

Leblanc Maurice

The Golden Triangle: The Return of Arsène Lupin



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CHAPTER I CORALIE

It was close upon half-past six and the evening shadows were growing denser when two soldiers reached the little space, planted with trees, opposite the Musée Galliéra, where the Rue de Chaillot and the Rue Pierre-Charron meet. One wore an infantryman's sky-blue great-coat; the other, a Senegalese, those clothes of undyed wool, with baggy breeches and a belted jacket, in which the Zouaves and the native African troops have been dressed since the war. One of them had lost his right leg, the other his left arm.

They walked round the open space, in the center of which stands a fine group of Silenus figures, and stopped. The infantryman threw away his cigarette. The Senegalese picked it up, took a few quick puffs at it, put it out by squeezing it between his fore-finger and thumb and stuffed it into his pocket. All this without a word.

Almost at the same time two more soldiers came out of the Rue Galliéra. It would have been impossible to say to what branch they belonged, for their military attire was composed of the most incongruous civilian garments. However, one of them sported a Zouave's *chechia*, the other an artilleryman's *képi*. The first walked on crutches, the other on two sticks. These two kept near the newspaper-kiosk which stands at the edge of the pavement.

Three others came singly by the Rue Pierre-Charron, the Rue Brignoles and the Rue de Chaillot: a one-armed rifleman, a limping sapper and a marine with a hip that looked as if it was twisted. Each of them made straight for a tree and leant against it.

Not a word was uttered among them. None of the seven crippled soldiers seemed to know his companions or to trouble about or even perceive their presence. They stood behind their trees or behind the kiosk or behind the group of Silenus figures without stirring. And the few wayfarers who, on that evening of the 3rd of April, 1915, crossed this unfrequented square, which received hardly any light from the shrouded street-lamps, did not slacken pace to observe the men's motionless outlines.

A clock struck half-past six. At that moment the door of one of the houses overlooking the square opened. A man came out, closed the door behind him, crossed the Rue de Chaillot and walked round the open space in front of the museum. It was an officer in khaki. Under his red forage-cap, with its three lines of gold braid, his head was wrapped in a wide linen bandage, which hid his forehead and neck. He was tall and very slenderly built. His right leg ended in a wooden stump with a rubber foot to it. He leant on a stick.

Leaving the square, he stepped into the roadway of the Rue Pierre-Charron. Here he turned and gave a leisurely look to his surroundings on every side. This minute inspection brought him to one of the trees facing the museum. With the tip of his cane he gently tapped a protruding stomach. The stomach pulled itself in.

The officer moved off again. This time he went definitely down the Rue Pierre-Charron towards the center of Paris. He thus came to the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, which he went up, taking the left pavement.

Two hundred yards further on was a large house, which had been transformed, as a flag proclaimed, into a hospital. The officer took up his position at some distance, so as not to be seen by those leaving, and waited.

It struck a quarter to seven and seven o'clock. A few more minutes passed. Five persons came out of the house, followed by two more. At last a lady appeared in the hall, a nurse wearing a wide blue cloak marked with the Red Cross.

"Here she comes," said the officer.

She took the road by which he had arrived and turned down the Rue Pierre-Charron, keeping to the right-hand pavement and thus making for the space where the street meets the Rue de Chaillot. Her walk was light, her step easy and well-balanced. The wind, buffeting against her as she moved quickly on her way, swelled out the long blue veil floating around her shoulders. Notwithstanding the width of the cloak, the rhythmical swing of her body and the youthfulness of her figure were revealed. The officer kept behind her and walked along with an absent-minded air, twirling his stick, like a man taking an aimless stroll.

At this moment there was nobody in sight, in that part of the street, except him and her. But, just after she had crossed the Avenue Marceau and some time before he reached it, a motor standing in the avenue started driving in the same direction as the nurse, at a fixed distance from her.

It was a taxi-cab. And the officer noticed two things: first, that there were two men inside it and, next, that one of them leant out of the window almost the whole time, talking to the driver. He was able to catch a momentary glimpse of this man's face, cut in half by a heavy mustache and surmounted by a gray felt hat.

Meanwhile, the nurse walked on without turning round. The officer had crossed the street and now hurried his pace, the more so as it struck him that the cab was also increasing its speed as the girl drew near the space in front of the museum.

From where he was the officer could take in almost the whole of the little square at a glance; and, however sharply he looked, he discerned nothing in the darkness that revealed the presence of the seven crippled men. No one, moreover, was passing on foot or driving. In the distance only, in the dusk of the wide crossing avenues, two tram-cars, with lowered blinds, disturbed the silence.

Nor did the girl, presuming that she was paying attention to the sights of the street, appear to see anything to alarm her. She gave not the least sign of hesitation. And the behavior of the motor-cab following her did not seem to strike her either, for she did not look round once.

The cab, however, was gaining ground. When it neared the square, it was ten or fifteen yards, at most, from the nurse; and, by the time that she, still noticing nothing, had reached the first trees, it came closer yet and, leaving the middle of the road, began to hug the pavement, while, on the side opposite the pavement, the left-hand side, the man who kept leaning out had opened the door and was now standing on the step.

The officer crossed the street once more, briskly, without fear of being seen, so heedless did the two men now appear of anything but their immediate business. He raised a whistle to his lips. There was no doubt that the expected event was about to take place.

The cab, in fact, pulled up suddenly. The two men leapt from the doors on either side and rushed to the pavement of the square, a few yards from the kiosk. At the same moment there was a cry of terror from the girl and a shrill whistle from the officer. And, also at the same time, the two men caught up and seized their victim and dragged her towards the cab, while the seven wounded soldiers, seeming to spring from the very trunks of the trees that hid them, fell upon the two aggressors.

The battle did not last long. Or rather there was no battle. At the outset the driver of the taxi, perceiving that the attack was being countered, made off and drove away as fast as he could. As for the two men, realizing that their enterprise had failed and finding themselves faced with a threatening array of uplifted sticks and crutches, not to mention the barrel of a revolver which the

officer pointed at them, they let go the girl, tacked from side to side, to prevent the officer from taking aim, and disappeared in the darkness of the Rue Brignoles.

"Run for all you're worth, Ya-Bon," said the officer to the one-armed Senegalese, "and bring me back one of them by the scruff of the neck!"

He supported the girl with his arm. She was trembling all over and seemed ready to faint.

"Don't be frightened, Little Mother Coralie," he said, very anxiously. "It's I, Captain Belval, Patrice Belval."

"Ah, it's you, captain!" she stammered.

"Yes; all your friends have gathered round to defend you, all your old patients from the hospital, whom I found in the convalescent home."

"Thank you. Thank you." And she added, in a quivering voice, "The others? Those two men?"

"Run away. Ya-Bon's gone after them."

"But what did they want with me? And what miracle brought you all here?"

"We'll talk about that later, Little Mother Coralie. Let's speak of you first. Where am I to take you? Don't you think you'd better come in here with me, until you've recovered and taken a little rest?"

Assisted by one of the soldiers, he helped her gently to the house which he himself had left three-quarters of an hour before. The girl let him do as he pleased. They all entered an apartment on the ground-floor and went into the drawing-room, where a bright fire of logs was burning. He switched on the electric light:

"Sit down," he said.

She dropped into a chair; and the captain at once gave his orders:

"You, Poulard, go and fetch a glass in the dining-room. And you, Ribrac, draw a jug of cold water in the kitchen... Chatelain, you'll find a decanter of rum in the pantry... Or, stay, she doesn't like rum... Then."

"Then," she said, smiling, "just a glass of water, please."

Her cheeks, which were naturally pale, recovered a little of their warmth. The blood flowed back to her lips; and the smile on her face was full of confidence. Her face, all charm and gentleness, had a pure outline, features almost too delicate, a fair complexion and the ingenuous expression of a wondering child that looks on life with eyes always wide open. And all this, which was dainty and exquisite, nevertheless at certain moments gave an impression of energy, due no doubt to her shining, dark eyes and to the line of smooth, black hair that came down on either side from under the white cap in which her forehead was imprisoned.

"Aha!" cried the captain, gaily, when she had drunk the water. "You're feeling better, I think, eh, Little Mother Coralie?"

"Much better."

"Capital. But that was a bad minute we went through just now! What an adventure! We shall have to talk it all over and get some light on it, sha'n't we? Meanwhile, my lads, pay your respects to Little Mother Coralie. Eh, my fine fellows, who would have thought, when she was coddling you and patting your pillows for your fat pates to sink into, that one day we should be taking care of her and that the children would be coddling their little mother?"

They all pressed round her, the one-armed and the one-legged, the crippled and the sick, all glad to see her. And she shook hands with them affectionately:

"Well, Ribrac, how's that leg of yours?"

"I don't feel it any longer, Little Mother Coralie."

"And you, Vatinel? That wound in your shoulder?"

"Not a sign of it, Little Mother Coralie."

"And you, Poulard? And you, Jorisse?"

Her emotion increased at seeing them again, the men whom she called her children. And Patrice Belval exclaimed:

"Ah, Little Mother Coralie, now you're crying! Little mother, little mother, that's how you captured all our hearts. When we were trying our hardest not to call out, on our bed of pain, we used to see your eyes filling with great tears. Little Mother Coralie was weeping over her children. Then we clenched our teeth still firmer."

"And I used to cry still more," she said, "just because you were afraid of hurting me."

"And to-day you're at it again. No, you are too soft-hearted! You love us. We love you. There's nothing to cry about in that. Come, Little Mother Coralie, a smile... And, I say, here's Ya-Bon coming; and Ya-Bon always laughs."

She rose suddenly:

"Do you think he can have overtaken one of the two men?"

"Do I think so? I told Ya-Bon to bring one back by the neck. He won't fail. I'm only afraid of one thing.."

They had gone towards the hall. The Senegalese was already on the steps. With his right hand he was clutching the neck of a man, of a limp rag, rather, which he seemed to be carrying at arm's length, like a dancing-doll.

"Drop him," said the captain.

Ya-Bon loosened his fingers. The man fell on the flags in the hall.

"That's what I feared," muttered the officer. "Ya-Bon has only his right hand; but, when that hand holds any one by the throat, it's a miracle if it doesn't strangle him. The Boches know something about it."

Ya-Bon was a sort of colossus, the color of gleaming coal, with a woolly head and a few curly hairs on his chin, with an empty sleeve fastened to his left shoulder and two medals pinned to his jacket. Ya-Bon had had one cheek, one side of his jaw, half his mouth and the whole of his palate smashed by a splinter of shell. The other half of that mouth was split to the ear in a laugh which never seemed to cease and which was all the more surprising because the wounded portion of the face, patched up as best it could be and covered with a grafted skin, remained impassive.

Moreover, Ya-Bon had lost his power of speech. The most that he could do was to emit a sequence of indistinct grunts in which his nickname of Ya-Bon was everlastingly repeated.

He uttered it once more with a satisfied air, glancing by turns at his master and his victim, like a good sporting-dog standing over the bird which he has retrieved.

"Good," said the officer. "But, next time, go to work more gently."

He bent over the man, felt his heart and, on seeing that he had only fainted, asked the nurse:

"Do you know him?"

"No," she said.

"Are you sure? Have you never seen that head anywhere?"

It was a very big head, with black hair, plastered down with grease, and a thick beard. The man's clothes, which were of dark-blue serge and well-cut, showed him to be in easy circumstances.

"Never.. never," the girl declared.

Captain Belval searched the man's pockets. They contained no papers.

"Very well," he said, rising to his feet, "we will wait till he wakes up and question him then. Ya-Bon, tie up his arms and legs and stay here, in the hall. The rest of you fellows, go back to the home: it's time you were indoors. I have my key. Say good-by to Little Mother Coralie and trot off."

And, when good-by had been said, he pushed them outside, came back to the nurse, led her into the drawing-room and said:

"Now let's talk, Little Mother Coralie. First of all, before we try to explain things, listen to me. It won't take long."

