

## *A Romance of Reality*

by a French Detective

I had some renown as a successful rogue character, and I had some experience, too. My field of operations, as a usual thing, lay within the confines of the Department of the Lower Alps, and though I served under the Sub-Prefect of the third Arrondissement, yet the Prefect of the Department called upon me when he chose. One morning—it was in the latter part of May—I received a note from the Prefect, ordering me to come to [Dinge] and see him with all possible dispatch. The missive came through the office of our Sub-Prefect, so that I had nothing to do but get ready and start, I took an early dinner, assumed the dress of a peasant, browned my face and hands and set forth. I reached Dinge just at night fall, and as soon as it was dark. I waited on the Prefect. He seemed to be relieved when he saw me, and took me to his private closet.

“Now,” said I, “have you got work for me?”

“Yes,” he replied, “sit down and listen.”

We sat down and he proceeded:—“Within a few months past, there have been some of the most mysterious murders committed in this Department and in the Department of War, that have ever come under my notice. They are done mostly on the road from Castellane to [Alps]. The first victim, was a Marseilles merchant, who had come up to Castellane to purchase preserved fruits. His body was found by the roadside, near the line, between the two Departments; and at first it was supposed that he must have fallen there in a fit, as no marks of violence could be found upon him. His pockets had been rifled, however. The next one was found near Annot, and under the same circumstances. He was a merchant also, and from Nice. Since then, five or six more died upon the same road, in the same mysterious way, and no marks of ill usage have been found upon any of them, but all have been robbed.”

“Have most of them stopped in Castellane?”

The Prefect told me they had.

“And I suppose they must have put up at the same inn then?” I remarked.

“Yes,” said the Prefect.

I then supposed some of the landlords must be concerned. But my companion informed me that they had been narrowly watched, and that no shadow of evidence rested against them.

“But,” said I, “is there not poison in this matter? Some inn-keeper may administer the poison, and then send an accomplice after the victim.”

“No,” returned the Prefect, with a shake of the head. “Experienced physicians have examined the stomachs of the dead men, but no traces of poison have been found. It is a mysterious affair. The Sub-Prefect has done all he could, but without effect; and now we mean to give the whole thing

into your hands. You must go to Castellane at once, and there you can get such further information as the Sub-Prefect can give you.”

After conferring awhile longer with the Prefect, he let me have a suit of ordinary tradesman’s clothing, and thus habited, I went to a hotel and put up for the night. In the morning, reaching Castellane at noon. During the day I pretended to be doing business; I went to the woolen factory and examined a lot of stuff and I also visited several places where preserved fruits were put up. I learned that most of the people that came there on business, put up at an inn kept by a man named Juan Fontaix; so I left my horse and engaged lodgings.

After dark I called upon the Sub-Prefect. He told me that he had used all the means in his power, but had been able to gain no clue to the guilty party. Most of the murdered victims had been from Marseilles, and the excitement in that city was intense. Gendarmes had been sent out upon all the roads, and secret police had also been upon the watch. The last victim had fallen only four or five days before, and the deed was done in fifteen minutes after the policeman had passed the spot.

I asked the Sub-Prefect if he had any suspicions. He answered that all the suspicions he had, were fastened upon Juan Fontaix, the innkeeper. Nearly all the murdered men had stopped at his house, and he must have known something of their business.

I bade the officer to keep perfectly quiet, not even to let one of his own men know of my presence. Then I turned toward the inn, and finally entered into conversation with my host upon the subject of the mysterious deaths. He pronounced it wonderful, and assured me that it had injured him more than he could tell.

“Parbleu!” he muttered, “they’ll be suspecting me next, if they have not done so already.”

I was soon satisfied that Juan Fontaix knew nothing of the guilty party. He was very fearful, and sometimes blanched and trembled at the very thought. Most people would have seen in this signs of guilt, but I thought differently.

I spent all the next day in the town, ostensibly engaged in business with the factories, but in reality hunting after some clue to the object of my mission. Night came again, but I had found nothing new. I was perfectly satisfied that the murderer had laid his plans so deeply, that no circumstantial clue could be found. If I would find him, I must catch him with the guilt upon him.

