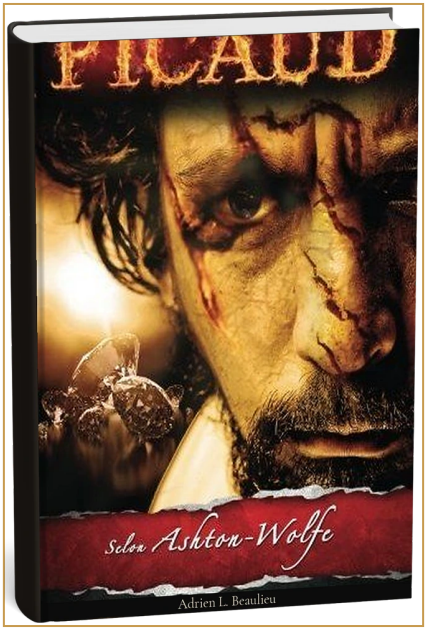
MAISON BEAULIEU · AB ÉDITIONS

L'Aventure Picaud · Partie V de l'Intégrale



Selon Ashton-Wolfe

PREMIER CHAPITRE INTÉGRAL OFFERT

ADRIEN L. BEAULIEU

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EXTRAIT DE LECTURE · DE L'ARCHIVE AU FEUILLETON

Texte Original: The Diamond Of Vengeance

The Diamond of Vengeance

Bring the true story of the Count of Monte Cristo

The French have a proverb : «Happy the people which has no history».

If there be any truth on the saying, then the French are a very unhappy nation - for few countries on this little planet have such a turgid, frightful, glorious, bloodstained, glittering history as France.

Echoes of the wild deeds committed in days gone by have drifted down to us in many a romance and poem, for those deeds where such that they could not fail to fire the imagination of the world's troubadours. Dumas wrote of nothing else ; and although his historical novels are fantastic and fancifully embroidered, they have their roots in French history.

Many a day have I wandered among the grim relics of the want on kings and their galaxy of courtiers, listening to echoes from the dead past.

I have stood and gazed at the black mediaeval towers of the Conciègerie, where countless prisoners dragged out a weary existence in foul dungeons, until the rack, the question, or the sword of some masked executioner ended their lives ; and I have felt their agony vibrating around me. In the distance across the Seine is Nôtre Dame,

a stone's throw from the Châtelet, where once towered the grim fortress prison, marking the extreme limit of the city.

I knew that vivid, picturesque records of those times existed, packed away on the dusty shelves of the Secret Police Archives. Only a few, a very fortunate few, have ever entered these Bluebeard's chambers and unwrapped the numbered parcels which bear such unexpected inscriptions that they instantly call to life a host of leaping thoughts.

«Prisoners of the Bastille», «Reports on the trial of Marie Antoinette», «The attempted assassination of the Duke of Wellington» ; such are some of the striking words on the labels.

Orders for executions and letters of cachet signed Louis, King of France, are still to be found in their hundreds, although a very convenient fire, which destroyed the Ministry of Justice and the old Sûreté building, consumed many which could to- day endanger the reputation of famous families.

Great was my joy, therefore, when having applied for permission to study these secret documents, I received the coveted permits, signed by the Prefect of Police and the Chief of the Archives, authorising me to delve among these records and to photograph, copy and publish what I thought might be of interest. That such permission should be granted to an Englishman was indeed a great kindness ; but then, Monsieur Chiappe, the energetic chief of Police, who was formerly head of the Sûreté, is a Corsican. And Corsicans, wether fighting for law and order, or against it, do everything impulsively.

M. Martin, the director of the Archives, whom I also wish to thank for his great courtesy, is a savant, a dreamer and poet, and he hailed

with delight the proposed publication in England of some of his treasures. Thus the stories which follow are true.

Among the first discoveries I made were the original documents from which Alexandre Dumas evolved his wonderful book, The Count of Monte Cristo.

As I scanned the reports of the old, famous story, I felt as I imagine a man would feel who suddenly, unexpectedly, encounters a fabled monster - a mermaid, or a unicorn. I realised that I had never believed the tale. Yet here, on ancient, rough, linen paper, and written in the clear mincing hand of police officials who lived more than a century ago, were the dates, names and statements, with annotations in the margin in Dumas' own handwriting. So my first story will be the relation of that amazing series of episodes which Dumas used for his great romance The Count of Monte Cristo. I shall add nothing, invent nothing, and alter no fact ; it would be the act of a vandal.

