

Jean Monette

EUGÈNE FRANÇOIS VIDOCQ

“VINTAGE SHORT MYSTERY CLASSICS”

Period Short Stories of Mystery, Crime & Intrigue

#26

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Eugène François Vidocq—a/k/a François Eugène Vidocq—(1775-1857) was the legendary criminal-turned-detective who, in the eyes of many, was the “father of criminal investigation.” After repeated imprisonment for theft, he offered his services and his knowledge of the underworld to the Parisian police. He became director of the Sûreté, the government security agency. Vidocq was deposed in 1832 as a result of fraud allegations, but his name in history was assured through publication of his Mémoires.

Vidocq and his writing collaborator are said to have embellished the facts liberally. Not surprisingly, “Jean Monette,” taken here from a 1910 English translation, reads as literature rather than journalism. Nonetheless, Vidocq’s real contributions to criminal detection are indisputable. He was a master of disguise and undercover success; was one of the first investigators to cast shoeprints in plaster of paris; and was the formulator of a paper indexing system to manage case information.

Jean Monette

At the time I first became commissary of police, my arrondissement was in that part of Paris which includes the Rue St. Antoine—a street which has a great number of courts, alleys, and culs-de-sac issuing from it in all directions. The houses in these alleys and courts are, for the most part, inhabited by wretches wavering betwixt the last shade of poverty and actual starvation, ready to take part in any disturbance, or assist in any act of rapine or violence.

In one of these alleys, there lived at that time a man named Jean Monette, who was tolerably well stricken in years, but still a hearty man. He was a widower, and, with an only daughter, occupied a floor, *au quatrième*, in one of the courts; people said he had been in business and grown rich, but that he had not the heart to spend his money, which year after year accumulated, and would make a splendid fortune for his daughter at his death. With this advantage, Emma, who was really a handsome girl, did not want for suitors, and thought that, being an heiress, she might wait till she really felt a reciprocal passion for some one, and not throw herself away upon the first tolerable match that presented itself. It was on a Sunday, the first in the month of June, that Emma had, as an especial treat, obtained sufficient money from her father for an excursion with some friends to see the fountains of Versailles.

It was a beautiful day, and the basin was thronged around with thousands and thousands of persons, look-

ing, from the variety of their dresses, more like the colors of a splendid rainbow than aught besides; and when, at four o'clock, Triton and his satellites threw up their immense volumes of water, all was wonder, astonishment, and delight; but none were more delighted than Emma, to whom the scene was quite new.

And, then, it was so pleasant to have found a gentleman who could explain everything and everybody; point out the duke of this, and the count that, and the other lions of Paris; besides, such an agreeable and well-dressed man; it was really quite condescending in him to notice them! And then, toward evening, he would insist they should all go home together in a fiacre, and that he alone should pay all the expenses, and when, with a gentle pressure of the hand and a low whisper, he begged her to say where he might come and throw himself at her feet, she thought her feelings were different to what they had ever been before. But how could she give her address—tell so dashing a man that she lived in such a place? No, she could not do that, but she would meet him at the Jardin d'Été next Sunday evening, and dance with no one else all night.

She met him on the Sunday, and again and again, until her father began to suspect, from her frequent absence of an evening—which was formerly an unusual circumstance with her—that something must be wrong. The old man loved his money, but he loved his daughter more. She was the only link in life that kept together the chain of his affections. He had been passionately fond of his wife, and when she died, Emma had filled up the void in his heart. They were all, save his money, that he had ever loved. The world had cried out against him as a hard-

hearted, rapacious man, and he, in return, despised the world.

He was, therefore, much grieved at her conduct, and questioned Emma as to where her frequent visits led her, but could only obtain for answer that she was not aware she had been absent so much as to give him uneasiness. This was unsatisfactory, and so confirmed the old man in his suspicions that he determined to have his daughter watched.

This he effected through the means of an *ancien ami*, then in the profession of what he called an "inspector," though his enemies (and all men have such) called him a mouchard, or spy. However, by whatever name he called himself, or others called him, he understood his business, and so effectually watched the young lady that he discovered her frequent absences to be for the purpose of meeting a man who, after walking some distance with her, managed, despite the inspector's boasted abilities, to give him the slip.

