

The Skeleton

Drama Of The Street Vaurigard, No. 58, In Paris—A Saving Mother- In-Law, And An Expensive Son-In-Law—The Widow Houet Mysteriously Disappears—Letters Received, Intimating That She Has Committed Suicide—Are They Forged?—An Able Detective, Mr. Chouard, Traces The Affair During Twelve Years Bastien’s Extortions—Robert, The Coward With An Unquiet Conscience—Gouvernant, The Noble Instrument Of Extortion—Arrested At Last—Condemning Evidence In The Criminal’s Pocket—Who Is The Murderer?—A Skeleton As A Witness In The Case—Startling Discoveries Of Science!—Phrenology Does Miracles—Murder Will Out!

by George McWatters

On the 13th of September, 1860, a woman, about seventy or seventy-eight years old, the widow Houet, had disappeared from her domicile, rue des Mathurins, in Paris.

The widow Houet, at the moment of her disappearance, possessed about 6,000 francs, interest; she had had her part in the inheritance of Mr. Lebrun, her brother, who possessed a capital of 43,000 francs. She had two children, a son who was an idiot, and a daughter who, in 1850, had married a certain Mr. Robert, a dealer in wine and engraver on crystal. The uncle Lebrun had given a dowry to this daughter.

From the very beginning of the marriage, mother and son-in-law did not agree; discussions about the property had made the widow Houet so afraid of her son-in-law, that she often said: “I am sure, he will be the death of me.”

On Thursday, the 13th of September, about six o’clock in the morning, Robert went to the widow Houet, and invited her to take breakfast with him and his wife, on that very morning. “I will come,” replied the widow. At seven o’clock, her housekeeper, Mrs. Ledion Jusson, came, and the widow reproached her for having come so late, and soon afterwards went out.

She went down the street of the Mathurins, was seen crossing the street de la Harpe. She was lost out of sight near the street Serpente, about where No. 58 of the street de la Harpe was. That was the dwelling of Robert and his wife.

At about eleven o’clock, Mrs. Robert came after her mother, for whom, as she said, they had waited in vain for breakfast. At twelve o’clock, she returned, once more, to the street of the Mathurins; her mother had not come back, and she resolved not to wait any longer.

The next morning, Robert and his wife were told that Mrs. Houet had not come home at all. Robert was alone, at home, when the message came, and said: “Do not speak of it to my wife; that will frighten her. I will tell her about it on Sunday, if we have not found her before that time.”

The next day, Mr. Hérolle received a letter, which he was requested to hand to Mrs. Jussion; this letter was put in the box at Paris. Mrs. Houet told her, in it, that she had gone on a journey, for a few days, with a friend of hers, and requested her not to speak to anybody about it.

Another letter, mailed at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, came into the hands of a man by the name of Vincent; he had rented one of the houses belonging to Mrs. Houet. The contents of this letter indicated that Mrs. Houet had made an end to her life by committing suicide.

It was easy to be seen that in both the letters, the signature of the widow had been forged; furthermore, it was not her accustomed style.

From this, it was easily to be inferred that a crime had been committed, but where? by whom?

The affair was given into the hands of the detective Chouard, and we will now faithfully render his own account of it.

“I went, at once, to the house of the widow Houet, in the street des Mathurins, and found, in her room, six banknotes of 1,000 francs, and 710 francs in gold and silver.

Hence we could not think of a theft, which could explain the disappearance of the widow. Another motive must have led to the murder, if such a one had been committed.

My suspicions were, of course, that the brother-in-law had something to do with the affair. Robert had been very unsuccessful in business. In the commencement of 1860, he had sold, for 1,800 francs, his interest in the wine business, and it was known that, besides this sum, and a house which he possessed at Dannemoine, but which was heavily mortgaged, he had no other resources than an income of 160 francs, the dowry of his wife. At the moment the widow was missed, he was reduced to what he gained by engraving on crystal.

This situation indicated an interest in the perpetration of a crime; while, on the other hand, I could not think of any other person, as the money had been left untouched. Besides, I traced some important facts.

