CHAPTER I

The peace of the warm July afternoon rested over the fishing-camp like a benediction. Under a sky of peerless blue the lake, girdled with firs, was a sheet of glass. On its bank half a dozen log cabins, strung in a wide arc about the central mess hut, showed shingles deep red against the pale green leaves and white trunks of the birches. The air was drenched with the resinous fragrance of balsam and spruce and from time to time, with a quiet plop a trout leaped in the lake.

The portly, pink-faced man in plus fours who, on the verandah of the hut inscribed ‘Number 3,’ was studying a piece of paper, paid no heed to the beauty of his environment. It was a single line of writing, scribbled on the note-paper of a New York club, and, since crossing the frontier into French Canada, he had had the paper out of his wallet at least a dozen times. As he scanned it now, so rapt was his mien, one would have said he had never seen it before.

He was a well-groomed individual, past middle age, whose height—above the medium—set off a certain tendency to overweight. Iron-gray hair lent him dignity, stressing his air of mild benevolence. He had a pair of singularly shrewd, very bright blue eyes which just then were veiled in thought. While his material presence—two hundred and forty pounds of it—was indubitably earthbound at the St. Florentin fishing-camp, his spirit was far off among the cloud-capped towers of Manhattan, back in the club smoking-room giving ear to Dudley Hunter recounting his bizarre experience.

Fixedly he stared at the paper and the four words it contained. ‘Joseph Ruffier, St. Florentin’—at the sight of the writing his nostrils seemed to dilate with excitement, his blue eyes glittered. So deeply sunk in thought was he that he failed to hear a footstep on the duckboards of the path below. Then a brisk ‘Hello, there!’ broke in upon his meditations. Looking up with a start, he thrust the paper quickly into his pocket.

A trim figure in well-worn tweeds, a tweed hat garnished with sundry trout flies in one hand, a fishing-rod in the other, stood at the foot of the verandah steps. It was a lean, wiry man, with close-cropped, grizzled hair and a tanned face radiating energy and determination. He was smiling agreeably. ‘I’m Adams,’ he announced imperturbably. ‘I have the hut next to yours. I saw you drive up as I was finishing a late lunch, so thought it only friendly to drop round and say “hello,” as we’re neighbours. . .’

‘My name’s Treadgold,’ the other replied. ‘Come in, won’t you?’

‘I can’t stop more than a minute,’ said Adams, going inside the hut. ‘I’m taking young Rees out—he’s a nice kid and a grand little fisherman. He’s here with his father, a retired British General. Why don’t you come along, too?’

Mr. Treadgold reddened. ‘You’re awfully kind,’ he said rather hastily, ‘but the fact is, I’ve one or two things to attend to. . .’

‘Some other time, then. You’re a fisherman, of course?’

The other coughed nervously. ‘Of a sort!’

Adams laughed. ‘Like the rest of us!’ He had a very easy way with him, his voice well-bred and pleasantly pitched, his smile charming. ‘Quebecker, are you?’

Mr. Treadgold shook his head. ‘I’m from New York!’

His companion elevated a polite eyebrow. ‘How on earth did you happen to strike this remote spot of all places? Most Americans go to the salmon clubs or the Government camps. Or are you a friend of old Forgeron?’

Mr. Treadgold shook his head again. ‘I just chanced to hear that he took in paying guests,’ he observed airily, ‘and the idea of a private camp appealed to me. The place struck me as being suitably off the map, so, as I wanted a complete rest and change . . .’

The other’s musical laugh cut him off. ‘You’ve come to the right spot for that, Mr. Treadgold. Ever been in French Canada before?’

Mr. Treadgold confessed that it was his first visit.

‘It’ll surprise you. They’ve put the clock back two hundred years—one might be in eighteenth-century France before the French Revolution. I’ve spoken French ever since I was able to talk and I’ve known these people all my life, but I never return to French Canada without a curious feeling as though I were entering through a door opening on the past,

as one does in a dream. Nothing ever changes here, you know!’

His companion’s eyes sparkled—of a sudden he looked strangely elated. One hand thrust deep in his pocket tightly clutched the address he had been scrutinizing. ‘I’m greatly looking forward to seeing something of the country and its people,’ he declared with considerable earnestness.

Adams smiled indulgently—he was fingering a row of books which were neatly arranged on the dressing-table behind Mr. Treadgold’s hair-brushes and shaving-tackle. ‘They’re a rum lot,’ he said briefly. ‘Speak French, do you?’

