

Lady Guilfort

A work has recently been published in Paris entitled “Anecdotes of the French Police,” by M. Peuchet, keeper of the archives of the police of Paris. Some of the statements it contains are among the most extraordinary we ever read. We have been particularly struck by the adventures of a murderous female who assumed the name of Lady Guilfort: and availing ourselves of an able digest given in the *Monthly Chronicle*, we hasten to lay a part of her strange story before our readers.

It was during the reign of Louis XIV., that disappearances of individuals became alarmingly frequently in Paris. Awfully mysterious rumors on the subject were rife; and the lieutenant-general of the police, anxious to unravel the awful secret, employed an intelligent agent of the name of Lecoq for that purpose. It transpired that a female who sometimes pretended to be a polish princess, a Mademoiselle Jaborouski, and at others assumed the title of Lady Guilfort, was at the bottom of all.—Lecoq placed his son, superbly dressed, in her way. The female appeared, and he was allured to her house, where many had been drawn who were seen no more. He entered; the charms of the sorceress made him for a moment forget the part he had to act, and he gazed on her with the most fervent admiration. While in this situation, “the elder Lecoq, who with the police agents were impatiently waiting in the street, not hearing the signal agreed upon with his son, put a whistle to his mouth, and blew it loudly. The shrill sound reached the ears of the young Lecoq, and put his illusions instantly to flight. He started from his seat, and the siren, under whose fascination he had been, under the pretense of giving directions to her old suivante, went into an adjoining chamber. L’Eveille, profiting by her absence, made an inspection of the room, in one corner of which stood what appeared to be a kind of Indian screen. Wishing to see what was behind this, he endeavored to close up its folds, but finding them immoveable he shook them with some violence, when he heard a click, like that of a spring giving way, and one of the folds descended into the floor, and left unmasked a deep and ample recess or cupboard, upon the shelves of which were ranged twenty-six silver dishes, and in each a human head, the flesh of which had been preserved by some embalming process. A stifled cry of horror burst from the youth’s lips, which but a moment before had been breathing the accents of admiration and passion. But his agony of terror was still further increased when, looking towards one of the windows of the room, he thought he saw several other cadaverous faces fixing upon him through the panes their glazed but fiery glances. He grasped at the back of a chair, to keep him from falling, his hair stood on end, drops of cold perspiration covered his forehead, his cheeks became paler and more livid than the faces of the dead that confronted him, and his nerves at length giving way, he sunk upon his knees, and clasped his hands in a delirium of terror and despair.

“At this moment the window was burst in, and his father followed by the police agents, jumped into the apartment: for the elder Lecoq, alarmed by the silence of his son, and dreading that he might be assassinated, had bravely mounted to the assault of the house, which he was enabled to do by means of ladders which the agents procured from a neighboring house-builder’s yard. This fortunate and daring act of Lecoq’s did in fact save his son’s life, for immediately after the noise made by Lecoq and the police agents breaking into the apartment, Mademoiselle Jaborouski, followed by four armed ruffians, rushed from the adjoining chamber, but the police agents being superior in number, and equally well armed, resistance was in vain, and the fair murderess and

her four accomplices were secured, and after being manacled, were carried off to prison. A close examination of the house led to no other discovery worth noticing.

“The explanation of this strange scene given by Peuchet is as follows:

“A number of the most desperate malefactors, whose crimes had often merited the gibbet and the galleys, had formed an association under the command of an experienced and daring chief. —This arch villain had; in the course of his wanderings, fallen in with a rich but most profligate English woman — a modern Messalina. Besides being his mistress, she lent herself as a decoy, by means of which young men who had the appearance of wealth were lured to the den where young Lecoq had had so miraculous an escape. There; after sharing in her entertainments, they were murdered, and their heads separated from their bodies. The latter were disposed of to the surgical students for anatomical purposes; and the heads, after being dried and embalmed, kept until a safe opportunity offered of sending them to Germany, where a price was given for them by the secret amateurs of a science then in its infancy, but which has since made some noise in the world under the name of phrenology; or the system of Gall and Spurzheim. The government, dreading the effect on the minds of the people likely to be produced by a public exposure of these numerous and atrocious murders, took measures for the prompt but secret punishment of the culprits. The four robbers were hanged, and their female accomplice was also sentenced to death; but destiny ordained otherwise, as the sequel will prove.

“The conclusion of this strange eventful history is thus narrated by Peuchet:

