



TO THE DIRECTOR  
OF THE «NATIONAL»

I fear it was quite foolhardy on my part to have promised you a few details concerning a curious figure who lived toward the end of the reign of Louis XIV.

I know that contributors to the *National* are required to observe a virtually military precision, and I am accordingly determined to honor my commitment to the fullest of my capabilities; — but unfortunately my resolve has been somewhat sidetracked by unforeseen circumstances.

Only a month ago, I happened to be passing through Frankfurt. — I had two days to kill, but being already acquainted with the place, — there was little for me to do but wander through its principal streets which, as so happened, were cluttered with the stalls of merchants who had come to town for the fair. The Roemerplatz in particular boasted a lavish array of merchandise; and nearby, the fur market flaunted its endless procession of pelts from outer Siberia or the banks of the Caspian Sea, — an extraordinary display whose more familiar curiosities included polar bear, blue fox, and ermine. Somewhat further along, Bohemian glassware was set

out on cedar planks in a dazzling rainbow of colors, — all bejeweled, festooned, and inlaid with gold, like bouquets of flowers plucked from an unimaginable paradise.

In one of the backwaters of this bazaar, a more modest series of stalls had been set up in front of a row of dimly lit shops, — specialized in haberdashery, shoe repair, or miscellaneous items of clothing. These stalls belonged to the booksellers who had traveled here from various parts of Germany and whose best-selling items seemed to be almanacs, illustrated broadsheets, and lithographs: the *Volks-Kalender* (People's Almanac) with its woodcuts, — picturing the popular uprisings in Frankfurt and Baden, Hecker the revolutionary, the principal members of the German National Assembly, political ditties, lithographs of Robert Blum and of the heroes of the Hungarian War, — these are what seized the eyes and *kreutzers* of the crowd. Beneath all this freshly printed merchandise lay rows of old tomes primarily notable for their low prices, — and I was astonished by the number of French books I came across.

The reason is simple: being a sovereign city-state, Frankfurt for many years provided a place of asylum for Protestant refugees, — and, like its sister cities in the Netherlands, it housed many printing establishments set up in order to publish the daring works of French philosophers and other malcontents of Europe, — and to this day, some of these firms still do a more or less thriving business as publishers of pirated editions which continue to flout the law.

It is virtually impossible for a Parisian to resist the urge to leaf through the ancient tomes arrayed in the bookseller's stalls. This part of the Frankfurt fair reminded me of the Paris quais, — memories charged

with emotion and enchantment. I bought a few old books, — thus purchasing the right to browse through the others at my leisure. As I sifted through the piles, I came across a volume, printed half in French, half in German, and bearing the following title which I have since verified in Brunet's *Bookseller's Manual*:

« Incident of the rarest sort, or History of the *abbé count de Bucquoy, Esq.*, specifically his escapes from Fort-l'Évêque and from the Bastille, with several works in verse and prose, most notably the whole *gamut* of women, *Jean de la France, Bookseller*, rue de la Réforme, à l'Espérance, à Bonnefoy. — 1719. »

The book dealer wanted to charge me one florin and six kreutzers (pronounced *crushes*). The price struck me as a bit steep for this kind of fair, so I contented myself with browsing through the volume, — which I was allowed to do for free, given my previous purchases. The narrative of the abbé de Bucquoy's escapes from prison was quite riveting, but I said to myself: I'll be able to find the book in Paris, either in some library or in one of the thousands of collections containing every imaginable memoir relating to the history of France. All I did was take down the exact title of the volume, and then proceeded on to the *Meinlust* on the banks of the Mein, leafing through the *Volks-Kalender* as I strolled along.

When I returned to Paris, I found the literary scene prey to a state of indescribable terror. As a result of the Riancey amendment that had been introduced into the laws regulating the press, newspapers were henceforth prohibited from publishing what the Assembly referred to as the *feuilleton-roman*, or *serial novel*. I came across many writers of no political persuasion whatsoever who

were in utter despair over this legal turn of events which had so cruelly robbed them of their livelihoods.

I myself, who am no novelist at all, was alarmed at the vagueness of interpretation invited by these two oddly coupled words: *serial novel*. I had agreed some time ago to deliver to you a piece of literary work similar to those I had previously managed to place in various magazines and newspapers; and when you held me to my promise, I therefore came up with the title *The Abbé de Bucquoy*, convinced I would easily find the necessary documents in Paris which would allow me to speak of this character in an historical rather than in a novelistic fashion, — for let's at least get our terms clear.

