

## *Part One: The Mysterious Shadow*

### *1. Destiny's Vagrant*

On the edge of the Seine between Mantes and Bonnières, nearly opposite the majestic Chateau des Sablons that towered amidst immense foliage, stood a vagrant with a bag and a walking stick. Ravaged by fatigue, he inspected the dark confines of an old mill. Located alongside the river, the edifice had long been abandoned. Three quarters of the structure was covered by an inextricable mass of vines.

A painful sob erupted from the vagrant's chest.

"I have lost all! My poor wife! My son! My entire life! My happiness! It would be better to end everything! But I can't kill myself. I have to save my son. My son! I must be brave. Yes, I must be brave!"

Erupting in tears due to the awakened memories of his loved ones, the nameless man crossed the road. He stopped in front of the monumental structure whose gilded paint gleamed under the rays of the clear June sun. Gazing through the bars, he eagerly contemplated the fine stone avenues, the punctuated flower beds and the beautiful alabaster statues. He was dazzled by the imposing mansion and its vast marble pool where swans dwelt magnificently among graceful waters worthy of the Palace of Versailles. From the distance, the rhythms of an orchestra enveloped the grounds. Throughout the groves, elegant couples were whirling in a romantic dance of spring.

The vagrant's tears dried. No longer did his eyes reflect despair. His sorrow was replaced by hatred that threatened to disrupt the festivities.

A white-haired man with a beard approached. Known as Vallières, he possessed a distinguished, albeit deferential, appearance. He addressed the vagrant in a benevolent tone.

"What do you want, my good fellow?"

"To talk to the banker Favraux."

"Monsieur Favraux is very busy. I am his secretary. Maybe I could..."

Pulling some money from his pocket, Vallières extended it to the vagrant who objected with a virulent passion.

"I don't want charity. I want to speak to Monsieur Favraux."

Recognizing that he was confronting an obstinate man, Vallières decided to inform his employer.

Segregated from his guests, the banker was with a companion in a discreet arbor. They were viewing a splendid panorama to which the ruined mill in the foreground added a charming and picturesque quality. Favraux leaned romantically towards a very attractive woman whose reserved mannerisms suggested a simple and honest nature.

"Monsieur," announced the secretary, "there is a stranger at the gates insisting to see you."

Combining a sturdy maturity and temperate elegance with a shaven face and a steely gaze, Monsieur Favraux conveyed the modern image of a prominent financier. He expressed impatience in his curt response.

"Who is this individual?"

"A vagrant, Monsieur."

"A vagrant! You disturb me for that?"

"This unfortunate man appears very excited. I fear that he'll create some disturbance."

Upon these words, a haze passed quickly over the banker's face. Exhibiting intense passion towards the enticing female near him, he moderated his natural abrasiveness.

"Will you permit me, darling?"

"Please do," answered the young woman while modestly lowering her deep black eyes.

Accompanied by his secretary, Favraux walked towards the gates. Upon seeing the stranger, Favraux immediately addressed him.

"What do you want, my good man?"

Throwing his tattered felt hat to the ground, the vagrant revealed a visage tortured by anxiety. "Don't you recognize me?" he yelled.

"I've never seen you before!"

"I am Pierre Kerjean."

"Pierre Kerjean!" repeated the banker, unable to suppress a slight shudder.

"Come on," continued the vagrant, "you remember me, Monsieur Favraux. I was once an honest man. I owned a mill and some land on the other side of the road. I lived happily with my wife and child. One day, you arrived in the country. You bought Les Sablons. To enlarge your estate, you wanted to buy my property. Seduced by your large offer, I agreed. Then enticed by your promises, I entrusted my money to you. Not only did you ruin me, but you persuaded me to commit risky and fraudulent speculations. I wasn't as fortunate as you. I acted too rashly. My impatience proved fatal. I was condemned to 20 years of hard labor. My wife died of shame. When I returned from the penal colony, I learned at the City Hall that my impoverished son had become a thief!"

"And now?" insolently asked the banker recovering his composure.

