than ever it had been.

"Bah!" said she, "I shall have less remorse for his death; he is half dead as it is."

With this paraphrase of her idea, she cast upon the said gentleman one of those warm ogles that are only allowable to princesses and harlots, and the false love which her lovely eyes bore witness to, gave a pleasant pang to the gallant of the pillar. Who does not love the warm attack of life when it flows thus round the heart and engulfs everything?

Madame recognised with a pleasure, always fresh in the minds of women, the omnipotence of her magnificent regard by the answer which, without saying a word, the chevalier made to it. And in fact, the blushes which empurpled his cheeks spoke better than the best speeches of the Greek and Latin orators, and were well understood. At this sweet sight, the countess, to make sure that it was not a freak of nature, took pleasure in experimentalising how far the virtue of her eyes would go, and after having heated her slave more than thirty times, she was confirmed in her belief that he would bravely die for her. This idea so touched her, that from three repetitions between her orisons she was tickled with the desire to put into a lump all the joys of man, and to dissolve them for him in one single glance of love, in order that she should not one day be reproached with having not only dissipated the life, but also the happiness of this gentleman. When the officiating priest turned round to sing the Off you go to this fine gilded flock, the constable's wife went out by the side of the pillar where her courtier was, passed in front of him and endeavoured to insinuate into his understanding by a speaking glance that he was to follow her, and to make positive the intelligence and significant interpretation of this gentle appeal, the artful jade turned round again a little after passing him to again request his company. She saw that he had moved a little from his place, and dared not advance, so modest was he, but upon this last sign, the gentleman, sure of not being over-credulous, mixed with the crowd with little and noiseless steps, like an innocent who is afraid of venturing into one of those good places people call bad ones. And whether he walked behind or in front, to the right or to the left, my lady bestowed upon him a glistening glance to allure him the more and the better to draw him to her, like a fisher who gently jerks the lines in order to hook the gudgeon. To be brief: the countess practiced so well the profession of the daughters of pleasure when they work to bring grist into their mills, that one would have said nothing resembled a harlot so much as a woman of high birth. And indeed, on arriving at the porch of her hotel the countess hesitated to enter therein, and again turned her face towards the poor chevalier to invite him

to accompany her, discharging at him so diabolical a glance, that he ran to the queen of his heart, believing himself to be called by her. Thereupon, she offered him her hand, and both boiling and trembling from the contrary causes found themselves inside the house. At this wretched hour, Madame d'Armagnac was ashamed of having done all these harlotries to the profit of death, and of betraying Savoisy the better to save him; but this slight remorse was lame as the greater, and came tardily. Seeing everything ready, the countess leaned heavily upon her vassal's arm, and said to him--

"Come quickly to my room; it is necessary that I should speak with you."

And he, not knowing that his life was in peril, found no voice wherewith to reply, so much did the hope of approaching happiness choke him.

When the laundress saw this handsome gentleman so quickly hooked, "Ah!" said she, "these ladies of the court are best at such work." Then she honoured this courtier with a profound salutation, in which was depicted the ironical respect due to those who have the great courage to die for so little.

"Picard," said the constable's lady, drawing the laundress to her by the skirt, "I have not the courage to confess to him the reward with which I am about to pay his silent love and his charming belief in the loyalty of women."

"Bah! Madame: why tell him? Send him away well contented by the postern. So many men die in war for nothing, cannot this one die for something? I'll produce another like him if that will console you."

"Come along," cried the countess, "I will confess all to him. That will be the punishment for my sins."

Thinking that this lady was arranging with her servant certain trifling provisions and secret things in order not to be disturbed in the interview she had promised him, the unknown lover kept at a discreet distance, looking at the flies. Nevertheless, he thought that the countess was very bold, but also, as even a hunchback would have done, he found a thousand reasons to justify her, and thought himself quite worthy to inspire such recklessness. He was lost in those good thoughts when the constable's wife opened the door of her chamber, and invited the chevalier to follow her in. There his noble lady cast aside all the apparel of her lofty fortune, and falling at the feet of this gentleman, became a simple woman.

"Alas, sweet sir!" said she, "I have acted vilely towards you. Listen. On your departure from this house, you will meet your death. The love which I feel for another has bewildered me, and without being able to hold his place here, you will have to take it before his murderers. This is the joy to which I have bidden you."

"Ah!" Replied Boys-Bourredon, interring in the depths of his heart a dark despair, "I am grateful to you for having made use of me as of something which belonged to you. . . . Yes, I love you so much that every day you I have dreamed of offering you in imitation of the ladies, a thing that can be given but once. Take, then, my life!"

And the poor chevalier, in saying this, gave her one glance to suffice for all the time he would have been able to look at her through the long days. Hearing these brave and loving words, Bonne rose suddenly.

"Ah! were it not for Savoisy, how I would love thee!" said she.

"Alas! my fate is then accomplished," replied Boys-Bourredon. "My horoscope predicted that I should die by the love of a great lady. Ah, God!" said he, clutching his good sword, "I will sell my life dearly, but I shall die content in thinking that my decease ensures the happiness of her I love. I should live better in her memory than in reality." At the sight of the gesture and the beaming face of this courageous man, the constable's wife was pierced to the heart. But soon she was wounded to the quick because he seemed to wish to leave her without even asking of her the smallest favour.

