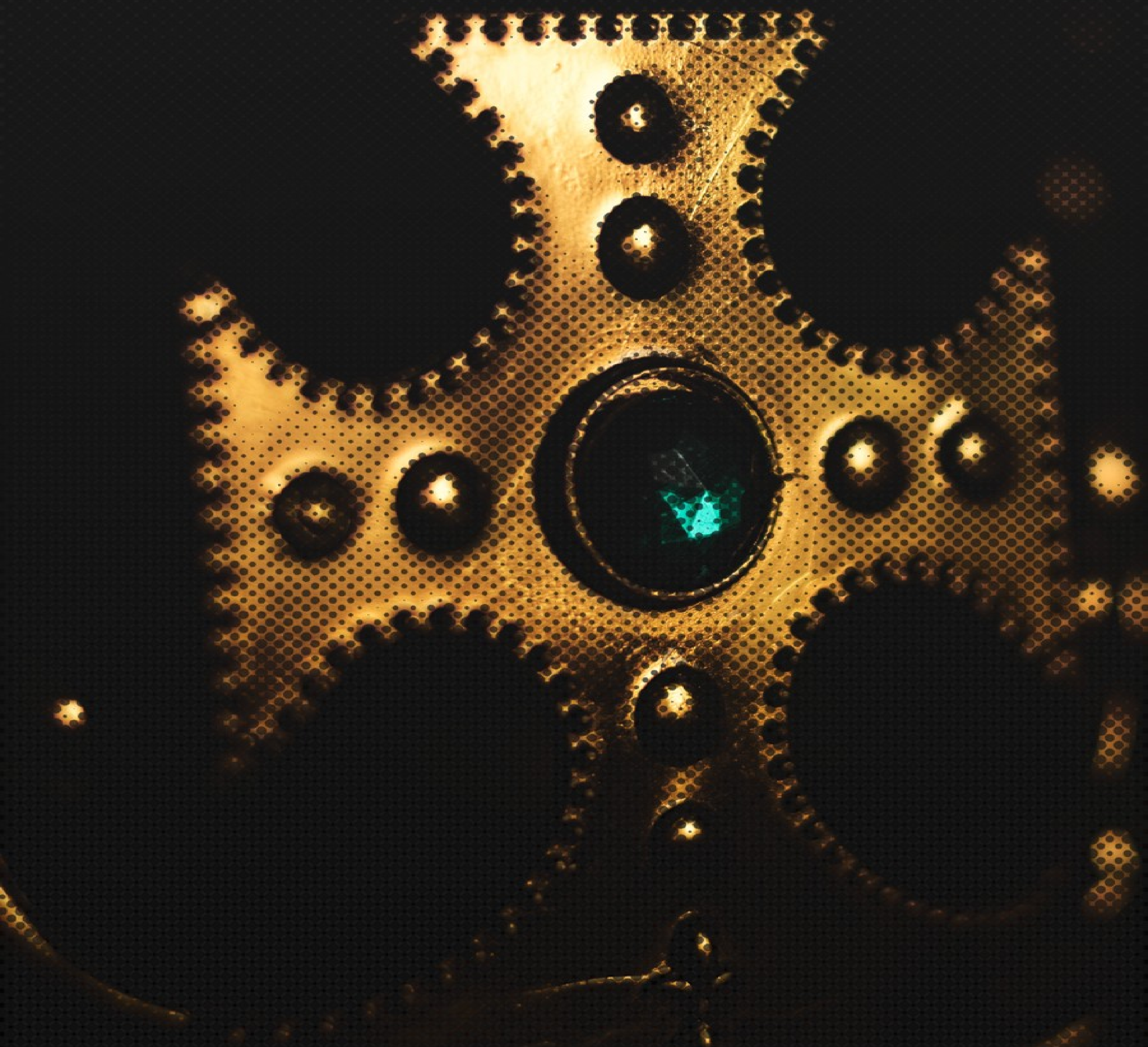
Baroness Orczy



The Uncrowned King

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Book 1
Introductory

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Chapter 1

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On a cold winter's morning in the year 1794 the Reverend Prior of the Dominican order at Gmünd stood in the porch of the monastery church. The monks, fifty or sixty in number, were grouped in a semicircle around him. Their heads and shoulders under the black hoods were lost in the surrounding gloom; only their white robes caught a glimmer of the pale blue light of early dawn, as did also the knuckles of their toil-worn hands, clasped tightly in prayer.