"I don't want any money," asserted the old man. "I don't even want revenge. I *demand* simply your help in finding my son and reforming him!"

"I don't know what I can do for you."

"You don't know!" roared the vagrant while shaking his fist through the bars. "You are even more evil than I dreamed!"

"If you have any claims to make, address them to a court of justice."

"Justice!" laughed the ex-convict. "Ah! I know justice! For 20 years, it cursed me, while you, the true guilty party, continued to enrich yourself ruining and destroying everyone in your path! And when I ask a little mercy, you refer me to justice! Do you want to thoroughly crush me? This is cowardly! Abominable! Since I have little time left, I will devote my life to hating you! Every day and every hour, you'll see me as a living indictment of your infamous crimes! You'll hear me constantly scream accusations! You're only a thief and an outlaw!"

Shrugging in an arrogant manner, Favraux moved away from the gates. With compassionate words, Vallières strove to calm Kerjean's anger. The old man had one final outburst.

"You are cursed, Favraux! Cursed forever!"

Retrieving his hat and lifting up his sack, he walked away.

"I will have my revenge! Yes! I will have my revenge!"

This ordeal had broken his spirit. Scarcely traveling a half kilometer, Kerjean paused. Collapsing on a rock pile, he dropped his bag and stick. Taking his head between his hands, Kerjean began crying. He evoked through a distant fog the happy years that, alas, had been quickly swept away!

Suddenly, Kerjean quivered. Rumbles of an automobile drew his attention. A hoarse cry escaped him: "Favraux!" Kerjean recognized his enemy seated behind the wheel in a luxurious car with a 40-horsepower engine. Next to Favraux was a man in a chauffeur's uniform. Overwhelmed by his hatred, the old man ran towards the car screaming with arms outstretched. "Scum! Scum!"

Clipped by one of the vehicle's fenders, the unfortunate Kerjean fell under the wheels. Not even leaning on the brake pedal, the banker continued on his way without any concern for the bloodstained man lying deserted on the white road.

Almost immediately, Kerjean reopened his eyelids. Raising his head, he saw the car carrying his assailant disappearing in a cloud of dust. With glazed eyes and twisted lips, Kerjean turned his face towards the sky. He moaned as his body was besieged by monstrous spasms.

"God will punish you!"

## *II. The Mysterious Message*

In his extravagant study occupying the entire ground floor of the Chateau's principal wing, Favraux had already spent more than an hour at work that morning. His labor was disturbed by a knock on the large double door of his chambers.

"Enter," said the banker with mild impatience. However, his face became joyful immediately upon the entrance of his visitors.

The beautiful brunette, with which whom he had behaved so intimately the day before, advanced holding the hand of a charming boy. This lad, nearly five years-old, looked like a blond angel from a fresco of Le Dominiquin or Andréa del Sarto.

The child swiftly ran towards the financier. Jumping familiarly on the banker's knee, he shouted, "*Bonjour, Grandpa!*"

"*Bonjour, Jeannot!*" replied Favraux. After kissing the child and placing him on the ground, the banker's eyes looked into those of his grandson's governess.

While the youngster moved towards the wide windows that opened on the park, Favraux passionately murmured to the young woman.

"Marie, I love you!"

"Monsieur..."

"I love you, and I want... Yes, I want you to be mine."

"Your mistress, never!"

"I want you to be my wife!"

"Monsieur Favraux!"

"Right after the marriage of my daughter," murmured the banker.

A feminine voice came from the other side of the door, "Can I enter, Father?"

"Yes, Mama," replied spontaneously the boy at the window.

A young woman with a gentle and tragic demeanor appeared on the threshold. Radiantly gorgeous, she was attired in a becoming riding-habit that emphasized her harmonious grace and frail suppleness.

"*Bonjour, Jacqueline,*" stated Favraux coldly.

"*Bonjour, Father,*" replied the banker's daughter before timidly kissing him.

"Are you going horseback riding this morning?" questioned Favraux.

"Yes," responded Jacqueline. "I'll be riding in the forest with Vicomte de la Rochefontaine."

Hearing this name, the naïve Jean squeezed his mother's hand.

