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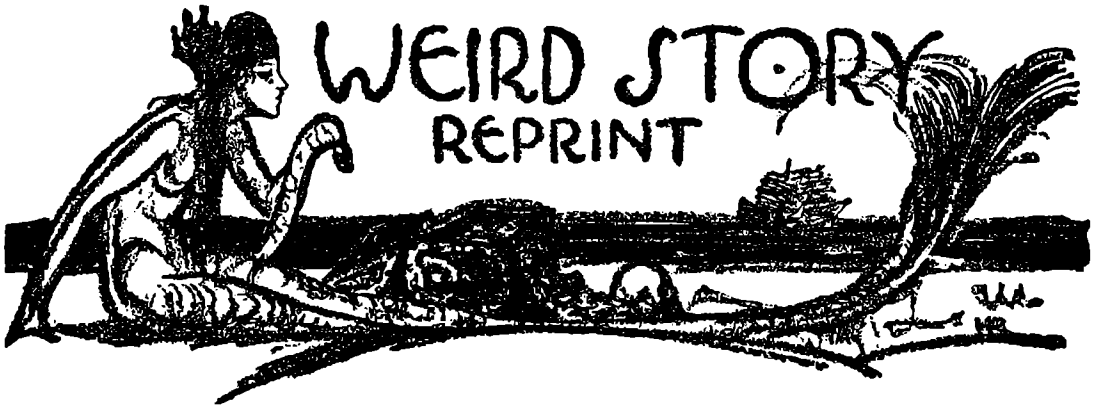
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



A Masterpiece of Crime*

By JEAN RICHEPIN

HIS baptismal name was Oscar; his family name, Lapissotte; both commonplace. He was poor, without talent, and he believed himself to be a genius. His first act on entering upon a literary career was to adopt a pseudonym; his second to adopt another. In ten years he managed to employ every sort of *nom de plume* that his active fancy could suggest. All this was done to excite the curiosity of his contemporaries, but this curiosity scarcely ever made the least effort to discover the secrets of his secluded life. Under all these borrowed names, noble and plebeian, romantic and ordinary, he still remained unknown, the poorest and most obscure of literary men.

With patience exhausted, pride humbled, and a life spoiled by vain and futile hopes, there seemed no better way than to end it by a suicide or a crime. Oscar Lapissotte was not brave enough to choose death. Besides, his pretensions to intellectual superiority led him to feel a sort of pleasure in the thought of committing some grand crime. He said to himself that, so far, his genius had taken a false

turn, as it had applied itself to dreams of art when it was really destined for the violence of action. And, too, crime would bring him a fortune, and wealth would bring appreciation of those talents which his poverty had served to hide from the sordid world. Artistically and morally, he proved to himself that he must commit a crime. He did commit a crime and for the first time in his life he created a masterpiece.

2

AT ONE time Oscar Lapissotte had lived on the sixth floor of a house in the Rue Saint-Denis. Scarcely noticed among the many other tenants and known only by one of his numerous pseudonyms, he had been the lover of a good-natured, gossiping creature who told him all her small affairs. She was employed by a rich old widow who was an invalid.

One evening, about ten years after this, when leaving one of his friends who was an inmate of a hospital for a time, he chanced, in making his way out, to pass through a ward where he saw a woman

* Translated by H. Twitchell from the French.

whom he at once recognized as his old sweetheart. She was evidently dying. She told him that she had not been with her mistress for three weeks and that her place had been filled. Her mistress was too feeble to visit her and she was very wretched.

"I understand that," said Oscar. "You wish to see her, do you not?"

"Oh! that is not what worries me. It is because I am afraid, if I die here, Madame may read the letters I left at her house and will despise me after I am dead."

"Why should she despise you?"

"Listen, I will tell you the whole truth. You have been my lover; but that was a long time ago and it is all past. I can confide to you the fact that I have had others. You did not care for me long. You are an artist, a man of the world. I was agreeable to you for a time and that was all. But I met at this house a man of my own class in life, a coachman. If Madame had known it, it would have been my ruin. I did so many wicked things for him. I do not want her to know what I have done."

"My dear woman," said Oscar, brusquely, "explain more fully, you speak too fast. You must make everything quite plain if you wish me to aid you."

At this moment, Oscar Lapissotte had no idea of committing a crime. He simply followed the instinct of a man of letters and scented a plot for a story.