‘I used to be fairly fluent . . .’

‘That’ll help. I don’t suppose there are more than a dozen people in the village of St. Florentin who know any English . . .’

‘Are you a French Canadian?’

‘Me? No, I’m from Toronto—a lawyer, if you’re interested. But we always had French servants at home—my stepmother was a French Canadian . . .’ He had drawn a book from the row. ‘Tristram Shandy, eh?’ he said, reading the title on the back.

Mr. Treadgold’s face lit up. ‘You know it?’

‘I haven’t read it since I was a student at McGill. . .’ He replaced the book and leaned forward to scan another title. ‘Universal Stamp Catalogue,’ he read out. ‘You collect stamps?’

Mr. Treadgold looked slightly flustered. ‘Just a hobby of mine,’ he murmured.

‘Manuel de Police Scientifique,’ Adams read out. He gave his companion a quizzing glance. ‘Crime, too?’

The other blushed. ‘Purely in an amateur way!’

Adams nodded. ‘Very interesting. Crime has always fascinated me. We must have some talks. Well, I suppose I mustn’t keep my young friend waiting. . .’ He moved towards the door. ‘Hello,’ he added, as they went out on the verandah, ‘here’s the Angel coming to see if you’re all snug. . .’

A bulky figure in a uniform cap came plodding along the duckboards that were laid along the path.

‘It’s the caretaker, or whatever they call him, isn’t it?’ said Mr. Treadgold. ‘But why “The Angel”?’

The other smiled. ‘Tremblay, his name is. But as his first name is “Ange” and he’s the gardien or caretaker, Montgomery—that’s an American who’s stopping here—calls him “The Angel Guardian”—“Angel” for short. . .’ He chuckled silently. ‘We’re all very French up here!’ A shrill

voice calling at this moment, ‘Ahoy, Mr. Adams!’ he bestowed a friendly nod on Mr. Treadgold and, fishing-rod at the trail, strolled off towards the little landing-stage where a small boy in white flannels was waving to him frantically.

The gardien puffed up. ‘I come see you got ev’yt’ing you want, Mis’ Treadgol’,’ he announced importantly. He was a solemn man with an elongated face like a horse’s. A mouth unusually small and a trick he had of pursing it after speaking invested him with a perpetual air of mild disapproval. With his steel spectacles and cap trimmed with tarnished gold lace he suggested a German bandsman.

‘I’m very comfortable, thanks,’ said Mr. Treadgold. ‘Didn’t you say I was sharing this hut with somebody?’

‘Correct. With Dr. Wood. He come by auto from New York. He don’ arrive yet, but he come pretty soon. You lak’ to feesh tomorrow, you tell me, I arrange canoe, guide, ev’yt’ing. . .’

‘I don’t believe I’ll make any plans for the moment,’ Mr. Treadgold broke in rather quickly. ‘How do I get to the village?’

The gardien extended his hand. ‘You have telegram, letter, no? I take heem after supper on my motocyclette. . .’

‘Thanks, but I’d rather go myself. I want a walk. . .’

‘Walk?’ Ange Tremblay’s smile was compassionate. ‘But, Mis’ Treadgol’, it ees eight mile!’

‘You mean by the road? I thought I’d go by the woods. . .’

A singular change came over the gardien’s heavy and rather stupid countenance. Shaking his head with owlish solemnity he said, ‘By the woods? It ees impossible!’

‘Why? There’s a trail, isn’t there?’

The man’s face was a blank. ‘Better you take your auto and go by road, I t’ink,’ he replied stubbornly.

‘I prefer to walk, I tell you. The trail’s shown on my map—it leads through those woods on the other side of the lake straight down to the village. It can’t be more than three miles at the outside!’

The Angel only shook his head. ‘Vair’ bad trell! You lose yourself in the woods, mebbe. You tell me what you want in the village and I go there now on my motocyclette, hein?’

The gardien was palpably ill at ease. He shuffled from one foot to the other, casting apprehensive glances sidelong through his glasses at the determined face at his side. It was apparent to Mr. Treadgold that, for some obscure reason, Tremblay was determined he should not take the path through the woods. Opposition always made him stubborn, and without more ado he said firmly: ‘I’m going to walk and I’m going through the woods. How do I get across the lake? There’s a boat, I suppose?’

There was a boat, the gardien admitted sulkily, but no one available to row the gentleman.

