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CUMNER'S SON AND OTHER SOUTH SEA FOLK

by Gilbert Parker

Volume 5.

A PAGAN OF THE SOUTH

When Blake Shorland stepped from the steamer Belle Sauvage upon the quay at Noumea, he proceeded, with the alertness of the trained newspaper correspondent, to take his bearings. So this was New Caledonia, the home of outcast, criminal France, the recent refuge of Communist exiles, of Rochefort, Louise Michel, Felix Rastoul, and the rest! Over there to the left was Ile Nou, the convict prison; on the hill was the Governor's residence; below, the Government establishments with their red-tiled roofs; and hidden away in a luxuriance of tropical vegetation lay the houses of the citizens. He stroked his black moustache thoughtfully for a moment, and put his hand to his pocket to see that his letters of introduction from the French Consul at Sydney to Governor Rapont and his journalistic credentials were there. Then he remembered the advice of the captain of the Belle Sauvage as to the best hotel, and started towards it. He had not been shown the way, but his instincts directed him. He knew where it ought to be, according to the outlines of the place.

It proved to be where he thought, and, having engaged rooms, sent for his luggage, and refreshed

himself, he set out to explore the town. His prudent mind told him that he ought to proceed at once to Governor Rapont and present his letters of commendation, for he was in a country where feeling was running high against English interference with the deportation of French convicts to New Caledonia, and the intention of France to annex the New Hebrides. But he knew also that so soon as these letters were presented, his freedom of action would be restricted, either by a courtesy which would be so constant as to become surveillance, or by an injunction having no such gloss. He had come to study French government in New Caledonia, to gauge the extent of the menace that the convict question bore towards Australia, and to tell his tale to Australia, and to such other countries as would listen. The task was not pleasant, and it had its dangers, too, of a certain kind. But Shorland had had difficulty and peril often in his life, and he borrowed no trouble. Proceeding along the Rue de l'Alma, and listening to the babble of French voices round him, he suddenly paused abstractedly, and said to himself "Somehow it brings back Paris to me, and that last night there, when I bade Freeman good-bye. Poor old boy, I'm glad better days are coming for him. Sure to be better, if he marries Clare. Why didn't he do it seven years ago, and save all that other horrible business?"

Then he moved on, noticing that he was the object of remark, but as it was daytime, and in the street he felt himself safe. Glancing up at a doorway he saw a familiar Paris name—Cafe Voisin. This was interesting. It was in the Cafe Voisin that he had touched a farewell glass with Luke Freeman, the one bosom friend of his life. He entered this Cafe Voisin with the thought of how vague would be the society which he would meet in such a reproduction of a famous Parisian haunt. He thought of a Cafe chantant at Port Said, and said to himself, "It can't be worse than that." He was right then. The world had no shambles of ghastly frivolity and debauchery like those of Port Said.

The Cafe Voisin had many visitors, and Shorland saw at a glance who they were—liberes, or ticket-of-leave men, a drunken soldier or two, and a few of that class who with an army are called camp-followers, in an English town roughs, in a French convict settlement recidivistes. He felt at once that he had entered upon a trying experience; but he also felt that the luck would be with him, as it had been with him so many times these late years. He sat down at a small table, and called to a haggard waitress near to bring him a cup of coffee. He then saw that there was another woman in the room. Leaning with her elbows on the bar and her chin in her hands, she fixed her eyes on him as he opened and made a pretence of reading *La Nouvelle Caledonie*. Looking up, he met her eyes again; there was hatred in them if ever he saw it, or what might be called constitutional diablerie. He felt that this woman, whoever she was, had power of a curious kind; too much power for her to be altogether vile, too physically healthy to be of that class to which the girl who handed him his coffee belonged. There was not a sign of gaudiness about her; not a ring, a necklace, or a bracelet. Her dress was of cotton, faintly pink and perfectly clean; her hair was brown, and waving away loosely from her forehead. But her eyes—was there a touch of insanity there? Perhaps because they were rather deeply set, though large, and because they seemed to glow in the shadows made by the brows, the strange intensity was deepened. But Shorland could not get rid of the feeling of active malevolence in them. The mouth was neither small nor sensuous, the chin was strong without being coarse, the figure was not suggestive. The hands—confound the woman's eyes! Why could he not get rid of the feeling they gave him? She suddenly turned her head, not moving her chin from her hands, however, or altering her position, and said something to a man at her elbow—rather the wreck of a man, one who bore tokens of having been some time a gallant of the town, now only a disreputable citizen of a far from reputable French colony.

Immediately a murmur was heard: "A spy, an English spy!" From the mouths of absinthe-drinking liberes it passed to the mouths of rum-drinking recidivistes. It did not escape Blake Shorland's ears, but he betrayed no sign. He sipped his coffee and appeared absorbed in his paper, thinking carefully of the difficulties of his position. He knew that to rise now and make for the door would be of no advantage, for a number of the excited crowd were between him and it. To show fear might precipitate a catastrophe with this drunken mob. He had nerve and coolness.

Presently a dirty outcast passed him and rudely jostled his arm as he drank his coffee. He begged the other's pardon conventionally in French, and went on reading. A moment later the paper was snatched from his hand, and a red-faced unkempt scoundrel yelled in his face: "Spy of the devil! English thief!"

