

# TRUTH ABOUT THE CASE

The Experiences of M. F. Goron, Ex-Chief of the Paris Detective Police

Edited by Albert Keyser

## AN UGLY CASE

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Six in the morning, Vaillant, the man who threw the bomb in the Chamber of Deputies, had been executed, and I had been compelled to attend this hideous function. I had not been to bed. I reached my office an hour later, very tired, and determined, if possible, to retire early. Up to four o'clock nothing had occurred to prevent my having a night's rest, when I received the following note:

"Dear Goron: I expect you to dinner tonight. Meet me at Pousset's at half-past seven. Serious business. "ARMAND."

Even without the last two words, I would have guessed that something had gone wrong. My friend's usually bold writing appeared thin and shaky; and he, the exuberant man, who would write three pages to say what others express in three lines, had adopted a laconic style. Yes, that note foreboded trouble—if not worse—and I scribbled a line to say that I would meet him at the appointed hour.

Armand P— and I were old chums. Both born in Rennes, we were educated at the same college, and, although in later years our ways lay in different directions, our friendship never changed.

Armand was the son of a retired stock-broker, and had inherited about one hundred thousand dollars from his mother, who died a year after he was born. He had a cousin, Marceline, whom he loved; and on the day he came of age he informed his father and me that he intended to marry her. I shall never forget that date, because it was the only time he and I quarreled.

His father, I knew, was strongly opposed to marriages between members of the same family. When he remonstrated with Armand, and the latter appealed to me, I sided with the father, and, after a stormy scene, induced my friend to give up his idea.

Marceline was not the wife for the good-natured Armand, and I was glad when that danger was past. Two years later he married a lady he had met at Royat, and bought a pretty villa near Ville d'Avray, where I sometimes paid them a visit on a Sunday afternoon.

Unfortunately, this union did not turn out well. Madame P— was rather bigoted, and, being of a highly nervous temperament, her husband's boisterousness and his loud laughter seemed to upset her. These two had no thoughts in common, and after a while my visits to Ville d'Avray stopped altogether.

As to Marceline, she had married a cavalry captain, who soon afterward was killed by a fall from his horse, leaving her a limited income and a house at Versailles. From Ville d'Avray to Versailles is but a twenty-minute drive, and I knew that Armand, since the captain's death, spent much of his time with Marceline.

When I reached Pousset's and saw Armand I looked at him in surprise. Hollow-cheeked, pale, with sunken, lack-luster eyes, I hardly recognized my poor friend. He rose when he saw me, walked with me to the door, and, hailing a cab, told the man to drive to Volain's.

"Is it a dinner-party?" I asked.

"No," he said. It was the first word he had spoken.

At Volain's he led the way to a private room on the first floor. I saw he had ordered the dinner and that the menu had been compiled with his usual skill.

"I wanted to be alone with you," he said, "and here we can talk undisturbed."

I was hungry and quite prepared to do honor to Volain's cuisine, but before I had swallowed my first spoonful of soup, I noticed that the waiter had placed before Armand a boiled egg and a glass of milk.

"Are you going to make your dinner off that?"

"Yes," he replied with a painful smile, "but don't trouble about me. We will talk when you have finished."

The fish was served, and the man was about to leave the room when I called him back.

"That will do," I ordered; "you need not bring the remainder of the dinner."

Then, turning to Armand, I exclaimed: "And now, for heaven's sake, speak!"

He walked up to me slowly, placed both hands on my shoulders, and in a strained voice asked: "Did you see Vaillant before he was led to execution?"

"Goron, I am being slowly poisoned."

I was speechless with amazement. He continued: "I want you to find out the culprit, and I know you will. But you will give me your word of honor that no harm shall befall the murderer."

"My dear Armand—" I began. "Wait till I have finished—until I have told you the names of two persons, one of whom is poisoning me. Yes, there are only two."

He gave a sob, and, after an unceremonious silence, suddenly screamed out: "Goron, either my wife, or Marceline, my cousin, is the murderer! You may well shudder. And now you will understand why the chief of police may not know of the affair, and why neither of these women may be harmed. They are sacred to me. For one bears my name; and the other, the other—I have loved all my life!"

I battled long; but as my friend's life was at stake, I reluctantly yielded, and promised to help solve the mystery without injuring the women.

"Thank you," he whispered, "I shall now die happy."

"No," I interrupted him, "you will not die. Heaven knows what is lurking behind all this, and what startling discovery I may make. But you will have to place yourself unreservedly in my hands, and obey my instructions without questioning my motives."

