

TREACHERY FOLLOWS ON THE HEELS OF INNOCENCE



**MADAME
PECKETT**

A S H O R T S T O R Y

PART 1

The year is 1860, and a refreshed, stylish Paris unfurls in the hands of Georges Haussmann. Her own, once peaceful, Neuilly, is fallen prey to the itinerant, provincial workforce — a group among whom had secured a commission to construct a dwelling on the adjacent lot. Madame Peckett watches their daily comings and goings, as is her habit.

‘Agnès!’ A young maid scurries at the high-pitched call, finds Madame Peckett, hunched and observant, having slightly parted the sheer voiles covering the window.

‘Yes, Madame?’

‘Come quickly to where I stand...who is that man – the tall, young man... I cannot properly see his face from here! I vouch that your eyes are far more reliable than mine, dear.’

Agnès flits to the window and peers over the bird-like woman’s shoulder. A small group of men stand arguing near to where a wall separates her property from the neighbour.

‘That is Grinard from the Auvergne. He is Monsieur Marchon’s foreman...Madame.’

‘I should say that the applicant has arrived to see Madame...’ replies Agnès, trying to capture her attention.

‘Who, among those asses will obey a lowly Auvernat?’ whispers Madame, as if to herself.

‘Ah, yes; I perceive it is him. Today, he wears his hair neatly under his cap...and he has replaced the brown one I always see him in, with a clean blue chemise today. I wonder if he expects an important visitor, Agnès?’

*

Agnès has been in Madame Peckett’s service for three happy years. She perceives her employer as fair-minded and industrious. Capable, too. She had instructed Agnès in domestic matters, trained her in certain etiquettes, and taught her to read properly. Even though she had judged Madame as sharp-tongued and wise to mischief, the young girl’s astute, yet untainted disposition had won the lady over. She has fostered loyalty and reverend gratitude in the orphan-girl, who Madame had picked out from an institution in Paris. She had quite transformed from the shy, colourless, underfed creature in whom Madame Peckett had

observed something of herself. The child, ten at the time, developed a fierce loyalty toward her benefactress.

‘I witnessed an argument, Madame, the day before last, between him and his builders,’ Agnès whispers conspiratorially, ‘they are behind with the work, so the bricklayer told me before he left...and Grinard expects a visit from the lawyer of Monsieur Marchon. But, Madame, the visitor is waiting, alone...’

‘The bricklayer is the third that has passed through in two months...little wonder there is strife.’

‘How does Madame know he is the third?’

‘I have learned to recognise much, and discern more than is immediately evident.’

Madame often speaks in riddles, and Agnès has learned never to question, for Madame is often unable to

explain a canny ability to perceive trouble long before it happens.

‘Madame, it is already past the quarter hour...’
beseeches Agnès, nervously. ‘Might I admit her ...’

*

Once, Madame Peckett had been a revered personage in the estimation of the Queen. The residents of Neuilly who hold to revolutionary principles retain a resentful respect for the woman. She had personally attended the beloved Prince after his fatal accident in its streets. There are those who still lament his unfortunate death. Eighteen years have passed since that fateful day.

She had fled the city in 1842 and had made her way south, just before the time of the troubles — in the same year the Prince had died. She had stayed away while the king was at his most hated, for she knew that

her chance association with the Royal House was well-known, and she feared retribution by those who seek vengeance in times of unrest.

The last of the Bourbons had been forced into exile six years later — the beloved Prince's father, the Queen and their family had sought asylum in England.

Madame Peckett returned, almost twelve years to the day of her departure, in '54, a short time after the royal family's vast estate in Neuilly had been broken up into lots, and she purchased one, having purposed to make this most significant place a permanent home.

The grocer, still alive upon her return, remembered fondly the brave girl who had tended His Highness's wounds, for it had been in the humble dwelling behind his shop, that the Prince had breathed his last.

*

‘The lady has arrived, Agnès?’ Madame Peckett ogles, as if she has been drawn from a stupor.

