ÉMILE GABORIAU

PIONEER OF DETECTIVE FICTION

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

TACET BOOKS

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

Émile Gaboriau

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Author

The book, which was Gaboriau's first detective novel, introduced an amateur detective. It also introduced a young police officer named Monsieur Lecoq, who was the hero in three of Gaboriau's later detective novels. The character of Lecoq was based on a real-life thief turned police officer, Eugène François Vidocq (1775–1857), whose own memoirs, Les Vrais Mémoires de Vidocq, mixed fiction and fact. It may also have been influenced by the villainous Monsieur Lecoq, one of the main protagonists of Féval's Les Habits Noirs book series.

The book was published in "Le Siècle" and at once made his reputation. Gaboriau gained a huge following, but when Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes, Monsieur Lecoq's international fame declined. The story was produced on the stage in 1872. A long series of novels dealing with the annals of the police court followed, and proved very popular. Gaboriau died in Paris of pulmonary apoplexy.

Gaboriau's books were generally well received. About The Mystery of the Orcival, Harper's wrote in 1872: "Of its class of romance - French sensational - this is a remarkable and unique specimen". A film version of Le Dossier n° 113 was released in 1932.

In A Study in Scarlet Arthur Conan Doyle has Watson ask Sherlock Holmes what he thinks of Gaboriau. Holmes disparages Lecoq as "a miserable bungler".

The Widow Lerouge

Chapter I.

On Thursday, the 6th of March, 1862, two days after Shrove Tuesday, five women belonging to the village of La Jonchere presented themselves at the police station at Bougival.

They stated that for two days past no one had seen the Widow Lerouge, one of their neighbours, who lived by herself in an isolated cottage. They had several times knocked at the door, but all in vain. The window-shutters as well as the door were closed; and it was impossible to obtain even a glimpse of the interior.

This silence, this sudden disappearance alarmed them. Apprehensive of a crime, or at least of an accident, they requested the interference of the police to satisfy their doubts by forcing the door and entering the house.

Bougival is a pleasant riverside village, peopled on Sundays by crowds of boating parties. Trifling offences are frequently heard of in its neighbourhood, but crimes are rare.

The commissary of police at first refused to listen to the women, but their importunities so fatigued him that he at length acceded to their request. He sent for the corporal of gendarmes, with two of his men, called into requisition the services of a locksmith, and, thus accompanied, followed the neighbours of the Widow Lerouge.

La Jonchere owes some celebrity to the inventor of the sliding railway, who for some years past has, with more enterprise than profit, made public trials of his system in the immediate neighbourhood. It is a hamlet of no importance, resting upon the slope of the hill which overlooks the Seine

between La Malmaison and Bougival. It is about twenty minutes' walk from the main road, which, passing by Rueil and Port–Marly, goes from Paris to St. Germain, and is reached by a steep and rugged lane, quite unknown to the government engineers.

The party, led by the gendarmes, followed the main road which here bordered the river until it reached this lane, into which it turned, and stumbled over the rugged inequalities of the ground for about a hundred yards, when it arrived in front of a cottage of extremely modest yet respectable appearance. This cottage had probably been built by some little Parisian shopkeeper in love with the beauties of nature; for all the trees had been carefully cut down. It consisted merely of two apartments on the ground floor with a loft above. Around it extended a much-neglected garden, badly protected against midnight prowlers, by a very dilapidated stone wall about three feet high, and broken and crumbling in many places. A light wooden gate, clumsily held in its place by pieces of wire, gave access to the garden.

"It is here," said the women.

The commissary stopped. During his short walk, the number of his followers had been rapidly increasing, and now included all the inquisitive and idle persons of the neighbourhood. He found himself surrounded by about forty individuals burning with curiosity.

"No one must enter the garden," said he; and, to ensure obedience, he placed the two gendarmes on sentry before the entrance, and advanced towards the house, accompanied by the corporal and the locksmith.

He knocked several times loudly with his leaded cane, first at the door, and then successively at all the window shutters. After each blow, he placed his ear against the

wood and listened. Hearing nothing, he turned to the locksmith.

