

Vidocq and the Locksmith's Daughter

GEORGE BARTON

“VINTAGE SHORT MYSTERY CLASSICS”

Period Short Stories of Mystery, Crime & Intrigue

#27

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Hornpipe Vintage Publications

P.O. Box 18428

Spartanburg, SC 29318

www.hornpipe.com/mysclas.htm

“Vintage Short Mystery Classics” have been selected by Daniel Elton Harmon, author of “The Harper Chronicles,” with the intent of introducing new readers to notable works of short historical fiction in the mystery/gothic/crime vein. For more information, please visit the author’s Web site at www.danieleltonharmon.com.

In Eugène François Vidocq’s “Jean Monette,” #26 in this series, we read a literary account from the annals of early 19th-Century crime detection in Paris, told from the viewpoint of the famous one-time thief who became a pioneering detective. Predictably, Vidocq himself was a likely subject of future generations of detective fiction writers.

Émile Gaboriau based his character “M. Lecoq” on the personage of Vidocq. In “Vidocq and the Locksmith’s Daughter,” from the 1909 collection Adventures of the World’s Greatest Detectives, George Barton (1866-1940) sends a sensationalized Vidocq into the heart of the Parisian underworld to crack a high-level burglary operation.

Of particular fascination is the detailing of Vidocq’s carefully conceived, virtually impenetrable disguise (Page 3).

“Locksmith’s daughter” was a period term for “key.”

Vidocq and the Locksmith's Daughter

M. Henry, the Prefect of the Paris Police, sat at his desk in his private office, his face a picture of perplexity. He picked up a paper that lay before him and read it carefully for the third time. It was an official report of a desperate robbery that had occurred in the heart of the French capital the night before. Moreover it was one of many similar reports. There had been an epidemic of robberies, and the police seemed powerless to stop them. M. Henry summoned M. Bertaux, famed as a cross-examiner of criminals, and M. Parisot, the governor of prisons, and the three men talked long and earnestly but without coming to any conclusion. Presently a look of gratification overspread the countenance of M. Henry. He turned to his colleagues,—

“Gentlemen, I have it.”

“What is it?” they called in chorus.

“Be seated,” he responded, “and wait.”

They did as they were bid and the Prefect touched a button. A messenger responded.

“Tell Vidocq to come here at once,” said M. Henry.

In a few minutes the door opened and a strong well-built man with square shoulders shambled into the room. He had gray hair, a thick nose, blue eyes, a smooth face and a perpetual smile. He glanced about him in a furtive way and realized that he was in the presence of the triumvirate of talent that ruled the under-world of Paris. He squared himself as a man would who was preparing to be on the defensive. But the first words of the Prefect reassured him.

"Vidocq, we need your assistance."

"M. Henry, I am at your service absolutely."

The Prefect handed him the report.

"Take that and read it carefully. It is one of many. The criminals are having a carnival. I want you to capture this gang. My regular police have failed. They bring me only excuses; I wish you to bring me the prisoners."

Vidocq smiled that everlasting smile and bowed again.

"It shall be as you wish, M. Henry."

He left the room with three batteries of sharp eyes leveled at him.

M. Bertaux shrugged his shoulders.

"A quack doctor sent to capture burglars."

M. Parisot spread out his hands in disgust.

"A showman's clown, a petty thief on the detective force."

M. Henry smiled blandly.

"Gentlemen, you are not alone in your disapproval. Do you see these papers?"—pointing to a high pile on the side of his desk—"these are all protests and complaints against the employment of Vidocq. Some are from honest men; some from thieves. But he shall have his chance. His past is behind him; his future is in his own hands. I shall judge him solely by results."

II

VIDOCQ SPENT ALL MORNING in going over the reports that had been placed in his hands. After that he returned to his lodgings, and throwing himself on the bed lay awake all night devising a plan of campaign. When daylight arrived, it was completely blocked out in his mind—not a detail was overlooked.

