

A True Bill

EARLY on the morning of the fifteenth of April, information reached the French police that the Baroness de C. was lying dead in her bed, strangled with a piece of ribbon. She had been married as a widow to Baron de C., and was about twenty-eight years old, very pretty, of engaging manners; and both she and her husband were known far and wide for lavish hospitality.

Three weeks before the murder the baron set out for Russia, where it was said that he inherited some property from a relative. During the absence of her husband the baroness kept very much at home, with Ernestine Lamont, a beautiful girl of the most innocent and simple manners, who had been educated and protected by her. On the night before the murder, the baroness went to the opera. Ernestine, who was not very well, did not accompany her; neither did she sit up for her, as the baroness had a private key, and did not wish that the young lady should be disturbed.

It was the custom that when the baroness, on awakening in the morning, rang her bell, Ernestine went first to her bedroom. When, on the morning after the murder, no bell was heard to ring, the servants wondered, and at last one of them went up to Ernestine's room to ask the cause. It was empty. Thinking that she was gone, as usual, to the baroness's bedroom, the servant went thither. There the shutters were still closed, and the night-lamp burning on a little table by the bedside. On the floor lay the lifeless body of Ernestine. The girl now screamed for help; the other servants hurried up-stairs, and on opening the shutters it was seen that the baroness lay dead, evidently strangled with a piece of ribbon, which was at once recognized as belonging to Ernestine, who was also found lying in a swoon on the floor.

On coming to herself, it was naturally supposed that she would be able to throw some light on the matter, but, to the surprise of all, she showed a nervous hesitation hardly to be reconciled with innocence. On further examination, it was found that the secretaire stood wide open, and that a quantity of papers and other articles were lying about in confusion, as if the contents of each drawer had been hastily turned inside out. By this time the police had arrived. With scarcely a moment's hesitation they pronounced that one of the inmates of the house must either have committed the crime, or at least been an accomplice in it. Evidently, also, there had been a robbery added to murder; and, therefore, it was thought right to search the boxes of each member of the household. The servants were all willing; but when it came to Ernestine's turn to deliver up her keys, the young lady showed a strange unwillingness to do so. Of course the police persisted, and in a very little time discovered a large sum of money and several jewels of the murdered lady carefully secreted at the bottom of her box.

"How does mademoiselle account for this money?" was the first question put to her.

"I do not know—I—cannot tell—pray—do not ask me," was the hesitating reply.

The suspicions already attached to her were now considerably strengthened, and the police only discharged their duty in arresting her. The case was tried, and Ernestine Lamont found guilty.

A young lawyer named Bernard, whose knowledge of Ernestine's previous character made it very hard for him to believe her guilty, resolved to see her. After some little difficulty, permission was granted him to visit the condemned in prison. But if he went thither with any faith in her innocence, he left the prison without doubt of her guilt. Her answers to his questions were evasive and unsatisfactory. On reaching home late that evening, he found a note lying on his table. It was from Ernestine, and ran as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND,—I feel that I owe you at least some explanation for my strange conduct, and will therefore put you in possession of the facts of the case. It is only forestalling my intention. This letter would have been delivered to you after my death. You are aware of the circumstances which made me regard the baroness as a mother. You are aware, too, of her husband's fatal propensity to the gaming-table, a passion which in course of time led to an estrangement between them. The baroness was very beautiful, and still young, and failing to find that love and affection which she had hoped her husband would show her, formed an unfortunate intrigue. I was horror-struck when she informed me of this; but it was not for me to blame her. As might be expected, no good could possibly result from this attachment. Her lover proved unworthy of her confidence, and succeeded, whether by threats or by menaces, I know not, in obtaining from her large sums of money. It was but a few days before her death that she confided this to me, and at the same time begged me to take care of her jewels and money for her in my box, as she dreaded lest her sordid lover should obtain possession of them. The last time I saw her alive was on the night she went to the opera. At what hour she returned I know not, for she always had a private key with her. The rest you know.

"Hence, dear friend, you will understand my reluctance to have my boxes searched; and my evasive answers as to the money and jewels found in them.

