

A French Detective Story

This is how I came to be mixed up with certain detectives of the Rue de Jerusalem, the Scotland Yard of Paris.

A friend of mine, a solicitor, had among his clients a firm of East India brokers, into which had recently been admitted a partner, the son of the senior member of the house. This young man had by no means turned out well. He had not only been extravagant, but utterly reckless in money matters, and had lately capped his previous offenses by absconding to the Continent, and taking with him £10,000 worth of foreign bonds or securities, that were not only the property of the firm, but formed the nest-egg on which the partners relied in case of a rainy day. Like most foreign securities, these bonds were payable to "bearer," and were therefore all the more easy to negotiate or dispose of. For several reasons the firm did not wish to make their loss public. In the first place, doing so would have been a severe, if not a fatal, blow to their credit in the city; and, secondly, the other partners were naturally unwilling to publish the dishonesty of an individual whose father was the head of their establishment. Somehow or other it had been ascertained that the absconded partner had gone to Paris. The affair had been placed in the hands of my friend, who, as I have said, was their solicitor, and his plan was to try and recover the securities on payment of a certain sum. As a matter of course it was expected those persons in whose hands they were pledged would ask as much as possible for these documents; and that, if they knew that legally there was a doubt if they could be looked upon as stolen, their demands would rise in proportion.

To me was entrusted the task of getting back the bonds. It was agreed that I was to start the next day; that I was to pay as little as possible for the recovery; and that I was to keep the whole affair as much as possible in the dark.

Some of the peculiarities of the French detectives and their system struck me very forcibly, even before I landed in Boulogne. On board the same steamer with me there happened to be very few passengers; but among them was an elderly, very gentlemanly-looking Frenchman, who spoke English well, although with a very decided accent. I am what is called a good sailor, and always enjoy a run across the channel, even in the most stormy days. As I was smoking my cigar in the bow of the steamer, and watching an iron-clad in the distance that was toiling up channel, the Frenchman of whom I speak made his way up to me, and begged the favor of a cigar-light, evidently with the intention of there and then commencing a conversation. He was a spare, middle-aged man, well set up, about fifty years of age, with iron-gray hair and mustache, no whiskers or beard, and with the omnipresent red ribbon in his buttonhole. He was well-dressed, had good manners, and all the outward and visible signs of a retired officer of the French army. After talking for some time of indifferent matters, he asked me if I was not Mons. So-and-so, mentioning my right name. Thinking he was some individual I had met in Paris or elsewhere on the Continent I replied in the affirmative.

"Ah," said he, "I never forget a face or name. Let me introduce myself as Monsieur X, of the Police Correctionnelle Secret de Paris. I have been engaged in a petite affair in London. Your police wanted some one who could identify a certain individual, and I was sent for that purpose. I happened to be in the bureau at Scotland Yard when monsieur came there last Wednesday, and

one of the Inspectors pointed you out as a gentleman about to proceed to Paris to recover some securities which had been stolen. If I can be of any use to monsieur over yonder in the Rue de Jerusalem, I shall only be too happy.”

I thanked my new acquaintance very much, and told him that though I had a letter of introduction from the French Embassy to the Chief de Police Correctionnelle in Paris, I should be very glad indeed to avail myself of his services. We then had a little refreshment together, and agreed to travel in company with each other to Paris.

In the train, as well as in the steamer, my friend talked a good deal about our English police system, and more particularly about our English detectives. The latter he declared to be “des excellent gens,” and “des brave homes,” but was not a little astonished at their way of doing work, which, as he said, would never suit Paris or France. “Your secret police,” he said, “are no more secret than your police in uniform. Everybody knows them, and they even dress so exactly alike that they might as well wear the blue tunic with the number on the collar. This is not the first or second time I have been in London, and it has always struck me that your rascals and vagabonds know far more what your detectives are doing than the detectives know about the rascals.

“We,” he continued, “divide our police into two great divisions—la police politique and la police correctionnelle. Of the former you have none at all. So much the better for you. The police correctionnelle we subdivide into two categories, those who wear uniform and those who don’t. The former are for keeping order in the streets, at the doors of public buildings, and other places where there are crowds; also they have to deal with ordinary thieves, house-breakers and rogues of the lower orders. For instance, if I happened to be passing through the streets of Paris and saw a fight, a tumult or other disturbance, I would not dream of interfering. It would be the business of the sergents-de-ville to do so. This part of the London police duty is admirably performed. Your policemen do their work in the streets, and whenever there is a crowd or crush, with a good temper and forbearance that is beyond all praise. But it must be admitted that this is very much owing to the English people themselves. With the exception of the lowest of the low, the English are a people who love order, and if a policeman is doing his duty, nine Englishmen out of ten would step forward and assist him if he were in difficulty or were outnumbered by what you call the roughs.”

