THE MÉLAMARE MYSTERY

MAURICE LEBLANC

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BY
MAURICE LEBLANC

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INTRODUCTION

ALL the world knows the exploits of Arsène Lupin, man of mystery, adventurer, and private detective—when it suits him! But of Lupin's own personality not so much is known. He is obviously a man of infinite ingenuity; of iron will and determination; of irresponsible gaiety and imperturbable good-humour. He has a genuine fondness for poetic justice, as opposed to the brand represented by the Paris police force. He is whimsical, ironical, curiously detached—in fact, that's half the secret of his success, that he never allows his life to be linked with the lives of other people. He is always the free-lance, playing a lone hand, trusting no one, relying solely on his own wits to extricate himself from the most perilous situation. For other people, including the public who delight to read of his escapades, he is always an urbane enigma, taking foul weather and fair with the same bland unconcern.

But now, a corner of the veil of mystery is lifted. For the first time, readers will find in this new adventure of the master-crook some indication of the Man behind the Mask. Arsène Lupin goes through life under a hundred aliases, a shadowy figure. But he is a human being like his fellows and can be moved by love and fear like other men.

As "Jean d'Enneris," Lupin finds himself engaged in a curious duel with his old opponent, Chief Inspector Béchoux. The Mélamare Mystery finds Lupin working both for and against the police—rather in his "Barnett" manner. But whereas in previous cases of the kind he has had no personal interest in the protagonists, this time he finds himself losing his heart to the delightful little mannequin, Arlette Mazolle. At once, the case is much more than an affair of missing diamonds. Lupin must solve the mystery, but in doing so, he must protect Arlette. He is distraught to realize that she shares the dangers of the game. He is further harassed by the advent of a rival, almost as enigmatical as himself, on whom Arlette appears to bestow her affections!

So, though the beginning of the story finds "Jean d'Enneris" gaily flirting with Régine the actress in a box at the Opéra, the end finds him in a boat on the Seine with quite a different companion. But to arrive at this happy issue, he has had to wander in a maze of misunderstanding and dark intrigue; to solve a grim secret; and himself to face death with his beloved—to be rescued therefrom by his hated rival!

The Curse of a Century overshadowed the House of Mélamare, and struck chill on all who strove to thwart its purpose of evil—on "Jean d'Enneris" and Inspector Béchoux; on Van Houben, the diamond merchant, and Régine; on the Adrien and Gilberte de Mélamare; and—on Arlette.

CHAPTER 1. ENTER RÉGINE!

THE Parisian is ever ready to put his hand in his pocket provided he is given the opportunity to give gaily. A charitable campaign with a new idea bears all before it. The idea in the present instance was a Dress Display at the Opéra. It was to be in the nature of a competition, presented between a couple of ballets. Twenty lovely ladies of stage and society would in turn display the creations of well-known *couturiers*. The audience were to vote for the three most attractive *toilettes*. The philanthropical point of the entertainment would be the division of the box-office receipts between the three *ateliers* responsible for the three prize-winning models. And that would mean a fortnight on the Riviera for a limited number of lucky *midinettes*.

The enterprise was a success from the outset. Books of tickets found enthusiastic purchasers, and in forty-eight hours the theatre was sold out down to standing-room at the back of the gallery. On the evening of the performance smart cars drove up in a steady stream. The *foyer* was packed with a brilliant throng. The air buzzed with talk and laughter and through it all sounded a note of undisguised curiosity.

This curiosity was perhaps a trifle indiscreet. It was certainly Parisian. Every one knew that the peerless Régine Aubry, a second-rate singer in second-rate revue, was going to display her remarkable beauty in a Valmenet frock, over which she would wear a marvellous tunic sewn with priceless diamonds.

The highly intriguing problem under discussion was: had the peerless Régine Aubry, for months the particular quarry of Van Houben, the gem merchant,—*had* she yielded to the ardour of the “King of Diamonds”? It certainly looked like it. In an interview with the Press on the preceding day, the peerless Régine had said:

“To-morrow I am wearing diamonds; perhaps I should say I shall be dressed in them. In my bedroom at this moment there are four men, specially chosen by Van Houben, working against time to sew the diamonds on to a silver corselet and tunic. Valmenet is there in person to supervise the work. May you write about me as the Queen of Diamonds? Oh, you must ask Van Houben that.”

And now Régine sat in the stage box at the Opéra, waiting for her call, while the crowd passed and repassed just below as before a goddess in her shrine. Régine certainly merited the epithet of “peerless” with which her name was always coupled. Her features combined a classical nobility and purity with that plasticity and elusive grace that charm the modern connoisseur of beauty. An ermine cloak veiled her famous shoulders and hid the marvellous tunic. She was radiant and smiling—a very gracious goddess. The whisper went round the theatre that three detectives were on guard in the corridor.

At the back of the box stood two men, their shirt-fronts gleaming in the shadow. One was the “King of Diamonds,” big Van Houben, whose bright, glancing eyes and loose-lipped, crooked mouth gave him an odd resemblance to an over-grown faun. Nobody seemed to know just where Van Houben’s money came from. At one time he had traded in imitation pearls. Then he had gone to the East, to return a good while later in the guise of a wealthy diamond merchant. But the transformation was as unexplained as it was impressive.

Régine’s other companion stood with his face slightly averted—it was just discernible as that of a young man with strong, clean-cut features. Actually, he was Jean d’Enneris, a celebrity whose fame eclipsed even that of the peerless Régine. Three months only had gone by since he landed from the motor-boat in which he had made a solitary round-the-world cruise. Van Houben, who had just made his acquaintance, had introduced him to the “Queen of Diamonds.”

The curtain went up on the first ballet, which was performed in the midst of general inattention. The half-hearted applause was succeeded by an interval. Régine, ready for her call, stood with the two men at the back of the box. To Van Houben she was distinctly terse in her remarks, but she seemed out to please d’Enneris and was sweetness itself to the young man.

“Look here, Régine,” said Van Houben, irritated by her tactics, “you are giving the boy a swelled head. After a whole year on the rolling wave a chap’s likely to be more than a spot inflammable!”

He cackled loudly in self-appreciative mirth.

“Fancy, now,” observed Régine smoothly, “if you weren’t always the first to laugh, I should never know when you were trying to be funny.”

Van Houben heaved a sigh, and, assuming an air of mock tragedy,—

“Take my advice, old top,” he said to d’Enneris. “Keep your hair on over that girl. I lost mine, and look where it’s landed me. Treats me like a blooming bit of stone, she does—precious stone,” he added, with a leer, and turned a clumsy pirouette on his friend’s glossy pump.

By now the dress display had begun. Each competitor was allowed about two minutes to hold the stage. For this brief while she walked up and down, sat on a couch, leaned against a pillar, and posed and turned about in the usual manner of a mannequin on parade.

As the time drew near for her turn, Régine began taking leave of her friends.

“I am in a frightful funk,” she said. “I shall break my heart if I don’t take first prize! Who are you going to vote for, Monsieur d’Enneris?”

“For the fairest,” he answered, bowing low.

“I am talking about the frock. . . .”

“Mere frocks mean nothing to me. What *does* matter is the beauty and charm of the wearer.”

“Oh well,” said Régine generously, “if you’re interested in beauty and charm, just take a look at the girl they’re clapping this minute. She’s a mannequin at Chernitz’—there’s been a lot about her in the papers—she designed that dress herself and the other girls in the workroom made it for her. She’s a peach of a kid.”

Régine was right. The young girl on the stage had a wild-flower grace and simplicity in striking contrast to the assurance of the other competitors that evening. Her movements were graceful and supple. The frock she wore, severely plain but exquisitely cut, revealed perfect taste coupled with real originality.

“Let’s see—Arlette Mazolle, isn’t it?” said Jean d’Enneris, looking at the programme.

“Yes,” said Régine. And she added, without a hint of envy or malice: “If I were on the selection committee, I’d see they put that kid Arlette Mazolle top of the lot.”

Van Houben promptly registered indignation.

“Aren’t you forgetting your tunic, Régine? What’s that little mannequin’s get-up worth compared to your tunic?”

“It isn’t a question of the *value*——”

“Excuse me, Régine, but the value is just what counts. That’s why I want to impress on you to be jolly careful and keep a sharp look-out.”

“What for?”

“Sneak thieves. Just remember that tunic isn’t sewn with pea-nuts.”

He guffawed heartily, to Régine’s evident annoyance, but Jean d’Enneris backed him up.

“Van Houben’s quite right,” he said. “We ought really to go behind with you.”

“Don’t be absurd,” protested the lady. “Why, I am counting on you two as my dramatic critics. You’ve got to tell me whether I look an awkward Annie on the sacred boards of the Opéra.”

“Oh, well,” said Van Houben, “there’s no need to worry. Chief Inspector Béchoux of the Sûreté is responsible for this evening’s arrangements.”

“Oh, do you know Béchoux?” asked d’Enneris, on a note of genuine interest. “Let’s see, wasn’t Béchoux the Inspector who won fame by his collaboration with the mysterious Jim Barnett[1]—The Barnett Agency man?”

“For goodness’ sake don’t mention Barnett to the Inspector or you’ll upset the poor chap thoroughly. Apparently Barnett made rings round Béchoux!”

“I think I remember hearing about it. . . . There was that business of the Man with the Gold Teeth, and the disappearance of the Twelve Little Nigger Boys. . . . So Béchoux is looking after your diamonds for you?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, Béchoux himself has had to leave Paris for a fortnight, but he’s detailed three ex-policemen to keep guard outside. Signed them up, and then sent the bill in to me!”

With a pitying smile, d’Enneris remarked: “My dear Van Houben, if you’d signed up an entire regiment you would still have been powerless against certain—er—tactics. . . .”

As they spoke, Régine swept out. Accompanied by her stalwart bodyguard of detectives, she passed from the front of the house into the wings. As she was the eleventh turn and there was a short interval after the tenth, a kind of breathless, solemn pause preceded her entrance. A hush fell on the brilliant audience. All eyes were riveted on the stage. Suddenly there came a great burst of clapping as Régine walked slowly down to the footlights and stood there for a second, motionless.

The crowd is always swayed by beauty. The peerless Régine and her splendid *toilette* were in that absolute harmony which defies analysis. But more compelling than even Régine’s own loveliness was the glitter of the jewels she wore. The silver tunic was caught in at the waist by a shining belt, and merged into a corselet which seemed entirely composed of diamonds. They were quite dazzling. Their glancing, reflecting lights played around the actress like a shimmering, rainbow flame.

“Good Lord,” said Van Houben, “those blessed stones are even finer than I thought. And doesn’t the little devil show them off! Fine filly, eh? Regular queen!” He waxed confidential. “See here, d’Enneris, I’ll let you into a secret. Can you guess why I tricked Régine out in all those sparklers? Well, one reason was that I wanted to mark an—auspicious occasion, shall we say? And the other reason was that it made an excuse for giving her a bodyguard, which pleases her and helps me keep track of her movements. It’s not that I’m scared of rivals, but I believe in keeping a weather eye open!”

He brought one big hand lightly down on his friend’s shoulder, as much as to say: “Keep off the grass, my lad. . . .”

[1] See *Jim Barnett Intervenes* (Mills & Boon, 7*s.* 6*d.*).

D’Enneris hastened to reassure him.

“You needn’t worry about me,” he said. “I never make love to the wives or the—friends—of my *friends*.”

Van Houben frowned. D’Enneris had spoken lightly, but the remark lent itself to a possible distressing interpretation. Determined to set his mind at rest, he blurted out: “Then it all depends whether you count me among your friends.”

D’Enneris clutched his arm violently.

“Be quiet,” he said, and cut short Van Houben’s stammered protest with a further curt admonition to silence.

“Something’s happening,” he vouchsafed, “behind the scenes. Something to do with your diamonds.”

Van Houben gave a leap on the spot.

“Listen,” said d’Enneris, and the “King of Diamonds” inclined his ear.

“Don’t hear anything,” he said, after a moment, and looked back at Régine.

“Perhaps I was wrong,” admitted d’Enneris, “and yet I certainly thought . . .”

As he spoke, there was a sudden commotion in the orchestra and in some of the boxes. People were looking round as though there were something going on in the wings. Some of the audience were rising from their seats in seeming perturbation. Then two men in evening dress dashed across the stage, there was a sudden noise of shouting and cries of “Fire, fire!”

On the right of the stage appeared an angry glow, and small spirals of smoke wound hungrily up. Then a crowd of stage-hands and supers rushed in from the wings and Régine was lost to sight. In that surging throng d’Enneris saw a man, arms outstretched, brandishing a fur cloak which hid his face from view. He, like every one else, was shouting “Fire, fire!” and fleeing from the right of the stage.

Régine’s one thought had been to reach safety, but as she ran her strength failed her and she sank, fainting, to her knees. The stranger swooped down, wrapped her in the fur cloak, slung her over his shoulder, and rushed off, mingling with the crowd of fugitives.

But before this, Jean d’Enneris was standing on the edge of the box, addressing the panic-stricken audience in the stalls.

“Stay where you are! It’s a put-up job!”

Then, pointing to the man who was carrying off Régine, he cried: “Stop him! Stop him!”

But he was too late. No one had realized what was happening. The stalls were calming down. But on the stage the rout went on, in such a tumult that no one could make himself heard. D'Enneris took a flying leap, clearing auditorium and orchestra, and landed almost acrobatically on the stage itself. Following in the wake of the frightened herd he got through to the stage door, which opened on to the Boulevard Haussmann. He gave a quick look up and down the Boulevard, then began anxious inquiries among the little knots of people clustered round. But no information was forthcoming. In the general uproar each had been intent on his own safety and Régine's abduction from the theatre had passed completely unnoticed.

Then d'Enneris caught sight of Van Houben's panting bulk, and said savagely: "She's been kidnapped—thanks to your blasted diamonds. . . . The blighter must have had a car ready and taken her off in that."

Van Houben's hand went to his pocket and drew out—a revolver. D'Enneris gave his wrist a sudden twist.

"Going to shoot yourself?"

"No!" barked Van Houben. "But I'm going to kill *him*!"

"Who do you mean—him?"

"The thief. He'll be found—he must be found. I'll move heaven and earth to lay hands on him."

He was like a straw whirled on the flood of people that poured out of the theatre.

"My diamonds!" he babbled. "They shan't have them! It's not fair! Some one's going to pay for this night's work. The management—Valmenet——"

The man at his elbow smiled quizzically. "Or Béchoux?" he murmured.

. . . . . .

D'Enneris had been right. The stranger, bearing the fainting Régine on his shoulder in the fur cloak, had crossed the Boulevard Haussmann and made for the Rue Mogador. A car was standing at the kerb. As he drew near, the door opened and a woman, with her head swathed in a thick scarf, held out her arms. The stranger pushed Régine on to her, with the words:

"We've pulled it off . . . absolute miracle!"

Then he closed the door, sprang into the driver's seat and drove off.

Régine's faint had been the result of sheer nervous terror. She came to as soon as she realized that they were leaving the fire—or what she thought was a fire—and her first thought was to thank her rescuer. She was foiled in this laudable intention by

something being wound suffocatingly round her head, impeding both her breathing and her vision.

“What is it?” she murmured.

A very low voice, seemingly that of a woman, spoke tonelessly in her ear:

“Don’t move. And don’t call for help, or you’ll be sorry!”

Then Régine felt a sudden sharp prick in her shoulder and cried out with pain.

“That’s nothing,” said the woman. “Just a knife-point. . . . Shall I press harder?”

Régine lay quite still, shocked into utter immobility. But her brain was beginning to work clearly now, and she was able to realize the true significance of her perilous situation. She groped back in her mind to the streak of flame seen at the back of the stage, and the outbreak of fire. She felt sure that some one had taken advantage of the panic in the theatre to abduct her and with the aid of an accomplice was now carrying her off, she knew not whither.

Cautiously, she made a movement with her free hand. Her diamond corselet seemed intact as yet.

The car was fairly racing. Régine, prisoned in swaying darkness, could not even guess at the route they followed. She got an impression of frequent swerves round sharp corners, doubtless mere doubling tactics to elude possible pursuit and prevent her from recognizing the direction.

At any rate, they never stopped at a toll-gate, and that proved that they could not have left Paris. Moreover, street-lamps streamed into the car at rapid intervals, giving each an instant’s blinding flash of illumination. The woman had slackened hold on her captive, and the cloak had slipped so that Régine could see two fingers of the hand clenched on the fur. And on one of these, the forefinger, she distinctly remarked a ring set with three small pearls in a triangle.

They drove for what seemed to Régine about twenty minutes. Then the car slackened speed and stopped. The driver jumped down. The two halves of a door swung heavily outward, one after the other, and they passed into what seemed to be an inner courtyard.

The woman effectively blindfolded Régine and then she and the man helped her down.

They went up a flight of six stone steps, and then crossed a flagged hall. After that came an ascent of twenty-five carpeted stairs, with, as Régine realized, a banister up one side. At the head of these stairs they turned into a first-floor room.

And now the man spoke to Régine, also in a very low voice, right in her ear:

“You’re here now and here you stay till we have that tunic. I don’t like to use force, and you won’t come to any harm if you hand it over quietly. Now, are you going to be sensible and give it up of your own accord?”

“No!” said Régine, with spirit.

“We can easily take it—we could have torn it off in the car.”

“No, no!” she shrilled feverishly. “Not the tunic . . . no . . .”

Her captor spoke again.

“I’ve risked everything for those diamonds. Now I’ve got them. Be reasonable.”

The actress stiffened her body with a convulsive effort. But he came close to her, and murmured:

“Have I got to take it, then?”

Régine felt a cruel hand take hold of the corselet and come roughly into contact with her smooth shoulders. This was too much for her, and she cried out:

“Don’t touch me! Keep off, I tell you. . . . There, take what you like . . . anything, anything . . . but for God’s sake don’t touch me!”

He drew away a little, keeping behind her. The fur cloak shook out round her now, and she realized that it was her own ermine wrap! She sat down, exhausted. She could see now the room to which they had brought her. She observed dully that the veiled woman, who was busy unhooking the jewelled overdress from the silver tunic, had on a plum-coloured dress, trimmed with bands of black velvet.

The room, brightly lit by electricity, was a big salon panelled in light wood in the best Louis XVI style. The furniture was upholstered in blue silk. There was a pierglass over the mantelpiece—the latter a massive marble structure adorned with two gilded bronze vases and a clock with little green marble columns. There were four wall-lights and two great crystal chandeliers.

Unconsciously Régine registered all these details while the woman stripped off tunic and corselet, leaving her in the plain silver slip, which bared her arms and shoulders. She noticed, too, the peculiar pattern of the parquet flooring, done in different woods, and, close by, a curious stool with mahogany legs.

At last the ordeal was over. The lights clicked out, and in the darkness she heard the man’s voice again:

“That’s right. You see, it pays to be reasonable—I’m leaving you your cloak!”

Then her head was swathed in folds of what seemed to be a lace scarf, like that the woman had worn. She was led down the staircase, across the hall, down the steps

and out into the night. Once more they lifted her into the car, and drove off again, with the same succession of swerving turns.

At last the car slowed down. “Here we are,” breathed the man, opening the door and helping her out. “There, you see, it hasn’t been so bad, has it? You’ve come through without any bones broken. But—a word of advice. Don’t you go talking to people of anything you may have seen or guessed. Your diamonds have been taken. You are safe. Full stop, new paragraph. Forget the rest. Yours truly!”

The car drew swiftly away. With trembling fingers, Régine loosened the veil, and realized that she was in the Place du Trocadéro, quite near her flat in the Avenue Henri Martin. It was a terrible effort for her to cover the short distance. Her legs gave under her; her heart was thumping painfully. Each moment she thought she would sink to the ground in a heap. But just as her strength was failing, she saw some one running to help her, and when sink she did, it was into the arms of Jean d’Enneris, who sat her down on a bench in the deserted Avenue.

“I was waiting for you,” he said, very softly. “I was sure that once they had the diamonds you would be brought back to somewhere near your home. It would have been much too dangerous to keep you. Now, rest for a few minutes . . . and don’t cry any more.”

She was sobbing, her tension suddenly relaxed, full of a childlike confidence in this man whom she hardly knew.

“I was so scared,” she said. “I’m still scared—stiff. . . . What *are* we to do about the diamonds? . . .”

Her voice trailed off. Very gently d’Enneris led her to her flat, going in the lift with her to the door.

They found her maid, who had just come back, in a terrible state, from the Opéra—the other servants were gathered round. Almost on their heels Van Houben burst in, wild-eyed.

“My diamonds!” he cried. “Have you got them all right, Régine? You hung on to them, didn’t you? You’re alive, so you can’t have let them go!”

Then he ascertained that the precious corselet and tunic had been stripped off, and burst into a kind of delirium. Jean d’Enneris restrained him sternly.

“Be quiet, you fool. . . . Can’t you see she’s knocked up—she needs a rest!”

“My diamonds!” wailed Van Houben. “They’re gone. Oh, if only Béchoux were here! My diamonds!”

“I’ll find them for you. Now, beat it,” said d’Enneris, almost brutally.

Régine was lying on a divan, her frame shaken with racking sobs. D'Enneris knelt at her side and began, lightly and methodically, to kiss her forehead and her hair.

"Good heavens!" cried Van Houben, beside himself. "What do you think you're doing?"

"There, there," said Jean d'Enneris, and his voice was as that of the sucking-dove. "Nothing so soothing as this little massage. My own patent. Normalizes the nervous system and restores circulation. A beneficent warmth pervades the arteries. It works like a charm."

And, under Van Houben's furious eye, he went calmly on with his labour of love, while Régine came slowly back to life, seeming to respond quite voluntarily to treatment!

CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCING ARLETTE

THE afternoon was over at the Maison Chernitz, and people were drifting out of the big showrooms in the Rue du Mont-Thabor. In the room allotted to the mannequins, Arlette Mazolle and her companions, set free from the ardours of showing off Chernitz creations, were seeking distraction. Fortune-telling was in progress, and a subdued munching indicated the consumption of chocolate by all concerned.

“Look, Arlette,” cried red-headed Irène, “you’re in luck! The cards say your life will be a round of adventures, happiness and good fortune.”

“That’s coming true, too,” said little Charlotte. “Arlette’s luck began the other evening when she won first prize in that show at the Opéra!”

But Arlette was not inclined to be cockahoop.

“I didn’t really deserve to win,” she said. “Régine Aubry was the best.”

“Oh, rot! Every one voted solid for you.”

“People didn’t know what they were doing. That false alarm of fire half-emptied the theatre. It wasn’t a fair vote at all.”

“Well, really, Arlette, you *are* the modest violet and no mistake,” remarked Irène, almost exasperated. She added maliciously: “I expect Régine Aubry’s pretty sick!”

“You’re quite wrong, my child. She came round to see me, and was awfully decent about my success. I like her.”

She unfolded an evening paper which one of the messengers had just brought in.

“Why, look!” she cried. “Here’s some more about it. They give a long rigmarole, explaining what must have happened.”

“Read it out, Arlette,” besought the others.

Nothing loath, she began:

“The police are still investigating the mysterious occurrence at the Opéra. Both at the Parquet and at the Préfecture the general opinion is that there was a prearranged plot to steal Régine Aubry’s diamonds. There is no means of identifying the man who carried off the well-known actress, since he kept his face hidden. It is thought that he entered the Opéra as a messenger with great sheaves of flowers which he set down in one of the wings. Mademoiselle Aubry’s maid vaguely remembers seeing him and thinks he wore light spats. The flowers were artificial and specially prepared so as to take fire easily. The man took advantage of the panic let loose by the alarm of fire

and snatched the actress' fur cloak from her maid's arm. There are no further clues. Régine Aubry has already been questioned several times. She finds it impossible to give the route followed by the car in which she was borne off, or to describe her abductor or his accomplice. She can only furnish a few unimportant details about the big house where she was robbed of the precious corselet."

"Ooh! I should have been scared to death, all alone in that house with that man and woman, wouldn't you, Arlette?" said Julie, a mouse of a girl.

"Of course I should. But *I* should have put up a fight, I think. I'm brave enough when it comes to the point, though I go all of a doodah once the danger's over."

"I say," said Irène suddenly, "didn't you notice the thief running across the stage at the Opéra?"

"I didn't realize anything at the time," replied Arlette. "I just saw one shadowy form carrying another, and I never even wondered who they were. I had quite enough to think about with looking after myself. You see, the fire . . ."

"Was there *nothing* that struck you?" persisted Irène.

"Oh, I saw Van Houben out in the passage."

"Do you know him?"

"No. But he was shouting: 'My diamonds. They're worth a fortune! Oh, my God!' " Arlette was an amusing mimic. "He was hopping first on one foot, then on the other, like a cat on hot bricks. Every one was fairly hooting with mirth."

She jumped up and gave a graphic imitation. Even in the plain little frock she wore now—a straight black serge, rather like a child's gym. tunic—she was the same miracle of grace as in the dress she had worn at the Opéra. Her slim, perfect little body resembled the statue of some antique dancing girl. Her skin was peach-like; her eyes smoky; her mouth rather a pale rose; her nose fine and small. Her hair was silky-golden and curled softly about her head.

"Now you're up, Arlette, give us a dance!" begged Charlotte.

Arlette smilingly acceded. She was no dancer, really, but she moved and gestured in fantastic exaggeration of her mannequin poses. The other girls were never tired of watching her. They all admired her immensely and regarded her as a being singled out by Fate for glad and golden days in the future.

"Fine!" they cried, "you're just marvellous!"

"And you're a real sport, old thing," added Irène, "for fixing it so's three of us are going to hit the high spots in the Sunny South!"

Arlette sat down, her face flushed, her usually pensive eyes sparkling. When she spoke it was to take them half-ironically, half-wistfully, into her confidence.

“I’m no better than any of you,” she began. “I’m not cleverer than you, Irène; I’m less conscientious than you, Charlotte, and I haven’t Julie’s self-respect. I have boys like the rest of you . . . who want more than I’m ready to give . . . and yet I somehow give more than I mean to! I’ll come to a bad end one day, I guess. But what can you expect? We’re not the sort men marry. They see us here in our glad rags and they’re scared!”

“Why worry?” said Julie. “The cards say you’ll be a rich woman.”

“And how!” rejoined Arlette, a little cynically. “Some old tightwad of ninety? Not on your life. And yet, I do want money. But I want love as well!”

“Both at once! Hark at her! What for, may one ask?”

“Love to make me happy!”

“And money?”

“That I’m not so sure about. I have my dreams and schemes I’ve so often told you about. I’d like to be rich, but not for myself. I want to be rich for others . . . for you, my dears. . . . I want . . .” Her eyes seemed to darken and widen, and she was silent.

“Go on, Arlette!” they clamoured.

She shook herself, and laughed.

“Oh, it’s absurd, of course. . . . I’m acting like a kid. But I’d like to have a lot of money which wouldn’t actually belong to me, but which I was to handle. For instance, I’d like to be the director—the head—of a big dressmaking place organized on quite new lines, with everything wonderful . . . and with *dots* for the girls so that each of you could marry any man you liked.”

She laughed again at her riotous fancy. The others, however, grew serious. One of them even wiped away a tear.

Arlette went on:

“Yes, *dots*, real ready-money *dots*. . . . Of course, I’m not properly educated, but I’ve made out a whole scheme with plenty of plain figures in between the spelling mistakes. At twenty a girl gets her *dot*. Then there’s a layette for the first child—then——”

“Arlette, you’re wanted on the ’phone!”

The *directrice* of the *ateliers* had opened the door and was calling her.

Arlette sprang up, suddenly pale with anxiety.

“That must mean Mother’s ill!” she said.

At Chernitz’ it was a rule that employees received no messages except in the case of something serious, such as the death or severe illness of a near relation. The girls knew that Arlette worshipped her mother. She herself was illegitimate, and had two elder sisters who had been mannequins and had disappeared into the void to practise another and older profession.

There was a sudden silence, and Arlette hardly dared move.

“Hurry up,” said the *directrice*.

The telephone was in the next room. Clustering round the half-open door, the other girls could hear Arlette’s voice, speaking in broken accents.

“You say Mother’s ill? . . . Is it her heart? . . . Who is it speaking? . . . Is it you, Madame Louvain? . . . I don’t recognize your voice. . . . What about getting a doctor? . . . Who did you say? . . . Doctor Bricou, 3a Rue du Mont-Thabor? . . . He knows already? . . . He’ll bring me with him, then? . . . Right, I’m coming.”

Without another word, Arlette, pale and trembling, grabbed her hat from the cupboard and sped downstairs. Her friends rushed to the window and a moment later saw her running down the street, peering at the numbers of the houses. At the end of the road she stopped on the left-hand side, doubtless at the door of 3a. There was a car drawn up at the kerb, and a man standing by it on the pavement. They could just make out his silhouette in the twilight and the light streak of his spats. He raised his hat to Arlette and spoke to her. They both got into the car and drove off in the opposite direction from Chernitz’.

“That’s funny,” said Julie reflectively. “I pass that way every day, and I’ve never noticed a doctor’s plate on any of the doors. Doctor Bricou, 3a—do you know the house, Irène?”

“Can’t say I do,” rejoined that damsel. “P’r’aps the brass plate is behind the courtyard door.”

“Anyhow,” suggested the *directrice*, who was still in the room, “we can look up in the telephone book . . . and in the street directory. . . .”

They hurried into the next room and feverishly seized hold of the two tomes lying on the little table.

“If there is a Doctor Bricou at No. 3, or even any doctor at all, he’s not on the ’phone,” pronounced Charlotte.

And Julie echoed her:

“No Doctor Bricou in the directory, either in the Rue du Mont-Thabor or anywhere else.”

There was a wave of upset and anxiety. Every one was ready with suggestions. The whole thing looked distinctly fishy. The *directrice* thought she had better tell Chernitz, and up he came at once. He was quite a young man, sallow and gawky, and abominably dressed. He aimed at perpetual impassivity, and prided himself on always knowing exactly what to do in any emergency. He could act without reflection, and was a man of few words.

With icy calm, he took the telephone and called a number. When he got it, he said:

“Hullo . . . Is that Madame Régine Aubry’s? . . . Will you tell Madame Régine Aubry that Chernitz, the *couturier* Chernitz, wants to speak to her? Right.”

He waited a minute, then began again:

“Yes, madame, Chernitz the *couturier*. Although I have not the honour of your patronage, I thought that in view of what has happened I ought to get in touch with you. The thing is this—one of my mannequins . . . Hullo! Yes, it’s about Arlette Mazolle. . . . You’re too kind, but I must tell you I voted for *you* myself. . . . Your dress, that evening . . . But permit me to be brief. There is every reason to think, madame, that Arlette Mazolle has been kidnapped, doubtless by the same man who abducted you. I thought it was to your own interest, and to that of your friends, to know of it. . . . Hullo! . . . . You’re expecting Chief Inspector Béchoux? Good. . . . I’ll come right along and give you all particulars.” And, as he hung up, “That, let me tell you,” said Chernitz, “was the One Right Thing to Do!”

. . . . . .

Things went with Arlette much as they had gone with Régine Aubry. There was a woman inside the car. The pseudo-doctor introduced her:

“Madame Bricou.”

She was heavily veiled. Anyway, night had fallen and Arlette was completely taken up with anxiety for her mother. She began questioning the doctor, without even looking at him. He replied in a curiously hoarse voice that one of his patients, Madame Louvain, had telephoned to him to come at once to a sick neighbour, and on his way to pick up the woman’s daughter. That was all he knew.

The car went down the Rue de Rivoli in the direction of the Place de la Concorde. As they were crossing the latter, the woman flung a rug over Arlette, tied it tightly round the girl’s neck, and then pricked her shoulder with a knife-point.

Arlette struggled valiantly, but her terror was mingled with real relief, for she realized that her mother’s illness had been merely a ruse to get her away and there must be

some other reason for her abduction. At last she gave up and lay still, listening intently.

Her impressions were similar to Régine's. There was the same racing about Paris, with sharp swerves round corners. She could not see the hand of the woman who held her, but she caught a glimpse of a very pointed shoe.

She managed to catch a few words of a conversation between her abductors. They spoke in low voices, evidently assured she could not hear them. But one sentence came to her in its entirety.

"You're making a mistake, I tell you," said the woman. "You ought to have waited several weeks . . . it's much too soon after the Opéra business."

Arlette thought she understood this; it must be the same couple whom Régine Aubry had reported to the police. The pseudo-doctor was the Opéra incendiary. But why were these people after her, a penniless girl with no diamond corselet or any other jewels for their taking? The very question calmed her. There was nothing to fear, and she would doubtless be set free when they found out their mistake.

The car slowed down and there was the sound of a heavy door opening. Arlette, remembering Régine's adventure, guessed that they were coming into the paved court. Then she was helped down, still blindfolded by the rug, and propelled up a flight of six steps—she counted them. Then came a flagged hall.

By now she had completely recovered her nerve and felt so emboldened that she acted on impulse in a manner that might have proved disastrous. While the man was closing the hall door, the woman's foot slipped on a tile, and for a second she let go Arlette's shoulder from her vice-like grip. Without a moment's hesitation, the girl shook off the rug that enfolded her, darted forward, and sped up a staircase. She raced across an ante-room and into a salon, the door of which she had sufficient presence of mind to close behind her.

A heavily shaded electric light radiated a dim circle which faintly lit the shadowy room. What was she to do? How escape? She tried to open one of the two windows, but failed to move it. Now she was thoroughly frightened, realizing that the couple would have already appeared had they begun by searching the salon, and that at any moment they would burst in and throw themselves upon her.

She could hear doors slamming through the house! At all costs she must hide herself! Leaping on to the back of an arm-chair against the wall, she climbed easily on to a great marble mantelpiece. With desperate haste she edged along the great glass to the other end, where there was a tall bookcase. With the courage of despair she placed one of her small feet on a bronze vase and managed to catch hold of the cornice of the bookcase. Then she hoisted herself up, she hardly knew how.

When the two criminals came rushing into the room, Arlette was crouched on top of the bookcase, half-hidden by the cornice.

They had only to look up to see her silhouette, but—they didn't! They searched the far part of the salon, looking under sofas and arm-chairs, and behind curtains. Arlette could see them reflected in the great glass opposite. But their faces were indistinct and their words hardly audible, for they spoke low and tonelessly.

"She's not here," said the man, at last.

"Perhaps she's jumped out into the garden," suggested the woman.

"That's impossible. Both windows are shut."

"What about the alcove?"

On the left, between the mantelpiece and one of the windows, was one of those little shut-off recesses, common to old-fashioned drawing-rooms. The man slid back the alcove panel and peered inside.

"No one there."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. It's pretty serious—if she escapes."

"But how can she?"

"How, indeed? Little devil! If I catch her, Heaven help her!"

They went out, turning off the light.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed seven on a sharp, old-fashioned little note, sounding metallically clear in the stillness.

Arlette, crouched up there, was to hear it strike eight—and nine—and ten! She dared not move. The man's threat held her there, cowering and shivering, heedless of her cramp. It was not until after midnight that she grew calmer, and realizing the necessity for action climbed down. This time she knocked down the bronze vase! It crashed to the floor, making such a noise that she stood petrified, shaking with agonized apprehension. But no one came, and she replaced it with trembling hands.

A bright light streamed into the room from outside. She went to a window and saw a garden lying in the moonlight—a lawn fringed with shrubs. This time she got the window open quite easily. Leaning out, she realized that the house must be built on rising ground, for she was not a full storey above the garden. Without hesitation, she climbed over the balcony and let herself drop. She landed on gravel, but did not hurt herself at all.

