

# FANTOMAS



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# Fantômas

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# Chapter 1 - The Genius of Crime

"Fantômas."

"What did you say?"

"I said: Fantômas."

"And what does that mean?"

"Nothing... . Everything!"

"But what is it?"

"Nobody... . And yet, yes, it is somebody!"

"And what does the somebody do?"

"Spreads terror!"

Dinner was just over, and the company were moving into the drawing-room.

Hurrying to the fireplace, the Marquise de Langrune took a large log from a basket and flung it on to the glowing embers on the hearth; the log crackled and shed a brilliant light over the whole room; the guests of the Marquise instinctively drew near to the fire.

During the ten consecutive months she spent every year at her château of Beaulieu, on the outskirts of Corrèze, that picturesque district bounded by the Dordogne, it had been the immemorial custom of the Marquise de Langrune to entertain a few of her personal friends in the neighbourhood to dinner every Wednesday, thereby obtaining a little pleasant relief from her loneliness and keeping up some contact with the world.

On this particular winter evening the good lady's guests included several habitués: President Bonnet, a retired magistrate who had withdrawn to his small property at Saint-Jaury, in the suburbs of Brives, and the Abbé Sicot, who was the parish priest. A more occasional friend was also there, the Baronne de Vibray, a young and wealthy widow, a typical woman of the world who spent the greater

part of her life either in motoring, or in the most exclusive drawing-rooms of Paris, or at the most fashionable watering-places. But when the Baronne de Vibray put herself out to grass, as she racily phrased it, and spent a few weeks at Querelles, her estate close to the château of Beaulieu, nothing pleased her better than to take her place again in the delightful company of the Marquise de Langrune and her friends.

Finally, youth was represented by Charles Rambert, who had arrived at the château a couple of days before, a charming lad of about eighteen who was treated with warm affection by the Marquise and by Thérèse Auvernois, the granddaughter of the Marquise, with whom since her parents' death she had lived as a daughter.

The odd and even mysterious words spoken by President Bonnet as they were leaving the table, and the personality of this Fantômas about which he had said nothing definite in spite of all the questions put to him, had excited the curiosity of the company, and while Thérèse Auvernois was gracefully dispensing the coffee to her grandmother's guests the questions were renewed with greater insistence. Crowding round the fire, for the evening was very cold, Mme. de Langrune's friends showered fresh questions upon the old magistrate, who secretly enjoyed the interest he had inspired. He cast a solemn eye upon the circle of his audience and prolonged his silence, the more to capture their attention. At length he began to speak.

"Statistics tell us, ladies, that of all the deaths that are registered every day quite a third are due to crime. You are no doubt aware that the police discover about half of the crimes that are committed, and that barely half meet with the penalty of justice. This explains how it is that so many mysteries are never cleared up, and why there are so many mistakes and inconsistencies in judicial investigations."

"What is the conclusion you wish to draw?" the Marquise de Langrune enquired with interest.

"This," the magistrate proceeded: "although many crimes pass unsuspected it is none the less obvious that they have been committed; now while some of them are due to ordinary criminals, others are the work of enigmatical beings who are difficult to trace and too clever or intelligent to let themselves be caught. History is full of stories of such mysterious characters, the Iron Mask, for instance, and Cagliostro. In every age there have been bands of dangerous creatures, led by such men as Cartouche and Vidocq and Rocambole. Now why should we suppose that in our time no one exists who emulates the deeds of those mighty criminals?"

The Abbé Sicot raised a gentle voice from the depths of a comfortable arm-chair wherein he was peacefully digesting his dinner.

"The police do their work better in our time than ever they did before."

"That is perfectly true," the president admitted, "but their work is also more difficult than ever it was before. Criminals who operate in the grand manner have all sorts of things at their disposal nowadays. Science has done much for modern progress, but unfortunately it can be of invaluable assistance to criminals at times; the hosts of evil have the telegraph and the motor-car at their disposal just as authority has, and some day they will make use of the aeroplane."

Young Charles Rambert had been listening to the president's dissertation with the utmost interest and now broke in, with a voice that quivered slightly.

"You were talking about Fantômas just now, sir——"

The president cast a cryptic look at the lad and did not reply directly to him.

"That is what I am coming to, for, of course, you have understood me, ladies. In these days we have been distressed by a steady access of criminality, and among the assets we shall henceforth have to count a mysterious and

most dangerous creature, to whom the baffled authorities and public rumour generally have for some time now given the name of Fantômas. It is impossible to say exactly or to know precisely who Fantômas is. He often assumes the form and personality of some definite and even well-known individual; sometimes he assumes the forms of two human beings at one and the same time. Sometimes he works alone, sometimes with accomplices; sometimes he can be identified as such and such a person, but no one has ever yet arrived at knowing Fantômas himself. That he is a living person is certain and undeniable, yet he is impossible to catch or to identify. He is nowhere and everywhere at once, his shadow hovers above the strangest mysteries, and his traces are found near the most inexplicable crimes, and yet ——"

"You are frightening us!" exclaimed the Baronne de Vibray with a little forced laugh that did not ring true, and the Marquise de Langrune, who for the past few minutes had been uneasy at the idea of the children listening to the conversation, cast about in her mind for an occupation more suited to their age. The interruption gave her an opportunity, and she turned to Charles Rambert and Thérèse.

