DEVIL'S LAUGHTER

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A TALE OF PARIS

By

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CHAPTER I

Tom Baring was dining with his father's friend, John Calverley, at the Ermitage Moscovite in the Rue Caumartin.

Calverley was due to leave Paris early the following morning on a journey that would take him to the hinterland of Bokhara; and as he listened while Calverley discussed his plans and explained that he would be out of touch with Western civilization for many months, Baring wondered if his companion's recurrent expeditions to strange and distant lands were solely inspired by an amateurish interest in archæology and geology, or whether they indicated a great and fretting unrest which occasionally drove Calverley away from the haunts of his fellows and sent him into solitude.

It was while he wondered and listened that Baring saw Gabrielle Laroche for the first time, and momentarily John Calverley and his travels were forgotten.

He saw her as she came up the stairs. He had an instant impression of youth—slim, vivid, vibrant—of bronze-coloured hair changing to gold, as the light struck it, of deep blue eyes touched with violet, of smiling red lips showing little white teeth.

A quiet-looking young man followed her; he looked a year or two her senior, and had a thoughtful, clever face.

Baring heard Calverley utter an exclamation of pleasure, and saw him get to his feet. A look of surprised recognition showed in the girl's eyes and she came across the little dance floor to the corner in which their table was set.

"John! This is splendid. Why haven't you been to see us?" Her English was almost perfect, touched with the slightest of Parisian accents. Her eyes were shining with genuine delight at the encounter. Calverley took her hand and touched it with his lips. Baring had never seen his friend kiss a woman's hand before, for though he spent much of his time in Paris, Calverley remained essentially Anglo-Saxon.

“I’ve been entertaining my friend Baring, who doesn’t come to Paris often enough to know it as he should. And how is brother Anton behaving himself nowadays?”

The young man with the clever face shook hands heartily with Calverley, and Baring found himself being introduced to Mademoiselle and Monsieur Laroche.

“You’ll join us, won’t you?” suggested Calverley. “We haven’t started our meal and such a delightful encounter merits some kind of celebration.”

Gabrielle laughed and shot a sly glance in Anton’s direction. “John,” she said, “it is at this moment, and taking the opportunity for doing so, that I reveal a dark and dreadful secret. I am a surplus woman to-night. I’m quite sure Anton would be glad if you would take me off his hands.”

“That’s not fair,” protested Anton, with a smile. “She pressed me into being her escort, although she knew that I had an engagement with two of my friends at the Café Procope. And now she’s holding me up to contempt as an unwilling squire of dames. Now look here, Gabrielle....”

“I refuse to look anywhere except at John,” declared Gabrielle. “Anton, you are dismissed. Go to your friends at the Café Procope and leave your sister in better hands than yours.

“Anton’s a dear,” she added, as he disappeared down the stairs after taking his leave. “He tried to hide his disappointment when I upset his plans, and didn’t confess his engagement until we got here, and then only under pressure. Well, John”—her eyes softened as they rested on Calverley’s face—“mother tells me that you’re deserting Paris again. Another of those journeys to the ends of the earth?”

“Yes, I leave Paris to-morrow.”

“We can never keep him long,” Gabrielle said to Baring. “The older John grows, the more restless he becomes. He fills us with despair.”

“Isn’t it natural that a man should become more restless as he becomes older?” Calverley responded. “He realizes how few are the years left to him, and how much there is still to be done and to be seen. If I were like Baring here, just over thirty, and with all my life before me, I should probably send him after Anton and flirt with you.”

“I’m perhaps a bit more determined than Anton,” smiled Baring. “Besides, I’m English, and when I’ve seated myself at a dinner table, I feel entrenched against all attacks.”

Gabrielle laughed. “I’m glad you’re determined, because it would be dreadful if John flirted openly with me. You see he was mother’s sweetheart. He has known her ever since they were young. That’s so, isn’t it, John?”

Baring saw a shadow pass across Calverley’s face and vanish. “We were children together,” he said quietly. “Madame Laroche, Baring, was one of the Warwickshire Graydons before she married.” Calverley paused almost imperceptibly. “So Gabrielle’s half English. She and Anton went to school in England and finished over here.”

The meal passed very rapidly for Baring. Gabrielle chattered all through it, the light ingenuous talk of the girl who sees life’s pathway strewn with roses. That she was very fond of Calverley was obvious, and Baring found himself envying his older companion.

He admired Gabrielle tremendously, the level frankness in her eyes, her eager and abundant happiness; and when she suggested that instead of taking her home they should allow her to dance in Montparnasse, Baring was immensely pleased.

On this evening Gabrielle’s wish was law, and they accordingly drove to Valentin’s in the Rue de l’Ecole des Medicins. Valentin’s was new and a direct challenge to the gaieties of Montmartre up the hill across the river.

They found it fairly full. There was a sprinkling of foreign tourists and a few quite pretty girl students among the crowd that danced on the wide sleek floor. Garish and ugly mural decorations assisted in creating the desired atmosphere.

Calverley did not dance, and it was Baring who took Gabrielle on to the floor and drifted round with her amid the gay crowd. It was, Baring told himself, one of the most delightful experiences of his life—this holding Gabrielle close in the rhythm of a dance, with the subtle perfume she used stealing to his nostrils, with her glorious hair brushing his cheek.

He hardly knew what they talked about, as they danced, for mainly he was noting how her hair changed from bronze to gold in certain lights, how the blue of her eyes deepened to violet, how effortless were her movements, how exquisite her grace.

“This is a funny crowd,” said Baring.

“Yes,” agreed Gabrielle. “Strange people come to Valentin’s. They are encouraged to do so. That brings tourists, because tourists love to see *outré* folk. Here’s a queer fellow.”

A man had walked through the curtained doorway. He was a giant of a fellow, with a great black beard which dropped half-way down his white shirt-front. The bulk of his shoulders seemed to fill the doorway. In his right hand he carried a great short-stocked whip, its long lash wound and gathered round his immense hand. Baring stared at him.

"There was once," said Gabrielle, "a coloured boxer who used to lead a wild animal into restaurants in Paris; but I've never known a man bring a whip to a dance before."

It was quickly evident that the giant with the whip was a well-known patron of Valentin's, for not only was he greeted effusively by the headwaiter, but Baring heard his name spoken by some of the people about them.

"Jan Dekker. The Boer with a whip...."

Dekker was swinging the big whip idly. Its lash dawdled through the air, curled gently and softly round the throat of a pretty girl and rested there without harming the flesh. Amid laughter, Dekker pulled her to the table at which he sat, and the whip fell away.

Once more its lash came out like a languorously-striking snake, curled round the slender stem of a wine glass, flicked it into the air, so that Dekker caught it as it came towards him.

He was obviously immensely proud of his uncanny control of the devilish thing which was so docile under his hand; but Baring, watching him, thought that under other circumstances and in different surroundings the whip and the man who wielded it might be a combination formidable beyond gauging, a dreadful partnership potent for death.

Just as the whip's slow movement did not disguise the savagery of its possibilities, so did Dekker's rude laughter fail to hide from Baring the man's crude and brutal nature.

The dance took Baring and Gabrielle past where Dekker sat. Suddenly Dekker ceased to talk to the girl his whip had brought to his table and leaned forward, staring, with a look on his face which was, to Baring, as insulting as a foul word. For Dekker was staring at Gabrielle.

Baring saw his eyes drop to her feet, lift slowly to the bronze of her hair, and drop again. They followed her until the crush hid her, and they picked her out once more when she drew close to the table.

Baring, fixing Dekker with his eyes, found the man momentarily bestowing a glance on him. The glance was full of challenge. The whip swung slowly, hesitantly, as though it reflected an indecision on Dekker's part, a pondering as to whether he should do unto Gabrielle as he had done to the girl at his side. Baring felt his pulses racing madly, hot rage drumming at his temples.

He heard Gabrielle say quietly: "I think I shall go home, Mr. Baring. That man rather frightens me." He took her to their table and Calverley called for the bill.

The episode seemed definitely to stamp the evening as finished, for Gabrielle had no desire to go anywhere else, and Calverley was anxious to snatch an hour or two's sleep before catching his early train. Accordingly they took a taxi down to her father's house in the Avenue Malakoff, and Gabrielle, leaning back in her corner, watched Baring on the little occasional seat facing her and wondered whether she had enjoyed the evening so much because he had been present. She liked his quiet manner. Girlishly, she found a reticent strength in him which she could admire. She wished Calverley had not been leaving Paris on the morrow.

And Baring studied her dim outline in the darkness of the interior as she sat by Calverley's side and thought her the most beautiful woman he had ever met. He must, he decided, not lose touch with her. His pulses quickened to the thought.

As he said "Good night" to her, he held her fingers gently. "I am wondering if I might call and see you?" he asked.

She smiled at him.

"That's very nice of you. I should like it immensely. You won't forget, will you?"

"That would be impossible," said Baring quietly.

CHAPTER II

The house stood hard by the Place du Tertre, high above Paris, on the edge of the Butte Montmartre; an old house, and strange, with fantastic decorations on its exterior, its lower windows always barred and shuttered, its upper windows curtained against the sunshine and the starlight; a house which was secretive and dark, drawn back from the narrow alley which led to it as though it shunned publicity and inspection.

Whispers were exchanged about the house in the Place, when the little lamps gleamed on the dining tables under the sky and contortionists and poets, artists and street songsters, collected francs from the diners. There were rumours and hints. Nobody seemed to have a precise knowledge of what happened in that gloomy building, of its occupants or their doings.

There was this or that about the house. It was, one would understand, a place dark and dreadful, charged with sinister mystery. Of what nature? Oh; well a mystery is a mystery always.

So ran the talk, like wind drifting here and there. And all the time the house stood bleak and black above Paris, crouched on the edge of the Butte like a living wicked thing which gloats.

The man who was known to his associates as Le Cagnard—they knew no other name for him—stood in the topmost room of the house and looked across Paris as the clocks proclaimed two hours after midnight. The room was in utter darkness.

Immediately below him he could see the crater of light formed by the night haunts round the Clichy, where his jackals prowled and ranged. Beyond, lower down, as though a giant had strung a dark garden with fairy lamps, were the street lights of Paris, long lines drifting to the far distance till they were lost in the pressing obscurity. A murmur of sound came up to the room above the Butte.

He was master of this house, master of the shadows which, in the night's darkest hours slipped in and out of it, came to report, to take instructions, to hear curt praises or damning disapproval. His was the brain which had conceived the vast and awful traffic controlled from this house. By his word men and women might live or die. He was the master.

He turned from the window and seated himself at the table. Behind him was the wall, before him the door. He touched a switch and a blinding light leapt into life directly behind him, revealing that the walls of the room were heavily curtained in black, which threw no reflection towards the man seated at the table.

Le Cagnard wore a blanket-like garment of black which came up above his neck and covered the lower part of his face. On his head was a black skull cap. The intense brilliance of the light behind made of him a black and motionless silhouette in the sight of anybody standing on the opposite side of the table.

The light itself tended to blind such people. They saw only a hunched black figure, edged with flaring whiteness, a figure which spoke and gestured, but was featureless, formless, queer.

Le Cagnard pressed one of a row of bell-pushes on the table before him. After a short interval, during which he sat without moving, there was a tap on the door, and a woman entered.

By some standards she was a beautiful woman, richly dark, with splendid figure, dressed daringly, flaunting challenge in her dark eyes, a smile of mockery on her pouting, painted lips. She might, one would think, be a woman who had come to face a known peril and was determined to show her fearlessness.

She stood, hand on hip, before the table. Le Cagnard said nothing. The room was quiet. And during the silence the woman's mien changed. Her lower lip became loose and quivering. The defiance died from her attitude. She broke the stillness at last.

"*Mon Dieu!* Why don't you speak? You sit there—bathed in light and yet invisible. You sit and watch and wait... watch and wait...." She shuddered.

Le Cagnard spoke metallically. "It is about Dupont that I have summoned you here." If he saw the woman's hands tighten, if he saw her gaze strained and anxious, he did not heed these signs, but went on evenly. "Dupont, I understand, was your lover, Malou."

"Was...?" she breathed the word.

"Exactly. That, no doubt, explains why your judgment was so completely obscured. You recommended Dupont to me as a valuable servant, guaranteeing, I believe, his *bona fides* with your life. Am I not right?"

“That is so.” The words crept from between bloodless lips. “Pierre and I ——” She stopped, staring at the faceless thing in the blinding light. “I love him,” she added in a whisper. And then, loudly, in sudden overmastering terror: “What have you done to him? What have you done?”

“We found something out about Dupont. He was, to be exact, a quite admirable agent of the Sûreté. I should say that at this moment your Pierre is lying outside the fortifications near Bagnolet, either studying the stars or endeavouring to see downward into that earth to which, I believe, we all ultimately return.”

“Dead....” The word hung on the silence of the room. A little moan followed it. The shapeless creature before her uttered a command, and a man she had loved was no longer a man, but a cold, unfeeling thing of clay.

“For you,” added Le Cagnard, “there shall be mercy. I care to know nothing of your love for Dupont, but in judging you I consider it. I am given to understand that women are inclined to believe in the men they love... unless”—the words were added slowly and in a curiously changed voice —“they find them out. In this case it is I who have made the discovery. I pass it on to you, Malou. You may go, and if you wish to fall in love again do not mix your pleasures with your business.”

She drew back from him. She was rent with agony, and yet no protestation, no accusation, leapt to her lips. The man before her had confessed to the slaying of her lover, but she could not find the courage to challenge him on that confession. She reached the door, fumbled for the handle, and staggered out in the night and its darkness.

Le Cagnard waited a little while and then pressed the bell-push once more.

Others came in—a rat-like bandit from Menilmontant; a spendthrift young fellow who once had been a gentleman and still bore himself like one; a pretty girl who frequented the cafés on the Grands Boulevards; a man from Berlin, via Brussels; a woman from Vienna.

Le Cagnard listened to all they had to say, to their reports and their requests, and so learnt how his organization fared. One told of the passing of forged banknotes. Another rendered an account of dealing in illicit drugs. The Viennese woman ran a gambling hell. The man from Berlin was a confidence trickster. The girl who frequented the big cafés worked in conjunction with the bandit from Menilmontant and lured promising victims into his clutches.

The organization was immense. These units of it represented many cities. It was stretched all across Europe, a devilish thing, selling death in those places where laughter and song are popularly supposed to reign, directing crime of all kinds wherever the riches of the earth were gathered together, drawing a golden dividend from the stupidities and miseries of mankind.

And its centre-point, its controlling brain, was the crouched shape at the table in the room above Paris.

The last visitor was Jan Dekker, the Boer with the whip whom Gabrielle and Baring had met at Valentin's. He stood in the blinding light, his immensity casting a monstrous shadow on the floor, a shadow cut off by the blackness of the wall behind him. The arrogance which had distinguished him at Valentin's was no longer visible. He was a servant in the presence of his master.

"The affair of Dupont has been made safe," he said.

Le Cagnard nodded. Jan Dekker went on, speaking monotonously like one who makes a report to a higher authority.

"Things are not too well at the Green Snake Cabaret. The dance girl engaged from Antwerp is not a success. The rich Americans and English and Argentines do not favour her as they should. A prettier and cleverer girl in her position would bring much money to us. She has sold but one packet of coco in the last week. I shall sack her to-morrow."

Once more the black head nodded.

"Varasin got himself pinched in a gang fight in Villette. He had nothing on him which was dangerous. He is a fool, and if they don't send him to Noumea I think we shall dispose of him. I have made a discovery to-night."

"What is it?"

Dekker's voice lost its monotonous intonation. He spoke with some enthusiasm. "A girl—so beautiful a girl—alive and magnetic, the sort of girl who could twist men to her will. I saw her at Valentin's with two Englishmen, and strove to attract her attention with my whip; but the Englishmen, like all their kind, were stiff-necked, and they took her away."

He paused and went on more intensely. "Tall, graceful, she wore black, with a red rose at the hip."

Le Cagnard was leaning slightly forward.

“Her hair was like bronze, changing to gold and to copper as the lights touched it. Her eyes were grey, changing to violet. Already I have set Trevert to watch her. She would be worth thousands of francs to us as a danseuse, for she dances divinely. I heard one of the Englishmen call her Gabrielle....”

He broke off. There was something in the poise of the head before him which warned him of wrath. He had seen it before.

The shrill metallic voice lashed across at him like a whip-lash.

“Listen to me, Dekker. Forget you ever saw that girl. Send your spy to work elsewhere or your eyes shall no longer see and your brain no longer think. You may go!”

“But master....”

“Go!”

Dekker stumbled from the room.

After the Boer had gone Le Cagnard sat for a long time motionless at the table. Then he touched a switch and the blinding white light dropped into darkness. He stood by the window for a few moments looking out across Paris—under his hand. He drew back from the window and the room was quiet, with the stars winking through the glass.

There was a closed car in the courtyard beneath the tall shadow of the old house. Le Cagnard climbed into it. It was a silent coupé which glided like a wraith through the narrow streets and dropped birdlike, towards the heart of Paris. Its driver sought and arrived at a second-class block of offices in a street near the Bourse. The car ran into an underground garage, and there was left, locked up.

The little street near the Bourse ran parallel with the Rue du Quatre Septembre, and fronting on this great thoroughfare was the skyscraper edifice which, in letters of gold, announced to all the world that it housed the Société des Credits Laroche. Late though it was, there was a light burning in the private room of the financier, a not uncommon spectacle for those who passed that way in the small hours, for it was said that Laroche was a diligent worker who gave all his life to his business.

Within ten minutes of Le Cagnard having disposed of his car in the underground garage near the Bourse, Paul Laroche himself descended from the bronze gates of his great modern office, climbed into the Hispano Suiza which awaited him, and was driven home.

CHAPTER III

Elizabeth Laroche, wife of Paul Laroche, mother of Anton and Gabrielle, lay dying in the great and luxurious bedroom which overlooked the Avenue Malakoff. While the man who called himself Le Cagnard sat in audience on the Butte Montmartre, death came on slow and stealthy feet to the palace his wealth had built in the most exclusive quarter of Paris.

Gabrielle, back from Valentin's, her happy memories of Baring temporarily effaced, sat near the head of the bed, her hand on the hand of her mother. Anton stood at the foot of the bed, his friends of the Café Procope forgotten. A doctor quietly directed the orderly and silent movements of a highly-trained nurse.

There was little hope, as he explained. The seizure had been sudden and devastating. Before dawn, he thought, a change might come—but it would be the change from life to death. Meantime there was this coma which might, or might not, be dispelled before the end.

He pondered, as he looked down on the unconscious woman whom his skill could not assist in any way. The most eminent in his profession in Paris, he had been the Laroche family physician from the time Paul Laroche brought back from England the young and beautiful girl who, an elderly woman now, lay dying before him. He had attended at the birth of Anton and of Gabrielle.

All of the family secrets were in his safe keeping—save, so far as he knew, one, and that one the deepest and most inexplicable of them all.

He had known years, the first years of the marriage and while Anton was a tiny boy, when a great and wonderful happiness had resided in the Laroche mansion. And then—it was nearly a year before Gabrielle was born—something had happened which slew that happiness as with a two-edged sword. What; the doctor did not know, nor could try to guess.

Its genesis had been marked by the disappearance of Madame Laroche, alone, from Paris. She returned to bring Gabrielle into the world, but even the birth of her daughter had not improved matters. He knew that all through the childhood of Gabrielle, Monsieur and Madame Laroche had maintained a vast pretence, obviously for the benefit of their children.

They lived in the same house, moved in the same circle, but in private they treated each other with the aloofness of strangers—madame even displaying a repugnance for Laroche which amounted to loathing; Laroche himself sardonically content to be isolated, hard, and unmoved by his wife's scorn.

The marriage had been a mistake. The doctor was sure of that. This Englishwoman should never have married a Frenchman. She should have stayed at home and mated with the rather cold and precise John Calverley who occasionally called, and for whom she had an undoubted affection.

A movement of the patient interrupted his thoughts and he leaned over her. Her eyes were partly open, and her lips were moving. He had almost to touch them with his ear before he understood the words they uttered.

"The light—hurts. But leave it on. Is that Anton? Anton!"

The young man came round and dropped to his knees. His mother's shaking hand felt for and found his head.

"You poor boy," she breathed. "You poor boy." There were tears on her cheeks.

She lay for a little while breathing slowly, and only herself and her Maker saw the pictures which passed before her closed eyes; of the girl who danced with young John Calverley and waited in vain for him to speak; of the coming to England of the romantic and wealthy Paul Laroche, of infatuation and hasty marriage, her subsequent heartache for Calverley suppressed and dismissed by her loyalty to the husband who seemed so obviously to worship her.

And then the discovery, and blind and agonized flight, days and nights spent on the dungeon floors of despair, until Calverley came to her in the valley in the Austrian Tyrol where she was hiding from the husband she saw now as a monster.

While the dying woman saw these pictures Paul Laroche slipped into the room. A manservant downstairs had apprised him of his wife's condition and he crept to the doctor's side and asked a quiet question. The doctor replied in a whisper, using technical terms. Laroche gathered that his wife had had a stroke of some kind, and had been found lying on the floor between her bathroom and bedroom.

Madame Laroche was moving restlessly. She spoke in a sobbing voice.

“Poor Anton! Poor Anton! His shadow is across you. But Gabrielle is free... my Gabrielle. Where is Gabrielle?”

Her voice lifted. Her eyes opened. At that moment Laroche stepped forward, behind the kneeling Anton, so that she looked up and saw him with the light behind him, a shapeless darkness stooping over Anton with a grey, unrecognizable smudge for a face.

She screamed, and so died.

Laroche straightened himself. He was very calm, though pale and with strained eyes. The only living person who knew his secret was dead. He was about to turn away when a folded paper slipped from the coverlet of the bed. He picked it up and glanced at it.

Scrawled on it in a shaking hand which still betrayed his wife’s writing was a name—John Calverley.

CHAPTER IV

It was the day after Calverley left Paris, and Tom Baring had decided to call on Gabrielle.

He hesitated over this decision for a little while, wondering whether he was being too precipitate, but reflected that it might be just possible that Gabrielle would be glad to see him, a piece of ingenuous egotism which instantly swept all his doubts away.

He was startled when he reached the Laroche mansion to see the black draperies which the Parisians use to distinguish a house of mourning, and it was with some diffidence that he approached the door.

Gabrielle had not mentioned that some member of her family was on the point of death. And she had been so gay and free from any sign of care. It must be some sudden calamity that had happened here. He felt he ought to go away without intruding upon this house of death, and was turning upon his heels when the great door opened and a servant appeared, evidently bound on some errand. He saw Baring stand there in obvious hesitation.

"You wish to see someone, Monsieur?"

Baring gave the man his card and asked if he might see Miss Laroche. The man glanced at it, and then, leaving Baring in the great shadowed hall of the house, went away. He returned in a few minutes, although to Baring it was as though he had waited for hours; the house was so quiet and breathless and still.

The servant was quiet-spoken, impersonal. "Monsieur Laroche presents his compliments, and asks me to inform Monsieur that there is no such person as Ma'm'selle Laroche."

Baring stood for a moment without speaking. "Do you mean she is dead?" he asked, at last, in a shocked voice.

The man gestured indefinitely. "That is the message Monsieur Laroche conveys to Monsieur—that there is no such person. He has no daughter."

Baring felt like catching him by the coat and shaking him into explicitness.

"Who is it that has died here?"

"It is Madame Laroche, Monsieur."

“Then Mademoiselle——”

“Monsieur Laroche sends the message that there is no such person.”

“But I met her. It was in the company of her brother—Monsieur Anton Laroche. Perhaps I could see him.”

“I am sorry, Monsieur. Monsieur Anton is not at home this afternoon.”

“Then,” asked Baring quietly, “Monsieur Anton is a reality?”

The man’s face did not change. He made no reply.

Baring left. Gabrielle, of course, was not dead. But something dreadful had happened to her. The thought drummed in his head as he walked aimlessly along the tree-lined roads. Something had happened of which he, a stranger, would not be informed. Now if Calverley had been in Paris he would know the truth. But Calverley was hundreds of miles away, travelling to a region beyond the reach of telegrams and telephones, letters and messages, into the unknown.

Baring turned round, irresolute, longing to go back to the Avenue Malakoff and demand an explanation, knowing all the while that he had no right to do so, no justification for such a course. He was a stranger, a man Gabrielle had met at a dinner table, a dance, as she must have met hundreds of other men who had passed on and never seen her again.

He must not behave either foolishly or outrageously. After all, she might never think of him again.

The afternoon sunlight shone in two dust-laden beams through the windows of the library of the great house in the Avenue Malakoff. The edge of one of these shafts of light struck the hand of Paul Laroche as he sat at his desk, and brightened the crinkled folds of the letter he had taken from his wife’s deathbed.

Paul Laroche had read the letter many times. He clutched it now in his strong fingers as his eyes followed the lines of shaky writing that ran diagonally across the pages. It was the last message of the woman who had died hating him.

> John.—I am dying. Something has happened to my heart. I have pretended to feel a little better, so that now I am alone and can write this to you. I want you to fetch Gabrielle from this house as soon as you have read this. I feel that I have no time to write

either fully or carefully, but I want you to try and understand, to try and read in this letter all that I cannot put down.

You will remember my flight from Paris; how I sent for you, and you came to see me in the Tyrol; how you guessed that a dreadful thing had happened to me, of which I would then tell you nothing. That dreadful thing was a discovery made in such a fashion as to leave no doubt as to its truth. I found that my husband is a being known as Le Cagnard, who draws his wealth from all the worst of crimes known to humanity.

I cannot write now all the hideous details. I ran from this house in the hour I made the discovery. I should never have told you how much I love you, and have always loved you, but for that. I had to send for you all those years ago, because I am, after all, just a woman in love, and was then a woman who needed her lover desperately.

My strength is rapidly failing. One day you may learn everything and understand everything about my husband. I must hurry to tell you the truth about Gabrielle. Take her away when I am gone. She is not his child, but mine and yours, born of our love in those days in the Tyrol.

John, you have always been so wonderful and kind and patient. I know I can depend on you to believe this and do it for me. And if you can help Anton, my poor dear boy in whose veins flows *his* blood, do so, won't you?

BETTY.

The signature was hardly decipherable.

Laroche sat at the desk, hunched, shadowed, and looked towards the window. He did not see the richness of the room's furnishings, the stretch of flowers and green beyond the window; but only broken images and wrecked dreams. In his slowly beating heart there was not so much anger as hate, bitter, cold, bleak hate, set like ice on a frozen sea, where the sun has never shone.

His viewpoint was clear; his emotional reflexes to the discovery clean-cut, but extraordinary.

First and foremost came that cold set hatred—hatred of the wife who had given her great love to another man, and who, dying, had snatched from him

the daughter he loved. For Laroche had loved his daughter. He loved his son.

He saw them moving in a different sphere from himself. He sat in the shadows of his own crimes' making and saw his son and his daughter walking in sunshine. He might wade thigh deep in life's gutters, but they should tread the pathways of the stars.

That had always been his intention. It was that alone which had made Elizabeth Laroche stay with him—the fact that he did not intend that Anton should ever know the truth, that he intended to make of Anton a man.

In the staccato sentences of his wife's letter he could read much. He calculated that all through the silent years since the discovery there had been increasing and increasing strain, fear walking on the heels of fear; a mother's anxious eyes searching for signs of Le Cagnard in the character of Anton, her boy; a mother's fierce and selfless love gradually achieving the determination that, at the last, at any rate, Gabrielle should go from under his hand.

Sitting there amid the ruins of his dreams, Paul Laroche chuckled the quiet chuckle of Le Cagnard, mirthless, joyless.

She, this dead woman who had hated him so, who had found comfort in another man's arms; this pale-faced thing with her scornful eyes and her ice-cold reserve; she had thought to free Gabrielle from him.

She had failed, but in failing had struck him deeply; for, in a few scrawled words, with the hand of death heavy on the pen, she had wiped away years of pride in the growing beauty of Gabrielle, had wiped away his hopes and his ambitions; had slain the curiously fervent love he had for the girl.

She was not of his flesh. She was a stranger to him. She was not Gabrielle Laroche. She was a nameless woman with a pretty face who had fed from his riches. There only remained Anton.

He saw Anton fleetingly, tall, and straight, not long from his service in the army, the finest type of Frenchman, eager and quick, alive. Anton... his son... whom he would make into a great man, with a great man's ideals; and, in doing so, would wipe out Le Cagnard and his crimes, the crimes which haunted and pursued him down the rapid sloping pathway of his awful life... would wipe them out....

For Anton he was prepared to continue what he deemed, in his distorted fashion, to be the great sacrifice of himself and his soul. For Anton he would continue to pile up wealth from the anterooms of hell which that wealth

increased and multiplied. Men should still die as Dupont had died, women should still sink to the gutters, that Anton might march on, not knowing, proud, clean.

But the girl.... He no longer thought of her as Gabrielle. She was with the dead woman in his thoughts, something to hate. The dead were dead. Even Le Cagnard could not reach out and hurt the cold white thing in the great shadowed bedroom overhead. But Le Cagnard could hurt the girl....

He looked out through the window near which he sat, as this thought came to him, and thought of the man he had seen approach the house, whose card lay on the desk before him.

A personable young Englishman, a lover, perhaps, come to call upon the dead woman's daughter. That's how he thought of Gabrielle now—no child of his—the dead woman's daughter.

The words of the letter danced and blurred and burned before his eyes "... a being called Le Cagnard..." "... the worst of crimes...." He thought of all the years of bitter contempt, the searing glances, the cold aloofness, the drawing of skirts as he passed... unclean.... She had used that word once to him... unclean.... And he was the father of Anton.

He had made his decision when he sent the message that drove Baring away—as he would drive anyone away who might befriend the girl—who might come between her and him.

It was a decision made coldly and with remorseless determination. His own flesh and blood, Anton, should go on and upward.... But hers should skulk with him in the shadows. If he were unclean, so should be the girl she had borne to another man. If he went down to the depths, so should this child who had taken his love and his wealth.

There should be no great stroke, no sudden action. That would be too swift, too merciful, unworthy of Le Cagnard, unsatisfying to the stricken heart of Paul Laroche.

But from this moment, and he swore it grimly, silently, the hand of Le Cagnard would be on the shoulder of the girl called Gabrielle, the shadow of Le Cagnard would lie all across her, until it engulfed her, until she was swallowed in its darkness—until her soul was lost, like his.

CHAPTER V

For the first time in her life Gabrielle understood grief. It seemed incredible that her mother should be dead, that she should never again hear her voice, nor speak to her, nor kiss her. She had never realized how complete and awful could be a sense of loss, utter and absolute.

Her mother was dead. She could not be called back even for a single moment. It was stupendous. It stunned her, so that she sat for hours, dry-eyed, looking straight before her, conscious only of immeasurable loneliness.

In those hours she did not see her father. For years, since she had been able to understand men and affairs, she knew that a barrier had existed between him and her mother. He had always seemed to her a strange man, aloof, secretive—loving, perhaps, in his aloof way—yes, she felt sure he loved his children—but lacking in qualities that would have made him beloved.

In him Gabrielle thought she might find no comfort. Certainly, he could never replace the great good friend she had called her mother.

Her thoughts were largely incoherent, weighed down by her grief, intermittently presenting themselves. She wished John Calverley had not gone away from Paris, for she knew he would have been an invaluable sympathizer in this hour of her life's greatest sorrow. Thinking of him reminded her of Baring, and while the death of her mother had robbed her of the joy she had felt in making a new friend, she yet could contemplate Baring with gentleness and hope that she could meet him again.

She was aroused by a tap on the door, and in response to her call Anton walked into the room. The boy was pale, but steady. He came and seated himself beside Gabrielle, and for a little while neither of them spoke. Anton's hand lay over Gabrielle's and her hand turned, so that her fingers crept into his.

At last Anton said: "Try not to grieve too much, won't you? I don't think mother would wish us to be too sad."

He paused a moment, and Gabrielle nodded. She knew what he meant. She knew that perhaps in death had come a release from the strange and

secret burden which had so obviously weighed her mother down for many years.

Anton went on awkwardly: “If there’s anything I can do, Gabrielle... I mean, somehow, these things always seem more terrible for a woman. Men can stand them better.”

Her fingers tightened on his, and she smiled wanly. “There’s nothing, Anton.” She looked at him, and her eyes filled with tears. Impulsively she slipped sideways, her head buried against his shoulder, and began to cry. He sat with his arm round her and held her close, and comforted her.

After a time she drew back. “It’s selfish of me,” she said, “to put my grief on you, when you have your own to bear. But I just couldn’t help it, Anton.”

He patted her cheek. “That’s all right.” His voice broke as he spoke.

They sat for a long time silent. Gabrielle was glad to have him with her, loving him and admiring him, knowing that he loved her and would always serve her. There was a vast comfort in the knowledge. She was intensely and tremendously proud of him, as was he of her, and the fact of his presence helped her. They had always been chums. As a boy Anton had fought her battles; as a young man he had watched over her. She knew that he would always watch over her.

She had recovered her poise somewhat when her maid came into her room and told her her father wished to see her. Anton followed her from the room, explaining that he had to go down to the Rue Royale to see a man on business, but that he would be back soon.

It was a long time before they saw each other again.

Gabrielle found Laroche standing with his back to the window, a shadowed figure, motionless, his shoulders slightly hunched, and as she closed the door behind her she felt suddenly cold, as if she had encountered a draught of chill air. It was with difficulty that she refrained from shivering.

Laroche stepped forward to the big flat-topped desk. His movement was slow. His eyes were fixed on Gabrielle’s face. It was she who broke the silence.

“What’s the matter, father?” She spoke a little breathlessly.

Laroche did not immediately reply. He was watching her, examining her, noting the beauty of which he had been so proud, and to which he now could

no longer lay claim; considering that beauty, and how he could use it as a weapon against the memory of the woman who had deceived him.

There was no sorrow in his heart, only that bleak hate, strong and steady, implacable. His conduct of the interview now beginning was already clearly planned in his thoughts. Ever since his wife had died he had considered it, planned it, framed sentences, made decisions.

"Sit down," he said.

Gabrielle seated herself. She saw that there was a paper under the hand of Laroche as it rested on the desk.

"Within an hour," added Laroche, steadily, "you will have left this house for ever. Do you understand?"

"I?" Gabrielle leaned forward. "Father! What is it? What do you mean?" Her grief-stunned brain tried in vain to grasp the full significance of his words.

Laroche gestured wearily. It was part of his plan that he should display no wrath; that in all his attitude should be only grief, the shocked despair of a man who finds his life's beliefs wrecked.

"It is very difficult for me to tell you what it is necessary for you to know, Gabrielle. In the past twenty-four hours I have lost two things which were valuable to me—my wife, and my belief in her." He paused, as though overcome by emotion.

Gabrielle breathed: "Why do you say that of my mother? What has happened?"

"That is what you are here to learn—what I find so difficult to tell you. Perhaps, since you have been old enough to understand, you have observed that your mother was—how can I put it?—aloof; that she largely isolated me from her affections and her company."

Gabrielle nodded. She could not speak.

Laroche dropped heavily into a chair beside him. It was the movement of a man weighed down with suffering. His shadowed eyes were considering Gabrielle carefully. His smoothly working brain was marking every little change in her expression.

"I thought it might be that she was too devoted to her children, as some women are. There is a type of woman who, when children come along, shuts

her husband out. I was content to bear it, for I loved all three of you. But last night I discovered the truth."

Gabrielle was sitting like stone. Laroche's very steadiness had more effect on her than the wildest declamation, the most vivid display of wrath. He was acting superbly. He spoke like a man under the utmost restraint, yet whose emotions were near to breaking point.

He held up the paper. "This was written by your mother last night as she lay dying. It came into my hands. It is unfinished; but it told me enough to force me to examine her private papers and effects. Perhaps you would care to read it, because I find myself unable to tell you what it contains." He passed the letter across.

He had carefully mutilated it, tearing off sections of it, taking out a page, and doing it so cleverly that it looked still as though a dying, fumbling woman had scrawled on scraps of paper the message she was destined never to finish.

The word "John" at the beginning was gone. The middle page was gone, but as they were not numbered that did not matter. The lower part of the last page was gone. Gabrielle read:

> "I am dying. Something has happened to my heart. I have pretended to feel a little better, so that now I am alone and can write this to you. I want you to fetch Gabrielle from this house immediately you read this. I feel that I have no time to write either fully or carefully, but I want you to try and understand, try and read in this letter all I cannot put down."

That was on the first page.

The last page had been torn away at the lower part, and held no signature. It began:

> "My strength is rapidly failing. One day you may learn everything about my husband. I must hurry to tell you the truth about Gabrielle. Take her away when I am gone. She is not his child, but mine and yours, born of our love in those days in the Tyrol."

There was no more.

Gabrielle read it once, and again, and again. Then she looked up. It was her mother's handwriting. The phraseology was characteristic of her mother. She knew beyond all doubting, that her mother had written it.

Laroche said quietly: "You are twenty-two. I have been married to your mother for twenty-nine years."

"It's impossible." Gabrielle could hardly hear her own words.

"So I thought—at first." Laroche half started to his feet, very naturally, very cleverly. His voice lifted. "By God! To think...." He checked himself, and sat down, speaking more quietly. "But no. You are not to blame. I must be calm." He sat, his fingers working nervously; then spoke in a hoarse strained voice: "Do you realize that that woman betrayed me?"

Gabrielle allowed the letter to fall from her fingers. The immensity of the disclosure overwhelmed her, so that she was incapable of speech or thought. In this tremendous moment of discovery she was hardly conscious of any vast emotion, but felt stunned.

"It can't be. It can't be." She spoke to herself rather than to Laroche.

"You have read," said Laroche, brusquely. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, fingers interlaced. This was the time for him to deliver his stroke, to make the most difficult and pitiless move in the campaign of devilry he had planned. "There is in Paris a criminal called Le Cagnard. Though he is unknown his name has occasionally occurred in the newspapers when some petty scoundrel or other has been captured and has talked. Have you observed it?"

Gabrielle aroused herself. "What is that you say?"

"I am speaking of Le Cagnard, the criminal."

"Oh yes, father...." She checked herself, her eyes wide with horror.

Laroche smiled bleakly, appreciating her thoughts. "I am speaking of Le Cagnard. It seems that this man was once an officer in the Army. His name, apparently, is Noel Bruleau. He met your mother twenty-four years ago, before the name of Le Cagnard had been invented for him by scoundrels less evil then he, when Noel Bruleau was a junior officer and exceedingly handsome. I myself met him. I know now, from your mother's papers, that Noel Bruleau became Le Cagnard, and that, had things been different, you might have been entitled to the name of Bruleau."

Gabrielle stood up, clutching at the edge of the table. "That's a lie," she panted. "I don't believe it. My mother.... this monstrous creature you

mention.... Where are the papers?"

Laroche reached out his hand for a little packet of letters. He continued to speak soberly. "These are they. I am not sure whether you would wish to read them, for they contain much that is hurtful. When a woman loves so much that she is willing to give her honour to the man she adores, she writes many things her daughter might think need never have been set down. I have read them, and every word of them is burnt in my soul."

He weighed the packet in his hand as though undecided, bluffing cleverly, gauging Gabrielle with absolute accuracy. "I think these are better destroyed," he added.

There was a great fire burning in the grate, and into this fire he dropped John Calverley's quiet love letters.

He turned and stood with his back to the flames, as though he would insure against any attempt to rescue the letters.

"Gabrielle, I have loved you all through these years. You know that." There was an intensity in his voice which was not all acting. Watching her, he was realizing what he had lost. "I could have conducted this talk of ours differently, had I followed the first dictates of my head and my heart when I read that letter your mother wrote. You will, I hope, realize my position. I had thought myself your father all through these years. I had trusted your mother's honour until the hour her lips were closed in death. Then ... wreckage...."

He paused. He was nervous. He was fighting a tremendous battle to continue to act, to refrain from tearing aside the veil and showing Gabrielle the slavering thing which planned her ruin, and prepared for that plan's execution with soft words, quietly spoken.

"I say this so that you will understand. A father does not tear his daughter from his heart and throw her to the dogs."

The truth of that statement was irrefutable. For no fault of her own this man, whom she had known as her father, was tearing her out of his heart. No father would do that. Therefore it must be true that her mother—that dear, dead woman who had stood in Gabrielle's consciousness for all that was fine and pure—had sinned against the laws of God. But that she had sinned with such a creature as Le Cagnard—that was surely incredible.

The girl stood there white-lipped. She tried to beat back the flood of agonizing thoughts that surged through her brain—tried to hear what Laroche was saying in his curiously even voice.

“You and Anton I have cherished exceedingly; and now... there is this.”

Gabrielle was swaying slightly. “I suppose”—she said with difficulty —“what is written here must be true. I suppose my mother knew what she was writing. She was not mad. But this story of Le Cagnard. How can I believe it?”

“I asked myself that, Gabrielle, but the facts are monumental. I am willing to assist you to verify the story. As you know, in my business of finance, I encounter many men and have many channels of information at my disposal. I might, given time, get into touch with Le Cagnard. If I succeed I would arrange for you to see him and hear what he has to say. Would that satisfy you?”

Gabrielle suddenly threw out her hands. “We stand and talk here—calmly, quietly, argumentatively—and all the time my life and my faith and my belief are being ground to dust. I can’t stay. I can’t endure it. I can’t listen any longer.”

Laroche inclined his head. “The way is open for you to go at once.”

Gabrielle stepped round the table towards him. He stood motionless, and made no attempt to meet her. He kept his hands behind his back. She turned away from him and went out of the room. Within half an hour she had left the house.

Laroche picked up the telephone after she had left and asked for a certain number. Dekker answered the call, and Laroche said: “This is the master. You were talking of a girl the other night. I told you to keep clear. I withdraw that. The ban is lifted. Find her.”

CHAPTER VI

Gabrielle went from the Laroche mansion with a little money in her possession and very few clothes. She had not the faintest idea as to what she intended to do, and for the time being could not plan or think coherently. An omnibus took her towards the Bastille district, and a newspaper, purchased late in the evening, gave her some addresses of lodgings, one of which she secured.

She did this more or less mechanically. It was not until she was settled in her unaccustomed surroundings that the enormity of that which had happened was emphasized to her. Her despair was so tremendous that it shut out everything else, and bred in her, temporarily, something which almost amounted to self-loathing.

That she was not the child of Paul Laroche she now believed implicitly. Her mother's letter told her so. The behaviour of Laroche himself confirmed it.

She did not con the matter carefully, as one who weighs a knotty problem. This was an impossibility. But flashes of dreadful thought bewildered her as she stumbled through the hours, her brain beaten down, her soul in torment.

It must be impossible that the mother she had loved so well could ever have been thus associated with the man who afterwards became Le Cagnard. Such a man must have had villainy deeply planted within him, and her mother would have perceived it.

So she argued, unaware of the ironic touch; unaware that Laroche himself appreciated the irony with a grim sardonic humour.

And while she argued, the doubt remained. Incredible, monstrous as it appeared, it yet might be that she was Le Cagnard's daughter. In her veins might flow the blood of that devil whose name occasionally appeared in the news columns of the sensational press, the elusive omnipresent ruler of the Parisian underworld, the dealer in every kind of evil.

It was that thought that restrained her from communicating with any of her friends, that made it impossible that she should ever see Anton again. Anton was fine and clean; in her veins might run the blood of a father who was utterly vile.

For days she did not go out, and refused food, so that her landlady, a kindly soul whose husband worked in Les Halles, became concerned about her and talked of bringing a doctor. On the day her mother was buried she lay and cried and wished she could die. On the evening of that day she crept to the cemetery, long after the interment, and a gardener found her lying across the flowers and took her to her lodgings.

There was no peace in her heart or her mind, no rest at nights, no count of days—just a blank awful period of much suffering. She was like a stricken animal that had crept to some hole, with torment in its eyes and no sound on its lips.

During those days Dekker searched in vain for her.

A tremendously prosaic fact helped Gabrielle to recover, in some measure, her power of consecutive thought. At the end of her first week in her lodgings she had to pay her landlady, and this fact reminded her that her stock of money was very small, and that she must find some means by which she could increase it. Though this necessity by no means caused her to forget her troubles it at least provided some diversion from them, and she considered the problem of work.

It was a problem she was ill-fitted to solve. She could sing, and was a fair performer on the piano and violin. She was an accomplished ballroom dancer. All these had been concomitants of the education with which Laroche's money had endowed her. But she could not work a typewriter; her knowledge of the needle was confined to fancywork.

