

A Little Affair

by James D. McCabe, Jr.

M. EUGENE LAROMIE had passed through some wonderful adventures in the exercise of his profession, and had been nearer death than most men care to be. His success in ferreting out and bringing to light crimes of all kinds has won for him the bitter enmity of all the offenders, both political and criminal, in the city. They had repeatedly vowed vengeance against him, for they declared that there was no chance of success for them while he remained in Paris. Laromie only laughed at their threats, and kept his wits about him. He declared his readiness to meet them whenever they desired it, provided only they would grant him fair play.

This, however, was the last thing they intended doing. They had fired at him frequently without success, and had been equally unlucky in their attempts with poison. They had gotten up mock conspiracies, with the hope of decoying him into their power; but he saw through them in an instant, and only laughed at his enemies for their trouble. Still they had not abandoned the hope of capturing him, and it was very certain, that if they could succeed in doing so, M. Laromie's fate was sealed.

One day he was lounging idly near one of the most noted shops of the Palais Royal, when a woman passed by. She was very beautiful, and was richly and tastefully dressed. She was evidently a lady, and decidedly one of the most beautiful the detective had ever seen. As she passed, she looked at him fixedly, and then smiled. Instantly Laromie lifted his hat, and bowed profoundly. When he raised his eyes again the lady had disappeared. He was annoyed at this, for he was anxious to learn more of the beautiful stranger; and from the smile she had given him he knew she was not averse to such a course upon his part.

Eugene Laromie was a true Frenchman in his love of gallantry, and this was the only thing that ever brought him into any real danger. Several times he had narrowly escaped death at the hands of jealous husbands, and his friends were confident, that if he ever died by violence, a woman would be the cause of it.

During the day he could not help thinking of the beautiful unknown who had so fascinated him. The next morning, about the same hour, he took his place again at the Palais Royal to watch for her. He was not kept waiting long. She soon appeared, and as she passed him she again smiled, and this time the smile was accompanied by a bow. Acting upon a sudden impulse, Laromie started forward and placed himself by her side. He was about to speak to her, when she said, hurriedly, and in a low tone:

“Not yet, Monsieur Laromie. We are observed. Tonight, at the Opera.”

“One word, madame,” exclaimed Laromie, impulsively. “Whom have I the honor of addressing?”

The lady laughed slightly, and then handing him a card, said impatiently:

“Go now,— I will see you tonight at the Opera.”

Laromie bowed low, and drew back, while the lady passed on. Glancing at the card she had given him, he saw written on it in a delicate hand, “*Julie de Noel*,” but whether it was Madame or Mademoiselle the pasteboard did not state, and the detective did not care. He only knew that she was a most beautiful woman, and that she had consented to grant him an interview.

“Who knows,” muttered Laromie, twitching his moustache, absently, “what may come of it? She is superb. But how the deuce did she learn my name? Well, it is not strange. Everyone in Paris has heard of me.”

In Paris when one wishes to learn anything respecting any inhabitant of the great city, he can be satisfied by applying to the chief of police. To the office of his chief, Laromie now bent his steps upon an errand of this kind respecting the lady he had just parted from. In answer to his inquiries, the chief consulted a ponderous ledger, and after a brief inspection declared there was no such person in Paris.

“What is it, Laromie?” he asked; “public business, or an assignation?”

“O, merely a little affair of my own,” said Laromie, laughing.

“Take care, my friend,” said the chief, gravely. “You run a great risk in these little affairs of yours. We could not afford to lose you just now.”

“Never fear,” returned the detective, gayly. “I always keep my wits about me.”

That night Laromie was at the Opera at an early hour. He waited impatiently as the audience came in, and he thought they had never been so slow before. He scanned boxes and parterre closely, but could see the lady nowhere. As the performance began, his attention was attracted by a friend, and he turned to speak to him. As he looked back at the audience, when his friend left him, his heart gave a bound of delight. The lady was sitting in one of the most retired boxes, radiant in her beauty. She saw him, and nodded, smilingly. In an incredibly short time he was seated by her side, pouring forth his thanks for the happiness she had given him.

