ГАСТОН ЛЕРУ

THE MAN WITH THE BLACK FEATHER

Гастон Леру

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Леру Г.

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Содержание

Gaston Leroux
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HISTORICAL PREFACE THE SANDALWOOD BOX

One evening last year I perceived in the waiting-room of my newspaper, *Le Matin*, a man dressed in black, his face heavy with the darkest despair, whose dry, dead eyes seemed to receive the images of things like unmoving mirrors.

He was seated; and there rested on his knees a sandalwood box inlaid with polished steel. An office-boy told me that he had sat there motionless, silent, awaiting my coming, for three mortal hours.

I invited this figure of despair into my office and offered him a chair. He did not take it; he walked straight to my desk, and set down on it the sandalwood box.

Then he said to me in an expressionless, far-away voice: "Monsieur, this box is yours. My friend, M. Theophrastus Longuet, charged me to bring it to you."

He bowed and was going to the door, when I stopped him.

"For goodness sake, don't run away like that!" I said sharply. "I can't receive this box without knowing what it contains."

"I don't know what it contains myself," he said in the same dull, expressionless tone. "This box is locked; the key is lost. You will have to break it open to find out."

"At any rate I should like to know the name of the bearer," I said firmly.

"My friend, M. Theophrastus Longuet, called me 'Adolphe,'" he said in the mournfullest tone.

"If M. Theophrastus Longuet had brought me this box himself, he would certainly have told me what it contains," I said stiffly. "I regret that M. Theophrastus Longuet—"

"So do I," said my visitor. "M. Theophrastus Longuet is dead; and I am his executor."

With that he opened the door, went through it, and shut it behind him. I stared at the sandalwood box; I stared at the door; then I ran after the man. He had vanished.

I had the sandalwood box opened; and in it I found a bundle of manuscripts. In a newspaper office one is used to receiving bundles of manuscripts; and I began to look through them with considerable weariness. Very soon it changed to the liveliest interest. As I went deeper and deeper into these posthumous documents I found the story related in them more and more extraordinary, more and more incredible. For a long while I disbelieved it. However, since the proofs of it exist, I ended, after a searching inquiry into them, by believing it to be true.

M. Theophrastus Longuet's reason for bequeathing this strange legacy to me was itself strange. He did not know me; but he had read articles by me in *Le Matin*, "his favourite organ"; and among the many contributors to that journal he had chosen me, not for my superior knowledge, an allegation which would have made me blush, but because he had come to the conclusion that I possessed "a more solid intellect" than the others.

Gaston Leroux

CHAPTER I
M. THEOPHRASTUS LONGUET DESIRES TO IMPROVE HIS MIND AND VISITS HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

M. Theophrastus Longuet was not alone when he rang the bell of that old-time palace prison, the Conciergerie: he was accompanied by his wife Marceline, a very pretty woman, uncommonly fair for a Frenchwoman, of an admirable figure, and by M. Adolphe Lecamus, his best friend.

The door, pierced by a small barred peephole, turned heavily on its hinges, as a prison door should; the warder, who acts as guide to the prison, dangling a bunch of great old-fashioned keys in his hand, surveyed the party with official gloom, and asked Theophrastus for his permit. Theophrastus had procured it that very morning at the Prefecture of Police; he held it out with the air of a citizen assured of his rights, and regarded his friend Adolphe with a look of triumph.

He admired his friend almost as much as he admired his wife. Not that Adolphe was exactly a handsome man; but he wore an air of force and vigour; and there was nothing in the world which Theophrastus, the timidest man in Paris, rated more highly than force and vigour. That broad and bulging brow (whereas his own was narrow and high), those level and thick eyebrows, for the most part raised a trifle to express contempt of others and self-confidence, that piercing glance (whereas his own pale-blue eyes blinked behind the spectacles of the short-sighted), that big nose, haughtily arched, those lips surmounted by a brown, curving moustache, that strong, square chin; in a word, all that virile antithesis to his own grotesque, flabby-cheeked face, was the perpetual object of his silent admiration. Besides, Adolphe had been Post-Office Inspector in Tunis: he had "crossed the sea."

Theophrastus had only crossed the river Seine. No one can pretend that that is a real crossing.

The guide set the party in motion; then he said:

"You are French?"

Theophrastus stopped short in the middle of the court.

"Do we look like Germans?" he said with a confident smile, for he was quite sure that he was French.

"It's the first time I ever remember French people coming to visit the Conciergerie. As a rule French people don't visit anything," said the guide with his air of official gloom; and he went on.

"It is wrong of them. The monuments of the Past are the Book of History," said Theophrastus sententiously; and he stopped short to look proudly at his wife and Adolphe, for he found the saying fine.

They were not listening to him; and as he followed the guide, he went on in a confidential tone, "I am an old Parisian myself; and if I have waited till to-day to visit the monuments of the Past, it was because my business—I was a manufacturer of rubber stamps right up to last week—did not give me the leisure to do it till the hour I retired from it. That hour has struck; and I am going to improve my mind." And with an air of decision he struck the time-old pavement with the ferule of his green umbrella.

They went through a little door and a large wicket, down some steps, and found themselves in the Guard-room.

They were silent, abandoning themselves entirely to their reflections. They were doing all they could to induce these old walls, which recalled so prodigious a history, to leave a lasting impression on their minds. They were not insensible brutes. While the guide conducted them over Cæsar's tower, or Silver tower, or Bon Bec tower, they told themselves vaguely that for more than a thousand years there had been in them illustrious prisoners whose very names they had forgotten. Marceline thought

of Marie Antoinette, the Princess Elizabeth, and the little Dauphin, and also of the waxwork guards who watch over the Royal Family in museums. In spirit therefore she was in the Temple while she was in body visiting the Conciergerie. But she did not suspect this; so she was quite happy.

As they descended the Silver tower, where the only relict of the Middle Ages they had found was an old gentleman on a stool in front of a roll-top desk, classifying the documents relating to political prisoners under the Third Republic, they came once more into the Guard-room on their way to Bon Bec tower.

Theophrastus, who took a pride in showing himself well-informed, said to the guide: "Wasn't it here that the Girondins had their last meal? You might show us exactly where the table was and where Camille Desmoulins sat. I always look upon Camille Desmoulins as a personal friend of mine."

"So do I," said Marceline with a somewhat superior air.

Adolphe jeered at them. He asserted that Camille Desmoulins was not a Girondin. Theophrastus was annoyed, and so was Marceline. When Adolphe went on to assert that Camille Desmoulins was a Cordelier, a friend of Danton, and one of the instigators of the September massacres, she denied it.

"He was nothing of the kind," she said firmly. "If he had been, Lucie would never have married him."

Adolphe did not press the point, but when they came into the Torture-chamber in Bon Bec tower, he pretended to be immensely interested by the labels on the drawers round the walls, on which were printed "Hops," "Cinnamon," "Senna."

"This was the Torture-chamber; they have turned it into a dispensary," said the guide in gruff explanation.

"They have done right. It is more humane," said Theophrastus sententiously.

"No doubt; but it's very much less impressive," said Adolphe coldly.

At once Marceline agreed with him…

One was not impressed at all… They had been expecting something very different… This was not at all what they had looked for.

But when they came on to the Clock platform, their feelings underwent a change. The formidable aspect of those feudal towers, the last relics of the old Frankish monarchy, troubles for awhile the spirit of even the most ignorant. This thousand-year-old prison has witnessed so many magnificent death-agonies and hidden such distant and such legendary despairs that it seems that one only has to penetrate its depths to find sitting in some obscure corner, damp and fatal, the tragic history of Paris, as immortal as those walls. That is why, with a little plaster, flooring, and paint, they have made there the office of the Director of the Conciergerie and that of the Recorder; they have put the ink-spiller in the place once occupied by the executioner. It is, as Theophrastus says, more humane.

None the less, since, as Adolphe affirmed, it is less impressive, that visit of the 16th of last June threatened to leave on the minds of the three friends nothing but the passing memory of a complete disillusion when there happened an incident so unheard of and so curiously fantastic that I considered it absolutely necessary, after reading Theophrastus Longuet's account of it in his memoirs, to go to the Conciergerie and cross-examine the guide himself.

I found him a stolid fellow, officially gloomy, but with his memory of the events of Theophrastus' visit perfectly clear.

At my questions he lost his air of gloom, and said with some animation, "Everything was going quite as usual, sir; and I had just shown the two gentlemen and the lady the kitchens of St. Louis—where we keep the whitewash. We were on our way to the cell of Marie Antoinette, which is now a little chapel. The figure of Christ before which she must have prayed is now in the Director's office—"

"Yes, yes; let's get to the facts!" I interrupted.