She stopped where she was till a cloud hid the moon, then dashed across a patch of open lawn and reached the dark belt of shrubbery. This she followed, bent double, and came out at the foot of a wall which was in full moonlight and too high for her to hope to scale. On the right was a heavily shuttered lodge, seemingly standing empty. She crept towards it. By the lodge there was a door in the wall, and in the lock of the door a great key! Arlette shot back the bolts, turned the key, and gave a tremendous pull.

She had only just time to open the door and rush through it into the road. Casting a backward glance, she had seen a shadow in pursuit. . . .

The road was deserted. Twenty yards down, she looked back, and saw the shadow gaining on her! Terror lent her miraculous speed. Despite her thumping heart and failing limbs, she had the absolute and comforting certainty that no one could catch her.

Short-lived certainty! Suddenly her strength gave way, she sagged at the knees and nearly fell. But there were people passing in the busy road into which she had now come. An empty taxi crawled along. Swiftly Arlette gave the driver her address and sprang in. Kneeling on the seat inside, she saw through the window in the back that her pursuer was getting into another taxi, which started up at once.

Streets, and streets, and streets. Was she being followed? Arlette did not know, nor did she try to know. They turned suddenly into a little square where there was a taxi-rank. Arlette tapped on the window.

“Stop, please, driver. Here’s twenty francs. Now, drive on quickly—I want you to throw off some one who’s chasing me.”

She jumped into one of the other taxis and gave her address to the new driver.

“Montmartre, please—55 Rue Verdrel.”

She was out of danger, but exhaustion told at last and she fainted.

She returned to consciousness to find herself lying on the couch in her own little room. A strange man knelt beside her. Her mother, seeming most concerned, bent a worried gaze upon her. Arlette tried to smile, and the stranger said to her mother:

“Don’t question her yet, madame. No, mademoiselle, don’t try to speak. Listen to me first. Your employer, Chernitz, informed Régine Aubry that you had been kidnapped in the same way as she was. The police were at once notified. Later, when Régine Aubry—whose friendship I am privileged to enjoy—told me of the affair, I came straight here. Your mother and I have been up all night outside the house. I was hoping you would be set free as Régine Aubry was. I asked your driver where he came from, and he told me from the Place de la Victoire. That was all he knew. Now keep quite quiet. You can tell us everything to-morrow morning.”

Poor Arlette was moaning, feverish and racked with nightmare memories. She shut her eyes, murmuring:

“Some one’s coming up the stairs.”

And, forthwith, there came a ring at the door. Her mother left the room. The voices of two men were raised in the hall—one of them was saying:

“Van Houben, madame. That’s my name. Van Houben—you know, the owner of the diamond tunic. When I heard of your daughter’s abduction, I hit the trail with Chief Inspector Béchoux who had just come back from his holiday. We have run round to all the police stations and here we are. The concierge told us Arlette Mazolle had got back and we both came right along to inquire after her.”

“But, monsieur——”

“It’s pretty important, madame. This affair is closely connected with the theft of my diamonds. It was the same gang . . . and we mustn’t lose a minute . . .”

Without waiting for permission, he came into the little room, followed by Chief Inspector Béchoux. What he saw seemed to startle him not a little. A charming girl lay stretched full length on a couch, And kneeling at her side, he beheld—his friend, Jean d’Enneris, raining light kisses on the girl’s brow, her eyelids and her cheeks, with industrious absorption!

“You, d’Enneris!” exclaimed Van Houben. “You! What the hell are *you* doing here?”

D’Enneris motioned with his arm for silence.

“Shh! Not so much noise. . . . I am soothing the poor young thing. . . . My own method . . . warranted to calm like a charm. . . . Watch her relax. . . .”

“But—but——”

“To-morrow, to-morrow morning . . . we’ll all meet at Régine Aubry’s. Until then, my patient is ordered complete rest. . . . We mustn’t jangle her nerves. . . . See you to-morrow.”

Van Houben was as one stunned. Arlette’s mother was in a state of complete bewilderment. There was one, however, whose astonishment and state of swoon exceeded theirs: Chief Inspector Béchoux.

Béchoux was a thin, pale man, who aimed at sartorial elegance. His enormous arms contrasted oddly with his slender frame. With ever-widening eyes he gazed on Jean d’Enneris, as though confronted with a nightmare apparition. And the apparition was at once foreign and familiar to him. Poor Béchoux! He was wondering helplessly whether this smiling stranger masked yet another manifestation of the man whom he was almost ready to identify with His Satanic Majesty!

Van Houben introduced his friend.

“Chief Inspector Béchoux . . . Monsieur Jean d’Enneris. . . . But you seem to know d’Enneris, Béchoux?”

The latter longed to speak—to loose a flood of questions. But he was tongue-tied, and could only stare and stare at the strangely calm young man, intent on his curious “treatment.” . . .

CHAPTER 3. D'ENNERIS DETECTS

THE meeting of the clans was fixed for eleven o'clock in Régine Aubry's boudoir. When Van Houben got there, he found d'Enneris making himself thoroughly at home, indulging in airy badinage with the actress and Arlette Mazolle. All three seemed highly amused. It was hard to believe that Arlette, bubbling over with high spirits, even if a trifle tired, was the same girl who had spent such hours of anguish only the previous night. Her eyes were fixed on d'Enneris. Like Régine, she hung on his words, laughing merrily at his lighthearted wit.

Van Houben, thoroughly upset by the loss of his diamonds, and seeing life as one great tragedy, was moved to furious ejaculation.

"Ha, ha! Laugh, damn you! Funny, isn't it?"

"Well, really," said d'Enneris mildly, "all is not lost. On the whole, everything's turned out remarkably well."

"Huh!" snorted Van Houben. "Easy to see it's not *your* diamonds that have vanished into thin air. As for mademoiselle here, her little adventure's been written up in all the papers. Lovely! Columns of free publicity! Oh, I'm the only one that's going to lose on the deal. Of course, you"—he turned to Arlette—"are looking all washed out—you've lost the roses out of your cheeks, which means, I suppose, that your rouge was not all the chemist cracked it up to be. . . ."

"Don't take any notice of him, Arlette," counselled Régine. "Van Houben has no education and less manners."

"Shall I tell you who has plenty of both, my girl?" snarled Van Houben.

"Oh, please," cooed Régine.

"Well, last night I surprised your precious d'Enneris on his knees beside mademoiselle, experimenting with his patent cure-all treatment which proved such a splendid pick-me-up in your own case a little while ago!"

"I know. They've just been telling me."

"And aren't you jealous?"

Régine threw back her head and laughed heartily.

"Do you mean to tell me d'Enneris never made love to *you*?"

"Bet your life!" Régine was amusedly emphatic. "D'Enneris has a unique method which it's his positive duty to demonstrate!"

“Or his pleasure?”

“Oh well, he can’t help it if they coincide!”

Van Houben waxed lugubrious.

“D’Enneris has all the luck,” he grumbled. “He can twist you women round his little finger.”

“Men just the same,” Régine said. “You may not like him, but you pitch on him as the only hope of getting back your diamonds.”

“Oh, that was because Béchoux wasn’t there. But now Béchoux is back——”

“Now Béchoux is back?” echoed Jean d’Enneris interrogatively.

“Well, my young friend, I shall deny myself the pleasure of your kind advice.”

“Don’t forget you asked me for it in the first instance!”

“Fact is,” admitted Van Houben, “you have an inexplicable and undue influence over myself, over Régine, over every one with whom you come in contact. And I for one shall be only too happy to get free of it in future. And since Béchoux——”

Van Houben’s words died on his lips. Turning, he beheld on the threshold Chief Inspector Béchoux.

“Here you are then, Inspector!”

“Been here a minute,” said Béchoux, bowing to Régine Aubry. “The door was ajar.”

“You heard our conversation?” Béchoux nodded. “What do you think of my decision in the matter?”

Chief Inspector Béchoux preserved a fixed scowl and a definitely hostile manner. He stared at Jean d’Enneris as he had done the night before, and pronounced emphatically:

“Monsieur Van Houben, although in my absence the matter of your diamonds was entrusted to one of my colleagues, it was an absolute certainty that I should be called in on the case. I have, as a matter of fact, been asked to make inquiries at the home of Mademoiselle Mazolle. But I must warn you, in no uncertain terms, that under no consideration whatever will I consent to the open or clandestine collaboration of any one of your friends!”

“Well, you’ve made that clear,” said Jean d’Enneris, laughing.

“As clear as possible.”

D’Enneris, placid as ever, took no pains to conceal his astonishment.

“Tut, tut, Monsieur Béchoux! Anyone would think you didn’t love me!”

“You’ve said it,” was the curt rejoinder.

“Alas!” said d’Enneris, rising to open the window, and casting a suicidal leg across the balcony. “If Béchoux doesn’t love me, then only death remains!”

Chief Inspector Béchoux came up to him, and ground out, in his face:

“Are you quite sure, monsieur, that we haven’t met before?”

“Why, yes,” cried d’Enneris gladly. “How nice of you to remember! It was twenty-three years ago in the Champs Elysées. We were bowling hoops together—I tripped you up and you never forgave me. Ah, I see it all. Van Houben, old sport, Monsieur Béchoux is right. You’re free to act as you please while I get on with the job. We couldn’t possibly collaborate. You have my permission to go.”

“*Your* permission to go?” said Van Houben.

“Well, my good man, here we are at Régine Aubry’s. I asked you to come. As we can’t agree, I ask you to go! So farewell, adios, step on the gas!”

He flung himself on the sofa between the two girls and took Arlette’s hands in his.

“Arlette, my dear, since you are quite recovered, suppose you waste no more time. Tell me in detail just what happened to you last night. Don’t leave out anything, however unimportant it seems to you.

“And don’t bother about those two blighters. Relatively they are not there. They have gone far, far away. Tell on, my sweet Arlette.”

Arlette, pink with confusion, began her artless narrative. Van Houben and Béchoux, who wanted the valuable information contained therein, seemed rooted to the soil like a couple of waxworks.

D’Enneris listened in absolute silence. Twice, however, he caught her up with:

“Say that again, Arlette. I was following up a line of thought and didn’t hear what you said. Go on, now——”

She went on, speaking only for him and taking no more notice of the other two than if they had not been there. From time to time Régine chimed agreement.

“That’s right . . . a flight of six steps. . . . Yes, a hall flagged in black and white, like a chessboard . . . and the salon on the first floor, opposite as you came up. . . .”

When Arlette had done, d’Enneris strode up and down the room, hands clasped behind. He proceeded to glue his forehead against the window, and stood thus a long while in reflection. Then he gritted, between clenched teeth:

“Complicated . . . very complicated. . . . Still, we can but try. . . . I see glimmerings . . . faint glimmerings at the end of the tunnel. . . .”

He resumed his seat on the sofa.

“Look here,” he said to the two girls, “when you get two adventures so strikingly parallel, with the same procedure and protagonists—for it was undoubtedly the same pair of criminals—then you’ve got to see where your two adventures differ from each other, and when you’ve got that clear you must stick to it till you’ve deduced everything possible. Now, thinking it over from every angle, the important point seems to me to lie in the different motives prompting your abduction, Régine, and yours, Arlette.”

He broke off to laugh.

“What I’ve doped out looks like nothing at all—absolutely obvious—but I’m telling you it’s pretty good! It clears the ground a lot. In your case, Régine, there’s absolutely no doubt that you were carried off because of those diamonds that our friend Van Houben is even now bewailing. There’s no disputing that, and I’m sure Monsieur Béchoux himself, if he were here, would agree with me.”

Monsieur Béchoux uttered not a word, hanging on the words of d’Enneris, who now turned to his other young friend.

“In your case, peaches, what was the motive for carrying you off? Your face is your fortune, just about, isn’t it?”

Arlette blushed pleasedly and spread out empty hands.

“Exactly,” said d’Enneris. “That knocks any idea of theft right out of court, and the only motives we have to consider are love or revenge or some such emotion which would account for——Tell me, Arlette, if you don’t mind my asking, have you ever been in love?”

“I don’t think so,” was the reply.

“Has anyone been in love with you?”

“I don’t know,” coyly.

“But you’ve had young men keen on you, surely—come now, what about Pierre and Philippe——”

“Oh no,” came the quick, ingenuous protest. “It was Octave and Jacques!”

“And were they good sorts, these two? I mean, they wouldn’t have been mixed up in a shady deal like this?”

“Certainly not,” maintained Arlette, staunch in defence of absent swains.

“Then——” began d’Enneris, and stopped short.

“Then what?”

Bending over her, he looked full into those wide, smoky eyes, and when he spoke it was with almost hypnotic, soft insistence:

“Think hard, Arlette. I don’t want you to try and remember all that has ever happened to you. But I want you to try to remember things which made no very deep impression on you at the time, things buried in your subconscious mind. That’s the hidden treasure I’m after. Can’t you dig up something rather out of the way, something *different*?”

Arlette smiled.

“I’m afraid I can’t,” she said. “There’s nothing like that in my life.”

“There must be. This kidnapping can’t have happened out of a clear sky. There must have been some kind of prelude, something with which you came in contact unconsciously. . . . Think hard.”

Arlette was making a great effort. She forced herself to recall all sorts of trivialities from the depths of memory. Once or twice, she came out with some detail in her past life, but each time Jean d’Enneris cut her short.

“It’s not that,” he said, almost petulantly. “Dig deeper, if you can. . . . Have you ever felt some one was shadowing you? Have you ever felt a vague premonition of dread, as if on the threshold of some mystery? I’m not talking of actual danger, but of those strange psychic warnings that make one suddenly uneasy and expectant, like the calm before a thunderstorm.”

Arlette’s expression changed suddenly. Her eyes darkened and seemed fixed on a point in time. D’Enneris exclaimed:

“That’s got it! Fine! What a shame Béchoux and Van Houben aren’t with us. . . . Come on, out with it, Arlette.”

With thoughtful precision, she began:

“There was once a gentleman . . .”

Jean d’Enneris, overjoyed at this opening, snatched her up from the sofa and began to whirl her round the room.

“Splendid! Begins just like a fairy story. There was once . . . You know, you’re frightfully attractive, Arlette, my child. And what became of your gentleman?”

They had gone right round the room and were back at the sofa. With a complete lack of confusion or self-consciousness, Arlette sat down again and went on, speaking rather slowly:

“This gentleman and his sister came to Chernitz’ one afternoon six months ago. We had a lot of people there for the dress show. I didn’t notice him, but one of my friends said: ‘You’ve got off, Arlette, with a priceless man, who couldn’t take his eyes off you. The *directrice* says he’s all taken up with social work. Aren’t you in luck, seeing you’re after money?’ ”

“After money, are you?” interrupted d’Enneris.

“Oh, that’s just my friends’ fun,” said Arlette. “They rag me because I want to have a benevolent fund for the *atelier*, and a fund for *dots*, and all sorts of mad ideas. Well, when I left work an hour later, I found a tall gentleman waiting for me. When he started following me, I thought perhaps there was something coming. But at my *métro* station, he stopped dead. The next day, the same thing happened. He kept some way behind me, probably thinking I didn’t see him. So I purposely walked right on to the third, and then to the fourth station. But I was thoroughly sold, for at the end of a week he disappeared. And then, a few days later, one evening . . .”

“One evening? . . .”

Arlette’s voice grew mysterious.

“Well, some evenings after I’ve cleared dinner I leave Mother and go to see a friend of mine who lives at the top of Montmartre. Before I get there, I have to go along a dark, narrow little street—almost a passage. It’s always deserted when I come back at eleven. And in that street, three times running, I spotted a shadow lurking against a courtyard door. The first and second times the shadow didn’t stir. But the third time it stepped out and tried to bar my way. I screamed, and bolted. The shadow didn’t come after me. Ever since I’ve kept away from that street. That’s all there is to tell.”

She subsided. Her story did not seem to have interested Béchoux and Van Houben, but d’Enneris asked her:

“Why did you tell us those two little episodes together? Do you yourself see any connection between them?”

Arlette nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve always thought, myself, that the man who jumped out on me was the same as the gentleman who followed me before.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I was able to see, that third evening at Montmartre, that the man in the shadow was wearing light spats, or cloth-top boots.”

“Like the gentleman of the boulevards?” exclaimed d’Enneris, in some excitement.

Again Arlette nodded.

Van Houben and Béchoux were stupefied. Régine, greatly excited, asked the girl:

“But don’t you remember, Arlette, the man who carried me off also wore light spats?”

“Why, so he did,” said Arlette. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“And your man, too, Arlette . . . the man yesterday, who called himself Doctor Bricou. . . .”

“Why, yes,” said the girl. “But I hadn’t put two and two together . . . it’s only this moment that I’ve remembered all that I’ve been telling you.”

Van Houben was beaming now. He came over and kissed Arlette’s hand.

“Mademoiselle, we have made great progress, thanks to you, and are much nearer getting back my diamonds.”

“What, you’ve come back, Van Houben? Arlette, one more effort, please, my dear. You haven’t mentioned the name of your gentleman. Do you know it?”

“I do.”

“And he is——?”

“The Comte de Mélamare.”

Régine and Van Houben both started violently. Jean controlled a movement of surprise. Béchoux shrugged his shoulders, and Van Houben, with a sudden revulsion of feeling towards Arlette, exclaimed:

“But that’s absurd! Comte Adrien de Mélamare. . . . But I know the man! I’ve sat next to him on charity committees. He’s perfectly all right—a fellow I should be proud to shake hands with. You needn’t tell me the Comte de Mélamare stole my diamonds!”

“But I never said he did,” cried poor Arlette. “I only gave his name in answer to a question.”

“Arlette’s perfectly right,” said Régine. “She is asked a question and answers it. But it’s obvious the Comte de Mélamare, in view of his reputation and that of his sister, cannot be the man who followed you in the street, nor the man who carried us both off.”

“Does he wear light spats?” asked Jean d’Enneris.

“I really don’t know . . . yes, I think he does . . . sometimes. . . .”

“Almost always,” said Van Houben sharply.

This confirmation was followed by silence. Then Van Houben spoke again: “There must be some misunderstanding. I can only repeat that the Comte de Mélamare is a pukka gentleman.”

“Let’s go and see him,” was d’Enneris’ bright suggestion. “Van Houben, haven’t you a friend in the police, the noble Béchoux? He can get us in all right.”

Béchoux registered annoyance.

“So you think you can call on people like that, without any kind of inquiry or warrant, on the strength of idiotic stories? Yes, I said idiotic and I mean it. All that I’ve heard during the last half-hour strikes me as being the height of idiocy.”

D’Enneris was murmuring:

“To think I bowled my hoop with such an abject goop! Tut, tut!”

He turned to Régine.

“My dear,” he said, “would you be so good as to look in the telephone book and ring up Comte Adrien de Mélamare? We’ll manage without the noble Béchoux.”

He rose, and a moment later Régine handed him the instrument.

“Hullo,” he said. “Is that the Comte de Mélamare’s house? This is Baron d’Enneris speaking. . . . Oh, is that Monsieur le Comte de Mélamare? Excuse me, monsieur, I’m so sorry to bother you, but I saw in a paper a few weeks ago an advertisement about some things you had had stolen—the knob off a pair of tongs, a silver candle sconce, a lock, and half a blue bell-cord . . . all valueless objects which you had special reasons for wanting back. . . . Am I right, monsieur? . . . Then, if you will be kind enough to see me, I think I can give you some useful information. . . . Two o’clock to-day? . . . Very well. . . . Oh, one other thing—may I bring with me two ladies, whose part in the matter I will explain to you? Thank you, thank you, you’re really too kind.”

D’Enneris hung up, and said sweetly:

“If the noble Béchoux is there, that’ll show him we go where we please. Régine, did you notice in the telephone book where it is the Comte lives?”

“Thirteen, Rue d’Urfé.”

“That’s in the Faubourg Saint Germain, then.”

Régine was afire with curiosity.

“But where are those things you were talking about?”

“I’ve got them. I bought them on the day the advertisement appeared, for the modest sum of thirteen francs fifty.”

“And why didn’t you send them back to the Comte?”

“The name of Mélamare struck an odd chord in my mind. I somehow think that during the last century there was a Mélamare Case. And I haven’t had time to go into it. But we must go right ahead now. Régine and Arlette, we will join forces again at ten-past two in the Place du Palais Bourbon. The meeting is adjourned.”

It had been a profitable séance. In half an hour d’Enneris had cleared the ground and opened up a new avenue for exploration. A figure was looming up in the shadow, and the problem was assuming definite shape: where did the Comte de Mélamare come in?

Régine kept Arlette to lunch. D’Enneris left a few minutes after Van Houben and Béchoux, but fell in with them on the second-floor landing. Béchoux, thoroughly exasperated, had hold of Van Houben by his coat-lapel and was haranguing him.

“No, I can’t let you go any further along the path to destruction. I won’t have you victimized by an impostor. Do you know who that man is?”

D’Enneris came forward.

“You’re obviously talking about me, and the noble Béchoux wants to unload his mind on the subject.” He produced a visiting-card. “Baron Jean d’Enneris, navigator,” he told Van Houben.

“Rot!” said Béchoux. “You’re no more Baron than you are d’Enneris, and no more d’Enneris than navigator.”

“Really, Monsieur Béchoux, your courtesy confounds me. And who am I, pray?”

“You’re Jim Barnett! Jim Barnett himself! . . . It’s all very well to disguise yourself, and leave off the wig, and the old coat. I recognize you under your pose of man-about-town and sportsman. It’s you, all right! You are Jim Barnett of the Barnett Agency. Barnett with whom I worked on a dozen cases, and who tricked me every time. I’ve had enough, and it’s my duty to warn others. Monsieur Van Houben, you mustn’t let this fellow prey on you!”

Van Houben, horribly embarrassed, was watching Jean d’Enneris, who was peacefully lighting a cigarette.

“Is what Béchoux says true?” he asked nervously.

D’Enneris smiled.

“It may be . . . I really know so little about it. My papers are all in order as Baron d’Enneris, but I believe I may also have a set in the name of Jim Barnett—he was my best friend, you see.”

“But what about your voyage round the world in a motor-boat? Did you really make it?”

“I may have done. I’m rather vague about it all. What’s it matter to you, anyway? For you the one essential is to get back your diamonds. Now if I *should* be this extraordinary Jim Barnett, as your policeman friend thinks, then that’s the best possible guarantee that I shall be successful, Van Houben.”

“The best possible guarantee that you will be robbed, Monsieur Van Houben,” persisted Béchoux. “Oh, he’ll succeed all right. Each time we worked together, he managed to unravel the case, and bring the guilty party to book or recover the stolen property. But each time he kept back a part or the whole of such property. He’ll find your diamonds, but he’ll walk off with them under your nose, and you’ll never see them more. He’s got you in his toils, and you can’t escape. Do you really think he’ll work in your interests? He’s out for himself. Barnett or d’Enneris, gentleman or detective, navigator or crook, he plays his own hand. If you let him join in the search, good-bye to your diamonds, monsieur.”

“No, no,” protested Van Houben. “If that’s the case, we’ll go no further. If I’m going to get my diamonds back only to have them pinched again, *good* morning! You mind your own business, d’Enneris, and I’ll mind mine.”

D’Enneris burst out laughing.

“Trouble is, your business, for the moment, interests me more than my own.”

“I forbid you!”

“What do you forbid me? Anyone can get busy on those diamonds. They’re lost; I’ve as much right as anyone else to look for them. And, anyhow, I’m afraid I can’t resist danger. I’m thrilled to the marrow by the whole affair. The women in the case are delectable. Régine, Arlette! Charming creatures. . . . I tell you, old chap, I shan’t give up this show until I have got hold of your diamonds.”

“And I,” snarled Béchoux, beside himself, “shall not give up until I have jailed you, Jim Barnett.”

“Jim Barnett? He’s dead. Alas, my poor brother. Good-bye, my friends, and good luck. Who knows? We may meet again ere long.”

And d’Enneris, cigarette in mouth, went off with a hop, skip and a jump.

. . . . . .

Arlette and Régine were looking pale when they got out of the car in the quiet little Place du Palais Bourbon where d’Enneris awaited them.

“Now do tell us, d’Enneris,” said Régine, “don’t you really believe it *was* the Comte de Mélamare who carried us off?”

“What makes you think that, Régine?”

“I don’t know . . . intuition perhaps. I’m rather scared. And Arlette feels just the same, don’t you, Arlette?”

“Yes. My heart’s in my boots.”

“Well,” said Jean. “What about it? Even if he is the man, he can’t eat you.”

They were near the Rue d’Urfé, a street of old eighteenth-century houses, bearing historic names. Hôtel de la Rocheferté, Hôtel d’Ourmes . . . all much alike, with melancholy façades, low first floors, heavy carriage gates. The houses themselves stood back behind their ill-paved courtyards. The Hôtel de Mélamare was the same as the rest.

Just as d’Enneris was about to ring the bell, a taxi drove up and out of it sprang Van Houben and Béchoux, both pretty sheepfaced, but proportionately overbearing.

D’Enneris folded his arms and gazed upon them, a Napoléon of calm wrath.

“Well, really,” he said, “of all the cheek. An hour ago those two blighters thought drowning too good for me, and here they are on our tracks!”

He turned his back on them and rang the bell. A moment later a small door cut in the big one was opened by a manservant in chestnut livery—a feeble, tottering ancient. D’Enneris gave his name and was told:

“Monsieur le comte is expecting monsieur. If monsieur will step this way . . .”

He pointed out on the other side of the courtyard the central steps, sheltered by an awning. Régine’s heart began to thump alarmingly.

“Six steps . . . it’s a flight of six steps,” she cried.

And Arlette echoed her in desolate accents:

“Six steps . . . the same steps . . . the same courtyard. . . . Is it possible? . . . It was here, in this place. . . .”

CHAPTER 4. BÉCHOUX THE BLOODHOUND

D'ENNERIS slid reassuring hands under the elbows of his fair companions.

"You really must control yourselves," he admonished. "The game's up if you're going to give way like this at the start."

The old butler was hobbling a little way in front of them, out of earshot. Van Houben, who, with Béchoux, had stolen after them into the courtyard, breathed in the latter's ear:

"I was the wise bird all right. It's a good thing we're here. . . . Look out for my diamonds, and don't take your eye off d'Enneris."

They crossed the court with its wide, uneven flags. The bare, blind walls of neighbouring hôtels flanked it right and left. Set back there, the lofty house of Mélamare presented an impressive appearance.

They went up a flight of six steps, and Régine Aubry exclaimed:

"If the hall floor is black and white squares, I know I shall faint."

"Oh, don't do that," implored d'Enneris.

The hall was flagged like a chessboard. . . .

But d'Enneris clutched the girls' arms so hard that they did not collapse, though they fairly sagged at the knees!

"Tut!" he said mildly. "*This* won't buy the baby a new dress!"

"The stair carpet!" cried Régine. "It's the same!"

"The same," echoed Arlette dolorously, "and the banister. . . ."

"Well, what of it?" said d'Enneris brutally. "Banisters don't bite."

"But supposing," said Arlette fearfully, "supposing we both recognize the salon?"

"Well, you've got to get there first, my dear, and if the Comte is Bluebeard he's hardly likely to lead us post-haste to his chamber! Brace your stumps, my hearties, and remember, mum's the word! Not a peep out of either of you, whatever happens."

It was at this moment that Comte Adrien de Mélamare came forward to receive his visitors and showed them into his study—a ground-floor room, delightfully furnished in Louis XVI mahogany. He was a self-possessed man of about forty-five, with

greying hair. His sombre, hawk-face was far from genial, his black, roving gaze oddly disconcerting.

He bowed formally to Régine, but gave a slight start at the sight of Arlette. He then proceeded to make himself perfunctorily agreeable, as though constrained thereto by native good breeding. D'Enneris introduced himself and his ladies, but utterly disregarded the presence of Béchoux and Van Houben.

The latter bowed rather more deeply than was necessary, and proclaimed himself pompously.

"Van Houben, the dealer in precious stones. . . . I am the Van Houben whose diamonds were stolen from the Opéra. Allow me to introduce my assistant, Monsieur Béchoux."

The Comte, though obviously more than a little taken aback by this press of visitors, said nothing. He bowed and waited.

At once, d'Enneris, with entire self-command and freedom from embarrassment, gave ready utterance.

"Monsieur," he said, "chance works wonders. This very day, after I had telephoned you, I happened to be glancing through an old *Répertoire des personnes de qualité*. And I find we are distant cousins! My maternal great-grandmother *née* de Sourdin, married a Mélamare of the younger branch—Mélamare-Saintonge."

The Comte's countenance brightened. Clearly genealogy interested him. He plunged into a complicated discussion with Jean d'Enneris, which ended by firmly establishing the relationship. Arlette and Régine were gradually recovering confidence, and Van Houben whispered to Béchoux:

"But if he's related to the Mélamares——"

"Then I'm the Pope's Aunt," completed Béchoux.

"He seems to be carrying it off all right."

"That's just till his next move."

But d'Enneris was off again, fairly blossoming in reflected glory.

"But I must be wearying you, monsieur—*et cher cousin*," said he, "and if you will allow me, I will now tell you at once how chance has aided me."

"Pray do, monsieur."

"I was reading a paper in the *métro* one morning when chance drew my attention to your advertisement. The first bit of good fortune! I admit that I was immediately struck both by its nature and by the apparent worthlessness of the lost property. A bit

of blue cord, a lock, a candle sconce, the knob of a pair of tongs—they were hardly important enough to warrant advertising for their recovery. A few moments later, however, the thing had gone clean out of my mind, and I should probably never have given it another thought if——”

After a carefully calculated pause, Jean went on:

“Of course, *cher cousin*, you know the Marché aux Puces. It’s a picturesque bargain ground—the most amazing assortment of wares all jumbled together. Personally, I’ve often picked up rather pleasant things there, and, anyway, I’ve never regretted taking a stroll along the stalls. This morning, for instance, I nobbled an old Rouen faience holy-water stoop. It had been broken and put together again, but it’s quite charming. . . . I got a soup-tureen . . . a thimble . . . oh, real finds, every one of them. And then, suddenly, on the pavement among a whole heap of worthless junk, my eye was caught by a bit of bell-cord—blue silk cord, worn and faded. And by it lay a lock . . . and a silver candle sconce. . . .”

Monsieur de Mélamare’s demeanour suffered a sudden transformation. He exclaimed agitatedly:

“Not really! Can it be true? Why, those are the very things I am trying to get back! With whom should I communicate to get hold of them, monsieur?”

“You’ve only got to ask me!” smiled d’Enneris.

“What! . . . You bought them yourself! How much were they? I will refund you double, triple what you paid for them! But I must . . .”

D’Enneris calmed him.

“Allow me to present you with them, *mon cher cousin*. I bought the lot for thirteen francs fifty!”

“Have you got them at home?”

“I have them here.” Jean tapped his bulging pocket. “I have just been and fetched them.”

Comte Adrien held out his hand unashamedly.

“Wait a bit,” said Jean d’Enneris gaily. “After all, there’s a little reward I’d like to claim . . . a whim of mine! I have a terribly inquiring mind and I should like to see where these oddments fit in . . . and to know why you set such store by them.”

The Comte hesitated. The request was on the face of it both ill-bred and indiscreet, but this hesitation was extremely significant to the other four in the room! At last, however, he replied:

“Your curiosity is easily gratified, monsieur, if you will come up to the salon with me.”

D’Enneris cast a quick glance in the direction of Arlette and Régine, which conveyed: “There you are . . . where there’s a will there’s a way!” But that glance told him they were both trembling with anticipation. The salon, to them, meant the scene of the ordeal they had each undergone. If they saw it again, it would be proof positive. Van Houben understood that this meant a big step forward. And Béchoux brightened perceptibly, treading on the Comte’s heels.

“Pardon me,” said the latter icily, “I am just showing you the way!”

They left the study and crossed the flagged hall. Their echoing footsteps filled the well of the staircase. As they went up, Régine counted the stairs. There were twenty-five. . . . Twenty-five! Exactly the same number. She was again overcome, and tottered, grasping the banister for support.

The others crowded round her. What ailed her? Was she ill?

“No, no,” murmured poor Régine, without opening her eyes, “it’s nothing. . . . I’m just feeling a bit dizzy. . . . I get these attacks. . . . So sorry.”

“You must sit down, madame,” said the Comte opening the door of the salon.

Van Houben and d’Enneris led her to a sofa. But when Arlette came in and saw the room, she gave a little scream of sheer terror, spun round and sank fainting into an arm-chair.

There ensued an almost comic rout, a positive stampede. The others ran wildly from sofa to chair and back again. The Comte was calling: “Gilberte! . . . Ursule! . . . quick, bring smelling-salts . . . and sal volatile. François, call Ursule.”

François was first on the scene. He was the concierge-butler and doubtless the only servant with his wife Ursule, who was as old as he and even more wrinkled. Then the woman the Comte called Gilberte came in, and he told her:

“*Ma sœur*, these two young ladies have been taken ill.”

Gilberte de Mélamare (after her divorce she had resumed her maiden name) was tall, dark and haughty. She had good, regular features, but there was something rather old-fashioned about her—notably her attire. She seemed a gentler nature than her brother. Yet in her dark, serious gaze there smouldered something of passion. D’Enneris observed that her plum-coloured dress was trimmed with bands of black velvet. . . .

Although the scene must have completely baffled her, she preserved perfect calm. Having bathed Arlette’s forehead with eau-de-cologne, she gave her over to Ursule and went across to Régine, round whom Van Houben was buzzing like an angry bee. Jean d’Enneris gently removed him so as to get a closer view of things as Gilberte de Mélamare leaned over the actress, and said:

“What about you, madame? You’re not really bad are you? How do you feel?”

She held smelling-salts under Régine’s nose. The latter’s eyes fluttered open, took in Gilberte, fell on her plum-coloured dress with its black velvet trimming, then on her hands. With a violent movement, the actress sat bolt upright, and cried aloud in utter terror:

“The ring! The three pearls! Keep your hands off me! You are the woman who . . . that night . . . I recognize your ring . . . and your hand . . . and this room . . . the furniture . . . the floor . . . the mantelpiece . . . that stool . . . Don’t touch me, I tell you, don’t touch me!”

A few more words came from her in an indistinct murmur. Then she reeled back and fainted right away.

Arlette was just coming to. At once she recognized Gilberte’s pointed shoes—the shoes she had seen in the car. The clock struck and at the sound of its thin, sharp chime, the girl moaned:

“It’s the same clock . . . and the same woman. . . . Oh, my God!”

. . . . . .

Such was the consternation that no one moved. The farcical aspect of the situation would have moved an outsider to mirth. Indeed, Jean d’Enneris’ thin lips twitched ever so slightly in token of his amusement.

Van Houben looked first from d’Enneris to Béchoux and back again, at a loss what to think. Béchoux was intently watching the brother and sister, both of whom seemed smitten speechless.

“What does she mean?” said the Comte at last. “What ring is this? I can only suppose the lady is delirious.”

D’Enneris intervened, very gracefully, as though he found the whole thing trivial and commonplace. Where was the excitement in two young women fainting and one of them insulting her kind hosts?

“*Mon cher cousin*, you’re perfectly right. The emotional display of which my two young friends have just been guilty is not unconnected with those sudden feverish attacks that are sometimes accompanied by slight delirium.” This he reeled off like any doctor. “That is all part of the explanation I owe you, and which I mentioned before coming here. Would you mind giving me just a few minutes’ grace while we settle up this business of the lost property?”

Comte Adrien did not at once reply. He registered mingled embarrassment and anxiety, muttering disjointedly:

“What on earth is this all about . . . what do you expect me to believe? . . . I really cannot see . . .”

He drew his sister apart and they spoke rapidly together. But in a moment Jean bore down upon him, holding between thumb and forefinger a little brass plate, on which were wrought two butterflies with outspread wings.

“Here is the lock, *mon cher cousin*, which I take it is the one missing from one of the drawers in that desk? It is identical with the other two.”