‘And what’s wrong with my rowing myself?’ Mr. Treadgold demanded crisply. ‘I’m not so young as I was, but at least I can still pull a pair of sculls. I’ve been sitting in a car for the past three days and a bout of rowing exercise is the very thing to loosen me up!’

A quarter of an hour later he was tying up the boat on the far side of the lake. Following the Angel’s reluctant directions he crossed a trestle bridge that spanned a river flowing into the lake and saw the trail before him. An instant later he was in the woods.

The trail was narrow but clearly marked—too deeply rutted for a car, maybe, but quite practical for a farm cart. Fringed with a vivid mass of wild flowers, it wound its way ever deeper among the trees. Notwithstanding the heat of the afternoon, Mr. Treadgold advanced at a swinging pace. Dudley Hunter’s half-sheet of paper was in his pocket, and every time he thought of it, he instinctively lengthened his stride, itching as he was to probe to the bottom Hunter’s story. The woods seemed endless and the trail ran on without the slightest obstacle—he asked himself what motive the gardien could have had in trying to dissuade him from using it. Bah! the fellow was probably paid for running messages on his motor bike to the village and was only angling for a tip. He shut the incident from his mind, his whole attention focussed on the quest which from New York, more than seven hundred miles away, had plunged him into the heart of French Canada.

His watch told him he had been walking for some twenty minutes when the trail emerged upon a narrow, stony road which presently dropped downhill to woods again with branches overhanging so that he moved in a greenish half-light. He was reflecting that he had come a good two miles without encountering a living soul or any sign of human habitation when he discerned, bathed in sunshine, at the end of the leafy tunnel he was threading, the roof of a building rising above a cluster of trees.

CHAPTER II

Even before he was clear of the trees the sound of rushing water was loud in his ears and he saw that, past the building he was approaching, a white-railed culvert carried the road over a torrent which tumbled gurgling from the hillside. The building, two stories high and solidly constructed of rough-cast masonry, with a slate roof, stood in a dip below the road. At first he thought it was a barn; but then he caught sight of the great water wheel enclosed in a cage overhanging the torrent and knew it was a mill.

There was no sign of life about it. Under the broad stone lintel the door was padlocked, the windows were blank and dusty, while the wheel, trailing streamers of moss, stood idle. Yet the mill was in good repair. The roof was intact and the upturned shafts of a cart were to be seen above the trellis-work enclosing a yard at the side. If abandoned, the place had not been abandoned long. The depression, Mr. Treadgold told himself, and passed on.

He crossed the culvert and, behind the mill, the swirling pool from which the stream, to turn the wheel, was diverted came into view, rushing through a deep crevice strewn with boulders and overhung with willows and alders. Raising his eyes from it, Mr. Treadgold caught the gleam of a long white façade among the trees. Somewhere beyond was evidently a private house, standing in its own grounds. But how silent everything was! He listened—not a sound save the sharp, metallic note of some bird and the gurgle of the water.

A little way along the road, where a rusty front gate tied up with wire broke the line of a high stone wall, he had a glimpse of the house. It crowned a low eminence which, screened by trees, formed a compact mass at the junction of two roads. One—that which Mr. Treadgold had been following—led down a sharply curving gradient towards where a distant spire, rising from a cluster of gray roofs, marked the site of the village of St. Florentin: the other circled the outer wall of the property. From the gate an ill-kept drive lined with some fine old walnut trees crossed the stream by a log bridge and disappeared in the direction of the house.

It was clearly an old house. Time had weathered the shingles of its immensely broad, steep roof to a rich madder brown and a row of dormer windows that marked the upper story brought to Mr. Treadgold’s mind the Old-World mansions of the Cours La Reine and other streets abutting upon the Palace of Versailles, where the Court officials used to live. From the circumstance that the front gate was wired up, he inferred that the house was unoccupied. So, to obtain a better view, he climbed over the gate and set off up the drive.

Once inside the property, he perceived that the place had not been inhabited for some considerable time. On either side of the avenue the park was a jungle of long grass which had begun to invade the roadway at the sides. The land in front of the house, traversed by the stream, had evidently, at some distant epoch, been carefully landscaped. Paths planted with bushes and flowers zigzagged their way in and out of the boulders and rocks, there was a rustic bridge, and a bench crowning a knoll. But now the garden was a wilderness, the paths half obliterated by the tangle of undergrowth, the bridge in ruins, the bench crumbling.