The story is classified in the archives of the Paris Sûreté as «The Diamond of Vengeance». Originally, it was merely a jumble of tedious police reports, details of investigations, and interrogations by examining magistrates, of the various men and women who played their parts in this epic drama.

Then, in 1820, Monsieur Peuchet, the eminent archivist of the French police, selected all those documents which were truly relevant and important, and welded them into one coherent narrative, eliminating the countless corroborations and repetitions so inevitable in a complex case. To this bald collection of facts he added the long confession of the dying Pierre Picaud, made in the presence of two police officers ; and the account of the death of Allut in England and

his strange statement, which Father Duvernais of the French Catholic Church in London sent to the Prefect.

Those who have read Monte Cristo will at once recognise the fantastic theme from which the great romancer evolved his story.

Nîmes, that ancient fortified town which was once held by the legions of Rome as a barrier to invasions from Spain, lay basking in the torrid sunshine of Provence. The day was drawing to a close and the public fountains were surrounded by groups of handsome, laughing girls come to obtain a supply of cool, sparkling water for the evening meal. The air vibrated to the deep, melodious language of the South. Each girl, as the tall brown pitcher brimmed over with a pleasant gurgle, hoisted the heavy vessel to her head and strode away with that graceful swing of the hips which left head and shoulders rigid, and balanced the burden so accurately that not a drop was spilt. Everywhere tousled children, brown as Arabs and almost nude, played in the dusty narrow streets, or slept in corners under the shady arches.

As usual Mathieu Loupian stood at the door of his modest inn, Place St. Opportune, awaiting the drove of customers who would soon return from their toil on the farms and among the olive groves and vineyards. Already, several be-ribboned mules, atinkle with bells, were tethered to iron rings, while their owners sprawled on the stools and benches scattered about the front of the tavern, and waited for the flame-coloured earthenware jugs of wine, for which Nîmes was famous.

Soon, a clamorous, turbulent company filled the street with yells and laughter, for the men of Provence love noise for its own sake, as

an expression of their violent, primitive natures. Three young fellows who sat apart and were evidently bosom friends of the innkeeper, were especially noticeable by their easy familiarity with the smiling servants and their boisterous greetings to each new arrival. These were Gervais Chaubart, who owned the finest mules in the town ; Guilhem Solari, the peasant ; and Antoine Allut, a farmer. The last-named was a giant, and his fierce temper and bulging muscles had more than once brought him in conflict with the rural police.

Mathieu Loupian had just settled down to drink with them, when a handsome, swarthy youngster halted before their table. His long legs touched the ground at every movement of the sturdy donkey which he straddled, and his appearance was greeted with shouts of ironical laughter.

«Hello, Pierre», the landlord called him, «how smart you look ! Why have you donned your sunday clothes ? Are you going to dance the Treilhas at the fête to-night ?»

«Dance, no. I've something better than that in view», the newcomer, whose name was Pierre Picaud, replied gaily. «I'm going courting when the moon rises.»

«Courting ?» Loupian exclaimed in astonishment, for Picaud's poverty was proverbial. «Who is the girl who'll flirt with you, when you cannot even buy her a silken shawl ?»

«That's my secret, and a secret it shall remain, until wedding. Now give me a jug of wine, for there is a layer of dust on my throat».

The four cronies looked at each other meaningly. Here was a chance for fresh gossip. At all costs this wonderful secret must be

dragged from handsome Pierre ; and they set to work to ply him with wine and flattery, until at last the unsuspecting man, flushed and laughing with embarrassment, sprang to his feet and cried :

«Well then, if you must know, drink to the health of Marguerite de Vigoroux, my betrothed.»

For an instant surprise held the listeners spellbound, then a babble of questions and exclamations broke from them :

«What, Marguerite the heiress ? Marguerite, who possesses a hundred thousand pistoles in gold ? Why, man, that's impossible. What have you to offer her ?»

«Love !», Picaud replied earnestly. «Such love as you cannot understand. I care nothing for her money. I worship her sweet face and could kiss the ground on which her dainty feet walk.»

«Love !» and shouts of laughter greeted the passionate outburst. «Love is not enough, you simpleton. Women want more than that nowadays.»