“Open!” said he.

The workman unstrapped his satchel, and produced his implements. He had already introduced a skeleton key into the lock, when a loud exclamation was heard from the crowd outside the gate.

“The key!” they cried. “Here is the key!”

A boy about twelve years old playing with one of his companions, had seen an enormous key in a ditch by the roadside; he had picked it up and carried it to the cottage in triumph.

“Give it to me youngster,” said the corporal. “We shall see.”

The key was tried, and it proved to be the key of the house.

The commissary and the locksmith exchanged glances full of sinister misgivings. “This looks bad,” muttered the corporal. They entered the house, while the crowd, restrained with difficulty by the gendarmes, stamped with impatience, or leant over the garden wall, stretching their necks eagerly, to see or hear something of what was passing within the cottage.

Those who anticipated the discovery of a crime, were unhappily not deceived. The commissary was convinced of this as soon as he crossed the threshold. Everything in the first room pointed with a sad eloquence to the recent presence of a malefactor. The furniture was knocked about, and a chest of drawers and two large trunks had been forced and broken open.

In the inner room, which served as a sleeping apartment, the disorder was even greater. It seemed as though some

furious hand had taken a fiendish pleasure in upsetting everything. Near the fireplace, her face buried in the ashes, lay the dead body of Widow Lerouge. All one side of the face and the hair were burnt; it seemed a miracle that the fire had not caught her clothing.

“Wretches!” exclaimed the corporal. “Could they not have robbed, without assassinating the poor woman?”

“But where has she been wounded?” inquired the commissary, “I do not see any blood.”

“Look! here between the shoulders,” replied the corporal; “two fierce blows, by my faith. I’ll wager my stripes she had no time to cry out.”

He stooped over the corpse and touched it.

“She is quite cold,” he continued, “and it seems to me that she is no longer very stiff. It is at least thirty-six hours since she received her death-blow.”

The commissary began writing, on the corner of a table, a short official report.

“We are not here to talk, but to discover the guilty,” said he to the corporal. “Let information be at once conveyed to the justice of the peace, and the mayor, and send this letter without delay to the Palais de Justice. In a couple of hours, an investigating magistrate can be here. In the meanwhile, I will proceed to make a preliminary inquiry.”

“Shall I carry the letter?” asked the corporal of gendarmes.

“No, send one of your men; you will be useful to me here in keeping these people in order, and in finding any witnesses I may want. We must leave everything here as it is. I will install myself in the other room.”

A gendarme departed at a run towards the station at Rueil; and the commissary commenced his investigations in regular form, as prescribed by law.

“Who was Widow Lerouge? Where did she come from? What did she do? Upon what means, and how did she live? What were her habits, her morals, and what sort of company did she keep? Was she known to have enemies? Was she a miser? Did she pass for being rich?”

The commissary knew the importance of ascertaining all this: but although the witnesses were numerous enough, they possessed but little information. The depositions of the neighbours, successively interrogated, were empty, incoherent, and incomplete. No one knew anything of the victim, who was a stranger in the country. Many presented themselves as witnesses moreover, who came forward less to afford information than to gratify their curiosity. A gardener’s wife, who had been friendly with the deceased, and a milk-woman with whom she dealt, were alone able to give a few insignificant though precise details.

In a word, after three hours of laborious investigation, after having undergone the infliction of all the gossip of the country, after receiving evidence the most contradictory, and listened to commentaries the most ridiculous, the following is what appeared the most reliable to the commissary.

Twelve years before, at the beginning of 1850, the woman Lerouge had made her appearance at Bougival with a large wagon piled with furniture, linen, and her personal effects. She had alighted at an inn, declaring her intention of settling in the neighbourhood, and had immediately gone in quest of a house. Finding this one unoccupied, and thinking it would suit her, she had taken it without trying to beat down the terms, at a rental of three hundred and twenty

francs payable half yearly and in advance, but had refused to sign a lease.

The house taken, she occupied it the same day, and expended about a hundred francs on repairs.

