

How Lamirande Was Caught by Gaston Fay

ERNEST SUREAU LAMIRANDE, a Bachelor of Arts, a defaulter, and ex-Cashier of the Branch Bank of France at Poitiers, is a gentleman by birth, in his manners, and in his capability for rascality. I doubt if in previous history any Bachelor of Arts has ever attained to the notoriety of Lamirande; for to secure such fame one must indeed follow in the footsteps of the clever defaulter, or, at best, be the recipient of the Jerome medal for good manners.

The family of Lamirande is one of the most respectable of the South of France. The father was a banker of eminence at Poitiers, and the brother is to-day a magistrate of the same city. In a social point of view the defaulter enjoyed peculiar advantages; besides he was in receipt of a salary of twelve thousand francs, every *sou* of which he could apply to his "*menus plaisirs*," for all his necessary expenses were defrayed by M. Lamirande, Senior.

As cashier, Lamirande occupied a position of ease, of responsibility, and of opportunities; of the first and third he availed himself, but, after the manner of such, sought to escape the second. Lamirande, moreover, was a gambler: both the Widow Blanc and a certain Mlle. Claës—ladies to whom Lamirande was somewhat attached—testify that the cashier's invariable reply, when the source of his wealth was questioned, was: "I gamble and I win." One can only be surprised that a widow should have been deceived by so transparent a reply.

Lamirande was also a sportsman and an epicure. We have evidence of this in a certain little bill of Mons. Le Page, a gunmaker of some renown. For the cashier purchased of this tradesman a gun, one barrel a smooth bore for shot, the other rifled, the whole crowned with a sword bayonet twenty inches in length. With this weapon, and accompanied by a servant named Pierre Garnier, *alias* "Pon Volant" (The Flying Louse), Lamirande followed "*la chasse*," that is to say, he had a license to shoot. If we may believe the testimony of the "Pon Volant," the ordinary result of these sporting excursions consisted in a bag of two sparrows, more or less. On the evening of his return from the hunt, Lamirande would give a dinner at the Hotel de France. At a certain stage of the banquet, when the enthusiasm of the guests was at its height, the "Pon Volant" would enter the room, bearing aloft upon a salver the two little sparrows neatly trussed. At the sight of the victims of his prowess, Lamirande would blush with conscious pride, whereupon the guests, overcome with emotion, would exclaim "*Ah, Ernest, que tu es courageux!*" (Oh, Ernest, how courageous thou art!")

It is but natural that such a lion-hearted sportsman should find favor in the eyes of the weaker sex. Previous to his having attained his forty-second year, we know nothing of Lamirande's loves, but subsequently his attentions were equally divided between the Widow Blanc, of the "Rue des Grandes Ecoles," and a certain Mlle. Claës, of the suburbs of Poitiers. The "Pon Volant" tells us in this connection, that on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, it was his custom to brush the cashier's boots at the Widow Blanc's, and on

Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, he performed the same office at Mlle. Claës'. An admirable example of method on the part of the servant, and of regular irregularity on the part of the master.

If Lamirande could have denied himself one day in the week and "kept the Sabbath day holy," he might perhaps have been stealing with impunity and success at this very moment; but, alas, foolish man, the odd day given to Mlle. Claës, was one of the causes of his ruin. There lies before me the testimony of the two women, as given before M. Jotty, the committing magistrate for the district of Poitiers. It is a singular record of wild dissipation, reckless extravagance and bitter jealousies; withal it is thoroughly human, but rather too French to be transferred to the pages of an American magazine.

At the time of the discovery of Lamirande's defalcations, he had occupied the position of cashier for a period of eight years. During the first four, he had abstained from speculation, but during the remainder of his term of office—not unlike our politicians—he robbed with great zeal and considerable discretion. For the benefit of those who are about to take positions in banks, and with brokers, I will briefly detail Lamirande's method. It is not wanting in a certain originality, but of course we must leave it to those most interested to determine with what success the system may be applied to a reduction of the reserve of our own moneyed institutions.

The securities of the Branch Bank of France, at Poitiers, were placed in three safes; the one, for money in daily use in the office of the cashier; the other, the supplementary safe, at the entrance of the vault; and the third, the great vault itself. There were two keys to each of these safes. M. Bailly, the director of the bank, held one, and Lamirande the other; each lock, moreover, was of different construction. M. Bailly had nothing to do with the safe containing the money in daily use. Lamirande had charge of, and was alone responsible for it. When a large surplus had accumulated in the cashier's safe, the fact was reported to M. Bailly, who at once took charge of this surplus, and deposited it in the supplementary vault.