The church clock struck seven. Thin flakes of snow fell from a leaden sky. The wind came moaning and soughing over the snow-clad Styrian Alps and the pine trees on the foothills sighed and shivered and bent their stately crests to the blast. Above the sighing of the trees and the soughing of the wind rose the monotonous voices of the monks chanting their morning orisons. But all the while that they mumbled their prayers, those men in the long white robes, with hands reverently clasped, seemed to be straining their ears as if to catch a sound—the rumble of coach wheels perhaps—the jingle of harness, or the crack of a whip. They prayed, but, intent and eager, they also listened, and the Prior appeared to be listening too, more eagerly than they. It was very cold. The snow fell thicker and faster as slowly the grey dawn chased away the lingering gloom of night.

And suddenly the Prior straightened his tall figure, the black hood fell back from his tonsured head. He craned his neck, listening more intently than before. The murmured prayers of the monks became a mere jumble of incoherent words, for they, too, were craning their necks and listening. Listening! From the remote distance there had come the scarcely perceptible sound of coach wheels and the clatter of horses' hoofs on the hard, frozen road.

The monks continued to mumble prayers, but they only did it with their lips. Mechanically. Inwardly every man was murmuring: “Here they are!” and “At last!” Only the rigid discipline of self-effacement prevented these men from running out into the snow; from running out in order to lessen the distance and the time that separated them from that coach. But the Prior was still standing motionless in their midst. His tall, erect figure looked soldierly even beneath the voluminous, effeminate white robes. And not until the Prior gave the word would any of those men have dared to move. All they did was to crane their necks and to keep their eyes fixed on one spot in the landscape—the edge of the forest, where the winding road emerged out of the thicket.

The rumble of coach wheels gradually became more distinct and all at once a heavy coach, drawn by four bays, came out of the thicket, travelling at a round pace up the road. It appeared and disappeared alternately in and out of clumps of fir trees and intervening cottages, with harness jingling and leather creaking, until, after a few more minutes of anxious waiting, it came rattling on the cobble-stones of

the precincts and came to a halt in front of the church porch.

The Prior alone advanced to meet it. A groom jumped down from the box seat and opened the carriage door. A tall man in a magnificent caped coat stepped out of the coach. He had a child in his arms. The Prior approached and took the child from him.

“He is tired now,” the tall stranger said, “but he has borne the journey remarkably well!”

The Prior held the child in his arms, closely pressed to his breast; a limp, emaciated little body it was, wrapped in a thick rug; a pale face with sensitive mouth, drooping pathetically at the corners; closed eyes circled with purple, and fair, lank hair falling over the forehead. The Prior gazed on the sleeping child in a kind of ecstasy, whilst two tears coursed down his furrowed cheeks. The snow fell on his tonsured head and covered his shoulders. His lips moved in soundless prayer.

The monks began to chant in unison the hymn which Simeon the Jew intoned close on eighteen hundred years ago:

“Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . .”

The tall man gave a light laugh. He took off his hat and glanced down on the child with a look of wonderful tenderness. He drew the rug more closely round the small body which he had saved from torture and death at peril of his life. “Poor little mole!” he murmured in English. Then he turned and went back to the coach. He had entered it and given the order to start before the Prior or any of the monks seemed to be aware that he was actually going. It was only

after the groom had slammed the carriage door to, and the horses with much snorting and pawing and jingling of harness started to go, that the Prior seemed to wake out of his trance-like state and to become alive to the duties of hospitality. But it was too late. The coachman had cracked his whip. Before the Prior had time to take a single step forward the coach was on the move, and he remained standing there with the child still in his arms, and the snow covering his head and shoulders, while the coach clattered away on the hard road and was soon lost to view.

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The monks filed into the church preceded by the Prior carrying the child.

The monks chanted:

"For mine eyes have seen thy salvation . . ."

The Prior went up the aisle and laid the sleeping child on the altar steps.

Through a side door the students of the seminary came filing in. Little black-robed figures of varying ages and sizes: lean, overgrown lads of seventeen and eighteen, schoolboys with a look of perpetual hunger in their bright eyes, and little people hardly out of babyhood who were led by the hand by one of the fathers. They were the seminarists, future abbés, bishops and perhaps cardinals—French, Austrians, Poles, Hungarians, Spaniards, but mostly French and Austrian—all boys of noble birth, for the seminary of Gmünd catered exclusively for the younger sons of aristocratic houses who either had a religious vocation or

were compelled to go into the Church for family reasons. Among the tiny tots was Louis Beneventy, the son of the great Hungarian general who fought for Marie Thérèse in the wars of succession, a bright-eyed, sturdy little fellow, future Cardinal Archbishop of Esztergom, Papal Legate and Primate of Hungary, but not yet five at this time.

