

## *Who Robbed Madame*

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I had waited but a few minutes when she entered.

The tasteful cap surmounting the brown locks clustering in a pretty confusion of short curls about her forehead proclaimed her no longer young, though the fair blooming face and shapely form were far more suggestive of youth than of old age. Altogether, Madame Leroux was a lady of most attractive appearance.

She approached me with nervous haste, her eyes fixed on mine. "I sent for—you are—" she faltered almost inaudibly, and then paused in a pitiable state of agitation, her tender fingers slowly intertwining themselves, and her whole frame trembling.

"Detective Ashton," I responded, hastily drawing forward a chair.

She sunk into it, and by a silent gesture invited me to be seated. Presently she murmured in a low quivering voice: "Monsieur, I am in great distress. My——" and she again paused, overcome by her emotions.

I waited a minute in expectant silence and then said:

"A case of robbery, I understand, Madame. Permit me to ask whether your servants are entirely honest?" "Entirely," she answered brokenly. "They have served me for twenty years."

"And your pupils?"

"Not a shadow of suspicion may touch them."

"[And the resident teachers?" She gasped once or twice, and then controlling herself with a mighty effort, answered tremulously:

"Pardon my agitation; I am worn with trouble and anxiety," adding presently, in more even tones, "I will tell you about it Monsieur. My school is, as you doubtless know from report, the best and, consequently, the most flourishing in the city. I take much money, and often keep large sums by me. This is my private business room, and in yonder cabinet I store my surplus finds."

"A rather unsafe place," I commented.

"Not at all, Monsieur," she answered, decidedly. "It is furnished with a secret receptacle. Discover it if you can." And rising, she led the way to the cabinet and threw open the desk.

But I exhausted my wits to no purpose. Madame looked on in silence till I drew back and folded my arms. She then quietly asked:

“You would not suspect the fact I have stated?” “If the secret compartment is here, most certainly not.”

“It is here,” she replied, briefly and emphatically, as she closed the desk.

“How many times have you been robbed?”

“Nightly, for the past week,” she answered excitedly. “A large amount was taken the first night, but since then only a few counterfeits which I deposited in the hope of detecting the thief without assistance.”

“Has anyone under your roof a knowledge of the secret of the cabinet?” I inquired, after a little interval of silence. “But one!” she cried, bursting into tears, and wringing her hands in an agony of distress.

I again deliberated a moment, and then said firmly, “Madame I have not a doubt that I can, in time, clear up this matter without assistance, but it is no less certain that perfect candor on your part will greatly aid me.”

It was some minutes before she could compose herself sufficient to answer. When she did it was in heart-broken tones: “You are right, Monsieur. I must tell you. My suspicions point to one who has for years been my all; namely Mademoiselle De Antoinette DeGray, Mademoiselle DeGray has been my *protege* since the death of her parents, which occurred while she was yet an infant. In her I have hitherto reposed the most unlimited confidence; now I am distracted with doubts it is impossible to silence.”

“But, monsieur, I have not sent for you to unravel this web of mystery with any intention of giving publicity to her guilt. Heaven knows I only desire to learn the truth for her own dear sake. I would not wrong the innocent even in thought; the guilty I would unceasingly labor to restore.”

Then with a sudden burst of grief she exclaimed:

“My poor Antoinette! She is so young! so winning! and so beautiful.” “Does Mademoiselle DeGray know of your suspicions?” I inquired, as a deep sob choked her utterance.

“She does. A few hours before I sent for you I told her of my loss, and entreated her to confess and receive my forgiveness.” “With what result?”

“She gazed at me with startled eyes for a moment, and then in proud, almost scornful accents replied that I, above all others, should know whether she was capable of such a deed.” “And is she acquainted with the fact of your having secured my services?”

“Oh, yes, Monsieur. I hoped it would frighten her into a full confession.” “Your servants?”

“They know nothing whatever. For Mademoiselle DeGray’s sake I have kept these startling robberies a profound secret.[”] After a few minutes’ serious consideration, I said:

“Madame, I will watch here nightly until the mystery is solved.” Madame shook her head despondingly.

“It is quite useless, Monsieur. I am no coward, and have already tried that plan, and, strange to say, my cabinet remained intact both times.”

“Perhaps Mademoiselle DeGray suspected your intentions,” I replied. “This time we must guard against the possibility. And now, if you please, I will trouble you for a few more details. About what time do these robberies take place?”