Without any heart in her efforts, she began to look for work, one of the thousands of girls on the pavements, those girls she had hitherto seen from afar, and whose lot she had but dimly appreciated.

She sought employment in places where she would not be known, and failed to find it. The wages offered were terribly insignificant. More than once she ran out of the little offices to which advertisements had taken her, that she might evade the glances of the men who had advertised.

As the days passed Paris disillusioned her. The city which she had always looked upon as a great gay and lovable friend became a cold and repellent enemy, showing a pitiless face to the unfortunate and impoverished.

Though she did her best to avoid them, necessity occasionally took her into those quarters of the city with which she had been most familiar, so that

she saw people she knew, places she had loved. The people she avoided—unwilling to face their curiosity, to endure their questions.

There was stirred up within her a frantic anxiety as to her future, and this anxiety helped to stay the numb despair following on Laroche's disclosure. The period of her greatest tribulation served her in this way.

She turned at last to her needlework, and strove to sell it. She found a shop near the Gare de Lyon where the man said he would take all she cared to offer him, and paid her a terribly small price for it. She never saw her work in any of his windows, and did not know that he resold it to an establishment in the Opera quarter at many hundreds per cent profit.

Doing this needlework was like beating against the incoming tide of the sea. So intricate and delicate was it that it took a long time to complete a single piece, though she worked for hours at a stretch. The payment was so inadequate that she was unable to replenish her exchequer sufficiently to meet her weekly bills, so that week by week her little stock of money sank, and week by week she worked longer and longer hours in a frantic effort to maintain financial equilibrium.

When she nervously asked the shopkeeper for a better rate of payment he bluffed shrewdly. He was making very little profit. The work sold slowly. It would suit him admirably if she asked him to buy no more. She was too inexperienced to argue with him.

As she alighted from a tramcar in the Place de la Bastille that evening she became aware that she had attracted the attention of someone who sat at the upper window of a café on the corner of the Rue de la Roquette. She saw a pointing finger, a heavily jowled face which a flash of remembrance revealed to her as the face of Dekker, the Boer with the whip whom she had seen in the cabaret in Montparnasse.

She turned quickly away, but not before she had noticed the Boer's companion, a flashily-dressed man who watched her with furtive peering eyes.

She crossed the Place. It seemed to her, as she hurried along the quiet street in which her lodgings were situated, that soft footsteps followed her, but when she glanced nervously over her shoulder the padding sound ceased, and she could see nothing but the shadows the old houses cast across the pavement.

She went up the narrow stairs to her room. As she drew the blinds of her window, she saw the flashily-dressed man standing in the light of a street

lamp, on the opposite kerb, staring up at her. He drew back swiftly, and disappeared into the darkness that veiled the end of the street.

CHAPTER VII

One day Gabrielle saw Baring. She had wandered aimlessly about the city and found herself emerging from a side street at the lower end of the Rue du Quatre Septembre. As she stepped into the big main thoroughfare Baring came from an office building on the other side of the road.

She stood, staring across at him. He looked about him, fiddling with a cigarette-case. Once she was sure he had seen her, for he seemed to look straight at her. She watched him light his cigarette and flick the match into the gutter, and she had an impulse to run across to him, an impulse which was so strong that she almost surrendered to it.

But she checked it as she moved towards the kerb. Baring and her memory of him belonged to the days that were dead. Where the daughter of Paul Laroche the financier might have encountered the Englishman and been glad of his company, the child of Le Cagnard must not intrude. Was it possible that she could be the child of Le Cagnard? The question gnawed at her once more.

Baring walked rapidly. She could not know that he was busy with thoughts of her—that he had longed for her, ached for her ever since the night of their first meeting. She could not know of his visit to the Avenue Malakoff, of the dread that had fallen upon him then, of the efforts he had since made to establish touch with her.

She felt, as she watched him, that vast opportunity was slipping past her, and that she was powerless to seize it. There was a surge of traffic along the roadway, hiding him from view, and when again she could see across the street he had gone. She turned away, dispiritedly.

She felt that she could not go back to her room. Her glimpse of Baring had bred a terrible unrest within her, and the unrest expressed itself in physical effort. She walked aimlessly on and on, drifting along the streets without noting her direction—tired, footsore, driven like some creature doing penance for an unforgivable sin.

With nightfall she was near to collapse, and she was forced by very weariness to return to her lodgings. The old house itself looked gloomy and despairful. The moonlight which filtered through the dirty window and mercifully failed to illuminate the bare landing with any thoroughness was itself wan and cheerless.

She reached the door of her room and fumbled for the key. The place was quiet and still. As she inserted the key in the lock she was conscious of a deeper shadow moving in the shadows against the wall, and heard a little low feminine cry. Turning swiftly she saw the woman Le Cagnard called Malou.

Malou stepped forward. She looked scared.

"Ma'm'selle!" Malou put out her hand.

"Yes?"

"Do you live here?"

"Certainly. But you are distressed. Is anything wrong?"

Malou did not instantly reply, but appeared to fight for her self-control. Then she said: "The streets outside are very dark and deserted. This is a part of Paris I do not know very well. A man troubled me—an atrociously dressed man who was hanging about." She eyed Gabrielle covertly.

Gabrielle's eyes lighted. "I've seen that man," she agreed.

Malou nodded. "He must be dangerous. I ran from him. He hunted me. I screamed, but these streets appear dead. I saw the open doorway below and ran inside, crept up here, crouched breathless. I heard your footsteps. *Mon Dieu!* When I saw that it was a woman who came, my heart burst with thankfulness."

Gabrielle was genuinely concerned. Malou was an actress of some ability, and she made her tale exceedingly convincing. It had been rehearsed over and over again, for that tale was a stone in the edifice of plot and treachery to be erected by Le Cagnard.

"If you will wait here," said Gabrielle, "I will fetch an *agent de police*."

"But no!" Malou's voice lifted, entreating, sobbing, almost hysterical. "Do not leave me now you have come. See! His hand nearly caught me. He snatched at my scarf and tore it. It tightened about my throat." She broke off and added weakly, "I want rest."

Gabrielle unlocked the door and admitted her to her room. "I'll warm some milk," she said. "Will you sit down and take your hat off."

Malou dropped into a chair and watched Gabrielle busy with her little gas-ring and a saucepan. With one swift scrutiny she took in the poverty of her surroundings, and felt a little steady exultation at her heart. She accepted the milk and drank it with an affectation of gratefulness.

Gabrielle felt a little awkward. The stranger had so impressed her with her assertions of terror that not for one moment did she doubt them; also, they had communicated themselves to her. It might be unwise to venture abroad in search of a policeman while still the night's shadows hung black across the silent and deserted streets.

"I think," said Gabrielle, "that you ought to stay here till daylight. I'm afraid the accommodation is very inadequate, but if you care to remain you may."

Malou again found it easy to look grateful. She had practised the art against those times when men showered favours on her.

"If only you wouldn't mind," she said; and picked up a section of unfinished needlework. "Did you do this? Isn't it perfectly charming? Is it a hobby?"

Gabrielle smiled wryly. Already she thought that Malou must be a woman of considerable means. Her clothes were costly enough to indicate that. It was, considered Gabrielle, natural that such a woman should regard needlework as a hobby. She herself had once done so.

"It's my livelihood," she replied, quietly; and added: "And a very poor one, indeed."

"But this is beautiful!" Malou had not to act in saying this. She meant it. "And do you say it is so badly paid?"

Gabrielle, pausing before replying, found consciousness of utter loneliness strong within her. This was the first woman with whom she had talked at all intimately since she left the home of Paul Laroche. The temptation was irresistible.

"So badly," she said, "that my work fails to keep me. You have been in trouble to-night, and you find me in trouble. Just as you were wondering what you were going to do when you met me, so I was wondering the same thing of myself." She spoke quietly, and tried to smile as she concluded: "So we are more or less comrades in distress."

Malou laid the needlework down. Her task was more easy than she had contemplated. There was now no need for subtle questioning, for a gradual working up to a discussion of Gabrielle's circumstances. The girl had spoken of them herself.

"I'm very sorry," Malou said, gently; and appeared to consider Gabrielle earnestly. When she spoke again it was in a tone of great friendliness. "You

have been awfully good to me to-night—the good Samaritan. I don't want you to be offended by what I am going to say, and if I phrase it so that it hurts, understand that no hurt was intended."

While Gabrielle listened, Malou watched her.

"You are not the sort of girl to be working her fingers sore in an attic like this. I think I could help you, and I wish to emphasize that I am not offering charity, but just repaying one good turn by another. Now do let me be interested in you just so far. Will you do that?"

Malou had a way with her, as men had discovered to their cost. Her smile was sweet and kindly and Gabrielle found herself smiling in reply. "You're very good," she said at last. "It's ever and ever so kind of you. I hardly know how to say thank you."

"I don't want you to"; Malou felt in her vanity bag and produced a card. "Here's my address. Will you call to-morrow afternoon and take tea with me. I shall be alone. Half-past four. I have English friends who have taught me the habit. Now promise you will come."

"Of course," said Gabrielle. "How could I refuse?"

She glanced at the card. The address was in the Avenue Niel, and she guessed it to be a modish flat in that expensive quarter, just such a flat as this woman would occupy; and while she glanced at the card Malou leaned back triumphantly.

For she had accomplished the most difficult part of her task. She had sprung the snare.

Malou left quite early in the morning after a night spent in dozing and chatting. Before going she renewed her invitation and demanded from Gabrielle a confirmation of her promise to see her during the afternoon.

The day passed swiftly. Gabrielle did no needlework. Mainly she dreamed. This well-to-do woman, who reminded her so hurtfully of the life she had lost and of the awful circumstances attaching to that loss, would probably be of great assistance to her. She would probably be able to show her how to earn such sums of money from her work as would permit of her living in modest comfort, and on this basis she might build up a business connexion which would expand and expand.... Gabrielle made fortunes in an hour.

She decided that she might very well leave her affairs largely in Malou's hands at first; the woman was so obviously personally interested in her and

grateful for the small service she had rendered her the previous night. Already Gabrielle felt freed from bondage, from the servitude represented by her work for the small shopkeeper.

At the appointed time she presented herself at the flat in the Avenue Niel.

CHAPTER VIII

To Paul Laroche, the most difficult phase of the affair of Gabrielle was the necessary explanation to Anton.

He loved Anton sincerely, devotedly. For Anton he was prepared to sacrifice much, and in the boy he saw all that he himself might have been. It pleased him to think that Anton represented in the fullest and best sense a side of his own character which had been suppressed, submerged, and, at length, overwhelmed.

Steeped in unspeakable villainy himself, he admired and reverenced all that was fine in his son, and was determined that Anton's good qualities should increase, should be more patent day by day. However deeply he himself had to delve into the festerous burrows of crime, Anton should mount with wings like an eagle.

He sent for Anton.

Their conversation was long, and never in all his life had Laroche used his mastery of words and phrases to such effect, his ability to act, his gift for expressing emotion in a gesture.

He told Anton of his discovery of his mother's unfaithfulness, and in the telling there was no heat. He and Anton stood alone. Both had been betrayed. The hurt was theirs, the suffering, and for them must be silence. He wove a net of words and cast it around Anton, and the boy, stupefied by all that he heard, made no struggle to escape from it.

Gabrielle had gone. Laroche etched an account of his interview with her, as an artist etches a picture, the lines that are omitted meaning much to the imaginative beholder. Gabrielle, it seemed, had known for some time. She had been in her mother's confidence. She had not cared. Laroche broke down at the right moment in the right way and brought Anton to his side in instant sympathy.

Gabrielle had gone away with a hot word on her lips and scorn in her eyes. She wanted nothing of Laroche, nothing of Anton. Laroche had set the police to the task of finding her.

The interview taxed Laroche severely. He had been hours planning it, setting it out, actually writing down a great deal of what he intended to say,

and revising it and revising it until he considered that it achieved the effect he desired.

Painstaking and appallingly efficient, never had his capacity for endeavour nor his efficiency shown to a greater advantage than in this talk which wrecked Anton's dreams, which won him to his father's side, which made him think of Gabrielle as something sweet who had died, and, in dying, had permitted the birth of a creature incredibly light and ungrateful.

Anton grieved for the loss of his sister, for the dishonour of his mother as bereavement only could never have made him grieve. Dishonour, hitherto, had never touched him; now it touched him closely. He was like a man who walks round a corner in his life's pathway, and meets something unexpected and hideous.

For some time he lost all zest in life. He would wander round Paris, avoiding his former friends like one who would hide from the world. But—the transmutation that his father's cunning story had worked was not so much outwardly apparent as deep within him, a vital change which had far-reaching consequences.

There came an evening when his self-imposed solitude fretted him, and, as he dressed, he suddenly determined that he would seek some amusement in those places which are popularly supposed to provide it. "*On rit, on chant, on danse!*" A little bitter smile curled Anton's lips as he thought of the oft-used announcement. He would laugh and sing and dance.

He went to a theatre and afterwards slipped into the tide of Parisian night life. It carried him up-hill to Montmartre, and he wandered from one cabaret to another, finding nothing at which to laugh, nothing he could sing, nobody with whom he wanted to dance.

He felt a little savage and at war with the world. From l'Abbaye Thélème, packed to the doors, he drifted into Zelli's. There was a big crowd there, mostly foreigners, and the place reeked with heat. Anton stood near the little bar and watched. He had seen it all often before, and wondered why he ever imagined it would amuse him.

He was not contemptuous of it. He had long since passed the half-baked stage when he pointed to this spendthrift pretence at amusement and declared that it was not Parisian night life, and hinted mysteriously, as certain folk do, that there is another more joyous, more abandoned "life" hiding somewhere in France's capital. Anton knew that, save for various

expensive night clubs, this place was typical of the night amusements provided by Paris.

He had just decided to go when he heard his name, and turning found himself face to face with Baring, the Englishman he had met that night which seemed so long ago, when Gabrielle had dined at the Ermitage Moscovite with Calverley, his mother's old friend.

"Monsieur Laroche. This is top-hole." Baring's hand was outstretched. Anton took it.

Baring went on: "I've been thinking a great deal about you, and about your sister." He paused at the changed expression on Anton's face. "I called, you know. I hadn't heard about your mother. I called to see your sister, and received a most extraordinary message to the effect that your father had no daughter." Baring hesitated once more. "But I'm hurting you. I'm sorry."

Anton gestured. "That's all right, Monsieur. The message told you the truth. I was just going from here. I find it hot."

They stood for a little while, silent and awkward. Baring wished he had not spoken to Anton, and Anton wished he could explain more to this Englishman whom he had liked at first sight. Then he added: "I was going down to my club. Would you care to join me? I hate these places. I don't know why I came."

Baring had a car in the street, and he drove Anton down to the club. They spent an hour together, chatting indifferently, but without any reference to Gabrielle or Anton's family, and at the end of the hour Baring drove Anton home.

"We'll have to meet again," said Anton. "I'll give you a 'phone call, or you give me one, in the next few days. We might make a four at dinner, one night. I know plenty of girls we could take along. Game?"

"Any time you like," agreed Baring, and left him.

The meeting with Baring perturbed Anton. He found that he would always associate the Englishman with Gabrielle, for she had spoken of him after her first meeting with him, and for this reason Anton wondered why he should feel so friendly towards him. He wished he had not met him, and made up his mind to avoid him in future.

This decision was largely indicative of Anton's state of mind. There was nothing decisive in his life. Every attempt at pleasure brought only pain and

a sense of emptiness. If he found a friend he ceased immediately to want him.

That fate against which, in his attempts to fashion the life and character of Anton, Laroche was playing, dictated that within forty-eight hours of his encounter with Baring, Anton should meet a woman who was destined to play an ironically important part in his life.

She was taking tea at Armenonville. Anton had driven there haphazard, selecting the place as he selected most of his destinations in those days. He saw the woman sitting alone at a table near the edge of the dance floor. It was obvious to him that she had been expecting somebody, for she constantly glanced towards the entrance. She was tall and dark, an elegant thing dressed with impeccable taste. Her glance met Anton's.

He walked across and asked if she would dance. She accepted the invitation, and he found her a delicious dancer, svelte and easy, lithe and soft against him, with a perfume that touched his nostrils softly and bewitchingly. When they reseated themselves Anton had his tea brought to her table, and they talked.

Anton stayed at Armenonville for an hour, and in that hour found his first pleasure for many days. The woman was charming. She had a soft voice that held a caress, dark eyes that flashed occasionally with humour, a ready wit, and an ability to talk of things more serious than the theatre and the dance hall. Anton, starving for companionship, feeling himself adrift, was enchanted by her.

"What is your name?" he asked, as they walked towards the little black-and-ivory car she drove.

She laughed and thought for a moment. "Call me Hélène. It is one of my names. That's true, Monsieur. And you?"

Anton laughed with her. He liked this mystery, for it lent romance to the encounter. "I have more than one name, and one of them is Robert. If I telephoned the Café de Paris to reserve a table for half-past seven this evening, would you join me?"

The woman had already seen Anton's long Hispano Suiza drawn up in the car park, had already appraised the costliness of his clothes and his linen, and she smiled her acceptance. "No," she said, as Anton added a further invitation. "I don't want to go to the theatre. Let us talk, and dance a little

while afterwards. Besides, I dislike being home very late too often, and I was late last night."

She refused to permit him to call for her, and withheld her address, promising to meet him inside the restaurant at the appointed hour.

From the time he left her until the rendezvous at the Café de Paris Anton was excited and near to being jubilant. Suddenly he had acquired an interest in life. He could vividly recall all the expressions of his new friend, her little tricks of speech, the way her eyes softened when they smiled at him, how delicious and fragrant was the perfume she used, the elegance of her dress.

He went to the restaurant like a boy going to his first assignation. She joined him within five minutes of his arrival.

Anton could not quite understand her. She did not mean him to do that. Though pressed, she gave him no further information about her name, and asked him, with a little mischievous glance, whether Hélène were not pretty enough to suffice.

She still refused to tell him where she lived, and though she flirted prettily with her eyes and her speech, though she once permitted Anton's hand to rest on hers under the downcast light of the table-lamp, she went no further.

She was mysterious, and Anton, being a very young man, was entranced by this mystery. She was undeniably beautiful, as only a richly dark woman can be beautiful. When her hair brushed Anton's cheek during the dance it sent his pulses throbbing wildly.

"We must meet again," he said, as the car took them away from the restaurant. "That is permissible, isn't it?"

She appeared to hesitate. "Yes, if you wish. But not at once. In another week's time."

She had gauged him correctly and knew it would increase his ardour if he had to wait.

"You aren't married, are you?" asked Anton, after a short silence.

She laughed merrily. "Of course not. Is that so dreadfully disappointing? Does it slay all the romance?"

"No. It widens the possibilities." Anton's tone reflected the merriment in hers. "You prefer to be mysterious, but I shall be open with you. I am Anton

Robert Laroche, the son of Paul Laroche, and I live in the Avenue Malakoff. Perhaps you have heard of my father?"

Certainly she had heard of Paul Laroche, for all Paris knew the name. Her heart was beating slightly faster as she realized the riches to which this young man was heir.

By the Arc de Triomphe she told him to stop the car. "You have promised not to follow me," she warned Anton. "I have a very short distance to walk, and shall be quite safe. And I, in turn, promise that the next time we meet you shall learn all about me. That is a bargain?"

"My hand on it," said Anton. She took his hand and gave him a smile that he found entrancing.

"As a matter of fact, it was rather foolish of me to accept your invitation to-night, although now I am sure I shan't regret it; so you must permit me a little reserve until we know each other better. I have your telephone number, and I promise you that I will ring you without fail. That is definite."

She drifted into the darkness, and Anton, sitting back in the car as it swung round the Arc, directed the driver to drop him at his club. He did not wish to sleep yet. He wanted to sit and think of this woman he had met, with her judicious combination of reserve and frankness, her eyes which sparkled with such fun and yet could be so serious, the fragrance of her, the femininity, the allure.

And the woman, walking down the Avenue Niel, reflected on Anton. He was the wealthy son of one of the wealthiest men in France. She knew, by long experience, that she was "handling" him correctly, for she had watched the eagerness come to life in his eyes.

For him she planned there should be no kisses, save such as she permitted him to bestow on her fingers from time to time. For him there should be a hint of intimacy and nothing more. She should build on this chance meeting something that might protect her in the years ahead.

The question rose in her thoughts as to whether she should tell Le Cagnard of the encounter and of the rich chance it offered, and she succumbed immediately to the temptation to say nothing—for the present.

No blame could be attached to her for failing to disclose her friendship with the son of Paul Laroche before that friendship showed signs of bearing fruit. And—she dreamed dreams as she walked swiftly along the darkened pavements.

This Anton Laroche might one day mean more to her than a chance acquaintance. Handled properly, he might prove her financial salvation, might afford her an opportunity to escape from the dark things she had always thought lay ahead of her, when her beauty was faded and her wit no longer drew men to her side.

The only man she had ever loved was dead, slain by the orders of that same master from whom she now proposed to hide all knowledge of her encounter with Anton. She knew she would never forgive him. She knew that, should chance present itself, she would strive to hit back at the omnipotent being whose word had killed her love.

For the woman’s name was Malou.

CHAPTER IX

Malou's flat, Gabrielle found, was situated three doors up in a four-storey building fronting on the Avenue Niel, and occupying an island site in that thoroughfare. There was a uniformed liftman in the marble panelled entrance-hall of the building, and he took Gabrielle aloft in the smoothly silent elevator, saying, as she stepped on to the luxurious carpet of the landing: "Madame's door is right opposite, Ma'm'selle."

The flat was tastefully furnished, and Malou, pouring tea, considered Gabrielle intently. Malou wore a gown whose expensive simplicity was the best evidence of her good taste; her talk contained unostentatious references to people she had met at Longchamps, Auteuil, Deauville and Nice. It seemed to Gabrielle, as Malou intended it should, that a little piece of her old life was being placed before her while she sat and drank tea with the woman she had befriended the previous night.

At last, having given Gabrielle a cigarette and lit one herself, Malou leaned back.

"I am going to talk business to you," she said, "and be perfectly frank in doing so. You probably imagine I am a woman of leisure. I am not. The whole of these premises are mine, though"—with a little laugh and a shrug —"there's a pretty heavy mortgage on them. By the way, I have not the pleasure of knowing your name."

Her manner was brisk and businesslike, and Gabrielle tautened under its influence. She hesitated a moment at the implied question, and thought swiftly. Since that fateful interview with the man she had believed to be her father she had ceased to use the name of Gabrielle Laroche. It was a name to which she had no right.

"Lebrun," she said. "Gabrielle Lebrun." It was the name by which she was known at her lodgings.

Malou smile at her momentary hesitation. Of course, the girl was lying, but Malou did not mind that. She had been instructed in her part, had been given a description of the girl she was to trap, and her address. Her real name seemed of no importance to Malou at that moment. She accepted the lie.

“I shall call you Gabrielle,” she said. “Listen, Gabrielle, I had with me an English girl named Mabel Calthorpe. She was very useful to me, but she ran off and married an American and I wish to replace her. I propose offering you her position, if you will accept it, and before you say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ I want to explain.” She paused a moment. “I am going to trust you to treat all I say confidentially.”

“Of course,” said Gabrielle, quietly.

Malou appeared to measure her for a space; then continued: “I run the lower floors of this house as an exclusive night club, a *cercle privée* to which only a small clientele is admitted.” She tapped the ash from her cigarette. “It is my job. That is all. I have no personal or emotional interest in it. People come here to dance, to see the dainty cabaret shows I present to them. They spend money. I would emphasize—and use brutal language in doing so, perhaps—that this is not a house of ill-fame. For that sort of thing I have no use. No woman can come here unescorted.”

Gabrielle listened but said nothing. Malou went on:

“Mabel Calthorpe was useful to me; my friend, in fact. She kept my books. I don’t think she ever once visited the cabaret show or saw the inside of the club during what I might term business hours. Normally, I am a woman who likes the quiet things of life. Fate dictated that I should do what I am doing in order to live nicely, as I like to live. Miss Calthorpe was at once a confidential secretary and a friend. Would you care to take her place?”

Malou spoke crisply, with a hint of indifference in her tone, and Gabrielle, surveying her, found herself believing all that she said. Malou was, thought Gabrielle, the typically hard-headed Gallic woman who can “run” such places as she had described and keep her personality, her thoughts, her inward emotions, outside them.

Owning a night club was no offence against the law. Owning an extremely *chic* and exclusive night club was the *métier* of a woman of considerable ability. Malou impressed Gabrielle as possessing this.

Gabrielle hesitated a long time. On the one side was the temptation to live—as Malou put it—“nicely,” to have pretty clothes, some money to spend, a dainty flat for her sheltering, pleasant companionship. On the other side was the beady-eyed shopkeeper, the attic near the Bastille, the omnipresent terror of penury. She surrendered.

“It is very, very kind of you,” she said. “I can do nothing but accept.”

They talked terms, and the terms were generous. In twenty-four hours Gabrielle was installed in Malou's flat, conning over the books of the night club, that club which, though she knew it not, was already known to the police as the swiftest gaming hell in all Paris.

For above the dance room, entered by doors, discreetly curtained, was a long room, in which was a table with a sunken wheel. There were other tables in the room, where baccarat was played, where much money was lost, and won—by the establishment.

Malou had various friends to whom she introduced Gabrielle, for her assertion that she treated her secretary as her friend was borne out by fact. There was a red-faced man called Gichot, who had been a colonel in the army, and a little lady who called herself his wife, and whose name was Annette. Both were the servants of Le Cagnard and actors in the drama staged for the trapping of Gabrielle. Then there was Monsieur Trevert, on whom the whole plot hinged.

Tall and dark, with long, thin white hands, and deep dark eyes, Trevert, one-time actor in provincial touring companies, now a confidence trickster whose nefarious trade was assisted by histrionic ability, took Gabrielle's hand when first they met and pressed it to hot, full lips. She shuddered, and when he had gone she told Malou that she did not like him.

Malou shrugged her shoulders and laughed quietly. "Trevert! Oh, he's all right in his way. A very clever man. One just has to be careful. That is all. He is very fond of women, you know, but easily kept at a distance. Of course, he would admire you, because you are beautiful and fair, and he is dark. I shouldn't worry about him."

"No," agreed Gabrielle, and felt some doubt.

The days passed pleasantly enough for her. Her work was light and she was able to stroll in the Champs Élysées on sunny afternoons, and to drive round the Bois with Malou in the little car Le Gagnard had placed at Malou's disposal.

Gradually Gabrielle settled down. She felt happier than at any time since Laroche made his disclosure to her, and would have been happier still but for Trevert, who was playing his part superbly and demonstrating that when the ineradicable kink in his nature made him a scoundrel France lost one who might have been a great actor.

He would sit near to Gabrielle in the drawing-room of the flat, and would find occasion to touch her hand, her arm, her frock. He would talk to

her, with burning eyes fixed on hers. She would look up sometimes, when she thought she was alone, and find him standing just inside the doorway, watching her. It seemed that he was always near her, that his presence was always indefinably threatening her. So Trevert prepared cunningly for the great moment.

To Malou, Gabrielle made no further reference to the repugnance and fear that Trevert inspired in her, for Malou named Trevert among her friends. She tried to tell herself that she was being childishly foolish and magnifying an instantly conceived antipathy into something stronger, endowing a personality which jarred on hers with a sinister quality unjustified by any logic. But she failed to convince herself.

Trevert remained, omnipresent, threatening, admiring, seemingly desiring....

CHAPTER X

Malou met Anton again and yet again, and the boy's ardour increased with each meeting. It occurred to Malou that she might make some immediate capital from her friendship with him.

She debated her plan at length before venturing on its execution, and deciding to do so, made preparations accordingly.

For one night, she told the regular visitors to her gaming-room, she herself would be a visitor. She had met a man who would like to play. There was, they would understand, some romance in it. It would be better if he did not know the truth about her. A jest—nothing more—one of life's little flirtations. They understood and approved. It would, indeed, be a jest.

Sitting with him over dinner one night, she said: "Can I make a confession?"

"What is it?" asked Anton swiftly, and his alarm showed in his eyes. He did not associate confessions with this beautiful woman who had enslaved him.

"I like playing cards. I don't play high. At least I compliment myself on some common sense. There is a place in the Avenue Niel to which I go, an awfully nice place, discreet, and patronized by nice people. I had to tell you, you see. I couldn't hide it any longer."

Anton laughed. "That's a dreadful admission." He paused. "Would it be possible for me to come with you, sometimes? It would avoid my leaving you so early."

Malou fenced prettily. She hadn't intended that at all. She only wanted Anton to know what she did. And he might not wish to go alone with her to this place. After all, one had to be careful. It was rather foolish of her to go, really.

The fencing had an effect the importance of which Malou did not immediately foresee. Anton reflected a moment and said: "I know. We'll make a party. It'll be good fun. I've got a friend in Paris who knows hardly anybody, so that he's perfectly safe. An awfully good fellow named Baring. Suppose I brought him along? Perhaps you could bring a friend with you."

Malou, too reflected. This Englishman would, as Anton said, be "safe," and, being a friend of Anton Laroche, he would undoubtedly be a well-to-do man. From clients introduced in such fashion the club gathered its revenues.

"All right," she said, "bring him. I'll arrange it for you."

That night Gabrielle walked into the drawing-room of the flat and found Malou cleaning a pistol. The weapon was of fairly heavy calibre, delicately chased and with an ivory inlaid butt. There was a box of snub-nosed cartridges lying open at Malou's elbow, and the magazine of the weapon was thrown out.

Malou lifted the gun and squinted through its muzzle at the electric light.

"Horrible thing, isn't it?" she smiled. "I don't know whether it is the suggestion born of actual knowledge, but a box of cartridges always seems to me to be eminently a box of death, if you understand me. Loathsome, aren't they?"

She greased cartridges as she spoke.

"I didn't know you kept a pistol on the premises," said Gabrielle. "Why do you have it?"

"Oh!" Malou snapped the magazine into place. "I've had the thing for years. There's a safe feeling about it, you know. It's a more efficient protector than any man or any dog. And it costs nothing to maintain—no food and drink and expensive wines." Malou laughed. "There it is, bless it. I shall probably hanker after publicity one day, find a lover, become jealous, and commit a *crime passionel*."

She slid the gun across the table towards Gabrielle, who picked it up gingerly.

"Don't be afraid of it," laughed Malou. "The safety catch is on. I'll show you."

She came round and showed Gabrielle how to stub the safety catch with her thumb and pull the trigger. "Try again," she urged. "That's right. You'll be a two-gun woman before you're finished. Now I'm going to load it; and after that—no tricks, or somebody will die rapidly."

Gabrielle watched her slip the greased cartridges into the magazine, and put the pistol in the drawer of a little writing-desk which stood against one of the walls.

“I always keep it there,” said Malou. “So if ever you find yourself in danger of being kidnapped, killed, or made love to, grab the gun, shoot first, and ask questions afterwards.” Gabrielle joined in her laughter.

The gun remained in the drawer, a mute actor added to the caste of the drama Laroche had staged for the trapping of Gabrielle.

CHAPTER XI

Trevert came more frequently to the flat in the Avenue Niel. He would call in the morning—he drove a long fast car—en route to the Bois for an aperitif, and he would invite Malou and Gabrielle to accompany him. He would drop in during the afternoon and take tea. Sometimes he would invite them to dinner. At last he invited Gabrielle alone, but she made Malou go with her.

Trevert acted superbly. He etched the part of a man becoming hopelessly infatuated, and he did it with such restraint, such seeming inevitability, that it became terrifying to Gabrielle.

One afternoon he called, and Malou was out. The maid had shown him in; and there was nothing for it but to invite him to have tea. He watched Gabrielle as she poured the tea. This was not his hour, but it was an opportunity for improving the possibilities of that hour when it should strike.

"Ma'm'selle, I used not to come very often to the flat of our charming Malou," he observed, taking the cup Gabrielle held out to him. "There are so many things to do in Paris. And one has friends and devotes a little time to each and all of them. But now my friends are being forgotten."

Gabrielle was disturbed. While she did not fear the consequence of an intimate talk with any man in whom she was not particularly interested, intimacy of speech with Trevert rendered her uneasy, so cleverly had the man contrived to manufacture an atmosphere of threat.

"That is hardly grateful of you," she smiled. "Friendship is a very precious thing, Monsieur."

"There is something far more precious, Ma'm'selle; something which makes a man forget friendship and everything else."

Gabrielle laughed. The laugh had the slightest tremor in it. "Now you are being foolish," she said.

"I am speaking the truth," replied Trevert, in a low, even voice.

Gabrielle put her cup down. Now and at once, she decided, was the time to stop this infatuation. She must indicate to Trevert that she did not want his attentions, and if he persisted in them she would show him that they were distasteful to her.

"Are you endeavouring to make love to me, Monsieur?" she asked.

Trevert gestured. "In my poor fashion, Ma'm'selle. I am trying to convey to you the intense admiration I have felt for you since the first time I saw you."

Gabrielle was very cool. "It's nice of you, Monsieur, but I would much rather we were just friendly. You will please me more by never referring to it again."

Trevert's eyes flashed. "I do not like that dismissal," he said, stiffly.

Antagonism stirred in Gabrielle. "And I hardly like your attentions, Monsieur."

She felt justified in this. Trevert's method of love-making caused her to shudder, even though there was no specific act at which she could take offence. It was the whole atmosphere the man created, the sensuality in his face and eyes, the horror of his touch.

Trevert got up. This was a part he could easily play.

"It is so easy to be a woman and say such things," he observed. "I wonder if you will ever regret them."

"I hope not." Gabrielle wondered whether she had been a little cruel to him. "I may have spoken hastily, Monsieur. I had no intention of hurting you. But your attentions are distasteful. I have to be frank."

"Oh, yes." There was a hint of melodrama in Trevert's attitude, but it was only a hint, and Gabrielle did not perceive it. "You are sorry. You do not want to hurt me. But my attentions are distasteful. You express regret and an insult in the same breath. I am not easy to insult."

"Please drink your tea," said Gabrielle. "I really didn't pick my words properly. Perhaps you will understand that. And we will say no more about it."

"We will say a great deal," observed Trevert, slowly and quietly. "It is not ended—yet."

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle, too, stood up. "I think you are forgetting yourself, Monsieur."

"Perhaps. But remembering you, Ma'm'selle. And, after all, that is a compliment which cannot possibly be distasteful. *Hein?* When a man forgets himself and remembers only the woman he loves, even she cannot mistake the compliment in that."

“Monsieur....” Gabrielle put out her hand imploringly, and instantly regretted the movement.

Trevert seized it and clung to it, and tried to pull her towards him.

“If I kiss you,” he said quietly, “I shall carry the memory of it all through my life.”

She panted. “Let go of my hand. You brute! If you kiss me I shall hit you. Let go.”

He smiled. The smile showed his white teeth in an even line. His very red lips were more vivid by comparison. His mouth, when he smiled like that, reminded Gabrielle of a wound. His dark eyes, however, did not smile. They remained fixed on Gabrielle’s and the expression in them was not all play-acting.

The smile frightened her. It was fixed. It was like a mask, and yet a mask endowed with some kind of mute and motionless life, horrid, threatening.

Trevert stood still, holding her hand, looking down at her with his dark eyes, hot like fire, and smiled—he continued to smile.

“If I kiss you,” he repeated slowly. “I am not sure whether I shall kiss you or not. You would be very desirable Ma’m’selle, were you to favour anybody. But for me, though I love you, there is nothing but snubs and cold words.”

“Will you let go of my hand?” persisted Gabrielle. She was very frightened. She did not like Trevert’s detached manner, the smile which appeared so meaningless and yet meant so much, the devouring eyes roving over her face and her hair.

He pulled her towards him. She came, struggling ineffectually, conscious of the absurdity of her efforts.

For a few seconds he was looking right down into her face. Then he bent his face towards hers.

She struck him. She leapt to vicious, vivid life as his full red lips hunted hers. There was a mark on his cheek, and for a little while the smile died from his lips leaving them set in a snarl, his eyes alight strangely.

He was stirred. For the second time his expression was not all play-acting. His cheek was stung by Gabrielle’s fingers. His pride was hurt.

He spoke very slowly, and he meant every word he said.

“It’s not a good thing to strike me, Ma’m’selle. I always remember.”

Gabrielle laughed. The laugh was weak and nervous. She knew the danger was not yet past.

“Go away,” she said. “I never want to see you again.”

He bowed. “And yet you shall.”

He turned away from her and walked to the door. He had an impulse to turn and add a final threat, but remembered it had been a trick of his old stage days, and refrained from doing so.

Walking along the corridor he conned all the interview over and found it good. It was a beginning; a jumping-off place, and the next act in the drama would bring the plot to a grim fruition.

Gabrielle told Malou about Trevert.

“I was terrified,” she said. “I’m very sorry, but I shan’t be able to stay if he continues to visit you.”

Gabrielle looked unhappy as she said that. She would be more than sorry in fact, to leave the shelter of the comfortable flat in the Avenue Niel.

Malou laughed quietly. “Trevert forgets himself.” The laugh ceased. She looked serious. “As a matter of fact, I have heard of other things about Trevert. He isn’t the man I imagined him to be. Perhaps you were in greater danger than you thought.”

She walked over to the little writing-desk and opened the drawer and held up the revolver. She spoke half laughingly.

“If ever he comes again, don’t forget that this is in here, and that it’s always loaded. It will stop him, I think.”

Gabrielle shuddered.

CHAPTER XII

Baring went with Anton and Malou to the gaming-house in the Avenue Niel, and they found the place pleasant; the people amusing. Monsieur Gichot and Annette and Baring enjoyed Gichot's stories of his fabulous exploits in the war. No event of note marked the visit, save that Baring received a fairly good impression of Malou—as she intended he should—and while he could not quite form an opinion of her, he would certainly not commit himself to an adverse decision on her character.

Anton was more deeply enamoured of Malou than ever. To him she was all that was charming, and poised and clever in womanhood. Keeping her wits at high pressure, Malou delivered herself of a number of *bons mots* during the evening found a jest in most things, and minutes for seriousness when seriousness was required. She played lightly, and had given orders that high play was taboo on that evening.

After leaving her and as the taxi took them to the Avenue Malakoff, Anton said to Baring: "Isn't she wonderful?"

"She's a very charming woman," agreed Baring.

"Words are inadequate."

Baring lit a cigarette. "You're in love with her, Anton?"

"Of course. Who wouldn't be? You admired her yourself."

"I did. But falling in love is different."

Anton said fiercely: "You're not finding fault with her?"

Baring shook his head. "I assure you, my dear fellow, that I deeply admire her. But one should be wary of falling in love. You must forgive me, I don't intend to hurt you in the slightest; but I'm a staid sort of English fellow who doesn't leap to emotionalism without stopping to look round. That's all. Probably entirely wrong. The English are wrong in lots of things, like everybody else. Only it's my way."

He paused for a moment. "I suppose I can't ask you again if you have any news of Gabrielle?"

Anton shook his head. "No. It is a subject never discussed by my father and myself." He spoke abruptly, and then dropped into a moody silence from which Baring could not rouse him.

When he had dropped Anton, Baring reflected on Gabrielle. It was strange, he thought, that that one meeting should have so implanted her in his memory that he felt he would never forget her. He was extending his stay in Paris indefinitely. More than once he had told himself that he would go home; but he had lingered on with hope that news might reach him regarding her.

Sometimes he wondered if it were just the mystery of her which held him to the city; but he knew that it was not. It was herself, the beautiful thing he had seen for an hour in the lights of the restaurant and the dance hall, before it disappeared into that darkness he had so far failed to pierce.

"I'll stay on," he thought. "And I'll get news of her somehow, whatever happens. I've got plenty of time."

A day later Anton rang him up. "I say, Baring. What about going to the Avenue Niel again. We might drop in alone. I thought it was a fine little place. On?"

"Anything you like?" agreed Baring. "When?"

"Wednesday?"

"Right."

Wednesday was the day Trevert was to play his part for the last time.

Baring duly met Anton and together they went to the gaming-house.

Though they were unconscious of it—so cleverly and immediately was it hidden—their arrival caused some trepidation.

The doorkeeper, remembering his previous instructions—that Malou was not to be identified with the management of the place—was racking his brains for some kind of explanation which would, while turning the two clients away, maintain their favour, when Baring and Anton walked past him and took off their hats. The doorkeeper began to talk. The hats were thrust at him. He took them. He was a man submerged by events he could not control.

Anton was essentially a gamester. He inherited the trait, in part, from his father, who gambled on a huge scale with humanity. Baring, apart from a passing interest in the turn of a card, had no great liking for games of chance.

Gichot, perturbed by the sudden arrival of the two men, whispered hurriedly to his little lady and decided that all he could do was to entertain them, to concentrate their thoughts on some game.

To Gichot the atmosphere of the great house was tense with expectancy and dread, and he wondered if the visitors might possibly be aware of this; which, of course they were not. Gichot was worked up into a pitch of vast excitement. He had waited all the evening for the moment to strike. And now two unsuspecting clients had blundered in, the wealthy young Frenchman Malou was ensnaring, and his rich English friend.

That was a problem for a quick brain to deal with. Gichot always prided himself on a quick brain. He suggested a game—*à quatre*. Anything the visitors pleased. His wife was of the most amiable. She would play anything. The little lady smiled with heavily painted lips and admired Baring with her eyes.

"What about bridge?" suggested Anton.

"Admirable," said Gichot, and thought it. Bridge needs concentration. It was a game which would hold the attention for hours.

He hoped that sound did not easily penetrate from one story to another of the building.

Gichot was undoubtedly clever that night. He was an extraordinarily good bridge player, and so was the little lady, but Gichot so contrived things that Anton and Baring, playing as partners, won slightly, and yet did not win easily. The result was that, so far as Anton was concerned, the excitement of the game was sufficient to hold him for a long time, particularly as the stakes were high. The time was drawing near. Gichot took a great grip of himself. He made a joke, and he made it easily. Yet surely, he thought, these men must become aware that there was something unnatural in his manner?

Malou was somewhere in the house. He knew that. But she had decided not to put in an appearance in the gaming-room until the affair of Gabrielle was over and done with. He wished she had come in. He knew that the doorkeeper would have told her who had arrived. Why didn't she make an appearance?

Gichot felt awful responsibility. He cursed that doorkeeper and everybody else. But he smiled at Baring and Anton and his little lady, and sipped champagne and was now very cool and collected.

The minutes were now flying fast. Gichot kept his cards steady in his hand, but only by the most tremendous effort of will. He concentrated on the

game for he had poor cards, and dared not play them badly, else he might lose more than he could afford or Le Cagnard would be willing to pay.

He wondered what Le Cagnard would say when he learnt that these two strangers had not been got rid of by some simple excuse. That was an error, if you wished! Where would Malou find herself?

Gichot's hair nearly rose on end, for immediately after that another question presented itself. Where would he, Gichot, find himself?

It was an error of the most colossal magnitude, the admission of these two men. The doorkeeper should be instantly taken out and shot against the most convenient wall.

Somebody was declaring one heart. Gichot pulled himself together and said two.

Le Cagnard would want to know all about it. What a mistake! What a ——

Dummy was laying his cards down and dummy was Baring. He looked across at Anton and smiled "Not too good," he said.

He got up from his seat. Gichot's tautened brain was telling him all kinds of things. He could see the time by Anton's wrist-watch.

He saw Baring stroll across the room. He was impotent to stop him. He could think of nothing natural enough to say which would prevent Baring from reaching the door.

"Be back in a minute or two," said Baring, over his shoulder.

Gichot watched him open the door. The door closed again. Gichot's head was a whirling top charged with madness.

He was watching the door.

It was the hour!

CHAPTER XIII

That night Gabrielle sat alone in the drawing-room. She knew that Malou was not in the gaming den below stairs. Malou had told her she was going to visit a friend, and would be back early, some time after dinner.

Gabrielle was doing some work. Malou's accounts were fairly complicated, and she had a system whereby the profits of the cabaret were not fully disclosed.

The flat was very quiet. Situated, as it was, at the top of the high building, it conveyed to Gabrielle a sense of isolation which was not wholly imaginative. Below it, the gaming-hall was discreetly silent. Only far down, on the ground floor, was the cabaret shrill with sound. The man who had plotted the scheme which that night was to come to fruition had taken all these things into account.

