

A Clock Wonder

During the summer of 18— there might have been observed loitering about the Tuileries a spare, shabbily-dressed man, past the prime of life, restless and disconcerted in his movements, but wearing, in spite of humble garb, an air of faded respectability and character. He was a decayed Spanish nobleman, Don Monsen Chavarri by name, and one thing noticeable about him was his persistency in endeavoring to obtain an audience of the Emperor. Foiled in every attempt, either through accident or the suspicions of the attendants, he invariable received the rebuffs in silence and withdrew—merely to renew his importunities. Repulsed today, tomorrow found him at his post. He haunted the palace like a spectre. Even the gamins soon grew familiar with the story of his homeless guest, and he began in time to be treated with that sort of pitiful consideration which is usually accorded to those in unsound mind.

At length, however, there came a day, when, in the Rue de Rivoli, as the Emperor was returning from a review, a pistol-shot rang out from the corner of the court, and the bullet, whistling through the line of outsiders, buried itself in the panel of the imperial carriage. The police at once charged the crowd, and among the number arrested was our friend the Spaniard.

At the trial, there being no evidence against him, he was acquitted, but warned to instantly leave Paris. Acting upon the warning he disappeared, and from the time all traces of him were lost.

It was some two years after this occurrence that there began to circulate among the quidnuncs of the capital reports of a marvelous clock to be seen in that city, which illustrated by means of automatic figures, an episode in the line of the Emperor, and was designed for presentation to that personage.

It was said to be the work of a famous [artisan], who had lately arrived, incognito, from foreign parts, accompanied by a young lady, his daughter, who in a supposed fit of eccentricity had taken lodgings in an humble and obscure quarter of the Faubourg St. Antoine. The reports of the wonderful, almost supernatural performances of this piece of mechanism, and the mystery surrounding its owner and inventor, gave rise for a short time and in certain circles to no small am't of gossip.

This gradually died away, and the artisan and his clock were alike forgotten, when an event occurred which restored them to more than their former prominence, and entitled them to a place in history.

Fouche, one morning in his office, received a letter from his secret agent in Spain, containing information of a most startling and important character. Its perusal threw him into a state of unusual excitement, and its result was an immediate descent of the police on the mysterious shop in the Faubourg St. Antonie, with orders to arrest the artisan and his daughter, secure the premises, and carefully guard all the stock, tools, implements and other contents from being

touched or displaced till further opportunity offered for a thorough investigation.

The party detailed for the duty having departed, Fouche reseated himself and waited, with ill-concealed anxiety, the arrival of the prisoners.

After a considerable lapse of time the officer charged with the arrest appeared empty-handed. His report was soon made.

The lady in the case, the daughter, had that morning at an early hour left her house in the Faubourg, accompanied by a young lad who bore a heavy black portmanteau. The two had been traced to the gates of Montmartre, beyond which point no clue to movements could be obtained.

The old workman himself had left the shop an hour before the visit of the police, locking doors and barring windows behind him. He bore in his arms what was apparently, according to the apple-woman opposite, a great square box, covered with oilskin. It seemed heavy. He sat down on his doorstep, when a caleche came by, into which he put himself and the box, with the assistance of the driver, and was driven off at a rapid pace. The caleche was brown. The driver was in green livery. A gendarme was following him, and another was guarding the shop in the Faubourg, where, however, nothing remained but a piece of furniture and a great many scraps of brass and iron.

Fouche reflected a moment, when his face suddenly whitened. Without a word he dashed down the stairway to the street and sprang into a passing fiacre.

‘To the Tuileries!’ he shouted. ‘Double wages for double speed!’

Arrived at the palace he hastily alighted, and demanded to be at once shown into the presence of the Emperor. Napoleon was in the boudoir in which he frequently received private visitors, and thither the ushers instantly conducted Fouche, who, encountering some delay in the anteroom impatiently pushed open the folding doors and entered unannounced. The Emperor greeted the intrusion at first with a frown of displeasure, but, instantly recognizing his visitor, resumed his customary expression and nodded affably.

Fouche took in the situation at a single glance.

Besides Napoleon there were five persons in the room. Four of these were officials of the palace—chamberlains and armed valets, who frequently attended when he gave audience, to prevent attempts at private assassination. The fifth was a man habited in a common workman’s blouse, standing apart from the others, at a respectful distance and holding in his hand a red fez cap. It needed but a glance to assure Fouche that this person was the old familiar goblin of the Tuileries—Don Monsen Chavarri. But how metamorphosed! His hair, formerly gray, was now dyed to an inky blackness; his face was despoiled of its moustache and pointed beard; and his

once smooth hands were roughened as though by exposure and toil. At his side stood a large lacquer table, supporting an object upon which Fouche's attention was immediately fixed. This was seen at once to be an exact model of the church of Notre Dame, wrought in metal, in the highest style of the art, and serving evidently as the case for a clock, since just above the folding-doors, which were perfect imitations of those which barred the principal entrance of Notre Dame, were two dials, on one of which the hours and minutes were measured, while on the other a long sweeping hand described the seconds. Fouche, by a natural impulse, noted the time indicated by the dials. It lacked a few minutes of noon.