"Mama, it is true that I'll have a new Papa?"

"Yes," replied the young woman blushing slightly.

"What will I call him?"

"Father."

"Is he as rich as Grandpa?"

"My dear, there are questions that children shouldn't ask," gently scolded Jacqueline. "My little one, it's time for Mademoiselle Verdier's lesson. Please be attentive and obedient."

"Yes, Mama. I promise."

The child departed with his governess while Jacqueline sighed with motherly pride.

"My sweet little angel, if only I didn't have to share you!"

"Enough!" interjected Favraux. "You still have ridiculous ideas."

"Father, you misunderstand me. Let me explain."

"You don't know what you're saying. You are foolish, my daughter. Foolish!"

Hearing this brutal sentence, Jacqueline sadly lowered her head.

Surrounded by luxury, the kindly heiress had never known happiness. Her meek mother had died when Jacqueline was a child. Madame Favraux's spirit had been crushed by her husband's neglect and the shame caused by the ruthless swindling of his clients. Once Jacqueline returned from convent school, her father coldly used her as a pawn to advance his own schemes. The banker forced her to wed Jacques Aubry, a young engineer without money or scruples.

Favraux had intended Aubry, a genius in his field, to be his associate (actually, his accomplice) in his financial manipulations. However, Aubry had perished in an automobile accident in America during a business trip undertaken on his father-in-law's orders. Jacqueline, already embittered by her father's domination, resolved to devote herself entirely to her child. For years, the banker's absorption in new projects had distracted him from interfering with Jacqueline's life.

Nevertheless, Favraux eventually desired to form a new alliance. The financier sought to expand his clientele to include the French aristocracy. The cultivation of a young penniless noble related to the most prominent families would be the means to achieve this goal.

Within a few weeks, acting like a tyrannical despot whose power conquers all, Favraux rushed the betrothal. For a second time, he imposed his will on his young daughter. The poor woman again succumbed to the iron authority that her father exercised like a force of nature.

Confronted now by the father who had always bullied her, she had inadvertently permitted him to glimpse the painful sorrow in her heart. She was about to excuse herself when the whistle of an acoustic tube sounded.

"Here's my secretary," said Favraux to his daughter. "The mail has arrived. Leave me and do your riding. Go! Try to be cheerful during lunch."

"*Au revoir*, Father."

"*Au revoir*."

Resigned to her father's domination, the submissive Jacqueline withdrew.

Jacqueline passed Vallières, who respectfully bowed to her. "My regards to the Vicomte," the banker said to his departing daughter. Alone with his secretary, Favraux spoke in whispers.

"Have you checked on the incident involving the vagrant?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Well?"

"I discovered that no one suspects you of being the involuntary author of this unfortunate accident."

"I prefer that."

"As for Kerjean, he was found by peasants and taken to the clinic of Dr. Gortais."

"Did Kerjean say anything?"

"No, Monsieur, and he will say nothing."

"Is he dead?"

"Tonight he fell into a coma without regaining consciousness. All the time that I was at the clinic, he showed no signs of life."

"All is well!"

Favraux designated the voluminous mail that a footman brought on a tray, "Now we take care of more important matters."

Once the servant withdrew, the banker opened his correspondence with a paper cutter. His eyes focused on a big yellow envelope whose address was bizarrely written in gothic and exaggerated characters.

*To the Banker Favraux  
Chateau des Sablons,  
Mantises (Seine-and-Oise)  
Urgent and Personal*

Somewhat intrigued, Jacqueline's father unsealed the envelope and read it aloud.

*"Not content with ruining the people, you have opted to murder them. I order you to pay for your crimes by donating half your wealth to the Public Assistance. You have until 10 o'clock, tomorrow evening, to execute my commands."*

The mysterious message was signed with a single name written in red letters and followed by an exclamation point drawn like a tear of blood: *JUDEX!*

"Judex! Judex!" repeated Favraux with surprise.

"It's Latin for 'judge,' Monsieur," said the secretary.

"Yes, I know." The banker muttered derisively between his teeth. "But what does this mean?"