

The Scourge of the Highway

The following singular story I condense from an old volume of French Police Reports.

In the year 1747 a man named Joseph Richelot was broken alive on the wheel, at Orleans, for highway robbery; and as there were no relatives or friends to claim the body, the executioner, when he thought life was extinct, gave it to a surgeon, who carried it to the anatomical academy for dissection. The legs and arms of the wretch had been fearfully broken and mangled, but yet, when the surgeon applied his knife he detected signs of life, and by the application of powerful excitants and stimulating cordials, the highwayman was brought to his senses, and to the power of speech.

The surgeon and his pupils were kind-hearted, and, deeply moved by the suffering and earnest solicitations of the culprit, they resolved to attempt his cure. They would thus lose the subject for dissection, but the experience of handling such a case in treatment would be valuable. So dreadfully mangled was he that they had to amputate both his legs at the hip-joints, and take off his left arm at the shoulder. His right arm had been fractured above and below the elbow, but the bones had not been shivered, and with extreme care that important limb was saved. Notwithstanding the mutilation—a mutilation and blood-loss that would surely be fatal in nine-hundred and ninety-nine cases in a thousand, the man recovered. And now what should be done with him? A man with not even a stump of a leg, and with only one arm! He begged that he might be taken further away from Paris, where he could gain a livelihood by begging. They might be sure he would henceforth lead an honest life. He swore he would rather die than steal again. The good doctor, willing to do anything in his power, put Richelot into a cart and sent two of his students to convey him fifty leagues away to the southwest, beyond Poitiers.

The man was full forty leagues away from the nearest place where he had ever been known. He took a situation by the roadside, close by a ragged cliff of rock, and a dense wood, where his deplorable condition excited the compassion of all who saw him. In his youth he had served in the army, and clad in an old huzzar's jacket and helm, he passed for a soldier who had lost his limbs in battle.

Time passed. By and by a peddler, who had set out from Lusignan on his way to Vitray, with a full pack, and much money, was missed. Other men mysteriously disappeared in that same section. The police searched for the robbers, but could not find them; and yet they were well assured that these oft-recurring disappearances were not the result of accident. There must be robbers and assassins somewhere. The celebrated Jean Coquelle, with a platoon of his well-trained detective force, came down from Paris, and spent two months in the provinces, but failed to unearth the mystery.

One day a drover, returning from market, where he had been selling cattle, came upon the poor, legless beggar by the wayside, and was solicited for charity. Being moved to compassion by the sight of so much disfigurement—for the wretched man seemed both legless and armless—the drover threw him a piece of silver.

“Alas,” said the mendicant, in piteous tones, “you see I cannot reach your bounty. I have neither an arm nor a leg. If you will be so kind as to put your generous donation into my pouch, I will bless you. Tonight my poor, faithful Lizette will come with Moniard’s cart and take me home, where your silver shall find us a meal such as we have not tasted for many a day.”

The drover got down from his cart and approached the beggar, and as he stooped to pick up the money, the sun, suddenly breaking from behind a cloud, threw a strange shadow upon the sward, causing the traveler to look up, when he caught sight of a good stout right arm, belonging to the mendicant, raised above his head, the brawny hand of which grasped a short iron bar, with a knotted knob on the end. He arrested the blow in its descent, and being a man of immense muscular power, he lifted the beggar and carried him to his cart, and having thrown him into it, he drove off to the next town, where he brought his prisoner before a magistrate.

On searching him a silver whistle, of curious construction, was found in his pocket, which naturally led to the suspicion that he might have accomplices in the wood, whereupon the magistrate called a sufficient guard, under the command of an experienced officer, and sent them, with the drover for a guide, to the place where the murder had been attempted. Not more than an hour had elapsed since the drover had left with his prisoner when the spot was reached, the distance from the village being not quite a league.

The *gens d’armes* concealed themselves in the bushes, after which the whistle was blown, the sound being exceedingly sharp, clear, and penetrating; and directly an answering whistle was heard, seeming to come from under ground, nor was this all; hardly had the note of the whistle died away, when three men arose to sight from a thick tangle of shrubs and vines close at hand. The soldiers, with muskets [cocked] and presented, advanced, and ordered the men to surrender. One of them turned to flee, and was immediately shot down, upon which the other two, seeing that they were fully caught, threw down their arms. When they had been secured, the place where they had appeared was searched, and an entrance found to a deep, spacious cave, wherein were discovered two women, and a boy and a girl.

The women gave in evidence that they had been originally seized by the robbers and carried away from their homes—that they had been forcibly held captives, and had finally had married with their abductors. The boy and girl were their children. The girl, a bright, intelligent miss of ten or twelve years, testified that the dead bodies of travelers newly killed were brought into the cave, and stripped and buried. On pleasant days it was their custom to carry the old mutilated soldier out to the roadside, where he would sit for three or four hours at a time, his pitiable condition being sure to excite the compassion of passers. When a traveler appeared, who gave promise of a well-filled purse, the old robber, with that strong right arm, and the bar of iron, having inveigled him within reach, would administer a blow that was sure to stun, if it did not kill him, and then the whistle would quickly call assistance. Only the sudden gleam of the sun had saved the drover.

The mystery of the disappearance of so many travelers was solved, and with the putting away of this precious gang the work was stopped. The next time Joseph Richelot was broken upon the wheel be sure the executioner did not surrender the body until he was well assured that no surgeon of earthly mould could bring it back to life. S. C., Jr.

The New York Ledger, December 23, 1876