

Through the Wall

Cleveland Moffett

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THROUGH THE WALL

BY

CLEVELAND MOFFETT

AUTHOR OF

THE BATTLE, ETC.

With Illustrations by

H. HEYER

NEW YORK 1909

TO

MY WIFE

AND OUR DELIGHTFUL PARIS HOME IN THE

VILLA MONTMORENCY, WHERE THIS

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C. M.

NEW YORK, AUGUST 1, 1909.

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"'We'll show 'em, eh, Caesar?'"

"'Alice,' he cried ... 'Say it isn't true'"

"'I want you,' he said in a low voice"

"'I didn't _resign_; I was discharged'"

"On the floor lay a man"

"'Ask Beau Cocono,' he called back"

"'Alice, I am innocent'"

"'Have one?' said M. Paul, offering his cigarette case"

"'There it lies to the left of that heavy doorway'"

"' _Cherche!_ ' he ordered"

"He prolonged his victory, slowly increasing the pressure"

"Gibelin beamed. 'The old school has its good points, after all'"

"'I know _why_ you are thinking about that prison'"

"She was just bending over it when Coquenil entered"

"'Did you write this?'"

"And when he could think no longer, he listened to the pickpocket"

"They all swore black and blue that Addison told the truth"
"A door was opened suddenly and he was pushed into a room"
"Stand still, I won't hurt you"
"There! he said with a hideous grin, and he handed Tignol the tooth"
"My dog, my dog!"
"The confessional box was empty--_Alice was gone!_"
"You mean that Father Anselm helped her to run away?" gasped Matthieu"
"No nonsense, or you'll break your arm"
"It's the best disguise I ever saw, I'll take my hat off to you on that"
"You have ordered handcuffs put on a prisoner _for the last time_"
"No, no, no! he shrieked. 'You dogs! You cowards!'"
"What's the matter? Your eyes are shut"
"And a moment later he had carried her safely through the flames"

CHAPTER I

A BLOOD-RED SKY

It is worthy of note that the most remarkable criminal case in which the famous French detective, Paul Coquenil, was ever engaged, a case of more baffling mystery than the Palais Royal diamond robbery and of far greater peril to him than the Marseilles trunk drama--in short, a case that ranks with the most important ones of modern police history--would never have been undertaken by Coquenil (and in that event might never have been solved) but for the extraordinary faith this man had in certain strange intuitions or forms of half knowledge that came to him at critical moments of his life, bringing marvelous guidance. Who but one possessed of such faith would have given up fortune, high position, the reward of a whole career, _simply because a girl whom he did not know spoke some chance words that neither he nor she understood_. Yet that is exactly what Coquenil did.

It was late in the afternoon of a hot July day, the hottest day Paris had known that year (1907) and M. Coquenil, followed by a splendid white-and-brown shepherd dog, was walking down the Rue de la Cite, past the somber mass of the city hospital. Before reaching the Place Notre-Dame he stopped twice, once at a flower market that offered the grateful shade of its gnarled polenia trees just beyond the Conciergerie prison, and once under the heavy archway of the Prefecture de Police. At the flower market he bought a white carnation from a woman in green apron and wooden shoes, who looked in awe at his pale, grave face, and thrilled when he gave her a smile and friendly word. She wondered if it was true, as people said, that M. Coquenil always wore glasses with a slightly bluish tint so that no one could see his eyes.

The detective walked on, busy with pleasant thoughts. This was the hour of his triumph and justification, this made up for the cruel blow that had fallen two years before and resulted, no one understood why, in his leaving the Paris detective force at the very moment of his glory, when the whole city was praising him for the St. Germain investigation. _Beau Cocono!_ That was the name they had given him; he could hear the night crowds shouting it in a silly couplet:

Il nous faut-o
Beau Cocono-o!

And then what a change within a week! What bitterness and humiliation! M. Paul Coquenil, after scores of brilliant successes, had withdrawn from the police force for personal reasons, said the newspapers. His health was affected, some declared; he had laid by a tidy fortune and wished to enjoy it, thought others; but many shook their heads mysteriously and whispered that there was something queer in all this. Coquenil himself said nothing.

But now facts would speak for him more eloquently than any words; now, within twenty-four hours, it would be announced that he had been chosen, on the recommendation of the Paris police department, to organize the detective service of a foreign capital, with a life position at the head of this service and a much larger salary than he had ever received, a larger salary, in fact, than Paris paid to its own chief of police.

M. Coquenil had reached this point in his musings when he caught sight of a red-faced man, with a large purplish nose and a suspiciously black mustache (for his hair was gray), coming forward from the prefecture to meet him.

"Ah, Papa Tignol!" he said briskly. "How goes it?"

The old man saluted deferentially, and then, half shutting his small gray eyes, replied with an ominous chuckle, as one who enjoys bad news: "Eh, well enough, M. Paul; but I don't like that." And, lifting an unshaven chin, he pointed over his shoulder with a long, grimy thumb to the western sky.

"Always croaking!" laughed the other. "Why, it's a fine sunset, man!"

Tignol answered slowly, with objecting nod: "It's too red. And it's barred with purple!"

"Like your nose. Ha, ha!" And Coquenil's face lighted gaily. "Forgive me, Papa Tignol."

"Have your joke, if you will, but," he turned with sudden directness, "don't you remember when we had a blood-red sky like that? Ah, you don't laugh now!"

It was true, Coquenil's look had deepened into one of somber reminiscence.

"You mean the murders in the Rue Montaigne?"

"Pre-cisely."

"Pooh! A foolish fancy! How many red sunsets have there been since we found those two poor women stretched out in their white-and-gold salon? Well, I must get on. Come to-night at nine. There will be news for you."

"News for me," echoed the old man. "Au revoir, M. Paul," and he watched the slender, well-knit figure as the detective moved across the Place Notre-Dame, snapping his fingers playfully at the splendid animal that bounded beside him and speaking to the dog in confidential friendliness.

"We'll show 'em, eh, Caesar?" And the dog answered with eager barking and quick-wagging tail.

[Illustration: "'We'll show 'em, eh, Caesar?'"]

So these two companions advanced toward the great cathedral, directing their steps to the left-hand portal under the Northern tower. Here they paused before statues of various saints and angels that overhang the blackened doorway while Coquenil said something to a professional beggar, who straightway disappeared inside the church. Caesar, meantime, with panting tongue, was eying the decapitated St. Denis, asking himself, one would say, how even a saint could carry his head in his hands.

And presently there appeared a white-bearded sacristan in a three-cornered hat of blue and gold and a gold-embroidered coat. For all his brave apparel he was a small, mild-mannered person, with kindly brown eyes and a way of smiling sadly as if he had forgotten how to laugh.

"Ah, Bonneton, my friend!" said Coquenil, and then, with a quizzical glance: "My decorative friend!"

"Good evening, M. Paul," answered the other, while he patted the dog affectionately. "Shall I take Caesar?"

"One moment; I have news for you." Then, while the other listened anxiously, he told of his brilliant appointment in Rio Janeiro and of his imminent departure. He was sailing for Brazil in three days.

"_Mon Dieu!_" murmured Bonneton in dismay. "Sailing for Brazil! So our friends leave us. Of course I'm glad for you; it's a great chance, but--_will_ you take Caesar?"

"I couldn't leave my dog, could I?" smiled Coquenil.

"Of course not! Of course not! And _such_ a dog! You've been kind to let him guard the church since old Max died. Come, Caesar! Just a moment, M. Paul." And with real emotion the sacristan led the dog away, leaving the detective all unconscious that he had reached a critical moment in his destiny.

How the course of events would have been changed had Paul Coquenil remained outside Notre-Dame on this occasion it is impossible to know; the fact is he did not remain outside, but, growing impatient at Bonneton's delay, he pushed open the double swinging doors, with their coverings of leather and red velvet, and entered the sanctuary. _And immediately he saw the girl_.

She was in the shadows near a statue of the Virgin before which candles were burning. On the table were rosaries and talismans and candles of different lengths that it was evidently the girl's business to sell. In front of the Virgin's shrine was a _prie dieu_ at which a woman was kneeling, but she presently rose and went out, and the girl sat there alone. She was looking down at a piece of embroidery, and Coquenil noticed her shapely white hands and the mass of red golden hair coiled above her neck. When she lifted her eyes he saw that they were dark and beautiful, though tinged with sadness. He was surprised to find this lovely young woman selling candles here in Notre-Dame Church.

And suddenly he was more surprised, for as the girl glanced up she met his gaze fixed on her, and immediately there came into her face a look so strange, so glad, and yet so frightened that Coquenil went to her quickly with reassuring smile. He was sure he had never seen her before, yet he realized that somehow she was equally sure that she knew him.

What followed was seen by only one person, that is, the sacristan's wife, a big, hard-faced woman with a faint mustache and a wart on her chin, who sat by the great column near the door dispensing holy water out of a cracked saucer and whining for pennies. Nothing escaped the hawklike eyes of Mother Bonneton, and now, with growing curiosity, she watched the scene between Coquenil and the candle seller. What interest could a great detective have in this girl, Alice, whom she and her husband had taken in as a half-charity boarder? Such airs as she gave herself! What was she saying now? Why should he look at her like that? The baggage!

"Holy saints, how she talks!" grumbled the sacristan's wife. "And see the eyes she makes! And how he listens! The man must be crazy to waste his time on her! Now he asks a question and she talks again with that queer, far-away look. He frowns and clinches his hands, and--upon my soul he seems afraid of her! He says something and starts to come away. Ah, now he turns and stares at her as if he had seen a ghost! _Mon Dieu, quelle folie!_"

This whole incident occupied scarcely five minutes, yet it wrought an extraordinary change in Coquenil. All his buoyancy was gone, and he looked worn, almost haggard, as he walked to the church door with hard-shut teeth

and face set in an ominous frown.

"There's some devil's work in this," he muttered, and as his eyes caught the fires of the lurid sky he thought of Papa Tignol's words.

"What is it?" asked the sacristan, approaching timidly.

The detective faced him sharply. "Who is the girl in there? Where did she come from? How did she get here? Why does she--" He stopped abruptly, and, pressing the fingers of his two hands against his forehead, he stroked the brows over his closed eyes as if he were combing away error. "No, no!" he changed, "don't tell me yet. I must be alone; I must think. Come to me at nine to-night."

"I--I'll try to come," said Bonneton, with visions of an objecting wife.

"You must come," insisted the detective. "Remember, nine o'clock," and he started to go.

"Yes, yes, quite so," murmured the sacristan, following him. "But, M. Paul--er--which day do you sail?"

Coquenil turned and snapped out angrily: "I may not sail at all."

"But the--the position in Rio Janeiro?"

"A thousand thunders! Don't talk to me!" cried the other, and there was such black rage in his look that Bonneton cowered away, clasp and unclasping his hands and murmuring meekly: "Ah, yes, exactly."

* * * * *

So much for the humble influence that turned Paul Coquenil toward an unbelievable decision and led him ultimately into the most desperate struggle of his long and exciting career. A day of sinister portent this must have been, for scarcely had Coquenil left Notre-Dame when another scene was enacted there that should have been happy, but that, alas! showed only a rough and devious way stretching before two lovers. And again it was the girl who made trouble, this seller of candles, with her fine hands and her hair and her wistful dark eyes. A strange and pathetic figure she was, sitting there alone in the somber church. Quite alone now, for it was closing time, Mother Bonneton had shuffled off rheumatically after a cutting word--she knew better than to ask what had happened--and the old sacristan, lantern in hand and Caesar before him, was making his round of the galleries, securing doors and windows.

With a shiver of apprehension Alice turned away from the whispering shadows and went to the Virgin's shrine, where she knelt and tried to pray. The candles sputtered before her, and she shut her eyes tight, which made colored patterns come and go behind the lids, fascinating geometrical figures that changed and faded and grew stronger. And suddenly, inside a widening green circle, she saw a face, the face of a young man with laughing gray eyes, and her heart beat with joy. She loved him, she loved him!--that was her secret and the cause of her unhappiness, for she must hide her love, especially from him; she must give him some cold word, some evasive reason, not the real one, when he should come presently for his answer. Ah, that was the great fact, he was coming for his answer--he, her hero man, her impetuous American with the name she liked so much, Lloyd Kittredge--how often she had murmured that name in her lonely hours!--_he_ would be here shortly for his answer.

And alas! she must say "No" to him, she must give him pain; she could not hope to make him understand--how could anyone understand?--and then, perhaps, he would misjudge her, perhaps he would leave her in anger and not come back any more. Not come back any more! The thought cut with a sharp

pang, and in her distress she moved her lips silently in the familiar prayer printed before her:

O Marie, souvenez vous du moment supreme ou Jesus votre divin Fils, expirant sur la croix, nous confia a votre maternelle sollicitude.

Her thoughts wandered from the page and flew back to her lover; Why was he so impatient? Why was he not willing to let their friendship go on as it had been all these months? Why must he ask this inconceivable question and insist on having an answer? His wife! Her cheeks flamed at the word and her heart throbbed wildly. His wife! How wonderful that he should have chosen her, so poor and obscure, for such an honor, the highest he could pay a woman! Whatever happened she would at least have this beautiful memory to comfort her loneliness and sorrow.

A descending step on the tower stairs broke in upon her meditations, and she rose quickly from her knees. The sacristan had finished his rounds and was coming to close the outer doors. It was time for her to go. And, with a glance at her hair in a little glass and a touch to her hat, she went out into the garden back of Notre-Dame, where she knew her lover would be waiting. There he was, strolling along the graveled walk near the fountain, switching his cane impatiently. He had not seen her yet, and she stood still, looking at him fondly, dreading what was to come, yet longing to hear the sound of his voice. How handsome he was! What a nice gray suit, and--then Kittredge turned.

"Ah, at last!" he exclaimed, springing toward her with a mirthful, boyish smile. His face was ruddy and clean shaven, the twinkling eyes and humorous lines about the mouth suggesting some joke or drollery always ready on his lips. Yet his was a frank, manly face, easily likable. He was a man of twenty-seven, slender of build, but carrying himself well. In dress he had the quiet good taste that some men are born with, besides a willingness to take pains about shirts, boots, and cravats--in short, he looked like a well-groomed Englishman. Unlike the average Englishman, however, he spoke almost perfect French, owing to the fact that his American father had married into one of the old Creole families of New Orleans.

"How is your royal American constitution?" She smiled, repeating in excellent English one of the nonsensical phrases he was fond of using. She tried to say it gayly, but he was not deceived, and answered seriously in French:

"Hold on. There's something wrong. We've been sad, eh?"

"Why--er--" she began, "I--er----"

"Been worrying, I know. Too much church. Too much of that old she dragon. Come over here and tell me about it." He led her to a bench shaded by a friendly sycamore tree. "Now, then."

She faced him with troubled eyes, searching vainly for words and finding nothing. The crisis had come, and she did not know how to meet it. Her red lips trembled, her eyes grew melting, and she sat there silent and delicious in her perplexity. Kittredge thrilled under the spell of her beauty; he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her.

"Suppose we go back a little," he said reassuringly. "About six months ago, I think it was in January, a young chap in a fur overcoat drifted into this old stone barn and took a turn around it. He saw the treasure and the fake relics and the white marble French gentleman trying to get out of his coffin. And he didn't care a hang about any of 'em until he saw you. Then he began to take notice. The next day he came back and you sold him a little red guidebook that told all about the twenty-five chapels and the seven hundred and ninety-two saints. No, seven hundred and ninety-three, for there was one saint with wonderful eyes and glorious hair and----"

"Please don't," she murmured.

"Why not? You don't know which saint I was talking about. It was My Lady of the Candles. She had the most beautiful hands in the world, and all day long she sat at a table making stitches on cloth of gold. Which was bad for her eyes, by the way."

"Ah, yes!" sighed Alice.

"There are all kinds of miracles in Notre-Dame," he went on playfully, "but the greatest miracle is how this saint with the eyes and the hands and the hair ever dropped down at that little table. Nobody could explain it, so the young fellow with the fur overcoat kept coming back and coming back to see if he could figure it out. Only soon he came without his overcoat."

"In bitter cold weather," she said reproachfully.

"He was pretty blue that day, wasn't he? Dead sore on the game. Money all blown in, overcoat up the spout, nothing ahead, and a whole year of--of damned foolishness behind. Excuse me, but that's what it was. Well, he blew in that day and--he walked over to where you were sitting, you darling little saint!"

"No, no," murmured Alice, "not a saint, only a poor girl who saw you were unhappy and--and was sorry."

Their eyes met tenderly, and for a moment neither spoke. Then Kittredge went on unsteadily: "Anyhow you were kind to me, and I opened up a little. I told you a few things, and--when I went away I felt more like a man. I said to myself: 'Lloyd Kittredge, if you're any good you'll cut out this thing that's been raising hell with you'--excuse me, but that's what it was--and you'll make a new start, right now.' And I did it. There's a lot you don't know, but you can bet all your rosaries and relics that I've made a fair fight since then. I've worked and--been decent and--I did it all for you." His voice was vibrant now with passion; he caught her hand in his and repeated the words, leaning closer, so that she felt his warm breath on her cheek. "All for you. You know that, don't you, Alice?"

What a moment for a girl whose whole soul was quivering with fondness! What a proud, beautiful moment! He loved her, he loved her! Yet she drew her hand away and forced herself to say, as if reprovingly: "You mustn't do that!"

He looked at her in surprise, and then, with challenging directness: "Why not?"

"Because I cannot be what you--what you want me to be," she answered, looking down.

"I want you to be my wife."

"I know."

"And--and you refuse me?"

For a moment she did not speak. Then slowly she nodded, as if pronouncing her own doom.

"Alice," he cried, "look up here! You don't mean it. Say it isn't true."

She lifted her eyes bravely and faced him. "It is true, Lloyd; I can never be your wife."

"But why? Why?"

"I--I cannot tell you," she faltered.

He was about to speak impatiently, but before her evident distress he checked the words and asked gently: "Is it something against me?"

"Oh, no!" she answered quickly.

"Sure? Isn't it something you've heard that I've done or--or not done? Don't be afraid to hurt my feelings. I'll make a clean breast of it all, if you say so. God knows I was a fool, but I've kept straight since I knew you, I'll swear to that."

"I believe you, dear."

"You believe me, you call me 'dear,' you look at me out of those wonderful eyes as if you cared for me."

"I do, I do," she murmured.

[Illustration: "'Alice,' he cried ... 'Say it isn't true.'"]

"You care for me, and yet you turn me down," he said bitterly. "It reminds me of a verse I read," and drawing a small volume from his pocket he turned the pages quickly. "Ah, here it is," and he marked some lines with a pencil. "There!"

Alice took the volume and began to read in a low voice:

"Je n'aimais qu'elle au monde, et vivre un jour sans elle
Me semblait un destin plus affreux que la mort.
Je me souviens pourtant qu'en cette nuit cruelle
Pour briser mon lien je fis un long effort.
Je la nommai cent fois perfide et deloyale,
Je comptai tous les maux qu'elle m'avait causes."

She stopped suddenly, her eyes full of pain.

"You don't think that, you _can't_ think that of me?" she pleaded.

"I'd rather think you a coquette than--" Again he checked himself at the sight of her trouble. He could not speak harshly to her.

"You dear child," he went on tenderly. "I'll never believe any ill of you, never. I won't even ask your reasons; but I want some encouragement, something to work for. I've got to have it. Just let me go on hoping; say that in six months or--or even a year you will be my own sweetheart--promise me that and I'll wait patiently. Can't you promise me that?"

But again she shook her head, while her eyes filled slowly with tears.

And now his face darkened. "Then you will never be my wife? Never? No matter what I do or how long I wait? Is that it?"

"That's it," she repeated with a little sob.

Kittredge rose, eying her sternly. "I understand," he said, "or rather I don't understand; but there's no use talking any more. I'll take my medicine and--good-by."

She looked at him in frightened supplication. "You won't leave me? Lloyd, you won't leave me?"

He laughed harshly. "What do you think I am? A jumping jack for you to pull

a string and make me dance? Well, I guess not. Leave you? Of course I'll leave you. I wish I had never seen you; I'm sorry I ever came inside this blooming church!"

"Oh!" she gasped, in sudden pain.

"You don't play fair," he went on recklessly. "You haven't played fair at all. You knew I loved you, and--you led me on, and--this is the end of it."

"No," she cried, stung by his words, "it's not the end of it. I won't be judged like that. I have played fair with you. If I hadn't I would have accepted you, for I love you, Lloyd, I love you with all my heart!"

"I like the way you show it," he answered, unrelenting.

"Haven't I helped you all these months? Isn't my friendship something?"

He shook his head. "It isn't enough for me."

"Then how about me, if I want your friendship, if I'm hungry for it, if it's all I have in life? How about that, Lloyd?" Under their dark lashes her violet eyes were burning on him, but he hardened his heart to their pleading.

"It sounds well, but there's no sense in it. I can't stand for this let-me-be-a-sister-to-you game, and I won't."

He turned away impatiently and glanced at his watch.

"Lloyd," she said gently, "come to the house to-night."

He shook his head. "Got an appointment."

"An appointment?"

"Yes, a banquet."

She looked at him in surprise. "You didn't tell me!"

"No."

She was silent a moment. "Where is the banquet?"

"At the Ansonia. It's a new restaurant on the Champs Elysees, very swell. I didn't tell you because--well, because I didn't."

"Lloyd," she whispered, "don't go to the banquet."

"Don't go? Why, this is our national holiday. I'm down to tell some stories. I've got to go. Besides, I wouldn't come to you, anyway. What's the use? I've said all I can, and you've said 'No.' So it's all off--that's right, Alice, it's all off." His eyes were kinder now, but he spoke firmly.

"Lloyd," she begged, "come after the banquet."

"No!"

"I ask it for you. I--I feel that something is going to happen. Don't laugh. Look at the sky, there beyond the black towers. It's red, red like blood, and--Lloyd, I'm afraid."

Her eyes were fixed in the west with an enthralled expression, as if she saw something there besides the masses of red and purple that crowned the

setting sun, something strange and terrifying. And in her agitation she took the book and pencil from the bench, and nervously, almost unconsciously wrote something on one of the fly leaves.

"Good-by, Alice," he said, holding out his hand.

"Good-by, Lloyd," she answered in a dull, tired voice, putting down the book and giving him her own little hand.

As he turned to go he picked up the volume and his eye fell on the fly leaf.

"Why," he started, "what is this?" He looked more closely at the words, then sharply at her.

"I--I'm _so_ sorry," she stammered. "Have I spoiled your book?"

"Never mind the book, but--how did you come to write this?"

"I--I didn't notice what I wrote," she said, in confusion.

"Do you mean to say that you don't _know_ what you wrote?"

"I don't know at all," she replied with evident sincerity.

"It's the damndest thing I ever heard of," he muttered. And then, with a puzzled look: "See here, I guess I've been too previous. I'll cut out that banquet to-night--that is, I'll show up for soup and fish, and then I'll come to you. Do I get a smile now?"

"O Lloyd!" she murmured happily.

"I'll be there about nine."

"About nine," she repeated, and again her eyes turned anxiously to the blood-red western sky.

CHAPTER II

COQUENIL'S GREATEST CASE

After leaving Notre-Dame, Paul Coquenil directed his steps toward the prefecture of police, but halfway across the square he glanced back at the church clock that shows its white face above the grinning gargoyles, and, pausing, he stood a moment in deep thought.

"A quarter to seven," he reflected; then, turning to the right, he walked quickly to a little wine shop with flowers in the windows, the Tavern of the Three Wise Men, an interesting fragment of old-time Paris that offers its cheery but battered hospitality under the very shadow of the great cathedral.

"Ah, I thought so!" he muttered, as he recognized Papa Tignol at one of the tables on the terrace. And approaching the old man, he said in a low tone: "I want you."

Tignol looked up quickly from his glass, and his face lighted. "Eh, M. Paul again!"

"I must see M. Pougeot," continued the detective. "It's important. Go to his office. If he isn't there, go to his house. Anyhow, find him and tell

him to come to me _at once_. Hurry on; I'll pay for this."

"Shall I take an auto?"

"Take anything, only hurry."

"And you want _me_ at nine o'clock?"

Coquenil shook his head. "Not until to-morrow."

"But the news you were going to tell me?"

"There'll be bigger news soon. Oh, run across to the church and tell Bonneton that he needn't come either."

"I knew it, I knew it," chuckled Papa Tignol, as he trotted off. "There's something doing!"

[Illustration: "'I want you,' he said in a low voice."]

With this much arranged, Coquenil, after paying for his friend's absinthe, strolled over to a cab stand near the statue of Henri IV and selected a horse that could not possibly make more than four miles an hour. Behind this deliberate animal he seated himself, and giving the driver his address, he charged him gravely not to go too fast, and settled back against the cushions to comfortable meditations. "There is no better way to think out a tough problem," he used to insist, "than to take a very long drive in a very slow cab."

It may have been that this horse was not slow enough, for forty minutes later Coquenil's frown was still unrelaxed when they drew up at the Villa Montmorency, really a collection of villas, some dozens of them, in a private park near the Bois de Boulogne, each villa a garden within a garden, and the whole surrounded by a great stone wall that shuts out noises and intrusions. They entered by a massive iron gateway on the Rue Poussin and moved slowly up the ascending Avenue des Tilleuls, past lawns and trees and vine-covered walls, leaving behind the rush and glare of the city and entering a peaceful region of flowers and verdure where Coquenil lived.

The detective occupied a wing of the original Montmorency chateau, a habitation of ten spacious rooms, more than enough for himself and his mother and the faithful old servant, Melanie, who took care of them, especially during these summer months, when Madame Coquenil was away at a country place in the Vosges Mountains that her son had bought for her. Paul Coquenil had never married, and his friends declared that, besides his work, he loved only two things in the world--his mother and his dog.

It was a quarter to eight when M. Paul sat down in his spacious dining room to a meal that was waiting when he arrived and that Melanie served with solicitous care, remarking sadly that her master scarcely touched anything, his eyes roving here and there among painted mountain scenes that covered the four walls above the brown-and-gold wainscoting, or out into the garden through the long, open windows; he was searching, searching for something, she knew the signs, and with a sigh she took away her most tempting dishes untasted.

At eight o'clock the detective rose from the table and withdrew into his study, a large room opening off the dining room and furnished like no other study in the world. Around the walls were low bookcases with wide tops on which were spread, under glass, what Coquenil called his criminal museum. This included souvenirs of cases on which he had been engaged, wonderful sets of burglars' tools, weapons used by murderers--saws, picks, jointed jimmies of tempered steel, that could be taken apart and folded up in the space of a thick cigar and hidden about the person. Also a remarkable

collection of handcuffs from many countries and periods in history. Also a collection of letters of criminals, some in cipher, with confessions of prisoners and last words of suicides. Also plaster casts of hands of famous criminals. And photographs of criminals, men and women, with faces often distorted to avoid recognition. And various gruesome objects, a card case of human skin, and the twisted scarf used by a strangler.

As for the shelves underneath, they contained an unequalled special library of subjects interesting to a detective, both science and fiction being freely drawn upon in French, English, and German, for, while Coquenil was a man of action in a big way, he was also a student and a reader of books, and he delighted in long, lonely evenings, when, as now, he sat in his comfortable study thinking, thinking.

Melanie entered presently with coffee and cigarettes, which she placed on a table near the green-shaded lamp, within easy reach of the great red-leather chair where M. Paul was seated. Then she stole out noiselessly. It was five minutes past eight, and for an hour Coquenil thought and smoked and drank coffee. Occasionally he frowned and moved impatiently, and several times he took off his glasses and stroked his brows over the eyes.

Finally he gave a long sigh of relief, and shutting his hands and throwing out his arms with a satisfied gesture, he rose and walked to the fireplace, over which hung a large portrait of his mother and several photographs, one of these taken in the exact attitude and costume of the painting of Whistler's mother in the Luxembourg gallery. M. Paul was proud of the striking resemblance between the two women. For some moments he stood before the fine, kindly face, and then he said aloud, as if speaking to her: "It looks like a hard fight, little mother, but I'm not afraid." And almost as he spoke, which seemed like a good omen, there came a clang at the iron gate in the garden and the sound of quick, crunching steps on the gravel walk. M. Pougeot had arrived.

M. Lucien Pougeot was one of the eighty police commissaries who, each in his own quarter, oversee the moral washing of Paris's dirty linen. A commissary of police is first of all a magistrate, but, unless he is a fool, he soon becomes a profound student of human nature, for he sees all sides of life in the great gay capital, especially the darker sides. He knows the sins of his fellow men and women, their follies and hypocrisies, he receives incredible confessions, he is constantly summoned to the scenes of revolting crime. Nothing, absolutely nothing, surprises him, and he has no illusions, yet he usually manages to keep a store of grim pity for erring humanity. M. Pougeot was one of the most distinguished and intelligent members of this interesting body. He was a devoted friend of Paul Coquenil.

The newcomer was a middle-aged man of strong build and florid face, with a brush of thick black hair. His quick-glancing eyes were at once cold and kind, but the kindness had something terrifying in it, like the politeness of an executioner. As the two men stood together they presented absolutely opposite types: Coquenil, taller, younger, deep-eyed, spare of build, with a certain serious reserve very different from the commissary's outspoken directness. M. Pougeot prided himself on reading men's thoughts, but he used to say that he could not even imagine what Coquenil was thinking or fathom the depths of a nature that blended the eagerness of a child with the austerity of a prophet.

"Well," remarked the commissary when they were settled in their chairs, "I suppose it's the Rio Janeiro thing? Some parting instructions, eh?" And he turned to light a cigar.

Coquenil shook his head.

"When do you sail?"

"I'm not sailing."

"Wha-at?"

For once in his life M. Pougeot was surprised. He knew all about this foreign offer, with its extraordinary money advantages; he had rejoiced in his friend's good fortune after two unhappy years, and now--now Coquenil informed him calmly that he was not sailing.

"I have just made a decision, the most important decision of my life," continued the detective, "and I want you to know about it. You are the only person in the world who will know--everything. So listen! This afternoon I went into Notre-Dame church and I saw a young girl there who sells candles. I didn't know her, but she looked up in a queer way, as if she wanted to speak to me, so I went to her and--well, she told me of a dream she had last night."

"A dream?" snorted the commissary.

"So she said. She may have been lying or she may have been put up to it; I know nothing about her, not even her name, but that's of no consequence; the point is that in this dream, as she called it, she brought together the two most important events in my life."

"Hm! What was the dream?"

"She says she saw me twice, once in a forest near a wooden bridge where a man with a beard was talking to a woman and a little girl. Then she saw me on a boat going to a place where there were black people."

"That was Brazil?"

"I suppose so. And there was a burning sun with a wicked face inside that kept looking down at me. She says she often dreams of this wicked face, she sees it first in a distant star that comes nearer and nearer, until it gets to be large and red and angry. As the face comes closer her fear grows, until she wakes with a start of terror; she says she would die of fright if the face ever reached her before she awoke. That's about all."

For some moments the commissary did not speak. "Did she try to interpret this dream?"

"No."

"Why did she tell you about it?"

"She acted on a sudden impulse, so she says. I'm inclined to believe her; but never mind that. Pougeot," he rose in agitation and stood leaning over his friend, "in that forest scene she brought up something that isn't known, something I've never even told you, my best friend."

"Tiens! What is that?"

"You think I resigned from the police force two years ago, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Everyone thinks so. Well, it isn't true. I didn't resign; I was discharged."

M. Pougeot stared in bewilderment, as if words failed him, and finally he repeated weakly: "Discharged! Paul Coquenil discharged!"

[Illustration: "'I didn't resign; I was discharged.'"]

"Yes, sir, discharged from the Paris detective force for refusing to arrest a murderer--that's how the accusation read."

"But it wasn't true?"

"Judge for yourself. It was the case of a poacher who killed a guard. I don't suppose you remember it?"

M. Pougeot thought a moment--he prided himself on remembering everything. "Down near Saumur, wasn't it?"

"Exactly. And it was near Saumur I found him after searching all over France. We were clean off the track, and I made up my mind the only way to get him was through his wife and child. They lived in a little house in the woods not far from the place of the shooting. I went there as a peddler in hard luck, and I played my part so well that the woman consented to take me in as a boarder."

"Wonderful man!" exclaimed the commissary.

"For weeks it was a waiting game. I would go away on a peddling tour and then come back as boarder. Nothing developed, but I could not get rid of the feeling that my man was somewhere near in the woods."

"One of your intuitions. Well?"

"Well, at last the woman became convinced that they had _nothing_ to fear from me_, and she did things more openly. One day I saw her put some food in a basket and give it to the little girl. And the little girl went off with the basket into the forest. Then I knew I was right, and the next day I followed the little girl, and, sure enough, she led me to a rough cave where her father was hiding. I hung about there for an hour or two, and finally the man came out from the cave and I saw him talk to his wife and child near a bridge over a mountain torrent."

"The picture that girl saw in the dream!"

"Yes; I'll never forget it. I had my pistol ready and he was defenseless; and once I was just springing forward to take the fellow when he bent over and kissed his little girl. I don't know how you look at these things, Pougeot, but I couldn't break in there and take that man away from his wife and child. The woman had been kind to me and trusted me, and--well, it was a breach of duty and they punished me for it; but I couldn't do it, I _couldn't_ do it, and I didn't do it."

"And you let the fellow go?"

"I let him go _then_, but I got him a week later in a fair fight, man to man. They gave him ten years."

"And discharged you from the force?"

"Yes. That is, in view of my past services, they _allowed_ me to resign." Coquenil spoke bitterly.

"Outrageous! Unbelievable!" muttered Pougeot. "No doubt you were technically in the wrong, but it was a slight offense, and, after all, you got your man. A reprimand at the most, _at the most_, was called for, and _not_ with you, not with Paul Coquenil."

The commissary spoke with deeper feeling than he had shown in years, and then, as if not satisfied with this, he clasped the detective's hand and added heartily: "I'm proud of you, old friend, I honor you."

Coquenil looked at Peugeot with an odd little smile. "You take it just as I thought you would, just as I took it myself--until to-day. It seems like a stupid blunder, doesn't it? Well, it wasn't a blunder; _it was a necessary move in the game_." His face lighted with intense eagerness as he waited for the effect of these words.

"The game? What game?" The commissary stared.

"A game involving a great crime."

"You are sure of that?"

"Perfectly sure."

"You have the facts of this crime?"

"No. It hasn't been committed yet."

"Not committed yet?" repeated the other, with a startled glance. "But you know the plan? You have evidence?"

"I have what is perfectly clear evidence _to me_, so clear that I wonder I never saw it before. Lucien, suppose you were a great criminal, I don't mean the ordinary clever scoundrel who succeeds for a time and is finally caught, but a _really great criminal_, the kind that appears once or twice, in a century, a man with immense power and intelligence."

"Like Vautrin in Napoleon's day?"

"Vautrin was a brilliant adventurer; he made millions with his swindling schemes, but he had no stability, no big purpose, and he finally came to grief. There have been greater criminals than Vautrin, men whose crimes have brought them _everything_ --fortune, social position, political supremacy--_and who have never been found out_."

"Do you really think so?"

Coquenil nodded. "There have been a few like that with master minds, a very few; I have documents to prove it"--he pointed to his bookcases; "but we haven't time for that. Come back to my question: Suppose _you_ were such a criminal, and suppose there was one person in this city who was thwarting your purposes, perhaps jeopardizing your safety. What would you naturally do?"

"I'd try to get rid of him."

"Exactly." Coquenil paused, and then, leaning closer to his friend, he said with extraordinary earnestness: "Lucien, for over two years _some one has been trying to get rid of me!_"

"The devil!" started Peugeot. "How long have you known this?"

"Only to-day," frowned the detective. "I ought to have known it long ago."

"Hm! Aren't you building a good deal on that dream?"

"The dream? Heavens, man," snapped Coquenil, "I'm building _nothing_ on the dream and nothing on the girl. She simply brought together two facts that belong together. Why she did it doesn't matter; she did it, and my reason did the rest. There is a connection between this Rio Janeiro offer and my discharge from the force. I know it. I'll show you other links in the chain. Three times in the past two years I have received offers of business positions away from Paris, tempting offers. Notice that--_business positions away from Paris!_ Some one has extraordinary reasons for wanting me out of this city and _out of detective work_."

"And you think this 'some one' was responsible for your discharge from the force?"

"I tell you I know it. M. Giroux, the chief at that time, was distressed at the order, he told me so himself; he said it came from _higher up_."

The commissary raised incredulous eyebrows. "You mean that Paris has a criminal able to overrule the wishes of a chief of police?"

"Is that harder than to influence the Brazilian Government? Do you think Rio Janeiro offered me a hundred thousand francs a year just for my beautiful eyes?"

"You're a great detective."

"A great detective repudiated by his own city. That's another point: why should the police department discharge me two years ago and recommend me now to a foreign city? Don't you see the same hand behind it all?"

M. Pougeot stroked his gray mustache in puzzled meditation. "It's queer," he muttered; "but----"

In spite of himself the commissary was impressed.

After all, he had seen strange things in his life, and, better than anyone, he had reason to respect the insight of this marvelous mind.

"Then the gist of it is," he resumed uneasily, "you think some great crime is preparing?"

"Don't you?" asked Coquenil abruptly.

"Why--er--" hesitated the Other.

"Look at the facts again. Some one wants me off the detective force, out of France. Why? There can be only one reason--because I have been successful in unraveling intricate crimes, more successful than other men on the force. Is that saying too much?"

The commissary replied impatiently: "It's conceded that you are the most skillful detective in France; but you're off the force already. So why should this person send you to Brazil?"

M. Paul thought a moment. "I've considered that. It is because this crime will be of so startling and unusual a character that it _must_ attract my attention if I am here. And if it attracts my attention as a great criminal problem, it is certain that I will try to solve it, whether on the force or off it."

"Well answered!" approved the other; he was coming gradually under the spell of Coquenil's conviction. "And when--when do you think this crime may be committed?"

"Who can say? There must be great urgency to account for their insisting that I sail to-morrow. Ah, you didn't know that? Yes, even now, at this very moment, I am supposed to be on the steamer train, for the boat goes out early in the morning _before the Paris papers can reach Cherbourg_."

M. Pougeot started up, his eyes widening. "What!" he cried. "You mean that--that possibly--to-_night?_"

As he spoke a sudden flash of light came in through the garden window, followed by a resounding peal of thunder. The brilliant sunset had been followed by a violent storm.

Coquenil paid no heed to this, but answered quietly: "I mean that a great fight is ahead, and I shall be in it. Somebody is playing for enormous stakes, somebody who disposes of fortune and power and will stop at _nothing_, somebody who will certainly crush me unless I crush him. It will be a great case, Lucien, my greatest case, perhaps my last case." He stopped and looked intently at his mother's picture, while his lips moved inaudibly.

"Ugh!" exclaimed the commissary. "You've cast a spell over me. Come, come, Paul, it may be only a fancy!"

But Coquenil sat still, his eyes fixed on his mother's face. And then came one of the strange coincidences of this extraordinary case. On the silence of this room, with its tension of overwrought emotion, broke the sharp summons of the telephone.

"My God!" shivered the commissary. "What is that?" Both men sat motionless, their eyes fixed on the ominous instrument.

Again came the call, this time more strident and commanding. M. Pougeot aroused himself with an effort. "We're acting like children," he muttered. "It's nothing. I told them at the office to ring me up about nine." And he put the receiver to his ear. "Yes, this is M. Pougeot.... What?... The Ansonia?... You say he's shot?... In a private dining room?... Dead?... _Quel malheur!_"... Then he gave quick orders: "Send Papa Tignol over with a doctor and three or four _agents_. Close the restaurant. Don't let anyone go in or out. Don't let anyone leave the banquet room. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Good-by."

He put the receiver down, and turning, white-faced, said to his friend: "_It has happened_"

Coquenil glanced at his watch. "A quarter past nine. We must hurry." Then, flinging open a drawer in his desk: "I want this and--_this_. Come, the automobile is waiting."

CHAPTER III

PRIVATE ROOM NUMBER SIX

The night was black and rain was falling in torrents as Paul Coquenil and the commissary rolled away in response to this startling summons of crime. Up the Rue Mozart they sped with sounding horn, feeling their way carefully on account of troublesome car tracks, then faster up the Avenue Victor Hugo, their advance being accompanied by vivid lightning flashes.

"He was in luck to have this storm," muttered Coquenil. Then, in reply to Pougeot's look: "I mean the thunder, it deadened the shot and gained time for him."

"Him? How do you know a man did it? A woman was in the room, and she's gone. They telephoned that."

The detective shook his head. "No, no, you'll find it's a man. Women are not original in crime. And this is--_this is different_. How many murders can you remember in Paris restaurants, I mean smart restaurants?"

M. Pougeot thought a moment. "There was one at the Silver Pheasant and one at the Pavillion and--and----"

"And one at the Cafe Rouge. But those were stupid shooting cases, not murders, not planned in advance."

"Why do you think this was planned in advance?"

"Because the man escaped."

"They didn't say so."

Coquenil smiled. "That's how I know he escaped. If they had caught him they would have told you, wouldn't they?"

"Why--er---"

"Of course they would. Well, think what it means to commit murder in a crowded restaurant and get away. It means brains, Lucien. Ah, we're nearly there!"

They had reached Napoleon's arch, and the automobile, swinging sharply to the right, started at full speed down the Champs Elysees.

"It's bad for Gritz," reflected the commissary; then both men fell silent in the thought of the emergency before them.

M. Gritz, it may be said, was the enterprising proprietor of the Ansonia, this being the last and most brilliant of his creations for cheering the rich and hungry wayfarer. He owned the famous Palace restaurant at Monte Carlo, the Queen's in Piccadilly, London, and the Cafe Royal in Brussels. Of all his ventures, however, this recently opened Ansonia (hotel and restaurant) was by far the most ambitious. The building occupied a full block on the Champs Elysees, just above the Rond Point, so that it was in the center of fashionable Paris. It was the exact copy of a well-known Venetian palace, and its exquisite white marble colonnade made it a real adornment to the gay capital. Furthermore, M. Gritz had spent a fortune on furnishings and decorations, the carvings, the mural paintings, the rugs, the chairs, everything, in short, being up to the best millionaire standard. He had the most high-priced chef in the world, with six chefs under him, two of whom made a specialty of American dishes. He had his own farm for vegetables and butter, his own vineyards, his own permanent orchestra, and his own brand of Turkish coffee made before your eyes by a salaaming Armenian in native costume. For all of which reasons the present somber happening had particular importance. A murder anywhere was bad enough, but a murder in the newest, the chic-est, and the costliest restaurant in Paris must cause more than a nine days' wonder. As M. Pougeot remarked, it was certainly bad for Gritz.

Drawing up before the imposing entrance, they saw two policemen on guard at the doors, one of whom, recognizing the commissary, came forward quickly to the automobile with word that M. Gibelin and two other men from headquarters had already arrived and were proceeding with the investigation.

"Is Papa Tignol here?" asked Coquenil.

"Yes, sir," replied the man, saluting respectfully.

"Before I go in, Lucien, you'd better speak to Gibelin," whispered M. Paul. "It's a little delicate. He's a good detective, but he likes the old-school methods, and--he and I never got on very well. He has been sent to take charge of the case, so--be tactful with him."

"He can't object," answered Pougeot. "After all, I'm the commissary of this quarter, and if I need your services----"

"I know, but I'd sooner you spoke to him."

"Good. I'll be back in a moment," and pushing his way through the crowd of sensation seekers that blocked the sidewalk, he disappeared inside the building.

M. Pougeot's moment was prolonged to five full minutes, and when he reappeared his face was black.

"Such stupidity!" he stormed.

"It's what I expected," answered Coquenil.

"Gibelin says you have no business here. He's an impudent devil! 'Tell _Beau Cocono_,' he sneered, 'to keep his hands off this case. Orders from headquarters.' I told him you _had_ business here, business for me, and--come on, I'll show 'em."

He took Coquenil by the arm, but the latter drew back. "Not yet. I have a better idea. Go ahead with your report. Never mind me."

"But I want you on the case," insisted the commissary.

"I'll be on the case, all right."

"I'll telephone headquarters at once about this," insisted Pougeot. "When shall I see you again?"

Coquenil eyed his friend mysteriously. "I _think_ you'll see me before the night is over. Now get to work, and," he smiled mockingly, "give M. Gibelin the assurance of my distinguished consideration."

Pougeot nodded crustily and went back into the restaurant, while Coquenil, with perfect equanimity, paid the automobile man and dismissed him.

Meantime in the large dining rooms on the street floor everything was going on as usual, the orchestra was playing in its best manner and few of the brilliant company suspected that anything was wrong. Those who started to go out were met by M. Gritz himself, and, with a brief hint of trouble upstairs, were assured that they would be allowed to leave shortly after some necessary formalities. This delay most of them took good-naturedly and went back to their tables.

As M. Pougeot mounted to the first floor he was met at the head of the stairs by a little yellow-bearded man, with luminous dark eyes, who came toward him, hand extended.

"Ah, Dr. Joubert!" said the commissary.

The doctor nodded nervously. "It's a singular case," he whispered, "a very singular case."

At the same moment a door opened and Gibelin appeared. He was rather fat, with small, piercing eyes and a reddish mustache. His voice was harsh, his manners brusque, but there was no denying his intelligence. In a spirit of conciliation he began to give M. Pougeot some details of the case, whereupon the latter said stiffly: "Excuse me, sir, I need no assistance from you in making this investigation. Come, doctor! In the field of his jurisdiction a commissary of police is supreme, taking precedence even over headquarters men." So Gibelin could only withdraw, muttering his resentment, while Pougeot proceeded with his duties.

In general plan the Ansonia was in the form of a large E, the main part of the second floor, where the tragedy took place, being occupied by public dining rooms, but the two wings, in accordance with Parisian custom, containing a number of private rooms where delicious meals might be had

with discreet attendance by those who wished to dine alone. In each of the wings were seven of these private rooms, all opening on a dark-red passageway lighted by soft electric lamps. It was in one of the west wing private rooms that the crime had been committed, and as the commissary reached the wing the waiters' awe-struck looks showed him plainly enough _which_ was the room--there, on the right, the second from the end, where the patient policeman was standing guard.

M. Pougeot paused at the turn of the corridor to ask some question, but he was interrupted by a burst of singing on the left, a roaring chorus of hilarity.

"It's a banquet party," explained the doctor, "a lot of Americans. They don't know what has happened."

"Hah!" reflected the other. "Just across the corridor, too!"

Then, briefly, the commissary heard what the witnesses had to tell him about the crime. It had been discovered half an hour before, more precisely at ten minutes to nine, by a waiter Joseph, who was serving a couple in Number Six, a dark-complexioned man and a strikingly handsome woman. They had arrived at a quarter before eight and the meal had begun at once. Oddly enough, after the soup, the gentleman told the waiter not to bring the next course until he rang, at the same time slipping into his hand a ten-franc piece. Whereupon Joseph had nodded his understanding--he had seen impatient lovers before, although they usually restrained their ardor until after the fish; still, _ma foi_, this was a woman to make a man lose his head, and the night was to be a jolly one--how those young American devils were singing!... so _vive l'amour_ and _vive la jeunesse!_ With which simple philosophy and a twinkle of satisfaction Joseph had tucked away his gold piece--and waited.

Ten minutes! Fifteen minutes! An unconscionably _long time when you have a delicious sole a la Regence_ getting cold on your hands. Joseph knocked discreetly, then again after a decent pause, and finally, weary of waiting, he opened the door with an official cough of warning and stepped inside the room. A moment later he started back, his eyes fixed with horror.

"_Grand Dieu!_" he cried.

"You saw the body, the man's body?" questioned the commissary.

"Yes, sir," answered the waiter, his face still pale at the memory.

"And the woman? Where was the woman?"

"Ah, I forgot," stammered Joseph. "She had come out of the room before this, while I was waiting. She asked where the telephone was, and I told her it was on the floor below. Then she went downstairs--at least I suppose she did, for she never came back."

"Did anyone see her leave the hotel?", demanded Pougeot sharply, looking at the others.

"It's extraordinary," answered the doctor, "but no one seems to have seen this woman go out. M. Gibelin made inquiries, but he could learn nothing except that she really went to the telephone booth. The girl there remembers her."

Again Pougeot turned to the waiter.

"What sort of a woman was she? A lady or--or not?"

Joseph clucked his tongue admiringly. "She was a lady, all right. And a stunner! Eyes and--shoulders and--um-m!" He described imaginary feminine

curves with the unction of a male dressmaker. "Oh, there's one thing more!"

"You can tell me later. Now, doctor, we'll look at the room. I'll need you, Leroy, and you and you." He motioned to his secretary and to two of his men.

Dr. Joubert, bowing gravely, opened the door of Number Six, and the commissary entered, followed by his scribe, a very bald and pale young man, and by the two policemen. Last came the doctor, closing the door carefully behind him.

It was the commissary's custom on arriving at the scene of a crime to record his first impressions immediately, taking careful note of every fact and detail in the picture that seemed to have the slightest bearing on the case. These he would dictate rapidly to his secretary, walking back and forth, searching everywhere with keen eyes and trained intelligence, especially for signs of violence, a broken window, an overturned table, a weapon, and noting all suspicious stains--mud stains, blood stains, the print of a foot, the smear of a hand and, of course, describing carefully the appearance of a victim's body, the wounds, the position, the expression of the face, any tearing or disorder of the garments. Many times these quick, haphazard jottings, made in the precious moments immediately following a crime, had proved of incalculable value in the subsequent investigation.

In the present case, however, M. Pougeot was fairly taken aback by the lack of significant material. Everything in the room was as it should be, table spread with snowy linen, two places set faultlessly among flowers and flashing glasses, chairs in their places, pictures smiling down from the white-and-gold walls, shaded electric lights diffusing a pleasant glow--in short, no disorder, no sign of struggle, yet, there, stretched at full length on the floor near a pale-yellow sofa, lay a man in evening dress, his head resting, face downward, in a little red pool. He was evidently dead.

"Has anything been disturbed here? Has anyone touched this body?" demanded Pougeot sharply.

"No," said the doctor; "Gibelin came in with me, but neither of us touched anything. We waited for you."

"I see. Ready, Leroy," and he proceeded to dictate what there was to say, dwelling on two facts: that there was no sign of a weapon in the room and that the long double window opening on the Rue Marboeuf was standing open.

"Now, doctor," he concluded, "we will look at the body."

Dr. Joubert's examination established at once the direct cause of death. The man, a well-built young fellow of perhaps twenty-eight, had been shot in the right eye, a ball having penetrated the brain, killing him instantly. The face showed marks of flame and powder, proving that the weapon--undoubtedly a pistol--had been discharged from a very short distance.

This certainly looked like suicide, although the absence of the pistol pointed to murder. The man's face was perfectly calm, with no suggestion of fright or anger; his hands and body lay in a natural position and his clothes were in no way disordered. Either he had met death willingly, or it had come to him without warning, like a lightning stroke.

"Doctor," asked the commissary, glancing at the open window, "if this man shot himself, could he, in your opinion, with his last strength have thrown the pistol out there?"

"Certainly not," answered Joubert. "A man who received a wound like this

would be dead before he could lift a hand, before he could wink."

"Ah!"

"Besides, a search has been made underneath that window and no pistol has been found."

"It must be murder," muttered Pougeot. "Was there any quarreling with the woman?"

"Joseph says not. On the contrary, they seemed on the friendliest terms."

"Hah! See what he has on his person. Note everything down. We must find out who this poor fellow was."

[Illustration: "On the floor lay a man."]

These instructions were carefully carried out, and it straightway became clear that robbery, at any rate, had no part in the crime. In the dead man's pockets was found a considerable sum of money, a bundle of five-pound notes of the Bank of England, besides a handful of French gold. On his fingers were several valuable rings, in his scarf was a large ruby set with diamonds, and attached to his waistcoat was a massive gold medal that at once established his identity. He was Enrico Martinez, a Spaniard widely known as a professional billiard player, and also the hero of the terrible Charity Bazaar fire, where, at the risk of his life, he had saved several women from the flames. For this bravery the city of Paris had awarded him a gold medal and people had praised him until his head was half turned.

So familiar a figure was Martinez that there was no difficulty in finding witnesses in the restaurant able to identify him positively as the dead man. Several had seen him within a few days at the Olympia billiard academy, where he had been practicing for a much-advertised match with an American rival. All agreed that Martinez was quite the last man in Paris to take his own life, for the simple reason that he enjoyed it altogether too much. He was scarcely thirty and in excellent health, he made plenty of money, he was fond of pleasure, and particularly fond of the ladies and had no reason to complain of bad treatment at their hands; in fact, if the truth must be told, he was ridiculously vain of his conquests among the fair sex, and was always saying to whoever would listen: "Ah, *_mon cher_*, I have met a woman! But *_such_* a woman!" Then his dark eyes would glow and he would snap his thumb nail under an upper tooth, with an expression of ravishing joy that only a Castilian billiard player could assume. And, of course, it was always a different woman!

"Aha!" muttered the commissary. "There may be a husband mixed up in this. Call that waiter again, and--er--we will continue the examination outside."

With this they removed to the adjoining private room, Number Five, leaving a policeman at the door of Number Six until proper disposal of the body should be made.

In the further questioning of Joseph the commissary brought out several important facts. The waiter testified that, after serving the soup to Martinez and the lady, he had not left the corridor outside the door of Number Six until the moment when he entered the room and discovered the crime. During this interval of perhaps a quarter of an hour he had moved down the corridor a short distance, but not farther than the door of Number Four. He was sure of this because one of the doors to the banquet room was just opposite the door of Number Four, and he had stood there listening to a Fourth-of-July speaker who was discussing the relations between France and America. Joseph, being something of a politician, was greatly interested in this.

"Then this banquet-room door was open?" questioned Pougeot.

"Yes, sir, it was open about a foot--some of the guests wanted air."

"How did you stand as you listened to the speaker? Show me." M. Pougeot led Joseph to the banquet-room door.

"Like this," answered the waiter, and he placed himself so that his back was turned to Number Six.

"So you would not have seen anyone who might have come out of Number Six at that time or gone into Number Six?"

"I suppose not."

"And if the door of Number Six had opened while your back was turned, would you have heard it?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, sir; there was a lot of applauding--like that," he paused as a roar of laughter came from across the hall.

The commissary turned quickly to one of his men. "See that they make less noise. And be careful no one leaves the banquet room _on any excuse_. I'll be there presently." Then to the waiter: "Did you hear any sound from Number Six? Anything like a shot?"

"No, sir."

"Hm! It must have been the thunder. Now tell me this, could anyone have passed you in the corridor while you stood at the banquet-room door without your knowing it?"

Joseph's round, red face spread into a grin. "The corridor is narrow, sir, and I"--he looked down complacently at his ample form--"I pretty well fill it up, don't I, sir?"

"You certainly do. Give me a sheet of paper." And with a few rapid pencil strokes the commissary drew a rough plan of the banquet room, the corridor, and the seven private dining rooms. He marked carefully the two doors leading from the banquet room into the corridor, the one where Joseph listened, opposite Number Four, and the one opposite Number Six.

"Here you are, blocking the corridor at Number Four"; he made a mark on the plan at that point. "By the way, are there any other exits from the banquet room except these two corridor doors?"

"No, sir."

"Good! Now pay attention. While you were listening at this door--I'll mark it _A_--with your back turned to Number Six, a person _might_ have left the banquet room by the farther door--I'll mark it _B_--and stepped across the corridor into Number Six without your seeing him. Isn't that true?"

"Yes, sir, it's possible."

"Or a person might have gone into Number Six from either Number Five or Number Seven without your seeing him?"

[Illustration: West Wing of Ansonia Hotel--First Floor. Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Private dining rooms opening on corridor H H.

No. 6. Private dining room where body was found.

F. Large dining room occupied at time of tragedy by Americans gathered at Fourth-of-July banquet.

C. Seat at banquet occupied by Kittredge and left vacant by him.

A, B. Two doors opening into corridor from banquet room.

D. Point in corridor where the waiter Joseph stood with back turned to No. 6 while he looked through door A during Fourth-of-July speeches.

X, Y. Arrows show direction taken by man and woman who passed Joseph in corridor going out.]

"Excuse me, there was no one in Number Five during that fifteen minutes, and the party who had engaged Number Seven did not come."

"Ah! Then if any stranger went into Number Six during that fifteen minutes he must have come from the banquet room?"

"Yes, sir."

"By this door, _B?_"

"That's the only way he could have come without my seeing him."

"And if he went out from Number Six afterwards, I mean if he left the hotel, he must have passed you in the corridor?"

"Exactly." Joseph's face was brightening.

"Now, _did_ anyone pass you in the corridor, anyone except the lady?"

"Yes, sir," answered the waiter eagerly, "a young man passed me."

"Going out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you know where he came from?"

"I supposed he came from the banquet room."

"Did this happen before the lady went out, or after?"

"Before."

"Can you describe this young man, Joseph?"

The waiter frowned and rubbed his red neck. "I think I should know him, he was slender and clean shaven--yes, I'm sure I should know him."

"Did anyone else pass you, either going out or coming in?"

"No, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure."

"That will do."

Joseph heaved a sigh of relief and was just passing out when the commissary cried out with a startled expression: "A thousand thunders! Wait! That woman--what did she wear?"

The waiter turned eagerly. "Why, a beautiful evening gown, sir, cut low with a lot of lace and----"

"No, no. I mean, what did she wear outside? Her wraps? Weren't they in Number Six?"

"No, sir, they were downstairs in the cloakroom."

"In the cloakroom!" He bounded to his feet. "_Bon sang de bon Dieu!_ Quick! Fool! Don't you understand?"

This outburst stirred Joseph to unexampled efforts; he fairly hurled his massive body down the stairs, and a few moments later returned, panting but happy, with news that the lady in Number Six had left a cloak and leather bag in the cloakroom. These articles were still there.

"Ah, that is something!" murmured the commissary, and he hurried down to see the things for himself.

The cloak was of yellow silk, embroidered in white, a costly garment from a fashionable maker; but there was nothing to indicate the wearer. The bag was a luxurious trifle in Brazilian lizard skin, with solid-gold mountings; but again there was no clew to the owner, no name, no cards, only some samples of dress goods, a little money, and an unmarked handkerchief.

"Don't move these things," directed M. Pougeot. "It's possible some one will call for them, and if anyone _should_ call, why--that's Gibelin's affair. Now we'll see these Americans."

It was a quarter past ten, and the hilarity of proceedings at the Fourth-of-July banquet (no ladies present) had reached its height. A very French-looking student from Bridgeport, Connecticut, had just started an uproarious rendering of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," with Latin-Quarter variations, when there came a sudden hush and a turning of heads toward the half-open door, through which a voice was heard in peremptory command. Something had happened, something serious, if one could judge by the face of Francois, the head waiter, who stood at the corridor entrance.

"Not so fast," he insisted, holding the young men back, and a moment later there entered a florid-faced man with authoritative mien, closely followed by two policemen.

"Horns of a purple cow!" muttered the Bridgeport art student, who loved eccentric oaths. "The house is pulled!"

"Gentlemen," began M. Pougeot, while the company listened in startled silence, "I am sorry to interrupt this pleasant gathering, especially as I understand that you are celebrating your national holiday; unfortunately, I have a duty to perform that admits of no delay. While you have been feasting and singing, as becomes your age and the occasion, an act of violence has taken place within the sound of your voices--I may say under cover of your voices."

He paused and swept his eyes in keen scrutiny over the faces before him, as if trying to read in one or the other of them the answer to some question not yet asked.

"My friends," he continued, and now his look became almost menacing, "I am here as an officer of the law because I have reason to believe that a guest at this banquet is connected with a crime committed in this restaurant within the last hour or two."

So extraordinary was this accusation and so utterly unexpected that for some moments no one spoke. Then, after the first dismay, came indignant protests; this man had a nerve to break in on a gathering of American citizens with a fairy tale like that!

