

## THE ORCIVAL MURDER

### *Chapter I*

The 9th of July 18\*\*, a Thursday, Jean Bertaud, called La Ripaille, and his son, well known in Orcival for living by poaching and pilfering, got up about 3:00 a.m. to go fishing at daybreak. Carrying their tackle, under the shade of acacia trees, they went down the charming road which can be seen from the Evry station and which leads from the town of Orcival to the Seine. They went to their boat, usually moored some fifty meters upstream from the iron bridge, alongside a meadow joining Valfeuillu, the beautiful property of the Count de Trémoré. Coming to the edge of the river, they put down their fishing equipment and Jean LaRipaille got into the boat to empty out the water. While bailing out the water with an experienced hand, he noticed that one of the rowlocks of the old boat, worn by the oar, was about to break.

“Philippe,” he shouted to his son, who was busy disentangling a casting net which a fishing warden would have found to have too tight a mesh, “Philippe, try to find me a piece of wood to repair our rowlocks.”

“Right away,” Philippe answered.

There wasn't one tree in the meadow. So the young man started toward the Valfeuillu Park only a few feet away. And paying very little attention to Article 391 of the Penal Code, he jumped the wide ditch which enclosed Monsieur de Trémoré's property. He intended to cut a branch from one of the old weeping willow trees which at that spot dipped their weeping branches over the water.

He had hardly taken his knife out of his pocket, while glancing about him with the uneasy look of the poacher, than he let out a stifled cry.

“Father! Eh! Father!”

“What is it?” The old poacher answered without looking up.

“Father, come quick,” Philippe continued, “in the name of Heaven, come quickly!”

From the hoarse voice of his son, Jean La Ripaille knew that something extraordinary had happened. He stopped scooping out water and, worry helping him, in three leaps he was in the park.

He too remained dumbfounded in front of the spectacle which had terrified Philippe. Stretched out on the river bank among the rushes and the water lilies was the cadaver of a woman. Her long flowing hair was spread out among the water grasses. Her tattered grey silk dress was soiled with mud and blood. The entire upper part of the body was plunged in the shallow water and her face was buried in the mud.

Philippe, whose voice trembled, murmured, “A murder.”

“That's for sure,” answered La Ripaille in an indifferent voice. “But who can that woman be? It almost looks like the Countess.”

“We'll soon see,” said the young man.

He took a step toward the cadaver. His father stopped him, holding him by the arm.

“What are you going to do, for Heaven's sake?” he asked. “You should never touch the body of a murdered person without the law.”

“Do you think so?”

“Certainly! There are penalties for that.”

“Then, let's go inform the mayor.”

“To do what? The people around here don't have it in for us enough? Who knows but what they would accuse us.”

“Nevertheless, Father...”

“What! If we went to tell Monsieur Courtois, he would ask us how and why we found ourselves in Monsieur de Trémorel’s park to see what was happening there. What does it matter to you that someone murdered the Countess? The body will be found without you... Come on, let’s leave.”

But Philippe didn’t budge. His head bowed, his chin in the palm of his hand, he was thinking.

“We have to tell,” he declared in a firm tone. “We aren’t savages. We’ll tell Monsieur Courtois that we saw the body while skirting the banks of the park in our punt.”

The elder La Ripaille resisted at first, then seeing that his son would go without him, he appeared to give in to his entreaties. They again jumped over the ditch, and, leaving their tackle on the prairie, they started in all haste to the house of Monsieur the Mayor of Orcival.

Situated five kilometers from Corbeil on the right bank of the Seine, twenty minutes from the Evry station, Orcival is one of the most delightful villages of the Paris suburbs in spite of the infernal etymology of its name.<sup>1</sup> The noisy and plundering Parisian who, more destructive than the locust, lays waste to the fields on Sundays, hadn’t yet discovered its pleasant countryside. The depressing odor of frying in the little dinner-dance restaurants hadn’t overpowered the perfume of the honeysuckles. The echoes had never been frightened by the refrains of boaters and the blaring of the cornets in the public dance halls.