‘Yes, Madame,’ she answers, relieved. ‘She has been waiting...’

‘Admit her, girl, for we dally over matters that we should not concern ourselves with...’

*

Madame Peckett is forced to put her extensive home to use, for economic reasons. The Parisian authority has annexed Neuilly, and with its new status as a suburb of Paris, taxes have been imposed.

She considered, turning her large home into a pensionne, but, she thought better of it, fearful that her establishment might attract immoral cavorters or confidence tricksters. Paris teems with strangers, and horrifying stories of criminal activities abound. She

wracked her brain, and had settled on opening a girls' school. The idea had come to her quite by accident, having observed Madame LeClaire's youngest from her regular pew one Sunday. The young woman had returned to Neuilly after having been sent away to a finishing school in Germany. She had set about registering her intention with the Education Ministry, and after having endured an unnecessarily long approval period, Madame Peckett wasted no time placing an offer of employment in a popular journal. Her venture requires the services of a competent teacher.

The last of a batch of five is admitted to Madame's salon at twenty past eleven. Each had written a letter care of the Education Ministry requesting an appointment, and Madame had decided to spread the interviewing process over several days to keep herself from making an instant, perhaps, regrettable decision.

Madame contemplates the young women that have passed under her scrutiny. Mademoiselle Moreau is altogether too nervous, she thinks, to command respect, or keep order. Mademoiselle Corbon is the opposite — a sour, rigid creature, and thoroughly contemptuous of the young members of her sex.

The third, Mademoiselle Dupré, might have done, had it not been for her opinions concerning ‘suffrage’, which Madame understands to be a form of feminine liberation. Such ideas will prove disastrous to the ethos of the school, even though Madame, herself, shares a similar outlook.

Her girls will be groomed to become dutiful wives and good mothers, because the Bourgeois sentiment favours this approach in the education of young women, and she means to pander to the aspirations of a certain class of citizen. The fourth, the most suitable among the applicants, is a sufferer of consumption.

Madame had spent her early years exposed to the peculiarly haggard, persistent cough that characterizes the disease, for her father had succumbed to it. She did not think it wise to offer the woman a permanent situation.

A measure of fatigue has taken hold — disillusioned with the tedious process of interviewing yet another hopeful, for she had desired to find a suitable candidate among the four.

*

A rustle of skirts stops abruptly a way from where Madame Peckett is seated. She takes in the measure of the person, bobbing an awkward, lopsided curtsy. Agnès stands behind the figure. The woman is dressed in a high-necked brown crinoline day dress.

When she lifts her face, Madame is taken aback. We have a drudge, and certainly, a woman that appears older than she is, she thinks.

‘Good afternoon...uh...Mademoiselle? Please, present me with your letter of introduction — Agnès, you may attend to the errand.’

Madame Peckett extracts her pince-nez from its case, and holds out her hand to receive a folded reference letter she had requested all applicants bring along.

Madame notices that this woman’s hands are not those of a lady, for the joints are thick and calloused, the skin, rough. Madame Peckett had invested in treatments to improve the unsightly appearance of her own hands, worn by the time she reached maturity.

‘I introduce myself as Madame Dubois.’

Madame Peckett frowns, her attention drawn away from the letter she holds, to the flat, dull tone.

‘You are married, Madame Dubois?’

‘Made a widow,’ comes the reply.

‘How unfortunate,’ says Madame Peckett, inspecting the faded complexion, mottled in places, and deep-set, tired eyes examining hers. ‘Please, be seated. Or, may I offer you a small apéritif, first?’

‘That is good of you, Madame.’

‘In the corner is a table where you will find something to wet your lips, and calm your nerves, for I can tell that you are nervous.’

The woman moves toward a silver tray on which stands a crystal decanter and a quartet of liqueur glasses. The woman says: ‘How welcome ... I am very fond of absinthe.’ Madame Peckett grimaces. It is far

too early in the day to take liquor. She offers it as a test to see who is inclined to take the bait.

