

GRIFFITHS
ARTHUR

THE ROME
EXPRESS

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The Rome Express

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CHAPTER I

The Rome Express, the *direttissimo*, or most direct, was approaching Paris one morning in March, when it became known to the occupants of the sleeping-car that there was something amiss, very much amiss, in the car.

The train was travelling the last stage, between Laroche and Paris, a run of a hundred miles without a stop. It had halted at Laroche for early breakfast, and many, if not all the passengers, had turned out. Of those in the sleeping-car, seven in number, six had been seen in the restaurant, or about the platform; the seventh, a lady, had not stirred. All had reëntered their berths to sleep or doze when the train went on, but several were on the move as it neared Paris, taking their turn at the lavatory, calling for water, towels, making the usual stir of preparation as the end of a journey was at hand.

There were many calls for the porter, yet no porter appeared. At last the attendant was found—lazy villain!—asleep, snoring loudly, stertorously, in his little bunk at the end of the car. He was roused with difficulty, and set about his work in a dull, unwilling, lethargic way, which promised badly for his tips from those he was supposed to serve.

By degrees all the passengers got dressed, all but two,—the lady in 9 and 10, who had made no sign as yet; and the man who occupied alone a double berth next her, numbered 7 and 8.

As it was the porter's duty to call every one, and as he was anxious, like the rest of his class, to get rid of his travellers as soon as possible after arrival, he rapped at each of the two closed doors behind which people presumably still slept.

The lady cried "All right," but there was no answer from No. 7 and 8.

Again and again the porter knocked and called loudly. Still meeting with no response, he opened the door of the compartment and went in.

It was now broad daylight. No blind was down; indeed, the one narrow window was open, wide; and the whole of the interior of the compartment was plainly visible, all and everything in it.

The occupant lay on his bed motionless. Sound asleep? No, not merely asleep—the twisted unnatural lie of the limbs, the contorted legs, the one arm drooping listlessly but stiffly over the side of the berth, told of a deeper, more eternal sleep.

The man was dead. Dead—and not from natural causes.

One glance at the blood-stained bedclothes, one look at the gaping wound in the breast, at the battered, mangled face, told the terrible story.

It was murder! murder most foul! The victim had been stabbed to the heart.

With a wild, affrighted, cry the porter rushed out of the compartment, and to the eager questioning of all who crowded round him, he could only mutter in confused and trembling accents:

"There! there! in there!"

Thus the fact of the murder became known to every one by personal inspection, for every one (even the lady had appeared for just a moment) had looked in where the body lay. The compartment was filled for some ten minutes or more by an excited, gesticulating, polyglot mob of half a dozen, all talking at once in French, English, and Italian.

The first attempt to restore order was made by a tall man, middle-aged, but erect in his bearing, with bright eyes and alert manner, who took the porter aside, and said sharply in good French, but with a strong English accent:

"Here! it's your business to do something. No one has any right to be in that compartment now. There may be reasons—traces—things to remove; never mind what. But get them all out. Be sharp about it; and lock the door. Remember you will be held responsible to justice."

The porter shuddered, so did many of the passengers who had overheard the Englishman's last words.

Justice! It is not to be trifled with anywhere, least of all in France, where the uncomfortable superstition prevails that every one who can be reasonably suspected of a crime is held to be guilty of that crime until his innocence is clearly proved.

All those six passengers and the porter were now brought within the category of the accused. They were all open to suspicion; they, and they alone, for the murdered man had been seen alive at Laroche, and the fell deed must have been done since then, while the train was in transit, that is to say, going at express speed, when no one could leave it except at peril of his life.

"Deuced awkward for us!" said the tall English general, Sir Charles Collingham by name, to his brother the parson, when he had reëntered their compartment and shut the door.

"I can't see it. In what way?" asked the Reverend Silas Collingham, a typical English cleric, with a rubicund face and square-cut white whiskers, dressed in a suit of black serge, and wearing the professional white tie.

"Why, we shall be detained, of course; arrested, probably—certainly detained. Examined, cross-examined, bully-ragged—I know something of the French police and their ways."

"If they stop us, I shall write to the *Times*" cried his brother, by profession a man of peace, but with a choleric eye that told of an angry temperament.

"By all means, my dear Silas, when you get the chance. That won't be just yet, for I tell you we're in a tight place, and may expect a good deal of worry." With that he took out his cigarette-case, and his match-box, lighted his cigarette, and calmly watched the smoke rising with all the coolness of an old campaigner accustomed to encounter and face the ups and downs of life. "I only hope to goodness they'll run straight on to Paris," he added in a fervent tone, not unmixed with apprehension. "No! By jingo, we're slackening speed—."

"Why shouldn't we? It's right the conductor, or chief of the train, or whatever you call him, should know what has happened."

"Why, man, can't you see? While the train is travelling express, every one must stay on board it; if it slows, it is possible to leave it."

"Who would want to leave it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the General, rather testily. "Any way, the thing's done now."

