

Unpublished Passages  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

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No. V.

*The Strange Discovery*

by J.M.B.

THERE was, some few years ago, in one of the streets leading from the rue St. Honore, an hotel known by the name of the Renard d'Or. It does not exist at the present day, but at the time I am speaking of was much frequented by persons from the south of France, who came to Paris with the intention of stopping a few days. Amongst the persons who were in the habit of residing there, during their stay in our metropolis, was a Madame Launay, the widow of a rich banker of Bordeaux, who came every year for the purpose of receiving her dividends, and transacting such other business as circumstances might require. On her arrival late one evening from Bordeaux, she was informed, by the landlady of the Renard d'Or, with a profusion of apologies, that unless Madame would for once put up with a small room, containing two beds, she should be unable to accommodate her. To this Madame Launay replied, she had no objection for a few days, as Julie, her waiting woman, could sleep in the same room, and when opportunity offered they might be better accommodated. The hostess curtsied assent, and Madame Launay was shown to her apartment, where, after partaking of some slight refreshment, she, with her maid, very soon retired to their separate beds, and in profound sleep forgot the fatigues of their journey, and the comparative inconvenience of their lodgings.

In the middle of the night Julie awoke, and finding her mouth parched from the still feverish excitement of the journey, got out of bed to obtain a draught of water from the dressing table. As Madame Launay always slept with a candle in her room, she had no difficulty in finding the water, and was returning into bed when her eye fell upon a handsome travelling cloak, which was lying by the bedside of her mistress. This Julie had admired during the whole of the journey, and as it had been sent home but a few hours previous to their leaving Bordeaux, had escaped the fate of the rest of her mistress's wardrobe, which was usually tried on by her previous to being delivered. The opportunity was not to be resisted; the candle burnt opposite a long glass, so that she could try it on to the best advantage. "Ah! really, I do look extremely well in it," said she, standing first on one side and then on the other, to see herself to more advantage, "and this bonnet, too is very becoming. I really wonder the men are so devoid of taste as to suffer me to continue still unmarried ;" and with a sigh she dropped the cloak and bonnet, tript into bed, and in a few minutes was dreaming of some favored swain throwing himself at her feet, and with most becoming importunity pressing her to name the happy day.

Her dreams were so delightful that she would have willingly continued them much longer, had not the sun, which shone with all the brightness of a clear summer's day, warned her it was time to get up and prepare for her mistress's rising. She could not refrain from glancing towards the object which had been the source of such pleasing reveries, but much to her astonishment the

cloak was nowhere to be seen. She searched all over the room without success. Could her mistress have been awake, and meant this as a hint for her vanity. She looked towards her bed to see if she were then awake, and enjoying her surprise. Her mistress seemed to be asleep. She must then have hid the cloak in the bed. She gently turned down the clothes to see if her suspicions were confirmed, and to her horror beheld the bed deluged with blood. Her mistress had been murdered, during the night, by someone who had struck her to the heart; and so truly had the blow been given, that she had expired without making noise sufficient to awake even her fellow lodger. Julie, by her screams, brought several persons to the room to ascertain the cause, amongst whom was the landlady, who was so alarmed for the respectability of her establishment that she declared none but Julie could have committed the atrocious act; and despite of her repeated protestations of innocence, called in the police who barely gave the poor girl time to dress before they hurried her off to prison—to contemplate alone on the misfortune that had befallen herself and mistress.

Julie found her situation far from an enviable one; to be looked upon by the world as the murderess of her mistress, was revolting enough by itself—besides which, there appeared but little hope that she should escape being found so, by those who were to decide her fate; since she could not but confess to herself, that suspicions were strongly against her. It was strange! very strange, she thought; the more so, as she could not even hazard a conjecture as to the real offender, who had, without doubt, so contrived as to throw the whole suspicion upon her.

Circumstances, though strongly against her, were not so conclusive as she herself imagined; for in her numerous examinations before the Juge d’Instruction, she had in no one instance prevaricated; and on her trial there was much in her favor to counterbalance the suspicions of her guilt. It was proved that she had been high in her mistress’s confidence, having free access to her money and valuables, so that she might have executed any robbery she had meditated, without adding to it the crime of murder, which would have brought on instant detection. Madame Launay’s friends, too, with one accord, expressed their belief in her strict integrity, and declared they were themselves convinced of her innocence, from her often proved affection towards her mistress, which would alone have rendered her incapable of such an act. All this had due weight with the jury, who stated their unanimous opinion of her perfect innocence of the imputed crime.

