

Diamond Cut Diamond

[Translated from the French, for the SUNDAY
UNION, by Mrs. N. E. White.]

“Monsieur, there is a peasant in the office who says he would like to speak to you.”

“What does he want?”

“*Ma foi!* from his idiotic expression, I should judge that he does not know himself.”

“We shall soon find out. Let him come in.”

Such was the order given by the celebrated Vidocq, Commander-in-Chief of the Paris Police Brigade, under the Restoration, to the dingy-looking Cerberus who guarded the entrance to his private office.

When the countryman found himself in the presence of the dread official he made an awkward obeisance, bending his body with well-feigned humility, and at the same time casting towards Vidocq the silly yet subtle glance peculiar to the cunning peasantry.

With one covert look Vidocq had taken the measurement of his man.

“Keep your fawning for those who are stupid enough to be taken in by it,” said he, brusquely. “You cannot gull me, you know. What is it you want?”

“Monsieur Vidocq, I would like to enter your service.”

“Bah! What can you do?”

“Why, I can work — at night, chiefly. You see, you are making such a clean sweep of suspicious characters that I find business too risky, and think it would be better to get on the safe side of the broom. As the vagabonds with whom I work (sharp rascals they are, too, I assure you) would never mistrust me on account of my stupid looks, and as I know all their haunts I could be of great assistance to you in running them down.”

Vidocq fixed a scrutinizing eye upon the candidate for detective glory, who, meanwhile, awaited a reply, twisting his old cap round and round as if unwinding a ball of yarn.

“I may, perhaps, find something for you,” answered Vidocq after a moment’s reflection. “But, in order that I may not be deceived in you, I wish, in the first place, to make sure that you are at least as cunning as the rogues in question. You must give me a proof of your skill.”

“I could give you ten, meaning no disrespect to your Honor,” replied the peasant with a knowing leer.

“That remains to be seen,” said Vidocq, feeling in his vest pocket. “Here is a five franc piece. You are to go at once to the market of La Vallee, a short distance from here, and bring me a pullet or a capon, whichever you please. I will give you half an hour.”

“I fly! Monsieur. You will be satisfied with my purchase.”

The peasant took the money, put it in his pocket, and bowing very respectfully, backed out of the room.

Vidocq then ordered three of his best agents to follow the man, and watch all his movements, but not to arrest him unless he failed to present himself at the place designated.

The amateur detective followed exactly the instructions given him by his superior, without the slightest crookedness being perceptible to the agents stationed a short distance away. Half an hour afterward he again stood in the presence of his chief.

“Here is the capon and your change, Master. By considerable haggling I managed to get them for two francs and a half.”

Vidocq gave him a look of mingled rage and contempt, and exclaimed:

“Is that all you can do, you stupid fool?”

The peasant stood with down-cast eyes, apparently confused and humiliated.

“Do not get angry so quickly, Sire,” said he deprecatingly. “Give me a chance to unload my marketing.”

Thereupon, opening his voluminous blouse, in which a triple row of pockets of incredible capacity was skillfully concealed, he drew forth two other fowls, which he placed triumphantly on the table.

“That,” said he, pointing to the first, ‘is a very nice pullet, and I cannot imagine anything finer than a stew made of it. The other is a grain-fed young chicken, very plump and tender, I think. Have it broiled to a turn and you will acknowledge I am right.”

Vidocq was speechless with surprise. The cunning thief now looked him boldly in the face with a self-satisfied grin, as he fumbled in his pocket.

“Ah!” said he carelessly. “I came near forgetting. Here are your five francs!” And he placed the piece of money on the table by the side of the fowl.

Vidocq was dumbfounded. At the same moment the three officers returned and announced that they had seen nothing unusual.

Vidocq frowned ominously. “You saw nothing unusual!” he ejaculated, angrily. “How does it happen that this fellow has stolen two chickens without your having seen anything? He also pilfered a five franc piece, after having received his change, and still you saw nothing unusual! Well, then, you blockheads, salute this man as the superior of you all, and next time try to look more sharply, if you wish to remain in my service.”