The train had pulled up in obedience to the signal of alarm given by some one in the sleeping-car, but by whom it was impossible to say. Not by the porter, for he seemed greatly surprised as the conductor came up to him.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Know! Know what? You stopped me."

"I didn't."

"Who rang the bell, then?"

"I did not. But I'm glad you've come. There has been a crime—murder."

"Good Heavens!" cried the conductor, jumping up on to the car, and entering into the situation at once. His business was only to verify the fact, and take all necessary precautions. He was a burly, brusque, peremptory person, the despotic, self-important French official, who knew what to do—as he thought—and did it without hesitation or apology.

"No one must leave the car," he said in a tone not to be misunderstood. "Neither now, nor on arrival at the station."

There was a shout of protest and dismay, which he quickly cut short.

"You will have to arrange it with the authorities in Paris; they can alone decide. My duty is plain: to detain you, place you under surveillance till then. Afterwards, we will see. Enough, gentlemen and madame"—

He bowed with the instinctive gallantry of his nation to the female figure which now appeared at the door of her compartment. She stood for a moment listening, seemingly greatly agitated, and then, without a word, disappeared, retreating hastily into her own private room, where she shut herself in.

Almost immediately, at a signal from the conductor, the train resumed its journey. The distance remaining to be traversed was short; half an hour more, and the Lyons station, at Paris, was reached, where the bulk of the passengers—all, indeed, but the occupants of the sleeper—descended and passed through the barriers. The latter were again desired to keep their places, while a posse of officials came and mounted guard. Presently they were told to leave the car one by one, but to take nothing with them. All their hand-bags, rugs, and belongings were to remain in the berths, just as they lay. One by one they were marched under escort to a large and bare waiting-room, which had, no doubt, been prepared for their reception.

Here they took their seats on chairs placed at wide intervals apart, and were peremptorily forbidden to hold any communication with each other, by word or gesture. This order was enforced by a fierce-looking guard in blue and red uniform, who stood facing them with his arms folded, gnawing his moustache and frowning severely.

Last of all, the porter was brought in and treated like the passengers, but more distinctly as a prisoner. He had a guard all to himself; and it seemed as though he was the object of peculiar suspicion. It had no great effect upon him, for, while the rest of the party were very plainly sad, and a prey to lively apprehension, the porter sat dull and unmoved, with the stolid, sluggish, unconcerned aspect of a man just roused from sound sleep and relapsing into slumber, who takes little notice of what is passing around.

Meanwhile, the sleeping-car, with its contents, especially the corpse of the victim, was shunted into a siding, and sentries were placed on it at both ends. Seals had been affixed upon the entrance doors, so that the interior might be kept inviolate until it could be visited and examined by the Chef de la Surûté, or Chief of the Detective Service. Every one and everything awaited the arrival of this all-important functionary.

CHAPTER II

M. Floçon, the Chief, was an early man, and he paid a first visit to his office about 7 A.M.

He lived just round the corner in the Rue des Arcs, and had not far to go to the Prefecture. But even now, soon after daylight, he was correctly dressed, as became a responsible ministerial officer. He wore a tight frock coat and an immaculate white tie; under his arm he carried the regulation portfolio, or lawyer's bag, stuffed full of reports, dispositions, and documents dealing with cases in hand. He was altogether a very precise and natty little personage, quiet and unpretending in demeanour, with a mild, thoughtful face in which two small ferrety eyes blinked and twinkled behind gold-rimmed glasses. But when things went wrong, when he had to deal with fools, or when scent was keen, or the enemy near, he would become as fierce and eager as any terrier.

He had just taken his place at his table and begun to arrange his papers, which, being a man of method, he kept carefully sorted by lots each in an old copy of the *Figaro*, when he was called to the telephone. His services were greatly needed, as we know, at the Lyons station and the summons was to the following effect:

"Crime on train No. 45. A man murdered in the sleeper. All the passengers held. Please come at once. Most important."

A fiacre was called instantly, and M. Floçon, accompanied by Galipaud and Block, the two first inspectors for duty, was driven with all possible speed across Paris.

He was met outside the station, just under the wide verandah, by the officials, who gave him a brief outline of the facts, so far as they were known, and as they have already been put before the reader.

"The passengers have been detained?" asked M. Floçon at once.

"Those in the sleeping-car only—"

"Tut, tut! they should have been all kept—at least until you had taken their names and addresses. Who knows what they might not have been able to tell?"

It was suggested that as the crime was committed presumably while the train was in motion, only those in the one car could be implicated.

"We should never jump to conclusions," said the Chief snappishly. "Well, show me the train card—the list of the travellers in the sleeper."

"It cannot be found, sir."

"Impossible! Why, it is the porter's business to deliver it at the end of the journey to his superiors, and under the law—to us. Where is the porter? In custody?"

"Surely, sir, but there is something wrong with him."

"So I should think! Nothing of this kind could well occur without his knowledge. If he was doing his duty—unless, of course, he—but let us avoid hasty conjectures."

