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Henry Vizetelly

Excerpt

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GLANCES BACK THROUGH SEVENTY YEARS.

XXII.

(1857-58.)

THE FRENCH DETECTIVE, AND HIS SMART SUBORDINATE—
AT THE PRINCESS ROYAL'S MARRIAGE—SOME POPULAR
PENNY PUBLICATIONS—THE YATES AND THACKERAY
SQUABBLE—A TALK WITH CHARLES READE—
THE CHERBOURG FÊTES.

I WAS in Paris at the end of 1857 and the beginning of the year following, and had scarcely returned to London before news arrived of the attempted assassination of the emperor by flinging some hand grenades at his carriage as it drew up at the opera-house in the Rue Lepelletier. The attempt, as we all know, failed, though a dozen unfortunate people were killed, and twice as many wounded by the exploded bombs. Singularly enough while I was in Paris I had been introduced by a friend to M. Claude, the police-agent who arrested the three principal conspirators, Pieri, Rudio, and Orsini, and who had moreover forewarned the prefect of police of the existence of the plot, though his warning was made light of at the time.

A friend who was present in the opera-house that evening informed me that when the emperor entered the imperial box, and showed himself to the audience, his

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countenance wore just the same calm, impassable look as on the day after the *coup d'état*, when he rode along the boulevards thirty feet or more in advance of his staff, while blood was still running in the gutters, and the road and footway were encumbered with unburied corpses. At the opera he glanced from side to side, surveying the audience with his habitual fathoming gaze, and bowed his acknowledgment of their plaudits in the calmest fashion, without a muscle of his face seeming to quiver, or the slightest sparkle lighting up his lack-lustre eyes.

I was several times in M. Claude's company, and was sufficiently interested by what I had been told of him—that he was in reality a nobleman, and that Claude was simply his Christian name—to study him carefully. He was a thick-set little man, with a clean-shaven face, the only thing remarkable about him being his piercing blue eyes. Though his manner was cold and formal, and he had much of the dignified air of the typical *juge de paix*, I found him agreeable, and not indisposed to be communicative. Most likely this arose from my being a foreigner, as he had the reputation of being remarkably reserved. Although of noble birth, he was next to penniless when he came up to Paris to engage in the struggle for a living. I have heard M. Claude say that he arrived in the capital from his native province shortly before the fall of Charles X., bringing with him letters of introduction to young M. Thiers, who, at the 1830 revolution, made him his temporary secretary. He afterwards became clerk, he said, to the public prosecutor, and on Louis Napoleon's election to the presidency of the republic, he secured the great object of his ambition, an appointment as commissary of police for one of the districts of Paris. It used to be said that M. Claude warned his old protector Thiers on the eve of the *coup d'état*, but Thiers either disbelieved his information, or would not act

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on it, so that he was caught in his bed like the other recalcitrant members of the Assembly.

Claude himself arrested several of the latter, and raided various printing-offices, where he arbitrarily caused the machines to be smashed to prevent the newspapers from being issued. His zeal obtained him promotion, and after his successful action in the Orsini affair, he was made chief of the detective police. While occupying this post he brought scores of notorious criminals to justice, and gained the reputation of being the greatest "chef de la sûreté" that the French police force ever had.

M. Claude, having been mixed up in many important affairs, had of course a fund of interesting anecdotes at command, but a certain official reticence generally caused him to preserve silence on most of the subjects one would have liked him to talk about. When I resumed my acquaintance with him, after I went to live in Paris six or seven years subsequent to the Orsini attempt, he told me rather an amusing story, of which a smart young member of his staff was the hero. A couple of ladies belonging to the Bonapartist aristocracy had paid, he said, a visit to M. Pietri, the prefect of police, to beg that he would help them find two respectable women, mother and daughter, in whom they were interested. A few years previously they had befriended these persons, who had been reduced by misfortune to a position of want. The mother was a cripple, incapable of supporting herself, and the daughter had earned what was at best a precarious livelihood by giving music lessons. The pair had long resided at Batignolles, but had moved from their lodging there a year or so previously, and all trace of them had been lost. This was the more unfortunate, as a distant relative had died leaving them a considerable fortune. The notary who had charge of the deceased's affairs had failed to find the missing legatees, and the property would

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soon be escheated if they did not come forward and claim it.

As a rule, the prefecture of police never intervenes in matters of this kind, but the application being made by two *grandes dames* exercising considerable influence at the Tuileries, M. Pietri graciously promised to render them all the help in his power. "With this view," said M. Claude, "he requested me, as chief of the detective department, to send him one of my most skilful agents, and my choice fell upon a shrewd, good-looking young fellow of four or five and twenty, in whom I placed considerable confidence. The prefect acquainted him with the particulars of the case, and told him to find the two women with all possible speed. 'I should like the matter settled in a fortnight,' said M. Pietri. 'That is giving me very little time, monsieur le préfet,' replied the young fellow, 'but I will do my best.'

