

Seventy Miles An Hour
by James M'Cabe, Jr.

M. Eugene Laromie was not a little startled one bright, clear morning, to receive an order commanding him to repair immediately to the Bureau of the Chief of the Secret Police of Paris. I say he was startled, not because such an occurrence was unusual, but because M. Laromie had been, for several days, indulging in what we Americans call "a spree," and his guilty conscience suggested to him that his chief was about to bring him to account for it. Nevertheless, such a summons is something that a French official cannot disregard, and without delay he hastened to the bureau, and without delay he hastened to the bureau, and was at once admitted to the presence of the chief.

"Good morning, Laromie," said the chief, pleasantly. "You look downcast. No wonder. For three days you have had too much wine in you. Ah, my friend, you see I am quite a good detective! I can tell you how you have spent every moment of those three days."

"Monsieur," said Laromie, bluntly, "one must relax his self-restraint sometimes."

"True, my friend. I have no idea of censuring you. I only wish to warn you to be more careful in the future, as those above me may not think so lightly of your indiscretions as I do. Enough of this, however. I wish to know if your head is clear enough to undertake a most difficult case?"

"I think so," replied Laromie, laughing. "I would not have returned to duty, if it had not been."

"Well, then, my friend, there has been a startling discovery in the last few hours. You know Monsieur Vilele, the banker?"

"Yes."

"What is your opinion of him?"

"I know nothing of him by my own experience," answered Laromie. "He has the reputation of being one of the most upright and reliable bankers in Paris."

"Exactly," said the chief, coolly; "and if he had not fallen into trouble, he would, no doubt, have died an honest man. But know, monsieur, that this excellent banker has been terribly imprudent of late. He has speculated heavily in the stocks, and has lost. Two days ago, he received two millions of francs belonging to the government, but, instead of applying them to the purpose indicated in his instructions, he has disappeared, and the government is unable to discover either the man, or any trace of its money."

"You astonish me!" exclaimed Laromie.

"Monsieur Laromie," said the chief, shrugging his shoulders, "I thought you a man of too much experience to be astonished at anything. However, let me resume my story. Monsieur Vilele has

disappeared. We have reason to believe that he is still in Paris. The government is extremely anxious to discover him and bring him to justice. I have suggested you as the best person to conduct the search for him, and have received orders to place you upon it at once. Here is a paper signed by the Minister of the Interior, commanding all persons to assist you, in whatsoever way you may desire. You will have a difficult task, I think; but it will bring you a plenty of honor, if you succeed. Do you object to undertaking it?"

"Not at all. It is my duty to obey all orders of this kind; and besides, the more difficult a case is, the better I like it."

"Very good, then, monsieur. I will so inform the minister. You will do well to lose no time, as Monsieur Vilele has already the start of you."

Laromie left the bureau, and, as was his custom when placed in charge of a difficult undertaking, strolled towards the gardens of the Tuilleries, to collect his thoughts and ponder over his plan of operations. There was something about the place, and in the fresh and cheering shrubbery with which it was surrounded, that seemed to inspire him. It was lucky for him that he went there on this occasion, as the sequel will show.

He was sitting on a bench in one of the main avenues, with his head resting on his hands, buried in profound thought. The rustling of a dress aroused him, and looking up half absently, he saw a lady pass by, leisurely. She did not seem to notice him, but walked on, carelessly. He sat for some time, watching her, until she had almost disappeared in the distance, and then, for the first time, noticed a small piece of paper lying on the ground just in front of him. Merely from curiosity, he picked it up and opened it. It was simply a note, and ran as follows:

"DEAR MARIE:—At nine tomorrow night.—V."

He was quite sure that the lady had dropped the paper, and now he remembered that as she passed him she had drawn her handkerchief from her pocket. In this way, no doubt, she had thrown out the paper. Laromie rose from his seat and hurried in the direction the lady had taken, intending to return the note to her; but she had passed out of sight, and, after a fruitless walk of a few minutes, he turned back towards the place he had left. As he did so, he glanced at the note again, and this time the signature attracted his attention.

"V," he exclaimed, suddenly pausing in his walk. "That's the first letter in the name of the man I am looking for. What if this note should have been written by M. Vilele? It's a fortunate thing that I thought of it, as I can settle the matter in a few minutes."

