The Roupell Mystery

By Austyn Granville

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

The prefect approached the bed and gazed with much earnestness upon the body. Around the neck, a pearl necklace of considerable value yet depended, and on her fingers rich gems still sparkled in their golden settings.

"Come here, Monsieur Revell," he said, quietly to the mayor, in that hushed voice which even men accustomed to such scenes involuntarily adopt in the presence of the dead. The mayor of Villeneuve approached the bedside, and gazed for some moments on the features of the murdered woman.

"Do you notice the direction of the bullet?" inquired the prefect, pointing with his finger.

"I do. It appears to have entered the front of the head, considerably above the temple."

"Just so; but you will notice that its course is downward."

"What does that indicate to you?" inquired the magistrate.

"Come with me, and I will show you," replied the officer. He led the way across the room, and stood before the secretoire. "You say nothing has been disturbed here."

"Positively nothing."

"Then notice how this chair has been tipped over. Now let me place another chair in the position it occupied. So! Now sit down in it. You are taller than Madame Roupell, but you may have noticed that women as a general thing sit higher than men."

"I have noticed that."

"Therefore when you were both seated there would not be so very much difference between the height of your head from the ground and that of Madame Roupell."

"No! It would be approximately the same."

"Exactly so. Now I am going to point my pistol at your head."

The prefect pressed the muzzle of his weapon against the magistrate's temple in the spot corresponding to the wound on the head of Mme. Roupell. M. Revell changed color slightly as he felt the cold rim of the pistol against his forehead, but he sat still.

"You may make this experiment as short as you please, monsieur le prefect," he exclaimed, with a feeble attempt at pleasantry.

"It is concluded," replied the officer, putting up his pistol. "If I had fired then my bullet would have described precisely the same course as the bullet of the assassin has done."

"Through my brain," replied the magistrate, not without a momentary shudder. "Which convinces you——"

"That Madame Roupell was at the secretoire when she was killed. She must have been seated; or how could the course of the bullet have been downward?"

The mayor's admiration for M. Leblanche increased every moment. Though they were alone in the room, the prefect dropped his voice to a whisper, and took M. Revell on one side close to the window when he asked the next few questions:

"You are well acquainted, I suppose, with the Roupell family?"

"Yes, I may say I am. We exchange visits. My wife and daughters frequently walked and rode with the young ladies here. In fact, I may say that we have been quite friendly."

M. Lablanche put the next question in an apparently careless manner.

"And the young ladies? There was nothing between either of them and this young man?"

"Nothing that I know of. He was simply a friend of the family."

"Has he not been particularly attentive to one of the young ladies?"

"I do not think so, and especially not of late. People here seem to think rather that he has been entirely eclipsed by Monsieur Chabot, who, it appears, stood very well with them. I know the gentleman was quite attentive."

"And to whom were those attentions directed, Mademoiselle Harriet or Mademoiselle Emily?"

"I could not really say. There was little to choose between them. Both, as you have seen, are charming, and both, as I have told you, are the acknowledged heiresses of Madame Roupell."

It was M. Lablanche's turn to be astonished.

"Her acknowledged heiresses!" he exclaimed. "Why, you never told me that."

"Did I not?" answered the mayor. "Well, it is the fact, all the same. But you were about to say something."

"Not at all," replies M. Lablanche, "I was only thinking," and he suffered his features to relapse into their accustomed expression of immobility. "Thank you; that is all I wish to know, monsieur le maire. If you will now go downstairs and prepare your report for the tribunal, I will join you in a few minutes, when I have concluded my investigations."

The mayor bowed to the prefect and left the apartment.

CHAPTER IV.

Victor Lablanche owed his unprecedented success largely to the fact that he never permitted anybody to share his discoveries in the field of crime. If ever he found out anything remarkable, he never suffered the slightest hint of it to cross his lips. He reserved it for a grand coup when the crisis of the case should be reached. And these surprises, which invariably enhanced his reputation as a shrewd officer, were generally effected through the exercise of the most searching investigations of the locality where a crime had been committed. No sooner had the door closed than the whole demeanor of the prefect underwent an entire change. From the staid, unconcerned official, quietly engaged in the perfunctory discharge of a duty, he became immediately transformed into an eager enthusiast.

But whatever success might have attended his efforts in previous cases, in this one the worthy officer was doomed to meet with nothing but disappointment. But one single ray illumined his darkened horizon of hope. In making a careful survey of all the rooms on that floor of the chateau, he discovered that two beds had not been slept in. Evidently Miss Harriet Weldon and M. Chabot had not retired, and they were the only two persons in the chateau except Mme. Roupell herself who had not done so.