Of his own accord, he laid the brass plate on the drawer. It fitted perfectly, and the little prongs on its inner face found their old holes in the wood. Next, Jean d’Enneris drew from his pocket a blue cord at one end of which was a bell-handle, also of brass. At one side of the mantelpiece hung a short length of precisely similar cord. He made for it and the two pieces fitted together exactly!

“Fine!” he said enthusiastically. “And the candle sconce, *mon cher cousin*, where does that go?”

“On that chandelier, monsieur,” said Comte Adrien sourly. “There were six. As you see, there are now only five . . . from which this differs in no particular. That leaves the brass knob, which, as you may see, has been unscrewed from the tongs.”

“Here it is,” said Jean, continuing to delve like a conjurer into his inexhaustible pocket. “And now, *mon cher cousin*, you will keep your promise, won’t you, and tell me why these trifles mean so much to you and how it was they strayed from home!”

During this business of restoration, the Comte had had time to recover himself. He seemed now to have forgotten Régine’s abuse and Arlette’s moans, for, after one last moment of hesitation, during which he again consulted with his sister, he answered, briefly, as if to get rid of the intrusion brought upon him by his unfortunate promise:

“I set store by everything which is a family possession, and the smallest trifles are as sacred to my sister and myself as the most priceless heirlooms.”

This explanation was received in silence for what it was worth. D’Enneris spoke again.

“That, *mon cher cousin*, is only right and natural, and I know only too well from my own experience how attached one gets to family relics. But how did these come to vanish?”

“That I cannot tell you. One morning I noticed that this candle sconce was missing. I made a minute inspection of the room with my sister. This lock was missing also, and a bit of this cord and the tong-knob.”

“It was a burglary, then?”

“Oh, assuredly! And all the things were taken at the one attempt.”

“Why didn’t you notify the police? But, of course, the theft is an absurdity. Good Lord, they might have stolen these dishes, these miniatures, this clock, this silver, all really valuable. . . . And instead they chose the most oddly assorted trifles! Why on earth was that?”

“That I cannot say, monsieur.”

The Comte’s tones were cold. This inquisition passed the bounds of hospitality, and as far as he was concerned the visit was at an end. He was at no pains to conceal this.

“I am extremely obliged to you, monsieur, and since you will not let me refund your expenditure, I can only extend my heartfelt thanks and those of my sister.”

“Perhaps, nevertheless, *mon cher cousin*,” said Jean, “you would like to hear my reasons for bringing along my two young friends, and the import of their emotional display?”

“No,” declared Comte Adrien roundly. “Contrary to yourself, I have little curiosity about what does not concern me.”

“But this does concern you, *mon cher cousin*.”

“In my opinion, no.”

He was itching to get rid of them, and would have withdrawn had the others not persisted with their presence. He was indeed making a move towards the door, but found his way blocked by Béchoux, who informed him gravely:

“In your opinion, perhaps not, but in mine, yes. There are one or two things that ought to be cleared up right away, and so they shall be.”

Béchoux’s intervention was imperious. The Chief Inspector barred the door, his long arms outstretched.

“And who are you, monsieur?” asked the Comte haughtily.

“Chief Inspector Béchoux, of the Sûreté.”

Monsieur de Mélamare fairly jumped.

“Police? What right have you coming here? Police here, in the Hôtel de Mélamare!”

“I was introduced to you by my name—Béchoux—when I got here, monsieur le comte. But what I have seen and heard obliges me to add to that name my rank of Chief Inspector.”

“What you have seen? . . . what you have heard?” stammered Monsieur de Mélamare, whose countenance was now livid. “Really, monsieur, I have given you no authority . . .”

“Oh, *that* doesn’t worry me,” remarked Béchoux, whose strong suit was not politeness.

The Comte turned again to his sister, and there ensued another rapid confabulation. Gilberte de Mélamare seemed to share her brother’s perturbation. They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, in an attitude of defensive expectancy.

“Béchoux’s off the leash now,” whispered Van Houben to Jean.

“Yes, I saw he was getting more and more worked up. I know my Béchoux. He swells and swells and then goes off pop!”

Arlette and Régine were on their feet now, cowering well behind Jean for protection.

“I won’t keep you long, monsieur le comte,” promised Béchoux. “I just want straightforward answers to a few questions. At what time did you leave home yesterday—you and Madame de Mélamare?”

The Comte shrugged his shoulders and made no reply, but his sister judged it more prudent to answer.

“My brother and I left the house at two o’clock and came back to tea at half-past four.”

“And after that?”

“We didn’t stir out. We never do go out at nights.”

“Very interesting,” observed Béchoux, with heavy irony. “But what I want to know is—what were you doing here, in this room yesterday, between eight o’clock and midnight?”

Monsieur de Mélamare stamped wrathfully and signed to his sister to say no more. Béchoux realized that no power on earth could force them to speak, and this so infuriated him that, carried away by his conviction, he reeled off the entire accusation without further questions. His voice, at first controlled, grew ever harsher and angrier.

“Monsieur le comte, you were not at home yesterday afternoon after tea, nor was your sister. You were outside No. 3a Rue du Mont-Thabor. In the guise of ‘Doctor Bricou’ you were lying in wait for a young girl whom you lured into your car. There your sister smothered her in a rug. You brought her here, to your house. This young girl escaped. You pursued her, but failed to recapture her in the streets. And this young girl—is here!”

The Comte's attitude grew increasingly strained; his lips twitched, his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"You're mad, mad, I tell you. Mad, the whole pack of you!"

"Indeed I am not mad," volunteered Béchoux, slipping little by little into melodrama, and exhibiting a grandiloquent pomposity that rejoiced the heart of d'Enneris. "I speak the strict truth. What proof have I? Ample proof! Mademoiselle Arlette, whom you know, for whom you waited at Chernitz', will bear me out. She climbed on to your mantelpiece. She crouched on top of that bookcase. She knocked over that vase. She opened that window. She crossed that garden. She swears it by all she holds sacred, don't you, Arlette Mazolle?"

"He's lost his head," d'Enneris whispered in Van Houben's ear. "What business has he to play magistrate? Rotten performance, too! He's doing all the talking, that is, if you can call it talking. . . ."

Béchoux was by now ranting in the Comte's face, the latter seeming utterly confounded.

"And that's not all, monsieur, that's not all! It's not the half of it! There is something far graver! This lady . . . this lady . . ."—he pointed to Régine Aubry—"you know her, eh? She who was kidnapped one fine evening from the Opéra—*by whom*? Who was it, I wonder, who brought her here, into this room . . . she can swear to the furniture, can't you, madame? You recognize these arm-chairs . . . this stool . . . the flooring. . . . Tell me, you—monsieur, who brought her here? Who robbed her of the diamond corselet? Who but the Comte de Mélamare. And his sister, Gilberte de Mélamare! . . . The proof? This ring. . . . But there are other proofs in plenty . . . the Parquet shall have them, monsieur, and then we shall see. . . ."

He never finished. The Comte, beside himself, sprang at his throat, stamping and swearing. Béchoux broke free, shook an angry fist in the man's face, and continued his extraordinary monologue. Carried away by the circumstantial evidence, and by his own part in the drama, above all by the importance he would shortly assume with his chiefs and with the public, he had indeed lost his head! Realizing it himself, he suddenly stopped dead, and wiped the sweat from his brow. Then, recovering himself all at once, he made the modest admission:

"I've exceeded my rights, I know—this is not my province. The next step is to telephone the Préfecture for instructions, and I must ask you to wait here for them."

The Comte collapsed, head in hands, like a man abandoning all attempt at defence. But Gilberte de Mélamare barred the Chief Inspector's way.

"Do you mean to bring the police here?" she demanded. "Into this house? You can't do such a thing . . . it's unheard of. . . It's out of the question . . . you've no right . . . it's an outrage!"

“Sorry, madame,” said Béchoux, his manner mellowed by triumph.

But she clung to his arm, suppliant now.

“I beg of you, monsieur—my brother and I are the victims of a frightful misunderstanding. My brother is incapable of any crime. . . . I beg of you . . .”

Béchoux was adamant. He had seen the telephone in the ante-room and went off to communicate with headquarters. He was back again in a few minutes.

After that, events moved quickly. For perhaps half an hour Béchoux held forth with increasing excitement to d’Enneris and Van Houben, while Régine and Arlette regarded the brother and sister in mingled terror and pity. Then the Chef de la Sûreté arrived, with several detectives, a magistrate, a recorder and an attorney.

There was a summary inquiry. The two old servants, François and Ursule, were cross-examined. They lived in a different wing and were solely concerned with their work. Once this was done, they withdrew into their own sitting-room or into the kitchen, which opened on to the garden.

But the evidence of the two young women was damning—they had only to draw on their memories. It was impossible not to believe Arlette, as she showed them how she had escaped. Besides, she described accurately, without even seeing them again, the garden, the shrubbery, the high wall, the isolated lodge, the door, and the deserted road leading into a more frequented thoroughfare. Her evidence was incontrovertible. And on top of all this it fell to Béchoux to make a discovery which swept away the least, last doubts from every mind. Glancing inside the bookcase, Béchoux noticed a set of old quartos in venerable bindings. His suspicious nature led him to open each in turn. This disclosed that they were mere husks, devoid of pages—book-boxes! From one of them he drew a length of shimmering silver tissue, from another—the corselet!

“My tunic!” cried Régine immediately. “And my corselet!”

“And the diamonds are all gone!” came from Van Houben, as upset as if they had been stolen from him all over again! “What have you done with my diamonds, monsieur? You shall be made to disgorge them. . . .”

The Comte de Mélamare had looked on all this while impassively but with a strange expression. When the magistrate turned round to him, showing the tunic and corselet stripped of their diamonds, he threw up his head and gave a ghastly grin.

“Where’s my sister gone?” he said, in a dry whisper, gazing round the room, filled with strangers.

The old servant answered him.

“I believe madame is in her room.”

“Say good-bye to her for me, then, and advise her to follow my example.”

Without any warning, he drew a revolver from his pocket and pressed it to his temple, finger on trigger. But d’Enneris, who had been watching him closely, struck the Comte’s elbow a sharp blow. The deflected bullet broke a pane in the window behind them. Policemen bore down on Monsieur de Mélamare, and the magistrate pronounced the unhappy nobleman under arrest.

“And bring Madame de Mélamare along, too,” he added.

But when they went to find the Comtesse, she was not in her room nor in her boudoir. They searched all through the hôtel. How had she fled? And with whose aid?

D’Enneris voiced loud anxiety, opining suicide. He it was who directed the exhaustive but fruitless search.

“Never mind,” remarked Béchoux, “it won’t be long now before you get your diamonds back, Monsieur Van Houben. We have the upper hand, and personally I think I’ve done pretty well.”

“We must give Jean d’Enneris his due,” observed Van Houben.

“He went cold on it half-way through,” contended Béchoux. “It was my point-blank accusation of the Comte that did the trick.”

. . . . . .

A few hours later, Van Houben came back to his luxurious flat in the Boulevard Haussmann. He had dined out with Béchoux and was bringing the Chief Inspector back for further discussion of the business which concerned them both so deeply.

“What’s that?” he exclaimed suddenly, after they had been talking only a minute. “I thought I heard a noise somewhere in the flat, but the servants don’t sleep on this side.”

He went out with Béchoux into the long passage, at the far end of which was a flat within a flat, with its own door on to the main staircase of the building.

“These two rooms are quite separate,” Van Houben told Béchoux. “I sometimes entertain my friends here.”

Béchoux listened intently.

“There’s some one there,” he said at last.

“It’s very odd. No one has a key.”

Brandishing their revolvers, they rushed in.

“My God!” cried Van Houben.

“Hell!” cried Béchoux.

A woman lay stretched on a sofa. Beside her knelt Jean d’Enneris! He was raining light, quick kisses on her hair and brow after his customary calming method.

The other two drew nearer and recognized—Gilberte de Mélamare! Her eyes were closed; she was very pale, and breathing heavily.

D’Enneris half-rose and turned a face of fury on them.

“You again! Good Lord, can’t you give anyone a moment’s peace! What the devil do you want coming here?”

“What do we want . . .” blustered Van Houben. “But this is my own place, confound you! I *live* here!”

And from the enraged Béchoux, “Well, you *have* a nerve! You mean to say it was *you* who helped her escape!”

D’Enneris, suddenly meek, struck an attitude of simpering coyness.

“I can hide nothing from you, Béchoux. Too true, ’twas I!”

“You dared——”

“My good fellow, you forgot to dump any of your policemen in the garden. So I shot her out that way, and told her to wait for me in a taxi near by. When we were through at the house, I picked her up again, and brought her along here—since when I have been tenderly tending her!”

“But who let you in?” Van Houben wanted to know. “You had no key to this place.”

“Nor any need of one. I have a handy little tool that’ll open any door. I’ve called on you several times here, old horse, and it struck me there could be no better refuge for Madame de Mélamare than these rooms. Who would ever think Van Houben was harbouring the Comtesse de Mélamare? No one, of course. Not even the infallible Béchoux! Well, she’s going to stop quietly here, under your protection, until the case is cleared up. The maid who waits on her will think she’s your new *amie* now that Régine is through with you.”

“I arrest her! I shall notify the police!” cried Béchoux.

D’Enneris burst out laughing.

“You always were a funny fellow, Béchoux. You know as well as I do that you won’t do anything of the sort. She’s sacred!”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Of course I do or I wouldn’t be taking her under my wing.”

“Then you intend to shelter a thief?” asked the irate Béchoux.

“A thief—what do you know about that?”

“But she’s the sister of the man you got arrested.”

“Vile calumny! *I* didn’t get him arrested. That was your doing.”

“It was through you, and because there’s no doubt that he is guilty.”

“What do you know about that?” came again in mocking tones from d’Enneris.

“D’you mean to say you’re no longer sure of it yourself?”

“Indeed I’m not,” said Jean d’Enneris, horridly playful. “There are some nasty contradictions in the business. Can this noble Comte be a common thief? And this august lady, whose hair I hardly dare touch with my plebeian lips, I ask you, is *she* a thief? You know, Béchoux, I can’t help wondering if you haven’t been a bit precipitate, and started something you’ll be sorry for later! Ah, what a load of responsibility, my poor friend!”

Béchoux heard him out, pale and shaking. Van Houben, an awful anxiety gnawing at his heart, felt his diamonds receding ever farther into the void.

Jean d’Enneris, on his knees again, was whispering:

“Of course you aren’t guilty! How could a woman like you turn to crime? You haven’t the profile, anyway! And you’re going to tell me all about everything, aren’t you, the moment Béchoux and Van Houben have the tact to leave us alone . . . ?”

CHAPTER 5. THE HUNT IS UP!

THE outstanding feature of the inquiry into the Mélamare case was probably its futility. In fact, but for the activities of Jean d'Enneris—or Arsène Lupin—the deadlock might have gone on indefinitely.

The two old servants were furious that anyone should dare suspect their irreproachable employers, but all their devotion produced no single piece of exculpatory evidence. Ursule had hardly stirred out of her kitchen that day, except to do the shopping in the morning. When the bell rang, which was rarely, as few visitors came to the house, it was François who struggled into his livery and went to open the door.

A thorough examination established that there was no secret exit from the house. The little recess off the drawing-room, formerly an alcove with couches, was used as a lumber-room. Nowhere was there anything in the least suspicious or smacking of deception.

The courtyard was bare of cover. There was not even a garage. It was ascertained that the Comte could drive, but if he had a car, where did he keep it? In what secret garage? These were questions to which no answer could be found.

On the other hand, the Comtesse de Mélamare did not come forward. The Comte himself took refuge in absolute silence and refused point-blank to answer leading questions or to give any information about his private life.

Something came out, however, which seemed of vital importance and soon dominated the entire case, profoundly influencing the Court, the Press and the public. This was the thing which had lurked all along at the back of Jean d'Enneris' mind and made him anxious to refresh his memory by a little research. Briefly, it was this. In 1840, the great-grandfather of the present Comte—Jules de Mélamare, the most illustrious scion of the house, a general under Napoléon and ambassador under the Restoration, was arrested for robbery with murder. He died of apoplexy in his cell.

On going closely into this and turning up the old records, they came on an unsuspected sequel. It was a queer story they eventually brought to light. In 1868 the son of Jules de Mélamare—Napoléon III's orderly—was found guilty of murder and robbery. He blew out his brains in the house in the Rue d'Urfé. The Emperor saw that the affair was hushed up.

The resurrection of these two family skeletons could not fail to cause a big stir. Suddenly, a word leapt to prominence and shed a blinding light on the drama of the day: atavism! Although the Mélamares were not wealthy, they enjoyed a fair income

and owned the Paris house and a château in Touraine. They devoted themselves to social work and philanthropy. Therefore cupidity was an insufficient motive for the Opéra incident and the theft of the diamonds. It must be atavism! Adrien and Gilberte de Mélamare were homicidal kleptomaniacs who had inherited their criminal tendencies from preceding generations of their house. They had probably been driven to theft as a result of living beyond their means or under the stress of violent temptation, but the prime cause of their outbreak was undoubtedly atavism.

And, like his grandfather Alphonse, Adrien de Mélamare had sought to kill himself. Atavism again!

Regarding Van Houben's diamonds, the respective abductions of Régine and Arlette, his own movements during these abductions, the tunic found in his bookcase, and all the other mysteries, the Comte professed himself ignorant. It was nothing to do with him, he said, and might all have happened in the moon so far as he was concerned.

He sought to clear himself in one direction only—concerning Arlette Mazolle. He had, he said, had a liaison with a married woman, and a daughter by her. This girl had died some years before, and he had felt her loss keenly. Arlette resembled her and he had several times involuntarily followed the little mannequin, remembering the child he had lost. He energetically denied, however, that he had sprung out on her in a lonely street, as Arlette herself declared.

A fortnight went by, during which time Chief Inspector Béchoux, violently opinionated, raced round in much and useless activity. Van Houben, who dogged him like a shadow, was now eternally bewailing his diamonds.

"They're gone—I tell you, Béchoux, they're gone!"

Béchoux held out a pair of tightly clenched fists.

"Your diamonds? As safe as if I had them here in my hands. I've got the Mélamares and I'll get your diamonds."

"You're sure you wouldn't like to call in d'Enneris?"

"Not on your life! I'd rather mess up the whole job than go to him for help."

Van Houben was nettled.

"I like that," he said, "you put your beastly pride before my diamonds."

He did not tell Béchoux that he himself never missed a chance of spurring on Jean d'Enneris, whom he met daily. Van Houben, beleaguered in his own flat, was for ever coming upon Jean d'Enneris at the feet of Gilberte de Mélamare, tendering consolation, holding out hope and promising to save her brother from death and

dishonour. Poor d'Enneris—labouring infinitely and failing to extract from the lady any kind of helpful information!

And if Van Houben, seeking once more the society of the peerless Régine Aubry, wanted to take the actress out to dine, he was sure to find d'Enneris installed in madame's boudoir, telling the tale as he alone could tell it!

"Oh, do leave us in peace, Van Houben," was Régine's weary plea. "Truth compels me to tell you you're a blot on the landscape. Not at all the little ray of sunshine! Now d'Enneris cheers me up and takes my mind off things. Smiles and the world smiles with him, so to speak."

She turned away from the discomfited Van Houben who, instead of taking his leave, drew d'Enneris aside.

"Any news of my diamonds?" he asked hoarsely.

"There, there," said d'Enneris kindly, making soothing motions with his free hand, one arm being about Régine's waist.

"What d'you mean?" cried Van Houben anxiously. "Have you got a clue? Do you really think——"

"Good Lord, man, you're in a blue funk!" laughed d'Enneris.

"Seems to me I've pretty good reason! If you are really Jim Barnett . . ."

"That still worrying you?"

"And if Béchoux's right and you always . . ."

". . . nobble what I'm set to retrieve for people, what will Van Houben do then, poor thing? You know, you want to have it both ways. You want me to find your diamonds and give them back to you. It's too much to expect, old horse."

"Then you mean to say . . . ?"

"I mean to say that I find life very pleasant, sporting with Amaryllis in the shade. My time is absolutely full—Régine every afternoon, Gilberte every evening."

"What about the mornings?"

"Arlette." D'Enneris kissed his finger-tips. "She's a sweet kid, Van Houben. She was feeling so played out after all she'd been through that Chernitz gave her a holiday. So you see it's up to me to look after her along with the other two. The more the merrier, so to speak!"

"Do you think you're a sick-nurse, may I ask?"

"Oh dear me no! The fact is—I'm in love!" D'Enneris laid an arch finger to his lips.

“In love! Who with?”

“With all three, my ungrammatical friend. It’s simply marvellous—I’ve never been so happy in my life before. They’re all so different—Régine’s a practised flirt, all on the surface; Gilberte’s mysterious and still-waterish; Arlette—but words fail me! There you have a girl with brains and breeding! Full of intuition—gay and appealing, merry and tender, simple as a child—and close as a sphinx! And she’s a good girl, let me tell you. The first evening, I was able to take her by surprise and kiss her. But—bars up now! Do you know, Van Houben, I believe after all it’s Arlette I love!”

And d’Enneris spoke truth. His fancy for Régine had resolved itself into a firm friendship with the actress. He only continued to court Gilberte in the dwindling hope of winning her confidence. But with Arlette he spent delicious mornings that thrilled even his sophistication. She was at once highly ingenuous and thoroughly on the spot. Her compelling charm never cloyed, being like a fruit drink with a “kick” in it. Even her fantastic schemes for the betterment of her fellow-mannequins seemed distinctly logical as she smilingly expounded them.

“Arlette, Arlette,” said d’Enneris, “I know no one so simple as you, and so baffling!”

“I, baffling?” she echoed.

“Yes, at times. I believe I understand you perfectly, except for one thing—a mystery which, funnily enough, wasn’t there at all the first time I met you. Each day the trouble grows—heart trouble, I fancy!”

“Oh, surely not!” she laughed.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. . . . Tell me, isn’t there some one—some one you love?”

“Don’t be silly! I love heaps of people!”

“I don’t mean that,” he said soberly, “I mean—something fresh has come into your life.”

“You’re quite right there,” teased Arlette. “Abductions—nerve-storms—cross-examinations—inquiries—letters from utter strangers—all the unnecessary fuss there’s been! More than enough to upset any modest mannequin!”

But d’Enneris only cocked his head on one side, and his whimsical survey of Arlette was tinged with an ever-growing tenderness.

. . . . . .

Things were at a standstill at the Parquet. Three weeks after Adrien de Mélamare’s arrest, they were still accumulating irrelevant evidence and exploring blind alleys. Every line of inquiry seemed blocked and every theory untenable. They even failed

to find the original taxi-driver who had brought Arlette from the Hôtel de Mélamare to the Place de la Victoire.

Van Houben was losing weight. And he was also losing hope that there could be any connection between the Comte's arrest and the theft of his diamonds. He did not hesitate to run down Béchoux's detective ability to the latter's face.

One afternoon, the pair rang at the door of d'Enneris' ground-floor flat near the Parc Monceau. The servant admitted and announced them.

"Hop it," d'Enneris bid the latter, and turned to greet his guests. "Van Houben! Béchoux! Well, well, humility is a virtue. It's nice to see you have so little pride!"

They blurted forth their discomfiture.

"It's one of those cases where nothing goes right," said Béchoux sadly. "Luck is against us!"

"Luck is always against boobs like you," said d'Enneris unkindly. "Well, I don't mind playing fairy godfather. But you must obey my orders blindly—unconditional surrender, like the burghers of Calais!"

"Certainly!" said Van Houben, perking up under d'Enneris' tone of gentle raillery.

"What about you, Béchoux?"

"Lead on, Macduff," said that worthy dourly.

"Well, you must forthwith fling Préfecture and Parquet to the winds, and promise me your loyal co-operation. What is the position at this moment?"

"To-morrow they are confronting the Comte with Régine Aubry and Arlette Mazolle."

"Goodness! We shall have to look sharp. There's nothing that every one doesn't know already, is there?"

"Practically nothing."

"Spill the beans."

"Mélamare had a note, which was found in his cell. It says, 'Don't lose heart. You have my promise, everything will be all right.' I have ascertained that the message was delivered with the connivance of a waiter who brings in the Comte's meals. This fellow confessed that the Comte had sent an answer!"

"Then you have a description of his correspondent?"

"A detailed description."

"Good. Van Houben, I perceive your car waits without. It shall bear us on our way."

“Where to?”

“Wait and see. I, too, have the description of some one who, if we can discover them, may be able to throw a little light on things. That gives us two trails to follow. If they happen to join up, we shall be on velvet!”

They got into the car, and d’Enneris continued:

“There is just one question, Béchoux, which you have neglected, but which I consider all-important, because it’s our only jumping-off ground. What was the real reason for the Comte’s advertisement in the lost-property columns, a few weeks before the curtain went up on the main drama? Why did he want to get back those oddments? And what was anyone’s motive in stealing such trifles rather than any of the many accessible valuables in the Rue d’Urfé house? I have not ceased to ponder that problem, Béchoux. The only way of getting at a solution, apart from mere speculation and theories, was, naturally, to seek out the old woman who sold me the candle sconce, the bell-cord and the other jumbles for the modest sum of thirteen francs fifty. Which is what I did.”

“Any result?”

“Negative, so far, but I hope it will shortly become positive. I interviewed the stall-keeper in the Marché aux Puces the very next morning: she remembered well the wardrobe dealer, who had sold her the various articles for a hundred sous, and used sometimes to come round hawking similar wares. But my informant did not know the woman’s name or address. However, she felt sure that one Gradin, an antique dealer who had originally introduced her to the wardrobe dealer, could tell me what I wanted to know. I hastened to cultivate the worthy Gradin, on the *rive gauche*. He was away, but he’s expected back to-day. . . .”

They arrived shortly at Gradin’s and the latter at once told them:

“Oh, you must mean Mère Trianon—we call her that after her shop: ‘Le Petit Trianon’ in the Rue Saint Denis. She’s an odd old party. Very self-contained—a bit eccentric, I should say. She carts round a whole heap of rubbishy junk, but she’s also sold me some very fine furniture—Lord knows where she picked it all up. . . . One of the things I got from her was a magnificent mahogany suite, Louis Seize, signed by Chapuis, the famous eighteenth-century cabinet-maker.”

“You’ve resold the suite, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes. It’s been shipped to America.”

The three men came away, highly intrigued; for the signature of Chapuis happened to adorn most of the Mélamare furniture. . . .

Van Houben rubbed his hands together.

“A fortunate coincidence,” he observed. “I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if we find my diamonds tucked away in a secret drawer at the ‘Petit Trianon.’ In which case, d’Enneris, I know I can rely on your——”

“—tactfully making you a present of them? . . . Absolutely, old friend!”

The car stopped some way from the ‘Petit Trianon,’ and d’Enneris and Van Houben went in, leaving Béchoux on guard outside. It was a long, narrow shop, crammed with gewgaws, cracked vases, chipped china, moth-eaten furs, torn lace, and all that goes to make up the stock of an old-clothes woman. In a room at the back of the shop, Mère Trianon was talking to a man—obviously a gentleman—with a stopperless carafe in his hand.

Van Houben and d’Enneris strolled slowly along the counters, aping casual bargain-hunters. Furtively d’Enneris scanned the man with the carafe, who did not strike him as being a customer. He was well set up, tall and fair, probably about thirty. His clothes fitted him well and his expression was one of cheerful frankness. He went on talking a moment, then set down the carafe and made for the door, looking over the wares as he went—and at the same time, as d’Enneris was quick to note, carefully taking in the new-comers.

Van Houben, who had seen nothing of this little bit of by-play and had come up with Mère Trianon, thought that as d’Enneris had done nothing he might as well have a word with her. So he asked, in a stage-whisper:

“Have you, by an extraordinary chance, had sold to you certain articles which have been stolen from me—for instance, a——”

D’Enneris, realizing the hash his companion was making, signed to him to shut up, but Van Houben went on:

“For instance, a lock, half a blue silk bell-cord——”

The wardrobe dealer pricked up her ears, exchanged a significant look with the tall man, who had turned round just a little more quickly than the occasion warranted, and was now frowning hard.

“No, nothing like that,” the woman said quickly. . . . “Look through my stock, sir, and perhaps you’ll find something you want. . . .”

The tall man waited a moment, shot another glance at the woman as though to put her on her guard, and went off.

D’Enneris quickly made for the door, in time to see the man hail a taxi, make sure that d’Enneris had not left the threshold of the shop, and jump in. Leaning out of the window, he almost whispered the address to the driver. But, at that very moment, Chief Inspector Béchoux, strolling on the pavement, passed close by.

D’Enneris did not stir until the stranger was out of sight. The moment the taxi was round a corner and Béchoux came up to him,—

“Did you hear what he said?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes. Hôtel Concordia in the Faubourg Saint Honoré.”

“But what made you suspect him?”

“I identified him through the shop window. It’s my man.”

“Who?”

“The fellow who got that letter through to the Comte de Mélamare.”

“The Comte’s mystery correspondent? And he was chatting with the woman who sold me the things stolen out of the Hôtel de Mélamare? My hat, Béchoux, there’s a coincidence for you!”

D’Enneris was so pleased that, when they were in the car again, he was quite moderate in his reproof of Van Houben.

“Luck favours you, Van Houben! After your magnificent attempt at pumping Mère Trianon, it was a good thing Béchoux was there to repair your blunder.”

But d’Enneris’ joy was short-lived. At the Hôtel Concordia no one answering to the stranger’s description had come in. They waited, and Jean grew impatient.

“Perhaps he gave a false address,” he said at last. “He must have wanted to get us away from the ‘Petit Trianon’.”

“What for?”

“To gain time. . . . Let’s go back there.”

D’Enneris had been right in his surmise. As they came into the Rue Saint Denis, they saw that the wardrobe dealer’s shop was already closed—shutters up, barred and padlocked.

The neighbours could tell them nothing. They all knew Mère Trianon by sight, but no one had ever managed to get a word out of her. Ten minutes ago they had seen her shutting up her shop—two hours before her usual closing-time. When asked where had she gone, the reply was that no one knew where she lived.

“I’ll soon find out,” snarled Béchoux.

“You’ll find out nothing,” declared d’Enneris. “Mère Trianon is obviously a tool of the stranger, and he strikes me as some one who knows his way about a bit—he won’t only be on the defensive; for two pins he’ll attack! Don’t you feel it coming, Béchoux?”

“I believe I do,” admitted Béchoux. “But he’ll have to start by being on the defensive.”

“The best method of defence is attack!”

“But what can he do to us? Who is there for him to go after?”

“Who——?”

D’Enneris was suddenly thoughtful. Then, abruptly, he sprang into the car, brushed aside Van Houben’s chauffeur, took the wheel and drove off with such rapidity that Van Houben and Béchoux had just time to make the running-boards! With miraculous skill he threaded traffic-jams, broke all speed limits and, driving like a fiend, shot into the outer boulevards. He hurtled into the Rue Lepic, stopping dead in front of Arlette’s home. Immediately he was out of the car and had descended like an avalanche on the unfortunate concierge.

“I want Arlette Mazolle!”

“I’m afraid she’s gone out, Monsieur d’Enneris.”

“When?”

“Not more than a quarter of an hour ago.”

“Alone?”

“No.”

“With her mother?”

“No. Madame Mazolle’s out shopping and doesn’t yet know that Mademoiselle Arlette’s gone. She went with a gentleman who fetched her in a car.”

“A tall, fair man?”

“That’s right.”

“Have you seen him before?”

“All this week—he’s been round each night after dinner to call on the ladies.”

“What’s his name?”

“Monsieur Fagerault—Antoine Fagerault.”

“Many thanks.”

D’Enneris manifested unconcealed disappointment and annoyance.

“I guessed his little game,” he growled, coming back to the car. “He’s diddled us, blast him! And for the moment he’s got the upper hand. But God help him if he hurts a hair of her little head!”

“He can hardly be meaning to do that,” objected Béchoux, “if he’s already been here in the evenings, and if, as it seems, she went with him of her own accord.”

“Yes, but what’s it all mean? Is it a trap? Why did she never mention his visits to me? What’s this fellow Fagerault after?”

Just as he had sprung into the car impelled by a sudden inspiration, so now, he dashed across the road into a post office and called Régine on the telephone.

“Is Madame in? Monsieur d’Enneris speaking.”

“Madame has just gone out, monsieur,” was the maid’s answer.

“Alone?”

“No, monsieur. With Mademoiselle Arlette, who called for her.”

“Was she meaning to go out?”

“No. Madame decided sudden-like. But now you mention it, Mademoiselle Arlette had telephoned her this morning.”

“You don’t know where the ladies went?”

“No, monsieur.”

. . . . . .

In twenty short minutes, these two—Arlette and Régine—had been kidnapped a second time. And the circumstances suggested that they were the victims of some criminal plot, and being rapidly whirled into peril even deeper and darker than before!

CHAPTER 6. THE MÉLAMARE SECRET

THIS second blow left Jean d'Enneris at any rate outwardly unmoved. He raged not, though a flood of terrible cold anger surged through his whole being.

He looked at his watch and found it was seven o'clock.

"Time for dinner," he said, "and I spy a little eating-house across the road. At eight o'clock we go into action. Food first."

"Why not act now?" Béchoux wanted to know.

They sat down at a corner table, among the rougher class of shop assistant and a sprinkling of taxi-drivers.

"Why not?" said d'Enneris. "Because I'm all wumbled. I've been trusting to luck, and trying to guard against all the possibilities. But I've been a bit too late on each count, and now I'm tired out with missing the bus. I must take stock of all that's happened and try to work it out. Why did Fagerault make Régine and Arlette leave their happy homes? I'm afraid that chap has nothing about him that tends to reassure the inquiring mind!"

"And you think that by waiting an hour . . ."

"One should always fix a time-limit, Béchoux. It forces one to make up one's mind."

No one would have thought d'Enneris the victim of violent mental agitation. He ate heartily, talking nonsense all the while. But his nervous movements betrayed his inward perturbation and the fact that he genuinely thought the situation serious. Towards eight o'clock, as they were on the point of leaving the café, he said to Van Houben:

"I hope the Comtesse never goes out! She is not to leave the flat on any account!"

"Oh, she doesn't," Van Houben hastily assured him.

"She has had no letters, no visitors?"

"Absolutely none!"

"I wish you'd ring up and see if she's all right," urged d'Enneris.

A moment later, Van Houben came out of the telephone booth in the café.

"Nothing fresh, according to the maid I told off to look after her. She's perfectly fit and having her dinner."

“Then come on.”

“Where?” Béchoux wanted to know.

“Don’t ask me! Let’s start walking somewhere, anywhere. We must *do* something, I tell you, Béchoux,” declared d’Enneris forcibly. “When I think that they are both even now at the mercy of that scoundrel——”

“But,” objected Béchoux, “they seem to have gone with him of their own accord.”

“Perhaps. But what did he say to deceive Arlette? and make her willing to deceive me? I saw her only yesterday. I thought her just a shade preoccupied, but that was all. She said nothing to make me anxious—nor did Régine—I had absolutely no misgivings. . . .”

They were walking down the steep slope of Montmartre towards the Place de l’Opéra and Jean proceeded to express his fury in a series of short barks.

“Blast Antoine Fagerault! I’ll make him pay for it! While we were on that wild-goose chase, he was making hay . . . but the sun’s gone in for him now. What’s his game? Who is he? Is he a friend of the Comte? It looks like it, judging by that letter. Or is he the Comte’s enemy? For or against? By, with or from? And, anyhow, what’s he want Régine and Arlette for? Hang it all, they’ve each been kidnapped once already. . . . What’s the idea of dragging them off together? And where’s he taking them? And how are we to rescue them?”

He subsided into gloomy reflection, stamping occasionally and barging into people when they did not make way for him.

Suddenly, Béchoux touched him on the arm.