"I will."

"Then tell me more about your suspicions."

"You call them 'suspicions?' Look here, Goron, two months ago I was a strong man. And now! About six weeks ago, my health suddenly began to fail. I experienced burning pains in the digestive organs, and a disagreeable taste in my mouth after meals. I consulted my medical man, who told me it was a form of indigestion, and prescribed a treatment which I followed. But my condition grew slowly worse, and for the last fortnight I have been sustaining myself on three eggs a day and a little milk."

"I consulted Dr. L— and Professor G—, renowned specialists. They took a big fee, and informed me that my medical man's diagnosis was right. Until that moment the idea of poisoning had never entered my mind until by a singular coincidence, I happened to read the report of a poisoning case in Milan, where a man had been systematically administering arsenic to his victims. I was struck by the similarity of the symptoms described with what I myself experienced, except that one of the victims had dark spots on his body."

"Goron, the next night when I undressed I discovered dark spots on my thighs! It flashed upon me that I, too, was being poisoned, and, under an assumed name, I went to the Hotel Dieu hospital, where I told the consulting physician that I feared I had inadvertently swallowed a dose of arsenic. He did not seem to believe my story, but as I accused no one, he made the necessary examination, and after a few days informed me that I had really taken poison, and prescribed the proper remedy."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then—I knew that only Jeanne or Marceline could have been guilty of this horrible crime. Jeanne and I, as you know, are not happy; and I am only too glad to spend a few hours with Marceline. Sometimes I lunch with her, at others I invite myself to dinner—she is always glad to see me. And, during the last week, I have taken all my meals at home or at my cousin's."

"And these pains, and the nasty taste, did you notice them after you lunched or dined at your house, or at Marceline's?"

"I knew you would ask me that. And it is there that the mystery comes in, for those very same symptoms show themselves when I return from my cousin's and when I stay at home."

"So that you are inclined to suspect the two women?"

"I don't know. It is too terrible."

"Is Jeanne on good terms with Marceline?"

"No."

"Does your wife expect you back tonight?"

"Yes."

"Then send her a telegram that you are detained in town. Tonight you stay with me, and tomorrow I will take you somewhere where you will be safe. But I have a few more questions to ask. What do your wife and Marceline say about your altered appearance?"

"They seem very concerned about me, and are anxious to do all they can."

"You see, old chap, Marceline is not rich, and, strictly between ourselves, she is a bit of a gambler. She bets on horses, and, occasionally, dabbles in stocks. She has already cost me a rather big amount. So, one day, I insured my life for thirty thousand dollars in her name, in case anything happened to me."

"I could not help starting slightly. "When was that?" "About a year ago."

"Have you told Marceline of this?" "Yes."

"And your wife?" "She knows I insured my life, but believes it was done in her name."

It was nearly eleven o'clock. I took Armand home with me, and the next morning conducted him to a sanatorium, near Chignon, where I had taken a little villa for my family, telling the director of the establishment that my friend was suffering from nervous prostration, and wanted absolute rest. I then sent him a valet—one of my own men—who every morning had to fetch him a bottle of fresh milk. I also gave him instructions respecting the bread, and even the eggs, for Armand's frugal meal, which had to be boiled in my friend's sitting-room.

Having taken these precautions, I made Armand write to his wife and to Marceline that by his doctor's orders he was taking a rest-cure.

I began by making a searching investigation, which brought to light such a startling fact that I went down to my friend, whom I found in bed, but looking less dejected. The burning pains were less intense and the dark spots were slowly disappearing.

"Armand," I said, "before touching

"It is impossible! What proofs have—"

"One moment. What was the last amount you gave Marceline, and on what date?"

"Four hundred dollars on the 19th of last month. But why do you ask?"

"Because the day following, Gaston, who, three days before, borrowed a dollar from Hippolyte, the waiter in the Cafe de France, paid four hundred dollars to the Vicomte de S—, to whom he had lost that amount in the gambling-club in the Rue Talbot, of which he is one of the chief ornaments. I have a little list in my pocket of the sums this amiable youth lost and spent during the last six months. And you will find the total agree with what you gave Marceline and what she took out of her own pocket. Marceline herself is heavily in debt and owes money to her tradespeople. It is not she who gambles, but he; and you have been supplying him with the necessary funds."

Armand looked at me in speechless astonishment.

