

THE
SLOW KNIFE

The Count of Saint-Lazare



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THE PITCH

The Count of Saint-Lazare draws heavily from the work of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo. These writers lived through the French Revolution and its aftermath: a volatile time of fiery politics and societal upheaval.

We'll play roles in a costume drama, steeped in fancy outfits and gilded decadence. But it's not all fine dining and curt whispers, no, there's plenty of room for swashbuckling action too—be it a clash of swords at dawn, a fiery mob bursting into a luxuriant manor garden, or a daring chase across moonlit rooftops.

Use this playset to visit a Paris that exists only in nostalgia, where beauty and strife clash with theatrical brilliance.

THE PLAYSET

We'll complete these steps to work through the playset and set up our game. This replaces the usual *Prelude*.

We'll take turns reading text aloud, and add characters, threads and notes to our board as we make new choices.

1. Read *The Long 19th Century* (3).
2. Read *These Streets Are Ours* (5) and make the four choices presented to customise your setting.
3. Create the *Knife* (8) together as a group.
4. Each choose one of the four *Conspirators* (9) to play as your character, then name & introduce them.
5. Outline the Knife's arrest in the *Incident* (13).
6. Define your Conspirator's role in the arrest by choosing options in *Each One Bloody Handed* (15).
7. Ensure that all relevant characters, threads and notes have been added to the board. There are lists at the back of the book to help name characters (17).
8. You are now ready to begin your story with *Act 1*.

This process typically takes around an hour to complete.



The Long 19th Century

PULP HISTORY

The years between the French Revolution (1789–1792) and the start of WWI (1914) are some of the most densely-packed with politics & change across all of history.

However, we do not need to be historians to enjoy this playset. A passing familiarity with rapiers, frilly shirts and the guillotine will do us just fine. Instead of interrupting to check a fact, we just say “*in **our** France, this is true*”.

IT'S ALWAYS KING LOUIS

In 1815, as we begin, the French Revolution is history.

King Louis XVI was sent to the guillotine, Napoleon Bonaparte rose to Emperor and was then exiled to the island prison of Elba. Now, royalists have restored yet another King Louis to precarious rule once more.

LIBERTY, EQUALITY OR DEATH

However, the revolution was not for naught. The country lurches with volatile, *often bloody*, steps towards a somewhat-fairer society.

The emboldened workers of Paris are bullish, knowing just how much can be gained when they organise. The burgeoning bourgeoisie hold no reverence for the rule of old. Together, they are rapidly transforming a feudal aristocracy into a capitalist paradise. Do try to keep up.

A BLACK CLOUD

For our story we should understand that this is still a time of great privilege for the nobility and landed gentry, but they are not untouchable. A demagogue's fiery mob, a jilted lover or an outdated political opinion can all result in a swift and unceremonious end.

Capitalise on other's misfortune to seize vast amounts of wealth, twist public perception to send frenzied masses to your rival's door, and don't forget to watch your back.

"Those born to wealth, and who have the means of gratifying every wish,
know not what is the real happiness of life."

— Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*



These Streets Are Ours

The story of *Saint-Lazare* begins in the coastal city of Marseille, but the real action begins when our cast of characters moves to Paris—the grand capital.

However, we aren't trying to make a historical facsimile of this famous city. Here, we'll shape this rich source material into something we're all excited to explore.

As we go, we should make notes on the board, reference media touchstones and ask clarifying questions. We can always revise our answers if a better idea emerges.

DEAD KINGS, BLOODY BANNERS

In this time, the monarchy is fragile and fading. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Pretenders to the throne squabble and scheme constantly, and inevitably we crown a new King every few years.*
- ♦ *The workers, organised and ardent, hold real power here. They see the King as a useful symbol, not an absolute ruler.*

STEELY-EYED, BLOODIED STEEL

This was a violent time, but our tale needn't be. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *We may wear swords, but it's more about ego and fashion than martial protection. Real duels are avoided at all costs.*
- ♦ *The streets are rife with brigands and rivals, and every trip through dark streets is tense with half-drawn blades.*

MUSKETS FIRE, ENGINES BLAZE

This was also a time of technological upheaval. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Steam trains connect the country, factories belch their acrid smog, and early photography is transforming the art world.*
- ♦ *Artificers furnish the homes of the rich with their clockwork marvels, and great airships ferry passengers across the globe.*

ANCIENT ORDERS, ARCANES TRUTHS

Despite their science, many follow the old ways. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Many of the rich and powerful swear fealty to an enduring secret society—each one a Hand of the prophetic Paper Queen.*
- ♦ *Magic is real, but only the clergy are permitted to use it. That doesn't stop the underclasses from trying though...*

“When you compare the sorrows of real life to the pleasures of the imaginary one, you will never want to live again, only to dream forever.”

— Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*



Characters

First, we'll introduce **Émile Mercier**, the *Knife*, and answer their two questions.

We should decide as a group which pronouns Émile uses.