In reply to his questions, the lady told him she was the widow of a gentleman of good family, and great wealth. She said she had seen Laromie at various places in the city, and with a blush, she confessed that she had become very much interested in him. The rest we have already told.

One of Laromie’s weak points was his vanity; and here a pretty woman could always strike a successful blow. He had become completely fascinated with Madame de Noel; and while he sat with her in the box, his demonstrations of his admiration were so excessive, that the lady had several times to remind him that they might be observed by someone in the audience. When the performance was over, the lady asked him if he would go home with her to supper, and he, overjoyed, consented.

If anyone had seen the detective during the drive from the opera to the lady's house, his reputation for coolness and discretion would have suffered. He did nothing but clasp the lady around the waist, and kiss her repeatedly, protesting between each empathetic salute, ardent and undying devotion to the fair widow. Fortunately the carriage protected the pair from observation, and hid the lady's blushes. Madame de Noel laughingly declared that she never had seen so impulsive a lover, and said she was sure no woman could resist such eloquence as he was using with her. Laromie's only answer was a storm of kisses. Well, it must be confessed very few men could have resisted the temptation.

When they reached the residence of Madame de Noel, the carriage paused in the *porte cochere*, and they left it. They entered a dimly-lighted hall, and passed into a sumptuously-furnished apartment brilliantly illuminated. A servant received madame, and took charge of the cloak and hood which she laid aside. Laromie afterwards remembered that she looked at the man in a peculiar way as she bade him have supper served as soon as possible, but he thought nothing of it at the time.

Madame seated herself in a luxurious fauteuil, and Laromie threw himself on a cushion at her feet. For a long while neither spoke. A strange silence had fallen over them, but had Laromie looked into his companion's eyes he would have been startled by the expression of them. All the while, however, the young man's head rested against the arm of her chair, and one of her hands played carelessly with his hair.

A slight noise in the apartment caused the detective to look up. But he could not raise his head high enough to see anything. Madame's hand rested on it heavily.

"Bah! It is nothing, *mon ami*," she said, quickly.

At the same instant he felt himself borne to the floor by an irresistible force, and before he could collect his wits, which he did not have about him this time, he was bound hand and foot, and left helpless on the floor. Glancing up he saw that the room was full of men.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, sternly.

"It means, Monsieur Laromie," replied the lady, smiling sweetly, "that you will not sup with me tonight."

Laromie's coolness returned to him, now that it was too late.

"It seems that I have been a very great fool," he said, bitterly.

"I agree with you, monsieur," laughed the lady.

"Stand aside," said one of the men, coming forward. "Let me speak with him. Do you know me, monsieur?" he asked.

“Yes,” replied Laromie. “You are Frederic Roulier, known to the government as the president of a socialist club, captain of a barricade, and a general promoter of disorder. These men, I suppose, are your confederates.”

“Precisely so, monsieur. You have been for a long time as anxious to capture us as we have been to secure you. Fortune has favored us this time, and you are now our prisoner. Perhaps you would like to know what we intend on doing with you?”

“That is a matter of indifference to me,” said the detective, coolly.

“Your courage is undoubtedly great,” said Roulier, “but we shall put it to the test. We have decided long ago, monsieur, that you must die. We would carry out our decision tonight, but all of our club are not present. Tomorrow night the absent ones will return, and then we shall proceed to visit our vengeance upon you. Your heart will be cut out of your living body. May Heaven preserve your soul,” he added, mockingly; “for your earthly part is doomed.”

“Do not be too sure of that,” exclaimed Laromie, indignantly. “I was never born to die by the hands of such cowardly miscreants.”

The socialist leader laughed.

“Ah! Monsieur Laromie,” he said, sarcastically; “why would you not be warned by your friends? Women will be the death of you, I fear.”