"Good heavens!" he exploded, "I will at once—"

"You will do nothing at all," I said, "until I give you permission. Leave the matter to me. Have you heard at all from your wife or Marceline?"

"Yes, Jeanne telegraphed yesterday that she is ill, but expects to be able to come and see me here in a couple of days. And half an hour before you came I received this note from Marceline:

"Dear Armand," it said: "I am glad you are taking a rest-cure, and hope it will soon put you right. I hear Jeanne has influenza, so I will come for a few days to Chignon, to the Hotel de la Boule d'Or. If you are well enough, come and lunch with me at one o'clock."

"MARCELINE."

"Yes," she replied, "he seems really ill."

"This milk," I said, "looks delicious. We do not get it like that in Paris. Try it." And I poured her out a glass.

But she shook her head. "No, I do not care for it. I never take milk."

She remained pensive, with her chin on her hand; suddenly she said: "M. Goron, I have to ask you a great favor. Can I have a few minutes' private conversation with you any time next week?"

"With great pleasure," I replied. This interview, to which I attached much importance, never came off.

On my return to town I immediately sent the flask I had brought with me from Chignon to the Municipal Laboratory to have the contents analyzed, and early the next morning received a short report stating that the milk did not contain the slightest trace of arsenic. I had just finished reading it when Armand was announced. He seemed greatly agitated.

"You here?" I called out. "Why did you leave Chignon without my permission?"

"I came up by the early train," he retorted, "to show you this. It came last night after you had left."

And he threw me a crumpled piece of paper.

It was a shockingly written, badly spelled, letter addressed to Monsieur Armand P—:

"The woman you love is attempting your life. Be warned ere it is too late."

There was no signature. I examined it long and carefully.

"What a calamity!" cried Armand in a hoarse voice.

habit of putting the dots, not over the 'i's, but above the letters that follow. This, no doubt, escaped you. There remains only the serious question of what led her to this."

Armand was in deep thought. "What will you do with her?" he at last said.

"You have my word she shall not be touched. But I have a duty to perform, and will perform it. By tomorrow night we shall be in possession of all the facts, and this ugly nightmare will have come to an end. Please return at once to Chignon, and wait till you hear from me."

My friend's villa in Ville d'Avray stood within its own grounds behind a cluster of trees that hid it from view. As Madame P— had written to her husband that she was suffering from influenza, I went to the tobacconist's at the corner, and, having purchased a few cigars, inquired after Monsieur P—. He, I was told, was in Paris; but Madame had not gone with him. Had she been ill? No, Madame had been driving her ponies every day. He had just seen her enter the gates.

I went straight to the house, and a few minutes later, Madame P— came to me in the library.

"You here, M. Goron?" she exclaimed. "It is six months since we saw you. You are neglecting your friends."

She was still the same thin, old-maidish-looking little woman, with pale cheeks, pale hair, pale hands, and a curiously big voice, not in keeping with her small stature.

"Have you seen Armand?" she asked.

"Yes, I knew he was better, and I came here hoping to find him."

"No, he is still away. I could not go to him because I have only just recovered from an attack of influenza. Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes, you can render me a small service. I want to send a letter to some one, but not in my own writing. I want to sign it only. Will you allow me to dictate it to you?"

"Certainly."

She sat at her husband's desk, dipped her pen in the ink, and waited. "The woman you love," I began, "is attempting—"

Madame looked up, her lips parted, her whole face turned an ashy gray.

"—is attempting your life. Be warned—"

I could go no further.

With fear expressed in every line of her face, she rushed at me, seized both my arms in a convulsive grasp, and, throwing herself on the sofa, her face buried in the cushions, broke into peals of uncontrollable laughter. It was fearful.

After a while she grew calmer.

"Madame," I said, "will you—"

At the sound of my voice she jumped up and stood in front of me.

"No!" she screamed in a paroxysm of excitement, "don't speak, don't utter a word. Only listen. Yes, you know I wrote that letter. You guessed the whole truth. I can read it in your face. You have come to avenge Armand. But you shall listen to me. You shall know what I suffered, and why I became a murderer. M. Goron, have you ever heard of a woman killing a man because she loved him? Don't look at me surprised. I am not mad. I am quite sane. Had I been bereft of reason I should have suffered less."

"I love Armand as no woman ever before loved a man. He is kind, generous, and I would give my life for him any hour of the day. I loved him from the moment I first saw him, and, when we married, I wanted him to know all he was to me. But a curse seemed to rest on me. My stony features and my harsh voice repelled him; and when I tried to tell him how I worshipped him, and that I was pining for his affection, my tongue seemed paralyzed. Finally I gave up. And then I knew he was lost to me; and I had to see him spend half his days in the company of that flighty doll, his cousin. I resolved to kill myself, but I knew that he would marry that woman; and I swore that sooner than that he should die!"