"Come, that I may arm you," said she to him, making an attempt to kiss him.

"Ha! my lady-love," replied he, moistening with a gentle tear the fire of his eyes, "would you render my death impossible by attaching too great a value to my life?"

"Come," cried she, overcome by this intense love, "I do not know what the end of all this will be, but come--afterwards we will go and perish together at the postern."

The same flame leaped in their hearts, the same harmony had struck for both, they embraced each other with a rapture in the delicious excess of that mad fever which you know well I hope; they fell into a profound forgetfulness of the dangers of Savoisy, of themselves, of the constable, of death, of life, of everything.

Meanwhile the watchman at the porch had gone to inform the constable of the arrival of the gallant, and to tell him how the infatuated gentleman had taken no notice of the winks which, during Mass and on the road, the countess had given him in order to prevent his destruction. They met their master arriving in great haste at the postern, because on their side the archers of the quay had whistled to him afar off, saying to him--

"The Sire de Savoisy has passed in."

And indeed Savoisy had come at the appointed hour, and like all the lovers, thinking only of his lady, he had not seen the count's spies and had slipped in at the postern. This collision of lovers was the cause of the constable's cutting short the words of those who came from the Rue St. Antoine, saying to them with a gesture of authority, that they did not think wise to disregard--

"I know that the animal is taken."

Thereupon all rushed with a great noise through this said postern, crying, "Death to him! death to him!" and men-at-arms, archers, the constable, and the captains, all rushed full tilt upon Charles Savoisy, the king's nephew, who they attacked under the countess's window, where by a strange chance, the groans of the poor young man were dolorously exhaled, mingled with the yells of the soldiers, at the same time as passionate sighs and cries were given forth by the two lovers, who hastened up in great fear.

"Ah!" said the countess, turning pale from terror, "Savoisy is dying for me!"

"But I will live for you," replied Boys-Bourredon, "and shall esteem it a joy to pay the same price for my happiness as he has done."

"Hide yourself in the clothes chest," cried the countess; "I hear the constable's footsteps."

And indeed M. d'Armagnac appeared very soon with a head in his hand, and putting it all bloody on the mantleshef, "Behold, Madame," said he, "a picture which will enlighten you concerning the duties of a wife towards her husband."

"You have killed an innocent man," replied the countess, without changing colour. Savoisy was not my lover."

And with the this speech she looked proudly at the constable with a face marked by so much dissimulation and feminine audacity, that the husband stood looking as foolish as a girl who has allowed a note to escape her below, before a numerous company, and he was afraid of having made a mistake.

"Of whom were you thinking this morning?" asked he.

"I was dreaming of the king," said she.

"Then, my dear, why not have told me so?"

"Would you have believed me in the bestial passion you were in?"

The constable scratched his ear and replied--

"But how came Savoisy with the key of the postern?"

"I don't know," she said, curtly, "if you will have the goodness to believe what I have said to you."

And his wife turned lightly on her heel like a weather-cock turned by the wind, pretending to go and look after the household affairs. You can imagine that D'Armagnac was greatly embarrassed with the head of poor Savoisy, and that for his part Boys-Bourredon had no desire to cough while listening to the count, who was growling to himself all sorts of words. At length the constable struck two heavy blows over the table and said, "I'll go and attack the inhabitants of Poissy." Then he departed, and when the night was come Boys-Bourredon escaped from the house in some disguise or other.

Poor Savoisy was sorely lamented by his lady, who had done all that a woman could do to save her lover, and later he was more than wept, he was regretted; for the countess having related this adventure to Queen Isabella, her majesty seduced Boys-Bourredon from the service of her cousin and put him to her own, so much was she touched with the qualities and firm courage of this gentleman.

Boys-Bourredon was a man whom danger had well recommended to the ladies. In fact he comported himself so proudly in everything in the lofty fortune, which the queen had made for him, that having badly treated King Charles one day when the poor man was in his proper senses, the courtiers, jealous of favour, informed the king of his cuckoldom. Boys-Bourredon was in a moment sewn in a sack and thrown into the Seine, near the ferry at Charenton, as everyone knows. I have no need add, that since the day when the constable took it into his head to play thoughtlessly with knives, his good wife utilised so well the two deaths he had caused and threw them so often in his face, that she made him as soft as a cat's paw and put him in the straight road of marriage; and he proclaimed her a modest and virtuous constable's lady, as indeed she was. As this book should, according to the maxims of great ancient authors, join certain useful things to the good laughs which you will find therein and contain precepts of high taste, I beg to inform you that the quintessence of the story is this: That women need never lose their heads in serious cases, because the God of Love never abandons them, especially when they are beautiful, young, and of good family; and that gallants when going to keep an amorous assignation should never go there like giddy young men, but carefully, and keep a sharp look-out near the burrow, to avoid falling into certain traps and to preserve themselves; for after a good woman the most precious thing is, certes, a pretty gentleman.

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