"Had I told the truth, should I have been believed? No! And how could I say anything that would dishonor the good name of one who has been more than a mother to me? Besides, I did not know even the name of her secret lover, and I had never seen him. No; it is better as it is. I am ready to die. My secret to all save you, shall die with me. That you believe in my innocence is the only comfort I have left me.

"Your unhappy friend,

"ERNESTINE."

"Thank God!" murmured the young man, pressing the paper to his lips. "Henceforth, I will devote my life to prove your innocence to the world. God grant it may not yet be too late!"

Late though it was, Bernard at once repaired to the prefect's house, and after some difficulty procured admission. The prefect fortunately happened to be an old friend of Bernard's father, and it was because of this that the young man was admitted at so late an hour.

“But, my good friend,” said the old man, after patiently listening to all that he had to say, “believe me, it is a useless task; there is no doubt that the young woman is guilty either as principal or as accomplice. Still, as you so earnestly wish it, you shall be permitted to search the apartments of the murdered lady. And now good-night,” he added with a smile, “and let me hear the result of your investigations.”

Early the next morning, Bernard, accompanied by a gendarme, repaired to the baroness’s house. Everything lay exactly as it had been left on the fatal morning; for the house had been and was still in the custody of the police. Not a drawer, nor a cupboard escaped Bernard’s notice. There was no violence visible on the windows, as if forcible admission had been gained from the outside. Nothing, in fact, presented itself which gave the slightest clue to the mystery.

The search had now occupied several hours, and Bernard felt that it was useless to remain there any longer. With a sad and heavy heart, therefore, he proceeded to leave the apartment. But in passing out into the entrée, which was quite dark, his foot struck against something, which, on taking up, he found to be a hat. Thinking it belonged to the baron, he was about to hang it up with the others on the peg from which he supposed it to have fallen.

“That hat, monsieur, if you please; I do not remember to have seen it before. It is strange,” remarked the gendarme, as he compared the hat in question with the others that hung up in the entrée; “It is larger, and of a different shape to them.”

“Let me have it, my good friend; I will show it to the prisoner. If it should chance to belong to this secret lover of the murdered lady!” thought Bernard to himself, as he hurriedly drove to the prison.

Ernestine was anxiously expecting to see her friend, for he had promised to visit her that day again; and she wished to learn from his own lips whether he still believed in her innocence.

“Do you know this hat, Ernestine?” said Bernard, on entering the cell.

“That hat—good heavens!—It is the very hat which the baron had on the night he left Paris,” said Ernestine, in an excited manner.

“Impossible!—we compared it with the other hats and this is much larger. I believe it belonged to the baroness’s lover—”

“No—no—a thousand times no—it is the baron’s—he bought it the very day he left. It was too large for him, and he asked me to put some wadding under the lining for him—see—if it be not there!”

“But, Ernestine, it must be fancy on your part—this hat never belonged to the baron! But—stay—you are right,” added Bernard, as, on turning up the lining, the wadding fell out, and with it a piece of paper which had been used to add a little to its thickness. It was a bill written by the

landlord of an hotel at Strasburg, made out in the baron's name, for a week's board and lodging. It was dated April 7,—just fourteen days after his departure from Paris.

Ernestine and Bernard looked at each other for a few moments in silence, as strange thoughts passed through the minds of each. That it was the baron's hat was now proven—but how did it come there? Had he returned to Paris secretly before the murder? Was he the murderer? Ernestine turned deadly pale.

“Do you suppose that the baron—” she gasped.

“Is the murderer?” added Bernard, finishing the sentence. “Yes! I do. But I will go at once to the prefect.”

For the first time since her condemnation a faint ray of hope was kindled in Ernestine's heart. The sight of Bernard, her old friend in happier days, had indeed excited a wish to live in her young breast.

“How thankful I am I did not anything at the trial. The good God will protect me!”

Bernard now left the prison and hastened to the house of the prefect.

“Well! And what did you find?” asked the old man, smiling sadly at his young friend, who rushed into the room without waiting to be announced.

