The Larcier Case

(*L'Affaire Larcier*, 1907)

by Tristan Bernard (1866-1947)

I

Larcier and I were noncommissioned officers in the dragoons at Nancy. My hitch was coming to an end, and Larcier, who wanted to continue his military career, was just about to re-enlist. We had both been promoted to master-sergeant early on - not easy in our regiment, because so many men re-enlisted. But at one point, several of them left at the same time, and we seized our opportunity.

We hadn't really bonded with the other sergeants, who weren't from our generation. By that I mean that they were two or three years older. But three years is three years of seniority. That's significant.

Some of them didn't like us, and that resulted in none of them liking us. The hostile atmosphere was all the more strained because it didn't bother us, and we did nothing to dispel it. Larcier and I were content with each other's company, and it showed only too clearly that we didn't need anybody else. Like all sergeants who aren't preparing for the academy at Saumur, they didn't have much to do once training was over for the day. The hatred they developed for us became a pastime, and it would have been hard for them to give it up.

Larcier was from the area, which is to say that his family lived a dozen kilometers away. He took me home with him one day, and I made the acquaintance of his mother and his two younger brothers. His father had been a teacher at the Nancy *lycée*. He died of a brain fever, leaving them a

small inheritance that was managed by one of their cousins, an old fellow who had been a notary in the Vosges and now lived on the outskirts of Toul.

Robert Larcier hadn't claimed his share of the inheritance when he turned twenty-one, preferring to put off the paperwork till he re-enlisted. The old fellow continued to send him an allowance suited to the modest lifestyle of a master-sergeant.

An encounter we had at the garrison changed our lives overnight.

Some reserve sergeants showed up, including a classmate from my *lycée*. He was the son of a major horse-dealer in Paris, a high-living young guy who thought of nothing except how to "bring off" his service time as entertainingly as possible. He took a room in the best hotel, and every evening we gathered there at five or six. We drank, we played baccarat. Other young guys from Paris were there: the sons of a stockbroker, a journalist, and a dealer in precious metals. All these young guys had some money on hand and were pretty good card players.

Gambling had always scared me, so I kept apart. From time to time, I threw in a hundred-*sou* coin, lost it, and felt searing regret.

The unfortunate Larcier, by contrast, had the temperament of a real gambler. One night, he lost more than five hundred francs. Because he was overdrawn with his cousin, he didn't dare ask him for money; likewise, he didn't dare ask his mother. Fortunately I could lend him what he owed. My parents, who lived in Chalon-sur-Saône, could send me the sum via money-order.

The story got spread around treacherously by an active-duty sergeant, who heard it from a reservist. Captain de Halban, who commanded our squadron, summoned Larcier to the office and gave him a thorough dressing-down, to the dark satisfaction of Sergeant Audibert, who hated Larcier. The latter was stung by the reproof, which spurred him to act out. Usually, Larcier was a mild enough guy. But I got the impression that his gambling losses embittered him. He spoke of

the captain with keen irritation, and, for the first time, he chafed at the attitude of the other sergeants, which up to now had left him indifferent.

Finally, he said "I paid five hundred francs for the lesson I just learned, and I'm not going to gamble any more. That's it! I'm stopping right here, and all told it won't be that expensive."

That evening, we were wandering around the streets of the town. I wasn't going to suggest going back to the hotel where my Paris friend was staying, so he said, disingenuously:

"Well, it wouldn't be polite not to go see them again, just because I lost."

I gave in out of weakness. We arrived at the reservists' quarters. The baccarat had already begun. Larcier watched without apparent interest.

Somebody asked why he wasn't playing. He said, with strained candor, that he'd already lost too much, and didn't have the wherewithal to join the game.

"In any case," Larcier added, "I don't have any cash on me. If I ran up even a small debt, a thousand francs or two, I couldn't settle it within 24 hours. I'd need more than a day to get it from my elderly relative." Finally, he said "I'd rather not set myself up for all that trouble" – but said it without much conviction.

They insisted.

"You don't have to pay us back right away. We're here for 28 days – still three weeks to go! You'll be sure to see us again."

Larcier drew me aside and said:

"Listen, Ferrat. I'm going to play, but just till I win back the 500 francs you lent me."

"No, old friend, I beg you! I don't need the 500 francs. You can pay me back a year from now, or two. I don't want you to start gambling again on my account. You're going to get deeper in the hole!"

"No, man, I had awfully bad luck last night, it won't happen again tonight … impossible. I'm in the groove, I know I'm in the groove. I have a feeling that I can win as much as I want."

There was nothing for it but to let him try. It was all over. The itch had gotten him. He wouldn't listen to any objection.

He sat down at the card table, and when we got back to our barracks, at three in the morning, he had lost five thousand francs.

We walked in silence through the courtyard of the post. He couldn't make up his mind to go to his room.

He said to me: "I really don't want to take advantage the respite those guys offered me. All the more since, when the game was over, they didn't repeat what they said earlier in the evening: that I could take my time paying them back, that we were all good friends. They're not bad guys," he added, "but I can tell that they didn't want to risk any delay in payment by assuring me there was no rush. Oh, I could feel it!"

That was how I read the situation, too. I wished that, as we were leaving, one of the winners had had something nice to say to poor Larcier. But they all kept their lips tightly shut.

So as not to upset him, I hid my opinion. I told him that, on the contrary, they'd seemed eager to be agreeable.

"No, no," he repeated. "I can't make them wait. It's four o'clock. I'm going to try to sleep for a few hours. Then I'll go see the old man, this very day, in Toul. He has to give me the money. The important thing is that Maman doesn't learn anything. That would be too hard for her."

"So you're going to ask leave to go to Toul?"

"No, I'm not going to ask for leave. The captain would need an explanation; I'd have to confess and tell him why I was going there. After the bother the other day, I don't want that. And I'm in no condition to think of a lie."

I no longer recognized Larcier. He was talking like he'd gone off the rails. Gambling had totally changed him. Till now, he'd been such a strict guy, so well-organized, a stickler for discipline! He had, all unconsciously, burst into passion. Even his manner of speaking was different. He was surer of himself than before, more stubborn.

It was so sad to see someone transformed like that, out of the blue - a man I'd really come to like, and thought I knew so well. Both of us had our ideas and feelings completely shook up.

I took him to the station at about three in the afternoon. In the morning there had been a review, and he hadn't been able to leave the post. He would get to Toul at dinnertime. And so, with the connivance of the duty officer, he could easily stay away till the following day, at eleven, when there was a dressage exercise. In between, nobody would ask after him. If the duty officer went looking for him during the evening's grooming or that of the following morning, it would be enough to invent some story: he'd taken ill and gone up to his room. When a sergeant makes that kind of excuse, nobody slights him by not believing him, or insisting that he go to the doctor.

II

So it was easy to conceal Larcier's absence till the following day. Even so, I wasn't relaxed as I went with him to the station. And he was thinking about nothing except the thorny conversation he was about to have with his relative.

"Uncle Bonnel – I call him 'uncle' even though he's only my cousin – Uncle Bonnel is quite a character, very strait-laced and domineering. I would never dare tell him right off that I'd lost money gambling. So I supposedly have to be claiming my share of the inheritance, which should have been settled several months ago … I'm almost 22 years old, you know, I joined up when I was 19."

"How come the accounts never got settled?"

"Oh, because he thought the money would be in better hands if they were his hands instead of mine. He's always given the impression that he doesn't take me seriously. He's afraid we will fritter away our little fortune, that I would make bad investments … He's said so to Maman, many times, and she seems to be of his way of thinking. Not that she mistrusts me! Poor Maman! If she knew that I gamble, she would be shocked and saddened. No, she thinks I'm a very proper young man, but even so she thinks I'm a little young, and she sets great store by Uncle Bonnel."

Just then, the train entered the station. I shook Larcier's hand. I can still see him, the instant he got into the carriage: tall and thin, his trim figure and his well-adjusted tunic. (In our regiment, the non-commissioned officers wore "fanciful" uniforms. Our colonel was pretty indulgent.)

I watched as the train drew away. Larcier, in the doorway, nodded his head in a farewell gesture. He was preoccupied, but he forced a smile. As he'd taken his leave, he had said that there was no need to get myself "wound up": he'd get his 5,000 francs, and all it would cost him would be a tough interview with his guardian.

Right then, I wasn't terribly worried. Above all, I felt remorse for helping him lose such a large sum. I reminded myself that I had put him in contact with the reservists.

I returned to the barracks for that evening's grooming. In the courtyard, some sergeants called out to me. They already knew that Larcier had sustained a big loss, even though Larcier had made the gamblers agree that they wouldn't tell anybody, because of the sums involved. But that's just why they talked about it. The young guys were happy to discuss what high stakes they played for, so they commiserated with the unhappy Larcier.

"I won 2,000 francs from him myself, and I got no joy from it," said a reserve brigadier, an employee of the Crédit Foncier, who was thinking hypocritically that the sum would make a nice down payment on a little carriage he was planning to buy.

Chief Raoul, from the third squadron, made some remarks that were obviously meant for me, though obliquely. He was a little fair-haired guy with glasses, who spoke softly, barely opening his lips. An enlisted man had nicknamed him "Sugar Tongs."

"I always say to myself: only bet large when you've got the means to cover it. I don't care about Larcier. He gambled because he convinced himself he was going to win. He saw those young Paris guys there full of cash, and he thought he would take advantage of them."

"I don't think that's fair," I answered, restraining myself. "Larcier wasn't in need. He didn't count on winning. He started playing for fun, he lost, and then he went all in after his money."

The chief responded with a simple shrug of doubt, polite but mildly disdainful. He struck up an involved conversation with another non-com, barely concealing his desire to drop his conversation with me.

I went to the stables, quite shaken up. The guys from my platoon had started grooming their horses. I walked up and down the aisles. Whenever I passed, the dragoons casually turned back to brushing their mounts, but I didn't pay much attention to them.

All at once, I found myself face to face with the duty officer, Lieutenant Richin de Roisin, who said to me:

"So, Ferrat, what's this I hear about Larcier? It seems something disagreeable happened to him?"

"You know about it, lieutenant?"

"Yes, Raynaud told me."

Staff Sergeant Raynaud was pretty close to Lieutenant Roisin. They were from the same neighborhood and had always called each other by the informal *tu*.

I could clearly see what had happened. The sergeants hadn't dared to report the tale directly to the officers, but they knew that Raynaud would tell it to his officer friend, and via him, it would get passed from one officer to another up the chain.

Lieutenant de Roisin started preaching a lesson to me about the evils of gambling, and then asked me what kind of game it was, and then started telling me tales about baccarat with such energy that he forgot all about the horses. The supper-bell rang. All the other platoons' horses were already back eating their hay. And our soldiers in the stalls, bewildered by such a prolonged session, kept combing their horses. The men closest at hand were fairly worn out by the work they had to keep up in the tedious presence of the lieutenant.

That evening, I avoided dining in the canteen. I went to a little restaurant where I knew I would be alone. But at nine o'clock I had to get back to the barracks to call my platoon to order – and the more so, since Larcier was gone, I would have to call his platoon to order as well.

After nine o'clock, the non-coms who didn't go into town – and since this wasn't a theater night, that was most of them, the chiefs, the quartermasters, and the staff sergeants - all went to the canteen, where they socialized at the bar until lights out.

One of them, probably selected by the group for the purpose, invited me to join them. They needed to "spend time with me." Out of bravado, I accepted their invitation, and spent an hour in their company. They spoke of Larcier to me, with feigned compassion. But I could tell they were all united against him and against me. Maybe if I'd spent the evening alone with just one of them, I could have inspired real sympathy in him, and overcome his bitter, hateful biases. But I knew that I could never break through so much antipathy when they were together. They frankly detested Larcier. The events that transpired validated them. Fate had sent them a windfall: they weren't generous enough to renounce it.

III

Back in my room, I felt calmer. I slept in a room with three beds, along with Larcier and a sergeant who worked in the major's office. He was a fat dreamy kid, who didn't get along well with the other staff sergeants. People saw him as something of an idiot, because he did whatever amused him. He was constantly fussing with statistics, obsessed with geography, and was always filling blank forms with lists of towns and cities. Nobody could ever figure out if he made any use of them. In any case, he put heart and soul into the activity.

