

The Strange Case of M. Bezuel

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"IN 1695," said M. Bezuel, "being a schoolboy of about fifteen years of age, I became acquainted with the two children of M. Abaquene, attorney, schoolboys like myself. The eldest was of my own age, the second was eighteen months younger; he was named Desfontaines; we took all our walks and all our parties of pleasure together, and whether it was that Desfontaines had more affection for me, or that he was more gay, obliging, and clever than his brother, I loved him the best.

"In 1696, we were walking both of us in the cloister of the Capuchins. He told me that he had lately read a story of two friends who had promised each other that the first of them who died should come and bring news of his condition to the one still living; that the one who died came back to earth, and told his friend surprising things. Upon that, Desfontaines told me that he had a favour to ask me; that he begged me to grant it instantly; it was to make him a similar promise, and on his part he would do the same. I told him that I would not. For several months he talked to me of it, often and seriously; I always resisted his wish. At last, towards the month of August 1696, as he was to leave to go and study at Caen, he pressed me so much with tears in his eyes, that I consented to it. He drew out at that moment two little papers which he had ready written; one was signed with his blood, in which he promised me that in case of his death he would come and bring me news of his condition; in the other, I promised him the same thing. I pricked my finger; a drop of blood came with which I signed my name. He was delighted to have my billet, and embracing me, thanked me a thousand times.

"Some time after, he set off with his tutor. Our separation caused us much grief, but we wrote to each other now and then, and it was but six weeks since I had had a letter from him, when what I am going to relate to you happened to me.

"The 31st of July, 1697, one Thursday,—I shall remember it all my life,—the late M. Sorteville, with whom I lodged, and who had been very kind to me, begged of me to go to a meadow near the Cordeliers, and help his people, who were making hay, and to make haste. I had not been there a quarter of an hour, when, about half—past two, I all of a sudden felt giddy and weak. In vain I lent upon my hay—fork; I was obliged to place myself on a little hay, where I was nearly half an hour recovering my senses. That passed off; but as nothing of the kind had ever occurred to me before, I was surprised at it, and I feared it might be the commencement of an illness. Nevertheless, it did not make much impression upon me during the remainder of the day. It is true, I did not sleep that night so well as usual.

"The next day, at the same hour, as I was conducting to the meadow M. de St Simon, the grandson of M. de Sorteville, who was then ten years old, I felt myself seized on the way with a similar faintness, and I sat down on a stone in the shade. That passed off, and we continued our way; nothing more happened to me that day, and at night I had hardly any sleep.

"At last, on the morrow, the second day of August, being in the loft where they laid up the hay they brought from the meadow, I was taken with a similar giddiness and a similar faintness, but still more violent than the other. I fainted away completely; one of the men perceived it. I have been told that I was asked what was the matter with me, and that I replied, 'I have seen what I never should have believed'; but I have no recollection of either the question or the answer. That, however, accords with what I do remember to have seen just then; as it were

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someone naked to the middle, but whom, however, I did not recognise. They helped me down from the ladder. The faintness seized me again; my head swam as I was between two rounds of the ladder, and again I fainted. They took me down and placed me on a beam which served for a seat in the large square of the Capuchins. I sat down on it, and then I no longer saw M. de Sorteville nor his domestics, although present; but perceiving Desfontaines near the foot of the ladder, who made me a sign to come to him, I moved on my seat as if to make room for him; and those who saw me and whom I did not see, although my eyes were open, remarked this movement.

"As he did not come, I rose to go to him. He advanced towards me, took my left arm with his right arm, and led me about thirty paces from thence into a retired street, holding me still under the arm. The domestics, supposing that my giddiness had passed off, and that I had purposely retired, went everyone to their work, except a little servant who went and told M. de Sorteville that I was talking all alone. M. de Sorteville thought I was tipsy; he drew near, and heard me ask some questions, and make some answers, which he has told me since.