Though absolved from all participation in the murder by the laws of her country, Julie was a girl of too much spirit to suffer the least shadow of guilt to hang around her, if by her unceasing endeavors she could bring the truth to light; and day after day, and month after month, she lingered in Paris, in hopes of finding some clue to trace out the murderer. But time wore fast away, and she had been nearly a year pursuing her endeavors, without having advanced a single step towards success, and began to fear she must give up all hopes of successfully clearing herself from the suspicions still entertained by many, and leave it to the action of time, which she felt convinced must eventually bring the offender to justice.

Having occasion one day to go a short distance from Paris, she went to the Champs Elysees, with the intention of going by one of the hack carriages which generally start from there, and are more moderate in their charges than the regular coaches. She was much importuned by two men to go by their conveyance, which was ready to start as soon as the last place was occupied; but not liking either the appearance of the men, or their carriage, she refused, and gave the preference to

the second in the rank, not being so much pressed for time as to mind a few minutes' delay. This gave great offence to the men, who immediately began to play off the artillery of their small wit against her, no less to their own than their passengers' amusement, who were rather nettled at the delay.

“Guillaume,” said one, “the lady thinks you don't look sufficiently like a gentleman to be honored with her company; why don't you brush up your hair, and place your hat in a more elegant style, and then when she comes this way next time, perhaps she'll go with you.”

“Why,” replied the other, “I think I am sufficiently elegant to have the honor of escorting a waiting-woman in a carriage—a waiting-woman, indeed, to give herself such airs.”

“Aye, Guillaume, but pretty women sometimes fancy themselves greater persons than they are.”

“Pretty! yes, Mam'selle is pretty, to be sure,” said the other, and assuming a mincing tone of voice, added, “I wonder the men are so devoid of taste as to suffer her to continue still unmarried.”

This seemed to please them both beyond measure; for they burst out into an immoderate fit of laughter, which was only finished by someone coming up to take the vacant place; and as they drove off they seemed repeating the sally, in order to have a re-enjoyment of their mirth.

Strange, indeed, thought Julie to herself; they were the very words I used when admiring myself in the glass on that fatal night. How could they have known them! I have never mentioned them to any one! Never—and she tried to remember if she had so done, but could not bring to mind that they had ever escaped her lips. I will go and mention the circumstance to Mons. Vidocq, who has hitherto so kindly assisted me in my endeavors; and on pretence of finding herself too unwell to continue her journey as she had intended, left the carriage, and came instantly to me, in order to ask my opinion concerning the men's conversation. I thought as she had done—that it was strange they should repeat her very words, and that they must know something more of the business than they ought; at any rate, I would secure the men, and see if anything could be elicited from them.

I went, with Julie and some of my men, to await at the Champs Elysees the return of the carriage. It was not long before it came back, and out jumped the two men, ready for another excursion. They did not at first perceive the company who were waiting their arrival; but on seeing Julie, seemed rather surprised at her being still there. Afterwards, when they beheld me, both turned as pale as death, and stammered out something about “they hoped they had not offended the young lady by anything they had said, and were very sorry if they had done so.”

I told them, on the contrary, that the lady was pleased with their conversation; that she wished to enjoy it more at leisure; and as I had heard so flattering an account of their abilities in that way I should feel much pleasure, at a future time, in enjoying a *tete-a-tete* with them myself; and, in the meantime, would see that they had proper accommodation and attendance in their new lodgings, to which my assistants would feel proud to conduct them.

I went afterwards with Julie to their lodgings and found several things which were identified by her as having belonged to Madame Launay, and which, on their examination, they were unable to account for the possession of. But to be brief, there were many circumstances came out against them which left but little doubt of their being the guilty parties. The words they had made use of, the things belonging to Madame Launay, and their being unable to account in any way for themselves on the night in question, were strong proofs against them. They were found guilty, and condemned to expiate their crime at the Place de Greve. Previous to their execution, they confessed that one of them had, before Madame Launay's arrival, got unperceived into the hotel, and hidden himself under one of the beds in the room where she had slept, and that it was there he had seen Julie admiring herself in the glass, and heard the expressions she had made use of. He further confessed having, after she had retired to bed, risen very gently and let in his companion, their intention being only to rob the room of as much as they could conveniently carry away with them, but Madame Launay having awoke during their operations, and fearing she might give the alarm, they had murdered her in self-defence.

There is but little doubt that had they been wise enough to have kept their own secret, they would have succeeded in eluding detection; for they had prudence sufficient, when they found the murder had created a great sensation in Paris, to abstain from selling any of the stolen things, and had destroyed those they thought most likely to be recognised: but the desire of showing off a little supposed wit, threw them off their guard, and was the means of bringing them to that justice they had so outrageously offended.

\* The reader of the foregoing tale will at once perceive the source from whence M. Scribe, the author of the words of the opera of Fra Diavolo, obtained the amusing incident which leads to the detection of the Brigands by the daughter of the Innkeeper at Terracina.

*Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, January, 1839