"You must find it very dull here with all of us grown-up people, dears, so run away now. Thérèse," she added with a smile to her granddaughter who had risen obediently, "there is a splendid new puzzle in the library; you ought to try it with Charles."

The young fellow realised that he must comply with the desire of the Marquise, although the conversation interested him intensely; but he was too well bred to betray his thoughts, and the next moment he was in the adjoining room, sitting opposite the girl, and deep in the intricacies of the latest fashionable game.

The Baronne de Vibray brought the conversation back to the subject of Fantômas.

"What connection is there, President, between this uncanny creature and the disappearance of Lord Beltham, of which we were talking at dinner?"

"I should certainly have agreed with you and thought there was none," the old magistrate replied, "if Lord Beltham's disappearance had been unattended by any mysterious circumstance. But there is one point that deserves your attention: the newspaper from which I read an extract just now, *La Capitale*, draws attention to it and regards it as being important. It is said that when Lady Beltham began to be uneasy about her husband's absence, on the morning of the day following his disappearance, she remembered noticing just as he was going out that he was reading a particular letter, the peculiar, square shape of which surprised her. She had also noticed that the handwriting of the letter was very heavy and black. Now, she found the letter in question upon her husband's desk, but the whole of the writing had disappeared, and it was only the most minute examination that resulted in the discovery of a few almost imperceptible stains which proved that it really was the identical document that had been in her husband's hands. Lady Beltham would not have thought very much about it, if it had not occurred to the editor of *La Capitale* to interview detective Juve about it, the famous Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department, you know, who has brought so many notorious criminals to justice. Now M. Juve manifested the greatest excitement over the discovery and the nature of this document; and he did not attempt to hide from his interviewer his belief that the strange nature of this unusual epistle was proof of the intervention of Fantômas. You very likely know that Juve has made it his special business to follow up Fantômas; he has sworn that he will take him, and he is after him body and soul. Let us hope he will succeed! But it is no good



pretending that Juve's job is not as difficult a one as can be imagined.

"However, it is a fair inference that when Juve spoke as he did to the representative of *La Capitale*, he did not think he was going too far when he declared that a crime lay behind the disappearance of Lord Beltham, and that perhaps the crime must be laid at Fantômas' door; and we can only hope that at some not distant date, justice will not only throw full light upon this mysterious affair, but also rid us for ever of this terrifying criminal!"

President Bonnet had convinced his audience completely, and his closing words cast a chill upon them all.

The Marquise de Langrune deemed it time to create a diversion.

"Who are these people, Lord and Lady Beltham?" she enquired.

"Oh, my dear!" the Baronne de Vibray answered, "it is perfectly obvious that you lead the life of a hermit in this remote country home of yours, and that echoes from the world of Paris do not reach you often! Lord and Lady Beltham are among the best known and most popular people in society. He was formerly attached to the English Embassy, but left Paris to fight in the Transvaal, and his wife went with him and showed magnificent courage and compassion in charge of the ambulance and hospital work. They then went back to London, and a couple of years ago they settled once more in Paris. They lived, and still live, in the boulevard Inkermann at Neuilly-sur-Seine, in a delightful house where they entertain a great deal. I have often been one of Lady Beltham's guests; she is a most fascinating woman, distinguished, tall, fair, and endowed with the charm that is peculiar to the women of the North. I am very distressed at the trouble that is hanging over her."

"Well," said the Marquise de Langrune conclusively, "I mean to believe that the gloomy prognostications of our friend the president will not be justified by the event."

"Amen!" murmured the Abbé mechanically, roused from his gentle slumber by the closing words of the Marquise.

The clock chimed ten, and her duties as hostess did not make the Marquise forgetful of her duties as grandmother.

"Thérèse," she called, "it is your bed-time. It is very late, darling."

The child obediently left her game, said good night to the Baronne de Vibray and President Bonnet, and last of all to the old priest, who gave her a paternal embrace.

"Shall I see you at the seven o'clock mass, Thérèse?" he asked.

The child turned to the Marquise.

"Will you let me accompany Charles to the station tomorrow morning? I will go to the eight o'clock mass on my way back."

The Marquise looked at Charles Rambert.

"Your father really is coming by the train that reaches Verrières at 6.55?" and when he assented she hesitated a moment before replying to Thérèse. "I think, dear, it would be better to let our young friend go alone to meet his father."

But Charles Rambert put in his plea.

"Oh, I am sure my father would be delighted to see Thérèse with me when he gets out of the train."