We didn't get on badly, but we hardly said good morning and goodnight, just a little nod when one of us came in, or a little grunt when leaving. Leonard was, in short, the best companion we could have had, seeing as we had to have one at all. And anyway, we weren't in our room very much. We came back there to sleep, usually pretty late; we got up early in the morning, and rarely went back to the room except to change clothes.

Leonard sometimes stayed up late at night working on his statistics, with his lamp lit. It was a small lamp with a shade, and it didn't keep us from sleeping. Our roommate was very grateful for our tolerance. Or at least we sensed his gratitude, more than we experienced it, because he didn't really show it all that much.

I went to bed very tired that evening, but it took me a long time to fall asleep. Leonard worked pretty late, and when he put out his light, I lay there awhile in the darkness, my eyes wide open. But at last I fell asleep, and after that the night passed so quickly that I heard the sound of reveille almost immediately. It seemed even more jarring than usual. The morning was grey, I was terribly worn out, and in spite of myself I fell asleep again in a few moments. Strictly speaking, I could have gone down even later, because my presence in the stables during mucking-out was not absolutely necessary; all that mattered was that the duty sergeant was there. But it was possible that the lieutenant on duty would be surprised at my absence, or more to the point, that of Larcier.

Nobody would be there to explain it to him. I woke up with a start, my head heavy, my heart troubled. I went down to the stables, but there were no worries; the lieutenant wasn't there. When the men were done giving the horses their hay and had gone back to their barracks, I went into the canteen, where cups of black coffee and slices of bread were laid out on the tables. I felt out of sorts. I wished I could go upstairs and back to bed, but I told myself that if I lay down, I wouldn't have the strength to get up for the nine o'clock grooming; and I had to be there, on account of Larcier.

When the grooming was done, I began to feel a little nervous. Larcier was likely to be back at the barracks at ten-thirty; the train from Toul came in at 10:20. I realized that I wasn't going to have the patience to wait at the barracks for another half-hour. I had a stable-boy quickly brush my coat, and I headed for the station.

The train from Toul was 15 minutes late. It seemed as if my very impatience was drawing it closer. Would it make up the lost time? Wasn't it just about to appear on the last curve, coming out of the tunnel? I seemed to see the dark engine emerging, as if pushed forward by its own carriages, and then the whole line of them stopping beside the platform, the doors clattering open, Larcier's face in the crowd. I could hear my anxious question: "And then? You've got the money?"

And meanwhile the train didn't arrive, and far from making up time, it was apparently getting later and later. Things began to get disturbing. By twenty-to-eleven, Larcier and I wouldn't have enough time to run back to the barracks, change into riding breeches, and get to drill – where the officer would be seething with rage as he waited for us, tapping his boot with his riding crop.

10:37 … 10:38 … 10:39 … a whiny bell rang out the approach of the Toul train. A few seconds later, a big roar. The train appeared in the tunnel. But it stopped at once, for some reason, and did not enter the station. Ah, the platform wasn't free. A freight train had stopped outside the station. On the Toul train, passengers appeared at the doors, but I did not see Larcier's kepi. A bad

sign! He knew that the train was late. He ought to be restive, afraid he would miss dressage. Why wasn't he showing himself in a doorway, all impatient?

I was getting more and more rattled. Finally, the engine started up again, and the train entered the station. I climbed up on a bench to have a better chance at spotting Larcier's uniform in the crowd, but nobody got off except people dressed in grey and black. Further down the platform, maybe … no, that was just a private soldier, heaving himself heavily out of a carriage.

Larcier wasn't there. Why not?

But I couldn't waste time asking myself questions. I ran back to the barracks, my head in a whirl. I didn't know what I was going to tell them about my friend's absence. I guessed I could always fall back on telling them he was ill.

I got dressed as fast as I could and went down to drill. The officer, as I had imagined, was waiting impatiently, pacing in front of the horses. The staff sergeants and brigadiers were already at attention; only Larcier and I were missing. I went straight to the officer and told him that my companion was sick. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Sick with a hangover! He'd better take care of that."

Somebody took Larcier's horse back to the stable. The rest of us mounted up and began dressage.

I was leading a line, atop Calomel, a nice enough animal, used to my casual style of riding. He was alarmed and a little jumpy today, feeling the nervous pressure of my thighs. I made some mental notes to correct the form of my fellow riders. Luckily, though, a reversal of the column put me in the rear. From that moment, I stopped trying to impose my will on Calomel, who, already exceedingly obliging, faithfully imitated his companions in their ensuing exercises.

I thought about what I was going to do in the afternoon, after lunch. I definitely had to leave for Toul. As soon as I was out of the saddle, I let the chief know that I wouldn't be there for

the grooming. I took the three o'clock train, after having killed some time in town by waiting fruitlessly for a local train that arrived, also from Toul, at 1:45, and might have been carrying my friend.

I knew where Larcier's guardian lived. One Sunday, we had gone to Toul for a stroll, and I had accompanied Larcier to his relative's house. I'd stayed behind the garden fence when he went inside, and I'd seen the old fellow come out to greet him; but because I was waiting several paces from the gate when Larcier came out again, I had never been introduced to M. Bonnel.

The property was located on the outskirts of Toul, a kilometer and a half from the station, among a little group of houses surrounded by small gardens. I followed the route that led to this hamlet, a road bordered by trees. From time to time you passed a workshop, or a construction site; all around was just fields.

The Bonnel house couldn't be seen from a distance; it lay about a hundred meters past a curve in the road. I was eager to get there. I was usually shy about going to see people I didn't know, but that day, I didn't feel any reluctance, I was so motivated by my friendly concern to know what had become of Larcier.

When I got to the bend in the road, I passed two workmen who were talking, and I made out these phrases:

"It happened about two in the morning … He must be in Belgium long since, or even in Germany. They're not going to catch him soon."

Suddenly uneasy, I stopped abruptly before rounding the bend, as if afraid of what I was going to see on that secluded part of the road.

I forced myself to go onward, my legs heavy. As I rounded the curve, I saw about fifty people gathered in front of Bonnel's house.

I barely had the power to walk on. I was so afraid of confirming my suspicions! I walked on mechanically, merely carrying out the motion I'd started, and I mixed with the crowd that was milling about along the fence. Some of the gawkers there caught sight of me, and one of them noted the number on my uniform collar. Turning to an old gentleman near the gate, he said:

"Monsieur Commissaire, there's a sergeant from the same regiment."

The commissaire's face was wrapped in a grey beard, and above his eyes bristled two menacing brows. He demanded:

"You know Larcier?"

"Yes, sir," I said weakly, "I know him. But I've just gotten to Toul, and I have no idea what's going on. What happened?"

"What happened is that your pal killed his old cousin … But I need some information from you. We can't stay here. Come into the house with me."

We went together into the dining room. The commissaire sat down at the corner of the old oak table, took some papers out of his pocket, and beckoned to his secretary to join us. He told me that he'd phoned our garrison, where the colonel confirmed Master-Sergeant Larcier's absence. The commissaire already knew that my unlucky friend had lost money gambling. It was easy to reconstruct the violent scene that took place at his guardian's home. They'd found traces of blood in M. Bonnel's office. Somebody had wiped the floor clean. The door of the safe was open, the keys on top. The old man must have been struck as he went to open the safe. Efforts to find the body had as yet been unsuccessful. All they'd found were the killer's clothes: his dragoon uniform, rolled up and stashed beyond some steps that led down into a corner of the garden.

It seems that the killer must have taken some civilian clothes from the house, so as not to be spotted in his conspicuous attire. Or at least that was the first theory that came to mind. But it gave way to another: if Larcier had changed out of his uniform, it was probably because it was soaked in

blood. And as it happened, the tunic and trousers had been carefully cleaned to remove bloodstains. Larcier probably hadn't put them back on because they were too damp. So he had decided to take some of his guardian's clothes. They were about the same size.

The commissaire had not yet been able to locate the body of the hapless M. Bonnel. They had looked closely at the soil in the garden. It was tough clay everywhere, and seemed undisturbed.

The commissaire asked me to stay in Toul for 24 hours, to help clear things up. He went so far as to phone my colonel and get permission.

I wasn't displeased to avoid returning to the barracks, where the terrible story must be stirring up the hateful clique of Larcier's enemies. But above all, I wanted to find the killer and learn from him how the crime had been committed. I found it impossible to believe that Larcier could have killed a man. He could never have had a murderous impulse. Was he even capable of one of those bursts of anger that lead to an impulsive, almost involuntary, manslaughter?

It's true that I'd noticed a change in Larcier's character since he had started to gamble. But was that alteration enough to turn my friend into a murderer? I was sure that there must have been some sort of accident. Maybe in the middle of a heated discussion, the old man fell down, hitting his head as he fell … and Larcier had hidden the body, and fled, fearing that he would be accused of murder …

That must have been how the scene played out. But I wasn't certain. I was seized by a terrible doubt: what if Larcier was capable of murder! In order to free myself of that awful thought, I wanted to see my friend again, to hear the story of the tragic occurrences straight from him.

I didn't keep my thoughts to myself; I shared them with the commissaire. But he wasn't fully listening. And besides, intimidated by his skepticism, I was aware that I wasn't arguing my case strongly enough. I always want to defend my friends, but I lack natural authority and a combative spirit. So people have a tendency to listen to me patronizingly, as if to say, "Of course you're right

to defend your friend, that's very nice of you; but we don't believe you. Your friendship itself makes your arguments suspect."

For the commissaire, the case was open and shut. Larcier lost money at cards. He came to ask his guardian for it; his guardian refused; he killed his guardian. His guilt was obvious. They'd get him, and that would be the end of him.

I couldn't understand why they weren't rushing to hunt him down. Because the authorities were so dilatory in tracking down Larcier, I made up my mind to trace him myself, to find him as soon as I could and talk the matter over with him. Since the commissaire was back on the phone with my colonel, I asked him to request an extended leave for me. I insisted I would do everything I could to find Larcier and bring him to justice.

The commissaire endorsed my request. Not because he set much store by my help, or thought that my investigations would lead anywhere, but just to be agreeable. He must have thought that I was asking for leave as a pretext, just so that I could get away from the garrison for a couple of weeks. I didn't take the trouble to correct his low impression of me. The key thing was that the colonel agreed to allow me two weeks' leave.

I decided to go back to the barracks that evening and get some clothes, because I had gone to Toul with nothing except the clothes on my back. And besides, I had a plan in going back to our garrison town.

I knew that Larcier had a girlfriend. He had told me about her, in confidence. Out of some sort of reserve, he disliked talking about his romantic attachments, even to his friends.

She was a young woman, recently widowed. I knew her character to be spotless. Larcier had described her; I believed them to be very much in love, and planning to marry. She didn't live in the town we were in, but in the little village of Saint-Renaud, a half-hour away. Larcier went over

there once or twice a week, in the evenings. On Sundays, as it happened, he couldn't get to see his girlfriend, because that's when her whole family came to visit her.

After spending the night in the barracks – I was too worn out to look for a hotel – I left very early the next morning. I didn't see anybody in the barracks except my roommate, the statistical sergeant, who asked me about the Larcier case, listened dreamily, and then shook his head to signify something that I couldn't grasp, and went back to his inane work.

I left the barracks the next morning at reveille. The only one of my comrades I was likely to meet at that hour was the duty sergeant, standing by the door of the barracks. I passed him rapidly, nodding at him in the manner of someone who doesn't want to start a conversation. I knew what they were all thinking, the air of false sympathy they adopted while speaking to me. They wanted nothing better than to be nice and kind to me, now that Fate had given them the fierce satisfaction of thinking my unhappy friend a criminal.

As I was striding away from the barracks, the officer of the week called out to me.

"Lieutenant," I said, "I have leave."

He just went "Ah!"

I thought he was going to talk to me about Larcier, and I was annoyed in advance by what I expected to hear, but he must not have found the right words to address me with, because he just inclined his head in a farewell gesture and kept going toward the barracks. It would have bothered me to speak with him, but I was still a little disappointed that he'd said nothing to me.

This tale is a kind of confession, and I ought to reveal everything that passed within me.