She was a woman about fifty-four or fifty-five years of age, well preserved, active, and in the enjoyment of excellent health. No one knew her reasons for taking up her abode in a country where she was an absolute stranger. She was supposed to have come from Normandy, having been frequently seen in the early morning to wear a white cotton cap. This night-cap did not prevent her dressing very smartly during the day; indeed, she ordinarily wore very handsome dresses, very showy ribbons in her caps, and covered herself with jewels like a saint in a chapel. Without doubt she had lived on the coast, for ships and the sea recurred incessantly in her conversation.

She did not like speaking of her husband who had, she said, perished in a shipwreck. But she had never given the slightest detail. On one particular occasion she had remarked, in presence of the milk-woman and three other persons, “No woman was ever more miserable than I during my married life.” And at another she had said, “All new, all fine! A new broom sweeps clean. My defunct husband only loved me for a year!”

Widow Lerouge passed for rich, or at the least for being very well off and she was not a miser. She had lent a woman at La Malmaison sixty francs with which to pay her rent, and would not let her return them. At another time she had advanced two hundred francs to a fisherman of Port–Marly. She was fond of good living, spent a good deal on her food, and bought wine by the half cask. She took pleasure in treating her acquaintances, and her dinners were excellent. If complimented on her easy circumstances, she made no

very strong denial. She had frequently been heard to say, “I have nothing in the funds, but I have everything I want. If I wished for more, I could have it.”

Beyond this, the slightest allusion to her past life, her country, or her family had never escaped her. She was very talkative, but all she would say would be to the detriment of her neighbours. She was supposed, however, to have seen the world, and to know a great deal. She was very distrustful and barricaded herself in her cottage as in a fortress. She never went out in the evening, and it was well known that she got tipsy regularly at her dinner and went to bed very soon afterwards. Rarely had strangers been seen to visit her; four or five times a lady accompanied by a young man had called, and upon one occasion two gentlemen, one young, the other old and decorated, had come in a magnificent carriage.

In conclusion, the deceased was held in but little esteem by her neighbours. Her remarks were often most offensive and odious in the mouth of a woman of her age. She had been heard to give a young girl the most detestable counsels. A pork butcher, belonging to Bougival, embarrassed in his business, and tempted by her supposed wealth, had at one time paid her his addresses. She, however, repelled his advances, declaring that to be married once was enough for her. On several occasions men had been seen in her house; first of all, a young one, who had the appearance of a clerk of the railway company; then another, a tall, elderly man, very sunburnt, who was dressed in a blouse, and looked very villainous. These men were reported to be her lovers.

Whilst questioning the witnesses, the commissary wrote down their depositions in a more condensed form, and he had got so far, when the investigating magistrate arrived, attended by the chief of the detective police, and one of his subordinates.

M. Daburon was a man thirty-eight years of age, and of prepossessing appearance; sympathetic notwithstanding his coldness; wearing upon his countenance a sweet, and rather sad expression. This settled melancholy had remained with him ever since his recovery, two years before, from a dreadful malady, which had well-nigh proved fatal.

Investigating magistrate since 1859, he had rapidly acquired the most brilliant reputation. Laborious, patient, and acute, he knew with singular skill how to disentangle the skein of the most complicated affair, and from the midst of a thousand threads lay hold to the right one. None better than he, armed with an implacable logic, could solve those terrible problems in which X— in algebra, the unknown quantity — represents the criminal. Clever in deducing the unknown from the known, he excelled in collecting facts, and in uniting in a bundle of overwhelming proofs circumstances the most trifling, and in appearance the most insignificant.

Although possessed of qualifications for his office so numerous and valuable, he was tremblingly distrustful of his own abilities and exercised his terrible functions with diffidence and hesitation. He wanted audacity to risk those sudden surprises so often resorted to by his colleagues in the pursuit of truth.

Thus it was repugnant to his feelings to deceive even an accused person, or to lay snares for him; in fact the mere idea of the possibility of a judicial error terrified him. They said of him in the courts, “He is a trembler.” What he sought was not conviction, nor the most probable presumptions, but the most absolute certainty. No rest for him until the day when the accused was forced to bow before the evidence; so much so that he had been jestingly reproached with seeking not to discover criminals but innocents.