He left the gardens, and proceeded to the house which M. Vilele had occupied for his bank. The head book-keeper and one or two of the clerks were still there, trying to arrange the accounts of the house in an intelligible form, before surrendering them to the government, which had demanded them, in virtue of its being the principal sufferer. Laromie informed the book-keeper that he was authorized by the Minister of the Interior to ask for a specimen of M. Vilele's handwriting.

“Anything,” he added; “an old letter, or anything that will give me a correct idea of the writing.”

The book-keeper handed him a letter which the banker had left unfinished on his desk, on the day of his disappearance. Placing it by the side of the note he had found, the detective compared the two, closely. There could be no mistake; the same person had written both notes. Turning to the book-keeper and handing him the note he had found, he asked if he recognized the writing. The man glanced at it, and then flushed darkly.

“It is Monsieur Vilele’s writing,” he said.

“Do you know the person to whom it is addressed?” asked Laromie.

“To my cost, monsieur. She is a very beautiful woman, and but for her this house would have been in a prosperous condition, and I should not have been thrown out of employment. She turned Monsieur Vilele’s head, from the first; and now you see the result.”

“Do you think Monsieur Vilele and she are in communication with each other?”

“It is likely. This note would seem to indicate it.”

“Can you tell me where the lady lives?”

“Not at present. If monsieur will call at eight o’clock tonight, I shall be able to inform him.”

“Very well. I will be here precisely at eight.”

Laromie was very well satisfied with his morning’s work. The note he had found had given him a clue to the mystery, and by following it closely, he might be able to accomplish his task. At eight o’clock he returned to the bank, and found the book-keeper waiting for him. The latter had succeeded in learning the residence of the woman, and gave Laromie explicit directions how to find it. Without delay, the detective set off for the place. It was in a distant part of the city, and it was after nine o’clock before he reached it. He rang the bell, and the porter appeared. In a sleepy voice, he asked Laromie what he wanted.

“Does Madame R— live here?” asked the official.

“She did live here until this afternoon, monsieur,” was the reply. “But she has gone to England, and will not return again.”

“I must search the house,” said Laromie, sternly. “I am an officer of the law.”

“Monsieur is at liberty to do so,” said the porter; “but he will find that I speak the truth. Madame left for Calais this afternoon.”

It was evident that the man spoke the truth, and Laromie felt that it would be losing time to search the hours. With an oath he turned from the door, and hailed a fiacre which chanced to be

passing. Springing in, he ordered the man to drive with speed to the railway station. As the vehicle rattled over the paved streets, he settled himself back in his seat, and commenced to think over what had happened. Madame R— had doubtless escaped him, unless he could telegraph to Calais to have her detained. That seemed hardly probable, as the train left early in the afternoon, and she was now, beyond a doubt, almost safe in England. Still, the effort must be made. Then he thought of the note.

“At nine tomorrow night,” he muttered, recalling its contents. “What can that mean? I am certain the note was written yesterday. Perhaps it was for her to meet him at Dover, at nine tonight. That seems a very plausible conjecture.”

While he was engaged in these reflections, the carriage drew up to the station. Handing the driver his fare, he passed in, and demanded to see the superintendent. That official appeared, and Laromie stated his business, which was to learn whether Madame R— had started for Calais that afternoon. The ticket-seller was called, and he remembered selling a ticket to London to a lady answering to the description given by Laromie. It was very unfortunate, the superintendent said, but it would be useless to telegraph to Calais to stop the lady, as she was, by that time, safe in England, and on her way to London, having left Paris at one o’clock in the afternoon.

Laromie was thoroughly vexed, and, in a not very pleasant voice, asked the ticket-seller if he had sold a ticket to anyone answering to M. Vilele’s description, which he gave him. No such person had purchased a ticket.

“Who is the person, monsieur?” asked the superintendent.

“Monsieur Vilele, the banker.”

“What do you want with him?” I have a reason for asking this question.”

“I have orders from the government to arrest him.”

“*Diable!*” exclaimed the superintendent, starting to his feet. “This explains the whole matter. Monsieur Vilele left here at a little after nine o’clock tonight, in a special train for Calais.”

“Who dared allow him to leave Paris?” cried Laromie, furiously.

“I allowed him, monsieur,” said the superintendent. “Monsieur Vilele’s passport was correct, and I have never heard anything to cause me to think it improper for him to leave Paris.”

“True,” muttered the detective. “This comes of the government keeping the affair secret. What reason did Monsieur Vilele give for wanting a special train?” he asked, turning to the official.

