

An Official Blunder
by James D. McCabe, Jr.

I HAVE already in a previous story introduced to the readers of "The Flag" my friend Eugene Laromie of the Paris Detective Police, and have endeavored to convey to them some idea of his skill and good qualities as an official. In accordance with a promise made then, I now proceed to lay before them another of his adventures in the discharge of his duties.

Shortly after the establishment of the Empire of his gracious majesty Napoleon the Third, it became necessary for the government to be on its guard, to thwart the plots which Socialists were organizing against it in every part of the country. Those arch enemies of order and established government worked their affairs well, however, and gave the officials no little trouble. As fast as one plot was detected and foiled, another was organized, and for a while the danger seemed to increase daily.

One morning, Eugene Laromie, who had been told by his chief a few days before to hold himself in readiness to obey a summons from the government, received a message to attend a certain high official without delay. Upon repairing to the presence of that personage he was received politely. "Monsieur Laromie," said the official, "the Chief of the Secret Police has designated you as the person most deserving the confidence of the government in conducting certain matters of importance. A conspiracy against the state is known to be in existence. You are desired to unravel it, and I am authorized to say that if you do so to the satisfaction of the emperor, you will be handsomely rewarded. At present we know nothing of the parties concerned in it. Our suspicions have been aroused by this paper, which was found in the street in front of the residence of Count —, the Ambassador of —. You must put us in possession of the remaining facts in the case."

As he spoke he handed the young man a small perfumed sheet of note paper, containing only the sentence, "Rivoli. 48. 10. 6. 53."

"May not this be merely an assignation, instead of evidence of a conspiracy?" asked Laromie, smiling.

"Monsieur Laromie," replied the official, shrugging his shoulders, "the government has an especial reason for believing itself to be right in this matter. It can give you no clue but this paper. It relies upon your sagacity to discover the rest. I have the honor to bid you good morning, monsieur. May success attend you."

Taking the hint so politely given, Laromie left the official to his duties, and started out to think over the task assigned him. It certainly promised to be very difficult. He had only an unintelligible paper to work upon, and the government expected him to discover the whole matter. Laromie was a shrewd man, and now that he felt that his reputation was at stake, he resolved to exert himself to the utmost to succeed.

The paper was found in front of the residence of the Ambassador from —, whose government was known to be hostile to the empire. Remembering this, Laromie proceeded to the office of his chief, and procured a complete list of the entire legation, from the minister himself, down to the humblest attaché. He studied this, and watched the mansion containing the parties for a couple of days, but without being any the wiser for his trouble.

“Why shouldn’t it be an assignation, after all?” he asked himself, going back to his original idea. “Why shouldn’t Rivoli stand for *Rue Rivoli*, and forty-eight for the number of a house on that street? But then what do the other figures mean? Ha! I have it,” a sudden inspiration flashing through his mind. “Ten stands for the tenth of the month, six for the sixth month, which is June, and fifty three for the year. There, I have the whole sentence—Forty-eight Rue Rivoli, tenth of June, 1853. Why, it’s as plain as the nose on a man’s face. It’s an assignation beyond a doubt, and the ministers are worrying themselves over an effort directed at nothing but the peace of some pretty woman. I’ll stake my reputation on it that I am correct. Now to see what sort of a place is number forty-eight.”

Acting upon the impulse which had possessed him, and which was one of those sudden inspirations that so often befall men trained in his profession, Laromie set off for the Rue Rivoli. The more he thought of it, the more he felt convinced he was right. No conspirator would have made use of so simple a cipher, and the perfumed note paper, and the delicate hand in which the sentence was written, made it plain that a woman was concerned in the matter. Reasoning thus in his mind, he entered the Rue Rivoli, and soon came opposite the mysterious number forty-eight.

The house was a large, handsome, private residence. It was evidently the dwelling of some person of wealth, and upon inquiring of a *gendarme* who stood nearby, Laromie learned that the house was the property of Monsieur D’Encourt, a wealthy banker. Being of a very communicative nature, the *gendarme* added that Monsieur D’Encourt was a happy man, inasmuch as he was the husband of the most beautiful woman in Paris. He had married her only a year before when she had been the reigning favorite at the Theatre Comique.

“Ah, there she is now,” he exclaimed, as a carriage drew up before the house.

Laromie was all attention, and placed himself so as to command a good view of the lady as she alighted from her carriage. She deserved all that her humble admirer had said of her. She was regally beautiful. She passed into the house almost immediately, and Laromie, after loitering about for a short while longer, left the street, and was soon in the presence of the chief of police.

