The TRUTH ABOUT THE CASE

The Experiences of M. F. Goron, Ex-Chief of the Paris Detective Police

Edited by Albert Keyzer

HUNTING THE GANG

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ON March 3rd, 1892, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, three men entered the wineshop in the Rue Saint-Denis, kept by M. Desvois, at the corner of the Rue de la Grande Truanderie. They ordered a bottle of wine, and went upstairs for a game of billiards. Of the two doors in the billiard-room, one opened into the bedroom, whilst the other led to the entrance in the Rue de la Grande Truanderie. After half an hour Mme. Desvois, not hearing the noise of the billiard balls, went upstairs, and, to her surprise, saw the door of the bedroom ajar. At that moment one of the men came forward, and Mme. Desvois, convinced they were burglars, called for help. At her shrieks the three fellows rushed out, knocked her over, and ran away. Two of them escaped unseen, by the back door, but the third found himself in the Rue de la Grande Truanderie followed by a crowd attracted by the woman's cries. On the point of being overtaken, the man drew a revolver, fired at a youth who had seized his coat tails, and shot him down. The mad chase continued towards the Rue Pierre-Lescot, where he fired again, killing a cabinet-maker called Martinot. M. Bottelier, an employe, was his third victim; for the poor man, with a bullet in the groin, died on his way to the hospital. The murderer sped along, brandishing his weapon, when a M. Guyomard caught him pluckily by the throat and felled him to the ground. The police had the greatest trouble to prevent him from being lynched. With his clothes torn to shreds, and bleeding from several wounds, he was first conveyed to the police-station in the Rue des Prouvaires, and afterwards brought before me.

He was a short, thick-set, determined-looking man with a strongly-developed jaw, and a curious hard expression in the eyes—the type of the brute. He gave his name as Crampon; and we discovered that under the name of Bonfantini he had already undergone several long terms of imprisonment.

When I asked him for the names of his accomplices he looked at me with an ugly grin.

"What for? To obtain favors? No, thank you. I am not going to harm them. Besides, I am sick of everything. I want to be 'butte.'" *

"Are you sorry you killed these poor men?"

"Sorry? Not I. Or, rather, I am sorry; for I had still two shots in my revolver; and, but for that meddling idiot, you would not see me here today."

I did not prolong this conversation, and waited till the next day, when I had him once more brought before me, and again questioned him about his accomplices.

"Save yourself the trouble," he said with a sneer, "you'll get nothing out of me. I want to be 'butte.'"

Crampon had a sweetheart, a certain Maria Thouvenin, then lying ill at the Charite hospital. I searched her room, and found a uniform of a private in the Fourth Infantry, which I took away with me.

The excitement in Paris, when that horrible murder became known, was intense and the press clamored for the arrest of the two men who accompanied Crampon on that fatal afternoon. Unfortunately, Mme. Desvois was unable to give me their description, and none of my men, although well acquainted with the criminals and their haunts, could supply any clue.

I sent for Inspector Larose—an experienced official—and described to him a fellow I had seen some months ago with Crampon enter a bar.

Larose thought a long time and then said:

"Well, sir, I think I know the man, but I doubt whether he belongs to the Crampon gang."

"He may or he may not. I noticed his hair; it was cut short and looked as if he had just left the regiment."

Larose looked up.

"I begin to see it now, sir; it would be funny if he turned out to be our man. His name is Georges Plessis, and he is employed in a wineshop in the Rue du Bac."

"All right; let us go there at once."

Twenty minutes later we alighted and enquired after Plessis.

"He will be done in a minute," said the proprietor of the establishment; "he is bringing down his trunk."

"His trunk?" I asked. "Is he going away?"

"Yes, sir. He had a telegram, last night, from his old aunt, who is very ill."

Whilst he spoke, Plessis came down the stairs with a big box on his shoulder, and nearly dropped it when he saw us. We put him in the cab, and took him, box and all, to the prefecture, where he denied ever having seen Crampon.

"Why were you so anxious to leave Paris?" I said.

