

A Detective in Danger

Brogniart, the Sub-Brigadier—From Police Archives

In 1868, the *police de surete*, or detective police of Paris, comprised one officer of the peace, the chief of the service, four office clerks, four chief inspectors, six brigadiers, six sub-brigadiers, one hundred and seventeen inspectors and seven auxiliaries—145 persons all told. One of the oldest and most efficient members of the force was the sous-brigadier, Hector Brogniart, a bachelor of fifty years of age, who had come up from the Mimizan in 1833 to seek his fortune, had served five years in a line regiment and then gone into the police as a sergent de ville. In the police he had been ever since, in one capacity or another, and no man on the force was more fully and implicitly trusted by his superiors.

Brogniart had very comfortable lodgings in the fourth story of a large, old-fashioned, rambling hotel garni of the Rue Neuve St. Augustin—a quaint, many-floored, many-roomed house, with crooked stairways, dim corridors leading off no one knew where, waxed floors above and tiled floors below, a table d’hote of its own, and a comical little journeyman tailor for concierge, whose mother, an old, white-haired, bent woman, still wore the wooden shoes she had brought up with her from Dauphine in the flush of her youth—the quaintest old hotel, with its narrow back stairways leading down to a flag-paved court, on which looked some rusty iron-barred windows of ancient stables, now converted onto storage warehouses for slow-selling goods.

Brogniart had lived in the house for twenty years, and he knew everybody in it. Florentin, the concierge, Mme. Guignan and her snuffy spouse, the proprietor, the great jewel merchant, M. Anquetil, of the first floor, M. Povuelais, the artist and caricaturist, even little Mlle. Lillebon, the seamstress who sang so pleasantly by the window in her ten-by-six room in the garret. Everybody knew Brogniart, too, and esteemed him; and indeed, he was a good model of deportment and morality. Rather a stiff, precise sort of man, with a severely decorous face, smooth shaven, and English in its cast of feature; short iron-gray hair, a cold blue eye, and firm lips, a trifle thin. He dressed severely as a Quaker or a diplomatist, and read with steel eye-glasses.

In 1866 Brogniart, and his friend and partner in the force, Jean Bellecour, had been detailed to go to Marseilles to “work up” a mysterious murder which had been committed there, and which baffled the provincial police. After some trouble, they discovered that the murderer was a deserter from the regiment of Besancon, who had formerly served in Algeria, and that he had probably fled to that country. The two officers crossed in pursuit, and got traces of their man. He was followed to Constantine, where it was found that he had influential Arab friends, who concealed him and aided his escape. The detectives, however, were indomitable. They followed their game across the Atlas range to the border town of El Aghouat, red and fiery in the sun of the angry desert. They found that the criminal had gone still further, and this time far beyond French jurisdiction; that he was, in fact, in Touat, and under the protection of the cruel, suspicious, fanatical Sheikh of In-Calalah, El Hadj-Abd-el-Kader. Jean Bellecour now wanted to give up the pursuit, but Brogniart refused inexorably, procured two dromedaries and dragged his unwilling partner off to Touat by way of El Goleah. In spite of protests and threats the intrepid detectives penetrated into In-Calalah, a long-forbidden city to Europeans. The criminal met and

defied them; more than that, he laughed at them. But he did not know Brogniart, who had laid his plans with prudence and was ready to carry them out with desperation. The Sheikh gave the officers three days to leave in, and they made good use of their time. On the morning early of the third day they left In-Calah and bivouacked in a ravine just beyond the walls. At high noon, when every living creature in the Sahara sleeps, even to the dogs, the two adventurers noiselessly returned through the silent streets to the house where the murderer lived, chloroformed him, gagged him, tied him and carried him off. Then, with the criminal behind him on his camel and Bellecour behind with a water-bag and a hamper of dates, with only a compass to guide him, Brogniart struck off across the desert. Ten days later he got into the French territories outposts at Tougourt, with the horsemen of El Hadj-Abd-el-Kader less than half a league behind him. The murderer was secured, but Brogniart dropped senseless from his camel with sunstroke.

