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VIDOCQ.

London. Pub. by Whitaker & Co. Ave Maria Lane, 1828

MEMOIRS

OF

VIDOCQ,

PRINCIPAL AGENT OF THE FRENCH POLICE
UNTIL 1827:

AND NOW PROPRIETOR OF
THE PAPER MANUFACTORY AT ST MANDÉ.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH.

"Le plus grand fleau est l'homme qui provoque. Quand il n'y a point de provocateurs ce sont les forts qui commettent les crimes, parceque ce ne sont que les forts qui les conçoivent. En police, il vaut mieux ne pas faire d'affaire que d'en créer."

MEMOIRES, VOL. I.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON, 1828 :
PRINTED FOR HUNT AND CLARKE,
YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

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INTRODUCTION.

To attempt an analysis of the Memoirs now laid before the public would be utterly impossible, so romantic are the narratives, so thrilling the horrors, so powerful the descriptions, so continuous the thread of its history. As a piece of Autobiography, it has many and singular characteristics, which stamp it at once as one of the most interesting and peculiar narratives ever penned, replete with astonishing incident and instructive moral. In these days, when the hand of improvement, so called, (God save the mark!) macadamizes the hoary relics of antiquity to smoothen the path along which civilization progresses; when the age of chivalry is gone; and daring deeds and adventurous

exploits are superseded by mere common-places and matter-of-fact details; it is a thing of marvel to read the incidents of a life so full of romance, so teeming with the wild and wonderful. To the light reader, who but skims over the surface of a book, and enjoys the tale merely as one of passing amusement, forgotten soon as read, these Memoirs offer all that the most fastidious can desire of the piquant and attractive: to the reflective reader, who, not content with the mere detail of events, inquires into causes, searches out motives, and philosophizes, *en passant*, on the wit or weakness, power or puerility, of the human mind, herein will be found ample scope and verge enough for his most meditative musings.

As a work of fiction, it would be said, and with apparent justice, that the Author had drawn too largely on his inventive powers, that he had exceeded the bounds of possibility, and set no limits to the excursions of his fancy; but "*le vrai n'est pas toujours le vraisemblable*;" and independently of the assertions of Vidocq himself as to the veracity of his Memoirs, we have other

powerful inducements to credit his statements. Many of the persons whom he has handled with severity, and spoken of in no very measured terms, are still living, and would doubtless be too happy to refute the charges alleged, did not truth forbid denial. Of his wonderful and multiplied escapes from "durance vile," we are equally assured, as no man in his senses would give fictitious descriptions of what could be readily disproved if false; and a similar argument may be applied to other seemingly overwrought narrations; but so many of them tell *against* our hero, that their truth cannot be impugned. Perhaps no man in his time ever assumed so many parts in life's drama, and so frequently on the very shortest possible notice, as EUGENE FRANÇOIS VIDOCQ. But too early initiated in deception, he soon became an adept in dissimulation, and expert in disguising his person or his intentions. Endued with a mind powerful but perverted, a temper careless but impetuous, and feelings kindly but irritable, he, by the early association with depraved companions, rendered himself, by one false step,

induced by a too ready compliance, an outcast, excluded from the pale of orderly society, and condemned to herd with the very refuse of mankind. Much may be urged in his defence, who, suffering under the penalty of a sentence, the result of perjured evidence, sought to escape the contamination which beset him in the recesses of his prison only to establish himself respectably; who, having lost caste amongst his fellow citizens, sought eagerly the means of re-instatement. But no sooner were respectable connexions formed, credit established, affections nourished, or hopes entertained, than some fortuitous and evil occurrence dashed the cup of anticipated happiness and security from his lips, leaving but the bitterness of the dregs to swallow, and thus again was he

————— Like ocean weed upturn,
And loose along the world of waters borne;
Thus cast companionless from wave to wave
On life's rough sea.

