

The Secret Door
A Strange Story of the Sequel to a Crime

The police of Paris have recently stumbled across the sequel to a very remarkable tragedy which occurred over twenty years ago, and has remained until the present an impenetrable mystery. To bring all the facts of the case fully before the reader, it will be necessary to go back to a comparatively remote period.

At the beginning of the year 1852, a family named D'Eimer became the owners of the Vertneuve estate, on the Saone, between Chalon and Dijon. Chateau Vert, the residence, was a very large old mansion, situated on a rising ground on the right bank of a small tributary of the Saone. The locality was romantically beautiful, and the new tenants, who were wealthy, speedily resuscitated the gardens and transformed the decayed and deserted dwelling into a comfortable and attractive homestead.

The D'Eimer family consisted of Mons. D'Eimer, a gentleman of about fifty; Madame, a motherly lady of about the same age, and three daughters and one son—the latter a boy of fifteen, and the youngest of the family. Within three months of their settling at the chateau, the three daughters and the mother died of typhus fever. Mons. D'Eimer was sunk in profound grief, and some time elapsed before he was able to look after his affairs. The following year the young D'Eimer formed an acquaintance with a very beautiful but uncultivated girl, named Jeannette Foille, the daughter of a charcoal burner, to whom Mons. D'Eimer rented a tract of woodland. Foille was a stranger in the locality, but appeared to be industrious and honest. He was a widower—so he said—and his daughter had charge of the small dwelling in which they resided. Charles D'Eimer, the son, spent much of his time with Jeannette, and the fact came to his father's knowledge. He expostulated with his son, and an estrangement was the result. After this Mons. D'Eimer was frequently absent from home, and in the autumn of 1854 he returned with a young wife, whom he installed as mistress of the chateau. After this his behavior to his son was as kind as before, and he supplied him liberally with funds, although he knew that Charles' acquaintance with the daughter of the charcoal burner continued, and that she had given birth to a child.

On the morning of December 27, 1854, Mons. D'Eimer's domestics found him and his young wife murdered in their beds. They had been stabbed in several places, and the crime had evidently been perpetrated while they were asleep. Investigations disclosed certain extraordinary facts.

1. The door of the bedroom was fastened on the inside.
2. The windows of the bedroom and the adjoining dressing room were also fastened within, and were, moreover, at least fifty feet from the ground, which sloped abruptly to the river, and afforded scarcely sufficient foothold for a goat.
3. Nothing was disposed in Mons. D'Eimer's apartments, and no marks of any kind existed to show which way the murderer had come or gone.

In the bedroom, however, was another door, which led into a suite of apartments occupied by Charles D'Eimer, the room adjoining Mons. D'Eimer's bedroom having been used as a library and the one beyond that as the son's sleeping apartment. The door leading into the library was locked and the key could not be found. Charles' bedroom opened on the corridor, and the door of that was also locked. The butler, however, produced the key, and acknowledged that Charles was in the habit of leaving it with him when he went to the charcoal burner with the intention of remaining all night, as he had done the previous evening.

While the first investigation was in progress Charles returned home, and was stricken with horror at the scene that awaited him. His amazement and grief were very great, and, later on, when the authorities made a searching inquiry, and he was conscious that they suspected him of the crime, his indignation was deep, and his denial of any participation in the dreadful deed almost contemptuous.

Suspicion next fixed itself on the butler, who had had the keys of Charles' room in his keeping, but Charles pointed out to the police the utter absurdity of supposing that the bedroom had been entered from the study, as the dust around the door was undisturbed, and the lock had not been used since his father had purchased the property. In addition to this, it was shown that the butler was nearly eighty years of age, and had been in the employ of Mons. D'Eimer and his father before him for over sixty years.

