

From the *Overland Monthly*
An Inexplicable Fancy

Frenchmen or Frenchwomen are tragic, or nothing, unless they happen to be comical. Nature had endowed the Gallic mind with an adroit aptness and seizes with equal facility upon the terrible or the grotesque, a revolution or a masquerade. This, by way of preface, and the story of “an inexplicable fancy” begins:

Henri Cardone was a young French artist of distinguished promise. His neat little domicile and his pretty little wife were situated in suburban Paris. One early twilight in the month of November of a certain year, as he entered his home, his wife ran unto him, twined her plump arms around his neck, bestowing a full-blown affection upon his responsive lips, and immediately exclaimed, “O, dear, Henri! I had such a surprise, such an odd visitor, this afternoon; a man with such an inexplicable fancy that I have been waiting these two hours for your arrival, and (bestowing a playful cut thereupon) your ears.

“And now these ears have arrived, Irene, my pet, I suppose your merry tongue will tattle away as glibly as a new wound up music-box; and once started, I shall not have an opportunity to put a word in even edgewise until you have run down completely. But for this old man, with the ‘inexplicable fancy.’ He could not have taken a fancy to you, for that would have been neither odd nor inexplicable. Did he, utterly regardless of the divine set of his trousers, go down upon his knees and beseech of you to fly with him to some intensely rural retreat, there to subsist upon moonshine and his adorable moustache? and was it his inexplicable fancy that you should be accompanied by such little articles of available value as this poor hovel might afford? Or, was he a wandering Gypsy lord, who predicted that you were to be the Queen of all proud French, instead of one humble heart? And did he, just as he was about to surround your august brow with the imperial crown, suddenly suspend it and take an inexplicable fancy to have his dirty palm first crossed with a crown of silver? Or—”

“There, there! do cease your badinage,” said the pouting little woman stamping her small foot impatiently. “You will never become wise listening to your own wisdom.”

“Nor weary, listening yours, my charming sage,” laughed the voluble Henri, caressing her soft, brown hair fondly; “proceed—from this on I am all ears.”

“Well, let all ears listen. At about 3 o’clock this afternoon, as I was sitting intent upon taking the finest possible stitches around the border of your finest cambric, there came a sharp rap at the door. I hastened, opened it, and found myself face to face with a man of middle age, who bowed politely and inquired if he were on the Rue de Chalons. On being informed that he was, he thanked me very affably, and was turning to depart, when his glance chanced to fall on this little cornelian cross, which then, as now, was lying on my bosom. He stopped, gazed fixedly at it, as though it possessed some terrible fascination, turned first deadly pale, then livid purple, and in a hoarse whisper articulated, ‘Madame, you will pardon me, for it is no ordinary curiosity that prompts the question, but might I venture to ask how that trinket,’ pointing a trembling finger at the cross, ‘came into your possession—under what circumstances?’”

“Well?” queried Henri, in a low, interested tone, “what was my little wife’s reply?”

“Your little wife told him, sir, that it was a present from her husband, and that it had been in her possession about four years. How or where you came by it she could not inform him.”

“Then he departed satisfied?”

“No, indeed.”

“Then he inquired your name, age, and profession?”

“Did he?” I do not know whether I ought to feel complimented or insulted. Did you tell him?”

“I hesitated, and told him.”

“I wish you had not hesitated, and then told him. Something of moment may grow out of his curiosity. But it will not matter. Then he departed?”

“No; he stood absorbed in troubled thought a few minutes, as though weighing a deep problem, and then said he had taken a very strong and eccentric fancy for the trinket and asked if I would for a consideration consent to part with it.”

“What was your reply to that very businesslike proposition?”

“That, being your gift, I should much dislike to let it go.”

“Of course, that must have terminated the conversation?”

“Of course, but it did not, though. It became more pointed than ever.”

“Well, well! I am eager to learn the denouement,” said Henri. “If I am not at fault in my surmises, something will shortly grow out of this affair that will interest a very wide circle. Give me the exact particulars. What followed?”

“He said he was wealthy and did not value money; and that he had conceived so strong a desire to possess the cross, that, wild as the offer might seem, he would not demur at giving 500 francs for it.”