The chief of detective police was none other than the celebrated Gevrol. He is really an able man, but wanting in perseverance, and liable to be blinded by an incredible obstinacy. If he loses a clue, he cannot bring himself to acknowledge it, still less to retrace his steps. His audacity and coolness, however, render it impossible to disconcert him; and being possessed of immense personal strength, hidden under a most meagre appearance, he has never hesitated to confront the most daring of malefactors.

But his specialty, his triumph, his glory, is a memory of faces, so prodigious as to exceed belief. Let him see a face for five minutes, and it is enough. Its possessor is catalogued, and will be recognised at any time. The impossibilities of place, the unlikelihood of circumstances, the most incredible disguises will not lead him astray. The reason for this, so he pretends, is because he only looks at a man’s eyes, without noticing any other features.

This faculty was severely tested some months back at Poissy, by the following experiment. Three prisoners were draped in coverings so as to completely disguise their height. Over their faces were thick veils, allowing nothing of the features to be seen except the eyes, for which holes had been made; and in this state they were shown to Gevrol.

Without the slightest hesitation he recognised the prisoners and named them. Had chance alone assisted him?

The subordinate Gevrol had brought with him, was an old offender, reconciled to the law. A smart fellow in his profession, crafty as a fox, and jealous of his chief, whose abilities he held in light estimation. His name was Lecoq.

The commissary, by this time heartily tired of his responsibilities, welcomed the investigating magistrate and

his agents as liberators. He rapidly related the facts collected and read his official report.

“You have proceeded very well,” observed the investigating magistrate. “All is stated clearly; yet there is one fact you have omitted to ascertain.”

“What is that, sir?” inquired the commissary.

“On what day was Widow Lerouge last seen, and at what hour?”

“I was coming to that presently. She was last seen and spoken to on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, at twenty minutes past five. She was then returning from Bougival with a basketful of purchases.”

“You are sure of the hour, sir?” inquired Gevrol.

“Perfectly, and for this reason; the two witnesses who furnished me with this fact, a woman named Tellier and a cooper who lives hard by, alighted from the omnibus which leaves Marly every hour, when they perceived the widow in the cross-road, and hastened to overtake her. They conversed with her and only left her when they reached the door of her own house.”

“And what had she in her basket?” asked the investigating magistrate.

“The witnesses cannot say. They only know that she carried two sealed bottles of wine, and another of brandy. She complained to them of headache, and said, ‘Though it is customary to enjoy oneself on Shrove Tuesday, I am going to bed.’”

“So, so!” exclaimed the chief of detective police. “I know where to search!”

“You think so?” inquired M. Daburon.

“Why, it is clear enough. We must find the tall sunburnt man, the gallant in the blouse. The brandy and the wine were intended for his entertainment. The widow expected him to supper. He came, sure enough, the amiable gallant!”

“Oh!” cried the corporal of gendarmes, evidently scandalised, “she was very old, and terribly ugly!”

Gevrol surveyed the honest fellow with an expression of contemptuous pity. “Know, corporal,” said he, “that a woman who has money is always young and pretty, if she desires to be thought so!”

“Perhaps there is something in that,” remarked the magistrate; “but it is not what strikes me most. I am more impressed by the remark of this unfortunate woman. ‘If I wished for more, I could have it.’”

“That also attracted my attention,” acquiesced the commissary.

But Gevrol no longer took the trouble to listen. He stuck to his own opinion, and began to inspect minutely every corner of the room. Suddenly he turned towards the commissary. “Now that I think of it,” cried he, “was it not on Tuesday that the weather changed? It had been freezing for a fortnight past, and on that evening it rained. At what time did the rain commence here?”

“At half-past nine,” answered the corporal. “I went out from supper to make my circuit of the dancing halls, when I was overtaken opposite the Rue des Pecheurs by a heavy shower. In less than ten minutes there was half an inch of water in the road.”