Then he rose quickly and stepped back to the wall, feeling for the spring in the sword-stick which he held closely pressed to his side. This same sword-stick had been of use to him on the Fly River in New Guinea.

"Down with the English spy!" rang through the room, joined to vile French oaths. Meanwhile the woman had not changed her position, but closely watched the tumult which she herself had roused. She did not stir when she saw a glass hurled at the unoffending Englishman's head. A hand reached over and seized a bottle behind her. The bottle was raised and still she did not move, though her fingers pressed her cheeks with a spasmodic quickness. Three times Shorland had said, in well-controlled tones: "Frenchmen, I am no spy," but they gave him the lie with increasing uproar. Had not Gabrielle

Rouget said that he was an English spy? As the bottle was poised in the air with a fiendish cry of "A baptism! a baptism!" and Shorland was debating on his chances of avoiding it, and on the wisdom of now drawing his weapon and cutting his way through the mob, there came from the door a call of "Hold! hold!" and a young officer dashed in, his arm raised against the brutal missile in the hands of the ticket-of-leave man, whose Chauvinism was a matter of absinthe, natural evil, and Gabrielle Rouget. "Wretches! scum of France!" he cried: "what is this here? And you, Gabrielle, do you sleep? Do you permit murder?"

The woman met the fire in his eyes without flinching, and some one answered for her. "He is an English spy."

"Take care, Gabrielle," the young officer went on, "take care—you go too far!" Waving back the sullen crowd, now joined by the woman who had not yet spoken, he said: "Who are you, monsieur? What is the trouble?"

Shorland drew from his pocket his letters and credentials. Gabrielle now stood at the young officer's elbow. As the papers were handed over, a photograph dropped from among them and fell to the floor face upward. Shorland stooped to pick it up, but, as he did so, he heard a low exclamation from Gabrielle. He looked up. She pointed to the portrait, and said gaspingly: "My God—look! look!" She leaned forward and touched the portrait in his hand. "Look! look!" she said again. And then she paused, and a moment after laughed. But there was no mirth in her laughter—it was hollow and nervous. Meanwhile the young officer had glanced at the papers, and now handed them back, with the words: "All is right, monsieur—eh, Gabrielle, well, what is the matter?" But she drew back, keeping her eyes fixed on the Englishman, and did not answer.

The young officer stretched out his hand. "I am Alencon Barre, lieutenant, at your service. Let us go, monsieur."

But there was some unusual devilry working in that drunken crowd. The sight of an officer was not sufficient to awe them into obedience. Bad blood had been fired, and it was fed by some cause unknown to Alencon Barre, but to be understood fully hereafter. The mass surged forward, with cries of "Down with the Englishman!"

Alencon Barre drew his sword. "Villains!" he cried, and pressed the point against the breast of the leader, who drew back. Then Gabrielle's voice was heard: "No, no, my children," she said, "no more of that to-day—not to-day. Let the man go." Her face was white and drawn.

Shorland had been turning over in his mind all the events of the last few moments, and he thought as he looked at her that just such women had made a hell of the Paris Commune. But one thought dominated all others. What was the meaning of her excitement when she saw the portrait—the portrait of Luke Freeman?

He felt that he was standing on the verge of some tragic history.

Barre's sword again made a clear circle round him, and he said: "Shame, Frenchmen! This gentleman is no spy. He is the friend of the Governor—he is my friend. He is English? Well, where is the English flag, there are the French—good French-protected. Where is the French flag, there shall the English—good English—be safe."

As they moved towards the door Gabrielle came forward, and, touching Shorland's arm, said in English: "You will come again, monsieur? You shall be safe altogether. You will come?" Looking at her searchingly, he answered slowly: "Yes, I will come."

As they left the turbulent crowd behind them and stepped into the street, Barr\$ said: "You should have gone at once to the Hotel du Gouverneur and presented your letters, monsieur, or, at least, have avoided the Cafe Voisin. Noumea is the Whitechapel and the Pentonville of France, remember."

Shorland acknowledged his error, thanked his rescuer, enjoyed the situation, and was taken to Governor Rapont, by whom he was cordially received, and then turned over to the hospitality of the officers of the post. It was conveyed to him later by letters of commendation from the Governor that he should be free to go anywhere in the islands and to see whatever was to be seen, from convict prison to Hotel Dieu.

Sitting that night in the rooms of Alencon Barre, this question was put to Blake Shorland by his host: "What did Gabrielle say to you as we left, monsieur? And why did she act so, when she saw the portrait? I do not understand English well, and it was not quite clear."

Shorland had a clear conviction that he ought to take Alencon Barre into his confidence. If Gabrielle Rouget should have any special connection with Luke Freeman, there might be need of the active counsel of a friend like this young officer, whose face bespoke chivalry and gentle birth. Better that Alencon Barre should know all, than that he should know in part and some day unwittingly make trouble. So he raised frank eyes to those of the other, and told the story of the man whose portrait had so affected Gabrielle Rouget.

"Monsieur," said he, "I will tell you of this man first, and then it will be easier to answer your questions."