At the hour on which the widow Houet went towards the street de la Harpe, Robert had been seen standing in the door of his house, looking in the direction of that street, as if he was waiting for somebody. After the widow's disappearance, instead of being restless, or looking for her, he tried to conceal it for some time from his wife.

Of course, I strongly suspected Robert, but as there was no proof against him, and we Frenchmen have a perfect dread of exposing ourselves to ridicule, I resolved to mislead, and yet keep him steadily in view.

In order to do so successfully, I had to go everywhere where he went, and in order not to give rise to suspicion, I had to disguise myself, at every new move, in a different character; in that way, I kept him easily in view, and managed to rent apartments always near to his. It would take too long to relate the different disguises I used, and, besides, I fear it would be of very little

interest to my readers; let me, therefore, only beg them to remember that I was disguised, gave no cause whatever for suspicion, and even succeeded in not being taken notice of, at all, which greatly facilitated my work, and rendered it possible to make the observations which I will now lay before the reader, unadorned, and related as simple facts.

At the outstart, although I kept careful watch on him, nothing occurred which could excite my slightest suspicion. He lived in Paris, in his accustomed way, a quiet citizen, although his money was spent rather freely; but as I was informed that this had always been his weak side, I did not attach much importance to this fact.

In the beginning of the next year, he left Paris, and established himself, with his wife, at Dannenoine. In February, 1862, Robert came back to Paris, and occupied, with a certain Mr. Veron, from Dannemoine, the apartments in the street de la Harpe, which had been untenanted till now. There passed, between him and an unknown person, scenes which soon attracted my attention.

One day, a man by the name of Bastien, entered the house, and Mr. Veron handed him a check of 250 francs, signed by Robert. A few days afterwards, Bastien returned again, and said to Mr. Veron that he wished to see Robert himself. Bastien waited, and when Robert came home, they locked themselves in an adjoining room.

Soon the cry, ‘murder! murder!’ was heard in the next room, and Veron stormed in to assist his friend. Robert and Bastien were standing against a bureau. Bastien was about to strangle Robert, when he saw Veron enter the room; he rushed out, muttering, and grating his teeth. Veron glanced at the bureau, and saw a check lying there, for 20,000 francs, in favor of Bastien, to which, undoubtedly, the signature of Robert was required.

Veron insisted upon it that Robert should make a complaint of the assault, but the latter refused, saying that he had gambled, lost, and that the discussion only concerned him and Bastien. However, when he was appeased, he told Veron that the demands of Bastien commenced to be unbearable, and boldly proposed to him to entice the former into one of the houses of Versailles, and to assassinate him, and bury him in the garden.

It was now my first aim to find out what was the reason of this power of Bastien over Robert. I traced the former, and soon found out that Bastien had been a well-to-do locksmith at Grenoble, which city he had left, in 1859, in order to escape his creditors; afterwards, he had lived in a house of the Cimetière Saint Nicolas, where Robert was then established as merchant in wine. Bastien took his meals with Robert, and since the disappearance of the widow Houet, the two friends had been very intimate, and frequently seen together.

Some time after the scene which I have described, Robert and Veron established themselves at Versailles, where repairs were being done to the houses of the family of Houet. There, Robert, returning from Paris, told, with tears in his eyes, to Veron that he had met Bastien, who had forced him, with a pistol at his breast, to sign a check for 30,000 francs. Veron spoke again of bringing a complaint against him; but Robert said that he had a horror of scandal.

Now he tried to escape Bastien, but that was impossible; Bastien knew too well the habits and manner of living of Robert, and, more than once, terrible scenes took place between the two men.

On a given day, Bastien appeared suddenly at Dannemoine, and compelled man and wife to accept twelve notes, amounting to 6,000 francs. This new persecution took place at the moment in which Robert, being in the greatest misery, had sold his house at Dannemoine, and was preparing a refuge in Villeneuve-le-Roi. Mrs. Robert was already on the road, to put the new house in readiness, and they overtook her at Germiny, as she had to accept the required notes. The interview was not without fearful outbursts of rage, and the landlord had heard Bastien saying:

‘Well, have I done the deed, or have I merely allowed it to be done?’

