

A Curious Stratagem
By James F. Franklin

I had been some years connected with the Detective Bureau (so the thief-taker commenced his story), and had naturally arrived at a great degree of proficiency in the calling at the time when the strange matter occurred which forms the basis of my story. The chief officer of the Bureau called me to his private office one day, and without prefacing his words in any manner, began as follows:

“Guillot, I wish you to listen to what I am about to say with the utmost attention, for the service upon which I am about to detail you must be most thoroughly understood by you.”

I bowed and he continued:

“Perhaps you may have heard of the name of Jacques Guichard?”

Before replying, I took a memorandum book from my pocket and examined it thoroughly.

“No such name figures in my books,” I at last replied. “I have here an alphabetical list, in which I will affirm there are the names of all the notorious rogues in Paris—each and every one of them has his place in this book—but Guichard is not among them. Still, the name sounds familiar—I must have heard it at some time.”

“You have, without doubt; although I cannot say that its owner was ever within ten leagues of Paris. Jacques Guichard is a most extraordinary man, although a common thief, or he could never have thwarted the extraordinary efforts that have been made to capture him, as he has done. His place of operation is the seacoast and the country in the vicinity of St. Malo, and there he flourishes in the most extraordinary manner. The audacity of the man, according to all accounts, almost passes belief; his robberies have been for the past year extensive and heavy, and I am informed that all attempts thus far to arrest him have been utterly fruitless; for he has a strange faculty of trifling with, and eluding all who are sent after him. How he does this, I am unable to say. A correspondent of mine in St. Malo has at different times informed me of his various performances, and certainly, some of them almost pass belief. Why, actually, the man once entered the house of the mayor of the town, and finding him alone in his parlor, he walked in, took a gold watch and purse from his table, and after informing the mayor, who was absolutely stupefied with astonishment, of his real name, and politely begging him the loan of the articles he had taken, he walked coolly away, and escaped, in spite of the instant pursuit which was instituted!”

“He is an adroit rascal, at all events,” I ventured.

“He is so—and if you can succeed in beating him with his own weapons, you will have the credit of doing what no man has yet been able to accomplish, in addition to the various large rewards which are offered for his apprehension.”

“Well, I will try,” I said, “and if Master Jacques manages to outwit me, it will certainly be by no advantage with any carelessness on my part might give him.”

“Do so,” the superintendent replied, “I can ask nothing more—and I have in some way acquired a belief that you will be successful in this matter. But I was about to refer to a letter which I have just received from Monsieur Auguste Beauville, sub-chief of the St. Malo police. After recounting several of Guichard’s late audacious exploits, he goes on to inform me that, in utter despair of ever apprehending the fellow, he invites me to ask the assistance of one of our most skilled detectives. I have decided to comply with the request, and, as I have intimated to you, I have selected you for the service,”

I bowed again, and he continued:

“Monsieur Beauville will cooperate with you, and with the knowledge which he has of Guichard’s character and habits, will render you valuable assistance. He will meet whoever I may send, he says, at the village of Auvergne, some distance this side of St. Malo, and there arrange a plan of operations. You will start as speedily as possible, and report to me when you return.”

After a few more unimportant instructions, the superintendent dismissed me with the renewed injunction to lose no time in repairing to Auvergne, and to put forth my best efforts after I had arrived there. These, however, needed not to be repeated. I had already begun to feel as though my professional reputation was at stake upon the issue of the business which I had undertaken; and every incentive was upon the side of its faithful and successful prosecution.

I left Paris the same night by diligence, and after two days of monotonous journeying, arrived at Auvergne. My first inquiry was for Monsieur Beauville, and ere long I found him. He had come to Auvergne the previous day, and was only awaiting my arrival. He was a somewhat elderly man, tall and spare in person, and evidently extremely nervous and excitable. A remarkable feature in his general appearance was his white powdered wig—and this, as also his immense gold-bowed spectacles, gave him a peculiarity which at once identified him. I introduced myself, mentioning my name my occupation, and he immediately shook me cordially by the hand, exclaiming, at the same time:

“Ah, yes—know who you are, and I am under a thousand obligations to Monsieur Berret for complying so promptly with my request. But I must tell you, Monsieur Guillot, I have been on thorns for the last twenty-four hours, waiting for your coming! We need go no nearer St. Malo than we are now—the scoundrel was seen in this vicinity no later than last evening! But he was not to be found three minutes afterward, of course. Upon my word, I have thought at times that the rascal was leagued with Satan himself! I should not consider his conduct so outrageous if he merely robbed and stole successfully, but to trifle with the agents of the law as Jacques Guichard does, is an unpardonable sin!”