The twin scientific and literary appeal of this account of the life and writings of the abbé de Bucquoy decided you to accept this project of mine, — which is part of a larger series of studies, some of which I have already published.

But this is what happened after the *National* announced the imminent publication of my abbé de Bucquoy. — I had ascertained that the book indeed existed in France, for I had seen it listed not only in Brunet's manual but also in Quérard's *La France littéraire*. — I was positive I would easily be able to locate this volume (admittedly described as rare) either in some public library, or in some private collection, or via some rare book dealer.

Besides, having browsed through the book, — having even come across another narrative of the adventures of the abbé de Bucquoy in the witty and eccentric letters of Madame Dunoyer, — I was confident I would be able to paint his portrait and write his biography in a manner that would be beyond all legal reproach.

But these days I'm beginning to get somewhat frightened about the penalties that threaten to befall any newspaper in violation of the slightest letter of the new law. A fine of fifty francs per copy seized, — this is enough to drive even the most stalwart into retreat. For newspapers with a circulation of a mere twenty-five thousand, — and there are several of these, — the fines would amount to over a million francs. One can therefore understand how a *broad* interpretation of the law might enable the government to squash any opposition by entirely legal means. Out-and-out censorship would be far preferable. Back in the days of the *Ancien Régime*, the approbation of a censor, — a censor, moreover, whom one was allowed to hand pick, — was all that was needed to ensure the safe publication of one's ideas, and the liberty one enjoyed was at times astonishing. I have read books officially approved by Louis and Phélippeaux which would without the slightest doubt be banned today.

As chance would have it, I had occasion to experience government censorship first-hand in Vienna. Finding myself in somewhat straitened circumstances after a series of unanticipated travel expenditures, and unable to surmount the difficulties involved in having money transferred to me from France, I hit upon the simple expedient of writing for the local newspapers. They paid one hundred fifty francs per page (which came out to sixteen short columns). I wrote two series of articles; but first they had to be submitted to the censor for approval.

I let a few days go by. There was no word of anything. — So I had no choice but to go pay a private visit to M. Pilat, the director of the bureau of censor-

ship, and to explain that I had been kept waiting far too long for the *visa* of approval. He was extremely courteous toward me, — unlike his virtual homonym, M. Pilat was certainly not going to wash his hands of the injustice to which I had alerted him. I mentioned that I was furthermore being deprived of access to French newspapers, seeing as how the local coffee houses only received the *Journal des Débats* and *La Quotidienne*. M. Pilat said to me: « You happen to be standing in the freest spot of the Empire (i.e. the bureau of censorship); you can come here every day and read whatsoever you please, including *Le National* or *Le Charivari*. »

It is only among Germanic functionaries that one encounters this degree of decorous wit and magnanimity; the only drawback is that their very mannerliness makes one all the more willing to endure the arbitrariness of their decisions.

I have never had the same luck with the French system of censorship, — at least as it is applied to the theater, — and I doubt that if book or newspaper censorship were reintroduced we would have anything to boast about. Given our national character, there is always the tendency to exert force simply because one possesses it, or to abuse power simply because one happens to exercise it. — What to expect of a situation that so seriously endangers the interests and even the security of non-political writers?

I was recently mentioning my plight to a scholar whom it would be fruitless to designate as anything other than a *bibliophile*. He said to me: « Don't base your history of the abbé de Bucquoy on the incidents recounted in Madame Dunoyer's *Lettres galantes*. The title of this book alone is enough to disqualify it from

serious consideration; wait until the Bibliothèque Nationale reopens (it was currently in recess), and you're sure to find the book you read in Frankfurt. »

I paid no attention to the malicious smile that was no doubt playing on the bibliophile's pinched lips, — and when the first of October came around, I was among the first in line to get into the Bibliothèque Nationale.

