

## *Fiacre No. 2,525*

From The Memoirs of M. Claude, Chief of Detective Police Under The Second Empire

CHANCE on many occasions is the detective officer's best friend. This I will prove by my meeting with the driver of Fiacre No. 2,525.

It was in 1862. I was engaged on the track of a forger, who, by his wondrous ability in imitating bank-notes, had already caused an enormous deficit in the Treasury.

Information had been lodged against the unknown forger. They came from the Minister of Finance himself. The Department instructed me to take charge of the case.

In less than six months six hundred thousand francs worth of forged bank-notes were put in circulation in all parts of France. On one occasion so well were the genuine notes imitated, the bank actually took them in and cashed them. The deficit which this expert forger was creating promised to develop into an ever-increasing gap. In order to put a summary stop to this condition of things, I brought into requisition all the forces at my disposal.

I dispatched some of my most adroit agents into the country, and especially into the districts immediately surrounding Paris.

It was not long before I learned that, in the environs of the Department of the Seine, the proprietor of a villa named Gatebourse, who had hitherto led a simple and rather retired life, had suddenly astonished his neighbors by his opulent and fast living.

For the last six months Gatebourse was the scene of luxurious festivity. Its proprietor, named Giraud, who caused it to be called Giraud de Gatebourse, not content with astonishing the immediate neighborhood with his prodigality, repaired to Paris to continue with increased *éclat* his princely existence.

My agent, who discovered this personage, informed me that, even in this locality where he had so long resided, the source from whence this sudden influx of wealth had poured in was a perfect mystery. In Paris I learned by one of my staff—the officer detailed on public carriage duty—that Gatebourse, on every occasion that he repaired to the capital, hired the same *fiacre* in order to go to the bank, which was always driven by the same coachman. The *fiacre* bore the number 2,525. It was driven by a middle-aged man, well-known in the Montmartre district by all the gentlemen of the Press and of the theatres.

He was a sturdy and somewhat eccentric fellow. His name was Antoine. On account of a certain monomania, he rose to the dignity of being made a butt of.

Driver Antoine was a philosopher. He had gone through the terrible epochs of February and June and the *coup d'état*, with his eyes and ears always open.

He pretended an intimate acquaintanceship with the heroes of those startling episodes, and offered his *souvenirs* to the journalists of the Quarter.

“All the Government of '48,” he said, “has passed through my cab; and my cab knows more than the ‘Black Cabinet,’ or the Cabinet of the Ministry.”

In spite of the pretensions of this eccentric Jehu, the newspaper-men only laughed at him and would not even bid for his precious *souvenirs*.

“They do not want my memoirs because they are jealous of me,” he would say. “So much the worse for history. The coming race will be deprived of my revelations. The history of our own time will never be known.”

Apart from this craze, the driver of No. 2,525 was most trustworthy and respectable, and the best-conducted of this unruly profession.

He was on such good terms with himself that he readily confided in others. The boulevardiers, when short of money, had but to flatter this mania of Antoine to enjoy a ride for nothing.

And if one man was done so easily and so often by Bohemians, how much stronger reason there was for supposing his being victimized by such skillful swindlers of the school of a Giraud de Gatebourse.

I ascertained that on each trip that the *nouveau-riche* made to Paris he would not hire any carriage but the Fiacre No. 2,525, driven by the eccentric Antoine.

The latter did not fail, even upon his first trip with his new client, to speak on the subject of the memoirs. Gatebourse, to whom it was necessary to spread his false money everywhere, as it was necessary for Antoine to place his manuscript, did not fail to encourage the monomaniac, with a view to demanding change for his false banknotes.

Antoine, enchanted to find a client who understood him, hastened, on each trip, to empty his purse into the hands of my bandit, insensibly receiving in exchange a Gatebourse note.

All these details were placed at my disposal by an inspector of the Public Conveyance Brigade, and I resolved upon making the acquaintance of the honest Antoine, being pretty certain that I was already upon the track of my forger.

Furnished with the number of the *fiacre*, I repaired to the angle of the Rue Montmartre with the Boulevard. There, my hands in my pockets, and with the most natural air imaginable, I addressed Antoine, who was engaged in feeding his horse.

He was a great big, burly fellow, with a face as red as his waistcoat.

“Are you engaged, coachman?”

“Yes, *citoyen*,” he replied.

“How comes it,” I severely rejoined, “that you are on the stand?”

“I am engaged,” he replied, with an air of disquietude—“I am engaged, and I am *not* engaged.”

“Ah!” I retorted. “Explain; for I am in a greater hurry than you appear to be.”

“Here it is,” he said. “I am waiting for a *citoyen* who at two o’clock will go to the bank. As he does not wish to be remarked, my *citoyen* desires me not to stop in any isolated place. Hence I am here on the stand as if on the ‘lob.’ Now, you see,” he finished, devouring me with his eyes after a fashion that irritated me—“now you see how I come to be engaged and *not* to be engaged.”

“You will be breaking the law if you refuse to carry me!” I imperiously exclaimed.