Since the night before, I had been miserable. I felt an almost physical pain in my limbs. I sat down in front of the station, an hour before the departure of the train that would take me to Saint-Renaud. And just then, I felt a sense of relief, and I spent that hour in happy fatigue. Yes, happy! I was happy to be on leave, and I was happy to be going to meet Larcier's girlfriend. It was

a vague feeling, for sure, and right at that moment I didn't dare enumerate my reasons for feeling relief, because I would have thrust them away in horror. But I understand now that my sense of freedom, and my hope of meeting and consoling a young woman, led me to forget all kinds of things …

IV

The little café where I sat occupied the ground floor of a sort of inn, where travelers, forced by a layover to remain part of the night in the vicinity of the station, could come and spend a few hours. At that hour of the morning, there was nobody in the room (besides me) except two drinkers, livestock dealers, who had started to play a game of écarté with old, well-thumbed cards. I was facing a shabby pool table; on the wall, a yellowed poster illustrated a series of billiard tactics.

My vague feeling of happy fatigue persisted during the brief train journey. I was alone in my compartment. The countryside looked fresh, bright, and deserted. I had slept soundly the night before, and felt in good health. I was in no hurry to get where I was going, because I knew I would arrive too early, and be obliged to walk around the streets of the village before I could go and call on Mme. Chéron.

The train, after a journey of half an hour, stopped for the first time at a nice little station with window-boxes full of flowers, embellished by a little garden on one side. At the door, an unmarked bus stood waiting for the train. The bus driver had gotten down from his seat and begun a slow, dull conversation with an old local hanger-on.

I went down the road toward the nearest houses. Then I headed toward the center of the village. The post office, a big grocery store, a pastry shop, a gas station, a little café, and a dry-goods store were neatly arranged around a fairly large square which featured, in its center, a statue of a

general. I went over to see if I could recognize the general, less out of curiosity than because I had nothing else to do. His name meant nothing to me.

The village was already awake and starting its morning. Window-curtains were drawn and shopfronts were opening. As I crossed the square, a team of oxen came down one of the streets that lined it. The oxen were dragging a gigantic tree-trunk that seemed to have been brought there as the finishing touch to the landscape. It was just like a fanciful advertisement: all kinds of different vehicles, delivery trucks, limousines, taxis, and in their midst a baker's apprentice carrying a basket.

I sat on a bench, intending to savor the charming calm of the little square for a few moments. But after two minutes, I found that I wasn't perceiving much – I had to force myself to take pleasure in the poetic qualities of the place. I decided to go into the little café and write a letter to Mme. Chéron, in order to let her know of my arrival and to tell her I would come to see her in a couple of hours. I had to prepare myself to meet her – and I had to give her time to dress to meet me.

I wrote her a few lines to that effect, and sent them to her home by means of a young lad who was hanging around the entrance to the café, with the casual air of those idle people who come in for severe criticism from the public, who claim that they're always looking for work and praying to God they don't find any. After a second black coffee, after taking mental note of all the furnishings in the little establishment where I found myself, and discovering that they were limited to the classic accessories of a little provincial café; after going over to the billiard table with its shrunken, dried-out surface and stiff bumpers, and setting up the balls for some triumphant combination shot – I asked for the local directory, and engrossed myself for quite a while in a study of the geography of the *département* of Meurthe-et-Moselle.

I was bored. I would have liked to talk with somebody, but the only person in the café was the owner, an old lady, as unfriendly as she was fat, and of a most uncordial appearance. The two

hours seemed never to end. I tried to nap, but I was ill-situated for it, on that little bench covered in fine, slippery leather.

Still, it was better to stay there than to wander around the streets or the countryside. I could have bought a book at the stationers' next door … but I couldn't get interested in reading made-up stories when I myself was mixed up in a genuine, tragic tale. And honestly, reading never really appealed to me except when I had no time to devote to it.

Finally, the improbable occurred: the big hand on the clock finished its second appointed turn round, and I could direct myself toward the little street where Mme. Chéron lived.

I soon found myself at a fence that stood before a small, boxy white house. In front was a garden with a little waterless pond and a glass globe standing on a tripod. To excuse the décor, I told myself that this probably wasn't Mme. Chéron's own house, but that of her in-laws, and that the glass globe couldn't be ascribed to her. At the entrance to a little hedgerow, a grubby plaster Atalanta stood, perpetually ready to launch herself into a race. I went up the front steps to a glass-front door, behind which stood the oldest housekeeper in France. Her face, sunk within her bonnet, evaded the eye. She led me into a dim parlor where everything – piano, armchairs, grandfather clock – was draped in slipcovers. The room seemed to sit beneath an invisible candle-snuffer. I sat down on a couch, which, beneath its white slipcover, was littered with little packets of camphor or naphthalene. The only object in the room that wasn't under a protective cover was me. It seemed to me that I was profaning some sort of mystery. I had barged into a place where everything was asleep, and there seemed no reason I shouldn't fall asleep in turn. Little by little, I felt myself merging with the overstuffed piece of furniture, and it was an upsetting shock when the door opened and light once again spilled onto that sleepward journey.

"Oh! You're altogether in the dark, monsieur. I can't believe Emérancie left you in here like this. Why didn't she open the windows?"

And Mme. Chéron, showing no consideration for the drowsy armchairs, pushed the furniture in her path out of the way and made straight for the window. With a spirited gesture, she conquered the groaning ill-will of the window, and opened the obstinate, creaky shutters to the sky. Then she turned around. I found myself in the presence of a young blonde woman, fairly short and slight, with lovely, soft grey eyes and shining teeth. She sat down opposite me, her face full of a seriousness that suited her all the more because you could tell it was not her usual expression.

"Can you believe it," she said, "what a terrible thing! I don't know what to think. What really happened?"

I told her about my visit to Toul, and how I'd learned what she knew now, thanks to the newspapers. She told me all her troubles, expansively: all the irritation that the attitude of her family (for a long time now they'd disapproved of Larcier) was causing her as, with a pitying manner, they triumphed in this tragedy. She found herself in the midst of the same hypocritical hostility that I had just left in the barracks. It was a great comfort to both of us to find each other and to commune in our friendship for poor Larcier.

We were of the same opinion: one really had to acknowledge the mass of evidence that the authorities had collected, but it was impossible for us to believe that Larcier was a criminal.

Unlike me, she hadn't thought of the possibility of an accident. Her impressions were more jumbled. So she took heart when I explained my theory. She too wanted to find Larcier, to speak with him, to hear from him the story of what had passed. It scared us a little that he had not written to us. But, after all, he was trying to escape from a criminal investigation, and it was risky to send news to us. I told Mme. Chéron that I intended to go off in search of my comrade, and that I'd gotten leave to do so.

She thanked me effusively. She had passed some unbearable days, there with her family. She envied me my task, and the scope for movement it gave me. She would have really liked to join me – but how?

I told her: "Couldn't we dream up some sort of trip for you, a visit to one of your friends, so that you could join me and we could go on the mission together?"

She thought for a few moments and lowered her head slightly. It was impossible. Though she did have a friend who lived in Lille, and could claim to be visiting her for a few days … I urged her to put her idea into action. If her friend really cared about her, she could tell the friend the whole story. The friend would be happy to take charge of all the letters she sent to Lille and forward them to her family. At the same time, the two of us could undertake our investigation, following the tracks of our fleeing friend.

I had observed pretty quickly that Mme. Chéron was a little timid, and quite malleable.

She bent to the will of her family, but if a new influence operated more closely on her, her docility would lead her to change masters at once. Though I wasn't very decisive when it came to my own plans, I vigorously urged her to speak with her family. She wanted to wait till evening to raise the subject, but time was pressing. I insisted that she go right up and say why I had come. Nobody needed to know that I was a friend of Larcier's. I was simply an acquaintance of Mme. Tubaud, in Lille, who had commissioned me to invite Mme. Chéron to go at once to the north of France.

Mme. Tubaud was supposed to have said that she was arranging a match between Mme. Chéron and a gentleman that she wanted to introduce to her without delay. We knew that this tactic would impress the family, who were rather anxious to see her get married, the more so because the rumors that were flying about the likely wedding between poor Larcier and Mme. Chéron would vanish of their own accord as soon as she was seen to have accepted another suitor.

"Don't you think it would be a good idea if you ate lunch with us?"

But that idea was wholly inadvisable! They would ask me about the Tubauds … I would chance saying something stupid … Much better for me to take the next train to the next station down the line. Mme. Chéron could take the three o'clock train, and I would join up with her en route.

V

I needed to make a great effort to remember that I was, after all, at a very sad juncture of my life, so that I wouldn't feel too light-hearted while I waited at the little station in Herchis for Blanche Chéron, who left her house two hours after I did. Finally, the train entered the station, and at first I felt anxious when I didn't see her at one of the doors. But then I noticed her straw hat with its red ribbon, her blonde hair, her bright face.

I got into her compartment. She squeezed my hand. We were old friends from that point forward.

As far as Toul, our journey was spent in all kinds of talk about the town where she lived, her widowhood, her youth. At first, we adopted a serious tone, because of the tragic situation that faced us both; but little by little, the melancholy lifted. Nevertheless, when we got to Toul, we felt ourselves becoming solemn. Toul was where the dramatic events occurred, and where we needed to begin our investigation.

I decided first to drop Blanche at the Hotel Lorraine, and then to go to the scene of the crime and see if I could learn whether the official investigation had made any progress.

When I got to the Bonnel house, I found nobody but an elderly town watchman, who had been given the task of watching over the items of evidence that had not yet been removed. These things had been left in the dining room, so that the crime could be reconstructed, if necessary, in the

presence of the presiding magistrate. I couldn't get anything out of the old watchman, who seemed quite uninterested in the Bonnel case. He was concerned mainly with the antics of some street kids who were having fun trying to damage a lamppost further down the street. In the course of leaving the house and going back to the hotel, I met an old woman dressed in black, who lived next door. She had probably seen me the day before, among the people who were surrounding the crime scene. She started to pump me avidly for information about Larcier's life.

She told me that she had seen him go into his cousin's house, two days before, and that the old man had received, just that morning, a sum of money from the butcher Félix, who was a client of his.

Old Bonnel, it seems, served as a kind of banker, investing money on behalf of local small-business owners.

I went to see the butcher, because it would not do to neglect any aspect of the investigation. This butcher, who lived at the end of the town, enthusiastically gave me all the information I asked for. He was a big expansive guy, a real butcher, curly-haired, red in the face, and appropriately fat. He seemed quite happy to have gotten mixed up in the affair. To be sure, he doubted he would ever see his money again; but it was only a matter of some 300 francs that he had taken to M. Bonnel, to buy a few minor foreign bonds, at 25 francs each. M. Bonnel had recommended this little speculation to him. He'd given him the 300 francs in the form of three 100-franc notes … "It could be," he added, "that those three notes will mark the trail of the assassin. I remember that they were marked with blood. I got them from a slaughterhouse, myself, and I almost refused them, they were so badly stained."

I went back to the hotel, fortified with a clue that might set a point of departure for our investigation. Mme. Chéron was waiting for me. Her room already seemed charming, somehow lived-in. It was no longer just a hotel room; the lodging had taken on something of her identity.

Without delay, I told her of the first fruits of my investigation. Then I let her know what I'd decided. To make his getaway, Larcier had to have taken a train from Toul, or from a nearby station. All we had to do was to check first at the Toul station, then at the ones in the vicinity, and ask the ticket-sellers if they'd sold a ticket and, in exchange, had received a bloodstained banknote.

Early that evening we went to the Toul station, without much hope of gleaning any relevant information: it was unlikely that Larcier had taken a train directly from Toul. The ticket-agent was sure that she had not received a stained bill.

It was a little late to continue our investigation that evening. After dinner, we went for a walk around the town; Mme. Chéron didn't know the place at all. Blanche took my arm, and we prolonged our walk as much as we could. We didn't speak much. The charm of the springtime evening struck us both: the unfamiliar little town where we didn't know our way, where we wandered almost at random, slightly concerned that we would get lost, but sure, for all that, that we could find our way again easily.

We went back to the hotel. Blanche was somewhat tired. I saw her as far as the door of her room, and then went to bed.

How my life had changed in the space of two days! So many new things, so many occurrences! Bearable miseries, double-edged joys. Life is so strange! It doesn't budge for months and months, and then all at once, in two or three days, it starts to spin at an incredible rate. Things get crazy – events tumble together – your surroundings change, and your concerns change, utterly, with them. It's like a bend in the road that suddenly reveals an unknown country. The country I saw ahead of me seemed radiant and calm. I had many worries. I just didn't want to notice them. I didn't know where I was going, but the route seemed pleasant enough.