"Silence!" rang out the commissary's voice sharply. "Who sat there?" He pointed to a vacant seat at the long central table.

All eyes turned to this empty chair, and heads came together in excited whispers.

"Bring me a plan of the tables," he continued, and when this was spread before him: "I will read off the names marked here, and each one of you will please answer."

In tense silence he called the names, and to each one came a quick "Here!" until he said "Kittredge!"

There was no answer.

"Lloyd Kittredge!" he repeated, and still no one spoke.

"Ah!" he muttered and went on calling names, but no one else was missing.

"All here but M. Kittredge. He was here, and--he went out. I must know why he went out, I must know when he went out--exactly when; I must know how he acted before he left, what he said--in short, I must know all you can tell me about him. Remember, the best service you can render your friend is to speak freely. If he is innocent, the truth will protect him"

Then began a wearisome questioning of witnesses, not very fruitful, either, for these Americans developed a surprising ignorance touching their fellow-countryman and all that concerned him. It must have been about nine o'clock when he went out, perhaps a few minutes earlier. No, there had been nothing peculiar in his actions or manner; in fact, most of the guests had not even noticed his absence.

As to Kittredge's life and personality the result was scarcely more satisfactory. He had appeared in Paris about a year before, just why was not known, and had passed as a good fellow, perhaps a little wild and hot-headed. Strangely enough, no one could say where Kittredge lived; he had left rather expensive rooms near the boulevards that he had occupied at first, and since then he had almost disappeared from his old haunts. Some said that his money had given out and he had gone to work, but this was only vague rumor.

These facts having been duly recorded, the banqueters were informed that they might depart, which they did in silence, the spirit of festivity having vanished.

Inquiries were now made in the hotel about Kittredge's movements, but nothing came to light except the statement of a big, liveried doorkeeper, who remembered distinctly the sudden appearance at about nine o'clock of a young man who was very anxious to get a cab. The storm was then at its height, and the doorkeeper had advised the young man to wait, feeling sure the tempest would cease as suddenly as it had begun; but the latter, apparently ill at ease, had insisted that he must go at once; he said he would find a cab himself, and turning up his collar so that his face was almost hidden, and drawing his thin overcoat tight about his evening dress, he had dashed into the black downpour, and a moment later the doorkeeper, surprised at this eccentric behavior, saw the young man hail a passing fiacre and drive away.

At this point in the investigation the unexpected happened. One of the policemen burst in to say that some one had called for the lady's cloak and bag. It was a young man with a check for the things; he was waiting for them now in the cloakroom and he seemed nervous.

"Well?" snapped the commissary.

"I was going to arrest him, sir," replied the other eagerly, "but----"

"Will you never learn your business?" stormed Pougeot. "Does Gibelin know this?"

"Yes, sir, we just told him."

"Send Joseph here--quick." And to the waiter when he appeared: "Tell the woman in the cloakroom to let this young man have the things. Don't let him see that you are suspicious, but take a good look at him."

"Yes, sir. And then?"

"And then nothing. Leave him to Gibelin."

A moment later Joseph returned to say that he had absolutely recognized the young man downstairs as the one who had passed him in the corridor, Francois was positive he was the missing banquet guest. In other words, they were facing this remarkable situation: that the cloak and leather bag left by the mysterious woman of Number Six had now been called for by the very man against whom suspicion was rapidly growing--Lloyd Kittredg himself.

CHAPTER IV

"IN THE NAME OF THE LAW"

When Kittredg, with cloak and bag, stepped into his waiting cab and, for the second time on this villainous night, started down the Champs Elysees he was under no illusion as to his personal safety. He knew that he would be followed and presently arrested, he knew this without even glancing behind him, he had understood the whispers and searching looks in the hotel; it was certain that his moments of liberty were numbered, so he must make a clean job of this thing that had to be done while still there was time. He had told the driver to cross the bridge and go down the Boulevard St. Germain, but now he changed the order and, half opening the door, he bade the man turn to the right and drive on to the Rue de Vaugirard. He knew that this was a long, ill-lighted street, one of the longest streets in Paris.

"There's no number," he called out. "Just keep going."

The driver grumbled and cracked his whip, and a moment later, peering back through the front window, he saw his eccentric fare absorbed in examining a white leather bag. He could see him distinctly by the yellow light of his two side lanterns. The young man had opened one of the inner pockets of the bag, drawing out a flap of leather under which a name was stamped quite visibly in gilt letters. Presently he took out a pocket knife and tried to scrape off the name, but the letters were deeply marked and could not be removed so easily. After a moment's hesitation the young man carefully drew his blade across the base of the flap, severing it from the bag, which he then threw back on the seat, holding the flap in apparent perplexity.

All this the driver observed with increasing interest until presently Kittredg looked up and caught his eye.

"You've got a nerve," the young man muttered. "I'll fix you." And, drawing the two black curtains, he shut off the driver's view.

As they neared the end of the Rue de Vaugirard, the American opened the door again and told the man to turn and drive back, he wanted to have a

look at Notre-Dame, three full miles away. The driver swore softly, but obeyed, and back they went, passing another cab just behind them which also turned immediately and followed, as Kittredge noticed with a gloomy smile.

On the way to Notre-Dame, Kittredge changed their direction half a dozen times, acting on accountable impulses, going by zigzags through narrow, dark streets, instead of by the straight and natural way, so that it was after midnight when they entered the Rue du Cloître Notre-Dame, which runs just beside the cathedral, and drew up at a house indicated by the American. The other cab drew up behind them.

"Tell your friend back there," remarked Kittredge to his driver as he got out, "that I have important business here. There'll be plenty of time for him to get a drink." Then, with a nervous tug at the bell, he disappeared in the house, leaving the cloak and bag in the cab.

And now two important things happened, one of them unexpected. The expected thing was that M. Gibelin came forward immediately from the second cab followed by Papa Tignol and a policeman. The shadowing detective was in a vile humor which was not improved when he got the message left by the flippant American.

"Time for a drink! Infernal impudence! We'll teach him manners at the depot! This farce is over," he flung out. "See where he went, ask the _concierge_," he said to Tignol. And to the policeman: "Watch the courtyard. If he isn't down in ten minutes _we'll go up_."

Then, as his men obeyed, Gibelin turned to Kittredge's driver. "Here's your fare. You can go. I'm from headquarters. I have a warrant for this man's arrest." And he showed his credentials. "I'll take the things he has left."

"Don't I get a _pourboire?_" grumbled the driver.

"No, sir. You're lucky to get anything."

"Am I?" retorted the Jehu, gathering up his reins (and now came the unexpected happening): "Well, I'll tell you one thing, my friend, _this is the night they made a fool of M. Gibelin!_"

The detective started. "You know my name? What do you mean?"

The cab was already moving, but the driver turned on his seat and, waving his hand in derision, he called back: "Ask Beau Cocono!" And then to his horse: "_Hue, cocotte!_"

Meantime Kittredge had climbed the four flights of stairs leading to the sacristan's modest apartment. And, in order to explain how he happened to be making so untimely a visit it is necessary to go back several hours to a previous visit here that the young American had already made on this momentous evening.

After leaving the Ansonia banquet at about nine o'clock in the singular manner noted by the big doorkeeper, Kittredge, in accordance with his promise to Alice, had driven directly to the Rue du Cloître Notre-Dame, and at twenty minutes past nine by the clock in the Tavern of the Three Wise Men he had drawn up at the house where the Bonnetons lived. Five minutes later the young man was seated in the sacristan's little _salon_ assuring Alice that he didn't mind the rain, that the banquet was a bore, anyhow, and that he hoped she was now going to prove herself a sensible and reasonable little girl.

[Illustration: "'Ask Beau Cocono,' he called back."]

Alice welcomed her lover eagerly. She had been anxious about him, she did not know why, and when the storm came she had been more anxious. But now

she was reassured and--and happy. Her mantling color, her heaving bosom, and the fond, wistful lights in her dark eyes told how very happy she was. And how proud! After all he trusted her, it must be so! he had left his friends, left this fine banquet and, in spite of the pain she had given him, in spite of the bad night, he had come to her here in her humble home.

And it would have straightway been the love scene all over again, for Alice had never seemed so adorable, but for the sudden and ominous entrance of Mother Bonneton. She eyed the visitor with frank unfriendliness and, without mincing her words, proceeded to tell him certain things, notably that his attentions to Alice must cease and that his visits here would henceforth be unwelcome.

In vain the poor girl protested against this breach of hospitality. Mother Bonneton held her ground grimly, declaring that she had a duty to perform and would perform it.

"What duty?" asked the American.

"A duty to M. Groener."

At this name Alice started apprehensively. Kittredge knew that she had a cousin named Groener, a wood carver who lived in Belgium, and who came to Paris occasionally to see her and to get orders for his work. On one occasion he had met this cousin and had judged him a well-meaning but rather stupid fellow who need not be seriously considered in his efforts to win Alice.

"Do you mean that M. Groener does not approve of me?" pursued Kittredge.

"M. Groener knows nothing about you," answered Mother Bonneton, "except that you have been hanging around this foolish girl. But he understands his responsibility as the only relation she has in the world and he knows she will respect his wishes as the one who has paid her board, more or less, for five years."

"Well?"

"Well, the last time M. Groener was here, that's about a month ago, he asked me and my husband to make inquiries about you, and see what we could find out."

"It's abominable!" exclaimed Alice.

"Abominable? Why is it abominable? Your cousin wants to know if this young man is a proper person for you to have as a friend."

"I can decide that for myself," flashed the girl.

"Oh, can you? Ha, ha! How wise we are!"

"And--er--you have made inquiries about me?" resumed Kittredge with a strangely anxious look.

Mother Bonneton half closed her eyes and threw out her thick lips in an ugly leer. "I should say we have! And found out things--well, just a few!"

"What things?"

"We have found out, my pretty sir, that you lived for months last year by gambling. I suppose you will deny it?"

"No," answered Kittredge in a low tone, "it's true."

"Ah! We found out also that the money you made by gambling you spent with a

brazen creature who----"

"Stop!" interrupted the American, and turning to the girl he said: "Alice, I didn't mean to go into these details, I didn't see the need of it, but----"

"I don't want to know the details," she interrupted. "I know you, Lloyd, that is enough."

She looked him in the eyes trustingly and he blinked a little.

"Plucky!" he murmured. "They're trying to queer me and maybe they will, but I'm not going to lie about it. Listen. I came to Paris a year ago on account of a certain person. I thought I loved her and--I made a fool of myself. I gave up a good position in New York and--after I had been here a while I went broke. So I gambled. It's pretty bad--I don't defend myself, only there's one thing I want you to know. This person was not a low woman, she was a lady."

"Huh!" grunted Mother Bonneton. "A lady! The kind of a lady who dines alone with gay young gentlemen in private rooms! Aha, we have the facts!"

The young man's eyes kindled. "No matter where she dined, I say she was a lady, and the proof of it is I--I wanted her to get a divorce and--and marry me."

"Oh!" winced Alice.

"You see what he is," triumphed the sacristan's wife, "running after a married woman."

But Kittredge went on doggedly: "You've got to hear the rest now. One day something happened that--that made me realize what an idiot I had been. When I say this person was a lady I'm not denying that she raised the devil with me. She did that good and plenty, so at last I decided to break away and I did. It wasn't exactly a path of roses for me those weeks, but I stuck to it, because--because I had some one to help me," he paused and looked tenderly at Alice, "and--well, I cut the whole thing out, gambling and all. That was six months ago."

"And the lady?" sneered Mother Bonneton. "Do you mean to tell us you haven't had anything to do with her for six months?"

"I haven't even seen her," he declared, "for more than six months."

"A likely story! Besides, what we know is enough. I shall write M. Groener to-night and tell him the facts. Meantime--" She rose and pointed to the door.

Alice and Kittredge rose also, the one indignant and aggrieved at this wanton affront to her lover, the other gloomily resigned to what seemed to be his fate.

"Well," said he, facing Alice with a discouraged gesture, "things are against us. I'm grateful to you for believing in me and I--I'd like to know why you turned me down this afternoon. But I probably never shall. I--I'll be going now."

He was actually moving toward the door, and she, almost fainting with emotion, was rallying her strength for a last appeal when the bell in the hall tinkled sharply. Mother Bonneton answered the call and returned a moment later followed by the doorkeeper from below, a cheery little woman who bustled in carrying a note.

"It's for the gentleman," she explained, "from a lady waiting in a

carriage. It's very important." With this she delivered a note to Kittredge and added in an exultant whisper to the sacristan's wife that the lady had given her a franc for her trouble.

"A lady waiting in a carriage!" chuckled Mother Bonneton. "What kind of a lady?"

"Oh, very swell," replied the doorkeeper mysteriously "Grande toilette, bare shoulders, and no hat. I should think she'd take cold."

"Poor thing!" jeered the other. And then to Kittredge: "I suppose this is _another one_ you haven't seen for six months."

Kittredge stood as if in a daze staring at the note. He read it, then read it again, then he crumpled it in his hand, muttering: "O God!" And his face was white.

"Good-by!" he said to Alice in extreme agitation. "I don't know what you think of this, I can't stop to explain, I--I must go at once!" And taking up his hat and cane he started away.

"But you'll come back?" cried the girl.

"No, no! This is the end!"

She went to him swiftly and laid a hand on his arm. "Lloyd, you _must_ come back. You must come back to-night. It's the last thing I'll ever ask you. You need never see me again but--_you must come back to-night_."

She stood transformed as she spoke, not pleading but commanding and beautiful beyond words.

"It may be very late," he stammered.

"I'll wait until you come," she said simply, "no matter what time. I'll wait. But you'll surely come, Lloyd?"

He hesitated a moment and then, before the power of her eyes: "I'll surely come," he promised, and a moment later he was gone.

Then the hours passed, anxious, ominous hours! Ten, eleven, twelve! And still Alice waited for her lover, silencing Mother Bonneton's grumblings with a look that this hard old woman had once or twice seen in the girl's face and had learned to respect. At half past twelve a carriage sounded in the quiet street, then a quick step on the stairs. Kittredge had kept his word.

The door was opened by Mother Bonneton, very sleepy and arrayed in a wrapper of purple and gold pieced together from discarded altar coverings. She eyed the young man sternly but said nothing, for Alice was at her back holding the lamp and there was something in the American's face, something half reckless, half appealing, that startled her. She felt the cold breath of a sinister happening and regretted Bonneton's absence at the church.

"Well, I'm here," said Kittredge with a queer little smile. "I couldn't come any sooner and--I can't stay."

The girl questioned him with frightened eyes. "Isn't it over yet?"

He looked at her sharply. "I don't know what you mean by 'it,' but, as a matter of fact, _it_ hasn't begun yet. If you have any questions you'd better ask 'em."

Alice turned and said quietly: "Was the woman who came in the carriage the one you told us about?"

"Yes."

"Have you been with her ever since?"

"No. I was with her only about ten minutes."

"Is she in trouble?"

"Yes."

"And you?"

Kittredge nodded slowly. "Oh, I'm in trouble, all right."

"Can I help you?"

He shook his head. "The only way you can help is by believing in me. I haven't lied to you. I hadn't seen that woman for over six months. I didn't know she was coming here. I don't love her, I love you, but I did love her, and what I have done to-night I--I _had_ to do." He spoke with growing agitation which he tried vainly to control.

Alice looked at him steadily for a moment and then in a low voice she spoke the words that were pressing on her heart: "_What_ have you done?"

"There's no use going into that," he answered unsteadily. "I can only ask you to trust me."

"I trust you, Lloyd," she said.

While they were talking Mother Bonneton had gone to the window attracted by sounds from below, and as she peered down her face showed surprise and then intense excitement.

"Kind saints!" she muttered. "The courtyard is full of policemen." Then with sudden understanding she exclaimed: "Perhaps we will know now what he has been doing." As she spoke a heavy tread was heard on the stairs and the murmur of voices.

"It's nothing," said Alice weakly.

"Nothing?" mocked the old woman. "Hear that!"

An impatient hand sounded at the door while a harsh voice called out those terrifying words: "_Open in the name of the law_."

With a mingling of alarm and satisfaction Mother Bonneton obeyed the summons, and a moment later, as she unlatched the door, a fat man with a bristling red mustache and keen eyes pushed forward into the room where the lovers were waiting. Two burly policemen followed him.

"Ah!" exclaimed Gibelin with a gesture of relief as his eye fell on Kittredge. Then producing a paper he said: "I am from headquarters. I am looking for"--he studied the writing in perplexity--"for M. Lo-eed Keetredge. What is _your_ name?"

"That's it," replied the American, "you made a good stab at it."

"You are M. Lo-eed Keetredge?"

"Yes, sir."

"You must come with me. I have a warrant for your arrest." And he showed the paper.

But Alice staggered forward. "Why do you arrest him? What has he done?"

The man from headquarters answered, shrugging his shoulders: "I don't know what he's done, _he's charged with murder_."

"Murder!" echoed the sacristan's wife. "Holy angels! A murderer in my house!"

"Take him," ordered the detective, and the two policemen laid hold of Kittredge on either side.

"Alice!" cried the young man, and his eyes yearned toward her. "Alice, I am innocent."

"Come," said the men gruffly, and Kittredge felt a sickening sense of shame as he realized that he was a prisoner.

"Wait! One moment!" protested the girl, and the men paused. Then, going close to her lover, Alice spoke to him in low, thrilling words that came straight from her soul:

"Lloyd, I believe you, I trust you, I love you. No matter what you have done, I love you. It was because my love is so great that I refused you this afternoon. But you need me now, you're in trouble now, and, Lloyd, if--if you want me still, I'm yours, all yours."

"O God!" murmured Kittredge, and even the hardened policeman choked a little. "I'm the happiest man in Paris, but--" He could say no more except with a last longing look: "Good-by."

Wildly, fiercely she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately on the mouth--their first kiss. And she murmured: "I love you, I love you."

Then they led Kittredge away.

[Illustration: "Alice, I am innocent."]

CHAPTER V

COQUENIL GETS IN THE GAME

It was a long night at the Ansonia and a hard night for M. Gritz. France is a land of infinite red tape where even such simple things as getting born or getting married lead to endless formalities. Judge, then, of the complicated procedure involved in so serious a matter as getting murdered--especially in a fashionable restaurant! Long before the commissary had finished his report there arrived no less a person than M. Simon, the chief of police, round-faced and affable, a brisk, dapper man whose ready smile had led more than one trusting criminal into regretted confidences.

And a little later came M. Hauteville, the judge in charge of the case, a cold, severe figure, handsome in his younger days, but soured, it was said, by social disappointments and ill health. He was in evening dress, having been summoned posthaste from the theater. Both of these officials went over the case with the commissary and the doctor, both viewed the body and studied its surroundings and, having formed a theory of the crime, both proceeded to draw up a report. And the doctor drew up _his_ report. And already Gibelin (now at the prison with Kittredge) had made elaborate notes

for _his_ report. And outside the hotel, with eager notebooks, were a score of reporters all busy with _their_ reports. No doubt that, in the matter of paper and ink, full justice would be done to the sudden taking off of this gallant billiard player!

Meantime the official police photographer and his assistants had arrived (this was long after midnight) with special apparatus for photographing the victim and the scene of the crime. And their work occupied two full hours owing largely to the difficult manipulation of a queer, clumsy camera that photographed the body _from above_ as it lay on the floor.

In the intervals of these formalities the officials discussed the case with a wide variance in opinions and conclusions. The chief of police and M. Pougeot were strong for the theory of murder, while M. Hauteville leaned toward suicide. The doctor was undecided.

"But the shot was fired at the closest possible range," insisted the judge; "the pistol was not a foot from the man's head. Isn't that true, doctor?"

"Yes," replied Joubert, "the eyebrows are badly singed, the skin is burned, and the face shows unmistakable powder marks. I should say the pistol was fired not six inches from the victim."

"Then it's suicide," declared the judge. "How else account for the facts? Martinez was a strong, active man. He would never have allowed a murderer to get so close to him without a struggle. But there is not the slightest sign of a struggle, no disorder in the room, no disarrangement of the man's clothing. It's evidently suicide."

"If it's suicide," objected Pougeot, "where is the weapon? The man died instantly, didn't he, doctor?"

"Undoubtedly," agreed the doctor.

"Then the pistol must have fallen beside him or remained in his hand. Well, where is it?"

"Ask the woman who was here. How do you know she didn't take it?"

"Nonsense!" put in the chief. "Why should she take it? To throw suspicion on herself? Besides, I'll show you another reason why it's not suicide. The man was shot through the right eye, the ball went in straight and clean, tearing its way to the brain. Well, in the whole history of suicides, there is not one case where a man has shot himself in the eye. Did you ever hear of such a case, doctor?"

"Never," answered Joubert.

"A man will shoot himself in the mouth, in the temple, in the heart, anywhere, but not in the eye. There would be an unconquerable shrinking from that. So I say it's murder."

The judge shook his head. "And the murderer?"

"Ah, that's another question. We must find the woman. And we must understand the role of this American."

"No woman ever fired that shot or planned this crime," declared the commissary, unconsciously echoing Coquenil's opinion.

"There's better reason to argue that the American never did it," retorted the judge.

"What reason?"

"The woman ran away, didn't she? And the American didn't. If he had killed this man, do you think _anything_ would have brought him back here for that cloak and bag?"

"A good point," nodded the chief. "We can't be sure of the murderer--yet, but we can be reasonably sure it's murder."

Still the judge was unconvinced. "If it's murder, how do you account for the singed eyebrows? How did the murderer get so near?"

"I answer as you did: 'Ask the woman.' She knows."

"Ah, yes, she knows," reflected the commissary. "And, gentlemen, all our talk brings us back to this, _we must find that woman_."

At half past one Gibelin appeared to announce the arrest of Kittredge. He had tried vainly to get from the American some clew to the owner of cloak and bag, but the young man had refused to speak and, with sullen indifference, had allowed himself to be locked up in the big room at the depot.

"I'll see what _I_ can squeeze out of him in the morning," said Hauteville grimly. There was no judge in the _parquet_ who had his reputation for breaking down the resistance of obstinate prisoners.

"You've got your work cut out," snapped the detective. "He's a stubborn devil."

In the midst of these perplexities and technicalities a note was brought in for M. Pougeot. The commissary glanced at it quickly and then, with a word of excuse, left the room, returning a few minutes later and whispering earnestly to M. Simon.

"You say _he_ is here?" exclaimed the latter. "I thought he was sailing for----"

M. Pougeot bent closer and whispered again.

"Paul Coquenil!" exclaimed the chief. "Why, certainly, ask him to come in."

A moment later Coquenil entered and all rose with cordial greetings, that is, all except Gibelin, whose curt nod and suspicious glances showed that he found anything but satisfaction in the presence of this formidable rival.

"My dear Coquenil!" said Simon warmly. "This is like the old days! If you were only with us now what a nut there would be for you to crack!"

"So I hear," smiled M. Paul, "and--er--the fact is, I have come to help you crack it." He spoke with that quiet but confident seriousness which always carried conviction, and M. Simon and the judge, feeling the man's power, waited his further words with growing interest; but Gibelin blinked his small eyes and muttered under his breath: "The cheek of the fellow!"

"As you know," explained Coquenil briefly, "I resigned from the force two years ago. I need not go into details; the point is, I now ask to be taken back. That is why I am here."

"But, my dear fellow," replied the chief in frank astonishment, "I understood that you had received a magnificent offer with----"

"Yes, yes, I have."

"With a salary of a hundred thousand francs?"

"It's true, but--I have refused it."

Simon and Hauteville looked at Coquenil incredulously. How could a man refuse a salary of a hundred thousand francs? The commissary watched his friend with admiration, Gibelin with envious hostility.

"May I ask _why_ you have refused it?" asked the chief.

"Partly for personal reasons, largely because I want to have a hand in this case."

Gibelin moved uneasily.

"You think this case so interesting?" put in the judge.

"The most interesting I have ever known," answered the other, and then he added with all the authority of his fine, grave face: "It's more than interesting, _it's_ the most important criminal case Paris has known for three generations_."

Again they stared at him.

"My dear Coquenil, you exaggerate," objected M. Simon. "After all, we have only the shooting of a billiard player."

M. Paul shook his head and replied impressively: "The billiard player was a pawn in the game. He became troublesome and was sacrificed. He is of no importance, but there's a greater game than billiards here with a master player and--_I'm_ going to be in it_."

"Why do you think it's a great game?" questioned the judge.

"Why do I think anything? Why did I think a commonplace pickpocket at the Bon Marche was a notorious criminal, wanted by two countries? Why did I think we should find the real clew to that Bordeaux counterfeiting gang in a Passy wine shop? Why did I think it necessary to-night to be _on_ the cab this young American took and not _behind_ it in another cab?" He shot a quick glance at Gibelin. "Because a good detective _knows_ certain things before he can prove them and acts on his knowledge. That is what distinguishes him from an ordinary detective."

"Meaning me?" challenged Gibelin.

"Not at all," replied M. Paul smoothly. "I only say that----"

"One moment," interrupted M. Simon. "Do I understand that you were with the driver who took this American away from here to-night?"

Coquenil smiled. "I was not _with_ the driver, I _was_ the driver_ and I had the honor of receiving five francs from my distinguished associate." He bowed mockingly to Gibelin and held up a silver piece. "I shall keep this among my curiosities."

"It was a foolish trick, a perfectly useless trick," declared Gibelin, furious.

"Perhaps not," answered the other with aggravating politeness; "perhaps it was a rather nice _coup_ leading to very important results."

"Huh! What results?"

"Yes. What results?" echoed the judge.

"Let me ask first," replied Coquenil deliberately, "what you regard as the most important thing to be known in this case just now?"

"The name of the woman," answered Hauteville promptly.

"_Parbleu!_" agreed the commissary.

"Then the man who gives you this woman's name and address will render a real service?"

"A service?" exclaimed Hauteville. "The whole case rests on this woman. Without her, nothing can be understood."

"So it would be a good piece of work," continued Coquenil, "if a man had discovered this name and address in the last few hours with nothing but his wits to help him; in fact, with everything done to hinder him." He looked meaningly at Gibelin.

"Come, come," interrupted the chief, "what are you driving at?"

"At this, _I have the woman's name and address_."

"Impossible!" they cried.

"I got them by my own efforts and I will give them up _on my own terms_." He spoke with a look of fearless purpose that M. Simon well remembered from the old days.

"A thousand devils! How did you do it?" cried Simon.

"I watched the American in the cab as he leaned forward toward the lantern light and I saw exactly what he was doing. He opened the lady's bag and cut out a leather flap that had her name and address stamped on it."

"No," contradicted Gibelin, "there was _no_ name in the bag. I examined it myself."

"The name was on the _under side_ of the flap," laughed the other, "in gilt letters."

Gibelin's heart sank.

"And you took this flap from the American?" asked M. Simon.

"No, no! Any violence would have brought my colleague into the thing, for he was close behind, and I wanted this knowledge for myself."

"What did you do?" pursued the chief.

"I let the young man cut the flap into small pieces and drop them one by one as we drove through dark little streets. And I noted where he dropped the pieces. Then I drove back and picked them up, that is, all but two."

"Marvelous!" muttered Hauteville.

"I had a small searchlight lantern to help me. That was one of the things I took from my desk," he added to Pougeot.

"And these pieces of leather with the name and address, you have them?" continued the chief.

"I have them."

"With you?"

"Yes."

"May I see them?"

"Certainly. If you will promise to respect them as my personal property?"

Simon hesitated. "You mean—" he frowned, and then impatiently: "Oh, yes, I promise that."

Coquenil drew an envelope from his breast pocket and from it he took a number of white-leather fragments. And he showed the chief that most of these fragments were stamped in gold letters or parts of letters.

"I'm satisfied," declared Simon after examining several of the fragments and returning them. "_Bon Dieu!_" he stormed at Gibelin. "And you had that bag in your hands!"

Gibelin sat silent. This was the wretchedest moment in his career.

"Well," continued the chief, "we must have these pieces of leather. What are your terms?"

"I told you," said Coquenil, "I want to be put back on the force. I want to handle this case."

M. Simon thought a moment. "That ought to be easily arranged. I will see the prefet de police about it in the morning."

But the other demurred. "I ask you to see him to-night. It's ten minutes to his house in an automobile. I'll wait here."

The chief smiled. "You're in a hurry, aren't you? Well, so are we. Will you come with me, Hauteville?"

"If you like."

"And I'll go, if you don't mind," put in the commissary. "I may have some influence with the prefet."

"He won't refuse me," declared Simon. "After all, I am responsible for the pursuit of criminals in this city, and if I tell him that I absolutely need Paul Coquenil back on the force, as I do, he will sign the commission at once. Come, gentlemen."

A moment later the three had hurried off, leaving Coquenil and Gibelin together.

"Have one?" said M. Paul, offering his cigarette case.

"Thanks," snapped Gibelin with deliberate insolence, "I prefer my own."

"There's no use being ugly about it," replied the other good-naturedly, as he lighted a cigarette. His companion did the same and the two smoked in silence, Gibelin gnawing savagely at his little red mustache.

"See here," broke in the latter, "wouldn't you be ugly if somebody butted into a case that had been given to you?"

"Why," smiled Coquenil, "if he thought he could handle it better than I could, I--I think I'd let him try."

[Illustration: "'Have one?' said M. Paul, offering his cigarette case."]

Then there was another silence, broken presently by Gibelin.

"Do you imagine the prefet de police is going to stand being pulled out of bed at three in the morning just because Paul Coquenil wants something?"

Well, I guess not."

"No? What do you think he'll do?" asked Coquenil.

"Do? He'll tell those men they are three idiots, that's what he'll do. And you'll never get your appointment. Bet you five louis you don't."

M. Paul shook his head. "I don't want your money."

"_Bon sang!_ You think the whole police department must bow down to you."

"It's not a case of bowing down to me, it's a case of _needing_ me."

"Huh!" snorted the other. "I'm going to walk around." He rose and moved toward the door. Then he turned sharply: "Say, how much did you pay that driver?"

"Ten louis. It was cheap enough. He might have lost his place."

"You think it's a great joke on me because I paid you five francs? Don't forget that it was raining and dark and you had that rubber cape pulled up over half your face, so it wasn't such a wonderful disguise."

"I didn't say it was."

"Anyhow, I'll get square with you," retorted the other, exasperated by M. Paul's good nature. "The best men make mistakes and _look out that you don't make one_."

"If I do, I'll call on you for help."

"And _if_ you do, I'll take jolly good care that you don't get it," snarled the other.

"Nonsense!" laughed Coquenil. "You're a good soldier, Gibelin; you like to kick and growl, but you do your work. Tell you what I'll do as soon as I'm put in charge of this case. Want to know what I'll do?"

"Well?"

"I'll have to set you to work on it. Ha, ha! Upon my soul, I will."

"You'd better look out," menaced the red-haired man with an ugly look, "or I'll do some work on this case you'll wish I hadn't done." With this he flung himself out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"What did he mean by that?" muttered M. Paul, and he sat silent, lost in thought, until the others returned. In a glance, he read the answer in their faces.

"It's all right," said the chief.

"Congratulations, old friend," beamed Pougeot, squeezing Coquenil's hand.

"The _prefet_ was extremely nice," added M. Hauteville; "he took our view at once."

"Then my commission is signed?"

"Precisely," answered the chief; "you are one of us again, and--I'm glad."

"Thank you, both of you," said M. Paul with a quiver of emotion.

"I give you full charge of this case," went on M. Simon, "and I will see that you have every possible assistance. I expect you to be on deck

to-morrow morning."

Coquenil hesitated a moment and then, with a flash of his tireless energy, he said: "If it's all the same to you, chief, I'll go on deck to-night--now."

CHAPTER VI

THE WEAPON

Right across from the Ansonia on the Rue Marboeuf was a little wine shop that remained open all night for the accommodation of cab drivers and belated pedestrians and to this Coquenil and the commissary now withdrew. Before anything else the detective wished to get from M. Pougeot his impressions of the case. And he asked Papa Tignol to come with them for a fortifying glass.

"By the way," said the commissary to Tignol when they were seated in the back room, "did you find out how that woman left the hotel without her wraps and without being seen?"

The old man nodded. "When she came out of the telephone booth she slipped on a long black rain coat that was hanging there. It belonged to the telephone girl and it's missing. The rain coat had a hood to it which the woman pulled over her head. Then she walked out quietly and no one paid any attention to her."

"Good work, Papa Tignol," approved Coquenil.

"It's you, M. Paul, who have done good work this night," chuckled Tignol. "Eh! Eh! What a lesson for Gibelin!"

"The brute!" muttered Pougeot.

Then they turned to the commissary's report of his investigation, Coquenil listening with intense concentration, interrupting now and then with a question or to consult the rough plan drawn by Pougeot.

"Are you sure there is no exit from the banquet room and from these private rooms except by the corridor?" he asked.

"They tell me not."

"So, if the murderer went out, he must have passed Joseph?"

"Yes."

"And the only persons who passed Joseph were the woman and this American?"

"Exactly."

"Too easy!" he muttered. "Too easy!"

"What do you mean?"

"That would put the guilt on one or the other of those two?"

"Apparently."

"And end the case?"

"Why--er----"

"Yes, it would. A case is ended when the murderer is discovered. Well, this case is not ended, you can be sure of that. The murderer I am looking for is not that kind of a murderer. To begin with, he's not a fool. If he made up his mind to shoot a man in a private room he would know exactly what he was doing and exactly how he was going to escape."

"But the facts are there--I've given them to you," retorted the commissary a little nettled.

Coquenil shook his head.

"My dear Lucien, you have given me some of the facts; before morning I hope we'll have others and--hello!"

He stopped abruptly to look at a comical little man with a very large mouth, the owner of the place, who had been hovering about for some moments as if anxious to say something.

"What is it, my friend?" asked Coquenil good-naturedly.

At this the proprietor coughed in embarrassment and motioned to a prim, thin-faced woman in the front room who came forward with fidgety shyness, begging the gentlemen to forgive her if she had done wrong, but there was something on her conscience and she couldn't sleep without telling it.

"Well?" broke in Peugeot impatiently, but Coquenil gave the woman a reassuring look and she went on to explain that she was a spinster living in a little attic room of the next house, overlooking the Rue Marboeuf. She worked as a seamstress all day in a hot, crowded atelier, and when she came home at night she loved to go out on her balcony, especially these fine summer evenings. She would stand there and brush her hair while she watched the sunset deepen and the swallows circle over the chimney tops. It was an excellent thing for a woman's hair to brush it a long time every night; she always brushed hers for half an hour--that was why it was so thick and glossy.

"But, my dear woman," smiled Coquenil, "what has that to do with me? I have very little hair and no time to brush it."

The seamstress begged his pardon, the point was that on the previous evening, just as she had nearly finished brushing her hair, she suddenly heard a sound like a pistol shot from across the street, and looking down, she saw a glittering object thrown from a window. She saw it distinctly and watched where it fell beyond the high wall that separated the Ansonia Hotel from an adjoining courtyard. She had not thought much about it at the moment, but, having heard that something dreadful had happened----

Coquenil could contain himself no longer and, taking the woman's arm, he hurried her to the door.

"Now," he said, "show me just where you saw this glittering object thrown over the wall."

"There," she replied, pointing, "it lies to the left of that heavy doorway on the courtyard stones. I could see it from my balcony."

[Illustration: "There it lies to the left of that heavy doorway."]

"Wait!" and, speaking to Tignol in a low tone, M. Paul gave him quick instructions, whereupon the old man hurried across the street and pulled the bell at the doorway indicated.

"Is he going to see what it was?" asked the spinster eagerly.

"Yes, he is going to see what it was," and at that moment the door swung open and Papa Tignol disappeared within.

"Did you happen to see the person who threw this thing?" continued M. Paul gently.

"No, but I saw his arm."

Coquenil gave a start of satisfaction. "His arm? Then a man threw it?"

"Oh, yes, I saw his black coat sleeve and his white cuff quite plainly."

"But not his face?"

"No, only the arm."

"Do you remember the window from which he threw this object?" The detective looked at her anxiously.

"Yes, indeed, it is easy to remember; it's the end window, on the first floor of the hotel. There!"

Coquenil felt a thrill of excitement, for, unless he had misunderstood the commissary's diagram, the seamstress was pointing not to private room Number Six, _but to private room Number Seven!_

"Lucien!" he called, and, taking his friend aside, he asked: "Does that end window on the first floor belong to Number Six or Number Seven?"

"Number Seven."

"And the window next to it?"

"Number Six."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure."

"Thanks. Just a moment," and he rejoined the seamstress.

"You are giving us great assistance," he said to her politely. "I shall speak of you to the chief."

"Oh, sir," she murmured in confusion.

"But one point is not quite clear. Just look across again. You see two open windows, the end window and the one next to it. Isn't it possible that this bright thing was thrown from the window _next_ to the end one?"

"No, no."

"They are both alike and, both being open, one might easily make a mistake."

She shook her head positively. "I have made no mistake, _it was the end window_."

Just then Coquenil heard the click of the door opposite and, looking over, he saw Papa Tignol beckoning to him.

"Excuse me," he said and hurried across the street.

"It's there," whispered Tignol.

"The pistol?"

"Yes."

"You remembered what I told you?"

The old man looked hurt. "Of course I did. I haven't touched it. Nothing could make me touch it."

"Good! Papa Tignol, I want you to stay here until I come back. Things are marching along."

Again he rejoined the seamstress and, with his serious, friendly air, he began: "And you still think that shining object was thrown from the _second_ window?"

"No, no! How stupid you are!" And then in confusion: "I beg a thousand pardons, I am nervous. I thought I told you plainly it was the end window."

"Thanks, my good woman," replied M. Paul. "Now go right back to your room and don't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"But," she stammered, "would monsieur be so kind as to say what the bright object was?"

The detective bent nearer and whispered mysteriously: "It was a comb, a silver comb!"

"_ Mon Dieu!_ A silver comb!" exclaimed the unsuspecting spinster.

"Now back to your room and finish brushing your hair," he urged, and the woman hurried away trembling with excitement.

A few moments later Coquenil and the commissary and Papa Tignol were standing in the courtyard near two green tubs of foliage plants between which the pistol had fallen. The doorkeeper of the house, a crabbed individual who had only become mildly respectful when he learned that he was dealing with the police, had joined them, his crustiness tempered by curiosity.

"See here," said the detective, addressing him, "do you want to earn five francs?" The doorkeeper brightened. "I'll make it ten", continued the other, "if you do exactly what I say. You are to take a cab, here is the money, and drive to Notre-Dame. At the right of the church is a high iron railing around the archbishop's house. In the railing is an iron gate with a night bell for Extreme Unction. Ring this bell and ask to see the sacristan Bonneton, and when he comes out give him this." Coquenil wrote hastily on a card. "It's an order to let you have a dog named Caesar--my dog--he's guarding the church with Bonneton. Pat Caesar and tell him he's going to see M. Paul, that's me. Tell him to jump in the cab and keep still. He'll understand--he knows more than most men. Then drive back here as quick as you can."

The doorkeeper touched his cap and departed.

Coquenil turned to Tignol. "Watch the pistol. When the doorkeeper comes back send him over to the hotel. I'll be there."

"Right," nodded the old man.

Then the detective said to Pougeot: "I must talk to Gritz. You know him, don't you?"

The commissary glanced at his watch. "Yes, but do you realize it's after

three o'clock?"

"Never mind, I must see him. A lot depends on it. Get him out of bed for me, Lucien, and--then you can go home."

"I'll try," grumbled the other, "but what in Heaven's name are you going to do with that dog?"

"_Use him,_" answered Coquenil.

CHAPTER VII

THE FOOTPRINTS

One of the great lessons Coquenil had learned in his long experience with mysterious crimes was to be careful of hastily rejecting any evidence because it conflicted with some preconceived theory. It would have been easy now, for instance, to assume that this prim spinster was mistaken in declaring that she had seen the pistol thrown from the window of Number Seven. That, of course, seemed most unlikely, since the shooting was done in Number Six, yet how account for the woman's positiveness? She seemed a truthful, well-meaning person, and the murderer _might_ have gone into Number Seven after committing the crime. It was evidently important to get as much light as possible on this point. Hence the need of M. Gritz.

M. Herman Gritz was a short, massive man with hard, puffy eyes and thin black hair, rather curly and oily, and a rapacious nose. He appeared (having been induced to come down by the commissary) in a richly embroidered blue-silk house garment, and his efforts at affability were obviously based on apprehension.

Coquenil began at once with questions about private room Number Seven. We had reserved this room and what had prevented the person from occupying it? M. Gritz replied that Number Seven had been engaged some days before by an old client, who, at the last moment, had sent a _petit bleu_ to say that he had changed his plans and would not require the room. The _petit bleu_ did not arrive until after the crime was discovered, so the room remained empty. More than that, the door was locked.

"Locked on the outside?"

"Yes."

"With the key in the lock?"

"Yes."

"Then anyone coming along the corridor might have turned the key and entered Number Seven?"

"It is possible," admitted M. Gritz, "but very improbable. The room was dark, and an ordinary person seeing a door locked and a room dark----"

"We are not talking about an ordinary person," retorted the detective, "we are talking about a murderer. Come, we must look into this," and he led the way down the corridor, nodding to the policeman outside Number Six and stopping at the next door, the last in the line, the door to Number Seven.

"You know I haven't been in _there_ yet." He glanced toward the adjoining room of the tragedy, then, turning the key in Number Seven, he tried to open the door.

"Hello! It's locked on the inside, too!"

"_Tiens!_ You're right," said Gritz, and he rumbled his scanty locks in perplexity.

"Some one has been inside, some one may be inside now."

The proprietor shook his head and, rather reluctantly, went on to explain that Number Seven was different from the other private rooms in this, that it had a separate exit with separate stairs leading to an alleyway between the hotel and a wall surrounding it. A few habitués knew of this exit and used it occasionally for greater privacy. The alleyway led to a gate in the wall opening on the Rue Marboeuf, so a particularly discreet couple, let us say, could drive up to this gate, pass through the alleyway, and then, by the private stairs, enter Number Seven without being seen by anyone, assuming, of course, that they had a key to the alleyway door. And they could leave the restaurant in the same unobserved manner.

As Coquenil listened, his mouth drew into an ominous thin line and his deep eyes burned angrily.

"M. Gritz," he said in a cold, cutting voice, "you are a man of intelligence, you must be. This crime was committed last night about nine o'clock; it's now half past three in the morning. Will you please tell me how it happens that this fact _of vital importance_ has been concealed from the police for over six hours?"

"Why," stammered the other, "I--I don't know."

"Are you trying to shield some one? Who is this man that engaged Number Seven?"

Gritz shook his head unhappily. "I don't know his name."

"You don't know his name?" thundered Coquenil.

"We have to be discreet in these matters," reasoned the other. "We have many clients who do not give us their names, they have their own reasons for that; some of them are married, and, as a man of the world, _I_ respect their reserve." M. Gritz prided himself on being a man of the world. He had started as a penniless Swiss waiter and had reached the magnificent point where broken-down aristocrats were willing to owe him money and sometimes borrow it--and he appreciated the honor.

"But what do you call him?" persisted Coquenil. "You must call him something."

"In speaking to him we call him 'monsieur'; in speaking of him we call him '_the tall blonde_'."

"The tall blonde!" repeated M. Paul.

"Exactly. He has been here several times with a woman he calls Anita. That's all I know about it. Anyway, what difference does it make since he didn't come to-night?"

"How do you know he didn't come? He had a key to the alleyway door, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I tell you he sent a _petit bleu_."

The detective shrugged his shoulders. "_Some one_ has been here and locked this door on the inside. I want it opened."

"Just a moment," trembled Gritz. "I have a pass key to the alleyway door. We'll go around."

"Make haste, then," and they started briskly through the halls, the proprietor assuring M. Paul that only a single key was ever given out for the alleyway door and this to none but trusted clients, who returned it the same night.

"Only a single key to the alleyway door," reflected, Coquenil.

"Yes."

"And your 'tall blonde' has it now?"

"I suppose so."

They left the hotel by the main entrance, and were just going around into Rue Marboeuf when the _concierge_ from across the way met them with word that Caesar had arrived.

"Caesar?" questioned Gritz.

"He's my dog. Ph-h-eet! Ph-h-eet! Ah, here he is!" and out of the shadows the splendid animal came bounding. At his master's call he had made a mighty plunge and broken away from Papa Tignol's hold.

"Good old fellow!" murmured M. Paul, holding the dog's eager head with his two hands. "I have work for you, sir, to-night. Ah, he knows! See his eyes! Look at that tail! We'll show 'em, eh, Caesar?"

And the dog answered with delighted leaps.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked the proprietor.

"Make a little experiment. Do you mind waiting a couple of minutes? It _may_ give us a line on this visitor to Number Seven."

"I'll wait," said Gritz.

"Come over here," continued the other. "I'll show you a pistol connected with this case. And I'll show it to the dog."

"For the scent? You don't think a dog can follow the scent from a pistol, do you?" asked the proprietor incredulously.

"I don't know. _This_ dog has done wonderful things. He tracked a murderer once three miles across rough country near Liege and found him hidden in a barn. But he had better conditions there. We'll see."

They had entered the courtyard now and Coquenil led Caesar to the spot where the weapon lay still undisturbed.

"_Cherche!_" he ordered, and the dog nosed the pistol with concentrated effort. Then silently, anxiously, one would say, he darted away, circling the courtyard back and forth, sniffing the ground as he went, pausing occasionally or retracing his steps and presently stopping before M. Paul with a little bark of disappointment.

"Nothing, eh? Quite right. Give me the pistol, Papa Tignol. We'll try outside. There!" He pointed to the open door where the _concierge_ was waiting. "Now then, _cherche!_"

In an instant Caesar was out in the Rue Marboeuf, circling again and again in larger and larger arcs, as he had been taught, back and forth, until he had covered a certain length of street and sidewalk, every foot of the

space between opposite walls, then moving on for another length and then for another, looking up at his master now and then for a word of encouragement.

[Illustration: "'_Cherche!_' he ordered."]

"It's a hard test," muttered Coquenil. "Footprints and weapons have lain for hours in a drenching rain, but--Ah!" Caesar had stopped with a little whine and was half crouching at the edge of the sidewalk, head low, eyes fiercely forward, body quivering with excitement. "He's found something!"

The dog turned with quick, joyous barks.

"He's got the scent. Now _watch_ him," and sharply he gave the word: "_Va!_"

Straight across the pavement darted Caesar, then along the opposite sidewalk _away_ from the Champs Elysees, running easily, nose down, past the Rue Francois Premier, past the Rue Clement-Marot, then out into the street again and stopping suddenly.

"He's lost it," mourned Papa Tignol.

"Lost it? Of course he's lost it," triumphed the detective. And turning to M. Gritz: "There's where your murderer picked up a cab. It's perfectly clear. No one has touched that pistol since the man who used it threw it from the window of Number Seven."

"You mean Number Six," corrected Gritz.

"I mean Number Seven. We know where the murderer took a cab, now we'll see where he left the hotel." And hurrying toward his dog, he called: "Back, Caesar!"

Obediently the dog trotted back along the trail, recrossing the street where he had crossed it before, and presently reaching the point where he had first caught the scent. Here he stopped, waiting for orders, eyeing M. Paul with almost speaking intelligence.

"A wonderful dog," admired Gritz. "What kind is he?"

"Belgian shepherd dog," answered Coquenil. "He cost me five hundred francs, and I wouldn't sell him for--well, I wouldn't sell him." He bent over and fondled the panting animal. "We wouldn't sell our best friend, would we, Caesar?"

Evidently Caesar did not think this the moment for sentiment; he growled impatiently, straining toward the scent.

"He knows there's work to be done and he's right." Then quickly he gave the word again and once more Caesar was away, darting back along the sidewalk _toward_ the Champs Elysees, moving nearer and nearer to the houses and presently stopping at a gateway, against which he pressed and whined. It was a gateway in the wall surrounding the Ansonia Hotel.

"The man came out here," declared Coquenil, and, unlatching the gate, he looked inside, the dog pushing after him.

"Down Caesar!" ordered M. Paul, and unwillingly the ardent creature crouched at his feet.

The wall surrounding the Ansonia was of polished granite about six feet high, and between this wall and the hotel itself was a space of equal width planted with slim fir trees that stood out in decorative dignity against the gray stone.

"This is what you call the alleyway?" questioned Coquenil.

"Exactly."

From the pocket of his coat the detective drew a small electric lantern, the one that had served him so well earlier in the evening, and, touching a switch, he threw upon the ground a strong white ray; whereupon a confusion of footprints became visible, as if a number of persons had trod back and forth here.

"What does this mean?" he cried.

Papa Tignol explained shamefacedly: "_We_ did it looking for the pistol; it was Gibelin's orders."

"_Bon Dieu!_ What a pity! We can never get a clean print in this mess. But wait! How far along the alleyway did you look?"

"As far as that back wall. Poor Gibelin! He never thought of looking on the other side of it. Eh, eh!"

Coquenil breathed more freely. "We may be all right yet. Ah, yes," he cried, going quickly to this back wall where the alleyway turned to the right along the rear of the hotel. Again he threw his white light before him and, with a start of satisfaction, pointed to the ground. There, clearly marked, was a line of footprints, _a single line_, with no breaks or imperfections, the plain record on the rain-soaked earth that one person, evidently a man, had passed this way, _going out_.

"I'll send the dog first," said M. Paul. "Here, Caesar! _Cherche!_"

Once more the eager animal sprang forward, following slowly along the row of trees where the trail was confused, and then, at the corner, dashing ahead swiftly, only to stop again after a few yards and stand scratching uneasily at a closed door.

"That settles it," said Coquenil. "He has brought us to the alleyway door. Am I right?"

"Yes," nodded Gritz.

"The door that leads to Number Seven?"

"Yes."

"Open it," and, while the agitated proprietor searched for his pass key, the detective spoke to Tignol: "I want impressions of these footprints, the _best_ you can take. Use glycerin with plaster of Paris for the molds. Take _this_ one and these two and _this_ and _this_. Understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Leave Caesar here while you go for what you need. Down, Caesar! _Garde!_"

The dog growled and went on guard forthwith.

"Now, we'll have a look inside."

The alleyway door stood open and, using his lantern with the utmost care, Coquenil went first, mounting the stairs slowly, followed by Gritz. At the top they came to a narrow landing and a closed door.

"This opens directly into Number Seven?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"Is it usually locked or unlocked?"

"It is always locked."

"Well, it's unlocked now," observed Coquenil, trying the knob. Then, flashing his lantern forward, he threw the door wide open. The room was empty.

"Let me turn up the electrics," said the proprietor, and he did so, showing furnishings like those in Number Six except that here the prevailing tint was pale blue while there it was pale yellow.

"I see nothing wrong," remarked M. Paul, glancing about sharply. "Do you?"

"Nothing."

"Except that this door into the corridor is bolted. It didn't bolt itself, did it?"

"No," sighed the other.

Coquenil thought a moment, then he produced the pistol found in the courtyard and examined it with extreme care, then he unlocked the corridor door and looked out. The policeman was still on guard before Number Six.

"I shall want to go in there shortly," said the detective. The policeman saluted wearily.

"Excuse me," ventured M. Gritz, "have you still much to do?"

"Yes," said the other dryly.

"It's nearly four and--I suppose you are used to this sort of thing, but I'm knocked out, I--I'd like to go to bed."

"By all means, my dear sir. I shall get on all right now if--oh, they tell me you make wonderful Turkish coffee here. Do you suppose I could have some?"

"Of course you can. I'll send it at once."

"You'll earn my lasting gratitude."

Gritz hesitated a moment and then, with an apprehensive look in his beady eyes, he said: "So you're going in there?" and he jerked his fat thumb toward the wall separating them from Number Six.

Coquenil nodded.

"To see if the ball from that," he looked with a shiver at the pistol, "fits in--in that?" Again he jerked his thumb toward the wall, beyond which the body lay.

"No, that is the doctor's business. Mine is more important. Good night!"

"Good night," answered Gritz and he waddled away down the corridor in his blue-silk garments, wagging his heavy head and muttering to himself: "More important than that! Mon Dieu! "

THROUGH THE WALL

Coquenil's examination of the pistol showed that it was a weapon of good make and that only a single shot had been fired from it; also that this shot had been fired within a few hours. Which, with the evidence of the seamstress and the dog, gave a strong probability that the instrument of the crime had been found. If the ball in the body corresponded with balls still in the pistol, this probability would become a practical certainty. And yet, the detective knit his brows. Suppose it was established beyond a doubt that this pistol killed the billiard player, there still remained the question _how_ the shooting was accomplished. The murderer was in Number Seven, he could not and did not go into the corridor, for the corridor door was locked. But the billiard player was in Number Six, he was shot in Number Six, and he died in Number Six. How were these two facts to be reconciled? The seamstress's testimony alone might be put aside but not the dog's testimony. _The murderer certainly remained in Number Seven_.

Holding this conviction, the detective entered the room of the tragedy and turned up the lights, all of them, so that he might see whatever was to be seen. He walked back and forth examining the carpet, examining the walls, examining the furniture, but paying little heed to the body. He went to the open window and looked out, he went to the yellow sofa and sat down, finally he shut off the lights and withdrew softly, closing the door behind him. It was just as the commissary had said _with the exception of one thing_.

When he returned to Number Seven, M. Paul found that Gritz had kept his promise and sent him a pot of fragrant Turkish coffee, steaming hot, and a box of the choicest Egyptian cigarettes. Ah, that was kind! This was something like it! And, piling up cushions in the sofa corner, Coquenil settled back comfortably to think and dream. This was the time he loved best, these precious silent hours when the city slept and his mind became most active--this was the time when chiefly he received those flashes of inspiration or intuition that had so often and so wonderfully guided him.

For half an hour or so the detective smoked continuously and sipped the powdered delight of Stamboul, his gaze moving about the room in friendly scrutiny as if he would, by patience and good nature, persuade the walls or, chairs to give up their secret. Presently he took off his glasses and, leaning farther back against the cushions, closed his eyes in pleasant meditation. Or was it a brief snatch of sleep? Whichever it was, a discreet knock at the corridor door shortly ended it, and Papa Tignol entered to say that he had finished the footprint molds.

M. Paul roused himself with an effort and, sitting up, his elbow resting against the sofa back, motioned his associate to a chair.

"By the way," he asked, "what do you think of _that?_" He pointed to a Japanese print in a black frame that hung near the massive sideboard.

"Why," stammered Tignol, "I--I don't think anything of it."

"A rather interesting picture," smiled the other. "I've been studying it."

"A purple sea, a blue moon, and a red fish--it looks crazy to me," muttered the old _agent_.

Coquenil laughed at this candid judgment. "All the same, it has a bearing on our investigations."

"_Diable!_"

M. Paul reached for his glasses, rubbed them deliberately and put them on.

"Papa Tignol," he said seriously, "I have come to a conclusion about this crime, but I haven't verified it. I am now going to give myself an intellectual treat."

"Wha-at?"

"I am going to prove practically whether my mind has grown rusty in the last two years."

"I wish you'd say things so a plain man can understand 'em," grumbled the other.

"You understand that we are in private room Number Seven, don't you? On the other side of that wall is private room Number Six where a man has just been shot. We know that, don't we? But the man who shot him was in this room, the little hair-brushing old maid saw the pistol thrown from this window, the dog found footprints coming from this room, the murderer went out through that door into the alleyway and then into the street. He couldn't have gone into the corridor because the door was locked on the outside."

"He might have gone into the corridor and locked the door after him," objected Tignol.

Coquenil shook his head. "He could have locked the door after him on the outside, not on the inside; but when we came in here, it was locked on the inside. No, sir, that door to the corridor has not been used this evening. The murderer bolted it on the inside when he entered from the alleyway and it wasn't unbolted until I unbolted it myself."

"Then how, in Heaven's name----"

"Exactly! How could a man in this room kill a man in the next room? That is the problem I have been working at for an hour. And I believe I have solved it. Listen. Between these rooms is a solid wooden partition with no door in it--no passageway of any kind. Yet the man in there is dead, we're sure of that. The pistol was here, the bullet went there--somehow. How did it go there? Think."

The detective paused and looked fixedly at the wall near the heavy sideboard. Tignol, half fascinated, stared at the same spot, and then, as a new idea took form in his brain, he blurted out: "You mean it went through the wall?"

"Is there any other way?"

The old man laid a perplexed forefinger along his illuminated nose. "But there is no hole--through the wall," he muttered.

"There is either a hole or a miracle. And between the two, I conclude that there is a hole which we haven't found yet."

"It might be back of that sideboard," ventured the other doubtfully.

But M. Paul disagreed. "No man as clever as this fellow would have moved a heavy piece covered with plates and glasses. Besides, if the sideboard had been moved, there would be marks on the floor and there are none. Now you understand why I'm interested in that Japanese print."

Tignol sprang to his feet, then checked himself with a half-ashamed smile.

"You're mocking me, you've looked behind the picture."

Coquenil shook his head solemnly. "On my honor, I have not been near the picture, I know nothing about the picture, but unless there is some flaw in

my reasoning----"

"I'll give my tongue to the cats to eat!" burst out the other, "if ever I saw a man lie on a sofa and blow blue circles in the air and spin pretty theories about what is back of a picture when----"

"When what?"

"When all he had to do for proof was to reach over and--and lift the darn thing off its nail."

Coquenil smiled. "I've thought of that," he drawled, "but I like the suspense. Half the charm of life is in suspense, Papa Tignol. However, you have a practical mind, so go ahead, lift it off."

The old man did not wait for a second bidding, he stepped forward quickly and took down the picture.

"_Tonnere de Dieu!_" he cried. "It's true! There are _two_ holes."

Sure enough, against the white wall stood out not one but two black holes about an inch in diameter and something less than three inches apart. Around the left hole, which was close to the sideboard, were black dots sprinkled over the painted woodwork like grains of pepper.

"Powder marks!" muttered Coquenil, examining the hole. "He fired at close range as Martinez looked into this room from the other side. Poor chap! That's how he was shot in the eye." And producing a magnifying glass, the detective made a long and careful examination of the holes while Papa Tignol watched him with unqualified disgust.

"Asses! Idiots! That's what we are," muttered the old man. "For half an hour we were in that room, Gibelin and I, and we never found those holes."

"They were covered by the sofa hangings."

"I know, we shook those hangings, we pressed against them, we did everything but look behind them. See here, did _you_ look behind them?"

"No, but I saw something on the floor that gave me an idea."

"Ah, what was that?"

"Some yellowish dust. I picked up a little of it. There." He unfolded a paper and showed a few grains of coarse brownish powder. "You see there are only board partitions between these rooms, the boards are about an inch thick, so a sharp auger would make the holes quickly. But there would be dust and chips."

"Of course."

"Well, this is some of the dust. The woman probably threw the chips out of the window."

"The woman?"

Coquenil nodded. "She helped Martinez while he bored the holes."

Tignol listened in amazement. "You think Martinez bored those holes? The man who was murdered?"

"Undoubtedly. The spirals from the auger blade inside the holes show plainly that the boring was done _from_ Number Six _toward_ Number Seven. Take the glass and see for yourself."

Tignol took the glass and studied the hole. Then he turned, shaking his head. "You're a fine detective, M. Paul, but I was a carpenter for six years before I went on the force and I know more about auger holes than you do. I say you can't be sure which side of the wall this hole was bored from. You talk about spirals, but there's no sense in that. They're the same either way. You _might_ tell by the chipping, but this is hard wood covered with thick enamel, so there's apt to be no chipping. Anyhow, there's none here. We'll see on the other side."

"All right, we'll see," consented Coquenil, and they went around into Number Six.

The old man drew back the sofa hangings and exposed two holes exactly like the others--in fact, the same holes. "You see," he went on, "the edges are clean, without a sign of chipping. There is no more reason to say that these holes were bored this side than from that."