"He has also lost the passengers' tickets, which you know he retains till the end of the journey. After the catastrophe, however, he was unable to lay his hand upon his pocket-book. It contained all his papers."

"Worse and worse. There is something behind all this. Take me to him. Stay, can I have a private room close to the other—where the prisoners, those held on suspicion, are? It will be necessary to hold investigations, take their depositions. M. le Juge will be here directly."

M. Floçon was soon installed in a room actually communicating with the waiting-room, and as a preliminary of the first importance, taking precedence even of the examination of the sleeping-car, he ordered the porter to be brought in to answer certain questions.

The man, Ludwig Groote, as he presently gave his name, thirty-two years of age, born at Amsterdam, looked such a sluggish, slouching, blear-eyed creature that M. Floçon began by a sharp rebuke.

"Now. Sharp! Are you always like this?" cried the Chief.

The porter still stared straight before him with lack-lustre eyes, and made no immediate reply.

"Are you drunk? are you—Can it be possible?" he said, and in vague reply to a sudden strong suspicion, he went on:

"What were you doing between Laroche and Paris? Sleeping?"

The man roused himself a little. "I think I slept. I must have slept. I was very drowsy. I had been up two nights; but so it is always, and I am not like this generally. I do not understand."

"Hah!" The Chief thought he understood. "Did you feel this drowsiness before leaving Laroche?"

"No, monsieur, I did not. Certainly not. I was fresh till then—quite fresh."

"Hum; exactly; I see;" and the little Chief jumped to his feet and ran round to where the porter stood sheepishly, and sniffed and smelt at him.

"Yes, yes." Sniff, sniff, sniff, the little man danced round and round him, then took hold of the porter's head with one hand, and with the other turned down his lower eyelid so as to expose the eyeball, sniffed a little more, and then resumed his seat.

"Exactly. And now, where is your train card?"

"Pardon, monsieur, I cannot find it."

"That is absurd. Where do you keep it? Look again—search—I must have it."

The porter shook his head hopelessly.

"It is gone, monsieur, and my pocket-book."

"But your papers, the tickets—"

"Everything was in it, monsieur. I must have dropped it."

Strange, very strange. However—the fact was to be recorded, for the moment. He could of course return to it.

"You can give me the names of the passengers?"

"No, monsieur. Not exactly. I cannot remember, not enough to distinguish between them."

"*Fichtre!* But this is most devilishly irritating. To think that I have to do with a man so stupid—such an idiot, such an ass!"

"At least you know how the berths were occupied, how many in each, and which persons? Yes? You can tell me that? Well, go on. By and by we will have the passengers in, and you can fix their places, after I have ascertained their names. Now, please! For how many was the car?"

"Sixteen. There were two compartments of four berths each, and four of two berths each."

"Stay, let us make a plan. I will draw it. Here, now, is that right?" and the Chief held up the rough diagram, here shown—

[Illustration: Diagram of railroad car.]

"Here we have the six compartments. Now take *a*, with berths 1, 2, 3, and 4. Were they all occupied?"

"No; only two, by Englishmen. I know that they talked English, which I understand a little. One was a soldier; the other, I think, a clergyman, or priest."

"Good! we can verify that directly. Now, *b*, with berths 5 and 6. Who was there?"

"One gentleman. I don't remember his name. But I shall know him by appearance."

"Go on. In *c*, two berths, 7 and 8?"

"Also one gentleman. It was he who—I mean, that is where the crime occurred."

"Ah, indeed, in 7 and 8? Very well. And the next, 9 and 10?"

"A lady. Our only lady. She came from Rome."

"One moment. Where did the rest come from? Did any embark on the road?"

"No, monsieur; all the passengers travelled through from Rome."

"The dead man included? Was he Roman?"

"That I cannot say, but he came on board at Rome."

"Very well. This lady—she was alone?"

"In the compartment, yes. But not altogether."

"I do not understand!"

"She had her servant with her."

"In the car?"

"No, not in the car. As a passenger by second class. But she came to her mistress sometimes, in the car."

"For her service, I presume?"

"Well, yes, monsieur, when I would permit it. But she came a little too often, and I was compelled to protest, to speak to Madame la Comtesse—"

"She was a countess, then?"

"The maid addressed her by that title. That is all I know. I heard her."

"When did you see the lady's maid last?"

"Last night. I think at Amberieux. about 8 p.m."

"Not this morning?"

"No, sir, I am quite sure of that."

"Not at Laroche? She did not come on board to stay, for the last stage, when her mistress would be getting up, dressing, and likely to require her?"

"No; I should not have permitted it."

"And where is the maid now, d'you suppose?"

The porter looked at him with an air of complete imbecility.

"She is surely somewhere near, in or about the station. She would hardly desert her mistress now," he said, stupidly, at last.

"At any rate we can soon settle that." The Chief turned to one of his assistants, both of whom had been standing behind him all the time, and said:

"Step out, Galipaud, and see. No, wait. I am nearly as stupid as this simpleton. Describe this maid."