“Be good enough to examine this hat,” said Bernard, as he handed it to him, and recounted to him the manner in which he found it, and what Ernestine had subsequently told him.

“Her husband!—he the murderer! Yes, it is plain—and we have been accusing an innocent girl!” ejaculated the prefect, carefully examining the hat; “but leave me now; I must think it over. But let me urge secrecy on you and depend on me.”

Early the next morning Bernard was again sent for to the prefect's house.

“I have carefully gone over the whole evidence since I saw you,” he said, “and it certainly seems there is a very strong suspicion against the baron. I have caused inquiries to be made, and have ascertained that the baron was a confirmed gambler, and that his journey to Petersburg was probably only a ruse to avoid arrest. It is a terrible case, and we must proceed very cautiously. The baron stands very high in the public esteem, and it seems incredible that he could have committed this horrible crime. Still that hat and the bill of the landlord made out in his own name prove at least that he must have returned to Paris. Why should he return? What was the motive? However, I have despatched an agent of the secret police to Strasburg, to track his steps from that place. When I hear anything I will send for you.”

On arriving at Strasburg, the police agent at once repaired to the Maison Rouge. The landlord perfectly remembered the baron's having stayed at his hotel for a week, and having then gone,

whither he could not say. The porter, however, remembered where his luggage was taken. It was to a house outside the city, on the road to Saverne, where a hired carriage was in readiness. He got into the carriage and drove off. But as the driver was an acquaintance of the porter's, it was no difficult matter to find him. He remembered the job perfectly, but averred that the gentleman's name was Thionville. He should not perhaps have paid much attention to this fact, had he not had a sister living in Saverne as a chambermaid in the same hotel to which he drove his fare. On inquiring at Saverne, the agent found that a Monsieur Thionville had arrived at the hotel as stated, and that he had remained there four days, during the greater part of which he had kept indoors, from indisposition.

The description the landlord gave of his person and luggage left no doubt on the agent's mind that he was on the right track. But nothing further could be learnt. Still, one important circumstance had been proved—namely, that, instead of proceeding on his journey to Russia, he had turned back on the road to Paris, under an assumed name. The only thing that now remained to be done was to put an advertisement in the French and German papers, inviting the husband of the murdered lady to repair to Paris, in order to claim the property of his deceased wife. For, it was argued, if he had murdered her for the sake of getting possession of her money, it was very probable that he would take the bait now held out. Neither did this surmise prove to be incorrect.

Two months, or thereabouts, had elapsed, and the police were beginning to despair of getting further tidings of the baron, when a gentleman, attired in deep mourning, and apparently bowed down with grief, presented himself at the bureau of the police. "He had," he said, "by chance seen the fearful tidings of his wife's murder in a paper at St. Petersburg, and had hastened back to Paris as quickly as he could. The shock, however, it had caused him had brought on a severe attack of illness, from which he had only just recovered, otherwise he should have returned to Paris some weeks sooner." Acting in obedience to the orders of his chief, the agent referred the baron to a comptoir, where he would be furnished with the register of the death and burial of his wife.

On entering the room, the baron was politely invited to take a seat while the necessary papers were being found. After the lapse of a quarter of an hour an official entered the room, and requested the baron to accompany him to another comptoir, where, to his dismay, he found himself submitted to a rigorous examination.

"But, Monsieur le Baron, when you left home, on March 25, whither did you travel?" asked the chief officer.

"I travelled through Germany, en route for St. Petersburg."

"Good! But which was the first town at which you stayed?"

"Strasburg!"

“Quite true!” said his questioner, referring to some papers. “On what day did you arrive there?”

“On the 28th.”

“Yes; and how long did you remain?”

“Let me see—yes, it was one night and half the next day,” replied the baron, with a little hesitation in his manner.

“And where did you proceed to next?” resumed the officer.

After some reflection, the baron answered that he had gone to Frankfort.