"I had a telegram——"

"Yes, I know. But I want to ask you why you did not do your military service? You are a defaulter."

"I defaulter!" he cried. "I have served my time; and in a fine regiment, too."

"Where?"

"In the Fourth Infantry."

"What has become of your uniform?"

"My uniform? My uniform? I—I—must have lost it."

"I think I have found it. Undo that parcel in the corner, and put on the coat and trousers."

He did so, and they fitted him like a glove.

"You left them with Maria Thouvenin," I said, "and you had better make a clean breast of it."

He reflected a moment, and then confessed having been with Crampon on the day of the murder; but, like Crampon, he positively refused to give the name of the other man.

"I'll tell you all about myself, M. Goron, but I'll never round on my pal; no, never. And I'll bet you'll never catch him either."

"We will see about that," I replied.

The following morning I sent again for Inspector Larose.

"Larose," I began, "Plessis two years ago broke his leg, and was nursed at Mangin's house by that man's sister. They are great pals?"

"Yes, sir. And he even wanted to marry the girl."

"Right. Then arrest Mangin for being implicated in this affair and bring him here at once."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I am certain Mangin had nothing to do with this business."

"So am I; and that is why I want you to bring him to me."

No doubt it seems horrible that I should arrest a man I knew to be innocent. But I saw no other way of laying my hands on a desperate character, who, at any moment, might have slipped through my fingers. And, before too much sympathy is wasted on Mangin, it should be remembered that this gentleman had spent about a third of his life in prison. He and Plessis belonged to the worst class of criminals. But I had had frequent opportunities of noticing that one chord, that of friendship, would vibrate in men of even that stamp; and it was on that I based the experiment I was about to make.

Mangin had been so often in custody that he did not look upset when he was marched into my office. And as he knew he was innocent of the crime imputed to him, he could afford to be sarcastic.

"What's the use," he said, "of hauling me in, when the fish who did the mischief is still swimming about? I was not in this affair."

"That remains to be seen."

"I was not in this affair," he repeated violently.

"Hold your tongue. You and Plessis were both in it."

After I had worked him to a high pitch of excitement I sent for Plessis, and then witnessed a curious scene, the one on which I had reckoned.

When Plessis was ushered in, and saw Mangin, he seemed dumbfounded, but he greeted him heartily with a:

"Bon jour, mon vieux!"

The other glared at him.

"You are a nice kind of friend," he hissed, "to denounce a pal you know to be innocent. You scoundrel!"

"I swear," shrieked Plessis, "I never mentioned your name! Ask M. Goron—ask him."

"He speaks the truth," I interposed; "he refused to give me the name of the third man who went with Crampon that afternoon to the Rue Saint-Denis; but, as I feel sure you, Mangin, are that man, I had you arrested."

Mangin growled and turned on Plessis.

"Am I to understand that in order to screen a pal of yours who took part in this business you actually let me, your best friend, suffer?"

If at that moment a member of the French academy, whose duty it is to expurge every strange word from our language, had entered my room he would have been horrified. For I and these two men were talking "the green tongue"—as it is called here—the slang in which Paris criminals feel so much more at home than in honest French. To the fact of my being able to converse in that queer idiom I attribute, in some measure, the influence I always have had over members of that class.

"Two years ago," continued Mangin, "when you had come to grief, and the police——"

"Shut up, you fool," shouted the angry Plessis.

"I shan't shut up, you white-livered sneak. You want to leave me in quod, when you know I had no hand in this? Look here, M. Goron, as he refuses to speak, I will. And you shall know something about this——"

"Stop your talk," bawled Plessis, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, "I give in; it's no use fighting any longer. M. Goron, my friend is innocent; he was never near the place on that day. Let him go, and I'll tell you who it is you are after."

He paced the room in uncontrolled agitation, talking rapidly as if to get the load off his mind.

"It is Joseph Simetiere. And now don't ask me anything else—for I shall not answer."

He then looked expectantly at Mangin, and the two shook hands. I rang the bell.

"This man," I said, pointing to Mangin, "is to be released."