This remark was so much in keeping with the rapid estimate which I had formed of the character of the sub-chief, that I could hardly repress a smile. The observation was made in a tone of grief and sorrow, clearly indicating that the speaker felt, most keenly the insults which the audacious

Guichard had cast upon the police department of St. Malo, of which he was a distinguished member.

“We have a keen-witted man to deal with, Monsieur Guillot,” he continued, “and a late discovery which I have made, serves to confirm the fact. You saw the letter which I addressed to Monsieur Berret?”

I replied in the affirmative.

“Well, in conformity with my usual custom, I copied that letter into a book which I keep for that purpose. Yesterday I had occasion to consult the book, and to my astonishment I discovered that the copy to which I have just referred *had been cut out and abstracted!*”

“And what inference do you draw from the fact?” I asked.

“Simply, that that letter or copy, is now in the hands of Jacques Guichard!”

“Do you think so?” I asked, in deep surprise.

“I *know* it—I would wager fifty gold Napoleons, that either Guichard or someone of his accomplices committed the act. It is a sample of the rascal’s boldness—and as we are sure that he knows of your presence here, we must act with double wariness and circumspection. And now listen to me, monsieur, and I will inform you of my plan.”

I listened attentively, while the sub-chief thus stated the course of action which he thought it best for us to pursue:

“The principal operations of Jacques Guichard have been confined to the district covered by the forest of Marne, which surrounds this place, and lies between it and St. Malo. As I have stated, I know that Guichard was in this vicinity last evening, and in the absence of any other hypothesis upon which to act, we must suppose him still in this vicinity—at least, until we are positively informed to the contrary.

“One of his haunts, as I have discovered from my own efforts to capture him, is the neighborhood of a farmhouse, perhaps a league from this place; and there, I think we had better commence our operations. The persons at this house will afford us all facilities which they are able to furnish. We will stay with them while we are in the neighborhood, and if you are not too much fatigued by your journey, perhaps you had better ride out to the farm house tonight. It is a short hour’s gallop—and I will give you a letter of introduction to my country friend.”

“Shall you not accompany me?” I asked.

“No—but I will shortly follow you. I have some correspondence which imperatively demands my attention for a brief time—an hour perhaps. This attended to, I will immediately take the road, and—but ah, I had almost forgotten one thing. There is a small hut half way between here and the farmhouse—you will see it on the road. It is a kind of depot which I keep for my official

use; my spies and detectives often leave their reports and communications there, where I find them whenever I am in this vicinity. It is a good arrangement, as it saves much time, and of course, it is a profound secret.”

The sequel, however, proved most conclusively that there was *one* person who was perfectly informed on the subject.

“I was about to say,” Beauville continued, “that doubtless, there are at the present time, many important papers in this repository awaiting my attention. I must, therefore, stop there and attend to them, and should I be able to dispatch this business before eleven o’clock—and it is now seven—I will join you at that time at the farmhouse. If not, I will pass the night at my hut. But in either event, you may be sure that I will rejoin you before breakfast tomorrow. Do these arrangements suit you?”

“In every particular, Monsieur Beauville,” I replied. Some few minor arrangements were then projected, and we parted until the morrow.

Mounted upon a horse furnished by the sub-chief, I left the village and wended my way easily towards my destination. The farmhouse was easily found, and my letter of introduction at once secured me a welcome from its honest proprietor. I should mention, however, that upon the way I noticed the hut to which Monsieur Beauville had alluded. It was situated in the forest, being almost surrounded by it, and standing some distance back from the highway.

Mindful of his agreement, upon descending to the breakfast room upon the following morning, I found that the sub-chief had already arrived. A cordial salutation passed between us, and after the meal had been dispatched, we walked out together some distance.

“We are now ready for our preliminary investigations,” Monsieur Beauville remarked, “and perhaps we had better separate, and prosecute them singly. I have reflected upon this subject, and it appears to me that this will be the better way. Of course, I need not advise you as to your course and manner of proceeding—your own experience will suggest whatever is needful.”

