The Arrest

[Translated for EVERY SATURDAY from *L'Événement*]

"AH! M. Vibert!" exclaimed the porter, as the agent of the secret police returned home. "There is a letter for you!"

Vibert took the letter. Its printed heading showed that it came from the Commissary of Police of the 1st Ward. It ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR VIBERT,—While you were employed in this office, your attention was called one day during my absence to an escaped convict named Langlade, and to a tall, red-haired girl known by the nickname 'Soleil Couchant.' The Prefecture of Police has requested me to furnish some information about these parties, who were believed to be in England, who are in Paris, but who have heretofore escaped, notwithstanding all the efforts made to arrest them. I know nobody but you who can give information about these two people. Will you be so good as to call at the Prefecture of Police tomorrow morning and give it all the information you possess?

Your old master,

"Dorécu."

"I will go tomorrow morning," said Vibert to himself, as he put the letter in his pocket and went upstairs.

He went the next morning to the Prefecture of Police, and was shown into the office of one of the superintendents. While he was waiting his turn to speak to the Superintendent, he overheard the following dialogue between the former and an agent of the secret police.

"And so Soleil Couchant has not only been arrested and brought here, but has given important information. Do you believe what she says?"

"Yes, because it is her interest to tell the truth."

"And if she is to be credited, Langlade will sleep tonight in the Rue Croix des Petits Champs?"

"She says it is more than probable he will sleep there."

"Very well, then, nothing can prevent your arresting him tomorrow morning?"

"If I can find men willing to undertake the job."

"What is to prevent you from finding all the men you want?"

"Langlade's terrible reputation. He has already escaped twice from the hulks at Toulon and Brest. He is a Hercules in size and strength. He never sleeps without loaded pistols by his bedside. The first man who enters his bed-chamber is sure to be shot down. My men know all this, and I am afraid they will hesitate."

"They are cowards, then!" suddenly exclaimed Vibert from his seat.

The Superintendent of the Secret Police and the other agent turned around with astonishment to see who spoke.

"Ay, they are cowards!" repeated Vibert. "Should a police agent draw back from a malefactor? Should a police agent hesitate when he knows he has it in his power to rid society of a desperado covered with crimes?"

"Ah, Vibert!" exclaimed the Superintendent, recognizing his agent.

"I should like to see you do it," said the other agent.

"Nothing is easier than to gratify your desire. You have but to walk behind me, if I am authorized to arrest Langlade tomorrow morning at his lodgings in the Rue Croix des Petits Champs."

"Are you in earnest?" asked the Superintendent

"Assuredly I am."

"But," exclaimed the other police agent, "you really don't know what sort of man this Langlade is."

"You are mistaken. I had Langlade in my hands when I was Secretary of the Commissary of Police in the Rue St. Honoré. He dared come one day to ask me to give him a passport for England. He struck me as a suspicious character. I had him followed and arrested. Since then he has escaped a second time from the hulks whither I sent him."

"As you are so familiar with him," said the other agent, "I am astonished that you are not more afraid of him. Surely you must remember what a giant he is: I never saw a more stalwart man."

"Perfectly well. I am a dwarf by the side of a great many persons; I am a mere pygmy compared to him."

"How many men will you require?"

"None."

"Surely you do not pretend to say you mean to arrest him unaided?"

"I certainly do. What use would your men be to me, since you yourself say they would be afraid of him? They would only be in the way."

"Do you want to be killed?"

"That's none of your business. The question is, How shall a difficult task be performed? Everybody declines attempting it. I volunteer to do it."

"Very well, then," said the Superintendent, once more taking part in the conversation, "I will give you all the information you may require to enable you to undertake this job,—or rather, go into the next room and tell M. Laveirarié to put you in possession of all he knows, and to let you question Soleil Couchant, if you please."

At half past five o'clock the next morning, Vibert with a determined step went up the staircase of the house in the Rue Croix des Petits Champs where Langlade lodged. After hunting in vain for a bell-rope at the door which the porter told him was Langlade's, he boldly rapped.

"Who is there?" cried a voice from the chamber.

"An agent of the secret police who has come to arrest you," replied Vibert.

"Shut up, you joker! Were you an agent of the secret police, you would not let me know it. They take rather more precautions than that before they wake up this passenger. It is you, Crampin, isn't it?"