They were sitting before the merrily blazing fire. Patrice Belval slipped a hassock under Little Mother Coralie's feet, put out a light that seemed to worry her and, when he felt certain that she was comfortable, began:

"As you know, Little Mother Coralie, I left the hospital a week ago and am staying on the Boulevard Maillot, at Neuilly, in the home reserved for the convalescent patients of the hospital. I sleep there at night and have my wounds dressed in the morning. The rest of the time I spend in loafing: I stroll about, lunch and dine where the mood takes me and go and call on my friends. Well, this morning I was waiting for one of them in a big café-restaurant on the boulevard, when I overheard the end of a conversation... But I must tell you that the place is divided into two by a partition standing about six feet high, with the customers of the café on one side and those of the restaurant on the other. I was all by myself in the restaurant; and the two men, who had their backs turned to me and who in any case were out of sight, probably thought that there was no one there at all, for they were speaking rather louder than they need have done, considering the sentences which I overheard.. and which I afterwards wrote down in my little note-book."

He took the note-book from his pocket and went on:

"These sentences, which caught my attention for reasons which you will understand presently, were preceded by some others in which there was a reference to sparks, to a shower of sparks that had already occurred twice before the war, a sort of night signal for the possible repetition of which they proposed to watch, so that they might act quickly as soon as it appeared. Does none of this tell you anything?"

"No. Why?"

"You shall see. By the way, I forgot to tell you that the two were talking English, quite correctly, but with an accent which assured me that neither of them was an Englishman. Here is what they said, faithfully translated: 'To finish up, therefore,' said one, 'everything is decided. You and he will be at the appointed place at a little before seven this evening.' 'We shall be there, colonel. We have engaged our taxi.' 'Good. Remember that the little woman leaves her hospital at seven o'clock.' 'Have no fear. There can't be any mistake, because she always goes the same way, down the Rue Pierre-Charron.' 'And your whole plan is settled?' 'In every particular. The thing will happen in the square at the end of the Rue de Chaillot. Even granting that there may be people about, they will have no time to rescue her, for we shall act too quickly.' 'Are you certain of your driver?' 'I am certain that we shall pay him enough to secure his obedience. That's all we want.' 'Capital. I'll wait for you at the place you know of, in a motor-car. You'll hand the little woman over to me. From that moment, we shall be masters of the situation.' 'And you of the little woman, colonel, which isn't bad for you, for she's deucedly pretty.' 'Deucedly, as you say. I've known her a long time by sight; and, upon my word..' The two began to laugh coarsely and called for their bill. I at once got up and went to the door on the boulevard, but only one of them came out by that door, a man with a big drooping mustache and a gray felt hat. The other had left by the door in the street round the corner. There was only one taxi in the road. The man took it and I had to give up all hope of following him. Only.. only, as I knew that you left the hospital at seven o'clock every evening and that you went along the Rue Pierre-Charron, I was justified, wasn't I, in believing.. ?"

The captain stopped. The girl reflected, with a thoughtful air. Presently she asked:

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"Warn you!" he exclaimed. "And, if, after all, it wasn't you? Why alarm you? And, if, on the other hand, it was you, why put you on your guard? After the attempt had failed, your enemies would have laid another trap for you; and we, not knowing of it, would have been unable to prevent it. No, the best thing was to accept the fight. I enrolled a little band of your former patients who were being treated at the home; and, as the friend whom I was expecting to meet happened to live in the square, here, in this house, I asked him to place his rooms at my disposal from six to nine

o'clock. That's what I did, Little Mother Coralie. And now that you know as much as I do, what do you think of it?"

She gave him her hand:

"I think you have saved me from an unknown danger that looks like a very great one; and I thank you."

"No, no," he said, "I can accept no thanks. I was so glad to have succeeded! What I want to know is your opinion of the business itself?"

Without a second's hesitation, she replied:

"I have none. Not a word, not an incident, in all that you have told me, suggests the least idea to me."

"You have no enemies, to your knowledge?"

"Personally, no."

"What about that man to whom your two assailants were to hand you over and who says that he knows you?"

"Doesn't every woman," she said, with a slight blush, "come across men who pursue her more or less openly? I can't tell who it is."

The captain was silent for a while and then went on:

"When all is said, our only hope of clearing up the matter lies in questioning our prisoner. If he refuses to answer, I shall hand him over to the police, who will know how to get to the bottom of the business."

The girl gave a start:

"The police?"

"Well, of course. What would you have me do with the fellow? He doesn't belong to me. He belongs to the police."

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "Not on any account! What, have my life gone into?.. Have to appear before the magistrate?.. Have my name mixed up in all this?.."

"And yet, Little Mother Coralie, I can't."

"Oh, I beg, I beseech you, as my friend, find some way out of it, but don't have me talked about! I don't want to be talked about!"

The captain looked at her, somewhat surprised to see her in such a state of agitation, and said:

"You sha'n't be talked about, Little Mother Coralie, I promise you."

"Then what will you do with that man?"

"Well," he said, with a laugh, "I shall begin by asking him politely if he will condescend to answer my questions; then thank him for his civil behavior to you; and lastly beg him to be good enough to go away."

He rose:

"Do you wish to see him, Little Mother Coralie?"

"No," she said, "I am so tired! If you don't want me, question him by yourself. You can tell me about it afterwards.."

She seemed quite exhausted by all this fresh excitement and strain, added to all those which already rendered her life as a nurse so hard. The captain did not insist and went out, closing the door of the drawing-room after him.

She heard him saying:

"Well, Ya-Bon, have you kept a good watch! No news? And how's your prisoner?.. Ah, there you are, my fine fellow! Have you got your breath back? Oh, I know Ya-Bon's hand is a bit heavy!.. What's this? Won't you answer?.. Hallo, what's happened? Hanged if I don't think."

A cry escaped him. The girl ran to the hall. She met the captain, who tried to bar her way.

"Don't come," he said, in great agitation. "What's the use!"

"But you're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"I?"

"There's blood on your shirt-cuff."

"So there is, but it's nothing: it's the man's blood that must have stained me."

"Then he was wounded?"

"Yes, or at least his mouth was bleeding. Some blood-vessel."

"Why, surely Ya-Bon didn't grip as hard as that?"

"It wasn't Ya-Bon."

"Then who was it?"

"His accomplices."

"Did they come back?"

"Yes; and they've strangled him."

"But it's not possible!"

She pushed by and went towards the prisoner. He did not move. His face had the pallor of death. Round his neck was a red-silk string, twisted very thin and with a buckle at either end.

CHAPTER II

RIGHT HAND AND LEFT LEG

"One rogue less in the world, Little Mother Coralie!" cried Patrice Belval, after he had led the girl back to the drawing-room and made a rapid investigation with Ya-Bon. "Remember his name – I found it engraved on his watch – Mustapha Rovalaïof, the name of a rogue!"

He spoke gaily, with no emotion in his voice, and continued, as he walked up and down the room:

"You and I, Little Mother Coralie, who have witnessed so many tragedies and seen so many good fellows die, need not waste tears over the death of Mustapha Rovalaïof or his murder by his accomplices. Not even a funeral oration, eh? Ya-Bon has taken him under his arm, waited until the square was clear and carried him to the Rue Brignoles, with orders to fling the gentleman over the railings into the garden of the Musée Galliéra. The railings are high. But Ya-Bon's right hand knows no obstacles. And so, Little Mother Coralie, the matter is buried. You won't be talked about; and, this time, I claim a word of thanks."

He stopped to laugh:

"A word of thanks, but no compliments. By Jove, I don't make much of a warder! It was clever the way those beggars snatched my prisoner. Why didn't I foresee that your other assailant, the man in the gray-felt hat, would go and tell the third, who was waiting in his motor, and that they would both come back together to rescue their companion? And they came back. And, while you and I were chatting, they must have forced the servants' entrance, passed through the kitchen, come to the little door between the pantry and the hall and pushed it open. There, close by them, lay their man, still unconscious and firmly bound, on his sofa. What were they to do? It was impossible to get him out of the hall without alarming Ya-Bon. And yet, if they didn't release him, he would speak, give away his accomplices and ruin a carefully prepared plan. So one of the two must have leant forward stealthily, put out his arm, thrown his string round that throat which Ya-Bon had already handled pretty roughly, gathered the buckles at the two ends and pulled, pulled, quietly, until death came. Not a sound. Not a sigh. The whole operation performed in silence. We come, we kill and we go away. Good-night. The trick is done and our friend won't talk."

Captain Belval's merriment increased:

"Our friend won't talk," he repeated, "and the police, when they find his body to-morrow morning inside a railed garden, won't understand a word of the business. Nor we either, Little Mother Coralie; and we shall never know why those men tried to kidnap you. It's only too true! I may not be up to much as a warder, but I'm beneath contempt as a detective!"

He continued to walk up and down the room. The fact that his leg or rather his calf had been amputated seemed hardly to inconvenience him; and, as the joints of the knee and thighbone had retained their mobility, there was at most a certain want of rhythm in the action of his hips and shoulders. Moreover, his tall figure tended to correct this lameness, which was reduced to insignificant proportions by the ease of his movements and the indifference with which he appeared to accept it.

He had an open countenance, rather dark in color, burnt by the sun and tanned by the weather, with an expression that was frank, cheerful and often bantering. He must have been between twenty-eight and thirty. His manner suggested that of the officers of the First Empire, to whom their life in camp imparted a special air which they subsequently brought into the ladies' drawing-rooms.

He stopped to look at Coralie, whose shapely profile stood out against the gleams from the fireplace. Then he came and sat beside her:

"I know nothing about you," he said softly. "At the hospital the doctors and nurses call you Madame Coralie. Your patients prefer to say Little Mother. What is your married or your maiden name? Have you a husband or are you a widow? Where do you live? Nobody knows. You arrive every day at the same time and you go away by the same street. Sometimes an old serving-man, with long gray hair and a bristly beard, with a comforter round his neck and a pair of yellow spectacles on his nose, brings you or fetches you. Sometimes also he waits for you, always sitting on the same chair in the covered yard. He has been asked questions, but he never gives an answer. I know only one thing, therefore, about you, which is that you are adorably good and kind and that you are also – I may say it, may I not? – adorably beautiful. And it is perhaps, Little Mother Coralie, because I know nothing about your life that I imagine it so mysterious, and, in some way, so sad. You give the impression of living amid sorrow and anxiety; the feeling that you are all alone. There is no one who devotes himself to making you happy and taking care of you. So I thought – I have long thought and waited for an opportunity of telling you – I thought that you must need a friend, a brother, who would advise and protect you. Am I not right, Little Mother Coralie?"

As he went on, Coralie seemed to shrink into herself and to place a greater distance between them, as though she did not wish him to penetrate those secret regions of which he spoke.

"No," she murmured, "you are mistaken. My life is quite simple. I do not need to be defended."

"You do not need to be defended!" he cried, with increasing animation. "What about those men who tried to kidnap you? That plot hatched against you? That plot which your assailants are so afraid to see discovered that they go to the length of killing the one who allowed himself to be caught? Is that nothing? Is it mere delusion on my part when I say that you are surrounded by dangers, that you have enemies who stick at nothing, that you have to be defended against their attempts and that, if you decline the offer of my assistance, I.. Well, I.. ?"

She persisted in her silence, showed herself more and more distant, almost hostile. The officer struck the marble mantelpiece with his fist, and, bending over her, finished his sentence in a determined tone:

"Well, if you decline the offer of my assistance, I shall force it on you."

She shook her head.

"I shall force it on you," he repeated, firmly. "It is my duty and my right."

"No," she said, in an undertone.

"My absolute right," said Captain Belval, "for a reason which outweighs all the others and makes it unnecessary for me even to consult you."

"What do you mean?"

"I love you."

He brought out the words plainly, not like a lover venturing on a timid declaration, but like a man proud of the sentiment that he feels and happy to proclaim it.

She lowered her eyes and blushed; and he cried, exultantly:

"You can take it, Little Mother, from me. No impassioned outbursts, no sighs, no waving of the arms, no clapping of the hands. Just three little words, which I tell you without going on my knees. And it's the easier for me because you know it. Yes, Madame Coralie, it's all very well to look so shy, but you know my love for you and you've known it as long as I have. We saw it together take birth when your dear little hands touched my battered head. The others used to torture me. With you, it was nothing but caresses. So was the pity in your eyes and the tears that fell because I was in pain. But can any one see you without loving you? Your seven patients who were here just now are all in love with you, Little Mother Coralie. Ya-Bon worships the ground you walk on. Only they are privates. They cannot speak. I am an officer; and I speak without hesitation or embarrassment, believe me."

