

A French Detective Story

How a Skilled Policeman Solved a Murder Mystery

Pere Tabaret, surnamed Tirauclore, standing at the threshold, bowed almost to the ground, bending his old back into an arch, and in the humblest of voices demanded:

“The Judge of Inquiry has deigned to send for me?”

“Yes,” replied Daburon, adding under his breath, “and if you are a man of any ability, there is at least nothing to indicate it in your appearance.”

“I am here,” continued the old fellow, “completely at the service of justice.”

“I wish to know,” replied the Judge, “whether you cannot, with more success than has attended our efforts, discover some indication that may serve to put us upon the track of the author of this atrocious crime. I will explain—”

“Oh, I know enough of it,” interrupted Pere Tabaret. “Lecoq has told me as much as I desire to know.”

“Nevertheless—” continued the Commissary.

“If you will permit me, I prefer to proceed without receiving any information, in order to be more fully master of my own impressions; if you know another’s opinion it can’t help influencing your judgment. I will, if you please, at once commence my researches, with Lecoq’s assistance.”

As the old fellow spoke his little gray eyes dilated and became brilliant as carbuncles. His face reflected an internal satisfaction; even his wrinkles seemed to laugh. His figure became erect, his step almost elastic as he darted, rather than walked, into the second chamber.

He remained there about half an hour, then came out running, then re-entered and came out again; and again re-entered, and again reappeared almost immediately. The Judge could not help comparing him to a pointer on the scent; restless and active he ran hither and thither, carrying his in the air as if to discover some subtle odor left by the assassin. All the while he talked wildly and with much gesticulation, apostrophizing himself, scolding himself, uttering little cries of triumph or self-encouragement. He did not allow Lecoq to have a moment’s rest. He wanted this or that or the other thing. He demanded paper and a pencil. Then he wanted a spade; and finally he cried out for plaster of paris and a bottle of oil. With these he left the cottage.

When more than an hour had elapsed the Judge of Inquiry began to lose patience, and asked what had become of the amateur detective.

“He’s in the road,” replied the Brigadier, “lying flat in the mud. He has mixed the plaster in a plate. He says he is nearly finished, and that he is coming back presently.”

Tabaret entered almost instantly, joyously, triumphant, looking at least twenty years younger. Lecoq followed him, carrying with the utmost precaution, a large pannier.

“I have it!” said he to the Judge, “completely. It is as plain as noonday. Lecoq, my boy, put the pannier on the table.”

Gevrol at this moment returned from his expedition equally delighted.

“I am on the track of the man with the rings in his ears,” said he: “the sloop went down the river. I have obtained an exact description of Captain Gervase.”

“What have you done, M. Tabaret?” said the Judge of Inquiry.

The old fellow carefully emptied the contents of the pannier—a huge lump of potter’s clay, several large sheets of paper and three or four small morsels of plaster yet damp. Standing behind this table he presented a grotesque resemblance of a mountebank conjurer, who in the public squares makes puddings in hats, swallows swords and eats fire. His dress was in a singular state; he was mud to the chin.

“In the first place,” said he, at last, in a tone of affected modesty, “robbery has had nothing to do with the crime that occupies our attention.”

“On the contrary,” muttered Gevrol.

“I shall prove it,” continued Pere Tabaret, “by my evidence. By and by I shall offer my humble opinion as to the real motive.”

“In the second place, the assassin arrived here before 9:30; that is to say, before the rain fell. No more than M. Gevrol have I been able to discover traces of muddy footsteps; but under the table, where his feet rested, I find dust. We are thus assured of the hour. The widow did not expect her visitor. She had commenced undressing, and was about to wind up her cuckoo clock when he entered.”

“These are absolute details!” cried the Commissary.

“But easily established,” replied the amateur. “Examine this cuckoo clock; it is one of those that run fourteen or fifteen hours at most. Now it is more than probable, it is certain, that the widow wound it up every evening before going to bed.

“Now then, should the clock have stopped at nine? She must have touched it at that hour. At the moment she was drawing the chain, the assassin knocked. In proof, I show this chair below the clock, and on the seat a very plain mark of a foot. Now, look at the dress of the victim. The waist

of her gown is taken off. In order to open the door more quickly, she did not wait to put it on again, but hastily threw an old shawl over her shoulders.”

“Sacristi!” exclaimed the Brigadier, evidently filled with admiration.

“The widow,” continued the old fellow, “knew the person who knocked. Her haste to open the door gives rise to this conjecture; what follows proves it. The assassin then gained admission without difficulty. He was a young man, a little above middle height, elegantly dressed. He wore on that evening a high hat. He carried an umbrella and smoked a trabucos with a cigar holder.”

“Ridiculous!” cried Gevrol. “This is too strong!”

