

EMMA ORCZY

CASTLES IN

THE AIR

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Baroness Emmuska Orczy Orczy

Castles in the Air

FOREWORD

In presenting this engaging rogue to my readers, I feel that I owe them, if not an apology, at least an explanation for this attempt at enlisting sympathy in favour of a man who has little to recommend him save his own unconscious humour. In very truth my good friend Ratichon is an unblushing liar, thief, a forger—anything you will; his vanity is past belief, his scruples are non-existent. How he escaped a convict settlement it is difficult to imagine, and hard to realize that he died—presumably some years after the event recorded in the last chapter of his autobiography—a respected member of the community, honoured by that same society which should have raised a punitive hand against him. Yet this I believe to be the case. At any rate, in spite of close research in the police records of the period, I can find no mention of Hector Ratichon. "Heureux le peuple qui n'a pas d'histoire" applies, therefore, to him, and we must take it that Fate and his own sorely troubled country dealt lightly with him.

Which brings me back to my attempt at an explanation. If Fate dealt kindly, why not we? Since time immemorial there have been worse scoundrels unhung than Hector Ratichon, and he has the saving grace—which few possess—of unruffled geniality. Buffeted by Fate, sometimes starving, always thirsty, he never complains; and there is all through his autobiography what we might call an "Ah, well!" attitude about his outlook on life. Because of this, and because his very fatuity makes us smile, I feel that he deserves forgiveness and even a certain amount of recognition.

The fragmentary notes, which I have only very slightly modified, came into my hands by a happy chance one dull post-war November morning in Paris, when rain, sleet and the north wind drove me for shelter under the arcades of the Odéon, and a kindly vendor of miscellaneous printed matter and mouldy MSS. allowed me to rummage amongst a load of old papers which he was about to consign to the rubbish heap. I imagine that the notes were set down by the actual person to whom the genial Hector Ratichon recounted the most conspicuous events of his chequered career, and as I turned over the torn and musty pages, which hung together by scraps of mouldy thread, I could not help feeling the humour—aye! and the pathos—of that drabby side of old Paris which was being revealed to me through the medium of this rogue's adventures. And even as, holding the fragments in my hand, I walked home that morning through the rain something of that same quaint personality seemed once more to haunt the dank and dreary streets of the once dazzling Ville Lumière. I seemed to see the shabby bottle-green coat, the nankeen pantaloons, the down-at-heel shoes of this "confidant of Kings"; I could hear his unctuous, self-satisfied laugh, and sensed his furtive footstep when'er a gendarme came into view. I saw his ruddy, shiny face beaming at me through the sleet and the rain as, like a veritable squire of dames, he minced his steps upon the boulevard, or, like a reckless smuggler, affronted the grave dangers of mountain fastnesses upon the Juras; and I was quite glad to think that a life so full of unconscious humour had not been cut short upon the gallows. And I thought kindly of him, for he had made me smile.

There is nothing fine about him, nothing romantic; nothing in his actions to cause a single thrill to the nerves of the most unsophisticated reader. Therefore, I apologize in that I have not held him up to a just obloquy because of his crimes, and I ask indulgence for his turpitudes because of the laughter which they provoke.

EMMUSKA ORCZY. *Paris, 1921.*

CHAPTER I

A ROLAND FOR HIS OLIVER

1

My name is Ratichon—Hector Ratichon, at your service, and I make so bold as to say that not even my worst enemy would think of minimizing the value of my services to the State. For twenty years now have I placed my powers at the disposal of my country: I have served the Republic, and was confidential agent to Citizen Robespierre; I have served the Empire, and was secret factotum to our great Napoléon; I have served King Louis—with a brief interval of one hundred days—for the past two years, and I can only repeat that no one, in the whole of France, has been so useful or so zealous in tracking criminals, nosing out conspiracies, or denouncing traitors as I have been.

And yet you see me a poor man to this day: there has been a persistently malignant Fate which has worked against me all these years, and would—but for a happy circumstance of which I hope anon to tell you—have left me just as I was, in the matter of fortune, when I first came to Paris and set up in business as a volunteer police agent at No, 96 Rue Daunou.

My apartment in those days consisted of an antechamber, an outer office where, if need be, a dozen clients might sit, waiting their turn to place their troubles, difficulties, anxieties before the acutest brain in France, and an inner room wherein that same acute brain—mine, my dear Sir—was wont to ponder and scheme. That apartment was not luxuriously furnished—furniture being very dear in those days—but there were a couple of chairs and a table in the outer office, and a cupboard wherein I kept the frugal repast which served me during the course of a long and laborious day. In the inner office there were more chairs and another table, littered with papers: letters and packets all tied up with pink tape (which cost three sous the metre), and bundles of letters from hundreds of clients, from the highest and the lowest in the land, you understand, people who wrote to me and confided in me to-day as kings and emperors had done in the past. In the antechamber there was a chair-bedstead for Theodore to sleep on when I required him to remain in town, and a chair on which he could sit.

And, of course, there was Theodore!

Ah! my dear Sir, of him I can hardly speak without feeling choked with the magnitude of my emotion. A noble indignation makes me dumb. Theodore, sir, has ever been the cruel thorn that times out of number hath wounded my over-sensitive heart. Think of it! I had picked him out of the gutter! No! no! I do not mean this figuratively! I mean that, actually and in the flesh, I took him up by the collar of his tattered coat and dragged him out of the gutter in the Rue Blanche, where he was grubbing for trifles out of the slime and mud. He was frozen, Sir, and starved—yes, starved! In the intervals of picking filth up out of the mud he held out a hand blue with cold to the passers-by and occasionally picked up a sou. When I found him in that pitiable condition he had exactly twenty centimes between him and absolute starvation.

And I, Sir Hector Ratichon, the confidant of two kings, three autocrats and an emperor, took that man to my bosom—fed him, clothed him, housed him, gave him the post of secretary in my intricate, delicate, immensely important business—and I did this, Sir, at a salary which, in comparison with his twenty centimes, must have seemed a princely one to him.

His duties were light. He was under no obligation to serve me or to be at his post before seven o'clock in the morning, and all that he had to do then was to sweep out the three rooms, fetch water from the well in the courtyard below, light the fire in the iron stove which stood in my inner office,

shell the haricots for his own mess of pottage, and put them to boil. During the day his duties were lighter still. He had to run errands for me, open the door to prospective clients, show them into the outer office, explain to them that his master was engaged on affairs relating to the kingdom of France, and generally prove himself efficient, useful and loyal—all of which qualities he assured me, my dear Sir, he possessed to the fullest degree. And I believed him, Sir; I nurtured the scorpion in my over-sensitive bosom! I promised him ten per cent. on all the profits of my business, and all the remnants from my own humble repasts—bread, the skins of luscious sausages, the bones from savoury cutlets, the gravy from the tasty carrots and onions. You would have thought that his gratitude would become boundless, that he would almost worship the benefactor who had poured at his feet the full cornucopia of comfort and luxury. Not so! That man, Sir, was a snake in the grass—a serpent—a crocodile! Even now that I have entirely severed my connexion with that ingrate, I seem to feel the wounds, like dagger-thrusts, which he dealt me with so callous a hand. But I have done with him—done, I tell you! How could I do otherwise than to send him back to the gutter from whence I should never have dragged him? My goodness, he repaid with an ingratitude so black that you, Sir, when you hear the full story of his treachery, will exclaim aghast.

Ah, you shall judge! His perfidy commenced less than a week after I had given him my third best pantaloons and three sous to get his hair cut, thus making a man of him. And yet, you would scarcely believe it, in the matter of the secret documents he behaved toward me like a veritable Judas!

Listen, my dear Sir.

I told you, I believe, that I had my office in the Rue Daunou. You understand that I had to receive my clients—many of whom were of exalted rank—in a fashionable quarter of Paris. But I actually lodged in Passy—being fond of country pursuits and addicted to fresh air—in a humble hostelry under the sign of the "Grey Cat"; and here, too, Theodore had a bed. He would walk to the office a couple of hours before I myself started on the way, and I was wont to arrive as soon after ten o'clock of a morning as I could do conveniently.

On this memorable occasion of which I am about to tell you—it was during the autumn of 1815—I had come to the office unusually early, and had just hung my hat and coat in the outer room, and taken my seat at my desk in the inner office, there to collect my thoughts in preparation for the grave events which the day might bring forth, when, suddenly, an ill-dressed, dour-looking individual entered the room without so much as saying, "By your leave," and after having pushed Theodore—who stood by like a lout—most unceremoniously to one side. Before I had time to recover from my surprise at this unseemly intrusion, the uncouth individual thrust Theodore roughly out of the room, slammed the door in his face, and having satisfied himself that he was alone with me and that the door was too solid to allow of successful eavesdropping, he dragged the best chair forward—the one, sir, which I reserve for lady visitors.

