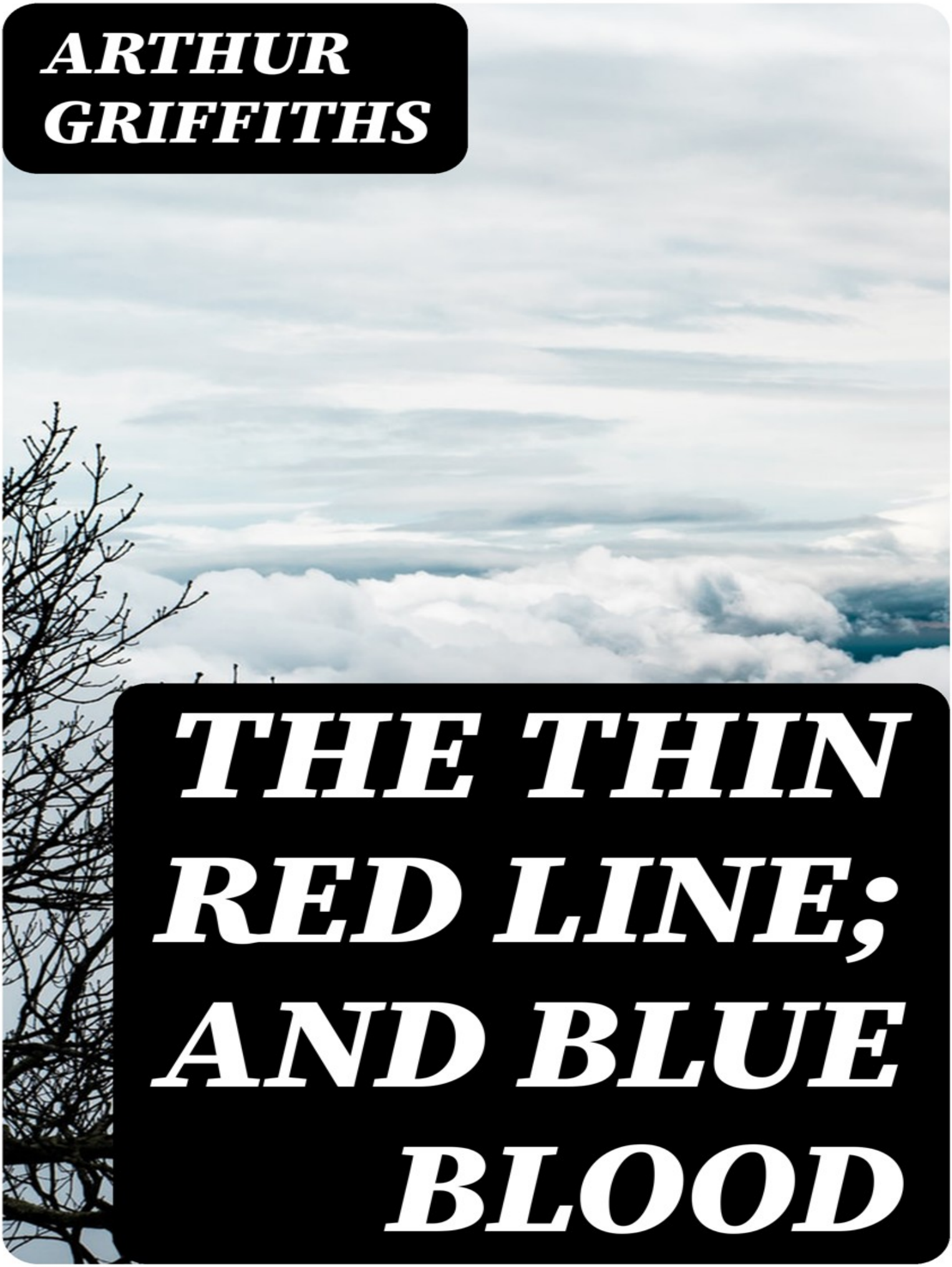
ARTHUR GRIFFITHS
THE THIN RED LINE; AND BLUE BLOOD

Arthur Griffiths

The Thin Red Line; and Blue Blood

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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THE THIN RED LINE.

VOLUME I

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CHAPTER I.

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THE COMMISSARY IS CALLED.

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In the Paris of the first half of this century there was no darker, dingier, or more forbidding quarter than that which lay north of the Rue de Rivoli, round about the great central market, commonly called the Halles.