“Do you realize where we are?” he said.

“Yes. On the Pont de la Concorde.”

“Quite close to the Rue d’Urfé.”

“Quite close to the Rue d’Urfé and the Hôtel de Mélamare. I know.”

“Then——”

D’Enneris seized his arm roughly.

“Béchoux,” he said, “this case is one where there are none of the usual sign-posts, no finger-prints, no cigarette ash, no steps in the snow . . . nothing . . . nothing to guide us but a little intelligence—and a lot of intuition. Now my intuition has brought me this way, without my realizing it. The Mélamare house is where everything has happened. First, Régine was taken there, then Arlette. And I now find myself driven back upon the flagged hall, the twenty-five stairs and the mysterious salon.”

They were passing the Chambre des Députés.

“It’s impossible!” cried Béchoux. “Why should Fagerault copy another man’s crime, in circumstances which increase the risk a thousandfold?”

“That’s just what floors me, Béchoux. If he has to take such a tremendous risk to accomplish his schemes, just think how terrible those schemes themselves must be!”

“But we can’t just walk into the house!” protested Béchoux. “Old François has the key, and no one can get past him. He won’t admit a soul . . . you won’t be able to get in any more than Fagerault!”

“Don’t worry about me, Béchoux,” said d’Enneris lightly. “I enter where I will! In fact, I know that house like my own flat. I’ve been over it from cellar to garret, day and night, without François suspecting a thing!”

“But what about Fagerault? How do you expect him to get in? And how will he get the two girls in with him?”

“With the complicity of François!” said d’Enneris grimly.

As they got nearer, he quickened his step, seeming to visualize more and more clearly what must lie ahead of them.

He avoided the Rue d’Urfé itself and circled the block of houses surrounding the Hôtel Mélamare. This brought them into the deserted back-street at the bottom of the Mélamare garden. Beyond the little lodge was the door in the wall through which Arlette had escaped. D’Enneris, to Béchoux’s intense astonishment, had the keys of this door! He unlocked first the padlock and then the door itself. The garden stretched before them, twilight and shadowy. Beyond it they could see the bulk of the house. There were no lights showing in any of the windows, which denoted closed shutters.

Like Arlette, but moving in the opposite direction, they followed the dark belt of shrubs and came out a few yards from the house. Suddenly a heavy hand fell on d’Enneris’ shoulder!

“Who’s that?” he whispered, stiffening defensively.

“It’s me,” said a voice in the gloom.

“Who’s me? Oh, Van Houben. . . . What the blazes are you doing?”

“My diamonds . . .”

“What about them?”

“I feel certain you are going to find them. I want you to promise me——”

“Oh, get to hell out of here,” exhorted d’Enneris, in sheer exasperation, and gave Van Houben a violent push. The unfortunate man subsided into a large shrub. “Stay there!” commanded d’Enneris. “You’ll only get in the way if you follow. . . . You can be our trusty watch-dog!”

“Will you promise me——” The unhappy voice trailed off into silence as d’Enneris went on with Béchoux.

The salon shutters were closed, but d’Enneris hoisted himself up to the balcony, glanced around, stood listening, and then sprang down again.

“There’s a light in the room,” he said, “but I couldn’t see in, and I didn’t hear a sound.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do?” Béchoux half-queried, half-affirmed.

“You make me tired!” was the rejoinder.

A low door led from the garden into the basement. D’Enneris opened this, went down a few steps and flashed on his torch. He passed through a lobby full of flower-pots and packing-cases, and stole cautiously into the hall. Here a single oil-lamp burned, but there was not a soul to be seen. He sped up the main staircase, finger on lips to urge Béchoux to silence. Opposite them on the landing was the door of the salon; to the right was a boudoir seldom used by the Mélamares, which d’Enneris had searched thoroughly in the course of his reconnoitrings. He entered the boudoir now, walking along the wall in the dark. Producing a skeleton key, he soundlessly opened the folding doors into the salon which were usually kept shut. He knew that a tapestry hung over the other side, and this tapestry, doubled and moth-eaten, was as easy to look through as fine wire netting.

They could hear some one pacing up and down in the next room, but no voices.

D’Enneris leaned heavily on Béchoux’s shoulder while the tapestry stirred slightly with the draught. They waited till it hung still, then pressed their faces to it, and were able to see into the salon.

The scene which their astonished eyes beheld did not somehow seem to call for a Balaclava charge! Arlette and Régine were sitting close together on a sofa, watching a tall, fair man who was striding up and down the room. It was the man they had met at the ‘Petit Trianon,’ Monsieur de Mélamare’s correspondent. Not one of the three uttered a word. The two young women did not seem at all perturbed and Antoine Fagerault’s attitude was not in the least bellicose, or threatening, or even unpleasant. They all seemed, in fact, to be waiting for something. They were obviously listening intently, and kept looking towards the door on to the landing. At last Fagerault opened it, and stood there expectantly.

“Are you sure you aren’t getting anxious?” said Régine to him, and d’Enneris almost jumped at the sound of her voice in the stillness.

“Not a bit,” he answered stoutly.

“It was a solemn promise,” said Arlette, “and given quite readily. But are you sure the servant will hear the bell?”

“He heard our ring all right. Besides, his wife is with him now and I have left the doors open.”

D’Enneris pressed harder on Béchoux’s shoulder. Both men were wondering what on earth was going to happen and who it was whose promised visit had brought Arlette and Régine to the house.

Antoine Fagerault came and sat down by Arlette and the two held a low-toned, animated conversation. They were obviously on fairly intimate terms—he, distinctly ardent, bending over her rather more than was necessary, without her seeming to mind it. But they suddenly drew apart, and he rose. The courtyard bell had rung twice. After a slight interval came two more rings.

“That’s the signal,” said Fagerault, and ran out on to the landing.

A minute passed. Then there was the sound of voices outside. Fagerault came back, accompanied by a woman whom d’Enneris and Béchoux immediately recognized as—Gilberte de Mélamare!

Poor Béchoux’s shoulder was being pounded almost to a jelly, and he smothered a sigh. This apparition of the Comtesse dumbfounded the two men. D’Enneris had thought of anything except that she would leave her refuge and come to the ball at the enemy’s bidding!

She was pale and out of breath, and her hands were shaking. She looked in anguish round the room, which she had not seen since the fatal afternoon. She gazed long and solemnly at the two women whose evidence had put her to flight and sent her brother to prison. Then she spoke to her companion.

“Thank you for your devotion, Antoine. I accept it in remembrance of our old friendship . . . but I warn you, I have little hope.”

“But you must have hope, Gilberte,” he said. “Haven’t I already managed to find you?”

“How did you do that?”

“Through Mademoiselle Mazolle. We’ve seen a lot of each other lately and I think I’ve won her over to your side. I got her to ask Régine Aubry, who knew the secret of

your refuge through Van Houben. It was Arlette Mazolle who telephoned you this morning, on my behalf, to implore your presence here to-night."

Gilberte inclined her head in token of thanks.

"I came secretly, Antoine," she said, "without the knowledge of the man who has shielded me all this while, although I promised to do nothing without consulting him. Do you know the man I mean?"

"Jean d'Enneris? I know of him, from what Arlette Mazolle has told me. She's sorry, too, to have to do this without telling him, but it had to be. I distrust every one!"

"You mustn't distrust him, Antoine!"

"More than anyone! I met him a short while ago in the shop of a wardrobe dealer I've been tracking for weeks. The things which were stolen from your brother had been through her hands. D'Enneris was there, with Van Houben and the detective Béchoux, and I felt his evil eye rest on me! He even tried to follow me. Why?"

"He could help you. . . ."

"Never! Do you think I would work with that adventurer, a man sprung from God knows where . . . a Don Juan, a rascally trickster who gets every one into his power? No—a thousand times no! Besides, we're after different things. My aim is simply to establish the truth. His, to steal the diamonds in the process!"

"How do you know?"

"I can guess! It's easy to see where he comes in. Besides, quite apart from my own ideas on the subject, that's the private opinion of Béchoux and Van Houben."

"They're wrong, then," maintained Arlette.

"Maybe, but I'm playing my hunch we're all three right!"

D'Enneris gave furious ear. He found himself cordially reciprocating Fagerault's hatred. It was a violent, instinctive emotion with him. He loathed the man all the more because he could not fail to recognize Fagerault's obvious devotion and sincerity. In the past—what had there been between him and Gilberte? Had they been lovers? In the present—how had he won Arlette's sympathy and her willing submission to his requests?

The Comtesse had been silent for some while. At last,—

"What ought I to do?" she murmured.

Fagerault pointed to Arlette and Régine.

“You must convince your accusers, Gilberte. My own personal belief in your innocence was sufficient to rouse their doubts and pave the way for this interview. Now you and you alone can complete my work.”

“How can I do that?”

“Just talk to them. There are facts about this bewildering business which make it even more incomprehensible. And yet the law has relied on these very facts for its case against you. And then there is . . . there is what *you* know.”

“I know nothing,” she protested, seeming strangely troubled.

“You know something—if it is only the reason you and your brother had, innocent of any crime, for not defending yourselves.”

“What possible defence was there—is there?” she asked, in beaten tones.

“I’m not asking you to defend yourself, Gilberte,” he cried warmly. “I’m asking you to tell us your motives for *not* doing so! I don’t want to hear about the actual facts at all. I want to hear about your innermost thoughts, Gilberte, your feelings . . . your fears . . . all the things Jean d’Enneris has tried in vain to find out . . . all the things I guess at . . . that I know, Gilberte, since I have lived near you, here, in this very house, and the Mélamare secret has dawned on me gradually. They are things I could perhaps myself explain, but it is your duty to tell us about them, Gilberte, because yours is the only voice which will convince Arlette Mazolle and Régine Aubry.”

With her elbows pressed into her knees, and her head sunk in her hands, “What’s the good!” she murmured.

“What’s the good, Gilberte? I have it on reliable authority that to-morrow your brother is to be confronted with these ladies. If their evidence should be more hesitant, less assured, then what real proof will remain?”

Still she was sunk in dejection. All his arguments seemed to her impotent and vain. She told him so, and added:

“No—nothing is any good . . . there is nothing for us but silence.”

“And death,” said he.

Her head went up.

“Death?” she exclaimed.

Bending over her,—

“Gilberte,” he said gravely, “I have been in communication with your brother. I have written to him that I will save you both, and I have his reply.”

“He wrote back to you, Antoine?” she said, tears in her eyes.

“Here is his note. Just a line . . . read it.”

She recognized her brother’s writing, and read:

“Thank you. I will wait till Tuesday evening. After that . . .”

“Tuesday!” she almost sobbed, “why, that’s to-morrow.”

“To-morrow, yes. If after the confrontation to-morrow evening Adrien de Mélamare is not a free man, or on the point of being released, Adrien de Mélamare will die in his cell. Don’t you think now, Gilberte, that we ought to make some sort of effort to save him?”

She shook as though with an ague, bent double, her face hidden.

Arlette and Régine observed her distress with infinite compassion. D’Enneris felt a choking in his throat. How often he had striven to get her to this pitch of surrender! Now at last she had given in. And through her tears she spoke in a low, muffled voice.

“There is no Mélamare secret, as you call it. . . . To admit the existence of a secret would be to make excuses for crimes committed by our family during the past century, and by ourselves. . . . But we have committed no crime. . . . And if we are both innocent, then Jules and Alphonse Mélamare were innocent, too. . . . I do not give you proofs because I cannot. All the proofs are against us, but we couldn’t be mistaken over a thing like that, could we?—I know that neither Adrien nor I ever brought these young women here . . . and that we did not take the diamonds or hide the tunic. . . . We know it. And we know, too, that it was the same with our grandfather, and with his father. All our family has always known that both were innocent. It was handed down to us as a sacred truth by our own father and committed to him by the very men who perished. . . . Every Mélamare loves honour more than life itself. . . . However far back you go in our family history, you will find nothing base or ignoble. Why should our forbears have suddenly turned criminal, without any motive? They were rich and respected. And why should my brother and I, again without a motive, have given the lie to our own past . . . and to the past of our entire line?”

She was silent. The two young women found themselves unaccountably moved by the note of desperation on which she had spoken. Arlette came towards her, and, with unconcealed sorrow, “What does it all mean, madame?” she asked her.

“It means,” said Gilberte, “that we are the victims of I know not what . . . that is the secret, if there is one. Who is our enemy? I have myself seen plays—tragedies—about families persecuted by fate for several generations. For three-quarters of a century, now, we have been dogged remorselessly. Perhaps at the outset Jules de Mélamare could have and would have defended himself, despite the terrible charges against him. Unfortunately, maddened by rage and indignation, he died of apoplexy

in his cell. Twenty years later, his son Alphonse made no attempt at resistance when foully accused of crimes he had not committed. With every one against him, terrified by his own helplessness and recollecting his father's agony, he committed suicide."

Once again Gilberte de Mélamare was silent. And again Arlette, trembling before her, asked:

"What does it all mean, madame? . . . Please go on!"

The Comtesse continued:

"That was how the legend began for us . . . the legend of the curse brooding over this fatal house where the father and son had lived, and where each in turn had been caught in a net of circumstantial evidence. Our grandfather's widow, broken by the whole thing, left her husband's memory undefended and fled to her parents in the country. There she brought up her son—our father. She taught him to hate Paris, and made him promise never to open up the Hôtel de Mélamare. He married there, in the country . . . and so was saved from the catastrophe which would otherwise have crushed him in his turn."

"Would have crushed him?" said Arlette. "How do you know?"

"Yes, it would," cried the Comtesse passionately, "it would have crushed him like the others, because there is death here, in this house. It is here that the curse of the Mélamares hems us in and fastens on us. And it is because, after our parents' death, we disobeyed our father, that the fatal destiny is being fulfilled in us to-day. From the first moment when we crossed the threshold of this place, fresh from the country, forgetful of the past, happy to be back in the home of the Mélamares—from the first we felt the sinister threat of danger. Especially my brother. I was married, and later divorced. I tasted happiness and unhappiness. But Adrien all at once became sunk in depression. He was so sure, so painfully certain of the oncoming doom, that he resolved not to marry. By cutting short the Mélamare line, he hoped to cheat the fates and break the chain of evil. He meant to be the last Mélamare. He was terrified!"

"Of what?" asked Arlette, in a faltering voice.

"Of what was going to happen, of what has happened after fifteen years of waiting."

"But there were no means of foreseeing it?"

"No, but the net was weaving somewhere in the shadow. Foes were prowling unseen around us. Our home was beleaguered by the enemy host. Suddenly there was a declaration of war!"

"What was that?"

“Something that happened several weeks ago—something which seemed trivial but was really a dreadful warning. One morning my brother noticed that several things had disappeared from this room—unimportant trifles—a bell-cord, a candle sconce, and so on! But they had been chosen from among our choicest possessions to show that the hour was come.”

She paused, and then finished:

“The hour was come . . . and the sword was about to fall.”

These words were spoken on a terrible, almost a mystic note. Her eyes were wild. They could sense from her attitude all that she and her brother had suffered during the time of suspense. . . .

She spoke again and her words revealed the state of distress and depression into which the “sword,” to use her phrase, had smitten them.

“Adrien tried to fight against it. He advertised about the stolen things. By doing this he hoped, as he said, to appease fate. If the house got back what had been stolen, if these objects were restored to the hallowed places they had occupied for a century and a half, then we should no longer have to contend with those mysterious forces ranged against the house of Mélamare. Vain hope! We were foredoomed to disaster. One day you both came here, you whom we had never seen before, and accused us of things of which we knew nothing. . . . And that was the end of it. What defence could we make? We were put in the wrong at once, and arrested. For the third time the Mélamares were overcome without even knowing why. The same dark shadows clung around us that had shrouded Jules and Alphonse de Mélamare. And the same dénouement would put an end to our trials . . . suicide, death. . . . There you have our story. In such a case, there is nothing left but resignation and prayer. Revolt is almost sacrilegious since it is all pre-ordained. But, ah, the suffering! What a heavy burden has been ours for a whole century!”

And now Gilberte had come to the end of her strange revelation. She slipped back into that torpor in which she had been sunk from the outset of the tragedy. But all that was abnormal and morbid in her narrative was outweighed by the great pity and respect her misfortunes compelled. Antoine Fagerault, who had said not a single word, now came and kissed her hand reverently. Régine, not easily moved, seemed touched. And Arlette was crying unashamedly!

CHAPTER 7. FAGERAULT TAKES A HAND

JEAN D'ENNERIS and Chief Inspector Béchoux stood like images behind their tapestry. Only, from time to time d'Enneris' relentless fingers punished the detective's shoulder. Profiting by a kind of interlude in the proceedings, he breathed in his companion's ear:

"What do you make of it? Clearing up a bit, what?"

"Darkens as fast as it clears," grumbled Béchoux. "We've learned the Mélamare secret, but that doesn't get us any further on the kidnapping and the stolen diamonds."

"Too true. Van Houben's luck is dead out. But stay—Fagerault is up and doing."

Antoine Fagerault had left Gilberte's side and turned towards the other two.

"Mademoiselle Arlette," said he, "you believe all that Gilberte de Mélamare has told us, don't you?"

"I do."

"And you too, madame?" he asked Régine, who nodded. "And you're both of you prepared to act on your conviction?"

"Yes," came the answer from both.

"Then, what we have to do is to go cautiously, our sole purpose being to obtain the Comte de Mélamare's release. You can do it!"

"How?" asked Arlette.

"Very simply: by weakening in your evidence; being vaguer and less positive, as though a bit shaken in what you affirmed at the start."

"But," objected Régine, "I am quite certain I was brought to this room, and I can't deny it."

"I'm not asking you to do that. But are you positive it was Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare who brought you here?"

"I recognized madame's ring."

"How can you prove it? The whole case is based on presumptions, mere circumstantial evidence—and the prosecution has in no way strengthened the original charges. We know the magistrate is getting worried. You have only to say rather hesitatingly: 'This ring is very like the one I saw. And yet after all I wouldn't

swear the pearls were set just that way.' And the doubt expressed by you will at once communicate itself to the court!"

"But," said Arlette, "for that the Comtesse de Mélamare would have to be present at the confrontation."

"And so she will be," said Antoine Fagerault.

It was a *coup de théatre*. Gilberte sprang up, horrified.

"I shall be there? . . . Must I be there?"

"You must," was the authoritative decree. "It's no good hedging or running away now. Your duty is to stand up to the prosecution and defend yourself every inch of the way, to shake off this stupor of fear and fatalism in which you are sunk, and stimulate your brother into fighting with you. You will sleep here to-night. You will resume residence as though Jean d'Enneris had never had the idiocy to make you leave, and, when the confrontation comes on, you will be there. Victory is assured, but you must have the will to win!"

"But they will arrest me . . ." she faltered.

"No!"

The word came with such violence and Fagerault's expression was one of such assurance that Gilberte bowed her head obediently.

"We will help you, madame," said Arlette, taking fire in her turn and bringing her logical, far-seeing mind to bear on the situation. "But is our good will sufficient? After our both being brought here one after the other, and both recognizing this room, and after the silver tunic being found in that bookcase, is anyone going to admit that Madame de Mélamare and her brother are not guilty at any rate of complicity in the crime? If they were living in this house and did not leave it while the criminals were here, they must have seen something, or known something of what took place."

"They saw nothing and knew nothing," insisted Antoine Fagerault. "You must keep in mind the plan of the house. The Comte and Comtesse have their rooms on the left of the second floor, looking on to the garden. They dine and spend their evenings there. Giving on to the garden on the right are the servants' quarters. But downstairs in the central block there was not a soul, nor in the courtyard nor in the outbuildings. So you see there was all that space unoccupied. That explains how the criminals did their work when they brought you both here, and you, mademoiselle, escaped."

"That doesn't seem likely," said Arlette.

"Unlikely, indeed, but not impossible. And what makes this quite an acceptable possibility is that the puzzle is set a third time in precisely similar circumstances and

there is every probability that Jules de Mélamare, Alphonse de Mélamare and Adrien de Mélamare were all lost because the Hôtel de Mélamare is built on this plan!”

Arlette shrugged her shoulders.

“According to your theory, then,” she said, “the same plot happened all over again three times with different criminals, who, each time, observed and made use of this plan?”

“Different criminals, yes, but criminals who knew of this thing. There is a Mélamare secret which is a secret of fear and weakness, handed down from generation to generation. But there is another secret, of cupidity and revenge, of unchecked aggression, which goes down through some other line!”

“But why do these people come here? They could just as well have robbed Régine Aubry in the car without being so rash as to bring her to this house to steal her diamonds.”

“Not rash, but cautious—their idea was to throw suspicion on others and go scot-free themselves.”

“But they didn’t rob *me*,” said Arlette, “and they couldn’t hope to rob me because I had nothing to steal!”

“Perhaps the man had designs on you?”

“But would he have brought me here for that reason?”

“Yes, to throw suspicion on others.”

“Do you think that’s the whole motive?”

“I don’t—there must also be hate—possibly the rivalry of two lines of which one, for reasons we don’t know, has all along been persecuting the other.”

“But Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare would surely know that?”

“No, and that’s where they’re at a disadvantage and bound to be defeated. Their enemies have paralleled them for a whole century, but they don’t know who they are, and those enemies are free in their knowledge to go on plotting. Consequently the Mélamares are driven to ascribing their misfortunes to a kind of family curse, while really it is just a line of people, making use of the field of action ready to their hand. They do their evil business and purposely leave traces of their activities . . . for instance, this silver tunic. The result is that the Mélamares are accused, and the victims, as in the case of you, Arlette Mazolle and Régine Aubry, recognize the place to which they were brought captive.”

Arlette was not satisfied with this explanation which, although cleverly made out and certainly fitting remarkably well with Gilberte’s account, yet seemed rather forced. It

was really full of contradictions and left out of the reckoning so much that was of importance that it could not be accepted unreservedly. All the same, it *was* an explanation, and from many angles seemed as though it might not be so far from the truth.

“All this,” she said at last, “cannot be admitted or denied as evidence unless the court hears it. Who is to make it public? Who has sufficient conviction and sincerity to force people first to listen and then to believe?”

“I,” said he boldly. “I am the only person who can do it. I will accompany Madame de Mélamare to-morrow, as her some-time friend, and I will even admit without shame that I should have been a happy man had she consented to exchange that title of friend for one in closer accord with my own feelings for her. I shall tell the court that after spending several years travelling, as a sequel to her refusal of me, I came back to Paris just when her troubles were beginning and swore to establish her own and her brother’s innocence. I shall tell them that I discovered her refuge and persuaded her to come home. And when the magistrates are already shaken by your wavering testimony and Régine Aubry’s doubts, then I shall repeat Gilberte’s confidential revelations, I shall lay bare the Mélamare secret and establish the conclusions to be drawn therefrom. Victory is certain. But, as you see, Mademoiselle Arlette, the first step must be taken by Régine Aubry and yourself. If you are still undecided, if the contradictions and gaps in my theories are disturbing you, then look at Gilberte de Mélamare, and ask yourselves if such a woman can be a criminal!”

Arlette, her hesitation over, declared:

“I will give evidence to-morrow just as you suggest.”

“And I,” said Régine.

“But I fear,” said Arlette, “lest the result should not after all fulfil your wishes . . . all our wishes.”

“I’ll answer for that,” he said finally. “Adrien de Mélamare may not actually leave prison to-morrow evening. But events will take such a turn that they won’t dare arrest Madame de Mélamare, and her brother will keep up sufficient hope to live till the hour of his release.”

Again Gilberte held out her hand to him.

“Once more, I can only thank you,” she said. “I misjudged you in the past, Antoine. Don’t be too angry with me.”

“I have never been angry with you, Gilberte,” he said. “I am overjoyed to help you now. I put myself at your service in memory of the past. I also did it because it was right, and because . . .” He lowered his voice. “Because some things are more eagerly accomplished under the eyes of particular persons. Such things, quite

ordinary actions in themselves, take on the glamour of adventures—of knightly feats to gain the onlooker's esteem and affection."

This little verbal bouquet was directed at Arlette, quite simply and unaffectedly. But d'Enneris, the position of the four in the drawing-room preventing him from seeing their faces, thought the words were meant for Gilberte de Mélamare. For a second only he intuitively suspected the truth, and Béchoux's shoulder-blades suffered agony. The Chief Inspector had never known that human fingers could be so much akin to red-hot tongs. Luckily the torture proved of short duration.

Antoine Fagerault had finished what he had to say. He now rang for the two old servants, and when they arrived coached them painstakingly in their parts for the morrow, teaching them the answers to the questions they would be asked. And d'Enneris' earlier suspicions melted away.

He and Béchoux listened some minutes longer, but the conversation seemed over. Régine was offering to drive Arlette home.

"Let's go," said d'Enneris. "There's nothing more coming."

He left the tapestry-covered door, thoroughly exasperated with Antoine Fagerault and with Arlette. He crossed the boudoir and the hall with the same caution as when making his way into the house.

Once safely outside, he vented his annoyance on Van Houben, who sprang from a shrub to demand his diamonds, and was thrust abruptly back by a vigorous and ill-tempered arm.

Béchoux was almost equally unfortunate when he tried to volunteer an opinion.

"After all, the fellow isn't such a bad sort."

"Fool!" grated d'Enneris.

"Why fool? Doesn't he impress *you* as very sincere? His theory . . ."

"Fool and dolt!"

The Chief Inspector flinched from the concentrated fury of d'Enneris' tone.

"Oh, I know there was our meeting him in the Trianon shop, and his seeming to know the old woman, and her disappearance. But don't you think there may be something to explain all that part of it?"

D'Enneris answered nothing. As soon as they were clear of the garden, he rid himself of his two satellites and dived into a taxi. Van Houben, convinced that he was bearing off the diamonds, tried to hold him back, but a straight right put a speedy end to his attempt. In ten minutes' time, Jean was stretched full-length on his divan.

This was his inevitable procedure in moments of stress when he felt beyond himself and feared he might suddenly make a false move. His own instinct was to gain secret admittance to Arlette's house and, after thrashing things out with her, to warn her against Antoine Fagerault. Which would have been useless. The important thing was first of all to go back in his mind over every bit of all he had been listening to and draw conclusions which were unaffected by his wounded vanity and vague jealousy.

"He's got them all eating out of his hand," he thought disgustedly, "and I believe he'd have got me too but for that Trianon business. . . . No, his story is a bit too steep. . . . It may convince the court, but not me! It doesn't hold water. But what is the man's idea? Why this devotion to the Mélamares? . . . And how is it he dares come forward like this from nowhere and thrust himself into the limelight as though he had nothing to fear? They'll want to know all about him—they'll rake up his past life—and yet he's going through with it! . . ."

D'Enneris was furious too, that Antoine Fagerault had so cleverly insinuated himself into Arlette's good graces. He seemed to assert an inexplicable and mysterious influence over Arlette, which fought that of d'Enneris to the extent of making her act without consulting him, against his wishes even. For d'Enneris this meant a fearful humiliation.

Next evening Béchoux arrived, greatly perturbed.

"D'Enneris," he cried, "the court's completely bowled over!"

"Like you!"

"Like me! Don't be silly. I——"

"You're as credulous as the rest, and Fagerault's made you believe black's white. Say on."

"Everything went according to schedule. Confrontation first. Then cross-examination. Arlette and Régine thoroughly upset the magistrate by their reservations and denials. On top of this came the Comtesse and Fagerault, and so the show went on."

"With Fagerault as the star, I presume."

"Yes, indeed. You know, that chap's an absolute orator . . . and clever as they make 'em. . . ."

"Quite, quite. Personally I think he's a fourth-rate jackass, but there you are. And the Comte is to be released?"

"To-morrow or the day after."

"What a nasty crash for you, Béchoux, as you got him arrested. By the way, how's Arlette? Still well under Fagerault's thumb?"

“I heard her tell the Comtesse she was going away,” said Béchoux.

“Going away?”

“Yes, to rest a bit, staying with a friend in the country.”

“Fine,” said Jean, a trifle cheered by the news. “Well, bye-bye, Béchoux. Try and find out for me about Fagerault and Mère Trianon. And leave me to my dreams.”

For a week d’Enneris smoked solidly, uninterrupted save for visits from Van Houben demanding the diamonds and threatening his life, by Régine sitting in close proximity to him, silent for fear of breaking in on his meditations, and finally by Béchoux, who called him on the telephone to read him the following chit:

“Fagerault. Age given on passport as twenty-nine. Born at Buenos Aires of French parents now deceased. Has been three months in Paris, living in the Hôtel Mondial, Rue de Châteaudun. No occupation. Seems to move mainly in racing and motoring circles. No information available on the man’s private life or on his past.”

For another whole week, d’Enneris scarcely stirred out. He sat and pondered, by turns a little better pleased or more deeply disgruntled. At last there came another telephone call.

It was Béchoux, and he spoke in quick, disjointed accents.

“Come and join me at once! There’s not a minute to lose. I’m at the Café Rochambeau at the top of the Rue Lafayette. Hurry!”

It was the trumpet call, and d’Enneris leapt to answer it, feeling by now quite able to grapple with the situation.

He got to the Café Rochambeau and sat down by Béchoux, who was at an indoor table, peering vigilantly out through the window.

“I hope you haven’t brought me here to help you look for mares’ nests, Béchoux,” said d’Enneris jauntily.

Béchoux in moments of success always swelled with importance and gave utterance in portentous periods of flowery prose.

“Consequent upon my investigations . . .”

“One syllable only, please—facts, not phrases.”

“Well, Mère Trianon’s shop having persisted in remaining shut . . .”

“A shop cannot persist, Béchoux. Pretend you’re telegraphing at twenty francs a word!”

“Well, the shop . . .”

“You’ve mentioned it already.”

“You’ll drive me crazy!”

“What is it you’re getting at?”

“I’m trying to tell you that the lease of this shop is made out in the name of a woman called Laurence Martin.”

“You see, there was no need for an address to the troops. And is this Laurence Martin our old clo’ woman?”

“Oh, no. I saw her lawyer and he says Laurence Martin’s age can’t be much over fifty.”

“Then she’s either sublet it or put some one in as her employee?”

“That’s it—and the wardrobe dealer, according to my theory, is Laurence Martin’s sister. . . .”

“Where does she live?”

“We don’t know. The lease dates back twelve years, and the address given in it is not the right one.”

“How does she pay her rent?”

“She pays it through a very old man—with a limp. I was rather stymied until, this morning, chance played into my hands.”

“Lucky for you. Well?”

“Well, this morning, at the Préfecture, I learned that a certain person—a woman—had offered Monsieur Lecourceux, the town councillor, fifty thousand francs if he would alter the details of a report he is due to make immediately. Monsieur Lecourceux, who has rather a dubious reputation, and is trying to live down a recent scandal, at once informed the police. The money is to be paid over right away in the office where Monsieur Lecourceux gives audience to his constituents. Two policemen are already concealed in a neighbouring room to witness the attempt at bribery.”

“Has the woman given her name?”

“She has not. But, as chance would have it, Monsieur Lecourceux had dealings with her in the past, though she has forgotten this.”

“And it is Laurence Martin?”

Béchoux nodded solemnly.

“Excellent,” applauded d’Enneris. “The link of complicity between Fagerault and Mère Trianon now extends to Laurence Martin. Know, Béchoux, that all that goes to prove the illustrious Fagerault’s knavery delights my heart. And where is the town councillor’s office?”

“In the house opposite, on the first floor. There are only two windows. Behind it there is a small waiting-room, giving on to the hall, like the office itself.”

“That’s all you have to tell me?”

“Not quite. But time’s flying—it’s five to two, and . . .”

“Yes, but I want to know, is there—something about Arlette?”

“Yes.”

“What? Tell me, quickly!”

“I saw her yesterday,” said Béchoux, a mocking note in his voice.

“Why, you told me she’d left Paris!”

“Well, she hasn’t!”

“Are you sure it was her?”

Béchoux did not answer. He half-rose, abruptly, and pressed his face to the window.

“Look! The Martin woman . . .”

A large woman, dressed with vulgar ostentation, was getting out of a taxi and paying the driver. She had a harsh, weather-beaten countenance and looked about fifty. She disappeared through the wide-open door of the entrance hall.

“That’s her,” said Béchoux, getting ready to go.

D’Enneris seized him by the wrist.

“Why so glad and gay?”

“Don’t be an idiot!”

“I mean, just now about Arlette.”

“We must get across the road at once!”

“I shan’t let go of you until you answer my question.”

“Well, here you are then! Arlette was waiting for some one in a street near her home.”

“For whom?”

“Fagerault!”

“Liar!”

“I saw him. They went off together.”

Béchoux got his arm free, and dashed across the road. But he did not go into the house. He hesitated.

“No,” said he. “Let’s wait here. It’s better for us to be ready to follow the Martin woman if she escapes the policemen up top, don’t you think so?”

“I don’t give a damn,” said d’Enneris, livid with fury. “I’m only interested about Arlette. You went in and saw her mother?”

“Oh, bottle it!”

“Listen, Béchoux, if you don’t answer me I shall warn Laurence Martin. Did you see Arlette’s mother?”

“Arlette has not left Paris at all. She goes out each day and doesn’t get back home till dinner.”

“Liar! You’re only saying this to rile me. . . . I know Arlette. She’s not the sort of girl . . .”

Seven or eight minutes went by. D’Enneris was silent, but paced the pavement feverishly, getting in the way of pedestrians. Béchoux kept watch, his eyes glued to the door. Suddenly the woman came out. She glanced at the two men, then went off in the other direction, walking unnaturally quickly, obviously perturbed.

Béchoux was at her heels in a moment, but as she came to a *métro* station she plunged abruptly out of sight and was able to get her ticket just as a train came into the station. Béchoux was thrown off. . . . He thought of telephoning the next station, but feared losing time and gave up the idea.

“Damn!” said he, rejoining d’Enneris.

“Really,” mocked the latter, pleased enough at Béchoux’s patent discomfiture. “You did just the opposite to what you should have done.”

“What should I have done?”

“You should have gone in to Monsieur Lecourceux’s at the start and seen to Martin’s arrest yourself. Instead of that, you rile me about Arlette, you answer my questions, you dither out here for ten minutes, and at the end of it all, you’re responsible for what’s happening up there!”

“What is happening?”

“Let’s go and see. But, really, your methods!”

Béchoux climbed the stairs to the first floor. There he found uproar and confusion. The two inspectors on duty were shouting and generally acting like madmen. The concierge had come up and was storming away. Tenants were appearing on the scene.

In the middle of his office, stretched out on a couch, Monsieur Lecourceux lay dying, a hole in his forehead, his face bathed in blood. He breathed his last without being able to utter a word.

Briefly, the inspectors explained matters to Béchoux. They had heard Laurence Martin renew her proposal in regard to a certain report, and count out some banknotes. They were preparing to rush into the office when Monsieur Lecourceux, in too much of a hurry, made the mistake of calling out. At once guessing her peril, the woman must have shot the bolt, for they hurled themselves against an unyielding door.

They then thought to cut off her retreat by waiting in the hall, but the second door also held against them although it could not possibly have been locked from the outside, either by key or bolt. They used all their strength to break it down, and then a shot rang out.

“But the Martin woman was already outside,” objected Béchoux.

“Oh, it wasn’t she who did the shooting,” replied one of the inspectors.

“Who was it, then?”

“It can only have been a shabby old man whom we saw sitting on the bench in the hall. He had asked to see Monsieur Lecourceux and was due to go in after the Martin woman’s visit.”

“Her accomplice, doubtless,” said Béchoux. “But how did he manage to shut the second door?”

“By jamming it with a crowbar so that it wouldn’t move.”

“And what happened to him? Did no one meet him?”

