

*The Wolf Man*



*Alfred Machard*



THE WOLF MAN  
(THE WERE-WOLF)



# THE WOLF MAN

(THE WERE-WOLF)

BY

ALFRED MACHARD



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## CHAPTER I

### VINCENT GETS MARRIED AGAIN

THE workshop, cleared of its contents and litter and of a few big bits of work in hand, had been transformed into a dancing and dining saloon. Six great shop-shutters, covered with table-cloths and placed end to end on trestles, formed a long table ready to receive more than thirty guests. Before each plate was a small nosegay of wild flowers with a pink butterfly fixed by a pin to the middle of a daisy. This butterfly bore on one wing the name of the diner and thus marked his place.

On the floor, which had previously been scraped and scrubbed, an artistic hand had deftly designed a whole series of scrolls with welcoming inscriptions: "Long live pleasure and joiners!" "Good luck to the bride!" "Friends, eat, drink and laugh!" "Long live joinery!"

Green wreaths festooned the walls above windows and doors like harmonious waves. On the ceiling, hundreds of gaudy streamers hung from the beams, rustling in the slightest draught with the noise of crumpled silk, calling to mind the terraces of wine-shops on nights of revelry after a beanfeast.

Under a big baking tin with ribbed sides, nailed to the centre beam as a smoke-shield, the old smoky copper lamp had been replaced for the evening by a huge bronze-coloured Chinese lantern, on which the quizzical face of the moon was painted in vermilion.

A goodly odour of wine and roast meat mingled pleasantly with that of fresh sawdust. On a box turned upon end like a platform was a stool and on this stool a big blue accordion, opened and barrelled like a caterpillar.

Ah! What a spree, friends! What songs, what laughter, what shouts of mirth!

The wedding party had just returned from the registry office, arm in arm, whistling the "Paimpolaise" to the tune of a cake-walk:

"I love dearly my Paimpolaise!  
Ta, ra, la, la, ta, ra, la, la!"

At the door of the workshop, seeing the table spread—flowers, wreaths, knick-knacks, flags, rows of bottles and romantic butterflies—the wedding-guests stopped dead, seized with silent astonishment, dazzled by all this splendour.

A wag shouted, in a voice of command:

“A roaring cheer for the bridegroom!”

The guests thereupon emitted, in perfect unison, a wild rumbling clamour.

The bridegroom leapt into the middle of the hall, and capered and pranced, which made two sous fall from his waistcoat pocket. Then he sank in salutation, like a star dancer, one leg stretched out, his hand to his lips, blowing kisses.

“And now another hearty cheer!” repeated the wag.

But this time it was a cry, a loud fervent cry, that the guests gave as one:

“Long live Vincent!”

Whereupon the bridegroom answered, waving his top-hat:

“And long live the joiners!”

A weird vehement thing rolled—yes, rolled, that’s the word—rather than ran, it was so small and round, between the legs of the jubilant Vincent, and began to squeak in a shrill treble, while shaking a navy-cap:

“Long live papa! Long live papa!”

It was Boubou, aged eight, the son of the above-named by his first wife.

The meal was on a colossal scale. There were eleven courses, six of them meat. The feast lasted three hours. Sixty-one bottles of wine and half a bottle of water were emptied. Before dessert, a few of the guests, radiantly happy, displayed charming freaks of humour. There was, notably, at the end of a table, an epic battle with corks. One fat lady laughed so unrestrainedly that she got one in the mouth, which came near sticking in her throat and choking her. The bride's uncle, very much warmed up, bet he would eat as a salad, with oil and vinegar, his nosegay of wild flowers. He ate it, amidst the cheers of the assembly, in three mouthfuls, including a little ant and the pink paper butterfly.

The heartiest amusement had not ceased to encourage these antics. But a few hammerings, sometimes regular, sometimes on the contrary, hurried, disturbed converse during the better part of the feast.

They had asked Vincent: “Who's working next door?”

“My employé.”

The hammering was strangely sonorous!

Vincent added quite calmly:

“To make room here, I’ve taken everything into the back shop.”

“Couldn’t you tell your mate,” spluttered one of the guests, “to drop his tools till to-morrow? The noise is deafening.”

All the ladies chimed in: “We can’t hear ourselves speak!”

Vincent apologized:

“It’s urgent!”

“Nonsense! A day more or less!”

“Impossible! It must be delivered this evening.”

And to change the subject, he noisily offered them drinks all round.

During dessert, the same wag as before proposed, not to celebrate their full stomachs with another cheer, but “to rejoice in chorus, each shouting for himself.”

“Here’s to Love, the saw-shop and the comic monologue!”

The motion, with various cries—including astounding imitations of the cow and the camel—was carried unanimously; but old Babulard, the bride’s father, called for order before he began.

He bleated: “I want to say—just a few words—to my son-in-law.”

He pulled out his spectacles and, after wiping them on the table-cloth, he adjusted them slowly on the flaming bosses of his fat lump of a nose. Then he drank a big glass of wine, swallowed a tiny piece of bread, and rose.

“Dear friends,” said he, leaning with his two hands on the edge of the table like an M.P. in the House, “courage! I don’t want—to keep you long—from dancing and singing; but first I want to say—a few words to Vincent Paroli—my son-in-law. Vincent Paroli, I am very happy—to——”

The unseen hammer began to knock so loudly that the door of the back shop shook in all its fibres like a human nervous system.

“Shut up! Silence! Let Babulard talk!” protested most of the guests.

Vincent got up and went to the door.

“Amadée!” he cried.

The hammer must have stopped suddenly. No one heard it fall again.

“What’s up, boss?” replied a dull voice.

“How are you getting along?”

“I’ve nearly finished.”

“How much longer?”

“Oh! ten minutes!”

“All right. Let up a bit, my boy. We want

quiet. When I knock on the door, you can start again."

"Right you are, boss!"

Vincent came back to his seat with the most natural air in the world.

"And now, father-in-law, on with it!"

But at the middle of the table sat two very inquisitive old gossips who enquired: "What are you making in your back shop?"

"A bit of furniture," answered Vincent, twisting his grizzly beard carelessly.

"What? A sideboard?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps! Then it's a table!"

"If you like . . ."

"Oh! He won't answer, the old fox!"

One of the priors ran to the door and tried to open it.

"We'll see!"

But the door was locked, and perhaps bolted as well, on the other side.

If the prior was disappointed, she did not acknowledge herself beaten.

"Come now, Vincent, tell us!"

The bride, too, chimed in:

"Husband dear, tell us!"

He began to laugh, very loudly.

“But why do you want to know? There is nothing mysterious about it, I assure you.”

“Oh! Tell us, Vincent!”

“Ah! These women! Well, since you insist, I’ll let you into this great secret! It’s . . .”

“It’s?”

He stopped a minute, then in an unconvincing tone of mock confidence: “It’s a bed!”

Around him buzzed a low murmur of unanimous incredulity.

“Get out! ’Tisn’t true!”

Vincent seemed suddenly angered by this contradiction. His face became sombre. He retorted:

“What is there impossible in that? We joiners, if we make sideboards and tables, we make beds, too!”

The wag remarked:

“What do you expect, old man? This doesn’t seem natural to these ladies! To deafen us with hammering at a wedding. There’s no hurry for that contraption. You might have put it off.”

His hands in a trumpet, Vincent had turned towards the back shop. He shouted:

“Amadée! You’re making a bed, aren’t you, Amadée?”

The workman behind the door began to laugh

too, very loudly, noisily, just as his master laughed a minute before.

“Of course it’s a bed! And a good bed too!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! A spiffing bed!”

They heard him now whistling between his teeth a kind of jig.

Old Babulard resumed his speech.

“Vincent Paroli, I say it before everybody, I’m very pleased to give you my daughter Louisa because you’re a good fellow and you deserve her! But, between ourselves, we must say this too and make our excuses to you, as is our duty. Ten years ago, when you came here to Nogent and went to work in the Chupal factory, you made a funny impression on us all. You didn’t look like the rest of us, Vincent. We couldn’t have said why, but we didn’t trust you. You never looked us in the face. You had the trick, as it were, of looking behind you, as if someone were going suddenly to jump on your back. We said to ourselves: ‘This Paroli fellow isn’t straight.’ And then you didn’t talk much. That’s it, you didn’t talk much.”

“I remember,” said a voice. “‘Good-day!’ when you came in, ‘Good-day!’ when you went out, and not that every day. That’s all Vincent used to say!”

“But in a short time, it must be acknowledged also,” continued Babulard, “you made us think otherwise. And all to your credit! In the first place, you’re a working-man with a conscience. You like your job and you’re good at it. Then, too, you’re an honest pal, always ready to do a good turn. We know more than one you’ve helped, and I’m sure there are many others we don’t know. For you’re modest as well as kind, Vincent. When you do good, you don’t brag about it.”

An outburst of “Hear, Hear!” endorsed this simple but genuine praise.

Flushed, confused, and with a look of pain, Vincent shook his head. He seemed to protest.

“No . . . naturally I don’t! Besides, I’m not so good as you seem to think.”

The speaker went on, having, with a wide sweep of his arm, demanded silence again.

“Then you married Marie Potier, the foreman’s daughter. You became one of us absolutely. Poor Marie! She was a good little thing, your late lamented; and you see, though this is your wedding-day and we’re enjoying ourselves, I wanted—and here I’m at one with Louisa—I wanted to remember Boubou’s mother, your first

wife, Vincent, who was the friend of my daughter—the friend of us all, and whom we all loved.”

Vincent had lowered his head and hidden his eyes behind his left hand, with which he had quickly shielded his forehead. Doubtless he wanted to hide the tears which were already clinging to his eyelids, or wished to meditate a moment, absorbed in pious memory of the dead. His right hand, resting listlessly on the table-cloth, began to tremble nervously.

Sitting between the bridesmaid and the bride Boubou, unmindful of old Babulard, was munching sugar. All at once, however, he pricked up his ears:

“Hi! Lady,” he enquired, “who’s calling me?”

“They’re not calling you, Boubou; they are talking about you.”

“Ah!”

“And of your poor mother.”

“Of mother?”

“Yes, Boubou.”

Boubou stopped talking and swung himself round on his chair. He had let fall the piece of sugar he had been nibbling for a long time with the steady obstinacy of a rat. Suddenly he got up, ran to his father and threw himself upon him. Vincent had opened his arms. Boubou fell on his

breast. Poor Boubou! He groaned out between two deep sobs which shook his shoulders: "Mother! Ah! Little mother!" Vincent, deathly pale, clutched the child closely in his arms. He gripped him so tightly that Boubou could not keep back a cry of pain: "Father! You are hurting me!"

Then Vincent became very tender, very motherly. He began rocking the suffering child. He had forgotten his wedding, the guests, and Babulard who was speaking. He whispered incoherently: "You, my redemption . . . it's you! A fine man. . . . Your mother's heart . . . redemption by goodness!"

And he put his mouth on his son's neck, under his ear, on the sensitive spot where a baby's flesh is so soft and so warm. He kissed him greedily, passionately, with big, noisy kisses. Boubou opened wide his eyes full of tears. And tears still rolled down his transformed face, which had just passed, without transition, by a quick alteration in his features, from the expression of distress to a burst of gaiety. For Boubou was laughing, suddenly comforted, at the soft tickle of his father's beard.

There was much blowing of noses around the table, and old Babulard ended off his speech:

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“Thus, then, Vincent Paroli, I say it again to you all. It is with joy I give you my Louisa, my only daughter, to be your second wife, because I know you are a good, straight chap and will make her happy. I raise my glass and wish you luck!”

Shouts, cheers, and the clink of glasses followed. Then the ladies, one after the other, kissed the bride.

Vincent commanded:

“Amadée, you can finish!”

And for a few minutes the workshop rang with the echo of frenzied hammering. Strangely sonorous, this bed!

The wag, a lover of the fine arts, grew restive.

“And now, silence! We will have a concert, followed by a dance.”

There was singing. Fat ladies warbled sentimental love ditties in which babbling brooks held converse with goldfinches. Girls dressed in blue, girls dressed in pink, who smelt of soap and of starch, recited realistic stories in which “poor madmen” died for “fair and fickle lassies.” Hilarious swains declaimed monologues.

Boisterous mirth shook the company.

“Long live the joiners’ trade!”

Vincent, though glum for a long time, seemed gradually to cheer up, and even took part in the

choruses. Then they begged him to do his turn too.

But the bride whispered:

“Ask him to show you his transformation tricks. If you only knew how funny he is!”

“Transformation tricks!” exclaimed several voices in astonishment.

“Yes. He disguises himself! Vincent, do please show us your transformation tricks, like at father’s the other night. You made us laugh so!”

The guests, all agog, surrounded the bridegroom:

“Come on, Vincent! Make us laugh!”

Vincent yielded.

“All right! But first I must go up to my room. I’ve got some disguises upstairs—wigs—and I need a few odds and ends! Ah! It’s a real ‘turn’ you’ll see!”

“Yes! yes!” promised the bride. “It is just like at the music-hall!”

Vincent started to go:

“While you’re waiting for me,” he added, “why shouldn’t you dance? Little Louis, take my concertina, and stir your stumps, young folks!”

Old Babulard stopped him at the door:

“But tell me, Vincent, who taught you to dress up like that? It isn’t credible! You disguise

yourself, upon my word, so that if they didn't know it was you, no one would recognize you!"

There crept over Vincent's face an odd smile which might have been a nervous twitching at the corners of his lips. A shiver, too, perhaps.

He replied:

"It came quite naturally, father-in-law."

And he went away very quickly.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRANGE COOK AND THE SUSPICIOUS CHINA-MENDER

To reach his room, Vincent had to follow a passage and climb a winding staircase. This room was above the shop—a big square room with plaster walls, floored with red brick, plainly furnished but very clean. Two windows lighted it and looked out on the street, a silent little suburban street with rare traffic.

Half-way up the stairs, between the ground and first floors, opened a kind of bull's-eye window ventilating the servants' quarters. Mechanically, or perhaps owing to the clatter of dishes below, Vincent stood still on a step and, raising himself on tiptoe, looked into the kitchen, where supper was already being prepared. Old Mother Tavane, a neighbour skilled in making sauces, was tasting the gravy, her daughter Gertrude was scouring the plates, and, standing in front of a flat sideboard, the man engaged to do the cooking, a woman's apron round his waist, in shirt sleeves, was about to break eggs into a salad bowl. This stranger

had come early that very morning to the shop. He explained that he was a cook out of work, and knew that there was to be a wedding in the house. If they would give him a job, he could make himself useful, for he had worked at the Ritz and the Terminus, he said, and in the biggest hotels in Paris. He asked for nothing but his food in payment. Vincent, touched and suspecting he was very hard up, promised him five francs to boot.

Mother Tavane, who was everywhere at once, mixed the sauces, poked up the fire, washed the vegetables, tasted everything, whisked away the flies, and girded at the kitchen maid.

“Well, Gertrude! You’re sleeping over the sink!”

The girl, awakened from some intoxicating reverie, started, turned scarlet, and plunged her reddened arms up to the elbows into the greasy dish-water to fish out, noisily, a handful of forks.

Vincent was about to pass on his way up to his room, when an apparently trifling detail suddenly arrested his attention.

The man engaged that morning, the stranger out of work, the cook from the Ritz and the Terminus and so many other smart establishments, did not know how to break an egg.

However odd it might appear, the fact was undeniable. This cook couldn't break an egg. He took up one awkwardly, turned it round and round, seemed to be weighing it. He was about to strike the smaller end against the edge of the bowl, then he changed his mind, gave it a hard knock in the middle, mixing the yolk with the white, outside the salad-bowl.

Vincent marvelled, and frowned rather suspiciously, but almost immediately his face smoothed into a pitying smile: "Poor fellow," he reasoned, "he's been forced to lie to get his daily bread." He was no more a cook than Vincent himself, the joiner, was an archbishop or lawyer. But pshaw! why send him off? He was not to remain in his employ; and then, on a wedding-day, charity insists upon a poor man having his share!

Vincent was about to leave his look-out and go up to his room to prepare his "transformation," when a new detail—rather an odd one this—riveted him to the window, his head suddenly craning forward.

The stranger had just taken out a pocket magnifying glass. He examined with great care the rim of a dessert plate, at the same time following over his shoulder the movements of Mother Tavane who might well have noticed his conduct

and been puzzled by it. After this, doubtless satisfied with his examination, the eccentric cook seized a poker and, with a sharp tap, struck the bottom of the plate, which broke clean in two.

At this noise Mother Tavane gave a start.

“*Hey! Hey!*”

The clumsy fellow bewailed:

“Woe’s me! It slipped out of my hands and fell on the stove!”

“Throw it on the rubbish heap,” decided Gertrude.

The stranger feigned blank despair.

“Dear, oh dear! Such a thing never happened to me! I don’t know how it came about! Woe’s me! Such a beautiful plate! And in such a nice family too! Dear, oh dear! So much the worse for me! I’ll get it mended out of my own pocket.”

“Bosh! A twopenny-halfpenny plate! It’s not worth it,” muttered Mother Tavane.

But the cook stuck to it:

“I will indeed! I’ll get it mended. The bits are here and it’ll never be seen.”

At this moment—yes, exactly at this moment!—while the stranger was gesticulating in front of the kitchen window, a bit of the plate in each hand, the shrill horn of a china-mender sounded quite

close, perhaps on the other side of the street, on the pavement opposite.

“ ’Tis King Dagobert  
He put on his breeks inside out!”

tootled the mender’s horn.

The cook had already hailed him.

“Hey there! Here’s something to mend!”

Vincent could not see the new-comer, prevented by a side of the dresser; but he heard.

“Here’s a plate, mate!”

“To be stuck together, it looks like.”

“Yes, to be stuck together.”

“Give it me. Thanks.”

“Careful!”

“No fear! I’m an old hand. I’ll fix it all right!”

Then this sentence, incoherent—at least, so it seemed—was uttered by the cook:

“You’ll report to him there’s now, as you might say, ‘not even the shadow of a fold in the fine hair of a fair child.’ ”

Whereupon the mender answered with a coarse laugh:

“As for the plate . . . Number 1193!”

Vincent Paroli seemed suddenly struck with stupor. Deathly pallor blotted out his features.

His purple lips quivered, and his haggard eyes stared as if hypnotised.

“No . . . no . . . am I mad?” he stuttered in a dying voice. “I *am* mad . . . it isn’t possible!”

Suddenly he threw himself back sideways, as if he now feared to show his face in the oval window to this uncanny cook. He stooped, his back bent, his knees taut, ready to spring. Then he risked over his shoulder the stealthy keen look of an animal run to earth. Over his shoulder, behind him, as before, ten years ago! As before!

But what was he now looking at so narrowly at the bottom of the passage? A cupboard where a few clothes were hanging. . . .

Skirting the wall, with muffled tread, like the disquieting steps of wild beasts or of burglars, he went down the stairs again, straight to the cupboard, reached it, sprang back, spun round, made sure no one saw him and hurriedly took down a man’s jacket of threadbare black cheviot, and went through the pockets. Vincent’s breath came short, quick and hoarse like a death-rattle. And how bloodless his hands were! . . . One pocket revealed a tinder-box, a key, a bit of string, a punched Underground ticket from the *Cité*; the other: an envelope bearing this address: “M. Barbelon, 24, Rue Rennequin.” In the envelope

was a cheap ticket for a Montmartre music-hall, also a pipe, a packet of tobacco, and a piece of chalk.

In the inside jacket-pocket, a very deep one, Vincent found a cambric handkerchief and a cap with a band of black crêpe on the right side above the ear. Under the band had remained an Underground ticket, slipped there working-men's fashion and forgotten. This ticket came from the *Cité*. Hallo! Just like the other! This Barbelon lived in the Rue Rennequin in Paris. The Rue Rennequin must be somewhere near that station. Rue Rennequin? But no. Vincent remembered it was at the other end of town, in the seventeenth *arrondissement*. What then? Let's see where the Metropolitan station of the *Cité* faces. On a square yes, on a square—and to the right is the Palais de Justice—opposite the Préfecture de Police. . . .

Police!

Vincent let go the jacket, which fell at his feet. He staggered and leaned with one shoulder against the wall amid the clothes which seemed to open, then close again, like accomplices, over his tortured face to hide him from prying eyes.

A long melodic sigh suddenly filled the house.

Petit-Louis was filling the big, blue concertina for these "gentlemen and ladies" to dance.

Vincent freed himself, made a visible effort, picked up the garment, the pockets of which he had examined a minute ago, and hung it back on the peg.

He was quite certain now! He knew now who the cook was. He knew!

The concertina wheezed a slow waltz. Unconsciously, Vincent hummed the words, conjuring up peaceful landscapes and a very quiet life:

"Nini, come with us, roysterers,  
Dance to the old refrain!  
Come to the flowery woods  
And gather marjolaine. . . ."

But at the same time his soul was sad, full of secret forebodings. Wearily he mounted the stairs with heavy tread, grasping the bannister. The song haunted him. He heard the whirl of the dancers, the clatter of their shoes on the uneven floor. A chair, overturned in a collision, went down with a bang on its back. A woman's laugh, loud and hysterical, mingled with the music.

Vincent opened the door of his room and went in. Quickly he shot the bolt and stood still for a second, leaning with both hands on the lock. He

put his ear against the panel of the door. No, no one had followed him.

Hallo! The concertina stopped! The sudden silence seemed menacing.

Vincent went to one of the windows, drew aside the curtain, uncovered the glass and looked out.

In the street, on the pavement opposite, seated on the steps of a neighbouring summer-house, the china-mender was repairing an old vase. Vincent seemed bewitched by the right hand of the worker. How nimble that hand was! It went backwards and forwards, took a tool from the leather-strapped box, with a painted cover and adorned with a five-pointed star in brass nails. Backwards and forwards it went, threw back one tool, took another, waved it, placed it upon the broken side of the vase as if to drill a hole for the rivets, but drew it back almost at once.

Make-believe!

Vincent shook his head and drooped his shoulders in despair.

Trap!

He drew the curtain.

What was the good of watching this mysterious mender any longer! It was clear this fellow *didn't know how to mend china*, any more than that odd cook could break eggs. On the other

hand, this also was clear: this new stranger, his eyes flush with the brim of his bowler hat, was examining Vincent's joinery and the portico with its closed door leading to the back room and to the workshop.

Trap!

Had he looked closely, yonder at the end of the street that skirted the back garden wall and flanked the Marne, which flowed at a distance of less than fifty yards, he would undoubtedly have discovered certain apparently inoffensive strollers deep in their newspapers or certain collarless loafers in greasy caps, sprawling as if asleep on the high grass of the banks. All of them, passing and prowling, despite their interest in their papers or the slackness of their appearance, would have been seen to have their eyes fixed stealthily on the roof of his house, on its windows, its doors, its vent-holes, all its openings.

Trap!

Ah! That concertina. . . . It puffed to the dashing tune of a polka. The whole party must be dancing. The building shook beneath the heavy steps of the couples; and here in the room, on the mantel-piece, the glass sockets in the copper candlesticks tinkled like chattering teeth. The trembling house seemed to share the terror of its

owner. He had fallen heavily on his knees before his bed, and, his face buried in the eiderdown, he stifled in it his groans, his complaints and his lamentations:

“My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me? If it’s my fault, I am expiating it. A life of remorse! And for ten years I’ve been a good father, a good husband and kind to everyone. Others said so just now. Thou must not forsake me, O God! I was so happy, so contented! I said to myself: ‘Vincent, it’s your turn now to have a bit of luck!’ I’ve a new mother for Boubou. Trade isn’t bad. It was peace for the end of my life—peace and forgetfulness! I’ll bring my boy up well: I’ll make a good man of him, that I swear! But here I am again tracked like a beast! I won’t go back yonder. I’d die sooner. They would take Boubou from me. O God, save me! Have mercy upon me! What have I done since to be punished like this? I’ve done nothing. I won’t go back yonder. It’s too wretched. It’s too shameful! Ah, Boubou! My little Boubou! O God, Thou hearest me, I’m only a poor man! Thou must not forsake me. Just think, O God, just think! *Only five days more, and it would be over! Over! In five days I’d be saved!*”

## CHAPTER III

### THE WERE-WOLF

THE concertina gave up the ghost with an abruptly broken sigh. The sound of feet ceased immediately. The house became still. The candle-sockets stopped shaking. The polka had just ended; and, in the restored silence, Vincent suddenly dared no longer hear the sound of his anxious voice. He got up, clenched his fists and stiffened himself. He would be brave. His two jaws, locked together in a determined effort, no longer uttered a complaint. He would have to fight. Very well. He accepted the fight and, if Heaven did not abandon him, in five days he would be saved.

Saved!

Alas, outside, about the house, the net set for him was already drawing in its narrow meshes, surrounding the walls, blocking up all exits! . . .

What odds? "Yonder," he had been initiated into the tricks of the most notorious escapes. He had but to cudgel his memory, to find once more

his old soul, the fierce soul of a hunted brute; his mind, ceaselessly on the alert, had been turned, night and day, towards his one haunting but supreme end in view: "Flight!"

He would flee. . . .

Five days of ambushes, of tracking, of traps to outwit! Five days of unheard-of hardships! Five days of moral wretchedness and suspense! Five days to live—to die rather—hour by hour, in the terror of pursuit!

He accepted the struggle!

But alone, against the world, once again in arms against him, the avenging and powerful world that was demanding the payment of an old and bloody debt! What a one-sided struggle it was!

Alone!

Already, he knew it, all the telephone lines, all telegraph lines running alongside the railroads, crossing towns, cutting the countrysides, spanning rivers, climbing mountains, dispersed over the whole land in myriad lacing, mingled, knotted ramifications—like the meshes of a gigantic net—all those wires had given the alarm to north, south, east and west, minutely specifying his status and his description:

“Léon Bernier, an escaped convict, established for ten years as a joiner at Nogent-sur-Marne under the name of Vincent Paroli (possesses duly authenticated documents in this name). Age 45. Medium forehead; oval face; grey hair, white at the temples; wears a beard round his neck; brown eyes; straight nose; height: 1 metre 70.

“Do your utmost to apprehend this individual without delay. Sentenced April 13, 19—, by the Assize Court at Rennes to transportation, he would reach—under Article 635 of the Penal Code (‘The pains and penalties inflicted by sentences and judgments given in the Criminal Court shall be null and void after the lapse of twenty years, reckoning from the date of sentence or judgment,’)—on April 13 at midnight (that is to say, in five days) the end of his sentence.”

He would therefore be free from that date, protected by new sanctions, forever released from his sentence—the most terrible of punishments, penal servitude for life—a lingering death, slow, ruthless, daily without hope.

“A reward is offered—without speaking of certain promotion—to every man in the police service: constable, gendarme or customs officer who will arrest this Bernier within the aforesaid time.”

“A reward is offered!”

He saw them—these policemen! Already,

throughout France, at the entrances to stations, at frontier posts, on the landing-stages of the great maritime ports, prying eyes were scanning passengers.

There was no quiet country road even which was not being watched by the gendarmes. How many tramps, wayfarers, poor beggars, would from now on be interrogated? "Halt! Are you Léon Bernier, an escaped convict? Come nearer! Grey hair, brown eyes, beard round the throat!"

He saw them, lured on by the promise of money, the honour of a commission, and also the fascination of the hunt. A man-hunt! What a cruel fascination! He seemed to hear still, after the lapse of ten years, the cries of the negroes, the furious barking of a pack at his heels, yonder in the green tropical forest, when he escaped from the convict prison with three fellow-captives, two of whom were recaptured, the other dying beneath an alligator's paw in the muddy waters of the Maroni.

Ah! The baying of the bloodhounds and the yelping of the excited negroes!

Listen, why was the mender's nasal pipe now playing that innocent dance tune:

"Tower, take care,  
Tower, take care—  
Not to be thrown down."

Why? Vincent listened. . . .

Amadée at that moment opened the street-door. It creaked on its hinges! The man opposite who saw it certainly told his helper. Yes, *parbleu*, that tune was a signal: "Look out, Cookie! Keep an eye indoors! A door has opened. We mustn't let our prey escape. Think of the reward, mate, and promotion! Keep an eye! Take care!"

Vincent stood for a long time in the middle of the room, his heavy, quivering eyelids closed, the better to shut himself up in the night of his eyes, alone with his thoughts. Intense meditation spread over his forehead a complicated network of blue veins. He seemed to have ceased breathing. . . .

"Tower, take care!"

Fly! Fly! Fly!

But how?

"Tower, take care—

Not to be thrown down!"

Vincent had opened his eyes again. He had to make a decision. He made a resolute gesture, then crouched. He raised a floorboard and uncovered an opening. It was he who had made it

formerly (after a chance customer had taken three hundred francs from the till) so that he could keep an eye on the shop from the bedroom. He leaned over and called:

“Amadée!”

“Hey? Ah, it’s you, boss!”

“You’ve opened the street door?”

“Yes. I’m going to deliver the work. I’ve loaded it on the little hand-cart with a tarpaulin over it. I’ll slip on my coat and be off.”

“Good work, Amadée! Now, for your trouble, go and drink a glass to my health and marriage.”

“I won’t refuse, boss! I’ve sweat a bit to finish in time, and my throat’s as dry as a board. Driving nails into oak isn’t the same as driving them into pine. You must put your back into it. That’s a fact!”

“Amadée!”

“Hey?”

“Shut the street door!”

“But I’m going out with the work in a minute.”

“Shut the street door, I tell you!”

“Good, I’ll shut it!”

“And let no one out of the workshop.”

“Right! It wouldn’t do for any of the wedding party to look under the tarpaulin. That would put a damper on their sport!”

“Amadée!”

“Hey?”

“Take your time. I’ll give you twenty minutes to have your drink. Afterwards, without saying a word and without asking anybody any questions—you understand me, Amadée?—without asking anybody any questions, you’ll put yourself into the shafts and deliver the work.”

“Count on me, boss, and here’s to your good health!”

Vincent put back the board. He quickly divested himself of his frock-coat, his white piquet waistcoat, and his over-starched shirt, which bulged out like a buckler. He put on a soft flannel shirt with a turned-down collar, and a worn blue cheviot suit, and tied a check handkerchief round his neck. He put on his head a soft cap, and looked like an ordinary workman.

He took the scissors from the drawer of a small dressing-table placed in an alcove and cropped his beard hurriedly. He would keep only his big moustache, which he would turn down in order to hide the shape of his mouth. He shaved his cheeks and chin, and had to be quick about it, as only a few minutes remained before. . . .

A knock!

Well? Another knock. . . . Who was at the door? Could it be . . .? Vincent shuddered.

A stormy fist hammered the door. Vincent, deathly pale, desperate, sought a way of escape. In vain! He was caught. They had come to arrest him. The police were on the stairs. The windows? Outside in the street were the sham china-mender and his minions, whom he divined to be hidden in corners. There remained the chimney! Too narrow! A child could not get up it. He was trapped!

He gathered himself up to spring, with a look of hatred, and brandished the razor as a weapon.

The fist grew impatient and a voice asked anxiously: "Are you there, Vincent?"

Vincent stood erect and let his threatening arm drop slowly. He gasped: "Oh! it's you! It's you, Louisa!"

"Yes, it's me. I've come to look for you."

"How did you get out from the workshop? I had told the mate. . . ."

"Amadée! He's drinking. He doesn't bother about other people; but what are you doing, pray? They're waiting for you."

Vincent strove to master the tremble in his voice and answered with a forced laugh: "You know I'm disguising myself."

“Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“Will you open?”

“No! I don’t want to spoil the effect.”

“And I, I want to be the first to see you. Open!”

The small hand kept on, obstinately.

“Open! Open! I won’t go away. Open! I’m headstrong! You bad man! Open!”

Vincent grew frightened. This noise might attract the attention of the cook. It was better to give in to the little tease.

“All right! I’ll open, Louisa, but you’ll have a shock.”

“Why?”

He hastily covered his head and his face with a towel and cried jocosely as he half opened the door:

“Because you won’t see me, I tell you.”

The bride, blushing with excitement at having asserted her authority for the first time, gave vent to childish merriment:

“How funny he is! This Vincent is a real wag.”

And she added: “You know everybody downstairs is getting impatient. They are dying to see

you, and are so delighted you're going to make them laugh."

Make them laugh! What irony!

Upstairs, Tragedy—downstairs, Comedy!

And he who, from now on, would be staking on an unequal and tragic game of hide-and-seek, his new-born happiness, the rest of his humble life of toil and love which he had hoped would forever save him from damnation and shame, he whom death was threatening—for if they should take him, they would not take him alive—this was the man they were awaiting to make them laugh!

To make them laugh!

Ah! If Louisa could have seen suddenly, under the thick covering, his face of distress, how she would have started back in fright; but she must not see him. She would go wild, demand reasons, would want to know the cause of this confusion. And then, this very evening, when the police, furious at having been baffled, told her the real identity of the man who had dared make her his wife and deceive her so ignominiously, she must not be able to give precisely his new description. He had cut off his beard and kept his moustache. Ah! If she had seen his face! Despair had no mask more terrible!

But she did not see him, and she laughed. Louisa laughed!

“Do lift that towel. I want to have a look at you.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I’m not yet quite as I want to be. Oh, ’twill be a funny disguise, I warrant you! I’m putting on the finishing touches. Go down and tell them I’m coming.”

Now Louisa sighed.

“You know I was worried because you were gone so long. I said to myself: ‘I only hope nothing has happened to him.’ You never know. Illness. . . .”

“Or sudden death!”

“Oh, Vincent!”

“It happens sometimes. An aneurism of the heart! What would you have done, Louisa, if after forcing the door you had found me on the floor?”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Vincent.”

“Oh! I’m only supposing, to—to—to make you mad! Ha! ha! ha! And then I’d have left you Boubou in remembrance of me.”

“Boubou. . . .”

“You’d have kept him, wouldn’t you?”

“The little darling! Can you doubt it? He’s so nice! And then the son of an honest man. . . .”

“Louisa!”

“What?”

“Nothing!”

There was a long silence. Vincent leaned against the lintel of the door.

Louisa, astonished, repeated: “Come now, lift up that towel.”

Vincent did not respond to this invitation. She heard him muttering:

“Of an honest man . . . yes . . . yes . . . of an honest man. . . .”

But suddenly he questioned her in an oddly changed voice:

“And even . . . were I not an honest man? Of course, I’m joking. Only supposing again. I’m joking, I tell you! If you were told I was a murderer. . . .”

“Vincent!”

“Tell me!”

“What? What?”

“Tell me, Louisa. If I were a murderer, would you keep Boubou?”

Louisa cried out in protest: “Is it likely? Never! A murderer’s offspring!”

Vincent had lowered his head; and his voice muffled, as if it came from afar, approved:

“To be sure, you’re right—you’re right.”

The bride, worried by this strange conversation, went away.

“I’ll tell them you’re coming; but really and truly! Why do you say things like that? They frighten me!”

“Just for a joke, Louisa!

“Try to be more funny when you come down. What an idea, making up things like that!”

