

Part One: Vincent Carpentier's Astonishing Adventure

I. Vincent's Health

At the beginning of Louis Philippe's reign, there was one house in the heart of Paris—which was then agitated by Republican and Legitimist conspiracies—that was as calm and austere as a monastery. Noise and movement surrounded it, for it was situated not far from the Palais-Royal, only a few paces from the Passage Choiseul, where a company of merrymaking vaudevillians and one of the most famous political discussion-groups both met at that time. Neither the echoes of harangues nor the nor the choruses of songs, however, reached as far as that refuge, as well-respected as a sanctuary. The solitude of the Rue Thérèse seemed to shelter it from the entire racket of the human comedy, both clamors of wrath and cries of delight.

Ah, how glorious then was the forelock of the Citizen-King! And his grey hat! And his umbrella! I don't believe that there had ever been a sovereign more popular than Louis Philippe d'Orléans. His portrait was in all the illustrated papers then, and on every wall: a magisterial portrait depicting a chubby face disguised by a pair of English mutton-chop whiskers, which provided a striking resemblance.

People amused themselves with the dear King very gently, without spite and without ceremony; he was called "Monsieur Thingy" or "Monsieur Whatsit," or even "the finest of Republicans."

His eldest son was generally known by the nickname of Poulot; his sister had been credited with a reputation for liking a drink; everyone tapped him on the belly, accusing him of sneaking into the Tuileries on a dark night as if into a wood, and having reached in through a window to put a stranglehold on his old uncle, the last Bourbon-Condé, in order to procure a position for the little Duc d'Aumale, a charming and very intelligent lad.¹

Those were good times. *La Mode*, *Le Charivari* and *La Caricature* made money hand-over-fist; that winter, street-urchins made snowmen that also carried the portrait of the King, which were decorated with the famous legend: *Big Fat Beast*.

Wasn't that the pinnacle of his popularity?

In all Paris, there only one man more flattered and more vilified than the King. That was a philanthropist known by the name of "Little Blue-Cloak," who was wholeheartedly mocked by everyone in the world because he distributed soup to the poor in the vicinity of Les Halles.

Did the action of distributing soup constitute a crime or an incongruity, then? I don't know, but I've always observed that those who give are denounced, put to the question and eventually executed by those who don't. That's perfectly understandable. Those who don't give form a vast majority.

Witness, however, the power of truth and high virtue; in that peaceful house in the Rue Thérèse lived an old saint, who did something very different from distributing soup. He had personally established, thanks to his considerable fortune, a charitable foundation that functioned as regularly as the official channels of public assistance—except that it functioned much better. No one will have difficulty believing that. Gradually, a few eminent but discreet individuals had joined forces with the old man to form that admirable charitable partnership. It was an organized service; the house had its visitors, its auditors and its employees, who received and classified requests. Here, from morning until evening, people worked at giving, as people elsewhere strove to receive. It was done without ostentation or publicity, but it was done in plain view and with everyone's knowledge.

Well, let it be said that in praise of Paris that, far from insulting Colonel Bozzo-Corona, patron of this marvelous office, Paris honored and respected him, along with his intelligent secretary-general, Monsieur Lecoq de la Perrière. Paris deigned not to oppose their work—which, it was said, was all the more useful in being addressed to a class of indigents whom misfortune too often persuaded to crime. Colonel Bozzo and his active auxiliary, as skillful as a police diplomat, sounded the depths of the great city in order to plunge benevolence into them. Paris is not always content to be safeguarded; but, as chance would have it, in this instance, Paris allowed itself to be protected without getting upset, and the house in the Rue Thérèse was everywhere held in veneration.

On Saturday, October 2 1835, at little after 5 p.m., an old man whose tall thin frame was wrapped up against the chill by an ample quilted coat left the ground floor of the house, where the offices were, and slowly and painfully ascended the large staircase leading to the first floor apartments. He leaned on the arm of a man who was still young, with a bold and cheerful face, proudly sporting a costume tailored in the latest fashion in fine cloth, but whose colors clashed a little too violently. This was Colonel Bozzo, with his faithful *alter ego*, Monsieur Lecoq; they had just finished their daily work and each of them could surely say, like Titus: "I have not wasted my time."

