

The Debt Collector

By Maurice Level

Ravenot, debt collector to the same bank for ten years, was a model employee. Never had there been the least cause to find fault with him. Never had the slightest error been detected in his books.

Living alone, carefully avoiding new acquaintances, keeping out of cafés and without love-affairs, he seemed happy, quite content with his lot. If it were sometimes said in his hearing: "It must be a temptation to handle such large sums!" he would quietly reply: "Why! Money that doesn't belong to you is not money."

In the locality in which he lived he was looked upon as a paragon, his advice sought after and taken.

On the evening of one collecting-day he did not return to his home. The idea of dishonesty never even suggested itself to those who knew him. Possibly a crime had been committed. The police traced his movements during the day. He had presented his bills punctually, and had collected his last sum near the Montrouge Gate about seven o'clock. At the time he had over two hundred thousand francs in his possession. Further than that all trace of him was lost. They scoured the neighborhood and waste ground that lies near the fortifications; the hovels that are found here and there in the military zone were ransacked: all with no result. As a matter of form they telegraphed in every direction, to every frontier station. But the directors of the bank, as well as the police, had little doubt that he had been lain in wait for, robbed, and thrown into the river. Basing their deductions on certain clues, they were able to state almost positively that the coup had been planned for some time by professional thieves.

Only one man in Paris shrugged his shoulders when he read about it in the papers; that man was Ravenot.

Just at the time when the keenest sleuth-hounds of the police were losing his scent, he had reached the Seine by the Boulevards Exterieurs. He had dressed himself under the arch of a bridge in some everyday clothes he had left there the night before, had put the two thousand francs in his pocket, and making a bundle of his uniform and satchel, he had dropped the whole, weighted with a large stone, into the river and, unperturbed, had returned to Paris. He slept at a hotel, and slept well. In a few hours he, had become a consummate thief.

Profiting by his start, he might have taken a train across the frontier, but he was too wise to suppose that a few hundred kilometres would put him beyond the reach of the gendarmes, and he had no illusions as to the fate that awaited him. He would most assuredly be arrested. Besides, his plan was a very different one.

When daylight came, he enclosed the two hundred thousand francs in an envelope, sealed it with five seals, and went to a lawyer.

"Monsieur," said he, "this is why I have come to you. In this envelope I have some securities, papers that I want to leave in safety. I am going for a long journey, and I don't know when I shall return. I should like to leave this packet with you. I suppose you have no objection to my doing so?"

"None whatever. I'll give you a receipt. . ."

He assented, then began to think. A receipt?! Where could he put it? To whom entrust it? If he kept it on his person, he would certainly lose his deposit. He hesitated, not having foreseen this complication. Then he said easily:

“I am alone in the world without relations and friends. The journey I intend making is . . . not without danger. I should run the risk of losing the receipt, or it might be destroyed. Would it not be possible for you to take possession of the packet and place it in safety among your documents, and when I return I should merely have to tell you, or your successor, my name!”

“But if I do that. . .”

“State on the receipt that it can only be claimed in this way. At any rate, if there is any risk, it is mine.”

“Agreed! What is your name!”

He replied without hesitation:

“Duverger, Henri Duverger.”

When he got back to the street, he breathed a sigh of relief. The first part of his program was over. They could clap the handcuffs on him now: the substance of his theft was beyond reach.

He had worked things out with cold deliberation on these lines: On the expiration of his sentence he would claim the deposit. No one would be able to dispute his right to it. Four or five unpleasant years to be gone through, and he would be a rich man. It was preferable to spending his life trudging from door to door collecting debts. He would go to live in the country. To everyone he would be Monsieur Duverger. He would grow old in peace and contentment, known as an honest, charitable man . . . for he would spend some of the money on others.

He waited twenty-four hours longer to make sure the numbers of the notes were not known, and, reassured on this point, he gave himself up, a cigarette between his lips.

Another man in his place would have invented some story. He preferred to tell the truth, to admit the theft. Why waste time! But at his trial, as when he was first charged, it was impossible to drag from him a word about what he had done with the two hundred thousand francs. He confined himself to saying:

“I don’t know. I fell asleep on a bench. . . . in my turn I was robbed.”

Thanks to his irreproachable past, he was sentenced to only five years’ penal servitude. He heard the sentence without moving a muscle. He was thirty-five. At forty he would be free and rich. He considered the confinement small, necessary sacrifice.

In the prison where he served his sentence he was a model for all the others, just as he had been a model employee. He watched the slow days pass without impatience or anxiety, concerned only about his health.