“He said he had a large amount of money at stake in London, and that it was necessary for him to reach there by morning. He paid a thousand francs for a locomotive and one car.”

“Monsieur,” said Laromie, “my orders are positive to arrest the man. I cannot disregard them. I am authorized by the Minister of the Interior to demand your assistance. I must go in pursuit of this man.”

“How can it be done?” asked the superintendent. “I am ready to comply with any demands you may make upon me.”

“You have a double track to Calais?”

“Yes.”

“How many trains are on their way here by the upper track tonight?”

“Two. One will start from Calais at midnight.”

“Telegraph to them to remain over at such stations as you think best, until I pass them. Then give me the best locomotive you have, and I will give chase on the upper track.”

“Would it not be well to telegraph them at Calais to arrest him?”

“No. He might escape. I am confident of overhauling him in time to prevent his leaving the country.”

“He has a fast train, monsieur.”

“Perhaps so, but I shall catch him. How long has it been since he left?”

“The train started at a quarter after nine,” said the agent, looking at his watch, “and has been gone an hour and ten minutes, making it now twenty-five minutes after ten. But come, Monsieur Laromie, you have no time to lose.”

Laromie followed the agent through the station to where the locomotives were kept. One of the largest and best, which was to take the midnight train from Paris already had steam up, and Laromie at once decided to start with it. Some little arrangements had to be made by the engineer before they could begin their journey, and it was fully eleven o’clock when everything was declared in readiness. As Laromie mounted the platform where the engineer stood awaiting him, he repeated his caution to the superintendent to be sure to have the up trains warned to keep out of the way.

“Fear nothing, monsieur,” was the reply. “You will have a clear road. May success attend you.”

The next moment the rush of steam through the cylinders, and the creaking of the ponderous driving wheels announced that the chase had begun.

“They are an hour and three quarters ahead of us,” said Laromie to the engineer. “We must make good time to catch them.”

The engineer smiled.

“They will not travel as fast as we shall,” he said; “and, besides, the ‘Hercules’ is the best locomotive on the line. You were fortunate in securing it, monsieur.”

There were only three persons on the locomotive, the detective, the engineer, and the stoker. It was a powerful engine, and being unencumbered with a train of carriages, had nothing to impede its flight. The last barrier was past, the city was left behind, and the speed of the engine was increased. They rattled furiously through the suburban towns, never pausing for a moment, their coming having been already announced by the telegraph all along the road. The railway officials at each station turned out to watch the novel sight of a down train on the upper track, unable to account for the phenomenon. A dash and roar mingled with a shrill scream from the whistle, and the locomotive appeared to their astonished gaze, dashing along at a rate far greater than was permitted to the fastest express train on the line. The next instant it was gone, and when its chattering had died out in the distance, they commenced to speculate at random as to the meaning of this strange affair.

Meanwhile the iron horse was dashing on, with the speed of the wind. It was a lovely night. The clear starlight made every object distinctly visible, and the air was cool and bracing. Laromie watched the steam-gage closely. The indicator rose higher and higher as the pressure of the steam became greater, and the pace of the iron horse grew faster. Here a river flashed for a moment in the starlight, and the iron wheels crashed over the bridge, and the next instant it was lost in the gloom. There the lights of a town glittered brightly, and then seemed to vanish in the unearthly shrieks of the flaming monster as it sped through their midst. On, on they dashed, the engineer standing motionless, with his hand on the lever, and his swarthy face lighted up with an unearthly glare by the red flames of the furnace. On, on, on, and they were steadily gaining on the fugitive. Twice they stopped for water and fuel, and each time heard news that cheered them.

Laromie stood like one entranced. The novelty of the situation, the bewildering speed with which he was whirled through the country, completely bewildered him, so that he took no heed of the flight of time. The cool night breeze swept by him with such force that it almost took his breath; the trees of the forests seemed to be one unbroken wooden wall; the towns were a confused line of white and flame, and the rivers were but silvery flashes across the dark surface of the pathway of the iron horse. He had never witnessed such a scene before. The locomotive shook like an aspen under the rapid motion of the machinery, and he feared that it might not be able to continue such an exertion, and that the banker might escape him, after all.

“Monsieur,” said the engineer, to whom he mentioned his fear, “dread nothing. The ‘Hercules’ is a giant, and will not disappoint you. I am well pleased with its behavior so far. We shall be in Calais as soon as our friends in the special train.”