"Very well, then," the kind old lady said; "arrange it as you please. But, Thérèse, before you go upstairs, tell our good steward, Dollon, to give orders for the carriage to be ready by six o'clock. It is a long way to the station."

Thérèse promised, and the two young people left the drawing-room.

"A pretty couple," remarked the Baronne de Vibray, adding with a characteristic touch of malice, "you mean to make a match between them some day, Marquise?"

The old lady threw up her hands protesting.

"What an idea! Why, Thérèse is not fifteen yet."

"Who is this Charles Rambert?" the Abbé asked. "I just caught sight of him the day before yesterday with Dollon, and I puzzled my brains wondering who he could be."

"I am not surprised," the Marquise laughed, "not surprised that you did not succeed in finding out, for you do not know him. But you may perhaps have heard me mention a M. Etienne Rambert, an old friend of mine, with whom I had many a dance in the long ago. I had lost sight of him completely until about two years ago, when I met him at a charity function in Paris. The poor man has had a rather chequered life; twenty years ago he married a woman who was perfectly charming, but who is, I believe, very ill with a distressing malady: I am not even sure that she is not insane. Quite lately Etienne Rambert has been compelled to send her to an asylum."

"That does not tell us how his son comes to be your guest," President Bonnet urged.

"It is very simple: Etienne Rambert is an energetic man who is always moving about. Although he is quite sixty he still occupies himself with some rubber plantations he possesses in Colombia, and he often goes to America: he thinks no more of the voyage than we do of a trip to Paris. Well, just recently young Charles Rambert was leaving the *pension* in Hamburg where he had been living in order to perfect his German; I knew from his father's letters that Mme. Rambert was about to be put away, and that Etienne Rambert was obliged to be absent, so I offered to receive Charles here until his father should return to Paris. Charles came the day before yesterday, and that is the whole story."

"And M. Etienne Rambert joins him here to-morrow?" said the Abbé.

"That is so——"

The Marquise de Langrune would have given other information about her young friend had he not come into the room just then. He was an attractive lad with refined

and distinguished features, clear, intelligent eyes, and graceful figure. The other guests were silent, and Charles Rambert approached them with the slight awkwardness of youth. He went up to President Bonnet and plucked up sudden courage.

"And what then, sir?" he asked in a low tone.

"I don't understand, my boy," said the magistrate.

"Oh!" said Charles Rambert, "have you finished talking about Fantômas? It was so amusing!"

"For my part," the president answered dryly, "I do not find these stories about criminals 'amusing.'"

But the lad did not detect the shade of reproach in the words.

"But still it is very odd, very extraordinary that such mysterious characters as Fantômas can exist nowadays. Is it really possible that a single man can commit such a number of crimes, and that any human being can escape discovery, as they say Fantômas can, and be able to foil the cleverest devices of the police? I think it is——"

The president's manner grew steadily more chilly as the boy's curiosity waxed more enthusiastic, and he interrupted curtly.

"I fail to understand your attitude, young man. You appear to be hypnotised, fascinated. You speak of Fantômas as if he weresomething interesting. It is out of place, to put it mildly," and he turned to the Abbé Sicot. "There, sir, that is the result of this modern education and the state of mind produced in the younger generation by the newspaper press and even by literature. Criminals are given haloes and proclaimed from the housetops. It is astounding!"

But Charles Rambert was not the least impressed.

"But it is life, sir; it is history, it is the real thing!" he insisted. "Why, you yourself, in just a few words, have thrown an atmosphere round this Fantômas which makes him absolutely fascinating! I would give anything to have

known Vidocq and Cartouche and Rocambole, and to have seen them at close quarters. Those were men!"

President Bonnet contemplated the young man in astonishment; his eyes flashed lightning at him and he burst out:

"You are mad, boy, absolutely mad! Vidocq—Rocambole! You mix up legend and history, bracket murderers with detectives, and make no distinction between right and wrong! You would not hesitate to set the heroes of crime and the heroes of law and order on one and the same pedestal!"

"You have said the word, sir," Charles Rambert exclaimed: "they all are heroes. But, better still, Fantômas——"

The lad's outburst was so vehement and spontaneous and sincere, that it provoked unanimous indignation among his hearers. Even the indulgent Marquise de Langrune ceased to smile. Charles Rambert perceived that he had gone too far, and stopped abruptly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he murmured. "I spoke without thinking; please forgive me."

He raised his eyes and looked at President Bonnet, blushing to the tips of his ears and looking so abashed that the magistrate, who was a kind-hearted man at bottom, tried to reassure him.

"Your imagination is much too lively, young man, much too lively. But you will grow out of that. Come, come: that's all right; lads of your age do talk without knowledge."

It was very late now, and a few minutes after this incident the guests of the Marquise de Langrune took their departure.

