

A Piece of Deception by An Ex-Detective

I.

MANY years ago, Alexandria was a refuge for half the runaway swindlers, robbers, and assassins of Europe. It was, in fact (the viceroy will pardon the strength of the expression), the sink of all the rascality of the Eastern and Western Worlds.

Among the rogues and *escrocs* who made Egypt the land of their adoption, two scoundrels especially attracted my attraction. These persons (the one of Prussian, the other of French extraction) were both gentlemen in appearance and conversation, — *chevaliers d'industrie* by trade. The former, James Vauler, was a converted Prussian Jew; the latter, M. Ernest, had lived several years in Paris, and claimed French protection. What the prefect of police in Paris thought of these two worthy men I never heard; but I strongly suspect that a change of climate had become necessary for their health. It soon became certain to me that they had taken high degrees in the blackleg schools of Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. Vauler was a pink-and-white man, with glossy, black, scented whiskers, and large dark eyes full of a smiling and false frankness: Ernest, a sallow little man, had a keen, sharp glance, and a smart, alert, businesslike manner. They were both great talkers, and sang in a fervid, semi-operatic way.

They arrived from Paris *via* Marseilles. The first glitter of their diamond rings secured them credit, and produced a general impression, that commercial magnates of enormous wealth and immaculate honesty had arrived to give a new impetus to the trade of Alexandria. They, *Arcades ambo*, got invited to one or two places, their shallow accomplishments, and the fluency with which they spoke French and Italian, soon making them the talk of all the marriageable young ladies in the town; and many a cap was set at them. In a month, M. Vauler was courting at the same time at least half a dozen of the daughters of the richest merchants of the place. The rascals were daring in their plans. The small sum they had with them they deposited for a few days, by turns, in every bank of Alexandria. So on the stage a few “supers” march round and round, and appear and reappear, and pass for a large and almost innumerable army. They began by a few real purchases, which they paid for in ready cash, in order to spread a belief that all their transactions were to be *bona fide* and prompt. Five or six confederates, several of whom resided in Paris, sent them constantly very large orders never to be executed, and sham notes for payment drawn on other confederates. They then received from Marseilles with much solemnity several boxes of old iron, which they pretended to be specie, and on which they paid the usual freight. They also showed every one sham invoices from Paris, Vienna, and other places; and talked largely of their extensive transactions in Manchester, Liege, and Paris goods. In this way they got hold of various consignments of whiskey, brandy, and beer, ordered by their European confederates, and gave them away to the friends who visited their offices.

Their suites of rooms, in a house fit for a palace, were hung with silk and damask, and the floors adorned with the most rich and velvety of carpets. There were showy oil-paintings on the walls, and singing-birds hung at every window. Musical snuff-boxes were chiming and tingling at all hours; and, in the intervals of business, Vauler played brilliant reminiscences of Rossini on a one-hundred-and-twenty-pound grand piano, which he had secured at an auction soon after his

arrival, and instantly paid for by a check. A game of cards for high points occasionally served to while away the half-hour between a commercial transaction and a champagne lunch. In a word, three months sufficed to secure to these dashing swindlers the reputation, not only of being the most elegant and charming of the marriageable men of Alexandria, but also of being the wealthiest men in all Egypt. Their success was complete; and, seeing the impression they had made by their extravagant hospitality and sham business transactions, they soon grew more daring, and laid themselves out for grander operations.

They began to show the sham orders from their confederates to everybody in their own way of business, to see who would execute them cheapest, and to prove the *bona fide* nature of their transactions. Their gulls regarded them as millionaires. In the mean time they were most hospitable to their dupes, and business-men of all classes. They gave a ceaseless round of breakfasts, balls, and *soirees*. The choicest wines and the most exquisite French dishes seemed always ready at their offices. Their consumption of wine became, indeed, so notorious, that the agents of the leading wine merchants of France and the Rhine forced wines upon them at two years' credit; and they gave the orders with such evident reluctance, that the jewelers, hearing it, came next, and pressed upon them from time to time diamonds of great value, on the same terms. Both these importunate classes of persons our two friends at last consented to patronize, never condescending to give orders for less than two or three thousand pounds' worth of any commodity at a time. They also refused to give bills, objecting to all transactions with bill-brokers, in their own hall-pleasant, half-contemptuous way. If it was possible to rise higher in public favor, Messrs. Vauler and Ernest, the fascinating millionaires, did so rise when they one day started a bank, in which the poor of Alexandria might deposit their savings. "Patriots," "benefactors," no words were too good for them. Wherever they went there was an ovation: the donkey-boys cheered them when they saw them in the streets; the *gourmands* praised their cooking; diners-out applauded their wines; the match-makers pronounced them charming; the rich fathers vowed they were Rothschilds in all but name. All this enthusiasm was not to be wasted. Very soon came an enormous order from a swindling confederate at Calcutta — four hundred and fifteen thousand pounds' worth of Manchester goods, wanted at once. This order Vauler and Ernest distributed condescendingly among the fathers of their future wives; and away the goods went to Bombay, the victims paying the carriage half-way. They then sent the invoices and bills of lading to their fraudulent agent in India, who, on the arrival of the goods, threw them into the market, and sold them at once for any thing they could get. And all this time the firm kept up a round of parties and balls; and their picnics to the gardens outside the town, at which they had usually Egyptian dancing-girls and jugglers to amuse the guests by their skill, became quite famous.

