

The Cork Finger

THE READER is not very much advanced in years who recalls the period when the Albion Hotel in this city was one of the most popular resorts we had. It was under the Major's roof that one found comfortable apartments, a most unexceptionable *cuisine*, and a cellar stocked with the choicest vintages; and for many years the aroma of the cigars which came from the Albion could almost be distinguished, so rich and fragrant were the brands.

It was the month of August, 18—, just as twilight was fading into darkness, that I entered the office, to meet, as every one did, with a pleasant salutation from the most even-tempered of hosts. Near the window sat a rather good looking man, about forty years of age, evidently a foreigner. As I passed him our eyes met, and the thought struck me that he was not a stranger to me, though where to place him I was unable. I glanced at the hotel register and read over the list of arrivals for a week, when I descried in the usual style of French calligraphy the name of Legendre, Paris. Years previous I had been in Paris, and one of my business acquaintances bore that surname. The age of the stranger prevented it from being him, but there was a family look which was not to be evaded. As I looked I could trace a strong resemblance to my former friend, and I solicited an introduction from the Major, and before I ventured to inform my new acquaintance of my suspicions, I endeavored to ascertain the cause of his visit. He was communicative and intelligent upon every point, but when I attempted to draw him out as to the purpose of his trip, he simply evaded it by an ingenious turn or some sparkling remark. I ventured to inform him that though he spoke most excellent English, I was not entirely acquainted with his language, and I gradually spoke of my friend bearing his name, whom I had known in Paris.

“Anatole Legendre?” he said.

“Yes—Rue St. Augustine.”

The electric fluid of his nature was started instantaneously, and as he grasped my hand and shook it with all the vigor that he could have shown had he found a long lost brother, he exclaimed, while the tears stood in his eyes:

“You are the only person who really knows me on this continent.”

A few inquiries after his brother, and some pleasant recollections of him which I related, established the *entente cordiale*, and we walked toward the Common, he giving his tongue a license, which, as he confessed, it had not known since he left Paris.

My natural curiosity was not yet satisfied as to the cause of his visit, and as we reached the m[all] and took a seat to finish our cigars, I inquired the probable length of his stay in Boston.

“Uncertain,” he replied, and saying which he indulged in a few minutes of brown study, as if discussing in his own mind the propriety or feasibility of some mental query which had suggested itself, I puffed away, for I know that when a Frenchman ponders, which is very rarely, he dislikes to be disturbed. He finally solved the doubt, and turning to me, he said:

“I am an agent of the Paris police.”

As I had committed no crime in Paris, I was not alarmed at this abrupt announcement, and my friend was evidently surprised that I did not show some strong emotion. I contented myself by remarking:

“Ah! indeed, and what brought you here?”

“Well, to the truth, I came out here after a counterfeiter, and possibly you can help me to find him.”

“And when found you can do nothing. You cannot arrest him.”

“True, but he has evidence which I might buy, which would be valuable. I want to purchase certain secrets which he possesses. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I can imagine such a thing as on the list of probabilities, but I confess I do not understand.”

He had another brief spell of self-interrogation, which I allowed him to enjoy, for I knew his story would be mine, if I only gave him time enough. As a bit of advice, *en passant*, let me suggest that one who attempts to extract information from a Frenchman, by what is called “pumping,” makes a poor investment. Wait for a rabbit to come out of his hole, if you wish to catch him, for if you ask him to come out he will only burrow deeper. Let a Frenchman think he possesses a secret which you desire to obtain, and he is the most adroit man in concealing even his own knowledge of it, that the world affords; but let him talk long enough and he will tell you his family history from the day his grandfather first saw light, and he will not omit even the peccadilloes of some maiden who could not resist the handsome Aid-de-Champ of General So so—no, not even if he confesses that you behold in the person before you the result of that unfortunate liaison.

“Well,” said my new friend, “I think that the man I want to see is or has been in Boston. I traced him to New York, thence to Montreal, and then I have positive information that he came here, but that is all I know.”

“But, after you find him, what if he refuses to disclose his secret? If it is a secret worth having, it may be worth his keeping. If there are others interested, others may possibly pay him for his silence.”