“Yes, I did,” said the concierge. “When I heard the shot, I rushed out of my place. There was an old man coming down who said to me quite calmly: ‘They’re having a fight upstairs, I should go up if I were you.’ Probably he was the man that done it. But how was I to know? An old cripple like him . . . all bent double, and limping. . . .”

“Limping,” cried Béchoux. “You’re sure of that?”

“Of course I am—limping badly, he was.”

“Laurence Martin’s accomplice,” groaned Béchoux. “When he saw her danger, he wiped out Monsieur Lecourceux.”

D’Enneris had, as he listened, been examining out of the corner of his eye the covers of the folios heaped on the desk.

“You don’t know, I suppose,” said he, “which report it was they were discussing, and what Laurence Martin wanted him to do about it?”

“No. Monsieur Lecourceux hadn’t told us the exact one. But it had to do with making certain modifications in a report he was due to turn in almost at once.”

One by one d’Enneris read the titles: Report on Abattoirs, Report on Local Markets . . . Report on Extension of the Rue Vieille du Marais . . . Report——

“What’s your idea?” Béchoux asked him, himself buzzing about in high dudgeon over the whole business. “Rotten business, isn’t it?”

“What business?”

“Why, this shooting, of course. . . .”

“I’ve already said I don’t give a damn for your doings! What do I care that this receiver of bribes has perished, and that you have made a consummate ass of yourself?”

“All the same,” said Béchoux, “if Laurence Martin is a murderess, then Fagerault, who you say is her accomplice . . .”

D’Enneris ground his teeth together.

“Fagerault,” he said furiously, “is a murderer too. . . . Fagerault is a robber. . . . I pity Fagerault if I ever get him in my clutches, and I shall get him there as sure as my name is—what it is.”

He stopped short, clapped his hat on his head and was off.

He took a taxi to the Rue Verdier, to Arlette’s house. It was ten minutes to three.

“Oh, Monsieur d’Enneris,” cried Madame Mazolle. “I *am* glad to see you. You’re quite a stranger. . . . Arlette *will* be sorry to have missed you.”

“Isn’t she in?”

“No. She always goes out for a stroll about this time of day. It’s funny you shouldn’t have met her.”

CHAPTER 8. FIRE!

THERE was a strong resemblance between Arlette and her mother. But though aged and careworn, Madame Mazolle's face showed the remnants of a beauty which must in her youth have exceeded Arlette's loveliness. Madame Mazolle had slaved at her work—first to bring up her three daughters, and then to dull the sorrow caused her by the elder two. She still toiled at repairing old lace, and was sufficiently expert to earn a modest competency.

D'Enneris came into the spotlessly clean little flat.

"Don't you think she'll be back soon, then?" he asked.

"I hardly know. Arlette doesn't tell me much of her doings these days. She is always afraid, after what's happened, I'll get worried. All the fuss there's been has distressed her enormously. But she did tell me she was going to see a sick mannequin, a young girl she had a letter from this morning. You know how kind-hearted Arlette is, and the trouble she will go to for a friend!"

"Does this girl live far from here?"

"I don't know her address."

"What a pity! I did so much want a little chat with Arlette!"

"Oh, but that's easy. She's sure to have thrown the letter into the waste-paper basket, and I haven't emptied it yet. Just a minute while I look . . . this must be it. Yes, I remember now . . . Cecile Holluin . . . at Levallois-Perret, 14, Boulevard de Courcy. Arlette will get there about four o'clock."

"I take it she is joining Monsieur Fagerault there?" D'Enneris' tone was barbed, and acid.

"What an idea, Monsieur d'Enneris! I'll have you know Arlette doesn't go out with men alone like that. Besides, Monsieur Fagerault often comes here."

"He comes often, does he?" said d'Enneris, catching his breath.

"Almost every evening. He sits here talking about all the things that Arlette's keen on . . . you know, the Fund for giving mannequins *dots* and everything. Monsieur Fagerault has offered to put up the capital for her schemes and they spend hours going into figures and working out plans."

"Is Monsieur Fagerault so blessed with this world's goods?" asked d'Enneris quizzically.

“Oh, he’s a very wealthy man indeed.”

Madame Mazolle spoke quite naturally. It was obvious that her daughter, anxious to spare her any upset, had kept the inwardness of the Mélamare case and its developments from her.

“A wealthy and welcome visitor!” sighed d’Enneris.

“Oh, most welcome,” innocently agreed Madame Mazolle. “He is so thoughtful in little ways—so unassuming.”

“Wedding bells?” suggested Jean with a wry smile.

“Oh, Monsieur d’Enneris, don’t be so unkind. You know Arlette would never dream . . .”

“I know? Who knows—anything?”

“Please don’t think any such thing. First of all, Arlette doesn’t always get on with Monsieur Fagerault. She seems to have changed altogether just lately. She’s nervy, somehow, and really rather unreasonable. Did you know that she’s taken a sudden dislike to Régine Aubry?”

“Not really?” exclaimed d’Enneris.

“Yes, without any reason, or else for some reason she didn’t tell me.”

The breach came as a complete surprise to d’Enneris, and he wondered what could be the meaning of it.

They talked a little longer, but d’Enneris was now in a fever to be up and doing. Since it was too soon to look for Arlette on the Boulevard de Courcy, he went in search of Régine Aubry, and met the lady just leaving her flat.

“Have I quarrelled with Arlette?” she said in answer to his question. “Good Lord, no. But she seems to think she has with me!”

“What’s it all about?”

“I went to see her at her home one evening. Antoine Fagerault was there—you know, the Mélamares’ friend. We talked away, and several times I thought Arlette was being distinctly nasty to me. I left, in the end—couldn’t make it out a bit.”

“That all?”

“Absolutely. Except that, d’Enneris, if you care the least little bit for Arlette, I should watch out for Fagerault. He seems pretty keen, and Arlette’s far from indifferent. Adieu, Jean.”

It seemed as though wherever he turned d'Enneris was fated to learn more of Arlette's intimacy with Fagerault. It was a rude awakening. He suddenly realized that Antoine Fagerault had got the girl well in hand, and at the same time it came to him what a big place Arlette had occupied in his own thoughts.

But if Fagerault was obviously courting Arlette, did that mean that Arlette was in love with Fagerault? Unpleasant thought! A thought at once insulting to Arlette and humiliating to himself. His wounded pride writhed under it.

"Quarter to four," he thought, getting down from his taxi, some way from the Boulevard de Courcy. "Now will she come alone? Or will Fagerault be with her?"

The Boulevard de Courcy was a new road at Levallois-Perret, outside the main manufacturing district, in that waste land along the Seine given over to various small factories and private plants. D'Enneris came to a narrow, muddy lane running between high brick walls. At the far end he could just make out the number 14 in black on a dilapidated gate.

A narrow open passage, littered with old tyres and automobile chassis, girdled a kind of garage building in light-coloured wood. This had an outer staircase going up to the attics indicated by two high windows. Under this staircase was a door bearing the word: "Knock."

But d'Enneris did not knock. Instead, he stood and hesitated. The obvious course seemed to be to wait for Arlette outside. And yet he was aware, only half-consciously, of something amiss. It struck him as odd that a sick girl should be living in one of those attics, above an isolated garage, and he suddenly had a premonition that here was a trap laid for Arlette. He called to mind the sinister gang with whom they had been dealing, who were multiplying their attacks with incredible rapidity. Since the beginning of the afternoon, there had been the attempted bribery and then the murder of the town councillor. Two hours later came this plot against Arlette, whom they were luring to this lonely spot. The pawns in the diabolical game were Laurence Martin, Mère Trianon and the old man who limped. But the hand that moved them on the board was that of—Antoine Fagerault.

All this was borne in upon him so forcibly that his doubts were finally dispelled. All being silent as the grave, he concluded the gang had not arrived and determined to get into the garage himself and be ready for them.

Very gently he tried to open the door. It was locked, and this confirmed his certainty that the place was empty.

With cool daring and a total disregard of possible risks, he picked the lock—a simple one—opened the door a few inches and thrust his head in. There was no one there—nothing but tools, spare parts and a big pile of petrol tins. It was nothing but a repair shop, seemingly converted into a petrol store.

He pushed the door a few inches further, thrusting one shoulder into the garage. He pushed again. And then—he received a sudden, overpowering blow in the chest! A metal arm on a spring was so fixed to the partition as to be released with incredible force the moment the door was a certain way open.

For some moments, d'Enneris was winded, and staggered back, unable to make any resistance. The enemies lying in wait for him came out from behind the petrol tins. They were only two women and an old man, but it was easy for them to bind his arms and legs, gag him, and secure him to an iron bench.

D'Enneris had been right about the trap for Arlette, but it was he who had sprung it. In the women he recognized Mère Trianon and Laurence Martin. The old man was not actually lame, but it was easy to see that his right leg was a little weak, and that he must, when it suited him, exaggerate this weakness to give an impression of lameness. And this was the man who had murdered the town councillor!

The three criminals seemed utterly unexcited. Doubtless they were used to the worst kinds of dirty work, and the fact of having countered d'Enneris' surprise attack was nothing to them but a commonplace incident unworthy to rank as a victory.

Mère Trianon bent over him a moment and then went back and spoke to Laurence Martin. Jean could only catch a few words of their conversation.

"You really think it's he?"

"Yes, it's the ferret who nosed me out of the shop."

"So that's Jean d'Enneris," murmured Laurence Martin. "A dangerous man—for us. He was probably with Béchoux on the pavement in the Rue Lafayette this afternoon. It was lucky we kept watch and I heard his footsteps in the lane! He must have come after the Mazolle girl."

"What are we going to do about it?" breathed Mère Trianon, secure in the belief that d'Enneris could not hear what she was saying.

"No need to waste words on that!" said Laurence hoarsely.

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean, his number's up!"

The two women exchanged glances. Laurence had an implacable expression; her face was alive with dark energy. She added:

"And why does he want to come butting into our business like this? First in the shop . . . then in the Rue Lafayette . . . then here. . . . He's got too much on us—he might give us away. Ask father."

It was unnecessary to ask advice of the man Laurence Martin had called father. The grimmest measures would find in this implacable ancient, with his lifeless eyes and withered skin, a formidable advocate. D'Enneris saw him get up and begin making preparations. They were at the moment meaningless for d'Enneris, but he guessed that "father" had right away decreed his doom, and would kill him in cold blood as he had killed Monsieur Lecourceux.

Less ruthless, the wardrobe dealer was speaking in low tones. Laurence Martin grew impatient with her.

"Don't talk rubbish," she said roughly. "You're always wanting half-measures. What must be must. It's him or us!"

"We could keep him prisoner."

"You're mad. A fellow like that!"

"Then—what?"

"Why—same as the girl, of course. . . ."

Laurence cocked her head and listened, and then looked out through a hole in the partition of the door.

"Here she is . . . at the end of the lane. . . . Ready, both of you?"

There was silence. D'Enneris, observing them closely, saw that there was a strong resemblance between them—notably in the grimly resolute expression. Here obviously were moving spirits in crime and knavery, accustomed to initiate and execute fell designs. D'Enneris was sure now that the two women were sisters, and the old man was their father. The latter was by far the most terrifying of the three. He gave an impression of not belonging to real life at all, but to an automatic, mechanical life, going forward on a preconceived plan. His head gave a bizarre impression of abrupt planes and angles. It did not express evil or cruelty—it might have been a block of stone roughly hewn by a futurist sculptor—a head of Destiny.

There came a knock at the door!

Laurence Martin, spying through her peephole, opened the door, and went out to the visitor. When she spoke, it was in tones of humble gratitude.

"Mademoiselle Mazolle, isn't it? How kind of you to put yourself out! My daughter is upstairs, very ill. Won't you come up . . . she *will* be pleased to see you! You were in the same workroom two years ago, at Lucienne Oudart's. Don't you remember? Ah, *she* hasn't forgotten *you*!"

Arlette's reply was not audible in the garage, but her voice sounded bright and carefree and not remotely perturbed.

As Laurence Martin prepared to take her visitor upstairs, Mère Trianon called from within:

“Shall I come too?”

“There’s no need,” said Laurence, meaning: “I don’t need your help . . . I’m quite strong enough for her.”

They heard the stairs creak underfoot. Each step was bringing Arlette closer to danger and to death.

D’Enneris, nevertheless, was not yet acutely alarmed. The very fact that they had not killed him right away seemed to point to the need for time in the execution of their plan, and any delay meant hope.

There came steps in the room above, then a scuffling and a sudden heartrending cry . . . followed by other cries, growing weaker and weaker. Then silence. It had been a short struggle. D’Enneris guessed that Arlette was now, like himself, gagged and bound. “Poor kid,” he thought. A moment later, the stairs creaked afresh, and Laurence Martin came back.

“That’s done,” she announced. “No trouble at all—went dead to the world almost at once.”

“All the better,” said her sister. “It’ll be a good thing if she doesn’t come to just yet. Then she won’t realize anything till the last moment.”

D’Enneris shuddered. Nothing else could have brought home to him so forcibly the finish planned by these people for Arlette and himself, and the probable tortures it involved. His premonition was justified almost at once by an involuntary outburst of repugnance from Mère Trianon.

“After all, there’s no reason the kid should be made to suffer! Why not just finish her off and be done with it? Don’t you agree, father?”

Quietly, Laurence handed her a length of cord.

“Too easy. You’ve only got to put that round her neck and draw it tight . . . unless you’d rather cut her throat,” she suggested, proffering a small dagger. “Personally, I won’t take it on. Those are things one doesn’t do in cold blood.”

Mère Trianon flinched no more, and from then until their departure there was not another word spoken. But quickly, since Arlette was lying helpless up there, “father,” as they called him, went on with his task, and, as he laboured, the dreadful doom took shape and the monstrous, inescapable reality was borne in upon d’Enneris.

The old man had arranged a double row of petrol cans all round the garage. He now opened several, and sprinkled the woodwork and the floor—except for three yards of

boarding leading to the door. This left a passageway into the middle of the garage, where he piled up more cans, one on top of the other.

In one of these he soaked the long cord Laurence gave him, and between them they stretched it the length of the passageway. The old man frayed out his end, drew a box of matches from his pocket and set fire to the frayed portion. When he saw it had caught, he straightened up.

All this had been done methodically by a man who, in the course of his long career, must have perpetrated many similar outrages. It occurred to D'Enneris that he doubtless took pleasure not in the actual crimes but in the perfection with which they were accomplished. He was almost "finicky" as to details. Nothing was left to chance, and all that now remained was for the three malefactors to steal away.

This they did, locking the door behind them. The machinery had been set in motion. Nothing could now prevent the inevitable catastrophe. The building would burn like matchwood, and he and Arlette would disappear without its ever being possible to identify the charred remains that would be found in the ashes. Would people even so much as suspect a case of arson?

The cord was burning. D'Enneris estimated that the end would come in between twelve and fifteen minutes. From the first second, he had set himself sternly to the painful labour of getting free, alternately contracting and expanding his muscles. But the knots were so tied that every effort he made drew them tighter, till the bonds cut into his flesh. Despite his extraordinary skill, despite all the exercises he had practised in view of one day finding himself in such a predicament, he did not think he could free himself in time. Nothing short of a miracle could prevent the explosion.

He was in torment. In his rage at having been caught like this, and being powerless; in his despairing grief at knowing that Arlette, too, was fast approaching eternity, he also found room to feel furious at the idea of perishing without ever understanding the inwardness of the whole frightful business. To him it was sheer revealed truth that Antoine Fagerault and the three criminals were hand in glove. But why had Fagerault, the head of the gang for whom the old man was merely executioner, why had he ordered this abominable murder? Had his plans which, up to date, had seemed to centre on making a conquest of the girl, changed so utterly as to require her death?

The cord was burning. The little fiery snake writhed towards its goal with nothing to stop it. And up there, Arlette lay unconscious and helpless, doomed. She would not wake until the first flames . . .

Seven minutes left . . . six minutes . . .

D'Enneris had hardly succeeded in loosening his bonds at all. His gag had fallen out and he might have called for help. He might have called to Arlette to tell her all he felt for her, all the tenderness of that love which he had not realized until too late—which

only came to him with full force now that life was soon to leave him. But what was the good of words? And why, if she were unconscious, should he wake her to a knowledge of the horror that was almost upon them both?

And he would not yet give up all hope. Emergencies produce their miracles. How many times already, hounded down, helpless, utterly doomed, had he not been rescued by some extraordinary occurrence? Three minutes remained. Perhaps the old man's measures had been insufficient. Perhaps the fiery cord would smoulder out going over that metal can up to which it had just crept.

With all his strength he stiffened his body against the torturing knots. After all, there lay his last resource, in the superhuman strength of his arms and chest muscles. Would the cords not, after all, give way? Would not he, d'Enneris, furnish his own miracle?

But the miracle came from another quarter, and from one that Jean d'Enneris had certainly not foreseen. Hurried steps rang out in the lane. A man's voice called:

"Arlette! Arlette!"

The tone was that of some one coming to the rescue, seeking to give fresh courage with the news of immediate deliverance. The door shook violently. As it would not open, the rescuer kicked and beat upon it. A panel gave, leaving a gap through which a hand could reach the lock.

D'Enneris saw an arm feeling about.

"No good," he shouted. "Push. The lock won't hold. Hurry!"

The lock gave. The door was half open. Some one burst in. It was Antoine Fagerault! At a glance he saw the danger, and hurled himself on the petrol can, kicking it aside just as it caught. He crushed out the flame and then dispersed the other cans which formed the central dump.

Jean d'Enneris had redoubled his efforts to free himself. He did not wish to owe his own actual deliverance to Fagerault, or that the latter should bend down and have the satisfaction of cutting his bonds. Nevertheless, when Fagerault came to him and murmured: "Oh, it's you is it?" Jean, freed from his toils, could not restrain himself from saying:

"Thanks, old man. In a few seconds I should have been for it."

"Where's Arlette?" asked Fagerault.

"Upstairs."

"Alive?"

"Yes."

They dashed together up the outside staircase.

“Arlette! Arlette! Here I am!” cried Fagerault. “Don’t be frightened!”

The door gave like the one below, and they burst into a small attic where the girl lay gagged and bound on a bed of sacking. They quickly freed her. She looked up at them in alarm, and Fagerault explained:

“We each got word, separately, about this, and met here . . . too late to catch the blighters. They haven’t hurt you, have they? My dear, you’re shaking all over! Were you terribly scared?”

Not a word did he say of the hideous attempt at murder—so nearly successful—nor of his own singlehanded rescue.

Arlette did not answer. Her eyes closed and her hands fluttered tremulously.

A moment later, the two men heard her murmur:

“Yes, I was scared. . . . They’re after me again. . . . Who is my enemy? . . . Who is it?”

“Were you decoyed to this garage?”

“There was a woman . . . I only saw a woman . . . she made me come up to this room, and then threw me down . . .”

She went on, betraying the fear which, despite their presence, still gripped her.

“It was the same woman as before. . . . I’m absolutely sure . . . the same woman. . . . I recognized her movements, her grasping hands, her voice . . . it was the woman in the car . . . the woman . . . the woman . . .”

Her voice trailed off and she sank back, craving rest. The two men left her a moment, and came out on to the narrow landing at the head of the stairs. Never had Jean so detested his rival. The thought that it was Fagerault who had saved Arlette’s life and his own was odious. He felt horribly humiliated. Antoine Fagerault was master of the situation and events seemed to play into his hands.

“She’s calmer than I would have believed possible,” said Fagerault in low tones. “She did not know the appalling danger she was in, and we mustn’t enlighten her.”

He spoke as though he had already been in close touch with d’Enneris, with the implicit understanding that each knew all the other knew. He made no pretence of superiority, though he might have on the strength of his accomplishment. He preserved his usual smiling, genial calm. There was nothing about him to suggest a duel between them, or any sort of rivalry. But Jean, who could hardly control his temper, plunged at once into open warfare. Laying a heavy hand upon the other’s shoulder,—

“A word with you,” he said, “since we have the opportunity.”

“Yes, but speak low. The noise of a quarrel would be fatal for her, and really that’s what you seem to be after!”

“Not a quarrel,” declared d’Enneris, his aggressive attitude contradicting the words. “What I want is a showdown.”

“What about?”

“About your line in this business.”

“My line is clear enough! I’ve nothing to hide! If I answer your questions, it’s only because my affection for Arlette constrains me to remember your friendship for her. Ask what you like.”

“I will. First, what were you doing in the Trianon shop when I met you there?”

“But you know that already!”

“How do I know it?”

“Why, I’ve told you myself.”

“*You’ve* told me? This is the first time I’ve ever spoken to you.”

“But not the first time you’ve heard me speak,” said Fagerault gently.

“Where was that?”

“At the Mélamare house, the evening of the day you trailed me with Béchoux. While Gilberte de Mélamare was making her revelations, and I was explaining matters, you were both hidden behind the tapestry. I saw it move when you went into the next-door room.”

D’Enneris was rather taken aback. Did nothing escape this man? He continued on a harsher note:

“Then you want to make out that your objective is the same as mine?”

“Surely that is borne out by the facts. Like you, I have set myself to catch the thieves who took the diamonds, who are hounding my friends the Mélamares and who are making a set at Arlette Mazolle.”

“And they include this wardrobe dealer, Mère Trianon?”

Fagerault nodded.

“But why did you flash her that warning glance when you left the shop?”

“It was you who put that construction on it. Actually, I was merely watching her closely.”

“Maybe. But directly after, she closed her shop and disappeared.”

“Because she was suspicious of all of us.”

“And you say she’s one of the gang?”

Again Fagerault nodded.

“Then in that case she’s mixed up in the murder of Councillor Lecourceux?”

Antoine Fagerault gave a great start. It certainly looked as though he knew nothing of the murder.

“What? Monsieur Lecourceux has been killed?”

“Only three hours ago!”

“Three hours? Monsieur Lecourceux dead? But this is terrible, terrible!”

“Did you know him well, then?”

“Oh, only by name. But I knew our enemies would be calling on him, that they wanted to bribe him, and I was not happy about their intentions.”

“You’re sure it was their work?”

“Positive.”

“They must have a lot of money to offer fifty thousand francs!”

“Well, of course, they must have if they’ve sold the diamonds.”

“What are their names?” asked d’Enneris.

“I haven’t any idea.”

“Then I can at least partly enlighten you,” said d’Enneris, observing the other closely. “There is Mère Trianon’s sister—she’s called Laurence Martin, who leased the shop. There is an old man with a limp. . . .”

“That’s right! That’s right!” said Antoine Fagerault quickly. “And those were the three you found here, weren’t they, and they set upon you?”

“Yes.”

Fagerault’s brow clouded.

“What a pity!” he muttered. “I got word too late . . . or I would have had them. . . .”

“The law will look after that. Béchoux now knows them all three, and they won’t escape him.”

“Good,” said Fagerault. “They are three dangerous criminals, and, if they aren’t caught, one day they’ll get Arlette.”

Everything Fagerault had said rang true. He never hesitated in his answers, and there was never the slightest contradiction between the actual facts and the natural way in which he explained them.

“What a consummate knave,” thought d’Enneris, who persisted in thinking him guilty, though disconcerted by so much consistent frankness.

At bottom, d’Enneris had supposed the new attack against Arlette to have been planned between Antoine Fagerault and his three accomplices, so that Fagerault might appear in the light of a deliverer to Arlette. But, in that case, why this *mise en scène*? Why had the girl not been a terrified witness of the preparations? And why, when he saw her, did Fagerault delicately withhold all mention of his own part in the affair?

Point-blank, d’Enneris asked Fagerault:

“Do you love Arlette?”

“Infinitely,” answered the other with fervour.

“And does Arlette love you?”

“I believe so.”

“And what leads you to believe that?”

Fagerault smiled, gently, but not fatuously.

“Because,” he replied, “she has given me the best possible proof of her affection.”

“What’s that?”

“We are engaged!”

“Engaged?”

Only by a prodigious effort did d’Enneris succeed in maintaining an outward calm. He was mortally wounded.

“Yes,” said Fagerault, “we’ve been engaged since yesterday evening.”

“Madame Mazolle, whom I saw a short while ago, said nothing of this.”

“She doesn’t know anything about it yet. Arlette wants to keep it a secret for the present.”

“But it’ll be good news for Madame Mazolle?”

“Yes, but Arlette wants to prepare her gradually.”

“Because it’s all happened without her realizing?”

“That’s it,” approved Fagerault.

D’Enneris began to laugh jerkily.

“Poor Madame Mazolle, thinking her daughter incapable of having a *rendezvous* with a man! What a nasty knock!”

“Our meetings,” said Antoine Fagerault gravely, “have always been in such a place and in the presence of such persons as would entirely satisfy Madame Mazolle if she knew them.”

“How’s that?”

“We have met at the Hôtel de Mélamare, in the presence of Gilberte and her brother.”

D’Enneris was flabbergasted. Here was the Comte de Mélamare sheltering the courtship of Fagerault the adventurer and Arlette, an illegitimate mannequin whose two sisters had gone to the bad! Why this incredible clemency?

“Do they know all about it?” asked Jean.

“They do.”

“And it has their approval?”

Fagerault nodded.

“My congratulations! Their support is greatly in your favour. Well, I suppose the Comte thinks he owes you a great deal, and you have for long been a friend of the family.”

“There is yet another reason,” said Fagerault, “which has strengthened our intimacy.”

“May I ask what that is?”

“Of course. Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare, as you will readily understand, have retained terrible memories of the drama which nearly crushed them. The curse which has hung over their family for a century, and which seems to work on it because the Mélamares live in that house, has led them to make an irrevocable decision.”

“What’s that? Not to live there any more?”

“Not only that. They do not even want to own the Hôtel de Mélamare. It is that which brings them disaster, so they are selling it, very shortly.”

“Have they found a purchaser?”

“They have.”

“Who?”

Fagerault laid a hand upon his heart.

“You?”

“Yes. Arlette and I are going to live there when we are married!”

CHAPTER 9. ARLETTE ENGAGED

ANTOINE FAGERAULT seemed fated to be the source of constant surprises for Jean. The man's secret friendship with Arlette, their unexpected engagement, the sympathy shown them by the Mélamares, the incredible purchase of the house—all so many thunderbolts, dropped casually in conversation in the manner of commonplace tidings of daily life.

And now d'Enneris realized that while he had held aloof the better to judge dispassionately of the situation, the enemy had taken advantage of this withdrawal to bring up all his troops. But *was* Fagerault an enemy? Did this rivalry in love really imply a state of hostilities between the two men? D'Enneris had to admit that he held no proper proof at all, and was playing a blind, lone hunch.

"When will the deed of sale be signed?" he asked pleasantly. "And when's the wedding?"

"In three or four weeks."

D'Enneris would gladly have wrung the neck beneath the smiling face. But he saw that Arlette had got up, and, though still pale and feverish, was putting a brave front on things.

"Let's go," she said. "I don't want to stay in this place. I don't want you to tell me anything about what's happened—and I don't want mother to know about it. That can all come later."

"Later, yes," said d'Enneris. "But in the meantime we must protect you better than we have done against these attacks. And there's only one way of doing that, which is for Monsieur Fagerault and myself to join forces. Are you willing?" he asked Fagerault. "Because, if we are agreed, then Arlette will be perfectly safe."

"Certainly," cried Fagerault, "and rest assured that personally I am not far from knowing the truth now."

"Between us, we will discover it in its entirety. I will tell you all I know and you will keep from me nothing that you know."

"Nothing."

D'Enneris held out his hand with a spontaneous gesture, and the other responded with equal warmth.

"I have wronged you, monsieur," said d'Enneris. "The man of Arlette's choice cannot be unworthy of her."

The pact was sealed. Never had Jean d'Enneris given a handshake so full of unappeased hate and the lust for vengeance, never had any adversary welcomed his advances with such frank cordiality.

They all three went down to the garage. Arlette was too tired to walk and besought Fagerault to find a taxi. The moment she was alone with d'Enneris, she told him:

"I feel badly about you, you know. I've done lots of things without telling you—things which must have annoyed you!"

"Why annoyed me, Arlette? You helped to save Monsieur de Mélamare and his sister. Well, wasn't that what I wanted to do myself? You've let Antoine Fagerault make love to you—you've just become engaged to him. My dear, you had every right!"

She said no more. Night was falling, and d'Enneris could hardly see her pretty face.

"You're quite happy, aren't you?" he asked anxiously.

"I should be perfectly happy," said Arlette, "if you would still be friends with me."

"It isn't friendship I feel for you, Arlette."

As she said nothing, he insisted:

"You understand what I mean, don't you, Arlette?"

"I understand," she murmured, "but I don't believe it."

And, as d'Enneris moved closer to her,—

"No, no," she cried, "let's say no more about it."

"How disconcerting you are, Arlette! As I told you from the first. And still you give me that impression of a mystery, of a secret . . . a secret mixed up with all that makes this business so baffling."

"I have no secret," she declared.

"Yes, you have, and I will free you from it just as I will free you from your enemies. I know them all already, I see them at work . . . I am watching them . . . especially one of them, Arlette, the most dangerous and the most unscrupulous. . . ."

He was about to accuse Fagerault, and he could feel Arlette in the twilight hanging on his words. But he stopped short, because he had still no proof.

"The end is in sight," he said. "But I mustn't anticipate. Go your own way, Arlette. I only ask you to promise me one thing, and that is to call me in as often as you need me and to arrange that I shall be received as a welcome guest by Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare."

“I promise!”

A taxi stood waiting at the end of the lane. Fagerault and d’Enneris shook hands once more, and Arlette went off with her fiancé.

“Go to it, my lad,” said Jean to himself as they were lost to sight. “Go to it! I’ve worsted trickier than you, and I swear to God you shan’t marry the girl I love, or live in the Hôtel de Mélamare, and you *shall* cough up the diamond corselet.”

Ten minutes later, Béchoux came upon a thoughtful d’Enneris, standing in precisely the same spot. The Chief Inspector ran up, much out of breath. He was accompanied by two subordinates.

“I’ve had a brain wave! When she left the Rue la Fayette, Laurence Martin must have come out here where she used to rent a kind of coach-house.”

“You’re marvellous, Béchoux,” said d’Enneris.

“Why?”

“Because you always get there in the end. Too late, ’tis true, but still you do!”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Except that you ought to go after those beggars like knife, Béchoux, for through them we may get a line on their chief.”

“Have they a chief?”

“Yes, Béchoux, and one who has a terrible weapon!”

“What’s that?”

“The face of an honest man.”

“Antoine Fagerault?” hazarded Béchoux. “Do you still suspect him?”

“I more than suspect him,” was the grim rejoinder.

“Well, I, Béchoux, tell you, d’Enneris, that you’re barking up the wrong tree. I never make a mistake about people’s faces.”

“Not even about mine,” sneered d’Enneris, and left him.

. . . . . .

The murder of Lecourceux and its attendant circumstances aroused public opinion. When Béchoux divulged that the affair was linked up with the corselet mystery, and that the Trianon shop was rented by one Laurence Martin, who was the same woman to whom Monsieur Lecourceux had given an audience, there was an immediate revival of interest. Every one was talking about Laurence Martin and the

man with a limp—her murderous accomplice. The motive for the crime remained a mystery, for it was impossible to ascertain which report it was Laurence Martin had wanted the Councillor to alter. But it all seemed so ably planned, by such practised criminals, that no one doubted they were the same crooks who had engineered the theft of the diamond corselet and been responsible for the mysterious plot against Monsieur de Mélamare and his sister. Laurence, the old man, Mère Trianon—the redoubtable trinity—became notorious in a few days, and their arrest seemed imminent.

D'Enneris saw Arlette each day at the Hôtel de Mélamare. Gilberte had not forgotten Jean's intrepidity and resource in helping her to escape. So that, on Arlette's recommendation, he was most warmly welcomed by both the Mélamares. Brother and sister had regained confidence, although definitely resolved to sell their house and leave Paris. They still felt the same urge to go, and looked upon it as a duty to sacrifice their ancestral home to a cruel fate.

But the last traces of their distress and worry vanished in contact with Arlette Mazolle and Antoine Fagerault. Arlette brought to that house, shut up for more than a century, all her grace and youth, the sunshine of her being, the wellspring of her enthusiasm for life, her essential sanity. Easily and unconsciously, she made herself beloved by Gilberte and the Comte, and d'Enneris understood how, in their wish to make her happy, they had not hesitated to help on Fagerault's suit, since they considered him as their friend and benefactor.

As for Fagerault, he seemed always merry and bright, free and easy. He influenced the Mélamares enormously, as he did also Arlette. He was a man without reservations, taking what life offered him confidently and confidingly.

And how anxiously d'Enneris studied Arlette! Between her and him there was, despite their friendly conversation at Levallois, a certain constraint which Jean did not attempt to dissipate. And the thought persisted in his mind that Arlette preserved this constraint almost all the time, with every one, that she did not let herself go and seem lighthearted like a girl in love who is about to be married. No one would have thought she was looking at the future in that light at all; or that the Hôtel de Mélamare, where she was going to live, was Honeymoon Hall. Whenever she talked to Fagerault about it—and it was their sole topic of conversation—they seemed rather to be planning out some kind of philanthropic institute. And indeed Arlette's idea was that from the Hôtel de Mélamare she and Antoine should administrate the famous Fund for *dots*. There the executive committee would meet, and there Arlette's protégées would have their reading-room. Arlette's dream as a mannequin at Chernitz was coming true at last! It was no longer a case of a young girl's idle fancies.

Fagerault was the first to laugh at it all.

“A man might as well marry a charity,” he grumbled. “I’m not a husband—I’m a blessed trust fund!”

A trust fund! Money—inexhaustible wealth! That was what puzzled d’Enneris about Antoine Fagerault. The man’s vast projects, his purchase of the Mélamare house and his self-avowed affluence were distinctly overwhelming. Where did all the money come from? The inquiries instituted by Béchoux at the Argentine Consulate and Legation had established that a family called Fagerault had come to live at Buenos Aires about twenty years before, and that the father and mother died ten years after. But they were poor people, and their son Antoine, whom the Mélamares had formerly known as quite poor, managed to get rich quick—overnight as it were. How, unless by the recent theft and disposal of Van Houben’s treasure of diamonds?

Each afternoon and evening the two men—Fagerault and d’Enneris—stuck to each other closer than brothers. They had tea every day at the Mélamares. Both in good form, blithe and debonair, they fairly overflowed with good fellowship towards one another. Each sang the other’s praises. But, ah, the sidelong glance d’Enneris would shoot at his rival! And how he himself writhed under Fagerault’s piercing stare!

Never a word passed between them about their secret bond; never a word of that co-operation which d’Enneris had claimed, although he would have at once refused its offer from the other. It was war to the knife, but an invisible warfare of silent skirmishes fought in savage concealment.

One morning—near the Square Laborde—d’Enneris observed Fagerault and Van Houben walking arm in arm and seemingly on the best of terms. They went along the Rue Laborde and stopped in front of a shuttered ground-floor window. Van Houben was pointing to the brass plate outside: “The Barnett Agency.” The pair drifted on, talking animatedly.

“So that’s how it is, is it,” said Jean, “those two blighters are in cahoots. Van Houben has done the dirty on me and is telling Fagerault that d’Enneris is none other than Alias Jim Barnett. And a man like Fagerault won’t be slow to put two and two together and identify Barnett with Arsène Lupin. And once he’s got that, he’ll denounce me. Which Greek will win this tug-o’-war—Lupin or Fagerault?”

Gilberte was preparing for departure. On Thursday, April 28th (and it was now the 15th), the Mélamares were due to leave their Paris house. Monsieur de Mélamare would sign the bill of sale, and Antoine would give him a cheque. Arlette would enlighten her mother, the banns of her marriage would be published, and the wedding bells would ring out in mid-May.