VI

The next morning, I found Blanche in front of a café au lait, in the hotel dining room. We took off together in a car I hired. It was more efficient than the train. Basically, I had to stop at every station, or at least the three or four stations after Toul on the Bar-le-Duc line. If I went by train, I wouldn't be able to get off at each station, reach the ticket office, and give every agent the third degree. And anyway, in these little stations, there often isn't a dedicated ticket seller. It might be the stationmaster's duty, and when a train is in the station, he is usually busy. So it was imperative to get to each station at a time when no train was stopping there. A car was much more convenient. And we would only be going about 20 kilometers from Toul. I'd bought a road map, to help us navigate the countryside, in case the driver wasn't knowledgeable.

We got into the car, outside the hotel. I noticed that Blanche had changed out of her tailored dress. She now wore a light-blue linen dress, and a hat decorated with flowers. She had felt no need to limit herself to a single dress, even on this serious, formal expedition.

The first leg of our journey was fairly long and mostly uphill. We passed through some woods, and the temperature grew chilly. Blanche had been careless enough not to bring a wrap. I saw that she was cold, and I suggested taking off my vest and putting it around her shoulders, but she energetically refused. So I took the liberty of putting my arm around her, to shelter her a little and keep the arm of hers that wasn't against mine warm. We were very nice about it, like pals, no harm in it at all.

I was preoccupied for a while, because I had the crazy notion that Larcier might be hiding in that little forest, and that we would suddenly see him pop up, haggard and emaciated, in the middle of a copse of trees.

When we'd gotten through the woods, the sun, out in force again, warmed us up. But Blanche remained sheltered by my arm. It wasn't till several minutes later that she must have said to

herself that the temperature no longer justified my protective encirclement. She released herself very gently and moved slightly off. I didn't dare hold her.

At the first station, our enquiry got us nowhere. Not only had the agent received no bloodstained bills in the past few days, she hadn't received any bills at all. That cut short any follow-up questions.

We set out on our course again, and the car followed its route for quite a while. We gave the countryside only the occasional indifferent glance. We talked of all sorts of things – of a trip she'd taken to Germany, of my life in the regiment. When we stopped at the next station, we stayed in the car for a few moments, talking. Then I got out to pursue the investigation.

There was nobody in the station. It seemed totally abandoned. As I was walking along the platform, looking for the stationmaster, I saw all at once, off in the distance, a farmer working in a field. He stopped and appeared to look in my direction. I watched him make his way towards me slowly, for several minutes. Finally he got to the station, opened a cupboard and took out a uniform cap – and bolstered with this official emblem, he asked what he could do for me.

He was a man of 45. On his head and on his cheeks, beneath his eyes, he sported white-blond hair, bristly, sticking out like the spines of a hedgehog. After hearing my question, he thought for a long time, then shook his head and answered, "No, no." Then we stood there a few moments without saying anything. I said goodbye and left him. He went back to his field.

The same lack of success awaited us at the next station, where an old woman indulged us so far as to retrieve the only banknote she had in her till. It was quite new, without a single stain.

The next station was located 27 kilometers from Toul and ten kilometers from where we were at the moment. We doubted that Larcier would have gone so far to catch a train. So we decided to return to Toul, and we asked the driver to take a different way back. I had a silent wish that he would take us through some woods again, so that I could repeat the gesture I had been

forced to renounce, protecting my companion with my arm. But he did not give me the chance; he took the main road all the way.

While we were heading back, our conversation was continuous and highly animated. We went over the whole twenty years that had passed before we met each other.

About one in the afternoon, we stopped at a little village where we had trouble finding something to eat, and eventually settled for an omelet cooked in lard and a bit of ham. The local beer, plenty strong, put my companion in high spirits. This interlude tired her a bit, so that, on our return to Toul, at about four in the afternoon, she had to go lie down in her room. For my part, I went over to the Bonnel house, more to kill time than in hopes of finding any new clues.

I found the watchman there, still in the same place, near the garden gate. He was an old fellow with grey hair, and his military uniform had ceased to become him many years ago; he would much sooner have been sitting in shirtsleeves, running up a tab in a café. I hardly dared to ask him if there was any news, he seemed so indifferent to the events that had been all the rage in the area for several days now. Not knowing what to do, I stayed on the road, and keeping my back to Toul, I ended up fifteen hundred meters away at a little café that faced a station.

VII

It was the first station on the way to Paris. I hadn't thought of exploring in that direction, because it seemed so likely that the killer had gone towards Belgium.

I sat in front of the inn and quietly drank a glass of lemonade. I figured it was pointless to ask any questions at the station, and besides, I was a little worn out by getting the same negative replies. I wasn't talking to the same person, but since I was saying the same things, it seemed to me that I was boring people with my repetitiveness. But of course none of the individuals I questioned were aware of my previous questions.

I was seated near the inn door, while the innkeeper drank at a nearby table with a horse-trader from the vicinity, whose carriage was parked along the sidewalk. I was a little tired myself from the long ride, and I gave myself over to my mixed-up thoughts, in which, from time to time, appeared the lovely face of Blanche Chéron …

Then, all of a sudden, some words I caught made me raise my head. I noticed an employee from the little station talking with the innkeeper beside me. Distracted, I hadn't seen him coming from the station. He handed the innkeeper a bloodstained banknote and asked for change. I had that exact amount on me, ready to exchange it for one of those famous banknotes, if I came across it in one of the stations.

Since the innkeeper was fumbling in his till and seemed not to be able to come up with the coins needed, I gave the station employee mine. I took the bloody bill in my hands and asked him how long it had been in his cash-box.

He said, "Well, it was my wife who got it, two days ago, from a gentleman who was about to get on a train. She gave him almost all the change we had, and now we're out of coins."

I lay the bill lovingly in my pocket. Not wanting to let everyone around in on the nature of my investigation, I limited myself to asking the employee if the train for Toul would soon come by. It was a half-hour's wait; the next scheduled train, an express, didn't stop there. I waited till the employee was back in the station, and a few minutes later, casually, I wandered over to the little station and rejoined him on the platform.

I asked him if his wife might be able to give me a description of the mysterious traveler who had changed the banknote.

His wife was busy hanging her washing in the little garden adjoining the station. He went and found her, and she easily recalled the details I needed.

Indeed, the morning after the crime, she had seen a traveler catch the 6:45 local train from Toul to Paris. The man who asked for the ticket had been rather tall: "A little taller than you," she told me.

Which was Larcier's height. She had not seen his face. He seemed to have a cold, she said, and had kept a handkerchief in front of his nose and mouth.

The banknote was thus from Larcier. All I had to do now was return to Toul, go back to the butcher, and ask him if he recognized it as one of the three notes he had taken to old Bonnel on the day before the crime.

In the train back to Toul, I tried to reconstruct Larcier's journey. I doubted that he had gone toward Paris and then doubled back, to throw the authorities off his trail. That was complicated and pointless. I certainly knew that sometimes, in the moments of disorientation that follow their crimes, killers can indulge in all kinds of excessive precautions. But it seemed more natural for Larcier to have taken the local train to the next major station and changed there for the express. Moreover, the ticket he had bought at the little station was for Bar-le-Duc, and the stationmaster's wife had given me a key bit of information: Larcier had first asked for a ticket to Paris, and then changed his mind and asked for one to Bar-le-Duc.

"I had a pretty hard time," she said, "finding the change for a hundred francs. I had enough coins in my till to make the change for a ticket to Paris; but for one to Bar-le-Duc, I needed a lot more coins. I had to use two silver five-franc pieces that I had put aside. They were in my own change-purse, and I didn't want to use them because I was saving them to give to my granddaughter."

In that way good luck, having given me a critical clue in the form of the note stained with blood, gave me another: the five-franc pieces would surely give me a new token by which to follow the tracks of the guilty man. I made my decision. We would leave that very evening, after dinner,

for Bar-le-Duc, and continue our investigation by quizzing the ticket-agent there. That way we could see if a traveler had bought a ticket for Paris using the silver coins. Of course I knew that he might well have paid in other coins, and that if the agent said no, that could still mean that Larcier had headed for Paris.

At the Toul station, I took a car to the butcher, Félix, who positively identified the note that he had given old Bonnel. I got back to the hotel a little later. Blanche was waiting in the salon, and I told her the results of my queries.

VIII

Honestly, I've always lacked self-confidence. I have never thought myself capable of pursuing a difficult line of inquiry all the way to the end. Not just because I doubt my own cleverness, but because I have no faith in human cleverness in general. It always seems to me that the web of events is so complicated that it must thwart any human intelligence. So I had never put much faith in these notorious detectives, who are in any case invented by novelists. A police inspector's best tool is luck. Luck, rather than any skill of my own, had suddenly put me on Larcier's trail. I reflected on that luck then, and my present success gave me no crazy illusions about my future abilities.

I told myself that, after reconstructing a portion of the route followed by the killer, I would soon find myself without direction, at a crossroads where I couldn't even see the roads leading out! Certainly, if I was alone, I would have abandoned this effort, which seemed sure to exhaust my few stores of courage. But luckily, I had a stimulant along the way: the presence of Blanche Chéron, which did a great deal to prevent me from losing heart.

I brought my companion up to date on my discoveries. Not only did my assistant help me considerably in pursuing my task, but that very task strengthened the bonds between us. The search

for Larcier fortified our conversations; we would otherwise have been tetchy and strained. But right from the start, we'd had a common concern, we'd known why we were together. It was like a book that we were reading together – a book all the more engrossing because we were the only ones following its twists and turns. The book wasn't finished, we couldn't read any faster, and unlike so many readers who are pressed for time, we didn't have the option of flipping through the pages to see the end. The great advantage of this preoccupation was that it made me less troubled when I was near Blanche; it gave me an excuse to be with her. I wasn't obliged to woo her, and she was not obliged to play the coquette. We were less distrustful, more uninhibited, and maybe, without our knowing it, secret connections of affection formed all the more quickly between our two souls.

We departed for Bar-le-Duc after dinner. But when we arrived, we could not glean any useful information at the station. There were no more trains at that hour. The ticket-agent had closed her window. We would have to wait till the next day.

Once again, we went for a walk in the streets of a town. We found a café with a floor show: Blanche didn't like it; still, we stayed to the end so we could critique the performance.

Blanche had visited Paris with her husband, and they had seen the shows tourists see, the Théâtre-Français, the Opéra, the Folies-Bergère. They'd had lunch in the Bois de Boulogne, and had seen the Jardin des Plantes. They'd made quick tours through the Louvre and the Cluny Museum. She returned from her trip with distinct satisfaction: she had done Paris.

Her husband had studied at Nancy. He had even passed his diploma exam, after a few tries. He was a good fellow. He didn't talk much. Because he lacked the words to express himself, his feelings, strong though they were, stayed bottled up. They had lived together for eight months. He died of a fever. Her grief was superficial; his death was no trauma to her. Everybody around her seemed to think of M. Chéron's death as a kind of injustice to her. He was a very nice kid, and

everybody was quick to recall his good qualities. For a week or so everybody sang his praises; then they filed him away.

Though one might have wished that he'd left his estate in as neat a condition as everyone first assumed. Towards the end of his life, he had made some investments that were slow to yield returns. His will was in Blanche's favor. She had an income of a few thousands; but getting everything free and clear meant that she had to stay with her husband's family for a while. But she had no great desire to be independent. She was ready to stay with them the rest of her life, if nobody arrived to take her away. She wasn't of a contrary nature, she said. She got angry once in a while, but never for long.

After losing her parents early in life, she had been raised by an aunt whom she loved very much, and who spoiled her terribly. She had learned nothing in school, though she had read a lot; as a result she knew all kinds of things from odd angles, but lacked basic knowledge. She kept saying that she was extremely ignorant, but it wouldn't do to agree too readily with her; in fact, she showed a fair amount of pride when anyone discussed her intellectual gifts. In short, she had a nice feminine intelligence. She had no pretenses, and she understood everything.

When we got back to the hotel, we were speaking in low tones. She was leaning on my arms, and I was stung with tenderness towards her. I would have liked, just out of affection, to touch her temple gently with my lips, and muss up the fine blonde hair there.