"We're just coming to them. I was telling the gentleman with the green umbrella that we had been compelled to put the Queen's armchair in the Director's office because the English were carrying away all the stuffing of it in their purses—"

"Oh, cut out the English!" I said with some impatience.

He looked at me with an injured air and went on: "But I must tell you what I was saying to the gentleman with the green umbrella when he interrupted me in such a strange tone that the other gentleman and the lady cried out together, 'What's the matter, Theophrastus? I never heard you speak like that before! *I shouldn't have recognised your voice!*'"

"Ah! and what was he saying to you?"

"We had come just to the end of Paris Street—you know the passage we call Paris Street at the Conciergerie?"

"Yes, yes: get on!"

"We were at the top of that dreadful black passage where the grating is behind which they used to cut off the women's hair before guillotining them. It's the original grating, you know."

"Yes, yes: get on!"

"It's a passage into which a ray of sunlight never penetrates. You know that Marie Antoinette went to her death down that passage?"

"Yes, yes: cut out Marie Antoinette!"

"There you have the old Conciergerie in all its horror… Then the gentleman with the green umbrella said to me, '*Zounds! It's Straw Alley!*'"

"He said that? Are you sure? Did he really say '*Zounds*'?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, after all, there's nothing very remarkable in his saying, '*Zounds! It's Straw Alley!*'"

"But wait a bit, sir," said the guide with yet more animation. "I answered that he was wrong, that Straw Alley was what we to-day call 'Paris Street.' He replied in that strange voice: '*Zounds! Are you going to teach me about Straw Alley? Why, I've slept on the straw there, like the others!*' I said laughing, though I felt a bit uncomfortable, that no one had slept in Straw Alley for more than two hundred years."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He was going to answer when his wife interfered and said: 'What are you talking about, Theophrastus? Are you going to teach the guide his business when you've never been to the Conciergerie before in your life?' Then he said, but in his natural voice, the voice in which he had been speaking since they came in: 'That's true. I've never been to the Conciergerie in my life.'"

"What did he do then?"

"Nothing. I could not explain the incident, and I thought it all over, when something stranger still happened. We had visited the Queen's cell, and Robespierre's cell, and the chapel of the Girondins, and that little door through which the prisoners of September went to get massacred in the court; and we had come back into Paris Street. On the left-hand side of it there's a little staircase which no one ever goes down, because it leads to the cellars; and the only thing to see in the cellars is the eternal night which reigns there. The door at the bottom of this is made of iron bars, a grating—perhaps a thousand years old, or even more. The gentleman they called Adolphe was walking with the lady towards the door of the Guard-room, when without a word the gentleman with the green umbrella ran down the little staircase and called up from the bottom of it in that strange voice I was telling you about:

"'Hi! Where are you going to? *It's this way!*'

"The other gentleman, the lady, and myself stopped dead as if we had been turned to stone. I must tell you, sir, that his voice was perfectly awful; and there was nothing in his appearance to make one expect such a voice. I ran, in spite of myself as it were, to the top of the staircase. The man with the green umbrella gave me a withering glance. Truly I was thunderstruck, turned to stone

and thunderstruck; and when he shouted to me, 'Open this grating!' I don't know how I found the strength to rush down the stairs and open it. Then, when the grating was opened, he plunged into the night of the cellars. Where did he go? How did he find his way? That basement of the Conciergerie is plunged in a terrible darkness which nothing has broken for ages and ages."

"Didn't you try to stop him?" I said sharply.

"He had gone too far; and I hadn't the strength to stop him. *The man with the green umbrella just gave me orders*; and I had to obey him. And we stood there for a quarter of an hour, half out of our wits: it was so odd. And his wife talked, and his friend talked, and I talked; and we said nothing of any use; and we stared into the darkness till our eyes ached. Suddenly we heard his voice—not his first voice, but his second voice, the awful voice—and I was so overcome, I had to hang on to the bars of the door.

"'Is that you, *Simon the Auvergnat?*' he cried.

"I didn't answer anything; and as he went past me, I fancied he put a scrap of paper into his breast pocket. He sprang up the staircase three steps at a time; and we went up after him. He did not offer any explanation; and I simply ran to open the door of the prison for them. I wanted to see their backs. When the wicket was opened and the man with the green umbrella was crossing the threshold, he said, for no reason that I could see:

"'*We must avoid the wheel.*'

"There was no carriage passing."

CHAPTER II
THE SCRAP OF PAPER

What did happen? The matter is very obscure. I cannot do better than give Theophrastus Longuet's account of it in the actual words of his memoirs in the sandalwood box.

"I am a man with a healthy mind in a healthy body," he writes, "and a good citizen: that is, I have never transgressed the law. Laws are necessary; and I have always kept them. At least I believe I have.

"I have always hated the imagination; and by that I mean that in all circumstances, whether, for instance, it has been a case of conferring my friendship on anyone, or of having to decide on a line of conduct, I have always been careful to stick to common sense. The most simple always seemed to me the best.

"I suffered deeply, for instance, when I discovered that my old College friend Adolphe Lecamus was addicted to the study of Spiritualism.

"The man who says Spiritualism says rubbish. To try to question spirits by turning tables is utterly absurd. I know what I am talking about, for, wishing to prove the absurdities of his theories, I have taken part in séances with Adolphe and my wife. We sat for hours round a little table which absolutely refused to turn. I laughed at him heartily; and that annoyed my wife, because women are always ready to put faith in the impossible and believe in the mysterious.

"He used to bring her books which she read greedily; and sometimes he would amuse himself by trying to send her to sleep by making passes before her face. I have never seen anything sillier. I should not indeed have stood it from anyone else; but I have a strong liking for Adolphe. He has a powerful face; and he has been a great traveller.

"He and Marceline called me a sceptic. I answered that I was not a sceptic in the sense of a man who believes in nothing or doubts everything. I believe in everything worthy of belief; for example, I believe in Progress. I am not a sceptic; I am a philosopher.

"During his travels Adolphe read a great deal; I manufactured rubber stamps. I am what people call 'an earthy spirit.' I do not make a boast of it; I merely state it.

"I thought it well to give this sketch of my character to make it clear that what happened yesterday is no fault of mine. I went to see the prison as I might have gone to buy a neck-tie at the Louvre. I wished to improve my mind. I have plenty of spare time nowadays, since we have sold the business. I said, 'Let us do as the English do and see the sights of Paris.' It was a mere chance that we began with the Conciergerie.

"I am very sorry indeed that we did.

"Am I really very sorry? I am not sure. I am not sure of anything. At present I am quite calm. And I am going to write down what happened exactly as if it had happened to someone else. All the same, what a story it is!

"While we were going through the towers nothing happened worth setting down here. I remember saying to myself in Bon Bec tower:

"'What, was it here in this little chamber, which looks just like a grocery, that there were so many agonies and so many illustrious victims martyred?'

"I tried honestly to picture to myself the horror of that chamber when the executioner and his assistants with their horrible instruments came to the prisoners with the intention of forcing them to confess crimes affecting the state. But owing to the little labels on the drawers, on which one reads 'Senna,' 'Hops,' I did not succeed.

"That Bon Bec tower! They used also to call it *The Prattler* on account of the horrible cries which burst from it and made the quiet passer-by shudder and quicken his steps along the quay at the sound of the King's justice.

"Now Bon Bec tower is peaceful and very still. I am not complaining of it: it is Progress.

"But when we penetrated to that part of the Conciergerie which has hardly changed for centuries and were walking quietly along between those bare stone walls which no fresh facing, no profane plaster has ever covered, an inexplicable fever began to fill my veins; and when we were in the gloom at the end of Straw Alley, I cried, '*Zounds! It's Straw Alley!*'

"At once I turned to see who had spoken those words. They were all staring at me; and I perceived plainly that I had spoken them myself. Indeed, my throat was still quivering from their utterance.

"The idiot of a guide asserted that we had passed Straw Alley. I contradicted him; and he shut up. I was sure of my facts, you understand, quite sure that it was Straw Alley. I told him that I had slept on the straw in it. But it is absurd. How do you suppose I could have slept on straw in Straw Alley when it was the first time I had ever been in the Conciergerie? Besides, was I sure? That is what worries me. I had an atrocious headache.

"My brow was burning even while I felt it swept by a strong current of cold air. Outside I was cool; inside I was a furnace.

"What had we been doing? I had a moment before walked quietly through the chapel of the Girondins; and while the guide was telling us the history of it, I played with my green umbrella. I was not in the least annoyed at having just behaved so oddly. I was my natural self. But as for that, I have never ceased to be my natural self.

"That which befell me later was also quite natural, since it was not the result of any effort. The unnatural is exactly what did not befall me.