"Yes; come, open quick."

"Egads! old fellow, it is hard to tumble out of bed in such cold weather at this early hour; but for a friend I suppose I must, although I run the risk of catching cold; but I warn you I hop back to bed again!"

The key had scarcely been turned and the bolt had hardly ceased to grate, when Vibert, who stood near the door, shoved against it with might and main, darted into the chamber, made for the bed, seized the revolver lying on the table near it, and aiming at Langlade,—all which was done as quick as thought,—said, "If you budge you are a dead man!"

"A thousand thunders!" screamed the escaped convict. "Hang me if it is not an agent of the secret police."

"Didn't I tell you so, you numskull? Come, you are caught. Surrender."

"Never!" exclaimed Langlade, foaming with rage. "I'll devour you first, you mean scoundrel! You have my revolver, but I have hands strong as any vice blacksmith ever saw and teeth sharp as steel."

"Pshaw!" quietly replied Vibert, "you can use neither unless you get me in arm's reach; and you know if you stir so much as a hair's-breadth I'll put a pistol-ball through your body."

The escaped convict stood like a statue, half naked, foaming with rage, but afraid to move a step. They eyed each other for an instant, one ready to leap on the other, the other ready to fire the revolver.

Then Vibert said, in a jeering tone: "I thought you were going to eat me up. Have you abandoned that idea? It is a pity: I wanted to die an original death."

"It must be confessed you are a bold fellow to dare come in here," exclaimed Langlade, becoming calmer, and looking in every direction to see if he could not discover some object which would serve him as a good weapon.

"Nonsense! Folks think you much more terrible than you really are. Come, now! come! don't be moving about in that way, or I shall be obliged to break one of your legs in order to keep you quiet. What do you want? What are you looking for? Your slippers, eh? Your feet are cold. Here they are. O, I am a good-natured fellow, I don't want you to catch cold."

Vibert, holding the revolver so as to check any movement of Langlade, picked up with his left hand a pair of shoes which lay at the foot of the bed, and threw them to the escaped convict.

"Thank you," said Langlade, whose wonted assurance had now completely returned. "A fellow is more solid on his feet when he has his shoes on."

"To be sure he is, therefore I gave you yours. Would you like to have your pantaloons, waistcoat, and frock-coat? Don't stand on ceremony with me. I have them within reach."

"If you will be good enough to give them to me, I shall be very glad to receive them," replied Langlade, astounded by so much kindness.

Vibert gave Langlade the desired pantaloons, waistcoat, and frock-coat, taking, however, the same precautions he had used when he gave him the shoes. While Langlade rapidly dressed himself, Vibert asked: "If I am not indiscreet, will you tell me what you intend doing when you are dressed?"

"Really I don't know yet. I have been thinking over the matter, but I cannot come to any decision. I believe I'd leap on you and give you a taste of my strength and teeth but for that confounded revolver, which is a little in my way."

"Would you like to have the revolver too?"

"I should say I would; but there is no chance of that—"

"Do you think not? That's not so certain. What would you do with it were I to give it to you?"

"Do with it? I'd blow your brains out in a jiffy!"

"Really?"

"Just as certain as you are standing there!"

"At the first shot?"

"At the very first shot, for I would aim at the temple."

"Very well then, old fellow. Be sure you aim with a steady hand. Here is your revolver."

Vibert, as he spoke, quitted his seat, went to Langlade, gave him the revolver, turned around and quietly went back to the bed; he sat on it, folded his arms and said, "Well, fire!"

The escaped convict was confounded. He exclaimed, "I'll be hanged if you belong to the secret police!"

"You thankless dog! I behave my best to you; I treat you like a son, and you are so ungrateful as to refuse to give me my titles!"

"Do you mean to tell me you really are a detective?"

"I'm nothing else. What in the world do you think I am? You don't take me for a peer, eh? I'm not such a fool; time hangs too heavily on their hands. I am a detective, — a real detective. What do you call these things I am drawing from my pocket. Look at 'em. Aren't they handcuffs? They are the only professional objects I brought with me when I came to see you. I left even my sword-cane at home."

"You are a bold fellow!"

"My dear Langlade, this is the second time you have used that expression. I confess to you I hate repetition."