He threw his leg across it, and, sitting astride, he leaned his elbows over the back and glowered at me as if he meant to frighten me.

"My name is Charles Saurez," he said abruptly, "and I want your assistance in a matter which requires discretion, ingenuity and alertness. Can I have it?"

I was about to make a dignified reply when he literally threw the next words at me: "Name your price, and I will pay it!" he said.

What could I do, save to raise my shoulders in token that the matter of money was one of supreme indifference to me, and my eyebrows in a manner of doubt that M. Charles Saurez had the means wherewith to repay my valuable services? By way of a rejoinder he took out from the inner pocket of his coat a greasy letter-case, and with his exceedingly grimy fingers extracted therefrom some twenty banknotes, which a hasty glance on my part revealed as representing a couple of hundred francs.

"I will give you this as a retaining fee," he said, "if you will undertake the work I want you to do; and I will double the amount when you have carried the work out success fully."

Four hundred francs! It was not lavish, it was perhaps not altogether the price I would have named, but it was vary good, these hard times. You understand? We were all very poor in France in that year 1815 of which I speak.

I am always quite straightforward when I am dealing with a client who means business. I pushed aside the litter of papers in front of me, leaned my elbows upon my desk, rested my chin in my hands, and said briefly:

"M. Charles Saurez, I listen!"

He drew his chair a little closer and dropped his voice almost to a whisper.

"You know the Chancellerie of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?" he asked.

"Perfectly," I replied.

"You know M. de Marsan's private office? He is chief secretary to M. de Talleyrand."

"No," I said, "but I can find out."

"It is on the first floor, immediately facing the service staircase, and at the end of the long passage which leads to the main staircase."

"Easy to find, then," I remarked.

"Quite. At this hour and until twelve o'clock, M. de Marsan will be occupied in copying a document which I desire to possess. At eleven o'clock precisely there will be a noisy disturbance in the corridor which leads to the main staircase. M. de Marsan, in all probability, will come out of his room to see what the disturbance is about. Will you undertake to be ready at that precise moment to make a dash from the service staircase into the room to seize the document, which no doubt will be lying on the top of the desk, and bring it to an address which I am about to give you?"

"It is risky," I mused.

"Very," he retorted drily, "or I'd do it myself, and not pay you four hundred francs for your trouble."

"Trouble!" I exclaimed, with withering sarcasm.

"Trouble, you call it? If I am caught, it means penal servitude—New Caledonia, perhaps—"

"Exactly," he said, with the same irritating calmness; "and if you succeed it means four hundred francs. Take it or leave it, as you please, but be quick about it. I have no time to waste; it is past nine o'clock already, and if you won't do the work, someone else will."

For a few seconds longer I hesitated. Schemes, both varied and wild, rushed through my active brain: refuse to take this risk, and denounce the plot to the police; refuse it, and run to warn M. de Marsan; refuse it, and— I had little time for reflection. My uncouth client was standing, as it were, with a pistol to my throat—with a pistol and four hundred francs! The police might perhaps give me half a louis for my pains, or they might possibly remember an unpleasant little incident in connexion with the forgery of some Treasury bonds which they have never succeeded in bringing home to me—one never knows! M. de Marsan might throw me a franc, and think himself generous at that!

All things considered, then, when M. Charles Saurez suddenly said, "Well?" with marked impatience, I replied, "Agreed," and within five minutes I had two hundred francs in my pocket, with the prospect of two hundred more during the next four and twenty hours. I was to have a free hand in conducting my own share of the business, and M. Charles Saurez was to call for the document at my lodgings at Passy on the following morning at nine o'clock.

2

I flatter myself that I conducted the business with remarkable skill. At precisely ten minutes to eleven I rang at the Chancellerie of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. I was dressed as a respectable commissionaire, and I carried a letter and a small parcel addressed to M. de Marsan. "First floor," said the concierge curtly, as soon as he had glanced at the superscription on the letter. "Door faces top of the service stairs."

I mounted and took my stand some ten steps below the landing, keeping the door of M. de Marsan's room well in sight. Just as the bells of Notre Dame boomed the hour I heard what sounded like a furious altercation somewhere in the corridor just above me. There was much shouting, then one or two cries of "Murder!" followed by others of "What is it?" and "What in the name of – is all this infernal row about?" Doors were opened and banged, there was a general running and rushing along that corridor, and the next minute the door in front of me was opened also, and a young man came out, pen in hand, and shouting just like everybody else:

"What the – is all this infernal row about?"

"Murder, help!" came from the distant end of the corridor, and M. de Marsan—undoubtedly it was he—did what any other young man under the like circumstances would have done: he ran to see what was happening and to lend a hand in it, if need be. I saw his slim figure disappearing down the corridor at the very moment that I slipped into his room. One glance upon the desk sufficed: there lay the large official-looking document, with the royal signature affixed thereto, and close beside it the copy which M. de Marsan had only half finished—the ink on it was still wet. Hesitation, Sir, would have been fatal. I did not hesitate; not one instant. Three seconds had scarcely elapsed before I picked up the document, together with M. de Marsan's half-finished copy of the same, and a few loose sheets of Chancellerie paper which I thought might be useful. Then I slipped the lot inside my blouse. The bogus letter and parcel I left behind me, and within two minutes of my entry into the room I was descending the service staircase quite unconcernedly, and had gone past the concierge's lodge without being challenged. How thankful I was to breathe once more the pure air of heaven. I had spent an exceedingly agitated five minutes, and even now my anxiety was not altogether at rest. I dared not walk too fast lest I attracted attention, and yet I wanted to put the river, the Pont Neuf, and a half dozen streets between me and the Chancellerie of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No one who has not gone through such an exciting adventure as I have just recorded can conceive what were my feelings of relief and of satisfaction when I at last found myself quietly mounting the stairs which led to my office on the top floor of No. 96 Rue Daunou.

3

Now, I had not said anything to Theodore about this affair. It was certainly arranged between us when he entered my service as confidential clerk and doorkeeper that in lieu of wages, which I could not afford to pay him, he would share my meals with me and have a bed at my expense in the same house at Passy where I lodged; moreover, I would always give him a fair percentage on the profits which I derived from my business. The arrangement suited him very well. I told you that I picked him out of the gutter, and I heard subsequently that he had gone through many an unpleasant skirmish with the police in his day, and if I did not employ him no one else would.

After all, he did earn a more or less honest living by serving me. But in this instance, since I had not even asked for his assistance, I felt that, considering the risks of New Caledonia and a convict ship which I had taken, a paltry four hundred francs could not by any stretch of the imagination rank as a "profit" in a business—and Theodore was not really entitled to a percentage, was he?

So when I returned I crossed the ante-chamber and walked past him with my accustomed dignity; nor did he offer any comment on my get-up. I often affected a disguise in those days, even when I was not engaged in business, and the dress and get-up of a respectable commissionnaire was a favourite one with me. As soon as I had changed I sent him out to make purchases for our luncheon—five sous' worth of stale bread, and ten sous' worth of liver sausage, of which he was inordinately fond. He would take the opportunity on the way of getting moderately drunk on as many glasses of absinthe as he could afford. I saw him go out of the outer door, and then I set to work to examine the precious document.

Well, one glance was sufficient for me to realize its incalculable value! Nothing more or less than a Treaty of Alliance between King Louis XVIII of France and the King of Prussia in connexion with certain schemes of naval construction. I did not understand the whole diplomatic verbiage, but it was pretty clear to my unsophisticated mind that this treaty had been entered into in secret by the two monarchs, and that it was intended to prejudice the interests both of Denmark and of Russia in the Baltic Sea.

I also realized that both the Governments of Denmark and Russia would no doubt pay a very considerable sum for the merest glance at this document, and that my client of this morning was certainly a secret service agent—otherwise a spy—of one of those two countries, who did not choose to take the very severe risks which I had taken this morning, but who would, on the other hand, reap the full reward of the daring coup, whilst I was to be content with four hundred francs!

Now, I am a man of deliberation as well as of action, and at this juncture—feeling that Theodore was still safely out of the way—I thought the whole matter over quietly, and then took what precautions I thought fit for the furthering of my own interests.

To begin with, I set to work to make a copy of the treaty on my own account. I have brought the study of calligraphy to a magnificent degree of perfection, and the writing on the document was easy enough to imitate, as was also the signature of our gracious King Louis and of M. de Talleyrand, who had countersigned it.

If you remember, I had picked up two or three loose sheets of paper off M. de Marsan's desk; these bore the arms of the Chancellerie of Foreign Affairs stamped upon them, and were in every way identical with that on which the original document had been drafted. When I had finished my work I flattered myself that not the greatest calligraphic expert could have detected the slightest difference between the original and the copy which I had made.