"I will assume for the purpose of argument that M. Jules Chabot is guilty," he began, quietly talking to himself, as if he were some second party. "Let me first see whether there is a sufficient motive for him to have committed this crime which young Van Lith so strenuously denies. In the first place, who knows anything about Monsieur Chabot? I do not, and the mayor does not, for I have asked him. Assume him to be a fortune hunter simply, and the motive grows stronger. But why? Is it because he is paying attention to the Mademoiselles Weldon? Not entirely; but because as long as Madame Roupell is alive, the Mademoiselles Weldon do not succeed to her fortune? Monsieur Chabot may have killed Madame Roupell in order to secure to himself the fortune he was after. And he may have contrived to throw suspicion upon Monsieur Van Lith, not only for the purpose of diverting suspicion from himself, but in order to rid himself of a very dangerous rival. But why a dangerous rival, when there are two young ladies, and Monsieur Van Lith cannot marry both? Because there must be some provision in Madame Roupell's will by which the first of her nieces marrying will have the larger share of the estate. And if such provision exists, it is not unlikely that a sharp, shrewd fellow like this Chabot would have made himself master of its contents, for he is an intimate friend of the family; and his relations must be almost confidential. This is a mere theory, of course," concluded the prefect to himself; "but in pursuance of it, let us see how Monsieur Chabot spent the hour which elapsed between his retiring and the time of the murder."

He again entered the chamber which had been occupied by Chabot, and with his new theory thus in his mind looked around him. He now sought to make each trifling incident reflect some suspicion against the late occupant of the chamber. He examined the bed clothes with greater care this time. It was evident that Chabot had not even lain down outside of them. He looked under the bedstead even, but espying nothing but a bootjack, directed his attention next to the toilette table. He was about to despair, when his eye fell upon a small black object, not over a quarter of an inch in length. He picked it up, and found it was the broken point of a lead pencil. M. Chabot had evidently passed the time in writing. The question was, how much of the time?

According to the mayor's written notes of his examination of the inmates of the chateau, an hour had certainly elapsed between the time of Mme. Roupell's retiring and the sound of the pistol shot. At what precise period of that interval had the pencil point been broken? The accident to the pencil had not occurred at the time of the firing of the shot, for if it had been caused by reason of the writer's starting with surprise, he would not, naturally have taken time to put away his writing materials before going to ascertain the cause of the noise. He must therefore have been thus employed for only a portion of the interval. The question now uppermost in Victor Lablanche's mind was: How did Jules Chabot consume the rest of his time? If he should fail to properly account for the whole hour, there would be strong reasons for holding him in custody.

Having revolved these matters in his mind, the prefect of police arose from the easy chair into which he had thrown himself and approached the door leading from Jules Chabot's room to the chamber of Mme. Roupell. Of course it was fastened, as by again referring to the mayor's notes it transpired that Jules Chabot had entered the chamber by another way. Almost mechanically he seized the handle and turned it. The door was unlocked. When he had made these discoveries he descended with a lighter heart than he would otherwise have done. Much would depend upon the evidence to be elicited by himself and the testimony to be taken before the judge of instruction.

He strolled out on the terrace to complete his official inspection of the premises. He commenced his examination at the back of the chateau. He went into all the outhouses; he visited the servants' offices—even the cellars and dairy. Then he emerged again into the open air and inspected the windows and searched among the flower beds beneath them for the prints of feet. Nothing, however, rewarded this careful scrutiny, until crossing the lawn he went through an ancient ivy-covered archway and gained the front of the building. Then his quick eye detected that a shrub had been brushed aside, and stooping on the graveled walk, he discovered that a weed had been crushed beneath a heavy foot. A little further on he found further signs, and a little later stood looking down upon a footprint in the soft mold.

Following these footprints, he found they led directly beneath the window of the chamber occupied by Harriet Weldon. This puzzled him. He was nonplussed for the moment, when he noticed that the vines on the lattice seemed lately to have been disturbed. There was another window below Miss Weldon's within easy reach. He put up his hand, and it swung open. Looking in he saw that it afforded access to a small pantry, and the door of the room was ajar. He took a rule from his pocket, and carefully measured the footprints. Then, after ruminating for a few moments, he quickly re-entered the house.

