

*Mademoiselle de Scudéri*



# *Mademoiselle de Scudéri*

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## *Contents*

Introduction	VII
Mademoiselle de Scudéri	I
<i>Note on the Text</i>	102
<i>Notes</i>	103



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**I**N THE RUE SAINT-HONORÉ was situated the little house in which Madeleine de Scudéri, well known for her graceful poetry, lived through the favour of Louis XIV and Mme de Maintenon.\*

Late, around midnight – it would have been in the autumn of the year 1680 – there came the sound of vehement knocking at her front door, so loud it echoed through the whole entrance hall. Baptiste, who in Mademoiselle’s small household played the part of cook, lackey and doorman all at once, had with his mistress’s permission gone to the country for his sister’s wedding, and so it was that Martinière, Mademoiselle’s chambermaid, was the only one still awake in the house. She heard the insistent banging, and reflected that Baptiste had gone away leaving her and Mademoiselle at home quite defenceless; every crime of burglary, theft and murder ever committed in Paris came to her mind. She was certain that some great mob of brigands, tipped off about the unprotected house, was on the rampage outside, intent on gaining admittance and carrying out their evil intentions against her mistress, and so she remained in her room quaking and trembling,

and cursing Baptiste and his sister's wedding. Meanwhile, blows continued to rain down thunderously on the door, and she seemed to hear a voice in the intervals yelling: "Open up, for Christ's sake, open up!" Finally, in increasing anxiety, Martinière grabbed the candlestick with the lighted candle in it and ran out into the hall; there she could quite clearly make out the voice of the man hammering at the door: "For Christ's sake, just open up!"

"Wait a minute," thought Martinière, "that's not how a robber talks. Who knows if it isn't a runaway, seeking refuge with my mistress, who is always ready to do a good deed? But let's be careful!"

She opened a window and called down, asking who it was banging on the front door so late at night and waking everyone up; she tried to make her deep voice sound as masculine as she possibly could. In the glimmer of the moon's beams breaking for an instant through the thick clouds, she caught sight of a tall figure wrapped in a light-grey cloak, with a broad-brimmed hat pulled right down over his eyes. Whereupon she shouted in a loud voice, so that the man below could hear, "Baptiste, Claude, Pierre, get up – come and look at this good-for-nothing trying to smash his way into our house!"

But then a soft, almost plaintive voice came up to her, "Ah! Martinière, I know it's you, my dear woman, despite all your efforts to disguise your voice; I know that Baptiste is in the country and that you're alone in the house with

your mistress. You just need to open up to me; don't fear a thing. I absolutely must speak to your mistress, this very minute."

"What can you be thinking of?" retorted Martinière. "You want to speak to my mistress in the middle of the night? Don't you know she's been asleep for ages, and that I won't for anything in the world wake her from the first, sweetest slumber? She really needs it at her age."

"I know," said the man standing below, "I know your mistress has only just laid aside the manuscript of her novel *Clélie*,\* on which she is always working, and is now writing a few lines of poetry that she intends to read tomorrow morning at the Marquise de Maintenon's. I entreat you, Mme Martinière, open up to me, for pity's sake! I'm telling you it's a matter of saving an unfortunate soul from ruin; the honour, the freedom, the very life of a man depend on these few minutes in which I have to speak to your mistress. Just reflect that your lady's anger would weigh heavily on you for ever if she found out you had been hard-hearted enough to turn away from her door an unfortunate man who had come to beg for her help."

"But why are you appealing to Mademoiselle's sympathy at *this* time of night? Come back early tomorrow," retorted Martinière; the man below replied in turn: "Does fate worry about times and seasons when it strikes like a deadly flash of lightning wreaking its havoc? Should you hesitate to offer help when it will not be possible to do so a few minutes later?"

Open the door for me – fear nothing from a wretched man: defenceless, abandoned by the whole world, pursued, harried by a monstrous fate, he has come to beg your mistress to rescue him from imminent danger!”

Martinière heard the man below groaning and sobbing in deep pain as he said these words – and the tone of his voice was that of a young man, soft and heart-piercing. She felt moved to the depths of her being, and without a moment’s further thought she went to fetch the keys.