"Tall and slight, dark-eyed, very black hair. Dressed all in black, plain black bonnet. I cannot remember more."

"Find her, Galipaud—keep your eye on her. We may want her—why, I cannot say, as she seems disconnected with the event, but still she ought to be at hand." Then, turning to the porter, he went on. "Finish, please. You said 9 and 10 was the lady's. Well, 11 and 12?"

"It was vacant all through the run."

"And the last compartment, for four?"

"There were two berths, occupied both by Frenchmen, at least so I judged them. They talked French to each other and to me."

"Then now we have them all. Stand aside, please, and I will make the passengers come in. We will then determine their places and affix their names from their own admissions. Call them in, Block, one by one."

CHAPTER III

The questions put by M. Floçon were much the same in every case, and were limited in this early stage of the inquiry to the one point of identity.

The first who entered was a Frenchman. He was a jovial, fat-faced, portly man, who answered to the name of Anatole Lafolay, and who described himself as a traveller in precious stones. The berth he had occupied was No. 13 in compartment *f*. His companion in the berth was a younger man, smaller, slighter, but of much the same stamp. His name was Jules Devaux, and he was a commission agent. His berth had been No. 15 in the same compartment, *f*. Both these Frenchmen gave their addresses with the names of many people to whom they were well known, and established at once a reputation for respectability which was greatly in their favour.

The third to appear was the tall, gray-headed Englishman, who had taken a certain lead at the first discovery of the crime. He called himself General Sir Charles Collingham, an officer of her Majesty's army; and the clergyman who shared the compartment was his brother, the Reverend Silas Collingham, rector of Theakstone-Lammas, in the county of Norfolk. Their berths were numbered 1 and 4 in *a*.

Before the English General was dismissed, he asked whether he was likely to be detained.

"For the present, yes," replied M. Floçon, briefly. He did not care to be asked questions. That, under the circumstances, was his business.

"Because I should like to communicate with the British Embassy."

"You are known there?" asked the detective, not choosing to believe the story at first. It might be a ruse of some sort.

"I know Lord Dufferin personally; I was with him in India. Also Colonel Papillon, the military attaché; we were in the same regiment. If I sent to the Embassy, the latter would, no doubt, come himself."

"How do you propose to send?"

"That is for you to decide. All I wish is that it should be known that my brother and I are detained under suspicion, and incriminated."

"Hardly that, Monsieur le General. But it shall be as you wish. We will telephone from here to the post nearest the Embassy to inform his Excellency—"

"Certainly, Lord Dufferin, and my friend, Colonel Papillon."

"Of what has occurred. And now, if you will permit me to proceed?"

So the single occupant of the compartment *b*, that adjoining the Englishmen, was called in. He was an Italian, by name Natale Ripaldi; a dark-skinned man, with very black hair and a bristling black moustache. He wore a long dark cloak of the Inverness order, and, with the slouch hat he carried in his hand, and his downcast, secretive look, he had the rather conventional aspect of a conspirator.

"If monsieur permits," he volunteered to say after the formal questioning was over, "I can throw some light on this catastrophe."

"And how so, pray? Did you assist? Were you present? If so, why wait to speak till now?" said the detective, receiving the advance rather coldly. It behooved him to be very much on his guard.

"I have had no opportunity till now of addressing any one in authority. You are in authority, I presume?"

"I am the Chief of the Detective Service."

"Then, monsieur, remember, please, that I can give some useful information when called upon. Now, indeed, if you will receive it."

M. Floçon was so anxious to approach the inquiry without prejudice that he put up his hand.

"We will wait, if you please. When M. le Juge arrives, then, perhaps; at any rate, at a later stage. That will do now, thank you."

The Italian's lip curled with a slight indication of contempt at the French detective's methods, but he bowed without speaking, and went out.

Last of all the lady appeared, in a long sealskin travelling cloak, and closely veiled. She answered M. Floçon's questions in a low, tremulous voice, as though greatly perturbed.

She was the Contessa di Castagneto, she said, an Englishwoman by birth; but her husband had been an Italian, as the name implied, and they resided in Rome. He was dead—she had been a widow for two or three years, and was on her way now to London.

"That will do, madame, thank you," said the detective, politely, "for the present at least."

"Why, are we likely to be detained? I trust not." Her voice became appealing, almost piteous. Her hands, restlessly moving, showed how much she was distressed.

"Indeed, Madame la Comtesse, it must be so. I regret it infinitely; but until we have gone further into this, have elicited some facts, arrived at some conclusions—But there, madame, I need not, must not say more."

"Oh, monsieur, I was so anxious to continue my journey. Friends are awaiting me in London. I do hope—I most earnestly beg and entreat you to spare me. I am not very strong; my health is indifferent. Do, sir, be so good as to release me from—"

As she spoke, she raised her veil, and showed what no woman wishes to hide, least of all when seeking the good-will of one of the opposite sex. She had a handsome face—strikingly so. Not even the long journey, the fatigue, the worries and anxieties which had supervened, could rob her of her marvellous beauty.