“Five hundred, parbleu! The trinket is not worth five francs,” said Henri, excitedly. “The man is either a lunatic, or—what I more strongly suspect him of being—”

“And what is it possible for you to more strongly suspect him of being?” asked Irene.

“A knave. In spite of the temptation of 500 francs, I see that you still bear your cross. I would have thought the sum sufficient to buy up all the crosses in Paris and all the women bearing them. How did you resist?”

“If I did not know that your slur on women and their crosses was said more in humor than earnest, I would not give you another word of information. I told the man the offer was very tempting, but that I could not possibly accept it without consulting you.”

“That was a noble reply, my darling,” said Henri, drawing his wife close to his side, bestowing on her an eloquent glance and several passionate kisses. “Hereafter I shall consider you cheap at 50,000 francs! What said old Croesus to your priceless answer?”

“At first he appeared much discomfited. After a little while he said he was going into the country to remain one week; that he should return this way, and if I, in the meantime, gained your consent, or concluded to part with the cross without it, he would make good his offer. And then he bade me a reluctant adieu, went to a post chaise that was waiting in the road, got in and drove off rapidly to Chalons.”

“Finally we have the finale of act first,” replied Henri.

“Yes,” responded the musing Irene, toying with the object of so much discussion, which was in reality of but intrinsic value, and in no way remarkable, excepting from peculiarity of design. It was of a clear, blood-red cornelian, the upright pillow being carved to represent a descending arrow, and the cross-piece a very fine wrought imitation of wings.

“What attraction this bit of a thing, which, aside from being your gift, I look upon as worthless, can possess to render it so exceedingly precious in the eyes of the man, I cannot conjecture,” continued the puzzled Irene.

“I think I can furnish you with a clue to the foundation of this extraordinary interest,” remarked Henri. “What was his general appearance? That of a coarse, ill-bred person?”

“Far from that. He was quite tall, not over fleshy, well-dressed, and refined in bearing and language. His countenance betokened much illness at some early period of his life, or excessive dissipation.”

“Should your cross-enamored friend call again, and I should much doubt if he ever does,” said Henri, “I am the person with whom he must deal.”

“Why with you, dear?”

“Because the object he is so extremely solicitous to possess has a mysterious history known only to myself.”

“And that mysterious history affords a key to the solution of the seemingly insane offer of five hundred francs?”

“I apprehend such to be the case. That cross was found upon a spot where, but a few days previous, a revolting crime had been committed. If my surmises are correct, this strange visitor

of yours was the author of that crime. If so, he and that little red cross are old acquaintances, and he would readily sacrifice several times five hundred francs to compass its possession. Why? Simply because, so long as it remains in other hands than his own, he is painfully conscious that it may at any moment rise up in judgment before him, and cost him the more irreparable sacrifice of his head.”

“And you have kept all this dark mystery from me,” complained Irene.

“I have, but will no longer. I have refrained from making you acquainted with the circumstances that are associated with my finding of the trinket, solely from a fear that the knowledge might cause you to conceive a morbid dislike to it, and, as it is really a pretty toy, I liked to see you wear it. And now for the mystery. Do you remember the murder, six years ago, of a nobleman of the name of Comte de St. Armande, in the Rue de Germaine?”

“Distinctly,” replied Irene. “All Paris was thrilled with horror at the mystery and barbarity of the deed. But what association can this cross have with that dreadful affair?”

“An intimate association. That cross was found by me on the identical spot of the murder, and but three days thereafter. If you closely examine the underside, you will observe a small drilled hole at each extremity. From these holes I am led to infer that it was worn by the unknown assassin on the fatal night in question; and furthermore, that it was wrenched from its fastenings by the hand of the hapless Comte in his dying struggle. Naturally enough, it fell to the ground, where I found it. To this day, in spite of the superhuman efforts of a by no means obtuse police, and the incentive of fabulous reward by St. Armande’s relatives, the murderer is undiscovered, and the whole affair remains wrapped in impenetrable mystery. After all these unrevealing years who shall say that the coming together of this man and the cross is not the working of a retributive fate? Too well does the man of inexplicable fancy know that the little toy he so covets is adequate, if it falls into proper hands, to work the crucifixion of a great scoundrel.”

