

The Lyons Courier

By Unknown

In the month of April 1796, or, according to the dates of the former French Republic, in Floreal of the year 4, a young man named Joseph Lesurques arrived in Paris with his wife and three children from Douai, his native town. He was thirty-three years of age, and possessed of a fortune of 15,000 francs (£600) per annum, inherited from his own and his wife's relations. He took apartments in the house of a M. Mounet, a notary, in the Rue Montmartre, and made preparations for permanently residing in Paris and educating his children. One of his first cares was to repay one Guesno, proprietor of a carrying establishment at Douai, two thousand francs he had formerly borrowed. On the day following, Guesno invited Lesurques to breakfast. They accordingly breakfasted at No. 27 Rue des Boucheries, in company with other two persons, one of whom, a gentleman of the name of Couriol, was invited in consequence of his calling on the third party just as they were sitting down to breakfast. The four remained at table until nearly twelve o'clock, when they proceeded to the Palais Royal, and after having taken coffee at the Rolonde du Caveau, separated

Four days afterwards (on the 27th April), four horsemen, mounted on good but evidently hired horses, were observed to ride out of Paris, through the Barriere de Charenton, as if on a party of pleasure. They all wore long cloaks, as was then the fashion, and sabres hanging from their waists. One of the party was Couriol.

Between twelve and one o'clock the four horsemen arrived at the pretty village of Mongeron, on the road to Melun and Burgogne. One of the party had galloped forward to order dinner at the Hotel de la Poste, kept by Sieur Evrard. After dinner they asked for pipes and tobacco, and two of them smoked. They paid their bill, and went to the casino of the place, where they took four cups of coffee. At three o'clock they mounted their horses, and, following the road shaded by beech-trees which leads through Mongeron to the forest of Lenarb, they proceeded, at a foot pace, towards Lieursaint, a picturesque village in the midst of a grove.

They arrived at Lieursaint about four o'clock in the afternoon, and then made another long halt. The horse of one of the party had lost a shoe, and one of the men had broken the chain of his spur by collision with a friend's horse. This one stopped at the entrance of the village, at the cottage of a woman named Chatelain, a lemonade-seller, and requested her to give him coffee and supply him with some coarse thread to mend the chain of his spur. The woman at once complied with his double request, and, as the traveller was not very skilful in mending the chain, she called her servant, one Grossetete, who accordingly mended the chain and assisted in putting the spur on the boot. The other three horsemen, during this time, had dismounted at one Champeaux's, an inn-keeper, and took something to drink, while he conducted the horse and horseman to the village smith, a man named Motteau. When the horse was shod, the four travellers went to the cafe of the woman Chatelain, where they played some games at billiards. At half-past seven O'clock, after taking a stirrup-cup with the innkeeper, to whose house they returned for their horses, they mounted and rode off towards Melun.

On going in, Champeaux saw on the table a sabre which one of the travellers had forgotten to put in his belt. He wished his stableboy to run after them, but they were already out of sight. It was not until an hour afterwards that the traveller to whom the weapon belonged and who was the man who had mended his spur, returned full gallop for it, He then drank a glass of brandy

and set off at full speed in the direction taken by his companions. At this moment the mail courier from Paris to Lyons arrived to change horses. It was then about half-past eight, and the night had been for some time dark. The courier, after having changed horses, and taken a fresh postillion, set out to pass the long forest of Lenart. The mail at that period was a sort of post-chaise with a large trunk behind containing the despatches and there was one place only open to the public, at the side of the courier. It was on the present occasion occupied by a man about thirty years of age, who had that morning taken his place to Lyons in the name of Laborde, silk merchant.

The next morning the mail was found rifled, the Courier dead in his seat, with one wound right through his heart and the postillion lay also on the road, his head cut open, his right hand cut, and his breast wounded in three places. The postillion's wounds were evidently inflicted by sabres, wielded by two persons. One horse only was found near the carriage. The mail had been robbed of 75,000 livres in assignats, silver, and bank bills.

The officers of justice by their inquiries immediately discovered that five persons had passed through the barrier of Rambouillet, proceeding to Paris between four and five o'clock in the morning after the murder. The horse ridden by the postillion was found wandering about the Place Royale; and they ascertained that four horses, covered with foam and quite exhausted, had been brought, about five o'clock in the morning, to a man named Muiron, Rue des Fosses, Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, by two persons who had hired them the evening before. These two persons were a man named Bernard, and Couriol. Bernard was immediately arrested. Couriol escaped.