“Who is this woman?” asked the detective, not heeding the taunt.

“Let me answer,” said Madame de Noel. “Monsieur Laromie,” she added, “I am one who has long owed you a debt of vengeance. Two years ago you arrested a woman named Marguerite Poisson, charged with murdering a French soldier. She was tried by your courts, and condemned to death. That woman was my mother.”

“Well,” said Laromie, calmly. “She was not executed.”

“No,” said Madame de Noel, fiercely, “but I owe you no thanks for that. The emperor banished her to Algeria, to die under the burning suns of that land.”

“But the government subsequently pardoned her, and gave her permission to return to France.”

“True; but the pardon was too late. When it reached Algeria my mother was dead. I swore to be revenged on you. I have succeeded in luring you here by my arts and lies. I hate you, as the man that caused my mother’s death, and I shall witness your execution with joy.”

“What is your name?”

“Madeleine Desmoulin.”

“Then you are the mistress of the chief of this club. A pretty couple truly, and a pretty scrape you have gotten me into,” muttered Laromie, with anger. “Well, then, Madame Julie de Noel, *alias* Madeleine Desmoulins, if it will afford you any satisfaction, know that, instead of causing your mother’s death, I tried to save her. In the discharge of my duty I arrested her. Although I believed her guilty of the offences charged against her, I pitied her. To oblige me the chief of the secret police interceded with the minister of justice, and procured the change in her sentence, and finally her pardon. If you doubt this, you have simply to apply to the chief of my command, and he will confirm my assertions.”

The woman grew pale as death. Calming her agitation, she turned to Roulier, and said hastily:

“Spare him till I find out the truth of this.”

“Stop,” said the detective, quickly. “I will not allow you to intercede for me. If you could give me my freedom now, I would not accept it from you.”

The woman turned away and left the room. M. Roulier directed two of his men to lift the detective, who was bound so securely as to be helpless, and convey him to the prison. The order was obeyed. M. Roulier led the way, carrying a large lamp, and the remainder of the men followed, bearing the detective with them. They passed through the hall, descended a stone stairway to a large cellar, and finally paused before a heavy, [closed] door. This M. Roulier opened, and the party passed into the room. The detective was set down on the floor, and M. Roulier, elevating the light, said:

“Look around you, Monsieur Laromie. This room is very large, and very strong. The hall, floor and ceiling are all of stone, and there is no outlet save through this heavy doorway by which we have entered. Some years before you became connected with the police of Paris, this building was occupied by one of its principal officials for professional purposes. It is within a quarter of a mile of the *Hotel de Ville*, so that you are almost within hearing of your friends, who are powerless to aid you. Tomorrow night at nine o’clock our sentence will be executed upon you. Until then we leave you to your own thoughts. Good-night, Monsieur Laromie.”

The men passed out of the cell, and the heavy door closed. Laromie heard the bolts slide into the hasp, and then all was silent. The room in which he lay was perfectly dark, and he was bound so securely that he could not move a limb.

He had no hope of escape. He was in the hands of his most inveterate enemies, and he knew he could expect no mercy from them. They had long threatened him with vengeance for the injuries he had inflicted upon them by detecting their plots, and now that they had him in their power, he felt sure that they would carry out their diabolical threat. Though he was without hope, he was not deserted by his courage. He was a brave man, and he resolved to meet his fate with fortitude. Still he cursed his folly bitterly, and was almost—though not quite—ready to swear that if he could escape this time, he would never look at a woman again.

He had been in the cell a little over an hour, when he heard a noise, as if a part of the flooring was being moved. He listened intently. The sound continued to be heard. Then someone spoke his own name in a low whisper.

“Laromie! are you here?” asked the voice.

“Yes,” replied the detective, “but who, in the fiend’s name, are you?”

The voice repeated the watchword of the secret police, and then Laromie was conscious of the presence of another person in the cell.

“Regnard, is it you!” asked Laromie, who recognized the person as one of his fellow detectives. “How did you get here?”