With a mind not naturally vicious, he was again and again condemned to mate with the most abandoned; with feelings not callous, he

was compelled to harbour with the most hardened ; with a yearning after a life of honest labour, he was coupled with villains whose conduct was one tissue of impious blasphemy, atrocious rascality, and unutterable bestiality. To escape this there was but one only course open to him, and that he adopted. He offered his services to the police, who, aware of his talent, acuteness, activity, and courage, accepted his proffered aid. This did not result from a fear of danger or a spirit of treachery ; the urgent motives that led VIDOCQ to this measure, were the desire of avoiding the perpetual contact with the vile scum with whom his lot was cast, and the knowledge that he could benefit his country, and thus pay recompense for past misconduct. Above all he could then enjoy liberty and have before him the encouraging prospect of a re-instatement in society, which, lost to him by one early and precipitous step, was to be recovered by years of suffering and daring, open obloquy and secret approval. Much was ventured, for much was to be achieved.

We shall give a brief narrative of our hero,

and leave our readers to form their own decision on his eventful life.

EUGENE FRANÇOIS VIDOCQ was a native of Arras, where his father was a baker : and from early associations he fell into courses of excess which led to the necessity of his flying from the paternal roof. After various, rapid, and unexampled events in the romance of real life, in which he was everything by turns and nothing long, he was liberated from prison, and became the principal and most active agent of police. He was made Chief of the Police de Sureté under Messrs Delavau and Franchet, and continued in that capacity from the year 1810 till 1827, during which period he extirpated the most formidable of those ruffians and villains to whom the excesses of the revolution and subsequent events had given full scope for the perpetration of the most daring robberies and iniquitous excesses. Removed from employment, in which he had accumulated a handsome independence, he could not determine on leading a life of ease, for which his career of perpetual vigilance and adventure had unfitted him, and he built

a paper-manufactory at St Mandé, about two leagues from Paris, where he employs from forty to fifty persons,—principally, it is asserted, liberated convicts, who having passed through the term of their sentence, are cast upon society without home, shelter, or character, and would be compelled to resort to dishonest practices did not this asylum offer them its protection and afford them opportunity of earning an honest living by industrious labour.

One additional point of interest in the present volumes is, that the author is still living. The criticism on autobiography falls harmless when the hand that penned it is mouldering with its kindred dust; and in the present instance the shafts of severe comment will be blunted on the shield of candid and contrite avowal.

PREFACE.

VIDOCQ TO THE READER.

It was in the month of January 1828, that I finished these Memoirs, of which it was my wish to direct the publication personally. Unfortunately, in the month of February I broke my right arm; and as it was fractured in five places, it was thought that amputation must ensue. For more than six weeks my life was in danger, and I was in the most racking agonies. In this distressing situation I was scarcely in condition to re-write my manuscript, and give it the finishing touches: but I had sold it, and the bookseller was anxious to publish, and offered me a reviser. Deceived by the recommendation of a writer well spoken of in the literary world, to perform a work, which under no other circumstances would I have trusted to other hands, he introduced to me one of those pretended men of letters, whose excessive impudence conceals their stupidity, and who had no other object in view than to make money. This pretended literatus boasted so much of his individual

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merits, that I was somewhat suspicious; but he was backed by so respectable an introduction, that I rejected all suspicion as unjust, and agreed to avail myself of his aid until I was convalescent. This worthy ran over the manuscript; and, after a superficial glance to show his ability, he declared, according to custom, that there was a great deal to revise and correct. The bookseller also, according to custom, believed his assertion, and I was persuaded of this truth also; and, like so many others who do not boast of it, I had got hold of a botcher.

Certainly there was much to alter in my style: I knew nothing of the forms of literary style, but yet I had some method; I knew that tautology was to be avoided; and if I was not so good a grammarian as Vaugelas, either by intuitiveness or by habit, I could always avoid bad orthography. Vidocq writing at all correctly was perhaps an unlikelihood in the eyes of my censor, I know not, but this is the case:—

In July last, I went to Douai, to get a confirmation of the pardon granted me in 1818, and on my return I asked for the printed proofs of my Memoirs; and as my restoration to the rights of a citizen did not allow of my fearing any arbitrary injunctions from the authorities, I had proposed revising my manuscript, and including all relative to the police, so as to complete the information till then kept back.