“The Chevalier de Lorraine, the Marquis de Louvois, and the Chancellor of France happened to be present in the Marchioness de Montespan’s apartment, whilst Louis XIV, was relating to her and to the Duke of Orleans, his brother, the adventure of young Lecoq, who had been rewarded with a considerable sum of money and a lucrative place. The marchioness expressed great horror at the profligacy and cruelty of Lady Guilfort, (which title, like that of Jaborouski, was one of the many names assumed by the Englishwoman, her real name having never been discovered,) and asked the king if the execution of so base and fiendish a creature should soon take place? Louis replied, that the law would take its course, and then changed the conversation. Soon after the Duke of Orleans and the Chevalier de Lorraine took their leave. After quitting the apartment the Chevalier said to his Royal Highness, ‘This Englishwoman must be a rare piece of womanhood (*une maitresse femme,*) suppose we have her to sup with us.’ The prince cried out ‘Shame! Shame!’ But the very extravagance of the proposal pleased him; and on the favorite renewing his entreaties he consented. The Englishwoman being confined in the Bastille, a blank letter de cachet was procured, and filled up with an order to the governor so deliver to the care of the bearer Lady Guilfort, for the purpose of her being transferred to the prison of Pignerol. The governor of the Bastille, deceived by this false warrant, delivered up his prisoner; but shortly after having done so, he came to the knowledge of the trick that had been played on him, and in the first moment of alarm and anger he talked of complaining to the king; but on the name of Duke of Orleans being mentioned, he resolved to hush up the matter, which was done by means of a process verbal certifying the sudden death and burial within the precincts of the Bastille of the female prisoner in question.

“Lady Guilfort, who supposed that her removal from the Bastille was only for the purpose of being taken to the Conciergerie, preparatory to her execution, soon perceived, however, that the carriage took the direction of one of the barriers of Paris; after quitting which, and at the end of a two hours’ drive it stopped. A kind of equerry came and opened the door, offered her his hand to descend, and after passing through a long corridor, and up some flights of stairs, ushered her into a brilliant and well-lighted apartment. A well-heaped fire of logs was blazing in the chimney, and nothing about the room wore the appearance of a prison. After the interval of a few minutes three gentlemen entered the room. Though plainly dressed, it was evident, from their air and manner that they were persons of high rank. One of them, immediately on entering, put an opera-glass to his eye, and examined with haughty curiosity Lady Guilfort; the two others threw themselves into armchairs. Lady Guilfort, after the first surprise was over, had no difficulty in recognising in the persons before her, the King’s brother, the Duke of Orleans, the Chevalier de Lorraine, and the Marquis d’Effiat. She quickly perceived the motives which led to her being brought into their presence; and though under other circumstances, she would have willingly joined in the wildest of orgies with the persons in whose company she then found herself, yet the recollection of her dungeon in the Bastille, and the terrible death impending over her, left her no thought but that of making her escape. She affected not to be aware of the rank of the personages before her; but seeming to enter into the spirit of the adventure, she exerted all her powers of fascination, and soon made captive to her seductive influence the Chevalier de Lorraine and the Marquis d’Effiat. But the Duke of Orleans, never a great admirer of the fair sex, and who could not vanquish his horror of the Englishwoman, tired before long of the scene; and bethinking himself that the gratification of his curiosity might be too dearly purchased by the risk of the king’s displeasure, should the circumstance meet his majesty’s ears, he proposed to have her conveyed back to the Bastille. His companions, however, made him sensible of the want of generosity in such a proceeding, and it was agreed that Lady Guilfort should be sent off in the direction of Brussels or England, at her option. The Duke of Orleans, having refused to stay for supper, was conducted by the Chevalier de Lorraine and the Marquis d’ Effiat to his apartments; for this scene took place in the palace of Versailles, and in the lodgings of the Marquis de Lafare, the use of which he had given to the Chevalier de Lorraine for twenty-four hours.

“After returning to the room where Lady Guilfort was, all three sat down to a *petit souper*. The most exuberant gaiety and not the most refined gallantry was the order of the night. At the close of a supper which had been prolonged into the small hours of the morning, Lady Guilfort on a sudden rose up, and taking up a taper, made her lowest courtesy, and wished the gentlemen good night. The marquis and the chevalier likewise quitted the table, and their frail guest, before she left the room, contrived to tell each, without the other hearing, that she would leave the door of her chamber open. She then quitted the room. Soon after the two gentlemen moved off as if to their respective chambers; but, after leaving in their rooms their lighted tapers, they stole back in the dark on tiptoe, and met face to face at the door of the lady’s chamber. Seeing the trick put upon them’ they burst out laughing, and both entered the chamber to reproach her with her duplicity; but they had scarcely advanced three paces into the room, when Lady Guilfort, who had been concealed in the corridor, pulled the door to, locked it, put the key in her pocket, and hurried back to the supper-room, where, tying together the table-cloths and napkins, she fastened one end of this *impromptu* rope to the balcony, and, by means of it, let herself down into the park, where she lay concealed until the gates were opened in the morning. She then slipped out, and hurrying into the town of Versailles, took the first vehicle that offered. and arrived in Paris

before her two imprisoned admirers were released from durance; as they dared not during the night make a noise in the place by calling or ringing for the servants, to have the door of the room in which they were locked up forced open, lest it might lead to the discovery of their participation in the criminal trick played off upon the governor of the Bastille, and the consequent escape of Lady Guilfort.”

Buffalo [NY] Courier, October 9, 1844

The opening paragraphs of this story appear to be the basis for *Mademoiselle Joborouski*, a story that was reprinted under various titles over a 40-year span.

A lengthier version of this story was published in the *Raftsmen's Journal* (April 13, 1859) and in the German Language newspaper *Minnesota Steats-Zeitung* (February 11, 1865).