"Well," replied the woman, "I will try to explain. I fell suddenly ill with an attack of apoplexy, in the street, and they brought me here where Madame has left me because I was too ill to be moved. I wrote to her and she answered, but sent her servant to see me in her place. But neither to Madame nor to the servant have I spoken of that which torments me. I have a packet of letters from the coachman. In those letters are mentioned cer-

tain things: some thefts, which he told me to commit; and then he wrote afterward, thanking me for what I had done. For I stole; yes, I stole for him, stole from my mistress! I ought to have burned the letters, but in them there were always endearing terms and promises of marriage; so I have kept them. One day the scoundrel threatened to take them away from me in order to compromise me. I had refused him money and he made me understand that once master of those papers, he would make me do as he wished. I have been horribly afraid, but still I would not destroy the letters. For greater security I asked Madame for the privilege of placing some important family documents in one of her secretaries. She gave me a desk with a key. I know, of course, that I need only say to her now that I need the papers, but I mistrust the maid who would bring them. From some words which she let fall I suspect that she loves the coachman. He is a cunning fellow, and if he plays the lover to her, it is only to gain possession of the letters whose hiding-place he knows. Now you understand my trouble. Oh, if you would be so good as to help me! I do not deserve it, it is true; but it would be so kind of you to render me this service."

"What service?"

"To bring me those letters."

"But how can I get them?"

"It is all very simple. This evening, about ten o'clock, Madame will take chloral to make her sleep, and she sleeps very soundly after that. The servant is not there at that hour, for she goes away every evening at seven o'clock, after dinner. You may be sure that she has never told the maid that she takes chloral, for fear that she might be robbed. She has told no one but me, in whom she had perfect confidence, poor woman. Well, you can enter then; she will never hear you and you can bring me my letters

when you come away. You know there are two entrances to the house. If you go in by the stairway for the *concierge*, no one will see you. Oh, tell me that you will do this for me!"

"But—the secretary—how can I open it or the door of the apartment?"

"I have two keys to the secretary. I had another one made, to my shame, in order to rob my good mistress. Here it is, with that of my own drawer. Here also is the key of the kitchen door at the top of the *concierge's* stairs. I give them to you. I do not know why, but I have faith in you, and I am sure that you will do this for me, so that I may die in peace."

OSCAR LAPISSOTTE took the keys. His eyes were fixed and staring; a strange pallor swept across his face; his thin and wrinkled cheeks twitched nervously. For suddenly, the possibility of the great crime had appeared to him. This woman dead, the thing was easy enough to execute.

"Oh, I am stifling!" said the sick woman whose long talk had exhausted her. "Give me a drink; give me water!"

The place was only half lighted by the night lamp. All the patients in the surrounding beds were asleep. Oscar raised the head of the dying woman; drew the pillow from under, and placed it over her mouth, where he held it with a grasp of iron for at least ten minutes. He had the frightful courage to count the moments, watch in hand. When he uncovered the face, the woman was dead. She had not made a movement, nor uttered a cry. She seemed to have succumbed at once. He replaced the pillow under her head, straightened the covering under the chin, and the body lay as if sleeping.

The bed was near the door; so the assassin escaped without difficulty. He slipped silently through the corridors and

found himself outside without having been seen by anyone.

It was now twenty minutes past nine. Without losing a moment, eager for the execution of his crime, he made his way swiftly toward the Rue Saint-Denis. He entered the house before ten o'clock. On the way he had matured his plans. He went first to the stable, where he thought to find some belongings of the coachman. He took from there a cravat, tore from it a small piece, and put this in his pocket. Then he mounted the stairway. The room was on the first floor and he ran no risk of being seen.

He opened the door noiselessly, found himself in the bedchamber, and with one strong grasp strangled the old woman who slept there so soundly. Again he showed the same *sang-froid*, and did not relax his grip upon the lean old throat for a quarter of an hour.

Then he opened the desk. In the large drawer in the center, there were deeds and notes and other papers. In the left-hand drawer were some bank-notes, in the one at the right some gold coins. He left the deeds and papers, but made a bundle of the bank-notes and gold pieces and thrust them into his pockets. Then he turned his attention to the letters. He found them easily, in the corner, just where the maid had told him.

He burned them in the fireplace, taking care, however, to leave intact those pieces that would most surely compromise the maid and the coachman. A few well-chosen ones sufficed to reveal the whole history of theft. He placed these near the chimney corner, so arranged as to make it appear that the letters had been burned in haste and that the criminal had departed before they were completely consumed.

He placed the piece of cravat, rumpled and torn, in the hands of the dead woman. Then he passed swiftly through the

hall to the street, where he assumed the loitering gait of a *boulevardier*.