"I remember finding myself at the bottom of a staircase in front of a grating. I was endowed with superhuman vigour; I shook the grating and shouted, 'This way!' The others, *who did not know*, were slow coming. I do not know what I should have done to the grating, if the guide had not unlocked it for me. For that matter, I do not know what I should have done to the guide. I was mad. No: I have no right to say that. I was not mad; and that's a great pity. It is worse than if I had been mad.

"Undoubtedly I was in a state of great nervous excitement; but my mind was quite lucid. I do not believe that I have ever seen so clearly; and yet I was in the dark. I do not believe that I have ever had clearer recollections; and yet I was in a place I did not know. Heavens! I did not recognise it and *I did recognise it!* I did not hesitate about my way. My groping hands found the stones they reached out in the darkness to find; and my feet trod a soil which could not have been strange to them.

"Who will ever be able to tell the age of that soil; who will ever be able to tell you the age of those stones? *I do not know it myself.* They talk of the origin of the palace. What is the origin of the old Frankish palace? They may be able to say when those stones will end; they will never be able to say when they began. And they are forgotten, those stones, in the thousand-year night of the cellars. The odd thing is that I remembered them.

"I crept along the damp walls as if the way were well known to me. I expected certain rough places in the wall; and they came to the tips of my fingers; I counted the edges of the stones and I knew that at the end of a certain number I had only to turn to see at the far end of a passage *a ray which the sun had forgotten there since the beginning of the history of Paris.* I turned and saw the ray; *and I felt my heart beat loudly from the bottom of the centuries.*"

M. Longuet interrupts his narrative for a while to describe the whirl of his mind during this singular hour. He has the greatest difficulty in remaining master of his thought, the utmost difficulty in following it. It rushes on in front of him like a bolting horse whose reins he has let go. It leaves him behind and bounds ahead, leaving on the paper, as traces of its passage, words of such profundity that when he looks at them, he says, they make him giddy.

And he adds, in a paroxysm of dread:

"One must stop on the edge of these words as one stops on the edge of a precipice."

And he guides the pen with a feverish hand, as he goes on burying himself in the depths of these subterranean galleries:

"And that's the Prattler! These are the walls which have heard! It was not up above, in the sunlight, that the Prattler spoke; it was here, in this night of the underworld. Here are the rings in the walls. Is it the ring of Ravaillac? *I no longer remember.*

"But towards the ray, towards the unique ray, motionless and eternal, the faint, square ray, which from the beginning of ages took and preserved the form of the air-hole, I advance; I advance in a stumbling hurry, while the fever consumes me, blazes, and dizzies my brain. My feet stop, but with such a shock that one would believe them caught by invisible hands, risen from the soil; my fingers run over the wall, groping and fumbling that spot in the wall. What do my fingers want? What is the thought of my fingers? I had a pen-knife in my pocket; and all at once I let my green umbrella fall to the ground to take my pen-knife from my pocket. And I scraped, with certainty, between two stones. I cleared away the dust and mortar from between two stones. Then my knife pierced a thing between the two stones and brought it out.

"That is why I know I am not mad. That thing is under my eyes. In my quietest hours, I, Theophrastus Longuet, can look at it on my desk between my latest models of rubber stamps. It is not I who am mad; it is this thing that is mad. It is a scrap of paper, torn and stained—a document whose age there is no telling and which is in every way calculated to plunge a quiet manufacturer of rubber stamps into the wildest consternation. The paper, as you can guess, is rotted by the damp of the cellars. The damp has eaten away half the words, which seem from their red hue to have been written in blood.

"But in these words before me, in this document which was certainly written two centuries ago, which I passed under the square ray from the air-hole and gazed at with my hair rising on end in horror, I recognised my own handwriting."

Here copied clearly out is this precious and mysterious document:

"I rt uried
my treasures after betrayal
of April 1st
Go and take the air
at the Chopinettes
look at the Gall
look at the Cock
Dig on the spot and you
will be rich."

CHAPTER III
THEOPHRASTUS LONGUET BURSTS INTO SONG

On leaving the prison, Marceline and Adolphe were, very naturally, full of curiosity to learn the reasons of Theophrastus' extraordinary behaviour; and he had the greatest difficulty in getting them away from the subject. He treated the matter lightly, declaring that the whim had taken him to visit the cellars of the Conciergerie; and he had visited them. They were even more impressed by his attitude to the guide than by his actual plunge into the cellars. That Theophrastus, the timid Theophrastus, should have browbeaten not a mere man, but an official, amazed them. Theophrastus admits that he was as much amazed as they, and felt rather proud of himself. All the evening they kept recurring to the matter until their amazement and their interest began to weaken by mere continuance of expression. But Theophrastus was glad indeed when sleep at last tied Marceline's tongue.

The next day he shut himself up in his study on the pretext of straightening out his accounts. Its window looks down on to the little grass-plot in the middle of Anvers Square; and he leaned out over the sill, contemplating the prosaic reality of the scene as if he could not have enough of it. He was above all pleased by the nurses wheeling along their babies in perambulators and by the shouting of the children romping about the Square.

His thought was of a great unity and a great simplicity. It was entirely contained in the phrase: "The World has not changed."

No: the world had not changed. There were the babies in the perambulators; and as the clock struck two the Signora Petito, wife of the Professor of Italian who occupied the flat above his, began to play *The Carnival of Venice*.

No: nothing in the world had changed; yet when he turned round, he could see on his desk, among the models of rubber stamps, a scrap of paper.

Did that scrap of paper *really* exist? He had passed a feverish night, almost a night of delirium; and at the end of it he had decided that his strange adventure must have been a bad dream. But in the morning he had found the scrap of paper in a drawer of his desk…

Even now he kept saying to himself, "I shall turn round presently; and the scrap of paper won't be there." He turned round; and the scrap of paper was there—*in his own handwriting*.

He passed his hand over his perspiring brow and heaved the sigh of a grieved child. Then he seemed to come to a definite resolve and carefully put the scrap of paper into his pocket-book. He had just remembered that Signor Petito had a great reputation as an expert in handwriting. His friend Adolphe was also an expert in handwriting, but from the Spiritualistic point of view. He told the character by it. Theophrastus had no intention of calling Adolphe into counsel. There was already too much mystery in the affair to entrust it to the overflowing imagination of a medium who boasted himself a pupil of a Papus.

He went slowly upstairs and was ushered into Signor Petito's study.

He found himself in the presence of a man of middle age, whose chief characteristics were a mass of crinkly black hair, a piercing glance, and enormous ears. After they had exchanged greetings, Theophrastus broached the subject of the scrap of paper. He drew it from his pocket-book and an unsigned letter which he had written a few days previously.

"Signor Petito," he said, "I understand that you are a first-class expert in handwriting. I should be much obliged if you would examine this letter and this document, and inform me of the result of your examination. I assert myself that there is no connection—"

He stopped short, as red as a peony, for he was not in the habit of lying. But Signor Petito had already scanned the letter and the scrap of paper with the eye of an expert; and with a smile which showed all his exceedingly white teeth, he said:

"I won't keep you waiting for my answer, M. Longuet. The document is in a very bad state; but the scraps of handwriting one can read are in every respect the same as the handwriting of the letter. Before the Courts, M. Longuet, before God and before men, these two handwritings were traced *by the same hand!*" He laid his hand on his heart with a great air.

He entered into particulars: a child, he declared, could not make a mistake about it. He became oracular.

"The handwriting in both is equally angular," he said in a very pompous tone. "By angular, M. Longuet, we describe a handwriting in which the thin strokes which join the strokes of the letters and the letters to one another are at an acute angle. You understand? Look at this hook, and this one, and this thin stroke, and all these letters which increase progressively in equal proportions. But what an acute handwriting, M. Longuet! I have never seen handwriting so acute: *it's as sharp as the blade of a knife!*"

At these last words Theophrastus turned so pale that Signor Petito thought that he was going to faint. None the less he took the letter and the document, thanked Signor Petito, and went out of the flat.

He walked straight out of the house and wandered about the streets for a long while. At last he found himself in Saint-Andrew-des-Arts Place; then he took his way to Suger Street, and opened the latch of an old-fashioned door. He found himself in a dark and dirty passage. A man came down it to meet him, and recognising him, greeted him.

"How are you, Theophrastus? What good wind blows you here?" he said in affectionate tones.

"How are you, Ambrose?" said Theophrastus gloomily.

Since they had not met for two years, they had a hundred inquiries to make of one another. Ambrose was an engraver of visiting-cards by profession. He had been a printer in the Provinces; but having put all his capital into a new invention in printing, it had not been long before he found himself a bankrupt. He was a cousin of Marceline; and Theophrastus, who was a good soul, had come to his aid in the hour of his gravest trouble.

Theophrastus sat down on a straw-seated chair in a little room which served as workshop, and was lighted by a large, dusty skylight in the ceiling.

