LEBLANC MAURICE

THE EIGHT STROKES OF THE CLOCK

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Leblanc M.

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Содержание

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

These adventures were told to me in the old days by Arsène Lupin, as though they had happened to a friend of his, named Prince Rénine. As for me, considering the way in which they were conducted, the actions, the behaviour and the very character of the hero, I find it very difficult not to identify the two friends as one and the same person. Arsène Lupin is gifted with a powerful imagination and is quite capable of attributing to himself adventures which are not his at all and of disowning those which are really his. The reader will judge for himself.

M. L.

I
ON THE TOP OF THE TOWER

Hortense Daniel pushed her window ajar and whispered:

"Are you there, Rossigny?"

"I am here," replied a voice from the shrubbery at the front of the house.

Leaning forward, she saw a rather fat man looking up at her out of a gross red face with its cheeks and chin set in unpleasantly fair whiskers.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, I had a great argument with my uncle and aunt last night. They absolutely refuse to sign the document of which my lawyer sent them the draft, or to restore the dowry squandered by my husband."

"But your uncle is responsible by the terms of the marriage-settlement."

"No matter. He refuses."

"Well, what do you propose to do?"

"Are you still determined to run away with me?" she asked, with a laugh.

"More so than ever."

"Your intentions are strictly honourable, remember!"

"Just as you please. You know that I am madly in love with you."

"Unfortunately I am not madly in love with you!"

"Then what made you choose me?"

"Chance. I was bored. I was growing tired of my humdrum existence. So I'm ready to run risks.... Here's my luggage: catch!"

She let down from the window a couple of large leather kit-bags. Rossigny caught them in his arms.

"The die is cast," she whispered. "Go and wait for me with your car at the If cross-roads. I shall come on horseback."

"Hang it, I can't run off with your horse!"

"He will go home by himself."

"Capital!… Oh, by the way...."

"What is it?"

"Who is this Prince Rénine, who's been here the last three days and whom nobody seems to know?"

"I don't know much about him. My uncle met him at a friend's shoot and asked him here to stay."

"You seem to have made a great impression on him. You went for a long ride with him yesterday. He's a man I don't care for."

"In two hours I shall have left the house in your company. The scandal will cool him off.... Well, we've talked long enough. We have no time to lose."

For a few minutes she stood watching the fat man bending under the weight of her traps as he moved away in the shelter of an empty avenue. Then she closed the window.

Outside, in the park, the huntsmen's horns were sounding the reveille. The hounds burst into frantic baying. It was the opening day of the hunt that morning at the Château de la Marèze, where, every year, in the first week in September, the Comte d'Aigleroche, a mighty hunter before the Lord, and his countess were accustomed to invite a few personal friends and the neighbouring landowners.

Hortense slowly finished dressing, put on a riding-habit, which revealed the lines of her supple figure, and a wide-brimmed felt hat, which encircled her lovely face and auburn hair, and sat down to

her writing-desk, at which she wrote to her uncle, M. d'Aigleroche, a farewell letter to be delivered to him that evening. It was a difficult letter to word; and, after beginning it several times, she ended by giving up the idea.

"I will write to him later," she said to herself, "when his anger has cooled down."

And she went downstairs to the dining-room.

Enormous logs were blazing in the hearth of the lofty room. The walls were hung with trophies of rifles and shotguns. The guests were flocking in from every side, shaking hands with the Comte d'Aigleroche, one of those typical country squires, heavily and powerfully built, who lives only for hunting and shooting. He was standing before the fire, with a large glass of old brandy in his hand, drinking the health of each new arrival.

Hortense kissed him absently:

"What, uncle! You who are usually so sober!"

"Pooh!" he said. "A man may surely indulge himself a little once a year!…"

"Aunt will give you a scolding!"

"Your aunt has one of her sick headaches and is not coming down. Besides," he added, gruffly, "it is not her business … and still less is it yours, my dear child."

Prince Rénine came up to Hortense. He was a young man, very smartly dressed, with a narrow and rather pale face, whose eyes held by turns the gentlest and the harshest, the most friendly and the most satirical expression. He bowed to her, kissed her hand and said:

"May I remind you of your kind promise, dear madame?"

"My promise?"

"Yes, we agreed that we should repeat our delightful excursion of yesterday and try to go over that old boarded-up place the look of which made us so curious. It seems to be known as the Domaine de Halingre."

She answered a little curtly:

"I'm extremely sorry, monsieur, but it would be rather far and I'm feeling a little done up. I shall go for a canter in the park and come indoors again."

There was a pause. Then Serge Rénine said, smiling, with his eyes fixed on hers and in a voice which she alone could hear:

"I am sure that you'll keep your promise and that you'll let me come with you. It would be better."

"For whom? For you, you mean?"

"For you, too, I assure you."

She coloured slightly, but did not reply, shook hands with a few people around her and left the room.

A groom was holding the horse at the foot of the steps. She mounted and set off towards the woods beyond the park.

It was a cool, still morning. Through the leaves, which barely quivered, the sky showed crystalline blue. Hortense rode at a walk down winding avenues which in half an hour brought her to a country-side of ravines and bluffs intersected by the high-road.

She stopped. There was not a sound. Rossigny must have stopped his engine and concealed the car in the thickets around the If cross-roads.

She was five hundred yards at most from that circular space. After hesitating for a few seconds, she dismounted, tied her horse carelessly, so that he could release himself by the least effort and return to the house, shrouded her face in the long brown veil that hung over her shoulders and walked on.

As she expected, she saw Rossigny directly she reached the first turn in the road. He ran up to her and drew her into the coppice!

"Quick, quick! Oh, I was so afraid that you would be late … or even change your mind! And here you are! It seems too good to be true!"

She smiled:

"You appear to be quite happy to do an idiotic thing!"

"I should think I *am* happy! And so will you be, I swear you will! Your life will be one long fairy-tale. You shall have every luxury, and all the money you can wish for."

"I want neither money nor luxuries."

"What then?"

"Happiness."

"You can safely leave your happiness to me."

She replied, jestingly:

"I rather doubt the quality of the happiness which you would give me."

"Wait! You'll see! You'll see!"

They had reached the motor. Rossigny, still stammering expressions of delight, started the engine. Hortense stepped in and wrapped herself in a wide cloak. The car followed the narrow, grassy path which led back to the cross-roads and Rossigny was accelerating the speed, when he was suddenly forced to pull up. A shot had rung out from the neighbouring wood, on the right. The car was swerving from side to side.

"A front tire burst," shouted Rossigny, leaping to the ground.

"Not a bit of it!" cried Hortense. "Somebody fired!"

"Impossible, my dear! Don't be so absurd!"

At that moment, two slight shocks were felt and two more reports were heard, one after the other, some way off and still in the wood.

Rossigny snarled:

"The back tires burst now … both of them.... But who, in the devil's name, can the ruffian be? … Just let me get hold of him, that's all!…"

He clambered up the road-side slope. There was no one there. Moreover, the leaves of the coppice blocked the view.

"Damn it! Damn it!" he swore. "You were right: somebody was firing at the car! Oh, this is a bit thick! We shall be held up for hours! Three tires to mend!… But what are you doing, dear girl?"

Hortense herself had alighted from the car. She ran to him, greatly excited:

"I'm going."

"But why?"

"I want to know. Some one fired. I want to know who it was."

"Don't let us separate, please!"

"Do you think I'm going to wait here for you for hours?"

"What about your running away?… All our plans …?"

"We'll discuss that to-morrow. Go back to the house. Take back my things with you.... And good-bye for the present."

She hurried, left him, had the good luck to find her horse and set off at a gallop in a direction leading away from La Marèze.

There was not the least doubt in her mind that the three shots had been fired by Prince Rénine.

"It was he," she muttered, angrily, "it was he. No one else would be capable of such behaviour."

Besides, he had warned her, in his smiling, masterful way, that he would expect her.

She was weeping with rage and humiliation. At that moment, had she found herself face to face with Prince Rénine, she could have struck him with her riding-whip.

Before her was the rugged and picturesque stretch of country which lies between the Orne and the Sarthe, above Alençon, and which is known as Little Switzerland. Steep hills compelled her frequently to moderate her pace, the more so as she had to cover some six miles before reaching her destination. But, though the speed at which she rode became less headlong, though her physical effort gradually slackened, she nevertheless persisted in her indignation against Prince Rénine. She bore him

a grudge not only for the unspeakable action of which he had been guilty, but also for his behaviour to her during the last three days, his persistent attentions, his assurance, his air of excessive politeness.

She was nearly there. In the bottom of a valley, an old park-wall, full of cracks and covered with moss and weeds, revealed the ball-turret of a château and a few windows with closed shutters. This was the Domaine de Halingre. She followed the wall and turned a corner. In the middle of the crescent-shaped space before which lay the entrance-gates, Serge Rénine stood waiting beside his horse.

She sprang to the ground, and, as he stepped forward, hat in hand, thanking her for coming, she cried:

"One word, monsieur, to begin with. Something quite inexplicable happened just now. Three shots were fired at a motor-car in which I was sitting. Did you fire those shots?"