The detectives went out smarting with humiliation. Upon a word from Vidocq one of them halted.

“Go carry the stolen articles to the shop woman,” said he gruffly.

The man bowed and rejoined his comrades.

“Now that we are alone, master thief, explain to me the way in which you managed such a bold game!”

“*Ma foi*, nothing could be simpler, Monsieur Vidocq! Let us suppose that you are the market-woman, surrounded by your fowls. I come up just as you are endeavoring to suit a very particular customer, and I pretend to wait patiently. Meanwhile, without going to the trouble of bargaining, I slip two pullets under my blouse, which is specially arranged for the purpose, as you see. Then I buy the third honestly and give you my five-franc piece to change. Now, as those honest souls are in the habit of emptying their bags of money into their aprons, in order to pick out the correct change, I take advantage of that moment to help myself to a trifle. And I do it in this way: I chuckle the market woman gayly under the chin — this way, you see — she resists, and I seize the opportunity to adroitly nip with the other hand a coin from the heap, taking care to sneeze as a precautionary measure. She naturally turns her head (precisely as you do) to avoid the results of the sneeze, and the trick is played. Simple, is it not?”

“Bravo! bravo! I see you are a cunning knave, and I will most gladly avail myself of your services. But I warn you not to try any of your tricks on me, for you know I could make you smart for it.”

“Oh, Monsieur Vidocq, how could you think of such a thing! Of course, I like to amuse myself a little, but at your expense — never! I would not dare to do it, *mon Dieu!*”

“The bargain is settled, and I enroll you in my brigade at the rate of three francs a day, not counting perquisites; but, above all, let me not catch you trying to play double, for that would be a dear game for you. You shall be known in the brigade as ‘Subtle-Hand’; that will be a just recognition of your talents.”

The peasant bowed, quite elated by such a compliment from the lips of the renowned detective Chief, Vidocq.

“By the way,” resumed the Chief, “what is your real name, and where were you born? I need that information.”

“I will bring you my papers tomorrow, Monsieur Vidocq, and you will find in them all you may wish to know concerning me. You will see that I am not trifling with you, and that I am a fellow capable of serving you in more than one way.”

“Very well, you may go now. Be on hand tomorrow.”

The pseudo-peasant bowed more profoundly than ever, and left the office, apparently enchanted with the welcome he had received from the redoubtable Chief.

On his side, Vidocq was congratulating himself upon his brilliant recruit. “With such a sharp fellow as that, who undoubtedly is full of resources,” mused he, as he watched his new detective disappear, “I shall be able to accomplish wonders.”

A few moments after, the sagacious Chief of the infallible Police Brigade, having finished the examination of various reports, began to make his preparations for his daily round of engagements. First of all he had an urgent appointment with the Prefect of Police. He took from his table a bundle of notes and stuck them into his pocket. In doing so his hand touched an object which he had no knowledge of possessing. “That is strange!” thought he, drawing the unfamiliar article from his pocket.

It was a small pasteboard box. He opened it, and found therein, suspended from his watchchain, one of those copper watches which the fakirs offer for sale on the boulevards. “Only fifteen centimes! the delight of the children, the peace of the parents, and only three cents!”

In the bottom of the box was a small piece of paper neatly folded. Vidocq unfolded the paper and read :

“Diamond cut diamond! ha! ha! ha.”

The officer quickly put his hand to his pocket — his watch had disappeared!

“Oh, the brigand!” cried he, in his exasperation. “What a trick he has played me! To think of it—that I, Vidocq, the celebrated Chief of the Detective force of Paris, whose name is a terror to evil-doers throughout France — that I should fall an easy victim to such a half-witted rogue as that!” And the Chief buried his face in his hands from utter shame.

For a long while, during nights of sleeplessness, the great functionary saw constantly before his mind’s eye the mocking features of the pseudo-peasant who had forgotten to inform him as to his name and birth place.

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