“That is possible, but, in his case, not probable. He is a rich counterfeiter in his expectations, but if he is suffering for means he may divulge.”

“I don’t understand your meaning.”

“That is true, for you do not know the case; if you did you would understand the case very clearly.”

“I have no doubt I should. But in what can I be of service to you?”

“Possibly you may have seen him. He is a tall, handsome young fellow, about twenty-eight, with light eyes, and wore, when at home, a thin moustache. He walks a little lame, and when he left Paris, six or eight months ago, could speak but very little English.”

“And,” I added, “he lost, at some period of his life, the upper-joint of his fingers on his left hand, I think.”

“Great heavens!” exclaimed the agent in a whisper, “and where is he?”

“That is my secret.”

“Do you know him, and will you refuse to tell me where he is? Possibly you will warn him. Oh! fool that I was to confide in one whom I knew but an hour; but then, I thought—but I know you won’t hazard every hope I have in life by betraying the brother of your old friend, will you, can you?”

I was afraid of a scene. I appreciated his fears; and though I had really told the truth, and had not made a lucky guess, I did not possess so much information as he anticipated, for in another second he promised me gold and his eternal love if I would show him where the counterfeiter was. I pledged him all the assistance in my power, and he was quieted. He proposed our immediate return to the hotel; and, ascending to his room, he showed me a photograph of the object of his search.

“I cannot swear it is the same, but it is wonderfully like the man I met.”

“You are sure about the finger?”

“I will swear to that.”

He immediately took from his valise a glove, and in the top of the third finger, there was a bit of cork, neatly adjusted, which gave to it a perfect filling, so that it resembled, except the nail, a glove upon a man’s finger. Here was a singular position. Romance and plot for a comedy at home.

“Take a seat, my friend, and I will tell you the story briefly.”

We pulled our chairs toward the window, and, looking out into the street, after he had lowered the gas, he asked my attention. I gave it, though I confess I was confused, for it appeared more like a dream or an imaginary tale than the reality, for we were in the matter-of-fact City of Notions, and I could scarcely realize, as I looked out upon familiar objects, that I had become a participator in a life drama which I had not dreamed of an hour before.

“The circumstances of this case,” said the agent, “are these: M. de Greme is a retired millionaire, and is now acting President of the Bank of France. For many years he has enjoyed the confidence of the government and the bank, and no man stands higher. His son, Alfred de Greme, the young man whom I am in search of, is a highly educated, talented man, who passed through the usual dissipation of a wealthy young Parisian without losing that nobility of character which many too often sacrifice. A year ago he became engaged in marriage to the daughter of a rich retired merchant of Marseilles, and the wedding was to have [taken] place when I was called upon by the bank [to aid] in ferreting out the perpetrators of a...-puted counterfeit upon our bank...-fied our force of detectives for...

...,” I remarked. “I thought ...[perfect].”¹

...[counterfeits] appear but occasionally, and then only in comparatively small amounts. It is rarely that over ten or twenty thousand francs are put out at one time. They are so nicely executed that even the bank has been deceived, and though new plates, private numbers and new papers have been procured, still there is an annual loss to the bank, which prefers, even when detected, to pay them rather than throw distrust upon their bills and create a panic. As I remarked, I was called in, having shown some skill in detecting crime, and I traced the issuing of one of these bills to young Greme. There was not a doubt of his guilt, and when I informed his father of the fact, he could not believe it, but that night he searched his son’s writing desk, and there were five in a single envelope and two in his own *portemonnaie*. In my presence the father charged the son with the deed, but he maintained he was innocent. He was arrested, and while in jail a letter came from the father of his intended, who, having been informed of this guilt, though the affair was not made public, refused him his daughter’s hand, and, though she could not but follow the dictates of her reason, which such overpowering proof, she said—for I was the letter—that she still hoped that he was innocent, and she felt that one day perhaps he might be able to prove it. It was a heavy blow for the poor boy. He became delirious, and with the consent of the authorities he was allowed to leave the country. His father had him conveyed, when he was able to travel, to England, but it was only after many weeks’ travel that I found he came to this country.”