What was my astonishment when, on reading the first volume and part of the second, I found that my compilation had been entirely altered;

and that, instead of a narrative developing perpetually the sallies, vivacity, and energy of my character, another had been foisted in, totally deprived of all life, colouring, or promptitude. With few alterations, the facts were nearly the same; but all that was casual, involuntary, and spontaneous, in a turbulent career, was given as the long premeditation of evil intent. The necessity that impelled me was altogether passed over; I was made the scoundrel of the age, or rather a *Compere Mathieu*, without one redeeming point of sensibility, conscience, remorse, or repentance. To crown my disgrace, the only motives that can justify some avowals of a candour somewhat uncommon, were not allowed to appear; I was only a shameless villain, who unblushingly united with the immorality of some of his actions the desire of narrating them. To lessen me still more, a language was attributed to me of the most puerile sort. I really felt myself humiliated with the details which the press had produced, and which I should certainly have obliterated, had I not relied on the revision of a man of judgment. I was shocked at the multitude of vicious conversations, long circumlocution, and prolix phrases, in which the ear, good sense, and syntax, were equally offended. I could not conceive how, with the total deficiency of talent, any person could assume the title of a literary man. But suspicions quickly arose, and in the suppression of certain names, which I was surprised not to find (that of my successor, *Coco-Lacour*, for instance), I thought I could trace the finger of the retired police, and

the traces of a transaction which my bookseller and myself had no wish should appear. Apparently, Delavau and Franchet, informed of my sad accident, which precluded me from superintending a publication which must disquiet them, had profited by the circumstance, to garble my Memoirs in such a way as to paralyze beforehand the effect of those discoveries on which they would have little cause for self-gratulation. All conjecture was fair: and I could only accuse the incapacity of my reviser; and as without vanity, I was more satisfied with my own prose than his, I begged him to terminate his labours.

It would seem that he had no objection,—but could he leave his post? He stated his bargain, and the commencement of his labours, by virtue of which he assumed a privilege of mutilating me at his pleasure, and to do what he pleased with me as long as he chose, if he received his “consideration.” I had a much greater right to ask him for damages and recompense; but where there is neither cash nor honesty, what avails any demand of this nature? To lose no time in useless debate, I had back my manuscript, and payed its ransom under certain reservations, which I kept “in petto.”

From this moment, I determined to destroy the pages in which my life and various adventures were mentioned without apology. A complete destruction was the surest method of overturning an intrigue, of which the plot was easily decyphered; but the first volume was ready, and the second far advanced. A total suppression would have been too considerable a sacrifice

for the bookseller ; and, on the other hand, by a culpable breach of confidence, the pirate trafficking in a fraudulent manner, sold my Memoirs in London ; and, inserted by extracts in the newspapers, they soon reached Paris, where they were given as translations. The theft was audacious ; I do not hesitate to point out the author. I might prosecute him ; his deeds shall not go unpunished. In the mean time, I thought it best to publish with all speed, to secure the bookseller, and that he might not be anticipated by a robbery unheard of in the literary world. Such an inducement was necessary to urge me to sacrifice all personal feeling : and it is because the consideration has been all powerful with me, that, contrary to my own interest and to satisfy the public impatience, I accept now as my own, a production which, at first, I would have rejected. In this text all is true ; only the truth, as far as regards me, is told with too little carefulness, and without any of those precautions which a general confession requires, and by which every one will pass judgment on me. The principal defect is in a too careless disposition, for which I alone can complain. Some alterations have appeared indispensable, and I have made them. This explains the difference of tone which may be observed in comparing some parts of these Memoirs ; but after my entering amongst the corsairs at Boulogne, it will be perceived that I have no longer an interpreter ; no one has thence meddled or shall hereafter meddle with the task I have imposed on myself, of unfolding to the public all that can interest them. I speak, and

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will speak, without reserve, without restriction, and with all the frankness of a man who has no longer cause for fear; and who, at last restored to the fulness of those rights of which he was unjustly deprived, aspires to the fullest exercise of them. If any doubts be created as to the reality of this intention, it is only necessary to refer my reader to the last chapter of my second volume, when he will have ample proof that I have the will and the power of keeping my word.

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MEMOIRS OF VIDOCQ.

CHAPTER I.