Next, each of us will choose a *Conspirator* to play for the rest of the story. There are four to choose from:

- ♦ **Giraud-LaBelle:** *a bitter love rival, and Émile's oldest friend.*
- ♦ **Rousseau-Gaspard:** *a colleague, overshadowed by Émile.*
- ♦ **Mercier-Clement:** *an elder sibling, cut out of the will.*
- ♦ **Pierre-Voclain:** *an ambitious lawyer, threatened by scandal.*

Read their description and make their choice, then introduce them and add them to the board.

Conspirators are referred to only by their surname, so we can choose their first name and pronouns freely. Consider their appearance, choosing a portrait card to represent them on the board if desired.

Émile Mercier *The Knife*

Born in the coastal city of Marseille, where our story begins, Émile had all the typical hubris of youth and fair features. They drank a little too much, thought themselves a little too clever and scoffed at the jaded elders who grumbled at their posturing.

But they were, at heart, a decent person.

HONEST WORK

They took pride in their trade, and did it well. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *An apprentice carpenter to one of the finest and most successful cabinet makers in France—the visionary Olivier Clément.*
- ♦ *A merchant sailor on the Saint-Vincent, beloved by the ship's owner-captain—the rakish troublemaker Luc D'Aramitz.*

MODEST DREAMS

Though content, they held one grand ambition. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *To work for themselves, growing a humble venture into a successful business—with their name on the building.*
- ♦ *To own one of the charming seafront houses of Marseille, with a kitchen garden and a view across the Mediterranean.*

Giraud-LaBelle Conspirator

You and Émile have been rivals since birth. Each of you would swear the other their boon companion, and yet you argue about everything and spar over nothing.

Despite their lower birth and simpler education, Émile bested you at almost any contest—from fencing to flirtation. As two rascally youths with nothing better to do, you would dance and carouse—joking freely about your second-place status in this lifelong competition.

As their star continued to soar, though, your feelings towards them soured. Your quips turned to barbs, rivalry to resentment. They took it all with easy geniality. And then they took your childhood sweetheart, the one you had intended to wed. And now you must destroy them.

A PRIZED HEART STOLEN

One soul, tangled in the mess of two rivals. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Marion Aubere, the spirited heiress to a sizeable family fortune. She loved Émile's smile and quick wit.*
- ♦ *Oscar Comtois, a bookish foreman and talented inventor. He loved Émile's passion and good heart.*

Rousseau-Gaspard Conspirator

You hated Émile from the moment you met them. They walked into your place of work, your little fiefdom, and somehow talked their way into a job. Ever since they've been a thorn in your side, showing you up with their quality work and, worst of all, cheery demeanour.

You worked hard to get to your position, eliminating rivals and taking credit for those who couldn't speak for themselves. But Émile always managed to find a way to turn things back on you, exposing you for the petty charlatan that you are.

And now, in just a fraction of the time you've been here, they've moved beyond you—the ultimate insult, and a real threat to your longevity.

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN ME

Your grand plan for your ascension, stolen away. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Your superior fell into your trap, and was forced to leave the business. But Émile was promoted to fill their position, not you.*
- ♦ *Émile goaded you into a competition of skill and you were trounced. Now you are overlooked, while they are celebrated.*

Mercier-Clement Conspirator

You are Émile's eldest and only sibling, six years their senior. As children you found little to bond over. Their intrusion into your happy little life caused irreparable damage, robbing you of your parent's undivided love.

Your attempts to *remove* them, the worst involving a second-storey window, drove a wedge between you and your family. Now, two decades on, that wedge has become a breach, one that even your loveless marriage to a respectable spouse has not been able to repair.

So, part in desperation and part in spite, you made one last big play for their affection—and it was catastrophic. You were disowned and cut out of the will, and Émile, the accursed 'golden child', is now their sole heir.

THE BLACK SHEEP

Your latest transgression was too much to bear. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *You stole several hundred francs from your parents, planning to return it five times over via keen investment. You lost it all.*
- ♦ *You paid bandits to kidnap one of your parents so that you could act saviour. They crossed you, and Émile saved the day.*

Pierre-Voclain Conspirator

You had never heard of Émile until the day you ruined their life. After all, you are the chief prosecutor of Marseille and your work keeps you too busy to bother yourself with every trifling serf who darkens your door.

But then Émile had the misfortune of uncovering your most scandalous and closely-guarded disgrace, almost entirely by accident. You knew you had to act with fierce haste to remove them from society—before their good-hearted nature shredded your reputation and aspirations.

Young, trusting and nervous, it was easy to shepherd them into the role you cast. When the authorities took them away, you simply told yourself it was your life or theirs.

A SCANDAL THREATENED

Émile simply could not go free with your secret. **Choose one:**

- ♦ *Émile possessed a letter that would expose your father, the infamous Bonapartist L'ours, and ruin you by association.*
- ♦ *Émile uncovered your romantic affair with a prominent, married woman—Hyacinthe Dupont, Comtesse de Marseille.*



The Incident

So, now we have our central cast of characters and know a little about Émile's life. They were blessed with good health, honest work and a loving family—and were on the precipice of getting all their humble heart desired.