He took the portrait from his pocket, passed it over, and continued. "I received this portrait in a letter from England the day that I left Sydney, as I was getting aboard the boat. I placed it among those papers which you read. It fell out on the floor of the cafe, and you saw the rest. The man whose face is before you there, and who sent that to me, was my best friend in the days when I was at school and college. Afterwards, when a law-student, and, still later, when I began to practise my profession, we lived together in a rare old house at Fulham, with high garden walls and—but I forget, you do not know London perhaps. Yes? Well, the house is neither here nor there; but I like to think of those days and of that home. Luke Freeman—that was my friend's name— was an artist and a clever one. He had made a reputation by his paintings of Egyptian and Algerian life. He was brilliant and original, an indefatigable worker. Suddenly, one winter, he became less industrious, fitful in his work, gloomy one day and elated the next, generally uncomfortable. What was the matter? Strange to say, although we were such friends, we chose different sets of society, and therefore seldom appeared at the same houses or knew the same people. He liked most things continental; he found his social pleasures in that polite Bohemia which indulges in midnight suppers and permits ladies to smoke cigarettes after dinner, which dines at rich men's tables and is hob-a- nob with Russian Counts, Persian Ministers, and German Barons. That was not to my taste, save as a kind of dramatic entertainment to be indulged in at intervals like a Drury Lane pantomime. But though I had no proof that such was the case, I knew Luke Freeman's malady to be a woman. I taxed him with it. He did not deny it. He was painting at the time, I remember, and he testily and unprofitably drew his brush across the face of a Copt woman he was working at, and bit off the end of a cigar. I asked him if it was another man's wife; he promptly said no. I asked him if there were any awkward complications any inconsiderate pressure from the girl's parents or brothers; and he promptly told me to be damned. I told him I thought he ought to know that an ambitious man might as well drown himself at once as get a fast woman in his path. Then he showed a faculty for temper and profanity that stunned me. But the up shot was that I found the case straight enough to all appearances. The woman was a foreigner and not easy to win; was beautiful, had a fine voice, loved admiration, and possessed a scamp of a brother who, wanted her to marry a foreigner, so that, according to her father's will, a large portion of her fortune would come to him.... Were you going to speak? No? Very well. Things got worse and worse. Freeman neglected business and everything else, became a nuisance. He never offered to take me to see the lady, and I did not suggest it, did not even know where she lived. What galled me most in the matter was that Freeman had been for years attentive to a cousin of mine, Clare Hazard, almost my sister, indeed, since she had been brought up in my father's house; and I knew that from a child she had adored him. However, these things seldom work out according to the law of Nature, and so I chewed the cud of dissatisfaction and kept the thing from my cousin as long as I could. About the time matters seemed at a crisis I was taken ill, and was ordered south. My mother and Freeman accompanied me as far as Paris. Here Freeman left me to return to England, and in the Cafe Voisin, at Paris—yes, mark that—we had our farewell. I have never seen him since. While in Italy I was brought to death's door by my illness; and when I got up, Clare told me that Freeman was married and had gone to Egypt. She, poor girl, bore it well. I was savage, but it was too late. I was ordered to go to the South Seas, at least to take a long sea-voyage; and though I could not well afford it I started for Australia. On my way out I stopped off at Port Said to try and find Freeman in Egypt, but failed. I heard of him at Cairo, and learned also that his wife's brother had joined them. Two years passed, and then I got a letter from an old friend, saying that Freeman's wife had eloped with a Frenchman. Another year, and then came a letter from Freeman himself, saying that his wife was dead; that he had identified her body in the Morgue at Paris—found drowned, and all that. He believed that remorse had driven her to suicide. But he had no trace of the brother, no trace of the villain whom he had scoured Europe and America over to find. Again, another three years, and now he writes me that he is going to be married to Clare Hazard on the twenty sixth of this month. With that information came this portrait. I tell you all, M. Barre, because I feel that this woman Gabrielle has some connection with the past life of my friend Luke Freeman. She recognised the face, and you saw the effect. Now will you tell me what you know about her?"

Shorland had been much more communicative than was his custom. But he knew men. This man had done him a service, and that made towards friendship on both sides. He was an officer and a gentleman, and so he showed his hand. Then he wanted information and perhaps much more, though what that would be he could not yet tell.

M. Barre had smoked cigarettes freely during Shorland's narrative. At the end he said with peculiar emphasis: "Your friend's wife was surely a Frenchwoman?"

"Yes."

"Was her name Laroche?"

"Yes, that was it. Do you think that Lucile Laroche and Gabrielle—!"

"That Lucile Laroche and Gabrielle Rouget are one? Yes. But that Lucile Laroche was the wife of your friend? Well, that is another matter. But we shall see soon. Listen. A scoundrel, Henri Durien, was sent out here for killing an American at cards. The jury called it murder, but recommended him to mercy, and he escaped the guillotine. He had the sympathy of the women, the Press did not deal hardly with him, and the Public Prosecutor did not seem to push the case as he might have done. But that was no matter to us. The woman, Gabrielle Rouget, followed him here, where he is a prisoner for life. He is engaged in road-making with other prisoners. She keeps the Cafe Voisin. Now here is the point which concerns your story. Once, when Gabrielle was permitted to see Henri, they quarrelled. I was acting as governor of the prison at the time, saw the meeting and heard the quarrel. No one else was near. Henri accused her of being intimate with a young officer of the post. I am sure there was no truth in it, for Gabrielle does not have followers of that kind. But Henri had got the idea from some source; perhaps by the convicts' 'Underground Railway,' which has connection even with the Hotel du Gouverneur. Through it the prisoners know all that is going on, and more. In response to Henri's accusation Gabrielle replied: 'As I live, Henri, it is a lie.' He sardonically rejoined: 'But you do not live. You are dead, dead I tell you. You were found drowned and carried to the Morgue and properly identified—not by me, curse you, Lucile Laroche. And then you were properly buried, and not by me either, nor at my cost, curse you again. You are dead, I tell you!' She looked at him as she looked at you the other day, dazed and spectre-like, and said: 'Henri, I gave up my life once to a husband to please my brother.

