

## *The Wronged Wife*

This story, to which I have given the above title, is among the most singular instances of mistaken circumstantial evidence during later years, and is still remembered in France, where it occurred as the Despenard affair.

Monsieur Despenard was a retired speculator on the Bourse. He was reputed to be very wealthy, and occupied a charming suburban villa on the banks of the Seine. His family consisted of himself, his wife and two children, a boy and a girl, aged respectively five and seven years.

One night about nine o'clock, in the summer of 1864, the servants were startled by the report of a pistol, accompanied by a sound of breaking glass ringing through the house. After a few moments of hesitation, lest it should be burglars, they rushed in a body to the library, from which the sound had seemed to proceed, and found their master fallen face downward upon the floor, with the blood pouring profusely from a wound in the temple.

A hasty and horrified examination showed that he was dead, the bullet having penetrated his brain, while the shattered glass of one of the large windows also proved that the assassin, whoever it might have been, had stood on the veranda outside and taken aim at the victim through the window.

Fully ten minutes must have elapsed before the slow wits of the servants arrived at this conclusion, and they began to wonder that Madame Despenard had not also been aroused by the noise. Could it be possible, they asked themselves, that she also had fallen a victim? And with this fear in their minds, they proceeded to her boudoir and knocked on the door.

No answer being returned, they opened the door, which was unlocked, and entered the room, only to find it empty; and they were looking at each other still more surprised than before, when one of them, more self-possessed than the rest, suggested that the police be sent for.

Word, accordingly, was sent to the nearest, and within half an hour four gen-d'armes, accompanied by two detectives in plain clothes, arrived upon the scene.

Still Madame Despenard had not appeared, and vague suspicions of her were gathering in the officers' minds, when the street door opened, and the lady appeared.

Her face had a terrified look, while the lace shawl she wore about her shoulders was torn almost in two, and upon the particulars of the tragedy that had taken place during her absence, she fainted away.

Carried to her bedchamber, and restoratives applied, she only recovered consciousness to pass from one hysterical fit to another, until the physician who had been summoned began to fear she would have an attack of brain-fever.

Meanwhile, the officers had charge of the house, and the detectives, pursuing their investigations, found link after link of a chain of evidence to encompass the perpetrator of the crime.

Long before daylight the detectives had left the house, and returning to the station, had their report before the chief, who at once granted a warrant to arrest Madame Despenard for the murder of her husband.

The lady had by this time become calmer, and she received the news in a silence which might have been the sullen submission of conscious guilt or the apathy of utter despair.

The course of French justice is proverbially dark and secret, and, though the public was excited to the highest pitch, no inkling to appease their curiosity was revealed until the whole evidence was cut and dried ready for her public trial.

Then the case was presented against her, overwhelming in its evidence of guilt and perfect even to the minutest detail.

From the preliminary evidence of the servants, it was proved that on the preceding day, Monsieur Despenard and his wife had had a violent quarrel. The lady's own maid especially testified to its bitterness, and that she overheard the prisoner accuse her husband of deceiving her by a false marriage, and that he had another wife still living. This the murdered man had denied, though not very vehemently, saying that she was dead.

This testimony supplied the required cause for the quarrel, while the circumstantial evidence that pointed to her as the assassin could hardly be more convincing.

First, there was her unexplained absence from the house at the time the murder was done, and her strange agitation upon returning. Her own story, that having a headache, she wandered along the banks of the river, where she had been attacked by an evidently insane woman, who tore her shawl and disarranged her dress, was at once set down as a weak invention. Besides, the hesitating air with which it was told still further went to confirm the conviction of prevarication.

The weapon with which the deed was done was found lying in the garden but a few yards away from the spot where the deadly shot had been fired. It was a small, elegantly mounted pocket revolver, which every member of the household identified as having been given the prisoner by her husband a few months before.

Caught in the catch of the shutter outside the window was found a shred of a lace shawl, which exactly matched the pattern and fitted the rent in the one Madame Despenard had worn when she returned to the house.

In the soft mould of the garden were footprints, undoubtedly those of the prisoner. She had an elegant but peculiarly-shaped foot, and there could be no mistake on this point. Moreover, the identical shoes were found thrown down a well in the garden, while the fact that the boots she

had worn on her return to the house were but partly buttoned, had not escaped the vigilant eyes of the detectives.