A few more days passed uneventfully. D’Enneris and Fagerault were so bitter against one another that their pretence of friendship did not always stand the strain. Despite themselves, the two men could not help occasionally manifesting their mutual hostility. Fagerault had the nerve to bring Van Houben to tea at the

Mélamares, and Van Houben was positively glacial towards Jean. He talked loudly about his diamonds and announced that Fagerault was on the track of the thief. This he said with such a threatening air that d'Enneris began to wonder if Fagerault was not imbued with the idea of getting him in the dock!

The direct issue could not long be staved off. D'Enneris, his theories now resting on increasingly solid ground, had fixed time and date for the showdown. The only question was—might it not come earlier? And then came a terrible development, which seemed to augur the worst.

D'Enneris had in his pay the porter at the Mondial Palace where Fagerault stayed. Through this man, and through Béchoux's unslackening watchfulness, he knew that Fagerault never had any letters or visitors. But one fine morning d'Enneris learned that the porter had intercepted a few words of a brief telephone conversation between Fagerault and a woman, fixing a rendezvous for that evening at half-past eleven in the Jardin du Champ de Mars "in the usual place."

That evening, at eleven, Jean was prowling about round the base of the Eiffel Tower and in the gardens. It was a black night, without stars or moon. He looked all about him for a long while, but there was no sign of Fagerault. Not until close on midnight did he perceive, sitting on a bench, a dark bulk which seemed to be the figure of a woman bent double, her head on her knees.

"What's this?" thought Jean. "People don't sleep like that out in the open. . . . Why, it's raining."

The woman did not stir, and he bent over her, flashing on his torch. The light showed him a hatless, greyhaired head, and a cloak trailing on the gravel. Gently, he raised the head, which fell forward again the moment he removed his hand: but in that instant he recognized the features, pale with a mortal pallor, of Mère Trianon the wardrobe dealer—Laurence Martin's sister.

The spot was set among shrubs and isolated from the main walks, but not far from the Ecole Militaire. Two policemen came cycling along the avenue, and d'Enneris attracted their attention with a sharp whistle and a call for help.

"I'm a fool, of course," he told himself. "Why get myself mixed up with this?"

As soon as the policemen came up, he told them of his discovery. They loosened the woman's clothing and found the handle of the knife that had been thrust between the heart and shoulder. Her hands were quite cold. She must have been dead for thirty or forty minutes. The gravel around was trampled as if the victim had struggled, but the fast-falling rain was now blotting out all traces of the encounter.

"We shall need a taxi," said one of the policemen, "and we must carry her to the rank."

Jean volunteered:

“You carry the body to the avenue, and I’ll run on ahead and come back with a cab; the rank’s quite close.”

He set off at a run. But, at the rank, instead of getting into the taxi, he merely instructed the driver and sent him off to meet the policemen. He then quickly decamped in the opposite direction.

“No use being a blessed boy scout,” he told himself. “They’d have asked my name. I should have been summoned to appear at the inquest. Not at all the thing for a respectable citizen! But who the hell killed that woman? Antoine Fagerault, whom she arranged to meet? Or Laurence Martin—wanting to get rid of her sister? One thing grows increasingly evident, and that is that there is division in the enemy camp. And this theory explains everything—Fagerault’s line of action, his plans, the whole lot. . . .”

Next day the noon editions of the papers made brief mention of the murder of an old woman in the Champ de Mars gardens. But, in the evening, came a double bolt from the blue! The victim was none other than the wardrobe dealer of the Rue Saint Denis, which meant the accomplice of Laurence Martin and her father. . . . And in one of the corpse’s pockets had been found a scrap of paper bearing a name traced in illiterate characters—obviously a disguised writing: “Ars. Lupin.” Added to which, the cycling police told of their meeting a man near the body, who had quietly sloped off. It was now perfectly patent to all that Arsène Lupin was mixed up in the Diamond Corselet Mystery!

The idea was absurd, and the Parisian public reacted quickly against it. Arsène Lupin never killed, and any crook might have deliberately written his name on the paper. But the writing on the paper was the writing on the wall for Jean d’Enneris! How significant this evocation of Lupin’s active ghost! The thing was a direct threat: “Clear out. Leave me alone. Otherwise, I will denounce you, for I am in possession of all the proofs connecting d’Enneris with Barnett and Barnett with Lupin.”

Would it not, however, be even more effective for Béchoux to get the warning? Béchoux always on the alert, unwillingly submitting to the authority of d’Enneris. Béchoux who would eagerly seize on the opportunity for such a magnificent revenge? And this was precisely what happened. Under the pretext of working for the recovery of the diamonds, Antoine Fagerault, just as he had introduced Van Houben, brought Béchoux to the Mélamares. The Chief Inspector’s awkward, constrained attitude towards d’Enneris left no room for doubt. For Béchoux, d’Enneris had abruptly become Arsène Lupin. Lupin alone could have accomplished the exploits Béchoux had seen Barnett perform, and Lupin alone could have fooled Béchoux as Béchoux had been fooled. So that Béchoux meant without delay, and with the sanction of his chiefs at the Préfecture, to arrange for the arrest of Jean d’Enneris.

Day by day the outlook blackened. Fagerault, who had seemed worried and disconcerted after the Champ de Mars murder, was back in his usual form, but, deliberately or no, adopted towards Jean an insolent and ill-disguised arrogance. He was obviously triumphing, like one who has only to lift his little finger to bring about the victory.

The Saturday before the sale, he got d'Enneris in a corner and said to him:

"Well, what do you think of it all?"

"All what?"

"I mean, this sudden intervention of Lupin."

"Oh, I take that like my morning egg—with a grain of salt."

"All the same, there are warrants out for his arrest. The police are on his trail, and his capture is now only a matter of hours."

D'Enneris whistled sceptically.

"I wouldn't bet on it! He's a cunning devil."

"Cunning he may be, but I don't see how he's going to wriggle out this time."

"I'm afraid I'm not spending sleepless nights over his predicament."

"Nor I, believe me! I speak as a disinterested spectator, merely. In his place . . ."

"In his place?"

"I should get out of the country!"

D'Enneris laughed and shook his head.

"That wouldn't be at all like Lupin!"

"Then I should—come to terms." Fagerault fiddled idly with his handkerchief, stretching it this way and that.

D'Enneris registered mild surprise.

"Come to terms? With whom? What about?"

"With whoever has those diamonds."

"Good Lord," said d'Enneris in honest mirth, "given what is known about Lupin, I think it's easy to see he'd only strike a bargain on one basis!"

"What's that?"

"All for me and none for you!"

Fagerault started, thinking he was being directly addressed. “Wh—what are you saying? What do you mean?”

D’Enneris smiled soothingly.

“I’m merely attributing to Lupin the kind of answer his characteristics suggest. All for Lupin, none for—anyone else!”

And now Fagerault in his turn laughed heartily. His expression of bluff openness positively infuriated d’Enneris. Nothing peeved Jean more than the “nice lad” aura which clung around Antoine and got the young man into every one’s good graces. And it was all the more anomalous at this moment, when Fagerault fancied himself strong enough to take the offensive.

D’Enneris, thinking it wise to fire the first shot, suddenly changed his tone from jest to enmity.

“Don’t let’s waste words,” he said abruptly. “A very few will do. I love Arlette. So do you. If you persist in marrying her, I’ll break you!”

Antoine seemed taken aback by this ultimatum, but replied, unflinching:

“I love Arlette and I’m going to marry her.”

“You refuse to withdraw, then?”

“I refuse! There is no reason whatever that I should obey your orders. You’ve no right to give them and you know it!”

“Right.” D’Enneris seemed perfectly satisfied. “Let us name the day of reckoning. The bill of sale is to be signed next Wednesday, isn’t it?”

“Yes, at half-past six in the evening.”

“I shall be there.”

“On what pretext?” asked Fagerault coldly.

“Monsieur de Mélamare and his sister are leaving Paris on Thursday. I come to say good-bye to them!”

“You will be a most welcome guest.”

D’Enneris chose to ignore the sarcasm.

“See you Wednesday,” he said cheerily.

“Wednesday,” echoed Fagerault on a note of menace.

After this interview, d’Enneris did not waste a moment. There were four days left. He did not want at any cost to run the slightest risk during that time, so did a

disappearing act into the shadows. He was no more seen in the land. Two inspectors from the Sûreté patrolled before his flat. Others watched Arlette Mazolle's house, others Régine Aubry's. Still others lurked in the road bordering the Mélamares' garden. Wasted vigilance, for there was no sign of Jean d'Enneris.

But during those four days, concealed in one of his well-arranged hiding-places in Paris, or else disguised as only he knew how, Jean was feverishly intent on the final issue, concentrating all his attention on the remaining mysteries, probing and testing where he had previously speculated and meditated. Never had he felt more keenly the necessity of being prepared, of foreseeing every deadly move his enemy could make.

Two nocturnal expeditions furnished him with what information he still lacked, and after these he saw pretty clearly how all the facts fitted in and the exact psychological significance of the various incidents in the affair.

He knew now what was the "Mélamare secret," that secret of which the Mélamares themselves had only seen one side. He knew the mysterious circumstance which gave such power to the enemies of the Comte and his sister, and he knew, too, Antoine Fagerault's part in the business.

"To-day's the day," he cried when he woke on Wednesday. "But I must remember dear Antoine's probably at this moment saying the same thing and I may soon be falling into snares I wot not of. But come what may, to-day's the day!"

He lunched early, then went for a stroll, still sunk in reflection. As in a daze, he crossed the Seine, and then bought a midday paper which he proceeded mechanically to unfold. His glance wandered over the pages to be suddenly riveted by a sensational column heading. He stopped dead to read it.

"The net is closing in round Arsène Lupin, and matters are taking on a novel and intriguing complexion. It is known that some weeks ago a well-dressed young man was inquiring for the whereabouts of a certain wardrobe dealer. This woman, whose address he succeeded in obtaining, was none other than the dealer of the Rue Saint Denis. Now the description of this man corresponds exactly with that of the man whom the police surprised, lurking near the corpse in the Champ de Mars, and who ran off and has not since come forward. At the Préfecture they are convinced that it is Arsène Lupin. (*See page three.*)"

And on the third page, in the stop press news, was this paragraph, signed "Regular Reader":

"It is said that the elegant man-about-town at present being sought by the police, bears the name of d'Enneris. Can this be the Vicomte Jean d'Enneris, the well-known nobleman who went round the world in a motor-boat and was publicly welcomed on his arrival in France last year? Information from other sources lends colour to the belief that the notorious Jim Barnett of the Barnett Agency was in

reality—Arsène Lupin. If this is so, may we not hope that the Lupin-Barnett-d'Enneris Trinity will not long escape detection, and that we shall be relieved of this public peril? The public can safely rely on Chief Inspector Béchoux to leave no stone unturned!"

Furiously, d'Enneris refolded the paper. He had no doubt that "Regular Reader's" sentiments emanated from Antoine Fagerault, who held all the cards and was carefully guiding Chief Inspector Béchoux's play!

"Scum!" he muttered. "I'll see you pay for this . . . heavily!"

D'Enneris felt ill at ease and troubled, like a hunted beast. Innocent passers-by seemed to his jaundiced eye to be detectives peering under his hat. Would it not be better to flee the country as Fagerault advised? He hesitated, thinking of the three means of escape he had always ready: an aeroplane, a car, and, quite close on the Seine, a launch.

"No, it's too idiotic," he told himself. "I'm not the sort to funk fighting. What is annoying, though, is that I shall have to drop the noble name of d'Enneris. A pity, because it has a pleasant ring and the advantage of being distinctly French. Well, well. I suppose my hours as a yachtsman are numbered! I feel more like a deep-sea diver to-day!"

Unconsciously, instinctively, he was watching the road by the Mélamare garden. It was empty. No police there. He walked round the house, but found nothing suspicious in the Rue d'Urfé either. This convinced him that Béchoux and Fagerault either must have thought he would never run his head into danger like this or else that they were confining their measures to the inside of the house.

He was full of one idea only—that not for anything would he be thought a coward by anyone. He fished in his pockets to make sure he was not inadvertently carrying a knife or a revolver, which weapons he deemed fatal encumbrances. Then he approached the courtyard door.

He had one last momentary hesitation. The place from this approach was so dark and forbidding as to suggest a prison wall. But the thought of Arlette, smiling, ingenuous, a little wistful, crossed his mind. Could he leave the girl defenceless?

He strove to reason jestingly with himself.

"No, Lupin, don't go kidding yourself, my lad. If you're going to save Arlette, you've no call to go walking into the mouse-trap and risking your precious liberty. Not so, my friend. You have only to send the Comte a little note elucidating the Mélamare mystery and the part played therein by Antoine Fagerault. Four lines will suffice—just that. But, really, nothing's going to stop your ringing that bell, for the simple reason that you want to! You're spoiling for a fight. You want to come to grips with Fagerault. It's on the cards you'll meet your doom, for they're probably waiting on the mat to

welcome you! But just the same, you’re crazy to tempt fate and attack the enemy in his camp, unarmed save for a smile. . . .”

He chuckled, and rang the bell!

CHAPTER 10. WITH THE GLOVES OFF

"GOOD day, François," said d'Enneris, stepping lightly into the courtyard.

"Good day, sir," said the old butler. "You're quite a stranger. . . ."

"Indeed I am," said Jean, who often had his little joke with François and thought the old man could not have been warned about him. "Yes, indeed! Family affairs . . . a legacy from an uncle in the country—close on a million."

"My congratulations, sir."

"Oh, I haven't made up my mind to take it yet."

"Not take it, sir?"

"No. It happens to be a million in—debts!"

This bit of innocent badinage pleased Jean. He felt almost carefree. But, at that very moment, he noticed the net curtain flapping wildly at one of the windows, but not so wildly as to disguise Chief Inspector Béchoux, playing Sister Anne in an ante-room on the ground floor.

"I see," said Jean, "that the Chief Inspector is at his post. Still after those diamonds?"

"That's it, sir. I should think somethink must be going to 'appen at last. The Chief Inspector's been and posted three men to-day."

Jean's heart rejoiced at the news. Three brawny limbs of the law . . . this was Béchoux going into battle, and a rare bit of luck! For precautions of this nature were exactly what would make his own measures effective. Without plenty of police on the scene his plan would have been doomed to failure.

He ascended the steps into the hall and then went straight upstairs. In the salon he found the Comte and his sister, Arlette, Fagerault and Van Houben—the last three all come to say good-bye. The atmosphere was one of calm and friendliness. They all seemed on such excellent terms that d'Enneris knew a further moment of hesitation at the thought that in two or three moments he would be casting the Stone of Consternation into the Pool of Peace.

Gilberte de Mélamare welcomed him cordially. The Comte held out a friendly hand. Arlette who was standing talking, came up quickly and seemed delighted to see him. Decidedly none of these three knew what had happened. They had not read the evening paper even now reposing in his pocket. They little suspected the duel so soon to be fought out in their presence.

As a counterblast to this cordiality, there was an icy handshake from Van Houben. Evidently he knew all about it. As for Fagerault, the man did not stir, but remained seated between the two windows, turning over the pages of an album. His attitude was one of such affectation and insolence that Jean d'Enneris at once took the offensive.

"Milord Fagerault is evidently so full of the bliss of his betrothal that his eyesight is affected!"

Fagerault made a vague gesture, as though to ward off an immediate encounter. But Jean did not see things that way, and nothing could deter him from pursuing his own private plan of speech and action. Like all great generals, he held that one should always take every advantage of surprising the enemy and throwing his plans into confusion. Attack is half the victory.

As soon as he had made excuses for his previous absence and had learned all particulars about the Mélamares' departure from Paris he took both Arlette's hands impulsively in his, and spoke to her and her alone in caressing accents:

"And you, Arlette, are you happy? Absolutely whole-heartedly happy? No regrets, sweetness? Just as happy as you deserve to be, darling?"

This sudden access of endearment, most inappropriate in the circumstances, had the effect of an electric shock on the assembly. Every one realized that it was deliberate on the part of d'Enneris and not pacifically intended! Fagerault sprang up, pale to the lips, utterly taken aback by the suddenness of the attack. He had thought to bide his time and then crush d'Enneris finally, and here was the fellow taking a totally unexpected line.

The Comte and Gilberte, shocked at d'Enneris' demonstration of bad form, were speechless. Van Houben let out an oath. All three looked at Arlette, ready to intervene. But Arlette did not seem at all put out. Her smiling eyes were lifted to Jean's, and she was looking at him as at an old and highly privileged friend.

"Of course I'm happy," she replied. "All my dreams are coming true at last. Isn't it splendid? Just think—my friends will all be able to marry the men they love and not have to worry about money!"

But d'Enneris' wrath against Fagerault was not to be turned away by Arlette's soft answer.

"I'm not talking about your friends, my dearest Arlette," he said. "I'm talking about you, and your own personal right to let your heart guide you in your choice of a husband. Now, darling child, is that what you're honestly doing? I want to know the truth!"

Arlette blushed deeply, and was silent.

“Really,” exclaimed the Comte, “what an astoundingly impertinent question to ask! I think we may safely assume that the matter concerns no one but Antoine and his fiancée!”

“And it is absolutely inconceivable——” began Van Houben.

“It is still more inconceivable,” interrupted d’Enneris gently, “that our adorable Arlette should sacrifice herself to her own generosity and make a loveless marriage. For that’s how it is, and you ought to know it, Monsieur de Mélamare, since it is not too late. Arlette does not love Antoine Fagerault. She isn’t even moderately fond of him, are you, Arlette?”

Arlette bowed an unprotesting head. The Comte stood, his arms folded, choking with indignation. This lapse on the part of d’Enneris, hitherto such a model of reserve and correctitude, astounded and disgusted him.

But Antoine Fagerault strode up to Jean. Gone was his smiling, boyish expression. A prey to anger and also perhaps to a vague fear, he looked unexpectedly evil.

“What do you think you’re butting into?” he demanded.

“Merely my own business,” was d’Enneris’ reply.

“Are Arlette’s feelings towards me your business?”

“Certainly, since her happiness is at stake.”

“And according to you she does not love me?” Fagerault’s clenched hands trembled at his side.

“Good God, no!”

“And your idea is——?”

“No wedding bells for you!”

“You go too far!” cried Antoine. “You’re insufferable. But, my friend, if that’s your little game, I have a card to play—and I shan’t scruple to use it. You shall see . . .”

With a sudden movement he seized the newspaper protruding from d’Enneris’ pocket and spread it out under the Comte’s nose.

“Read this,” he enjoined, “read this and you shall see who this man really is. And now turn to the article on page three. . . . It’s a clear case. . . .”

Carried away by an access of fury, in strong contrast to his habitual calm, he read out himself, in one breath, the barbed comments of “Regular Reader.”

The Comte and his sister listened dumbfounded. Arlette fixed despairing eyes on Jean d’Enneris.

But the latter did not blench. Once, when Fagerault paused for breath, he simply remarked:

“No need to read it, Antoine. Why not say it off by heart, as it’s your own handiwork?”

Fagerault finished on a note of rhetoric, one finger pointing to Jean:

“. . . there is good reason to believe that the notorious Jim Barnett of the Barnett Agency was in reality—Arsène Lupin.”

There was a silence as of the tomb. The Comte and Gilberte were horror-stricken, but Jean smiled imperturbably.

“Call in Chief Inspector Béchoux, then,” he counselled. “For you must know, Monsieur de Mélamare, that the noble Antoine has introduced Béchoux and his minions here solely on my account. I had announced my intention of coming to the house, and I am known for a man of my word. Come in, Béchoux, old horse! I know you’re lurking behind the tapestry, like Polonius. You shouldn’t go a-snooping, Béchoux. It’s unworthy of a detective of your ability!”

The tapestry was pushed aside, to reveal Béchoux, resolute of countenance, but distinctly wary of manner. He came slowly towards d’Enneris, with the air of one reserving judgment.

Van Houben, panting with impatience, made a dive in his direction:

“Call his bluff, Béchoux! Arrest the blighter! He took my diamonds—he’s got to give them back. Hang it all, you’re in command here!”

Monsieur de Mélamare intervened, suave and frigid.

“One moment, please. I wish anything that takes place in my house to do so decently and in order.” And, turning to d’Enneris, he asked: “Who are you, monsieur? I do not ask you to refute the newspaper accusations, but simply to tell me frankly whether I am still to regard you as the Vicomte Jean d’Enneris . . .”

“Or the elusive Arsène Lupin!” interrupted d’Enneris, with a laugh.

He turned to Arlette.

“Sit down, darling,” he told her. “You’re getting all wrought up. We can’t have that, you know. And whatever happens, don’t get alarmed. Everything’s going to be all right while I’m on the job.”

Then, turning back to the Comte,—

“I do not answer your question, Monsieur de Mélamare,” he said, “because the thing is not to know who *I* am, but to know *what* Antoine Fagerault is!”

The Comte quietly restrained Fagerault from throwing himself on d'Enneris and hushed Van Houben's babble of his diamonds. Jean went on:

"Hasn't it occurred to any of you to wonder what brought me here, of my own free will, with a copy of this wretched paper in my pocket? I had read that article. I knew that Béchoux, primed by Fagerault, was waiting for me with a warrant. And yet I came—walked right into the trap, because, you see, the risk run by our beloved Arlette . . . and just as much by you and by Madame de Mélamare far outweighed any danger to myself. My mystery is a little matter between Béchoux and myself, to be settled quite independently. But the mystery of Antoine Fagerault is—is a problem for immediate resolution."

At this point Fagerault broke from Monsieur de Mélamare's restraining grasp.

"Who am I, then?" he panted. "Answer! Dare to answer! Who and what do you accuse me of being?"

Jean began, as though making an inventory:

"You are, A, the man who stole the corselet . . ."

"Liar!" cried Antoine. "As if I stole the corselet!"

Jean went calmly on:

"You are, B, the man who abducted Régine Aubry and Arlette Mazolle."

"Liar!"

"C, the man who stole the things from this room," continued Jean, unheeding.

"Liar!"

"D, the accomplice of the wardrobe dealer who was killed in the Champ de Mars garden."

"Liar!" Fagerault was foaming at the mouth.

"E, the accomplice of Laurence Martin and her father," the catalogue droned on.

"Liar!"

"And F—for finally—you are the heir of that implacable line which, for three-quarters of a century, has persecuted the Mélamare family."

Antoine was shaking with fury. At each charge he raised his voice.

"Liar! Liar! Liar!"

And, when d'Enneris had made an end, he stood before him, threateningly, and thundered:

“Liar! . . . You’re making chance guesses . . . because you are in love with Arlette and mad with jealousy. . . . That’s the reason you hate me, and the reason for something I’ve seen about your game from the start. You’re afraid! Yes, you’re afraid, scared stiff, because you’ve guessed that I hold proofs . . . all possible proofs” (he smote his inner breast pocket), “all possible proofs that Barnett and d’Enneris are Arsène Lupin. . . . Yes, Arsène Lupin . . . Arsène Lupin!”

Beside himself, as though goaded by the name of Arsène Lupin, he shouted louder and louder, and brought his hand down heavily on d’Enneris’ shoulder.

The latter did not budge an inch.

“You’re deafening us, Antoine,” he said lightly. “You really must fit a silencer!”

He paused expectantly, but the other did not cease his outburst.

“This won’t help you, you know,” said Jean seriously. “I warn you, for the last time, to lower your voice. If you don’t, something is going to happen to you—something mighty disagreeable. You won’t? All right then, you’ve brought it on yourself, and I should like to put on record that I’ve been as patient as was humanly possible. Now, watch out!”

The two men were so close to one another that their chests almost touched. D’Enneris’ fist made a road between them with the swiftness of a bullet, and caught Fagerault on the chin. Fagerault swayed, his knees gave like those of a wounded animal, and he measured his length on the carpet.

In the ensuing uproar, the Comte and Van Houben attempted to seize Jean, while Gilberte and Arlette made to revive Antoine. With outstretched arms, Jean held off the four of them, and, keeping them at a distance, called on Béchoux in compelling tones.

“Now is the time for all good men——Come on, Béchoux, old warhorse, and lend me your aid. You’ve often seen me in action—enough times to know that I never leap where I haven’t looked. You know I don’t shoot the place up without good and sufficient reason! And in this business we’re fighting on the same side; so, Béchoux, I look to you to help me.”

The Chief Inspector had so far stood by as an impassive spectator, taking everything in and withholding judgment until he had heard the whole story. As things were going at the moment, he could not fail to score one way or the other. The mortal duel that had just begun in the salon would ultimately deliver the combatants to him trussed and bound. And d’Enneris’ appeal to him as an old warhorse left him completely cold. Béchoux was by now one of life’s realists. Sentiment could not touch him.

“Do you know,” he asked d’Enneris, “that I have three men below?”

“I do know, and I am relying on you to use them to mop up the whole blackguardly band.”

“You too, perhaps!” sneered Béchoux.

“If your heart so prompts you. To-day you hold five aces—play the hand and get on with it!”

And d’Enneris half-turned away, smiling subtly. But when Béchoux spoke, as though following a train of thought, it was really in obedience to the will of d’Enneris.

“Monsieur le Comte, in the interests of justice, I beg you to be patient. If the accusations against Antoine Fagerault are groundless, we shall very soon know it. In any case, I take all responsibility.”

This was giving d’Enneris full latitude, with a vengeance. To Béchoux’s horror he at once took advantage of it in the most devastating manner imaginable! Drawing from his pocket a small flask filled with a brownish liquid, he poured out half the contents on to a ready-prepared pad. There was a strong smell of chloroform. D’Enneris clapped the pad over Antoine Fagerault’s face and strapped it on firmly with a piece of tape round the luckless man’s head.

The thing was so fantastic, so utterly in opposition to the Comte’s express request, that it needed a fresh effort for Béchoux to appease Adrien and Gilberte de Mélamare. Poor Arlette was utterly bewildered. She did not know what to think and her pretty eyes filled with tears. Van Houben began storming in his accustomed manner.

But Béchoux, who had now gone too far to withdraw, insisted:

“Monsieur le Comte, I know this man. I swear to you that we ought to wait and see.”

And Jean, straightening up, came over to Monsieur de Mélamare.

“My sincere apologies, monsieur,” he said, “and I beg you to believe that in what I have done there is nothing of caprice or aimless violence. There is a purpose for all this. Occasionally peculiar methods have to be employed in the search for truth. The one thing we must at all costs find out is the secret of the persecution that has dogged your family and yourself. . . . You know what I mean, monsieur? . . . the Mélamare secret. Well, *I know it*. And now it only remains for you to learn it too and destroy it at the source. Won’t you trust me for twenty minutes as I ask? Twenty minutes, not a moment more!”

D’Enneris did not even await Monsieur de Mélamare’s reply. His request was definitely in the class labelled Unrefusable. He now turned to Van Houben.

“I have to thank you for betraying me,” he said sternly. “Oh, well—we’ll forget that. To-day I take it you want the diamonds this fellow stole from you? If so, stop grousing. He will give them up.”

Remained Béchoux.

“And now you, Béchoux,” said d’Enneris. “Here is what you get out of the lucky dip. First, I’m offering you the truth—the shining truth for which every one at the Préfecture is searching high and low, and which you will now be able to serve up to them on a silver salver. I am also presenting you Antoine Fagerault—as a corpse if it comes to the worst. Thirdly and lastly, I’m delivering to you the two accomplices, Laurence Martin and her father. It is now four o’clock. At six o’clock exactly you shall have them. Good enough?”

“Er—yes.”

“Then we are agreed. Only . . .” D’Enneris paused thoughtfully.

“Only what?”

“Be sure and stand by me to the bitter end. If, at seven this evening, I have not kept all my promises—that’s to say, if I haven’t revealed the Mélamare secret, cleared up the whole business and handed over the criminals, I swear on my honour that I will hold out a ready wrist for the bracelets and will assist you to determine whether I am d’Enneris—Jim Barnett—or Arsène Lupin. In the meantime, I am the man who knows how to disentangle the tragic skein in which we are all caught up. Béchoux, have you some official mode of conveyance parked near by?”

Béchoux nodded.

“Send for it. And you, Van Houben, what of your princely car?”

“I have told my chauffeur to be here at four o’clock.”

“How many does it hold?” d’Enneris wanted to know.

“Five.”

“We shan’t want your chauffeur. You can send him away and drive us yourself.”

He turned again to Antoine Fagerault, examined him and felt his pulse. Antoine’s heart was beating normally; his breathing was regular. His expression was that of a man asleep. D’Enneris replaced the pad.

“He’ll come round in twenty minutes,” he said. “Just the time I require.”

“For what?” asked Béchoux.

“To get where we are going, Béchoux. Come on.”

“But where’s that?”

“You’ll see. *Come on!*”

There was no further protest. D’Enneris had cast the spell of his authority over every one. And they were even more deeply in the toils of Arsène Lupin’s formidable personality. To the natural prestige of d’Enneris was now added the arch-crook’s astounding reputation. One and all confounded, they bowed before the Modern Miracle-Worker of Paris.

Arlette looked on, her eyes very big and bright.

The Comte and his sister both felt a strange thrill of hope.

“My dear d’Enneris,” said Van Houben, executing a *volte-face*, “I have never for an instant swerved from my original opinion. You alone can restore my lost diamonds!”

A car had just driven into the courtyard. They went downstairs and lifted Fagerault into it. The three policemen got in with him, Béchoux telling them in low tones:

“Keep your eyes skinned . . . not so much for this bird as for that chap d’Enneris . . . when the moment comes, seize him and mind you don’t let him slip!”

Then Béchoux went back to d’Enneris. In the past five minutes Monsieur de Mélamare had telephoned for a lawyer, and Gilberte had put on her hat and coat. With Arlette they all got into Van Houben’s car.

“Cross the Seine at the end of the Tuileries,” ordered Jean, “and then turn to the right by the Rue de Rivoli.”

All held their peace. Tense with anxiety, Gilberte and Adrien de Mélamare awaited developments! Why the mysterious car drive? Where were they being taken? How would the sinister truth be revealed?

D’Enneris murmured in muffled tones, seeming to talk to himself rather than for the edification of his listeners:

“The Mélamare secret! Lord, what a lot of time I’ve spent on it! From the very start, from the abduction of Régine and Arlette, I had a hunch that we were up against one of those problems where the present is only explicable by an already remote past. Such problems have so often fascinated me. And I have so often solved them! One thing I ruled out immediately: Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare could not possibly be guilty. Was the inference that other people were making use of their house for the execution of fell designs? That was Antoine Fagerault’s theory. But it was to Fagerault’s interest that it should be believed and that this red herring should be drawn across the trail of Justice. On the other hand, was it admissible that Arlette and Régine could have been brought to that salon without attracting the attention of Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare, or of the two servants?”

He paused for a moment. Adrien de Mélamare, his face drawn, leaned over and whispered:

“Go on . . . go on . . . please!”

“No,” said Jean slowly. “It is not through any words of mine that you will learn the truth. . . . Don’t rush me. . . .”

But he went on.

“It’s all so simple! I wonder how it has never occurred to anyone—at any rate as a passing thought. In my case, what touched things off was the shock of remembering certain things. We will add, if you like, those peculiar thefts from your house—the disappearance of trifling, valueless objects—so inexplicable and so full of significance! For you see, if intrinsically valueless objects were stolen, it was because they had a special value for the thief!”

He paused again. The Comte was feverishly impatient. On the point of knowing all, he was tortured by the urgent need to know it at once. Gilberte was also suffering torments.

“Be patient,” d’Enneris besought them. “The Mélamares have waited for more than a century. Let them wait another few minutes! Nothing on earth can now come between them and the truth that will set them free.”

Turning to Béchoux,—

“Do you begin to see daylight, Béchoux, old horse?” he asked gaily. “Or at least the streak of dawn? No? Not got there yet? Too bad . . . it’s a good secret, original, nutty, impenetrable, crystal-clear and dark as night. But isn’t every really good secret like Christopher Columbus’ egg—you’ve got to think of it! Turn left now, Van Houben. We’re nearly there.”

They were passing through narrow, uneven, winding roads. It was an old-fashioned shopping district, full of small premises and old buildings used as warehouses and workshops. From time to time they caught glimpses of a wrought-iron balcony, or a big window, and, through open doors, of wide oak staircases.

“Slow down, Van Houben. That’s right. . . . Now stop quietly there on the right at the kerb. A few yards more . . . here we are!”

He jumped out and helped Gilberte and Arlette down.

The police car had drawn up behind Van Houben’s.

“Don’t let them move yet,” Jean said to Béchoux, “and be sure that Antoine doesn’t wake. Have him brought in in two or three minutes.”

They were in a dark street, running from east to west, and the houses on the left were storage depôts for potted meats and preserves. On the right were four mean little houses in a row, all exactly alike, with dirty, curtainless windows, and seemingly uninhabited. There was a low door in the leaf of the double door into the courtyard—formerly green but now faded to a neutral tint and disfigured by the trailing tatters of a polling-notice.

The Comte and Gilberte looked at one another, both in a state of nervous indecision. What was going to happen? What would they find here? How could the answer to the Mélamare riddle possibly be located in this precise spot, behind this particular door?

D’Enneris produced a long, thin, shining key of modern workmanship and inserted it in a slit made at the height of a safety-latch.

He scanned his companion’s faces. All four were pale and set. Truly their lives seemed to hang on his least gestures, such was his triumphant domination. For no good reason, these four people were expecting something extraordinary to happen. They had no notion how it would come about, but resigned themselves to the inevitable, since the hand of Arsène Lupin held the curtain veiling the hidden stage.

Then he turned the key, and standing aside ushered them through, one by one.

Gilberte went first. There broke from her a cry of sheer terror, and she leaned heavily on her brother’s arm. The latter, following her, reeled like a drunken man. With his two strong arms, d’Enneris supported the house of Mélamare!

CHAPTER 11. IN LA VALNÉRY'S DAY

IT was utterly incredible! Ten minutes ago they had left the main court of the Hôtel de Mélamare—and here they were back in the main court of the Hôtel de Mélamare! But in the course of their drive they had crossed the Seine *and had only crossed it once*! There could be no question of their having gone in a circle and come back to the start. And yet, after having covered about three kilometres (roughly the extent of old Paris between the Invalides and the Place des Vosges), they were now entering the main court of the Hôtel de Mélamare!

A miracle was obviously the only explanation of the phenomenon. It meant a strenuous mental effort and put a considerable strain on the reason to try to separate things out, and picture each place in turn. The first impression was so absolutely clear that the two courtyards were the same and that this one courtyard existed, at one and the same time, near the Invalides and near the Place des Vosges. A kink in time—or space? Who could say?

Not only were the features of both places identical, identical in form and colour, with identical façades beyond the courtyards in each case, but, more than all this, over both places brooded that same atmosphere, impossible to counterfeit, the product of the passage of years. Surely these walls, damp with river air, could not exist in duplicate?

They were obviously of precisely similar stone, identically quarried and cut to the same dimensions. But in addition to this fact they had weathered to the same surface with the years. And wind and rain had given the grass-grown paving the same age-old look, and the roofs wore the same greenish tinge.

"My God," gasped Gilberte weakly. "It can't be true!"

The eyes of Adrien de Mélamare mirrored the long years of his family's persecution.

D'Enneris led them towards the front steps.

"Arlette, dearest," he said, "do you recollect your feelings on the day I took you all into the Mélamare courtyard? You and Régine immediately recognized the six steps up which you had been taken. Well, it was this courtyard, and here are those very steps."

"Yes, they are the same," said Arlette.

Without doubt they were the same steps, towards which d'Enneris was bringing them, the steps of the house in the Rue d'Urfé, surmounted by the same glass porch with a few missing panes. And, when they entered the house of mystery, they came into the same hall, flagged in exactly the same way.

“Our steps sound just the same here,” observed the Comte, whose voice rang out with the exact reverberation that it did on entering his own house.

