Secret of the Plundered Safe

By EMILE GABORIAU

CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued.)

As he spoke M. LeCoq took from his desk and unrolled a large sheet of drawing paper. On this paper was photographed the door of M. Fauvel's safe. The scratch was indicated with great exactness.

"Now," said M. Lecoq, here is our scratch. It runs from top to bottom, starting from the hole in the lock, diagonally, and from left to right; that is to say, it terminates on the side next to the private staircase leading to the banker's apartments. Although very deep at the keyhole, it ends in a scarcely perceptible mark."

"Yes, patron, I see that."

"Naturally you thought that this scratch was made by the person who took the money. Let us see if you were right. I have here a little iron box painted with green varnish like M Fauvel's safe; here it is. Take a key and try to scratch it. The paint is very hard, my friend, and yet that on the safe is still harder and thicker. So you see the scratch you discovered could not have been made by the trembling hand of a thief letting the key slip."

"Whew!" exclaimed Fanferlot, stupefied; "I never should have thought of that. It certainly required great force to make the deep scratch on the safe."

"Yes, but how was that force employed? I have been racking my brain for three days, and only yesterday did I come to a conclusion. Let us examine together and see if our conjectures present enough chances of probability to establish a starting point."

M. Lecoq abandoned the photograph and, walking to the door communicating with his bedroom, took the key from the lock, and, holding it in his hand, said:

"Come here, Fanferlot, and stand by my side; there; very well. Now, suppose that I want to open this door, and you don't want me to open it; when you see me about to insert the key what would be your first impulse?"

"To put my hands on your arm and draw it toward me so as to prevent your introducing the key."

"Precisely so. Now let us try it; go on." Fanferlot obeyed; and the key held by M. Lecoq, pulled aside from the lock, slipped along the door, and traced upon it a diagonal scratch, from top to bottom, the exact reproduction of the one in the photograph.

"Oh, oh, oh!" exclaimed Fanferlot, in three different tones of admiration, as he stood gazing in a reverie at the door. "What a man you are! I see the scene as if I had been present. Two persons were present at the robbery; one wished to take the money, the other wished to prevent its being taken. That is clear, certain, and it proves that I am correct in thinking the cashier innocent."

"How so?"

"Because, at perfect liberty to open the safe whenever he wished to do so, it is not likely that he would have brought a witness when he intended to commit the theft."

"Well reasoned, Fanferlot. But on this supposition the banker would be equally innocent. Look for the real rogue, the one who opened the safe, and stole the notes, and who is still at large, while others are suspected."

"Impossible, patron—impossible! Don't you know that M. Fauvel and his cashier had keys, and they only? And they always kept these keys in their pockets."

"On the evening of the robbery the banker left his key in the secretary."

"Yes; but the key alone was not sufficient to open the safe; the word must also be known. That name was 'Gypsy.'

"Which is the name of the cashier's cousin. Now keep your eyes open. The day you find a man sufficiently intimate with Bertomy to be aware of all the circumstances connected with this name, and at the same time on a footing with the Fauvel family which would give him the privilege of entering M. Fauvel's chamber, then, and not till then, you will discover the guilty party. On that day the problem will be solved."

"We shall certainly succeed if you interest yourself in the case."

"Yes, I am interested in it, and during the last four days I have discovered many important facts. But listen to me. I have reasons for not appearing in this affair. No matter what happens, I forbid you mentioning my name."

"I will obey your instructions and be discreet."

"I shall rely upon you. Now, to begin, you must carry this photograph to the judge of instruction. Explain to him as if it were your own discovery, what I have just shrown you; repeat for his benefit the scene we have just acted, and I am convinced that this evidence will determine him to release the cashier. Prosper must be at liberty before I can commence my operations."

Fanferlot was joyously picking up his hat to go when M. Lecoq checked him by waving his hand, and said:

"I have not finished. You know how to drive a carriage and manage horses? Very well. As soon as the judge dismisses you return home immediately, make yourself a wig and the complete dress of a valet; and, having dressed yourself, take this letter to the agency on the Rue Delorme. The agent will send you to M. de Clameran, who is looking for a valet, his man having left him yesterday."

"Excuse me if I venture to suggest that you are making a mistake. This Clameran is not the cashier's friend."

"Why do you always interrupt me?" said M. Lecoq, imperiously. "Do what I tell you, and don't disturb your mind about the rest. Clameran is not a friend of Prosper's, I know, but he is the friend and protector of Raoul de Lagors. Why so? Whence the intimacy of these two men of such different ages? That is what I must find out. I must also find out who this ironmaster is, who lives in Paris, and never goes to attend to his furnaces. Through you I will have an eye upon him. He has a carriage; you are to drive it, and you will soon be able to give me an account of his manner of life, and of the sort of people with whom he associates."

"You will be obeyed. Where shall I report to you?"

"I will call on you every day. Until I tell you differently don't step foot in this house; you might be followed. If anything important should happen send a note to your wife, and she will inform me. Go, and be prudent."

