

# **THE ODDITIES OF THE ENGLISH**

Robert Barr



# Table of Contents

<b><u>THE ODDITIES OF THE ENGLISH</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Robert Barr</u> .....	<b>2</b>

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The events I have just related led to my dismissal by the French Government. It was not because I had arrested an innocent man; I had done that dozens of times before, with nothing said about it. It was not because I had followed a wrong clew, or because I had failed to solve the mystery of the five hundred diamonds. Every detective follows a wrong clew now and then, and every detective fails more often than he cares to admit. No. All these things would not have shaken my position, but the newspapers were so fortunate as to find something humorous in the case, and for weeks Paris rang with laughter over my exploits and my defeat. The fact that the chief French detective had placed the most celebrated English detective into prison, and that each of them were busily sleuth-hounding a bogus clew, deliberately flung across their path by an amateur, roused all France to great hilarity. The Government was furious. The Englishman was released and I was dismissed. Since the year 1893 I have been a resident of London.

When a man is, as one might say, the guest of a country, it does not become him to criticise that country. I have studied this strange people with interest, and often with astonishment, and if I now set down some of the differences between the English and the French, I trust that no note of criticism of the former will appear, even when my sympathies are entirely with the latter. These differences have sunk deeply into my mind, because, during the first years of my stay in London, my lack of understanding them was often a cause of my own failure when I thought I had success in hand. Many a time did I come to the verge of starvation in Soho, through not appreciating the peculiar trend of mind which causes an Englishman to do inexplicable things—that is, of course, from my Gallic standpoint. For instance, an arrested man is presumed to be innocent until he is proved guilty. In England, if a murderer is caught red-handed over his victim, he is held guiltless until the judge sentences him. In France we make no such foolish assumption, and although I admit that innocent men have sometimes been punished, my experience enables me to state very emphatically that this happens not nearly so often as the public imagines. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred an innocent man can at once prove his innocence without the least difficulty. I hold it is his duty toward the state to run the very slight risk of unjust imprisonment in order that obstacles may not be thrown in the way of the conviction of real criminals. But it is impossible to persuade an Englishman of this. *Mon Dieu!* I have tried it often enough.

Never shall I forget the bitterness of my disappointment when I captured Felini, the Italian anarchist, in connection with the Greenwich Park murder. At this time—it gives me no shame to confess it—I was myself living in Soho, in a state of extreme poverty. Having been employed so long by the French Government, I had formed the absurd idea that the future depended on my getting, not exactly a similar connection with Scotland Yard, but at least a subordinate position on the police force which would enable me to prove my capabilities, and lead to promotion. I had no knowledge, at that time, of the immense income which awaited me entirely outside the Government circle. Whether it is contempt for the foreigner, as has often been stated, or that native stolidity which spells complacency, the British official of any class rarely thinks it worth his while to discover the real cause of things in France, or Germany, or Russia, but plods heavily on from one mistake to another. Take, for example, those periodical outbursts of hatred against England which appear in the continental press. They create a dangerous international situation, and more than once have brought Britain to the verge of a serious war. Britain sternly spends millions in defense and preparation, whereas, if she would place in my hand half a million pounds, I would guarantee to cause Britannia to be proclaimed an angel with white wings in every European country.

When I attempted to arrive at some connection with Scotland Yard, I was invariably asked for my credentials. When I proclaimed that I had been chief detective to the Republic of France, I could see that this announcement

## THE ODDITIES OF THE ENGLISH

made a serious impression, but when I added that the Government of France had dismissed me without credentials, recommendation, or pension, official sympathy with officialism at once turned the tables against me. And here I may be pardoned for pointing out another portentous dissimilarity between the two lands which I think is not at all to the credit of my countrymen.

I was summarily dismissed. You may say it was because I failed, and it is true that in the case of the queen's necklace I had undoubtedly failed, but, on the other hand, I had followed unerringly the clew which lay in my path, and although the conclusion was not in accordance with the facts, it was in accordance with logic. No, I was not dismissed because I failed.

