

The Unholy Compact Abjured

by Charles Antoine Pigault-Lebrun, 1753-1835

Published: 1825



In the churchyard of the town of Salins, department of Jura, may still be seen the remains of a tomb, on which is sculptured in figures as rude as the age in which they were carved, a representation of a soldier, firmly clasped in the arms of a maiden; near them stands the devil in a menacing attitude. Though the inhabitants of the town are all ready to swear to the truth of the story, they are not agreed as to the time when it happened; so that we can only say, that some centuries have rolled away, since a young soldier named St Amand, a native of Salins, was returning after a long absence to the bosom of his family. He walked with quick and cheerful steps, carrying with ease, in a small knapsack, the whole of his worldly goods. Never since he quitted the paternal roof, had he felt so happy; for he hoped ere night, to see his pretty cousin, Ninette, whom he loved with all his heart, and whom he intended to make his wife.

He walked on, gaily carolling, till he saw a cross-road before him, and uncertain of his way, he called to an old woman, with her back towards him, to direct him. She was silent: and, as he ap-proached, he repeated the call, and she raised her head to answer it. The stout heart of the young soldier quailed, as he cast his eyes upon a countenance, such as never before had met his gaze.

He had indeed, reason to tremble; for he had just disturbed in the middle of an incantation, one of the most powerful witches in the country. She regarded him with a demoniac smile, and said in a tone which froze his blood, „Turn where thou wilt, thy road is sure—it leads to death!“

For some moments, he stood as if rooted to the spot; but, soon, fear of the sorceress, who remained gazing upon him, gave him strength to flee. He ran forward, nor stopped till he had completely lost sight of the fearful being, whose dreadful prediction had struck him with such horror. Suddenly a frightful storm arose; the thunder growled, and the lightning flashed round the weary traveller, who, drenched with rain, and overcome with fatigue, had hardly strength to proceed. How great was his joy, when he saw at a distance, a magnificent chateau, the gate of which stood open. He exerted all his remaining strength to reach it, and precipitately entered a large hall. There he stopped, expecting every moment to see some domestics, but no one appeared. He remained some time, watching the progress of the storm: at length it began to abate, and he determined to pursue his way; but as he approached the door, it closed with a loud noise, and all his efforts to open it were vain.

Struck with astonishment and dismay, the young soldier now believed that the prediction of the witch was about to be accomplished, and that he was doomed to fall a sacrifice to magic art.

Exhausted by his vain efforts to open the ponderous door, he sank for a moment in helpless despondency, on the marble pavement; put his trust in providence, and soon revived. He said his prayers, and rising, waited with firmness the issue of this extraordinary adventure. When he became composed enough to look round him, he examined the hall in which he was: a pair of folding doors at the further end, flattered him with the hope of escape that way; but they too, were fastened. The hall was of immense size, entirely unfurnished; the walls, pavement and ceiling, were of black marble; there were no windows, but a small sky-light faintly admitted the light of day, into this abode of gloom, where reigned a silence like that of the tomb. Hour after hour passed; this mournful silence remained still undisturbed; and St Amand, overcome with fatigue and watching, at length sunk into a deep, though perturbed slumber.

His sleep was soon disturbed by a frightful dream: he heard all at once, the sound of a knell, mingled with the cries of bats, and owls, and a hollow voice, murmured in his ear, „Woe to those who trouble the repose of the dead!“ He started on his feet, but what a sight met his eyes! The hall was partially illuminated by flashes of sulphurous fire; on the pavement was laid the body of a man newly slain, and covered with innumerable wounds, from which, a band of unearthly forms, whose fearful occupation, proclaimed the hellish origin, were draining the yet warm blood.

St Amand uttered a shriek of terror, and was in an instant surrounded by the fiends: already were their fangs, from which the remains of their horrid feast still dripped, extended to grasp him, when he hastily made the sign of the cross, and sank senseless upon the ground. When he regained his senses, the infernal band had vanished, and he saw bending over him, an old man, magnificently but strangely dressed: his silken garments flowed loosely around him, and were embroidered with figures of different animals, and mystic devices. His countenance was majestic, and his venerable white beard descended below his girdle: but his features had a wild and gloomy expression: his eyes, above all, had in their glance, that which might appal the stoutest

heart. St Amand shrunk from this mysterious being, with awe, mingled with abhorrence, and a cold shudder ran through his veins, as the old man bent upon him his piercing eyes.

„Rash youth,“ cried he in a severe tone, „how is it that thou hast dared to enter this place, where never mortal foot save mine has trod?“

„I came not willingly,“ replied St Amand, trembling; „an evil destiny, and not vain curiosity brought me hither.“

„Thou wouldst not the less have expiated thy presumption with thy life, but for my aid.“ returned the old man, austere. „I have saved thee from the vampires who guard it, and it depends upon me, whether thou shalt not still become their prey.“

„Oh! save me, then, I pray thee!“

„And why should I save thee?“ demanded the venerable magician. „What price art thou willing to give me for thy life?“

„Alas! I have nothing worthy of thy acceptance,“ sighed St Amand.

„But thou may'st have; and it is only through thee that I can obtain what I most desire.“

„How?“

„The blood of a dove, for me, would be a treasure, but I may not kill one; she must be slain for me, by one whose life I have saved. Should I liberate thee, a dove will fly to thy bosom; swear that thou wilt instantly sacrifice her for me, and thou shalt be free.“

„I swear it!“

Hardly had St Amand uttered the words, when he found himself in the chamber of Ninette, who, with a cry of joy, rushed into his arms. He pressed her with transport to his breast; but scarcely had he embraced her, when he saw the magician standing by his side.

„Wretch!“ cried he, „is it thus thou keepest thine oath? Pierce her heart—she is the dove that thou must instantly sacrifice, if thou wilt not become a feast for the vampires!“

„Sacrifice her? Never! Never!“

„Then, thou art my prey!“ and the fiend assuming his own form, sprang towards his victim; but he stopped suddenly—he dared not seize him: for the maiden held him firmly clasped in her arms, and the little cross of gold, which night and day she wore upon her bosom, had been blest by the venerable priest, whose gift it was. Thus, nought unholy dared approach the maiden, and the baffled fiend fled with a tremendous yell, as the crowing of the cock, announced the approach of dawn.

The cries of the maiden soon brought the neighbours to her chamber, and among them was the pastor, to whom St Amand related his adventure. „Oh, my son!“ said the good priest, „what have you done? See you not, that you have entered into a contract with the powers of darkness? Unable to wreak their vengeance on you, when you had guarded yourself with the blessed sign of our redemption, the fiend has had recourse to craft to draw you into his power. You have promised a sacrifice, to the enemy of God and man, but you have done it in ignorance. Abjure then, solemnly, the cursed contract, and dread no longer the vengeance of the fiend.“

The young soldier made the required abjuration, during which, the most dreadful noises were heard: it was the last effort of the demon's vengeance; for, from that time, he was never seen, nor heard of. St Amand married Ninette,

who had given him such a courageous proof of her love; and the cross transmitted from her, to her descendants, was always considered by them as the most precious part of their inheritance. In process of time, the family became wealthy, and a great grandson of St Amand erected the monument we have described, to commemorate the miraculous escape of his ancestor.

