

The Scarlet Cross

by Austyn W. Granville

All Paris was ringing with the news of a horrible murder.

In theatrical circles, especially, the excitement was intense, when it was known that Mlle. Croizette, the most popular danseuse on the boards of the Varieties, had fallen beneath the knife of a cowardly assassin.

Two hideous and gaping wounds had been inflicted upon the unfortunate woman either of which would have caused her death. But beyond this, all the circumstances connected with the atrocious crime remained shrouded in mystery—the motive as well as the chief actor in the terrible tragedy. There was positively no clew of any kind. The weapon even, with which the murder had been committed, had been inflicted with some sharp instrument.

After minute investigation, the first theory that Mlle. Croizette had met her death at the hands of some jealous lover was reluctantly abandoned. Whilst only a dancer, the strict morality of her conduct during her engagement at the Theater de Varieties precluded any suspicion being thrown upon her numerous admirers. The search for the murderer would undoubtedly have been given up if a curious circumstance had not happened.

Mons. Pierre Morel, an artist, called at police headquarters and stated that he resided at 62 Rue de Petits Champs, and occupied apartments directly opposite those of the murdered woman. Shortly after midnight on the day of the murder he had arisen, being unable to sleep, and going to his sitting-room window. Whilst seated there he had noticed the shadows of two persons, those of a man and a woman, thrown against the window shade in the upper story of a house opposite him. As he gazed the two shadows lurched forward and fell, disappearing from view. Then, to his intense astonishment, distinctly outlined against the window curtain, appeared the shadow of a small cross. It remained in view for about thirty seconds, when a shadowy hand plucked it in haste and the light was extinguished. He had failed to report this occurrence to the police, until urged to do so by the news of Mlle. Croizette's death, which reached him at Versailles, whither he had gone on the morning immediately succeeding the murder.

Alfred Cassagne had been sitting quietly in the chief's room, having but lately reported to him the result of his expedition to St. Petersburg, whither he had gone to discover the assassin of Paul Pelaufski. He listened with considerable interest to the artist's narrative. Chief of Police Pommard, however, who had heard fifty stories about the murder during the past week, heard Mons. Morel's narrative with impatience. He was about to dismiss him when Cassagne said:

“Permit me to ask him a few questions.”

“Certainly,” replied the chief of police with just a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. “Ask a hundred if you like. What the entire department has not succeeded in accomplishing in two weeks, no doubt Mons. Alfred Cassagne, after his Russian experiences, will be able to solve immediately.”

Chief Pommard was an excellent officer, but just a trifle out of temper just then. No doubt it was galling to an old and experienced official to be so completely baffled in the detection of a crime that had stirred Paris to its center.

Cassagne smiled slightly, but did not retort. On the contrary, having first subjected Mons. Morel to a searching cross examination, he turned politely to Chief Pommard and urgently requested to be detailed on the Croizette case.

He felt convinced that he had now struck upon an important and likely clew.

The chief, however, was unwilling that Cassagne should “waste any time on the matter.”

“But I will conduct the investigation at my own expense,” replied the detective. “Recollect, Monseieur, that your own population is at stake, as well as that of the whole body of secret police.”

This view of the matter seemed to strike Mons. Pommard more forcibly.

“Well, go ahead, do your best,” he said at last.

Cassagne invariably commenced his investigations upon the inductive theory, that is, he reasoned from effect to cause, not from cause to effect. The question he now asked himself was, “What produced the shadow of the cross upon the curtain?”

That very morning he went alone and made a thorough examination of the scene of the murder. Nothing in the apartment had been removed. In the evening, accompanied by Mons. Morel, he again visited it.

Lighting a lamp he placed it upon a small wooden table.

“Why do you put it in the exact center with so much care?” asked his companion.

“Because,” answered the detective, “lamps are almost invariably placed in the center of tables. You will see its importance later on.” Mons. Morel had become as interested in the discovery of the murderer as the detective. He was an educated and intelligent man.

Cassagne then took from his pocket two pieces of wood and fastened them together in the form of a small cross about eight inches high. This he now placed upright on the table at a little distance from the lamp. The shadow of the cross fell upon the curtain. It was about eight feet high.

“Was it as large as that?” he inquired of Morel.

“No, not half as large; but what are you driving at?”

“Never you mind,” was the reply of the detective. “Wait and see.”

Cassagne then moved the cross further from the lamp until it reached the very edge of the table, but the shadow of the cross was only lessened thereby by about a foot.

“It is still far too large,” said the artist.

Cassagne thought deeply [for] a few moments. “I have it,” he said at last. “The table has been moved.” He stooped down and raised one of the legs of the table. “It has dust under it,” he exclaimed. “I thought so.” Then he searched around and found the spots where the legs had usually been placed. After a little search he located them, and moved the table back into its original position.

“It is poor detective work to move anything in a room where a murder has been committed. In doing so vulnerable clues are oftentimes destroyed.”

Then he again repeated his [maneuverers] with the wooden cross and the lamp. Commencing close to the light, he moved the cross gradually nearer to the window until the artist cried:

“Stop, that is the exact size of the cross I saw.”

“How is it for position on the curtain?” asked the detective.

“It should be moved more to the right.”