I had failed on various occasions before, as might happen to any man in any profession. I was dismissed because I made France for the moment the laughingstock of Europe and America. France dismissed me because France had been laughed at. No Frenchman can endure the turning of a joke against him, but the Englishman does not appear to care in the least. So far as failure is concerned, never had any man failed so egregiously as I did with Felini, a slippery criminal who possessed all the bravery of a Frenchman and all the subtlety of an Italian. Three times he was in my hands—twice in Paris, once in Marseilles—and each time he escaped me; yet I was not dismissed.

When I say that Signor Felini was as brave as a Frenchman, perhaps I do him a little more than justice. He was desperately afraid of one man, and that man was myself. Our last interview in France he is not likely to forget, and although he eluded me, he took good care to get into England as fast as train and boat could carry him, and never again, while I was at the head of the French detective force, did he set foot on French soil. He was an educated villain, a graduate of the University of Turin, who spoke Spanish, French, and English as well as his own language, and this education made him all the more dangerous when he turned his talents to crime.

Now, I knew Felini's handiwork, either in murder or in housebreaking, as well as I know my own signature on a piece of white paper, and as soon as I saw the body of the murdered man in Greenwich Park I was certain Felini was the murderer. The English authorities at that time looked upon me with a tolerant, good-natured contempt.

Inspector Standish assumed the manner of a man placing at my disposal plenty of rope with which I might entangle myself. He appeared to think me excitable, and used soothing expressions as if I were a fractious child to be calmed, rather than a sane equal to be reasoned with. On many occasions I had the facts at my finger's ends, while he remained in a state of most complacent ignorance, and though this attitude of lowering himself to deal gently with one whom he evidently looked upon as an irresponsible lunatic was most exasperating, I nevertheless claim great credit for having kept my temper with him. However, it turned out to be impossible for me to overcome his insular prejudice. He always supposed me to be a frivolous, volatile person, and so I was unable to prove myself of any value to him in his arduous duties.

The Felini instance was my last endeavor to win his favor. Inspector Standish appeared in his most amiable mood when I was admitted to his presence, and this in spite of the fact that all London was ringing with the Greenwich Park tragedy, while the police possessed not the faintest idea regarding the crime or its perpetrator. I judged from Inspector Standish's benevolent smile that I was somewhat excited when I spoke to him, and perhaps used many gestures which seemed superfluous to a large man whom I should describe as immovable, and who spoke slowly, with no motion of his hand, as if his utterances were the condensed wisdom of the ages.

"Inspector Standish," I cried, "is it within your power to arrest a man on suspicion?"

"Of course it is," he replied; "but we must harbor the suspicion before we make the arrest."

"Have confidence in me," I exclaimed. "The man who committed the Greenwich Park murder is an Italian named Felini."

I gave the address of the exact room in which he was to be found, with cautions regarding the elusive nature of this individual. I said that he had been three times in my custody, and those three times he had slipped through my fingers. I have since thought that Inspector Standish did not credit a word I had spoken.

"What is your proof against this Italian?" asked the inspector slowly.

"The proof is on the body of the murdered man; but, nevertheless, if you suddenly confront Felini with me without giving him any hint of whom he is going to meet, you shall have the evidence from his own lips before he recovers from his surprise and fright."

Something of my confidence must have impressed the official, for the order of arrest was made. Now, during the absence of the constable sent to bring in Felini, I explained to the inspector fully the details of my plan.

## THE ODDITIES OF THE ENGLISH

Practically he did not listen to me, for his head was bent over a writing pad on which I thought he was taking down my remarks, but when I had finished he went on writing as before, so I saw I had flattered myself unnecessarily. More than two hours passed before the constable returned, bringing with him the trembling Italian. I swung round in front of him, and cried, in a menacing voice:

"Felini! Regard me! You know Valmont too well to trifle with him! What have you to say of the murder in Greenwich Park?"