In the course of the inquiry it became evident that the criminals must have been five in number. A description was obtained of the four persons who had ridden from Paris and stopped at Mongeron and Lieursaint, from the many persons with whom they had conversed on the road. A description was also obtained of the man who had taken his place with the courier under the name of Laborde, from the clerk at the coach-office and from those who had seen him take his seat.

Couriol was traced to Chateau Thierry, where he lodged in the house of one Bruer, with whom, too. Guesno, the courier of Douai, was also staying. The police proceeded there, and arrested Couriol. In his possession was found a sum of money in assignats, drafts, and cash, equal to about a fifth of what had been taken from the mail, Guesno and Bruer were also taken into custody, but they proved such conclusive alibis that they were discharged as soon as they arrived in Paris.

The Bureau Central entrusted to one Daubenton the *Juge de Paix* of the division of Pont-Neuf and an officer of the judicial police, the preliminary investigations in this affair, This magistrate, after discharging Guesno, had told him to apply at his office next morning for the return of his papers, which had been seized at Chateau Thierry. At the same time he had ordered a police officer named Heudon to set out immediately for Mongeron and Lieursaint and to bring back with him the witnesses of whom he gave a list, so as to have them all together the next day at the central office, ready to be examined.

Guesno, desiring to obtain his papers as soon as possible, left home earlier than usual. Just before he reached the central office he met his friend Lesurques. They conversed together, and Guesno, having explained the reason of his visit to the office of the *Juge de Paix*, proposed that he should accompany him. They went to the office, then at the hotel subsequently occupied by the Prefect de Police, and, as Citizen Daubenton had not yet arrived, they sat down in the antechamber to wait for him, and be more speedily released.

About ten o'clock the *Juge de Paix*, who had entered his room by a private door, was interrupted in his perusal of the documents before examining the witnesses, by the officer Heudon.

'M. Magistrate,' said he, 'among the Witnesses there are two—the woman Santon, servant of Evrard the innkeeper at Mongeron, and the girl Grossetete, servant to the woman Chatelain, the lemonade-seller at Lieursaint—who declare in the most positive manner that two of the assassins are waiting in the antechamber. They say they cannot be mistaken, as one of them waited at the dinner of the four travellers at Mongeron, and the other conversed with them at Lieursaint and remained more than an hour in the room while they played billiards.'

The *Juge de Paix*, not crediting this improbable statement, ordered the two women to be introduced separately. He then examined each of them, when they energetically repeated their statements and said that they could not be mistaken. He then, after warning the women that life and death depended on their answers, had Guesno brought into his room.

'What,' said the judge, 'do you want here?'

'I am come,' replied Guesno, 'for my papers which you promised yesterday to restore to me. I am accompanied by one of my friends from Douai, my native place. His name is Lesurques. We met on the road, and he is waiting for me in the other room.'

The *Juge de Paix* then ordered the other person pointed out by the two women to be brought into the room. This was Lesurques. He conversed with him and Guesno for a few minutes, requested them to walk into another room, where their papers would be brought to them, and privately told Heudon not to lose sight of them. When they had left the room, the magistrate again asked the women if they persisted in their previous declarations. They did so. Their evidence was taken down in writing, and the two friends were immediately arrested.

From this time the proceedings were pressed on with great speed. Guesno and Lesurques, when confronted with the witnesses, were recognised by all. The woman Santon asserted that it was Lesurques who, after dinner at Mongeron, wished to pay in assignats, but that the tall dark man (Couriol) paid in silver. Champeaux and his wife, the inn-keepers at Lieursaint, recognised Lesurques as the man who had mended his spur and returned for his sabre. Lafolie, the stable-boy at Mongeron, and a female named Alfroy, a florist at Lieursaint, also recognised him. Laurent Charbant, a labourer who had dined in the same room with the four horsemen, deposed that he was the one who had spurs fixed to his boots, hussar fashion.