«No», Picaud replied, looking at the innkeeper with an angry glitter in his eyes. «She is content. I shall bring her my two strong arms and a faithful heart. You fellows think money is everything. If you like to come, I invite you all to the wedding feast next Tuesday, at Latignac's restaurant. There will be a dance afterwards ; an open air 'bal' and fireworks. Now goodbye and thank you for the wine», an Pierre swung a leg over his donkey and trotted away.

Loupian watched him disappear with a sneer on his thin lips. A silence had fallen on the four friends, and each was busy with his thoughts. The canker of envy was in their hearts, for Marguerite was

not only the most beautiful girl in Nîmes, but one of the wealthiest and an orphan besides.

Loupian turned abruptly to the giant Allut.

«I'll bet you a hundred francs that Marguerite doesn't marry that poverty-stricken Adonis.»

«What do you mean, Mathieu ? What evil thoughts are you harbouring ? Let the youngster be. Good luck to him ! He' s a better man than any of us.»

Loupian lifted his lip in a snarl.

«A better man, is he ? Well, he won't be that for long. Now, listen - just for a joke we'll send a letter to the commissaire. You know Picaud was the friend of that English painter, John Forrester, who had to flee for his life when the people rose against the aristocrats. The Englishman was known to have had friends at Court in Paris, and the revolutionary tribunal would have sent him to the guillotine had they caught him. We'll say that Picaud is a spy of the English and an agent of the Vendéens. The police will arrest him and that'll put off his wedding feast for some time.»

Solari and Chaubart agree eagerly to the proposal, but Allut thumped the table with his huge fist and shouted :

«Don't do it, Loupian. It'a foul scheme. No good will come of it, and I'll have nothing to do with such plotting.»

«Rubbish ; it's only a joke anyway. We'll see whether the rich Marguerite loves him enough to wait until he is released.»

So the letter was sent to the commissaire of Police, who forwarded it at once to his chief, the Duke of Rovigo.

Meanwhile, Pierre Picaud, happy and full of plans for the future, had gone to keep the tryst with his beloved, who awaited him, as she had done every evening, in the orange gardens surrounding her house. There, in the scented paths, bathed in soft moonlight, they renewed their vows of eternal love and discussed the day, now so near, when they would be man and wife. Pierre was in an aggressive and vainglorious mood, a thing so strange and unusual that Marguerite was vaguely distressed.

«I have to-day had it thrown in my teeth that I am poor peasant», he cried, when he was about to leave, «and that it is your wealth alone which attracts me. I invited those who said that, to come to our wedding I can see that there will be many who will hate me, sweet one, and one who may, perhaps, try to poison your mind.»

Marguerite felt an evil breath sweep about her at the words. Later, when the whole town was astounded at Picaud's mysterious disappearance, she remembered that moment and repeated the conversation which took place to the police.

«Why have you spoken of our betrothal ?» she exclaimed with fear and reproach in her voice. «You little realise, Pierre, how soon now the news will spread.»

«Well, and what of it, ma mie ? We are doing no wrong. I would like to shout my happiness from the housetops. You have no parents to raise obstacles ; neither have I, and we love each other. If spiteful rumours are spread about me you will not believe them, surely ?»

Marguerite nestled closer to the stalwart from her lover, and said nothing more. She felt that while he was in that mood argument was useless, and to tell the truth she was a little proud of his defiant attitude. They parted after many kisses and soft speeches. No friendly spirit warned them that from that moment the dark curtain of destiny had swept down, and that they would never kiss again.

Like a poisoned arrow, the lying denunciation sped on its way to the Duke of Rovigo, and orders were immediately given to take Pierre Picaud secretly, at night, to the prison fortress of Fenestrelle. It was sufficient in those times that a man should be merely accused of conspiracy with the British, or the exiled nobles, to cause him to be imprisoned, and, unfortunately, Picaud's friendship with John Forrester, who had once painted a picture of the unhappy Marie Antoinette, was well known, and regarded with much disfavour.

Two days later, as Pierre was leaving his house to meet his betrothed, a cloak suddenly enveloped his head and shoulders ; a rope was twisted around his arms and legs, and he was lifted and carried to a coach which at once drove away.

Marguerite waited for her lover until dawn, and then in her anxiety she hurried to his house, but no one had seen him ; and as the days passed with no sign of Picaud, his mysterious disappearance was discussed in all the taverns and the wildest theories were evolved. But the three conspirators who guessed at the truth kept their own counsel and threatened Allut with instant death if he spoke.