He remembered it all throughout his long life. The high altar a blaze of lights and groaning under a mass of white lilies and carnations from the rich hothouses of the monastery. The fathers, in their white robes, lined up in the elaborately carved mahogany pews, their shiny, tonsured pates reflecting the sanctuary lights. Then the tall, soldierly Prior at the foot of the altar steps, and the sleeping child wrapped in a rug stretched full length on the topmost step, his fair hair lying in a tousled mass about his forehead. The boys filed past the sanctuary rails while the organ loft murmured an exquisite voluntary of Palestrina. As they passed they made genuflexion, paying reverent homage partly to the altar of God, but partly, also, to the sleeping child—the King of France—Louis XVII by God's own grace.

They filed two by two down the aisle to the corner of the church allotted to them. Here they knelt on the hard stone floor, and clasped their hands which were blue with cold. A solemn silence fell upon the congregation while the organ continued its scarce audible murmur of exquisite harmonies. There were no laymen or outsiders present, only the monks and the young seminarists: less than a hundred and fifty people all told. They were all on their knees now, hands clasped, heads bent, their lips moving in whispered prayer.

Then all at once they rose to their feet. The organ gave forth a terrific crash, like a note of exultation, and the monks chanted the Te Deum “We praise thee, O God . . . !” The Prior remained standing at the foot of the altar steps, his arms outstretched, his eyes fixed upon the altar. Roused by the music, the child stirred, and raised himself on his elbow; he stared about him with eyes still heavy with sleep. What he saw was so different to what he had looked on of late—the dreary, dank prison-cell, the broken furniture, the dirt and the squalor, that no doubt the poor little mole thought that it was all a dream—a dream of those beautiful days of long ago, the luxury of Versailles, the pageants, the ceremonies when he, the royal Dauphin, was the centre of a crowd of sycophants and worshippers. Dazzled by the lights he closed his eyes again and turning over, went back to sleep.

The King of France slept while a crowd of worshippers gave thanks to God that he had been saved from his enemies and from the hands of all that hated him and his kin.

The picturesque scene remained impressed on the mind of Cardinal Beneventy from the age of five to his dying day.

Chapter 2

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The years rolled on. Louis XVII, King of France, spent them in obscurity within the peaceful walls of the monastery at Gmünd.

For reasons which are not all to their credit, his relatives, including his only sister, chose to ignore his existence. In spite of proofs—some of them absolutely irrefutable—they professed disbelief in the boy's escape from prison, and openly accepted the revolutionary government's account of his death and burial. In point of fact, they classed the legitimate head of their house with the numerous impostors who at this time sprang up like mushrooms, all claiming to be the one and only Dauphin, son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, escaped from the Temple prison. This was a deliberate as well as a monstrous act of injustice, for the Bourbon family knew well enough that the real Louis XVII was alive, but they put their attitude down to political necessity, and to the question of physical fitness. Undoubtedly the maltreatment which the young King had suffered as a child and the many horrors which he had witnessed did impair his health; those who knew him best went so far as to say that his mind was slightly affected. Be that as it may, Louis XVII himself made no move to establish his claim to the throne, even though he had a number of faithful adherents and many friends who worked ceaselessly

on his behalf. His two uncles were successively crowned Kings of France as Louis XVIII and Charles X respectively. The first died childless; the eldest son of the other was also childless and the second was murdered. France for the best part of the nineteenth century was in a perpetual state of political turmoil. One revolution followed another; one form of government after another was set up and swept away. Charles X, the last of the Bourbon kings, was driven into exile. Still the family clung to its original policy and continued to ignore its legitimate head, in spite of the fact that his sister, the Duchesse d'Angoulême, made a solemn declaration on her death-bed that she had known all along that her brother was alive. Perhaps it was impossible after the lapse of time to go back on that policy. Too many lies had been told in the past, too much injustice perpetrated. To confess to these would have brought about humiliation and discredit. And so Charles X, going into exile, abdicated in his own name and that of his eldest son in favour of his grandson, the Duc de Bordeaux, and he it was whom the royalist party, and what was left of the Bourbon family, acknowledged as their legitimate King Henri V by the grace of God, and secretly hoped and prayed for the death of the recluse of Gmünd, their one and only rightful King.