‘I find, Madame Dubois,’ she reassures, while scrutinizing the woman’s sagging frame, for the dress is ill-fitting, ‘that absinthe loosens an anxious tongue...’

‘Indeed, I find it so, too.’

It is a costly beverage, favoured by the Bourgeoise, though, it is not a taste Madame Peckett has acquired herself. It is, however, a useful medium with which to encourage a wagging tongue. Madame likes to keep up with the comings and goings of her neighbours and the townsfolk, as a rule.

She takes up the reference letter once again. Her eyes focus on the words, written in a scrawl. It is a letter from a Parisian named Madame Pinchon, claiming that

Madame Dubois had served as governess to her children Henri, Jean and Ninette, for ten years.

‘A headache prevents me from straining my eyes,’ she declares. ‘Perhaps you will tell me what is written here...you have received a well-rounded education, Madame Dubois?’

Madame Dubois smiles widely, a crooked, broad grin.

‘I would say so, Madame, and, through the years, I acted...have acted, as a loved governess to many delightful children. I did not think to bring all my letters of reference.’

‘I do not think that of great significance,’ states Madame Peckett, her thoughts stalled, in horror.

The woman’s coarse, careless manner disturbs her. It is not one that befits the governess of refined children.

Her speech, too, is animated, as if she has to think before speaking. She points to the piano.

‘May I play to soothe Madame’s headache?’

‘You may,’ says the lady of the house, relieved that the woman’s back will be turned once more, for she cannot pinpoint the cause for bother; she feels sure that she knows this woman from somewhere.

The woman rises.

‘Should I sing, too? I have a sweet voice, they say?’

‘I would like that very much, Madame Dubois, and I have a keen ear.’

She waits while the woman prepares herself to play. It gives her time to re-read the letter. Madame Peckett places it in her lap, instead.

She cannot help being surprised by the sweetness of a naturally good voice — though neglected, and strained.

Her fingers are less dexterous, and Madame picks up a number of false notes in the rendition of a popular theatre melody of years before. She has the impression that the woman had been taught the tune as a party piece. Her posture, and the lay of her hands do not suggest that she is trained.

‘It is a costly instrument, Madame,’ says the Madame Dubois in an admiring tone, lifting her fingers.

Madame Peckett has re-directed her attention, fully alert, at the moment the music had stopped. She had bought the piece at an auction, and she has not heard it played often, but every year, she gets a tuner in, and she is most strict over its appearance.

She clears her throat.

‘A quality pianoforte...uh, certainly...’ she replies.

The woman takes her seat once more. Madame Peckett, asks, determined to get to the bottom of the reason for falsity on the part of a thorough misfit:

‘I have been so taken with the recital that I have quite forgotten your reference, Madame – how else will your accomplishments benefit my pupils?’

‘I speak English, Madame, and I have heard it said...they say that the teaching of English is fashionable here in Paris.’

‘You speak English, and how is that?’

‘I lived in England. I thought, Madame, that you speak the language also, for your surname is English...and we could have a good conversation...’

A wave of irritation engulfs Madame Peckett.

‘There was no need or desire to have English spoken in my home...and there has been no request to have it

taught in my school — I am afraid that providing instruction in English is a skill I have no need of. What else is within your grasp?’

Madame Peckett delivers her discourse in a peculiarly brash way that flows so easily from her.

‘Of course, Madame, if you say so. I...teach the piano, as you have heard, and I do needlework — I’m very good with my hands.’ The woman possesses a natural cunning that Madame Peckett recognizes. She smooths the folds of her gown.

‘That is not quite what I had in mind. Were you born in France, if I may ask?’

For the first time, the pastiche expression fades a little, and Madame Dubois throws back the remnants of the absinthe.

‘In Paris...my mother was French and my father, English. He died unexpectedly and she was murdered. I was taken in by my mother’s relatives, a family of tailors.’

‘A noble profession, Madame Dubois.’

Madame Dubois lowers her eyes. Madame Peckett watches her intently.