M. D\*\*\* is a gentleman of immense erudition and courtesy. He had his assistants undertake a search, but they came back empty-handed after half an hour. He consulted Brunet and Quérard, discovered that both in fact listed the book, and asked me to come back in three days; — they had not been able to locate it. « Perhaps, said M. D\*\*\* to me with his legendary patience, — perhaps the book has been catalogued among the novels. »

I trembled: « *Among the novels?* . . . but it's a work of history! . . . it should be in the collection of Memoirs relating to the century of Louis XIV. The book specifically deals with the history of the Bastille; it provides details about the Camisard uprising, the expulsion of the Protestants, and the famous league of Salt Smugglers in the Lorraine, whom Mandrin later recruited into the rebel troops who managed to fight off the regular army and to capture such towns as Beaune and Dijon! . . .

—I know, said M. D\*\*\*, but given the vagaries of classification over time, errors often creep into our catalogue system. The mistakes can only be mended if and when a reader happens to request a particular work. The only person here who could solve your problem is M. R\*\*\*. . . Unfortunately, this is not *his week*. »

I waited for M. R\*\*\*'s week. — The following Mon-

day I was lucky enough to meet an acquaintance of his in the reading room who offered to introduce me. M. R\*\*\* gave me a very polite welcome and said to me: « I am delighted to have had the chance to make your acquaintance; all I ask is that you grant me several more days. You see, this week I belong to the general reading public. Next week I shall be entirely at your service. »

Since I had been formally introduced to M. R\*\*\*, I was no longer a member of the general reading public! I had become a private acquaintance, — and therefore had no right to impinge on his official time.

This was entirely as things should be, — but you have to admire my stroke of bad luck! . . . There was really nothing or nobody else I could blame.

The bunglings of the Bibliothèque Nationale have often been commented upon. They derive in part from the shortage of personnel and in part from ancient traditions that continue to exercise their hold. The most accurate criticism that has been leveled at the place is that too much of the time and energy of its highly qualified and underpaid staff is devoted to dealing with the six hundred readers who come there every day in search of books they could just as easily find on the open shelves of any private lending library, — a state of affairs that does considerable harm not just to the aforesaid lending libraries, but to publishers and authors as well, for it would seem that nobody wants to pay for their reading matter anymore.

It has also been quite rightly observed that this establishment, which is without equal in the world, should not function as a place where people come just to keep warm, — and whose patrons, for the most, pose a very

real threat to the existence and conservation of its collections. All the idlers, retirees, widowers, unemployed job-seekers, schoolchildren copying their homework, ancient eccentrics, — like poor old *Carnaval* who used to turn up wearing flowers in his hat and sporting red, pale blue or apple green suits, — all these certainly deserve consideration, but wouldn't it make more sense to open other libraries especially for them? . . .

There used to be nineteen editions of *Don Quixote* in the department of printed books. Not a single edition has remained intact. Now that libraries no longer lend out novels, the general reading public invariably requests travel literature, comedies, humorous stories in the vein of M. Thiers and M. Capefigue, and the *Registry of Addresses*.

Gradually, over the course of time, an edition loses one of its volumes, a bibliographical curiosity disappears, thanks to the all-too-liberal policy by which readers are not even required to give their names.

The Republic of Letters, unlike other institutions, needs to be imbued with certain standards of aristocracy, — for no one would ever call into question the membership of the republics of science or talent.

The celebrated library of Alexandria was open to established scholars or to poets whose work had been recognized for its merits . . . But the hospitality extended by the library was total, and its readers received free board and lodging for the entire duration of their stay.

And while we are on the subject, — allow a traveler who has walked among its ruins and listened to the whisper of the past to defend the memory of the illustrious caliph Omar against the widely held assumption

that it was he who burned down the library of Alexandria. Omar never set foot in Alexandria, — despite the claims of many scholars. He never even issued orders concerning the library to his lieutenant Amrou. — The library of Alexandria and the *Serapeion* or almshouse attached to it were burned to the ground in the fourth century by Christians, — who also went on to slaughter the renowned Pythagorean philosopher Hypatia as she was making her way down the street. — To be sure, these excesses can not be solely imputed to the Christian religion, — but at least the unfortunate Arabs should no longer have to stand accused of ignorance, for the wonders of Greek philosophy, medicine, and science were preserved thanks to their translations and thanks to their own scholarship, — all of which directed a continuous beam of light through the obstinate fog of the feudal era.

Pardon these digressions, — I shall keep you abreast of my travels *in search of* the abbé de Bucquoy. — This eccentric and ever-so-slippery figure cannot hope to elude my painstaking investigation for very long.