Coralie had put her hands to her burning cheeks and sat silent, bending forward.

"You understand what I mean, don't you," he went on, in a voice that rang, "when I say that I speak without hesitation or embarrassment? If I had been before the war what I am now, a maimed man, I should not have had the same assurance and I should have declared my love for you humbly and begged your pardon for my boldness. But now!.. Believe me, Little Mother Coralie, when I sit here face to face with the woman I adore, I do not think of my infirmity. Not for a moment do I feel the impression that I can appear ridiculous or presumptuous in your eyes."

He stopped, as though to take breath, and then, rising, went on:

"And it must needs be so. People will have to understand that those who have been maimed in this war do not look upon themselves as outcasts, lame ducks, or lepers, but as absolutely normal men. Yes, normal! One leg short? What about it? Does that rob a man of his brain or heart? Then, because the war has deprived me of a leg, or an arm, or even both legs or both arms, I have no longer the right to love a woman save at the risk of meeting with a rebuff or imagining that she pities me? Pity! But we don't want the woman to pity us, nor to make an effort to love us, nor even to think that she is doing a charity because she treats us kindly. What we demand, from women and from the world at large, from those whom we meet in the street and from those who belong to the same set as ourselves, is absolute equality with the rest, who have been saved from our fate by their lucky stars or their cowardice."

The captain once more struck the mantelpiece:

"Yes, absolute equality! We all of us, whether we have lost a leg or an arm, whether blind in one eye or two, whether crippled or deformed, claim to be just as good, physically and morally, as any one you please; and perhaps better. What! Shall men who have used their legs to rush upon the enemy be outdistanced in life, because they no longer have those legs, by men who have sat and warmed their toes at an office-fire? What nonsense! We want our place in the sun as well as the others. It is our due; and we shall know how to get it and keep it. There is no happiness to which we are not entitled and no work for which we are not capable with a little exercise and training. Ya-Bon's right hand is already worth any pair of hands in the wide world; and Captain Belval's left leg allows him to do his five miles an hour if he pleases."

He began to laugh:

"Right hand and left leg; left hand and right leg: what does it matter which we have saved, if we know how to use it? In what respect have we fallen off? Whether it's a question of obtaining a position or perpetuating our race, are we not as good as we were? And perhaps even better. I venture to say that the children which we shall give to the country will be just as well-built as ever, with arms and legs and the rest.. not to mention a mighty legacy of pluck and spirit. That's what we claim, Little Mother Coralie. We refuse to admit that our wooden legs keep us back or that we cannot stand as upright on our crutches as on legs of flesh and bone. We do not consider that devotion to us is any sacrifice or that it's necessary to talk of heroism when a girl has the honor to marry a blind soldier! Once more, we are not creatures outside the pale. We have not fallen off in any way whatever; and this is a truth before which everybody will bow for the next two or three generations. You can understand that, in a country like France, when maimed men are to be met by the hundred thousand, the conception of what makes a perfect man will no longer be as hard and fast as it was. In the new form of humanity which is preparing, there will be men with two arms and men with only one, just as there are fair men and dark, bearded men and clean-shaven. And it will all seem quite natural. And every one will lead the life he pleases, without needing to be complete in every limb. And, as my life is wrapped up in you, Little Mother Coralie, and as my happiness depends on you, I thought I would wait no longer before making you my little speech... Well! That's finished! I have plenty more to say on the subject, but it can't all be said in a day, can it?"

He broke off, thrown out of his stride after all by Coralie's silence. She had not stirred since the first words of love that he uttered. Her hands had sought her forehead; and her shoulders were shaking slightly.

He stooped and, with infinite gentleness, drawing aside the slender fingers, uncovered her beautiful face:

"Why are you crying, Little Mother Coralie?"

He was calling her *tu* now, but she did not mind. Between a man and the woman who has bent over his wounds relations of a special kind arise; and Captain Belval in particular had those rather familiar, but still respectful, ways at which it seems impossible to take offence.

"Have *I* made you cry?" he asked.

"No," she said, in a low voice, "it's all of you who upset me. It's your cheerfulness, your pride, your way not of submitting to fate, but mastering it. The humblest of you raises himself above his nature without an effort; and I know nothing finer or more touching than that indifference."

He sat down beside her:

"Then you're not angry with me for saying.. what I said?"

"Angry with you?" she replied, pretending to mistake his meaning. "Why, every woman thinks as you do. If women, in bestowing their affection, had to choose among the men returning from the war, the choice I am sure would be in favor of those who have suffered most cruelly."

He shook his head:

"You see, I am asking for something more than affection and a more definite answer to what I said. Shall I remind you of my words?"

"No."

"Then your answer.. ?"

"My answer, dear friend, is that you must not speak those words again."

He put on a solemn air:

"You forbid me?"

"I do."

"In that case, I swear to say nothing more until I see you again."

"You will not see me again," she murmured.

Captain Belval was greatly amused at this:

"I say, I say! And why sha'n't I see you again, Little Mother Coralie?"

"Because I don't wish it."

"And your reason, please?"

"My reason?"

She turned her eyes to him and said, slowly:

"I am married."

Belval seemed in no way disconcerted by this news. On the contrary, he said, in the calmest of tones:

"Well, you must marry again! No doubt your husband is an old man and you do not love him. He will therefore understand that, as you have some one in love with you."

"Don't jest, please."

He caught hold of her hand, just as she was rising to go:

"You are right, Little Mother Coralie, and I apologize for not adopting a more serious manner to speak to you of very serious things. It's a question of our two lives. I am profoundly convinced that they are moving towards each other and that you are powerless to restrain them. That is why your answer is beside the point. I ask nothing of you. I expect everything from fate. It is fate that will bring us together."

"No," she said.

"Yes," he declared, "that is how things will happen."

"It is not. They will not and shall not happen like that. You must give me your word of honor not to try to see me again nor even to learn my name. I might have granted more if you had been

content to remain friends. The confession which you have made sets a barrier between us. I want nobody in my life.. nobody!"

She made this declaration with a certain vehemence and at the same time tried to release her arm from his grasp. Patrice Belval resisted her efforts and said:

"You are wrong... You have no right to expose yourself to danger like this... Please reflect."

She pushed him away. As she did so, she knocked off the mantelpiece a little bag which she had placed there. It fell on the carpet and opened. Two or three things escaped, and she picked them up, while Patrice Belval knelt down on the floor to help her:

"Here," he said, "you've missed this."

It was a little case in plaited straw, which had also come open; the beads of a rosary protruded from it.

They both stood up in silence. Captain Belval examined the rosary.

"What a curious coincidence!" he muttered. "These amethyst beads! This old-fashioned gold filigree setting!.. It's strange to find the same materials and the same workmanship.."

He gave a start, and it was so marked that Coralie asked:

"Why, what's the matter?"

He was holding in his fingers a bead larger than most of the others, forming a link between the string of tens and the shorter prayer-chain. And this bead was broken half-way across, almost level with the gold setting which held it.

"The coincidence," he said, "is so inconceivable that I hardly dare.. And yet the face can be verified at once. But first, one question: who gave you this rosary?"

"Nobody gave it to me. I've always had it."

"But it must have belonged to somebody before?"

"To my mother, I suppose."

"Your mother?"

"I expect so, in the same way as the different jewels which she left me."

"Is your mother dead?"

"Yes, she died when I was four years old. I have only the vaguest recollection of her. But what has all this to do with a rosary?"

"It's because of this," he said. "Because of this amethyst bead broken in two."

He undid his jacket and took his watch from his waistcoat-pocket. It had a number of trinkets fastened to it by a little leather and silver strap. One of these trinkets consisted of the half of an amethyst bead, also broken across, also held in a filigree setting. The original size of the two beads seemed to be identical. The two amethysts were of the same color and contained in the same filigree.

Coralie and Belval looked at each other anxiously. She stammered:

"It's only an accident, nothing else."

"I agree," he said. "But, supposing these two halves fit each other exactly."

"It's impossible," she said, herself frightened at the thought of the simple little act needed for the indisputable proof.

The officer, however, decided upon that act. He brought his right hand, which held the rosary-bead, and his left, which held the trinket, together. The hands hesitated, felt about and stopped. The contact was made.

The projections and indentations of the broken stones corresponded precisely. Each protruding part found a space to fit it. The two half amethysts were the two halves of the same amethyst. When joined, they formed one and the same bead.

There was a long pause, laden with excitement and mystery. Then, speaking in a low voice:

"I do not know either exactly where this trinket comes from," Captain Belval said. "Ever since I was a child, I used to see it among other things of trifling value which I kept in a cardboard

box: watch-keys, old rings, old-fashioned seals. I picked out these trinkets from among them two or three years ago. Where does this one come from? I don't know. But what I do know."

He had separated the two pieces and, examining them carefully, concluded:

"What I do know, beyond a doubt, is that the largest bead in this rosary came off one day and broke; and that the other, with its setting, went to form the trinket which I now have. You and I therefore possess the two halves of a thing which somebody else possessed twenty years ago."

He went up to her and, in the same low and rather serious voice, said:

"You protested just now when I declared my faith in destiny and my certainty that events were leading us towards each other. Do you still deny it? For, after all, this is either an accident so extraordinary that we have no right to admit it or an actual fact which proves that our two lives have already touched in the past at some mysterious point and that they will meet again in the future, never to part. And that is why, without waiting for the perhaps distant future, I offer you to-day, when danger hangs over you, the support of my friendship. Observe that I am no longer speaking of love but only of friendship. Do you accept?"

She was nonplussed and so much perturbed by that miracle of the two broken amethysts, fitting each other exactly, that she appeared not to hear Belval's voice.

"Do you accept?" he repeated.

After a moment she replied:

"No."

"Then the proof which destiny has given you of its wishes does not satisfy you?" he said, good-humoredly.

"We must not see each other again," she declared.

"Very well. I will leave it to chance. It will not be for long. Meanwhile, I promise to make no effort to see you."

"Nor to find out my name?"

"Yes, I promise you."

"Good-by," she said, giving him her hand.

"*Au revoir*," he answered.

She moved away. When she reached the door, she seemed to hesitate. He was standing motionless by the chimney. Once more she said:

"Good-by."

"*Au revoir*, Little Mother Coralie."

Then she went out.

Only when the street-door had closed behind her did Captain Belval go to one of the windows. He saw Coralie passing through the trees, looking quite small in the surrounding darkness. He felt a pang at his heart. Would he ever see her again?

"Shall I? Rather!" he exclaimed. "Why, to-morrow perhaps. Am I not the favorite of the gods?"

And, taking his stick, he set off, as he said, with his wooden leg foremost.

That evening, after dining at the nearest restaurant, Captain Belval went to Neuilly. The home run in connection with the hospital was a pleasant villa on the Boulevard Maillot, looking out on the Bois de Boulogne. Discipline was not too strictly enforced. The captain could come in at any hour of the night; and the man easily obtained leave from the matron.

"Is Ya-Bon there?" he asked this lady.

"Yes, he's playing cards with his sweetheart."

"He has the right to love and be loved," he said. "Any letters for me?"

"No, only a parcel."

"From whom?"

"A commissioner brought it and just said that it was 'for Captain Belval.' I put it in your room."

The officer went up to his bedroom on the top floor and saw the parcel, done up in paper and string, on the table. He opened it and discovered a box. The box contained a key, a large, rusty key, of a shape and manufacture that were obviously old.

What could it all mean? There was no address on the box and no mark. He presumed that there was some mistake which would come to light of itself; and he slipped the key into his pocket.

"Enough riddles for one day," he thought. "Let's go to bed."

But when he went to the window to draw the curtains he saw, across the trees of the Bois, a cascade of sparks which spread to some distance in the dense blackness of the night. And he remembered the conversation which he had overheard in the restaurant and the rain of sparks mentioned by the men who were plotting to kidnap Little Mother Coralie..

