

See. He made a great show of being busy and did not look up for quite an appreciable time. It was the longest minute Madame Lacordaire had lived.

"Well, what's this?" said the magistrate at last, eyeing Madame Lacordaire hard.

"Monsieur le Commissaire," said the police-agent, saluting, "this gentleman accuses this lady of stealing a book from the National Library."

"It is an abominable falsehood," cried the lady. "It is an outrage for which you shall all pay dearly. I am Madame Lacordaire."

"The wife of M. Deputy Lacordaire of Indre?" cried the commissary, rising from his seat, with a half bow.

"The same," said Madame Lacordaire.

"And you accuse this lady, the wife of a deputy, with theft, sir?" cried the magistrate, turning on the inspector.

"I do, Monsieur le Commissaire," said he. "It is with a thousand regrets, but I do. I charge her with stealing a pamphlet entitled, 'Lifting of the Mask,' from the National Library."

"Why, imbecile, I returned the pamphlet at the desk."

"Oh, oh, is that so?" said the commissary, siding with the prisoner.

"It is true, Monsieur le Commissaire, that she gave back a pamphlet—"

"Well, then."

"Wasn't it 'Lifting of the Mask'?" cried Madame Lacordaire.

"Yes. On the outside. Inside, however, were blank leaves. It was an artful substitution."

"A fine story," cried the lady indignantly. "I took out a pamphlet called 'Lifting of the Mask.' And I handed back a pamphlet called 'Lifting of the Mask.' And you have me dragged through the streets like a pickpocket. Oh, but you shall pay for this, if I have to go to the Minister himself."

The inspector, however, was not to be intimidated, and disregarding alike the lady's threats and the angry looks of the gallant commissary, repeated very calmly:

"I make a formal charge against this lady. I accuse her of stealing a copy of a pamphlet, entitled 'Lifting of the Mask,' the property of the National Library. In its place she returned some blank sheets stitched in to the wrapper of another copy of the same pamphlet. The attention of the receiving clerk was attracted by the fact that whilst the copy handed to this lady was black with dust, the one she returned was quite clean."

"Why should this lady steal a pamphlet? Was it of any value?"

"Oh, no," said the inspector, shrugging his shoulders. "quite worthless. The work of some unknown scribbler."

"Scribbler, indeed!" began Madame Lacordaire, indignantly. "Checking herself, however, she continued, 'I deny the charge absolutely.'"

"If Monsieur Commissaire will look at Madame's muff," said the inspector, pointing a bony finger, "he will see for himself whether the charge is founded or not."

The end of the pamphlet was sticking out of the end of the muff, in a ruffle of white Valenciennes. Madame Lacordaire gave a scream, and banged her hand down on the protrusion.

It was too late. The commissary said so. The charge must be taken.

So the muff was impounded, and with willing fingers, the police magistrate, no longer benign, began to explore its perfumed softness. A powder box, dainty little purse, a little tube of lip salve, a scented handkerchief, and a dusty, dirty booklet.

The commissary glanced at the title page. Then he muttered, "Oh, I begin to understand!"

Madame Lacordaire burst into tears. "Oh, do not send me to prison," she cried, wringing her hands so violently that her gloves split in many places. "Oh, I am no thief, Monsieur."

"Nevertheless, Madame —" said the commissary, holding up the pamphlet.

"I know, I know," sobbed Madame Lacordaire. "But I can explain. Oh! I can explain. Only send these horrid men away."

"I do not think either of you need stay," said the magistrate, not at all displeased at the prospect of a tete-a-tete with such a pretty woman.

The police agent saluted and retired.

"But what about the property of the National Library?" said the in-

spector, lingering at the door.

The commissary hesitated, but a pleading glance from Madame Lacordaire's liquid violet eyes decided him. "The book, as a piece de conviction, as an incriminating object, must for the present remain in the hands of the law."

"Very good," said the inspector. He saluted and withdrew.

"This is very serious matter," began the commissary, "theft of national property, offence provided against by article—article—of the Criminal Code. What can have induced you to steal so worthless an object, at such a risk to yourself? Do you suffer from kleptomania?"

"Oh, no, no, no," sobbed Madame Lacordaire.

"Can you give any explanation of your conduct, then?" said the commissary, crossing to the fireplace and poking the fire. He was a chilly soul, and fuel was supplied by Government.

"It's, it's because I love my husband!" cried the lady, with a fresh burst of tears.

"Ah! I thought so. The pseudonym on the cover is an anagram for Jean Lacordaire—your husband's name. I saw that at once."

"How clever you are!" cried Madame Lacordaire, trying a little flattery.

"Well, but why should you want to steal your husband's book?"

"Voilà! That pamphlet is a violent exposure of Monsieur Deligny."

"Deligny? The President of the Council? The Prime Minister?"

"Yes, it was written seventeen years ago. Jean and Deligny are both from Tournoan, and Jean knew all about Deligny's escapades. They had been comrades and had quarrelled. The pamphlet was written at the time when Deligny was standing for the Isere Department."