In the routine of business, it often happened that a large amount of specie was handled for remittance from one branch bank to the other. On these occasions M. Bailly and Lamirande opened the great vault, and the *employés* conducted the transfer in the presence of these two. It was not, therefore, during the removal of this bullion that Lamirande effected his robberies, neither could he make false entries and steal one or two bags of gold or silver from the reserve; for that in time would have been detected by a wretched bore peculiar to France, called an "Accidental Inspector," whose duty it is to visit, at irregular intervals, the various branches of the Bank of France to examine the accounts and count the specie. Lamirande adopted a method much more clever and ingenious.

It was customary when the *employés* of the Bank had counted the coin, and placed it in bags, to cap each bag with a label, bearing the words, "Bank of France, 1,000 Francs." Moreover, the clerks were required to sign these labels, each with his name in full, so that any deficiency might at once be traced, and the counter held responsible for the

difference. Previous to the delivery of these bags to the cashier, they were weighed for verification, and if found correct, transferred to the safe for money in daily use. Now, when these bags were under the control of Lamirande, he would ingeniously remove the label of the original counter, and take from each the sum of two hundred francs or less. This accomplished, he would replace the label, and cut from the mouth of the bag the superfluous linen. Two hundred francs abstracted from a bag containing one thousand francs would make no appreciable difference in the weight—that is to say, the deficiency would not be remarked in the ordinary handling to which the bags were subjected in their removal from one safe to the other, more particularly as every confidence was felt in the integrity of the cashier.

It is impossible to say to what extent Lamirande would have carried his defalcations had there not arisen a necessity to draw upon the reserve specie of the Bank at Poitiers. On a certain Monday in March, 1866, when the safe was opened, Mons. Bailly notified the cashier that they were to remit on that same day one million of francs in gold to Angoulême, and on the following day, Tuesday, five hundred thousand francs in silver coin.

This remittance of silver necessarily attacked the reserve in the vault, and comprised the altered bags. Lamirande, when he received this order, saw very plainly that his little game was played. He did not lose heart, however, but, with admirable prudence, immediately bagged four hundred and fifty thousand francs more from the private safe, and bolted by the 9:30 P. M. for Paris.

This was on Monday evening. The gold had already been shipped from the bank to the express office. On Tuesday morning, five hundred bags of silver, of a thousand francs each, were placed in sacks and likewise forwarded to the express office. As the bags bore the label of the counter, and there were no indications that they had been tampered with, the formality of weighing was dispensed with. Not so, however, with the express messenger, for, in the presence of the *employés* of the Bank, he weighed the sacks. Each sack should have weighed fifty *kilogrammes*; many of them weighed much less, indicating a deficiency of about two thousand francs per sack. M. Bailly was immediately notified. He ordered the remittance back to the Bank, where the sacks were opened. It was then discovered that there were two hundred francs missing from each of the three hundred and ten bags. Any careful and well-regulated bank president can imagine the agony of M. Bailly at this awful discovery. For myself, not being a director in any moneyed institution, I can only judge of Mons. Bailly's discomfort by a system of comparison. If on these occasions the agony of a bank president at all approaches that of a householder when he discovers that Mary Ann, the cook, is a defaulter to the extent of a dozen silver spoons, a cheese, four pounds of butter and a ham, one can no longer deny the greater sufferer the sympathy which the world under these circumstances seems so loath to accord.