The door closed on Fanferlot as M. Lecoq passed into his bedroom. In the twinkling of an eye he had divested himself of the appearance of a police officer. He took off his stiff cravat and gold spectacles, and removed the close wig from his thick black hair. The official Lecoq had disappeared, leaving in his place the genuine Lecoq whom nobody knew—a handsome young man, with a bold, determined manner, and brilliant, piercing eyes.

Meanwhile Fanferlot did not run, but flew, toward the Palais de Justice. At last he was now able to convince some one that he, Fanuferlot, was a man of wonderful perspicacity. His hopes were not deceived. If the judge was not absolutely and fully convinced he admired the ingenuity of the whole proceeding.

"This decides me," he said, as he dismissed Fanferlot. "I will make out a favorable report to-day; and it is highly probable that the accused will be released to-morrow."

He began at once to write out one of those terrible decisions of "Not proven," which restores liberty, but not honor, to the accused man; which says that he is not guilty, but does not say he is innocent.

CHAPTER IX.

Prosper had been languishing in his lonely cell for nine days, when on Thursday morning the jailer came to inform him of the judge's decision. He was conducted before the officer who had searched him when he was arrested; and the contents of his pockets, his watch, penknife and several articles of jewelry were restored to him; then he was told to sign a receipt.

He was next led across a dark passage, and almost pushed through a door, which abruptly shut upon him. He found himself on the quay; he was alone; he was free, but only acquittal after due trial would restore him to his former position among men.

Having arrived in front of Gypsy's house, he hesitated to cross the threshold. He experienced the timidity of an honest man who is suspected of a crime; he feared to meet a familiar face. However, as he could not remain all day on the pavement, he went in. The janitor uttered a joyful exclamation on seeing him.

"I am delighted to see you again!" he said. "I felt that you would come back as white as snow. When I read in the newspapers that you were accused of robbery I said to every one, 'He is innocent!'"

"Madam has, no doubt, left here?" he said; "do you know where she has gone?"

"No, monsieur. On the day of your arrest she sent for a cab, put all her boxes into it, and drove away without saying where she was going. Since then we have heard nothing of her. When your father left this morning at 8 o'clock he told me that one of his friends remained, whom I was to look upon as the master until your return. You know him, doubtless, a stout man, about your height, with red whiskers."

Prosper was greatly astonished. A friend of his father occupying the house! What did that mean? However, he concealed his surprise.

"Yes, I know him," he said. Then, rapidly ascending the staircase, he rang his own bell.

The cashier did not recollect having seen him before.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," said the man, with a bow. "That you are surprised to see me here, you were about to observe. I can easily understand. Your father intended to introduce me to you, but he was obliged to leave for Beaucaire this morning. I am glad to say he went away as convinced as I am that you have not taken a sou belonging to M. Fauvel. This letter," continued the stout gentleman, "will serve as an introduction, I hope."

The cashier took the letter, opened it, and as he read his face brightened and the blood returned to his cheeks. Having finished the letter, he held out his hand to the stout gentleman, who shook it warmly.

"My father tells me," said Prosper, "that you are one of his best friends. He tells me to place implicit confidence in you and to act entirely on your advice."

"Just so. This morning your father said to me, 'Verduret—that is my name—Verduret, my son is in a painful position. You must get him out of it.' I answered, 'All right, I will do my best.' Now the ice is broken, let us discuss the question. What are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do? I am going to find out the wretch who has caused my ruin, and hand him over to justice—to revenge myself."

"Exactly; and have you any clew to the guilty person?"

"None, and yet I shall succeed, for a man who devotes his whole life to the accomplishment of a task cannot fail."

"Well said, M. Prosper; I fully expected such would be your intention, and I have already been looking into the case. I have formed a plan. To begin with, you must disappear."

"Disappear!" cried the cashier, indignantly. "Disappear! that would be a confession of guilt, would authorize the world to say that I am hiding so as to enjoy undisturbed the stolen fortune."

"Well, what then?" said Red Whiskers. "Did you not say just now that the sacrifice of your life was made? You have an enemy? Some petty imprudence will betray him. But while he sees you standing on the watch he will be on his guard. Let us reflect on the course you should pursue. Now listen. You have a friend, M. de Lagors? Who is this fellow?"

"M. de Lagors, monsieur," said Prosper haughtily, "is M. Fauvel's nephew; a wealthy young man, handsome, intelligent, cultivated, and the best friend I have."

"Humph!" said M. Verduret. "I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of one adorned with so many charming qualities. I must let you know that I wrote him a note in your name asking him to come here, and he sent word that he would be here directly. I must see this young man. Also I have arranged and will submit to you a little plan of conversation——"

A ring at the front door interrupted M. Verduret.

"Adieu to my plan; here he is. Remember, Prosper," said M. Verduret, in a warning tone, "not one word to this man about your plans, or about me. Pretend to be discouraged, helpless and undecided what to do."