“Why did you not seek information of his father?”

“Ah! that is the point. After young Greme had been gone some months, the new bills were counterfeited.”

“And the director himself is suspected?” I said.

“Hush!” said the agent, as if afraid some hidden spy would leave that moment the quiet city of Boston and inform the Parisian millionaire of the web which was weaving for him. “Hush! I found one of the new counterfeits on him. He does not know it yet. The bank knows it, and he is watched day and night. It is feared that the wrong man has suffered; or, what is still more

¹ Note: any text in brackets is lost from damage but assumed from context. Any ellipses denote significant chunks missing, making reproduction without a new text impossible.

probable, that to save his father from deep degradation he suffered the imputation, and left, that he might show his devotion.”

“But if this was the case,” I suggested, “Would not the father send him remittances!”

“It is not known that he ever sent him anything. The mails have been watched, but there are no doubt others in the plot, and if I could only see young Greme, I could so act upon him that I should know his secret. Where did you see him, and how recently?”

“I am sorry my information is only likely to discourage you,” I observed, “for if the young man saw was really the object of your search, he has gone to England.”

“Explain, explain, my dear fellow?”

“Well, to relieve your mind, it was about three weeks ago that I noticed a young man answering your description walking around the city, apparently engaged in no business and intent only upon killing time. He walked, as you say, a little lame. One morning I entered a furnishing store to purchase a pair of gloves, and I found him engaged in the same business, and as he extended his hand I accidentally glanced at it and noticed the top of one of his fingers was gone. A day or two after, I met him again, looking into the window of a paint shop, and he wore the dark-green gloves which he had selected when I met him. I glanced at his hand to know what disposition he had made of the end of the glove-finger which was missing, but I could not detect any difference between his hands. These little incidents naturally fixed the young man in my mind, and I next saw him on board the steamer which sailed for Europe. I was at the wharf to bid a friend farewell, and as the boat was leaving the dock there were exchanges of adieus between those on board and the many collected on the wharf. I saw my unknown among the rest, and as I caught his eye, he seemed to recognize me as one of his street acquaintances and smiled. I ventured to wave my hand and shouted ‘bon voyage,’ which he acknowledged by a touch of his hat, and the steamer went on her way, and that is all I know of the young man.”

“He had a very pleasant smile, had he not?”

“Yes, and his whole manner was very distingue.”

“Did you hear him speak?”

“Only a few words when he was buying his gloves, and then he spoke in a very low voice?”

“There can be no doubt it was he,” said the agent, “and he has no doubt gone to England.”

I suggested the possibility of his stopping in Halifax, but he thought that he had returned to Europe, and the next steamer which left for England carried back the French police agent, who promised on leaving to let me hear the denouement of the drama. I waited patiently many weeks for the hoped-for letter, but months passed away, and year followed year, and no tidings came. Occasionally, as the smoke of my cigar curled into the air, I thought of my adventure, but it was nearly effaced from my recollection, when but a few days since a letter reached me, which gives

the sequel to the episode which I have related. I translate the letter, as it affords all the information I possess of the affair.

PARIS, Dec. 21, 1861.

MY DEAR FRIEND—I hope this may find you in good health, and in the enjoyment of the world's prosperity. How many years have fled since I left you in Boston? Ah, time flies. What have you thought of me? I promised to write and inform you the result of my search after young Greme. Well, it had no result till quite recently. You did see Greme, as you supposed; he remembered very well the incidents you related, and especially your adieu to him as he left in the steamer. But let me be a little more systematic in my statement of facts.