The authorities were greatly puzzled to fix the crime on anyone, or to discover a clue to the perpetrator. The prevailing suspicion was against Charles D'Eimer, and the fact of his having been on bad terms with his father for a long time, and the probability of there being a new family of children to share the patrimony with him, were considered as presumptive evidence against him. He was not arrested, however, but the neighbors, who had before been on friendly terms, began to shun him, and even the domestics quitted his service. Within a reasonable time after the murder, Charles brought Jeannette to the chateau and installed her as mistress, giving out that they were man and wife, which turned out to be actually the case. At the same time the charcoal burner disappeared from the neighborhood.

After residing for about six months at Chateau Vert, Charles D'Eimer and his wife discharged their domestics and removed to Neufchatel, in Switzerland. The chateau was left in charge of a steward, and was only once visited by its owner in twenty years.

As before stated, the sequel to this almost unprecedented tragedy has just been disclosed, and in order to complete the story it is necessary to give the particulars of a crime of a later date.

On February 24, 1875, one Monsieur Lecoq, a wealthy bachelor of Avignon, disappeared under singular circumstances. He resided in a small detached house in the suburbs, and kept two domestics—an old woman and her daughter. He had been a resident of Avignon about seven years, and had come there, it was generally supposed, from Paris; where he had been in business and amassed a fortune. On the day named, two men called at his house and were closeted with him for an hour. He directed his housekeeper to prepare a valise, and then quitted the house with the strangers, saying he might be absent a week. Half an hour after he had left, one of the two men returned and informed the housekeeper that he was a detective and Monsieur Lecoq had

been arrested for a crime committed in Paris many years before, and that he had come for certain documents in Monsieur Lecoq's possession which would tend to establish his innocence.

He showed the keys which Monsieur Lecoq, he said, had given him, and said his directions were to place the housekeeper and her daughter in a secure place until the next morning. He conducted them to an upper room in the rear of the dwelling, and fastened them in. There they passed a miserable night and waited disconsolately until noon the next day for deliverance. Weary and hungry, they then managed to burst open the door, and on descending discovered that their master's bureaus and safe had been rifled of everything of value. Their suspicion of foul play was for the first time aroused, and they gave the alarm. It was soon clear enough that the arrest of Monsieur Lecoq and the pretended search for documents was the scheme of expert and audacious thieves, and measures were taken to secure their capture. They had nearly twenty-four hours, however, in which to make good their escape, and there was little hope of their immediate arrest. It was likewise difficult to get any accurate description of the men, and the police had to work on the most meager information. There was little doubt, however, that the men would seek refuge in Paris, and the police of that city were soon in possession of all the facts, and occupied in seeking for a clue to the perpetrator of the crime. Nothing, however, was heard of them or Monsieur Lecoq for over three months, when the old gentleman unexpectedly made his appearance, and learned for the first time that he was the victim of a conspiracy.

It seems that in 1840 he had in his employ, as clerk, a man named Dunesme. This man had a very beautiful wife, of whom Lecoq became enamored. He dispatched Dunesme to Russia, as his agent, and in his absence endeavored to seduce his wife. He represented to her that Dunesme had robbed him of a large sum, and that unless she acceded to his desires he would send her husband to the galleys. She yielded to save the man whom she loved, but overcome by remorse she lost her reason, and Lecoq awoke, one morning, to find the woman by his side a corpse, with a stiletto in her breast. He paid the woman who acted as Madame Dunesme's servant a heavy bribe to keep his presence in the house a secret, and returned unobserved to his own residence. The evidence showed that Madame Dunesme had taken her own life, and the terrible news was sent to her husband. Immediately upon his arrival in Paris he was arrested for embezzling his employer's funds, and after a speedy trial sent to the galleys.

The woman who had been his wife's servant took care of his only child, and Dunesme served out his ten year's sentence. On his liberation he found that the woman had a short time before married, and turned over his daughter to his sister, from whom he claimed the child, but the former custodian could not be found.

At the close of last year Dunesme suddenly came upon the person whom he had given up all hope of ever seeing again. She was in poverty and he aided her, and in return she told him the story of his wife's wrongs, and gave utterance to the suspicion that Lecoq had himself murdered her.