‘If that is how you see it,’ replies the interviewee, in a steady, calm tone.

‘That is exactly how I see it,’ replies Madame Peckett, peering over her pince-nez. ‘Take another absinthe, Madame Dubois, please, help yourself. It is difficult, I imagine, imparting the details of a tragic historical circumstance to a complete stranger.’

The sullen expression lifts when the offer to partake of another is issued.

Madame Peckett prods: ‘you have been happily married, Madame Dubois?’

She has waited for the woman to take her place once more.

‘My husband succumbed to wounds, Madame, suffered in battle — we were married ten years.’ This time, she downs the contents of the glass.

‘During which time you held the post of governess to the family Pinchon?’

The woman holds her gaze, and says:

‘He was a soldier and gone a great deal; we needed the money. Perhaps...perhaps, I would like to know, Madame Peckett, if you’ll excuse me of course. I am certain I’ve encountered the name “Peckett” before. I just don’t know where.’

Madame Peckett had long placed the wretch, and pinpointed why she seemed so familiar. She smiles at the woman.

‘Peckett is a common surname in England, Madame Dubois.’

‘Bless your Monsieur Peckett for having left his widow in providence, Madame,’ says Madame Dubois, sweeping a hand around the well-appointed salon.

The statement provides Madame Peckett her cue. ‘I have nothing further to discuss with you, Madame Dubois. I have gleaned everything I require to form a sound impression.’

‘Why are you here, Madame Dubois? What is it you seek, for it is clear that you are wholly unsuited to this position?’

PART 2

She hopped over a muddy puddle in the road, on her way toward Neuilly, having left Paris behind. A courier had arrived at the home of Monsieur Peckett, hours prior, with news.

The young sir had succumbed to a vomiting sickness he developed upon his return to France. The ship's doctor had ordered a burial at sea, and her master had managed to pen a letter. William Peckett had provided a handsome sum to anyone willing to ride the seventy leagues between Calais and Paris, at speed, to deliver his last will and testament. Once docked, the captain of the vessel had made immediate work of honouring his friend's dying wish.

*

‘There is no wife here, Monsieur,’ she replied, startled at the man’s declaration.

‘Madame Peckett is due to arrive...’ he stated, unenthusiastically. ‘The wife is expected to meet her husband at this address, on this day. She has been travelling, and the Monsieur Peckett hoped to recover in time to greet his wife and new child, but that has not been the case...’

‘But,’ she insisted, ‘there must be some mistake...the master has never spoken of a wife?’

The man sniffed, stamped his boot on the floorboards.

‘You are the housekeeper?’

‘Yes; Monsieur...’

He closed his eyes, patience having run out, convinced that the girl had not understood what he has communicated.

‘Your master left instruction to tell you that it is your responsibility to welcome your new mistress, and to tend to her needs and the child’s, if that is what she requires.’

She squinted.

‘And if he passes to the next life, what is to become of me?!’

‘He has passed. He was buried at sea a few days ago. He is dead, girl.’

Madame Peckett stared at him vacantly.

The tall man scowled, opening the flap of his satchel. ‘His instructions are written down in the letter he wrote...see that she gets it...Good day.’

She took the letter and made her way inside, slid upon a chair near the hearth, her heart chopped into small chunks. Dead? She read his words and with each line

she felt small chunks of her heart melt into a bitter-tasting, venomous stew where the juices in her stomach curdled, and made her belch the toxic fumes of one betrayed.

He had been kind to her, and she mistook his geniality as an expression of love. He had not shown it in the manner lovers do, but she interpreted the flutter his gaze brought to her heart as a sign of an unspoken bond. The feelings she treasured assured her. She had begun to be intoxicated by the awakening within. And in the few months she had known him, this truth took hold. She had been in his employ, and he had asked after her wellbeing every morning before leaving the house.

You are like a fresh breeze, Mademoiselle, he said once, like the Springtime – as Mother Nature cleans her earthly hearth and prepares it for the summertime. He meant to offer a compliment in acknowledgement,

for she worked hard to keep his home spotless, to please him.

