

Assassin of Castellane

From the Records of a French Policeman

I possessed some renown as a successful rogue catcher; and I had some experience, too. My field of operation, as a usual thing, lay within the confines of the department of Lower Alps; and though I served under the Sub-Prefect of the third Arrondissement, yet the Prefect of the Department called upon me when he chose. One morning—it was the latter part of May—I received a note from the Prefect, ordering me to come to Digne and see him with all possible dispatch. The missive came thro' the office of the Sub-Prefect, so I had nothing to do but get ready and start. I took an early dinner, browned my face and hands, and started out. He seemed to be relieved when he saw me, and at once took me to his private closet.

“Now,” said I, “have you work for me!”

“Yes. Sit down and listen,” he replied.

We sat down, and having tasted a glass of wine, he proceeded:

“Within a few months past there have been some of the most mysterious murders committed in the Department, and in the Department of Ver, that ever came under my notice. They are done mostly on the road from Castellane to Aups. The first victim was a Marseilles merchant, who had come up to Castellane to purchase preserved fruits. His body was found by the roadside near the line between the two Departments; and at first it was supposed that he must have fallen there and died in a fit, as no marks of violence could be found upon him. —His pockets were rifled, however. The next one was found near Arnot, and under the same circumstances. He was a merchant also, and from Nice. Since then, five or six have died upon the road in the same manner, and no marks of ill usage have been found upon any of them; but they all have been robbed.”

“Have most of them stopped at Castellane?” I asked.

The Prefect told me they had.

“And I suppose they must have put up in some inn there?” I remarked.

“Yes,” said the Prefect.

I then supposed that some of the landlords must be concerned. But my companion informed me that they had been narrowly watched, and that no shadow of evidence rested against them.

“But,” said I, “is there not some poison in the matter? Some innkeeper may administer the poison, and then send an accomplice after the victim.”

“No,” returned the Prefect with a shake of the head. Experienced physicians have examined the stomachs of several of the men, but no trace of poison has been found. It is a mysterious affair. The Sub-Prefect has done all he could, but without effect; and now we mean to give the whole thing into your hands. You must go to Castellane at once, and there you can get such further information as the Sub-Prefect can give you.”

After conferring a while longer with the Prefect, he let me have a suit of ordinary tradesman’s clothing, and thus habited, I went to a hotel and put up for the night. In the morning I procured a horse, set out and reached Castellane before noon. During the day I pretended to be doing business. I went to the woolen factory and examined a lot of stuff; and also visited several places where preserved fruits were put up. I learned that most of the people who came there on business stopped at an inn kept by a man named Juan Fontaix; so, I left my horse there and engaged lodgings.

After dark, I called upon the Sub-Prefect. He told me he had used all the means within his power, but had been able to gain no clue to the guilty party. Most of the murdered victims had been from Marseilles, and the excitement of the city was intense. Gens d’Armes had been sent out on all the roads and the secret police had also been on the watch. The last victim had fallen only four days before, and the deed was done only fifteen minutes after the policeman passed the post.

I asked the Sub-Prefect if he had any suspicions. He answered that all the suspicions he had held, was fastened on Juan Fontaix, the innkeeper. Nearly all the murdered men had stopped at his house, and he must have known something of their business.

I bade the officer keep perfectly quiet and not even let one of his own men know of my presence. Then I returned to the inn, and finally entered into conversation with my host upon the subject of the mysterious deaths. He pronounced it wonderful and assured me that it injured him more than he could tell.

“Parbleu!” he muttered; “they’ll be suspecting me next, if they have not done so already.”

I was soon satisfied that Juan Fontaix knew nothing of the guilty parties. He was very fearful, and at times blanched and trembled at the thought of being apprehended for the crime. Most people would have seen in this signs of guilt; but I thought differently.

I spent all the next day in town, ostensibly engaged in business with the factories, but in reality hunting after some clue to the object of my mission. Night came again; but I found nothing new. I was perfectly satisfied that the murderer had laid his plan so deeply that no circumstantial claims could be found. If I would find him, I must do so with the proof upon him.