A long illness ensued, and was not followed by a complete reaction. Brogniart was appointed sous-brigadier and returned to his duties, but there was something anxious and haggard in his expression that worried his friends, and he complained frequently of headache. When the Emperor went to Biarritz in the fall of 1867, Brogniart was detailed thither to look after his safety, and the bathing restored him so much that he seemed quite well on his return. In the latter part of May, 1868, a heavy misfortune befell the old hotel in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin. Mme. Guinan's drawer, in the little office, was broken open and robbed of 17,000 francs in money, besides valuable papers. Some 450 francs belonged to Brogniart, who had left it with Madame for safe keeping. The matter was immediately reported to headquarters, and Brogniart was detailed to work it up. He did not make much headway, but found this: That the robbery was a *coup d'amateur*, not the work of a professional thief, and that it was probably committed by someone in the house, or had private means of access to it. This was not very satisfactory, since there were nearly one hundred and fifty persons in the hotel altogether, and no one particularly to suspect. Brogniart, however, did not despair, and it piqued his professional pride that a robbery should be committed right under his nose, so to speak, and the thief yet go undetected. He began to institute a careful and secret yet thorough surveillance over each member of the little community, their antecedents, associations, and ways and means of living, with a view to find out whom to suspect.

Two weeks later poor Mlle. Lillebon's room was entered between midnight and daybreak, while she was asleep, and a costly dress stolen. It was work given to her to do, and the unhappy seamstress would have been ruined had not the kind people of the house started a subscription, headed by Brogniart, which enabled her to replace it. This robbery gave the Brigadier a great deal of worry, and he redoubled his exertions and inquiries, determined to root out the rogue who made everybody in the hotel feel so uncomfortable. He had his suspicion of Flotintin, the concierge, who was rather secretive and shady in regard to his going-out and comings-in, and avoided him with solicitude. A week's careful pursuit, however, assured him that he was following a false scent. Florentin turned out to be a member of l'Internationale, and very probably a conspirator, but there were absolutely no grounds for suspecting him of being a thief.

Lacroix, a billiard-maker, who roomed on the sixth floor, was a man of some *scabreuses* antecedents, and Brogniart was beginning to mark him down with persistence and some hope of success, when the apartment of Mme. Dournaux-Duperrie, a widow from Auvergne, who lived very comfortably on the third floor, were entered at night and robbed of dresses, jewelry and

articles de luxe. This was a very bold robbery. The lady, nurse, and child, all three, slept in one room. The outer room was entered by means of nippers, and the principal part of the things stolen were gathered up from the room in which the sleepers lay. The child cried and the *bonne* woke up. She distinctly saw a man in a white dress, with a white face and glassy eyes, bending over Mme. Dournaux-Duperrie's bed. She gave utterance to an exclamation, when instantly the apparition bounded to her side and she became insensible, probably from the effects of chloroform. When she roused again it was gray morning. She immediately gave the alarm. Brogniart was summoned, and, as soon as he could hurry on his clothes, began a thorough search of the house. Noting was discovered but the fact that Lacroix had a companion with him, and when Brogniart entered the room both were in bed and asleep, with their clothes on. The companion said his name was Daveyrier, and his trade that of paper-hanger. They explained the way they were found together by confessing they had got drunk together over night on absinthe, and, indeed, their heads were not yet clear of the fumes of that most detestable of all distillations. However, Brogniart determined to arrest them both on suspicion, and Lacroix and Daveyrier were accordingly committed to await a hearing.

Thinking painfully over the last case, Brogniart came to the conclusion that the robberies were committed in coincidence and that there could be no less than five or six in the band—three or four within the hotel, and others outside to receive and bear off the plunder. An inspector was accordingly set to watch the front of the hotel night and day, and Brogniart made some perquisitions into the character of the artist, M. Poquelais, who was moderately intimate with Lacroix. These inquiries promised to yield some fruit, when all Brogniart's calculations were upset by a fourth robbery committed in the hotel on the night of July 22. As Lacroix and Daveyrier were in prison at the time, and M. Poquelais sketching on the coast of Brittany, Brogniart's theory of a "gang" and their complicity with it was completely refuted. The robbery was the most serious one that had yet been perpetrated. The sufferer was a M. Anquetil, who had his first establishment for the sale of jewels on the first floor. In a quiet way Anquetil did a very extensive business, his specialty being to trade in antiquities, old silverware, family diamonds, and jewels of ancient styles—a sort of gold and silver bric-a-bric, so to speak. The bulkier articles were kept in cases, but the more precious ones in a large iron safe. Anquetil, who was a bachelor, slept in a room adjoining, with the door to the shop open. The key of the safe he kept under his pillow. Yet that key was extracted, the safe opened, and jewelry to the value of 89,000 francs, including seventy gold watches, a large ormolu clock and over a hundred pounds of silverware, carried off without disturbing M. Anquetil's slumbers in the least!

