ANDREW FORRESTER

# THE PRIVATE DETECTIVE

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# The Private Detective

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# Number 1
# The Priest And The Miser

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In a portion of the great metropolis, described in the Postmaster-General's map of London as the North-Western district, is a congeries, or braided mass, of narrow streets, squares, courts, and alleys, the dingy and dilapidated houses of which are thickly tenanted by men, women, and children, who (dock labourers and Spitalfields weavers excepted) perhaps find it harder to make "both ends meet" than any other corresponding number of the Queen's subjects. The neighbourhood is one in which the O'Mulligan of Bally Mulligan (Mr. Thackeray's acquaintance) might hope to find lodgings suitable to his means, if not to his taste; but any gentleman residing thereabout might also be reasonably excused if he did not press his hospitality upon his friends, and preferred to give his address at "the club." Some of my readers may have heard of the district I refer to —a few may know it—under its title of Somers Town.

In a room in one of the best houses standing in one of the best streets of this quarter, described by otherwise conflicting testimony as "a miserable garret," a few years ago, a lone, unfriended old man was slowly dying. As I am in truth, not writing romance, but history in the garb of fiction, it may be just as well to be a little precise and minute, and say that this narrative opens on the 28th of February, 1847. It was Sunday morning. The old man's name was Carré—Maturin Carré. He was seventy-seven years of age, and looked quite as old as his baptismal register indicated. He

was a native of France, but had been many years in England. He came to London from Jersey, and arrived on that speck of debatable geography from the South of France.

People who knew him best, with one exception, commiserated him most. His age, and the external indications of poverty, elicited many delicate attentions from the needy Irish devotees who frequented the Roman Catholic chapel adjacent to his home, and at the same time it screened him so well from the notice of the richer members of that communion, that neither the lawyer who will figure in this story, nor the priest who afterwards made oath that he had been for three years preceding his death Carré's spiritual director, was apparently at this exact moment aware of the existence of such a person. It is presumed that he never went to the confessional, and it is said that he attended the chapel more for the purpose of obtaining material relief than spiritual guidance or consolation.

A mystery surrounded the man which nobody cared to penetrate. Rumours had been heard about a marriage to which he had been a party—a child, and a faithless wife; but these reports died away almost as speedily as they were uttered. His principal means of subsistence were unknown. It was thought he earned a few shillings now and then by teaching his native and other languages. He had, in fact, been in his earlier days much employed in that way, and until utterly prostrated by the illness which had brought him into contact with the grim fiend, he made a little income by teaching.

The reader may also perhaps be concerned to know that Maturin Carré was a political refugee. His exile was caused by his attachment to the fallen fortunes of Charles X. He had many years received a pension from a fund which had been raised for the sustenance of the refugees of that party. At one time it was forty pounds a year, but it had dwindled to fifteen pounds.

When his usual reticence forsook him, he would tell stories about Robespierre and the Reign of Terror, and there is no reason for supposing him guilty of untruth when he asserted that, if he had been content to serve under the merciless dictator, he might have played an important part in the terrible drama of the French revolution, instead of being compelled to find safety in a miserable exile.

The interesting rumours about a wife and child were, however, pure fictions. It is doubtful whether that repulsive nature had ever been softened by the gentle emotions of love. He was a bachelor, and for a long time had uniformly betrayed an aversion to the society of women. It is said that as long as possible he performed every domestic office with his own hands, and his bed in Somers Town had never, as far as he knew, been smoothed or adjusted by fairy or crone in human shape. His fare was the simplest and cheapest which markets that contain no luxury offer to a purchaser. If the reader will imagine the most wretched condition that solitary old age could bear, he will have a true conception of the existence led by Maturin Carré.

I described the old man as dying. He was conscious of the fact, but anxious, as nearly all men are—not excepting the most forlorn and wobegone—to prolong the remnant of

his days to their utmost span. Christian charity is, after all, not quite so rare as it is often said to be. Medical aid is, at all events, within the reach of the poorest and the most obscure. The doctor’s advice, and his physic, are to be had without pay, by everybody who chooses to ask for them on these terms. Maturin Carré was not a proud old man. He asked for the assistance of a doctor, who belonged to the church he attended, and that gentleman was directed to visit the exile. He called to see him very early on the morning of Sunday, the 28th of March, 1847.

The miserable patient lay stretched on a sort of box, rather than bedstead. When the surgeon, after early mass, looked in to see and prescribe for his necessities, the landlord of the house, who showed the pious son of Esculapius to the garret, was present at an interview between them, and noted their conversation.

Maturin Carré, it was as obvious to the shrewd nonprofessional eye as to the most skilful in diagnosis, had not long to live, and no landlord could be altogether indifferent about the fate of a dying lodger, so that we may excuse his presence as a third party on this occasion. It is to be observed, however, that the hopeless sufferer was not at all desirous to partake of those spiritual consolations that I have been told the Roman Catholic faith can bestow at such a time more liberally than a Protestant creed.