"You 're a scientific man, Ambrose," he said, still gloomily.

"Nothing of the kind!" said Ambrose quickly.

"Yes; you are. No one could teach you anything in the matter of paper."

"Oh, yes: that's true enough. I do know paper."

"You know all papers," said Theophrastus.

"All," said Ambrose with modest pride.

"If one showed you a piece of paper you could tell the age of it?"

"Yes; I have published a monograph on the water-marks of the papers used in France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Academy crowned it."

"I know it. And I have the fullest confidence in your knowledge of papers," said Theophrastus with unrelieved gloom.

"It's well-founded; but really it's a very simple matter. The oldest papers presented at first, when they were new, a smooth, glossy surface. But soon wire-marks appeared in them, crossed at regular intervals by perpendicular lines, both reproducing the impression of the metal trellis on which the paste was spread. In the fourteenth century they had the idea of utilising this reproduction by making it a mark of the source or mill which the paper came from. With this object in view, they embroidered in brass wire on the trellis mould, initials, words, and all kinds of emblems: these are the water-marks. Every water-marked sheet of paper carries in itself its birth-certificate; but the difficulty is to decipher it. It requires a little practice: the pot, the eagle, the bell…"

Theophrastus opened his pocket-book and held out his scrap of paper with trembling fingers.

"Could you tell me the exact age of this document?" he said.

Ambrose put on his spectacles and held the paper up to the light.

"There's a date," he said. "172… The last figure is missing. It would be a paper of the eighteenth century then. Given the date within ten years, our task becomes very simple."

"Oh, I saw the date," said Theophrastus quickly. "But is this really an eighteenth-century paper? Isn't the date false? That's what I want to know."

Ambrose pointed to the middle of the scrap.

"Look," he said.

Theophrastus looked; but he saw nothing. Then Ambrose lighted a little lamp and threw its light on the document. In holding the scrap of paper between one's eyes and the lamp one distinguished in the middle of it a kind of crown.

"This paper's extremely rare, Theophrastus!" cried Ambrose in considerable excitement. "This water-mark is almost unknown, for very little of it was manufactured. The water-mark is called 'The Crown of Thorns.' This paper, my dear Theophrastus, is exactly of the year 1721."

"You are sure of it?"

"Absolutely. But how comes it that this document, which is dated 1721, is, in every part of it which is visible, in your handwriting?" cried Ambrose in a tone of amazement.

Theophrastus rose, put the document back into his pocket-book, and went out on stumbling feet, without answering.

I reproduce from the medley of documents of which his memoirs are composed the following passage:

"So now," writes Theophrastus, "I had the proof; I could no longer doubt; I had no longer the right to doubt. This scrap of paper which dated from the beginning of the eighteenth century, from the times of the Regent, this sheet which I had found, or rather *had gone to seek* in a prison, was truly in my own handwriting. I had written on this sheet, I, Theophrastus Longuet, late manufacturer of rubber stamps, who had only retired the week before, at the age of forty-one years, I had written on this sheet the still incomprehensible words which I read on it, in 1721! Besides, I had not really any need of Signor Petito, or of Ambrose, to assure me of it. All my being cried, 'It's your paper! It's your paper!'"

"So before being Theophrastus Longuet, the son of Jean Longuet, market-gardener at Ferté-sous-Jouarre, I had been in the past someone whom I did not know, but who was re-born in me. Yes: every now and then I 'foamed at the mouth' at remembering that I lived two hundred years ago!

"Who was I? What was then my name? I had a strange certainty that these questions would not remain unanswered for long. Was it not a fact that already things of which in my present existence I was ignorant, were rising from my past? What did certain phrases I had uttered at the Conciergerie mean? Who was Simon the Auvergnat, whose name had risen twice to my burning lips?

"Yes, yes: the name of long ago, *my* name, would also rise to my awakening brain; and knowing who I was, I should recall the whole of my reviving life in the past, and read the document at a glance."

Theophrastus Longuet might well be troubled in mind. He was a simple, rather dense, self-satisfied soul who had never believed in anything but rubber stamps. A good-natured, strictly honest, narrow-minded and obstinate tradesman, like the bulk of his class in France he had considered religion only fit for women; and without declaring himself an unbeliever, he had been wont to say that when one died one was dead for a long time.

He had just learned in the most convincing, palpable fashion that *one was never dead*.

It was indeed a blow. But he took it very well. From the moment that he remembered having been alive at the beginning of the eighteenth century, he began to regret that it was not two thousand years earlier.

That is the nature of the French tradesman; he is full of common sense; but when he does exaggerate, he passes all bounds.

In his uncertainty about his previous existence he had two definite facts to start from: the date 1721, and the Conciergerie prison. These enabled him to affirm that in 1721 he had been confined in the Conciergerie as a Prisoner of State: he could not admit for an instant that even in the wicked times of Louis XV he, Theophrastus Longuet, could possibly have been in prison for an offence against the Common Law.

Again the scrap of paper gave grounds for certain inferences. At some desperate conjuncture, possibly on the eve of his execution, he had written it and hidden it in the wall, to find it on a passing visit, two centuries later. There was nothing supernatural about that; it was merely the logical explanation of the facts of the case.

He betook himself once more to the consideration of the document. Two words in it seemed to him, naturally, of paramount importance. They were the words "Betrayal" and "Treasures."

He hoped from these two words to reconstitute his earlier personality. In the first place, it was plain that he had been rich and powerful. Only rich men bury treasures; only powerful men are betrayed. It seemed to him that it must have been a memorable, perhaps historic betrayal, of *the betrayal of the First of April*.

Whatever else was mysterious about the document, it was quite clear that he had been a great personage and had buried treasures.

"By Jove!" he said to himself. "Provided that no one has touched them, those treasures belong to me! If need were, with this document in my own handwriting I could establish my claim to them."

Theophrastus was not a rich man. He had retired from business with a moderate competence: a cottage in the country, with its little garden, its fountain, and its lawn. It was not much, with Marceline's occasional fits of extravagance. Decidedly the treasures would come in very useful.

At the same time we must give him the credit of being far more interested in the mystery of his personality than in the mystery of the treasures. He decided to postpone his search for them till he could definitely give a name to the personage who had been Theophrastus in 1721. To his mind this discovery, which was of chief interest to him, would be the key to all the rest.

He was somewhat astonished by the sudden disappearance of what he called his "historical instinct." It had been lacking during the earlier part of his life; but it had revealed itself to him in the cellars of the Conciergerie with the suddenness and emphasis of a clap of thunder. For a while the Other (in his mind he called the great personage he had been in the eighteenth century the "Other") had taken possession of him. The Other had been so completely master of him that he had acted with the Other's hands and spoken with his voice. It was the Other who had found the document. It was the Other who had cried, "*Zounds! It's Straw Alley!*" It was the Other who had called *Simon the Auvergnat* and then had vanished. Theophrastus did not know what had become of him. He sought in vain. He sounded himself, plumbing the depths of his being. Nothing!

Theophrastus would not stand it. He had not been troubled all his life long by any unhealthy curiosity about the beginning or end of things; he had wasted no time on the mysteries of philosophy. He had shrugged his shoulders at their futility. But since the revelation of the extraordinary fact that a man sold rubber stamps in 1911 after burying treasures in 1721, he swore to go to the end of the business. He would know. He would know everything.

His "historical instinct" seemed to have left him for the time being, he would hunt for it in books. He would assuredly end by finding out who was the mysterious personage who had been shut up in the Conciergerie in 1721 after having been betrayed on the First of April. Which First of April? That remained to discover.

Little as the selling of rubber stamps fits man for historical research, he betook himself to libraries and hunted for that personage. He studied the lives of the chief men of the period. Since he was at it, nothing was too grand for him: Princes, Peers, Statesmen, and Generals, he studied the lives of all. He paused for a while at the great financier Law, but found him too dissipated; the same objection applied to the Comte du Barry; and he was positively horrified by the thought that he

might have been the Comte de Charolais, renowned for his debaucheries, whose hobby was to shoot thatchers at work on the house-roofs. For forty-eight hours he was the Cardinal de Polignac before he was disgusted to learn that that great Churchman had not been a man of stainless virtue. Whenever he did find a person whom the historians painted in the most engaging colours and adorned with the most solid virtues, that personage invariably disobliged him by not having been shut up in the Conciergerie or betrayed on the First of April.

However he had just discovered, *in the Journal de Barbier*, a favourite of the Regent who, strangely enough, was exactly the man he was looking for, when there came a development of his case which plunged him into a profound consternation.