On the day of his arrest, Lesurques wrote to his friends the following letter, which was intercepted and added to the legal documents—

'My Friend,—Since my arrival in Paris I have experienced nothing but troubles, but I did not expect the misfortune which now overwhelms me. Thou knowest me, and thou knowest whether I am capable of degrading myself by crime, yet the most frightful of crimes is laid to my charge. I am accused of the murder of the courier to Lyons. Three men and two women, whom I do not know, nor even their abode (for thou knowest I have never left Paris), have had the assurance to declare that they remember me, and that I was the first who rode up on horseback. Thou knowest that I have never mounted a horse since my arrival in Paris. Thou wilt see of what vital import to me is such testimony as this which tends to my judicial assassination. Assist me with thy memory, and try to remember where I was and what persons I saw in Paris—I think it was the seventh or eighth of last month—so that I may confound these infamous calumniators, and punish them as the law directs.'

At the bottom of this letter were written the names of the persons whom he had seen on that day—Citizen Tixier, General Cambrai, Mademoiselle Eugenic, Citizen Hilaire, Ledru, his wife's

hairdresser, the workmen engaged on his apartments, and the porter of the house. He concluded by saying—‘Thou wilt oblige me by seeing my wife often, and trying to console her.’

Lesurques, Guesno, Couriol, Bernard, Richard, and Bruer were tried before the criminal tribunal—the three first as participators or accomplices in the assassination and robbery; Bernard for having supplied the four horses; Richard for having concealed Couriol, and for having hidden and divided all or part of the stolen property; Bruer for having received Couriol and Guesno in his house at Chateau Thierry. In the course of the trial the witnesses who appeared to recognise Guesno and Lesurques persisted in their declarations. Guesno and Bruer produced evidence which completely cleared them, Guesno proving an alibi in the most distinct manner, and thus ensuring his acquittal. Lesurques called fifteen witnesses, all citizens exorcism” respectable professions, and enjoying the esteem of the public. He appeared at the bar with remarkable calmness and confidence. The first witness for the defence was Citizen Legrand, a townsman of Lesurques’s, a wealthy silversmith and jeweller. He testified that on the eighth, the very day the crime was committed, Lesurques passed part of the morning with him. In addition, Aldenof, a jeweller, Hillaire, and Ledru all affirmed that they had dined with the prisoner on the same day at his relation’s, Lesurques’s, in the Rue Montorquail. They stated that after dinner they went to a café, and after taking some liqueur, had seen him to his own house.

The painter Bendart added that he meant to dine with his friends, but being on duty as a National Guard he could not arrive in time, and so he had been at Lesurques’s house the same evening in uniform, and had seen him retire to rest. In support of this deposition, the witness produced his *billet-de-garde*, dated the eighth. The workmen employed on the apartments Lesurques was about to occupy, deposed that they had seen him several times on the eighth and ninth.

The jeweller Legrand, to corroborate his testimony, had stated that on the day the 8th Floreal (27th April) he had before dinner made an exchange with Aldenof, or, at any rate, that it was mentioned in his book on that day. He proposed that his book should be brought. It was examined in court, and it was discovered that the 9th had been clumsily scratched out, and the 8th put in its place. This at once changed the favourable impression which had been produced in favour of the prisoner, and the witness was ordered into custody. He then lost all his presence of mind, and owned that he was not certain of having seen Lesurques on that day, but that, feeling convinced of his innocence, he had altered his register in order to corroborate his own testimony. This circumstance produced the most unfavourable effect on the judges, but in spite of the dark complexion of his case Lesurques continued to maintain his innocence.

The discussion and examinations were closed, and the jury had retired to deliberate. At this moment a woman, in a violent state of excitement, called aloud from the midst of the crowd in the court for leave to speak to the president. She was, she said, urged by the voice of conscience to save the tribunal from committing a fearful crime. On being placed before the judge she declared that Lesurques was innocent, that the witnesses had mistaken him for a man of the name of Dubosq, to whom he bore an extraordinary resemblance. The woman was Madeleine Breban, a friend of Couriol, and the confidante of his most secret thoughts, who now abandoned him, and avowed her own guilt in order to save Lesurques.

Madeleine Breban’s evidence was rejected, and the jury brought in their verdict, by which Couriol, Lesurques, and Bernard were condemned to death; Richard was sentenced to twenty-four years’ labour in irons; and Guesno and Bruer were acquitted.

No sooner had sentence been pronounced than Lesurques, rising calmly, and addressing the judges, said—

'I am innocent of the crime imputed to me. Ah! citizens, if murder on the highway be atrocious, to execute an innocent man is not less a crime!'

Then Couriol rose.

'I am guilty,' said he. 'I own my crime. But Lesurques is innocent, and Bernard had no part in the crime.'