She was a brilliant brunette, dark-skinned; but her complexion was of a clear, pale olive, and as soft, as lustrous as pure ivory. Her great eyes, of a deep velvety brown, were saddened by near tears. She had rich red lips, the only colour in her face, and these, habitually slightly apart, showed pearly-white glistening teeth.

It was difficult to look at this charming woman without being affected by her beauty. M. Floçon was a Frenchman, gallant and impressionable; yet he steeled his heart. A detective must beware of sentiment, and he seemed to see something insidious in this appeal, which he resented.

"Madame, it is useless," he answered gruffly. "I do not make the law; I have only to support it. Every good citizen is bound to that."

"I trust I am a good citizen," said the Countess, with a wan smile, but very wearily. "Still, I should wish to be let off now. I have suffered greatly, terribly, by this horrible catastrophe. My nerves are quite shattered. It is too cruel. However, I can say no more, except to ask that you will let my maid come to me."

M. Floçon, still obdurate, would not even consent to that.

"I fear, madame, that for the present at least you cannot be allowed to communicate with any one, not even with your maid."

"But she is not implicated; she was not in the car. I have not seen her since—"

"Since?" repeated M. Floçon, after a pause.

"Since last night, at Amberieux, about eight o'clock. She helped me to undress, and saw me to bed. I sent her away then, and said I should not need her till we reached Paris. But I want her now, indeed I do."

"She did not come to you at Laroche?"

"No. Have I not said so? The porter,"—here she pointed to the man, who stood staring at her from the other side of the table,—"he made difficulties about her being in the car, saying that she came too often, stayed too long, that I must pay for her berth, and so on. I did not see why I should do that; so she stayed away."

"Except from time to time?"

"Precisely."

"And the last time was at Amberieux?"

"As I have told you, and he will tell you the same."

"Thank you, madame, that will do." The Chief rose from his chair, plainly intimating that the interview was at an end.

CHAPTER IV

He had other work to do, and was eager to get at it. So he left Block to show the Countess back to the waiting-room, and, motioning to the porter that he might also go, the Chief hastened to the sleeping-car, the examination of which, too long delayed, claimed his urgent attention.

It is the first duty of a good detective to visit the actual theatre of a crime and overhaul it inch by inch,—seeking, searching, investigating, looking for any, even the most insignificant, traces of the murderer's hands.

The sleeping-car, as I have said, had been side-tracked, its doors were sealed, and it was under strict watch and ward. But everything, of course, gave way before the detective, and, breaking through the seals, he walked in, making straight for the little room or compartment where the body of the victim still lay untended and absolutely untouched.

It was a ghastly sight, although not new in M. Floçon's experience. There lay the corpse in the narrow berth, just as it had been stricken. It was partially undressed, wearing only shirt and drawers. The former lay open at the chest, and showed the gaping wound that had, no doubt, caused death, probably instantaneous death. But other blows had been struck; there must have been a struggle, fierce and embittered, as for dear life. The savage truculence of the murderer had triumphed, but not until he had battered in the face, destroying features and rendering recognition almost impossible.

A knife had given the mortal wound; that was at once apparent from the shape of the wound. It was the knife, too, which had gashed and stabbed the face, almost wantonly; for some of these wounds had not bled, and the plain inference was that they had been inflicted after life had sped. M. Floçon examined the body closely, but without disturbing it. The police medical officer would wish to see it as it was found. The exact position, as well as the nature of the wounds, might afford evidence as to the manner of death.

But the Chief looked long, and with absorbed, concentrated interest, at the murdered man, noting all he actually saw, and conjecturing a good deal more.

The features of the mutilated face were all but unrecognizable, but the hair, which was abundant, was long, black, and inclined to curl; the black moustache was thick and drooping. The shirt was of fine linen, the drawers silk. On one finger were two good rings, the hands were clean, the nails well kept, and there was every evidence that the man did not live by manual labour. He was of the easy, cultured class, as distinct from the workman or operative.

This conclusion was borne out by his light baggage, which still lay about the berth,—hat-box, rugs, umbrella, brown morocco hand-bag. All were the property of some one well to do, or at least possessed of decent belongings. One or two pieces bore a monogram, "F.Q.," the same as on the shirt and under-linen; but on the bag was a luggage label, with the name, "Francis Quadling, passenger to Paris," in full. Its owner had apparently no reason to conceal his name. More strangely, those who had done him to death had been at no pains to remove all traces of his identity.

M. Floçon opened the hand-bag, seeking for further evidence; but found nothing of importance,—only loose collars, cuffs, a sponge and slippers, two Italian newspapers of an earlier date. No money, valuables, or papers. All these had been removed probably, and presumably, by the perpetrator of the crime.

Having settled the first preliminary but essential points, he next surveyed the whole compartment critically. Now, for the first time, he was struck with the fact that the window was open to its full height. Since when was this? It was a question to be put presently to the porter and any others who had entered the car, but the discovery drew him to examine the window more closely, and with good results.

