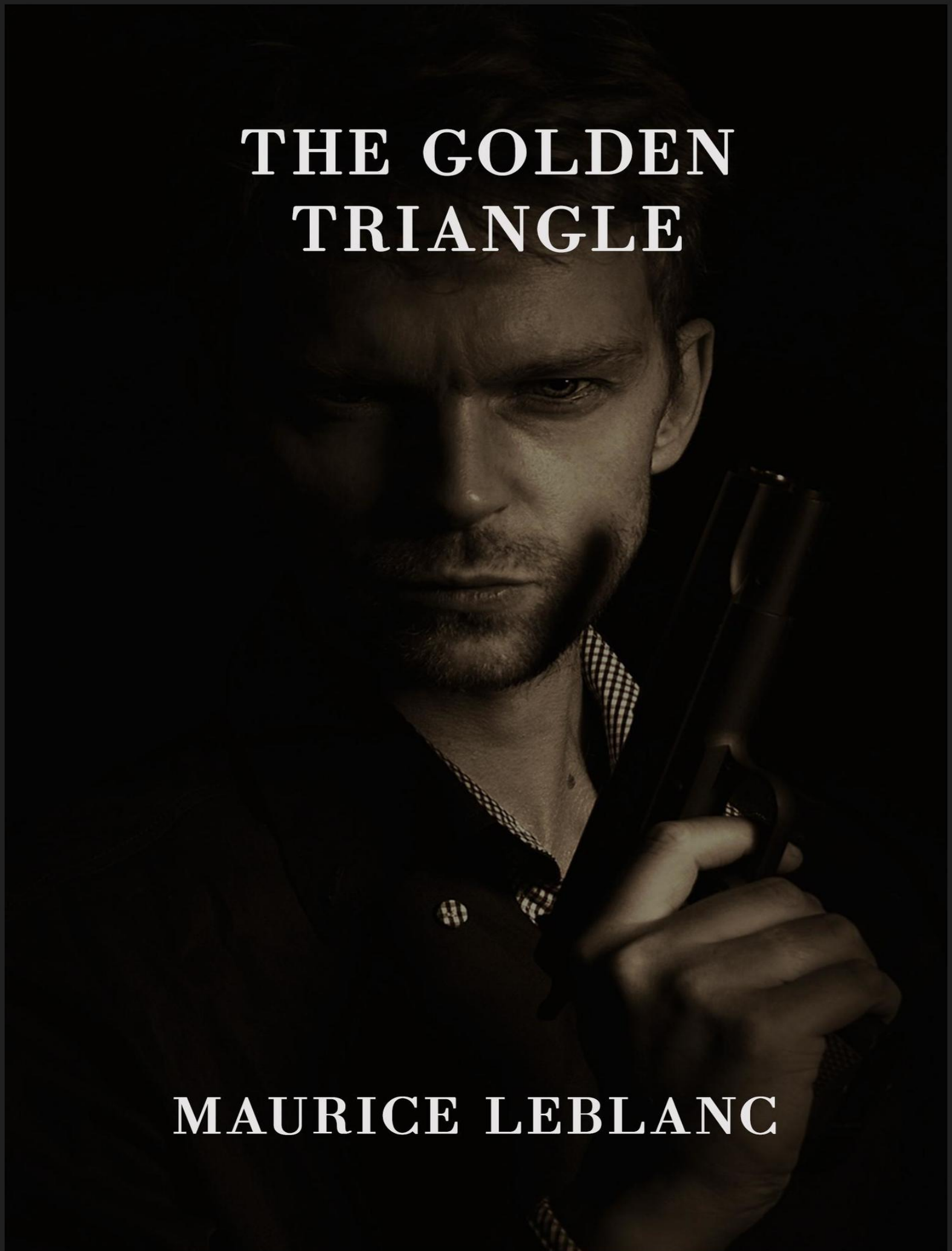
THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE



MAURICE LEBLANC

The Golden Triangle

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The Return of Arsène Lupin

BY MAURICE LE BLANC

CHAPTER I CORALIE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here she comes," said the officer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sit down," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Much better."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She rose suddenly:

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

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

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

"Drop him," said the captain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you know him?"

"No," she said.

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

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

"Never . . . never," the girl declared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. Why?"

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

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

"Why didn't you warn me?"

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

She gave him her hand:

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

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

Without a second's hesitation, she replied:

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

"You have no enemies, to your knowledge?"