He had sent Marceline down to his country cottage on the banks of the Marne, to which it was their habit to betake themselves at the beginning of July; and Adolphe had gone down to the village inn, to help her get it in order for their stay. Their absence left him freer to prosecute his researches. Then on the morning of the anniversary of his wedding-day he went down to join them at the cottage. He had called it "Azure Waves Villa," in spite of the remonstrances of Adolphe, who had urged that such a name was only suitable to a cottage by the sea. Theophrastus had been firm in the matter because, he declared, he had often been to Treport, and the sea was always green; whereas, fishing for gudgeon in the Marne, he had frequently observed that its waves were blue.

He found his wife and friend awaiting him eagerly on its threshold; and as with the air of a favourite of the Regent, he complimented Marceline on her charming appearance, he gracefully waved his green umbrella, from which he seldom allowed himself to be parted, in the fashion in which he believed the dandies waved their canes at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

He found the household in the stress of the preparations for the anniversary dinner, to which several of his friends in the neighbourhood brought their wives to do honour to Theophrastus and Marceline.

Still the favourite of the Regent, to the astonishment of Marceline and Adolphe, he found a few gracious words of compliment for each guest. Neither of them had ever seen him so shine as host before.

They dined in a tent in the garden; and the talk at once turned on fishing, a sport to which they were all devoted; and they did their best to be accurate about their exploits. M. Lopard had caught a three-pound pike; old Mlle. Taburet complained bitterly that someone had been fishing in her favourite pool; a third declared that the fish were being overfed; and there was a long discussion on ground-bait.

Theophrastus said nothing: he suddenly found these good people too middle-class for him. He would have liked to raise the level of the conversation; and he would have preferred it to deal with the matters which filled his fevered imagination.

Towards the end of dinner he found a way to set Adolphe talking of ghosts. Then Madame Lopard told them of the extraordinary doings of a somnambulist who lived near; and at once Adolphe explained the phenomena of somnambulism according to the Spiritualistic theory, and quoted Allan Kardec. Adolphe was never at a loss to explain "phenomena." Then, at last, they came to the matter to which Theophrastus was burning to bring them, the Transmigration of Souls.

Marceline observed that our reason rejected the hypothesis; and Adolphe protested vigorously: "Nothing is lost in nature," he said authoritatively. "Everything is transformed, souls and bodies alike. The transmigration of souls with a view to their purification is a belief which goes back to the remotest antiquity; and the philosophers of all ages have been careful not to deny it."

"But if one came back into a body, one would know it," said Marceline.

"Not always, only sometimes," said Adolphe confidently.

"Sometimes? Is that so?" said Theophrastus quickly; and his heart began to beat tumultuously.

"Oh, yes: there are instances—authentic instances," said Adolphe emphatically. "Ptolemy Cæsarion, Cleopatra's son and King of Egypt thirty years before Christ, recollected perfectly that he had been the philosopher Pythagoras who lived six hundred years before him."

"Impossible!" cried the ladies; and the men smiled with an air of superior wisdom.

"It's nothing to laugh at, gentlemen. It's the most serious subject in the world," said Adolphe sternly. "The actual transformation of our bodies which is the last word in Science, is in entire accord with the theory of Reincarnation. What is this theory of transformation except that living beings *transform themselves into one another?* Nature for ever presents herself to us as a creative flame unceasingly perfecting types, on her way to the attainment of an ideal which will be the final crown of the Law of Progress. Since Nature has only one aim, what she does for bodies, she does also for souls. I can assure you that this is the case, for I have studied this question, which is the very foundation of all sound Science."

None of the party understood Adolphe's discourse, a fact which filled him with quiet pride; but they listened to him in an ecstasy; and he was pleased to see that Theophrastus, as a rule so restive under such discussions, was listening with the liveliest interest. It was an attitude hardly to be wondered at in a man who was hearing that what seemed a wild imagining of his delirium rested on a firm scientific basis.

"The transmigration of souls was taught in India, the cradle of the human race," Adolphe continued in his most professorial tone, delighted to have caught the ear of the party. "Then it was taught in Egypt, then in Greece by Pythagoras. Plato took the doctrine from him; and adduced irrefutable proofs in his Phædo that souls do not pass into eternal exile but return to animate new bodies."

"Oh, if we could only have proofs of a fact like that!" cried Madame Sampic, the wife of the schoolmaster of Pont-aux-Dames, with enthusiasm.

"If we had, I shouldn't mind dying one bit," said old Mlle. Taburet, who was in mortal fear of her approaching end.

"There *are* proofs—irrefutable proofs," said Adolphe solemnly. "There are two: one drawn from the general order of Nature, one from human consciousness. Firstly, Nature is governed by the law of contradictions, says Plato, meaning by that that when we see in her bosom death succeed life we are compelled to believe that life succeeds death. Is that clear to you?"

"Yes, yes," cried several of the guests, without understanding a word he was saying.

"Moreover, Plato continues, since nothing can be born from nothing, if the beings we see die were never to return to life, everything would end by becoming absorbed in death, and Nature would be moving towards an eternal sleep. Have I made this first proof clear?"

"Yes, yes: the second!" cried his fellow guests, quite untruthfully.

"Secondly," said Adolphe, growing absolutely pontifical, "when, after having observed the general laws of the Universe, we descend into the depths of our own being, we find the same dogma confirmed by the fact of memory. 'To learn,' cries Plato to the Universe, 'To learn is nothing else but to remember.' Since our soul learns, it is that it remembers. And what does it remember if not that it has lived before, and that it has lived in another body? 'Why should we not believe that in quitting the body which it animates at the moment, it must animate several others in succession?' I am quoting Plato word for word," said Adolphe in a tone of ringing triumph.

"And Plato is a person to be reckoned with," said Theophrastus warmly.

"Charles Fourier says," said Adolphe, moving on to the modern, "Where is the old man who does not desire not to be certain of carrying into another life the experience he has acquired in this one? To assert that this desire can never be realised is to admit that the Deity would deceive us. We must then recognise that we have lived already, before being what we are to-day, and that many more lives await us. All these lives—Fourier adds with a precision for which we cannot be sufficiently

thankful—to the number of a hundred and ten are distributed over five stages of unequal extent and cover a period of eighty-one thousand years."

"Eighty-one thousand years! That's pretty filling!" interrupted M. Lopard.

"We spend twenty-seven thousand of them on our planet and the other fifty-four thousand elsewhere," explained Adolphe.

"And how long is it before we come back into another body?" asked Madame Bache.

"At least two or three thousand years, if we are to believe Allan Kardec, always supposing that we have not died a violent death. Then, especially if one has been executed, one may be reincarnated at the end of two hundred years," said Adolphe.

"That's it! They must have hanged me," said Theophrastus to himself. "Or if they didn't hang a man of my quality, they beheaded me. All the same," he went on to think, with a natural pride, "if these people here knew that they were sitting with a favourite of the Regent, or perhaps a Prince of Royal blood, how astonished and respectful they'd be! But not a bit of it: they are merely saying to themselves, 'It's Theophrastus Longuet, manufacturer of rubber stamps'; and that's enough for them."

The advent of the two waiters with the champagne cut short the dissertation of Adolphe; and though everyone had been deeply impressed by it, now they only wished to be amused.

It was then that Marceline turned to Theophrastus and begged him to sing the song with which he was wont to delight their ears at dessert on each anniversary of their wedding-day. He had sung it on their wedding-day itself; and thanks to its charm and freshness, it had been a great success. It was Beranger's *Lisette*.

But what was the amazement of Marceline and all the guests, when Theophrastus sprang to his feet, threw his napkin on the table, and bawled to the mistress of the house:

"As you will, *Marie-Antoinette!* I can refuse you nothing!"

"Gracious goodness! *That voice of his has come back!*" gasped Marceline.

The guests had not recovered from the shock when Theophrastus bawled to an old French air, in a voice which none of them recognised as his, his voice of the Conciergerie, bawled to the most select society from Crécy-en-Brie to Lagny-Thorigny-Pomponne:

"Bullies all! In our snug cribs
We live like fighting-cocks:
On dainties rich we splash the dibbs,
And booze we never docks.
Then guzzle, cullies, and booze away
Till Gabriel's trump on Judgment Day!"

In spite of the richness of the rhyme, no applause followed the stanza. The ladies did not clink their glasses with their knives; they stared at Theophrastus with their eyes starting out of their heads; and the eyes of Marceline projected furthest of all.

Theophrastus did not need any applause; like one possessed of a devil, he bawled on:

"Bullies all! In our snug cribs
Dan Cupid loves to dance.
He brings to help us splash the dibbs
The prettiest silk in France.
Then guzzle, cullies, and booze away
Till Gabriel's trump on Judgment Day!"

