

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

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THE ASSASSIN OF THE PAS DE CALAIS.

WHEN he became sufficiently well to leave his room, and to indulge in conversation, he was informed that amongst those who had thus testified their sympathy, were Monsieur and Madame De Vernelle, the lady and gentleman who had been married by the unfortunate Abbé Vière, the very day preceding the night on which he was so barbarously murdered, and placed on the altar at Menterre. It appeared that these terrible associations caused them to feel particular interest for him who had been so shortly after a victim of the same diabolical scourge and they had frequently expressed a wish that they might be permitted to have an interview with him, as soon as he became well enough to bear the presence of strangers. This permission, was of course, readily granted, with thanks for the sympathy expressed.

Accordingly, one day M. and Madame De Vernelle, upon calling, were conducted to the room in which Ferrers, still pallid and weak, was sitting. The visitors had the air of people of consideration; their calls were always made in a carriage; they were handsomely attired, and their address and bearing had all the elegance and refinement of high breeding. The gentleman appeared to have numbered some thirty-six or eight years, and to have arrived at that turn of existence in which the elasticity and freshness of youthful manhood takes the settled force and character of middle life. His hair was rather closely cut, but his moustache and beard were allowed full and ample growth, and the raven hue of these in conjunction with sharply chiselled features contributed to invest his countenance with a severe, inexorable cast of expression. This cast of face can rarely be styled pleasing or prepossessing, and in the present instance the ungratifying effect was considerably aggravated by an unusually low forehead, and the almost Chinese straightness and narrowness of a pair of piercing black eyes. An involuntary sensation of aversion possessed Ferrers, as he regarded the remarkable face of his sympathetic visitor. To the countenance of Madame De Vernelle, on the contrary, he turned with delight. It was one of the sweetest, most innocent, most happy, he had ever seen. Without being correctly or finely beautiful, it was bright and charming, the index of a gentle, trusting, and loving soul.

Immediately they entered the room, M. De Vernelle advanced to Ferrers with an easy but courteous bow, and taking his hand and smiling in a manner which displayed, behind the dark moustache and beard, a perfect range of close, small, and particularly white front teeth, congratulated him warmly upon his escape from an atrocious attempt at assassination. Madame De Vernelle echoed these congratulations in a voice and manner full of feeling and sincerity. De Vernelle then proceeded to ask various questions respecting the time, place, and manner of the attack, with the earnestness and *empressment* of one who took a deep and strong interest in the subject. He informed Ferrers that he owned a small château situated near the highway from St. Omer to Arras, and was residing there when the first of this extraordinary series of outrages was committed, and from that period he had never ridden out, or made any excursion in that somewhat solitary neighbourhood without being well armed. He had taken an active part in the endeavours which had been made to discover and arrest the offenders, and had contributed largely towards the reward offered to whomsoever should succeed in so doing. When, the night after his marriage, the very priest who had united him to his 'Dear Hyacinthe' had been barbarously assassinated and robbed as he was returning home after the wedding festivities, his feeling of horror and resentment had, of course, received a very powerful stimulation. Immediately he had conferred with the police authorities, and endeavoured by all the means in his power to increase the diligence and effectiveness of their exertions, and, in addition to the reward offered by the Government, had publicly promised five thousand francs, out of his own purse, to whomsoever should succeed in tracing and securing the assassin.

'In spite of the horror with which I regard these outrages,' said he, after Ferrers had finished his narration, 'there is something about the manner in which they are carried out that touches me strangely.'

'How?' asked Ferrers, surprised at a peculiar change of tone in his visitor's voice.

'Because the murderer is evidently a fine genius in his way.'

'I trust you bear him no admiration or sympathy?'

'Neither one nor the other. The play of ordinary feeling is stopped when we are ter-

rified, amazed and appalled. There is a mystery, a bravado, a success, an *aplomb*, about these crimes, which makes them wonderful; and crime is something more than crime for pondering minds, when it is of a nature to be considered wonderful.'

'The only wonderful thing to me is, that the wretches are allowed to escape!' exclaimed Ferrers impatiently.