"Yes."

She seemed dumbfounded:

"Then you confess it?"

"You have asked a question, madame, and I have answered it."

"But how dared you? What gave you the right?"

"I was not exercising a right, madame; I was performing a duty!"

"Indeed! And what duty, pray?"

"The duty of protecting you against a man who is trying to profit by your troubles."

"I forbid you to speak like that. I am responsible for my own actions, and I decided upon them in perfect liberty."

"Madame, I overheard your conversation with M. Rossigny this morning and it did not appear to me that you were accompanying him with a light heart. I admit the ruthlessness and bad taste of my interference and I apologise for it humbly; but I risked being taken for a ruffian in order to give you a few hours for reflection."

"I have reflected fully, monsieur. When I have once made up my mind to a thing, I do not change it."

"Yes, madame, you do, sometimes. If not, why are you here instead of there?"

Hortense was confused for a moment. All her anger had subsided. She looked at Rénine with the surprise which one experiences when confronted with certain persons who are unlike their fellows, more capable of performing unusual actions, more generous and disinterested. She realised perfectly that he was acting without any ulterior motive or calculation, that he was, as he had said, merely fulfilling his duty as a gentleman to a woman who has taken the wrong turning.

Speaking very gently, he said:

"I know very little about you, madame, but enough to make me wish to be of use to you. You are twenty-six years old and have lost both your parents. Seven years ago, you became the wife of the Comte d'Aigleroche's nephew by marriage, who proved to be of unsound mind, half insane indeed, and had to be confined. This made it impossible for you to obtain a divorce and compelled you, since your dowry had been squandered, to live with your uncle and at his expense. It's a depressing environment. The count and countess do not agree. Years ago, the count was deserted by his first wife, who ran away with the countess' first husband. The abandoned husband and wife decided out of spite to unite their fortunes, but found nothing but disappointment and ill-will in this second marriage. And you suffer the consequences. They lead a monotonous, narrow, lonely life for eleven months or more out of the year. One day, you met M. Rossigny, who fell in love with you and suggested an elopement. You did not care for him. But you were bored, your youth was being wasted, you longed for the unexpected, for adventure … in a word, you accepted with the very definite intention of keeping your admirer at arm's length, but also with the rather ingenuous hope that the scandal would force your uncle's hand and make him account for his trusteeship and assure you of an independent existence.

That is how you stand. At present you have to choose between placing yourself in M. Rossigny's hands … or trusting yourself to me."

She raised her eyes to his. What did he mean? What was the purport of this offer which he made so seriously, like a friend who asks nothing but to prove his devotion?

After a moment's silence, he took the two horses by the bridle and tied them up. Then he examined the heavy gates, each of which was strengthened by two planks nailed cross-wise. An electoral poster, dated twenty years earlier, showed that no one had entered the domain since that time.

Rénine tore up one of the iron posts which supported a railing that ran round the crescent and used it as a lever. The rotten planks gave way. One of them uncovered the lock, which he attacked with a big knife, containing a number of blades and implements. A minute later, the gate opened on a waste of bracken which led up to a long, dilapidated building, with a turret at each corner and a sort of a belvedere, built on a taller tower, in the middle.

The Prince turned to Hortense:

"You are in no hurry," he said. "You will form your decision this evening; and, if M. Rossigny succeeds in persuading you for the second time, I give you my word of honour that I shall not cross your path. Until then, grant me the privilege of your company. We made up our minds yesterday to inspect the château. Let us do so. Will you? It is as good a way as any of passing the time and I have a notion that it will not be uninteresting."

He had a way of talking which compelled obedience. He seemed to be commanding and entreating at the same time. Hortense did not even seek to shake off the enervation into which her will was slowly sinking. She followed him to a half-demolished flight of steps at the top of which was a door likewise strengthened by planks nailed in the form of a cross.

Rénine went to work in the same way as before. They entered a spacious hall paved with white and black flagstones, furnished with old sideboards and choir-stalls and adorned with a carved escutcheon which displayed the remains of armorial bearings, representing an eagle standing on a block of stone, all half-hidden behind a veil of cobwebs which hung down over a pair of folding-doors.

"The door of the drawing-room, evidently," said Rénine.

He found this more difficult to open; and it was only by repeatedly charging it with his shoulder that he was able to move one of the doors.

Hortense had not spoken a word. She watched not without surprise this series of forcible entries, which were accomplished with a really masterly skill. He guessed her thoughts and, turning round, said in a serious voice:

"It's child's-play to me. I was a locksmith once."

She seized his arm and whispered:

"Listen!"

"To what?" he asked.

She increased the pressure of her hand, to demand silence. The next moment, he murmured:

"It's really very strange."

"Listen, listen!" Hortense repeated, in bewilderment. "Can it be possible?"

They heard, not far from where they were standing, a sharp sound, the sound of a light tap recurring at regular intervals; and they had only to listen attentively to recognise the ticking of a clock. Yes, it was this and nothing else that broke the profound silence of the dark room; it was indeed the deliberate ticking, rhythmical as the beat of a metronome, produced by a heavy brass pendulum. That was it! And nothing could be more impressive than the measured pulsation of this trivial mechanism, which by some miracle, some inexplicable phenomenon, had continued to live in the heart of the dead château.

"And yet," stammered Hortense, without daring to raise her voice, "no one has entered the house?" "No one."

"And it is quite impossible for that clock to have kept going for twenty years without being wound up?"

"Quite impossible."

"Then …?"

Serge Rénine opened the three windows and threw back the shutters.

He and Hortense were in a drawing-room, as he had thought; and the room showed not the least sign of disorder. The chairs were in their places. Not a piece of furniture was missing. The people who had lived there and who had made it the most individual room in their house had gone away leaving everything just as it was, the books which they used to read, the knick-knacks on the tables and consoles.

Rénine examined the old grandfather's clock, contained in its tall carved case which showed the disk of the pendulum through an oval pane of glass. He opened the door of the clock. The weights hanging from the cords were at their lowest point.

At that moment there was a click. The clock struck eight with a serious note which Hortense was never to forget.

"How extraordinary!" she said.

"Extraordinary indeed," said he, "for the works are exceedingly simple and would hardly keep going for a week."

"And do you see nothing out of the common?"

"No, nothing … or, at least...."

He stooped and, from the back of the case, drew a metal tube which was concealed by the weights. Holding it up to the light:

"A telescope," he said, thoughtfully. "Why did they hide it?… And they left it drawn out to its full length.... That's odd.... What does it mean?"

The clock, as is sometimes usual, began to strike a second time, sounding eight strokes. Rénine closed the case and continued his inspection without putting his telescope down. A wide arch led from the drawing-room to a smaller apartment, a sort of smoking-room. This also was furnished, but contained a glass case for guns of which the rack was empty. Hanging on a panel near by was a calendar with the date of the 5th of September.

"Oh," cried Hortense, in astonishment, "the same date as to-day!… They tore off the leaves until the 5th of September.... And this is the anniversary! What an astonishing coincidence!"

"Astonishing," he echoed. "It's the anniversary of their departure … twenty years ago to-day."

"You must admit," she said, "that all this is incomprehensible.

"Yes, of course … but, all the same … perhaps not."

"Have you any idea?"

He waited a few seconds before replying:

"What puzzles me is this telescope hidden, dropped in that corner, at the last moment. I wonder what it was used for.... From the ground-floor windows you see nothing but the trees in the garden … and the same, I expect, from all the windows.... We are in a valley, without the least open horizon.... To use the telescope, one would have to go up to the top of the house.... Shall we go up?"

She did not hesitate. The mystery surrounding the whole adventure excited her curiosity so keenly that she could think of nothing but accompanying Rénine and assisting him in his investigations.

They went upstairs accordingly, and, on the second floor, came to a landing where they found the spiral staircase leading to the belvedere.

At the top of this was a platform in the open air, but surrounded by a parapet over six feet high.

"There must have been battlements which have been filled in since," observed Prince Rénine. "Look here, there were loop-holes at one time. They may have been blocked."

"In any case," she said, "the telescope was of no use up here either and we may as well go down again."

"I don't agree," he said. "Logic tells us that there must have been some gap through which the country could be seen and this was the spot where the telescope was used."

He hoisted himself by his wrists to the top of the parapet and then saw that this point of vantage commanded the whole of the valley, including the park, with its tall trees marking the horizon; and, beyond, a depression in a wood surmounting a hill, at a distance of some seven or eight hundred yards, stood another tower, squat and in ruins, covered with ivy from top to bottom.

Rénine resumed his inspection. He seemed to consider that the key to the problem lay in the use to which the telescope was put and that the problem would be solved if only they could discover this use.

He studied the loop-holes one after the other. One of them, or rather the place which it had occupied, attracted his attention above the rest. In the middle of the layer of plaster, which had served to block it, there was a hollow filled with earth in which plants had grown. He pulled out the plants and removed the earth, thus clearing the mouth of a hole some five inches in diameter, which completely penetrated the wall. On bending forward, Rénine perceived that this deep and narrow opening inevitably carried the eye, above the dense tops of the trees and through the depression in the hill, to the ivy-clad tower.

