

# French Mother's Love Saves Son From Guillotine But His Bragging Brings Justice and He Pays Penalty

Youth Who  
Shuns Work  
and Glories  
in His  
Strength  
Comes to Grief  
After Brief  
Sortie in  
Crime

By JOSEPH GOLLOMB

ROGER VORON would have puzzled the wisest student of the human face, so little did he story; certainly he puzzled the French peasants in the Loire village where he was raised. His mother, a hard-working country school teacher, was of good sound peasant stock, yet the boy seemed to have loafing in his very veins. Powerfully built, he was physically indolent, until it came to wrestling in play; then he excelled. He had a serious, gentle, good-looking face; yet those who knew him best felt uneasy about him; why, they could not tell, unless it was his stubborn loafing.

It was his eyes, clear, blue and calm, that troubled people most; at least when he smiled. Then he had a look as if there were too much sun in his eyes; or was it more the look of a tiger half-asleep? But even those whom he reminded of a drowsy tiger, admitted that at least it was a tiger who had not yet tasted blood. For, except for his refusal to help his widowed mother make a living, there was nothing objectionable in his character; his proneness to boast of his wrestling was understandable in a lad who had nothing else to boast about.

Nevertheless, when he turned twenty-four and was still a loafer, his mother lost all patience with him.

"You are a reproach to me," she told him. "How can I expect my pupils to believe me that one should be industrious and useful, when my own son is an idler? If you will not help me, neither shall you any longer remain here to be a burden on me and a bad example to our youth!"

When Mme. Voron said anything, people believed her; and Roger, who at first did not think it possible that his mother really meant to throw him out of the house, found out otherwise.

He went to his grandmother, who lived alone in a house near his mother's. When Roger wished, he could be an ingratiating young man, and he tried his sunny smile on the old woman, who was reputed to have quite a bit of money hidden away in her home. But his grandmother was as outraged at his loafing as her daughter, and bluntly told Roger to shift for himself.

Roger decided, then, that since he could no longer loaf in his home village he would try life in Paris. Thither he made his way, partly on foot, partly by stealing rides.

In Paris, however, he found the lot of a penniless loafer no easier than at home—in fact, less so. He learned how it feels to go hungry and did not like it.

One sunny afternoon he was brooding on a bench on the Boulevard St. Michel, when a faded little old woman came along and sat down near him. She looked the picture of poverty, and Roger gave her only a glance and resumed his unpleasant thoughts.

The old woman proved a reliable soul, and wanted to know Roger. She asked him what his trade was.

"A plasterer," he said; and added sarcastically, "You haven't by any chance some work for me on one of your numerous properties?"

She blushed at the snarl; then a defiant little expression came into her sunken face.

"I suppose you think me a pauper!" she retorted. "Just because you see me in poor clothes."

Roger turned his back on her and on her pathetic attempt to interest him. "Well, you're wrong if you think so," the old woman pursued, with spite in her voice. "I could hire you for a month and keep you busy if I wanted to. I have money, I have! I don't have to work. And if I look poor it is because I have better



"Where do you keep your money?" he demanded softly, towering over her.

sense then to squander my money on clothes!"

She went on boasting of her money, apparently without being heard, for Roger kept his back to her. Finally, however, he turned. His clear blue eyes had a look of apology in them.

"You must forgive the rudeness of a man who hasn't slept under a roof for 10 nights; and you know some of the nights this week have not been too warm," he said.

The old woman was touched to the heart.

"You poor boy!" she exclaimed. "I wish I could do something for you!"

"You can," he said slowly. "You can let me sleep on the floor somewhere in your house. I'll be a watchdog for you."

She was in greater distress than ever.

"My home is only a garret in Rue Aubrey-le-Boucher." Then remembering that she was supposed to be well-to-do, she added hastily, "Expensive quarters I find as much of a waste as clothes. But if you are willing to put up with what modest home I have perhaps I can give you shelter for a few days—until you find work."

"Yes, yes," Roger said eagerly. Anything better than the cold stones in the Big Market!

So Roger went home with Mme. Villet. It was indeed a modest home, a little garret, as poor in looks as her clothes. In her bedroom, however, Roger saw a closed cupboard of oak.

"And in that cupboard, I suppose," he smiled friendly, "is your treasure?"

Mme. Villet grew confused and a little frightened.

"Why, no—that is, I'd rather not discuss that," she stammered.

