

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 Du Vall*

Walter Pope



I

Marguerite 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 trembled and she was drenched in sweat. She wished someone would at least hold her hand, but there were only she and the midwife, who waited between her legs to take the bébé. Then, at long last, she pushed the child out from her body, and her head fell back onto the pillow.

The midwife announced it was a boy. Her watery eyes slid over to her bébé, his tiny form 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 over to her.

Soon afterwards, 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."

The bitter wind gusted over Domfront. The slick street under young Claude Du Vall'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 his tiny feet 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; 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 Du Valls' were late to Sunday service and mostly Father was to blame. He had slept in once again after staying out drinking and wenching. His mother spent half the morning rousing him, cursing his name, and damning him to hell for his wicked ways. It was The Fear that always got him up and running his family mad through the streets, just so Father's ears could meet the words of the priest. The Fear of Damnation motivated him, but never enough to keep him away from the alehouse and beds not his own.

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

The huge solid oak door achingly creaked open. Those sitting in the back pews craned their necks to look at them. Fat drops of water dripped from the Du Valls' as they entered the hollow 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 his face before stepping into His house. Mother tried drying Claude's dark hair, while her husband recollected his own baptism. The soaked scarf she used only dampened his head even more, but he kept to his usual quietness, and said nothing about her fruitless attempt to dry him. Once blessed to enter, they stepped beyond the foyer and into the chapel as quietly as possible, but it was difficult for them not to draw attention from the more loyal servants of God as they searched for a vacant pew. When they finally settled in a seat, Claude listened here and there to the short priest, speaking Latin behind his podium upon the tall wooden platform.

His echoing voice filled 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 made his nose tickle a bit. On damp days, the moldy smell was at its peak. Once in a while, he gazed at the lifeless expressions of the so-called 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 torture. 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. He knew that Father believed it, although if a church building could absorb all his father’s sins, it would seem that the air would 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.”

Many nights, Claude woke to the sound of Father’s drunken singing as he stumbled toward the house. He’d watched him through his bedroom window upstairs. His father would be carried by a couple of his friends, or the harlot he’d slept with that night. Mother always came outside, shouting and cursing at everyone. 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 he 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?

“And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.””

Perhaps Claude would ask the priest in confession since his parents forced him to go each and every Sunday. He had no new sins to report anyway. After all, how much sin 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, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.””

It seemed everything in life was a sin. Drinking, screwing, dancing, singing, masturbating, 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. When it finally did, 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 Mary’s before you sleep tonight.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Is there anything else, *mon fils?*”

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

For a moment the priest gave no reply, as though 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.”

He decided 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.

“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 to smile, though. The priest couldn’t see him well through the small decorative window.

The priest eventually managed a meager reply, “You have no worries, child.” He made the sign of the Cross. “*Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat; et ego auctoritate ipsius te absolvo ab omni vinculo excommunicationis (suspensionis) et interdicti in quantum possum et tu indiges. Deinde, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*”

“Amen, Father.”

Claude stepped out from the confession box just as his father exited from his own; his face aglow as if new breath had been blown into his chest. Father appeared younger, fresher. He had confessed everything, and afterwards the priest instructed him on how many Hail Marys he needed to say, then blessed him, 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 back home was less stressful. Mother held his hand in hers, her fingers coarse, 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. “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 change in their favor.

Claude woke one night, not because of his Father’s loud drunken singing, but from the hunger pangs in his stomach. He opened his eyes and heard his parent’s voices coming from their bedroom next to his.

“The wages at the mill haven’t been enough to feed this family,”

“I know, husband, and the tax hikes have everyone holding onto their money,” Mother moaned despairingly. “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 that he could join them. A bird had the freedom to do whatever it pleased without religious repercussions.

“My family has fallen on hard times as well, Claude,” Adrien consoled, 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 dim-witted friend.

“I’ve had enough with 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 if though the stone was a magic wishing stone.

“I vow that I will 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, nervously. “Are you alright?”

He gave no answer.

“Claude?”

“I need to go.”

He wandered the village’s streets, at first aimlessly, and then headed toward the poor section where his wooden home stood. He was too engrossed by his angry hunger pangs to notice three young women approaching him, until one said, “Oh, sisters, look at him. Isn’t he a charm?”

He lifted his chin. The young women’s focus was aimed directly at him. They were dressed in Dutch fashion, each gown a different color, which he figured was a way to tell them apart, since 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 a raven’s wing, 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 one in the 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 said petulantly. “Why marry a dog like you? Everyone knows *I’m* the pretty one.”

While the sisters bickered over who he belonged to, he turned his attention to the quiet sister in blue. His eyes locked with hers before lowering to the lighter blue sash that followed the line of her collar. Caught in the center was a red jeweled clasp, which looked beautiful nestled between her creamy breasts. It wasn’t until he felt a growing tightness in his crotch that he realized what he was doing. He raised 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 arguing sisters silenced their loud voices and each one of the three craned their necks around.

“*Maman!*” the sister in pink gasped.

A tall, robust woman burst into view, snatching two of the sisters by their arms. The other sister in blue possessed a relieved look 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 as oversized cherries.

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

“I’ve told you not to go walking about in the old section. Are you trying to get yourselves murdered, or may The Lord help you, your virtue 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 felt the need to hid himself the way he had.

Finally, giving him a disgusted snarl, she yanked her daughters away 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 had the same effect on his erection as cold water. His heavenly encounter with the sisters had provided a brief escape from his present woes, until that beastly woman drained from him 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, but that venomous slur triggered rage in his young soul.

Filth like me?

He ground his teeth so hard his jaw hurt by the time he reached home. He stormed into the house to find Mother and Father sitting at the kitchen table. Instead of eating, Mother was mending holes in her drab little dress while Father shuffled his worn-out playing cards, over and over. He considered his Father. No longer did he go drinking and whoring. Taxes 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 owned the good sense to not 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 that his simple pleasures were gone, so was the light in his soul.

No more Hail Marys required.

Mother seemed pleased to have her husband home, though she looked just as beaten down by life as he. Worries had eaten away what remained of her youth, aging her beyond her actual years. Once upon a time, Pierre Du Vall and Marguerite de la Roche were the most beautiful couple in the village. Both had been blessed with a dark, mysterious beauty, which they had bestowed upon their son. Now they sat seemingly inches away from lying in their coffins.

"Don't expect any dinner tonight," Father growled without looking up while shuffling cards in his large hands.

Claude said nothing. His blood still ran thick with anger from his encounter with that horrible woman. He respected his parents, knowing that whatever food was in the house it would first be given to him without asking, even if it meant their own bellies would stay empty. Never had either of them struck him in anger, unlike most of his friends who had received countless beatings. He was young and virtually new to the world, but he appreciated this small cut of fortune, and did his best to focus on that rather than what he lacked, though at times it was very difficult.

So 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, rapid 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 to, his freshly awakening mind couldn't grasp, until his eyes focused on his father sitting silently in the corner.

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