Charles Rambert accompanied the Marquise to the door of her own private rooms, and was about to bid her a respectful good night before going on to his bedroom, which adjoined hers, when she asked him to follow her.

"Come in and get the book I promised you, Charles. It should be on my writing-table." She glanced at that piece of

furniture as she entered the room, and went on, "Or in it, perhaps; I may have locked it away."

"I don't want to give you any trouble," he protested, but the Marquise insisted.

"Put your light down on that table," she said. "Besides, I have got to open my desk, for I must look at the lottery tickets I gave to Thérèse a few weeks ago." She pushed back the roll top of her Empire desk and looked up at the young fellow. "It would be a piece of good luck if my little Thérèse won the first prize, eh, Charles? A million francs! That would be worth winning?"

"Rather!" said Charles Rambert with a smile.

The Marquise found the book she was searching for and gave it to the lad with one hand while with the other she smoothed out several variegated papers.

"These are my tickets," she said, and then broke off. "How stupid of me! I have not kept the number of the winning ticket that was advertised in *La Capitale*."

Charles Rambert immediately offered to go downstairs again to fetch the newspaper, but the Marquise would not let him.

"It is no good, my dear boy; it is not there now. You know—or rather you don't know—that the Abbé takes away all the week's newspapers every Wednesday night in order to read all the political articles." The old lady turned away from her writing-table, which she left wide open, conducted the young man to the door, and held out a friendly hand. "It is to-morrow morning already!" she said. "So now good night, dear Charles!"

In his own room, with the lights extinguished and the curtains closed, Charles Rambert lay wide awake, a prey to strange excitement. He turned and tossed in his bed nervously. In vain did he try to banish from his mind the words spoken during the evening by President Bonnet. In imagination Charles Rambert saw all manner of sinister and dramatic scenes, crimes and murders: hugely

interested, intensely curious, craving for knowledge, he was ever trying to concoct plots and unravel mysteries. If for an instant he dozed off, the image of Fantômas took shape in his mind, but never twice the same: sometimes he saw a colossal figure with bestial face and muscular shoulders; sometimes a wan, thin creature, with strange and piercing eyes; sometimes a vague form, a phantom—Fantômas!

Charles Rambert slept, and woke, and dozed again. In the silence of the night he thought he heard creakings and heavy sounds. Then suddenly he felt a breath pass over his face—and again nothing! And suddenly again strange sounds were buzzing in his ears.

Bathed in cold sweat Charles Rambert started and sat upright in bed, every muscle tense, listening with all his ears. Was he dreaming, or had he really waked up? He did not know. And still, still he had a consciousness of Fantômas—of mystery—of Fantômas!

Charles Rambert heard the clock strike four.

## Chapter 2 - A Tragic Dawn

As his cab turned by the end of the Pont Royal towards the Gare d'Orsay, M. Etienne Rambert looked at his watch and found, as he had anticipated, that he had a good quarter of an hour before the train that he intended to take was due to start. He called a porter, and gave him the heavy valise and the bundle of rugs that formed the whole of his hand baggage.

"Where is the office for forwarding luggage, my man?" he enquired.

The porter led him through the famous panelled hall of the Gare d'Orsay, and M. Etienne Rambert satisfied himself that his trunks had been properly registered for Verrières, the station at which he had to alight for the château of Beaulieu.

Still attended by the porter, who had conceived a respectful admiration for him in consequence of the authoritative tone in which he demanded information from the various railway servants, and who scented a probable munificent tip, M. Etienne Rambert proceeded to the booking-office and took a first-class ticket. He spent a few minutes more at the book-stall where he selected an imposing collection of illustrated papers, and then, his final preparations completed, he turned once more to the porter.

"The Luchon train," he said; "where is it?" and as the man only made a vague gesture and growled something wholly indistinct, he added: "Lead the way, and I will follow."

It was now just half-past eight, and the station showed all the animation inseparable from the departure of main-line trains. M. Etienne Rambert hurried onwards, and reaching the platform from which all the lines begin, was stayed by the porter who was laden with his baggage.

"You want the express, sir?"



"No, the slow train, my man."

The porter showed some surprise, but made no remark.

"Do you like the front or the back of the train?"

"The back by choice."

"First-class, isn't it?"

"Yes, first-class."

The porter, who had stopped a moment, picked up the heavy valise again.

"Then there isn't any choice. There are only two first-class carriages on the slow train, and they are both in the middle."

"They are corridor carriages, I suppose?" said Etienne Rambert.

"Yes, sir; there are hardly any others on the main-line trains, especially first-class."

In the ever-increasing crowd Etienne Rambert had some difficulty in following the porter. The Gare d'Orsay has little or none of the attractiveness of the other stations, which cannot fail to have a certain fascination for any imaginative person, who thinks of the mystery attaching to all those iron rails reaching out into the distance of countries unknown to him. It is less noisy than the others also, for between Austerlitz and Orsay the traction is entirely electric. And further, there is no clearly defined separation between the main and the suburban lines.

