

[Written for *The Flag of our Union*]
Hearthstone Tales

by a Traveller
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The Telltale Eye

Some years ago, while living in Paris, I met with a French detective who was boarding for a while at the house at which I was sojourning. I confess I was drawn to the man from the first. He was a frank, open-hearted, careless Frenchman, whose only aim seemed to be to enjoy life. I had no idea that he was a detective, but supposed him to be simply a young man of fortune. Together we attended various places of amusement, and I soon found my friendship for Eugene Laromie was cordially reciprocated.

He was a tall, splendidly-formed man with a good-looking careless face, black hair and whiskers. A close observer would have noticed self-reliance and determination in every feature, and the calm, clear eyes told of more than ordinary courage. He was quiet and unobtrusive in his manners, and was decidedly a favorite with all in the house.

One morning, as Laromie and I were sitting at breakfast, an old gentleman who had been boarding there for some time (he was there before my arrival), came in and seated himself opposite us. Laromie glanced at him carelessly, but I noticed a quiet smile in the corner of his mouth as he did so. I noticed, also that Laromie was longer over his breakfast than usual, and rose only when the old gentleman did. My surprise was soon ended, however; for as the old gentleman turned to leave the dining room, Laromie approached him, and laying his hand on his shoulder, said, quietly:

“Monsieur Du Far, you are my prisoner.”

The old man turned deadly pale, and glanced around hurriedly, as if to secure some means of escape. But Laromie’s grasp on his shoulder tightened, and he continued coolly:

“Monsieur Du Far, I arrest you in the name of the state, for forgery and counterfeiting.”

“Who are you?” faltered the old man.

“Eugene Laromie, one of the secret police of Paris, but better known to you as Henri Gaubin.”

The old man said not another word, but suffered Laromie to lead him away. I followed, in the most complete astonishment. Arriving at the street entrance, we found a cabriolet waiting for someone. Laromie, after telling me that he would see me again during the day and explain the matter, entered the vehicle with his prisoner, and drove off.

I was positively bewildered by what I had seen and heard. Laromie a detective! I could scarcely credit it. I felt not a little uneasy, too. I had been expressing my opinions with regard to the

government and condition of affairs, to him without reserve, and many of them were not very complimentary to the “powers that be.” I could not help fearing that his duty as a government official might require him to get me into trouble; and I was somewhat impatient to see him and have an explanation of the whole matter. I did not meet him again until late in the afternoon.

“Well, *mon ami*,” said he, as he entered my room, where I sat smoking, “have you recovered from your surprise? Ha, ha! I don’t know which was more amusing, this morning, your astonishment or that of old Du Far. The rascal was completely caught, and I do myself the credit to believe it has been one of the neatest affairs yet performed in Paris.”

“Laromie,” said I, as I pointed to a chair, which he took, “I am afraid I have been very imprudent since I have known you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not knowing your real character,” I answered, “I have been perfectly unreserved in the expression of my opinions with regard to your government, and matters in general here.”

“You fear, then, that I might have played the spy on you, and reported your sayings to the head of the Bureau of Police?” he said, hastily, while his face flushed painfully.

“Exactly,” I replied.

He rose abruptly from his seat and went towards the door; but in a moment he came back, laughing.

“Knowing your opinions of our system here,” he said, good-naturedly, “I don’t blame you for the suspicion, especially after what you witnessed this morning. But, believe me, *mon ami*, it is no part of my duty to sacrifice my honor; and being on such intimate terms with you, I should have warned you, had I thought it necessary for you to be cautious. But I am willing for you to hold your opinions, so long as you do not interfere with matters here. You have wronged me greatly, but I forgive you.”

I at once offered him my hand, and apologized for my suspicions. He laughed good-naturedly, and assured me that I was forgiven. Then we sealed the forgiveness with a cigar and a bottle of claret.

“Now,” said I, “I want you to tell me something of your experience as a detective; for, from what I have seen of you today, I think you must be an uncommonly clever fellow. Suppose you give me the history of the case you have just completed.”

“They say at headquarters,” said Laromie, “that I do my work well, and I believe the compliment is not undeserved. I give great care to my cases, and am usually employed in those which are considered difficult. But instead of telling you of the case that happened this morning, suppose you let me relate what I consider my most famous exploit.”