The worst part of it, perhaps, was the Rue Assiette d'Etain, or Tinplate Street. All day evil-looking loafers lounged about its doorways, nodding lazily to the passing workmen, who, blue-bloused, with silk cap on head, each with his loa under his arm, came to take their meals at the wine-shop at the corner; or gossiping with the porters, male and female, while the one followed closely his usual trade as a cobbler, and the other attended to her soup.

By day there was little traffic. Occasionally a long dray, on a gigantic pair of wheels, drawn by a long string of white Normandy horses in single file, with blue harness and jangling bells, filled up the roadway. Costermongers trundled their barrows along with strange, unmusical cries. Now and again an empty cab returning to its stable, with weary horse and semi-somnolent coachman, crawled through the street.

But at night it was otherwise. Many vehicles came dashing down Tinplate Street: carriages, public and private, of every variety, from the rattletrap cab hired off the stand, or the decent coach from the livery stable, to the smart spick-and-span brougham, with its well-appointed horses

and servants in neat livery. They all set down at the same door, and took up from it at any hour between midnight and dawn, waiting patiently in file in the wide street round the corner, till the summons came as each carriage was required.

As seen in the daytime, there was nothing strange about the door, or the house to which it gave access. The place purported to be an hotel—a seedy, out-at-elbows, seemingly little-frequented hotel, rejoicing in the altogether inappropriate name of the Hôtel Paradis, or the Paradise Hotel. Its outward appearance was calculated to repel rather than invite customers; no one would be likely to lodge there who could go elsewhere. It had habitually a deserted look, with all its blinds and casements close shut, as though its lodgers slept through the day, or had gone away, never to return.

But this was only by day. At night the street-door stood wide open, and a porter was on duty at the foot of the staircase within. He was on the inner side of a stout oaken door, in which was a small window, opening with a trap. Through this he reconnoitred all arrivals, taking stock of their appearance, and only giving admission when satisfied as to what he saw.

The Hôtel Paradis, in plain English, was a gambling-house, largely patronised, yet with an evil reputation. It was well known to, and constantly watched by, the police, who were always at hand, although they seldom interfered with the hotel.

But when the porter's wife came shrieking into the street early one summer's morning, with wildest terror depicted in

her face, and shaking like a jelly, the police felt bound to come to the front.

"Has madame seen a ghost?" asked a stern official in a cocked hat and sword, accosting her abruptly.

"No, no! Fetch the commissary, quick! A crime has been committed—a terrible crime!" she gasped.

This was business, and the police-officer knew what he had to do.

"Run, Jules," he said to a colleague. "You know where M. Bontoux lives. Tell him he is wanted at the Hôtel Paradis." Then, turning to the woman, he said, "Now, madame, explain yourself."

"It is a murder, I am afraid. A gentleman has been stabbed."

"What gentleman? Where?"

"In the drawing-room, upstairs. I don't know his name, but he came here frequently. My husband will perhaps be able to tell you; he is there."

"Lead on," said the police-officer; "take me to the place. I will see to it myself."

They passed into the hotel through the inner portal, and up the stairs to the first floor, where the principal rooms were situated—three of them furnished and decorated magnificently, altogether out of keeping with the miserable exterior of the house, having enormous mirrors from ceiling to floor, gilt cornices, damask hangings, marble console tables, and chairs and sofas in marqueterie and buhl. The first room evidently served for reception; there was a sideboard in one corner, on which were the remains of a succulent repast, and dozens of empty bottles. The second

and third rooms were more especially devoted to the business of the establishment. Long tables, covered with green cloth, filled up the centre of each, and were strewed with cards, dice and their boxes, croupier's rakes, and other implements of gaming.

The third room had been the scene of the crime. There upon the floor lay the body of a man, a well-dressed man, wearing the white kerseymere trousers, the light waistcoat, and long-tailed green coat which were then in vogue. His clothes were all spotted and bedrabbled with gore; his shirt was torn open, and plainly revealed the great gaping wound from which his life's blood was quickly ebbing away.

The wounded man's head rested on the knee of the night porter, a personage wearing a kind of livery, a strongly built, truculent-looking villain, whose duties, no doubt, comprised the putting of people out as well as the letting them into the house.

"Oh, Anatole! my cherished one!" began the porter's wife. "Here are the police. Tell us then, how this occurred."