M. Paul made no reply, but going to the sofa he knelt down by it, and using his glass, proceeded to go over its surface with infinite care.

"Turn up all the lights," he said. "That's better," and he continued his search. "Ah!" he cried presently. "You think there is no reason to say the holes were bored from this side. I'll give you a reason. Take this piece of white paper and make me prints of his boot heels." He pointed to the body. "Take the whole heel carefully, then the other one, get the nail marks, everything. That's right. Now cut out the prints. Good! Now look here. Kneel down. Take the glass. There on the yellow satin, by the tail of that silver bird. Do you see? Now compare the heel prints."

Papa Tignol knelt down as directed and examined the sofa seat, which was covered with a piece of Chinese embroidery.

"_Sapristi!_ You're a magician!" he cried in great excitement.

"No," replied Coquenil, "it's perfectly simple. These holes in the wall are five feet above the floor. And I'm enough of a carpenter, Papa Tignol," he smiled, "to know that a man cannot work an auger at that height without standing on something. And here was the very thing for him to stand on, a sofa just in place. So, _if_ Martinez bored these holes, he stood on this sofa to do it, and, in that case, the marks of his heels must have remained on the delicate satin. And here they are."

"Yes, here they are, nails and all," admitted Tignol admiringly. "I'm an old fool, but--but----"

"Well?"

"Tell me _why_ Martinez did it_."

Coquenil's face darkened. "Ah, that's the question. We'll know that when we talk to the woman."

The old man leaned forward eagerly: "_Why_ do you think the woman helped him?_"

"_Somebody_ helped him or the chips would still be there, _somebody_ held back those hangings while he worked the auger, and somebody carried the auger away."

Tignol pondered this, a moment, then, his face brightening: "Hah! I see! The sofa hangings were held back when the shot came, then they fell into place and covered the holes?"

"That's it," replied the detective absently.

"And the man in Number Seven, the murderer, lifted that picture from its nail before shooting and then put it back on the nail after shooting?"

"Yes, yes," agreed M. Paul. Already he was far away on a new line of thought, while the other was still grappling with his first surprise.

"Then this murderer must have known that the billiard player was going to bore these holes," went on Papa Tignol half to himself. "He must have been waiting in Number Seven, he must have stood there with his pistol ready while the holes were coming through, he must have let Martinez finish one hole and then bore the other, he must have kept Number Seven dark so they couldn't see him----"

"A good point, that," approved Coquenil, paying attention. "He certainly kept Number Seven dark."

"And he probably looked into Number Six through the first hole while Martinez was boring the second. I suppose you can tell which of the two holes was bored first?" chuckled Tignol.

M. Paul started, paused in a flash of thought, and then, with sudden eagerness: "I see, that's it!"

"What's it?" gasped the other.

"He bored this hole first," said Coquenil rapidly, "it's the right-hand one when you're in this room, the left-hand one when you're in Number Seven. As you say, the murderer looked through the first hole while he waited for the second to be bored; so, naturally, he fired through the hole where his eye was. That was his first great mistake."

Tignol screwed up his face in perplexity. "What difference does it make which hole the man fired through so long as he shot straight and got away?"

"What difference? Just this difference, that, by firing through the left-hand hole, he has given us precious evidence, against him."

"How?"

"Come back into the other room and I'll show you." And, when they had returned to Number Seven, he continued: "Take the pistol. Pretend you are the murderer. You've been waiting your moment, holding your breath on one side of the wall while the auger grinds through from the other. The first hole is finished. You see the point of the auger as it comes through the second, now the wood breaks and a length of turning steel shoves toward you. You grip your pistol and look through the left-hand hole, you see the woman holding back the curtains, you see Martinez draw out the auger from the right-hand hole and lay it down. Now he leans forward, pressing his face to the completed eyeholes, you see the whites of his eyes, not three inches away. Quick! Pistol up! Ready to fire! No, no, through the left-hand hole where he fired."

"Sacre matin!" muttered Tignol, "it's awkward aiming through this left-hand hole."

"Ah!" said the detective. "Why is it awkward?"

"Because it's too near the sideboard. I can't get my eye there to sight along the pistol barrel."

"You mean your right eye?"

"Of course."

"Could you get your left eye there?"

"Yes, but if I aimed with my left eye I'd have to fire with my left hand and I couldn't hit a cow that way."

Coquenil looked at Tignol steadily. "_You could if you were a left-handed man_."

"You mean to say--" The other stared.

"I mean to say that _this_ man, at a critical moment, fired through that awkward hole near the sideboard when he might just as well have fired through the other hole away from the sideboard. Which shows that it was an easy and natural thing for him to do, consequently----"

"Consequently," exulted the old man, "we've got to look for a left-handed murderer, is that it?"

"What do _you_ think?" smiled the detective.

Papa Tignol paused, and then, bobbing his head in comical seriousness: "I think, if I were this man, I'd sooner have the devil after me than Paul Coquenil."

CHAPTER IX

COQUENIL MARKS HIS MAN

It was nearly four o'clock when Coquenil left the Ansonia and started up the Champs Elysees, breathing deep of the early morning air. The night was still dark, although day was breaking in the east. And what a night it had been! How much had happened since he walked with his dog to Notre-Dame the evening before! Here was the whole course of his life changed, yes, and his prospects put in jeopardy by this extraordinary decision. How could he explain what he had done to his wise old mother? How could he unsay all that he had said to her a few days before when he had shown her that this trip to Brazil was quite for the best and bade her a fond farewell? Could he explain it to anyone, even to himself? Did he honestly believe all the plausible things he had said to Pougeot and the others about this crime? Was it really the wonderful affair he had made out? After all, what had he acted on? A girl's dream and an odd coincidence. Was that enough? Was that enough to make a man alter his whole life and face extraordinary danger? _Was it enough?_

Extraordinary danger! _Why_ did this sense of imminent peril haunt him and fascinate him? What was there in this crime that made it different from many other crimes on which he had been engaged? Those holes through the wall? Well, yes, he had never seen anything quite like that. And the billiard player's motive in boring the holes and the woman's role and the intricacy and ingenuity of the murderer's plan--all these offered an extraordinary problem. And it certainly was strange that this candle-selling girl with the dreams and the purplish eyes had appeared again as the suspected American's sweetheart! He had heard this from Papa Tignol, and how Alice had stood ready to brave everything for her lover when Gibelin marched him off to prison. Poor Gibelin!

So Coquenil's thoughts ran along as he neared the Place de l'Etoile. Well, it was too late to draw back. He had made his decision and he must abide by it, his commission was signed, his duty lay before him. By nine o'clock he must be at the Palais de Justice to report to Hauteville. No use going home. Better have a rubdown and a cold plunge at the _haman_, then a turn on the mat with the professional wrestler, and then a few hours sleep. That

would put him in shape for the day's work with its main business of running down this woman in the case, this lady of the cloak and leather bag, whose name and address he fortunately had. Ah, he looked forward to his interview with her! And he must prepare for it!

Coquenil was just glancing about for a cab to the Turkish bath place, in fact he was signaling one that he saw jogging up the Avenue de la Grande Armee, when he became aware that a gentleman was approaching him with the intention of speaking. Turning quickly, he saw in the uncertain light a man of medium height with a dark beard tinged with gray, wearing a loose black cape overcoat and a silk hat. The stranger saluted politely and said with a slight foreign accent: "How are you, M. Louis? I have been expecting you."

The words were simple enough, yet they contained a double surprise for Coquenil. He was at a loss to understand how he could have been expected here where he had come by the merest accident, and, certainly, this was the first time in twenty years that anyone, except his mother, had addressed him as Louis. He had been christened Louis Paul, but long ago he had dropped the former name, and his most intimate friends knew him only as Paul Coquenil.

"How do you know that my name is Louis?" answered the detective with a sharp glance.

"I know a great deal about you," answered the other, and then with significant emphasis: "_I know that you are interested in dreams_. May I walk along with you?"

"You may," said Coquenil, and at once his keen mind was absorbed in this new problem. Instinctively he felt that something momentous was preparing.

"Rather clever, your getting on that cab to-night," remarked the other.

"Ah, you know about that?"

"Yes, and about the Rio Janeiro offer. We want you to reconsider your decision." His voice was harsh and he spoke in a quick, brusque way, as one accustomed to the exercise of large authority.

"Who, pray, are 'we'?" asked the detective.

"Certain persons interested in this Ansonia affair."

"Persons whom you represent?"

"In a way."

"Persons who know about the crime--I mean, who know the truth about it?"

"Possibly."

"Hm! Do these persons know what covered the holes in Number Seven?"

"A Japanese print."

"And in Number Six?"

"Some yellow hangings."

"Ah!" exclaimed Coquenil in surprise. "Do they know why Martinez bored these holes?"

"To please the woman," was the prompt reply.

"Did she want Martinez killed?"

"No."

"Then why did she want the holes bored?"

"_She wanted to see into Number Seven_."

It was extraordinary, not only the man's knowledge but his unaccountable frankness. And more than ever the detective was on his guard.

"I see you know something about the affair," he said dryly. "What do you want with me?"

"The persons I represent----"

"Say the _person_ you represent," interrupted Coquenil. "A criminal of this type acts alone."

"As you like," answered the other carelessly. "Then the person I represent _wishes you to withdraw from this case_."

The message was preposterous, the manner of its delivery fantastic, yet there was something vaguely formidable in the stranger's tone, as if a great person had spoken, one absolutely sure of himself and of his power to command.

"Naturally," retorted Coquenil.

"Why do you say naturally?"

"It's natural for a criminal to wish that an effort against him should cease. Tell your friend or employer that I am only mildly interested in his wishes."

He spoke with deliberate hostility, but the dark-bearded man answered, quite unruffled: "Ah, I may be able to heighten your interest."

"Come, come, sir, my time is valuable."

The stranger drew from his coat pocket a large thick envelope fastened with an elastic band and handed it to the detective. "Whatever your time is worth," he said in a rasping voice, "I will pay for it. Please look at this."

Coquenil's curiosity was stirred. Here was no commonplace encounter, at least it was a departure from ordinary criminal methods. Who was this supercilious man? How dared he come on such an errand to him, Paul Coquenil? What desperate purpose lurked behind his self-confident mask? Could it be that he knew the assassin or--or _was he the assassin?_

Wondering thus, M. Paul opened the tendered envelope and saw that it contained a bundle of thousand-franc notes.

"There is a large sum here," he remarked.

"Fifty thousand francs. It's for you, and as much more will be handed you the day you sail for Brazil. Just a moment--let me finish. This sum is a bonus in addition to the salary already fixed. And, remember, you have a life position there with a brilliant chance of fame. That is what you care about, I take it--fame; it is for fame you want to follow up this crime."

Coquenil snapped his fingers. "I don't care _that_ for fame. I'm going to work out this case for the sheer joy of doing it."

"You will _never_ work out this case!" The man spoke so sternly and with

such a menacing ring in his voice that M. Paul felt a chill of apprehension.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because you will not be allowed to; it's doubtful if you could work it out, but there's a chance that you could and we don't purpose to take that chance. You're a free agent, you can persist in this course, but if you do----"

He paused as if to check too vehement an utterance, and M. Paul caught a threatening gleam in his eyes that he long remembered.

"Why?"

"If you do, you will be thwarted at every turn, you will be made to suffer in ways you do not dream of, through those who are dear to you, through your dog, through your mother----"

"You dare--" cried Coquenil.

"We dare anything," flashed the stranger. "I'm daring something now, am I not? Don't you suppose I know what you are thinking? Well, I take the risk because--because you are intelligent."

There was something almost captivating in the very arrogance and recklessness of this audacious stranger. Never in all his experience had Coquenil known a criminal or a person directly associated with crime, as this man must be, to boldly confront the powers of justice. Undoubtedly, the fellow realized his danger, yet he deliberately faced it. What plan could he have for getting away once his message was delivered? It must be practically delivered already, there was nothing more to say, he had offered a bribe and made a threat. A few words now for the answer, the refusal, the defiance, and--then what? Surely this brusque individual did not imagine that he, Coquenil, would be simple enough to let him go now that he had him in his power? But wait! Was that true, was this man in his power?

As if answering the thought, the stranger said: "It is hopeless for you to struggle against our knowledge and our resources, quite hopeless. We have, for example, the fullest information about you and your life down to the smallest detail."

"Yes?" answered Coquenil, and a twinkle of humor shone in his eyes. "What's the name of my old servant?"

"Melanie."

"What's the name of the canary bird I gave her last week?"

"It isn't a canary bird, it's a bullfinch. And its name is Pete."

"Not bad, not at all bad," muttered the other, and the twinkle in his eyes faded.

"We know the important things, too, all that concerns you, from your forced resignation two years ago down to your talk yesterday with the girl at Notre-Dame. So how can you fight us? How can you shadow people who shadow you? Who watch your actions from day to day, from hour to hour? Who know exactly the moment when you are weak and unprepared, as I know now that you are unarmed because you left that pistol with Papa Tignol."

For a moment Coquenil was silent, and then: "Here's your money," he said, returning the envelope.

"Then you refuse?"

"I refuse."

"Stubborn fellow! And unbelieving! You doubt our power against you. Come, I will give you a glimpse of it, just the briefest glimpse. Suppose you try to arrest me. You have been thinking of it, now act. I'm a suspicious character, I ought to be investigated. Well, do your duty. I might point out that such an arrest would accomplish absolutely nothing, for you haven't the slightest evidence against me and can get none, but I waive that point because I want to show you that, even in so simple an effort against us as this, you would inevitably fail."

The man's impudence was passing all bounds. "You mean that I cannot arrest you?" menaced Coquenil.

"Precisely. I mean that with all your cleverness and with a distinct advantage in position, here on the Champs Elysees with policemen all about us, you cannot arrest me."

"We'll see about that," answered M. Paul, a grim purpose showing in his deep-set eyes.

"I say this in no spirit of bravado," continued the other with irritating insolence, "but so that you may remember my words and this warning when I am gone." Then, with a final fling of defiance: "This is the first time you have seen me, M. Coquenil, and you will probably never see me again, but you will hear from me. Now blow your whistle!"

Coquenil was puzzled. If this was a bluff, it was the maddest, most incomprehensible bluff that a criminal ever made. But if it was not a bluff? Could there be a hidden purpose here? Was the man deliberately making some subtle move in the game he was playing? The detective paused to think. They had come down the Champs Elysees, past the Ansonia, and were nearing the Rond Point, the best guarded part of Paris, where the shrill summons of his police call would be answered almost instantly. And yet he hesitated.

"There is no hurry, I suppose," said the detective. "I'd like to ask a question or two."

"As many as you please."

With all the strength of his mind and memory Coquenil was studying his adversary. That beard? Could it be false? And the swarthy tone of the skin which he noticed now in the improving light, was that natural? If not natural, then wonderfully imitated. And the hands, the arms? He had watched these from the first, noting every movement, particularly the left hand and the left arm, but he had detected nothing significant; the man used his hands like anyone else, he carried a cane in the right hand, lifted his hat with the right hand, offered the envelope with the right hand. There was nothing to show that he was not a right-handed man.

"I wonder if you have anything against me personally?" inquired M. Paul.

"On the contrary," declared the other, "we admire you and wish you well."

"But you threaten my dog?"

"If necessary, yes."

"And my mother?"

"If necessary".

The decisive moment had come, not only because Coquenil's anger was stirred by this cynical avowal, but because just then there shot around the corner from the Avenue Montaigne a large red automobile which crossed the Champs Elysees slowly, past the fountain and the tulip beds, and, turning into the Avenue Gabrielle, stopped under the chestnut trees, its engines throbbing. Like a flash it came into the detective's mind that the same automobile had passed them once before some streets back. Ah, here was the intended way of escape! On the front seat were two men, strong-looking fellows, accomplices, no doubt. He must act at once while the wide street was still between them.

"I ask because--" began M. Paul with his indifferent drawl, then swiftly drawing his whistle, he sounded a danger call that cut the air in sinister alarm. The stranger sprang away, but Coquenil was on him in a bound, clutching him by the throat and pressing him back with intertwining legs for a sudden fall. The bearded man saved himself by a quick turn, and with a great heave of his shoulders broke the detective's grip, then suddenly he attacked, smiting for the neck, not with clenched fist but with the open hand held sideways in the treacherous cleaving blow that the Japanese use when they strike for the carotid. Coquenil ducked forward, saving himself, but he felt the descending hand hard as stone on his shoulders.

"He struck with his right," thought M. Paul.

At the same moment he felt his adversary's hand close on his throat and rejoiced, for he knew the deadly Jitsu reply to this. Hardening his neck muscles until they covered the delicate parts beneath like bands of steel, the detective seized his enemy's extended arm in his two hands, one at the wrist, one at the elbow, and as his trained fingers sought the painful pressure points, his two free arms started a resistless torsion movement on the captured arm. There is no escape from this movement, no enduring its excruciating pain; to a man taken at such a disadvantage one of two things may happen. He may yield, and in that case he is hurled helpless over his adversary's shoulder, or he may resist, with the result that the tendons are torn from his lacerated arm and he faints in agony.

Such was the master hold gained by M. Paul in the first minute of the struggle; long and carefully he had practiced this coup with a wrestling professional. It never failed, it could not fail, and, in savage triumph, he prolonged his victory, slowly increasing the pressure, slowly as he felt the tendons stretching, the bones cracking in this helpless right arm. A few seconds more and the end would come, a few seconds more and--then a crashing, shattering pain drove through Coquenil's lower heart region, his arms relaxed, his hands relaxed, his senses dimmed, and he sank weakly to the ground. His enemy had done an extraordinary thing, had delivered a blow not provided for in Jitsu tactics. In spite of the torsion torture, he had swung his free arm under the detective's lifted guard, not in Yokohama style but in the best manner of the old English prize ring, his clenched fist falling full on the point of the heart, full on the unguarded solar-plexus nerves which God put there for the undoing of the vainglorious fighters. And Coquenil dropped like a smitten ox with this thought humming in his darkening brain: "It was the left that spoke then."

[Illustration: "He prolonged his victory, slowly increasing the pressure."]

As he sank to the ground M. Paul tried to save himself, and seizing his opponent by the leg, he held him desperately with his failing strength; but the spasms of pain overcame him, his muscles would not act, and with a furious sense of helplessness and failure, he felt the clutched leg slipping from his grasp. Then, as consciousness faded, the brute instinct in him rallied in a last fierce effort and he bit the man deeply under the knee.

When Coquenil came to himself he was lying on the ground and several policemen were bending over him. He lifted his head weakly and looked about

him. The stranger was gone. The automobile was gone. And it all came back to him in sickening memory, the flaunting challenge of this man, the fierce struggle, his own overconfidence, and then his crushing defeat. Ah, what a blow that last one was with the conquering left!

And suddenly it flashed through his mind that he had been outwitted from the first, that the man's purpose had not been at all what it seemed to be, that a hand-to-hand conflict was precisely what the stranger had sought and planned for, because--_because_--In feverish haste Coquenil felt in his breast pocket for the envelope with the precious leather fragments. It was not there. Then quickly he searched his other pockets. It was not there. _The envelope containing the woman's name and address was gone_.

CHAPTER X

GIBELIN SCORES A POINT

The next day all Paris buzzed and wondered about this Ansonia affair, as it was called. The newspapers printed long accounts of it with elaborate details, and various conjectures were made as to the disappearance of Martinez's fair companion. More or less plausible theories were also put forth touching the arrested American, prudently referred to as "Monsieur K., a well-known New Yorker." It was furthermore dwelt upon as significant that the famous detective, Paul Coquenil, had returned to his old place on the force for the especial purpose of working on this case. And M. Coquenil was reported to have already, by one of his brilliant strokes, secured a clew that would lead shortly to important revelations. Alas, no one knew under what distressing circumstances this precious clew had been lost!

Shortly before nine by the white clock over the columned entrance to the Palais de Justice, M. Paul passed through the great iron and gilt barrier that fronts the street and turning to the left, mounted the wide stone stairway. He had had his snatch of sleep at the _haman_, his rubdown and cold plunge, but not his intended bout with the wrestling professional. He had had wrestling enough for one day, and now he had come to keep his appointment with Judge Hauteville.

Two flights up the detective found himself in a spacious corridor off which opened seven doors leading to the offices of seven judges. Seven! Strange this resemblance to the fatal corridor at the Ansonia! And stranger still that Judge Hauteville's office should be Number Six!

Coquenil moved on past palace guards in bright apparel, past sad-faced witnesses and brisk lawyers of the court in black robes with amusing white bibs at their throats. And presently he entered Judge Hauteville's private room, where an amiable _greffier_ asked him to sit down until the judge should arrive.

There was nothing in the plain and rather businesslike furnishings of this room to suggest the somber and sordid scenes daily enacted here. On the dull leather of a long table, covered with its usual litter of papers, had been spread the criminal facts of a generation, the sinister harvest of ignorance and vice and poverty. On these battered chairs had sat and twisted hundreds of poor wretches, innocent and guilty, petty thieves, shifty-eyed scoundrels, dull brutes of murderers, and occasionally a criminal of a higher class, summoned for the preliminary examinations. Here, under the eye of a bored guard, they had passed miserable hours while the judge, smiling or frowning, hands in his pockets, strode back and forth over the shabby red-and-green carpet putting endless questions, sifting out truth from falsehood, struggling against stupidity and cunning, studying each new case as a separate problem with infinite tact and insight, never

weariness, never losing his temper, coming back again and again to the essential point until more than one stubborn criminal had broken down and, from sheer exhaustion, confessed, like the assassin who finally blurted out: "Well, yes, I did it. I'd rather be guillotined than bothered like this."

Such was Judge Hauteville, cold, patient, inexorable in the pursuit of truth. And presently he arrived.

"You look serious this morning," he said, remarking Coquenil's pale face.

"Yes," nodded M. Paul, "that's how I feel," and settling himself in a chair he proceeded to relate the events of the night, ending with a frank account of his misadventure on the Champs Elysees.

The judge listened with grave attention. This was a more serious affair than he had imagined. Not only was there no longer any question of suicide, but it was obvious that they were dealing with a criminal of the most dangerous type and one possessed of extraordinary resources.

"You believe it was the assassin himself who met you?" questioned Hauteville.

"Don't you?"

"I'm not sure. You think his motive was to get the woman's address?"

"Isn't that reasonable?"

Hauteville shook his head. "He wouldn't have risked so much for that. How did he know that you hadn't copied the name and given it to one of us--say to me?"

"Ah, if I only had," sighed the detective.

"How did he know that you wouldn't remember the name? Can't you remember it--at all?"

"That's what I've been trying to do," replied the other gloomily, "I've tried and tried, but the name won't come back. I put those pieces together and read the words distinctly, the name and the address. It was a foreign name, English I should say, and the street was an avenue near the Champs Elysees, the Avenue d'Eylau, or the Avenue d'Iena, I cannot be sure. I didn't fix the thing in my mind because I had it in my pocket, and in the work of the night it faded away."

"A great pity! Still, this man could neither have known that nor guessed it. He took the address from you on a chance, but his chief purpose must have been to impress you with his knowledge and his power."

Coquenil stared at his brown seal ring and then muttered savagely: "How did he know the name of that infernal canary bird?"

The judge smiled. "He has established some very complete system of surveillance that we must try to circumvent. For the moment we had better decide upon immediate steps."

With this they turned to a fresh consideration of the case. Already the machinery of justice had begun to move. Martinez's body and the weapon had been taken to the morgue for an autopsy, the man's jewelry and money were in the hands of the judge, and photographs of the scene of the tragedy would be ready shortly as well as plaster impressions of the alleyway footprints. An hour before, as arranged the previous night, Papa Tignol had started out to search for Kittredge's lodgings, since the American, when questioned by Gibelin at the prison, had obstinately refused to tell where

he lived and an examination of his quarters was a matter of immediate importance.

It was not Papa Tignol, however, who was to furnish this information, but the discomfited Gibelin whose presence in the outer office was at this moment announced by the judge's clerk.

"Ask him to come in," said Hauteville, and a moment later Coquenil's fat, red-haired rival entered with a smile that made his short mustache fairly bristle in triumph.

"Ah, you have news for us!" exclaimed the judge.

Gibelin beamed. "I haven't wasted my time," he nodded. Then, with a sarcastic glance at Coquenil: "The old school has its good points, after all."

"No doubt," agreed Coquenil curtly.

"Although I am no longer in charge of this case," rasped the fat man, "I suppose there is no objection to my rendering my distinguished associate," he bowed mockingly to M. Paul, "such assistance as is in my power."

"Of course not," replied Hauteville.

"I happened to hear that this American has a room on the Rue Racine and I just looked in there."

"Ah!" said the judge, and Coquenil rubbed his glasses nervously. There is no detective big-souled enough not to tingle with resentment when he finds that a rival has scored a point.

"Our friend lives at the Hotel des Etrangers, near the corner of the Boulevard St. Michel," went on Gibelin. "I _happened_ to be talking with the man who sent out the banquet invitations and he told me. M. Kittredge has a little room with a brick floor up six flights. And long! And black!" He rubbed his knees ruefully. "But it was worth the trouble. Ah, yes!" His small eyes brightened.

"You examined his things?"

"_Pour sur!_ I spent an hour there. And talked the soul out of the chambermaid. A good-looking wench! And a sharp one!" he chuckled. "_She_ knows the value of a ten-franc piece!"

"Well, well," broke in M. Paul, "what did you discover?"

[Illustration: "Gibelin beamed. 'The old school has its good points, after all.'"]

Gibelin lifted his pudgy hands deprecatingly. "For one thing I discovered a photograph of the woman who was in Number Six with Martinez."

"The devil!" cried Coquenil.

"It is not of much importance, since already you have the woman's name and address." He shot a keen glance at his rival.

M. Paul was silent. What humiliation was this! No doubt Gibelin had heard the truth and was gloating over it!

"How do you know it is the woman's photograph?" questioned the judge.

"I'll tell you," replied Gibelin, delighted with his sensation. "It's quite a story. I suppose you know that when this woman slipped out of the

Ansonia, she drove directly to the house where we arrested the American. You knew that?" He turned to Coquenil.

"No."

"Well, I _happened_ to speak to the _concierge_ there and she remembers perfectly a lady in an evening gown with a rain coat over it like the one this woman escaped in. This lady sent a note by the _concierge_ up to the apartment of that she-dragon, the sacristan's wife, where M. Kittredge was calling on Alice."

"Ah! What time was that?"

"About a quarter to ten. The note was for M. Kittredge. It must have been a _wild_ one, for he hurried down, white as a sheet, and drove off with the lady. Fifteen minutes later they stopped at his hotel and he went up to his room, two steps, at a time, while she waited in the cab. And Jean, the _garcon_, had a good look at her and he told Rose, the chambermaid, and _she_ had a look and recognized her as the woman whose photograph she had often seen in the American's room."

"Ah, that's lucky!" rejoined the judge. "And you have this photograph?"

"No, but----"

"You said you found it?" put in Coquenil.

"I did, that is, I found a piece of it, a corner that wasn't burned."

"Burned?" cried the others.

"Yes," said Gibelin, "that's what Kittredge went upstairs for, to burn the photograph and a lot of letters--_her_ letters, probably. The fireplace was full of fresh ashes. Rose says it was clean before he went up, so I picked out the best fragments--here they are." He drew a small package from his pocket, and opening it carefully, showed a number of charred or half-burned pieces of paper on which words in a woman's handwriting could be plainly read.

"More fragments!" muttered Coquenil, examining them. "It's in English. Ah, is this part of the photograph?" He picked out a piece of cardboard.

"Yes. You see the photographer's name is on it."

"Watts, Regent Street, London," deciphered the detective. "That is something." And, turning to the judge: "Wouldn't it be a good idea to send a man to London with this? You can make out part of a lace skirt and the tip of a slipper. It might be enough."

"That's true," agreed Hauteville.

"Whoever goes," continued Coquenil, "had better carry him the five-pound notes found on Martinez and see if he can trace them through the Bank of England. They often take the names of persons to whom their notes are issued."

"Excellent. I'll see to it at once," and, ringing for his secretary, the judge gave orders to this effect.

To all of which Gibelin listened with a mocking smile. "But why so much trouble," he asked, "when you have the woman's name and address already?"

"I _had_ them and I--I lost them," acknowledged M. Paul, and in a few words he explained what had happened.

"Oh," sneered the other, "I thought you were a skillful wrestler."

"Come back to the point," put in Hauteville. "Had the chambermaid ever seen this lady before?"

"Yes, but not recently. It seems that Kittredge moved to the Hotel des Etrangers about seven months ago, and soon after that the lady came to see him. Rose says she came three times."

"Did she go to Kittredge's room?" put in Coquenil.

"Yes."

"Can the chambermaid describe her?" continued the judge.

"She says the lady was young and good-looking--that's about all she remembers."

"Hm! Have you anything else to report?"

Gibelin chuckled harshly. "I have kept the most important thing for the last. I'm afraid it will annoy my distinguished colleague even more than the loss of the leather fragments."

"Don't waste your sympathy," retorted Coquenil.

Gibelin gave a little snort of defiance. "I certainly won't. I only mean that your debut in this case hasn't been exactly--ha, ha!--well, not exactly brilliant."

"Here, here!" reproved the judge. "Let us have the facts."

"Well," continued the red-haired man, "I have found the owner of the pistol that killed Martinez."

Coquenil started. "The owner of the pistol we found in the courtyard?"

"Precisely. I should tell you, also, that the balls from that pistol are identical with the ball extracted from the body. The autopsy proves it, so Dr. Joubert says. And this pistol belongs in a leather holster that I found in Mr. Kittredge's room. Dr. Joubert let me take the pistol for verification and--there, you can see for yourselves."

With this he produced the holster and the pistol and laid them before the judge. There was no doubt about it, the two objects belonged together. Various worn places corresponded and the weapon fitted in its case. "Besides," continued Gibelin, "the chambermaid identifies this pistol as the property of the American. He always kept it in a certain drawer, she noticed it there a few days ago, but yesterday it was gone and the holster was empty."

"It looks bad," muttered the judge.

"It looks bad, but it's too easy, it's too simple," answered M. Paul.

"In the old school," sneered Gibelin, "we are not always trying to solve problems in difficult ways. We don't reject a solution merely because it's easy--if the truth lies straight before our nose, why, we see it."

"My dear sir," retorted Coquenil angrily, "if what you think the truth turns out to be the truth, then you ought to be in charge of this case and I'm a fool."

"Granted," smiled the other.

"Come, come, gentlemen," interrupted the judge. Then abruptly to Gibelin:
"Did you see about his boots?"

"No, I thought you would send to the prison and get the pair he wore last night."

"How do you know he didn't change his boots when he burned the letters? Go back to his hotel and see if they noticed a muddy pair in his room this morning. Bring me whatever boots of his you find. Also stop at the depot and get the pair he had on when arrested. Be quick!"

"I will," answered Gibelin, and he went out, pausing at the door to salute M. Paul mockingly.

"Ill-tempered brute!" said Hauteville. "I will see that he has nothing more to do with this case." Then he touched an electric bell.

"That American, Kittredge, who was arrested last night?" he said to the clerk. "Was he put in a cell?"

"No, sir, he's in with the other prisoners."

"Ah! Have him brought over here in about an hour for the preliminary examination. Make out his commitment papers for the Sante. He is to be au secret."

"Yes, sir." The clerk bowed and withdrew.

"You really think this young man innocent, do you?" remarked the judge to Coquenil.

"It's easier to think him innocent than guilty," answered the detective.

"Easier?"

"If he is guilty we must grant him an extraordinary double personality. The amiable lover becomes a desperate criminal able to conceive and carry out the most intricate murder of our time. I don't believe it. If he is guilty he must have had the key to that alleyway door. How did he get it? He must have known, that the 'tall blonde' who had engaged Number Seven would not occupy it. How did he know that? And he must have relations with the man who met me on the Champs Elysees. How could that be? Remember, he's a poor devil of a foreigner living in a Latin-Quarter attic. The thing isn't reasonable."

"But the pistol?"

"The pistol may not really be his. Gibelin's whole story needs looking into."

The judge nodded. "Of course. I leave that to you. Still, I shall feel better satisfied when we have compared the soles of his boots with the plaster casts of those alleyway footprints."

"So shall I," said Coquenil. "Suppose I see the workman who is finishing the casts?" he suggested; "it won't take long, and perhaps I can bring them back with me."

"Excellent," approved Hauteville, and he bowed with grave friendliness as the detective left the room.

Then, for nearly an hour, the judge buried himself in the details of this case, turning his trained mind, with absorbed concentration, upon the papers at hand, reviewing the evidence, comparing the various reports and opinions, and, in the light of clear reason, searching for a plausible

theory of the crime. He also began notes of questions that he wished to ask Kittredge, and was deep in these when the clerk entered to inform him that Coquenil and Gibelin had returned.

"Let them come in at once," directed Hauteville, and presently the two detectives were again before him.

"Well?" he inquired with a quick glance.

Coquenil was silent, but Gibelin replied exultingly: "We have found a pair of Kittredge's boots that absolutely correspond with the plaster casts of the alleyway footprints; everything is identical, the shape of the sole, the nails in the heel, the worn places--everything."

The judge turned to Coquenil. "Is this true?"

M. Paul nodded. "It seems to be true."

There was a moment of tense silence and then Hauteville said in measured tones: "It makes a strong chain now. What do you think?"

Coquenil hesitated, and then with a frown of perplexity and exasperation he snapped out: "I--I haven't had time to think yet."

CHAPTER XI

THE TOWERS OF NOTRE-DAME

It was a distressed and sleepless night that Alice passed after the torturing scene of her lover's arrest. She would almost have preferred her haunting dreams to this pitiful reality. What had Lloyd done? Why had this woman come for him? And what would happen now? Again and again, as weariness brought slumber, the sickening fact stirred her to wakefulness--they had taken Kittredge away to prison charged with an abominable crime. And she loved him, she loved him now more than ever, she was absolutely his, as she never would have been if this trouble had not come. Ah, there was her only ray of comfort that just at the last she had made him happy. She would never forget his look of gratitude as she cried out her love and her trust in his innocence and--yes, she had kissed him, her Lloyd, before those rough men; she had kissed him, and even in the darkness of her chamber her cheeks flamed at the thought.

Soon after five she rose and dressed. This was Sunday, her busiest day, she must be in Notre-Dame for the early masses. There was a worn place in a chasuble that needed some touches of her needle; Father Anselm had asked her to see to it. And this duty done, there was the special Sunday sale of candles and rosaries and little red guidebooks of the church to keep her busy.

Alice was in the midst of all this when, shortly before ten, Mother Bonneton approached, cringing at the side of a visitor, a lady of striking beauty whose dress and general air proclaimed a lavish purse. In a first glance Alice noticed her exquisite supple figure and her full red lips. Also a delicate fragrance of violets.

"This lady wants you to show her the towers," explained the old crone with a cunning wink at the girl. "I tell her it's hard for you to leave your candles, especially now when people are coming in for high mass, but I can take your place, and," with a servile smile, "madame is generous."

"Certainly," agreed the lady, "whatever you like, five francs, ten francs."

"Five francs is quite enough," replied Alice, to Mother Bonneton's great disgust. "I love the towers on a day like this."

So they started up the winding stone stairs of the Northern tower, the lady going first with lithe, nervous steps, although Alice counseled her not to hurry.

"It's a long way to the top," cautioned the girl, "three hundred and seventy steps."

But the lady pressed on as if she had some serious purpose before her, round and round past an endless ascending surface of gloomy gray stone, scarred everywhere with names and initials of foolish sightseers, past narrow slips of fortress windows through the massive walls, round and round in narrowing circles until finally, with sighs of relief, they came out into the first gallery and stood looking down on Paris laughing under the yellow sun.

"Ouf!" panted the lady, "it _is_ a climb."

They were standing on the graceful stone passageway that joins the two towers at the height of the bells and were looking to the west over the columned balustrade, over the Place Notre-Dame, dotted with queer little people, tinkling with bells of cab horses, clanging with gongs of yonder trolley cars curving from the Pont Neuf past old Charlemagne astride of his great bronze horse. Then on along the tree-lined river, on with widening view of towers and domes until their eyes rested on the green spreading _bois_ and the distant heights of Saint Cloud.

And straightway Alice began to point out familiar monuments, the spire of the Sainte Chapelle, the square of the Louvre, the gilded dome of Napoleon's tomb, the crumbling Tour Saint Jacques, disfigured now with scaffolding for repairs, and the Sacre Cour, shining resplendent on the Montmartre hill.

To all of which the lady listened indifferently. She was plainly thinking of something else, and, furtively, she was watching the girl.

"Tell me," she asked abruptly, "is your name Alice?"

"Yes," answered the other in surprise.

The lady hesitated. "I thought that was what the old woman called you." Then, looking restlessly over the panorama: "Where is the _conciergerie?_"

Alice started at the word. Among all the points in Paris this was the one toward which her thoughts were tending, the _conciergerie_, the grim prison where her lover was!

"It is there," she replied, struggling with her emotion, "behind that cupola of the Chamber of Commerce. Do you see those short pointed towers? That is it."

"Is it still used as a prison?" continued the visitor with a strange insistence.

"Why, yes," stammered the girl, "I think so--that is, the depot is part of the _conciergerie_ or just adjoins it."

"What is the depot?" questioned the other, eyeing Alice steadily.

The girl flushed. "Why do you ask me that? Why do you look at me so?"

The lady stepped closer, and speaking low: "Because I know who you are, I

know _why_ you are thinking about that prison."

Alice stared at her with widening eyes and heaving bosom. The woman's tone was kind, her look almost appealing, yet the girl drew back, guided by an instinct of danger.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Don't you _know_ who I am?" answered the other, and now her emotion broke through the mask of calm. "I am the lady who--who called for M. Kittredge last night."

"Oh!" burst out Alice scornfully. "A lady! You call yourself a _lady!_"

"Call me anything you like but----"

"I don't wish to speak to you; it's an outrage your coming here; I--I'm going down." And she started for the stairs.

"Wait!" cried the visitor. "You _shall_ hear me. I have come to help the man you love."

"The man _you_ love," blazed the girl. "The man whose life you have ruined."

"It's true I--I loved him," murmured the other.

"What _right_ had you to love him, you a married woman?"

The lady caught her breath with a little gasp and her hands shut tight.

"He told you that?"

[Illustration: "'I know _why_ you are thinking about that prison.'"]

"Yes, because he was forced to--the thing was known. Don't be afraid, he didn't tell your name, he _never_ would tell it. But I know enough, I know that you tortured him and--when he got free from you, after struggling and--starving and----"

"Starving?"

"Yes, starving. After all that, when he was just getting a little happy, _you_ had to come again, and--and now he's _there_."

She looked fixedly at the prison, then with angry fires flashing in her dark eyes: "I hate you, I _hate_ you," she cried.

In spite of her growing emotion the lady forced herself to speak calmly: "Hate me if you will, but _hear_ me."

"No," went on Alice fiercely, "_you_ shall hear _me_. You have done this wicked, shameless thing, and now you come to me, think of that, _to me!_ You must be mad. Anyhow, you are here and you shall tell me what I want to know."

"What do you want to know?" trembled the woman.

"I want to know, first, who you are. I want your name and address."

"Certainly; I am--er--Madam Marius, and I live at--er--6 Avenue Martignon."

"Ah! May I have one of your cards?"

"I--er--I'm afraid I have no card here," evaded the other, pretending to

search in a gold bag. Her face was very pale.

The girl made no reply, but walked quickly to a turn of the gallery.

"Valentine," she called.

"Yes," answered a voice.

"Ah, you are there. I may need you in a minute."

"_Bien!_"

Then, returning, she said quietly: "Valentine is a friend of mine. She sells postal cards up here. Unless you tell me the truth, I shall ask her to go down and call the sacristan. Now then, _who are you?_"

"Don't ask who I am," pleaded the lady.

"I ask what I want to know."

"Anything but that!"

"Then you are _not_ Madam Marius?"

"No."

"You lied to me?"

"Yes."

"Valentine!" called Alice, and promptly a girl of about sixteen, bare-headed, appeared at the end of the gallery. "Go down and ask Papa Bonneton to come here at once. Say it's important. Hurry!"

With an understanding nod Valentine disappeared inside the tower and the quick clatter of her wooden shoes echoed up from below.

"But--what will you tell him?" gasped the lady.

"I shall tell him you were concerned in that crime last night. I don't know what it was, I haven't read the papers, but he has."

"Do you want to ruin me?" cried the woman; then, with a supplicating gesture: "Spare me this shame; I will give you money, a large sum. See here!" and, opening her gold bag, she drew out some folded notes. "I'll give you a thousand francs--five thousand. Don't turn away! I'll give you more--my jewels, my pearls, my rings. Look at them." She held out her hands, flashing with precious stones.

Suddenly she felt the girl's eyes on her in utter scorn. "You are not even intelligent," Alice flung back; "you were a fool to come here; now you are stupid enough to think you can buy my silence. _Mon Dieu_, what a base soul!"

"Forgive me, I don't know what I am saying," begged the other. "Don't be angry. Listen; you say I was a fool to come here, but it isn't true. I realized my danger, I knew what I was risking, and yet I came, because I _had_ to come. I felt I could trust you. I came in my desperation because there was no other person in Paris I dared go to."

"Is that true?" asked the girl, more gently.

"Indeed it is," implored the lady, her eyes swimming with tears. "I beg your pardon sincerely for offering you money. I know you are loyal and kind and--I'm ashamed of myself. I have suffered so much since last night

that--as you say, I must be mad."

It was a strange picture--this brilliant beauty, forgetful of pride and station, humbling herself to a poor candle seller. Alice looked at her in wonder.

"I don't understand yet why you came to me," she said.

"I want to make amends for the harm I have done, I want to save M. Kittredge--not for myself. Don't think that! He has gone out of my life and will never come into it again. I want to save him because it's right that I should, because he has been accused of this crime through me and I know he is innocent."

"Ah," murmured Alice joyfully, "you know he is innocent."

"Yes; and, if necessary, I will give evidence to clear him. I will tell exactly what happened."

"What happened where?"

"In the room where this man was--was shot. Ugh!" She pressed her hands over her eyes as if to drive away some horrid vision.

"You were--there?" asked the girl.

The woman nodded with a wild, frightened look. "Don't ask me about it. There isn't time now and--I told _him_ everything."

"You mean Lloyd? You told Lloyd everything?"

"Yes, in the carriage. He realizes that I acted for the best, but--don't you see, if I come forward now and tell the truth, I shall be disgraced, ruined."

"And if you don't come forward, Lloyd will remain in prison," flashed the girl.

"You don't understand. There is no case against Lloyd. He is bound to be released for want of evidence against him. I only ask you to be patient a few days and let me help him without destroying myself."

"How can you help him unless you speak out?"

"I can help with money for a good lawyer. That is why I brought these bank notes." Again she offered the notes. "You won't refuse them--for him?"

But Alice pushed the money from her. "A lawyer's efforts _might_ free him in the future, your testimony will free him now."

"Then you will betray me?" demanded the woman fiercely.

"Betray?" answered the girl. "That's a fine-sounding word, but what does it mean? I shall do the best I can for the man I love."

"Ha! The best you can! And what is that? To make him ashamed of you! To make him suffer!"

"Suffer?"

"Why not? Don't you suppose he will suffer to find that you have no sympathy with his wishes?"

"What do you mean?"

"You threaten to do the very thing that he went to prison to prevent. You're going to denounce me, aren't you?"

"To save him--yes."

"When it isn't necessary, when it will cause a dreadful calamity. If he wanted to be saved that way, wouldn't he denounce me himself? He knows my name, he knows the whole story. Wouldn't he tell it himself if he wanted it told?"

The girl hesitated, taken aback at this new view. "I suppose he thinks it a matter of honor."

"Exactly. And you who pretend to love him have so little heart, so little delicacy, that you care nothing for what he thinks a matter of honor. A pretty thing your sense of honor must be!"

"Oh!" shrank Alice, and the woman, seeing her advantage, pursued it relentlessly. "Did you ever hear of a debt of honor? How do you know that your lover doesn't owe me such a debt and isn't paying it now down there?"

So biting were the words, so fierce the scorn, that Alice found herself wavering. After all, she knew nothing of what had happened, nor could she be sure of Lloyd's wishes. He had certainly spoken of things in his life that he regretted. Could it be that he was bound in honor to save this woman at any cost? As she stood irresolute, there came up from below the sound of steps on the stairs, ascending steps, nearer and nearer, then distinctly the clatter of Valentine's wooden shoes, then another and a heavier tread. The sacristan was coming.

"Here is your chance," taunted the lady; "give me up, denounce me, and then remember what Lloyd will remember always, that when a distressed and helpless sister woman came to you and trusted you, you showed her no pity, but deliberately wrecked her life."

Half sorry, half triumphant, but without a word, Alice watched the torture of this former rival; and now the loud breathing of the sacristan was plainly heard on the stairs.

"Remember," flung out the other in a final defiance that was also a final appeal, "remember that nothing brought me here but the sacredness of a love that is gone, a sacredness that I respect and he respects but that you trample on."

As she said this Valentine emerged from the tower door followed wearily by Papa Bonneton, in full regalia, his mild face expressing all that it could of severity.

"What has happened?" he said sharply to Alice. Then, with a habit of deference, he lifted his three-cornered hat to the lady: "Madam will understand that it was difficult for me to leave my duties."

Madam stood silent, ghastly white, hands clinched so hard that the gems cut into her flesh, eyes fixed on the girl in a last anguished supplication.

Then Alice said to the sacristan: "Madam wants to hear the sound of the great bell. She asked me to strike it with the hammer, but I told her that is forbidden during high mass. Madam offered ten francs--twenty francs--she is going away and is very anxious to hear the bell; she has read about its beautiful tone. When madam offered twenty francs, I thought it my duty to let you know." All this with a self-possession that the daughters of Eve have acquired through centuries of practice.

"Twenty francs!" muttered the guileless Bonneton. "You were right, my

child, perfectly right. That rule was made for ordinary visitors, but with madam it is different. I myself will strike the bell for madam." And with all dispatch he entered the Southern tower, where the great bourdon hangs, whispering: "Twenty francs! It's a miracle."

No sooner was he gone than the lady caught the girl's two hands in hers, and with her whole soul in her eyes she cried: "God bless you! God bless you!"

Alice tried to speak, but the words choked her, and, leaning over the balustrade, she looked yearningly toward the prison, her lips moving in silence: "Lloyd! Lloyd!" Then the great bell struck and she turned with a start, brushing away the tears that dimmed her eyes.

A moment later Papa Bonneton reappeared, scarcely believing that already he had earned his louis and insisting on telling madam various things about the bell--that it was presented by Louis XIV, and weighed over seventeen tons; that eight men were required to ring it, two poised at each corner of the rocking framework; that the note it sounded was _fa diese_--did madam understand that? _Do, re, mi, fa?_ And more of the sort until madam assured him that she was fully satisfied and would not keep him longer from his duties. Whereupon, with a torrent of thanks, the old man disappeared in the tower, looking unbelievably at the gold piece in his hand.

"And now what?" asked Alice with feverish eagerness when they were alone again.

"Let me tell you, first, what you have saved me from," said the lady, leaning weakly against the balustrade. A feeling of faintness had come over her in the reaction from her violent emotion.

"No, no," replied the girl, "this is the time for action, not sentiment. You have promised to save _him_, now do it."

"I will," declared the other, and the light of a fine purpose gave a dignity to her rather selfish beauty. "Or, rather, we will save him together. First, I want you to take this money--you will take it now _for him?_ That's right, put it in your dress. Ah," she smiled as Alice obeyed her. "That is for a lawyer. He must have a good lawyer at once."

"Yes, of course," agreed Alice, "but how shall I get a lawyer?"

The lady frowned. "Ah, if I could only send you to my lawyer! But that would involve explanations. We need a man to advise us, some one who knows about these things."

"I have it," exclaimed Alice joyfully. "The very person!"

"Who is that?"

"M. Coquenil."

"What?" The other stared. "You mean Paul Coquenil, the detective?"

"Yes," said the girl confidently. "He would help us; I'm sure of it."

"He is on the case already. Didn't you know that? The papers are full of it."

Alice shook her head. "That doesn't matter, does it? He would tell us exactly what to do. I saw him in Notre-Dame only yesterday and--and he spoke to me so kindly. You know, M. Coquenil is a friend of Papa Bonneton's; he lends him his dog Caesar to guard the church."

"It seems like providence," murmured the lady. "Yes, that is the thing to

do, you must go to M. Coquenil at once. Tell the old sacristan I have sent you on an errand--for another twenty francs."

Alice smiled faintly. "I can manage that. But what shall I say to M. Paul?"

"Speak to him about the lawyer and the money; I will send more if necessary. Tell him what has happened between us and then put yourself in his hands. Do whatever he thinks best. There is one thing I want M. Kittredge to be told--I wish you would write it down so as to make no mistake. Here is a pencil and here is a piece of paper." With nervous haste she tore a page from a little memorandum book. "Now, then," and she dictated the following statement which Alice took down carefully: "_ Tell M. Kittredge that the lady who called for him in the carriage knows now that the person she thought guilty last night is NOT guilty. She knows this absolutely, so she will be able to appear and testify in favor of M. Kittredge if it becomes necessary. But she hopes it will not be necessary. She begs M. Kittredge to use this money for a good lawyer_."

CHAPTER XII

BY SPECIAL ORDER

It was not until after vespers that Alice was able to leave Notre-Dame and start for the Villa Montmorency--in fact, it was nearly five when, with mingled feelings of confidence and shrinking, she opened the iron gate in the ivy-covered wall of Coquenil's house and advanced down the neat walk between the double hedges to the solid gray mass of the villa, at once dignified and cheerful. Melanie came to the door and showed, by a jealous glance, that she did not approve of her master receiving visits from young and good-looking females.

"M. Paul is resting," she grumbled; "he worked all last night and he's worked this whole blessed day until half an hour ago."

"I'm sorry, but it's a matter of great importance," urged the girl.

"Good, good," snapped Melanie. "What name?"

"He wouldn't know my name. Please say it's the girl who sells candles in Notre-Dame."

"Huh! I'll tell him. Wait here," and with scant courtesy the old servant left Alice standing in the blue-tiled hallway, near a long diamond-paned window. A moment later Melanie reappeared with mollified countenance. "M. Paul says will you please take a seat in here." She opened the study door and pointed to one of the big red-leather chairs. "He'll be down in a moment."

Left alone, Alice glanced in surprise about this strange room. She saw a photograph of Caesar and his master on the wall and went nearer to look at it. Then she noticed the collection of plaster hands and was just bending over it when Coquenil entered, wearing a loosely cut house garment of pale yellow with dark-green braid around the jacket and down the legs of the trousers. He looked pale, almost haggard, but his face lighted in welcome as he came forward.

[Illustration: "She was just bending over it when Coquenil entered."]

"Glad to see you," he said.

She had not heard his step and turned with a start of surprise.

"I--I beg your pardon," she murmured in embarrassment.

"Are you interested in my plaster casts?" he asked pleasantly.

"I was looking at this hand," replied the girl. "I have seen one like it."

Coquenil shook his head good-naturedly. "That is very improbable."

Alice looked closer. "Oh, but I have," she insisted.

"You mean in a museum?"

"No, no, in life--I am positive I have."

M. Paul listened with increasing interest. "You have seen a hand with a little finger as long as this one?"

"Yes; it's as long as the third finger and square at the end. I've often noticed it."

"Then you have seen something very uncommon, mademoiselle, something _I_ have never seen. That is the most remarkable hand in my collection; it is the hand of a man who lived nearly two hundred years ago. He was one of the greatest criminals the world has ever known."

"Really?" cried Alice, her eyes wide with sudden fright. "I--I must have been mistaken."

But now the detective's curiosity was aroused. "Would you mind telling me the name of the person--of course it's a man--who has this hand?"

"Yes," said Alice, "it's a man, but I should not like to give his name after what you have told me."

"He is a good man?"

"Oh, yes."

"A kind man?"

"Yes."

"A man that you like?"

"Why--er--why, yes, I like him," she replied, but the detective noticed a strange, anxious look in her eyes. And immediately he changed the subject.

"You'll have a cup of tea with me, won't you? I've asked Melanie to bring it in. Then we can talk comfortably. By the way, you haven't told me your name."

"My name is Alice Groener," she answered simply.

"Groener," he reflected. "That isn't a French name?"

"No, my family lived in Belgium, but I have only a cousin left. He is a wood carver, in Brussels. He has been very kind to me and would pay my board with the Bonnetons, but I don't want to be a burden, so I work at the church."

"I see," he said approvingly.

The girl was seated in the full light, and as they talked, Coquenil observed her attentively, noting the pleasant tones of her voice and the

charming lights in her eyes, studying her with a personal as well as a professional interest; for was not this the young woman who had so suddenly and so unaccountably influenced his life? Who was she, what was she, this dreaming candle seller? In spite of her shyness and modest ways, she was brave and strong of will, that was evident, and, plain dress or not, she looked the aristocrat every inch of her. Where did she get that unconscious air of quiet poise, that trick of the lifted chin? And how did she learn to use her hands like a great lady?

"Would you mind telling me something, mademoiselle?" he said suddenly.

Alice looked at him in surprise, and again he remarked, as he had at Notre-Dame, the singular beauty of her wondering dark eyes.

"What is it?"

"Have you any idea how you happened to dream that dream about me?"

The girl shrank away trembling. "No one can explain dreams, can they?" she asked anxiously, and it seemed to him that her emotion was out of all proportion to its cause.

"I suppose not," he answered kindly. "I thought you might have some--er--some fancy about it. If you ever should have, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Ye-es." She hesitated, and for a moment he thought she was going to say something more, but she checked the impulse, if it was there, and Coquenil did not press his demand.

"There's one other thing," he went on reassuringly. "I'm asking this in the interest of M. Kittredge. Tell me if you know anything about this crime of which he is accused?"

"Why, no," she replied with evident sincerity. "I haven't even read the papers."

"But you know who was murdered?"

Alice shook her head blankly. "How could I? No one has told me."

"It was a man named Martinez."

She started at the word. "What? The billiard player?" she cried.

He nodded. "Did you know him?"

"Oh, yes, very well."

Now it was Coquenil's turn to feel surprise, for he had asked the question almost aimlessly.

"You knew Martinez very well?" he repeated, scarcely believing his ears.

"I often saw him," she explained, "at the cafe where we went evenings."

"Who were 'we'?"

"Why, Papa Bonneton would take me, or my cousin, M. Groener, or M. Kittredge."

"Then M. Kittredge knew Martinez?"

"Of course. He used to go sometimes to see him play billiards." She said all this quite simply.

"Were Kittredge and Martinez good friends?"

"Oh, yes."

"Never had any words? Any quarrel?"

"Why--er--no," she replied in some confusion.

"I don't want to distress you, mademoiselle," said Coquenil gravely, "but aren't you keeping something back?"

"No, no," she insisted. "I just thought of--of a little thing that made me unhappy, but it has nothing to do with this case. You believe me, don't you?"

She spoke with pleading earnestness, and again M. Paul followed an intuition that told him he might get everything from this girl by going slowly and gently, whereas, by trying to force her confidence, he would get nothing.

"Of course I believe you," he smiled. "Now I'm going to give you some of this tea; I'm afraid it's getting cold."

And he proceeded to do the honors in so friendly a way that Alice was presently quite at her ease again.

"Now," he resumed, "we'll settle down comfortably and you can tell me what brought you here, tell me all about it. You won't mind if I smoke a cigarette? Be sure to tell me _everything_--there is plenty of time."

So Alice began and told him about the mysterious lady and their agitated visit to the tower, omitting nothing, while M. Paul listened with startled interest, nodding and frowning and asking frequent questions.

"This is very important," he said gravely when she had finished. "What a pity you couldn't get her name!" He shut his fingers hard on his chair arm, reflecting that for the second time this woman had escaped him.

"Did I do wrong?" asked Alice in confusion.

"I suppose not. I understand your feelings, but--would you know her again?" he questioned.

"Oh, yes, anywhere," answered Alice confidently.

"How old is she?"

A mischievous light shone in the girl's eyes. "I will say thirty--that is absolutely fair."

"You think she may be older?"

"I'm sure she isn't younger."

"Is she pretty?"

"Oh, yes, very pretty, very animated and--_chic_."

"Would you call her a lady?"

"Why--er--yes."

"Aren't you sure?"

"It isn't that, but American ladies are--different."

"Why do you think she is an American?" he asked.

"I'm sure she is. I can always tell American ladies; they wear more colors than French ladies, more embroideries, more things on their hats; I've often noticed it in church. I even know them by their shiny finger nails and their shrill voices."

"Does she speak with an accent?"

"She speaks fluently, like a foreigner who has lived a long time in Paris, but she has a slight accent."

"Ah! Now give me her message again. Are you sure you remember it exactly?"

"Quite sure. Besides, she made me write it down so as not to miss a word. Here it is," and, producing the torn page, she read: "_ Tell M. Kittredge that the lady who called for him in the carriage knows now that the person she thought guilty last night is NOT guilty. She knows this absolutely, so she will be able to appear and testify in favor of M. Kittredge if it becomes necessary. But she hopes it will not be necessary. She begs M. Kittredge to use this money for a good lawyer_."

"She didn't say who this person is that she thought guilty last night?"

"No."

"Did she say _why_ she thought him guilty or what changed her mind? Did she drop any hint? Try to remember."

Alice shook her head. "No, she said nothing about that."

Coquenil rose and walked back and forth across the study, hands deep in his pockets, head forward, eyes on the floor, back and forth several times without a word. Then he stopped before Alice, eyeing her intently as if making up his mind about something.

"I'm going to trust you, mademoiselle, with an important mission. You're only a girl, but--you've been thrown into this tragic affair, and--you'll be glad to help your lover, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," she answered eagerly.

"You may as well know that we are facing a situation not altogether--er--encouraging. I believe M. Kittredge is innocent and I hope to prove it, but others think differently and they have serious things against him."

"What things?" she demanded, her cheeks paling.

"No matter now."

"There can be _nothing_ against him," declared the girl, "he is the soul of honor."

"I hope so," answered the detective dryly, "but he is also in prison, and unless we do something he is apt to stay there."

"What can we do?" murmured Alice, twining her fingers piteously.

"We must get at the truth, we must find this woman who came to see you. The quickest way to do that is through Kittredge himself. He knows all about her, if we can make him speak. So far he has refused to say a word, but there is one person who ought to unseal his lips--that is the girl he

loves."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Alice, her face lighting with new hope, "I think I could, I am sure I could, only--will they let me see him?"

"That is the point. It is against the prison rule for a person au secret to see anyone except his lawyer, but I know the director of the Sante and I think----"

"You mean the director of the depot?"

"No, for M. Kittredge was transferred from the depot this morning. You know the depot is only a temporary receiving station, but the Sante is one of the regular French prisons. It's there they send men charged with murder."

Alice shivered at the word. "Yes," she murmured, "and--what were you saying?"

"I say that I know the director of the Sante and I think, if I send you to him with a strong note, he will make an exception--I think so."

"Splendid!" she cried joyfully. "And when shall I present the note?"

"To-day, at once; there isn't an hour to lose. I will write it now."

Coquenil sat down at his massive Louis XV table with its fine bronzes and quickly addressed an urgent appeal to M. Dedet, director of the Sante, asking him to grant the bearer a request that she would make in person, and assuring him that, by so doing, he would confer upon Paul Coquenil a deeply appreciated favor. Alice watched him with a sense of awe, and she thought uneasily of her dream about the face in the angry sun and the land of the black people.

"There," he said, handing her the note. "Now listen. You are to find out certain things from your lover. I can't tell you how to find them out, that is your affair, but you must do it."

"I will," declared Alice.