Gabrielle pushed the books back at last. She had satisfactorily dealt with the profits of the cabaret in the way Malou had taught her. She reflected, with a little smile, that it was not quite in order, and guessed that Malou in that fashion evaded a certain amount of taxation.

She sighed. The place was very quiet, seemingly breathless. She was, of course, she thought, fairly happy in it; but it was the happiness of forced contentment, the happiness begotten of determined forgetfulness.

She was grateful to Malou. Malou was kind to her. The flat was a refuge compared with which the attic near the Bastille had been a dreadful den. She pushed back her chair and turned away from the desk.

Trevert was standing just inside the room. The door was closed behind him!

Gabrielle remained still, clutching the back of the chair. How long the man had been in the room, she did not know. How he had gained admission to the flat she did not know. She just stood and leaned against the chair until it slid along the carpet and struck the edge of the little desk.

Trevert stayed watching her. He was almost motionless. His lips were fixed in that vividly red-lipped, white-toothed smile which so frightened her.

"Good evening." There was a tremor in his voice.

"What do you want?" Gabrielle spoke swiftly, pantingly.

“To see you.” He took a step forward.

“Don’t come near me,” she said. “I shall ring.”

He laughed. “The maid is out. I had occasion to remember something I had forgotten. Is that complicated? So she runs a little message for me. And you and I are alone.”

Gabrielle tried to think clearly. This was ridiculous. This man had come to force himself upon her. He would probably insult her; but she could handle him. There might be a scene, but nothing more. There was no need for fear.

And yet—looking into Trevert’s dark, hot eyes, looking at the red wound which was his mouth, she knew that the scene might easily be something more, something hideous. Trevert was clever enough to convey that to her.

She spoke deliberately. “I do not want to see you, nor to talk to you. If you persist in staying I shall go out.”

“I persist in staying, and I insist that you stay, too. Dear lady, the time has passed when you and I might fence with words and find profit in it. The other day I desired to kiss you. You were very rude to me. I desire it now.”

“Stand still.” Gabrielle hardly recognized her own voice.

He was walking towards her. He was still smiling.

Suddenly he jumped. His arms went about her. She struggled violently, madly, desperately. And while she struggled he rained kisses on her face, her hair, her throat.

At last he released her. She was struggling for breath, white-faced, shaken. His breathing was quick, and in his eyes was a high swift light.

“So,” he said. “That is right.”

“You devil!” she breathed.

He laughed at her. “Once more?” he was advancing on her.

She dodged. She eluded him. He made a fine pretence of seizing her. She screamed, and she beat at him with her hands.

He was now deathly white. He uttered a name. She fled towards the door. He caught her and flung her away.

“Try again!” he snarled.

Faintness was coming over her. The walls of the room swung and swayed, and Trevert's face was huge and hideous through a mist. She drew away from him. He advanced on her. Their movements were now slow and his eyes were burning terribly.

So Gabrielle retreated till she found the desk at her back. She stood against it, watching Trevert, knowing that she was cornered; and as she did so, she seemed to see Malou cleaning the gun on the table before her and afterwards dropping it into the drawer of the desk against which she stood.

Her right hand was behind her clutching the edge of the desk for support. She moved it slowly. She found the drawer. Trevert's teeth were like a dog's teeth, white and pointed. His lips looked as though they had been dipped in blood.

She had the gun.

"Stand back!" she cried. "Stand back!"

Trevert stared at the weapon; at her. Then he laughed wildly, recklessly; and sprang.

Gabrielle pulled the trigger. The boom of the shot filled the room. She felt as though her wrist was broken.

She saw Trevert clutch his chest and drop in a crumpled heap to the carpet.

In those tense seconds while the booming echoes rocked from wall to wall, from ceiling to floor, until they eddied away to silence Gabrielle saw things with startling clearness, as one sees scenes under a southern sun in a clarified atmosphere.

There was a smoke drift across the room, swirling, thinning, disappearing. Trevert was lying with his left leg drawn up slightly, face downwards, his right hand beneath him. He did not move.

When the echoes of the gunshot were lost the room was appalling in its silence—like a tomb, or some secret place where men might creep to hide their sins.

The gun was heavy in Gabrielle's hand. It weighed her down, pulling all the way to her shoulder.

She said: "Dear God!"

The exclamation was breathed, but, quiet though it was, it startled her. She stood and looked down at Trevert and tried to think.

This was nightmare, unreal, impossible. It had not happened. Death could never come so swiftly to anything human and alive as had been Trevert a few moments before. He had been jumping towards her. He had been smiling with those blood-flecked lips of his, his dog's teeth showing white and strong behind them.

It was impossible that he was dead—impossible.

These minutes would pass. She would be sitting at the desk finishing the accounts. Nothing had happened to break her life as though a gigantic axe had dropped and cut it all away behind her. She had not killed.

Killed! The word repeated itself. Killed! A sudden flaring terror leapt to life within her. Killed! Trevert was dead.

There was somebody at the door.

She looked up. The door was opening and no power vouchsafed to her could prevent it. Somebody was coming in, and would see Trevert dead. The door seemed hours in opening. She saw Malou.

Malou was smiling, ready to greet her. The smile vanished, and Malou stood still, staring at Gabrielle, at Trevert, at the gun half-hidden by Gabrielle's frock.

"*Mon Dieu!* What is this?"

"He's dead," said Gabrielle. "He was awful. He hunted me. I got the pistol. It went off."

"But—my child——" Malou stepped forward. "This man—dead in my flat. Dead. You've killed him! My God! What shall we do?" She seemed suddenly to realize the enormity of the happening. She began to babble. "Somebody must come. Something must be done. I must think of something. We can't leave things like this. My God! That this should happen!"

"He was awful," repeated Gabrielle mechanically. She felt sick and weak and dizzy. The pistol had dropped from her grip. She leaned on the table and kept looking at Trevert, who lay so motionless on the floor.

And Malou wondered why Gichot did not come. She did not know that he was making his excuses to Anton that he must go and telephone a friend and would not be many minutes, and that his wife would remain.

Gichot came at last. He looked scared. "I was downstairs. I heard a shot. *Mon Dieu!* Trevert!"

Gabrielle laughed. The laugh was hysterical, high-pitched, charged with tears. She swayed horribly.

"He was awful," she said again. They were the only words she could think of, the only words her lips would fashion.

Gichot stepped forward. He made pantomimic signs to Malou, and Malou, as though she took control of herself, stepped to Gabrielle's side and took her arm.

"Sit down here a minute, *petite*," she said, soothingly. "Sit beside me." She put her arm round Gabrielle and pulled the girl's head on to her shoulder. Gichot was on his knees beside Trevert.

"He's dead," he said, in a hushed voice. "This is too terrible. What shall we do?"

There was some dignity about Gichot in those moments. He got up slowly and thoughtfully, and achieved an appearance of strength worthy of a better man and a better situation.

He closed the door and locked it. His movements were deliberate. "Am I to understand," he asked, "that Trevert was offensive, that this was self-defence?"

"I think so," replied Malou, quietly, holding Gabrielle close, "you know Ma'm'selle Lebrun. It is incredible—that—well, of course, utterly incredible."

Gichot nodded, still thoughtful, still dignified. "I think one might assist," he said slowly. "The worst of it is there were no witnesses. We have only ma'm'selle's word. At least"—hastily—"the law would only have ma'm'selle's word."

"That is so," agreed Malou. "What do you think?"

Gichot shrugged his shoulders. He considered Gabrielle sympathetically. Then he looked at Trevert. "A terrible thing," he murmured. "Terrible beyond understanding. We must do our best."

"Do you mean to hide it?" Malou asked the question slowly.

"Of course. For your sake, for hers. Trevert—well we all knew Trevert. I am willing to believe ma'm'selle. I can quite appreciate it all. I knew Trevert so well." The dignity died from his voice and his face. He whipped out: "What is that?"

There was a tap at the door—silence, as they failed to respond. Then a voice came to them, and the sound of it brought Gabrielle from Malou's shoulders, upright, tense, strained.

"Is anybody inside?"

It was the voice of Baring.

CHAPTER XIV

They remained still—Malou, Gichot and Gabrielle, while Baring waited for his reply. Malou was looking at Gichot questioningly, and Gichot, seeing the collapse of their scheme in this unexpected and disastrous intrusion, wondered what would happen to him when Le Cagnard learnt everything.

Gabrielle recognized the voice instantly. This was the man who had never been far from her thoughts since that night she met him with Calverley. That he should return at this moment, and find her in this situation, was a tragedy as dreadful as the killing of Trevert. Distraught, not fully conscious of what she said or did, she cried: “He must not come in. He must not see me.”

Malou quietened her with a fierce swift gesture. Gichot gestured despairingly. That had been a foolish thing—crying aloud like that.

Malou got up. “Wait here,” she said. “Look after her. I will speak to him.”

She went to the door and turned the key. As she did so, Baring, waiting impatiently outside, realizing, almost with incredulity, that he had heard Gabrielle’s voice, thrust at the door violently, so that only the swift intervention of Malou’s foot prevented it from swinging wide open. He looked through the narrowing aperture as Malou confronted him, pulling the door close behind her, and although he could see neither Gabrielle nor Gichot, who had drawn the girl aside from his line of vision, he caught a momentary glimpse of Trevert lying face downward on the carpet, strangely twisted and still.

Then Malou closed the door completely.

“I should like to speak to you privately,” she said. “Will you come with me?”

“But...” began Baring.

“There can be no buts, Monsieur,” Malou said coolly.

Baring looked at her. “There is a lady in that room whom I wish to see.”

“But the lady does not wish to see you, Monsieur.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“She asked me to tell you so. She heard your voice and knew that you were here.”

Baring hesitated. There was no sound now from the room. If Gabrielle were in peril, if she needed him, she knew that a cry would bring him to her. And there was silence.

“All right,” he replied, at last. “As you wish.”

She took him into a small room near by and closed the door after them. “What is it you want?” she asked.

Her coolness puzzled Baring.

He decided to be bold. “I heard a shot,” he said. “It brought me upstairs.”

Malou’s brows wrinkled. “A shot! Monsieur do you realize what you are saying?”

“Quite.” Baring, once he had recovered from his bewilderment, was very matter of fact and calm. “I distinctly heard a shot. I have had some experience of shooting, and I assure you that I know the report of an automatic pistol when I hear it. Also—I saw something when that door opened.”

Malou shook her head. “You are entirely wrong, Monsieur. Isn’t it dangerous to say that you heard shooting in somebody else’s house?”

“Whose house?” demanded Baring swiftly.

Malou was momentarily silent. Baring refused to be turned, refused to acknowledge that he trod on dangerous ground in talking of shooting. He was difficult. Besides, he had confirmed what Malou feared—that he had seen Trevert stretched on the floor of the room.

“The identity of the owner of the house is something I am not in a position to discuss,” she said carefully. “I called to visit a friend, a lady who lives here. There has been a little unfortunate incident—nothing of importance. My friend is upset. That is all. I would advise you, Monsieur, to go back to your play, and to refrain from wandering in the private quarters of people with whom you are unacquainted.”

Baring felt slightly nonplussed. He was unable to place Malou in this affair. Her story that she had come to visit somebody seemed to be perfectly true; she had told Anton that she was a client of the gaming den below.

On the other hand, her very willingness to talk to him privately showed that she had something to hide. Had there been nothing suspicious about the happenings in the other room she would have politely but firmly turned Baring away.

"Let us be frank," he said. "Suppose I suggest that you can gain nothing by evasion, but might gain a great deal by trusting me."

"I don't understand you," replied Malou.

"Do you understand the meaning of murder," asked Baring bluntly.

She met his gaze without flinching. "You talk very dangerously. Murder! What do you mean?"

"That I believe somebody has been killed in this house—the man I saw lying on the floor in that room just now. That's what I mean, Madame. Further, I'm going to tell the police."

Malou was thinking carefully. If she, after all, took him into her confidence, or sufficiently so to serve her purpose, he might be made amenable and go quietly away without giving further trouble. In any case he must not be permitted to go to the police.

"Monsieur," she said. "You talk of frankness. I will try to be frank with you. We know each other well enough for that, I think." She paused, and looked at Baring with a little supplication. "Is it necessary that Monsieur Anton Laroche should be told anything of this, provided I explain? I give you my most sacred word that I did not arrive until after—well, afterwards. I only know what I have been told. But it would hurt me if Anton knew. I mean—I should be afraid that he might misunderstand...." She pretended to flounder prettily and Baring thought that he guessed her reasons.

"I won't commit myself to a promise like that," he replied. "But I'll say that I'll be discreet and probably silent."

She smiled gratefully. "I knew I could rely on you. There has, as a matter of fact, been very nearly a tragedy. A man has been shot."

"I saw him," Baring said. "Is the man dead?"

"No. Fortunately. Just wounded. He was a horrible creature. There was an incident with the lady I came to see. She had a little pistol—one of those toy pearl-handled things women sometimes own. She tried to stop him with it. It went off. Save for the fact that he has a nasty little wound in his shoulder, the thing is almost like opera bouffe. She was terrified and

fainting. He was frightened out of his life, and fainted in earnest. That is all, monsieur."

The explanation was just too detailed. Malou did not know how much Baring had seen during the lightning glimpse he had had of the room's interior. She did not know that the pistol Gabrielle had dropped lay in a direct line from the door beyond Trevert, a squat forty-four automatic revolver instantly noted by Baring.

Baring, listening to her, thought swiftly. She might be telling the truth—so far. Her story might be correct save for the talk of the pistol and its effects. The wound might not be slight, it might be serious, but the circumstances of its administration might have been correctly stated. Baring decided this while Malou waited for his answer.

He felt in a quandary. Gabrielle was implicated in this matter, for he had heard her begging Malou in the room not to admit him.

He asked another question almost without thinking. "May I see the lady who fired the shot?"

"I'm afraid not. I have told you that she doesn't wish to see you."

"But she might see me if my card were taken in."

Malou did not answer. There was a little throb at her pulses. She was learning. She could wait. Baring went on:

"Don't you realize that without seeing her I can't possibly promise to say nothing to Anton? You must have appreciated that when you asked me for the promise. Probably that is why you did ask me."

"Of course," said Malou, calmly. She did not understand. All this was Greek to her. But she was content to let Baring talk, while she remained non-committal and listened.

"Well? Am I still refused permission?"

"I can only respect her wishes, monsieur."

Baring stood up. "Then I must fetch Anton. He has the right, which I have not, of insisting on seeing her. I can't possibly go down to him knowing that his sister has shot a man in this house, and say nothing to him."

He could tell nothing of the immensity of Malou's surprise at this statement. She remained outwardly calm and quiet, while her brain, reeling

from the shock of the discovery, strove to understand it, and striving, fashioned a reply to Baring. She seized on an important, unescapable fact.

"You understand that she has not used the name of Laroche for some time? That she has left her father's home?"

"I know. But that doesn't dismiss the fact that Anton has every right to be at her side in a crisis like this."

"She would not want him. She never refers to him, nor to her father—to anybody named Laroche." Malou tried not to watch Baring too anxiously. She wanted him to tell her more. She wanted him to think she understood all.

Baring stroked his chin. "So?" He paused. "It's a mystery to me, a dreadful, dark mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it, ma'm'selle. You've been very frank with me over this affair. Be a little more frank. What has happened in the Laroche household?"

Malou felt level with him. She knew as much as he knew, and she could fight him on equal terms.

"That is a matter for Ma'm'selle Laroche, Anton, and their father, monsieur. I am not at liberty to discuss it."

"I'm sorry. I had no intention of intruding. Will you tell me how she got here? Why she is living in this place?"

Malou shook her head. She had found out all he could tell her, and she desired the interview ended as soon as possible.

"I can tell you nothing, monsieur. It isn't in my power to do so. But I will make you a promise if you will make me one. Say nothing of this to Anton at the moment. I think you will believe me when I assure you that Ma'm'selle Laroche would wish it. And in return, in a day or two, if you will keep in touch with me, I will arrange that you meet her and talk to her. She will then be better fitted to see you. Will you do that?"

"You'll keep that promise?" Baring said.

"I will telephone you to-morrow," replied Malou, "if you will give me your address."

He gave it to her and she opened the door for him.

"You are very kind and understanding," she smiled. "I feel that I can rely on you entirely, and I'm more than grateful for it. You will be my friend if I want you to, won't you, so far as this affair is concerned?"

“Of course,” he agreed.

She watched him vanish down the corridor, and then she closed the door of the room. She wanted to consider many things before she went back to Gichot and Gabrielle and the room where Trevert lay.

CHAPTER XV

When Malou had gone out to see Baring, Gichot gently took Gabrielle through a communicating door which led into Malou's boudoir. The girl went without protest, too stunned and dazed to think for herself, shocked by the utterly unexpected arrival of Baring during the moments of tragedy just behind her.

Gichot seemed very kind. He spoke soothingly. "You are not to be frightened," he said. "We shall do our best for you. We quite understand, and our sympathies are entirely with you. Nobody shall know."

She accepted his comfort dumbly. She felt that she wanted nothing else than that somebody should think and act for her. Wistfully, she half wished that she had told them to admit Baring.

To have had the courage to face Baring then would have been a gift beyond value; but she did not possess it. She wanted to hide from everybody who had known her in the days gone by. And Gichot was kind. He was fatherly and tender and comforting. He seemed to know what to say. She lay back in the big chair to which he had guided her, and closed her eyes.

Gichot went to a bottle on a sideboard close by. The bottle had already been prepared.

"I want you to drink this," he said, bringing across a liqueur glass. "It's very old brandy, and it will do you a great deal of good. So drink it to the last drop."

She took the brandy obediently, watching him with a child's trustfulness. When Le Cagnard picked his tools he picked them well.

She knew nothing about brandy, save that it was potent and intoxicating. This seemed very fiery, with a strange and nauseous taste in it. But it undoubtedly warmed her, and set her heart beats going slightly faster.

"Drink it all up," urged Gichot. "I want to see some colour coming back into your cheeks."

Though the brandy made her shudder, she swallowed it and lay back. Gichot stood and watched her. She felt more restful; her eyelids seemed heavy.

“Try to compose yourself,” said Gichot. “If only you could sleep you would feel so much more fitted to face this crisis. You can leave it all to us. We are your friends.”

She smiled at him wanly. He seemed to be talking from a great distance. Her tortured nerves no longer fretted her. There was a great peace descending on her. It did not seem to matter very much that Trevert lay still on the floor in the next room. That was a matter far removed, of little importance. She slipped gently into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Gichot leaned over her and touched her eyelids with his finger-tips. There was no reflex action to the touch. He stayed for a little while beside her, watching her. Then he straightened himself and lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking.

He looked round the room, once more touched Gabrielle’s eyes with his fingers, and then he went into the next room, closing the door after him.

“All right,” he said. “She’s right off.”

Trevert was sitting up. “*Mon Dieu!* Give me a drink. Quick. I’ve played many parts in my time but never one so hard as this. Have you ever tried lying perfectly still, hardly breathing, for ten minutes or more? See how you like it. And it isn’t at all a pleasant thing to face a pistol even when you know it is loaded only with blank cartridges. I tell you it wants doing, all that, *mon vieux*.”

He swallowed the champagne Gichot had poured out for him, and asked: “Who was that came to the door?”

“An Englishman who was playing cards downstairs. Malou’s talking to him now.”

Trevert looked at Gichot. “Is there danger?”

Gichot shrugged his shoulders. “God knows. I’m sick of it, Trevert. The whole thing is full of peril. That’s my view. Thank God my part’s nearly ended. She’s rather a nice girl, Trevert.”

Trevert cocked his head to one side. He was a cool devil, and now he was recovering from the physical discomfort of his sojourn on the floor, was disposed to be easy. “Shouldn’t say that too often and to too many people, Gichot. Le Cagnard hears lots of things—has many ears.”

Gichot walked to the curtained window. He had meant it when he called Gabrielle a nice girl. When she was sipping the brandy and looking up at

him with utter trustfulness Gichot had found that he was not altogether a scoundrel, a comforting and yet a distressing thought.

He knew that love of easy living, love of the wine-pot and pretty women had had much to do with his present situation, and he wondered why he had not been endowed with that little bit of extra strength which enabled some men to indulge these fancies and yet maintain their financial independence.

"What happens next?" asked Trevert.

"You'll soon learn. You keep out of the way, of course."

Trevert walked over to him. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Gichot. I think I can trust you with a confidence."

Gichot looked round him. "I'm flattered."

"Oh! Don't let your nerves make you snappy. Pull yourself together. Do you know, I'm afraid!"

"Eh?" Gichot stared at him.

Trevert nodded. "I am. It's the sober truth, Gichot. You see, I'm supposed to be dead. Suppose Le Cagnard decided to make sure?"

There was a short silence. "That's absurd," said Gichot uneasily. "He knew the shooting was to be a fake."

"Yet we both know what a devil he is. He may find it expedient later, to produce the corpse."

"That's nonsense," fumed Gichot.

"It's shrewd reasoning," countered Trevert.

"Listen to me, Gichot. I'm in one of Le Cagnard's secrets. Therefore I don't feel safe. Therefore I'm going to take some precautions. You understand? I won't say what they are—but they'll be sound ones, and you shall know of them. I'm going to insure myself against loss. That's the way it's put, isn't it?"

"I don't know," muttered Gichot. He was reflecting that he, too, was in the secret. "Look here, Trevert, I don't want to be in this with you. I'm keeping out of it as much as I can."

Trevert's grin was once more in evidence, and Gichot reflected that it was a horrid grin—like a dog's.

"You'll be in this with me, Gichot. I need a friend. Hello!"

The door opened and Malou came into the room. “All right?” she asked.

“Yes. She’s asleep.”

“Good. Gichot, get back to the tables. I’ve satisfied our important visitor and he’ll say nothing. Trevert, you know where to go. Ring me up in the morning for further instructions. It is best to hurry.”

Gichot made his exit. Trevert lingered for a few moments, seemed about to speak, and then changed his mind and followed Gichot.

Malou went into the room where Gabrielle lay.

The place was quiet.

CHAPTER XVI

Malou seated herself beside Gabrielle and looked at her. She knew that the girl would sleep for at least twelve hours, and that the drug which she had taken in the brandy would leave her listless and dazed when she awoke. So far, the plot had gone well; but Malou was not thinking of the plot. She was thinking of what the night had taught her.

This girl was Gabrielle Laroche, daughter of Paul Laroche, the great financier. She was the sister of Anton Laroche, who was so desperately infatuated with Malou. Anton's friend, Baring, had very willingly promised that he would not mention her presence in the house to Anton, so willingly, in fact, that Malou shrewdly suspected that Anton was not too interested in his sister.

There had been no newspaper outcry regarding the disappearance of the daughter of Laroche, as there certainly would have been had the girl vanished in circumstances which were a mystery to her family. Therefore Gabrielle, living away from the Laroche household and bearing a false name, had left home with the full knowledge of her father and brother. Perhaps some folly or disagreement had caused them to disown her.

What had Le Cagnard to do with all this?

Malou was thinking very clearly during this time that she sat beside Gabrielle and watched her sleeping. This was a great night in Malou's life. She had discovered things beyond her imagination's compass. She felt that she might change her destiny if she considered these things carefully.

What was the connection between Laroche and Le Cagnard, that the master criminal should hunt Laroche's daughter down to worse than death? Why should a carefully selected organization hurl its weight against the frail girl who slept on the couch at Malou's side? And what would it profit Le Cagnard?

Malou came to a decision. She would probe the mystery, and would learn all there was to learn. She had opportunities for doing so, for Anton was entirely her servant in all things, and Gabrielle regarded her as the only friend she had in the world.

One other thing must be done. Baring must not see Gabrielle and a clever story must be invented to explain how impossible it was.

Malou lit a cigarette. She was living busily these days, seizing the opportunities fate had thrown in her way. She had arranged to rent for a little while a flat near the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, the address of which she could give to Anton, so that her game of make believe with him could be maintained. She intended to push this matter of Gabrielle to its furthest limits.

Malou in fact had ceased to be a pawn in the game and had become an important piece.

While Malou thought these things Baring had announced that he wished to play no more, and, with Anton, much to Gichot's relief, he took his departure.

"You seem a bit upset," said Anton, as they walked along the Avenue. "Nothing gone wrong?"

"No. I'm all right. I'm a bit thoughtful—that's all." Baring considered his words carefully. "I'm afraid I rather spoilt the play, going out as I did. Was Gichot annoyed, that he went away as well?"

"Oh, no. We played that hand through, rather quickly I thought, and then Gichot said he must telephone a friend, and he left me with his wife. A great little wife, that." Anton laughed.

Baring pondered. It seemed strange that the little ex-soldier should have hurried from the room just when that mysterious affair was happening upstairs "Gichot was out within a minute or two of me, then?"

"Yes. But why are you concerned about him?"

"Oh, I was a bit worried. I thought I alone had made a mess of the game. It relieves me to think that Gichot also had to run away. His wife talk much?"

Anton lit a cigarette. "Rather. She's a little devil. She wondered if I would like to take tea with her to-morrow afternoon. It seems that she and Gichot have a flat near the Porte Maillot, and Gichot's out every afternoon. Can you beat that? She said it all very prettily, of course."

Baring grinned. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife—even though she doesn't happen to be his wife. What's the address?"

Anton looked round at him. "You're not thinking of going yourself, are you?" he asked, in surprise.

“Not in the afternoon. I’m not built for affairs. But I rather like Gichot, and I might drop in on him one evening.”

Anton gave Baring the address and Baring made a mental note of it. Gichot knew everything. Suddenly he felt sure of that, even though he had not seen the little man in the room where Trevert lay stretched on the carpet.

And if there was a weak link in the chain of circumstances that link was Gichot.

Gabrielle awoke to find herself in bed with Malou sitting by her. She felt ill and her head ached dreadfully, so that she had no inclination for anything save to lie and rest and allow others to think and act for her.

“We had to give you something,” said Malou. “After you had drunk the brandy Gichot brought you, you seemed to drop into a state of semi-consciousness, faint I suppose. Then hysteria threatened, and we thought it best to ensure that you slept. We didn’t want complete nervous prostration. Do you feel better?”

“A little,” replied Gabrielle. “I don’t remember anything after Gichot gave me the brandy.” She suddenly sat up. “Where is he?”

“Trevert?”

Gabrielle nodded. Her eyes were on Malou’s and Malou returned her gaze steadily and gave her shoulders a little shrug, spreading her hands as she did so. “We have arranged it while you slept,” she said quietly.

Gabrielle sank back and began to cry, and Malou made no attempt to stop her.

“Whatever shall I do?” sobbed Gabrielle. “What can I do?”

“Leave it to us. You are going from here. Unfortunately, we find that Trevert had an appointment with a relative last night, and that he left word he was visiting here before keeping the appointment. Of course, they are making some inquiries. We have said that he never came here, and by great good luck the hall porter was out of the way when he arrived and Trevert walked up the stairs without being seen. But the inquiries are troublesome, and they may become more and more so as time goes by.”

She leaned over Gabrielle and spoke more quietly. “Your friends have taken a grave risk for you, my dear, and I want you to do exactly all they

wish. That is only fair, isn't it—that those who are endeavouring to shield you should choose their own way of doing it?"

Gabrielle nodded. She was dumb with misery, fear, horror. Somewhere at the back of her brain a little voice urged her to go to the police; but while her drugged senses hardly responded to the urge she remembered Gichot's observation that she and Trevert had been alone—that there was only her word as to the actual circumstances leading to the shooting of Trevert. Suppose the police refused to believe her.

"I don't know whether you've suspected it," added Malou, "but in addition to the cabaret here there is also a private gaming-room. I know that the police are aware of its existence, but have so far refrained from any action. But you will understand that a shooting affray in such a place brings the gravest suspicion on everybody concerned. I mean the police would be less likely to credit your story."

Still Gabrielle did not speak. She grasped all that Malou's supposed confession meant to her, but she had hardly the mental energy to comment on it, even while it increased her feeling of desperation.

"I have a friend here who will take you away and who can give you work for a little while, at any rate. I have heard you sing so many times in my drawing-room and have realized how pretty your voice is, and I thought of this man at once. I'll bring him in."

She went out of the room. Gabrielle lay still, heavily charged with the drug Gichot had given her. She was aware that the door was opening, and turning her head, she saw a man. He was a giant, whose immensity could not be disguised by the well-cut clothes he wore. In one hand he carried a short-hafted whip.

Gabrielle recognized him instantly. This was Jan Dekker, the Boer she had seen on that night when first she met Baring, John Calverley's friend.

Gabrielle lifted herself on her elbow. Though time, until this moment of their second meeting, had somewhat dimmed her memories of Dekker, she had never properly forgotten that night when she saw him at Valentin's, nor the threat of him.

She cried: "What is he doing here? Send him away!"

Dekker advanced towards her, ponderous in his great strength and bulk. "I've come to help you," he said. "This lady has asked me to be your friend. I want to discuss business with you, if you will permit me." He paused and

smiled, and the smile terrified Gabrielle. “I understand everything, of course.”

Gabrielle, fighting the drug-created languor which still fettered her brain, looked at Malou. “You brought this man here. Are you really my friend, or are you deceiving me?”

Malou laid her hand on her forehead. Gabrielle wildly threw it off. “I don’t want caresses,” she panted. “I want an explanation.”

Malou realized that the scheme was in danger. Either the drug had rendered Gabrielle completely unbalanced, or she had seen Dekker before in circumstances which caused her to fear him. Malou did not know which, but she did know that decisive action was called for. She spoke a little sharply.

“Listen, Gabrielle. You have got to be sensible. For the first time, and perhaps cruelly, I am going to tell you exactly how you stand. I do it for your own good, and I do it so that you shall cease to protest against any assistance your friends may devise for you.

“You are guilty of murder in the eyes of the law. At your own request your friends have aided you, have, in fact, become accomplices after the act. Through you several of us are in grave peril, and for your sake.”

“What do you mean?” Gabrielle asked.

“I mean that it’s too late now to retract, too late to alter things, for—and again I speak with perhaps crude frankness—the very fact that we have disposed of Trevert’s body makes us sharers of your guilt. There’s the situation. We have to face it. You will have to face it. God knows our nerves are strained enough without your raising opposition to everything we do. Mr. Dekker here is a good friend of mine. He is willing, after careful consideration of all the facts, to help you. Cease to be a child and try to be a woman, I implore you.”

Gabrielle shrank a little from her. There was a force about Malou which was magnified in comparison with Gabrielle’s drug-wrought weakness. In those moments, with the vague shadows left by the drug wreathing round her brain, Gabrielle was not quite sure whether Malou was potent for good or for ill.

“But—that man!” she protested. “I saw him once—at Valentin’s. He is dreadful. I’m sure of it. I shall not go with him. I would rather tell the police everything.”

Malou leaned over her. “You will tell the police nothing. We shall not permit it. Do you imagine we are going to sacrifice ourselves at your request, and then find you turning on us? Is that gratitude, friendship, acknowledgment of our kindness? Pull yourself together for heaven’s sake. Are your friends continually to work out your salvation, or will you do something for yourself?”

Her words seemed to beat Gabrielle down. They were like a bludgeon hammering at her reeling brain. There were tears in her eyes.

“Send him away,” she pleaded. “And let me stay here.”

Malou shook her head decisively. “Impossible. You go with him. It is arranged, and irrevocable. Come along, I will help you to get your things together.”

“Oh, my God! But I can’t! I can’t!”

Malou took her arm and pulled her off the couch to her feet. Directly Gabrielle stood up her head reeled, and the whole room swung sickeningly, as though she were drunk. She saw Dekker vaguely, multiplied. She stumbled and dropped to her knees.

“I feel terribly ill,” she whispered. “Leave me alone, please. Oh, please leave me alone.”

She was pitiful on the floor, helpless, weak, attacked by a giddiness which was so frightful that she thought her head would split.

Malou looked across Gabrielle at Dekker. Dekker stooped and picked the girl up as easily as though she had been a child.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll look after her. You bring her things.”

He carried Gabrielle downstairs. In the narrow street that ran along one side of the house was a big closed car. The driver of the car was watching the street, and as Dekker appeared at the door he signalled that all was clear. Dekker carried Gabrielle into the rear of the car, pulled down the blinds and sat with his immense arm round her.

In a little while Malou arrived with a bag into which she had thrown Gabrielle’s few clothes.

“Bon voyage,” she said hurriedly to Dekker. “You know what to do.”

The car slid silently off and turned into the Avenue Niel and the sunshine.

“Thank God for that,” breathed Malou, as it vanished.

CHAPTER XVII

That same night a killer went up to the Butte Montmartre. He went in response to a summons from one more dangerous than himself. He went to interview Le Cagnard.

He skirted the Place du Tertre, with its lamps and its little tables, going like some evil thing of the shadows, a slim lithe animal with a dead white face and little black eyes.

Any *flic*, seeing him, would have told you that he was Machet, the bandit, and that he lived beyond the fortifications of Bagnolet. In telling you this the *flic* would have loosened his automatic pistol in his pocket and stood ready to kill, for Machet, it was said, slew for the lust of slaying, and he hated detectives worse than anything in the world.

Le Cagnard awaited his visitor in the tall strange house which was his headquarters. Far below him, like a light-dotted plain, Paris lay under swimming darkness. He sat in absolute silence, with the great white light behind him, hunched, his figure casting a grotesque shadow towards the door, the fingers of his black-gloved hands interlocked before him.

Things had so far gone well. Gabrielle had fallen into the trap, and was now in Dekker's hands. Dekker knew what to do with her, and Dekker might be trusted a fair distance. Malou, for the moment, must be trusted. But there were others—Trevert, Gichot.

A tap at the door brought a low invitation to his lips. Machet stood in the blinding light, blinking like some creature of the night that finds itself in unexpected sunshine.

He was still for a moment, just inside the door, leaning forward slightly, staring at the black mass which threw its shadow athwart the gloom.

"Come here!" The invitation, although uttered in a thin voice, had a command in it, and it seemed to startle Machet.

The man stepped towards the table. His movement was feline, smooth, as though some member of one of the fiercer cat tribes stepped across the floor.

When he came to a standstill he hesitated a moment, and then, with a slow movement he took off his cap. It was a tremendously significant action.

In his own place and among his own kind Machet the bandit was king by reason of his ferocity and his wild courage. It was his boast that he feared nothing on earth nor above the earth nor below it. He was a dealer in death, in robbery with violence, in all the most savage crimes known to the legal code; yet, standing in the presence of Le Cagnard, reluctantly perhaps, but nevertheless immediately, he removed his cap.

Le Cagnard spoke to him. “Your reputation travels far, Machet. It has reached me up here.”

Machet grinned and showed nicotine-stained teeth. His feet shifted uneasily. He wished he had the immense courage to adhere to his first impulse on receiving the invitation to visit this Skulker, the impulse which had bade him refuse; and, wishing, knew that the wish was utterly futile, like the impulse.

“You are,” added Le Cagnard, slowly, “a man after my own heart, one of stout heart and able to strike surely. Would you take service with me?”

Machet tried to see the other’s features and failed. The light was blinding. It hurt Machet’s eyes. “I am my own master,” he said at last. “I work for no man save myself.”

“And without much profit. Listen, Machet. To a man like you I can offer big rewards. My organization makes much money, and the best of my servants share heavily in these profits. I should name you among the best. I am putting it to you as a business proposition. Are you content to run alone, effecting coups—shall I call them?—as chance may offer; or are you inclined towards service with one who can place definite and profitable work in your way, with sure rewards accruing for the execution of that work?”

Le Cagnard paused, as though to let his words sink in, and Machet stood looking at the shapeless thing which was Le Cagnard’s head.

“You would hardly have to think. Your work would be assigned to you. You would not have to reason, to plan. You would be told to go here or there, to do this or that. Perhaps, sometimes, you would see no logic in your actions; but if you performed them properly the money would always be waiting for you. You understand that, Machet?”

“I understand that.”

“That is better than your present mode of living, isn’t it, Machet? To let another brain plan the coups, to know that your income is assessed, to know that even though six months passed without your doing anything you still

could live in comfort. Because I should pay even if I found no use for your services over a long period. Each month the money would come to you."

Machet breathed deeply. It was a tempting proposition, yet, stripped of its allure, it represented bondage, and Machet was of the type which prefers a pittance and absolute freedom to a comfortable income and servitude to an employer.

He shook his head. The movement held a hint of fear. "I prefer my own way," he said.

Le Cagnard seemed to be weighing him carefully, considering him. Machet stood silent. He had never thus stood before anybody, cap in hand, uncertain, fearing, wishing himself away. He wanted to light one of the cigarettes which dangled eternally from the corner of his thin-lipped mouth, but he dared not do so. Yet he would have lit that cigarette in front of an officer of the Sûreté and have blown the smoke into his face.

"That is unfortunate, Machet. I had hoped you would see reason. I am not a man who cares to do anything that sounds unfair. I sent for you to-night for two reasons—one was to tell you something of which that you have already heard is but part, and the other was to offer you a job. I think I will finish my statement of the first reason, so that you will understand exactly how we stand, you and I. Shall I?"

He still spoke quietly, but there was an inflexion in his voice which, subtle though it was, affected Machet strangely. He nodded. For the moment he could not speak, for his mouth and tongue were very dry.

"I have been studying your activities over a long period. More than once they have stood in the way of my objectives. You slew Harkerson, the American, at a time when he would have been useful to me. You have done one or two other things which I need not mention, but which have interfered with my plans. Now, Machet, when a man interferes with my plans I do one of two things, and both ensure that that interference shall cease. I either make him part and parcel of those plans, or I... eliminate him."

Le Cagnard leaned forward. His voice held a higher note of implacable threat, as though a sword stabbed.

"Machet, there is no room in Paris for you and for me. Do you understand? You work with me or against me. That is the plain fact of it all. And who works against me soon finds himself unable to work at all. You can go, Machet. I have finished. Only—from this moment—look not only

for the police but for the agents of Le Cagnard, and look hard and well, Machet, else you will not long be able to see."

A gun slid across the table, clutched in a black-gloved hand. Le Cagnard's voice dropped to a whisper. "You are a thrower of knives, Machet, the deadliest in Paris, they say. Well—this little thing throws lead faster than ever man threw steel; so keep that right hand still or I'll splash your poor brains on the wall behind you. Now go!"

But Machet did not move. He was thinking—thinking fast... fast.... He was remembering. Shadows had moved in the darker shadows outside this grim dark house, just before he entered it.

Was death awaiting him as he stepped across its threshold on his homeward journey? Would a silenced gun, a knife-blade, stay his evil course for ever on the second that he left Le Cagnard's presence? Could he fight the whole weight of this hideous creature's huge and efficient organization?

They would run so little risk in killing him. Machet, the bandit, was always likely to be slain in some gang fight, some private quarrel—always likely to be found face downward in some Parisian gutterway without a clue to the identity of his killer.

He said hoarsely: "Master! Wait! Let us talk this thing further."

"I have talked," said Le Cagnard. "And you have chosen. What else is there to say?"

Machet's tongue touched his lips. "Can't a man change his mind?"

Le Cagnard laughed. "So that he can escape a death trap, and then change it again? You think I'm a fool, Machet."

"Master, I swear that if I consent to serve you I shall be faithful." There was perspiration on Machet's temples. "I swear it. I had no time for proper consideration. You threw that offer at me and demanded an instant answer. Give a man a chance."

He waited in silence, knowing that the unseen eyes of Le Cagnard were considering him. He felt that the room was insufferably hot and that all the good air in it had been consumed, so that he wanted to pant like a dog on a hot day.

"Did you say consent?" asked Le Cagnard quietly. "I thought you had refused."

Machet found some difficulty in speaking. “The word was ill-chosen, master. Tell me what you want done and I will do it.”

Le Cagnard smiled. Machet did not know. The terrifying unreadable shadow remained dark, impregnable.

“In effect you are now willing to serve me. Take note of this, Machet. You have volunteered for my service under threat. I’m not blind to that, and you know it very well. Had various thoughts not occurred to you as to what might happen to you after this interview, not perhaps at once, but assuredly at some time, you would have walked out, free as you call it.”

“From to-day I am your servant,” Machet said sulkily.

Le Cagnard leaned nearer. “Machet, I need you. I pay you the compliment of saying that you are the best man at your trade in all France. For the time being I do not trust you. When you have discovered how valuable I can be to you, when you find that it pays you well to be my servant, you may work so that I know I can trust you so far as I trust anybody who serves me.”

Machet was silent.

Le Cagnard went on in his thin voice: “I trust none of them altogether. Always one watches the other. You understand? It is all interlocked, interdependent. None knows what the other is doing or reporting. When a man of mine works he is unaware what secret eyes are on him. Thus I achieve and maintain mastery. I am explaining, so that you will make no foolish mistake.”

Machet nodded. He understood. This was a tremendous web where all the strands crossed and locked, and if one strand gave way there were others tightening about it.

“I see, master. I am willing. You will find that I am faithful once I promise. I’ve never yet betrayed a friend.” This, curiously enough, was true.

“Right. Then we know, and we are friends.” But Le Cagnard did not put away the gun. Obviously he was leaving nothing to chance with the snake before him. He named terms that brought quick light to Machet’s eyes. And then said: “I want two men killed.”

He added this casually, and Machet betrayed no horror, voiced no protest. Life was cheap to Machet, as cheap as it is to those New York and Chicago gunmen whom police records have shown to have price lists for various crimes from maiming to actual murder.

What Machet did not realize was that there was a tremendous significance for him in the dreadful work which Le Cagnard immediately gave him to do. He had heard what Le Cagnard had just said about his interlocking system, about spies spying on spies. But he did not realize—just then—that once he committed murder under the eyes of Le Cagnard's agents he was bound to Le Cagnard by unbreakable bonds; for could not Le Cagnard at a word, send him to the guillotine.

He did not understand that, desiring men killed, Le Cagnard sent for him, knowing that once his mission was accomplished, Machet was his, body and soul. All these things escaped Machet.

"The first will be killed to-morrow night," went on Le Cagnard. "His name is Trevert, and here is a photograph of him. Study it, and burn it when you are sure you will recognize him. It is one of those strips out of the new machines which gives eight different views of the subject." He flicked a strip of eight photographs across to Machet, who stooped and picked it up from the floor.

"This man, Trevert," went on Le Cagnard, "performed certain work for me recently, which I need not detail to you. After the work was done, he expressed some doubts as to his own safety. Since, he has talked to various of my people. You will observe that news travels to me very fast. He seems to be afraid. He seems to think I shall proceed against him. In effect, the man has manufactured for himself a great terror—and terror drives men to do dangerous things, confess to the police, for instance, appeal to the police for protection. You will understand."

"This Trevert is a fool," said Machet.

"For the fool," said Le Cagnard, "for the man who regrets afterwards, for the man who is afraid of consequences, I have no room in my organization. Such men are dangerous. Trevert knows too much to be merely cast aside. I may err on the side of thoroughness, but I take no chances. You yourself can remember all this, Machet. It may be useful to you."

Le Cagnard paused to let this advice sink in. "Trevert," he added, "will, at eleven o'clock to-morrow night, visit a certain flat near the Porte Maillot where lives a man named Gichot. Here is the address."

Machet saw the gloved hand slide a piece of paper towards him, across the table. On the paper was a typewritten inscription. "You will wait outside until Trevert comes out, having seen him enter and marked him and made sure he is your man. You will kill him by throwing a knife at him and as

soon as the job is done you will at once clear out. Your part in the business will be finished. Near by, with some of my people in it, will be a motor-car, and when Trevert falls they will collect him."

"I understand, master. It shall be done. And the second man?"

"The second man is Gichot, who lives in the flat. But you will do nothing in connection with him until I tell you, save that you will make discreet inquiries, establish his identity, and get to know his appearance so that you could always pick him out."

"And it is certain that this Trevert will visit Gichot at eleven to-morrow night?"

"Certain, Machet. He has been told to go. And as far as Gichot is concerned you need have no fear that Trevert's death will warn him, because he will not know Trevert is dead. He thinks Trevert is going away. Is that all clear?"

"Perfectly, master."

"Good. We shall get along together. Use a new knife, and get it through channels which cannot be traced. When Gichot is dead there will be four thousand francs for you above your ordinary retaining fee."

"Master!"

"I told you the service was a remunerative one. All right. You may go."

Machet crept out to the night. The moving shadows watched him, but he heeded them not. For he was one of them. He was a servant of Le Cagnard.