I assented to his proposition, and we separated at once, each pursuing a different route. Upon leaving Paris, I had adopted the blouse of the common laborer, and consequently no suspicions of my official capacity could attach to the conversations which I held that morning with several persons upon the road, and in various houses at which I stopped. Guichard, I of course mentioned incidentally, and every person I saw had something to say concerning him, many rumors were in circulation as to his whereabouts, but I could only find one person who had positively seen the man. He told me unsuspectingly, that he had known Jacques Guichard at one period of his life, and could consequently identify him without hesitation. He had seen him, he said, two evenings before, just at dusk, almost on the corporate limits of Auvergne, and had immediately informed Monsieur Auguste Beauville, who happened to be in the village, of the fact. But upon immediate search by a number of policemen, no Jacques Guichard could be found!

“He must be a wonderful man,” I remarked, after I had listened to his account with innocent and open-mouthed astonishment.

“*Le diable* himself couldn’t catch him,” was the reply, “Monsieur Beauville and his men had better give up the game at once. Guichard could steal the hair off their heads without their knowing it, if he made up his mind to do it.”

With the exception of the information which I gathered from this person, I could obtain no positive intelligence of the object of my search; and as the hour of noon had now arrived, and I had wandered back to the immediate vicinity of the farmhouse, I repaired thither at once, where I found Beauville just commencing his dinner.

“Well—and what success?” he inquired, after the domestic had left the room.

“Very little,” I replied—and thereupon gave him a brief summary of my proceedings. “Why my dear fellow, you underrate yourself,” he exclaimed, when I had finished. “You have already taken one step forward—while as for myself, I am ashamed to confess that I have discovered nothing. You will probably return, tonight leading the unlucky Guichard by a halter.”

“I hope I may,” was my simple reply.

This last remark of Beauville, as also the manner in which it was spoken, struck me as being widely different from anything I had thus far heard from him; but the incessant conversation which he kept up prevented me from following up the train of thought which it suggested.

We set out again after a brief rest, and separated as before. This time my efforts were more vigorous, although made with no relaxation of caution, which with me had become almost habitual. But strange to say, these efforts were attended with not the slightest degree of success; although I took a different direction, and made use of extraordinary means to obtain information, my labors were utterly vain.

“Hang the fellow!” I soliloquized, as I came to a full stop in the middle of a bypath which I was pursuing. “Hang the fellow—if I may believe the stories I heard this morning, there are no less than a hundred Jacques Guichards—and I’ll be bound not one of the hundred is within a dozen leagues of Auvergne at this moment!”

The afternoon was not half gone—by disposition of the sun, I judged that it might be three o’clock—but I had by this time come to the conclusion that I would prosecute my search no farther upon that day,

“I need time for reflection,” was my thought, as I directed my steps towards the farmhouse. “I will return, shut myself up in my room, and endeavor to concert some peculiar measure, which once put in practice, cannot fail of compelling Master Guichard to disclose in some way his whereabouts.

Buried with cogitations like these, I presently reached the house, and was just entering, when I met my worthy host.

“Monsieur Auguste has returned before you,” he remarked, as he saw me.

These simple words had an instant effect upon me. They re-excited the train of thought which the conversation of the agent had dissipated when I last saw him. It instantly occurred to me that it was somewhat singular that Beauville should return thus early. True, the same supposition might be applied to myself—but I reflected that his knowledge of the country and its inhabitants should give him facilities for discovery which I did not possess, and I instantly decided that upon these grounds, his primary efforts towards our common object should be protracted longer than my own.

“Aha,” I said, in answer to the above observation, “how long since he returned?”

“About an hour, I should say.”

“And where is he now?”

“In your room—he desired me to conduct him there.”

In my room! There are many occasions in the experience of a detective when he is *forced* to receive conclusions -- but the conclusion which those words produced in my mind was the effect of no guesswork! With the rapidity of lightening I recalled each particularity which I had noticed in the manner and bearing of the sub-agent since his arrival at the farmhouse; and the rapid deduction which I was instantly able to draw from them was such as to almost to defy belief.

“What is he doing?” was my next excited question.

“Examining some papers, I believe.”

“Examining papers—*my papers?*” I almost shouted. “Jean, do you hear me?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Take off your shoes then—instantly!”

“My shoes—take them off?” the man reiterated, staring at me as if he wished to say he thought me crazy.

“Yes—off with them!” and I kicked mine vehemently from my feet. Jean did the same—possibly from the force of example, for he could not certainly have understood my meaning then.

“Now follow me, and be sure that you make no noise!”