The discomfited officials of the Branch Bank of France at Poitiers, now descended into the vault from which the altered bags had been removed. They found that other bags of silver had been tampered with. Twelve bags, which should have contained one thousand

francs each, in twenty-franc pieces, contained, though showing no difference in bulk, only coins of two francs and fifty centimes. But, worse still, in the compartments that should have contained gold, were found twelve bags of silver. An examination was now made of Lamirande's private safe, and here was discovered a deficit of four hundred and eighty thousand francs. This amount was taken in notes of the Bank of France of one thousand francs each, and was the sum "appropriated" by Lamirande a few hours previous to his departure. The compartment also contained two bags of gold labeled "20,000 frcs.," of seemingly proper weight, but a more thorough examination revealed the fact that these also had been disturbed. In order to understand how Lamirande altered these two bags of gold, it must be known that in France, when a bag of gold is composed only of twenty-franc pieces, it is not generally put up in rolls—that is called gold "*en vrai*." On the contrary, when a bag is made up of coins of forty francs, twenty francs and of five francs, rolls are made of each class of coin, these are wrapped in blue paper—rolls of silver money being wrapped in white paper. The bags of gold under examination were originally made up of forty, twenty and five-franc pieces, but many of these had been removed and their places supplied with rolls of two-franc and fifty-centime pieces, carefully wrapped first in white then in blue paper, in such a manner as to represent the exact weight within one *centigramme* of what the bags should have weighed. It required the greatest study and skill to attain this result. The whole of Lamirande's defalcation revealed by the examination amounted to seven hundred thousand francs.

Notwithstanding the skill and impunity with which, for several years, Lamirande carried on his operations, he must have been continually on the rack. As we have before remarked, there exists in France an official, called an "Accidental Inspector," whose duty it is to visit, at irregular intervals, the various branches of the Bank of France, and weigh the specie on hand. On the occurrence of these official visits it is the duty of the cashier to attend the inspector in his visit to the safes and deliver the bags to be weighed. On these occasions Lamirande escaped detection with singular good luck. For example, when the vaults were opened for inspection, and the inspector in attendance with his scales, Lamirande would say to him, with great *sang froid*: "Well, which bag will Monsieur have?" The official, completely deceived by the well-feigned indifference of the cashier, would reply: "Well, any one; suit yourself." Whereupon Lamirande would consult his own delicate, sensitive nature, and take good care to hand out a bag of full weight.

In France, where "we do things so well," seven hundred thousand francs is an enormous amount for a man to steal; but in our country, if an individual bolts with an odd hundred thousand or so, and he happens to be shrewd and have friends, rather than incur the expense of his capture it is considered more politic to pay him a salary to keep out of the way. The directors of the Bank of France, however, were not so minded, for, as soon as they had complied with certain formalities, they went to work to catch the thief.

On Monday night Lamirande fled from Poitiers. He reached London on Tuesday night. On Tuesday morning a French detective started in pursuit. This person, although an Inspector of Police, does not appear to have been a good sample of his corps, or else they are all a very much overrated body of men. Lamirande reached Liverpool on Wednesday,

and, under the name of Thébault, took passage in the “Moravian” for Portland. It was fortunate for the defaulter that he only had a detective on his track, and that the Atlantic Cable was not yet in operation. On the following Saturday the detective sailed for this country, furnished with the necessary papers to insure the extradition of the fugitive, provided he should succeed in effecting his arrest. Certain documents had also gone forward by the very same steamer on which Lamirande was a passenger. These were addressed to French officials in New York, and by them handed to a firm of three lawyers, whom we will designate as S., S. & S.

In view of the importance of the case, and the absolute necessity of great secrecy, it was not considered prudent to entrust the matter to the ordinary criminal authorities; so the Messrs. S., S. & S. concluded to keep the affair under the immediate control of their own office. The *employé* whom they selected for the delicate duty of discovering and arresting the fugitive, we shall designate as X.

It was natural to suppose that Lamirande, *alias* Thébault, upon his arrival in this country, would make at least a temporary stop in New York. As the rogue could not speak English, it was more than probable that he would take lodgings at a French hotel. It required no great exercise of cunning to reach this conclusion. As a preliminary step, X. hurried off to a lunch hotel in Houston street, much frequented by foreigners. Now, when a man enters a restaurant, he is supposed to go there either to meet a friend, or satisfy the cravings of hunger. X. had his mission, but as he did not wish the world in general to divine it, he quieted any suspicion by ordering a kidney omelette. The unwonted extravagance of his guest attracted the attention of the landlord. So the latter buzzed about, suggesting this and that dish, but our friend cut him short, delivered a few incisive questions, and developed his mission. Lamirande was not there. In the meantime, a stout, deliberate party, travel-stained and hungry, entered the hotel and demanded food. This person was no other than our friend the French detective, who, once comfortably seated, allowed his eye to wander about the room, and finally to alight upon X. The latter returned the stare with interest, whereupon the police-agent called the landlord, and demanded, in a loud voice, “if he was acquainted with Monsieur Thébault, a wine merchant in New York?” When the police agent uttered these words, his expression was one of triumph, for he surely expected X. to bolt, or at least to betray his guilt in a change of color; but our friend exhibited no emotion, whereupon the Frenchman, contented with this preliminary development of his mission, fell upon the food placed before him with a voracity peculiar to his race and calling.