The staff at the Bibliothèque Nationale couldn't be more helpful. No serious scholar could complain about its current *modus operandi*; — but should a novelist or serial writer show his face, « all hell breaks loose in the stacks ». A bibliographer, a man dealing in a standard field of knowledge, knows exactly what books to request. A *fantaisiste* writer, a writer who runs the risk of perpetrating a *serial novel*, upsets the natural course of things and bothers everybody in sight for the sake of some half-baked idea that has happened to pop into his mind.

It is in circumstances like these that one should admire the patience of the senior librarian,—the lower-level staff are often too young to have mastered this degree of paternal self-abnegation. Occasionally the people who turn up at the library are extraordinarily rude. Convinced that the mere fact of belonging to the reading *public* endows them with a privileged status, they address the librarians in the same peremptory tone one might use to get a waiter's attention in a café. —And faced with this kind of treatment, the famous scholar or academician will respond with the benign resignation of a monk, suffering no end of indignities from the reading public from ten till two thirty sharp.

Having taken pity on my plight, the staff had scoured the catalogues and had even gone so far as to explore the *reserve* collection and rummage through the unappetizing garbage heap of novels, — where the abbé de Bucquoy might have found himself classified by mistake; suddenly one of the assistant librarians shouted out: « We have it! In Dutch! » He read me the title out loud: « Jacques de Bucquoy, *Incidents of the most remarkable sort . . .* »

—Excuse me, I interrupted, but the book I was looking for is entitled “*Incident of the rarest sort . . .*”

—Let's have another look then, perhaps there was a translation error: “. . . *drawn from a sixteen-year voyage to the Indies, Harlem, 1744.*”

—That's not it . . . and yet the book dates from exactly the same period as the abbé de Bucquoy, whose first name was indeed Jacques. But what on earth could this fantastic abbé have been doing in the Indies? »

Another assistant librarian appears on the scene: the name has been misspelled; it is not de Bucquoy, but

rather Du Bucquoy, and since this may have also been spelled Dubucquoy, the search has to be started all over again, this time under the letter D.

Damn these names with nobiliary particles! Dubucquoy, I said, would be a mere commoner . . . whereas the title of the book refers to him as the count de Bucquoy.

A *paleographer* who was working at a nearby table raised his head and said to me: « A particule in a name has never been proof of nobility; on the contrary, it often indicates that the name belongs to the landed gentry, that is, to those people who were originally known as *franc-allevu* folk. They took the name of their property and the various *branches* of a given family were often designated by the different endings of their names. The great families of French history are called Bouchard (Montmorency), Bozon (Périgord), Beaupoil (Saint-Aulaire), Capet (Bourbon), etc. The resultant *de* and *du* are often the product of sheer irregularity or outright usurpation. But this is not all: in Flanders and in Belgium, the *de* is the same article as the German *der*, meaning *the*. — Thus, *de* Muller means the miller, etc. — With the result that a good quarter of France is filled with bogus aristocrats. Béranger used to make light of the *de* in his name which merely indicated his Flemish origins. »

One does not argue with a paleographer; one just lets him rattle on.

All this notwithstanding, the various catalogues had yielded up absolutely nothing under the letter D.

« What makes you so sure that his name is Du Bucquoy? I asked the assistant librarian who had been the last to arrive on the scene.

— Because I located his name among the manuscripts catalogued in the police archives: 1709, that would be his period, wouldn't it?

— Absolutely; it's the year that the count de Bucquoy made his third escape from prison.

— Du Bucquoy! . . . That's the name he's listed under in the catalogue of manuscripts. Just follow me upstairs, and you'll be able to consult the material for yourself. »

I soon saw myself in possession of large folio bound in red morocco and containing the files of various police reports of the year 1709. The second file in the volume bore the following names: « Le Pileur, François Bouchard, lady de Boulanvilliers, Jeanne Massé, — Count du Buquoy. »

Now we've got the fox by the tail, — for indeed there's something here about an escape from the Bastille, and here is what M. d'Argenson of the police writes in his report to the minister M. de Pontchartrain:

« I have continued to search for the *alleged* count of Buquoy in all the locations you have been so kind as to indicate to me, but nothing has been learned of his whereabouts and I doubt he is in Paris. »

The information contained in these few lines struck me as at once most reassuring and most depressing. — On the one hand, the count de Buquoy or de Bucquoy, about whom I previously possessed only vague or questionable evidence, takes on an incontrovertible historical existence thanks to this item. No court of law could now justifiably classify him as a hero of a serial novel.