And he walked away, proud at having only been three hours in custody, a thing which, I am sure, had never happened to him before.

Joseph Simetiere was a dangerous bandit. No time had to be lost, and that same night I went in search of him, accompanied by two of my men.

I knew Simetiere was a frequenter of a low dancing place in the Rue Montagne-Sainte-Genevieve, where the worst characters congregated. At an early hour I went there with my companions, whom I left a little distance off, and walked straight into a small room, from which, through a window closed by a curtain, everything could be seen that went on in the hall. This closet bore the curious name of "the Grand Duke's observatory," for it was from there that two of the Russian grand dukes had once watched the entertainment.

"Do you expect Joseph Simetiere tonight?" I asked the proprietor, who had every reason to assist the police.

"Yes, he comes here constantly. But his pals are always with him, and in your stead I would——"

"Thank you. I do not want your advice. Stay here, and tell me when he enters."

After an hour he called out:

"Here he is!"

Simetiere, a sinister-looking scoundrel, with three men and a woman, all desperate characters, sat down, ordered drinks, and started a conversation, which, above the squeak of fiddles and the thumping of feet, I could not hear. It was fortunate I had taken the precaution of locking the door, for the woman crossed the hall, and—I do not known for what reason—tried to come in. When I saw the fellow rise, I stole out, and joined my companions, whom I conducted to a dark doorway by which Simetiere had to pass.

"It is no good making a selection," I whispered to my men, "we must take our chance."

A few minutes after midnight we saw Simetiere come down the street. One of his friends walked by his side; the others were a few yards behind. The instant the two were level with us we rushed at them and before they could utter a cry they were bound, thrown into a cab, and taken off.

The other man we had arrested was Thevenin, an old offender, and this, as it turned out, proved a lucky haul, for the next morning, when Simetiere was brought before me, he scowled angrily, and said:

"I am sure it is that coward Thevenin who has rounded on me; and I'll be even with him. Yes, I was in the affair of the Rue Saint-Denis; but Thevenin, that ugly rat, was the third man."

This was at variance with what Plessis had told me. But instead of doubting Simetiere's statement I guessed that Plessis had only told me half the truth and that there was a fourth. My supposition proved correct, for, having confronted Crampon with the other three, it turned out that while Crampon with Simetiere and Thevenin had gone to the billiard-room in the wine-shop, Plessis had kept watch outside, which accounted for the fact that no one had seen him.

The public were delighted when it was announced that the men in connection with the Rue Saint-Denis crime were in custody; but I was not satisfied. Crampon was the head of a gang who had been, or were still, committing depredations, and I could not rest until that whole pack had been routed. And I may remark here that the post of chief of the Paris detective police is not a bed of roses. He certainly disposes of men in whose courage he can place reliance; but when a dangerous expedition on a big scale is planned, the chief has to place himself at their head and risk his life—like they do.

I had also to overcome a serious difficulty, that of laying my hand on the whole lot in one swoop; for I knew full well that if I caught only two or three the rest would disappear, and I should have to start a fresh hunt. I, therefore, sent for Latrille, an active young officer, who possessed the talent of disguising himself in such a marvelous manner that I often failed to recognize him when I met him in one of the passages of the prefecture. I instructed him to watch the gang, and keep me informed of their movements. Their favorite meeting-place was a low tavern in the Rue Aubry-le-Boucher.

A few days later, Latrille told me that the whole gang were to meet that evening, whereupon I made all my arrangements.

One by one, so as not to awaken any suspicion, we met in a passage close by that tavern, whence, unseen, we could watch the neighborhood. The night was dark, and the street bore an indescribably gloomy look. But, instead of the silence that would befit such a place, the air was rent with sounds of scuffles and brawls. Occasionally shrieks would be heard, shrieks that would not affect anybody about there. Little they cared whether it was an ordinary quarrel or murder; whatever it might be, it was common enough in the Rue Aubry-le-Boucher. A villainous-looking man grabbed a woman by the throat, and, with curses, demanded something that she kept hidden beneath her cloak. But, quick as lightning, she whipped out a knife, whereupon the fellow slunk off, and she continued her way as if nothing had occurred.