On the right of the platform was the train which was to take Etienne Rambert beyond Brives to Verrières, the slow train to Luchon; and on the left of the same platform was another train for Juvisy and all the small stations in the suburbs of Paris.

Very few people were making for the train to Luchon; but a large crowd was pressing into the suburban train.

The porter who was piloting M. Etienne Rambert, set the baggage he was carrying down on the footboard of a first-class carriage.

"There is no one for the slow train yet, sir; if you like to get in first you can choose your own compartment."

M. Etienne Rambert acted on the suggestion, but he had hardly set foot in the corridor before the guard, also scenting a generous tip, came to offer his services.

"It really is the 8.50 you want, sir?" was his first enquiry.

"You are sure you are not making a mistake?"

"No," Etienne Rambert replied. "Why?"

"A great many first-class passengers do make a mistake," the man explained, "and confuse the 8.50 with the 8.45 express."

As he spoke the guard took the baggage from the porter who had remained on the platform, and the porter, after being generously remunerated for his trouble by M. Rambert, hurried away to look for other travellers.

"The 8.45 is the express, isn't it?" M. Rambert enquired.

"Yes," the guard answered; "it runs right through without stopping at all the small stations as this train does. It goes in front of this one and gets to Luchon three hours earlier. There it is on the side there," and he pointed through the window in the door on the far side to another train on the next rails, in which a number of travellers were already taking their seats. "If you prefer to go by that one, sir," he went on, "there is still time for you to change; you are entitled to take your choice since you have a first-class ticket."

But Etienne Rambert, after a moment's consideration, declined the suggestion.

"No: I would rather go by the slow train. If I take the express I should have to get out at Brives, and then I should be twelve or thirteen miles from Saint-Jaury, which is my destination; whereas the slow train stops at Verrières, where, by the way, I have already telegraphed to say I shall arrive to-morrow morning."

He walked a little way along the corridor, assuring himself that the various compartments were still quite empty, and

then turned to the guard.

"Look here, my man," he said, "I am awfully tired, and I mean to get some sleep to-night; consequently I should like to be alone. Now where shall I be most quiet and undisturbed?"

The man understood. M. Etienne Rambert's enquiry about the place where he would be most quiet, was an implicit promise of a handsome tip if nobody did disturb him.

"If you like to settle yourself here, sir," the man answered, "you can draw down the blinds at once, and I dare say I shall be able to find room for any other passengers somewhere else."

"Good," said M. Rambert, moving towards the compartment indicated. "I will smoke a cigar until the train starts, and immediately afterwards I will settle down to sleep. By the way, my man, since you seem so obliging, I wish you would undertake to call me to-morrow morning in time for me to get out at Verrières. I am desperately sleepy and I am quite capable of not waking up."

The guard touched his cap.

"You can be perfectly easy, sir, and sleep without the least anxiety. I won't fail."

"Very well."

When his baggage had been stowed away, and his rugs spread out to make the seat more comfortable still, M. Etienne Rambert repeated his appeal, for he was an old traveller and knew that it does not do to rely too much upon the promises of chance attendants.

"I can rely upon you, can't I? I may sleep as sound as I like, and you will wake me at Verrières?" And the more to assure himself that the guard would execute his orders he slipped a franc into his hand.

When he was left alone, M. Rambert continued his preparations for the night. He carefully drew down the blinds over the door and over the windows of the

compartment that gave on to the corridor, and also lowered the shade over the electric light, and then, in order to enjoy the last puffs at his cigar in peace, he opened the window over the other door and leant his elbows on it, watching the final preparations being made by the travellers by the express on the other line.

The departure of a train is always a picturesque sight, and M. Rambert leant forward inquisitively to note how the passengers had installed themselves in the two compartments which he could see from his coign of vantage.

There were not many people in the train. As a matter of fact the Brives and Luchon line is not much used at this time of year. If the number of passengers in the express were any criterion Etienne Rambert might reasonably expect that he would be the only one in the slow train. But there was not much time for observations and reflections of this kind. On the platform for the express, which he got a glimpse of through the compartments, people were hurrying up their farewells. The passengers had got into their carriages, and the friends who had come to see them off were standing alone upon the platform. There was the sound of safety locks being fastened by porters, and the noise of trollies being wheeled along bearing articles for sale.

"Pillows! Rugs! Sweets! Papers!"

Then came the whistle of the guard, the shriller scream from the electric engine, and then, slowly at first but steadily, more rapidly as the engine got up speed, the express moved along the platform and plunged into the tunnel on the way to Austerlitz.

Meanwhile the guard of the slow train was doing wonders. Shamelessly resolved to assure perfect quiet to "his" passenger, he managed, without unduly compromising himself but yet without leaving any doubt about it in any mind, to insinuate discreetly that M. Rambert's carriage

was reserved, so that that gentleman might count upon an entirely undisturbed night.