"That is an American boot heel, if ever I saw one in my life," muttered the prefect. "The open door and the footprints! I wonder which of those men did it, for it lies between the two. And just at present the odds are against the American. Yet, still, something tells me Monsieur Jules Chabot will bear watching."

CHAPTER V.

The village of Villeneuve was within the jurisdiction of the tribunal of the department of the Seine. The judge of instruction of this department was a man of unusual ability. In addition to possessing a profound knowledge of the law, M. Joseph Bertrand was a deep and interested student of human nature. Of all the cases which during his term of office had come before him, none, perhaps, had excited such widespread attention as this mysterious murder of the unfortunate Mme. Roupell. The horrible nature of the crime, the heartlessness of the assassin, and the age and rank of his victim, all tended to invest the case with unusual interest.

At ten o'clock precisely M. Bertrand took his seat. The diagram which Lablanche, the prefect of police, had prepared, the notes of the mayor's examination and those of the justice of the peace, lay on the desk before him. There, too, lay the pistol found on the floor of Mme. Roupell's chamber. In an adjoining chamber were gathered the witnesses who were prepared to testify in the case.

"You may bring in the prisoner," said M. Bertrand, when all was in readiness; and Charles Van Lith was led in.

The judge of instruction eyed him keenly. His face was of a deathly pallor; his eyes were hollow and sunken. Altogether, he appeared to disadvantage, and he was conscious that he did so. His youth, however, and the fearless manner in which he glanced around him, did not fail to impress M. Bertrand favorably. Notwithstanding his official habit of sternness, the judge of instruction was possessed of many humane qualities. It was with a voice, therefore, rather mild and encouraging than harsh, that he addressed the young man before him.

"I wish, monsieur," he said, "to afford you every opportunity of clearing yourself. Now state, as briefly as possible, for there are many witnesses to be examined, how you came to be in the chateau Villeneuve last night. I see by the report of the prefect that you have refused to explain that point. Perhaps you had good reasons for your silence then; but you can have none now, here before me. How did you happen to be in the chateau, I repeat, at the time this crime was committed, and even in Madame Roupell's chamber?"

A fearful struggle was taking place in the breast of the American. To state the true reason of his presence in the chamber would be to forever compromise Harriet Weldon, and yet it was the only course which could possibly clear him. The same sense of honor, however, which had bound him to silence when interrogated by the prefect of police, operated to close his lips before the judge of instruction. So, instead of flatly refusing to give the desired information, he sought to modify the bad effect of his refusal by saying:

"I cannot answer the question—as yet, monsieur. It may appear an easy one to which to reply; but I ask you to believe that at present there is an insurmountable obstacle to my doing so."

An expression of vexation seemed to pass over the face of the judge. He had been favorably predisposed toward the prisoner, and would have liked to see him go free.

"I warn you that your persistent refusal to answer is liable to be construed as evidence of guilt. Would the explanation you decline to give involve the party guilty of the crime—perhaps some friend of yours whom you desire to screen?"

Van Lith hesitated but a moment, and then, to the evident surprise of M. Bertrand, replied:

"It would not."

"Would the explanation you refuse to give clear you?"

Again, to M. Bertrand's growing astonishment, the young American replied:

"I don't think it would."

(To be continued.)

What Red Tape Leads To.

Clerk (at poor relief office to applicant)—Are you applying for relief?

Applicant (in rags and looking famished)—Yes.

Clerk—Where do you live?

Applicant gives an address.

Clerk—Well, we shall inquire into your case and the result will be made known to you as soon as possible. By the way, have you a telephone?—Bon Vivant.

In Bostonese.

"Come in, Waldonia," said her mother. "You have been in that swing long enough."

"Presently, gramma," answered the little Boston girl. "I am permitting the carnivorous quadruped of the genus Felis to slacken its physical activities and pass by imperceptible gradations into a condition of total extinct vitality."—Chicago Tribune.

Doing Good.

The woman crowded into the seat reserved for smokers and sniffed ominously, contemptuously.

"Tobacco," she remarked, "is a vile poison. Nicotine would kill a cat."

"Then being the case, madam," replied an embarrassed smoker, "if I were you I'd make the cat cut it out."—Philadelphia Ledger.

The Village Pest.

"Well, so long, old man. I must sneak. Here comes Tompkins, and he always persists in telling me his troubles."

"That leaves me up against it."

"In what way?"

"He always tells me his jokes."—Milwaukee Sentinel.

The Confession.

