

Vidocq And The Sansons

An Interview with the Chief Executioner of France.

The following curious and apparently authentic details of an interview with the Chief Executioner of France, and one of the greatest thief-catchers, appears in an English magazine, the Cornhill:

“Among my Parisian acquaintances was M. Appert. He was the almoner to the Queen of the French. In the discharge of his duties, he was brought into contact with all the vagabondism and profligacy of Paris; he was familiar with the haunts of rascaldom when out of the hands of justice, and with the most distinguished of the representatives of rascaldom when justice had seized them for its prey. In his company I visited and associated with some of the fiercest ruffians and most daring burglars of the French Capital. Through him I was brought into personal contact with Sanson, the executioner, and Vidocq, the spy. I will record a few reminiscences connected with his name and history. I dined with him on one occasion (it was about the a third of a century ago), when among the invited guests were Vidocq and the two Sansons (father and son—the headman’s office being an inheritance.) Several gentlemen known in the literary world were present. In no other place than Paris could there have been such *service du table*. And the meeting was more remarkable, as it was the first time that Sanson had ever seen the man who had furnished him so much food for the guillotine; and it gave Vidocq the opportunity of making many inquiries as to the deportment of illustrious victims in the moment supreme of violent death.

“Sanson, the father, was a man of huge size—in stature more than six feet—of a placid and serious expression of countenance. He might have passed for a country gentleman, ‘at ease in his possessions.’ I could have pointed out a ‘turtle-loving’ Alderman or two to whom he bore a resemblance. He answered every question with the greatest serenity and gravity. He called the instrument of death ‘*la mecanique*,’ and in my intercourse with him I never heard the word ‘guillotine,’ or ‘knife’ fall from his lips. He was disposed to be taciturn, but less so than his son, who appeared to look upon his father with a considerable degree of reverence, and took no part in the conversation except when especially addressed. The son was a man of ordinary appearance, of common height, and of sallowy look. No one would have noticed him in a crowd. Vidocq was a short man, vivacious, vain and talkative. He seemed to consider the interest he excited as the recognition of a claim which everybody must allow. He liked to be the narrator of his own great deeds, of which he was ostentatiously proud; and on the stage where he played his part—whether tragic or comic—he would always be the principal actor.

“Many of the tales Vidocq related may be found in the memoirs which he afterwards published; but no printed narrative could convey an idea of the hilarity—the enthusiasm—I might say the eloquence with which he spoke of some of his successful feats. ‘Do you remember the great burglary at the Batignoles? That was a scheme of murder and robbery on a grand scale. It was soon after I joined the public service—long before it was known that I had anything to do with the authorities. But I was a party consulted as to all the preparations for breaking into the house, for securing the property, and for disposing any person who should resist. It was determined,

route qui cuote, that the work should be done. The spoil was considerable; and I was named the leader of the expedition. We were all well armed; the arrangements were directed by me, and they were perfect. But I had settled with the police that a certain number of them should be planted in a neighboring house, and that they were to rush forward and capture us all when I fired a pistol from a window that pointed out. *L'effraction fut faite*, and I was as busy as the rest in gathering up the spoils. I made my way to the room from whence it had been agreed the pistol should be fired. The police rushed to the doors at the signal, and the whole gang was captured, I among the number. Not one of them had the slightest idea that I had been a party to their betrayal; but murder had been committed before the arrest took place, and two of the robbers were ordered for execution. I saw them on their way to the Place de Greve, as the cart was conveying them to execution. They recognized me in the crowd. I fancied I saw on their faces the knowledge that I had '*fait leur affaire.*' My depositions were not necessary to their conviction. Tell me, Monsieur Sanson, do you recollect the circumstance? How did they die? Sanson—They died cursing their betrayers.

“Vidocq gave us an account of the manner in which, while in jail, he carried on the courtship with his wife. She was a felon like himself, and inhabited a separate and remote prison. Much correspondence passed between them by the collusion and cooperation of keepers and convicts, who fancied they owed a sort of fealty to so distinguished a member of the profession. Each had been well acquainted with the other while carrying on their schemes of fraud, and each came to the conclusion that it would be wiser and better to be the helpers and the instruments rather than the foes and the victims of the law. When both were released and the nuptials celebrated, it was their amusement to recount to each other their hairbreadth escapes and strange adventures, and to moralize on the sweetness of adversity. Vidocq talked of the heroic character of his fiancée, and of the risks she had run and the dangers she had encountered *dans l'interet de nos amours*. But he pronounced her a most faithful and a most useful wife; and when Vidocq established himself in Paris as a discoverer and restorer of lost and stolen property—a profession he exercised on his own account after his connection with the police had been terminated—his wife became to him a valuable auxiliary. They were both well acquainted with the mysterious hierarchy of crime.

[Following are paragraphs describing in detail the operation of the guillotine.]

Daily State Sentinel [Indianapolis, IN] , July 13, 1865

Essex County Herald [Guildhall, VT], August 11, 1877

The Abbeville [SC] Press and Banner, August 22, 1877

The Centre Reporter [Centre Hall, PA], August 30, 1877