This audacious robbery necessarily created a great sensation. Brogniart was so much cut about it that he handed in his resignation to the Prefect who declined to accept it, but detailed Bellecour to assist the Brigadier. Lacroix and Daveyrier were released. Anquetil offered a reward of 10,000 francs for the recovery of his goods, and a good many amateur detectives began to make inquiries into the mysterious occurrences at the old hotel in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin. Bellecour stayed at the hotel just one month, sharing Brogniart's room. During that time no robbery occurred. On the 3rd of August Bellecour went to Brussels in some business of the police, and was gone four days. On the night of the 3rd, Florentin's shop was entered and a pair of half-finished trousers with the little tailor's "goose" and his best shears, were carried off. The next night Lacroix saw and fired his pistol at a man dressed in white, who was moving carefully along one of the corridors. The apparition escaped, the house was alarmed, but with no result.

The third night little Mlle. Lillebon, sitting at her window, uttered a loud scream as she saw, far below in the courtyard, a white figure crossing with great rapidity. Her cries alarmed Mme. Dournaux-Duperrie, who, going to the window, was just in time to catch a glimpse of some white object apparently entering the side of the house. It disappeared before she could collect herself sufficiently to notice.

Bellecour returned and Brogniart told him all that happened in his absence. "I am desperate," said the unhappy brigadier, "I am disgraced. I have resolved to take my life if this felon is not at once detected." Bellecour tried to console his friend, but he returned to the robberies again. "Do you know," said he, "I always know in the morning when the thief has been at work in the night?"

"How is that?" asked Bellecour curiously.

"I do not precisely know, a sort of premonition, I suppose; a dull feeling here in the forehead—a sense of fatigue in my legs and arms. I cannot describe it accurately, but I always know, infallibly."

Bellecour looked at his partner curiously, shrugged his shoulders, and went off and had a private interview with M. le Prefect. A day or two later Brogniart was dispatched to [Membra] on a police mission of great delicacy and importance. He was gone three weeks, and during his absence Bellecour occupied his room in the hotel, but there was no repetition of the robberies.

In the meantime, Mme. Dournaux-Duperrie, convinced that the old hotel was haunted, moved away, and her apartments were immediately taken by an Englishman, Hyde Latrobe of Culm Hill Park, Sussex. Mr. Latrobe was a character, a sportsman and a fisherman, who had shot all sorts of game, whipped for all sorts of fish, been in several heavy battles, always as an amateur, and said that he would now be able to die contented if he could only shoot a ghost. It was his desire to perform this feat which brought him to the hotel in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin, the reputation of which had got abroad. Mr. Latrobe was a tall, spare man of sixty years. His face was sun-burnt to a deep crimson hue, and his bushy eyebrows and enormous moustache were perfectly white. He had a fine assortment of rifles and pistols, which he seemed to like to parade around his room, and he proclaimed, with something like ostentation, that he never locked his doors at night.

Brogniart returned from Sicily and resumed his efforts to detect the robber. Bellecour, however, did not share his room any more. He said that he had rheumatism of the shoulders, and was compelled to be at home at night in order to have the attentions of his wife. There was apparently a better detective in the house, though, than either Brogniart or Bellecour. This was the eccentric Hyde Latrobe, who, without telling any one, slept all day and watched all night. He further, did not appraise any one that, in connection with the open ventilator over his door, was a mirror so arranged that if any person passed along the main corridor in front of it a shadow would be reflected across the page of the book or paper he was reading.

