

Unpublished Passages
IN THE LIFE OF
Vidocq, The French Minister of Police

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No. II
Doctor D'Arsac

THERE was a circumstance which made some sensation at Paris at the time it took place, not only from the peculiar features of the case, but from the means by which the discovery of the real offender was made.

You know that long narrow street which runs close by where the Bastille used to stand. I cannot at present remember the name, but that is of little importance. It is now many years since, that the “rez de chaussee” of one of the houses in that street was inhabited by an elderly woman who had formerly been attendant on an infirm gentleman for a long period, and at his death, as a recompense for her assiduous attentions, had been left by him in comfortable circumstances. She was one of those old women who were ever fearing the instability of the institutions of her country, and could not be prevailed upon to put her money either in the funds or on mortgage, but kept dipping from time to time, as her necessities required, into her principal, which she always kept by her, quaintly remarking to those few of her friends who were in her secrets, that the sieur's chest, lock and key, were highly responsible bankers.

The old lady, whose name was Audran, had been for some time seriously indisposed, and was attended by a highly respectable surgeon, a Monsieur D'Arsac, and under his care was fast recovering, and wanted, as the surgeon said, only a few days' quiet to effect her perfect restoration—poor woman! she was soon quiet enough, but her quietude was that of eternity! — for M. D'Arsac came to me one morning, and with wild and horror-stricken looks informed me, that on going as usual to visit his patient, he had found her brutally murdered.

I accompanied him to her rooms, and found, as he had stated, the poor old woman lying in her bed, with her throat cut so as almost to sever the head from the body. The room had been rifled of every valuable it contained, and the poor old lady's favorite bankers had stopped payment. There was no appearance of force in entering the rooms. It had been Madame Audran's habit during her illness to open her door by a pulley attached to her bedside, which lifted a strong iron bar, and had any attempt been made to force it, the neighborhood must have been alarmed, as it was well known that she kept no servant, and was so excessively nervous on her bankers' account, that she never opened the door unless she was fully convinced by the sound of the person's voice, that they were friends whom she might safely admit. There could, therefore, be no doubt that it was done by some persons on intimate terms with their victim—but who, was the question; her acquaintances were few, very few, but they were all persons of irreproachable characters, and it would have been cruel in the highest degree to have attached the suspicion of the crime to any of them, unless there were some strong grounds for *so* doing.

All, therefore, that could be done on the occasion, was to draw up a “process” of the circumstance, attested by the surgeon and some of the neighbors— and it was left to time to

point out some clue to the murderer. But, in the course of a few months, the circumstance seemed almost forgotten, or, if remembered, it was merely as a gossip's story, related because there hung some strange mystery, which all being unable to solve, they might safely hazard a conjecture and appear marvellous wise.

“You are going, M. Vidocq, to the wedding tonight, are you not?” said Madame Parguet, the wine merchant's wife, one day, when she came to me to make her pretty usual inquiry as to where her husband had slept out the night before, not giving implicit credence to the “little way out of town, my dear.”

“Mons. D'Arsac was kind enough to send me an invitation, and, as the day seems fine, I shall look in to see the festivities of the evening. He keeps his marriage at the ‘Jardin Beaulieu,’ I think—I must go, for I have not seen him since that affair of poor Madame Audran's.”

“Ah! poor Madame Audran!” replied the wine merchant's wife, with a long sigh: “she was a good woman, and a most particular friend of mine. I used to be there almost every day, and it makes me shudder to think of it—it was a sad business!”

“Who is D'Arsac to be married to?”

“Oh, to a beautiful creature—only eighteen! such a shape—so ‘distingue’—you remember Emile de Lucevalle; she and D'Arsac have loved each other from childhood; they will be a happy pair.”

“They ought to be. But I thought that match was off on account of D'Arsac not being rich enough to settle an equal sum with that brought by Emile. Do you know, Madame, how that has been arranged?”

“An uncle of his died in the provinces, and left him the money.”

“I never knew he had one.”

“Nor I, until the other day; I never heard him mention a word about an uncle until it had been all settled about the marriage, and the money on each side paid into the trustees' hands. But I must wish you a good day, Mons. Vidocq, and am much obliged to you for the information. I am an unhappy woman to have such a husband as Parguet—‘going out of town,’ indeed!—I'll out of town him with a vengeance,” said Madame, and hastened out of the room to scold her husband—dress for the wedding—and afterwards appear with him so lovingly as to elicit the usual exclamation, “if we were as happy as Monsieur and Madame Parguet, we should indeed be happy.”

The evening was delightful, and the illuminations at the “Jardin Beaulieu” everybody pronounced to be superior to anything that had been seen for a long time; so charming—so happy everybody looks—how beautifully the bride is dressed—what a very pleasant evening we shall have! were the expressions passing from one to another. The dancing was kept up without cessation; first quadrilles—then waltzing—everybody, in fact, seemed determined to be pleased.

“Oh, look,” said some, “the bride is going to stand up in a quadrille; how elegantly she dances!”