“Do you know a Madame D’Encourt of this city?” he asked the chief, carelessly.

“By reputation, only. You know I have to keep myself informed concerning everyone of note here.”

“What is her character?”

“She is a weak, foolish woman, young enough to be her husband’s daughter. She doesn’t care for him at all, and married him for his money.”

“Do you think her capable of conspiring against the government?”

The chief burst into a laugh.

“Nonsense, Laromie. She has too tender a feeling for a certain member of the government to seek to do it any harm. No, my friend; the only intrigues she cares to engage in threaten more harm to the repose of her husband’s mind than to the emperor.”

That evening Laromie posted himself at the principal entrance of the Grand Opera, having learned from Madame D’Encourt’s coachman that she would be there. At the last the lady arrived. Suffering her to pass in to her box, he waited patiently until the close of the performance, and then placing himself immediately behind her, followed her towards her carriage. Just before they reached the street entrance, he took advantage of the crowd around them, and leaning towards her, said, in a low, distinct tone, “*Rivoli; forty-eight; ten; six; fifty-three.*” She uttered a slight scream, and turned sharply around, but the detective had drawn back among the crowd. There was an anxious look on her face as she glanced around. Laromie felt convinced that he had found the writer of the mysterious note.

The next day Madame D’Encourt was informed that a man desired to speak with her. She bade the domestic show him into the room where she was seated. She glanced at him in surprise. His beard was worn much heavier than was the custom in France, and his hair was long and inclined to curl. His forehead was traversed by a deep scar, which terminated in the corner of his left eye, giving him a singular and not very attractive expression.

“You wish to see me, I believe,” said the lady, as he entered.

“Madame is right. I have heard that she wishes to employ a confidential servant—one upon whose discretion she can always rely,” said the man, calmly.

“Well?”

“I have come to solicit the place, feeling sure that I can give entire satisfaction.”

“You? Why, you look like a brigand,” said the lady, laughing. “I should never sleep in peace with you in the house.”

“Nevertheless,” replied the man, calmly, “I do not think madame can do better.”

“What are you good for? What can you do?”

“I can keep a secret, madame. I can see that a lady does not suffer from too much suspicion on the part of her husband,” was the significant reply.

Madame D’Encourt’s color heightened, and she looked at the man searchingly; but he met her gaze calmly and without embarrassment.

“What is your name?” she asked, abruptly.

“Eustache Peloubert.”

“Why do you wish to enter my service?”

“Why does the bright flame draw the poor moth to it, madame?” was the cool reply.

“You can flatter, I see,” said the lady, laughing. “That shows you have tact. But mark me,” she said, sharply, “don’t venture too near the flame. You may meet the moth’s fate.”

The man bowed low, with a singular smile.

“Does madame accept me?” he asked.

“What wages do you expect?”

“I leave that to the bounty of madame.”

“Then listen to me,” said the lady. “I will take you into my service, for I think you will suit me. I will offer you no wages. If you please me you shall be amply rewarded. If I do not like you I will give you nothing, and will also discharge you. Does the arrangement suit you?”

“Perfectly, madame. When shall I commence?”

“Today. You will always be in the neighborhood of this room, unless I give other orders, so that you may be within the sound of my bell.”

“Madame shall be obeyed,” was the reply. And with a low bow the new domestic passed into an adjoining room, leaving Madame D’Encourt to ponder over the strange scene.

As the time wore on she liked her new servant better, and at the close of a week came to the conclusion that she had been very fortunate in securing him.

A few hours after forming this conclusion, she summoned him to her presence, and handing him a letter, said:

“Take this to its address, and wait for an answer.”

Eustache took the letter, and left the room. As he entered the street he glanced at the address, and an exclamation of surprise escaped his lips. He hastily sought the nearest *cafe*, and calling for some boiling water, held the letter over it until the gum by which the envelope was fastened was softened. Then opening it, he took out the enclosure and read it. A strange smile overspread his features, and after a moment's hesitation he copied the letter in a small notebook which he took from his pocket. Then placing the letter back in the envelope, he re-sealed it, and in another hour had placed it in the hands of the party for whom it was intended, and had received instructions to say to his mistress that the matter should be attended to. He delivered the message promptly.

Monsieur D'Encourt had been called away to London on important business, and would be gone several days, madame said to him, when he had delivered the message.