"Personally, no."

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

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

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

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

The girl gave a start:

"The police?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then what will you do with that man?"

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

He rose:

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

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

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

She heard him saying:

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

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

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

"But you're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"I?"

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

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

"Then he was wounded?"

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

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

"It wasn't Ya-Bon."

"Then who was it?"

"His accomplices."

"Did they come back?"

"Yes; and they've strangled him."

"But it's not possible!"

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

CHAPTER II RIGHT HAND AND LEFT LEG

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

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

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

He stopped to laugh:

"A word of thanks, but no compliments. By Jove, I don't make much of a warder! It was clever the way those beggars snatched my prisoner.

Why didn't I foresee that your other assailant, the man in the gray-felt hat, would go and tell the third, who was waiting in his motor, and that they would both come back together to rescue their companion? And they came back. And, while you and I were chatting, they must have forced the servants' entrance, passed through the kitchen, come to the little door between the pantry and the hall and pushed it open. There, close by them, lay their man, still unconscious and firmly bound, on his sofa. What were they to do? It was impossible to get him out of the hall without alarming Ya-Bon. And yet, if they didn't release him, he would speak, give away his accomplices and ruin a carefully prepared plan. So one of the two must have leant forward stealthily, put out his arm, thrown his string round that throat which Ya-Bon had already handled pretty roughly, gathered the buckles at the two ends and pulled, pulled, quietly, until death came. Not a sound. Not a sigh. The whole operation performed in silence. We come, we kill and we go away. Good-night. The trick is done and our friend won't talk."

Captain Belval's merriment increased:

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

He continued to walk up and down the room. The fact that his leg or rather his calf had been amputated seemed hardly to inconvenience

him; and, as the joints of the knee and thighbone had retained their mobility, there was at most a certain want of rhythm in the action of his hips and shoulders. Moreover, his tall figure tended to correct this lameness, which was reduced to insignificant proportions by the ease of his movements and the indifference with which he appeared to accept it.

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

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

"I know nothing about you," he said softly. "At the hospital the doctors and nurses call you Madame Coralie. Your patients prefer to say Little Mother. What is your married or your maiden name? Have you a husband or are you a widow? Where do you live? Nobody knows. You arrive every day at the same time and you go away by the same street. Sometimes an old serving-man, with long gray hair and a bristly beard, with a comforter round his neck and a pair of yellow spectacles on his nose, brings you or fetches you. Sometimes also he waits for you, always sitting on the same chair in the covered yard. He has been asked questions, but he never gives an answer. I know only one thing, therefore, about you, which is that you are adorably good and kind

and that you are also—I may say it, may I not?—adorably beautiful. And it is perhaps, Little Mother Coralie, because I know nothing about your life that I imagine it so mysterious, and, in some way, so sad. You give the impression of living amid sorrow and anxiety; the feeling that you are all alone. There is no one who devotes himself to making you happy and taking care of you. So I thought—I have long thought and waited for an opportunity of telling you—I thought that you must need a friend, a brother, who would advise and protect you. Am I not right, Little Mother Coralie?"

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

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

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

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

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

She shook her head.

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

"No," she said, in an undertone.

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

"What do you mean?"

"I love you."

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

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

"You can take it, Little Mother, from me. No impassioned outbursts, no sighs, no waving of the arms, no clapping of the hands. Just three little words, which I tell you without going on my knees. And it's the

easier for me because you know it. Yes, Madame Coralie, it's all very well to look so shy, but you know my love for you and you've known it as long as I have. We saw it together take birth when your dear little hands touched my battered head. The others used to torture me. With you, it was nothing but caresses. So was the pity in your eyes and the tears that fell because I was in pain. But can any one see you without loving you? Your seven patients who were here just now are all in love with you, Little Mother Coralie. Ya-Bon worships the ground you walk on. Only they are privates. They cannot speak. I am an officer; and I speak without hesitation or embarrassment, believe me."

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

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

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

"And it must needs be so. People will have to understand that those who have been maimed in this war do not look upon themselves as

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

The captain once more struck the mantelpiece:

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

He began to laugh:

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

Well! That's finished! I have plenty more to say on the subject, but it can't all be said in a day, can it? . . ."

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

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

"Why are you crying, Little Mother Coralie?"

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

"Have I made you cry?" he asked.

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

He sat down beside her:

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