Then she became more frightened. For the young man's smiling eyes narrowed until she could not tell whether he was still smiling in friendliness—or how.

And he advanced slowly, still with that expression about his eyes. She retreated before him and tried to leave the room, but he got between her and the door. She called to him to go away; then she called for help. Her voice was not very strong and the walls of the old tenement were thick.

Then Roger Voron caught her. Throwing her to the bed, he pressed his strong fingers about the old woman's throat until she stopped struggling.

He assured himself that she would not cry out again. Then he turned to the oak cupboard. It was locked, but he did not stop to look for a key. He kicked the door in and ransacked the inside.

Ah! from a few hills of faded linen, ribbons and such, all he found was a small coin, not enough to buy a loaf of bread.

He searched the rest of the apartment, and was finally convinced that the little old woman had lied to him when she said she had money.

He looked to see what he had done to her. She was dead.

No one had seen the two enter; and Roger left the house unobserved, as he had entered.

He seemed to have lost his time for Paris; for several days later he was back in his home village.

"Mother!" he said, contently, "I have come back to do as you want me to. I'll find a job and settle down with you—I will give you another chance."

Roger's earnestness was something that even his own mother could not resist. She accepted the prodigal's return for what it seemed to be, a mending of his ways.

For several weeks she had no reason to think otherwise. Roger did look for a job, found one with a farmer; worked hard all day and stayed home every evening. He even began to read a little for the first time in his life. Only it was the Paris newspapers that he read; and read assiduously.

IN THE meantime the landlady of the house in which Madame Villet was a tenant wondered why the old woman had not appeared for so many days. She must be ill, the landlady decided; and mounted to the garret to see.

She knocked repeatedly without getting an answer. She became uneasy and went down and told her husband. A day or two later they decided to break in the door.

They did so, and found Madame Villet dead in her bed. The room showed there had been violence in her death.

The police were notified.

The verdict was that Madame Villet had been choked to death. By whom?

The police did all that modern police could do to find out the murderer. But their efforts brought them no nearer to a solution of the murder than that it must have been a man who committed the crime.

The Paris newspapers treated the mystery at no great length; Mme. Villet was really poor and the great newspaper reading public is not interested in murder little more than routine attention. They really had done as much as they could, and there was no one interested enough to push them to extraordinary effort. So the dossier on Mme. Villet's murder was filed away in the archives of the Paris police as one of the many unanswered questions gathering dust and oblivion there.

IN THE Loire village Roger Voron began to get restless. He no longer read the Paris newspapers; he no longer stayed home evenings. The farmer with whom he worked began to complain of his laziness. Finally he discharged him.

Roger made no further effort to find work. His mother began again to worry about him. The neighbors again wondered how so eminently good a woman as Mme. Voron could be mother to so worthless a son.

In his boredom Roger sought companionship in a younger set—drifters of the village. Hermette, the two were birds of a feather and took to each other and to a life of parasitism.

The day came when Mme. Voron again said to her son, "Go!"

Roger was willing to go; he had tasted Paris, and although it had not suited him, he knew there was something to be done there—just one had the means.

He knew now, too, that within himself he had the courage to get the means—early. The fact that the first time he had tried it brought him no money was not the important thing. What mattered was that he knew what to do, knew where to do it, and had all the nerve necessary.

Cautiously he approached the scheme in Hermette. At first the latter was frightened, then fascinated by the boldness, the stealthiness, of his friend. Yes, he would join him in his plan; then off they would go together to see the world with money in their pockets.

Roger's grandmother, the well-to-do, lived, as I have said, alone in a house in the same village. She was somewhat of a recluse and a miser. She had worked so hard for a provision against old-age poverty that every franc to her was precious. So, although aged, she kept no servant. Her only companion was a noisy watchdog that barked mechanically most of the night.

Roger and Hermette stole up to her house one night. Hermette's part of the plot was to decoy the dog with some meat on a string; then to silence him with an iron bar.

The two young men had waited for the dark of the moon, and Hermette went first. The dog was lying on the doorstep to the house, drowsily barking away at the night. A stealthy approach brought him to his feet and there was a fresh burst of barking.

Something landed with a soft thud at his feet. He shied away, barking more than ever. Then a pleasant, small meat he curiously. It was a fresh succulent steak. His barks became tentative as he nosed the meat; then rose again as the appetizing morsel moved away. He followed it; suddenly he yelped; then barked no more.