"And do you really think I am going to let you handcuff me?"

"You are going to do one of two things: you are going either to kill me or to let me handcuff you. Between you and me, which you choose is matter of perfect indifference to me,—but choose you shall."

"Don't you prize your life?"

"If I prized my life, should I have come here to wake you up this morning? Do you prize life?"

"Why, yes; just now I must say I do. I am loved."

"You are loved! really? Lucky dog!"

"Am I not?" exclaimed Langlade, straightening himself up with a self-satisfied air.

Vibert took out his green eye-glasses and eyed the escaped convict from head to foot, then said: "The truth is, your father and mother did not play the churl with you when they introduced you to life. They gave you good measure. You fill a large space on earth. I can understand how it is women should adore you,—they have such wretched taste!"

Then changing his tone suddenly, and turning his back to Langlade, he said: "It is rather cold here. You forgot to light your fire this morning. Let us be moving. They are waiting for us."

"Where?"

"At jail. I believe you will be better off there than anywhere else. In the first place, you will get there in time to be examined tomorrow. And rest assured, as you are an old hand, you will be treated with all proper attention. You will not be mixed up with the small fry. You shall have a cell to yourself."

"Are you making a butt of me?" bawled Langlade.

"Don't scream so loud, man! You will wake up all your neighbors. Recollect, it is only six o'clock in the morning."

"The report of the revolver when I blow out your brains will wake them up still more effectually."

"Hush! hush! hush! You do nothing but menace: execution is not your part!"

Vibert, as he made this remark, fell back and lay stretched at length on Langlade's bed. The escaped convict, exasperated beyond all bounds, sprang towards the bed and placed the muzzle of the revolver on Vibert's temple. The detective looked steadily at Langlade. They remained in their respective positions for a minute. Then the escaped convict lowered his eyes, let his revolver fall on the bed, and drew back, exclaiming: "A thousand thunders! I dare not kill him, after all!"

"Well, after all," said Vibert, rising from the bed, and adroitly slipping the revolver into his pocket as he rose, "you will not kill me. I must still live and suffer."

"Are you unhappy?" asked Langlade, coming up to him.

"Ay, most wretched. So wretched I would gladly change places with you and make you the detective, could I be the escaped convict carried back to the hulks. But I did not come here to confess my griefs to you. Let us be going."

"Go, if you please. I will not kill you, but here I stay."

"That is impossible, my dear Langlade. I have pledged my word of honor to bring you to the jail. Now don't put on any airs. You are a good fellow; so am I. Let us come to an understanding at once. Your mistress is a tall, red-haired girl, named Stephanie Cornu, and nicknamed 'Soleil Couchant.' Isn't she?"

"How in the world did you find that out?"

"My dear boy, we know everything. It is our trade. But if you want to know the full particulars, I will tell you, for I can refuse you nothing. It was Soleil Couchant herself who told us where you were to sleep tonight."

"It is a lie!" bawled Langlade.

"It is every word true. Were it not true, I would not amuse myself by giving you useless pain. I respect a man's affections, and hold it cowardice to tell a man his mistress betrays him when she is true. It would be less cruel to plunge a dagger in his heart."

"Ah! indeed it is," said the escaped convict, while two big tears rolled down his cheeks. Then he fell back on his chair, murmuring to himself: "That is the reason I have not seen her these two days gone. O, the vile woman! And yet I madly loved her. She was the only thing on earth I did love." He turned towards Vibert, his face bathed in tears, and, stretching out his arms at full length, said: "I surrender! Here, handcuff me."

"What sort of a fellow do you take me to be? Do you think I am a man to take advantage of your weakness? Never! When you are calmer we'll talk over matters."

The giant sat in a corner and sobbed like a child.

Vibert walked up and down the room for a moment or two, then he went up to Langlade, and, laying his hand on the convict's shoulder, said, "Come with me; I will carry you to Soleil Couchant."

Langlade sprang to his feet and said, "Do you know where she is?"

"To be sure I do. She was arrested yesterday, and is now in jail. She became frightened; she saw herself mixed up in bad business, imprisoned for the rest of her life, and she gave you up, in order to win the favor of the prison authorities."

"The vile creature! Do you offer to carry me to her?"

"Right away."

"But I will kill her if I get near her."