After I went to bed, I began again to muse about Larcier and the trail we were following. It seemed to me that I had left Toul a bit hastily. I should have paid a call on the magistrate; certain details needed clearing up. I was really kind of a lousy detective. I looked carefully at every clue in front of me, but I lacked the context that could help me make sense of the investigation. I was always led astray by clever theories, as if truth were always cleverly put together! I overlooked big

strong tracks in the sand, in favor of worrying over little scratches that, in my eccentric opinion, told me which way the criminal had gone.

I was on the point of returning to Toul, which I had left just that morning, when I glanced at a newspaper and saw that it gave some details of the Larcier case.

Old Bonnel's safe and office furniture had been opened, but it was likely that all the killer found there were some securities in Bonnel's name, worthless to the bearer. The killer must have simply taken them indiscriminately, because everything had been emptied out. The furniture had been opened, but not broken into – doubtless with the use of the keys that were in the victim's pocket.

Poor Bonnel must have been murdered right when he was opening the safe, and so the killer had not had to pick the lock.

Now of course this was the opinion of the journalist, or maybe of the magistrate. I had my own ideas, and I was saving them to bring to the attention of the authorities at the proper time.

I knew that Larcier had gone there to claim the money that Bonnel held in trust. It was his; Bonnel was obliged to render it. It was hardly likely, in the circumstances, that Larcier would have wanted to rob the old man, so the real cause of the crime must have been as I imagined: a dispute, a fit of rage, an accident, panic over being believed guilty … but the emptying out of the cabinets and the safe cast doubt on my theory. Why had Larcier taken those documents? Now, it was possible that old Bonnel didn't really have any papers at his home. The investigators could follow up that possibility, by looking at the various banks that Bonnel had dealings with, and get some results that way. But nobody was thinking of that line of approach right now. In the magistrate's opinion, the killer had taken the papers, and there was no reason to think further about it.

Basically, the simplest course for me to follow was what I was already doing – trying to find Larcier – and not to bother with the official investigation.

I got to the Bar-le-Duc station early, and finally located the ticket agent. I asked her if she'd received any five-franc coins. She said no. I followed up by asking her if she had seen a tall man at her ticket window recently, dressed in a soft hat and a big dark overcoat, holding a handkerchief to his face, like someone who has a bad cold.

"Oh, you know," she said, "so many people pass through here! I'd tell you anything I could remember, but I can't remember anything like that. If you keep asking, I might end up imagining that I'd seen someone like that, but honestly, I can't say that I do."

I went back to the hotel. Blanche was waiting for me. I had to admit to her that I had run out of leads for following Larcier.

"I'm pretty sure he went to Paris … but once we get to Paris, where do we start looking for him? Oh well – let's go to Paris! And in any case, before asking for a ticket to Bar-le-Duc at the little station where he changed the hundred-franc note, he asked for a ticket to Paris, and then thought better of it. He is certainly in Paris – or at least he passed through Paris. Let's go to Paris!"

Blanche and I were each thinking: "What does it matter – as long as we travel there together!" But neither of us dared say it aloud. And we scarcely spelled it out even to ourselves.

IX

Before we left Bar-le-Duc, it seemed obligatory to exhaust all possibility of picking up Larcier's trail there. We had no other clues beside his description, and the five-franc coins that he had gotten in change from the agent at the little station. Those two five-franc coins seemed to me a strange, scarce item that a crafty Fate had devised to put me on the guilty man's track. So I decided to concentrate my investigation there. Once again, I questioned the man who ran the station lunch counter, and the boss and waiters at the inn across from the station, trying to learn if Larcier, while

waiting for his connection, might have stopped at either place and made use of his tell-tale ten francs.

But I could find no leads, and was forced to give up that direction of inquiry. We took the train for Paris, and gave ourselves over to chance.

From time to time I said to Blanche: "Let's be methodical and patient." We'd reflect for ten minutes, or perhaps thought we were reflecting, and we'd daydream … and soon our thoughts took other directions. Neither of us were capable of seriously applying ourselves. She was bored, and I lacked confidence. The complexity of life scared me, and I had a strong impression that I would never be able to unravel this mystery.

As long as our investigation had proceeded in a definite direction, Blanche and I felt no inhibitions about being together. But it seemed now as if the pretext that had brought us together was dissolving, to some extent, because we had little hope of finding any trace of Larcier in Paris.

I rummaged through my memory, trying to recall certain conversations I'd had with my friend. Hadn't he told me about some hotel where he stayed when he was in Paris? But it was improbable that he'd think of staying at some hotel where he was known. Still, it wasn't a possibility one could immediately reject.

We left early for Paris. We booked second-class tickets. Blanche advised it. She was keen on sharing the expenses of our journey. At first I refused. But she insisted, so I had to give in and let her pay her share. After all, we were not "together." We were simply traveling in parallel, like two old friends, and no romantic connection gave me any right to pay for her accommodations and travel costs.

"However," I said to her, "you can't have brought very much money with you."

It's strange how the vagaries of a conversation can lead you all at once onto a train of thought. That simple suggestion set in motion a number of recollections that became vital to our investigation.

It's just like when you're looking for a long time for some lost object, and then all at once you find it while looking for something else.

Blanche had answered:

"I don't have any money with me, but I can get some in Paris."

Then she struck her forehead, and said:

"What am I saying – I have 3,500 francs at my disposal in Paris, at an accountant's. I gave Larcier authorization to get that money and bring it to me. Because, you know, he was thinking of spending a few days in Paris. It would be funny if he'd gone to the accountant and gotten that money. I know it's not his money, but if he was panicked by the police pursuing him, I would completely excuse him. In fact, I would have endorsed his decision. He needs to find money wherever he can. He knows I would never disavow him."

We got to Paris, after eating a small box lunch on the train. It was about two o'clock when we got off the train at the Gare de l'Est.

I took Blanche's arm. I was happy to walk with her along the streets where I'd been brought up, in the neighborhood of the Gare de l'Est: rue de Chabrol, rue d'Hanteville, that whole area, very proper and somewhat stuck-up, full of businesses and passengers going to and from the stations: the Gare de l'Est and the Gare du Nord.

Now my family had retired to the country in Burgundy. All the relatives I had in Paris were a few cousins I didn't really care to see.

I made up my mind to lead quite the carefree tourist life with Blanche in Paris.

We went to a hotel in the rue Vivienne, where I had stayed a few times before. Blanche took a room on the second floor. At first they offered me a room near hers, but I declined, and asked for a different room, one floor above. There was already too much intimacy between us …

But we had made up our minds, once and for all, to link arms as we walked, like old companions.

We'd walked to the hotel, after giving our bags to a porter who plied his trade with his handcart, in front of the station.

Then, after checking into our rooms, we went out on the boulevard and sat at a sidewalk café. They brought us ices, and we sat there in front of them, in the unconscious happiness of being together. Then Blanche said to me:

"We ought to go see that accountant. If Larcier went to him for the money, we could pick up his trail. If not, I could withdraw the money myself. I could use it right now."

But first she had to remember the man's name. It was something like "Morilleau," but she wasn't sure. He lived in the rue de la Victoire; she remembered the address, which was nearby.

We took a stroll over there.

M. Morilleau was actually named Moriceau. He lived in a low-ceilinged apartment off a courtyard, a collection of several dark rooms crowded with files. He let us in himself. He was a sleek and shiny little man, but with a certain style; still, his clothes were more notable for their cut than for their cleanness. He wore a wide black necktie. Fine white specks sugared his neck and shoulders. A double chain of gold draped his vest, which was stuffed with a well-satisfied belly. Blanche Chéron explained the purpose of our visit. As soon as she began, M. Moriceau raised his eyebrows in amazement. He no longer had the money; Larcier had sent someone to collect it. He explained that, a few days earlier – he told us the date, and we noted that it was the day after the

crime – he had received a visit, not from M. Larcier himself, but from someone representing him, who had produced creditable authorization.

X

"This M. Marteau," said M. Moriceau, consulting one of his files, "showed me the authorization, along with the authorization that you, madame, had given to M. Larcier. Whereupon I gave him the 3.500 francs."

Clearly, M. Moriceau was not aware of the crime in Toul. He might have read about it in the newspapers, but the name Larcier hadn't caught his attention, and he had no idea he was giving money to a murderer.

I asked to see the documents. I saw Larcier's signature on one of them. It was well-shaped; his hand hadn't shaken when he signed it.

We took leave of M. Moriceau, making our excuses, and wandered at random for a while in the streets, musing about what we had learned.

We had learned one new thing: Larcier had clearly passed through Paris. He had employed someone named Marteau, and we might be able to find Marteau.

But what hotel had Larcier stayed at? I had been too distracted to ask M. Moriceau if he by any chance knew which one.

I asked Blanche to wait for me, and I went back to the accountant's place. I met him just as he was going out. He wore a very striking high hat, and white gloves that were still fairly presentable.

At the time when Marteau had come from Larcier, looking for the money, M. Moriceau realized that he didn't have that much on hand. He proposed bringing it to Marteau at his hotel.

Marteau hesitated. He said that Larcier had to leave Paris very soon. Finally, at M. Moriceau's insistence, Marteau gave him the address of a hotel. It was the Hotel Savarin, in the rue Saint-Denis. An hour afterwards, M. Moriceau sent his housemaid to the hotel with the money. She found Marteau there, and he gave her a receipt.

I asked M. Moriceau what Marteau looked like. He was an elderly person, the type of the aging businessman, haughty, the kind who made a living collecting debts. M. Moriceau did not know him, but he ought to be easy enough to find.

Supplied with this information, I rejoined Blanche. We told ourselves proudly that we were on the trail now. We were happy to be a step closer to the truth, and finally to have a good pretext to spend time together in Paris.

We went at once to the Hotel Savarin. It's a little hotel with a narrow front, like so many in the city center. The office, just off a little lobby, was on the ground floor, to the left of the foyer.

I took a room on the third floor. We agreed that Blanche would return later to the hotel on the rue Vivienne, which was quite comfortable; she would be safe there. If I needed to, I could stay here at the Savarin.

I went into the lobby, assuming the air of somebody who was vexed, in order to have an excuse to stay there for a few moments and start up a conversation with an old white-bearded gentleman, somewhat disabled, who turned out to be the landlady's father.

Blanche sat next to me. So as not to be rude to the bushy-browed man, we listened patiently to everything he had to say. He seemed preoccupied with some street repairs that were taking place at a nearby corner. He said they were unhealthy, that they brought all sorts of fevers up out of the ground. In short, he was a cantankerous old guy, who claimed to be quite a radical; but as soon as you began to agree with him, he tacked around and supported the government. We chatted a while about politics, and then I let fall, innocently:

"Have you seen someone named Marteau around the hotel?"

"Yes, two or three days ago. He didn't stay long. He came one evening, and then left the next morning, right after somebody brought him some money. Now, where did he go?"

He came up with that question himself, sparing me the trouble of asking him. Just then, a lanky bellhop with a gloomy expression passed by in the hallway. He called out:

"Adolphe! Where did M. Marteau leave for, do you know?"

"When he sent his luggage to the station, he said 'Gare de Lyon'," Adolphe replied. "But once they were a little ways down the street, he told the driver 'Gare du Nord.' I know because the driver who took him is an acquaintance of mine. He's the husband of a greengrocer in the rue des Petits-Champs. M. Marteau asked me to call him a taxi. So naturally I went and found my pal, who was waiting in his car outside his wife's shop. I sent the car over here."

Adolphe cheered up quite a bit as he spoke. I asked him to try to find the driver. Without a reply, he left at once. We figured he was off to find the driver at his usual spot.

If he wanted to cover his tracks, Marteau had clearly made an error by asking a bellhop to find him a driver. Very often these lads prefer to get some friend of theirs, from the station or maybe from in front of a wine shop.

Before too long, a fat man in a blue cloak arrived. It was the greengrocer's husband. He must have led much of his life parked outside the shop for hours at a stretch. The flag on the meter of his cab was fitted with a black sleeve which he could employ when he didn't want to take passengers. He wasn't out hustling for work. He had probably chosen the career of cab driver because you have to do something, and driving sounded respectable enough.

