

PART I: THE BROTHERS OF DEATH

I. A Marriage under the Empire

It is recalled that in July 1810, on the occasion of the marriage of the Emperor with the Archduchess Marie-Louise, the Prince de Schwarzenburg, the Austrian Ambassador, gave an elaborate reception that a great disaster upset. During the ball, and before the outbreak of the fire which devoured the hall, Mademoiselle Léa de Montgermon, daughter of Baron de Montgermon, one of the richest landowners of the Seine-et-Oise Department, had noticed the presence of a very distinguished and elegant young man, who, with the epaulette of a Captain and Legion of Honor Cross, wore the uniform of the Mounted Guards. For Mademoiselle de Montgermon, that young man was not exactly unknown. Often at Versailles, where she lived and where he was garrisoned with his regiment, she had had multiple occasions to encounter him on the walkways. She also knew that his name was Alfred de Missery, the son of an Imperial Procureur General near one of the Appeals Courts of the Midi, and he was supposed to be someone who had greatest expectations, since the Emperor had particularly distinguished him with this title.

The girl hadn't been mistaken: she had been the object of the young officer's unequivocal attention, and yet, something inexplicable had happened: he had never made any effort to be presented to her father, nor at some other houses where he had easy access, and where he would frequently encounter her. Without a doubt, Léa de Montgermon was one of the most attractive young women at the gathering where chance had just placed Monsieur de Missery in her path. She must then very naturally suppose that, in a quadrille, he had an easy and ready-made opportunity to approach her; and that eternal wooer at a distance would hurry to invite her to dance. However, nothing of the sort happened. With a worried and melancholy air, the incomprehensible lover continued, with remarkable perseverance, to look at her, although discreetly, and to court her, with his looks, so to speak. But he let her fill all the spaces on her dance card, without showing the least ambition to see himself listed there.

However, it wasn't that time for thought was lacking for the late comer, because for an hour, the merciful girl had left a name blank, and secretly reserved a dance. But finally tired of seeing nothing happen, she gave to the first claimant who presented himself the place that she had saved until then. And with a nuance of pique, she had just disposed of her last engagement when the fire broke out. To represent the confusion and frightening disorder that accompanied the invasion of the flames, it must be remembered that in the middle of the general "everyone for himself," the Russian Ambassador, Prince Kourakin, was thrown down, trod under foot, covered by those confused groups, and robbed of a magnificent garniture of diamonds, and that, in the number of victims of that disastrous night, there must be counted Princess Pauline de Schwarzenberg, sister-in-law of the master of the house, and who, in the heroism of her maternal love, found a deplorable end.

Separated violently from her parents by the wave of fleeing crowds, Mademoiselle de Montgermon remained exposed to the most imminent peril. She had already fallen, senseless, on a small bench where asphyxiation, if not the devouring invasion of the flames, menaced her beautiful life. But the officer, *who didn't dance*, from the instant there was danger, hadn't stopped watching out for her. Alert and strong, he picked her up in his arms, and managing to make his way across a half-closed partition, at the end of several minutes, made his way outside the townhouse carrying his precious burden.

Great catastrophes don't show human nature under a very beautiful aspect, and in the middle of a frightened and self-interested crowd, it was in vain that the courageous young man sought some sympathetic help that would allow him to give, according to demanding social conventions, a denouement to his generous act. Everyone passed by that beautiful unconscious girl, that he had had to put down on the street pavement, and to whom his inexperience was administering care that was more devoted than

effective. It was also impossible for him to know where to take her and what he should do with her after he had brought her out of that swoon.

Finally, however, Mademoiselle de Montgermon regained consciousness and she was immediately able to point out the house of a relative that she knew lived in a nearby neighborhood, where she could very easily go and ask asylum. However, it wasn't without a great deal of resistance that she consented to leave the place of the disaster, where she wanted at any price to ask about her mother and father, about whom fate had left her in a state of terrible anxiety. To get her to leave that place, her savior had to agree to go back to look her dear ones as soon as she herself had been left in a safe place.

The journey was made on foot, the girl leaning in a sisterly way on the arm of her liberator. As she entered her relative's house, Léa found herself immediately confronted with a great consolation: Madame de Montgermon had just arrived at the same place, brought there by her husband. Although he had immediately left to seek news of his daughter, he could equally be thought to be safe and sound, Monsieur de Missery also offered to go look for him, to keep his fatherly despair from leading him into some danger. Shortly thereafter, Monsieur de Montgermon learned through the young officer that his daughter was near her mother and safe. To tell then his ardent gratitude would be so much more superfluous when, the next day, we will have to recount a similar scene at the moment when, back in Versailles, Monsieur de Missery, who hadn't been able to avoid the pressing duty to inquire about the beautiful girl in his debt, found himself this time in the presence of the assembled family. After having submitted to the ovation given him with perhaps a little too much dignity, the young officer was urged to follow up on an acquaintance begun for him under such honorable auspices. As for Mademoiselle de Montgermon, her gratitude was expressed in a way at the same time measured and sincerely felt. Following such a welcome, at the time of some rare visits, difficult for her liberator to avoid, with the eloquence of two of the most beautiful eyes in the world, that, for merit less modest than that of Monsieur de Missery, would have seemed to say things of greater significance.