On the other hand, why does M. d'Argenson refer to him as the *alleged* count de Bucquoy?

Are we dealing with a fake Bucquoy here, — who is trying to pass himself off for the real thing . . . for reasons we have no way of fathoming today?

Or are we dealing with the actual Bucquoy who may have hidden his real name behind a pseudonym?

With only this piece of evidence to go on, the truth escapes me, — and I imagine the material existence of this individual could easily be challenged by any lawyer worth his salt!

How to defend oneself against the prosecutor who would declare before the court that: « The count of Bucquoy is a fictional character, a figment of the *novelistic* imagination of his author! . . . » and who would then go on to request a legal settlement involving, say, a million francs in fines! — with the sum going up every day a new installment was seized?

Although he can hardly pretend to wear the noble mantle of the scholar, every writer occasionally finds himself having to resort the scientific method; I therefore proceeded to scrutinize in detail the yellowed writing on the Holland paper of the report signed by d'Argenson. At the same level as the line that read: « I have continued to search for the alleged count . . . » there were two words penciled into the margin, written in a swift and decisive hand: « Carry on. » Carry on what? — Carry on the search for the abbé de Bucquoy, no doubt . . .

I was entirely of the same opinion.

All the same, when it comes to analyzing handwriting, there can be no certainty without comparison. On another page of the same report there was the following note:

« The lanterns have been hung in the passageways of

the Louvre in accordance with your instructions, and I shall see to it that they are lit every evening. »

This is how the sentence ended in the handwriting of the secretary who had copied the report. Following the words « lit every evening », a less professional hand had added: « quite so. »

And in the margin, evidently in the hand of the minister Pontchartrain, these same words again: « Carry on. »

The same comment here as for the abbé de Bucquoy.

But in all likelihood M. de Pontchartrain occasionally varied his pet phrases. Here is another example:

« I have informed the merchants of the Saint-Germain fair that they must obey the orders of the King, namely, that it is forbidden to serve food during those hours which, according to the rules of the Church, are reserved for fasting. »

In the margin next to this, there is but a single word in pencil: « Good. »

Further on, there is something about an *individual* who was arrested for having murdered a nun from Évreux. A silver seal, some bloody underclothing, and a *glove* were found on his person. — The individual turns out to be an abbé (yet another abbé!); but the charges against him were dropped, according to M. d'Argenson, because the abbé had apparently merely come to Versailles to look after some business affairs that were doing rather poorly, the proof being that he was still quite indigent. « Thus, he concludes, I think he can safely be regarded as a mere visionary who should be sent back to his province rather than being allowed to stay on in Paris where he is certain to become a ward of the city. »

The minister had penciled in the following comment: « Have a few words with him first. » A terrible phrase which may very well have changed the entire legal situation of the poor abbé.

And what if this were the abbé de Bucquoy himself! — No name, just the designation: *An individual*. — Further on, there is something about a certain Lebeau woman, wife of a certain Cardinal and a known prostitute . . . His Excellency Pasquier is interested in her case . . .

Penciled in the margin: « House of Detention. Give her six months. »

I don't know whether everybody would be as engrossed as I was by these horrific pages entitled *Miscellaneous Police Files*. This handful of facts paints the precise historical moment at which the elusive abbé walked the earth. And I who know this unlucky abbé, — perhaps better than any of my readers could, — I trembled as I turned the pages containing the merciless reports that changed hands between these two men, — d'Argenson and Pontchartrain.

At one point, after having assured the latter of his eternal loyalty, the former had added:

« I shall not waver in my devotion, no matter what rebukes and reprimands you care to honor me with . . . »

The minister replies in the third person, this time using a pen. « He shall not be so honored whensoever he pleases; and I would be most unhappy to have to put his loyalties into question, since I cannot do the same with his abilities. »

There was another item in this file: « The Le Pileur Affair. » A dreadful drama unfolded under my eyes.

Have no fear, — this is not a *novel*.