"I will tell all I know," replied her husband, looking at the police-officer. "This morning, when the clients had nearly all gone, and I was sitting half asleep in the lodge, I heard—"

"Stop," said the police-officer, "not another word. Keep all you have to say for the commissary. He is already on the stairs."

The next minute M. Bontoux entered, accompanied by his clerk and the official doctor of the quarter.

"A crime," said the commissary, slowly, and with as much dignity as was possible in a middle-aged gentleman pulled from his bed at daybreak, and compelled to dress in a hurry.

"A crime," he repeated. "Of that there can be no doubt. But let us establish the fact formally. Where are the witnesses?"

The porter, having relinquished the care of the wounded man to the doctor, stood up slowly and saluted the commissary.

"Very well; tell us what you know. Sit down"—this to the clerk. "Produce your writing-materials and prepare the report."

"It must have been about four this morning, but I was very drowsy, and the gentlemen had nearly all gone," said the night porter, speaking fluently, "when I was disturbed by the noise of a quarrel, a fight, up here in the principal drawing-room. While I was still rubbing my eyes, for I was very drowsy, and fancied I was dreaming, I heard a scream, a second, and a third, followed by a heavy fall on the floor. I rushed upstairs then, and found this poor gentleman as you see him."

"Alone?"

"Quite alone."

"But there must have been other people here. Did they come down the stairs past you?"

"No, sir; they must have escaped by that window. It was open—"

The commissary looked at the police-officer, who nodded intelligently.

"I had already noticed it, Mr. Commissary. The window gives upon a low roof, which communicates with the back street. Escape would be quite easy from that side."

"Well," said the commissary, "and you found this gentleman? Do you know him? His name? Have you ever

seen him before?"

"He is M. le Baron d'Enot; he is a constant visitor at the house. Very fortunate, I believe, and I heard he won largely last night."

"Ah!" said the commissary. This fact was important, as affording a reason for the crime. "And do you suspect any one? Have you any idea who was here at the last?"

"I scarcely noticed the gentlemen as they went away; it would be impossible for me, therefore, to say who remained."

"Then there is no clue—"

"Hush! Mr. Commissary." It was the doctor's exclamation. "The victim is still alive, and is trying, I think, to speak." Evidence given at the point of death has extreme value in every country, under every kind of law. The commissary therefore bent his head, closely attentive to catch any words the dying man might utter.

"Water! water!" he gasped out. "Revenge me; it was a foul and cowardly blow."

"Who struck you, can you tell us? Do you know him?" inquired the commissary, eagerly.

"Yes. I—know—" The voice grew visibly weaker; it sank into a whisper, and could speak only in monosyllables.

"His name—quick!"

"There—were—three—I had no chance—Gas—coigne—"

"Strange name—not French?"

The dying man shook his head.

"Gasc—tell—Engl—"

It was the last supreme effort. With a long, deep groan, the poor fellow fell back dead.

"How unfortunate!" cried the commissary, "to die just when he would have told us all. These few words will scarcely suffice to identify the murderers. Can any one help us?"

M. Bontoux looked round.

"The name he mentioned I know," said the night-porter, quickly. "This M. Gascoigne came here frequently. He is an Englishman."

"So I gathered from the dead man's words. Do you know his domicile in Paris?"

"Rue St. Honoré, Hôtel Versailles and St. Cloud. I have seen him enter it more than once, with his wife. He has lived there some months."

"We must, if possible, lay hands on him at once. You, Jules, hasten with another police-agent to the Rue St. Honoré; he may have gone straight to his hotel."

"And if we find him?"

"Arrest him and take him straight to the Préfecture. I will follow. There, there! lose no time."

"I am already gone," said the police-officer as he ran downstairs.

CHAPTER II.

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ARREST AND INTERROGATION.

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The Hôtel Versailles and St. Cloud was one of the best hotels of Paris at this time, a time long antecedent to the opening of such vast caravansaries as the Louvre, the Continental, the Athenée, or the Grand. It occupied four sides of a courtyard, to which access was had by the usual gateway. The porter's lodge was in the latter, and this functionary, in sabots and shirt-sleeves, was sweeping out the entrance when the police arrived in a cab, which they ordered to wait at the door.

"M. Gascoigne?" asked the agent.

"On the first floor, number forty-three," replied the porter, without looking up. "Monsieur has but just returned," he went on. "Knock gently, or you may disturb him in his first sleep."