“Ugh!” shuddered Irene. “And I have been wearing it all this time, and admiring it, totally ignorant of the terrible thing its blood-red color symbolizes. I can wear it no longer. Here,”—removing from her shrinking neck the chain by which it was suspended—“I can now view it with no interest but that of horror;” and she threw it nervously into her husband’s lap.

“Why, you little fool!” said Henri, in a jocose tone, “are you going to faint? Are you afraid of it? It is just as harmless as it has been, and just as beautiful.”

“I do not fear it,” replied Irene, shrinking from it, nevertheless. I am not that foolish. But I dislike it. Its innocent charm is lost to me forever.”

After weighing the matter in his mind until the specified week had nearly elapsed, Henri suddenly and sagely concluded to acquaint the Prefect of Police with the story in all its bearings, real and suppository. That astute functionary proved to be an intelligent and patient listener, and was only too glad to detail two subordinates to further a scheme that promised to result in the capture of the criminal who had succeeded in eluding the pursuit of justice. Early in the morning, a week subsequent to that on which the supposed criminal had called, Henri sent Irene into the

city on a visit to some friends, with the explicit understanding that she was not to return until he came for her. Following close upon her departure, came the arrival of two gendarmes, who were forthwith secreted in her but recently-vacated bedroom, thereafter to make their re-entree in the presence of the expected stranger, or not, as he might or might not criminate himself in the interview with Henri.

All the preliminary arrangements being made, our artist detective took station at the window, and behind his closed blinds became a silent and intense watcher. He was a brave and resolute man; but, nevertheless, an occasional misgiving flitted across his mind. The business before him was of an extremely hazardous nature. Should the supposed criminal prove to be the real criminal, his capture would be likely to be precluded by a desperate encounter. If fatal, fatal to whom? Henri thought of this, then of Irene, and closed his eyes. Then he thought of the gendarmes in the next room, set his jaw, and, in a spirit of grim defiance, put all forebodings from him. Morning, noon, afternoon, and evening glided by with no result. Henri yawned with impatient discouragement. His allies took to the bedroom floor and cards early in the forenoon. Hitherto the excitement of the chase had been quite strong enough to sustain Henri's interest. But now, would the expected not come at all? A brief consultation with the officers, who adhered to the opinion that he would come, and was much more likely to make his appearance within the next three hours than at any time previous during the day, especially if he was a rogue, and was not lacking in the usual cunning, braced Henri somewhat. Lighting a lamp for the quondam gamblers, and another for himself, he camped on the lounge. He had got but comfortably settled, however, before a resonant rap on the street door brought him instantly to his feet. Schooling himself to meet the probable crisis with quiet deliberation, he leisurely proceeded to the door and opened it. From Irene's graphic description he had no difficulty in recognizing his visitor. The expected man of the cross stood before him. His heart gave a tremendous thump against his breast; but his voice was steady and quiet as he saluted the stranger with "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening, sir," responded the visitor, scrutinizing Henri closely. "Is the madame at home?"

"My wife is the lady to whom you refer, I presume," said Henri. "She is absent on a visit. Can I serve you in anything? Will you not step in, sir?" Henri threw the door wide open, that the man might see the room was vacant, and thence might imagine him to be alone.

"Ah! you are the husband of the lady," remarked the stranger, who, after peering in, walked in.

"I have the honor. Pray be seated."

"I will trespass upon your hospitality but for a few moments—"

"No trespass, I assure you. Solitude is not the best of companions."

Without removing his hat, the stranger took the proffered chair. "I can tarry but a short time," he said. "Probably your wife has informed you of an offer she received a week ago, for a small, fanciful cornelian cross that was in her possession?"

“Yes; she did mention the matter to me, and we both wondered at the strange fancy of the man, and the excessive price he offered.”

“Well,” replied the stranger, with a forced laugh, “the fancy cannot matter to you; and as for the price, if you get it that ought to satisfy you on that point. I am the man; and I renew the offer.”

“Ah! No, certainly not, the fancy does not concern us, of course not,” and Henri eyed the stranger keenly. “But you know that unusual occurrences will set the least curious of mortals to surmising.”