CHAPTER XVIII

At eleven o'clock the following night Trevert presented himself to Gichot. No longer was Gichot's little lady in evidence. A mere pawn on the board, she had been sent away to Madrid by Le Cagnard at a moment's notice, packed aboard the Sud Express and given a broad hint to the effect that Paris might prove extremely unhealthy for her if she chose to return to it.

Trevert was frankly troubled concerning himself. He told Gichot so over the splitting of a bottle of Cordon Rouge.

"I was told to be here to-night at eleven," he said, "to learn that everything is clear, and, if not, to take alternative instructions. You tell me everything is clear. Therefore the alternative instructions are unnecessary. Gichot, isn't that rather thin?"

"What do you mean?" asked Gichot.

"Why should I come here? Why is it essential for me to be in this flat at eleven o'clock to-night?"

"God knows," said Gichot, and reached for the bottle. "Good vintage this, isn't it? It's a little parcel I picked up quite by chance. And try one of these Partagas. No? Trevert, you're losing your perspective. One should always drink good drinks and smoke good smokes when one can, whatever's happening. One day you may be reduced to vin ordinaire and cheap cigarettes."

"You and your fleshpots, Gichot. Listen to me. I'm in danger. I know it."

The champagne had made Gichot expansive.

"Shut up," he said. "You've got nerves."

"I haven't. I feel that I'm in danger. Something tells me. Do you know, when I received those instructions to come here to-night I had an impulse to flee. The instructions were harmless enough. You are an old friend of mine. Yet I wanted to bolt. I wish I had. I'm frightfully depressed."

"Have another drink," urged Gichot. "Hello! What's all this?"

Trevert was pulling a large envelope from his pocket. It was heavily sealed and there was writing on the front. He handed the envelope to Gichot,

and Gichot saw that it also bore postage stamps of the Republic. It was addressed to the chief of the Sûreté.

"Good God!" breathed Gichot. "Are you mad?"

"No. I'm sane. I want you to keep that, Gichot."

"Not I. You take it back. I don't want it with an address like that on it." Gichot threw back the envelope to Trevert, who caught it and laid it on the table beside the ice bucket.

"Gichot," said Trevert, "you and I have been concerned in many things which are outside the law, but we have always been able to repose the utmost confidence in each other. That's true, eh?"

Gichot nodded. It was perfectly true. In some strange fashion these two men had been bound together by the bonds of a friendship worthy of better characters than they. Though they had been willing to betray all the rest of the world, they had never yet betrayed each other. Lacking any other true friends, they had made true friends of each other, and Trevert, in this extremity, turned to the only man he could trust.

"In that envelope," said Trevert, "is a full account of my association with Le Cagnard: all the jobs I've done for him, all the addresses I've had, every shred and scrap of evidence I can put down which may help the police to find him. In addition I have stated plainly the details of the trick we have just turned in connexion with the girl who called herself Gabrielle Lebrun. I've omitted one thing only, Gichot, your name and the name of the girl."

"Thanks," said Gichot. "If it weren't a warm night I'd have a fire, and I'd burn that damned envelope before your eyes. Don't you understand that the evidence of others would implicate me?"

"Would it? I'm not so sure. That envelope is to be posted by you if I'm killed. It will then be the confession of a dead man, and I've worked out the story of Gabrielle Lebrun's supposed crime so that it appears that you could not possibly be in it. They're going to accept your word, backed by my confession, I think."

Gichot shook his head. "You're a fool. It hurts me to say so, because you're a friend of mine. But you're a fool, Trevert. What use is this to you?"

"This," Trevert's expression was intense. "I'm going to tell Malou that I've placed a full account of those proceedings into such hands that unless I communicate with the holder each month my statement will be forwarded to the police. I'm going to tell Malou so that Le Cagnard will know. When he

does know, I shall feel safe. That envelope, with the statement inside it, is a life insurance for me, Gichot."

Gichot looked doubtful. "And a death warrant for me if Le Cagnard suspects that I have it. I can't do it, Trevert."

"You can. You will." Trevert was urgent and pleading, obviously afraid.

It is probable that Gichot would never have accepted the commission had he not insisted on opening the bottle of Cordon Rouge. He had been out the whole evening, and he had dined well, if unwisely, and the champagne he was then drinking was but more added to a considerable quantity already consumed. Under those circumstances, even Gichot was inclined to take a chance, and, moreover, he felt that Trevert was a friend and brother to him.

"It's madness," he said. "Absolute madness, But if you think it will help you to feel easier I'm willing to risk it. But I warn you, Trevert, that I shall stand no tricks. Perhaps, if things get desperate with me, I may destroy it."

Trevert grinned mirthlessly. "If things get desperate with you, Gichot, use it as I'm using it—say your signature is added to it."

"That's an idea," reflected Gichot. He got up a little unsteadily and weighed the envelope in his hand. "That certainly is an idea. I'll put the damned thing in the safe. No, I won't. I'll hide it. Where can I put it? I know. No fires these days and the grate filled with fancy paper. Under the paper." He suited the action to his words.

"I feel better now," said Trevert, as he prepared to leave. "I know I can depend on you, Gichot, and with that envelope and its contents in existence, Le Cagnard would not dare to touch you. You're a good friend."

"Don't mention it," said Gichot. "All pals together. Sink or swim, ride or fall. Good night, old man. Excuse my coming down in the lift with you. I don't take lifts at this time of night, they go up and down so much. Make a fellow feel rotten. Good night."

He closed the flat door, and Trevert sought the elevator. There was no night porter in the block where Gichot lived, and the concierge had been trained to take little notice of who passed up and down.

Trevert went out through the dark doorway to the dark street.

CHAPTER XIX

All that day Baring had thought of nothing but Gabrielle. More than once he called himself a fool for having been so easily persuaded to leave the house in the Avenue Niel without insisting on seeing her.

At midday he decided that he would try and discover some news of her. Long and patient work on the villainous Parisian telephone service at last secured for him the number of the house in the Avenue Niel, and, demanding it, he was put through.

To his surprise, Malou answered the call, and directly she spoke he knew that she was annoyed at her indiscretion.

"Monsieur Baring! But this is delightful. I have only just arrived here. I came to see how she was."

"May I speak to her?" asked Baring.

There was a little pause. Then: "*Hélas!* It is difficult for me to tell you. Monsieur, I came here and the maid admitted me. I find everything in confusion—upside down as you would say. She has gone."

"What do you mean?" asked Baring, swiftly and in alarm.

"Just that, monsieur. She has gone. The maid says it. She herself packed some things and went out. And that is all I know. She just went. She told the maid she would not come back."

"But..." Baring felt exasperatedly impotent.

"Has anything been done to find out where she has gone?" he asked.

"I can do nothing, monsieur. It is hardly a matter for the police. Perhaps you will agree on that. What can I do?"

Baring asked one or two futile questions, received futile replies and rang off. At first he was nonplussed. Why should Gabrielle vanish into thin air without even confiding in the woman who was apparently one of her greatest friends?

He spent the afternoon pondering the problem, and it was only after dinner that a conviction gradually forced itself upon him that Malou had deliberately deceived him. It was so extraordinary that he should be

promised communication with Gabrielle and then should find out, the first time he endeavoured to get into touch with her, that she was out of his reach.

He had been cleverly jockeyed away from the house in the Avenue Niel so that time could be gained. The time had been sufficient. Gabrielle had vanished, and he was as far as ever from the meeting he so ardently desired.

He felt annoyed, not only with the woman responsible for this, but with himself. Up to the present, he thought, he had acted like a fool, Malou had done what she liked with him, told what lies she pleased, handed him any evasions she liked.

But now things should be different. He would not sit down and accept it all. He would go and see Gichot and try to find in him a clue to the mystery.

He went straightway from his dinner to the flat near the Porte Maillot, only to receive a fresh disappointment. Monsieur Gichot, said the concierge, was out. He was usually out in the evening. If Monsieur's business was so urgent he might call back and see Monsieur Gichot later—say eleven o'clock, or just after—to make sure, half-past eleven. That might be better. Monsieur Gichot would almost certainly be in then.

Baring spent the evening walking about and striving in vain to understand some part of the problem. Soon after half-past eleven he passed the Porte Maillot, walking in the direction of Gichot's flat. A few minutes' sharp striding brought him into view of the block, standing in a very quiet street, not too well lit, utterly deserted save for himself.

He was on the opposite side to the block of flats. He noticed at a corner as he walked past, a closed car standing with its engine running. The car had seemed about to move off, but checked as he came into view.

He did not know that the men inside the car were quietly cursing his advent and waiting until he should have gone on his way.

He was thinking of Gabrielle, wondering where she was, what she was doing, what mystery lay behind the shot he had heard in the house in the Avenue Niel and the explanation given him by Malou, when he saw lying on the pavement a black bulk, half-hidden by the shadows thrown across it by the tall buildings.

To the consternation of the men in the car he crossed towards Trevert's body, and the man in charge of Le Cagnard's gang lost his head and issued a sharp order. The car gathered speed and bore down on Baring.

Baring stood on the further pavement and his heartbeats were like hammer blows. He looked down at the man who was stretched on the stones, and recognized him. Very dimly, in the darkness, Baring could see his face, turned sideways, grey and set, his sprawled legs, his outflung arms.

It was the man he had seen stretched on the floor of the room in the Avenue Niel, not very many hours earlier, and Baring knew he was dead.

So that—and the realization made Baring feel sick—the man had been slain in that room in the Avenue Niel and now was dropped into this quiet street, as the simplest means of disposing of him. Gabrielle had killed him.

So dark was the pavement on which Trevert lay that Baring could not see the knife hilt which, protruding from his chest, was hidden by a fold of the dead man's coat. He was just about to stoop down and examine Trevert more closely when the car bore swiftly down upon him.

He heard a swift movement, and turned, and as he turned something crashed on to his head and he dropped without a sound. He awoke to find himself lying on grass behind some bushes, rather cold, with a rocking head and a temporarily imperfect recollection of what had occurred.

Sitting up Baring decided after some minutes of confused thought, that he was somewhere in the Bois and that it was very early in the morning. A glance at his watch confirmed this. His clothes were damp with dew, and a swift examination of his pockets told him that he had been robbed of all his cash.

His personal valuables had not been taken; it was evident that the thieves were very careful. They preferred to leave behind anything that might be traced, and thus lead to their discovery. But mille notes and lesser moneys could be spent without leaving any trail.

Baring staggered to his feet and clutched a tree trunk for support. The whole world seemed suddenly to whirl on a gigantic axis, and nausea swept over him. The man who had used the blackjack had used it well. At last Baring was able to walk to the road, and with the fresh morning air on his face and head he rapidly began to recover his power of thought, and with it his memory.

He had been bending over the man who had been killed in the Avenue Niel.... That was the first thing he remembered. The man who was killed in the room in the Avenue Niel, killed by Gabrielle.

Fiercely he tried to argue with himself that he must have been mistaken; but in vain. He had seen the man stretched on the pavement, had seen him

stretched on the floor of the room, had heard the heavy boom of that pistol which Malou had tried to tell him was a little pearl-handled affair, but which he knew to have been a heavy forty-four automatic. He had heard Gabrielle's voice begging that he should not be admitted to the room where the dead man lay. Gabrielle had killed him.

It was not so much of a shock to Baring as the establishment of something which subconsciously he had always felt to be true; yet it afflicted him with a numb despair.

He considered his own situation. It was possible that the men who had assaulted him had been concerned in the disposal of the dead man. On the other hand, they might have been motor-car bandits who had chanced on an easy and unsuspecting victim—for had they not robbed him? He could not decide which, nor could he decide immediately whether he should inform the police of the whole occurrence or remain silent.

He tried to reassure himself concerning Gabrielle. No doubt she was blameless; no doubt she had fired the fatal shot under great provocation—to save herself from dreadful usage. He believed that now he came to think of it. Malou's words had indicated it. But would the police believe it?

The law-abiding instinct within him insisted that he should inform the police of what he had seen. The lover in him cried out that he should ponder, hesitate, investigate before he did anything that might place Gabrielle under suspicion.

He wondered whether he could report the matter without endangering her; but decided that it would be impossible. He might tell the police nothing about the adventure in the house in the Avenue Niel, and merely relate the finding of Trevert's body on the pavement; but that would start a great inquiry, and that inquiry might lead the police to Gabrielle.

Baring shrank from this. He knew the Parisian Police methods, he knew their interrogation system, and the idea of Gabrielle facing an examining magistrate who accused, threatened, brow-beat and gibed, revolted him.

He found a wandering taxi and had himself driven to his flat. He was still in a state of indecision when he left his bath and got into bed, but the indecision did not prevent him from dropping into a sound sleep from which he awoke at lunch-time, feeling considerably refreshed and more able to tackle the problem sanely.

And still he could do nothing. He could not go to the police. He must, before everything else, satisfy himself that Gabrielle was innocent, the

victim of circumstance.

He had plenty of time at his disposal. There was no need for him to leave Paris at present. He would devote the whole of his time and energies in probing the mystery. The decision refreshed him. He felt that he was really about to do something worth while.

CHAPTER XX

There was a heavy drift of tobacco smoke in the air of the room, swirling in grey layers of moving cloud under the light of the lamps. The smell of it was mingled with that of sweet sickly perfume, of heated humanity, of sawdust. The combined odours made Gabrielle shudder.

She stood with Dekker at the curtained doorway. Dekker had brought her down from the bedroom where she had slept ever since he took her from Malou's flat in the big closed car. Gabrielle had no idea what part of Paris she was in, but she guessed it to be one of the basest because of the people who filled the long low cabaret into which she now looked.

There were tables alongside the wall with seats behind them, and a space cleared for dancing in the middle of the floor. There was a little bar athwart one corner with a negro in attendance behind it. Two Senegalese were extracting music from a saxophone and a still more battered piano. The crowd was singing a questionable song which had achieved considerable success on the French music-halls.

The French loved their musical successes. The popularity of them does not wane so quickly as in England and America. A good tune will be played again and again in new revue shows, and will be hummed and sung by the man in the street long after its prototype in Anglo-Saxon countries is forgotten.

Gabrielle looked round. There were pallid faces showing through the smoke wreath, little gleaming dark eyes and twisted, sneering mouths. There were painted faces, lips thickened and made into wounds with red paint; eyes unnaturally bright, hair barbarically frizzed.

Some of the people were singing; some were talking. Some were laughing. One man sat with his head pillowed in his arms, the swift fierce elation given by cocaine drained from him, leaving him corpselike, sunk in misery.

The babble and clamour of them all, the soft moaning of the saxophone, the crash of the piano, did not stir him, though it threatened to deafen Gabrielle. The drug he had used as his servant had become his master, and its grey shape was bending over him mocking him.

A man and girl stepped on to the dance floor. They might have been bound together with ropes so close were they as they straddled and grotesquely moved across the boards in a travesty of dance. Others followed them. They applauded the old music-hall song with its quickening lilt. They howled lines from it. The dance space was packed.

The reek of them—perspiration, perfume, wine smells, tobacco aroma, came at Gabrielle in sickening waves. The negro was tossing a cocktail shaker. The Senegalese, grinning like apes, were banging the tune out as though noise was the ultimate and only object of their efforts.

Dekker took Gabrielle's arm. "Some of Le Cagnard's people," he said, quietly.

Gabrielle turned to him swiftly, shocked, startled. Laroche had said she was Le Cagnard's daughter—but nobody else had mentioned the name of the arch-criminal to her. She had not believed it, and yet doubt had dwelt with her always.

Now, standing on the edge of this morass of vice and iniquity, she was deliberately told that she looked down on the servants of the fiend whose shadow lay across Paris.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Dekker still holding her arm, led her to a table. "You and I will talk," he said. He lifted an enormous finger and the negro came from behind his bar. "Café natural for ma'm'selle," ordered Dekker, "and a Pernod Fils for me. Make the coffee strong, and bring brioches and butter with it."

The food and drinks were brought. The effects of Gichot's drug had now completely worn off, and Gabrielle was grateful for the strong, black coffee and felt that the brioche could more satisfactorily have been replaced by a meal.

"We will have dinner in an hour or so," observed Dekker, splashing the water into the Pernod. "It is just six o'clock in the evening. You have slept all day. *À toi, ma'm'selle.*" He lifted his glass to his lips.

"Here," he added, "you will find shelter for a little while. You will be perfectly safe." He smiled at her, and she thought he looked more ferocious in his mirth than he might ever look in wrath. "You and I, more or less, are bound together. I serve Le Cagnard."

Gabrielle was making a tremendous effort to be calm, to think clearly, to refrain from giving way to despair. She tried, for the moment, to elude the

significance of Dekker's words. Of Le Cagnard, of what Le Cagnard might mean to her she dare not, just now, allow herself to think. She must concentrate on her position in relation to what had happened at Malou's flat.

The death of Trevert was—she thought—an accomplished fact. Dreadful reaction after that death had caused her to permit all kinds of things to be done with her, and those things made her case look black. She was in a serious and desperate situation, and though she could not quite decide what she ought to do, she was sure of one thing, that appeal to the police might prove exceedingly perilous for her, might, in fact, bring her into the shadow of the guillotine.

She was able to think these things calmly. The drugging had brought a great many hours of sleep to her, and the last eight of those hours had been calm and restful. She was alert in mind and body, and she was possessed of a will-power which might have disconcerted Le Cagnard and his people had they been able fully to gauge it.

"I want to know," she said quietly, "exactly where I stand in the matter of Trevert and where I am now."

Dekker looked at her with a little surprise. Her calmness astonished him; but after a second of reflection he decided that it was probably forced and did not indicate any power to think or act for herself.

"You are in La Villette," he replied. "This little place is a café dansant which I control. We call it the White Rat. I also control the people in it. That is something you might bear in mind. It is one of a number of night resorts under my management throughout the city, and while it is low down in the scale of these places, it is the safest of them all. I thought of your safety first. The surroundings were an after consideration. Hence your presence here. This place is private—a sort of club to which only known people are admitted."

"But how do I stand?" persisted Gabrielle. "What is going to happen to me?"

"That you will see," smiled Dekker. He swallowed his Pernod at a gulp. "I have one or two things to attend to. Continue to drink your coffee and eat the brioche. I will be back in a few minutes."

He went out with the ponderous movement of a big and heavy man. Gabrielle continued to consume the coffee, which was surprisingly good.

A man came across the dance floor and dropped into the chair vacated by Dekker. He was a short man with a not too intelligent face, a little carefully-waxed moustache, and an outrageous suit of new clothes cut on an extravagant pattern. He wore cloth-topped enamelled boots with pearl buttons, and on one of his fingers a diamond ring gleamed. Altogether he was a dandy in his way.

"Any trouble with the *flics*?" he asked, passing his hand across his smooth and well-oiled hair. He spoke in an affected voice.

"I don't know what you mean," replied Gabrielle. The little dapper man, with his flashiness, seemed rather harmless.

He laughed in a silly, cackling, affected fashion and winked knowingly. "Come off it," he said. "You're all right here. Any girl in this room will tell you that her secrets are well kept." He considered Gabrielle speculatively. "Though I wouldn't have said that you look the kind to shoot a man."

Gabrielle had been about to pick up the coffee cup. She refrained and sat looking at the little man. This fellow treated her with casual friendliness: he talked as though she were one with him and his kind; he accepted her as one of the great freemasonry of criminals—for she had killed.

He was smiling at her. "Don't look so startled, little one. I'm all right. I wouldn't let a pal down for anything. My name's Prinet—Auguste Prinet." He paused. "I like you. Do you want *un ami*? I make a good bit of money—jewels are my line. I've just turned a job that'll put me right for some while. If, when you feel safer, you'd like to go to Deauville, or Le Touquet, just mention it. I'll be with you. I'd see you had a good time."

Gabrielle shook her head. "I don't think so," she said. "I'd rather not go."

He shrugged his shoulders, and his eyes gleamed with intense and growing admiration. "You've got pretty hands. Never done much work, I bet. And you speak like a lady. I like refinement. I was always a man to dress and keep myself decent; and I like a woman to be a real woman. You and I will get on well together I'm sure. Excuse me."

He got up and walked across to where a man was beckoning to him from the bar. He took a drink and entered into deep conversation with this man.

Gabrielle sat and watched the whirl before her. At any other time, and in other circumstances, she would have laughed at the smug, pert little man with his talk of Deauville and Le Touquet. Now she could find no reason to smile, although amid her own unhappiness she had some pity for Prinet.

But for a malicious trick of fate, she imagined he might have graced some shop counter, have lived in a little house in the suburbs, the boastful, self-satisfied husband of some simple wife, who might have strutted across his tiny stage, as proud of his honesty as he was now of his misdoings, always liking to be refined, always atrociously over-dressed, but good-hearted, confiding, and altogether harmless.

A pitiful figure, thought Gabrielle—one of life's mistakes.

She was aware of two girls approaching her table. One of them was tall and dark, with black hair plastered glossily about a handsome, boyish insolent face. The other was fair, inclined to be plump, and her face expressed that hardness which is often seen in blondes, a keen mercenary face lit by grey eyes as cold as ice and definitely calculating.

"Hullo!" said the dark girl to Gabrielle. "My name's Annette. This is my little comrade, Louise. Got a fag?" She seated herself on the table. The fair girl sat down in the chair.

"I'm afraid I haven't," said Gabrielle.

The dark girl lifted plucked and pencilled eyebrows. "God Almighty, don't you talk educated? I wish I did. It's so damned useful if you meet a toff in the Opera district. He can take you out to Armenonville without you letting him down. Speak English, too?"

"Quite well," smiled Gabrielle.

The fair girl interjected. "You'll have to teach us. We've been going to a school to learn it, but it costs such a hell of a lot of money. Yet you must know it. These Americans and English won't trouble to learn French. They only know the names of drinks and little sentences like 'I love you.' 'You are very pretty.' Fools..."

The dark girl leaned sideways on the table. "I say. You've got a hell of a nerve—shooting Trevert. I wish I had your pluck. I do—honest. And nobody would think it, to look at you. I said to Louise just now, when you came in with Dekker—'Some baby!' An American I met in the Olympia Taverne taught me that. I speak a lot more American than I do English. He was a nice boy, but he hadn't got much money."

Louise observed: "I don't know, myself, why you should have killed Trevert. He wasn't so bad. He was one who ran after the women, but what would you? He'd never do any harm. He hadn't the guts of a rabbit. Frightened of his own shadow. What are you going to work next?"

Gabrielle was no longer drinking her coffee, and the brioche lay broken on the plate before her. She was sickened and shamed and afraid. The two women were so flauntingly evil, so vulgar, and so intimate. Their sentences were befouled with curses which may not be written. And they treated her as one of themselves.

They said that Trevert was harmless. She wondered, with some sick anxiety, whether she had allowed magnified terror to overtop her reason in these awful moments when Trevert died. She wished and wished, with all her heart and soul and might, that Trevert could walk in through the door opposite, and, by his coming, release her from this vile place where it seemed she must hide—at any rate until she was able intelligently to arrive at some decision as to her destiny.

The girls went on talking. Their talk now frightened her. She had never imagined women could talk so. She was about to protest, to order them away, when a man came in with L'Intransigeant.

He approached a group nearby, and asked quietly. "Where's Prinet? They've got full details of the job he did last night. Prinet, that was a wonderful necklace you pinched. And what about the bracelets? Hear this!" He read aloud, and Annette and Louise left Gabrielle and joined the crowd which gathered about him.

Listening, Gabrielle learnt that the previous night a flat in the Champs Élysées had been burgled and some valuable jewellery stolen, including a diamond necklace. Prinet stood at the bar and grinned. "Not I!" he declared. "I was at Chantilly. Père Buson can prove that. Alibi, my lads. Père Buson's word."

There was a roar of laughter. Prinet winked at Gabrielle and threw a chest. He picked up his glass and with his little finger extended so that the diamond on it shone in the lamp light, bowed towards Gabrielle and drank.

Annette called out: "Don't have anything to do with him, little one. He's only big enough to be wheeled in a baby chair."

Prinet snarled at her. His lack of stature was evidently a sore point with him. He hurled a rapid-fire insult at Annette, and Annette swore shrilly. Somebody in the crowd urged them on, and a first-class quarrel was developing when the curtains at the door parted, and a man came into the room. He had a flat head like a snake, glittering, little dark eyes, a twisted, sneering mouth, pallid cheeks. From the corner of his mouth dangled a cigarette.

"What's this?" he asked. The tumult died.

"Prinet's pinched some jewels, Machet," said somebody.

The Killer looked at Prinet and spat. Prinet was standing against the bar, making a valiant effort to look important, but uneasy and very self-conscious. "Is that anything wrong?" he demanded. "It was a clean job, and no danger because of its planning."

Machet laughed coarsely. "Bring me a drink," he ordered. "Here!" stabbing his finger towards the floor at his feet.

Prinet hesitated. "I'm not a damned waiter," he mumbled.

"*Hein?*" Machet leaned forward slightly.

Prinet gestured quickly. "All right. All right. If you want a bit of fun. I'm a man who can take a joke. Pernod?"

He brought the liquor across. Machet took it, swallowed half of it, and threw the rest in Prinet's face. "That's for your nice new suit," he snarled. "You pretty baby."

Little Prinet staggered back, wiping the pungent aniseed spirit from his face and dabbing at his waistcoat and tie. Gabrielle felt sorry for him, and was wondering whether it would be advisable to evince her sympathy openly when she saw that Machet was looking at her.

"Hello! Name of a name! Who's that?" He pointed towards Gabrielle.

Somebody whispered to him. Gabrielle heard the name Trevert. Machet lounged across to her table, his tiny, glittering eyes alight.

He leaned on the edge of the table for a little while, studying her, and then said: "You're pretty. You're the best-looking girl in this place. Come and have a dance."

"No thanks."

His brows came together. "I said dance—with me."

"I don't want to."

He put out a hand to seize hers lying on the table, but she was too quick for him. He swayed between anger and sardonic amusement. Everybody was watching them.

"Are you going to dance?" he asked.

Gabrielle had made her decision. This man, for some reason or other, was regarded with awe by the habitués of the place—probably because he was the most dreadful criminal of them all. His arrogance in itself was offensive. There was evil all about him. She spoke imploringly.

"I wish you would go away. I couldn't dance with you."

Machet's lips twisted hideously. He hissed. "You killed Trevert, but you'll find me more difficult. Come here!"

He leaned right across the table and seized her shoulder. She cried out involuntarily at the pain of his grip. And Dekker appeared.

"What are you doing, Machet?" he demanded.

"What the devil has it got to do with you?" snarled Machet.

"Everything." Dekker's big whip was swinging slowly. He was not looking at Machet's face, but at his right hand. The whip reminded Gabrielle of a snake coiled to strike. "This girl dances with whom she pleases. I'm looking after her for the boss. That's good enough for me—and for you."

Machet stood still and was silent. His eyes sought Gabrielle, returned to Dekker. Gabrielle knew that here was a crisis. Some of the spectators were drawing back. Dekker seemed easy, a giant confident in his immense strength. Machet was small, yet his lack of stature did not detract from the threat of him.

At last Machet laughed. "I'll wait," he said. He looked again at Gabrielle, and walked to the bar. Dekker sat down.

"Don't worry about him," he remarked. "One day I'll cut his throat for you with my whip."

He kept Gabrielle beside him in the den for several hours. He made no attempt to force her to dance, but talked about the people around them, told her of them, so that she understood fully what manner of place she was in.

There were thieves moving before her eyes, stealthy creatures of the night not long out of bed, carousing before they went to their unlawful work. There were women of the pavements and the lower cafés, women who stole and robbed and cheated, women who walked the outer boulevards and some who sought the brighter and more expensive haunts of Montmartre.

At last Gabrielle was allowed to go back to her room. Dekker accompanied her and left her at the door. Through all his undoubted

courtesy of the evening he had shown an admiration of her which Gabrielle found to be as terrifying as Machet's deliberate advances. He said to her: "You'll be all right, here. You depend on me and I'll see you're right. I want to be your friend."

He patted her cheek with a great clumsy hand. It was as if a bear pawed her. She crept into the room and seated herself on the edge of the bed, and the night outside was not darker than her thoughts.

How long she sat she did not know, but she was aroused by a quick and insistent tapping on her door. She sat rigid, leaning forward, her heartbeats filling her. The tapping went on, and a voice said: "Ma'm'selle. It is I, Prinet. Open the door but a few inches. I have something for you."

She hesitated. Prinet, she knew, was harmless enough, a weak, vainglorious little braggart with a fine opinion of himself, who wilted at the first breath of peril. It might be better to humour him, if only to get rid of him. She cautiously opened the door a little way.

A hand came round its edge. "For thee," whispered Prinet. "In admiration."

The hand withdrew, and she heard Prinet's footfalls hurrying away down the passage. She looked at that which dropped like white fire over her fingers. It was a diamond necklace. Prinet had given her the most valuable of the gems he had stolen.

Gabrielle laughed, and the laugh held tears. She stood in the horrid little room with the diamonds dripping towards the floor and her laughter ended with a choked despairing sob.

A thief gave her the proceeds of his thieving because he thought she would understand the compliment. Women of the streets, robbers, cheats, criminals, accepted her and treated her as one of their own kind. Was Le Cagnard really her father? Was this her inevitable heritage? Was she foredoomed to live with the lost?

She stumbled to her knees at the side of the dirty bed, the necklace locked and crossed in her hands, and whispered to the God Who made her.

CHAPTER XXI

Paul Laroche considered affairs. Gabrielle was safely in the hands of Dekker, and the matter was going well. She was surrounded by vile people, she believed that she had killed a man, that she was a fugitive from justice; she was accepted by her infamous associates as one of themselves; she was being schooled to regard with indifference that which at first might horrify her.

Laroche knew full well the truth of that adage concerning the constant dripping of water which wears away stone. He had plenty of time, where Gabrielle was concerned. Let her stay with the lost, live with them, eat with them, talk with them, until she became like them. Then he would make his next move.

That phase of his operations was eminently satisfactory.

His thoughts turned to Anton. There was something subtly different about Anton in these days. Laroche was not sure whether it was the result of the disclosure he had made to the boy or—something else; but the fact remained. Anton had changed; it was difficult to define the change that had taken place in him, but it could be sensed.

Laroche tried to tell himself that he was imagining it. Perhaps, in his tremendous eagerness to see Anton walk straightly in the world he was manufacturing anxieties without justification, just as an overfond mother will worry herself over her child when there is no need for worry.

He walked along to Anton's room. Anton had just finished dressing and was touching the ends of his bow. He looked over his shoulder as Laroche came into the room.

"Hello, father."

"Hello, Anton. Not dining at home to-night?" Laroche was looking into the mirror at the reflection of Anton's face.

"No, father. Somewhere out. Perhaps at the club."

Anton finished with his bow and turned and offered Laroche a cigarette. Laroche lit it and spoke deliberately.

"I wanted to ask you a question. Has anything happened lately to upset you?"

“Of course.” Anton replied quietly, and it seemed to Laroche that he was slightly on his guard. “Gabrielle; mother.”

“I meant something else.” Laroche’s gaze was very steady.

Anton laughed. The laugh was a little uneasy. “Why? I know of nothing. I suppose the shock...” He gestured indefinitely. “Those things take a lot of getting over.”

“H’m!” Laroche was silent for a moment, conscious of awkwardness between himself and the boy he loved with a love which was strange and paradoxical. He had it in his mind to ask Anton if there was a woman in the background, but a curious diffidence prevented him. He and Anton had never spoken of such things. There are many fathers in the world who make the same mistake. Laroche had never been Anton’s pal.

“All right,” he said at last. “I was a little worried. That’s all. I want you to be happy, my boy, and fulfil all the dreams I’ve dreamed about you.” He smiled. “I may see you when you come in, as I shall probably sit up late. I’ve some accounts to run through.”

Anton left the house feeling like a cheat. He had missed a fine opportunity of telling his father about Malou and he wished that his courage had not faltered at the critical moment. Such a chance might not easily occur again, and he felt that if he had seized it he might have persuaded his father to meet her, perhaps, even to permit him to bring her to dinner that evening. For Anton loved Malou passionately.

They dined at the Drouant and Malou expressed a desire to visit Montmartre, so afterwards they went up to the Abbaye Thélème. The place was very packed and had Anton not taken the precaution of having a table reserved by telephone before they left the restaurant he would have been forced to seek pleasure elsewhere.

L’Abbaye is one of the oldest of the big Montmartre night resorts, and Anton saw many beautiful women among its mixed clientele—the wives, friends and daughters of wealthy foreigners, danseuses come up the hill for an hour’s relaxation after their work at the big music-halls, the girls of the establishment, beautifully gowned, hardly to be distinguished from many of their more fortunate sisters present; but, to him, Malou was the most beautiful of all. Wearing black, with slight relief, Anton thought her superb, and as he leaned across the table towards her his admiration showed in his eyes.

Malou was not quite so guarded as she usually was when with Anton. The affair of Gabrielle had been a strain on her, and she was constantly thinking of the discoveries she had made in connexion with it. She had, in fact, thought of little else for many days and the habit had grown. The result was that, very slightly, the veil was down between Anton and herself on this night when they went to L'Abbaye.

Anton, dancing with her, sensed a difference—subtle, hardly to be explained, but true. There was a suggestion about Malou—nothing more—a hint of potentiality for evil, slight, elusive, yet not to be mistaken.

She was not like the girls of the place. She was not like the more sophisticated *amies* of the Argentines and the Greeks. Yet she seemed to possess some of the attributes of both—alluring in a strange and wicked fashion of which Anton, until this night, had been unaware.

He might have recoiled—for he had set her high, as on a pedestal, in his thoughts, but that, sensing the evil in her as they swayed across the dance floor, he found something within himself responding eagerly and quickly to it, as though a sleeping creature heard an old familiar call, wild and beckoning, and stirred.

He looked down into Malou's eyes. They were sleepy, deep with mystery, secret. Her rich lips were slightly parted, so that he could see the white teeth behind them. He wanted to crush his lips down on them, and draw love from them. She lay very close to him.

He was forgetting his surroundings and was dancing mechanically. Malou was not speaking. She was watching the kaleidoscope of his face and trying to understand all that he was thinking.

That sleeping creature within him found it hard to awake—it had been asleep so long. Anton, as he danced, was drugged with memories.

An old priest had once been his tutor when he was a lad. Anton could remember him very well—a dear old man with an unassumed and genuine holiness, sweet-natured as a woman. Often his goodness had irked Anton. Something in Anton had cried out against it. Goodness was not only a bore, it confined one's activities so much. A fellow should not have always to be good.

Perhaps that had been the very natural rebelliousness of a boy against discipline; but Anton was not sure. On this night when a chord within him responded to the suggestion of wickedness in Malou and, far from being

repelled, was attracted by it, he wondered if the rebellion had not possessed a deeper significance.

He could remember an extraordinary and irrepressible exultation when the priest had been grieved by some out-of-the-ordinary piece of mischief, and how he had chuckled slily for days over the old man's sorrow, while pretending contrition. That, too, might have been boyish mischievousness, but Anton was not quite sure.

When he left Malou at the door of her new flat he said to her: "Our meeting was the happiest chance of my life, *chérie*."

His hand was over hers. She turned her palm to his and squeezed his fingers. She said nothing, for Malou knew when silence was more effective than words.

Laroche, as he had promised, waited up for Anton. It had been a long and dreadful evening. He had sat alone in the library of his big house, and it seemed to him that, invisibly, creatures of the shadow-world audited and checked his life's accounts.

He had made vast sums of money. The nefarious work directed by Le Cagnard brought in rich rewards in the way of cash, and this cash was legitimately handled by the Laroche financial concern—legitimately and cleverly. Thus Laroche had become a figure in international finance, and the source of his wealth seemed obvious to all the world.

But to him, on this night, his financial success had turned to ashes. The woman whose scorn had flayed him as with a whip had died striking a catastrophic blow at him—had smitten him so that he tottered, and then had fled where he could not harm her. He had lost a much-loved daughter in an hour, and built up and maintained an edifice of hate for that daughter, while, paradoxically, mourning her loss. He sought to kill the girl, kill her body and soul, while he kept his daughter's memory alive.

And Anton. He felt that Anton was drifting further and further away from him. He felt alone, a solitary man staggering towards a black and predestined goal under the load of his uncountable sins, treading a pathway of gold but finding no pleasure therein—with only his thoughts and his own dark shadow to go with him.

He would this night make an effort to get closer to Anton. The effort before dinner had not been successful, perhaps because it was not properly conceived. But he would try again. He would try to get under Anton's skin. He would like to be with Anton as were Anton's friends of the boy's own

age—chatty, informal, without any restraint in their attitude towards each other.

He came out to meet Anton as Anton entered the hall.

“Had a good time?” he asked.

Anton was thinking of Malou. She had thrilled him this night. She had set his brain throbbing and his heart. He still could see her smiling up at him lazily, sleepily, secretly. He could still feel the warm pressure of her fingers on his. He felt uplifted and excited by these memories of her. He seemed to awake from reverie as his father spoke to him.

“Quite good. I’m tired.” He yawned. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

Laroche, who was Le Cagnard, who spoke soft words of command and knew they would be obeyed, whose tongue could order death to come to a man within an hour, said nothing to this man who was of his flesh.

“Good night.” Anton was walking towards the great sweep of the staircase.

Laroche stood and watched him. “I thought we’d split a bottle between us,” he said.

Anton smiled. “Had enough, I think. And I’m very tired. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not if it’s like that.” Laroche forced himself to smile, also.

Anton was thinking again of Malou before he reached the gallery across the back of the hall. Laroche stood and watched him until he disappeared; then he went to his library and sat down with his thoughts. The gold-foil necked bottle and the two glasses stood on the table where the butler had placed them against Anton’s homecoming. The gilt winked mockingly at Laroche.

He had so much gold and it seemed as useless as that about the bottle neck.

CHAPTER XXII

For several days Gabrielle did not go outside the house in La Villette. She was not told she must not leave, but she felt afraid to make any effort to reach the streets. Each night she sat in the underground den and rubbed shoulders with the habitués of the cabaret of the White Rat.

Little notice was taken of her. The fact that she was not regarded as an interloper further impressed her with the full horror of her position. She was accepted. She could do what she liked, please herself whether she danced or talked, or sat still and remained silent, because she was one of them.

Prinet was constantly there, as was Dekker. Machet came in and out, and always watched Gabrielle. She noticed that he did not dance, and this was mentioned as something unusual.

She realized that he refrained from dancing because he wanted to watch her. She found his scrutiny terrifying. He would stand by the bar, making no effort to draw near her, sipping his absinthe, and never take his eyes from her face.

Dekker would mumble about him but make no effort to interfere with him, and gradually Gabrielle understood that Dekker was not too sure about himself where Machet was concerned. Dekker controlled everybody else in the place; but everybody feared Machet. Dekker was nominally the master; but Machet did not acknowledge his mastery.

There was a clash of wills in progress. Machet saw in Dekker his one real obstacle to the securing of Gabrielle. Dekker saw in Machet a threat to his chance of possessing her.

The two men would sit silent, the giant lowering, clumsily truculent, toying with his whip, maintaining consistently that childlike pride in his dexterity which he had shown when first Gabrielle had met him on that night, which seemed so long ago, when she dined and danced with Baring and Calverley; Machet pantherine, vibrant with tense wild life, a living threat in himself.

Little Prinet talked to Gabrielle one night when Dekker was away from her.

“You liked the gems?” he asked in a low tone. “Keep them. You and I will have some good times one of these days, and I’ll get the diamonds

made up again, so that the damned *flics* won't recognize them."

Gabrielle hardly knew what to say. She held stolen property and to return it to the original thief would be dishonest. In fact, she had already decided that, at the first opportunity she would send the necklace to the police.

"You shouldn't have given it to me," she said at last.

Prinet smiled the smile of a man who does big things easily. "I'm like that," he declared. "If I fall in love with a woman she can have everything I've got. I'm not mean."

"But you mustn't fall in love with me," said Gabrielle, quickly—alarmed.

"I have," said Prinet simply. "You're my style. I like a lady. I'm refined myself. Look at Machet. God help us. A murdering fiend, and nothing more. Never looks smart. Now I'm different." He rose hastily. "I must go and see a friend."

Gabrielle saw Machet walking down the room. Machet deliberately turned aside and barred Prinet's way as the little man left the table.

He called Prinet a name, and the little man lost some of his fear and flared at him.

"I can talk to the girl if I want to, Machet. Why shouldn't I?"

Machet grinned. "Because I'm waiting to talk to her." His voice was hissing, soft, smooth. He looked past Prinet at Gabrielle. "I'm very patient," he said slowly. "I can wait. I prefer to wait. But meantime I won't have you fishing round, Prinet. Understand?"

Prinet swallowed. This was taking place before everybody and he felt that he was losing caste.

"Why shouldn't I?" he repeated feebly.

Machet put out his hand, seized Prinet's shoulder, and threw him aside. He walked to the counter and called for his usual drink. Prinet went out. There was a little titter of laughter.

With Machet's arrival, Dekker came and seated himself beside Gabrielle, and did not again move away from her.

Machet remained at the bar, drinking slowly and with deliberate purposefulness, talking to nobody, ignoring the rest of the people in the room, watching Gabrielle.

The dancing went on. The violin shrilled and the piano crashed. Voices were lifted in song. Feet shuffled across the boards. The negro served his drinks, juggled with the cocktail shaker, and threw coarse jests to his clients.

And all through it Machet leaned on the bar and watched Gabrielle. Dekker stayed with her, speaking but little, his right hand resting on the stock of his tremendous whip.

Behind the clamour and the movement of the dancers, the crash of bizarre music, the howling of the vulgar songs, crept threat, sinister and stealthy.

Gabrielle was quivering with fright. A crisis was rapidly approaching; the giant at her side, and the snake at the bar, were measuring each other.

The door at the far end opened and a loud shout rang through the room. "Where's my girl?"

Prinet had come back, and Prinet was arrogantly intoxicated.

Prinet walked right down the middle of the room. His face was flushed and his gait was not too steady. But though he reeled very slightly, he carried himself with a ridiculous air, a sort of swagger, his shoulders set well back, his little chin thrust forward.

There was nothing repulsive in Prinet's drunkenness at the moment. Gabrielle saw it as a pitiful thing. The man had swallowed brandy or that same Pernod which Machet consumed, and the potent spirit had persuaded him that all his own ideas regarding his importance, his courage and his force of character were true. It was an ironic masquerade that Gabrielle witnessed—an ass clad in a lion's skin, with all the world aware of the deception save the ass.

The den was silent. The band ceased to play, as though an invisible conductor had stricken it to silence with a baton stroke. Gabrielle saw Dekker's hand close tight over the stock of the whip and, moved by desperation, she turned to him and whispered: "If this means something terrible, will you stop it?"

Dekker shrugged his shoulders. "I am no peacemaker. I cannot prevent men quarrelling." His eyes were on Machet.

Machet continued to lean on the bar. He called for another drink. He had not looked toward Prinet, and while the drink was being served he lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the one he was smoking.

Prinet shouted again. “Free will! I’m no man’s slave. I’m my own master —I, Prinet! Auguste Prinet. Hear that, all of you. I do what I like.”

He swayed slightly, his brilliant eyes fixed on the back of Machet’s head. Then he turned to Gabrielle and blew a kiss towards her.

“Hello, *ma vie*. Send that big lout away and let a gentleman sit next to you.”

Gabrielle said softly. “Please don’t let him offend you. Can’t you make him go?”

Dekker laughed. He had a gift of roaring laughter which seemed to bespeak the incarnation of jollity and good humour. Now it rang loud and long, thundering through the place, as though a Titan stood, legs astride, hands on hips, and found a monstrous joke.

“Go home, Prinet,” he said. “Come again to-morrow. And don’t call me a lout. I’m not. It hurts my feelings.” His laughter rang out once more.

Prinet blinked and shook his head. He pointed to Machet. “I won’t go home and leave him here,” he declared. “If he stays—I stay.”

Dekker grunted. Much against his will, he had endeavoured to get Prinet out of the way, and the little fool persisted in staying. Dekker drank philosophically.

Gabrielle herself made a desperate effort to send Prinet out. To her it was horrible that Machet should completely ignore the little man—not because such ignorance constituted a contemptuous insult, but because she read a sly and awful threat in it. Machet, she thought, was telling himself that it was far more enjoyable to continue drinking and smoking than to waste time in wordy warfare.

“If I ask you to go—will you go?” she said.

Prinet stepped forward. “You don’t want me?” He tried to be dramatic. He might easily have been comic, but for the peril in which he stood.