The house itself was in better shape, but in appearance no less forlorn. The broad platform, with its elegant balustrade that ran its length before it, like a verandah without a roof, was deep in mud and leaves. Every window was shuttered. One of the panes in the graceful, conch-shaped fanlight above the curiously wide front door was broken and a leaking gutter had dripped a slimy green blot athwart the dull cream of the façade. Boasting but a single floor, if you did not reckon the attic story above, the house was unpretentious, but, snuggled under the deep eaves of that tremendous roof, it looked spacious and warm and comfortable. ‘A grand old house,’ Mr. Treadgold murmured to himself. A stone above the front door was inscribed with the date ‘1799,’ and he could picture those hardy French settlers of more than a century since, when the first snowfall heralded the advent of the long Canadian winter, installing themselves cosily behind those massive walls, under that spreading roof-tree, to wait resignedly for spring. He wondered what the history of the old house might be and why it had been suffered to fall into abandonment and neglect.

He had turned to regain the road when a slight rustle in the bushes caught his ear. Startled, he swung about sharply. But the forsaken gardens lay quiet and silent in the sunlight—there was not so much as the swaying of a leaf to betray the presence of any living creature. He laughed to himself and with his finger eased his collar. The unrelieved solitude of the place was getting on his nerves, he decided—anyway, it was high time he was pushing on to the village. It was only at the foot of the hill—in a very few minutes now he’d know whether Dudley Hunter had sent him on a wild-goose chase.
. . .

At that moment he was aware of a face looking out at him through the foliage, a face, dark as an Indian’s and framed in matted hair, with a single, savage eye that glared at him and a mouth that slavered through black and broken teeth. It was visible only for the fraction of a second, then it vanished as noiselessly as it had appeared, and Mr. Treadgold found himself regarding the trembling tangle of greenery.

He sprang towards the tree, forcing his way through the underbrush. ‘Hey, you there!’ he called peremptorily, ‘come out of that, d’you hear?’ But not a twig stirred—once more brooding silence had descended upon the grounds. In a voice made harsh by the fright he had received, he repeated the summons. His cry, echoed back from the house, fell dead, and with a baffled shrug, he disentangled a thistle from his stocking and made briskly for the gate.

Ten minutes later he was passing the first houses of St. Florentin. The village street, with its bleak frame dwellings, each with its small platform supported on struts before it, was deserted, except for the swarms of black-haired, barefoot little children squatted on almost every porch—he had already discovered that French Canada is the land of large families. The whole colour scheme of the village was russet—russet-gravelled roadway, russet fences, russet houses—and there was a characteristic odour in the air as of charred wood. He was chilled by a sense of isolation. The houses, each with its rounded clay bake-oven at the side, were so primitive, hoisted on low stilts like the huts of some native village: the silhouettes of the men in the fields so unfamiliar—broad-brimmed straw hats, pale yellow corduroy breeches, woollen socks and boots reaching halfway up the calf: the names over the shops so quaint—why, they were

pure Balzac! Euclide Fortin, Druggist: Evariste Laliberté, Butcher: Narcisse Laframboise, Baker.

Ruffier’s store, Mr. Treadgold knew, was at the far end of the village, with a gasoline pump before it—Dudley Hunter had been coming from Trois-Ponts and had stopped at the store for gas: he had said that Ruffier’s was the first pump he had encountered on entering St. Florentin. Several of the village shops boasted pumps, Mr. Treadgold noticed—there was even one outside a somewhat flyblown sweet-stuff shop styling itself, rather pathetically, ‘Restaurant de la Gaieté.’

Then with a thrill he saw a faded blue signboard inscribed ‘Joseph Ruffier, Marchand Général.’

CHAPTER III

The store was a dusty, twilight place, crammed to the rafters with a bewildering jumble of merchandise, from canned goods to wooden hay-forks, from bolts of cloth and bedding to storm lanterns and stovepipes. High under the roof a row of women’s dresses swaying eerily on a wire might have been Bluebeard’s wives strung up in their forbidden chamber, and in the dim background a suit of cotton jeans dangling from a hook suggested a farmhand who has hanged himself in a barn.

A pallid woman in a blue-and-white frock appeared behind one of the counters as Mr. Treadgold entered. ‘Is Mr. Joseph Ruffier in?’ he asked in English and, perceiving that she had not understood, repeated the question in French.

‘Un petit instant, Monsieur!’ Noiseless in felt slippers she glided to the back of the shop.

