

Mine and Countermine

By C. H.

It was on a raw November evening in 1869, that a spare, hook-nosed individual, bearing in his hand a small valise, entered a cafe-restaurant in the immediate vicinity of the Gare du Midi at Brussels. The atmosphere of the one long room which occupied the ground floor was strongly impregnated with tobacco, and the majority of the customers were either workmen in blouses, smoking clay pipes, or railway porters. At the farthest extremity of the salle, a few tables were scantily decked with coarse napkins, plates, and black-handled knives, the whole of the commonest order, and not peculiarly inviting in point of cleanliness. The stranger, lifting his hat as he passed the counter, made his way to the end of the room, and seated himself on a horsehair bench placed against the wall, and commanding a good view of the entire locality.

“I may as well dine here as anywhere else,” he said. “Perhaps something may turn up.” After a brief conference with the solitary waiter, the newcomer proceeded to while away the interval necessary for the preparation of his repast, by a leisurely examination of the taciturn smokers around him. A very cursory glance, however, at the different groups seemed to satisfy him; and he concluded by installing himself at one of the tables, took a notebook from his pocket, and was soon absorbed in its contents.

It may be remembered that about the period in question, the circulation in France of M. Rochefort’s *Lanterne* had been for some time rigidly prohibited; but that, notwithstanding every precaution taken at the frontier, several hundred copies of this pungent squib, more than one of which had been published in Brussels, had found their way through divers channels into the very heart of the Empire. In vain were suspected [traveler’s] searched, both in baggage and in person; in vain were the cleverest emissaries of the Rue de Jerusalem quartered at the various douanes; the invasion of the mischievous little pamphlets still continued, and the Prefecture de Police and its myrmidons were alike in despair.

Now it happened that one of the sharpest and most lynx-eyed emulators of Gaboriau’s redoubtable Monsieur Lecoq, by name Etienne Brigaud, had been summoned from Paris to Lille, and from thence dispatched to Brussels respecting a case of disputed extradition, and, his mission successfully accomplished, was awaiting the departure of the half-past eight o’clock train, by which he purposed returning to Lille. “Keep your eyes open,” had been the parting injunction of the commissaire; “before leaving Brussels see Chaponet, of the Belgian police; you may trust him. Ascertain how many copies of the last *Lanterne* have been sold, and to whom; and bid the people at Blandain be on the alert, for I have positive information that they are smuggled into France that way.”

M. Brigaud then it was who, pending the arrival of his dinner, sat conning over the particulars he had gleaned from his colleague Chaponet, which, in fact, amounted to little or nothing. “Not much to be learnt from that quarter,” soliloquised the detective, with a contemptuous air, pocketing his notebook, and swallowing his first spoonful of a so-called Julienne. “Hollo! who have we here?” added he, glancing curiously at two new comers, who at that moment entered the café, apparently man and wife, and both well laden with handbags and other travelling appendages.

“Ah, bah!” muttered M. Brigaud, with an impatient shrug of the shoulder, “des bourgeois, going back to Ath or Tournay, no doubt.” Having arrived at which conclusion, he filled himself a bumper of wine from the bottle beside him, drank it off, and tapped with his knife on the empty glass as a signal to the waiter that he was in a hurry for the promised bifteck aux pommes. Meanwhile the couple had taken their seats at an adjoining table, and after piling up their luggage and wrappers as symmetrically as the slippery bench would allow,

“Garçon!” said the male stranger, “deux bock, et vivement!”

“Sac à papier! they’re French,” murmured the police agent. “No Belgian ever asks for a bock, and I’m pretty sure there is no such word as ‘vivement’ in their dictionary! I must have another look at my friends yonder.”

It is but justice to dame Nature to admit that if, as regards personal beauty, M. Brigaud’s countenance left much to be desired, his small but penetrating grey eyes let nothing escape them, and his ear was so marvellously acute, that, like the servant in the fairy tale, he could almost hear the grass grow. While ostensibly engaged in demolishing his “bifteck,” he was eagerly watching his unsuspecting neighbours, more, it must be owned, from pure habit than from any special motive; their conversation, however, was carried on in so low a tone that for some time the practised listener could not distinguish a single word. At length, the supposed bourgeois, turning to his companion, inquired in a sufficiently audible voice, if she were certain that “the books were well hidden?”