The work took me a long time. When at last I folded up the papers and slipped them once more inside my blouse it was close upon two. I wondered why Theodore had not returned with our luncheon, but on going to the little anteroom which divides my office from the outer door, great was my astonishment to see him lolling there on the rickety chair which he affectioned, and half asleep. I had some difficulty in rousing him. Apparently he had got rather drunk while he was out, and had then returned and slept some of his booze off, without thinking that I might be hungry and needing my luncheon.

"Why didn't you let me know you had come back?" I asked curtly, for indeed I was very cross with him.

"I thought you were busy," he replied, with what I thought looked like a leer.

I have never really cared for Theodore, you understand.

However, I partook of our modest luncheon with him in perfect amity and brotherly love, but my mind was busy all the time. I began to wonder if Theodore suspected something; if so, I knew that I could not trust him. He would try and ferret things out, and then demand a share in my hard-earned emoluments to which he was really not entitled. I did not feel safe with that bulky packet of papers on me, and I felt that Theodore's bleary eyes were perpetually fixed upon the bulge in the left-hand side of my coat. At one moment he looked so strange that I thought he meant to knock me down.

So my mind was quickly made up.

After luncheon I would go down to my lodgings at Passy, and I knew of a snug little hiding-place in my room there where the precious documents would be quite safe until such time as I was to hand them—or one of them—to M. Charles Saurez.

This plan I put into execution, and with remarkable ingenuity too.

While Theodore was busy clearing up the debris of our luncheon, I not only gave him the slip, but as I went out I took the precaution of locking the outer door after me, and taking the key away in my pocket. I thus made sure that Theodore could not follow me. I then walked to Passy—a matter of two kilometres—and by four o'clock I had the satisfaction of stowing the papers safely away under

one of the tiles in the flooring of my room, and then pulling the strip of carpet in front of my bed snugly over the hiding-place.

Theodore's attic, where he slept, was at the top of the house, whilst my room was on the ground floor, and so I felt that I could now go back quite comfortably to my office in the hope that more remunerative work and more lavish clients would come my way before nightfall.

4

It was a little after five o'clock when I once more turned the key in the outer door of my rooms in the Rue Daunou.

Theodore did not seem in the least to resent having been locked in for two hours. I think he must have been asleep most of the time. Certainly I heard a good deal of shuffling when first I reached the landing outside the door; but when I actually walked into the apartment with an air of quiet unconcern Theodore was sprawling on the chair-bedstead, with eyes closed, a nose the colour of beetroot, and emitting sounds through his thin, cracked lips which I could not, Sir, describe graphically in your presence.

I took no notice of him, however, even though, as I walked past him, I saw that he opened one bleary eye and watched my every movement. I went straight into my private room and shut the door after me. And here, I assure you, my dear Sir, I literally fell into my favourite chair, overcome with emotion and excitement. Think what I had gone through! The events of the last few hours would have turned any brain less keen, less daring than that of Hector Ratichon. And here was I, alone at last, face to face with the future. What a future, my dear Sir! Fate was smiling on me at last. At last I was destined to reap a rich reward for all the skill, the energy, the devotion, which up to this hour I had placed at the service of my country and my King—or my Emperor, as the case might be—without thought of my own advantage. Here was I now in possession of a document—two documents—each one of which was worth at least a thousand francs to persons whom I could easily approach. One thousand francs! Was I dreaming? Five thousand would certainly be paid by the Government whose agent M. Charles Saurez admittedly was for one glance at that secret treaty which would be so prejudicial to their political interests; whilst M. de Marsan himself would gladly pay another five thousand for the satisfaction of placing the precious document intact before his powerful and irascible uncle.

Ten thousand francs! How few were possessed of such a sum in these days! How much could be done with it! I would not give up business altogether, of course, but with my new capital I would extend it and, there was a certain little house, close to Chantilly, a house with a few acres of kitchen garden and some fruit trees, the possession of which would render me happier than any king. . . . I would marry! Oh, yes! I would certainly marry—found a family. I was still young, my dear Sir, and passably good looking. In fact there was a certain young widow, comely and amiable, who lived not far from Passy, who had on more than one occasion given me to understand that I was more than passably good looking. I had always been susceptible where the fair sex was concerned, and now . . . oh, now! I could pick and choose! The comely widow had a small fortune of her own, and there were others! . . .

Thus I dreamed on for the better part of an hour, until, soon after six o'clock, there was a knock at the outer door and I heard Theodore's shuffling footsteps crossing the small anteroom. There was some muttered conversation, and presently my door was opened and Theodore's ugly face was thrust into the room.

"A lady to see you," he said curtly.

Then, he dropped his voice, smacked his lips, and winked with one eye. "Very pretty," he whispered, "but has a young man with her whom she calls Arthur. Shall I send them in?"

I then and there made up my mind that I would get rid of Theodore now that I could afford to get a proper servant. My business would in future be greatly extended; it would become very important, and I was beginning to detest Theodore. But I said "Show the lady in!" with becoming dignity, and a few moments later a beautiful woman entered my room.

I was vaguely conscious that a creature of my own sex walked in behind her, but of him I took no notice. I rose to greet the lady and invited her to sit down, but I had the annoyance of seeing the personage whom deliberately she called "Arthur" coming familiarly forward and leaning over the back of her chair.

I hated him. He was short and stout and florid, with an impertinent-looking moustache, and hair that was very smooth and oily save for two tight curls, which looked like the horns of a young goat, on each side of the centre parting. I hated him cordially, and had to control my feelings not to show him the contempt which I felt for his fatuousness and his air of self-complacency. Fortunately the beautiful being was the first to address me, and thus I was able to ignore the very presence of the detestable man.

"You are M. Raticchon, I believe," she said in a voice that was dulcet and adorably tremulous, like the voice of some sweet, shy young thing in the presence of genius and power.

"Hector Raticchon," I replied calmly. "Entirely at your service, Mademoiselle." Then I added, with gentle, encouraging kindness, "Mademoiselle . . . ?"

"My name is Geoffroy," she replied, "Madeleine Geoffroy."

She raised her eyes—such eyes, my dear Sir!—of a tender, luscious grey, fringed with lashes and dewy with tears. I met her glance. Something in my own eyes must have spoken with mute eloquence of my distress, for she went on quickly and with a sweet smile. "And this," she said, pointing to her companion, "is my brother, Arthur Geoffroy."

An exclamation of joyful surprise broke from my lips, and I beamed and smiled on M. Arthur, begged him to be seated, which he refused, and finally I myself sat down behind my desk. I now looked with unmixed benevolence on both my clients, and then perceived that the lady's exquisite face bore unmistakable signs of recent sorrow.

"And now, Mademoiselle," I said, as soon as I had taken up a position indicative of attention and of encouragement, "will you deign to tell me how I can have the honour to serve you?"

"Monsieur," she began in a voice that trembled with emotion, "I have come to you in the midst of the greatest distress that any human being has ever been called upon to bear. It was by the merest accident that I heard of you. I have been to the police; they cannot—will not—act without I furnish them with certain information which it is not in my power to give them. Then when I was half distraught with despair, a kindly agent there spoke to me of you. He said that you were attached to the police as a voluntary agent, and that they sometimes put work in your way which did not happen to be within their own scope. He also said that sometimes you were successful."

"Nearly always, Mademoiselle," I broke in firmly and with much dignity. "Once more I beg of you to tell me in what way I may have the honour to serve you."

"It is not for herself, Monsieur," here interposed M. Arthur, whilst a blush suffused Mlle. Geoffroy's lovely face, "that my sister desires to consult you, but for her fiancé M. de Marsan, who is very ill indeed, hovering, in fact, between life and death. He could not come in person. The matter is one that demands the most profound secrecy."

"You may rely on my discretion, Monsieur," I murmured, without showing, I flatter myself, the slightest trace of that astonishment which, at mention of M. de Marsan's name, had nearly rendered me speechless.

"M. de Marsan came to see me in utmost distress, Monsieur," resumed the lovely creature. "He had no one in whom he could—or rather dared—confide. He is in the Chancellerie for Foreign Affairs. His uncle M. de Talleyrand thinks a great deal of him and often entrusts him with very delicate work. This morning he gave M. de Marsan a valuable paper to copy—a paper, Monsieur, the

importance of which it were impossible to overestimate. The very safety of this country, the honour of our King, are involved in it. I cannot tell you its exact contents, and it is because I would not tell more about it to the police that they would not help me in any way, and referred me to you. How could they, said the chief Commissary to me, run after a document the contents of which they did not even know? But you will be satisfied with what I have told you, will you not, my dear M. Raticchon?" she continued, with a pathetic quiver in her voice and a look of appeal in her eyes which St. Anthony himself could not have resisted, "and help me to regain possession of that paper, the final loss of which would cost M. de Marsan his life."