I had given an assumed name at the inn, and stated that I belonged to Toulon. On the next morning I called for my bill, and informing my host that I was off for home. Then I went to the fruit preservers and told him the same, stating that I must confer with my partner before I concluded my bargain. After this I went to the woolen factory and saw the business agent. His name was Louis Cazaubon, and he had come to Castellane about a year before. He seemed to be a straightforward business man, and yet he was the only man whom I thought of suspecting. In conversation about the murders, he had been a little too free and off-handed, treating the subject more coolly than a man with a heart would be apt to do. But still I had been unable to prove

anything against him. On the present occasion I told him, as I had many others, that I must return to Toulon.

“If you have not money with you, we can give you credit for it,” he said.

I told him that I had plenty of money but was not fully prepared to pay the prices he demanded. He said, “very well;” and added that he should be very happy to sell me when I came again. I bade him good day, and then departed. As soon as I was alone, I began to suspect Mons. Louis Cazaubon in earnest. When I told him that I had money, but did not wish to purchase, why didn’t he banter me? Simply because he wished me to leave town with the money in my pocket. At least so it appeared to me. This was sufficient ground for me to work upon, and I resolved to watch the man a little while. So I rode to an out of the way place and left my horse, and then returned and concealed myself in a position where I could watch the movements of Louis Cazaubon.

In a few moments, he came out of the factory and walked away. His step was hurried and eager. I felt sure that he was not the man that had done the direct work of death. The plot was deeper than that, or he would have been discovered ere this. So I resolved to wait a while and see if he returned. I would have followed him if I could have done so with safety; but he might have detected me, and that would not do. However, in less than fifteen minutes he came. He walked with a sober innocent air.

I saw Cazaubon at his desk, and then I returned to my horse. I knew that I had a risk to run now, but I was ready for it. If the factory agent was at the bottom of the crime, and meant to have me robbed, he had already set his machinery in motion, and the next development would be upon the road. I examined my pistol and then left the town, taking my road along the river, toward the Alps.

At the end of half an hour, I came to the slopes of the Barjois mountains, and soon afterward entered the wood. I now began to be careful, and kept my eyes about me. I will not say that I was wholly without fear for the mysterious manner in which the murders had been done, verged so closely upon the marvelous, that a sort of superstitious dread attached to it. Had the victims been shot or run through with a sword, or had their throats cut, I should have had no sort of dread.— But this was new ground. Death had come here nobody knew how. It might have come from an invisible hand and in dead silence. Yet when I reasoned upon the subject, I felt sure that the murderer must approach very near to his victims ere the blow was struck, since it must be some direct and powerful agent that could produce death in so strange a manner.

I had crossed the little cascade of Saint Esprit, and was descending a short steep hill-side when I saw a young man by the road-side, at the foot of the decent, engaged in whipping a mule.—He was a slightly built fellow, and his coarse garments were covered with meal. I knew that there was a mill upon the branch of the Verdon, not far back, and I supposed he might be the miller’s boy. As I came nearer, I saw a large sack lying upon the ground, close by where the mule stood.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, as I went up near him.

“This ugly mule has thrown both me and my bag of corn from his back,” he answered.

“Are you much hurt?” I continued.

“My left shoulder is hurt,” he said. “and I can’t lift this sack again. If monsieur would help me, I would be very grateful.”

Until this moment, the idea of suspecting that young man, had never entered my head; but the suspicions dashed upon me now. He was altogether too keen a looking fellow for a miller’s apprentice. He gave me a glance from a pair of quick sharp eyes, that meant more than he had spoken. And then if I had not been very much mistaken, I had seen him holding his mule firmly with the left hand.

I leaped from my saddle, and moved toward him, being careful to watch his every movement.

“Now,” said he “if you will take hold of that end, we will put it on.”—He lifted at the other end, and pretended that it hurt his shoulder and begged of me to lift in on alone.

I professed to be willing to comply, and stooped down for the purpose, keeping my head in such a position, that I could watch him by a sidelong glance. As I bent over, and took hold of the sack, I saw him carry his hand to his bosom, and draw something out. I saw his dark eye flash, and heard his quick eager breathing. In an instant I seized his wrist and bent it upward, and, as I did so, I heard a sharp report, like the explosion of a percussion cap and I saw a tiny wreath of smoke curl up from the hand I held. He struggled to free himself from my grasp, but I held him with a grip of iron and fixed my gaze upon him.