In a final triumphant roar he repeated the last couplet and prolonged the final note, his eyes on the sun, which was sinking over the edge of the horizon, laid one hand on his heart, embraced "Nature" with a sweeping gesture of the other, and bellowed:

"Then guzzle, cullies, and booze away
Till Gabriel's trump on Judgment Day!"

He sat down with an air of supreme content, and said proudly:

"*What do you think of that, Marie-Antoinette?*"

"Why do you call me Marie-Antoinette?" gasped the trembling Marceline.

"Because you're the prettiest of them all!" roared Theophrastus in that awful voice. "I appeal to Madame la Maréchale de Boufflers, who's a woman of taste! I appeal to all of you! And there's not one of you, by the Pope's gullet, who'll dare to deny it! Neither the big Picard, nor the Bourbonnais, nor the Burgundian, nor Sheep's-head, nor the Cracksman, nor Parisian, nor the Provincial, nor the little Breton, nor the Feather, nor Patapon, nor Pint-pot, nor St. James's Gate, nor Gastelard, nor Iron-arm, nor Black-mug, nor even Fancy Man!"

Since Theophrastus had on his right old Mlle. Taburet, he prodded her in the ribs by way of emphasis, an action which nearly made her faint.

No one dared budge; his flaming eye chained them to their chairs; and leaning affectionately towards Mlle. Taburet, he pointed to the gasping Marceline, and said:

"Look, Mlle. Taburet, aren't I right? Who can compare with her? Pretty-Milkmaid, of Pussycat? Or even Blanche, the Bustler? Or Belle-Hélène who keeps the Harp tavern?"

He turned towards Adolphe.

"Here—you—old Easy-Going!" he said with a terrifying energy. "Let's have your opinion. Look at Marie-Antoinette a moment! By the Sucking-pig! there's not one to compare with her: not Jenny Venus, the flower-seller of the Palais-Royal, nor Marie Leroy, nor mother Salomon, the pretty coffee-house-keeper of the Temple, nor Jenny Bonnefoy *who's just married Veunier who keeps the Pont-Marie café*. Not one of them, I tell you! Not one of them! The Slapper, Manon de Versailles, Fat-Poulteress, the Lock, Cow-with-the-Baskets, or the Bastille!"

With a bound Theophrastus was on the table; and the crockery round him smashed into a thousand pieces. He caught up a glass and bellowed:

"I drink to the queen of the nymphs! Marie-Antoinette Neron!"

He crushed the glass in his hands, cutting them in twenty places, and bowed to the company.

But the company had fled.

CHAPTER IV
ADOLPHE LECAMUS IS FLABBERGASTED BUT FRANK

Theophrastus stood on the table and gazed sheepishly round the empty tent. His fine ardour was extinguished.

But I take up the narrative in the words of his memoirs:

"I found myself on the table," he writes, "in the middle of the broken crockery, and all the company fled. My guests' rough fashion of taking leave of me had confused me a little. I wished to get down, but by a singular phenomenon, I found as much difficulty in getting down from the table as I had displayed address in mounting it. I went down on my hands and knees; and by dint of the most careful precautions reached the ground safely. I called Marceline, who did not answer; and presently I found her trembling in our bedroom. I shut the door carefully and set about explaining matters. Her appealing eyes, full of tears, demanded an explanation; and I felt it my duty as a husband to hide from her no longer my great and amazing trouble of mind.

"'My dear Marceline,' I said, 'you must be entirely at a loss to understand what happened this evening; but never mind, I don't understand it myself. Still, by putting our heads together, reinforced by our love for one another, I do not despair of arriving at the correct explanation of it.'

"Then I coaxed her to go to bed; and when at last her head rested peacefully on the pillow, I told her my story. I gave her a complete account of my visit to the cellars of the Conciergerie, concealing nothing, and describing exactly the extraordinary feelings which troubled me and the unknown force which appeared to control me. At first she said nothing; in fact she seemed to shrink away from me as if she were frightened of me; but when I came to the document in the wall which revealed the existence of the treasures, at once she asked to see it.

"I took it from my pocket-book, and showed it to her by the light of the moon, which was at its full. Like myself, like all who had already seen it, she recognised my handwriting; and crossed herself for all the world as if she suspected something diabolical in it.

"However the sight of the document seemed to relieve her; and at once she said that it was most fortunate that we had at hand an expert in Spiritualism, that Adolphe would be of the greatest service to us in this difficult matter. We had the paper on the bed before us in the moonlight; and in the presence of this unshakable witness, she was presently compelled to admit that I was a reincarnated soul dating from two hundred years before.

"Then, as I was once more asking who I could have been, she annoyed me for the first time since our marriage.

"'Poor Theophrastus, you couldn't have been up to much,' she said.

"'And why not?' I said sharply, for I was nettled.

"'Because, dear, this evening you sang a song in slang; and the ladies whose names you mentioned certainly couldn't have belonged to the Aristocracy. When one associates with the Slapper, the Lock, and Manon of Versailles, one can't be up to much.'

"She said this in a tone of contempt which I put down to jealousy.

"'But I also spoke of La Maréchale de Boufflers,' I said again rather sharply. 'And you ought to know that in the time of the Regent all the ladies of the Court had some queer nickname. It's my belief, on the contrary, that I was a man of quality—what do you say to a favourite of the Regent?'

"I spoke rather huffily; and she gave me a kiss, and admitted that there was a good deal in what I said.

"The next morning she repeated her suggestion that we should take Adolphe into our confidence. She declared that his wide experience in these matters and his profound knowledge of

metaphysics could not but be of the greatest help to a man who had buried treasures two hundred years ago and wished to recover them.

"'You'll see, dear, that he's the man who'll tell you what your name was,' she said.

"I yielded to her persuasion; and as we sat in the garden after lunch, I explained to him the inner meaning of the strange occurrence of the evening before. I took him back from the song to the document, from the document to the Conciergerie, watching the effect of the astonishing revelation on the expression of his face. It was clear that he was utterly astounded; and it appeared to me very odd that a professed Spiritualist should be so flabbergasted at finding himself face to face with a retired man of business, sound in mind and body, who claimed to have existed two hundred years before. He said that my behaviour at yesterday's dinner and the incomprehensible phrases to which I had given utterance at the Conciergerie were indeed calculated to prepare him for such a confidence, but as a matter of fact he had not been expecting anything of the kind, and was entirely nonplussed. He would like to have actually in his hand the proofs of such a phenomenon.

"I took out my document and handed it to him. He could not deny its authenticity; he recognised the handwriting. Indeed that recognition drew a sharp explanation from him; and I asked him the reason of it. He answered that my handwriting on a document two hundred years old explained a heap of things.

"'What things?' I said.

"He confessed loyally that till that moment he had never understood my handwriting and that it had always been impossible for him to see any connection between it and my character.

"'Is that so?' I said. 'And what is your conception of my character, Adolphe?'

"'Well, you won't be angry, if I'm frank with you?' he said, hesitating.

"'Of course not,' I said.

"On this assurance he described my character: it was that of a worthy business man, an honest merchant, an excellent husband, but of a man incapable of displaying any firmness, strength of mind, or energy. He went on to say that my timidity was excessive, and that my kindness of heart, to which he was fully alive, was always apt to degenerate into sheer feebleness.

"It was not a flattering portrait; and it made me blush for myself.

"'And now,' said I, hiding my mortification, 'you've told me what you think of my character: what do you think of my handwriting?'

"'It's the exact opposite of your character,' he said quickly. 'It expresses every sentiment utterly opposed to your nature as I know it. In fact, I can't think of a more direct antithesis than your character and your handwriting. It must be, then, that you haven't the handwriting which goes with your actual character, but the handwriting of the Other.'

"I might have been angry, if Signor Petito had not told me much the same thing; as it was, I exclaimed, 'Oh, this is very interesting! The Other, then, was a man of energy?'

"I thought to myself that the Other must have been some great leader. Then Adolphe went on; and as long as I live I shall never forget his words, so painful did I find them:

"'Everything shows, these thin strokes, the way they are joined to one another, their manner of rising, mounting, topping one another, energy, strength of will, pigheadedness, harshness, ardour, activity, ambition… for evil.'

"I was dismayed; but in a flash of genius I cried:

"'What is evil? What is good? If Attila had known how to write, he might have had the handwriting of Napoleon!'

"'Attila was called "the flail of God,"' he said.

"'And Napoleon was the flail of men,' I retorted on the instant.

"I was hard put to it to restrain my anger; but I asserted that *Theophrastus Longuet could only be an honest man before this life, during this life, and after this life*.

"My dear wife agreed with me, warmly. Adolphe saw that he had gone too far, and apologised."

CHAPTER V
THEOPHRASTUS SHOWS THE BLACK FEATHER

From that day the conversations of Theophrastus, Marceline, and Adolphe were of fascinating interest to them. They pored and pored over the document; they discussed over and over again the "Cock," the "Gall," "Chopinettes," and the "Betrayal of April 1st" of the mysterious document. They soon left Azure Waves Villa and returned to Paris to ransack the libraries.