I give you my word that the Italian collapsed, and would have fallen to the floor in a heap had not the constables upheld him with hands under each arm. His face became of a pasty whiteness, and he began to stammer his confession, when this incredible thing happened, which could not be believed in France. Inspector Standish held up his finger.

"One moment," he cautioned solemnly; "remember that whatever you say will be used against you!"

The quick, beady black eyes of the Italian shot from Standish to me, and from me to Standish. In an instant his alert mind grasped the situation. Metaphorically I had been waved aside. I was not there in any official capacity, and he saw in a moment with what an opaque intellect he had to deal. The Italian closed his mouth like a steel trap, and refused to utter a word. Shortly after he was liberated, as there was no evidence against him. When at last complete proof was in the tardy hands of the British authorities, the agile Felini was safe in the Apennine Mountains, and to-day is serving a life sentence in Italy for the assassination of a senator whose name I have forgotten.

Is it any wonder that I threw up my hands in despair at finding myself among such a people? But this was in the early days, and now that I have greater experience of the English, many of my first opinions have been modified.

I mention all this to explain why, in a private capacity, I often did what no English official would dare to do. A people who will send a policeman, without even a pistol to protect him, to arrest a desperate criminal in the most dangerous quarter of London, cannot be comprehended by any native of France, Italy, Spain, or Germany. When I began to succeed as a private detective in London, and had accumulated money enough for my project, I determined not to be hampered by this unexplainable softness of the English toward an accused person. I therefore reconstructed my flat, and placed in the center of it a dark room strong as any Bastille cell. It was twelve feet square, and contained no furniture except a number of shelves, a lavatory in one corner, and a pallet on the floor. It was ventilated by two flues from the center of the ceiling, in one of which operated an electric fan, which, when the room was occupied, sent the foul air up that flue, and drew down fresh air through the other. The entrance to this cell opened out from my bedroom, and the most minute inspection would have failed to reveal the door, which was of massive steel, and was opened and shut by electric buttons that were partially concealed by the head of my bed. Even if they had been discovered, they would have revealed nothing, because the first turn of the button lit the electric light at the head of my bed; the second turn put it out; and this would happen as often as the button was turned to the right. But turn it three times slowly to the left, and the steel door opened. Its juncture was completely concealed by paneling. I have brought many a scoundrel to reason within the impregnable walls of that small room.

Those who know the building regulations of London will wonder how it is possible for me to delude the Government inspector during the erection of this section of the Bastille in the midst of the modern metropolis. It was the simplest thing in the world. Liberty of the subject is the first great rule with the English people, and thus many a criminal is allowed to escape. Here was I, laying plans for the contravening of this first great rule, and to do so I took advantage of the second great rule of the English people, which is, that property is sacred. I told the building authorities I was a rich man with a great distrust of banks, and I wished to build in my flat a safe or strong room in which to deposit my valuables. I built then such a room as my be found in every bank, and many private premises of the City, and a tenant might have lived in my flat for a year and never suspect the existence of this prison. A railway engine might have screeched its whistle within it, and not a sound would have penetrated the apartment that surrounded it unless the door leading to it had been left open.

But besides M. Eugene Valmont, dressed in elegant attire, as if he were still a boulevardier of Paris, occupier of the top floor in the Imperial Flats, there was another Frenchman in London to whom I must introduce you, namely, Prof. Paul Ducharme, who occupied a squalid back room in the cheapest and most undesirable quarter of Soho. Valmont flatters himself he is not yet middle-aged, but poor Ducharme does not need his sparse grey beard

## THE ODDITIES OF THE ENGLISH

to proclaim his advancing years. Valmont vaunts an air of prosperity; Ducharme wears the shabby habiliments and the shoulder stoop of hopeless poverty. He shuffles cringingly along the street, a compatriot not to be proud of. There are so many Frenchmen anxious to give lessons in their language, that merely a small living is to be picked up by any one of them. You will never see the spruce Valmont walking alongside the dejected Ducharme.

