

CHAPTER 12

The Count of Monte Cristo

Shortly after Edmond's visit to Caderousse, upper-class society in Paris was delighted to hear that an enormously rich and charming nobleman had settled in their city for a time. Since many titles were bought and not inherited, no one cared that this nobleman's family had never been heard of before. The Count of Monte Cristo had money and good manners, and Edmond knew these were enough.

After hearing Caderousse's confession, Edmond had decided to call himself the Count of Monte Cristo. He moved to Paris, sent

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Jacopo on many errands to gather information, and began his war of revenge.

Edmond's first targets were Danglars and Villefort, co-owners of the largest bank in Paris. Danglars, always shrewd, had made a wartime fortune as a supervisor of supplies for the army. Though it was illegal for him to do so, he had purchased food and ammunition as a private merchant. Then as head of supplies for the army, he had bought his own goods for the government at an enormous price. He was now among the wealthiest men in Paris, but his passion was still to have more money. Since titles could be bought, he became known as Baron Danglars.

Villefort had become his associate, for he, too, always needed money. His connections with the government brought in international business and secret information. Though rich, Villefort had had some misfortunes personally. His first wife had died. His second

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wife was highly nervous and terrified of poverty. They had been childless for many years, but now had a son, Edward, for whom both parents would gladly have died.

Villefort had come to the bank especially early one morning because Danglars wanted him to be present when he received the fabulously wealthy Count of Monte Cristo about whom all Paris was buzzing. Exactly on time the Count was announced and shown into Danglar's elaborate, antique-filled office.

Danglars was disturbed by his first sight of the tall, slender man with a pale, calm face. The Count's clothes were so fine, yet not showy, that Danglars felt shabby in his own rich garments. He did not like feeling inferior so he waved the Count in with a casual nod.

"Please come in, sir. No, it's 'Count,' isn't it? This is my associate, Monsieur Villefort. Sit down here. This chair once belonged to the Emperor of China. Now it belongs only to a

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baron." Danglars laughed nervously as he spoke.

Edmond nodded pleasantly to both men and handed Danglars a letter from the most famous bank in Rome, Thomson and French. Edmond had recently bought it but had ordered the purchase to remain a secret. Danglars read the letter with amazement.

"But it says here I am to give you *unlimited* credit while you are in Paris!"

"Yes," said Edmond, "that is the way I usually like things arranged."

"But *unlimited!* No, we must settle on a sum beyond which you cannot draw," decided Danglars. "That is only good business."

Edmond stood up. "Forgive me. I have been misinformed. I had been told yours was the largest bank in Paris, but I see you cannot meet my requirements."

Danglars and Villefort exchanged a look of surprise. Danglars said, "Now, wait, Count, of

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course we can come to some agreement. Why don't we set the amount you can draw on at, say, one million francs? I'm sure you've never had such good treatment anyplace else."

Edmond was laughing. "Excuse my mirth, my dear Baron, but one million is ridiculous. I carry that amount with me all the time just in case I see some trinket I want to carry home with me." Edmond opened his money case and displayed more than the amount of money he had just claimed.

Danglars stared at it open-mouthed. Villefort left his chair so he, too, could see. The partners exchanged another quick look, and Danglars said, "You shall have any amount you desire, Count. Any amount!"

"Thank you, Baron Danglars. Also I may ask you to handle some investments for me from time to time. Perhaps I will buy some cargoes, cashmere or indigo from the East, you know. I will inform you what to buy... and,

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most important, when to sell for me.”

“Our bank is at your service,” said Danglars and Villefort, almost together. The idea had come to them both at the same time that they could use the Count’s instructions to invest on their own behalf.

From then on, there was constant communication between Danglars and Villefort’s bank and the Count of Monte Cristo. Funds poured out of the bank for Edmond’s new house, his carriage and matched gray horses, his large staff of servants, his entertainments, and his antiques and paintings.

Along with this activity Edmond sent a stream of orders to invest in numerous cargoes from all over the world. Danglars did as ordered, and each time he and Villefort invested some of their own money in the cargoes too. The first four investments returned such handsome profits that they were angry with themselves for not having risked more money.

Soon both men had invested all their available money and were using the bank's assets for themselves. They had no fears of a loss.

When Edmond judged that Danglars and Villefort had overextended themselves financially, he came himself to the bank to order yet another investment—this time in a diamond mine. Edmond ordered three times his usual number of shares.

Danglars was amazed. "Dear Count," he said respectfully, "this must be a very important investment, since you have come in person to order it."

Edmond nodded solemnly. "It will make all my other investments seem unimportant. I expect to make huge sums."

As soon as Edmond left, Danglars signed notes for credit on all his belongings, including his four houses, his wife's inheritance, his daughter's dowry, and all their jewelry. Villefort, aware of his wife's intense desire to have

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great wealth, hesitated. Then he reasoned that the success of this investment would make her ten times as secure as she was now, so he followed Danglars' example. The two men spent the next few weeks envisioning themselves the richest men in Paris, except for Monte Cristo.

During the next two months, reports of cargo shipments began to come in. Storms had wrecked ships. Cargoes had been captured by smugglers. And men who had once been trusted with transporting cash had vanished with it. Though somewhat disturbed by these reports, Danglars and Villefort remained happy and confident of their great wealth to come from the diamond mine.

Then the news came. The diamond mine was a fraud!

Danglars, pale and trembling, rushed to Monte Cristo's house. The Count was having a late breakfast and ordered coffee and fruit to

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be brought for Danglars.

Danglars gasped, "Count, how can you sit there so calmly and eat? We are ruined! The diamond mine was a fraud! "

Edmond smiled. "I heard a rumor some time ago that it might be. Through Thomson and French in Rome I sold my shares. I have lost nothing. This fruit is really excellent. Please try some."