At a quarter past one a shabby-looking individual, with a dirty rag over his left eye, passed our hiding-place, and, turning sharply around, whispered:

"Come, quick; now is the time!"

It was Latrille.

I placed myself at the head of my men, and in less than a minute we were in the den, a narrow room, with a small bar covered with zinc, tables and chairs along the wall. Half a dozen ruffians were sitting there, listening attentively to one of their party, who was emphasizing his words with a bottle he held in his hand.

And then the scramble began. Three were overpowered before they could make use of their weapons; but the others fought like savages. One, with a knife between his teeth, had barricaded himself behind a table, and fired revolver shots at us; while the other two, armed with huge knives, threw themselves upon those nearest to them. Brunet received an ugly gash in the thigh, and poor Larose was shot in the leg. Suddenly one of my men shouted:

"Look out, sir."

I turned quickly, and saw a fellow, who had been hiding underneath a table, pointing a pistol at me. But the arm that held it was caught, wrenched backward, and, with a howl, he fell on the floor. In less than five minutes everything was over, and my prisoners, carefully handcuffed, were conveyed to the prefecture.

Then came the day of reckoning. Crampon and his accomplices were committed for trial. Of the eight who were arraigned, seven were sent to penal servitude; but Crampon, the murderer, was sentenced to death. The latter, who had told me twice that he wanted to be, as he called it, "butte," had hoped that his sentence would be commuted to transportation for life; but on the sixteenth of December, in the afternoon, I was officially informed that his execution would take place the following day.

At five o'clock the next morning, Deibler, the executioner, arrived on the Place de la Rouquette to build up the guillotine; and punctually at seven I followed M. Beauquesne, the governor of the Roquette prison, into Crampon's cell. The examining magistrate, the police commissary of the Roquette district, two other officials, and three warders accompanied us. When we entered, Crampon, who was sitting on his bed, turned livid.

"Crampon," said M. Beauquesne, "the moment of expiation has arrived."

The condemned man tried to speak, but we heard nothing but a rattling sound. The warders helped him to dress, and we left him alone with the priest, the Abbe Valladon. He then was conducted to the "Salle du Griffe," a dismal room with a stone floor, and, in the center, a small stool on which the culprit sits to submit to the "toilette," which consists in cutting his hair and shirt around the shoulders, and pinioning him. When Crampon felt the cold steel of the scissors on his neck, he shuddered, and uttered a faint cry.

A few minutes later the heavy doors of the prison were thrown open, and the sad procession appeared. First came Deibler, and behind him Crampon, supported by two of the executioner's assistants. Thus far he had shown a certain amount of courage. When, however, he caught sight of the horrible machine, he seemed paralysed. Deibler's men had to carry him; and when, a few seconds later, the knife dropped, I was almost certain that it had fallen on a lifeless body

*Slang term for "guillotined."

And then the scramble began.

GOOD-BYE TO AN OLD PIANO

"I've been thinking the matter over," said the tall commuter, "and I've about come to the conclusion that the younger generation of the present day is thoroughly devoid of sentiment."

"I wish my wife could hear you," dissented the commuter's neighbor. "Within the comparatively short space of eight months, no less than five trembling ladies have fluttered forth into the world, via our back kitchen step. You mightn't think it from just a casual survey of our modest establishment, but, sir, we have harbored not only sentiment of the native-born variety, but have encountered the imported sort as well. Did you ever chance to overhear a Polish lover telling his heart's delight what he thought of her?"

"Could anyone live in this particular suburb and not hear it?" asked the tall commuter sadly; "but that is not the kind of sentiment to which I refer. What I have in mind is the sentiment that attaches to things or places with which one has been associated for a long time."

"Well," said the seatmate, "my experience is this. I find that when I have been associated with 'things' a long time, they wear out, and in nine cases out of ten the only sentiment I can scare up is intense annoyance. Take my typewriter machine as a case in point. The 'sentiments' that I harbor for that hoary piece of mechanism would melt the type, should I endeavor to reduce them to print."