“Oh,” cried my coachman, who now smiled whilst piercing with his gaze, “you would not be down upon *me*, Monsieur Claude?”

“Eh!” I said, considerably startled. “You know me!”

“Know you? It is Antoine who knows everybody that is asked such a question! Have I not carried you as I have carried the others. You hired me in ’48, then in ’51 at the *coup d’état*. Oh, your face is here”—triumphantly slapping his forehead—“like those of my celebrated clients whom I have served in snow, and rain and hail for the last thirty years.”

Whilst he talked of men and things, especially of the *coup d’état*, events came back with the man’s face.

I recollected that during the *coup d’état* I had been dispatched to the Rue St. Martin with a picket of gendarmes to arrest a deputy of the Montague who was about to fly after the capture of his colleagues. This representative, by virtue of a seizure-warrant, was destined to Mazas. He had been denounced by Monsieur de Maupas.

The *fiacre* in which I bore him off was the 2,525, driven by Antoine. I should not have recollected so much, if during the struggle with the deputy I had not lost the letter from the Prefect of Police investing me with my powers.

As I requested the services of Antoine, I now told him that I recollected him perfectly. I then frankly informed him why I wished to retain him and his cab all day, although hired by the *citoyen*, since this *citoyen* was under the surveillance of the police.

“Here,” said I, as I extracted a note for a hundred francs from my purse, “is a better note than if I had manufactured it myself.”

“A thousand million thunders of the devil,” shouted Antoine, when I informed him of how he had been duped. “I have given my good and hard-earned money in exchange for the manufacture of this brigand. Ah, you shall pay for this, *coquin!* As to you, Monsieur Claude, reckon on me, and if, Cocotte, my mare, you and I do not take this villain to the parish of Mazas today, I will renounce the name of Antoine. Cocotte has had her hay, and when she has had her hay, she defies a steam-engine. Ah, brigand, you would give me forged paper for my good silver! We shall see who will pay the piper, you or I.”

I had now in Antoine a valuable auxiliary, for, in aiding justice, the duped driver was on the road to personal vengeance.

I arranged that when our man arrived I would step into the *fiacre* beside him, and that we would drive off together to the Prefecture.

It was near two o’clock, so I gave Antoine a sign to bring his cab out of line till Gatebourse would arrive.

Antoine moved opposite to the Café de Madrid, and took such a position that I, seated opposite the *fiacre* at a table, enjoying a cup of coffee, had but to cross the sidewalk to join the forger the instant he entered the cab.

At this hour, however, the boulevardiers commenced to appear, and an unlooked-for incident interfered with my plans.

For about ten minutes, Antoine upon his seat, and I at the *café*, silently awaited our bandit, when a young fellow attached to the management of the Gaiety Theatre took a chair beside me at the table. This was Ponson du Terrail, now so celebrated as a journalist.

This *rencontre* put me about a little, for I saw that Antoine, with a view to button-holing this literary man, had instantly forgotten Gatebourse.

To complicate the situation still further, the *littérateur* was no sooner seated than a great fat man, accompanied by a very lean one, crossed over to join us—the one, by the soul-tortured and satanic expression on his face, Goethe’s fiend; the other, by his cheeriness, also marked with satanism, a regular Sancho Panza.

One was Rochefort, the other Villemessant. We chatted away gayly enough, Antoine approaching us by imperceptible degrees.

It was now just upon the stroke of two, and I must not lose my brigand. Antoine had just joined us, when I took him by the lapel of the coat.

“Monsieur Villemessant—” he began; but I pulled him away, and not a second too soon.

A man of about thirty-five years appeared, seeking for the *fiacre*, which, according to my instructions, had been drawn up in the spot assigned by me.

This man, whose photograph I had in my pocket, as well as the authority to take him into custody, was Giraud de Gatebourse.

Antoine, in spite of the fumes of glory which had mounted to his brain at the thought of Monsieur Villemessant's publishing his memoirs in the *Figaro*, became as cool as a cucumber at the sight of the forger, who had so persistently and consistently robbed him.

He hastened to the door to open it for Gatebourse.

The forger had just popped into his seat, crying, "To the Bank!" when I stepped into the vehicle, seating myself face to face with him.

In my turn, once installed, I cried to Antoine:

"To the Prefecture of Police!"

My gentleman protested, became highly indignant, threatened, then endeavored to bribe me, but I calmly said:

"Monsieur Giraud de Gatebourse, do not attract the attention of the passers-by. We are on the Boulevard Montmartre, before all the editors of the press. A word, a gesture, from me, and I shall proclaim you what I suspect you to be—a robber and a forger."

"Monsieur," he palpitated, pale as death, his voice husky, "you mistake. Out of respect for yourself, I shall be silent. But where are you carrying me to?" he added.

"To the Prefecture of Police."

"Have you the right? Are you provided with the warrant?" demanded my bandit, who, under his air of submission, showed vigor and daring, while his eyes emitted a very sinister light.

I exhibited the warrant.

The man was sentenced to twenty years.

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