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Close on forty years had gone by since the Prior of the Dominican order at Gmünd had laid the rightful King of France on the altar steps of the monastery church, while the monks sang a Te Deum to Almighty God. Forty years, during

which many sanguine expectations led to bitter disappointment and many fervent hopes ended in frustration. True, there were some loyal hearts who never lost faith in the ultimate triumph of the cause, and men like Cardinal Beneventy continued to toil in that cause, for they believed in its righteousness as they did in that of their religion. He it was who, after his enthronement as Archbishop of Esztergom and Primate of Hungary, brought pressure to bear on the Emperor of Austria and on the Pope on behalf of the claims of Louis XVII, both from the political and the financial point of view.

But time went on. Louis XVII passed from youth to middle age. When scarcely fifty he seemed an old, old man, delicate in health, dispirited and disillusioned: repudiated by his nearest kin, with an ever-diminishing number of adherents, overshadowed by impostors, he appeared content to live his life in solitude and peace, cared for by the monks. He had a serious illness about this time and was tended through it by a highly skilled nurse, the sister of one of the probationers. This lady who was destined to play such an important part in the subsequent history of the Bourbons was Spanish by birth. She was the widow of an English army officer named Bertrand and had one child, a baby boy, named Cyril, whom she brought with her to Gmünd. She had learned the art of sick-nursing in England, and it was generally conceded that her skill and devotion saved the life of the illustrious patient on that occasion.

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Cardinal Beneventy made note of all these events in his diary and among the entries relating to this particular period I found two which are extraordinarily interesting, because they reaffirm the truth and authenticity of the subsequent drama. In one of these notes he says:

"Lady Bertrand has certainly an excellent influence over His Majesty's health and spirits. He seems much brighter: more cheerful. He sleeps better and enjoys the food which this devoted lady prepares for him with her own beautiful hands. I thank God for her advent amongst us."

Lady Bertrand! She was the widow of the English army officer. The sister of one of the probationers at Gmünd! She was the trained nurse and devoted lady who came to take charge of the august sufferer and helped him to regain his health and spirits!

The second entry is more remarkable still. It is dated nine months after the other. As a matter of fact, it is the keystone on which rests the whole edifice of this amazing chronicle. To all appearances it is the rough draft of what was evidently a circular letter which His Eminence addressed to various noblemen and gentlemen in France, Austria and Italy, who were affirmed Legitimists. It runs thus:

My dear Friend

This is to apprise you that His Majesty Louis XVII by the grace of God King of France and of Navarre has this day contracted holy matrimony with Inez di Gama, widow of Sir Mark Bertrand, late Captain of Artillery in the English Army. I had the privilege of pronouncing God's blessing upon this union on Thursday last the 17th of May in the Priory Church of Gmünd. His Majesty deigned to sign the register with his

own hand.
I am my dear friend
Your brother in God
Louis Beneventy, Archbishop.
Gmünd, May 21st, 1833."

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For some years after this (he did not receive the Cardinal's hat till much later) Archbishop Beneventy's entries in his diary and records of events connected with the fortunes of Louis XVII are very scrappy. There are many references to the activities of the widowed Duchesse de Berry on behalf of her son the Duc de Bordeaux, whom one section of royalists looked upon as their only legitimate King, and His Eminence's mordant wit does not spare that adventurous and unfortunate lady; indeed, he seems to have derived a certain grim satisfaction from her repeated failures in her son's cause.

Only here and there could I find a few notes concerning Louis XVII and his family—not many, but they are important.

"A son has been born to His Majesty the King of France. God be praised."

* * * * * * * * *

"I had the joy of holding Monsieur le Dauphin at the baptismal font. He has been given the names of Louis, Antoine, Marie, Charles, Aimé. Tears came to my eyes when they rested on the future King of France."

* * * * * * * * *

“His Majesty is in failing health. The devotion of the Queen Consort to him is marvellous to behold.”

* * * * * * * * *

“Monsieur le Dauphin has been sick with measles and is making a slow recovery. Alas! he has inherited His Majesty’s weak physique. Outwardly he is the image of his mother, but has nothing of her strength of character or of her ambition. Sometimes I wish he was more like his half-brother. Young Bertrand is a fascinating boy. He too is the very image of his mother, but in character as well as in looks. I am sorry for the child as His Majesty detests him, and even his mother seems to have little love for him.”

