

CHERISHED THIEF

*Based on the true story of Britain's most notorious
highwaymen, Claude Duval.*

On the day of his birth, Venus was in conjunction with
Mercury—
which stands for good fortune, but a short life.

—The Memoirs of Monsieur Claude Duval

Walter Pope

*M*arguerite de la Roche screamed as she gave another push. Her labor had been a long one, and, at times, she believed the pain would kill her. Her body, drenched in sweat, trembled. Marguerite wished someone would hold her hand. Alas, it was only she and the town's midwife, who waited between her legs to take the *bébé*.

At long last, Marguerite pushed the child out from her body and her head fell back onto the pillow.

The midwife announced it was a boy. Marguerite's watery eyes went to her *bébé* as the midwife cleaned him. His tiny form was covered in blood. Finally, he drew in his first crisp breath and let out a cry. The midwife wrapped him in a ratty blanket and handed him to her.

Soon afterward, her husband, Pierre, entered their bedroom to gaze upon his son for the first time. Marguerite admired the child fondly, forgetting the worries of the world for a brief moment until her husband said, "Welcome to a cruel world, Claude."

*T*he bitter wind gusted over Domfront. The slick street under young Claude Duval's feet made it difficult to keep up with Mother and Father as they hurried to church through the downpour.

"Late again!" complained Pierre, yanking his son's hand whenever he lagged behind. "The Lord will punish us for this."

Claude said nothing to Father about the sharp pain he caused his arm. Not because he feared his father, for never had the man laid a violent hand on him. Claude was merely used to the Sunday morning dash to church. It was not the first time the Duvals were late to Sunday service, and mostly Father was to blame. He had slept in once again after staying out drinking and screwing. His mother had spent half the morning rousing him, cursing his name, and damning him to hell for his wicked ways. The Fear always got Father up and running his family mad through the streets just so his ears could meet the words of the priest. The Fear of Damnation motivated him, but never kept him away from the alehouse and the beds not his own.

Impatient with his son, Pierre lifted the child into his arms and carried him the rest of the way.

The solid oak door creaked open. Those sitting in the back pews craned their necks to look at them. Fat water drops dripped from the Duvals as they entered the hallowed stone room.

Claude knew the routine. He went to the bowl of holy water, dipped his fingers in, and made the sign of the cross over himself before stepping into His house. Mother tried drying Claude's dark hair. The soaked scarf she used only dampened his head even more. He said nothing about her fruitless attempt to dry him.

Once blessed to enter, they stepped beyond the foyer and into the chapel. As they searched for a vacant pew, it was difficult for them to not draw attention to themselves. When they finally settled in a seat, Claude listened here and there to the priest who spoke Latin behind his podium upon the tall wooden platform. His echoing voice traveled through the entire room.

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

For the most part, Claude kept his black eyes on the window above the priest. The stench of mildew coming off the tapestries tickled his nose. On damp days, the moldy smell was at its peak. Once in a while, he gazed at the lifeless expressions on the faces of these Followers of God. They looked miserable. Perhaps because they walked a fine line between lavishing in His Grace's promised afterlife or falling into an

eternity of torment. It made Claude wonder about the logic of religion. He didn't understand how simply coming inside a building every single Sunday to listen to a man read from a book could wash away the sins people accumulated during the other six days of the week. Father believed it. Although, if a church building could absorb all of his father's sins, he thought the air should be sucked dry the moment he stepped inside.

"And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever," the preacher carried on.

On many nights, Claude would wake to the sound of Father's drunken singing as he stumbled toward the house. Claude would watch him through his bedroom window upstairs. A couple of Pierre's friends, or the whore he'd slept with that night, always assisted him home. Mother always came outside, shouting and cursing at them all. Then she'd help her husband inside. Why do that? Was it God's will for her to allow this sort of behavior from him? Would Father be expected to do the same if it were *she* who went out drinking and whoring? How exactly could the church save his father's soul?

Perhaps he'd ask the priest in confession since his parents forced him to go each Sunday. He had no new sins to report, anyway. After all, how much wickedness could a seven-year-old commit?

"I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And, when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me..."

It seemed everything in life was a sin. Drinking, screwing, dancing, singing, laughing, and eating too much. All the pleasures that life offered were works of the devil and there was nothing anyone could do to avoid these sins, unless they sat still all day.

Inside the confession box, Claude waited for the window to slide open. He decided at the last second not to ask about the logic of religion. It would only get him into trouble. Instead, he thought to ask the priest a question he felt was as logical as religion itself.

When the window finally opened, he heard the priest say, "*Oui, mon fils?*"

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been six days since my last confession."

"Tell me your sins, child."

"I saw a boy wearing nice shoes, Father."

"And?" the low, gentle voice pressed.

"And I wished I owned nice shoes like him."

"Ah, *oui, oui*, the sin of envy. You must say two Hail Marys before you sleep tonight."

"Yes, Father."

