

The Mystery of Orcival

by

Emile Gaboriau

Web-Books.Com

The Mystery of Orcival

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Chapter 1..... | 3 |
| Chapter 2..... | 11 |
| Chapter 3..... | 18 |
| Chapter 4..... | 27 |
| Chapter 5..... | 36 |
| Chapter 6..... | 42 |
| Chapter 7..... | 51 |
| Chapter 8..... | 64 |
| Chapter 9..... | 68 |
| Chapter 10..... | 81 |
| Chapter 11..... | 97 |
| Chapter 12..... | 105 |
| Chapter 13..... | 113 |
| Chapter 14..... | 122 |
| Chapter 15..... | 131 |
| Chapter 16..... | 139 |
| Chapter 17..... | 145 |
| Chapter 18..... | 152 |
| Chapter 19..... | 162 |
| Chapter 20..... | 174 |
| Chapter 21..... | 186 |
| Chapter 22..... | 194 |
| Chapter 23..... | 198 |
| Chapter 24..... | 215 |
| Chapter 25..... | 235 |
| Chapter 26..... | 243 |
| Chapter 27..... | 254 |
| Chapter 28..... | 261 |

Chapter 1

On Thursday, the 9th of July, 186-, Jean Bertaud and his son, well known at Orcival as living by poaching and marauding, rose at three o'clock in the morning, just at daybreak, to go fishing.

Taking their tackle, they descended the charming pathway, shaded by acacias, which you see from the station at Evry, and which leads from the burg of Orcival to the Seine.

They made their way to their boat, moored as usual some fifty yards above the wire bridge, across a field adjoining Valfeuillu, the imposing estate of the Count de Tremorel.

Having reached the river-bank, they laid down their tackle, and Jean jumped into the boat to bail out the water in the bottom.

While he was skilfully using the scoop, he perceived that one of the oar-pins of the old craft, worn by the oar, was on the point of breaking.

"Philippe," cried he, to his son, who was occupied in unravelling a net, "bring me a bit of wood to make a new oar-pin."

"All right," answered Philippe.

There was no tree in the field. The young man bent his steps toward the park of Valfeuillu, a few rods distant; and, neglectful of Article 391 of the Penal Code, jumped across the wide ditch which surrounds M. de Tremorel's domain. He thought he would cut off a branch of one of the old willows, which at this place touch the water with their drooping branches.

He had scarcely drawn his knife from his pocket, while looking about him with the poacher's unquiet glance, when he uttered a low cry, "Father! Here! Father!"

"What's the matter?" responded the old marauder, without pausing from his work.

"Father, come here!" continued Philippe. "In Heaven's name, come here, quick!"

Jean knew by the tone of his son's voice that something unusual had happened. He threw down his scoop, and, anxiety quickening him, in three leaps was in the park. He also stood still, horror-struck, before the spectacle which had terrified Philippe.

On the bank of the river, among the stumps and flags, was stretched a woman's body. Her long, dishevelled locks lay among the water-shrubs; her dress - of gray silk - was soiled with mire and blood. All the upper part of the body lay in shallow water, and her face had sunk in the mud.

"A murder!" muttered Philippe, whose voice trembled.

"That's certain," responded Jean, in an indifferent tone. "But who can this woman be? Really one would say, the countess."

"We'll see," said the young man. He stepped toward the body; his father caught him by the arm.

"What would you do, fool?" said he. "You ought never to touch the body of a murdered person without legal authority."

"You think so?"

"Certainly. There are penalties for it."

"Then, come along and let's inform the Mayor."

"Why? as if people hereabouts were not against us enough already! Who knows that they would not accuse us - "

But, father - "

"If we go and inform Monsieur Courtois, he will ask us how and why we came to be in Monsieur de Tremorel's park to find this out. What is it to you, that the countess has been killed? They'll find her body without you. Come, let's go away."

But Philippe did not budge. Hanging his head, his chin resting upon his palm, he reflected.

"We must make this known," said he, firmly. "We are not savages; we will tell Monsieur Courtois that in passing along by the park in our boat, we perceived the body."