"He was a villain, my brother. I gave it up a second time to please you, and because I loved you. I left behind me name, fortune, Paris, France, everything, to follow you here. I was willing to live here, while you lived, or till you should be free. And you curse me—you dare to curse me! Now I will give you some cause to curse. You are a devil—I am a sinner. Henceforth I shall be devil and sinner too.' With that she left him. Since then she has been both devil and sinner, but not in the way he meant; simply a danger to the safety of this dangerous community; a Louise Michel—we had her here too!—without Louise Michel's high motives. Gabrielle Rouget may cause a revolt of the convicts some day, to secure the escape of Henri Durien, or to give them all a chance. The Governor does not believe it, but I do. You noticed what I said about the Morgue, and that?"

Shorland paced up and down the room for a time, and then said: "Great heaven, suppose that by some hideous chance this woman, Gabrielle Rouget, or Lucile Laroche, should prove to be Freeman's wife! The evidence is so overwhelming. There evidently was some trick, some strange mistake, about the Morgue and the burial. This is the fourteenth of January; Freeman is to be married on the twenty-sixth! Monsieur, if this woman should be his wife, there never was brewed an uglier scrape. There is Freeman—that's pitiful; there is Clare Hazard—that's pitiful and horrible. For nothing can be done; no cables from here, the Belle Sauvage gone, no vessels or sails for two weeks. Ah well, there's only one thing to do—find out the truth from Gabrielle if I can, and trust in Providence."

"Well spoken," said M. Barre. "Have some more champagne. I make the most of the pleasure of your company, and so I break another bottle. Besides, it may be the last I shall get for a time. There is trouble brewing at Bompari—a native insurrection—and we may have to move at any moment. However this Gabrielle affair turns out, you have your business to do. You want to see the country, to study our life—well, come with us. We will house you, feed you as we feed, and you shall have your tobacco at army prices."

Much as Blake Shorland was moved by the events of the last few hours he was enough the soldier and the man of the world to face possible troubles without the loss of appetite, sleep, or nerve. He had cultivated a habit of deliberation which saved his digestion and preserved his mental poise; and he had a faculty for doing the right thing at the right time. From his stand-point, his late adventure in the Cafe Voisin was the right thing, serious as the results might have been or might yet be. He now promptly met the French officer's exuberance of spirits with a hearty gaiety, and drank his wine with genial compliment and happy anecdote. It was late when they parted; the Frenchman excited, beaming, joyous, the Englishman responsive, but cool in mind still.

III

After breakfast next morning Shorland expressed to M. Barre his intention of going to see Gabrielle Rouget. He was told that he must not go alone; a guard would be too conspicuous and might invite trouble; he himself would bear him company.

The hot January day was reflected from the red streets, white houses, and waxen leaves of the tropical foliage with enervating force. An occasional ex-convict sullenly lounged by, touching his cap as he was required by law; a native here and there leaned idly against a house-wall or a magnolia tree; ill-looking men and women loitered in the shade. A Government officer went languidly by in full uniform—even the Governor wore uniform at all times to encourage respect—and the cafes were filling. Every hour was "absinthe-hour" in Noumea, which had improved on Paris in this particular. A knot of men stood at the door of the Cafe Voisin gesticulating nervously. One was pointing to a notice posted on the bulletin-board of the cafe announcing that all citizens must hold themselves in readiness to bear arms in case the rumoured insurrection among the natives proved serious. It was an evil-looking company who thus discussed Governor Rapont's commands. As the two passed in, Shorland noticed that one of the group made a menacing action towards Alencon Barre.

Gabrielle was talking to an ex-convict as they entered. Her face looked worn; there was a hectic spot on each cheek and dark circles round the eyes. There was something animal-like about the poise of the head and neck, something intense and daring about the woman altogether. Her companion muttered between his teeth: "The cursed English spy!"

But she turned on him sharply: "Go away, Gaspard, I have business. So have you—go." The ex-convict slowly left the cafe still muttering.

"Well, Gabrielle, how are your children this morning? They look gloomy enough for the guillotine, eh?" said M. Barre.

"They are much trouble, sometimes—my children."

"Last night, for instance."

"Last night. But monsieur was unwise. We do not love the English here. They do not find it comfortable on English soil, in Australia—my children! Not so comfortable as Louis Philippe and Louis Napoleon. Criminal kings with gold are welcome; criminal subjects without gold— ah, that is another matter, monsieur. It is just the same. They may be gentlemen—many are; if they escape to Australia or go as liberés, they are hunted down. That is English, and they hate the English— my children."

Gabrielle's voice was directed to M. Barre, but her eyes were on Shorland.