However, on his part, either through natural lack of social polish, or through some unknown preoccupation, or finally through the fear of ridicule by seeming to aspire to the hand of such a rich heiress, he answered only in a discreet and restrained way the kinds of invitations of which he was the object. Then, after some time, spacing his visits more and more apart, he stopped them completely.

Monsieur de Missery wouldn't have been the most dangerous of seducers if he had conducted himself differently. A young girl, whom a man gifted with all the social advantages and all the exterior graces had made his entrance by saving her life, but, then, instead of seeing herself ardently sought out by this savior to whom she did not in any way haggle about her gratitude, imagine that young girl getting nothing from him but formal and cold attention. Wouldn't that be the way above all others to make himself adored, another Hippolytus?¹

So it was that Monsieur de Montgermon came to see Monsieur de Missery and, point-blank, like a man who had calculated in advance all the implications of his question, he asked him if he had not ever thought of marriage. The young officer having answered that his age had not yet put him in a position to consider such a serious subject, Monsieur de Montgermon said:

"Nevertheless, it should be considered, because a person to whom it is customary in this country to defer, has begun to take an interest in you."

As Monsieur de Missery asked that Monsieur de Montgermon explain himself more clearly the latter continued:

"Yes, sir, the Emperor, who willingly takes an interest in these kinds of affairs, has been told of your generous devotion for my daughter, and he has wished to do me the honor of setting out some ideas on that subject."

"The Emperor has some special kindness for me."

"Better than that, he has looked into everything concerning you; young women you snatch out of fires, very natural feelings that can be born from such events; he calculates the wealth of the father and

¹ Theseus' wife, Phaedra, fell in love with Hippolytus, but was spurned by him; infuriated by his lack of response, she caused his death.

mother of young men to whom he destines splendid futures; and then one fine day at Saint-Cloud or at the Tuileries, passing in front of a line of people, he throws out these words which could very well be taken for an order: 'Monsieur de Montgermon, you have, they say, a charming daughter, and they add that you are giving her a dowry of a million; I ask it for Monsieur de Missery, one of the officers of my Guard. The girl must not have anything against my protégé, since he saved her life.'

"What, my dear sir, would you answer to that suggestion, when, what's more, by rare good fortune, the thought of the Sovereign and the father of the family meet so fortunately."

It would have been difficult to throw one's daughter at Monsieur de Missery's head more pleasantly. Everything was said in the short discourse of Monsieur de Montgermon: the good will of the family, that of the fiancée, the brilliant sum of the dowry, and, floating above all that, the will of the Emperor, before which the Officers of the Guard did not usually back off.

Monsieur de Missery—who would believe it?—had, however, objections, if not to this marriage in particular, at least to marriage in general. He then spoke of his own merit with modesty, even carried so far as humility and injustice. Then he told of the perfections of Mademoiselle de Montgermon, with the best felt and the most exalted praise; in faith of which, giving to this panegyric the most unexpected conclusion, he ended by categorically refusing the remarkable honor and happiness that had just been offered him.

"That's all we have to say to each other," Monsieur de Montgermon said, rising, with a quickness and astonishment that can be understood. "You saved my daughter and you refuse her from the hand of the Emperor! One act cancels the other, All I can find as an excuse for you is that you are only lucid in the moments when you are doing generous actions."

And he left without wanting to hear any kind of explanation.

Two days later, Monsieur de Missery presented himself at the Montgermon family and came humbly to request Léa's hand. Not that he had in any way modified his idea about the marriage; not that, considering the habitually serious, and even a little melancholy, turn of his character, he though himself less improper than two days earlier before making the happiness of a woman for whom, besides, he didn't deny he had the most tender feelings; but strange gossip had reached him.

He had learned that, despite the assuredly very justified circumstances in which he had in some sort abducted Mademoiselle de Montgermon, their nocturne tête-à-tête had been the object of malicious comments. Given that, he had not hesitated. Triumphant over his unbelievable repugnance, but being very careful not to let the motives of his new determination be guessed, he had come, as if he had changed his mind, to put himself at Monsieur de Montgermon's disposal. It's clear that if Alfred de Missery was a noble character, he was also a rather eccentric person, unless, however, at this point in his life there wasn't some secret or some extraordinary nuance that would explain his strange behavior.

Whatever the situation, the marriage wasn't long in taking place and it was celebrated at the Saint-Louis church of the Versailles parish with brilliance and magnificence which made it a sort of public event.