“Very well,” said Gevrol. “Then if the man came after half-past nine his shoes must have been very muddy. If they were dry, he arrived sooner. This must have been noticed, for the floor is a polished one. Were there any imprints of footsteps, M. Commissary?”

“I must confess we never thought of looking for them.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the chief detective, in a tone of irritation, “that is vexatious!”

“Wait,” added the commissary; “there is yet time to see if there are any, not in this room, but in the other. We have disturbed absolutely nothing there. My footsteps and the corporal’s will be easily distinguished. Let us see.”

As the commissary opened the door of the second chamber, Gevrol stopped him. “I ask permission, sir,” said he to the investigating magistrate, “to examine the apartment before any one else is permitted to enter. It is very important for me.”

“Certainly,” approved M. Daburon.

Gevrol passed in first, the others remaining on the threshold. They all took in at a glance the scene of the crime. Everything, as the commissary had stated, seemed to have been overturned by some furious madman. In the middle of the room was a table covered with a fine linen cloth, white as snow. Upon this was placed a magnificent wineglass of the rarest manufacture, a very handsome knife, and a plate of the finest porcelain. There was an opened bottle of wine, hardly touched, and another of brandy, from which about five or six small glassfuls had been taken.

On the right, against the wall, stood two handsome walnut-wood wardrobes, with ornamental locks; they were placed

one on each side of the window; both were empty, and the contents scattered about on all sides. There were clothing, linen, and other effects unfolded, tossed about, and crumpled. At the end of the room, near the fireplace, a large cupboard used for keeping the crockery was wide open. On the other side of the fireplace, an old secretary with a marble top had been forced, broken, smashed into bits, and rummaged, no doubt, to its inmost recesses. The desk, wrenched away, hung by a single hinge. The drawers had been pulled out and thrown upon the floor.

To the left of the room stood the bed, which had been completely disarranged and upset. Even the straw of the mattress had been pulled out and examined.

“Not the slightest imprint,” murmured Gevrol disappointed. “He must have arrived before half-past nine. You can all come in now.”

He walked right up to the corpse of the widow, near which he knelt.

“It can not be said,” grumbled he, “that the work is not properly done! the assassin is no apprentice!”

Then looking right and left, he continued: “Oh! oh! the poor devil was busy with her cooking when he struck her; see her pan of ham and eggs upon the hearth. The brute hadn’t patience enough to wait for the dinner. The gentleman was in a hurry, he struck the blow fasting; therefore he can’t invoke the gayety of dessert in his defense!”

“It is evident,” said the commissary to the investigating magistrate, “that robbery was the motive of the crime.”

“It is probable,” answered Gevrol in a sly way; “and that accounts for the absence of the silver spoons from the table.”

“Look here! Some pieces of gold in this drawer!” exclaimed Lecoq, who had been searching on his own account, “just three hundred and twenty francs!”

“Well, I never!” cried Gevrol, a little disconcerted. But he soon recovered from his embarrassment, and added: “He must have forgotten them; that often happens. I have known an assassin, who, after accomplishing the murder, became so utterly bewildered as to depart without remembering to take the plunder, for which he had committed the crime. Our man became excited perhaps, or was interrupted. Some one may have knocked at the door. What makes me more willing to think so is, that the scamp did not leave the candle burning. You see he took the trouble to put it out.”

“Pooh!” said Lecoq. “That proves nothing. He is probably an economical and careful man.”

The investigations of the two agents were continued all over the house; but their most minute researches resulted in discovering absolutely nothing; not one piece of evidence to convict; not the faintest indication which might serve as a point of departure. Even the dead woman’s papers, if she possessed any, had disappeared. Not a letter, not a scrap of paper even, to be met with. From time to time Gevrol stopped to swear or grumble. “Oh! it is cleverly done! It is a tiptop piece of work! The scoundrel is a cool hand!”

“Well, what do you make of it?” at length demanded the investigating magistrate.

“It is a drawn game monsieur,” replied Gevrol. “We are baffled for the present. The miscreant has taken his measures with great precaution; but I will catch him. Before night, I shall have a dozen men in pursuit. Besides, he is

sure to fall into our hands. He has carried off the plate and the jewels. He is lost!”