He pushed anxiously on, eager to go and look at the other ground-floor rooms. But d’Enneris, pressed for time, restrained him and insisted on their all accompanying him up the twenty-five steps of the staircase—the stairs being covered with the same carpet and railed with the same wrought-iron baluster.

The landing . . . three doors confronting them, as in that other house . . . then the salon. . . .

Their dismay was as great as on entering the main court. It was much more than the identicality of the atmosphere which hangs about a room, it was the absolute identicality of furniture and ornaments—the fact that things had *worn* to the same degree. The tapestries were the same in shade and colour; there was the same design of flooring, the same chandelier, the same lighting, the same locks on the drawers and cupboards, the same candle sconces—even the same length of blue bell-cord!

“You’re quite sure that this is the room in which they held you prisoner, Arlette?” asked Jean. “You couldn’t have been mistaken?”

“It was here—as much as it was there,” she replied, like a bewildered child.

“It was here, Arlette. Here is the mantelpiece you climbed, the bookcase on which you crouched. Now come and see the window through which you escaped!”

And from this window he showed her the garden, with its shrubbery, bordered by high walls which hid it from the neighbouring houses. At the far end was the deserted lodge by the lower wall, in which was visible the little side-door Arlette had been able to open.

“Béchoux!” D’Enneris turned sharply to the baffled detective. “Bring in Fagerault! The best thing will be for your car to drive right up to the door, and for your men to wait down there. We shall need them before long!”

And Béchoux, speechless, made speed to obey.

The clang of the courtyard door rang out with the same sound as that in the Rue d’Urfé. The car made the same rumble as it was driven over the cobbles.

As they went upstairs, Béchoux told one of his men:

“Post the other two downstairs in the hall, and then dash to the Préfecture and ask for three extra men to come here at once. Say it’s urgent. Bring them back with you and plant them at the bottom of the basement stairs where the door is. We may not need them after all, but I mean to take every precaution. And don’t say a word of

what's up to anyone at the Préfecture. We'll collect the full credit for this scoop ourselves. Got that?"

A little later Antoine Fagerault was deposited unconscious in an arm-chair in their midst. D'Enneris shut the door of the salon again.

The twenty minutes' grace he had craved had barely passed. Certainly Antoine was beginning to stir now. D'Enneris untied the chloroform pad and pitched it out of the window.

"Madame," he said to Gilberte, "would you be so kind as to remove your hat and coat? I want you not to think of yourself as here, madame, but to imagine yourself at home in your own house in the Rue d'Urfé. So far as Antoine Fagerault is concerned, we have never stirred from the Rue d'Urfé. And I urgently beg all of you not to utter a single word in contradiction of whatever I myself say. It matters to all of you even more than it does to me that things should be finally and successfully cleared up."

Antoine was now breathing more deeply. His hand went up to his forehead as though to brush away an unwelcome heaviness that weighed him down.

D'Enneris' eyes never left him. The Comte could not refrain from asking in a low voice:

"Is this man, then, the scion of the enemy line?"

"Yes," whispered d'Enneris, "of that line of whose existence you have always been aware. You thought of it as the Mélamares on one side and their unknown, invisible opponents on the other. That was all right so far as it went. The trouble was it did not go far enough. You could not solve the puzzle because some of the pieces were missing. The drama remained a mystery because there was no possibility of explaining its staging! We had to start with the assumption that Arlette and Régine had really been brought to your salon. But actually where they came was this room!"

He stopped short, and cast a look round to see that everything was as he wanted it. And it was in this atmosphere of strained attention, among people forcibly or automatically keyed to a certain pitch, that Antoine Fagerault gradually awoke from his torpor. He had only been lightly chloroformed. In a few moments he had recovered consciousness—at least, sufficient consciousness to think back to what had happened. He remembered taking d'Enneris' punch on his jaw. But after that his memory was clouded; he could recall nothing of what had followed, and had no idea that he had been asleep.

Slowly he got out:

"What's happened? I feel all stiff, and as if it were ages since . . ."

“Good Lord, no,” said d’Enneris, laughing. “Ten minutes, not a moment more. But we were beginning to marvel. Who ever saw a boxer staying down in the ring for ten minutes after a hard punch! I’m sorry. I must have hit you with more force than I intended.”

Antoine shot him a furious glance.

“I remember now,” he said. “You were mad because I had recognized that under your disguise you were—Arsène Lupin.”

D’Enneris seemed much upset.

“What! Still harping on that! If you’ve only been asleep ten minutes, all I can say is that things have moved on a bit since then. Lupin, Barnett—why, that’s old stuff! That doesn’t interest anyone here *now*!”

“What does interest them, then?” asked Antoine, looking questioningly at the poker faces of those who had been his friends and whose glances now evaded his own.

“What interests them?” cried Jean. “Why, your own story—purely and simply your story—and that of the Mélamares, since the two are inextricably interwoven.”

“Interwoven?” echoed Fagerault, still pretty dazed.

“Certainly! And it won’t do you any harm to listen to what I’m going to say as you only know the half of it and you haven’t got all of that right!”

While d’Enneris and Fagerault exchanged these few words, every one else had maintained a passive silence as requested by d’Enneris. They were in league and from their concerted demeanour might all have been sitting in the salon in the Rue d’Urfé. If the slightest doubt had crossed Antoine Fagerault’s mind, it would have been enough for him to look at Gilberte and her brother to be certain they were in their own house.

“Go on,” he said; “tell away. I’d simply love to hear a bedtime story of my life from your lips. It’ll be my turn next.”

“To tell my story?”

“That’s right.”

“Based on the little dossier in your pocket?”

“Yes.”

“ ’Fraid you haven’t got it any more!”

Antoine made a hasty search, and let out an oath.

“Damn you,” he cried, “you’ve stolen my papers!”

“I’ve already told you we aren’t going to waste time on *me*. You are the topic of the day. Now, silence for the Speaker.”

Antoine controlled himself. Folding his arms, and turning his head away so as not to see Arlette, he adopted an attitude of scornful boredom.

From that moment on, Fagerault might not have existed for d’Enneris, who proceeded to address his remarks exclusively to Gilberte and her brother. The time had come for entire and detailed revelation of the Mélamare secret. He set about it in a businesslike manner, without wasting words—not in the manner of a lecturette on Deduction from the Known Facts, but like a straightforward tale resting on indisputable documentary evidence.

“You must forgive me if I have to go back rather a long way in the annals of your family. But the origin of the evil is more distant than you imagine, and while you were obsessed by the two sinister dates when your two innocent forbears died so tragically, you did not know that those dates were determined by a little episode of a more or less sentimental character belonging to the late eighteenth-century—something that happened when your house was already built and had been standing twenty-five years.

“In the year 1772, your ancestor, François de Mélamare, the father of the first victim and the grandfather of the second, entirely refurnished his house and arranged everything exactly as it is to-day.”

“Yes,” confirmed the Comte. “All the bills for decorations and so forth are in my possession.”

“Good,” said d’Enneris.

“Well, François de Mélamare had just married the daughter of a wealthy financier, a beautiful girl called Henriette whom he loved above all things and who loved him dearly in return. He wanted to house this exquisite jewel in a worthy casket. Hence his expenditure—not wantonly prodigal, but laid out wisely and tastefully with the assistance of the best craftsmen. François and his Henriette were very happy in their married life. No other woman seemed to the young husband to compare with his wife; nothing seemed to him to equal in taste or charm the works of art and the furniture he had chosen or commissioned for his house. He spent his time arranging his possessions, altering their position and cataloguing them.

“But this calm life of domestic pleasures, while it continued for the Comtesse who was absorbed in the upbringing of her children, later became rather disrupted in the case of François de Mélamare. As ill-luck would have it, he conceived a passion for an actress, La Valnéry—quite young, attractive, witty, poor in talent but rich in ambition. Outwardly he remained unchanged. He reserved for his wife all his respect, all his affection, and, as he said, seven-eighths of his existence. But every morning, from ten to one, under the pretext of going for a walk or to the studios of

famous painters he would lunch with his mistress. And his precautions were so efficient that his Henriette suspected nothing, knew nothing.

“One thing alone troubled the satisfaction of the inconstant spouse—and that was having to leave his beloved house in the Rue d’Urfé, in the heart of the Faubourg Saint Germain, and, forsaking his treasures, instal himself in a vulgar dwelling where there was nothing for his eyes to feast upon. Without a qualm in his unfaithfulness to his wife, he felt keenly being unfaithful to his house. And this was why, in the marshy district at the other end of the Paris of those days, he had a house built identical in every detail with his house in the Rue d’Urfé, furnishing it identically in every particular. The external surroundings were different. There was no risk of discovery. But once inside the main court of the Folie-Valnéry, as he called his new abode, François could take up his life again as if in his own house. The door closed with the same reverberation. The court was the same underfoot. The steps were the same, the hall had the same tiles, each room had the same furniture and the same ornaments. There was now nothing to outrage his taste or his order of life. He was at home again. He carried on as though at home. He continued to catalogue and classify, and his passion became such that he could not bear that the least trifle should be a shade out of place to right or left, or be missing from its accustomed niche.

“A refinement of pleasure, a subtle delight, but one which, alas! was to bring about his downfall and cast a shadow of tragedy over his line for several generations. The tale had passed from mouth to mouth and soon got to the salons and boudoirs of Paris. It became a jest. Marmontel, the Abbé Galiani and Fleury the actor, make covert allusions to it in their memoirs or their letters. So much so that La Valnéry, whom François had so far managed to keep in ignorance of the reason for his manœuvre, got wind of it. Furiously offended, believing her sovereignty over her lover to be unlimited, she forced him to choose, not between her and his wife but between the two houses. François did not hesitate: he chose his house in the Rue d’Urfé, and he penned to his mistress the charming note which Grimm has handed down to us:

“ ‘I am ten years older, Florinda, and so are you. And that means a liaison of twenty years. After twenty years, isn’t it best to make one’s bow?’

“He made his bow to La Valnéry by leaving her the house in the Rue Vieille du Marais, and he said farewell to his treasures there with no regret since he would of course possess their originals in his real home, and could now devote himself entirely to his Henriette.

“Great was the wrath of La Valnéry. One day she burst into the house in the Rue d’Urfé, Henriette being mercifully absent, and stormed to such purpose that François threw her out forcibly.

“From that day on, her one idea was revenge. Three years later the Revolution broke out. Ugly, surly, but still wealthy, she played her part therein, married a man called Martin, one of Fouquier-Tinville’s jackals, denounced the Comte de Mélamare who had not been able to tear himself away from home, and, some days before Thermidor, was the cause of his mounting the scaffold with his Henriette.”

D’Enneris stopped dead. They had all listened eagerly to the strange recital, only Antoine Fagerault seeming indifferent.

“Monsieur,” said the Comte de Mélamare, “the secret story of our ancestor never reached us. But we did indeed know, through oral tradition, that a low-class actress of the name of Valnéry denounced both him and our great-grandmother. Everything was swallowed up in the confusion, and nothing remained of our family archives but account-books and inventories.”

“But the secret,” went on d’Enneris, “was alive in the memory of the Martin woman. A widow (for Fouquier-Tinville’s jackal was in his turn guillotined), she took up her abode in the old Folie-Valnéry and lived in deep retirement, with the son of her marriage, whom she taught to hate the name of Mélamare. The death of François and his wife had in no way appeased her, and the glory which the eldest son of the family, Jules de Mélamare, won in Napoléon’s army, and later, under the Restoration, in diplomatic posts, only served to renew her rage and rancour. Intent on his downfall, she pitted herself against him all her life, and when, loaded with honours, he opened up the house in the Rue d’Urfé, she organized the dread plot which brought him to prison. Jules de Mélamare succumbed under the terrible weight of proof against him. He had been accused of a crime he had not committed, but which had been committed in the salon recognizable as his, among his furniture, in front of a tapestry identified as his. For the second time La Valnéry was avenged.

“Twenty-two years later, she died, nearly a hundred. Her son had preceded her to the grave. But she left a grandson of fifteen, Dominique Martin, whom she had reared in hate and crime, and who knew, through her, the possibility of exploiting the secret of the ‘double’ Hôtel de Mélamare. He proved it by accomplishing, with consummate mastery, the machination which brought about the suicide of Alphonse de Mélamare, Napoléon III’s orderly. This unhappy man was accused of having murdered two women in a salon which could only be that of the house in the Rue d’Urfé. And this Dominique Martin is the terrible old man for whom the police are searching, and the father of Laurence Martin. And here it is that the real drama begins.”

The real drama, as d’Enneris put it, was certainly beginning! The curtain had fallen on the prologue, and the bell had gone for Act I. Now they were coming out of far-off, almost legendary times and right into the present day. The actors were still alive. The harm they worked was poisoning the present for the House of Mélamare.

D’Enneris continued:

“And so it is that just two people suffice to link up the last quarter of the eighteenth-century with the first of the twentieth. The hand of François de Mélamare’s mistress stretches across a whole century to grasp that of the town councillor’s murderer. She inspires his actions, fans his resentment, gives a new impulse to the deadly force of hatred. But all Dominique Martin’s racial inheritance was to become allied with a force which had not hitherto come into play—the need of money. The crime against Alphonse de Mélamare combined plunder with vengeance. But his booty from it, together with the inheritance from his grandmother, was swiftly dissipated by Dominique Martin. So he had to live on his wits, by thefts and pilferings. But, since he had no longer the ready alibi of the two houses to help him, that in the Rue d’Urfé being barred and shuttered and the Mélamare family living in retirement in the country, he could not bring off any big coup. Still less could he attack his hereditary enemies.

“I hardly know just how Dominique Martin got along in those days, nor do I know the details of the minor crimes planned by him and carried out by accomplices. He married a good woman, who died of unhappiness, it seems, leaving him with three daughters—Victorine, Laurence and Félicité, who grew up as best they could in the Folie-Valnéry. Early on, Victorine and Laurence helped their father in his exploits. Félicité, who took after her mother, ran away from home rather than obey her father. She married an honest fellow called Fagerault, with whom she went to America. Fifteen years passed. Things went badly with the Martins. At no price would Dominique and his two daughters give up the old house, the only remnant of their heritage. They would neither sell nor mortgage it. It was essential that they should be free, on their own ground, ready to take the first opportunity that offered. And that opportunity would come! The other house, in the Rue d’Urfé, was open again. Comte Adrien de Mélamare and his sister Gilberte, forgetting the terrible lessons of the past, had come to live in Paris. And the thought came to the Martins that it was for them now to seize their chance and recommence the warfare that had felled Jules and Alphonse de Mélamare. It was at this moment that Fate took a hand. Félicité, the exiled daughter of Dominique, died at Buenos Aires, along with her husband. The son of their marriage was seventeen. He was poor. What did life hold for him? He was seized with a longing to see Paris. One fine day, without any warning, he rang at his grandfather’s door. The door opened furtively: ‘What is it? Who are you?’—‘Antoine Fagerault.’ ” D’Enneris ceased speaking abruptly. It was the curtain of Act I.

At the sound of his name, Antoine Fagerault, who had ill concealed his growing interest in the dark story of his family, turned round, shrugged his shoulders, and sneered:

“What is all this pack of old wives’ tales? Where do you get your filthy ideas? La Valnéry? House in the Rue Vieille du Marais? Two houses? . . . Never heard such rot in all my life. . . . You’re a marvel at invention, d’Enneris.”

But d’Enneris took no notice of the interruption. He went calmly on.

“Antoine Fagerault came to France, ignorant of the past save for what could have and would have been told him by his mother—nothing much. He was a nice lad and intelligent. He adored his mother, and only asked to live according to the principles with which she had imbued him. His grandfather and his aunts were careful not to disillusion him too abruptly. They played a waiting game, seeing clearly that the young man, gifted as he was, was also idle and lazy, and a born pleasure-seeker. Instead of keeping a check on him, they continually urged him on. ‘Have a good time, my boy. See life. Make friends. Spend money—plenty more where that came from.’ So Antoine spent, and gambled, and lost, and, little by little, involuntarily ran into debt, until the day came when his aunts told him that they were ruined and it was time he got work. Didn’t Victorine work, in her shop as a dealer in the Rue Saint Denis?

“Antoine was not enthusiastic. Work? There are better things to do than work when one is twenty-four, clever, not over-scrupulous and distinctly attractive? Upon which, the two sisters told him of the family’s past, of François de Mélamare and La Valnéry. They revealed to him the secret of the two similar houses, and, without alluding to the murders, indicated to him the possibility of some profitable coup. Two months later, Antoine had played his cards so well that he had been introduced to the Comtesse de Mélamare and her brother Adrien, under such favourable conditions that he was actually invited to the house in the Rue d’Urfé. After that things went smoothly. The Comtesse had got a divorce. She was rich and pretty. *Ergo*, he would marry the Comtesse.”

At this point Fagerault protested vehemently:

“I’m not troubling to refute your stupid calumnies. It would be a farce. But one thing I will not allow, and that is for you to vilify my feelings towards Gilberte de Mélamare.”

“I don’t say no,” conceded Jean, without directly replying. “Young Fagerault was rather romantic at times, and quite sincere. But naturally his principal preoccupation was the question of his future. And, since he had to dress his part, take life easy and go about with plenty of money, he persuaded his aunts, to the great fury of Dominique Martin, into selling a few articles from the furnishings of La Valnéry. And, for a whole year, he paid discreet court to his lady. But it was labour lost. At that time, the Comte had little confidence in the young man. And Madame de Mélamare, on a day that he showed himself overbold in his advances, rang for the servant and had him shown the door. That was the finish of his dreams. All was to do again, and in what changed conditions! Where was the way out? Humiliation and rancour broke down in him the last remaining traces of maternal influence, and in flowed all the bad instincts of the Valnéry line. He swore to take revenge. Pending this, he flitted hither and thither, travelled, thieved, swindled, and, when he came to Paris with an empty purse, sold more furniture, despite terrible rows with his grandfather. The sale of this furniture, signed by Chapuis, and its despatch abroad, was proved by the antiquary I visited in company with Béchoux. The Hôtel was gradually emptying. What matter!

The main thing was to leave untouched the salon, the staircase, the hall and the courtyard. And on that the two sisters were adamant. There must be absolute similarity between the two salons, or else they would be risking discovery in any future plot. They had duplicates of the inventories and catalogues of François de Mélamare, and would not spare a single item on the list.

“Laurence Martin was particularly keen about this. Her father had given her the Rue d’Urfé keys. She paid several nocturnal visits to the house. And so it happened that one day Monsieur de Mélamare noticed several small things were missing. Laurence had come in the night. She had cut the bell-cord because in her house half this cord was hanging short. She stole a candle sconce and a drawer-lock, because these things had been lost from the house in the Rue Vieille du Marais. And so it went on. Valueless articles? She ran a certain amount of stuff into the Marché aux Puces whither chance had guided my footsteps, and the rest into her shop to which my researches led me, and where I saw at last Antoine Fagerault!

“At that time things were going very badly indeed. The Martins were penniless. There was not even enough to eat in the house. There was practically nothing left to sell, and the grandfather kept good watch over what remained. They had reached a crisis. It was then that the big charity show was organized at the Opéra, with much to-do. In Laurence Martin’s fertile brain germinated the idea of a master-stroke; they would steal the diamond corselet! Antoine Fagerault caught fire from her enthusiasm. In twenty-four hours he had everything prepared. When night came, he slipped into the theatre and set fire to the sheaf of artificial flowers behind the scenes. He carried off Régine Aubry and hurled her into a closed car. A coup which could have no other outcome than the theft of the corselet, effected in the car. But Laurence Martin wanted more than that. The great-granddaughter of La Valnéry had not forgotten. To give the exploit its full hereditary significance, she wanted the theft to take place in the salon in the Rue Vieille du Marais, in that room which was the twin of the one in the Rue d’Urfé. Besides, it was a golden opportunity, should they be threatened with discovery, to direct suspicion to the Rue d’Urfé, and renew against the Comte of the day the strategy that had felled Jules and Alphonse de Mélamare. So the corselet was actually stolen in the Valnéry salon. Like the Comtesse, Laurence wore on her finger a ring with three small pearls set in a triangle. Like the Comtesse, she wore a plum-coloured dress trimmed with black velvet. Like the Comte, Antoine Fagerault wore light spats. . . . Two hours after, Laurence got into the Mélamare house and hid the silver tunic in one of the books in the library, where, a few weeks later, it was discovered as proof incontrovertible by Chief Inspector Béchoux whom I brought thither. The Comte was arrested. His sister escaped. For the third time, the Mélamares were ruined. It meant scandal; prison; then, suicide, and immunity for the descendants of La Valnéry.”

. . . . . .

No one had interrupted Jean's narrative. He spoke on in a dry tone, pointing his sentences with one finger, and each of his listeners lived through the dark history whose ramifications were at last revealed and made plain.

Antoine began to laugh, and it was quite a natural laugh.

"Most amusing! All hangs together so well, too. Our powerful serial, with a thrill in every paragraph. Congrats, d'Enneris. But I'm afraid that so far as I'm concerned, without even going into the question of my supposed relationship with the Martins, and my absolute ignorance on the score of this second house you mention, and which, I'm afraid, only exists in your lurid imagination, my part in this business is exactly the opposite of that you describe. I have never kidnapped anyone, nor stolen any diamond corselet. All that my friends the Mélamares, that Arlette, that Béchoux and yourself can have seen of my actions is nothing but the sheerest disinterestedness, help and friendship. You're out of luck, d'Enneris."

A valid objection, on some counts, which did not fail to strike the Comte and his sister. The overt conduct of Fagerault had always been beyond reproach. And, on the other hand, he might indeed know nothing of this second house. D'Enneris did not attempt to slide out, but answered, still indirectly:

"There are appearances which are deceptive—things which lead one astray. Personally I was never taken in by the bluff heartiness of Milord Fagerault. From the first time when I saw him in the shop of his Aunt Victorine, I thought it must be our enemy. And when I heard him talk that evening, hidden behind the tapestry with Béchoux, my doubt became a certainty. Milord Fagerault was acting a part. Only I confess that, from that day on, his actions floored me. As an enemy he seemed suddenly to be in direct contradiction both to his own character and to the plans of which I suspected him. There he was defending the Mélamares instead of attacking them, and, in some sort, changing sides. What was happening? Oh, something very elementary. Arlette, our lovely, delightful Arlette, had come into his life."

Fagerault shrugged his shoulders with a hearty laugh.

"Brighter yet and brighter," he observed. "Look here, d'Enneris, could Arlette transform my whole nature? And turn me into the accomplice of the rogues I was tracking long before you were?"

"Arlette had come into his life," went on d'Enneris, "some time before. You remember, Monsieur de Mélamare, that, attracted by her resemblance to your dead daughter, you had several times followed Arlette. Now Antoine, who often trailed you, either directly or through his aunts' agency, noticed the girl you followed, tracked her to her home, prowled in the shadow and even tried to accost her one evening when she was out. His primary curiosity became a livelier sentiment which grew at each encounter. We must not forget that Milord Antoine is a romantic, able to mingle tender dreams with his more practical speculations. But he is also a lover

who does not linger on his way. Emboldened by the abduction of Régine, he did not hesitate. With Laurence Martin's aid, although she thought it a risky proceeding, he carried off Arlette. He intended to keep her prisoner, always at his disposal, and profit by the day on which she wearied. Vain hope! Arlette escaped. He then felt a real despair. For some days he suffered genuinely, and could not do without her. He wanted to see her. He wanted to make her love him. And one fine evening, having abruptly changed all his plans, he came to see Arlette and her mother in the guise of an old friend of the Mélamares. He declared that the Comte and Comtesse were innocent. Would Arlette help him to establish their innocence? You see now, don't you, Monsieur de Mélamare, his game in this new departure and how it served him? At one stroke he gained the sympathy of Arlette, only too happy to repair her mistake. He worked with her, he earned your sister's gratitude, persuaded her to go into court, offered her a plan of defence, and saved her along with you. While I, thoroughly disconcerted, wasted my time in reflection, he was making himself at home in your salon. He was welcomed as the good fairy. He offered millions (which cost him nothing to promise) to realize Arlette's generous dreams and, upheld by those he had rescued from the abyss, he finally wrung from her a promise of marriage."

CHAPTER 12. ARSÈNE LUPIN

ANTOINE had edged closer. His whole conduct had been exposed so violently, without a single action remaining cloaked, that he had begun to lose his expression of indifferent irony. It must be remembered, also, that the chloroform had plunged him into a state of physical depression, that his nervous system was thoroughly shaken, and above all that he was fighting an enemy whose power and knowledge he little suspected. Standing in front of Jean, he trembled with suppressed fury, compelled by a stronger will than his own to hear the other out to the end. He began gulping in brief, angry sentences.

“Liar! You miserable blackguard! This is all jealousy on your part!”

“Maybe,” cried d’Enneris, turning abruptly round on him and at last accepting the direct encounter he had so far refused. “Maybe, since I too am in love with Arlette. But I was not your only enemy. Your real enemies were your former accomplices. Your grandfather, your aunts, who remained unshakably faithful to the past, while you were trying to turn over a new leaf.”

“I don’t know these accomplices you speak of,” said Antoine, “or rather I only knew them as enemies and fought to ward them off.”

“You fought because they got in your way, you were frightened of being compromised, and you wanted to render them harmless. But nothing could invalidate criminals—or rather homicidal maniacs—of their calibre. For instance, there was a town-planning project to enlarge and straighten various roads in the du Marais quarter of Paris, one of which was the Rue Vieille du Marais. The execution of that would mean the construction of a new road cutting right across the Folie-Valnéry. Now that Dominique Martin and his daughters would never allow. The old house was sacred. Flesh of their flesh, their very life-blood. Anything rather than a destruction which amounted to sacrilege! Laurence Martin entered upon negotiations with a town councillor of shady reputation. Trapped, she fled away, and old Dominique killed Monsieur Lecourceux with a revolver shot.”

“What did I know about that?” protested Antoine. “Why, it was you who told me of the murder.”

“Certainly. But the murderer was your grandfather and Laurence Martin was his accomplice. And on that very day they turned their attack on the girl you love, whom they had marked down. Indeed, if you had not known Arlette and if you had not wanted to marry her, despite them, you would not have betrayed the cause of your family. Not very lucky for Arlette! When some one gets in the way, they are suppressed. Lured to a lonely garage, Arlette would have been burnt alive if you had not arrived on the scene in time.”

“Which surely proves that I am Arlette’s friend,” suggested Fagerault, “and a resolute enemy of those scum?”

“Yes, but the scum are—your family.”

“Liar!”

“Your family. It’s all very well for you to have had that terrible scene with them that evening, reproaching them for their crimes and protesting that you wouldn’t be a party to their murders. All very well for you to forbid them to touch a hair of Arlette’s head. But you are liable for the actions of your grandfather and your aunts.”

“One is not liable for the actions of bandits!” protested Fagerault, losing ground at each fresh onslaught.

“Yes, if one is their accomplice and has stolen with them.”

“I never stole!”

“You stole the diamonds, and, moreover, you kept them for yourself, hidden away. You refused them their share of the booty. And that was partly what turned you against each other in a frenzy till it was war to the knife. Hounded by justice, terrified, believing you capable of betraying them, they left their house and retreated to a shack in the suburbs, which belonged to them. But they would not give up. They wanted those diamonds! And they wanted to save their ancestral hall. And they wrote to you, or telephoned you. Two nights running they arranged to meet you in the Champ de Mars gardens. No agreement was reached. You refused to share up and you refused to shelve the idea of your marriage. Then the three of them employed the supreme argument: they tried to kill you. In the shadow of the garden a deadly battle raged. You had youth and strength on your side. You won. When Victorine Martin came in too close upon you, you finished her with a knife-stab.”

Antoine staggered, livid. The conjuration of that terrible moment shook him badly. He was sweating with fear.

“From that time it looked as though you had nothing to fear. In favour with every one, in the confidence of the Mélamares, Van Houben’s friend, Béchoux’s adviser—master of the situation. And what were your plans? To rid yourself of the past by letting the Folie-Valnéry be taken over and destroyed. To break for ever with the Martins, whom you would pay off at a given moment. To return to honest citizenship. To marry Arlette. To buy the Hôtel in the Rue d’Urfé. And, in such wise, reunite in yourself the two enemy lines and enjoy without remorse or apprehension living in that house, whose ‘double’ would no longer be a pretext for theft and violence. That was your aim. There was only one obstacle—myself! You knew I was your enemy and you knew how I felt about Arlette. So then, in excess of prudence, leaving nothing to chance, you took further precautions and sought to compromise me fatally. Wasn’t that the best way to assure your own safety? Isn’t the accusation of

another a good means of defence? And, just as you carefully wrote the name Arsène Lupin on the paper you slipped into Victorine Martin's pocket, so you proceeded to play on this new string. 'Arsène Lupin is Jean d'Enneris.' You proclaimed it in the papers. You set Béchoux on me. Which of us would win the day? He who first got the other arrested, of course. And that would be you, eh? You were so sure of victory that you provoked me openly. The end was in sight—a question first of hours, then of minutes. We were at grips under the eyes of the police. Béchoux had only to choose between us. The danger was so great for me that I felt the necessity of stepping back, so to speak, and dotting you one on the jaw."

Antoine Fagerault looked all round, searching for support, for sympathy. But the Comte and his sister, and Van Houben too, were looking sternly at him. Arlette seemed abstracted. Béchoux had that ruthless expression of the detective who sees his man within his grasp.

He shuddered, but still tried to put on a bold face and rout his enemy.

"What proofs have you?"

"Twenty! For a week I have lived in the shadow of the Martins, whom I managed to track down. I have letters from Laurence to you and from you to Laurence. I have notebooks—a kind of diary kept by Victorine Martin, the dealer, in which she tells the whole story of La Valnéry and your own history in all its details."

"And why have you not already turned all that over to the police?" faltered Antoine, pointing to Béchoux.

"Because I first wanted to convict you of baseness and thievery before every one, and because I wanted next to show you an avenue of escape."

"What's that?"

"Give back the diamonds."

"But I haven't got them!" cried Antoine in a gust of fury.

"Oh, yes, you have. Laurence Martin accuses you of just that. You've got them hidden."

"Where?"

"In that other house—the Folie-Valnéry."

Antoine almost exploded with rage.

"Then you know this non-existent Hôtel? You know this mysterious, fantastic abode?"

“Good heavens, the day when Laurence wanted to bribe the town councillor about that report, and I found that the report concerned the widening of a road, it was easy for me, knowing the road, to find the position of a big house with a courtyard in front and a garden behind.”

“Well, why haven’t you taken us there? If you want to confound me and get these diamonds I’ve hidden, why aren’t we at La Valnéry’s house?”

“But we are,” remarked d’Enneris quietly.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that a little chloroform sent you right off to sleep, and enabled you to be brought here with Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare.”

“Here?”

“Yes—the house of La Valnéry.”

“But we’re not at the house of La Valnéry at all! We’re in the Rue d’Urfé.”

“We’re in that same salon where you robbed Régine and to which you brought Arlette.”

“It’s not true . . . it’s not true . . .” muttered Antoine in dismay.

“What,” sneered d’Enneris, “is the illusion so perfect that you yourself, the great-grandson of La Valnéry and the grandson of Dominique Martin, are deceived?”

“It isn’t true! You’re making it up! It’s impossible!” Fagerault went on, making himself perceive non-existent differences between the various objects in the room.

And Jean, mercilessly, pursued:

“It is here. It is here that you lived with the Martins. Almost all the other rooms in the house are empty now. But this room has all its furniture. The staircase and the court wear their ancient aspect. This is the Folie-Valnéry.”

“It’s a lie, it’s a lie,” stammered the wretched Antoine.

“It is here. The house is surrounded. Béchoux has come on with us. His men are in the courtyard and in the basement. It is here, Antoine Fagerault! It is here that Dominique and Laurence Martin, both obsessed by this fatal dwelling, creep back from time to time. Do you want to see them, eh? Do you want to be present at their arrest?”

“*See them?*” gasped Fagerault.

“Why, man, if you saw them suddenly appear, you would surely admit that they were in their own home, and that we are in the Rue Vieille du Marais, and not in the Rue d’Urfé.”

“And are they going to be arrested?”

“Unless,” jested d’Enneris, “Béchoux shirks the onus——”

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed six times with its sharp little note. And d’Enneris observed:

“Six o’clock! You know how exact they are. I heard them the other night say they would call round here to-day on the stroke of six. Look out of the window, Antoine. They always come in at the bottom of the garden. Look.”

Antoine had gone to the window, and despite himself was peering through the net curtain. The others, too, bent forward in their chairs, trying to see, motionless and anxious.

And, near the deserted lodge, the little door through which Arlette had escaped swung slowly open. Dominique came in first, followed by Laurence.

“Oh, this is terrible . . .” breathed Antoine . . . “a nightmare!”

“It’s no nightmare, my friend,” d’Enneris told him. “It’s grim reality. Monsieur Martin and daughter, taking a stroll in the grounds of their home. Ha, ha! Béchoux, would you please dispose your little band below this room? . . . You know? In the lobby full of old flower-pots. Not a sound, remember. At the least alarm, Monsieur Martin and daughter would vanish like a dream. The house has its pitfalls, I warn you, and under the garden is a secret way out, leading to the empty lane, and issuing in a neighbouring stable. So you must wait till they are close up to the windows. Then you must spring on them, and keep them, secured, in the hall.”

Béchoux went off hastily. They heard a scuffling downstairs. Then silence.

Down below, father and daughter crept along with stealthy steps, in that manner common to criminals, due not to any particular anxiety, but manifesting that perpetual alertness of strained eyes and ears, with every nerve tense.

“Oh, this is terrible,” repeated Antoine dully.

But it was Gilberte whose emotion ran the highest. She watched with unspeakable misery the slow approach of the two wretched beings. For her and her brother, who could imagine themselves in their salon in the Rue d’Urfé, Dominique and Laurence were the representatives of that line which had caused them so much suffering. They seemed to emerge from the shadowy past, and to be coming yet again to attack the Mélamares and bring them once more to dishonour and death.

Gilberte slid from her chair and fell on her knees. The Comte's hands clenched in fury.

"I beg of you not to move," said d'Enneris. "Nor you, Fagerault!"

"Spare them!" besought the latter. "If they are put in prison, they will kill themselves. They've often told me so."

"What of it? Haven't they done enough harm?"

And now they could be clearly seen, a little way off. They had the same bleakness of expression, crueller in the daughter, more impressive in the father, whose smooth, angular, inhuman face seemed ageless.

Suddenly they stopped dead. Had they heard something? Had something moved somewhere? Or was it just a sixth sense warning them of danger ahead?

Reassured, they came on again.

And suddenly it was as if a pack of hounds fell upon them. Three men sprang out and held them at wrist and throat before they could make any attempt at flight or resistance. There was no cry. A few seconds later, they disappeared, dragged off to the basement. Dominique and Laurence so long sought for, invisible heirs of so many unpunished crimes, were in the hands of justice at last.

There was a moment's silence. Gilberte, on her knees, was praying voicelessly. Adrien de Mélamare felt as though the lid of his coffin had been raised, and he could breathe again. Then d'Enneris bent forward to Antoine Fagerault and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"And now it's your turn, Fagerault. You are the last of your line, of the accursed race, and like the rest, you must pay the ancient debt."

There was now no trace in Antoine Fagerault of the smiling, carefree individual they had known. In this short time he had become a thing of distress and collapse, trembling with fright.

Arlette came up.

"Save him," she besought d'Enneris, "I beg of you."

"He cannot be saved," said d'Enneris. "Béchoux is on guard."

"I beg of you," she implored. "I know you can do it if you wish."

"But it's he who does not wish it. He has only to say the word, but he keeps it back."

With a sudden uprush of energy, Antoine pulled himself together. "What must I do?" he asked.

“Where are the diamonds?”