He told us quite willingly that he had taken Marteau to the Gare du Nord, the intercity platforms. He didn't know exactly where Marteau was headed, but maybe if we went back to the

station with him, we could find a porter who would remember taking Marteau's suitcase, which was fairly heavy.

He gave us Marteau's description: a fairly elderly man, tall and thin.

For a moment, I had the idea that Marteau might not exist: that Larcier might have used makeup to give himself an older appearance. But I soon rejected that melodramatic theory. To design a new look, make himself up, and adopt the disguise in public, was something out of my friend's ken. Marteau was surely somebody in Larcier's employ. It was quite possible that Larcier had gone abroad, to England for instance, and that he'd met Marteau in Paris, and charged him with collecting the money from M. Moriceau. Marteau had then gone to join up with Larcier in London.

How did Larcier know this Marteau? He had never mentioned him to me, though it was very possible that he knew people in Paris that he'd never told me about. After all, our friendship began only when I joined the regiment. Even the most trusting people, ones who tell their friends everything, don't mention some of their acquaintances till circumstances suggest it.

XI

We arrived at the Gare du Nord, and, led by the stout driver, who was delighted to form part of our investigative team, we questioned some of the station employees.

The first, a little man with a black moustache whom the driver was sure was the one who had taken Marteau's suitcase, didn't remember anything. We kept peppering him with questions, and finally came up with one thing for certain: he absolutely had not gone work on the day when Marteau had caught the train, and thus wasn't at the station. This statement, which undermined what he'd affirmed, didn't deter our driver, because he next indicated, even more confidently, a guy with red, curly hair and a sleepy expression, who was standing near the baggage window with his arms hanging loose.

The redhead looked at me with a stupid expression. He stuck strictly to answering the questions I asked. Meanwhile another employee, who had come over to listen to our conversation but had so far escaped the notice of the driver, suddenly recalled the traveler, and described him in scrupulous detail: how he'd lifted the man's heavy suitcase, apparently bulging with papers, onto the ten o'clock train to Boulogne.

This statement, though he'd done nothing to elicit it, gave our driver an air of triumph. He now looked on the redhead with some contempt, without seeming to take into account that it was reasonable for the guy not to remember anything about something he'd had no part in to begin with.

Meanwhile, I went to the London ticket window, seeking some confirmation. I asked the agent if she remembered selling a second-class ticket on the given day, to a tall, elderly man whom I described to her. I also asked – remembering what had happened at the little station near Toul – if she had received one or two five-franc pieces in payment. I thought Larcier might have given them to Marteau. But the agent remembered nothing.

But anyway, any information she could have given me would only have corroborated the more detailed clues I'd gotten from the station employee.

Blanche, during this whole process, waited in the car. I went to find her and apprised her of the results of my most recent investigation. On the spot, we decided to go to London. Not that such a plan was without its difficulties, above all because she and I barely spoke any English. And we really had very feeble clues with which to trace Marteau.

That was the moment when, worn out by the chase, I felt the need to enlist someone to help us. Though I had only scant confidence in the infallible skills of detectives, I still felt I needed to call on the talents and experience of a professional … who knew how to speak English.

I had an old school friend in the Ministry of the Interior who had connections in the Sûreté. He could give me the address of an agent who took on private cases. I could also ask him for a

contact in the War Department, because I was going to have to extend my leave. To fund the new expenses that our investigation entailed, I wrote to a notary in Chalon-sur-Saône, where I had some securities on deposit, asking him to send me money.

I still remember the panicked letter I got back a few days later, enclosing the 2,000 francs I had asked for.

The notary could never understand why I, a simple sergeant, would be heading for London. He didn't want to express his suspicions openly, but I could tell that he was afraid I was deserting, so he insisted, without saying why, that I mustn't stay away from France for long.

Blanche and I spent the evening at the theater, and I escorted her back to her room at the hotel in the rue Vivienne. I myself went to the hotel in rue Savarin, because I still hoped to pick up more information about Marteau's stay there.

I didn't go to visit my friend at the Interior ministry till the next morning, at ten o'clock.

He set about my requests so briskly that right after lunch, a Sûreté agent joined Blanche and me at the rue Vivienne hotel.

His name was M. Galoin. I sized him up the way you do when you go to a new doctor and are anxious to see whether you're going to have a good or bad feeling about him.

I'd thought quite a bit about this detective, trying to imagine what he'd be like. I was afraid some dry, pretentious policeman would show up, doing everything by the book. But weren't those the best men for the job? They could bring to bear a careful system passed down by generations of cops, whose combined experience is richer and more powerful than even the inventive initiatives of a single clever man.

On the other hand, I was afraid that some of these functionaries lacked the intelligence even to apply their own system. The way they're recruited offers few rewards, because their profession

comes in for so much criticism. And at that, the pool of applicants for the Sûreté is not drawn from all intelligent people belonging to all classes of society. The field is much narrower.

But I was fairly satisfied with my first impression of M. Galoin.

He was a man of thirty-five, full beard, straight brown hair combed forward. I am prone to letting my first impressions of people be guided by their beard and hair. I find information there akin to what graphology furnishes, except that in my case my reactions are somewhat automatic. I instinctively distrust men whose hair is too well combed, who part it too carefully, who style it too precisely. It seems to me that their concerns are rather childish.

Along the same lines, I prefer either a full beard or a clean shave to stylish combinations of beard and whiskers.

XII

M. Galoin was neat and took care of his appearance, but unpretentiously. When he met me, he said simply:

"I'm the Sûreté agent you asked for."

He didn't pull a notebook out of his pocket and start jotting things down; he just asked me what I knew about the crime at Toul and the departure of Marteau.

From time to time, he nodded, not with clerical gravity, but with the satisfaction of a man taking in a detail useful to his investigation.

I got the feeling that he liked his work. But he liked it simply, unselfconsciously. He asked me if I intended to go to London, but told me that wasn't necessary; I could spare myself the bother.

But when he saw that I was intent on going:

"All things considered, I would be just as happy if you came along. I can't ask you now all the questions that might come to mind, and I wouldn't be upset to have you along so that I could ask you, from time to time, for supplementary information about Larcier and the rest of the case. We can't anticipate in advance everything we might want to know. It'll come to us little by little."

M. Galoin didn't explain things to you in order to enumerate the beauties of his system. He did so to be polite, and not to present an obscure, esoteric manner. He kept you abreast of the workings of his mind – but at the same time, as I was to learn, he didn't tell you absolutely everything. He kept quite a few things to himself. He explained to me later on that he avoided putting forth half-formed hypotheses, for fear that some sign of disbelief or disapproval from his listeners would lead him to abandoning some line of thought that might, after all, turn out to be correct.

"You tell somebody an idea," he said to me, "and the person you're talking to doesn't seem to be of your opinion. You don't ask yourself if they'd really thought it through before disagreeing, and in spite of yourself you let their attitude influence you, and sometimes you give up on your idea. You shouldn't."

I asked M. Galoin when we would leave for London. It was impossible for him to leave before four o'clock the next afternoon.

Was it a good idea to let Marteau have so much of a head start? Galoin told me that he wasn't worried. His assurance gave me all the more confidence, because I had already learned that he didn't express himself with such authority unless he was convinced.

So it wasn't till the next afternoon, at four, that we met again, on the train to Boulogne.

Blanche and I were very happy to be traveling in the company of the detective.

She asked him about his life, with the charming indiscretion that belongs to women who can easily get away with it.

M. Galoin told us cheerfully how he'd been treasurer of a school. He had some stories to tell … one time he had "borrowed" from the cash drawer and hadn't been able to restore the sum in time. Things had worked out; he had connections. He had lost his place as treasurer, but thanks to the same connections, had been able to get a job with the Sûreté, who sent him on missions for hire.

He'd been doing that work for four years, and had already rendered some very important services, notably in tracking down a band of counterfeiters and later, shining some light on the complex financial dealings of a large corporation that was in trouble.

I asked him if the Sûreté really employed many brilliant detectives.

He said that he'd met some intelligent men there, maybe a little too complacent, maybe not possessing all the qualities of genius that they ascribed to themselves, but who nevertheless had a remarkable ability to set people talking.

"That's something I lacked when I began this new career," M. Galoin told me. "I didn't dare speak to people. I was always afraid of saying the wrong thing when interviewing somebody. But things worked out. Eventually I learned how ask questions, how to get people to feel positively happy about being interrogated. It comes with practice, that's for sure."

Blanche was surprised that he wore a full beard. That would seem to make it harder for him to disguise his appearance.

"I very rarely have any need to do that," M. Galoin told her. "Up till now I haven't had any assignments where I've had to change the way I looked. And besides, I'm no master of disguise, as you can tell. I've always been used to having a beard. I have a pretty normal face, almost boring, I daresay. I don't have – or at least I don't think I have – the face of a cop."

There were only the three of us in the compartment. The train rapidly descended the slope near Chantilly. M. Galoin traded his bowler hat for a soft cap, and moved over to the corner of the compartment to read a newspaper. Blanche and I, each in our own corner, looked at him curiously.

Blanche asked him point-blank:

"Are you married, sir?"

He put down his newspaper, smiled a little at my friend's frankness, and then said:

"No, ma'am."

Blanche caught the intent of the smile quite plainly and blushed, though she didn't seem to want to be caught doing it.

"That must make it easier to travel like this, when you're free …"

The conversation died out.

M. Galoin started reading again, but without concentrating; after a while he put down the newspaper and asked me some questions about the case we were involved in.

He seemed very interested in the fact that the body hadn't been recovered. He asked me several questions about Larcier's uniform, which had been found in the garden. Then he went back to his reading.

"Why did you ask those questions?" said Blanche, whose indiscretion was really becoming somewhat embarrassing.

"Just to find out," was all M. Galoin said, though he smiled a little to dispel the brusqueness of his reply.

"I'm wondering," I said to him, "why Larcier, who doesn't know English, would go to London instead of to Belgium. Doesn't that surprise you?"

"No," said M. Galoin. "For the moment, I'm not thinking about Larcier, I'm thinking about finding Marteau. You can't do two things at once."

"Forgive me for asking all these questions."

"No, go ahead, go ahead!" he said. "It doesn't bother me at all. I make my living asking questions, and it would be remarkable if I put up a fuss about answering them. I wouldn't be setting a good example."

"All right then, I want to ask you whether you have any idea how to find Marteau in London. It seems to me terribly hard. Of course I know that there are hotels that French people prefer; but if Marteau speaks English, which seems likely, and if he wants to follow Larcier's instructions and escape notice, I think he'd probably head for an English hotel where you don't usually find French visitors, and where he wouldn't come to the attention of the French police. And moreover, are we sure that Marteau is going to be in London?"

"I guess we're going to see," said M. Galoin, evasively.

It seemed to me that he probably had some clues, though he said he knew nothing. I told myself that at that very moment he was brooding over one of his nascent ideas, but didn't want to let on, lest he weaken the confidence he was beginning to have in it.

We stopped talking about the Larcier case. I drew closer to Blanche, and we set about talking in low tones, not without casting a sidelong glance at M. Galoin once in a while. We felt inhibited with each other. There was something unspoken between us. If a third party hadn't been there, we might have been untroubled, but since our intimacy was subject to the investigative eye of M. Galoin, we weren't as relaxed as we might have been.

XIII

Blanche had never been overseas, and she was delighted to be going to London. The weather was lovely, and all signs foretold a pleasant crossing.

She and I sat in rocking-chairs on the deck, while M. Galoin strolled around smoking his pipe.

"He's looking everything up and down," said Blanche.

"No," I said, "he's not looking at anything at all. Just because he's a Sûreté inspector, he doesn't feel obliged to spend his energy fruitlessly in keeping an ear to the ground. He's simply relaxing."

I saw that my blonde friend held fast to the typical romantic idea of a detective always on the alert. M. Galoin scared her, and amused her at the same time.

The trip from Folkestone to London passed without incident. M. Galoin left us at Charing Cross Station, after making an appointment with us for dinner at a hotel that he recommended.

It was a newly-built French hotel in a little street near Leicester Square.

Blanche was wide-eyed as we crossed London by car. I was completely happy to see her next to me, marveling, astonished. I was also completely happy to be alone with her. It seemed to me that we had recovered our intimacy, which had been briefly troubled by the presence of M. Galoin.

We went to drop our bags at the hotel, and then took a walk on Coventry Street and through Piccadilly, waiting for dinnertime.

