

Vidocq;
Or, the Charcoal Burners of France

A THRILLING SKETCH

Not many miles from the city of Rouen, in France, is located a wild and somewhat extensive forest. The wood is chiefly inhabited by charcoal burners; and many are the dark legends in which they figure. Of course, the tales are mostly exaggerated, and in some cases have no foundation at all. — During the year 183--, however, several travelers, whose way lay through this forest, mysteriously disappeared. The whole place was scoured, and the inhabitants rigorously examined, but no clue was obtained: and they were dismissed. For several months after this, no more travelers were missed, and finally the public excitement was allayed. It was at this time that the incident related in this sketch occurred.

It was a fine day in early autumn, and the woods presented a beautiful appearance. The birds were gaily singing, and the rays of an afternoon sun not too warm, were gilding the tree tops. In the very heart of the forest, surrounded by heaps of smoking earth, stood one of these burners. He was a splendid specimen of a man, as far as physical proportions went; fully six feet in height, and stout in proportion. His broad shoulders might have contained the strength of a Hercules. His head was large and covered with a shaggy mass of hair, and his features were decidedly repulsive. His eyes were small and nearly covered with bushy eyebrows. He had altogether a cruel and malevolent appearance.

As we introduce him to the reader he was leaning upon a large axe, apparently in a listening position. The road ran by a place where he was standing but he could not see far along it, on account of a sudden turn a little distance from him. The clatter of a horse's hoofs, however, could be plainly heard, and in a few minutes horse and rider came into sight. The newcomer was a small and active looking man, and from his dress, was a gentleman well off. His eyes were unusually keen and searching and were bent upon the charcoal burner in such a manner that the latter completely quailed before him.

“A fair day, my good man,” said the horseman, in the easy manner of one speaking to his inferior.

“Excellent, Monsieur, for one of my trade; I love not the boiling sun of summer, nor the bleak winds of winter.”

“Since you are so finely suited, I suppose you must be what so few are in this world — happy.”

“You say truly, Monsieur — few, few, indeed, are happy. There is no happiness without contentment.”

“And are you content?”

“At times I think I am; but when I see the nobleman riding in his coach and four, rolling in riches, with servants to obey his every wish, and I have to toil hard for my daily bread, I cannot help thinking that God is sometimes unjust.”

“And do you never think of appropriating any of the superfluous riches?”

“What does Monsieur mean? I trust no thought of disobeying the laws of God or man alike, ever entered into my mind.”

“I meant nothing; it was merely an idle question; but I did not stop to talk thus, but to ask the way to P—. It is getting late, and I must be getting on the move.”

“If Monsieur is in a hurry, I can direct him to P—, in about half the time.”

“I shall be much obliged to you, my friend.”

“This lane begins very near my home; which is about a mile and a half further on. — You had better stop there, as my wife can point it out to you.”

“I will do so. Here is a reward,” exclaimed the horseman, offering him a piece of gold. The other drew back and refused to take it, alleging that he had done nothing to deserve it. The horseman then put spurs in to his horse and rode away, a bend in the road soon hiding him from sight. — Having rode on until he imagined that the sound of his horse’s hoofs could not be heard by the coal burner, should the latter be listening, he dismounted and silently retraced his steps. He arrived at the place where he had left his friend, the charcoal burner, but the latter was not to be seen. The stranger hastened back to his horse and remounted.

“It is as I expected,” he muttered. “This road makes a large bend here, and by cutting across he can reach his hut before me. I care little, though, as I am ‘forearmed.’ We shall see who’ll come out first. I comprehend why he refused my gold piece; he considers it as his own, and thinks he may as well take all together; but I must hurry on, and finish this business before nightfall.” So saying, he put spurs to his horse and rode away. Ten minutes’ sharp riding brought the charcoal burner’s cabin in view. As he first caught sight of it, he thought he detected a man’s face pressed against the window. Of this, however, he could not be certain, as the face, if such it was, instantly disappeared. At the sound of his horse’s hoofs, an old woman appeared in the doorway, and gazing curiously at him, waited till he rode up. The horseman could not help think the woman was a most fitting companion for her husband. The expression of her countenance was even more villainous. The stranger, however, did not stop to criticize her appearance, but courteously saluted her, saying:

“I believe, Madame, that you are the wife of a charcoal burner whom I met up the road.”
The woman replied in the affirmative.

“Then I will tell you that I am bound for P—, which I wish to reach before nightfall. He told me of a lane which was much shorter than the regular road, which he said you could point out to me.”

“Certainly! If that is all Monsieur wishes, he is easily satisfied. You may see, a little way up, that large tree which towers above the rest. Just beyond that large rock, and the lane enters the road on the other side of it. As it is very narrow and nearly grown up with bushes, you would hardly notice it. But with these directions you can hardly fail.”

“Never you fear; I shall not miss the road.”

“Is that all Monsieur wishes?”

“I believe so; but stop a minute. I offered your husband a piece of gold, but he refused to take it. Perhaps you may be more sensible.”

The old woman greedily took the proffered coin, saying:

“Pierre is too sensitive. We might both starve before he would take a cent.”

“I see you differ a little from him,” returned the horseman, laughing. He then put spurs to his horse, and rode on. In a few minutes he reached the rock alluded to and could then perceive the entrance to a narrow lane artfully concealed by bushes. He soon made his way through them, and when once in the lane, found it a little wider than he expected. It also became free of bushes, as he proceeded. He stopped a moment to examine the priming of his pistols, muttering:

“My worthy friends are rather sharp. — They do not do their murdering in the open road where spilled blood might lead to their detection, but inveigle the unfortunate traveler into the dark lane, where he may be safely put out of the way and none be the wiser of it. At any rate, I am fully prepared for them, and they will not put me out of the way without a struggle.”