The drama involves one of those terrible family

scenes that take place at the bedside of someone who has just expired. At this very moment, so nicely seized by the popular stage of yore, — when the chief heir, now casting aside his mournful mask of sorrow and contrition, proudly pulls himself up to his full height and says to the members of the household: « The keys? »

Here we have two heirs in the wake of the death of Binet de Villiers: the brother of the deceased and sole legatee, Binet de Basse-Maison, and the brother-in-law of the deceased, Le Pileur.

Two attorneys, one representing the deceased, the other Le Pileur, were drawing up the inventory with the help of a notary and a clerk. Le Pileur complained that they had not inventoried a certain number of papers that Binet de Basse-Maison claimed were of no importance. The latter warned Le Pileur not to provoke an incident and said he should just abide by the opinion of his attorney Châtelain.

But Le Pileur replied that he had absolutely no intention of consulting his attorney, that he knew what was afoot, and that as far as provoking an incident was concerned, he certainly was *a great enough gentleman* to know how to take things into his own hands.

Basse-Maison, irritated by these comments, went up to Le Pileur and, taking hold of him by the two buttonholes of his jerkin, said to him that he would thwart any attempt of his to do so; — Le Pileur put his hand to his sword, Basse-Maison did likewise . . .



Observing a safe distance from each other, Basse-Maison and Le Pileur waved their swords around a bit. Le Pileur's wife threw herself between her husband and

her brother; then the others came to her assistance and managed to drag each of the combatants into separate rooms, which were then locked.

A moment later there was the sound of a window opening; it was Le Pileur bellowing to his servants down in the courtyard: « Go fetch my nephews! »

The attorneys were in the process of writing up a legal report about the scuffle when the two nephews burst into the room, sabers in hand. — They were both officers of the Royal Guard; — pushing the servants aside and presenting the points of their swords to the two attorneys and the notary, they asked where Basse-Maison was.

Nobody would tell them, whereupon Le Pileur shouted from his room: « Over here, my boys! »

But the nephews had already battered down the door to the room at the left and were beating the hapless Binet de Basse-Maison, — who, according to the police file, was « *hasthmatic* », — with the flats of their sabers.

The notary, whose name was Dionis, thinking that Le Pileur's anger would have been appeased by this point and hoping that he would call off his nephews, decided to unlock him from his room while admonishing him to remain calm. Le Pileur lunged through the door, shouting: « Now you'll see some fireworks! » He rushed over to where his nephews were still beating Basse-Maison and planted his sword in the latter's belly.

The police file relating these events is followed by a more detailed dossier containing the depositions of thirteen witnesses, — the most *eminent* of whom were the two attorneys and the notary.

It should be observed that each of these thirteen

witnesses seems to have flinched at the crucial moment. As a result, none is absolutely certain that Le Pileur stabbed Basse-Maison to death with his sword.

The first attorney swears that he can only be sure of having heard the sound of saber blows in the distance.

The second attorney agrees with his colleague.

A manservant by the name of Barry is somewhat more forthcoming: — he saw the murder from a distant window; but he does not know whether it was Le Pileur or someone *dressed in light gray* who actually delivered the fatal blow to Basse-Maison's belly. Louis Calot, another servant, more or less corroborates this deposition.

The last of this courageous band and the least eminent of the thirteen, namely, the notary's clerk, claims to have seen Le Pileur's wife make off with some of the papers of the deceased. According to him, after the crime Le Pileur calmly went to the room where his wife was and « then went off in his carriage with her and the two men who had caused the ruckus. »

The moral of this instructive tale, at least as concerns the mores of the period, seems to be lacking, — that is, until one comes across the following remarkable conclusion at the end of the report: « There are few examples of an act of violence so odious and so criminal . . . But given the fact that the heirs of the two dead brothers are at the same time the brothers-in-law of the murderer, it is safe to assume that this murder shall go unpunished and shall have no consequence other than to render his lordship Le Pileur more agreeable to the various propositions emanating from his co-legatees in those matters touching upon their mutual interests. »

It has been observed that during the *grand siècle* even the most minor clerk wrote in a style as florid as

Bossuet's. It is impossible not to admire the marvelous detachment of this police report which evinces the hope that the murderer will become more amenable to the resolution of his affairs . . . As for the murder, the theft of the papers, the saber blows (some of which were probably also directed at the attorneys), they will all go unpunished because nobody inside or outside the family will ever press charges: — M. Le Pileur being *too great a gentleman* not to get away with this *incident* . . .