‘Yes, that is true,’ replied Robert.

‘Well, then, you will have to pay me.’

‘Alas, my God! it is true; I shall have to pay.’

Robert, however, had resisted till sunrise, and the acceptances had not been given. He secretly went to the landlord, and, giving him a crown of six francs, he said to him;

‘Here, there is a man in my room, of whom I cannot get rid, who wants money from me, and I will not give him any; if he comes here, I will say to you that I do not have a *sou*, and you will lend me a crown.’

The landlord refused to play this role, and told Bastien of it, who said to him:

‘Well, if that is the case, tell Robert that there is not a bunch of straw in his house, which does not belong to me, and that, if I desire to do so, I can make him leave it to-day.’

Robert paid the expenses which Bastien had made at the inn, and they left together.

Of course, I did not doubt, any more, but that Robert had committed a crime, of which Bastien knew; the reader will probably think that nothing would have been easier than to arrest both the men, but if I had done so, and they had denied, I could not bring any proof against them; besides, I could not accuse them of any crime. I did not know whether the widow Houet had been murdered, or whether she had left the country.

I resolved to carefully observe them, without causing their suspicion.

Since the scene of Germiny, Robert, who had succeeded in hiding his place of refuge at Villeneuve-le-Roi from Bastien, lived there in apparent security, when suddenly, in November, Bastien reappeared. He had found the track. This time, he required a yearly income of 1,200 francs; he said that he was tired of roaming about, and that he wanted to settle down, perhaps at Villeneuve-le-Roi, but he did not know that for certain. Robert wavered, but refused; he always

commenced by doing so. Then Bastien began to put his pretensions higher, and presented the blank of an obligation of 40,000 francs. Robert refused to sign it, but he trembled very much. And now, the secret which existed between the two men, was revealed.

‘Murderer! murderer!’ exclaimed Bastien, as loud as he could; ‘do you want me to climb on the roofs, and exclaim: “Robert has assassinated his mother-in-law!”?’

At this cry, Robert, frightened to death, ran down the stairs, where he met his neighbor Fleury, who said to him:

‘Let us go to the police, and have this fellow arrested.’

‘No, no,’ said Robert, stuttering; and going up the stairs again, to the great surprise of Fleury, he went to the attic, descended a ladder which was standing outside, and ran over the fields, while Bastien was in waiting for him in the street.

A few days afterwards, a last step was taken, but this time, by an agent. This man, by the name of Gouvernant, had made acquaintance with Bastien, in prison. The two men had soon understood each other, and Bastien had singularly entrusted everything to Gouvernant, and told him that Robert was at his discretion, on account of a common crime. In 1871, after the interview of Villeneuve-le-Roi, Gouvernant was charged, by Bastien, to take a last, decisive step. He went to Robert, armed with two papers, which, Bastien said, would prove to be irresistible: a note containing some names and addresses; a plan of a garden, in an angle of which a red cross was drawn.

When Gouvernant arrived at Villeneuve-le-Roi, he prepared an ultimatum, and showed the two papers, on seeing which, Robert grew pale, and sank into a chair, exclaiming:

‘Oh! the scoundrel! the rascal! But if I give him all my fortune, who will assure me that he will not go to my family and have me beheaded?’

Gouvernant, seeing that Robert was in a fearful nervous state, left him, telling him to be, in the afternoon, in a neighboring inn. Robert and his wife, however, fled, and set off for Bourgundy, passed Sens, and from there went to Bourbonne-les-Bains. I did not care to follow them, as I thought that I could get the most convincing information from the papers which were in the hands of Gouvernant, and I did not doubt but that this man stood in communication with Bastien, whom, in that case, I could easily trace by arresting Gouvernant; however, I did not want to lose sight of Mr. Robert, and, for that reason, charged one of my assistants with closely following him, and to arrest him whenever he tried to leave the country. If he did not do so, to merely watch him, and only arrest when I sent word. I kept Bastien in view, who, seeing that Robert did not appear at the inn, went to the house, and hearing of his departure, he was furious, took a piece of chalk, and wrote on his door:

‘Robert has assassinated his mother-in-law.’