That evening, we met up with M. Galoin. He seemed in good spirits, but a little excited. He explained that he was always that way when he was following a trail.

Because Blanche was worn out after the journey, she went up to bed almost immediately after dinner. M. Galoin and I walked up and down in front of the hotel. Then we went over to Leicester Square and walked around it three or four times. M. Galoin talked about London, which he liked very much.

"Unfortunately, I can never come here just to walk around. I always have some job that demands my attention, but it would be so entertaining just to wander in London."

I didn't like to ask him what progress he'd made, but he brought up the subject himself.

He said: "You know that between our arrival in London and our dinner, in just three hours, I talked with quite a few people."

And then, without a break in thought:

"I can't remember if there was a doorbell on the little garden door in Toul. I can visualize the hinges on the left-hand side, but I can't tell whether there was a little mechanism in the upper part of the door to ring a bell with when entering."

I looked at him, a little dumbfounded.

"You know the garden in Toul?"

"Yes," he said. "I went there, the day before yesterday. That's why we left so late. I didn't know how the investigation had been conducted, out there. Casually … a bit casually. They didn't even go up to the attic, where there was a chest full of interesting old papers. It was those papers that gave me some idea of where to make inquiries in London. I saw what connections old Bonnel had here. I saw that he'd been in contact with someone named Hilbert, a London businessman."

"So you think that Larcier, after finding that information in the papers he took away with him, got in touch with this Hilbert?"

M. Galoin did not answer. He just made an equivocal gesture which I did not understand. I was a little surprised, because it seemed that he was proceeding with great certainty right now in unraveling the mystery.

"The hell of it is," he went on, "that Hilbert doesn't live at the address I found in those papers in the attic, any more. They're fairly old documents, from ten or twelve years ago. Over that stretch, Hilbert has moved, probably twice. I don't know exactly where he is, but I know he's alive, and in London. The address shown in the Toul papers is a little street near Ludgate Hill. I went there this afternoon. Hilbert left a long time ago, and at first I couldn't find anyone who remembered him. It wasn't till after some time that I knocked at random on a door off the stairway

on the third floor, and I found myself in the presence of an elderly insurance agent who recalled Hilbert, and could give me, not the man's address, but that of a tobacconist in Fleet Street, where Hilbert had been a customer and befriended the owner. I went to Fleet Street. The tobacconist had sold up a while ago. His successor had no idea where he lived, but he gave me the address of somebody else who knew where the tobacconist was now. You have to have patience, you see. This person wasn't at home this afternoon. I'm certain to see her tomorrow morning, and I am confident I'll find the tobacconist later in the day. I think the tobacconist will be quick to give me Hilbert's address, and once I've located Hilbert, I will soon find … Anyway, we're not far from a solution."

"But do you think," I interrupted, "that Larcier is still in London?"

M. Galoin made his equivocal gesture again. He was like that every time I talked about Larcier, as if he seemed to have forgotten completely who we were actually looking for.

I told myself: "Here's a guy who doesn't make matters too complicated. First he wants to find Marteau, and he knows that when he has Marteau, Larcier can't be far away."

"I'm going to be very busy tomorrow," M. Galoin went on, "which will allow you to make a more thorough tour of London with Mme. Chéron. She's a charming lady!"

Did M. Galoin know how things really stood between Blanche Chéron and me? Was he up to date on Blanche's relations with Larcier?

We walked on for a few moments in silence, and during that time I asked myself if I should enlighten my companion on that score.

So I told him how it was – how Blanche and I had been brought together by our mutual desire to find Larcier, and what tender bonds of affection united Blanche and my poor friend.

M. Galoin listened to me silently, and then said:

"Your friend, that woman – she really loves the young man?"

"I believe so," I answered.

"Ah," he said simply, with a dreamy air. Then he added:

"All the more reason that she should gradually get used to the idea that she is not going to be able to resume the kind of attachment that she and Larcier once had."

"But I think that despite Larcier's crime, Blanche still has a deep sympathetic attraction to Larcier."

"Uh-huh," said M. Galoin, ever-mysteriously. "But at the end of the day, suppose that she can never see Larcier again. Maybe it would be better for her to get used to that idea right now, to reassure her that she can find consolation elsewhere. If one is very kind to her, one could, without being too blatant, accustom her to the idea of being separated from him …"

I wasn't quite sure what the inspector was trying to say. I wondered if his words held a certain irony. Maybe he had noticed the almost tender familiarity that had developed between Blanche and me. Maybe he wanted to say that she had already found the consolation he was talking about.

Our conversation ended there. I was a little tired, and M. Galoin and I headed back to the hotel.

XIV

When I got up the next morning, M. Galoin had already left. He had left me only a brief message, saying that he certainly wouldn't be back before evening. I found Blanche in the foyer of the hotel, and I told her how the inspector, the night before, had described his trip to Toul and his pursuits in London.

Blanche listened to me fervidly. Finally, she saw M. Galoin taking on the traditional role of the detective. I didn't tell her anything about the part of the conversation that concerned her. You can imagine that I would be embarrassed to tell her anything about that.

We went out together into London, and went for a walk together in the Zoo. I really felt good walking at Blanche's side, step for step. When she slowed down a little, it was a good pretext to take her arm and draw her closer to me.

I didn't want to think about what might happen once we found Larcier. I didn't want to think about leaving Blanche, about not being able to spend the whole day with her, as had been my delectable routine for several days now. Once, when we were walking side by side down a deserted path, I looked at her. She lifted her eyes. They met mine. It was as if we'd touched. Our eyes, abashed, fell away at once, almost as if injured, and we walked on for a little while in silence. We came to a bend in the path where several people were walking. It was at once a relief and a disappointment not to be alone anymore; but I knew well, and she must have known too, that the next time we were alone, we would be struck by the same intimate embarrassment again. We got a cab and left the Zoo, but though we seemed alone in the cab, we weren't really: there were lots of people around, and it was an open car.

The cab let us out in Regent Street, and we got out to look at the shops. Every one of them fascinated Blanche.

And that's when I told myself that, sooner or later, we were going to find Larcier. Even though nothing serious had passed between Blanche and me, I felt a kind of regret. Who knows? Maybe we were just about to meet our friend. London is huge, but actually, the quarter where French people gather is very compact, and despite the precautions that Larcier was obliged to take, there would be nothing odd about him being drawn to that part of town, where he would naturally encounter so many people from the Continent.

As I was thinking that we might run into Larcier right then and there, I felt a shiver: someone was calling me by name.

I saw an elegant young blond man in front of me, and it took me a moment to recognize him. It was M. de Simond, a lieutenant in my regiment, who was a racing fan and had come to London to attend the meet at Epsom.

"But what are you doing here, my good man?" he asked, after greeting Blanche Chéron with a scrupulously polite nod of his head.

A little embarrassed, I explained the purpose of our trip.

He said that I might be wrong to put myself to so much trouble; that I would do better to return to the regiment and my comrades, and start my usual life again, so that this terrible business could fade away little by little.

"I hardly have to tell you that everybody's quite stirred up against Larcier over there," he said. "But also a little against you. I don't know exactly what took place among the sergeants, but in our mess, we heard rumors. You know how officers talk with their staff sergeants in the stables. So when we all get together for dinner, we're up to date on what's on everyone's mind.

"When people say that hanging is too good for Larcier, that seems quite right to me. I know everyone tends to gang up against an outcast, but after all, he's a criminal, a major criminal, and anything one can say about him would have some justice in it. But what truly bothers me, what bothers several of us, is to see that you're being bundled up together with him. I'm being a little blunt, I know.

"Because I've kept a good impression of you, you know? I supervised part of your training, and you reported to me for two months when I commanded the cadet brigade. I'm not trying to flatter you, but I've always considered you a good lad capable of making an excellent sergeant, and even, if you had a notion of preparing for the military academy … So I'll allow myself to say that I'm

not happy with the things I've been hearing about you. Of course nobody's making specific allegations. Nobody claims that you were Larcier's accomplice. But people talk about you in a hostile way, all the more so when you take into account the tone of their voice. If you were back there, my friend, I am sure that would change things. While you're away, people keep saying you've gone who knows where, searching for Larcier … I've even heard people insinuate that you know quite well where he is, and that you've gone straight there to meet him. Nobody's come right out and said that you're in the process of sharing the spoils of his crime with him, but nobody's denying it, either.

"She's really nice, that little woman," he continued *sotto voce*, gesturing toward Blanche, who had stopped several paces away to allow us to talk more at our ease, and stood looking into a shop window with keen attention.

I nodded without replying. I wasn't of a mind to give M. de Simond any details about Blanche.

"All joking aside," M. de Simond went on, "you really don't know where Larcier is?"

"No, Lieutenant," I said, "I really don't."

"Very good, my friend. Believe me – don't hesitate. Come straight back, you know. You have to take public opinion into account, to some extent. As soon as people start to say bad things about you, and form a bad opinion, it's very difficult for your friends to steer them back to their way of thinking. So come back to Nancy."

I listened to what the lieutenant was saying. He expressed himself like a man of the world, someone of middling intelligence who liked to say wise-sounding things. So he busied himself with this officious manner of speaking, while he was killing time waiting for lunch and post-time.

He asked me if I was going to Epsom that afternoon. He had lost £200 there the day before. He talked about the wonders of the Empire and the Alhambra, and invited me to come see him at the Hotel Carlton, if I was going to be in London for another few days.

I saw that he was not all that invested in the advice and counsel he'd given me. I was grateful to him. All the same, as we parted, I was irritated with the sergeants of my regiment. It had been some time now since I'd left the garrison, and M. de Simond had refreshed my memories of it.

To tell the truth, I wasn't annoyed with what they were saying about me. But their smug, malicious hatred of Larcier filled me with aversion. And I now had an even more burning desire to find Larcier, and get some explanation of his crime from him. But would I be able to confound all his ill-wishers?

Blanche and I had lunch at a busy, picturesque restaurant in the Strand, and we had fun making our ill-fated attempts to have the English waiters serve us just what we wanted.

Then we went and spent part of the day in the National Gallery, and since it was a Wednesday, we went to the theater for a matinee.

London wore us out a bit. So after the matinee, at about 5:30, instead of continuing our walk in Regent Street and Piccadilly, we went back to the hotel, as if automatically, to find out (as we put it) if there was any news.

Once there, I decided to write a letter to my family. Because I had no stationery, Blanche invited me to her room to get some.

It was a large bright room with two windows and a big brass bed, an English armoire in waxed walnut, and several chairs in faux-Empire style.

Instead of writing, we each sat down in an armchair. After our weariness cleared a little, we noticed that we were alone, and our inhibitions recommenced.

Blanche got up, and went over and opened a little writing-desk. I got up too, went over to her, and stood beside her, not saying anything. Then all at once I put my hand behind her head and my lips to the temple that was covered in fine blonde hair.

Scarcely had I given her this furtive kiss than we stared at each other like a pair of guilty people. I felt the strain of great emotion. I went back and sat in one of the armchairs. She sat in the other. I looked at her and said:

"Forgive me! I can't stay silent any longer. Whatever is going to happen will happen. One can't be near a woman like you for hours at a time and come away unscathed. I've gotten used to you. I know that I love you. That is, I know it now, but I've felt it for a long time."

"Oh, that's very bad. Very bad!"

I supposed myself to be tortured and unhappy, but I wasn't sure about that, because I could tell that Blanche was listening to me. I also had an impression that I almost didn't want to acknowledge, and that was something like a feeling of great joy. I loved Blanche. It seemed that she loved me, too. But what good is joy if you can't really discern it? Then, from the moment you feel tortured and unhappy, you really are.

I got up after a split-second. I squeezed Blanche's hand, not daring to bring it to my lips, and I asked her for permission to go, because I was too upset.

I went down the staircase and out of the hotel. I went as far as Trafalgar Square, without realizing it. I took stock of what had happened, and found myself despicable when I thought how I had betrayed poor Larcier. I thought that Blanche and I must separate, and conceal the secret of our weakness in the depths of our hearts.

I was still young enough then to feel very grand, for a few moments, at the thought of such a sacrifice. But I knew too well that the moral exhilaration of such a noble sacrifice would be brief, and I already envisioned a time when, separated forever from Blanche, I would lead a sad and

desolate existence. Regimental life was hateful to me, but on the other hand, what would I do as a civilian?