A moment later a man, who might have been in his late forties, came out enquiringly from behind a stack of packing-cases. A pen was behind his ear and he had a ledger in his hand, as though he were taking an inventory. He wore a cloth cap and had discarded coat and vest. His blue shirt and dark trousers belted at the waist were neat—in station he looked distinctly superior to the general run of villager.

‘Mr. Ruffier?’ said the visitor.

The storekeeper shot him a quick, appraising glance. His eyes were small and lively. ‘C’est moi-même, Monsieur,’ he replied guardedly, and added rather thickly, ‘No onderstan’ English!’

Mr. Treadgold was so excited that he could scarcely speak. With an effort he pulled himself together. ‘Then I’ll try to explain myself in French,’ he said in that language. ‘I’ve come on rather a curious mission. About a month ago an American gentleman, a friend of mine in New York, stopped here to buy some gas. . .’

He spoke slowly, framing his sentences in his mind ahead as was his custom when speaking French. His measured diction seemed to make the storekeeper restless. ‘That may well be,’ he broke in rather impatiently.

‘On that occasion,’ said Mr. Treadgold, looking at Ruffier sharply, ‘you showed my friend an envelope of old stamps, and asked him if he’d care to buy them. But my friend isn’t interested in such things—besides, he was in a hurry and wouldn’t stop. On his return to New York, however, he mentioned the incident to me and, as I happened to be in your neighbourhood on a fishing holiday, I thought I’d run over and ask you to let me look at them.’

All this, Mr. Treadgold got off very glibly. He was warming to his task and his French was going well. He glanced up hopefully to see to his dismay the storekeeper solemnly shaking his head.

‘There’s some mistake,’ he protested stolidly. ‘I’ve no stamps to sell!’ His arm described a wide arc. ‘You see what

I am, a general merchant. I sell almost everything. But not old stamps. I regret!’ He turned away and began to arrange a shelf.

‘Yet my friend was quite specific,’ the other persisted. ‘Is there anyone here to whom he could have spoken except yourself?’

‘Nobody but my wife. Your friend may have bought his gasoline elsewhere. My name is not uncommon. . .’

‘Is there another Joseph Ruffier in the village?’

The man shrugged. ‘For that, no! But the gentleman may have got the name of the village wrong?’

‘Out of the question! My friend is a most accurate-minded person. He couldn’t be mistaken about a thing like that!’

With an indifferent air Ruffier hoisted his shoulders once more and fell silent.

But Mr. Treadgold was not so easily beaten. He had no doubt that the stamps were there. The only thing was, he had been too eager—he had shown his hand too soon: the fellow was merely stalling, to put up the price. The time had come to talk straight, he decided.

‘My friend,’ he said, putting his hands on the counter and leaning forward to look the other in the eye, ‘I’m going to be frank with you. I’m a collector of old stamps and I’m

prepared to pay a reasonable price for any you have for sale!’

Ruffier’s face darkened. ‘But I tell you I have no stamps!’ he cried angrily.

Mr. Treadgold smiled amiably and, producing his wallet, extracted a five-dollar bill, which he laid on the counter. ‘You play poker, Monsieur Ruffier?’

The storekeeper frowned—he was puzzled. ‘Yes,’ he said dubiously.

‘Eh bien, I’ll see you—for five dollars!’

Ruffier stared at him hard, then at the note. Thinking that the man had not grasped his meaning, Mr. Treadgold elucidated further.

‘There’s five dollars! It’s yours for the sight of any old stamps you happen to have in your possession. And,’ he added, ‘I won’t deduct it from the price, if we come to terms!’

In a tense silence the storekeeper continued to regard Mr. Treadgold and the money in turn. The visitor made no sign—he knew from experience that, in such impasses as this, there are few arguments more persuasive than the display of hard cash, however little.

At length the man shrugged. ‘If you must know it,’ he muttered reluctantly, ‘there are a few old stamps in the cash desk which I may have shown to your friend—if I did I don’t recall it. . .’

He paused, scanning the back of his hairy hand. ‘Voyez-vous, Monsieur, I’m not over-anxious to dispose of them, for, properly speaking, they belong to my wife, or rather to her family—she found some old letters among her mother’s things when the old lady died. I’m not on the best of terms with my wife’s family and if they should find out that I’d disposed of these stamps, sapri! I should never hear the end of it. But, Monsieur, I perceive, is a person of discretion, and since he’s so insistent. . .’