A few minutes after the express had gone, the slow train drew out in its turn, and disappeared into the darkness of the underground tunnel.

At the château of Beaulieu young Charles Rambert was just finishing dressing when a gentle tap sounded on the door of his room.

"It is a quarter to five, Charles. Get up at once!"

"I am awake already, Thérèse," Charles Rambert answered with some pride. "I shall be ready in two minutes."

"What? up already?" the girl exclaimed from the other side of the door. "Marvellous! I congratulate you. I'm ready too; I will wait for you in the dining-room. Come down as soon as you are dressed."

"All right!" the young man answered.

He wasted no time over his toilette, the more so because it was none too warm in his room, for at this early hour it was still quite dark; and then taking his light in one hand he opened his door carefully so as to make no noise, tip-toed along the landing, and went down the staircase to join Thérèse in the dining-room. The girl was an accomplished housekeeper already, and while waiting for the young fellow she had got a scratch meal together.

"Let us have breakfast quickly," she suggested; "it isn't snowing this morning, and if you like we might walk to the station. We have plenty of time, and it will do us good to have a walk."

"It will warm us up anyhow," Charles Rambert replied; he was only half-awake, but he sat beside Thérèse, and did justice to the preparations she had made.

"Do you know that it is very wonderful of you to get up so punctually?" Mme. de Langrune's granddaughter remarked. "How did you manage it? Last night you were afraid you would sleep on as usual."

"It was not much trouble for me to wake up," Charles Rambert answered. "I hardly closed an eye all night."

"But I promised to come and knock at your door myself, so you might have slept without any anxiety."

"That's so, but to tell you the truth, Thérèse, I was regularly upset and excited by the thought of papa arriving this morning."

They had both finished breakfast, and Thérèse got up.

"Shall we start?" she asked.

"Yes."

Thérèse opened the hall door, and the two young people went down the flight of steps leading to the garden. The girl had thrown a big cloak over her shoulders, and she inhaled the pure morning air with keen delight.

"I love going out in the early morning," she declared.

"Well, I don't like it at all," Charles Rambert confessed with characteristic candour. "Good Lord, how cold it is! And it is still pitch dark!"

"Surely you are not going to be frightened?" said Thérèse teasingly.

Charles Rambert made an irritable movement of vexation and surprise.

"Frightened? What do you take me for, Thérèse? If I don't like going out in the early morning it's really only because it is cold."

She laughed at him while they were crossing the lawn towards the out-buildings, through which she meant to get out on to the high road. As they passed the stables they came across a groom who was leisurely getting an old brougham out of the coach-house.

"Don't hurry, Jean," Thérèse called out as she greeted him.

"We are going to walk to the station, and the only important thing is that you should be there to bring us back."

The man touched his cap and the two young people passed through the park gate and found themselves upon the high road.

It was still very dark, with just a wan reflection in the distance of the sky vaguely outlining some cloud-shapes to the eastward to give some promise of the day. There was no sound to break the silence of the fields, and as they walked briskly along Charles and Thérèse could hear their footsteps ringing on the hard surface of the frozen ground.

"It must please you awfully to be going to meet your father," said Mme. de Langrune's granddaughter half questioningly. "It is a long time since you have seen him, isn't it?"

"Three years," Charles Rambert answered, "and then just for a few minutes. He is coming home from America now, and before that he travelled in Spain for a long time."

"He was travelling the whole time you were a child, wasn't he?"

"Yes, always: either in Colombia, looking after his rubber plantations there, or in Spain, where he has a good deal of property too. When he was in Paris he used to come to the school and ask for me, and I saw him in the parlour—for a quarter of an hour."

"And your mother?"

"Oh, mamma was different. You know, Thérèse, I spent all the childhood that I can remember at the school. I liked the masters and had good chums, and was very happy there, and if the truth must be told I looked forward with anything but pleasure to the holidays, when I had to go to my parents' house. I always felt a stranger with them; my real home was the school-room, where I had my desk and all my own interests. And then, you know, when one is little one doesn't understand things much; I didn't feel having hardly any family, very much."

"But you loved your mother very much?"

Thérèse asked the question quite anxiously, and it was patent that she would have thought it dreadful if her companion had not had a real affection for his mother.

"Oh, yes, I loved her," Charles Rambert answered; "but I hardly knew her either." And as Thérèse showed her surprise he went on, telling her something of the secret of his lonely childhood. "You see, Thérèse, now that I am a man I guess lots of things that I could not have had even a suspicion of then. My father and mother did not get on well together. They were what you call an ill-assorted couple. They were both very good, but their characters did not harmonise. When I was little I always saw mamma silent and sad, and papa active and on the go, and bright and talking at the top of his voice. I half believe he frightened mamma! And then my father was constantly away, whereas mamma hardly ever went out. When a servant took me to the house on Thursdays, I was taken up to say good morning to her, and I invariably found her lying on a sofa in her room, with the blinds down and almost dark. She just touched me with her lips and asked me one or two questions, and then I was taken away again because I tired her."