At the ledge, caught on a projecting point on the far side, partly in, partly out of the car, was a morsel of white lace, a scrap of feminine apparel; although what part, or how it had come there,

was not at once obvious to M. Floçon. A long and minute inspection of this bit of lace, which he was careful not to detach as yet from the place in which he found it, showed that it was ragged, and frayed, and fast caught where it hung. It could not have been blown there by any chance air; it must have been torn from the article to which it belonged, whatever that might be,—head-dress, nightcap, night-dress, or handkerchief. The lace was of a kind to serve any of these purposes.

Inspecting further, M. Floçon made a second discovery. On the small table under the window was a short length of black jet beading, part of the trimming or ornamentation of a lady's dress.

These two objects of feminine origin—one partly outside the car, the other near it, but quite inside—gave rise to many conjectures. It led, however, to the inevitable conclusion that a woman had been at some time or other in the berth. M. Floçon could not but connect these two finds with the fact of the open window. The latter might, of course, have been the work of the murdered man himself at an earlier hour. Yet it is unusual, as the detective imagined, for a passenger, and especially an Italian, to lie under an open window in a sleeping-berth when travelling by express train before daylight in March.

Who opened that window, then, and why? Perhaps some further facts might be found on the outside of the car. With this idea, M. Floçon left it, and passed on to the line or permanent way.

Here he found himself a good deal below the level of the car. These sleepers have no foot-boards like ordinary carriages; access to them is gained from a platform by the steps at each end. The Chief was short of stature, and he could only approach the window outside by calling one of the guards and ordering him to make the small ladder (*faire la petite échelle*). This meant stooping and giving a back, on which little M. Floçon climbed nimbly, and so was raised to the necessary height.

A close scrutiny revealed nothing unusual. The exterior of the car was encrusted with the mud and dust gathered in the journey, none of which appeared to have been disturbed.

M. Floçon reëntered the carriage neither disappointed nor pleased; his mind was in an open state, ready to receive any impressions, and as yet only one that was at all clear and distinct was borne in on him.

This was the presence of the lace and the jet beads in the theatre of the crime. The inference was fair and simple. He came logically and surely to this:

1. That some woman had entered the compartment.
2. That whether or not she had come in before the crime, she was there after the window had been opened, which was not done by the murdered man.
3. That she had leaned out, or partly passed out, of the window at some time or other, as the scrap of lace testified.
4. Why had she leaned out? To seek some means of exit or escape, of course.

But escape from whom? from what? The murderer? Then she must know him, and unless an accomplice (if so, why run from him?), she would give up her knowledge on compulsion, if not voluntarily, as seemed doubtful, seeing she (his suspicions were consolidating) had not done so already.

But there might be another even stronger reason to attempt escape at such imminent risk as leaving an express train at full speed. To escape from her own act and the consequences it must entail—escape from horror first, from detection next, and then from arrest and punishment.

All this would imperiously impel even a weak woman to face the worst peril, to look out, lean out, even try the terrible but impossible feat of climbing out of the car.

So M. Floçon, by fair process of reasoning, reached a point which incriminated one woman, the only woman possible, and that was the titled, high-bred lady who called herself the Contessa di Castagneto.

This conclusion gave a definite direction to further search. Consulting the rough plan which he had constructed to take the place of the missing train card, he entered the compartment which the Countess had occupied, and which was actually next door.

It was in the tumbled, untidy condition of a sleeping-place but just vacated. The sex and quality of its recent occupant were plainly apparent in the goods and chattels lying about, the property and possessions of a delicate, well-bred woman of the world, things still left as she had used them last—rugs still unrolled, a pair of easy-slippers on the floor, the sponge in its waterproof bag on the bed, brushes, bottles, button-hook, hand-glass, many things belonging to the dressing-bag, not yet returned to that receptacle. The maid was no doubt to have attended to all these, but as she had not come, they remained unpacked and strewn about in some disorder.

M. Floçon pounced down upon the contents of the berth, and commenced an immediate search for a lace scarf, or any wrap or cover with lace.

He found nothing, and was hardly disappointed. It told more against the Countess, who, if innocent, would have no reason to conceal or make away with a possibly incriminating possession, the need for which she could not of course understand.

Next, he handled the dressing-bag, and with deft fingers replaced everything.

Everything was forthcoming but one glass bottle, a small one, the absence of which he noted, but thought of little consequence, till, by and by, he came upon it under peculiar circumstances.

Before leaving the car, and after walking through the other compartments, M. Floçon made an especially strict search of the corner where the porter had his own small chair, his only resting-place, indeed, throughout the journey. He had not forgotten the attendant's condition when first examined, and he had even then been nearly satisfied that the man had been hocused, narcotized, drugged.

Any doubts were entirely removed by his picking up near the porter's seat a small silver-topped bottle and a handkerchief, both marked with coronet and monogram, the last of which, although the letters were much interlaced and involved, were decipherable as S.L.L.C.