While all this tissue of rascality was weaving, Vauler and Ernest had the good sense never to quarrel, and always took every opportunity of praising up each other to the world as sharp men of business, and delightful, dashing fellows. Even the beys and pashas became drawn in, so fascinating were the patriots of the new bank, so glorious were their wines! — forbidden by Mahomet, but winked at by his degenerate followers. There was even some talk that Messrs. Vauler and Ernest, the rich, the enterprising glories of Alexandria, might be induced to undertake the raising a new loan to help to wipe away some of the viceroy's debts. Even some native ladies of rank gave them audience.

Thus, a certain amount of knowledge of human nature, combined with the general corruption of Egyptian society, and the ease of bribing every one, from the highest to the donkey-boy, enabled these two impudent swindlers to dazzle and cheat all classes with whom they came into contact. At last the time seemed ripe for the rascals' last *coup*. In twelve months they had established confidence among all business-men; and they commenced simultaneous work with three months' bills, aided by their auxiliary firms in Alexandria, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, having prepared the way by small orders, which they only met at the end of the three months, and which gave them the real credit they needed. The next three months they spent in renewed hospitalities, to which the beys and pashas came without scruple. The two partners were by this time engaged to about eight Alexandrian beauties each; but, as these Jew and Greek merchants had each cliques of their own, the treachery of false Herr Vauler and perfidious M. Ernest remained for a long time undiscovered. Whenever the sixteen fathers-in-law met, and demanded that the firm instantly lead their sixteen daughters simultaneously to the altar, a fracas, as country newspapers call a disturbance, was inevitable.

In the mean time the firm prepared to play their final card, and sweep the table, and decamp. They issued orders — urgent orders — for vast consignments: cottons and calicoes from Manchester, cloth from Leeds, coals from Newcastle, — goods, indeed, from every large town in England. They also sent for silk from Lyons, champagne from Rheims, brandy from Charente, and costly bronzes and clocks from Paris. Orders were, in addition, distributed freely in Vienna, Berlin, Trieste, Smyrna, and Constantinople. The goods arrived nearly all at the same time. They had calculated the bills would fall due the week they left. While waiting for the goods from Europe, to pass the time, they bought up all available goods in the square of Alexandria, and paid for them with bills for six months. These latter goods they secretly sold to the Jews of Cairo and Alexandria, half of whom paid in ready cash; and in this way the rogues realized thousands. When the goods from Europe arrived, the firm, following Alexandrian custom, sold every thing from the invoices, being very particular about ready money. This done, as the place was getting hotter daily, the firm scraped up all they could, changed names with some refugees from Syria, and flew from Alexandria. The game was over, the last card played, the table swept, and the room deserted.

The final tableau was not unworthy of such a career. The noble pair gave a splendid ball the night of their hegira: wine flowed in fountains; two bands discoursed most eloquent music; the sixteen future fathers-in-law were all there, the sixteen future brides glowered on each other, and each one exerted all her fascinations to fix the firm for the greatest number of dances. An hour or two after midnight, a quiet brougham drove up to the door of the swindlers' palace; and the firm, leaving the ball-room in full spin, stole away and embarked on board a steamer bound for Cyprus, city of love and wine. The report at first was, that they had quietly gone to Cairo on sudden business; but one of their confederates, dissatisfied with his pay, soon betrayed their real flight.

II.