That evening, at the home of Monsieur de Montgermon, where the newlyweds were to live, there was an elaborate reception which almost all the officers of the regiment who served with Monsieur de Missery attended.

When the time came for the bride to retire, whose beauty her white wedding gown and her understandable and touching emotion made more dazzling, one can imagine if, among the friends of the very fortunate groom, there wasn't some envy of the happiness that awaited him. Several came successively to shake his hand in a meaningful manner; then, little by little, shortly after Mademoiselle de Montgermon had retired, as the dance was ending, one of the young officers had an idea. Living in the furnished house where Alfred de Missery lodged before his marriage, and, considering that proximity, with closer ties than the others, he had shown a sort of melancholy solemnity, and after telling the groom goodbye:

"Gentlemen," that boy then said, in view of shaking off something like a sentimental fog which he felt despite himself, "I suggest we go to my room to smoke a pipe and cheer ourselves up with a glass of

punch. I don't know if you are like me, but I find what they serve here sweet and watered-down. I believe that it was that women's tea which turns me thus to languishing and lamentation."

The suggestion was unanimously accepted and, soon afterwards, our young men were seated at a table around a sparkling bowl where its bluish flame showed the powerful strength of the alcohol. As for the conversation, it goes without saying that Alfred de Missery and guessing the mysteries of the bridal chamber were the major subjects. In the middle of that happy calculation, some hammer blows, struck as if by a hand in great haste to be admitted, shook the door of the house. That first call not being enough to wake up the people in the townhouse, the sound was renewed so loud that one of the punch drinkers had the curiosity to go to the window to see who was knocking like that. After having looked out a moment, he said:

"Oh! Gentlemen, this is unbelievable! De Missery is there at the door instead of being where we thought him!"

The truth of that discovery could be immediately verified, because the house, at the same instant, was opened and the impatient visitor introduced. The bedroom where the happy reunion was being held opened on the corridor necessary to pass through to reach the former apartment of Alfred de Missery. The door was ajar and all the officers were grouped behind it. Their astonishment can be imagined on actually seeing appear the groom, who was immediately surrounded and rather indiscreetly pressed with questions.

Pale and very strongly preoccupied, he gave no satisfaction to the general curiosity, and hurried to regain the lodging where, a few minutes earlier, it seemed unlikely that he would spend the night. He was followed there by the one of his friends, with whom we have already said he had a kind of closeness. But all the questions asked him, he answered evasively:

"It was something unexpected... later I will explain... for the moment I don't know what to say..."

And, finally, cutting short the questions which seemed to weigh heavily on him, he finally asked the questioner to leave him alone, since he had to write several letters which were of a pressing nature. Reported to the reunion, whose curiosity and commentaries can be imagined, that detail capped off their astonishment. Then, after exchanging some more suppositions, they dispersed because happy youthful gaiety had just been struck dead by that inconceivable and sad incident.

Remaining alone, the friend of the groom didn't dare try to trouble the solitude that the groom had wanted. He had to be content with going several times to listen at the door, carrying his worry to the extent of looking through the keyhole. However, he was then reassured in seeing the object of his surveillance seated tranquilly in a back bedroom, the door of which he had left ajar, and still busy writing, without any appearance of noticeable emotion. Doing that several times, the observer, always finding things the same, didn't think he should insist any more, and when the first light of day appeared on the horizon, he went to bed.

He had almost fallen asleep when he awoke at the sound of a door being shut, and, at the same time, he thought he recognized Alfred de Missery's footsteps descending the stairs. He ran to his bedroom door, called out, received no answer, and had no other recourse but to open a window from which he could see what was happening in the street. There he saw the groom walking toward a mail box in the area. After having put several letters in the box, Alfred de Missery came back within sight of the window, saw his friend, and waved good morning to him. Then, without seeming preoccupied, he walked toward the woods that encircled Versailles that could be seen at the far end of the walk.

The hour of that departure, the pathway that Alfred took, gave his friend the idea that there was some affair of honor, and, although he was astonished, in that case, at not being chosen for second, he supposed the inexplicable groom, having just learned some serious attack on his conjugal honor, hadn't wanted to confide in anyone, and had preferred to run the chance of a duel without witnesses. That thought, everything considered, decidedly took root in the mind of the one who had just had it; he quickly got dressed and left precipitously so as to follow the path of his imprudent friend, who in that kind of fight could be exposed to some trap. But nothing happened that would shed light on that supposition. The officious young man vainly beat the woods in every direction. Finally, after several hours had passed in

useless searches, he decided to return to the Montgermon residence where he could very reasonably expect that some explanations would be given him.

“Ah! There you are,” said Monsieur de Montgermon when he saw his son-in-law’s friend arrive. “You probably know about the unbelievable conduct of Monsieur de Missery? Are you coming on his behalf? Are you charged with giving us with some explanation?”