He repeated these words four times, and on returning to his prison wrote a letter to his judges full of anguish and repentance, in which was this passage—

'I never knew Lesurques. My accomplices were Vidal, Rossi, Durochat, and Dubosq. The resemblance of Lesurques to Dubosq has deceived the witnesses.'

Madeleine Breban presented herself after sentence had been pronounced, to renew her declaration. Two persons attested that before the condemnation of the prisoners, Madeleine had told them that Lesurques had never had any connection with the guilty parties, that he was the victim of his fatal likeness to Dubosq. The declaration of Couriol caused some doubt in the minds of the judges. They immediately applied to the Directory for a reprieve, who, alarmed at the idea of an Innocent man being executed, applied to the legislative assemblies, for all judicial means had been exhausted. The message of the Directory to the Five Hundred was urgent. It requested a reprieve, and instructions as to the subsequent steps to be taken. The legislative body, however refused to interfere, on the ground that to annul a Sentence legally pronounced by a jury would subvert all ideas of justice and of equality before the law!

The right of pardon had been abolished. Lesurques was left without help or hope. He bore his fate with calmness and with resignation. On the day appointed for his death he wrote his wife the following letter—

'Dear Wife,—We cannot avoid our fate, and I shall, at any rate, endure it with the courage which becomes a man. I send some of my hair. When our children are older, divide it among them, it is the only thing I can leave them.

In a letter of adieu addressed to his friends, he merely observed—

'Truth has not been heard. I shall die the victim of a mistake.'

He caused the following letter to be published in the newspapers, addressed to Dubosq, whose name had been revealed by Couriol.

'Man, in whose place I am to die, be satisfied with the sacrifice of my life. If ever you be brought to justice, think of the shame you have cast upon my children and of their mother's despair, and do not prolong the misfortunes of so fatal a resemblance.'

On the 10th of March 1797, Lesurques went to the place of execution. He was dressed completely in white as a symbol of his innocence, with his shirt turned over his shoulders. The day was Holy Thursday (old style), and he expressed his regret at not having to die on the next day, the anniversary of the Passion. On the way from the prison of the Concierge to the place of the Grève, Couriol, who was seated in the car beside him, cried out in a loud voice to the people—

'I am guilty, but Lesurques is innocent.'

'I pardon my judges, the witnesses whose mistake has caused my death, and Legrand, who has not a little contributed to it,' said Lesurques. 'I die protesting my innocence.'

Many of the jury afterwards expressed their regret at having given credit to the witnesses from Mongeron and Lieursaint, and Citizen Daubenton, the *Juge de Paix*, who had arrested Lesurques, and conducted the subsequent proceedings, resolved to investigate the case, which could only be done by the arrest and trial of the four persons denounced by Couriol as his accomplices.

Two years elapsed without the conscientious magistrate being able, in spite of all his inquiries, to discover the slightest trace of the fugitives. At length, in examining the numerous warrants and registers of prisoners daily brought to his bureau, he discovered that Durochat, the individual whom Couriol had denounced as the one who had taken his place by the side of the courier under the name of Laborde, had just been arrested for a robbery he had lately effected, and lodged in St. Pelagic. At the time of Lesurques's trial it had come out in evidence several persons, amongst others an inspector of the post-mails, had preserved a perfect recollection of the pretended Laborde, having seen him when waiting for the mail.

Citizen Daubenton, by great exertions, procured the presence of the inspector in the court on the day of Durochat's trial. Durochat was condemned to fourteen years' labour in chains; and as he was being conducted to prison, the inspector recognised him as the person who had travelled in the mail towards Lyons under the name of Laborde, on the day when the courier was assassinated.

Durochat made but feeble denials, and was reconducted to the Conciergerie, where Citizen Daubenton had him immediately detained, under a charge arising out of the proceedings against Couriol. The next morning the magistrate, assisted by Citizen Masson, an officer of the criminal tribunal, took means for transferring the prisoner to the prison of Melun, where he arrived the same evening. After he had been examined early the next morning, it was found necessary to transfer him to, Versailles, where he was to be tried, and the magistrate and the officer set out with him, accompanied by two gendarmes. On the road, in a moment of penitence, he confessed the whole affair. The true criminals were, he stated, Couriol, Rossi, Vidal, himself, and Dubosq.