“Indeed!” answered the officer, raising his eyes, and directing a steady glance towards the baron. “To Frankfort! I think you are mistaken. You say you arrived at Strasburg on the 28th, where you remained till the following day. But the landlord of the Maison Rouge says that you remained at his house till April 7. How do you account for that, Monsieur le Baron?”

“Was I there a week? Yes! now I think of it, you are quite right, monsieur; for I met several friends there, who persuaded me to lengthen my stay.”

“You also state that you next went to Frankfort. But if Monsieur le Baron reflects, he will remember that he went to Saverne in a close carriage.”

“Yes; but that was only a day’s trip, and nothing to do with my journey,” was the ready answer. “But may I ask, monsieur, why all these questions?”

“Excuse me, Monsieur le Baron, you are here to answer questions, not to ask them. Suffice it to say, it is usual under such circumstances. Now, please to attend. You said just now it was only a day’s trip, I think; how was it you came to stay four days at Saverne?”

“I had only intended to remain one day at Saverne, but was taken ill during my stay at the hotel.”

“Was that why Monsieur le Baron changed his name?” continued the officer.

“Changed my name? Monsieur must be in error.”

“Not at all. You took the name of Thionville, for some reason best known to yourself. But as you seem to have forgotten this circumstance, will you have the goodness to tell us where you went on leaving Saverne?”

“I returned to Strasburg.”

“Pardon me, Monsieur le Baron, and allow me to refresh your memory. You went, or pretended to go, to a private house in the neighborhood. But was not Paris the goal of your journey, and did you not arrive here about April 15?”

“Monsieur!” exclaimed the baron, “I have submitted to these impertinent questions quite long enough. By what right do you presume to interrogate me in the manner you have done, I do not know. Rest assured I shall represent the matter to the minister of police. I wish you a very good morning!” And the baron turned himself round to leave the room.

“Not so fast, monsieur. I have not yet done with you,” continued the officer, without noticing the interruption. “I repeat—you arrived in Paris about the 15th, and you were in your wife’s bedroom on the night of the 15th and 16th.”

At these words the baron leaped to his feet, his face distorted with the pangs of fear and passion.

“Calm yourself, Monsieur le Baron, I have not finished with you yet. Will you then explain, if you were not in the bedroom of your wife on the night in question—which you will remember was the very night on which she was murdered—how it was your hat was found in the passage?” And with these words he handed a hat to the baron.

All eyes were bent upon him. The baron turned deadly pale, and remained speechless for a considerable time. At last he stammered forth incoherently:

“It is not my hat. I never saw this one before—I had one like it—but not this.”

“Not this?” exclaimed the relentless questioner. “Monsieur le Baron, you have been followed step by step from the day you quitted Paris, to the day you returned. If this hat be not yours, then have the goodness to tell me how your bill incurred at the Maison Rouge, Strasburg, found its way underneath the lining? Please to look for yourself.”

“Hotel bill!” gasped the baron, as he struck his forehead with his clenched hand.

“Yes! wretched man. By that little piece of paper, Providence has disclosed your crime, and has prevented an innocent girl from dying a felon’s death. Confess that you entered your wife’s room and committed the diabolical deed for which you would have allowed another to suffer.”

But such a confession was never made. That night Baron de C. was safely shut up in prison till his trial should take place. All Paris rang with the news that the real murderer of the baroness had been discovered, and that he was no other than her own husband. But that night the prisoner escaped. On entering the cell on the following morning, he was found lying stretched out on his couch, cold and stiff. It was supposed that, living a lawless life, he had been in the habit of carrying poison about him.

Years have elapsed since the above events took place. Monsieur Bernard soon became one of the most celebrated ornaments of the French bar, and his wife, nee Ernestine Lamont, noted not only

for the brilliancy of her balls and dinners, but for the affability of her manner and the courtesousness of her disposition. Of the story of the murder nobody knows more than is here told.

The Brooklyn [NY] Daily Eagle, September 4, 1865

Flag of Our Union [Boston, MA], October 7, 1865

The Star of the Valley [Newville, PA], January 20, 1866

Harrisburg [PA] Daily Telegraph, May 18, 1867