“My dearest” he had written to a person that existed apart from her, and she felt sickened within. He lamented that he had taken ill and that he feared being forever deprived of the tender touch of the woman he adored, and the son whose soft smell he would not remember until such day when they would meet in the heavenly realm.

He bequeathed all his possessions and the eternity within which his heart would rest, to the only woman that had filled his every thought with the purest love. He had tried, he wrote, to assure his kin that he had made a fine decision choosing her as his bride but alas, they refuse to recognize a union consecrated in the Catholic faith. He had hoped to coax an unbiased stance in time, but it is not to be. Look after yourself, o bride of my youth and my heart, and teach our bonny

boy that his father watches over him from afar in the company of angels.

And her heart crawled up to the recesses of her throat and there, became whole again, the poison flowed in the tears fallen from her eyes.

She rarely displayed emotion, but that morning, she cried bitterly, inconsolably. Vengeful thoughts consumed her.

“Be kind to Caroline, the girl you will find tending your new home, if you have need of her,” he had added at the end. “A homely girl and quite dull-witted, but obedient, my dear. Do as you see fit...”

She swallowed back her heart, its path trickled downward once more, and into the rancid pool to fester a kind of laborious, prolonged hatred. He had not thought of her as clever, and her willingness to please made him think of her as dim-witted. She had raised in

him a kind of pathetic sympathy. She believed that Love had hurtled joyfully over the flaws with which Nature had stamped its vessel. She had been mistaken. ‘Do as you see fit!’ she repeated feverishly, as she went about the business of erasing her presence from a life of temporary happiness.

*

Her mother had always said that people felt one of two ways toward the unfortunate Madame Peckett - contemptuous or completely apathetic. Contempt, in the case of the tailor, or apathetic, which described her father’s feelings toward a child he had not cared to bring into the world. Her mother had never used her name and nobody, including Madame Peckett had no idea what it was. She had not been baptized. She asked her mother once:

‘What is my name, Maman?’

Her mother laughed.

‘I don’t know. I never chose one for you.’

‘I will have to choose a name when I become an actress.’

Her mother looked at her comically.

‘La Paille.’

‘That’s not a name’ she said.

‘It’s as good as it’ll ever be.’

From then on, her mother called her ‘the straw girl’, and as a consequence, so did everyone else.

William Peckett had toyed with a heart unaccustomed to a most basic mode of common decency.

And he had mattered, which was not true of either the tailor or her father. Her mother had been right.

‘How,’ she said, when Madame Peckett turned fourteen, ‘are you to be of use to me...we can’t even get a price for your favour, for there is no man I know that seeks to lie with an obnoxious bag of bones, not even the drunks.’

‘I am able to read, and I will become an actress, and I will not need to sell my favours!’ she retorted. And her mother shook with mirth. ‘O, the foolishness of a naïve tongue...for it is in that profession you will need them most!’

*

Her mother, a gregarious, ample woman of fair complexion, attracted men to herself, as flies are attracted to dung. Her daughter, the cutter’s child, turned out to be as spare and as unpleasing to the eye as her father – a small swarthy man with thin lips, a stub nose that didn’t fit on his face, and a noticeable

weakness in one eye. The only thing Madame Peckett had inherited from her mother was the shape of her large eyes, which made the weakness in the left eye more apparent, and made her appear dim-witted.

The tailor taught Madame Peckett to read and write. She stood by his desk one day. Her mother had gone to the vegetable stall in the market, at Les Halles, where she ran her small enterprise, and she had brought the child to her lover's shop. The child's father, the cutter, had taken ill with a fever, and lay half-dead in his cot in the small cottage the family occupied.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked, all of seven.

‘I am writing a letter to a customer,’ he said.

‘You will teach me to read and write, for I need to know how, to act.’