He broke off and walked composedly to the high cash desk. Raising the lid he burrowed for an instant within. When he came back he held in his hand a large, used envelope. He placed the envelope silently on the counter and, picking up the bill, carefully folded it and put it away in his pocket.

The visitor fairly pounced upon the envelope, spilling its contents out upon the counter. A jumble of stamps lay there. Each had been squarely clipped, with great exactness, from its envelope. Mr. Treadgold suppressed a groan. ‘What on earth possessed you to cut them from their covers?’ he cried.

Ruffier moved his shoulders. ‘It was on account of Madame Ruffier—I don’t wish to risk her finding out: it would only lead to unpleasantness with her brothers!’ Then, as there was the sound of a door opening in rear of the store, he quickly cast a newspaper over the stamps. ‘Ps-st!’ he whispered. ‘Here she comes now!’

The woman Mr. Treadgold had seen before came from the back of the shop. This time she was wearing an old-fashioned hat with a bird on it. At the sight of the stranger standing there, she fired a quick remark at her husband. She spoke so rapidly that Mr. Treadgold failed to catch the sense; but her eyes were unfriendly, her lips compressed, and he divined that it was a reproach. Ruffier rapped out an equally unintelligible reply and the woman, with a formal inclination of the head to the customer, went out through the street door.

With a whimsical air the storekeeper regarded his visitor. ‘Ah, les femmes!’ he murmured, shaking his head. ‘They double our joys and triple our expenses. Monsieur is married?’

‘I’m a widower!’ With a rapt air Mr. Treadgold was raking the stamps over with his finger.

‘Monsieur will appreciate, then,’ Ruffier proceeded waggishly, ‘that, even in the happiest marriages, there are matters which the most loyal husband, if he value his peace and quiet, must keep from his wife. Madame Ruffier is conscientious and full of scruples—were she to tumble on the fact that I had disposed of these stamps, she would insist on her good-for-nothing brothers having their share and I should reap nothing but trouble, maudit!’

Mr. Treadgold turned but an absent ear to him. The stamps claimed his whole attention. They were mainly Canadian, United States, and French, with a few specimens from other countries, chiefly England and the British Dominions. And

none was of later date than the seventies—he was thrilled. Many of them, it is true, were common: but there were some early United States stamps, some Confederates, and a number of old French stamps, at the sight of which his eyes shone.

‘What do you want for this lot?’ he asked, looking up at last.

The storekeeper squeezed his palms together. ‘A nice little collection, eh?’ he said jovially. ‘A big chap like that, now’—he picked out a large United States excise stamp which Mr. Treadgold had passed over as of small interest—‘it’s worth something to a collector, hein, mon bon Monsieur?’ His eyes were mere slits. ‘Shall we say—fifty dollars?’

Until he should have had the opportunity to examine the stamps with the aid of lens and catalogue, Mr. Treadgold had a very uncertain idea of their actual value. But, having in his mind that the stamps before him might represent only a small part of the find he had unearthed, he resolved on the instant not to haggle. Let him play his cards rightly now and, if the storekeeper had other stamps he was holding back, they would surely be forthcoming! Without speaking Mr. Treadgold drew forth his wallet again and counted the money out in American bills. Then, scooping up the stamps into their envelope, he thrust it into his pocket.

Ruffier picked up the bills. ‘If Monsieur will agree that the matter remain between us,’ he remarked slowly, ‘in the interest of the conjugal peace, that is,’ he added, with a delicately ironical air, ‘I might take a look around at home and see if I can’t unearth some more old stamps!’

Mr. Treadgold exulted—his strategy was triumphantly justified. He felt that he and Monsieur Ruffier understood one another perfectly. That was one good thing about doing business with a Frenchman—the French were always quick to size up a situation, without the need for embarrassing explanations. To cover his elation he brought out his pipe and began to fill it from his capacious oilskin pouch.

‘Good!’ he rejoined as calmly as he could. ‘I’m stopping at the camp on the lake. My name is Treadgold, if you want to let me know when to come again. Or I could look in about this time tomorrow if you liked. . .’

The man shook his head. ‘No. Better I send you word. In the meantime——’ With a flick of the hand, lightning-quick, he wet the tip of his finger with his tongue and drew the finger across his throat. Mr. Treadgold recognized the characteristically French gesture for imposing absolute discretion and smiled. ‘On account of——’ Ruffier broke off again and, with an indescribably droll expression on his mobile face, jerked his head towards the rear of the store.