Old Jean resisted at first; then, seeing that his son would, if need be, go without him, yielded.

They re-crossed the ditch, and leaving their fishing-tackle in the field, directed their steps hastily toward the mayor's house.

Orcival, situated a mile or more from Corbeil, on the right bank of the Seine, is one of the most charming villages in the environs of Paris, despite the infernal etymology of its name. The gay and thoughtless Parisian, who, on Sunday, wanders about the fields, more destructive than the rook, has not yet discovered this smiling country. The distressing odor of the frying from coffee-gardens does not there stifle the perfume of the honeysuckles. The refrains of bargemen, the brazen voices of boat-horns, have never awakened echoes there. Lazily situated on the gentle slopes of a bank washed by the Seine, the houses of Orcival are white, and there are delicious shades, and a bell-tower

which is the pride of the place. On all sides vast pleasure domains, kept up at great cost, surround it. From the upper part, the weathercocks of twenty chateaux may be seen. On the right is the forest of Mauprevoir, and the pretty country-house of the Countess de la Breche; opposite, on the other side of the river, is Mousseaux and Petit-Bourg, the ancient domain of Aguado, now the property of a famous coach-maker; on the left, those beautiful copses belong to the Count de Tremorel, that large park is d'Etiolles, and in the distance beyond is Corbiel; that vast building, whose roofs are higher than the oaks, is the Darblay mill.

The mayor of Orcival occupies a handsome, pleasant mansion, at the upper end of the village. Formerly a manufacturer of dry goods, M. Courtois entered business without a penny, and after thirty years of absorbing toil, he retired with four round millions of francs.

Then he proposed to live tranquilly with his wife and children, passing the winter at Paris and the summer at his country-house.

But all of a sudden he was observed to be disturbed and agitated. Ambition stirred his heart. He took vigorous measures to be forced to accept the mayoralty of Orcival. And he accepted it, quite in self-defence, as he will himself tell you. This office was at once his happiness and his despair; apparent despair, interior and real happiness.

It quite befits him, with clouded brow, to rail at the cares of power; he appears yet better when, his waist encircled with the gold-laced scarf, he goes in triumph at the head of the municipal body.

Everybody was sound asleep at the mayor's when the two Bertauds rapped the heavy knocker of the door. After a moment, a servant, half asleep, appeared at one of the ground-floor windows.

"What's the matter, you rascals?" asked he, growling.

Jean did not think it best to revenge an insult which his reputation in the village too well justified.

"We want to speak to Monsieur the Mayor," he answered. "There is terrible need of it. Go call him, Monsieur Baptiste; he won't blame you."

"I'd like to see anybody blame me," snapped out Baptiste.

It took ten minutes of talking and explaining to persuade the servant. Finally, the Bertauds were admitted to a little man, fat and red, very much annoyed at being dragged from his bed so early. It was M. Courtois.

They had decided that Philippe should speak.

"Monsieur Mayor," he said, "we have come to announce to you a great misfortune. A crime has been committed at Monsieur de Tremorel's."

M. Courtois was a friend of the count's; he became whiter than his shirt at this sudden news.

"My God!" stammered he, unable to control his emotion, "what do you say - a crime!"

"Yes; we have just discovered a body; and as sure as you are here, I believe it to be that of the countess."

The worthy man raised his arms heavenward, with a wandering air.

"But where, when?"

"Just now, at the foot of the park, as we were going to take up our nets."

"It is horrible!" exclaimed the good M. Courtois; "what a calamity! So worthy a lady! But it is not possible - you must be mistaken; I should have been informed - "

"We saw it distinctly, Monsieur Mayor."

"Such a crime in my village! Well, you have done wisely to come here. I will dress at once, and will hasten off - no, wait." He reflected a moment, then called:

"Baptiste!"

The valet was not far off. With ear and eye alternately pressed against the key-hole, he heard and looked with all his might. At the sound of his master's voice he had only to stretch out his hand and open the door.

"Monsieur called me?"

"Run to the justice of the peace," said the mayor. "There is not a moment to lose. A crime has been committed - perhaps a murder - you must go quickly. And you," addressing the poachers, "await me here while I slip on my coat."