Time, 11 p. m.: Private Brown (on bridge guard for first time)—Ha'alt! 'Oo-goes-thur?

Country woman (returning late from market)—There, there, my dear, don't 'ee be afraid, 'tis only me.—Ally Sloper's Half Holiday.

What He Went By.

Club Man (rather full)—I wish you'd take me home. Do you know where I live?

Policeman—What's the name of your cook?

So There.

A little fellow of 3 years was asked by a gentleman how old he was.

"I'm not old!" he exclaimed indignantly; "I'm almost new."

TURN DOWN HENEY

Oregon Land Fraud Trials Cannot Wait Longer.

BRISTOL TO GO ON WITH CASES

Department of Justice Has Been at Last Goaded to Action by Complaints and Criticisms.

Washington, Nov. 26.—Further postponement of the trial of the Oregon land fraud cases is not to be tolerated. Because of complaints and criticisms the department of Justice has decided to take radical steps, which will force trials at an early date, and it is expected that District Attorney Bristol will soon receive instructions to proceed.

Only recently John Hall, under indictment, wrote the president, asking for trial. His request was transmitted to the attorney general and thence to Mr. Bristol, who replied that he could not proceed, as that was one of F. J. Heney's cases.

The department says that, if Mr. Heney cannot get away from San Francisco long enough to prosecute Hall and Binger Hermann, some one else will be found who can take up this work. In fairness to those under indictment, the department believes these long delayed cases should be tried. It is probable that Mr. Bristol will be instructed to prosecute Hall and Hermann, as well as all others under indictment for land frauds.

BURNED IN REVENGE.

Thirteen Persons Roasted in New York to Gratify Malice.

New York, Nov. 26.—Thirteen persons lost their lives and several others were injured early today in a tenement house fire at 106 Eighth street and Second avenue. All the dead were Italians. Six of the 13 were children. The bodies were huddled together in rooms on the top floor of the four-story building, where the terror-stricken people had been driven by the flames, which rushed up from the lower floors. Some had been enveloped in the flames and burned alive. Others, overcome by smoke, were spared the agonies of death by the flames.

That the fatal fire was the work of incendiaries who sought revenge is the opinion of the police and firemen, who made the first hasty examination. Three weeks ago three Italians were caught in the act of trying to rob a safe in the saloon of Guiseppe Cudano, on the ground floor. The safe contained more than $2,000 which the saloonist's friends had withdrawn from the banks during the money panic. The would-be robbers were arrested and are now awaiting trial.

The fire of today started in Cudano's saloon, and the police believe it may have been the work of friends of the prisoners, who take this means of squaring accounts with the saloonist.

OPEN MORE LAND.

Nearly Million and a Half Acres in Montana to Be Sold.

Helena, Mont., Nov. 26.—The members of the commission recently appointed to appraise the remaining government land on the Flathead Indian reservation have perfected an organization. Orders from Washington are to go into the field at once and begin work. The reservation contains approximately 1,425,000 acres, of which 175,000 acres have been allotted to the Indians, leaving 1,250,000 acres to be inspected, classified and appraised. The land will be divided into agricultural land of the first class, agricultural land of the second class, timber land, mineral land and grazing land.

Settlers under the homestead law, who shall reside upon and cultivate the land for five years, shall pay one-third of the appraised value in cash, at the time of entry, and the remainder in five equal installments, one, two, three, four and five years, respectively, with the usual homestead fees.

California Selects Site.

Seattle, Nov. 26.—A site near the Washington and Oregon state grounds will be recommended to Governor Gillett, of California, by the representatives from that state who inspected the exposition grounds yesterday. Under the California law the governor makes the final decision on the site and J. A. Filcher, his special representative, and Nathaniel Ellery, the state engineer, came to look over the grounds. The California men and Director General Nadeau went over the sites yesterday.

A New Source of Heat.

Virginia City, Nev. Nov. 26.—Some engineers of Virginia City, reflecting on the scarcity of fuel every winter in that rigorous climate, have hit upon an odd idea for mitigating the temperature and warming the buildings of that town. One of them has undertaken to struggle with the difficulty by utilizing the superfluous heat of the adjacent mines, which he proposes to tap with an iron tube, and so ventilate the mines while heating the houses.

Government Checks Plague.

San Francisco, Nov. 26.—The plague report issued by the board of health was as follows: One new suspect; none verified; 101 verified to date; 63 deaths; 30 discharged as cured; 8 remaining. The Federal authorities have decided to take over the work of sanitation.

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