This is the first reference I found in His Eminence’s papers to this Cyril Bertrand, and I was left to guess who he was. Later on, however, the Cardinal speaks of him again.

“Young Bertrand shows that he has English blood in his veins, for he is a very fine horse-man, and an athlete. He seems very fond of Monsieur le Dauphin, and does his best to brighten his life for him and to infuse in His Royal Highness a love of outdoor games. Monsieur le Dauphin, I am sorry to say, does not respond very readily to his half-brother’s affection. He thinks him rough and rude. The boys are extraordinarily alike, both being so like their mother. But in character they are very different. Young Bertrand is only two years older than Monsieur but is much broader in build and much stronger.”

* * * * * * * * *

“His Majesty’s health has become very precarious. He has had a serious hæmorrhage. The Queen Consort has sent

to Vienna for Professor Scanzoni, the greatest authority on lung trouble."

* * * * * * * * *

"Young Bertrand has developed a rare talent for painting. I do my best to encourage it."

* * * * * * * * *

"Have suggested to His Majesty that young Bertrand be sent to Vienna to study painting under Piloty. But the Queen Consort opposed this strenuously, and His Majesty said some very bitter things about the lad. Strange how the unfortunate boy is disliked by the royal family. I must say I like him. He has some very lovable qualities, though I quite see that his English brusqueness and arrogance must often jar on His Majesty's sensitiveness."

* * * * * * * * *

"Professor Scanzoni has diagnosed lung trouble in His Majesty. He declares there is no immediate danger to that precious life."

* * * * * * * * *

"Bertrand has run away from home. No one knows what has become of him."

* * * * * * * * *

"His Majesty's illness has taken a turn for the worse. Special prayers are daily offered up for him in every Catholic church throughout France and Austria."

The final entry in this set of diaries is dated the 15th of February, 1849.

"The King is dead. Long live the King."

Louis XVII was dead. To every diehard royalist, his son was now Louis XIX, King of France.

Strangely enough after that momentous entry, there is a gap of eleven years during which His Eminence seems to have lost touch with the head of the royal family of Bourbon. At any rate, during those eleven years there is not a single reference to the King of France or to the Queen Mother in any of his notes, letters and diaries. There was nothing that gave me the slightest clue as to what happened after the death of Louis XVII, what became of his widow, or where His Majesty Louis XIX spent those intervening years. Of “young Bertrand” too, not another word.

For many days I was left wondering whether my romantic story would have to come to an inconclusive end. Then suddenly, when I had almost despaired of disentangling the threads of this “strange and eventful history,” I came across the loose notes dated 1860, which gave me all the data I could possibly wish for.

And that is how the rest of the story came to be written.

Book 2
How It All Began

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Chapter 3

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When next you are in Paris and happen to go one day up the Rue de Clichy—the street which is on the left of the large church of La Trinité—you will come, just before you reach the Place, on a new block of buildings, which look strangely incongruous in this old quarter of the city. They are a portion of the improvements which “le grand Préfet”—as Baron Haussmann was universally called—designed for the transformation of the ancient, insalubrious town into a Ville Lumière—ultra-modern, elegant, exquisite, but no longer picturesque, save in those out-of-the-way parts, which are sedulously avoided by the sightseer.

But in this year 1860 Haussmann had not yet tackled the problem of Montmartre, and where that block of new buildings now stands, there was a kind of Bohemian backwater beloved of artists and poets and of the under-dog. It was known as the Cité du Réaumur, and consisted of a square courtyard hemmed in by low buildings, all in a more or less dilapidated condition. A tumbledown archway gave access to the square. Exactly facing the archway there was a row of studios with tall windows on which lay the grime of ages. On the inside of each window there was a dark curtain hanging from an invisible rod, all crooked and torn. These curtains looked as if nothing on earth would induce them to move either up or down, but as the film of

dirt on the windows effectually shut out the interior of the studios from the gaze of the curious, this inefficacy of the curtains did not seem to matter very much. On the right of the courtyard, at right angles to the studios, there was a row of shops, in the windows of which there was a display of miscellaneous articles such as no one could possibly want, boots that didn't look as if they could fit any human foot, chignons that no self-respecting woman could possibly wear, pots of paste and bottles of liquid that defied usage, ribbons of colours that would never match or tone in with any gown. The stories above the shops were occupied respectively by a cobbler, a tailor, a dealer in scrap iron, a chimney sweep, and a barber. The dealer in scrap iron and the cobbler were guilty of the various noises peculiar to their trade; the tailor worked cross-legged on his table, in silence; the chimney sweep gave one loud cry of "Ramoneur," when he emerged from his lair soon after dawn every morning; but no one ever seemed to enter the shops down below, the front doors of which were in the possession of frowsy ill-conditioned cats.