I had never lived alongside a woman for such an extended period. In addition, I had never found anyone whose personality was more to my taste. Up till now, I had been contented enough with my life because I had never had this experience, but now I could not do without it. I was like some poor person who can put up with the cold as long as he never gets too close to a fire.

Now that Blanche had come into my life, and I had known the rare charm of having a companion - that particular companion - it was impossible to resume my old existence.

Blanche and I met up again at a table in the hotel restaurant. I offered her my hand; she extended her hand to me, icily. We sat on opposite sides of the table without saying anything, waiting for M. Galoin.

Someone brought us a letter from him. He was not going to make it to dinner. He told us to eat without waiting for him. He would eat somewhere else and be back at the hotel before nine. And he simply added, "Things are going well."

"For him to write that," I said in altered tones, "he must be very near completing his task."

"Yes," said Blanche. "When he has doubts, he doesn't go that far."

We talked of this and that, in neutral tones – quite changed, quite false. In fact, we scarcely said anything before M. Galoin arrived. A little before nine, I saw him in the courtyard of the hotel; he was headed for the dining room. He came in, and all at once his beaming expression caused Blanche and me great anguish. Larcier was found, our misfortune had arrived, the moment to obey the call of duty …

M. Galoin sat down and said to me:

"It could be that I'll have need of you tonight for a showdown. I sent a telegram to Paris. Paris telegraphed the magistrate in Toul, and I'm waiting for an arrest warrant to arrive at any

moment. We'll arrest the killer under English law: that is, we'll place him in custody and wait for the courts here to weigh in on the validity of the arrest. The important thing is that he'll be under lock and key."

Blanche and I listened to him breathlessly. Could it be? Had we engaged this policeman in Paris just so he could arrest our friend? Had we taken over the role of the police in forcing Larcier to pay for his crime? I gazed at M. Galoin, uncomprehendingly.

He knew why we had gone in search of Larcier. I had thoroughly explained to Rocheton, my friend at the Interior Ministry, that I wanted a detective to help me do some research, but that it wouldn't do to make it an official investigation …

I looked at M. Galoin, and not knowing what else to say:

"I don't want anyone to arrest Larcier!"

That's when he looked at me – and I will never forget that moment – and said quite simply:

"It's not a matter of arresting your friend Larcier. It's a matter of arresting a murderer. We have to arrest Bonnel."

"Bonnel?"

"Yes, Bonnel. The man who killed Larcier."

XV

We fell silent. M. Galoin told us the following story:

"When I got to Toul, I went at once to the scene of the crime, and I asked the neighbors to get the police commissaire, and to tell him I'd been sent by the Sûreté. He came fast enough, and we went over the crime scene together. That's when I found those papers I told you about, in the attic. I didn't yet attach any importance to them. I didn't realize their value till I looked at Larcier's clothes. The clothes were being kept at the courthouse, with the other evidence. After some

difficulty, I got permission from the magistrate to look meticulously at those clothes, or rather at scraps of them – because I have to add an interesting detail here, something the newspapers didn't mention. The tunic was cut to pieces. I examined the shreds of cloth that were attached, here and there, to the lining. I was struck by a detail that I believe escaped the sagacity of the magistrate: the clothes had been well-scrubbed, but especially on the side that was lined with grey satin. There was no visible blood there, but I could see a light brown outline that the dampness had left behind,. So I deduced that the lining of the clothes had become stained with blood.

"Why would a murderer have gotten stained like that? I reconsidered the absence of the corpse, and then I raced back to my hotel, where I looked at some of the papers I had uncovered in the attic.

"It was in those papers that I learned the names of some of Bonnel's correspondents, particularly that of Hilbert, and I was sure I had got a handle on things.

"Among the addresses, I also saw those of two or three Paris banks.

"I took the night train, so that I could get to Paris bright and early, because we had to leave for London at four o'clock. If my investigation hadn't been so far advanced by then, I would have asked you to postpone your journey, because I needed to do certain things in Paris.

"Thanks to two or three visits I made before meeting you at the Gare du Nord, I was able to reconstruct Bonnel's life.

"I didn't let the magistrate in Toul know of my theories, because he had his own ideas, and you can't go around contradicting people. But I was dead sure.

"From what you told me, I was sure that Larcier had gone to his uncle to claim his inheritance. My research showed that Bonnel was nearly broke. I was able to reconstruct his life, for the past two or three years, in some detail.

"The thing that trips up scoundrels like Bonnel is that they're not altogether scoundrels. It's more that they're careless, rash, or sometimes just unlucky, than that they're really villainous.

"Sixteen years ago, old Bonnel had been enticed by one of his friends to enter into a financial dealing that should have brought astonishing success. In one day, he lost 50,000 francs. He was convinced he could get them back, but they constituted part of Larcier's trust fund. To get back those 50,000 francs he had so disastrously lost, Bonnel threw himself into speculations for the next 16 years. Not always going downhill, because if that was the case, he might have stopped; but with good luck and bad luck by turns. And even at the best of times, he was still so far from breaking even that he didn't dare quit, and had to try again to win back what he needed to recoup the losses.

"After twelve years of struggle, the young Larciers' capital was completely gone. For four years, Bonnel had borrowed money to send Mme. Larcier and her children the interest they needed to live on.

"From that point, Bonnel tried all kinds of schemes, finding clients who would entrust him with money that he hazarded, as he put it, in speculations, which he pretended yielded interest of 15 or 18 percent. But of course after paying that 'interest,' he used the rest of the capital to pay his arrears and to make up the interest he owed Mme. Larcier.

"He found quite a lot of money among his acquaintances, and thanks to his manipulations, he could have kept going for another dozen years. But he loved to take risks, hoping to regain all his losses. He didn't want to admit to himself that he was embezzling. So he continued to take flyers, always hoping that he would come across some precious tip, and find the big deal that would pull him all at once out of his difficulties and permit him to honor all his debts.

"For six months he had been tricking Larcier's mother with promises, putting off her requests for back interest.

"When Larcier arrived that evening at his guardian's door, he rang three times before anyone answered. Then the old man came down himself. He got a start when he saw his ward. He muttered a few words to explain why he had no servant. The truth was that his only maid had left a fortnight earlier, and he'd replaced her with a cleaning woman who only came in the morning.

"Old Bonnel prepared his own dinner: some eggs and cold cuts. The neighbors knew that he lived very simply, but they ascribed his thrift to a certain amount of greed. His reputation for avarice only helped boost the confidence of people who entrusted money to him.

"He led Larcier into the dining room, and only after a few moments did he think to ask him if he'd already dined.

"Larcier tried to come up with small talk, preoccupied by the knowledge that he was going to have to ask for money – never dreaming that his guardian was even more distraught.

"He accepted the invitation to dine …

"We can't establish the exact moment when Larcier spoke to his guardian about the inheritance. It was probably after dinner. The delay must have maddened the old guy. Finally he took his ward to his office, which was on the floor above.

"There must have been some sort of premeditation, however brief. It seems one has to entertain the idea of premeditation, because Bonnel must have seen the advantages of Larcier's disappearance and of his own. By killing Larcier, he disposed of an oppressive creditor. And by apparently killing himself, he got rid of all his creditors. And by stealing his own papers, he got rid of the evidence of his peculations …

"I am positive that Larcier was struck in his guardian's office, while he was sitting at the table, waiting for the old man to take his seat and spread out the papers that he'd gone to his filing cabinet to look for. The filing cabinet was behind Larcier. I went into the office. The chairs weren't where they would have been at the moment of the crime, any more, but I saw that normally

Larcier would have sat opposite Bonnel, on the other side of his desk, and thus between the desk and the cabinet. Bonnel must have taken a weapon out of the cabinet, maybe a knife. The opportunity presented itself, and he dealt the young man a knife wound in the back, which immediately caused his death. The tunic was torn on the left side, in back. The gash caused by the weapon would have provided strong evidence of Bonnel's guilt. So he took care to cut several gashes in the tunic with a pair of scissors. This led the magistrate to believe that the killer first intended to burn the piece of clothing entirely, but gave up when he figured it would take too long. The magistrate assembled the bits of the tunic, which was a good idea, but he didn't measure them. He would have seen that the right side didn't match the left, because the blade of the weapon produced a different kind of cut – and in order to conceal it, the killer cut away a small strip of fabric with the intention of throwing it away somewhere, or burning it. Probably not the latter, because I examined the fireplace and found no trace of ashes.

"What did Bonnel do with Larcier's body? We have no idea. Only Bonnel himself, if we get ahold of him, can tell us. The truth is that nobody has yet seriously investigated this aspect of the crime. They've been content to check whether the corpse was buried in the garden. They've also looked at a plot of land belonging to old Bonnel, two kilometers away. If they made a really thorough search of the countryside, they might find the body, maybe in a river, maybe in a culvert: there are a lot of those in the area. We'll probably learn all the details when we catch Bonnel.

"The crime must have been committed fairly early in the evening. Since the killer didn't catch the train till 4:30 the next morning, at the little station near Toul, he had four or five hours ahead of him to prepare a false trail and dispose of the body. Bonnel went through the victim's pockets and found the authorization that Mme. Chéron had given him. It was pretty risky to collect that money, but the odds are that he had no other resources, and preferred to run that risk rather

than starve. So he made up a false authorization in Marteau's name – it's certain that Bonnel and Marteau were one and the same.

"It would astonish me if the killer used an accomplice to get the money. That's the first thing that tipped me off. Of course the killer needed cash. And if Larcier was the killer, it would have been dangerous for him, since the affair was in the news, openly to visit a financier in Paris.

"That's why I was convinced that if we found Marteau, we would find Bonnel. And we have found him. Yesterday, I finally located Hilbert, who lives very near here, just off Soho Square. I learned some things about Hilbert, who has a fairly nasty reputation. It's quite possible that Bonnel confided in him, because he needed him to complete some business that he'd set in motion.

"It would have been dangerous to go see Hilbert and ask him for information that he doubtless wouldn't have given me. The best course was to follow Hilbert, or to keep watch on his house in case Bonnel should visit him there.

"I had the house under surveillance starting at ten in the morning, as soon as I got Hilbert's address from the tobacconist that I dug up. At about 11:30, I saw Hilbert leave his place. I followed in his footsteps. He went to Waterloo Station and took the Claremond train. At the station in Claremond, an elderly man was waiting for him. I recognized Bonnel.

"I don't know what schemes they were hatching in the little house they went to, but I hung around in the pub next door, and when they headed back to catch the train, I followed close behind, naturally making every attempt to stay unnoticed. This was the more difficult because I was eager to listen in on their conversation.

"I had sent a message to Paris, asking for an arrest warrant. I had telephoned the hotel to see if the warrant had arrived. Because I had already alerted the English police, I met a detective at Waterloo Station who helped me by following Hilbert. Hilbert and Bonnel then went to Hilbert's little house in Soho. I don't know what they're conspiring to do, but according to my colleague

here, Bonnel is planning to leave London and indeed England tomorrow. So there is no time to lose …"

XVI

At that moment, someone opened the door of the restaurant where we were lingering, and brought M. Galoin a message. He cast his eyes over it, and then said:

"Good news. The man is under lock and key. They want me to go down there and identify him."

M. Galoin left us.

We were alone in the dining room. I drew near to Blanche, and kissed her hand. We hadn't said a word. We had learned of Larcier's innocence, but at the same time, of his death! It is true that there are times in life when one person's misfortune … but it seems shameful to realize it.

I took Blanche back as far as the door of her room. I kissed her hand a second time, and we parted without saying anything.

The morning editions of the London newspapers published all the details of Bonnel's arrest. The same details appeared that evening in all the Paris newspapers. The news reached our garrison, and Larcier's exoneration hit the regimental sergeants like thunder. M. Galoin, who was needed in London to assist in Bonnel's hearing before an English court, took leave of us, and we returned to France, not without visiting an English vicar who, with all dispatch, united Henri Ferrat and Blanche Chéron. We still had to formally register our marriage in France. But our first priority was to honeymoon in Paris.

XVII

I left the regiment. For some time, one of my uncles has been keeping a job open for me as an insurance auditor. It involves quite a bit of travel around the country. My wife is too agreeable a traveling companion for me not to take her along.