"Well, Gabrielle, all English are not inhospitable. My friend here, we must be hospitable to him. The coals of fire, you know, Gabrielle. We owe him some thing for yesterday. He wishes to speak to you. Be careful, Gabrielle. No communist justice, Citizen Gabrielle." M. Barre smiled gaily.

Gabrielle smiled in reply, but it was not a pleasant smile, and she said: "Treachery, M. Barre—treachery in Noumea? There is no such thing. It is all fair in love and war. No quarter, no mercy, no hope. All is fair where all is foul, M. Barre."

M. Barre shrugged his shoulders pleasantly and replied: "If I had my way your freedom should be promptly curtailed, Gabrielle. You are an active citizen, but you are dangerous, truly."

"I like you better when you do not have your way. Yet my children do not hate you, M. Barre. You speak your thought, and they know what to expect. Your family have little more freedom in France than my children have here."

M. Barre looked at her keenly for an instant, then, lighting a cigarette, he said: "So, Gabrielle, so! That is enough. You wish to speak to M. Shorland—well!" He waved his hand to her and walked away from them. Gabrielle paused a moment, looking sharply at Blake Shorland, then she said: "Monsieur will come with me?"

She led the way into another room, the boudoir, sitting-room, breakfast-room, library, all in one. She parted the curtains at the window, letting the light fall upon the face of her companion, while hers remained in the shadow. He knew the trick, and moved out of the belt of light. He felt that he was dealing with a woman of singular astuteness, with one whose wickedness was unconventional and intrepid. To his mind there came on the instant the memory of a Rocky Mountain lioness that he had

seen caged years before; lithe, watchful, nervously powerful, superior to its surroundings, yet mastered by those surroundings—the trick of a lock, not a trick of strength. He thought he saw in Gabrielle a woman who for a personal motive was trying to learn the trick of the lock in Noumea, France's farthest prison. For a moment they looked at each other steadily, then she said: "That portrait—let me see it."

The hand that she held out was unsteady, and it looked strangely white and cold. He drew the photograph from his pocket and handed it to her. A flush passed across her face as she looked at it, and was followed by a marked paleness. She gazed at the portrait for a moment, then her lips parted and a great sigh broke from her. She was about to hand it back to him, but an inspiration seemed to seize her, and she threw it on the floor and put her heel upon it. "That is the way I treated him," she said, and she ground her heel into the face of the portrait. Then she took her foot away. "See, see," she cried, "how his face is scarred and torn! I did that. Do you know what it is to torture one who loves you? No, you do not. You begin with shame and regret. But the sight of your lover's agonies, his indignation, his anger, madden you and you get the lust of cruelty. You become insane. You make new wounds. You tear open old ones. You cut, you thrust, you bruise, you put acid in the sores—the sharpest nitric acid; and then you heal with a kiss of remorse, and that is acid too—carbolic acid, and it smells of death. They put it in the room where dead people are. Have you ever been to the Morgue in Paris? They use it there."

She took up the portrait. "Look," she said, "how his face is torn! Tell me of him."

"First, who are you?"

She steadied herself. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am his friend, Blake Shorland."

"Yes, I remember your name." She threw her hands up with a laugh, a bitter hopeless laugh. Her eyes half closed, so that only light came from them, no colour. The head was thrown back with a defiant recklessness, and then she said: "I was Lucile Laroche, his wife—Luke Freeman's wife."

"But his wife died. He identified her in the Morgue."

"I do not know why I speak to you so, but I feel that the time has come to tell all to you. That was not his wife in the Morgue. It was his wife's sister, my sister whom my brother drowned for her money—he made her life such a misery! And he did not try to save her when he knew she meant to drown herself. She was not bad; she was a thousand times better than I am, a million times better than he was. He was a devil. But he is dead now too. . . . She was taken to the Morgue. She looked like me altogether; she wore a ring of mine, and she had a mark on her shoulder the same as one on mine; her initials were the same. Luke had never seen her. He believed that I lay dead there, and he buried her for me. I thought at the time that it would be best I should be dead to him and to the world. And so I did not speak. It was all the same to my brother. He got what was left of my fortune, and I got what was left of hers. For I was dead, you see—dead, dead, dead!"

She paused again. Neither spoke for a moment. Shorland was thinking what all this meant to Clare Hazard and Luke Freeman.

"Where is he? What is he doing?" she said at length. "Tell me. I was—I am—his wife."

"Yes, you were—you are—his wife. But better if you had been that woman in the Morgue," he said without pity. What were this creature's feelings to him? There was his friend and the true-souled Clare.

"I know, I know," she replied. "Go on!"

"He is well. The man that was born when his wife lay before him in the Morgue has found another woman, a good woman who loves him and—"

"And is married to her?" interrupted Gabrielle, her face taking on again a shining whiteness. But, as though suddenly remembering something, she laughed that strange laugh which might have come from a soul irretrievably lost. "And is married to her?"

Blake Shorland thought of the lust of cruelty, of the wounds, and the acids of torture. "Not yet," he said; "but the marriage is set for the twenty-six of this month."

"How I could spoil all that!"

"Yes, you could spoil all that. But you have spoiled enough already. Don't you think that if Luke Freeman does marry, you had better be dead as you have been this last five years? To have spoiled one

life ought to be enough to satisfy even a woman like you."