"Is there anything else, *mon fils?*"

"Father, can you be a sinner if you witness sinful acts?"

The priest gave no reply as though he were wrapping his mind around the question.

"Child, do you mean—can you become a sinner simply by others committing sinful acts before your eyes?"

"Yes, Father."

"No, my son. Sin is around every corner and no one can escape the sight of it. God knows this and grants mercy to those who witness the wicked deeds of others. Why do you ask such things?"

"I see my father coming home drunk with whores."

The priest again seemed stumped for an immediate reply.

"I see him doing so nearly every night, singing and laughing. And every time he staggers into my mother's embrace. I want to know if I could be infected by seeing him doing this."

Claude bit the inside of his cheek to keep from snickering. He allowed himself a smile, though, for the priest couldn't see him well through the small decorative window.

The priest eventually managed a meager reply. "You have nothing to fear, my child." He made the sign of the Cross. "*Deinde, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*"

"Amen, Father."

Claude stepped out of the confession box just as his father exited from his own. His face glowed as if new breath had been blown into his chest. Father appeared younger, fresher. He had confessed everything, and afterward, the priest had instructed him on how many Hail Marys he needed to say, then blessed Father and sent him on his way. *This* was what drove Father to church every Sunday. The need for forgiveness was the reason he had been willing to pull his own son's arm off. Now that he had been cleansed, he was ready to sin again.

The journey home was less stressful. Mother held Claude's hand, her fingers coarse and hardened by years of needle pricks from her job as a seamstress. They walked steadily behind Father, who floated with heavenly forgiveness.

"Did you understand what the priest said today, Claude?"

His mother asked him the question after every sermon to see if the Latin language was sinking in.

"*Oui, Maman*. He spoke of the apocalypse."

"Good boy, my son," she praised him. "And stay a good boy, for all good boys go to heaven."

She glared up at her husband and narrowed her eyes. "Follow God's word and you will be rewarded."

The English Civil War had reached its peak with the execution of King Charles I. His eldest surviving son, Charles II, was proclaimed king by Parliament of Scotland, only to be defeated at Worcester by Oliver Cromwell and reduced to becoming a fugitive. Weeks later, the Prince made safe passage to the shores of Normandy. For the next five years, France harbored Charles and his exiled subjects, waiting for the political winds to shift in their favor . . .

Claude woke one night, not because of his father's loud drunken singing, but from his gnawing hunger pangs. His parents' voices rose up from downstairs. Claude cracked his bedroom door open and listened to the conversation.

"The wages at the mill haven't been enough to feed this family," Father said to Mother.

"I know, husband, and the tax hikes have everyone holding onto their money," Mother moaned in despair. "No one can afford new clothing and so, we don't make them. I shall be out of work soon."

The next day, Claude went searching for a job.

"Too young," most men said. "Go back home to feed off your mother's breast!"

After a humiliating and fruitless day of searching for employment, he and his closest friend, Adrien Rousseau, went to the ruins of Château de Domfront.

Birds soared overhead and Claude watched in sinful envy, wishing he could join them.

"My family has fallen on hard times as well, Claude," Adrien consoled him, throwing loose stones around.

"Claude . . . tsk. Do you know your name means *lame*?"

"I know," he returned. "It only shows what caring parents I have."

"Do you resent them? You do know that's a sin? 'Honor thy Father and thy Mother.'"

Claude shot him a hateful glare. The last thing he needed after a day like today was a lecture from his dimwitted friend.

"I've had enough of Catholic law. I have had enough living the life I do now." He approached Adrien and snatched a stone from his hand. He glared at it as though it was a magic wishing stone.

"I vow to never struggle to survive through one day after the next. I swear I'll live a better life than my parents."

With that, he threw the stone as hard as he could. It vanished over a broken wall. He stood there for a long moment in complete silence.

“Claude?” Adrien said. “Are you all right?”

He gave no answer.

“Claude?”

“I need to go.”

Claude wandered the town’s streets, headed for the poor section where his wooden home stood. Along the way, three young women approached. He was too engrossed by his angry hunger pangs to notice them until one said, “Oh, sisters, look at him. Isn’t he a charm?”

He lifted his chin. The young woman’s focus was squarely on him.

The three women were dressed in Dutch fashion gowns, each one a different color, which he figured was a way to tell them apart, given they shared the exact same physical features.

“*Oui*,” another sister cooed. “He is very beautiful, *non*?”

They stopped and so did he. The sisters, identically lovely in every shapely way, began complimenting what they favored most about him.

“His hair—it’s so dark, like rich chocolate, and with such eyes to match.”

“And what a face he wears. Carved by the finest French artist, I’m sure.”

“What a mysterious charmer you must be,” said the sister in a salmon-colored gown. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

They giggled, causing him to blush.

“A cruel shame,” the sister in pink said flirtatiously. “If only you were a few years older, you could marry me.”

“Marry you?” the other chided. “Why marry a dog like you? Everyone knows *I’m* the pretty one.”