“But,” said I, “do you not approve of our secret police, or detectives?”

“No,” said the Frenchman, “I do not. I may be wrong, but they don’t appear to me to know the very commencement of their work. For instance, as your London detective goes along the street the policemen on duty speak to him, or give him a nod of recognition, or, if he is a superior, salute him. You saw me a little while ago at Boulogne”—we were then in the train on our way to Paris—“pass a number of sergents-de-ville when we disembarked. Did any one of them make me a sign of recognition?”

“No,” said I, “they certainly did not. I was close behind you, and observed that not one of them appeared ever to have seen you before.”

“Bon,” said the Frenchman; “and yet they all knew me as well as I know my superiors in Paris. But, in fact, even you, monsieur,” he said, addressing me, “have only my word for it that I have anything whatever to do with the police. And if you were to take off my clothes, search all the pockets, and cut out all the lining, you would not find one scrap of paper which would show you that I have anything to do with Rue de Jerusalem.”

“But,” said I, “after a time people must get to know your appearance, and must mark you down as Mons. So-and-so of the police force, in the same way that the banker, merchant or other private individual would be noted down by his neighbors.”

“Ah, mon cher monsieur,” he replied, “how little you English know of the working of our secret police, of what you call detectives! If my appearance and my vocation were known, even to my landlord and my concierge, I would be of no more use to the secret police of Paris than a pair of boots without soles would be to an infantry soldier.

“You don’t suppose that I always go about in the same costume! It is true that I leave my house every morning in the same dress; and if you were to ask my concierge, or any of my neighbors, who and what I am, you would be told that my name was so-and-so—*que je suis decore, et que je suis dans les affaires*—which is equivalent to what you English call ‘something in the city.’”

“Do you ever, if I may ask the question, use disguises or dresses so as to make yourself pass for something else than what you really are?”

“Mais, comment!” replied the policeman, “that is one of our special duties. A member of the special police who could not pass himself off for what he is not would not be worth twenty francs in the way of salary. I have at different times disguised myself as a priest, as a dragoon, as an infantry officer, as a carpenter, as a printer, as a cocher de fincre. I have waited at a table in a restaurant as a garcon of the establishment; I have wheeled a truck with luggage on it from the Chemin de Fer du Nord to the Grand Hotel; I have smuggled cigars, passed myself off as a commissaire, and assisted in taking tickets at a railway station. In fact there are few situations and fewer trades to which I have not for a time belonged, and to which I hope I have done a certain amount of honor.”

“But,” said I, “surely in a large city like Paris there must be somebody, and I should say not a few people, who knew you, and cannot be deceived by your different costumes.”

“Look here,” replied my companion, “this is Thursday; we shall arrive in Paris about seven o’clock this morning. If monsieur will make me a bet of a dinner for four persons at any restaurant the loser pleases, I will wager that before Sunday night I will speak on three different occasions to monsieur, that he will not on either occasion recognize who I am until I disclose myself, and that each time I will speak to him for at least five minutes.”

Thinking it impossible that any one person could by change of dress, or what not, deceive me as to his identity three times in four days, I at once agreed to make the bet. In due time we arrived at the station of the Chemin de Fer du Nord; I betaking myself to my hotel and my companion to his own home.

After breakfast I set off to present my credentials at the Rue de Jerusalem; which, as most people know, is the headquarters of the Paris police. Upon sending up my letter and card, I was shown to the room of the "Sous-Chef de Police Correctionnelle;" which, as I have mentioned before, is a totally distinct department from that of the political police. The gentleman into whose presence I was shown had very little the appearance which in England we perceive in our Police Inspectors. He was a well-dressed, clean-shaven man of about fifty years of age, and looked more like the manager or head of a banking establishment than as if he had anything to do with the detective police. He was seated at a large writing-table, upon which were a multitude of letters and other papers, duly docketed. Within reach he had three or four handles of electric-bells, and half a dozen elastic speaking-tubes, by which he could communicate in an instant with any part of the building. On one side of the room was a large glass door, beyond which I could perceive quite plainly some three or four sergents-de-ville were sitting, so that they could see all that passed in their Chief's room, and be ready to come in at a moment's notice, although they could not hear what was said.