The bride, suddenly sad, went downstairs. Vincent, who had again locked the door of his room, re-opened it hurriedly.

He called:

“Louisa!”

“Vincent?”

“Louisa. . . . I’ve an idea . . . for a comic entry . . . with Boubou. You’ll see. Send me Boubou.”

“At once?”

“Yes, at once. Send me Boubou.”

Vincent uncovered his face, rolled the towel into a ball and threw it from him. Then, in a fever, he finished shaving. He had to be quick. Only a few minutes more! Amadée must not leave the house without. . . .

With a shaky hand, and in his haste, he gashed his cheek. At once tiny streaks of blood trickled down in zigzag lines, coming together in big red drops which dripped slowly, as if congealed, from the tip of his trembling chin.

Someone was trotting along the landing. It was Boubou.

Vincent turned round, stretched out his arms.  
“My Boubou!”

The child, who was running, stopped. He opened his mouth to howl out his sudden fright; but his throat, contracting, choked his cry. He stood there at the door, white as a sheet, his arms slack, his eyes protruding.

“Come now, Boubou.”

The little fellow jumped and wanted to run away. He had already grasped the bannister.

“I’m afraid . . .! Papa! Where are you, papa?”

“Hold your tongue, you little wretch!”

Vincent jumped forward, clutched the child and with a heavy hand closed his mouth.

“Hold your tongue, you!”

He dragged him into the room, shut the door and tried to soothe him.

“But it’s me—your father! It’s me, Boubou.”

Was this new face, so colourless, worn, bleeding, which leaned over his, really his father's?

"I'm afraid! It isn't you! Where are you, papa? Where are you?"

Yet the voice, which he recognized, gradually calmed his fright.

"It's me, your father!" repeated Vincent. "Now come, Boubou, you know I dress up sometimes like this to make people laugh. You remember the other day? . . . Just for a joke, Boubou! Come then, it's all right, you recognize me, don't you?"

The little fellow nodded.

"Yes, papa! Yes, papa!"

And he began to cry.

"Don't be afraid, Boubou."

Vincent pressed his son against him.

"Ah! My little one! I can't leave you! I must take you away. I know now. . . . They would abandon you! And where would you go? To the workhouse? I won't have it! I don't want them to take you from me! I'll fight for you and carry you off. We're going away very far, perhaps. I don't know where. Far away. . . . We shan't come back any more, maybe. It's mad what I'm doing. Taking you with me is a danger! A small boy is the surest description. Never

mind, I won't leave you! I love you, little chap! From on high, your poor mother will protect us. I'm not a blackguard. I've the right to be happy! Give me your hand, Boubou, we'll be off!"

"Be off?"

"Yes, both of us. We're going to hide. We mustn't say anything, above all! And you must do everything I tell you!"

"Why, papa?"

"There's someone who wants to hurt us!"

"Oh!"

"Hush, Boubou!"

"Who is it, papa? Tell me who it is."

No, Vincent could not answer. In the first place, did the boy even know what those terrible words meant: 'I'm a murderer and the police are on my track'? And then, before this innocent child, with his eyes full of naïve terror, Vincent could not—even though he were not understood—thus confess, aloud, his crime and dishonour.

No. He made a vague gesture indicating beyond the walls, somewhere, yonder, the Invisible Menace.

But Boubou wanted to know, as he clung, trembling, to his father's coat:

"Who is he, papa? Tell me who he is." And

he added in a little contrite voice: "And yet I haven't been very bad!"

This childish remark immediately reminded Vincent of a legendary character, the son of Darkness, who, hiding behind doors, is ever ready to devour little children; and he answered, in a low, confidential whisper, fiercely taking his motionless son into his arms:

"It's the wolf man!"

## CHAPTER IV

OH! THE GOOD BED, THE FINE BED!

NOISELESSLY he descended the stairs, keeping close to the wall, bent down by the weight of his precious burden. Through the open bull's-eye window a goodly smell of caramel pervaded the house. Mother Tavane was grinding coffee and the creaking of the mill drowned opportunely the sound of the hunted man's steps on the stairs.

Ah! There was the concertina beginning again. . . .

A waltz in slow time!

“When all things are past  
And your sweet dream at last. . . .”

Vincent set his son down on his feet in the passage and silently commanded: “Not a word!”

Then, slowly, he turned the handle of a door. Slowly—the door opened. He went in. Boubou, whom he pushed before him, was not at all easy in his mind and panted anxiously:

“Oh! Is the wolf man there?”

“Sh! . . .” said Vincent, a finger to his lips.

He cast round him a swift, sweeping glance. In the back room the large work-table, strewn with sawdust, twisted nails and bits of wood, contained nothing but tools scattered here and there. Amadée's "job" was no longer there! Vincent started. . . . Had his assistant already gone out to deliver it? If so, his plan would collapse at once. He would be lost, captured. Captured! Already, in a pocket, his fingers closed fiercely on the handle of his razor. Captured? Never! Death sooner than that!

But he remembered. . . . Had not Amadée said just now: "I've loaded it on the little-hand-cart"? Quickly he crossed the back room on tiptoe, half opened another door which gave upon the porch, put his head out, looked, drew a deep breath, reassured. On the hand-cart lay Amadée's "job," covered with a tarpaulin which had once been green but which, in course of years, the sun and the rain had discoloured.

"Come quickly, Boubou!"

Boubou rejoined his father under the porch. In order not to make a noise and wake the wicked were-wolf, he walked cautiously in his socks, holding his shoes in his hand.

"Hurry up, Boubou!"

Vincent took off the tarpaulin and uncovered

Amadée's "job." How curious the wedding-guests had been just now to know what it was! But could he have answered them without disturbing the rude gaiety of the feast? Amadée's "job" was a——

Vincent had taken off the tarpaulin and uncovered a large oak coffin.

The hunted man looked to right and left, cocking his ear furtively, like a thief.

"Let's be off, Boubou! They're dancing. So much the better! That makes a noise!"

How sad that concertina was! It wheezed, groaned and sighed with a consumptive's hoarseness.

"Why mourn o'er days that are gone,  
Why regret dreams that are done?"

"Don't be afraid, Boubou. We are both going to sleep in here."

Why should Boubou be afraid? He had never seen a coffin. He didn't know what it was. Did he even know what death was?

Vincent hoisted the child on to the cart, climbing up in his turn.

"Mind, whatever you do, you mustn't cry. You mustn't say anything, even if you were to hear this howl of the wolf man!"

“Yes . . . yes, father!”

Vincent stretched out first in the coffin. Oh, what a nice bed, what a fine bed! It was a vast bier, made to receive the body of a big, strong man.

“Boubou, lie between my legs. Be quick! Between my legs! Like that.”

Vincent pulled the tarpaulin back over the coffin.

“Give it a tug, too, Boubou—a little further—just once more! There, lie down again, and don’t budge.”

Now, beneath the replaced covering, Vincent slid back the lid. Presently, when they got under way, he would raise it a bit so as to get fresh air.

The coffin was closed.

The concertina droned the slow waltz in the distance.

Footsteps! Someone was coming. It was Amadée. It was time.

Footsteps!

Boubou’s tiny hands clasped his father’s legs, nervously, desperately.

The were-wolf was prowling. . . .

Vincent’s face contracted. That wasn’t Amadée outside. Someone was walking round the cart. Who? The cook, doubtless. Someone touched the

cover and pushed it back. Vincent heard the grating of the stiff oil-cloth on the wood of the coffin.

The hunted man held his breath. He felt Bou-bou stiffen with fright. If only he did not scream!

The were-wolf was prowling, prowling. . . .

Ha! Would the stranger raise the lid?

Silence was the word—the silence of the grave, an impossible silence! And now a sudden sound struck Vincent's ears, a continuous noise which grew, increased, deepened, became strangely audible:

Tic . . . tac . . . tic . . . tac. . . . Tic . . .  
tac. . . .

His watch, his big joiner's watch, lay forgotten in his waistcoat! His gigantic "onion" he was so proud of before his mates, throbbed with metallic, resounding pulsations.

Tic . . . tac . . . tic . . . tac. . . .

His watch would betray him. To stop it was unthinkable. The slightest sign of movement might be fatal. And suddenly lusty hammering joined the tickings of the watch, vibrating formidably in the ears of the outstretched man.

Toc! . . . Toc! . . . Toc! . . .

Vincent, whose every nerve, painfully on edge, exaggerated and transformed the least noise,

thought he heard his heart jump like a sledge-hammer.

Toc! . . . Toc! . . .

The were-wolf prowling, prowling, prowling. . . .

Hands touched the lid, felt it, were already displacing it. . . .

But a voice close by cried protestingly:

“Hey! Don’t touch that, cookie!”

It was Amadée’s voice!

The cook sniggered, as if abashed at having been surprised:

“No danger of my carrying it off! I hope I shan’t want it for a long time yet! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Give us a hand, cookie, to draw the cover. The boss has just told me: ‘Look alive the folks inside don’t see what you’ve got. It would turn them cold!’ You twig, eh, old man!”

“The boss has just told you?”

“Yes, a few minutes ago.”

“And where is the boss?”

“In his room; but give me the straps and I’ll get into the shafts. Ho, hoist! Give us a shove behind, so I can get her going!” . . .

“And where are you going to leave it?”

“At the Mayor’s house. Just fancy, old top, he

dropped dead at a meeting of the Town Council. They picked him up off the carpet. Heart failure! The best of deaths, eh, old chap? No time to suffer! Open the door. . . . Thanks, old fellow!"

The hand-cart started, and Vincent contracted the muscles of his neck to keep his head from knocking against the sides of the coffin through the jolting of the axles. High hopes now filled his heart and lulled his feelings. He was slipping through the meshes of the net. Space opened before him. He could flee far away. . . . Flee! And he forgot the myriads of prying eyes already on the lookout for him throughout the whole of France.

## CHAPTER V

### A NIGHT IN A COFFIN

AMADEE, tugging his cart, had gone ten yards down the street when he altered his mind, took a path turn, and came back under the porch.

“What’s happening?” Vincent wondered nervously. The fellow had pushed back the tarpaulin and uncovered the coffin. . . .

Was he going to open it?

The hunted man, on tenterhooks, clenched his trembling jaws.

That cursed watch again! Tic, tac; tic, tac! And his heart too! Toc! Toc! Toc!

What was that noise?

It was like a mouse nibbling persistently at night in a silent barn, trying to gnaw its way into the side of an old corn-bin. The nibbling of an obstinate rodent on wood. . . .

Ah! Sinister revelation! What was Amadée doing? But . . . then suddenly the strange cook came back, peeling a potato.

“Ah, here you are again, carpenter!”

“Yes, here I am again, mate!”

“What are you about?”

“You can see for yourself! *I'm screwing down the lid.* One screw at the top, another at the bottom. That'll hold it firm. Otherwise the jolting would fling it off for me. Now you're here, give me a hand with the cover again . . . and now another shove behind. It's a job to start it. Gee up! Now she's off! Thanks! So long!”

The cart wobbled, jolted and creaked over the uneven cobbles. From time to time Amadée stopped pulling and, leaning against a shaft, mopped his face, grumbling: “O Lord, it's heavy. I don't envy the hearse springs!”

The cart lurched and pitched. In the coffin the air became gradually more stifling. Boubou, with beating temples and flushed face, fidgeted and tried to get up. He wanted to push the lid. Vincent pinned him down between his legs and muttered in a faint voice:

“The wolf man!”

The child ceased to move, frightened each time; but soon seized anew by the nervous agony of slow asphyxiation, he wanted at all costs to free himself from his father's tight hold. He wanted to breathe—to breathe! Ah, to breathe freely! And suddenly he began to groan, aching in every limb.

If only Amadée didn't hear him! Vincent, his eyes closed, his brain astonishingly lucid, took stock of the situation. Any other than he would have gone mad and lost his head in the oppressive gloom of the hermetic coffin. But he had seen so much, endured so much in the past! He didn't fear suffering. What he wanted was to give the slip to the pack of sleuths who were on his track; and, as of yore, he was ready to bear anything in order to bring this off. Ten years in a convict prison—that represented for him torment, infinite hardship, infinite misery. Then his escape—a long martyrdom of hunger and thirst! He had suffered so much in his flesh that he no longer feared pain. But Boubou. . . .

“Hush! The wolf man!”

Vincent, with heaving chest and short of breath, reflected:

Could he keep his son much longer in this closed coffin with its poisoned air? He, himself, panting, struggled with all his might against the instinctive revolt of his being in peril. His hands, despite himself, pressed against the lid as if to force it.

Amadée, who had to cross the town to reach the Mayor's house, had hardly—for he knew the route—gone half-way.

“Hush! There’s the wolf man!”

And then, granting that he could stick it out to the end in this coffin, how would he leave it presently? The man or men (for there might well be the dead man’s servants, the undertaker’s men, or the family) who saw him rise from the bier when they had unscrewed the lid, would seize him, suspiciously, and give the alarm.

“Boubou! Boubou! There’s the wolf!”

Boubou howled, gasped and kicked.

“Hush, Boubou! The wolf man!”

The child rebelled. He wanted to scream, but his breath died away in a rattle.

“Shut up!”

Amadée stopped. They heard his surprised voice.

“Eh! What’s up?”

Vincent’s knees crushed Boubou’s sides, and he put his heavy hand over the child’s wide-open mouth.

Now Amadée talked to himself:

“I’m damned! I thought I heard voices behind me. Yet I’d but two glasses of white wine and a nip of kümmel. I’m not dreaming. Pshaw! It’s just a fancy! Now then, forward!”

The cart started again, joltingly. . . .

Why was Boubou stiffening thus, all of a sud-

den; his little nails clawing at the coarse cloth of Vincent's trousers? He seemed at the last gasp. The man withdrew his heavy hand, which was gagging the child.

"What's the matter, Boubou? Answer!"

All his attention concentrated solely on the sounds from outside, the man had forgotten that his powerful grip was stopping the child's desperate breathing.

"Boubou! Oh!"

Quickly he slackened the grasp of his legs.

"Boubou, answer! What's the matter?"

The child no longer stirred.

Had Vincent throttled his son? He had not been conscious of it, but the heavy pressure on the child's mouth had perhaps lasted long—too long; and the air had become deadly. Even he, whose resistance was great, could hardly breathe. It seemed to him his cheeks, his lips, his neck were swelling to the point of bursting. They must get out of the coffin at once. . . .

"Boubou! My Boubou!"

Get out! He could gull Amadée anyhow, say it was the joke of a bridegroom who had drunk a drop too much.

A grim joke but an amusing one.

"Amadée! Hi! Amadée!"

Then Vincent's eyes opened in the dark, dilating enormously.

It was because he had just heard, still distant (no, quite close perhaps, since the thick tarpaulin and the wooden coffin had deadened the sound considerably), the horn of the china-mender giving the alarm. They had discovered his escape. They would capture him!

But what did it matter if Boubou were dead?

“Boubou, answer, my little man!”

What a sudden din!

No matter how hard he cried, hammered the sides of his prison with his fist, Amadée did not hear. Vincent guessed why. The cart was passing through a narrow tunnel under the railway embankment. The creaking of the axles, the racket of the iron-bound wheels in the ruts were increased by the echoing arch.

Get out!

Vincent, with the agility of a gymnast, turned round. He had the frightful sensation that one of his legs was crushing Boubou's lifeless body, but he could not bend back or free himself; and he had to act quickly! Already a kind of dizziness was coming over him. He groaned; but, with a last frantic effort of will, he got upon his knees and, with back arched like a battering-ram, he

butted, butted, butted. The wooden lid seemed to give; but his strength failed him. Strange purple flowers rose and crackled silently in his wild eyes. His head was so heavy! Another effort—and the last!

Ah! . . .

A sudden wrench. Vincent, all at once, found himself on his knees, body upright, his face bathed in a current of fresh air. He opened his mouth and eagerly breathed in this vivifying freshness. Leaning with his two hands on the edge of the coffin, he wagged his head like a drunken man.

It was dark and dank around him, but yonder, at both ends of the tunnel, flickered streaks of light. There was the open country, vast and wide. . . . He was free! A moment ago under the pressure of his spine a screw had given and the lid had shot up like a hinge, twisting the head of the other screw and bringing down the tarpaulin, in a sudden swoop, on the man between the shafts. Poor Amadée thought he was being treacherously attacked in the rear. At first, bravely, he had wanted to turn round and face his enemy; but held by his harness, he had got tangled up in the tarpaulin which covered him and the shafts. He now struggled in vain under the heavy covering, the folds of which hampered his arms while its corners

wound treacherously round his legs and feet. Vincent could flee without being recognized or even seen.

And how about Boubou?

The hunted man leaned over, seized the child and held him up in front of him. Ah, those blue cheeks—those swollen lips, almost black! Those upturned eyes!

“My little chap! My little chap!”

He pressed him to him, then shook him to rouse him, but did not succeed. He became desperate and entreated:

“Open your eyes, my little lad! Ah, not that! No, not that!”

He raved, and his face was that of a madman. . . . Suddenly the china-mender's tootle sounded, yonder. It sent through the tunnel its sharp notes, like an invisible arm of sound-waves coming to seize the stricken man by the ear. The horn squeaked a well-known hunting-song! . . . yes, a hunting-song. The horn in the thicket sounded: “Gone away,” then the tallali, then the quarry:

“Tally-ho! Tally-ho!”

Run, Vincent! . . . There is still time! . . .  
Run!

But Boubou was dead.

What mattered it henceforth to an old escaped

convict if he were caught? Boubou was dead! The detectives could come if they liked.

“My Boubou!”

In his despair he was going to put his lips to the forehead of the child for one last kiss. . . .

Ah! What did he see? Boubou’s lips quivered! Was he not deceived by an appearance? No. The child’s nostrils seemed to open, his mouth to open even more, the swelling on his face to diminish, to grow less and less. . . .

He lived!

The horn grew nearer, very quickly. It would soon enter the tunnel. There must be several after him, he heard numerous voices, cries and calls.

Boubou was alive! Then he must fly!

Vincent jumped down from the cart, jostled poor Amadée, still entangled in the heavy tarpaulin. He rushed past him, his strength having returned. He bore away his son clasped to his bosom. He ran . . . and laughed hysterically, laughed and sobbed, for with the fright at being pursued mingled the ardent rapture of feeling in his arms the living body of his son.

He ran . . . out of the darkness into the light of day. How warm it was! The birds were singing in the air. It was a beautifully mild, late afternoon. The sun, a little weary, was sinking to-

wards the horizon and painting the white fronts of the houses in rose. Before him, a short road planted with chestnuts led to the Bois de Vincennes. The Bois! It was easy to hide there. Quite close there were trees, thickets and high grass.

A short, shrill whistle rose and pierced the calm air above the head of the runaway, who stood still for an instant, hesitating.

Above him, on the embankment, a train was slackening its speed and its brakes, slowly applied, were grinding. The signal was up at the entrance of the station. The train stopped. The evening breeze spread over the land a stale smell of hot grease.

Vincent climbed the slope. The grass was thick. His feet slipped sometimes. He fell on his knees and barked his shins against the slag and stones. He could not use his hands, for he was carrying Boubou.

Now he was on the line.

The signal fell with a clatter, far off, and disturbed a swallow which had perched on it. Wires grated on little rusty wheels in the tiny signal-boxes which marked the track. The train started off again. . . .

Being luckily on the wrong side, Vincent had

not been seen by the guard, who was watching the signals. The train increased its speed. Vincent had placed his son on his right hip and held him there like a bundle, with a firm grip. As the train went by, he clutched with his free hand, to haul himself up, the rail of one of those stairs leading to those lofty compartments known as "dickies" which are the picturesque equipment of the slow suburban trains. He climbed the stairs hastily, entered, stooping under the low roof, and took his seat at the end of the passage in the last box. No one was in the carriage.

Vincent gently laid Boubou on the wooden seat. The child's face had become very pale. He shut his eyes and his nostrils were seen to twitch. He had only fainted. Boubou was coming back to life.

Down the line, the china-mender was rallying men round him with commanding gestures. Ah! there was the cook! He had not put on his coat. Vincent recognized him by his blue shirt-sleeves. The mender pointed towards the Bois. Three men started off at a run. Then, with the authority of a chief, he likewise indicated the road to right and to left. Sleuths were spreading themselves out in both directions. The line made a bend and ran between two cuttings, suddenly restricting

Vincent's view. Alas! He had time to see, in the twinkling of an eye, the strange cook stop dead suddenly and point out to his mate along the embankment the footmarks of the fugitive, still fresh in the trampled grass.

It was all up with them! In no time at all, the alarm, transmitted by telephone, would travel quicker than the train to every railway station.

Come! He mustn't lose his head! How long would it take to inform the system? Vincent calculated. . . . The police would first go to the station. As they had to go back the way they came, pass the tunnel again and follow the winding streets, they could hardly reach it, even at a run, in less than ten minutes. If they got up on the line, they would gain little time. Their feet would slip and sink into the ballast. Then they would have to inform the station-master of their pursuit and ask to be put on the telephone with Fontenay first of all, or some minutes' wait. Now, in a quarter of an hour the train would have passed Vincennes and no doubt reached Saint-Mandé. It would be at least twenty minutes before they could warn Reuilly and the Bastille. Therefore, until then, he had time to make his decision. An idea! Cautiously, to avoid the watchers, and because he was travelling without a ticket, he could get out

before arriving at Bel-Air at the spot where the line enters Paris through a gap in the fortifications. The engine there would reduce speed about a hundred yards from the station.

The train had just left Nogent after hardly a minute's halt. That minute was as long as a century! Luckily, no one had got into the carriage where Vincent was kneeling before his son. He put his arm underneath the little fellow's head for a pillow, and rocked him gently:

"That's better, isn't it? It's all over. . . . You're not ill any more! . . . Draw a deep breath. Wait, I'll take off your collar. Would you like to sit up? No? Well, lie like that. Your heart hurts you, eh? That'll pass off. Ah, little lad, what a fright you gave me! No! That won't happen again. Speak! Yes, yes. What? Yes, it was the wolf man!"

Fontenay. . . .

Vincennes. . . .

An old woman got in with a big basket.

"Oh!" said she, noticing Boubou who was still lying down, "the little chap's ill!"

"Yes," replied Vincent, "it's the railway—the jolts, the smoke. He's so delicate!"

The old woman opened her basket.

"Here," said she, holding out a glass and a

bottle, "make him drink a drop of my pet tipple—sweetened water, a little coffee and lots of rum. I sew boots in a factory, it's hard work. So I take a nip of it when I'm beat. At my age you want a pick-me-up. It's hard to have to keep on working when you're sixty-seven, my good sir."

Boubou drank some mouthfuls of the drink, and it revived him. He tried to stand. His father helped him, then took him on his knees.

The old woman was quite affected.

"Ah, you seem to be very fond of your little lad!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Vincent, with bowed head, his eyes averted. A big drop fell on Boubou's forehead.

Saint-Mandé. . . .

The train steamed into the station.

At each halt, Vincent, his gaze fixed on the platform, felt for the razor in his pocket. At Saint-Mandé, two new passengers got up into the "dicky," but sat down furtively in a dark corner at the other end—a courting couple—and were soon lost to sight.

The train started again and ploughed into the long tunnel under the city. At that moment the old woman said:

“Hallo! Your little man has taken off his boots!”

Fumbling with his hands in the gathering darkness, Vincent touched the child’s feet. It was true! He remembered. Yonder, in the shop, Bou-bou, so as not to make a noise, walked about in his socks. He had taken off his shoes and had carried them in his hand. The shoes had been left behind in the coffin.

Ah well! He would buy him another pair directly.

The woman repeated curiously:

“Why has he taken off his boots?”

“I must tell you his feet are paralysed,” answered Vincent astutely, “and as I carry him about all day, he. . . .”

“Poor little dear!” remarked the old woman pityingly.

The train, before long, would have left the tunnel. Already the evening sunlight was shining aslant on the glass against which, without, big clouds of white smoke were crushed.

It would soon be Bel-Air. Look out! Yet another narrow tunnel, then a level crossing, the points and the station. Vincent got up and took

“Where are you going?” asked the old woman, in astonishment.

“I’m getting out at the next station,” he replied, opening the door at the head of the narrow stairs.

“Wait till the train stops, you’ve time!” she squeaked in fright. “It’s the height of rashness!”

“No danger, I’ve hold of the rail.”

“What! With a child in your arms—a crippled child! No, it’s madness!”

“Let me go, I tell you!”

“You won’t do that!”

“Let me go!”

“Wait till we stop!”

“Let me go!”

The old crone hung on gamely. She implored him solemnly:

“For your child’s sake, wait till we stop!”

Vincent lost patience. Was this crazy woman going to hold him thus till the train had drawn up? The danger might be great. It was time to have done! He strove to appear rough and brutal:

“Mind your own business! What an old hen you are!”

Choking with anger, the poor old woman at once

retreated. She let go her prisoner, shut the door and collapsed on the seat, raging:

“That’s what you get for bothering yourself about other people! An old hen! I, who gave him some of my pet tippie! It’s enough to cool you off your fellow-creatures.”

Vincent put Boubou astride his back.

“Feeling better, sonnie?”

“Yes, papa.”

“Hang tight to my neck, with all your might. I’m going to jump.”

“Are we on the run?”

“Yes, we’re on the run!”

“Is he in the train—the wolf man?”

“Yes. Hang on tight!”

Boubou clasped his father’s neck with his trembling arms.

Vincent had jumped.

Here was the tunnel, the level crossing. Soon they would cross the points.

The engine gave two long whistles. The brakes were already gripping the creaking wheels. The station, far off, announced itself in the twilight by a semaphore, on which flamed a red lantern like a staring, prying eye.

Now for it! Jump!

Vincent jumped.

He fell heavily on his knees, stifled a cry of pain, but got up hastily.

“You’re not hurt, are you, Boubou?”

“No, daddy.”

He went off limping.

The old woman, aloft, shouted vehemently:

“Ah, the thief! It’s because he’d no ticket.”

Vincent climbed over the fence which bordered the line at this spot. His knees were painfully bruised. Every step made him groan. He wanted to dash, very quickly, to put at once a long distance between himself and the station; but he could scarcely walk.

And Boubou was a heavy weight on his back.

If he put his son down, the passers-by, in the neighbouring streets, would be astonished to see a child running about in his socks. Therefore he had to carry Boubou.

All at once Vincent started. The shoes left in the coffin! What a precise clue for the police! “Fled with his son. The child had no shoes on his feet.” He had not yet thought of this danger, and yet he was an ex-convict, up to all the tricks!

“Boubou, quick! Wind your feet round in the skirts of my coat. No, better still! Put them into my pockets.”

Boubou recovered, with his strength, his childish joy.

“Oh yes, papa, as if I were on horseback!”

The train had already been in the station for some time! This seemed abnormal to the hunted man who stopped several seconds to scan the platform. What was happening?

Curious faces had come to the carriage windows. Two men were standing on the track, their arms outstretched. They pointed to the runaway. Others appeared, jumped on the ballast and dashed away.

The alarm was given!

Cheerly, Vincent! Make tracks!

But what pain he was in! His knees—skinned, bleeding, stiff—almost refused to support him. At each step he uttered a groan. Now, he must make a dash for it. His pursuers were approaching, already their cries were audible.

“Stop him! Stop him!”

Cheerly!

Yonder, bearing off to the left, a high factory wall would hide him for an instant from those who were after him. Vincent clenched his teeth; savage, determined, and, mastering his pain, he at last began to run. He ran!

Boubou, whose head was still aching badly,

rested it heavily on his father's shoulder. Nevertheless, he was amused at this mad race, and Vincent heard him muttering in his ear:

“Gee up, daddy! Pretend you're a horse! Gee up!”

The child had already forgotten the were-wolf.

But Vincent ordered him: “Look behind you, Boubou. Do you see any men running?”

“Oh yes, father! I see some!”

“Are they a long way off?”

“No, they're coming up on us!”

“Hold on tight, Boubou. I'm going to run quicker still, and hide your feet in my pockets.”

“Why, father?”

“Because the wolf man would eat them, of course.”

The child's tiny arms clasped desperately the neck of the man, who was already blown.

“Not so tight, lad, you'll throttle me!”

“Then the wolf man's still coming?”

“He's coming.”

“Oh! father, let's get away!”

Vincent reached the cross street and dashed into it. Old crones sitting on the doorstep of a house were astonished to see him pass by so quickly with such an agonised look.

“Why are you running like that?”

The hunted man answered with a loud forced laugh:

“Me? I’m playing with my brat!”

And he began to howl at the top of his voice:

“Astride on my donkey, astride,  
As he trots along,  
Astride on my donkey, astride,  
What capers he cuts when I ride!”

He added, in a whisper, at the end of the verse:  
“Laugh, Boubou! Louder still! Laugh, I tell you! Laugh! They must think you’re having a good time!”

“I’m afraid, papa!”

“Astride on my donkey, astride,  
Quickly will I gallop  
Astride on my donkey, astride  
I’ll ride across all Europe!”

“I tell you to laugh, Boubou.”

“I’m afraid!”

“Astride on . . . .”

The man’s song ended in a sudden groan: “Oh, my knees! My knees!”

A lane on the right. Vincent entered it.

It was high time. The pursuers, in their turn, were entering the street.

The lane was short. There were the fortifications.

A factory lorry was speeding along the outer boulevard, rattling its load of old iron. Vincent jumped into the middle of the road in front of the lumbering van. He said to Boubou very quickly:

“Now, you must cry!”

“Cry?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t! I’m afraid!”

“If you don’t cry, I’ll give you to the wolf man!”

Boubou gave a scream and, his heart in his throat, sobbed madly.

“That’s right!” muttered the runaway, lifting his arm and waving it frantically to attract the driver’s attention.

The lorry slowed down and stopped.

“Hey! Mate!” cried Vincent at the top of his lungs, for the roar of the motor almost drowned his voice, “are you going down the Faubourg Saint-Antoine?”

“Why?” answered the driver in surprise.

“Because of my boy. . . . He has just broken his leg. How the poor little fellow is suffering!

I was taking him to the hospital. Mate! Let me sit on your seat alongside you. I've come a long way and the boy's heavy. I can't go any further. Take me at least as far as the Porte de Vincennes."

"I'll take you to the hospital."

"Thanks, mate!"

"Get up on the seat. Up you come!"

Vincent sat down. Boubou was resting in his father's arms. The lorry started again, very quickly, for the driver, a good fellow, wanted the injured child to have the expert skill of a surgeon without further delay.

Behind him, in the van, the old iron rattled, clashed, and turned topsy-turvy with a crash like thunder, drowning every other noise.

Luckily! For suddenly appeared, spurting from the lane like a waterspout, the reinforced crowd of pursuers—at least thirty: police officers, railway men, one soldier, stragglers, and women. They screamed with lung-splitting power: "Stop him! The murderer! Stop him! Lorry driver, stop!"

But the driver, bending over his steering-wheel, did not hear their shouts; and Vincent, his mouth at his son's ear, entreated in a whisper: "Scream

as if you were hurt, Boubou. Louder still. Louder!"

The lorry forged ahead and the brawlers, out of breath, gave up the chase. The women were the first to retire to the kerb. The men argued vehemently in groups, wiping their foreheads under a chestnut tree. The soldier alone continued along the road, at top speed, the two flaps of his overcoat fluttering like wings in the wind; but, soon exhausted, he stopped in his turn and stood still, fuming, in the middle of the highway, shaking his fist.

## CHAPTER VI

NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING!

“HERE we are at the Hospital Saint-Antoine! Shall I help you to get your son down?”

“No, thanks, mate.”

“I will if you like, you know.”

“Mate, if I hadn’t been so hustled, we’d have had a drink together; but my little one is in such pain.”

“Yes, don’t think of it! Carry him quick to the hospital. Next time we meet!”

“Good-bye, and thank you once more, mate.”

The lorry started off again. Vincent hastened to quit the quarter, swarming with crowds and traffic. He went up a narrow winding street where the gloom seemed deepest, about to spread its pall over the town. The low doors of the high, dingy houses gave forth, like foul breath, the sickening smell of bad drains and stale cooking. Vincent, still carrying Boubou on his back, cast right and left a scrutinising glance. What was he after? He had just spotted it no doubt, because, suddenly, he left the middle of the street and entered a little

shop the front shutters of which were already up; but the door, with its rough, green bottle-glass windows, was half open and seemed to tell customers they could still enter.

What a dark, uninviting hole! A putrid combination of smells of various kinds—damp, benzine and stinking meat—filled his nostrils as he entered. Vincent hastily closed the door behind him. Such black darkness pervaded that pestilential den that the hunted man stopped still and dared not advance for fear of running into something.

A nasal drawl in a German accent seemed to issue from a remote corner:

“Vat you vant?”

“Clothes,” replied Vincent.

“Vait a leetle—I vill make de light.”

A smoking candle emerged from the floor and rose at the end of an extended arm, then, lo and behold! followed an ancient top-hat which covered the bald skull of an old man, then a dirty whitish beard, fan-shaped; then a wide collar of thread-bare sham astrakan; then a long black overall.

The flickering light of the candle awoke with a start a big green fly which began to zigzag across the room and dashed against the panes of the shop window.

Old clothes and heaps of trousers, masses of

waistcoats and tunics, smelling of soap and disinfectant! From the low ceiling hung from wires corsets, skirts, musty old dressing-gowns of flannelette, all patched, torn and faded—also a row of dried rabbit skins, infested with swarms of small maggots.

“Then it’s clothes you vant?” asked the old man who had taken off his top-hat discovering a bald pate and a green velvet skull-cap.

“Yes, for my boy and myself,” explained Vincent. “I want a dust-coat and a straw hat, and some stout shoes for the lad. Have you got them?”

“I got ’em, sure! Jotzekal—he ’ave all. You try on de overcoat! Try on and see! Gut! And de ’at? Fits like it was made for you. Gut! I find now de shoes for de leetle one! Mein Gott! Like dey was made for ’im. You vant de lot, hein?”

“Yes.”

“I make de packet, eh?”

“Yes.”

“With de cord?”

“Yes.”

While the old man was trying a pair of hob-nailed shoes on Boubou, Vincent was thinking hard. He answered the old-clo’ man’s questions

evasively, his head bent, his thoughts elsewhere. Suddenly he looked up.

“No, wait a bit!” he added, “don’t make a parcel. My boy’ll keep his shoes on his feet and I’ll put on the overcoat, the hat as well. Now I’m going to explain to you. I’ve got another child at home—a girl. She’s a year older than the little man, but she’s nearly the same size. Well, now, I’d like a pretty Sunday dress for her.”

“I got dat,” said Jotzekal, “you can send the leetle one.”

“She’s ill in bed at present,” replied Vincent, “but, now I think of it, there’s a way out. My boy’ll try on his sister’s clothes. Then we needn’t come back again. I live, you see, a long way from here, at the other end of Paris, in the Batignolle. My wife won’t have time to make such a long journey.”