To say that my feeling of elation of a while ago had turned to one of supreme beatitude would be to put it very mildly indeed. To think that here was this lovely being in tears before me, and that it lay in my power to dry those tears with a word and to bring a smile round those perfect lips, literally made my mouth water in anticipation—for I am sure that you will have guessed, just as I did in a moment, that the valuable document of which this adorable being was speaking, was snugly hidden away under the flooring of my room in Passy. I hated that unknown de Marsan. I hated this Arthur who leaned so familiarly over her chair, but I had the power to render her a service beside which their lesser claims on her regard would pale.

However, I am not the man to act on impulse, even at a moment like this. I wanted to think the whole matter over first, and . . . well . . . I had made up my mind to demand five thousand francs when I handed the document over to my first client to-morrow morning. At any rate, for the moment I acted—if I may say so—with great circumspection and dignity.

"I must presume, Mademoiselle," I said in my most business-like manner, "that the document you speak of has been stolen."

"Stolen, Monsieur," she assented whilst the tears once more gathered in her eyes, "and M. de Marsan now lies at death's door with a terrible attack of brain fever, brought on by shock when he discovered the loss."

"How and when was it stolen?" I asked.

"Some time during the morning," she replied. "M. de Talleyrand gave the document to M. de Marsan at nine o'clock, telling him that he wanted the copy by midday. M. de Marsan set to work at once, laboured uninterruptedly until about eleven o'clock, when a loud altercation, followed by cries of 'Murder!' and of 'Help!' and proceeding from the corridor outside his door, caused him to run out of the room in order to see what was happening. The altercation turned out to be between two men who had pushed their way into the building by the main staircase, and who became very abusive to the gendarme who ordered them out. The men were not hurt; nevertheless they screamed as if they were being murdered. They took to their heels quickly enough, and I don't know what has become of them, but . . ."

"But," I concluded blandly, "whilst M. de Marsan was out of the room the precious document was stolen."

"It was, Monsieur," exclaimed Mlle. Geoffroy piteously. "You will find it for us . . . will you not?"

Then she added more calmly: "My brother and I are offering ten thousand francs reward for the recovery of the document."

I did not fall off my chair, but I closed my eyes. The vision which the lovely lady's words had conjured up dazzled me.

"Mademoiselle," I said with solemn dignity, "I pledge you my word of honour that I will find the document for you and lay it at your feet or die in your service. Give me twenty hours, during which I will move heaven and earth to discover the thief. I will go at once to the Chancellerie and collect what evidence I can. I have worked under M. de Robespierre, Mademoiselle, under the great Napoléon, and under the illustrious Fouché! I have never been known to fail, once I have set my mind upon a task."

"In that case you will earn your ten thousand francs, my friend," said the odious Arthur drily, "and my sister and M. de Marsan will still be your debtors. Are there any questions you would like to ask before we go?"

"None," I said loftily, choosing to ignore his sneering manner. "If Mademoiselle deigns to present herself here to-morrow at two o'clock I will have news to communicate to her."

You will admit that I carried off the situation in a becoming manner. Both Mademoiselle and Arthur Geoffroy gave me a few more details in connexion with the affair. To these details I listened with well simulated interest. Of course, they did not know that there were no details in connexion with this affair that I did not know already. My heart was actually dancing within my bosom. The future was so entrancing that the present appeared like a dream; the lovely being before me seemed like an angel, an emissary from above come to tell me of the happiness which was in store for me. The house near Chantilly—the little widow—the kitchen garden—the magic words went on hammering in my brain. I longed now to be rid of my visitors, to be alone once more, so as to think out the epilogue of this glorious adventure. Ten thousand francs was the reward offered me by this adorable creature! Well, then, why should not M. Charles Saurez, on his side, pay me another ten thousand for the same document, which was absolutely undistinguishable from the first?

Ten thousand, instead of two hundred which he had the audacity to offer me!

Seven o'clock had struck before I finally bowed my clients out of the room. Theodore had gone. The lazy lout would never stay as much as five minutes after his appointed time, so I had to show the adorable creature and her fat brother out of the premises myself. But I did not mind that. I flatter myself that I can always carry off an awkward situation in a dignified manner. A brief allusion to the inefficiency of present-day servants, a jocosely comment on my own simplicity of habits, and the deed was done. M. Arthur Geoffroy and Mademoiselle Madeleine his sister were half-way down the stairs. A quarter of an hour later I was once more out in the streets of Paris. It was a beautiful, balmy night. I had two hundred francs in my pocket and there was a magnificent prospect of twenty thousand francs before me! I could afford some slight extravagance. I had dinner at one of the fashionable restaurants on the quay, and I remained some time out on the terrace sipping my coffee and liqueur, dreaming dreams such as I had never dreamed before. At ten o'clock I was once more on my way to Passy.

5

When I turned the corner of the street and came in sight of the squalid house where I lodged, I felt like a being from another world. Twenty thousand francs—a fortune!—was waiting for me inside those dingy walls. Yes, twenty thousand, for by now I had fully made up my mind. I had two documents concealed beneath the floor of my bedroom—one so like the other that none could tell them apart. One of these I would restore to the lovely being who had offered me ten thousand francs for it, and the other I would sell to my first and uncouth client for another ten thousand francs!

Four hundred! Bah! Ten thousand shall you pay for the treaty, my friend of the Danish or Russian Secret Service! Ten thousand!—it is worth that to you!

In that happy frame of mind I reached the front door of my dingy abode. Imagine my surprise on being confronted with two agents of police, each with fixed bayonet, who refused to let me pass.

"But I lodge here," I said.

"Your name?" queried one of the men. "Hector Ratichon," I replied. Whereupon they gave me leave to enter.

It was very mysterious. My heart beat furiously. Fear for the safety of my precious papers held me in a death-like grip. I ran straight to my room, locked the door after me, and pulled the curtains together in front of the window. Then, with hands that trembled as if with age, I pulled aside the strip of carpet which concealed the hiding-place of what meant a fortune to me.

I nearly fainted with joy; the papers were there—quite safely. I took them out and replaced them inside my coat.

Then I ran up to see if Theodore was in. I found him in bed. He told me that he had left the office whilst my visitors were still with me, as he felt terribly sick. He had been greatly upset when, about an hour ago, the maid-of-all-work had informed him that the police were in the house, that they would allow no one—except the persons lodging in the house—to enter it, and no one, once in, would be allowed to leave. How long these orders would hold good Theodore did not know.

I left him moaning and groaning and declaring that he felt very ill, and I went in quest of information. The corporal in command of the gendarmes was exceedingly curt with me at first, but after a time he unbent and condescended to tell me that my landlord had been denounced for permitting a Bonapartiste club to hold its sittings in his house. So far so good. Such denunciations were very frequent these days, and often ended unpleasantly for those concerned, but the affair had obviously nothing to do with me. I felt that I could breathe again. But there was still the matter of the consigne. If no one, save the persons who lodged in the house, would be allowed to enter it, how would M. Charles Saurez contrive to call for the stolen document and, incidentally, to hand me over the ten thousand francs I was hoping for? And if no one, once inside the house, would be allowed to leave it, how could I meet Mlle. Geoffroy to-morrow at two o'clock in my office and receive ten thousand francs from her in exchange for the precious paper?

Moreover the longer the police stayed in this house and poked their noses about in affairs that concerned hardworking citizens like myself—why—the greater the risk would be of the matter of the stolen document coming to light.

It was positively maddening.

I never undressed that night, but just lay down on my bed, thinking. The house was very still at times, but at others I could hear the tramp of the police agents up and down the stairs and also outside my window. The latter gave on a small, dilapidated back garden which had a wooden fence at the end of it. Beyond it were some market gardens belonging to a M. Lorraine. It did not take me very long to realize that that way lay my fortune of twenty thousand francs. But for the moment I remained very still. My plan was already made. At about midnight I went to the window and opened it cautiously. I had heard no noise from that direction for some time, and I bent my ear to listen.

Not a sound! Either the sentry was asleep, or he had gone on his round, and for a few moments the way was free. Without a moment's hesitation I swung my leg over the sill.

Still no sound. My heart beat so fast that I could almost hear it. The night was very dark. A thin mist-like drizzle was falling; in fact the weather conditions were absolutely perfect for my purpose. With utmost wariness I allowed myself to drop from the window-ledge on to the soft ground below.

If I was caught by the sentry I had my answer ready: I was going to meet my sweetheart at the end of the garden. It is an excuse which always meets with the sympathy of every true-hearted Frenchman. The sentry would, of course, order me back to my room, but I doubt if he would ill-use me; the denunciation was against the landlord, not against me.