This is a noble remnant of those feudal manners which lingers on well into the final years of *grand siècle* under Mme de Maintenon's reign.

There is no further mention of this affair, — which has allowed me to forget my poor abbé for a moment; — but even though it lacks the embellishments of a novel, this police report nonetheless provides a number of historical silhouettes that could be cut out and used as background figures. Already everything is coming to life for me, reconstructed by my mind's eye. I see d'Argenson in his office, Pontchartrain in his ministry, the Pontchartrain who (according to Saint-Simon) became an object of ridicule by calling himself *de* Pontchartrain and who, like many others, took his revenge against ridicule by inspiring terror.

But to what avail is all this background preparation? Will they only allow me to set the scene for the events in the fashion of Froissart or Monstrelet? — They will probably claim that this is how Walter Scott goes about things, — and he is after all a novelist. I should probably just restrict myself to giving a straightforward synopsis of the history of the abbé de Bucquoy . . . if and when I find it.

I had reason to hope: M. R\*\*\* was going to take matters into his hands; — there were merely eight more days to wait. Besides, in the interim I still might be able to locate the book in some other public library.

Unfortunately they were all closed, — except for the Mazarine. I therefore went off to disturb the silence of its magnificent and chilly halls. The library has a catalogue which is quite complete and which you are allowed to consult on your own; in ten minutes, it can help you solve any question whatsoever. But the staff on duty is so competent there is no need to bother the reference librarians or even to consult the catalogue. I addressed myself to one of them: somewhat taken aback, he turned my request over in his mind and replied, « We don't have the book . . . but I have a vague idea . . . »

The curator is man well-known for his wit and encyclopedic erudition. He recognized me. « What do you need the abbé de Bucquoy for? For an opera libretto? I remember that charming opera you wrote ten years ago; the music was delightful. The second one was even more admirable. What a marvelous actress you had there . . . But these days the censors would never allow you to do a play involving an *abbé*.

— I need the book for something historical I'm working on. »

He gave me a long, hard look, of the sort one might cast at someone requesting books on alchemy. « Oh I see, he said at last, it's for an historical novel à la Dumas.

— I have never written an historical novel, nor do I intend to: I have absolutely no desire to cost the newspapers for which I write four or five hundred francs a

day in fines . . . If I find I am incapable of writing straight history, I'll just print the book as is. »

He nodded his head and said, « We have it.

— Oh?

— I know where it is. It's part of the collection of books that came to us from Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Which is why it is not yet catalogued . . . It must be somewhere in the basement.

— Ah, if you would be kind enough to . . .

— I'll try to locate it for you; just give me a few days.

— I'm starting in on my project the day after tomorrow.

— It won't be easy: there are piles and piles of books down there and we'll probably have to turn the place upside down. But the book is here: I have seen it with my own eyes.

— Just be careful about the books in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés collection, — on account of the rats . . . A number of new species have been sighted, including the gray Russian rat which arrived in the wake of the Cossacks. True, this Russian rat managed to destroy the English rat, but now they are talking about a new *rodent* that has recently appeared on the scene. It's called the *Athens mouse* and has apparently been multiplying like mad ever since it arrived here in the crates that were shipped from the university France has recently established in Athens . . . »

The curator dismissed my fears with a smile and took his leave, promising me his full attention to my request.

Another idea came to mind: the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal is closed for the month, but I know the curator. — He is in town; he has the keys. He has been most

helpful to me in the past; I'm sure he would make an exception for me and allow me to see the book which is after all only a minor item in his library's vast holdings.

I was on my way to see him. But a dreadful thought stopped me dead in my tracks. It was the memory of a fantastic tale I had heard ages ago.

The predecessor of the current curator had been a celebrated old man who was passionate about books; it was with great regret that he was finally forced to give up his cherished seventeenth-century editions late in life, but death carried him off in the end and the new curator took possession of his lodgings.

The latter had just gotten married and was sleeping in peace next to his young wife when he was suddenly woken up, at one o'clock in the morning, by the violent ringing of the doorbell. The maid's quarters were on another floor of the house. The curator gets up and goes to open the door.

Nobody.

He tries to figure out who it was: everybody is asleep in the house; — the concierge has seen nothing.