CHAPTER III THE RUSTY KEY

When Patrice Belval was eight years old he was sent from Paris, where he had lived till then, to a French boarding-school in London. Here he remained for ten years. At first he used to hear from his father weekly. Then, one day, the head-master told him that he was an orphan, that provision had been made for the cost of his education and that, on his majority, he would receive through an English solicitor his paternal inheritance, amounting to some eight thousand pounds.

Two hundred thousand francs could never be enough for a young man who soon proved himself to possess expensive tastes and who, when sent to Algeria to perform his military service, found means to run up twenty thousand francs of debts before coming into his money. He therefore started by squandering his patrimony and, having done so, settled down to work. Endowed with an active temperament and an ingenious brain, possessing no special vocation, but capable of anything that calls for initiative and resolution, full of ideas, with both the will and the knowledge to carry out an enterprise, he inspired confidence in others, found capital as he needed it and started one venture after another, including electrical schemes, the purchase of rivers and waterfalls, the organization of motor services in the colonies, of steamship lines and of mining companies. In a few years he had floated a dozen of such enterprises, all of which succeeded.

The war came to him as a wonderful adventure. He flung himself into it with heart and soul. As a sergeant in a colonial regiment, he won his lieutenant's stripes on the Marne. He was wounded in the calf on the 15th of September and had it amputated the same day. Two months after, by some mysterious wirepulling, cripple though he was, he began to go up as observer in the aeroplane of one of our best pilots. A shrapnel-shell put an end to the exploits of both heroes on the 10th of January. This time, Captain Belval, suffering from a serious wound in the head, was discharged and sent to the hospital in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. About the same period, the lady whom he was to call Little Mother Coralie also entered the hospital as a nurse.

There he was trepanned. The operation was successful, but complications remained. He suffered a good deal of pain, though he never uttered a complaint and, in fact, with his own good-humor kept up the spirits of his companions in misfortune, all of whom were devoted to him. He made them laugh, consoled them and stimulated them with his cheeriness and his constant happy manner of facing the worst positions.

Not one of them is ever likely to forget the way in which he received a manufacturer who called to sell him a mechanical leg:

"Aha, a mechanical leg! And what for, sir? To take in people, I suppose, so that they may not notice that I've lost a bit of mine? Then you consider, sir, that it's a blemish to have your leg amputated, and that I, a French officer, ought to hide it as a disgrace?"

"Not at all, captain. Still."

"And what's the price of that apparatus of yours?"

"Five hundred francs."

"Five hundred francs! And you think me capable of spending five hundred francs on a mechanical leg, when there are a hundred thousand poor devils who have been wounded as I have and who will have to go on showing their wooden stumps?"

The men sitting within hearing reveled with delight. Little Mother Coralie herself listened with a smile. And what would Patrice Belval not have given for a smile from Little Mother Coralie?

As he told her, he had fallen in love with her from the first, touched by her appealing beauty, her artless grace, her soft eyes, her gentle soul, which seemed to bend over the patients and to fondle them like a soothing caress. From the very first, the charm of her stole into his being and

at the same time compassed it about. Her voice gave him new life. She bewitched him with the glance of her eyes and with her fragrant presence. And yet, while yielding to the empire of this love, he had an immense craving to devote himself to and to place his strength at the service of this delicate little creature, whom he felt to be surrounded with danger.

And now events were proving that he was right, the danger was taking definite shape and he had had the happiness to snatch Coralie from the grasp of her enemies. He rejoiced at the result of the first battle, but could not look upon it as over. The attacks were bound to be repeated. And even now was he not entitled to ask himself if there was not some close connection between the plot prepared against Coralie that morning and the sort of signal given by the shower of sparks? Did the two facts announced by the speakers at the restaurant not form part of the same suspicious machination?

The sparks continued to glitter in the distance. So far as Patrice Belval could judge, they came from the riverside, at some spot between two extreme points which might be the Trocadéro on the left and the Gare de Passy on the right.

"A mile or two at most, as the crow flies," he said to himself. "Why not go there? We'll soon see."

A faint light filtered through the key-hole of a door on the second floor. It was Ya-Bon's room; and the matron had told him that Ya-Bon was playing cards with his sweetheart. He walked in.

Ya-Bon was no longer playing. He had fallen asleep in an armchair, in front of the outspread cards, and on the pinned-back sleeve hanging from his left shoulder lay the head of a woman, an appallingly common head, with lips as thick as Ya-Bon's, revealing a set of black teeth, and with a yellow, greasy skin that seemed soaked in oil. It was Angèle, the kitchen-maid, Ya-Bon's sweetheart. She snored aloud.

Patrice looked at them contentedly. The sight confirmed the truth of his theories. If Ya-Bon could find some one to care for him, might not the most sadly mutilated heroes aspire likewise to all the joys of love?

He touched the Senegalese on the shoulder. Ya-Bon woke up and smiled, or rather, divining the presence of his captain, smiled even before he woke.

"I want you, Ya-Bon."

Ya-Bon uttered a grunt of pleasure and gave a push to Angèle, who fell over on the table and went on snoring.

Coming out of the house, Patrice saw no more sparks. They were hidden behind the trees. He walked along the boulevard and, to save time, went by the Ceinture railway to the Avenue Henri-Martin. Here he turned down the Rue de la Tour, which runs to Passy.

On the way he kept talking to Ya-Bon about what he had in his mind, though he well knew that the negro did not understand much of what he said. But this was a habit with him. Ya-Bon, first his comrade-in-arms and then his orderly, was as devoted to him as a dog. He had lost a limb on the same day as his officer and was wounded in the head on the same day; he believed himself destined to undergo the same experiences throughout; and he rejoiced at having been twice wounded just as he would have rejoiced at dying at the same time as Captain Belval. On his side, the captain rewarded this humble, dumb devotion by unbending genially to his companion; he treated him with an ironical and sometimes impatient humor which heightened the negro's love for him. Ya-Bon played the part of the passive confidant who is consulted without being regarded and who is made to bear the brunt of his interlocutor's hasty temper.

"What do you think of all this, Master Ya-Bon?" asked the captain, walking arm-in-arm with him. "I have an idea that it's all part of the same business. Do you think so too?"

Ya-Bon had two grunts, one of which meant yes, the other no. He grunted out:

"Yes."

"So there's no doubt about it," the officer declared, "and we must admit that Little Mother Coralie is threatened with a fresh danger. Is that so?"

"Yes," grunted Ya-Bon, who always approved, on principle.

"Very well. It now remains to be seen what that shower of sparks means. I thought for a moment that, as we had our first visit from the Zeppelins a week ago.. are you listening to me?"

"Yes."

"I thought that it was a treacherous signal with a view to a second Zeppelin visit."

"Yes."

"No, you idiot, it's not yes. How could it be a Zeppelin signal when, according to the conversation which I overheard, the signal had already been given twice before the war. Besides, is it really a signal?"

"No."

"How do you mean, no? What else could it be, you silly ass? You'd do better to hold your tongue and listen to me, all the more as you don't even know what it's all about... No more do I, for that matter, and I confess that I'm at an utter loss. Lord, it's a complicated business, and I'm not much of a hand at solving these problems."

Patrice Belval was even more perplexed when he came to the bottom of the Rue de la Tour. There were several roads in front of him, and he did not know which to take. Moreover, though he was in the middle of Passy, not a spark shone in the dark sky.

"It's finished, I expect," he said, "and we've had our trouble for nothing. It's your fault, Ya-Bon. If you hadn't made me lose precious moments in snatching you from the arms of your beloved we should have arrived in time. I admit Angèle's charms, but, after all."

He took his bearings, feeling more and more undecided. The expedition undertaken on chance and with insufficient information was certainly yielding no results; and he was thinking of abandoning it when a closed private car came out of the Rue Franklin, from the direction of the Trocadéro, and some one inside shouted through the speaking-tube:

"Bear to the left.. and then straight on, till I stop you."

Now it appeared to Captain Belval that this voice had the same foreign inflection as one of those which he had heard that morning at the restaurant.

"Can it be the beggar in the gray hat," he muttered, "one of those who tried to carry off Little Mother Coralie?"

"Yes," grunted Ya-Bon.

"Yes. The signal of the sparks explains his presence in these parts. We mustn't lose sight of this track. Off with you, Ya-Bon."

But there was no need for Ya-Bon to hurry. The car had gone down the Rue Raynouard, and Belval himself arrived just as it was stopping three or four hundred yards from the turning, in front of a large carriage-entrance on the left-hand side.

Five men alighted. One of them rang. Thirty or forty seconds passed. Then Patrice heard the bell tinkle a second time. The five men waited, standing packed close together on the pavement. At last, after a third ring, a small wicket contrived in one of the folding-doors was opened.

There was a pause and some argument. Whoever had opened the wicket appeared to be asking for explanations. But suddenly two of the men bore heavily on the folding-door, which gave way before their thrust and let the whole gang through.

There was a loud noise as the door slammed to. Captain Belval at once studied his surroundings.

The Rue Raynouard is an old country-road which at one time used to wind among the houses and gardens of the village of Passy, on the side of the hills bathed by the Seine. In certain places, which unfortunately are becoming more and more rare, it has retained a provincial aspect. It is skirted by old properties. Old houses stand hidden amidst the trees: that in which Balzac lived has

been piously preserved. It was in this street that the mysterious garden lay where Arsène Lupin discovered a farmer-general's diamonds hidden in a crack of an old sundial.¹

The car was still standing outside the house into which the five men had forced their way; and this prevented Patrice Belval from coming nearer. It was built in continuation of a wall and seemed to be one of the private mansions dating back to the First Empire. It had a very long front with two rows of round windows, protected by gratings on the ground-floor and solid shutters on the story above. There was another building farther down, forming a separate wing.

"There's nothing to be done on this side," said the captain. "It's as impregnable as a feudal stronghold. Let's look elsewhere."

From the Rue Raynouard, narrow lanes, which used to divide the old properties, make their way down to the river. One of them skirted the wall that preceded the house. Belval turned down it with Ya-Bon. It was constructed of ugly pointed pebbles, was broken into steps and faintly lighted by the gleam of a street-lamp.

"Lend me a hand, Ya-Bon. The wall is too high. But perhaps with the aid of the lamp-post."

Assisted by the negro, he hoisted himself to the lamp and was stretching out one of his hands when he noticed that all this part of the wall bristled with broken glass, which made it absolutely impossible to grasp. He slid down again.

"Upon my word, Ya-Bon," he said, angrily, "you might have warned me! Another second and you would have made me cut my hands to pieces. What are you thinking of? In fact, I can't imagine what made you so anxious to come with me at all costs."

There was a turn in the lane, hiding the light, so that they were now in utter darkness, and Captain Belval had to grope his way along. He felt the negro's hand come down upon his shoulder.

"What do you want, Ya-Bon?"

The hand pushed him against the wall. At this spot there was a door in an embrasure.

"Well, yes," he said, "that's a door. Do you think I didn't see it? Oh, no one has eyes but Master Ya-Bon, I suppose."

Ya-Bon handed him a box of matches. He struck several, one after the other, and examined the door.

"What did I tell you?" he said between his teeth. "There's nothing to be done. Massive wood, barred and studded with iron... Look, there's no handle on this side, merely a key-hole... Ah, what we want is a key, made to measure and cut for the purpose!.. For instance, a key like the one which the commissioner left for me at the home just now.."

He stopped. An absurd idea flitted through his brain; and yet, absurd as it was, he felt that he was bound to perform the trifling action which it suggested to him. He therefore retraced his steps. He had the key on him. He took it from his pocket.

He struck a fresh light. The key-hole appeared. Belval inserted the key at the first attempt. He bore on it to the left: the key turned in the lock. He pushed the door: it opened.

"Come along in," he said.

The negro did not stir a foot. Patrice could understand his amazement. All said, he himself was equally amazed. By what unprecedented miracle was the key just the key of this very door? By what miracle was the unknown person who had sent it him able to guess that he would be in a position to use it without further instructions? A miracle indeed!

But Patrice had resolved to act without trying to solve the riddle which a mischievous chance seemed bent upon setting him.

"Come along in," he repeated, triumphantly.