My birth—Precocious disposition—I become a journeyman baker—The first theft—The false key—The accusing fowls—The stolen plate—Prison—Maternal clemency—My father's eyes opened—The finishing stroke—Departure from Arras—I seek a ship—The ship broker—The danger of idleness—The trumpet calls—M. Comus, first physician in the world—The preceptor of general Jacquot—The rope dancers—I enter the company—Lessons of the Little Devil—The savage of the South Seas—Punch and the Theatre of Amusing Varieties—A scene of jealousy, or the serjeant in the eye—I go into the service of a quack doctor—Return to my father's house—Acquaintance with an actor—Another chase—My departure in a regiment—The rash companion—Desertion—The raw Picardy soldier and the assignats—I go over to the enemy—A flogging—I return to my old standard—A domestic robbery, and the housekeeper of an old worthy—Two duels a day—I am wounded—My father a public functionary—I join the war—Change of regiment—Residence at Arras.

I WAS born at Arras; my continual disguises, the flexibility of my features, and a singular power of grimacing, having cast some doubt concerning my age, it will not be deemed superfluous to declare here, that I was brought into the world on the 23d of July 1775, in a house adjoining that in which Robespierre was born sixteen years before. It was night; the rain fell in torrents; the thunder growled; a relation, who combined the functions of midwife and fortune-teller, predicted that my career would be a stormy one. There were even then in the world some good people who believed in prognostications; now that the world

has become more enlightened, how many men, and those far from being old women, would bet on the infallibility of Miss Lenormand !

However that may be, we will presume that the sky was not troubled on my special account ; and although there is always something very attractive in the marvellous, I am far from thinking that the turbulence of the elements had much reference to my birth. I had a most robust constitution, and there was plenty of me, so that as soon as I was born they took me for a child of two years of age ; and I gave tokens of that athletic figure, that colossal form, which have since struck terror into the most hardened and powerful ruffians. My father's house being situated in the Place d'Armes, the constant resort of all the blackguards of the vicinity, I had my muscular powers early called into action, in regularly thrashing my comrades, whose parents were regularly complaining of me to my father and mother. At home nothing was talked of but torn ears, black eyes and rent garments ; at eight years of age, I was the terror of all the dogs, cats, and children of the neighbourhood ; at thirteen I handled a foil sufficiently well not to be defeated in an attack. My father perceiving that I associated chiefly with the military of the garrison, was alarmed for me, and desired me to prepare myself for the first receiving of the communion : two devotees undertook to prepare me for this solemn duty. God knows what fruit I have gathered from their lessons. I began at the same time to learn the trade of a baker, which was my father's business, in which he intended that I should succeed him, although I had an elder brother.

My employment principally consisted in carrying bread through the city. During my rounds I made frequent visits to the fencing-rooms, of which my parents were not long in ignorance ; but the cooks all gave such testimony of my politeness and punctuality that they winked at this trifling prank. This went on

until they discovered a deficiency in the till, of which they never took away the key. My brother, who visited it in the same manner as myself, was detected in the very act, and sent off in a hurry to a baker at Lille. The day after this event, which had not been explained to me, I was about to explore, according to custom, the convenient drawer, when I perceived that it was carefully closed. The same day my father desired me to use more alacrity in my rounds, and to return at a certain hour. It was then evident that from this day forward I should be equally deprived of liberty and money. I bewailed this twofold calamity, and hastened to impart it to a comrade named Poyant, older than myself. As a hole was cut in the counter to drop the money through, he first advised me to introduce a feather dipped in glue; but this ingenious expedient only produced me very small pieces of money, and it became necessary for me to employ a false key, which was made for me by a blacksmith's son. I then dipped again into the chest, and we spent together the fruits of these pilferings at a public-house where we had established our head quarters. There assembled, attracted by the master of the house, a great many well-known rogues, and some unfortunate young fellows, who, to get replenished pockets, used the same expedient as myself. I soon joined the society of the most abandoned vagabonds of the country, Boudou, Delcroix, Hedon, Franchison, Basserie, &c., who initiated me into all their villanies. Such was the honourable society in the bosom of which I spent my leisure hours, until one day my father surprised me, as he had done my brother, took away my key, heartily thrashed me, and took such precautions as totally cut off all my hopes of ever again getting a dividend from the receipts therein deposited.