THE news fell on Alexandria like the news of Sedan on Paris. From the viceroy to the poorest donkey-boy, every one was "struck with the thunderbolt of amazement." We must be pardoned recurring to Oriental metaphor. The news that Vauler and Ernest had gone — gone, too, with

£105,000 — flew like lightning from country-house to country-house. Faces turned pale, jaws fell, hands shook. The sixteen future fathers-in-law tore their hair, and yelped hysterically: the sixteen future brides fainted right off, and when they came to, screamed violently, and went off again. The women ran about the streets crying; old Arabs almost wrenched off their top-knots, by which the angels were to carry them up to heaven, and shouted for their seventy years' savings. Hundreds of gulls declared there was no proof of the flight, and crowded into the house to see the piano, the oil-pictures, the singing-birds, the musical snuff-boxes, and returned home re-assured. I and the sixteen fathers-in-law started at once for Cairo to see if the firm was there. We leaped on seventeen donkeys the moment we arrived at Cairo, and galloped to the house. My sixteen companions nearly fell from their donkeys when the black servant who came to us said his masters were not there, and that all the furniture had just been taken away. He had at first refused to let it go, telling the men who came for it that his masters were no bankrupts, but some of the richest men in the world; that only a week before they had taken champagne baths for a joke. He would not believe a word of the matter; upon which the men fell to and beat him severely: but, nevertheless, they had not convinced him. Finding the poor fellow had not been paid his wages for three months, I advised him to at once seize the wine, which the rascals, in their hurry, had forgotten. If he left it for another day, some other victim would have it. I believe he took my advice.

After four days of incredulity, it began to be pretty certain that the men were swindlers, and had really fled. Even the sixteen future fathers-in-law began reluctantly to allow this; and the question among the angry dupes now was, what plan to adopt to arrest the rogues, and wring the plunder out of them. In their trouble, the indignant fools came in a crowd to me. I was then a commission-agent in Alexandria: but I had been rather an active chief inspector of police in the town; and I had in my time brought to justice more slippery rogues than even such men as Vauler and Ernest. It was an unthankful office; and I would have refused the Jews, and those fooled rascals, the sixteen fathers-in-law: but I was sorry for the poor Arabs who had lost their hard-earned dollars, and I felt no mercy to such mean and cruel cheats. I yielded to the procession demanding vengeance. I derided them, and told them they had been justly punished for putting such false confidence in two tricky adventurers, who had gulled half the city with a little mock politeness and sham jewelry. Even the biggest rascal, when he has suffered, flies at once to the police. The police could not refuse their help, even to the undeserving; so I promised to do what I could. The Jews and the sixteen fathers-in-law overwhelmed me with communications of their losses: one blamed the others for having introduced the rascals, and declared that they were responsible.

My first step was to go to different foreign consuls, and get them to sign a general warrant empowering me to arrest Vauler and Ernest wherever I could lay my hands on them. I felt sure, that, as the swindlers could neither of them speak Arabic, they must have obtained some one else's passports, and have left for some place in the Levant under native names. Now, I had not been chief inspector for nothing. I had by me a monster roll of all the murderers and thieves in Alexandria. I knew all their haunts, and the very places to find them there. I had never removed a policeman from his beat, except for dishonesty or connivance; and I held each policeman responsible for all that happened on his beat. I instantly summoned eighteen hundred of the worst rascals in the infamous city to appear before me at a certain place and hour. What an army of Satan! What foreheads! what squints! what mouths! what demure, what defiant villainy! There

were men there who would have murdered their own fathers for a shilling, and their mothers for half a crown. I had previously been to the passport-office, and taken down the names of all natives who had recently left Alexandria by sea or land. I called the list over, and came at last to the names of two Jews, who at once answered, although their passports had been made out for Beirut.

“Gacorb and Demethriani, — that will do,” I said: “These are the two fellows I want; the rest I dismiss to their business, regretting that so many honest and worthy gentlemen should have been inconvenienced by two rascals.”

Off the scurvy regiment trooped. The two Jews then declared to me that they had lost their passports, and were afraid to apply for fresh. They did not like to confess to me that they had sold them to the firm. This was all I wanted. I afterwards found that a Wallachian Jew, one of the worst class of Oriental Jews, had purchased the passports. I had known this fellow before, as ready to do any thing for money, and living by secretly buying and selling young Abyssinian slaves, whom he kept hidden in cellars. I should, then, find the firm for certain at Beirut, Damascus, or Cyprus.

My plans were soon arranged, and were based on some knowledge of the East. I began by drawing largely on my imagination; and going to a printer in the great square of Alexandria, I drew up a placard in English, Arabic, Italian, and French.