"You must find them out even if he doesn't wish to tell you. His safety and your happiness may depend on it."

"I understand."

"One thing is this woman's name and address."

"Yes," replied Alice, and then her face clouded. "But if it isn't honorable for him to tell her name?"

"You must make him see that it is honorable. The lady herself says she is ready to testify if necessary. At first she was afraid of implicating some person she thought guilty, but now she knows that person is not guilty. Besides, you can say that we shall certainly know all about this woman in a few days whether he tells us or not, so he may as well save us valuable time. Better write that down--here is a pad."

"Save us valuable time," repeated Alice, pencil in hand.

"Then I want to know about the lady's husband. Is he dark or fair? Tall or short? Does Kittredge know him? Has he ever had words with him or any trouble? Got that?"

"Yes," replied Alice, writing busily.

"Then--do you know whether M. Kittredge plays tennis?"

Alice looked up in surprise. "Why, yes, he does. I remember hearing him say he likes it better than golf."

"Ah! Then ask him--see here. I'll show you," and going to a corner between the bookcase and the wall, M. Paul picked out a tennis racket among a number of canes. "Now, then," he continued while she watched him with perplexity, "I hold my racket _so_ in my right hand, and if a ball comes on my left, I return it with a back-hand stroke _so_, using my right hand; but there are players who shift the racket to the left hand and return the ball _so_, do you see?"

"I see."

"Now I want to know if M. Kittredge uses both hands in playing tennis or only the one hand. And I want to know _which_ hand he uses chiefly, that is, the right or the left?"

"Why do you want to know that?" inquired Alice, with a woman's curiosity.

"Never mind why, just remember it's important. Another thing is, to ask M. Kittredge about a chest of drawers in his room at the Hotel des Etrangers. It is a piece of old oak, rather worm-eaten, but it has good bronzes for the drawer handles, two dogs fighting on either side of the lock plates."

Alice listened in astonishment. "I didn't suppose you knew where M. Kittredge lived."

"Nor did I until this morning," he smiled. "Since then I--well, as my friend Gibelin says, I haven't wasted my time."

"Your friend Gibelin?" repeated Alice, not understanding.

Coquenil smiled grimly. "He is an amiable person for whom I am preparing a--a little surprise."

"Oh! And what about the chest of drawers?"

"It's about one particular drawer, the small upper one on the right-hand side--better write that down."

"The small upper drawer on the right-hand side," repeated Alice.

"I find that M. Kittredge _always_ kept this drawer locked. He seems to be a methodical person, and I want to know if he remembers opening it a few days ago and finding, it unlocked. Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"Good! Oh, one thing more. Find out if M. Kittredge ever suffers from rheumatism or gout."

The girl smiled. "Of course he doesn't; he is only twenty-eight."

"Please do not take this lightly, mademoiselle," the detective chided gently. "It is perhaps the most important point of all--his release from prison may depend on it."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not taking it lightly, indeed I'm not," and, with tears in her eyes, Alice assured M. Paul that she fully realized the importance of this mission and would spare no effort to make it successful.

A few moments later she hurried away, buoyed up by the thought that she was not only to see her lover but to serve him.

It was after six when Alice left the circular railway at the Montrouge station. She was in a remote and unfamiliar part of Paris, the region of the catacombs and the Gobelins tapestry works, and, although M. Paul had given her precise instructions, she wandered about for some time among streets of hospitals and convents until at last she came to an open place where she recognized Bartholdi's famous Belfort lion. Then she knew her way, and hurrying along the Boulevard Arago, she came presently to the gloomy mass of the Sante prison, which, with its diverging wings and galleries, spreads out like a great gray spider in the triangular space between the Rue Humboldt, the Rue de la Sante and the Boulevard Arago.

A kind-faced policeman pointed out a massive stone archway where she must enter, and passing here, beside a stolid soldier in his sentry box, she came presently to a black iron door in front of which were waiting two yellow-and-black prison vans, windowless. In this prison door were four glass-covered observation holes, and through these Alice saw a guard within, who, as she lifted the black iron knocker, drew forth a long brass key and turned the bolt. The door swung back, and with a shiver of repulsion the girl stepped inside. This was the prison, these men standing about were the jailers and--what did that matter so long as she got to _him_, to her dear Lloyd. There was _nothing_ she would not face or endure for his sake.

No sooner had the guard heard that she came with a note from M. Paul Coquenil (that was a name to conjure with) than he showed her politely to a small waiting room, assuring her that the note would be given at once to the director of the prison. And a few moments later another door opened and a hard-faced, low-browed man of heavy build bowed to her with a crooked, sinister smile and motioned her into his private office. It was M. Dedet, the chief jailer.

"Always at the service of Paul Coquenil," he began. "What can I do for you, mademoiselle?"

Then, summoning her courage, and trying her best to make a good impression, Alice told him her errand. She wanted to speak with the American, M. Kittredge, who had been sent here the night before--she wanted to speak with him alone.

The jailer snapped his teeth and narrowed his brows in a hard stare. "Did Paul Coquenil send you here for _that?_" he questioned.

"Yes, sir," answered the girl, and her heart began to sink. "You see, it's a very special case and----"

"Special case," laughed the other harshly; "I should say so--it's a case of murder."

"But he is innocent, perfectly innocent," pleaded Alice.

"Of course, but if I let every murderer who says he's innocent see his sweetheart--well, this would be a fine prison. No, no, little one," he went on with offensive familiarity, "I am sorry to disappoint you and I hate to refuse M. Paul, but it can't be done. This man is _au secret_, which means that he must not see _anyone_ except his lawyer. You know they assign a lawyer to a prisoner who has no money to employ one."

"But he _has_ money, at least I have some for him. Please let me see him, for a few minutes." Her eyes filled with tears and she reached out her hands appealingly. "If you only knew the circumstances, if I could only make you understand."

"Haven't time to listen," he said impatiently, "there's no use whining. I can't do it and that's the end of it. If I let you talk with this man and the thing were known, I might lose my position." He rose abruptly as if to

dismiss her.

Alice did not move. She had been sitting by a table on which a large sheet of pink blotting paper was spread before writing materials. And as she listened to the director's rough words, she took up a pencil and twisted it nervously in her fingers. Then, with increasing agitation, as she realized that her effort for Lloyd had failed, she began, without thinking, to make little marks on the blotter, and then a written scrawl--all with a singular fixed look in her eyes.

"You'll have to excuse me," said the jailer gruffly, seeing that she did not take his hint.

Alice started to her feet. "I--I beg your pardon," she said weakly, and, staggering, she tried to reach the door. Her distress was so evident that even this calloused man felt a thrill of pity and stepped forward to assist her. And, as he passed the table, his eye fell on the blotting paper.

"Why, what is this?" he exclaimed, eying her sharply.

"Oh, excuse me, sir," begged Alice, "I have spoiled your nice blotter. I am _so_ sorry."

"Never mind the blotter, but--" He bent closer over the scrawled words, and then with a troubled look: "_Did you write this?_"

"Why--er--why--yes, sir, I'm afraid I did," she stammered.

"Don't you _know_ you did?" he demanded.

"I--I wasn't thinking," she pleaded in fright.

[Illustration: "Did you write this?"]

He stared at her for a moment, then he went to his desk, picked up a printed form, filled it out quickly and handed it to her.

"There," he said, and his voice was almost gentle, "I guess I don't quite understand about this thing."

Alice looked at the paper blankly. "But--what is it?" she asked.

The jailer closed one eye very slowly with a wise nod. "It's what you asked for, a permit to see this American prisoner, _by special order_."

CHAPTER XIII

LLOYD AND ALICE

Kittredge was fortunate in having a sense of humor, it helped him through the horrors of his first night at the depot, which he passed with the scum of Paris streets, thieves, beggars, vagrants, the miserable crop of Saturday-night police takings, all herded into one foul room on filthy bunks so close together that a turn either way brought a man into direct contact with his neighbor.

Lloyd lay between an old pickpocket and a drunkard. He did not sleep, but passed the hours thinking. And when he could think no longer, he listened to the pickpocket who was also wakeful, and who told wonderful yarns of his conquests among the fair sex in the time of the Commune, when he was a strapping artilleryman.

"You're a pretty poor pickpocket, old chap," reflected Kittredge, "but you're an awful good liar!"

In spite of little sleep, he was serene and good-natured when they took him, handcuffed, before Judge Hauteville the next morning for his preliminary examination—a mere formality to establish the prisoner's identity. Kittredge gave the desired facts about himself with perfect willingness; his age, nationality, occupation, and present address. He realized that there was no use hiding these. When asked if he had money to employ a lawyer, he said "no"; and when told that the court would assign Maitre Pleindeaux for his defense, he thanked the judge and went off smiling at the thought that his interests were now in the hands of Mr. Full-of-Water. "I'll ask him to have a drink," chuckled Kittredge.

And he submitted uncomplainingly when they took him to the Bertillon measuring department and stood him up against the wall, bare as a babe, arms extended, and noted down his dimensions one by one, every limb and feature being precisely described in length and breadth, every physical peculiarity recorded, down to the impression of his thumb lines and the precise location of a small mole on his left arm.

All this happened Sunday morning, and in the afternoon other experiences awaited him—his first ride in a prison van, known as a *panier a salade*, and his initiation into real prison life at the Sante. The cell he took calmly, as well as the prison dress and food and the hard bed, for he had known rough camping in the Maine woods and was used to plain fare, but he winced a little at the regulation once a week prison shave, and the regulation bath once a month! And what disturbed him chiefly was the thought that now he would have absolutely nothing to do but sit in his cell and wait wearily for the hours to pass. Prisoners under sentence may be put to work, but one *au secret* is shut up not only from the rest of the world, but even from his fellow-prisoners. He is utterly alone.

"Can't I have a pack of cards?" asked Lloyd with a happy inspiration.

"Against the rule," said the guard.

"But I know some games of solitaire. I never could see what they were invented for until now. Let me have part of a pack, just enough to play old-maid solitaire. Ever heard of that?"

The guard shook his head.

"Not even a part of a pack? You won't even let me play old-maid solitaire?" And with the merry, cheery grin that had won him favor everywhere from wildest Bohemia to primest Presbyterian tea parties, Lloyd added: "That's a hell of a way to treat a murderer!"

The Sunday morning service was just ending when Kittredge reached the prison, and he got his first impressions of the place as he listened to resounding Gregorian tones chanted, or rather shouted, by tiers on tiers of prisoners, each joining in the unison with full lung power through cell doors chained ajar. The making of this rough music was one of the pleasures of the week, and at once the newcomer's heart was gripped by the indescribable sadness of it.

[Illustration: "And when he could think no longer, he listened to the pickpocket."]

Having gone through the formalities of arrival and been instructed as to various detail of prison routine, Lloyd settled down as comfortably as might be in his cell to pass the afternoon over "The Last of the Mohicans." He chose this because the librarian assured him that no books were as popular among French convicts as the translated works of Fenimore Cooper.

"Good old Stars and Stripes!" murmured Kittredge, but he stared at the same page for a long time before he began to read. And once he brushed a quick hand across his eyes.

Scarcely had Lloyd finished a single chapter when one of the guards appeared with as much of surprise on his stolid countenance as an overworked under jailer can show; for an unprecedented thing had happened--a prisoner _au secret_ was to receive a visitor, a young woman, at that, and, _sapristi_, a good-looking one, who came with a special order from the director of the prison. Moreover, he was to see her in the private parlor, with not even the customary barrier of iron bars to separate them. They were to be left together for half an hour, the guard standing at the open door with instructions not to interfere except for serious reasons. In the memory of the oldest inhabitant such a thing had not been known!

Kittredge, however, was not surprised, first, because nothing could surprise him, and, also, because he had no idea what an extraordinary exception had been made in his favor. So he walked before the guard indifferently enough toward the door indicated, but when he crossed the threshold he started back with a cry of amazement.

"Alice!" he gasped, and his face lighted with transfiguring joy. It was a bare room with bare floors and bare yellow painted walls, the only furnishings being two cane chairs and a cheap table, but to Kittredge it was a marvelous and radiantly happy place, for Alice was there; he stared at her almost unbelieving, but it was true--by some kind miracle Alice, his Alice, was there!

Then, without any prelude, without so much as asking for an explanation or giving her time to make one, Lloyd sprang forward and caught the trembling girl in his arms and drew her close to him with tender words, while the guard muttered: "_Nom d'un chien! Il ne perd pas de temps, celui-la!_"

This was not at all the meeting that Alice had planned, but as she felt her lover's arms about her and his warm breath on her face, she forgot the message that she brought and the questions she was to ask, she forgot his danger and her own responsibility, she forgot everything but this one blessed fact of their great love, his and hers, the love that had drawn them together and was holding them together now here, together, close together, she and her Lloyd.

"You darling," he whispered, "you brave, beautiful darling! I love you! I love you!" And he would have said it still again had not his lips been closed by her warm, red lips. So they stood silent, she limp in his arms, gasping, thrilling, weeping and laughing, he feasting insatiable on her lips, on the fragrance of her hair, on the lithe roundness of her body.

"_Voyons, voyons!_" warned the guard. "_Soyons serieux!_"

"He is right," murmured Alice, "we must be serious. Lloyd, let me go," and with an effort she freed herself. "I can only stay here half an hour, and I don't know how much of it we have wasted already." She tried to look at him reproachfully, but her eyes were swimming with tenderness.

"It wasn't wasted, dear," he answered fondly. "To have held you in my arms like that will give me courage for whatever is to come."

"But, Lloyd," she reasoned, "nothing bad will come if you do what I say. I am here to help you, to get you out of this dreadful place."

"You little angel!" he smiled. "How are you going to do it?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," she said, "but, first, you must answer some questions. Never mind why I ask them, just answer. You will, won't you, Lloyd? You trust me?"

"Of course I trust you, sweetheart, and I'll answer anything that I--that I can."

"Good. I'll begin with the easiest question," she said, consulting her list. "Sit down here--that's right. Now, then, have you ever had gout or rheumatism? Don't laugh--it's important."

"Never," he answered, and she wrote it down.

"Do you play tennis with your right hand or your left hand?"

"Oh, see here," he protested, "what's the use of----"

"No, no," she insisted, "you must tell me. Please, the right hand or the left?"

"I use both hands," he answered, and she wrote it down.

"Now," she continued, "you have a chest of drawers in your room with two brass dogs fighting about the lock plates?"

Kittredge stared at her. "How the devil did you know that?"

"Never mind. You usually keep the right-hand upper drawer locked, don't you?"

"That's true."

"Do you remember going to this drawer any time lately and finding it unlocked?"

He thought a moment. "No, I don't."

Alice hesitated, and then, with a flush of embarrassment, she went on bravely: "Now, Lloyd, I come to the hardest part. You must help me and--and not think that I am hurt or--or jealous."

"Well?"

"It's about the lady who--who called for you. This is all her fault, so--so naturally she wants to help you."

"How do you know she does?" he asked quickly.

"Because I have seen her."

"What?"

"Yes, and, Lloyd, she is sorry for the harm she has done and----"

"You have seen her?" he cried, half dazed. "How? Where?"

Then, in as few words as possible, Alice told of her talk with the lady at the church. "And I have this message for you from her and--and this." She handed him the note and the folded bank notes.

Lloyd's face clouded. "She sent me money?" he said in a changed voice, and his lips grew white.

"Read the note," she begged, and he did so, frowning.

"No, no," he declared, "it's quite impossible. I cannot take it," and he handed the money back. "You wouldn't have me take it?"

He looked at her gravely, and she thrilled with pride in him.

"But the lawyer?" she protested weakly. "And your safety?"

"Would you want me to owe my safety to _her?_"

"Oh, no," she murmured.

"Besides, they have given me a lawyer. I dare say he is a good one, Mr. Full-of-Water." He tried to speak lightly.

"Then--then what shall I do with these?" She looked at the bank notes in perplexity.

"Return them."

"Ah, yes," she agreed, snatching at a new idea. "I will return them, I will say that you thank her, that _we_ thank her, Lloyd, but we cannot accept the money. Is that right?"

"Exactly."

"I will go to her apartment in the morning. Let me see, it's on the Avenue--Where did I put her address?" and she went through the form of searching in her pocketbook.

"The Avenue Kleber," he supplied, unsuspecting.

"Of course, the Avenue Kleber. Where _is_ that card? I've forgotten the number, too. Do you remember it, dear?"

Poor child, she tried so hard to speak naturally, but her emotion betrayed her. Indeed, it seemed to Alice, in that moment of suspense, that her lover must hear the loud beating of her heart.

"Ah, I see," he cried, eying her steadily, "she did not give you her address and you are trying to get it from me. Do you even know her name?"

"No," confessed Alice shamefacedly. "Forgive me, I--I wanted to help you."

"By making me do a dishonorable thing?"

"Don't look at me like that. I wouldn't have you do a dishonorable thing; but----"

"Who told you to ask me these questions?"

"M. Coquenil."

"What, the detective?"

"Yes. He believes you innocent, Lloyd, and he's going to prove it."

"I hope he does, but--tell him to leave this woman alone."

"Oh, he won't do that; he says he will find out who she is in a few days, anyway. That's why I thought----"

"I understand," he said comfortingly, "and the Lord knows I want to get out of this hole, but--we've got to play fair, eh? Now let's drop all that and--do you want to make me the happiest man in the world? I'm the happiest man in Paris already, even here, but if you will tell me one thing--why--er--this prison won't cut any ice at all."

"What do you want me to tell you?" she asked uneasily.

"You little darling!" he said tenderly. "You needn't tell me anything if it's going to make you feel badly, but, you see, I've got some lonely hours to get through here and--well, I think of you most of the time and--" He took her hand fondly in his.

"Dear, dear Lloyd!" she murmured.

"And I've sort of got it in my head that--do you want to know?"

"Yes, I want to know," she said anxiously.

"I believe there's some confounded mystery about you, and, if you don't mind, why--er----"

Alice started to her feet, and Lloyd noticed, as she faced him, that the pupils of her eyes widened and then grew small as if from fright or violent emotion.

"Why do you say that? What makes you think there is a mystery about me?" she demanded, trying vainly to hide her agitation.

"Now don't get upset--please don't!" soothed Kittredge. "If there isn't anything, just say so, and if there is, what's the matter with telling a chap who loves you and worships you and whose love wouldn't change for fifty mysteries--what's the matter with telling him all about it?"

"Are you sure your love wouldn't change?" she asked, still trembling.

"Did yours change when they told you things about me? Did it change when they arrested me and put me in prison? Yes, by Jove, it did change, it grew stronger, and that's the way mine would change, that's the only way."

He spoke so earnestly and with such a thrill of fondness that Alice was reassured, and giving him her hand with a happy little gesture, she said: "I know, dear. You see, I love you so much that--if anything should come between us, why--it would just kill me."

"Nothing will come between us," he said simply, and then after a pause: "So there is a mystery."

"I'm--I'm afraid so."

"Ah, I knew it. I figured it out from a lot of little things. That's all I've had to do here, and--for instance, I said to myself: 'How the devil does she happen to speak English without any accent?' You can't tell me that the cousin of a poor wood carver in Belgium would know English as you do. It's part of the mystery, eh?"

"Why--er," she stammered, "I have always known English."

"Exactly, but how? And I suppose you've always known how to do those corking fine embroideries that the priests are so stuck on? But how did you learn? And how does it come that you look like a dead swell? And where did you get those hands like a saint in a stained-glass window? And that hair? I'll bet you anything you like you're a princess in disguise."

"I'm your princess, dear," she smiled.

"Now for the mystery," he persisted. "Go on, what is it?"

At this her lovely face clouded and her eyes grew sad. "It's not the kind of mystery you think, Lloyd; I--I can't tell you about it very well--because--" She hesitated.

"Don't you worry, little sweetheart. I don't care what it is, I don't care if you're the daughter of a Zulu chief." Then, seeing her distress, he said tenderly: "Is it something you don't understand?"

"That's it," she answered in a low voice, "it's something I don't understand."

"Ah! Something about yourself?"

"Ye-es."

"Does anyone else know it?"

"No, no one could know it, I--I've been afraid to speak of it."

"Afraid?"

She nodded, and again he noticed that the pupils of her eyes were widening and contracting.

"And that is why you said you wouldn't marry me?"

"Yes, that is why."

He stopped in perplexity. He saw that, in spite of her bravest efforts, the girl was almost fainting under the strain of these questions.

"You dear, darling child," said Lloyd, as a wave of pity took him, "I'm a brute to make you talk about this."

But Alice answered anxiously: "You understand it's nothing I have done that is wrong, nothing I'm ashamed of?"

"Of course," he assured her. "Let's drop it. We'll never speak of it again."

"I want to speak of it. It's something strange in my thoughts, dear, or--or my soul," she went on timidly, "something that's--different and that--frightens me--especially at night."

"What do you expect?" he answered in a matter-of-fact tone, "when you spend all your time in a cold, black church full of bones and ghosts? Wait till I get you away from there, wait till we're over in God's country, living in a nice little house out in Orange, N. J., and I'm commuting every day."

"What's commuting, Lloyd?"

"You'll find out--you'll like it, except the tunnel. And you'll be so happy you'll never think about your soul--no, sir, and you won't be afraid nights, either! Oh, you beauty, you little beauty!" he burst out, and was about to take her in his arms again when the guard came forward to warn them that the time was nearly up, they had three minutes more.

"All right," nodded Lloyd, and as he turned to Alice, she saw tears in his eyes. "It's tough, but never mind. You've made a man of me, little one, and I'll prove it. I used to have a sort of religion and then I lost it, and now I've got it again, a new religion and a new creed. It's short and easy to say, but it's all I need, and it's going to keep me game through this whole rotten business. Want to hear my creed? You know it already, darling, for you taught it to me. Here it is: 'I believe in Alice'; that's all, that's enough. Let me kiss you."

"Lloyd," she whispered as he bent toward her, "can't you trust me with that woman's name?"

He drew back and looked at her half reproachfully and her cheeks flushed. She would not have him think that she could bargain for her lips, and throwing her arms about him, she murmured: "Kiss me, kiss me as much as you like. I am yours, yours."

Then there was a long, delicious, agonizing moment of passion and pain until the guard's gruff voice came between them.

"One moment," Kittredge said, and then to the clinging girl: "Why do you ask that woman's name when you know it already?"

Wide-eyed, she faced him and shook her head. "I don't know her name, I don't want to know it."

"You don't know her name?" he repeated, and even in the tumult of their last farewell her frank and honest denial lingered in his mind.

She did not know the woman's name! Back in his lonely cell Kittredge pondered this, and reaching for his little volume of De Musset, his treasured pocket companion that the jailer had let him keep, he opened it at the fly leaves. _She did not know this woman's name!_ And, wonderingly, he read on the white page the words and the name written by Alice herself, scrawlingly but distinctly, the day before in the garden of Notre-Dame.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE

Coquenil was neither surprised nor disappointed at the meager results of Alice's visit to the prison. This was merely one move in the game, and it had not been entirely vain, since he had learned that Kittredge _might_ have used his left hand in firing a pistol and that he did not suffer with gout or rheumatism. This last point was of extreme importance.

And the detective was speedily put in excellent humor by news awaiting him at the Palais de Justice Monday morning that the man sent to London to trace the burned photograph and the five-pound notes had already met with success and had telegraphed that the notes in question had been issued to Addison Wilmott, whose bankers were Munroe and Co., Rue Scribe.

Quick inquiries revealed the fact that Addison Wilmott was a well-known New Yorker, living in Paris, a man of leisure who was enjoying to the full a large inherited fortune. He and his dashing wife lived in a private _hotel_ on the Avenue Kleber, where they led a gay existence in the smartest and most spectacular circle of the American Colony. They gave brilliant dinners, they had several automobiles, they did all the foolish and extravagant things that the others did and a few more.

He was dull, good-natured, and a little fat; she was a beautiful woman with extraordinary charm and a lithe, girlish figure of which she took infinite care; he was supposed to kick up his heels in a quiet way while she did the thing brilliantly and kept the wheels of American Colony gossip (busy enough, anyway) turning and spinning until they groaned in utter weariness.

What was there that Pussy Wilmott had not done or would not do if the impulse seized her? This was a matter of tireless speculation in the ultra-chic salons through which this fascinating lady flitted, envied and censured. She was known to be the daughter of a California millionaire who had left her a fortune, of which the last shred was long ago dispersed. Before marrying Wilmott she had divorced two husbands, had traveled all over the world, had hunted tigers in India and canoed the breakers, native

style, in Hawaii; she had lived like a cowboy on the Texas plains, where, it was said, she had worn men's clothes; she could swim and shoot and swear and love; she was altogether selfish, altogether delightful, altogether impossible; in short, she was a law unto herself, and her brilliant personality so far overshadowed Addison that, although he had the money and most of the right in their frequent quarrels, no one ever spoke of him except as "Pussy Wilmott's husband."

In spite of her willfulness and caprices Mrs. Wilmott was full of generous impulses and loyal to her friends. She was certainly not a snob, as witness the fact that she had openly snubbed a certain grand duke, not for his immoralities, which she declared afterwards were nobody's business, but because of his insufferable stupidity. She rather liked a sinner, but she couldn't stand a fool!

Such was the information M. Paul had been able to gather from swift and special police sources when he presented himself at the Wilmott _hotel_, about luncheon time on Monday. Addison was just starting with some friends for a run down to Fontainebleau in his new Panhard, and he listened impatiently to Coquenil's explanation that he had come in regard to some English bank notes recently paid to Mr. Wilmott, and possibly clever forgeries.

"Really!" exclaimed Addison.

Coquenil hoped that Mr. Wilmott would give him the notes in question in exchange for genuine ones. This would help the investigation.

"Of course, my dear sir," said the American, "but I haven't the notes, they were spent long ago."

Coquenil was sorry to hear this--he wondered if Mr. Wilmott could remember where the notes were spent. After an intellectual effort Addison remembered that he had changed one into French money at Henry's and had paid two or three to a shirt maker on the Rue de la Paix, and the rest--he reflected again, and then said positively: "Why, yes, I gave five or six of them, I think there were six, I'm sure there were, because--" He stopped with a new idea.

"You remember whom you paid them to?" questioned the detective.

"I didn't pay them to anyone," replied Wilmott, "I gave them to my wife."

"Ah!" said Coquenil, and presently he took his departure with polite assurances, whereupon the unsuspecting Addison tooted away complacently for Fontainebleau.

It was now about two o'clock, and the next three hours M. Paul spent with his sources of information studying the career of Pussy Wilmott from special points of view in preparation for a call upon the lady, which he proposed to make later in the afternoon.

He discovered two significant things: first, that, whatever her actual conduct, Mrs. Wilmott had never openly compromised herself. Love affairs she might have had, but no one could say when or where or with whom she had had them; and if, as seemed likely, she was the woman in this Ansonia case, then she had kept her relations with Kittredge in profoundest secrecy.

As offsetting this, however, Coquenil secured information that connected Mrs. Wilmott directly with Martinez. It appeared that, among her other excitements, Pussy was passionately fond of gambling. She was known to have won and lost large sums at Monte Carlo, and she was a regular follower of the fashionable races in Paris. She had also been seen at the Olympia billiard academy, near the Grand Hotel, where Martinez and other experts played regularly before eager audiences, among whom betting on the games

was the great attraction. The detective found two bet markers who remembered distinctly that, on several occasions, a handsome woman, answering to the description of Mrs. Wilmott, had wagered five or ten louis on Martinez and had shown a decided admiration for his remarkable skill with the cue.

"He used to talk about this lady," said one of the markers; "he called her his 'belle Americaine,' but I am sure he did not know her real name." The man smiled at Martinez's inordinate vanity over his supposed fascination for women—he was convinced that no member of the fair sex could resist his advances.

With so much in mind Coquenil started up the Champs Elysees about five o'clock. He counted on finding Mrs. Wilmott home at tea time, and as he strolled along, turning the problem over in his mind, he found it conceivable that this eccentric lady, in a moment of ennui or for the novelty of the thing, might have consented to dine with Martinez in a private room. It was certain no scruples would have deterred her if the adventure had seemed amusing, especially as Martinez had no idea who she was. With her, excitement and a new sensation were the only rules of conduct, and her husband's opinion was a matter of the smallest possible consequence. Besides, he would probably never know it!

Mrs. Wilmott, very languid and stunning, amidst her luxurious surroundings, received M. Paul with the patronizing indifference that bored rich women extend to tradespeople. But presently when he explained that he was a detective and began to question her about the Ansonia affair, she rose with a haughty gesture that was meant to banish him in confusion from her presence. Coquenil, however, did not "banish" so easily. He had dealt with haughty ladies before.

"My dear madam, please sit down," he said quietly. "I must ask you to explain how it happens that a number of five-pound notes, given to you by your husband some days ago, were found on the body of this murdered man."

"How do I know?" she replied sharply. "I spent the notes in shops; I'm not responsible for what became of them. Besides, I am dining out to-night, and! I must dress. I really don't see any point to this conversation."

"No," he smiled, and the keenness of his glance: pierced her like a blade. "The point is, my dear lady, that I want you to tell me what you were doing with this billiard player when he was shot last Saturday night."

"It's false; I never knew the man," she cried. "It's an outrage for you to—to intrude on a lady and—and insult her."

"You used to back his game at the Olympia," continued Coquenil coolly.

"What of it? I'm fond of billiards. Is that a crime?"

"You left your cloak and a small leather bag in the vestiaire at the Ansonia," pursued M. Paul.

"It isn't true!"

"Your name was found stamped in gold letters under a leather flap in the bag."

She shot a frightened glance at him and then faltered: "It--it was?"

Coquenil nodded. "Your friend, M. Kittredge, tore the flap out of the bag and then cut it into small pieces and scattered the pieces from his cab through dark streets, but I picked up the pieces."

"You—you did?" she stammered.

"Yes. _Now what were you doing with Martinez in that room?_"

For some moments she did not answer but studied him with frightened, puzzled eyes. Then suddenly her whole manner changed.

"Excuse me," she smiled, "I didn't get your name?"

"M. Coquenil," he said.

"Won't you sit over here? This chair is more comfortable. That's right. Now, I will tell you _exactly_ what happened." And, settling herself near him, Pussy Wilmott entered bravely upon the hardest half hour of her life. After all, he was a man and she would do the best she could!

"You see, M. Coquelin--I beg your pardon, M. Coquenil. The names are alike, aren't they?"

"Yes," said the other dryly.

"Well," she went on quite charmingly, "I have done some foolish things in my life, but this is the most foolish. I _did_ give Martinez the five-pound notes. You see, he was to play a match this week with a Russian and he offered to lay the money for me. He said he could get good odds and he was sure to win."

"But the dinner? The private room?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I went there for a perfectly proper reason. I needed some one to help me and I--I couldn't ask a man who knew me so----"

"Then Martinez didn't know you?"

"Of course not. He was foolish enough to think himself in love with me and--well, I found it convenient and--amusing to--utilize him."

"For what?"

Mrs. Wilmott bit her red lips and then with some dignity replied that she did not see what bearing her purpose had on the case since it had not been accomplished.

"Why wasn't it accomplished?" he asked.

"Because the man was shot."

"Who shot him?"

"I don't know."

"You have no idea?"

"No idea."

"But you were present in the room?"

"Ye-es."

"You heard the shot? You saw Martinez fall?"

"Yes, but----"

"Well?"

Now her agitation, increased, she seemed about to make some statement, but

checked herself and simply insisted that she knew nothing about the shooting. No one had entered the room except herself and Martinez and the waiter who served them. They had finished the soup; Martinez had left his seat for a moment; he was standing near her when--when the shot was fired and he fell to the floor. She had no idea where the shot came from or who fired it. She was frightened and hurried away from the hotel. That was all.

Coquenil smiled indulgently. "What did you do with the auger?" he asked.

"The auger?" she gasped.

"Yes, it was seen by the cab driver you took when you slipped out of the hotel in the telephone girl's rain coat."

"You know that?"

He nodded and went on: "This cab driver remembers that you had something under your arm wrapped in a newspaper. Was that the auger?"

"Yes," she answered weakly.

"And you threw it into the Seine as you crossed the Concorde bridge?"

She stared at him in genuine admiration: "My God, you're the cleverest man I ever met!"

M. Paul bowed politely, and glancing at a well-spread tea table, he said: "Mrs. Wilmott, if you think so well of me, perhaps you won't mind giving me a cup of tea. The fact is, I have been so busy with this case I forgot to eat and I--I feel a little faint." He pressed a hand against his forehead and Pussy saw that he was very white.

"You poor man!" she cried in concern. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? I'll fix it myself. There! Take some of these toasted muffins. What an extraordinary life you must lead! I can almost forgive you for being so outrageous because you're so--so interesting." She let her siren eyes shine on him in a way that had wrought the discomfiture of many a man.

M. Paul smiled. "I can return the compliment by saying that it isn't every lady who could throw a clumsy thing like an auger from a moving cab over a wide roadway and a stone wall and land it in a river. I suppose you threw it over on the right-hand side?"

"Yes."

"How far across the bridge had you got when you threw it? This may help the divers."

She thought a moment. "We were a little more than halfway across, I should say."

"Thanks. Now who bought this auger?"

"Martinez."

"Did you suggest the holes through the wall?"

"No, he did."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"But the holes were bored for you?"

"Of course."

"Because you wanted to see into the next room?"

"Yes," in a low tone.

"And why?"

She hesitated a moment and then burst out in a flash of feeling: "Because I knew that a wretched dancing girl was going to be there with----"

"Yes?" eagerly.

"With my husband!"

CHAPTER XV

PUSSY WILMOTT'S CONFESSION

"Then your husband was the person you thought guilty that night?" questioned Coquenil.

"Yes."

"You told M. Kittredge when you called for him in the cab that you thought your husband guilty?"

"Yes, but afterwards I changed my mind. My husband had nothing to do with it. If he had, do you suppose I would have told you this? No doubt he has misconducted himself, but----"

"You mean Anita?"

It was a chance shot, but it went true.

She stared at him in amazement. "I believe you are the devil," she said, and the detective, recalling his talk with M. Gritz, muttered to himself: "The tall blonde! Of course!"

And now Pussy, feeling that she could gain nothing against Coquenil by ruse or deceit, took refuge in simple truth and told quite charmingly how this whole tragic adventure had grown out of a foolish fit of jealousy.

"You see, I found a *_petit bleu_* on my husband's dressing table one morning--I wish to Heaven he would be more careful--and I--I read it. It began '*_Mon gros bebe_*,' and was signed '*_Ta petite Anita_*,' and--naturally I was furious. I have often been jealous of Addison, but he has always managed to prove that I was in the wrong and that he was a perfect saint, so now I determined to see for myself. It was a splendid chance, as the exact rendezvous was given, nine o'clock Saturday evening, in private room Number Seven at the Ansonia. I had only to be there, but, of course, I couldn't go alone, so I got this man, Martinez--he was a perfect fool, I'm sorry he's been shot, but he was--I got him to take me, because, as I told you, he didn't know me, and being such a fool, he would do whatever I wished."

"What day was it you found the *_petit bleu_*?" put in Coquenil.

"It was Thursday. I saw Martinez that afternoon, and on Friday, he reserved private room Number Six for Saturday evening."

"And you are sure it was his scheme to bore the holes?"

"Yes, he said that would be an amusing way of watching Addison without making a scandal, and I agreed with him; it was the first clever idea I ever knew him to have."

"That's a good point!" reflected Coquenil.

"What is a good point?"

"Nothing, just a thought I had," he answered abstractedly.

"What a queer man you are!" she said with a little pout. She was not accustomed to have men inattentive when she sat near them.

"There's one thing that doesn't seem very clever, though," reflected the detective. "Didn't Martinez think your husband or Anita would see those holes in the wall?"

"No, because he had prepared for that. There was a tall palm in Number Seven that stood just before the holes and screened them."

Coquenil looked at her curiously.

"How do you know there was?"

"Martinez told me. He had taken the precaution to look in there on Friday when he engaged Number Six. He knew exactly where to bore the holes."

"I see. And he put them behind the curtain hangings so that your waiter wouldn't see them?"

"That's it."

"And you held the curtain hangings back while he used the auger?"

"Yes. You see he managed it very well."

"Very well except for one thing," mused Coquenil, "there wasn't any palm in Number Six."

"No?"

"No."

"That's strange!"

"Yes, it is strange," and again she felt that he was following a separate train of thought.

"Did you look through the holes at all?" he asked.

"No, I hadn't time."

"Did Martinez look through the first hole after it was bored?"

"Yes, but he couldn't see anything, as Number Seven was dark."

"Then you have absolutely no idea who fired the shot?"

"Absolutely none."

"Except you think it wasn't your husband?"

"I know it wasn't my husband."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I asked him. Ah, you needn't smile, I made him give me proof." When I got home that night I had a horrible feeling that Addison must have done it. Who else could have done it, since he had engaged Number Seven? So I waited until he came home. It was after twelve. I could hear him moving about in his room and I was afraid to speak to him, the thing seemed so awful; but, at last, I went in and asked him where he had been. He began to lie in the usual way--you know any man will if he's in a hole like that--but finally I couldn't stand it any longer and I said: 'Addison, for God's sake, don't lie to me. I know something terrible has happened, and if I can, I want to help you.'

"I was as white as a sheet and he jumped up in a great fright. 'What is it, Pussy? What is it?' he cried. And then I told him a murder had been committed at the Ansonia in private room Number Seven. I wish you could have seen his face. He never said a word, he just stared at me. 'Why don't you speak?' I begged. 'Addison, it wasn't you, tell me it wasn't you. Never mind this Anita woman, I'll forgive that if you'll only tell me where you've been to-night.'

"Well, it was the longest time before I could get anything out of him. You see, it was quite a shock for Addison getting all this together, caught with the woman and then the murder on top of it; I had to cry and scold and get him whisky before he could pull himself together, but he finally did and made a clean breast of everything."

"'Pussy,' he said, 'you're all right, you're a plucky little woman, and I'm a bad lot, but I'm not as bad as that. I wasn't in that room, I didn't go to the Ansonia to-night, and I swear to God I don't know any more about this murder than you do.'

"Then he explained what had happened in his blundering way, stopping every minute or so to tell me what a saint I am, and the Lord knows that's a joke, and the gist of it was that he had started for the Ansonia with this woman, but she had changed her mind in the cab and they had gone to the Cafe de Paris instead and spent the evening there. I was pretty sure he was telling the truth, for Addison isn't clever and I usually know when he's lying, although I don't tell him so; but this was such an awful thing that I couldn't take chances, so I said: 'Addison, put your things right on, we're going to the Cafe de Paris.' 'What for?' said he. 'To settle this business,' said I. And off we went and got there at half past one; but the waiters hadn't gone, and they all swore black and blue that Addison told the truth, he had really been there all the evening with this woman. And that," she concluded triumphantly, "is how I know my husband is innocent."

[Illustration: "They all swore black and blue that Addison told the truth."]

"Hm!" reflected Coquenil. "I wonder why Anita changed her mind?"

"I'm not responsible for Anita," answered Pussy with a dignified whisk of her shoulders.

"No, of course not, of course not," he murmured absently; then, after a moment's thought, he said gravely: "I never really doubted your husband's innocence, now I'm sure of it; unfortunately, this does not lessen your responsibility; you were in the room, you witnessed the crime; in fact, you were the only witness."

"But I know nothing about it, nothing," she protested.

"You know a great deal about this young man who is in prison."

"I know he is innocent."

Coquenil took off his glasses and rubbed them with characteristic deliberation. "I hope you can prove it."

"Of course I can prove it," she declared. "M. Kittredge was arrested because he called for my things, but I asked him to do that. I was in terrible trouble and--he was an old friend and--and I knew I could depend on him. He had no reason to kill Martinez. It's absurd!"

"I'm afraid it's not so absurd as you think. You say he was an old friend, he must have been a very particular kind of an old friend for you to ask a favor of him that you knew and he knew would bring him under suspicion. You did know that, didn't you?"

"Why--er--yes."

"I don't ask what there was between you and M. Kittredge, but if there had been everything between you he couldn't have done more, could he? And he couldn't have done less. So a jury might easily conclude, in the absence of contrary evidence, that there was everything between you."

"It's false," she cried, while Coquenil with keen discernment watched the outward signs of her trouble, the clinching of her hands, the heaving of her bosom, the indignant flashing of her eyes.

"I beg your pardon for expressing such a thought," he said simply. "It's a matter that concerns the judge, only ladies dislike going to the Palais de Justice."

She started in alarm. "You mean that I might have to go there?"

"Your testimony is important, and the judge cannot very well come here."

"But, I'd rather talk to you; really, I would. You can ask me questions and--and then tell him. Go on, I don't mind. M. Kittredge was not my lover--there! Please make that perfectly clear. He was a dear, loyal friend, but nothing more."

"Was he enough of a friend to be jealous of Martinez?"

"What was there to make him jealous?"

"Well," smiled Coquenil, "I can imagine that if a dear, loyal friend found the lady he was dear and loyal to having supper with another man in a private room, he might be jealous."

To which Pussy replied with an accent of finality but with a shade of pique: "The best proof that M. Kittredge would not be jealous of me is that he loves another woman."

"The girl at Notre-Dame?"

"Yes."

"But Martinez knew her, too. There might have been trouble over her," ventured M. Paul shrewdly.

She shook her head with eager positiveness. "There was no trouble."

"You never knew of any quarrel between Kittredge and Martinez? No words?"

"Never."

"Madam," continued Coquenil, "as you have allowed me to speak frankly, I am going to ask if you feel inclined to make a special effort to help M. Kittredge?"

"Of course I do."

"Even at the sacrifice of your own feelings?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let me go back a minute. Yesterday you made a plucky effort to serve your friend, you gave money for a lawyer to defend him, you even said you would come forward and testify in his favor if it became necessary."

"Ah, the girl has seen you?"

"More than that, she has seen M. Kittredge at the prison. And I am sorry to tell you that your generous purposes have accomplished nothing. He refuses to accept your money and----"

"I told you he didn't love me," she interrupted with a touch of bitterness.

"We must have better evidence than that, just as we must have better evidence of his innocence than your testimony. After all, you don't know that he did not fire this shot, you could not see through the wall, and for all you can say, M. Kittredge may have been in Number Seven."

"I suppose that's true," admitted Pussy dolefully.

"So we come back to the question of motive; his love for you or his hatred of the Spaniard might be a motive, but if we can prove that there was no such love and no such hatred, then we shall have rendered him a great service and enormously improved his chances of getting out of prison. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly. But how can we prove it?"

The detective leaned closer and said impressively: "If these things are true, it ought to be set forth in Kittredge's letters to you."

It was another chance shot, and Coquenil watched the effect anxiously.

"His letters to me!" she cried with a start of dismay, while M. Paul nodded complacently. "He never wrote me letters--that is, not many, and--whatever there were, I--I destroyed."

Coquenil eyed her keenly and shook his head. "A woman like you would never write to a man oftener than he wrote to her, and Kittredge had a thick bundle of your letters. It was only Saturday night that he burned them, along with that photograph of you in the lace dress."

It seemed to Pussy that a cold hand was closing over her heart; it was ghastly, it was positively uncanny the things this man had found out. She looked at him in frightened appeal, and then, with a gesture of half surrender: "For Heaven's sake, how much more do you know about me?"

"I know that you have a bundle of Kittredge's letters here, possibly in that desk." He pointed to a charming piece of old mahogany inlaid with ivory. He had made this last deduction by following her eyes through these last tortured minutes.

"It isn't true; I--I tell you I destroyed the letters." And he knew she was lying.

M. Paul glanced at his watch and then said quietly: "Would you mind asking

if some one is waiting for me outside?"

So thoroughly was the agitated lady under the spell of Coquenil's power that she now attached extraordinary importance to his slightest word or act. It seemed to her, as she pressed the bell, that she was precipitating some nameless catastrophe.

"Is anyone waiting for this gentleman?" she asked, all in a tremble, when the servant appeared.

"Yes, madam, two men are waiting," replied the valet.

She noticed, with a shiver, that he said two men, not two gentlemen.

"That's all," nodded Coquenil; "I'll let you know when I want them." And when the valet had withdrawn: "They have come from the prefecture in regard to these letters."

Pussy rose and her face was deathly white. "You mean they are policemen? My house is full of policemen?"

"Be calm, my dear lady, there are only two in the house and two outside."

"Oh, the shame of it, the scandal of it!" she wailed.

"A murder isn't a pleasant thing at the best and--as I said, they have come for the letters."

"You told them to come?"

"No, the judge told them to come. I hoped I might be able to spare you the annoyance of a search."

"A search?" she cried, and realizing her helplessness, she sank down on a sofa and began to cry. "It will disgrace me, it will break up my home, it will ruin my life!" She could hear the gossips of the American Colony rolling this choice morsel under their tongues, Pussy Wilmott's house had been searched by the police for letters from her lover!

Then, suddenly, clutching at a last straw of hope, she yielded or seemed to yield. "As long as a search must be made," she said with a sort of half-defiant dignity, "I prefer to have you make it, and not these men."

"I think that is wise," bowed M. Paul.

"In which room will you begin?"

"In this room."

"I give you my word there are no letters here, but, as you don't believe me, why--do what you like."

"I would like to look in that desk," said the detective.

"Very well--look!"

Coquenil went to the desk and examined it carefully. There were two drawers in a raised part at the back, there was a long, wide drawer in front, and over this a space like a drawer under a large inlaid cover, hinged at the back. He searched everywhere here, but found no sign of the expected letters.

"I must have been mistaken," he muttered, and he continued his search in other parts of the room, Pussy hovering about with changing expressions that reminded M. Paul of children's faces when they play the game of "hot

or cold."

"Well," he said, with an air of disappointment, "I find nothing here. Suppose we try another room."

"Certainly," she agreed, and her face brightened in such evident relief that he turned to her suddenly and said almost regretfully, as a generous adversary might speak to one whom he hopelessly outclasses: "Madam, I hear you are fond of gambling. You should study the game of poker, which teaches us to hide our feelings. Now then," he walked back quickly to the desk, "I want you to open this secret drawer."

He spoke with a sudden sternness that quite disconcerted poor Pussy. She stood before him frozen with fear, unable to lie any more, unable even to speak. A big tear of weakness and humiliation gathered and rolled down her cheek, and then, still silent, she took a hairpin from her hair, inserted one leg of it into a tiny hole quite lost in the ornamental work at the back of the desk, pushed against a hidden spring, and presto! a small secret drawer shot forward. In this drawer lay a packet of letters tied with a ribbon.

"Are these his letters?" he asked.

In utter misery she nodded but did not speak.

"Thanks," he said. "May I take them?"

She put forward her hands helplessly.

"I'm sorry, but, as I said before, a murder isn't a pleasant thing." And he took the packet from the drawer.

Then, seeing herself beaten at every point, Pussy Wilmott gave way entirely and wept angrily, bitterly, her face buried in the sofa pillows.

"I'm sorry," repeated M. Paul, and for the first time in the interview he felt himself at a disadvantage.

"Why didn't I burn them, why didn't I burn them?" she mourned.

"You trusted to that drawer," he suggested.

"No, no, I knew the danger, but I couldn't give them up. They stood for the best part of my life, the tenderest, the happiest. I've been a weak, wicked woman!"

"Any secrets in these letters will be scrupulously respected," he assured her, "unless they have a bearing on this crime. Is there anything you wish to say before I go?"

"Are you going?" she said weakly. And then, turning to him with tear-stained face, she asked for a moment to collect herself. "I want to say this," she went on, "that I didn't tell you the truth about Kittredge and Martinez. There was trouble between them; he speaks about it in one of his letters. It was about the little girl at Notre-Dame!"

"You mean Martinez was attentive to her?"

"Yes."

"Did she encourage him?"

"I don't know. She behaved very strangely--she seemed attracted to him and afraid of him at the same time. Martinez told me what an extraordinary effect he had on the girl. He said it was due to his magnetic power."

"And Kittredge objected to this?"

"Of course he did, and they had a quarrel. It's all in one of those letters."

"Was it a serious quarrel? Did Kittredge make any threats?"

"I--I'm afraid he did--yes, I know he did. You'll see it in the letter."

"Do you remember what he said?"

"Why--er--yes."

"What was it?"

She hesitated a moment and then, as though weary of resisting, she replied: "He told Martinez that if he didn't leave this girl alone he would break his damned head for him."

CHAPTER XVI

THE THIRD PAIR OF BOOTS

The wheels of justice move swiftly in Paris, and after one quiet day, during which Judge Hauteville was drawing together the threads of the mystery, Kittredge found himself, on Tuesday morning, facing an ordeal worse than the solitude of a prison cell. The seventh of July! What a date for the American! How little he realized what was before him as he bumped along in a prison van breathing the sweet air of a delicious summer morning! He had been summoned for the double test put upon suspected assassins in France, a visit to the scene of the crime and a viewing of the victim's body. In Lloyd's behalf there was present at this grim ceremony Maitre Pleindeaux, a clean-shaven, bald-headed little man, with a hard, metallic voice and a set of false teeth that clicked as he talked. "Bet a dollar it's ice water he's full of," said Kittredge to himself.

When brought to the Ansonia and shown the two rooms of the tragedy, Kittredge was perfectly calm and denied any knowledge of the affair; he had never seen these holes through the wall, he had never been in the alleyway, he was absolutely innocent. Maitre Pleindeaux nodded in approval. At the morgue, however, Lloyd showed a certain emotion when a door was opened suddenly and he was pushed into a room where he saw Martinez sitting on a chair and looking at him, Martinez with his shattered eye replaced by a glass one, and his dead face painted to a horrid semblance of life. This is one of the theatrical tricks of modern procedure, and the American was not prepared for it.

"My God!" he muttered, "he looks alive."

Nothing was accomplished, however, by the questioning here, nothing was extorted from the prisoner; he had known Martinez, he had never liked him particularly, but he had never wished to do him harm, and he had certainly not killed him. That was all Kittredge would say, however the questions were turned, and he declared repeatedly that he had had no quarrel with Martinez. All of which was carefully noted down.

[Illustration: "A door was opened suddenly and he was pushed into a room."]

While his nerves were still tingling with the gruesomeness of all this, Lloyd was brought to Judge Hauteville's room in the Palais de Justice. He

was told to sit down on a chair beside Maitre Pleindeaux. A patient secretary sat at his desk, a formidable guard stood before the door with a saber sword in his belt. Then the examination began.

So far Kittredge had heard the voice of justice only in mild and polite questioning, now he was to hear the ring of it in accusation, in rapid, massed accusation that was to make him feel the crushing power of the state and the hopelessness of any puny lying.

"Kittredge," began the judge, "you have denied all knowledge of this crime. Look at this pistol and tell me if you have ever seen it before." He offered the pistol to Lloyd's manacled hands. Maitre Pleindeaux took it with a frown of surprise.

"Excuse me, your honor," he bowed, "I would like to speak to my client before he answers that question."

But Kittredge waved him aside. "What's the use," he said. "That is my pistol; I know it; there's no doubt about it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hauteville. "It is also the pistol that killed Martinez. It was thrown from private room Number Seven at the Ansonia. A woman saw it thrown, and it was picked up in a neighboring courtyard. One ball was missing, and that ball was found in the body."

"There's some mistake," objected Pleindeaux with professional asperity, at the same time flashing a wrathful look at Lloyd that said plainly: "You see what you have done!"

"Now," continued the judge, "you say you have never been in the alleyway that we showed you at the Ansonia. Look at these boots. Do you recognize them?"

Kittredge examined the boots carefully and then said frankly to the judge: "I think they are mine."

"You wore them to the Ansonia on the night of the crime?"

"I think so."

"Aren't you sure?"

"Not absolutely sure, because I have three pairs exactly alike. I always keep three pairs going at the same time; they last longer that way."

"I will tell you, then, that this is the pair you had on when you were arrested."

"Then it's the pair I wore to the Ansonia."

"You didn't change your boots after leaving the Ansonia?"

"No."

"Kittredge," said the judge severely, "the man who shot Martinez escaped by the alleyway and left his footprints on the soft earth. We have made plaster casts of them. There they are; our experts have examined them and find that they correspond in every particular with the soles of these boots. What do you say to this?"

Lloyd listened in a daze. "I don't see how it's possible," he answered.

"You still deny having been in the alleyway?"

"Absolutely."

"I pass to another point," resumed Hauteville, who was now striding back and forth with quick turns and sudden stops, his favorite manner of attack. "You say you had no quarrel with Martinez?"

A shade of anxiety crossed Lloyd's face, and he looked appealingly at his counsel, who nodded with a consequential smack of the lips.

"Is that true?" repeated the judge.

"Why--er--yes."

"You never threatened Martinez with violence? Careful!"

"No, sir," declared Kittredge stubbornly.

Hauteville turned to his desk, and opening a leather portfolio, drew forth a paper and held it before Kittredge's eyes.

"Do you recognize this writing?"

"It's--it's my writing," murmured Lloyd, and his heart sank. How had the judge got this letter? And had he the others?

"You remember this letter? You remember what you wrote about Martinez?"

"Yes."

"Then there was a quarrel and you did threaten him?"

"I advise my client not to answer that question," interposed the lawyer, and the American was silent.

"As you please," said Hauteville, and he went on grimly: "Kittredge, you have so far refused to speak of the lady to whom you wrote this letter. Now you must speak of her. It is evident she is the person who called for you in the cab. Do you deny that?"

"I prefer not to answer."

"She was your mistress? Do you deny that?"

"Yes, I deny that," cried the American, not waiting for Pleindeaux's prompting.

"Ah!" shrugged the judge, and turning to his secretary: "Ask the lady to come in."

Then, in a moment of sickening misery, Kittredge saw the door open and a black figure enter, a black figure with an ashen-white face and frightened eyes. It was Pussy Wilmott, treading the hard way of the transgressor with her hair done most becomingly, and breathing a delicate violet fragrance.

"Take him into the outer room," directed the judge, "until I ring."

The guard opened the door and motioned to Maitre Pleindeaux, who passed out first, followed by the prisoner and then by the guard himself. At the threshold Kittredge turned, and for a second his eyes met Pussy's eyes.

"Please sit down, madam," said the judge, and then for nearly half an hour he talked to her, questioned her, tortured her. He knew all that Coqueni knew about her life, and more; all about her two divorces and her various sentimental escapades. And he presented this knowledge with such startling effectiveness that before she had been five minutes in his presence poor Pussy felt that he could lay bare the innermost secrets of her being.

And, little by little, he dragged from her the story of her relations with Kittredge, going back to their first acquaintance. This was in New York about a year before, while she was there on business connected with some property deeded to her by her second husband, in regard to which there had been a lawsuit. Mr. Wilmott had not accompanied her on this trip, and, being much alone, as most of her friends were in the country, she had seen a good deal of M. Kittredge, who frequently spent the evenings with her at the Hotel Waldorf, where she was stopping. She had met him through mutual friends, for he was well connected socially in New York, and had soon grown fond of him. He had been perfectly delightful to her, and--well, things move rapidly in America, especially in hot weather, and before she realized it or could prevent it, he was seriously infatuated, and--the end of it was, when she returned to Paris he followed her on another steamer, an extremely foolish proceeding, as it involved his giving up a fine position and getting into trouble with his family.

"You say he had a fine position in New York?" questioned the judge. "In what?"

"In a large real-estate company."

"And he lived in a nice way? He had plenty of money?"

"For a young man, yes. He often took me to dinner and to the theater, and he was always sending me flowers."

"Did he ever give you presents?"

"Ye-es."

"What did he give you?"

"He gave me a gold bag that I happened to admire one day at Tiffany's."

"Was it solid gold?"

"Yes."

"And you accepted it?"

Pussy flushed under the judge's searching look. "I wouldn't have accepted it, but this happened just as I was sailing for France. He sent it to the steamer."

"Ah! Have you any idea how much M. Kittredge paid for that gold bag?"

"Yes, for I asked at Tiffany's here and they said the bag cost about four hundred dollars. When I saw M. Kittredge in Paris I told him he was a foolish boy to have spent all that money, but he was so sweet about it and said he was so glad to give me pleasure that I hadn't the heart to refuse it."

After a pause for dramatic effect the judge said impressively: "Madam, you may be surprised to hear that M. Kittredge returned to France on the same steamer that carried you."

"No, no," she declared, "I saw all the passengers, and he was not among them."

"He was not among the first-cabin passengers."

"You mean to say he went in the second cabin? I don't believe it."

"No," answered Hauteville with a grim smile, "he didn't go in the second

cabin, _he went in the steerage!_"

"In the steerage!" she murmured aghast.

"And during the five or six months here in Paris, while he was dancing attendance on you, he was practically without resources."

"I know better," she insisted; "he took me out all the time and spent money freely."

The judge shook his head. "He spent on you what he got by pawning his jewelry, by gambling, and sometimes by not eating. We have the facts."

"_Mon Dieu!_" she shuddered. "And I never knew it! I never suspected it!"

"This is to make it quite clear that he loved you as very few women have been loved. Now I want to know why you quarreled with him six months ago?"

"I didn't quarrel with him," she answered faintly.

"You know what I mean. What caused the trouble between you?"

"I--I don't know."

"Madam, I am trying to be patient, I wish to spare your feelings in every possible way, but I _must_ have the truth. Was the trouble caused by this other woman?"

"No, it came before he met her."

"Ah! Which one of you was responsible for it?"

"I don't know; really, I don't know," she insisted with a weary gesture.

"Then I must do what I can to _make_ you know," he replied impatiently, and reaching forward, he pressed the electric bell.

"Bring back the prisoner," he ordered, as the guard appeared, and a moment later Kittredge was again in his place beside Maitre Pleindeaux, with the woman a few feet distant.

"Now," began Hauteville, addressing both Lloyd and Mrs. Wilmott, "I come to an important point. I have here a packet of letters written by you, Kittredge, to this lady. You have already identified the handwriting as your own; and you, madam, will not deny that these letters were addressed to you. You admit that, do you not?"

"Yes," answered Pussy weakly.

The judge turned over the letters and selected one from which he read a passage full of passion. "Would any man write words like that to a woman unless he were her lover? Do you think he would?" He turned to Mrs. Wilmott, who sat silent, her eyes on the floor. "What do _you_ say, Kittredge?"

Lloyd met the judge's eyes unflinchingly, but he did not answer.

Again Hauteville turned over the letters and selected another one.

"Listen to this, both of you." And he read a long passage from a letter overwhelmingly compromising. There were references to the woman's physical charm, to the beauty of her body, to the deliciousness of her caresses--it was a letter that could only have been written by a man in a transport of passion. Kittredge grew white as he listened, and Mrs. Wilmott burned with shame.

"Is there any doubt about it?" pursued the judge pitilessly. "And I have only read two bits from two letters. There are many others. Now I want the truth about this business. Come, the quickest way will be the easiest."

He took out his watch and laid it on the desk before him. "Madam, I will give you five minutes. Unless you admit within that time what is perfectly evident, namely, that you were this man's mistress, I shall continue the reading of these letters _before your husband_."

"You're taking a cowardly advantage of a woman!" she burst out.

"No," answered Hauteville sternly. "I am investigating a cowardly murder." He glanced at his watch. "Four minutes!"

Then to Kittredge: "And unless _you_ admit this thing, I shall summon the girl from Notre-Dame and let _her_ say what she thinks of this correspondence."

Lloyd staggered under the blow. He was fortified against everything but this; he would endure prison, pain, humiliation, but he could not bear the thought that this fine girl, his Alice, who had taught him what love really was, this fond creature who trusted him, should be forced to hear that shameful reading.

"You wouldn't do that?" he pleaded. "I don't ask you to spare me--I've been no saint, God knows, and I'll take my medicine, but you can't drag an innocent girl into this thing just because you have the power."

"Were you this woman's lover?" repeated the judge, and again he looked at his watch. "Three minutes!"