Mr. Treadgold laughed—Ruffier amused him. Like most Frenchmen he was good company, well-mannered and suave, with a fund of high spirits upon which he did not hesitate to draw on occasion. At present his transaction appeared to have put him in excellent humour.

‘As one with twenty-two years of married life to his record,’ the visitor replied gravely, ‘you may rely upon my silence!’

A distant bell, tolling thrice, cut across his words. Ruffier whipped off his cap. ‘It’s the Angelus!’ he announced.

Mr. Treadgold hauled out an old-fashioned gold half-hunter. ‘Six o’clock!’ he exclaimed. ‘I must go. Supper is at half-past and I’ve a long road home!’

‘If Monsieur wouldn’t mind waiting five minutes while I pay a call in the village, I could run him back! The car is there!’

‘If it isn’t giving you too much trouble. . .’

‘Not in the least!’ The storekeeper removed the pen from his ear, donned cap and coat, and, taking a cardboard sign from the desk, ushered his visitor to the door. He locked the door behind him and hung the sign on the handle. ‘Retour en 5 minutes,’ it read in rough hand-lettering.

A sedan was parked in the runway of a yard beside the store. Ruffier went to it and opened the door. It was a car of one of the better American makes and recent date which, with the duty added, must have cost at least twenty-five hundred dollars Canadian, Mr. Treadgold, who had a fondness for pricing things, figured. He felt rather impressed. Clearly the storekeeper was a man of substance.

CHAPTER IV

They stopped outside a white house near the church, Ruffier explaining that he wanted a word with Maître Boucheron, the village notary, who lived there. Getting out of the car Mr. Treadgold strolled as far as the church and, noticing the date ‘1753’ on a stone over the porch, went inside. After the hot sunshine of the square, the interior, faintly permeated with the lingering fragrance of incense, was dim and cool. Before a statue of the Madonna, at an altar ablaze with candles, a woman knelt in prayer, her lips moving silently. She wore a blue-and-white dress, a hat with a bird on it—it was Madame Ruffier. Except for the solitary suppliant Mr. Treadgold had the church to himself.

It was admirably proportioned, with an elegant rococo pulpit and high altar sumptuously carved and gilded. A mural tablet was affixed to the wall of the sanctuary. It was dedicated in French to ‘Ignace Antoine Hector Charles Ferdinand de St. Rémy, Seigneur de Mort Homme,’ who, to judge by the somewhat flowery epitaph, had been a pattern of all the Christian virtues and had passed away at St. Florentin, fortified by the rites of Holy Church, on the 21st of March, 1858. As Mr. Treadgold was reading the inscription, a figure in a long black cassock came through the sanctuary. It was a priest, gray-haired and keen-eyed, the amply skirted soutane encircling a respectable girth—evidently the curé.

From his reading Mr. Treadgold was aware that the parish priest is the most important figure in a French Canadian village. He made up his mind to address him.

‘A fine old church, Monsieur le Curé,’ he said politely in French.

The priest bowed. ‘It dates from before the English conquest,’ he replied gravely. Then he pointed at the sanctuary lamp which glowed ruby red before the altar. ‘For a hundred and eighty years that lamp has never gone out. An ancient parish, Monsieur!’ He pointed at the wall. ‘That tablet commemorates the last of the seigneurs of St. Florentin under the old order. The seigneuries were abolished in 1855. The old Manoir de Mort Homme, the seigneurial mansion, rebuilt in 1799, is still standing on the outskirts of the village. . .’

Mr. Treadgold was instantly interested. ‘An old house with a stream running through the grounds? I saw it as I came along. It’s uninhabited at present, isn’t it?’

The curé nodded. ‘The present Seigneur lives abroad,’ he said rather coldly.

‘I thought you said that the seigneurs had been abolished?’

Only their rights, not the title, the cleric explained in his precise French, and the tenants still paid the Seigneur rent for their land, albeit a very nominal sum. The seigneuries were a relic of the feudal system. To encourage colonization the kings of France granted leading settlers, for the most part officers who had served with the army in Canada, large tracts of land coupled with specific rights over their tenants, such as the right of la corvée or forced labour, and contributions in kind. ‘One valuable prerogative,’ he added, ‘was the right to grind the tenants’ corn. Where the old

manors survive, you will still sometimes find the seigneurial mill adjoining, the community mill, as it was called. The Mort Homme mill is still extant, although it no longer belongs to the St. Rémy family. You must have seen it if you passed the Manor.'