Immediately thereafter he started with a nervous alarm as the clock gave a warning note as though about to strike, then suddenly there was a clank of complicated machinery, and the great doors folded slowly inward, exposing the whole of the gorgeous interior to view.

The mimic church was decorated as though for some great fete. Banners and hangings of the richest materials and the most costly workmanship fluttered from the ceilings and flaunted from the niches in the walls. The aisles were carpeted with tapestry and velvet, and the pillars were clustered with gold and blazing with gems. On the opposite side of the great nave two thrones were erected, the one being approached by a flight of velvet covered steps, and canopied with cloth of gold and scarlet velvet sprinkled with golden bees.

And now the great bell in the tower struck one with a heavy reverberating clang; there arose a swell of triumphal music, and a mimic procession, clad in gorgeous robes, moved into view from one of the hidden aisled. At the head of this cortege walked an old man, wearing a triple crown, who, as the bell tolled for the second time, ascended the steps of the smaller throne.

It was the ceremony of the coronation performed by automatons.

Napoleon looked on with unusual interest. 'Confess, Fouche,' said he, 'that this is admirable in its way as the police system of Paris. There is one mistake, however,' he continued, 'The great doors of Notre Dame were not open on that occasion. The throne was built against them, and the only entrance was through the transverse halls.'

'True, sirs,' said the fictitious artisan, casting a side glance at Fouche, whose name he had just heard pronounced. 'True, but your majesty will see that it is a mistake unavoidable here[.] Like the rest of the world, we have been obliged to sacrifice truth in order to secure effect.'

The Emperor smiled, and remained silent[.]

Meanwhile, Fouche was revolving a dilemma in his mind with the rapidity of one accustomed to act in dangerous crises. There are situations in which a slight advantage of the hands of a dangerous man may set at naught the strength of thousands, and in which the most extraordinary means must be employed to secure what are apparently trifling results. Fouche adopted the course which seemed at first most speedily practicable, since the consideration of

first importance was in this instance time.

‘Your Majesty,’ said he, advancing and speaking rapidly, ‘may I request your immediate attendance in your cabinet to a matter which will not admit of a moment’s delay.’

The Emperor turned in surprise, and frowned. Chavarri looked up sullenly and silently, and made a suspicious movement toward his clock. With the rapidity of thought Fouche changed his plans.

‘Your Majesty,’ said he, loudly and more rapidly than before, ‘the Lady Isidore Chavarri has just been arrested near the cemetery of Montmartre, charged with a capital crime. She has already been tried by a special tribunal and condemned to death. I come to implore your Majesty to grant her pardon.’

As he spoke he fixed a painful and searching gaze upon the Spaniard. This time the bolt had struck. The old man’s tawny face was taking a sickly hue and his limbs quivered and trembled.

‘This is a most unusual proceeding,’ said the Emperor, in amazement, ‘who is the lady, and what is the nature of her crime?’

Fouche, bent double with suspense, still keeping his eye riveted upon the tawny, cringing face, spoke almost imploringly:

‘You have trusted me before, Sire. I beseech you, trust me now. Ask me no questions, but write the pardon—quickly.’

There was an instant silence, broken only by the ticking, and low, fair music of the clock. The second hand was measuring off the sixtieth minute with rapid, steady sweep. Almost unconsciously, Fouche drew a pistol from his pocket, cocked it unobserved and with a face as that of a corpse, was raising it himself to fire—with a cry to the Emperor on his lips—when Chavarri, whose mind seemed torn by fearful emotions, bent suddenly over his mechanism, touched a spring concealed in the rear of the tower, and instantly the whole complicated machinery of the clock stopped with a metallic clang. The music ceased, the automations paused, standing like statues, each in his place, the mimic Emperor stretching out his hand for the crown of the Caesars, and the bell in the tower paused midway in its swing for the twelfth and final stroke.

‘Parblieu!’ muttered Fouche, pocketing the pistol, and wiping the perspiration from his brow. ‘Allow me, Monsieur,’ he said, advancing to the table; let me inspect this wonderful specimen of art.’

‘It is so delicate, Monsieur,’ said Chavarri, hurriedly, still keeping his finger on the secret spring and waving Fouche off with his unengaged hand.

‘Here is the pardon,’ said the Emperor, affixing his signature to a paper as he spoke. ‘I hold you responsible, Fouche, for results. Well, what next?’

‘Our worthy friend’s clock is broken, it appears,’ said Fouche, awkwardly.

‘Broken, Sire,’ said the Spaniard, ‘and with it the plans of a lifetime. And,’ he added, casting down his eyes and speaking in a querulous broken voice, ‘since, when one’s hopes are broken, one cares but little where he goes, I wish a passport to get away from France.’

