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The Bonnot Gang's First Crime

Victor Méric

1926

It all began on December 21, 1911 – fully fourteen years ago, years filled with other killings.

On the boulevards the newspapers flew from hand to hand, amid the paperboys' shouts, "Read all about the crime on rue Ordener! Messenger boy killed in the middle of the day! The murderers fire into the crowd!" No one has forgotten how strong emotions were around this.

The crime, carried out with consummate skill and unheard-of calm, conceived and planned to the least detail, was meant to provoke terror. We seemed to be in the presence of a well-organized gang, one that demonstrated horrific boldness, and whose abominable act went far beyond the most shocking crimes ever before seen.

The same word was immediately on everyone's lips: "Anarchists!... An anarchist crime!" People spoke of the days of terror of 1894... The bombs... Ravachol, Emile Henry. The public had no doubts about it: this was the anarchists' declaration of war of on society.

What had happened?

The facts were the following. That gloomy and rainy December morning a messenger headed to the branch of the Société Générale at 146 rue Ordener, carrying a bag weighted down with the funds needed for the day. Accompanied by a colleague, he calmly got off the tram that stopped on that street. The messenger's name was Ernest Caby. His bag contained stock certificates worth 318,772 francs and a small bag containing 5,266 francs in specie. A wallet in an inside pocket held 20,000 francs in bills and rolls of gold.

About fifteen meters from the bank, Caby, who trailed slightly behind his colleague, suddenly saw a man standing before him, gazing fixedly at him with eyes from which a double flame gleamed. The man was hiding his hands in his pockets. He stood motionless, ferocious before the messenger. He pulled out his left hand, in it a pistol.

He fired.

The messenger, shot in the chest, fell to his knees. He tried to protect his burden, to hold on to it. But the unknown man, never losing his calm, fired a second shot from a high angle into his back, then grabbed at the bag.

At the same time an accomplice emerged, who managed to take the bag from the victim.

At the first shot, Caby's colleague, Peemans, ran into the branch office shouting for help, but the two attackers hadn't waited around. They leapt into a car parked a few steps away, which immediately pulled out.

These, brutally summarized, are the details. The messenger shot at point blank range, the bag grabbed, and the flight in the car. The inquest later revealed that in the car, along with the driver, was a third man. Passersby attempted to halt their flight. They were fired upon with a pistol, and miraculously, no one was hit.

The final results: a messenger boy killed, the cash and certificates taken, and the mysterious auto vanishing into the unknown.

The unfortunate Caby was first taken to a nearby pharmacy, where first aid was given, then to Bichat Hospital. He had been hit twice, once at the base of his neck, the other in his right breast. He was unable to speak a word. It was pointless to try to question him.

His state appeared extremely serious.

The next day it was learned that the car, the famous car of the crime, had been found in Dieppe, on rue Alexandre-Duman, abandoned in the mud.

It had traveled far since the murder of the messenger.

Dragged by two horses, it was taken to a garage and, after careful examination, various objects were found inside it: a brown goatskin, a crowbar, and several empty cans. The front license plate, which had been removed, was found in a garden. The plate number was 668 X-8. The doors had the initials J.-M. painted on them, which allowed it to be quickly established that the car used in the crime belonged to Monsieur Normand, a landlord in Boulogne-sur-Seine, who had, in fact, reported his car stolen on the night of December 13–14 from the garage attached to his house.

Here, then, was a clue.

It was quickly realized that the thieves had been able to break into Normand's house by means of false keys and a ladder. Along with the car, clothing and various objects had disappeared that night.

But none of these discoveries provided the identity of the criminals.

The police floundered. They followed the most varied leads. The Société Générale joined in and promised a reward of 12,500 francs to whoever, in France or England, provided information allowing the capture of the enigmatic bandits. Vague eyewitness descriptions were sent to all the police stations of London and Paris, as well as all the firms that might negotiate the value of the certificates.

There then broke out a strange wave of collective auto-suggestion. People thought they saw the bandits everywhere. Their presence was reported at the same time in the most distant spots.

In Brussels a waiter in a café asserted that two clients who spoke French had divided up a great number of bills. Then suspicion was cast on an Italian named Ravera, a specialist in the theft of bicycles and of accessories taken from cars, an extremely dangerous bandit, one capable of selling his skin dearly.

People came to forget the anarchists who'd originally been accused. Now, it was observed that most of those arrested, or simply suspected, lived in Montmartre and maintained, in this neighborhood dear to crooks, strange.

One has to leaf through the newspapers of the time to realize the effect produced by the murder on rue Ordener and the florid imagination of those sleuths, the reporters of the time. Every contributor to the *fait divers* section was transformed into a detective. Sherlock Holmes had nothing on them.

A confrere had an ingenious idea. According to him, a certain Barbe, alias the Wog of Montmartre, a man who, with the assistance of three accomplices, had robbed a debt collector in Puteaux and then fled in a car, was behind the affair on rue Ordener. His techniques had been recognized. Alas, it was soon necessary to look elsewhere. The celebrated Wog had had nothing to do with the business.

Days passed that brought nothing new.

Suddenly, a more serious lead appeared. Monsieur Chapron, a clerk in Bobigny, declared to the police superintendent of Pantin that a car exactly like that of M. Normand had been parked in his town at the home of a certain Detwiller. The police, who no longer had any idea which way to turn, hurried to Detwiller's house. Monsieur Hamard, chief of the local police, searched the house closely and at length. He then arrested Detwiller and his wife.

When they were questioned, the two prisoners made the same declaration: "During the night of December 13-14," Detwiller explained, "I was awakened by four men who asked me to fix their car, whose crank was bent. One of them told me his name: Charles Delorme, place du Marché, in Melun. They then left.

"On the night of the 20-21, around 1:00 in the morning, I was woken up again. It was the three visitors of the fourteenth. The boss wasn't with them. They told me they had come to get the car, that they were going to Paris to pick up their boss, who was at the theater, and they left after paying me."

This was Monsieur Detwiller's explanation.

They seemed suspicious. Monsieur Hamard arrested the mechanic along with his wife. At the same time, he arrested a woman named B..., who lived with her lover and her daughter at the Detwillers' home. But the latter insisted she didn't know anything about the time the car spent her hosts', and that she'd neither seen nor heard anything. As for the lover, at that moment he was selling fake jewelry at the market.

The B... woman's companion was named Edouard Carouy. He was known to be an anarchist. His friends called him "Red."

Thus, after a few days of stumbling about, the investigation, by a stroke of luck, had returned to the anarchists.

But what was strangest, and which no one was able to later explain, is that the very next day, after this well-oiled operation, the newspapers announced that Caby's killer had been identified. And the assassin, it was said, was Carouy, the anarchist Carouy, whose mistress was already being held. All that was lacking were the accomplices but, the well-informed tipsters said, it was only a matter of time.

An aggravating circumstance for Carouy was that in the false bottom of his car a crowbar had been found, one of those tools used by crooks who break through walls. There was no hesitation: he was the killer.