Now I resolved to arrest Bastien, and send order to my assistant to arrest Robert and his wife, and to dispatch them to Paris.

I went to the inn, arrested him, and searched his pockets. I found a portfolio, containing different important papers.

First, the following note:

‘June, 1860.

Mr. Robert:

‘Hired a cellar, street of the Deux Portes.

‘Street of Vaurigard, a house, with a beautiful fruit garden.

‘During July. Hired, by means of 700 francs, in my name.

‘Afterwards, money received to purchase a shovel, spade, and a sprinkler.

‘On the same day. Bought, near the Gréve, half a measure of lime.’

And on the back of the note:

‘Project of destruction of the widow Houet, for Robert and wife, and for that purpose, one hired, first the cellar, and afterwards the house in the street Vaurigard.’

Another note was found, containing the following:

‘Street of the Deux Portes, No. 81.

‘Street of the Vaurigard, No. 81.

‘Widow Blanchard.

‘Mr. Poisson.

‘Mr. Roussel.

‘Mr. Veron.

‘Mr. Robert, at Dannemoine, near Tonnerre.

‘Mr. Cherest, lawyer at Tonnerre.’

The first of these notes explained the second one.

The portfolio contained, besides, scraps of letters; among others, I read:

‘Unhappy Robert, is it predestined that you should not escape punishment for a revolting crime, as the man told you, whom you have compromised? Did you forget *the street of Vaurigard*, which conceals, in its bosom, the victim, which, sooner or later, will accuse you? *Do not deem yourself safe! Time and decay are not annihilated yet.*’

And further:

‘You and your wife are murderers. Don’t you remember the cellar of the street of the Deux Portes? And the house of the street Vaurigard, did you forget it? And the disappearance of that mother, which took place on the 13th of September, 1860. . . Cowards that you are, you believe that your crime has been expiated. . . But you are on the edge of the scaffold. Your relative, the idiot, will enjoy all your fortune, and you will have nothing but repentance. Now, I am going to take care of your persons, and recommend you to the safe-keeper, as the rascal you are.’

A plan was added to this letter, and this plan was that of the garden of the street Vaurigard. In a corner, a red cross marked a spot and attracted the attention.

Bastien was locked up, and, provided with his notes, I commenced to trace the particulars of the murder, the committal of which I did not doubt any longer.

Calling at the house Vaurigard, No. 81, the widow Blanchard told me that Bastien, a man from the country, had rented the house and the garden, for the quarter of July, 1860. He said that he wished to establish himself, for a while, with his wife, in Paris, so as to be able to supervise the education of their children.

After that, Bastien told to a woman with the name of Saintin, that he had rented the house for a man of the name of Sauze, one of his countrymen, who intended to inhabit it with his daughters. There was no truth, whatever, in his words. At the end of a month, passed in suspicious hesitations, Bastien dismissed Victor Jean, a man who had taken care of the garden to that day; he said that he did so for economy. However, the widow Blanchard began to feel uneasy, as she saw that the house was not furnished, at all; she had been told, notwithstanding the absence of furniture and inhabitants, of visitors during the night, and walks in the garden with candles; the neighbors even expressed suspicion. At the end of three months, nobody put in an appearance, and the widow Blanchard had the house opened in the presence of an officer. The next day, Bastien, who had been warned, returned the keys, saying that his wife had given up her notion of coming to Paris. He paid for a second term, and profited neither by the house nor the fruits of the garden.

I now knew enough, and provided with the map of the garden, I went to the chief, requesting him to give me a writ for searching the garden; he did so, and, at the same time, gave me four men, provided with spades and other tools, to pursue my research.

It was now the 25th of April, 1872.

Early in the morning, I halted, in a carriage, with my four laborers, before No. 81, rue Vaurigard, and entered into a garden, which was rather large, for one in the city; it had many beautiful fruit

trees, and showed that it had been, previously, very well kept, although, at the present time, weeds covered the flower-beds, and the footpaths between them. I consulted the map, and soon found the spot corresponding with that marked on the map with a red cross. I ordered my men to commence digging there.