Boubou stared aghast. As he believed blindly all his father said he wondered, astonished: “And where is my sister?”

The old-clo’ man fished out from the bottom of a cupboard a tiny print dress, in white and blue check, with green buttons—a poor shabby thing, shoddy, skimpy. Its leg-of-mutton sleeves, much creased at the shoulders, bore witness to its age.

“No, not that!” growled Vincent. “It would be so conspicuous.”

“I ’ave no oder,” retorted the dealer. “It is bootiful, indeed! Gut colour, and solide—yes, solide!”

He went back to the cupboard.

“Ah! Yes. Gut! I ’ave anoder. But black. . . . You vish you to ’ave it all the same?”

“Let’s see it.”

Boubou tried on this tweed dress, threadbare but more fashionably made. It was deep mourning with a band of crêpe. The sleeves were rather too wide, the skirt too long, but as it was, it fitted Boubou quite decently.

Jotzekal twisted his beard between his crooked fingers in joy and ecstasy:

“Dat’s a leetle laidie, I can tell you! And bootiful! Ach! mein Gott!”

“Have you a hat?” asked Vincent, with a beaming face.

“Ah . . . no! But I’ve a leetle fichu. I show it to you!”

The fichu covered Boubou’s head so well, hiding his short hair, that, upon my word, with his delicate nose and coaxing eyes, the boy seemed changed into a girl.

“They *will* laugh,” said Vincent. “He’s going

to stay dressed. I'll take him off home like that and I'll say to my wife and his sister: 'I've sold my son and brought you instead a young lady who'll help you at least to do the housework and to cook.' Ha! Ha!"

"Ho! Ho!" chuckled the old man.

"Hi! Hi!" laughed Boubou loudly.

When this unanimous merriment had subsided, Vincent asked:

"And now, how much do I owe you?"

"I go make de bill," said the old man.

He took a slate and a piece of chalk and began figuring.

Meanwhile, Vincent looked Boubou up and down. He seemed pleased, and muttered: "A girl, a real girl!" Then leaning over, he observed the effect of his overcoat. "That changes me," he added. "It's all right like that."

"That make thirty-eight franc," announced the old man. "It's for nuthing! Gut stuff and all for nuthing! For nuthing! Ach! I lose!"

"But I'm not haggling," interrupted Vincent.

With both hands in his pockets he sought his purse. A deathly pallor suddenly stole over his face. He stood stock-still, his eyes closed, his arms slack, as if struck dumb. Alone, his chin started trembling.

Now he remembered. In his hurry to leave the beleaguered house, he had left in his gala dress pockets a big wallet with two thousand francs in notes, and his purse, containing in gold and silver rather more than a hundred francs.

Beads of sweat suddenly broke out on his forehead. He hadn't a sou!

At the beginning of a terrible game of hide-and-seek in which his liberty was at stake, he found himself all at once deprived of his most essential weapon—money. What could he do henceforth without help, without support, without resources, and saddled with a youngster? He who had determined to take a night-train without further delay and thus try to reach foreign parts! He was done for! Irrevocably done for!

And now he had to give back, because he hadn't the money, the clothes which would cover his flight so admirably, and his son's as well.

And yet how necessary those clothes were to him, the hunted man! The police at Reuilly must, in their turn, have transmitted his description: "The fugitive is dressed in an ordinary blue suit. He has round his throat a check handkerchief and wears a cap. He is accompanied by a little boy of six or seven, dressed in a navy suit, and the child has no shoes."

Now, thanks to his craft, the blue suit had disappeared under a long, voluminous dust-coat. The cap, rolled up and hidden in one of his pockets, had given place to a straw hat. As for the little boy—ah, the fine trick!—he had, all at once, become a girl; and a girl with good shoes on her feet!

Could anyone detect, in this disguise, Vincent the joiner and his son Boubou?

The old-clo' man slowly added the bill again.

“Thirty-eight, that's it!”—bending down to put the slate and the chalk back into a drawer.

The fugitive's countenance underwent an odd change. A contraction of his face-muscles rendered it cruel, disquieting, and his eyes, cautiously hidden beneath the lids, fixed a dark, sly, sinister look on the old man's bent neck.

Vincent's hands quivered behind his back. He brought them forward. They moved towards that neck, as if attracted involuntarily, for they trembled and seemed to hesitate. The fingers alone twitched. They seemed eager to grip, to throttle, to strangle swiftly to end the business. The two hands, coming together, had already taken the shape of a collar.

Boubou, amazed, looked at his father and he was

suddenly filled with fear at seeing, for the first time, his face so terrible.

“Papa!” he groaned in despair, with a low whine.

Vincent looked at his son, and his whole being visibly in revolt against his grim, invisible purpose, he suddenly snatched back his hands.

“Now den! You pay?” asked the old man straightening.

Vincent confessed, in a low voice, panting, as if worn out by a violent effort: “I have no money.”

“Ach! Mein Gott!” snarled the old-clo’ man and, with a smart run, placed himself before the shop door against which he leaned, carelessly, to close it. Then he took out the key.

“Den you give me back de clothes! Eh?”

Vincent explained:

“I changed my clothes before coming here and I forgot my wallet and purse.”

“Gut!” cried the old man. “If you ’ave de money, dat is quite simple. I wrap all in a packet, and when you come back, I give you. Eh?”

Vincent shook his head.

“Listen!” he said. “I’m in a hurry. I want those clothes at once. Will you swop? I’ll give

you my watch . . . it cost me more than a hundred francs.”

“I like better de money!” declared Jotzekal.

However, he took the watch, looked at it, turned it over and over, tested its weight and listened for a long time to the regular beat of the works.

“Give de sailor suit of de leetle fellow which ’e ’ave under de dress, and I say, ‘yes,’ ” said the old man at last.

It was an unfair bargain. The boy’s clothes were brand new and the watch, though old, was of excellent quality; but Vincent had to give in.

“I accept,” said he.

A few minutes later the old-clo’ man opened his door again and the hunted man went out of the shop, holding Boubou by the hand. Boubou was now quite happy. He enjoyed himself and chuckled. “What a lark! I walk like a ninepin!”

The night covered the whole town. A rich smell of soup descended from the windows all along the street.

Boubou, after a few steps, looked up, opened wide his nostrils, sniffed the air and declared:

“Papa, I’m hungry!” But Vincent did not answer.

## CHAPTER VII

### VINCENT FINDS THE CONVICT BERNIER AGAIN

VINCENT crossed the Place de la Bastille and slackened his pace as he passed along the Canal de l'Arsenal bordered by the Quai Bourbon.

Boubou kept on complaining: "I'm hungry, daddy!" and then, "You're walking too fast, daddy! I'm tired! My shoes are hurting me, you know. You're walking too fast!"

The hunted man sat down at length on a heap of sand. Boubou fell heavily beside his father and was almost at once asleep. Vincent, his elbows on his knees, his face in the hollow of his hands, was buried in sad thoughts. Around him was silence. The mighty voice of the city with its incessant hubbub seemed slowly to die there on that deserted bank, on the edge of that dark water where greasy patches floated at times in the moonlight like bands of glistening silk, carried by the stream towards the broad shoulders of the barges.

Silence!

Alone, at times, yonder on the Vincennes line, engines gave a melancholy shriek, like a wail of

grief. The world was sad. A hungry stray dog passed by. Its jerky trot was inaudible. It looked like a ghost.

Silence! Someone was crying . . . sobs and stifled gulps! But who was crying thus! It was Vincent.

He was weeping over his wretched fate which, twenty years ago, had made a criminal of him—but an unconscious criminal. Yes, unconscious! For formerly, very often, during the long, mournful years of his prison life, he had vainly racked his poor worried brain for the reasons of his deed, and that tragic night with its chain of events, which, when daylight came, left both his hands red with a man's blood.

But he knew—and that was for ever graven in definite and awful details on his memory—that the law, twenty years ago, had pronounced him guilty of murdering, for money, his master, a tax-collector, in whose office he was a clerk. He had been sentenced to penal servitude for life.

The Public Prosecutor had asked for death—the guillotine—but the jury found for extenuating circumstances. Bernier had acted without full possession of his faculties. He was drunk.

Drunk! He who, until then, had never drunk. Bowled over by a few glasses of cider! Strange

drunkenness! It was scarcely credible. What then was this cider which could so change him and give him, with the lust for gold the lust for blood, while depriving him for hours of his reason and memory?

The witness, a M. le Mée, publican at Ploubalec, had affirmed in the witness-box: "I served Bernier, on the night of the murder, but one pot of cider containing about a pint and a half, which he drank quietly under an arbour in the courtyard of my wine-shop."

However, he had to believe he had been drunk, since they had found him, heavily asleep, covered with mud and blood, near his dying victim.

So it was the convict prison and the hell it involved. He lived in it long months, interminable years, with odious, vile beings, the scum of humanity, whose brutal strength was their only recommendation. Gradually he felt, in contact with them, that he was losing all sense of right and wrong. For to escape the cruelty of the warders, the brutality of his loathsome fellow-prisoners, he had often to use guile and brute force. Luckily, after his escape, he had come back amongst men and had been able, not without effort, slowly to recover his old self, so loyal, so generous, so hearty—also his open, honest look which the

constant watching of his warders had rendered crafty.

Suddenly, there came back to his memory the words of old Babulard when, a few hours ago, he had proposed his health:—"You didn't look like the rest of us, Vincent. We couldn't have said why, but we didn't trust you. You never looked us in the face. You had, you might say, a habit of always looking behind you to see if anybody was going to leap on you. We said: 'Paroli isn't straight'; but in a little while you made us change our minds. In the first place, you're a conscientious workman, and then you're a good pal too, always ready to do a good turn. We know more than one you've befriended; and I'm sure there are many others we don't know. For you're as modest as you're kind, Vincent. When you do anyone a good turn, you don't brag about it!"

Good, was he? No! The fact was he hadn't become again what he was formerly, before the murder. The passion of hatred still lay deep down in his corrupted being. Just as, in the convict prison, when he had to fight to get back from his fellow jail-birds some stolen tool or food, he had almost leapt, just now, on the old-clo' man's neck to throttle him and steal from him the clothes he needed. An innocent child's pure look had alone

stopped, by some unseen power, his murderous hands.

Vincent uncovered his face and looked up at the dark sky. The moon was veiled by a long tattered cloud. No stars were seen. Above the town a smoky mist gradually grew denser and stagnated.

Vincent was still trying, in his memory, to find a few rays of light. How could he have killed?

Suddenly he started. . . .

Just now, if his son had not been there, he would have killed the old man. He was obeying, without a qualm, a blind and evil force within him. He knew it well. *Within him!* Then, perhaps, during that tragic night—twenty years ago—he was prey to a similar criminal passion? Yet, in his youth, he had been a quiet, peace-loving fellow. He never fought with his playmates and had no taste for rough play.

Ah! How he would like to know! Was his conduct just now the result of a slow deterioration after his convict days, or was it—ah! what new agony!—a sudden return to natural savagery?

Had he once killed? If so, how? Why? Before the prison he had been kindly, harmless, inclined to compassion. Had he been born, hiding in the recesses of his heart a devil which awoke,

after long periods of slumber, to strike outside of his conscious control? Or else did he merely bare the evil imprint of the Sequestered and the Damned? He did not know. He could not know!

Despairingly he lifted his agonised face; but a heavy black mist clouded his thoughts, wrapping his soul like the City fog which, above his head, hid from his imploring eyes the clear light of the stars.

Hark! A distant concertina, in some music-loving café, wheezed a popular waltz.

The concertina! What a suddenly revived memory! As if fainting, Vincent threw back his head.

The concertina—his wedding—Louisa, his second wife—the festive gaiety—the songs—the dance.

But the concertina was also the reminder of his shattered happiness. The other one, hardly a few hours ago, had also, deadened by the walls, droned a tune like this, when it was revealed that he was discovered after ten years' tranquillity, when he had imagined he was for ever safe from the police and within five days of his time limit!

Within five days!

And here he was, at present, alone with his boy, run to earth, wretched, without money!

Ah! Why did this apparently insignificant detail haunt him like this, all at once? This detail was so acutely precise that he seemed to have lived it a few seconds before. Returning to his gaily-decorated workshop smelling of wine and cooking, he leaped like a big rowdy boy and dropped two sous from his pocket.

Unconsciously, with groping hands, he sought the coin in the sand around him. No! No! That was past and gone! It had happened long ago. But when? Was it just now? He was still called Vincent then—Vincent, the good joiner. Yes, it was just now—five or six hours ago. How quickly things had happened! In three hours he had lost everything: his slowly built-up trade, his new home, his happiness and even his name which he had made loved. Henceforth he was nothing but Léon Bernier, an escaped convict.

And the two sous. . . . Ah! He had not even them!

He now had nothing—absolutely nothing!

Bernier laughed nervously, sorrowfully; and his laugh woke Boubou. The child rubbed his eyes, looked around him wonderingly, and muttered: “Where are we?” Immediately he added: “I’m hungry.”

Bernier got up and said: "Now then, stand on your legs! We're off."

"I'm tired!" moaned the boy. "Why don't we go home?" And then, "Why aren't we going to eat?"

Bernier did not know what to reply. The child insisted, sniffing:

"Oh, I'm so hungry! Tell me, why don't we go home?"

The man in a trembling voice explained:

"You know well enough. It's because of the wolf man!"

"Ho!" whispered Boubou, terrified again, and got up. Then he begged:

"Give me your hand, daddy, your big hand! Hold me tight, and don't leave go, mind! Must we be off again?"

The hunted man dragged him off, very quickly, towards the Seine lock, after answering in a low voice: "Yes, we must be off again!"

Bernier thought he saw a suspicious shadow behind a heap of cement sacks which had been landed from a barge that very day.

He must not forget it! The detectives had begun their hunt and, exasperated at having let him escape, must have put their best sleuths on his track.

VINCENT FINDS BERNIER AGAIN 101

Luckily, he had been able to alter his appearance at the old-clo' man's—and his son's.

“By the by, Boubou, your name is ‘Marie’ now.”

“Why should I be called Marie?”

“Since you're disguised as a girl, you must have a girl's name.”

“Tell me, papa, why did you tell the gentleman it was to play a trick on mother and sister you were dressing me up as a girl? Tell me! But where's my sister?”

“Hush! Don't talk so loud. It was just a joke. You know right enough you haven't any sister!”

“Then why do you dress me as a girl?”

Ah! the handy response which cut short all dangerous discussion:

“So that he shan't recognize you.”

“Who?”

“The wolf man.”

The man and child had reached the lock, climbed the stone stairs leading to the Quai Henri IV. They followed its parapet along the Seine, on the side away from the houses, in the thick shadow of the trees. Boubou clutched his father's arm with both hands.

He groaned: “I'm hungry! I won't walk any more”; and then, “I'm hungry, oh! I'm hungry!”

Bernier's face became hard again.

"I'm hungry, papa!"

The man answered nothing to the child's complaints.

"Papa . . . daddy . . . I'm so hungry!"

But he must have heard him, for each time his brow became careworn, his look sterner, his jaw more set.

"Come!" he said at last, sharply.

He crossed the street, took to the pavement and made his way to a baker's shop where, in the window, could be seen lying aslant, side by side, on copper rods, long thin loaves, their golden crust well baked and crisp. A thin, forbidding-looking woman sat at the counter, and, her head bent, and her "bun" falling over one ear, was arranging piles of coppers in rows. Bernier entered and raised his hat.

"Excuse me, madame," he ventured in a shaky voice. "I lost my purse a little while ago and my little girl is hungry. If you would be good enough to give me a little piece of stale bread. . . ."

The scowling woman raised her head to look at the man from top to toe. Picking up a hairpin, which had just fallen among the coppers, she put it between her thin lips, like a bit. Then, raising

her hands to tidy her hair, she muttered with a scornful twist of her mouth:

“Sorry! No more left. Sorry! Good evening!”

Bernier went out in a hurry, but not soon enough to avoid hearing behind him the strident voice of the woman, her lips liberated:

“These tramps have a cheek!”

“I haven’t got my roll, then?” asked the child.

Bernier answered “Shut up!” so roughly that the child, dazed, held his tongue and began to cry softly.

They walked on. Here was the Quai des Célestins. The child no longer dared complain, but how empty his head was, how heavy were his legs! Had it not been for the rough hand of his father, which held him up, he would have stumbled at every step.

“Ah! What a good smell of broth!”

Bernier had stopped before an open window on the ground floor of a house. It was a narrow kitchen in which a single gas jet cast upon the walls and even upon the ceiling the vague, dancing shadows of pots and pans. Before a sink, her sleeves tucked up, a young domestic was washing dishes, her back to the street.

On the window-ledge—but protected half-way

up by wire gauze—a stewpan had been placed to cool in which broth was slowly thickening like a stagnant pond at the first touch of frost.

Boubou's nostrils quivered and his eyes closed. He hoped his father's big hand would not let go his tired little arm.

Bernier stopped. This time he took off his hat. He had already the humble look of a poor beggar.

“Mademoiselle!”

The servant started and turned round.

“Mademoiselle! I'm out of work and I've got my little daughter here who is very hungry. Could you give her something to eat?”

“I haven't anything.”

“I see you have something on a plate.”

“You can't have that. It's the dog's food!”

“Then just a little cup of broth—a little tiny cup, mademoiselle!”

He was already stretching forth his hand towards the screen, but the girl had made a dash for it and seized her pan in both arms, with an outraged gesture, as if she were snatching a darling child from a kidnapper's grasp. “What are you thinking of! My consommé!”

With her elbows she roughly shut the two window shutters and then, turning rather pale, suddenly trembling, she began to scream, while in the

shaken pan the greasy scum of the broth broke up, as if thawed.

“M. Philidor . . . quick! M. Philidor!”

Bernier ran. Farther, at the corner of a deserted street, he stopped, biting his lips with anger, and muttered:

“Why did that little fool scream? Why?”

Boubou scarcely dared raise his timid voice in the silence which ensued. Yet he said, and Bernier heard him:

“It’s because you looked so bad, daddy!”

“Me?”

“Yes!”

“I looked bad?”

“Yes, all of a sudden you looked like you did in the shop where we got our clothes. I was awfully scared, you know! You still love me, don’t you, daddy? It was when you saw the broth you looked so wicked!”

A deep shiver shook the runaway who was propping himself against a wall. His face became livid like a dying man’s.

“Then, then,” he panted. “I don’t know when that comes over me—and I can’t help it. It was true, then—I did kill. I can still kill—without knowing it!”

With a fixed stare, his eyes aflame, he began to

look at his hands—big rough workman's hands, turning them round and round.

But two tiny hands grasped and drew them down, while Boubou's lips eagerly pressed his father's palms, in child fashion, wetting them.

"If you still love me, daddy, you mustn't scold me any more. It isn't my fault if I'm hungry."

The man hugged the child in a loving embrace and clasped him to his heart.

Boubou screamed: "You're hurting me!" But the man did not relax his fierce grip. How brutal his face had become all at once! Then he turned towards the opulent city, yonder, where the rich live, behind the Louvre, towards the Champs-Elysées, the Etoile and the Parc Monceau. His eyes reflected hatred, his voice was hoarse, meanly cringing. He groaned:

"After all, I'm only a miserable sinner! I won't struggle any more. I'll go back to them. I'm like them, after all. They're my brothers, while I'm a murderer! But I'll get you bread, my little man. Wait, as soon as I've found those I'm going to look for, you shall have fine things, and plenty of them. Don't cry any more, little man, because I tell you not to. Ah! They won't give you bread, those who've got it. So much the worse for them!"

He raised his fist in anger.

In the twinkling light of a gas-lamp, the huge shadow of his arm shot over the pavement and climbed high up the wall of the house.

The shadow of his fist, trembling and formidable, seemed a frightful menace to the whole city.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ARE YOU "A LINK IN THE CHAIN"?

THE man with his child went on once more into the night. From a dull, lowering sky, a fine rain, cold and penetrating, began suddenly to fall.

Boubou grabbed one of his father's arms with both hands. He was so tired and worn out, his heavy, stiff leather shoes hurt his little feet so much, he would not be able to walk much farther.

Bernier went down the Quai des Célestins, along the river.

"Where are we going, daddy?"

"Hush!"

They had passed the Pont Sully, somnolent with lines of barges in a tiny backwater. Sand, flour, cement, unloaded there, were piled up in heaps on the bank and covered with tarpaulin, awaiting the waggons. Night had fallen and shadowy forms haunted these purlieus and disappeared suddenly, mysteriously.

"It's raining, daddy."

"I know."

"I'm getting wet."

"I can't help it. Shut your mouth!"

Bernier, anxious, prowled about these heaps of merchandise.

In the distance, the houses on the river banks were blotted out behind a quivering film of rain. On the bridges, no longer visible, the lights of the gas-lamps had a halo and seemed as if suspended.

Bernier lifted the tarpaulin covering a long row of piled-up sacks.

A gruff voice growled:

"Well, what's up?"

Sacks of cement, skilfully drawn back on one side of the heap, had left a sort of excavation, a dark nook where shadowy forms were crouching.

The same grumpy voice continued: "Off with you! There's no more room."

"I'm not looking for a place," answered the hunted man. "I'm looking for somebody."

"Who are you looking for?"

Bernier lifted up the tarpaulin. He wanted to make out their faces. How many were there underneath? Four, five, perhaps more, poor devils, huddled up close together, to keep warm in this cold, damp night.

Bernier said slowly and in a loud voice:

"Is 'A Link in the Chain' in your gang?"

A coarse, aggressive voice yelled out:

“Stop it, or I’ll land you one! Here’s another bloody fool!”

From the far end of the hole angry mutterings confirmed the threat. The hunted man let fall the tarpaulin.

“All right!” he said; and taking Boubou by the hand, he went off, his eyes fixed towards the bridges, Pont Marie and Pont Louis-Philippe.

The rain increased. But, noiselessly, myriads of tiny drops seemed to float in the air, without even touching the ground—numberless and frozen. The only sounds were the gush of the swollen gutters, the gurgle of running water and the dull splash of the drain-pipes.

“Daddy, I’ve a pain!”

“Come along.”

“Daddy, I’m hungry.”

“I told you just now—wait a bit.”

“Daddy, my shoes are full of water. . . . Daddy, it trickles down my back! I’m so cold!”

Under the Pont Marie there was not a soul. Bernier, however, kept close to the arch, bent double, and groped his way along.

Boubou, in an imploring voice, exclaimed: “I say, daddy, can’t we sleep on the ground?”

“On with you!” the hunted man ordered.

The arch of the Pont Louis-Philippe was, on the

contrary, a popular resort that night. Bad weather had driven thither all the loafers, beggars and tramps without hearth or home. In an aged, stove-in boat, going to pieces, a woman slept, deathly pale, lifeless, like a corpse. Two boys from four to five years old lay at her side and, on her lap, between her thin legs, wrapped up in an old shawl at which a sly rat was nibbling, a baby sucked its thumb greedily.

On the ground lay old men, old women. Some—sybarites!—had a stone for a pillow. Far from the rest, a rich man munched all alone! He was a poodle-clipper. Seated on his box, he slowly masticated a kipper with evident satisfaction.

At Bernier's appearance a few spectres rose to their feet in alarm. Was it the police? Then, reassured, the bodies fell again. Nothing to fear. This gloomy-looking man and this little crying girl in tattered rain-soaked garments were their companions in misfortune.

Bernier said slowly and in a loud voice: "Is there among you 'A Link in the Chain'?"

But no one answered.

The child who was sucking his thumb all at once began to cry.

"Daddy, let's stop! I can't go any further."

"You'll have to, Boubou."

“Ah! daddy, I’ll fall!”

“Well then, I give in. Go and sit down, little man . . . but not for long. We must be off again. We must!”

“Why don’t we ever stop, daddy?”

“You know well enough. Hush! Because of the wolf man.”

Bernier dropped heavily on the ground. He too was weary, and the pain in his swollen knees overwhelmed him; and he was very hungry; but he didn’t intend to give way to the weakness of the flesh. He had borne in the past so many privations that he no longer feared cold, hunger, or thirst. He was prepared to go through anything, provided he escaped his pursuers. He stiffened his body, even as he had stiffened his heart.

To escape! . . .

He counted: still four days and four nights. If he had had any money, with a little luck he might have got out of the country and found a safe shelter; but without money, and with Boubou——! He must be a fool to dare hope! However, he would go on fighting!

Ah, if he could only come across “A Link in the Chain”!

He took his son in his arms and the child imme-

diately fell asleep after uttering a sharp little cry.

The famished baby was silent, one hand over his hungry mouth. The poodle-clipper chewed a big chunk of something under his bulging cheek. The half-dead woman never moved, and here and there, in the midst of the rubbish and offal, vague human forms coughed or snored.

How it did rain! The quays and houses were no longer to be seen. The red lights of the signal lamps, shrouded in a cottony fog, were hardly visible above the river. A profound gloom held the city in its grasp. It was already late—eleven o'clock was striking.

Bernier had closed his eyes.

At intervals there fell from the dripping arch of the bridge a heavy roll like thunder. It was a motor-bus returning late.

And ever the continual swish of water, the murmur of the river against the piers of the bridge, the subdued gurgle from the myriad tiny gutters running down the bank between loose stones, the drip from the roofs, and from the flooded wherries, the rush of water from the water-pipes and drains. . . .

Ever this liquid noise, the noise of rain, of tears falling despairingly from a sad, invisible sky.

The poodle-clipper said suddenly: "Don't mope, old pals, I've got a feast for the whole crowd!" He lifted the lid of his box and took out a chicken—a big fat roasted chicken, still steaming, then a ham, a long string of sausages, then new bread, then fruit, then bottles of wine.

No one would have imagined that such a narrow box held so many victuals.

The words of this Lucullus and the appetising smell coming from the dainties had awakened the company.

"Don't get down-hearted!" cried the clipper. "Here's any amount of tuck! Who wants it?"

The death-faced woman stretched out withered, quivering hands.

"I want some chicken—just a small wing."

The beggars advanced their greedy faces and their trembling hands.

"Out with it! Out with it!"

He threw them a string of sausages which slipped through their fingers.

Bernier said:

"I'll have the ham, comrade. We're famished, my boy and I. Don't worry! We'll take care of it! We'll give you back the bone, ha! ha! Chuck it across. Thanks!"

He received the ham, thrown from a distance, on

his head. That made the whole wretched crowd laugh and awoke Boubou.

"Daddy, I'm hungry!" cried the child at once.

"You're hungry? Ah, child! Don't mope, as t'other chap said. Look! It smells fine, eh? York ham—for you and me. But you can't eat all that!"

"Yes, I can!"

"Well then, put your teeth into it."

Boubou set his teeth, which were young and sharp, into the thick, tender flesh.

"Take a big mouthful! There! Now it's my turn!"

Bernier bit ravenously into the ham.

"It's my turn again, daddy!"

"Yes . . . it's your turn. Swallow! Afterwards, it'll be mine! All right? . . . Give it here!"

The huge ham passed from the man's mouth to the child's alternately, without stopping. It diminished very rapidly, and, strange to say, neither father nor son felt they had had enough. The meat seemed to melt, under their active jaws, into imponderable matter—perhaps wind! Now the bone was bare, cleaned, gnawed down to the knuckle. Now, their stomachs suddenly contracted, twisted under the subtle grip of hunger.

Bernier uttered a cry. . . .

He had opened his eyes. The rain had ceased. A wisp of fog trailed over the dark water. In the distance, along the deserted quays, gas-lamps flickered feebly.

Day was dawning.

The poor wretches lay still here and there on the damp ground. - On her plank bed the lifeless woman looked perhaps more livid than before. The baby, still hungry, sucked its little thumb which had turned blue in the morning cold; and the poodle-clipper, prostrate over his box, his head between his knees, was fast asleep. At his feet lay twisted the delicate skeleton of a kipper, with only its shiny tail and coppery head intact.

Where were the remnants of the magnificent feast, the chicken bones, the cores and skins of the fruit, and the empty bottles?

Bernier understood. It was a dream!

A glimmering light gradually revealed the dark arch of the bridge and liberated men and things from the night.

The man started up. There, quite close to him, an old beggar woman slept, face down, her head buried in her elbow. Beside her was a wallet half open which revealed its contents—a pair of rough shoes, a rusty tin box, a comb with only three

teeth, a scallop-shell and a big bit of stale bread.

Ah! that bread.

Bernier seemed spellbound. His nostrils quivered. Slyly he stretched out an eager hand along the ground. That bread! It was within his reach. No one would see him. What mattered was that bit of bread which would appease his hunger and his child's. His fingers were already touching the wallet, were about to grasp the tempting crust. . . .

Suddenly, Bernier drew back his hand. With a mighty effort he rose, holding his son in his arms. Standing, he staggered a little, but, pulling himself together, took a long breath of air and went away, very quickly, without looking back.

You can sleep in peace, poor old woman, and when you wake up directly, you will find your bread!

Boubou rubbed his smarting eyes. Rudely awakened from sleep, he was surprised at finding himself once more, after his long slumber, on his father's heaving chest.

"Where are we? Where are we going?" Then he added immediately, crying: "I'm hungry!"

Bernier's dull voice entreated: "Oh, shut up! Oh, shut up!"

The man mounted the steps leading up to the

Quai de l'Hôtel de Ville, muttering between his clenched teeth:

“No! No! Not from poor devils! I can't! I can't! No, not from the poor!”

Reaching the top, he put Boubou down on the pavement:

“Forward!”

The child, who had slept for many hours in his soaking clothes, felt his legs stiff.

“I can't!”

“Yes you can. You must!”

His stomach empty, his head swimming, his head aching, Boubou stumbled: “I can't, daddy!”

Bernier bent down resignedly: “Well then, get up on my back as you did yesterday.”

His jaws fixed, in a plucky effort despite the painful swelling of his knees, he started off again, carrying his heavy yet precious burden on his back.

The town was still deserted, but the runaway scanned the misty distance where policemen were slowly pacing to and fro.

He crossed the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, reached the Rue du Renard, then darted hastily into those narrow streets, the Rue de la Verrerie and the Rue des Lombards.

Doors shut and closed with a slam in the still-

ness. Early morning workers were coming out of their dwellings and their steps sounded very long and very loud on the pavement.

Drinking-bars raised their iron blinds with a rattle like an avalanche, and sheets of light spread out over the roadway. Bernier would not look on the white metal counter, the row of cups already containing sugar and spoons, ready to receive the good warm coffee which was brewing in a huge bubbling red copper percolator. Neither would he look on the piles of rolls, biscuits and crisp loaves, coming steaming hot from the oven in their wicker baskets.

The man passed the Boulevard de Sebastopol, crossed the Rue Sainte-Opportune, fell into the Ruelle de la Ferronnerie, came out in the Rue des Halles. Compared with the stillness of the other streets, the contrast was striking—here was bustle and noise.

In the early dawn the crowd was on the move, shouting, yelling, busily occupied. In the roadway was a helpless mass of vehicles: motor-lorries full of sacks, crates, and baskets of foreign fruit which mingled a fresh scent from distant lands with the smell of petrol or hot oil; two-wheeled butchers' carts from the Villette upholstered with huge quarters of beef hung on the inside, or over-

flowing, as after a slaughter of the innocents, with tiny lambs' feet, stiff and bleeding; peasants' carts from far-off suburbs, bedecked as for a country fête with the full glory of vegetables and green stuff, piled up row upon row, varying the natural green of leeks, the faint white of turnips, with the brilliant red of carrots and tomatoes.

Arms shot up, hands snatched melons, others flung cauliflowers. Bundles of radishes passed above heads. Sacks of potatoes defiled slowly, swaying, on porters' shoulders. The pavements were sticky and feet trampled greens, stale fish and rotten fruit. Wine-shops were full of men in their shirt-sleeves and women in aprons, wrapped up in thrice-folded shawls and with sabots, drinking warm wine while shouting prices. The clink of money was audible everywhere. Laughter and hot arguments heard. One heard also, under the echoing roof of the Halles, the crowing of cocks, pent up in their narrow wicker baskets, evoking memories of the peaceful countryside and bright mornings, down yonder.

The crowd of buyers and sellers caught Bernier. It hustled him, surrounded him, pushed him right and left, threw him backwards and forwards and seemed to want to drive him, like an interloper, to calmer precincts; but immediately capricious, it

caught him again, took possession of him, re-incorporated him in its folds, the better to stifle him in the thick of a scrimmage. And he went, tossed about, jostled, crushed, like an over-worked automaton, yet keeping his feet by an effort of will, while Boubou, on his father's aching loins, swooned, assailed by all these smells of things to eat.

Ah! How sensitive and subtle are the noses of the famished! Well fed, they would not feel beneath their twitching nostrils these whirlwinds of varied odours in which they recognise and can distinguish, because they are hungry, the insipid exhalations of fresh meat, the delicate aroma of vegetables, the heavy fumes from the sausage-shop or the sharp odours of over-ripe fruit.

Bernier suddenly stooped down.

In the gutter, amid packing litter, wisps of straw and heaps of shavings, lay all sorts of garbage.

The hunted man picked up something, furtively—a half rotten orange with a broad green blotch.

With a quick twist of his finger he gouged out the decayed part. A few pieces, almost untainted, remained. How luscious they looked to him! He was going to put them into his mouth, but a tiny hand descended before his face, while a sharp voice begged, breathlessly:

“For me, daddy! For me!”

“Take it!” said the man, quietly.

Then he picked up cabbage leaves, chewed them up, finding them good. He also found a walnut which he broke with his heel, and the oily taste long remained in his mouth. Boubou got two bits of rotten bananas.

Many beggars, carrying sacks, were searching, with iron hooks, through this mass of garbage. Bernier came and questioned each of them in a whisper:

“Are you ‘A Link in the Chain?’”

Some laughed stupidly. Others shrugged their shoulders, not having understood. Others thought he was making fun of them and threatened him; but the runaway was not to be put off. He walked along, repeating in the poor wretches’ ears his one mysterious question:

“Are you ‘A Link in the Chain?’”

Now it was day. . . .

Bernier had reached adjacent streets where there was less excitement. Here was the Rue du Plat d’Etain.

Before the entrance to a beer-tap—a kind of dark vault whence rose the shouts of voices and the clink of glasses—he bent down and shouted as loud as he could, with his hands to his mouth:

"Is there here 'A Link in the Chain'?"

His call must have been lost in the noise, for no one answered.

And Bernier wandered away, aimlessly. . . .

"What's the matter, Boubou? You don't talk any more."

"I'm looking at a gentleman who's following us."

"What!"

Bernier turned very pale and shivered.

"Who's *following* us?"

"Yes, daddy."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, just now he came up to know what you were asking the old fellow. He'd been listening. It was just when you were shouting before the house we came from. He had been listening again, and then he kept walking behind us."

"How did you happen to notice him?"

"Because I was afraid. I looked to see who was coming. Perhaps, I thought, 'twas the wolf man!"

"What does he look like?"

Boubou could not explain. He answered: "He's a gentleman!"