It was that of the Countess, and corresponded with the marks on her other belongings. He put it to his nostril, and recognized at once by its smell that it had contained tincture of laudanum, or some preparation of that drug.

CHAPTER V

M. Floçon was an experienced detective, and he knew so well that he ought to be on his guard against the most plausible suggestions, that he did not like to make too much of these discoveries. Still, he was distinctly satisfied, if not exactly exultant, and he went back towards the station with a strong predisposition against the Contessa di Castagneto.

Just outside the waiting-room, however, his assistant, Galipaud, met him with news which rather dashed his hopes, and gave a new direction to his thoughts.

The lady's maid was not to be found.

"Impossible!" cried the Chief, and then at once suspicion followed surprise.

"I have looked, monsieur, inquired everywhere; the maid has not been seen. She certainly is not here."

"Did she go through the barrier with the other passengers?"

"No one knows; no one remembers her; not even the conductor. But she has gone. That is positive."

"Yet it was her duty to be here; to attend to her service. Her mistress would certainly want her—has asked for her! Why should she run away?"

This question presented itself as one of infinite importance, to be pondered over seriously before he went further into the inquiry.

Did the Countess know of this disappearance?

She had asked imploringly for her maid. True, but might that not be a blind? Women are born actresses, and at need can assume any part, convey any impression. Might not the Countess have wished to be dissociated from the maid, and therefore have affected complete ignorance of her flight?

"I will try her further," said M. Floçon to himself.

But then, supposing that the maid had taken herself off of her own accord? Why was it? Why had she done so? Because—because she was afraid of something. If so, of what? No direct accusation could be brought against her on the face of it. She had not been in the sleeping-car at the time of the murder, while the Countess as certainly was; and, according to strong presumption, in the very compartment where the deed was done. If the maid was afraid, why was she afraid?

Only on one possible hypothesis. That she was either in collusion with the Countess, or possessed of some guilty knowledge tending to incriminate the Countess and probably herself. She had run away to avoid any inconvenient questioning tending to get her mistress into trouble, which would react probably on herself.

"We must press the Countess on this point closely; I will put it plainly to M. le Juge," said the detective, as he entered the private room set apart for the police authorities, where he found M. Beaumont le Hardi, the instructing judge, and the Commissary of the Quartier (arrondissement).

A lengthy conference followed among the officials. M. Floçon told all he knew, all he had discovered, gave his views with all the force and fluency of a public prosecutor, and was congratulated warmly on the progress he had made.

"I agree with you, sir," said the instructing judge: "we must have in the Countess first, and pursue the line indicated as regards the missing maid."

"I will fetch her, then. Stay, what can be going on in there?" cried M. Floçon, rising from his seat and running into the outer waiting-room, which, to his surprise and indignation, he found in great confusion.

The guard who was on duty was struggling, in personal conflict almost, with the English General. There was a great hubbub of voices, and the Countess was lying back half-fainting in her chair.

"What's all this? How dare you, sir?"

This to the General, who now had the man by the throat with one hand and with the other was preventing him from drawing his sword. "Desist—forbear! You are opposing legal authority; desist, or I will call in assistance and will have you secured and removed."

The little Chief's blood was up; he spoke warmly, with all the force and dignity of an official who sees the law outraged.

"It is entirely the fault of this ruffian of yours; he has behaved most brutally," replied Sir Charles, still holding him tight.

"Let him go, monsieur; your behaviour is inexcusable. What! you, a military officer of the highest rank, to assault a sentinel! For shame! This is unworthy of you!"

"He deserves to be scragged, the beast!" went on the General, as with one sharp turn of the wrist he threw the guard off, and sent him flying nearly across the room, where, being free at last, the Frenchman drew his sword and brandished it threateningly—from a distance.

But M. Floçon interposed with uplifted hand and insisted upon an explanation.

"It is just this," replied Sir Charles, speaking fast and with much fierceness: "that lady there—poor thing, she is ill, you can see that for yourself, suffering, overwrought; she asked for a glass of water, and this brute, triple brute, as you say in French, refused to bring it."

"I could not leave the room," protested the guard. "My orders were precise."

"So I was going to fetch the water," went on the General angrily, eying the guard as though he would like to make another grab at him, "and this fellow interfered."

"Very properly," added M. Floçon.

"Then why didn't he go himself, or call some one? Upon my word, monsieur, you are not to be complimented upon your people, nor your methods. I used to think that a Frenchman was gallant, courteous, especially to ladies."

The Chief looked a little disconcerted, but remembering what he knew against this particular lady, he stiffened and said severely, "I am responsible for my conduct to my superiors, and not to you. Besides, you appear to forget your position. You are here, detained—all of you"—he spoke to the whole room—"under suspicion. A ghastly crime has been perpetrated—by some one among you—"

"Do not be too sure of that," interposed the irrepressible General.

"Who else could be concerned? The train never stopped after leaving Laroche," said the detective, allowing himself to be betrayed into argument.