The men began to turn the ground at a place where the road ran parallel with the wall, and two old peach trees were led along them. After they had been digging for some time, one of the laborers said that his spade sank into an excavation.

Just at that moment, the judge of instruction had arrived, with Robert and Bastien led by four policemen. Bastien wore large, green spectacles, and as soon as the laborer had uttered his exclamation, I saw him startle, and Robert's eyes dashed lightnings at Bastien. The policemen formed half a circle around the two men, keeping hold of them by their arms.

'Now,' I said, to the laborers, 'take the greatest precautions. Advance slowly, step by step, and take care not to destroy anything.'

The laborers began to enlarge the hole which they had made with their spade, with their hands, and brought to daylight a layer of lime, which formed a kind of vault. The spade had entered into that layer. The vault was taken off by crusts, and this operation laid bare a ditch of about four feet and a half deep, and three feet and a half wide.

At the bottom of the ditch, we saw a skeleton, having a rope around its neck. The teeth and hair were marvelously preserved; a golden ring was on one of the fingers, which was deprived of its flesh.

'It is evident,' said Mr. Orfila, the judge of instruction, 'that this corpse has been covered with lime, but they have forgotten to throw water over it. Hence, the lime, instead of consuming the body, as they undoubtedly expected, has preserved it. The flesh has disappeared, but the skeleton is unharmed.'

Now he quietly wrote a few lines in his pocket-book, tore out the leaf, and handed it to one of the policemen, who mounted the carriage, and drove away.

The skeleton was carefully taken out, and laid upon a table in the adjoining room; soon after this was done, a carriage halted before the garden, and three gentlemen stepped out; one of them was a phrenologist, and the others were the doctors Marc and Bois de Loury.

The judge went towards them, and said:

'Gentlemen! I require a miracle from you; you must recompose this body, which has been decomposed by time and lime, and tell me whose the skeleton is. I want you to determine whether all these detached bones belong to the same individual. You will have to do more; you will have to determine to what sex it belongs, the age of the body buried there, and tell me how long it has been in the grave.'

‘My colleagues can easily do that,’ said the phrenologist, Dumoutier; ‘it was not necessary to call me to their assistance, if nothing else has to be done: *i. e.*, the inspection of the head, it may be that you want to know the habitual thoughts; the passions, the virtues and the vices of the soul which has animated the body.’

The physicians exchanged a smile of incredulity at these words of Mr. Dumoutier, but we will soon see that they had no reason to doubt his ability.

The physicians now began to examine the skeleton, and soon agreed, considering the form of the basin, the smallness of the bones, the narrowness of the waist, even the form of the head, that they had before them the skeleton of a woman. That woman had been four feet and eight inches long. The state of the bones of the skull, some sunken joints of the back indicated an advanced age. The hair was white-yellow, and about an inch long; another indication of old age. The teeth were long, and while she was living, they must have seemed very long; the gums had been eaten away by the lime. The nails, which were unmolested, indicated that the party had not done any difficult manual labor; they certainly had been singularly small.

I was exultant, hearing the declaration of the physicians. No doubt any more; this was the widow Houet.

However, the judge of instruction was not satisfied, yet, and said:

‘That is not all, gentlemen. I want you, now, to determine how long she has been dead.’

‘That question is more difficult to solve,’ replied Mr. Bois de Loury. ‘Two or three years ago, I thought that it was an impossibility; at present, new experiments have led me to be able to approximate it.’

A minute examination now ensued, and the physicians decided that the woman had been dead for ten or twelve years. ‘As far as the cause of the death is concerned,’ they added, ‘this is easily determined, as the rope is still fastened around the neck. The woman was strangled. And what is more, all idea of suicide is absurd, for the turns of the rope run towards the back, and downward, which indicates the intervention of the hand of a stranger. At last, in the ditch, the head was lower than the lower limbs, and these limbs were folded up; hence, the corpse must have been buried a few moments after death, before the stiffness of the corpse had ensued.’