"We shall disturb him in any case," said the police-officer, gruffly. "Justice cannot wait."

"The police!" cried the porter, now recognising his visitors for the first time. "What has happened, in Heaven's name?"

"Stand aside; we have no time to gossip," replied the agent, as he passed on.

The occupant of No. 43 upon the first floor was pacing his room with agitated steps—a young man with fair complexion and light curly hair; but his blue eyes were

clouded, and his fresh, youthful face was drawn and haggard. His attire, too—English, like his aspect—was torn and dishevelled, his voluminous neckcloth was disarranged, his waistcoat had lost several buttons, and there were stains—dark purple stains—upon sleeves and smallclothes.

"What has become of her?" he was saying as he strode up and down; "she has not been here; she could not have come home when we parted at the door of the Vaudeville—the bed has not been slept in. Can she have gone? Is it possible that she has left me?"

He sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

"It was too horrible. To see him fall at my feet, struck down just when I—Who is there?" he cried suddenly, in answer to a knock at the door.

"Open, in the name of the law!"

"The police here already! What shall I do?"

"Open at once, or we shall force the door."

The young man slowly drew back the bolt and admitted the two police-agents.

"M. Gascoigne? You will not answer to your name? That is equal—we arrest you."

"On what charge?"

"It is not our place to explain. We act by authority: that is enough. Will you go with us quietly, or must we use force?"

"Of what am I accused?"

"You will hear in good time. Isidore, where is your rope?"

His colleague produced the long thin cord that serves instead of handcuffs in France.

"Must we tie you?"

"No, no! I am ready to submit, but under protest. You shall answer for this outrage. I am an Englishman. I will appeal to our ambassador."

"With all my heart! We are not afraid. But enough said. Come."

The three—police-agents and their prisoner—went out together. On the threshold of No. 43 the officer named Jules said—

"Your key, monsieur—the key of your room. I will take charge of it. Monsieur the Judge will no doubt make a searching perquisition, and no one must enter it till then."

The door was locked, M. Jules put the key in his pocket, and the party went down to the cab, which was driven off rapidly to the depôt of the Préfecture.

Here the usual formalities were gone through. Rupert Gascoigne, as the Englishman was called, was interrogated, searched, deprived of money, watch, penknife, and pencil-case; his description was noted down, and then he was asked whether he would go into the common prison, or pay for the accommodation of the *pistole* or private "side."

For sixteen sous daily they gave him a room to himself, with a little iron cot, a chair, and a table. Another franc or two got him his breakfast and dinner, and he was allowed to enjoy them with such appetite as he could command.

No one came near him till next morning, when he was roused from the heavy sleep that had only come to him after dawn by a summons to appear before the *Juge d'instruction*.

He was led by two policemen to a little room, barely furnished, with one great bureau, or desk, in the centre, at

which sat the judge, his back to the window. On one side of him was a smaller desk for the clerk, and exactly opposite a chair for the accused, so arranged that the light beat full upon his face.

"Sit down," said the judge, abruptly.

He was a stern-looking man, dressed all in black, still young, with a cold and impassive face, the extreme pallor of which was heightened by his close-cut, coal-black hair, and his small, piercing, beady black eyes.

"Your name and nationality?"

"Rupert Gascoigne. I am an Englishman, and as such I must at once protest against the treatment I have received."

"You have been treated in accordance with the law—of France. You must abide by it, since you choose to live here. I do not owe you this explanation, but I give it to uphold the majesty of the law."

"I shall appeal to our ambassador."

The judge waved his hand, as though the threat did not affect him.

"I must ask you to keep silence. You are here to be interrogated; you will only speak in reply to my questions."

There was a pause, during which judge and accused looked hard at each other; the former seeking to read the other's inmost thoughts, the latter meeting the gaze with resolute and unflinching eyes.

"What is your age?"

"Twenty-six."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"But your wife has left you."

Gascoigne started in spite of himself.

"How do you know that?" he asked, nervously.

"It is for me to question. But I know it: that is enough. Your occupation and position in life?"

"I am a gentleman, living on my means."

"It is false." An angry flush rose to Gascoigne's face as the judge thus gave him the lie. "It is false—you are a professional gambler—a Greek—a sharper, with no ostensible means!"

"Pardon me, monsieur; you are quite misinformed. I could prove to you ----"

"It would be useless; the police have long known and watched you."