"That is none of my business. All I have to do is to arrest you, and you will be arrested the moment you enter the jail's portal. So, if you have a fancy for killing Soleil Couchant, I do not care a snap of my fingers. One woman more or less in the world is not a matter of much moment."

"I'm ready; let us be off."

"Agreed."

They went downstairs together. Langlade seemed unconscious of everything. Plunged in his own thoughts, his head drooping on his breast, he followed Vibert mechanically, just as a dog follows his master. Soleil Couchant had betrayed him! What cared he for aught else? Nevertheless, when they reached the door, the cool morning air for a moment recalled him to himself. He raised his head, looked around, and said to Vibert, "Where is your carriage?"

"My carriage? I don't keep a carriage."

"But the carriage with your men?"

"I have no men with me."

"You don't mean to say you came all alone to arrest me?"

"Why, great heavens, man! how often do you require to be told the same thing? Do you think I ought to have been accompanied by a squadron of cavalry? My dear boy, I am accustomed to do my business by myself, and I manage it all the better alone. Are you vexed because you don't see at your door three or four detectives, with frock-coats buttoned up to their chins, and looking like undertakers? I never go on the street with such fellows. I have too much self-respect for that. But if their absence vexes you, I can order them to be sent around."

"No; it is useless."

"Don't use any ceremony with me, my dear fellow. If you desire a first-class funeral, say the word; it shall be yours."

"No, I don't want them."

A hack passed by. Vibert engaged it. "Get in," said he to Langlade. He ordered the driver to go to the Rue de Jerusalem, drive into the court-yard of the Prefecture of Police, and stop in front of the great staircase.

The ride to the Prefecture was marked by no incident. Langlade sat in his corner wrapt in his own thoughts. Vibert kept attentive watch on him, and had one hand on his revolver to fire at the least attempt at escape. He was determined his prisoner should not give him the slip at the entrance of the haven.

As the hack rumbled up the Rue de Jerusalem Vibert said, "Before we part, be good enough to give me your hands."

"What for?"

"To put fetters on them."

"O, I will not harm anybody—but Soleil Couchant," replied Langlade, completely conquered, and as gentle as a child.

"My dear fellow," responded Vibert, in the same honeyed tone, "since we have been together I think I have conclusively demonstrated to you that I am not afraid of you. But we shall now be alone no more. I am going to carry you up staircases, down passages, into offices where you will be met by a great many people who know you by sight or by reputation, and in whom you inspire fear, which I grant you is greatly exaggerated, but nevertheless very serious. It is for their sake I propose this little measure of precaution."

Langlade rejoined, in an ingenuous and very gentle voice, "But if I am handcuffed I can never kill Soleil Couchant."

"There you are mistaken. The handcuffs will not prevent you from raising your arms and letting them fall on her head; with your strength this bare motion would suffice to rid you of half a dozen weak women. Moreover, as Soleil Couchant's life or death is a matter of perfect indifference to me, I promise you, if you wish it, to have your handcuffs taken off when you are shown into her company."

"Very well, then; put them on," said Langlade, holding out his hands.

Five minutes afterwards Vibert entered the office of the Superintendent of the Secret Police with his prisoner. He went up to the Superintendent and said: "I have kept my promise. Here is Langlade."

"Did you arrest him?"

"Yes, all alone. Didn't I so promise?"

"You have done us a signal service. I shall see the Prefect of Police in an hour, and I promise I will speak to him about you."

"I have one request to make of you."

"It is granted in advance."

The Superintendent rose and talked with Vibert in the recess of the window. At last the Superintendent said: "It is agreed. In truth, I am of your opinion: promises made to these men must be kept. They fear us, hate us, kill us, but are obliged to esteem us. I will have Langlade sent to a cell by himself, and give the necessary orders about Soleil Couchant."

Vibert bowed and retired. Agents summoned by the Superintendent carried Langlade to jail. This energetic, brutal, terrible fellow quietly followed them. He had but one thought, one desire,—to see Soleil Couchant as soon as possible. He knew anything like show of resistance would retard the moment which he longed for so ardently.

The news of his arrest had flown like wildfire throughout the Prefecture. Young clerks, messengers, and some strangers who happened to be at the Prefecture, ran up to the passage down which he was to be led to jail. He glanced with quiet indifference at this throng. What cared he for them? He reserved all his wrath for the woman who had betrayed him.

