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Freeman

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TRACED IN BLOOD

The Little Old Man of the Batignolles.
EMILE GABORIAU.
CHAPTER V.

While waiting for the concierge, M. Mechinot proceeded to make a rapid and careful examination of the scene of the crime. The lock of the door leading into the apartment was what principally occupied his attention. It was unopened, and the key turned in it without the slightest difficulty. This circumstance entirely precluded the idea that a stranger had entered at night by the aid of false keys. On my part, mechanically, or rather inspired by the astonishing instinct that had been revealed in me, I picked up the cork half covered with green wax which I had seen on the floor. It was fastened on the wall and the wax portion still showed the marks of the corkscorer; but in the other end was a deep notch, evidently produced by some sharp instrument.

Suspecting the importance of my discovery, I imparted it to M. Mechinot. He did not restrain an exclamation of pleasure. "At last," he cried, "we have a clue. This cork was dropped here by the assassin. It was fastened on the point of the weapon he used. Inference: the instrument of murder is a pointed, fastened with this cork. I am sure of finding the criminal, whoever he may be!"

The commissary of police was finishing his work in the bed-chamber, and M. Mechinot and I remained in the drawing-room, when we were interrupted by the sound of panting breath. Almost immediately a stout woman whom I had seen in the vestibule hurrying amidst the lodgers appeared. She was fastened on the point of the weapon he used. Inference: the instrument of murder is a pointed, fastened with this cork. I am sure of finding the criminal, whoever he may be!"

"I need certain information," he began, "and I am going to question you. In your own interest I advise you to answer without any evasion. In the first place, what is the name of the poor old man who has been murdered?" "His name was Escorvais, monsieur, but he was best known by the name of Antenor, which he had formerly borne because it was better suited to his business." "Has he lived in this house long?" "For eight years."

What gave you this certainty? To discover a man who had committed a crime to thrust him upon the scaffold. "No, Monsieur, who else could it be? Monsieur Mechinot came to see his uncle yesterday evening, and when he went out it was nearly midnight. Besides, though he always speaks to me, he said nothing when he came or went away. And from that moment till the one when I discovered everything, no one, I am sure, went up to Monsieur Escorvais's room."

"I confess that this testimony bewildered me. Still, I should not have thought of perceiving the examination. Fortunately, M. Mechinot's experience was great, and he was thoroughly skilled in the difficult art of drawing the whole truth from a witness. "So, madame," he continued, "you are certain that Monsieur came here yesterday evening? He did not come here yesterday evening? He did not come here yesterday evening?"

"I am not certain," she replied, "but I am sure that he was here yesterday evening. I saw him enter the house at about eight o'clock, and he was alone. He was wearing a dark coat and a hat. He was looking very nervous, and he was talking to himself. He was looking very nervous, and he was talking to himself."

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time in our inquiries to stop to exchange impressions and discuss our conclusions. "Now," said M. Mechinot, "before entering the place, let us study the approaches to it." And, trained to carry on these prudent investigations and those of a detective, he made me a sign to follow him into a doorway, directly opposite Mechinot's shop. It was an unpromising, almost shabby shop, compared with those that surrounded it. The front needed painting. Over the door, in letters one after another, were the names of the various tradesmen who had occupied the place. The name of Mechinot was the last. I had it was probably intended to clearly that glittered in the windows. From the rods hung a quantity of plated chains, let ornaments, glass chandeliers, and necklaces of imitation coral, and pendants and sleeve-buttons set with imitation gems of all colors. A poor display, I perceived at a glance, and one that would not tempt sleep-walkers. "Let's go in," said I to M. Mechinot. He was less impatient than I, or understood how to control his impatience better, for he grasped me by the arm, saying: "One moment—I should like to catch a glimpse of Mrs. Mechinot." But it was in vain that he remained at our post of observation twenty minutes longer; the shop was still empty. Mrs. Mechinot did not appear. "We have waited long enough," my worthy neighbor at last exclaimed. "Come, Monsieur Godeuil, 'll risk it." "To be continued."