'Aye—this is wonderful, too,' replied De Vernelle, turning sharply towards him, and fixing his bright, narrow eyes upon his face. 'That is wonderful! Notwithstanding all we have done for these months past, scouring the country, searching houses, woods, fields, roads, lanes, ditches, caves, and pits,—and men will search like blood-hounds, mind you, when they have a chance of gaining some thousands of francs,—there is not yet a clue or sign gained of the villains. It is the most astonishing part of the whole affair.'

'It is particularly surprising to me that the villainous dog, which has so evidently been trained to the work of murder, is not turned up somewhere or other, if the search has been so complete. See that dog where you may, and you must pronounce it an animal too dangerous to be allowed to live.'

'Indeed! Pray describe the creature to me again;—who knows but I may chance to meet with it when I return to the country.'

'I trust your *rencontre* may not happen at night, or under anything like similar circumstances to mine,' said Ferrers with a shrug. 'It is no joke, I can assure you.'

'Ah, there is no fear of that,' exclaimed the visitor carelessly, then, checking himself with a slight start, he continued—'I believe I know the country too well to be caught unguarded, in any lonely place at a dangerous hour. And depend upon it the villains know me too well to venture an attack upon me.—That redoubtable dog once set at my throat, and I warrant you would hear no more of these mysterious outrages!' He clenched his teeth and shook his walking-stick in a threatening manner as he made this remark.

'I imagine, sir, that these worthies, and especially their brute of a dog, are not likely to entertain much respect for persons; and I should think a proprietor of a district stood as good, or as bad a chance as any one else of falling in for a share of their attentions.'

De Vernelle made no reply, but clenched his white teeth and shook his walking-stick again, accompanying the gesture with a curious smile.

'It is a disgrace to the police and the authorities of the whole country, that the wretches have not been hunted down and made to suffer for their crimes upon the scaffold!' exclaimed Ferrers with warm indignation.

'So it is—a disgrace to us all,' returned the De Vernelle, his moustache still twitching with a strange smile, which seemed to Ferrers unmeaning and ridiculous, if not offensive, but which he ascribed to uncommon peculiarity of temperament on the part of the visitor. 'There was never such a case of justice baffled—never! And if you only knew the immense pains, the enormous amount of sagacity, the ceaseless watchfulness and suspicion, the thousand-and-one excruciatingly clever plans, that have all been lavished by police, magistrates, mayors, proprietors, and I don't know who, upon the discovery and arrest of the offenders, your very reasonable astonishment would be considerably increased. Ha ha! the plans, intrigues and stratagems, that have been concerted and carried into operation during the last three months, one would have imagined sufficient to entrap even a Mephistopheles. *Mon Dieu!* the brains of the whole police force of France have been racked. There never were such admirable, capital, irresistible methods contrived for the capture of any villain or villains whatsoever. And yet all in vain! I, myself—you have no idea how I have worked in the same cause—have I not, my love?'

'Yes, indeed, you have!' exclaimed Madame De Vernelle, to whom the interrogation was addressed, speaking in a very serious tone. 'And I wish to Heaven you had been rewarded with better success, Monsieur. All this time, who knew how many more unfortunates had fallen victims to the same shocking scourge?'

'True!—who knows?' returned De Vernelle. 'Yes, Monsieur,' he continued, turning again to Ferrers; 'you would hardly credit how heartily I have worked in order to assist the authorities, and vindicate our poor outraged law and justice. I have suggested plan after plan; I have kept watch by night; I have put myself at the head of parties of scouts and have scoured the country; I have taken part in the routing and searching of every thicket and hovel, from Dan even to Beersheba; I have spent money, and still hold out the promise of a tolerably handsome reward to whomsoever may be lucky enough to succeed in what all as yet have so signally failed. *Peste!*—all to no purpose. What, think you, had better be done now? Tell me; a fresh head may afford some new and happy idea.'