“Happy man, D’Arsac!” sighed many an admiring swain. “Eh! why what is the matter?—the quadrille has stopped.”

“Madame Parguet has fainted. Lead her away from the dancers into the open air of the garden,” cried someone.

“It is nothing;” said Madame Parguet; “merely a slight spasm. I shall be much better if you will let me walk a few minutes about the garden by myself. But here is Mons. Vidocq—he does not dance, and will allow me to lean on his arm.” So saying, she took my arm, and the rest, at her request, resumed their dancing.

“Oh, Mons. Vidocq,” said she, “I have had such a shock.”

“What occasioned it, Madame?” said I.

“Are you sure nobody can overhear us?”

“They are all engaged dancing.”

“You know I danced next the bride.”

“Yes.”

“And I was admiring the beautiful dress she had on, when my eyes fell upon a brooch she wears upon her bosom, and I thought I should have fainted.”

“What, because you saw a brooch?”

“Yes,” said she, drawing close to me, and whispering in my ear; “that brooch was Madame Audran’s.”

“Madame Audran’s!”

“Hush—speak low!”

“How do you know it? you may—you must be mistaken.”

“No, no, I have seen it a thousand times; besides, it was so uncommon a pattern that I often asked her to sell it to me, but was always refused. She said she would part with it only at her death.”

“This is very strange; I hardly know what to think! I do not wish to hurt her feelings, but can you learn from her how she became possessed of it?”

This Madame Parguet undertook to do under pretence of admiring it, and saying she wished to know where she might obtain a similar one. In a few minutes she returned, having gleaned from the gentle and ill-fated bride all that she knew concerning it: it had been given to her that morning by her dear D'Arsac, and she would ask him where he got it, and let her know in the morning.

This information in some degree confirmed the suspicions I had previously entertained, that none but D'Arsac could be the murderer; but then his character had hitherto been unblemished, and he stood high in every man's report. It was not a thing to hesitate about; the conviction in my own mind was so strong, that I considered it my duty to arrest him without delay. I accordingly procured some of my agents, who were in the neighborhood, and sent to him to say I wished a few moments' private conversation with him. As he entered the room, I heard the soft, sweet voice of his bride chiding him for leaving her, and exacting a promise he would not stay long—long! poor girl, she little thought how long the separation would be—that his promise of a quick return would be the last words to fall upon her ear.

As the door closed, I approached D'Arsac, and said, "Sir, you are my prisoner!" Looking at me, at the same time, as if to read in my face the answer to what he dared not ask, at last, with a gasp for breath, he faltered out, "For what?"

"You are accused of the murder of Madame Audran!"

His color fled in an instant, and he seemed as if he were about to fall, but covering his face with his hands, he remained a few moments in thought. His deep hard breathing betokened a suppressed sigh—one that tried for utterance, but was forced back; presently he sobbed out, "Oh, my poor Emile! this will be your death!" and dashing his hand across his forehead, and striving to recover the sudden shock he had sustained, said, "I am ready to follow you."

At the door he paused a moment, saying, "Could not something be said to Emile that I am ill? something to console her for my absence? any thing but the truth, though it must soon out. Oh, Heavens; but this is too much"—and he dashed into the coach at the door, and was at once conveyed to prison.

The Tribunals being always sitting at Paris, his trial soon took place, and many things came out against him which he could not rebut; the sudden possession of a large sum of money, which he had accounted for by the death of an uncle, was proved to be false, as he had never had one. The brooch, too, which was proved to have belonged to Madame Audran, he could not say where he had obtained: besides other minor circumstances, which left so little doubt in the minds of the majority of his jury, that he was found guilty. Murder, in all countries, is punished alike—by death—and such was his sentence. That he did not die by the hands of the executioner, was not the fault of the law. He had procured some strong poison, which he took the morning previous to his intended death on a scaffold, and left in disgrace a world wherein, by his talents, he might have shone one of its brightest ornaments.

A short time previous to his death, he confessed the crime, and how it had taken place. He had been for some long time striving to amass a sufficient sum of money to meet the views of

Emile's friends; he had got together more than half the requisite amount, when he thought he might by one *coup* obtain the whole; in an evil hour, he tried for the first time in his life the gaming table, and found himself in a few minutes, a beggar, and the hopes of possessing Emile farther than ever removed from him. Returning home, he chanced to pass by Madame Audran's, and the force of habit led him to inquire after his patient's health. He sat down in her room, musing on the waywardness of his fate for a few minutes, and on rising to go, perceived Madame Audran had fallen into a slumber; his eye, at that moment, fell upon her chest of valuables, and the devil instigated him to that murder as the fulfillment of all his hopes, which a few moments consideration would have shown the fallacy of.

With all the pains which were taken the truth could not be concealed from Emile; it cast a fixed gloom upon her mind that could not be removed; she sickened at the sight, and thought of all her former pleasures and pursuits, and lived in the world as one who bore no part in the events of life—a stranger to all around. It was not of long duration, for a few months saw her a prey to those morbid feelings of the mind which naught on earth could allay.

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