¹ *The Confessions of Arsène Lupin*. By Maurice Leblanc. Translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos. III. *The Sign of the Shadow*.

Branches struck him in the face and he perceived that he was walking on grass and that there must be a garden lying in front of him. It was so dark that he could not see the paths against the blackness of the turf; and, after walking for a minute or two, he hit his foot against some rocks with a sheet of water on them.

"Oh, confound it!" he cursed. "I'm all wet. Damn you, Ya-Bon!"

He had not finished speaking when a furious barking was heard at the far end of the garden; and the sound at once came nearer, with extreme rapidity. Patrice realized that a watchdog, perceiving their presence, was rushing upon them, and, brave as he was, he shuddered, because of the impressiveness of this attack in complete darkness. How was he to defend himself? A shot would betray them; and yet he carried no weapon but his revolver.

The dog came dashing on, a powerful animal, to judge by the noise it made, suggesting the rush of a wild boar through the copsewood. It must have broken its chain, for it was accompanied by the clatter of iron. Patrice braced himself to meet it. But through the darkness he saw Ya-Bon pass before him to protect him, and the impact took place almost at once.

"Here, I say, Ya-Bon! Why did you get in front of me? It's all right, my lad, I'm coming!"

The two adversaries had rolled over on the grass. Patrice stooped down, seeking to rescue the negro. He touched the hair of an animal and then Ya-Bon's clothes. But the two were wriggling on the ground in so compact a mass and fighting so frantically that his interference was useless.

Moreover, the contest did not last long. In a few minutes the adversaries had ceased to move. A strangled death-rattle issued from the group.

"Is it all right, Ya-Bon?" whispered the captain, anxiously.

The negro stood up with a grunt. By the light of a match Patrice saw that he was holding at the end of his outstretched arm, of the one arm with which he had had to defend himself, a huge dog, which was gurgling, clutched round the throat by Ya-Bon's implacable fingers. A broken chain hung from its neck.

"Thank you, Ya-Bon. I've had a narrow escape. You can let him go now. He can't do us any harm, I think."

Ya-Bon obeyed. But he had no doubt squeezed too tight. The dog writhed for a moment on the grass, gave a few moans and then lay without moving.

"Poor brute!" said Patrice. "After all, he only did his duty in going for the burglars that we are. Let us do ours, Ya-Bon, which is nothing like as plain."

Something that shone like a window-pane guided his steps and led him, by a series of stairs cut in the rocks and of successive terraces, to the level ground on which the house was built. On this side also, all the windows were round and high up, like those in the streets, and barricaded with shutters. But one of them allowed the light which he had seen from below to filter through.

Telling Ya-Bon to hide in the shrubberies, he went up to the house, listened, caught an indistinct sound of voices, discovered that the shutters were too firmly closed to enable him either to see or to hear and, in this way, after the fourth window, reached a flight of steps. At the top of the steps was a door.

"Since they sent me the key of the garden," he said to himself, "there's no reason why this door, which leads from the house into the garden, should not be open."

It was open.

The voices indoors were now more clearly perceptible, and Belval observed that they reached him by the well of the staircase and that this staircase, which seemed to lead to an unoccupied part of the house, showed with an uncertain light above him.

He went up. A door stood ajar on the first floor. He slipped his head through the opening and went in. He found that he was on a narrow balcony which ran at mid-height around three sides of a large room, along book-shelves rising to the ceiling. Against the wall at either end of the room was an iron spiral staircase. Stacks of books were also piled against the bars of the railing which

protected the gallery, thus hiding Patrice from the view of the people on the ground-floor, ten or twelve feet below.

He gently separated two of these stacks. At that moment the sound of voices suddenly increased to a great uproar and he saw five men, shouting like lunatics, hurl themselves upon a sixth and fling him to the ground before he had time to lift a finger in self-defense.

Belval's first impulse was to rush to the victim's rescue. With the aid of Ya-Bon, who would have hastened to his call, he would certainly have intimidated the five men. The reason why he did not act was that, at any rate, they were using no weapons and appeared to have no murderous intentions. After depriving their victim of all power of movement, they were content to hold him by the throat, shoulders and ankles. Belval wondered what would happen next.

One of the five drew himself up briskly and, in a tone of command, said:

"Bind him... Put a gag in his mouth... Or let him call out, if he wants to: there's no one to hear him."

Patrice at once recognized one of the voices which he had heard that morning in the restaurant. Its owner was a short, slim-built, well-dressed man, with an olive complexion and a cruel face.

"At last we've got him," he said, "the rascal! And I think we shall get him to speak this time. Are you prepared to go all lengths, friends?"

One of the other four growled, spitefully:

"Yes. And at once, whatever happens!"

The last speaker had a big black mustache; and Patrice recognized the other man whose conversation at the restaurant he had overheard, that is to say, one of Coralie's assailants, the one who had taken to flight. His gray-felt hat lay on a chair.

"All lengths, Bournef, whatever happens, eh?" grinned the leader. "Well, let's get on with the work. So you refuse to give up your secret, Essarès, old man? We shall have some fun."

All their movements must have been prepared beforehand and the parts carefully arranged, for the actions which they carried out were performed in an incredibly prompt and methodical fashion.

After the man was tied up, they lifted him into an easy-chair with a very low back, to which they fastened him round the chest and waist with a rope. His legs, which were bound together, were placed on the seat of a heavy chair of the same height as the arm-chair, with the two feet projecting. Then the victim's shoes and socks were removed.

"Roll him along!" said the leader.

Between two of the four windows that overlooked the chimney was a large fire-place, in which burnt a red coal-fire, white in places with the intense heat of the hearth. The men pushed the two chairs bearing the victim until his bare feet were within twenty inches of the blazing coals.

In spite of his gag, the man uttered a hideous yell of pain, while his legs, in spite of their bonds, succeeded in contracting and curling upon themselves.

"Go on!" shouted the leader, passionately. "Go on! Nearer!"

Patrice Belval grasped his revolver.

"Oh, I'm going on too!" he said to himself. "I won't let that wretch be."

But, at this very moment, when he was on the point of drawing himself up and acting, a chance movement made him behold the most extraordinary and unexpected sight. Opposite him, on the other side of the room, in a part of the balcony corresponding with that where he was, he saw a woman's head, a head glued to the rails, livid and terror-stricken, with eyes wide-open in horror gazing frenziedly at the awful scene that was being enacted below by the glowing fire.

Patrice had recognized Little Mother Coralie.

CHAPTER IV BEFORE THE FLAMES

Little Mother Coralie! Coralie concealed in this house into which her assailants had forced their way and in which she herself was hiding, through force of circumstances which were incapable of explanation.

His first idea, which would at least have solved one of the riddles, was that she also had entered from the lane, gone into the house by the steps and in this way opened a passage for him. But, in that case, how had she procured the means of carrying out this enterprise? And, above all, what brought her here?

All these questions occurred to Captain Belval's mind without his trying to reply to them. He was far too much impressed by the absorbed expression on Coralie's face. Moreover, a second cry, even wilder than the first, came from below; and he saw the victim's face writhing before the red curtain of fire from the hearth.

But, this time, Patrice, held back by Coralie's presence, had no inclination to go to the sufferer's assistance. He decided to model himself entirely upon her and not to move or do anything to attract her attention.

"Easy!" the leader commanded. "Pull him back. I expect he's had enough."

He went up to the victim:

"Well, my dear Essarès," he asked, "what do you think of it? Are you happy? And, you know, we're only beginning. If you don't speak, we shall go on to the end, as the real *chauffeurs* used to do in the days of the Revolution. So it's settled, I presume: you're going to speak?"

There was no answer. The leader rapped out an oath and went on:

"What do you mean? Do you refuse? But, you obstinate brute, don't you understand the situation? Or have you a glimmer of hope? Hope, indeed! You're mad. Who would rescue you? Your servants? The porter, the footman and the butler are in my pay. I gave them a week's notice. They're gone by now. The housemaid? The cook? They sleep at the other end of the house; and you yourself have told me, time after time, that one can't hear anything over there. Who else? Your wife? Her room also is far away; and she hasn't heard anything either? Siméon, your old secretary? We made him fast when he opened the front door to us just now. Besides, we may as well finish the job here. Bournef!"

The man with the big mustache, who was still holding the chair, drew himself up.

"Bournef, where did you lock up the secretary?"

"In the porter's lodge."

"You know where to find Mme. Essarès' bedroom?"

"Yes, you told me the way."

"Go, all four of you, and bring the lady and the secretary here!"

The four men went out by a door below the spot where Coralie was standing. They were hardly out of sight when the leader stooped eagerly over his victim and said:

"We're alone, Essarès. It's what I intended. Let's make the most of it."

He bent still lower and whispered so that Patrice found it difficult to hear what he said:

"Those men are fools. I twist them round my finger and tell them no more of my plans than I can help. You and I, on the other hand, Essarès, are the men to come to terms. That is what you refused to admit; and you see where it has landed you. Come, Essarès, don't be obstinate and don't shuffle. You are caught in a trap, you are helpless, you are absolutely in my power. Well, rather than allow yourself to be broken down by tortures which would certainly end by overcoming your resistance, strike a bargain with me. We'll go halves, shall we? Let's make peace and treat upon that

basis. I'll give you a hand in my game and you'll give me one in yours. As allies, we are bound to win. As enemies, who knows whether the victor will surmount all the obstacles that will still stand in his path? That's why I say again, halves! Answer me. Yes or no."

He loosened the gag and listened. This time, Patrice did not hear the few words which the victim uttered. But the other, the leader, almost immediately burst into a rage:

"Eh? What's that you're proposing? Upon my word, but you're a cool hand! An offer of this kind to me! That's all very well for Bournef or his fellows. They'll understand, they will. But it won't do for me, it won't do for Colonel Fakhi. No, no, my friend, I open my mouth wider! I'll consent to go halves, but accept an alms, never!"

Patrice listened eagerly and, at the same time, kept his eyes on Coralie, whose face still contorted with anguish, wore an expression of the same rapt attention. And he looked back at the victim, part of whose body was reflected in the glass above the mantelpiece. The man was dressed in a braided brown-velvet smoking-suit and appeared to be about fifty years of age, quite bald, with a fleshy face, a large hooked nose, eyes deep set under a pair of thick eyebrows and puffy cheeks covered with a thick grizzled beard. Patrice was also able to examine his features more closely in a portrait of him which hung to the left of the fireplace, between the first and second windows, and which represented a strong, powerful countenance with an almost fierce expression.

"It's an Eastern face," said Patrice to himself. "I've seen heads like that in Egypt and Turkey."

The names of all these men too – Colonel Fakhi, Mustapha, Bournef, Essarès – their accent in talking, their way of holding themselves, their features, their figures, all recalled impressions which he had gathered in the Near East, in the hotels at Alexandria or on the banks of the Bosphorus, in the bazaars of Adrianople or in the Greek boats that plow the Ægean Sea. They were Levantine types, but of Levantines who had taken root in Paris. Essarès Bey was a name which Patrice recognized as well-known in the financial world, even as he knew that of Colonel Fakhi, whose speech and intonation marked him for a seasoned Parisian.

But a sound of voices came from outside the door. It was flung open violently and the four men appeared, dragging in a bound man, whom they dropped to the floor as they entered.

"Here's old Siméon," cried the one whom Fakhi had addressed as Bournef.

"And the wife?" asked the leader. "I hope you've got her too!"

"Well, no."

"What is that? Has she escaped?"

"Yes, through her window."

"But you must run after her. She can only be in the garden. Remember, the watch-dog was barking just now."

"And suppose she's got away?"

"How?"

"By the door on the lane?"

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

"The door hasn't been used for years. There's not even a key to it."

"That's as may be," Bournef rejoined. "All the same, we're surely not going to organize a battue with lanterns and rouse the whole district for the sake of finding a woman."

"Yes, but that woman."

Colonel Fakhi seemed exasperated. He turned to the prisoner:

"You're in luck, you old rascal! This is the second time to-day that minx of yours has slipped through my fingers! Did she tell you what happened this afternoon? Oh, if it hadn't been for an infernal officer who happened to be passing!.. But I'll get hold of him yet and he shall pay dearly for his interference.."