“By all means. I want to know, also, why you became a detective. Tell me anything you like. I shall be a willing listener.”

“I think I must have been born for my profession,” said Laromie, brushing the ashes off his cigar; “for in my childhood I was always finding out other persons’ secrets. My companions could hide nothing from me, and it seemed to me that events had only to happen for me to know them. Many that I did not seek to learn forced themselves under my very eyes, and frequently to my great annoyance. As I grew up, this talent, for so I consider it, increased. When I came of age, I found myself in possession of an ample fortune which was left by my late father. There was no necessity for me to adopt any profession, or enter any branch of business, for my support was already guaranteed; but, in order to give my talents room for legitimate use, I determined to enter the secret service of the government. The chief of the secret police was a friend, and I sought him, and asked admission into his force. At first, he advised me strongly against the course I wished to pursue, giving me many reasons which it is useless to mention here. Some of them were good, others, of no consequence; but none of them sufficient to alter my determination. I pressed my application with so much earnestness that the chief at last consented to take me on trial for six months. At first, he gave me only trivial cases; but I soon satisfied him that I was capable of better things than these, and he gave me more responsible duties. I succeeded so well in everything, that in less than three months I was promoted to a position of great trust and importance. I have now been in the service nine years, and during that time have made myself valuable to the government; and it has become customary whenever a case requires unusual talents, to entrust it to me; and I do not remember but one instance in which I have failed to give satisfaction.

“Having told you this, *mon ami*, simply in compliance with your request, I will now relate what I consider my greatest exploit.

“About fifteen months ago, I was summoned by the chief, and informed that a murder had been committed in Faubourg St. Antoine, attended by an uncommon amount of mystery. He wished me to visit the spot immediately, and take charge of the case, which promised to be an exceedingly interesting one. I at once repaired to the house. I found it in charge of the authorities, who had refused to allow anything to be disturbed until I had visited the place. I was told that the murder had been committed on the previous night. The victim was an old woman who had amassed a considerable sum of money, which she always kept hidden in her chamber. It was generally known in the neighborhood that she was very miserly, and kept the money by her, being unwilling to trust it out of her sight. Her body was lying on the floor of the chamber, and the room had evidently been plundered by the murderer. The woman’s throat was cut through to the spinal column, and though she lay in an immense puddle of blood, there were no stains on her dress, and no blood marks on the floor of the room. This was singular, and at once convinced me that the deed was done by a practiced hand. The murderer had evidently held the woman in one position with one hand, while he cut her throat with the other with one powerful sweep of the knife. There was no other clue to the assassin. It was of importance to know that the murderer was not a novice, and, from the manner in which the deed was done, I inclined to the opinion that he was not a Parisian, for the method had never been practiced in the city before.

I returned to the Bureau and informed the chief of the result of my observations, at the same time telling him that I had very little hope of succeeding, the clues to the mystery being so obscure. Nevertheless, I promised to do my best to unravel it. In about three weeks, I was sent to examine into another murder. The victim this time, was the mistress of a boardinghouse, and was a widow somewhat advanced in years. Her chamber had been entered and robbed, and her throat had been cut to the bone, in precisely the same manner as in the other case. She, too, lay on the floor, weltering in a pool of blood, but nowhere else was a drop of the blood visible, on her person, the floor, or the furniture. Evidently, the same man had committed both murders. The only difference in the circumstances of the second affair was that I found on the floor near the body a pocket-handkerchief folded into a three-cornered shape, and showing marks of having been knotted at the ends.

“The thing perplexed me greatly and I felt quite hopeless of dispelling the mystery which surrounded it. The pocket-handkerchief was of no use to me, as it had belonged to the deceased. Nevertheless, I took it with me, hoping that it might be of use some day. I was very anxious to trace the assassin, for I began to see that he was commencing an organized system of murder; and besides this, I felt that my reputation was at stake.