Kittredge was in torture. Once his eyes turned to Mrs. Wilmott in a message of unspeakable bitterness. "You're a judge," he said in a strained, tense voice, "and I'm a prisoner; you have all the power and I have none, but there's something back of that, something we both have, I mean a common manhood, and you know, if you have any sense of honor, that _no man_ has a right to ask another man that question."

"The point is well taken," approved Maitre Pleindeaux.

"Two minutes!" said Hauteville coldly. Then he turned to Mrs. Wilmott. "Your husband is now at his club, one of our men is there also, awaiting my orders. He will get them by telephone, and will bring your husband here in a swift automobile. _You have one minute left!_"

Then there was silence in that dingy chamber, heavy, agonizing silence. Fifteen seconds! Thirty seconds! The judge's eye was on his watch. Now his arm reached toward the electric bell, and Pussy Wilmott's heart almost stopped beating. Now his firm red finger advanced toward the white button.

Then she yielded. "Stop!" came her low cry. "He--he was my lover."

"That is better!" said the judge, and the scratching of the _greffier's_ pen recorded unalterably Mrs. Wilmott's avowal.

"I don't suppose you will contradict the lady," said Hauteville, turning to Kittredge. "I take your silence as consent, and, after all, the lady's confession is sufficient. You were her lover. And the evidence shows that you committed a crime based on passionate jealousy and hatred of a rival. You knew that Martinez was to dine with your mistress in a private room; you arranged to be at the same restaurant, at the same hour, and by a cunning and intricate plan, you succeeded in killing the man you hated. We have found the weapon of this murder, and it belongs to you; we have found a letter written by you full of violent threats against the murdered man;

we have found footprints made by the assassin, and they absolutely fit your boots; in short, we have the fact of the murder, the motive for the murder, and the evidence that you committed the murder. What have you to say for yourself?"

Kittredge thought a moment, and then said quietly: "The fact of the murder you have, of course; the evidence against me you seem to have, although it is false evidence; but----"

"How do you mean false evidence? Do you deny threatening Martinez with violence?"

"I threatened to punch his head; that is very different from killing him."

"And the pistol? And the footprints?"

"I don't know, I can't explain it, but--I know I am innocent. You say I had a motive for this crime. You're mistaken, I had no motive."

"Passion and jealousy have stood as motives for murder from the beginning of time."

"There was no passion and no jealousy," answered Lloyd steadily.

"Are you mocking me?" cried the judge. "What is there in these letters," he touched the packet before him, "but passion and jealousy? Didn't you give up your position in America for this woman?"

"Yes, but----"

"Didn't you follow her to Europe in the steerage because of your infatuation? Didn't you bear sufferings and privations to be near her? Shall I go over the details of what you did, as I have them here, in order to refresh your memory?"

"No," said Kittredge hoarsely, and his eye was beginning to flame, "my memory needs no refreshing; I know what I did, I know what I endured. There was passion enough and jealousy enough, but that was a year ago. If I had found her then dining with a man in a private room, I don't know what I might have done. Perhaps I should have killed both of them and myself, too, for I was mad then; but my madness left me. You seem to know a great deal about passion, sir; did you ever hear that it can change into loathing?"

"You mean--" began the judge with a puzzled look, while Mrs. Wilmott recoiled in dismay.

"I mean that I am fighting for my life, and now that she has admitted this thing," he eyed the woman scornfully, "I am free to tell the truth, all of it."

"That is what we want," said Hauteville.

"I thought I loved her with a fine, true love, but she showed me it was only a base imitation. I offered her my youth, my strength, my future, and she would have taken them and--broken them and scattered them in my face and--and laughed at me. When I found it out, I--well, never mind, but you can bet all your pretty French philosophy I didn't go about Paris looking for billiard players to kill on her account."

It was not a gallant speech, but it rang true, a desperate cry from the soul depths of this unhappy man, and Pussy Wilmott shrank away as she listened.

"Then why did you quarrel with Martinez?" demanded the judge.

"Because he was interfering with a woman whom I did love and would fight for----"

"For God's sake, stop," whispered the lawyer.

"I mean I would fight for her if necessary," added the American, "but I'd fight fair, I wouldn't shoot through any hole in a wall."

"Then you consider your love for this other woman--I presume you mean the girl at Notre-Dame?"

"Yes."

"You consider your love for her a fine, pure love in contrast to the other love?"

"The other wasn't love at all, it was passion."

"Yet you did more for this lady through passion," he pointed to Mrs. Wilmott, "than you have ever done for the girl through your pure love."

"That's not true," cried Lloyd. "I was a fool through passion, I've been something like a man through love. I was selfish and reckless through passion, I've been a little unselfish and halfway decent through love. I was a gambler and a pleasure seeker through passion, I've gone to work at a mean little job and stuck to it and lived on what I've earned--through love. Do you think it's easy to give up gambling? Try it! Do you think it's easy to live in a measly little room up six flights of black, smelly stairs, with no fire in winter? Anyhow, it wasn't easy for me, but I did it--through love, yes, sir, pure love."

As Hauteville listened, his frown deepened, his eyes grew harder. "That's all very fine," he objected, "but if you hated this woman, why did you risk prison and--worse, to get her things? You knew what you were risking, I suppose?"

"Yes, I knew."

"Why did you do it?"

Kittredge hesitated. "I did it for--for what she had been to me. It meant ruin and disgrace for her and--well, if she could ask such a thing, I could grant it. It was like paying a debt, and--I paid mine."

The judge turned to Mrs. Wilmott: "Did you know that he had ceased to love you?"

Pussy Wilmott, with her fine eyes to the floor, answered almost in a whisper: "Yes, I knew it."

"Do you know what he means by saying that you would have spoiled his life and--and all that?"

"N-not exactly."

"You do know!" cried the American. "You know I had given you my life in sacred pledge, and you made a plaything of it. You told me you were unhappy, married to a man you loathed, a dull brute; but when I offered you freedom and my love, you drew back. When I begged you to leave him and become my wife, with the law's sanction, you said no, because I was poor and he was rich. You wanted a lover, but you wanted your luxury, too; and I saw that what I had thought the call of your soul was only the call of your body. Your beauty had blinded me, your eyes, your mouth, your voice, the smell of you, the taste of you, the devilish siren power of you, all these had blinded me. I saw that your talk about love was a lie. Love! What did

you know about love? You wanted me, along with your ease and your pleasures, as a coarse creator of sensations, and you couldn't have me on those terms. In my madness I would have done anything for you, borne anything; I would have starved for you, toiled for you, yes, gladly; but you didn't want that kind of sacrifice. You couldn't see why I worried about money. There was plenty for us both where yours came from. God! Where yours came from! Why couldn't I leave well enough alone and enjoy an easy life in Paris, with a nicely furnished _rez de chaussee_ off the Champs Elysees, where madam could drive up in her carriage after luncheon and break the Seventh Commandment comfortably three or four afternoons a week, and be home in time to dress for dinner! That was what you wanted," he paused and searched deep into her eyes as she cowered before him, "but _that was what you couldn't have!_"

"On the whole, I think he's guilty," concluded the judge an hour later, speaking to Coquenil, who had been looking over the secretary's record of the examination.

"Queer!" muttered the detective. "He says he had three pairs of boots."

"He talks too much," continued Hauteville; "his whole plea was ranting. It's a _crime passionel_, if ever there was one, and--I shall commit him for trial."

Coquenil was not listening; he had drawn two squares of shiny paper from his pocket, and was studying them with a magnifying glass. The judge looked at him in surprise.

"Do you hear what I say?" he repeated. "I shall commit him for trial."

M. Paul glanced up with an absent expression. "It's circumstantial evidence," was all he said, and he went back to his glass.

"Yes, but a strong chain of it."

"A strong chain," mused the other, then suddenly his face lighted and he sprang to his feet. "Great God of Heaven!" he cried in excitement, and hurrying to the window he stood there in the full light, his eye glued to the magnifying glass, his whole soul concentrated on those two pieces of paper, evidently photographs.

"What is it? What have you found?" asked the judge.

"I have found a weak link that breaks your whole chain," triumphed M. Paul. "The alleyway footprints are _not_ identical with the soles of Kittredge's boots."

"But you said they were, the experts said they were."

"We were mistaken; they are _almost_ identical, but not quite; in shape and size they are identical, in the number and placing of the nails in the heel they are identical, in the worn places they are identical, but when you compare them under the magnifying glass, this photograph of the footprints with this one of the boot soles, you see unmistakable differences in the scratches on separate nails in the heel, unmistakable differences."

Hauteville shrugged his shoulders. "That's cutting it pretty fine to compare microscopic scratches on the heads of small nails."

"Not at all. Don't we compare microscopic lines on criminals' thumbs? Besides, it's perfectly plain," insisted Coquenil, absorbed in his comparison. "I can count forty or fifty nail heads in the heel, and _none_ of them correspond under the glass; those that should be alike are _not_ alike. There are slight differences in size, in position, in wear; they are not the same set of nails; it's impossible. Look for yourself. Compare any

two and you'll see _that they were never in the same pair of boots!_"

With an incredulous movement Hauteville took the glass, and in his turn studied the photographs. As he looked, his frown deepened.

"It seems true, it certainly seems true," he grumbled, "but--how do you account for it?"

Coquenil smiled in satisfied conviction. "Kittredge told you he had three pairs of boots; they were machine made and the same size; he says he kept them all going, so they were all worn approximately alike. We have the pair that he wore that night, and another pair found in his room, but the third pair is missing. _It's the third pair of boots that made those alleyway footprints!_"

"Then you think--" began the judge.

"I think we shall have found Martinez's murderer when we find the man who stole that third pair of boots."

"Stole them?"

Coquenil nodded.

"But that is all conjecture."

"It won't be conjecture to-morrow morning--it will be absolute proof, unless----"

"Unless what?"

"Unless Kittredge lied when he told that girl he had never suffered with gout or rheumatism."

CHAPTER XVII

"FROM HIGHER UP"

A great detective must have infinite patience. That is, the quality next to imagination that will serve him best. Indeed, without patience, his imagination will serve him but indifferently. Take, for instance, so small a thing as the auger used at the Ansonia. Coquenil felt sure it had been bought for the occasion--billiard players do not have augers conveniently at hand. It was probably a new one, and somewhere in Paris there was a clerk who _might_ remember selling it and _might_ be able to say whether the purchaser was Martinez or some other man. M. Paul believed it was another man. His imagination told him that the person who committed this crime had suggested the manner of it, and overseen the details of it down to even the precise placing of the eye holes. It must be so or the plan would not have succeeded. The assassin, then, was a friend of Martinez--that is, the Spaniard had considered him a friend, and, as it was of the last importance that these holes through the wall be large enough and not too large, this friend might well have seen personally to the purchase of the auger, not leaving it to a rattle-brained billiard player who, doubtless, regarded the whole affair as a joke. It was _not_ a joke!

So, as part of his day's work, M. Paul had taken steps for the finding of this smallish object dropped into the Seine by Pussy Wilmott, and, betimes on the morning after that lady's examination, a diver began work along the Concorde bridge under the guidance of a young detective named Bobet, selected for this duty by M. Paul himself. This was _one_ thread to be

followed, a thread that might lead poor Bobet through weary days and nights until, among all the hardware shops in Paris, he had found the particular one where that particular auger had been sold!

Another thread, meanwhile, was leading another trustworthy man in and out among friends of Martinez, whom he must study one by one until the false friend had been discovered. And another thread was hurrying still another man along the trail of the fascinating Anita, for Coquenil wanted to find out why she had changed her mind that night, and what she knew about the key to the alleyway door. Somebody gave that key to the assassin!

Besides all this, and more important, M. Paul had planned a piece of work for Papa Tignol when the old man reported for instructions this same Wednesday morning just as the detective was finishing his chocolate and toast under the trees in the garden.

"Ah, Tignol!" he exclaimed with a buoyant smile. "It's a fine day, all the birds are singing and--we're going to do great things." He rubbed his hands exultantly, "I want you to do a little job at the Hotel des Etrangers, where Kittredge lived. You are to take a room on the sixth floor, if possible, and spend your time playing the flute."

"Playing the flute?" gasped Tignol. "I don't know how to play the flute."

"All the better! Spend your time learning! There is no one who gets so quickly in touch with his neighbors as a man learning to play the flute."

"Ah!" grinned the other shrewdly. "You're after information from the sixth floor?"

M. Paul nodded and told his assistant exactly what he wanted.

"Eh, eh!" chuckled the old man. "A droll idea! I'll learn to play the flute!"

"Meet me at nine to-night at the Three Wise Men and--good luck. I'm off to the Sante."

As he drove to the prison Coquenil thought with absorbed interest of the test he was planning to settle this question of the footprints. He was satisfied, from a study of the plaster casts, that the assassin had limped slightly on his left foot as he escaped through the alleyway. The impressions showed this, the left heel being heavily marked, while the ball of the left foot was much fainter, as if the left ankle movement had been hampered by rheumatism or gout. It was for this reason that Coquenil had been at such pains to learn whether Kittredge suffered from these maladies. It appeared that he did not. Indeed, M. Paul himself remembered the young man's quick, springy step when he left the cab that fatal night to enter Bonneton's house. So now he proposed to make Lloyd walk back and forth several times in a pair of his own boots over soft earth in the prison yard and then show that impressions of these new footprints were different in the pressure marks, and probably in the length of stride, from those left in the alleyway. This would be further indication, along with the differences already noted in the nails, that the alleyway footprints were not made by Kittredge.

Not made by Kittredge, reflected the detective, but by a man wearing Kittredge's boots, a man wearing the missing third pair, the stolen pair! Ah, there was a nut to crack! This man must have stolen the boots, as he had doubtless stolen the pistol, to throw suspicion on an innocent person. No other conclusion was possible; yet, he had not returned the boots to Kittredge's room after the crime. Why not? It was essential to his purpose that they be found in Kittredge's room, he must have intended to return them, something quite unforeseen must have prevented him from doing so. What had prevented the assassin from returning Kittredge's boots?

As soon as Coquenil reached the prison he was shown into the director's private room, and he noticed that M. Dedet received him with a strange mixture of surliness and suspicion.

"What's the trouble?" asked the detective.

"Everything," snarled the other, then he burst out: "What the devil did you mean by sending that girl to me?"

"What did I mean?" repeated Coquenil, puzzled by the jailer's hostility. "Didn't she tell you what she wanted?"

Dedet made no reply, but unlocking a drawer, he searched among some envelopes, and producing a square of faded blotting paper, he opened it before his visitor.

"There!" he said, and with a heavy finger he pointed to a scrawl of words. "There's what she wrote, and you know damned well you put her up to it."

Coquenil studied the words with increasing perplexity. "I have no idea what this means," he declared.

"You lie!" retorted the jailer.

M. Paul sprang to his feet. "Take that back," he ordered with a look of menace, and the rough man grumbled an apology. "Just the same," he muttered, "it's mighty queer how she knew it unless you told her."

"Knew what?"

The jailer eyed Coquenil searchingly. "_Nom d'un chien_", I guess you're straight, after all, but--_how_ did she come to write that?" He scratched his dull head in mystification.

"I have no idea."

"See here," went on Dedet, almost appealingly, "do you believe a girl I never saw could know a thing about me that _nobody_ knows?"

"Strange!" mused the detective. "Is it an important thing?"

"Is it? If it hadn't been about the _most_ important thing, do you think I'd have broken a prison rule and let her see that man? Well, I guess not. But I was up against it and--I took a chance."

Coquenil thought a moment. "I don't suppose you want to tell me what these words mean that she wrote?"

"No, I don't," said the jailer dryly.

"All right. Anyhow, you see I had nothing to do with it." He paused, and then in a businesslike tone: "Well, I'd better get to work. I want that prisoner out in the courtyard."

"Can't have him."

"No? Here's the judge's order."

But the other shook his head. "I've had later orders, just got 'em over the telephone, saying you're not to see the prisoner."

"What?"

"That's right, and _he_ wants to see you."

"He? Who?"

"The judge. They've called me down, now it's your turn."

Coquenil took off his glasses and rubbed them carefully. Then, without more discussion, he left the prison and drove directly to the Palais de Justice; he was perplexed and indignant, and vaguely anxious. What did this mean? What could it mean?

As he approached the lower arm of the river where it enfolds the old island city, he saw Bobet sauntering along the quay and drew up to speak to him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "I told you to watch that diver."

The young detective shrugged his shoulders. "The job's done, he found the auger."

"Ah! Where is it?"

"I gave it to M. Gibelin."

Coquenil could scarcely believe his ears.

"You gave the auger to Gibelin? Why?"

"Because he told me to."

"You must be crazy! Gibelin had nothing to do with this. You take your orders from me."

"Do I?" laughed the other. "M. Gibelin says I take orders from him."

"We'll see about this," muttered M. Paul, and crossing the little bridge, he entered the courtyard of the Palais de Justice and hurried up to the office of Judge Hauteville. On the stairs he met Gibelin, fat and perspiring.

"See here," he said abruptly, "what have you done with that auger?"

"Put it in the department of old iron," rasped the other. "We can't waste time on foolish clews."

Coquenil glared at him. "We can't, eh? I suppose you have decided that?"

"Precisely," retorted Gibelin, his red mustache bristling.

"And you've been giving orders to young Bobet?"

"Yes, sir."

"By what authority?"

"Go in there and you'll find out," sneered the fat man, jerking a derisive thumb toward Hauteville's door.

A moment later M. Paul entered the judge's private room, and the latter, rising from his desk, came forward with a look of genuine friendliness and concern.

"My dear Coquenil," exclaimed Hauteville, with cordial hand extended. "I'm glad to see you but--you must prepare for bad news."

Coquenil eyed him steadily. "I see, they have taken me off this case."

The judge nodded gravely. "Worse than that, they have taken you off the force. Your commission is canceled."

"But--but why?" stammered the other.

"For influencing Dedet to break a rule about a prisoner au secret; as a matter of fact, you were foolish to write that letter."

"I thought the girl might get important evidence from her lover."

"No doubt, but you ought to have asked me for an order. I would have given it to you, and then there would have been no trouble."

"It was late and the matter was urgent. After all you approve of what I did?"

"Yes, but not of the way you did it. Technically you were at fault, and--I'm afraid you will have to suffer."

M. Paul thought a moment.

"Did you make the complaint against me?"

"No, no! Between ourselves, I should have passed the thing over as unimportant, but--well, the order came from higher up."

"You mean the chief revoked my commission?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen the chief, but the order came from his office."

"With this prison affair given as the reason?"

"Yes."

"And now Gibelin is in charge of the case?"

"Yes."

"And I am discharged from the force? Discharged in disgrace?"

"It's a great pity, but----"

"Do you think I'll stand for it? Do you know me so little as that?" cut in the other with increasing heat.

"I don't see what you're going to do," opposed the judge mildly.

"You don't? Then I'll tell you that--" Coquenil checked himself at a sudden thought. "After all, what I do is not important, but I'll tell you what Gibelin will do, and that is important, he will let this American go to trial and be found guilty for want of evidence that would save him_."

"Not if I can help it," replied Hauteville, ruffled at this reflection on his judicial guidance of the investigation.

"No offense," said M. Paul, "but this is a case where even as able a judge as yourself must have special assistance and--Gibelin couldn't find the truth in a thousand years. Do you think he's fit to handle this case?"

"Officially I have no opinion," answered Hauteville guardedly, "but I don't mind telling you personally that I--I'm sorry to lose you."

"Thanks," said M. Paul. "I think I'll have a word with the chief."

In the outer office Coquenil learned that M. Simon was just then in conference with one of the other judges and for some minutes he walked slowly up and down the long corridor, smiling bitterly, until presently one of the doors opened and the chief came out followed by a black bearded judge, who was bidding him obsequious farewell.

As M. Simon moved away briskly, his eye fell on the waiting detective, and his genial face clouded.

"Ah, Coquenil," he said, and with a kindly movement he took M. Paul's arm in his. "I want a word with you--over here," and he led the way to a wide window space. "I'm sorry about this business."

"Sorry?" exclaimed M. Paul. "So is Hauteville sorry, but--if you're sorry, why did you let the thing happen?"

"Not so loud," cautioned M. Simon. "My dear fellow, I assure you I couldn't help it, I had nothing to do with it."

Coquenil stared at him incredulously. "Aren't you chief of the detective bureau?"

"Yes," answered the other in a low tone, "but the order came from--from higher up."

"You mean from the _prefet de police?_"

M. Simon laid a warning finger on his lips. "This is in strictest confidence, the order came through his office, but I don't believe the _prefet_ issued it personally. _It came from higher up!_"

"From higher up!" repeated M. Paul, and his thoughts flashed back to that sinister meeting on the Champs Elysees, to that harsh voice and flaunting defiance.

"He said he had power, that left-handed devil," muttered the detective, "he said he had the biggest kind of power, and--I guess he has."

CHAPTER XVIII

A LONG LITTLE FINGER

Coquenil kept his appointment that night at the Three Wise Men and found Papa Tignol waiting for him, his face troubled even to the tip of his luminous purple nose. In vain the old man tried to show interest in a neighboring game of dominoes; the detective saw at a glance that his faithful friend had heard the bad news and was mourning over it.

"Ah, M. Paul," cried Tignol. "This is a pretty thing they tell me. _Nom d'un chien_, what a pack of fools they are!"

"Not so loud," cautioned Coquenil with a quiet smile. "It's all right, Papa Tignol, it's all for the best."

"All for the best?" stared the other. "But if you're off the force?"

"Wait a little and you'll understand," said the detective in a low tone, then as the tavern door opened: "Here is Pougeot! I telephoned him. Good evening, Lucien," and he shook hands cordially with the commissary, whose face wore a serious, inquiring look. "Will you have something, or shall we move on?" and, under his breath, he added: "Say you don't want anything."

"I don't want anything," obeyed Pougeot with a puzzled glance.

"Then come, it's a quarter past ten," and tossing some money to the waiter, Coquenil led the way out.

Drawn up in front of the tavern was a taxi-auto, the chauffeur bundled up to the ears in bushy gray furs, despite the mild night. There was a leather bag beside him.

"Is this your man?" asked Pougeot.

"Yes," said M. Paul, "get in. If you don't mind I'll lower this front window so that we can feel the air." Then, when the commissary and Tignol were seated, he gave directions to the driver. "We will drive through the _bois_ and go out by the Porte Dauphine. Not too fast."

The man touched his cap respectfully, and a few moments later they were running smoothly to the west, over the wooden pavement of the Rue de Rivoli.

"Now we can talk," said Coquenil with an air of relief. "I suppose you both know what has happened?"

The two men replied with sympathetic nods.

"I regard you, Lucien, as my best friend, and you, Papa Tignol, are the only man on the force I believe I can absolutely trust."

Tignol bobbed his little bullet head back and forth, and pulled furiously at his absurd black mustache. This, was the greatest compliment he had ever received. The commissary laid an affectionate hand on Coquenil's arm. "You know I'll stand by you absolutely, Paul; I'll do anything that is possible. How do you feel about this thing yourself?"

"I felt badly at first," answered the other. "I was mortified and bitter. You know what I gave up to undertake this case, and you know how I have thrown myself into it. This is Wednesday night, the crime was committed last Saturday, and in these four days I haven't slept twelve hours. As to eating--well, never mind that. The point is, I was in it, heart and soul, and--now I'm out of it."

"An infernal shame!" muttered Tignol.

"Perhaps not. I've done some hard thinking since I got word this morning that my commission was canceled, and I have reached an important conclusion. In the first place, I am not sure that I haven't fallen into the old error of allowing my judgment to be too much influenced by a preconceived theory. I wouldn't admit this for the world to anyone but you two. I'd rather cut my tongue out than let Gibelin know it. Careful, there," he said sharply, as their wheels swung dangerously near a stone shelter in the Place de la Concorde.

Both Pougeot and Tignol noted with surprise the half-resigned, half-discouraged tone of the famous detective.

"You don't mean that you think the American may be guilty?" questioned the commissary.

"Never in the world!" grumbled Tignol.

"I don't say he is guilty," answered M. Paul, "but I am not so sure he is innocent. And, if there is doubt about that, then there is doubt whether this case is really a great one. I have assumed that Martinez was killed by an extraordinary criminal, for some extraordinary reason, but--I may have

been mistaken."

"Of course," agreed Pougeot. "And if you were mistaken?"

"Then I've been wasting my time on a second-class investigation that a second-class man like Gibelin could have carried on as well as I; and losing the Rio Janeiro offer besides." He leaned forward suddenly toward the chauffeur. "See here, what are you trying to do?" As he spoke they barely escaped colliding with a cab coming down the Champs Elysees.

"It was his fault; one of his lanterns is out," declared the chauffeur, and, half turning, he exchanged curses with the departing jehu.

They had now reached Napoleon's arch, and, at greater speed, the automobile descended the Avenue de la Grande Armee.

"Are you thinking of accepting the Rio Janeiro offer?" asked the commissary presently.

"Very seriously; but I don't know whether it's still open. I thought perhaps you would go to the Brazilian Embassy and ask about it delicately. I don't like to go myself, after this affair. Do you mind?"

"No, I don't mind, of course I don't mind," answered, Pougeot, "but, my dear Paul, aren't you a little on your nerves to-night; oughtn't you to think the whole matter over before deciding?"

"That's right," agreed Tignol.

"What is there to think about?" said Coquenil. "If you've got anything to say, either of you, say it now. Run on through the _bois_, " he directed the chauffeur, "and then out on the St. Cloud road. This air is doing me a lot of good," he added, drawing in deep breaths.

For some minutes they sat silent, speeding along through the Bois de Boulogne, dimly beautiful under a crescent moon, on past crowded restaurants with red-clad musicians on the terraces, on past the silent lake and then through narrow and deserted roads until they had crossed the great park and emerged upon the high-way.

"Where are we going, anyway?" inquired Tignol.

"For a little ride, for a little change," sighed M. Paul.

"Come, come," urged Pougeot, "you are giving way too much. Now listen to me."

Then, clearly and concisely, the commissary went over the situation, considering his friend's problem from various points of view; and so absorbed was he in fairly setting forth the advantages and disadvantages of the Rio Janeiro position that he did not observe Coquenil's utter indifference to what he was saying. But Papa Tignol saw this, and gradually, as he watched the detective with his shrewd little eyes, it dawned upon the old man that they were not speeding along here in the night, a dozen miles out of Paris, simply for their health, but that something special was preparing.

"What in the mischief is Coquenil up to?" wondered Tignol.

And presently, even Pougeot, in spite of his preoccupation, began to realize that there was something peculiar about this night promenade, for as they reached a crossroad, M. Paul ordered the chauffeur to turn into it and go ahead as fast as he pleased. The chauffeur hesitated, muttered some words of protest, and then obeyed.

"We are getting right out into wild country," remarked the commissary.

"Don't you like wild country?" laughed Coquenil. "I do." It was plain that his spirits were reviving.

They ran along this rough way for several miles, and presently came to a small house standing some distance back from the road.

"Stop here!" ordered the detective. "Now," he turned to Pougeot, "I shall learn something that may fix my decision." Then, leaning forward to the chauffeur, he said impressively: "Ten francs extra if you help me now."

These words had an immediate effect upon the man, who touched his cap and asked what he was to do.

"Go to this house," pointed M. Paul, "ring the bell and ask if there is a note for M. Robert. If there is, bring the note to me; if there isn't, never mind. If anyone asks who sent you, say M. Robert himself. Understand?"

"_Oui, m'sieur_" replied the chauffeur, and, saluting again, he strode away toward the house.

The detective watched his receding figure as it disappeared in the shadows, then he called out: "Wait, I forgot something."

The chauffeur turned obediently and came back.

"Take a good look at him now," said Coquenil to Tignol in a low tone. Then to the man: "There's a bad piece of ground in the yard; you'd better have this," and, without warning, he flashed his electric lantern full in the chauffeur's face.

"_Merci, m'sieur_" said the latter stolidly after a slight start, and again he moved away, while Tignol clutched M. Paul's arm in excitement.

"You saw him?" whispered the detective.

"Did I see him!" exulted the other. "Oh, the cheek of that fellow!"

"You recognized him?"

"Did I? I'd know those little pig eyes anywhere. And that brush of a mustache! Only half of it was blacked."

"Good; that's all I want," and, stepping out of the auto, Coquenil changed quickly to the front seat. Then he drew the starting lever and the machine began to move.

"Halloa! What are you doing?" cried the chauffeur, running toward them.

"Going back to Paris!" laughed Coquenil. "Hope you find the walking good, Gibelin!"

"It's only fifteen miles," taunted Tignol.

"You loafer, you blackguard, you dirty dog!" yelled Gibelin, dancing in a rage.

"Try to be more original in your detective work," called M. Paul. "_Au revoir_"

They shot away rapidly, while the outraged and discomfited fat man stood in the middle of the road hurling after them torrents of blasphemous abuse that soon grew faint and died away.

"What in the world does this mean?" asked Pougeot in astonishment.

Coquenil slowed down the machine and turned. "I can't talk now; I've got to drive this thing. It's lucky I know how."

"But--just a moment. That note for M. Robert? There was no Robert?"

"Of course not."

"And--and you knew it was Gibelin all the time?"

"Yes. Be patient, Lucien, until we get back and I'll tell you everything."

The run to Paris took nearly an hour, for they made a detour, and Coquenil drove cautiously; but they arrived safely, shortly after one, and left the automobile at the company's garage, with the explanation (readily accepted, since a police commissary gave it) that the man who belonged with the machine had met with an accident; indeed, this was true, for the genuine chauffeur had used Gibelin's bribe money in unwise libations and appeared the next morning with a battered head and a glib story that was never fully investigated.

"Now," said Coquenil, as they left the garage, "where can we go and be quiet? A cafe is out of the question--we mustn't be seen. Ah, that room you were to take," he turned to Tignol. "Did you get it?"

"I should say I did," grumbled the old man, "I've something to tell you."

"Tell me later," cut in the detective. "We'll go there. We can have something to eat sent in and--" he smiled indulgently at Tignol--"and something to drink. Hey, cocher!" he called to a passing cab, and a moment later the three men were rolling away to the Latin Quarter, with Coquenil's leather bag on the front seat.

"Enfin!" sighed Pougeot, when they were finally settled in Tignol's room, which they reached after infinite precautions, for M. Paul seemed to imagine that all Paris was in a conspiracy to follow them.

"I've been watched every minute since I started on this case," he said thoughtfully. "My house has been watched, my servant has been watched, my letters have been opened; there isn't one thing I've done that they don't know."

"They? Who?" asked the commissary.

"Ah, who?" repeated M. Paul. "If I only knew. You saw what they did with Gibelin to-night, set him after me when he is supposed to be handling this case. Fancy that! Who gave Gibelin his orders? Who had the authority? That's what I want to know. Not the chief, I swear; the chief is straight in this thing. It's some one above the chief. Lucien, I told you this was a great case and--it is."

"Then you didn't mean what you were saying in the automobile about having doubts?"

"Not a word of it."

"That was all for Gibelin?"

"Exactly. There's a chance that he may believe it, or believe some of it. He's such a conceited ass that he may think I only discovered him just at the last."

"And you're not thinking of going to Rio Janeiro?"

Coquenil shut his teeth hard, and there came into his eyes a look of indomitable purpose. "Not while the murderer of Martinez is walking about this town laughing at me. I expect to do some laughing myself before I get through with this case."

Both men stared at him. "But you are through."

"Am I? Ha! Through? I want to tell you, my friends, that I've barely begun."

"My dear Paul," reasoned the commissary, "what can you do off the force? How can you hope to succeed single-handed, when it was hard to succeed with the whole prefecture to help you?"

Coquenil paused, and then said mysteriously: "That's the point, did they help me? Or hinder me? One thing is certain: that if I work alone, I won't have to make daily reports for the guidance of some one higher up."

"You don't mean--" began the commissary with a startled look.

M. Paul nodded gravely. "I certainly do--there's no other way of explaining the facts. I was discharged for a trivial offense just as I had evidence that would prove this American innocent. They don't want him proved innocent. And they are so afraid I will discover the truth that they let the whole investigation wait while Gibelin shadows me. Well, he's off my track now, and by to-morrow they can search Paris with a fine-tooth comb and they won't find a trace of Paul Coquenil."

"You're going away?"

"No. I'm going to--to disappear," smiled the detective. "I shall work in the dark, and, when the time comes, I'll strike in the dark."

"You'll need money?"

Coquenil shook his head. "I have all the money I want, and know where to go for more. Besides, my old partner here is going to lay off for a few weeks and work with me. Eh, Papa Tignol?"

Tignol's eyes twinkled. "A few weeks or a few months is all the same to me. I'll follow you to the devil, M. Paul."

"That's right, that's where we're going. And when I need you, Lucien, you'll hear from me. I wanted you to understand the situation. I may have to call on you suddenly; you may get some strange message by some queer messenger. Look at this ring. Will you know it? A brown stone marked with Greek characters. It's debased Greek. The stone was dug up near Smyrna, where it had lain for fourteen hundred years. It's a talisman. You'll listen to anyone who brings you this ring, old friend? Eh?"

Pougeot grasped M. Paul's hand and wrung it affectionately. "And honor his request to the half of my kingdom," he laughed, but his eyes were moist. He had a vivid impression that his friend was entering on a way of great and unknown peril.

"Well," said Coquenil cheerfully, "I guess that's all for to-night. There's a couple of hours' work still for Papa Tignol and me, but it's half past two, Lucien, and, unless you think of something---"

"No, except to wish you luck," replied the commissary, and he started to go.

"Wait," put in Tignol, "there's something I think of. You forget I've been playing the flute to-day."

"Ah, yes, of course! Any news?" questioned the detective.

The old man rubbed his nose meditatively. "My news is asleep in the next room. If it wasn't so late I'd bring him in. He's a little shrimp of a photographer, but--he's seen your murderer, all right."

"The devil!" started M. Paul. "Where?"

Tagnol drew back the double doors of a long window, and pointed out to a balcony running along the front of the hotel.

"There! Let me tell you first how this floor is arranged. There are six rooms opening on that balcony. See here," and taking a sheet of paper, he made a rough diagram.

[Illustration: Diagram of floor-plan of rooms.]

"Now, then," continued Papa Tagnol, surveying his handiwork with pride, "I think that is clear. B, here, is the balcony just outside, and there are the six rooms with windows opening on it. We are in this room D, and my friend, the little photographer, is in the next room E, peacefully sleeping; but he wasn't peaceful when he came home to-night and heard me playing that flute, although I played in my best manner, eh, eh! He stood it for about ten minutes, and then, eh, eh! It was another case of through the wall, first one boot, bang! then another boot, smash! only there were no holes for the boots to come through. And then it was profanity! For a small man he had a great deal of energy, eh, eh! that shrimp photographer! I called him a shrimp when he came bouncing in here."

"Well, well?" fretted Coquenil.

"Then we got acquainted. I apologized and offered him beer, which he likes; then he apologized and told me his troubles. Poor fellow, I don't wonder his nerves are unstrung! He's in love with a pretty dressmaker who lives in this room C. She is fair but fickle--he tells me she has made him unhappy by flirting with a medical student who lives in this room G. Just a minute, I'm coming to the point.

"It seems the little photographer has been getting more and more jealous lately. He was satisfied that his lady love and the medical student used this balcony as a lover's lane, and he began lying in wait at his window for the medical student to steal past toward the dress-maker's room."

"Yes?" urged the detective with growing interest.

"For several nights last week he waited and nothing happened. But he's a patient little shrimp, so he waited again Saturday night and--something _did_ happen. Saturday night!"

"The night of the murder," reflected the commissary.

"That's it. It was a little after midnight, he says, and suddenly, as he stood waiting and listening, he heard a cautious step coming along the balcony from the direction of the medical student's room, G. Then he saw a man pass his window, and he was sure it was the medical student. He stepped out softly and followed him as far as the window of room C. Then, feeling certain his suspicions were justified, he sprang upon the man from behind, intending to chastise him, but he had caught the wrong pig by the ear, for the man turned on him like a flash and--_it wasn't the medical student_."

"Who was it? Go on!" exclaimed the others eagerly.

"He doesn't know who it was, or anything about the man except that his hand shut like a vise on the shrimp's throat and nearly choked the life out of

him. You can see the nail marks still on the cheek and neck; but he remembers distinctly that the man carried something in his hand."

"My God! The missing pair of boots!" cried Coquenil. "Was it?"

Tignol nodded. "Sure! He was carrying 'em loose in his hand. I mean they were not wrapped up, he was going to leave 'em in Kittredge's room--here it is, A." He pointed to the diagram.

"It's true, it must be true," murmured M. Paul. "And what then?"

"Nothing. I guess the man saw it was only a shrimp he had hold of, so he shook him two or three times and dropped him back into his own room; _and he never said a word_."

"And the boots?"

"He must have taken the boots with him. The shrimp peeped out and saw him go back into this room F, which has been empty for several weeks. Then he heard steps on the stairs and the slam of the heavy street door. The man was gone."

Coquenil's face grew somber. "It was the assassin," he said; "there's no doubt about it."

"Mightn't it have been some one he sent?" suggested Pougeot.

"No--that would have meant trusting his secret to another man, and he hasn't trusted anyone. Besides, the fierce way he turned on the photographer shows his nervous tension. It was the murderer himself and--" The detective stopped short at the flash of a new thought. "Great heavens!" he cried, "I can prove it, I can settle the thing right now. You say his nail marks show?"

Tignol shrugged his shoulders. "They show as little scratches, but not enough for any funny business with a microscope."

"Little scratches are all I want," said the other, snapping his fingers excitedly. "It's simply a question which side of his throat bears the thumb mark. We know the murderer is a left-handed man, and, being suddenly attacked, he certainly used the full strength of his left hand in the first desperate clutch. He was facing the man as he took him by the throat, so, if he used his left hand, the thumb mark must be on the left side of the photographer's throat, whereas if a right-handed man had done it, the thumb mark would be on the right side. Stand up here and take me by the throat. That's it! Now with your left hand! Don't you see?"

"Yes," said Tignol, making the experiment, "I see."

"Now bring the man in here, wake him, tell him--tell him anything you like. I must know this."

"I'll get him in," said the commissary. "Come," and he followed Tignol into the hall.

A few moments later they returned with a thin, sleepy little person wrapped in a red dressing gown. It was the shrimp.

"There!" exclaimed Papa Tignol with a gesture of satisfaction.

The photographer, under the spell of Pougeot's authority, stood meekly for inspection, while Coquenil, holding a candle close, studied the marks on his face. There, plainly marked _on the left side of the throat_ was a single imprint, the curving red mark where a thumb nail had closed hard against the jugular vein (this man knew the deadly pressure points), while

on the right side of the photographer's face were prints of the fingers.

"He used his left hand, all right," said Coquenil, "and, sapristi, he had sharp nails!"

"Parbleu!" mumbled the shrimp.

"Here over the cheek bone is the mark of his first finger. And here, in front of the ear, is his second finger, and here is his third finger, just behind the ear, and here, way down on the neck, is his little finger. Lord of heaven, what a reach! Let's see if I can put my fingers on these marks. There's the thumb, there's the first finger--stand still, I won't hurt you! There's the second finger, and the third, and--look at that, see that mark of the little finger nail. I've got long fingers myself, but I can't come within an inch of it. You try."

[Illustration: "Stand still, I won't hurt you."]

Patently the photographer stood still while the commissary and Tignol tried to stretch their fingers over the red marks that scarred his countenance. And neither of them succeeded. They could cover all the marks except that of the little finger, which was quite beyond their reach.

"He has a very long little finger," remarked the commissary, and, in an instant, Coquenil remembered Alice's words that day as she looked at his plaster casts.

A very long little finger! Here it was! One that must equal the length of that famous seventeenth-century criminal's little finger in his collection. But this man was living! He had brought back Kittredge's boots! He was left-handed! He had a very long little finger! And Alice knew such a man!

CHAPTER XIX

TOUCHING A YELLOW TOOTH

It was a quarter past four, and still night, when Coquenil left the Hotel des Etrangers; he wore a soft black hat pulled down over his eyes, and a shabby black coat turned up around his throat; and he carried the leather bag taken from the automobile. The streets were silent and deserted, yet the detective studied every doorway and corner with vigilant care, while a hundred yards behind him, in exactly similar dress, came Papa Tignol, peering into the shadows with sharpest watchfulness against human shadows bent on harming M. Paul.

So they moved cautiously down the Boulevard St. Michel, then over the bridge and along the river to Notre-Dame, whose massive towers stood out in mysterious beauty against the faintly lighted eastern sky. Here the leader paused for his companion.

"There's nothing," he said, as the latter joined him.

"Nothing."

"Good! Take the bag and wait for me, but keep out of sight."

"Entendu."

Coquenil walked across the square to the cathedral, moving slowly, thinking over the events of the night. They had crossed the track of the assassin, that was sure, but they had discovered nothing that could help in his

capture except the fact of the long little finger. The man had left absolutely nothing in his room at the hotel (this they verified with the help of false keys), and had never returned after the night of the crime, although he had taken the room for a month, and paid the rent in advance. He had made two visits to this room, one at about three in the afternoon of the fatal day, when he spent an hour there, and entered Kittredge's room, no doubt, for the boots and the pistol; the other visit he made the same night when he tried to return the boots and was prevented from doing so. How he must have cursed that little photographer!

As to the assassin's personal appearance, there was a startling difference of opinion between the hotel doorkeeper and the garçon, both of whom saw him and spoke to him. The one declared he had light hair and a beard, the other that he had dark hair and no beard; the one thought he was a Frenchman, the other was sure he was a foreigner. Evidently the man was disguised either coming or going, so this testimony was practically worthless.

Despite all this, Coquenil was pleased and confident as he rang the night bell at the archbishop's house beside the cathedral, for he had one precious clew, he had the indication of this extraordinarily long little finger, and he did not believe that in all France there were two men with hands like that. And he knew there was one such man, for Alice had seen him. Where had she seen him? She said she had often noticed his long little finger, so she must often have been close enough to him to observe such a small peculiarity. But Alice went about very little, she had few friends, and all of them must be known to the Bonnetons. It ought to be easy to get from the sacristan this information which the girl herself might withhold. Hence this nocturnal visit to Notre Dame—it was of the utmost importance that Coquenil have an immediate talk with Papa Bonneton.

And presently, after a sleepy salutation from the archbishop's servant, and a brief explanation, M. Paul was shown through a stone passageway that connects the church with the house, and on pushing open a wide door covered with red velvet, he found himself alone in Notre Dame, alone in utter darkness save for a point of red light on the shadowy altar before the Blessed Sacrament.

As he stood uncertain which way to turn, the detective heard a step and a low growl, and peering among the arches of the choir he saw a lantern advancing, then a figure holding the lantern, then another crouching figure moving before the lantern. Then he recognized Caesar.

"Phee-et, phee-et!" he whistled softly, and with a start and a glad rush, the dog came bounding to his master, while the sacristan stared in alarm.

"Good old Caesar! There, there!" murmured Coquenil, fondling the eager head. "It's all right, Bonneton," and coming forward, he held out his hand as the guardian lifted his lantern in suspicious scrutiny.

"M. Paul, upon my soul!" exclaimed the sacristan. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"It's a little--er--personal matter," coughed Coquenil discreetly, "partly about Caesar. Can we sit down somewhere?"

Still wondering, Bonneton led the way to a small room adjoining the treasure chamber, where a dim lamp was burning; here he and his associates got alternate snatches of sleep during the night.

"Hey, Francois!" He shook a sleeping figure on a cot bed, and the latter roused himself and sat up. "It's time to make the round."

Francois looked stupidly at Coquenil and then, with a yawn and a shrug of indifference, he called to the dog, while Caesar growled his reluctance.

"It's all right, old fellow," encouraged Coquenil, "I'll see you again," whereupon Caesar trotted away reassured.

"Take this chair," said the sacristan. "I'll sit on the bed. We don't have many visitors."

"Now, then," began M. Paul. "I'll come to the dog in a minute--don't worry. I'm not going to take him away. But first I want to ask about that girl who sells candles. She boards with you, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"You know she's in love with this American who's in prison?"

"I know."

"She came to see me the other day."

"She did?"

"Yes, and the result of her visit was--well, it has made a lot of trouble. What I'm going to say is absolutely between ourselves--you mustn't tell a soul, least of all your wife."

"You can trust me, M. Paul," declared Papa Bonneton rubbing his hands in excitement.

"To begin with, who is the man with the long little finger that she told me about?" He put the questions carelessly, as if it were of no particular moment.

"Why, that's Groener," answered Bonneton simply.

"Groener? Oh, her cousin?"

"Yes."

"I'm interested," went on the detective with the same indifferent air, "because I have a collection of plaster hands at my house--I'll show it to you some day--and there's one with a long little finger that the candle girl noticed. Is her cousin's little finger really very long?"

"It's pretty long," said Bonneton. "I used to think it had been stretched in some machine. You know he's a wood carver."

"I know. Well, that's neither here nor there. The point is, this girl had a dream that--why, what's the matter?"

"Don't talk to me about her dreams!" exclaimed the sacristan. "She used to have us scared to death with 'em. My wife won't let her tell 'em any more, and it's a good thing she won't." For a mild man he spoke with surprising vehemence.

"Bonneton," continued the detective mysteriously, "I don't know whether it's from her dreams or in some other way, but that girl knows things that--that she has no business to know."

Then, briefly and impressively, Coquenil told of the extraordinary revelations that Alice had made, not only to him, but to the director of the Sante prison.

"_ Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!_" muttered the old man. "I think she's possessed of the devil."

"She's possessed of dangerous knowledge, and I want to know where she got it. I want to know all about this girl, who she is, where she came from, everything. And that's where you can help me."

Bonneton shook his head. "We know very little about her, and, the queer thing is, she seems to know very little about herself."

"Perhaps she knows more than she wants to tell."

"Perhaps, but--I don't think so. I believe she is perfectly honest. Anyhow, her cousin is a stupid fellow. He comes on from Brussels every five or six months and spends two nights with us--never more, never less. He eats his meals, attends to his commissions for wood carving, takes Alice out once in the afternoon or evening, gives my wife the money for her board, and that's all. For five years it's been the same--you know as much about him in one visit as you would in a hundred. There's nothing much to know; he's just a stupid wood carver."

"You say he takes Alice out every time he comes? Is she fond of him?"

"Why--er--yes, I think so, but he upsets her. I've noticed she's nervous just before his visits, and sort of sad after them. My wife says the girl has her worst dreams then."

Coquenil took out a box of cigarettes. "You don't mind if I smoke?" And, without waiting for permission, he lighted one of his Egyptians and inhaled long breaths of the fragrant smoke. "Not a word, Bonneton! I want to think." Then for full five minutes he sat silent.

"I have it!" he exclaimed presently. "Tell me about this man Francois."

"Francois?" answered the sacristan in surprise. "Why, he helps me with the night work here."

"Where does he live?"

"In a room near here."

"Where does he eat?"

"He takes two meals with us."

"Ah! Do you think he would like to make a hundred francs by doing nothing? Of course he would. And you would like to make five hundred?"

"Five hundred francs?" exclaimed Bonneton, with a frightened look.

"Don't be afraid," laughed the other. "I'm not planning to steal the treasure. When do you expect this wood carver again?"

"It's odd you should ask that, for my wife only told me this morning she's had a letter from him. We didn't expect him for six weeks yet, but it seems he'll be here next Wednesday. Something must have happened."

"Next Wednesday," reflected Coquenil. "He always comes when he says he will?"

"Always. He's as regular as clockwork."

"And he spends two nights with you?"

"Yes."

"That will be Wednesday night and Thursday night of next week?"

"Yes."

"Good! Now I'll show you how you're going to make this money. I want Francois to have a little vacation; he looks tired. I want him to go into the country on Tuesday and stay until Friday."

"And his work? Who will do his work?"

Coquenil smiled quietly and tapped his breast.

"You?"

"I will take Francois's place. I'll be the best assistant you ever had and I shall enjoy Mother Bonneton's cooking."

"You will take your meals with us?" cried the sacristan aghast. "But they all know you."

"None of them will know me; you won't know me yourself."

"Ah, I see," nodded the old man wisely. "You will have a disguise. But my wife has sharp eyes."

"If she knows me, or if the candle girl knows me, I'll give you a thousand francs instead of five hundred. Now, here is the money for Francois"--he handed the sacristan a hundred-franc note--"and here are five hundred francs for you. I shall come on Tuesday, ready for work. When do you want me?"

"At six o'clock," answered the sacristan doubtfully. "But what shall I say if anyone asks me about it?"

"Say Francois was sick, and you got your old friend Matthieu to replace him for a few days. I'm Matthieu!"

Papa Bonneton touched the five crisp bank notes caressingly; their clean blue and white attracted him irresistibly.

"You wouldn't get me into trouble, M. Paul?" he appealed weakly.

"Papa Bonneton," answered Coquenil earnestly, "have I ever shown you anything but friendship? When old Max died and you asked me to lend you Caesar I did it, didn't I? And you know what Caesar is to me. I love that dog, if anything happened to him--well, I don't like to think of it, but I let you have him, didn't I? That proves my trust; now I want yours. I can't explain my reasons; it isn't necessary, but I tell you that what I'm asking cannot do you the least harm, and may do me the greatest good. There, it's up to you."

M. Paul held out his hand frankly and the sacristan took it, with emotion.

"That settles it," he murmured. "I never doubted you, but--my wife has an infernal tongue and----"

"She will never know anything about this," smiled the other, "and, if she should, give her one or two of these bank notes. It's wonderful how they change a woman's point of view. Besides, you can prepare her by talking about Francois's bad health."

"A good idea!" brightened Bonneton.

"Then it's understood. Tuesday, at six, your friend Matthieu will be here to replace Francois. Remember--Matthieu!"

"I'll remember."

The detective rose to go. "Good night--or, rather, good morning, for the day is shining through that rose window. Pretty, isn't it? Ouf, I wonder when I'll get the sleep I need!" He moved toward the door. "Oh, I forgot about the dog. Tignol will come for him Tuesday morning with a line from me. I shall want Caesar in the afternoon, but I'll bring him back at six."

"All right," nodded the sacristan; "he'll be ready. _Au revoir_--until Tuesday."

M. Paul went through the side door and then through the high iron gateway before the archbishop's house. He glanced at his watch and it was after five. Across the square Papa Tignol was waiting.

"Things are marching along," smiled Coquenil some minutes later as they rolled along toward the Eastern railway station. "You know what you have to do. And I know what I have to do! _Bon Dieu!_ what a life! You'd better have more money--here," and he handed the other some bank notes. "We meet Tuesday at noon near the Auteuil station beneath the first arch of the viaduct."

"Do you know what day Tuesday is?"

M. Paul thought a moment. "The fourteenth of July! Our national holiday! And the crime was committed on the American Independence Day. Strange, isn't it?"

"There will be a great crowd about."

"There's safety in a crowd. Besides, I've got to suit my time to _his_."

"Then you really expect to see--_him?_" questioned the old man.

"Yes," nodded the other briefly. "Remember this, don't join me on Tuesday or speak to me or make any sign to me unless you are absolutely sure you have not been followed. If you are in any doubt, put your message under the dog's collar and let him find me. By the way, you'd better have Caesar clipped. It's a pity, but--it's safer."

Now they were rattling up the Rue Lafayette in the full light of day.

"Ten minutes to six," remarked Tignol. "My train leaves at six forty."

"You'll have time to get breakfast. I'll leave you now. There's nothing more to say. You have my letter--_for her_. You'll explain that it isn't safe for me to write through the post office. And she mustn't try to write me. I'll come to her as soon as I can. You have the money for her; say I want her to buy a new dress, a nice one, and if there's anything else she wants, why, she must have it. Understand?"

Tignol nodded.

Then, dropping the cab window, M. Paul told the driver to stop, and they drew up before the terraced fountains of the Trinite church.

"Good-by and good luck," said Coquenil, clasping Tignol's hand, "and--don't let her worry."

The cab rolled on, and M. Paul, bag in hand, strode down a side street; but just at the corner he turned and looked after the hurrying vehicle, and his eyes were full of sadness and yearning.

* * * * *

Tuesday, the fourteenth of July! The great French holiday! All Paris in the

streets, bands playing, soldiers marching, everybody happy or looking happy! And from early morning all trains, 'buses, cabs, automobiles, in short, all moving things in the gay city were rolling a jubilant multitude toward the Bois de Boulogne, where the President of the Republique was to review the troops before a million or so of his fellow-citizens. Coquenil had certainly chosen the busiest end of Paris for his meeting with Papa Tignol.

Their rendezvous was at noon, but two hours earlier Tignol took the train at the St. Lazare station. And with him came Caesar, such a changed, unrecognizable Caesar! Poor dog! His beautiful, glossy coat of brown and white had been clipped to ridiculous shortness, and he crouched at the old man's feet in evident humiliation.

"It was a shame, old fellow," said Tignol consolingly, "but we had to obey orders, eh? Never mind, it will grow out again."

Leaving the train at Auteuil, they walked down the Rue La Fontaine to a tavern near the Rue Mozart, where the old man left Caesar in charge of the proprietor, a friend of his. It was now a quarter to eleven, and Tignol spent the next hour riding back and forth on the circular railway between Auteuil and various other stations; he did this because Coquenil had charged him to be sure he was not followed; he felt reasonably certain that he was not, but he wished to be absolutely certain.

So he rode back to the Avenue Henri Martin, where he crossed the platform and boarded a returning train for the Champs de Mars, telling the guard he had made a mistake. Two other passengers did the same, a young fellow and a man of about fifty, with a rough gray beard. Tignol did not see the young fellow again, but when he got off at the Champs de Mars, the gray-bearded man got off also and followed across the bridge to the opposite platform, where both took the train back to Auteuil.

This was suspicious, so at Auteuil Tignol left the station quickly, only to return a few minutes later and buy another ticket for the Avenue Henri Martin. There once more he crossed the platform and took a train for the Champs de Mars, and this time he congratulated himself that no one had followed him; but when he got off, as before, at the Champs de Mars and crossed the bridge, he saw the same gray-bearded man crossing behind him. There was no doubt of it, he was being shadowed.

And now Tignol waited until the train back to Auteuil was about starting, then he deliberately got into a compartment where the gray-bearded man was seated alone. And, taking out pencil and paper, he proceeded to write a note for Coquenil. Their meeting was now impossible, so he must fasten this explanation, along with his full report, under Caesar's collar and let the dog be messenger, as had been arranged.

"I am sending this by Caesar," he wrote, "because I am watched. The man following me is a bad-looking brute with dirty gray beard and no mustache. He has a nervous trick of half shutting his eyes and jerking up the corners of his mouth, which shows the worst set of ugly yellow teeth I ever saw. I'd like to have one of them for a curiosity."

"Would you?" said the man suddenly, as if answering a question.

Tignol stared at him.

"Excuse me," explained the other, "but I read handwriting upside down."

"Oh!"

"You say you would like one of my teeth?"

"Don't trouble," smiled Tignol.

"It's no trouble," declared the stranger. "On the contrary!" and seizing one of his yellow fangs between thumb and first finger he gave a quick wrench. "There!" he said with a hideous grin, and he handed Tignol the tooth.

They were just coming into the Auteuil station as this extraordinary maneuver was accomplished.

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Tignol.

[Illustration: "'There!' he said with a hideous grin, and he handed Tignol the tooth."]

"Is it really as good as that?" asked the stranger, in a tone that made the old man jump.

Tignol leaned closer, and then in a burst of admiration he cried: "_Nom de dieu! It's Coquenil!_"

CHAPTER XX

THE MEMORY OF A DOG

"It's a composition of rubber," laughed Coquenil. "You slip it on over your own tooth. See?" and he put back the yellow fang.

"Extraordinary!" muttered Tignol. "Even now I hardly know you."

"Then I ought to fool the wood carver."

"Fool him? You would fool your own mother. That reminds me--" He rose as the train stopped.

"Yes, yes?" questioned M. Paul eagerly. "Tell me about my mother. Is she well? Is she worried? Did you give her all my messages? Have you a letter for me?"

Tignol smiled. "There's a devoted son! But the old lady wouldn't like you with those teeth. Eh, eh! Shades of Vidocq, what a make-up! We'd better get out! I'll tell you about my visit as we walk along."

"Where are you going?" asked the detective, as the old man led the way toward the Rue La Fontaine.

"Going to get the dog," answered Tignol.

"No, no," objected M. Paul. "I wouldn't have Caesar see me like this. I have a room on the Rue Poussin; I'll go back there first and take off some of this."

"As you please," said Tignol, and he proceeded to give Coquenil the latest news of his mother, all good news, and a long letter from the old lady, full of love and wise counsels and prayers for her boy's safety.

"There's a woman for you!" murmured M. Paul, and the tenderness of his voice contrasted oddly with the ugliness of his disguise.

"Suppose I get the dog while you are changing?" suggested Tignol. "You know he's been clipped?"

"Poor Caesar! Yes, get him. My room is across the street. Walk back and forth along here until I come down."

Half an hour later Coquenil reappeared almost his ordinary self, except that he wore neither mustache nor eyeglasses, and, instead of his usual neat dress he had put on the shabby black coat and the battered soft hat that he had worn in leaving the Hotel des Etrangers.

"Ah, Caesar! Old fellow!" he cried fondly as the dog rushed to meet him with barks of joy. "It's good to have a friend like that! Where is the man who cares so much? Or the woman either--except one?"

"There's one woman who seems to care a lot about this dog," remarked Tignol. "I mean the candle girl. Such a fuss as she made when I went to get him!"

M. Paul listened in surprise. "What did she do?"

"Do? She cried and carried on in a great way. She said something was going to happen to Caesar; she didn't want me to take him."

"Strange!" muttered the other.

"I told her I was only taking him to you, and that you would bring him back to-night. When she had heard that she caught my two hands in hers and said I must tell you she wanted to see you very much. There's something on her mind or--or she's afraid of something."

Coquenil frowned and twisted his seal ring, then he changed it deliberately from the left hand to the right, as if with some intention.

"We'll never get to the bottom of this case," he muttered, "until we know the truth about that girl. Papa Tignol, I want you to go right back to Notre-Dame and keep an eye on her. If she is afraid of something, there's something to be afraid of, for she knows. Don't talk to her; just hang about the church until I come. Remember, we spend the night there."

"Sapristi, a night in a church!"

"It won't hurt you for once," smiled M. Paul. "There's a bed to sleep on, and a lot to talk about. You know we begin the great campaign to-morrow."

Tignol rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "The sooner the better." Then yielding to his growing curiosity: "Have you found out much?"

Coquenil's eyes twinkled. "You're dying to know what I've been doing these last five days, eh?"

"Nothing of the sort," said the old man testily. "If you want to leave me in the dark, all right, only if I'm to help in the work----"

"Of course, of course," broke in the other good-naturedly. "I was going to tell you to-night, but Bonneton will be with us, so--come, we'll stroll through the bois as far as Passy, and I'll give you the main points. Then you can take a cab."

Papa Tignol was enormously pleased at this mark of confidence, but he merely gave one of his jerky little nods and walked along solemnly beside his brilliant associate. In his loyalty for M. Paul this tough old veteran would have allowed himself to be cut into small pieces, but he would have spluttered and grumbled throughout the operation.

"Let's see," began Coquenil, as they entered the beautiful park, "I have five days to account for. Well, I spent two days in Paris and three in Brussels."

"Where the wood carver lives?"

"Exactly. I got his address from Papa Bonneton. I thought I'd look the man over in his home when he was not expecting me. And before I started I put in two days studying wood carving, watching the work and questioning the workmen until I knew more about it than an expert. I made up my mind that, when I saw this man with the long little finger, I must be able to decide whether he was a genuine wood carver--or--or something else."

"I see," admired Tignol. "Well?"

"As it turned out, I didn't find him, I haven't seen him yet. He was away on a trip when I got to Brussels, away on this trip that will bring him to Paris to-morrow, so I missed him and--it's just as well I did!"