¹ See Notes p. 391.

The Colonel seemed already to have reached the ultimate limits of old age—we say *already* because he was to live for a long time yet, but we ought to add that those who had known him for 20 years had not seen him grow any older. Under the Restoration, no one would have judged him to be any less than 80 years old.

Monsieur Lecoq was between his 30th and 40th year, solidly accommodated within his robust figure, bearing on his broad shoulders a face that was slightly common but singularly clear-sighted. His gold-rimmed spectacles were like one of his facial features, and one scarcely ever encountered him without a large bag of loose change bumping against his Scottish trousers, inflated at the waist by the beginnings of a paunch.

“We’ve distributed 4,329 francs today,” said Lecoq, while the Colonel caught his breath on the first landing.

“It’s Saturday,” observed the old man, as if by way of apology.

“All the same, it’s a bit stiff. There’s no pleasure in paying an army’s soldiers in peace-time.”

“In time of war, old chap, one gets back double at a stroke.”

“I don’t deny it, but business is slow. We’ve put out more than 200,000 francs since the last big deal.”

“The last big deal brought in 200,000 francs.”

Lecoq shook his head. “I don’t deny it,” he repeated, “but time is money, and we’ve wasted at least six months in complete idleness.”

The old man put his fur-slipped foot on the next step. “Lah de dah!” he said. “Time! I’ll live to be old, l’Amitié, and so will you. There’s no rush. I’m mulling over a new project right now—my last affair!”

Lecoq burst out laughing.

“Why are you laughing, old friend?” asked the Colonel.

“Because, Papa” Lecoq replied, “ever since I reached the age of reason, all the projects you’ve mulled over have been your ‘last affair.’ You’ve said it at least 200 times.”

“It’ll come in the end, l’Amitié,” murmured the old man, in a melancholy tone. “My real final affair! We’re all mortal, even me. Let’s go up, old chap; support me as need be. I’m thinking about my little Fanchette, too—she’s of an age to marry. What child-like love! And so good!”

Lecoq did not reply.

“How do you like her?” asked the Colonel.

“Well enough,” said Lecoq, dryly.

“You detest her, and she returns the compliment. Otherwise, I would have given her to you in marriage.”

“Thanks!” said Lecoq. “I like the bachelor life. Besides, Papa, I’m only second in line now. Your favorite is the precious Vincent Carpentier, failed architect, from whose jacket you’ve brushed the plaster. Is he the one who’s to pay for Mademoiselle Francesca Corona’s orange-blossom?”

The Colonel looked at Lecoq. The irises of his eyes no longer had any color, but only a troubled translucency; they suddenly took on a strange gleam.

“You mustn’t be envious of my friend Vincent,” he murmured. “My friend Vincent has a hard task to perform.” As he spoke, he turned a doorknob.

In response to the noise that the warning-bell made when the door opened, a very young woman came out of a neighboring room. She had shining eyes that seemed disproportionately large; a figure that was already luxuriant and slightly lascivious in its liveness; and an unclouded forehead inundated by a torrent of silky curls blacker than ebony. She bounded towards the old man, who pretended to be afraid of such impetuosity.

“One day you’ll break me, Fanchette, my darling!”

“Mademoiselle Francesca is as agile and beautiful as the tigress in the Jardin des Plantes,” added Lecoq, bowing.

“Have I done you any harm, grandfather?” asked the dazzling creature who had been called Francesca and Fanchette.

“Never, granddaughter. Your hands, your eyes, your voice, your smile and everything else about you are softer than velvet.”

Fanchette kissed him on both cheeks, then turned towards Lecoq and said: “You’re making him work too hard. Are you staying for dinner? I suppose not, for Vincent Carpentier is in the drawing-room. I like him a lot, because of his jewel of a daughter, Irène—such a pretty name!”

Lecoq had surrendered the Colonel’s arm to her. The Colonel laughed and murmured: “You have a way of issuing an invitation that puts people out of the door, darling—but you’re right; l’Amitié won’t be able to stay today.”