At the bottom of this channel, in a sort of groove which ran through it like a gutter, the telescope fitted so exactly that it was quite impossible to shift it, however little, either to the right or to the left.

Rénine, after wiping the outside of the lenses, while taking care not to disturb the lie of the instrument by a hair's breadth, put his eye to the small end.

He remained for thirty or forty seconds, gazing attentively and silently. Then he drew himself up and said, in a husky voice:

"It's terrible … it's really terrible."

"What is?" she asked, anxiously.

"Look."

She bent down but the image was not clear to her and the telescope had to be focussed to suit her sight. The next moment she shuddered and said:

"It's two scarecrows, isn't it, both stuck up on the top? But why?"

"Look again," he said. "Look more carefully under the hats … the faces...."

"Oh!" she cried, turning faint with horror, "how awful!"

The field of the telescope, like the circular picture shown by a magic lantern, presented this spectacle: the platform of a broken tower, the walls of which were higher in the more distant part and formed as it were a back-drop, over which surged waves of ivy. In front, amid a cluster of bushes, were two human beings, a man and a woman, leaning back against a heap of fallen stones.

But the words man and woman could hardly be applied to these two forms, these two sinister puppets, which, it is true, wore clothes and hats–or rather shreds of clothes and remnants of hats–but had lost their eyes, their cheeks, their chins, every particle of flesh, until they were actually and positively nothing more than two skeletons.

"Two skeletons," stammered Hortense. "Two skeletons with clothes on. Who carried them up there?"

"Nobody."

"But still...."

"That man and that woman must have died at the top of the tower, years and years ago … and their flesh rotted under their clothes and the ravens ate them."

"But it's hideous, hideous!" cried Hortense, pale as death, her face drawn with horror.

Half an hour later, Hortense Daniel and Rénine left the Château de Halingre. Before their departure, they had gone as far as the ivy-grown tower, the remains of an old donjon-keep more than

half demolished. The inside was empty. There seemed to have been a way of climbing to the top, at a comparatively recent period, by means of wooden stairs and ladders which now lay broken and scattered over the ground. The tower backed against the wall which marked the end of the park.

A curious fact, which surprised Hortense, was that Prince Rénine had neglected to pursue a more minute enquiry, as though the matter had lost all interest for him. He did not even speak of it any longer; and, in the inn at which they stopped and took a light meal in the nearest village, it was she who asked the landlord about the abandoned château. But she learnt nothing from him, for the man was new to the district and could give her no particulars. He did not even know the name of the owner.

They turned their horses' heads towards La Marèze. Again and again Hortense recalled the squalid sight which had met their eyes. But Rénine, who was in a lively mood and full of attentions to his companion, seemed utterly indifferent to those questions.

"But, after all," she exclaimed, impatiently, "we can't leave the matter there! It calls for a solution."

"As you say," he replied, "a solution is called for. M. Rossigny has to know where he stands and you have to decide what to do about him."

She shrugged her shoulders: "He's of no importance for the moment. The thing to-day...."

"Is what?"

"Is to know what those two dead bodies are."

"Still, Rossigny...."

"Rossigny can wait. But I can't. You have shown me a mystery which is now the only thing that matters. What do you intend to do?"

"To do?"

"Yes. There are two bodies.... You'll inform the police, I suppose."

"Gracious goodness!" he exclaimed, laughing. "What for?"

"Well, there's a riddle that has to be cleared up at all costs, a terrible tragedy."

"We don't need any one to do that."

"What! Do you mean to say that you understand it?"

"Almost as plainly as though I had read it in a book, told in full detail, with explanatory illustrations. It's all so simple!"

She looked at him askance, wondering if he was making fun of her. But he seemed quite serious.

"Well?" she asked, quivering with curiosity.

The light was beginning to wane. They had trotted at a good pace; and the hunt was returning as they neared La Marèze.

"Well," he said, "we shall get the rest of our information from people living round about … from your uncle, for instance; and you will see how logically all the facts fit in. When you hold the first link of a chain, you are bound, whether you like it or not, to reach the last. It's the greatest fun in the world."

Once in the house, they separated. On going to her room, Hortense found her luggage and a furious letter from Rossigny in which he bade her good-bye and announced his departure.

Then Rénine knocked at her door:

"Your uncle is in the library," he said. "Will you go down with me? I've sent word that I am coming."

She went with him. He added:

"One word more. This morning, when I thwarted your plans and begged you to trust me, I naturally undertook an obligation towards you which I mean to fulfill without delay. I want to give you a positive proof of this."

She laughed:

"The only obligation which you took upon yourself was to satisfy my curiosity."

"It shall be satisfied," he assured her, gravely, "and more fully than you can possibly imagine."

M. d'Aigleroche was alone. He was smoking his pipe and drinking sherry. He offered a glass to Rénine, who refused.

"Well, Hortense!" he said, in a rather thick voice. "You know that it's pretty dull here, except in these September days. You must make the most of them. Have you had a pleasant ride with Rénine?"

"That's just what I wanted to talk about, my dear sir," interrupted the prince.

"You must excuse me, but I have to go to the station in ten minutes, to meet a friend of my wife's."

"Oh, ten minutes will be ample!"

"Just the time to smoke a cigarette?"

"No longer."

He took a cigarette from the case which M. d'Aigleroche handed to him, lit it and said:

"I must tell you that our ride happened to take us to an old domain which you are sure to know, the Domaine de Halingre."

"Certainly I know it. But it has been closed, boarded up for twenty-five years or so. You weren't able to get in, I suppose?"

"Yes, we were."

"Really? Was it interesting?"

"Extremely. We discovered the strangest things."

"What things?" asked the count, looking at his watch.

Rénine described what they had seen:

"On a tower some way from the house there were two dead bodies, two skeletons rather … a man and a woman still wearing the clothes which they had on when they were murdered."

"Come, come, now! Murdered?"

"Yes; and that is what we have come to trouble you about. The tragedy must date back to some twenty years ago. Was nothing known of it at the time?"

"Certainly not," declared the count. "I never heard of any such crime or disappearance."

"Oh, really!" said Rénine, looking a little disappointed. "I hoped to obtain a few particulars."

"I'm sorry."

"In that case, I apologise."

He consulted Hortense with a glance and moved towards the door. But on second thought:

"Could you not at least, my dear sir, bring me into touch with some persons in the neighbourhood, some members of your family, who might know more about it?"

"Of my family? And why?"

"Because the Domaine de Halingre used to belong and no doubt still belongs to the d'Aigleroches. The arms are an eagle on a heap of stones, on a rock. This at once suggested the connection."

This time the count appeared surprised. He pushed back his decanter and his glass of sherry and said:

"What's this you're telling me? I had no idea that we had any such neighbours."

Rénine shook his head and smiled:

"I should be more inclined to believe, sir, that you were not very eager to admit any relationship between yourself … and the unknown owner of the property."

"Then he's not a respectable man?"

"The man, to put it plainly, is a murderer."

"What do you mean?"

The count had risen from his chair. Hortense, greatly excited, said:

"Are you really sure that there has been a murder and that the murder was done by some one belonging to the house?"

"Quite sure."

"But why are you so certain?"

"Because I know who the two victims were and what caused them to be killed."

Prince Rénine was making none but positive statements and his method suggested the belief that he supported by the strongest proofs.

M. d'Aigleroche strode up and down the room, with his hands behind his back. He ended by saying:

"I always had an instinctive feeling that something had happened, but I never tried to find out.... Now, as a matter of fact, twenty years ago, a relation of mine, a distant cousin, used to live at the Domaine de Halingre. I hoped, because of the name I bear, that this story, which, as I say, I never knew but suspected, would remain hidden for ever."

"So this cousin killed somebody?"

"Yes, he was obliged to."

Rénine shook his head:

"I am sorry to have to amend that phrase, my dear sir. The truth, on the contrary, is that your cousin took his victims' lives in cold blood and in a cowardly manner. I never heard of a crime more deliberately and craftily planned."

"What is it that you know?"

The moment had come for Rénine to explain himself, a solemn and anguish-stricken moment, the full gravity of which Hortense understood, though she had not yet divined any part of the tragedy which the prince unfolded step by step."

"It's a very simple story," he said. "There is every reason to believe that M. d'Aigleroche was married and that there was another couple living in the neighbourhood with whom the owner of the Domaine de Halingre were on friendly terms. What happened one day, which of these four persons first disturbed the relations between the two households, I am unable to say. But a likely version, which at once occurs to the mind, is that your cousin's wife, Madame d'Aigleroche, was in the habit of meeting the other husband in the ivy-covered tower, which had a door opening outside the estate. On discovering the intrigue, your cousin d'Aigleroche resolved to be revenged, but in such a manner that there should be no scandal and that no one even should ever know that the guilty pair had been killed. Now he had ascertained–as I did just now–that there was a part of the house, the belvedere, from which you can see, over the trees and the undulations of the park, the tower standing eight hundred yards away, and that this was the only place that overlooked the top of the tower. He therefore pierced a hole in the parapet, through one of the former loopholes, and from there, by using a telescope which fitted exactly in the grove which he had hollowed out, he watched the meetings of the two lovers. And it was from there, also, that, after carefully taking all his measurements, and calculating all his distances, on a Sunday, the 5th of September, when the house was empty, he killed them with two shots."