Decidedly, Oscar Lapissotte was not mistaken in thinking himself a man of genius: he had the genius for crime and had worked with the hand of a master.

3

A CRIME is not a masterpiece unless the author of it remains unpunished. And the impunity is not really complete, unless justice condemns an innocent person. Oscar Lapissotte had everything perfect and complete. Justice did not hesitate for an instant to find the assassin. He was, without a doubt, the coachman. Were not the fragments of letters infallible proof? Who but the coachman, a lover of the maid, could know so well the circumstances favorable to the commission of such a crime? Who else could have had the keys? Had he not begun by stealing from his mistress, with the connivance of the maid? Was it not quite reasonable to believe that he had finally taken the leap which separates the thief from the murderer? Besides, the piece of cravat was an accuser not to be refuted. And to add to his misfortunes, the coachman had bad antecedents. As a last and overwhelming proof, the man could not tell what he had been doing at that fatal hour. He denied, protested and affirmed his innocence again and again, but all was against him; nothing appeared in his favor.

He was judged, condemned to death and executed. Judges, jury, the lawyers, the newspapers, the public, all agreed that he died justly. There remained only one thing which puzzled them all, and that was that it could not be discovered what he had done with the money. It was believed that the scoundrel had concealed it in some safe place, but no one doubted that he had stolen it. If ever a

criminal was proved guilty, it was this one.

4

THEY say that the consciousness of a good action performed gives profound peace. But there are few people who have the courage to admit that a wicked act which escapes punishment also brings its happiness. Barbey d' Aureville, in his admirable *Diaboliques*, has not been afraid to write a story entitled *Happiness in Crime*, and he is right; for there are rascals who are happy.

Oscar Lapissotte could enjoy to the utmost the double murder and could taste its fruits in absolute serenity. He experienced neither remorse nor terror. The only feeling he knew was one of immense pride. It was the pride of an artist, which made him forget every moral consideration; it was the perfection of his work, and the consciousness that he had shown himself to be really great, and this furnished him means to slake his ever growing thirst for fame and glory.

He profited by his new fortune and forced his way through the portals of journals and magazines; he was able to feast the critic; but he could not compel the attention of the public. His verse, his prose, his dramas, all failed to possess any power of pleasing the people. Literary men knew a little of Anatole Desroses, the man of letters who had more money than talent; but all were agreed in denying him the least spark of real talent, or genius. He was daily convinced of his own inability and mediocrity.

"And yet," he said to himself sometimes with a brightening of the eye, "and yet, if I wished! If I should tell them of my masterpiece! For I have created a masterpiece! It may be that Anatole Desroses is a fool, but Oscar Lapissotte is a man of genius. It is a pity that a deed

so well planned, so powerfully conceived, so vigorously executed, so completely successful, should remain unknown. Oh, that day I had the true, the real inspiration which leads to perfection. Abbé Prévost has scribbled a hundred romances, but only one *Manon Lescaut*. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre left only *Paul and Virginia*. There are many geniuses who produce only one great work. But indeed, what a work! That remains like a monument in literature. And I am of that family of geniuses. I have produced but one good thing. Why have I lived it instead of writing it? If I had written it I should be famous. I should have not only a story to show, but all the world would read it, for it would be unique of its kind. I have produced a masterpiece of crime."

This idea became at length a mania with him. For years he cherished it. He let it consume him; at first the regret that he had not had the dream instead of the act, then the desire to relate the fact as a dream. What haunted him was not the demon of perversity, the singular power which urges men of the Edgar Allan Poe type to cry their secret aloud; it was the need of fame, the desire for glory. His fixed idea pursued him with a thousand specious reasonings.

"Why should you not write the truth? What do you fear? Anatole Desroses is safe from justice. The crime is old. It is forgotten by all the world. The author of it is known, he is dead and buried. You will have the reputation of having artistically arranged an old law case. You will reveal in it all the obscure thoughts, all the rancorous hatreds that have urged the murderer to the commission of the crime; all the faculties employed to commit it; all the circumstances that the marvelous inventor we call chance has furnished you. You are alone in the secret of the deed and no one will guess that you are the