“Dismissed twice over!” cried the latter, with forced gaiety. “You don’t have anything to say to me, boss?”

“Nothing—good night!” The Colonel abruptly let go of Fanchette’s arm. “Yes, indeed!” he went on. “Go, darling, and have dinner served. Will you be a mother to that little Irène if...if...” He pronounced the final monosyllable twice.

Fanchette had stopped, and her large eyes fixed themselves on him.

“There are people,” the old man went on, in a compassionate tone, “who seem quite well, but have mortal illnesses.”

Lecoq's knitted brows relaxed. The Colonel had just exchanged a glance with him.

Fanchette put her hands together and cried: "What! What illness? Will my little dear Irène be left an orphan?"

"Not a word to Vincent!" ordered the Colonel, gravely. "One can kill a sick man by revealing his condition to him. Be prudent."

As soon as Fanchette had gone, Lecoq said: "Thank you, boss. You've certainly reassured me. There were two or three of us who believed that Vincent was going to cut the grass beneath our feet."

"Ingrate!" said the Colonel. "You, who are to me like my own son! You, who are my heir presumptive—for my will is in order."

"Are you trying to make me cry?" Lecoq put in, not without irony. "A death is required before an inheritance, and we want to keep you alive indefinitely. But we should also be settled as to the amount of capital..."

"You speak of the treasure?" the Colonel said, interrupting in his turn—and his dull eyes took on a bizarre radiance for a second time. "You will be rich, rich, rich! I don't spend a *sou* on myself! I'll undertake this project for my Fanchette's dowry. Everything else is yours—everything! Goodnight, l'Amitié!"

"One more word," said Lecoq. "This Vincent is condemned?"

"I'm afraid so, my son. One of these mornings, it'll *get light*, and I'll have need of someone to *pay the law*. See you soon!"

Monsieur Lecoq, who had already opened the door, blew him a kiss and went out, saying: "You're a love Papa!"

The Colonel locked the door behind him. He was alone in the antechamber. He stood up straight and his physiognomy changed. A cloud of profound meditation, which contrasted with the senile cheerfulness he wore as his usual mask, darkened and creased his forehead. When he walked to the door of the dining-room, it was with a firm and almost virile step; before crossing the threshold, though—unthinkingly and by the force of habit that is the genius of actors—he bent his back again and resumed the tremulous attitude of a centenarian.

Two people were waiting for him in the dining-room: Fanchette and this Vincent Carpentier, whose name we have hard mentioned several times.

Vincent was a man of about 35 years of age, with a face that was handsome, but bore the scars of long moral suffering. Fanchette and he were chatting by a window overlooking a narrow garden, planed with beautiful trees that were about to shed their leaves.

"Grandfather never refuses me anything, you know," Fanchette was saying. "I want Irène to be my little friend, and when she comes of age, we'll provide a dowry for her—grandfather is so rich and so generous!—so that she can marry this fine fellow, Reynier, who will then be a handsome and fully-grown young man." She was a woman in figure and beauty, but her heart was still a child's. A few months later, she would become the Comtesse Francesca Corona, and discover unhappiness along with life. "I know Vincent's story," she cried, running to the old man to guide him to the table. "I know everything. It's very sad and very touching. Father, why have you been so slow to give him a great deal of money?"

The Colonel pointed his finger at Vincent, who blushed. "Because," he replied, "Vincent is one of those to whom one does not give anything, especially money. He prefers to earn it." He gave his hand to Vincent, who bowed to him with grateful respect and shook it warmly. "Isn't that true, my friend?" the Colonel added. "You're as proud as Artaban,ⁱⁱ aren't you? This doll has grown up, but she still puts her pretty little foot in it. Come on, treasure, let's get on with the soup. Sit down, Carpentier, old chap! You've come down from architect to mason; we'll give you a ladder by which you can climb back to architect. I've a keen appetite today."

Fanchette brushed his skull with one of those rapid kisses that only birds and granddaughters know how to bestow; then she put half a ladleful of soup into a bowl. As he received it in his hands, the Colonel said: "While we're on the subject of masons, give me a whole ladleful, as they do in a cheap eatery!"