He stared at the insolent face for a moment, its limp, mousy hair framing a face which, he had always thought, resembled a root vegetable, never more so than at that moment. He laughed at his own malice. The child, perceiving his scorn, took offense.

‘If you do not teach me, I will tell Papa, and he will surely slit your throat.’ The tailor’s eyes narrowed. Her father was in a state of delirium, but being a man with a keen sense of self-preservation the tailor momentarily envisioned the man rise and as a last act of vengeance, muster strength enough to leave this earth having immortalized his honour, egged on by his vile child. He wondered whether Madame Peckett’s mother might throw her bulk between his throat and the blade to prevent the massacre, or laugh.

He said: ‘Your father will not slit my throat because I will not teach you your letters; you avaricious little liar!’ She held his gaze, and she replied, thus.

‘I will tell him how you hover over Maman naked, and grunt like a hog at the slaughter, and he will surely cut your throat with the knife he uses to slice the leather!’

Her mother laughed at the tailor’s rather florid version of the story. After the tailor had spat out his disgust, and Madame Peckett had been given a sound thrashing, she announced, having heaved onto his lap: ‘If my daughter wants to learn her letters, teach her, Hubert, so she may read to me when I am old!’

‘But, “ma petite libelulle”,’ he cooed, ‘I will be the one to comfort you.’ The term of endearment he chose made him an object of immediate scorn. ‘You will kill me with your fawning ways – a tiny dragonfly...me, watch me flutter away!’ She despised the soft, simpering tailor, but, he bought her gifts and entertained her whims.

He had been the only man that had loved Madame Peckett's mother fervently and truly.

*

It was when her mother took the burly doorman at the Comédie Française as her only lover, that Madame Peckett's ambition of playing to an audience took a grand turn in the small dreamer's mind. She'd become distracted, on her route delivering vegetables to the restaurants on her mother's behalf, and would stand gazing, mesmerized by aristocratic ladies and grand citizenesses alighting from carriages along the Marais, and taking déjeuner in the fashionable cafés lining the Boulevard des Italiens — a habit for which she would get her ears boxed by her mother.

She imitated their ways and mimicked their speech, and she practised re-enacting the plays she watched from a concealed spot off-stage at the theatre. The girl

would be sneaked in during the time that the doorman ravaged her mother in an enclave somewhere in the theatre's bowels.

The doorman got his chum, the wigmaker, to put the child to work, and, with that, she spent her time carrying around garments and wigs and polishing the shoes for the evening's performance with care, especially those of Mademoiselle Rachel — the greatest tragic actress in all Paris. Madame Peckett existed as a ghost of the theatre, an apparition with a voracious appetite for observation and imitation, unnoticed by most. The wigmaker, a neurotic, sickly eccentric, had her to fetch his medication from a 'doctor' situated in a dinghy back street. She would watch the apothecary, everyone knew as 'Makh Baba'. He claimed to have fled a Pashtun dynastic feud and styled himself as a royal prince. She watched him mix his potions, clad in exotic, shiny fabric, a lopsided,

dusty jewel pinned on his greasy turban, surrounded by the many jars lining rickety shelves. He was a jovial character, and ready to impart his knowledge to the young girl who, he would often say, was far more astute and intelligent than the lout he kept as an assistant.

When her mother's great love of five years replaced her with another, Madame Peckett's mother moped, listless and sobbed day after day, inconsolable. She lost her vegetable stall in a short time because she could no longer pay the rent on its upkeep.

*

During her mourning period, her mother became besotted with a feckless drunkard who called himself a poet. A cruel, violent man. And Madame Peckett feared her mother's adoration. The cutter had died, and she was not able to return home, for her mother had

sold the ramshackle cottage, and squandered the proceeds. The poet beat from them the meagre monies they eked out as charwomen.

‘Let us leave, Maman,’ she would beg, ‘for he will kill us sooner than later! I will audition for the theatre, or ask the apothecary to take me in!’