"My wife and I went over to visit her mother last night," said the tall commuter, ignoring, after a happy fashion all his own, his companion's remarks about his typewriter, "and when we got there we saw as neat a bit of twentieth century callousness as I ever laid my eyes on. All the youths of the neighborhood were gathered in the family sitting room, around one of those 'horseless pianos' that my in-laws have just acquired. As the poets say, 'joy reigned supreme.' They were waltzing and two-stepping, and singing and chorusing, and committing more offenses against the laws of harmony by their failures to keep on the key than I can bear to remember."

"It's news to me that you are a high-brow where music is concerned," said the skeptical listener.

"I have the privilege of knowing what I like, havent I?" inquired the upholder of sentiment loftily; "but as a matter of fact, I did not start this conversation for the purpose of revealing the capacity of my younger in-laws to commit musical murder."

"You make the same mistake every day, don't you?" asked the fellow-traveler, innocently. "You always call your monologues 'conversations.'" The tall commuter grinned. "What I want to show up is their inhuman indifference to the faithful old piano that has withstood their combined poundings. There it stood in a corner of the piazza, where they had obligingly rolled it so as to facilitate the work of getting rid of it when the firm from which they had bought the new piano should send for the worn-out old giant the next day."

"Well, you know, they do worse to square pianos than stand them out on nice dry porches nowadays," announced the unsympathetic auditor. "Why, I read not long ago about a manufacturer who burned up five hundred of them out in his back lots. It was bad for the pianos, but good for business, you know."

"I'm not one to block the wheels of progress, you know that," said the tall commuter, "but I would have liked it if even one of the youngsters had remembered the good times that old piano had given him or her. If he had thought even once of the children's parties, when my wife, who is the big sister of the family, used to play all sorts of lively little jig tunes for them, when they danced the 'Virginia Reel' and 'Going to Jerusalem.' They used to have family singing of an evening. Why, one of the things that helped me fall in love with my wife was the picture she used to make as she sat and played for her herd of little sisters and brothers as they sang their Sunday evening hymns."

"Did they sing any better than you say they do now?" breathed the listener, guardedly.

As usual, the tall commuter ignored him. "My wife," he went on, "felt just as I did about it, and when we were going home we shut the door on that crowd of vandals and went around to the side of the piazza to take a good-bye look at the old piano."

"I thought your eyes looked a trifle red this morning," said the unfeeling confidant.

"If I didn't know you to be a thousand per cent better than you sound, I'd rather choose another seat for my daily trip," announced the tall commuter. "Well, we went around to say good-bye to the old piano, and my wife told me the first flowers I ever sent her were lying on the piano when she came in from school—you know, she used to teach. They were lilies-of-the-valley, and it was deep winter. I don't remember having luncheon downtown for a month after buying them."

"For a sentimentalist, your memory of the flowers seems material enough."

"Then, I had forgotten this, but my wife says she had just stopped playing when I asked her to marry me."

"An uncontrollable burst of gratitude on your part, I dare say," chuckled the Philistine.

"Say," announced the tall commuter, "I'm going to finish these remarks about my in-laws' old piano, whether you like it or not. We, well, we finished our adieus, and started home, when my wife ran back. She said she had forgotten something, but, do you know, I bet a dollar she ran back to kiss that old piano good-bye."

"Well, well," mused the seatmate, "it seems like a terrible waste of a good material, when a nice little lady like your wife lavishes caresses on a mahogany case. But it is a good trait to stick to old friends, even inanimate ones. I've no doubt my wife would do the same."

"Sure she would," agreed the tall commuter. "That new conductor with the megaphone voice is getting ready to shout 'Woodside, change for Pennsylvania station.'"

A dog can attract attention by scaring up a rabbit, but a man must work very hard and accomplish a great deal before the people begin to glance in his direction.

When a man carries a girl's parasol he is in love with her. When she carries her own parasol she is in love with him.