“I’ve found you, have I,” I said, drawing my pistol and cocking it. “I will simply inform you, that I am an officer of Prefecture, and that I have been hunting for you. Just offer a particle of resistance, and a bullet goes through your brain! Now give me that weapon.”

The young man was frightened and trembled violently.

“It is only a tobacco-pipe,” he said as he handed it to me.

And certainly it looked like nothing more; but I had seen enough of it to know that evil was in it. It appeared to me to be an ordinary meerschaum pipe, the bowl being colored as though by long use—only the amber mouth piece was missing. I did not stop to examine it, then, but turned my attention to its owner. I saw he was still trembling with fear, and I knew that now would be the time to work upon him.

“So you are selling your soul to Monsieur Louis Cazaubon?” I remarked by way of letting him know that I was thoroughly informed. He started, and I saw very plainly he knew just what I meant; but he tried to recover himself, and asserted that he did not know anything about the individual I had named.

“You needn’t lie to me,” I sternly replied “for I know all about you.—Louis Cazaubon has been watched by me when he didn’t dream of such a thing. He thought I was a tradesman. But you are young and I would save you. Confess everything to me, and I promise your life shall be spared.”

I saw that he wavered, and I followed up my advantage, and ere long I had him bent to my wishes. I made him understand that I held his life in my hand; and that I could protect him from the vengeance of any one whom he might criminate, and that he had everything to gain and nothing to loose by a full confession. He came to it gradually and reluctantly, but my wit finally triumphed, and I gained the secret.

His name, he said, was Henry Dupin. He was born in Paris, but never knew who his parents were. He went to live with Cazaubon when quite young and had been with him ever since. He said Cazaubon used to be a chemist, and did some business in that line; and that it was in Paris he invented the infernal machine which they had since used with such fatal effect. About two years previous to the present time they left Paris together, and spent nearly a year in traveling over the kingdom, murdering and robbing for a living.—Finally they came to Castellane, where the master got his present situation.—Cazaubon marked the victims that were to be robbed and the young man did the work. He used various artifices to carry out his plans, but the usual one was the one he tried on me.

The young man then tried to explain to me the secret of the pipe. Only the outer surface was of meerscham.—Within it was a pistol of the finest steel, and of the most exquisite workmanship. The stem was the barrel, and the lock was concealed within the bowl, and covered with tobacco. A thin plate of metal protected the curiously contrived lock, and upon which the tobacco rested. A pressure of the thumb or finger upon this plate discharged the weapon. In order to cock it the plate had to be removed. And now comes the internal feature of the contrivance: The powder used in the barrel was of Cazaubon’s own manufacture, and very powerful. For a wad a piece of felt was used, and on the top of this was a missil which did the mischief. The young man had two of them with him, stitched up in the lining of his cap. He took them out and showed them to me.

The projectile was a tiny arrow, not larger than a cambric needle, with one end sharp, and the other beat down to a thin leather. It was of fine steel, but coated with a greenish yellow substance, which was the most virulent and speedy poison that the chemist’s art could concoct. The needle once within the course of the blood, and death was already at the heart. Its wound no mortal eye could detect. It punctured the skin not so palpable as the prick of a pin. He who sent it on its fatal errand made sure of his aim, generally striking the neck, and the victim would fall insensible ere he could comprehend what hurt him.

I returned to Castellane with my prisoner; having left him in charge of the Sub-Prefect, I took a gendarme along with me and went to the factory. Monsieur Cazaubon was surprised to see me back again so soon; but he was more surprised when I asked him to take a walk with me; and when I called the officer and bade him put the handcuffs upon the agent, he was ready to sink to the floor. We had him secured before he had sense enough to resist, and he was conveyed to the Sub-Prefect without trouble. At first he denied everything, but when he found that this would not avail him any he swore he would kill his accomplice.

In due time Monsieur Louis Cazaubon was tried and condemned to death, and the Prefect of Dunge took possession of the infernal machine. Before the villain was executed he confessed his crimes—told how many years he had worked to perfect his fatal instrument and produce the poison and also owned that the young man had been driven to help him through fear of his life.

So the rascal was executed. Henry Dupin, his accomplice, spent two weeks in confinement, and was then set free, and commenced an honest life. As for me, I got all the praise I deserved, and perhaps more. At all events, I had done the country some service, and the people were not slow in acknowledging it.

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