The first step was to discard his own personality and take up that of another. It would have to be a thief. The honor of being impersonated fell to one Germain, alias "the Captain." He was a fugitive galley-slave. Vidocq had known him in the days—well, in the days before he became a detective. Germain had dark brown hair; that of Vidocq was light; he was thin, Vidocq was stout; his complexion was sallow, that of Vidocq was clear. But the resourceful detective overcame all of these obstacles. Days were employed in perfecting the likeness. First he attained a seven days' growth of beard. Then he dyed his hair and beard black. By the generous use of white walnut liquor he attained a most unhealthy complexion. The original was a snuff fiend. Vidocq garnished his upper lip with a mixture of coffee grounds and gum arabic. He made blisters on his feet by rubbing in a composition with which he was familiar. He made the marks of the fetters on his ankles and dressing himself in a suitable garb was ready for his enterprise.

After that he became a regular frequenter of the thieves' dens of Paris. He drank cheap gin, tossed off absinthe, cursed the police, showed the marks of the irons on his legs and altogether made himself a general favorite. Night after night he visited a cheap concert hall in the Faubourg St. Germain where he met most of the disreputable characters of the French metropolis. He became very friendly with most of them and made them drink his health in sundry glasses of bad wine. The resort was a veritable clearing-house for the gossip of the under-world. A man or a woman who had not "served time" was out of place in that assemblage. Talk of burglaries past and prospective was as free as remarks concerning the state of the weather.

Vidocq told his experiences with great vividness and with a degree of exaggeration that would have won a medal from the Ananias Club.

Among so many little thieves there was one big thief. His name was Constantine, a former fencing-master who, having run the gamut of dissipation, had now reached the closing stages of crime in his ill-spent life. His companions looked upon him as a man of enterprise—bold in execution and on all occasions possessing the most unblushing effrontery. The attention of the police had been directed to him more than once but they had never been able to secure the least scintilla of evidence against the man.

Vidocq, knowing this, moved cautiously. He knew that a misstep might mean his own life, for he was in the midst of desperate characters who thought nothing of murder. He put on a sad face, bemoaned his own fate, and bewailed the fact that he had no means of recouping his fallen fortunes. He became friendly with one of the intimates of Constantine, and that worthy, being plied with liquor, gave the detective full particulars of the habits of the big thief. They passed the night together and before morning Vidocq knew all about the haunts of Constantine.

On the following day he again met his voluble informant in the dance hall on the Faubourg St. Germain. He was quite excited.

"Would you like to meet Constantine?" he asked Vidocq.

"Most assuredly!" replied the detective.

They remained in conversation for some time. Presently the door opened and a smart-looking fellow came in. Vidocq's companion plucked at his sleeve.

“Now is your time if you wish to speak to Constantine—he is here.”

The detective looked up and saw a neatly dressed man of thirty with good broad shoulders. He was about five feet six inches high, extremely good looking, fine black hair and regular teeth. Vidocq waited only long enough for the newcomer to be seated when he went up to him carelessly and said:

“Would you kindly oblige me with a little tobacco from your box?”

The famous thief looked the detective over from head to foot before replying. After an embarrassing interval, Constantine passed his tobacco box to Vidocq. Then he said abruptly:

“You have been in the army?”

The detective could have fallen to the floor. Had all of his carefully-contrived disguise counted for nothing? Did Constantine know who he was? In any event it would serve his interest to answer the question truthfully. So with pretended nonchalance he said:

“Why, yes, how did you know it?”

“Simply because no man can conceal it. Once in the army you carry the badge of it with you through life, in your walk, in your shoulders, in your talk, in your manners.”

Vidocq laughed uproariously as if he considered this a good joke, and in the confusion invited his new-found friend to take a drink. He accepted, and in the course of their conversation the detective was delighted to find that the other had not penetrated his disguise.

“I like you,” finally cried Constantine, “and I want you to take dinner with some friends of mine.”