Cassagne then moved more the cross slowly lengthwise on the table. Once more Mons. Morel, with his eyes fixed on the moving shadow on the curtain, called “Halt.”

“Come here, Mons. Morel,” said Cassagne, “and see whether you can find any mark on this table at the foot of the cross.”

Mons. Morel bent his gaze curiously upon the smooth surface.

“I see nothing,” he replied.

“Because your eyes, unlike mine, have not been sufficiently trained. I see a small slit in the table.”

“What of that?”

Once more Mons. Cassagne replied to the interrogatory of the artist by illustration instead of words. He drew from his pocket a large clasp knife and tied a piece of wood across the handle. Then he plunged the blade into the slit. The knife stood upright in the exact position lately occupied by the wooden cross. Its shadow, an exact counterpart, fell, precisely at the same angle upon the window curtain.

A sudden gleam of intelligence shot across the face of the artist.

“You would imply that Mlle. Croizette was stabbed with just such a knife as that shadow

represents?”

“Yes, by a knife with a cross-piece to it—some o’ d-fashioend dagger. When the two shadows you saw struggling on the curtain passed from your sight, the murderer was killing his victim. He withdrew the blade all reeking as it was, and stuck it into the table. Its shadows fell upon the curtain for a few moments are he plucked away and extinguished the light. Look here, see where the blood dripped from the blade.”

“What is the next step?” asked Mons. Morel.

“To reason as usual from effect to cause. I have not abandoned the jealous lover theory, which Mons. Pommard thinks so untenable. Mlle. Croizette was not by any means the angel she was depicted. Look here!”

The detective went to the upright piano and moved it back from the wall. Touching a spring a door flew open. It communicated with a passageway leading into the adjoining house.

Mons. Morel was thunderstruck. “How did you discover that?” he exclaimed.

“I was here this morning early,” said Cassagne, “on my own account and made a complete investigation. Poor men have been detailed on this case, hitherto. They should have sounded every inch of these walls.

“Certainly not the murderer of Mlle. Crozette. It is the Abbe Froissart. He is famed for his piety and learning. He is an immaculate person in every respect and greatly venerated.”

“Um; ah!—perhaps. Tell me, though. How long has he lived in this neighborhood?”

“About three years,” replied Mons. Morel.

“Precisely. That is exactly the same length of time Mlle. Croizette resided here.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it is my business to know these things, Monsieur. Mlle. Croizette, I find, took up with the Abbe Froissart after her quarrel with Mons. Chattieu, the rich banker in the Rue de la Roche.”

“What do you propose to do?” asked Mons. Morel. “Denounce the Abbe Froissart as the murderer of Mlle. Croizette?”

“Such a course,” replied Cassagne, “would be the height of foolishness. He would meet all such accusations with a calm denial and his reputation would clear him. We could prove nothing and should only cover ourselves with ridicule. I know a better way than that. If he is not guilty, what I propose will be simply regarded as a practical joke should it ever become known. If guilty it will so effectually undermine his nerves, that when confronted with an accuser he will voluntarily confess his crime. I am hungry. Let us go now. I will be at your rooms at 11 to-

night.”

At the appointed hour, Cassagne knocked at Mons. Morel’s door and was admitted. He carried with him a small but exceedingly powerful stereopticon. Morel asked no questions.

About midnight, the Rue de Petits Champs became comparatively deserted. Cassagne then placed the stereopticon in such a position as to cause a small but powerful circle of light to fall directly on the window shade of the room occupied by the Abbe Froissart. Running in a small slide, a dagger apparently dripping with blood, at once stood boldly outlined on the curtain, and the color of it, as seen in the mingled glare of the lime-light and the street lamps, was blood-red, awful and awe-inspiring.

Mons. Morel shuddered. The effect was ghastly.

“My God,” he exclaimed. “If I were to wake and see that on my window in the dead of night, it would drive me mad.”

“Not if you were innocent, for the innocent sleep; but the eye of the murderer is seldom closed in the dark. The room is peopled with the image of his victim. It is in every corner. Look, look! Shut off the light, quickly.”

Instantly Mons. Morel threw a heavy cloth over the stereopticon, just as there came rushing to the window opposite a figure, with a face as ghastly white as the night-ropes in which it was enveloped. One look at that awful, fear-haunted, blanched and guilty face, convinced both men that they had found in the Abbe Froissart the murderer of Mlle. Croizette. Twice again, at intervals of an hour or so, was the same maneuver repeated, with the same result, until just before dawn, a man, his nerves utterly broken down, pale, ghastly, looking over his shoulder at every moment, crept from that awful chamber, where he dared no longer face the symbol of his dreadful crime.

He did not go far. Hardly had he turned into the Rue de Rivoli when the hand of the law was on his shoulder.

“Mons. Abbe Froissart. I arrest you for the murder of Mlle. Croizette!”

The wretch at once broke down, and confessed everything. In a fit of ungovernable jealousy he had stabbed the danseuse for resuming her former relations with Mons. Chattieu, the banker. The Abbe suffered death by the guillotine. Cassagne found the dagger where the murderer had hidden it under an old stairway. It exactly corresponded with the reflection on the curtain which the artist had seen, and which brought the Abbe Froissart to his doom in the shadow of the scarlet cross.

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