Fouche took up the cue immediately. ‘I have to request, Sire,’ said he, ‘that you also make out a full and free pardon for the accomplice of the Lady Isadore Chavarri—her father, Don Mosen Chavarri, of Seville.’

The Emperor smiled bitterly. His active mind had already compassed the situation, and without a word of expostulation or the inquiry he seized a pen and wrote. Then, having finished and signed the double pardon, he advanced with it in his hand.

‘Our friend here,’ said he, ‘doubtless knows where these parties are to be found, and to him I confide these papers.’

The old man, still jealously keeping his hand on the spring of mechanism, read aloud:

A full permission to Don Mosen and Donna Isadore Chavarri to leave France immediately, without hindrance or question.

‘Add,’ said he, ‘and alive.’

‘You would have made a good diplomat,’ said Napoleon, as he made the required addition.

Chavarri hesitated a moment, removed his hand lingeringly from the spring, bowed his head and glided towards the door. Just upon the threshold he turned in sudden dismay.

‘Where shall I find my daughter?’ he asked.

‘When she is found we will send you word,’ sneered Fouche.

An expression of the most intense malignity flashed across the old man’s face, and with an oath he sprang back toward the table in the room. But a pistol confronted him.

‘The pardons are forfeited!’ cried Fouche.

‘No,’ said the Emperor, ‘let him pass.’

Chavarri, with a look of wonder, then wheeled slowly around and disappeared.

After his departure, Napoleon stood for a short time in the center of the room lost in thought.

Then, as his gaze fell upon the clock and the automaton standing beneath the suspended crown within, he bent forward and regarded the figure attentively.

‘So,’ said he, this was to have been my successor.’

It is scarcely necessary to add that the clock proved, on examination, to be an infernal machine of the most ingenious and deadly description. Concealed beneath the metallic slab, which formed the pavement of the mimic chapel, and which was constructed to fold back at the proper moment, was found a triple row of small wrought iron barrels, loaded heavily with slugs and balls, and arranged to cover an arc of forty-five degrees, at a distance of twenty yards from the machine; no one within that range could possibly have withstood their discharge, exploded simultaneously, exactly when the hands on the dial indicated the hour of noon; but a spring on the outside of the case gave the manipulator power to alter the ‘set’ of the works, and discharge them sooner if necessary.

A few months after the occurrence of the incident narrated above, Fouche received a letter from Chavarri, then in England, written in the vein in which men, who have played a desperate game and lost, occasionally write to those who have outwitted them. The writer stated that the instrument was entirely the work of his own hands, and that he and his daughter alone were concerned in the plot, which had been frustrated by Fouche’s promptness.

As for himself, he had but little expectation of escaping, having freely resolved to involve himself, if necessary, in the destruction which should overwhelm the Emperor. His daughter, however, the only person on earth for whom he retained any affection, he could not afford thus to sacrifice. He had made provision elsewhere for her future support, and, according to the original plan, she was to have left Paris some thirty days before the consummation of the plot, thus having abundant time to pass the frontier and reach a place of safety. This had been foiled by an unforeseen event. On the evening before the final fiasco at the Tuileries they had received information to the effect that Napoleon was on the point of departure for the frontier, and everything being ready, and the period of his return being uncertain, it was determined to make the attempt at once. On the following morning, accordingly, the daughter had departed at as early an hour as possible, trusting for her escape to good fortune, and he, himself, fortified with letters from prominent officials, had proceeded to the palace at eleven, having given his daughter all the time he could spare.

Fouche himself knew the rest.

No personal danger, no promised honor, nothing, in short, but the cunningly devised falsehood regarding his daughter, could have induced him, Chavarri, to have stopped the hands of the

fatal clock.

He also confessed that it was he who, two years before, had fired the shot in the Rue de Rivoli, and stated that it had long been the aim and purpose of his life to assassinate Napoleon. He added, however, that they need have no fear of his repeating the attempt, as the magnanimity of the Emperor on the last occasion had disarmed him.

Chavarri subsequently died in extreme poverty in London. Of the after fate of his daughter nothing is known. His clock, despoiled of the murderous portion of its machinery, was preserved for several years in the Tuileries, and was finally destroyed by an accidental fire and the falling of a wall.

The Baltimore [MD] Sun, September 21, 1871

Intelligencer Journal [Lancaster, PA], September 22, 1871

Harrisburg [PA] Telegraph, September 27, 1871

The States and Union [Ashland, OH], October 18, 1871

The Summit County Beacon [Akron, OH], October 25, 1871

Public Ledger [Memphis, TN], October 28, 1871

Bates County Record [Butler, MI], November 25, 1871

The Superior [WI] Times, September 14, 1872

Port Tobacco [MD] Times and Charles County Advertiser, September 20, 1872

Newport [RI] Daily News, February 10, 1877

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Bloomington [IL] Pantograph, December 14, 1870—with the subtitle “A Reminiscence of Fouche, the French Detective”

Burlington [VT] Democrat, October 26, 1871

Burlington [VT] Democrat, August 31, 1872