“Too strong for you, perhaps,” retorted Pere Tabaret. “At all events it is the truth. If you have not been minute in your examinations there is no reason why I shouldn’t be. I search and I find. Too strong, say you? Well, deign to glance at these morsels of damp plaster. They represent the heels of the boots worn by the assassin, of which I found the most perfect impression near the ditch, where the key was picked up. On these sheets of paper I have marked in outline the imprint of the foot which I cannot take up because it is in gravel.”

“Look! Heel high, instep pronounced, sole small and narrow—an elegant foot belonging to a foot well cared for evidently. Look for this impression all along the road, and you will find it twice repeated. Then you will find it five times repeated in the garden; and those footprints prove, by the way, that the stranger knocked not at the door but at the window shutter, beneath which shone a gleam of light. Near the entrance of the garden the man made a leap to avoid a square flower-bed; the point of the foot, more deeply imprinted than usual, shows it. He leaped more than two yards with ease, proving that he is active, and, therefore, young.

Pere Tabaret spoke now in a low voice, but clear and penetrating; and his eye glanced from one to the other of his auditors, watching the impression he was making.

“Does the hat astonish you, Gevrol?” pursued Pere Tabaret. “Just look at this circle traced in the dust on the marble of the secretary. That was where he placed his hat, so we arrive at the shape and size of the crown; and the height is, at least, presumable. Now the assassin put his hands on the top shelf of the cupboard to get at its contents. If he had been a very tall man he could have seen them without touching the shelf, and if a very short man, he would have stood upon a chair; consequently he must have been a little above the middle height. You seem troubled about the umbrella and the cigar-holder; but they are very simple. This lump of earth preserves an admirable impression, not only of the point, but even of the little wooden shield which holds the silk. As for the cigar, here is the end of a trabucos that I found in the ashes. Is it bitten? No. Has it been moistened with saliva? No. Then he who smoked it used a cigar-holder.”

Lecoq was unable to conceal his enthusiastic admiration, and noiselessly rubbed his hands. The commissary appeared stupefied, while the Judge was delighted. Gevrol’s face, on the contrary, was sensibly elongated. As for the Brigadier, he was overwhelmed.

“Now,” continued the old fellow, “follow me closely. We have traced the young man into the house. How he explained his presence at this hour, I do not know; this much is certain: he told the widow he had not dined. The honest woman was delighted to hear it, and at once set to work to prepare a meal. This meal was not for herself; for in the cupboard I find the remains of her dinner. She had dined on fish; the autopsy will confirm the truth of this conjecture. You can see the rest for yourself. There is but one glass on the table, and one knife. Who was this young man? Evidently the widow looked upon him as a man of rank superior to her own; for, in the small plate-closet is a table-cloth suitable enough for her, but not at all good enough for him. For her guest, she brought out one of white linen, and much handsomer. For him she sets this magnificent glass—a present, no doubt—and this knife with the ivory handle.

“That is all true,” murmured the Judge—“very true.”

“Now, then we have got the young man seated. He began by drinking a glass of wine, while the widow was putting her pan on the fire. Then, his heart failing him, he called for brandy, and swallowed about five *petite verres*. After an internal struggle of ten minutes (the time it must have taken to cook the ham and eggs to the point they have reached), the young man arose and approached the widow, who was leaning forward over her cooking. He stabbed her twice in the back; but she was not killed instantly. She half arose, seizing the assassin by the hands; while he drew back, lifting her rudely, and then hurling her down in the position in which you see her.”

“This short struggle is indicated by the posture of the body; for, wounded in the back, it is on her back she ought naturally to have fallen. The weapon was sharp and pointed, and, unless I am deceived, was the end of a foil, broken off and sharpened. By wiping the weapon upon the victim’s skirt, the assassin leaves us this indication. He was not, however, hurt in the struggle, though the victim must have clung with a death-grip to his hands, but as he had not left his gray gloves—”

“Gloves! Why, this is a romance,” exclaimed Gevrol.

“Have you examined the dead woman’s finger-nails, M. Gevrol? No. Well, do so, and then tell me whether I am deceived.”

“The woman now dead, we come to the object of her assassination. What did this well-dressed young gentleman want? Money? Valuables? No! no! a hundred times no. What he wanted, what he sought, and what he found were papers, documents, letters, which he knew to be in the possession of the unfortunate woman. To find them he has overturned everything, upset the cupboard, unfolded the linen, broken open the secretary, of which he could not find the key, and even emptied the mattress of the bed.

“At last he found them; and then what did he do? Burned them, of course; not in the chimney, but in the little stove in the front chamber. His end accomplished, what does he then? He flies, carrying with him all that he finds valuable, to mislead pursuit and baffle detection, by indicating a robbery. Having bundled them together, he wrapped these valuables in the napkin which was to have served him at dinner, and, blowing out the candle, he fled, locking the door, and afterward throwing the key into the ditch.”

“That is my idea of the case, M. le Judge.”

Emil Gaboriau, in “The Widow Lerouge.”

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