“Je crois bien,” was her answer: “I defy anyone to guess where I have stowed them away.”

“We’ll see about that by-and-by, Madame,” thought M. Brigaud, pricking up his ears.

“Would they confiscate them if they were found?” asked the wife.

“Parbleu!” replied her liege lord, summoning the waiter as he spoke, by a sharp tap of his glass on the table, and discharging the reckoning by means of a handful of Belgian ten centime pieces. Then rising hastily from his seat, he seized hold of one of the handbags, threw a great coat over his arm, and followed by his wife charged with the remaining articles, quitted the café, and proceeded across the road towards the railway station.

M. Brigaud, who had been a silent but not an indifferent spectator of the foregoing scene, smiled significantly as they left the room. “Either I am very much mistaken, my good friends,” said he, “or those traps of yours will tell tales when we get to Blandain!”

A quarter of an hour later, the mail train from Brussels to Calais was on the point of starting. The evening had set in bitterly cold, and a motley crowd of passengers just released from the waiting-room, and shivering under their manifold wrappers, were hurrying to and fro. Among them, quietly enjoying his cigar, and apparently on the watch for somebody, was the hook-nosed detective, sauntering along leisurely, but keenly investigating every carriage as he went by.

Presently he stopped before a first-class smoking compartment, the occupants of which were two in number; and after a whispered intimation to the guard on duty that no one else was to be admitted, opened the door, and installed himself quietly in a vacant corner. In another moment the train was gliding out of the station.

Sitting opposite his fellow-travelers, who had appropriated to themselves and luggage one entire side of the carriage, and who, it is almost superfluous to state, were the identical couple whose temporary sojourn in the café has been already recorded, M. Brigaud maintained for some time a discreet silence. His reflections, whatever they might have been, were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the guard with the usual formula, “Vos billets, s’il vous plait!” a demand responded to on the part of the police agent by the display of a pass ticket for Lille, and on that of his female vis-à-vis by the production of two little rose-coloured pamphlets, bearing the inscription “Bruxelles a Londres”; from each of which the inspecting functionary dexterously extracted a leaf, and vanished as abruptly as he had entered.

“Brrr!” shivered M. Brigaud, as a rush of cold air made its way into the carriage. “You will find it unpleasant travelling on the sea, monsieur,” said he, addressing his opposite neighbour. “We have taken our precautions, you perceive,” replied the stranger, wrapping a thick cloak closely round him as he spoke, and pointing to his wife, half hidden beneath a pyramid of shawls and rugs.

“I wish I could say as much,” observed the detective: “I must have left my paletot in the café; I missed it as I got in here.”

“If monsieur does not mind,” interposed the lady, “we have a spare coat lying idle, belonging to my brother-in-law. It will keep monsieur warm at all events as far as Lille.”

“Ma foi! the very thing,” exclaimed her husband, dislodging the article in question from a recess by his side, and tossing it on the opposite seat. “There,” he said, “wrap yourself well up in that: it’s a trifle too large for you, but you’ll be all the warmer.”

M. Brigaud, after a decent show of resistance, allowed himself to be persuaded, and was speedily encased in a ponderous garment of vast circumference, lined throughout with fur, and altogether extremely comfortable. “Very civil people these,” he murmured, as he sank back complacently into his corner. “Sorry to be obliged to split upon them, but must do my duty!”

“Blandain! Blandain! Tout le monde descend pour la visite!”

At this unwelcome summons our three travellers, who had all been more or less in that hazy state of unconsciousness which has been happily defined as the “ante-room of Morpheus,” woke up with a start, and hastily collecting their various goods and chattels, prepared to join the other unfortunates assembled outside the douane. Leaving his companions to wait there until their turn came, M. Brigaud slipped unseen into the building by a side-door, and taking the grim-visaged female entrusted with the examination of the lady passengers aside, communicated his suspicions to her, and after accurately describing the supposed delinquents, repaired to a back apartment,

there to indulge in the luxury of a “grog au rhum.” In about ten minutes the sound of a bell warned him that the “visite” was at an end. Messieurs les voyageurs, who had been huddled together in a narrow room, half passage half sheep-pen, were streaming out pell-mell, and endeavouring, as far as the uncertain light would permit, to regain possession of the seats they had previously occupied; an attempt which usually resulted in their being bundled in anywhere by the impatient guards. As the detective passed rapidly through the salle, he was arrested by the shrill voice of the female official, calling him by name:

“Ah ça!” she said, “what cock-and-bull story have you been telling me?—keeping everybody waiting, and giving me all this trouble for nothing?”

