

Following Up a Clew by Joseph Montet

On the day when she felt her end approaching and that life was slowly leaving her, just as the oil in her china lamp gently sank on a winter's night, Mlle. Aglae put her skinny hands upon the head of her pug Mirza and shed copious tears after which, turning to her faithful servant, Gertrude, she said in a weak, sad voice:

“I am leaving you my fortune, Gertrude, but on condition that, when I am gone, you will take care of Mirza as I have done. The poor creature will need all your affection to console her for my loss. Swear to me that death alone will separate you from her!”

Gertrude swore on all that she held most dear, that is upon the remains of her parrot Leocadie, which she had seen sadly depart life from the effects of a too rash indulgence in parsley, and which the skill of a taxidermist had enabled her to preserve, upon a gilded perch, with wide-spread wings, in ecstatic attitude of a parrot winging its flight to a better world.

Mlle. Aglae died peacefully after this, for she knew well that the pledge would be sacredly kept. Her confidence was not misplaced, as Gertrude was a woman of her word, and the whole town of Briqueville was edified by the conscientious zeal she displayed in carrying out her mistress' last wishes. Never had a quadruped been the object of more unremitting kindness than was this precious pug of Mlle. Aglae. Not only did it have at all times on its plate food that would have satisfied nine out of ten human beings, but it was watched over and petted to such an extent that no child could have desired a happier existence. Its wardrobe consisted of about twenty coats, jackets and dresses, the making and fitting of which were to Gertrude a labor of love. She had prepared clothes for the animal suitable for all kinds of weather, and in dressing the creature she guided herself closely by the indications of the thermometer hanging upon the window frame.

The consequences of this kind of living were not long in coming. At the end of a year Mirza died from the effects of a plethora of health.

Great and sincere was Gertrude's grief. She broke the set of her finest dozen of towels to shroud the icy remains of her friend. Then, as she reflected that she did not know what to do with the dead animal, she became prey to the most poignant anguish.

In truth she was at a loss as to what to do. Bury the remains in the garden? No, she could not muster up the courage to do that; the proximity of the grave would have afflicted her with an incurable melancholy. Where then would she put the pet? In the depth of her despair an inspiration flashed, lightning like, through her mind; the kind Monsieur Gregoire, the beadle of St. Ursula's church, would assist her in this, her hour of sorrow. He was so good, so obliging! Without a moment's delay she dispatched a lad, her neighbor's son, with a message, begging him to come to see her immediately. Half an hour later M. Gregoire arrived.

He found the unfortunate Gertrude in the parlor, the blinds of which were closed, and which by four lighted tapers was formed into a kind of mortuary chapel. She was seated upon a lounge,

where, wrapped in its white towel as if in a winding sheet, the pug lay stretched out on its back. Somewhat moved by the sight, M. Gregoire doffed his hat.

He was about to cross himself, when, with a sigh, Mlle. Gertrude stopped him. In a few words, intermingled with sobs, she related her troubles and explained what she expected of him.

“Especially,” concluded she, “I wish you to bury the body far from here, and to keep me in ignorance of the spot, for if I knew where to find the grave I would go every day and wear my eyes out in weeping over it.”

M. Gregoire promised all that was asked.

“I will come this evening,” said he, “after dark, to take away the body. As you know, people are so funny! Seeing me would be enough to set them gossiping.”

He returned, as he had promised, at 8 o’clock. A long cloak hung from his shoulders to his heels. Gertrude uttered a cry and clasped her hands together, when he drew from under the mantle an oblong poplar box of the same shape and size as a violin case.

“A coffin! A real coffin! Oh, Monsieur Gregoire, you are really too kind.”

“For one’s friends,” replied the beadle, with his most unctuous smile, “one can’t do too much. Besides, you know the proverb,” added he, as he pointed to the rigid body, “The friends of our friends are our friends.”

Half an hour later Monsieur Gregoire went off with a step of becoming gravity, carrying under his arm the mournful burden confined to his pious care.

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“And you say you found it in a field near the hospital?”

“Near the military hospital; yes, corporal.”

“In clearing up the field?”

“In clearing it up.”

“With your plow?”

“With my plow.”

“That’s peculiar!”

Corp. Poireau stopped writing to scratch his nose with the point of his pencil.

“It is very pe-cu-li-ar,” repeated he, drawing the word out to its full length. “I shall refer the matter to my ranking officer!”

And the corporal referred the matter to his ensign, who advised his lieutenant. The latter informed his captain, who notified the colonel, so that, half an hour later, all the gendarmerie of Briqueville was on foot.

“Very well, colonel!”

The captain started off, left foot foremost, closely followed by our friend the corporal, who all the way kept muttering to himself, “Decidedly this is a very peculiar case!”

An hour later a detachment of police was stationed at a distance of about 100 meters from the military hospital, at the top of the hill from which may be seen the whole of Briqueville with its short, straight streets, and, at a distance, the harbor with its forest of masts, surrounding countless fishing boats.

Near the detachment, the colonel and the prosecutor were conferring together, while, at a respectful distance, the laborer, the first cause of all this emotion, stood twirling his greasy hat, awaiting to be questioned.

All at once the attorney turned to him.

“So,” asked he, “you say that until now this field has not been cultivated?”

“Why, yes, and the best proof is that I was hired to break the ground.”