Still not a sound. I could have danced with joy. Five minutes more and I would be across the garden and over that wooden fence, and once more on my way to fortune. My fall from the window had been light, as my room was on the ground floor; but I had fallen on my knees, and now, as I picked myself up, I looked up, and it seemed to me as if I saw Theodore's ugly face at his attic window. Certainly there was a light there, and I may have been mistaken as to Theodore's face being visible. The very next second the light was extinguished and I was left in doubt.

But I did not pause to think. In a moment I was across the garden, my hands gripped the top of the wooden fence, I hoisted myself up—with some difficulty, I confess—but at last I succeeded. I threw my leg over and gently dropped down on the other side.

Then suddenly two rough arms encircled my waist, and before I could attempt to free myself a cloth was thrown over my head, and I was lifted up and carried away, half suffocated and like an insentient bundle.

When the cloth was removed from my face I was half sitting, half lying, in an arm-chair in a strange room which was lighted by an oil lamp that hung from the ceiling above. In front of me stood M. Arthur Geoffroy and that beast Theodore.

M. Arthur Geoffroy was coolly folding up the two valuable papers for the possession of which I had risked a convict ship and New Caledonia, and which would have meant affluence for me for many days to come.

It was Theodore who had removed the cloth from my face. As soon as I had recovered my breath I made a rush for him, for I wanted to strangle him. But M. Arthur Geoffroy was too quick and too strong for me. He pushed me back into the chair.

"Easy, easy, M. Raticchon," he said pleasantly; "do not vent your wrath upon this good fellow. Believe me, though his actions may have deprived you of a few thousand francs, they have also saved you from lasting and biting remorse. This document, which you stole from M. de Marsan and so ingeniously duplicated, involved the honour of our King and our country, as well as the life of an innocent man. My sister's fiancé would never have survived the loss of the document which had been entrusted to his honour."

"I would have returned it to Mademoiselle to-morrow," I murmured.

"Only one copy of it, I think," he retorted; "the other you would have sold to whichever spy of the Danish or Russian Governments happened to have employed you in this discreditable business."

"How did you know?" I said involuntarily.

"Through a very simple process of reasoning, my good M. Raticchon," he replied blandly. "You are a very clever man, no doubt, but the cleverest of us is at times apt to make a mistake. You made two, and I profited by them. Firstly, after my sister and I left you this afternoon, you never made the slightest pretence of making inquiries or collecting information about the mysterious theft of the document. I kept an eye on you throughout the evening. You left your office and strolled for a while on the quays; you had an excellent dinner at the Restaurant des Anglais; then you settled down to your coffee and liqueur. Well, my good M. Raticchon, obviously you would have been more active in the matter if you had not known exactly where and when and how to lay your hands upon the document, for the recovery of which my sister had offered you ten thousand francs."

I groaned. I had not been quite so circumspect as I ought to have been, but who would have thought—

"I have had something to do with police work in my day," continued M. Geoffroy blandly, "though not of late years; but my knowledge of their methods is not altogether rusty and my powers of observation are not yet dulled. During my sister's visit to you this afternoon I noticed the blouse and cap of a commissionnaire lying in a bundle in a corner of your room. Now, though M. de Marsan has been in a burning fever since he discovered his loss, he kept just sufficient presence of mind at the moment to say nothing about that loss to any of the Chancellerie officials, but to go straight home to his apartments in the Rue Royale and to send for my sister and for me. When we came to him he was already partly delirious, but he pointed to a parcel and a letter which he had brought away from his office. The parcel proved to be an empty box and the letter a blank sheet of paper; but the most casual inquiry of the concierge at the Chancellerie elicited the fact that a commissionnaire had brought these things in the course of the morning. That was your second mistake, my good M. Raticchon; not a very grave one, perhaps, but I have been in the police, and somehow, the moment I caught sight of that blouse and cap in your office, I could not help connecting it with the commissionnaire who had brought a bogus parcel and letter to my future brother-in-law a few minutes before that mysterious and unexplained altercation took place in the corridor."

Again I groaned. I felt as a child in the hands of that horrid creature who seemed to be dissecting all the thoughts which had run riot through my mind these past twenty hours.

"It was all very simple, my good M. Ratichon," now concluded my tormentor still quite amiably. "Another time you will have to be more careful, will you not? You will also have to bestow more confidence upon your partner or servant. Directly I had seen that commissionaire's blouse and cap, I set to work to make friends with M. Theodore. When my sister and I left your office in the Rue Daunou, we found him waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs. Five francs loosened his tongue: he suspected that you were up to some game in which you did not mean him to have a share; he also told us that you had spent two hours in laborious writing, and that you and he both lodged at a dilapidated little inn, called the 'Grey Cat,' in Passy. I think he was rather disappointed that we did not shower more questions, and therefore more emoluments, upon him. Well, after I had denounced this house to the police as a Bonapartiste club, and saw it put under the usual consigne, I bribed the corporal of the gendarmerie in charge of it to let me have Theodore's company for the little job I had in hand, and also to clear the back garden of sentries so as to give you a chance and the desire to escape. All the rest you know. Money will do many things, my good M. Ratichon, and you see how simple it all was. It would have been still more simple if the stolen document had not been such an important one that the very existence of it must be kept a secret even from the police. So I could not have you shadowed and arrested as a thief in the usual manner! However, I have the document and its ingenious copy, which is all that matters. Would to God," he added with a suppressed curse, "that I could get hold equally easily of the Secret Service agent to whom you, a Frenchman, were going to sell the honour of your country!"

Then it was that—though broken in spirit and burning with thoughts of the punishment I would mete out to Theodore—my full faculties returned to me, and I queried abruptly:

"What would you give to get him?"

"Five hundred francs," he replied without hesitation. "Can you find him?"

"Make it a thousand," I retorted, "and you shall have him."

"How?"

"Will you give me five hundred francs now," I insisted, "and another five hundred when you have the man, and I will tell you?"

"Agreed," he said impatiently.

But I was not to be played with by him again. I waited in silence until he had taken a pocket-book from the inside of his coat and counted out five hundred francs, which he kept in his hand.

"Now—" he commanded.

"The man," I then announced calmly, "will call on me for the document at my lodgings at the hostelry of the 'Grey Cat' to-morrow morning at nine o'clock."

"Good," rejoined M. Geoffroy. "We shall be there."

He made no demur about giving me the five hundred francs, but half my pleasure in receiving them vanished when I saw Theodore's bleary eyes fixed ravenously upon them.

"Another five hundred francs," M. Geoffroy went on quietly, "will be yours as soon as the spy is in our hands."

I did get that further five hundred of course, for M. Charles Saurez was punctual to the minute, and M. Geoffroy was there with the police to apprehend him. But to think that I might have had twenty thousand—!

And I had to give Theodore fifty francs on the transaction, as he threatened me with the police when I talked of giving him the sack.

But we were quite good friends again after that until— But you shall judge.

CHAPTER II

A FOOL'S PARADISE

1

Ah! my dear Sir, I cannot tell you how poor we all were in France in that year of grace 1816—so poor, indeed, that a dish of roast pork was looked upon as a feast, and a new gown for the wife an unheard-of luxury.

The war had ruined everyone. Twenty-two years! and hopeless humiliation and defeat at the end of it. The Emperor handed over to the English; a Bourbon sitting on the throne of France; crowds of foreign soldiers still lording it all over the country—until the country had paid its debts to her foreign invaders, and thousands of our own men still straggling home through Germany and Belgium—the remnants of Napoléon's Grand Army—ex-prisoners of war, or scattered units who had found their weary way home at last, shoeless, coatless, half starved and perished from cold and privations, unfit for housework, for agriculture, or for industry, fit only to follow their fallen hero, as they had done through a quarter of a century, to victory and to death.

With me, Sir, business in Paris was almost at a standstill. I, who had been the confidential agent of two kings, three democrats and one emperor; I, who had held diplomatic threads in my hands which had caused thrones to totter and tyrants to quake, and who had brought more criminals and intriguers to book than any other man alive—I now sat in my office in the Rue Daunou day after day with never a client to darken my doors, even whilst crime and political intrigue were more rife in Paris than they had been in the most corrupt days of the Revolution and the Consulate.

I told you, I think, that I had forgiven Theodore his abominable treachery in connexion with the secret naval treaty, and we were the best of friends—that is, outwardly, of course. Within my inmost heart I felt, Sir, that I could never again trust that shameless traitor—that I had in very truth nurtured a serpent in my bosom. But I am proverbially tender-hearted. You will believe me or not, I simply could not turn that vermin out into the street. He deserved it! Oh, even he would have admitted when he was quite sober, which was not often, that I had every right to give him the sack, to send him back to the gutter whence he had come, there to grub once more for scraps of filth and to stretch a half-frozen hand to the charity of the passers by.