"You got facts about him?"

"Yes, I got facts about him; not the kind of facts I expected to get, either. I saw the place where he boards, this Adolph Groener. In fact, I stopped there, and I talked to the woman who runs it, a sharp-eyed young widow with a smooth tongue; and I saw the place where he works; it's a wood-carving shop, all right, and I talked to the men there--two big strong fellows with jolly red faces, and--well--" he hesitated.

"Well?"

The detective crossed his arms and faced the old man with a grim, searching look.

"Papa Tignol," he said impressively, "they all tell a simple, straight story. His name is Adolf Groener, he does live in Brussels, he makes his living at wood carving, and the widow who runs the confounded boarding house knows all about this girl Alice."

Tignol rubbed his nose reflectively. "It was a long shot, anyway."

"What would you have done?" questioned the other sharply.

"Why," answered Tignol slowly, while his shrewd eyes twinkled, "I--I'd have cussed a little and--had a couple of drinks and--come back to Paris."

Coquenil sat silent frowning. "I wasn't much better. After that first day I was ready to drop the thing, I admit it, only I went for a walk that night--and there's a lot in walking. I wandered for hours through that nice little town of Brussels, in the crowd and then alone, and the more I thought the more I came back to the same idea, he can't be a wood carver!"

"You couldn't prove it, but you knew it," chuckled the old man.

Coquenil nodded. "So I kept on through the second day. I saw more people and asked more questions, then I saw the same people again and tried to trip them up, but I didn't get ahead an inch. Groener was a wood carver, and he stayed a wood carver."

"It began to look bad, eh?"

Coquenil stopped short and said earnestly: "Papa Tignol, when this case is over and forgotten, when this man has gone where he belongs, and I know where that is"--he brought his hand down sideways swiftly--"I shall have the lesson of this Brussels search cut on a block of stone and set in my study wall. Oh, I've learned the lesson before, but this drives it home, that the most important knowledge a detective can have is the knowledge he gets inside himself!"

Tignol had never seen M. Paul more deeply stirred. "_Sacre matin!_" he exclaimed. "Then you did find something?"

"Ah, but I deserve no credit for it, I ought to have failed. I weakened; I had my bag packed and was actually starting for Paris, convinced that Groener had nothing to do with the case. Think of that!"

"Yes, but you _didn't_ start."

"It was a piece of stupid luck that saved me when I ought to have known, when I ought to have been sure. And, mark you, if I had come back believing in Groener's innocence, this crime would never have been cleared up, never."

Tignol shrugged his shoulders. "La, la, la! What a man! If you had fallen into a hole you might have broken your leg! Well, you didn't fall into the hole!"

Coquenil smiled. "You're right, I ought to be pleased, I am pleased. After all, it was a neat bit of work. You see, I was waiting in the parlor of this boarding house for the widow to bring me my bill--I had spent two days there--and I happened to glance at a photograph she had shown me when I first came, a picture of Alice and herself, taken five years ago, when Alice was twelve years old. There was no doubt about the girl, and it was a good likeness of the widow. She told me she was a great friend of Alice's mother, and the picture was taken when the mother died, just before Alice went to Paris.

"Well, as I looked at the picture now, I noticed that it had no photographer's name on it, which is unusual, and it seemed to me there was something queer about the girl's hand; I went to the window and was studying the picture with my magnifying glass when I heard the woman's step outside, so I slipped it into my pocket. Then I paid my bill and came away."

"You _needed_ that picture," approved Tignol.

"As soon as I was outside I jumped into a cab and drove to the principal photographers in Brussels. There were three of them, and at each place I showed this picture and asked how much it would cost to copy it, and as I asked the question I watched the man's face. The first two were perfectly businesslike, but the third man gave a little start and looked at me in an odd way. I made up my mind he had seen the picture before, but I didn't get anything out of him--then. In fact, I didn't try very hard, for I had my plan.

"From here I drove straight to police headquarters and had a talk with the chief. He knew me by reputation, and a note that I brought from Pougeot helped, and--well, an hour later that photographer was ready to tell me the innermost secrets of his soul."

"Eh, eh, eh!" laughed Tignol. "And what did he tell you?"

"He told me he made this picture of Alice and the widow _only six weeks ago_."

"Six weeks ago!" stared the other. "But the widow told you it was taken five years ago."

"Exactly!"

"Besides, Alice wasn't in Brussels six weeks ago, was she?"

"Of course not; the picture was a fake, made from a genuine one of Alice

and a lady, perhaps her mother. This photographer had blotted out the lady and printed in the widow without changing the pose. It's a simple trick in photography."

"You saw the genuine picture?"

"Of course--that is, I saw a reproduction of it which the photographer made on his own account. He suspected some crooked work, and he didn't like the man who gave him the order."

"You mean the wood carver?"

Coquenil shrugged his shoulders. "Call him a wood carver, call him what you like. He didn't go to the photographer in his wood-carver disguise, he went as a gentleman in a great hurry, and willing to pay any price for the work."

Tignol twisted the long ends of his black mustache reflectively. "He was covering his tracks in advance?"

"Evidently."

"And the smooth young widow lied?"

"Lied?" snapped the detective savagely. "I should say she did. She lied about this, and lied about the whole affair. So did the men at the shop. It was manufactured testimony, bought and paid for, and a manufactured picture."

"Then," cried Tignol excitedly, "then Groener is not a wood carver?"

"He may be a wood carver, but he's a great deal more, he--he--" Coquenil hesitated, and then, with eyes blazing and nostrils dilating, he burst out: "If I know anything about my business, he's the man who gave me that left-handed jolt under the heart, he's the man who choked your shrimp photographer, he's the man who killed Martinez!"

"Name of a green dog!" muttered Tignol. "Is that true, or--or do you only know it?"

"It's true because I know it," answered Coquenil. "See here, I'll bet you a good dinner against a box of those vile cigarettes you smoke that this man who calls himself Alice's cousin has the marks of my teeth on the calf of one of his legs--I forget which leg it is."

"Taken!" said Tignol, and then, with sudden gravity: "But if this is true, things are getting serious, eh?"

"They've been serious."

"I mean the chase is nearly over?"

M. Paul answered slowly, as if weighing his words: "This man is desperate and full of resources, I know that, but, with the precautions I have taken, I don't see how he can escape--if he goes to Bonneton's house to-morrow."

Tignol scratched his head in perplexity. "Why in thunder is he such a fool as to go there?"

"I've wondered about that myself," mused Coquenil "Perhaps he won't go, perhaps there is some extraordinary reason why he must go."

"Some reason connected with the girl?" asked the other quickly.

"Yes."

"You say he calls himself Alice's cousin. Isn't he really her cousin?"

Coquenil shook his head. "He isn't her cousin, and she isn't Alice."

"Wha-at?"

"Her name is Mary, and he is her stepfather."

The old man stared in bewilderment. "But--how the devil do you know that?"

Coquenil smiled. "I found an inscription on the back of that Brussels photograph--I mean the genuine one--it was hidden under a hinged support, and Groener must have overlooked it. That was his second great mistake."

"What was the inscription?" asked Tignol eagerly.

"It read: 'To my dear husband, Raoul, from his devoted wife Margaret and her little Mary.' You notice it says her little Mary. That one word throws a flood of light on this case. The child was not his little Mary."

"I see, I see," reflected the old man. "And Alice? Does she know that--that she isn't Alice?"

"No."

"Does she know that Groener is her stepfather, and not her cousin?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I think I know why not, but, until I'm sure, I'd rather call it a mystery. See here, we've talked too much, you must hurry back to her. Better take an auto. And remember, Papa Tignol," he added in final warning, "there is nothing so important as to guard this girl."

A few moments later, with Caesar bounding happily at his side, M. Paul entered the quieter paths of the great park, and presently came to a thickly wooded region that has almost the air of a natural forest. Here the two romped delightedly together, and Coquenil put the dog through many of his tricks, the fine creature fairly outdoing himself in eagerness and intelligence.

"Now, old fellow," said M. Paul, "I'll sit down here and have a cigarette," and he settled himself on a rustic bench, while Caesar stretched out comfortably at his feet. And so the one dozed as the other drifted far away in smoke-laden reverie.

What days these had been, to be sure! How tired he was! He hadn't noticed it before, but now that everything was ready, now that he had finished his preparations--yes, he was very tired.

Everything was ready! It was good to know that. He had forgotten nothing. And, if all went well, he would soon be able to answer these questions that were fretting him. Who was Groener? Why had he killed Martinez? How had he profited by the death of this unfortunate billiard player? And why did he hate Kittredge? Was it because the American loved Alice? And who was Alice, this girl whose dreams and fears changed the lives of serious men? From whichever side he studied the crime he always came back to her--Kittredge loved her, Martinez knew her, he himself had started on the case on her account. Who was Alice?

During these reflections Coquenil had been vaguely aware of gay sounds from

the neighboring woods, and now a sudden burst of laughter brought him back to the consciousness of things about him.

"We're too serious, my boy," he said with an effort at lightness; "this is a bit of an outing, and we must enjoy it. Come, we'll move on!"

With the dog at his heels M. Paul turned his steps toward a beautiful cool glade, carpeted in gold and green as the sunbeams sprinkled down through the trees upon the spreading moss. Here he came into plain view of a company of ladies and gentlemen, who, having witnessed the review, had chosen this delightful spot for luncheon. They were evidently rich and fashionable people, for they had come as a coaching party on a very smart break, with four beautiful horses, and some in a flashing red-and-black automobile that was now drawn up beside the larger vehicle.

With an idle eye M. Paul observed the details of the luncheon, red-coated servants emptying bounteous hampers and passing tempting food from group to group, others opening bottles of champagne, with popping corks, and filling bubbling glasses, while the men of the party passed back and forth from break to automobile with jests and gay words, or strolled under the trees enjoying post-prandial cigars.

Altogether it was a pleasing picture, and Coquenil's interest was heightened when he overheard a passing couple say that these were the guests of no less a person than the Duke of Montreuil, whose lavish entertainments were the talk of Paris. There he was, on the break, this favorite of fortune! What a brilliant figure of a man! Famous as a sportsman, enormously rich, popular in society, at the head of vast industrial enterprises, and known to have almost controlling power in affairs of state!

"Never mind, old sport, it takes all kinds of people to make up the world. Now then, jump!"

So they went on, playing together, master and dog, and were passing around through the woods on the far side of the coaching party, when, suddenly, Caesar ceased his romping and began to nose the ground excitedly. Then, running to his master, he stood with eager eyes, as if urging some pursuit.

The detective observed the dog in surprise. Was this some foolish whim to follow a squirrel or a rabbit? It wasn't like Caesar.

"Come, come," he reasoned with friendly chiding, "don't be a baby."

Caesar growled in vigorous protest, and darting away, began circling the ground before him, back and forth, in widening curves, as Coquenil had taught him.

"Have you found something--sure?"

The animal barked joyously.

M. Paul was puzzled. Evidently there was a scent here, but what scent? He had made no experiments with Caesar since the night of the crime, when the dog had taken the scent of the pistol and found the alleyway footprints. But that was ten days ago; the dog could not still be on that same scent. Impossible! Yet he was on some scent, and very eagerly. Coquenil had never seen him more impatient for permission to be off. Could a dog remember a scent for ten days?

"After all, what harm can it do?" reflected the detective, becoming interested in his turn. Then, deciding quickly, he gave the word, "Cherche!" and instantly the dog was away.

"He means business," muttered M. Paul, hurrying after him.

On through the woods went Caesar, nose down, tail rigid, following the scent, moving carefully among the trees, and once or twice losing the trail, but quickly finding it again, and, presently, as he reached more open ground, running ahead swiftly, straight toward the coaching party.

In a flash Coquenil realized the danger and called loudly to the dog, but the distance was too great, and his voice was drowned by the cries of ladies on the break, who, seeing the bounding animal, screamed their fright. And no wonder, for this powerful, close-clipped creature, in his sudden rush looked like some formidable beast of prey; even the men started up in alarm.

"Caesar!" shouted M. Paul, but it was too late. The dog was flying full at the break, eyes fixed, body tense; now he was gathering strength to spring, and now, with a splendid effort, he was actually hurling himself through the air, when among the confused figures on the coach a man leaned forward suddenly, and something flashed in his hand. There was a feather of smoke, a sharp report, and then, with a stab of pain, Coquenil saw Caesar fall back to the ground and lie still.

"My dog, my dog!" he cried, and coming up to the stricken creature, he knelt beside him with ashen face.

One glance showed there was nothing to be done, the bullet had crashed into the broad breast in front of the left shoulder and--it was all over with Caesar.

"My friend, my dear old friend!" murmured M. Paul in broken tones, and he took the poor head in his arms. At the master's voice Caesar opened his beautiful eyes weakly, in a last pitiful appeal, then the lids closed.

"You cowards!" flung out the heartsick man. "You have killed my dog!"

"It was your own fault," said one of the gentlemen coldly, "you had no business to leave a dangerous animal like that at liberty."

[Illustration: "My dog, my dog!"]

M. Paul did not speak or move; he was thinking bitterly of Alice's presentiment.

Then some one on the break said: "We had better move along, hadn't we, Raoul?"

"Yes," agreed another. "What a beastly bore!"

And a few moments later, with clanking harness and sounding horn, the gay party rolled away.

Coquenil sat silent by his dog.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WOOD CARVER

A detective, like an actor or a soldier, must go on fighting and playing his part, regardless of personal feelings. Sorrow brings him no reprieve from duty, so the next morning after the last sad offices for poor Caesar, Coquenil faced the emergency before him with steady nerve and calm resolution. There was an assassin to be brought to justice and the time for

action had come. This was, perhaps, the most momentous day of his whole career.

Up to the very hour of luncheon M. Paul doubted whether the wood carver would keep his appointment at the Bonnetons'. Why should he take such a risk? Why walk deliberately into a trap that he must suspect? It was true, Coquenil remembered with chagrin, that this man, if he really was the man, had once before walked into a trap (there on the Champs Elysees) and had then walked calmly out again; but this time the detective promised himself things should happen differently. His precautions were taken, and if Groener came within his clutches to-day, he would have a lively time getting out of them. There was a score to be settled between them, a heavy score, and--let the wood carver beware!

The wood carver kept his appointment. More than that, he seemed in excellent spirits, and as he sat down to Mother Bonneton's modest luncheon he nodded good-naturedly to Matthieu, the substitute watchman, whom the sacristan introduced, not too awkwardly, then he fell to eating with a hearty appetite and without any sign of embarrassment or suspicion.

"It's a strong game he's playing," reflected the detective, "but he's going to lose."

The wood carver appeared to be a man approaching forty, of medium height and stocky build, the embodiment of good health and good humor. His round, florid face was free from lines, his gray eyes were clear and friendly. He had thick, brown hair, a short, yellowish mustache, and a close-cut, brownish beard. He was dressed like a superior workingman, in a flannel shirt, a rough, blue suit, oil-stained and dust-sprinkled, and he wore thick-soled boots. His hands were strong and red and not too clean, with several broken nails and calloused places. In a word, he looked the wood carver, every inch of him, and the detective was forced to admit that, if this was a disguise, it was the most admirable one he had ever seen. If this beard and hair and mustache were false, then his own make-up, the best he had ever created, was a poor thing in comparison.

During the meal Groener talked freely, speaking with a slight Belgian accent, but fluently enough. He seemed to have a naive spirit of drollery, and he related quite amusingly an experience of his railway journey.

"You see," he laughed, showing strong white teeth, "there were two American girls in one compartment and a newly married couple in the next one, with a little glass window between. Well, the young bridegroom wanted to kiss his bride, naturally, ha, ha! It was a good chance, for they were alone, but he was afraid some one might look through the little window and see him, so he kept looking through it himself to make sure it was all right. Well, the American girls got scared seeing a man's face peeking at them like that, so one of them caught hold of a cord just above the window and pulled it down. She thought it was a curtain cord; she wanted to cover the window so the man couldn't see through. Do I make myself comprehensible, M. Matthieu?" He looked straight at Coquenil.

"Perfectly," smiled the latter.

"Well, it wasn't a curtain cord," continued the wood carver with great relish of the joke, "it was the emergency signal, which, by the regulations, must only be used in great danger, so the first thing we knew the train drew up with a terrible jerk, and there was a great shouting and opening of doors and rushing about of officials. And finally, ha, ha! they discovered that the Brussels express had been stopped, ha, ha, ha! because a bashful young fellow wanted to kiss his girl."

M. Paul marveled at the man's self-possession. Not a tone or a glance or a muscle betrayed him, he was perfectly at ease, buoyantly satisfied, one would say, with himself and all the world--in short, he suggested nothing

so little as a close-tracked assassin.

In vain Coquenil tried to decide whether Groener was really unconscious of impending danger. Was he deceived by this Matthieu disguise? Or was it possible, could it be possible, that he was what he appeared to be, a simple-minded wood carver free from any wickedness or duplicity? No, no, it was marvelous acting, an extraordinary make-up, but this was his man, all right. There was the long little finger, plainly visible, the identical finger of his seventeenth-century cast. Yes, this was the enemy, the murderer, delivered into his hands through some unaccountable fortune, and now to be watched like precious prey, and presently to be taken and delivered over to justice. It seemed too good to be true, too easy, yet there was the man before him, and despite his habit of caution and his knowledge that this was no ordinary adversary, the detective thrilled as over a victory already won.

The wood carver went on to express delight at being back in Paris, where his work would keep him three or four days. Business was brisk, thank Heaven, with an extraordinary demand for old sideboards with carved panels of the Louis XV period, which they turned out by the dozen, ha, ha, ha! in the Brussels shop. He described with gusto and with evident inside knowledge how they got the worm holes in these panels by shooting fine shot into them and the old appearance by burying them in the ground. Then he told how they distributed the finished sideboards among farmhouses in various parts of Belgium and Holland and France, where they were left to be "discovered," ha, ha, ha! by rich collectors glad to pay big prices to the simple-minded farmers, working on commission, who had inherited these treasures from their ancestors.

Across the table Matthieu, with grinning yellow teeth, showed his appreciation of this trick in art catering, and presently, when the coffee was served, he made bold to ask M. Groener if there would be any chance for a man like himself in a wood-carving shop. He was strong and willing and--his present job at Notre-Dame was only for a few days. Papa Bonneton nearly choked over his demi tasse as he listened to this plea, but the wood carver took it seriously.

"I'll help you with pleasure," he said; "I'll take you around with me to several shops to-morrow."

"To-morrow, not to-day?" asked Matthieu, apparently disappointed.

"To-day," smiled Groener, "I enjoy myself. This afternoon I escort my pretty cousin to hear some music. Did you know that, Alice?" He turned gayly to the girl.

Since the meal began Alice had scarcely spoken, but had sat looking down at her plate save at certain moments when she would lift her eyes suddenly and fix them on Groener with a strange, half-frightened expression.

"You are very kind, Cousin Adolf," she answered timidly, "but--I'm not feeling well to-day."

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked in a tone of concern that had just a touch of hardness in it.

The girl hesitated, and Mother Bonneton put in harshly: "I'll tell you, she's fretting about that American who was sent to prison--a good riddance it was."

"You have no right to say that," flashed Alice.

"I have a right to tell your cousin about this foolishness. I've tried my best to look after you and be a mother to you, but when a girl won't listen to reason, when she goes to a prison to see a worthless lover----"

"Stop!" cried Alice, her beautiful eyes filling with tears.

"No, no, I'll tell it all. When a girl slips away from her work at the church and goes to see a man like Paul Coquenil----"

"Paul Coquenil?" repeated the wood carver blankly.

"Have you never heard of Paul Coquenil?" smiled Matthieu, kicking Papa Bonneton warningly under the table.

Groener looked straight at the detective and answered with perfect simplicity: "No wonder you smile, M. Matthieu, but think how far away from Paris I live! Besides, I want this to be a happy day. Come, little cousin, you shall tell me all about it when we are out together. Run along now and put on your nice dress and hat. We'll start in about half an hour."

Alice rose from the table, deathly white. She tried to speak, but the words failed her; it seemed to Coquenil that her eyes met his in desperate appeal, and then, with a glance at Groener, half of submission, half of defiance, she turned and left the room.

"Now Madam Bonneton," resumed Groener cheerfully, "while the young lady gets into her finery we might have a little talk. There are a few matters--er--" He looked apologetically at the others. "You and I will meet to-morrow, M. Matthieu; I'll see what I can do for you."

"Thanks," said Matthieu, rising in response to this hint for his departure. He bowed politely, and followed by the sacristan, went out.

"Don't speak until we get downstairs," whispered Coquenil, and they descended the four flights in silence.

"Now, Bonneton," ordered the detective sharply, when they were in the lower hallway, "don't ask questions, just do what I say. I want you to go right across to Notre-Dame, and when you get to the door take your hat off and stand there for a minute or so fanning yourself. Understand?"

The simple-minded sacristan was in a daze with all this mystery, but he repeated the words resignedly: "I'm to stand at the church door and fan myself with my hat. Is that it?"

"That's it. Then Tignol, who's watching in one of these doorways, the sly old fox, will come across and join you. Tell him to be ready to move any minute now. He'd better loaf around the corner of the church until he gets a signal from me. I'll wait here. Now go on."

"But let me say--" began the other in mild protest. "No, no," broke in M. Paul impatiently, "there's no time. Listen! Some one is coming down. Go, go!"

"I'm going, M. Paul, I'm going," obeyed Bonneton, and he hurried across the few yards of pavement that separated them from the cathedral.

Meantime, the step on the stairs came nearer. It was a light, quick step, and, looking up, Coquenil saw Alice hurrying toward him, tense with some eager purpose.

"Oh, M. Matthieu!" exclaimed the girl in apparent surprise. Then going close to him she said in a low tone that quivered with emotion: "I came after you, I must speak to you, I--I know who you are."

He looked at her sharply.

"You are M. Coquenil," she whispered.

"You saw it?" he asked uneasily.

She shook her head. "I knew it."

"Ah!" with relief. "Does he know?"

The girl's hands closed convulsively while the pupils of her eyes widened and then grew small. "I'm afraid so," she murmured, and then added these singular words: "He knows everything."

M. Paul laid a soothing hand on her arm and said kindly: "Are you afraid of him?"

"Ye-es." Her voice was almost inaudible.

"Is he planning something?"

For a moment Alice hesitated, biting her red lips, then with a quick impulse, she lifted her dark eyes to Coquenil. "I must tell you, I have no one else to tell, and I am so distressed, so--so afraid." She caught his hands pleadingly in hers, and he felt that they were icy cold.

"I'll protect you, that's what I'm here for," he assured her, "but go on, speak quickly. What is he planning?"

"He's planning to take me away, away from Paris, I'm sure he is. I overheard him just now telling Mother Bonneton to pack my trunk. He says he will spend three or four days in Paris, but that may not be true, he may go at once to-night. You can't believe him or trust him, and, if he takes me away, I--I may never come back."

"He won't take you away," said M. Paul reassuring, "that is, he won't if--See here, you trust me?"

"Oh, yes."

"You'll do exactly what I tell you, exactly, without asking how or why?"

"I will," she declared.

"You're a plucky little girl," he said as he met her unflinching look. "Let me think a moment," and he turned back and forth in the hall, brows contracted, hands deep in his pockets. "I have it!" he exclaimed presently, his face brightening. "Now listen," and speaking slowly and distinctly, the detective gave Alice precise instructions, then he went over them again, point by point.

"Are you sure you understand?" he asked finally.

"Yes, I understand and I will do what you tell me," she answered firmly, "but----"

"Well?"

"It will bring trouble on you. If anyone stands in his way--" She shivered in alarm.

Coquenil smiled confidently. "Don't worry about me."

She shook her head anxiously. "You don't know, you can't understand what a"--she stopped as if searching for a word--"what a wicked man he is."

"I understand--a little," answered Coquenil gravely; "you can tell me more when we have time; we mustn't talk now, we must act."

"Yes, of course," agreed Alice, "I will obey orders; you can depend on me and"--she held out her slim hand in a grateful movement--"thank you."

For a moment he pressed the trembling fingers in a reassuring clasp, then he watched her wonderingly, as, with a brave little smile, she turned and went back up the stairs.

"She has the air of a princess, that girl," he mused, "Who is she? What is she? I ought to know in a few hours now," and moving to the wide space of the open door, the detective glanced carelessly over the Place Notre-Dame.

It was about two o'clock, and under a dazzling sun the trees and buildings of the square were outlined on the asphalt in sharp black shadows. A 'bus lumbered sleepily over the bridge with three straining horses. A big yellow-and-black automobile throbbed quietly before the hospital. Some tourists passed, mopping red faces. A beggar crouched in the shade near the entrance to the cathedral, intoning his woes. Coquenil took out his watch and proceeded to wind it slowly. At which the beggar dragged himself lazily out of his cool corner and limped across the street.

"A little charity, kind gentleman," he whined as he came nearer.

"In here, Papa Tignol," beckoned Coquenil; "there's something new. It's all right, I've fixed the doorkeeper."

And a moment later the two associates were talking earnestly near the doorkeeper's lodge.

Meantime, Alice, with new life in her heart, was putting on her best dress and hat as Groener had bidden her, and presently she joined her cousin in the salon where he sat smoking a cheap cigar and finishing his talk with Mother Bonneton.

"Ah," he said, "are you ready?" And looking at her more closely, he added: "Poor child, you've been crying. Wait!" and he motioned Mother Bonneton to leave them.

"Now," he began kindly, when the woman had gone, "sit down here and tell me what has made my little cousin unhappy."

He spoke in a pleasant, sympathetic tone, and the girl approached him as if trying to overcome an instinctive shrinking, but she did not take the offered chair, she simply stood beside it.

"It's only a little thing," she answered with an effort, "but I was afraid you might be displeased. What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes to three."

"Would you mind very much if we didn't start until five or ten minutes past three?"

"Why--er--what's the matter?"

Alice hesitated, then with pleading eyes: "I've been troubled about different things lately, so I spoke to Father Anselm yesterday and he said I might come to him to-day at a quarter to three."

"You mean for confession?"

"Yes."

"I see. How long does it take?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Will it make you feel happier?"

"Oh, yes, much happier."

"All right," he nodded, "I'll wait."

"Thank you, Cousin Adolf," she said eagerly. "I'll hurry right back; I'll be here by ten minutes past three."

He eyed her keenly. "You needn't trouble to come back, I'll go to the church with you."

"And wait there?" she asked with a shade of disappointment.

"Yes," he answered briefly.

There was nothing more to say, and a few minutes later Alice, anxious-eyed but altogether lovely in flower-spread hat and a fleecy pink gown, entered Notre-Dame followed by the wood carver.

"Will you wait here, cousin, by my little table?" she asked sweetly.

"You seem anxious to get rid of me," he smiled.

"No, no," she protested, but her cheeks flushed; "I only thought this chair would be more comfortable."

"Any chair will do for me," he said dryly. "Where is your confessional?"

"On the other side," and she led the way down the right aisle, past various recessed chapels, past various confessional boxes, each bearing the name of the priest who officiated there. And presently as they came to a confessional box in the space near the sacristy Alice pointed to the name, "Father Anselm."

"There," she said.

"Is the priest inside?"

"Yes." And then, with a new idea: "Cousin Adolf," she whispered, "if you go along there back of the choir and down a little stairway, you will come to the treasure room. It might interest you."

He looked at her in frank amusement. "I'm interested already. I'll get along very nicely here. Now go ahead and get through with it."

The girl glanced about her with a helpless gesture, and then, sighing resignedly, she entered the confessional. Groener seated himself on one of the little chairs and leaned back with a satisfied chuckle. He was so near the confessional that he could hear a faint murmur of voices--Alice's sweet tones and then the priest's low questions.

Five minutes passed, ten minutes! Groener looked at his watch impatiently. He heard footsteps on the stone of the choir, and, glancing up, saw Matthieu polishing the carved stalls. Some ladies passed with a guide who was showing them the church. Groener rose and paced back and forth nervously. What a time the girl was taking! Then the door of the confessional box opened and a black-robed priest came out and moved solemnly away. _Enfin!_ It was over! And with a feeling of relief Groener watched the priest as he disappeared in the passage leading to the sacristy.

Still Alice lingered, saying a last prayer, no doubt. But the hour was

advancing. Groener looked at his watch again. Twenty minutes past three! She had been in that box over half an hour. It was ridiculous, unreasonable. Besides, the priest was gone; her confession was finished. She must come out.

"Alice!" he called in a low tone, standing near the penitent's curtain.

There was no answer.

Then he knocked sharply on the woodwork: "Alice, what are you doing?"

Still no answer.

Groener's face darkened, and with sudden suspicion he drew aside the curtain.

The confessional box was empty--_Alice was gone!_

[Illustration: "The confessional box was empty--_Alice was gone!_"]

CHAPTER XXII

AT THE HAIRDRESSER'S

What had happened was very simple. The confessional box from which Alice had vanished was one not in use at the moment, owing to repairs in the wall behind it. These repairs had necessitated the removal of several large stones, replaced temporarily by lengths of supporting timbers between which a person might easily pass. Coquenil, with his habit of careful observation, had remarked this fact during his night in the church, and now he had taken advantage of it to effect Alice's escape. The girl had entered the confessional in the usual way, had remained there long enough to let Groener hear her voice, and had then slipped out through the open wall into the sacristy passage beyond. _And the priest was Tignol!_

"I scored on him that time," chuckled Coquenil, rubbing away at the woodwork and thinking of Alice hastening to the safe place he had chosen for her.

"M. Matthieu!" called Groener. "Would you mind coming here a moment?"

"I was just going to ask you to look at these carvings," replied Matthieu, coming forward innocently.

"No, no," answered the other excitedly, "a most unfortunate thing has happened. Look at that!" and he opened the door of the confessional. "She has gone--run away!"

Matthieu stared in blank surprise. "Name of a pipe!" he muttered. "Not your cousin?"

Groener nodded with half-shut eyes in which the detective caught a flash of black rage, but only a flash. In a moment the man's face was placid and good-natured as before.

"Yes," he said quietly, "my cousin has run away. It makes me sad because--Sit down a minute, M. Matthieu, I'll tell you about it."

"We'll be more quiet in here," suggested Matthieu, indicating the sacristy.

The wood carver shook his head. "I'd sooner go outside, if you don't mind.

Will you join me in a glass at the tavern?"

His companion, marveling inwardly, agreed to this, and a few moments later the two men were seated under the awning of the Three Wise Men.

"Now," began Groener, with perfect simplicity and friendliness, "I'll explain the trouble between Alice and me. I've had a hard time with that girl, M. Matthieu, a very hard time. If it wasn't for her mother, I'd have washed my hands of her long ago; but her mother was a fine woman, a noble woman. It's true she made one mistake that ruined her life and practically killed her, still----"

"What mistake was that?" inquired Matthieu with sympathy.

"Why, she married an American who was--the less we say about him the better. The point is, Alice is half American, and ever since she has been old enough to take notice, she has been crazy about American men." He leaned closer and, lowering his voice, added: "That's why I had to send her to Paris five years ago."

"You don't say!"

"She was only thirteen then, but well developed and very pretty and--M. Matthieu, she got gone on an American who was spending the winter in Brussels, a married man. I had to break it up somehow, so I sent her away. Yes, sir." He shook his head sorrowfully.

"And now it's another American, a man in prison, charged with a horrible crime. Think of that! As soon as Mother Bonneton wrote me about it, I saw I'd have to take the girl away again. I told her this morning she must pack up her things and go back to Brussels with me, and that made the trouble."

"Ah!" exclaimed Matthieu with an understanding nod. "Then she knew at luncheon that you would take her back to Brussels?"

"Of course she did. You know how she acted; she had made up her mind she wouldn't go. Only she was tricky about it. She knew I had my eye on her, so she got this priest to help her."

Now the other stared in genuine astonishment. "Why--was the priest in it?"

"Was he in it? Of course he was in it. He was the whole thing. This Father Anselm has been encouraging the girl for months, filling her up with nonsense about how it's right for a young girl to choose her own husband. Mother Bonneton told me."

"You mean that Father Anselm helped her to run away?" gasped Matthieu.

"Of course he did. You saw him come out of the confessional, didn't you?"

"I was too far away to see his face," replied the other, studying the wood carver closely. "Did you see his face?"

"Certainly I did. He passed within ten feet of me. I saw his face distinctly."

"Are you sure it was he? I don't doubt you, M. Groener, but I'm a sort of official here and this is a serious charge, so I ask if you are sure it was Father Anselm?"

"I'm absolutely sure it was Father Anselm," answered the wood carver positively. He paused a moment while the detective wondered what was the meaning of this extraordinary statement. Why was the man giving him these details about Alice, and how much of them was true? Did Groener know he was talking to Paul Coquenil? If so, he knew that Coquenil must know he was

lying about Father Anselm. Then why say such a thing? What was his game?

[Illustration: "'You mean that Father Anselm helped her to run away?' gasped Matthieu."]

"Have another glass?" asked the wood carver. "Or shall we go on?"

"Go on--where?"

"Oh, of course, you don't know my plan. I will tell you. You see, I must find Alice, I must try to save her from this folly, for her mother's sake. Well, I know how to find her."

He spoke so earnestly and straightforwardly that Coquenil began to think Groener had really been deceived by the Matthieu disguise. After all, why not? Tignol had been deceived by it.

"How will you find her?"

"I'll tell you as we drive along. We'll take a cab and--you won't leave me, M. Matthieu?" he said anxiously.

Coquenil tried to soften the grimness of his smile. "No, M. Groener, I won't leave you."

"Good! Now then!" He threw down some money for the drinks, then he hailed a passing carriage.

"Rue Tronchet, near the Place de la Madeleine," he directed, and as they rolled away, he added: "Stop at the nearest telegraph office."

The adventure was taking a new turn. Groener, evidently, had some definite plan which he hoped to carry out. Coquenil felt for cigarettes in his coat pocket and his hand touched the friendly barrel of a revolver. Then he glanced back and saw the big automobile, which had been waiting for hours, trailing discreetly behind with Tignol (no longer a priest) and two sturdy fellows, making four men with the chauffeur, all ready to rush up for attack or defense at the lift of his hand. There must be some miraculous interposition if this man beside him, this baby-faced wood carver, was to get away now as he did that night on the Champs Elysees.

"You'll be paying for that left-handed punch, old boy, before very long," said Coquenil to himself.

"Now," resumed Groener, as the cab turned into a quiet street out of the noisy traffic of the Rue de Rivoli, "I'll tell you how I expect to find Alice. I'm going to find her through the sister of Father Anselm."

"The sister of Father Anselm!" exclaimed the other.

"Certainly. Priests have sisters, didn't you know that? Ha, ha! She's a hairdresser on the Rue Tronchet, kind-hearted woman with children of her own. She comes to see the Bonnetons and is fond of Alice. Well, she'll know where the girl has gone, and I propose to make her tell me."

"To make her?"

"Oh, she'll want to tell me when she understands what this means to her brother. Hello! Here's the telegraph office! Just a minute."

He sprang lightly from the cab and hurried across the sidewalk. At the same moment Coquenil lifted his hand and brought it down quickly, twice, in the direction of the doorway through which Groener had passed. And a moment later Tignol was in the telegraph office writing a dispatch beside the wood carver.

"I've telegraphed the Paris agent of a big furniture dealer in Rouen," explained the latter as they drove on, "canceling an appointment for to-morrow. He was coming on especially, but I can't see him--I can't do any business until I've found Alice. She's a sweet girl, in spite of everything, and I'm very fond of her." There was a quiver of emotion in his voice.

"Are you going to the hairdresser's now?" asked Matthieu.

"Yes. Of course she may refuse to help me, but I think I can persuade her with you to back me up." He smiled meaningly.

"I? What can I do?"

"Everything, my friend. You can testify that Father Anselm planned Alice's escape, which is bad for him, as his sister will realize. I'll say to her: 'Now, my dear Madam Page'--that's her name--'you're not going to force me and my friend, M. Matthieu--he's waiting outside, in a cab--you're not going to force us to charge your reverend brother with abducting a young lady? That wouldn't be a nice story to tell the commissary of police, would it? You're too intelligent a woman, Madam Page, to allow such a thing, aren't you?' And she'll see the point mighty quick. She'll probably drive right back with us to Notre-Dame and put a little sense into her brother's shaven head. It's four o'clock now," he concluded gayly; "I'll bet you we have Alice with us for dinner by seven, and it will be a good dinner, too. Understand you dine with us, M. Matthieu."

The man's effrontery was prodigious and there was so much plausibility in his glib chatter that, in spite of himself, Coquenil kept a last lingering wonder if Groener could be telling the truth. If not, what was his motive in this elaborate fooling? He must know that his hypocrisy and deceit would presently be exposed. So what did he expect to gain by it? What could he be driving at?

"Stop at the third doorway in the Rue Tronchet," directed the wood carver as they entered the Place de la Madeleine, and pointing to a hairdresser's sign, he added: "There is her place, up one flight. Now, if you will be patient for a few minutes, I think I'll come back with good news."

As Groener stepped from the carriage, Coquenil was on the point of seizing him and stopping this farce forthwith. What would he gain by waiting? Yet, after all, what would he lose? With four trained men to guard the house there was no chance of the fellow escaping, and it was possible his visit here might reveal something. Besides, a detective has the sportsman's instinct, he likes to play his fish before landing it.

"All right," nodded M. Paul, "I'll be patient," and as the wood carver disappeared, he signaled Tignol to surround the house.

"He's trying to lose us," said the old fox, hurrying up a moment later. "There are three exits here."

"Three?"

"Don't you know this place?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's a passage from the first courtyard into a second one, and from that you can go out either into the Place de la Madeleine or the Rue de l'Arcade. I've got a man at each exit but"----he shook his head dubiously--"one man may not be enough."

"Tonnere de Dieu, it's Madam Cecile's!" cried Coquenil. Then he gave

quick orders: "Put the chauffeur with one of your men in the Rue de l'Arcade, bring your other man here and we'll double him up with this driver. Listen," he said to the jehu; "you get twenty francs extra to help watch this doorway for the man who just went in. We have a warrant for his arrest. You mustn't let him get past. Understand?"

"Twenty francs," grinned the driver, a red-faced Norman with rugged shoulders; "he won't get past, you can sleep on your two ears for that."

Meantime, Tignol had returned with one of his men, who was straightway stationed in the courtyard.

"Now," went on Coquenil, "you and I will take the exit on the Place de la Madeleine. It's four to one he comes out there."

"Why is it?" grumbled Tignol.

"Never mind why," answered the other brusquely, and he walked ahead, frowning, until they reached an imposing entrance with stately palms on the white stone floor and the glimpse of an imposing stairway.

"Of course, of course," muttered M. Paul. "To think that I had forgotten it! After all, one loses some of the old tricks in two years."

"Remember that blackmail case," whispered Tignol, "when we sneaked the countess out by the Rue de l'Arcade? Eh, eh, eh, what a close shave!"

Coquenil nodded. "Here's one of the same kind." He glanced at a sober coupe from which a lady, thickly veiled, was descending, and he followed her with a shrug as she entered the house.

"To think that some of the smartest women in Paris come here!" he mused. Then to Tignol: "How about that telegram?"

The old man stroked his rough chin. "The clerk gave me a copy of it, all right, when I showed my papers. Here it is and--much good it will do us."

He handed M. Paul a telegraph blank on which was written:

DUBOIS, 20 Rue Chalgrin.

Special bivouac amateur bouillon danger must have Sahara easily
Groener arms impossible.

FELIX.

"I see," nodded Coquenil; "it ought to be an easy cipher. We must look up Dubois," and he put the paper in his pocket. "Better go in now and locate this fellow. Look over the two courtyards, have a word with the doorkeepers, see if he really went into the hairdresser's; if not, find out where he did go. Tell our men at the other exits not to let a yellow dog slip past without sizing it up for Groener."

"I'll tell 'em," grinned the old man, and he slouched away.

For five minutes Coquenil waited at the Place de la Madeleine exit and it seemed a long time. Two ladies arrived in carriages and passed inside quickly with exaggerated self-possession. A couple came down the stairs smiling and separated coldly at the door. Then a man came out alone, and the detective's eyes bored into him. It wasn't Groener.

Finally, Tignol returned and reported all well at the other exits; no one had gone out who could possibly be the wood carver. Groener had not been near the hairdresser; he had gone straight through into the second courtyard, and from there he had hurried up the main stairway.

"The one that leads to Madam Cecile's?" questioned M. Paul.

"Yes, but Cecile has only two floors. There are two more above hers."

"You think he went higher up?"

"I'm sure he did, for I spoke to Cecile herself. She wouldn't dare lie to me, and she says she has seen no such man as Groener."

"Then he's in one of the upper apartments now?"

"He must be."

Coquenil turned back and forth, snapping his fingers softly. "I'm nervous, Papa Tignol," he said; "I ought not to have let him go in here, I ought to have nailed him when I had him. He's too dangerous a man to take chances with and--_mille tonneres_, the roof!"

Tignol shook his head. "I don't think so. He might get through one scuttle, but he'd have a devil of a time getting in at another. He has no tools."

Coquenil looked at his watch. "He's been in there fifteen minutes. I'll give him five minutes more. If he isn't out then, we'll search the whole block from roof to cellar. Papa Tignol, it will break my heart if this fellow gets away."

He laid an anxious hand on his companion's arm and stood moodily silent, then suddenly his fingers closed with a grip that made the old man wince.

"Suffering gods!" muttered the detective, "he's coming!"

As he spoke the glass door at the foot of the stairs opened and a handsome couple advanced toward them, both dressed in the height of fashion, the woman young and graceful, the man a perfect type of the dashing _boulevardier_.

"No, no, you're crazy," whispered Tignol.

As the couple reached the sidewalk, Coquenil himself hesitated. In the better light he could see no resemblance between the wood carver and this gentleman with his smart clothes, his glossy silk hat, and his haughty eyeglass. The wood carver's hair was yellowish brown, this man's was dark, tinged with gray; the wood carver wore a beard and mustache, this man was clean shaven--finally, the wood carver was shorter and heavier than this man.

While the detective wavered, the gentleman stepped forward courteously and opened the door of a waiting _coupe_. The lady caught up her silken skirts and was about to enter when Coquenil brushed against her, as if by accident, and her purse fell to the ground.

"Stupid brute!" exclaimed the gentleman angrily, as he bent over and reached for the purse with his gloved hand.

At the same moment Coquenil seized the extended wrist in such fierce and sudden attack that, before the man could think of resisting, he was held helpless with his left arm bent behind him in twisted torture.

"No nonsense, or you'll break your arm," he warned his captive as the latter made an ineffectual effort against him. "Call the others," he ordered, and Tignol blew a shrill summons. "Rip off this glove. I want to see his hand. Come, come, none of that. Open it up. No? I'll _make_ you open it. There, I thought so," as an excruciating wrench forced the stubborn fist to yield. "Now then, off with that glove! Ah!" he cried as

the bare hand came to view. "I thought so. It's too bad you couldn't hide that long little finger! Tignol, quick with the handcuffs! There, I think we have you safely landed now, _M. Adolf Groener!_"

[Illustration: "No nonsense, or you'll break your arm."]

The prisoner had not spoken a word; now he flashed at Coquenil a look of withering contempt that the detective long remembered, and, leaning close, he whispered: "_You poor fool!_"

CHAPTER XXIII

GROENER AT BAY

Two hours later (it was nearly seven) Judge Hauteville sat in his office at the Palais de Justice, hurrying through a meal that had been brought in from a restaurant.

"There," he muttered, wiping his mouth, "that will keep me going for a few hours," and he touched the bell.

"Is M. Coquenil back yet?" he asked when the clerk appeared.

"Yes, sir," replied the latter, "he's waiting."

"Good! I'll see him."

The clerk withdrew and presently ushered in the detective.

"Sit down," motioned the judge. "Coquenil, I've done a hard day's work and I'm tired, but I'm going to examine this man of yours to-night."

"I'm glad of that," said M. Paul, "I think it's important."

"Important? Humph! The morning would do just as well--however, we'll let that go. Remember, you have no standing in this case. The work has been done by Tignol, the warrant was served by Tignol, and the witnesses have been summoned by Tignol. Is that understood?"

"Of course."

"That is my official attitude," smiled Hauteville, unbending a little; "I needn't add that, between ourselves, I appreciate what you have done, and if this affair turns out as I hope it will, I shall do my best to have your services properly recognized."

Coquenil bowed.

"Now then," continued the judge, "have you got the witnesses?"

"They are all here except Father Anselm. He has been called to the bedside of a dying woman, but we have his signed statement that he had nothing to do with the girl's escape."

"Of course not, we knew that, anyway. And the girl?"

"I went for her myself. She is outside."

"And the prisoner?"

"He's in another room under guard. I thought it best he shouldn't see the

witnesses."

"Quite right. He'd better not see them when he comes through the outer office. You attend to that."

"_Bien!_"

"Is there anything else before I send for him? Oh, the things he wore? Did you find them?"

The detective nodded. "We found that he has a room on the fifth floor, over Madam Cecile's. He keeps it by the year. He made his change there, and we found everything that he took off--the wig, the beard, and the rough clothes."

The judge rubbed his hands. "Capital! Capital! It's a great coup. We may as well begin. I want you to be present, Coquenil, at the examination."

"Ah, that's kind of you!" exclaimed M. Paul.

"Not kind at all, you'll be of great service. Get those witnesses out of sight and then bring in the man."

A few moments later the prisoner entered, walking with hands manacled, at the side of an imposing garde de Paris. He still wore his smart clothes, and was as coldly self-possessed as at the moment of his arrest. He seemed to regard both handcuffs and guard as petty details unworthy of his attention, and he eyed the judge and Coquenil with almost patronizing scrutiny.

"Sit there," said Hauteville, pointing to a chair, and the newcomer obeyed indifferently.

The clerk settled himself at his desk and prepared to write.

"What is your name?" began the judge.

"I don't care to give my name," answered the other.

"Why not?"

"That's my affair."

"Is your name Adolf Groener?"

"No."

"Are you a wood carver?"

"No."

"Have you recently been disguised as a wood carver?"

"No."

He spoke the three negatives with a listless, rather bored air.

"Groener, you are lying and I'll prove it shortly. Tell me, first, if you have money to employ a lawyer?"

"Possibly, but I wish no lawyer."

"That is not the question. You are under suspicion of having committed a crime and----"

"What crime?" asked the prisoner sharply.

"Murder," said the judge; then impressively, after a pause: "We have reason to think that you shot the billiard player, Martinez."

Both judge and detective watched the man closely as this name was spoken, but neither saw the slightest sign of emotion.

"Martinez?" echoed the prisoner indifferently. "I never heard of him."

"Ah! You'll hear enough of him before you get through," nodded Hauteville grimly. "The law requires that a prisoner have the advantage of counsel during examination. So I ask if you will provide a lawyer?"

"No," answered the accused.

"Then the court will assign a lawyer for your defense. Ask Maitre Cure to come in," he directed the clerk.

"It's quite useless," shrugged the prisoner with careless arrogance, "I will have nothing to do with Maitre Cure."

"I warn you, Groener, in your own interest, to drop this offensive tone."

"Ta, ta, ta! I'll take what tone I please. And I'll answer your questions as I please or--or not at all."

At this moment the clerk returned followed by Maitre Cure, a florid-faced, brisk-moving, bushy-haired man in tight frock coat, who suggested an opera impresario. He seemed amused when told that the prisoner rejected his services, and established himself comfortably in a corner of the room as an interested spectator.

Then the magistrate resumed sternly: "You were arrested, sir, this afternoon in the company of a woman. Do you know who she is?"

"I do. She is a lady of my acquaintance."

"A lady whom you met at Madam Cecile's?"

"Why not?"

"You met her there by appointment?"

"Ye-es."

The judge snorted incredulously. "You don't even know her name?"

"You think not?"

"Well, what is it?"

"Why should I tell you? Is she charged with murder?" was the sneering answer.

"Groener," said Hauteville sternly, "you say this woman is a person of your acquaintance. We'll see." He touched the bell, and as the door opened, "Madam Cecile," he said.

A moment later, with a breath of perfume, there swept in a large, overdressed woman of forty-five with bold, dark eyes and hair that was too red to be real. She bowed to the judge with excessive affability and sat down.

"You are Madam Cecile?"

"Yes, sir."

"You keep a maison de rendez-vous on the Place de la Madeleine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Look at this man," he pointed to the prisoner. "Have you ever seen him before?"

"I have seen him--once."

"When was that?"

"This afternoon. He called at my place and--" she hesitated.

"Tell me what happened--everything."

"He spoke to me and--he said he wanted a lady. I asked him what kind of a lady he wanted, and he said he wanted a real lady, not a fake. I told him I had a very pretty widow and he looked at her, but she wasn't chic enough. Then I told him I had something special, a young married woman, a beauty, whose husband has plenty of money----"

"Never mind that," cut in the judge. "What then?"

"He looked her over and said she would do. He offered her five hundred francs if she would leave the house with him and drive away in a carriage. It seemed queer but we see lots of queer things, and five hundred francs is a nice sum. He paid it in advance, so I told her to go ahead and--she did."

"Do you think he knew the woman?"

"I'm sure he did not."

"He simply paid her five hundred francs to go out of the house with him?"

"Exactly."

"That will do. You may go."

With a sigh of relief and a swish of her perfumed skirts, Madam Cecile left the room.

"What do you say to that, Groener?" questioned the judge.

"She's a disreputable person and her testimony has no value," answered the prisoner unconcernedly.

"Did you pay five hundred francs to the woman who left the house with you?"

"Certainly not."

"Do you still maintain that she is a lady whom you know personally?"

"I do."

Again Hauteville touched the bell. "The lady who was brought with this man," he directed.

Outside there sounded a murmur of voices and presently a young woman, handsomely dressed and closely veiled, was led in by a guard. She was almost fainting with fright.

The judge rose courteously and pointed to a chair. "Sit down, madam. Try to

control yourself. I shall detain you only a minute. Now--what is your name?"

The woman sat silent, wringing her hands in distress, then she burst out: "It will disgrace me, it will ruin me."

"Not at all," assured Hauteville. "Your name will not go on the records--you need not even speak it aloud. Simply whisper it to me."

Rising in agitation the lady went to the judge's desk and spoke to him inaudibly.

"Really!" he exclaimed, eying her in surprise as she stood before him, face down, the picture of shame.

"I have only two questions to ask," he proceeded. "Look at this man and tell me if you know him," he pointed to the accused.

She shook her head and answered in a low tone: "I never saw him before this afternoon."

"You met him at Madam Cecile's?"

"Ye-es," very faintly.

"And he paid you five hundred francs to go out of the house with him?"

She nodded but did not speak.

"That was the only service you were to render, was it, for this sum of money, simply to leave the house with him and drive away in a carriage?"

"That was all."

"Thank you, madam. I hope you will learn a lesson from this experience. You may go."

Staggering, gasping for breath, clinging weakly to the guard's arm, the lady left the room.

"Now, sir, what have you to say?" demanded the judge, facing the prisoner.

"Nothing."

"You admit that the lady told the truth?"

"Ha, ha!" the other laughed harshly. "A lady would naturally tell the truth in such a predicament, wouldn't she?"

At this the judge leaned over to Coquenil and, after some low words, he spoke to the clerk who bowed and went out.

"You denied a moment ago," resumed the questioner, "that your name is Groener. Also that you were disguised this afternoon as a wood carver. Do you deny that you have a room, rented by the year, in the house where Madam Cecile has her apartment? Ah, that went home!" he exclaimed. "You thought we would overlook the little fifth-floor room, eh?"

"I know nothing about such a room," declared the other.

"I suppose you didn't go there to change your clothes before you called at Madam Cecile's?"

"Certainly not."

"Call Jules," said Hauteville to the sleepy guard standing at the door, and straightway the clerk reappeared with a large leather bag.

"Open it," directed the magistrate. "Spread the things on the table. Let the prisoner look at them. Now then, my stubborn friend, what about these garments? What about this wig and false beard?"

Groener rose wearily from his chair, walked deliberately to the table and glanced at the exposed objects without betraying the slightest interest or confusion.

"I've never seen these things before, I know nothing about them," he said.

"Name of a camel!" muttered Coquenil. "He's got his nerve with him all right!"

The judge sat silent, playing with his lead pencil, then he folded a sheet of paper and proceeded to mark it with a series of rough geometrical patterns, afterwards going over them again, shading them carefully. Finally he looked up and said quietly to the guard: "Take off his handcuffs."

The guard obeyed.

"Now take off his coat."

This was done also, the prisoner offering no resistance.

"Now his shirt," and the shirt was taken off.

"Now his boots and trousers."

All this was done, and a few moments later the accused stood in his socks and underclothing. And still he made no protest.

Here M. Paul whispered to Hauteville, who nodded in assent.

"Certainly. Take off his garters and pull up his drawers. I want his legs bare below the knees."

"It's an outrage!" cried Groener, for the first time showing feeling.

"Silence, sir!" glared the magistrate.

"You'll be bare above the knees in the morning when your measurements are taken." Then to the guard: "Do what I said."

Again the guard obeyed, and Coquenil stood by in eager watchfulness as the prisoner's lower legs were uncovered.

"Ah!" he cried in triumph, "I knew it, I was sure of it! There!" he pointed to an egg-shaped wound on the right calf, two red semicircles plainly imprinted in the white flesh. "It's the first time I ever marked a man with my teeth and--it's a jolly good thing I did."

"How about this, Groener?" questioned the judge. "Do you admit having had a struggle with Paul Coquenil one night on the street?"

"No."

"What made that mark on your leg?"

"I--I was bitten by a dog."

"It's a wonder you didn't shoot the dog," flashed the detective.

"What do you mean?" retorted the other.

Coquenil bent close, black wrath burning in his deep-set eyes, and spoke three words that came to him by lightning intuition, three simple words that, nevertheless, seemed to smite the prisoner with sudden fear: "_Oh, nothing, Raoul!_"

So evident was the prisoner's emotion that Hauteville turned for an explanation to the detective, who said something under his breath.

"Very strange! Very important!" reflected the magistrate. Then to the accused: "In the morning we'll have that wound studied by experts who will tell us whether it was made by a dog or a man. Now I want you to put on the things that were in that bag."

For the first time a sense of his humiliation seemed to possess the prisoner. He clinched his hands fiercely and a wave of uncontrollable anger swept over him.

"No," he cried hoarsely, "I won't do it, I'll never do it!"

Both the judge and Coquenil gave satisfied nods at this sign of a breakdown, but they rejoiced too soon, for by a marvelous effort of the will, the man recovered his self-mastery and calm.

"After all," he corrected himself, "what does it matter? I'll put the things on," and, with his old impassive air, he went to the table and, aided by the guard, quickly donned the boots and garments of the wood carver. He even smiled contemptuously as he did so.

"What a man! What a man!" thought Coquenil, watching him admiringly.

"There!" said the prisoner when the thing was done.

But the judge shook his head. "You've forgotten the beard and the wig. Suppose you help make up his face," he said to the detective.

M. Paul fell to work zealously at this task and, using an elaborate collection of paints, powders, and brushes that were in the bag, he presently had accomplished a startling change in the unresisting prisoner--he had literally transformed him into the wood carver.

"If you're not Groener now," said Coquenil, surveying his work with a satisfied smile, "I'll swear you're his twin brother. It's the best disguise I ever saw, I'll take my hat off to you on that."

"Extraordinary!" murmured the judge. "Groener, do you still deny that this disguise belongs to you?"

[Illustration: "'It's the best disguise I ever saw, I'll take my hat off to you on that.'"]

"I do."

"You've never worn it before?"

"Never."

"And you're not Adolf Groener?"

"Certainly not."

"You haven't a young cousin known as Alice Groener?"

"No."

During these questions the door had opened silently at a sign from the magistrate, and Alice herself had entered the room.

"Turn around!" ordered the judge sharply, and as the accused obeyed he came suddenly face to face with the girl.

At the sight of him Alice started in surprise and fear and cried out: "Oh, Cousin Adolf!"

But the prisoner remained impassive.

"Did you expect to see this man here?" the magistrate asked her.

"Oh, no," she shivered.

"No one had told you you might see him?"

"No one."

The judge turned to Coquenil. "You did not prepare her for this meeting in any way?"

"No," said M. Paul.

"What is your name?" said Hauteville to the girl.

"Alice Groener," she answered simply.

"And this man's name?"

"Adolf Groener."

"You are sure?"

"Of course, he is my cousin."

"How long have you known him?"

"Why I--I've always known him."

Quick as a flash the prisoner pulled off his wig and false beard.

"Am I your cousin now?" he asked.

"Oh!" cried the girl, staring in amazement.

"Look at me! Am I your cousin?" he demanded.

"I--I don't know," she stammered.

"Am I talking to you with your cousin's voice? Pay attention--tell me--am I?"

Alice shook her head in perplexity. "It's not my cousin's voice," she admitted.

"And it's not your cousin," declared the prisoner. Then he faced the judge. "Is it reasonable that I could have lived with this girl for years in so intimate a way and been wearing a disguise all the time? It's absurd. She has good eyes, she would have detected this wig and false beard. Did you ever suspect that your cousin wore a wig or a false beard?" he asked Alice.

"No," she replied, "I never did."

"Ah! And the voice? Did you ever hear your cousin speak with my voice?"

"No, never."

"You see," he triumphed to the magistrate. "She can't identify me as her cousin, for the excellent reason that I'm not her cousin. You can't change a man's personality by making him wear another man's clothes and false hair. I tell you I'm not Groener."

"Who are you then?" demanded the judge.

"I'm not obliged to say who I am, and you have no business to ask unless you can show that I have committed a crime, which you haven't done yet. Ask my fat friend in the corner if that isn't the law."

Maitre Cure nodded gravely in response to this appeal. "The prisoner is correct," he said.

Here Coquenil whispered to the judge.

"Certainly," nodded the latter, and, turning to Alice, who sat wondering and trembling through this agitated scene, he said: "Thank you, mademoiselle, you may go."

The girl rose and, bowing gratefully and sweetly, left the room, followed by M. Paul.

"Groener, you say that we have not yet shown you guilty of any crime. Be patient and we will overcome that objection. Where were you about midnight on the night of the 4th of July?"

"I can't say offhand," answered the other.

"Try to remember."

"Why should I?"

"You refuse? Then I will stimulate your memory," and again he touched the bell.

Coquenil entered, followed by the shrimp photographer, who was evidently much depressed.

"Do you recognize this man?" questioned Hauteville, studying the prisoner closely.

"No," came the answer with a careless shrug.

The shrimp turned to the prisoner and, at the sight of him, started forward accusingly.

"That is the man," he cried, "that is the man who choked me."

"One moment," said the magistrate. "What is your name?"

"Alexander Godin," piped the photographer.

"You live at the Hotel des Etrangers on the Rue Racine?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are engaged to a young dressmaker who has a room near yours on the sixth floor?"

"I was engaged to her," said Alexander sorrowfully, "but there's a medical student on the same floor and----"

"No matter. You were suspicious of this young person. And on the night of July 4th you attacked a man passing along the balcony. Is that correct?"

The photographer put forth his thin hands, palms upward in mild protest. "To say that I attacked him is--is a manner of speaking. The fact is he--he--" Alexander stroked his neck ruefully.

"I understand, he turned and nearly choked you. The marks of his nails are still on your neck?"

"They are, sir," murmured the shrimp.

"And you are sure this is the man?" he pointed to the accused.

"Perfectly sure. I'll swear to it."

"Good. Now stand still. Come here, Groener. Reach out your arms as if you were going to choke this young man. Don't be afraid, he won't hurt you. No, no, the other arm! I want you to put your left hand, on his neck with the nails of your thumb and fingers exactly on these marks. I said exactly. There is the thumb--right! Now the first finger--good! Now the third! And now the little finger! Don't cramp it up, reach it out. Ah!"