The truth was becoming apparent. The light of day was breaking. The count muttered:

"Yes, that's what must have happened. I expect that my cousin d'Aigleroche...."

"The murderer," Rénine continued, "stopped up the loophole neatly with a clod of earth. No one would ever know that two dead bodies were decaying on the top of that tower which was never visited and of which he took the precaution to demolish the wooden stairs. Nothing therefore remained for him to do but to explain the disappearance of his wife and his friend. This presented no difficulty. He accused them of having eloped together."

Hortense gave a start. Suddenly, as though the last sentence were a complete and to her an absolutely unexpected revelation, she understood what Rénine was trying to convey:

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that M. d'Aigleroche accused his wife and his friend of eloping together."

"No, no!" she cried. "I can't allow that!… You are speaking of a cousin of my uncle's? Why mix up the two stories?"

"Why mix up this story with another which took place at that time?" said the prince. "But I am not mixing them up, my dear madame; there is only one story and I am telling it as it happened."

Hortense turned to her uncle. He sat silent, with his arms folded; and his head remained in the shadow cast by the lamp-shade. Why had he not protested?

Rénine repeated in a firm tone:

"There is only one story. On the evening of that very day, the 5th of September at eight o'clock, M. d'Aigleroche, doubtless alleging as his reason that he was going in pursuit of the runaway couple, left his house after boarding up the entrance. He went away, leaving all the rooms as they were and removing only the firearms from their glass case. At the last minute, he had a presentiment, which has been justified to-day, that the discovery of the telescope which had played so great a part in the preparation of his crime might serve as a clue to an enquiry; and he threw it into the clock-case, where, as luck would have it, it interrupted the swing of the pendulum. This unreflecting action, one of those which every criminal inevitably commits, was to betray him twenty years later. Just now, the blows which I struck to force the door of the drawing-room released the pendulum. The clock was set going, struck eight o'clock … and I possessed the clue of thread which was to lead me through the labyrinth."

"Proofs!" stammered Hortense. "Proofs!"

"Proofs?" replied Rénine, in a loud voice. "Why, there are any number of proofs; and you know them as well as I do. Who could have killed at that distance of eight hundred yards, except an expert shot, an ardent sportsman? You agree, M. d'Aigleroche, do you not?… Proofs? Why was nothing removed from the house, nothing except the guns, those guns which an ardent sportsman cannot afford to leave behind–you agree, M. d'Aigleroche–those guns which we find here, hanging in trophies on the walls!… Proofs? What about that date, the 5th of September, which was the date of the crime and which has left such a horrible memory in the criminal's mind that every year at this time–at this time alone–he surrounds himself with distractions and that every year, on this same 5th of September, he forgets his habits of temperance? Well, to-day, is the 5th of September.... Proofs? Why, if there weren't any others, would that not be enough for you?"

And Rénine, flinging out his arm, pointed to the Comte d'Aigleroche, who, terrified by this evocation of the past, had sunk huddled into a chair and was hiding his head in his hands.

Hortense did not attempt to argue with him. She had never liked her uncle, or rather her husband's uncle. She now accepted the accusation laid against him.

Sixty seconds passed. Then M. d'Aigleroche walked up to them and said:

"Whether the story be true or not, you can't call a husband a criminal for avenging his honour and killing his faithless wife."

"No," replied Rénine, "but I have told only the first version of the story. There is another which is infinitely more serious … and more probable, one to which a more thorough investigation would be sure to lead."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. It may not be a matter of a husband taking the law into his own hands, as I charitably supposed. It may be a matter of a ruined man who covets his friend's money and his friend's wife and who, with this object in view, to secure his freedom, to get rid of his friend and of his own wife, draws them into a trap, suggests to them that they should visit that lonely tower and kills them by shooting them from a distance safely under cover."

"No, no," the count protested. "No, all that is untrue."

"I don't say it isn't. I am basing my accusation on proofs, but also on intuitions and arguments which up to now have been extremely accurate. All the same, I admit that the second version may be incorrect. But, if so, why feel any remorse? One does not feel remorse for punishing guilty people."

"One does for taking life. It is a crushing burden to bear."

"Was it to give himself greater strength to bear this burden that M. d'Aigleroche afterwards married his victim's widow? For that, sir, is the crux of the question. What was the motive of that marriage? Was M. d'Aigleroche penniless? Was the woman he was taking as his second wife rich? Or were they both in love with each other and did M. d'Aigleroche plan with her to kill his first wife and the husband of his second wife? These are problems to which I do not know the answer. They have no interest for the moment; but the police, with all the means at their disposal, would have no great difficulty in elucidating them."

M. d'Aigleroche staggered and had to steady himself against the back of a chair. Livid in the face, he spluttered:

"Are you going to inform the police?"

"No, no," said Rénine. "To begin with, there is the statute of limitations. Then there are twenty years of remorse and dread, a memory which will pursue the criminal to his dying hour, accompanied no doubt by domestic discord, hatred, a daily hell … and, in the end, the necessity of returning to the tower and removing the traces of the two murders, the frightful punishment of climbing that tower, of touching those skeletons, of undressing them and burying them. That will be enough. We will not ask for more. We will not give it to the public to batten on and create a scandal which would recoil upon M. d'Aigleroche's niece. No, let us leave this disgraceful business alone."

The count resumed his seat at the table, with his hands clutching his forehead, and asked:

"Then why …?"

"Why do I interfere?" said Rénine. "What you mean is that I must have had some object in speaking. That is so. There must indeed be a penalty, however slight, and our interview must lead to some practical result. But have no fear: M. d'Aigleroche will be let off lightly."

The contest was ended. The count felt that he had only a small formality to fulfil, a sacrifice to accept; and, recovering some of his self-assurance, he said, in an almost sarcastic tone:

"What's your price?"

Rénine burst out laughing:

"Splendid! You see the position. Only, you make a mistake in drawing me into the business. I'm working for the glory of the thing."

"In that case?"

"You will be called upon at most to make restitution."

"Restitution?"

Rénine leant over the table and said:

"In one of those drawers is a deed awaiting your signature. It is a draft agreement between you and your niece Hortense Daniel, relating to her private fortune, which fortune was squandered and for which you are responsible. Sign the deed."

M. d'Aigleroche gave a start:

"Do you know the amount?"

"I don't wish to know it."

"And if I refuse?…"

"I shall ask to see the Comtesse d'Aigleroche."

Without further hesitation, the count opened a drawer, produced a document on stamped paper and quickly signed it:

"Here you are," he said, "and I hope...."

"You hope, as I do, that you and I may never have any future dealings? I'm convinced of it. I shall leave this evening; your niece, no doubt, tomorrow. Good-bye."

In the drawing-room, which was still empty, while the guests at the house were dressing for dinner, Rénine handed the deed to Hortense. She seemed dazed by all that she had heard; and the thing that bewildered her even more than the relentless light shed upon her uncle's past was the miraculous

insight and amazing lucidity displayed by this man: the man who for some hours had controlled events and conjured up before her eyes the actual scenes of a tragedy which no one had beheld.

"Are you satisfied with me?" he asked.

She gave him both her hands:

"You have saved me from Rossigny. You have given me back my freedom and my independence. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Oh, that's not what I am asking you to say!" he answered. "My first and main object was to amuse you. Your life seemed so humdrum and lacking in the unexpected. Has it been so to-day?"

"How can you ask such a question? I have had the strangest and most stirring experiences."

"That is life," he said. "When one knows how to use one's eyes. Adventure exists everywhere, in the meanest hovel, under the mask of the wisest of men. Everywhere, if you are only willing, you will find an excuse for excitement, for doing good, for saving a victim, for ending an injustice."

Impressed by his power and authority, she murmured:

"Who are you exactly?"

"An adventurer. Nothing more. A lover of adventures. Life is not worth living except in moments of adventure, the adventures of others or personal adventures. To-day's has upset you because it affected the innermost depths of your being. But those of others are no less stimulating. Would you like to make the experiment?"

"How?"

"Become the companion of my adventures. If any one calls on me for help, help him with me. If chance or instinct puts me on the track of a crime or the trace of a sorrow, let us both set out together. Do you consent?"

"Yes," she said, "but...."

She hesitated, as though trying to guess Rénine's secret intentions.

"But," he said, expressing her thoughts for her, with a smile, "you are a trifle sceptical. What you are saying to yourself is, 'How far does that lover of adventures want to make me go? It is quite obvious that I attract him; and sooner or later he would not be sorry to receive payment for his services.' You are quite right. We must have a formal contract."

"Very formal," said Hortense, preferring to give a jesting tone to the conversation. "Let me hear your proposals."