real author of it. They will see in the story only the effort of an extraordinary imagination. And then you will be the man you wish to be: the great author who reveals himself late, but with a master-stroke. You will enjoy your crime as never criminal enjoyed one before. You will have gained by it not only fortune, but fame also. And who knows? After this first success, when you have a name, the public will read again your other works, and will see without a doubt what an unjust opinion they have had of you. On the road to fame, it is only the first step which costs. Recall a little of that courage that you had one particular day in your life. See how well it succeeded. It cannot fail to succeed now. You have known once how to seize opportunity by the forelock. Do so again. Shall you allow yourself to shrink from it? You know well that the deed was grand, do you not? Well, then, tell it without fear, without hesitation, proudly, in all its majestic honor. Be boldly courageous, renounce the pseudonym and sign your own name. It is not Jacques de la Mole, Antoine Guirland, nor even Anatole Desroses. It is not the host of men without talent that you wish to render illustrious; it is yourself, it is Oscar Lapissotte!"

So one evening Oscar Lapissotte seated himself before a pile of white paper, his head on fire, his hand burning, like a great poet who feels himself about to create some grand work, and he wrote the true history of his crime. He told of the miserable struggles of Oscar Lapissotte, his Bohemian life, his multiplied failures, his proud mediocrity, his rancorous hatreds, the ever haunting thoughts of suicide and crime, the revolt of a heart that fancy had deceived and that wished to avenge itself on the reality, the whole a romance in metaphysics. Then in a sober fashion and with frightful clearness, he

described the scene at the hospital, the scene in the Rue Saint-Denis, the death of the innocent coachman, the triumph of the real murderer. With a subtlety of details curious and almost satanic, he analyzed the causes which had decided the author to publish his crime, and he finished by the apotheosis of Oscar Lapisotte who put his signature at the end of this confession.

5

THE *Masterpiece of Crime* appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and had prodigious success. One can gain some idea of it by reading a few of the following extracts from some of the articles which greeted its appearance: "Everyone knows that the *nom de plume* of Oscar Lapisotte conceals an author who delights in this sort of disguise, Monsieur Anatole Desroses. After having, for a long time, wasted his talents in light journalistic work, Monsieur Anatole Desroses has just given us his true measure. The story is drawn from a judicial tragedy which occurred about ten years ago in the Rue Saint-Denis. But the imagination of the romancer has known how to transform a vulgar assassination into a wonderfully complex and interesting story. Poor Gaboriau himself would not have thought of the strange complications that Monsieur Anatole Desroses has invented. We shall give part of the *Masterpiece of Crime* in our next Sunday's issue." (*Figaro.*)

"Masterpiece, indeed, this *Masterpiece of Crime!* This pen has the sharpness of a sword and the keenness of a scalpel. It spares nothing, it lays bare the darkest thoughts of the mind, the inmost feelings of the soul. One sees here clearly, too clearly indeed, all, everything. It is a sulfurous clearness accorded to the eye of

the evil one himself; it is the finger of the evil one, this finger of Monsieur Anatole Desroses, which drags away the covering of crime and shows the human heart in all its nakedness. He pleases, this Monsieur Anatole Desroses, like a vice, a forbidden pleasure." (*Constitutionnelle.*)

In short, there was a concert of plaudits, some generous, some envious, some foolish, from the Prudhommes and other lights of journalism.

6

YET in all these articles, in the most flattering even, two things were always found which irritated Oscar Lapisotte. The first was that they persisted in taking his true name for a *nom de plume* and in calling him Anatole Desroses. The second was the fact that they spoke too much of his imagination and seemed wholly incredulous as to the probability of his story being a true one. These two desiderata tormented him to such a degree that he forgot in them all the happiness of his budding glory. Artists are made thus, so that even when the public and the critics lull them to slumber on a bed of roses, they suffer if one leaf is crumpled.

So, one day, when someone congratulated the great author who had written the *Masterpiece of Crime*, and highly flattered him, the great author answered, stepping quite close to him:

"Oh, Monsieur, you would felicitate me in quite another strain if you knew the real truth of the affair. My novel is not a romance; it really has happened. The crime has been committed just as I have related it. And it is I who committed it. I called myself by my true name, Oscar Lapisotte."

He said this quite coldly, with a grand air of conviction, speaking every word
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A Masterpiece of Crime

(Continued from page 372)

slowly and distinctly as if he wished to be believed.

"Ah, charming, charming!" exclaimed the flatterer. "The pleasantry is rather lugubrious, however. It is like the best of Baudelaire."

The following day all the journals repeated the anecdote. They found it delicious, this attempt at mystification by which Anatole Desroses wished to make himself pass for an assassin. Decidedly he was original and quite worthy of living in Paris.