At A— they stopped again for fuel and water. There, to his great joy, Laromie learned that the special train was only ten minutes ahead of them. They had indeed made good time, and the engineer had not exaggerated the merits of the “Hercules.” Now they seemed to fly through the

country. In half an hour the engineer touched Laromie, and pointed towards the front of the locomotive. A small red light some distance in the advance was all that could be seen.

“It is the special train,” said the engineer, quietly, as he opened the valve still wider. The “Hercules” literally jumped forward. The light in the distance grew brighter and larger, and soon the train itself could be seen distinctly. Ten minutes more, and they were near enough to distinguish objects on it by the light of the lamps in the carriage and locomotive.

Laromie could see the compartment nearest the engine was the only one occupied, and in a few minutes he noticed that the attention of the solitary passenger was attracted by the approach of the “Hercules.” He could see him throw open the window, and gaze into the darkness. Then the window at the end which communicated with the locomotive was opened, and he could see the passenger gesticulating vehemently to the engineer. Immediately the train shot forward.

“They will escape us,” cried Laromie, furiously. “They are increasing their speed.”

“Monsieur,” said the engineer, as quietly as ever, “you are on the ““Hercules.” Fear nothing.”

He opened the valve to its fullest extent as he spoke, and again stood motionless and silent, with his eyes fixed on the gage, which now clearly indicated that there was danger if this furious speed was kept up. It would not be needed much longer. They were rapidly nearing Calais, and already they could smell the fresh sea-breeze as it came over the country from the channel. Laromie now noticed that the special train was slackening its speed. In a moment the “Hercules” flew by it.

“They have reversed their course,” he cried. “They are going back, and we shall lose them, after all.”

“*Ciel!*” exclaimed the engineer. “They will be ruined. The train we passed an hour ago is coming on right after them, and they will meet it before they can reach a station. What madness! They will be dashed to pieces, for a collision is inevitable.”

He turned his attention to checking his own headway, and, upon accomplishing this, hurried back after the special train, whose lights had now disappeared in the distance. It was a thrilling moment. Those on the engine knew that the object of their pursuit was doomed, and Laromie felt that the banker would escape him, after all, for it was more than probable that he would be killed in the collision. At that moment the thought flashed across his mind that he was forcing M. Vilele upon his death. But no, he reasoned, he was simply obeying his orders, and the banker had taken upon himself the responsibility of running back upon the wrong track. He could only abide the issues, feeling that he was simply doing his duty.

The lights of the doomed train now came in sight, and the “Hercules” dashed on even faster. The hope of the engineer was to overtake the train and warn it of its danger. They were running through an open plain, at the further end of which they could distinguish the heavy outlines of a forest. There was not more than a mile between the two locomotives, and it seemed not unlikely that the warning would be given in time.

Vain hope! At this moment a dull red glare shot up from the line of the distant woods. It grew brighter and brighter every second.

“*Mon Dieu!*” cried the engineer, “we are too late. It is the night express. They are lost.”

The speed of the “Hercules” was slackened, and the whistle blown violently to warn all parties of their danger. They saw it at last, but not in time to avert it. A minute more and there was a crash and a shock, which threw the special train entirely off the rails, and broke the locomotive and forward carriage of the express train to pieces, killing and wounding nearly a dozen persons. When the “Hercules” came up, the scene was frightful beyond description.

Laromie’s first care was to spring from the engine, and search for M. Vilele. Hastening to where the ruins of the special train were heaped, he saw that his search was ended. The carriage had been entirely demolished, and the banker, who was its only occupant, was lying amid the wreck, dead, and horribly mutilated. The engineer had both legs broken, and the stoker had been killed. Securing the engineer of the special train, whom he justly regarded as responsible for the catastrophe, Laromie mounted the “Hercules” again and hastened to the nearest station, from which relief was dispatched to the scene of the accident.

The engineer was brought to trial for the murder of the persons killed by the collision, as by running back on the wrong track he had violated both the laws of the road and country. He stated that M. Vilele upon seeing the “Hercules” approaching them, had supposed that he was pursued, and had offered him six thousand francs if he would reach the station they had last passed before the arrival of the night express train. He had tried to do so, tempted by the large reward, and the collision had ensued. The engineer was found guilty, and duly executed.

Flag of Our Union, June 16, 1866