‘He is frustrated because they will not publish his work, and, when finally they see his genius...when he is rich and famous, we will have a fine life...but, if we leave, I will have deserted a worthy man,’ her mother always replied, her sodden eyes filled with delusions brought on by the deadly cocktail of love and drink. When she went looking for the apothecary she was told by a beggar who had made the back street his domicile that the gendarmes had come for Mekh Baba. The shop had been shut for months. She put her hand to the door and found it open to her surprise.

A day came, not long after, when the poet complained of excruciating stomach pain. His condition worsened as the days passed, and he died on the third, in agony. ‘It is you killed him; I know a case of poison when I see it!’ Her mother bellowed, devoid of reason and control. ‘I did nothing of the sort, Maman,’ she squeaked.

Her mother threw herself about like a woman possessed, took up the poker and threatened her daughter. ‘I am going to seek the gendarmes to take you away forever from my sight! You hated him! You wanted him dead – you and your evil compatriots!’ Madame Peckett fled the garret as her mother lunged.

She crept around the street corner, hid herself, waiting for her mother to emerge. She followed the woman, staggering toward the river, threatening the air, poker in hand. ‘Maman, please!’ Madame Peckett tried to

reason with her mother. ‘His gut had rotted from drink, so, the doctor had said!’

‘What do they know of it...no, the gendarmerie will expose the real cause! You and that quack, that Mekh Baba deserve to go to the gallows...’

Her mother stopped in a secluded spot along the Pont-Neuf, to wretch over its bridge.

The woman appeared to have flung herself into the river’s currents, so the witnesses said. The authorities were unable to retrieve the body, for the level of the river had risen dangerously. And her mother was lost to a turbulent end. Madame Peckett rushed home, relieved the garret of the books the poet had guarded, which she hid, afraid that they would accuse her of both the death of the poet and the demise of her mother. A gendarme knocked against the rickety door that evening, a corpulent man.

‘You are the daughter?’ he asked, eye on the empty bottles stacked in the corner. She nodded. He grunted, having assessed the situation to his satisfaction. The woman had been a hopeless drunk, according to those he had made enquiries with. Her body had not yet been retrieved. It would be weeks before a bloated mass appeared downstream, unrecognizable.

*

The Comédie had no vacancy for an actress, she was told by the manager, angered at the gall of this wretch, claiming to have learnt everything required to become a great actress from the wondrous Rachel herself.

‘Mademoiselle Rachel possesses the rarest of talents,’ he had said, ‘why should she bother with you?’

‘I know the operas and the comedies off-by-heart, Monsieur.’

And she recited a soliloquy from *L'éclair*, to impress upon him that she had not lied. He would allow her ten minutes. She stood on the stage for the first time, engulfed by the openness of it, her words choked by the trembling sensation taken hold of her senses, and she understood somewhere in her soul, not her head, that, for some, the stage represents an act of war, and they are never able to conquer fear and arrest a public.

‘Your recital is...how shall I say... uninspiring, Mademoiselle; but, in a way that shows a great deal of depth.’

‘What should I do, Monsieur, for I yearn to perform?’ she asked, in great earnest. He gave her the advice he reserved for deficient hopefuls.

‘Go and live; absorb the headiness of love, weather the bite of loss and learn to imbue your performance with those same profound feelings.’

‘The mind is a theatre,’ he said, embellishing, ‘and I am able to discern that your mind, Mademoiselle, is the most splendid and grandest of theatres.’

‘I am able to tell,’ he said pointing a finger, ‘that the stage is the poor cousin to the rich stories that find purchase in a superior intellect. You are a force, Mademoiselle, you transcend the paint and falsities of the stage.’ He wafted on, for he appreciated the sound of his own voice, and he took pleasure in his mockery. ‘Yours,’ he said, his voice rising to a crescendo, ‘is a mind that impacts life itself, and is able, I am certain, of creating its own theatre!’

‘No,’ he shook his head, croaking a lament, having brought his voice down to a whisper, ‘the stage is not for you; I see...I see the makings of a refined lady before me — a patron of the arts, rather than a servant to its rigours.’