Facing these shops, on the left of the courtyard, there was an eating-house which called itself, grandiloquently, Restaurant des Trois Rois. It had the reputation of serving once a week for dinner, the best cassoulette Normande to be had in Paris. On that one evening in the week the passer-by who had been curious enough to venture under the crumbling masonry of the archway would be rewarded for his temerity by seeing some of the greatest men in the world of art or literature squaring their elbows to large platesful of cassoulette which they consumed by the

uncertain light of gas burners hissing behind round wire cages. That same venturesome passer-by would see at one of the tables by the window Eugène Delacroix, painter of ethereal womanhood, burying his shaggy moustache at intervals in large tankards of beer, and opposite to him Horace Vernet in an old military coat, his chest covered with decorations, his white hair tousled, his chin unshaved, ogling the few women who from time to time dropped into the restaurant for a square meal. He would see Gustave Flaubert, whose recently published *Madame Bovary* had shocked the sensibilities of provincial France, discussing the respective merits of Saint-Emilien and Château-Yquem with Octave Feuillet, whose *Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre* had set the young ladies of two continents dreaming of romance.

And in a corner at a small table, sitting by himself, Alexandre Dumas, the man with the fleshy lips and flat nose which betrayed his negroid origin; whilst in the far corner of the salle the young 'uns, very quiet, very modest, gazing in respectful silence on their elders who had already "got there": Alphonse Daudet with the leonine head, the shabby velvet coat and delicate hands, and young Zola, saturnine, obstinate, with the shoulders of a butcher and a fist fashioned ready to smite.

They came and went, ate and drank copiously, engrossed in the important business of feeding and enjoying life. They entered the crowded salle without taking notice of anyone else there, though they were all friends, comrades together; but in the Restaurant des Trois Rois nobody ever greeted anybody else: the *habitués* just came in, sat down at their

accustomed table and ordered their cassoulette without paying attention to any of the other customers. This was Bohemia *par excellence*. The motto above the entrance door might easily have been: “Abandon your manners all ye who enter here!”

They all wore shabby coats, and trousers immensely wide at the hips and tapering down into a tight band round the ankles, greasy black hats with pointed crowns and huge flat brims. They wore their hair long and their beards shaggy. They knew nothing about collars, and their ties were large and floppy. They talked with their mouths full and ate peas with their knife. They were rough, uncouth, quarrelsome, vulgar if you like, but they were giants, these men, giants whom the world did not ignore, and whom posterity will never forget.

“*Eh bien!* Cyril, *mon petit, ça va*?”

The man who spoke had just come in. Contrary to the usage of the place, everyone turned to look at him: he was small and malformed, with legs that were too short and hands that were too big. His eyes were small and his forehead narrow; his lips were thin and betrayed obstinacy allied with pride. He had entered the room with an air that commanded attention, crossed the salle over to a far corner where a young man who wore a very shabby velvet coat with shirt open wide at the neck, sat eating all alone. The newcomer hung up his hat and without more ceremony dragged a chair to the table and sat down opposite the young man.

“*Comment ça va?*” he reiterated.

The other shrugged and replied dolefully:

“*Oh! pas très bien, Monsieur Ingres, vous savez.*”

“Ah, bah!” the great little man retorted, “I rather liked that portrait, you know.”

The young man blushed furiously at this praise from the great master, but before he could frame a single word Jean Auguste Ingres had called the waiter and become absorbed in the study of the bill of fare.

“No cassoulette for me to-day, *mon vieux*,” he said with a sigh.

“But, Monsieur Ingres,” the waiter protested.

“I said no cassoulette,” the old artist reiterated. “What else have you got?”

And thereafter there followed a long discussion between the painter of “La Source” and the waiter as to what should take the place of the classical dish.

The young man at the table was apparently forgotten. He waited in vain for another word from the master.

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Outside it was raining hard. One of those storms of wind and rain for which springtime in Northern France is ingloriously famous. There had been a few warm days in March and the beginning of April had been lovely, but now this treacherous month was going out like a roaring lion, with bitter blasts and cold douches in his train, and the young buds on the chestnut trees which had taken a premature peep at the spring, shivered and shrivelled inside their gummy husks.