He started back “in amazement lost,” like Sir Christopher in the “Critic.” “What! you don’t mean to say you didn’t find the books?”

“Books![]” shouted the enraged dame; “what do I care about English books! They don’t pay duty!”

“English books!” muttered M. Brigaud, as he hurried off. “I’ve put my foot in it nicely, this time; if they ever hear of it in Paris I’m done for!”

Once more in his snug corner he found his fellow-travellers in the highest spirits, detailing with infinite zest the discomfiture of the searcher, and imitating her grimaces as she extracted one after another half-a-dozen volumes of Tauchnitz’ novels from Madame’s capacious pockets.

“It was as good as a farce, Monsieur,” said the lady, nearly choking at the recollection.

“Beat the Palais Royal hollow,” chimed in her husband.

M. Brigaud listened as politely as he could, but his interest in the matter was over. At length, feeling that he was expected to say something, he inquired what could have been Madame’s object in concealing them, as they were not contraband.

Here the husband and wife exchanged looks, and smiled.

“Not here, I grant you,” replied the latter, “but in London that is quite another story. No, no; I have them safe in my pocket, and the English douaniers are too polite to look for them there!”

“Ah, ah!” said M. Brigaud, suddenly enlightened, “that explains what I overheard in the café,” he thought. “Confound Chaponet and the *Lanterne*! I shall never dare to come this way again as long as I live. Clever woman, my opposite neighbour! I’d give something to see her walk out of the Custom-house la-bas with the books in her pocket!”

The idea of the London officials being taken in tickled the detective amazingly, and with the help of another cigar he gradually recovered his good humour, and chatted pleasantly with his companions, whom he ascertained to be commission agents established in England, and

returning thither *via* Calais, on account of the short sea-passage, from a business trip to Belgium; until a succession of whistles and the periodical flickering of gaslamps announced their approach to Lille.

“You stop here, Monsieur, do you not?” asked the lady, who had just whispered a few words to her husband.

M. Brigaud, at that moment engaged in divesting himself reluctantly of the comfortable coat, answered in the affirmative.

“I have a great favour to beg of you, Monsieur,” she continued, “if it would not give you too much trouble.”

“Say rather pleasure,” was the gallant reply. “I am entirely at Madame’s orders.”

Madame signified her acknowledgments by a gracious smile.

“You know the Hotel du Chemin de fer du Nord,” she pursued—“it is close by; would it inconvenience you to leave the coat there for my brother-in-law on your way home? I am so afraid he may not think of coming to the gate.”

“He shall have it in five minutes, Madame. What name shall I enquire for?”

“Monsieur Jules.”

“Madame may consider her commission as already executed.” And with many bows and mutual expressions of goodwill, M. Brigaud took leave of his fellow-passengers, and, shouldering his valise, descended from the carriage and proceeded on his errand.

On arriving at the hotel, he found a stout individual standing at the door in conversation with one of the waiters.

“Monsieur Jules?” he began, addressing the latter.

“C’est moi, Monsieur,” replied the stout man, looking hard at the coat.

“Monsieur,” said the detective, “I have been commissioned to deliver this coat into your hands. You will pardon me, I trust, for having worn it during the cold journey.”

“Comment done! I cannot sufficiently thank you for your kindness. I was about to apply for it at the bureau, but you have anticipated my intention. Believe me, Monsieur,” he added, in a tone of deep conviction, “I shall not easily forget how much I am indebted to you.”

“Well,” said M. Brigaud to himself as he walked away, “Who would think that I had only brought back a coat which didn’t belong to me! They say we French are a polite people, and if my fat friend yonder is an average specimen of the nation at large, I suppose we are.”