“So that a criminal might have come here and have buried the proof of his crime with a firm hope that it would never be discovered?”

“That might be possible.”

“Well, first we must see for ourselves. Lead us to the spot where you made the discovery.”

The peasant obeyed and walked about fifty steps. He was followed by the public prosecutor, the colonel and the detachment of police. Reaching the spot where his plow still stood in the furrow, he pointed to the earth at a box of white wood slightly disjointed by the dampness and in the side of which the ploughshare had made a hole.

The public prosecutor stooped and closely examined the object.

“There is no possible doubt,” said he as he resumed an erect position. “See for yourself, colonel; it is really a coffin.”

“A child’s coffin,” added the colonel.

“It is strange, very strange,” continued the public prosecutor, shaking his head. “It is evident that we hold the clew of the crime. Colonel, please order the thing to be taken up with the greatest care. There is nothing more to do until our return to town.”

The colonel said a few words to Corp. Poireau, who leaned over the gaping pit and gently took up the mysterious box, muttering to himself, “All this is beginning to look very peculiar.”

On the way back to Briqueville the prosecutor said to the colonel:

“What a vexing coincidence! Our examining magistrate and our coroner are away and will be absent until to-morrow. Now, in a case of this kind, it is my opinion that it would be better to await their return before investigating the matter any further.”

“I believe you are right,” replied the colonel. “Besides, this is not a case that demands an immediate examination. This coffin has been buried fully ten or twelve months; a delay of twenty-four hours can surely do no harm.”

It was therefore decided that they would await the return of the judge and the coroner. In depositing the object upon the office table Corp. Poireau gave a start.

“Hello!” exclaimed he, “here is something most superlatively peculiar!”

“What is it?” asked the colonel.

“See for yourself, colonel. A piece of linen sticking out of the hole made by the ploughshare, and there is a mark on the end of it.”

“That’s so!” said the colonel. “Well! Well! That criminal does not seem to have been very shrewd! Still, how can we find out whose name these initials stand for?”

“Anyhow,” suggested the public prosecutor, “there is one thing we can do. Let us send for the five or six laundresses that are in Briqueville. If I mistake not, one of them will give us a clew.”

“A good idea!” exclaimed the colonel, “a very good idea.”

An hour later the six Briqueville washerwomen were collected together, and each, in turn, held her nose between her thumb and forefinger as she stooped over the strange, inodorous box, from which hung the bit of linen that was to bring all their sagacity into play.

Suddenly one of them exclaimed:

“I know the mark! It is Mlle. Aglae’s linen.”

“Who is Mlle. Aglae?”

“A customer of mine who died about two years ago.”

“Do you know what became of her linen?”

“Why, of course I do. Her servant inherited of her clothes as well as of everything else. She now resides in the house of her dead mistress.”

The public prosecutor and the colonel exchanged a look of triumph.

Just then Corp. Poireau, who had been examining the box very closely, exclaimed: “Why, this is still more peculiar.”

“What is the matter now?” asked the colonel.

“The matter is, colonel, I think I perceive the end of a bone. You may see for yourself, colonel, it is really the end of a bone.”

“So it is,” said the colonel. “Look, Monsieur le Prosecutor, see if it isn’t.”

The public prosecutor did as directed. For a little while he had felt somewhat excited over the turn affairs were taking. The case was becoming more and more interesting. It was a lucky windfall to him. He sat down and scribbled a few words on a piece of paper.

“Take this to the telegraph office,” said he. “It is a dispatch to the minister of justice! And now,” added he, complacently rubbing his hands together, “we shall leave this box to be opened by the examining magistrate and the coroner. They will find their work already done for them. As for you, worthy woman, lead the way to the house you spoke of!”

As they went along the attorney could not conceal his satisfaction.

“Well, colonel, what do you think? We have got a fine case, haven’t we?”

“A fine case indeed,” replied the colonel. “A first class murder! That will be a toothsome morsel for the jury.”

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Peacefully knitting at her window, Mlle. Gertrude nearly swooned away when she saw her home invaded by so formidable an array of authorities. But how great soever might have been her surprise, it in nowise equaled the astonishment of the invaders, who stood before her with open mouths, as if transfixed. The seventy springs of the worthy maiden, and the hairy treble wart which softened the austere outlines of her nose, produced on their minds an impression they had not expected.

“Sapristi,” whispered the colonel to the public prosecutor, “the lady seems to me rather too ripe to have anything to do with a crime of this nature.”

Although visibly discomfited, the attorney put on a sickly smile.

Matters had to be explained, however. They were in a most satisfactory manner by Monsieur Gregoire, the beadle of St. Ursula, who threw so much light on the affair that it made the public prosecutor's vexation all the more evident.

A pug! Was it possible? It was so possible that it was the truth. The prosecutor had to believe the evidence of his own eyes, when the skeleton of Mirza, divested of its winding sheet, lay upon the office table, testifying to the truth of what Monsieur Gregoire had advanced.

They still laugh about this affair in Briqueville, and the merry townsmen predict that it will make Monsieur le Procureur's fortune. As for Corp. Poireau, he stoutly maintained that, in all his many years of service as a gendarme, he never was connected with a case which was so very pe-cu-li-ar!—Joseph Montet, translated for *The Times-Democrat*

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