Bernier stopped before a grocer's shop and glued his face to the window where there was a castle of tinned goods propped up against a tall

mirror. People passing in the street were reflected behind the ramparts.

“Boubou!”

“Papa!”

“Is that the man with the cloth cap?”

“No.”

“Is it that old man?”

“No.”

“Is it the one in an overcoat?”

“Wait, daddy, I must turn round. No, that’s not him.”

“Do you see him coming along?”

“There he is!”

“Where?”

“He’s stopped.”

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s looking at us.”

Bernier, with a quick glance, saw the man leaning casually against the wall of a neighbouring house. He was a well-set-up fellow of about twenty-five, with a narrow-brimmed bowler set far back on his head. He was dressed in navy-blue serge, the worse for wear, and had round his neck a red knitted scarf. The hunted man felt his overwrought nerves give way and desert him. A cold shudder descended upon his shoulders, his legs shook, and he staggered.

"Boubou, get down! I can't carry you any more. Quick! Get down!"

He put his son on the ground as if he were a bundle.

"What's the matter, daddy?"

"We're done in!"

"Why?"

"It's the wolf man!"

A broken, nervous laugh shook his frame. The police already had him again in their clutches. They were on his track. That man with the red scarf, who was narrowly eyeing him, was a detective. He had their stealthy, disturbing look; but there must be others in the neighbourhood. To arrest a man like Bernier, so terrible a convict, who could escape from the hell of Nouméa, they did not send *one* man! Where were the others? How many were they? What about this hawker—this sham merchant who was extolling too glibly the pile of artichokes on his cart? Or that house-painter, engaged yonder in scraping with straw the dingy front of a wine-shop? Or that road-sweeper? Or——?

Whether there were one or ten, what difference did it make? Bernier laughed harshly. . . . He had no more strength to run away, no more strength to defend himself. For hours too many

frights, too many agonies, too much fatigue, had assailed his body and soul. He was beaten. He had believed himself more plucky, more invulnerable. Ten years ago he could have run for whole days and nights, for miles and miles, and kept himself going on roots, with hardly any sleep. At that time, inured to hardship, accustomed to toil and moil, he was a kind of gaunt wolf, with muscles of iron and a heart of steel.

But since then he had again become like other men. He had put on flesh and got slack, eating and drinking his fill, sleeping when he wanted to, living quiet days without ill-will. To-day he saw clearly he had lost his endurance.

The honest man had conquered the wild beast. That was why he was beaten.

Bernier now had not even the strength to express his distress with a bitter laugh. Every toss of his head gave him such pain at the back of his neck! His forehead felt like lead. Leaning with one shoulder against the window of the grocer's shop so as not to fall, prostrated, white as a sheet, he awaited the end.

The man yonder, his hands in his pockets, with a slow curve of the back, separated himself from the wall and came forward.

He advanced slowly. He must have guessed

that his prey, worn out and tottering, would not escape him and would give himself up without a struggle. He advanced slowly and half closed his keen eyes, doubtless to hide the flush of triumph.

He advanced.

Bernier had the air of a defenceless bird mesmerised by a hawk. He thrust his face forward, irresistibly, towards the enigmatic figure, and was already offering his back to the detective's rough grip about to weigh upon him. He held out his hands, too, for the ruthless hand-cuffs. . . .

The man touched him. Bernier uttered a kind of groan. The man, facing him, said:

"Ninety-Five!"

Bernier stared at him with wild eyes and gasped out:

"Sixty-One!"

## CHAPTER IX

BUT SOMEBODY SPOILT THE FUN. . . .

THE sham cook and the china-mender entered the room where the dancing was going on, shouting: "He's not in this room! Where's Bernier? Stop! Where's Bernier?"

Both pointed revolvers.

Petit-Louis' concertina which went on squeaking under deft fingers; the dull, continuous clatter of heels; the puffing, the blowing, the laughter and the shouts of the waltzers; the creaking floor—all these multiple noises drowned the voices of the police officers, who shouted with all their might:

"Stop, damn you! Where's Bernier?" and began to hustle the dancers.

Petit-Louis, perched upon his box and thus dominating the crowd of heads, was the first to see, in the midst of the whirl, two raised arms frantically waving revolvers. That suddenly reminded him of one of those violent scenes in American films which show cattle-thieves raiding a cowboy saloon. In his terror, he flattened his instru-

ment which roared with all its liberated stops. The dancing ceased at once.

“It isn’t my fault!” yelled the player, standing up.

The whole company cried out at him.

Then, with a shaking hand, he pointed out the cook and the china-mender.

The latter sprang about, nearly voiceless with shouting:

“Where’s Bernier? Where’s Ber . . . nier?”

The women, seeing them brandishing their revolvers, shrieked in terror. A panic ensued. . . .

The jester, who had called for cheers, thought, in order to dazzle and reassure the weaker sex, to disarm these strange spoil-sports, one after the other.

He first rushed at the cook. Rash man! An accurate swing sent him to the floor. The china-mender waved a magistrate’s warrant and panted:

“We’re the police! Yes, policemen!”

There was a dull stupor. A hushed crowd all at once surrounded them.

They repeated:

“Don’t let him go! Where’s Bernier?”

Old Babulard was dumbfounded.

“Who’s that—Bernier?”

“That’s true,” puffed the cook, “you don’t know! Where’s Vincent Paroli?”

“My son-in-law?”

“Yes.”

“Why—in his room!”

“He’s not there now. Is he here?”

“We haven’t seen him.”

The agonised bride demanded:

“But why do you want to see my husband?”

“To take him into custody, lady!”

The bride’s face and hands grew whiter than her wedding-dress and, without uttering a cry, she fainted. Yet an occasional sob could be heard. The wedding party stood aghast in mute bewilderment.

The china-mender offered his excuses.

“We must arrest him. . . . Yes, but we’ll do it as quietly as we can. This poor woman naturally is thoroughly upset. Well, we’ve got to arrest him, haven’t we?”

Old Babulard looked as if he had been stricken. He held his head in his hands and bent forward as if he were about to fall. They held him up with their arms about his shoulders. He kept stammering:

“What . . . what has he done? I must know . . . I must know!”

“What has he done!” ejaculated the cook, rushing towards the shop; “why, Paroli is Bernier, and Bernier, the murderer of the tax-collector at Ploubalec, is an escaped convict!”

The women fled. A tiger would have caused them less fright than a convict. Atrocious images of murder haunted them.

The bride was carried off.

Old Babulard collapsed on his knees. He had let his head fall forward and all its weight came upon his chin. A tiny streak of blood issued from one nostril, and gradually his big white moustache was reddened with it.

The china-mender suddenly cried:

“He must have gone off concealed in the little cart!”

“Yes! . . . In the coffin! . . . That’s an idea! Run!” commanded the cook, coming from the shop which he had searched. “I’ll leave men here to watch the house.”

A good buxom lady began to worry, crying:

“But where’s the little one? Where’s the little one?”

“Yes, the little one! Where is he?” repeated several sympathising voices.

Then some kindly souls scattered over the house shouting:

“Boubou! Boubou! Boubou!”

Louisa, the bride, did not hear the brutal announcement of the cook-detective. She had previously lost consciousness. They had therefore to inform her with the greatest consideration, but as these informants, good friends who had formed a group so that their courage should not fail them, gave the exact details of the awful accusation, she did not cease to shake her head, sobbing:

“It’s not possible! It can’t be! No, don’t say that!”

“He had escaped from prison, my poor Louisa.”

“Impossible!”

“There are the facts—definitely established!”

“No . . . no . . . I tell you!”

“He killed a man many years ago . . . and was convicted.”

“It’s not possible . . . I know him. It isn’t possible! He’s too kind, too upright, too meek! It’s a mistake . . . you’ll see . . . it’s a mistake!”

“But he confessed it by his flight.”

“It’s true he ran away. Ah, my God! My God!”

“Now you see, don’t you?”

“No! No! I feel . . . it’s impossible. My heart would not deceive me.”

Then the friends looked at one another discreetly, with sympathetic faces. One of them furtively tapped his forehead to hint silently that the poor young woman had lost her reason; and all the others nodded gravely, assenting.

Louisa, her face buried in her hands, repeated in a soft, weak, tearful but strangely obstinate little voice:

“It’s not possible! It’s not possible!”

Old Babulard had the beginning of a fit; but the attack, stiffly combated, soon yielded. When he had revived, the old man continued to say; “Never, never could I have believed it!”

The news of this sensational event left the joinery simultaneously with the wedding-guests and the police. It spread quickly to the four cardinal points of the small town of Nogent, borne by eager mouths. It scattered in divers rumours which ran through every street and every house. On every doorstep it penetrated into the passage and mounted the stairs from ground floor to garret.

The town had soon but one voice, a formidable voice, which repeated these few words uttered simultaneously by thousands of tongues:

“Joiner Paroli has just been arrested! He’s an old convict who has escaped from prison.”

Towards evening a curious crowd came, grew and swelled before the scene of the drama. A mute crowd, that seemed almost sad.

“Who would have thought it?” murmured voices. “He looked such a good fellow, Paroli!”

Some rowdies did try to hiss and boo, but the angry crowd hammered them, and they prudently made themselves scarce.

At nightfall, about eight o’clock, the magistrate, several disquieting policemen and a large number of journalists put in an appearance.

## CHAPTER X

BERNIER AGAIN FINDS "A LINK IN THE CHAIN"

THE stranger added:

"Then you're one of them?"

"Yes," whispered the hunted man, trying to stand upright. "Yes, I'm one of them. . . . But you——?"

"I'm not."

Bernier slipped against the shop-window in terror. To have him more surely, the police had tricked him like a novice.

But the man smiled:

"Don't worry! I'm not one of you, but my dad belongs to the gang. He got fifteen years in New Caledonia. That's why I know the pass-word. You mustn't be angry with my old dad because he put me on to it. My dad does hardly anything in that line now. So he said to me: 'It's in case you should come across pals in need.' I'll take you home. My dad'll be glad! He's just on the lookout for some 'plucked ones' for a job of work. Come along!"

Bernier wanted to walk, but tottered. The

stranger quickly held him up with a strong arm.

“Hallo! What’s up with you? You can’t walk.”

“No, I can’t walk.”

“You’re not drunk, are you?”

“No.”

“Then what’s up?”

“I’m starving!”

“Why didn’t you say so? You shall have a peck. I’ve got my instructions—‘Never refuse the boys of the old gang anything.’ And your kid, she shall have a bite, too, the poor little brat! Come along, both of you. It’s quite close.”

The unknown stranger dragged them off.

“Lean on me, pal, don’t be afraid! I’m strong! And you, little one, hang on to my overcoat. Hold on tight! Here we are.”

The three entered the dark passage of a low tavern.

“Father Polyte!” shouted the stranger.

A little pot-bellied man, pasty-faced and “tubby,” appeared. He was sketchily clad in a pair of khaki trousers and a cotton shirt with black flowers on a yellow ground. His bare feet were thrust into green slippers with corded heels.

“Ah, it’s you, M. Ferdinand!” he exclaimed, with a broad grin of welcome, and he came wad-

dling, wheezing and puffing to meet the newcomers.

He rather frightened Boubou because he opened a huge black mouth in which remained but two big, protruding canines. He had a very bristly moustache, like a seal's, and sucked its drooping corners between his blue lips.

M. Ferdinand said: "Polyte, give us a private room. I've business with a pal, and bring us up something to chew."

"Cheese, M. Ferdinand?"

"Yes, and a bowl of wine."

Old Polyte opened a little low door, bowed politely, pressing his enormous stomach with both hands:

"If the gentlemen will be good enough to step inside!"

It was in a sort of gloomy den, dimly lighted by a flaring gas-jet which whistled like a signal of alarm, that Bernier, his son and the stranger installed themselves. On the wall-paper—a deep red—many generations of flies had left foul traces of their passing. Between advertisements of bitters, tonics and refreshing drinks, shrivelled corpses of bugs showed on the wall in the midst of a splash of black blood.

Polyte, puffing, brought up a Camembert, a loaf of new bread, and a bowl of warm wine.

Ah! What delightful giddiness!

Bernier at once filled his glass with the steaming beverage and drank. The warmth trickled through his body, deliciously. Boubou got a slice of cheese. He swallowed it gluttonously, his cheeks stuffed tight, half closing his eyes.

Bernier also took a chunk of bread and ate it greedily, his hands trembling with excitement.

M. Ferdinand, his face between his hands and his elbows on the table, looked at the ravenous pair and sniggered, in astonishment and delight.

“How they can gorge! Upon my word! They haven’t stomachs but toboggans!”

And he filled their glasses with a heavy, thick, tart wine which stained his fingers and the china bowl a deep purple.

Bernier at last said:

“Thanks . . . we needed that! I couldn’t move . . . . Ah! thanks!”

“Don’t mention it,” replied Ferdinand. “‘A Link in the Chain’ has a right to that when he is down on his luck. Now you’re bucked up again, old pal, we’ll scoot off to Goume’s.”

“To Goume’s?” stammered Bernier, in astonishment.

Ah! This name, what a tragic reminder! Goume! That terrible bandit who formerly had

terrorised for months the French countrysides! Goume the bloodthirsty! Goume the ripper!

"Yes, to be sure! To Goume's!" calmly replied the man with the red scarf.

"Then," questioned Bernier, starting, "then Goume is——"

"My father!" answered M. Ferdinand, coolly. Then after a brief silence, he added: "Only for everybody he is M. Duvanet."

M. Ferdinand got up. "We can take the Metropolitan as far as the fortifications," he added.

Bernier got up in his turn. The food he had just eaten, the fiery drink he had swallowed, gave him new strength. His head was on fire, his heart was beating quickly. Through his veins warm blood coursed swiftly. He no longer felt the pain in his knees. He could seize Boubou with one hand and lift him to his back.

M. Ferdinand was surprised.

"Then your little daughter can't walk?"

"Yes he can, but he isn't used to passing a night out of doors."

"Who . . . he?"

"My boy."

"Your daughter!"

"No, my boy! True, I must tell you—it isn't a girl!"

“It isn’t a girl?”

“No, it’s a boy, a little snip of a man!”

“Then why do you dress him up in girl’s clothes?”

“Because of the police! I’m wanted. They’re after me and they know at the Préfecture I bunked with my boy.”

“What do you say? The police! You’re wanted?”

“Yes . . . and they’re on my track.”

“You don’t say so! But what are you thinking of? Do you want to get us all jugged? For a chap who has done time, you’re a rum one! That changes my plans then! We can’t take the Métro together. I don’t ask you to tell me your secret. It isn’t done in the fraternity; but you see we could all be rounded up at dad’s place.”

He opened the low door of the private room and shouted:

“Hey, Polyte!”

The pale-faced *patron* hurried in, slithering in his slippers.

“What’s up, M. Ferdinand?”

“Listen, Polyte. . . . First put the door to. No one must hear us. Now I’ll explain. This gent is in trouble with the police.”

Polyte nodded to Bernier.

"That happens at times," said he calmly and philosophically.

"Yes, that happens," replied Ferdinand with a sly smile, "but they mustn't run him in. That would complicate matters. So I'll leave here alone; but you must let the others out through the back."

"Right, M. Ferdinand."

"Here, take this for the feed."

Goume's son turned to Bernier:

"Now listen. This is what you must do so that we can meet. Polyte'll lead you. You've only to follow him. When you're in the street, call a taxi—you'll find one easily. Don't wait, jump in at once and tell the driver: 'Saint-Sulpice Station.' Get me? Pay him a round sum so you won't have to wait beside his rattle-trap. Take this oof, since you haven't a stiver. Goume'll put it down on your bill. Then take the Métro for Montparnasse. At Saint Sulpice just now there won't be much of a crowd. If you're alone with your gal on the platform, get into the first train that comes along. If there's anybody, an old woman, a soldier, or even a padre, pretend to get in, but when the train starts, stop on the platform. You understand?"

"Yes," said Bernier, "I'm on. If anybody's following me, he'll get in and go off alone."

“You’ve said it! If, however, he notices the wheeze and stops on the platform too, you can watch him. Then, if that comes off and you’re left alone, cross over to the other platform and say to the collector at the gate: ‘I’ve made a mistake, I’m going to Les Halles!’ then board the next train going that way. Get out quickly at Saint-Germain-des-Prés and take a taxi as far as the Porte du Bas-Meudon. There, under the little railway bridge on the Versailles line, you’ll find me. Get it?”

“Right,” answered Bernier.

M. Ferdinand now jammed his bowler down over his eyes, took off his knitted tie and put it in his pocket. He wore no collar, his shirt being fastened by a copper stud which pressed tightly against his throat.

“Till we meet again!” he cried as he went out.

Polyte closed the door behind him, put out the gas and ordered:

“Don’t budge! I must warn someone.”

He took a stool and, after a hard struggle, got up on it so as to reach a sort of casement-window of frosted glass which he swung open by pulling a cord.

Bernier saw a narrow court and, barely two yards away, the spotty wall of an old house. The

noise of rattling saucepans and the splash of water-taps struck his ear at once.

Polyte explained:

"Those are the kitchens of a swagger restaurant." With both hands to his mouth, he hooted: "Hou . . . hou . . . hou," then waited.

A far-off voice answered, like an echo: "Hou-hou!"

"All right, we can get through," muttered Polyte, letting the window drop. "Follow me!"

The pot-bellied man preceded Bernier and the boy. He led them down a passage, then, gripping the greasy balustrade with his flabby hand, he announced: "And now up to the fifth. Forward!"

Bernier implored: "Not too fast! My knees are stiff!"

"No fear," replied the landlord, "I've got to drag my fifteen stone!"

Boubou's head ached and he was amazed to see on his left the interminable staircase winding up and up like a snake. Boubou had drunk too much warm wine.

Above Polyte unlocked another door which revealed a small garret.

"Come in with me," he ordered.

He barred the door cautiously, took a little rope ladder with hooks from a cupboard, fastened it to

the ledge of a narrow window which lighted the room dimly, climbed a few rungs and, seizing the frame with both hands, pushed the glass back on the roof.

“You’ve got to scoot this way.”

First, however, he again uttered his cry: “Hou,” but in a low voice; and quite near this time, the same voice feebly answered: “Houhou.”

“Follow me!” he commanded.

“Where does it lead?” asked Bernier.

“On to the roof,” answered the landlord, “but be quick. Don’t hang back, for fear folks may be looking, and don’t bear to the left, whatever you do, for that’s the street!”

Polyte, panting, hoisted himself up on the roof.

Bernier, who had pushed him up from behind, joined him there, and leaning over the window, clutched Boubou by the shoulders to haul him up.

A few feet off, on an adjoining roof, which was barely a yard higher and followed that of the hotel, rose the head of a man from another sliding window.

Polyte hailed him.

“Hey! Maurice!”

“Well?” replied the man addressed with a quick questioning look.

"These are friends of M. Ferdinand. They've got to get by without being spotted."

"There's a way. Send them along!"

The landlord instructed Bernier:

"Go straight on. Don't show yourself over the sides. If there's any bobbies in the street, they might see you from down below. Good luck, and 'op it!"

Bernier, as a precaution, had taken Boubou in his arms. Boubou, with flushed cheeks, his eyes moist and twinkling, laughed and laughed with all his might, for he was having the time of his life.

"What are we playing at, daddy?" asked he insistently. "What are we playing at? Tell me!"

"Shut your mouth, Boubou!"

"No, I won't! I'm having fun!"

"Won't you shut up?"

"I want to play!"

The wine had upset his small head. Bernier reached the neighbouring roof. He turned back to thank Polyte, but the landlord had already disappeared.

The man became impatient. "Come along! This game's no good in daylight! Hand me the kid, and jump into my box. . . . My bed's below. You won't hurt your feet! Jump!"

Bernier found himself in another garret, but

had no time to note the arrangement, for the man at once pushed them towards the door.

“Come on down. Quick!”

Bernier once more expostulated: “Not too fast! My legs pain me so!”

It was a broad, old-fashioned stone staircase and they had to descend six flights. Below, the man warned them:

“Stoop along the wall before the concierge’s box so no one will see you, and turn to the left.”

Bernier obeyed—and his pressure on Boubou’s shoulder forced the child to imitate him. He turned to the left where a big porch opened on a busy street. He was now on the pavement and looked behind him to take leave of his guide, but the man had disappeared.

Then he remembered M. Ferdinand’s instructions: “Hail a taxi. You’ll easily find one!” It was true. The road was blocked with traffic. He took his bearings, saw the Tour Saint-Jacques in the distance and recognised the Rue de Rivoli. He hailed a taxi.

“Saint Sulpice Station.”

He clasped Boubou fiercely to his breast.

“Well, my boy, you’ve got something to eat at last.”

“Oh! Yes! It *was* good, papa! It warmed me

up! It tasted fine! It was jolly decent of that gentleman to give us the feed!"

"Yes, it was decent."

Bernier muttered these words with lowered head.

The man who had allowed them to appease their hunger was Goume's son. Now Goume was one of the vilest criminals who ever terrorised France; and Bernier was going to Goume! The die was cast! Because he was alone and destitute, abandoned by everybody, disgraced, hunted down, execrated, Bernier was turning back to the companions of his shame. All at once he hesitated. A voice within him cried: "Vincent, what are you going to do? You'd become an honest man again, and you're going to lose, in a few hours, the fruit of ten years' repentance and renewal! What are you going to do? Doubtless, connecting with 'A Link of the Chain,' you'll get his help and protection and, through him, the help and protection of 'Links' who owe you absolute devotion; but you know, too, that according to the implacable laws of the Secret International Association of Escaped Convicts, you, in your turn, abandon yourself absolutely to them. They can demand of you, in exchange for the food, the lodgings, the forged documents, the disguises and the money

they will secure you, your brains to plan, develop and prepare some evil deed, or your hand to strike! Have you paid sufficient attention to M. Ferdinand's seemingly harmless expression? He told you, at the very beginning of your conversation. 'My dad'll be glad to see you—just as he's looking for some reliable fellows for a "job."' "

“‘A job’! You know well enough what a Goume ‘job’ is likely to be! Blood will be shed. Reflect, Vincent, there’s still time! Hail your driver, stop the car, get down, mingle with the passing crowd and take your chance of remaining what you have become—an honest man!”

His mind made up, Bernier let down the window. He was already leaning forward to tell the driver to stop; but suddenly, before he had opened his mouth, he threw himself back and, pale as death, pulled his hat down over his eyes.

The car having crossed the Place du Châtelet and the Pont au Change, had entered the Boulevard du Palais and was about to pass before the Préfecture de la Police. Bernier recognised the dread building. Policemen in uniform were on duty before the vast portico, beneath which clerks laden with dossiers, municipal guards and plain-clothes men entered and left, going swiftly about their business. It seemed to the hunted man

whose head, after too long abstinence, had been over-heated by the wine, that he was the sole subject of this unwonted excitement. The colossal police machine had set all its wheels moving to find the fugitive. It had to capture him before five days and five nights had passed!

Those dossiers bore his name, told his life-story, gave details and his description. The Police-Inspectors must have hundreds of his photographs ready for distribution. Those policemen were about to transmit the order for his arrest at the station booking-offices, at the city gates. The minions of the law were already organising the hunt. . . .

And he would descend into the street, alone, with uncovered face. No! The die was cast.

To fight the police he needed the co-operation of his craftiest "Chain" mates. Goume was expecting him. In what den? No matter!

Goume was expecting him. To Goume he would go. . . .

## CHAPTER XI

### BOUBOU, THE BUTTERFLY AND THE EXCISE MAN

BERNIER had strictly followed M. Ferdinand's orders. He had pretended to take the Métro for Montparnasse at Saint-Sulpice. He had let one train go by, then changed platforms, entered a train for the Châtelet and taken another taxi to the Porte du Bas-Meudon.

M. Ferdinand had strictly allowed him with regard to his money. His travelling expenses paid, sixteen sous was all he had left.

The rendezvous had been fixed under the little bridge on the Versailles line. Bernier slowly wended his way thither, dragging his feet, for the warm reaction of the wine had been followed by a new and heavier sense of fatigue. Boubou, on the contrary, showed excitement. He skipped, laughed and chattered ceaselessly.

The spot, at the end of the Boulevard Victor leading to the Quai de Javel, is little frequented. No building gives life to the quarter. Only a sombre bastion, with its damp-sweating walls, backs the slope of the fortifications which on the

other side dominate the plain of Issy and overhang a deep moat full of water. The Seine flows quite close to the heart of a desolate suburb and landscape.

Under the little bridge there was no one. No one in the vicinity either.

Bernier thought: "I'm the first."

He remained, however, faithful to his instructions, and sat down on the edge of the pavement. Boubou wanted to play.

"Papa, let me have a run!"

"Stay here!"

"Oh, papa, let me have a run."

"You won't go far?"

"Oh, no! I'm having a good time!"

Bernier cast a look about him. There was nothing suspicious. Boubou could play.

"Get along then, my boy!"

The child darted off with a cry of joy. Eleven o'clock was about to strike. A pale anæmic sun had placed its jaundiced face on the thick cotton of a smoky fog. In the distance, behind the line of the Ceinture where small factories crowded one another, hammers sounded, motors roared, sirens shrieked. On the fortifications a solitary bugler blew away, repeating obstinately: "There's a drop to drink aloft, there's a drop to drink!

Taratata! Taratata!" On the Seine, tugs panted. . . .

Bernier, his head curiously empty and hollow, suffered from all these confused noises, which seemed to unite above him, to coalesce beneath the metal framework of the bridge and fall in solid masses on his sensitive skull, like so many blows of a sledge-hammer.

Ah! Those hammers, in the distance! More than an hour slipped by, and still no one! Wouldn't M. Ferdinand come? Had Goume refused—in spite of the strict rule of their secret society—to aid him? Bernier, at this thought, felt his anguished heart writhe; but almost immediately he started and groaned, as if to excuse himself aloud, at the reproach of his suddenly awakened conscience: "If I were not quite alone, peniless, I certainly should not go; but I am quite alone—quite alone! Then . . . ."

A voice said:

"Hallo! Sixty-One!"

Bernier got up, looked around him. There was nobody. Was it an illusion?

The voice said again:

"Sixty-One! It's me!"

"Who are you?"

"Ferdinand."

“Where are you?”

“Above—on the bridge—so they can’t see us together. Listen, old top. There’s a tool station not far off. Go, slowly, as if you were loafing along the banks of the Seine. You’ll first pass the Porte de Meudon in front of the toll-masters. . . . On the right you’ll see lots of old river-steamers the Company lays up there. They’re falling to bits—rotting; but that’s none of our business. You’ll hide quietly in the last of the row—the worst-looking, the oldest—just a mass of scrap-iron. Inside, where the engines used to be, I’ve put sausages, bread, and a litre of wine under a newspaper. You’ll have enough for the day. Try not to let them see you. If boys come along to catch dace, pretend you’re having a snooze in the open air. Hide your kid also. He’s too conspicuous, the little rascal!”

“But—Goume? When do I see him?” Bernier enquired anxiously.

“Wait a bit! I haven’t finished explaining. Tonight, when it’s dark, a boat will come alongside the steamer. You must show yourself—you and your boy.”

“Then, what will happen after that? . . .”

“Mum’s the word! . . . You’ll see!”

“But why can’t I go there at once?”

“Hell! If you aren’t slow! You don’t understand anything then! You surely don’t want to have our house watched for your sake! Before Goume sees you, we’ve got to make sure that the police haven’t smelt you out—in other words, that, at this moment, you ain’t done for. One of two things—either the police nab you shortly and ship you off again to New Caledonia, or it’s we, ‘The Links of the Chain,’ off again to New Caledonia. . . .”

“Yes,” stammered Bernier, terrified by this sudden alternative.

“Then, good luck—till this evening!”

Bernier heard, above his head, something like a landslide and the quick step of a man walking off along the ballast. He caught himself repeating unconsciously in his fright: “Either the police nab you shortly and ship you off again to New Caledonia! . . .”

Boubou encountered a yellow butterfly—quite a young one, a little mad, having sucked too much pollen from the flowers in the suburban gardens. It flew hither and thither on heavy wings, completely drunk in its zigzag flight, and laughed with all its quivering antennæ because the trembling

spikes of grass on the slopes of the fortifications tickled its stomach.

Boubou, a little wild too, having drunk too much hot spiced wine, went to and fro, ran, stopped, started off again, also zigzagging, completely fuddled. . . .

The child saw the butterfly and said: "I want you!"

The butterfly, seeing the child, thought: "You shan't have me!" and leaped skyward.

To catch it, as he had no net, not even a hat or a cap, Boubou took off the little woolen shawl which covered his boyish head. Then he rushed in pursuit. . . .

This sportive little butterfly must have presumed too much upon its strength. Aloft, dizziness seized it, and it came rustling down like a leaf, its wings beating wildly in circles. It must have fallen ten yards away, behind that mound! Boubou, ready to throw his shawl, in a circular movement, as a gladiator would have done with a net, scampered after it.

Where were the yellow wings?

They rose from a clump of dandelions and, without flying high, but increasing their speed, sped down the slope, flew over the road leading to the Quai de Javel, then settled on the other side,

near the river, on the worm-eaten side of an old tar barrel.

Boubou did not fly but ran. He toddled down the slope, crossed the quay and reached the bank and the cask.

“I want you!”

He threw his shawl.

“You shan’t have me!”

Tantalisingly, the butterfly had ensconced itself on the ground. It made a sudden turn, passed—oh, irony of ironies!—between the youngster’s legs and went on a little farther, quivering with pleasure, shaking its head, its antennæ bent back, in the river breeze.

The pursuit went on. . . .

M. Piérout, toll official, sitting on a stool under the shade of the rampart, was reading *Le Petit Journal* while awaiting the arrival—rather a rare occurrence at this time and in this place—of motor lorries and vehicles having to pay toll. Quite close to him, but in the full glare of the sun, sat his colleague Cazot, smoking his long pipe, and learning from a popular handbook *A Hundred Ways to Cook Potatoes*.

Suddenly, Piérout covered his leg with his

paper, as if it were a napkin, put his elbow on it and said:

“You’ve read, Cazot, the story of this escaped convict?”

“The man they tracked down on his wedding-day and who escaped in a coffin? Yes, Piérout, I’ve read it. It’s all stuff and nonsense!”

“It’s true! It’s in *Le Petit Journal!*”

“Newspaper lies!”

“It’s true, I tell you! They give the names!”

“It’s easy to make up names.”

“Anyhow, as the article points out, this ex-convict has had no luck! He needed but five days to escape from the rigour of the law entirely; but I bet this time he won’t get away. He’ll be caught before then.”

“No. . . . He’ll get away again!”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know!”

“Then, why did you say just now the whole story about this convict was nonsense?”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes, you said so!”

“I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did! And then how do you know he’ll escape?”

“And why did you say he’d be caught?”

“Because of the reward of ten thousand francs they’ve offered the person or persons who arrest him. That’ll put a lot of folks on the scent. You’ve read about it? They give his description. He bolted with his son, a boy seven years old nicknamed ‘Boubou.’ ”

“Bonbon!”

“No, Boubou!”

“In my paper it’s given as Bonbon.”

“Look at the *Petit Journal*—it’s ‘Boubou.’ And then it has been confirmed, by traces left in his room, that, before his flight, he shaved his beard and, by the blood-stains on a towel, that he had cut his chin. Keep your eyes open. Cazot. Perhaps he’ll pass this way.”

“He won’t pass this way.”

“Why not?”

“He’s far away by this time, if he’s still on the run.”

“All the same, ten thousand francs, Cazot! It’s worth while. . . .”

“M. Piérout wants to play the amateur detective!”

“And why not, M. Cazot?”

“You’ve got to have *flair* for that.”

“And I haven’t? That’s what you mean?”

“I say we’re made to stop goods, not cut-

throats! Every man to his trade, Piérout! You could detect a case of old brandy, but certainly not an escaped convict. Ha! Ha! Piérout would like to be a little Sherlock Holmes! You make me die laughing!”

“And you, M. Cazot, fill me with pity!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Piérout a detective! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“We’ll see perhaps one day. . . .”

“What?”

“I say: perhaps one day. . . .”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

When Piérout said it was white, Cazot said it was black! That was the invariable rule; but it did not prevent the two being on very good terms.

M. Piérout, vexed, was soon deep again in *Le Petit Journal*. After the fashion of simple souls, he muttered, slowly, almost aloud: “When – they – informed – her – of – the – terrible – character – of – the – man – she – had – just – married – the – young – wife – waving – her – arms – fainted. Excitement – was – at – its – height – in – the – charming – little – town – of – Nogent-sur-Marne – where – curious – to – relate – the – strange – ex-convict – enjoyed – an – excellent – reputation – and – the – good – will – of – everybody.”

Teasing from afar the panting Boubou, the mad butterfly stopped, successively, to rest, now on a heap of rope, now on a windlass, now on a tiny daisy or on the bottom of an old sardine tin. Now it had settled in the middle of a salad bed. On a lettuce leaf? Yes, it had flown under a barbed wire and entered the small garden belonging to the toll-house. This garden was a fine example of the triumph of man's determination. On barren ground, without subsoil, facing the north, covered with stones, Piérout's zeal for gardening had succeeded in growing vegetables. There were three kinds: cabbages, leeks and a few little lettuces. This enthusiastic amateur had likewise planted a marrow which remained green and stunted, and a cherry tree which would perhaps give one sour cherry in ten years; but Piérout stuck manfully to his garden, like a miser to his hoard.

Boubou, following the butterfly, got under the barbed wire; but he, alas! could not settle—light, fragile, almost without weight—on the young shoots of the lettuces. He trod them down.

“I want you, butterfly!”

“You shan't have me, dirty brat!”

Boubou again threw his shawl at it, in a wide sweep, like a cowboy whirling a lasso; but, car-

ried off his feet by the swing, fell flat in the salad bed.

The butterfly quitted its leaf and flew off to cling, its horns quivering like lips laughing silently, to the lowest branch of the cherry tree.

“I want you!”

“You shan’t have me!”

Piérout had scarcely finished the sensational article: “The Romance of an Escaped Convict,” when he heard a suspicious noise coming from his garden. He raised his head, looked, opened his mouth and, without a word, without a cry, jumped up, with a bound, as if he had been prodded by spear-points.

Suddenly he made a dash. . . .

“Oh! the wretch!”

He picked up Boubou who, dazed by his fall, was lying on the ground like a log, panting, his nose in the heart of a lettuce.

“Where does this hussy come from?” shouted the toll-master. “Dear me! Right in my lettuces!”

Boubou, shaken harshly, recovered his senses. He protested:

“It isn’t me, sir!”

“It isn’t you?”

“It’s the butterfly.”

“What? The butterfly? You’re making fun of me, you limb! Come now, answer! Who gave you leave to enter my garden?”

The furious Piérout forced the child, whom he had lifted up by the two ears, to stand on the tip of his toes and looked him straight in the face. The eyes of the toll-master, under the green tent of a long peak, seemed to flash fire. Boubou, his head already overheated by the fumes of wine, was in a state of abject terror.