Having seen that his arms were ready for use, he rode slowly forward, keeping a careful watch on each side of the road, that he might not be surprised. As long as the woods kept open as they were, he had no fear, as there was no good hiding place for a man. Ere long the woods began to grow thicker and more somber. Little hillocks covered with bushes became frequent, until at last they became a long range skirting each side of the road. The horseman felt that the time which was to try him was near at hand, and he dropped the reins until his hand covered a holster pistol, which he firmly grasped, though in such a manner as a person would not notice, and he then assumed an air of carelessness, though his watch was now keener than ever. At length he came to a place which he felt certain contained his enemy. Nature seemed to [have] adapted this place for the purpose of concealment. The rocks which skirted the road at this place were about breast high, and so perpendicular as to have the appearance of a wall; they were covered with a growth of bushes so thick, as to be nearly impervious. The tall trees on each side of the road, twined their tops together, forming a natural roof of leaves and branches, and rendering the place as dark and dismal as night.

It was indeed a scene sufficient to appall the stoutest heart, but the horseman, although he knew that the next moment might be his last, rode forward with as careless an air as he might have worn had he been traveling the streets of a populous city. — His hand still grasped the butt of a pistol, and his keen eye still searched every covert. Suddenly a pistol shot rang out upon the air,

and his hat fell to the ground with a bullet through it, not more than an inch above where his head had been. Instantly turning in the direction of the sound, he beheld a slight wreath of smoke curling up from behind a bush, and without a moment's hesitation, he leveled his pistol and fired. The aim was terribly fatal. A wild shriek rang upon the air and the next moment there sprang from behind the bush, not the coal burner, as he had expected, but his wife. — The blood was flowing copiously from her forehead, and she presented a horrible spectacle. She tottered to the edge of the rock and fell into the road a corpse.

“Had I known it to be a woman,” the horseman muttered, “I never would have fired. But it is too late to moralize. What can have become of my friend the charcoal burner?”

As he spoke, he turned around quickly and encountered the object of his thoughts. It was lucky for him that he was so quick. The charcoal burner held a gleaming knife in his hand, already uplifted to strike. — While the horseman's attention had been engaged by the tragical end of the woman, he had silently crept up behind him. The would-be assassin sprang forward, making a desperate pass at his breast. The horseman still held the discharged pistol in his hand, and with its long barrel managed to parry the blow.

He then buried his spurs deep into the horse's side, and the goaded beast sprang forward so violently as to dash the charcoal burner to the ground, and sprang completely over him, dashing the knife from his hand, leaving him stunned in the middle of the road. The horseman turned instantly, and drawing his remaining pistol from his holster, waited for the other to rise. The latter struggled to his feet, and leaning against the rocks on the side of the road, gazed sullenly and revengefully on his conqueror. Thus the strange couple regarded each other for some time, until at last the horseman broke the silence:

“So, my friend,” he said, “your career is ended at last?”

“Yes! Curse you! I'd rend you asunder too, if — ”

“You dared, I presume,” put in the stranger.

“I doubt not your good intentions, and can only thank Heaven that you have not a power proportionate to your will, but I am doubly thankful that I have been the means of ridding the earth of such a monster. I presume you can give a pretty good account of those mysterious disappearances of late?”

“Aye, that I can! You are the first richly freighted traveler who has entered this lane and escaped the bullet or the knife.”

“Pshaw! Do you take me for one of those simpletons whose purses are better filled than their heads?”

“No!” exclaimed the other with sudden energy. “I know better. From the very first you seemed to have read my intention, and you must have been sent expressly to entrap me. In other words, you are a detective in disguise.”

“You are right,” was the reply.

“Well, you have come out best, but you have played a desperate game, — and conquered, Few would have escaped as you have, for my wife is a good shot. — But you seemed from the first to be fortune’s favorite.”

“I certainly had a narrow escape,” returned the other, pointing to the bullet hole in his hat.

“But it is not the first time that fortune has proved friendly to me.”

“Well, who are you?” at length demanded the other.

“My name is Vidocq!”

“Great heavens! The Parisian detective! I might have known that it would be all up with me when you was pitted against me.”

“Yes; business at the metropolis being rather dull, and having heard some rumors of your doings, I thought I would take a trip out here, if only for the good of my health. But it is growing late, and you must be moving.”

“Where must I go?”

“To the gallows in the end,” was the reply; “but at present to the jail at P—.”

“To the gallows!” returned the other fiercely. “Never! Any death but that!”

The detective leveled a pistol at the charcoal burner’s head, exclaiming:

“You shall have a bullet through your head, if you prefer it!”

The other ducked his head in expectation of the shot, and then made a desperate spring at the detective. The latter, however, was in no hurry to fire, and calmly awaited the other’s attack. The charcoal burner grasped the reins with his left hand, and with his right endeavored to grasp the pistol. The detective, however, caught his right hand with his own left, and holding it up in an iron grasp, passed his right hand under, until his pistol pressed against the other’s forehead, when he fired. The other instantly relaxed his hold, and with a terrible cry, fell back a corpse.

The detective having accomplished the object of his visit, did not delay his return to Paris, but having explained the whole affair to the proper authorities at P—, he departed.

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