That night Vidocq dined with a party of charming cracksmen, every one of them noted in his profession. Constantine was the chief, Joubert his able lieutenant, and the others faithful followers. The wine flowed freely and the best of feeling prevailed. One of the company said facetiously that he had just come into a fortune and was celebrating the event. As a matter of fact, he had "cracked a crib" the night before and was spending part of his ill-gotten wealth; Constantine, turning to Vidocq, said:

"How's your nerve?"

"Fine."

"Are you in for an adventure?"

"Surely, with whom?"

"With the locksmith's daughter."

Vidocq made a grimace as if mocking and said:

"I don't believe I ever had the honor of the lady's acquaintance."

All hands laughed loudly at this sally. Constantine put his hands down into his pocket and produced a big brass key. He handed it gravely to the detective.

"Permit me to present you to the minx."

Vidocq, keeping up the spirit of the thing, bowed gravely, acknowledging the introduction and inquired when he would have the pleasure of going out with the lady.

"It might be to-night," he said grumblingly, "if it were not for that infernal Vidocq."

The detective pricked up his ears at the mention of his own name. He preserved the gravity of his countenance, however, as he remarked carelessly:

"Oh, I don't mind him if I can keep clear of the informers. They tell me Paris swarms with the parasites."

"That's true," said Constantine, "but if you can keep Vidocq from guessing at your business, you are safe enough with me. As for these informers, I don't fear them. I can smell those beggars as easily as a crow scents powder."

"Well," said Vidocq, "I cannot boast of so much penetration, yet I think, too, that from the frequent description I have heard of this Vidocq, his features are so well engraved in my recollection that I should pretty soon recognise him, if I came unexpectedly in his way."

"God bless you!" cried Constantine, "it is easy to perceive you are a stranger to the vagabond; just imagine now, that he is never to be seen twice in the same dress; that he is in the morning perhaps just such another looking person as you; well, the next hour so altered that his own brother could not recognize him, and by the evening, I defy any man to remember ever having seen him before. Only yesterday, I met him disguised in a manner that would have deceived any eye but mine, but he must be a deep hand if he gets over me; I know these sneaks at the first glance, and if my friends were as knowing as myself, his business would have been done long ago."

"Nonsense," cried Vidocq, "everybody says the same thing of him, and yet you see there is no getting rid of him."

Constantine was on his feet at once, with an oath. He cried out:

"To prove that I can act as well as talk, if you will lend me a helping hand, this very evening we will waylay him at his door, and I'll warrant we'll settle the job, so as to keep him from giving any of us further uneasiness."

Vidocq immediately agreed, and was placed in the unique position of going out with a party of thieves to

waylay himself. They actually went to the home of the detective, but, as may be imagined, he did not appear, and after three hours of waiting they gave up the vigil in disgust.

Many days had passed and still Vidocq was without the specific evidence which would enable him to put his hand on the shoulders of Constantine and say, "Thou art the man!" Of one thing he was morally certain; it was that the erstwhile fencing-master was at the head of a band of resourceful and unscrupulous thieves. One night, after a jollification at the dance hall, the crisis came.

"Friend," said Constantine with a leer, "do you feel like an adventure to-night?"

"With whom?" asked Vidocq.

"With my lady-love—the locksmith's daughter."

"I'll join you with all my heart!" exclaimed the detective in undisguised sincerity.

The plot was revealed with great attention to details. The cracksmen had been "spotting" the mansion of a wealthy banker on one of the boulevards of Paris. Through the treachery of a housemaid who had been smitten with the charms of Constantine the gang had been provided with the key which would admit them into the garden of the house. Vidocq listened very attentively and occasionally answered in monosyllables. He was careful not to say anything which would expose him to the reproach of having caused them to commit crime.

"Midnight is the hour," said Constantine, "and I want every man to do his duty."

There were six in the party—including Vidocq. Each of the cracksmen was assigned to his part in the enterprise. Constantine was in command and Joubert was chief

of staff. Vidocq was to be lifted into a ground floor window, but the detective demurred to this particular assignment on the plea that he was as yet only a novice.

"He has a weak stomach," sneered Joubert, "he will never make a good cracksman."