Patrice clenched his fists with fury. He understood: Coralie was hiding in her own house. Surprised by the sudden arrival of the five men, she had managed to climb out of her window and, making her way along the terrace to the steps, had gone to the part of the house opposite the rooms that were in use and taken refuge in the gallery of the library, where she was able to witness the terrible assault levied at her husband.

"Her husband!" thought Patrice, with a shudder. "Her husband!"

And, if he still entertained any doubts on the subject, the hurried course of events soon removed them, for the leader began to chuckle:

"Yes, Essarès, old man, I confess that she attracts me more than I can tell you; and, as I failed to catch her earlier in the day, I did hope this evening, as soon as I had settled my business with you, to settle something infinitely more agreeable with your wife. Not to mention that, once in my power, the little woman would be serving me as a hostage and that I would only have restored her to you – oh, safe and sound, believe me! – after specific performance of our agreement. And you would have run straight, Essarès! For you love your Coralie passionately! And quite right too!"

He went to the right-hand side of the fireplace and, touching a switch, lit an electric lamp under a reflector between the third and fourth windows. There was a companion picture here to Essarès' portrait, but it was covered over. The leader drew the curtain, and Coralie appeared in the full light.

"The monarch of all she surveys! The idol! The witch! The pearl of pearls! The imperial diamond of Essarès Bey, banker! Isn't she beautiful? I ask you. Admire the delicate outline of her face, the purity of that oval; and the pretty neck; and those graceful shoulders. Essarès, there's not a favorite in the country we come from who can hold a candle to your Coralie! My Coralie, soon! For I shall know how to find her. Ah, Coralie, Coralie!"

Patrice looked across at her, and it seemed to him that her face was reddened with a blush of shame. He himself was shaken by indignation and anger at each insulting word. It was a violent enough sorrow to him to know that Coralie was the wife of another; and added to this sorrow was his rage at seeing her thus exposed to these men's gaze and promised as a helpless prey to whosoever should prove himself the strongest.

At the same time, he wondered why Coralie remained in the room. Supposing that she could not leave the garden, nevertheless she was free to move about in that part of the house and might well have opened a window and called for help. What prevented her from doing so? Of course she did not love her husband. If she had loved him, she would have faced every danger to defend him. But how was it possible for her to allow that man to be tortured, worse still, to be present at his sufferings, to contemplate that most hideous of sights and to listen to his yells of pain?

"Enough of this nonsense!" cried the leader, pulling the curtain back into its place. "Coralie, you shall be my final reward; but I must first win you. Comrades, to work; let's finish our friend's job. First of all, twenty inches nearer, no more. Good! Does it burn, Essarès? All the same, it's not more than you can stand. Bear up, old fellow."

He unfastened the prisoner's right arm, put a little table by his side, laid a pencil and paper on it and continued:

"There's writing-materials for you. As your gag prevents you from speaking, write. You know what's wanted of you, don't you? Scribble a few letters, and you're free. Do you consent? No? Comrades, three inches nearer."

He moved away and stooped over the secretary, whom Patrice, by the brighter light, had recognized as the old fellow who sometimes escorted Coralie to the hospital.

"As for you, Siméon," he said, "you shall come to no harm. I know that you are devoted to your master, but I also know that he tells you none of his private affairs. On the other hand, I am certain that you will keep silent as to all this, because a single word of betrayal would involve your master's ruin even more than ours. That's understood between us, isn't it? Well, why don't

you answer? Have they squeezed your throat a bit too tight with their cords? Wait, I'll give you some air.."

Meanwhile the ugly work at the fireplace pursued its course. The two feet were reddened by the heat until it seemed almost as though the bright flames of the fire were glowing through them. The sufferer exerted all his strength in trying to bend his legs and to draw back; and a dull, continuous moan came through his gag.

"Oh, hang it all!" thought Patrice. "Are we going to let him roast like this, like a chicken on a spit?"

He looked at Coralie. She did not stir. Her face was distorted beyond recognition, and her eyes seemed fascinated by the terrifying sight.

"Couple of inches nearer!" cried the leader, from the other end of the room, as he unfastened Siméon's bonds.

The order was executed. The victim gave such a yell that Patrice's blood froze in his veins. But, at the same moment, he became aware of something that had not struck him so far, or at least he had attached no significance to it. The prisoner's hand, as the result of a sequence of little movements apparently due to nervous twitches, had seized the opposite edge of the table, while his arm rested on the marble top. And gradually, unseen by the torturers, all whose efforts were directed to keeping his legs in position, or by the leader, who was still engaged with Siméon, this hand opened a drawer which swung on a hinge, dipped into the drawer, took out a revolver and, resuming its original position with a jerk, hid the weapon in the chair.

The act, or rather the intention which it indicated, was foolhardy in the extreme, for, when all was said, reduced to his present state of helplessness, the man could not hope for victory against five adversaries, all free and all armed. Nevertheless, as Patrice looked at the glass in which he beheld him, he saw a fierce determination pictured in the man's face.

"Another two inches," said Colonel Fakhi, as he walked back to the fireplace.

He examined the condition of the flesh and said, with a laugh:

"The skin is blistering in places; the veins are ready to burst. Essarès Bey, you can't be enjoying yourself, and it strikes me that you mean to do the right thing at last. Have you started scribbling yet? No? And don't you mean to? Are you still hoping? Counting on your wife, perhaps? Come, come, you must see that, even if she has succeeded in escaping, she won't say anything! Well, then, are you humbugging me, or what?."

He was seized with a sudden burst of rage and shouted:

"Shove his feet into the fire! And let's have a good smell of burning for once! Ah, you would defy me, would you? Well, wait a bit, old chap, and let me have a go at you! I'll cut you off an ear or two: you know, the way we have in our country!"

He drew from his waistcoat a dagger that gleamed in the firelight. His face was hideous with animal cruelty. He gave a fierce cry, raised his arm and stood over the other relentlessly.

But, swift as his movement was, Essarès was before him. The revolver, quickly aimed, was discharged with a loud report. The dagger dropped from the colonel's hand. For two or three seconds he maintained his threatening attitude, with one arm lifted on high and a haggard look in his eyes, as though he did not quite understand what had happened to him. And then, suddenly, he fell upon his victim in a huddled heap, paralyzing his arm with the full weight of his body, at the moment when Essarès was taking aim at one of the other confederates.

He was still breathing:

"Oh, the brute, the brute!" he panted. "He's killed me!.. But you'll lose by it, Essarès... I was prepared for this. If I don't come home to-night, the prefect of police will receive a letter... They'll know about your treason, Essarès.. all your story.. your plans... Oh, you devil!.. And what a fool!.. We could so easily have come to terms.."

He muttered a few inaudible words and rolled down to the floor. It was all over.

A moment of stupefaction was produced not so much by this unexpected tragedy as by the revelation which the leader had made before dying and by the thought of that letter, which no doubt implicated the aggressors as well as their victim. Bournef had disarmed Essarès. The latter, now that the chair was no longer held in position, had succeeded in bending his legs. No one moved.

Meanwhile, the sense of terror which the whole scene had produced seemed rather to increase with the silence. On the ground was the corpse, with the blood flowing on the carpet. Not far away lay Siméon's motionless form. Then there was the prisoner, still bound in front of the flames waiting to devour his flesh. And standing near him were the four butchers, hesitating perhaps what to do next, but showing in every feature an implacable resolution to defeat the enemy by all and every means.

His companions glanced at Bournef, who seemed the kind of man to go any length. He was a short, stout, powerfully-built man; his upper lip bristled with the mustache which had attracted Patrice Belval's attention. He was less cruel in appearance than his chief, less elegant in his manner and less masterful, but displayed far greater coolness and self-command. As for the colonel, his accomplices seemed not to trouble about him. The part which they were playing dispensed them from showing any empty compassion.

At last Bournef appeared to have made up his mind how to act. He went to his hat, the gray-felt hat lying near the door, turned back the lining and took from it a tiny coil the sight of which made Patrice start. It was a slender red cord, exactly like that which he had found round the neck of Mustapha Rovalaïof, the first accomplice captured by Ya-Bon.

Bournef unrolled the cord, took it by the two buckles, tested its strength across his knee and then, going back to Essarès, slipped it over his neck after first removing his gag.

"Essarès," he said, with a calmness which was more impressive than the colonel's violence and sneers, "Essarès, I shall not put you to any pain. Torture is a revolting process; and I shall not have recourse to it. You know what to do; I know what to do. A word on your side, an action on my side; and the thing is done. The word is the yes or no which you will now speak. The action which I shall accomplish in reply to your yes or no will mean either your release or else."

He stopped for a second or two. Then he declared:

"Or else your death."

The brief phrase was uttered very simply but with a firmness that gave it the full significance of an irrevocable sentence. It was clear that Essarès was faced with a catastrophe which he could no longer avoid save by submitting absolutely. In less than a minute, he would have spoken or he would be dead.

Once again Patrice fixed his eyes on Coralie, ready to interfere should he perceive in her any other feeling than one of passive terror. But her attitude did not change. She was therefore accepting the worst, it appeared, even though this meant her husband's death; and Patrice held his hand accordingly.

"Are we all agreed?" Bournef asked, turning to his accomplices.

"Quite," said one of them.

"Do you take your share of the responsibility?"

"We do."

Bournef brought his hands together and crossed them, which had the result of knotting the cord round Essarès' neck. Then he pulled slightly, so as to make the pressure felt, and asked, unemotionally:

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

There was a murmur of satisfaction. The accomplices heaved a breath; and Bournef nodded his head with an air of approval:

"Ah, so you accept! It was high time: I doubt if any one was ever nearer death than you were, Essarès." Retaining his hold of the cord, he continued, "Very well. You will speak. But I know you; and your answer surprises me, for I told the colonel that not even the certainty of death would make you confess your secret. Am I wrong?"

"No," replied Essarès. "Neither death nor torture."

"Then you have something different to propose?"

"Yes."

"Something worth our while?"

"Yes. I suggested it to the colonel just now, when you were out of the room. But, though he was willing to betray you and go halves with me in the secret, he refused the other thing."

"Why should I accept it?"

"Because you must take it or leave it and because you will understand what he did not."

"It's a compromise, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Money?"

"Yes."

Bournef shrugged his shoulders:

"A few thousand-franc notes, I expect. And you imagine that Bournef and his friends will be such fools?... Come, Essarès, why do you want us to compromise? We know your secret almost entirely.."

"You know what it is, but not how to use it. You don't know how to get at it; and that's just the point."

"We shall discover it."

"Never."

"Yes, your death will make it easier for us."

"My death? Thanks to the information lodged by the colonel, in a few hours you will be tracked down and most likely caught: in any case, you will be unable to pursue your search. Therefore you have hardly any choice. It's the money which I'm offering you, or else.. prison."

"And, if we accept," asked Bournef, to whom the argument seemed to appeal, "when shall we be paid?"

"At once."

"Then the money is here?"

"Yes."

"A contemptible sum, as I said before?"

"No, a much larger sum than you hope for; infinitely larger."

"How much?"

"Four millions."

CHAPTER V HUSBAND AND WIFE

The accomplices started, as though they had received an electric shock. Bournef darted forward:

"What did you say?"

"I said four millions, which means a million for each of you."

"Look here!.. Do you mean it?.. Four millions?."

"Four millions is what I said."

The figure was so gigantic and the proposal so utterly unexpected that the accomplices had the same feeling which Patrice Belval on his side underwent. They suspected a trap; and Bournef could not help saying:

"The offer is more than we expected... And I am wondering what induced you to make it."

"Would you have been satisfied with less?"

"Yes," said Bournef, candidly.

"Unfortunately, I can't make it less. I have only one means of escaping death; and that is to open my safe for you. And my safe contains four bundles of a thousand bank-notes each."

Bournef could not get over his astonishment and became more and more suspicious.

"How do you know that, after taking the four millions, we shall not insist on more?"

"Insist on what? The secret of the site?"

"Yes."

"Because you know that I would as soon die as tell it you. The four millions are the maximum. Do you want them or don't you? I ask for no promise in return, no oath of any kind, for I am convinced that, when you have filled your pockets, you will have but one thought, to clear off, without handicapping yourselves with a murder which might prove your undoing."