Dunesme, who was a lawless man, then concocted the plot which has been already treated of. Two of his companions played the part of detectives, and arrested Lecoq, as they said, for the murder of Madame Dunesme over thirty years ago. He was taken to Paris and kept in seclusion, the supposed officers assuring him that, for a large sum of money which he had drawn from his

bankers, they would secure his ultimate safety. At length he was released, and returned home, having been assured by the sham detectives that his innocence had been established to the satisfaction of the police, and that he would suffer no further molestation.

When the outrage perpetrated on Monsieur Lecoq was made known to the police, the most strenuous exertions were put forth to capture the offenders. Lecoq was summoned to Paris, and after several days spent in perambulating the city, he at length fixed on a street which he believed was that in which he had been confined. The police watched it thoroughly for several days; and ultimately arrested a man of suspicious behavior as he was entering one of the domiciles early in the morning. Lecoq positively identified him as one of the sham detectives, and a room into which he was going when taken as the apartment in which he had been imprisoned. There was a memorandum written in pencil on the wall by Lecoq, which left no doubt as to its being the place. There were letters on the man arrested which led to the securing of the other sham detective, and finally to the capture of Dunesme. The latter was in the last stage of disease, and made revelations of an astounding nature.

Among other things he detailed the facts respecting his wife and Lecoq already given, but his most important confession related to the dreadful tragedy of which Chateau Vert was the scene.

After his discharge from the galleys and the restoration of his daughter he rented a tract of woodland from Monsieur D'Eimer at the Chateau Vert. There he went under the name of Foille. It was he who encouraged the visits of young D'Eimer to his dwelling, and procured his marriage to his daughter Jeannette. When Monsieur D'Eimer brought home his young wife, Foille saw the hope of one day seeing his child the mistress of the chateau and the mother of children who would inherit vast wealth cut off. The thought preyed upon his mind until he became almost demented.

The woodland which Foille rented was in the rear of the chateau, and within it were the ruins of a small chapel. While searching them one day he partially removed a large slab and saw a deep hole underneath. He raised the block, and a flight of stone steps was discovered. Procuring a lantern and a flint and steel, he explored the subterranean opening, and soon found himself in the vaults of the chateau. More than one skeleton lay around, and here and there rusty bolts and chains, which showed that the place had once been used as a prison. In one corner of the vault he discovered an opening and winding staircase, which he ascended. After a while it became narrow and straight, and evidently ran inside the walls of the chateau. Having ascended some distance he came to a landing, and to the right saw what resembled a wooden door. He gave it a gentle push and it shook. A careful search disclosed a small knob in the wood, and a slight pressure upon it sent the door ajar, and a flood of daylight poured in. He was somewhat startled, and drew the door toward him. Hearing no indication of any one's being on the other side, he opened the door, and saw that he was on the threshold of what he knew at a glance must be Monsieur D'Eimer's bedroom. The door was a panel of the wainscot extending from almost the top of the room to within a foot of the floor. He retired and closed the door, and thought little of the discovery until the dread of his daughter's children being robbed of a splendid inheritance dwelt on his mind like a horrible nightmare.

To shorten a horrible confession, Foille resolved to murder the elder D'Eimer and his young wife, and entering the room by the secret stairway, accomplished his design only too effectually. As soon as his daughter and her husband were securely domiciled in the chateau Foille disappeared, his son-in-law having first made arrangements by which he secured an income amply sufficient for his ordinary wants. Foille, however, became a gambler, and finally got mixed up with a lawless gang, who assisted him subsequently in carrying out his designs on Lecoq. He died within a month of his confession, and the two sham detectives are now undergoing a fifteen year's sentence.

There is every reason to believe that neither Charles D'Eimer nor his wife ever had the slightest suspicion of Foille's having any hand in the long unexplained murder of the elder D'Eimer.

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