This naturally puzzled him, and so it would any man in his situation. Fancy the feelings of one of the government's employees in the argus line of business, a man renowned for his success in almost all the arduous and intricate affairs that had been committed to his care, to find himself baffled in a paltry private intrigue, and one which he had merely undertaken for the sake of friendship!

For a second time, he tried the plan of fancying himself to be well paid, thinking this would stimulate his dormant energies, knowing well that a thing done for friendship's sake is always badly done; but even here he failed. He watched them to a certain corner, but, before

he could get around it, they were nowhere to be seen. This was not to be borne. It was setting him at defiance. Should he call in the assistance of a brother in the line? No, that would be to acknowledge himself beaten, and the disgrace he could not bear—his honor was concerned, and he would achieve it single-handed; but, then, it was very perplexing.

The man, to his experienced eye, seemed not, as he had done to Emma, a dashing gentleman, but more like a foul bird in fine feathers. Something must be wrong, and he must find it out—but, then, again came that confounded question, how?

He would go and consult old Monette—he could, perhaps, suggest something; and, musing on the strangeness of the adventure, he walked slowly toward the house of the old man to hold a council with him on the situation.

On the road, his attention was attracted by a disturbance in the street, and mingling with the crowd, in hope of seizing some of his enemies exercising their illegal functions on whom the whole weight of his official vengeance might fall, he for the time forgot his adventure. The crowd had been drawn together by a difference of opinion between two gentlemen of the vehicular profession, respecting some right of way, and, after all the usual expressions of esteem common on such occasions had been exhausted, one of them drove off, leaving the other at least master of the field, if he had not got the expected job.

The crowd began to disperse, and with them also was going our friend, the detective, when, on turning round, he came in contact with Mlle. Monette, leaning on the arm of her mysterious lover. The light from a lamp

above his head shone immediately on the face of Emma and her admirer, showing them both as clear as noonday, so that when his glance turned from the lady to the gentleman, and he obtained a full view of his face, he expressed his joy at the discovery by a loud "Whew!" which, though a short sound and soon pronounced, meant a great deal.

For first, it meant that he had made a great discovery; secondly, that he was not now astonished because he had not succeeded before in his watchfulness; thirdly—but perhaps the two mentioned may be sufficient; for, turning sharply round, he made the greatest haste to reach Monette and inform him, this time, of the result of his espionage.

After a long prelude, stating how fortunate Monette was to have such a friend as himself, a man who knew everybody and everything, he proceeded to inform him of the pleasing intelligence that his daughter was in the habit of meeting, and going to some place (he forgot to say where) with the most desperate and abandoned character in Paris—one who was so extremely dexterous in all his schemes that the police, though perfectly aware of his intentions, had not been able to fix upon him the commission of any one of his criminal acts, for he changed his appearance so often as to set at naught all the assiduous exertions of the *Corps des Espions*.

The unhappy father received from his friend at parting the assurance that they would catch him yet, and give him an invitation to pass the rest of his days in the seclusion of a prison.

On Emma's return, he told her the information he had received, wisely withholding the means from which his knowledge came, saying that he knew she had that

moment parted from a man who would lead her to the brink of destruction, and then cast her off like a child's broken play-thing. He begged, nay, he besought her, with tears in his eyes, to promise she would never again see him. Emma was thunderstruck, not only at the accuracy of her father's information, but at hearing such a character of one whom she had painted as perfection's self; and, calling to her aid those never-failing woman's arguments, a copious flood of tears, fell on her father's neck and promised never again to see her admirer and, if possible, to banish all thoughts of him from her mind.

"My child," said the old man, "I believe you from my heart—I believe you. I love you, but the world says I am rich—why, I know not. You know I live in a dangerous neighborhood, and all my care will be necessary to prevent my losing either my child or my reputed wealth; therefore, to avoid all accidents, I will take care you do not leave this house for the next six months to come, and in that time your lover will have forgotten you, or what will amount to the same thing, you will have forgotten him; but I am much mistaken if the man's intentions are not to rob me of my money, rather than my child."

The old man kept his word, and Emma was not allowed for several days to leave the rooms on the fourth floor.

She tried, during the time, if it were possible to forget the object of her affections, and thought if she could but see him once more, to bid him a long and last farewell, she might in time wear out his resemblance from her heart; but in order to do that, she must see him once more; and having made up her mind that this interview would be an essential requisite to the desired end, she

took counsel with herself how it was to be accomplished. There was only one great obstacle presenting itself to her view, which was that "she couldn't get out."