He reflected for a moment and continued:

"Well, we'll say this. The clock at Halingre gave eight strokes this afternoon, the day of the first adventure. Will you accept its decree and agree to carry out seven more of these delightful enterprises with me, during a period, for instance, of three months? And shall we say that, at the eighth, you will be pledged to grant me...."

"What?"

He deferred his answer:

"Observe that you will always be at liberty to leave me on the road if I do not succeed in interesting you. But, if you accompany me to the end, if you allow me to begin and complete the eighth enterprise with you, in three months, on the 5th of December, at the very moment when the eighth stroke of that clock sounds–and it will sound, you may be sure of that, for the old brass pendulum will not stop swinging again–you will be pledged to grant me...."

"What?" she repeated, a little unnerved by waiting.

He was silent. He looked at the beautiful lips which he had meant to claim as his reward. He felt perfectly certain that Hortense had understood and he thought it unnecessary to speak more plainly:

"The mere delight of seeing you will be enough to satisfy me. It is not for me but for you to impose conditions. Name them: what do you demand?"

She was grateful for his respect and said, laughingly:

"What do I demand?"

"Yes."

"Can I demand anything I like, however difficult and impossible?"

"Everything is easy and everything is possible to the man who is bent on winning you."

Then she said:

"I demand that you shall restore to me a small, antique clasp, made of a cornelian set in a silver mount. It came to me from my mother and everyone knew that it used to bring her happiness and me too. Since the day when it vanished from my jewel-case, I have had nothing but unhappiness. Restore it to me, my good genius."

"When was the clasp stolen?"

She answered gaily:

"Seven years ago … or eight … or nine; I don't know exactly … I don't know where … I don't know how … I know nothing about it...."

"I will find it," Rénine declared, "and you shall be happy."

II
THE WATER-BOTTLE

Four days after she had settled down in Paris, Hortense Daniel agreed to meet Prince Rénine in the Bois. It was a glorious morning and they sat down on the terrace of the Restaurant Impérial, a little to one side.

Hortense, feeling glad to be alive, was in a playful mood, full of attractive grace. Rénine, lest he should startle her, refrained from alluding to the compact into which they had entered at his suggestion. She told him how she had left La Marèze and said that she had not heard of Rossigny.

"I have," said Rénine. "I've heard of him."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he sent me a challenge. We fought a duel this morning. Rossigny got a scratch in the shoulder. That finished the duel. Let's talk of something else."

There was no further mention of Rossigny. Rénine at once expounded to Hortense the plan of two enterprises which he had in view and in which he offered, with no great enthusiasm, to let her share:

"The finest adventure," he declared, "is that which we do not foresee. It comes unexpectedly, unannounced; and no one, save the initiated, realizes that an opportunity to act and to expend one's energies is close at hand. It has to be seized at once. A moment's hesitation may mean that we are too late. We are warned by a special sense, like that of a sleuth-hound which distinguishes the right scent from all the others that cross it."

The terrace was beginning to fill up around them. At the next table sat a young man reading a newspaper. They were able to see his insignificant profile and his long, dark moustache. From behind them, through an open window of the restaurant, came the distant strains of a band; in one of the rooms a few couples were dancing.

As Rénine was paying for the refreshments, the young man with the long moustache stifled a cry and, in a choking voice, called one of the waiters:

"What do I owe you?… No change? Oh, good Lord, hurry up!"

Rénine, without a moment's hesitation, had picked up the paper. After casting a swift glance down the page, he read, under his breath:

> "Maître Dourdens, the counsel for the defence in the trial of Jacques Aubrieux, has been received at the Élysée. We are informed that the President of the Republic has refused to reprieve the condemned man and that the execution will take place to-morrow morning."

After crossing the terrace, the young man found himself faced, at the entrance to the garden, by a lady and gentleman who blocked his way; and the latter said:

"Excuse me, sir, but I noticed your agitation. It's about Jacques Aubrieux, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, Jacques Aubrieux," the young man stammered. "Jacques, the friend of my childhood. I'm hurrying to see his wife. She must be beside herself with grief."

"Can I offer you my assistance? I am Prince Rénine. This lady and I would be happy to call on Madame Aubrieux and to place our services at her disposal."

The young man, upset by the news which he had read, seemed not to understand. He introduced himself awkwardly:

"My name is Dutreuil, Gaston Dutreuil."

Rénine beckoned to his chauffeur, who was waiting at some little distance, and pushed Gaston Dutreuil into the car, asking:

"What address? Where does Madame Aubrieux live?"

"23 *bis*, Avenue du Roule."

After helping Hortense in, Rénine repeated the address to the chauffeur and, as soon as they drove off, tried to question Gaston Dutreuil:

"I know very little of the case," he said. "Tell it to me as briefly as you can. Jacques Aubrieux killed one of his near relations, didn't he?"

"He is innocent, sir," replied the young man, who seemed incapable of giving the least explanation. "Innocent, I swear it. I've been Jacques' friend for twenty years … He is innocent … and it would be monstrous...."

There was nothing to be got out of him. Besides, it was only a short drive. They entered Neuilly through the Porte des Sablons and, two minutes later, stopped before a long, narrow passage between high walls which led them to a small, one-storeyed house.

Gaston Dutreuil rang.

"Madame is in the drawing-room, with her mother," said the maid who opened the door.

"I'll go in to the ladies," he said, taking Rénine and Hortense with him.

It was a fair-sized, prettily-furnished room, which, in ordinary times, must have been used also as a study. Two women sat weeping, one of whom, elderly and grey-haired, came up to Gaston Dutreuil. He explained the reason for Rénine's presence and she at once cried, amid her sobs:

"My daughter's husband is innocent, sir. Jacques? A better man never lived. He was so good-hearted! Murder his cousin? But he worshipped his cousin! I swear that he's not guilty, sir! And they are going to commit the infamy of putting him to death? Oh, sir, it will kill my daughter!"

Rénine realized that all these people had been living for months under the obsession of that innocence and in the certainty that an innocent man could never be executed. The news of the execution, which was now inevitable, was driving them mad.

He went up to a poor creature bent in two whose face, a quite young face, framed in pretty, flaxen hair, was convulsed with desperate grief. Hortense, who had already taken a seat beside her, gently drew her head against her shoulder. Rénine said to her:

"Madame, I do not know what I can do for you. But I give you my word of honour that, if any one in this world can be of use to you, it is myself. I therefore implore you to answer my questions as though the clear and definite wording of your replies were able to alter the aspect of things and as though you wished to make me share your opinion of Jacques Aubrieux. For he is innocent, is he not?"

"Oh, sir, indeed he is!" she exclaimed; and the woman's whole soul was in the words.

"You are certain of it. But you were unable to communicate your certainty to the court. Well, you must now compel me to share it. I am not asking you to go into details and to live again through the hideous torment which you have suffered, but merely to answer certain questions. Will you do this?"

"I will."

Rénine's influence over her was complete. With a few sentences Rénine had succeeded in subduing her and inspiring her with the will to obey. And once more Hortense realized all the man's power, authority and persuasion.

"What was your husband?" he asked, after begging the mother and Gaston Dutreuil to preserve absolute silence.

"An insurance-broker."

"Lucky in business?"

"Until last year, yes."

"So there have been financial difficulties during the past few months?"

"Yes."

"And the murder was committed when?"

"Last March, on a Sunday."

"Who was the victim?"

"A distant cousin, M. Guillaume, who lived at Suresnes."

"What was the sum stolen?"

"Sixty thousand-franc notes, which this cousin had received the day before, in payment of a long-outstanding debt."

"Did your husband know that?"

"Yes. His cousin told him of it on the Sunday, in the course of a conversation on the telephone, and Jacques insisted that his cousin ought not to keep so large a sum in the house and that he ought to pay it into a bank next day."

"Was this in the morning?"

"At one o'clock in the afternoon. Jacques was to have gone to M. Guillaume on his motor-cycle. But he felt tired and told him that he would not go out. So he remained here all day."

"Alone?"

"Yes. The two servants were out. I went to the Cinéma des Ternes with my mother and our friend Dutreuil. In the evening, we learnt that M. Guillaume had been murdered. Next morning, Jacques was arrested."

"On what evidence?"

The poor creature hesitated to reply: the evidence of guilt had evidently been overwhelming. Then, obeying a sign from Rénine, she answered without a pause:

"The murderer went to Suresnes on a motorcycle and the tracks discovered were those of my husband's machine. They found a handkerchief with my husband's initials; and the revolver which was used belonged to him. Lastly, one of our neighbours maintains that he saw my husband go out on his bicycle at three o'clock and another that he saw him come in at half-past four. The murder was committed at four o'clock."

"And what does Jacques Aubrieux say in his defence?"

"He declares that he slept all the afternoon. During that time, some one came who managed to unlock the cycle-shed and take the motor-cycle to go to Suresnes. As for the handkerchief and the revolver, they were in the tool-bag. There would be nothing surprising in the murderer's using them."

"It seems a plausible explanation."