Oscar Lapissotte became furious. In making this confession, he had acted, to a degree, mechanically. But now he really wished to be believed by someone. He repeated his confession to all his friends whom he met on the boulevard. The first day it seemed rather droll. The second day his friends found it monotonous. The third day he was thought decidedly tiresome. At the end of the week he was frankly adjudged an imbecile. He was unable to live up to the reputation of a great author, everyone said. His warmest partizans began to torment him by telling him strange and incredible stories. This descent from the heights of fame exasperated him.

"Oh, it is too much!" he said. "No one will give credence to that which is the exact truth; no one will believe that I have not only written, but executed, a *Masterpiece of Crime!* Well, I shall have a clear conscience in the matter. Tomorrow, all Paris shall know who Oscar Lapissotte is!"

7.

HE SOUGHT out the judge who had presided when the case from the Rue Saint-Denis was tried.

"Monsieur," said he, "I have come to give myself into custody. I am Oscar Lapissotte."

"It is unnecessary to continue, Monsieur," replied the judge. "I have read your novel, and I extend you my congratulations. I know also the eccentricity with which you have amused yourself for the past week. Another than myself might perhaps be annoyed that you should carry your pleasantry to this extreme. But I love the fine arts and all literary productions, and I shall pardon your sprightly farce since it gives me the pleasure of knowing you."

"But, Monsieur," said Oscar, impatient under these polite phrases, "it is no farce! I swear to you that I am Oscar Lapissotte; that I have committed this crime and that I am going to prove it to you."

"Well, Monsieur," replied the judge, "you will see how accommodating I am. For the curiosity of the thing I am going to lend myself to this farce. I confess to you that I enjoy in advance the pleasure of seeing how a mind as subtle as your own can adapt itself to the task of proving to me this absurdity."

"The absurdity! But what I related is the absolute truth. The coachman was not guilty. It is I who have——"

"I believe you have said all that, Monsieur, in your novel which I have read. But, if it pleases you to tell it to me yourself, I shall take great pleasure in listening to your story, though it will prove nothing at all, except that which is already proved: that you have an imagination singularly rich and strange."

"I have had only imagination enough to commit this crime."

"Not to commit it, but to write it, dear sir, to write it. Stop one moment and let me tell you my opinion of it. You have had almost too much imagination; you

have passed the limits permitted to the fancy of the author; you have invented certain circumstances that are not to be considered as possible, or probable, at least."

"But when I tell you——"

"Allow me; I beg your pardon, but you must admit that I possess some judgment in criminal matters. Well, I assure you that the circumstances of your crime are not naturally arranged. The meeting with the maid in the hospital is too unlikely, and then there are other improbabilities. As a work of art, your novel is charming, original, well planned, what you call strong; and I admit that you are perfectly right, you authors, to travesty reality in this way. But your famous crime in itself is impossible. My dear Monsieur Desroses, I am sorry to give you the least annoyance; but if I admire you as a man

of letters, I cannot accept you seriously as a criminal."

"It is that which you must do now," shouted Oscar Lapissotte, rushing upon the magistrate.

He was frothing at the lips, his eyes were bloodshot, his whole body was bursting with rage. He would have strangled the judge had not his cries brought help. The judge's assistants overcame the furious man, and bound him.

Five days later he was taken to Charenton as a hopeless maniac.

"See to what literary ambition may lead!" said the newspapers the following day. "Anatole Desroses has produced, just once, a great work. He has been so wrought up by it that he has ended by believing that his dream was reality. It is the old fable of Pygmalion and his statue."

8

THE most frightful part of it all was that Oscar Lapissotte was not a madman. He had all his reason and was only the more tortured by it.

"Now all misfortunes are mine," he said. "They will believe neither in my name nor in my crime. When I am dead I shall pass simply for Anatole Desroses, a scribbler who had the genius to create only one fine work; and they will know as a fictitious personage this Oscar Lapissotte, this being that I am, the man of action, decision, the hero of ferocity, the living negation of remorse. Oh, let them guillotine me but let them know the truth! Were it for one moment only, be-

fore thrusting my neck under the ax; were it for one second even while the knife fell; were it only for the length of a flash of lightning, that I might have the certainty of my glory and the vision of my immortality!"

These exaltations were treated with cold water. At last, by living with one fixed idea and in the company of madmen, he actually became mad. And when he had reached this point he was discharged as cured!

Oscar Lapissotte finished by believing that he was really Anatole Desroses, and that he had never been an assassin. He died with the conviction that he had dreamed his crime and not committed it!