“I like to see you; but you must go now. Will you?”

Prinet stood silent. “I don’t see why...” he mumbled.

“I’m a man—a first-class man.” He held out his right hand. “See those fingers. Delicate they are—artist’s fingers. With the tips of my fingers I can feel the wards of a combination move.” He kissed his finger tips. “Money earners—my dear; money for me and for you.”

"Please go," urged Gabrielle. "I will see you another time."

Prinet bowed exaggeratedly. "As you wish. To me it is a command. I go not because he is here, but because you ask me to go." He wheeled about. "Keep a clear path for Prinet, everybody. I'm going home."

He had taken three steps towards the door, and Gabrielle's heart was filled with welling thankfulness, when Machet turned indolently round and said: "A moment."

Gabrielle heard Dekker's breath go hissing through his teeth. He now held the whip poised a few inches above the table, ready for instant use. His eyes roved quickly round the room, noting the positions of the various men, marking the more dangerous of them, considering the strategic qualities of his own position should a mêlée develop.

Prinet looked over his shoulder. He waved his hand. "She tells me to go. I go. She is my queen, the ruler of my life."

"I ask you to stay." Machet spoke gently. He tapped the ash from his cigarette, his back against the bar, his legs crossed.

"I need no asking from you," snarled Prinet. "I stay if I wish. I go if I wish."

Machet tossed the cigarette aside and walked away from the bar to where Prinet stood. His movement was easy, swift, catlike.

"You say you're going," he said. "Go for good. Don't let me find you here again. That's all, Prinet. No more."

Prinet laughed. "Who'll stop me? I'm as good a man as you, Machet."

Machet flung a name in his teeth.

Prinet came forward, and there was steel in Machet's hand, as though it had leapt there of its own volition.

Gabrielle heard Machet's high cry: "Those artist's fingers, Prinet!" She heard Prinet's shrill agonized shriek. She saw the knife-blade dulled, with Prinet on his knees, his right hand covered by his left, hugged to his chest, with redness creeping down his arm. She dared not look at what lay on the floor.

They carried Prinet out, but before they did so Dekker had pushed Gabrielle through the inner doorway and told her to go to her room. She heard his great voice yelling for music, and she heard Machet laughing. The

laughter followed her up the stairs, music and laughter—and her memory of Prinet's livid face.

CHAPTER XXIII

Baring, having made up his mind thoroughly to investigate the circumstances surrounding Gabrielle, lost no time in taking the initiative. He paid a visit to the man whom he had previously decided might be able to give him information—Gichot.

Gichot, prior to Baring's arrival, had carefully read through the document Trevert had left in his charge. It astonished and appalled him.

It was, in round terms, a more or less detailed statement of Trevert's association with the gangs controlled by Le Cagnard. It gave lists of the names of such people as Trevert knew to be associated with Le Cagnard and his activities—omitting only Gichot's name—and it gave full details of all the crimes in which Trevert had been engaged, together with details of the plot to entrap Gabrielle.

Trevert had omitted nothing. He had condemned all his friends, save Gichot. He had written down addresses which were known only to Le Cagnard's servants. He had been scrupulously careful to adduce as much proof as was possible of his statements.

The document would have been invaluable to the police. With it they could have wrecked Le Cagnard's organization, and though it contained no clue to the real identity of the master criminal, because Trevert did not know that identity, it would have rendered him powerless.

Gichot understood this when he had finished reading. His temples were wet with perspiration and his hands shook. What he wanted was champagne. A man needed champagne after reading a thing like that.

Fancy Trevert writing it all down! Fancy committing to paper information which meant the guillotine for some, prison for many, starvation and penury for others! That was a man for you, if you like! So long as he tried to ensure his own miserable safety, nobody else counted.

Gichot was beginning to fill with righteous indignation against Trevert when the indignation evaporated suddenly and left him thinking.

Trevert might be selfish, but his selfishness was that of a wise man. Such a document was, as Trevert had said, the finest life insurance one could possess. Would Le Cagnard kill Trevert if Le Cagnard knew that by so doing

he would automatically permit such damning evidence to fall into the hands of the police? Trevert might be selfish, but he was also shrewd.

Gichot pondered for a long time, and then wrote his own name under the signature of Trevert, considered it, and then wrote beside it: "I, Auguste, Bernard Gichot, having been concerned in all the matters set out above, hereby add my testimony to this statement."

That, he thought, was businesslike and not to be mistaken. He folded the document and put it into another envelope and heavily sealed it. Across it he wrote: "To be forwarded at my death to the Chef de Sûreté, Paris."

Then Baring came.

Gichot greeted him effusively. Gichot was one of those men who greeted everybody effusively—one of the hearty handshake—"How do you do old man?" type. He invited Baring to smoke a cigar. He thought a bottle of champagne might be a welcome diversion, though it was only eleven o'clock in the morning. Baring accepted it. His head might benefit from it. They toasted each other, and Baring began to speak.

"I wanted to see you about that affair the other night in the Avenue Niel," he said.

"What affair?" asked Gichot. He was trying to remember whether Baring had been aware of his complicity in it. It was difficult. Lots of things had happened since then, and Gichot never had a great memory for details.

Baring was looking straight at him. "I mean when the man was killed."

"Good God! Whatever are you saying?" Gichot's tone and expression were indicative of the liveliest concern and astonishment.

Baring had thought out the whole of his procedure before arriving. He had been quite prepared for Gichot to be astonished, quite prepared for his denials.

"Of course," he reflected aloud, "you knew nothing of it. I ought to tell you." He related how, wandering in the corridors, he had heard a shot, had rushed upstairs to the flat above, and had been sent away by Malou.

Gichot listened to all this with polite attention and indications of growing astonishment.

"You amaze me. You have, of course, gone to the police?"

"Not yet," said Baring. He was reserving his trump card for the time when Gichot felt absolutely secure, so that its appearance would be more

effective in shaking Gichot. “As a matter of fact, I think that a lady in whom I am rather interested is involved, and that has made me hesitate.”

Gichot was relieved and at the same time, curious. Was Baring particularly keen on Malou? A wonderful woman—Malou. She drew men to her like flies to a honeypot. She had only to lift her finger and men flocked around her.

“She’s very beautiful,” he said, with a smile. “I, too, have always admired her.”

Baring stared at him for a moment, and then realized that Gichot talked of Malou. It was in Baring’s mind to correct the misapprehension when he realized that it was better to permit it to exist. Gabrielle might stand in greater danger than ever—if she were in danger at all—should it be known that he was seeking her.

“Of course,” he agreed. “Everybody admires her. Now I like you. I told myself, when first I met you, that you were a man in whom one could confide.”

The audacity of this flattery escaped Gichot. He threw a chest and murmured: “Awfully good of you. I think I’m a man who knows how to keep a confidence. Yes. I do.”

“This is the point,” said Baring, quietly. He was trying to find out how much Gichot knew, and wished to do so without ostentation. “At the time of the occurrence in the Avenue Niel I was uncertain as to what had happened. You see, I was reassured as to the seriousness of the matter, and I left the house satisfied in my own mind that there was nothing to worry about.”

Gichot was listening intently.

“Now,” continued Baring, watching Gichot very carefully, “we know that gaming-houses, if properly conducted, are not interfered with; but at the same time it is likely to go hard with anybody inside their doors should something serious occur.”

“Yes?”

Baring leaned forward. “Since that night I have received irrefutable proof that the man I saw lying on the floor of that room is dead.”

Gichot had been reaching out for his champagne. The movement stopped, and he sat staring at Baring, his lips slightly parted, his arm motionless.

Then he said with an effort: “How do you mean—irrefutable proof?”

“I saw him lying dead on the pavement outside this block of flats near midnight the other night.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” breathed Gichot. He sat back. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief and his hand trembled as he did so. “That’s impossible, monsieur. Are you sure?”

There was no mistaking the incredulity in Gichot’s eyes. He had known nothing of what Baring was revealing to him.

“As sure as we sit here together,” Baring said. “I’ll tell you about it.” He told Gichot of his finding of Trevert’s body and what had afterwards befallen him. “Now comes the mystery,” he added. “Who removed the body? There is no mention in the newspapers of a murder. Yet that man was dead. I have seen many men dead, for I fought through four years of warfare, and I knelt down beside him and looked at his face. He was dead. I was knocked out and the body removed. Who was behind it all?”

Gichot could have told him. Trevert had been wise beyond Gichot’s conception of him. Trevert, when he feared death, had been forewarned surely. Le Cagnard had slain him on Gichot’s very threshold. That was the kind of reward Le Cagnard’s servants got for obeying his behest. It was as if Le Cagnard whispered into the affrighted Gichot’s ear that he would be the next. Le Cagnard was removing witnesses.

Baring could see that Gichot was shaken, and he strongly suspected that something more contributed to the emotion than friendship for the dead man. Gichot was too light and too easy to be strongly affected by the misfortunes of his friends, however grave they might be.

Gichot swallowed champagne. He poured out more and swallowed that. The wine revived and steadied him.

“Awful,” he muttered. “Awful. That man was a friend of mine.”

“What was his name?” asked Baring.

“Trevert.” Gichot replied before he realized what he was doing, cursed himself for a fool, had an impulse to try and rectify the error, and prevented himself in time from making an effort which would not only have been useless, but might have aroused Baring’s suspicions.

“I can’t advise you,” he added, while Baring made a mental note of the name. “I can’t tell you what to do.” He poured out more champagne for himself. “It’s a terrible thing,” he said reflectively. “Terrible.”

Trevert had asked him to forward that document to the police should he ever be killed; but now that document could not be forwarded, because Gichot had signed it, and it would condemn Gichot. Yet the need for its existence was proved beyond all argument. Unfortunately for Trevert, Le Cagnard had killed him before Trevert had time to tell his formidable master of the existence of the paper.

That was it. Trevert had been too late, or Le Cagnard too soon. Time was of importance. Why—even at that moment men might be seeking Gichot, to slay him. Gichot's blood turned to water at the thought.

He considered Baring. Trevert had had him, Gichot, to turn to as a trusted friend. He had nobody. Yet this man before him claimed some sort of friendship with him, and was, into the bargain an honest man, one who could be trusted. Driven and desperate, believing that every hour was of the utmost importance, Gichot made a rapid decision.

"Monsieur, would you do something for me—something which is of tremendous importance, and which I would prefer to leave in your hands, because I know I can trust you?"

"What is it?" asked Baring.

Gichot went to the bureau in which he had left the envelope, found another envelope and put the original inside it. This second envelope he also sealed and brought back to the table.

"I have here," he said, "an envelope containing important and valuable papers. They are inside a second envelope, and on that second envelope are instructions as to their disposal. I propose to put them in a safe deposit in your name and ask you to hold the key."

Gichot paused. "We shall doubtless be seeing each other often in the future, and communicating with one another; but should one month elapse without your hearing from me in any way I would ask you to go to the safe deposit, take out this packet, open the outer envelope, and obey the instructions written on the inner envelope. May I rely on you to help me?"

Baring considered before replying. He had a shrewd idea that this suggestion was made because he had told his story of the finding of the man Trevert dead on the pavement. But he had committed himself to investigate the affair, and though he had no wish whatsoever to be connected with Gichot's business he felt that he should not neglect any chance, however remote it might seem, of penetrating further into the maze.

"I should be pleased to do anything for you," he said.

Gichot heaved a sigh of relief. That was what he wanted—a sound, honest, reliable man to take charge of the envelope for him, one who was outside the crime and its furtive considerations, one who would, at the right time, act without thought of consequences to himself, and one who would keep his promise not to meddle until that time came.

"It is understood," he said, "that these papers are private. You will not interfere with them?"

Baring smiled. "I understand."

Gichot produced a fountain pen and wrote on the outer envelope: "To be handed to Mr. Thomas Baring on request."

"Now, *mon vieux*," he said briskly, "we shall finish this little business, you and I, and it will be all square."

He took Baring to a safe deposit near the Opera, rented a compartment, and handed Baring a key. His next step would be to let Le Cagnard know of the precaution he had taken.

They parted. Baring a little mystified by Gichot's behaviour, more mystified by the whole affair, utterly unconscious of the ironic fact that in the key to Gichot's compartment in the safe deposit he held the key to the whole mystery.

CHAPTER XXIV

Malou considered the story of Le Cagnard's daughter, as told to Dekker and herself under a ban of secrecy by Le Cagnard himself.

It was much the same story as Laroche had told Gabrielle. Le Cagnard, it seemed, many years earlier, had met a woman highly placed in Parisian society. A love affair had developed, and a daughter had been born. No names had been given by Le Cagnard; but Malou had since learnt a name which gave Le Cagnard's story a new and tremendous significance provided it were true. Baring had told Malou that the girl who called herself Gabrielle Lebrun was Gabrielle Laroche, daughter of the great Laroche, the banker.

Malou was developing in those days.

All that latent cleverness which had enabled her to entrap men and still preserve an extraordinary appearance of what, for want of a better term, might be called respectability, was making itself apparent. She was a cool, clever creature, feline in her patience, poised, reasoning, strong enough to play a lone hand, cunning enough to use the wariest of men as her instruments.

Thinking of Le Cagnard's story regarding his daughter, thinking of what Baring had said, of these and many things, she suddenly realized something which had hitherto escaped her.

She saw a way to discovering the identity of the being called Le Cagnard.

Malou marshalled the facts as she knew them, provided Le Cagnard's story was true.

He had, when a younger man, met and loved the wife of Paul Laroche, the great financier. Malou believed Baring's account of Gabrielle's parentage, because Baring had spoken with every appearance of truthfulness.

From this Malou deduced that Le Cagnard under another name and in a different guise, had been, and perhaps still was, able to move in the most exclusive circles.

She knew, from her own operations, and those of the people who were her confidants, that Le Cagnard must draw a large revenue from his

nefarious business, so that it was not illogical to picture him as a wealthy man, living in the best part of Paris, going about the city in great cars, attending the races, visiting Deauville and Monaco.

Perhaps she had often seen him, without knowing that he was Le Cagnard. Perhaps, even, she had endeavoured to make his acquaintance. That would have amused him. She could permit him the amusement. It would have amused her, had she been aware of the situation.

But what power would be hers if she unmasked him! What wealth could she achieve! It would even be better than marrying Anton Laroche—to know Le Cagnard's secret and thus be free of him because of his fear of her.

She must act carefully, and her first moves must be directed towards discovering somebody who could tell her a great deal about the Laroche family and its affairs more than twenty years earlier. Anton would be of no use. He would not remember. But there must be some relative, some old friend, who, properly handled, would divulge the information.

Malou had decided this when she received a summons. It came through the usual channels, but, being unexpected, frightened her. Le Cagnard wished to see her that night.

She was not due to interview her master for more than a week, and the unexpectedness of the call chilled her. Why should Le Cagnard want her? Knowing her intentions regarding him, she was rendered more afraid than she might have been, although she tried to reassure herself that it was impossible for Le Cagnard to have read her thoughts.

That night she went to the tall dark house above the Butte Montmartre and stood in the blinding light before the formidable thing that ruled her destiny, and listened to the familiar unmistakable voice.

"I have sent for you," said Le Cagnard, "because I wish you to cease certain operations you are now carrying out. It has been reported to me that you are very friendly with, and always in the company of Anton Laroche, the son of Paul Laroche, the financier."

The name Laroche again! Le Cagnard was more than interested in this family! He took the girl whom Paul Laroche must have imagined to be his own daughter. He banned the entrapment of Laroche's son.

Malou, striving to keep her features from expressing her thoughts, considered these things swiftly, while Le Cagnard awaited her reply.

“He is a rich young man,” she said. She nearly added that Anton was fond of her, but refrained. She was too wary to tell Le Cagnard anything more than he already knew.

“He may be. But there are others. I am ordering you to see him no more.”

Malou shrugged her shoulders. “Things are going well. While he does not pretend to be in love with me, he seems to like buying me presents and if I handle him properly there should be money in it at last. But he is very difficult.”

This, she thought was non-revealing. She had made similar reports on other men in the same casual fashion. Le Cagnard could not conclude from her tone that she was particularly interested.

“Nevertheless,” said Le Cagnard, quietly, “it shall cease—from now. If you have an appointment with him you will not keep it. You will cease to know him, cease to communicate with him. That is my word.”

“But why?” asked Malou.

The form moved impatiently.

“Is it your place to ask me questions?”

Malou forced back the resentment which threatened to mount to her eyes. She was this thing’s slave. It had slain Dupont, the only man she would ever love. It ordered her ways for her. She lived by its favour. She might die because of its wrath. She was more chained than ever was the serf in the days of the ancient tyrannies. She was a pawn to be moved across the board and sacrificed if the ends of the creature before her could so be achieved.

She hated Le Cagnard with a still, sure hatred, more formidable than wild wrath. Yet she spoke quietly:

“I wondered if there were anything I should know. I have worked long and hard in connexion with Anton Laroche, given up many evenings to his company, evenings which have often bored me.”

“There is nothing you should know.”

Malou looked sullen. It would be best to find out to what lengths Le Cagnard would go in his efforts to keep her from Anton. It might be essential to the development of her plans that she should see Anton again, and she would wish to know exactly what she faced in doing so. Planning

far ahead, foreseeing many moves as yet undeveloped, she would probe the position.

“I don’t see why...” she began.

Le Cagnard leaned forward. He spoke very gently and without haste.

“Malou. You have always served me well. Such as you are, I value you and your services. Therefore, I still warn you. On the occasion that you see Anton Laroche again you make up your mind to die. Do you understand! A decision to meet him again is a decision to commit suicide. That is my last word to you.”

She knew the weight of it then. This strange creature, Le Cagnard; this hideous being who ruled her, was so concerned in the affairs of the Laroche family that he had not only been the lover of Madame Laroche, but he would slay to preserve Anton Laroche from spoliation.

“As you wish, master,” she said.

“All right. You have boasted that your memory is long, Malou. The longer your memory of this interview, the longer your life.”

She did not answer. The matter was ended so far as she was concerned. Only the most desperate of situations, or the most unexpected of chances, would permit her to meet Anton again. But the interview had been illuminating.

“You may go.”

She went out. She was not frightened. More and more she felt that she was getting a grip of the problem she had set herself. Every development brought her nearer to a solution of the problem. Its salient points repeated themselves again and again in her brain—Le Cagnard and the Laroches, Le Cagnard and the Laroches. Where was the connexion?

Le Cagnard, preparing to leave, told himself that Malou had unexpectedly shown herself a fool in her obstinacy. It did not occur to him that she was the most dangerous woman in Paris.

CHAPTER XXV

The hideous fate of Prinet threatened to prostrate Gabrielle. She had just begun to recover somewhat from her previous ordeal, and the memory of the poor little man reeling so pitifully to the floor, maimed, with Machet grinning down at him, made her ill. She stayed in her room for two or three days, and the tall, dark girl, Annette, attended to her.

Gabrielle found that Annette, despite her coarse speech and flagrant vulgarity, was not a bad sort.

"You're strange," she said to Gabrielle on one occasion. "You kill Trevert, and yet you flop out when a fool like Prinet gets what he asked for. His own common sense should have told him to leave a snake like Machet alone. I hate Machet myself, but I always smile at him and dance with him if he wants me to. It's safer."

"Do you like being here?" asked Gabrielle.

"Don't know. Never think about it. It's safe. Only known people can get in—old-fashioned people, if you understand me. A detective would have as much chance of finding his way into this joint as he would have of jumping off the Eiffel Tower and hitting the ground without injury. Sometimes, of course, I'm lucky and get away from Paris with somebody or other. Dekker's not so bad—but one must watch him. If he gets wild he's terrible. He's like a kid, you know. Thinks he's God Almighty because he's strong. But he hasn't got any brains, and that's a fact."

Gabrielle pondered on this. Then she said: "Suppose I didn't like it here. Could I go off at any time?"

Annette looked at her slily. "Trying to pump me? Well, you're a decent kid. I like you, and I still can't understand how you managed to get Trevert. I'll tell you this. Don't try running away from here unless you've got enough money to pay a long, long railway journey—far out of Paris. Don't just skip and hang about the city. They don't like people to leave."

"I understand," said Gabrielle, despairingly.

"You see, it's dangerous. It means that those people don't care for the place and those who come here; and anybody like that might one day give the game away." Annette paused. "I don't know why you don't like it. There's always plenty of fun going on. I should stick it if I were you."

Gabrielle felt she must justify her question. “I’m afraid of Machet and Dekker.”

Annette laughed. “They’re sweet on you. We can all see that. Holy Mother! I wish they were on me. I’d have some fun. Why don’t you get at them both—make them quarrel? I would. Play one off against the other. That’s the way to make life sparkling. I wish I had the chance.”

“But they’d kill each other!” protested Gabrielle.

“So? Why should that worry you? What’s Dekker? Only a great baby with the strength of a bull. And Machet? I tell you it makes me shudder to look at Machet. I could picture that the way to kill that fellow would be to put one’s heel on his head, like one would a snake by the roadside. That’s what Machet is. So why worry?”

This talk with Annette troubled Gabrielle a great deal. She knew that Annette had spoken the truth about the danger she would have to face if she decided upon flight.

She went out for a walk one day when she felt a little better; and she had not gone far before she realized that she was followed. She tested this by standing before a shop window which had a mirror fitted at an angle. This mirror showed her the street behind her, and a man, pretending to gaze into another shop window, whom she recognized as an habitué of Dekker’s establishment.

Annette had been right. They kept her under surveillance and their methods would be ruthless if she attempted to escape.

She turned away from the mirror and walked on.

She was in a trap. She was beleaguered by creatures whom she loathed and feared. She did not know what was going to happen to her. She did not know where to look for a way of escape. A wave of panic rushed over her. On the opposite side of the street a gendarme strolled along, a little ahead of her. She would appeal to him.

She began to cross the street. But swiftly as she moved, a figure more swiftly came to her side. A voice said quietly: “Remember you killed Trevert.”

Her heart stopped. She had slain a man, and had been about to place herself within the grasp of the law. She returned to her own side of the street again, and Dekker’s spy followed her.

He followed her whenever she went out.

Every time she walked the streets she wanted to run away, but every time she returned with the spy at her heels. She knew not a waking moment when fear was absent from her. She felt crushed in spirit, without hope.

Annette was now always talking to her and she learnt that Louise had found "*un ami*" who had taken her to the seaside. Gradually Annette's foulness ceased to horrify Gabrielle. She could listen to Annette's talk without being shocked. She conversed with Annette on all manner of subjects, and, by degrees, began to like talking to the girl so long as Annette refrained from swearing and uttering indecencies.

That stone-wearing process on which Paul Laroche counted for the achievement of his ends was justifying his confidence in it.

And all the time Gabrielle felt that the tension between Machet and Dekker was growing. Machet had made no more attempts to speak to her, and Dekker now did not guard her quite so closely, for he had other activities to occupy his time.

Machet left her unmolested solely because he was awaiting his opportunity.

After all, Dekker was master. He had told Machet not to speak to Gabrielle nor to molest her in any way. Machet had either to obey that command or disobey it, and if he disobeyed it he could precipitate a crisis.

As Machet went about his evil business he debated the point—whether he could face Dekker's wrath with the knowledge that he would be victorious. Dekker was a dangerous man—but so was Machet. Dekker was immensely strong, utterly ruthless, and he possessed, in his great whip, an unusual and fearful weapon. Machet was strong and quick, and nobody in all Paris could throw a knife as he could.

Machet debated all these things, but Gabrielle knew nothing of the thoughts that passed through Machet's mind. She knew only that she never ceased to fear him.

The fact that he constantly came to the White Rat gave her the feeling that she was always menaced.

Machet, studying her from afar off, had found his first impressions of her gradually strengthened. To him she became more and more the one woman in all Paris whom he wanted. She was something not easily attained and therefore trebled in value.

Gabrielle knew, from that moment onwards, that it was only a question of time; that she sat in the threatening shadow of a storm cloud and that at any moment the cloud might burst.

CHAPTER XXVI

Though Malou dared not for the time being disobey Le Cagnard's order that she was no more to see Anton, she departed in one small point from the details of her instructions. She communicated with Anton. She wrote him a little note saying that she found it impossible to see him again.

The note gave no reason and was very carefully written; in fact, it took Malou a long time to compose it, for she wished to infuse into it a hint of tenderness—she wished, moreover, that that little note should still maintain a thread of communication between Anton and herself so that, if ever it became necessary, she could, by means of that thread, draw Anton to her side once more.

Malou was very much like a general preparing for a campaign. She had a fair knowledge of the terrain, but not a complete knowledge. She could make some moves with sureness; others she must defer until she understood the whole situation. She guessed that great opportunities might arise. She was willing to acknowledge that she might be mistaken and that no such opportunities would ever come her way; but she must be prepared for them. In matching her wits against Le Cagnard's she had to be ready for anything and everything.

The arrival of her note marked a change in Anton which was instantly apparent to Laroche. The boy was plunged into despair after the first shock of incredulity had passed. He telephoned Malou's flat to be told that she had gone away. He telephoned the house in the Avenue Niel, but was informed that they knew nothing of her. She had vanished.

Anton was distraught. He sought Baring and told him what had happened, and Baring tried to comfort him, but without succeeding. Anton ceased to go out in the evening, save occasionally to visit his club. He sat about miserably, now and again fitfully haunting restaurants and places where he might meet Malou.

And Laroche noticed all these things and understood their meaning.

Malou had been very clever, he thought. She had surely entrapped Anton, while remaining unaffected herself. It showed how valuable a servant she was, even though she might prove dangerous when she happened to meet his son. Anton had been infatuated with her, and Anton was now despairing because he could not see her.

Laroche sent for him.

"I think," said Laroche, "that the time has come to talk rather seriously of your future."

"Yes?" said Anton. He felt that he had no future.

"I have been invited by the directorate of a British financial trust to join their board. The Trust is a very reputable one, solidly established and immensely wealthy. I shall need somebody in London to watch over my interests, and I have suggested that instead of joining the board, I should invest a large sum of money in the trust and that you should take my seat as a director. I think they will reply in the affirmative."

"Does that mean that I live in London?" asked Anton, quietly.

"Of course. The Trust has offices in the city of London, somewhere near the Bank of England. I would suggest that you take one of the new mansion flats they have built in Park Lane, or, if you wish, you can rent a house in Audley Street or Curzon Street, or that district."

Anton looked at his father for some time without speaking; then he said: "That talk suggests to me that you have something else in your mind—a house, a big flat.... I can only see one meaning."

"Exactly," smiled Laroche. "I was thinking of Jeanne Bosquet."

Anton's thoughts went back to a visit he and Gabrielle had paid to the Bosquet mansion at Amiens. Leon Bosquet was a business associate of his father. He had been attracted to Jeanne; she was very light-hearted and happy, a charming little girl who was intensely fond of him, and whom he had met only once since then.

"I have already seen her father," added Laroche. "The dot is eminently satisfactory, although, for that matter, I am so fond of Jeanne and should so much like to see you married to her that it would not weigh much with me."

"Of course I shan't marry her," interjected Anton.

"And why not?"

"I don't love her. I like her. She's a good sort. But I don't love her, and I never shall. Also, I don't want to go to London."

Laroche's brows came together for a moment, and that cold rage which rendered Le Cagnard so formidable to his underlings seethed within him. But he suppressed it. He, who commanded so many people, dared not endeavour to command his own son. He was so afraid of losing Anton.

The age-old threat of expulsion from home and heritage could never be used by Paul Laroche. He dared not even threaten to curtail Anton's allowance. He could bring no pressure whatsoever upon the boy in case Anton suddenly decided to cut adrift.

Laroche, who was master of so many, was himself mastered by the one lad in all the world he should have been able to rule completely.

"Suppose I told you that it was my dearest wish, Anton? Suppose I pleaded with you to marry Jeanne?"

Anton looked him straight in the eyes. "I don't think you will, father. You must want me to be happy, above all things. And I tell you that if I marry Jeanne I shall be very unhappy, and that she also will be very unhappy, because I can't love her as a husband should love, and that would wreck both our lives. I mean this, father. I'm fond of Jeanne, but I shall never love her. I know half a dozen other girls of whom I'm equally fond."

Laroche drew a deep long breath. Anton's very calmness only served to emphasize the quality of his decision. The boy knew exactly what he wanted and exactly what he did not want. When he said he had no love for Jeanne Bosquet he spoke nothing but the truth, and therein lay the tragedy of it, the futility of Laroche's efforts.

Yet Laroche could not surrender.

"That's all very well, Anton. Successful marriage is not usually built on what one might term burning love. It is based on deep affection, respect, friendliness. From my observation these things exist between you and Jeanne. I'm not going to accept this denial. You and I must not quarrel, because it would hurt me too much; but I am going to insist on your not making your refusal final. This matter must be discussed again—and more fully. Do you understand that?"

"If you wish, father. All the discussion in the world will make no difference to me."

"And about this post in London? It is an opportunity that most of the young men in Paris would be only too eager to accept. These British financial trusts are very powerful and are conducted with that genius for conservative finance which is the gift of the British alone. Not only will you occupy a position of great and growing importance; but you will also be learning much that will be valuable to you."

"I don't want to go to London."

Laroche gestured angrily. “Listen to me, Anton. I have worked for you for many years, and have made many sacrifices for you, God knows that.”

He said this soberly, and it seemed to him that the phantoms of his sins leered at him as he said it.

“A father always makes sacrifices for his children. There inevitably comes a time in his life when he ceases to work so much for himself as for them; when all he does must be governed by consideration of them and their future. I have so worked. I have sunk myself beneath my thoughts of you. Is there nothing I can suggest that you will accept? Are all my plans to be wrecked on the rock of your perversity?”

Laroche spoke with feeling. This was the Laroche who had recoiled from his other self—from that grim and secret creature called Le Cagnard. Laroche who pitifully strove to fashion Anton after an ideal which had always dwelt in his thoughts, the Laroche who would have walked the world clean and unafraid.

The genuineness of the appeal affected Anton and all the impulsiveness in his nature urged him to tell Laroche that he would do anything he wished to repay his father for what he had done for him; but he remembered Malou. Her picture was very clear in his mind, and he thought it wonderful. He loved her very much as he saw this picture. She was worth all the rest of the world, and for her he would lose everything else in life and find the loss nothing.

An idea came to him. He wanted to please his father, and he wanted to find Malou and keep her close to him. The idea seemed so clever in its simplicity that it brought a light to his eyes which puzzled Laroche, particularly in view of his reply.

“All right, father. I think, after all, I should like to go to London; but would you wait for a few days before I definitely decide? It isn’t so urgent. I suppose?”

“There is about a week to spare,” said Laroche, soberly. “And now what of Jeanne?”

“I have told you.”

Laroche did not press the point. He had gained one objective. He was getting Anton away from Paris into a different environment, where he would meet all kinds of unfamiliar people. He would, thought Laroche, soon forget Malou and after that it might be easy to persuade him to marry Jeanne,

whose heart was aching for him. It might even be politic to take Jeanne to London on an extended visit once Anton had settled down.

Anton left his father feeling much happier than for some time. He would, he decided, certainly go to London—but in his own time. First of all, he must see Baring and seek his assistance. For, bound up in this journey to London were definite plans regarding Malou, and through Baring Anton hoped to bring those plans to fruition.

CHAPTER XXVII

For two days Malou considered the question of the past history of the family of Laroche. She had to discover what had happened more than twenty years earlier, who had been their close friends, and to decide, from among these, which might be Le Cagnard. It was a difficult problem, but Malou was finding herself capable of tackling difficult problems.

It was at the end of two days that a splendid and—though she knew it not—ironic idea occurred to her.

Why not seek her information at the fountain head? Why not get it from Laroche himself?

Le Cagnard, while he had banned the banker's son had not told her she could not cultivate the society of the banker. Laroche was eminently a suitable subject for the kind of operation Malou conducted. He was now wifeless. He was immeasurably rich. He was lonely. Malou had sufficient confidence in her charms and her arts to imagine that she might be able to handle him provided she could make his acquaintance.

The whole operation might take time. It might be a long while before she could even know so rich and aloof a man; still longer before she became his friend—and yet longer before she was so far in his confidence that she could venture on discreet and personal questions regarding that episode in his past when Madame Laroche took for herself a lover.

But it might be done, although Laroche, the financier, was a clever man. Malou knew by experience that many men clever in business were like wax in the hands of a shrewd and beautiful woman.

To meet Laroche socially was extremely difficult. He moved but little in public, having few friends, and those exclusive and not to be reached by Malou. There remained only the opportunity afforded by a chance meeting, and this opportunity Malou set herself deliberately to manufacture.

She knew that Laroche attended daily at his great offices in the Rue du Quatre Septembre, and her first mission was to discover the restaurant at which he lunched. This was not difficult. It was an exclusive place, not too large, with alcoves in its walls, a discreet place where the food was super-excellent and a man might lunch with a business acquaintance and discuss affairs without risk of interruption.

Malou lunched there once and talked to her waiter. She was, the waiter gathered, from Nice, a young Frenchwoman seeing Paris for the first time—and friends had told her that at this restaurant some of the greatest men in Paris lunched, wealthy brokers and stock manipulators from the nearby Bourse, captains of industry, even the great Laroche.

The waiter was pleased. It was a compliment to the establishment for which he worked that its fame should have reached Nice. He pointed out a table set in an alcove. That, he said, was the table regularly reserved for Monsieur Laroche. Every day when in Paris he lunched there, either alone or with friends.

Some big deals had gone across that little table, the waiter assured Malou—millions of francs had been disposed of, invested, handled, spent, when the liqueurs stood beside the coffee cups and the cigars the management specially imported for Monsieur Laroche were breathing their fragrant smoke on to the cool air of the restaurant.

The waiter added information regarding Laroche's little dietary idiosyncrasies, and Malou listened to it all with wrapt attention.

She noticed a table very close to the screened table reserved for Laroche. Anybody entering or leaving the alcove, she decided, must see a person seated at that table. Henceforth, for as many days as might be necessary, Paul Laroche, coming to lunch and going away from it, would see at that table a beautiful woman, gowned exquisitely, equipped for conquest. Malou had under-estimated her powers if the plan did not succeed.

She told the waiter to reserve the table for her on the following day, and she spent nearly the whole morning of that day preparing.

She tried frock after frock, discarding one after another until she achieved the effect she desired. To her make-up she paid special attention. The perfume she used with discretion and care was a priceless distillation that came from the East, a discovery recently made by a firm in the Rue Royale, and possessed of a wistful, alluring aroma subtly different from anything Malou had encountered before.

She wore a few exquisite gems correctly. Her hair was perfect; her hat *chic*, redolent of invitation; her frock, faultless. She subjected herself to a searching scrutiny before the long mirrors in her bedroom, turning round slowly while her maid watched her with admiration; for the maid considered Malou the most beautiful thing she had ever known.

Then Malou went out to the taxi that had been brought to the door and told the man to drive to the restaurant near the Rue de Quatre Septembre. She was ready for the opening of the battle.

She entered the restaurant, conscious that the eyes of many men turned on her, that the women present looked at her and at each other.

Malou seated herself.

There was a palm near the banker's table and it screened the interior of the alcove from her sight. Her gloves were off, and she laid them on the table beside the vanity bag she had selected from some three dozen that lay at her flat.

Her waiter was bending over her.

"Has Monsieur Laroche arrived?" asked Malou. "I do so want to see him."

"Monsieur Laroche has already arrived," he said. "He was early. He is even now lunching."

Her food was brought. She played with it. For some reason which she could not explain, she was filled with charging excitement, like a young girl awaiting her lover. She could not understand it.

A wine waiter went into the alcove, and it was evident that he was explaining some fault or mistake, for Malou heard him murmuring quietly.

And then a sharp, anger-charged voice answered him, every word clear and distinct—*every inflection familiar!* Malou sat like stone, her lunch forgotten, her cheeks paling, her eyes fixed on the swaying fronds of the palm which screened the alcove.

For the voice she heard, charged with a snarl, high-pitched, malignant, she had heard but a few nights earlier when she was told that she must not see Anton again. She had heard it when Dupont's death was announced to her as an accomplished fact and as a warning.

There were wild thoughts flashing through her brain. Le Cagnard's anxiety for Anton Laroche. His condemnation of the girl who was not the daughter of Paul Laroche, the financier. That—until now—incredible story that the girl was Le Cagnard's daughter.

Malou beckoned her waiter. She asked him for her bill, saying: "I cannot wait to-day. I am faint. Quickly with the bill. Are you sure that is Monsieur Laroche behind that palm?"

“But certainly, ma’m’selle. And he is angry. There has been an error in the wine.”

Malou settled her bill. She walked swiftly out to the open air, for Paul Laroche must not see her sitting in that restaurant so near to him. She walked along the Rue de Quatre Septembre, and she saw not the jostling crowds, the great office buildings, the shops. She reached the corner of the Opera, and she stood on the kerb and stared at the lines of traffic obeying the mechanical signs.

She knew. She knew the deepest secret in Paris. It stunned her. The magnitude of her discovery was like a great weight pressing down her clever brain. The value of it was beyond computation. She felt like one who conquers incredibly and finds immense victory beyond comprehension.

Le Cagnard was Paul Laroche.

Malou threw back her head and laughed aloud. And as she laughed—significantly—the slim white fingers of her right hand clenched as though they grasped something... and broke it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

On the day after Malou discovered Laroche's secret Anton sought out Baring, and, in a condition of considerable agitation, told him that Malou had refused to see him and had gone away.

"You must help me to find her. I cannot understand what has made her act like this. If I could see her, speak to her, everything would come right."

Baring liked Anton, and Anton's distress worried him. He was not quite sure of Malou. He could not exactly decide what manner of woman she was. But it was neither wise nor useful, he reflected, to meddle in a man's love affairs. The old and time-worn tag which declared that love was blind was unassailably true. For all Baring knew, Anton might be heading straight for disaster, but the hand or advice of a friend would certainly never change his course.

"Her message seems final," he said when Anton had told him everything. "I should hate to meet her and put your request to her and have to come and tell you that she refuses to grant it."

"She'll see me," declared Anton confidently. "I'm sure of it. If you handle it right, that is. You'll do your best, won't you, Baring?"

The anxiety in his eyes was sufficient to ensure an answer in the affirmative, and it was with some uneasiness that Baring parted from him. It was an uneasiness founded on nothing very tangible, and it might be utterly unjustified by events. He decided that if chance brought him into contact with Malou he would convey to her Anton's request.

Meanwhile he must continue with the task to which he had devoted himself since taking over the key of the safe deposit compartment, that task being the almost constant shadowing of Gichot. He wanted to find out who were Gichot's friends, where Gichot went, what he did. Through Gichot, Baring was still convinced that he could penetrate to the heart of the mystery surrounding Gabrielle.

He spent further fruitless and profitless days shadowing the bon-vivant from restaurant to restaurant, from night haunt to night haunt. He learnt much about the art of feeding and of spending hours wastefully, but nothing about Gabrielle and her affairs, nothing of the secret of what had happened in the flat in the Avenue Niel. He discovered queer resorts hidden away from

the knowledge of workaday Paris and the tourist, some of them even hidden from the ever watchful police, places no guide book listed. The search was long, tiring, fretting to the nerves; but he persisted in it, was tenacious in his observations of Gichot, confident that his hour would come.

One day, by chance, as he strolled along the pavement of the Rue de Rivoli, fifty yards behind Gichot, he met Malou. They came face to face outside the English book shop. He was about to speak to her, when he saw Gichot hail a passing taxi, and, having instantly to decide what he should do, he automatically hailed another and followed. He looked back as the taxi plunged into the surging traffic towards the Place de la Concorde, and caught a glimpse of Malou standing on the pavement watching him. He told himself that she had wished to speak to him, and was disappointed because he avoided her.

Reaching his flat that evening he found a cablegram awaiting him. It was from Calverley, and had come from the wild hinterland of Bokhara. It gave an address to which letters should be sent.

Baring, after some consideration, cabled Calverley that Madame Laroche was dead, and that he was writing more fully by the next mail.

He might have spared himself the trouble of writing, for within two hours of receiving his cablegram John Calverley abandoned his expedition and started for Paris.

Though time had seemed of such pressing importance when Gichot first read through the amazing document left by Trevert, that importance gradually took second place to a consuming fear, which grew as the days passed, and robbed life of all its pleasure as far as Gichot was concerned.

It was essential for his scheme for converting the Trevert statement into a life insurance that Le Cagnard should be advised of the document's existence and its purport.

That, thought Gichot, was a pretty job to tackle! To go to Le Cagnard, to defy him, to strike a bargain with him, to talk to him as an equal—even with a hint of mystery! Gichot's temples became damp at the thought. One needed to be not merely brave but incredibly foolhardy.

And yet it had to be done. The document was absolutely valueless save as an instrument of futile vengeance, unless Le Cagnard knew all about it. With him in ignorance, it no more safeguarded Gichot's life than did the morning paper Gichot always read in bed over his *café complet*.

Of course he might have sent his message to Le Cagnard through Malou, or some other member of the organisation, as Trevert had intended to do. But Gichot considered that such a course might be unwise. He did not want Trevert's clever idea to be known to anybody but his dreaded employer and himself. Otherwise news of it might spread through the organisation, the habit of preparing statements intended to safeguard the writer and to incriminate everybody else might become prevalent. Gichot himself might be imperilled by it. The device Trevert had invented must remain Gichot's exclusive property. Nobody else must know sufficient to take news of it to Le Cagnard.

Therefore the ordeal had to be faced. Gichot steadily braced himself for the effort, and at last, much to Le Cagnard's surprise, sent a request through a certain channel asking for an interview.

The request was instantly granted. It was a rule with Le Cagnard that any of his immediate subordinates could always see him with the minimum of delay, on request. Le Cagnard never knew what they might have to tell—the discovery of a big coup, a warning, a hint of danger, anything of vital importance to himself and his organization.

Powerful though he was, he knew that he was largely dependent on his lieutenants; that with people like Dekker, Machet, Malou and Gichot out of the way the whole fabric would topple to the dust; and though he maintained an attitude of contemptuous indifference to their fates, he was actually keenly interested in preserving them so long as they were useful to him.

Gichot he counted as the least among these higher servants of his. Gichot was useful at times, but not always. He was not of the stuff of the habitual or hardened criminal. He had never yet been concerned in any of the more atrocious crimes committed by the organization. His employer had recognized him as unfitted for such tasks.

At night, under the darkness, Gichot climbed the long hill to the Butte Montmartre, and Baring followed him like a shadow moving across the veil of the shadows of the narrow steep streets.

Gichot walked from the Place Clichy—a long walk, and a tiring one, but it did him good. He had two brandies in one of the cafés on the boulevard before beginning his walk, and the liquor assisted him mightily. His mood changed as he toiled up the steps and the steep streets beyond. His brain felt unusually cool and poised.

Some of his squandered youth came back to him for a brief and magic hour, and it was a mentally young Gichot who at last reached the dark shadows of the grotesque house that hung on the edge of the Butte and looked down on Paris like a black vulture poised high.

Baring saw Gichot pass into the black house and wondered. Though he saw Gichot he did not detect the presence of the spies who lurked in the shadows, standing guard about the place where Le Cagnard sat in the blindingly-lighted room in the top story of the house.

A slim, olive-faced man in a tight-fitting lounge suit who stood in the dark doorway of a nearby tavern considered Baring for a while. Baring did not move, and at last the spy became convinced that he was no chance wayfarer, but that he had, indeed, been following Gichot.

The spy slipped round a corner and then walked back into the space about the house, swaying slightly on his feet, rolling along in the middle of the pavement, fumbling in his pocket as he went.

He produced a yellow packet of *Gauloise* cigarettes, pulled one out and stuck it between his lips; then dropped the packet into his pocket and fumbled as though seeking matches. This brought him to where Baring stood. He halted, and said: “Have you got a match, *mon vieux*? Plenty of cigarettes—no damned matches.”

Baring handed a box of matches to Le Cagnard’s spy, and the spy, swaying close to him, lifted the box face high and struck a match.

In the few seconds which elapsed before the flickering flame died in the wind the spy took a mental photograph of Baring’s features; then, with a muttered word of thanks, reeled on his way. He lurched round a corner and found a comrade. To this man he said: “Jacques, there is a fellow who has followed Gichot. He stands in the shadows round the corner. I want him followed and his address noted. I shall always recognize him; but I dare not risk shadowing him, in case he, in turn, recognizes me.”

The second man nodded and moved off.