"Yes, but the prosecution raised two objections. In the first place, nobody, absolutely nobody, knew that my husband was going to stay at home all day, because, on the contrary, it was his habit to go out on his motor-cycle every Sunday afternoon."

"And the second objection?"

She flushed and murmured:

"The murderer went to the pantry at M. Guillaume's and drank half a bottle of wine straight out of the bottle, which shows my husband's fingerprints."

It seemed as though her strength was exhausted and as though, at the same time, the unconscious hope which Rénine's intervention had awakened in her had suddenly vanished before the accumulation of adverse facts. Again she collapsed, withdrawn into a sort of silent meditation from which Hortense's affectionate attentions were unable to distract her.

The mother stammered:

"He's not guilty, is he, sir? And they can't punish an innocent man. They haven't the right to kill my daughter. Oh dear, oh dear, what have we done to be tortured like this? My poor little Madeleine!"

"She will kill herself," said Dutreuil, in a scared voice. "She will never be able to endure the idea that they are guillotining Jacques. She will kill herself presently … this very night...."

Rénine was striding up and down the room.

"You can do nothing for her, can you?" asked Hortense.

"It's half-past eleven now," he replied, in an anxious tone, "and it's to happen to-morrow morning."

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"I don't know.... I don't know.... The poor woman's conviction is too impressive to be neglected. When two people have lived together for years, they can hardly be mistaken about each other to that degree. And yet...."

He stretched himself out on a sofa and lit a cigarette. He smoked three in succession, without a word from any one to interrupt his train of thought. From time to time he looked at his watch. Every minute was of such importance!

At last he went back to Madeleine Aubrieux, took her hands and said, very gently:

"You must not kill yourself. There is hope left until the last minute has come; and I promise you that, for my part, I will not be disheartened until that last minute. But I need your calmness and your confidence."

"I will be calm," she said, with a pitiable air.

"And confident?"

"And confident." "Well, wait for me. I shall be back in two hours from now. Will you come with us, M. Dutreuil?"

As they were stepping into his car, he asked the young man:

"Do you know any small, unfrequented restaurant, not too far inside Paris?"

"There's the Brasserie Lutetia, on the ground-floor of the house in which I live, on the Place des Ternes."

"Capital. That will be very handy."

They scarcely spoke on the way. Rénine, however, said to Gaston Dutreuil:

"So far as I remember, the numbers of the notes are known, aren't they?"

"Yes. M. Guillaume had entered the sixty numbers in his pocket-book."

Rénine muttered, a moment later:

"That's where the whole problem lies. Where are the notes? If we could lay our hands on them, we should know everything."

At the Brasserie Lutetia there was a telephone in the private room where he asked to have lunch served. When the waiter had left him alone with Hortense and Dutreuil, he took down the receiver with a resolute air:

"Hullo!… Prefecture of police, please.... Hullo! Hullo!… Is that the Prefecture of police? Please put me on to the criminal investigation department. I have a very important communication to make. You can say it's Prince Rénine."

Holding the receiver in his hand, he turned to Gaston Dutreuil:

"I can ask some one to come here, I suppose? We shall be quite undisturbed?"

"Quite."

He listened again:

"The secretary to the head of the criminal investigation department? Oh, excellent! Mr. Secretary, I have on several occasions been in communication with M. Dudouis and have given him information which has been of great use to him. He is sure to remember Prince Rénine. I may be able to-day to show him where the sixty thousand-franc notes are hidden which Aubrieux the murderer stole from his cousin. If he's interested in the proposal, beg him to send an inspector to the Brasserie Lutetia, Place des Ternes. I shall be there with a lady and M. Dutreuil, Aubrieux's friend. Good day, Mr. Secretary."

When Rénine hung up the instrument, he saw the amazed faces of Hortense and of Gaston Dutreuil confronting him.

Hortense whispered:

"Then you know? You've discovered …?"

"Nothing," he said, laughing.

"Well?"

"Well, I'm acting as though I knew. It's not a bad method. Let's have some lunch, shall we?"

The clock marked a quarter to one.

"The man from the prefecture will be here," he said, "in twenty minutes at latest."

"And if no one comes?" Hortense objected.

"That would surprise me. Of course, if I had sent a message to M. Dudouis saying, 'Aubrieux is innocent,' I should have failed to make any impression. It's not the least use, on the eve of an execution, to attempt to convince the gentry of the police or of the law that a man condemned to death is innocent. No. From henceforth Jacques Aubrieux belongs to the executioner. But the prospect of securing the sixty bank-notes is a windfall worth taking a little trouble over. Just think: that was the weak point in the indictment, those sixty notes which they were unable to trace."

"But, as you know nothing of their whereabouts...."

"My dear girl–I hope you don't mind my calling you so?–my dear girl, when a man can't explain this or that physical phenomenon, he adopts some sort of theory which explains the various manifestations of the phenomenon and says that everything happened as though the theory were correct. That's what I am doing."

"That amounts to saying that you are going upon a supposition?"

Rénine did not reply. Not until some time later, when lunch was over, did he say:

"Obviously I am going upon a supposition. If I had several days before me, I should take the trouble of first verifying my theory, which is based upon intuition quite as much as upon a few scattered facts. But I have only two hours; and I am embarking on the unknown path as though I were certain that it would lead me to the truth."

"And suppose you are wrong?"

"I have no choice. Besides, it is too late. There's a knock. Oh, one word more! Whatever I may say, don't contradict me. Nor you, M. Dutreuil."

He opened the door. A thin man, with a red imperial, entered:

"Prince Rénine?"

"Yes, sir. You, of course, are from M. Dudouis?"

"Yes."

And the newcomer gave his name: "Chief-inspector Morisseau."

"I am obliged to you for coming so promptly, Mr. Chief-inspector," said Prince Rénine, "and I hope that M. Dudouis will not regret having placed you at my disposal."

"At your entire disposal, in addition to two inspectors whom I have left in the square outside and who have been in the case, with me, from the first."

"I shall not detain you for any length of time," said Rénine, "and I will not even ask you to sit down. We have only a few minutes in which to settle everything. You know what it's all about?"

"The sixty thousand-franc notes stolen from M. Guillaume. I have the numbers here."

Rénine ran his eyes down the slip of paper which the chief-inspector handed him and said:

"That's right. The two lists agree."

Inspector Morisseau seemed greatly excited:

"The chief attaches the greatest importance to your discovery. So you will be able to show me?…"

Rénine was silent for a moment and then declared:

"Mr. Chief-inspector, a personal investigation–and a most exhaustive investigation it was, as I will explain to you presently–has revealed the fact that, on his return from Suresnes, the murderer, after replacing the motor-cycle in the shed in the Avenue du Roule, ran to the Ternes and entered this house."

"This house?"

"Yes."

"But what did he come here for?"

"To hide the proceeds of his theft, the sixty bank-notes."

"How do you mean? Where?"

"In a flat of which he had the key, on the fifth floor."

Gaston Dutreuil exclaimed, in amazement:

"But there's only one flat on the fifth floor and that's the one I live in!"

"Exactly; and, as you were at the cinema with Madame Aubrieux and her mother, advantage was taken of your absence...."

"Impossible! No one has the key except myself."

"One can get in without a key."

"But I have seen no marks of any kind."

Morisseau intervened:

"Come, let us understand one another. You say the bank-notes were hidden in M. Dutreuil's flat?"

"Yes."

"Then, as Jacques Aubrieux was arrested the next morning, the notes ought to be there still?"

"That's my opinion."

Gaston Dutreuil could not help laughing:

"But that's absurd! I should have found them!"

"Did you look for them?"

"No. But I should have come across them at any moment. The place isn't big enough to swing a cat in. Would you care to see it?"

"However small it may be, it's large enough to hold sixty bits of paper."

"Of course, everything is possible," said Dutreuil. "Still, I must repeat that nobody, to my knowledge, has been to my rooms; that there is only one key; that I am my own housekeeper; and that I can't quite understand...."

Hortense too could not understand. With her eyes fixed on Prince Rénine's, she was trying to read his innermost thoughts. What game was he playing? Was it her duty to support his statements? She ended by saying:

"Mr. Chief-inspector, since Prince Rénine maintains that the notes have been put away upstairs, wouldn't the simplest thing be to go and look? M. Dutreuil will take us up, won't you?"

"This minute," said the young man. "As you say, that will be simplest."

They all four climbed the five storys of the house and, after Dutreuil had opened the door, entered a tiny set of chambers consisting of a sitting-room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, all arranged with fastidious neatness. It was easy to see that every chair in the sitting-room occupied a definite place. The pipes had a rack to themselves; so had the matches. Three walking-sticks, arranged according to their length, hung from three nails. On a little table before the window a hat-box, filled with tissue-paper, awaited the felt hat which Dutreuil carefully placed in it. He laid his gloves beside it, on the lid.

He did all this with sedate and mechanical movements, like a man who loves to see things in the places which he has chosen for them. Indeed, no sooner did Rénine shift something than Dutreuil made a slight gesture of protest, took out his hat again, stuck it on his head, opened the window and rested his elbows on the sill, with his back turned to the room, as though he were unable to bear the sight of such vandalism.