But I did not do it, Sir. No, I did not do it. I kept him on at the office as my confidential servant; I gave him all the crumbs that fell from mine own table, and he helped himself to the rest. I made as little difference as I could in my intercourse with him. I continued to treat him almost as an equal. The only difference I did make in our mode of life was that I no longer gave him bed and board at the hostelry where I lodged in Passy, but placed the chair-bedstead in the anteroom of the office permanently at his disposal, and allowed him five sous a day for his breakfast.

But owing to the scarcity of business that now came my way, Theodore had little or nothing to do, and he was in very truth eating his head off, and with that, grumble, grumble all the time, threatening to leave me, if you please, to leave my service for more remunerative occupation. As if anyone else would dream of employing such an out-at-elbows mudlark—a jail-bird, Sir, if you'll believe me.

Thus the Spring of 1816 came along. Spring, Sir, with its beauty and its promises, and the thoughts of love which come eternally in the minds of those who have not yet wholly done with youth. Love, Sir! I dreamed of it on those long, weary afternoons in April, after I had consumed my scanty

repast, and whilst Theodore in the anteroom was snoring like a hog. At even, when tired out and thirsty, I would sit for a while outside a humble café on the outer boulevards, I watched the amorous couples wander past me on their way to happiness. At night I could not sleep, and bitter were my thoughts, my revilings against a cruel fate that had condemned me—a man with so sensitive a heart and so generous a nature—to the sorrows of perpetual solitude.

That, Sir, was my mood, when on a never-to-be-forgotten afternoon toward the end of April, I sat mooning disconsolately in my private room and a timid rat-tat at the outer door of the apartment roused Theodore from his brutish slumbers. I heard him shuffling up to the door, and I hurriedly put my necktie straight and smoothed my hair, which had become disordered despite the fact that I had only indulged in a very abstemious déjeuner.

When I said that the knock at my door was in the nature of a timid rat-rat I did not perhaps describe it quite accurately. It was timid, if you will understand me, and yet bold, as coming from one who might hesitate to enter and nevertheless feels assured of welcome. Obviously a client, I thought.

Effectively, Sir, the next moment my eyes were gladdened by the sight of a lovely woman, beautifully dressed, young, charming, smiling but to hide her anxiety, trustful, and certainly wealthy.

The moment she stepped into the room I knew that she was wealthy; there was an air of assurance about her which only those are able to assume who are not pestered with creditors. She wore two beautiful diamond rings upon her hands outside her perfectly fitting glove, and her bonnet was adorned with flowers so exquisitely fashioned that a butterfly would have been deceived and would have perched on it with delight.

Her shoes were of the finest kid, shiny at the toes like tiny mirrors, whilst her dainty ankles were framed in the filmy lace frills of her pantalets.

Within the wide brim of her bonnet her exquisite face appeared like a rosebud nestling in a basket. She smiled when I rose to greet her, gave me a look that sent my susceptible heart a-flutter and caused me to wish that I had not taken that bottle-green coat of mine to the Mont de Piété only last week. I offered her a seat, which she took, arranging her skirts about her with inimitable grace.

"One moment," I added, as soon as she was seated, "and I am entirely at your service."

I took up pen and paper—an unfinished letter which I always keep handy for the purpose—and wrote rapidly. It always looks well for a lawyer or an *agent confidentiel* to keep a client waiting for a moment or two while he attends to the enormous pressure of correspondence which, if allowed to accumulate for five minutes, would immediately overwhelm him. I signed and folded the letter, threw it with a nonchalant air into a basket filled to the brim with others of equal importance, buried my face in my hands for a few seconds as if to collect my thoughts, and finally said:

"And now, Mademoiselle, will you deign to tell me what procures me the honour of your visit?"

The lovely creature had watched my movements with obvious impatience, a frown upon her exquisite brow. But now she plunged straightway into her story.

"Monsieur," she said with that pretty, determined air which became her so well, "my name is Estelle Bachelier. I am an orphan, an heiress, and have need of help and advice. I did not know to whom to apply. Until three months ago I was poor and had to earn my living by working in a milliner's shop in the Rue St. Honoré. The concierge in the house where I used to lodge is my only friend, but she cannot help me for reasons which will presently be made clear to you. She told me, however, that she had a nephew named Theodore, who was clerk to M. Raticchon, advocate and confidential agent. She gave me your address; and as I knew no one else I determined to come and consult you."

I flatter myself, that though my countenance is exceptionally mobile, I possess marvellous powers for keeping it impassive when necessity arises. In this instance, at mention of Theodore's name, I showed neither surprise nor indignation. Yet you will readily understand that I felt both. Here was that man, once more revealed as a traitor. Theodore had an aunt of whom he had never as much as breathed a word. He had an aunt, and that aunt a concierge—*ipso facto*, if I may so express it, a woman of some substance, who, no doubt, would often have been only too pleased to

extend hospitality to the man who had so signally befriended her nephew; a woman, Sir, who was undoubtedly possessed of savings which both reason and gratitude would cause her to invest in an old-established and substantial business run by a trustworthy and capable man, such, for instance, as the bureau of a confidential agent in a good quarter of Paris, which, with the help of a little capital, could be rendered highly lucrative and beneficial to all those, concerned.

I determined then and there to give Theodore a piece of my mind and to insist upon an introduction to his aunt. After which I begged the beautiful creature to proceed.

"My father, Monsieur," she continued, "died three months ago, in England, whither he had emigrated when I was a mere child, leaving my poor mother to struggle along for a livelihood as best she could. My mother died last year, Monsieur, and I have had a hard life; and now it seems that my father made a fortune in England and left it all to me."

I was greatly interested in her story.

"The first intimation I had of it, Monsieur, was three months ago, when I had a letter from an English lawyer in London telling me that my father, Jean Paul Bachelier—that was his name, Monsieur—had died out there and made a will leaving all his money, about one hundred thousand francs, to me."

"Yes, yes!" I murmured, for my throat felt parched and my eyes dim.

Hundred thousand francs! Ye gods!

"It seems," she proceeded demurely, "that my father put it in his will that the English lawyers were to pay me the interest on the money until I married or reached the age of twenty-one. Then the whole of the money was to be handed over to me."

I had to steady myself against the table or I would have fallen over backwards! This godlike creature, to whom the sum of one hundred thousand francs was to be paid over when she married, had come to me for help and advice! The thought sent my brain reeling! I am so imaginative!

"Proceed, Mademoiselle, I pray you," I contrived to say with dignified calm.

"Well, Monsieur, as I don't know a word of English, I took the letter to Mr. Farewell, who is the English traveller for Madame Cécile, the milliner for whom I worked. He is a kind, affable gentleman and was most helpful to me. He was, as a matter of fact, just going over to England the very next day. He offered to go and see the English lawyers for me, and to bring me back all particulars of my dear father's death and of my unexpected fortune."

"And," said I, for she had paused a moment, "did Mr. Farewell go to England on your behalf?"

"Yes, Monsieur. He went and returned about a fortnight later. He had seen the English lawyers, who confirmed all the good news which was contained in their letter. They took, it seems, a great fancy to Mr. Farewell, and told him that since I was obviously too young to live alone and needed a guardian to look after my interests, they would appoint him my guardian, and suggested that I should make my home with him until I was married or had attained the age of twenty-one. Mr. Farewell told me that though this arrangement might be somewhat inconvenient in his bachelor establishment, he had been unable to resist the entreaties of the English lawyers, who felt that no one was more fitted for such onerous duties than himself, seeing that he was English and so obviously my friend."

"The scoundrel! The blackguard!" I exclaimed in an unguarded outburst of fury. . . .

"Your pardon, Mademoiselle," I added more calmly, seeing that the lovely creature was gazing at me with eyes full of astonishment not unmixed with distrust, "I am anticipating. Am I to understand, then, that you have made your home with this Mr. Farewell?"

"Yes, Monsieur, at number sixty-five Rue des Pyramides."

"Is he a married man?" I asked casually.

"He is a widower, Monsieur."

"Middle-aged?"

"Quite elderly, Monsieur."

I could have screamed with joy. I was not yet forty myself.

"Why!" she added gaily, "he is thinking of retiring from business—he is, as I said, a commercial traveller—in favour of his nephew, M. Adrien Cazalès."

Once more I had to steady myself against the table. The room swam round me. One hundred thousand francs!—a lovely creature!—an unscrupulous widower!—an equally dangerous young nephew. I rose and tottered to the window. I flung it wide open—a thing I never do save at moments of acute crises.

The breath of fresh air did me good. I returned to my desk, and was able once more to assume my habitual dignity and presence of mind.

"In all this, Mademoiselle," I said in my best professional manner, "I do not gather how I can be of service to you."