The agents carried Langlade to a double cell, where the handcuffs were removed. Langlade was still as calm as ever, and had answered quietly and politely all the questions put to him.

The youngest agent whispered to the other: "He has been calumniated. He is a perfect lamb."

The other agent, who had spent all his life in prisons, shook his head and replied: "Wait a bit yet before we come to any opinion. There may be fire yet under those ashes."

Langlade asked, as he took his seat on a wooden stool in the cell, "By which door will she enter?"

The agent pointed to a door on the other side of the stout iron grating which divided the room into two cells.

Langlade leaped from the stool, his eyes flashed fire, his nostrils dilated. He began to suspect something, he scented a trap. His voice had lost something of its calmness when he said, "But if she comes in by that door, how can she meet me here?"

"Why, she is not going to meet you any nearer than those iron bars," replied the youngest agent.

"Ah! she will not come nearer me than this?"

The older agent, seeing Langlade's face contract more and more, and wear an expression of increasing fury, said, in a gentle tone, "You can get very near her, and the grating will not prevent your talking to her as much as you please."

"They have lied to me then!" screamed Langlade.

"You were told you should see her. She is coming."

Langlade screamed still louder: "They have lied to me! She was to be near me,—by my side, without a grating between us. I have been deceived! Had I suspected as much, I should never have been arrested. I would have defended myself. I would have killed that villain! I would have killed every one of ye! Ye are all a pack of infernal scoundrels!"

He suddenly walked up to the older agent and bawled: "I tell ye, I want to be by her side. She must be brought in here, or I must be carried in on the other side of the grating."

The agent replied: "My orders on the subject are explicit? What you ask is simply impossible."

"Ah! it is impossible!" yelled Langlade. "Very well, then my surrender is void! You have not arrested me yet. It is all to begin over again."

In the twinkling of an eye he wrenched from the wall a wooden bench secured to it by iron plates, seized two stools, three straw chairs, and a small table, threw them into one corner of the cell, broke off a leg of the table to serve him as a sort of club, stood with his back to the wall behind the sort of barricade he had made, and yelled in a terrible voice, as he brandished his club over his head, "Come on, I'm ready for ye!"

The younger agent ran out of the cell, crying at the top of his voice, "The guard! the guard, ho!"

The older agent remained at his post, and, shrugging his shoulders, looked calmly at Langlade. This agent's calmness exasperated the convict to the highest degree. He leaped over his barricade and advanced towards him, club in hand. The agent felt then that he was wantonly exposing himself to danger. Fixing his eyes on his adversary, holding in one hand his bunch of keys to fend off the club, curling his thick gray mustache with the other hand, he rapidly walked backwards, without saying a word. When he got near the door, which had remained open since the flight of the other agent, he jumped backwards just as Langlade was upon him, and he slammed the door. It was a retreat, but it was an honorable retreat,—it was no rout. Langlade was alone in his cell.

Meantime, the guard of soldiers which is posted in every jail had armed, and was marching to the double cell. It was evident that a terrible struggle was about to take place. The convict would certainly be vanquished, after all, by the number of his adversaries, but it was certain he would defend himself with energy. In his vigorous hands, every sort of weapon would prove a fatal instrument of defence. Besides, he might jump on the first soldier who entered the cell, disarm him, retreat behind his barricade, and keep the enemy at bay for hours. The soldiers, headed by the two agents, had reached the door of the double cell, and were about to enter it.

Vibert suddenly made his appearance.

He had heard an unusual noise, had made inquiry, and was told what was taking place. He said to himself: "I ought to have expected as much. It is my fault, after all. It is certain Langlade has some right to complain. I have not kept my promise strictly. It is my duty to repair the ill I have done, and to prevent the effusion of blood."

Brave and resolute as he was, he could not hesitate long. He made haste and joined the soldiers and agents, and said to them, as the agent was about turning the key of the door, "Let me go in; I'll settle everything."

"What are you going to do, M. Vibert?" asked the older agent.

"I don't know; but begin by sending the guard away, I beg of you. It is not worthwhile to have the soldiers killed by this fellow. I mastered him this morning, and I dare say I shall master him now. If I fail, it will be time enough to summon the guard. You know the Superintendent is always glad when you abstain from violent measures."