I had given an assumed name at the inn and stated that I belonged at Toulon. On the next morning I called for my bill, and informed my host that I was off for home. Then I went to the fruit preserver’s and told him the same, stating that I must confer with my partner before concluding the bargain. After this I went to the woolen factory, and saw the

business agent. His name was Louis Cazabon, and he had come to Castellane about a year before. He seemed to be a straight-forward, business man, and yet he was the only one I had seen whom I really wished to suspect. In conversing upon the murders, he had been a little too free and off-handed, treating the subject more coolly than a man with a heart would be apt to do. —But still, I had thus far been able to find nothing against him. On the present occasion I told him, as I had told the others, that I must return to Toulon.

“If you have not ready money with you, we can give you credit,” he said.

I told him I had plenty of money, but I was not fully prepared to pay the prices he had demanded. He said “Very well;” and added that he should be happy to sell to me when I came again. I bade him good day and departed. As soon as I was alone, I began to suspect Monsieur Louis Cazabon in earnest. —When I told him I had money, but did not purchase, because he charged me too much, why didn’t he barter me? Simply because he wished me to leave town with my money in my pocket. At least so it appeared to me. This was sufficient ground for me to work upon, and I resolved to watch the man a little; so I rode to an out-of-the-way place, and left my horse, and then returned and concealed myself in a position where I could see the movements of Louis Cazabon. In a few minutes he came out of his factory and walked away. His step was hurried and eager. I felt sure that he was not the man who did the direct work of death. The plot was deeper than that, or he would have been discovered ere this. —So I resolved to wait a while and see if he returned. I would have followed him if I could have done so with safety; but he might have detected me, and that would not do. However, in less than fifteen minutes he came. He walked now with a sober innocent air. It seemed to say —“O! I haven’t been up to any mischief, as you can see!”

I saw Cazabon at his desk again, and then I returned to my horse. I knew that I had a risk to run now, but I was ready for it. If the factory agent was at the bottom of the crime, and meant to have me robbed, he had already set his machinery in motion, and the next development would be upon the road. I examined my pistols, and then left the town, taking the road along the river toward Aups.

At the end of half an hour I came to the slope of the Bajois mountains, and soon afterward entered the wood. I now began to be very careful and keep my eyes about me. I will not say that I was wholly without fear; for the mysterious manner in which the murders had been done verged so closely upon the marvelous, that a sort of superstitious dread was attached to it. Had the victims been shot or run through with a sword, or had their throats cut, I should have felt no sort of dread. But this was new ground. Death had come here, nobody knew how. It might have come from an invisible hand, and in dead silence. Yet when I reasoned upon the subject, I felt sure that the murderer must approach very near his victim ere the blow was struck, since it must be some direct and powerful agent that co’d cause death in so strange a manner.

I had crossed the little cascade of St. Esprit, and was descending a short, steep hillside, when I saw a boy by the roadside at the foot of the descent, engaged in whipping a mule. He was a slightly built fellow, not more than fifteen years of age, and his coarse garments

were covered with meal. I knew that there was a mill upon the branch of the Verdon, not far back, and I supposed he might be the miller's. As I came nearer, I saw a large sack upon the ground, close to where the mule stood.

"What's the matter, my boy?" I asked, as I drew up near him.

"This ugly mule has thrown both me and my bag of corn from his back," he answered.

"Are you hurt?" I continued.

"My left shoulder is hurt," he said, "and I can't lift this sack again. If Monsieur would help me, I would be very grateful."

Until this moment the idea of suspecting the boy had not entered my head; but the suspicion dashed upon me now. He was altogether too keen a looking fellow for a miller's apprentice. He gave me a glance from a pair of quick sharp eyes, that meant more than what he had spoken. And then if I had not been mistaken, I had seen him holding the mule firmly with his left hand.

I leaped from my saddle and moved towards the boy, being careful to watch every movement.

"Now," said he, "if you will take hold of that end, we will put it on." —He lifted at the other end, and pretended that it hurt his shoulder; and he begged me to lift it alone.

I professed to be willing to comply, and stooped down for that purpose, keeping my head in such a position that I could watch him by a sidelong glance. As I bent over and took hold of the sack I saw him carry his hand to his bosom and draw something out. I saw his dark eye flash, and heard his quick, eager breathing. In an instant I seized his wrist, and bent it upwards, and as I did so, heard a sharp report, like the explosion of a percussion cap, and saw a tiny wreath of smoke curl from the hand I held. He struggled to free himself from my grasp, but I held him with a grip of iron, and fastened my gaze upon him.