My only resource was now to take my tithes from the bakings. Occasionally I pilfered a loaf or two; but as in disposing of them I was compelled to sell

them very cheaply, I scarcely by their sale obtained sufficient to regale myself with tarts and honey. Necessity makes us active; I had an eye for everything; all was agreeable to me, wine, sugar, coffee, and liquors. My mother had never known her provisions to disappear so quickly, and perhaps would not have discovered so soon, but two chickens which I had resolved on disposing of to my own peculiar profit raised their voices to accuse me. Hid in my breeches pocket, and concealed by my baker's apron, they thrust out their heads and crowed; and my mother thus informed of their intended fate, came out to prevent it. She gave me several cuffs of the head, and sent me supperless to bed. I did not sleep a wink, and it was, I think, the evil spirit that kept me awake; all I know is, that I rose with the determination to lay hands on all the plate. One thing alone gave me uneasiness. On each piece the name of VIDOCQ was engraved in large letters. Poyant, to whom I broached the matter, overruled all difficulties; and the same day, at dinner time, I swept off ten forks and as many coffee spoons. Twenty minutes afterwards the whole was pawned, and the next day I had not a farthing left of the hundred and fifty francs which they lent me on them.

I did not return home for three days, and on the third evening I was arrested by two police officers, who conveyed me to the Baudets, a place in which mad persons are confined, together with those committed for trial, and the rogues of the district. I was kept in a dungeon for ten days without being told the cause of my arrest, and then the jailor told me that I had been imprisoned at the desire of my father. This information a little composed me: it was a paternal correction that was inflicted on me, and I accordingly judged that its continuance would not be rigorous. My mother came to see me the next day, and I was pardoned. Four days afterwards I was set at liberty, and I returned to work with a determination and

promise of henceforward conducting myself irreproachably. Vain resolve! I soon resumed my old habits, except extravagance; and I had excellent reasons for no more playing the prodigal, for my father, who had before been rather careless and regardless, now exercised a vigilance that would have done credit to the commandant of an advanced guard. If he left the post at the counter, my mother relieved guard; it was impossible for me to approach it, although I was constantly on the look out. This put me in despair. At last one of my tavern companions took pity on me; it was Poyant again, that thorough rogue, of whose abilities in this way the citizens of Arras may still preserve the memory. I confided my sorrows to his friendly bosom. "What," said he, "you are a precious fool to remain thus; and what a thing it is that a lad of your age should be ever short a farthing. Ah! were I in your place, I know what I should do."—"Well, what?"—"Your parents are rich, and a thousand crowns, more or less, would not hurt them. The old misers! they are fair game, and we must carry it off."—"I understand, we must grasp at once what we cannot get in detail."—"You're right; and then we will be off, neither seen nor known."—"Yes, but the police."—"Hold your tongue; are you not their son? and your mother is too fond for that." This consideration of my mother's love, united to the remembrance of her indulgence after my late freaks, was powerfully persuasive; I blindly adopted a project which smiled on my audacity; it only remained to put it in execution, and an opportunity was not long wanting.

One evening whilst my mother was at home alone, a confidant of Poyant came kindly to tell her, that engaged in a debauch with some girls, I was fighting everybody, and breaking and destroying everything in the house, and that if I were not stopped there would be at least a hundred francs to pay for the damage done.

At this moment my mother was seated in her chair knitting; the stocking dropped from her hand, she arose with haste, and ran with great alarm to the place of the pretended affray, which had been fixed on at the extremity of the city. Her absence could not be of long continuance, and we hastened to profit by it. A key which I had stolen from the old lady procured us admittance into the shop. The till was closed; I was almost glad to meet with this obstacle. I recalled the memory of my mother's love for me, not as an inducement to commit the act with impunity, but as exciting feelings of coming remorse. I was going to retire; Poyant held me, his infernal eloquence made me blush for what he called my weakness; and when he presented me with a crow-bar, with which he had the precaution to provide himself, I seized it almost with enthusiasm; the chest was forced; it contained nearly 2,000 francs (upwards of 80*l.*) which we shared, and half an hour afterwards I was alone on the road to Lille. In the trouble which this affair threw me into, I walked at first very quickly, so that when I reached Lens I was much fatigued. A return chaise passed, into which I got, and in less than three hours arrived at the capital of French Flanders, whence I immediately started for Dunkirk, being excessively anxious to place myself beyond the reach of pursuit.