‘Well! prisoners Bastien and Robert, you see it; these gentlemen did not even know, before they came here, what was wanted of them; and they have drawn the most striking portrait of your victim. They have brought us vividly on the scene of your crime. With this description before me, I need only look and exclaim: ‘This is the widow Houet!’”

‘Wait,’ said the phrenologist, ‘this name does not signify anything to us, but I am about to tell you what meaning it has to those who have known the human being, before whom we are standing now. The woman whose skull I have now in my hands, was avaricious, defiant, and, above all, easily scared and enraged.’

These details given by Mr Dumoutier, seemed to revive the skeleton, and we almost saw her, before the crime had been perpetrated. For a moment, the illusion was so great that Robert, the man who had not feared to commit a crime so outrageous, stepped backward, and covered his eyes with his hands. Sweat stood beaded on his forehead; his teeth chattered; he looked for something to support himself.

Grasping around, his hand came in contact with the arm of Bastien; he seemed to awake, as a man who has been under the influence of the nightmare, and he pushed back the arm of Bastien, with a movement of disgust, horror, and hatred. Then, making a violent effort, he regained his impassable attitude.

‘The identity is proven,’ said the judge; ‘gentlemen, I asked a miracle of you, and you have done it.’ And then, turning towards me, he said: ‘Mr. Chouard, France owes you great gratitude, for the sagacity, patience, and astonishing prudence with which you have traced this crime. Had you arrested them at once, we probably should have had to dismiss them for want of proofs, and by this time the criminals would have been out of the reach of the law.’*

**We deem it necessary to explain the meaning of these words, which, we fear, will not be understood by those not versed in French law.*

If a criminal has been arrested, and dismissed for want of proofs, the jury gives a verdict of “non-lieu,” which means “not proven.” The criminal, by strength of this verdict, is released, and if no proofs can be brought against him, within ten years after that verdict, the law cannot reach him any more.

We can easily see that if Robert had been arrested immediately after the murder, that is, in 1860, and he would have been released for want of proofs, he would have been now, in 1872, out of the reach of the law.

Before court, Robert, and Bastien, the greatest rogue of both, obstinately denied; the audience gave the greatest signs of rage, and when the skeleton was brought in as evidence against them, the tumult in the audience was so great that the presiding judge had to threaten them that he should have to clear the hall, if such unbecoming ejaculations were repeated.

The proofs were overwhelming; there was no use in denying, any longer, and Robert confessed that he and Bastien had plotted the murder, to get possession of the property of the widow Houet; that Bastien had managed the whole, had rented the house for the purpose; that he had dismissed the gardener, whom he dreaded as a witness against them; that he bought the spades, with which they had digged the grave; that Robert had paid for them, and for the lime, which Bastien had bought in a drug-store; that on the 13th of September, Robert had gone to the widow’s house, had invited her to take breakfast with them; that Bastien had met her before she readied the house; that he had coaxed her to go, for a moment, with him, to see a new house, in which he and Robert intended to open a new wine business; that the widow had reluctantly consented, as she did not approve of their investing money in a business, again, in which Robert had before failed; that Robert had joined them there; that soon a quarrel about money matters ensued; that Robert,

pretending to be in a great rage, had taken hold of his mother-in-law, and that Bastien, at that moment, had thrown the rope around her neck, and soon strangled the old, feeble woman.

Robert declared that, after the deed had been done, he had felt a fearful remorse; that Bastien had laughed at him; had prevailed upon him to take the woman up, and that they had buried her in the garden, covered her with lime, thinking that this would destroy every trace of the crime; that they had forgotten to throw water over the lime, and that Bastien had ruined him by repeated extortions, threatening that he would make a complaint against him.

Bastien obstinately denied having had any part in the murder, but he contradicted himself so frequently that the jury, having no doubt as to the guilt of both parties, returned the verdict 'of guilty of murder in the first degree.'

They were both condemned to the galleys for life, and I had the satisfaction of seeing them transported, soon afterwards, to Toulon, where they are, at the present time, engaged at hard labor."

McWatters, George. *Detectives of Europe and America*. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1877.