"I have found you, have I?" said I, drawing one of my pistols and cocking it. "I will inform you that I am an officer of the Prefecture, and have been hunting for you. Just offer a particle of resistance, and a bullet goes through your brain. Now give me that weapon."

The boy was frightened, and trembled quite violently.

"It is only a tobacco pipe," he said, as he gave it to me,

And certainly it looked like nothing more; but I had seen enough of it to know that evil was in it. It appeared to me to be an ordinary meerschaum pipe the bowl being colored as though by long use —only the amber mouthpiece was missing. I did not stop to examine

it then, but turned my attention to its owner. I saw that he was still trembling with fear, and now would be the time to work upon him.

“So, you are selling your soul to Monsieur Louis Cazabon!” I remarked by way of letting him know that I was thoroughly informed.

He started very plainly, and I saw that he knew just what I meant; but he tried to recover himself, and clumsily asserted that he did not know anything about the individual I had named.

“You need not lie to me;” I sternly replied, “for I know all about it. Louis Cazabon has been watched by me when he didn’t dream of such a thing. He thought I was a tradesman. But you are young and I will save you. Confess everything to me, and I promise you your life will be spared.”

I saw that the boy wavered, and I followed up my advantage; and ere long I had him bent to my wishes. I made him understand that I held his life in my hands; that I could protect him from the vengeance of anyone he might criminate; that he had everything to gain and nothing to lose by a full confession. He came to it gradually and reluctantly, but my will finally triumphed, and I drew the secret from him.

His name, he said, was Henry Dupin. He was born in Paris, but he never knew who his parents were. He went to live with Cazabon while quite young and had lived with him ever since. He said that Cazabon used to be a chemist, and did some business in that line: that in Paris he invented the infernal machine, which they have used with such fatal effect. About two years previous to the present time they left Paris together and spent a year in traveling over the Kingdom, murdering and robbing for a living. Finally they came to Castellane, where the master obtained his present situation while the boy went into a mill close at hand. Cazabon marked the victims that were to be robbed, and the boy then did the work. He used various artifices in carrying out his plan but the usual one was the same that he had tried upon me.

The boy then explained to me the secret of the pipe. Only the outer surface was meerschaum. Within it was a pistol of the finest steel, and of the most exquisite workmanship. The stem was the barrel, and the lock was concealed in the bowl, and covered with tobacco. A thin plate of metal protected the curiously contrived lock, and upon this the tobacco rested. A pressure of the thumb or finger upon the plate discharged the weapon. In order to cock it, the plate had to be removed. And now comes the *infernal* feature of the contrivance. The powder used in the little barrel was of Cazabon’s own manufacture, and very powerful. For a wad a piece of felt was used, and on the top of the wad was placed the missile which did the mischief. The boy had two of them with him, stitched up to the lining of his cap. He took them out and showed them to me. The projectile was a tiny arrow, not larger than a cambric needle, with one end sharp and the other beat down to a thin feature. It was fine steel, but coated with a greenish yellow substance, which was the most virulent poison that the chemist’s art could concoct. That needle once within the course of the blood, and death was already at the heart. It

punctured the skin not as palpably as the prick of a pin. He who sent it on its fatal errand made sure of his aim, generally striking the neck and the victim would fall into insensibility ere he could comprehend what had hurt him.

I returned to Castellane with the boy; and having left him in charge of the Sub-Prefect, I took a gen d'arme along with me, and went to the factory. Monsieur Cazabon was surprised to see me back so soon; but he was more surprised when I asked him to take a walk with me; when I called in the gen d'arme, and bade him to put the handcuffs upon the agent, he was ready to sink into the floor. We had secured him before he had sense enough to resist, and he was conveyed to the office of the Sub-Prefect without trouble. At first he denied everything; but when he found that this would not avail, he swore he would kill the boy.

In due time Monsieur Louis Cazabon was tried and condemned to death; and the Prefect of Digne took possession of the infernal machine. Before the villain was executed he confessed his crimes —told how many years he had worked to perfect his fatal instrument and produce the poison —and also owned that the boy Henry had been driven to help him through fear of his life.

So the rascal was executed. Henry Dupin spent two years in confinement, and was then free, and commenced an honest life. As for me, I got all the praise I deserved and perhaps more. —At all events I had done the country some service, and the people were not slow to acknowledge it.

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