Her manner, too, during the trial, impressed the spectators with a feeling that she was guilty, and when a verdict to that effect was brought in she had but few sympathizers among the audience.

A sentence of life imprisonment was pronounced, and she was carried from the court insensible, and regaining consciousness, it was only to pass into the delirium of brain fever.

She still lay in the hospital ward when the case, which had begun to fade in the public mind, was recalled prominently to their remembrance.

One day a lady called upon the executors of the murdered man, and claimed a share of his property, alleging that she was his wife, legally wedded to him nearly fifteen years before.

Though there could be little doubt of the validity of her claim, the executors, who were personal friends of the murdered man, considered it their duty to contest it, and the alleged widow at once instituted a suit against the estate.

The claimant, who, though evidently on the shady side of thirty-five, was still a remarkably handsome woman, had almost universally the public sympathy, and the verdict that awarded her claim was received by a burst of applause throughout the court-room.

Graciously acknowledging it with a bow and a triumphant smile upon her face, the woman was about to leave the room, when a man dressed in black, with a scrap of red ribbon in his buttonhole, advanced and laid his hand upon her arm.

“Not so fast, madam, if you please,” he said. “The case is far from being ended yet.”

The look of triumph faded from the woman’s face, leaving it deadly pallid as she turned and faced him.

“Who are you, and what do you mean by this outrage?” she gasped.

“My name,” the man answered, calmly, “is Jules Chasson, of the Seventh Division of the Detective Police, and I arrest you for the murder of Henri Despenard, once your husband.”

The audience were struck speechless by his words, even the court sharing the general surprise.

“This is certainly a remarkable proceeding, M. Chasson,” the judge said, at length, “and one, I must say, that requires further explanation.”

“Which you shall have, my lord,” the detective answered with a respectful bow. “In the first place, then, this woman was really married to M. Despenard, fifteen years ago, in a small village in the south of Normandy. After a few months, however, she eloped with another man, and for more than seven years following, M. Despenard heard nothing from her, which in the eyes of the

law annulled his marriage. Therefore, when he again married it was perfectly legal, and the lady now unjustly under sentence for his murder was lawfully his wife. I say unjustly accused my lord, for the real murderess is the woman who now claims her widow's dowry."

The detective paused a moment, and all eyes turned on the woman by his side, and were startled by the change in her countenance. It was pallid to the very lips, which were slightly parted, as if to utter words which her voice refused to speak, and her eyes stared into vacancy and a look as if she once more saw her victim, arisen from his grave and standing before her.

"About a year after his second marriage," the detective went on, "the first wife returned, and commenced a regular system of blackmail upon Monsieur Despenard, which, for his wife's sake, he submitted to until a week before his death. Then, when he refused to submit any longer to the extortion, a scheme of almost fiendish subtlety entered her mind. Through the connivance of Madame Despenard's maid, she gained admittance to the house when the lady and her husband were absent, and possessed herself of the revolver and shoes which were afterwards found in the well. The lady's story of being attacked by a woman was true, and the shred of lace was torn from the shawl for the purpose of affixing it to the shutter. This, however, was after the time when, ascending the veranda, the murderess, peering through the window, saw her victim seated in a chair reading. His face was half-turned towards her, and, raising the revolver, she took deliberate aim and fired –"

A wild, blood-curdled laugh ringing through the apartment interrupted the detective's narrative, and the breathless audience, once more turning, saw that it proceeded from the arrested woman, whose eyes were rolling wildly, and upon whose lips a foam gathered.

Her crime had been found out by man's ingenuity, but the retribution had come from an avenging God. The sudden shock of discovery, at the very moment she had deemed her success complete, had overthrown her reason, and she was an incurable maniac.

The detective had not spoken without proofs to support his assertions, and the wronged wife, now the object of public sympathy, was at once released from confinement and restored to her children.

Still it was months before she fully recovered from the terrible shock she had experienced, and before then the woman who had so cruelly wronged her had still further paid the penalty of her crime. In one of her paroxysms of maniac fury she had burst a blood-vessel and expired.

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