"You're positive, are you not?" the inspector asked Rénine.

"Yes, yes, I'm positive that the sixty notes were brought here after the murder."

"Let's look for them."

This was easy and soon done. In half an hour, not a corner remained unexplored, not a knick-knack unlifted.

"Nothing," said Inspector Morisseau. "Shall we continue?"

"No," replied Rénine, "The notes are no longer here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they have been removed."

"By whom? Can't you make a more definite accusation?"

Rénine did not reply. But Gaston Dutreuil wheeled round. He was choking and spluttered: "Mr. Inspector, would you like *me* to make the accusation more definite, as conveyed by this gentleman's remarks? It all means that there's a dishonest man here, that the notes hidden by the murderer were discovered and stolen by that dishonest man and deposited in another and safer place. That is your idea, sir, is it not? And you accuse me of committing this theft don't you?"

He came forward, drumming his chest with his fists: "Me! Me! I found the notes, did I, and kept them for myself? You dare to suggest that!"

Rénine still made no reply. Dutreuil flew into a rage and, taking Inspector Morisseau aside, exclaimed:

"Mr. Inspector, I strongly protest against all this farce and against the part which you are unconsciously playing in it. Before your arrival, Prince Rénine told this lady and myself that he knew nothing, that he was venturing into this affair at random and that he was following the first road that offered, trusting to luck. Do you deny it, sir?"

Rénine did not open his lips.

"Answer me, will you? Explain yourself; for, really, you are putting forward the most improbable facts without any proof whatever. It's easy enough to say that I stole the notes. And how were you to know that they were here at all? Who brought them here? Why should the murderer choose this flat to hide them in? It's all so stupid, so illogical and absurd!… Give us your proofs, sir … one single proof!"

Inspector Morisseau seemed perplexed. He questioned Rénine with a glance. Rénine said:

"Since you want specific details, we will get them from Madame Aubrieux herself. She's on the telephone. Let's go downstairs. We shall know all about it in a minute."

Dutreuil shrugged his shoulders:

"As you please; but what a waste of time!"

He seemed greatly irritated. His long wait at the window, under a blazing sun, had thrown him into a sweat. He went to his bedroom and returned with a bottle of water, of which he took a few sips, afterwards placing the bottle on the window-sill:

"Come along," he said.

Prince Rénine chuckled.

"You seem to be in a hurry to leave the place."

"I'm in a hurry to show you up," retorted Dutreuil, slamming the door.

They went downstairs to the private room containing the telephone. The room was empty. Rénine asked Gaston Dutreuil for the Aubrieuxs' number, took down the instrument and was put through.

The maid who came to the telephone answered that Madame Aubrieux had fainted, after giving way to an access of despair, and that she was now asleep.

"Fetch her mother, please. Prince Rénine speaking. It's urgent."

He handed the second receiver to Morisseau. For that matter, the voices were so distinct that Dutreuil and Hortense were able to hear every word exchanged.

"Is that you, madame?"

"Yes. Prince Rénine, I believe?"

"Prince Rénine."

"Oh, sir, what news have you for me? Is there any hope?" asked the old lady, in a tone of entreaty.

"The enquiry is proceeding very satisfactorily," said Rénine, "and you may hope for the best. For the moment, I want you to give me some very important particulars. On the day of the murder, did Gaston Dutreuil come to your house?"

"Yes, he came to fetch my daughter and myself, after lunch."

"Did he know at the time that M. Guillaume had sixty thousand francs at his place?"

"Yes, I told him."

"And that Jacques Aubrieux was not feeling very well and was proposing not to take his usual cycle-ride but to stay at home and sleep?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely certain."

"And you all three went to the cinema together?"

"Yes."

"And you were all sitting together?"

"Oh, no! There was no room. He took a seat farther away."

"A seat where you could see him?"

"No."

"But he came to you during the interval?"

"No, we did not see him until we were going out."

"There is no doubt of that?"

"None at all."

"Very well, madame. I will tell you the result of my efforts in an hour's time. But above all, don't wake up Madame Aubrieux."

"And suppose she wakes of her own accord?"

"Reassure her and give her confidence. Everything is going well, very well indeed."

He hung up the receiver and turned to Dutreuil, laughing:

"Ha, ha, my boy! Things are beginning to look clearer. What do you say?"

It was difficult to tell what these words meant or what conclusions Rénine had drawn from his conversation. The silence was painful and oppressive.

"Mr. Chief-Inspector, you have some of your men outside, haven't you?"

"Two detective-sergeants."

"It's important that they should be there. Please also ask the manager not to disturb us on any account."

And, when Morisseau returned, Rénine closed the door, took his stand in front of Dutreuil and, speaking in a good-humoured but emphatic tone, said:

"It amounts to this, young man, that the ladies saw nothing of you between three and five o'clock on that Sunday. That's rather a curious detail."

"A perfectly natural detail," Dutreuil retorted, "and one, moreover, which proves nothing at all."

"It proves, young man, that you had a good two hours at your disposal."

"Obviously. Two hours which I spent at the cinema."

"Or somewhere else."

Dutreuil looked at him:

"Somewhere else?"

"Yes. As you were free, you had plenty of time to go wherever you liked … to Suresnes, for instance."

"Oh!" said the young man, jesting in his turn. "Suresnes is a long way off!"

"It's quite close! Hadn't you your friend Jacques Aubrieux's motor-cycle?"

A fresh pause followed these words. Dutreuil had knitted his brows as though he were trying to understand. At last he was heard to whisper:

"So that is what he was trying to lead up to!… The brute!…"

Rénine brought down his hand on Dutreuil's shoulder:

"No more talk! Facts! Gaston Dutreuil, you are the only person who on that day knew two essential things: first, that Cousin Guillaume had sixty thousand francs in his house; secondly, that Jacques Aubrieux was not going out. You at once saw your chance. The motor-cycle was available. You slipped out during the performance. You went to Suresnes. You killed Cousin Guillaume. You took the sixty bank-notes and left them at your rooms. And at five o'clock you went back to fetch the ladies."

Dutreuil had listened with an expression at once mocking and flurried, casting an occasional glance at Inspector Morisseau as though to enlist him as a witness:

"The man's mad," it seemed to say. "It's no use being angry with him."

When Rénine had finished, he began to laugh:

"Very funny!… A capital joke!… So it was I whom the neighbours saw going and returning on the motor-cycle?"

"It was you disguised in Jacques Aubrieux's clothes."

"And it was my finger-prints that were found on the bottle in M. Guillaume's pantry?"

"The bottle had been opened by Jacques Aubrieux at lunch, in his own house, and it was you who took it with you to serve as evidence."

"Funnier and funnier!" cried Dutreuil, who had the air of being frankly amused. "Then I contrived the whole affair so that Jacques Aubrieux might be accused of the crime?"

"It was the safest means of not being accused yourself."

"Yes, but Jacques is a friend whom I have known from childhood."

"You're in love with his wife."

The young man gave a sudden, infuriated start:

"You dare!… What! You dare make such an infamous suggestion?"

"I have proof of it."

"That's a lie! I have always respected Madeleine Aubrieux and revered her...."

"Apparently. But you're in love with her. You desire her. Don't contradict me. I have abundant proof of it."

"That's a lie, I tell you! You have only known me a few hours!"

"Come, come! I've been quietly watching you for days, waiting for the moment to pounce upon you."

He took the young man by the shoulders and shook him:

"Come, Dutreuil, confess! I hold all the proofs in my hand. I have witnesses whom we shall meet presently at the criminal investigation department. Confess, can't you? In spite of everything, you're tortured by remorse. Remember your dismay, at the restaurant, when you had seen the newspaper. What? Jacques Aubrieux condemned to die? That's more than you bargained for! Penal servitude would have suited your book; but the scaffold!… Jacques Aubrieux executed to-morrow, an innocent man!… Confess, won't you? Confess to save your own skin! Own up!"

Bending over the other, he was trying with all his might to extort a confession from him. But Dutreuil drew himself up and coldly, with a sort of scorn in his voice, said:

"Sir, you are a madman. Not a word that you have said has any sense in it. All your accusations are false. What about the bank-notes? Did you find them at my place as you said you would?"

Rénine, exasperated, clenched his fist in his face:

"Oh, you swine, I'll dish you yet, I swear I will!"

He drew the inspector aside:

"Well, what do you say to it? An arrant rogue, isn't he?"

The inspector nodded his head:

"It may be.... But, all the same … so far there's no real evidence."

"Wait, M. Morisseau," said Rénine. "Wait until we've had our interview with M. Dudouis. For we shall see M. Dudouis at the prefecture, shall we not?"

"Yes, he'll be there at three o'clock."

"Well, you'll be convinced, Mr. Inspector! I tell you here and now that you will be convinced."

Rénine was chuckling like a man who feels certain of the course of events. Hortense, who was standing near him and was able to speak to him without being heard by the others, asked, in a low voice:

"You've got him, haven't you?"