"Such espionage is below contempt," cried Gascoigne, indignantly.

"Silence! Do not dare to question the conduct of the authorities. It is the visit of persons of your stamp to Paris that renders such precautions necessary."

"If you believe all you hear from your low agents, with their lying, scandalous reports—"

"Be careful, prisoner; your demeanour will get you into trouble. Our information about you is accurate and trustworthy. Judge for yourself."

Gascoigne looked incredulous.

"Listen; you arrived in Paris three months ago, accompanied by a young demoiselle whom you had decoyed from her home."

"She was my wife."

"Yes; you married her after your arrival here. The official records of the 21st arrondisement prove that—married her

without her parents' consent."

"That is not so. They approved."

"How could they? Your wife's father is French vice-consul at Gibraltar. Her mother is dead. Neither was present at your marriage; how, then, could they approve?"

Gascoigne did not answer.

"On your first arrival you were well provided with funds—the proceeds, no doubt, of some nefarious scheme; a run of luck at the tables; the plunder of some pigeon—"

"The price of my commission in the English Army."

"Bah! You never were in the English Army."

"I can prove it."

"I shall not believe you. Being in funds, I say, you lived riotously, stayed at one of the best hotels, kept a landau and pair, dined at the Trois Frères and the Rocher de Cancale, frequented the theatres; madame wore the most expensive toilettes. But you presently ran short of cash."

"It's not surprising. But I presume I was at liberty to do what I liked with my own."

"Coming to the end of your resources," went on the judge, coldly ignoring the sneer, "you tried the gaming-table again, with varying success. You went constantly to the Hôtel Paradis—"

"On the contrary, occasionally, not often."

"You were there last night; it is useless to deny it. We have the deposition of the proprietor, who is well known to the police—M. Hippolyte Ledantec; you shall be confronted with him."

"Is he in custody?" asked Gascoigne, eagerly.

"I tell you it is not your place to question."

"He ought to be. It was he who committed the murder."

"You know there was a murder, then? Curious. When the body was discovered by the porter there was no one present. How could you know of the crime unless you had a hand in it?"

"I saw it committed. I tried my best to save the Baron, but Ledantec stabbed him before I could interpose."

"An ingenious attempt to shift the guilt; but it will not serve. We know better."

"I am prepared to swear it was Ledantec. Why should I attack the Baron? I owed him no grudge."

"Why? I will tell you. For some time past, as I have reminded you, your funds have been running low, fortune has been against you at the tables, and you could not correct it at the Hôtel Paradis as you do with less clever players—"

"You are taking an unfair advantage of your position, Monsieur le Juge. Any one else who dared accuse me of cheating—"

"Bah! no heroics. You could not correct fortune, I say; yet money you must have. The hotel-keeper was pressing for his long-unpaid account. Madame, your smart wife, was dissatisfied; she made you scenes because you refused her money; in return, you ill-used her."

"It is false! My wife has always received proper consideration at my hands."

"You ill-used her, ill-treated her; we have it from herself."

"Do you know, then, where she is?" interrupted Gascoigne, with so much eagerness that it was plain he had taken his wife's defection greatly to heart. "Why has she left

me? With whom? I have always suspected that villain Ledantec; he is an arch scoundrel, a very devil!"

"The reasons for your wife's disappearance are sufficiently explained by this letter."

"To me?" said Gascoigne, stretching out his hand for it.

"To you, but impounded by us. It was found, in our search of your apartments yesterday, placed in a prominent place upon your dressing-table."

"Give it me—it is mine!"

"No! but you shall hear what it says. Listen:—

"'I could have borne with resignation the miserable part you have imposed upon me. After luring me from my home with dazzling offers, after promising me a life of luxury and splendid ease, you rudely, cruelly dispelled the illusion, and made it plain to me that I had shared the lot of a pauper. All this I could have borne—poverty, however distasteful, but not the infamy, the degradation, of being the partner and associate of your evil deeds. Sooner than fall so low I prefer to leave you for ever. Do not seek for me. I have done with you. All is at an end between us!'"

CHAPTER III.

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THE MOUSETRAP.

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"Well," said the judge, when he had finished reading, "you see what your wife thinks of you. What do you say now?"

"There is not a word of truth in that letter. It is a tissue of misstatements from beginning to end. You must place no reliance upon it."