It was not the doctor’s first visit to Carré, and the man of physic had previously recommended that a priest should be called in: but the advice was more unpalatable than the contents of his bottles and pillboxes. On the Sunday morning I speak of, the surgeon repeated the obnoxious

suggestion. Bronchitis had almost done its work upon a feeble system. Drugs might as well have been thrown to the dogs, or into the common sewer, as down the wheezy throat of the expiring champion of decayed Bourbonism. The only real means of relief to the sufferer were not kept in gallipots, or the drawer of a surgery. The diet suited to a man in *extremis*, Carré had no visible funds to purchase, and the doctor had no money at his disposal to expend in obtaining them.

“Well, well,” said the doctor in French—after feeling the pulse of his patient—for he was a Frenchman—“I must tell you, I think you are a little worse than you were the day before yesterday, Shall I ask Father Andrews to call and see you?”

The old man, with an effort, shook his head, and muttered a word of dissent.

“I will send you another draught,” rejoined the surgeon, who observed by the shock his former advice produced, that the approach of death had not excited the latent religious feelings of the patient.

“I think our friend had better let me ask Father Thomas to call,” in a few moments the doctor said, turning his eyes in the direction of the landlord, as if to obtain some further influence from this direction, and in the hope that it might be a personal objection to the priest whose name had been first mentioned, which led to the rejection of his ministrations.

The landlord expressed his concurrence; but the lodger spasmodically ejaculated “No!” and fell backwards.

It was quite plain that M. Carré had no wish to avail himself of the comforts of the faith he professed. May I not say it is certain that he had no faith in the efficacy of the religion he professed! Is it not reasonable to suppose that the dying man had for some time, and up to this moment, been an unbeliever in all religions, and although not unconscious that the hand of death was upon him, its approach had not broken through the gloom which unbelieving selfishness, and the lack of sympathy from and towards his fellows, had engendered during his isolated existence? Without extending hypothesis, it may surely be written down as a truth, that Maturin Carré was not, on that Sunday morning, entitled to be regarded as “a good Catholic.” So thought the Doctor; and although he was not, consequently, disposed to withdraw from attendance at the old man’s bedside, or inclined to then resent the ungracious disbelief in his creed, by stopping the supply of physic, he saw it was useless on this occasion to follow up what had all the appearance of undoubtedly kind, disinterested, and seasonable advice to call in either of the priests he had named.

In a few minutes, after the patient had somewhat recovered himself from the shock produced by this conversation, the doctor withdrew.

As he descended the stairs he observed the landlord close upon his heels. This person had left the garret with the surgeon in order to perform a simple office of courtesy by opening and closing the street-door upon the beneficent visitor. As he did so they exchanged a few words.

“Poor man,” said the surgeon, “it’s little or nothing I can do for him; he wants port wine and arrow-root, and such things; but it’s impossible he can get them. It’s a melancholy case.”

These fragmentary sentences took the landlord by surprise, but why they should have done so is yet unaccountable. All we know is, that the reserve of the auditor forsook him, and that he yielded up at once a real or pretended confidence, which he had long treasured as a secret of value.

“Oh no, sir,” somewhat hastily replied the landlord, “he’s got plenty of money. Order what you think he wants; he can buy anything.”

A critical person, or one skilful in detecting hidden thoughts and half-concealed emotions, might possibly have observed a slight change pass over the countenance of that unimpassioned French Roman Catholic charity doctor. The landlord noticed nothing of the kind. The surgeon shook his learned head, as if he doubted the accuracy of the intelligence. He went on his way, and the landlord closed the door.

The words of the landlord appeared to have had a rather grotesque or eccentric influence upon the mind of the doctor.

While it seemed impossible to procure those small luxuries he prescribed wine and arrow-root; but when told they were at the command of the patient, this medical genius, judging by his conduct, deemed them unnecessary. The reputed wealth of the dying man awakened a new and extraordinary solicitude for his spiritual welfare.

When the doctor first saw his patient, he certainly recommended him to call in a priest, yet, as I have said, he did not press the suggestion; but now, having reason to presume that the dying man had an abundance of cash, it became necessary to save his soul, if that were possible, against his will. The surgeon did not, therefore, return at once to his own house, but went straightway to the chapel hard by, and held a consultation with Father Andrews.

Let me here say a word or two on behalf of this zealous priest. I will not attempt to sketch his features in pen and ink. The portrait of one Roman Catholic clergyman is so very like the picture of another, that I should be needlessly wearying the reader. The discipline, or system, which crushes, or extinguishes, the mental individuality of its professional exponents, somehow mutilates those salient distinctions which Providence marks upon every human face in infancy. Did the reader ever see two Romanist priests walking in the street, side by side? If so, unless there was a great disparity of age between them, or one had the advantage of six inches in stature over his brother, none but a most intimate acquaintance could trace an intelligible line of distinction in their features. The countenances of any two Roman Catholic priests of the same age will, in juxtaposition, be found to resemble each other almost as nearly as two peas extracted from the same pod. It will therefore be enough to say that Father Andrews was a man of portly bearing, who trod the earth like one aware he exercised enormous power over his fellows. He was about fifty years of age, but the cares of life and the severity of his penances had been met by a vigorous constitution, so that