“Despite all that,” said M. Daburon, “we are no further advanced than we were this morning!”

“Well!” growled Gevrol. “A man can only do what he can!”

“Ah!” murmured Lecoq in a low tone, perfectly audible, however, “why is not old Tirauclair here?”

“What could he do more than we have done?” retorted Gevrol, directing a furious glance at his subordinate. Lecoq bowed his head and was silent, inwardly delighted at having wounded his chief.

“Who is old Tirauclair?” asked M. Daburon. “It seems to me that I have heard the name, but I can’t remember where.”

“He is an extraordinary man!” exclaimed Lecoq. “He was formerly a clerk at the Mont de Piete,” added Gevrol; “but he is now a rich old fellow, whose real name is Tabaret. He goes in for playing the detective by way of amusement.”

“And to augment his revenues,” insinuated the commissary.

“He?” cried Lecoq. “No danger of that. He works so much for the glory of success that he often spends money from his own pocket. It’s his amusement, you see! At the Prefecture we have nicknamed him ‘Tirauclair,’ from a phrase he is constantly in the habit of repeating. Ah! he is sharp, the old weasel! It was he who in the case of that banker’s wife, you remember, guessed that the lady had robbed herself, and who proved it.”

“True!” retorted Gevrol; “and it was also he who almost had poor Dereme guillotined for killing his wife, a thorough bad woman; and all the while the poor man was innocent.”

“We are wasting our time, gentlemen,” interrupted M. Daburon. Then, addressing himself to Lecoq, he added: —“Go and find M. Tabaret. I have heard a great deal of him, and shall be glad to see him at work here.”

Lecoq started off at a run, Gevrol was seriously humiliated. “You have of course, sir, the right to demand the services of whom you please,” commenced he, “but yet —”

“Do not,” interrupted M. Daburon, “let us lose our tempers, M. Gevrol. I have known you for a long time, and I know your worth; but today we happen to differ in opinion. You hold absolutely to your sunburnt man in the blouse, and I, on my side, am convinced that you are not on the right track!”

“I think I am right,” replied the detective, “and I hope to prove it. I shall find the scoundrel, be he whom he may!”

“I ask nothing better,” said M. Daburon.

“Only, permit me, sir, to give — what shall I say without failing in respect? — a piece of advice?”

“Speak!”

“I would advise you, sir, to distrust old Tabaret.”

“Really? And for what reason?”

“The old fellow allows himself to be carried away too much by appearances. He has become an amateur detective for the sake of popularity, just like an author; and, as he is vainer than a peacock, he is apt to lose his temper and be very obstinate. As soon as he finds himself in the presence of a crime, like this one, for example, he pretends he can explain everything on the instant. And he manages to invent a story that will correspond exactly with the situation. He professes, with the help of one single fact, to be able to

reconstruct all the details of an assassination, as a savant pictures an antediluvian animal from a single bone. Sometimes he divines correctly; very often, though, he makes a mistake. Take, for instance, the case of the tailor, the unfortunate Dereme, without me —”

“I thank you for your advice,” interrupted M. Daburon, “and will profit by it. Now commissary,” he continued, “it is most important to ascertain from what part of the country Widow Lerouge came.”

The procession of witnesses under the charge of the corporal of gendarmes were again interrogated by the investigating magistrate.

But nothing new was elicited. It was evident that Widow Lerouge had been a singularly discreet woman; for, although very talkative, nothing in any way connected with her antecedents remained in the memory of the gossips of La Jonchere.

All the people interrogated, however, obstinately tried to impart to the magistrate their own convictions and personal conjectures. Public opinion sided with Gevrol. Every voice denounced the tall sunburnt man with the gray blouse. He must surely be the culprit. Everyone remembered his ferocious aspect, which had frightened the whole neighbourhood. He had one evening menaced a woman, and another day beaten a child. They could point out neither the child nor the woman; but no matter: these brutal acts were notoriously public. M. Daburon began to despair of gaining the least enlightenment, when some one brought the wife of a grocer of Bougival, at whose shop the victim used to deal, and a child thirteen years old, who knew, it was said, something positive.