And, as Antoine hesitated, Van Houben, beside himself, set upon him.

“The diamonds—immediately! Otherwise I myself will finish you off!”

“Don’t waste time, Antoine,” commanded d’Enneris. “I repeat—the house is surrounded. Béchoux is even now placing his men, and there are more of them than you imagine. If you want me to save you from him, speak up. Where are the diamonds?”

He held him pinioned by one arm and Van Houben held the other.

“I shall go free?” asked Antoine.

“I swear it.”

“What will become of me?”

“You will go to America. Van Houben will send you a hundred thousand francs to Buenos Aires.”

“A hundred thousand! Two hundred thousand!” cried Van Houben, ready to promise anything, so long as he wasn’t kept to it. “Three hundred thousand——”

Still Antoine hesitated.

“Must I call Béchoux?” asked Jean.

“No . . . no . . . wait . . . well . . . all right, I agree.”

“Speak, then.”

In a low voice,—

“They’re in the next-door room,” said Antoine, “in the boudoir.”

“No fooling,” said Jean. “That room’s empty. All the furniture was sold.”

“Except the chandelier. Old Martin clung to that most of all.”

“And you hid the diamonds in the chandelier!”

“No—I substituted them for a certain number of the smallest crystals in the top circle . . . one in two, exactly. I fixed the diamonds on with little bits of wire, so that it looked as though they were pierced and strung like the other drops on the chandelier.”

“Well! That was pretty smart!” exclaimed d’Enneris. “You certainly go up one, my lad.”

With Van Houben's help, he thrust back the tapestry and opened the communicating door. The boudoir was indeed empty. But from the ceiling hung a fine eighteenth-century chandelier, all in chains of cut crystals.

"Well?" asked d'Enneris in astonishment. "Where are they?"

The three of them searched, head in air. Then Van Houben let out in a doleful voice:

"I can't see anything . . . the chains of the smallest circle are incomplete. That's all."

"Well, then . . ." said Jean.

Van Houben went and got a chair, which he stood under the chandelier, and climbed on it. Almost at once he nearly lost his balance and fell.

"Stolen!" he screamed. "They've been stolen again!"

Antoine Fagerault seemed utterly confounded.

"No . . . surely . . . that's impossible. Can Laurence have found them after all?"

"Too right she has," groaned Van Houben, who could hardly find words to express his anguish.

"You put a diamond for every other crystal, didn't you?"

"Yes . . . I swear I did."

"Well, the Martins have had the lot. . . . See, the wires have been cut one by one with clippers. . . . This is awful. . . . I've never known anything like it. . . . At the very moment when we thought . . ."

His voice came back suddenly, and he rushed out into the hall crying:

"Thief! Thief! Béchoux, stop them, they've got my diamonds. Force them to speak! Twist their wrists! Put the thumbscrews on them!"

D'Enneris came back into the salon, readjusted the tapestry and said to Antoine, staring him in the face:

"Do you swear that you put the diamonds there?"

"On the very same night, and they were still there last time I came—a week ago, on a day when I knew the other two would not be here."

Arlette came up. Laying a hand on d'Enneris' arm,—

"Please believe him, Jean," she besought. "I'm sure he's speaking the truth now. And now you must keep your promise even as he has kept his. You must help him to escape."

D’Enneris did not answer. The disappearance of the jewels seemed to have disconcerted him somewhat, and he repeated between clenched teeth:

“Most odd . . . odd and inexplicable. If they had the diamonds, what need was there for them to come back here? . . . Where did they hide them themselves?”

But the incident did not long absorb his attention, and as the Comte de Mélamare and his sister were urging him with as much insistence as Arlette to help Antoine, his expression suddenly cleared, and he said with a smile:

“Well, well! I see that, in spite of all, your hearts go out to Master Fagerault. All the same, Master Fagerault isn’t exactly beaming, is he? Brace up, old chap. All is not lost. You look like the condemned man minus the hearty breakfast. Are you scared of Béchoux? Poor old Béchoux! Want me to show you how one deals with him—how one wriggles gently through the meshes of his net, and, instead of going to jail, fixes things so as to sleep in a nice white bed in Belgium?”

He rubbed his hands together.

“Yes, in Belgium, this very night as ever is. Dost like the picture? And shall I give the signal?”

He stamped thrice on the floor. At the third stamp the door opened suddenly and Béchoux fairly leapt into their midst.

“No one is to leave the room,” he cried.

D’Enneris might jest, and Béchoux’s irruption on the stroke of the signal might strike him as abnormally funny and mirth-provoking, but the others did not see it in that light and were thoroughly taken aback.

Béchoux shut the door behind him, and with tragic solemnity, as was his wont in such moments, declared:

“I have given my orders, to be observed by every one. No one may leave the house without my permission.”

“Fine,” approved d’Enneris, seating himself comfortably. “I just love the voice of authority. What you say is absolute rot, but you say it with such conviction! Do you hear, Fagerault? If you want to take a stroll, you must put up your hand and say ‘Please, Teacher,’ to Chief Inspector Béchoux before stirring!”

This touched off Béchoux’s temper.

“That’s enough from you,” he cried. “We’ve a score to settle, and it’s more serious than you think!”

D’Enneris collapsed into helpless laughter.

“Poor old Béchoux, what a clown you are! Why be so dramatic over it all when your mere presence turns the whole business into a farce! Fagerault and I have called quits. So there’s no need to come the stern detective over us and wave your warrant in our faces.”

“What do you mean? How are you quits?”

“In every way. Fagerault could not give us back the diamonds. But, since old Martin and his daughter are in the clutches of the law, they are sure to be forthcoming.”

Shamelessly, Béchoux declared:

“To hell with the diamonds!”

“Oh, Béchoux, naughty, naughty! And with ladies present! Anyway, we are all agreed here—the diamond question doesn’t come into it, and, through the representations of the Comte de Mélamare and the Comtesse and Arlette, my heart is softened towards Fagerault.”

“After all you’ve told us about him?” sneered Béchoux.

“What would you? He saved my life once. There’s no getting away from that. Anyway, he’s not such a bad egg.”

“A crook!”

“Oh, a semi-crook only—astute but a piker, ingenious and devoid of genius—trying to swim against the tide. He’s elected honest citizenship now, you see. And we ought to help him, Béchoux. Van Houben is giving him a hundred thousand francs, and I am offering him the job of cashier in an American bank.”

Béchoux’s shoulders squared ominously.

“Come off it!” he urged. “I’m taking the Martins to the station, and there are two spare seats in the car.”

“Lucky for you—you’ll have so much more room!”

“Fagerault . . .”

“You’re not to lay a finger on him. It would mean a scandal for Arlette. And that I can’t allow. Leave us in peace, Béchoux.”

“But look here,” cried Béchoux in ever-growing irritation, “don’t you understand what I mean when I say that I’ve *two* spare seats? The idea is that the muster should be complete!”

“And you mean to bear off Fagerault?”

“Certainly.”

“And——?”

“You!”

“Me? You want to arrest me?”

“The thing is done,” said Béchoux, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder.

D’Enneris registered immense surprise.

“But the man’s mad! He ought to be under lock and key, poor devil! What! I unravel the whole tangled skein, I toil like a black slave, I heap benefits on your ungrateful head, I hand over to you Dominique Martin—and Laurence Martin—and the Mélamare secret. I present you with a worldwide reputation, I authorize you to say you did it all with your little hatchet, I put you in the way of getting promotion and greeting the world as an Assistant Commissioner. And is this my reward? Oh, Béchoux, you have broken my heart.”

Monsieur de Mélamare and his sister listened in silence. What on earth was this fellow driving at? For if he jested it must surely be with some purpose. Antoine seemed less worried. Even Arlette looked as though, despite her anxiety, she wanted to laugh.

Béchoux rejoined emphatically:

“The two Martins? They are being guarded by a policeman and Van Houben, who won’t take their eyes off them you may be sure. Downstairs in the hall, there are three of my men—the toughest! Three more in the garden—just as beefy. Take a look at their mugs and you’ll see they’re no mother’s boys. And every one of them has orders to knock you down and sit on you if you attempt to escape. The whole thing is taped. On hearing my whistle, they will all rush up here and all you’ll get will be revolver shots and fisticuffs.”

D’Enneris’ head went up mutinously. He seemed bewildered, and repeated,—

“You want to arrest me! You want to arrest that impeccable gentleman, name of d’Enneris, the well-known navigator . . .”

“No, not d’Enneris.”

“Whom, then! Jim Barnett?”

“Not him either.”

“Then——?”

“Arsène Lupin!”

D’Enneris burst out laughing.

“You want to arrest Arsène Lupin? But that’s too priceless. My poor fish, one doesn’t arrest Arsène Lupin. D’Enneris perhaps—or even Jim Barnett, *perhaps*. But Lupin! Come, come, you can’t know what it stands for, that name of Lupin?”

“It stands for a man, just like other men,” cried Béchoux. “And he’s going to get what’s coming to him!”

“It stands for a man,” declared d’Enneris warmly, “who has never put up with anything from anyone—let alone from a boob like you—a man who is a law unto himself, who pleases himself and lives as he chooses. Who is perfectly willing to collaborate with justice, but in his own way—which is the right way. Hop it!”

Béchoux became crimson in the face. He fairly shook with fury.

“That’s enough from you. Now you both come with me!”

“Sorry, it can’t be did.”

“Am I to call my men?”

“They won’t come inside this room!”

“We’ll see about that!”

“Remember that this is the bandits’ lair—the house is riddled with surprises! Want me to prove it?”

His hand turned the little rose carved on a panel.

“By turning that rose, all the locks are jammed. Your orders are that no one shall leave the room. Mine are that no one shall enter it!”

“They will break down the door—they’ll smash the place to bits!” cried Béchoux, beside himself.

“Call them!”

Béchoux drew out his police whistle.

“Your whistle is out of order,” d’Enneris told him.

Béchoux blew into it with every atom of strength, but no sound came—merely the windy outrush of his breath.

D’Enneris’ mirth was redoubled. He held his sides.

“Lord, this is funny! And you’re out to fight me? But see here, old thing, if I really am Lupin, do you think I should have come here with a squad of police without first taking a few elementary precautions? Don’t you think I’d have foreseen your

treachery and ingratitude? But this is a house of surprises, my friend, and I repeat, that I know all the tricks!”

And, coming close to Béchoux, he hurled in his face:

“Fool! You’ve rushed into this like a madman. You think that by surrounding yourself with policemen, you can hold me! And what about the secret passage I told you about just now? That way in and out known to La Valnéry and to the Martins, but unknown to the world—unknown even to Fagerault, but discovered by me? I am free—free to leave when I please, and so is Fagerault. And you can do nothing to prevent it.”

Still facing Béchoux, he thrust Fagerault behind him to the wall between the mantelpiece and one of the windows.

“Go into the old alcove, and look on the right . . . there’s a carved panel . . . the whole panel comes away . . . got it?”

D’Enneris was watching Béchoux like a lynx. The latter wanted to use his revolver, but found his arm held in a vice-like grip.

“Must I tell you again not to get dramatic! Laugh, man, laugh—it’s so darned humorous! You didn’t foresee a thing, did you? . . . Not even the secret passage, not even that I should filch your whistle and substitute another. Here is yours—you may use it now!”

He pirouetted lightly and disappeared. Béchoux hurled himself against the partition. A gust of laughter answered his blows upon the woodwork. Then they heard something being slid away, and a creaking sound.

In his blind rage, Béchoux did not hesitate. He was not going to waste time battering his fists to pulp. Picking up his whistle, he sprang to the window, opened it and leapt out.

The moment he was in the garden, surrounded by his men, he blew the whistle, and running towards the lodge, towards the deserted road into which the secret passage opened, he whistled yet again, with piercing blasts that rent the air.

At the window, Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare leaned out waiting breathlessly. Arlette sighed:

“They won’t take them, surely? It would be too dreadful!”

“No, no,” said Gilberte, not striving to hide her emotion. “No, no; see, it’s getting dark. They can’t, they mustn’t be taken!”

All three were immeasurably desirous for the escape of the two men—the escape of Fagerault, burglar and bandit, and the escape of d’Enneris, that strange adventurer,

whose character left no room for doubt, and who throughout the whole affair had so conducted his operations that they could not help but take his part against the police.

Hardly a minute had gone by when Arlette said again:

“It would be too dreadful if they were taken. But it’s impossible, isn’t it?”

“Impossible!” said a joyous voice behind her. “They will not take them because they are looking for them at the exit of an utterly non-existent subterranean passage!”

The old alcove had opened again. D’Enneris had come out of it, followed by Fagerault.

Jean was still laughing heartily.

“No secret passage! No sliding panel! No jammed locks! Nothing! Never was there more honest and unmysterious house. Only, you see, I got Béchoux into such a state of nerves and credulity that he was quite beyond reflecting calmly.”

Then, smoothly, addressing Antoine:

“You see, Fagerault, it’s like a theatrical production—it needs careful preparation. When the scene is set, suggestion is the card to play. And that was how Béchoux, charged with suggestion, raced off in the direction I wanted, and all the police were drawn to the stables, whose entrance they have by this time broken down. Look at them rushing across the lawn like rabbits. Come on, Fagerault—there’s no time to lose!”

D’Enneris seemed so calm and spoke with such assurance that his attitude communicated itself to the others, and they felt their agitation decrease. The danger suddenly appeared negligible—they envisaged Béchoux and his men prowling in the road outside and breaking down doors, all to no purpose!

The Comte held out his hand to d’Enneris.

“You have no further need of my services, I take it, monsieur?” he asked with grave courtesy.

“No, monsieur. The road is clear for another few minutes.”

Jean bowed to Gilberte, who also shook hands with him.

“I shall never be able to thank you enough for all you have done for us,” she told him.

“And for the honour of our name and family,” added the Comte. “I thank you with all my heart.”

“I shall be seeing you soon, Arlette darling,” said d’Enneris. “Say good-bye to her, Fagerault. Out of the kindness of her heart she’ll write to you: Antoine Fagerault, bank cashier, Buenos Aires.”

From the drawer of a table he snatched a small package done up with a rubber band. Then he bowed a last time and was gone, taking Fagerault with him. Monsieur and Madame de Mélamare and the girl followed them with wondering eyes.

The hall was empty. It was growing dusk, and in the middle of the court could be seen the shadowy forms of two cars. One—that from the Préfecture—held old Martin and his daughter, securely bound. Van Houben, revolver in hand, was keeping guard over them with the chauffeur's aid.

"The day is won!" announced d'Enneris, coming up to Van Houben. "There was yet another of the gang hiding in a cupboard and they smoked him out. It was he who snooped the diamonds. Béchoux and his men are after the blighter now."

"What about the diamonds?" Van Houben wanted to know—suspecting no guile on the part of d'Enneris.

"Oh, Fagerault found those."

"Have you got them?" Van Houben began to dance with excitement.

"Yes," said d'Enneris, displaying the package and opening it a little.

"My God! The diamonds! Hand them over!" Van Houben made a grab which d'Enneris eluded.

"All in good time," he said, "but first of all we must get Antoine safely off the premises. That is the one condition I make—not a hard one. You must take us in your car."

From the moment of the diamonds' reappearance, Van Houben was ready to concede anything. The three of them left the courtyard and sprang into the car. As they shot into the road,—

"Where to?" asked Van Houben.

"To Belgium," was the calm reply. "And see if she won't do a hundred, while you're about it—bust the speedometer, we shan't care."

"Right," said Van Houben, seizing the package from d'Enneris and pocketing it.

"Just as you like," said Jean. "But if we aren't across the frontier before they've telegraphed from the Préfecture, I shall take them back. I warn you!"

The thought that the diamonds were in his pocket, the fear of losing them again, and the irresistible influence wielded by d'Enneris over him, all served to bring Van Houben to the pitch when his sole idea was to keep going at top speed, never slackening even through villages. His whole being was concentrated on winning through to the frontier in time.

They reached it soon after midnight.

“We’ll stop here,” said Jean, just before the customs. “I will shepherd Fagerault so that he has no further worries, and I’ll rejoin you here in an hour’s time. Then we’ll drive straight back to Paris.”

Van Houben waited in the car for two hours. It was only then that a sudden suspicion pierced him to the heart. All along he had been revolving the position in his mind, wondering just why d’Enneris was taking this line, and what resistance to make should there be any attempt to take back the precious package. But he had never for an instant doubted that the package contained his diamonds.

By the light of a flare, with trembling hands he investigated the package. It held several dozen small cut crystals, which had evidently come off the mutilated chandelier. . . .

Van Houben drove straight back to Paris at the same reckless speed. Fooled by d’Enneris and Fagerault, realizing that he had simply served as a getaway for the two crooks to leave France, he felt his sole hope of recovering the diamonds now lay in the possible revelations of old Martin and his daughter Laurence.

But when he got to Paris, it was to find the papers full of the last grim development in the Mélamare case—old Martin had strangled himself in his cell; Laurence Martin had taken poison. . . .

EPILOGUE: ARLETTE AND JEAN

THE double suicide of the Martins made a terrific impression on the Parisian public. It was perhaps a fitting climax to a case which had for weeks aroused the strongest popular feeling. It came as a tragic and yet inevitable close to the dark trail of mystery and horror stretching back over a whole century. And it ended the long ordeal inflicted by fate on the Mélamare family.

Unexpectedly, yet after all naturally, Chief Inspector Béchoux failed to reap from this doomsday the public recognition and acclamation he seemed to have earned. All the interest centred on d'Enneris, or rather Arsène Lupin. For, all said and done, the press, and in its wake the police, were sure it was a case of two names for but a single man. Lupin was at once hailed as the real hero of the affair—the man who had solved the historic puzzle, cleared up the mystery of the two houses, brought to light the whole story of La Valnéry, saved the Mélamares and brought the criminals to book. Béchoux's part was reduced to that of an "extra"—a ridiculous subordinate, fooled by Lupin, for whom he had confidingly furnished—along with Van Houben—all the means for that farcical flight to the Belgian frontier.

But the public introduced an innovation, going farther than press or police, by attributing the disappearance of the diamonds to Arsène Lupin! Since Lupin had performed all things, prepared all things and succeeded in all things, the obvious inference was that he had pocketed all things into the bargain! The crowd took on trust what had not been apparent to Béchoux, Van Houben or the Mélamares. And the crowd had logic on their side, since nothing could have made a neater finish to the affair than this eleventh-hour haul by Lupin.

Béchoux's exasperation became frenzied. He was too clear-sighted not to realize his own denseness up to date, and did not for a moment attempt to blink the truth of what the public so spontaneously proclaimed. But he rushed round to Van Houben and overwhelmed that unfortunate man with reproach and sarcasm.

"Loud laughter off! I told you from the start that fiend would find the diamonds, but you would never see them again. As usual, all our efforts have simply served to further his interests. He has used us as pawns in his game—tools to his hand. He collaborates with the police, and takes every advantage of their spadework to smooth his path, then when the case is solved—thanks to him, I admit—it's Farewell all, and off he goes with the goods!"

Van Houben, sick and exhausted, had taken to his bed.

"They're quite gone, then?" he moaned from under the eiderdown. "No use looking for them now?"

Béchoux confessed himself discouraged. With a new humility partaking almost of the sublime,—

“We must resign ourselves,” he said; “we are powerless against that man. He has inexhaustible resources of invention and energy in the execution of his plans. Look at the way he got me to believe in that secret passage at the Martins, and pipped me off in one direction so that he could calmly walk away in the other. That was sheer genius. It’s the height of folly to try to fight anyone of that calibre. I give it up!”

“Well, I don’t!” cried Van Houben, raising himself on one pyjama-clad elbow.

“Let me ask you just one thing, Monsieur Van Houben?” said Béchoux. “Are you quite ruined by the loss of those diamonds?”

“Oh, no,” replied the other with unthinking candour.

“Then if you take my advice you’ll be satisfied with what you’ve still got, and not give the diamonds another thought. Might as well make up your mind to it—you’ll never see them again.”

“Give up my diamonds! Never see them again! But that’s an impossible idea! See here, the police are still on the trail, aren’t they?”

“Oh—after a fashion. But they’re up against a blank wall and they know it!”

“What about yourself, though?”

“Oh, I’ve cut right out of it!” said Béchoux airily.

“Then what’s going to happen?” demanded Van Houben.

“Oh, the case will go on record! The Martins are dead, and there is no definite charge out against Fagerault.”

“But they must get after Lupin!” wailed Van Houben. “Don’t you understand? Lupin must be found!”

Béchoux laughed, rather mirthlessly. “Lupin is never found!” he declared.

“Why not try looking for him near Arlette Mazolle? Lupin has a craze on her—he’s sure to hang about near where she lives.”

“We thought of that,” Béchoux told him. “There are two men watching the house now. But——”

“But——?”

“Arlette has simply gone off! They seem to think she has joined Lupin out of France.”

“Fate is against me! I am a broken man,” cried Van Houben, and buried his face in the pillow.

. . . . . .

Arlette had not gone off. Nor had she joined Lupin. But, emotionally exhausted and feeling unable just yet to go back to work, she was taking a rest outside Paris, in a charming woodland bungalow, whose garden fell in flowery terraces to the banks of the Seine.

As a matter of fact, she had gone one day to see Régine Aubry and explain her fit of temper on a previous occasion. The lovely actress, on the crest of the wave now, was rehearsing the lead in a big spectacular revue. She and Arlette fell into each other’s arms, and Régine, seeing the girl all to pieces, asked no questions but proposed that she should stay in her Seineside bungalow.

Arlette accepted, and went home to tell her mother. Next day, she bid the Mélamares farewell. She found them both carefree and happy, quite rid of their wretched domination by the past. Jean d’Enneris had dispelled for ever that which had brooded over brother and sister. They were already deep in plans to modernize and brighten the old house in the Rue d’Urfé.

That very evening Arlette, unknown to a soul, left Paris in a car.

Two weeks went by, slackly, peacefully. Arlette was finding herself again in the calm and solitude. The July sun was bringing the colour back to her cheeks. Waited on by Régine’s confidential servants, she never went outside the garden, and spent most of her time dreaming at the edge of the Seine, on a seat sheltered by limes in flower.

Sometimes a boat bearing a pair of lovers would glide down-stream. Almost every day, an old peasant moored his boat to the opposite bank, among the slippery stones, and sat fishing. Arlette would exchange a few words with him, her eyes following the float bobbing on the little waves, or else straying to the old man’s profile under his “extinguisher” straw hat—idly marking the broad blob of a nose, the stubbly chin.

One afternoon, as she came down to the river’s edge, he motioned her to silence, and she sat down softly beside him. The float at the end of the long rod was submerged and bobbing up and down fitfully. A fish was biting.

The fish must have got suspicious, for the float calmed down again, and Arlette said gaily to her companion:

“No luck to-day, eh? Caught nothing!”

“On the contrary, Mam’selle, I’ve made a fine catch,” he murmured.

“Oh, but,” remonstrated Arlette, pointing to the empty net on the bank, “you haven’t caught a thing.”

“Oh, yes, I have.”

“But what?”

“A very pretty little Arlette!”

At first she did not realize what he had said, and thought she must have misheard the local name for some fish.

But she was quickly disabused, for he repeated:

“A pretty little Arlette, who came and took my hook. . . .” And then, suddenly, she understood: it was Jean d’Enneris, Jean sitting there in the peasant’s clothes, fishing from the peasant’s boat!

Terrified, she stammered out:

“You! You! Oh, go away, please, please go away!”

He took off the straw extinguisher and displayed his laughing countenance.

“Why do you want me to go away, Arlette?”

“I’m frightened . . . please . . . please . . .”

“Frightened of what?”

“They’re after you! . . . there are men watching my home in Paris!” She was trembling from head to foot.

“And is that the reason you disappeared?”

“Yes,” she answered, very low. “I’m so frightened—you can’t know how frightened. I can’t have you being trapped through me. Go away!” She put out her little hands as though to push him from her, but instead they found his hands and were quickly imprisoned. Tears filled her eyes.

“Steady on, pet,” said Jean gently. “No need to get wrought up. Why, they’ve so little hope of finding me, they’re not even trying now!”

“Oh, but they are—they’re looking for you near me.”

“But, my dear, why should they look for me—near you?” Jean’s tone was whimsical but tender.

“Because they know . . .”

She blushed, and stopped suddenly short. He finished the sentence:

“Because they know I love you, and can’t get on without seeing you—that it?”

She drew back on the seat and, less fearful now, soothed by Jean’s smiling calm,—

“Sh!” she admonished him. “You mustn’t say things like that . . . or else I shall have to go.”

Silence fell between them. The Seine flowed serenely on, while they looked long and searchingly at one another. Arlette was amazed to notice how young Jean looked—much younger than in Paris. In his peasant’s smock, with his neck bare to the sun, he seemed just about her own age.

D’Enneris knew a moment’s hesitation, suddenly disquieted by those grave eyes meeting his. What was in the child’s mind?

“Tell me what’s up, Arlette, my sweet? Anyone would think you aren’t a bit pleased to see me!”

As she did not answer, he tried again.

“Do tell me what’s the matter. There’s some kind of barrier between us—something I never expected!”

And then, speaking in a serious voice, no longer the voice of the “little Arlette” he knew, she said:

“There’s one question I must ask you: why have you come here?”

“To see you, of course, baby.”

Arlette shook her head gravely.

“Don’t fool, Jean. There must be other reasons—I know there are.”

D’Enneris was a bit disconcerted.

“Well, yes, Arlette,” he was forced to admit, “there are other reasons. . . . Listen. I’ll explain. When I showed up Fagerault, I spoilt all your plans, your fine, generous plans—you, who wanted to do so much for others. So I felt it was up to me to provide you with the means to carry on the good work, so to speak. . . .”

She heard him out absently. This was nothing like what she had expected. When he had finished, she demanded:

“Did you have the diamonds? You did, didn’t you?”

Between clenched teeth, he answered her:

“Oh, so that’s what’s bothering you, Arlette? Why didn’t you say so to begin with?”

He smiled oddly, a little bitterly perhaps.

“Yes, I had them. I found them on the chandelier the night before. And I chose to keep the discovery to myself and let suspicion rest on the Martins. It seemed to fit in better with my part in the show. It never occurred to me then that the public would guess the truth . . . that truth which you find so unpleasant, eh, Arlette?”

“But,” said Arlette, “you’re going to give the diamonds back, aren’t you?”

“To whom?”

“To Van Houben, of course.”

“Van Houben? Not on your life!” D’Enneris laughed shortly.

“But they belong to him . . . or don’t they?” she finished rather weakly.

“My dear child,” d’Enneris assured her rather grimly, “Van Houben stole those diamonds from an old Jew in Constantinople when he was on his travels some years ago. I can prove it, if you don’t believe me.”

“Then they belong to the Jew,” declared Arlette.

“He died of a broken heart. . . .” Jean regarded her quizzically.

“Then they belong to his family,” she persisted.

Jean cast his eyes heavenward.

“He didn’t have one. No one knew his name or anything at all about him—one of life’s mystery men.”

“So I suppose you have made up your mind to hang on to them.” Arlette was again near tears.

D’Enneris longed to burst out laughing and tell her,—

“Of course, you goose, and I think I’ve some right to them, taking it by and large!”

But instead he answered:

“All through this business, Arlette, I have been a simple seeker after truth. My aim was to free the Mélamares and to unmask Antoine and so get you away from him. As for the diamonds—they shall go towards your good works, my dear, and to any other works you care to name!”

With a toss of her pretty head, Arlette rapped out:

“No, thank you. . . . I don’t want anything. . . . anything. . . .”

A solitary tear trickled down her tilted nose.

“Oh, but why not?” d’Enneris wanted to know.

“Because, as a matter of fact, I’m giving up all my plans now.”

“Oh, but why this thusness? . . . Come, come, not losing heart, are you?” teased Jean.

“No, but I’ve thought things over. I see now that I wanted to do everything in too much of a hurry. I lost my sense of proportion when I won that competition, and I got to thinking I had only to take a thing on to make a go of it.”

“Too true. Clever of you to find it out. But what made you change your mind?”

“Oh,” Arlette shrugged her shoulders, “I’m too young. I’m just—‘little Arlette.’ One has to earn the right to play fairy godmother. And at my age that right is yet to come. . . .”

Jean edged closer.

“You sure you aren’t refusing because you don’t want the money to come that way, Arlette . . . because you blame me? And you’re right, my dear. . . . A nature as straight and steadfast as yours is bound to draw back after all the things that have been said about me . . . things I’ve certainly not denied!”

But she cried out:

“Please don’t deny them; I don’t ask you to deny them! I know nothing and I wish to know nothing.”

Seemingly the secret of the man called Jean d’Enneris burdened and tormented her. She was wild to know the truth, but even more she shrank from piercing the mystery which at once attracted and repelled her.

“Then you don’t want to know who I am?” he said.

“I know who you are, Jean,” came the firm, soft reply.

“Then you tell me—who am I?”

“You are the man who brought me home that night, and kissed me . . . so wonderfully, so sweetly, that I couldn’t manage to forget.”

“What’s this you’re saying, Arlette?” d’Enneris was deeply moved, but tried to keep his tone light.

Arlette was blushing again. But this time she did not lower her eyes.

“I’m saying what I can’t hide any more. I’m saying that you are the biggest thing in my life, and that I’m not ashamed to tell you so, because it’s the truth. That’s what you mean to me. The rest just doesn’t count. You are—Jean!”

“Do you love me, then, Arlette?” he whispered.

“Yes,” came the answer in a little gasp.

“You love me . . . you love me . . .” he repeated, as if this avowal took him aback, as if he could hardly believe his ears. “You love me. . . . Was that your secret, then?”

“Heavens, yes,” she told him, smiling now. “There was the great Mélamare secret . . . and then there was the little secret of the so-called ‘baffling’ Arlette—which was simply the secret of my love!”

“But why did you never tell me?”

“I didn’t trust you . . . you were so attentive to Régine . . . and to Madame de Mélamare . . . but specially to Régine. . . . I was very jealous of her, and pride and unhappiness made me hold my tongue. Once only, I tackled her. But she didn’t understand . . . nor did you.”

“But I was never in love with Régine,” he cried.

“But I thought you were,” she countered. “And it made me so miserable that I accepted Antoine Fagerault . . . out of sheer wretchedness . . . in a fit of pique and annoyance. . . . Besides, he lied to me about you and Régine. It was only by degrees, when I saw you again at the Mélamares, that I began to understand.”

“To understand that I loved you, Arlette?”

“Yes. It came to me gradually. And then, when you said so straight out in front of every one, I felt sure you were telling the truth . . . that all your efforts, all the risks you were running, were on my account. For getting me away from Antoine meant winning me for yourself. . . . But, of course, then it was too late . . . I was swept away by circumstances. . . .”

Jean’s emotion flooded up at each fresh admission, spoken so tenderly, so sweetly.

“It’s my turn to be afraid now, Arlette,” he said very humbly.

“Afraid of what, Jean?”

“Of my own good fortune . . . and also lest you shouldn’t be happy, Arlette.”

“But why shouldn’t I be happy?”

“Because I’ve nothing to offer that’s worthy of you, little Arlette.”

And in a low voice he added:

“I don’t see anyone marrying d’Enneris . . . or Barnett . . . or . . .”

Arlette stopped his mouth with one small hand. She could not bear to hear the name of Arsène Lupin. She was troubled enough by that of Barnett . . . perhaps even by that of d’Enneris. To her, he was Jean—nothing more.

“And *I* don’t see anyone marrying Arlette Mazolle . . .” she breathed.

But he protested.

“My dear! You’re the most adorable thing that ever happened. I’ve no right to spoil your life.”

“You won’t spoil my life, Jean,” she told him. “What will become of me one day or another doesn’t matter a scrap. Don’t let’s talk of the future. Don’t let’s look beyond a certain point . . . or outside the magic circle we can trace around us . . . and our friendship.”

“Our love, you mean.”

But she withstood him.

“We won’t talk about love any more.”

“Then what shall we talk about?” he asked with a troubled smile, for Arlette’s lightest words tortured and exalted him. “What shall we talk about? And what do you ask of me?”

She whispered:

“I want things—differently—more impersonal——”

“What a funny idea!”

“No—I want it on another footing—I——”

“You want us to part, Arlette?” he asked, sick at heart.

“Not at all. I want us to draw closer together, Jean . . . but as friends, just friends who can never be anything more.”

He gave a deep sigh.

“What difficult things you’re asking, little one. Aren’t you . . . aren’t you my little Arlette any longer? Well, I’ll see what can be done. And what else do you want, Arlette?”

“I hardly like to ask.”

“Tell me,” he insisted.

“A few weeks of your life, Jean—two months . . . or three—of space and freedom. . . . Or is that impossible? . . . That we should be two friends *en voyage* together in this land of France. Then, when my holiday’s over, I’ll go back to work. But I need that holiday . . . and that happiness. . . .”

“Arlette darling . . .”

“You’re not laughing at me, Jean? I was afraid . . . It’s so piking—so petty. . . . I’m a fool. Of course you aren’t going to waste your time sampling the joys of friendship with me—under the moon . . . at sunset . . .”

D’Enneris had grown pale. His gaze dwelt on those dewy lips, those fresh cheeks, those rounded young shoulders, that slim form. Must he give up all fond hope?

In the depths of Arlette’s clear eyes he saw that lovely dream of pure friendship, so hard to realize between lovers. But he felt too that she did not want to think things out much or to be too sure what she was going into. And withal she was so sincere, so ingenuous in her request that he found himself reluctant to draw aside the veil of mystery from that near, dear future.

“What are you thinking of, Jean?” she asked him.

“Two things. First, those diamonds. Will it vex you if I keep them?”

“It will, a lot.”

“Then I’ll send them to Béchoux so that he’ll have the credit of their recovery. I certainly owe him that much.”

She thanked him; then asked:

“And what’s the other thing, Jean?”

Gravely, he told her:

“Oh, a fearful problem, Arlette.”

“But what, Jean? You frighten me . . . some obstacle?”

“Not exactly. But it’s going to be difficult . . . fiendishly so . . . it concerns our travels . . . you see . . .”

“Tell me, quickly, I can’t bear it!”

“Well—the thing’s this: What are we going to wear? As I see it, I shall plump for a flannel shirt, blue slops and a straw hat. . . . And you, Arlette, what about corn-coloured accordion pleated organdie?”

She shook with helpless laughter.

“Oh, Jean, Jean, what I love about you is your sense of fun. People watch you, and they think ‘How subtle he is . . . how mysterious.’ And you positively frighten them. And then, pouf! you laugh, and away goes the mystery. That’s the real you, that unexpected fun under everything.”

Bending over, he kissed her finger-tips respectfully.

“Do you know, little friend, that our travels have begun?”

She was amazed to see that, indeed, the trees on the river bank were gliding past them. Without her perceiving it, Jean had unmoored the boat and it was drifting down-stream.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Where are we going?”

“Far away, and farther still!”

“But that’s impossible. What’ll they say when I don’t come back? What will Régine think? And this boat isn’t yours. . . .”

“Don’t bother your head about anything. Just give yourself up to life. Régine herself told me where to find you. I bought the boat, the hat and the smock, and the rest will come all right. You want a holiday—why wait?”

She said no more, but lay back, eyes upturned to the sky.

An hour later they came alongside a launch and were welcomed by an old lady whom Jean introduced as:

“My old nurse, Yvonne.”

The launch was fitted up inside with two separate cabins, light and airy.

“This is yours, on the left, Arlette.” He shut the door on her.

They met for dinner. Then Jean ordered “up anchor.” The engine began throbbing. They were off—off along rivers and canals towards the old towns and smiling fields of France.

Late, very late that night, Arlette lay full length on the bridge, alone. And to the stars and the rising moon she confided that she found life very good, full of delightful surprises . . . and that—oh—well—that could wait for the new day!