The justice of the peace at Orcival, M. Plantat - "Papa Plantat," as he was called - was formerly an attorney at Melun. At fifty, Mr. Plantat, whose career had been one of unbroken prosperity, lost in the same month, his wife, whom he adored, and his two sons, charming youths, one eighteen, the other twenty-two years old. These successive losses crushed a man whom thirty years of happiness left without defence against misfortune. For a long time his reason was despaired of. Even the sight of a client, coming to trouble his grief, to recount stupid tales of self-interest, exasperated him. It was not surprising that he sold out his professional effects and good-will at half price. He wished to establish himself at his ease in his grief, with the certainty of not being disturbed in its indulgence.

But the intensity of his mourning diminished, and the ills of idleness came. The justiceship of the peace at Orcival was vacant, and M. Plantat applied for and obtained it. Once installed in this office, he suffered less from ennui. This man, who saw his life drawing to an end, undertook to interest himself in the thousand diverse cases which came before him. He applied to these all the forces of a superior intelligence, the resources of a mind admirably fitted to separate the false from the true among the lies he was forced to hear. He persisted, besides, in living alone, despite the urging of M. Courtois; pretending that society fatigued him, and that an unhappy man is a bore in company.

Misfortune, which modifies characters, for good or bad, had made him, apparently, a great egotist. He declared that he was only interested in the affairs of life as a critic tired of its active scenes. He loved to make a parade of his profound indifference for everything, swearing that a rain of fire descending upon Paris, would not even make him turn his head. To move him seemed impossible. "What's that to me?" was his invariable exclamation.

Such was the man who, a quarter of an hour after Baptiste's departure, entered the mayor's house.

M. Plantat was tall, thin, and nervous. His physiognomy was not striking. His hair was short, his restless eyes seemed always to be seeking something, his very long nose was narrow and sharp. After his affliction, his mouth, formerly well shaped, became deformed; his lower lip had sunk, and gave him a deceptive look of simplicity.

"They tell me," said he, at the threshold, "that Madame de Tremorel has been murdered."

"These men here, at least, pretend so," answered the mayor, who had just reappeared.

M. Courtois was no longer the same man. He had had time to make his toilet a little. His face attempted to express a haughty coldness. He had been reproaching himself for having been wanting in dignity, in showing his grief before the Bertauds. "Nothing ought to agitate a man in my position," said he to himself. And, being terribly agitated, he forced himself to be calm, cold, and impassible.

M. Plantat was so naturally.

"This is a very sad event," said he, in a tone which he forced himself to make perfectly disinterested; "but after all, how does it concern us? We must, however, hurry and ascertain whether it is true. I have sent for the brigadier, and he will join us."

"Let us go," said M. Courtois; "I have my scarf in my pocket."

They hastened off. Philippe and his father went first, the young man eager and impatient, the old one sombre and thoughtful. The mayor, at each step, made some exclamation.

"I can't understand it," muttered he; "a murder in my commune! a commune where, in the memory of men, no crime has been committed!"

And he directed a suspicious glance toward the two Bertauds. The road which led toward the chateau of M. de Tremorel was an unpleasant one, shut in by walls a dozen feet high. On one side is the park of the Marchioness de Lanascot; on the other the spacious garden of Saint Jouan. The going and coming had taken time; it was nearly eight o'clock when the mayor, the justice, and their guides stopped before the gate of M. de Tremorel.

The mayor rang. The bell was very large; only a small gravelled court of five or six yards separated the gate from the house; nevertheless no one appeared.

The mayor rang more vigorously, then with all his strength; but in vain.

Before the gate of Mme. de Lanascot's chateau, nearly opposite, a groom was standing, occupied in cleaning and polishing a bridle-bit. "It's of no use to ring, gentlemen," said this man; there's nobody in the chateau."

"How! nobody?" asked the mayor, surprised.