Thus admonished, Jean obeyed, and we ascended the stairs together, passing thence along the hall, until we had reached my chamber. The door was open—but its occupant was kneeling on the floor, with his back towards us, and consequently we remained undiscovered. My valise was

upon the floor by his side, and from it he was taking papers, which he as quickly stowed away in his pockets. I looked but for one instant—then I *acted!* Advancing noiselessly behind him, I inserted my fingers in his white wig, and lifted it from his head. As I did so, he sprang to his feet, but he did not escape my grasp, until I had also clutched the gold-bowed spectacles. And then the effect was precisely what I had supposed it would be. The wig had covered a closely-cropped head of hair, and the spectacles had served as a mask to a face, which although not certainly wholly unlike that of the sub-chief, was as certainly not his! The exclamation of Jean, however, disclosed the true state of the case. Starting back in astonishment, as he saw the person whom my act had revealed, he cried out:

“Wh-what, in the name of heaven, is this? *Jacques Guichard* himself, as I live!”

At the sound of his name, the man sprang past me, but Jean was on the alert. Catching him by the collar, he tripped his feet from under him, and as he came down heavily upon the floor, I enclosed his wrists in a pair of irons, and the next instant had his feet similarly confined.

“Now, Jean,” I said, “don’t leave this room till I return. Watch him as if your life depended upon it while I am gone. I will return in less than an hour.”

Taking with me one of the farm servants, I repaired to the roadside hut as quickly as Jean’s best horse could carry me—and there I found a truly pitiful, though at the same time, a laughable sight. Monsieur Auguste Beauville—minus his wig and spectacles, of course, and also his long gray overcoat—was strapped firmly to a chair, while a large gag was thrust into his mouth. The latter I immediately removed, and while I was casting loose his fastenings, he eagerly asked:

“Monsieur, in the name of mercy, tell me that you have got the villain in your power!”

“I have, indeed,” was my reply. “I have just detected his strange transformation, arrested him, and have hastened to free you from your disagreeable situation.”

“Disagreeable indeed!” he rejoined, grinding his teeth. “The scoundrel—this rascally trick ought to add at least five years to his sentence! You must have conjectured before this, how the scamp operated. He surprised me here last night, bound and gagged me before I could make any resistance, and then, after he had arrayed himself in my coat, hat and spectacles, he actually asked me, gagged and helpless as I was, if I didn’t think he might pass for the sub-chief of St. Malo!”

The idea of the ludicrousness of the situation of the worthy agent at that moment struck me so forcibly that I burst into an irrepressible peal of laughter, in which he, contrary to my expectations, joined—remarking a moment after:

“Well, as this matter has turned out so well in the end, we can afford to laugh about it; but I verily believe that if the rascal had escaped after this exploit, I should have shot myself through vexation. As it is, you have done admirably—no person on earth could have avoided being

deceived by his almost incredible transformation. His voice, too, was the exact reproduction of my own. I have often heard that Guichard was a ventriloquist, and now I am satisfied of it!”

Notwithstanding the very weak condition to which his long fasting and forced constraint had subjected him, the agent insisted on being immediately conveyed to the farmhouse; and when introduced to the presence of Guichard, his satisfaction was most edifyingly demonstrative—although when the latter maliciously inquired as to his reasons for preferring a sitting posture, the rage of the worthy agent became so excessive, that I was forced to interpose from fear of the consequences to the prisoner.

From a knowledge of the singular character of Jacques Guichard, I was enabled without difficulty to assign sufficient reasons for the bold and very nearly successful step he had taken; and these inferences were afterwards confirmed by the prisoner himself, in the various conversations which took place between us while he remained under my charge. There was, in the first instance, the natural and characteristic audacity of the man, which was constantly urging him to do some act which might gain notoriety for him. Then there was the indignity which he wished to put upon his old enemy, the sub-agent, and in addition to these, the possession of the papers I had with me, containing as they did, some of the most important secrets of the police department, would, it may be well believed, have been of itself a sufficient inducement to attempt the deception, and especially to such a person as Monsieur Jacques Guichard. I had almost forgotten to say, that upon searching him, the letter which had been abstracted from Monsieur Beauville’s letter book was found upon his person. The result of my mission, it may readily be supposed, was amply satisfactory to myself. Guichard was sentenced to a term of twenty years’ labor in the galleys—which term he is still serving out.

Originally published in *Ballou’s Dollar Monthly*, April 1859