The Sous-Chef received me not only well, but courteously. He heard my story and, without expressing an opinion as to whether I could carry out the views of my employers, and recover the bonds, said he thought he knew the man who would suit me. He then touched one of the bell-handles, and immediately spoke through one of the tubes to some person or persons in another part of the house. Having received a reply to his queries, he told me that the man he wanted would be with us in a minute, and then began talking on indifferent subjects. In a very short time some one knocked at the door, and, upon being told to come in, there entered quite a young man, almost as well dressed as his superior, and who, if I had been asked the question, I should have put down as one of the ordinary flaneurs on the boulevards. The Sous-Chef introduced me to him, saying he was an individual well up in all the rascality of commercial Paris; and that if I would go with him and tell him my whole story he could, no doubt, help me, and, if it were possible to do, would recover the bonds. He then took me by the hand, wished me "bonne chance," said he would be glad to see me again, and hoped that I would be able to give a good account of the Paris police on my return to London. I then went forth with my new guide, thinking how utterly unlike both he and his Chief were to anything I had seen in the way of police detectives in London.

I asked the individual under whose care I had been put to come with me to breakfast at a certain restaurant in Place du Havre, where I usually eat my midday meal when staying in the pleasantest of European capitals. My companion promptly accepted the proffered civility, and, as we jogged thither in a fiacre, I explained to him the nature of my business in Paris, and how anxious I was to recover the lost bonds for my friends without letting the public know that the latter had been robbed.

The detective said that he did not think there would be any difficulty in the matter. After coffee, cigars and chasse, we separated, my comrade walking with me as far as the Grand Hotel, where he took leave, promising to see me about 5 o'clock on the afternoon of the next day at the hotel where I was lodging, the Bedford, in the Rue de l'Arcade. During our walk between the Place du Havre and the Grand Hotel I was anxious to see whether my companion was recognized by several sergents-de-ville that we met on the road; nothing of the kind took place. No one,

whether of the police or not, appeared to have the slightest idea that this individual was anything more than one of the well-dressed loiterers who may be counted by the thousands in Paris. He was well-dressed, but not in any way dandified; and from the crown of his hat to the sole of his boot there was nothing whatever about him that spoke of his profession. If I had been asked to guess who he was, I should have said he was a clerk in some merchant's office or bank, and that, although not wealthy, he was a tolerably prosperous and well-to-do man. His manners were good and free, without being presuming; he spoke to me as being quite my equal, and yet with nothing but what was savored with true French politeness. He never in any way so much as hinted at money or money's being worth being needed to carry out his work, and when I spoke to him of the expenses he would incur in making this inquiry, and of my willingness to place some in his hands for that purpose, his answer was: "Those are matters which you will arrange by-and-by with the Chief. I am only acting under his orders."

After leaving the detective officer whose services were thus placed at my disposal, I walked back to the boulevards to the Madeleine, on my way to the Rue de l'Arcade. Happening to pass a linen-draper's shop, and noticing some socks which took my fancy, I went in to look at them. Not being certain about the size and whether or not they would fit me, the woman of the shop very civilly offered to send round some pairs of different sizes from which I could select. I gave her my address at the hotel, which was but a short distance off, and had hardly arrived at the Bedford before one of the waiters tapped at my door and announced that a man had brought me some socks to look at from a shop on the boulevard.

I desired that the man should be shown up. He brought his parcel in with him and stood facing me as he undid it, talking about the weather, of the few strangers that were in Paris and the usual gossip of a would-be civil Paris shopman. I did not look at him very fixedly, but noticed that he was a man of about thirty years of age, with a full black beard and mustache, black and somewhat long hair and respectably, although not fashionably, dressed. He showed me several pairs of socks, which I measured with some of my own from my portmanteau. I selected a dozen pairs, but demurred at the price he asked me, which was more than double what I should have to pay in the most fashionable west-end shop in London. We argued the point amicably together, and, when I produced a 100-franc note wherewith to pay him he said he had no change, but would go down to the bureau of the hotel and ask for what he needed. I state these particulars to show that the man was some time in my room, and that we had a considerable amount of conversation together. As he was turning to go out of the door, he at once pulled off his wig, his beard and his whiskers, and stood revealed to me as my traveling companion from Dover to Paris. He grinned with delight, having scored one of the three points he had to make to win his bet. For my own part I was so astonished I could hardly speak. The disguise had been perfect, and the manner in which he had followed me from the shop—into which a short half hour before I had no idea of entering—was so astonishing that I told him at the time he deserved to win the game from what he had already done. But this would not satisfy him. A Frenchman, no matter what his occupation may be, invariably takes pride in his work; and this detective was as proud of having outwitted me as a General would be of having gained a great victory. He resumed his wig and beard so as not to excite surprise in the people of the hotel, and going with him to the bureau I procured change for my note and paid him for the socks. The latter, it appeared, belonged *bona fide* to the shop where I had been. But how Monsieur X. had got possession of

them, or why the woman of the shop had allowed him to bring them to my hotel, are mysteries I have never yet been able to solve.