At last the day of his discharge came. They gave him back his little stock of personal effects, and he left with but one idea in his mind, that of getting to the lawyer. As he walked along he imagined the coming scene.

He would arrive. He would be ushered into the impressive office. Would the lawyer recognize him? He would look in the glass: decidedly he had grown considerably older, and no doubt his face bore traces of his experience. . . . No, certainly the lawyer would not recognize him. Ha! Ha! It would add to the humor of the situation!

“What can I do for you, Monsieur?”

“I have come for a deposit I made here five years ago.”

“Which deposit? . . . In what name?”

“In the name of Monsieur . . .”

Ravenot stopped suddenly, murmuring:

“How extraordinary I can’t remember the name I gave!”

He racked his brains . . . a blank! He sat down on a bench, and feeling that he was growing unnerved, reasoned with himself:

“Come, come! Be calm . . . Monsieur . . . Monsieur. . . It began with. . . which letter!” For an hour he sat lost in thought, straining his memory, groping after something that might suggest a clue. . . . A waste of time. The name danced in front of him, round about him: he saw the letters jump, the syllables vanish. Every second he felt that he had it, that was before his eyes, on his lips. . . . No! At this only worried him: then it became a sharp irritation that cut into him with a pain that was almost physical. Hot waves ran up and down his back. His muscles contracted: he found it impossible to sit still. His hands began to twitch. He bit his dry lips. He was divided between an impulse to weep and to fight.

But the more he focused his attention, the further the name seemed to recede. He struck the ground with his foot, rose and said aloud:

“What’s the good of worrying? . . . It only makes things worse. If I leave off thinking about it, it will come of itself!”

But an obsession cannot be shaken off in this way. In vain he turned his attention to the faces of the passers-by, stopped at the shop windows, listened to the street noises; while he listened, unhearing, and looked, unseeing, the great question persisted:

“Monsieur? . . . Monsieur? . . .”

Night came. The streets were deserted. Worn out, he went to a hotel, asked for a room, and flung himself fully dressed on the bed. For hours he went on racking his brain. At dawn he fell asleep. It was broad daylight when he awoke. He stretched himself luxuriously, his mind at ease; but in a flash the obsession gripped him again:

“Monsieur? . . . Monsieur? . . .”

A new sensation began to dominate his anguish of mind: fear. Fear that he might never remember the name, never. He got up, went out, walked for hours at random, loitering about the office of the lawyer. For a second time the night fell. He clutched his head in his hands and groaned:

“I shall go mad.”

A terrible idea had now taken possession of his mind: he had two hundred thousand francs in notes, two hundred thousand francs, acquired by dishonesty of course, but his, and they were out of his reach. To get them he had undergone five years in prison and now he could not touch them. The notes were there waiting for him, and one word, a mere word he could not remember, stood, an insuperable barrier, between him and them. He beat with clenched fists on his head, feeling his reason trembling in the balance; he stumbled against lamp-posts with the sway of a drunken man, tripped over the curbstones. It was no longer an obsession or a torment, it had become a frenzy of his whole being, of his brain and of his flesh. He had now become convinced that he would never remember. His imagination conjured up a sardonic laugh that rang in his ears; people in the streets seemed to point at him as he passed. His steps quickened into a run that carried him straight ahead, knocking up against the passersby, oblivious of the traffic. He wished that someone would strike him so that he might strike back; that he might be run over, crushed out of existence.

“Monsieur? . . . Monsieur? . . .”

At his feet the Seine flowed by, a muddy green, spangled with the reflections of the bright stars. He sobbed out:

“Monsieur? . . . Oh, that name! . . . That name! . . .”

He went down the steps that lead to the water, and lying face downwards, worked himself towards the river to cool his face and hands. He was panting . . . the water drew him . . . drew his hot eyes . . . his ears. . . He felt himself slipping, but unable to cling to the steep bank, he fell. . . The shock of the cold water set every nerve a-tingle. He struggled . . . thrust out his arms . . . flung his head up . . . went under . . . rose to the surface again, and in a sudden mighty effort, his eyes starting from his head, yelled:

“I’ve got it! . . . Help! Duverger! Du. . .” . . . The quay was deserted. The water rippled against the pillars of the bridge: theecho of the somber arch repeated the name in the silence. . . The river rose and fell lazily: lights danced on it, white and red. . . A wave a little stronger than the rest licked the bank near the moving rings. . . All was still. . .