Constantine hotly repelled the insinuation. He put his hand on Vidocq's shoulder affectionately and said:

"When this boy has had a little more experience, he will beat you all in the business."

Vidocq smiled in a sickly way at this unexpected, if dubious, compliment. It seemed a shame to deceive such a big-hearted scoundrel. But then, business is business, and it was too late to turn back now. It was finally arranged that Vidocq should remain on the outside of the garden wall and give the alarm if the police should come in sight. It was now within an hour of the time when they should sally forth on their unlawful mission.

"Come, boys," cried Constantine, "a drink all around and then we'll get down to business."

On the plea of searching for his hat and coat Vidocq contrived to separate himself from the others for a few minutes. He wrote a hurried message on the back of an old envelope and finding a gendarme in the vicinity of the restaurant dispatched him with the note to the nearest Prefecture. It was to the point. It told of the place of rendezvous and added:

Have half a dozen men on the spot. Frighten the cracksmen but make no arrest until they have been driven to a place of refuge.

When Vidocq returned to the table, his unsuspecting confederates were preparing to leave. Their final toast

was "Success," drunk standing and in silence. Under the exhilarating influence of their liquor they had scarcely noticed the momentary absence of the detective. Once on the outside they hurried along rapidly, choosing the narrow and less frequented thoroughfares. In about twenty minutes they reached their destination. Constantine halted and, putting his hand in his hip pocket, pulled out a glistening revolver, which he examined carefully. Vidocq was not a cowardly man, but the resolute manner in which the chief thief scrutinized his weapon sent a cold shiver down his spinal column. Constantine then gathered his men about him and distributed a half dozen black masks which they adjusted with the ease that comes from long practice. After that the chief advanced to the gate with his brass key—the famous locksmith's daughter. To his surprise it would not work. He fumbled with it for nearly a minute and then gave it up as a bad job.

"Blast the girl!" he muttered. "She permitted them to bolt the door from the inside."

"Perhaps she's peached," whispered Vidocq insinuatingly.

"She wouldn't dare," cried Constantine, showing his teeth. "She knows me, and she knows that I would kill an informer."

Once again that cold shiver ran up and down Vidocq's spinal column. But it was merely a fleeting emotion. He had nerve in plenty and to spare.

"Boys," called the chief, "we've got to jump the wall and get down to business. We can't fool around all night. Here you"—to the detective—"give us a hand."

Vidocq planted himself against the wall of the garden and, holding out his two hands, boosted the cracksmen

over the wall one at a time. Constantine was the last one up. He held his hand down to Vidocq and assisted him to the top of the stone coping.

"Now Germain," said Constantine to the detective, "you get in the shadow near the end of the wall and keep a sharp lookout. If you see the police, give a low whistle. Be on the alert, because everything depends on you."

Vidocq nodded his head.

"Yes," he repeated significantly, "everything depends on me."

Two of the men had dark lanterns. Slowly, cautiously, they felt their way toward the house. Constantine carried a complete burglar's kit. He got to work immediately.

Vidocq on the wall watched the operation intently. What a unique purpose! He felt like an umpire for society at that moment. The thieves on one side of the wall, the officers of the law on the other. And himself in the middle. Truly everything depended on him.

"Tick, tick, tick," came the low, sharp sound of the metallic instrument.

Finally the shutter was forced. After that a pane of glass was cut and then nothing stood between the burglars and their booty. Five minutes, ten minutes, they worked there industriously. Everything was done with business-like precision. Four stout bags stood with yawning mouths ready to receive the swag.

Vidocq looked on the outside of the wall. The streets were deserted. Not a soul was in sight. Had his note mis-carried? Would the police fail him? It looked that way. What a predicament for a sleuth! To be the confederate of thieves! If one of his many enemies should catch him in such a position he might have a hard time explaining to

M. Henry. Presently a measured tread was heard on the hard sidewalk. His heart bounded. It was a squad of police. He leaned over and whispered.

"Hist!"