And he disappeared behind a curtain as Prosper ran to open the door. Prosper's portrait of M. de Lagors had not been an exaggerated one. So handsome a face and manly a figure could only belong to a noble character. His first impulse was to throw himself into Prosper's arms.

"Your letter, my dear Prosper," said Raoul, "made me almost ill. I was so frightened by it. I asked myself if you could have lost your mind. Then I left everything to fly to your assistance, and here I am."

Prosper did not seem to hear him; he was preoccupied about the letter he had not written.

"You must not feel discouraged," continued M. de Lagors, "you are young enough to commence life anew. Your friends are still left to you. Rely on me. I am rich, half of my fortune is at your disposal."

"Thanks, Raoul," he said, with emotion, "thank you. But unfortunately all the money in the world would be of no use now. I have made no plans yet. My mind is too confused for me to think."

"I will tell you what to do," replied Raoul, quickly; "you must start afresh; until this mysterious robbery is explained you must keep away from Paris. It will never do for you to remain here. I have been talking about you to Clameran. 'If I were in Prosper's place,' he said, 'I would turn everything into money and embark for America; there I would make a fortune and return to crush with my millions those who have suspected me.'"

"I will think it over," Prosper finally forced himself to say. "I will see. I would like to know what M. Fauvel says."

"My uncle? I suppose you know that I have declined the offer he made me to enter his banking house, and we have almost quarreled. I have not set foot in his house for over a month; but I hear of him occasionally. My uncle, they say, is more distressed by this affair than you are. He does not attend to his business, and wanders about as if he had lost every friend on earth."

"And Mme. Fauvel, and——" Prosper hesitated—"and Mlle. Madeleine, how are they?"

"Oh," said Raoul, lightly, "my aunt is as pious as ever. As to my handsome, icy cousin, she cannot bring herself down to common matters, because she is entirely absorbed in preparing for the fancy ball to be given day after to-morrow by the Jaudidiers. She has discovered, so one of her friends told me, a wonderful dressmaker, a foreigner who has suddenly appeared from no one knows where, who is making a costume of Catherine de Medici's maids of honor; and it is to be a marvel of beauty."

Excessive suffering brings with it a sort of dull insensibility and stupor; and Prosper thought that there was nothing left to be inflicted upon him.

"I must leave you now, my dear Prosper; on Saturday I will see these ladies at the ball, and will bring you news of them. Now, do have courage, and remember that, whatever happens, you have a friend in me."

(To be continued.)

Finding a Victim.

When a crowd of boys in a boarding school have settled on some mischief by common consent, and have been detected and ordered to bring forward the ringleader to be punished, there is often great difference of opinion as to who the ringleader really is. The boys of Winchester College, in England, have hit upon a scheme for settling the matter, says a master of the school, the Rev. G. M. A. Hewett.

When the master demands a victim as a sacrifice of atonement for breaking rules, the boys get all together, and each puts twopence into a hat. Then each boy's name is written on a slip and lots are drawn. The one who is chosen to be the victim takes the collection in the hat, and delivers himself over to the master as the ringleader. Then when he has been sufficiently punished, he goes down-town and consoles himself with ice cream bought by the common fund.

Every man's task is his life preserver.—Emerson.

Taking Him at His Word.

"I didn't do it, your honor."

"But two witnesses here say they saw you pick his pocket."

"I'll tell you how it was, judge. We were on the car coming home from the races. I remarked that I wondered where I was going to get the price of a night's lodging and this gentleman replied: 'You can search me.' Well, I searched him. Nothing wrong in taking a man at his word, is there?"—Kansas City Journal.

Old Joke True.

The old jokes about the antiquity of the ballet girl have gone out of fashion, and it is not likely that they will be revived now that the ballet has become so much less important than it used to be. The show girls who figure in contemporaneous musical pieces are, as a rule, too good-looking to admit of any jokes on that subject. So the reality of the situations existing in some of the comic opera choruses is for that reason more interesting.

A fair member of one organization is the daugther of another. Mother naturally occupies a somewhat inconspicuous position in the line. Daughter, on the other hand, is right down in front in the beauty row. She is only 19, so her relative in the company is not so old as the relation suggests.

In another company the mother of one of the principals is in the chorus. In a theatrical troupe that played here last winter the wife of the leading man used to be the principal lady super.

Muscular Faith.

Mrs. Meeker—I don't take any stock in these faith cures brought about by the laying on of hands.

Mrs. Strongun—Well, I do. I cured my little boy of the cigarette habit in that way.

The barbers in Cuba lather their patrons with their hands, from a bowl made to fit under the chin. A brush is not used.

Cause and Effect.

"Now, that is what I like to see," observed the rural merchant to the proprietor of the great department store. "All your clerks are full of vim and energy."

"Yes," replied the proprietor with a sarcastic smile. "We close at noon today and they are getting ready to go out."

So Convenient.

Mrs. Urban—How you must enjoy living in the country. I suppose you can get all the fresh fruit and vegetables you want.

Mrs. Annex—Oh, yes. Such a nice peddler comes out from the city three times a week.—Brooklyn Life.