“Always between midnight and daybreak. I seldom retire till twelve o’clock, and on the night of the first theft it was considerably later. I remember distinctly; for, by a singular coincidence, Mademoiselle DeGray and I sat here discussing the possibility of the very event which occurred. The recent Madworth robbery had impressed us both deeply, and as I left the room I bade Mademoiselle lock the door.”

“Did you lock the other?” I asked, indicating one I noticed awhile before.

“It might secrete a burglar, however.” “That is only a store closet.”

“Yes, Monsieur; but it did not. I was in there a very few minutes before we retired.”

“And the key of the door here—did Mademoiselle know where you put it?”

“Certainly, Monsieur.”

“And since that night?”

“Alas! Monsieur, I have hidden my keys in vain.”

After some further conversation I took my leave, promising to return about midnight. I did so. Mademoiselle and the servants had retired, and, as previously arranged, Madame answered my light tap herself. She ushered me into the private room, and soon bade me good night.

After a short absence, she returned with a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of Dutch cake.

“I always take a cup before retiring,” she explained, “and thought you might find one acceptable.” And with a final good night she left me. Feeling both chilled and thirsty, I emptied the cup, almost as a draught. Then wheeling a chair behind the curtains draping a bay window, I extinguished the light and sat down to await the appearance of the unknown thief.

But I saw nothing. Just at daybreak Madame softly entered the room and spoke to me. I rose unsteadily to my feet, and stepped from behind the curtains. She gazed at me in surprise for a moment, and then smiled a little ironically:

“Monsieur slept well, I perceive.”

“Yes, Madame, if well means soundly,” I replied. “The coffee was drugged.”

“Drugged!” she echoed, staggering back a pace or two.

“Yes, Madame. Permit me to ask who made it?”

She covered her face with her hands for an instant, and then dropping them, reeled over to the cabinet. In a minute she was beside me again.

“Who made it?” she repeated, in deep, hollow tones. “Mademoiselle DeGray! And—and Monsieur, *the money is gone!*”

“But,” I answered in some vexation, “Mademoiselle, of all others, should not have known of my presence here.”

“Ah, Monsieur, I was most careful,” returned madame sorrowfully. “’Tis a mystery how she gained her knowledge.” “Well, Madame,” I answered, after a few minutes deliberation, “we will meet Mademoiselle on her own ground. Permit her, if you please, to prepare another cup of coffee tonight. She will, no doubt, count upon its effects.” And that night I received another steaming cup. But it was received only. Consequently I was not found napping. I had watched patiently for two hours or more, when the door softly opened, and a pale, slender, little old woman, wrapped in a crimson dressing-gown, and about whose bare head floated a few scanty gray locks, stole noiselessly into the room. She carried a bunch of keys and a lighted taper in a small bronze candle-stick. Closing the door carefully behind her, she proceeded at once to the cabinet. “Can this weird-looking woman be Mademoiselle DeGray?” I thought, gazing after the singular apparition. “No, it cannot be. Certainly, Mademoiselle is young. This must be some old relative or friend of madame.” Quickly and noiselessly she approached the cabinet, and in a moment it was unlocked and the secret compartment open.

After carefully withdrawing the notes deposited there by Madame a few hours previous, she snapped the spring and reclosed the desk. Then turning quickly away, she went over to the store closet.

I now left my hiding place and cautiously followed. When I reached the door she was in the act of removing the false bottom from a large japanned box in one corner. Dropping it on the floor beside her, she took from the box a roll of notes, and after adding the ones just stolen, returned then bundle to its place again. Then hastily restoring the box to its former order, she rose and turned away.

I stepped back a pace or two with the design of seizing her outside the closet.

In a moment she appeared and confronted me, and for the first time I obtained a fair view of her features. But instead of the horror and dismay which I had been anticipating, I was the one to fall

back aghast. My outstretched arms dropped powerless as, with a swift tread and strong gaze, she swept past me and out of the room.

“And this is the solution!” I muttered, drawing a deep breath of relief as the door closed upon her. “What will Madame say? Will she readily credit the reports I must give?”

Without deciding the question I dropped on the sofa and made myself comfortable for the remainder of the night. As on the previous day, madame sought me early. She looked at me scrutinizingly.

“Ah! Monsieur has had another good night, without the aid of drugs,” she remarked, somewhat tartly.

“Yes, madame, a very good one,” I replied; “but I first earned the right.” “Ah!” ejaculated madame again; but this time very tremulously. “Then you have—you—”

“Yes, madame,” I answered, finding she could not finish the sentence. “And now will you kindly allow me to see Mademoiselle DeGray?”