Nestled lazily on the gentle slopes of a hill bathed by the Seine, Orcival has white houses, delicious shady areas, and a new bell tower which is its pride. Vast country estates, kept up at great expense, surround it on all sides. The weather vanes of twenty chateaux can be seen from its highest point. On the right are the huge trees of Mauprévoir and the pretty little castle of the Countess de la Brèche. Across, on the other side of the river, there is Mousseaux and Petit-Bourg, the former Aguado domain, which has become the estate of a famous carriage maker, Monsieur Binder. Those beautiful trees on the left belong to the Count de Trémorel. That beautiful park is the Etiolles Park, and in the distance, very low on the horizon, is Corbeil. That immense building, whose roof rises higher than the great oaks, is the Darblay mill.

The mayor of Orcival lives at the top of the village in one of those houses that can be dreamed of with 100,000 pounds of income. Formerly a maker of canvas cloth. Monsieur Courtois courageously entered commerce without a *sou* and after thirty years of relentless labor he retired with an income of a full 4,000,000. At that time, he intended to live peacefully with his wife and his daughters, spending the winter in Paris and the summer in the country. But, then, suddenly he became nervous and agitated. Ambition came gnawing at his heart. He performed a hundred services in order to be forced to accept being mayor of Orcival. And, much against his will, he accepted the position, as he will tell you himself. That office of Mayor was at the same time his joy and his despair. Apparent despair, real and private joy. He was in good form when, his forehead clouded with worries, he cursed the cares of power. He was in better form when as head of the municipal body he triumphed, his stomach girded with the golden tasseled sash of office.

Everybody was still asleep at the Mayor’s house when the Bertauds, father and son, came banging the heavy door knocker. After a short wait, a servant, three-fourths awake, half clothed, appeared at one of the windows on the ground floor.

“What’s the matter, you rascals?” he asked in a bad-tempered voice.

La Ripaille didn’t think it the proper time to take note of an insult that his reputation in the community only too well justified.

“We want to talk to Monsieur le Maire,” he answered. “And it’s terribly important. Go wake him, Monsieur Baptiste. He won’t scold you.”

“Do I get scolded, me!” Baptiste grumbled.

Nevertheless, it took ten good minutes of negotiations and explanations for the servant to make a decision. Finally, a little fat, red-faced man, very unhappy to have been torn out of bed so early, appeared before the Bertauds. It was Monsieur Courtois. It had been decided that Philippe would speak.

“Monsieur le Maire,” he began, “we’ve come to tell you a great misfortune. It’s for sure that a crime

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with the Orcival in the Puy-de-Dôme department in Auvergne in central France.

has been committed at Monsieur de Trémoré's house."

Monsieur Courtois was a friend of the Count. At that statement he became whiter than his shirt.

"Ah! *Mon Dieu!*" He stammered, incapable of controlling his emotion. "What's that you're telling me?"

"Yes, we've seen the body, a little while ago, and as real as you are. I believe it's that of the Countess."

The worthy mayor lifted his arms toward heaven with a totally wild-eyed expression.

"But where? But when?" he asked.

"A little while ago, where we were skirting the end of the Park to go take up our nets."

"This is horrible!" the good Monsieur Courtois kept repeating. "What a misfortune! Such a worthy woman! But that isn't possible. You must be mistaken. I would have been told..."

"We certainly saw it, Monsieur le Maire."

"Such a crime, in my jurisdiction! Well, you were right to come. I'm going to get dressed in two seconds and we'll run... That is...no...wait."

He seemed to think a minute and called out:

"Baptiste!"

The servant wasn't very far away. His ear and his eye alternately glued to the door's keyhole, he was listening and looking as hard as he could. At his master's voice, he had only to stretch out his arm to open the door.

"Monsieur called me?"

"Run to the Justice of the Peace," the Mayor told him. "There's not a second to lose. It's a matter of a crime, of a murder perhaps. Tell him to come quickly, very quickly. And you others," he said, addressing the Bertauds, "wait for me here. I'm going to put on a jacket."

The Orcival Justice of the Peace, Père Plantat, as he was called, was a former Melun lawyer. At fifty, Père Plantat, to whom everything had been as successful as could be wished, lost in the same month his wife, whom he adored, and his sons, two charming young boys, one age eighteen, the other twenty-two.

These losses, one after the other, brought low a man that thirty years of prosperity had left without a defense against misfortune. For a long time they feared for his sanity. Just the sight of a client coming to trouble his sorrow in order to tell him stupid stories concerning their self-interest exasperated him. Therefore, people were not surprised to see him sell his practice at half-price. He wanted to be at home with his grief, with the certainty of not being distracted from it.

