

Crime Detected
“An Anecdote of the Paris Police”
Henry Mills Alden

Previously to the year 1789, but at what precise date I cannot say, the city of Paris possessed as guardian of its safety, and chief minister of police, a man of rare talent and integrity. At the same period, the parish of St. Germais, in the quarter of the Rue St. Antoine, had for its curé a kind venerable old man, whose whole life was spent in doing good to both the souls and bodies of his fellow-creatures, and whose holy consistency and dignified courage caused him to be loved by the good, and respected by even the most abandoned characters. One cold dark winter’s night, the bell at the old curé’s door was rung loudly, and he, although in bed, immediately arose and opened the door, anticipating a summons to some sick or dying bed.

A personage, richly dressed, with his features partly concealed by a large false beard, stood outside. Addressing the curé in a courteous and graceful manner, he apologized for his unseasonable visit, which, as he said, the high reputation of monsieur had induced him to make.

“A great and terrible, but necessary and inevitable deed,” he continued, “is to be done. Time presses; a soul about to pass into eternity implores your ministry. If you come you must allow your eyes to be bandaged, ask no questions, and consent to act simply as spiritual consoler of a dying woman. If you refuse to accompany me, no other priest can be admitted, and her spirit must pass alone.”

After a moment of secret prayer, the curé answered, “I will go with you.” Without asking any further explanation, he allowed his eyes to be bandaged, and leaned on the arm of his suspicious visitor. They both got into a coach, whose windows were immediately covered by wooden shutters, and then they drove off rapidly. They seemed to go a long way, and make many doublings and turnings ere the coach drove under a wide archway and stopped.

During this time, not a single word had been exchanged between the travelers, and ere they got out the stranger assured himself that the bandage over his companions eyes had not been displaced, and then taking the old man respectfully by the hand, he assisted him to alight and to ascend the wide steps of a staircase as far as the second story. A great door opened, as if of itself, and several thickly-carpeted rooms were traversed in silence. At length, another door was opened by the guide, and the curé felt his bandage removed. They were in a solemn-looking bed-chamber; near a bed, half-veiled by thick damask curtains, was a small table, supporting two wax lights, which feebly illuminated the cold death-like apartment. The stranger (he was the Duke de —), then bowing to the curé, led him toward the bed, drew back the curtains, and said in a solemn tone:

“Minister of God, before you is a woman who has betrayed the blood of her ancestors, and whose doom is irrevocably fixed. She knows on what conditions an interview with you has been granted her; she knows too that all supplication would be useless. You

know your duty, M. le Curé; I leave you to fulfill it, and will return to seek you in half an hour.”

So saying he departed, and the agitated priest saw lying on the bed a young and beautiful girl, bathed in tears, battling with despair, and calling in her bitter agony for the comforts of religion. No investigation possible! for the unhappy creature declared herself bound by a terrible oath to conceal her name; besides, she knew not in what place she was.

“I am,” she said, “the victim of a secret family tribunal, whose sentence is irrevocable! More, I cannot tell. I forgive mine enemies, as I trust that God will forgive me. Pray for me!”

The minister of religion invoked the sublime promises of the gospel to soothe her troubled soul, and he succeeded. Her countenance, after a time, became composed, she clasped her hands in fervent prayer, and then extended them toward her consoler.

As she did so, the curé perceived that the sleeve of her robe was stained with blood.

“My child,” said he, with a trembling voice, “what is this?”

“Father, it is the vein which they have already opened, and the bandage, no doubt, was carelessly put on.”

At these words, a sudden thought struck the priest. He unrolled the dressing, allowed the blood to flow, steeped his handkerchief in it, then replaced the bandage, concealed the stained handkerchief within his vest, and whispered:

“Farewell, my daughter, take courage, and have confidence in God!”

The half hour had expired, and the step of his terrible conductor was heard approaching.

“I am ready,” said the curé, and having allowed his eyes to be covered, he took the arm of the Duke de —, and left the awful room, praying meanwhile with secret fervor.

Arrived at the foot of the staircase, the old man succeeded, without his guide’s knowledge, in slightly displacing the thick bandage so as to admit a partial ray of lamplight. Finding himself in the carriage gateway, he managed to stumble and fall, with both hands forward toward a dark corner. The duke hastened to raise him, both resumed their places in the carriage, and, after repassing through the same tortuous route, the curé was set down in safety at his own door.

Without one moment’s delay, he called his servant.

“Pierre,” he said, “arm yourself with a stick, and give me your support; I must instantly go to the minister of police.”

Soon afterward the official gate was opened to admit the well-known venerable pastor.

“Monseigneur,” he said, addressing the minister, “a terrible deed will speedily be accomplished, if you are not in time to prevent it. Let your agents visit, before daybreak, every carriage gateway in Paris; in the inner angle of one of them will be found a blood-stained handkerchief. The blood is that of a young female, whose murder, already begun, has been miraculously suspended. Her family have condemned their victim to have her veins opened one by one, and thus to perish slowly in expiation of a fault, already more than punished by her mortal agony. Courage, my friend, you have already some hours. May God assist you—I can only pray.”

That same morning, at eight o’clock, the minister of police entered the curé’s room.

“My friend,” said he, “I confess my inferiority, you are able to instruct me in expedients.”

“Saved!” cried the old man, bursting into tears.

“Saved,” said the minister, “and rescued from the power of her cruel relations. But the next time, dear abbé, that you want my assistance in a benevolent enterprise, I wish you would give me a little more time to accomplish it.”

Within the next twenty-four hours, by an express order from the king, the Duke de — and his accomplices were secretly removed from Paris, and conveyed out of the kingdom.

The young woman received all the care which her precarious state required; and when sufficiently recovered, retired to a quiet country village where the royal protection assured her safety. It is scarcely needful to say, that next to her Maker, the curé of St. Germais was the object of her deepest gratitude and filial love. During fifteen years, the holy man received from time to time the expression of her grateful affection; and at length, when himself, from extreme old age, on the brink of the grave, he received the intelligence that she had, departed in peace.

Never until then, had a word of this mysterious adventure passed the good curé’s lips. On his deathbed, however, he confided the recital to a bishop, one of his particular friends; and from a relation of the latter, I myself heard it.

This is the exact truth.

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