'Really I cannot venture to offer any suggestion,' answered Ferrers; 'if those who know the country and the people so well, are thus baffled what chance is there for an entire stranger. It is certainly a very extraordinary affair altogether; and from what you tell me, I begin to have something like a suspicion that some one amongst the authorities or the police, must be in league, or on excellent terms, with the villains, putting them on their guard as to the direction of every new search, and as to the course of all proceedings.'

'No, it is not so I am sure,' returned De Vernelle, eagerly. 'I would stake my life it is not so. I know every bonhomme of them all; and I know that every one of them is completely hoodwinked. They are as much in the dark as—I am myself. But *pardon*—all this is apart from the object for which I have been desirous of seeing you. I wish to have a minute and circumstantial statement of the mode in which these attacks were made; I desire to gain all the information I can; so pray tell me exactly how the affair happened, and especially give me a faithful description of this dragon of a dog; and then I will trouble you no more.'

Ferrers complied with the request, and detailed the circumstances of the attack, as they are given above, De Vernelle listening, and watching every gesture and every movement of his features with the closest attention. Madame De Vernelle listened also, and an occasional lifting of the hands and exclamation of terror or sympathy bore evidence of the strong interest she took in the narrative. When Ferrers had concluded, De Vernelle held out his hand in silence to him, as a man might offer his hand in condolence and encouragement to one who has sustained a heavy calamity. Ferrers made a responsive movement, and De Vernelle shook his warmly. He was still silent, however, and continued to regard, with a curious, half-abstracted fixedness, the face of the sufferer.

'After the dog sprang upon you,' said he, presently, 'you heard foot steps, you say?'

'Yes.'

'Did you see any one, or catch a glimpse of any human being?'

'No. Whoever came to the assistance of the brute kept behind me, out of sight.'

'Ah! Did you hear a voice?'

'No.'

'Not a word, not a sound?' asked De Vernelle, with great earnestness.

'No; not a sound. The instant the foot-steps approached I was knocked on the head, and after that neither heard nor saw anything.'

Again De Vernelle's dark moustache worked and twitched, and once more the strange smile spread over his face and glittered in his eyes.

'How frightened you looked!' he exclaimed, bursting in a low laugh.

'Eh?' exclaimed Ferrers.

'I say, how frightened you must have looked when that infernal dog began to worry you, and to ply his jaws upon your throat.'

'It is by no means unlikely. Doubtless, I was rather alarmed,' said Ferrers, with a shrug. 'And to this moment I am unable to think of the affair with sufficient nonchalance, to enjoy a laugh over it.'

'Well, I suppose not,' answered De Vernelle, rising and buttoning his coat. 'Were it my case, I am sure I should be serious enough over it; and it is very inconsiderate of me to smile. Excuse me; it was mere thoughtlessness. Be assured you have my sincerest sympathy, and no exertion shall be spared, on my part, to further the ends of justice in your behalf.'

He then bade Ferrers adieu, and thanked him for the interview and for the information he had afforded, with most winning and respectful politeness; handed him his card, entreated a visit as soon as he should be well enough to move out, and took his leave; Madame De Vernelle, who also expressed a fervent hope that Ferrers might soon be completely recovered, and that they might then have the pleasure of seeing him again, going with him.

When Ferrers was well enough, he availed himself of this invitation, but found that the De Vernelles had left Paris on the morning of the day on which he made the call. They were gone to their residence in the country but were expected to return to Paris in about a month.

He did not repeat the visit, however, and, being introduced to numerous friends by the relative whose house was now his home, and living a life of pleasure, thought very little about the De Vernelles or the outrage which had brought him in contact with them.

About a year after the above interview, he saw De Vernelle for the second time, in a box at the Porte Saint Martin Theatre, where he found him listening to the gloomy dialogue and watching the terrible *tableaux* of one of Victor Hugo's early melodramas with the deepest relish. After the first salutation, which was accompanied with a quick start and the old unpleasant smile, he spoke but little, seeming to be thoroughly engrossed

ed by the dark, wild business proceeding on the stage. At the culmination of the catastrophe he appeared hardly to breathe, and, when the curtain fell, a long, violent sigh told great was the nervous relaxation which the conclusion brought with it.