"Eustache," she added, "the gentleman to whom you gave the letter may call this evening on business of importance. You will see that we are not interrupted. Should there be danger of such an occurrence, you will be careful to warn me promptly by three taps on the door of my boudoir."

Eustache bowed.

"Madame's will is my law," he said, quietly.

Late that evening he admitted to the presence of his mistress the gentleman he had seen in the morning.

"You will remember my instructions, Eustache," she said, as he passed out of the room.

Some hours later he was summoned to see that the way was clear for the visitor to depart unobserved. His report was favorable, and he accompanied the gentleman to the door.

"Madame has engaged you as her confidential valet, she tells me," said the stranger, as he paused for a moment at the door.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You can be trusted, I suppose?"

"I think so monsieur."

"And you are not troubled with the faculty of recollecting things and persons that do not concern you." And the stranger dropped a couple of bright new Napoleons into the valet's hand.

"Monsieur," said Eustache, gravely, "what passes in at one ear goes out at the other, or into my pocket."

The stranger laughed, and added:

“Very well, my good man. Act on this principle, and you will find a great deal going into your pocket.”

Eustache bowed low, and the stranger disappeared in the darkness of the street. The valet stood gazing after him for a while, softly clinking the coins in his hand, and laughing in a quiet, meditative way. Then he shut the door, and went up to his chamber, which, owing to his important position, was somewhat better than that occupied by the other domestics.

The next morning Eustache Peloubert left the house at an early hour, and bent his steps in the direction of the Bureau of the Secret Police.

Some hours later his mistress rang for him, but he was not to be found on the place. A few hours later still in the day, as she was impatiently awaiting his return, she was informed that a gentleman desired to speak with her immediately on important business. Very much surprised, she bade the servant admit him to her presence. He was a tall, handsome man, and bore himself with an ease and grace that impressed her favorably.

“Well, monsieur,” she said, “to whom am I indebted for the honor of this visit?”

“My name is Eugene Laromie, madame,” replied her visitor, bowing.

“Well, Monsieur Laromie, what is the business you consider so important?”

“It is a matter that I would rather not trouble you with madame. First let me say that I am one of the Secret Police of Paris.”

Madame D’Encourt looked at him searchingly, and asked, haughtily:

“Well, monsieur, what have I to do with the police?”

“I will explain. It has become known to the authorities that you have been guilty of a great imprudence lately.” The lady started and turned pale. “In short, madame, it is believed that you are engaged in a conspiracy to overthrow the government, and I have special orders from the emperor to investigate the matter.”

“There is some mistake here, monsieur,” said Madame D’Encourt, energetically. “The emperor has no more devoted subject than I am. What cause is there to suspect me?”

“I will tell you. A mysterious note has been found in front of the residence of a foreign minister whose government is known to be hostile to the emperor. This note has been traced to you. A short while ago you employed a domestic for a service which you did not wish to be known. You sent him with a letter to a certain gentleman of this city.”

Madame D'Encourt started violently. "The letter was delivered, but it was first opened and copied."

"The wretch!" exclaimed the lady—"to betray me."

"This letter," continued Laromie, not heeding the interruption, "was, like the first, written in cipher. The suspicions of the government have been very strongly excited against you, madame, and if you can explain this matter, I trust you will do so now. Otherwise it will be my duty to arrest you, and I need not tell you that I would regret that exceedingly. Here is the first letter, and a copy of the second." He laid two papers in her lap, and sat calmly waiting for her to speak.

Madame D'Encourt took the papers and glanced at them. Her neck and face grew crimson, and a faint smile hovered around her lips.

"Monsieur," she said, in a low tone of relief, "I assure you these notes have no connection with a conspiracy. They do not mean the government the slightest harm. I assure you I speak truly."

"I am ready to accept your assurance, madame," said Laromie, "in my private capacity; but I have the emperor's orders to clear up the mystery, and as his servant I am compelled to require a satisfactory explanation."

"But, monsieur," urged the lady, with great embarrassment, "it is very trying to me. These notes concern a private affair of mine. I do not wish to make it public."

"It will not be made public, madame," said the detective. "I will simply report in such a manner as to save you from annoyance. But to do this I must understand the whole matter. If you do not explain to *me*, you will be required to do so to a court of justice."

"Ah, no! Not that. You are cruel, monsieur."

"Madame, I am only obeying the orders of my sovereign."

The lady buried her face in her hands for a moment in extreme embarrassment, and Laromie could see the crimson of her neck and cheeks growing deeper every moment. Suddenly she raised her head.