"Ah!" you exclaim, "Valmont in his prosperity has forgotten those less fortunate of his nationality."

Pardon, my friends, it is not so. Behold, I proclaim to you, the exquisite Valmont and the threadbare Ducharme are one and the same person. That is why they do not promenade together. And, indeed, it requires no great histrionic art on my part to act the role of the miserable Ducharme, for when I first came to London I warded off starvation in this wretched room, and my hand it was that nailed to the door the painted sign, "Professor Paul Ducharme, Teacher of the French Language." I never gave up the room, even when I became prosperous and moved to Imperial Flats, with its concealed chamber of horrors unknown to British authority. I did not give up the Soho chamber principally for this reason: Paul Ducharme, if the truth were known about him, would have been regarded as a dangerous character; yet this was a character sometimes necessary for me to assume. He was a member of the very inner circle of the International, an anarchist of the anarchists. This malign organization has its real headquarters in London, and we who were officials connected with the secret service of the Continent have more than once cursed the complacency of the British Government which allows such a nest of vipers to exist practically unmolested. I confess that before I came to know the English people as well as I do now, I thought that this complacency was due to utter selfishness, because the anarchists never commit an outrage in England. England is the one spot on the map of Europe where an anarchist cannot be laid by the heels unless there is evidence against him that will stand the test of open court. Anarchists take advantage of this fact, and plots are hatched in London which are executed in Paris, Berlin, Petersburg, or Madrid. I know now that this leniency on the part of the British Government does not arise from craft, but from their unexplainable devotion to their shibboleth—"The liberty of the subject." Time and again France has demanded the extradition of an anarchist, always to be met with the question:

"Where is your proof?"

I know many instances where our certainty was absolute, and also cases where we possessed legal proof as well, but legal proof which, for one reason or another, we dared not use in public; yet all this had no effect on the British authorities. They would never give up even the vilest criminal except on publicly attested legal evidence, and not even then if the crime were political.

During my term of office under the French Government, no part of my duties caused me more anxiety than that which pertained to the political secret societies. Of course, with a large portion of the Secret Service fund at my disposal, I was able to buy expert assistance, and even to get information from anarchists themselves. This latter device, however, was always more or less unreliable. I have never yet met an anarchist I could believe on oath, and when one of them offered to sell exclusive information to the police, we rarely knew whether he was trying to get a few francs to keep himself from starving, or whether he was giving us false particulars which would lead us into a trap. I have always regarded our dealings with nihilists, anarchists, or other secret associations for the perpetrating of murder as the most dangerous service a detective is called upon to perform. Yet it is absolutely necessary that the authorities should know what is going on in these secret conclaves. There are three methods of getting this intelligence. First, periodical raids upon the suspected, accompanied by confiscation and search of all papers found. This method is much in favor with the Russian police. I have always regarded it as largely futile: first, because the anarchists are not such fools, speaking generally, as to commit their purposes to writing; and, second, because it leads to reprisal. Each raid is usually followed by a fresh outbreak of activity on the part of those left free. The second method is to bribe an anarchist to betray his comrades. I have never found any difficulty in getting these gentry to accept money. They are eternally in need, but I usually find the information they give in return to be either unimportant or inaccurate. There remains, then, the third method, which is to place a spy among them. The spy battalion is the forlorn hope of the detective service. In one year I lost three men on anarchist duty, among the victims being my most valuable helper, Henri Brisson. Poor Brisson's fate was an example of how a man may follow a perilous occupation for months with safety, and then by a slight mistake bring disaster on himself.