"You see, Monsieur Carpentier," Fanchette went on, giving him his share of the soup, "it's the good Lord who brought you into contact with grandfather. He's making fun of you a little, as he does to me and everyone else, but misfortune disappears when he gets involved..."

"Just say that I'm Providence," the Colonel put in, his mouth full. "Soup's good, but it's necessary not to pay too dear for it. Well, my dear Vincent, would you like me to send this urchin away? She'll prevent us from taking business."

Vincent Carpentier, who really was a simple companion mason, although he had neither the costume nor the bearing, was experiencing considerable emotion at that moment. "If you can help me, Monsieur," he said, "to recover the position I have lost, won't I owe something to this dear demoiselle?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" the old man declared. "I never do anything she wants..."

"Firstly," Fanchette cut in, putting her charming arm around his shoulder, "I don't want to go away. Then, grandfather, you're being naughty! And you're lying like a tooth-puller, for everyone know perfectly well that I lead you by the end of your nose!"

The Colonel drew her to his heart and held her there briefly.

“You have a beloved daughter yourself, Monsieur Carpentier,” he said, with an emotion that seemed involuntary, “and you know how one adores these little demons.”

Fanchette, who had her mouth very close to the old man’s ear, murmured; “Look at him, Father—he doesn’t seem ill to me.”

“Bless me!” cried the Colonel, “we’re not here to make one another maudlin. Let’s eat, my jewels! I hope that our comrade Vincent will be content with me at dessert.”

Over the Colonel’s white head, Fanchette’s eyes were fixed on her guest. *Grandfather didn’t answer me, she thought. Monsieur Carpenter looks quite well to me, but grandfather knows him better than I do.... Poor little Irène!*

II. Over Dessert

In truth, everything in that house was respectable. Dinner was served with an abundant simplicity, and the domestics would have reminded you of those old valets whom one admires in images of *Morality in Action*. The Colonel only drank water, but his trembling yet sprightly hand filled Vincent Carpentier's glass several times over. As for Fanchette, she ate and twittered like a bird.

"It's necessary that you know everything, grandfather," she said. "He's never told his story to anyone but me. They were very happy at first—he and his wife, that is. She was called Irène, like his little beloved. She was beautiful—so very beautiful!—and very young. Monsieur Vincent had an office. He didn't do badly in business, for a beginner, but Madame Irène suddenly became pale and began to cough, a few months after bringing her little one into the world, who was the very image of her. The physicians came and prescribed the waters, then Italy; there was no more work done. But it's not only his money that Monsieur Vincent would have given—it's his blood, his life..."

"Poor Monsieur Vincent!" the Colonel put in, succeeding quite well in hiding a yawn. "That's a great misfortune!"

"It lasted three years," Fanchette continued. "Madame Irène spent all that time suffering and dying. When Monsieur Vincent came back to France, alone and in mourning, he had two children to feed, because, along with his daughter, he brought back a pretty little boy that Madame Irène loved dearly, whom they had found in Italy. He was named Reynier; he will soon be a young man. To raise the two of them, Reynier and little Irène, Monsieur Vincent went back to the trowel and worked with his hands."

"You tell stories like an angel, darling," said the Colonel, pushing away his plate. "What time is it?"

"And he is also very glad to have met him, this Reynier!" continued Fanchette, with the impetuous obstinacy of children whose speech one attempts to cut short. "You always think you know everything, grandfather, but you're mistaken. Reynier's not a burden now—he looks after the house and the household; he's teaching my little Irène to read and write. Oh, if he could find something to console his friend! Hold on! Look! Monsieur Vincent has tears in his eyes, and just now he said to me: 'That child is God's blessing upon my house. Without him, who would look after my beloved? I have no anxiety so long as he's with her. He's a man in strength, and especially in courage; for concern and tenderness, he's a woman. It seems to me that he loves my little Irène like a beloved sister.' He said more than that! Monsieur Vincent, you said 'It seems to me that I'm leaving her with her mother!' didn't you?"

Vincent looked at her gratefully, but he said: "That's too much talk about me and my affairs, Mademoiselle."