Regnard drew back the shade of a dark lantern and showed Laromie a square opening in the floor.

“Through that hole,” he replied. “But stay! Let me commence at the beginning. What you said to the chief about your little affair made him anxious for your safety. He set me to watch you, so that we might assist you if you got into trouble. I followed you to the Opera, and rode behind the carriage which brought you here. The name of the lady, which, if you recollect, you gave to the chief, did not correspond with that of the woman who resides here. I reported your presence here to the chief. It seems that he once used this building for government purposes. There is a secret passage from this prison chamber to the *Hotel de Ville*, and another from here to the upper part of the house. He is well acquainted with them, having used them often some years ago. The secret was never imparted to anyone out of the employ of the state, and no one else could have discovered it. The chief instructed me how to use the passages, and being still anxious for your safety, directed me to gain admittance to the house by means of them, and learn what I could concerning you. I had no idea of finding you here. Tell me what is the meaning of your being here bound in this way.”

“First cut these cords, and I will,” said Laromie. He was soon freed from his bonds, after which he related all that had happened to him.

“A plan suggests itself to me,” he added. He quickly explained to his companion the design which had presented itself to him at that instant. Regnard shook his head.

“It involves great risk,” he said, gravely. “It may be fatal to you.”

“Nevertheless,” said Laromie, “I shall try it. First show me how to escape from this place, in case I find such a step necessary, and then do as I tell you.”

Regnard showed him how to work the opening in the floor, and then arranged the cords so that it should seem that Laromie was still bound by them, but fixed them in such a manner, that he could rid himself of them at a moment’s warning. He left his lantern and some matches with

Laromie, and then entering the secret passage closed the opening after him, and Laromie was alone once more. He placed himself over the stone, and then fell asleep.

The next day passed away slowly, and the night came at last. Precisely at nine o'clock, Laromie heard the door of his cell unlocked. It swung open, and M. Roulier appeared, bearing a large lamp. As he entered the room the light suddenly went out.

"Come in, my friends," he said, quickly. "Let us close the door, and stop this draught, and then we'll light the lamp again. I have matches."

In response to this summons, about thirty men entered the room, and the door was closed.

"Monsieur Laromie," exclaimed M. Roulier, "are you here?"

"To be sure I am," replied the detective. "How could I get away?"

"True," muttered the socialist. "Now for a light."

At this moment the lamp was dashed from his hand by a heavy blow.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed, quickly.

"It means," exclaimed Laromie, in a loud, clear voice, "that you are all my prisoners."

As he spoke the room was lit up by the glare of a dozen lanterns from which the dark slides were drawn suddenly back, and the astounded socialists found themselves in the presence of forty strong and well-armed *Sergens de Ville*. The *denouement* was so sudden and startling, that they could not speak at first. The police were prompt, and secured their prisoners before they had recovered from their surprise.

"Well, Monsieur Roulier," said Laromie, smiling, "the tables have been turned this time."

The socialist glared at him, and muttered between his teeth:

"You must be in league with the devil."

"Perhaps I am," said Laromie, with a laugh. "At all events, monsieur, I was not ready to have my heart cut out."

The prisoners were conducted to the upper part of the house, so that they did not learn the secret of the subterranean passage by which the police had entered the cell, and to the last they regarded their presence there as a piece of diabolism on Laromie's part. The woman who had ensnared the detective was also arrested. As he passed her, Laromie said, sarcastically:

"I hope madame will have a pleasant visit to Algeria."

She lowered her eyes, and replied in a low tone:

“I deserve this, monsieur, for betraying my mother’s only friend.”

The prisoners, being old offenders, were all convicted, and were transported to the penal colony.

The story soon became known throughout Paris, and the old house in which the detective had been imprisoned became an object of great curiosity to the citizens. The prisoners themselves, however, never learned the solution of the mystery. If they ever return to France, perhaps they may hear of it.

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