On the following day, when the police agent presented himself at the office of the Messrs. S., S. & S., and exhibited his credentials, he was not a little astonished to find that the person whom he had mistaken for Lamirande was no other than the individual destined to effect the capture of the clever defaulter—indeed, at that very moment, was about to set off in search of the ex-cashier.

Lamirande, *alias* Thébault, appears, from the moment of his first appearance on board the “Moravian,” at Liverpool, to have assumed, in the eyes of his fellow passengers, the position of a suspected character. Whether his utter ignorance of the English language

was *prima facie* evidence of his being a rascal, we are not informed; but we may proceed on general principles, and presume that if the ex-cashier was incompetent to swear and curse furiously in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, it was more than enough to stamp him, in the eyes of the English bagmen, his fellow-travellers, as an extremely bad and dangerous character. Moreover, Lamirande never washed himself, and this, to men wedded to the “*tub*” and the sponge, was in itself an eccentricity calculated to excite suspicion and distrust. When the “Moravian” arrived at Portland, the fugitive cashier had become an exceedingly well-known party; so that when X. reached Portland in pursuit, and made inquiry of the officers of the ship concerning Lamirande, *alias* Thébault, he had no difficulty in satisfying himself that he was on the track of the defaulter.

Among the fellow-passengers of Lamirande were three or four Canadian ship-builders, from Quebec. With these, during the voyage, the ex-cashier became quite intimate. X. took advantage of this circumstance, and, to obtain a first clue as to the movements of Lamirande subsequent to the arrival of the steamer at Portland, he went by rail to Quebec, and there placed himself in communication with the French Consul. This gentleman obtained, without much difficulty, the addresses of the ship-builders, and requested them to appear at the Consulate on the following day. In obedience to the summons, the ship-builders called upon X., who made known his business to them, whereupon one of the number became very much annoyed, and acknowledged that he held in trust for Lamirande, *alias* Thébault, six thousand francs of the stolen money. This amount had been entrusted him on board ship, to hold until the ex-cashier should visit Quebec, when he would draw against the amount to defray his personal expenses. The recipient of the money and confidence of Lamirande, *alias* Thébault, was only too happy to part with the stolen property, and receive therefor an acknowledgment of the same. From the ship-builders X. learned that Lamirande, *alias* Thébault, had revealed with entire frankness his future route of travel; his intention to tarry a day or two in Boston; thence to one of the leading hotels in New York. X. also learned from the same source, that the defaulter left Portland in company with a young man, an American, who travelled in special trains and drove the fastest team in Boston.

X., satisfied that the information he had received was entirely trustworthy, started forthwith for Boston, *via* Montreal. Arrived at the former place, X. hurried to the Tremont House. His first inquiry concerned our fast young friend of the special train; but this individual was unknown to the clerks, nor did the register contain the name of any Frenchman whose arrival should correspond with that of Lamirande. The conductors and baggage-masters on the Portland road were appealed to, but they were utterly oblivious. Undismayed, X., in company with the French Consul, visited every hotel in Boston, of low and high degree. At one of the more obscure he encountered the name of our bragging swell. “Does Mr. — stop here?” asked X. “I rather guess he does!” was the reply. The landlord looked upon Mr. — as a national institution, or, at least, as one of the spokes of the everlasting “*Hub*.”

X. was now shown to the apartments of our swell; he knocked, and was invited to enter. The scene revealed Mr. — seated on the edge of the bed drawing on his boots.

“I believe,” said X., in his blandest manner, “that you are Mr. —? I understand, sir, that you drive the fastest team in Boston.”

This delicate bit of homage to the most ambitious longing of the Puritan element opened the way to a full account, on the part of Mr. X., of the movements of Lamirande subsequent to his departure from Portland.