Adolphe, the great reader, was much better adapted to historical research than either Marceline or Theophrastus; and their patience was exhausted long before his.

One Sunday they were strolling along the Champs-Elysées; and both Theophrastus and Marceline had been complaining bitterly of their failure at the libraries, when Adolphe said thoughtfully:

"What use would it be to us to find approximately the spot in which the treasures are buried *unless Theophrastus had his Black Feather?*"

"What Black Feather? What do you mean?" said Marceline and Theophrastus with one voice.

"Let's stroll back towards the Rond-Pont; and I'll tell you what I mean," said Adolphe.

When they were under the trees, among the throng of careless strollers, Adolphe said:

"You've heard of the water-finders?"

"Of course," they said promptly.

"Well, owing to some phenomenon, of which the explanation has not yet been discovered, these water-finders, equipped with forked hazel-twigs which they hold over the ground they are crossing, are able to *see*, through the different strata of the soil, the position of the spring sought, and the spot where the well must be sunk. I don't despair of getting Theophrastus to do for his treasures what the water-finders do for their springs. I shall take him to the place, and he will say, 'Here's where you dig for the treasures.'"

"But all this does not explain what you mean by my Black Feather," interrupted Theophrastus.

"I'm coming to it. I shall bring to this spot you, the treasure-seeker, as one brings the water-finder to the spot where one suspects the presence of water. I shall bring you there *when you have your Black Feather*."

He paused, and then went on in his professorial tone:

"I shall have to talk to you about Darwin; but you needn't be uneasy: I shan't have to talk about him for long. You'll understand at once. You know that Darwin devoted a great part of his life to some famous experiments of which the most famous were his experiments with pigeons. Desirous of accounting for the phenomena of heredity, he studied closely the breeding of pigeons. He chose pigeons because the generations of pigeons follow one another so closely that one can draw conclusions from them in a comparatively short space of time. At the end of a certain number, call it X, of generations he found once more the same pigeon. You understand, the same pigeon, with the same defects and the same qualities, the same shape, the same structure, and *the same black feather* in the very place where the first pigeon had a black feather. Well, I, Adolphe Lecamus, maintain, and I will prove it to you, that to eyes opened by Darwin it is the same with souls as with bodies. At the end of a number X of generations, one finds the same soul, exactly as it was originally, with the same defects and the same qualities, *with the same black feather*. Do you understand?"

"Not quite," said Theophrastus apologetically.

"Yet I'm lowering myself to the level of your intelligence," said Adolphe, impatient but frank. "But it is necessary to distinguish between the soul which appears hereditarily and that which returns by reincarnation."

"What do you mean?" said Theophrastus rather faintly.

"An hereditary soul which revives the ancestor *has always its black feather*, owing to the fact that it is the result of a unique combination, since it exists in the sheath, the body, which is hereditary to the same extent. Is that clear?"

"I notice that whenever you say, 'Is that clear?' my dear Adolphe, everything seems to go as dark as pitch," said Marceline humbly.

Adolphe ground his teeth, and raised his voice:

"Whereas a soul which returns in the course of reincarnation finds itself in a body in which nothing has been prepared to receive it. The aggregate of the materials of this body have their origin in—I take Theophrastus as example—several generations of cabbage-planters—"

"Gardeners—market-gardeners!" interjected Theophrastus gently.

"—at Ferté-sous-Jouarre. The aggregate of the materials of this body may for a while impose silence on this soul, originally perhaps—I am still taking Theophrastus as an example—belonging to one of the first families in France. But there comes a time when the soul gets the upper hand; then it speaks, and shows itself in its entirety, exactly as it was originally, *with its black feather*."

"I understand! I understand the whole business!" cried Theophrastus joyfully.

"Then when this soul speaks in you," cried Adolphe, warming to eloquence, "you're no longer yourself! Theophrastus Longuet has disappeared! It's the Other who is there! The Other who has the gestures, the air, the action, and *the Black Feather* of the Other! It's the Other who will recall exactly the mystery of the treasures! It's the Other who remembers the Other!"

"Oh, this is wonderful!" cried Theophrastus, almost in tears of joy. "I grasp now what you mean by my *Black Feather*. I shall have *my Black Feather* when I'm the Other!"

"And we will help you in the matter, dear friend," said Adolphe with unabated warmth. "But till we have disentangled the Unknown who is hidden in Theophrastus Longuet, until he is alive before our very eyes with the right amount of force, daring, and energy, until, in a word, he appears with *his Black Feather*, let us calmly devote ourselves to the study of this interesting document which you brought back from the Conciergerie. Let us make it our pastime to penetrate its mystery, let us fix the limits of the space in which these treasures were buried. But let us wait before ransacking the bowels of the earth till the Other, who is asleep in you, awakes and cries, 'It is here!'"

"You speak like a book, Adolphe!" cried Marceline, overwhelmed with admiration. "But can we really expect the soil in which the treasures were buried to have remained undisturbed all these years—over two hundred?"

"Woman of little faith," said Adolphe sternly, "they have been disturbing the sacred soil of the Roman Forum for over two thousand years as the soil of Paris has never been disturbed; and it was only a few years ago that they brought to light the famous rostrum from which Caius and Tiberius poured forth their eloquence… Ah, here's M. Mifroid, my friend the Commissary of Police, whom I've so long wanted you to know. Well, this is lucky!"

A man of forty, dressed in the height of fashion and as neat as a new pin, with one white lock drawn carefully down on his unwrinkled brow, came up to them smiling, raised his hat, and shook Adolphe warmly by the hand.

"How are you?" said Adolphe cordially. "Let me introduce you to my friends. M. Mifroid—Madame Longuet—M. Longuet."

From the glance of respectful admiration which he bestowed on her charming face Marceline gathered that the Commissary of Police was also a squire of dames.

"We have often heard our friend M. Lecamus speak of you," she said with a gracious smile.

"I feel that I have known you for a long time. Every time I meet him, he talks about his friends of Gerando Street, and in such terms that the good fortune which this moment befalls me, this introduction, has been my most fervent desire," said M. Mifroid gallantly.

"I hear that you are an accomplished violinist," said Marceline, delighted with his politeness.

"Accomplished? I don't know about accomplished: I *play* the violin; and I am something of a sculptor and a student of philosophy—a taste which I owe to our friend M. Lecamus here. And when I passed you just now, I heard you discussing the immortality of the soul," said M. Mifroid, who wished to shine before the eyes of the pretty Marceline.

"Adolphe and I love to discuss these serious questions; and just now we were discussing the body and soul and the relations between them," said Theophrastus with a very fair imitation of the professorial air of Adolphe.

"Haven't you got beyond that?" said M. Mifroid, burning to shine. "In the eyes of Science matter and spirit are one and the same thing, that is to say, they constitute the same unity in the same Force, at once result and phenomenon, cause and effect, moving towards the same end: the Progressive Ascent of Being. You two gentlemen are the only people left to make this distinction between matter and spirit."

Theophrastus was a trifle huffed: "We do the best we can," he said stiffly.

The little party had come into the Place de la Concorde. At the top of the Rue Royale there was a large crowd of people, shouting and gesticulating.

At once Theophrastus, like a true Parisian, was on fire to learn what was going on, and plunged into the heart of the crowd.

"Mind you don't get your pockets picked!" cried Marceline after him.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of getting your pocket picked when you're in the company of Commissary Mifroid," said that gentleman proudly.

"That's true," said Marceline with an amiable smile. "You are here; and we run no risk at all."

"I don't know about that," said Adolphe slyly. "My friend Mifroid appears to me more dangerous than all the pickpockets on the face of the earth—to the heart."

"Ah, he will have his joke!" said M. Mifroid laughing; but he assumed his most conquering air.

Theophrastus kept them standing there for fully ten minutes before he emerged from the crowd with his eyes shining very brightly.

"It's a cab-driver who has locked his wheel with that of a motor car," he said.

"And what has happened?" said Marceline.

"Why, he can't unlock it," said Theophrastus.

"And all this crowd about a trifle like that! How silly people are!" said Marceline.

Thereupon she invited M. Mifroid to come home and dine with them. He needed but a little pressing to accept the invitation; and they strolled slowly back to Gerando Street.

The dinner was very lively, for M. Mifroid was still bent on shining; and his example spurred Adolphe to splendid emulation. It was when they were taking their coffee at the end of dinner that M. Mifroid suddenly seemed uneasy. He felt in all his pockets, trying to find his handkerchief. His search was vain; it was not there. After a final search in the pockets in the tails of his frock-coat, he ground his teeth, gave his moustache a despairing tug, and took a deep breath.