But the intensity of regrets diminishes and the malady of idleness arrives. The position of Justice of the Peace of Orcival was vacant. Père Plantat applied for it and got it. Once he was Justice of the Peace, he was less bored. That man, who thought his life was over, undertook to become interested in the thousand different causes that came to be pleaded before him. He applied all the strength of a superior intelligence, all the resources of a mind eminently clever enough to disentangle the false from the true among all the lies he was forced to hear.

In addition, he stubbornly insisted on living alone, despite the exhortations of Monsieur Courtois, claiming that all social contact tired him and that an unhappy man was a spoil-sport. The time left from his legal duties he consecrated to an unparalleled collection of petunias.

Misfortune, which modifies personalities, either for good or bad, had made him, apparently, very self-centered. He claimed to be no more interested in the things of life than a blasé critic is to stage settings. He liked to show off his profound indifference for everything, swearing that a rain of fire falling on Paris wouldn't even make him turn his head. To touch him seemed impossible. "What does that matter to me!" was his invariable refrain.

Such was the man who, a quarter of an hour after Baptiste's departure, arrived at the house of the Mayor of Orcival.

Monsieur Plantat was tall, thin, and nervous. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance. He wore his hair short. His restless eyes seemed always to be looking for something. His nose was very long and thin as the blade of a razor. His mouth, so fine in the past, was deformed since his sorrows. His lower lip had sunken in and gave him the deceptive appearance of simplicity.

“What’s this about someone murdering Madame de Trémoré?” he asked as he neared the door.

“At least that’s what these men here claim,” answered the Mayor, who had just reappeared.

Monsieur Courtois was no longer the same man. He had had time to pull himself together somewhat. His face was trying to express a majestic coldness. He had soundly criticized himself for having lacked dignity by showing his trouble and his sadness in front of the Bertauds.

“Nothing should affect a man in my position to this point, “ he had told himself.

And, although terribly agitated, he forced himself to be calm, cold, impassive.

Père Plantat himself was that way naturally. “This is perhaps a very unfortunate accident,” he said in a tone of voice he forced himself to render perfectly disinterested, “but, as a legal issue what is that to us? Nevertheless, we have to go see what it’s all about without delay. I’ve alerted the Gendarme Brigadier, who will join us.”

“Let’s go,” said Monsieur Courtois. “I have my official sash in my pocket.”

They left. Philippe and his father went ahead, the young man in a hurry and impatient, the old gloomy and preoccupied.

At each step, the Mayor let out some exclamation.

“Can you believe that,” he murmured. “ A murder in my commune, a commune where, in the memory of man, there hasn’t been any crime committed at all.”

And he gave the two Bertauds a suspicious look.

The road which led to the house—in the countryside they said chateau— of Monsieur Trémoré is rather unattractive, encased as it is by wall a dozen feet high. On one side it’s the park of the Marquise de Lanascol, on the other the large garden of Saint-Jouan.

The comings and goings had taken time. It was almost 8:00 a.m. when the Mayor, the Justice of the Peace, and their guides stopped in front of the iron gate of Monsieur Trémoré.

The Mayor rang the bell. The bell is very big. Only a little five- or six- meter sanded courtyard separated the iron gate and the house. However, no one came. Monsieur le Maire rang louder, then louder still, then with all his strength. In vain.

In front of the iron gate of Monsieur de Lanascol’s chateau, situated almost across the road, a groom was standing, busy cleaning and polishing the bits of a bridle.

“It won’t do any good to ring, Messieurs,” that man said. “There’s nobody at the chateau.”

“What do you mean, no one?” the Mayor asked, surprised.

“I mean,” replied the groom, “that only the masters are there. All the household staff left yesterday evening by the 8:40 p.m. train to go to Paris to attend the wedding of the former cook, Madame Denis. They’re supposed to come back this morning by the first train. I myself was invited...”

“*Grand Dieu!* interrupted Monsieur Courtois, “Then the Count and the Countess were alone last night?”

“Absolutely alone, Monsieur le Maire.”

“That’s horrible!”

Père Plantat seemed to be becoming impatient with this dialogue.

“Let’s go,” he said. “We can’t spend eternity at this door. The gendarmes aren’t coming. Let’s send for the locksmith.”