With breathless interest Coquenil watched the test, and, as the long little finger slowly extended to its full length, he felt a sudden mad desire to shout or leap in the pure joy of victory, for the nails of the prisoner's left hand corresponded exactly with the nail marks on the shrimp photographer's neck!

CHAPTER XXIV

THIRTY IMPORTANT WORDS

"Now, Groener," resumed the magistrate after the shrimp had withdrawn, "why were you walking along this hotel balcony on the night of July 4th?"

"I wasn't," answered the prisoner coolly.

"The photographer positively identifies you."

"He's mistaken, I wasn't there."

"Ah," smiled Hauteville, with irritating affability. "You'll need a better defense than that."

"Whatever I need I shall have," came the sharp retort.

"Have you anything to say about those finger-nail marks?"

"Nothing."

"There's a peculiarity about those marks, Groener. The little finger of the hand that made them is abnormally, extraordinarily long. Experts say that in a hundred thousand hands you will not find one with so long a little finger, perhaps not one in a million. It happens that you have such a hand and such a little finger. Strange, is it not?"

"Call it strange, if you like," shrugged the prisoner.

"Well, _isn't_ it strange? Just think, if all the men in Paris should try to fit their fingers in those finger marks, there would be only two or three who could reach the extraordinary span of that little finger."

"Nonsense! There might be fifty, there might be five hundred."

"Even so, only one of those fifty or five hundred would be positively identified as the man who choked the photographer _and that one is yourself_. There is the point; we have against you the evidence of Godin who _saw_ you that night and _remembers_ you, and the evidence of your own hand."

So clearly was the charge made that, for the first time, the prisoner dropped his scoffing manner and listened seriously.

"Admit, for the sake of argument, that I _was_ on the balcony," he said. "Mind, I don't admit it, but suppose I was? What of it?"

"Nothing much," replied the judge grimly; "it would simply establish a strong probability that you killed Martinez."

"How so?"

"The photographer saw you stealing toward Kittredge's room carrying a pair of boots."

"I don't admit it, but--what if I were?"

"A pair of Kittredge's boots are missing. They were worn by the murderer to throw suspicion on an innocent man. They were stolen when the pistol was stolen, and the murderer tried to return them so that they might be discovered in Kittredge's room and found to match the alleyway footprints and damn Kittredge."

"I don't know who Kittredge is, and I don't know what alleyway you refer to," put in Groener.

Hauteville ignored this bravado and proceeded: "In order to steal these boots and be able to return them the murderer must have had access to Kittredge's room. How? The simplest way was to take a room in the same hotel, on the same floor, opening on the same balcony. _Which is exactly what you did!_ The photographer saw you go into it after you choked him. You took this room for a month, but you never went back to it after the day of the crime."

"My dear sir, all this is away from the point. Granting that I choked the photographer, which I don't grant, and that I carried a pair of boots along a balcony and rented a room which I didn't occupy, how does that connect me with the murder of--what did you say his name was?"

"Martinez," answered the judge patiently.

"Ah, Martinez! Well, why did I murder this person?" asked the prisoner facetiously. "What had I to gain by his death? Can you make that clear? Can you even prove that I was at the place where he was murdered at the critical moment? By the way, where _was_ the gentleman murdered? If I'm to defend myself I ought to have some details of the affair."

The judge and Coquenil exchanged some whispered words. Then the magistrate said quietly: "I'll give you one detail about the murderer; he is a left-handed man."

"Yes? And _am_ I left-handed?"

"We'll know that definitely in the morning when you undergo the Bertillon measurements. In the meantime M. Coquenil can testify that you use your left hand with wonderful skill."

"Referring, I suppose," sneered the prisoner, "to our imaginary encounter on the Champs Elysees, when M. Coquenil claims to have used his teeth on my leg."

Quick as a flash M. Paul bent toward the judge and said something in a low tone.

"Ah, yes!" exclaimed Hauteville with a start of satisfaction. Then to Groener: "How do you happen to know that this encounter took place on the Champs Elysees?"

"Why--er--he said so just now," answered the other uneasily.

"I think not. Was the Champs Elysees mentioned, Jules?" he turned to the clerk.

Jules looked back conscientiously through his notes and shook his head. "Nothing has been said about the Champs Elysees."

"I must have imagined it," muttered the prisoner.

"Very clever of you, Groener," said the judge dryly, "to imagine the exact street where the encounter took place. You couldn't have done better if you had known it."

"You see what comes of talking without the advice of counsel," remarked Maitre Cure in funereal tones.

"Rubbish!" flung back the prisoner. "This examination is of no importance, anyhow."

"Of course not, of course not," purred the magistrate. Then, abruptly, his whole manner changed.

"Groener," he said, and his voice rang sternly, "I've been patient with you so far, I've tolerated your outrageous arrogance and impertinence, partly to entrap you, as I have, and partly because I always give suspected persons a certain amount of latitude at first. Now, my friend, you've had your little fling and--it's my turn. We are coming to a part of this examination that you will not find quite so amusing. In fact you will realize before you have been twenty-four hours at the Sante that---"

"I'm not going to the Sante," interrupted Groener insolently.

Hauteville motioned to the guard. "Put the handcuffs on him."

The guard stepped forward and obeyed, handling the man none too tenderly. Whereupon the accused once more lost his fine self-control and was swept with furious anger.

"Mark my words, Judge Hauteville," he threatened fiercely, "you have ordered handcuffs put on a prisoner _for the last time_."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the magistrate.

[Illustration: ""You have ordered handcuffs put on a prisoner _for the last time_.""]

But almost instantly Groener had become calm again. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I'm a little on my nerves. I'll behave myself now, I'm ready for those things you spoke of that are not so amusing."

"That's better," approved Hauteville, but Coquenil, watching the prisoner, shook his head doubtfully. There was something in this man's mind that they did not understand.

"Groener," demanded the magistrate impressively, "do you still deny any connection with this crime or any knowledge concerning it?"

"I do," answered the accused.

"As I said before, I think you are lying, I believe you killed Martinez, but it's possible I am mistaken. I was mistaken in my first impression about Kittredge--the evidence seemed strong against him, and I should certainly have committed him for trial had it not been for the remarkable work on the case done by M. Coquenil."

"I realize that," replied Groener with a swift and evil glance at the detective, "but even M. Coquenil might make a mistake."

Back of the quiet-spoken words M. Paul felt a controlled rage and a violence of hatred that made him mutter to himself: "It's just as well this fellow is where he can't do any more harm!"

"I warned you," pursued the judge, "that we are coming to an unpleasant part of this examination. It is unpleasant because it forces a guilty person to betray himself and reveal more or less of the truth that he tries to hide."

The prisoner looked up incredulously. "You say it forces him to betray himself?"

"That's practically what it does. There may be men strong enough and self-controlled enough to resist but we haven't found such a person yet. It's true the system is quite recently devised, it hasn't been thoroughly tested, but so far we have had wonderful results and--it's just the thing for your case."

Groener was listening carefully. "Why?"

"Because, if you are guilty, we shall know it, and can go on confidently looking for certain links now missing in the chain of evidence against you. On the other hand, if you are innocent, we shall know that, too, and--if you are innocent, Groener, here is your chance to prove it."

If the prisoner's fear was stirred he did not show it, for he answered mockingly: "How convenient! I suppose you have a scales that registers innocent or guilty when the accused stands on it?"

Hauteville shook his head. "It's simpler than that. We make the accused register his own guilt or his own innocence with his own words."

"Whether he wishes to or not?"

The other nodded grimly. "Within certain limits--yes."

"How?"

The judge opened a leather portfolio and selected several sheets of paper ruled in squares. Then he took out his watch.

"On these sheets," he explained, "M. Coquenil and I have written down about a hundred words, simple, everyday words, most of them, such as 'house,' 'music,' 'tree,' 'baby,' that have no particular significance; among these words, however, we have introduced thirty that have some association with this crime, words like 'Ansonia,' 'billiards,' 'pistol.' Do you

understand?"

"Yes."

"I shall speak these words slowly, one by one, and when I speak a word I want you to speak another word that my word suggests. For example, if I say 'tree,' you might say 'garden,' if I say 'house,' you might say 'chair.' Of course you are free to say any word you please, but you will find yourself irresistibly drawn toward certain ones according as you are innocent or guilty.

"For instance, Martinez, the Spaniard, was widely known as a billiard player. Now, if I should say 'billiard player,' and you had no personal feeling about Martinez, you might easily, by association of ideas, say 'Spaniard'; but, if you had killed Martinez and wished to conceal your crime then, when I said 'billiard player' you would not say 'Spaniard,' but would choose some innocent word like table or chalk. That is a crude illustration, but it may give you the idea."

"And is that all?" asked Groener, in evident relief.

"No, there is also the time taken in choosing a word. If I say 'pen' or 'umbrella' it may take you three quarters of a second to answer 'ink' or 'rain,' while it may take another man whose mind acts slowly a second and a quarter or even more for his reply; each person has his or her average time for the thought process, some longer, some shorter. But that time process is always lengthened after one of the critical or emotional words, I mean if the person is guilty. Thus, if I say, 'Ansonia' to you, and you are the murderer of Martinez, it will take you one or two or three seconds longer to decide upon a safe answering word than it would have taken if you were not the murderer and spoke the first word that came to your tongue. Do you see?"

"I see," shrugged the prisoner, "but--after all, it's only an experiment, it never would carry weight in a court of law."

"Never is a long time," said the judge. "Wait ten years. We have a wonderful mental microscope here and the world will learn to use it. I use it now, and I happen to be in charge of this investigation."

Groener was silent, his fine dark eyes fixed keenly on the judge.

"Do you really think," he asked presently, while the old patronizing smile flickered about his mouth, "that if I were guilty of this crime I could not make these answers without betraying myself?"

"I'm sure you could not."

"Then if I stood the test you would believe me innocent?"

The magistrate reflected a moment. "I should be forced to believe one of two things," he said; "either that you are innocent or that you are a man of extraordinary mental power. I don't believe the latter so--yes, I should think you innocent."

"Let me understand this," laughed the prisoner; "you say over a number of words and I answer with other words. You note the exact moment when you speak your word and the exact moment when I speak mine, then you see how many seconds elapse between the two moments. Is that it?"

"That's it, only I have a watch that marks the fifths of a second. Are you willing to make the test?"

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Why should you refuse if you are innocent?"

"But if I do?"

The magistrate's face hardened. "If you refuse to-day I shall know how to _force_ you to my will another day. Did you ever hear of the third degree, Groener?" he asked sharply.

As the judge became threatening the prisoner's good nature increased. "After all," he said carelessly, "what does it matter? Go ahead with your little game. It rather amuses me."

And, without more difficulty, the test began, Hauteville speaking the prepared words and handling the stop watch while Coquenil, sitting beside him, wrote down the answered words and the precise time intervals.

First, they established Groener's average or normal time of reply when there was no emotion or mental effort involved. The judge said "milk" and Groener at once, by association of ideas, said "cream"; the judge said "smoke," Groener replied "fire"; the judge said "early," Groener said "late"; the judge said "water," Groener answered "river"; the judge said "tobacco," Groener answered "pipe." And the intervals varied from four fifths of a second to a second and a fifth, which was taken as the prisoner's average time for the untroubled thought process.

"He's clever!" reflected Coquenil. "He's establishing a slow average."

Then began the real test, the judge going deliberately through the entire list which included thirty important words scattered among seventy unimportant ones. The thirty important words were:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. NOTRE DAME. | 16. DETECTIVE. |
| 2. EYEHOLE. | 17. BRAZIL. |
| 3. WATCHDOG. | 18. CANARY BIRD. |
| 4. PHOTOGRAPHER. | 19. ALICE. |
| 5. GUILLOTINE. | 20. RED SKY. |
| 6. CHAMPS ELYSEES. | 21. ASSASSIN. |
| 7. FALSE BEARD. | 22. BOOTS. |
| 8. BRUSSELS. | 23. MARY. |
| 9. GIBELIN. | 24. COACHING PARTY. |
| 10. SACRISTAN. | 25. JAPANESE PRINT. |
| 11. VILLA MONTMORENCY. | 26. CHARITY BAZAAR. |
| 12. RAOUL. | 27. FOOTPRINTS. |
| 13. DREAMS. | 28. MARGARET. |
| 14. AUGER. | 29. RED HAIR. |
| 15. JIU JITSU. | 30. FOURTH OF JULY. |

They went through this list slowly, word by word, with everything carefully recorded, which took nearly an hour; then they turned back to the beginning and went through the list again, so that, to the hundred original words, Groener gave two sets of answering words, most of which proved to be the same, especially in the seventy unimportant words. Thus both times he answered "darkness" for "light," "tea" for "coffee," "clock" for "watch," and "handle" for "broom." There were a few exceptions as when he answered "salt" for "sugar" the first time and "sweet" for "sugar" the second time; almost always, however, his memory brought back, automatically, the same unimportant word at the second questioning that he had given at the first questioning.

It was different, however, with the important words, as Hauteville pointed out when the test was finished, in over half the cases the accused had answered different words in the two questionings.

"You made up your mind, Groener," said the judge as he glanced over the sheets, "that you would answer the critical words within your average time

of reply and you have done it, but you have betrayed yourself in another way, as I knew you would. In your desire to answer quickly you repeatedly chose words that you would not have chosen if you had reflected longer; then, in going through the list a second time, you realized this and improved on your first answers by substituting more innocent words. For example, the first time you answered 'hole' when I said 'auger,' but the second time you answered 'hammer.' You said to yourself: 'Hole is not a good answer because he will think I am thinking, of those eyeholes, so I'll change it to "hammer" which, means nothing.' For the same reason when I said 'Fourth of July' you answered 'banquet' the first time and 'America' the second time, which shows that the Ansonia banquet was in your mind. And when I said 'watchdog' you answered first 'scent' and then 'tail'; when I said 'Brazil' you answered first 'ship' and then 'coffee,' when I said 'dreams' you answered first 'fear' and then 'sleep'; you made these changes with the deliberate purpose to get as far away as possible from associations with the crime."

"Not at all," contradicted Groener, "I made the changes because every word has many associations and I followed the first one that came into my head. When we went through the list a second time I did not remember or try to remember the answers I had given the first time."

"Ah, but that is just the point," insisted the magistrate, "in the seventy unimportant words you did remember and you did answer practically the same words both times, your memory only failed in the thirty important words. Besides, in spite of your will power, the test reveals emotional disturbance."

"In me?" scoffed the prisoner.

"Precisely. It is true you kept your answers to the important words within your normal tone of reply, but in at least five cases you went beyond this normal time in answering the unimportant words."

Groener shrugged his shoulders. "The words are unimportant and so are the answers."

"Do you think so? Then explain this. You were answering regularly at the rate of one answer in a second or so when suddenly you hesitated and clenched your hands and waited four and two fifths seconds before answering 'feather' to the simple word 'hat.'"

"Perhaps I was tired, perhaps I was bored."

The magistrate leaned nearer. "Yes, and perhaps you were inwardly disturbed by the shock and strain of answering the previous word quickly and unconcernedly. I didn't warn you of that danger. Do you know what the previous word was?"

"No."

"It was guillotine!"

"Ah?" said the prisoner, absolutely impassive.

"And why did you waver and wipe your brow and draw in your breath quickly and wait six and one fifth seconds before answering 'violin' when I gave you the word 'music'?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Then I'll tell you; it was because you were again deeply agitated by the previous word 'coaching party' which you had answered instantly with 'horses.'"

"I don't see anything agitating in the word 'coaching party,'" said Groener.

Hauteville measured the prisoner for a moment in grim silence, then, throwing into his voice and manner all the impressiveness of his office and his stern personality he said: "And why did you start from your seat and tremble nervously and wait _nine and four fifths seconds_ before you were able to answer 'salad' to the word 'potato'?"

Groener stared stolidly at the judge and did not speak.

"Shall I tell you why? It was because your heart was pounding, your head throbbing, your whole mental machinery was clogged and numbed by the shock of the word before, by the terror that went through you _when you answered 'worsted work' to 'Charity Bazaar.'_"

The prisoner bounded to his feet with a hoarse cry: "My God, you have no right to torture me like this!" His face was deathly white, his eyes were staring.

"We've got him going now," muttered Coquenil.

"Sit down!" ordered the judge. "You can stop this examination very easily by telling the truth."

The prisoner dropped back weakly on his chair and sat with eyes closed and head fallen forward. He did not speak.

"Do you hear, Groener?" continued Hauteville. "You can save yourself a great deal of trouble by confessing your part in this crime. Look here! Answer me!"

With an effort the man straightened up and met the judge's eyes. His face was drawn as with physical pain.

"I--I feel faint," he murmured. "Could you--give me a little brandy?"

"Here," said Coquenil, producing a flask. "Let him have a drop of this."

The guard put the flask to the prisoner's lips and Groener took several swallows.

"Thanks!" he whispered.

"I told you it wouldn't be amusing," said the magistrate grimly. "Come now, it's one thing or the other, either you confess or we go ahead."

"I have nothing to confess, I know nothing about this crime--nothing."

"Then what was the matter with you just now?"

With a flash of his former insolence the prisoner answered: "Look at that clock and you'll see what was the matter. It's after ten, you've had me here for five hours and--I've had no food since noon. It doesn't make a man a murderer because he's hungry, does it?"

The plea seemed reasonable and the prisoner's distress genuine, but, somehow, Coquenil was skeptical; he himself had eaten nothing since midday, he had been too busy and absorbed, and he was none the worse for it; besides, he remembered what a hearty luncheon the wood carver had eaten and he could not quite believe in this sudden exhaustion. Several times, furthermore, he fancied he had caught Groener's eye fixed anxiously on the clock. Was it possible the fellow was trying to gain time? But why? How could that serve him? What could he be waiting for?

As the detective puzzled over this there shot through his mind an idea for a move against Groener's resistance, so simple, yet promising such dramatic effectiveness that he turned quickly to Hauteville and said: "I _think_ it might be as well to let him have some supper."

The judge nodded in acquiescence and directed the guard to take the prisoner into the outer office and have something to eat brought in for him.

"Well," he asked when they were alone, "what is it?"

Then, for several minutes Coquenil talked earnestly, convincingly, while the magistrate listened.

"It ought not to take more than an hour or so to get the things here," concluded the detective, "and if I read the signs right, it will just about finish him."

"Possibly, possibly," reflected the judge. "Anyhow it's worth trying," and he gave the necessary orders to his clerk. "Let Tignol go," he directed. "Tell him to wake the man up, if he's in bed, and not to mind what it costs. Tell him to take an auto. Hold on, I'll speak to him myself."

The clerk waited respectfully at the door as the judge hurried out, whereupon Coquenil, lighting a cigarette, moved to the open window and stood there for a long time blowing contemplative smoke rings into the quiet summer night.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MOVING PICTURE

"Are you feeling better?" asked the judge an hour later when the accused was led back.

"Yes," answered Groener with recovered self-possession, and again the detective noticed that he glanced anxiously at the clock. It was a quarter past eleven.

"We will have the visual test now," said Hauteville; "we must go to another room. Take the prisoner to Dr. Duprat's laboratory," he directed the guard.

Passing down the wide staircase, strangely silent now, they entered a long narrow passageway leading to a remote wing of the Palais de Justice. First went the guard with Groener close beside him, then twenty paces, behind came M. Paul and the magistrate and last came the weary clerk with Maitre Cure. Their footsteps, echoed ominously along the stone floor, their shadows danced fantastically before them and behind them under gas jets that flared through the tunnel.

"I hope this goes off well," whispered the judge uneasily. "You don't think they have forgotten anything?"

"Trust Papa Tignol to obey orders," replied Coquenil. "Ah!" he started and gripped his companion's arm. "Do you remember what I told you about those alleyway footprints? About the pressure marks? Look!" and he pointed ahead excitedly. "I knew it, he has gout or rheumatism, just touches that come and go. He had it that night when he escaped from the Ansonia and he has it now. See!"

The judge observed the prisoner carefully and nodded in agreement. There

was no doubt about it, as he walked _Groener was limping noticeably on his left foot!_

Dr. Duprat was waiting for them in his laboratory, absorbed in recording the results of his latest experiments. A kind-eyed, grave-faced man was this, who, for all his modesty, was famous over Europe as a brilliant worker in psychological criminology. Bertillon had given the world a method of identifying criminals' bodies, and now Duprat was perfecting a method of recognizing their mental states, especially any emotional disturbances connected with fear, anger or remorse.

Entering the laboratory, they found themselves in a large room, quite dark, save for an electric lantern at one end that threw a brilliant circle on a sheet stretched at the other end. The light reflected from this sheet showed the dim outlines of a tiered amphitheater before which was a long table spread with strange-looking instruments, electrical machines and special apparatus for psychological experiments. On the walls were charts and diagrams used by the doctor in his lectures.

"Everything ready?" inquired the magistrate after an exchange of greetings with Dr. Duprat.

"Everything," answered the latter. "Is this the--er--the subject?" he glanced at the prisoner.

Hauteville nodded and the doctor beckoned to the guard.

"Please bring him over here. That's right--in front of the lantern." Then he spoke gently to Groener: "Now, my friend, we are not going to do anything that will cause you the slightest pain or inconvenience. These instruments look formidable, but they are really good friends, for they help us to understand one another. Most of the trouble in this world comes because half the people do not understand the other half. Please turn sideways to the light."

For some moments he studied the prisoner in silence.

"Interesting, _ve_ry interesting," murmured the doctor, his fine student's face alight. "Especially the lobe of this ear! I will leave a note about it for Bertillon himself, he mustn't miss the lobe of this ear. Please turn a little for the back of the head. Thanks! Great width! Extraordinary fullness. Now around toward the light! The eyes--ah! The brow--excellent! Yes, yes, I know about the hand," he nodded to Coquenil, "but the head is even more remarkable. I must study this head when we have time--_ve_ry remarkable. Tell me, my friend, do you suffer from sudden shooting pains--here, over your eyes?"

"No," said Groener.

"No? I should have thought you might. Well, well!" he proceeded kindly, "we must have a talk one of these days. Perhaps I can make some suggestions. I see so _many_ heads, but--not many like yours, no, no, not many like yours."

He paused and glanced toward an assistant who was busy with the lantern. The assistant looked up and nodded respectfully.

"Ah, we can begin," continued the doctor. "We must have these off," he pointed to the handcuffs. "Also the coat. Don't be alarmed! You will experience nothing unpleasant--nothing. There! Now I want the right arm bare above the elbow. No, no, it's the left arm, I remember, I want the left arm bare above the elbow."

When these directions had been carried out, Dr. Duprat pointed to a heavy wooden chair with a high back and wide arms.

"Please sit here," he went on, "and slip your left arm into this leather sleeve. It's a little tight because it has a rubber lining, but you won't mind it after a minute or two."

Groener walked to the chair and then drew back. "What are you going to do to me?" he asked.

"We are going to show you some magic lantern pictures," answered the doctor.

"Why must I sit in this chair? Why do you want my arm in that leather thing?"

"I told you, Groener," put in the judge, "that we were coming here for the visual test; it's part of your examination. Some pictures of persons and places will be thrown on that sheet and, as each one appears, I want you to say what it is. Most of the pictures are familiar to everyone."

"Yes, but the leather sleeve?" persisted the prisoner.

"The leather sleeve is like the stop watch, it records your emotions. Sit down!"

Groener hesitated and the guard pushed him toward the chair. "Wait!" he said. "I want to know how it records my emotions."

The magistrate answered with a patience that surprised M. Paul. "There is a pneumatic arrangement," he explained, "by which the pulsations of your heart and the blood pressure in your arteries are registered--automatically. Now then! I warn you if you don't sit down willingly--well, you had better sit down."

Coquenil was watching closely and, through the prisoner's half shut eyes, he caught a flash of anger, a quick clenching of the freed hands and then--then Groener sat down.

Quickly and skillfully the assistant adjusted the leather sleeve over the bared left arm and drew it close with straps.

"Not too tight," said Duprat. "You feel a sense of throbbing at first, but it is nothing. Besides, we shall take the sleeve off shortly. Now then," he turned toward the lantern.

Immediately a familiar scene appeared upon the sheet, a colored photograph of the Place de la Concorde.

"What is it?" asked the doctor pleasantly.

The prisoner was silent.

"You surely recognize this picture. Look! The obelisk and the fountain, the Tuileries gardens, the arches of the Rue de Rivoli, and the Madeleine, there at the end of the Rue Royale. Come, what is it?"

"The Place de la Concorde," answered Groener sullenly.

"Of course. You see how simple it is. Now another."

The picture changed to a view of the grand opera house and at the same moment a point of light appeared in the headpiece back of the chair. It was shaded so that the prisoner could not see it and it illumined a graduated white dial on which was a glass tube about thirty inches long, the whole resembling a barometer. Inside the tube a red column moved regularly up and down, up and down, in steady beats and Coquenil understood that this column

was registering the beating of Groener's heart. Standing behind the chair, the doctor, the magistrate, and the detective could at the same time watch the pulsating column and the pictures on the sheet; but the prisoner could not see the column, he did not know it was there, he saw only the pictures.

"What is that?" asked the doctor.

Groener had evidently decided to make the best of the situation for he answered at once: "The grand opera house."

"Good! Now another! What is that?"

"The Bastille column."

"Right! And this?"

"The Champs Elysees."

"And this?"

"Notre-Dame church."

So far the beats had come uniformly about one in a second, for the man's pulse was slow; at each beat the liquid in the tube shot up six inches and then dropped six inches, but, at the view of Notre-Dame, the column rose only three inches, then dropped back and shot up seven inches.

The doctor nodded gravely while Coquenil, with breathless interest, with a morbid fascination, watched the beating of this red column. It was like the beating of red blood.

"_And this?_"

As the picture changed there was a quiver in the pulsating column, a hesitation with a quick fluttering at the bottom of the stroke, then the red line shot up full nine inches.

M. Paul glanced at the sheet and saw a perfect reproduction of private room Number Six in the Ansonia. Everything was there as on the night of the crime, the delicate yellow hangings, the sofa, the table set for two. And, slowly, as they looked, two holes appeared in the wall. Then a dim shape took form upon the floor, more and more distinctly until the dissolving lens brought a man's body into clear view, a body stretched face downward in a dark red pool that grew and widened, slowly straining and wetting the polished wood.

"Groener," said the magistrate, his voice strangely formidable in the shadows, "do you recognize this room?"

"No," said the prisoner impassively, but the column was pulsing wildly.

"You have been in this room?"

"Never."

"Nor looked through these eyeholes?"

"No."

"Nor seen that man lying on the floor?"

"No."

Now the prisoner's heart was beating evenly again, somehow he had regained his self-possession.

"You are lying, Groener," accused the judge. "You remember this man perfectly. Come, we will lift him from the floor and look him in the face, full in the face. There!" He signaled the lantern operator and there leaped forth on the sheet the head of Martinez, the murdered, mutilated head with shattered eye and painted cheeks and the greenish death pallor showing underneath. A ghastly, leering cadaver in collar and necktie, dressed up and photographed at the morgue, and now flashed hideously at the prisoner out of the darkness. Yet Groener's heart pulsed on steadily with only a slight quickening, with less quickening than Coquenil felt in his own heart.

"Who is it?" demanded the judge.

"I don't know," declared the accused.

Again the picture changed.

"Who is this?"

"Napoleon Bonaparte."

"And this?"

"Prince Bismarck."

"And this?"

"Queen Victoria."

Here, suddenly, at the view of England's peaceful sovereign, Groener seemed thrown into frightful agitation, not Groener as he sat on the chair, cold and self-contained, but Groener as revealed by the unsuspected dial. Up and down in mad excitement leaped the red column with many little breaks and quiverings at the bottom of the beats and with tremendous up-shootings as if the frightened heart were trying to burst the tube with its spurting red jet.

The doctor put his mouth close to Coquenil's ear and whispered: "It's the shock showing now, the shock that he held back after the body."

Then he leaned over Groener's shoulder and asked kindly: "Do you feel your heart beating fast, my friend?"

"No," murmured the prisoner, "my--my heart is beating as usual."

"You will certainly recognize the next picture," pursued the judge. "It shows a woman and a little girl! There! Do you know these faces, Groener?"

As he spoke there appeared the fake photograph that Coquenil had found in Brussels, Alice at the age of twelve with the smooth young widow.

The prisoner shook his head. "I don't know them--I never saw them."

"Groener," warned the magistrate, "there is no use keeping up this denial, you have betrayed yourself already."

"No," cried the prisoner with a supreme rally of his will power, "I have betrayed nothing--nothing," and, once more, while the doctor marveled, his pulse steadied and strengthened and grew normal.

"What a man!" muttered Coquenil.

"We know the facts," went on Hauteville sternly, "we know why you killed Martinez and why you disguised yourself as a wood carver."

The prisoner's face lighted with a mocking smile. "If you know all that, why waste time questioning me?"

"You're a good actor, sir, but we shall strip off your mask and quiet your impudence. Look at the girl in this _false_ picture which you had cunningly made in Brussels. Look at her! Who is she? There is the key to the mystery! There is the reason for your killing Martinez! _He knew the truth about this girl_."

Now the prisoner's pulse was running wild, faster and faster, but with no more violent spurtings and leapings; the red column throbbed swiftly and faintly at the bottom of the tube as if the heart were weakening.

"A hundred and sixty to the minute," whispered Duprat to the magistrate. "It is dangerous to go on."

Hauteville shrugged his shoulders.

"Martinez knew the truth," he went on, "Martinez held your secret. How had Martinez come upon it? Who was Martinez? A billiard player, a shallow fellow, vain of his conquests over silly women. The last man in Paris, one would say, to interfere with your high purposes or penetrate the barriers of wealth and power that surrounded you."

"You--you flatter me! What am I, pray, a marquis or a duke?" chaffed the other, but the trembling dial belied his gayety, and even from the side Coquenil could see that the man's face was as tense and pallid as the sheet before him.

"As I said, the key to this murder," pursued the magistrate, "is the secret that Martinez held. Without that nothing can be understood and no justice can be done. The whole aim of this investigation has been to get the secret and _we have got it!_ Groener, you have delivered yourself into our hands, you have written this secret for us in words of terror and we have read them, we know what Martinez knew when you took his life, we know the story of the medal that he wore on his breast. Do _you_ know the story?"

"I tell you I know nothing about this man or his medal," flung back the prisoner.

"No? Then you will be glad to hear the story. It was a medal of solid gold, awarded Martinez by the city of Paris for conspicuous bravery in saving lives at the terrible Charity Bazaar fire. You have heard of the Charity Bazaar fire, Groener?"

"Yes, I--I have heard of it."

"But perhaps you never heard the details or, if you did, you may have forgotten them. _Have_ you forgotten the details of the Charity Bazaar fire?"

Charity Bazaar fire! Three times, with increasing emphasis, the magistrate had spoken those sinister words, yet the dial gave no sign, the red column throbbed on steadily.

"I am not interested in the subject," answered the accused.

"Ah, but you are, or you ought to be. It was such a shocking affair. Hundreds burned to death, think of that! Cowardly men trampling women and children! Our noblest families plunged into grief and bereavement! Princesses burned to death! Duchesses burned to death! Beautiful women burned to death! _Rich women burned to death!_ Think of it, Groener, and--" he signaled the operator, "_and look at it!_"

As he spoke the awful tragedy began in one of those extraordinary moving pictures that the French make after a catastrophe, giving to the imitation even greater terrors than were in the genuine happening. Here before them now leaped redder and fiercer flames than ever crackled through the real Charity Bazaar; here were women and children perishing in more savage torture than the actual victims endured; here were horrors piled on horrors, exaggerated horrors, manufactured horrors, until the spectacle became unendurable, until one all but heard the screams and breathed the sickening odor of burning human flesh.

Coquenil had seen this picture in one of the boulevard theaters and, straightway, after the precious nine-second clew of the word test, he had sent Papa Tignol off for it posthaste, during the supper intermission. If the mere word "Charity Bazaar" had struck this man dumb with fear what would the thing itself do, the revolting, ghastly thing?

That was the question now, what would this hideous moving picture do to a fire-fearing assassin already on the verge of collapse? Would it break the last resistance of his overwrought nerves or would he still hold out?

Silently, intently the three men waited, bending over the dial as the test proceeded, as the fiends of torture and death swept past in lurid triumph.

The picture machine whirled on with droning buzz, the accused sat still, eyes on the sheet, the red column pulsed steadily, up and down, up and down, now a little higher, now a little quicker, but--for a minute, for two minutes--nothing decisive happened, nothing that they had hoped for; yet Coquenil felt, he knew that something was going to happen, he knew it by the agonized tension of the room, by the atmosphere of pain about them. If Groener had not spoken, he himself, in the poignancy of his own distress, must have cried out or stamped on the floor or broken something, just to end the silence.

Then, suddenly, the tension snapped, the prisoner sprang to his feet and, tearing his arm from the leather sleeve, he faced his tormentors desperately, eyes blazing, features convulsed:

"No, no, no!" he shrieked. "You dogs! You cowards!"

"Lights up," ordered Hauteville. Then to the guard: "Put the handcuffs on him."

[Illustration: "No, no, no!" he shrieked. "You dogs! You cowards!"]

But the prisoner would not be silenced. "What does all this prove?" he screamed in rage. "Nothing! Nothing! You make me look at disgusting, abominable pictures and--why shouldn't my heart beat? Anybody's heart would beat--if he had a heart."

The judge paid no attention to this outburst, but went on in a tone as keen and cold as a knife: "Before you go to your cell, Groener, you shall hear what we charge against you. Your wife perished in the Charity Bazaar fire. She was a very rich woman, probably an American, who had been married before and who had a daughter by her previous marriage. That daughter is the girl you call Alice. Her true name is Mary. She was in the fire with her mother and was rescued by Martinez, but the shock of seeing her mother burned to death and, perhaps, the shock of seeing you refuse to save her mother----"

"It's a lie!" yelled the prisoner.

"All this terror and anguish caused a violent mental disturbance in the girl and resulted in a failure of her memory. When she came out of the fire it was as if a curtain had fallen over her past life, she had lost the sense of her own personality, she did not know her own name, she was

helpless, you could do as you pleased with her. _And she was a great heiress!_ If she lived, she inherited her mother's fortune; if she died, this fortune reverted to you. So shrinking, perhaps, from the actual killing of this girl, you destroyed her identity; you gave it out that she, too, had perished in the flames and you proceeded to enjoy her stolen fortune while she sold candles in Notre-Dame church."

"You have no proof of it!" shouted Groener.

"No? What is this?" and he signaled the operator, whereupon the lights went down and the picture of Alice and the widow appeared again. "There is the girl whom you have wronged and defrauded. Now watch the woman, your Brussels accomplice, watch her carefully--carefully," he motioned to the operator and the smooth young widow faded gradually, while the face and form of another woman took her place beside the girl. "Now we have the picture as it was before you falsified it. Do you recognize _this_ face?"

"No," answered the prisoner, but his heart was pounding.

"It is your wife. Look!"

Under the picture came the inscription: "_To my dear husband Raoul with the love of Margaret and her little Mary_".

"I wish we had the dial on him now," whispered Duprat to M. Paul.

"There are your two victims!" accused the magistrate. "Mary and Margaret! How long do you suppose it will take us to identify them among the Charity Bazaar unfortunates? It is a matter of a few hours' record searching. What must we look for? A rich American lady who married a Frenchman. Her name is Margaret. She had a daughter named Mary. The Frenchman's name is Raoul and he probably has a title. We have, also, the lady's photograph and the daughter's photograph and a specimen of the lady's handwriting. Could anything be simpler? The first authority we meet on noble fortune hunters will tell us all about it. And then, M. Adolf Groener, we shall know whether it is a, marquis or a duke whose name _must be added to the list of distinguished assassins_".

He paused for a reply, but none came. The guard moved suddenly in the shadows and called for help.

"Lights!" said the doctor sharply and, as the lamps shone out, the prisoner was seen limp and white, sprawling over a chair.

Duprat hurried to him and pressed an ear to his heart.

"He has fainted," said the doctor.

Coquenil looked half pityingly at his stricken adversary. "Down and out," he murmured.

Duprat, meantime, was working over the prisoner, rubbing his wrists, loosening his shirt and collar.

"Ammonia--quick," he said to his assistant, and a moment later, with the strong fumes at his nostrils, Groener stirred and opened his eyes weakly.

Just then a sound was heard in the distance as of a galloping horse. The white-faced prisoner started and listened eagerly. Nearer and nearer came the rapid hoof beats, echoing through the deserted streets. Now the horse was crossing the little bridge near the hospital, now he was coming madly down the Boulevard du Palais. Who was this rider dashing so furiously through the peaceful night?

As they all turned wondering, the horse drew up suddenly before the palace

and a voice was heard in sharp command. Then the great iron gates swung open and the horse stamped in.

Hauteville hurried to the open window and stood there listening. Just below him in the courtyard he made out of the flashing helmet and imposing uniform of a mounted *_garde de Paris_*. And he caught some quick words that made him start.

"A messenger from the Prime Minister," muttered the judge, "on urgent business *_with me_*."

Groener heard and, with a long sigh, sank back against the chair and closed his eyes, but Coquenil noticed uneasily that just a flicker of the old patronizing smile was playing about his pallid lips.

CHAPTER XXVI

COQUENIL'S MOTHER

In accordance with orders, Papa Tignol appeared at the Villa Montmorency betimes the next morning. It was a perfect summer's day and the old man's heart was light as he walked up the Avenue des Tilleuls, past vine-covered walls and smiling gardens.

"Eh, eh!" he chuckled, "it's good to be alive on a day like this and to know what *_I_* know."

He was thinking, with a delicious thrill, of the rapid march of events in the last twenty-four hours, of the keen pursuit, the tricks and disguises, the anxiety and the capture and then of the great coup of the evening. *_Bon dieu_*, what a day!

And now the chase was over! The murderer was tucked away safely in a cell at the depot. Ouf, he had given them some bad moments, this wood carver! But for M. Paul they would never have caught the slippery devil, never! Ah, what a triumph for M. Paul! He would have the whole department bowing down to him now. And Gibelin! Eh, eh! Gibelin!

Tignol closed the iron gate carefully behind him and walked down the graveled walk with as little crunching as possible. He had an idea that Coquenil might still be sleeping and if anyone in Paris had earned a long sleep it was Paul Coquenil.

To his surprise, however, the detective was not only up and dressed, but he was on his knees in the study before a large leather bag into which he was hastily throwing various garments brought down by the faithful Melanie, whose joy at having her master home again was evidently clouded by this prospect of an imminent departure.

"Ah, Papa Tignol!" said M. Paul as the old man entered, but there was no heartiness in his tone. "Sit down, sit down."

Tignol sank back in one of the red-leather chairs and waited wonderingly. This was not the buoyant reception he had expected.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked finally.

"Why--er--why, yes," nodded Coquenil, but he went on packing and did not say what was wrong. And Tignol did not ask.

"Going away?" he ventured after a silence.

M. Paul shut the bag with a jerk and tightened the side straps, then he threw himself wearily into a chair.

"Yes, I--I'm going away."

The detective leaned back and closed his eyes, he looked worn and gray. Tignol watched him anxiously through a long silence. What could be the trouble? What had happened? He had never seen M. Paul like this, so broken and--one would say, discouraged. And this was the moment of his triumph, the proudest moment in his career. It must be the reaction from these days of strain, yes that was it.

M. Paul opened his eyes and said in a dull tone: "Did you take the girl to Pougeot last night?"

"Yes, she's all right. The commissary says he will look after her as if she were his own daughter until he hears from you."

"Good! And--you showed her the ring?"

The old man nodded. "She understands, she will be careful, but--there's nothing for her to worry about now--is there?"

Coquenil's face darkened. "You'd better let me have the ring before I forget it."

"Thanks!" He slipped the old talisman on his finger, and then, after a troubled pause, he said: "There is more for her to worry about than ever."

"More? You mean on account of Groener?"

"Yes."

"But he's caught, he's in prison."

The detective shook his head. "He's not in prison."

"Not in prison?"

"He was set at liberty about--about two o'clock this morning."

Tignol stared stupidly, scarcely taking in the words. "But--but he's guilty."

"I know."

"You have all this evidence against him?"

"Yes."

"Then--then how is he at liberty?" stammered the other.

Coquenil reached for a match, struck it deliberately and lighted a cigarette.

"By order of the Prime Minister," he said quietly, and blew out a long white fragrant cloud.

"You mean--without trial?"

"Yes--without trial. He's a very important person, Papa Tignol."

The old man scratched his head in perplexity. "I didn't know anybody was too important to be tried for murder."

"He _can't_ be tried until he's committed for trial by a judge."

"Well? And Hauteville?"

"Hauteville will never commit him."

"Why not?"

"Because Hauteville has been removed from office."

"Wha-at?"

"His commission was revoked this morning by order of the Minister of Justice."

"Judge Hauteville--discharged!" murmured Tignol, in bewilderment.

Coquenil nodded and then added sorrowfully: "And you, too, my poor friend. Everyone who has had anything to do with this case, from the highest to the lowest, will suffer. We all made a frightful mistake, they say, in daring to arrest and persecute this most distinguished and honorable citizen. Ha, ha!" he concluded bitterly as he lighted another cigarette.

"_C'est epatant!_" exclaimed Tignol. "He must be a rich devil!"

"He's rich and--much more."

"Whe-ew! He must be a senator or--or something like that?"

"Much more," said Coquenil grimly.

"More than a senator? Then--then a cabinet minister? No, it isn't possible?"

"He is more important than a cabinet minister, far more important."

"Holy snakes!" gasped Tignol. "I don't see anything left except the Prime Minister himself."

"This man is so highly placed," declared Coquenil gravely, "he is so powerful that----"

"Stop!" interrupted the other. "I know. He was in that coaching party; he killed the dog, it was--it was the Duke de Montreuil."

"No, it was not," replied Coquenil. "The Duke de Montreuil is rich and powerful, as men go in France, but this man is of international importance, his fortune amounts to a thousand million francs, at least, and his power is--well--he could treat the Duke de Montreuil like a valet."

"Who--who is he?"

Coquenil pointed to his table where a book lay open. "Do you see that red book? It's the Annuaire de la Noblesse Francaise. You'll find his name there--marked with a pencil."

Tignol went eagerly to the table, then, as he glanced at the printed page there came over his face an expression of utter amazement.

"It isn't possible!" he cried.

"I know," agreed Coquenil, "it isn't possible, but--_it's true!_"

"_Dieu de Dieu de Dieu!_" frowned the old man, bobbing his cropped head and

tugging at his sweeping black mustache. Then slowly in awe-struck tones he read from the great authority on French titles:

BARON FELIX RAOUL DE HEIDELMANN-BRUCK, only son of the Baron Georges Raoul de Heidelmann-Bruck, upon whom the title was conferred for industrial activities under the Second Empire. B. Jan. 19, 1863. Lieutenant in the 45th cuirassiers, now retired. Has extensive iron and steel works near St. Etienne. Also naval construction yards at Brest. Member of the Jockey Club, the Cercle de la Rue Royale, the Yacht Club of France, the Automobile Club, the Aero Club, etc. Decorations: Commander of the Legion of Honor, the order of St. Maurice and Lazare (Italy), the order of Christ (Portugal), etc. Address: Paris, Hotel Rue de Varennes Chateau near Langier, Touraine. Married Mrs. Elizabeth Coogan, who perished with her daughter Mary in the Charity Bazaar fire.

"You see, it's all there," said M. Paul. "His name is Raoul and his wife's name was Margaret. She died in the Charity Bazaar fire, and his stepdaughter Mary is put down as having died there, too. We know where she is."

"The devil! The devil! The devil!" muttered Tignol, his nut-cracker face screwed up in comical perplexity. "This will rip things wide, wide open."

The detective shook his head. "It won't rip anything open."

"But if he is guilty?"

"No one will know it, no one would believe it."

"You know it, you can prove it."

"How can I prove it? The courts are closed against me. And even if they weren't, do you suppose it would be possible to convict the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck of any crime? Nonsense! He's the most powerful man in France. He controls the banks, the bourse, the government. He can cause a money panic by lifting his hand. He can upset the ministry by a word over the telephone. He financed the campaign that brought in the present radical government, and his sister is the wife of the Prime Minister."

"And he killed Martinez!" added Tignol.

"Yes."

For fully a minute the two men faced each other in silence. M. Paul lighted another cigarette.

"Couldn't you tell what you know in the newspapers?"

"No newspaper in France would dare to print it," said Coquenil gravely.

"Perhaps there is some mistake," suggested the other, "perhaps he isn't the man."

The detective opened his table drawer and drew out several photographs. "Look at those!"

One by one Tignol studied the photographs. "It's the man we arrested, all right--without the beard."

"It's the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck," said Coquenil.

Tignol gazed at the pictures with a kind of fascination.

"How many millions did you say he has?"

"A thousand--or more."

"A thousand millions!" He screwed up his face again and pulled reflectively on his long red nose. "And I put the handcuffs on him! Holy camels!"

Coquenil lighted another cigarette and breathed in the smoke deeply.

"Aren't you smoking too many of those things? That makes five in ten minutes."

M. Paul shrugged his shoulders. "What's the difference?"

"I see, you're thinking out some plan," approved the other.

"Plan for what?"

"For putting this thousand-million-franc devil where he belongs," grinned the old man.

The detective eyed his friend keenly. "Papa Tignol, that's the prettiest compliment anyone ever paid me. In spite of all I have said you have confidence that I could do this man up--_somehow_, eh?"

"Sure!"

"I don't know, I don't know," reflected Coquenil, and a shadow of sadness fell over his pale, weary face. "Perhaps I could, but--I'm not going to try."

"You--you're not going to try?"

"No, I'm through, I wash my hands of the case. The Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck can sleep easily as far as I am concerned."

Tignol bounded to his feet and his little eyes flashed indignantly. "I don't believe it," he cried. "I won't have it. You can't tell me Paul Coquenil is afraid. _Are_ you afraid?"

"I don't think so," smiled the other.

"And Paul Coquenil hasn't been bought? He _can't_ be bought--can he?"

"I hope not."

"Then--then what in thunder do you mean," he demanded fiercely, "by saying you drop this case?"

M. Paul felt in his coat pocket and drew out a folded telegram. "Read that, old friend," he answered with emotion, "and--and thank you for your good opinion."

Slowly Tignol read the contents of the blue sheet.

M. PAUL COQUENIL, Villa Montmorency, Paris.

House and barn destroyed by incendiary fire in night. Your mother saved, but seriously injured. M. Abel says insurance policy had lapsed. Come at once.

ERNESTINE.

"_Quel malheur! Quel malheur!_" exclaimed the old man. "My poor M. Paul! Forgive me! I'm a stupid fool," and he grasped his companion's hand in quick sympathy.

"It's all right, you didn't understand," said the other gently.

"And you--you think it's _his_ doing?"

"Of course. He must have given the order in that cipher dispatch to Dubois. Dubois is a secret agent of the government. He communicated with the Prime Minister, but the Prime Minister was away inaugurating a statue; he didn't return until after midnight. That is why the man wasn't set at liberty sooner. No wonder he kept looking at the clock."

"And Dubois telegraphed to have this hellish thing done?"

"Yes, yes, they had warned me, they had killed my dog, and--and now they have struck at my mother." He bent down his head on his hands. "She's all I've got, Tignol, she's seventy years old and--infirm and--no, no, I quit, I'm through."

In his distress and perplexity the old man could think of nothing to say; he simply tugged at his fierce mustache and swore hair-raising oaths under his breath.

"And the insurance?" he asked presently. "What does that mean?"

"I sent the renewal money to this lawyer Abel," answered Coquenil in a dull tone. "They have used him against me to--to take my savings. I had put about all that I had into this home for my mother. You see they want to break my heart and--they've just about done it."

He was silent a moment, then glanced quickly at his watch. "Come, we have no time to lose. My train leaves in an hour. I have important things to explain--messages for Peugeot and the girl--I'll tell you in the carriage."

Five minutes later they were speeding swiftly in an automobile toward the Eastern railway station.

* * * * *

There followed three days of pitiful anxiety for Coquenil. His mother's health was feeble at the best, and the shock of this catastrophe, the sudden awakening in the night to find flames roaring about her, the difficult rescue, and the destruction of her peaceful home, all this was very serious for the old lady; indeed, there were twenty-four hours during which the village doctor could offer small comfort to the distracted son.

Madam Coquenil, however, never wavered in her sweet faith that all was well. She was comfortable now in the home of a hospitable neighbor and declared she would soon be on her feet again. It was this faith that saved her, vowed Ernestine, her devoted companion; but the doctor laughed and said it was the presence of M. Paul.

At any rate, within the week all danger was past and Coquenil observed uneasily that, along with her strength and gay humor, his mother was rapidly recovering her faculty of asking embarrassing questions and of understanding things that had not been told her. In the matter of keen intuitions it was like mother like son.

So, delay as he would and evade as he would, the truth had finally to be told, the whole unqualified truth; he had given up this case that he had thought so important, he had abandoned a fight that he had called the greatest of his life.

"Why have you done it, my boy?" the old lady asked him gently, her searching eyes fixed gravely on him. "Tell me--tell me everything."

And he did as she bade him, just as he used to when he was little; he told her all that had happened from the crime to the capture, then of the assassin's release and his own baffling failure at the very moment of success.

His mother listened with absorbed interest, she thrilled, she radiated, she sympathized; and she shivered at the thought of such power for evil.

When he had finished, she lay silent, thinking it all over, not wishing to speak hastily, while Paul stroked her white hand.

"And the young man?" she asked presently. "The one who is innocent? What about _him?_"

"He is in prison, he will be tried."

"And then? They have evidence against him, you said so--the footprints, the pistol, perhaps more that this man can manufacture. Paul, he will be found guilty?"

"I--I don't know."

"But you think so?"

"It's possible, mother, but--I've done all I can."

"He will be found guilty," she repeated, "this innocent young man will be found guilty. You know it, and--you give up the case."

"That's unfair. I give up the case because your life is more precious to me than the lives of fifty young men."

The old lady paused a moment, holding his firm hand in her two slender ones, then she said sweetly, yet in half reproach: "My son, do you think your life is less precious to me than mine is to you?"

"Why--why, no," he said.

"It isn't, but we can't shirk our burdens, Paul." She pointed simply to the picture of a keen-eyed soldier over the fireplace, a brave, lovable face. "If we are men we do our work; if we are women, we bear what comes. That is how your father felt when he left me to--to--you understand, my boy?"

"Yes, mother."

"I want you to decide in that spirit. If it's right to drop this case, I shall be glad, but I don't want you to drop it because you are afraid--for me, or--for anything."

"But mother----"

"Listen, Paul; I know how you love me, but you mustn't put me first in this matter, you must put your honor first, and the honor of your father's name."

"I've decided the thing"--he frowned--"it's all settled. I have sent word by Tignol to the Brazilian embassy that I will accept that position in Rio Janeiro. It's still open, and--mother," he went on eagerly, "I'm going to take you with me."

Her face brightened under its beautiful crown of silver-white hair, but she shook her head.

"I couldn't go, Paul; I could never bear that long sea journey, and I should be unhappy away from these dear old mountains. If you go, you must

go alone. I don't say you mustn't go, I only ask you to think, _to think_."

"I have thought," he answered impatiently. "I've done nothing but think, ever since Ernestine sent that telegram."

"You have thought about me," she chided. "Have you thought about the case? Have you thought that, if you give it up, an innocent man will suffer and a guilty man will go unpunished?"

"Hah! The guilty man! It's a jolly sure thing _he'll_ go unpunished, whatever I do."

"I don't believe it," cried the old lady, springing forward excitedly in her invalid's chair, "such wickedness _cannot_ go unpunished. No, my boy, you can conquer, you _will_ conquer."

"I can't fight the whole of France," he retorted sharply. "You don't understand this man's power, mother; I might as well try to conquer the devil."

"I don't ask you to do that," she laughed, "but--isn't there _anything_ you can think of? You've always won out in the past, and--what is this man's intelligence to yours?" She paused and then went on more earnestly: "Paul, I'm so proud of you, and--you _can't_ rest under this wrong that has been done you. I want the Government to make amends for putting you off the force. I want them to publicly recognize your splendid services. And they will, my son, they must, if you will only go ahead now, and--there I'm getting foolish." She brushed away some springing tears. "Come, we'll talk of something else."

Nothing more was said about the case, but the seed was sown, and as the evening passed, the wise old lady remarked that her son fell into moody silences and strode about restlessly. And, knowing the signs, she left him to his thoughts.

When bedtime came, Paul kissed her tenderly good night and then turned to withdraw, but he paused at the door, and with a look that she remembered well from the days of his boyhood transgressions, a look of mingled frankness and shamefacedness, he came back to her bedside.

"Mother," he said, "I want to be perfectly honest about this thing; I told you there is nothing that I could do against this man; as a matter of fact, there is one thing that I could _possibly_ do. It's a long shot, with the odds all against me, and, if I should fail, he would do me up, that's sure; still, I must admit that I see a chance, one small chance of--landing him. I thought I'd tell you because--well, I thought I'd tell you."

"My boy!" she cried. "My brave boy! I'm happy now. All I wanted was to have you think this thing over alone, and--decide alone. Good night, Paul! God bless you and--help you!"

"Good night, mother," he said fondly. "I will decide before to-morrow, and--whatever I do, I--I'll remember what you say."

Then he went to his room and for hours through the night Ernestine, watching by the patient, saw his light burning.

The next morning he came again to his mother's bedside with his old buoyant smile, and after loving greetings, he said simply: "It's all right, little mother, I see my way. I'm going to take the chance, and," he nodded confidently, "between you and me, it isn't such a slim chance, either."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DIARY

Coquenil's effort during the next month might be set forth in great detail. It may also be told briefly, which is better, since the result rather than the means is of moment.

The detective began by admitting the practical worthlessness of the evidence in hand against this formidable adversary, and he abandoned, for the moment, his purpose of proving that De Heidelmann-Bruck had killed Martinez. Under the circumstances there was no way of proving it, for how can the wheels of justice be made to turn against an individual who absolutely controls the manner of their turning, who is able to remove annoying magistrates with a snap of his fingers, and can use the full power of government, the whole authority of the Prime Minister of France and the Minister of Justice for his personal convenience and protection?

The case was so extraordinary and unprecedented that it could obviously be met only (if at all) by extraordinary and unprecedented measures. Such measures Coquenil proceeded to conceive and carry out, realizing fully that, in so doing, he was taking his life in his hands. His first intuition had come true, he was facing a great criminal and must either destroy or be destroyed; it was to be a ruthless fight to a finish between Paul Coquenil and the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck.

And, true to his intuitions, as he had been from the start, M. Paul resolved to seek the special and deadly arm that he needed against this sinister enemy in the baron's immediate _entourage;_ in fact, in his own house and home. That was the detective's task, to be received, unsuspected, as an inmate of De Heidelmann-Bruck's great establishment on the Rue de Varennes, the very center of the ancient nobility of Paris.

In this purpose he finally succeeded, after what wiles and pains need not be stated, being hired at moderate wages as a stable helper, with a small room over the carriage house, and miscellaneous duties that included much drudgery in cleaning the baron's numerous automobiles. It may truthfully be said that no more willing pair of arms ever rubbed and scrubbed their aristocratic brasses.

The next thing was to gain the confidence, then the complicity of one of the men servants in the _hotel_ itself, so that he might be given access to the baron's private apartments at the opportune moment. In the horde of hirelings about a great man there is always one whose ear is open to temptation, and the baron's household was no exception to this rule. Coquenil (known now as Jacques and looking the stable man to perfection) found a dignified flunky in black side whiskers and white-silk stockings who was not above accepting some hundred-franc notes in return for sure information as to the master's absences from home and for necessary assistance in the way of keys and other things.

Thus it came to pass that on a certain night in August, about two in the morning, Paul Coquenil found himself alone in the baron's spacious, silent library before a massive safe. The opening of this safe is another matter that need not be gone into--a desperate case justifies desperate risk, and an experienced burglar chaser naturally becomes a bit of a burglar himself; at any rate, the safe swung open in due course, without accident or interference, and the detective stood before it.

All this Coquenil had done on a chance, without positive knowledge, save for the assurance of the black-whiskered valet that the baron wrote frequently in a diary which he kept locked in the safe. Whether this was true, and, if so, whether the baron had been mad enough to put down with his own hand a record of his own wickedness, were matters of pure

conjecture. Coquenil was convinced that this journal would contain what he wanted; he did not believe that a man like De Heidelmann-Bruck would keep a diary simply to fill in with insipidities. If he kept it at all, it would be because it pleased him to analyze, fearlessly, his own extraordinary doings, good or bad. The very fact that the baron was different from ordinary men, a law unto himself, made it likely that he would disregard what ordinary men would call prudence in a matter like this; there is no such word as imprudence for one who is practically all-powerful, and, if it tickled the baron's fancy to keep a journal of crime, it was tolerably certain he would keep it.

The event proved that he did keep it. On one of the shelves of the safe, among valuable papers and securities, the detective found a thick book bound in black leather and fastened with heavy gold clasps. It was the diary.

With a thrill of triumph, Coquenil seized upon the volume, then, closing the safe carefully, without touching anything else, he returned to his room in the stable. His purpose was accomplished, and now he had only one thought—to leave the _hotel_ as quickly as possible; it would be a matter of a few moments to pack his modest belongings, then he could rouse the doorkeeper and be off with his bag and the precious record.

As he started to act on this decision, however, and steal softly down to the courtyard, the detective paused and looked at his watch. It was not yet three o'clock, and M. Paul, in the real burglar spirit, reflected that his departure with a bag, at this unseasonable hour, might arouse the doorkeeper's suspicion; whereas, if he waited until half past five, the gate would be open and he could go out unnoticed. So he decided to wait. After all, there was no danger, the baron was away from Paris, and no one would enter the library before seven or eight.

While he waited, Coquenil opened the diary and began to read. There were some four hundred neatly written pages, brief separate entries without dates, separate thoughts as it were, and, as he turned through them he found himself more and more absorbed until, presently, he forgot time, place, danger, everything; an hour passed, two hours, and still the detective read on while his candle guttered down to the stick and the brightening day filled his mean stable room; he was absolutely lost in a most extraordinary human document, in one of those terrible utterances, shameless and fearless, that are flung out, once in a century or so, from the hot somber depths of a man's being.

I

I have kept this diary because it amuses me, because I am not afraid, because my nature craves and demands some honest expression somewhere. If these pages were read I should be destroyed. I understand that, but I am in constant danger of being destroyed, anyway. I might be killed by an automobile accident. A small artery in my brain might snap. My heart might stop beating for various reasons. And it is no more likely that this diary will be found and read (with the precautions I have taken) than that one of these other things will happen. Besides, I have no fear, since I regard my own life and all other lives as of absolutely trifling importance.

II

I say here to myself what thousands of serious and successful men all over the world are saying to themselves, what the enormous majority of men must say to themselves, that is, that I am (and they are) constantly committing crimes and we are therefore criminals. Some of us kill, some steal, some seduce virgins, some take our friends' wives, but most of us, in one way or another,

deliberately and repeatedly break the law, so we are criminals.

III

Half the great men of this world are great criminals. The Napoleons of war murder thousands, the Napoleons of trade and finance plunder tens of thousands. It is the same among beasts and fishes, among birds and insects, probably among angels and devils, everywhere we find one inexorable law, resistless as gravitation, that impels the strong to plunder and destroy the weak.