Two minutes later Theophrastus blew his nose. Marceline asked him where he had got that pretty handkerchief. M. Mifroid looked at it and saw that it was his. He laughed somewhat awkwardly, declared that it was an excellent joke, took it from Theophrastus, and put it in his pocket. Theophrastus could not understand it at all.

Suddenly M. Mifroid turned pale, and felt in his left-hand breast pocket.

"Goodness! What has become of my pocket-book?" he cried.

The explanation of its absence was entirely simple: someone had picked the pocket of the Commissary of Police of his pocket-book with five hundred francs in it. M. Mifroid did not so much regret the loss of the five hundred francs as he was furious to find himself ridiculous. Marceline made fun of him gently as she condoled with him on its loss; she could not help it. He was furious indeed.

"Let me lend you any money you want for to-night, M. Mifroid," said Theophrastus amiably.

He pulled out a pocket-book. M. Mifroid uttered a sharp cry: it was his own pocket-book!

Theophrastus turned a rich scarlet. M. Mifroid stared at him, took the pocket-book from his trembling fingers, recovered his five hundred francs, and put them in his pocket.

Then he forthwith began to make a hundred pressing occupations his excuse for taking a hurried leave of them, and said good-bye.

As he was clattering down the staircase, he called back up it, with some heat, to his friend Adolphe, who had hurried out of the flat after him:

"Whoever are these people you have introduced me to?"

Adolphe said nothing; he wiped his perspiring brow.

The clattering footsteps of M. Mifroid died away down the stairs; and he went slowly back into the dining-room. Theophrastus had just finished turning out his pockets. On the table lay three watches, six handkerchiefs, four pocket-books, containing considerable sums of money, and eighteen purses!

CHAPTER VI
THE PORTRAIT

The three friends stared at the three watches, the six handkerchiefs, the four pocket-books, and the eighteen purses in a blank and silent consternation.

There was indeed nothing to be said.

A dreadful despair rested on the face of Theophrastus; but he was the first to break the heavy silence.

"My pockets are *quite* empty," he said.

"Oh, Theophrastus—Theophrastus!" moaned Marceline reproachfully.

"My poor friend," said Adolphe; and he groaned.

Theophrastus wiped away the cold sweat from his brow with a handkerchief of which he did not know the owner.

"I see what it is," he said in a despairing tone. "I've had my *Black Feather*."

Marceline and Adolphe said nothing; they were utterly overwhelmed.

Theophrastus looked from one to the other and wiped the glasses of his spectacles. His face cleared a little; and then he said with a faint smile:

"*Perhaps after all, in those days, it was a parlour game.*"

He stuck the index finger of his right hand into his mouth, with him a sign of grave preoccupation of spirit.

Marceline heaved a deep sigh and said, "Take your finger out of your mouth, dear, and tell us how it came about that you had on you three watches, six handkerchiefs, four pocket-books, and eighteen purses, without counting the handkerchief and pocket-book of Commissary Mifroid. I turned your pockets out this morning to brush the linings; and as usual there was nothing in them but a few scraps of tobacco."

"There was a large gathering in the Place de la Concorde. I plunged into it; and I came out of it with all these things. It's quite simple," said Theophrastus.

"And what are we going to do with them?" said Adolphe in solemn tones.

"What do you want me to do with them?" said Theophrastus sharply, for he was recovering a little from the shock. "You don't suppose I'm going to keep them! Is it my habit to keep things which don't belong to me? I'm an honest man; and I have never wronged a soul. You'll take these things to your friend the Commissary of Police. It will be easy enough for him to find the owners."

"And what am I to tell him?" said Adolphe with a harried air.

"Anything you like!" cried Theophrastus, beginning to lose his temper. "Does an honest cabman who finds a pocket-book and fifty thousand francs in his cab and takes them to the Police Station, bother about what he is going to tell the inspector? He says, 'I've found this in my cab,' and that's enough. He even gets a reward. All you have to say is: 'My friend Longuet asked me to bring you these things which he found in his pocket, and he doesn't ask for any reward.'"

He spoke in a tone of impatient contempt for the intelligence of Adolphe, a tone to which Adolphe was quite unused. Adolphe frowned with ruffled dignity and was about to retort sharply, when Marceline kicked him gently under the table, a little kick which said plainly: "Theophrastus is going off his head! Come, friend, to his rescue!"

Adolphe understood the message of that little shoe: the frown faded from his face, leaving on it only an expression of supernal gloom; he looked at the eighteen purses, scratched his nose, and coughed. Then he gazed at Theophrastus and said in very solemn tones:

"What has just happened, Theophrastus, is not natural. We must try to find the explanation of it; we must force ourselves to find the explanation. It's no use shutting our eyes; we must open them, as wide as we can, to the misfortune, if it is misfortune, in order to battle with it."

"What misfortune?" said Theophrastus, suddenly becoming his timid self again, and catching distressfully at Marceline's hand.

"It's always a misfortune to have other people's property in one's pocket," said Adolphe gloomily.

"And what else is there in the pockets of conjurors?" cried Theophrastus with fresh violence. "And conjurors are very honest men; and Theophrastus Longuet is a very honest man! *By the throttle of Madame Phalaris*, he is!"

He shouted this out; then fell back exhausted in his chair.

There was a gloomy silence. Presently he sat up again, and with tears in his eyes said plaintively:

"I feel that Adolphe is right. I am threatened by some great misfortune and I don't know what it is—I don't know what it is!"

He burst into tears; and Marceline and Adolphe strove in vain to comfort him. But after a while he dried his tears, grasped a hand of either, and said in a firmer voice:

"Swear—swear never to abandon me *whatever happens*."

They promised in all good faith; and the assurance seemed to cheer him a little. Then Adolphe asked him to let him see the document again; and he fetched it. Adolphe spread it out before him and studied it intently. Presently he nodded his head sagely and said:

"Do you ever dream, Theophrastus?"

"Do I ever dream? Well, I suppose I do sometimes. But my digestion is so good that I hardly ever remember my dreams."

"Never?" persisted Adolphe.

"Oh, I couldn't go so far as to say never," said Theophrastus. "In fact, I remember having dreamt four or five times in my life. I remember it because I always woke up at the same point in the dream; and it was always the same dream. But how on earth does it affect this business which is worrying us?"

"Dreams have never been explained by Science," said Adolphe solemnly. "It fancies that it has said everything when it has ascribed them to the effect of the imagination. But it gives us no explanation of the quite clear and distinct visions we sometimes have which have nothing whatever to do with the events or preoccupations of the previous day. In particular how are we to account for those visions of actually existing things which one has never seen in the waking state, things of which one has never even thought? Who will dare to say that they are not retrospective visions of events which have taken place before our present existence?"

"As a matter of fact, Adolphe, I can assure you that the things of which I dream—and I remember now that I have dreamt of them three times—are perhaps real in the past or future, but that I have never seen them in the present."

"You understand my point," said Adolphe in a gratified tone. "But what are these things you have dreamt of but never seen?"

"That won't take long to tell and thank goodness for it, for they're not particularly pleasant. I dreamt that I was married to a wife whom I called Marie-Antoinette and who annoyed me extremely."

"And then?" said Adolphe, whose eyes never quitted the document.

"And then I cut her up into little bits," said Theophrastus, blushing faintly.

"What a horrible thing to do!" cried Marceline.

"As a matter of fact it was rather horrible," said Theophrastus. "And then I put the pieces into a basket and was going to throw them into the Seine near the little bridge of the Hôtel-de-Ville. At that point I awoke; and I was jolly glad to awake, for it wasn't a pleasant dream."

"It's awful!" cried Adolphe; and he banged his fist down on the table.

"Isn't it?" said Marceline.

"Not the dream! But I've just succeeded in reading the whole of the first line of the document! That's what's awful!" groaned Adolphe.

"What is it? What have you found out?" cried Theophrastus in a panic-stricken tone as he sprang up to pore over the document.

"It reads *I rt uried my treasures*. And you don't know what that *rt* stands for? Well, I'm not going to tell you till I have made absolutely sure. I shall be absolutely sure by to-morrow. To-morrow, Theophrastus, at two o'clock, meet me at the corner of Guénégaud and Mazarine Streets." He rose. "In the meantime I'll take these things along to my friend Mifroid, who will restore them to their owners. Good-night, and courage, Theophrastus—above everything—courage!"

He shook Theophrastus' hand, with the lingering pressure with which one shakes the hand of a relation of the corpse at a funeral, and departed.

That night Theophrastus did not sleep. While Marceline breathed peacefully by his side, he lay awake staring into the darkness. His own breathing was irregular and broken by deep sighs. A heavy oppression weighed on his heart.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.