While the two sisters bickered over whom Claude belonged to, he turned his attention on the quiet sister in blue. His eyes locked with hers, but then he lowered them to the lighter blue sash that followed the lining of her collar. Caught in the center was a clasp with a red jewel, which looked beautiful on her bosom. It wasn’t until his cock stiffened that he realized what he was doing. He raised his eyes to hers and she rewarded him with an innocent smile. Quickly, before she noticed, he took off his ragged old coat and wrapped it around his scrawny waist. His skin flushed so rapidly it burned.

“Polly! Caroline! Betty!” called a shrill voice nearby.

The sisters stopped their arguing and looked around.

“*Maman!*” the sister in pink gasped.

A tall, robust woman stomped toward her daughters, snatching the sisters by their arms when she reached them. The quieter sister in blue looked relieved that her mother hadn’t a third arm to grab her with.

“I have been searching for you girls all morning long!” the healthy woman bellowed, her puffy cheeks bright red like oversized cherries.

The unfortunate girls in her grasp scrunched up their faces painfully.

“I’ve told you not to go walking about in the old section. Are you trying to get yourselves murdered, or, Lord help you, your virtues stolen?”

She snapped her sharp, narrow eyes over to the boy with his coat wrapped around him. She studied him a long moment as though guessing why he had hidden himself the way he had.

Giving him a disgusted snarl, she yanked her children in the other direction while shouting for the daughter she couldn’t snare to follow her.

“Come, Betty, we do not associate ourselves with filth like him.”

Her words felt like cold water on his erection. His heavenly encounter with the sisters had provided a brief escape from his present woes until that beast woman drained him of the pleasure. If she had simply taken her daughters away, he would have been left with nothing more than a bit of humiliation and some mild amusement. Her comment, though, triggered the rage in his young soul.

Filth like me?

He gritted his teeth so hard his jaw hurt by the time he reached home. He stormed into the house to find his mother and father sitting at the kitchen table. Instead of eating, Mother was sewing the holes in her own dress while Father shuffled his playing cards.

Claude considered his father. No longer did he go drinking and whoring. Taxes had consumed most of his wages, taking away his life spending. "Life spending" was how Claude referred to it, because now that Father no longer had the money for fun and games, he had ceased to live. He had become death without decay. Pierre had the good sense not to spend what little he had on drink and women when he could barely feed himself and his wife. He had some good traits. But now, since his simple pleasures were gone, so was the light in his soul. No more Hail Mary prayers were required.

Mother seemed pleased to have her husband home, though she looked just as dreadful as he did. Her worries had taken away what remained of her youth, aging her to a near corpse. Once upon a time, Pierre Duval and Marguerite de la Roche were the most beautiful couple in town. Both had been blessed with a dark, mysterious beauty, which they later bestowed upon their son. Now, they sat seemingly inches away from lying in coffins.

"Don't expect any dinner tonight," Father growled, shuffling cards in his large hands.

Claude said nothing. His blood still ran hot with anger by the earlier remark from the beast woman.

Instead of starting a fight, he went upstairs to his bedroom, closing the door behind him. The rain struck his window like pebbles. The hard tapping drove him from the comfort of his dream state. He lifted his heavy eyelids and rolled his head over the hay-stuffed potato sack pillow. A bag, bloated with belongings, sat by the door. The storm clouds kept the morning light hidden, but he saw it. To whom the things in the bag belonged, his freshly awakened mind couldn't grasp until his eyes snagged on his father sitting in the corner.

"It's time you go out and make your mark on the world," Father said.

Plump raindrops dripped off him as he stood before his father outside the front door. Father and Mother had given him two sous, which they'd secretly saved. Apparently, the decision to cast their son out was premeditated.

"You are a man now," Father said mockingly as though he didn't believe his own words. "And that's good, because it is a harsh world out there."

Never did Claude avert his eyes from his Father, even when water slid into them. He listened to the man's brief man-to-man speech, waiting patiently for him to finish.

"I think you will do fine," Father concluded. "If you make a fortune, do not forget us. If not, it is best not to return."

He rubbed Claude on top of his sopping wet head and turned to go back inside. Father took hold of the latch and froze in place as if his son's piercing eyes had paralyzed him.

"Do you have anything to say, son?"

"You have chosen a perfect day to toss me out," he said in a heartbeat.

Father nodded slightly as if agreeing with his newly abandoned son and opened the door. He disappeared into the darkness of the house like a wounded bear returning to its cave.

When the door shut, it locked, cutting Claude off completely from all the comfort and safety he ever knew. He stepped away from the house. His mother peered at him from his bedroom window. Her face appeared gloomy between the drips of constant rainwater descending from the edge of the roof. She pressed a hand against the window.

He would never forget her rough, needle-pricked hands. Those fingertips could spark a fire if she rubbed them together hard enough. He took her ghostly image with him as he left to make his mark. Though he wished he could begin this new stage in life on a more favorable day.