

Vidocq and the Forger

Vidocq was an old man, and his personal qualities always struck me as those which were the most adapted to the office he had so long filled in Paris. But, after sitting with him for some time, I began to estimate the man more truly, and drew a much more accurate measure of his qualifications for it. His gray eye was as quick and as stealthy as a cat's. Did you look away from him for a minute, when your glance again fell upon him, his eyes were taking your mental measure.

No sooner, however, did yours meet them, than they roamed away into a purely indifferent speculation. Scarcely had you become interested in anything your friend was saying, than they were again fixed upon you, scrutinizing your thoughts, and examining your expression.

Of course, he could have no idea that either my companion or myself were pickpockets, and yet I had a very uncomfortable impression that he was thinking so, and meditating on the pleasure which he would have experienced in arresting us. This, naturally enough, could not conduce to make me feel very agreeable towards him.

It was as a student of human nature, however, that I visited him. Consequently, my legs did not run away with me, although it must be confessed that once or twice my mind felt very much inclined to prompt an immediate evasion.

His attire was as singular as his person. In addition to the scratch-wig which I have previously alluded to, and which was, if my memory serves me rightly, colored of a reddish tint, he wore a brown dress-coat, cut in a very large, loose, and baggy style.

Such a coat was it, as I never could have dreamed of a French tailor's perpetrating. It was almost new, but looked as if it had not been brushed for a week. Probably it may not have been from the time he first ordered it. A large buff waistcoat, as loose and almost as large gray trousers, cut with the same disregard to economy of cloth, and heavy, ill-made shoes, completed the remainder of his attire. He was, evidently, in his age, disposed more to consider the ease and comfort of his person than to calculate on the ocular effect which he might produce upon a comparative stranger to him and his style of dress.

As my eyes ran over his frame and its clothing, I could not help ruminating upon the extraordinary ability which this man must have in disguising himself so completely as to remove every vestige of his actual nature from his external appearance, and revolving the countless stories which I had heard of his hairbreadth escapes in the pursuits of his vocation.

One of these he on that evening told us, and it was of such daring character, and so brief, that I cannot help transferring it to these pages.

During the second period in which he had been connected with the French police; the first had been during the earlier portion of the French Revolution; and while he was one of the chiefs in connection with the Central Bureau, information had come to his ears respecting a complex system of forgeries which had been going on for some months in the capital of France, and

which the police had as yet been unable to trace to their actual authors, although several of the utterers of them had been detected, tried, and sentenced to the Bains.

This information appearing to bring them home to an Alsatian, who had been residing in Paris for the last year or more. By a series of skillful maneuvers, which Vidocq detailed to us, he was at last identified as the principal agent in the system of fraud which had been going on. So large was it that it had defrauded the principal banks of more than a quarter of a million francs in the last two or three months.

He necessarily could at once have been arrested and punished, but Vidocq had experienced so much difficulty in tracing the matter to him, and doubted so much whether his arrest would break up the gang, that he felt when the hour arrived, he must make a clean sweep, and capture the whole of them.

For this purpose, the Alsatian was watched carefully. Nothing, however, was discovered. He would ride out at all times of the day, frequent the theatres, amuse himself as a man of pleasure will do, and return to his house at an hour late in the evening, but by no means late enough to give any idea that he had managed to elude the attention of the police officials who had been watching him.

Moreover, Vidocq had taken the opportunity of testing this, by placing a spy on his own system of espionage, and was perfectly certain that no attempt had been made at cheating him through his own men.

Matters were thus, when it was discovered that a locataire in the tenement, of which the Alsatian occupied the first floor, was politically compromised in one of the numerous conspiracies to ensure the restoration of the Bourbons.

He was immediately arrested by Vidocq himself and another officer, who was deputed by the superior to take him to his location—the said location being a prison, although he did not say it was so.

Meanwhile, as no tapage had been made in the affair—I am using his own expression—he warned the porter of the house not to mention the fact, and remained above for the purpose of examining the locality.

At first he said that it struck him the gentleman who had just been arrested might have been compromised in the matter of the forged checks on the leading banking houses of Paris, but a glance at the very apparent penury of the furniture of his apartments at once dispelled the idea. Convinced, however, that the forgeries were committed in the house, he determined upon his mode of proceeding, and with a piece of twine accurately measured every portion of the apartments in which he then was. There were three, and exactly over those occupied by the Alsatian.

After waiting until he had seen him quit his apartments, he descended, and stopping at the lodge, bade the porter admit him to the chamber of this gentleman.

“I have no key,” said the domestic.

“How is that?”

“Monsieur said that I had allowed others to enter his chamber, and complained that something had been stolen from them. In consequence of this, he had another lock placed upon the door. I mentioned it to the proprietor, who said that he had no objection.”

“Ah, indeed!” replied Vidocq. “Then you had better follow me.”

He consequently ascended the stairs, examined the lock, and producing a bunch of keys, found one that fitted it. The door opened, and he went in. There was no defect in the measurement of the rooms. They corresponded exactly with those which were over them. A closet in the bedchamber was locked. This also he opened. It was vacant, but his eye at once discovered a trapdoor in the floor.

“Where does that lead to?”

“It is new, Monsieur.”

“I see it is,” said Vidocq, closing the door. “Who have the apartments beneath these?”

“I assure, Monsieur,” was the trembling reply of the porter, “that I really know nothing about the—”

“Answer me,” was the response of Vidocq.

“An old lady with her two daughters, Monsieur. I can testify to you that they are very quiet and respecta—”

Vidocq again cut him short.

“What is their occupation?” was his question.

“Nothing, Monsieur.”

“How do they live, then?”

“Upon their rents, Monsieur.”

“O, very good. In that case, I will return in less than half an hour, and arrest them. You will, in the meantime, accompany me to the Bureau of Police.”

As he said it, it was done, and Vidocq had the satisfaction of discovering two men in the inner apartment, under the bedroom occupied by the Alsatian. It was also fitted up with a truckle-bed,

and a small, but complete printing press, and contained the whole of the plates necessary for the manufacture of forged checks upon some of the principal banking houses in Paris.

The man and the three women were of course arrested, but Vidocq did not remove them, as he wished to give their principal no possibility of obtaining a hint which might lead to the chance of his escape. He then once more ascended to the apartments of the Alsatian, and concealed himself in the inner chamber. It was now late in the evening, but the forger did not return until it was eleven. He washed his hands, and changed his coat for a rough kind of jacket.

While he did so, Vidocq had the opportunity of observing him. He was built with enormous muscular strength, and Vidocq began to imagine that he might have miscalculated his own capacity of dealing with him. However, assistance was near, and he made up his mind how to act. As the Alsatian went to and unlocked the cabinet, he bent down over the trap. At this instant, the Chief of Police—I forget whether at that time he was Chief or not—sprang upon him, and gave the signal for those below to mount the stairs.

The struggle was short and fierce. Taken at a disadvantage as he was, the muscles of the Alsatian enabled him to get the better of his opponent, whom he threw upon the floor of the chamber, just as Vidocq heard his companions rush up the stairs. Unluckily, the forger had bolted the door as he entered the room. They were obliged to break it open.

This had made the chance of Vidocq for life an amazingly narrow one. His friend from Alsace had plucked out a pistol from the bosom of his waistcoat, and cocked it. While he was doing so, Vidocq had managed to release one of his arms. But for this he would have been a dead man. The Alsatian, of course, went to the Bains, and had the pleasure of passing the remainder of his life in the occupation of les travaux forcees. [*Home Journal*].

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