X. learned enough to cause him to make a more thorough examination of the register at the Tremont House. Under the date of the 29th of March he discovered an almost unintelligible scrawl, which, after much patient study, he tortured into the word “Thébault,” with the prefix “Boston.” The clerks of the hotel, upon being questioned, acknowledged that as they were unable to decipher the name, and understood the person alluded to was from Belgium—*en route* to the Metropolitan Hotel in New York—he passed among them under the *soubriquet* of “the gentleman from Belgium.” The books of the hotel also bore witness that Lamirande had taken his departure by the Fall River Line for New York, on the afternoon of the 31st of March.

On Sunday, the 8th day of April, X. started by express train for New York. At an early hour on Monday morning he arrived at the Metropolitan Hotel. In the meantime, however, he telegraphed the Messrs. S., S. & S., who were watching his proceedings with no ordinary interest, that he had found his man, and needed a warrant of arrest and a deputy sheriff. X. now made a careful examination of the register of the hotel; and under the date of April 1st, found, written in a bold round hand, the name “[M.] Deyhers, Antwerp.” X. was now convinced that Thébault, *alias* Deyhers, was no other than Lamirande, *alias* “the gentleman from Belgium.”

He hastened to assure himself if M. Deyhers was stopping in the house. The clerks answered affirmatively, and stated, moreover, that as M. Deyhers could not speak a word of English, he employed as interpreter a colored waiter attached to the house. The French inspector of police, in obedience to a telegraphic summons, now made his appearance, when X. requested him to make an examination of M. Deyhers’ baggage. The police agent did so, but whether or no the luggage did not attain to the detective average of value, the inspector reported that it was not that of Lamirande. X., not content with this, instituted another test; he sent for the colored interpreter, and, placing a ten-dollar note in his hand, told him to go to M. Deyhers, who was at that moment at breakfast, and engage him in conversation, and observe closely if his left eyetooth was broken. Sambo hastened to earn his commission, and shortly returned with the report that M. Deyhers’ mouth exhibited the dental defect indicated.

It was now evident that “the gentleman from Belgium” and the cashier of Poitiers were the same.

X., in the meanwhile, dispatched a messenger to the office of the Messrs. S., S. & S., for an additional force. He then posted his men in such a manner as to effectually prevent the escape of Lamirande. A deputy sheriff had made his appearance, armed with a warrant of arrest. The defaulter breakfasted with his usual composure and deliberation: at the

conclusion of the meal he wandered about the halls of the hotel. Although Lamirande had no positive reason to suppose that he was known and watched; yet his subsequent movements indicated a mind ill at ease. The defaulter, when he descended to the main hall of the house, was permitted to pass into Broadway, but a deputy-sheriff and one P., an *employé* of the Messrs. S., S. & S., followed him step by step.

Lamirande, undecided and confused, passed around the Metropolitan and halted at a rear door. Here he was met by the colored interpreter, from whom he doubtless received an intimation that he was watched. At this moment the deputy sheriff touched Lamirande upon the shoulder and claimed him as a prisoner. The defaulter received this announcement with such entire composure, and protested his innocence with such naturalness, that the officer, and P., the clerk, were almost convinced that they had trapped the wrong man.

“Monsieur,” said the defaulter to P., “what means this outrage? My name is Deyhers, a traveller from Belgium!”

But the clerk had been associated with lawyers for too many years to take at any price the word of man. So M. Deyhers was marched off to the Ludlow Street Jail.

The prisoner, through every test, photographic and legal, protested his innocence with so much dignity and calmness that the affair, to those engaged therein, became somewhat embarrassing. The accumulated evidences of identity at last assumed so positive a form that the captured defaulter, unable to longer resist the pressure, admitted not only his identity but his guilt.

The extradition of Lamirande has become one of the “*causes célèbres*,” rendered so by his second escape and rearrest in Canada, where an attempt was made to brand the proceedings as improper, and in violation of international law. Indeed, the case of Lamirande led to a long correspondence between Lord Stanley and the French Government, but it had no other effect than to induce the latter to keep a firmer hold on the prisoner and hasten his trial and conviction.

Of the sum embezzled by Lamirande from the Bank of France, about one-third was recovered. To-day the defaulter is serving out in a French prison a term of ten years. When he is liberated he will be presented with a yellow passport, a document which necessitates, on the part of the recipient, as long as he may remain in France, a hebdomadal visit to the police station nearest which he may at the time reside.

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