"True. Our orders are, to be as gentle as possible. But if you could imagine the state of fury in which this scoundrel is, you would despair of producing any effect."

"It costs nothing to try."

"You risk your life."

"I had better risk mine than risk the life of all these people."

"As you please. Would you have me go in with you?"

"No, it is useless."

"I shall remain here, then, to go to your assistance if necessary."

Vibert opened the door and entered the double cell.

Langlade, who had heard the clatter of the muskets and the murmur of voices, expected to be attacked, and he had taken refuge behind his barricade. As soon as he saw Vibert his fury became frenzy. He made one leap, jumped on Vibert, took him in his arms, and, throwing him as one throws a ball, tossed him to the extremity of the double cell.

Vibert fell on his knees, rose, brushed his pantaloons with his elbow to remove the dust, (for in the gravest circumstances he was a particular man,) and, without waiting for Langlade to fall on him, he crossed his arms and went up to him and bawled in his face, "You are a coward!"

"And you are a liar?"

- "Why do you call me liar?" asked Vibert, without lowering his voice in the least.
- "Because you promised me I should see her, and I have not seen her yet."
- "She is there, behind that door. They are only waiting for you to be calm to show her in."
- "But she will not enter here. I shall only see her behind that grating. That is not what you promised me."
- "I made you no promise whatever on the subject. I dare you to tell me I promised you should see her at your side."
- "We did not speak of that, but—"
- "You ought to have spoken of it. You ought to have expressed all your conditions. I couldn't possibly divine your wishes. I have faithfully kept every one of the promises I made you. I have had even your handcuffs taken off. If you had not had free use of your hands, you would not have been able to damage this cell, and treat me as cowardly as you have done."
- "Cowardly?"
- "Yes, cowardly! I am small, you are tall. I am weak, you are strong. I entered here alone and unarmed, to prevent a sanguinary struggle in which you would most certainly have been vanquished, and you leaped on me like a wild beast. Isn't that cowardly?"
- "Will they bring Soleil Couchant here?" asked Langlade, already a great deal calmer than he had been. "May I see her without being separated from her by this grating?"
- "No. You will see her and talk to her through these iron bars. She made this request."
- "Ah! these iron bars are provided at her request! Why is that?"
- "I dare say because she is afraid to be near you. Does that astonish you?"
- "If she is afraid, it is because she feels guilty."
- "Clear enough; but that's no reason why she should desire to be murdered."
- "But suppose I should promise not to kill her?"
- "You cannot make such a promise, and be sure of keeping it. You are too violent. You have not sufficient self-command. A word or gesture is enough to throw you into a frenzy. You even strike those who don't say a word to you, who do nothing to you."
- "Pardon me."

"O, I forgive you; but it is more than probable that the Superintendent will not forgive you for having disturbed the quiet which always reigns here, committed deeds of violence, menaced the agents, called out the guard—"

"What can he do?"

"He can refuse to allow you to see Soleil Couchant, even behind that iron grating."

"See here," said Langlade, trying to take Vibert's hand, "if you will persuade the Superintendent to let me see her, I promise to put everything here back in its place, to present excuses to the agents, and to be as calm as I have been furious."

"Well, I will use my influence with the Superintendent; but, I warn you, the utmost he will grant now will be to allow you to see her behind that grating."

"That is all I ask! I no longer feel like killing her. My anger has spent itself."

Vibert quitted the cell. The agents were at the door, and expressed their astonishment at seeing him in such good condition. He said to them: "He is quiet now. Let him see Soleil Couchant, as if nothing had taken place. This evening he will be sent to another jail, and you will be rid of him."

While Vibert was speaking, a strange noise was heard in the cell. Vibert returned and summoned the other agents. Langlade was lying on the floor insensible. The younger agent went for the surgeon, who came in time only to see the escaped convict breathe his last. The emotions of the day had been too much for the giant. His arrest, Soleil Couchant's betrayal, his frenzy at discovering the iron bars and at sight of Vibert, his fear the Superintendent might refuse to allow him so much as to see Soleil Couchant again, had brought on a fit of apoplexy. It proved fatal before any remedy could be administered.

Every Saturday, July 28, 1866