When I left you I visited England, but could not find young Greme. I returned to Paris, and was ordered to investigate the case further, but the more I sought for traces, the less it appeared to me that M. de Greme and his son were guilty. In course of time I became satisfied that all suspicion of either had been unjust, but how to account for their possession of the counterfeits? It puzzled all our force. Our shrewdest detectives were engaged. They could not solve the problem, and we even called in the aid of the most expert London detectives. But it was useless. For a space of three years there was no new emissions of the bills, and the whole question gradually lost all interest. About this time M. de Greme, who still held his official position in the bank, was taken seriously ill and as the doctors said he had but a short time to live, the government granted him permission to send for his son, whom it appears he had constantly corresponded with, and who was then residing in a small town in Scotland. The father died, and young Greme, his only child, became his heir, thus inheriting an immense fortune. Soon after he had again settled in Paris he sent for me, and then asserted his entire ignorance of the whole charge, and though he was aware the bank had long since been convinced of his innocence, he was anxious, if money could do so, to procure some explanation of the fact of his having in his possession the counterfeit bills. He assured me he received them from his father. This surprised me, and again, ah! shame upon me, thought it possible that the father was after all the culprit. I did not want to tell him my suspicion, for he loved the memory of his father, and so I loved him. Years passed away and no new counterfeits appeared. M. de Greme lived a retired life, doing great good with his means. He avoided the frivolities of life, and gave his attention to scientific pursuits and literature. I often felt the loss of his intended wife weighed heavily upon him. In his room there hung a portrait of a lady, who I suspected was the only love he ever had. He appeared to lead, if such a thing is possible, a melancholy, happy life, conscious of his own integrity, but not forgetful of the suspicions of the past.

But the cloud has passed over, and it is now broad daylight with him. The whole mystery is cleared up, and this is how it came about.

On the first of this month I was sent for, and I found him in a state of great excitement. He was delirious with joy. As I entered he said:

“I have sent for you because you know my history. I have many true friends who would no doubt serve me, but I intrust myself to you, for various reasons. This morning I received this letter. Read it.”

MARSEILLES, Nov. 28, 1861

If Alfred de Greme still cherishes for his early love that affection which she never for a single instant has withheld from him, let him be assured that circumstances which have transpired within a few hours, though sad in themselves, have removed all suspicions from her mind of the possibility of his having perpetrated any act which bore trace of guilt. If he still entertains any love or any desire to renew his former friendship, let him come at once to

MARIE.

P.S.—My father died yesterday.

“I have waited for that message for these many years. I knew it would come. I have kept myself informed of her fidelity to me, and at last I am rewarded,” he exclaimed.

“And she evidently has not been ignorant of your position to life,” I added. “But the postscript is singular. It merely records the death of her father.”

“She is in grief, evidently, and I must leave at once,” he replied, “and you must go with me, for I am sure that she has discovered some explanation of the mystery of the bank bill, or she would never have sent for me.”

“You don’t appear to understand it, but I do,” I remarked.

“How? What do you mean?”

“It may be only my suspicions, and I will keep them to myself for the present, if you will allow me.”

A rapid trip brought us to Marseilles, and we attended the funeral of the father of Marie. It the evening we were shown by her to a private room in the attic, and there, covered with dust and rusty for want of use, were the implements of a most expert counterfeiter. For years, unknown to any one, and unsuspected by all, he had carried on his trade. He had made his confession to Marie, and he confessed that he had changed the money in Alfred’s pockets after he had retired at night for the false issues. The bill found on the elder Greme had, no doubt, been conveyed there by him, as Alfred’s father visited Marseilles shortly after the affair. He died, however, poor and miserable at last. I have not attempted to describe the scene. You can’t imagine it. It was Marie’s intention to enter a convent, but Alfred has dissuaded her from such a life, and the altar will soon witness their union.

I must close my epistle, already too long. You will see in the papers various versions of this affair, one of which states the counterfeiter was arrested and is now in prison, but you know you can rely upon this from

Yours, truly,

EMILE LEGENDRE

What an improbable story, I hear exclaimed by some of my readers. Do you think so? And why? Because it don't seem true that the Albion Hotel should have any connection with a counterfeiter in Marseilles. It is not so strange, however, when we reflect upon it, as the fortunes of the Emperor Napoleon. He has walked through the streets of Boston when he was quite uncertain where he was to obtain means for another week's lodging. If you do not believe the story, go look at the register of the Albion, and ask the Major if such an incident as that I relate in the first paragraph is not a positive fact. The room in which I passed the evening with the agent of the French police was recently occupied by my bachelor friend, Colonel ——, and when I called there occasionally, I always saw Legendre taking from his valise the glove with a bit of cork in the finger.

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