“Oh, sir! Sir! Don’t hurt me!”

“You’re an odd-looking girl with your hair bobbed like a boy! You must be a rag-picking girl, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not a girl.”

“What?”

“I’m not a girl. I’m a boy!”

“You’re a boy. Yet you’re dressed in girl’s clothes!”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because of the wolf man.”

“What! She’s mad, this kid! She’s out of her mind! Well, what’s your name?”

“Boubou.”

“What do you say?”

“Boubou.”

“Say it again! Quick! Say it again!”

“Oh, sir, don’t hurt me!”

“No! . . . Say it again!”

“Bou—bou. Bou—bou!”

M. Piérout suddenly stopped pinching the ears of the destroyer of his cabbage-patch. Pushing his cap far back on his head, he leaned forward as far as he could over the child, his hands on his knees.

His voice was hoarse, his breath short, and the fat lobes of his ears became red like raw meat.

“You say you’re called Boubou?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From yonder, sir.”

“From Nogent-sur-Marne, perhaps?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And where’s your father?”

“He’s over there, sir.”

“Where?”

“Under the bridge.”

“What bridge?”

“That one down there, sir.”

“What’s he doing under the bridge?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“I know! He’s hiding.”

“P’raps, sir.”

“And your father’s a joiner, eh?”

“Yes, sir!”

“And his name’s Bernier!”

“No.”

“What? No?”

“Daddy’s called Vincent.”

“Vincent? Ah yes, it’s true. Vincent! That’s the man! That’s him all right!”

He continued, breathlessly:

“Yesterday you were at the wedding, weren’t you?”

“I—I—I——” stammered the child, who no longer remembered.

“Well, anyway, you had a good time yesterday! . . . Had a good laugh. . . . There was fun at your daddy’s place?”

“Oh yes!” cried Boubou, now recollecting, “I pinched some nice cakes! It hasn’t been like that since. Ah! last night, how hungry I was! And then, you know, my feet ached so, because we’d been walking all the time!”

M. Piérout unbuttoned his tunic. The joy which filled him blew him out like a bladder. He got up and nearly fell. Two big knotted, very blue veins swelled out the wrinkled skin on his forehead. He panted:

“Well, now! Just fancy! Well, now, well!”

Then he closed his eyes for a moment and reflected. Should he summon his mate there and then and inform him of his extraordinary encounter which would enable him, without wrongdoing, to win the reward of ten thousand francs? No. Cazot had just been laughing at him! It was only when the dread bandit was arrested he would say to him: "Well, well, M. Cazot, when I dabble in detective work, I—a 'would-be Sherlock Holmes'—don't stop, at the barrier, cases of old brandy only. Look, M. Cazot, look!"

How speechless and admiring he would then be, the quiz!

His decision was made. He would telephone at once to the local Inspector: "Hello! It's me, Piérout, toll-master at the Porte du Bas-Meudon. . . . Hello! I'm on the track of Bernier, the escaped convict! Send a squad!" Inspectors and armed men would soon arrive in side-cars. A few minutes at the most. They would collar the wretch!

But steady! Not so fast! If things happened like that, if it were the police who mastered and arrested Bernier, would he get the whole of the reward? Did not the *Petit Journal* say: "Ten thousand francs are promised the person or persons who shall apprehend this malefactor"? If

they were going to force him to divide this sum into eight or ten parts. . . . No! He wanted it all. . . .

Then he would have to capture this man all alone. Alone? It was a risky business certainly! Alone? The devil! But, all the same, ten thousand francs were ten thousand francs. It was worth risking. . . .

Piérout threw out his chest, valiant, determined. He would chance the risk. Single-handed? Yes, single-handed. One night, during the war, on patrol duty near Verdun, had he not held out against three assailants? The convict was but a man, like himself. One man was as good as another; and this fellow, criminal though he was, didn't frighten him. He would challenge him, revolver in hand.

Besides, he was not sorry to show this idiot Cazot what he could do, single-handed, without aid, with his sole brains, with his sole instinct, when he took a hand at being a detective. A 'would-be Sherlock Holmes,' forsooth? Yes, somebody was going to have a good laugh, and that somebody wouldn't be Cazot!

Boubou stood stock-still, restless, head bent, shamming tears in the presence of this enigmatical, thoughtful toll-man, who all of a sudden abandoned his sombre calculations.

He ordered:

“You understand, you little wretch, never come in my garden again! If you do, I’ll take you off to prison. Now go and find your father! I won’t tell him, this once, you’ve trampled down my lettuces. Come to think of it, you needn’t tell him either. You won’t tell him anything, eh?”

“Oh no, sir!”

“Not even that you’ve seen me and that I pulled your ears?”

“Oh no, sir!”

“You’ll say nothing, absolutely nothing?”

“Nothing!”

“Right. . . . Off with you!”

Boubou did not need to be invited twice. He scampered away; but almost immediately stopped, looked round him in fright and burst into tears.

“I don’t know where to go,” he sobbed. “I don’t know where father is!”

Piérout guided him:

“Look, that’s the way . . . turn to the right . . . then there’s the little bridge. Don’t say anything to your father, mind!”

“No, sir,” the child promised as he went away.

M. Piérout hastily re-entered the little office where M. Cazot, under a green lamp-shade which hung from the ceiling and covered him like a

Chinese hat, was transcribing, in round hand, on a register provided for the purpose, the alphabetical list, corrected by the last Customs circular, of the "Materials, Products and Merchandise liable to duty in the City of Paris." Piérout furtively took from a drawer of his desk a Browning. Putting it in the pocket of his blouse, he left the office saying, the most natural way in the world: "I'm going away for two minutes."

"A real Sherlock Holmes!" sniggered Cazot.

But Piérout shrugged his shoulders and answered nothing. Outside, he caught sight of the child who, having passed the barrier, was about to turn to the right. Then he dashed off on his track.

The face of this amateur detective, which a moment before had flushed scarlet, now grew as pale as death. Piérout had great trouble in controlling his chattering teeth and his twitching chin. Lord! The enterprise was painful, arduous, dangerous, but decisive.

At a turn in the road which, from the Quai de Javel, becomes the Boulevard Victor, he stopped, and crouching, hid quickly behind a hillock, the last outwork of the fortifications.

Yonder, under the little railway bridge, was the man. . . .

Piérout also watched the child. Fifty yards from his father, Boubou lay down on the grass and pretended to go to sleep, the wily little devil!

Hello! What was the man doing? He seemed to be talking to himself, and was gesticulating; but why was he looking thus into the air? Look! On the line above, a suspicious individual had suddenly arisen, as if from the ballast. No doubt was possible. It was to him that Bernier's signs and words were addressed; but did the ex-convict then have confederates in the town, who would aid his escape?

Who was this new stranger? A criminal too, probably. Piérout saw him making off, very rapidly, in the direction of the Auteuil viaduct and sliding, about fifty yards from the Grenelle station, down the steep slope of the embankment.

Bernier remained under the bridge, his head bowed, preoccupied, motionless. . . .

A puff of pride mounted to Piérout's brain and intoxicated him like drink. He thought that not only would he catch this terrible bandit single-handed, but that also—he foresaw it—thanks to his *flair*, of which that envious Cazot had gone so far as to deny the existence, he would help the police to lay their hands upon another malefactor—several malefactors! And suppose he were to

reveal a veritable nest of criminals! That had happened before. What a stir there would be throughout France! And the papers would publish his photograph under this wonderful heading: "A SIMPLE TOLL MAN RIVALS THE BEST KNOWN DETECTIVES IN THE WORLD." He would first get the ten thousand francs offered, then would leave the Customs service. He would enter the police department and would soon become head of a detective bureau. And who knows? Aided by luck and his marvellous *flair*, he might, before very long, solicit the highest offices. Why not? He seemed to hear the voice of the gentleman-usher, with his silver chain, in the river breeze, from distant quays, from yonder, from the pointed tower, solemnly announcing, as at an official reception:

"M. Piérout, Chief Commissioner of Police!"

And Cazot's expression then! Cazot's expression!

There was now but one urgent thing for Bernier to do—to hide.

No. He could hope—yes, he could hope!—that the police were not on his track and that, stowed away all day in the hull of the old boat, he would reach night without the misfortune of being recaptured.

Then the boat would come, and he would be saved. Quick, now! He must reach the river-bank.

But where was Boubou?

He saw him lying on his back, fast asleep, yonder in the high grass of the fortifications. Poor little chap! The long night tramp had worn him out. Bernier made for the child, but first glanced about to see that no one was watching or following him. Piérout rapidly lay down at full length behind the mound. He had taken off his cap and covered his hair with handfuls of grass. His eyes flush with the top, he watched the movements of the ex-convict. He was barely twenty yards from him, and for a moment saw him full-face. He was the man, all right. He exactly answered the description given in the paper. He had shaved off his beard and on his right cheek, about his chin, could still be seen the dark streaks of dried blood. His clothes alone had changed; but he had disguised himself, no doubt. Had he not rigged out his son in girl's clothes to put the police off the track?

Bernier, taking care not to wake his son, lifted him from the ground and was about to carry him off in his arms.

But Boubou burst out laughing: "I'm not asleep, papa!" and got up unaided.

"Come—quick!" then ordered the hunted man.

"Oh! daddy," groaned the little lad who, all the same, was drowsy. "Must we be off again?"

"We must hide!"

"Why, papa?"

"Because of the wolf man!"

"Oh! Let's run, daddy! Let's run!"

Boubou again clung to his father's overcoat. He was pale and trembling. He was thinking, without daring to confess it aloud, that the strange creature whose wrath he had just incurred, with his red cheeks, his long yellow irregular teeth, his fiery eyes under a green peaked cap, might be the wolf man.

The man and child went down to the Seine. By retreating slowly, Piérout reached the highway, hid himself behind a little sentry-box and drew his revolver, cocking it. What was he going to do? Silently approach the man, who, having crossed the Quai de Javel, was now walking along the river-bank, and suddenly jump upon him from behind? Digging his knees into the small of his back, he would surely throw him; and with the menacing revolver he would be able to hold him in submission on the ground.

Then the ten thousand francs would be his!

Stealthily, he started forward again on Bernier's tracks.

The runaway had reached the cemetery where the old Paris steamers were laid up. No sadder sight than these motionless hulks, formerly swift, animated, vibrating like the human body with the rhythmic pulsations of their engines. Yesterday, these smart boats, graceful as greyhounds, crossed Paris from the Pont d'Auteuil to Charenton, filled with noisy crowds; or, on Sunday excursions, on smiling spring mornings, they steamed down the Seine to flowery Meudon, echoing with laughter and song.

To-day, rust devoured their sides, crumbled the sheathing, notched the funnels, demolished the iron railing along the broken-down companion-way. The rain had bulged the decks and rotted the linoleum, and damp had fouled the benches. The hot sun had burnt their red-striped awnings, blanching the colours, and tattered bits of canvas, hanging from the poles, looked like flags at half-mast. Discoloured curtains, frayed by exposure and blown by the wind from broken portholes, flapped, uniformly grey and dirty, like signals of distress:

At times, tugs, towing long lines of barges, sent

their wash against these rotten hulks, trying to wreck them on the bank, as if unworthy of keeping afloat.

Then, for a long time, until the last swell had spent itself, was heard the grinding of their resisting timbers and of worn rivets which the slightest strain sundered; the creak of heavy chains suddenly stretched taut; the moan of swaying hawsers.

Thus these derelicts mourned with human voices day and night in the last resting-place of the old *bateaux mouches*.

Bernier, picking up a long plank lying in the grass, threw one end upon the deck of the last boat in the row to make a bridge.

“Come, Boubou! Give me your hand!”

“We’ll fall into the water, daddy!”

“Don’t be afraid! I’ve got you!”

“Oh! How it goes up and down! I’m afraid. . . . Is it deep, daddy?”

Both passed, slowly, cautiously, over the worm-eaten plank which crumbled under their feet and bent in an alarming way beneath the weight of their bodies.

They boarded safely. . . .

Bernier drew in the plank and hid it along the gunwale. Then he took a long look around. Not

a soul on the river-bank. Not a soul on the road skirting the aerodrome at Issy. Fresh hope inspired his weary mind.

Not a soul!

A few more hours of daylight and the night would envelop him in its veil of darkness. A few hours more and the boat would come!

How quiet everything was!

“Boubou, let’s hurry. We’re going to hide!”

M. Ferdinand had said: “Stow yourself away in what was the boiler room.” Bernier looked for the companionway. There was no longer any companionway, only a chaotic jumble of twisted banisters and broken steps.

“Slide down, Boubou!”

“The nails are tearing my frock!”

“Wait! Now then! Let yourself go, and I’ll follow!”

Before descending into the dark cabin of the old craft, the hunted man cast one last look round him.

Come, all was going well! There was no one. The police had lost his trail. To-night he would be protected in his flight by his Brothers of the Chain and in four days would be a free man—for ever!

Free!

M. Piérout, seated Turkish fashion, was hidden behind a cask.

This new Sherlock Holmes was thinking hard. It would be premature to arrest the terrible convict immediately, if he, Piérout, single-handed, with his *flair*, wanted to lay hands upon the whole gang whose existence he now suspected. He had one in his power. Through him he would know the others. He ought then to wait in patience, and all the more because Bernier could not give him the slip. Hadn't he gone and boxed himself up on that hulk, surrounded by water, which he could only leave slowly and with difficulty by the narrow, dangerous plank?

The man and child had vanished into the hull of the old boat. Swiftly Piérout arose and, by way of his ruined garden, regained the Issy road, the toll-house and his stool. Thirty yards from the river he could, all day long, without saying a word or betraying himself by a sign, observe the convict's movements on the hulk. At six o'clock in the evening his substitute would relieve him of his duties. Then he would go back to crouch in the dark, revolver in hand, and await events with a brave heart. . . .

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TWO OLD LADIES OF VILLA "BON REPOS"

THE Villa "Bon Repos" was situated fairly far from the station Chaville-Vélizy, on the edge of the forest of Meudon, in a lonely spot. A high grey wall, bristling with broken glass, enclosed it and its large, quiet garden, where there seemed to be no trees. No leafy bough showed itself above the gloomy wall. From the road could be seen the roof of the house—sad slates covered with moss. No grating, no opening afforded a glimpse inside the grounds. An oak gate, as thick as a prison door, hid its old bolts beneath a blotchy coat of tar; and here and there tin patches were nailed on wooden parts which worms had eaten for ever so long.

Two old ladies, widows it was said, had been living there, in seclusion, for nearly fifteen years. They rarely went out save on great saints' days, when they went to church. Age, no doubt, or illness, held them to their house. The Vicar of Chaville used to come every week to see them. Except for this priest, no one crossed the threshold of the

Villa "Bon Repos." By rare exception, the doctor had come twice in one winter. They never received a letter. The postman, however, every now and then, on his afternoon rounds, slipped under the door a newspaper to which one of them had subscribed. His arrival must have been awaited; for often, behind the porch, a hasty hand drew in the paper, which seemed thus to reach the other side all by itself. The wrapping bore this address:—"Madame Malvinat, Chaville." Which was Madame Malvinat, the younger or the older?—the one who might be fifty-five, or the other, fifteen years older at least? Were they sisters? No one knew. It might be thought so, for they were always dressed alike, in black. They did not keep a servant. The errand boys of the various tradesmen who came every morning to take orders or deliver goods, had noticed, however, that it was almost always the elder—a rather odd fact—who did the housework and prepared the meals. When she half opened the street door to take in supplies, she was generally peeling potatoes or vegetables or wiping her red hands, greasy with dish-water, on her blue apron.

Towards evening, the postman had, as usual, slipped the paper underneath the door of the Villa "Bon Repos." The elder lady came and took it

almost at once, for she had been on the lookout for it while polishing a copper basin in the doorway.

Then she stopped before the house, her dress hitched up by the tall grass which surrounded the villa with a green-waving, impenetrable girdle, and the abundance of which had long since obliterated the garden paths.

She called: "Madame Malvinat!"

A window opened on the first floor. The other old lady in black leaned out. She was muffled up in a large woollen shawl, and her face was pale.

"What is it, Martine?"

"It's the paper, madame."

"Ah! Good . . . bring it up as soon as you can! Bring the big dining-room lamp too. It will soon be dark."

"Very well, madame!"

"And then, take my spectacles from the work-basket at the same time, and also the sleeping-draught on the sideboard."

Old Martine, who was the servant, brought in the basin and soon went off, bearing the paper, lamp, spectacles and physic to her mistress who, suffering from heart trouble, hardly ever left her room on the first floor.

Reading the newspaper, which they did aloud

every day, by turns, was the sole but the fascinating delight of these two recluses. About them was silence, the silver of the countryside and of the wood close by, often wrapped in a white mist, as if to deaden, to stifle still more, the songs of the birds.

The sick woman's grey room, sparsely furnished and curiously echoing, which smelt of the warming-pan and of ether, and the resonant calm of which was filled, day and night, by nothing but sighs, groans and the feverish tick of an alarm clock, gave place at reading time to a whirling phantasmagoria like a pell-mell cubist picture, of memories, faces, countries, corpses, kings, prize-fighters and bolshevists.

The reader's voice brought there the President of the Republic in a top-hat in the paddock at Longchamps on the day of the Grand Prix—Briand making a speech—a child eight years old run over by an omnibus—Mr. Lloyd George in private conversation with Poincaré—Count Xaintrailles de Pertribeau, the ruined squire of the serial story prostrate and conquered at the feet of the fair Doradou, the perfidious international spy.

To-day it was Martine who, seated in an arm-chair, her back to the light, close to the invalid's couch, began to read. She started methodically

with the leading article, then went on, in the order of the columns, to local items, the political editorials, the news articles and “all the latest.” She even read the Money Market; for Madame Malvinat, who had secreted a considerable sum of money and bonds in the piano case, took an interest in these things.

Martine had read slowly, in her monotonous voice, faltering a little, the learned article on the “French Expansion in Morocco” and “The Discourses of a Socratic Idler,” when she articulated these words: “An-escaped-convict—wanted by the police—decamps-on-his-wedding-day.” Then she stopped suddenly. Her eyes alone continued to read on. Madame Malvinat, surprised, looked at her with pursed-up lips. Martine’s face, which was extraordinarily wrinkled, and yellow like an old candle, seemed to get smaller and smaller. Over her cheek-bones spread slowly a bright sallow hue.

Martine dropped the paper, and throwing both hands into her lap, stammered:

“Oh! Mistress, mistress! Oh!”

She rocked her head and groaned, as if suddenly seized with an acute pain.

“What is it?” exclaimed Madame Malvinat.

Martine panted, as if heavy, uncontrolled sobs were choking and stifling her.

“Tell me, Martine, what is it?”

The old woman at last could cry. Then she gulped aloud:

“It’s he! O my God, mistress! It’s he!”

“He?”

The invalid suddenly sat upright, her mouth contracted in a nervous tension. Her false teeth, becoming unfastened, fell on her under-lip and gave her, for a moment, the fierce jaw of a shark. Then she threw herself back, her head in the pillows, and began to tremble in all her limbs, as if she were suddenly very cold. Her quivering lips made a weak, watery sound.

The haggard old woman muttered:

“It’s he! Then he didn’t die out there. . . . They said he’d escaped from prison. . . . Ah, Lord God! It’s he!”

The invalid gasped: “Martine! The ether! The ether!”

The old woman went to fetch the flask among the bottles on the night-table, but her trembling hands could not draw the cork.

“I’m shaking too much, madame.”

“Martine, quick! Open the window.”

The servant, staggering, opened the window.

The invalid stretched out her skinny neck to the fresh evening air which rushed into the room and slammed the door.

Martine, starting, uttered a cry of fright. Then she collapsed into the arm-chair.

“My legs! My poor mistress, my legs!” she groaned, her hands clutching her knees.

It was growing dark outside.

Madame Malvinat, deathly pale, shut her eyes, now quite exhausted. Her trembling gradually ceased, giving place to prostration. Was she still breathing? There was no heaving of her chest under the flat corset.

The old woman went on talking to herself:

“Ah! Mistress! May I be cursed for having made you so unhappy. You who are so kind, so generous! You, my benefactress! O my Saviour, is this another trial you are sending me?”

The invalid moved her lips. Martine leant over quickly.

“Mistress!”

The sick woman was talking, but in a voice which was but breath. She said:

“Then—he—he—is—out?”

“Yes, he’s out!”

“They haven’t caught him again?”

“No—he’s in hiding—somewhere. They don’t know where.”

“Ha!”

The invalid raised her blue eyelids, slowly, with an effort, as if they were lead. Then she stared at the window. Martine understood.

“Must I shut it?”

“Yes—and the door—too . . . all the doors, and don’t ever leave me again—never! I don’t want him to come! I . . .”

A panic terror took her once more. She wanted to scream. A sudden convulsion made her rise from her couch and wave her arms. She seemed to wish to grasp some invisible support. Then she fell back like a log, her mouth open and distorted.

The servant groaned:

“Ah! My God! Madame is suffering because of him. Forgive me, my benefactress, forgive me!”

Fussily she moved the bottles about on the mantel-board and, in her haste, she let some fall and break. The room was at once filled with the sickly smell of a chemist’s shop. At length she succeeded in opening the bottle of ether and, long accustomed to tend her mistress in her heart-at-

tacks, she knelt beside her bed and tried to bring her round.

Darkness had quickly fallen. . . .

The old woman felt little by little that Madame Malvinat was reviving. Once again the fatal crisis had been postponed.

Then, aloud, in prayer, she thanked Heaven for preserving her benefactress.

She also prayed for sinners:

“May God Almighty be merciful unto them,” she implored. “May He forgive them their sins and lead them to the life everlasting!”

Then she added, but very low this time, as if whispering in God’s ear:

“Have mercy upon *him*, O Lord! Have mercy upon *him*!”

The rusty front door bell tinkled faintly.

The old woman, who had just put her mistress to bed, this time for the night, didn’t even hear it; but the sick woman, whose nerves were perhaps on edge, started and muttered:

“I thought I heard someone ring. . . .”

“It’s the wind,” surmised Martine. “Sometimes the bell stirs of itself.”

“No! Someone rang!”

“Who would come here at this time, ma’am? We don’t know anybody outside.”

“Yes! There’s somebody who knows us now.”

“Who?”

“He. . . .!”

“Ho!”

The old woman crossed herself.

The rusty door bell pealed lustily this time.

The invalid, her fingers clutching the folds of her bed-sheets, screamed like one demented.

“Ah! All this—all this is killing me! Oh, my poor heart! I’m in pain!”

Fright seemed to petrify Martine.

“Shall I go and see, madame?”

“No!”

“They’re knocking now. Do you hear?”

“Yes.”

“But if it were someone else? . . . someone who needed to warn us—or the vicar?”

“It isn’t his day.”

“Listen! They’re still at it!”

“Go and see, but don’t open. Ask who it is through the door, and come back quickly. I’m so afraid!”

The servant, gabbling a fervent prayer to the powers above, descended the stairs. She crossed the dark garden where two bats beat the air with

their nimble wings, and, screaming, traced strange, weird hieroglyphics on the leaden background of the night sky. The handle of a walking-stick beat time on the door lock.

“Who’s there?” she wheezed in agony.

She couldn’t have been heard on the other side, for the bell rang violently for the third time. The old woman stopped its swinging with the handle of a broom which she had picked up in her childish fright, to defend herself. Then she repeated more loudly:

“Who’s there?”

“Madame Malvinat, if you please?” enquired a man’s voice.

“But who are you?”

“I want to speak to Madame Malvinat,” repeated the stranger.

“Madame Malvinat is ill—very ill and in bed. She can’t see you.”

“Just for a few minutes!”

“It’s impossible, I tell you! But who are you?”

“Open the door. Then I’ll tell you!”

“I can’t do anything for you. Be off with you!”

“Listen! Listen, I say!”

The terrified old woman, who had moved away, returned timidly.

*whom the police are trying to find in extraordinarily curious and dramatic circumstances. Our Special Correspondent at Rennes (private wire) having informed us, after a discreet enquiry at Ploubalec, that Madame Malvinat, the widow of the murdered Customs official, had shortly after the crime left Brittany to settle at Chaville-Vélizy, far from the place which would too cruelly remind her of her dear departed, our colleague immediately sought this charming locality. He had the good fortune to be very courteously received by the poor widow. But let us allow our brilliant colleague to tell his own story. . . .*

“Hallo! You are following me, Miss Annette? Right! I’ll go on:

*“Madame Malvinat, he tells us, lives a retired life with an old housekeeper to whom she is, moreover, related. [The journalist had beforehand picked up some information in the region. Some, when asked, answered: ‘The old woman is the sister.’ Others said: ‘The old woman is the servant.’ Not knowing what to write, the journalist took a middle course—housekeeper and relative—which combined the two possibilities.] She lives in a smart villa, though rather out of the way, on the border of the magnificent forest of Meudon; but she came there to seek not oblivion for her*

*afflicted heart, but consolation for her bleeding sorrow. . . .*

“Hallo! Strike out ‘bleeding.’ I continue:

*“In her drawing-room, prettily furnished and decorated with cherished souvenirs, Madame Malvinat told us. . . .”*

And for a long time the lying pressman went on in this strain, dictating a marvellous, false and impressive interview!

Invisible and crossing links connect all the actions of men and thus dictate their destiny. A stranger somewhere, in a country you have never visited, makes a movement, loves, hates, dies, and behold, by an unfathomable and mysterious correspondence, your life is influenced by it!

Maybe you never knew either the name, the life or the death of this stranger.

Thus, by means of a false and fanciful interview, this hoaxing pressman was going to sidetrack Bernier’s tragic fate—and to what end, O Lord?

## CHAPTER XIII

### PIÉROUT-SHERLOCK HOLMES BRAVES THE WAVES

NIGHT had come—a dark night without moon or stars, for the sky was still rolling up great rain clouds.

A few yellowish lights, here and there, twinkled in the huts in the military zone and, afar off, like glittering diamonds, the arc-lights of a factory-yard drew geometrical figures on the great black-board of coal-black earth. On the railway line gleamed a green signal light and, over the Seine, all the red eyes of the Auteuil viaduct scattered their bright reflections on the shimmering water.

M. Piérout was at his post. Slowly he rolled down the bank the cask he had hidden behind in the morning, to bring it nearer the boat where Bernier was hiding. He made it fast with two big stones, and now, lying at full length on the grass behind this shelter which concealed him from Bernier's vision, he awaited events, rather nervously, his loaded revolver within reach of his hand.

But the lure of the reward, and above all the keen desire to avenge himself in the eyes of the

world, by a brilliant victory, for Cazot's sarcasms, kept up his courage and sometimes even increased it.

Bernier had had a long, an endless day of anguish. Whenever a nonchalant stroller, a suburban idler, a bargee, or even a quiet fisherman, followed the river-bank and approached his hiding place, his heart stopped beating, a deathly pallor stole over his features and, his back bent, his head bowed down, he awaited the imperious injunction:

“Now then, Bernier, hands up!”

Ah! He was scarcely to be feared, however. He had no weapons and, in the course of his wanderings, he had lost his razor.

But the promenaders had disappeared in the distance, the idlers had regained the road and the bargees had returned to their barges. The fishermen, tired of waiting vainly before an inner float, had departed also, and night, the accomplice night, had fallen.

The man hoisted himself up on the deck of the hulk, and, creeping along, went and hid in the bows, on the river side, behind a heap of old iron covered with a rotten tarpaulin. Thus he could not be seen from the bank. Boubou had followed his father, very much frightened by the gathering

darkness and the proximity of this black water which flowed and flowed, quite close, making, along the hull, a thousand gurgling sounds like the greedy lips of an invisible shadowy mouth, very hungry—the ogress!—for children’s flesh.

Boubou had said nothing to his father, but the distorted impression of the morning’s incident had not ceased to excite his childish imagination. The man who had shaken him so roughly was as tall as a house, he possessed endless arms which lifted him very high into the air, like a balloon. His fingers were on fire, his eyes shone like flame. His voice sounded like thunder and, along his chest, trickled taps of flame.

Ah! Why had Boubou been bewitched that morning by a tall man’s tunic and the double row of bright burnished copper buttons which a pale sun, peering for a moment through a break in a cloud, had lighted furtively with a stray gleam?

Boubou trembled. He was sure of it now. He had seen the were-wolf, and the wolf man prowled in the dark. He heard his vast mouth open, shut, then open again.

How hungry the wolf man was!

“What’s the matter, kiddy?”

“I’m afraid, daddy!”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Oh daddy, daddy, don't scold me! But this morning—while you were——”

“Hush! Boubou!”

“What's up, daddy?”

“Hush! I hear oars. You don't see—yonder. . . .”

“Where?”

“Yonder—on the other side—a boat!”

“Yes, I see!”

“It's they! Ah! my God!”

“Daddy, this morning I——”

“Hush!”

The boat drew near. Skilfully, the rower dipped his sculls noiselessly into the water, and put all his strength into the stroke. He had pointed rather high up stream so as to profit by the current. The boat would soon be alongside. Bernier, with beating heart, made out two forms on board. He recognised, standing up behind the sculler, Ferdinand's powerful frame. He got up, excited, and, with his hands to his mouth, halloed:

“Boat ahoy!”

“Shut up, for God's sake!” ordered a hoarse voice, apparently the sculler's.

The boat now touched the side of the old craft. M. Ferdinand had, from afar, flung a rope to the deck and made a sign:

“Make fast! We’re going to take you on board.”

Bernier rapidly lashed the end of the painter round a wooden upright. The boat had come to a standstill alongside the hulk, about a yard and a half below the level of the deck.

“Bring the kid first,” ordered Ferdinand in a low voice.

Bernier lifted Boubou by the shoulders, lifted him and passed him over the gunwale. Other hands grasped the child who, his eyes shut, uttered a long cry of horror.

“The dirty brat!” muttered the sculler. “He’s going to get us spotted!”

M. Ferdinand growled in his turn:

“If you don’t stop your gab, I’ll buzz you into the water!”

Boubou gave a gulp, and was thrown roughly into the bottom of the boat.

“No, no! I don’t want to be given to the wolf man!”

“Keep quiet, I tell you, imp of Satan! These brats!”

Bernier was getting ready to climb over the bulwarks in his turn, when, turning his head suddenly shorewards, he stopped short, spellbound.

What had he seen?

There, hardly ten yards away, a man had been standing some seconds ago. All at once he seemed to sink into the ground. Was it fact or fancy? Ought he warn M. Ferdinand and his companion? Perhaps it would be wise to determine on the spot whether anyone was hidden there, in the grass, watching? No, for if he alarmed them, the two men, through excessive prudence, might leave him to pass another long day waiting on the hulk.

“Now, then, what are you doing aloft?” Goume’s son enquired impatiently.

“I’m coming!” said Bernier simply, clutching the top of the gunwale with his two hands and letting himself slide down, not without a groan, for his knees, still bruised, rubbed hard against the hull.

Fancy or fact? Fancy, probably, since there was now no one on the bank.

Bernier had got into the boat, which moved off.

“Here you, Sixty-One! Do you know how to scull?” asked M. Ferdinand under his breath.

“Yes,” answered in the same way the hunted man, whose heart became lighter again as the skiff drew away from the bank.

“Then catch up the sculls and help one of your convict-pals!”

“Is he one, then?” asked Bernier, pointing to

the sculler pulling away lustily with a guttural exclamation at each stroke. "Is he 'A Link in the Chain'?"

"Yes, that's Butard, called Zinc-Beak."

"What's his number?"

"Forty-Six! He got twenty years in New Caledonia for dynamiting a bank in the Opéra district and doing-in a concierge and all his family! Hot stuff, you see! He did only two years in the settlement and bolted."

"You say Zinc-Beak? Forty-Six."

"Yes."

"Wait. You'll see."

Bernier shoved his sculls into the tholepins and began to row, humming:—

"The coffin goes slowly along,  
Tho' 'tis clamped down quite tight,  
A wily lad can bolt in flight."

The rower suddenly held his sculls suspended and turned about:

"What's that? What's that?" he barked like an angry dog.

With a shudder, Bernier answered:

"You don't recognise me, Butard? I was there when you bolted one evening with Le Chouffique. I'm Bernier."

“Perhaps.”

“And we were singing as loud as we could when you slipped your cable.”

“Yes.”

“I’m Number Sixty-One.”

“Ah!”

The man started rowing again. Only his brawny back and huge shoulders could be seen. He muttered:

“Now shut your mouth! Enough chattering. It’s not healthy to be out in a boat at this time of night! The river police might think we’re poaching. It would be a pretty go to be pinched for that!”

“You’re right Butard. Don’t get excited. We’ll shut up.”

“That’s right! Silence!”

“Yes, silence!”

M. Piérout had not foreseen this. It was not from the bank that help had come to the escaped convict, but from the river. Piérout was not therefore an altogether serious rival to Sherlock Holmes! Yet he was brave, bold and venturesome; perhaps also a wee bit conceited. No, he didn’t consider himself beaten yet! That fellow Cazot would laugh too hard.

Moreover, if he wanted to, sheltered as he was behind the old boat—which allowed him to take leisurely aim—he could fire on the fugitives whose three dark forms he could still make out in mid-stream.

He hadn't reckoned previously upon the silent arrival of the boat, any more than he had upon the presence of Boubou and Bernier on the deck of the hulk; but the latter had suddenly stood up to catch a rope thrown to him, mysteriously, from the river.

And Piérout had seen him.

Then he too had stood up. At a glance he had taken in the situation. There was no doubt: confederates had come to fetch the runaway or bring him food. He couldn't jump on the boat to seize the convict, for there was no plank or gangway lying about; and then the movements which he would have to make in order to find a plank and throw it on board would certainly attract the criminals' attention. There was no telling, a revolver duel might follow; and how many men, how many bandits were in the invisible boat on the side of the hulk? He was alone, and mustn't forget it. Show himself? Foolhardiness! Strategy? Wisdom! Absolutely like Sherlock Holmes!

He had suddenly thrown himself back on the ground, for it seemed to him that Bernier, stock-still in the night, had turned his face towards him seeking to penetrate the darkness. . . .

Then the boat had pushed off again, bearing away the convict and his son.

What was to be done?

To run back up the bank as far as the Auteuil viaduct, cross it at full speed, and turn up again on the opposite side, where the boat would soon land—would take at least fifteen minutes. By that time the gang, having landed near Billancourt, would be hidden in the dark, and their tracks lost forever. Lost too the reward of ten thousand francs! Lost his fine future in the police service, lost the delirious thrill of being famous in a day! One thing only remained: Cazot's cruel sneers!

Piérout was adventurous. He put his revolver on his head, covering it with his cap which he jammed down over his ears. Then, hastily taking off his tunic, vest and boots, he threw the lot into the barrel behind which he had entrenched himself up to then, and turned it over so that he would find his clothes there in the morning. He kept on only his shirt, his socks and his trousers.

Then, very quickly, he entered the river.