CHAPTER XXIX

Meanwhile Gichot had reached the room of the blinding light, and stood blinking at the hunched black faceless figure of the being who had been his master. The past tense thrilled Gichot. He had never thought to enter this room and this Presence in such fashion. Always fear had crept at his shoulder when he mounted the stairway to the vulture's perch above Paris.

Now—fear was gone. Gichot carried his head high.

Le Cagnard sensed these things, the conspicuous absence of that timid servility which had always distinguished Gichot during these interviews, his coolness; and Le Cagnard wondered. Gichot had never before asked to see him, had never before entered his presence with such self-assurance.

"What is it?" he asked.

It was wonderful, thought Gichot, what power a knowledge of absolute safety lent to a man. Gichot could afford to choose words when speaking to this formidable being, instead of floundering through halting answers to terse questions.

"I came to discuss myself," he said.

Le Cagnard leaned forward slightly. The action was involuntary, and indicated immense interest. "Oh? What has happened to you?" There was a sarcastic note in the question.

"I have assured my future," replied Gichot. He smiled. "For a long time I have pondered on the security of my position, and have decided that it has been a negligible quantity. The hour has come, my Master, when I should speak plainly to you, and I am going to do so."

"Thanks"—drily. "Where does all this lead?" Le Cagnard spoke in the quiet, even, high-pitched voice which usually indicated unmeasured threat; but Gichot continued to smile, and the threat left him unmoved. There was a little throb in Le Cagnard's pulses. What had Gichot done?

Gichot threw a bomb. "The death of Trevert precipitated a decision I had already half formed."

Le Cagnard sat still and silent for an appreciable time, and during that time questions shuttled and flashed and repeated themselves again and again

in his brain. How did Gichot know that Trevert was dead. Who had bungled —and how and why?

"You bring news," he said gently. "Is it true that I have lost so admirable a servant as Trevert?"

Gichot's smile became a laugh. He did a thing unheard of in the presence of Le Cagnard. He lit a cigarette, and the dreadful thing at the table noticed that his hands were perfectly steady.

"You should know, Master. You had him killed. For myself"—he gestured finely—"I discover these things in my own way. Oh! It was secret enough. I grant you that. But for some time I have devoted myself to discovering secrets. The holder of secrets holds long life. Do you understand? I know that Trevert was killed. I am ensuring that I, too, do not go the same way."

"It seems to me," said Le Cagnard deliberately, "that you are taking the surest steps towards following him quickly." He still spoke quietly. Gichot's bomb might have stirred him, but the emotion was not evident. For just one second Gichot's immense confidence faltered, and during that second he had a vivid vision of the power he had always seen in Le Cagnard, the power he was now fighting of his own free will.

The vision tended to shake him, but he forced down the weakness. The gage had been picked up. The battle was closed. He had to fight or die, to win or lose pitifully. There was no retreat.

"I have a friend," he said, "on whom I can depend, one whose word is his bond."

"Unusual, and probably untrue," commented Le Cagnard. "Continue. At least you amuse me."

Gichot's smile vanished. His fat, easy face contorted into a frown. "The amusement shall be mine when I have finished. I have written a document. Do you understand that? There is in existence at this very moment a paper on which is set down all my knowledge of you and your people, the address of this house, the names and addresses of all your lieutenants, Dekker, Machet, the rest—particulars of many crimes and much secret matter I have discovered. All this is set down in writing and hidden away. Now be amused!"

Le Cagnard was not amused, although Gichot could not know it. Deep in his ice-cold brain some venomous and yelping voice cursed Gichot for a

fool, for more than a fool, for a black traitor who blundered into making something which, if found, would ruin all.

Le Cagnard spoke softly. He wanted all the information possible from Gichot.

"That is interesting, Gichot—and dangerous. I grant you that. We shall not pretend, you and I; I shall not laugh at you and challenge you. I shall not appear contemptuous of your threats, even while I am contemptuous of yourself. You have acted foolishly, but in such a fashion that it puts me in peril. I give you that willingly. What has all this got to do with your friend whose word is his bond?"

"This!" Gichot snapped the word. "There is no question of hiding the paper. It rests in the vaults of a safe deposit—which one I leave you to discover. You may, if you wish, devote all your energies in breaking into the safe deposits of London and Paris in an effort to find the document. The key to the compartment in which it lies is in the hands of my friend. He has instructions that if he does not hear from me or see me within a certain arranged time he will go to that safe deposit and forward the sealed envelope to the Sûreté."

Gichot ceased to smile and his frown came back. His voice was silky and caressing.

"That is the position, my master. It now pays you to tend me very carefully, to watch over my welfare. If I am ill, then the finest doctors must attend me. If I step off the pavement of the Opéra and a taxicab knocks me down and kills me, you shall mourn my loss exceedingly, because your loss, also, will be heavy. As for slaying me—that is a matter for you to debate at great length, for in slaying me you slay yourself."

"I see, Gichot. The matter is quite clear. You have resorted to an old device, and just because it is old, and has been much practised, it is a good one. Had it not been good it would long since have fallen into disuse. I congratulate you."

All this was so entirely unexpected that Gichot's eyes opened a little wider and he stared at the figure across the table with surprise. He had expected revilings, curses, snarled threats. Instead he got something closely resembling amicable discussion. But it frightened him.

"We now understand each other, exactly," continued Le Cagnard. "You have been frank with me. You have told me your position and my own. You

have exposed a danger to me, a danger which is, at the same time, a safeguard to yourself. I am now going to be frank with you, Gichot."

The voice dropped slightly. "My friend, and one time my servant—for, from this moment, you no longer work for me, but must seek employment elsewhere—we are at war. In this war there can be no armistice, no truce, no cessation of hostilities, no surrender. Guard yourself Gichot, guard your friend, guard your document. I may have to wait for ten years—but on the last day of the tenth year you shall find me at your shoulder. Keep this in your thoughts, Gichot, evergreen in your memory. Walk with it, sleep with it—that Le Cagnard will not forget this night, nor forget all that it means to him; that one day you will regret the safeguard which safeguards you no longer."

Gichot said loudly: "How shall I live? I want money. I can ruin you. I demand money."

"You shall have money, Gichot, the same wage as you have always had. But you shall not work for it. See what benefit you already derive from your plan? You live for nothing. Always you may collect your money from the usual sources and live in peace—but remembering...."

Gichot nodded. He had to have money. He could not live without it. He was still tied to this evil creature until such time as he might devise some means of living without Le Cagnard's pension. Then he might fly for his life from Paris; but until then he must stay while Le Cagnard worked against him slowly and inexorably. He had no illusions as to why he was to be paid, why he would no longer be asked to work. He was to be paid so that Le Cagnard could very easily keep in touch with him. He was prevented from working so that he might learn no more secrets. He was a pensioned outcast, and the eyes of Le Cagnard would always be on him.

And then he remembered his document. After all, he had the whip hand, and the document had already achieved much for him, in that it had secured for him a life of ease and an income for which he had nothing to do. That was something. Trouble there might be for him, but to anticipate it was absurd.

"All right," he agreed. "We understand one another. I shall draw my money, and every time it purchases for me a bottle of Pol Roger I shall lift a glass to the health of Le Cagnard, whom I once served—and who now serves me by providing me with cash."

“That is kind of you. Good-bye, Gichot. I say good-bye, because you and I shall never meet again—only my agents shall one day wait on you.”

Something flared in Gichot, exultant, perhaps prophetic. “And I say au revoir,” he snarled; “and in saying it I think I see it to be true.”

He swung round and walked from the room, his shoulders squared. He reached the dark and open space about the strange house and looked about him. Somewhere in the shadows lurked the agents of Le Cagnard, those agents who now would always be observing him. Well—let them do their worst. And yet—he shuddered. Le Cagnard had not acted as he had anticipated. Le Cagnard had been too polite. Le Cagnard’s threat had been spoken too calmly, too evenly. God only knew what peril lurked for Gichot in the days ahead.

He went down to the Place Clichy. Baring followed him, and behind Baring walked Le Cagnard’s spy.

Early next morning Le Cagnard received particulars of Baring’s address, and his name.

He considered these things. When Gichot had claimed to have a friend who held the key to the safe deposit compartment Le Cagnard instantly concluded that some other member of his organization might be sharing Gichot’s treachery. The one argument against this conclusion had been Gichot’s confident assertion that his ally was a man whose word was his bond. Le Cagnard sardonically admitted that that reproach could never rightfully be hurled at any of his servants.

But here was an Englishman apparently very interested in Gichot. He had escorted Gichot up to the house, and had waited until Gichot returned from it. While it was not highly probable, it was certainly possible that this was the man in whom Gichot had confided.

Le Cagnard knew that he had to act and act swiftly. He had to pass every one of Gichot’s friends and acquaintances through a fine sieve, and he had to make a start somewhere. He decided that he would begin with Baring.

CHAPTER XXX

For all the rest of that day on which she discovered the secret of Paul Laroche, Malou was quivering with excitement, so that she could not eat nor think clearly. She held in her hand the fate of the man who had killed Dupont her lover. She could kill him as surely as though she stood before him and shot him down with a gun. These and other wild thoughts drummed in her head all day, and stayed with her when she sought her bed at night. She was, at last, forced to take a sleeping draught in order to throw off a wakefulness which threatened to shake her nerves at a time when they needed, above all, to be steady.

The morning brought coolness and more reasoned reflection. She was still aquiver with excitement, but it was controlled. She was like a player leaning across a chessboard, seated opposite a doughty opponent and seeing moves and moves ahead. Mate.... But the moves must first be made.

She would not betray Le Cagnard. That would be equivalent to betraying herself, and many whom she counted as her friends. She would not blackmail him, or he might slay her under the darkness. She must strike at him more subtly, with a devilish cunning equal to his own.

Now she understood why he had placed an embargo on her relations with Anton. She now understood why the name of Laroche must not come into contact with Le Cagnard and his people.

Temporarily shelving the mystery of Gabrielle she concentrated on her own problem of vengeance, exulting in the power her knowledge gave her, mercilessly determined to use that power to its utmost limit. And so she saw a way.

Anton... who was infatuated with her. Could she strike at Le Cagnard, at Paul Laroche, through the son all Paris knew he idolized? Dare she defy Le Cagnard’s fiat?

It might have to be done subtly. It might be better, first of all, to probe the situation as it now existed. Malou was wary. With the first flush her excitement passed, she trod carefully. Through Baring she might gain some knowledge of Anton’s feelings, find out whether her note had been received with some lightly-spoken regret and then torn up, or whether it had stirred Anton to more urgent need of her company.

She sought Baring deliberately. Once she missed him in the Rue de Rivoli. The second time she came face to face with him in the Boulevard des Italiens.

He greeted her warmly. She practised some slight indifference, and when he suggested a coffee on the *terrasse* of a nearby café she hesitated before accepting.

"I wanted to see you," he said, as he picked up his slim-stemmed glass. "It's about Anton."

Malou accepted a cigarette. "So he has told you. Of course I could not go on."

"But why?" asked Baring, astonished.

"Was it fair to me? I will confess to you, monsieur, because you are a friend of us both. I was getting fonder of Anton than was good for me. It was useless prolonging—shall I say a friendship? which was becoming hurtful to me and seemed to lead nowhere, so I decided to break it off. It was not done lightly, I assure you."

Baring was still more astonished. He had not expected this of Malou, and she had spoken so earnestly that he was convinced that she was telling the truth. He wondered if his suspicions of her had been unjust.

"Suppose you were mistaken?" he asked.

"In what way?"

"I have seen Anton since he received your note, and he is desperately unhappy. I know that he has tried and tried again to find you, without success, and he enlisted my aid. I am sure you will not think that I intrude on your affairs. It is at Anton's request that I say all this."

"I understand," said Malou quietly. "And what does Anton want?"

"To see you just once again. He says that it is of vital importance, and begs that you will grant him one last interview."

Malou wondered whether she was not having too much luck. She discovered Le Cagnard's identity. She formulated a plan on the basis of that discovery. The success of the plan rested entirely on Anton's attitude to be exactly as she wanted it. Was it too much? Was she playing with loaded dice, and might one day find the bias turned against herself, so that she could not win a single main? Yet it was an adage of gambling to play one's luck, and Malou was surely a gambler.

"What's the use?" she asked. "I tell you frankly, Monsieur Baring, I am not anxious to maintain a friendship which has gradually become hurtful to me, nor to renew it."

"But I think Anton means more than friendship. Ma'mselle, listen to me. Anton is a very, very unhappy young man. That I know. You may, for your own good reasons, desire not to see him seriously any more; but I think you will at least be doing him a great kindness if you permit him to meet you just once, even for ten minutes. One might almost consider it due to him. After all, a short letter of farewell is hardly a *beau geste*, is it?"

"No." Still Malou appeared to reflect. At last she said: "I will see Anton again. I agree with you—I should do so. I don't wish to dine with him. It would awaken painful memories. To-morrow afternoon, at three o'clock, I shall be driving my little car through the Bois. I shall pass the Cascades about ten minutes past three, and if Anton cares to follow me in his car I will speak to him."

She parted from Baring quite satisfied as to the course of events. She had arranged a secret meeting with Anton, a meeting not likely to be discovered by Le Cagnard. She was playing her luck, and was confident it would pull her through.

Baring told Anton that night at the club, and Anton was wild with delight. The fates were marching against Paul Laroche.

Baring, returning to his flat after lunch the following day, found a state of affairs which caused him some alarm. The flat had been ransacked.

His man followed him into the house some ten minutes later. He was agitated in the extreme, and told a story of a telephone message which had reached him, summoning him to St. Cloud where, so the voice on the 'phone said, Baring had met with an accident.

Baring received this information in silence, and proceeded to examine the flat. Every drawer in the place had been turned out. Every cupboard had been examined. Every scrap of floor-covering had been pulled up. There were marks on the walls indicating that they had been systematically sounded with some blunt instrument. The place was a wreck.

A few articles of personal jewellery had been stolen, such as pearl studs, a pair of gold cuff-links, and five mille notes Baring had left in a wallet on his dressing-table; but Baring had a strong suspicion that these more or less minor thefts were carried out to cover a more serious motive, and his

thoughts reverted to the key of Gichot's safe deposit which, by chance, reposed still in his pocket.

However, he sent for the landlord of the flat and the police. The former, while happy to inform all the world that he was covered by insurance, bewailed the desecration of his so beautiful apartment. The latter took copious notes—after the fashion of police all over the world—and set their machinery going.

Baring took the key of Gichot's safe deposit from his pocket, sent his man out for a length of silk ribbon—a journey which made the man wonder exceedingly—and suspended the key round his neck wrapped in silk, beneath his shirt. That night his precautions were justified and his suspicions confirmed.

He went to Montparnesse after dinner on the heels of Gichot, and, having seen Gichot installed in the Café de la Rotonde, obviously until the early hours of the morning, he decided to go for a stroll. The stroll took him through some of the quieter streets east of the Boulevard St. Michel, and he was turning into the Rue Cujas when he became suddenly and instantly aware of imminent peril.

Something came flying through the air from the dark maw of an alley to his left. He ducked, and felt the missile shave the nape of his neck, heard it strike the further wall with a crash, and go tinkling to the pavement—an empty bottle thrown with deadly aim.

Baring did not wait to be courageous. He jumped forward into the shadows ahead and ran as hard as he could in the direction of the boulevard.

Something came out of the darkness. Baring glimpsed the big, quick figure of a man, and saw a right arm lifted, saw the quivering deadly tube of loaded rubber high above his head. He shifted feet with the agility of a boxer, and before the tube could come down he whipped his left to his assailant's jaw, half an inch above the point. The man dropped from the knees as though he had been shot, and Baring, twisting round him like a flying three-quarter, held on his way.

They were after him. He could hear the quick patter of lightly-shod feet in his wake. Shadow figures appeared from a street corner in front of him; he was headed away from the boulevard and turned left. He had lost his bearings a little, for he was not too familiar with all this network of narrow streets where once the tide of revolution had surged and ebbed.

They had another man in the street into which he turned how. They had a cordon about him. The man carried a gun. He yelled: "*Halte!*" and the yell died on a high screaming note as Baring kicked hand and gun and sent the weapon flying from broken fingers.

There was a glare above the houses ahead of him—the lights of the Boulevard St. Germain. He put on pace. Something flashed over his shoulder and struck and span metallically across the stones, its blade gleaming like silver. He flung himself round the corner, his eyes alert for attackers and for missiles. He felt he need not fear the shots, for they would hardly use a pistol so close to the broad main street.

He could see the boulevard. The little street ran into it like a tiny tributary losing itself in a broad river of light. There was a man lounging on the corner. Baring watched him. The man's hand was in his pocket. He might be a gunman, prepared to kill in the most public of places, provided the pay was adequate. Baring went straight for him.

The pocket lifted. Baring felt a sudden sickness, the terror of a man facing a fire-arm at point-blank range. He jumped, and in his day he had been able to cover twenty feet at a bound. That leap saved his life. He hit the man breast to breast as the fellow pulled the trigger. The bullet went under Baring's legs, and of the two who fell Baring was first up.

He swung into the boulevard, not heeding the sudden shouts the pistol shot had raised. He saw a crawling taxi and stopped it. "Opéra," he said briefly. "*Vite!*"

He knew he could leave the rest to the Parisian taxi-driver.

Outside the Café de la Paix, sipping coffee and brandy, he reviewed the excitement of the past half hour. There was now not the slightest doubt but that somebody wanted the key Gichot had given him, for he could think of no other reason for the systematic and ruthless searching of his flat and the attack on his person.

Wondering what lay behind it all, he had a sudden idea. Gichot after giving him the key, had visited that dark and mysterious house on the Butte Montmartre. Some devil's plot had been hatched up there. Baring, swiftly resentful of the attempt against his safety, wrathful at the misuse of his flat, was eager to strike back.

He summoned the waiter and paid his score; then hailed a taxi and told the driver to take him to Gichot's address.

He would, he decided, deliver a counter blow.

CHAPTER XXXI

Gichot left the Café de la Rotonde late. He had consumed a considerable quantity of champagne, and as his taxicab carried him swiftly through the streets to his flat he felt at peace with all the world, confident that the world was his own particular oyster.

There was considerable pleasure in reflecting that for all the champagne he had drunk that night Le Cagnard had paid; that the smiles of the girls he had so lavishly tipped for dancing with him were the products of Le Cagnard's generosity. Gichot chuckled. He doubted whether anybody else had achieved such a fine position—to be living on the most dangerous criminal in France, to be able to demand of that criminal largesse, to do no work whatsoever, to lounge all day and drink all night. Gichot had reached the gates of paradise.

As for Le Cagnard's threats, they counted for nothing. Charged with the good white wine of Epernay, Gichot metaphorically snapped his fingers in Le Cagnard's shapeless hidden face. Let Le Cagnard do his worst, or his best, or both. Gichot wasn't quite sure which he ought to say. But let him. Gichot was all right. The taxicab stopped and he fell out of it.

He had some difficulty over payment because for some unaccountable reason his pockets appeared to have shifted about, or else his confounded tailor had made some hideous mistake which, up to the moment, had been successfully concealed. He was diving his hands all over his person when a voice said: "Allow me, Gichot, I've got some loose change."

He saw a ten franc note pass into the driver's hand to be followed by another as that professional bandit protested volubly, then he said: "*Mon Dieu!* Baring! This is fine. We'll split a bottle, I could do with a drink. Haven't had one for ten minutes. Come in. Where's my key? Had a key when I left. Here it is. Hold my arm, will you? Dropped the key. Damn the key. Pick it up, Baring. Thanks. Good fellow. Put the key in the hole, Baring. That's where it belongs. That little hole there. Just slip the key in while the hole's standing still. Do it quick and the hole won't have a chance. Good fellow. We're in."

He fell in.

Gichot sang softly in the lift, his head on Baring's shoulder. "*Lentement, tendrement, doucement*...." "I like that old song," he said. "Always sing it

when I'm happy. Have a drink with me. Let's be friends. Give me my key. Thanks."

Baring gently pushed him back into a big chair.

"No drink for me—nor for you, Gichot," he said. "I've come to talk seriously with you."

"Good. Serious matters discussed between friends, I know. What's the woman's name? Leave it to Gichot. I know how to handle 'em. Who is she?"

"Don't be a fool, Gichot. Listen to me. This matter of your safe deposit has gone far enough, and I'm going to take drastic steps in relation to it. Do you understand that?"

"What do you mean?" Perhaps Baring's words had a slightly sobering effect on Gichot; but Baring did not perceive it.

"I mean this." Baring lowered his voice slightly. "An attempt was made to murder me to-night."

"Eh?" Gichot sat up straight, found the physical effort too much and flopped back again. "Don't be silly. Don't start upsetting me at this time of night. Have a drink and forget it. I don't believe you."

"I'm telling you the truth, Gichot. If you don't pull yourself together I'll dip your head in the bath. I tell you that some men tried to kill me to-night. My flat has been ransacked. Now I like you, though you are a drunken old devil, and——"

"Old devil—but not drunken," protested Gichot. "Don't mind being an old devil. Good fun. But not drunken. Who tried to kill you?"

"I don't know. Do you feel more sober now?"

"Head's clear as pure water."

Baring took a deep breath. Gichot, in this mood, was almost impossible. Baring decided to jolt him.

"To-morrow morning," he said very distinctly, "I am going to the safe deposit, where I shall secure that document and carry out the instructions you say are on the inner envelope. I shall do this without fail. I've had enough."

Gichot sat still. The exact meaning of Baring's threat was slowly but surely making itself known to him. His feeling of intense and friendly

exhilaration swiftly retreated before the significance of what he had heard, and in his fuddled brain alarm began to stir.

"Good God! You don't mean that, Monsieur Baring?"

"I do. To-morrow morning, Gichot, without fail. I'm finished."

Gichot wept. He wept quite openly and unashamedly, and Baring seated himself on the edge of the table, swung his legs, and watched him and waited. He knew that the tears would soon pass, and he guessed that Gichot's natural cunning would soon bring him to a more reasonable condition.

At last Gichot looked up. "Forgive tears," he said. "Unmanly. But when friendship goes to the wall a man's heart will break. Baring, you will kill me if you carry out your threat. I shall probably be buried at the Père Lachaise, and when you put flowers on my grave you will wish your heart had been softened this night. It's a damn shame, Baring. That's what it is. Give me back that key."

Baring shook his head. "Oh, no; I'm the master while I hold the key. Are you willing and able to talk sense?"

"Sense! I'm an intelligent man."

"All right, then. Will you listen to me?"

"I'm listening."

Baring decided to drop another bomb. "I know you're a crook, Gichot. That's why I became friendly with you. It paid me to do so."

Gichot made another valiant effort to straighten himself, failed once more, and moaned miserably. "I'm betrayed," he said. "That's what comes of being honest and trustful. I've fallen into the hands of the Pharisees—or is it the Philistines? It doesn't matter. I'm in their hands, and you're one of them. You can hurt me no more. All my illusions have gone. And don't keep hopping about on that table. You'll break it. It's like me—not strong. Let me have a drink, and give me back that key."

"You sit still." Baring wished he had deferred his visit until Gichot was more able to discuss things sanely. Though he could tell by Gichot's eyes that his bombs had created some kind of disturbance in his mind, he greatly feared that the interview would be productive of no very startling results.

"I'm going to be frank with you, Gichot. But you've got to be frank with me. Confidence for confidence. Do you understand that?"

“Certainly. A confidence trick. I know what you mean. Talk on. I’m sunk in misery at your treachery, but I won’t turn you out because I can’t get up out of this damned chair. I think I’ve got paralysis.”

“Do you remember Trevert and that house in the Avenue Niel—and the girl who was there?”

“I do.” Gichot spoke a little more soberly, and it seemed to Baring that the slightest hint of watchfulness crept into his eyes. Baring felt glad and rewarded for his persistence.

“Right. Now I’m definitely in this matter on account of that girl. Is that clear to you? I have no other interest in you or your affairs save to establish touch with the girl and elucidate the truth of the happenings of that particular night. Does your document refer to it in any way?”

It was a long time before Gichot replied. In a confused fashion he was beginning to realise that Baring was more vitally concerned in the affair of Trevert and the girl Gabrielle Lebrun than he had imagined, that Baring was no innocent bystander, but a person deeply involved.

This realisation gave rise to a great many queries which Gichot felt his poor brain could not possibly deal with at that moment. For instance, where did Baring stand in relation to Le Cagnard? What was Baring exactly? A detective? Other questions, speculations, fears suggested themselves to him, but as they all revolved round a ball of blazing fire in Gichot’s head and yelled themselves into his brain accompanied by the jangling of immense bells, it was rather difficult for Gichot to deal adequately with them.

But one thing emerged clearly, monumentally. He must gain time. He must wait until he was in a fit condition to think things over clearly.

“Are you a detective?” he asked.

“No. I am a friend of the girl. What name did she call herself?”

“Gabrielle Lebrun,” replied Gichot. “But, of course, we all knew that wasn’t her real name. Couldn’t deceive me with a name like Lebrun. Not a clever fellow like me.”

“I see. Well, are you going to tell me whether that document refers to her, and what else you know of her, and of that night in the Avenue Niel?”

This was a question to be avoided. Gichot was sufficiently clear in his head to understand that his very drunkenness had so far saved him.

He said: “Hidden Treasure,” very solemnly.

"What do you mean?"

Gichot gestured vaguely. He now appeared more drunk than ever. "Hidden treasure, pirates, maps, skeletons, yard-arms. What else do they have in hidden treasure stories? You know. Think it out for yourself. I can't think any more. That's what it is. Hidden Treasure."

Baring's brows contracted. "Don't be such a fool. The only kind of treasure you'd ever be interested in is loot stolen by modern burglars."

It was an unfortunate observation, for it gave Gichot a cue. He realized, in fuddled fashion, that the hidden treasure story had been a gem of inspiration. He now only need to make a seemingly forced admission to lend it a semblance of absolute verity.

"Who told you?" he snapped.

"Oh!" said Baring, quietly. "Hit the clout first time, eh? Come on, Gichot—out with it. I want the truth. Only a drunken man would ever think of so ridiculous a story."

Gichot nodded. "Drunk—but thoughtful. That's what I am. Under the weather, but still intelligent. Baring, I've been a fool. I've cheated a gang. There were some gems stolen in Biarritz and one of the thieves hid them. He was my friend. He sent me directions for finding them. They're in the envelope. I found out I was watched, and dare not go near the hiding-place. And that's that." Gichot stared moodily in front of him. "Wish I hadn't done it," he added. "Fool."

Baring felt that the story of hidden loot rang true. Gichot looked incapable of inventing such a likely story.

"Is that all?" asked Baring.

"Isn't it enough?" demanded Gichot. "What else do you want?"

"To know all about the events in the Avenue Niel."

"In good time. Let me see. What house was it? Oh, yes, I know. No, I don't. Baring, give me my key."

Baring sighed. "I intend to keep the key. And I intend to reserve to myself the right to use it."

"Tyranny," murmured Gichot. "The mailed fist on the neck of the downtrodden. You come and see me in a week's time, Baring. I'll feel better then. If I've been moved to a nursing-home I'll leave the address for you."

Baring slid from the table. “I’m going to make a bargain with you. I want you to understand that I mean every word of it. I shall come and see you again and give you a chance to tell me what you know. I shall come in the daytime, and unless you satisfy me I shall drive straight from this flat to the safe deposit and carry out my threat.”

“Which day?” asked Gichot drowsily. He was exultant. He had gained time.

“I don’t know. Soon. Almost at once. You can expect me any morning about ten—when you are in bed. And I may bring an officer of the Sûreté with me.”

Gichot nodded. His eyes were half closed. “All right. Friends again. All forgiven and forgotten. I bear no malice. Don’t bring a policeman. Spoil everything. If you won’t bring a policeman, I’ll tell you something that may please you. Agreed?”

“Conditionally.”

“Good. That girl didn’t kill Trevert. Good night. Go away now. I’m dropping into innocent slumber.”

Baring leaned over him and shook him. His eyes were alight. “Is that true, Gichot? Do you swear it? Thank God! That girl’s the sweetest thing that ever breathed, Gichot, and you’ve made all this worth my while. Say it’s true again.”

“Never tell a lie,” murmured Gichot. “Truth’s been my ruin. I’d have been rich if I’d had the gift for lying. It’s true enough, Baring. Let go my shoulder. Good night. Find your way out. There’s a door somewhere. It’s in a wall.”

Baring left him. He had gained vital and wonderful information. He walked on air. He was confident that he could now force from Gichot proofs of his statement, and once he had those proofs he could go unfettered to the police with the story. But he must see Gichot again when Gichot was sober. He dared not visit the police on the word of a drunken man; although he implicitly believed that word.

And Gichot, stumbling to his bedroom, found Baring’s last words ringing in his head. The girl was sweet. Gichot had always thought so, from the first time he saw her. And the talons of Le Cagnard were at her throat. Gichot shuddered. This was a thing he hated; for Gichot, with all his faults, warred not against women. He slept uneasily and seemed to see Gabrielle’s white, wan face as he saw it in the room where Trevert had pretended to die.

CHAPTER XXXII

Gonzales came from South America. He was a slim and handsome man, dark, elegant in dress, gifted with good manners and a smooth tongue, with a straight glance and a firm handgrip; a gentleman, one would say on first meeting him, for the souls of men do not always shine through their eyes. The soul of Gonzales was black as the Pit.

There were nameless stories whispered of Gonzales here and there along the South American seaboard. Bleak-eyed girls in scattered cantinas thought of him as the Devil come to earth, shuddered when they recalled their first meeting with him, wished they had died at the moment their hands first touched his.

He controlled a traffic which all civilization endeavours to stop. He dealt in bodies and souls. He did things which may never be written down, nor even whispered. The taking of human life was a light thing compared with those things done by Gonzales. He stood hip deep in foulness and yet outwardly seemed clean. He sold virtue for tarnished gold. He mocked God and His creation. Le Cagnard had decided that Gabrielle should marry Gonzales.

The fact that even Le Cagnard could think of no greater degradation for the girl he hated than that she should become the wife of Gonzales may convey some idea of the kind of man Gonzales was. Gonzales came to Dekker's place one night when there was a large gathering of people there, and he dropped in as one who finds his way into an unexpected place, a stranger strolling round the town seeking light adventure. Nobody knew him there save Dekker and Machet; they had been told by Le Cagnard so that the scheme could be furthered sufficiently.

Gonzales knew exactly what he had to do, exactly how he had to do it. He had learnt all his instructions by heart, and had accepted the rôle willingly, for he was being paid a high fee by Le Cagnard.

He was, for the purposes of the plan, a Spanish gentleman who had never before visited Paris, and who knew a little French. Gonzales was a master of five languages.

He was rather foolhardy, according to the rôle bestowed on him, and had come down to the worst quarters of Paris out of sheer curiosity, confident in his athletic strength. He was possessed of winning ways, fundamental and

transparent honesty. He was to meet Gabrielle, apparently by chance, win her confidence and offer her his friendship.

This should all be easy, Le Cagnard explained. Gabrielle, driven to the limits of desperation, would only be too willing to accept the friendship of a seemingly honest man.

Gonzales would talk of his orange groves outside Seville. That was his occupation—growing oranges. He was well-to-do, charming, fascinating. Following the opportunities which should present themselves to him, he was gradually to unfold a plan for getting Gabrielle away from the White Rat and to Spain.

The details of this plan were left to him, but one element must be introduced and emphasised—the element of romance. Gonzales was to appear in the most romantic light possible. He was to be the beau chevalier, the "parfit gentil knight" come to the rescue of the damsel in distress.

Before the rescue he was to have begun his wooing. Afterwards gratitude would do much to help him, for gratitude is often mistaken by women for love. Gonzales knew this as well as did Le Cagnard.

That was the plan—a simple one. Gonzales regarded it as promising a unique and decidedly interesting adventure, something off the beaten track of his horrible occupation, even though it ended in the same way. Also, he understood that Gabrielle was beautiful.

Gabrielle was sunk more deeply into the deeps of despair. The girl, Annette, with whom she had struck up an incongruous sort of friendship, had vanished from the place without giving her any word of warning, and Gabrielle wondered what had become of her. With Annette's departure she found herself altogether alone, except when Dekker came to take her into the cabaret, and she did not guess that this was the reason why Annette had been removed, that the girl had been sent away to another town so that her chatter should not relieve the misery of Gabrielle's life.

She had nobody now with whom she could talk, save Dekker, and with Dekker she wished less and less to hold conversation, for Dekker was following the way of Machet and looking at her in a fashion she did not like.

Machet still came often. His tremendous patience, his watchfulness, terrified Gabrielle. Every time he walked into the den she told herself that the hour had arrived and that there would be unimaginable trouble; but each time Machet danced a little, drank a lot, puffed his cigarettes, and studied her.

Dekker never left her when Machet was there.

She made one or two hesitant and timid inquiries regarding poor Prinet, but never received a plain answer and never knew what ultimately happened to him. He dropped clean out of her life on the night he dared Machet's anger.

Gradually, the environment in which she found herself began to have its effect. She was no longer horrified by what she saw and heard about her, but accepted it all with a mute indifference which would have pleased Le Cagnard had he been able to perceive it. She even began to feel grateful if one or other of the girls casually chatted to her. Listening to their conversation was better than sitting brooding over her fate.

The desiring glances which Machet and Dekker turned so openly upon her, their covert hostility towards each other, filled her with frightful misgivings. Sometimes, in the quiet of her room, she would wake up convinced that somebody was at her door, and would picture Machet, svelte and snake-like—or Dekker, monstrous, half-drunken—fumbling at the door fastenings. She would scream until her own scream frightened her, and then would sob till sleep crept into the room on timid feet and soothed her.

Her nerves were fraying more and more. She was sure that this was a period of waiting; but for what? The very impossibility of answering the question magnified its potentialities. God alone knew what the days ahead held for her, what the devils who imprisoned her intended to do.

Often she felt that she would rather have been accepted as a member of the clique which gathered in the den, have been given her allotted place in the organisation, so long as she knew exactly where she stood. She wanted to know something definite. The worst, she thought, would have been more acceptable than the long-drawn anxiety and ignorance.

The idea of escape she had long since dismissed. It was an idle dream, an impossible happening, a miracle beyond her achievement. To be free of all this was a thought that dazed her.

She could never hope to be free. Everybody had forgotten her, including the man she had met only once, and whose voice she had heard on the night she fired the pistol at Trevert. Baring had forgotten her. Anton, her old friends, everybody.

She had no friends now. She had no hope of anything worth while in life. She could only sit at Dekker's side, watching Machet, and wait.

She was in this condition when Gonzales appeared. It was an eminently favourable condition for him.

Gabrielle saw him come through the doorway hesitantly. He seemed a little nervous and yet defiant, like one who enters a place which he suspects to be dangerous. She did not see the quick understanding look that flashed from Dekker to Machet, nor realise that for a moment Machet's interest was transferred from herself to the newcomer: for she was watching Gonzales.

He seemed so obviously out of place in the den. He was dressed quietly and he removed his hat as he entered. There was a little excited movement, and all eyes were directed on him.

Dekker got up and, swinging his whip, strolled ponderously towards Gonzales, who appeared to be hesitating between a swift exit and a desire to stay.

"What do you want?" asked Dekker.

Gonzales said: "I don't speak French very well."

Gabrielle, like the rest of them, was listening intently.

"Well, I asked you what you wanted."

Gonzales smiled. "I'm from Spain—Seville. I'm having a look round. Are you the proprietor of this cabaret? I thought it might be interesting to see other quarters of Paris than those where the regular night life assembles. I hope I'm not intruding at all."

Somebody tittered. Gonzales spoke French with a precise accent which he deliberately emphasized.

"So you're having a look round, are you?" asked Dekker heavily. He, too, had his part to play. "Well, I'll tell you that this isn't a cabaret. It's a club open only to members."

He appeared to study Gonzales for a little while. Then he said abruptly: "Stand where you are for a minute."

"Of course." Gonzales spoke nervously.

Dekker turned and walked towards Machet, and Gabrielle and those within immediate earshot, heard the little staged dialogue between the two men.

"He's in," said Dekker. "And he may be a detective and he may not. We don't know. I suggest that we get what we can out of him in the way of cash

and watch him. It might be safer than just turning him adrift in the streets. And everybody will have to be careful. When he goes we can have him followed. What do you say?"

"Agreed," said Machet. They did not want to waste either their own or Gonzales's time in argument. They wished only to establish an excuse for breaking that unwritten law which permitted no stranger to enter the place and be safe.

Dekker went back to Gonzales. "All right," he said. "You can be a member of the club if you wish. Got five hundred francs?"

Gonzales smiled. "I've joined night clubs in other cities just as quickly. Here's five hundred. Thank you." He looked round. "Perhaps everybody will have a drink with me."

It was an invitation never refused by the habitué's of Dekker's place, and they drank Gonzales's health with acclamation. The ceremony of the drinking broke the slight awkwardness consequent upon his entry, and when Dekker roared for music there was an instant response, and the floor became flooded with dancers.

Gonzales danced with the girl nearest him and appeared thoroughly to enjoy himself. He endeavoured to talk to her, found she knew nothing but French, of which he seemed to have a limited supply, and so danced in silence.

The dance ended. There were more drinks, and Gabrielle saw that Dekker had whispered to one of his men, who had stationed himself near to the door against the time when Gonzales should leave. The details of the plan were very well worked out.

She became aware that Gonzales was watching her, and she tried to avoid his eyes, for she did not wish to embroil him with Machet and Dekker. But her effort was useless, for he came across to her as the music started again, and said: "Will you dance with me?"

Gabrielle made no immediate reply. She was afraid of causing a scene, and of bringing trouble upon this apparently nice young Spaniard; but while she debated this she realized that while dancing with him she would have an opportunity of warning him against revisiting the establishment, a warning of which he seemed to stand in need.

She got up and came round the table, not daring to look towards Machet or Dekker, conscious that there was some surprise visible on the faces of the others.

She drifted into a dance with Gonzales, and the South American, his arm round her, realized that here was somebody different from the women he usually met. When Le Cagnard had said this girl was beautiful he had not lied. Gonzales's sluggish blood pumped a little faster through his veins, and he told himself that the task was a good one and well worthy of prosecution, might even be its own reward apart from all monetary considerations.

"What do you do here?" he asked, as the band crashed and screamed and filled the place with deafening sound.

"I?" Gabrielle laughed mirthlessly. "Nothing."

He looked down at her. "You don't seem to be very happy. You don't laugh like the others. Why did you sit apart? And why did nobody talk to you?"

She smiled. "You ask too many questions at once. And I can't answer them. But I wanted to talk to you, not to listen to your questions."

"Yes?"

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder. They were a little distance away from the nearest couple, and the band's noise was appalling. She spoke very quietly.

"You ought not to have come here. It is a dangerous place. I should advise you to get out as quickly and conveniently as you can, and never to return."

She felt his arm tighten in startled fashion about her, and then relax. Looking up at him she saw resolution in his eyes, and realized that this smiling young Spaniard might be a man of considerable force should necessity arise. Gonzales was a good actor.

"Is that so?" he whispered. "Then what are you doing here?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "That is my affair, monsieur, and too complex to discuss with you. I ask you to go. You are in great danger. I not only warn you, I implore you. Will you promise that, as soon as possible after this dance, you will leave? See. They have put a man near the door to follow you."

Gonzales, after a swift glance at the door, smiled into Gabrielle's eyes. "*Nous verrons*," he said. "That's good French, isn't it? I'm not disposed to run away. I don't usually. Besides, I'm interested in you. Let us sit down and have a drink together and talk."

“You mustn’t. Really, you mustn’t. There will be awful trouble if you do. I am not allowed to talk to anybody. Perhaps there will be trouble because I’ve danced with you.”

Gonzales’s expression hardened. “I don’t understand,” he said slowly. “You say all these mysterious things to me and they pique my curiosity. I think I shall insist on sitting with you and see what happens.”

“And allow me to be punished for it?” asked Gabrielle, quietly. Nevertheless, she felt that she liked him for his courage in face of her warnings and his friendly interest in herself.

“Is it as bad as that?” he asked. “Are you so placed here that an attempt by me to talk to you would bring punishment down on you? Surely I can talk casually?”

It was a temptation. Here, thought Gabrielle, was an honest man, and a nice one—the first she had met for a long time. He wanted to talk to her. She would hear the old politeness; would, for a fleeting moment, know something of the life she had lost. She could not resist the lure of it.

She said: “All right. If you wish.”

They went to her table, and behind her Gonzales smiled; for he told himself that this meant success.

He seated himself beside her very naturally and offered her a cigarette. He ordered coffee for her and some beer for himself.

“Now,” he said, “we will not look at all these people, and we will talk together. You’re unhappy here, aren’t you?”

“Why do you ask?” said Gabrielle. “Monsieur, we will chat for a few minutes and then you must go.”

Gonzales shook his head. “They would instantly conclude that you had warned me. Now that we are talking I must stay; and, even after I leave the table, I must stay for a little while. I don’t intend to get you into trouble.”

Gabrielle felt grateful to him, but persisted in her warning. “The danger is great, monsieur, and comes nearer the longer you stay.”

“Let it come,” said Gonzales carelessly. “I want to talk to you. Now, I’m not inexperienced in the ways of cities, although I was foolish enough to stumble in here, and I can tell you that you’re different from all the girls about this place and other such places. What are you doing here?”

Gabrielle did not answer, and Gonzales pressed the point. “I don’t ask idly. I’m interested. You seem to need a friend. Do you?”

Gabrielle gestured indefinitely. “Perhaps. Monsieur, you should go.”

Gonzales laughed. “You evade me. Well, perhaps I am impertinent—trying to probe your private affairs. Will you let me tell you about myself? Look at these photographs.”

He produced some small snapshots, carefully prepared for the occasion. They showed him in an orange grove, and near him was a white-haired woman holding a black cat in her arms.

“That’s my mother,” he said. “She and I live together. I grow oranges near Seville, and it’s a very fine life. Look at the cat. We call him Esteban; I think he knows all that mother says to him. Here’s our house.” He gave Gabrielle another photograph. “That’s me, standing on the step. I’m too far off for anybody to recognize me. Do you see the spot of black on the steps? That’s old Esteban again, sunning himself.”

There were other photographs, the kind that homely people might carry around with them. Gonzales seemed keenly interested in them, anxious to show them to Gabrielle; and the boyishness of it touched her, the happiness of which he gave her glimpses seemed something for which she might yearn but never attain.

Gonzales maintained the conversation on this homely personal note for the rest of his stay, and Gabrielle learnt a great many things about him—how his orange groves were prospering, so that he was making money quickly; how he took his mother for motor rides; how, in fact, he seemed to be an exceedingly decent and praiseworthy young man.

It left an ache in her heart. Gonzales was clever enough to tell his story without in the least painting himself as a prig. He made an impression of simple honesty combined with decisive shrewdness, and he pleased Gabrielle immensely.

When he got up from the table he said: “I’m coming back again to see you. It’s no use warning me. I’m not going to be frightened by words. I want to see you again, and I shall do so in spite of what you say.”

He left the place without incident, and the watcher made the pretence of following him.

Although she wished he had not so rashly declared his intention of revisiting the White Rat, Gabrielle realised that she would experience a

pleasant thrill if he kept his promise. He had broken the grey bleakness of her stay in Dekker's establishment. She liked him, as had many other women to their cost.

Gonzales had made dangerous progress.

CHAPTER XXXIII

When Baring delivered Malou's message to Anton the boy was wild with delight. He gripped Baring's hands warmly and declared: "You're the best friend I've got, Baring. You bring me wonderful news. She will see me! And now I have a chance. Do you know, I feel happier than I've felt for days. It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"If you feel that way," agreed Baring. Then quietly: "Anton, do you know anything about her? I mean, her connections, family—what you will?"

"I know," said Anton deliberately, "that she is wonderful, that no man can stand and say anything against her in my presence. That's all I want to know. Are you trying to warn me, or something? Don't spoil what you have done, Baring, for heaven's sake."

"I'm not spoiling anything, Anton. I'm still trying to be your friend. What does your father say about all this?"

"He doesn't know. He wants me to marry Jeanne Bosquet—a nice girl whom I don't love, and who doesn't love me!"

Anton was out in the Bois soon after lunch and had his big Voisin pulled up beside the road near the Cascades by half-past two. He was exceedingly nervous, and kept smoking cigarettes, scanning the road for Malou's little car, getting out and strolling about, getting into the car again, fretting, fuming, impatient, while the hands of the clock on the dash-board seemed as if they would never crawl to the appointed hour.