One may imagine the utter despair and anguish of Pierre when, after a terrible and apparently endless dash though the night, bound

and unable to move or cry out, he was thrust into a tiny stone cell, and the heavy door clanged shut behind him.

It was all the more dreadful since he could not conceive why he was thus treated. In the long, monotonous days which followed, each day seeming like a long, weary year, he cudgelled his brain in vain for a reason for this unbelievable thing which had happened.

His gaolers would tell him nothing, and merely shrugged their shoulders when demanded to see their superior. A whole year passed before he even discovered where he was imprisoned. Then for a time a frenzy seized him, he refused to eat, and one morning, when the turnkey entered his cell with the daily ration of water and bread, he sprang at the man and fought desperately to escape. But his iron muscles were already weakened from slow starvation and the absence of fresh air and exercise. The noise of the scuffle naturally brought help, and Pierre was beaten with sticks into unconsciousness and then chained to a ring in the wall. As a punishment for his assault on the gaoler he was later taken into an underground vault and received two hundred strokes with an iron rod, from which he never completely recovered.

Another year passed, leaden, bitter, dreadful, every day adding white threads to his once glossy black hair, and fresh furrows to his pale, grime-encrusted face. Only one thought bore him on and kept his mind from plunging over the brink into final madness : he clung tenaciously to the belief that Marguerite, his beloved, still waited somewhere in the world of free men, and that perhaps he would see her again. And with that hope came a desire for vengeance. Vengeance on those who were guilty of having sent him to that living death.

During those endless days he groped in vain for some clue to the mystery of his fate. No doubt it was the unsolved problem which preserved his sanity. He realised, too, that rebellious conduct would only harm his chances of freedom, and became docile and patient. At last, after three months, his daily plea that the chain should be removed was acceded to, and it was taken from his neck.

One gathers from his description that the constant, unbroken silence was almost unendurable, for he related that even the distant shrieks and groans of prisoners undergoing some nameless torture, dreadful though they were, came as a relief from that unending grey monotony.

It was during the third year in the gloomy fortress that he first heard faint tappings on the wall, to which he replied with frantic joy. Some unhappy wretch in a cell not far from his own was trying to attract his attention. Then, one day, while chewing the scanty allowance of black bread, his teeth encountered a tightly rolled wad of paper. He unrolled this with the eagerness of a man starved for human intercourse and found that it bore a message of cheer and instructions for communicating by a series of raps on the wall.

Thereafter, when the guards were at meals, Picaud conversed with the unknown. He learnt thus that his neighbour was an Italian priest named Torri, who had already spent ten years in the same dungeon. Picaud in return related his own story. Patiently day after day he slowly spelt words, by tapping on the wall with the chain which had formerly been fastened by a ring to his neck.

These two unhappy men thereupon decided to cut through the massive stone which separated them, in order to be able to

communicate more freely. Picaud smashed the iron collar, and ground both halves to a sharp edge, and with these improvised chisels, he scraped and laboured day after day at a spot near the floor where the stones had been joined with cement, and where no ray of light ever penetrated. Picaud had no exact means of gauging the passing of time, for sometimes he was ill for weeks and lay shivering with fever on the heap of straw which was his bed. But he tried to allow for these periods when he added a scratch on the wall for each dragging month.

It was in April of the year of 1807 when Picaud was arrested, and 1812 arrived before at last the remains of his chisels, now worn away to tiny fragments, broke through the last layer of stone and cement. The whole was just large enough for Picaud to reach with his emaciated arm into the next cell and grasp bony fingers in his own.

Each kissed the other's hand in an ecstasy of joy, and thereafter, when night came, Picaud, who had shifted his straw to that wall, as the other had done, lay and talked, or listened in his turn while the priest related his own odyssey. He learnt thus Giuseppe Torri of Milan had been thrown into that dungeon by the intrigues and influence of his brother, Prince Carlo Torri of Milan, in order to force him to divulge the hiding place of a vast treasure in diamonds, and the names of the banks where his money was deposited. Neither torture nor the dreadful years of silence had weakened his determination to prevent his arch enemy from learning the secret.

— Fin des premières pages offertes (Chapitre I complet à retrouver dans l'édition intégrale) —

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