She had barely opened the door when the cloaked figure burst in and shouted wildly, pushing past Martinière into the hall, “Take me to your mistress!” Martinière, startled, lifted up the candlestick, and the candle’s flickering light fell on the deathly-pale, dreadfully contorted face of a young man. Martinière was so terrified she almost fainted when the man tore his cloak open and the shining hilt of a dagger appeared protruding from his belt. The man glared at her with flashing eyes, and shouted even more wildly than before: “Take me to your mistress, I tell you!”

Martinière now imagined Mademoiselle to be in the most imminent danger; all the love she felt for her dear mistress, whom she also honoured like a pious, faithful mother, surged up more ardently within her, and helped her summon up a courage of which even she would scarcely have believed herself capable. She hastily slammed shut the door of her chamber, which she had left open, planted herself in front of it and said in strong, firm tones: “You know, your crazed

behaviour here indoors doesn't match the pitiful words you were uttering outside: I can see all too clearly now that you were simply trying to play on my sympathy. You chose the wrong time. You cannot and will not speak to Mademoiselle now. If you're not up to mischief, and aren't afraid to show your face in broad daylight, then come back in the morning, and ask for what you want then! And now... clear off out of the house!" The man heaved a muffled sigh, stared at Martinière with a terrible expression in his eyes and reached for his dagger. Martinière silently commended her soul to God, but she stood steadfast and looked the man boldly in the eye, while pressing herself more firmly against the door of the chamber through which the man would need to go to reach Mademoiselle.

"Let me in to your mistress, I tell you," the man shouted once more.

"Do what you want," retorted Martinière, "I'm not budging an inch from this place; just go ahead and finish the wicked deed you've begun: you too will end up dying a shameful death on the Place de Grève, \* like your cursed accomplices."

"Ha!" the man yelled. "You're right, Martinière! I look like a damned robber and murderer, and I'm armed like one, but my accomplices haven't been found guilty – not guilty yet!"

Whereupon, darting venomous glances, he drew his dagger on the terrified woman. "Jesus!" she called, waiting for the fatal blow, but at that very minute the clatter of weapons and the clop of horses' hooves rang out in the street.

“It’s the police!\* Police! Help, help!” cried Martinière.

“You vile woman, you want to see me ruined – well, now I’m done for! Here! Take this; give it to your mistress today – in the morning, if you want...”

Softly muttering these words, the man had torn the candlestick from Martinière’s grasp, blown out the candle and thrust a small casket into her hands.

“As you hope for salvation, give this casket to your mistress,” he shouted, and rushed out of the house. Martinière had slumped to the ground; she hauled herself up and felt her way back through the dark to her chamber, where in total exhaustion, unable to utter a sound, she sank into her armchair. Suddenly she heard the jingling of the keys that she had left in the lock of the front door. She heard the door being locked; hesitant steps padded towards her chamber. Spellbound and paralysed, without the strength to move a muscle, she awaited the dreadful event – but what were her feelings as the door opened and, in the gleam of the night lamp, at a single glance, she recognized honest Baptiste! He was looking as pale as death, and completely distraught.

“By all the saints,” he began, “by all the saints, tell me, Mme Martinière, what has happened? Ah, I have felt such anguish! Such anguish! I don’t know what it was, but something forced me to come away from the wedding yesterday evening! So I arrive here, outside on the street. Mme Martinière, I’m thinking, is a light sleeper: she’s bound to hear me if I knock nice

and gentle on the front door, and she'll let me in. Then along comes this big patrol rushing up to me, horsemen there are, and infantry too, armed to the teeth, and they stop me and won't let me go. But as luck will have it Desgrais is there, the police lieutenant; he knows me really well, and he says, as they're holding the lantern under my nose: 'Hey, Baptiste, what brings you out this way so late at night? You should be staying quietly at home like a sensible lad and keeping an eye on things. There's fishy business going on round here, and we're hoping to make a fine catch tonight.' You just can't imagine, Mme Martinière, how these words set my heart racing. So I'm just stepping up to the front door, and a man wrapped in a cloak comes charging out of the house, brandishing a gleaming dagger, and runs straight into me and bowls me over – the house is open, the keys are still in the lock... tell me, what's going on?"

Martinière, freed of her deadly anguish, told him what had happened. Both she and Baptiste went into the hall, and found the candlestick on the ground where the stranger in his flight had thrown it down.