Taking my friend Wilkinson with me, disguised as a Bedouin, and blacking myself as an African from Barbary, I started by the Austrian night-steamer for Beirut. With my hair greased, and armed with a big knife, a revolver, a war-club, and a battle-axe, I looked sufficiently formidable; for in that country men go armed: in the same boat there were Aleppo men carrying swords and targets, and no one wondered at my wieldy equipment. On arriving at Beirut, we kept very quiet, for fear of alarming the thieves or their friends. We went first to the offices of the different steamers to make inquiries for certain friends we pretended to have expected by the last boat. While entering the port, we had noticed another steamer nearly ready to start, which we had heard was the vessel going to Cyprus; so we felt there was no time to lose, and posted to and fro more like madmen than decent thief-takers. In every office we entered we felt we might come upon our men; and we were ready to pounce upon them. In one bureau the agent was counting out gold (the money paid for goods shipped): I suppose I looked very wild as I entered, pulling out my knife without thinking what I was doing; for directly he saw me, the good *bourgeois* gave a frightened stare, and, without giving me any answer, jumped from his stool, broke a passage through the window, and leaped into the garden like a harlequin. He took me for a murderer come to kill him and seize the money. Luckily, a heap of mud behind his own house broke his fall and saved his neck. When he had changed his clothes and returned, he found the harmless murderer guarding the treasure so foolishly abandoned.

Two hours after the bills had been posted up, as I was on my way to M. Lessens, the French consul's, I was astonished to find a crowd in the street dragging along some unfortunate wretch. I passed through the mob, and, to my delight, found one of my men. It was Vauler, one of my birds; and, like a true sportsman, I ran to take him from the dogs. They had a halter already round his neck, and one side of his face was bleeding; for the barber who had been shaving off his

whiskers, to prevent his being recognized, had been frightened by the arrival of the mob, and had removed only one whisker, and cut the man's cheek in doing that. There he was, forlorn, stunned, with one whisker on and the other off, looking a most deplorable object. I threw away the rope, silenced the donkeymen and boys by insisting on his first having a trial, and then took him to the French consul's, where I got an order enabling me to send him to the local prison. I had bagged one; and now I wanted the other.

I found him at last, still on board the steamer. The animal was snug in bed in his cabin, reading a novel of the younger Dumas, and with a bottle of port-wine by his side. The moment I told him my name, produced the handcuffs, and ordered him to get up and go on shore with me to the Prussian consul, the French captain and the officers — all of whom he had bribed — got out and protested against the violation of hospitality, and insult offered to the French flag. The engineer, who had been drinking, was especially indignant, and ran for his double-barrel gun. I had to address the angry crew. I told them that I had not come to insult any flag, but to arrest a man who had stolen the savings of the widow and the orphan. I was sure they would not lend their flag to conceal such a villain; and then, to prove that I had the sanction of their own consul, I called the janissary of the French consulate. He deposed to the authenticity of my mission. I then asked for some water, and washed the disguising color from my face and hands. This quite satisfied my opponents. The engineer put away his gun, the captain asked me to take wine; and I returned on shore, handed over the thief to his consul, and determined to return to Alexandria as soon as possible.

On my way back from the cage in which I had locked my two birds, I met my friend Wilkinson, tired and dispirited. He was looking for me. He would not at first believe my success; and, when we returned to the prison, borrowed a lantern of a Turk to go in and look at my captives. He spoke to them, and was satisfied. He returned in raptures, and declared that such a capture had never been so successfully effected.

The news of the arrest had reached the city before me; and I found the populace aware of my success. The moment we entered the harbor, and the name of the vessel had gone up on the Rassakhan signal-staff, a vast crowd poured down to welcome me. The city had never known such a commotion since the battle of Aboukir. Most of the people were glad; but some of the swindlers' accomplices were afraid of the confessions they might make, and the secrets they might disclose. Every one, pleased or not, wanted to see the two men brought in chains. Not a door or window, from the custom-house to the great square, but was crowded with friends or foes of Vauler and Ernest. The Arab rabble screamed and shouted at the discomfiture of the wretches who had robbed the widows and orphans. The traffic of two miles of streets was entirely stopped as we passed. The women from the balconies cast down on me rose-water and flowers; and near the square some fervid enthusiast tossed me a small gold chain and a string of gold pieces. The delight at the defeat of the impostors was great and irrepressible. The French and Prussian consuls claimed their precious subjects; and the brief trial soon took place.— Ernest being sentenced to eighteen months', and Vauler to five years', imprisonment. They, however, still had money; and they brought such influence to bear, that in a few mouths, somehow or other, the imprisonment was commuted to simple banishment.

Every Saturday, November 16, 1872