The argument was so unanswerable that Bournef ceased discussing and asked:

"Is the safe in this room?"

"Yes, between the first and second windows, behind my portrait."

Bournef took down the picture and said:

"I see nothing."

"It's all right. The lines of the safe are marked by the moldings of the central panel. In the middle you will see what looks like a rose, not of wood but of iron; and there are four others at the four corners of the panel. These four turn to the right, by successive notches, forming a word which is the key to the lock, the word Cora."

"The first four letters of Coralie?" asked Bournef, following Essarès' instructions as he spoke.

"No," said Essarès Bey, "the first four letters of the Coran. Have you done that?"

After a moment, Bournef answered:

"Yes, I've finished. And the key?"

"There's no key. The fifth letter of the word, the letter N, is the letter of the central rose."

Bournef turned this fifth rose; and presently a click was heard.

"Now pull," said Essarès. "That's it. The safe is not deep: it's dug in one of the stones of the front wall. Put in your hand. You'll find four pocket-books."

It must be admitted that Patrice Belval expected to see something startling interrupt Bournef's quest and hurl him into some pit suddenly opened by Essarès' trickery. And the three confederates seemed to share this unpleasant apprehension, for they were gray in the face, while Bournef himself appeared to be working very cautiously and suspiciously.

At last he turned round and came and sat beside Essarès. In his hands he held a bundle of four pocket-books, short but extremely bulky and bound together with a canvas strap. He unfastened the buckle of the strap and opened one of the pocket-books.

His knees shook under their precious burden, and, when he had taken a huge sheaf of notes from one of the compartments, his hands were like the hands of a very old man trembling with fever.

"Thousand-franc notes," he murmured. "Ten packets of thousand-franc notes."

Brutally, like men prepared to fight one another, each of the other three laid hold of a pocket-book, felt inside and mumbled:

"Ten packets.. they're all there... Thousand-franc notes."

And one of them forthwith cried, in a choking voice:

"Let's clear out!.. Let's go!"

A sudden fear was sending them off their heads. They could not imagine that Essarès would hand over such a fortune to them unless he had some plan which would enable him to recover it before they had left the room. That was a certainty. The ceiling would come down on their heads. The walls would close up and crush them to death, while sparing their unfathomable adversary.

Nor had Patrice Belval any doubt of it. The disaster was preparing. Essarès' revenge was inevitably at hand. A man like him, a fighter as able as he appeared to be, does not so easily surrender four million francs if he has not some scheme at the back of his head. Patrice felt himself breathing heavily. His present excitement was more violent than any with which he had thrilled since the very beginning of the tragic scenes which he had been witnessing; and he saw that Coralie's face was as anxious as his own.

Meanwhile Bournef partially recovered his composure and, holding back his companions, said:

"Don't be such fools! He would be capable, with old Siméon, of releasing himself and running after us."

Using only one hand, for the other was clutching a pocket-book, all four fastened Essarès' arm to the chair, while he protested angrily:

"You idiots! You came here to rob me of a secret of immense importance, as you well knew, and you lose your heads over a trifle of four millions. Say what you like, the colonel had more backbone than that!"

They gagged him once more and Bournef gave him a smashing blow with his fist which laid him unconscious.

"That makes our retreat safe," said Bournef.

"What about the colonel?" asked one of the others. "Are we to leave him here?"

"Why not?"

But apparently he thought this unwise; for he added:

"On second thoughts, no. It's not to our interest to compromise Essarès any further. What we must do, Essarès as well as ourselves, is to make ourselves scarce as fast as we can, before that damned letter of the colonel's is delivered at headquarters, say before twelve o'clock in the day."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"We'll take the colonel with us in the motor and drop him anywhere. The police must make what they can of it."

"And his papers?"

"We'll look through his pockets as we go. Lend me a hand."

They bandaged the wound to stop the flow of blood, took up the body, each holding it by an arm or leg, and walked out without any one of them letting go his pocket-book for a second.

Patrice Belval heard them pass through another room and then tramp heavily over the echoing flags of a hall.

"This is the moment," he said. "Essarès or Siméon will press a button and the rogues will be nabbed."

Essarès did not budge.

Siméon did not budge.

Patrice heard all the sounds accompanying their departure: the slamming of the carriage-gate, the starting-up of the engine and the drone of the car as it moved away. And that was all. Nothing had happened. The confederates were getting off with their four millions.

A long silence followed, during which Patrice remained on tenterhooks. He did not believe that the drama had reached its last phase; and he was so much afraid of the unexpected which might still occur that he determined to make Coralie aware of his presence.

A fresh incident prevented him. Coralie had risen to her feet.

Her face no longer wore its expression of horror and affright, but Patrice was perhaps more scared at seeing her suddenly animated with a sinister energy that gave an unwonted sparkle to her eyes and set her eyebrows and her lips twitching. He realized that Coralie was preparing to act.

In what way? Was this the end of the tragedy?

She walked to the corner on her side of the gallery where one of the two spiral staircases stood and went down slowly, without, however, trying to deaden the sound of her feet. Her husband could not help hearing her. Patrice, moreover, saw in the mirror that he had lifted his head and was following her with his eyes.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs. But there was no indecision in her attitude. Her plan was obviously quite clear; and she was only thinking out the best method of putting it into execution.

"Ah!" whispered Patrice to himself, quivering all over. "What are you doing, Little Mother Coralie?"

He gave a start. The direction in which Coralie's eyes were turned, together with the strange manner in which they stared, revealed her secret resolve to him. She had caught sight of the dagger, lying on the floor where it had slipped from the colonel's grasp.

Not for a second did Patrice believe that she meant to pick up that dagger with any other thought than to stab her husband. The intention of murder was so plainly written on her livid features that, even before she stirred a limb, Essarès was seized with a fit of terror and strained every muscle to break the bonds that hampered his movements.

She came forward, stopped once more and, suddenly bending, seized the dagger. Without waiting, she took two more steps. These brought her to the right of the chair in which Essarès lay. He had only to turn his head a little way to see her. And an awful minute passed, during which the husband and wife looked into each other's eyes.

The whirl of thoughts, of fear, of hatred, of vagrant and conflicting passions that passed through the brains of her who was about to kill and him who was about to die, was reproduced in Patrice Belval's mind and deep down in his inner consciousness. What was he to do? What part ought he to play in the tragedy that was being enacted before his eyes? Should he intervene? Was it his duty to prevent Coralie from committing the irreparable deed? Or should he commit it himself by breaking the man's head with a bullet from his revolver?

Yet, from the beginning, Patrice had really been swayed by a feeling which, mingling with all the others, gradually paralyzed him and rendered any inward struggle illusory: a feeling of curiosity driven to its utmost pitch. It was not the everyday curiosity of unearthing a squalid secret, but the higher curiosity of penetrating the mysterious soul of a woman whom he loved, who was carried away by the rush of events and who suddenly, becoming once more mistress of herself, was of her own accord and with impressive calmness taking the most fearful resolution. Thereupon other questions forced themselves upon him. What prompted her to take this resolution? Was it revenge? Was it punishment? Was it the gratification of hatred?

Patrice Belval remained where he was.

Coralie raised her arm. Her husband, in front of her, no longer even attempted to make those movements of despair which indicate a last effort. There was neither entreaty nor menace in his eyes. He waited in resignation.

Not far from them, old Siméon, still bound, half-lifted himself on his elbows and stared at them in dismay.

Coralie raised her arm again. Her whole frame seemed to grow larger and taller. An invisible force appeared to strengthen and stiffen her whole being, summoning all her energies to the service of her will. She was on the point of striking. Her eyes sought the place at which she should strike.

Yet her eyes became less hard and less dark. It even seemed to Patrice that there was a certain hesitation in her gaze and that she was recovering not her usual gentleness, but a little of her womanly grace.

"Ah, Little Mother Coralie," murmured Patrice, "you are yourself again! You are the woman I know. Whatever right you may think you have to kill that man, you will not kill him.. and I prefer it so."

Slowly Coralie's arm dropped to her side. Her features relaxed. Patrice could guess the immense relief which she felt at escaping from the obsessing purpose that was driving her to murder. She looked at her dagger with astonishment, as though she were waking from a hideous nightmare. And, bending over her husband she began to cut his bonds.

She did so with visible repugnance, avoiding his touch, as it were, and shunning his eyes. The cords were severed one by one. Essarès was free.

What happened next was in the highest measure unexpected. With not a word of thanks to his wife, with not a word of anger either, this man who had just undergone the most cruel torture and whose body still throbbed with pain hurriedly tottered barefoot to a telephone standing on a table. He was like a hungry man who suddenly sees a piece of bread and snatches at it greedily as the means of saving himself and returning to life. Panting for breath, Essarès took down the receiver and called out:

"Central 40.39."

Then he turned abruptly to his wife:

"Go away," he said.

She seemed not to hear. She had knelt down beside old Siméon and was setting him free also.

Essarès at the telephone began to lose patience:

"Are you there?.. Are you there?.. I want that number to-day, please, not next week! It's urgent... 40.39... It's urgent, I tell you!"

And, turning to Coralie, he repeated, in an imperious tone:

"Go away!"

She made a sign that she would not go away and that, on the contrary, she meant to listen. He shook his fist at her and again said:

"Go away, go away!.. I won't have you stay in the room. You go away too, Siméon."

Old Siméon got up and moved towards Essarès. It looked as though he wished to speak, no doubt to protest. But his action was undecided; and, after a moment's reflection, he turned to the door and went without uttering a word.

"Go away, will you, go away!" Essarès repeated, his whole body expressing menace.

But Coralie came nearer to him and crossed her arms obstinately and defiantly. At that moment, Essarès appeared to get his call, for he asked:

"Is that 40.39? Ah, yes."

He hesitated. Coralie's presence obviously displeased him greatly, and he was about to say things which he did not wish her to know. But time, no doubt, was pressing. He suddenly made up his mind and, with both receivers glued to his ears, said, in English:

"Is that you, Grégoire?.. Essarès speaking... Hullo!.. Yes, I'm speaking from the Rue Raynouard... There's no time to lose... Listen.."

He sat down and went on:

"Look here. Mustapha's dead. So is the colonel... Damn it, don't interrupt, or we're done for!.. Yes, done for; and you too... Listen, they all came, the colonel, Bournef, the whole gang, and robbed me by means of violence and threats... I finished the colonel, only he had written to the police, giving us all away. The letter will be delivered soon. So you understand, Bournef and his three ruffians are going to disappear. They'll just run home and pack up their papers; and I reckon they'll be with you in an hour, or two hours at most. It's the refuge they're sure to make for. They prepared it themselves, without suspecting that you and I know each other. So there's no doubt about it. They're sure to come.."

Essarès stopped. He thought for a moment and resumed:

"You still have a second key to each of the rooms which they use as bedrooms? Is that so?.. Good. And you have duplicates of the keys that open the cupboards in the walls of those rooms, haven't you?.. Capital. Well, as soon as they get to sleep, or rather as soon as you are certain that they are sound asleep, go in and search the cupboards. Each of them is bound to hide his share of the booty there. You'll find it quite easily. It's the four pocket-books which you know of. Put them in your bag, clear out as fast as you can and join me."

There was another pause. This time it was Essarès listening. He replied:

"What's that you say? Rue Raynouard? Here? Join me here? Why, you must be mad! Do you imagine that I can stay now, after the colonel's given me away? No, go and wait for me at the hotel, near the station. I shall be there by twelve o'clock or one in the afternoon, perhaps a little later. Don't be uneasy. Have your lunch quietly and we'll talk things over.. Hullo! Did you hear?.. Very well, I'll see that everything's all right. Good-by for the present."

The conversation was finished; and it looked as if Essarès, having taken all his measures to recover possession of the four million francs, had no further cause for anxiety. He hung up the receiver, went back to the lounge-chair in which he had been tortured, wheeled it round with its back to the fire, sat down, turned down the bottoms of his trousers and pulled on his socks and shoes, all a little painfully and accompanied by a few grimaces, but calmly, in the manner of a man who has no need to hurry.