"The fortnight expired, the prefect, anxious not to disappoint his aristocratic applicants, was impatient to know whether my agent had succeeded. 'Not yet, monsieur le préfet,' replied he, 'but I have a clue, and think I am on the right track.' 'Well, take another fortnight,' said the prefect, 'but understand the matter must be settled by then. Remember that time is flying, and that if these people are not soon found, the property will be escheated.'

"A couple of weeks later my young detective, on being summoned to the prefectural sanctum, pleaded that the clue on which he had relied had proved a failure. Some new information, however, had reached him, and he hoped to lay hands on the missing women very shortly. The prefect was extremely dissatisfied with these excuses, and plainly intimated to the young fellow that he considered I had greatly overrated his abilities. 'However,' said he, 'I will grant you a final fortnight, and if you have not then succeeded, the matter will be taken out of your hands.'

"So frequent were the inquiries of the two *grandes*

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dames," continued M. Claude, "that there was no possibility of the affair escaping M. Pietri's memory, and the last fortnight had scarcely expired, when he sent impatiently for my agent, and said to him: 'Well, I have every day been expecting a report from you, but it is quite evident that you are not the sharp fellow M. Claude took you to be. We shall have to place you in some other branch of the service, where less energy and acumen are required, and the prospect of promotion is slight.'

"'Oh! pray do not trouble about that, monsieur le préfet,' replied the impudent young fellow who, by the way, had shown much more acuteness than the prefect had given him credit for, 'I propose withdrawing from the service altogether.' 'And why, pray?' asked M. Pietri in some surprise. Assuming a self-satisfied air, and twirling his moustaches, the young rascal replied: 'Because, monsieur le préfet, I found those two women you are so anxious about several weeks ago; the daughter is now my wife, and I have taken the necessary steps to secure the fortune she is entitled to.'

"The same day," continued M. Claude, "I received a note from M. Pietri, wishing to see me. When I called he told me the entire story, and laughed heartily over the sequel. 'My friend,' said he to me, 'you were not mistaken in your estimate of that young fellow, and I look upon his leaving us as a positive loss to the service.'"

The close of January 1858 was unexpectedly fortunate to me, as, on the occasion of the princess royal's marriage, the current number of the "Illustrated Times," containing a very complete series of engravings of the ceremony, yielded me a clear profit of £1200. At the period in question, newspaper representatives were steadily refused admission to all Court ceremonies, and even on occasions of more than ordinary interest editors had to depend on the Court Circular for such scanty information as they

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were able to give their readers. I determined, therefore, to write to the Marquis of Breadalbane, the then lord chamberlain, on the subject, and it was eventually settled through Mr Spencer Ponsonby that five morning and two illustrated papers should receive cards of admission to the Chapel Royal, St. James's, on the day of the princess's marriage, Jan. 25, 1858.

I was present with half-a-dozen of my *confrères* at the ceremony. We were posted in a pew on the left hand side near the entrance to the building, and, to comply with the requirements of official etiquette which pretended to ignore our presence, were screened by a dwarf red silk curtain which in no degree interfered with our view. As every one knows, the chapel is very small—so small indeed that I remember by the time one of the very high *geboren* Prussian ladies, in attendance on the Princess of Prussia, reached her seat near the altar, the whole of her long train was not entirely within the nave.

All the handsomest women of the high aristocracy, blazing with diamond coronals, necklaces and stomachers, had managed to secure seats—Attenborough on this particular occasion had considerably unlocked the door of his strong room in which the diamonds of impecunious peeresses were stowed away—and immediately in front of us sat half a dozen ladies, including that queen among Court beauties, Lady Alfred Paget, looking handsomer than any of the rest. Presently some distinguished state and other old fogies began to arrive, and while one of them more than usually heavily decorated was hunting for his place I somewhat disrespectfully asked “Jenkins” of the “Morning Post,” who was supposed to know every member of the aristocracy a mile off: “who is that old buffer opposite with the stars and garters?” To my great astonishment the particular Lady Beautiful directly in front of me obligingly turned round, and gracefully nodding her ostrich

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plumes, and causing her diamond head-dress to dazzle me with its scintillations, courteously replied: "That elderly gentleman"—with a marked emphasis on the word gentleman—"is the Marquis of Lansdowne. Is there anybody else you would like me to point out to you?" I was so surprised and confused that for the moment I hardly knew what to reply; but noticing a veteran officer in tartan breeks comfortably dozing against one of the pillars of the opposite gallery, I thanked my handsome informant and inquired who the sleeping warrior was. I soon discovered that I had made a most unfortunate random shot, for the lady, gracefully bowing again, replied: "Oh! that is my papa, the Duke of Richmond."