He had hardly disappeared round the corner of the street when the stout man, turning to the waiter, asked him if he knew the gentleman who had just left them?

“I don’t know his name,” was the reply, “but I have seen him more than once with the commissaire. He is a police agent.”

“Diable!” said Monsieur Jules.

Meanwhile, the subject of this inquiry had directed his steps towards the Prefecture, and had been forthwith admitted to the private office of the commissaire, to whom he rendered a detailed account of his mission, and received orders to be in attendance at twelve o’clock on the following day. “I shall have looked over the extradition papers by that time,” said the presiding functionary, “and you can return to Paris by the afternoon train.” Whereupon M. Brigaud bowed respectfully, and retired to his lodgings in the town, where it is to be hoped he slept as soundly as a “mens conscia recti” could desire.

At the appointed hour he was once more ushered into the cabinet of his chief, no longer smiling affably as on the preceding evening, but frowning ominously.

“What is the meaning of this, Brigaud?” said he sternly, holding out a paper for the inspection of the agent. It was a telegram, marked “private,” and dated that morning from Brussels.

“Read it aloud,” pursued the commissaire. M. Brigaud obeyed, and read as follows:—

“Brussels, Thursday, 9.30.

“Yesterday twelve copies sold, sent last night by Calais mail train, sewed inside coat lined with fur. Bearers, two persons unknown.

“CHAPONET.”

During the perusal of this document [the] police agent’s voice trembled, and his face grew ashy pale. “Ah, les brigands!” he exclaimed, forgetful of the presence of his superior. Suddenly, a thought appeared to strike him, and before the astonished commissaire could make any effort to detain him, he seized his hat, and, without attempting an explanation, darted headlong out of the room.

In an incredibly short space of time he had reached the hotel, and grasped by the collar the luckless waiter, who was solacing himself with a pipe on the steps before the door. “Where is the scoundrel?” he shouted.

“What scoundrel?” stammered the half-throttled garçon.

“Monsieur Jules, idiot! I must see him directly.”

“What do I know about Monsieur Jules?” cried the waiter, rescuing himself with difficulty from his infuriated aggressor. “If you want him, you had better take the next train to Paris and follow him. He left here at six this morning.”

“Ah, triple canaille!” exclaimed the baffled detective. “And the train arrives at eleven! Those infernal copies will be half over Paris by this time! Stay, garçon, who and what is he, this Monsieur Jules?”

“Dame, M’sieu,” replied the waiter, “he didn’t tell me who he was, but I saw one thing plain enough.”

“Ha! what was that?”

“Why, M’sieu, I saw that he was uncommon glad to get his coat again!”

It was with faltering step and downcast mien that the police agent re-ascended the staircase leading to the private bureau, and so utterly depressed and woebegone was his appearance that the commissaire stared at him for a moment in speechless wonder.

“Monsieur Brigaud,” said he at length, “perhaps you will now have the goodness to explain the meaning of this unaccountable conduct.”

“Monsieur,” began Brigaud.

“Stay,” interrupted the commissaire. “I will listen to your excuses presently. Answer me first; is this information,” pointing to the telegram which lay on the table, “correct?”

“I am afraid it is,” replied the detective in a scarcely audible tone.

“The twelve copies of the *Lanterne* passed the frontier last night.”

“I—I believe so.”

“Concealed in the lining of a coat?”

“Apparently,” sighed the agent.

“Without suspicion being attached to any particular individual? Inexplicable!” murmured the commissaire. “The employés at Blandain shall answer for this.”

“It was no fault of theirs,” exclaimed the detective, unable to contain himself any longer. “Tenez, this questioning drives me wild, and I had rather make a clean breast of it at once. Monsieur, I have been tricked, as police agent was never tricked before! I have laid a trap, and fallen into it myself. The entire occurrences of last night have been one enormous mistake, as you will own,

when I tell you that the innocent wearer of the cloak lined with fur, the involuntary circulator of the *Lanterne*, was no other than ——”

“Who?” interrupted the commissaire, bending eagerly forward.

“Etienne Brigaud.”

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