IV

It is five years since I committed what would be called a monstrous and cowardly crime. As a matter of fact, I did what my intelligence recognized as necessary and what was therefore my duty. However, let us call it a crime. I have been interested to watch for any consequences or effects of this crime in myself and I have discovered none. I study my face carefully and fail to find any marks of wickedness. My eyes are clear and beautiful, my skin is remarkably free from lines. I am in splendid health, I eat well, sleep well, and enjoy life. My nerves are absolutely steady. I have never felt the slightest twinge of remorse. I have a keen sense of humor. I look five years younger than I am and ten years younger than men who have drugged virtuously and uncomplainingly on the "Thy-will-be-done" plan. I am certainly a better man, better looking, better feeling, stronger in every way than I was before I committed this crime. It is absolute nonsense, therefore, to say that sin or crime (I mean intelligent sin or crime) put an ugly stamp on a man. The ugly stamp comes from bad health, bad surroundings, bad conditions of life, and these can usually be changed by money. _Which I have!_

V

Last night (July 4th) I shot a man (Martinez) at the Ansonia Hotel. I observed my sensations carefully and must say that they were of a most commonplace character. There was no danger in the adventure, nothing difficult about it; in fact, it was far less exciting than shooting moose in the Maine woods or tracking grizzlies in the Rockies or going after tigers in India. There is really nothing so tame as shooting a man!

VI

There is no necessary connection between crime and vice. Some of the most vicious men--I mean gluttons, drunkards, degenerates, drug fiends, etc. have never committed any crimes of importance. On the other hand, I am satisfied that great criminals are usually free from vices. It must be so, for vices weaken the will and dull the brain. I take a little wine at my meals, but never to excess, and I never was drunk in my life. I smoke three or four cigars a day and occasionally a cigarette, that is all. And I never gamble. No doubt there are vicious criminals, but they would probably have been vicious if they had not been criminals.

VII

I have the most tremendous admiration for myself, for my courage, for my intelligence, for the use I have made of my opportunities. I started as the son of a broken-down nobleman, my material assets being a trumpery title. My best chance was to marry one of the vain and shallow rich women of America, and by many brilliant maneuvers in a most difficult and delicate campaign, I succeeded in marrying the very richest of them. She was a widow with an enormous fortune

that her husband (a rapacious brute) had wrung from the toil of thousands in torturing mines. Following his method, I disposed of the woman, then of her daughter, and came into possession of the fortune. It would have been a silly thing to leave such vast potential power to a chit of a girl unable to use it or appreciate it. I have used it as a master, as a man of brain, as a gentleman. I have made myself a force throughout Europe, I have overthrown ministries, averted wars, built up great industries, helped the development of literature and art; in short, I have made amends for the brutality and dishonesty of the lady's first husband. I believe his name was Mike!

VIII

I am afraid of this girl's dreams! I can control her body, and when she is awake, I can more or less control her mind. But I cannot control her dreams. Sometimes, when I look into the depths of her strange, beautiful eyes, it seems to me she knows things or half knows them with some other self. I am afraid of her dreams!

Coquenil had reached this point in his reading and was pressing on through the pages, utterly oblivious to everything, when a harsh voice broke in upon him: "You seem to have an interesting book, my friend?"

Looking up with a start, M. Paul saw De Heidelmann-Bruck himself standing in the open doorway. His hands were thrust carelessly in his coat pockets and a mocking smile played about his lips, the smile that Coquenil had learned to fear.

"It's more than interesting, it's marvelous, it's unbelievable," answered the detective quietly. "Please shut that door. There's a draught coming in."

As he spoke he sneezed twice and reached naturally toward his coat as if for a handkerchief.

"No, no! None of that!" warned the other sharply. "Hands up!" And Coquenil obeyed. "My pistol is on you in this side pocket. If you move, I'll shoot through the cloth."

"That's a cowboy trick; you must have traveled in the Far West," said M. Paul lightly.

"Stand over there!" came the order. "Face against the wall! Hands high! Now keep still!"

Coquenil did as he was bidden. He stood against the wall while quick fingers went through his clothes, he felt his pistol taken from him, then something soft and wet pressed under his nostrils. He gasped and a sweetish, sickening breath filled his lungs, he tried to struggle, but iron arms held him helpless. He felt himself drifting into unconsciousness and strove vainly against it. He knew he had lost the battle, there was nothing to hope for from this man--nothing. Well--it had been a finish fight and--one or the other had to go. _He_ was the one, he was going--going. He--he couldn't fix his thoughts. What queer lights! Hey, Caesar! How silly! Caesar was dead--Oh! he must tell Papa Tignol that--a man shouldn't swear so with a--red--nose. Stop! this must be the--_end_ and---

With a last rally of his darkening consciousness, Coquenil called up his mother's face and, looking at it through the eyes of his soul, he spoke to her across the miles, in a wild, voiceless cry: "I did the best I could, little mother, the--the best I--could."

Then utter blackness!

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GREAT CRIMINAL

Coquenil came back to consciousness his first thought was that the adventure had brought him no pain; he moved his arms and legs and discovered no injury, then he reached out a hand and found that he was lying on a cold stone floor with his head on a rough sack filled apparently with shavings.

He did not open his eyes, but tried to think where he could be and to imagine what had happened. It was not conceivable that his enemy would let him escape, this delay was merely preliminary to something else and--he was certainly a prisoner--somewhere.

Reasoning thus he caught a sound as of rustling paper, then a faint scratching. With eyes still shut, he turned his face toward the scratching sound, then away from it, then toward it, then away from it. Now he sniffed the air about him, now he rubbed a finger on the floor and smelled it, now he lay quiet and listened. He had found a fascinating problem, and for a long time he studied it without moving and without opening his eyes.

Finally he spoke aloud in playful reproach: "It's a pity, baron, to write in that wonderful diary of yours with a lead pencil."

Instantly there came the scraping of a chair and quick approaching steps.

"How did you see me?" asked a harsh voice.

Coquenil smiled toward a faint light, but kept his eyes closed. "I didn't, I haven't seen you yet."

"But you knew I was writing in my diary?"

"Because you were so absorbed that you did not hear me stir."

"Humph! And the lead pencil?"

"I heard you sharpen it. That was just before you stopped to eat the orange."

The light came nearer. M. Paul felt that the baron was bending over him.

"What's the matter? Your eyes are shut."

"It amuses me to keep them shut. Do you mind?"

"Singular man!" muttered the other. "What makes you think I ate an orange?"

[Illustration: "'What's the matter? Your eyes are shut.'"]

"I got the smell of it when you tore the peel off and I heard the seeds drop."

The baron's voice showed growing interest. "Where do you think you are?"

"In a deep underground room where you store firewood."

"Extraordinary!"

"Not at all. The floor is covered with chips of it and this bag is full of shavings."

"How do you know we are underground?"

"By the smell of the floor and because you need a candle when it's full daylight above."

"Then you know what time it is?" asked the other incredulously.

"Why--er--I can tell by looking." He opened his eyes. "Ah, it's earlier than I thought, it's barely seven."

"How the devil do you know that?"

Coquenil did not answer for a moment. He was looking about him wonderingly, noting the damp stone walls and high vaulted ceiling of a large windowless chamber. By the uncertain light of the baron's candle he made out an arched passageway at one side and around the walls piles of logs carefully roped and stacked together.

"Your candle hasn't burned more than an hour," answered the detective.

"It might be a second candle."

M. Paul shook his head. "Then you wouldn't have been eating your breakfast orange. And you wouldn't have been waiting so patiently."

The two men eyed each other keenly.

"Coquenil," said De Heidelmann-Bruck slowly, "I give you credit for unusual cleverness, but if you tell me you have any inkling what I am waiting for----"

"It's more than inkling," answered the detective quietly, "I _know_ that you are waiting for the girl."

"The girl?" The other started.

"The girl Alice or--Mary your stepdaughter."

"God Almighty!" burst out the baron. "What a guess!"

M. Paul shook his head. "No, not a guess, a fair deduction. My ring is gone. It was on my hand before you gave me that chloroform. You took it. That means you needed it. Why? To get the girl! You knew it would bring her, though _how_ you knew it is more than I can understand."

"Gibelin heard you speak of the ring to Pougeot that night in the automobile."

"Ah! And how did you know where the girl was?"

"Guessed it partly and--had Pougeot followed."

"And she's coming here?"

The baron nodded. "She ought to be here shortly." Then with a quick, cruel smile: "I suppose you know _why_ I want her?"

"I'm afraid I do," said Coquenil.

"Suppose we come in here," suggested the other. "I'm tired holding this candle and you don't care particularly about lying on that bag of shavings."

With this he led the way through the arched passageway into another stone chamber very much like the first, only smaller, and lined in the same way with piled-up logs. In the middle of the floor was a rough table spread with food, and two rough chairs. On the table lay the diary.

"Sit down," continued the baron. "Later on you can eat, but first we'll have a talk. Coquenil, I've watched you for years, I know all about you, and--I'll say this, you're the most interesting man I ever met. You've given me trouble, but--that's all right, you played fair, and--I like you, I like you."

There was no doubt about the genuineness of this and M. Paul glanced wonderingly across the table.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"It's a pity you couldn't see things my way. I wanted to be your friend, I wanted to help you. Just think how many times I've gone out of my way to give you chances, fine business chances."

"I know."

"And that night on the Champs Elysees! Didn't I warn you? Didn't I almost plead with you to drop this case? And you wouldn't listen?"

"That's true."

"Now see where you are! See what you've forced me to do. It's a pity; it cuts me up, Coquenil." He spoke with real sadness.

"I understand," answered M. Paul. "I appreciate what you say. There's a bond between a good detective and----"

"A great detective!" put in the baron admiringly, "the greatest detective Paris has known in fifty years or will know in fifty more. Yes, yes, it's a pity!"

"I was saying," resumed the other, "that there is a bond between a detective and a criminal--I suppose it gets stronger between a--a great detective," he smiled, "and a great criminal."

De Heidelmann-Bruck looked pleased. "You regard me as a great criminal?"

Coquenil nodded gravely. "I certainly do. The greatest since Ludovico Schertzi--you know he had your identical little finger."

"Really!"

"Yes. And your absolute lack of feeling about crime. Never a tremor! Never a qualm of remorse! Just cold intelligence!"

"Of course." The baron held his left hand close to the candle and looked at it critically. "Strange about that little finger! And pretty the way you caught the clew of it on that photographer's neck. Poor little devil!"

"What did you do with the boots you were trying to return that night?" questioned the detective.

"Burned them."

Coquenil was silent a moment. "And this American? What of him--now?"

"He will be tried and----" The baron shrugged his shoulders.

"And be found guilty?"

"Yes, but--with jealousy as an extenuating circumstance. He'll do a few years, say five."

"I never saw quite why you put the guilt on him."

"It had to go on some one and--he was available."

"You had nothing against him personally?"

"Oh, no. He was a pawn in the game."

"A pawn to be sacrificed--like Martinez?"

"Exactly."

"Ah, that brings me to the main point. How did Martinez get possession of your secret?"

"He met the girl accidentally and--remembered her."

"As the one he had rescued from the Charity Bazaar fire?"

"Yes. You'd better eat a little. Try some of this cold meat and salad? My cook makes rather good dressing."

"No, thanks! Speaking of cooks, how did you know the name of that canary bird?"

"Ha, ha! Pete? I knew it from the husband of the woman who opens the big gate of the Villa Montmorency. He cleans your windows, you know, and--he was useful to me."

"He knew you as--Groener?"

"Of course."

"None of these people knew you really?"

"No."

"Not Dubois?"

"Ah, Dubois knew me, of course, but--Dubois is an automaton to carry out orders; he never knows what they mean. Anything else?"

Coquenil thought a moment. "Oh! Did you know that private room Number Seven would not be occupied that night by Wilmott and the dancing girl?"

"No."

"Then how did you dare go in there?"

"Wilmott and the girl were not due until nine and I had--finished by half past eight."

"How did you know Wilmott would not be there until nine?"

"Martinez told me. It was in Anita's *_petit bleu_* that Mrs. Wilmott showed him."

"Had you no direct dealings with Anita?"

The baron shook his head. "I never saw the girl. The thing just happened

and--I took my chance."

"You bought the auger for Martinez and told him where to bore the holes?"

"Yes."

"And the key to the alleyway door?"

"I got a duplicate key--through Dubois. Anything else?"

"It's all very clever," reflected M. Paul, "but--isn't it too clever? Too complicated? Why didn't you get rid of this billiard player in some simpler way?"

"A natural question," agreed De Heidelmann-Bruck. "I could have done it easily in twenty ways--twenty stupid safe ways. But don't you see that is what I didn't want? It was necessary to suppress Martinez, but, in suppressing him as I did, there was also good sport. And when a man has everything, Coquenil, good sport is mighty rare."

"I see, I see," murmured the detective. "And you let Alice live all these years for the same reason?"

"Yes."

"The wood-carver game diverted you?"

"Precisely. It put a bit of ginger into existence." He paused, and half closing his eyes, added musingly: "I'll miss it now. And I'll miss the zest of fighting you."

"Ah!" said Coquenil. "By the way, how long have you known that I was working here in your stable?"

The baron smiled. "Since the first day."

"And--you knew about the valet?"

"Naturally."

"And about the safe?"

"It was all arranged."

"Then--then you wanted me to read the diary?"

"Yes," answered the other with a strange expression. "I knew that if you read my diary I should be protected."

"I don't understand."

"Of course not, but--" Suddenly his voice grew harsher and M. Paul thought of the meeting on the Champs Elysees. "Do you realize, sir," the baron went on, and his voice was almost menacing, "that not once but half a dozen times since this affair started, I have been on the point of crushing you, of sweeping you out of my path?"

"I can believe that."

"Why haven't I done it? Why have I held back the order that was trembling on my lips? Because I admire you, I'm interested in the workings of your mind, I, yes, by God, in spite of your stubbornness and everything, I like you, Coquenil, and I don't want to harm you.

"You may not believe it," he went on, "but when you sent word to the

Brazilian Embassy the other day that you would accept the Rio Janeiro offer, after all, I was honestly happy _for you_, not for myself. What did it matter to me? I was relieved to know that you were out of danger, that you had come to your senses. Then suddenly you went mad again and, and did this. So I said to myself: 'All right, he wants it, he'll get it,' and, I let you read the diary."

"Why?"

"Why?" cried the baron hoarsely. "Don't you _see_ why? You know everything now, _everything_. It isn't guesswork, it isn't deduction, it's absolute certainty. You have _seen_ my confession, you _know_ that I killed Martinez, that I robbed this girl of her fortune, that I am going to let an innocent man suffer in my place. You know that to be true, don't you?"

"Yes, I know it to be true."

"And because it's true, and because we both know it to be true, neither one of us can draw back. We _cannot_ draw back if we would. Suppose I said to you: 'Coquenil, I like you, I'm going to let you go free.' What would you reply? You would say: 'Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck, I'm much obliged, but, as an honest man, I tell you that, as soon as I am free, I shall proceed to have this enormous fortune you have been wickedly enjoying taken from you and given to its rightful owner.' Isn't that about what you would say?"

"I suppose it is," answered M. Paul.

"You know it is, and you would also say: 'Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck, I shall not only take this fortune from you and make you very poor instead of very rich, but I shall denounce you as a murderer and shall do my best to have you marched out from a cell in the Roquette prison some fine morning, about dawn, between a jailer and a priest, with your legs roped together and your shirt cut away at the back of the neck and then to have you bound against an upright plank and tipped forward gently under a forty-pound knife'--you see I know the details--and then, phsst! the knife falls and behold the head of De Heidelmann-Bruck in one basket and his body in another! That would be your general idea, eh?"

"Yes, it would," nodded the other.

"Ah!" smiled the baron. "You see how I have protected myself _against_ my own weakness_. I must destroy you or be destroyed. _I am forced_, M. Coquenil, to end my friendly tolerance of your existence."

"I see," murmured M. Paul. "If I hadn't read that diary, your nerve would have been a little dulled for this--business." He motioned meaningly toward the shadows.

"That's it."

"Whereas now the thing _has_ to be done and--you'll do it."

"Exactly! Exactly!" replied the baron with the pleasure one might show at a delicate compliment.

For some moments the two were silent, then M. Paul asked gravely: "How soon will the girl be here?"

"She's undoubtedly here now. She is waiting outside." He pointed to a heavily barred iron door.

"Does she know it was a trick, about the ring?"

"Not yet."

Again there was a silence. Coquenil hesitated before he said with an effort: "Do you think it's necessary to--to include _her_ in this--affair?"

The baron thought a moment. "I think I'd better make a clean job of it."

"You mean _both?_"

"Yes."

They seemed to understand by half words, by words not spoken, by little signs, as brokers in a great stock-exchange battle dispose of fortunes with a nod or a lift of the eyebrows.

"But--she doesn't know anything about you or against you," added M. Paul, and he seemed to be almost pleading.

"She has caused me a lot of trouble and, she _might_ know."

"You mean, her memory?"

"Yes, it might come back."

"Of course," agreed the other with judicial fairness. "I asked Duprat about it and he said _it might_."

"Ah, you see!"

"And--when do you--begin?"

"There's no hurry. When we get through talking. Is there anything else you want to ask?"

The detective reflected a moment. "Was it you personally who killed my dog?"

"Yes."

"And my mother?" His face was very white and his voice trembled. "Did you--did you intend to kill her?"

The baron shrugged his shoulders. "I left that to chance."

"That's all," said Coquenil. "I--I am ready now."

With a look of mingled compassion and admiration De Heidelmann-Bruck met M. Paul's unflinching gaze.

"We take our medicine, eh? I took mine when you had me hitched to that heart machine, and--now you'll take yours. Good-by, Coquenil," he held out his hand, "I'm sorry."

"Good-by," answered the detective with quiet dignity. "If it's all the same to you, I--I won't shake hands."

"No? Ah, well! I'll send in the girl." He moved toward the heavy door.

"Wait!" said M. Paul. "You have left your diary." He pointed to the table.

The baron smiled mockingly. "I intended to leave it; the book has served its purpose, I'm tired of it. Don't be alarmed, _it will not be found_." He glanced with grim confidence at the stacked wood. "You'll have fifteen or twenty minutes after she comes in, that is, if you make no disturbance. Good-by."

The door swung open and a moment later Coquenil saw a dim, white-clad

figure among the shadows, and Alice, with beautiful, frightened eyes, staggered toward him. Then the door clanged shut and the sound of grating bolts was heard on the other side.

Alice and Coquenil were alone.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LOST DOLLY

As Alice saw M. Paul she ran forward with a glad cry and clung to his arm.

"I've been so frightened," she trembled. "The man said you wanted me and I came at once, but, in the automobile, I felt something was wrong and--you know he is outside?" Her eyes widened anxiously.

"I know. Sit down here." He pointed to the table. "Does Pougeot know about this?"

She shook her head. "The man came for M. Pougeot first. I wasn't down at breakfast yet, so I don't know what he said, but they went off together. I'm afraid it was a trick. Then about twenty minutes later the same man came back and said M. Pougeot was with you and that he had been sent to bring me to you. He showed me your ring and----"

"Yes, yes, I understand," interrupted Coquenil. "You are not to blame, only--God, what can I do?" He searched the shadows with a savage sense of helplessness.

"But it's all right, now, M. Paul," she said confidently, "I am with you."

Her look of perfect trust came to him with a stab of pain.

"My poor child," he muttered, peering about him, "I'm afraid we are--in trouble--but--wait a minute."

Taking the candle, Coquenil went through the arched opening into the larger chamber and made a hurried inspection. The room was about fifteen feet square and ten feet high, with everything of stone--walls, floor, and arched ceiling. Save for the passage into the smaller room, there was no sign of an opening anywhere except two small square holes near the ceiling, probably ventilating shafts.

[Illustration:

A. Bag of shavings where Coquenil recovered consciousness in large underground chamber.

B. Table and two chairs in smaller chamber where de Heidelmann-Bruck was writing.

C C C C C. Logs of wood piled around walls of two chambers.

D. Heavy iron door through which Alice was brought in.

E. Stone shelf above wood pile.

F. F. Opening through thick wall separating chambers, where Coquenil built a barricade of logs. Dotted lines 1-2, indicate curve of archway.

S. S. Section of wood pile torn down by Alice to make barricade.

X. The second barricade of logs.]

Around the four walls were logs piled evenly to the height of nearly six feet, and at the archway the pile ran straight through into the smaller room. The logs were in two-foot lengths, and as the archway was about four feet wide, the passage between the two rooms was half blocked with wood.

Coquenil walked slowly around the chamber, peering carefully into cracks between the logs, as if searching for something. As he went on he held the candle lower and lower, and presently got down upon his hands and knees and crept along the base of the pile.

"What _are_ you doing?" asked Alice, watching him in wonder from the archway.

Without replying, the detective rose to his feet, and holding the candle high above his head, examined the walls above the wood pile. Then he reached up and scraped the stones with his finger nails in several places, and then held his fingers close to the candlelight and looked at them and smelled them. His fingers were black with soot.

"M. Paul, won't you speak to me?" begged the girl.

"Just a minute, just a minute," he answered absently. Then he spoke with quick decision: "I'm going to set you to work," he said. "By the way, have you any idea where we are?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Why, don't _you_ know?"

"I _think_ we are on the Rue de Varennes--a big _hotel_ back of the high wall?"

"That's right," she said.

"Ah, he didn't take me away!" reflected M. Paul. "That is something. Pougeot will scent danger and will move heaven and earth to save us. He will get Tignol and Tignol knows I was here. But can they find us? Can they find us? Tell me, did you come down many stairs?"

"Yes," she said, "quite a long flight; but won't you please----"

He cut her short, speaking kindly, but with authority.

"You mustn't ask questions, there isn't time. I may as well tell you our lives are in danger. He's going to set fire to this wood and----"

"Oh!" she cried, her eyes starting with terror.

"See here," he said sharply. "You've got to help me. We have a chance yet. The fire will start in this big chamber and--I want to cut it off by blocking the passageway. Let's see!" He searched through his pockets. "He has taken my knife. Ah, this will do!" and lifting a plate from the table he broke it against the wall. "There! Take one of these pieces and see if you can saw through the rope. Use the jagged edge--like this. That cuts it. Try over there."

Alice fell to work eagerly, and in a few moments they had freed a section of the wood piled in the smaller chamber from the restraining ropes and stakes.

"Now then," directed Coquenil, "you carry the logs to me and I'll make a barricade in the passageway."

The word passageway is somewhat misleading--there was really a distance of only three feet between the two chambers, this being the thickness of the massive stone wall that separated them. Half of this opening was already filled by the wood pile, and Coquenil proceeded to fill up the other half, laying logs on the floor, lengthwise, in the open part of the passage from chamber to chamber, and then laying other logs on top of these, and so on as rapidly as the girl brought wood.

They worked with all speed, Alice carrying the logs bravely, in spite of splintered hands and weary back, and soon the passageway was solidly walled with closely fitted logs to the height of six feet. Above this, in the arched part, Coquenil worked more slowly, selecting logs of such shape and size as would fill the curve with the fewest number of cracks between them. There was danger in cracks between the obstructing logs, for cracks meant a draught, and a draught meant the spreading of the fire.

"Now," said M. Paul, surveying the blocked passageway, "that is the best we can do--with wood. We must stop these cracks with something else. What did you wear?" He glanced at the chair where Alice had thrown her things. "A white cloak and a straw hat with a white veil and a black velvet ribbon. Tear off the ribbon and--we can't stand on ceremony. Here are my coat and vest. Rip them into strips and--Great God! There's the smoke now!"

As he spoke, a thin grayish feather curled out between two of the upper logs and floated away, another came below it, then another, each widening and strengthening as it came. Somewhere, perhaps in his sumptuous library, De Heidelmann-Bruck had pressed an electric button and, under the logs piled in the large chamber, deadly sparks had jumped in the waiting tinder; the crisis had come, the fire was burning, they were prisoners in a huge, slowly heating oven stacked with tons of dry wood.

"Hurry, my child," urged Coquenil, and working madly with a piece of stick that he had wrenched from one of the logs, he met each feather of smoke with a strip of cloth, stuffing the cracks with shreds of garments, with Alice's veil and hat ribbon, with the lining of his coat, then with the body of it, with the waist of her dress, with his socks, with her stockings, and still the smoke came through.

"We must stop this," he cried, and tearing the shirt from his shoulders, he ripped it into fragments and wedged these tight between the logs. The smoke seemed to come more slowly, but--it came.

"We must have more cloth," he said gravely. "It's our only chance, little friend. I'll put out the candle! There! Let me have--whatever you can and--be quick!"

Again he worked with frantic haste, stuffing in the last shreds and rags that could be spared from their bodies, whenever a dull glow from the other side revealed a crack in the barricade. For agonized moments there was no sound in that tomblike chamber save Alice's quick breathing and the shrieking tear of garments, and the ramming thud of the stick as Coquenil wedged cloth into crannies of the logs.

"There," he panted, "that's the best we can do. Now it's up to God!"

For a moment it seemed as if this rough prayer had been answered. There were no more points in the barricade that showed a glow beyond and to Coquenil, searching along the logs in the darkness by the sense of smell, there was no sign of smoke coming through.

"I believe we have stopped the draught," he said cheerfully; "as a final touch I'll hang that cloak of yours over the whole thing," and, very carefully, he tucked the white garment over the topmost logs and then at the sides so that it covered most of the barricade.

"You understand that a fire cannot burn without air," he explained, "and it must be air that comes in from below to replace the hot air that rises. Now I couldn't find any openings in that large room except two little ventilators near the ceiling, so if that fire is going to burn, it must get air from this room."

"Where does this room get its air from?" asked Alice.

Coquenil thought a moment. "It gets a lot under that iron door, and--there must be ventilating shafts besides. Anyhow, the point is, if we have blocked this passage between the rooms we have stopped the fire from turning, or, anyhow, from burning enough to do us any harm. You see these logs are quite cold. Feel them."

Alice groped forward in the darkness toward the barricade and, as she touched the logs, her bare arm touched Coquenil's bare arm.

Suddenly a faint sound broke the stillness and the detective started violently. He was in such a state of nervous tension that he would have started at the rustle of a leaf.

"Hark! What is that?"

It was a low humming sound that presently grew stronger, and then sang on steadily like a buzzing wheel.

"It's over here," said Coquenil, moving toward the door. "No, it's here!" He turned to the right and stood still, listening. "It's under the floor!" He bent down and listened again. "It's overhead! It's nowhere and--everywhere! What is it?"

As he moved about in perplexity it seemed to him that he felt a current of air. He put one hand in it, then the other hand, then he turned his face to it; there certainly was a current of air.

"Alice, come here!" he called. "Stand where I am! That's right. Now put out your hand! Do you feel anything?"

"I feel a draught," she answered.

"There's no doubt about it," he muttered, "but--how can there be a draught here?"

As he spoke the humming sound strengthened and with it the draught blew stronger.

"Merciful God!" cried Coquenil in a flash of understanding, "it's a blower!"

"A blower?" repeated the girl.

M. Paul turned his face upward and listened attentively. "No doubt of it! It's sucking through an air shaft--up there--in the ceiling."

"I--I don't understand."

"He's forcing a draught from that room to this one. He has started a blower, I tell you, and----"

"What is a blower?" put in Alice.

At her frightened tone Coquenil calmed himself and answered gently: "It's like a big electric fan, it's drawing air out of this room very fast, with a powerful suction, and I'm afraid--unless----"

Just then there came a sharp pop followed by a hissing noise as if some one were breathing in air through shut teeth.

"There goes the first one! Come over here!" He bent toward the logs, searching for something. "Ah, here it is! Do you feel the air blowing through _toward_ us? The blower has sucked out one of our cloth plugs. There goes another!" he said, as the popping sound was repeated. "And another! It's all off with our barricade, little girl!"

"You--you mean the fire will come through now?" she gasped. He could hear her teeth chattering and feel her whole body shaking in terror.

Coquenil did not answer. He was looking through one of the open cracks, studying the dull glow beyond, and noting the hot breath that came through. What could he do? The fire was gaining with every second, the whirling blower was literally dragging the flames toward them through the dry wood pile. Already the heat was increasing, it would soon be unbearable; at this rate their hold on life was a matter of minutes.

"The fire may come through--a little," he answered comfortingly, "but I--I'll fix it so you will be--all right. Come! We'll build another barricade. You know wood is a bad conductor of heat, and--if you have wood all about you and--over you, why, the fire can't burn you."

"Oh!" said Alice.

"We'll go over to this door as far from the passageway as we can get. Now bring me logs from that side pile! That's right!"

He glanced at the old barricade and saw, with a shudder, that it was already pierced with countless open cracks that showed the angry fire beyond. And through these cracks great volumes of smoke were pouring.

Fortunately, most of this smoke, especially at first, was borne away upward by the blower's suction, and for some minutes Alice was able to help Coquenil with the new barricade. They built this directly in front of the iron door, with only space enough between it and the door to allow them to crouch behind it; they made it about five feet long and three feet high. Coquenil would have made it higher, but there was no time; indeed, he had to do the last part of the work alone, for Alice sank back overcome by the smoke.

"Lie down there," he directed. "Stretch right out behind the logs and keep, your mouth close to the floor and as near as you can to the crack under the door. You'll have plenty of cool, sweet air. See? That's right. Now I'll fix a roof over this thing and pretty soon, if it gets uncomfortable up here, I'll crawl in beside you. It's better not to look at the silly old barricade. Just shut your eyes and--rest. Understand little friend?"

"Ye-es," she murmured faintly, and with sinking heart, he realized that already she was drifting toward unconsciousness. Ah, well, perhaps that was the best thing!

He looked down at the fair young face and thought of her lover languishing in prison. What a wretched fate theirs had been! What sufferings they had borne! What injustice! And now this end to their dream of happiness!

He turned to his work. He would guard her while life and strength remained, and he wondered idly, as he braced the overhead logs against the iron door, how many more minutes of life this shelter would give them. Why take so much pains for so paltry a result?

He turned toward the barricade and saw that the flames were licking their way through the wall of logs, shooting and curling their hungry red tongues through many openings. The heat was becoming unbearable. Well, they were at

the last trench now, he was surprised at the clearness and calmness of his mind. Death did not seem such a serious thing after all!

Coquenil crawled in behind the shelter of logs and crouched down beside the girl. She was quite unconscious now, but was breathing peacefully, smilingly, with face flushed and red lips parted. The glorious masses of her reddish hair were spread over the girl's white shoulders, and it seemed to M. Paul that he had never seen so beautiful a picture of youth and innocence.

Suddenly there was a crumbling of logs at the passageway and the chamber became light as day while a blast of heat swept over them. Coquenil looked out around the end of the shelter and saw flames a yard long shooting toward them through widening breaches in the logs. And a steady roar began. It was nearly over now, although close to the floor the air was still good.

He reflected that, with the enormous amount of wood here, this fire would rage hotter and hotter for hours until the stones themselves would be red hot or white hot and--there would be nothing left when it all was over, absolutely nothing left but ashes. No one would ever know their fate.

Then he thought of his mother. He wished he might have sent her a line--still she would know that her boy had fallen in a good cause, as his father had fallen. He needn't worry about his mother--she would know.

Now another log crumbled with a sharp crackling. Alice stirred uneasily and opened her eyes. Then she sat up quickly, and there was something in her face Coquenil had never seen there, something he had never seen in any face.

"Willie, you naughty, naughty boy!" she cried. "You have taken my beautiful dolly. Poor little Esmeralda! You threw her up on that shelf, Willie; yes, you did."

Then, before Coquenil could prevent it, she slipped out from behind the shelter and stood up in the fire-bound chamber.

"Come back!" he cried, reaching after her, but the girl evaded him.

"There it is, on that shelf," she went on positively, and, following her finger, Coquenil saw, what he had not noticed before, a massive stone shelf jutting out from the wall just over the wood pile. "You must get my dolly," she ordered.

"Certainly, I'll get it," said M. Paul soothingly. "Come back here and--I'll get your dolly."

She stamped her foot in displeasure. "Not at all; I don't like this place. It's a hot, nasty place and--come"--she caught Coquenil's hand--"we'll go out where the fairies are. That's a much nicer place to play, Willie."

Here there came to M. Paul an urging of mysterious guidance, as if an inward voice had spoken to him and said that God was trying to save them, that He had put wisdom in this girl's mouth and that he must listen.

"All right," he said, "we'll go and play where the fairies are, but--how do we get there?"

"Through the door under the shelf. You know perfectly well, Willie!"

"Yes," he agreed, "I know about the door, but--I forget how to get it open."

"Silly!" She stamped her foot again. "You push on that stone thing under

the shelf."

Shading his eyes against the glare, Coquenil looked at the shelf and saw that it was supported by two stone brackets.

"You mean the thing that holds the shelf up?"

"Yes, you must press it."

"But there are two things that hold the shelf up. Is it the one on this side that you press or the one on that side?"

"Dear me, what an _aggravating_ boy! It's the one _this_ side, of course."

"Good! You lie down now and I'll have it open in a jiffy."

He started to force Alice behind the shelter, for the heat was actually blistering the skin, but to his surprise he found her suddenly limp in his arms. Having spoken these strange words of wisdom or of folly, she had gone back into unconsciousness.

Coquenil believed that they were words of wisdom, and without a moment's hesitation, he acted on that belief. The wall underneath the shelf was half covered with piled-up logs and these must be removed; which meant that he must work there for several minutes with the fierce breath of the fire hissing over him.

It was the work of a madman, or of one inspired. Three times Coquenil fell to the floor, gasping for breath, blinded by the flames that were roaring all about him, poisoned by deadly fumes. The skin on his arms and neck was hanging away in shreds, the pain was unbearable, yet he bore it, the task was impossible, yet he did it.

At last the space under the shelf was cleared, and staggering, blackened, blinded, yet believing, Paul Coquenil stumbled forward and seized the left-hand bracket in his two bruised hands and pressed it with all his might.

Instantly a door underneath, cunningly hidden in the wall, yawned open on a square black passage.

"It's here that the fairies play," muttered M. Paul, "and it's a mighty good place for us!"

With a bound he was back at the shelter and had Alice in his arms, smiling again, as she slept--as she dreamed. And a moment later he had carried her safely through flames that actually singed her hair, and laid her tenderly in the cool passage. _And beside her he laid the baron's diary!_

[Illustration: "And a moment later he had carried her safely through the flames."]

Then he went back to close the door. It was high time, for the last obstructing logs of the old barricade had fallen and the chamber was a seething mass of fire.

"I feel pretty rotten," reflected Coquenil with a whimsical smile. "My hair is burned off and my eyebrows are gone and about half my skin, but--I guess I'll take a chance on a burn or two more and rescue Esmeralda!"

Whereupon he reached up inside that fiery furnace and, groping over the hot stone shelf, brought down a scorched and battered and dust-covered little figure that had lain there for many years.

It was the lost dolly!

CHAPTER XXX

MRS. LLOYD KITTREDGE

The details of the hours that followed remained blurred memories in the minds of Alice and her rescuer. There was, first, a period of utter blank when Coquenil, overcome by the violence of his struggle and the agony of his burns, fell unconscious near the unconscious girl. How long they lay thus in the dark playground of the fairies, so near the raging fire, yet safe from it, was never known exactly; nor how long they wandered afterwards through a strange subterranean region of passages and cross passages, that widened and narrowed, that ascended and descended, that were sometimes smooth under foot, but oftener blocked with rough stones and always black as night. The fairies must have been sorry at their plight, for, indeed, it was a pitiable one; bruised, blistered, covered with grime and with little else, they stumbled on aimlessly, cutting their bare feet, falling often in sheer weakness, and lying for minutes where they fell before they could summon strength to stumble on. Surely no more pathetic pair than these two ever braved the mazes of the Paris catacombs!

Perhaps the fairies finally felt that the odds were too great against them, and somehow led them to safety. At any rate, through the ghastly horror of darkness and weakness and pain there presently came hope--flickering torches in the distance, then faint voices and the presence of friends, some workmen, occupied with drainage repairs, who produced stimulants and rough garments and showed them the way to the upper world, to the blessed sunshine.

Then it was a matter of temporary relief at the nearest pharmacy, of waiting until Pougeot, summoned by telephone, could arrive with all haste in an automobile.

An hour later M. Paul and Alice were in clean, cool beds at a private hospital near the commissary's house, with nurses and doctors bending over them. And on a chair beside the girl, battered and blackened, sat Esmeralda, while under the detective's pillow was the scorched but unharmed diary of De Heidelberg-Bruck!

"Both cases serious," was the head doctor's grave judgment. "The man is frightfully burned. The girl's injuries are not so bad, but she is suffering from shock. We'll know more in twenty-four hours." Then, turning to Pougeot: "Oh, he insists on seeing you alone. Only a minute mind!"

With a thrill of emotion the commissary entered the silent, darkened room where his friend lay, swathed in bandages and supported on a water bed to lessen the pain.

"It's all right Paul," said M. Pougeot, "I've just talked with the doctor."

"Thanks, Lucien," answered a weak voice in the white bundle. "I'm going to pull through--I've got to, but--if anything should go wrong, I want you to have the main points. Come nearer."

The commissary motioned to the nurse, who withdrew. Then he bent close to the injured man and listened intently while Coquenil, speaking with an effort and with frequent pauses, related briefly what had happened.

"God in heaven!" muttered Pougeot. "He'll pay for this!"

"Yes, I--I think he'll pay for it, but--Lucien, do nothing until I am able

to decide things with you. Say nothing to anyone, not even to the doctor. And don't give our names."

"No, no, I'll see to that."

"The girl mustn't talk, tell her she--_mustn't talk_. And--Lucien?"

"Yes?"

"She may be delirious--_I_ may be delirious, I feel queer--now. You must--make sure of these--nurses."

"Yes, Paul, I will."

"And--watch the girl! Something has happened to--her mind. She's forgotten or--_remembered!_ Get the best specialist in Paris and--get Duprat. Do whatever they advise--no matter what it costs. Everything depends on--her."

"I'll do exactly as you say, old friend," whispered the other. Then, at a warning signal from the nurse: "Don't worry now. Just rest and get well." He rose to go. "Until to-morrow, Paul."

The sick man's reply was only a faint murmur, and Pougeot stole softly out of the room, turning at the door for an anxious glance toward the white bed.

This was the first of many visits to the hospital by the devoted commissary and of many anxious hours at that distressed bedside. Before midnight Coquenil was in raging delirium with a temperature of one hundred and five, and the next morning, when Pougeot called, the doctor looked grave. They were in for a siege of brain fever with erysipelas to be fought off, if possible.

Poor Coquenil! His body was in torture and his mind in greater torture. Over and over again, those days, he lived through his struggle with the fire, he rescued Alice, he played with the fairies, he went back after the doll. Over and over again!

And when the fever fell and his mind grew calm, there followed a period of nervous exhaustion when his stomach refused to do its work, when his heart, for nothing at all, would leap into fits of violent beating. Pougeot could not even see him now, and the doctor would make no promise as to how soon it would be safe to mention the case to him. Perhaps not for weeks!

For weeks! And, meantime, Lloyd Kittredge had been placed on trial for the murder of Martinez and the evidence seemed overwhelmingly against him; in fact, the general opinion was that the young American would be found guilty.

What should the commissary do?

For a week the trial dragged slowly with various delays and adjournments, during which time, to Pougeot's delight, Coquenil began to mend rapidly. The doctor assured the commissary that in a few days he should have a serious talk with the patient. A few days! Unfortunately, the trial began to march along during these days--they dispose of murder cases expeditiously in France--and, to make matters worse, Coquenil suffered a relapse, so that the doctor was forced to retract his promise.

What should the commissary do?

In this emergency Coquenil himself came unexpectedly to Pougeot's relief; instead of the apathy or indifference he had shown for days, he suddenly developed his old keen interest in the case, and one morning insisted on knowing how things were going and what the prospects were. In vain doctor

and nurse objected and reasoned; the patient only insisted the more strongly, he wished to have a talk with M. Pougeot at once. And, as the danger of opposing him was felt to be greater than that of yielding, it resulted that M. Paul had his way, Pougeot came to his bedside and stayed an hour--two hours, until the doctor absolutely ordered him away; but, after luncheon, the detective took the bit in his teeth and told the doctor plainly that, with or without permission, he was going to do his work. He had learned things that he should have known long ago and there was not an hour to lose. A man's life was at stake, and--his stomach, his nerves, his heart, and his other organs might do what they pleased, he proposed to save that life.

Before this uncompromising attitude the doctor could only bow gracefully, and when he was told by Pougeot (in strictest confidence) that this gaunt and irascible patient, whom he had known as M. Martin, was none other than the celebrated Paul Coquenil, he comforted himself with the thought that, after all, a resolute mind can often do wonders with a weak body.

It was a delightful September afternoon, with a brisk snap in the air and floods of sunshine. Since early morning the streets about the Palais de Justice had been, blocked with carriages and automobiles, and the courtyard with clamorous crowds eager to witness the final scene in this celebrated murder trial. The case would certainly go to the jury before night. The last pleas would be made, the judge's grave words would be spoken, and twelve solemn citizens would march out with the fate of this cheerful young American in their hands. It was well worth seeing, and all Paris that could get tickets, especially the American Colony, was there to see it. Pussy Wilmott, in a most fetching gown, with her hair done ravishingly, sat near the front and never took her eyes off the prisoner.

In spite of all that he had been through and all that he was facing, Kittredge looked surprisingly well. A little pale, perhaps, but game to the end, and ready always with his good-natured smile. All the ladies liked him. He had such nice teeth and such well-kept hands! A murderer with those kind, jolly eyes? Never in the world! they vowed, and smiled and stared their encouragement.

A close observer would have noticed, however, that Lloyd's eyes were anxious as they swept the spread of faces before him; they were searching, searching for one face that they could not find. Where was Alice? Why had she sent him no word? Was she ill? Had any harm befallen her? _Where was Alice?_

So absorbed was Kittredge in these reflections that he scarcely heard the thundering denunciations hurled at him by the public prosecutor in his fierce and final demand that blood be the price of blood and that the extreme penalty of the law be meted out to this young monster of wickedness and dissimulation.

Nor did Lloyd notice the stir when one of the court attendants made way through the crush for a distinguished-looking man, evidently a person of particular importance, who was given a chair on the platform occupied by the three black-robed judges.

"The Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck!" whispered eager tongues, and straightway the awe-inspiring name was passed from mouth to mouth. The Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck! He had dropped in in a dilettante spirit to hear the spirited debate, and the judges were greatly honored.

Alas for the baron! It was surely some sinister prompting that brought him here to-day, so coldly complacent as he nodded to the presiding judge, so quietly indifferent as he glanced at the prisoner through his single eyeglass. The gods had given Coquenil a spectacular setting for his triumph!

And now, suddenly, the blow fell. As the prosecuting officer soared along in his oratorical flight, a note was passed unobtrusively to the presiding judge, a modest little note folded on itself without even an envelope to hold it. For several minutes the note lay unnoticed; then the judge, with careless eye, glanced over it; then he started, frowned, and his quick rereading showed that a spark of something had flashed from that scrap of paper.

The presiding judge leaned quickly toward his associate on the right and whispered earnestly, then toward his associate on the left, and, one after another, the three magistrates studied this startling communication, nodding learned heads and lowering judicial eyebrows. The public prosecutor blazed through his peroration to an inattentive bench.

No sooner had the speaker finished than the clerk of the court announced a brief recess, during which the judges withdrew for deliberation and the audience buzzed their wonder. During this interval the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck looked frankly bored.

On the return of the three, an announcement was made by the presiding judge that important new evidence in the case had been received, evidence of so unusual a character that the judges had unanimously decided to interrupt proceedings for a public hearing of the evidence in question. It was further ordered that no one be allowed to leave the courtroom under any circumstances.

"Call the first witness!" ordered the judge, and amidst the excitement caused by these ominous words a small door opened and a woman entered leaning on a guard. She was dressed simply in black and heavily veiled, but her girlish figure showed that she was young. As she appeared, Kittredge started violently.

The clerk of the court cleared his throat and called out something in incomprehensible singsong.

The woman came forward to the witness stand and lifted her veil. As she did so, three distinct things happened: the audience murmured its admiration at a vision of strange beauty, Kittredge stared in a daze of joy, and De Heidelmann-Bruck felt the cold hand of death clutching at his heart.

It was Alice come to her lover's need! Alice risen from the flames! Alice here for chastening and justice!

"What is your name?" questioned the judge.

"Mary Coogan," was the clear answer.

"Your nationality?"

"I am an American."

"You have lived a long time in France?"

"Yes. I came to France as a little girl."

"How did that happen?"

"My father died and--my mother married a second time."

Her voice broke, but she shot a swift glance at the prisoner and seemed to gain strength.

"Your mother married a Frenchman?"

"Yes."

"What is the name of the Frenchman whom your mother married?"

The girl hesitated, and then looking straight at the baron, she said: "The Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck."

There was something in the girl's tone, in her manner, in the fearless poise of her head, that sent a shiver of apprehension through the audience. Every man and woman waited breathless for the next question. In their absorbed interest in the girl they scarcely looked at the aristocratic visitor.

"Is your mother living?"

"No."

"How did she die?"

Again the witness turned to Kittredge and his eyes made her brave.

"My mother was burned to death--in the Charity Bazaar fire," she answered in a low voice.

"Were you present at the fire?"

"Yes."

"Were you in danger?"

"Yes."

"State what you remember about the fire."

The girl looked down and answered rapidly: "My mother and I went to the Charity Bazaar with the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck. When the fire broke out, there was a panic and we were held by the crush. There was a window near us through which some people were climbing. My mother and I got to this window and would have been able to escape through it, but the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck pushed us back and climbed through himself."

"It's a lie!" cried the baron hoarsely, while a murmur of dismay arose from the courtroom.

"Silence!" warned the clerk.

"And after that?"

The girl shook her head and there came into her face a look of terrible sadness.

"I don't know what happened after that for a long time. I was very ill and--for years I did not remember these things."

"You mean that for years you did not remember what you have just testified?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

The room was so hushed in expectation that the tension was like physical pain.

"You did not remember your mother during these years?"

"No."

"Not even her name?"

She shook her head. "I did not remember my own name."

"But now you remember everything?"

"Yes, everything."

"When did you recover your memory?"

"It began to come back a few weeks ago."

"Under what circumstances?"

"Under circumstances like those when--when I lost it."

"How do you mean?"

"I--I--" She turned slowly, as if drawn by some horrible fascination, and looked at De Heidelmann-Bruck. The baron's face was ghastly white, but by a supreme effort he kept an outward show of composure.

"Yes?" encouraged the judge.

"I was in another fire," she murmured, still staring at the baron. "I--I nearly lost my life there."

The witness had reached the end of her strength; she was twisting and untwisting her white fingers piteously, while the pupils of her eyes widened and contracted in terror. She staggered as if she would faint or fall, and the guard was starting toward her when, through the anguished silence, a clear, confident voice rang out:

"_Alice!_"

It was the prisoner who had spoken, it was the lover who had come to the rescue and whose loyal cry broke the spell of horror. Instantly the girl turned to Lloyd with a look of infinite love and gratitude, and before the outraged clerk of the court had finished his warning to the young American, Alice had conquered her distress and was ready once more for the ordeal.

"Tell us in your own words," said the judge kindly, "how it was that you nearly lost your life a second time in a fire."

In a low voice, but steadily, Alice began her story. She spoke briefly of her humble life with the Bonnetons, of her work at Notre-Dame, of the occasional visits of her supposed cousin, the wood carver; then she came to the recent tragic happenings, to her flight from Groener, to the kindness of M. Pougeot, to the trick of the ring that lured her from the commissary's home, and finally to the moment when, half dead with fright, she was thrust into that cruel chamber and left there with M. Coquenil--to perish.

As she described their desperate struggle for life in that living furnace and their final miraculous escape, the effect on the audience was indescribable. Women screamed and fainted, men broke down and wept, even the judges wiped pitying eyes as Alice told how Paul Coquenil built the last barricade with fire roaring all about him, and then how he dashed among leaping flames and, barehanded, all but naked, cleared a way to safety.

Through the tense silence that followed her recital came the judge's voice: "And you accuse a certain person of committing this crime?"

"I do," she answered firmly.

"You make this accusation deliberately, realizing the gravity of what you say?"

"I do."

"Whom do you accuse?"

The audience literally held its breath as the girl paused before replying. Her hands shut hard at her sides, her body seemed to stiffen and rise, then she turned formidably with the fires of slumbering vengeance burning in her wonderful eyes--vengeance for her mother, for her lover, for her rescuer, for herself--she turned slowly toward the cowering nobleman and said distinctly: "I accuse the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck."

So monstrous, so unthinkable was the charge, that the audience sat stupidly staring at the witness as if they doubted their own ears, and some whispered that the thing had never happened, the girl was mad.

Then all eyes turned to the accused. He struggled to speak but the words choked in his throat. If ever a great man was guilty in appearance, the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck was that guilty great man!

"I insist on saying--" he burst out finally, but the judge cut him short.

"You will be heard presently, sir. Call the next witness."

The girl withdrew, casting a last fond look at her lover, and the clerk's voice was heard summoning M. Pougeot.

The commissary appeared forthwith and, with all the authority of his office, testified in confirmation of Alice's story. There was no possible doubt that the girl would have perished in the flames but for the heroism of Paul Coquenil.

Pougeot was followed by Dr. Duprat, who gave evidence as to the return of Alice's memory. He regarded her case as one of the most remarkable psychological phenomena that had come under his observation, and he declared, as an expert, that the girl's statements were absolutely worthy of belief.

"Call the next witness," directed the judge, and the clerk of the court sang out:

"_Paul Coquenil!_"

A murmur of sympathy and surprise ran through the room as the small door opened, just under the painting of justice, and a gaunt, pallid figure appeared, a tall man, wasted and weakened. He came forward leaning on a cane and his right hand was bandaged.

"I would like to add, your Honor," said Dr. Duprat, "that M. Coquenil has risen from a sick bed to come here; in fact, he has come against medical advice to testify in favor of this young prisoner."

The audience was like a powder mine waiting for a spark. Only a word was needed to set off their quivering, pent-up enthusiasm.

"What is your name?" asked the judge as the witness took the stand.

"Paul Coquenil," was the quiet answer.

It was the needed word, the spark to fire the train. Paul Coquenil! Never in modern times had a Paris courtroom witnessed a scene like that which followed. Pussy Wilmott, who spent her life looking for new sensations, had

one now. And Kittredge manacled in the dock, yet wildly happy! And Alice outside, almost fainting between hope and fear! And De Heidelmann-Bruck with his brave eyeglass and groveling soul! They all had new sensations!

As Coquenil spoke, there went up a great cry from the audience, an irresistible tribute to his splendid bravery. It was spontaneous, it was hysterical, it was tremendous. Men and women sprang to their feet, shouting and waving and weeping. The crowd, crushed in the corridor, caught the cry and passed it along.

"Coquenil! Coquenil!"

The down in the courtyard it sounded, and out into the street, where a group of students started the old snappy refrain:

"Oh, oh! Il nous faut-o!
Beau, beau! Beau Cocono-o!"

In vain the judge thundered admonitions and the clerk shouted for order. That white-faced, silent witness leaning on his cane, stood for the moment to these frantic people as the symbol of what they most admired in a man--resourcefulness before danger and physical courage and the readiness to die for a friend. For these three they seldom had a chance to shout and weep, so they wept and shouted now!

"Coquenil! Coquenil!"

There had been bitter moments in the great detective's life, but this made up for them; there had been proud, intoxicating moments, but this surpassed them. Coquenil, too, had a new sensation!

When at length the tumult was stilled and the panting, sobbing audience had settled back in their seats, the presiding judge, lenient at heart to the disorder, proceeded gravely with his examination.

"Please state what you know about this case," he said, and again the audience waited in deathlike stillness.

"There is no need of many words," answered M. Paul; then pointing an accusing arm at De Heidelmann-Bruck, "I know that this man shot Enrico Martinez on the night of July 4th, at the Ansonia Hotel."

The audience gave a long-troubled sigh, the nobleman sat rigid on his chair, the judge went on with his questions.

"You say you know this?" he demanded sharply.

"I know it," declared Coquenil, "I have absolute proof of it--here." He drew from his inner coat the baron's diary and handed it to the judge.

"What is this?" asked the latter.

"His own confession, written by himself and--Quick!" he cried, and sprang toward the rich man, but Papa Tignol was there before him. With a bound the old fox had leaped forward from the audience and reached the accused in time to seize and stay his hand.

"Excuse me, your Honor," apologized the detective, "the man was going to kill himself."

"It's false!" screamed the baron. "I was getting my handkerchief."

"Here's the handkerchief," said Tignol, holding up a pistol.

At this there was fresh tumult in the audience, with men cursing and women

shrieking.

The judge turned gravely to De Heidelmann-Bruck. "I have a painful duty to perform, sir. Take this man out--_under arrest_, and--clear the room."

M. Paul sank weakly into a chair and watched idly while the attendants led away the unresisting millionaire, watched keenly as the judge opened the baron's diary and began to read. He noted the magistrate's start of amazement, the eager turning of pages and the increasingly absorbed attention.

"Astounding! Incredible!" muttered the judge. "A great achievement! I congratulate you, M. Coquenil. It's the most brilliant coup I have ever known. It will stir Paris to the depths and make you a--a hero."

"Thank you, thank you," murmured the sick man.

At this moment an awe-struck attendant came forward to say that the baron wished a word with M. Paul.

"By all means," consented the judge.

Haltingly, on his cane, Coquenil made his way to an adjoining room where De Heidelmann-Bruck was waiting under guard.

As he glanced at the baron, M. Paul saw that once more the man had demonstrated his extraordinary self-control, he was cold and composed as usual.

"We take our medicine, eh?" said the detective admiringly.

"Yes," answered the prisoner, "we take our medicine."

"But there's a difference," reflected Coquenil. "The other day you said you were sorry when you left me in that hot cellar. Now you're in a fairly hot place yourself, baron, and--I'm _not_ sorry."

De Heidelmann-Bruck shrugged his shoulders.

"Any objection to my smoking a cigar?" he asked coolly and reached toward his coat pocket.

With a quick gesture Coquenil stopped the movement.

"_I don't like smoke_, " he said with grim meaning. "If there is anything you want to say, sir, you had better say it."

"I have only this to say, Coquenil," proceeded the baron, absolutely unruffled; "we had had our little fight and--I have lost. We both did our best with the weapons we had for the ends we hoped to achieve. I stood for wickedness, you stood for virtue, and virtue has triumphed; but, between ourselves"--he smiled and shrugged his shoulders--"they're both only words and--it isn't important, anyhow."

He paused while a contemplative, elusive smile played about his mouth.

"The point is, I am going to pay the price that society exacts when this sort of thing is--found out. I am perfectly willing to pay it, not in the least afraid to pay it, and, above all, not in the least sorry for anything. I want you to remember that and repeat it. I have no patience with cowardly canting talk about remorse. I have never for one moment regretted anything I have done, and I regret nothing now. Nothing! I have had five years of the best this world can give--power, fortune, social position, pleasure, _everything_, and whatever I pay, I'm ahead of the game, way ahead. If I had it all to do over again and knew that this would

be the end, _I would change nothing_."

"Except that secret door under the stone shelf--you might change that," put in Coquenil dryly.

"No wonder you feel bitter," mused the baron. "It was you or me, and-- _I_ showed no pity. Why should you? I want you to believe, though, that I was genuine when I said I liked you. I was ready to destroy you, but I liked you. I like you now, Coquenil, and--this is perhaps our last talk, they will take me off presently, and--you collect odd souvenirs--here is one--a little good-by--from an adversary who was--game, anyway. You don't mind accepting it?"

There was something in the man's voice that Coquenil had never heard there. Was it a faint touch of sentiment? He took the ring that the baron handed him, an uncut ruby, and looked at it thoughtfully, wondering if, after all, there was room in this cold, cruel soul for a tiny spot of tenderness.

"It's a beautiful stone, but--I cannot accept it; we never take gifts from prisoners and--thank you."

He handed back the ring.

The baron's face darkened; he made an angry gesture as if he would dash the trinket to the floor. Then he checked himself, and studying the ring sadly, twisted it about in his fingers.

"Ah, that pride of yours! You've been brilliant, you've been brave, but never unkind before. It's only a bauble, Coquenil, and----"

De Heidelmann-Bruck stopped suddenly and M. Paul caught a savage gleam in his eyes; then, swiftly, the baron put the ring to his mouth, and sucking in his breath, swallowed hard.

The detective sprang forward, but it was too late.

"A doctor--quick!" he called to the guard.

"No use!" murmured the rich man, sinking forward.

Coquenil tried to support him, but the body was too heavy for his bandaged hand, and the prisoner sank to the floor.

"I--I won the last trick, anyhow," the baron whispered as M. Paul bent over him.

Coquenil picked up the ring that had fallen from a nerveless hand. He put it to his nose and sniffed it.

"Prussic acid!" he muttered, and turned away from the last horrors.

Two minutes later, when Dr. Duprat rushed in, the Baron de Heidelmann-Bruck, unafraid and unrepentant, had gone to his last long sleep. His face was calm, and even in death his lips seemed set in a mocking smile of triumph.

* * * * *

And so it all ended, as the baron remarked, with virtue rewarded and right triumphant over wrong. Only the doctors agreed that many a day must pass before Coquenil could get back to his work, if, indeed, he ever went back to it. There were reasons, independent of M. Paul's health, that made this doubtful, reasons connected with the happiness of the lovers, for, after all, it was to Coquenil that they owed everything; Kittredge owed him his liberty and established innocence, Alice (we should say Mary) owed him her

memory, her lover, and her fortune; for, as the sole surviving heir of her mother, the whole vast inheritance came to her. And, when a sweet young girl finds herself in such serious debt to a man and at the same time one of the richest heiresses in the world, she naturally wishes to give some substantial form to her gratitude, even to the extent of a few odd millions from her limitless store.

At any rate, Coquenil was henceforth far beyond any need of following his profession; whatever use he might in the future make of his brilliant talents would be for the sheer joy of conquest and strictly in the spirit of art for its own sake.

On the other hand, if at any time he wished to undertake a case, it was certain that the city of Paris or the government of France would tender him their commissions on a silver salver, for now, of course, his justification was complete and, by special arrangement, he was given a sort of roving commission from headquarters with indefinite leave of absence. Best of all, he was made chevalier of the Legion of Honor "for conspicuous public service." What a day it was, to be sure, when Madam Coquenil first caught sight of that precious red badge on her son's coat!

So we leave Paul Coquenil resting and recuperating in the Vosges Mountains, taking long drives with his mother and planning the rebuilding of their mountain home.

"You did your work, Paul, and I'm proud of you," the old lady said when she heard the tragic tale, "but don't forget, my boy, it was the hand of God that saved you."

"Yes, mother," he said fondly, and added with a mischievous smile, "don't forget that you had a little to do with it, too."

As for the lovers, there is only this to be said: that they were ridiculously, indescribably happy. The mystery of Alice's strange dreams and clairvoyant glimpses (it should be Mary) was in great part accounted for, so Dr. Duprat declared, by certain psychological abnormalities connected with her loss of memory; these would quickly disappear, he thought, with a little care and a certain electrical treatment that he recommended. Lloyd was positive kisses would do the thing just as well; at any rate, he proposed to give this theory a complete test.

The young American had one grievance.

"It's playing it low on a fellow," he said, "when he's just squared himself to hustle for a poor candle seller to change her into a howling millionaire. I'd like to know how the devil I'm going to be a hero now?"

"Silly boy," she laughed, her radiant eyes burning on him, at which he threatened to begin the treatment forthwith.

"You darling!" he cried. "My little Alice! Hanged if I can ever call you anything but Alice!"

She looked up at him archly and nestled close.

"Lloyd, dear, I know a nicer name than Alice."

"Yes?"

"A nicer name than Mary."

"Yes?"

"A nicer name than any name."

"What is it, you little beauty?" he murmured, drawing her closer still and pressing his lips to hers.

"How can I--tell you--unless you--let me--speak?" she panted.

Then, with wonderful dancing lights in those deep, strange windows of her soul, she whispered: "The nicest name in the world _for me_ is-- _Mrs. Lloyd Kittredge!_"

THE END

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