"Not at all, not at all!" said the Colonel. "It's interesting. Fanchette is the mistress here, aren't you, my treasure? She'd sit on her old grandfather's head if she wanted to. I've no one but her to love, Monsieur Vincent, but..."

"But you're going to send me away, grandfather," the girl put in, her face sparkling with spiritual generosity. "I can see it in your eyes. Oh well! I'll be obedient and make myself scarce right away, if you and Monsieur Vincent will grant me one thing. Go on—it's not you who'll be making the greater sacrifice. I want Reynier to go to college and Irène to boarding-school. Is that settled?"

She had stood up, and her rosy lips remained suspended above her grandfather's foreheads.

"It's settled," the latter replied.

Amid the gentle rain of kisses that fell upon the Colonel's skull, Fanchette asked again: "And what about you, Monsieur Vincent?"

"Oh! As for me," replied the latter, whose eyes were moist, "if I were to see the education of those dear children assured..."

"It's a promise," said the Colonel, with visible impatience. "Send in the coffee, darling, and go read *Robinson Crusoe*. If you're ever cast away on a desert island, you'll know how to get by there, with an umbrella and a few animal skins!"

Fanchette shook Monsieur Vincent's hand like a little gentleman, and disappeared.

The old man sank into his armchair, drew back the sleeves of his quilted coat and twiddled his thumbs meditatively. "What would you do, my friend," he asked, after a pause, "if your daughter, at my Fanchette's age, loved a villain devoid of faith and law?"

"A villain!" cried Vincent, with veritable horror. "Loved by that adorable child! Mademoiselle Francesca!"

The servant came in and served the coffee.

"I'm almost inclined to add a little extra," said the Colonel, as if to himself. "I've dined like a wolf. I'll dip a lump of sugar in your cup. Go, Giampietro—we don't need anything else."

The servant withdrew.

“Giampietro is a Sicilian,” the Colonel said. “It means Jean-Pierre in Catania. In Naples, Jeans become Giovans. My coachman is named Giovan-Battista. We all have a little Italian in us, here.” He put half a sugar-lump into the steam that was rising from Vincent’s cup and repeated: “What would you do?”

Vincent hesitated.

“Would you kill him?” the Colonel asked.

The spoon dropped from Vincent’s fingers. The old man laughed merrily. “I was a great humorist in my time,” he murmured. “I could make people laugh. Drink your coffee while it’s hot, my friend. Each of us has his annoyances and embarrassments, that’s for sure. Would you like me to tell you? You’re an ambitious man, through and through, but you have every devil’s desires underneath.”

His eyes met Vincent’s as the latter lifted his cup to his lips. Vincent shuddered slightly.

The old man nibbled his sugar-lump. “It keeps me awake, I know,” he went on, “but I’m not yet ready to go to bed. We both have work to do tonight.”

Anxiety became increasingly legible in Vincent’s face.

“Well then, my friend,” the Colonel said suddenly, “Am I dealing with a coward?”

“You spoke of killing a man...” Vincent stammered.

The Colonel uttered a little dry laugh. “Bless me!” he cried. “The humorist will only kill himself! Be tranquil, and allow me to address you as *tu*, which I find more comfortable. We were saying, then, that little Irène will be sent to a nice boarding-school and that young Reynier will go to college. Fanchette wishes it—you may choose the college and the school, Vincent, my friend...”

Joy coloring his pale cheeks, Carpentier attempted to interrupt him. “How can I thank you, Monsieur...?”

“Why should you thank me?” asked the Colonel, coldly.

Carpentier stopped. “A man like you,” he stammered, “surely could not ask anything dishonorable of me.”

“Damn it!” said the old man, bad-temperedly. “There are times, my companion, when one might think you were as stupid as a cabbage. Don’t worry; I’m often taken for a hypocrite myself, because I spend my money elsewhere than the Opera and the Bourse. I’ve never murdered anyone, my friend, and it’s too late to start. Don’t make excuses, man, and look me in the whites of my eyes, as they say. You please Fanchette—so much the better for you! That will bring you good luck. Your face is fine and honest; I have enough enemies not to disdain a friend. You’re an ambitious man, as I said—did you know that?”