Her eyes looked through Blake Shorland's eyes and beyond them to something else; and then they closed. When they opened again, she said: "It is strange that I never thought of his marrying again. And now I want to kill her—just for the moment. That is the selfish devil in me. Well, what is to be done, monsieur? There is the Morgue left. But then there is no Morgue here. Ah, well, we can make one, perhaps—we can make a Morgue, monsieur."

"Can't you see that he ought to be left the rest of his life in peace?"

"Yes, I can see that."

"Well, then!"

"Well—and then, monsieur? Ah, you did not wish him to marry me. He told me so. 'A fickle foreigner,' you said. And you were right, but it was not pleasant to me. I hated you then, though I had never spoken to you nor seen you; not because I wanted him, but because you interfered. He said once to me that you had told the truth in that. But—and then, monsieur?"

"Then continue to efface yourself. Continue to be the woman in the Morgue."

"But others know."

"Yes, Henri Durien knows and M. Barre suspects."

"So, you see."

"But Henri Durien is a prisoner for life; he cannot hear of the marriage unless you tell him. M. Barre is a gentleman: he is my friend; his memory will be dead like you."

"For M. Barre, well! But the other—Henri. How do you know that he is here for life? Men get pardoned, men get free, men—get free, I tell you."

Shorland noticed the interrupted word. He remembered it afterwards all too distinctly enough.

"The twenty-sixth, the twenty-sixth," she said.

Then a pause, and afterwards with a sudden sharpness: "Come to me on the twenty-fifth, and I will give you my reply, M. Shorland."

He still held the portrait in his hand. She stepped forward. "Let me see it again," she said.

He handed it to her: "You have spoiled a good face, Gabrielle."

"But the eyes are not hurt," she replied; "see how they look at one." She handed it back.

"Yes, kindly."

"And sadly. As though he still remembered Lucile. Lucile! I have not been called that name for a long time. It is on my grave-stone, you know. Ah, perhaps you do not know. You never saw my grave. I have. And on the tombstone is written this: By Luke to Lucile. And then beneath, where the grass almost hides it, the line: I have followed my Star to the last. You do not know what that line means; I will tell you. Once, when we were first married, he wrote me some verses, and he called them, 'My Star, Lucile.' Here is a verse—ah, why do you not smile, when I say I will tell you what he wrote? Chut! Women such as I have memories sometimes. One can admire the Heaven even if one lives in—ah, you know! Listen." And with a voice that seemed far away and not part of herself she repeated these lines:

"In my sky of delight there's a beautiful Star;
'Tis the sun and the moon of my days;
And the doors of its glory are ever ajar,
And I live in the glow of its rays.
'Tis my winter of joy and my summer of rest,
'Tis my future, my present, my past;
And though storms fill the East and the clouds haunt the West,
I shall follow my Star to the last."

"There, that was to Lucile. What would he write to Gabrielle—to Henri's Gabrielle? How droll—how droll!" Again she laughed that laugh of eternal recklessness.

It filled Shorland this time with a sense of fear. He lost sight of everything—this strange and interesting woman, and the peculiar nature of the events in which he was sharing, and saw only Clare Hazard's ruined life, Luke Freeman's despair, and the fatal 26th of January, so near at hand. He could see no way out of the labyrinth of disgrace. It unnerved him more than anything that had ever happened to him, and he turned bewildered towards the door. He saw that while Gabrielle lived, a dead misfortune would be ever crouching at the threshold of Freeman's home, that whether the woman agreed to be silent or not, the hurt to Clare would remain the same. With an angry bitterness in his voice that he did not try to hide he said: "There is nothing more to be done now, Gabrielle, that I can see. But it is a crime—it is a pity!"

"A pity that he did not tell the truth on the gravestone—that he did not follow his star to the last, monsieur? How droll! And you should see how green the grass was on my grave! Yes, it is a pity."

But Shorland, heavy at heart, looked at her and said nothing more. He wondered why it was that he did not loathe her. Somehow, even in her shame, she compelled a kind of admiration and awe. She was the wreck of splendid possibilities. A poisonous vitality possessed her, but through it glowed a daring and a candour that belonged to her before she became wicked, and that now half redeemed her in the eyes of this man, who knew the worst of her. Even in her sin she was loyal to the scoundrel for whom she had sacrificed two lives, her own and another's. Her brow might flush with shame of the mad deed that turned her life awry, and of the degradation of her present surroundings; but her eyes looked straight into those of Shorland without wavering, with the pride of strength if not of goodness.

"Yes, there is one thing more," she said. "Give me that portrait to keep—until the 25th. Then you may take it—from the woman in the Morgue."

Shorland thought for a moment. She had spoken just now without sneering, without bravado, without hardness. He felt that behind this woman's outward cruelty and varying moods there was something working that perhaps might be trusted, something in Luke's interest. He was certain that this portrait had moved her deeply. Had she come to that period of reaction in evil when there is an agonised desire to turn back towards the good? He gave the portrait to her.

IV

Sitting in Alencon Barre's room an hour later, Shorland told him in substance the result of his conference with Gabrielle, and begged his consideration for Luke if the worst should happen. Alencon Barre gave his word as a man of honour that the matter should be sacred to him. As they sat there, a messenger came from the commandant to say that the detachment was to start that afternoon for Bompari. Then a note was handed to Shorland from Governor Rapont offering him a horse and a native servant if he chose to go with the troops. This was what Shorland had come for—news and adventure. He did not hesitate, though the shadow of the twenty-fifth was hanging over him. He felt his helplessness in the matter, but determined to try to be back in Noumea on that date. Not that he expected anything definite, but because he had a feeling that where Gabrielle was on that day he ought to be.