"Yes, it did," corrected Sir Charles, with a contemptuous laugh; "shows how much you know."

Again the Chief looked unhappy. He was on dangerous ground, face to face with a new fact affecting all his theories,—if fact it was, not mere assertion, and that he must speedily verify. But nothing was to be gained—much, indeed, might be lost—by prolonging this discussion in the presence of the whole party. It was entirely opposed to the French practice of investigation, which works secretly, taking witnesses separately, one by one, and strictly preventing all intercommunication or collusion among them.

"What I know or do not know is my affair," he said, with an indifference he did not feel. "I shall call upon you, M. le Général, for your statement in due course, and that of the others." He bowed stiffly to the whole room. "Every one must be interrogated. M. le Juge is now here, and he proposes to begin, madame, with you."

The Countess gave a little start, shivered, and turned very pale.

"Can't you see she is not equal to it?" cried the General, hotly. "She has not yet recovered. In the name of—I do not say chivalry, for that would be useless—but of common humanity, spare madame, at least for the present."

"That is impossible, quite impossible. There are reasons why Madame la Comtesse should be examined first. I trust, therefore, she will make an effort."

"I will try, if you wish it." She rose from her chair and walked a few steps rather feebly, then stopped.

"No, no, Countess, do not go," said Sir Charles, hastily, in English, as he moved across to where she stood and gave her his hand. "This is sheer cruelty, sir, and cannot be permitted."

"Stand aside!" shouted M. Floçon; "I forbid you to approach that lady, to address her, or communicate with her. Guard, advance, do your duty."

But the guard, although his sword was still out of its sheath, showed great reluctance to move. He had no desire to try conclusions again with this very masterful person, who was, moreover, a general; as he had seen service, he had a deep respect for generals, even of foreign growth.

Meanwhile the General held his ground and continued his conversation with the Countess, speaking still in English, thus exasperating M. Floçon, who did not understand the language, almost to madness.

"This is not to be borne!" he cried. "Here, Galipaud, Block;" and when his two trusty assistants came rushing in, he pointed furiously to the General. "Seize him, remove him by force if necessary. He shall go to the *violon*—to the nearest lock-up."

The noise attracted also the Judge and the Commissary, and there were now six officials in all, including the guard, all surrounding the General, a sufficiently imposing force to overawe even the most recalcitrant fire-eater.

But now the General seemed to see only the comic side of the situation, and he burst out laughing.

"What, all of you? How many more? Why not bring up cavalry and artillery, horse, foot, and guns?" he asked, derisively. "All to prevent one old man from offering his services to one weak woman! Gentlemen, my regards!"

"Really, Charles, I fear you are going too far," said his brother the clergyman, who, however, had been manifestly enjoying the whole scene.

"Indeed, yes. It is not necessary, I assure you," added the Countess, with tears of gratitude in her big brown eyes. "I am most touched, most thankful. You are a true soldier, a true English gentleman, and I shall never forget your kindness." Then she put her hand in his with a pretty, winning gesture that was reward enough for any man.

Meanwhile, the Judge, the senior official present, had learned exactly what had happened, and he now addressed the General with a calm but stern rebuke.

"Monsieur will not, I trust, oblige us to put in force the full power of the law. I might, if I chose, and as I am fully entitled, commit you at once to Mazas, to keep you in solitary confinement. Your conduct has been deplorable, well calculated to traverse and impede justice. But I am willing to believe that you were led away, not unnaturally, as a gallant gentleman,—it is the characteristic of your nation, of your cloth,—and that on more mature consideration you will acknowledge and not repeat your error."

M. Beaumont le Hardi was a grave, florid, soft-voiced person, with a bald head and a comfortably-lined white waistcoat; one who sought his ends by persuasion, not force, but who had the instincts of a gentleman, and little sympathy with the peremptory methods of his more inflammable colleague.

"Oh, with all my heart, monsieur," said Sir Charles, cordially. "You saw, or at least know, how this has occurred. I did not begin it, nor was I the most to blame. But I was in the wrong, I admit. What do you wish me to do now?"

"Give me your promise to abide by our rules,—they may be irksome, but we think them necessary,—and hold no further converse with your companions."

"Certainly, certainly, monsieur,—at least after I have said one word more to Madame la Comtesse."

"No, no, I cannot permit even that—"

But Sir Charles, in spite of the warning finger held up by the Judge, insisted upon crying out to her, as she was being led into the other room:

"Courage, dear lady, courage. Don't let them bully you. You have nothing to fear."
Any further defiance of authority was now prevented by her almost forcible removal from the room.

CHAPTER VI

The stormy episode just ended had rather a disturbing effect on M. Floçon, who could scarcely give his full attention to all the points, old and new, that had now arisen in the investigation. But he would have time to go over them at his leisure, while the work of interrogation was undertaken by the Judge.

The latter had taken his seat at a small table, and just opposite was his *greffier*, or clerk, who was to write down question and answer, *verbatim*

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