

# Monsieur Lecoq

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### I

At about eleven o'clock in the evening of the 20th of February, 186—, which chanced to be Shrove Sunday, a party of detectives left the police station near the old Barriere d'Italie to the direct south of Paris. Their mission was to explore the district extending on the one hand between the highroad to Fontainebleau and the Seine, and on the other between the outer boulevards and the fortifications.

This quarter of the city had at that time anything but an enviable reputation. To venture there at night was considered so dangerous that the soldiers from the outlying forts who came in to Paris with permission to go to the theatre, were ordered to halt at the barriere, and not to pass through the perilous district excepting in parties of three or four.

After midnight, these gloomy, narrow streets became the haunt of numerous homeless vagabonds, and escaped criminals and malefactors, moreover, made the quarter their rendezvous. If the day had been a lucky one, they made merry over their spoils, and when sleep overtook them, hid in doorways or among the rubbish in deserted houses. Every effort had been made to dislodge these dangerous guests, but the most energetic measures had failed to prove successful. Watched, hunted, and in imminent danger of arrest though they were, they always returned with idiotic obstinacy, obeying, as one might suppose, some mysterious law of attraction. Hence, the district was for the police an immense trap, constantly baited, and to which the game came of their own accord to be caught.

The result of a tour of inspection of this locality was so certain, that the officer in charge of the police post called to the squad as they departed: "I will prepare lodgings for our guests. Good luck to you and much pleasure!"

This last wish was pure irony, for the weather was the most disagreeable that could be imagined. A very heavy snow storm had prevailed for several days. It was now beginning to thaw, and on all the frequented thoroughfares the slush was ankle-deep. It was still cold, however; a damp chill filled the air, and penetrated to the very marrow of one's bones. Besides, there was a dense fog, so dense that one could not see one's hands before one's face.

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“What a beastly job!” growled one of the agents.

“Yes,” replied the inspector who commanded the squad; “if you had an income of thirty thousand francs, I don’t suppose you’d be here.” The laugh that greeted this common-place joke was not so much flattery as homage to a recognized and established superiority.

The inspector was, in fact, one of the most esteemed members of the force, a man who had proved his worth. His powers of penetration were not, perhaps, very great; but he thoroughly understood his profession, its resources, its labyrinths, and its artifices. Long practise had given him imperturbable coolness, a great confidence in himself, and a sort of coarse diplomacy that supplied the place of shrewdness. To his failings and his virtues he added incontestable courage, and he would lay his hand upon the collar of the most dangerous criminal as tranquilly as a devotee dips his fingers in a basin of holy water.

He was a man about forty-six years of age, strongly built, with rugged features, a heavy mustache, and rather small, gray eyes, hidden by bushy eyebrows. His name was Gevrol, but he was universally known as “the General.” This sobriquet was pleasing to his vanity, which was not slight, as his subordinates well knew; and, doubtless, he felt that he ought to receive from them the same consideration as was due to a person of that exalted rank.

“If you begin to complain already,” he added, gruffly, “what will you do by and by?”

In fact, it was too soon to complain. The little party were then passing along the Rue de Choisy. The people on the footways were orderly; and the lights of the wine-shops illuminated the street. All these places were open. There is no fog or thaw that is potent enough to dismay lovers of pleasure. And a boisterous crowd of maskers filled each tavern, and public ballroom. Through the open windows came alternately the sounds of loud voices and bursts of noisy music. Occasionally, a drunken man staggered along the pavement, or a masked figure crept by in the shadow cast by the houses.

Before certain establishments Gevrol commanded a halt. He gave a peculiar whistle, and almost immediately a man came out. This was another member of the force. His report was listened to, and then the squad passed on.

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“To the left, boys! ” ordered Gevrol; “we will take the Rue d’Ivry, and then cut through the shortest way to the Rue de Chevaleret. ”

From this point the expedition became really disagreeable. The way led through an unfinished, unnamed street, full of puddles and deep holes, and obstructed with all sorts of rubbish. There were no longer any lights or crowded wine-shops. No footsteps, no voices were heard; solitude, gloom, and an almost perfect silence prevailed; and one might have supposed oneself a hundred leagues from Paris, had it not been for the deep and continuous murmur that always arises from a large city, resembling the hollow roar of a torrent in some cavern depth.

All the men had turned up their trousers and were advancing slowly, picking their way as carefully as an Indian when he is stealing upon his prey. They had just passed the Rue du Chateaudes-Rentiers when suddenly a wild shriek rent the air. At this place, and at this hour, such a cry was so frightfully significant, that all the men paused as if by common impulse.

“Did you hear that, General? ” asked one of the detectives, in a low voice.

“Yes, there is murder going on not far from here—but where? Silence! let us listen. ”

They all stood motionless, holding their breath, and anxiously listening. Soon a second cry, or rather a wild howl, resounded.

“Ah! ” exclaimed the inspector, “it is at the Poivriere. ”

This peculiar appellation “Poivriere” or “pepper-box” was derived from the term “peppered” which in French slang is applied to a man who has left his good sense at the bottom of his glass. Hence, also, the sobriquet of “pepper thieves” given to the rascals whose specialty it is to plunder helpless, inoffensive drunkards.

“What! ” added Gevrol to his companions, “don’t you know Mother Chupin’s drinking-shop there on the right. Run. ”

And, setting the example, he dashed off in the direction indicated. His men followed, and in less than a minute they reached a hovel of sinister aspect, standing alone, in a tract of waste ground. It was

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indeed from this den that the cries had proceeded. They were now repeated, and were immediately followed by two pistol shots. The house was hermetically closed, but through the cracks in the window-shutters, gleamed a reddish light like that of a fire. One of the police agents darted to one of these windows, and raising himself up by clinging to the shutters with his hands, endeavored to peer through the cracks, and to see what was passing within.

Gevrol himself ran to the door. "Open! " he commanded, striking it heavily. No response came. But they could hear plainly enough the sound of a terrible struggle—of fierce imprecations, hollow groans, and occasionally the sobs of a woman.

"Horrible! " cried the police agent, who was peering through the shutters; "it is horrible! "

This exclamation decided Gevrol. "Open, in the name of the law! " he cried a third time.

And no one responding, with a blow of the shoulder that was as violent as a blow from a battering-ram, he dashed open the door. Then the horror-stricken accent of the man who had been peering through the shutters was explained. The room presented such a spectacle that all the agents, and even Gevrol himself, remained for a moment rooted to the threshold, shuddering with unspeakable horror.

Everything denoted that the house had been the scene of a terrible struggle, of one of those savage conflicts which only too often stain the barriere drinking dens with blood. The lights had been extinguished at the beginning of the strife, but a blazing fire of pine logs illuminated even the furthest corners of the room. Tables, glasses, decanters, household utensils, and stools had been overturned, thrown in every direction, trodden upon, shattered into fragments. Near the fireplace two men lay stretched upon the floor. They were lying motionless upon their backs, with their arms crossed. A third was extended in the middle of the room. A woman crouched upon the lower steps of a staircase leading to the floor above. She had thrown her apron over her head, and was uttering inarticulate moans. Finally, facing the police, and with his back turned to an open door leading into an adjoining room, stood a young man, in front of whom a heavy oaken table formed, as it were, a rampart.