

A Detective's Story

[The following, which we translate from the French, appears in a little volume before us, entitled "Annals of the Empire and Restoration," published at Brussels in 1839:]

A police agent should never be a man who has a conscientious regard for truth. Fouche compared those honest men of the force, but which the public insist on calling us spies, to the stage-coach which must make its regular trips, full or empty. A detective should make his report every day, in order that he may receive his pay, and show his fidelity and zeal; if he knows nothing he must invent a story of some kind, and if, perhaps, he does know something, he should seek in every way to amplify the details, and magnify the importance of the whole affair. The police are very good for the detection of counterfeiters, murderers and other violators of the civil law, but when they dabble in political matters, they often commit as many blunders as they gain successes. The secret political police, however, has its ramifications throughout the country, and its agents in all classes of society.—If a Frenchman, or for the matter of that, a European of almost any nation, gets up a conspiracy against the government, and imparts his ideas to even a few particular friends, it would be truly extraordinary if among his confederates there was not at least one particular *friend* of the minister or chief of police. Under the Empire this class was never more effective, although it then employed the fewest agents, and yet each day Fouche, the minister of police, had two or three baskets full of reports which he never read.

Of all the governments that have fallen to the lot of France decidedly the most ridiculous was the Directory. The members, with one or two exceptions, believed in the police as they believed in the Bible, and Gohier, one of the directors, was the most credulous of them all. The agents, however, were capable, honest, intelligent men, and they soon learned to keep away from the entertainments which the members of the Directory often gave, for there they were certain to see the tall, lank figure of Gohier, asking for the thousandth time the question "What do you know: Have you any report to make to me?" The answer was always in the negative, and Gohier was not slow in showing his vexation.

M. Real, who was then one of the principal functionaries in the department of police, happened to meet Fouche one evening just as the latter was going to the Luxembourg; Fouche asked him to go to the Directory.

"Not I," said Real.

"Why not?"

"Because Gohier is there, and the moment he would see me he would come shambling across the room to ask if I had any report for him."

"That's the trouble, is it?" said Fouche. "See this basket. There are two hundred reports there; choose the most amusing or the most foolish; there will be enough to keep him going for a week or two."

Real took the basket and commenced to look at the endorsements on the papers. The first was bad enough, and the next was no better; but at last he found one giving information of an unlawful meeting of between four and five hundred men, which had been held in a garden a short distance from Paris. The meeting had been seen by the agent for several days in succession, and although he approached very near and watched for some time, he was unable to hear distinctly what was said. He was, however, certain that they had met to organize a plot against the government.

“If Gohier is not content with such a discovery,” said Real, “it will be because he is the most unreasonable man in existence.”

They went to the Luxembourg. Gohier was there in all his glory. His first question was:

“What is there new? Have you a report?”

“Here is one. I tell you honestly that I do not place much reliance in it; but anyhow you can read it, and perhaps you will think differently from what I do.”

Gohier took it and read. His eyes glistened. Then, having rapidly run over the first few pages of the report, he approached the detective and said softly:

“Friend Real, your report is much more important than you appear to think. This is not the first time that my attention has been called to this meeting, and I am astonished that you attach such little importance to so grave a matter. Look up this affair, and let me know what progress you make, and as soon as possible.”

Real at first thought he was wrong and that Gohier was right. Have I been unfortunate enough, said he to himself, to stumble upon a report which is really true, and got in by some strange mischance from about two hundred others which were undoubtedly false? But on reflection, he became convinced that the case was not so bad as it appeared. He perceived that Gohier had been informed of the matter by some one of his agents, and he concluded that where there was so much smoke there was at least some fire. Filled with these reflections he arrived at his office, and sending for one of his most trusty subordinates, he dispatched him to the locality mentioned in the report, charging him to find out all about the matter.

The next day he made his appearance, and was ushered into the presence of the chief. “Well,” said he, “I have caught them in the act.”

“Really!”

“Yes, Monsieur; right in the act.”

“What is there in the matter?”

“About as much as there generally is in these police reports. But to the points. I went to the spot. The garden spoken of is the property of a hatter. It was a fine night, and the hatter had put out a

number of hats on sticks to dry. Now, suppose a hedge about the same height as these sticks; an observer would only see the hats, and the agent naturally supposed that the said hats were on the heads of as many men. That is all!”

That evening Monsieur Real went to the Directory. Gohier was there and propounded the eternal question, asking particularly concerning the affair of the unlawful assembly. The former, with as serious a tone as he could assume, related his story. Gohier never forgave him, and until their death they were implacable enemies.

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