"Ah, well, then, monsieur," she said, speaking with a great effort, "I will explain to you, and will rely upon your honor as a man to save me from any unfortunate result of this most awkward affair."

He bowed low, and she at once entered upon her explanation, frequently pausing and covering her face with her hands to hide her confusion. When she had finished, Laromie rose.

“This is most awkward, madame,” he said, calmly. “I will make my report at once, and do my best to quiet the matter, so that it shall trouble you no longer.”

He bowed and left the house. Calling a fiacre, he set off for the cabinet of the official who had set him to work to ferret out the plot. Upon sending in his name, he was immediately admitted.

“Well, Monsieur Laromie,” said the official, as he entered, “I trust you have been successful.”

“I have succeeded far better than I expected,” replied the detective, quietly, “and I am now prepared to lay the whole case before your highness.”

“Aha!” exclaimed the duke (for the official was no other than a cabinet minister), rubbing his hands. “Proceed, my young Argus.”

“I suspected at first,” said Laromie, “that the paper was an appointment for an assignation, you remember.”

“Very foolishly, too,” interrupted the duke.

“Well, I started out with this idea, and at last discovered that the paper contained an appointment for a meeting of parties concerned in the affair. Further than this, I learned the locality at which the meeting was to take place, and upon following up this knowledge, discovered that one of the principal parties concerned in the matter is a wealthy and beautiful woman now residing in Paris.

“Of course,” exclaimed the duke, shrugging his shoulders; “always a woman at the bottom of every trouble.”

“Having brought to light one of the parties,” continued Laromie, “I was of course anxious to discover the others. Fortune seemed to favor me. I heard that the lady desired a servant, and as I was unknown to her, and there was no danger of my true character being suspected, I at once resolved to apply for the place. I did so, and was successful.”

“A very shrewd fellow, I confess,” said the duke. “But go on, monsieur, the story interests me.”

“I had not been in her service long,” Laromie went on, “before she entrusted me with a letter for a certain party. I took it and promised to deliver it with promptness. It was addressed to a peer of France, my lord duke, one high in the confidence of the emperor. I suppose it is not necessary to call names?”

“No, Monsieur Laromie,” replied the duke, somewhat quieter than before, “they are not necessary.”

“I opened the letter and read it. It was in cipher, like the first, and like that, an appointment for a meeting. I copied the letter, then sealed it again, delivered it to the personage for whom it was intended, and received his answer, which I transmitted to the lady. That night I admitted the peer to the lady’s presence, and stood guard during the interview. The lady’s husband, my lord, is ignorant of the whole matter, and I was to give warning should he return unexpectedly. When the peer departed, he placed in my hand two Napoleons as the price of my discretion.”

“He was very liberal,” said the duke, dryly.

“Very liberal, my lord duke. This morning I called on the lady in my own true character, and informed her that she was suspected of plotting against the government. She denied it, and frankly explained the whole matter. I have found, my lord, that it is as I at first suspected, merely a love affair, with which the government has no right to meddle, and I promised the lady that it shall be hushed up. I think *you* will confirm my promise.”

While the detective was speaking, the duke had been hurriedly turning over a mass of papers that lay on his table. As Laromie finished, he took up one and glanced at it. Then turning to him, he said, hastily:

“Monsieur Laromie, will you let me see the paper entrusted to your care, and also the copy you made?”

“Certainly, my lord duke,” replied the detective, handing them to him.

The duke glanced at them, and then burst into a laugh.

“This is very awkward, monsieur,” he said, at length. “One makes some strange mistakes in a life-time. You were given the wrong paper. The government is satisfied with your skill in this matter, and now entrusts you with the true conspiracy.” He handed the detective another paper, and went on, “By the by, Monsieur Laromie, I think you told the peer last night, when you helped him to gain the street without notice, that what passed in at one of your ears, went out of the other, and all else into your pocket—in short, that you can keep a secret when it is to your advantage to do so.”

“My lord duke is right.”

“Well, then, Monsieur Laromie, you will receive from the peer whose secret you have discovered, a cheque for ten thousand francs. You will then forget what you have seen. I have the honor to wish you good morning, monsieur.”

Laromie returned the duke’s bow and left the office. The next day he received a cheque for ten thousand francs, signed by the Duke de —, and later an equal amount in bank notes with a note of thanks, written in a woman’s hand, but without a signature.

Two months later he laid before the duke the details of a conspiracy which had been for some time directly encouraged by the ambassador from — and his government.

Flag of Our Union, April 28, 1866