“While pondering over the matter—and it was rarely out of my thoughts—one of my friends, who is a photographer, communicated to me some intelligence that he had gained from his reading and studies. He had seen it stated that the last impression made upon the eye of a dying person would be retained there for a certain time after death. That being the case, he thought it possible to obtain a photographic likeness of that impression, and was very anxious to try the experiment. The matter interested me at once, and I readily promised to give him an opportunity to test it in the next murder case that came within my observation. I saw plainly that the discovery, if successful, would be of immense importance in tracing murderers, and I had a vague hope that it would enable me to find the man I was seeking, as I was confident that he would repeat his performance before long. A month passed away, and then a third murder occurred. This victim was, like the second, the keeper of a boardinghouse, and was killed for her money. She, too, lay weltering in a pool of blood, with her throat cut to the bone, while, as in the other cases, the wound had been inflicted so as to cause no splashing of blood. The handkerchief lay near the corpse, as in the second case, but seemed to have belonged to the assassin, this time, instead of being the property of his victim.

“I at once dispatched a messenger to my friend the photographer, who soon arrived, bringing with him instruments of great power and delicacy, which he had procured in anticipation of this event. The eyes of the murdered woman were wide open, and we had no difficulty in fixing her face in a proper position. The day being clear and bright, an excellent negative was taken, and when the impression was transferred to the paper, we found it the profile of a man’s face. The upper portion was obscure, but the lower part, from the nose down, was perfect. The features were those of an Italian. This confirmed my supposition that a foreigner had committed the murders. Only the lower part of the face being reproduced, I was somewhat perplexed. It was too bad to be so near the end I sought, and yet to be baffled by an imperfect picture. I was sorry that only the profile was the last thing seen by the dead woman. Had it been the full face, I might have had more to encourage me. Then again, there is something common to all Italians in the lower part of the face, and what resembles one, might with reason be said to resemble another in

this respect. However, my friend and I were delighted with the result of our experiment. It was a novelty then; now it is a common thing. We decided to say nothing about it until we had made other trials, unless we found it necessary for the development of the case I was engaged upon. I provided myself with a copy of the photograph we had taken, and determined to subject every Italian I met to a rigid inspection. On the whole, the matter was progressing favorably, and although the difficulties in my way were formidable, I could not help feeling encouraged by the events of the day, and I resumed my task with new vigor.

“I at once busied myself with searching for my man among all the Italians that I met. I frequented the places mostly patronized by them—the boulevards, the cafes, the theatre and the opera. Every Italian I met, even down to the organ-grinders, I subjected to a rigid scrutiny, and once or twice came near getting into quarrels with persons who resented my conduct as impertinence. At least, two months passed away in this fruitless search, and, in spite of the advantages which I possessed, I began to despair.

“At last, the government having occasion to send me to Switzerland on a secret mission, I found myself in one of the small towns of that country. Having transacted my business, I set out on my return. In the compartment in which I was placed, were four persons. One was an old lady, another, a young one, the third, a priest, and the fourth, a man whose features I could not see, as his hat was drawn down over them. I knew at once, from the man’s manner, that he was trying to avoid being recognized, and I determined to watch him.

“After we had gotten fairly under weigh, and had left the town some twenty miles behind us, the man raised his hat, and I could hardly repress a scream of delight. There sat the very counterpart of the picture I had in my pocket. I was confident of it from the first, but I knew that it would never do to alarm him at first, and I did not wish to arrest him until I was sure of fastening the charge upon him. Every feature coincided exactly with those of the photograph. Although I felt certain of this, I quietly took out the picture, and compared it with the face before me. The examination satisfied me.

“It was necessary to proceed cautiously. As soon as I had entirely recovered my self-control, I caught the fellow’s eye.

“‘Monsieur is Swiss?’ I said, inquiringly.

“‘No,’ he replied, with an unmistakably Italian accent, ‘not Swiss.’

“‘Italian?’ I said.

“‘Yes.’

“‘Monsieur is going to Paris?’

“‘Yes. Are you?’

“‘No. I shall leave the cars at Dijon. Has monsieur ever visited Paris?’

“‘Yes, frequently. I was there several months ago.’

“‘Ah, then you heard of the terrible murders that took place in the city during your visit?’

“The man started slightly, and looked at me searchingly. I could scarcely repress a smile, but I kept my countenance motionless.