Philippe was already getting ready to rush off when they heard songs and laughter at the end of the road. Five people, three women and two men appeared almost immediately.

“Ah! There’s the chateau staff,” said the groom, whom that morning visit seemed unusually to intrigue. “They must have a key.”

On their side, the servants, seeing the group stopped in front of the iron gate, were quiet and came forward quickly. One of them even began to run, thus outstripping the others. He was the Count’s personal valet.

“Do you gentlemen wish to speak to Monsieur le Comte?” he asked, after having greeted the Mayor and the Justice of the Peace.

“We’ve rung five times as hard as we could,” said the Mayor.

“That’s surprising,” said the Count’s valet. “Because Monsieur is a light sleeper! After all that, he

may be out.”

“Poor people!” Philippe cried out. “Someone murdered them both!”

These words sobered up the chateau servants, whose gaiety showed the very reasonable number of toasts drunk to the happiness of the newlyweds.

Monsieur Courtois himself seemed to study the attitude of the older Bertaud.

“Murder!” murmured the Count’s valet. “It was for the money, then. They would have known...”

“What?” demanded the Mayor.

“Yesterday morning the Count received a very large sum.”

“Ah! Yes, a big sum,” added a chamber maid. “There were bank bills as big as that. Madame even told Monsieur that she wouldn’t sleep a wink that night with such an immense sum in the house.”

There was silence. Everyone looked at each other with a frightened air. Monsieur Courtois himself was thinking.

“What time did you leave yesterday evening?” he demanded the servants.

“At 8:00 p.m. We put the dinner hour forward.”

“All of you left together?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“You didn’t separate from each other?”

“Not one minute.”

“And you all came back together?”

The servants gave each other an unusual look.

“All of us,” answered a chambermaid who had a loose tongue. “That is to say, no. There was one of us who left us on arriving at the Lyon train station in Paris. That was Guespin.”

“Ah!”

“Yes, Monsieur. He dashed off in his direction, saying he would rejoin us in the Batignolles, at Wepler’s where the wedding took place.”

Monsieur le Maire gave a big shoulder nudge to the Justice of the Peace, as if to suggest he pay attention, and continued to interrogate.

“And this Guespin, as you call him, did you see him again?”

“No, Monsieur. I even asked news of him, uselessly, several times during the night. His absence seemed suspicious to me.”

Evidently, the chamber maid was trying to show superior intelligence. In a little while she would have talked about premonitions.

“This servant, has he been with the household a long time?” Monsieur Courtois asked.

“Since Spring.”

“What were his qualifications?”

“He was sent from Paris by the Gentil Jardinier employment agency to take care of the rare flowers in Madame’s greenhouse.”

“And did he know about the money?”

And the servants again gave each other very meaningful glances.

“Yes! Yes!” They all responded at once. “We all talked about it a great deal among ourselves in the servants’ hall.”

The chamber maid, an easy talker, added: “He even told me, speaking just to me: ‘Just think that the Count has in his secretary what would make all our fortunes!’”

“What kind of man is he?”

That question absolutely shut off the servants’ talkativeness. Not one dared speak, knowing that the least word might serve as the basis for a terrible accusation.

But the groom from the house across the road, eager to get mixed up in that affair, didn’t have these scruples at all.

He answered: “Guespin, he’s a nice fellow, and someone who’s been around. *Dieu de Dieu!* does he know some stories! He knows everything, that man does. It seems he was rich in the past and if he wanted to...but *Dame!* he likes an easy job. And what’s more, he’s a party-goer like nobody else, a billiard ace,

don't you know!"

While listening to these depositions, or to speak more accurately, this gossip, with one ear, apparently distracted, Père Plantat was carefully examining the wall and the iron gate. He returned to the conversation at this point the interrupt the groom.

"That's really enough of this," he said, to the great scandal of Monsieur Courtois. "Before going on with this interrogation, it would be well to look into the crime, if, however, there is a crime, which hasn't been proven. Whoever among you has a key, open the gate."

The Count's valet had the key. He opened the gate and everyone one moved into the courtyard. The gendarmes had just arrived. The Mayor told the Brigadier to follow him and placed two men at the gate with orders to let no one enter or leave without his permission.

Only then did the Count's valet open the door to the house.