"I am coming to that, Monsieur," she resumed after a slight moment of hesitation, even as an exquisite blush suffused her damask cheeks. "You must know that at first I was very happy in the house of my new guardian. He was exceedingly kind to me, though there were times already when I fancied . . ."

She hesitated—more markedly this time—and the blush became deeper on her cheeks. I groaned aloud.

"Surely he is too old," I suggested.

"Much too old," she assented emphatically.

Once more I would have screamed with joy had not a sharp pang, like a dagger-thrust, shot through my heart.

"But the nephew, eh?" I said as jocosely, as indifferently as I could.

"Young M. Cazalès? What?"

"Oh!" she replied with perfect indifference. "I hardly ever see him."

Unfortunately it were not seemly for an avocat and the *agent confidentiel* of half the Courts of Europe to execute the measures of a polka in the presence of a client, or I would indeed have jumped up and danced with glee. The happy thoughts were hammering away in my mind: "The old one is much too old—the young one she never sees!" and I could have knelt down and kissed the hem of her gown for the exquisite indifference with which she had uttered those magic words: "Oh! I hardly ever see him!"—words which converted my brightest hopes into glowing possibilities.

But, as it was, I held my emotions marvellously in check, and with perfect sang-froid once more asked the beauteous creature how I could be of service to her in her need.

"Of late, Monsieur," she said, as she raised a pair of limpid, candid blue eyes to mine, "my position in Mr. Farewell's house has become intolerable. He pursues me with his attentions, and he has become insanely jealous. He will not allow me to speak to anyone, and has even forbidden M. Cazalès, his own nephew, the house. Not that I care about that," she added with an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"He has forbidden M. Cazalès the house," rang like a paeon in my ear. "Not that she cares about that! Tra la, la, la, la, la!" What I actually contrived to say with a measured and judicial air was:

"If you deign to entrust me with the conduct of your affairs, I would at once communicate with the English lawyers in your name and suggest to them the advisability of appointing another guardian. . . . I would suggest, for instance . . . er . . . that I . . ."

"How can you do that, Monsieur?" she broke in somewhat impatiently, "seeing that I cannot possibly tell you who these lawyers are?"

"Eh?" I queried, gasping.

"I neither know their names nor their residence in England."

Once more I gasped. "Will you explain?" I murmured.

"It seems, Monsieur, that while my dear mother lived she always refused to take a single sou from my father, who had so basely deserted her. Of course, she did not know that he was making a fortune over in England, nor that he was making diligent inquiries as to her whereabouts when he

felt that he was going to die. Thus, he discovered that she had died the previous year and that I was working in the atelier of Madame Cécile, the well-known milliner. When the English lawyers wrote to me at that address they, of course, said that they would require all my papers of identification before they paid any money over to me, and so, when Mr. Farewell went over to England, he took all my papers with him and . . ."

She burst into tears and exclaimed piteously:

"Oh! I have nothing now, Monsieur—nothing to prove who I am! Mr. Farewell took everything, even the original letter which the English lawyers wrote to me."

"Farewell," I urged, "can be forced by the law to give all your papers up to you."

"Oh! I have nothing now, Monsieur—he threatened to destroy all my papers unless I promised to become his wife! And I haven't the least idea how and where to find the English lawyers. I don't remember either their name or their address; and if I did, how could I prove my identity to their satisfaction? I don't know a soul in Paris save a few irresponsible millinery apprentices and Madame Cécile, who, no doubt, is hand in glove with Mr. Farewell. I am all alone in the world and friendless. . . . I have come to you, Monsieur, in my distress . . . and you will help me, will you not?"

She looked more adorable in grief than she had ever done before.

To tell you that at this moment visions floated in my mind, before which Dante's visions of Paradise would seem pale and tame, were but to put it mildly. I was literally soaring in heaven. For you see I am a man of intellect and of action. No sooner do I see possibilities before me than my brain soars in an empyrean whilst conceiving daring plans for my body's permanent abode in elysium. At this present moment, for instance—to name but a few of the beatific visions which literally dazzled me with their radiance—I could see my fair client as a lovely and blushing bride by my side, even whilst Messieurs X. and X., the two still unknown English lawyers, handed me a heavy bag which bore the legend "One hundred thousand francs." I could see . . . But I had not the time now to dwell on these ravishing dreams. The beauteous creature was waiting for my decision. She had placed her fate in my hands; I placed my hand on my heart.

"Mademoiselle," I said solemnly, "I will be your adviser and your friend. Give me but a few days' grace, every hour, every minute of which I will spend in your service. At the end of that time I will not only have learned the name and address of the English lawyers, but I will have communicated with them on your behalf, and all your papers proving your identity will be in your hands. Then we can come to a decision with regard to a happier and more comfortable home for you. In the meanwhile I entreat you to do nothing that may precipitate Mr. Farewell's actions. Do not encourage his advances, but do not repulse them, and above all keep me well informed of everything that goes on in his house."

She spoke a few words of touching gratitude, then she rose, and with a gesture of exquisite grace she extracted a hundred-franc note from her reticule and placed it upon my desk.

"Mademoiselle," I protested with splendid dignity, "I have done nothing as yet."

"Ah! but you will, Monsieur," she entreated in accents that completed my subjugation to her charms. "Besides, you do not know me! How could I expect you to work for me and not to know if, in the end, I should repay you for all your trouble? I pray you to take this small sum without demur. Mr. Farewell keeps me well supplied with pocket money. There will be another hundred for you when you place the papers in my hands."

I bowed to her, and, having once more assured her of my unswerving loyalty to her interests, I accompanied her to the door, and anon saw her graceful figure slowly descend the stairs and then disappear along the corridor.

Then I went back to my room, and was only just in time to catch Theodore calmly pocketing the hundred-franc note which my fair client had left on the table. I secured the note and I didn't give him a black eye, for it was no use putting him in a bad temper when there was so much to do.

2

That very same evening I interviewed the concierge at No. 65 Rue des Pyramides. From him I learned that Mr. Farewell lived on a very small income on the top floor of the house, that his household consisted of a housekeeper who cooked and did the work of the apartment for him, and an odd-job man who came every morning to clean boots, knives, draw water and carry up fuel from below. I also learned that there was a good deal of gossip in the house anent the presence in Mr. Farewell's bachelor establishment of a young and beautiful girl, whom he tried to keep a virtual prisoner under his eye.

The next morning, dressed in a shabby blouse, alpaca cap, and trousers frayed out round the ankles, I—Hector Ratichon, the confidant of kings—was lounging under the porte-cochere of No. 65 Rue des Pyramides. I was watching the movements of a man, similarly attired to myself, as he crossed and recrossed the courtyard to draw water from the well or to fetch wood from one of the sheds, and then disappeared up the main staircase.

A casual, tactful inquiry of the concierge assured me that that man was indeed in the employ of Mr. Farewell.

I waited as patiently and inconspicuously as I could, and at ten o'clock I saw that my man had obviously finished his work for the morning and had finally come down the stairs ready to go home. I followed him.

I will not speak of the long halt in the cabaret du Chien Noir, where he spent an hour and a half in the company of his friends, playing dominoes and drinking eau-de-vie whilst I had perforce to cool my heels outside. Suffice it to say that I did follow him to his house just behind the fish-market, and that half an hour later, tired out but triumphant, having knocked at his door, I was admitted into the squalid room which he occupied.

He surveyed me with obvious mistrust, but I soon reassured him.

"My friend Mr. Farewell has recommended you to me," I said with my usual affability. "I was telling him just awhile ago that I needed a man to look after my office in the Rue Daunou of a morning, and he told me that in you I would find just the man I wanted."

"Hm!" grunted the fellow, very sullenly I thought. "I work for Farewell in the mornings. Why should he recommend me to you? Am I not giving satisfaction?"

"Perfect satisfaction," I rejoined urbanely; "that is just the point. Mr. Farewell desires to do you a good turn seeing that I offered to pay you twenty sous for your morning's work instead of the ten which you are getting from him."

I saw his eyes glisten at mention of the twenty sous.

"I'd best go and tell him then that I am taking on your work," he said; and his tone was no longer sullen now.

"Quite unnecessary," I rejoined. "I arranged everything with Mr. Farewell before I came to you. He has already found someone else to do his work, and I shall want you to be at my office by seven o'clock to-morrow morning. And," I added, for I am always cautious and judicious, and I now placed a piece of silver in his hand, "here are the first twenty sous on account."

He took the money and promptly became very civil, even obsequious. He not only accompanied me to the door, but all the way down the stairs, and assured me all the time that he would do his best to give me entire satisfaction.

I left my address with him, and sure enough, he turned up at the office the next morning at seven o'clock precisely.

Theodore had had my orders to direct him in his work, and I was left free to enact the second scene of the moving drama in which I was determined to play the hero and to ring down the curtain to the sound of the wedding bells.