“‘What murders?’ he asked, hurriedly.

“I narrated the incidents of the three murders with apparent carelessness, but all the while watched him calmly. He was nervous, and, as you Americans say, ‘fidgetty.’ Everything thus far confirmed my suspicions. I was confident that I had my man, but I determined to try him a little further. Since the last murder, I had carried with me, together with the photograph, the handkerchief that I had found near the body of the third victim, and which I supposed had belonged to the assassin. Now I drew it out quietly, and, while pretending to use it, displayed it in such a way that the man could not help noticing it. As his eyes rested upon it, his face grew perfectly livid. He glanced at me with a look of terror, but then by a powerful effort regained his self-control, and turned to look out of the window. In a few minutes he turned to me again.

“‘Monsieur,’ said he, ‘that is a singular handkerchief you have. Will you let me see it?’

“I handed it to him and he gazed at it searchingly. I saw his lips close rigidly. After a searching examination, he handed it back to me.

“‘There is a singular history connected with that handkerchief,’ said I. ‘The last of the victims of whom I have told you was a distant connection of mine, and I was the first one to discover the murder. I saw this handkerchief lying on the floor near the body. It was folded into a three-cornered shape, and had the appearance of having been knotted. I supposed it had been used in the assassination; but as it was not injured, and as I took a fancy to it, I took possession of it before the officials came. Do you know I have always had an impression that the murderer was, begging your pardon, an Italian?’

“‘An Italian?’ cried the man, suddenly, showing signs of great excitement. ‘Why do you think so?’

“‘From the manner in which the throat was cut. I have heard that your countrymen are deucedly clever with the knife in matters of this sort. But it’s an ugly, unpleasant subject. Suppose we drop it?’

“‘Willingly,’ said the Italian.

“With that our conversation ceased. During the remainder of the ride, as I sat silent, with my hat drawn over my eyes, feigning sleep, I watched the Italian closely. He never took his eyes off of me, and I noticed that he glared at me with a look that was not indicative of a very warm

friendship. As the train entered the town of Dijon, I quietly prepared my revolver (with which I am always provided when on duty) for use.

“‘By the way,’ said I, taking the photograph from my coat pocket, ‘I forgot to tell you of a new discovery which was made in connection with the last murder of which we have spoken. It has been found that the eye of a dead person retains for a certain time the last impression made upon it. This being made known to us, we determined to try it with the hope of discovering the murderer of my relative. We procured an artist, who made an excellent photograph of the eye of the murdered woman. To our delight, the features of the assassin were revealed distinctly. Here is the picture, if you would like to see it.’

“‘The train stopped at the depot, and the guard appeared at the door as I handed the photograph to the man. He glanced at it for a moment, and then with a yell sprang to his feet, and moved towards the door. I had anticipated him, and as he turned he saw me standing at the door covering him with my revolver.

“‘One more step and I will fire,’ I said. ‘In the name of the law, I arrest you upon three distinct charges of murder.’

“‘In a few minutes I had him handcuffed. I did not get out at Dijon, but kept on to Paris with my prisoner. On the way he confessed everything; and indeed, on searching him, I found a memorandum book with a calendar. Opposite the date of each murder was a black cross, and other dates had a slight mark, with the names of women, and the words ‘without husbands.’ These, he told me, were murders which he meant to have committed. I also found in a private pocket of his coat a large, pointed, sharp double-edged knife in a paper sheath. The picture which I had shown him, had completely cowed him, and had induced him to confess everything to me.

“‘Well, he was tried, convicted and beheaded, and I was complimented by the chief for the way in which I had conducted the case. I really do think it was done handsomely, if you will allow me to say so.’”

I thanked Laromie for his story, and we talked for a long time about criminal affairs in France. He promised, now that I knew his true character, to take me with him in some of his rounds, and show me the wonders and mysteries of Paris. I frequently availed myself of his kind offer, and some of these days, when I have leisure, may be tempted to relate my experience for the benefit of my readers.

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Bradford [VT] *Opinion*, August 21, 1875

Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine, September 1875

The Indiana [PA] *Progress*, October 3, 1878

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