His muffled voice was heard saying: "Yew! It's cold!"

But he began swimming at once, on his side, his head half submerged, taking care to keep his arms below the surface.

## CHAPTER XIV

### GOUME

“Now then, shove her in!”

The skiff buried her nose in the reeds. Zinc-Beak was the first on shore. He took Boubou under his arm, like a bundle.

“Full speed ahead!” he ordered.

Bernier and Ferdinand got out after him.

“I can’t run!” groaned the hunted man.

“Why?”

“My knees are swollen!”

“Can’t be helped, you must! Buck up! As soon as we strike the path, we’ll have a breather. But first we must go along behind the railings.”

With clenched teeth, Bernier made a last effort. Behind the two men, one of whom was carrying his son, he ran groaning.

Zinc-Beak led. He bore to the right and entered a narrow path bordered on one side by a high board fence and on the other by a low barrier. It was very dark. Bernier felt the earth heaps give under his feet and heard the crunch of the slag. Sometimes his heavy boots hit noisily against old

petrol tins, broken bottles and empty meat-boxes, and then Zinc-Beak exclaimed irritably:

“Here! No noise!”

Butard and Ferdinand were shod with cloth-soled boots and walked as silently as ghosts.

After a few minutes of sharp running, Zinc-Beak stopped and put Boubou on the ground.

“Now then, kid, you can walk by yourself. We’re out of sight of the river police and we must look natural if we meet people.”

The child dashed to his father and clung, trembling, to his big protecting hand, imploring him:

“Don’t leave me again, daddy.”

The way was long and winding. The man who led kept on zigzagging from path to path, making twists and turns. Every instant they had to cross a garden or a field, skirt in silence the sides of ruined shanties, so numerous in the military zone, and cross rivulets swollen by recent rain. At last roads appeared. Stone houses loomed up, at first scattered, surrounded by walled gardens. Then the dwellings came closer together, forming a long row, and streets began, very dark streets, lighted only here and there by flickering gas-lamps.

A heavy silence made the darkness disquieting.

Yet, sometimes, as the three men and the child passed, an awakened dog gave tongue behind a

wall. Then, in the distance, other dogs joined in, and the night for a moment echoed with furious barking, after which the heavy silence fell again suddenly.

Zinc-Beak sang out: "Here we are!"

M. Ferdinand drew from his pocket a kind of little cloth bag with a slip-knot. Before Bernier could raise a hand, he had slipped it over his head and face, and Bernier felt the sudden tightening of the noose about his neck.

Was it an attack?

Ferdinand's voice at once put him at ease.

"Don't worry! You mustn't see how you get into Goume's place. Don't worry, I tell you! We'll be there in a sec! Here, hold out your hand and take your bowler which I knocked off your head. Now lift up your leg, there's a step. I won't let go your arm. Don't be funky!"

"But, my lad?" Bernier asked anxiously.

"We're minding him," responded Butard's hollow voice.

The hunted man resigned himself, not without apprehension—it was too late to draw back—to the guidance of Ferdinand, who directed his steps.

"Look out! There's a turn! Two more steps and you're in the shack. Wait, I must shut the door. Now we're going down for fair this time.

On the left, there's a rail. Hang on to it! Lower your head, the ceiling's low. Hey! Not so fast! You'll go through the wall!"

Bernier, with uncertain steps, like a sick man recently stricken with blindness, butted against the walls, the door-frames, and stumbled down the stairs.

A nervous anguish oppressed him, and he continued to torture himself:

"Has Zinc-Beak got my boy?"

"Yes, Zinc-Beak has him."

"Where is he? I don't hear him walking in front of me now."

"He's further on."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"My boy . . . where is he?"

"He's with Butard, I tell you."

"Why have they taken my boy from me? I don't want them to take him from me, my little boy! You must give him back to me."

"Not so much fuss! They aren't going to kill him, I tell you. Duck again! We're going through a hole which isn't any too big this time. Stand sideways, like this, because of your shoulders. They wouldn't get through straight, you bet. Like this, see, you can get through. Bend, I

tell you, hang it all! You must bend your knees. Your knees? Ah yes, tell Goume you want them bandaged. Just now they've got to work! Now, down on the ground. It won't dirty you, it's sand. Where are we? Want to know, don't you! Well, you shan't! It's a bit chilly, you bet! They haven't put in the radiators yet. That'll come in time. Ah! Ah! It's a slug! You've only got to wipe your hand! There's nothing dirty about it! Where do you think there's water? It's a bit damp, that's all. Don't lift your cocoanut, or you'll kill yourself. Don't ask questions, I tell you! And don't touch your mask either. Otherwise, look out! We're nearly there! You can stand up. Stand up, I tell you! Stop! You're going to see Goume."

Bernier had stood up and remained motionless. Close at hand he heard three slow knocks on a sheet of iron. A door, in front of him, must have opened, for the hinges were creaking. A puff of hot air bathed his hands all at once. M. Ferdinand took his arm again and pushed him forward. The door behind him was closed again. Then fingers undid the cord about his neck which was throttling him, and quickly removed the bag which covered his head.

Bernier found himself in a low spacious room, dimly lighted by an oil-lamp hanging in a copper

ring from the ceiling. Around him, in the gloom, were silent men sitting astride wicker chairs or leaning with folded arms against the walls; but Bernier's look was suddenly deflected, attracted, captivated, and finally riveted.

There, huddled up in a high-backed easy chair, wrapped in a thick woollen rug as if cold, a shrivelled old man with a bald skull like a plucked vulture, a withered face, a sallow puckered skin, the wrinkles filled with dirt, strange, feverish eyes deep sunken in their hollow dark-circled sockets, smiled at Bernier—a toothless, sardonic, cynical smile.

One of this old man's hands hung listlessly over the arm of the easy chair—the hand of a skeleton, twisted and distorted by rheumatism, its fingers more knotted than vine-shoots. On this ghastly hand sparkled a big blue diamond, of fine lustre, which seemed to take from the oil-lamp all its pale dingy light to reflect it in a thousand many-hued and crossing flashes.

Bernier had received, like lances, in both his eyes, still steeped with darkness, the violent magnetic flashes. This lightning gleam from a skeleton's finger held him spellbound.

But the hand had lifted a little. The play of its beams changed. A soft prismatic ellipse ran

round the walls and made the rafters stand out with sudden sharpness.

Bernier's dazzled eyes were then freed from their brilliant fascination. The human wreck which shivered under its rug, in a muffled voice swimming with saliva, the words issuing from a toothless mouth, without accents, as if spat out, demanded:

"It's you then, Sixty-One!"

"Yes, it's me," replied the fugitive.

"Your name?"

"Bernier."

"What year did you enter yonder?"

"Nineteen. . . ."

The old man made an effort to sit up. Two sharp cracks were heard—quick grinding of the joints of the dilapidated arm-chair or the old man's marrowless bones? A sputtering bubble burst on his lips. He had scarcely the strength to spit.

But he rested his eyes, curiously alive in his corpse-like face, upon Bernier, and slowly asked this question:

"What were the names of the two warders?"

"Goff and Vicorsi," answered the hunted man.

A voice behind approved:

“That’s right!”

The old man resumed:

“Then you have the Mark?”

“Sure.”

“Let me see it.”

“Here it is.”

Bernier tucked up his left sleeve and showed, on his arm, by the elbow, three tiny blue tattooed triangles.

A man got up, pulled a chair from between his legs, then came into the light.

“Wait till I have a squint!” he commanded.

He took Bernier’s arm and narrowly examined the tattooing. This man wore a costly overcoat. Between the facings of his sumptuous apparel was seen the stiff front of a dress shirt. A pungent, fashionable scent emanated from his entire person, with the stale smell of smoke.

“He belongs!” he agreed, retiring to his seat.

The creak of his patent boots was heard in the short silence which followed.

The old man’s examination continued.

“Where did they mark you?”

“At Santander.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I was working before coming back. I had to make some oof.”

“And it was the Brotherhood which gave you forged papers?”

“Yes.”

“Then, why didn't you come back to the Brotherhood at Pantruche? ‘The Link of Santander’ had given you the password; and then, too, no doubt, the address to find the ‘Chain.’ Where were you?”

“I don't remember.”

“We'll tell you. You came back ten years ago. Here, Mr. Secretary, where was it, ten years back? I needn't tell you, Bernier, that the rendezvous changes every six months.”

The voice which, just now, had acknowledged as correct the names of the warders, replied from the depths of the darkness:

“Ten years ago, to renew ‘The Links in the Chain,’ members had to go, on the last Saturday of the month, to the home of the dead in the Saint-Ouen cemetery—8th division, 12th row, 5th grave. One of our ‘eyes’ was stationed nearby. The grave was surrounded by a chain. If the brother took the chain in both hands the agent came forward and said: ‘Are you one of us?’ Then, if the fellow gave the password, the agent led him off to the band.”

The old man, with his vulture-like head, held

Bernier under his imperious eye. He questioned:

“The brother at Santander had given you the token?”

“Yes,” stammered the runaway, “I recollect now.”

“Then why, after you had received the papers of the Brotherhood, had promised to be a brother, had been marked as a Link—why didn’t you come to the Brotherhood?”

Bernier lowered his head. He dared not confess the noble reasons which induced him, years ago, to try and escape from the noxious hold of his fellows.

The old man sneered:

“We know! You wanted to rehabilitate yourself and become again an honest man! When a man’s been at Le Grand Pré, like you, like us, he don’t have anything to do with the others! Here’s the proof—you’re accursed! The police get after you and you make no bones about it—you come back to the Brotherhood!”

Bernier examined for a moment the dark corners of the room. He could not make out the human forms there. The white ovals of thin faces alone stood out on the shadowy walls.

He asked anxiously:

“Where’s my boy?”

The gruff, grating voice of Zinc-Beak replied :

“Your kid’s in safe keeping!”

“Where’s my boy?” again implored the runaway.

“I tell you he’s all right,” Butard answered again. “I’ve even given him a Nanny—a fine Nanny!”

“Who is it?” then asked the old man.

“La Boule,” answered Zinc-Beak.

“Your wife?”

“Yes. Upstairs. It’s time you sent us in the grog!”

Voices were raised.

“And in double-quick! We’re dry.”

“I’ll go,” said Zinc-Beak, “and bring in the light.”

“My boy!” Bernier continued to implore, “my boy!”

The old man grew impatient :

“You’ll see him again directly. We can’t bring a brat into a Council Chamber. Now we must clear this matter up.”

He thought for a moment, then exclaimed suddenly :

“Then it was your wedding gave you away!”

The runaway cried in astonishment :

“How do you know?”

“Why, the papers! They’re full of your business! You’re the talk of the town. Everyone is saying: The joiner has only four more days before he is free. . . . Some say you’ll get through, others say you won’t. The Pilot even—where’s the Pilot?”

“Here I am, boss!” someone shouted.

“Well, the Pilot even saw just now, in a bar near Montparnasse station, a betting book started by bookmakers as if they were making bets for the Grand Prix! Isn’t that so, Pilot?”

“Yes, boss, and the fools were shouting out the odds—six to one he’d be caught.”

“That shows you we’re on! When they told me this morning that Sixty-One was asking help of the Brethren, I said to myself: ‘That must be the man who decamped yesterday on his wedding-day,’ and I had enquiries made. The papers tell me the rest. You bet they’re talking about you. It appears your wife had an awful shock, fainted dead away. It wasn’t just the thing for a wedding.”

There was a round of coarse laughter.

Bernier started. Poor Louisa! How she must have suffered, and how she must hate him, too, now she knew!

He stammered, his eyes full of tears:

“Is she ill? Is it true? Is she ill?”

“Now, since you are marked,” the old man went on, “we’re not going to be hard on you for having jumped the Brotherhood, because you’ll come back to it, don’t worry. You’ll get your four days. The police can search, but they won’t find you, even if we have to pack you off to England. The Brotherhood has brought itself up to date. You can get away in an aeroplane. Yes, in a ‘bus.’ The Brethren have one. Over there they’ll give you pocket-money. The Brotherhood has capital, like a regular business concern. It’s in a London bank, and a banker administrates the funds.”

The man in the rich overcoat said jestingly:

“I’m a dab hand at increasing ‘pocket-money’!”

Bernier, who had been standing stock-still since entering this mysterious den, suddenly felt very tired. His knees seemed to give way under him and he staggered.

“Give him a seat!” commanded the old man.

The hunted man fell heavily on a chair which an arm pushed to him.

“It’ll put heart into you, to think the police won’t get you!”

Bernier was about to reply; but behind him loud shouts of wild joy drowned his stammering. He turned to look in astonishment.

A man had entered. How? Had he sprung out from some trap-door or fallen through some hole? He bore on high a great flaming dish, all ablaze with blue sparks. His face behind this flare was a frightful sight, with the nose half eaten away, lipless mouth and toothless jaws, lashless eyes minus eyebrows, torn eyelids, and a flabby, bluish, shining skin.

It was Zinc-Beak bringing in the grog.

A little pine table was pushed towards the old man, and Butard placed on it the huge bowl containing the flaming drink.

Then the men came out of the dark and, carrying their chairs, sat about. Butard went out for a minute and came back with some tin mugs. Hands reached out, faces converged towards the grog. Flickering flames, with yellow tongues, lighted them pallidly.

Bernier could see them.

There they were, then—"The Links in the Chain"! Old escaped convicts like himself, to whom the same need of combining against law and order had given the sense of comradeship in misfortune.

There they were. . . .

Many of the faces of these wretches bore signs of long years of privation. Brutish, low, thick

foreheads; cunning, shifty eyes; mouths of cruel domination and of coarse desire; hairy hands, huge fingers tapering like murderers' knives!

These, then, were his brothers!

Zinc-Beak thrust a tin ladle into the liquor which, at its metallic touch, seemed to flame higher still.

The eyes of all these men, with livid faces, were changed in a twinkling. Their eyeballs seemed to shoot out fire suddenly, while, in the centre of their staring and contracted pupils, a tiny yellow gleam stretched and twisted strangely. Butard's ladle poured liquid fire into the mugs, which seemed to become torches in the raised hand of every drinker.

And all the flames suddenly streamed towards the old man in a wild toast.

The man in the rich overcoat, who had fixed his gold-mounted monocle in his left eye, proposed it, with elegance:

“The Boss's health!”

Like a chorus of barbarians, all the rude voices howled:

“Goume!”

Goume, the old man with vulture head, shrivelled up in the rug, smiled, opening wide his drooling mouth and, summoning all his strength, his hands

suddenly clutching the arm of his chair, shouted, standing:

“To the power of the Brotherhood and its Brethren!”

Mugs clashed with a dull noise. Then the revellers waited till the flames had died down. Only Zinc-Beak, his throat heaving, his Adam’s apple protruding on the tight skin of his neck, tossed off his flaming grog at a draught.

“Come, Bernier! You don’t drink?”

It was Goume’s voice.

“What are you thinking about, Bernier?”

“I’d like to see my boy.”

“Don’t worry, I told you! You’ll see him directly. Now we must come to an understanding. We’ll take care of you for four days, we’ve promised it. Only, on this condition—it stands in the rules of the Brotherhood—you must help us in a job!”

Bernier shivered. A deep fright seized him. A job! Just now, on learning from Goume’s lips that the police would not find him, but little joyous enthusiasm had exalted his soul; and yet, what physical struggle, what moral misery would he not accept not to be sent back to prison, to keep his freedom! But his duty to these reprobates, in a sudden awakening of his conscience, the darkness

of which was at times illuminated by a little gleam, spoilt all his pleasure in knowing he was saved. Now, to fill his cup of sorrow, he had to submit to the rules of the Secret Society of Escaped Convicts and become a passive instrument in the hands of the directors of the association; but, after all, ought he to complain? He had accepted it formerly. It was true that the pressing need of making money and of obtaining forged certificates to settle once more in France had induced him to join one of the "Links" yonder one evening, in Santander harbour. He had sold his soul that night. He had received the mark which gave him certain rights but imposed upon him terrible duties as well. Since he returned to his "Chain" brothers, to implore their protection, he ought, in exchange, according to prison law, to yield himself to them without reserve.

But for what job, O God!

Goume explained:

"The Banker'll explain the business to you. It's his job. Now then, Banker, get on with it. You may talk!"

"This," said the man in the overcoat, "is a political affair. The Brotherhood does all sorts of business, as you'll see. The job this time is worth the trouble: Ten thousand pounds ster-

ling—two thousand for you, five for me, and the rest for the Brotherhood. We've got to slip something over a nuisance in the diplomatic world. We're working for a foreign Government. Don't try to find out which! You wouldn't succeed. It's somewhere in the Balkans."

Bernier, white and dazed, jerked his head.

"Yes, I see, we've got to kill a man."

"I tell you: a chap who's holding up some political combination, doubtless. He's in the way—got to disappear. After all, it isn't our business to know. Ours is easy. First, I'm taking you to London. It is to be brought off there in a fortnight, at the Admiralty ball. I've chosen you because you're free. The Brothers here are busy elsewhere, and their mugs too well known at the frontiers. And then, in four days, you're a gentleman at large! Over there, I'll get you taken on as a butler in the refreshment room at the Admiralty. Baron Isaac—that's me—has the *entrée* anywhere, and acquaintances likewise. Now you must give the poison to the fellow I'll point out to you—two drops in a glass of champagne. There is no risk. You'll hide the phial under your napkin and the poison takes slow effect. The diplomatist won't shuffle off till two days later."

“Kill a man!” repeated Bernier in a whisper of anguish; “kill a man!”

Suddenly, at intervals, an electric bell rang shrilly but dully, as if cracked, in a corner by a large cupboard.

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr. . . .

“Look out!” roared a voice in alarm.

“Hush!” commanded Goume imperatively, raising a wasted hand.

Why, suddenly, at this unexpected ring, as if obeying an order, did revolvers and knives leap from every pocket?

All these eight men, some armed with two revolvers, seemed petrified as if expecting a terrible conflict.

And the ringing continued, muffled, interrupted by longer or shorter pauses, like the pauses of a worn-out machine or a weak current.

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr. . . .

Zinc-Beak threw open the double flaps of the cupboard, disclosing a huge blackboard on which was drawn, in large red strokes, the plan of a garden and a house. In the garden round the house, between the walls of the dwelling and those that bordered the road, were fixed, side by side, in the centre of small numbered rectangular boxes,

tiny electric bells, tied up with a green twisted thread, and provided with small hammers.

“He’s in the garden,” whispered Goume, after a glance at the board.

“He’s beginning to take a quiet turn round the house,” added Zinc-Beak. “Look!”

Here and there, slowly, but following a continuous line, electric bells, one by one, rang under the vibrating blows of their hammers some of which emitted blue sparks.

“Perhaps it’s La Boule who may have left the house and forgotten to switch off the current,” remarked the Banker.

“Perhaps there are two,” interposed the Pilot.

“No, squint! There’s only one bell and that’s clear! If there were two, they must have walked together on the same flagstone—and they’re not broad. It wouldn’t happen often.”

“I think it’s La Boule,” said the Snake.

As if to give the lie immediately to this assertion, up on the ceiling, between two rafters, a trap-door slid back. A shadowy head leaned over. A drunken voice, a woman’s, announced:

“It’s me—La Boule! Don’t stir there! M. Ferdinand’s gone to see!”

“How many are they?” asked Goume.

“There’s only one man.”

“I was sure of it,” said the old man.

“There’s only one man,” replied the woman.  
“That’s why we should leave it for M. Ferdinand to manage.”

“You’re quite sure there’s only one man?” asked the Banker.

“Yes. Ferdinand was watching. I saw him climb the wall.”

“But, if that’s the case, there were two bells ringing together,” exclaimed the Pilot.

“It’s M. Ferdinand, who’s outside.”

“Anyway,” ordered Gouime who had stood up and seemed crushed, his back bent under the weight of his rug, “anyway La Boule must see that everything’s ready. If it was a scout and the police were behind him, burst open the petrol tins and set fire to the house. We’ll trot off to the basement.”

“All right, boss,” said the woman as she disappeared.

There were indeed, at present, two bells ringing. Bernier guessed what was happening. An ingenious electric distributor surrounded with a protective belt the lair of “The Links in the Chain.” It ended at this black switchboard where the advance of the enemy could be easily followed. A whole system of paving, tilting, no doubt, gave

warning of trespassers by establishing a current which started a series of electric bells. So, to every shifting flagstone, to every step made on it by the mysterious visitor, corresponded a tinkling of a particular tone and more or less prolonged according to the rapidity of his walk.

But who would be prowling thus in the night? The anxiety manifested by the harsh faces about him made Bernier fear a great danger.

Hadn't Goume, just now, talked of the police?

The police! So that even now he might not be rescued from their clutches? Suddenly, with an instinctive gesture, he approached the old man as if to seek his powerful protection.

Now that danger again threatened him, a kind of unconscious cowardice threw him back upon these wretches!

The man who, outside, was walking round the house, advanced slowly and cautiously. His pace was recorded by the metallic clicks on the tell-tale switchboard.

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr . . .

Long intervals, at times, interrupted the muffled sound of the bells. The man had, indeed, to note his surroundings and make his plans.

Yonder, in a corner of the switchboard, Bernier was reckoning: twenty flagstones separated

them now. M. Ferdinand was watching his man like a cat watching a mouse. Craftily, he conformed his pace to the stranger's. If the latter stopped, he stood still. If he went forward quickly, he followed him at once on tiptoe.

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr. . . .

The mouse all at once seemed to hesitate. The tinklings became less and less frequent. The cat, crouching now, had suddenly ceased his pursuit.

Grr. . . .

Silence!

"What does that mean?" muttered the Banker.

"One of them has perhaps fallen," the Serpent suggested out loud.

"If it had been a bomb," remarked Goume, "we should have heard the bang. With the knife, Ferdinand is afraid of no one."

"Suppose I go and have a look," volunteered Zinc-Beak, holding up a dagger.

"Let my son do the job!" Goume said in a tone of pride.

The mouse, no doubt reassured by the silence of the garden and of the house with its closed shutters which let no gleam filter through, now moved forward incautiously.

The cat, this time, cast prudence to the winds. He darted forward and was seen. His hasty

steps started a whole series of bells ringing. He must have sprung upon his prey.

The fight was beginning. . . .

The mouse dodged between the cat's paws, sprang sideways, tried to fly. The cat followed it, cut it off, trapped it again. The mouse tried to escape anew. Both strove desperately. A bitter struggle was divined by the multiple and localised ringing.

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr. . . .

At present the hand-to-hand fight must be keeping the two contestants almost stationary. The tinkles were less rapid and, out of the whole row of the electric bells, but two or three were now ringing. . . .

The struggle had narrowed itself to a few flagstones. Was this the end?

Goume smiled. In truth, he didn't appear to fear for his son's life. Was it the proud, boundless confidence in Ferdinand's strength or almost total absence of paternal affection? Goume smiled and, head erect, nostrils dilating, seemed to sniff already the fresh smell of blood.

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr. . . .

Silence once more. Tragic, agonising silence. Was it death passing?

One of the struggling men had, doubtless, suc-

ceeded in stabbing his adversary in the back with the sharp blade of his knife. The vanquished at once hung heavily in the arms of the victor who, panting but filled with a cruel joy, must be holding him lingeringly in his embrace the better to feel his limpness and the first quivering of his death-agony.

A savage silence. . . .

Grr! Grr! Grr!

Three sudden, mighty rings! Why? No doubt the winner had just flung on the ground the lifeless body of his adversary lying along three flagstones.

But who is the winner?

Grr! Grr! Grr!

The victor moved away from his victim. Was he going to leave the range of the bells, reach the neutral zone, leap the wall and flee? Then it would be the mysterious stranger.

If he re-entered the house, it would be M. Ferdinand.

The winner was in no hurry!

Grr . . . Grr . . . Grr. . . .

How unsteadily he walked! Was he reeling?

Doubtless he felt the effects of a long struggle.

Grr . . . Grr. . . .

Ah! here he was entering the house.

“He has laid him out, the lad! Laid him out!” roared old Goume with savage satisfaction.

M. Ferdinand appeared.

He was very pale. He at once fell back upon the little pine table, after brutally sweeping off the punch bowl which fell on the floor with a crash.

Ferdinand propped himself with his outstretched arms behind him. His broad, brawny, brute chest rose and fell under his shirt, which was torn and, strange to say, wringing wet in places. He could not speak, his breath coming short and pantingly. Fierce nails had torn his face and dug up bloody furrows in his cheeks. Winding purple rivulets trickled along his right arm and stained with splashes the palm and fingers of his left hand; but, as there was no wound to be seen on Ferdinand's arm, this blood could only be his enemy's.

“It's raining outside then?” cried Zinc-Beak in amazement. “Look at his togs. They're soaking wet!”

“No,” Ferdinand shook his head.

With an effort he managed to say:

“It's the man! He must have come out of the water. He was wet through.”

Ferdinand, strangely enough, did not take his

eyes off Bernier, and Bernier felt that this look fixed on him was heavy with suspicion.

“Well, you’ve done him in?” asked the Banker.

“Yes, I’ve done him in!” gasped the young bandit, gradually recovering the use of his tongue.

“Where’s your knife?”

“I’ve left it where I put it!”

“Who was the fellow?” asked Goume eagerly.

“Somebody from the police.”

A muffled exclamation of surprise and of anger answered Ferdinand’s words.

“Somebody from the police?”

M. Ferdinand confirmed it: “Yes, from the police!”

And he added, staring at Bernier more fixedly than ever:

“Ask him if he knows whether he came from the police!”

Bernier exclaimed with astonishment:

“Me!”

“Yes, you! Come now, you knew a police-spy was following us to find out where the Brotherhood has its quarters. He was wringing wet, I said—must have swum the river behind us. . . . Now I remember! Before you got down to the boat I saw you make a sign. It was to the police! I even asked you: ‘What are you doing aloft?’ ”

Bernier protested wildly.

“Me? No, no! I’ll swear!”

“I saw you!”

“I was looking. It seemed to me I saw a man standing on the bank.”

“And you said nothing!”

“I thought it was my fancy!”

“You did not, you leper!”

A threatening ring now surrounded Convict Number Sixty-One.

M. Ferdinand lost his temper.

“You wanted to sell! The trick’s clear! The police got hold of you in the afternoon and, to save your skin, you promised to give us away!”

Wild faces shot forward at Bernier, with grinding of teeth.

Bernier, groaning, tried to clear himself.

“I swear it. I didn’t give you away! No, that’s a lie. Me betray you? Never!”

But Ferdinand had arisen and, with slow, rolling gait, approached quite close to the man he accused, so close that their bodies touched.

“Why, then, did the tyke, as he turned up his eyes, howl: ‘Boubou! Bernier!’ He was calling you and your brat. He knew you! Talked of police, of arresting.”

Bernier, haggard, tapping his forehead from

which he could extract no argument, no clue, no ray of light, gasped:

“I don’t know! . . . I don’t know! . . . I don’t know!”

“There you see! You can’t say a word. You’re caught out! Own up!” roared Ferdinand, seizing Bernier by the throat as if to throttle him. “Own up you wanted to give us away. You cowardly skunk!”

Goume commanded:

“Separate them!”

Zinc-Beak instantly carried out the old man’s order.

Ferdinand was held, powerless, under the rough grasp of the victim of vitriol.

Goume sat down again in his arm-chair and declared:

“The Brotherhood alone judges traitors! Go up, Ferdinand, and get La Boule to help remove the body at once and—decently. We’re going to deal with this fellow!”

“His fate is sealed!” jeered the Banker.

“He can say his prayers!” sneered the Serpent.

“And make his will!” jested the Pilot.

“Count his bones!” said the Secretary going one better.

Other voices threatened too:

“Tie up his package for the pine-box!”

“Pay his debt to the Brotherhood!”

Zinc-Beak had the last word:

“He shall die!”

## CHAPTER XV

### LA BOULE

WHILE M. Ferdinand led Bernier through dark mazes to the cave of "The Links in the Chain," Zinc-Beak followed another path, carrying Boubou like a bundle under his arm. The child, terrified at finding himself parted from his father, struggled with all his might; but Butard's grip was rough, as was likewise the pressure of his hard palm on Boubou's mouth to drown his screams.

Zinc-Beak entered a rather gloomy room where, in the centre, roared a small iron stove, the pipe of which went up straight to the ceiling. A candle, fixed in the mouth of a bottle placed on a low stool, feebly illuminated the apartment. Near the bottle was a short pipe, a kind of sailor's "cutty," a packet of tobacco and a pocket electric torch.

In a nook, on a flattened straw mattress, dozed an enormous female, lying on her back. On the bandit's entrance she started up:

"Ugh!"

"Don't worry, La Boule, it's all serene," said the man.

The monster nevertheless arose. It took time. She first turned, painfully, half-way round on her side which brought her flat on her stomach on the bed. There, she gathered her strength, gulped in an ample supply of air, dug her fists into the mattress, which creaked, and stretched out her arms to prop herself upon it and, at the same time, raise her huge frame. Suddenly nothing but her gigantic back was to be seen. She looked like a captive balloon ready to break from its ropes. She fell heavily to her knees. Then, grunting, she contented herself with half raising her barrel-like frame, her raucous breathing reminiscent of the gasp of a seal.

She had to implore her husband's aid:

"Come, pet, and help your little wife!"

Zinc-Beak put Boubou down on the floor and went to help the monster to get up.

La Boule was coquettish and purred, in the voice of a docker with laryngitis:

"Ah! My pet! My sweetheart! My darling!"

The pot-bellied little stove glowed red and the over-heated iron became spotted here and there with sparks; but La Boule's face was more brilliant still. She looked like a stuffed tomato ready to burst.

Zinc-Beak pointed to the child.

“That’s the Brother’s kid.”

“Where’s the Brother?” enquired the woman.

“He’s at the meeting downstairs, with Goume,” replied the bandit. “I’m going there. I’ll leave you the brat, and brew us a bowl of hot grog!”

La Boule took Boubou’s nose between two fingers, squeezed it hard and simpered.

“She’s a love, this little girlie!”

Decidedly, the monster was in a tender mood this evening!

From the door, Zinc-Beak warned her.

“Don’t make a mistake! It’s no gal. It’s a boy in disguise!”

“The deuce it is,” said the woman laughing. “He looks like a gal; but no matter; I’ll love the Brother’s brat just as much!” Then she sighed:

“Ah! To love! Why haven’t you given me a baby?”

Zinc-Beak didn’t hear this touching appeal. He had disappeared.

Almost at once, Ferdinand entered by a door opposite. He said, on the threshold:

“The Brotherhood is sitting! Give me a drop of rum. I’m going up to the first floor. I must be on the watch, while the pals are yapping.”

“At once, my sweet one!” trumpeted the elephant.

She went off and opened a cupboard where the tiny flame of the distant candle threw bright gleams on the sides of the bottles standing in a row. She filled a glass with brandy, smelt it with a greedy sniff and offered it to Ferdinand.

“Shove your nose into that, Cherub!”

The man drank it at a draught, smacked his lips, tied his red woollen scarf round his throat and went out.

Then the beauty grabbed Boubou and dragged him roughly towards her.

“Ah! my little bit of blue sky,” she roared poetically, belching through her nose.

Boubou, who was very much afraid, moaned in a stifled voice, his head buried between the elephant’s breasts:

“Oh! You hurt! Let me alone!”

His nose was flattened against the steel busks of her stays.

She didn’t listen, vehement in her passionate demonstration of explosive motherhood:

“My sugar-candy! My tricolour soldier! My little bird!”

Boubou was choking. He struggled and wanted to breathe in a supply of fresh air. A gag of fat entered his mouth and his nose, momentarily freed, sniffed horrid smells. The woman’s greasy

bodice stank of drink and tobacco mixed. Then, in desperation Boubou pinched the woman's thigh with all his might. She pushed him back with one hand, while, with the other, she gave him a box on the ear.

"Oh, the little swine of a dicky-bird!"

La Boule's hand weighed at least two kilos and Boubou, dazed, fell on his back. The woman seized him by a leg, held him downwards and, without apparent effort, carried him off to the bed. She threw him down carelessly, as she would have done an inanimate object.

"Go to sleep, my little soldier!" she warbled as sweetly as she could with her snarly voice.

Then she took from her chair the sailor's "cutty," stuffed it with a quid of strong tobacco and, having sucked three or four times noisily at the flame of the candle, she sat down in a dense cloud of tobacco smoke, like a certain god of Olympus who, of old, used to hide himself in clouds when angry.

Boubou, bruised by such rough handling, regarded the ogress with terror-stricken eyes. She went back to the cupboard, took out a huge bowl, threw into it, like a hail storm, several handfuls of sugar, and emptied the contents of a pepper-dredge and two bottles of spirit.

Zinc-Beak came back.

“Have you got the bowl?”

“Here it is,” said La Boule, holding out the vessel.

Zinc-Beak took the enormous receptacle with both hands.

“Put a match to it,” he ordered.

“Wait! Here’s something better.”

From the neck of the bottle she pulled out the candle and appeared to plunge it into the bowl. Drops of melting wax were heard fizzling as they stiffened in a film on the cold surface of the beverage. Then a blue flame shot up.

“Damn it! It burns!” cursed La Boule as she quickly drew back her arm.

The candle had gone out. A weird light lit up the hideous faces of Butard and his wife. They looked like gibbering devils risen from hell with a bowl of fire.

Boubou lay crumpled up on the bed, his teeth chattering.

Zinc-Beak carried off the grog.

La Boule did not light the candle again at once. She circled for a long time round the roaring stove, emitting thick clouds of smoke, and her face, lighted up beneath her nose by the red glow from the bowl of her pipe, arose in the dark, bloated and

glistening. All at once, beating her wobbling paunch with her hands, she started to sing this nursery ditty—the tune she made up:

“I know a wee bit of a lad  
Who to sleep is only too glad  
With his dear little Nanny—  
’Twill be nice, little manny!”

As she passed near the bed she gave it a kick. Boubou got it instead on the leg and howled with pain. The ogress gave vent to a slight cry of fright, turned round and asked in astonishment:

“Now then, what’s the matter with my heavenly child?”

Then she relighted the candle.

From a deep hiding-place, between her breasts in the hollow of her stays, she extracted a long snuff-box. She opened it and slipped it under the boy’s nose.

“Take a good sniff to buck you up!”

Boubou, whose eyes filled with tears, had sniffed in a big dose of powdery snuff. It was atrocious. His eyes bloodshot, his nose on fire, his throat burning, he coughed, spat, wept and vomited. At his bedside, La Boule sat deep in thought. She put her mop of hair over her low forehead which was almost on a level with her bristly eyebrows.

She began talking to herself.

“Isn’t it a shame to see children brought up like that! They don’t even appreciate a pinch of snuff. As soon as you touch them, they scream. Eddication be damned! If I had to bring him up—this tiny wee brat—I’d make a boy of him who wouldn’t get cold in his eyes! A man! a real man, like Butard.”

It was at this moment that M. Ferdinand entered. He was pale and excited. He whispered:

“Twenty-two!”