'I have heard,' he said, 'that there was a fellow named Lesurques condemned for this business. But, to tell the truth, I never heard of the fellow, either at the planning of the business, its execution, or at the division of the plunder.'

To this confession Durochat afterwards adhered. The magistrate present at his examination observed to him that Lesurques had been sworn to as one of the party of four, and also that he had silver spurs to his boots, which he had been observed to repair with thread, and that this spur had been found on the spot where the mail had been attacked.

'It was Dubosq,' said Durochat, 'who had the silver spurs. The morning we divided the plunder, I remember hearing he had broken one of the chains, that he had mended it where we dined, and lost it in the scuffle. I saw in his hand the other spur, which he said he was going to throw away.'

Durochat then described Dubosq, and added that on the day that the mail was attacked he wore a blonde wig.

Some days after the capture of Durochat, Vidal, one of the other authors of the crime, was also arrested. Although all the witnesses swore to him as one of the party who had dined and played at billiards, he denied everything. Special proceedings were instituted against him, and he remained a prisoner in the dungeons of La Seine.

Durochat was condemned to death. Vidal was shut up in the principal prison of Seine and Oise, where the prosecution, commenced at Paris, was carried on.

Towards the end of the year 8 (1799-1800), four years after the assassination of the courier, Dubosq, having been arrested for a robbery in the department of Allier where he had retired under a false name, was recognised in the prison, brought to Paris, and thence to Versailles, to be tried at the same time as Vidal, before the criminal tribunal, he, however, contrived to escape out of his prison, and left his companion Vidal to meet his fate alone.

At length, in the latter part of the year 9 (1800-1801), Dubosq was again arrested and immediately brought before the criminal tribunal at Versailles. The president had ordered a blonde wig to be placed on his head before the witnesses were brought in.

The citizen Perrault, a member of the Legislative Assembly, and one of those who had seen the four horsemen who had dined at Mongeron on the day of the murder of the courier, and who had recognised Lesurques as one of them, stated that there was a remarkable resemblance between Dubosq and Lesurques. The woman Alfroy, who had before sworn to Lesurques as one of the four, now declared that he was mistaken in her evidence before the Tribunal de la Seine, and that she was now firmly convinced that it was not Lesurques but Dubosq whom she had seen. To this evidence Dubosq replied by stubborn denials, but he was unanimously condemned.

The last of the accomplices denounced by Couriol and Durochat, Rossi, was discovered near Madrid, and given up at the request of the French Government. Having been tried and sentenced, he authorised the good priest, Monsieur de Grandpré, to deliver to the president a full confession of his participation in the crime.

Thus terminated this long judicial drama. Rossi, otherwise Ferrari, was the sixth condemned for the attack upon the mail. Yet it was most distinctly proved in the course of the trials that only five persons took part in the crime—the one who, under the name of Laborde, had taken his place beside the courier, and the four horsemen who rode on the horses hired by Bernard, and who dined at Mongeron, and took coffee and played billiards at Lieursaint.

The widow and family of Lesurques, relying on the facts adduced at the trials, and supported by the declarations of Couriol and Durochat, the confessions of Rossi and Vidal, and the retractions of the witnesses in Dubosq's trial, applied for a revision of the sentence so far as concerned Lesurques, in order to obtain a *rehabilitatum* (a judicial declaration of his innocence, and the restoration of his property) if he should be proved the victim of an awful judicial error.

The citizen Daubenton devoted the latter part of his life, and the greater part of his fortune, to the discovery of the truth. In the conclusion of his memoir he declared that, according to his conviction, there were sufficient grounds to lead the Government to order a revision of Lesurques's sentence. But the right of revision no longer existed in the French code. Under the Directory, the Consulate, and the Restoration, the applications of the widow and the family of Lesurques were equally unsuccessful. All that the family could obtain was the restoration, in the last two years of the reign of the elder Bourbons, of part of the property sequestered according to the law in force at the time when Lesurques died.

After the revolution of 1830 the Lesurques family again appealed to the Chambers. In the session of 1834 a report favourable to the claims of the family was made by a committee who sat to consider their case. The case was then sent back for the consideration of the minister of justice and the minister of finance. Since that nothing was done. The widow of Lesurques died in the month of October 1842. His eldest son fell fighting in the ranks of the French army. A son and daughter only remained, whom their mother, on her deathbed had enjoined to persevere in the pious task which she had commenced the day her husband perished on the scaffold.