A captain of police approached.

"It is I—Vidocq," called the detective in a subdued voice. "I will give the alarm but I wish you to let them go their way. Two of them are armed. Presently come to my old lodgings."

The captain saluted and with his men sought shelter. At the same moment Vidocq gave a low prolonged whistle. Instantly there was a commotion within. Bags were grabbed up and all scampered toward the wall.

"It's the police," whispered Vidocq, "come quickly and you may escape."

They unbolted the gate and hurried out. Vidocq joined them.

"Where are the police?" whispered Constantine.

"They've gone the other way," said Vidocq. "If we're careful we can elude them."

They hurried along for a few blocks. The detective turned to the chief cracksman:

"It's dangerous to go through the streets with these bags. Here's my old lodgings. Let's creep in here for shelter?"

"Can you get in?" asked Constantine.

"Sure," replied Vidocq. "I have my key and I know the room's vacant."

Silently they crept inside one at a time and closed the door behind them. Constantine slapped Vidocq on the back.

"You're a brick, Germain. I told you he'd distinguish himself, boys."

"What do you call this place?" asked Joubert, looking around him.

"I call it the mouse-trap," said Vidocq with a leer.

The cracksmen laughed loudly at this sally.

The swag was poured out on the table and the enterprising gentlemen were soon engaged in dividing their rich haul. Constantine and Joubert, the only ones who possessed weapons, laid their pistols on a chair. Slyly Vidocq picked them up and secreted them under a mattress. In the midst of the exultation a loud knocking was heard at the door. The thieves looked at one another with pale faces. Vidocq crawled under the bed, unobserved. No sooner was he out of sight than the door was burst open and a swarm of inspectors and policemen entered the room. In the twinkling of an eye five pairs of handcuffs were shoved on the wrists of the cracksmen, and they were being marched to the nearest police station.

III

IT WAS NEW YEAR'S DAY at the Prefecture of Police. M. Henry, following a long-established custom, was holding his annual reception. The room was crowded and all of the officers of the police, high and low, were there to present their chief with the compliments of the season. M. Bertaux, the cross-examiner of criminals, and M. Parisot, the governor of prisons, were in the line receiving with M. Henry. During a lull in the crowd the three men drifted into a conversation concerning crime.

"By the by, M. Henry," said M. Bertaux, "what has become of the fellow Vidocq?"

"I really do not know," said the Prefect gravely.

"What!" exclaimed the other, "not know!"

"No," was the response. "I have not seen him since the day I called him in, in your presence, and delegated him to break up the burglaries that have disgraced the police system of the city."

"And the burglaries," continued the other tauntingly, "they have continued?"

M. Henry nodded.

"And Vidocq—he has disappeared?"

The Prefect nodded again.

M. Bertaux burst into an ironical laugh.

"M. Henry, you have been deceived; taken in; hood-winked."

The Prefect shook his head.

"I am not ready to confess defeat."

At that moment a great commotion was heard on the outside. An attendant was summoned.

"What is the confusion?"

"All of the valuables stolen from the banker's house in the Champs Elysées have been recovered."

"Good," retorted M. Henry, "but is that all?"

"No, Vidocq is outside demanding admittance; he has no card."

"Admit him!" snapped the Prefect.

A moment later five men, handcuffed, entered the room. Bringing up the rear was Vidocq. The first prisoner was Constantine, the others Joubert and his companions. Vidocq made a profound bow, and, smiling his perpetual smile, pointed to the cursing culprits:

"M Henry, I wish you the compliments of the season and, as a New Year's gift, present to you the redoubtable Constantine and his fellow cracksmen."

—*GEORGE BARTON*

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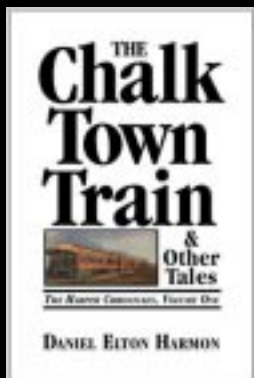
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