“Of course, of course,” said the stranger, with strong symptoms of uneasiness. “People cannot help thinking, that’s what brains were made for. But to the point; if you still possess the cross, and will exchange it for the sum offered, that sum is yours. Your answer? You will excuse my seeming abruptness; I am pressed for time, and cannot dally.”

“I hold you perfectly excusable,” said Henri, drawing the coveted cross from his pocket, and noting the eager flashing of the stranger’s eyes, as his gaze fell upon it. Deciding to thrust the probe home at once, he deliberately added: “Another reason, other than want of time, may exist to occasion your abruptness, my friend; want of confidence.”

“What, sir!” ejaculated the man, starting up in a threatening, apprehensive way. “What do you mean by that remark?”

“Listen, and I will tell you,” replied Henri, fully convinced that he was on the right track, as his visitor indecisively sat down again. “Listen and I will tell you what I mean. This cross, for which you have taken such an inexplicable fancy, came into my possession under very peculiar circumstances, circumstances that invest it with extraordinary interest.” Pausing a moment to note the effect of his language, Henri fixed his burning eyes on the stranger’s. Speaking slowly, and emphasizing every word, he continued: “I found this cross on the 3d of January, 1859, on the Rue de Germaine, on the very spot on which, three days previous, the Comte de St. Armand had been brutally murdered.”

During the utterance of the concluding words of the above, the countenance of the listening man underwent a most appalling change, and dreadful, indeed, as though he had heard the sentence for his immediate execution pronounced. The muscles of his face twitched convulsively, his under jaw fell, and his eyes rolled in their sockets as though following the fantastic evolutions of some horrid goblin.

The paroxysm lasted but for a moment. By a superhuman effort of the will he recovered his faculties, sprang to his feet, and with the demonic fury of a madman, dashed at Henri, hissing between his teeth, “D—n you, the telling of that tale is your death-knell.”

Just as his muscular hand closed oppressively on Henri’s throat, he was violently jerked backwards, and found himself in the tenacious clutches of the two gendarmes.

“So ho! my fine fellow!” ejaculated one of the officers. “We are altogether too deeply concerned for the future welfare of your soul to permit you to perpetrate such a crime. You have done bad enough already to bring you to hanging, and that is quite sufficient for our purpose.”

The foiled villain glared suddenly from one to the other, and made no attempt to escape.

“That is right,” remarked the officer who spoke before. “Take it easy—shows you to be a philosopher and a man of common sense.”

The prisoner coolly folded his arms and stood silent.

“Monsieur Cardone,” continued the officer, “as your friend seems to take kindly our interference with his little plan to give you a long resting-spell, will you, with equal disinterestedness, provide us with a rope for his benefit? Unluckily, we came from town and forgot to bring the professional bracelets—an unintentional oversight, which, I assure you,” addressing the prisoner, “we deplore more than you yourself can. In fact, we were rather uncertain of having the pleasure of your company on our return.”

“Now will you have that pleasure,” growled the hitherto quiescent captive, suddenly striking out with his two powerful arms, upsetting both officers, kicking over the table on which stood the light, and leaping out into the darkness. As he vanished, a bullet hissed by either ear, but he escaped unhurt.

The report of the pistols hurried Henri back into the room from which he had gone in quest of a rope.

“Quick!” exclaimed one of the officers. “The devil has outwitted and escaped us. We must be after him at once. It is Leone Breme, the most reckless and ferocious of the many cutthroats who infested Paris six years ago. He most miraculously disappeared about the time of the St. Armande murder, and the department had given him up for dead. We must allow him to have his length for a moment. Our first move is to lodge information at the three heads of the police department. He is an astute dog of infinite resource, and the whole force on the scent will hardly suffice to capture him.”

Breme was eventually taken. But so adroit was he, that he contrived to remain at large for three weeks after his escape from Cardone’s house. He was tried, condemned, and executed for the murder of St. Armande, several witnesses being found who identified him, and testified to having seen fastened to his shirt bosom, on the evening of the murder, the blood-red cross.

Irene was never afterward persuaded to wear it. It hung over the mantel in her boudoir, and many an evening visitor has been beguiled by Henri with a recital of the two dark episodes in its history which are embodied in this story, and have departed shuddering at its sanguinary hue.

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