For two days they travelled, the friendship between them growing hourly closer. It was the swift amalgamation of two kindred natures in the flame of a perfect sincerity, for even with the dramatic element so strongly developed in him, the Englishman was downright and true. His friendship was as tenacious as his head was cool.

On the evening of the third day Shorland noticed that the strap of his spur was frayed. He told his native servant to attend to it. Next morning as they were starting he saw that the strap had not been mended or replaced. His language on the occasion was pointed and confident. The fact is, he was angry with himself for trusting anything to a servant. He was not used to such a luxury, and he made up his mind to live for the rest of the campaign without a servant, as he had done all his life long.

The two friends rode side by side for miles through the jungle of fern and palm, and then began to enter a more open but scrubby country. The scouts could be seen half a mile ahead. Not a sign of natives had been discovered on the march. More than once Barre had expressed his anxiety at this. He knew it pointed to concentrated trouble ahead, and, just as they neared the edge of the free country, he rose in his saddle and looked around carefully. Shorland imitated his action, and, as he resumed his seat, he felt his spur-strap break. He leaned back, and drew up the foot to take off the spur. As he did

so, he felt a sudden twitch at his side, and Barre swayed in his saddle with a spear in the groin. Shorland caught him and prevented him falling to the ground. A wild cry rose from the jungle behind and from the clearing ahead, and in a moment the infuriated French soldiers were in the thick of a hand-to-hand fray under a rain of spears and clubs. The spear that had struck Barre would have struck Shorland had he not bent backward when he did. As it was the weapon had torn a piece of cloth from his coat.

A moment, and the wounded man was lifted to the ground. The surgeon shook his head in sad negation. Death already blanched the young officer's face. Shorland looked into the misty eyes with a sadness only known to those who can gauge the regard of men who suffer for each other. Four days ago this gallant young officer had taken risk for him, had saved him from injury, perhaps death; to-day the spear meant for him had stricken down this same young officer, never to rise again. The vicarious sacrifice seemed none the less noble to the Englishman because it was involuntary and an accident. The only point clear in his mind was that had he not leant back, Barre would be the whole man and he the wounded one.

"How goes it, my friend?" said Shorland, bending over him.

Alencon Barre looked up, agony twitching his nostrils and a dry white line on his lips. "Ah, mon camarade," he answered huskily, "it is in action—that is much; it is for France, that is more to me—everything. They would not let me serve France in Paris, but I die for her in New Caledonia. I have lived six-and-twenty years. I have loved the world. Many men have been kind, and once there was a woman—and I shall see her soon, quite soon. It is strange. The eyes will become blind, and then they will open, and—ah!" His fingers closed convulsively on those of Blake Shorland. When the ghastly tremor, the deadly corrosions of the poisoned spear passed he said: "So—so! It is the end. C'est bien, c'est bien!"

All round them the fight raged, and French soldiers were repeating English bravery in the Soudan.

"It is not against a great enemy, but it is good," said the wounded man as he heard the conquering cries of a handful of soldiers punishing ten times their numbers. "You remember Prince Eugene and the assegais?"

"I remember."

"Our Houses were enemies, but we were friends, he and I. And so, and so, you see, it is the same for both."

Again the teeth of the devouring poison fastened on him, and, when it left him, a grey pallor had settled upon the face.

Blake Shorland said to him gently: "How do you feel about it all?"

As if in gentle protest the head moved slightly. "All's well, all's well," the low voice said.

A pause, in which the cries of the wounded came through the smoke, and then the dying man, feeling the approach of another convulsion, said: "A cigarette, mon ami."

Blake Shorland put a cigarette between his lips and lighted it.

"And now a little wine," the fallen soldier added. The surgeon, who had come again for a moment, nodded and said: "It may help."

Barre's native servant brought a bottle of champagne intended to be drunk after the expected victory, but not in this fashion!

Shorland understood. This brave young soldier of a dispossessed family wished to show no fear of pain, no lack of outward and physical courage in the approaching and final shock. He must do something that was conventional, natural, habitual, that would take his mind from the thing itself. At heart he was right. The rest was a question of living like a strong-nerved soldier to the last. The tobacco-smoke curled feebly from his lips, and was swallowed up in the clouds of powder-smoke that circled round them. With his head on his native servant's knee he watched Shorland uncork the bottle and pour the wine into the surgeon's medicine-glass. It was put in his fingers; he sipped it once and then drank it all. "Again," he said.

Again it was filled. The cigarette was smoked nearly to the end. Shorland must unburden his mind of one thought, and he said: "You took what was meant for me, my friend."

"Ah, no, no! It was the fortune, we will say the good fortune. C'est bien!" Then, "The wine, the wine," he said, and his fingers again clasped those of Shorland tremblingly. He took the glass in his right hand and lifted it. "God guard all at home, God keep France!" he said. He was about to place the glass to his lips, when a tremor seized him, and the glass fell from his hand. He fell back, his breath quick and vanishing, his eyes closing, and a faint smile upon his lips. "It is always the same with France," he said; "always the same." And he was gone.