“What?” the fat woman jerked out.

“Shove out the light!”

“Yes.”

La Boule’s breath extinguished the candle at the word of command, but, too powerful, had knocked over the bottle as well.

“Look out! No row!”

“Because . . .?” answered the ogress.

“We’ve got visitors!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Where?”

“In the garden. One jumped the wall. Tell the Brotherhood. . . . I’m going to see!”

He went out at a run.

La Boule fell on the floor with a soft, heavy

thud. Scratching with her nails in the dust on the floor, she uncovered a flat ring. Having pulled it, she raised a trap-door and, with her hands to her mouth, gave the alarm. That done, she got up. Luckily the wicker chair was within her reach, and this chair helped her considerably to hoist up her capacious frame.

When she was at last standing, she went to a window, opened it noiselessly, carefully drew back the shutters, then, pressing her full bosom on the rail, looked out.

Boubou heard her gloating with delight, like an epicure tasting a delicate dish.

Suddenly she jumped back and, leaning into the darkened room, commanded:

“You brat, come here this minute! Come and see how a man—a real man—can fight!”

As he did not obey, terror-stricken by La Boule’s strange brutal ways, she walked to the bed with her fist raised.

“Will you come, yes or no?”

Boubou, with a bound, was on his legs at once. He came forward, shielding his face with his two arms above his head. She seized him by the ear.

“Come and see, my sugar-candy!”

She pressed his forehead into the corner of the two half-open shutters.

“Look, my bird of paradise!”

Then she leaned her fat chin and flabby throat on the boy's head as a support. Good Lord, how heavy she was, this podgy lump! Boubou's head, forced in between the sides of the shutters, seemed to be in a vice.

“You see, my gilded warrior! Do you see them? Ah, it's fine! How they do fight!”

Outside, on a kind of flagged walk, several yards wide, surrounding the house, two shadowy forms were wrestling. The hoarse, fierce, infuriated panting of the two combatants could be distinctly heard. The night was without moon or stars. Their faces could be easily distinguished. Sometimes, however, their hands rose into the air over their heads and circled round them like fluttering night-jars. The struggle continued desperately. At times their bodies formed one solid, panting mass. Then, all at once, they seemed to break apart. Four feet, locked together, opened out as if to prop up, on a solid base, a gnarled pedestal formed by two interlocking chests. No cries or groans! Suddenly an arm shot up, high above the rude embrace of the bodies. A perpendicular flash of steel traversed the uplifted hand. The hand sank, and a throat gurgled its last gasp.

La Boule coughed, shaken by an intense, fiendish joy.

“Which one is it? Which?”

She pushed open the shutters. A shaft of light shot in. She directed the light of her electric torch on the two combatants, now motionless. They were still locked together. One, the mysterious stranger, had his head thrown back as if he were seeking air in spite of the stab in his chest. The other, surprised by the flash of the torch, turned round, dazzled, and shut his eyes. It was M. Ferdinand. Then they saw the rigid arms of the stranger, as if suddenly tired by too long a fight, drooping, lifelessly, and hanging inert. His knees, too, were seen to bend, his body to stiffen. He slid slowly down between the muscular arms of the bandit, who went over him, following his victim in his fall, with one ear close to his mouth, as if he were listening. . . .

A dagger fell from the neck of the stranger as from a sheath. The blade flashed like lightning and fell with a sharp clatter on a flagstone.

Suddenly M. Ferdinand freed himself from the dead weight of the corpse and flung it before him. Then, slowly and unsteadily, like a drunken man, wiping the sweat from his brow, he went back into the house.

La Boule had switched off her lamp.

Boubou, trembling in all his limbs, kept on muttering:

“It’s the wolf man!”

“What do you mean?” said the ogress.

“It’s the wolf man!”

“What on earth is the wolf man?”

“Why! The man on the ground.”

“Where?”

“There—outside!”

“You’re dotty! You’re up the pole!”

“But it’s the wolf man! I’ve seen him!”

“You’ve seen him?”

“Yes, I talked with him this morning.”

“You’ve talked with him?”

“Yes, lady. . . . Oh! Don’t beat me!”

“I won’t beat you. You come with me!”

She dragged him away.

“Where are we going, lady?”

“To Goume!”

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE CHAIN

BERNIER was going to die.

The judgment was summary.

“You’ve given us away! The proof is that this police-spy knew you and your kid. You know what awaits you. The ‘Brother’ at Santander must have told you. Betrayal means death.”

Sullen growls approved the sentence.

“What have you to say in your defence?”

Bernier raised his hand for a supreme oath.

“Down with your hand!” snarled the old man.

“Those monkey tricks don’t go here.”

“But I’m innocent!” shouted the accused.

“Give us a proof. Have you one?”

“No.”

“That’s settled. Zinc-Beak!”

Butard came forward.

“Well, boss?”

“You can stick him. Yours is the honour!”

The rough hands which were gripping Bernier’s shoulders turned him over in a trice on the little table, and his legs were at once tied to the table-

legs with silk scarves. He could not budge, and the bandits stood round him.

The Banker opened Bernier's clothes, unbuttoned his waistcoat, tore his shirt open, laid bare the upper part of his body. He leaned over, placed one ear on his heaving chest and seemed to sound him carefully like a precise, meticulous doctor.

"There!" and placing his finger under the left breast of the helpless man, he pointed to his heart.

Goume got up. Resting both hands on the edge of the table, he bent over the condemned man whose hoarse breathing betrayed his fright.

He sneered.

"It won't take long! Don't lose patience! We'll put you out of the way without any fuss—decently—without a tomb! A little outing to the land of the dead!"

"Room," demanded Zinc-Beak.

The crowd opened and Butard appeared, bearing the sacrificial weapon. It was a long steel pin, perhaps the very tapering blade of a dagger.

A spasm of fright racked the victim's body. He divined. . . . He was to be stabbed to the heart.

"Take away your thumb, Banker!" commanded the executioner.

'And already the pin was touching the condemned man's flesh.

But just then La Boule entered, in a state of great excitement, crying:

"Wait! Listen! The Brother's brat knows the stiff upstairs."

"What!" cried Goume, coming forward.

All the other bandits turned towards the woman. Butard held, for an instant, his homicidal hand.

"Well then, what is it?" repeated the old man.

The ogress pushed the child forward.

"Tell them, kid, what you told me!"

But the vision of all these unpleasant visages thrust towards him paralysed Boubou.

"Oh, daddy! My daddy!"

Bernier tried in vain to rise.

"Boubou! My little one!"

A hand closed his mouth.

Goume gently caressed the child's face with his rough fingers.

"Don't be afraid, little chap. Tell us what you told La Boule."

"I want daddy!" implored the child.

"You'll see him in a minute," promised the old man.

The ring of "Links in the Chain" hid the little table and concealed the victim.

“Now then, tell your story. You know him up there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And your father—knows him too?”

“No, sir!”

“Ah! Tell us, then.”

Boubou, sobbing, described the morning's events—the flying butterfly, the trodden-down lettuce bed and the toll-man. The account was sometimes confused, distorted by the boy's childish imagination. Goume, half shutting his piercing eyes, thought deeply, with wrinkled brow.

This child was not lying.

Goume, an acute psychologist, was reconstructing the order of events. In the first place, it was when Bernier, under the railway bridge, was receiving M. Ferdinand's instructions, that Boubou met the toll-man. The latter, like everyone else, had read the newspapers and had taken a keen interest in the story of this escaped convict who had escaped the police on the very day of his wedding. The boy's answers had not been long in giving him the suspicion, then the certainty, that the son of the man with a price on his head was standing before him. The reward, the famous reward, had induced this toll-man to turn himself into a detective!

“Tell me, kid! You’re quite sure he asked you your name?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He didn’t know you were a boy?”

“No, sir. I told him that myself.”

“Why?”

“Because he called me a dirty girl!”

“And he asked you where your father was?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What did you answer?”

“That he was under the railway bridge, sir.”

“He knew his name?”

“I don’t remember.”

“And what more did he say?”

“He told me I wasn’t to tell daddy.”

Goume was quite clear in his mind now.

Butard’s rasping voice exclaimed impatiently:

“Well, boss, am I to finish off the Brother?”

“No,” declared the old man, with authority, “let him go! He’s not guilty! He belongs to the ‘Brotherhood’ and we must be just towards him. He had nothing to do with the spy’s coming. It was his kid who caused the trouble!”

“It’s always the same with these confounded brats!” growled Zinc-Beak.

“Take him away, La Boule,” ordered the old

man, "and give him a good spanking. That'll teach him to hold his tongue!"

The ogress did not wait to be told twice and carried off her groaning prey on her huge rolling paunch.

"Ah! my little soldier, what a hiding you're going to get! How I'll hammer your cocoanut, my birdie! I'll spank you like my mother did me. I'll teach my little barley-sugar darling to shut his mouth. I'll. . . ."

Bernier, now free, wanted to dash after her, but was pulled back.

"Chuck it! That's the way brats should be brought up," jested the Banker. "He nearly got us all pinched! He must be punished for that!"

Goume, for the second time, returned to his chair. Again he laid his skinny hand on the arm. The big blue diamond sparkled once more and Bernier felt a bright light flash across his face. He wanted to fall back into the dark, but the imperious chief commanded:

"Don't stir!"

What a strange, magnetic power this bald-headed old man had, trembling and coughing!

"My boy . . ." stammered Bernier.

"Don't stir, I tell you!" reiterated the old man. Ah! How that flashing diamond hurt his eyes!

Bernier had to close them. Goume was speaking. He had resumed his old broken voice, mixed with saliva:

“You’ve had luck, Brother! If it hadn’t been for La Boule, you’d have passed on. . . . A moment more, eh?”

“Don’t let them hurt my boy,” implored the hunted man.

“Listen to me! I’m talking to you. Zinc-Beak would have run you through. But I know men and am convinced you’re no traitor. Looked like it for a moment, didn’t it, boys? To purchase his liberty——”

“I beg you, don’t let them hurt my little boy!” groaned Bernier.

“Again! Shut your mouth! I’m convinced you’ve not betrayed the Brotherhood. You’re a white man—that’s a fact. Then the Brotherhood must help you. But I’ve an idea. . . . Listen!”

All turned submissive faces to the old man.

“Listen! In four days’ time this man will be free, thanks to us. He’ll be able to walk the streets without fear of arrest. He’ll be a man like other men. We’ll still have to hide and disguise ourselves. He’ll brag and say, ‘I’ve forgotten ‘The Links in the Chain.’’ Yet he’s one of us.

He's been marked and must always remain a true Brother."

Butard growled sullenly: "I've a kind of notion he'd disown us. The gent had set himself up! Put on lugs! Perhaps he wanted to go into politics!"

A loud burst of laughter convulsed the meeting.

"I agree with you, Zinc-Beak," said Goume. "So this is what I've decided."

Bernier opened his eyes again. The flashing hand had now withdrawn beneath the rug, but the hunted man saw again the old man's little sparkling eyes:

"This is what I've decided. Within four days he must have worked for the Brotherhood. It's too late for the Banker's job. Inside of four days he must again be put without the law!"

Bernier recoiled.

"No!" he exclaimed, with a gesture of horror.

Goume misunderstood.

"The Brotherhood is strong. It will protect you. But you understand, we want you to remain 'A Link in the Chain.' For that, you'll have to break the law again. Don't worry. In four days you'll have done a good job for the Brotherhood. We'll map out a plan. In the meantime Zinc-Beak will take you to a room where you can have a

snooze, and your boy will be brought to you. It's late. To-morrow we meet again. The Brethren, between now and then, will have hatched out something and will explain to you."

"I don't want to! No, I don't want to!" shouted Bernier wildly.

"What?" growled the bandits in fierce chorus.

"I don't want to. I want to remain what I had become—an honest man—an . . ."

"Ah!" answered the ironic, mocking, treacherous smile of the wheezy, tragic old man. He didn't fly into a passion. He chaffed:

"What? The Goume *flair!*"

Bernier had fallen heavily to his knees, his poor bruised knees, and he implored:

"Let me go! I swear I'll hold my tongue. I'll say nothing about the Brotherhood. If they catch me, so much the worse for me; but let me go. I don't want to rob any more! I don't want to kill any more! Let me go away with my little son!"

Goume beckoned and Butard came forward.

"Well, boss?"

Goume ordered:

"You'll take him where I said. But alone, you understand, quite alone! His boy shall stop with La Boule!"

"She's a good nurse," sniggered Zinc-Beak.

Bernier got up and groaned.

“No! don’t take Boubou from me.”

The old man, with a wave of his hand, imposed silence.

“You shall work for the Brotherhood. If you refuse, you’re done for! We’ll give you up to the police! As for your boy, brother, I’ll tell you this: if you don’t remain a ‘Link,’ you’ll never see your lad again, never!”

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE AMATEUR IN CRIME

THE place to which Zinc-Beak conducted Bernier was a kind of dark cellar, with sweating walls and without windows.

The air could only enter by a narrow circular hole cut in the ceiling. A speaking tube through which passed a tiny current of air ended there.

A sliding iron door was closed and noisily padlocked behind the prisoner.

For light, the prisoner had only a candle and for a bed but a pallet. He threw himself upon this wretched couch and, his face in the hollow of a folded arm, wept and wept.

Once more, in his thoughts, he lived over again his miserable life since the fatal day when his hand stabbed—under the spell of some demoniac curse—the tax-collector of Ploubalec. Ah! the long martyrdom! The incessant moral torture! After his degrading sentence, all his relatives, neighbours—all those he loved—had suddenly left him. Even his mother had disowned him—his own mother! What a blow that was! And yet she had

worshipped her little "pussy-cat" as she used to call him in his childhood, when he sought a warm, fond kiss from her lips and curled up in her lap.

Since he had gone away, yonder to the prison, he had never again heard of her. Never again! Yet, on his secret return to France, his first thought had been to find her, and, in spite of all his caution, to implore her pardon, to tell her how repugnant to him was the crime he had committed in a moment of unconsciousness. A mother always forgives.

He had gone, disguised and unrecognisable, to Ploubalec. After long hours of travelling he arrived there very early in the morning. It was still dark. He had hidden behind a hedge quite close to the cottage where he was born. Its glass door and its one shutter with a hole in it were still closed. In the village the chimneys, one by one, reared their smoke wreaths. The dawn rose pink and blue. Cocks crowed, doors opened, clogs clattered on the hard ground.

At last the shutter of his well-loved birthplace was pushed open; but the beloved face, so long desired, so long expected, did not appear at the casement. The face he saw was that of an old man who sought in the sky the promise of fine weather for approaching seed-time.

Then his mother no longer dwelt there! A dull anguish clutched his heart. He went across fields, round the village, and, behind the little Breton church with its open-work belfry, he entered the graveyard. One by one he visited the graves and eagerly read the inscriptions on the crosses. That done, he breathed again. A mighty hope lifted up his heart. His mother was not lying there among the dead.

Then he waxed bold. A priest left the vicarage and went towards the church. He didn't know him—a newcomer, doubtless. He accosted him:

“Excuse me, Monsieur le Curé, does Bernier's widow still live in Ploubalec?”

The priest asked him to repeat his question:

“I beg pardon—the widow?”

“Bernier—Bernier's widow?”

The priest, his brow wrinkled, reflected. This name seemed at first unknown to him.

“Bernier's widow,” he muttered, “Bernier's widow. . . .”

All at once his face lit up. He remembered now, but almost immediately he grew grave and answered:

“Ah, yes! Bernier's widow! Mother of that unfortunate con. . . .”

The ex-convict did not let him finish his sentence.

“Yes,” he broke in, “yes, his mother!”

“Well, the poor woman left the country shortly after her son was transported, and since then no one knows what has become of her.”

“Ah! No one knows?”

“No one knows.”

“Thanks all the same, Monsieur le Curé!”

Bernier went away, very quickly. When he was alone in the sunken road, he sat down beside a ditch. Then he wept. He wept a long time, groaning deeply and shaken with grief, and sobbed like a lost child.

Where had his poor mother gone? She had certainly left Ploubalec to escape the disgrace of being pointed out. Where had she gone? Bernier was never again to see her. Was she still living? She would be very old now. No, she must have died, far from him, somewhere, quite alone, cursing his name.

Ah! What a life he had had!

A craving for love had induced him, a few months after his return to France, to propose to a work girl, Marie Potier, a daughter of the foreman of the Chupal works, where, under the name of Vincent Paroli, he was employed. It had been

a real love story. Had it not been for the daily secret dread of being one day discovered, Vincent would have enjoyed the most perfect bliss; but there was this terrible menace. . . . Anguish stood behind him on the threshold of the days.

Saving money rapidly, the united couple bought a joinery. Trade was brisk. Then a son was born to them—Boubou. Years passed. Vincent Paroli gradually found peace. The police, he thought, had lost trace of him for ever. So he was saved! He could, at last, enjoy his tardy happiness.

His wife died.

How this saddened his life! How he grieved!

Misfortune dogged his wretched existence. He tried to drown care by hard, regular work. Then again, years passed. There came over his sorrowing heart, not forgetfulness but peaceful calm.

It was then he discovered that Louisa, an old friend of Marie's, had a secret liking for him. He was touched and stirred by it. Suddenly a deep sympathy attracted him to this young girl. She was so kind, so eager, that he fell in love with her. He asked her to be his wife. She joyfully accepted. Boubou would thus have a new and very tender mother. Vincent Paroli would perhaps know happiness again. He hardly remembered

now that he was still Bernier, the ex-convict. He was being lulled to sleep. His former agony now gave place to tranquillity; and then was he not going to be free, before long, from all apprehension? Article 635 of the Penal Code was explicit: "All penalties will lapse in a period of twenty years, reckoning from date of arrest or sentence." In a few days, April 13, it would be twenty years since the Assize Court at Rennes had condemned him to penal servitude for life.

Alas! What a life he had led!

And five days before this liberation, on the happy evening of his wedding, five days before his definite pardon, they were on his track again!

The prison was demanding its prey!

Five days before. . . .

Ah! his life, his sad life, his poor life!

And now, what would happen to him? He was Goume's prisoner. He could not escape. If he could, what good would come of it? Alone, without money, without support, he would soon be caught again. That meant prison, until the end of his days.

But what would he be ordered to do? What deed? What shame? What crime, perhaps! Refuse? He knew the treat. It was through his son they would get at him, torture him. What chastise-

ment would they inflict upon his little one, his darling child? These brute-beasts would kill him perhaps. . . .

Bernier, his face in the hollow of his bent arm, had been weeping continuously.

Then, suddenly, deep sleep fell upon his poor, worn-out, bruised body.

How long had he slept?

The candle had gone out, burnt to the socket. It was pitch dark in the cell to which Zinc-Beak had brought him. The narrow round hole in the ceiling alone held, in its orbit, a diffused, uncertain light. Yet it proved that the far end of the tube received the daylight. Outside the sun must be shining.

The prisoner got up, and, standing on his bed, his ear close to the opening, listened. The distant chirp of a bird came to him. Clearly, then, the ventilator must end in a garden. Bernier's heart clutched painfully. Outside was the sun, a singing bird, the clear sky—freedom!

The prisoner threw himself back quickly upon his bed and pretended to be still asleep, for a hand was about to open the iron door.

It was Zinc-Beak who entered.

“Well, Sixty-One! You're still snoozing?”

“What time is it?”

“Five o’clock.”

“In the morning?”

“No. In the afternoon! You’ve slept fifteen hours at a stretch. You must be hungry! You’re going to have a bite with Goume. He wants to talk to you.”

Bernier started.

“To talk to me?”

“Yes. Come along.”

The prisoner got up, but before following Butard he took him by the arm.

“Listen, Zinc-Beak!”

“Well?”

“My boy—where is he?”

“With my Missus—La Boule.”

“How is he?”

“He’s having a fine time! He’s in the garden. Don’t worry about him.”

“Why don’t you give him back to me?”

“Ask Goume. Come along now. He’s waiting for you!”

Goume was still huddled up in his arm-chair—pale, coughing and trembling under his rug. No doubt he never left it—slept in it perhaps. On his left sat the Banker. The latter had taken off his rich overcoat, now carelessly thrown on a seat behind. He was in evening dress, but his broad,

stiff shirt-front was stained, here and there, with splashes of wine, and he also showed the mark of a big dirty finger on his collar.

At the old man's right, on the table, stood glasses, a bottle of red wine, a loaf of bread and potted pork.

When the prisoner entered, Goume sat up. In his strange little hypnotic eyes shone a bright flame. Bernier closed his, when he noticed it, instinctively; but the magnetic attraction remained and he felt a great shiver come over his limbs and freeze his skin, chilling him to the bone.

Goume started.

"Are you still sleeping, Sixty-One?"

The prisoner opened his eyes again.

Goume did the polite:

"Take a chair. Sit up to the table. Drink if you're thirsty, and eat if you're hungry—just as you please. In the meantime, I am going to talk to you."

Bernier sat down.

"You're going to be happy," the old man continued, "you're going to be able to remain a true 'Link in the Chain'! We've found a nice job for you, and it was my idea. The Serpent and the Pilot have gone down to inspect the house, note position and fix up matters, do you see? They'll

be back again directly, and we'll have some tips. I got my idea reading this morning's papers—a top-hole idea. Isn't it, Banker? You know this name—Malvinat?"

Goume chuckled:

"It's the name of the tax-collector at Ploubalec whom you sent into the next world. Ha! Ha! Eh? Come now, by the by, what did you do with that wallet and the eighty thousand gold boys?"

"I don't know," muttered Bernier, haggard.

"You're talking through your hat! You'll say next you didn't take it. I've got our Secretary to bring from our archives (for now you'll have your dossier here) all the papers reporting your case. I know what you are going to say! You'll continue to deny, like you did in Court before. 'The wallet? I don't know, I didn't take it.' Get out! You can't get round Goume. And then they found a whole bundle of notes in your pocket, wrapped up in your handkerchief! There was blood on the notes . . . on your fingers too! Witnesses swore to it. After you laid out the tax-collector, you buried the wallet. It's in black and white! Now own up! If you like, we'll send the Brethren down to the place and they'll turn over the ground on the quiet. Naturally, if they find it, we'll go shares. Does that suit your ticket?"

"I didn't take the wallet. . . . No, I can't have! I didn't take it," stammered the prisoner, whose tormented face showed infinite distress.

"I didn't take it. If I had, how could I have lain down by the side of the man I had murdered?"

"Well, well! You don't recollect! You were 'up the pole' that night!"

"Yes . . . Yes . . ." groaned the prisoner.

Goume nodded assent.

"That's true. When the job's been done one doesn't go to sleep on the corpse! But the Crown Prosecutor explained all that. You were drunk. When you'd laid out your man, you bunked off with the wallet. . . . You hid it somewhere on the quiet. Then you came back again. It was a very dark night, apparently. Then, as you were three sheets in the wind, you fell over the corpse, and, of course, like a good drunk, you stopped where you were. Now, old chap, if you don't want to go shares with us in the wallet, that's your business! But to come back to my idea, and a spiffing good idea it is. . . . Just fancy, I saw in the morning's paper, that the widow of this fellow, Malvinat, had settled down not far from here, at Chaville, in a detached villa. It appears that she is living there with an old woman, her sister or her slavey, we

don't know which. She's got some property, according to the paper. The house is full of valuable knick-knacks; there must be a nest-egg hidden somewhere. It is quite a usual thing for old frumps living alone—under the mattress, at the bottom of the sideboard, underneath the fireplace. Then I said to myself: 'Good business. After the husband, Bernier's going to wipe up the wife's swag.' Ha! Ha! Ha! Twenty years afterwards, like in a novel. Ha! Ha! Quite sensational!"

Goume gave a prolonged cough, spat and snuffled, choked with laughter.

The Banker, delighted, smacked his sides.

"After the husband, the wife! Ha! Ha! They've no luck in that family! Ha! Ha!"

Bernier leaped up. His chair fell backward and went down with a crash on its back.

"What's up?" cried Goume, suddenly roused from his delirious merriment.

Bernier screamed, with all his might, in a spontaneous, irresistible outburst of outraged feelings—or was it the real voice of conscience?

"I won't go! I won't do it! No, never!"

But Goume's voice rose, too.

The angry old man's voice, although dull and

husky, at once drowned Bernier's. It spoke in commanding tones.

"You know what awaits you! You know! We'll send you back to the police! As for your brat, you can say good-bye to him for ever."

Bernier reeled.

"My little boy! What will you do to him?"

Goume's sneer was more ominous than the cruelest of answers.

The prisoner collapsed on a bench along the wall. His face in his hands, he wept disconsolately. There was no way out of it, his torment had no end, his outburst was futile. He well knew he was beaten. He must give way for his child's sake. If he did not. . . . A heavy hand weighed on his shoulder. He started and raised his head.

The Banker stood in front of him, smiled at him and said:

"Come now! Don't play the fool."

Goume, who had become very calm again, explained:

"It isn't a risky job. A chap like you would do it quickly and decently, and then the Brotherhood will back you up according to its regulations. In the first place, as soon as you have got the swag or the bonds—this woman must have some jewellery—we'll meet by arrangement. The Serpent

and the Pilot must have unearthed a quiet corner. We'll divide the swag—two-thirds for you and the rest for the Brotherhood. You'll do the job by yourself—you know why. Then you'll beat it with the Banker, who's going back to England. The aeroplane will be there, in a field close by. Yes. . . . the Brotherhood's machine! I told you yesterday we're up-to-date. You'll find your boy inside, I promise you that, but if you let us down, it's all up with you! The Banker'll fly off with your child and, egad, I know him, he hasn't a very feeling heart. Perhaps above the Channel he'll——!"

The threat was terrible.

Bernier bowed his head. He promised in a low mutter:

"Well, all right. . . . I'll go through with it to the end."

"There!" laughed the old man. "You're talking sense."

The Pilot, with the Serpent at his side, walked in, laughing loudly.

"Ripping!" he exclaimed on the doorstep. "A detached villa, two old women inside, no dogs, no telephone, no neighbours, and a big field alongside for the 'bus.' Quite a soft job! A real picnic! Sixty-One is in luck!"

“If, by any chance, Bernier doesn’t find it to his taste,” offered the Serpent, “I’ll sign on. And how——”

Goume begged for quiet.

“We don’t want you to do anything. Zinc-Beak will take charge with you two and the Banker. Sixty-One will enter the villa alone, as agreed. Your fellows outside will keep watch.”

“It’ll be a light job.”

“So much the better. Now you understand, Sixty-One, everything’s fixed up. The Malvinat lady will receive you. When? Soon—as soon as possible! Think that this side of three days you’ll be able to trot round like us—a free man! All you have to do is to stick on to us as ‘A Link in the Chain.’ Then, Pilot, you think we could go down and take a look at the house?”

“When you like!” chipped in the Pilot, “when you like. There’s no danger.”

“This very night?”

“This very night.”

Goume, beaming, rubbed his hands.

“All right! Now, Brother Bernier, go and take another rest. I’ll send you in some wine and grub. . . . Don’t worry, everything’ll be ready. You’ll have pincers, hooks, an electric torch, and a sharp blade. You prefer a knife to a bomb? It

makes less noise and does the trick quite—decently. The tax-collector at Ploubalec knew something about that. Ha! Ha! Go and have a snooze, Brother. Butard, hi, Butard! Look slippy! To-night Sixty-One is going to do a bit of work for himself and for the Brotherhood. Take him back to his room. He doesn't know the house yet. Look after him well. He's a real blood. Go and have a snooze, Brother. We'll get everything ready. You can trust us for that."

When Bernier left, he walked, with staring eyes and distraught, haggard face, like an automaton.

"He's out of practice!" jeered the Serpent, behind him.

Goume was strangely elated. With fevered eyes, a slight flush on his cheek, he panted out his orders:

"Hi! Pilot, come here! You'll ring up Bauroff at once and tell him to bring his aeroplane this evening to Chaville. He's to reach the ground at nightfall. You'll tell him the spot. He'll pretend his motor wants repairing and leave his 'bus' till next day in the field where he landed. Understand?"

"Right!"

"Be off! Now then, Serpent, come here! You

see this razor? It belongs to Bernier. Ferdinand turned out his pockets yesterday, when he met him, to be sure he'd nothing suspicious about him. This razor was bought from a cutler at Nogent and his name is on the blade—a fine mark of identification! Stick it into your pocket. And take this cap, too, it's his cap. It fell out of his overcoat last night. Throw these things over the wall into Malvinat's garden. Bernier must leave traces of his visit yonder. You 'twig'?"

“What do you mean?”

“A new crime, a new sentence! He'll be condemned by default. He can't avoid the maximum penalty!”

“He'll be obliged to rely on the Brotherhood!”

“And will remain our man!”

## CHAPTER XVIII

### CONSCIENCE DOTH MAKE COWARDS OF US ALL

THE prisoner, again alone, did not throw himself down on his bed. He walked up and down in the gloom of his cell with a tortured countenance.

“I’m under a curse,” thought he. “I cannot escape from the grip of my wretched fate! And then, O Lord, have I the right to hope for another life—a life of toil, honesty and love; if it is true that I hide within me the powers of evil? I killed years ago. I killed! I must believe it, since the law confirmed it and condemned me. Moreover, the day before yesterday I could have strangled the old-clo’ man in his shop. My hands were moving by themselves towards his neck. Was that, O Lord, the last memory of past violences, imposed and endured in the hell of a prison, or the natural reflex of a bloodthirsty nature, latent in me from birth? Then, if it is true I am under a curse, if it is true I am a criminal without hope of redemption, what is the good of continuing to struggle and of recoiling before a new crime?”

The prisoner stopped and stood still, wrapt in

thought, shaking his head. He murmured softly as if, in a sudden duplication of his conscious self, Vincent Paroli, suddenly reappearing, were trying to reason with the ex-convict Bernier.

“And then, after all, I have no need to kill! No one can force me to strike Malvinat’s widow. Ah, I’ve had enough of blood! I can enter the house and take the money, but I am also free to take nothing, to steal nothing, and tell the others: this woman has nothing worth taking, either money or jewels.”

This thought soothed him strangely.

But Zinc-Beak had pushed back, ever so little, the sliding door, just enough to introduce his brutal face in the opening.

He growled:

“Goume told me to tell you it’s understood you’re to squeak Malvinat’s widow—the old girl too, if she makes a row. Otherwise we won’t let you off. Get me? Goume thinks it a scream that, after twenty years, you’re going to ‘do in’ the whole family! Besides, Brother, to be a real ‘Link,’ you must go through life with blood on your fingers.”

Slowly Zinc-Beak pulled the door to on his toothless, dark, cruel, grinning face.

Boubou was sitting in the sun, on the flags in the garden, his back against the wall of the house. Armed with a big broken knife which in its time must have known less peaceful work, he was peeling potatoes.

It was La Boule who had given him this domestic duty.

“Peel the taties, my tricolour birdie! Peel them well, my china doll, or I’ll fetch you a smack on the corner of your mouth!”

Poor Boubou!

Since daylight he had been working like a slave. He had turned over the beds, scrubbed the floor, hauled up heavy buckets of water, polished the stove, washed up the dishes and cleaned up La Boule. This kindly creature’s arms were too short and her chest too full to allow her to perform this operation by herself. Her outstretched hands could scarcely touch the end of her nose. Henceforward, every morning, Boubou would be told off to groom the elephant—a task not without risk, for if, through carelessness, he happened to put a finger inside her nose, twisted one of her big flat ears, or sent a splash of soapy water into her eye, he got a spanking with a hard hair-brush to the tune of the *Carmagnole!*

Poor Boubou!

Every time he asked to see his father, La Boule took a malicious pleasure in answering him in her sweetest voice :

“My blue-eyed lollypop! You won’t see him till the week with four Thursdays comes round!”

The child, worried, puzzled over this unsolvable problem :

“When does the week with four Thursdays come round?”

The inexperienced Boubou hacked the potatoes, which, when they had been peeled by the clumsy hands, were reduced to very minute proportions. It would have been better to cook the skins!

Then La Boule came on the scene. Oh, ye gods! What a torrent of curses, imprecations and anathemas! What a rain of cuffs, kicks, slogs, prods, and excruciating scratches on the top of his head! When she had sated her wrath, the ogress went off muttering :

“I must give this little dicky-bird a course of sprouts!”

And, before re-entering the house, she blew him a smacking kiss from her podgy lips.

“I’ll break you in, my blue rabbit! I’ll break you in! In the meanwhile, we’ll do our shopping and you shall carry my basket!”

Boubou, panting, well-nigh dead, rubbed his

bruises and moaned: "Oh, daddy! My darling daddy, where are you? They hurt me, and I'm all alone. Where are you, daddy dear?"

A mysterious, muffled voice—where did it come from?—cried out, not far from the child's ear:

"I'm here, Boubou, I'm here!"

Boubou, startled, dare not speak.

The voice began again, ever so tenderly.

"And where are you, little one? Don't be afraid! It's me, your father. Answer! Where are you?"

The boy, bewildered, addressed the wall.

"Where does your voice come from?"

"Look! Don't you see a hole in the wall?"

"Yes, I see it."

"Put your ear closer, you'll hear me better."

"Yes, daddy."

"I'm in the cellar—shut up—and you?"

"In the garden."

"They beat you just now?"

"Yes, daddy."

"Who?"

"The fat woman. She's wicked. You must beat her, when you see her!"

"The beast! But tell me, Boubou, have you been out in the street since the morning?"

"No, daddy."

“Do you know whether you’re going out before this evening?”

“I think so. The wicked woman told me we were going shopping together.”

“Heaven help us! Boubou, mind what I’m going to tell you. If you don’t, the wicked woman will keep you for a long time, and you’ll always be beaten.”

“Oh no. I don’t want to stop with her. I’m too afraid.”

“Then listen to me. Run away if you can, in the street. If you meet a policeman, run to him, squeeze his hand tightly and say to him: ‘I’m a child kidnapped by the woman who’s with me. Take me to the Inspector.’ Don’t be afraid, whatever you do. The Inspector is a kind man and will send you back home.”

“And you, daddy?”

“I’ll come and find you there later.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“Are you crying, daddy?”

“No—no—!”

“Daddy, if I meet a policeman . . . and if I can’t run away?”

“That’s so! Lord! What will he do? Oh,

I've an idea. Can you put your little arm into the hole?"

"I think so, daddy. It's in."

"Can you touch my fingers?"

"Are those your fingers?"

"Yes."

"Oh, darling daddy!"

"Now, wait. I'll give you a paper. Hide it in your pocket, and, if you can, without La Boule seeing, throw it, in passing, at the feet of a constable, making a sign for him to pick it up. But look out for La Boule! She mustn't on any account find the note I'm going to give you. If she does, you'll never see your daddy again! In case of danger, roll it up in your mouth and swallow it. You understand, Boubou?"

"Oh yes, if you knew how I'm listening!"

The prisoner remained silent for a few minutes, while the child kept repeating to himself his father's instructions under his breath.