"There you must allow me to differ from you. This letter is, in my belief, perfectly genuine. It supplies a most important link in the chain of evidence, and I shall give it the weight it deserves. But enough—will you still deny your guilt?"

"It is Ledantec's doing," said Gascoigne, following out a line of thought of his own. "She was nothing loth, perhaps, for he has been instilling insidious poison into her ears for these weeks past. I had my suspicions, but could prove nothing; now I know. It was for this, to put money in his purse for her extravagance, that he first robbed, then struck down the baron."

"Why do you still persist in this shallow line of defence? You cannot deceive me; it would be far better to make a clean breast of it at once."

"I have already told you all I know. I repeat, I saw Ledantec strike the blow."

"Psha! this is puerile. I will be frank with you. We have the fullest and strongest evidence of your guilt—why, then, will you not confess it?"

"I have nothing to confess; I am perfectly innocent. I was the poor man's friend, not his murderer. I tried hard to save him, but, unhappily, I was too late."

"You will not confess?"

A flush of anger rose to Gascoigne's cheek; his eyes flashed with the indignation he felt at being thus bullied and browbeaten; his lips quivered, but still he made no reply.

"Come! you have played this comedy long enough," said the judge, his manner growing more insolent, his look more threatening. "Will you, or will you not, confess?"

Gascoigne met his gaze resolutely, but with a dogged, obstinate silence, the result of a firm determination not to utter a word.

"This is unbearable," said the judge, angrily, after having repeated his question several times without eliciting any reply. "Take him away! Let him be kept in complete isolation, in one of the separate cells of the Mousetrap—the Souricière."

At a signal from within the police entered, resumed charge of the prisoner, and escorted him, by many winding passages, down a steep staircase to an underground passage, ending in a dungeon-like room, badly lighted by one small, heavily-barred window, through which no glimpse of the sky was seen.

Here he was left alone, and for a long time utterly neglected. No one came near him till late in the day, when he was brought a basin of thin soup and a hunch of coarse

ammunition bread. He spoke to his jailers, asking for more and better food, but obtained no reply. He asked them for paper, pens, and ink; he wished, he said, to make a full statement of his case to the British Embassy, and demand its protection. Still no reply. Maddened by this contemptuous treatment, and despairing almost of justice, he begged, entreated the warder to take pity on him, to tell him at least how long they meant to keep him there in such terrible solitude, cut off altogether from the advice and assistance of friends. The warder shook his head stolidly, and at length broke silence, but only to say, "It is by superior order," then left him.

Gascoigne passed a terrible night, the second night in durance, but far worse than the first. He was torn now with apprehensions as to his fate; circumstances seemed so much against him; the facts, as stated by the judge, might be grossly misrepresented; but how was he to dispute them? There was no justice in this miserable country, with such a partial and one-sided system of law. He began to fear that his life was in their hands; already he felt his head on the block, under the shadow of the awful guillotine.

Nor were his personal terrors the only nightmare that visited and oppressed him. He was harassed, tortured, by the shameless conduct of his wife; of the woman for whom he had sacrificed everything—profession, fortune, name, the affection of relatives, the respect of friends. With base, black-hearted perfidy, she had deserted him for another, had plotted against him, had helped to bring him into his present terrible straits.

Once again they awoke him, unrefreshed, from the deep sleep haunted by such hideous dreams. He was told to dress himself and come out. At the door of his cell the same escort—two police-agents—awaited him.

"Where are you taking me? Again before that hateful judge?"

"Monsieur had better speak more respectfully," replied one of them, in a warning voice.

"It is no use, I tell you, his interrogating me. I have nothing more to say."

"Silence!" cried the other, "and march."

They led him along the passage and upstairs, but not, as before, to the judge's cabinet. Turning aside, they passed on one side of it, and out into the open air. There was a cab drawn up close to the door, the prisoner was ordered to get in, one police-agent taking his seat alongside, the other mounting on the box. The glasses were drawn up, and the cab drove rapidly away.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Gascoigne.

"You will see," replied his conductor, coldly.

"To another prison?"

"Silence! A prisoner is not permitted to enter into conversation with his guard."

Thus rebuffed, Gascoigne resigned himself to gazing mournfully through the windows as the cab rattled along. He did not know this quarter of Paris well, but he could see that they were passing along one of the quays of the Ile de la Cité. He could see the houses on the opposite bank, and knew from the narrowness of the river that it was not the main stream of the Seine. It was still early morning; the