V

The French had bought their victory dear with the death of Alencon Barre, their favourite officer. When they turned their backs upon a quelled insurrection, there was a gap that not even French buoyancy could fill. On the morning of the twenty-fifth they neared Noumea. Shorland thought of all that day meant to Luke and Clare. He was helpless to alter the course of events, to stay a terrible possibility.

"You can never trust a woman of Gabrielle's stamp," he said to himself, as they rode along through valleys of ferns, grenadillas, and limes. "They have no baseline of duty; they either rend themselves or rend others, but rend they must, hearts and not garments. Henri Durien knows, and she knows, and Alencon Barre knew, poor boy! But what Barre knew is buried with him back there under the palms. Luke and Clare are to be married to-morrow—God help them! And I can see them in their home, he standing by the fireplace in his old way—it's winter there—and looking down at Clare; and on the other side of the fireplace sits the sister of the Woman in the Morgue, waiting for the happiest moment in the lives of these two before her. And when it comes, as she did with the portrait, as she did with him before, she will set her foot upon his face and then on Clare's; only neither Luke nor Clare will live again after that crucifixion." Then aloud: "Hello! what's that?—a messenger riding hard to meet us! Smoke in the direction of Noumea and sound of firing! What's that, doctor? Convicts revolted, made a break at the prison and on the way to the quarries at the same moment! Of course—seized the time when the post was weakest, helped by ticket-of-leave-men and led by Henri Durien, Gaspard, and Gabrielle Rouget. Gabrielle Rouget, eh! And this is the twenty-fifth! Yes, I will take Barre's horse, captain, thank you; it is fresher than mine. Away we go! Egad, they're at it, doctor! Hear the rifles!" Answering to the leader's cry of "Forward, forward!" the detachment dashed into the streets of this little Paris, which, after the fashion of its far-away mother, was dipping its hands in Revolution. Outcast and criminal France were arrayed against military France once more. A handful of guards in the prison at Ile Nou were bravely holding in check a ruthless mob of convicts; and a crowd of convicts in the street keeping back a determined military force. Part of the newly-arrived reinforcements proceeded to Ile Nou, part moved towards the barricade. Shorland went to the barricade.

The convicts had the Cafe Voisin in their rear. As the reinforcements joined the besieging party a cheer arose, and a sally was made upon the barricade. It was a hail of fire meeting a slighter rain of fire—a cry of coming victory cutting through a sullen roar of despair. The square in which the convicts were massed was a trench of blood and bodies; but they fought on. There was but one hope—to break out, to meet the soldiers hand to hand and fight for passage to the friendly jungle and to the sea, where they might trust to that Providence who appears to help even the wicked sometimes. As Shorland looked upon the scene he thought of Alencon Barre's words: "It is always the same with France, always the same."

The fight grew fiercer, the soldiers pressed nearer. And now one clear voice was heard above the din, "Forward, forward, my children!" and some one sprang upon the outer barricade. It was the plotter of the revolt, the leader, the manager of the "Underground Railway," the beloved of the convicts—Gabrielle Rouget.

The sunlight glorified her flying hair and vivid dress—vivid with the blood of the fallen. Her arms, her shoulders, her feet were bare; all that she could spare from her body had gone to bind the wounds of her desperate comrades. In her hands she held a carbine. As she stood for an instant unmoving, the firing, as if by magic, ceased. She raised a hand. "We will have the guillotine in Paris," she said; "but not the hell of exile here."

Then Henri Durien, the convict, sprang up beside her; the man for whom she had made a life's sacrifice—for whom she had come to this! His head was bandaged and clotted with blood; his eyes shone with the fierceness of an animal at bay. Close after him crowded the handful of his frenzied compatriots in crime.

Then a rifle-crack was heard, and Henri Durieu fell at the feet of Gabrielle. The wave on the barricade quivered, and then Gabrielle's voice was heard crying, "Avenge him! Free yourselves, my children! Death is better than prison!"

The wave fell in red turmoil on the breakers. And still Gabrielle stood alone above the body of Henri Durien; but the carbine was fallen from her hands. She stood as one awaiting death, her eyes upon the unmoving form at her feet. The soldiers watched her, but no one fired. Her face was white; but in the eyes there was a wild triumph. She wanted death now; but these French soldiers had not the heart to kill her.

When she saw that, she leaned and thrust a hand into the bleeding bosom of Henri Durien, and holding it aloft cried: "For this blood men must die." Stooping again she seized the carbine and levelled it at the officer in command. Before she could pull the trigger some one fired, and she fell across the body of her lover. A moment afterwards Shorland stood beside her. She was shot through the lungs.

He stooped over her. "Gabrielle, Gabrielle!" he said. "Yes, yes, I know—I saw you. This is the twenty-fifth. He will be married to-morrow-Luke. I owed it to him to die; I owed it to Henri to die this way." She drew the scarred portrait of Luke Freeman from her bosom and gave it over.

"His eyes made me," she said. "They haunted me.

"Well, it is all done. I am sorry, ah! Never tell him of this. I go away—away—with Henri."

She closed her eyes and was still for a moment; so still that he thought her dead. But she looked up at him again and said with her last breath: "I am—the Woman in the Morgue—always—now!"

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

All is fair where all is foul
He borrowed no trouble

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