"Ah, I see. Now that Deligny has worked his way up to the top of the tree M. Lacordaire regrets having attacked him, because he wants something of the Prime Minister?—Oh, politics, politics!" cried the commissary with an indulgent smile.

"That's just it," cried Madame Lacordaire. "How quickly you do grasp things! Jean has an excellent chance of being appointed Prefect of the Eure. The only thing in his way is this wretched pamphlet, this error of his youth. Deligny would never forgive it, and our Prefecture would be in the water, if he came to read it."

"Didn't he read it at the time?"

"No. Jean's father stopped it before it was really published. Only this wretched copy, which had been sent up to the Ministry of the Interior to secure copyright—a fine right!—remained. Papa-in-law burned all the others when they came from the printer, except one, which he kept as an awful warning against youthful folly. It was with the cover of that copy that I made up the dummy."

"You admit that then," said the commissary, resuming for an instant his magisterial air. Then with a smile he added: "But why steal this pamphlet? If Monsieur Deligny did not hear of it when it was written, he was not likely to hear of it now."

"Alas, yes, Monsieur. There are other candidates in the field for the Prefecture of the Eure Department."

"Oh, politics, politics! And one of them I suppose, knows of this skeleton in the cupboard of the Lacordaires and—"

"All of them do. It was that wretched printer who betrayed Jean, only a day or two ago."

"And do you think that Deligny would bear your husband a grudge for a political pamphlet—however violent—which was written seventeen years ago, anonymously, and never even published?"

"Oh, there are such dreadful things about Deligny's conduct and character in it, things only known to Jean, from his first theft in an orchard up to his candidacy. He would never, never forgive him for the mere intention to reveal them."

"So your husband sent you to purloin this book, at the risk of your liberty?" said the commissary with a pale smile.

"Indeed he did not," cried Madame Lacordaire, indignantly. "Jean is a man of honour. No. I am alone to blame. I, I want to be Madame la Prefete. Besides, I love my husband. I saw how anxious he was. His sleep was disturbed; he had no appetite at his meals. For Deligny to hear of this book meant his political ruin. He is all powerful."

"Oh, oh!" said the commissary doubtfully.

"So to save my poor darling's future and—"

"To become Madame la Prefete," interrupted the commissary, who had rapidly made up his mind what line of action to pursue, "you went"—in stern, magisterial tones, "and stole a volume deposited at the National Library. It was a very serious matter, and must of course go before the Court."

Monsieur le Commissaire was not at all disinclined to ingratiate himself also with a powerful Prime Minister.

"Oh, Mon Dieu, mon Dieu," cried the accused woman.

"You need not be so alarmed," said the commissary, crossing back to his desk. "The Court will not be severe on you under the circumstances. You will have a small fine to pay, voilà tout. I shall not detain you, of course. And you will win the reputation of being a model wife. All the husbands in Paris will be on your side. And now, Madame, excuse me. I must write my report to the Parquet."

"Oh, sir, sir!" cried Madame Lacordaire, joining her hands in supplication. "Do not, do not let this matter

go any further, I beseech you—I implore you."

"But, Madame, I assure you," said the commissary, much moved at the sight of her real distress, "that you need fear nothing but a small fine."

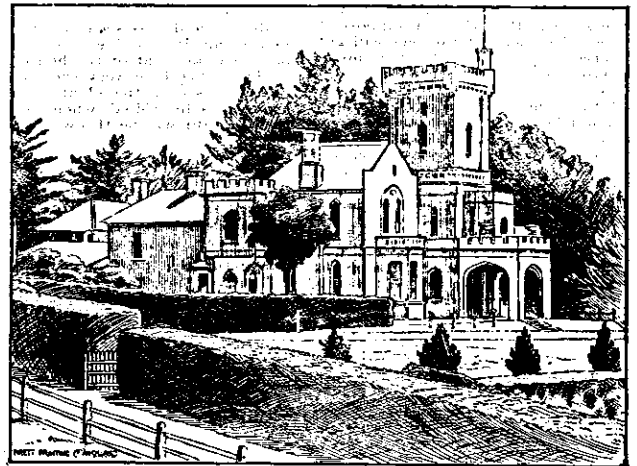
"Oh, it's not that," she cried. "It's Jean's whole future. Deligny will never forgive him. Jean will be ruined. The elections are coming on soon. He will not be re-elected if the Government is against him. And he has worked so hard. It will be too cruel if for a youthful error, a whole career, full of promise, is to be wrecked. For my sake, Monsieur, for the sake of our little children, I implore you—"

It is probable that the police magistrate, susceptible as he was to the sight of beauty in distress, would have hushed the matter up, using the large discretionary powers vested in the office of commissaire. Unfortunately for Madame Lacordaire she suddenly remembered a striking passage in her favourite volume of Balzac, and, as though the life of a Lucien de Rubenpre instead of the political ambition of a Jean Lacordaire were at stake, reacted, or rather tried to react, one of the most famous scenes in French fiction.

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