'I did,' said Mr. Treadgold. 'But it doesn't seem to be working.'

A shadow crossed the curé's face. 'The miller died,' he explained shortly, 'and in the present difficult times no one has found it worth while to take his place.'

'And why do they call it the Manoir de Mort Homme?' Mr. Treadgold wanted to know.

The priest shrugged his shoulders. 'It's said that a settler was killed by Indians at those crossroads. Who knows? The name also occurs in France, they tell me. . .'

Manoir de Mort Homme—Dead Man Manor! The name had a sinister ring in Mr. Treadgold's ears.

'I see,' he observed. 'I thought, perhaps, there was some legend attaching to the house, some ghost story, maybe. . .'

The curé gave Mr. Treadgold an odd look. He did not speak. Vaguely aware that he had said the wrong thing, the other put in hastily: 'You see, the gardien at the fishing-camp where I'm staying was most insistent that I should not go to

the village through the woods. He tried to tell me that the trail was impassable, which is sheer nonsense, so I can’t help wondering whether he wasn’t trying to keep me away from the Manor. It’s a pretty creepy place, isn’t it? and then, while I was in the grounds. . .’

The priest interrupted him very sharply. ‘Ange Tremblay would do better to attend to his trout,’ he declared acidly.

Mr. Treadgold subsided. He had been leading up to his adventure in the Manor gardens, intending to sound the curé about the face that had peered out at him through the foliage. But the uncompromising severity of the priest’s regard told him he had blundered again and he quickly proceeded to change the subject by questioning the curé about the early history of the parish. There was something disarming about Mr. Treadgold’s personality. Whether it was his frank and open countenance flushed with health, or his agreeably modulated voice, people were seldom brusque with him for long. So successfully did he practise his wiles upon the curé that before he left the church they had exchanged cards and he found himself invited to call upon the Abbé Bazin at the presbytery beside the church that same evening after dinner to inspect some of the old parish records.

But, back in the car with Ruffier, on their way to the camp, his thoughts kept returning to Dead Man Manor, silent and shuttered amid its neglected gardens. It occurred to him that the storekeeper, who was clearly a person of prominence in the village, should be able to explain the enigma of the gardien’s behaviour.

Ruffier had none of the curé's reticence. With a short laugh he said, 'Queer things have happened at the Manor since Seigneur Hector went away!'

'What sort of things?' his companion demanded bluntly.

The other shrugged. 'Our people are superstitious, Monsieur. They believe that the spirit of old Seigneur Ignace, the one who has the tablet in the church, walks the empty rooms at night. No villager, it is certain, will go near the Manor after dark, or even in the daytime, if he can avoid it, especially since the miller's death. . .'

'What happened to the miller?'

'They found him in the stream with his neck broken and a bruise on his head. The police came from Quebec to investigate and brought it in as an accident and so did the coroner's jury—it's thought he slipped from a boulder in the dark. But every man, woman, and child in St. Florentin believes that Télésphore Gagnon met his death at the hands of the evil spirit that haunts the Manor. I don't ask Monsieur to credit these ghost stories, but if he's wise he'll do like the rest of us and give the Manor a wide berth. . .'

'But why?'

'Voilà! There's a drunken poacher who has a shack on the river-bank near-by. He's appointed himself a sort of guardian of the place, roaming about the grounds at all hours of the day and night. . .'

‘But I saw him there myself this afternoon,’ Mr. Treadgold cried in high excitement. And he proceeded to relate his adventure.

Ruffier looked grave. ‘You were in considerable danger. This fellow—One-Eye, they call him in the village’—he used the French expression ‘Le Borgne’—‘is obsessed by the belief that anybody who approaches the Manor comes to steal it away from the St. Rémys. It’s my conviction that it was he who surprised this poor Gagnon going to take a trout from the pool for supper, and killed him. Indeed, the coroner had him arrested on suspicion. But there was no proof and we had to let him go.’

‘And you mean to tell me that a homicidal maniac like this man is allowed to remain at large? I never heard of such a thing!’

The other hoisted his broad shoulders. ‘He does no harm where he is, since no one enters the Manor grounds any more, now that the miller is dead. But let it be a warning to you, Monsieur, and the other guests at the camp, to steer clear of the Manor in future!’

Mr. Treadgold shuddered. ‘I don’t have to be told twice!’ he affirmed with much emphasis.

The next moment a turn of the narrow forest road they were following showed the roofs of the camp among the trees.