Danglars sank down in a chair. "Why didn't you tell me. I am ruined, ruined!"

Edmond pretended surprise. "Oh, I didn't know you were investing in my choices. You have my sympathy. Jacopo, I will have more coffee."

Danglars rushed home. Without speaking to his family, he packed a suitcase with his clothes and his wife's jewelry. He raced to the bank and ordered all available cash brought to him. Neither the jewels nor money belonged to him, since he had already used both to gain

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credit to invest in the mine. With this fortune Danglars fled from Paris.

When Villefort arrived at the bank, he found the employees in a turmoil. No one had given them instructions, but with no money available they had been forced to shut the doors of the bank. In Danglars' office Villefort found the report on the diamond mine. At this crushing blow, Villefort felt his mind waver. He fell into a chair and stared unseeing at the wall.

For five hours, no one could rouse Villefort until the butler from his house suddenly appeared and spoke to him. Villefort's wife had heard that something was wrong at the bank. Since her husband had not come home to tell her what the matter was, she had sent their butler for news. Remembering his wife and his beloved son, Edward, Villefort pulled himself together. He reminded himself that he still had his position with the government. Also he

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determined to ask for his old position as Assistant Prosecutor again. Between the two, he could continue to support his family though, of course, not in their present high style. In time, he might be able to amass another fortune. Leaning on the butler's shoulder, Villefort made his way home.

Villefort went directly to his wife's room. She was in bed recovering from a nervous spell, but sat up trembling when her husband staggered in. Gently he told her what had happened and that they must move and make a new life. He promised her and their delicate Edward every care. He would work night and day to regain their lost position in life.

His wife seemed to take the news well. Villefort was still so shocked himself, he did not notice the terrible fear that suddenly flamed in her eyes. But she spoke calmly and asked that Edward be sent to her so she might have the pleasure of watching him at his lessons.

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Villefort left his wife and son together and went to lie down. A half-hour later he was awakened by the butler, who was weeping and holding out a note to Villefort.

In a trance Villefort read the note, in which his wife bade him good-bye and asked forgiveness. "I must take Edward where he will be safe forever. I know that security for him and me no longer lies in your house," she wrote.

Running to his wife's room, Villefort saw her slumped in death, cradling Edward, also dead, in her arms. She had poisoned herself and the boy.

At this sight, Villefort's mind snapped.

He began screaming and running about the room. He was so maddened that he did not notice the Count of Monte Cristo enter the room until he was standing beside him.

"You have ruined me," he shouted at Edmond. "You are the instrument of the devil."

"No," replied Edmond solemnly. "I am the instrument of your own past evil. Look at me carefully, Villefort, and see if you can see a young, innocent sailor whom you betrayed with a smile and kind words!"

Villefort started back, putting out his hand to ward Edmond off. "It cannot be! No, you cannot be" He could not go on.

"Yes, I am Edmond Dantes," thundered Edmond, "and you deserve your fate."

Villefort started to groan and weep. "I admit it. I deserved it, but *they* did not!" He sank to his knees beside the bodies of his wife and son.

Now it was Edmond's turn to gasp. He bowed his head for a moment and murmured, "You are right. I had no hatred of them, only of you, Villefort."

Villefort looked up with a mad gleam in his eyes. "Not Villefort, Noirtier. Noirtier! Noirtier! Noirtier!" He chirped his father's name like

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a bird, over and over.

A doctor had now arrived, and he shook his head sadly at Villefort, who was dancing and capering about the room.

“He is quite mad,” said the doctor. “He must be bound or else he will hurt himself.”

Edmond drove off with Villefort’s screams and chirps trailing after his carriage. When he arrived home, he was greeted by Jacopo with the news that Danglars had been located.

“And as you ordered, sir, I had some of my old smuggling friends prepare a reception for him.”

And they had. The smugglers had stopped Danglars’ carriage along the road and dragged him from it, along with his precious suitcase. He was tossed into a bedroom in a farmhouse, but not harmed. At first Danglars was terrified, but he soon regained his confidence and demanded food and drink.

“Food has to be paid for here,” said his

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guard. "Likewise, drink. Can you pay?"

"Of course, I can pay," answered Danglars with scorn. "Bring me meat and wine."

The man counted on his fingers. "That will cost ten thousand francs."

For a moment Danglars was speechless. Then he cursed the man and announced he would rather starve than pay such a sum. He held out for two days and two nights until he got weak and thirsty. Then Danglars paid the ten thousand francs and was given a fine meal.

This pattern went on for a month. Soon Danglars was down to his last thousand francs. After a lifetime of greed, he could not bear the thought of being penniless. He held out for a week. Feeling close to death, Danglars realized his foolishness. Creeping to the door with his money in hand, he called weakly to the guard to bring water and food. But it wasn't his guard who entered the room. It was a stranger whose face was hidden by his

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cloak.

“Do you suffer?” asked the stranger.

“Yes, I am starving,” said Danglars.

“I know an old man who starved through your doing,” said the man. “Do you repent?”

“I don’t know who you mean, but yes, I repent, I repent,” said Danglars weakly.

Edmond Dantes decided to show mercy because he was sorry for what had happened to Villefort’s wife and son. He dropped his cloak. “I forgive you.”

“The Count of Monte Cristo!” cried Danglars.

“No, Monsieur, I am Edmond Dantes.”

Danglars gave a terrible gasp and fell backward. He trembled all over and wept.

Edmond looked at him with contempt and turned to the guard. “Feed him and let him go with his thousand francs. I want him out of my life forever.”

Paris never heard of Baron Danglars again.