"Was she ill, then?"

"Mamma always has been ill. I suppose you know, Thérèse, that three months ago—stay, it was just when I had taken my degree and went to Germany—she was sent to an asylum? I believe my father had wanted her to agree to undergo careful treatment of the kind long before, but she would not."

Thérèse was silent for a few minutes.

"You have not been very happy," she said presently.

"Oh, it was only after I grew up that I felt unhappy. When I was a little chap I never thought of how sad it is to have no real father or mother. The last four or five years it has hurt me, but when he came to see me once at school, papa told me he would take me with him as soon as I had taken my degree and grown up. Last October, after my examination, he wrote and told me to be patient a little longer, and that he was hurrying on with the winding up of his business and



coming back to France. That gave me a hope which has brightened these last few months, and will also make you understand why I am so pleased this morning at my fathers coming. It seems to me that a new life is going to begin."

Day was breaking now: a dirty December day, with the light filtering through heavy grey clouds that drifted along the ground, hid the horizon, clung to the low hills, and then suddenly dispersed in long wisps driven by a keen breeze, that got up in gusts, and drove clouds of dust along the hard frozen ground.

"I have not been very happy either," said Thérèse, "for I lost my father when I was tiny: I don't even remember him; and mamma must be dead as well."

The ambiguous turning of the child's phrase caught Charles Rambert's interested attention.

"What does that mean, Thérèse? Don't you know if your mother is dead?"

"Yes, oh yes; grandmamma says so. But whenever I ask for particulars grandmamma always changes the subject. I will echo what you said just now: when you are little you don't know anything and are not surprised at anything. For a long time I took no notice of her sudden reticence, but now I sometimes wonder if something is not being kept back from me—whether it is really true that mamma is no more in this world."

Talking like this Thérèse and Charles had walked at a good pace, and now they came to the few houses built around Verrières station. One by one, bedroom windows and doors were being opened; peasants were making their way to the sheds to lead their cattle to the pastures.

"We are very early," Thérèse remarked, pointing to the station clock in the distance. "Your father's train is due at 6.55, and it is only 6.40 now; we still have a quarter of an hour to wait, and more, if the train is not punctual!"

They went into the little station and Charles Rambert, thankful for some shelter from the cold, stamped his feet, making a sudden uproar in the empty waiting-room. A porter appeared.

"Who the deuce is kicking up all this row?" he began angrily, and then seeing Thérèse, broke off short. "Ah, Mademoiselle Thérèse," he said with the familiar yet perfectly respectful cordiality that marks country folk, "up already? Have you come to meet somebody, or are you going away?"

As he spoke, the porter turned a curious eye upon Charles Rambert, whose arrival had caused quite a sensation two days before in this little spot, where with but few exceptions none but people belonging to the neighbourhood ever came by train.

"No, I am not going away," Thérèse replied. "I have accompanied M. Rambert, who has come to meet his father."

"Ah-ha, to meet your papa, sir: is he coming from far?"

"From Paris," Charles Rambert answered. "Is the train signalled yet?"

The man drew out a watch like a turnip, and looked at the time.

"It won't be here for quite another twenty minutes. The work on the tunnel makes it necessary to be careful, and it's always late now. But you will hear when the bell rings: that will be when the train is coming over the level-crossing; it will run into the station three minutes after that. Well, Mademoiselle, I must get on with my work," and the man left them.

Thérèse turned to Charles Rambert.

"Shall we go on to the platform? Then we shall see the train come in."

So they left the waiting-room and began to walk up and down the whole length of the platform. Thérèse watched

the jerky movements of the hands of the clock, and smiled at her companion.

"Five minutes more, and your father will be here! Four minutes more! Ah! There it is!" and she pointed to a slope in the distance where a slight trail of smoke rose white against the blue of the sky, now clear of cloud. "Can't you see it? That is the steam from the engine coming out of the tunnel."

Ere she finished speaking the quivering whir of the bell echoed through the empty station.

"Ah!" said Charles Rambert: "at last!"

The two porters who, with the stationmaster, constituted the entire railway staff at Verrières, came bustling along the platform, and while the bell continued its monotonous whirring ring, pulled forward trucks in readiness for any possible luggage. Puffing portentously, the engine slackened speed, and the heavy train slowed down and finally stopped, bringing a noisy atmosphere of life into the station of Verrières that but a moment ago was so still.

The first-class carriages had stopped immediately in front of Charles and Thérèse, and on the footboard Etienne Rambert stood, a tall, elderly man of distinguished appearance, proud bearing and energetic attitude, with extraordinarily keen eyes and an unusually high and intelligent forehead. Seeing Thérèse and Charles he seized his baggage and in a twinkling had sprung on to the platform. He dropped his valise, tossed his bundle of rugs on to a seat, and gripped Charles by the two shoulders.