Now women's invention never fails them, when they have set their hearts upon any desired object; and it occurred to her, that although she could not get out, yet it was not quite so apparent that he could not get in; and this point being settled, it was no very difficult matter to persuade the old woman who occasionally assisted her in the household arrangements, to be the bearer of a short note, purporting to say that her father having been unwell for the last few days, usually retired early to rest, and that if her dear Despreau would come about eleven o'clock on the following evening, her father would be asleep, and she would be on the watch for a signal, which was to be three gentle taps on the door.

The old woman executed her commission so well that she brought back an answer avowing eternal fidelity, and promising a punctual attendance at the rendezvous. Nor was it likely that he meant to fail—seeing it was the object he had had for months in view, and he reasoned with himself that if he once got there, he would make such good use of his time as to render a second visit perfectly unnecessary.

Therefore it would be a pity to disappoint any one, and he immediately communicated his plans to two of his confederates, promising them a good share of the booty, and also the girl herself, if either of them felt that way inclined, as a reward for their assistance.

His plans were very well managed, and would have gone on exceedingly well, but for one small accident which happened through the officious interference of the inspec-

tor, who, the moment he had discovered who the Lothario was, had taken all the steps he could to catch him, and gain the honor of having caught so accomplished a gentleman. He rightly judged that it would not be long before he would pay a visit to Monette's rooms, and the letters, before their delivery by the old woman, had been read by him, and met with his full approbation.

I was much pleased on being informed by the inspector that he wanted my assistance, one evening, to apprehend the celebrated Despreau, who had planned a robbery near the Rue St. Antoine, and make me acquainted with nearly all the circumstances. So, about half past ten o'clock, I posted myself with the inspector and four men where I could see Despreau pass, and at eleven o'clock, punctual to the moment, he and his two associates began to ascend the stairs.

The two confederates were to wait some time, when he was to come to the door on some pretext and let them in.

After the lapse of half an hour they were let in, when we ascended after them, and the inspector, having a duplicate key, we let ourselves gently in, standing in the passage, so as to prevent our being seen; in a few minutes we heard a loud shriek from Emma, and old Monette's voice most vociferously crying "Murder!" and "Thieves!" On entering the rooms, we perceived that the poor girl was lying on the ground, while one of the men was endeavoring to stifle her cries by either gagging or suffocating her, though in the way he was doing it, the latter would have been the case.

The old man had been dragged from his bed, and Despreau stood over him with a knife, swearing that unless he showed him the place where his money and

valuables were deposited, it should be the last hour of his existence.

Despreau, on seeing us, seemed inclined to make a most desperate resistance, but not being seconded by his associates, submitted to be pinioned, expressing his regret that we had not come half an hour later, when we might have been saved the trouble.

Despreau was shortly after tried for the offense, which was too clearly proved to admit of any doubt. He was sentenced to the galleys for life, and is now at Brest, undergoing his sentence. Emma, soon afterward, married a respectable man, and old Monette behaved on the occasion much more liberally than was expected.

—*EUGÈNE FRANÇOIS VIDOCQ*

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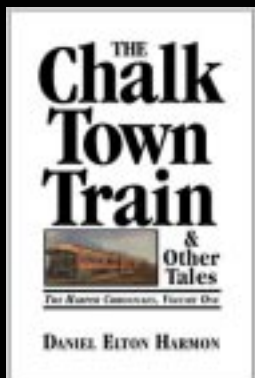
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South Carolina author and editor Daniel Elton Harmon has written more than fifty books. Recently published by Chelsea House are his six volumes in the "Exploration of Africa: The Emerging Nations" series; *The Titanic*, part of the "Great Disasters: Reforms and Ramifications" series; his history of the Hudson River for the "Rivers in American Life and Times" series; and juvenile biographies in the "Explorers of New Worlds" series. Other of his books are published by Wright/McGraw-Hill, Mason Crest and Barbour Publishing. His freelance articles have appeared in such periodicals as *Nautilus*, *Music Journal* and *The New York Times*. Harmon is the associate editor of *Sandlapper: The Magazine of South Carolina* and editor of *The Lawyer's PC*, a technology newsletter.

The Chalk Town Train & Other Tales: "The Harper Chronicles," Volume One is his first book of fiction and the first of his series of short story collections that follow the career of Harper the crime reporter.

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