“No, monsieur, no!” she replied, with hasty emphasis. “My poor Antoinette has sinned, no doubt; but she shall be protected. You shall not see my poor child, monsieur,” she concluded passionately. “Heaven and I will make a good woman of her yet!”

“My dear madame, you quite mistake me,” I answered feelingly. “Mademoiselle is innocent.” I was hardly prepared for the little Frenchwoman’s outburst of joy.

“My Antoinette! My pure darling! My white dove? My wronged angel! Sweet heaven, I thank thee!” she cried, tearfully.

And before I could say any more, she had darted from the room. In a few minutes she returned, leading a tall, elegant, golden-haired girl, whose proud eyes glittered with tears. This fair vision of youthful beauty left madame’s side and came to me. “I thank you, monsieur,” she said, with simple earnest dignity. “I thank you most truly.”

“I have done little or nothing to entitle me to your thanks, mademoiselle,” I smiled in response. “But have you no desire to learn the name of the guilty party?”

“Ah, true!” exclaimed madame. “I forgot all but my infinite joy. Tell us, monsieur.”

“First, madame,” I answered, “permit me to restore your stolen money. You have your keys, I see; will you be kind enough to open the treasure box?”

And hastening to the closet I brought out the japanned box.

Madame knelt down and wonderingly turned the key. I then lifted the lid and removed the false bottom. An astonished exclamation parted Mademoiselle Gray’s lips but madame leaned over

the box like one in a dream, and could not be convinced until the notes were in her hand and counted that it was no dream at all, but a most pleasant reality.

“Yes, Antoinette,” she at last said, rising and casting the notes on the table, “every sou of it is here. And to think of its being in the old box, Antoinette!” “Yes,” smiled mademoiselle, with a puzzled expression, but——”

“But,” interrupted madame, even more vivaciously, “but who put it into the box?” And she fixed her eyes in eager expectancy on mine.”

“The—the apparition,” I faltered, “entered the room between two and three o’clock, and went straight to the cabinet. In a few moments the notes were purloined and deposited where you just now found them.”

“But the secret compartment, monsieur,” interrupted madame, excitedly, “was it opened without difficulty?” “Yes, madame.”

“Strange! most strange!” she ejaculated, in perplexing tones, adding the next instant, “Go on monsieur.”

“That is all, madame.”

“All! But what did you do, monsieur?” she asked, sharply.

“Nothing, madame, but stagger aside and gaze like an imbecile after the retreating form I had extended my hand to seize.”

“Oh!” exclaimed madame, in a low, awed voice. “Was it—you called it an apparition, I recollect, monsieur. What—what did it resemble?”

“It was a woman. A small pallid woman, clad in a trailing crimson robe——“

“A crimson robe!” echoed madame and mademoiselle, both evidently aghast.

“Yes, and with silvery white hair——“

“White hair!” again echoed both, looking at each other with faces of consternation.

Mademoiselle DeGray recovered herself first. “What else, monsieur?” she queried impatiently.

“Nothing else, mademoiselle,” except that this singular apparition carried a bronze candlestick and yonder bunch of keys.” Mademoiselle gazed at me a moment in silence, and then turning, suddenly flung her arms about the madame’s neck, and kissing her on both cheeks exclaimed between tears of laughter:

“Oh! you naughty, naughty thief.” Madame stared from Mademoiselle to the picture of bewildered dismay; then dropping her eyes to the floor she revolved, apparently, some perplexing question. Presently she looked up.

“Tell me, Antoinette,” she murmured doubtfully, “why did you drug monsieur’s coffee?”

“I?” exclaimed mademoiselle, flushing with astonishment. “I did it no more than I stole your money. I knew not that monsieur was here, much less that he took coffee. But perhaps,” she roguishly added the next moment, as she again showered kisses on madame’s roseate cheeks, “but perhaps you can plead guilty.” Again bewildered dismay widened madame’s eyes, and, after a little she faltered:

“Oh, Antoinette, I—I—yes, certainly I did! Monsieur slept well and I slept poorly. Yes, monsieur got my powders! I never thought of it till this minute.”

“What powders?” laughed Mademoiselle DeGray. “The morphine!” exclaimed madame, more composedly. “I felt sleepless and excited, and put it into a cup, intending to pour my coffee over it; but I must have given monsieur the wrong cup.”

Then suddenly snatching up the keys from the table, she thrust them into Mademoiselle DeGray’s hand, exclaiming, tearfully:

“There! keep them, my poor, wronged darling. I have played ‘La Somnambula’ long enough.”

And I, looking at madame’s brown curls, roseate skin, and faultless figure, thought amusedly: “What a miracle of French art!”

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