"I mean," said the groom, "that there is no one there but the master and mistress. The servants all went away last evening by the 8.40 train to Paris, to the wedding of the old cook, Madame Denis. They ought to return this morning by the first train. I was invited myself - "

"Great God!" interrupted M. Courtois, "then the count and countess remained alone last night?"

"Entirely alone, Monsieur Mayor."

"It is horrible!"

M. Plantat seemed to grow impatient during this dialogue. "Come," said he, "we cannot stay forever at the gate. The gendarmes do not come; let us send for the locksmith." Philippe was about to hasten off, when, at the end of the road, singing and laughing were heard. Five persons, three women and two men, soon appeared.

"Ah, there are the people of the chateau," cried the groom, whom this morning visit seemed to annoy, "they ought to have a key."

The domestics, seeing the group about the gate, became silent and hastened their steps. One of them began to run ahead of the others; it was the count's valet de chambre.

"These gentlemen perhaps wish to speak to Monsieur the Count?" asked he, having bowed to M. Plantat.

We have rung five times, as hard as we could," said the mayor.

"It is surprising," said the valet de chambre, "the count sleeps very lightly. Perhaps he has gone out."

"Horror!" cried Philippe. "Both of them have been murdered!" These words shocked the servants, whose gaiety announced a reasonable number of healths drunk to the happiness of the newly wedded pair. M. Courtois seemed to be studying the attitude of old Bertaud.

"A murder!" muttered the valet de chambre. "It was for money then; it must have been known - "

"What?" asked the mayor.

"Monsieur the Count received a very large sum yesterday morning."

"Large! yes," added a chambermaid. "He had a large package of bank-bills. Madame even said to Monsieur that she should not shut her eyes the whole night, with this immense sum in the house."

There was a silence; each one looked at the others with a frightened air. M. Courtois reflected.

"At what hour did you leave the chateau last evening?" asked he of the servants.

"At eight o'clock; we had dinner early."

"You went away all together?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did not leave each other?"

"Not a minute."

"And you returned all together?"

The servants exchanged a significant look.

"All," responded a chambermaid - "that is to say, no. One left us on reaching the Lyons station at Paris; it was Guespin."

"Yes, sir; he went away, saying that he would rejoin us at Wepler's, in the Batignolles, where the wedding took place." The mayor nudged the justice with his elbow, as if to attract his attention, and continued to question the chambermaid.

"And this Guespin, as you call him - did you see him again?"

"No, sir. I asked several times during the evening in vain, what had become of him; his absence seemed to me suspicious." Evidently the chambermaid tried to show superior perspicacity. A little more, and she would have talked of presentiments.

"Has this Guespin been long in the house?"

"Since spring."

"What were his duties?"

"He was sent from Paris by the house of the 'Skilful Gardener,' to take care of the rare flowers in Madame's conservatory."

"And did he know of this money?"

The domestics again exchanged significant glances.

"Yes," they answered in chorus, "we had talked a great deal about it among ourselves."

The chambermaid added: "He even said to me, 'To think that Monsieur the Count has enough money in his cabinet to make all our fortunes.'"

"What kind of a man is this?"

This question absolutely extinguished the talkativeness of the servants. No one dared to speak, perceiving that the least word might serve as the basis of a terrible accusation. But the groom of the house opposite, who burned to mix himself up in the affair, had none of these scruples. "Guespin," answered he, "is a good fellow. Lord, what jolly things he knows! He knows everything you can imagine. It appears he has been rich in times past, and if he wished - But dame! he loves to have his work all finished, and go off on sprees. He's a crack billiard-player, I can tell you."

Papa Plantat, while listening in an apparently absent-minded way to these depositions, or rather these scandals, carefully examined the wall and the gate. He now turned, and interrupting the groom:

"Enough of this," said he, to the great scandal of M. Courtois. "Before pursuing this interrogatory, let us ascertain the crime, if crime there is; for it is not proved. Let whoever has the key, open the gate."

The valet de chambre had the key; he opened the gate, and all entered the little court. The gendarmes had just arrived. The mayor told the brigadier to follow him, and placed two men at the gate, ordering them not to permit anyone to enter or go out, unless by his orders. Then the valet de chambre opened the door of the house.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