"It's all too clear," said Baptiste, "that our mistress was going to be robbed and probably even murdered. That man knew, as you say, that you were alone with Mademoiselle, and he even knew that she was still awake getting on with her writing; he was certainly one of those damn scoundrels and villains who make their way inside a house, slyly take a look around, and make a note of everything that might come

in handy for their diabolical machinations. And as for the casket, Mme Martinière, I think we'll throw into the Seine, just where the river's at its deepest. Who's to say that some despicable fiend isn't intent on our good mistress' life? If she opens the casket she could well fall down dead, just like the old Marquis de Tournay\* when he opened the anonymous letter addressed to him!"

After long deliberation, the trusty servants finally decided to tell Mademoiselle everything the next morning, and to hand over the mysterious casket for her to open, with all due care. Both of them went over every detail of the appearance of the suspicious stranger, and came to the conclusion that some deep mystery no doubt lurked behind it, one which they should not try to solve on their own initiative, but entrust to their mistress.

Baptiste's apprehensions were well founded. At just this time, Paris was the scene of the most heinous atrocities – at just this time, the diabolical inventiveness of hell was contriving the easiest possible means of achieving its ends.

Glaser, a German apothecary, the best chemist of his time, was occupied, as specialists in his science often are, with experiments in alchemy. He was intent on finding the philosophers' stone. He was joined in this endeavour by an Italian named Exili.\* But for the latter, the art of making gold was merely a pretext. He simply wanted to learn how to mix, prepare and sublimate the poisonous substances

from which Glaser hoped to make his fortune, and he finally succeeded in concocting a subtle poison which, odourless and tasteless, can kill its victim either on the spot or else more slowly; it leaves not the slightest trace in the human body, and evades all the art and science of doctors, who, not suspecting murder by poison, are forced to ascribe death to natural causes. Despite all his precautions, however, Exili came under suspicion of selling poison and was interned in the Bastille. Captain Godin de Sainte-Croix soon joined him in the same cell.\* He had long been living with the Marquise de Brinvilliers\* in a relationship which brought scandal on the whole family – and finally, as the Marquis de Brinvilliers remained indifferent to the crimes of his wife, her father, Dreux d’Aubray,\* Civil Lieutenant of Paris, was forced to separate the criminal couple by issuing an order for the captain’s arrest. The captain was a hot-headed man, but weak of character; he put on a show of piety, but since his youth he had been inclined to vices of every sort; he was jealous and driven almost mad by thoughts of vengeance. Nothing could have been more welcome to him than Exili’s diabolical secret, as it gave him the means of destroying all his enemies. He became Exili’s assiduous pupil, and was soon his master’s equal, so that on his release from the Bastille he was in a position to carry on working independently.

De Brinvilliers was already a degenerate woman: thanks to Sainte-Croix she became a monster. He enabled her little by little first to poison her own father, in whose house she was

living, pretending with despicable hypocrisy to be caring for him in his old age, and then to poison both her brothers, and finally her sister; her father she murdered out of a desire for vengeance, the others so that she could get her hands on their rich inheritance. The stories of several poisoners provide us with the most dreadful proof that crimes of this kind become an irresistible compulsion. Poisoners have often murdered people whose life or death was a matter of perfect indifference to them, with no further aim in view than their own sheer pleasure, in exactly the same way as a chemist performs experiments for his own satisfaction. The sudden demise of several paupers in the Hôtel-Dieu\* later aroused the suspicion that the loaves which De Brinvilliers had been in the habit of distributing there every week, to create the impression she was a model of piety and benevolence, had been poisoned. One thing is certain: she poisoned the pigeon pie that she served up to her guests. The Chevalier du Guet\* and several other people fell victim to these infernal suppers. Sainte-Croix, his accomplice and valet La Chaussée, and De Brinvilliers managed for a long time to conceal their horrible misdeeds behind an impenetrable veil – but however great the heinous cunning of such villains, the time comes when the Eternal Power of heaven decides to punish the evildoers while they are still walking the earth!

The poisons which Sainte-Croix concocted were so subtle that if the powder (“*poudre de succession*”, the Parisians called it)\* were exposed to the air during its preparation, a