

A TRUE BILL.

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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 at Saverne as 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 in-doors, 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 26th, 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 had 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 neighbourhood. But was not Paris the goal of your journey, and did you not arrive here about April 15th?"

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the baron, "I have submitted to these impertinent questions quite long enough. By what right 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 this word 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, née 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 GOOD OLD DAYS.

THE following amusing description of the condition of things in the last generation is given by Sydney Smith.—"A young man, alive at this period, hardly knows to what improvements of human life he has been introduced, and I would bring before his notice the following eighteen changes which have taken place in England since I first began to breathe in it the breath of life—a period amounting now to nearly seventy-three years.

"Gas was unknown. I groped about the streets of London in all but the darkness of a twinkling oil lamp under the protection of watchmen in their grand climacteric, and exposed to every species of depredation and insult.

"I have been nine hours sailing from Dover to Calais before the invention of steam. It took me nine hours to go from Taunton to Bath before the invention of railroads, and I now go in six hours from Taunton to London. In going from Taunton to Bath I suffered between 10,000 and 12,000 severe contusions before stone-breaking Macadam was born.

"I can walk, by the assistance of the police, from one end of London to another without molestation; or, if tired, get into a cheap and active cab, instead of those cottages on wheels, which the hackney-coaches were at the beginning of my life. I had no umbrella: they were little used, and very dear. There were no waterproof hats, and my hat has often been reduced by rains into its primitive pulp.

"I could not keep my small-clothes in their proper place, for braces were unknown. If I had the gout, there was no colicium. If I was bilious, there was no calomel. If I was attacked by ague, there was no quinine. There were filthy coffee-houses instead of elegant clubs. Game could not be bought. There were no banks to receive the savings of the poor. The Poor Laws were gradually sapping the vitals of the country; and whatever miseries I suffered, I had no post to whisk my complaints for a single penny to the remotest corners of the empire; and yet, in spite of all these privations, I lived on quietly, and am now ashamed that I was not more discontented, and utterly surprised that all these changes and inventions did not occur two centuries ago.

"I forgot to add, that as the baskets of stage-coaches in which luggage was then carried, had no springs, your clothes were rubbed all to pieces; and that even in the best society one third of the gentlemen at least were always drunk."