Up in her bedroom Roger's grandmother was awakened by her dog's unusual behavior. Why was he no longer barking?

The door to her room opened. In the doorway stood a figure.

"Who is it?" the old woman cried. "It is I, Roger," was the reply. "Don't be afraid."

But she was afraid. It needed no miser's fear to tell her why Roger had come.

"Where do you keep your money?" he demanded softly, towering over her. "Let me have it without any fuss, and I'll go away and never trouble you again."

Her life had become much interwoven with her little hoard that it was no wonder her fear of losing her money was as strong as her fear of Roger. She tried to scream for help; but her palm over her mouth silenced her. She tried to beat him, scratch out his eyes. His hand closed about her throat and tightened.

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she retorted,  
"just  
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clothes."

Whether it was her heart gave out or her breath was cut off, Roger found that once more he was a killer; again an old woman was his victim.

This time he got some money; not much. He was not able to find his grandmother's hoard, though he spent some time looking for it.

While he was doing this Hermette was watching outside the house.

He could not know, of course, what was transpiring at a neighboring house. These neighbors of Roger Voron's grandmother were so used to her dog's barking that any departure from it woke them. This night when he stopped barking the couple sat up in bed and wondered what could have made the difference in the dog's behavior.

The wonder grew to uneasiness. The man of the house took an old hunting gun and stole over to his own neighbors, the two Richet brothers, and woke them.

The three peasants, all armed stealthily crossed the road to the old woman's house. As they entered the little hedge-enclosed front garden some one sounded a signal whistle.

The peasants rushed forward and a young man broke from the garden and started to run. One of the peasants shot at him. The runner tripped, fell and was overpowered by the man who shot at him.

The other two peasants ran into the house. One of them was knocked down by burly Roger Voron, who tried to run out of the house. But Roger Voron was in turn knocked over the head with a gun butt. It sent Roger Voron to his knees—and his days of freedom were at an end.

VORON and Hermette were tried for the murder of Roger's grandmother at the assizes in the Loire district. The jury were typical provincial Frenchmen, of simple emotional and mental processes

to guide them as they listened to the defense and to the prosecution.

The defense could only point to the fact that this was the first time Roger had ever been charged with crime. The deed was something to shudder at, yes; but one offense does not make one a criminal who should be given the death penalty. For the guillotine was what the defense feared.

The prosecution on the other hand emphasized that the killing was not only murder. Roger Voron was a matricide. "Murdered his own grandmother!" was the refrain of the prosecution.

The defense had every reason to believe that this consideration would prevail with the jury and that Roger could not escape the ultimate sentence, the guillotine.

Hermette too was a first offender; and although he would be convicted of murder it would not be the murder of his own kin.

The prosecution was about to close its case, and it was easy to see what effect its arguments had on the jury.

Suddenly Roger's mother rose in court and with dramatic simplicity asked to be heard.

The defense had made much capital of the sterling character of the mother, and although her interruption was out of order the judge asked sympathetically:

"What have you to say? Is it a plea for mercy or will it shed some new light on the case?"

"I have something to confess."

The startled court room listened.

"God knows I have said harsh things of my son," Mme. Voron said, "and with bitter truth, but the prosecution charges that Roger murdered his own grandmother. That is not the fact. . . . For 25 years I have enjoyed a reputation to which I am not entitled. I am supposed to be a good woman. I am not. Twenty-five years ago while Roger's father, the son of the murdered woman, was still alive, I was unfaithful to him, my husband. Roger is the son of my lover, not of my husband. The old woman Roger killed was not his grandmother. No one knew this but Roger. He has kept my secret to save my name."

For the idea came to him how he could avoid having to go to Ile de Re the following week. If his plan worked he would be kept in France for some time to come. It would cost so little an effort to accomplish this plan of his.

He got Roger to repeat his story several times, until he knew by heart all the details of the murder.

Then he waited till the day he was to be shipped off to the penal colony.

At the last moment he told one of the guards to summon the prison warden. "Why?" the guard asked.



Everyone turned to look at Roger. His gentle calm eyes had dropped, so that no one could see the expression in them. Was Mme. Voron telling the truth? Was she sacrificing her good name to save her son? Did he really know the dead woman was not his grandmother when he killed her?

The jury in the Voron case were so moved by Mme. Voron's avowal that, whether they believed her or not, her plea saved Roger from the guillotine.