Coralie kept her eyes fixed on his face.

"I really ought to go," thought Captain Belval, who felt a trifle embarrassed at the thought of overhearing what the husband and wife were about to say.

Nevertheless he stayed. He was not comfortable in his mind on Coralie's account.

Essarès fired the first shot:

"Well," he asked, "what are you looking at me like that for?"

"So it's true?" she murmured, maintaining her attitude of defiance. "You leave me no possibility of doubt?"

"Why should I lie?" he snarled. "I should not have telephoned in your hearing if I hadn't been sure that you were here all the time."

"I was up there."

"Then you heard everything?"

"Yes."

"And saw everything?"

"Yes."

"And, seeing the torture which they inflicted on me and hearing my cries, you did nothing to defend me, to defend me against torture, against death!"

"No, for I knew the truth."

"What truth?"

"The truth which I suspected without daring to admit it."

"What truth?" he repeated, in a louder voice.

"The truth about your treason."

"You're mad. I've committed no treason."

"Oh, don't juggle with words! I confess that I don't know the whole truth: I did not understand all that those men said or what they were demanding of you. But the secret which they tried to force from you was a treasonable secret."

"A man can only commit treason against his country," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm not a Frenchman."

"You were a Frenchman!" she cried. "You asked to be one and you became one. You married me, a Frenchwoman, and you live in France and you've made your fortune in France. It's France that you're betraying."

"Don't talk nonsense! And for whose benefit?"

"I don't know that, either. For months, for years indeed, the colonel, Bournef, all your former accomplices and yourself have been engaged on an enormous work – yes, enormous, it's their own word – and now it appears that you are fighting over the profits of the common enterprise and the others accuse you of pocketing those profits for yourself alone and of keeping a secret that doesn't belong to you. So that I seem to see something dirtier and more hateful even than treachery, something worthy of a common pickpocket.."

The man struck the arm of his chair with his fist:

"Enough!" he cried.

Coralie seemed in no way alarmed:

"Enough," she echoed, "you are right. Enough words between us. Besides, there is one fact that stands out above everything: your flight. That amounts to a confession. You're afraid of the police."

He shrugged his shoulders a second time:

"I'm afraid of nobody."

"Very well, but you're going."

"Yes."

"Then let's have it out. When are you going?"

"Presently, at twelve o'clock."

"And if you're arrested?"

"I sha'n't be arrested."

"If you are arrested, however?"

"I shall be let go."

"At least there will be an inquiry, a trial?"

"No, the matter will be hushed up."

"You hope so."

"I'm sure of it."

"God grant it! And you will leave France, of course?"

"As soon as I can."

"When will that be?"

"In a fortnight or three weeks."

"Send me word of the day, so that I may know when I can breathe again."

"I shall send you word, Coralie, but for another reason."

"What reason?"

"So that you may join me."

"Join you!"

He gave a cruel smile:

"You are my wife," he said. "Where the husband goes the wife goes; and you know that, in my religion, the husband has every right over his wife, including that of life and death. Well, you're my wife."

Coralie shook her head, and, in a tone of indescribable contempt, answered:

"I am not your wife. I feel nothing for you but loathing and horror. I don't wish to see you again, and, whatever happens, whatever you may threaten, I shall not see you again."

He rose, and, walking to her, bent in two, all trembling on his legs, he shouted, while again he shook his clenched fists at her:

"What's that you say? What's that you dare to say? I, I, your lord and master, order you to join me the moment that I send for you."

"I shall not join you. I swear it before God! I swear it as I hope to be saved."

He stamped his feet with rage. His face underwent a hideous contortion; and he roared:

"That means that you want to stay! Yes, you have reasons which I don't know, but which are easy to guess! An affair of the heart, I suppose. There's some one in your life, no doubt... Hold your tongue, will you?.. Haven't you always detested me?.. Your hatred does not date from to-day. It dates back to the first time you saw me, to a time even before our marriage... We have always lived like mortal enemies. I loved you. I worshipped you. A word from you would have brought me to your feet. The mere sound of your steps thrilled me to the marrow... But your feeling for me is one of horror. And you imagine that you are going to start a new life, without me? Why, I'd sooner kill you, my beauty!"

He had unclenched his fists; and his open hands were clutching on either side of Coralie, close to her head, as though around a prey which they seemed on the point of throttling. A nervous shiver made his jaws clash together. Beads of perspiration gleamed on his bald head.

In front of him, Coralie stood impassive, looking very small and frail. Patrice Belval, in an agony of suspense and ready at any moment to act, could read nothing on her calm features but aversion and contempt.

Mastering himself at last, Essarès said:

"You shall join me, Coralie. Whether you like it or not, I am your husband. You felt it just now, when the lust to murder me made you take up a weapon and left you without the courage to carry out your intention. It will always be like that. Your independent fit will pass away and you will join the man who is your master."

"I shall remain behind to fight against you," she replied, "here, in this house. The work of treason which you have accomplished I shall destroy. I shall do it without hatred, for I am no longer capable of hatred, but I shall do it without intermission, to repair the evil which you have wrought."

He answered, in a low voice:

"I *am* capable of hatred. Beware, Coralie. The very moment when you believe that you have nothing more to fear will perhaps be the moment when I shall call you to account. Take care."

He pushed an electric bell. Old Siméon appeared.

"So the two men-servants have decamped?" asked Essarès. And, without waiting for the answer, he went on, "A good riddance. The housemaid and the cook can do all I want. They heard nothing, did they? No, their bedroom is too far away. No matter, Siméon: you must keep a watch on them after I am gone."

He looked at his wife, surprised to see her still there, and said to his secretary:

"I must be up at six to get everything ready; and I am dead tired. Take me to my room. You can come back and put out the lights afterwards."

He went out, supported by Siméon. Patrice Belval at once perceived that Coralie had done her best to show no weakness in her husband's presence, but that she had come to the end of her strength and was unable to walk. Seized with faintness, she fell on her knees, making the sign of the cross.

When she was able to rise, a few minutes later, she saw on the carpet, between her and the door, a sheet of note-paper with her name on it. She picked it up and read:

"Little Mother Coralie, the struggle is too much for you. Why not appeal to me, your friend? Give a signal and I am with you."

She staggered, dazed by the discovery of the letter and dismayed by Belval's daring. But, making a last effort to summon up her power of will, she left the room, without giving the signal for which Patrice was longing.

CHAPTER VI

NINETEEN MINUTES PAST SEVEN

Patrice, in his bedroom at the home, was unable to sleep that night. He had a continual waking sensation of being oppressed and hunted down, as though he were suffering the terrors of some monstrous nightmare. He had an impression that the frantic series of events in which he was playing the combined parts of a bewildered spectator and a helpless actor would never cease so long as he tried to rest; that, on the contrary, they would rage with greater violence and intensity. The leave-taking of the husband and wife did not put an end, even momentarily, to the dangers incurred by Coralie. Fresh perils arose on every side; and Patrice Belval confessed himself incapable of foreseeing and still more of allaying them.

After lying awake for two hours, he switched on his electric light and began hurriedly to write down the story of the past twelve hours. He hoped in this way to some small extent to unravel the tangled knot.

At six o'clock he went and roused Ya-Bon and brought him back with him. Then, standing in front of the astonished negro, he crossed his arms and exclaimed:

"So you consider that your job is over! While I lie tossing about in the dark, my lord sleeps and all's well! My dear man, you have a jolly elastic conscience."

The word elastic amused the Senegalese mightily. His mouth opened wider than ever; and he gave a grunt of enjoyment.

"That'll do, that'll do," said the captain. "There's no getting a word in, once you start talking. Here, take a chair, read this report and give me your reasoned opinion. What? You don't know how to read? Well, upon my word! What was the good, then, of wearing out the seat of your trousers on the benches of the Senegal schools and colleges? A queer education, I must say!"

He heaved a sigh, and, snatching the manuscript, said:

"Listen, reflect, argue, deduct and conclude. This is how the matter briefly stands. First, we have one Essarès Bey, a banker, rich as Crœsus, and the lowest of rascals, who betrays at one and the same time France, Egypt, England, Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece.. as is proved by the fact that his accomplices roast his feet for him. Thereupon he kills one of them and gets rid of four with the aid of as many millions, which millions he orders another accomplice to get back for him before five minutes are passed. And all these bright spirits will duck underground at eleven o'clock this morning, for at twelve o'clock the police propose to enter on the scene. Good."

Patrice Belval paused to take breath and continued:

"Secondly, Little Mother Coralie – upon my word, I can't say why – is married to Rascallion Bey. She hates him and wants to kill him. He loves her and wants to kill her. There is also a colonel who loves her and for that reason loses his life and a certain Mustapha, who tries to kidnap her on the colonel's account and also loses his life for that reason, strangled by a Senegalese. Lastly, there is a French captain, a dot-and-carry-one, who likewise loves her, but whom she avoids because she is married to a man whom she abhors. And with this captain, in a previous incarnation, she has halved an amethyst bead. Add to all this, by way of accessories, a rusty key, a red silk bowstring, a dog choked to death and a grate filled with red coals. And, if you dare to understand a single word of my explanation, I'll catch you a whack with my wooden leg, for I don't understand it a little bit and I'm your captain."

Ya-Bon laughed all over his mouth and all over the gaping scar that cut one of his cheeks in two. As ordered by his captain, he understood nothing of the business and very little of what Patrice had said; but he always quivered with delight when Patrice addressed him in that gruff tone.

"That's enough," said the captain. "It's my turn now to argue, deduct and conclude."

He leant against the mantelpiece, with his two elbows on the marble shelf and his head tight-pressed between his hands. His merriment, which sprang from temperamental lightness of heart, was this time only a surface merriment. Deep down within himself he did nothing but think of Coralie with sorrowful apprehension. What could he do to protect her? A number of plans occurred to him: which was he to choose? Should he hunt through the numbers in the telephone-book till he hit upon the whereabouts of that Grégoire, with whom Bournef and his companions had taken refuge? Should he inform the police? Should he return to the Rue Raynouard? He did not know. Yes, he was capable of acting, if the act to be performed consisted in flinging himself into the conflict with furious ardor. But to prepare the action, to divine the obstacles, to rend the darkness, and, as he said, to see the invisible and grasp the intangible, that was beyond his powers.

He turned suddenly to Ya-Bon, who was standing depressed by his silence:

"What's the matter with you, putting on that lugubrious air? Of course it's you that throw a gloom over me! You always look at the black side of things.. like a nigger!.. Be off."

Ya-Bon was going away discomfited, when some one tapped at the door and a voice said:

"Captain Belval, you're wanted on the telephone."

Patrice hurried out. Who on earth could be telephoning to him so early in the morning?

"Who is it?" he asked the nurse.

"I don't know, captain... It's a man's voice; he seemed to want you urgently. The bell had been ringing some time. I was downstairs, in the kitchen.."

Before Patrice's eyes there rose a vision of the telephone in the Rue Raynouard, in the big room at the Essarès' house. He could not help wondering if there was anything to connect the two incidents.

He went down one flight of stairs and along a passage. The telephone was through a small waiting-room, in a room that had been turned into a linen-closet. He closed the door behind him.

"Hullo! Captain Belval speaking. What is it?"

A voice, a man's voice which he did not know, replied in breathless, panting tones:

"Ah!.. Captain Belval!.. It's you!.. Look here.. but I'm almost afraid that it's too late... I don't know if I shall have time to finish... Did you get the key and the letter?."

"Who are you?" asked Patrice.

"Did you get the key and the letter?" the voice insisted.

"The key, yes," Patrice replied, "but not the letter."

"Not the letter? But this is terrible! Then you don't know."

A hoarse cry struck Patrice's ear and the next thing he caught was incoherent sounds at the other end of the wire, the noise of an altercation. Then the voice seemed to glue itself to the instrument and he distinctly heard it gasping:

"Too late!.. Patrice.. is that you?.. Listen, the amethyst pendant.. yes, I have it on me... The pendant... Ah, it's too late!.. I should so much have liked to.. Patrice... Coralie.."

Then again a loud cry, a heart-rending cry, and confused sounds growing more distant, in which he seemed to distinguish:

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