The fixity of his stare had caused Vincent’s eyelids to droop; the latter’s expression was distinctly ill-at-ease.

“At present,” the Colonel went on, “you work with your hands; you work hard for your bread and that of your family, but there have been hours in your life when you ardently desired or hoped to make your fortune. Answer me honestly.”

“That’s true,” Carpentier admitted, in a low voice. “My wife was so beautiful, and I loved her so much!”

“Your daughter will be beautiful!”

“Tell me what you want of me, Monsieur, I beg you,” Carpentier put in. “You’re making me feverish.”

The Colonel’s only reply was an amicable nod of the head. He rang the hand-bell positioned within arm’s reach on the table.

“Giampietro,” he said, to the servant who came back in, “Giovan-Battista will have to finish his dinner in half an hour. Tell him to harness up immediately.” Using Carpentier’s shoulder to help him get up, he continued: “My good fellow, you’ll be an architect again—you have my word. If I don’t play straight in this business, Fanchette will make me sorry. Perhaps you’ll build me a château, a house, a cathedral—but for the moment, you’re a mason. This evening, I only need your hammer and trowel.”

“This evening?” Carpentier repeated, more and more astonished. He added: “I don’t have my tools.”

The Colonel caressed his chin, as one does with argumentative children. “Let’s go down,” he said. “We’ll chat on the way. The lottery no longer pays out on five numbers, my lad. I won one in the times when it did, and Madame la Marquise de Pompadour wanted to see me because of it. She was a pretty slut.ⁱⁱⁱ I don’t say that you’ll come in for a four-number win straight away by drinking with that old Methuselah, Colonel Bozzo, but it’s a prize, at any rate, a big prize in the lottery. What displeases me, you see, is slothfulness...or mistrust...or even curiosity. That little Irène, to all appearances, will be dazzlingly beautiful. It’s bad for the daughter of a poor man to be beautiful. When I give someone work, I provide the tools.”

They had already reached the vestibule and they could hear the horse that was being put in harness stamping its feet.

Vincent was still pensive.

As he opened the outer door, the old man stopped to look at him fixedly. “If your heart isn’t in it, my good man,” he said, “there’s still time to hand in your resignation. I have a secret that you’ll never know.”

“Is it a matter of hiding something?” Carpentier asked, in a low voice.

The old man replied, with his bizarre smile: “Something—or someone. Who can tell?”

The harnessed horse pawed the ground. Giovan-Battista climbed up to his seat while the footman took up his standing position by the carriage-door.

“Let’s go,” said Vincent. “It’s not you that I mistrust, for you’ve never done me anything but good; it’s me. Every time I’ve gambled in my life, I’ve lost.”

“In that case, comrade,” said the old man, “the time has come to throw in all your remaining chips. The lucky streak must have been looking out for you for some time.” He interrupted himself to say to his coachman: “Giovan, your soup won’t have time to go cold. Take us at top speed to the Rue des Bons-Enfants, the second entrance to the Passage Radziwill. When we get out, you can come back here without further ado.”

The coupé moved off, and took exactly ten minutes to reach the Rue des Bons-Enfants. The journey was made in silence.

The Colonel and his companion went into the damp and ill-kempt passage that brought such great shame upon the Palais-Royal. As soon as they got down, Giovan flicked his horse and the coupé disappeared.

Part One

ⁱ The Duc d’Aumale (1822-1897), Louis-Philippe’s fourth son, was the intellectual of the family, who wrote an *Histoire des Princes de Condé* and was elected to the Académie Française. He also distinguished himself on military service in Algeria, but Féval wasn’t about to mention that while he was being bitterly sarcastic about the entire family.

ⁱⁱ Artaban is the hero of *Cléopâtre*, a romance by the 17th century novelist Gauthier La Calprenède; the character’s pride was sufficiently ostentatious to become proverbial. The term “*compagnon*,” which I have translated here and elsewhere as “companion” for the sake of consistency, has a double meaning in French left over from the decay of tradesmen’s guilds, whose particular application here is more specifically translatable as “journeyman.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Madame de la Pompadour’s heyday in Louis XV’s Court was in the 1750s, some 80 years before the date at which this scene is set.