“*Mon Dieu!*” the young officer answered, “here’s what I personally know about Alfred’s behavior.”

And he recounted in detail what he had witnessed.

“I’m lost in all that,” Monsieur de Montgermon continued, “and you see us here in the utmost astonishment. Last night, shortly after Madame de Montgermon conducted her daughter to the bridal chamber, and when you and some of your friends had said goodnight to my unusual son-in-law, one of my servants came to tell me that a man had come on horseback and stubbornly refused to dismount what he said was a hard-to-control horse; he was waiting in the courtyard below until Monsieur de Missery came to speak to him. The servant has since explained that the individual Monsieur de Missery came to meet had a sinister face, that he was riding a black horse, seemed to be dressed in mourning, and that, without saying a word, all he did was salute my son-in-law, give him a paper, and immediately ride away at a gallop.

“Without going any further than the vestibule, Monsieur de Missery was in a hurry to open the paper with three black seals that had just been presented to him. At the first words he read, a livid pallor spread across his face; however, he immediately regained self-control, and to compose his expression better, he instantly stopped in front of a mirror before going back into the salon. There, giving proof of great strength of mind, he had, I recall, the courage to answer gaily some jokes addressed to him relative to the wedding night, after which he passed into his wife’s apartment, and here’s what passed between them:

“He began by thanking my daughter in the most affectionate terms for the honor she had done him in wanting him for a husband; then he reminded her of the incomprehensible hesitations with which he himself had greeted this so little hoped for happiness. ‘I wasn’t wrong, however,’ he continued, ‘to doubt my star before that favor; I knew that, from one moment to the next, an unknown power had the chance to separate me from my dearest affections, and, at this moment, Léa, who would believe it? I must leave you without duty permitting me to bargain an instant with that necessity.’

“What’s more, he was very tender, swore to his wife that in the morning, without fail, he would have news of him brought to her, and he asked her to keep the secret of his strange behavior only until daybreak. The separation taken place, to the great astonishment of the servants who had to open the door for him, he left the townhouse.

“Brought up to date this morning by my daughter,” Monsieur de Montgermon said in finishing, “it was also only at that moment that I learned of the strange ambassador who, taking away her husband from the poor child the first night of her marriage, had all the appearance of concealing some terrible mystery, which I wish and fear at the same time, to be soon cleared up.”

Less than a quarter of an hour had passed when that conjecture was sadly justified. In a letter addressed to Monsieur de Montgermon, Alfred de Missery clearly declared the thought of suicide, and, without explaining the motives of that desperate act, he charged his father-in-law with telling his well-beloved Léa the terrible news.

Soon afterward that horrible confirmation, they learned that the unfortunate young man had just been found in a deep thicket of the Forest of Satory with a pistol shot to the heart. A guard had been led by his dog to the out-of-the-way place where the deranged man had taken his own life. A letter to his friend was found in one of his pockets, and—another extraordinary detail—to that letter was attached a will in legal form which named as his only heir an unknown woman who resided in a foreign country.

In the same day another letter, dated from Versailles and addressed to Monsieur de Missery senior, arrived in Paris. It was supposed to be delivered to a village in the Midi where he exercised the functions of Imperial Procurer General. Well before that letter had been classed as outgoing, the Emperor had been

told of the suicide of one of his officers of the guard, and a famous order of the day, dated 22 Floréal, year 10,² showed the effect the news of that catastrophe had produced upon Napoleon.

“The Grenadier Gobain,” wrote the First Consul, “committed suicide because of love. He was a very good man. That was the second event of that nature that has occurred in the corps in the last month.”

The First Consul then ordered that the following be the order of the day:

That a soldier must know how to conquer sadness and the melancholy of the passions; that there is as much true courage in suffering with constancy the pains of the soul, as remaining stationary under machine-gun fire. To abandon oneself to sorrow with resisting, to kill oneself to get away from it, is to abandon the field of battle before having been conquered

Now de Missery was not a simple soldier; especially honored by the Emperor, he was an officer with a future and in a happy situation apparently, made to be envied by everyone, surrounded by mysterious circumstances, who had just *deserted* life. Wanting at any cost to penetrate the secret of that inexplicable event, in addition to other measures of the police, the Emperor immediately ordered that all the correspondence that, near or far, could be suspected of having a connection to the object of his search, be stopped at the post and carefully examined.

That measure couldn't fail to reach a letter that carried on its envelope the name of the father of the victim. Stopped by the Secret Bureau, it was immediately placed under the eyes of the Emperor.

The content of the text can be seen in the chapter which follows.

² 22 Floréal 10 (Republican Calendar) = 12 May 1802 (Gregorian Calendar). The Republican calendar was used from 1793-1895, and again for 18 days in 1871 by the French Commune.