Suppose she changed her mind? Suppose she decided, after all, not to keep the appointment? Anton was shocked at the thought if it. He was sick with love for her; in his heart was a great ache. Separation from her had increased his longing; in his visions of her she was most beautiful of all women.

Three o'clock, and the minutes sliding past. There was no sign of the car. Anton's anxiety became painful. Now the time was flying. Five minutes past three. Ten minutes past.

Malou knew the value of keeping an anxious man waiting just long enough to increase his anxiety and yet not make him angry.

Three-fifteen and Anton saw the little car. It came swinging out from among the trees, passed him and went on. He had had his engine running since just before three, and he dropped home a gear and went after the machine ahead of him, noting with exultation and admiration the smartness of Malou's head as seen from behind.

She drew him some distance from the Cascades, into a little-used by-track, before she pulled up. The Voisin ran silently to a standstill behind her tiny machine and Anton, hat in hand, jumped out and ran to her side.

"Beloved," he said, and looked into her eyes.

She smiled at him, and the smile was sweetly said. "Why did you make me meet you again? It does no good, Anton, it only hurts both of us, I was trying to be so resolute and strong, and now you have broken down all my resolutions and reduced my strength to weakness."

He laughed. The laugh had a joyous exultant ring. "I want your resolutions to break down; I want your strength turned to weakness where I am concerned. I had to see you. I had to ask you one vital question, and on your answer will depend all my life's happiness."

Malou's pulses were beating slightly faster. The boy was madly infatuated with her, and in his slavish dependence on her pleasure she read the enslavement of Paul Laroche, who called himself Le Cagnard. Vengeance had never seemed so sweet to Malou as she sat in the shadow-flecked sunshine and read the adoration in Anton's eyes.

"You must not be silly, Anton," she said. "What does your father say about all this?"

She was anxious to discover whether Paul Laroche had mentioned the matter of their association to Anton or whether he had deemed it sufficient merely to instruct his subordinate Malou, that she was no longer to proceed with her intrigue with Anton Laroche.

"My father knows nothing of it." Anton took her hand and clung to it. "Darling, you look wonderful. You are the sweetest thing in the world. I love you more than I shall ever be able to tell you."

Malou's eyes softened and smiled and were kind to him. Her fingers closed gently round his.

"You hurt me, Anton," she whispered. "I knew it would be foolish to come, and I ought to have been wise enough to stay away."

“Love cannot be wise,” said Anton. “I don’t want to be wise. I want to keep on loving you. I want you to keep on loving me. I want to leave all the wisdom to the people who have never known the happiness of love like ours. You darling.”

They were silent for a little while. Malou was too clever to give any lead to Anton. She was sure that he had not sent that urgent request through Baring merely for the purpose of telling her once more that he loved her and, confident in her power over him, she was content to wait until he had finished looking at her admiringly and was ready to speak.

At last he said: “My father wants me to marry Jeanne Bosquet.”

“And who is she?” asked Malou, and permitted alarm to show in her eyes and some bitterness to creep into her voice.

“She’s a girl I’ve known for a very long time—an awfully nice girl and a very good friend. But I don’t love her.” Anton laughed shortly. “I’ve seen her once since I’ve known you and it was like looking at a star after coming in from the sunshine. She is rather pretty. You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Malou smiled. “You’re getting extravagant, Anton. I should imagine Mlle. Jeanne is a very charming girl, else your father would not wish you to marry her.” She added slyly, “and he will have assured himself that she has an adequate dot.”

“Don’t tease me, Malou,” pleaded Anton “I’m in no condition to be teased. Ever since I last saw you, ever since your letter arrived, I have been ill with need of you. And now I’ve got you, I’m never going to let you go.”

Anton looked straight at her. He was suddenly very calm.

“Dearest,” he said, “do you love me?”

“Of course.” Malou met his change of mood with equal seriousness.

“Enough to marry me?” breathed Anton.

Malou’s left hand, resting on the rim of the steering wheel, tightened, but Anton did not see it. Her eyes were melting, and in some miraculous fashion she forced tears to them when wild and mocking laughter strove to find expression there.

“Are you sure, Anton?”

“It is all I ask of life,” replied Anton.

Malou leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. “My dear, you have made me very happy.”

For a little while they were silent. Then Anton drew back a little from Malou and said: “I want to avoid trouble with my father as much as possible. He is so set on this marriage with Jeanne that if I tell him I intend to marry you we shall encounter tremendous opposition. Once the marriage is an accomplished fact that opposition will automatically disappear.”

“How do you mean, Anton?”

“This. Father has made an arrangement for me to take up a position with a British financial trust in London. I am to go there immediately. I will at once make the necessary arrangements, and let you know what train I am catching. I want you to catch the same train and after we have fulfilled the British residential qualifications we will be married in London.” His eyes were alight. “Don’t you think it’s a great scheme?”

Malou pretended that anything he devised in connection with their forthcoming marriage was a great scheme. It was as though once committed, she plunged heart and soul into the business and borrowed zest from Anton. She made herself a young girl planning golden dreams with a boy lover, and if, for one brief, wistful instant, she thought of Dupont and the dreams he and she had planned together before Le Cagnard killed him, the instant passed, and she saw only the chances of a vengeance beyond her imagination.

She left Anton at last, having given him a telephone number which she said would always find her.

Anton went back to Paris mad with delight.

Malou drove back, soberly, deliberately, as though she feared that the wildness of her exultation would make itself apparent in her driving unless she exercised iron restraint.

She wanted to stand in the blindingly-lighted room and hurl her news into the hidden face of the thing which was her master, the thing that had slain Dupont, and one night, had flung her love at her feet, broken.

She wanted to go to the mansion of Paul Laroche, to call him Le Cagnard, to tell him what the afternoon’s plans would mean to him, to point out that the son he had cherished through the years, the son he had kept in ignorance of his own foulness, was enmeshed in the net Le Cagnard himself had woven with such patience.

But all these things she thrust back and down. She had waited a long time, and she could afford to wait a little longer.

Only one thing went unheeded by her among the things she thought—the ardour of Anton's love, its honesty and simplicity, and all that it might have meant to a woman worthy of it.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Gonzales did not visit Dekker's den on the night following that on which he first met Gabrielle. Like Malou, Gonzales knew the art of intensifying anxiety by keeping his victims waiting.

Although she had warned him not to come, Gabrielle watched anxiously for him all that second evening, and it was with a feeling of bitter disappointment that she realised he was not going to put in an appearance.

She went to her room feeling unutterably depressed. The man who had so appealed to her had forsaken her—like Baring and others of her friends. It was an illogical conclusion for which the wretchedness in which she lived was to blame. She was about to close the door when it was roughly pushed open and Dekker strolled in.

"What do you want?" she asked breathlessly.

He looked down at her. "Been watching for your fancy man all the evening, haven't you?" he demanded.

She did not answer.

Dekker put out his hand and clutched her shoulder, dragging her towards him—close.

"Listen to me. I don't know what your idea is regarding that dago, but if you think he's going to help you, think again—before you ask him. Don't forget you killed Trevert, and that there are witnesses who will swear to it if you try any tricks."

His grip of her tightened so that it hurt. He shook her savagely. "Do you hear me?"

"I hear. Let me go."

"Right. Remember." He flung her back, so that she fell across the bed, and walked out.

He had spoken a few more lines of the part assigned to him by Le Cagnard. He had emphasized to Gabrielle the peril of her position as the slayer of Trevert, had indirectly indicated that in Gonzales might lie her only hope of escape from the net which seemed so tight about her.

She feared for Gonzales should he return, yet she desperately wanted him to return. He seemed to be her only hope, the one man who might help her.

The night after that Gonzales came back.

He was cheery, elegant, easy-mannered. He greeted the foul people about the place with a friendliness which made Gabrielle want to cry aloud to him to be careful. He came to her table and seated himself beside her.

"Went to the Casino last night," he said. "Not a bad show, but of course, I didn't understand half that they were saying. They've got two Spanish dancers there. I saw them in Madrid about six months ago. Coffee for you?"

Gabrielle was glad to have him at her side. She had not realized how great an impression he had made on her until this moment when he returned to her. She was grateful for his kindness, grateful even to have him beside her.

After a little pause he said: "I've been thinking since I saw you last, and I'm convinced that there's a mystery about you. You should never be in this place. I can find no convincing reason why you should be here."

He looked at her with frank, level eyes. "Now, I'm a stranger, just passing through Paris. We have met by chance, and it may sound foolishly flattering for me to say that I shall never forget you; but it will not sound foolish for me to assure you that I am very interested indeed in you and in the reasons that brought you to a place like this. May I ask you to confide in me?"

He spoke very earnestly, and with apparent sincerity, for Gonzales had a gift for these things.

"I can't easily get away," replied Gabrielle. "I'm not going to tell you why I first came here."

"Why not?" demanded Gonzales.

He pressed the question. Using cunning words he wove a net of friendship which he cast over Gabrielle who wanted a friend so badly; and at last she told him about Trevert.

Gonzales considered when she had finished her story, and she saw once more that shrewdness in his eye which she had observed on the occasion of their first meeting.

Gonzales appeared to reflect.

“Of course,” he said, “your situation is difficult. I believe your story, ma’m’selle, believe it implicitly, but I understand your difficulty. It is not so much a question of telling the truth as of making people understand that it is the truth. I think you were perfectly justified in what you did. Though you never reflected on the possibility of the pistol being loaded, though you probably never intended to use it, yet you were justified.”

Gabrielle felt relieved. She realised that she had wanted this man to refrain from condemnation when he heard the truth about Trevert, and that he should approve of what had happened was like a burden lifted from her heart.

Gonzales added: “Have you thought of getting away from here?”

Gabrielle looked round fearfully. “It’s impossible,” she said. “I’m followed when I go out. Escape is out of the question. They are always watching me.”

“We’ll think about it,” replied Gonzales.

“We?” echoed Gabrielle.

He turned to her. “Ma’m’selle in this matter I want to be your friend, and I want you to count on me. I knew from the first that there was something wrong with you in this place, and I’m going to do my best to help you, if you will allow me to. Now will you be patient and leave things to me? I seem to be able to come and go as I wish, and I am going to try to get you away.”

Gabrielle felt tears gathering in her eyes. The incredible kindness of it overwhelmed her after all the ill-treatment she had known during the past weeks.

“You mustn’t, monsieur,” she protested. “These people are terribly dangerous, and if you were suspected for one single instant of an intention to help me the consequences would be dreadful.” She thought of Prinet’s fingers and shuddered.

“I have seen hideous things here. That man leaning against the bar is Machet, the most notorious bandit in Paris. He is a sample of the people who come here every night. I can’t say that I do not need help, but it would be unfair to allow you to go in ignorance of the sort of people with whom you have to deal.”

Gonzales shrugged his shoulders. “Permit me a little vanity, ma’m’selle. Perhaps I feel I am doing somebody a good turn. It would be disappointing

to find that the good turn could be done easily, wouldn't it? It might be complimentary to myself to know that there was danger in attempting it. We will talk another night."

Gonzales came again and again. Gradually the intimacy between him and Gabrielle grew; Dekker was too clever to pretend not to notice it. He commented on it openly, and referred to Gonzales as Gabrielle's dago.

These comments did much to set Gabrielle's mind at rest. So long as Dekker observed Gonzales's attentions to herself and treated them lightly all was well.

Gonzales and Gabrielle came to address each other by their Christian names. Subtly Gonzales began to convey more than friendship in his glances at Gabrielle. She, grateful to him, could not resent his admiration. Gonzales was clever enough to mingle it with some shyness. He knew this was audacious and was amused to find it successful. The girl, he decided, was a fool. But then most girls were fools.

One night he said to Gabrielle: "How would you like to live in Spain?"

"I've never thought of it," she replied.

"Well, I wrote to my mother about you and she wrote back and told me I ought to go to the police and get assistance in securing your freedom; but I did not tell her that you had killed Trevert. Now, could you come to Spain with me if I succeed in getting you out of here? There you would feel safe. You could forget this horrible episode in your life and begin all over again. Will you?"

Gabrielle was silent. The discovery of so helpful a friend in this friendless place rendered her speechless.

His hand dropped over hers.

"Won't you answer me?" he added, after a little while.

She looked at him appealingly. "What is there that I can say? You come to me with all this kindness...." She threatened to break down.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "All right," he said, "you can leave it to me."

Machet saw all this and cursed Gonzales wholeheartedly, and cursed himself for ever having taken service with Le Cagnard. A black image sitting in a lighted room, perhaps an old man Machet could have broken with his bare hands. Damn Le Cagnard, anyhow!

Machet soaked absinthe in larger quantities as the days passed and brought with them the nights of Gonzales' increasing and cumulative success. The little hard snake's eyes of the bandit glittered more brilliantly. The absinthe was getting a stronger hold of him. Yet the word of Le Cagnard was stronger than the potent spirit.

Gonzales continued to assure Gabrielle that the moment of her deliverance drew near, and as he hinted at the arrangements he was making, his eloquent dark eyes gave her glances that she could not misinterpret.

"I shall love to take you to Spain with me," he said softly; "to take you home where you will find my mother kind and good, where—dare I hope for such good fortune?—you will stay always...."

Gabrielle thought of him night and day. She knew that she could never love him as she loved Baring; but Baring was gone. He had forgotten her. The love she had conceived for him had not been reciprocated, and for this she did not blame him. Experienced men of the world did not fall in love like women, at first sight, she thought.

She was grateful to Gonzales. He was kind to her. And gratitude for kindness is, with many women, a substitute for love, which they find satisfactory all through their lives.

It was the only way out—the one way by which she might escape the perils that longer sojourn at Dekker's might hold in store for her.

So the net closed at last.

Gonzales completed his arrangements for the journey south, that journey which was to end in explanations of which Gabrielle did not dream.

CHAPTER XXXV

Gichot was a very unhappy man. He pondered on friendship, and decided that it was a broken reed.

He remembered a phrase common among his countrymen before the great and unlamented War—Perfidious Albion! Baring was the most perfidious of a perfidious nation.

Gichot decided that he must have been drunk when he evolved the scheme which placed into Baring's hands that key which was both literally and metaphorically the key to Gichot's fate. What a fool he must have been!

He groaned over it in bed, and now and again he groaned over it in the night-haunts—in El Garron and Palermo, Le Jockey and the Fantasio Taverne. He told his troubles to this little dancer and that—he was a man in grave trouble, with heavy responsibilities. A friend had let him down. They took his money and sympathized with him.

Sometimes, when he was cold sober, he thought of Gabrielle, and it was then that the tattered rag which Gichot called his conscience fluttered feebly in the breeze of self-reproach.

Baring had spoken truly when he had said that the girl who had called herself Gabrielle Lebrun was a nice girl. She was a nice girl. She was a gentlewoman. Gichot still liked to think he was a gentleman and, therefore, he claimed something in common with her.

From Gabrielle his harassed thoughts shifted to Le Cagnard. There was a devil for you if you liked! That ever a boulevardier of Gichot's standing should have taken service with a fiend like that was a thing to make the angels weep! Gichot always counted the angels on his side.

A scrap of paper stood between him and death, and Baring had threatened to show that scrap of paper to the police. That was friendship.

Gichot continued to groan. He got into the habit of it. It was while he was groaning one night in a Chinese restaurant in Montparnàsse that he once again remembered how interested Baring had been in Gabrielle.

That made him think. Suppose he went and investigated the girl's circumstances, considered them in direct relation to his own peril, and

considered whether it would not be worth while to barter all his knowledge of her, of where she was to be found, with Baring in exchange for the key.

That at least would relieve him of one slice of his worries. He must revisit quarters which had not seen him for some time. He hated the Belleville and La Villette districts. There were slums worse than any to be found elsewhere. There dwelt the creatures of the Parisian shadows, things that crawled out of holes after dark and went about nameless tasks that ended before the sun shone. Gichot liked bright lights and gold-foil-covered bottles.

However, necessity knows no law. The idea once conceived, Gichot determined to execute it. He started off for La Villette.

He had visited Dekker's joint once, and once only, and he had some difficulty in finding it. He skirted the immense cemetery of Père Lachaise and wished that tombstones did not look so ghostly in the moonlight.

By the time he reached the White Rat he was very sober. To begin with he had forgotten that a man in evening clothes and wearing an opera hat, even though he buttons his overcoat across his shirt-front, is a conspicuous figure in the neighbourhood of Père Lachaise.

Silent forms drifted out of the shadows against the wall, and pallid faces came close to Gichot's as he hurried along the pavements. He got an idea that a tireless thing was padding behind him, and once he looked over his shoulder and had a wild impulse to break into a run. He cursed Baring, and Gabrielle and Le Cagnard, and everybody he could think of. He reached the White Rat.

Gichot had never been friendly with Dekker and filled with fears he had manufactured en route to the place, he found himself oppressed with doubt as to his reception. The scheme, he decided, was a very bad one; he should never have thought of it. He ought to have stayed in the Chinese restaurant. Besides, it was very bad for a man at his time of life to go walking round damp streets when there were warm dance-places to sit in.

He slipped inside and seated himself at a table near the door. A man strolled over and looked down at him and Gichot said, "All right. I come from the Lighted Room."

The man walked off. Gichot had spoken the rarely used password of the Le Cagnard organization. Nobody else came near to him.

He could not see Dekker, who, as a matter of fact, had left the room for a little while. Machet, Gichot perceived, was leaning against the bar at the far

end. Sight of him made Gichot shudder and reminded him vividly of his own position. Though he hardly ever saw these people who were in the submerged ranks of Le Cagnard's forces, they were his colleagues, his friends, his companions in crime. There was a little yelping voice inside Gichot, gibing at him.

He saw a table near the bar. The girl was there and she was talking with animation and obvious pleasure to a man whose hand was covering hers as it rested on the table. Even at that distance Gichot could distinguish the confiding look in the girl's eyes, the protective attitude of her companion. The man had planted his elbow on the table and his back was turned to Gichot.

Gichot watched him. He moved at last so that Gichot could see his profile. Gichot leaned forward, his memory stirring, and with it horror. The man turned still more, looking down the room, and Gichot knew him, for this was a face he would never forget.

He had seen it once, and once only. It had looked at him across the body of a girl, self-slain—a wolf's face, hideous in its vicious contorted handsomeness. This was Gonzales.

Forgotten were the perils of the street outside. Gichot stumbled forth. He ran. Something was awakened in him, and it was something which made him forget all his own difficulties, something which redeemed him and always had redeemed him from being among the worst of Le Cagnard's servants.

That girl with Gonzales, believing in him, trusting him, as other girls had believed and trusted! The dreadful knowledge of it rang in Gichot's head like the clanging of a great bell.

He saw a taxi and hailed it.

On this night, when he saw Gonzales in the den near the Père Lachaise, Gichot ceased to be a criminal, ceased, even, to be a drifting easy-going fool, and became a man frantically active under the spur of one idea—an intention to avert the consummation of what he guessed to be a hideous scheme.

He did not stop to reflect for a single instant on any penalties to himself. If he thought that Gonzales was in the pay of Le Cagnard he resolutely refused to be influenced by that thought.

Once, as the taxi charged and swung through the streets, he wondered whether his interference might result in his death. It terrified him. He did not want to die, for the world held much that seemed good to him. Gichot had that kind of selfishness which enhanced the sweetness of life out of all proportion to its true value.

Gichot loathed the part he had played in the scheme to entrap Gabrielle. To drag down a girl so young and remarkably beautiful, so unmistakably innocent and well bred, and to sink her into the foul underworld controlled by Le Cagnard, had been an atrocious thing. But he had assisted in it. And now, as a result of the evil he had helped to commit, Gonzales had the girl. She believed in him. That was obvious. He was making love to her. She permitted him to hold her hand. Gichot's brows were wet at the thought. This was a thing that cried to high heaven. If ever he hoped for some kind of benevolent consideration when he stood before God's Judgment Seat, he must stay the hand of Gonzales.

Was that why he was doing it—because he was afraid that if he allowed the thing to go on, a black crime would be marked against himself? A poor sort of righteousness which manifested itself only at the back of fear. So thought Gichot and examined his own impulses and found satisfaction from the examination.

It was not so. He had run out of the White Rat to seek Baring solely with the idea of stopping Gonzales, of saving the girl. And he would do it. He felt heroic. He would do it.

The taxi dropped him at Baring's flat. He flung the man a note and dashed into the building. Baring was out.

Gichot was now in a state of perspiration and flurry beyond anything he had ever known before. He was like a man who strives desperately for his life. He started to run down the street.

Where would Baring be? There were a hundred places in Paris where one might search for a lonely man seeking enjoyment. Gichot might range the Clichy district, Montparnasse, the Grands Boulevards, without success. Baring might be at the Café de Paris or out at Armenonville. God knows where he might be. Why the devil didn't he stay indoors quietly and read, so that he could always be found?

Gichot reached the street corner and stood panting painfully, trying to think. Sanity suggested a quiet drink somewhere and another visit to Baring's flat later, even the use of the telephone. But all this entailed

inaction, an opportunity to think coldly, a feeling that he was inert while danger pressed round the girl, that he was doing nothing.

Just as a man in a frantic hurry feels an urge to leap from a vehicle and run, to express by physical effort his desire for haste, so Gichot felt that he must keep moving, searching, hoping.

He stopped another taxi and told the man to drive him to Zelli's. He went into the place with a rush, and a little *fille de joie* who knew him said to a friend: "Our Gichot is in a hurry to find pleasure to-night."

She stopped him. "Hello, *mon vieux*. Will you buy me a drink?"

Gichot mopped his brow. "Has an Englishman been here to-night?"

The girl laughed. "About fifty Englishmen have been in. There are Englishmen in here now. Which one do you want—the one in the horrible check suit who jumps on your toes when he dances? He sits over there with Juliette, and is trying to talk to her, though he knows no French. Or would you like to see the very handsome one in the corner? Babette has got him and...."

"I seek a friend," snapped Gichot.

She smiled—very close to him. "*Mon vieux*, I am more than a friend. I love you."

Gichot went out. He chased along the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, the Rue Blanche, all those lighted and seething streets through which roars the tide of Parisian night life. It was a futile quest, a ridiculous quest, but it kept him on the move, and it reduced him to physical exhaustion.

He stumbled into the Rat Mort. A waiter promptly put a bottle of champagne in front of him and he swallowed it. Two girls seated themselves at his table, and another bottle was brought. The girls had some, but Gichot had most. The wine refreshed him.

He left there and plunged down to the Opera district once again. There was something ridiculous in this mad rush of his through Paris, and, at the same time, something pathetic. The man was trying to perform a worthy action, and his efforts were typical of all else in his life, aimless, ill-directed, without logic, but well-intentioned.

In this wild search through Paris Gichot might, for all he knew, be deliberately seeking his own death; for as sure as the lights blazed along the Clichy, Le Cagnard would kill him if he knew what he did that night.

Baring had been to the Comédie Française, and he ate a quiet supper at a nearby café and strolled to his flat, taking care to see that he was not followed. He was not, however, very much afraid of direct attack, as he had hidden the fatal key of the safe deposit, and no longer carried it about with him—a fact which his assailants had discovered when two of them, ruffians of the apache type from Belleville, held him up earlier that evening in a passage of the Place Vendome. One of them threatened him with a pistol while the other made a swift but very expert search of his garments and person, incidentally relieving him of his watch and his note case. If he had not chanced upon an English acquaintance in the cloak-room of the theatre he would have been temporarily penniless.

He had not been long indoors when there came a ring at the bell. He had told his man to go to bed, and so he himself opened the door.

Gichot shot in like a monstrous projectile "*Mère de Dieu!* where have you been? Here have I been searching Paris for you. Where do you hide? What is it that you do with yourself? A man like me to exert myself so.... Give me a drink." He dropped into a chair.

"What's the matter, Gichot?" asked Baring, complying with his request and pushing cigarettes towards him. "You look rattled. Have you decided to make a bargain with me after all?"

Gichot gestured. "Bargains are not in this, Monsieur Baring. I—Gichot—do not bargain on such a matter. I come on an errand of some nobility. It is about that girl."

"Ah!" said Baring, quietly.

Now that he had time to examine the man, he saw that there was a change in Gichot. His expression was intensely serious, and temporarily the weakness had gone from his eyes. Gichot was resolute for once in his life.

"I have something to tell," said Gichot rapidly. "And it must be told quickly, and you must act quickly. The girl is in peril, and I, for one, cannot stand aside and allow the affair to go on. There is no bargain, monsieur, none at all. I tell everything to you."

"That's fine of you, Gichot." Baring realized that he was hearing the truth.

Gichot leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "The time has come when I shall make a full confession. You think in your heart that the girl might have killed Trevert. That is untrue. It was a trick, a faked thing, to make her

believe herself a murderess—a cruel trick of which I did not approve. But Le Cagnard had organized it and I feared him."

"My God!" breathed Baring. "Le Cagnard! Are you among his servants?"

Gichot nodded. His gaze remained steady. "Exactly, monsieur. Realize what I tell you. I am placing myself and my liberty in your hands. Perhaps I am an old fool. Perhaps, on the other hand, I can this night thank the good God that He has left to me some shreds of honour. However, it may be, I must continue to tell you what I know."

In rapid staccato sentences he told all the Trevert plot, beginning with Malou's apparent discovery of Gabrielle in the Bastille district, Gabrielle's sojourn with Malou, the advent of Trevert and the part he played.

"That is it, monsieur. The instructions were that this girl was to be ground down, that she was to be submerged in the underworld, made part of it, one with creatures who live in it. The supposed killing of Trevert was the opening; Malou allowed the girl to see her load the pistol with ball cartridges. Afterwards she unloaded it and replaced the balls with blanks. But the girl did not know."

"Yet I saw Trevert dead," said Baring. He was shaking with excitement, and in his heart was a loud triumphant song. Gabrielle's hands were clean if Gichot's story were to be believed, and Baring felt that it rang with the ring of truth.

"I know. Trevert was killed by Le Cagnard. Of that I am certain. Trevert had written a document. Of that also I will tell you."

And he related the story of Trevert's statement, of his own use of it, and of his defiance to Le Cagnard.

Baring whistled softly. "And why have you told me all this?"

"That is it," said Gichot urgently. "I had to tell it. And the time is short. But you must be made to understand. Listen, monsieur, to the worst."

Baring listened and his blood ran cold. He was on his feet before Gichot ended all his story of his discovery of Gonzales.

"Where's this place?" he snapped. "Can I get into it?"

Gichot reflected, swayed on the brink of the most momentous decision of all.

"Not easily, monsieur. Not easily. *Mon Dieu!* That chivalry should so imperil a man!" He looked at Baring with pitiful, terrified eyes. He had revealed so much, and yet he was deadly afraid of going further, of telling Baring the secret password that admitted to Dekker's den.

Baring walked round the table and placed his hand on Gichot's shoulder.

"Gichot," he said quietly, "there is an aspect of your revelation to me to-night which has not escaped me. It is that of your own free will, and without any preliminary discussion of terms, you have come to me and told me the peril in which this lady stands. You've been an honest man and a gentleman, Gichot, and I count you, from to-night onwards, as a friend. Now a man can offer to help a friend financially without insulting him, eh?"

Gichot smiled wanly. "You are careful of my self-respect, monsieur." The smile became a harsh little mirthless laugh. "My self-respect! That is a jest in the midst of this tragedy, monsieur. See! I can laugh at it myself."

Baring's grip tightened upon his shoulder. "Gichot, I am fairly rich—perhaps very rich, according to certain standards. The girl of whom you have told me, is worth, in my sight, all the money I own. You are a man past the age of working, long past it, used to living in some degree of comfort. I gather that in order to permit me to enter this den where the girl is imprisoned you must make one last revelation concerning your master, and that the greatest of all. Right. Kindness for kindness, Gichot. A fair bargain, if you care to call it so, between friends."

"What do you mean?" asked Gichot. His voice shook slightly.

"I will lend you five thousand pounds in English money, to-morrow. You can repay me if you can, how you can. We will let it be a loan from friend to friend. It is on my part, a mark of esteem, an expression of gratitude, an opportunity to thank you more solidly than in words. And now how can I get into that place, and how do I reach it?"

"Five thousand pounds!" breathed Gichot. "Six hundred thousand francs! *Mon Dieu!*"

He did what no other servant of Le Cagnard would ever have dared to do. He gave the password and the whereabouts of the White Rat.

"That is all, monsieur," he concluded. "They do not know every one of Le Cagnard's servants. The word will get you in. The rest is in your hands and the hands of God. May He go with you, monsieur!"

Baring was rushing from the place.

But it was very late, and it was this night that Gonzales had arranged to take Gabrielle from Paris.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Malou promised Anton she would be on the boat at Boulogne. Anton had been worried, because he was so desperately afraid of losing her, and wondered—for a brief and horrifying moment—whether she might change her mind and not go to London after all.

Paul Laroche observed the uneasiness in him, but so desperately did Anton strive to conceal it that its importance was not appreciated by his father, and Laroche told himself that Anton was resigned to the inevitable, and was making the best of things. He had, thought Laroche, definitely decided to try and forget Malou.

Once Malou had made her promise, Anton entered into his preparations with the utmost speed. He was afire for her, loving her the more now that she was so nearly his. He went to Laroche.

"I've been thinking things over, father, and I've decided that I'll take that position in London. I'm ready to go when you like to send me, and the sooner the better. I want to get away from Paris."

Laroche's eyes lighted. In his strange perverted fashion, he linked what he deemed his triumph in this matter of Anton's future with his triumph in the affair of Gabrielle. The reports of Gonzales told him that Gabrielle was surely falling into the trap set for her. Anton was willing to go to London and embark on a serious career which would inevitably bring him advancement.

Things went well. Laroche's schemes were coming to fruition.

His boy should walk with the most powerful, should sit at the council tables of the world's financiers, deciding the fate of nations—for more surely do the financiers make those decisions than the politicians whom voters send to Parliaments. Anton should be a great figure, a noble man.

And the nameless girl who represented Laroche's betrayal should sink to the depths, until she was forgotten.

"I'm glad, my boy." Laroche took Anton's arm in genuine affection, and Anton felt a little self-reproach. "It would have meant more to me than I can tell you had you persisted in refusing. I've worked for years to see you do something like this. I'm proud of you, and one day I shall have cause for greater pride."

Malou did not cross by the boat as she had promised, and Anton would have let it go without him, but that there was a telegram from her in the embarkation office. The telegram advised him that she was delayed, and would follow him to London, and it was worded so emphatically that he believed it.

Temporarily, he had taken a suite in a great hotel in Piccadilly, and he decided that here, to commence with, he would stay with Malou until his father arrived from Paris after the wedding.

He had got all his plans made. He and Malou should be married, and in a day or two afterwards, he would write to Paul Laroche and tell him about it and where they were staying. He had no doubt but that his father would instantly cross to London, perhaps by air, and Anton instinctively braced himself at the thought, as though he prepared for an ordeal.

Within twenty-four hours of his arrival in London Malou rang him up. He had already told her where he would be staying, and her telephone message sent him wild with delight. She was not in London, but at Eastbourne, and she wanted him to make full inquiries as to the residential qualifications, and other matters.

But Anton had evolved a better scheme than that since he had seen her. The whole affair, in fact, progressed in a series of detached incidents, and never went forward according to original plan.

“Listen, darling,” said Anton. “Jules Berrand is here with his yacht. She is lying at Tilbury. Now a ship’s captain can marry anybody on the high seas. Jules has been with me in London and we have had dinner together and talked about you. Jules thinks the whole thing is finely romantic and he is willing to help us. He says that if we go aboard his yacht he will have her sailed right out to sea and his captain shall marry us. Then we can come back to London and, in due course, in Paris, be married a second time if you wish. Isn’t that wonderful?”

It was more than wonderful, thought Malou at the other end of the telephone wire. It was miraculous. Her luck still held—stupendous luck, almost unbelievable. Would it ever break?

From the moment she had set out to discover the secret of Le Cagnard, events had shaped themselves for her. She had only to act and everything fell into her hands.

For a brief and shaking moment her confidence faltered. When would the pendulum swing back? When would come the ill-fortune which must surely balance this run of gigantic success?

She answered Anton enthusiastically. The plan was fine. When should she reach Tilbury and where should they meet?

Jules Berrand was a romantic young man and the prospect of arranging a real runaway wedding on his thousand-ton yacht was an opportunity too good to be missed. The yacht was a beautiful thing. Jules had bought her from a South American millionaire, and she was a dream in white and gold.

Jules was at the head of the gangway to meet Malou and Anton as they stepped aboard, and, with everything done Navy fashion, slick and smart and precise, with her brass shining like gold and her deck like snow, the big yacht nosed her way past the Nore and headed eastwards for the open sea.

It was a wonderful morning. There was a high sun drenching the estuary with light, and a soft breeze stole across the wide waste of waters. Anton and Malou watched two brown-sailed barges tacking up towards Sheerness. A fast motor boat out of Leigh ran astern of them. There was a giant liner heading for the edge of the world, and a little tramp steamer wallowed in her wake, with black smoke making dirtier her already dirty superstructure.

Anton stayed at Malou's side, hovering, loving, admiring. She was dressed in white, a dainty little pleated frock, a chic white hat, sleek silk stockings glimmering against dainty shoes.

She belonged to him already. He was worshipping her, pouring out his soul as an offering on the altar of his love for her. Her every wish was a command. Her glances expressed orders that he should obey. He held her hand like a boy.

She laughed within herself, and thought of Le Cagnard, of Paul Laroche, of Dupont.

She thought of Dupont last and most. She was thinking of him when the giant Norman who commanded Jules's yacht went through the marriage ceremony, with the crew paraded all about them, and the navigating officer on the bridge alternating his watch of the seaway with glances in their direction.

There was an ache in her heart. Thus she might have stood with Dupont, hand in hand, while somebody married them, made of their love a thing indissoluble.

Anton was gathering her into his arms. His ring was on her fingers. She was no longer Malou, the woman who adventured in Paris. But Madame Laroche, with the doors of the world opened to her.

Anton's lips were seeking hers. She kissed him and looked into his eyes, alight and tender with love, the eyes of a boy giving all, trusting all.

And a stirring, snarling something inside her jeered at him. She was blind to the pity of it.

The captain kissed her. Jules kissed her. There was laughter and swift chatter, champagne bottles open under the awning on the after deck. Deep down in the depths of the slim and graceful thing which carried them a bell was clanging, and the engines were restarted. The sheer prow swung round as the quartermaster's hands spun the little brass wheel. The yacht was going back to Tilbury.

Jules made a speech. It was exactly the kind of speech a high-spirited rather irresponsible young man might be expected to make on the occasion of the wedding of a close friend. He ended it by kissing Malou again.

Malou had to reply. She did so prettily and with a fine pretence of shyness and hesitance. All the time she mocked them in her thoughts.

Jules was doing the thing properly. He had a car at Tilbury and he placed it at Anton's disposal. They could ride to London in it and Anton should keep it until he had bought a machine of his own.

They left amid cheers, with a casual and smiling crowd looking on. Jules had tied an old boot to the back of the car and he made another speech not only to the wedding party but to the crowd on the quayside. The last they saw of him he was balanced on the rails clinging to a rope and waving a glass of champagne.

It was all joyous and friendly and filled with gladness. Good wishes followed them as the car took the great arterial road and sped Londonwards.

And Malou saw only the face of her dead lover, Dupont, and the black shadow who had killed him.

Anton passed the afternoon in a dream of happiness. He felt that he could not tell Malou often enough that he loved her. He drove with his arm round her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. They were bound for the hotel, and Anton had ordered a special dinner for them.

He was full of little preparations. He had planned them joyously, thinking out this and that. In his pocket was a wonderful diamond necklace,

and he had resolved to give this to his bride as a wedding present that night when they went to their suite.

It was glorious being able to give her a present like that, to have a great deal of money at hand so that her every whim could be granted, so that she should be endowed with luxury and never know the meaning of financial anxiety.

He remembered the Song of Solomon. He would make this wife of his a garden enclosed, wherein all was beautiful, and he would stand and worship her and tend her and protect her always.

They dined luxuriously in the finest *salle à manger* in Great Britain. The opulence of their surroundings, thought Anton, made a splendid setting for Malou, whose beauty surpassed that of every other woman in the room. The magnificence of the place adorned her. He looked across the table and worshipped.

They danced afterwards in the ballroom, and then Malou said that she was tired. Anton let her go. He strolled round the Winter garden nervously athrob with excitement.

Malou did not go straight to the lifts. She first of all sought the telegraph bureau and sent a wire to Paris. It was addressed to Paul Laroche at his home.

"Do you remember Dupont? Anton and I were married this morning. Malou."

When, half an hour later, Anton entered their suite, he tapped on Malou's door and found her sitting on the edge of her bed with a kimono over her nightrobe. She looked pale.

He smiled at her. "I've got a surprise for you," he said. "Shut your eyes and hold out your hand."

She obeyed, and he dropped the necklace across her fingers, stooping and kissing them as he did so.

"Now you can look," he said.

She glanced at the necklace once, casually, indifferently, and allowed it to slip through her fingers, and fall to the ground.

"Anton," she said very steadily. "I've got something to tell you."

This was her hour. This was where she would break the boy whose clean love enfolded her like a white garment, and through him, break his father.

Already her telegram was speeding towards Paris. Though she spoke so evenly there were drum beats at her heart.

"What do you mean?" Anton, staring down at the necklace, asked the question breathlessly.

"Have you ever heard of Le Cagnard?" she asked.

He nodded. He was watching her fixedly. His cheeks were pale.

"I am his servant." She got up. She walked past him, and stood with her back against the dressing-table. He had to turn, to see her. She was some distance away from him.

She laughed. Her laughter had a clear high ringing quality.

"Listen!" she said tensely, in a voice he could not recognize. "And keep looking at me, Anton. See me for what I am—a woman of the cafés and the public places. Listen—while I tell you a love story, and of all that followed; my love story, and how your father broke it. Your father—Paul Laroche—Le Cagnard!"

"By God! That's a lie! You're mad!"

"Listen!" she snarled. "You poor damned fool! Listen!"

And she told him of Dupont. She told him how she had tracked Laroche, how she had identified him with Le Cagnard. She told him how she had been summoned to the den of the skulker and forbidden to see Anton again. She explained that that was why she had written him her note of dismissal.

"But I saw a way for vengeance," she panted. "Laroche had taken the man I loved and had killed him. I saw I could take the man he loved and break him. Anton! Laugh with me! See the jest! By God! By God!"

She broke into pealing laughter. Her kimono had fallen away. She stood slim and straight in her white nightrobe, her hands flung wide.

"Kiss me," she breathed. "Kiss me. Tell me you love me. Tell me as you have told me all this day. Come close to me. This is your hour—and mine. We're married." Her laughter rang once more. "I'm the virgin bride come to your arms at last. Oh, by God! Laugh, Anton. There's a jest for you. Damn you! Damn you! Damn you and your father, the whole brood of you! Laugh!"

Anton was leaning on the bedrail, his cheeks grey. Years had marched across his face in the minutes during which Malou had spoken. He spoke as though to himself.

“It can’t be true,” he muttered. “And yet—she tells it on this night of all nights. She tells it as though it were true. It sounds true.” He shook as if from an ague. His eyes were burning, pitiful; but Malou had no pity. She saw only the face of Dupont.

“Is your love dead, Anton?” The mocking voice hammered at his brain. “Is all that beautiful love gone? It was never to die, was it? When my hair was grey and my beauty dimmed it should still live and worship. Do you remember?”

“I remember!” Anton moved for the first time. She saw his face change, and, as though a fiend stooped down and whispered to her, she remembered having seen a similar change once before—at the Abbaye Thélème when some deep-rooted instinct for wickedness, some latent evil begat of Paul Laroche, had stirred in Anton and had responded to the elusive hint of evil in herself.

“I am the son of Le Cagnard!” Anton’s syllables fell like footfalls. “Le Cagnard killed your lover!” She laughed no more. She stood against the dressing-table.

And as he jumped like a beast, hands outstretched, she knew that her luck had broken at last.

A chambermaid met Anton in the corridor outside the suite. He was groping along the wall like a blind man. He pointed to the open door and said. “She’s in there.”

So they found all that was left of Malou with the marks of Anton’s fingers on her fair white throat.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Gichot sat alone in Baring's room. He was alone for a very long time, and during that time his resolution faltered, and all kinds of doubts and fearful questions found birth within him.

If Baring lived through the night he was to give Gichot—for the loan amounted to a gift—six hundred thousand francs, a very large sum of money, which would probably see Gichot through to the end of his days.

That was satisfactory—if Baring lived. But Baring had gone down to the White Rat in an effort to rescue Gabrielle. Gichot reflected that it was fortunate Baring had not, in his haste and anxiety, thought of going first to the police. In that event Gichot might have found himself where Baring's six hundred thousand francs would have been of little use to him.

He was a brave man, Baring, or else an ignorant man—probably ignorant. He did not know the immense danger he ran when he plunged off to Dekker's place in the middle of the night, carrying with him Gichot's hopes of pecuniary reward and financial stability.

A man should not do those things when he had just promised another six hundred thousand francs. It was hardly fair. Gichot ought to have demanded the money from Baring first. An oversight of the first magnitude, that.

Gichot's temples were drenched in perspiration at the memory, and he felt sick and ill. What folly! What incredible folly! And all for the sake of a girl.

A subtle and horrid temptation came to him. He might get through on the telephone to Dekker and reveal—not what had actually happened—but that he had discovered Baring to be on his way to the White Rat. Thus he might gain credit and some position in Le Cagnard's eyes.

It was a mighty temptation to a man like Gichot, and it needed all his strength to fight it; but he managed to do so and, in victory, felt stronger. After all, he had done the right thing. He was again conscious of nobility. He had done his very best to save the girl, and his conscience was clean. A clean conscience was an admirable possession, even if it rather circumscribed one's activities.

He decided to drink some of Baring's champagne, and, as he drank, endeavoured to be more composed, but without success.

Six hundred thousand francs of his money were, at that moment, in danger of being irretrievably lost. He had betrayed his dreadful master. His life was shipwrecked unless Baring won through.

He had just finished a bottle when he heard the doorbell ring. It set him trembling. He could not conceive that Baring had returned with the girl, and his fear-spurred imagination whispered to him that Le Cagnard might, in some miraculous fashion, have discovered his treachery.

That ring which awoke the echoes in the still quiet flat might indicate the presence outside of a shadow which would reach into the flat and obliterate Gichot.

Gichot sat still. He dared not open the door. He dared not move. The doorbell sounded again, more prolonged, more insistent. Gichot murmured the name of his Maker.

He heard Baring's man come from the service room, heard him go along the little hall of the flat and open the door. He sat still and tense, charged with hideous expectancy.

He heard the man exclaim with pleasure. "Mr. Calverley. I didn't expect to see you for months, sir."

Gichot lifted his head. A friend of Baring's. ... Evidently unexpected. He felt limp with relief.

The manservant was still talking, and Gichot could hear a stranger's voice answering him. The door of the room opened and Calverley was shown in. He stopped with astonishment, as he saw Gichot who was on his feet at the other side of the table.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know anybody was here."

Gichot was very polite. "I'm a friend of Monsieur Baring's. He's out for a while and I await him. Permit me to offer you a chair, monsieur."

The manservant was asking if he could prepare a bath, but Calverley shook his head. "I shall wait until Mr. Baring comes in, Sam. You run along back to bed. You can sling my things in the spare bedroom. Good night."

He sat down, eyeing Gichot with some inquiry.

Gichot said: "May I introduce myself, monsieur? Gichot, Auguste Gichot. I, too, await Mr. Baring's return."

Calverley smiled. "My name's Calverley. Yes. I don't mind if I do. I've had a long and hurried journey." He accepted the glass of champagne Gichot

offered him.

They sat for a moment or two in an awkward silence, then Gichot said: "You have known Mr. Baring a great many years, monsieur?"

"Ever since he was boy. I was a friend of his father. Have you any idea what is keeping him out so late?"

"Well—yes—and no, monsieur. It is an affair of a lady in some distress."

Gichot was pondering, considering. Here was a man who was obviously an old and close friend of Baring's, as witness the greetings that had been exchanged between him and Baring's man, and Calverley's own statement. It was conceivable that such a man would have Baring's safety very much at heart, and wrapped up in Baring's safety was the safety of Gichot's six hundred thousand francs, a very great consideration when one viewed it from the proper angle.