I had resolved on visiting the new world. My fate forbade this project. The port of Dunkirk was empty. I reached Calais, intending to embark immediately, but they asked me more than the whole sum in my possession. I was induced to hope that at Ostend the fare would be less; and on going there found the captains not more reasonable than at Calais. Thus disappointed I fell into that adventurous disposition which induces us to throw ourselves voluntarily into the arms of the first enterprize that offers; and, I scarcely know why, I expected to meet with some good fellow who would take me on board his vessel.

without being paid, or at least would make a considerable reduction in favour of my good appearance, and the interest which a young man always inspires. Whilst I was walking, full of this idea, I was accosted by a person whose benevolent appearance induced a belief that my vision was about to be realized. The first words he addressed to me were questions. He had learnt that I was a stranger; he told me that he was a ship-broker; and when he learnt the cause of my coming to Ostend, he offered his services. "Your countenance pleases me," said he, "I like an open face; there is in your features the air of frankness and joviality which I like, and I will prove it to you by procuring for you a passage for almost nothing." I spoke of my gratitude. "No thanks, my friend, that will be soon enough when your business is completed, which I hope will be soon; but surely you will be tired of waiting about in this manner?" I said that certainly I was not very much amused. "If you will accompany me to Blakemberg, we will sup there together, with some jolly fellows, who are very fond of Frenchmen." The broker was so polite, and asked me so cordially, that I thought it would be ungentlemanly to refuse, and therefore accepted his invitation. He conducted me to a house where some very agreeable ladies welcomed us with all that ancient hospitality which did not confine itself only to feasting. At midnight, probably—I say probably, for we took no account of hours—my head became heavy, and my legs would no longer support me; there was around me a complete chaos, and things whirled in such a manner, that without perceiving that they had undressed me, I thought I was stripped to my shirt in the same bed with one of the Blakembergian nymphs; it might be true, but all that I know is, that I soon fell soundly asleep. On waking I found myself cold; instead of the large green curtains which had appeared to me in my sleep, my heavy eyes only gazed on a forest of masts, and I heard the watchful cry which

only echoes in the sea-ports. I endeavoured to rise, and my hand touched a heap of cordage against which I was leaning. Did I dream, then, or had I dreamt the previous evening? I felt about, I got up, and when on my feet I found that I did not dream, and what was worse, that I was not one of the small number of those personages whom fortune favours whilst sleeping. I was half naked, and except two crowns and six livres, which I found in one of my breeches pockets, I was penniless. It was then but too clear to me, as the broker had said, "my business had soon been done." I was greatly enraged, but what did that avail me? I was even unable to point out the spot where I had been thus plundered. I made up my mind and returned to the inn, where I had some clothes which remedied the deficiencies of my attire. I had no occasion to tell my misfortune to the landlord. "Ah, ah!" said he to me, as far off as he could see me, "here comes another. Do you know, young man, that you have got off well? You return with all your limbs, which is lucky when one gets into such a hornet's nest; you now know what a land shark is; they were certainly beautiful syrens! All pirates are not on the sea, you observe, nor all the sharks within it; I will wager that they have not left you a farthing." I drew my two crowns from my pocket to show them to the inn-keeper. "That will be," said he, "just enough to pay your bill," which he then presented. I paid it and took leave of him, without however quitting the city.

Assuredly, my voyage to America was deferred till the Greek calends, and the old continent was to be my lot; I was about to be reduced to the level of the lowest degrees of degraded civilization, and my future lot was the more uncertain and disquieting, as I had no present resources. At home I never wanted bread; and this inspired regret for my paternal roof; the oven, said I to myself, was always heated for me as well as for others. After these regrets, I ran over mentally