The grocer’s wife first made her appearance. She had heard Widow Lerouge speak of having a son still living.

“Are you quite sure of that?” asked the investigating magistrate.

“As of my existence,” answered the woman, “for, on that evening, yes, it was evening, she was, saving your presence, a little tipsy. She remained in my shop more than an hour.”

“And what did she say?”

“I think I see her now,” continued the shopkeeper: “she was leaning against the counter near the scales, jesting with a fisherman of Marly, old Husson, who can tell you the same; and she called him a fresh water sailor. ‘My husband,’ said she, ‘was a real sailor, and the proof is, he would sometimes remain years on a voyage, and always used to bring me back cocoanuts. I have a son who is also a sailor, like his dead father, in the imperial navy.’”

“Did she mention her son’s name?”

“Not that time, but another evening, when she was, if I may say so, very drunk. She told us that her son’s name was Jacques, and that she had not seen him for a very long time.”

“Did she speak ill of her husband?”

“Never! She only said he was jealous and brutal, though a good man at bottom, and that he led her a miserable life. He was weak-headed, and forged ideas out of nothing at all. In fact he was too honest to be wise.”

“Did her son ever come to see her while she lived here?”

“She never told me of it.”

“Did she spend much money with you?”

“That depends. About sixty francs a month; sometimes more, for she always buys the best brandy. She paid cash for all she bought.”

The woman knowing no more was dismissed. The child, who was now brought forward, belonged to parents in easy circumstances. Tall and strong for his age, he had bright intelligent eyes, and features expressive of watchfulness and cunning. The presence of the magistrate did not seem to intimidate him in the least.

“Let us hear, my boy,” said M. Daburon, “what you know.”

“Well, sir, a few days ago, on Sunday last, I saw a man at Madame Lerouge’s garden-gate.”

“At what time of the day?”

“Early in the morning. I was going to church, to serve in the second mass.”

“Well,” continued the magistrate, “and this man was tall and sunburnt, and dressed in a blouse?”

“No, sir, on the contrary, he was short, very fat, and old.”

“You are sure you are not mistaken?”

“Quite sure,” replied the urchin, “I saw him close face to face, for I spoke to him.”

“Tell me, then, what occurred?”

“Well, sir, I was passing when I saw this fat man at the gate. He appeared very much vexed, oh! but awfully vexed! His face was red, or rather purple, as far as the middle of his head, which I could see very well, for it was bare, and had very little hair on it.”

“And did he speak to you first?”

“Yes, sir, he saw me, and called out, ‘Halloa! youngster!’ as I came up to him, and he asked me if I had got a good pair of legs? I answered yes. Then he took me by the ear, but without hurting me, and said, ‘Since that is so, if you will run an errand for me, I will give you ten sous. Run as far as the Seine; and when you reach the quay, you will notice a large boat moored. Go on board, and ask to see Captain Gervais: he is sure to be there. Tell him that he can prepare to leave, that I am ready.’ Then he put ten sous in my hand; and off I went.”

“If all the witnesses were like this bright little fellow,” murmured the commissary, “what a pleasure it would be!”

“Now,” said the magistrate, “tell us how you executed your commission?”

“I went to the boat, sir, found the man, and I told him; and that’s all.”

Gevrol, who had listened with the most lively attention, leaned over towards the ear of M. Daburon, and said in a low voice: “Will you permit me, sir, to ask the brat a few questions?”

“Certainly, M. Gevrol.”

“Come now, my little friend,” said Gevrol, “if you saw this man again, would you know him?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Then there was something remarkable about him?”

“Yes, I should think so! his face was the colour of a brick!”

“And is that all?”

“Well, yes, sir.”

“But you must remember how he was dressed; had he a blouse on?”

“No; he wore a jacket. Under the arms were very large pockets, and from out of one of them peeped a blue spotted handkerchief.”

“What kind of trousers had he on?”

“I do not remember.”

“And his waistcoat?”