In spite of my unlucky inquiry my fair informant continued exceedingly gracious, courteously replying to whatever questions I put to her, and frequently volunteering information of her own. Lord Panmure, who found himself encumbered by his big cocked-hat with its huge scarlet and white plumes, prevailed on her to take temporary charge of it, when, noticing how inconvenienced she was by the burthen, I hastened to relieve her of it, and wrapping up the war secretary's imposing head-gear in a copy of that morning's "Times" I irreverently tucked it under the seat. When the ceremony was over I thought the least I could do was to see after the lady's carriage, and on volunteering my services I learned that she was the Countess of Bessborough, wife of the then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

The most interesting part of the marriage ceremony was at the end when the princess threw herself upon her mother's bosom, and there ensued an artless interchange of affection which touched the many lookers on. Kisses soon gave place to audible sobs, and the eyes of the poor little bride glistened with tears which she was unable to control, as one after another her relatives affectionately

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embraced her. Such was her emotion that the procession formed for leaving the chapel had to be delayed until the weeping bride had in some degree recovered her self-composure.

The Indian mutiny, which broke out in the summer of the previous year, led to my making the acquaintance of John Lang, a smart and prolific contributor to the light literary publications of the day. He had practised at the Indian bar, and been editor of the Bombay "Mofussilite;" and some millionaire begum had presented him with £10,000, it was said, for successfully pleading her suit against John Company, then the ruling power in India, in the native courts. Owing to this circumstance, Lang's fame spread far and wide among the native princes, and he used to tell a story of how the Ranee of Jhansi, when her territory was about to be annexed and more than half of her income confiscated, sent him a letter, written on gold paper, urging him to come and advise her on the subject.

The ranee's finance minister and head attorney-general brought this letter to Lang, who was received with almost royal state on his arrival at Jhansi. At the interview which followed, the ranee—who in her youth had been famed for her great beauty—was hidden behind a curtain, but, woman like, she permitted Lang to catch more than a glimpse of her, as though purely by accident, so that he might see she was a handsome woman still. His journey served no advantageous purpose, however, as the only advice he could give the ranee was to petition the queen, a proceeding not at all to her taste, as she knew well enough how useless it would be. When Lang went away, she paid him his fee in kind, which included such inconvenient objects as an elephant, a camel, and an Arab slave. To these she added a leash of swift greyhounds and some embroidered silks and shawls. The ranee's state

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was of course annexed and never restored to her; and when the mutiny broke out, she rivalled Nana Sahib, whose grievances were identical with her own, in the fiendish cruelties she was guilty of.

Nana Sahib was one of Lang's especial friends and had presented him with his portrait—a large oil-painting—for which he had sat to the European portrait painter to King of Oude. This portrait Lang lent me for reproduction on a large scale in the "Illustrated Times," and its publication excited a good deal of curiosity at the time. Lang's literary career in England, though brilliant in its way, was but brief. In a very few years he succumbed to an insatiable craving for champagne at all hours of the day and night, after this pleasant but insidious beverage had unstrung every nerve in his wiry frame.

The little world of purveyors of penny popular literature, which not unfrequently comprised

"— the awfullest trash

About earls as goes mad in their castles, and females what settles their hash,"

was startled about this time with the news that Stiff the lank, cadaverous-looking proprietor of the "London Journal," one of the most successful cheap publications of the epoch, had sold the copyright of it to Ingram and McMurray, the papermaker, for the large sum of £24,000. This tempted me to start a penny periodical, a kind of cross between the "London Journal" and Dickens's "All the Year Round." Freytag's "Debit and Credit" formed its first serial story, and I thought myself especially fortunate in securing Sala's clever "Twice round the Clock," when in its conception stage, to publish contemporaneously with Freytag's clever tale. The new venture was called the "Welcome Guest," and started with the respectable circulation of a hundred and twenty thousand copies. The censorious "Blackwood" and the dignified "Saturday

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Review" went out of their way to commend the publication, still, from one cause or another, I managed to lose between two and three thousand pounds by it. Mr. John Maxwell (Miss Braddon's husband), fancying there was still money to be made out of what had promised to be a triumphant success, in an evil moment for himself, was daring enough to buy this unlucky "Welcome Guest" from me, and lost another couple of thousand pounds over the publication before he determined to abandon it.

To return, however, to the "London Journal," the career of whose proprietor, a certain George Stiff, had been rather a peculiar one. Originally a very bad wood-engraver, earning little more than a pound a week, he added a trifle to his income by starting a portrait club at some "public" which he frequented. Subsequently, by dint of putting a high estimate upon himself, he managed to secure the direction of the "Illustrated London News" engraving establishment in its early days, but his incompetency soon manifesting itself, he was sent to the right about. He took his revenge by talking some ambitious printer into starting an opposition paper, and persuaded a few draughtsmen and engravers to assist in the enterprise; but the affair proving a miserable failure in the course of a few weeks he was again adrift. The "Family Herald" had at this time secured a very large circulation, and Stiff puzzled his brains how he could best cut into this. Finally, he determined upon bringing out a somewhat similar sheet with illustrations, and thereupon planned the subsequently well-known "London Journal."

Stiff was beset by one serious difficulty in his enterprise. He had not a penny piece of capital, and was, moreover, without credit. Still he knew that he possessed a specious tongue, and determined this should procure him all he wanted. His first step was to prevail on some new printer to trust him for a moderate amount,