The next morning, while I was still discussing an early breakfast, a visiting card, on which was inscribed the name "Achille Dubras," was handed to me, with the intimation that a gentleman of that name wished to see me. Anxious as I was to obtain news of the lost property, and thinking that "Achille Dubras" might be the name I had not caught when introduced to the detective at the Rue de Jerusalem, I was a little disappointed when my visitor was ushered into the room. He was an elderly man, with short-cut, crisp hair, white, drooping mustache and a very pale face, and began a long, rambling statement about being commis or clerk in a certain financial firm, to which firm, upon a day he named, some foreign bonds, payable "to bearer," and worth 250,000 francs (£10,000), had been pledged as security for a loan of one-twenty-fifth their value. The principal facts of the man's statement were easy enough to understand, but what between his rambling voice and his evident desire to conceal certain details I could not exactly make out his story, and ended by asking him whether he would accompany me to Rue de Jerusalem and state there what he had told me.

"*Avec le plus grand plaisir,*" replied he, in a familiar and altogether changed voice, and then, pulling off his wig and adjusting his moustache, sat revealed once more my traveling companion, Monsieur X! I had certainly been taken in, if possible more completely than the first time, and I again offered to pay by bet as fairly lost. This, however, my friend would not hear of, and said he must either win a third time or pay for the dinner he had lost. In the meantime he must tell me that he had really been sent by the Chef-de-Bureau in the Rue Jerusalem to announce to me that a part, if not the whole, of the bonds had been discovered, and that they were in the hands of a very disreputable firm in Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth. "And now, mon ami," said the Frenchman, "all you have to do is to remain quiet for the present, and not to move in the affair. In two or three days we hope to carry through your wishes. And as to our little bet, gar' a vous monsieur!" With this he gave my hand a shake and disappeared, chuckling to himself behind the thick white moustache before going down the stairs.

During the next two days, which I nothing loath, employed in looking up my friends, visiting the theater, and otherwise killing time, I regarded with suspicion every Frenchman who approached me, thinking to discover, in every strange face, the bright, twinkling eyes and triumphant smile of my clever enemy. On the evening of the second day I went to see a friend off from the Mazas Station, and, strange to say, that, although I had only at the eleventh hour made up my mind to accompany him, it was here I lost my third and last point in my bet with Monsieur X. As our fiacre drove up, one of the regular-ticketed porters came forward to take my companion's trunk. In lifting it from the roof of the carriage he let it fall. Upon this I spoke to him somewhat angrily. Frenchman-like, he returned my abuse, and, for at least five minutes, we stood face to face, slanging each other in the choicest of French language. My friend, who was an Englishman, stood by, anxious to put in a word to help me, but not knowing exactly how to do so. All of a sudden the porter put down the trunk, and asked me to speak to him in the street. Taking me under the gaslight, and looking cautiously around, he pulled off his cap and a curious sort of skin-mask which covered the forehead, nose and upper part of the face, fitting closely like a glove, and there stood Monsieur X.

I at once declared that I had fairly lost the bet and invited him and any other two friends he liked to bring to dine with me the next day at my favorite restaurant in the Place du Havre. We then returned to the most central part of Paris, my companion having in the meantime changed his clothes at the house of a friend in the neighborhood.

The history of the finding of the bonds is soon told. In three or four days after my arrival in Paris the police had the whole affair at their finger's end. It was just as they suspected. The securities had been pledged to a very low money-lending firm for something under five hundred pounds, they being worth twenty times that amount. A little—or I should say not a little—pressure were put upon these Shylocks, who, for a premium of two thousand francs (£80) were made to disgorge what may truly be called their plunder. They manage these things, if not better, at any rate more promptly in France than in England. The Paris police gave the holders of the bonds the chance of restoring the bonds to me, or of appearing before the judge d'instruction. Both individually and collectively, this firm could not be said to have had a clean bill of health. It was not the first, nor yet the second, nor third time, that they had been mixed up with money affairs, which to say the least of it, were excessively shady. They consented at once to give up what they were told was stolen property. The result was that within ten days of my leaving London, I returned there, having fulfilled my mission my expenses, being all paid and a check for a hundred guineas handed to me as a remuneration for my trouble.—*Cornhill Magazine*.

Decatur [IL] Daily Review, March 24, 1879

The Redwood Gazette [Redwood Falls, MN], March 27, 1879

The Weekly Oskaloosa [IA] Herald, April 3, 1879

Reprinted as "A Skilled Detective's Way" in *The Bennington [VT] Banner*, July 3, 1879

Published earlier in England in

All the Year Round, November 24, 1877

Leeds Times, November 24, 1877

Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, November 28, 1877

Preston Herald, December 1, 1877

Exeter Flying Post, January 2, 1878