'You admire this species of play?' asked Ferrers.

'Yes, yes, yes; it must be something of the strongest, or I care not for it,' he answered quickly; 'something of the strongest, where hopes, and fears, and passions are made to rend the soul. Oh, Hugo! king of dramatists, Magician, sorcerer, cabalist of hearts and souls, I adore thee! A play of this kind is a fine feast to me; and you—how does it suit your taste?'

'Not much, I must confess,' said Ferrers. 'To represent the world as a pandemonium of saints and devils, is not holding the mirror up to nature, according to my English notions.'

'Bah! what is nature and the world?' exclaimed De Vernelle. 'Beyond green fields, trees, and flowers, who knows anything about nature? By the world, you mean the men and women who live in it; and, by this time, what is left of nature amongst them? We may live side by side for years, and talk daily, after the way of the world, and in the end what would you know of me, what should I know of you? Saints and Devils!—no, nothing of the sort; nothing out of the way of everyday life. Men and women, sir!—with the masks and veils of conventionality, and the paraphernalia of society and etiquette exchanged for dramatic situations and the undisguised working of the soul. Holding the mirror up to Nature! Why it is Nature herself who is presented to us here. Out of doors, in the world, one can never catch a glimpse of her, as far as men and women are concerned. But—ha, ha!—it is all a matter of taste. By the way I shall never forget how frightened you looked when I first saw you—never!'

'When?' demanded Ferrers, in much surprise, and not without displeasure.

'Why, when—when you were telling me the story of your mishap on the Arras road. Ha, ha, ha, ha!—we have had nothing better to-night! There, I grant, was a touch of Nature!'

'If you had felt the dog's fangs in your throat, you would perhaps, have considered that a touch of Nature.'

'No doubt. I am sorry to laugh, but I can't help it. Ha, ha! I am afraid I shall always laugh when I think of that.'

'Well, well, laughter, however unreasonable, hurts no one,' exclaimed Ferrers, as he turned away.

'That's right,' said De Vernelle, as he seized Ferrers' hand and shook it warmly; 'take it like a philosopher, for I declare I can't help it.'

They parted, but Ferrers almost immediately stepped back again and enquired after Madame De Vernelle.

'Ah, je ne sais pas!' exclaimed De Vernelle, with a rough contemptuous shrug. 'I have not seen her for many months. I thought all the world knew we were separated, for everyone seemed to be chattering about it.'

'Excuse me; I did not know.'

'Yes,' continued De Vernelle, with mocking seriousness; 'she has gone back to her papa, for I was not good enough for her, alas! La, la! she made sad complaints about me—that I was cold blooded, cold-hearted, selfish, cruel, dissipated, irregular—and by no means the proper sort of husband for a saintly and enthusiastic young lady. You see, whatever bad qualities I possess, I am frank and ingenuous. Eh bien! you will not be likely to meet Madame Vernelle again, sir—at any rate not in company with her *beau-père* of a husband.'

This interview made a considerable impression upon the mind of Ferrers, who quitted De Vernelle with a feeling of dislike, almost amounting to detestation.

Shortly after this, the Englishman returned to his native country, and for six years lived the life of a country gentleman, surrounded by the old friends and connection of his family. It was on the occasion of his marriage that he visited Paris for the second time, proposing to spend there his honeymoon. Passing through the Rue Montmartre one day, with his young wife, he happened to step into a jeweller's shop, for the purpose of allowing her to select some articles of bijouterie. Whilst looking over an assortment of rings, the attention of Ferrers became suddenly and strongly attracted by a particular one, in which a fine diamond was very handsomely set. 'That is my ring!' exclaimed he, in the low, concentrated tone of amazement and conviction. He took it up, and examined it. The ring of which he had been robbed on the Arras road bore the initial 'F,' on the inside; there was no initial on this, but there were traces of an erasure, which apparently had been made with great care.—He consulted with the jeweller, who, after an inspection, said there had undoubtedly been an erasure, but it had not been done whilst the article had been in his possession, and he himself was not aware of it before the present moment. Ferrers' first idea was to proceed to