The next night, at the very same hour, the bell again goes off with a repeated series of rings.

Again, nobody at the door. The curator, who had been a teacher shortly before this, concludes that it is probably some aggrieved schoolboy who has hidden himself in the house, — or who has tied a cat to the bell by means of a slip knot attached to its tail . . .

On the third night, the curator instructs his concierge to remain on the landing with a candle until the fatal hour has passed; he promises him a reward if the bell does not ring.

At one in the morning, the concierge is horrified to

see that the cord of the bell is jerking up and down on its own and that its red tassel is crazily dancing across the wall. The curator in turn opens his bedroom door only to witness the concierge making signs of the cross in front of him.

« It is the soul of your predecessor who has returned to haunt you.

— Did you see him?

— No, but you can't see ghosts in candlelight.

— Well, let's try again tomorrow without candlelight.

— Sir, you can go ahead and try on your own . . . »

After having given the matter further consideration, the curator decided not to try to get a glimpse of the ghost. They probably had a mass said for the ancient bibliophile, for the phenomenon never repeated itself again.

And I was about to go ring this same bell! . . . Who knows whether the ancient ghost himself might not greet me at the door?

Besides, this library brings back many sad memories. I have known three of its curators over time, — the first of these was the original of the supposed ghost; the second, ever so brilliant, ever so generous, was one of my literary mentors; the last one was so helpful in allowing me access to his fine collections of engravings that I presented him with an edition of *Faust* illustrated with German engravings!

No, it would be most difficult for me to return to the Arsenal.

Besides, there are still several rare book dealers to visit: there's France, then Merlin, then Techener . . .

M. France said to me: « I know the book well; it must have crossed my hands at least ten times . . . With luck,

you're sure to find it on the quais: that's where I picked it up myself for ten sous. »

The idea of combing the bookstalls on the quais for days on end in search of an item officially classified as rare . . . I decided it made more sense to try Merlin's bookshop. « The Bucquoy? I was informed by his successor, of course I'm familiar with it, I even have a copy of it on hand . . . »

My joy may easily be imagined. The book dealer brought me a volume whose format was the appropriate duodecimo; except that it was far too fat (949 pages). Upon opening the book, I discovered it bore the title, *In Praise of the Count de Bucquoy*. Around the portrait facing the title page, there was the Latin inscription: COMES. A. BVCQVOY.

My illusions were soon dashed. It was a history of the Bohemian uprising, with a portrait of a Bucquoy whose armor and beard clearly dated from the Louis XIII period. He was probably an ancestor of the poor abbé. — Still, it was a book worth owning: family features often reproduce themselves over time. Here is a Bucquoy born in the Artois who goes off to Bohemia to fight; — imagination and energy are written all over his face, as is a certain tendency toward whimsy. The abbé de Bucquoy no doubt followed after him as dreamers follow after men of action.

As I was on my way to Techener's to try my luck one last time, I stopped in front of a bird-seller's shop. A woman of a certain age, decked out in a hat and dressed with a threadbare elegance indicative of better days, was trying to sell her canary and its cage to the shop-owner.

He replied that he was already having a hard time

just trying to feed the birds he had on hand. The woman pleaded with him. He told her that her canary was worthless. — The old lady heaved a sigh and trudged off.

I had spent all my money on the Bohemian exploits of the count of Bucquoy; otherwise I would have said to the bird-seller: « Call that woman back and tell her that you will buy her canary after all . . . »

The fact that I was unable to do this filled me with remorse, — but when it comes to the Bucquoyes, I am obviously pursued by the Fates.

M. Techener said to me: « I no longer have the book you're looking for, but I know a copy of it is soon going to be auctioned off in a lot of items from the library of a book collector.

— What is his name? . . .

— He prefers to be known as X; his name will not be listed in the auction catalogue.

— But if I wanted to buy the book now? . . .

— Books that have already been catalogued and sorted out into lots are never sold in advance. The auction will take place on November 11th. »

November 11th!

Yesterday I received a note from M. R\*\*\*, the librarian to whom I had been introduced at the Bibliothèque Nationale. He had not forgotten about me and was writing to inform me of the same auction. Except that according to him, the auction had been moved back to November 20th.

What to do between now and then? — Who knows, the way things are going, the price of the book may well go sky-high . . .