3

I took on the work of odd-job man at 65 Rue des Pyramides. Yes, I! Even I, who had sat in the private room of an emperor discussing the destinies of Europe.

But with a beautiful bride and one hundred thousand francs as my goal I would have worked in a coal mine or on the galleys for such a guerdon.

The task, I must tell you, was terribly irksome to a man of my sensibilities, endowed with an active mind and a vivid imagination. The dreary monotony of fetching water and fuel from below and polishing the boots of that arch-scoundrel Farewell would have made a less stout spirit quail. I had, of course, seen through the scoundrel's game at once. He had rendered Estelle quite helpless by keeping all her papers of identification and by withholding from her all the letters which, no doubt, the English lawyers wrote to her from time to time. Thus she was entirely in his power. But, thank heaven! only momentarily, for I, Hector Ratichon, argus-eyed, was on the watch. Now and then the monotony of my existence and the hardship of my task were relieved by a brief glimpse of Estelle or a smile of understanding from her lips; now and then she would contrive to murmur as she brushed past me while I was polishing the scoundrel's study floor, "Any luck yet?" And this quiet understanding between us gave me courage to go on with my task.

After three days I had conclusively made up my mind that Mr. Farewell kept his valuable papers in the drawer of the bureau in the study. After that I always kept a lump of wax ready for use in my pocket. On the fifth day I was very nearly caught trying to take an impression of the lock of the bureau drawer. On the seventh I succeeded, and took the impression over to a locksmith I knew of, and gave him an order to have a key made to fit it immediately. On the ninth day I had the key.

Then commenced a series of disappointments and of unprofitable days which would have daunted one less bold and less determined. I don't think that Farewell ever suspected me, but it is a fact that never once did he leave me alone in his study whilst I was at work there polishing the oak floor. And in the meanwhile I could see how he was pursuing my beautiful Estelle with his unwelcome attentions. At times I feared that he meant to abduct her; his was a powerful personality and she seemed like a little bird fighting against the fascination of a serpent. Latterly, too, an air of discouragement seemed to dwell upon her lovely face. I was half distraught with anxiety, and once or twice, whilst I knelt upon the hard floor, scrubbing and polishing as if my life depended on it, whilst he—the unscrupulous scoundrel—sat calmly at his desk, reading or writing, I used to feel as if the next moment I must attack him with my scrubbing-brush and knock him down senseless whilst I ransacked his drawers. My horror of anything approaching violence saved me from so foolish a step.

Then it was that in the hour of my blackest despair a flash of genius pierced through the darkness of my misery. For some days now Madame Dupont, Farewell's housekeeper, had been exceedingly affable to me. Every morning now, when I came to work, there was a cup of hot coffee waiting for me, and, when I left, a small parcel of something appetizing for me to take away.

"Hallo!" I said to myself one day, when, over a cup of coffee, I caught sight of her small, piggy eyes leering at me with an unmistakable expression of admiration. "Does salvation lie where I least expected it?"

For the moment I did nothing more than wink at the fat old thing, but the next morning I had my arm round her waist—a metre and a quarter, Sir, where it was tied in the middle—and had imprinted a kiss upon her glossy cheek. What that love-making cost me I cannot attempt to describe. Once Estelle came into the kitchen when I was staggering under a load of a hundred kilos sitting on my knee. The reproachful glance which she cast at me filled my soul with unspeakable sorrow.

But I was working for her dear sake; working that I might win her in the end.

A week later Mr. Farewell was absent from home for the evening. Estelle had retired to her room, and I was a welcome visitor in the kitchen, where Madame Dupont had laid out a regular feast

for me. I had brought a couple of bottles of champagne with me and, what with the unaccustomed drink and the ogling and love-making to which I treated her, a hundred kilos of foolish womanhood was soon hopelessly addled and incapable. I managed to drag her to the sofa, where she remained quite still, with a beatific smile upon her podgy face, her eyes swimming in happy tears.

I had not a moment to lose. The very next minute I was in the study and with a steady hand was opening the drawers of the bureau and turning over the letters and papers which I found therein.

Suddenly an exclamation of triumph escaped my lips.

I held a packet in my hand on which was written in a clear hand: "The papers of Mlle. Estelle Bachelier." A brief examination of the packet sufficed. It consisted of a number of letters written in English, which language I only partially understand, but they all bore the same signature, "John Pike and Sons, solicitors," and the address was at the top, "168 Cornhill, London." It also contained my Estelle's birth certificate, her mother's marriage certificate, and her police registration card.

I was rapt in the contemplation of my own ingenuity in having thus brilliantly attained my goal, when a stealthy noise in the next room roused me from my trance and brought up vividly to my mind the awful risks which I was running at this moment. I turned like an animal at bay to see Estelle's beautiful face peeping at me through the half-open door.

"Hist!" she whispered. "Have you got the papers?"

I waved the packet triumphantly. She, excited and adorable, stepped briskly into the room.

"Let me see," she murmured excitedly.

But I, emboldened by success, cried gaily:

"Not till I have received compensation for all that I have done and endured."

"Compensation?"

"In the shape of a kiss."

Oh! I won't say that she threw herself in my arms then and there. No, no! She demurred. All young girls, it seems, demur under the circumstances; but she was adorable, coy and tender in turns, pouting and coaxing, and playing like a kitten till she had taken the papers from me and, with a woman's natural curiosity, had turned the English letters over and over, even though she could not read a word of them.

Then, Sir, in the midst of her innocent frolic and at the very moment when I was on the point of snatching the kiss which she had so tantalizingly denied me, we heard the opening and closing of the front door.

Mr. Farewell had come home, and there was no other egress from the study save the sitting-room, which in its turn had no other egress but the door leading into the very passage where even now Mr. Farewell was standing, hanging up his hat and cloak on the rack.

4

We stood hand in hand—Estelle and I—fronting the door through which Mr. Farewell would presently appear.

"To-night we fly together," I declared.

"Where to?" she whispered.

"Can you go to the woman at your former lodgings?"

"Yes!"

"Then I will take you there to-night. To-morrow we will be married before the Procureur du Roi; in the evening we leave for England."

"Yes, yes!" she murmured.

"When he comes in I'll engage him in conversation," I continued hurriedly. "You make a dash for the door and run downstairs as fast as you can. I'll follow as quickly as may be and meet you under the porte-cochere."

She had only just time to nod assent when the door which gave on the sitting-room was pushed open, and Farewell, unconscious at first of our presence, stepped quietly into the room.

"Estelle," he cried, more puzzled than angry when he suddenly caught sight of us both, "what are you doing here with that lout?"

I was trembling with excitement—not fear, of course, though Farewell was a powerful-looking man, a head taller than I was. I stepped boldly forward, covering the adored one with my body.

"The lout," I said with calm dignity, "has frustrated the machinations of a knave. To-morrow I go to England in order to place Mademoiselle Estelle Bachelier under the protection of her legal guardians, Messieurs Pike and Sons, solicitors, of London."

He gave a cry of rage, and before I could retire to some safe entrenchment behind the table or the sofa, he was upon me like a mad dog. He had me by the throat, and I had rolled backwards down on to the floor, with him on the top of me, squeezing the breath out of me till I verily thought that my last hour had come. Estelle had run out of the room like a startled hare. This, of course, was in accordance with my instructions to her, but I could not help wishing then that she had been less obedient and somewhat more helpful.

As it was, I was beginning to feel a mere worm in the grip of that savage scoundrel, whose face I could perceive just above me, distorted with passion, whilst hoarse ejaculations escaped his trembling lips:

"You meddlesome fool! You oaf! You toad! This for your interference!" he added as he gave me a vigorous punch on the head.

I felt my senses reeling. My head was swimming, my eyes no longer could see distinctly. It seemed as if an unbearable pressure upon my chest would finally squeeze the last breath out of my body.

I was trying to remember the prayers I used to murmur at my mother's knee, for verily I thought that I was dying, when suddenly, through my fading senses, came the sound of a long, hoarse cry, whilst the floor was shaken as with an earthquake. The next moment the pressure on my chest seemed to relax. I could hear Farewell's voice uttering language such as it would be impossible for me to put on record; and through it all hoarse and convulsive cries of: "You shan't hurt him—you limb of Satan, you!"

Gradually strength returned to me. I could see as well as hear, and what I saw filled me with wonder and with pride. Wonder at Ma'ame Dupont's pluck! Pride in that her love for me had given such power to her mighty arms! Aroused from her slumbers by the sound of the scuffle, she had run to the study, only to find me in deadly peril of my life. Without a second's hesitation she had rushed on Farewell, seized him by the collar, pulled him away from me, and then thrown the whole weight of her hundred kilos upon him, rendering him helpless.

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