A voice in the distance called out again:

"Boubou."

"What, daddy?"

"Put your arm through. Take the note. You've got it?"

"Yes."

“And now hide it quick in your pocket. No one saw you?”

“No, daddy.”

“Good! Boubou!”

“What, daddy?”

“My dear little man. . . . If by any chance I should not see you again for a long time, you mustn't forget me; and if they say bad things to you about your daddy, you mustn't believe them, Boubou, you mustn't believe them!”

## CHAPTER XIX

“IF YOU CAN’T GET IN BY THE GARDEN GATE, GET OVER  
THE GARDEN WALL!”

It was very dark. For days and nights the sky had been uniformly cloudy. An anxious silence brooded over the murky country. From the dripping forest, where not a leaf stirred, floated wisps of mist which crawled over the moist land and imparted to the night a musty smell of decay.

Bernier sat astride the top of the wall of the Villa “Bon Repos,” uncoiling a long, knotted rope which would enable him to slide down into the garden, while Butard and the Serpent held it taut without.

The raid, though hastily planned, proceeded without mishap. The Banker and the Pilot, one on the right, the other on the left of the house, acted as scouts, lying in the grass. Further off, about a hundred yards away, in a waste piece of ground, Bauroff’s aeroplane was awaiting its passengers. Bauroff had landed there about six o’clock in the evening, pretending to have engine trouble. People ran to the spot, thinking there

had been an accident; but Bauroff smilingly reassured them: “An important part of my carburetter is broken. I’ll go and get another. Unfortunately, I shan’t be able to start till to-morrow morning. In the meantime, show me a restaurant where I can get some dinner.” Loafers and a few urchins remained for a time examining the machine, and with the gathering darkness these sight-seers disappeared, one after the other.

Bernier, Butard and the Banker came to Chaville in a side-car, which they presently left at a cross-road on the edge of the wood. The Serpent, the Pilot and Boubou took the train at Val d’Or station. Everybody had arrived at the place appointed on the outskirts of the Villa “Bon Repos” with the exception of Boubou who had been taken to Bauroff in charge of the Serpent.

Thus Bernier had not seen his son. He was prey to a heavy anxiety. Had Boubou been able to deliver his letter to the police? Hadn’t La Boule stolen it from him? He brushed aside this last surmise. In that case would not Goume already have manifested terrible wrath?

Bernier had, in the first place, carefully scraped large pieces of glass from the crumbling mortar at the top of the wall, so as not to tear his skin. He was strangely slow about it. His pale tortured

face peered into the night towards the high road the winding white line of which was scarcely visible in the darkness.

“Why is he waiting thus?”

Zinc-Beak grew impatient:

“What are you about?” he whispered in a muffled voice.

“I’m taking a squint at the shack,” answered Bernier, preparing to slide down the other side of the wall.

But the Serpent had an idea.

“Here! Listen! Open the door! If anything goes wrong we’ll be able to come to your aid quicker!”

“All right!” promised Bernier, as he disappeared. Now, he was in the garden. Everything was dark. Streaks of fog, drifting in the heavy atmosphere of the garden, rendered the night still more obscure. Yonder stood the house, a dark mass, vaguely outlined.

Everything was quiet.

Bernier leaned against the wall. Unmoving, oppressed, he laid his hand on his racing heart.

The dreaded moment had arrived! He must enter this quiet dwelling where two defenceless old women slept. To steal! No, to kill! Goume’s order was categoric; and in his ears still sounded

Zinc-Beak’s infamous voice: “You must live with blood on your hands.”

Ah! his letter! If Boubou had delivered his letter *things might take a turn; but let them be quick about it!* His former prison companions would get restive and force him to act. Then it would be too late. . . .

As he was offering up his body as a sacrifice, let the Lord at least have mercy on his soul!

Bernier was sure of it now; there was no moral taint lurking in him. His acts of violence? They were the last mark of his prison life. He couldn’t have killed that time! So now, at present, all his being revolted with horror and loathing at the crime to be committed.

Had Boubou delivered the letter? Oh! If he only knew! Bernier trembled. That call? Yes, he understood. It was the signal! The Serpent must be wondering why he had not yet opened the door. Open the door for those thieves to invade the garden, perhaps the house. No, not the house! *Especially if Boubou had delivered the letter!*”

But he must seem to consent in a moment to the Serpent’s demands.

Where is this door? This way . . . along the wall.

How wet and high the grass was!

Here's the door. God! Zinc-Beak and his mate were already there, fuming behind it.

The Serpent, flat on the ground, his mouth at the bottom of the heavy door, was growing irritated.

"Hey! What's up? Hey!"

"Not so loud!" protested Bernier, "they'll hear you!"

"True! But what are you doing? Open!"

"I can't. I've tried everything. There's a big chain with rings and padlocks."

"Saw it!"

"There's no time! It would take an hour to file it. And then there's a lock, too."

"Can't you gouge the lock?"

"I haven't a jemmy strong enough."

Bernier was concealing the truth. A kind of rusty latch alone kept the door shut. A single pull would have sufficed to open it.

Crestfallen, the Serpent muttered:

"Bad luck! If there's a row we can climb over."

It was now Zinc-Beak's turn.

"What were you up to a moment ago, when we couldn't hear you?"

"I went up to the house."

“Well?”

“It’ll be a hard job.”

“Why?”

Bernier was smiling now, enigmatically:

“The inside door is very stout,” he answered, “worse than the street door. Two complicated locks and panels three inches thick. As for the shutters, they are closed inside with iron bars!”

“The deuce they are! It isn’t a house, it’s a fortress!”

Bernier had leaned with one shoulder on the tarred door-frame. His face remained anxious; but there was in his tear-wet eyes something like a dawning hope; and then this unexpected, sudden, mysterious smile. . . .

Why did he invent this yarn intended to deceive Butard? What was he hoping for?

Zinc-Beak, becoming uneasy, proposed:

“We mustn’t hang about here. I’ll give you a hand to knock in the door.”

“No!” cried Bernier nervously and excitedly. “That wouldn’t help any. It would make too much noise. There’s only one way.”

“What’s that?”

“Listen!”

How Bernier’s voice trembled all of a sudden!

“Look! I noticed above the entrance a kind of window—a bull’s-eye—no shutter. . . .”

“That’s a find!” exclaimed Butard. “We’ve only got to slip through!”

“I thought of that,” said Bernier, “but the opening is quite small. A man couldn’t get through. It would need a boy.”

“A boy! We haven’t got one handy.”

Bernier’s secret thought now revealed itself. He said, trying to hide his agitation and desire:

“Yes, we have! Boubou—my little lad!”

“That’s true!” the Serpent chimed in.

“Pfui! He’s too small!” retorted Zinc-Beak.

Bernier seemed not to have heard him. He explained:

“I’ll smash the glass and let the boy down into the passage with a rope. He’ll open the door. He’s a good one and I can do what I like with him.”

Zinc-Beak was not convinced.

“He’ll make a noise!”

Bernier, to persuade him, made up this story—not without an effort: “It won’t be the first time he’s worked for his father. The other evening, when we were starving, I passed him into a kitchen. You should have seen how smart he was!”

“Then that’ll teach him the trade,” jested the Serpent, who rather liked this idea. “This kid must start his apprenticeship some day!”

Bernier fell to his knees. If they had seen him like this! He joined his hands together and, his face turned heavenward, he seemed to be praying.

“Hallo!” queried Zinc-Beak, surprised at this sudden silence, “what are you up to?”

“I am waiting for you to decide,” replied the kneeling man. “If you accept, so much the better! If you don’t—so much the worse! In which case I won’t be responsible for the job!”

A new silence ensued. Butard’s and the Serpent’s whisperings were hardly audible as they discussed the feasibility of going to fetch Boubou.

And with a very white face Bernier waited.

Zinc-Beak yielded this time.

“No more gabbing, eh? We’ll end by getting run in! I’ll go and fetch your brat. It’s your business after all. It’s your job!”

In a low voice Bernier cried fervently, in the silence of his soul:

“My God! How I thank Thee!”

They hoisted Boubou to the top of the wall. Then the child, grasping the knotted rope, was let down into his father’s arms.

“Here! Have you got your brat?”

“Yes.”

Beside himself, Bernier bore his son off in the thickening fog, towards the house.

“Tell me, Boubou—quick! The letter! What did you do with it?”

“Nothing, daddy!”

“Nothing?”

“No.”

Bernier, crushed, repeated:

“Nothing! . . . . Ho!”

Then:

“The wicked woman took me off shopping, but it wasn’t real shopping.”

“Hush! Talk softer!”

“Where are we going, daddy?”

“Tell me! The letter?”

“This shopping wasn’t in the shops. No! We went and pinched things out of the fields. Cabbages, lettuces! Because I’m small she forced me through the hedges. . . . I was afraid because of the dogs. Then, when we came back, as we hadn’t met any policemen, I threw the letter on the pavement. I said that, if a policeman saw it, he’d pick it up perhaps. I’ve done right, haven’t I?”

Bernier stopped, worn out, in the middle of the

garden. He was oppressed with anguish, and also these night fogs, sodden with rain.

So *Boubou had not delivered the letter!* Nothing would come of what he had been anticipating with such hope and dread at the same time.

Nothing!

The anxious child repeated:

“Didn’t I do right?”

Bernier reflected a few seconds:

“Yes! It was better than keeping it. Yes, perhaps. But you never know. . . .”

His vacant, uncertain gesture, towards the clouds, seemed, all the same, to recall hope.

Then he headed once more towards the house.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE OLD WOMAN

BERNIER had put his son down.

They had now reached the doorstep. The man had enjoined silence, yet the child kept muttering, grasping a flap of his father's overcoat in his fright.

“Then the wolf man wasn't dead!”

Bernier with one hand supported his head, heavy with apprehension and thought. What should he do? Thousands of conflicting ideas, thousands of various sensations, thousands of panic fears assailed him simultaneously, mingling, commingling, stunning him. What should he do? He didn't know. He no longer knew. His mind was a blank. He swayed like a tree in a storm.

Ah! If he had been able to flee once more with Boubou! The forest was near and the night dark; but four “Links in the Chain” at the four corners of the grounds were on the watch. If they kept one eye on the distance where disquieting forms and shapes might arise, they kept the other on the wall Bernier would have to climb to escape.

Goume must have warned them: "Don't trust Sixty-One!"

What should he do? Wait outside, in this garden—wait for *them* to appear? But if *they* did not come?

Just now, Zinc-Beak, amazed at not seeing him bring back the swag, was on the point of jumping into the garden and approaching the house.

What was to be done then?

Perhaps it would be better to enter the silent dwelling where two old defenceless women were sleeping. In the first place he would do no murder and simply return with a few articles of no value, saying: "There was nothing else to steal . . . and Malvinat's widow was dead." By pricking his arm he would get a little blood and smear it over his hands and the blade of his knife. Then the airman would fly away with him and his son, over to England. Far from Goume he could escape; and then, when two days, one night and half of another had passed, he would have reached the time limit, and he would be free at last. Free!

That was settled. . . . He must enter the house! But why had he written the letter Boubou had dropped on the pavement? If this note, by an evil fate, had reached its destination—in a few minutes, perhaps even a few seconds—he would

forever lose his liberty. Forever! For if they came, the prison would reclaim its prey.

It was under the stress of an infinite despair, and to escape Goume's criminal command—also to rescue his little one from the violence of these beasts—that he had warned the Inspector of Police. It was on the back of a letter addressed to Vincent Paroli by a dealer in saw-wood, which he had found in one of his pockets, he had written in pencil: “To-night, Bernier, the escaped convict, will burglarise the Villa ‘Bon Repos,’ the house of Madame Malvinat at Chaville. Near the villa will be an aeroplane. Above all, prevent the airman from flying off, and protect the child you will find in the machine. Bernier will not be alone, take care! I implore you to trust this information, but act quickly.”

Weary of struggling, he had preferred to surrender of his own free will to the police rather than commit a fresh crime to buy back his liberty at the price of bloodshed.

But since he could employ craft! He realized at present that, without robbery or murder, he could deceive his rough companions. Then would come his escape in an aeroplane, salvation!

What madness it was to have written that letter!

To live in these dreadful alarms, to be tossed

about from misery and hunger into the most abject terror; to be hounded from the maw of the police into the jaws of the bandits—his courage was exhausted, his physical and moral strength had abandoned him. He was now but a poor rag, eager to end it all! Come! He must enter! He would take a few things of no value, then would rejoin Zinc-Beak and the rest of the gang in hot haste.

But how was he to enter the house? The bull's-eye was a myth and existed only in his imagination. Taking off the lock required time and made a noise. Besides, he wasn't an adept in this special and ticklish work. Should he go to a window? Opening a window was easier. . . . Wasn't he a joiner by trade? Between the shutters he inserted a chisel, then, with a slight pressure, turned it over. The shutters half opened with a creak. Quickly he slipped a tool into this opening and burst the catch. The shutters, unfastened, opened, the hinges creaked. Bernier held them with his breast. Slowly, carefully, silently he uncovered the window. Behind the panes hung white cotton curtains which gave a note of pallor to the gloom.

“Why don't we ring?” asked Boubou in a whisper.

“Hush!” commanded Bernier. “Keep still!”

He drew from his pocket a large piece of putty, wrapped in a wet rag. He kneaded it a moment to make it softer, then spread it out on the glass. With a quick twist round of a diamond cutter, he scratched the glass all round it. The fingers of his left hand stuck into the ball of putty, he struck the window a quick, dull blow with his right palm. A grinding sound, and then he pulled out a large round of glass, stuck to the putty.

A draught of air entered whistling. One of the curtains swelled out suddenly and rustled in the dark like the flutter of a bird's wing. The gap was large enough to pass his arm through. Bernier did so and turned the window catch within.

The way was open. . . .

The man seized Boubou under the arms, hoisted him up, pushed him over the shutter bar and put him down carefully on a carpet.

“Come quickly, daddy! I'm so afraid!”

Bernier put his legs over the window-sill and stood in the room.

He closed the shutters slowly behind him. The darkness could be felt.

“Daddy, I'm frightened!”

“Be still!”

“But I'm frightened! Don't you hear?”

“What?”

“There!”

“Hush!”

Bernier leant his ear and shivered.

“Ah! That noise!”

Boubou seized his father round the waist, with both his arms, and pressed against him in fright.

That uncanny noise!

Somewhere, within the house, a panting, precipitate breathing, like a death rattle. The night seemed gasping with a human voice. Somewhere. No, quite close. It could be heard distinctly. It grew louder; now it dominated the darkness.

A round of light fell right on one of Bernier's shoes. The man had just taken from his pocket a small electric torch. This circle of light grew into an oval and glided over the ephemeral flowers of the carpet which bloomed and died as soon as they were blotted out by darkness; climbed up arm-chairs; spread in a sheet over a mahogany table, fell back elliptically on the floor to become a perfect circle on the wall.

Bernier's hand spread a shaft of light over the whirling dust.

Yonder the fiery eye ran rapidly over the wall, then darted suddenly through an open door, at the end of the passage.

What's that?

At the bottom of a staircase, on the first step, were two naked feet, quite still. Two old wizened feet, distorted by gout and swollen with large blue veins.

There was somebody there—one of the women, doubtless. Fright kept her rooted to the spot. Her panting breath came faster and faster. Words now interspersed her gasping: “Have mercy . . . don’t . . . hurt . . . me! No . . . don’t!”

Raising his lamp a little, Bernier made out a tweed skirt, then a cotton blouse, then a face.

The circle of light, being stationary, showed up in the dark this horror-stricken face like a ghostly apparition.

Boubou screamed: “I’m afraid!” and hid his haunted eyes in the folds of his father’s cloak.

Even Bernier started back and stiffened.

What a shock had numbed his limbs and left him without voice or breath! He dropped his arm. The light, like a spurt of fire, had fallen on the tiled floor of the passage, and once more darkness engulfed that face of terror. Alone the imploring voice remained:

“Pity! Ha! Pity!”

Now, a tiny point of bright light passed slowly and fitfully over Bernier’s overcoat, shone on the

buttons, rose up, increased, broadened out, lit up the under part of a chin, the curl of a lip, the shape of the nostrils, entered in the sightless sockets of the eyes. Then, rising higher, gleaming further, it lighted up the man's entire face.

Bernier muttered and entreated in one breath:

"Look! It's me . . . don't be afraid, mother!"

Then—what shame bowed him suddenly! He collapsed on his knees, his lamp went out and again it was pitch-dark.

The old woman must have rushed away yonder into the gloom. She had doubtless hurried up the stairs. The balustrade was shaking, the treads were creaking, and her hollow voice, which could only repeat: "It's him! It's him! 'Oh, it's him!'" grew thinner, feebler, became a murmur, then a sigh. . . .

Then silence.

How long did the man lie like this—prostrated, stupefied, crying like a child? How long?

Boubou sobbed:

"They're going away, daddy! Let's go too! I'm afraid!"

But Bernier did not hear. He sobbed:

"Mother! You—here—in Madame Malvinat's house! Ah! I'm dreaming! It can't be! You!

Here! Mother, speak to me! I must hear your voice, to make sure. Speak!"

A ruddy light, like a sunrise, suddenly shone down from the top of the stairs.

What a relief! She was coming down!

The man stretched his bewildered face towards her.

"Mother!"

The old woman reappeared. She raised a little copper oil lamp with a red paper shade. Her hand was trembling. Her eyes tried to make out, yonder, at the end of the shadowy passage, the disquieting form of the assassin. She doubtless saw nothing. With one finger she slightly tilted the shade. A brighter light advanced over the floor a few yards, in a sheet.

The man was now in the light.

She saw him on his knees, holding out his arms.

The old woman, leaning against the rail, stood still. Then, in a whisper, she commanded sternly:

"Go away! Go away quickly!"

"Forgive me!" he entreated, "forgive me!"

"Go away! My mistress mustn't hear you."

"Mother! What are you doing here?"

"Go away!"

"What are you doing here in Malvinat's house?"

“What am I doing? I am atoning for the wrong you did this poor woman! For she, after your bloody deed, as I was all alone, dishonoured, came and sought me out. She brought me here to be with her, to live her life, as if I were her sister! I, so unworthy! I, the mother of the man who had wronged her so! Ah! My benefactress, may God keep you! Were it not for her, where should I be? Everyone avoided me, because of you! Be-gone, you wretch!”

“I beseech you, mother, listen to me! This murder . . . no! I knew nothing about it, and how could I have. . . .”

“Be gone! Be gone!”

A shrill whistle broke the stillness of the night, without. Bernier jumped up with a bound. He shut his eyes and his mouth moved convulsively. This signal? Was it Zinc-Beak? Was it the Serpent, getting impatient, announcing his approach? Or was it. . . .?

The old woman had heard it too. She seemed to be fainting, the lamp was ready to fall from her hand, it shook so violently. Suddenly her voice took the accent of a little frightened child to ask:

“And you—what are you doing here? And why this noise outside?”

Then she broke into beseeching sobs:

“Don’t harm me—your mother! Ah! Don’t harm me!”

The man with the back of his hand wiped the icy sweat from his brow. He reassured her:

“Don’t be afraid, mother! Yes, there are men outside who seek to do you harm, but I’ll defend you, have no fear! I’m strong. Go upstairs. Lock yourself in. I’ll stop here . . . but take the child away.”

The old woman, haggard, thrust her head forward.

“The child?” she murmured, without yet fully understanding, “The child?”

“Yes, it’s my son! Where are you, Boubou?”

The child came out of the dark where he had been hiding in his fright.

“Here I am, daddy!”

The old woman had bent so low that she had to descend a step so as not to fall headlong.

The man pushed the timid child before him.

“Mother!” he entreated, “this is your grandson! No, it’s not a girl, it’s a boy. I disguised him to put the police off the track. He’s your grandson. Ah! Protect him . . . he is innocent!”

The old woman, petrified, stood there, her mouth open. A loud cry frozen on her lips.

“Your grandson, mother! Your grandson!”

Then, in a quick whisper, he ordered the child:

“Call her granny!”

Boubou cried: “Granny, Granny!” stretching out his little arms.

The old woman groaned: “My God! Ah, my God!” and, to reach the child, descended the stairs.

The night was full of warning whistles. Bernier had drawn his dagger.

## CHAPTER XXI

MADAME MALVINAT

THE old woman bent down, forgetting the mysterious signs from outside, the presence of a convict son and her own fright. The old woman had bent to kiss the child. Bernier had taken the lamp and placed it on the floor. Now, all round, the penumbra was red.

The grandmother stood up, suddenly seized anew by terror:

“Lord Jesus, protect us!”

The man tried to calm her fright.

“Don’t be afraid, mother, I’m here. No one shall enter; but go upstairs quickly with the child. Quickly, I beg you!”

Ah! These shrill whistles! Did they signify impatience or alarm?

“Get up quickly, mother! Get up quickly!”

“What do they want—those men outside? Do they want to rob us or kill us? And you’re here. . . .”

“Don’t be afraid, mother.”

But what was that white form above, descending slowly, feeling the wall? Neither Bernier, nor his mother, nor the child noticed it. It was still in the dark, above the bright zone of the lamp-shade. Her tread could not be heard.

The old woman prepared to climb the stairs with Boubou.

“Come and hide, my little lad! Quick! Quick!”

But, turning to her son whom she had not forgiven and whose evil tendencies she still feared, she enquired anxiously:

“You aren’t lying, at any rate? You didn’t come here to harm me?”

The man groaned, overwhelmed, in a tone of humble reproach:

“Oh, mother!”

In his left hand he had again taken the lamp and held it out to her.

“Take it, and go back upstairs!”

This gesture lighted up his face and made the blue blade of his dagger flash in his right hand.

A wild shriek, a concentrated and panic-stricken shriek, filled the passage.

The white form had just fallen, after shouting: “He!”

This form tumbled and rolled down the stairs

and suddenly stopped, hair dishevelled, head thrown back and arms crossed, held by one leg, unluckily caught diagonally between two posts of the baluster.

The old woman rushed forward.

“Oh! Mistress! Mistress!”

Bernier rushed up, brushed aside his mother, freed the woman, lifted her up and carried her off in his arms.

“Quick! Where’s her room?”

The old woman, staggering, showed him.

“On the first floor. . . . Ah, my God! Mistress, you my benefactress!”

They went up in haste.

Behind them Boubou was sobbing:

“I want to go away! I’m afraid! I want to go away with daddy!”

A shot rang out in the distance. Whistles wildly answered whistles in the darkness. Then other shots. They were fighting outside with revolvers. A dull buzz filled the sky above the house. It was Bauroff’s aeroplane flying off!

Bernier laid the lifeless woman on the bed. The old servant, at the mantelpiece, muttering incoherently, was rattling medicine bottles. A smell of ether was escaping and filled, suddenly, the

whole room. The lamp-flame seemed to leap up, as if to breathe it in.

Bernier pressed his son fiercely to his breast. The child whimpered: "You hurt me, daddy," but the man did not hear him and groaned tragically:

"Here they are, my boy. Good-bye! It's all over! I could no longer struggle. . . . Here they are! Good-bye, dear little lad!"

The old servant hurried to the sick woman's bedside.

"Mistress! Mistress! Answer me!"

The whistles had ceased suddenly. A few shots were still audible.

Then suddenly nothing. What an agonising silence!

The alarm-clock ticked on and on with its loud, metallic beat. The room was filled with anguish.

And still the whining mutter of the old woman continued: "Mistress! My benefactress! Don't be afraid! Answer me! He won't do you any harm. Don't be afraid! Mistress, my good mistress! Answer me!"

In the garden, the bell of the outside door rang loud and long.

Bernier leant against the wall of the room.

Fainting, he stumbled forward and in a hoarse voice cried: "Ha! Here they are!"

The bell again jingled impatiently. Then a rough voice shouted in the distance:

"Hi, there, inside! Open!"

The old woman drew herself to her full height. In her shaking hand, the ether bottle dropped a little more of its fluid on the pillow of the sick woman, at each quiver.

The voice answered:

"Open! It's the police."

Bernier gulped out:

"They've come for me! To save you, I'll surrender. They've come to take me. Go and open, mother, I can't. My poor legs! I'm done. Go, mother, go!"

The impatient police officers had climbed the wall and crossed the garden. They were now knocking at the entrance.

"Open!"

One of them suggested aloud:

"Perhaps the mischief is done, and we'll only find two corpses."

"Knock the door in!" ordered a voice of command.

But someone had noticed the half-open shutters (for Bernier had burst open the catch) and

opened them wider. Behind them the window had remained open.

“This way!”

They were inside the house, examining all the rooms hastily, opening cupboards and moving furniture. They were now coming up. The heavy tread made the stairs creak. They were in a hurry.

Here they were!

Invading the room, the sight which met their eyes astonished them and abated their ardour. This lifeless woman stretched on the bed, this old servant who had just gone on her knees and was sobbing with her face in her hands, this little girl clutching the coat of a man who stood rigid, leaning against the wall, as pale as death.

And this smell of ether told them of death.

However, one of them called out:

“Where’s Bernier?”

The man left the wall, made a step forward, put out his hand and said:

“I’m Bernier!”

Five revolvers were levelled at him. Bernier threw his dagger at their feet.

Madame Malvinat reopened her eyes.

One of the officers—doubtless the captain—commanded:

“Handcuff him!”

The order was promptly executed.

“Take away the girl!”

Boubou hung on.

“I want to stop with daddy. I won’t leave him.  
Daddy! My daddy!”

“Come now, get the kid out of the way!”

Rough hands seized the child and threw him to one side.

“Daddy! My daddy!” sobbed Boubou, who had fallen to his knees.

Bernier closed his eyes. Big tears coursed down his white cheeks. How his lips were trembling! He shut his eyes. He no longer wanted to look at this tragic room, nor at his old mother, nor at his beloved son whom he would never see again. He had already said good-bye to them. He wanted to be strong and pluck them from his heart and thoughts. He was on his way into exile. He saw again his first journey and already, from the bows of the ship where the convict-horde was swarming, he beheld, on the cursed coast of the Tropics, the dark dungeon which was to be his grave!

Madame Malvinat slowly raised herself on her elbows.

Bernier, breathing hard, entreated:

“Take me away! For pity’s sake, take me away!”

Boubou wanted to rush off to rejoin his poor father from whom they had so cruelly parted him. He didn’t understand the reason. A police officer had held him back.

“This little girl is a fury!”

The child implored:

“Papa, don’t leave me! Papa! Oh, my papa!”

If Bernier had closed his eyes, he could not close his ears. He heard the frantic appeal. Tortured to death, he ordered:

“Take me away!”

This was done. Heavy hands fell upon his shoulders and he was dragged off. The captain had said:

“Put him on board with the others. We’ve made a good haul! I shall stop behind here with Daburon for the enquiry.”

Madame Malvinat uttered a cry, into which she put her last strength: “Wait!”

Surprised, the officers stopped. They were crossing the threshold of the room with their prisoner.

The woman, whose eyes were no longer to be seen, as if already extinguished in their hollow sockets, was at her last gasp—head drooping on

her shoulder, lips bloodless, pursed up, parched throat.

“Wait! I *will* speak! Before I die . . . for . . . it’s finished. The priest . . . let him go. . . . No, it’s not . . . Bernier . . . forgive! Martine . . . I want . . . the priest . . . quick. Let him go! Let him go! Guilty . . . no! The priest . . . I want the priest!”

Madame Malvinat fell back exhausted on her pillow.

One of the police was moved to pity.

“Poor woman! She’s delirious.”

The captain gave a sign to his men:

“Take Bernier away!”

Leaning over the rail to see the prisoner go downstairs, he could not contain his joy. “He shan’t give us the slip again! Ah! Ah! He thought he was smarter than we were, but we’ve got him—and two days before his free pardon.”

And a chaffing voice chimed in:

“We’ve got the reward!”

But the old woman had come, with silent tread, and pulled the officer by the sleeve.

The latter turned round in astonishment.

“What is it?”

The old woman, with staring eyes and strangely

puckered face, muttered, in a very low voice, as if she feared the words she pronounced:

“Sir, come and see!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Mistress is dead!”

## EPILOGUE

NEXT day's newspapers announced this sensational incident:

**“DRAMATIC ARREST OF LEON BERNIER AND  
TWO OTHER ESCAPED CONVICTS.”**

In the course of this exciting night the Pilot and Zinc-Beak had been “collared” by the police.

The evening newspapers published, in their turn, the following disturbing report:

“An unknown aeroplane, carrying three passengers, crashed near the Military School of St. Cyr. All three were killed on the spot. The inquest revealed the fact that the pilot had received a revolver bullet in his right lung. It was perhaps owing to this mysterious and perhaps incriminating circumstance that he was forced through loss of blood to abandon the steering-gear of his machine.”

These three dead men were quickly identified: Bauroff, the Banker and the Serpent.

And Goume?

Urged by the magistrate, and to escape penal servitude for life (indulgence had been promised him), the Pilot "gave away" the old chieftain of "The Links in the Chain." La Boule, the Secretary and other scoundrels of lesser importance were rounded up in a sudden raid.

Thus the Brotherhood had come to its end.

And Bernier?

The convict prison, of course.

"Your Worship, there is a priest outside who insists on seeing you. He hasn't been subpoenaed."

"Has he given you his name?"

"The Reverend Devrigny, Vicar of Chaville."

"What does he want me for?"

"He has come—he has told me in confidence—to give evidence in the Malvinat-Bernier case. He has disclosures to make."

"Ah, that is interesting. Show him in!"

The usher brought in the priest immediately. He was an old man with white hair and jovial face. He seemed greatly excited.

"Take a seat, Monsieur le Curé," said the magistrate, pointing to a chair.

The priest sat down. As a preliminary, he got out of his pocket a small packet of notepaper each

sheet of which was covered with close, illegible handwriting. He handed it to the magistrate.

“These are confessions signed by the person guilty of the murder of the ex-tax-collector at Ploubalec.”

“Bernier’s confession!” exclaimed the magistrate.

The priest shook his head. The magistrate hurriedly looked for the signature and could not repress a cry of astonishment:

“What!”

The priest crossed himself furtively, with lowered head. He was praying:

“O God, have mercy upon him!”

There was a prolonged silence.

The magistrate read the document rapidly through.

“This is terrible!” he muttered when he had finished reading it. “We have condemned an innocent man!”

He added thoughtfully: “And this woman! What a mistress of dissimulation!”

The priest raised his head.

“Yes,” said he, “in spite of the remorse which tortured her, she kept her secret to the end. How many times in confession have I felt that one corner of her soul was a sealed book! A mere im-

pression, which did not permit me, however, to extract her secrets or refuse her absolution. When I asked her: 'Are those all your sins?' she answered: 'Yes, those are all my sins, Father.' She gave into my charge, a few months ago, under a sealed envelope, this last confession. I was only to open it the day after her death. I thought, in accepting this trust, that it contained nothing but instructions for her funeral. I had no suspicion that the liberty and honour of a man were at stake. Poor Bernier! So cruelly punished for a crime he had not committed! You have read, your Worship, from the guilty woman herself, the whole story of this terrible tragedy. . . . The husband, an inveterate gambler, employed in the Customs at Ploubalec, was in the habit of going off to Brest to the gambling dens and was frittering away her dowry. This domestic feud was kept most carefully from the eyes of everyone by the couple, and especially by the wife, naturally proud and reserved. Thus the Courts, in spite of many enquiries at the Bernier trial, had no suspicion of this conjugal estrangement. Hence arose hatred—a silent hatred growing worse each day—implacable to the end—between man and wife. Madame Malvinat, coming from peasant stock, worshipped money in a truly barbarous fashion. The squan-

dering of her fortune made her half mad. Thus it was that the idea of murder came one evening into her head, fixed itself there, and haunted her for months during the long hours of the night, and finally, in order to get control of her vanishing property, armed her. . . . Your Worship will recognise her wiles and stratagems. She enumerates them throughout these pages: the powerful drug in Bernier's cider, her silent walk in the night behind the two men coming back over the Common from their round of inspection, Bernier's sudden illness, his sitting on the ground, fuddled, nodding his head, and going to sleep; the astonishment of the collector as he bent over his colleague; her sudden leap forward, her treacherous stab in the back, the collector's collapse, his mortal wound; the theft of the wallet, the handful of notes hidden in Bernier's pocket to cast suspicion upon him; the blood-stained dagger thrust into the hand of the sleeping man . . . and then her flight. On the last page of her confession, I believe, she discloses the place where she hid the wallet. Your detectives will perhaps find it there still, your Worship. But of all these confessions there is nothing more disquieting than the story of her remorse. After Bernier's sentence, she suddenly left the small town of Ploubalec. She had just

bought the Villa 'Bon Repos' at Chaville. You know the woman she brought with her—old Martine, the mother of the man whom the law had proved to be the murderer of the unfortunate collector, the slayer of her husband. This last act of generosity must have appeared incomprehensible to more than one thoughtful mind; but we now understand the reasons. Remorse was already clutching at this disordered mind. Yet cowardice, inspired by dread of the Law with its formalities and penalties, withheld her from confessing her crime and thus clearing a tortured innocent. Up to her death she could not resolve herself to it. Then, by a hypocritical kink in her brain, to salve her racked conscience, she took it into her head—having sacrificed her son—to overwhelm the mother with acts of kindness. This she did. The old woman was comforted, petted and treated as a very dear relation. In the country they were taken for sisters. Poor Martine had more than once to protest in order to retain the right to serve her whom she called her benefactress. In this way Madame Malvinat hoped to atone for her crime in the sight of God.”

The priest stopped.

The magistrate took his seat in his arm-chair at

the desk. With one finger he pressed the ivory button of an electric bell.

“What are you going to do, your Worship?”

“I am going, Monsieur le Curé, not to right the wrong which this woman and the Law have inflicted on Bernier . . . that is impossible! What has been done, is done! But I intend to free this luckless fellow on the spot.”

The usher appeared.

“Tell the warder to bring in Bernier.”

Bernier soon entered. He was very white and tired, already looking years older. Seeing him, the priest could not restrain his tears and stretched out his arms to him with a moan.

“In the name of those who have committed this error, in the name of a dead woman, accused no doubt, but hopeful, perhaps through you, of an atonement, from you, my son, I ask forgiveness!”

Ah! What a merry time were they having! What laughter! What cries of joy!

The bride and bridegroom, arm in arm, had come back from the Registry Office, humming the “*Madelon*.”

An entire town followed singing.

Bernier, cleared, was marrying again his dear

Louisa, but this time under his right name, and for good and all.

The wedding breakfast was even more sumptuous than the first, which had ended so badly. There were twenty courses. A hundred-odd bottles were drunk and not a single drop of water.

A cinema photographer had come to film the wedding party and its hero. This, in the "Actualities" on all the screens of the world, was to illustrate the truth of the adage: "Right always wins in the end."

If it does not always, alas! we can all the same appear to believe it.

After the banquet came the dance.

And do you know who opened the ball?

Why! Boubou, with old Martine, who soon became his dear and well-beloved granny!

THE END