But then, of course, our villains played their part. They plotted together in the shadows to frame Émile for a crime they never committed, each of them playing a pivotal, active role in the conspiracy.

Émile's halcyon days were cut short, and they were arrested and imprisoned far from those they love.

To establish the truth of this incident, we'll first sketch the basic facts of their arrest by making three choices: the crime they were framed for, the site of their arrest, and their place of imprisonment. Once we have this sketch, we'll work out how our Conspirators were involved.

Add notes to the board as you make these choices.

PRELUDE TO A FEUD

Émile was framed for a heinous crime. **Choose one.**

- ♦ **The murder of Sylvette St Pierre**, a celebrated magnate turned political demagogue. Beloved by the working class.
- ♦ **Conspiracy to treason**, caught with a coded message from Napoleon addressed to the Bonapartist L'ours—'the bear'.

SWEPT AWAY

They never had a chance to say goodbye. **Choose one.**

- ♦ Arrested outside the church, Émile left their spouse-to-be alone at the altar—jilted, and wondering what they did wrong.
- ♦ Émile's parents, busy preparing a family meal, watched in horror as their child was arrested on the steps of their home.

INTO DARKNESS

Now they are confined in a dank, distant prison. **Choose one.**

- ♦ A half-crumbling tower on a windswept islet several miles from the coast—all salt-rusted iron and gale-worn stone.
- ♦ A medieval estate in the foothills of the Pyrenees, now a dusty prison of flaking gilt and moth-bare carpets.

"The pupil dilates in darkness and in the end finds light,
just as the soul dilates in misfortune and in the end finds God."

— Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*



Each One Bloody Handed

Now it's time to figure out how our Conspirators were involved and the sequence that led to the Knife's arrest.

We'll take turns choosing a prompt for our Conspirator. It will establish a truth about their role and also provide a question that **we should ask the player to our left**. They answer as their Conspirator, weaving our plot together.

Continue discussing the conspiracy until we've each made our choice and we're clear on the order of events.

Then, update the board before beginning with Act 1.

THE ROLE OF **GIRAUD-LABELLE**

Your jealousy made you all-too willing. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *You asked me to divulge something that Émile had told me in confidence. What vulnerability of theirs did I betray?*
- ♦ *You needed me to keep Émile busy while you moved against them. What heartfelt truth did they confide in me over dinner?*

THE ROLE OF ROUSSEAU-GASPARD

You joined in with gleeful malice. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *My practical skills were essential to execute this plot. What did you ask of me, and what price did I know you would pay?*
- ♦ *You asked me to wrest some information out of Émile. What secret did they reveal, and what insult did I have to ignore?*

THE ROLE OF MERCIER-CLEMENT

If Émile's star sinks, your's still may soar. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *You goaded me into a rash move that almost had me arrested instead of Émile. What reckless ploy did you have me attempt?*
- ♦ *I knew how to access Émile's most private space. What evidence did you ask me to plant in their personal belongings?*

THE ROLE OF PIERRE-VOCLAIN

Things just fall into place sometimes. **Choose one, ask left:**

- ♦ *You sent Émile to me when they were desperate—a wolf's embrace. How did I trick them into incriminating themselves?*
- ♦ *I could summon the law to appear wherever I desired. What trap did we set for Émile to spring, gendarmes at every exit?*

“For all evils there are two remedies - time and silence.”

— Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*

People of Paris

GIVEN NAMES

Simple folk—pick one. High society—pick several, possibly preceded by *Marquis/e*, *Comte/sse*, *Vicomte/sse* or *Baron/ess*.

Alexandre, Armand, Arielle, Barbou, Benoit, Candide, Charles, Claude, Christophe, Étienne, Gabriel, Gigi, Henri, Leone, Jean, Joseph, Marie, Maxence, Michel, Philippe, Pierre, René, Richard, Robert, Rosemonde, Urbain, Victor, Vivienne, Sabine, Yves, Zélie

FAMILY NAMES

As above. If they're really fancy, consider adding a title.

Arnaud, Baptiste, Beaumont, Bouchard, Chaput, Chastenet, Conrad, Duval, Dumas, Garçon, Fablet, François, Gaston, Jacques, Lambert, Laporte, Lacroix, Martel, Noel, Olivier, Pascal, Rousseau, Savatier, Sartre, St. Martin, Tremblay, Vincent, Xavier

PLACES AND PARTNERSHIPS

tree-lined boulevards; neoclassical churches; textile factories & sugar refineries; gaslit arcades with glazed roofing; floating baths on the Seine; a public execution; the unfinished Arc de Triomphe
Sergeants de Ville, blue-coated police; Le Figaro, a daily newspaper; The Salpêtrière, a psychiatric hospital; Salle Favert; an opera house