He nodded his head in assent:

"Got him? I should think I have! All the same, I'm no farther forward than I was at the beginning."

"But this is awful! And your proofs?"

"Not the shadow of a proof … I was hoping to trip him up. But he's kept his feet, the rascal!"

"Still, you're certain it's he?"

"It can't be any one else. I had an intuition at the very outset; and I've not taken my eyes off him since. I have seen his anxiety increasing as my investigations seemed to centre on him and concern him more closely. Now I know."

"And he's in love with Madame Aubrieux?"

"In logic, he's bound to be. But so far we have only hypothetical suppositions, or rather certainties which are personal to myself. We shall never intercept the guillotine with those. Ah, if we could only find the bank-notes! Given the bank-notes, M. Dudouis would act. Without them, he will laugh in my face."

"What then?" murmured Hortense, in anguished accents.

He did not reply. He walked up and down the room, assuming an air of gaiety and rubbing his hands. All was going so well! It was really a treat to take up a case which, so to speak, worked itself out automatically.

"Suppose we went on to the prefecture, M. Morisseau? The chief must be there by now. And, having gone so far, we may as well finish. Will M. Dutreuil come with us?"

"Why not?" said Dutreuil, arrogantly.

But, just as Rénine was opening the door, there was a noise in the passage and the manager ran up, waving his arms:

"Is M. Dutreuil still here?… M. Dutreuil, your flat is on fire!… A man outside told us. He saw it from the square."

The young man's eyes lit up. For perhaps half a second his mouth was twisted by a smile which Rénine noticed:

"Oh, you ruffian!" he cried. "You've given yourself away, my beauty! It was you who set fire to the place upstairs; and now the notes are burning."

He blocked his exit.

"Let me pass," shouted Dutreuil. "There's a fire and no one can get in, because no one else has a key. Here it is. Let me pass, damn it!"

Rénine snatched the key from his hand and, holding him by the collar of his coat:

"Don't you move, my fine fellow! The game's up! You precious blackguard! M. Morisseau, will you give orders to the sergeant not to let him out of his sight and to blow out his brains if he tries to get away? Sergeant, we rely on you! Put a bullet into him, if necessary!…"

He hurried up the stairs, followed by Hortense and the chief inspector, who was protesting rather peevishly:

"But, I say, look here, it wasn't he who set the place on fire! How do you make out that he set it on fire, seeing that he never left us?"

"Why, he set it on fire beforehand, to be sure!"

"How? I ask you, how?"

"How do I know? But a fire doesn't break out like that, for no reason at all, at the very moment when a man wants to burn compromising papers."

They heard a commotion upstairs. It was the waiters of the restaurant trying to burst the door open. An acrid smell filled the well of the stair-case.

Rénine reached the top floor:

"By your leave, friends. I have the key."

He inserted it in the lock and opened the door.

He was met by a gust of smoke so dense that one might well have supposed the whole floor to be ablaze. Rénine at once saw that the fire had gone out of its own accord, for lack of fuel, and that there were no more flames:

"M. Morisseau, you won't let any one come in with us, will you? An intruder might spoil everything. Bolt the door, that will be best."

He stepped into the front room, where the fire had obviously had its chief centre. The furniture, the walls and the ceiling, though blackened by the smoke, had not been touched. As a matter of fact, the fire was confined to a blaze of papers which was still burning in the middle of the room, in front of the window.

Rénine struck his forehead:

"What a fool I am! What an unspeakable ass!"

"Why?" asked the inspector.

"The hat-box, of course! The cardboard hat-box which was standing on the table. That's where he hid the notes. They were there all through our search."

"Impossible!"

"Why, yes, we always overlook that particular hiding-place, the one just under our eyes, within reach of our hands! How could one imagine that a thief would leave sixty thousand francs in an open cardboard box, in which he places his hat when he comes in, with an absent-minded air? That's just the one place we don't look in.... Well played, M. Dutreuil!"

The inspector, who remained incredulous, repeated:

"No, no, impossible! We were with him and he could not have started the fire himself."

"Everything was prepared beforehand on the supposition that there might be an alarm.... The hat-box … the tissue paper … the bank-notes: they must all have been steeped in some inflammable liquid. He must have thrown a match, a chemical preparation or what not into it, as we were leaving."

"But we should have seen him, hang it all! And then is it credible that a man who has committed a murder for the sake of sixty thousand francs should do away with the money in this way? If the hiding-place was such a good one–and it was, because we never discovered it–why this useless destruction?"

"He got frightened, M. Morisseau. Remember that his head is at stake and he knows it. Anything rather than the guillotine; and they–the bank-notes–were the only proof which we had against him. How could he have left them where they were?"

Morisseau was flabbergasted:

"What! The only proof?"

"Why, obviously!"

"But your witnesses? Your evidence? All that you were going to tell the chief?"

"Mere bluff."

"Well, upon my word," growled the bewildered inspector, "you're a cool customer!"

"Would you have taken action without my bluff?"

"No."

"Then what more do you want?"

Rénine stooped to stir the ashes. But there was nothing left, not even those remnants of stiff paper which still retain their shape.

"Nothing," he said. "It's queer, all the same! How the deuce did he manage to set the thing alight?"

He stood up, looking attentively about him. Hortense had a feeling that he was making his supreme effort and that, after this last struggle in the dark, he would either have devised his plan of victory or admit that he was beaten.

Faltering with anxiety, she asked:

"It's all up, isn't it?"

"No, no," he said, thoughtfully, "it's not all up. It was, a few seconds ago. But now there is a gleam of light … and one that gives me hope."

"God grant that it may be justified!"

"We must go slowly," he said. "It is only an attempt, but a fine, a very fine attempt; and it may succeed."

He was silent for a moment; then, with an amused smile and a click of the tongue, he said:

"An infernally clever fellow, that Dutreuil! His trick of burning the notes: what a fertile imagination! And what coolness! A pretty dance the beggar has led me! He's a master!"

He fetched a broom from the kitchen and swept a part of the ashes into the next room, returning with a hat-box of the same size and appearance as the one which had been burnt. After crumpling the tissue paper with which it was filled, he placed the hat-box on the little table and set fire to it with a match.

It burst into flames, which he extinguished when they had consumed half the cardboard and nearly all the paper. Then he took from an inner pocket of his waistcoat a bundle of bank-notes and selected six, which he burnt almost completely, arranging the remains and hiding the rest of the notes at the bottom of the box, among the ashes and the blackened bits of paper:

"M. Morisseau," he said, when he had done, "I am asking for your assistance for the last time. Go and fetch Dutreuil. Tell him just this: 'You are unmasked. The notes did not catch fire. Come with me.' And bring him up here."

Despite his hesitation and his fear of exceeding his instructions from the head of the detective service, the chief-inspector was powerless to throw off the ascendancy which Rénine had acquired over him. He left the room.

Rénine turned to Hortense:

"Do you understand my plan of battle?"

"Yes," she said, "but it's a dangerous experiment. Do you think that Dutreuil will fall into the trap?"

"Everything depends on the state of his nerves and the degree of demoralization to which he is reduced. A surprise attack may very well do for him."

"Nevertheless, suppose he recognizes by some sign that the box has been changed?"

"Oh, of course, he has a few chances in his favour! The fellow is much more cunning than I thought and quite capable of wriggling out of the trap. On the other hand, however, how uneasy he must be! How the blood must be buzzing in his ears and obscuring his sight! No, I don't think that he will avoid the trap.... He will give in.... He will give in...."

They exchanged no more words. Rénine did not move. Hortense was stirred to the very depths of her being. The life of an innocent man hung trembling in the balance. An error of judgment, a little bad luck … and, twelve hours later, Jacques Aubrieux would be put to death. And together with a horrible anguish she experienced, in spite of all, a feeling of eager curiosity. What was Prince Rénine going to do? What would be the outcome of the experiment on which he was venturing? What resistance would Gaston Dutreuil offer? She lived through one of those minutes of superhuman tension in which life becomes intensified until it reaches its utmost value.

They heard footsteps on the stairs, the footsteps of men in a hurry. The sound drew nearer. They were reaching the top floor.

Hortense looked at her companion. He had stood up and was listening, his features already transfigured by action. The footsteps were now echoing in the passage. Then, suddenly, he ran to the door and cried:

"Quick! Let's make an end of it!"

Two or three detectives and a couple of waiters entered. He caught hold of Dutreuil in the midst of the detectives and pulled him by the arm, gaily exclaiming:

"Well done, old man! That trick of yours with the table and the water-bottle was really splendid! A masterpiece, on my word! Only, it didn't come off!"

"What do you mean? What's the matter?" mumbled Gaston Dutreuil, staggering.

"What I say: the fire burnt only half the tissue-paper and the hat-box; and, though some of the bank-notes were destroyed, like the tissue-paper, the others are there, at the bottom.... You understand? The long-sought notes, the great proof of the murder: they're there, where you hid them.... As chance would have it, they've escaped burning.... Here, look: there are the numbers; you can check them.... Oh, you're done for, done for, my beauty!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.