"I was there nearly three-quarters of an hour, conversing with Desfontaines. 'I promised you,' said he to me, 'that if I died before you I would come and tell you of it. I was drowned the day before yesterday in the river of Caen, at nearly this same hour. I was out walking with such and such a one. It was very warm, and we had a wish to bathe; a faintness seized me in the water, and I fell to the bottom. The Abbé de Menil-Jean, my comrade, dived to bring me up. I seized hold of his foot; but whether he was afraid it might be a salmon, because I held him so fast, or that he wished to remount promptly to the surface of the water, he shook his legs so roughly, that he gave me a violent kick on the breast, which sent me to the bottom of the river, which is there very deep.'

"Desfontaines related to me afterwards all that had occurred to them in their walk, and the subjects they had conversed upon. It was in vain for me to ask him questions—whether he was saved, whether he was damned, if he was in purgatory, if I was in a state of grace, and if I should soon follow him; he continued to discourse as if he had not heard me, and as if he would not hear me.

"I approached him several times to embrace him, but it seemed to me that I embraced nothing, and yet I felt very sensibly that he held me tightly by the arm, and that when I tried to turn away my head that I might not see him, because I could not look at him without feeling afflicted, he shook my arm as if to oblige me to look at and listen to him.

"He always appeared to me taller than I had seen him, and taller even than he was at the time of his death, although he had grown during the eighteen months in which we had not met. I beheld him always naked to the middle of his body, his head uncovered, with his fine hair, and a white scroll twisted in his hair over his forehead, on which there was some writing, but I could only make out the word In...

"It was his usual tone of voice. He appeared to me neither gay nor sad, but in a calm and tranquil state. He begged of me, when his brother returned, to tell him certain things to say to his father and mother. He begged me to say the Seven Psalms which had been given him as a penance the preceding Sunday, which he had not yet recited; again he recommended me to speak to his brother, and then he bade me adieu, saying, as he left me, 'Jusques, jusques' (till, till), which was the usual term he made use of when at the end of our walk we bade each other good-bye, to go home.

"He told me that at the time he was drowned, his brother, who was writing a translation, regretted having let him go without accompanying him, fearing some accident. He described to me so well where he was drowned, and the tree in the avenue of Louvigni on which he had written a few words, that two years afterwards, being there with the late Chevalier de Getel, one of these who were with him at the time he was drowned, I pointed out to him the very spot; and by counting the trees in a particular direction which Desfontaines had specified to me, I went straight up to the tree, and I found his writing. He (the Chevalier) told me also that the article of the Seven Psalms was true, and that on coming from confession that they had told each other their penance; and since then his

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brother has told me that it was quite true that at that hour he was writing his exercise, and he reproached himself for not having accompanied his brother. As nearly a month passed by without my being able to do what Desfontaines had told me in regard to his brother, he appeared to me again twice before dinner at a country house whither I had gone to dine a league from hence. I was very faint. I told them not to mind me, that it was nothing, and that I should soon recover myself; and I went to a corner of the garden. Desfontaines having appeared to me, reproached me for not having yet spoken to his brother, and again conversed with me for a quarter of an hour without answering any of my questions.

"As I was going in the morning to Notre-Dame de la Victoire, he appeared to me again, but for a shorter time, and pressed me always to speak to his brother, and left me, saying still, 'Jusques, jusques,' without choosing to reply to my questions.

"It is a remarkable thing that I always felt a pain in that part of my arm which he had held me by the first time, until I had spoken to his brother. I was three days without being able to sleep, from the astonishment and agitation I felt. At the end of the first conversation, I told M. de Varonville, my neighbour and schoolfellow, that Desfontaines had been drowned; that he himself had just appeared to me and told me so. He went away and ran to the parents' house to know if it was true; they had just received the news, but by a mistake he understood that it was the eldest. He assured me that he had read the letter of Desfontaines, and he believed it; but I maintained always that it could not be, and that Desfontaines himself had appeared to me. He returned, came back, and told me in tears that it was but too true."