"My boy!" he exclaimed; "my dear boy!"

Although he had hitherto shown so little affection for his child, it was obvious that the man was making a great effort to restrain his emotion, and was really moved when he now saw him again as a grown young man.

Nor, on his part, did Charles Rambert remain unmoved. As if the sudden grip of this almost stranger, who yet was his

father, had awakened a world of memories within him, he turned very pale and his voice faltered as he replied:

"Papa! Dear papa! I am so glad to see you!"

Thérèse had drawn tactfully aside. M. Rambert still held his son by the shoulders and stepped back a pace, the better to consider him.

"Why, you are a man! How you have altered, my boy! You are just what I hoped you would be: tall and strong! Ah, you are my son all right! And you are quite well, hey? Yet you look tired."

"I did not sleep well," Charles explained with a smile. "I was afraid I should not wake up."

Turning his head, M. Rambert saw Thérèse and held out his hand.

"How do you do, my little Thérèse?" he exclaimed. "You have altered too since I saw you last. I left a little chit of a child, and now I behold a grown-up young lady. Well! I must be off at once to pay my respects to my dear old friend, your grandmother. All well at the château, eh?"

Thérèse shook hands warmly with M. Rambert and thanked him prettily.

"Grandmamma is very well; she told me to tell you to excuse her if she did not come to meet you, but her doctor says she must not get up very early."

"Of course your grandmamma is excused, my dear. Besides, I have to thank her for her kindness to Charles, and for the hospitality she is going to extend to me for a few days."

Meanwhile the train had gone on again, and now a porter came up to M. Rambert.

"Will you take your luggage with you, sir?"

Recalled to material things, Etienne Rambert contemplated his trunk which the porters had taken out of the luggage van.

"Good Lord!" he began, but Thérèse interrupted him.

"Grandmamma said she would send for your heavy luggage during the morning, and that you could take your valise

and any small parcels with us in the brougham."

"What's that? Your grandmamma has taken the trouble to send her carriage?"

"It's a long way to Beaulieu, you know," Thérèse replied. "Ask Charles if it isn't. We came on foot and the walk would be too tiring for you after a whole night in the train."

The three had reached the station yard, and Thérèse stopped in surprise.

"Why, how's that?" she exclaimed; "the carriage is not here. And yet Jean was beginning to get it ready when we left the château."

M. Etienne Rambert was resting one hand on his son's shoulder, and contemplating him with an affectionate, all-embracing survey every now and then. He smiled at Thérèse.

"He may have been delayed, dear. I tell you what we will do. Since your grandmamma is going to send for my luggage there is no need for me to take my valise; we can leave everything in the cloak-room and start for the château on foot; if my memory serves me right—and it is a very good memory—there is only one road, so we shall meet Jean and can get into the carriage on the way."

A few minutes later all three set out on the road to Beaulieu. M. Rambert walked between the two young people; he had gallantly offered his arm to Thérèse, who was not a little proud of the attention, which proved to her mind that she was now regarded as a grown-up young lady. On the other side of his father Charles made answer to the incessant questions put to him.

M. Etienne Rambert enjoyed the walk in the quiet morning through the peaceful country-side. With a tender half-melancholy he recognised every turn in the road, every bit of scenery.

"Just fancy my coming back here at sixty years of age, with a great son of eighteen!" he said with a laugh. "And I remember as if it were yesterday the good times I have had

at the château of Beaulieu. Mme. de Langrune and I will have plenty of memories to talk over. Gad! it must be quite forty years since I came this way, and yet I remember every bit of it. Say, Thérèse, isn't it the fact that we shall see the front of the château directly we have passed this little copse?"

"Quite true," the girl answered with a laugh. "You know the country very well, sir."

"Yes," said Etienne Rambert; "when one gets to my age, little Thérèse, one always does remember the happy days of one's youth; one remembers recent events much less distinctly. Most likely that means, my dear, that the human heart declines to grow old and refuses to preserve any but pictures of childhood."

For a few minutes M. Rambert remained silent, as if absorbed in somewhat melancholy reflections. But he soon recovered himself and shook off the tender sadness evoked in his mind by memories of the past.

"Why, the park enclosure has been altered," he exclaimed. "Here is a wall which used not to be here: there was only a hedge."

Thérèse laughed.

"I never knew the hedge," she said. "I have always seen the wall."

"Must we go on to the main gate?" M. Rambert asked, "or has your grandmamma had another gate made?"

"We are going in by the out-buildings," the girl answered; "then we shall hear why Jean did not come to meet us." She opened a little door half-hidden among the moss and ivy that clothed the wall surrounding the park, and making M. Rambert and Charles pass in before her, cried: "But Jean *has* gone with the brougham, for the horses are not in the stable. How was it we did not meet him?" Then she laughed. "Poor Jean! He is so muddle-headed! I would not