I longed to have this painful interview over, and said:

"Madame, I have not come to arrest you, because Armand made me promise that if the crime should be brought home to you, you should not be harmed, so far as the law is concerned. In order to save my friend's life I am making the sacrifice of my duty; but I must insist on your obeying my injunctions."

She bowed her head, and it was decided that before the end of the week she should leave France. She at once proposed to go to the cholera-stricken district in Tonquin, where she could be useful, and I promised to see her safely on board the next outgoing steamer. She also signed a declaration to the effect that she was leaving her husband and her home, which would enable Armand to obtain a divorce without any trouble. As I rose to go, she stopped me.

"Allow me to make a last request. Don't tell Armand anything about my confession to you. He need not know what I have suffered. Will you promise me?"

"I promise it."

"I thank you. Good-by, M. Goron; I shall not forget your kindness."

In less than a week she left for Tonquin, where she toiled night and day in the hospital. She died six months after her arrival, from over-exertion.

Armand, I believe, married Marceline. I say "I believe," because that lady wrote me an indignant letter, wherein she said she would never forgive my suspicions of her. And she must have made Armand share her indignation, for I have never seen him nor heard from him since.



Madame looked up, her lips parted, her whole face turned an ashy gray.

upon the business that brings me here I must refer to the statement you made the other night that you experienced these ugly symptoms no matter where you took your meals. For a minute I had the idea that possibly both women might be implicated in the crime; but, in the absence of direct proof, I abandoned this hypothesis, especially as I have it on the highest medical authority that the effects of systematic arsenical poisoning do not show themselves till several hours later. And since every day you dined and lunched either at home or at Marceline's, we cannot draw any inference as to where the poison was administered.

"And now," I continued, "let us talk of Marceline. Did you know that her brother Gaston—the young scamp—is back in Paris?"

"Yes, I did."

"Have you ever met him?"

"A few months ago I saw him at his sister's, and the next morning he borrowed one hundred dollars from me. Since that day I have never come across him."

"And his sister?"

"She has nothing more to do with him."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Quite certain."

My friend looked at me expectantly.

"What must I do?" he asked.

"My dear Armand," I said, "I know you are anxious to go to the heart of this terrible business, and so am I. Go to Marceline to-morrow. About one o'clock I shall come to the hotel to see you; as I am supposed to have missed you when I called here. Remember that you have not seen me, nor heard from me, for a long time. Marceline, of course, will ask me to luncheon. You will have your milk and eggs, which you must not touch. But, two or three minutes after we are at table, when you see me twirl my moustache, rise, and tell your cousin you feel faint and want to lie down. Have you understood?"

"Yes, quite."

The next day when I called at the Boule d'Or, Marceline insisted on my staying, and she herself placed a jug of milk and two boiled eggs before Armand. I gave the agreed signal, whereupon Armand at once rose and asked permission to rest a little while. As I expected, Marceline conducted him to the adjoining bedroom, and the instant she had gone I poured some of the milk from the jug into a small flask I had brought with me.

When Marceline returned she looked grave.

"I did not know Armand was so ill," I remarked. "I was surprised to hear he had gone to a sanatorium."

"What is a calamity?" I asked.

"Why, this letter! Can't you see that the business has leaked out? Who can have sent this?"

"Armand, for a fairly intelligent man, you are not sharp. This letter gives us the last link we wanted, and it comes at the right moment. Listen carefully, and I will show you which are the points on which this mystery turns. My suspicions, I own, were at first directed against Marceline. Her love of money, and the knowledge that your death would bring her thirty thousand dollars, told against her. When, however, I heard of her brother's doings I changed my opinion. Women, my dear Armand, may be weak and foolish enough to impoverish themselves for their brothers, yet sisterly devotion will not lead them into crime. A woman will commit a murder for motives of her own, and sometimes, though very rarely, she will risk her neck for the man she loves—for her brother, never."

"This disposes of Marceline. And now it is your wife who stands before us as the accused person. Of her guilt I have little doubt, and that letter confirms what other suspicions I may have entertained. She penned that note herself, and her attempt to compromise Marceline tells its own tale. She wrote it with her left hand, and in the writing—otherwise excellently disguised—I detect her curious