It was two hours after midnight on the third night after Brogniart's return, when Mr. Latrobe suddenly put down a novel of Charles Bernard's he was reading and a glass of Burgundy he was

sipping, rose noiselessly, took a pistol in each hand and very quietly opened his door, which led out into the main hall. In the dim light he saw a white object rapidly passing along beyond him. He raised his arm to shoot, but changed his mind and pursued instead. The man in white disappeared on the stairs, but Latrobe ran swiftly in his stocking feet down the steps, and saw the man in white again passing up the entry-hall of the first floor. Again he raised his pistol, but felt a firm hand upon his arm. "Don't shoot!" whispered a voice in his ear. He turned and saw Bellecour, just come from Mme. Guignan's office. He too was on the watch, it seemed, without Brogniart's privity. "Let us follow him and unravel this mystery," said Bellecour.

They silently followed the figure in white, which rapidly descended a narrow back stairway that led down to the old court-yard. When they reached the court the man in white disappeared, and Mr. Latrobe would have searched for him, but Bellecour pulled him back into the doorway. "Wait," he said. They waited five minutes. Suddenly the figure appeared again, standing in one of the iron-barred stable windows that opened upon the court-yard. He leaped down. He carefully closed to the whole frame of the window, which shut like a door. He came toward Latrobe and Bellecour, who advanced a step to meet and capture him. But he passed them without a start, without a sign of notice. Latrobe turned to seize him, but Bellecour held him back once more. "Tenez!" said the officer. "*C'est in somnambule! Nous verrons!*" The rainspout of the hotel was countersunk between two pilasters, which were sculptured in zigzag with sharp chevrons and frettes. Clinging to these the man ascended the wall with great rapidity and disappeared in the window of a room on the fourth floor. "Brogniart's room!" murmured Bellecour. "Come with me, monsieur, quickly!"

He went rapidly to the concierge's room, and kicked at the door. "Come, Florentin! Florentin! The thief is caught." The concierge came out immediately, and Bellecour led the way swiftly upstairs to Brogniart's room. "Not a word now, for your lives," he whispered, and tried the room door. It was locked. He shut the slide of his lantern, handed it to Florentin, and then softly opened the door by turning the key with a pair of nippers. To their astonishment Brogniart was quietly standing at the wash-basin washing his hands. His eyes were fixed and glassy. He emptied the basin into the slop bucket, dried his hands, opened a door and passed into it a "jimmy," a slung-shot, and a pair of handcuffs, took a bottle of chloroform from his shirt bosom and put it on the mantel shelf, kicked off a pair of white canvas slippers which he wore, and then, in shirt, drawers and socks, quietly laid down on the bed. "*Eh bien!*" said he aloud to himself, with an intense satisfaction in his tones. "Not a bad night's work!" A minute later he was snoring.

"You see." Said Bellecour, as the three silently withdrew, stupefied. "He may be shamming," said the Englishman. "Oh, I mean to make sure that he is not!" rejoined Bellecour. "How will you do that?" "I will show you, in the morning." "In the meantime, then, Bellecour, come to my room and smoke a cigar with me. Come Florentin.

At daybreak Bellecour and Latrobe went to Brogniart's room, and waked him up. He sprang to his feet in some excitement. "Ha! Bellecour, you here? And Monsieur? There had been another robbery! I know it!"

“No,” answered Bellecour, “but the thief is detected!” “Mon Dieu!” cried Brogniart, in a sort of agony—“without my aid. I am eternally disgraced!” “No,” said Bellecour, “you can help in the discovery of the goods, which are not yet recovered. “Who is the rogue, then?” “I will tell you presently; but put on your clothes.”

When Brogniart was dressed they descended to the court, and Bellecour crossed to the stable window, which he opened. “*Mon Dieu!*” cried Brogniart. “I found that out fifteen years ago and told old M. Guignan to have it remedied! Is it possible it was not done?” They entered the store-rooms, mostly furnished with old furniture and unsaleable goods. Tracks plain enough in the dust led through piles of rubbish to a trap-door leading to a cellar stair-way, closed at the bottom with a locked door. Bellecour turned the light of his lantern down the steps, and there, in a disordered heap, as if carelessly flung down, was every article and every franc that had been stolen from the hotel in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin. “But who is the thief?” asked Brogniart.

“*Un somnambule—un vieux roturier qu’en nomme Hector Brogniart!*”

Brogniart fainted. He was pensioned from the force, and spent some months in a *maison de santé*. After he came out he married, and walked no more o’ nights.

Nor was the hotel in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin robbed again.

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