At the last gathering Brisson attended he received news of such immediate and fateful import that, on emerging from the cellar where the gathering was held, he made directly for my residence instead of going to his



## THE ODDITIES OF THE ENGLISH

own squalid room in the Rue Falgarie. My concierge said that he arrived shortly after one o'clock in the morning, and it would seem that at this hour he could easily have made himself acquainted with the fact that he was followed. Still, as there was on his track that human panther, Felini, it is not strange poor Brisson failed to elude him.

Arriving at the tall building in which my flat was then situated, Brisson rang the bell, and the concierge, as usual, in that strange state of semisomnolence which envelops concierges during the night, pulled the looped wire at the head of his bed, and unbolted the door. Brisson assuredly closed the huge door behind him, and yet, the moment before he did so, Felini must have slipped in unnoticed to—the stone-paved courtyard. If Brisson had not spoken and announced himself, the concierge would have been wide-awake in an instant. If he had given a name unknown to the concierge, the same result would have ensued. As it was, he cried aloud, "Brisson!" whereupon the concierge of the famous chief of the French detective staff, Valmont, muttered, "Bon!" and was instantly asleep again.

Now Felini had known Brisson well, but it was under the name of Revensky, and as an exiled Russian. Brisson had spent all his early years in Russia, and spoke the language like a native. The moment Brisson had uttered his true name he had pronounced his own death warrant. Felini followed him up to the first landing—my rooms were on the second floor—and there placed his sign manual on the unfortunate man, which was the swift downward stroke of a long, narrow, sharp poniard, entering the body below the shoulders, and piercing the heart. The advantage presented by this terrible blow is that the victim sinks instantly in a heap at the feet of his slayer, without uttering a moan. The wound left is a scarcely perceptible blue mark which rarely even bleeds. It was this mark I saw on the body of the Maire of Marseilles, and afterwards on one other in Paris besides poor Brisson. It was the mark found on the man in Greenwich Park, always just below the left shoulder blade, struck from behind. Felini's comrades claim that there was this nobility in his action, namely, he allowed the traitor to prove himself before he struck the blow. I should be sorry to take away this poor shred of credit from Felini's character, but the reason he followed Brisson into the courtyard was to give himself time to escape. He knew perfectly the ways of the concierge. He knew that the body would lie there until the morning, as it actually did, and that this would give him hours in which to effect his retreat. And this was the man whom British law warned not to incriminate himself! What a people!

After Brisson's tragic death, I resolved to set no more valuable men on the track of the anarchists, but to place upon myself the task in my moments of relaxation. I became very much interested in the underground workings of the International. I joined the organization under the name of Paul Ducharme, a professor of advanced opinions, who because of them had been dismissed from his situation in Nantes. As a matter of fact, there had been such a Paul Ducharme, who had been so dismissed, but he had drowned himself in the Loire, at Orleans, as the records show. I adopted the precaution of getting a photograph of this foolish old man from the police at Nantes, and made myself up to resemble him. It says much for my disguise that I was recognized as the professor by a delegate from Nantes, at the annual convention held in Paris, which I attended, and although we conversed for some time together he never suspected that I was not the professor, whose fate was known to no one but the police of Orleans. I gained much credit among my comrades because of this encounter, which, during its first few moments, filled me with dismay, for the delegate from Nantes held me up as an example of a man well off, who had deliberately sacrificed his worldly position for the sake of principle. Shortly after this I was chosen delegate to carry a message to our comrades in London, and this delicate undertaking passed off without mishap.

It was perhaps natural, then, that when I came to London after my dismissal by the French Government, I should assume the name and appearance of Paul Ducharme, and adopt the profession of French teacher. This profession gave me great advantages. I could be absent from my rooms for hours at a time without attracting the least attention, because a teacher goes wherever there are pupils. If any of my anarchist comrades saw me emerging shabbily from the grand Imperial Flats where Valmont lived, he greeted me affably, thinking I was coming from a pupil.

The sumptuous flat was therefore the office in which I received my rich clients, while the squalid room in Soho was often the workshop in which the tasks intrusted to me were brought to completion.