He and Hermette were each sentenced to fourteen years in prison; a mild sentence they owed to the fact that theirs was a first offense.

AS NO. 6197, Roger entered Poissy Prison. Later he was transferred to the prison at Pontrevaux. The ordeal he had gone through seemed to have tamed the tiger in him. Indeed it left him spiritless. He became a mere hard working prisoner, whose only thought seemed to be to please the prison keepers.

So ingratiating had he become, that one day when he tried to make friends with a fellow prisoner, a newcomer, the latter feared:

"Go use your sweetness on your guards, you worm!"

This newcomer was a stout, rather small-framed man by the name of Bebert. He and a confederate had murdered a merchant and robbed him. The confederate escaped and the police never learned who he was, for Bebert never learned to tell. The police promised him mitigation of sentence if he informed on the confederate. Bebert did not say a word.

He was sentenced to detention for life to the French penal colony at Ile de Re, in the temples. Every French convict knows of Ile de Re, and most of them would prefer any fate to exile on that murdering planet spot in the antipodes.

Roger knew how loyal Bebert had been to a fellow criminal; the whole prison knew it, and admired Bebert for it; in

fact, that was the reason Roger tried to cultivate Bebert's friendship. It hit him harder therefore to have this under-sized man call him, Roger Voron, strong, big, with power in his hands, a worm.

"You say that because you don't in the least know my character!" Roger retorted. "And because you think you are safe from these hands of mine."

"You think because you killed an old woman you are a master criminal?"

"One old woman," Roger repeated, his eyes on Bebert. "If you only knew!"

But Bebert did not seem interested. He had something more important to him on his mind than Roger's character. Bebert did not want to go to Ile de Re, as he would have to do in another week. He would do anything in the world not to go there. Pontrevaux was not a bad place; its keepers were not unkind; Pontrevaux was in France; civilization was all around it; at Pontrevaux Bebert's woman could come occasionally to see him. . . .

He and Roger were alone in the prison corridor. Roger was saying something in a low tone, trying still to make an impression on him.

"... and all this time the Paris police have not the slightest idea I am the man who did it."

Bebert asked absently, "Did what?"

Roger was furious. "Do you mean to say you were not listening to me?"

"My mind wandered. Besides I don't care what you did or did not do."

Which, of course, made Roger all the more eager to tell again the story of how he had strangled little, old Mme. Villet in her garret home in Rue Aubrey-le-Boucher in the big city. This time Bebert listened.

For the idea came to him how he could avoid having to go to Ile de Re the following week. If his plan worked he would be kept in France for some time to come. It would cost so little an effort to accomplish this plan of his.

He got Roger to repeat his story several times, until he knew by heart all the details of the murder.

Then he waited till the day he was to be shipped off to the penal colony.

At the last moment he told one of the guards to summon the prison warden. "Why?" the guard asked.

"Last October in the Rue Aubrey-le-Boucher an old woman was strangled to death. The Paris police have never found out who did it. I can tell them."

"Oh," said the guard, "our Bebert doesn't like the thought of Ile de Re and thinks to win a respite by a little informing on some fellow murderer, eh?"

"Perhaps," Bebert said indifferently.

The warden came, prepared to have Bebert act informer. Prison seemed to have done something to the man who at his own trial was loyal to a fellow murderer.

"So you know who murdered an old woman in Paris," the warden asked. "All right, who did it?"

"I did," Bebert said.

He proceeded to describe his crime with such detail that the warden was impressed.

Bebert did not go to Ile de Re next day, but was detained in Pontrevaux, while his confession was being confirmed by the Paris police.

For several days Bebert enjoyed the fruits of his little scheme. Then a delicate came down from Paris and went into conference with the warden.

The detective said, "Bebert lies. He never saw Mme. Villet. We found fingerprints on the scene of the murder, and they are not the fingerprints of Bebert. But we should find the real murderer in a few minutes."

"What makes you think so?" the warden asked.

Bebert's confession contains details which he could not possibly have read in the newspapers. He was in prison when the murder was committed; he counted on your ignorance of the date to win a delay in deportation. It turns, therefore, that he must have learned these details in prison. . . . Let's take a look at the fingerprints of all your recent arrivals."

That was how Roger Voron came to trial for the murder of Mme. Villet. And this time nothing his mother could say saved him from the guillotine.