Calverley, as Gichot replied, leaned forward slightly. "A woman. There is nothing—unpleasant?"

Gichot gestured. "But no, monsieur. If you mean that Monsieur Baring has been indiscreet I am happy to reassure you. It is an affair of rescue. A young lady who strayed into the hands of a scoundrel. Monsieur Baring goes forth like a knight errant." Gichot tried to speak lightly, but a little strain showed in his eyes, and did not escape Calverley.

"Are you concerned, monsieur?" asked Calverley quietly.

Gichot looked at him quickly. "I? No, no. A thousand times no. I just await his return in a spirit of friendship."

"Where has he gone?" asked Calverley bluntly. He was old enough to be Baring's father, and, having been a friend of that father, was still inclined to view Baring with some protectiveness as though he were a boy.

"I do not know, monsieur." Gichot lied very unconvincingly, while his thoughts still toyed with Calverley's old-established friendship for Baring and the suggestion regarding this that had presented itself to him, a suggestion so daring that he reeled from it while still refusing altogether to relinquish it.

Calverley said: "Pardon me, monsieur, but I think you are trying to protect him. Now there is nobody in whom Tom Baring would confide more than in myself. Bad news has brought me to Paris, and it is essential that I should see him as soon as possible. If he's in a difficulty I think I have as much right as any living man to try and help him. I don't ask you to betray

any of his confidences, if he has taken your word on it, but if, in your discretion, it will be of assistance to him to have a very old and tried friend with him in this matter, you can rely on me."

Only Gichot would have done what Gichot did, for Gichot had always been a fool. He was a fool to tell Calverley what he did tell him, because he knew nothing of Calverley whatsoever. Yet in his folly he was wise.

"Monsieur Baring goes to a den near the Père Lachaise to rescue a girl. It is a dangerous place, and he goes alone. There are reasons why the police should not be called in, and I impress this on you in telling you. The place is called the White Rat. It is in a passage leading from the Rue de Bagnolet, to your left as you go from the Boulevard de Charonne."

Calverley was already on his feet and moving to the door when Gichot's voice rose to a note of alarm.

"A moment, monsieur. They would refuse you admittance. There is a password that one must use: 'I come from the Lighted Room.' And I think monsieur should take a gun."

"I carry one," said Calverley.

"Good. Make sure then, that it's loaded."

Calverley went, and Gichot opened another bottle. There would be two men to safeguard his six hundred thousand francs now and he felt his fortune to be a little more secure.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Gonzales had made his preparations. There was a big, fast closed car that could roar along the straight roads of France at sixty miles an hour, a car with a specially fitted searchlight in addition to its powerful headlamps, such a car as one meets on the touring grounds of the Continent. There was a ship in the port of Le Havre, her papers cleared, her skipper apparently awaiting the repair of some minor engine defect. Actually he awaited a dark night, a little boat and a pitiful cargo.

The girl would not know whether she drove north, south, east or west under the night. The great car would eat distance, so that Paris became only a memory. Gonzales blessed the man who invented the petrol engine.

The girl was very beautiful. Gonzales had told himself that many times. She was as beautiful as a violet dew-drenched under a hedgerow, as sweet and delicious in her simplicity.

It was a question of marrying her on the ship—just for a jest. The captain could do it. How would the girl know they were bound for Buenos Ayres instead of Lisbon? And there would be an added spice to the adventure.

Gonzales was a careful man. He went down to the White Rat that night with a little bottle containing a narcotic in his wallet, a little steel-cased, glass-lined bottle which had served him well many times.

Dekker on this night of fate was uneasy, also he was regretful. He felt like a man—he had his poetic moments—who has reared a rose in his own garden that a neighbour might step in and pluck it. He drank bock beer in pints, and reflected on asceticism.

Machet drank absinthe against the bar, and thought of death.

There was a lean, grey knife across Machet's hip, even as there was a knife across the hip of Gonzales; but the difference was that Machet could use his knife far better than Gonzales.

To Gabrielle there was an atmosphere of strain and expectancy in the dance room when she took her accustomed seat. She debited this to her imagination and tautened nerves, not knowing that Dekker had set his stage for the final act in her tragedy.

This, she told herself, was the night her Spaniard should save her. That she insulted a great and noble race when she called him a Spaniard she did not know. She thought of him and his stories of orange orchards outside Seville, of the mother he said awaited him there, and her heart was warm towards him. If now and again she remembered Baring, it was with a wistful sadness, as if she thought of one long dead.

She knew that Gonzales wanted her to marry him, for he had whispered love talk to her; his eyes had told her more than his lips; and she knew that she would marry him as many women have married many men, from gratitude. But this also she knew—that no man would ever stand in her thoughts as Baring had stood, though she had met him only once.

Gonzales left the car in the passage close to the den. Two men watched the car, chosen hirelings of Le Cagnard.

Gonzales was careful with it. He inspected its tank, its oil level, and tried its lights, even though these things had been done before he left the garage. There were petrol tins stacked on the floor behind the front seats, two spare wheels, everything that could be carried to guard against enforced stoppage. The engine was tuned and tested. The big machine was ready for a thousand miles' run, and more.

Gonzales went into the den and made his way to Gabrielle's side. Dekker, standing back, fingered his whip and watched him dourly. He had to help this fellow to take away the girl, or lose his own life. It was tantalizing, and even bock was much too weak a liquor to compensate.

Dekker's eyes strayed to Machet. The bandit was swallowing his aniseed spirit, and it seemed to Dekker that his pallid face was slightly paler than usual, harder, like a carven white stone in which black brilliant gems represented the pitiless eyes of a snake.

Dekker's fingers tightened instinctively about the stock of the whip. He had an uneasy premonition of disaster. For a moment he wondered whether he should take Machet aside and ask him to leave, but realized that such action might precipitate measureless trouble. So he could only stand, and wait, and worry.

Gabrielle greeted Gonzales eagerly, and he dropped into a chair beside her. He had assumed the air of a man labouring under intense excitement, such as might be expected of a young fellow who finds his first great adventure and takes a big risk with full knowledge of that risk.

“Listen,” he whispered. “I have a great Delage six-cylinder car round the corner. She is very fast and ready for a tremendous run. I have driven her for more than an hour before coming here, and her engine is hot and will start at the first touch of the starter button. Are you ready for a risk?”

She was afraid, not for herself, but for him.

“You could never do it,” she said, quietly. “I dare not permit you to do it. They’ll kill you.”

He shook his head confidently. “Not they. Now I am a fine pistol shot, and I have brought a revolver with me. Once one gets clear of this dance room there is only the doorkeeper and the street beyond. My pistol shall deal with him. He won’t touch us when he sees it, and if he does I shall disable him.”

“You can’t! It sounds so easy, but it’s so dreadfully dangerous. I wouldn’t dare to let you do it.”

“You must. Continue to listen, and see if the plan is not simple and good. They always encore each dance. You and I will dance the next dance together, and at the end of it will stand with the rest, applauding. The music will re-start and we shall go on again. They will have watched us go round through one dance, and will not heed us too much during the encore.

“When we reach the far end of the room we shall bolt through the door into the passage way, up the steps and so to the lobby on the street level. I shall have my gun, as I have said, and the doorkeeper will be helpless. By the time the crowd reaches the street we shall be in the Delage, and if they can run fast enough to catch it, they deserve success. Isn’t it good?”

She vacillated. The temptation was strong, and the plan seemed sound. A quick dash, with the sure knowledge that a weapon could overawe the doorkeeper and that a fast and powerful car was within a few feet of them once they had gained the street, might conceivably succeed. In fact, it seemed certain to succeed.

Once in the car they were safe, for no taxi that might conceivably be at the disposal of the gang—and Gabrielle knew they had several—could ever hope to overtake the car, and the big Delage could at least hold her own with the majority of other powerful machines on the road, should Dekker’s people have a fast automobile close at hand.

There was freedom before her, a dash for liberty with the man she trusted and who said he loved her, a car to carry her beyond Paris to the open roads and the stars. Freedom... .

“All right,” she said at last. “Only—I’m afraid.”

Gonzales showed his white teeth in a smile. “I’m not. We shall succeed.”

He ordered a drink and finished half of it, explaining to Gabrielle that he wanted to do everything that might lead those about them to imagine he had come for the evening. He put his hat on the table beside his glass. One could, as he explained, buy a hat anywhere at any time, and, anyhow, it was an old one he had brought especially to lose. The feeble witticism made Gabrielle laugh. Her nerves were so strained that she was ready to laugh—or to cry—at anything.

The band crashed, and the dance floor filled with the usual tangoing mass of close-hugged couples.

“Come along,” said Gonzales. “And remember during the encore.”

They walked on to the floor and mingled with the dancers.

Machet tossed off the dregs of his last drink. His hand went under his jacket.

Gabrielle moved mechanically through the first dance. Every time she passed the little curtained door at the far end of the room her knees seemed likely to give under her. The dance was incredibly fast—to her. It seemed to hurry, as though the band were anxious to give the encore during which she and Gonzales were to make their dash for liberty. When the music wailed away to silence she and Gonzales were standing near to the bar at Dekker’s end of the room.

“Applaud,” whispered Gonzales. She joined in the chattering handclaps.

The instrumentalists were grinning as they always grinned. They were preparing to start all over again. Gabrielle wondered if she were going to be silly and faint. She could see Dekker by the further door with his whip, Machet against the bar, an empty glass at his left elbow, his right hand behind him under his jacket. She felt dizzy and sick to death, terrified.

Gonzales whispered: “When I pull at you, run.”

She nodded, her lips too dry for speech.

There was a short moment of silence as the clapping ceased and the band got ready.

In that silence Machet spoke. His beady eyes were fixed on Gonzales.

“I want to talk to you, my little *souteneur*.”

The music did not start. The band had played its last tune in the White Rat. The dance music which was to have marked Gabrielle's flight with Gonzales was never heard. There was silence in the place that quivered, as though a mute harp-string had been struck by invisible fingers.

Dekker came forward. "Machet!"

Machet did not look at him. His brilliant eyes were on Gonzales. He just waved his hand flatly backwards, in the direction of Dekker, and snarled, "Stand still, *cochon*!"

The other dancers drew back to the walls, a rustling wave of humanity silently retreating from the snake that reared its head against the bar. So Gonzales and Gabrielle stood alone with Machet staring at them.

The right hand of Gonzales began to move towards his jacket pocket. Machet snapped: "Keep that hand still, Gonzales!"

It dropped to Gonzales' side.

Machet smiled. The smile showed his strong brown teeth. For a second his eyes rested on Gabrielle.

"A rescue, eh? Staged by friend Le Cagnard. But there shall be no rescue. I, Machet, declare it. I shall be the hero of this night. And I shall claim the reward. What! I, who have done this and that, to stand aside at the last that a smooth-tongued betrayer of women shall be paid to take the woman for whom I would fight! By God! No! A thousand times no. Not if Le Cagnard himself stood in that doorway and ordered it." He spat horribly.

"What does he mean?" whispered Gabrielle looking up at Gonzales. "What does he mean?"

She saw something in Gonzales' face that Gichot had seen there, a hint of wolf, slavering, utterly without humanity, and she fell back from him.

Machet answered her. "What do I mean? Look at him. Look at him. I'll tell you who your lover is, I'll tell you his plan. There's a car round the corner. There are orange trees in Seville. But there are places in Buenos Ayres to which he has sold many girls, even as one day he would sell you. Le Cagnard arranged this—that I might lose you! But it is I who now arrange—and I make the last arrangement of all!"

The absinthe was flaming madly in Machet's eyes. The man was insane with drink.

“See this!” Steel quivered in his hand, and a girl against the wall screamed shortly and was silent. “At least it is honest. I kill. Everybody knows it. But I kill honestly. Who’s the better man—the bandit who slays with steel, or the devil who slays souls with words? See? I press my suit. Come here—to my side, and I’ll keep you there against Le Cagnard and all Paris.”

But Gabrielle did not move. She stood like stone.

Gonzales shrieked. “Machet! You fool. You’ve spoilt all. Le Cagnard will demand reckoning for this!” Gonzales was wild with fear, for he read death in the eyes of Machet, and he hardly knew what he said.

Machet laughed. “Pay! That is always the word—pay. Pay for you to deceive this girl and take her away from me. Pay if I snatch that which I want. Pay. Pay. Mother of God! There shall be payment to-night, and to spare.”

Now Dekker had stood all this time watching. He knew that from the moment Machet moved and spoke the plan was spoilt, and in his cumbersome fashion he strove to see how he might profit from its spoiling. There were scores of witnesses to prove to Le Cagnard that he himself had not been responsible for this happening, and once the matter were under way he felt that he could justifiably act at his own discretion.

Exercising an extraordinary patience, he awaited the outcome of the wordy duel between Gonzales and Machet. The end came soon and without drama, as though the fates dared pile no more on the horror which was to come.

Gonzales suddenly smiled and spread his hands. After all, the life of Gonzales was a thing of great value to him, and he knew that in the knife-blade Machet balanced in such practised fashion was sure death, death that would leap at him before ever he could reach the gun in his pocket.

“Machet, I have done my best, and you have seen fit to spoil it. I will go. The lady, I am sure, will appreciate how advantaged she is in procuring you as a protector instead of myself.”

“You’ll go? To Le Cagnard? To warn him?” asked Machet, softly. “But no, my Gonzales. You can lie to women but not to me. Are you faint, ma’m’selle?”

Gabrielle was backing away from Gonzales. She found a chair against the wall and dropped into it. Her eyes were like stones, tearless, fixed. She felt that all, for her, was dead.

Gonzales disregarded her. His attention was fixed solely on Machet. His smile had faded. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and he looked uneasy, sallow. “I surrender to you. What more do you want?”

“That you stay here while I get clear,” Machet lifted his voice. “Who will see that this dog does not stir from the place for an hour? That man will be my friend. Those who refuse—my foes.”

There was a little half-hearted murmur of support from the men about the walls. Le Cagnard was a formidable thing, but so was Machet, and Machet was present.

Machet, with a smile, walked across to Gabrielle.

“Come on, *petite*. We shall take a motor ride, you and I.” He put his hand on her shoulder.

As he did so the lash of Dekker’s whip coiled about his throat.

Dekker had acted upon a swift, passionate impulse. Machet should never have the girl. He himself would have her. But as soon as he had made his first move all his cool fighting instinct came back to him.

His whip-thong tightened round Machet’s throat, choking him. Dekker pulled upon the whip-stock with all the strength of his massive body, and Machet was flung backwards from Gabrielle. He tore at the thing which threatened to strangle him.

The people who watched suddenly forgot to be afraid, and that latent blood-lust which made them the creatures of prey that they were showed in their eyes.

Here was a fight which had long been brewing. Machet and Dekker would strive for mastery and for the white-faced girl who lolled against the wall in the chair, hardly seeing what took place before her, hardly conscious of her surroundings, knowing only one thing—that she was filled with indescribable terror.

Dekker’s own strength proved the undoing of his surprise attack. He pulled too hard, so that Machet reeled back faster than Dekker’s arm could move. The thong slackened. The slackening was only for an instant, but that instant was long enough.

Machet tore the thong from around his throat and turned and leapt at Dekker like a tiger.

His knife went up. There was a roar from the crowd. Dekker, clumsily evading the rush, was torn down the left arm as though, indeed, a tiger had slashed at him with razor-like claws.

He beat at Machet with his whip. The cracks of the great lash were like pistol shots in the tremulous silence.

Machet reeled back.

There was a pause in the fight; the knife-armed man retreated beyond the reach of the giant with the whip.

Dekker came after him, anxiously watchful for Machet to throw his knife. Machet—thrashed, in pain—remembered that he had only one knife, and that if he threw it vainly he would be at Dekker's mercy.

He determined to hold it a little longer.

His rapid, shuffling retreat brought him against a row of chairs and tables. He tossed the knife, caught it with his left hand, and snatched a chair.

Dekker rushed at him; the chair crashed against his face and he went sideways.

Machet came after the chair like lightning, and stabbed—once, twice.

Dekker smashed at Machet with the whip-stock, and the bandit could not stand up to the blows. He reeled across the floor and the thong took up the work of the stock, so that Machet was driven back from the attack which might have won him the fight.

Dekker, wounded horribly, leaned on a table and breathed in great gasps that filled the room with choking sound.

Nobody noticed Gabrielle. They were watching Dekker and Machet. Gabrielle sat with her face buried in her hands, so that she could see nothing.

Machet began to talk to Dekker. He used vile words. He was mutilated by the whip-thong, but his strength was unimpaired. Dekker was badly wounded, but his vital force was so immense that what might have brought another man to the floor at Machet's mercy, left him yet able to continue the fight.

Dekker did not answer Machet. He knew he was badly hurt, but that served only to inflame him the more. He was riding high on the crest of a great wave of ungovernable rage, and he wanted to cut Machet with the whip until the bandit was blinded and insensible.

All Machet's insults passed him by. He continued to stand against the table, leaning on it, watching from blood-flecked eyes, swinging the great whip.

Machet debated. Should he throw his knife? It was simple to do so—but if it missed he was doomed. And his left eye troubled him, hurt him, where the thong had come across it in the last mad *mêlée*.

He came on slowly. Dekker suddenly lurched forward and thrashed at him. The man's strength and recovery were wonderful. He stood squarely on his powerful legs and beat at Machet as though he beat at a fixed post.

The thong leapt and danced about the bandit like a slaying, living thing. He screamed with pain, strove futilely to cover his face with his arms, tried to retreat, and fell into a bunch of chairs, and Dekker came after him and beat him.

The thong struck here and there. Sometimes it fell with a loud crash across a table-top; more often it slashed on Machet's head and throat.

The man was hideous with wounds, suffering unimaginably.

Dekker had him. Machet tried to get up. He tried to crawl beneath the table. The lash pursued him, merciless, life-taking, a weapon more formidable than his knife had ever been.

The people hardly dared watch now. Even men among them who had seen floggings in the punishment battalion of the Foreign Legion told themselves that this had never been surpassed. Here was Machet being beaten to death by Dekker, who himself was so wounded that it seemed incredible that he could stand up to carry on the thrashing.

The thong struck—again—again, and tangled itself about the table leg.

Dekker eased it. It clung, locked for a moment. He pulled the table clattering towards him, but the thong remained fast.

Machet lifted his seared and awful face and understood. For a moment he spurred his dying brain into a semblance of its old activity. His knife-blade gleamed across the lamplight like silver, and Dekker, swaying on his feet stupidly, saw its haft standing in his chest.

The thong fell free. The world was going from Dekker on the wings of agony. He saw Machet crawling, and his whip-thong leapt out once more. It curled round Machet's throat and Dekker pulled. He kept pulling, so that Machet was dragged backwards round the room struggling—till he struggled no more....

Then Dekker fell on to his knees like a great bear wounded mortally. He still clung to his whip, but his head lolled forwards.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Gonzales stood up and his quick eyes roved round the room. Dekker was down, and Machet with him. Both were finished. The ban Machet had laid on him was lifted by the hand of death.

He moved like lightning, while the women screamed and the men stared stupidly. He went across the floor, and with a swift action, caught Gabrielle by one slim wrist. His pistol gleamed blue-black in the lamplight.

"Everybody will stand still!" he shouted.

He began to retreat towards the further door, walking slowly backwards, his eyes gleaming viciously, his head turning from side to side. Gabrielle, after an ineffectual struggle, dragged after him.

Nobody moved. The horror of the thing that had happened to Dekker and Machet had momentarily stunned them, and the threat of Gonzales' gun was too vividly apparent for any of them to dare an attack.

He reached the door and stood for a moment considering them, smiling —triumphant.

As he stood, the door opened behind him and a man who was a stranger to them stepped into the room.

Gabrielle was hardly conscious of what was taking place. Instead of a detailed realization of a terrible happening she was aware only of a vague but emphasised impression of horror.

The brutal struggle between Machet and Dekker was not so much a terrifying incident as the culminating point in a long ordeal which had sapped both nerves and body to such an extent that something almost like indifference to her fate possessed her as Gonzales stood there, triumphant, smiling, before he made his exit.

She could see, down the long and lighted room the people huddled against the walls, the strangely postured forms of Dekker and Machet lying so still on the floor, the musicians sitting open-mouthed, afraid, their instruments in their hands. She could see Gonzales' right hand extended, the gleaming squat gun in it that moved from side to side as though a snake's head swayed to weird music.

All these things she could see. And then, into her field of vision leapt a hand and arm. They came from behind Gonzales and the fingers of the hand closed over Gonzales' gun.

There was a cry: Gonzales screamed with sudden pain as his arm was twisted brutally. His fingers relaxed their grip on the gun butt, and the weapon went into the hand that had snatched at it.

Gabrielle looked over Gonzales' shoulder, and it seemed that the whole world stood still for a palpitant moment of welling triumphant thankfulness, for she found Baring's eyes looking into hers.

She called his name as Gonzales released her and wheeled round.

She clutched at a table to save herself, and doing so, saw Gonzales's hand go under his jacket.

Baring hit him with the pistol full in the face. The man went backwards, his svelte beauty for ever marred by the steel that bit into his flesh. He lay on the floor, looking up, his teeth showing, snarling, spitting oaths that were silenced as the gun muzzle swung in his direction.

He went away on all fours, bleeding, stricken down, terrified, and that was the last Gabrielle saw of him—running to earth like some foul creature of the wild, burrowing his way between the chairs and tables till he reached the wall, where he could nurse his hurt and be unseen.

Baring shouted: "The first man to move dies." His left hand went sideways towards Gabrielle. "Darling," he added, softly, "you're all right now. We're getting away."

She took his hand in both of hers. His coming had given her strength. Hope so long stricken down was lifting its head within her. Loving Baring, she felt safer with her hands in his than if an army had stood about her.

They were moving towards the door when the unexpected happened. The doorkeeper had heard the shouts, and had come hurrying to see what was happening. He looked inside, saw Baring with his gun, and swiftly withdrew his head. The door slammed, and they heard the heavy bar outside it drop into place.

Gabrielle felt Baring's handgrip tighten. He stood for a moment, and then said quietly: "We're locked in—with this lot. Try not to be afraid, and stand close to me."

She obeyed him. She would have done anything he told her, without question, without argument. She wanted to hold close to him, to stroke his

face, his arms, to make sure he was real, that she was not dreaming and might wake at any moment to find herself sitting at the table at the far end of the room with the band still crashing its hideous cacophony and the floor jammed with dancers.

Baring was very cool. He spoke to the people in front of him.

"Your doorkeeper has shut us in. I'd like to tell you all that I'm considered a first-class pistol shot, and that if any of you try to make trouble I shall shoot to kill. I presume the door-man has gone to get assistance. Well—we'll wait for it. But I warn you that when it comes there will be deaths in this place?"

A man stepped forward. "How did you get here? How did you get past Jacques?"

"I told them I came from The Lighted Room."

There was a little murmur of surprise. "Then you are one of us?" asked the man in amazement.

Baring nodded.

Some of them began to murmur. There were doubtful glances cast at him. Gabrielle caught stray words—traitor, betrayal, detective. There was peril in the air.

The spokesman destroyed what shred of hope might have been created by Baring's announcement of his knowledge of the password.

"Somebody has betrayed us," he said. "You are no member of Le Cagnard's crew. If you are—come down here and join us."

Baring did not move. He dared not essay the bluff. He calculated that they would risk Le Cagnard's wrath and make him prisoner, finding in all the extraordinary circumstances of his advent their excuse for such conduct should he prove to be a member of the gang.

There remained nothing but waiting, while the situation grew more desperate every moment.

Baring smiled. He thought it best to preserve an appearance of carelessness, even though he was strung up and alert and more than uneasy.

"This lady," he said, "wants something to drink. I want one of you girls to bring me an unopened bottle of Vichy water, with an opener, and put it on that table." He indicated a table within a foot or two of where he stood. "I perceive," he added, "that there are two ice buckets on the counter. Put the

bottle into one of the buckets. You will do." He pointed to a dark girl at the end of the line.

The girl obeyed sullenly, and when she had brought the bottle, Baring allowed it to rest in ice for a few moments and then handed it to Gabrielle.

"I shall have to ask you to open it yourself. Take a drink. It'll refresh you."

Gabrielle pulled the cap off the bottle and drank the cold, clear water, then passed the bottle to Baring.

She whispered: "What will happen when they come?"

Baring put his hand over hers. "Stand ready for a rush. I shall shoot the lights out and try to get away. It's our only chance. Perhaps the shooting will bring help."

They waited. The gang along the walls shuffled and shifted, but said nothing. It was obvious that they were as strung up as Baring and Gabrielle.

Baring wondered what the doorkeeper was doing—who he was summoning to his assistance.

As a matter of fact, the doorkeeper was doing something that so lowly a person as himself had never before endeavoured to do. He was trying to get through on the telephone to Le Cagnard and failing.

The man was frantic with anxiety. There had been murder in the den, and he had admitted one who was obviously a spy or a traitor. He would have to answer for this, and if by chance the police came—or if, by chance, the spy was a detective—he would be implicated in a murder charge.

Failing to establish communication with that tremendous master he had never seen, he dashed down into the blackness of the Rue de Bagnolet, seeking in every known haunt for men who were servants of Dekker. He worked himself up into a state of increasing and feverish anxiety, but gradually, one by one, he gathered together half a dozen men, and with them hurried back to where Baring and Gabrielle were imprisoned.

The wait had been long. For all her faith in Baring, Gabrielle gradually found the perilous uncertainty telling on her. She began again to be afraid, and now her fear was mainly for Baring.

"You'll be killed," she whispered; "and just for me. That it should happen—through me."

His hand rested on hers, and he smiled at her. “Don’t worry. We’ll get out all right.”

She tried to smile in answer, but she could not. She knew he was only talking to cheer her, and that though he had suggested a desperate stratagem on the arrival of the reinforcements, he had little faith in its success. She shuddered as she looked at the wolfish faces that began to form a closer semi-circle about them, as she listened to the growls and threats with which these venomous creatures of the night tried to intimidate the man whose steady eyes held them at bay. She guessed that soon they would gather courage for the concerted rush which would certainly result in the death of Baring and herself.

Footfalls sounded on the steps beyond the door.

The scowling crowd leaned forward, alert and silent. Baring gripped Gabrielle’s hand tightly.

Someone was fumbling at the bar. They heard it lift and go back.

Baring’s brows wrinkled questioningly. Was this the doorkeeper returning alone? Surely a band of men would not move so carefully? They would indeed prefer to rush.

The door opened slowly and a hand came through. The hand held a gun. A face appeared at the opening. Then Baring cried aloud.

“Calverley—Thank God!”

There was an instant movement. He backed to the door with Gabrielle. The ravening semi-circle moved nearer, but still no unit of it dare jump forward to face the menace of Baring’s gun.

“Come on,” urged Calverley. “Gabrielle! To see you here!”

They were on the steps. Calverley shut the door and dropped the bar into its socket. A welter of blows shook the woodwork. They could hear running feet on the pavement outside, and, hurrying, they met the first of the men the doorkeeper had gathered.

Calverley fired, and the fellow went down with a bullet in his leg. The shot gave pause to those who followed him, and Calverley and Baring were running down the street with Gabrielle before Le Cagnard’s men realized what was happening.

Baring began to shoot. He was not so much desirous of hitting anybody as of raising an alarm. The shots drummed sharply, waking the whole

neighbourhood with vicious echoes, and though none of their number was hurt, the gang melted into the shadows, knowing that the police would come pell mell to the scene.

"I've got a taxi waiting in the street beyond the passage," panted Calverley. "Put your gun away and get to it quickly."

They bundled into the taxi. The driver, taught by experience to ask no questions, dropped home a gear and went off. When they got out at Baring's flat, Calverley said to the man: "I wonder what that shooting was that we heard as we left?"

The man smiled and glanced at the hundred franc note in his hand.

"It does not pay to inquire into shootings, monsieur. We were best away out of it."

"Exactly," agreed Calverley.

They went upstairs and found Gichot. He stood up and smiled, his hands held out, and said in his best manner: "This is the greatest moment of my life."

He looked at Gabrielle, holding close to Baring, and reflected how important six hundred thousand francs are to any man financially inclined.

CHAPTER XL

Paul Laroche was trying to think.

He sat in the library of his great house—alone.

There was a telegram before him, and he kept reading it, though he had read it a thousand times since its receipt:

> "*Do you remember Dupont? Anton and I were married this morning.—Malou.*"

The telegram was tattered and dirty, for it had rested in Laroche's pocket for a long time.

There were other papers beside it. There was an account of an inexplicable and hideous tragedy in London's greatest hotel. Anton Laroche, son of Paul Laroche, the great Parisian financier, had gone mad on his wedding night and had slain his bride.

There were further details added to this—chief among them the statement of a semi-hysterical chambermaid.

The girl told of her meeting with Anton in the corridor outside the suite; how she had gone into the suite and what she had found there.

She had come rushing back to the corridor and saw Anton far away to her left, by the four elevator shafts. He was tearing at the decorated iron gates. She was too late to prevent him from getting one of them open and dropping down the shaft.

That was all Anton's story—a slain woman in her nightrobe, and a shattered thing lying lifeless in the deep heart of the great hotel, while dancers moved across the polished floor of the ballroom and music drifted across the dining tables.

Other news had reached Laroche, but he hardly heeded it. The underworld of Paris had provided yet another atrocity. A low-class dancing-place known as The White Rat, run by a man named Dekker, had been the scene of a ferocious combat in which two men had died—Dekker himself and a notorious bandit named Machet.

There was no mention of Le Cagnard. The avenues, always kept carefully closed, had not been opened by the tragedy.

Laroche went over the events of the measureless hours immediately behind him.

He had refused to go to London. To all inquiries he had said: “I know nothing.”

Anton was dead. Gabrielle was freed. Malou, in dying, had struck back more dreadfully than even she had imagined. The end had come.

He was full charged with his feeling of finality.

This was the end. He had planned and wrought, and dreamed, and here were the results of it all—this tattered telegram and the horrifying story the newspapers had to tell him and the world.

He knew why Anton had killed Malou. He knew that Malou had told Anton the truth. She would be like that. He had underrated her, been too contemptuous of that vivid intelligence which had made her so valuable to him.

Patient, she must have been, cunning—waiting—waiting—winning!

For she had won. She had beaten him in the most vital affair of his whole life. He had brought off this coup and that. He had matched his wits honestly against financial cliques, dishonestly against the police, and always the victory had been to himself. But this woman who was his servant had attacked the most carefully planned scheme of all, had assaulted his most cherished ambition, and had ground it in the dust.

How Gabrielle had been rescued, why Machet and Dekker had died, he did not care. What did they matter? Anton was dead in circumstances of shame. What light there had been in the dark life of Le Cagnard had gone out.

In that curiously twisted fashion which was typical of him, he felt immensely sorry for himself. He saw Paul Laroche as the man against whom Fate’s hand had always been turned.

He had never had a chance. Now the name of Laroche was brought low by that very son who should have enhanced its fame. The irony of it tortured Laroche.

Fate, which had always been against him, was now making one great effort to smash him. The son of Paul Laroche was dead in such circumstances that the world called him murderer, lunatic, or both.

There remained now only one more blow—the linking up of Le Cagnard with Paul Laroche.

Laroche felt determination mounting up within him like a great wave. That should never be. He had kept his secret through the years from all save Malou.

Life was ended for him. His son was gone; Gabrielle had slipped through his clutches; Dekker and Machet were dead; Malou was dead. His organization was useless. It was useless because its strongest links were broken; because he, its maker, had no will to forge others in their places. Futile for him longer to sit in that lighted room above Montmartre, for none would visit him there save jackals coming in from the capitals of Europe alarmed at the fate that had overtaken Dekker and Machet.

Nothing was left whatsoever. That which he had built, and which had seemingly been so strong, had crashed into ruins at the first serious assault upon it.

His self-pity increased, and his determination with it. Fate, which had scourged Laroche with a seven-thonged whip, should be beaten at the last ditch—somehow.

For hours he sat alone in the tall, lonely room and thought. His mental processes were slow to-night, but he saw his plan at last. It was very simple. It made him chuckle. He thought he was being more clever than he had ever been in his life.

He touched a bell, and summoned his butler and housekeeper, a man old in his service, and a woman who had nursed Gabrielle and Anton when they were tiny children—sound, honest servants, shaken to the core by that which had happened in London.

"You two," he directed, "will stand by this table and watch me write. I shall say each word as I write it, and you will then sign and be ready to swear that you saw the document written."

They stood and watched him. He wrote, and recited as he did so:

> "This is the last will and testament of me, Paul Marcel St. Just Laroche, and it cancels and makes void all other wills that may previously have been prepared by me or at my direction.
>
> "I give and bequeath my entire possessions to the Government of France, directing that such possessions shall be converted into a trust fund, the proceeds of which shall be employed at the sole

discretion of the Government of France or its appointed representatives for such charitable purposes as may commend themselves to the administrators of the fund.

"I further direct that this fund shall be called in perpetuity The Paul Laroche National Trust, and that each year through the medium of the Press its activities shall be made known to the public."

He signed this will, and the butler and housekeeper witnessed it.

Laroche looked up at them when the pen was laid aside.

"You have been faithful servants to me through many years. I am closing down this establishment and shall have no further use for your services, nor for the services of any others of my domestic staff. To-morrow, at midday, you will all assemble in the hall, when I shall have something to say to you."

He met them in the great hall of his house. He had not slept, and during the working hours of the morning he had been tremendously busy. The will was now in the hands of his lawyers, and was stamped, sealed and in proper legal order. He had paid a fabulous price that the name of Paul Laroche should never die, but should always be honoured.

Let Fate deal in irony if it wished. He also knew something of that commodity.

He made a little speech to his servants. He was a lonely man, and there was no need for him longer to maintain the immense house in which they now stood. Though his face was white, his eyes burned steadily and his voice was even.

He opened a bag. It was filled with packets of notes, and on each packet was the name of one of his servants. He distributed the packets. The butler and his housekeeper found themselves in possession of twenty thousand francs each. There was an eager thankfulness among them all. They crowded about him and called him Master, and their gratitude poured over him in a soothing stream.

He went to his library and laughed. The departing servants were blessing his name, and wherever they went they would speak of him with grateful reverence; they would spread far and wide stories of his goodness and generosity; while the great fund he had created would work under his name, would each year remind the people of France of his name and his magnificent charity, his thought for others.

He continued to laugh as he wandered around the great and empty house, with no living being in it save himself. He went from room to room, from the salon packed with priceless treasures to the kitchen at the rear.

There were two rooms only of them all that he did not visit—Anton's room and the room in which his wife had died. On the threshold of Anton's room he halted and turned back. The other room had been locked ever since Madame Laroche was carried away, and Paul Laroche had dropped the key in the Seine.

He realized early in the evening that he had not eaten for forty-eight hours. He dressed himself with care, thrust a great bundle of one thousand franc notes into his pocket, and telephoned for a taxi. The six cars in the garage were useless to him.

The taxi carried him to a restaurant in the Avenue de l'Opéra. He had a strange feeling of elation. He chose a meal that earned the admiration of the *maître d'hôtel*. His choice of wines was unusually discriminating and fastidious. He felt that some of the diners who knew him by sight were stealing little pitying glances at him, but he did not care.

He would win. He would beat that fate which had tried so ruthlessly to thrust Paul Laroche into oblivion and utter darkness. He had wrought so that the name of Laroche should flame through the years. He could laugh and be merry.

And then, when the very old brandy was mingling its bouquet with the aroma of the cigar the waiter had lighted for him, it seemed that Anton sat opposite him—the boy with the clever eager face and the clean eyes, the boy whose feet should have marched towards Heaven, but who dropped down to Hell because Le Cagnard was his father.

Anton was talking to him. He wanted his father to go for a walk with him. Laroche said: "Certainly, Anton. You and I—just a little stroll and a talk over old times. God bless you, my boy. You're always in your father's thoughts."

A waiter paused in the act of pouring wine at the next table. The people at the table turned and stared. But Laroche did not see them. He was smiling at Anton, who was smiling at him.

The *maître d'hôtel* came hurrying to the table. Laroche thrust some notes into his hand. He did not know how many. He was unaware that the man stood and stared at five pieces of paper, each stamped with the magic word "*mille*."

Somebody gave him his hat and coat. He carried the one across his arm, the other in his hand. He was talking to Anton. A *chasseur* raised his cap and asked: “Taxi, monsieur?”

Laroche tossed him a crumpled note and said that he did not want a taxi. He reached the Avenue de l’Opéra while the *chasseur* spread one thousand francs in his hands, aghast. Laroche had not even looked at him. He could look only on Anton.

Anton took him down to the Rue de Rivoli. They walked along the Rue du Pont Neuf to the Quai de le Megisserie, and so by the banks of the Seine, along the Quai des Gevres until they reached the Pont d’Arcole.

In the middle of the bridge they halted.

The Seine was quiet and dark beneath them. To their right, peaceful under the stars, was Notre Dame, with the lights of the Boulevard St. Michel flaring in the sky beyond it.

Laroche looked to his left. In the distance, vaguely, he could see the heights of Montmartre; but though he tried hard he could not distinguish that dark and awful house on the edge of the Butte where Le Cagnard had sat and looked across all Paris.

The house was gone. He felt sure of that. He had been so clever that not only had Le Cagnard vanished but the house also. There remained only Anton at his side and the dark peace of Notre Dame close by. Anton was moving towards the parapet.

A gendarme, approaching the bridge from the island side, saw Le Cagnard climb on to the parapet, and, shouting an alarm, ran to the spot as fast as he could.

But when they recovered Paul Laroche from the waters of the Seine he was dead.

CHAPTER XLI

Calverley stood with his back to Baring and looked out of the window. He was thinking deeply, swiftly, pondering the most momentous problem of his life.

He looked round at last. “Does Gabrielle assert this strange story, or does she seem bewildered by it, unbelieving?”

Baring shrugged his shoulders: “I don’t know. It’s difficult to judge. She is so ill that she seems incapable of expressing any great emotion. But she confidently declares that Laroche showed her the letter in her mother’s handwriting, and that he turned her from the house because she was the daughter of Le Cagnard.”

Calverley was silent for a moment. Then he spoke deliberately.

“Baring, I think I ought to be frank. I have been thinking this thing over while I’ve been looking out of the window; and I think you should know the truth.”

Calverley was meeting Baring’s gaze steadily.

“Many years ago,” he said quietly, “the lady you knew as Madame Laroche and I were children together. We grew up believing in each other. I lived near her—in England. I won’t give details, Baring; but I was not too blessed with this world’s goods at that time. Laroche came along, rich, handsome, entertaining. My poor girl”—Calverley’s voice broke for just one moment—“was fascinated by him. Perhaps I was a fool. Perhaps she was foolish. I don’t know. But I went away instead of staying. She married him, and afterwards knew that she loved me. But she was a good wife to Laroche, faithful, affectionate.”

Calverley was silent for a moment. Clearly he was suffering. He went on:

“And then—sometime after Anton was born—she sent for me. She had left her husband—had fled from him to a tiny village in the Austrian Tyrol. Something had happened—what, I never knew. She was distraught, broken, terrified. I gathered that she had discovered something concerning her husband which she could not even tell me. And I—I just loved her. I had always loved her—always will. I think that sometimes a man meets one woman in his life who stands alone. It was like that with Betty and myself.

We thought in that lovely remote place that we had left the world for ever behind us; that our lives were consecrated to each other; for a few weeks we knew the real meaning of happiness, but she had left Anton with her husband, and for Anton's sake, for love of her little son and to guard him from some peril which she would never disclose to me, she went back."

Calverley was again silent. He added shortly: "After that, Gabrielle was born."

Baring looked at him and he looked at Baring. The room was very quiet.

Calverley drew a deep breath. "There is another aspect of my explanation, Baring, to which I must now turn." His voice had changed, and he seemed to have forced into it a pitiful, businesslike briskness that hurt Baring.

"I've been putting two and two together—Gabrielle's explanation about that strange letter her mother wrote, Laroche's accusation that she was the daughter of Le Cagnard—Le Cagnard's persecution of Gabrielle, and it seems to me that the whole thing is revealed. Betty discovered that her husband was Le Cagnard. That was what drove her to my side. Dying, she wrote a letter to me—telling me everything. That must have been the letter Laroche found after she was dead. It told him that Gabrielle was my child, not his, and he mutilated it, used it to convince Gabrielle that her father was Le Cagnard, used it to crush her."

Again they looked at each other. Baring suddenly stepped forward. "Calverley," he said, "I'm glad." He put his hand on the elder man's shoulder. "I'm glad you've told me about Gabrielle."

Calverley smiled wanly. "I was afraid—Baring. ... You see...." He broke off.

"I understand," said Baring gently. "And now—Gabrielle?"

"Somebody must see her," said Calverley. "Shall I? Perhaps it is right for me to see her."

Baring considered. "I hardly know. Let me think."

He took a turn about the room while Calverley watched him.

At last he stopped. "Calverley, I wonder whether you would allow me to see her, and report to you afterwards. Then, on the basis of what I tell you, you yourself can talk to her. Will you?"

"What you wish," said Calverley.

They started off together for the nursing-home in which Gabrielle lay, and they hardly spoke to each other as the car sped through the streets.

When they reached the nursing-home, Baring went alone into the room. The bed had been drawn across the open window, and he could see the wide park-like land round the racecourse of Longchamps. There was a display of flowers in the room. He seated himself beside Gabrielle and put his hand over hers.

"I've been thinking," she said, "while I waited for you to come."

"Are you going to worry?" asked Baring. His eyes were drinking in her frailty, and he was wondering how he could ever find it possible to answer any direct questions she might put to him.

She shook her head slowly. "No. What's the use of worrying, Tom?"

Baring said nothing. She was not looking at him, but out of the window musingly.

"I realize," she added, "that I should never have doubted my mother. I wonder if I really did. But—anyhow—the whole affair is so dreadful a mystery that I have decided never to dwell on it." She paused, and added softly: "Poor Anton."

She suddenly turned and looked full at Baring. Her eyes were shining with tears and something else that filled his heart with welling thankfulness —trust, hope, love.

"The past is dead," he whispered. "And the future lives, Gabrielle. That's all we have to think about, you and I."

Baring's grip tightened on her fingers. He never knew how much she guessed, how much she had accepted or rejected during those hours she had lain and thought, waiting for him to come. He only knew that there was wisdom in her face and her words, and a love for himself that made him feel humble.

He leaned over her and kissed her gently on her pale, smiling lips, and felt them respond, heard her whisper: "My dear! My dear!"

The very stout and well-dressed gentleman had strolled about the terrace in front of the great casino for some distance before impulse made him buy, together with his copy of the *Petit Parisien*, an English overseas newspaper.

Leaning on the balustrade, with the glory of Monaco Bay spread below him, he glanced at both journals casually, as one who had been fortunate enough to put himself outside the world of affairs and politics, reflecting as he did so that it was very comfortable to be able to stand in the sunshine and find out what the less fortunate folk of the world were about.

In the English newspaper he read a notice.

There had been a wedding at a famous church in London. Gabrielle Laroche, daughter of Paul and Elizabeth Laroche. Thomas Aston Baring, son of Thomas Aston and Mary Baring of London and Dorsetshire....

The stout man crumpled the papers up and walked into the Hotel de Paris.

He demanded Pol Roger in an ice bucket and a fine cigar. They were brought. As the waiter spun the bottle the stout man saw a casual acquaintance, and he hailed him and invited him to join in splitting the bottle.

“This is an occasion,” he said, lifting his glass. “The two greatest friends of my life have just been married. I come from reading it in an English newspaper. As you know, I step more or less frugally these days, but champagne seems but fitting on a morning when one finds sunshine and reads of love. You will drink with me, my friend, to them.”

They drank solemnly and in silence.

“Who are they, Gichot?” asked the acquaintance.

Gichot smiled. “Friends—very dear friends, generous friends, whom I once had the honour of assisting. It is at a time like this that one realizes how much pleasure one may derive from life by helping others. Another glass, my friend?”

He lifted the cup again, and seemed to see, written across the foaming gold within, six hundred thousand francs.

The day was very beautiful.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

Space between paragraphs varied greatly. The thought-breaks which have been inserted attempt to agree with the larger paragraph spacing, but it is quite possible that this was simply the methodology used by the typesetter, and that there should be no thought-breaks.

[The end of *Devil's Laughter: A Tale of Paris* by John Hunter (as L. H. Brenning)]