“Let me see,” answered the child. “I don’t think he wore a waistcoat. And yet — but no, I remember he did not wear one; he had a long cravat, fastened near his neck by a large ring.”

“Ah!” said Gevrol, with an air of satisfaction, “you are a bright boy; and I wager that if you try hard to remember you will find a few more details to give us.”

The boy hung down his head, and remained silent. From the knitting of his young brows, it was plain he was making a violent effort of memory. “Yes,” cried he suddenly, “I remember another thing.”

“What?”

“The man wore very large rings in his ears.”

“Bravo!” cried Gevrol, “here is a complete description. I shall find the fellow now. M. Daburon can prepare a warrant for his appearance whenever he likes.”

“I believe, indeed, the testimony of this child is of the highest importance,” said M. Daburon; and turning to the

boy added, “Can you tell us, my little friend, with what this boat was loaded?”

“No, sir, I couldn’t see because it was decked.”

“Which way was she going, up the Seine or down?”

“Neither, sir, she was moored.”

“We know that,” said Gevrol. “The magistrate asks you which way the prow of the boat was turned — towards Paris or towards Marly?”

“The two ends of the boat seemed alike to me.”

The chief of the detective of police made a gesture of disappointment.

“At least,” said he, addressing the child again, “you noticed the name of the boat? you can read I suppose. One should always know the names of the boats one goes aboard of.”

“No, I didn’t see any name,” said the little boy.

“If this boat was moored at the quay,” remarked M. Daburon, “it was probably noticed by the inhabitants of Bougival.”

“That is true, sir,” approved the commissary.

“Yes,” said Gevrol, “and the sailors must have come ashore. I shall find out all about it at the wine shop. But what sort of a man was Gervais, the master, my little friend?”

“Like all the sailors hereabouts, sir.”

The child was preparing to depart when M. Daburon recalled him.

“Before you go, my boy, tell me, have you spoken to any one of this meeting before today?”

“Yes, sir, I told all to mamma when I got back from church, and gave her the ten sous.”

“And you have told us the whole truth?” continued the magistrate. “You know that it is a very grave matter to attempt to impose on justice. She always finds it out, and it is my duty to warn you that she inflicts the most terrible punishment upon liars.”

The little fellow blushed as red as a cherry, and held down his head.

“I see,” pursued M. Daburon, “that you have concealed something from us. Don’t you know that the police know everything?”

“Pardon! sir,” cried the boy, bursting into tears — “pardon. Don’t punish me, and I will never do so again.”

“Tell us, then, how you have deceived us?”

“Well, sir, it was not ten sous that the man gave me, it was twenty sous. I only gave half to mamma; and I kept the rest to buy marbles with.”

“My little friend,” said the investigating magistrate, “for this time I forgive you. But let it be a lesson for the remainder of your life. You may go now, and remember it is useless to try and hide the truth; it always comes to light!”

Chapter II.

The two last depositions awakened in M. Daburon’s mind some slight gleams of hope. In the midst of darkness, the humblest rush-light acquires brilliancy.

“I will go at once to Bougival, sir, if you approve of this step,” suggested Gevrol.

“Perhaps you would do well to wait a little,” answered M. Daburon. “This man was seen on Sunday morning; we will inquire into Widow Lerouge’s movements on that day.”

Three neighbours were called. They all declared that the widow had kept her bed all Sunday. To one woman who, hearing she was unwell, had visited her, she said, “Ah! I had last night a terrible accident.” Nobody at the time attached any significance to these words.

“The man with the rings in his ears becomes more and important,” said the magistrate, when the woman had retired. “To find him again is indispensable: you must see to this, M. Gevrol.”

“Before eight days, I shall have him,” replied the chief of detective police, “if I have to search every boat on the Seine, from its source to the ocean. I know the name of the captain, Gervais. The navigation office will tell me something.”

He was interrupted by Lecoq, who rushed into the house breathless. “Here is old Tabaret,” he said. “I met him just as he was going out. What a man! He wouldn’t wait for the train, but gave I don’t know how much to a cabman; and we drove here in fifty minutes!”