He was the only man who had never betrayed her to herself.

*

She wandered around for a day, without a place to return to. The landlord evicted Madame Peckett shortly after the gendarme had left. The poet had not paid rent for months. She stood facing the bridge at Neuilly, having convinced herself that happiness was to be found elsewhere. It became as large as the stage had seemed.

She was unable to move forward, for she was overcome by the obstacle to freedom.

She felt hungry, back in the Cité, and went into the baker's shop to buy bread. First, she pawned the poet's copy of Balzac's 'Le Père Goriot'. The baker's wife, feeling badly over the plight of the famished wretch, suggested that she apply for the position as maid to a

Monsieur Peckett — an Englishman, recently moved to Paris. The baker's wife had heard about the fate of her mother.

He lived on the third floor of a modest house near the Jardins des Plantes. He was not a wealthy man, but, his prospects had been solid. She slept in an attic on the top floor of a well-to-do house not far from where Monsieur Peckett lived. The rest of the maidservants with whom she shared the dwelling, who were employed by the families on the first and the second floors of the building, were afraid of her, for she was a strange girl who would speak to no one, except herself. The baker's wife, Madame Loulou, was acquainted with the mistress of the family that inhabited the first floor, and secured, for Madame Peckett, a musty corner in which to sleep. Monsieur Peckett asked her her name, and in a panic she said 'Caroline', which was her mother's name.

He had engaged the young girl immediately, at the recommendation of Madame Loulou, who had taken it upon herself to accompany the girl, all scrubbed and tidied, to meet Monsieur Peckett. It was the first time that she had felt shy in the presence of another.

*

On the day she jumped over the puddle, a determination had taken hold that she had never felt before. She had scoured the extent of his possessions, which she would never dared to have done, had she known that he had loved her truly. She removed a few valuable trinkets and a pile of banknotes that he kept in a trunk, and searched his bureau till she found proof of his infidelity – in the form of a marriage certificate and the love letters he had received. She packed the goods she had selected into a small sack, having layered the notes to her body, under her stays, and she left,

returning once more to the bridge at Neuilly, where, this time, she would cross.

*

She paid the dressmaker a visit before leaving, to purchase a bonnet.

‘Where did the likes of you get the money to come by such a fine piece of cloth?’ the old gypsey asked slyly, eyeing the comely dress of a sky-blue hue Madame Peckett wore. ‘It was given to me – what is it to you!’ she snapped.

‘There’s trouble, they say, in the place where you work,’ the old woman continued, deliberately savouring each word. ‘A fiery death. You can smell the smoke from here.’

‘The English Monsieur went away on business weeks ago,’ said Madame Peckett, inspecting the ribbon on a bonnet. ‘He will call for me upon his return.’

‘The gendarmes and firemen are there...they would want to talk to people who know the tenants...Élise, fetch me a pin!’

‘I know only Monsieur Peckett and he isn’t here. What started the fire?’ The old woman’s granddaughter, her belly full with child, sauntered up to Madame Peckett, tongue-in-cheek.

‘A woman was killed they say, hit over the head from behind...the babe’s dead, too. Set alight. Gruesome I tell you. The gendarmes will be looking hard for this maniac!’

Madame Peckett, ashen, choked: ‘Who is this woman?’

‘No one knows *yet*, but they will soon. They’re going to be questioning everyone who lives there, *and* the servants...’ And the girl challenged, hands on hips, her belly protruding. ‘It happened in the Englishman’s apartment.’

Madame Peckett gasped, fingering the bonnet she had picked out.

‘What was a woman with a baby doing there?’

‘That’s what I ask you.’

‘How must I know?! I am not my master’s keeper!’

‘It’s none of your business, granddaughter!’ croaked the old woman nervously, ‘were it not for Mademoiselle’s patronage today, we would not be able to feed the parasite in your belly! Had you kept its father, I would have fewer troubles, but no, you seek the company of ruffians, instead!’

The granddaughter grimaced, returned to a workbench and took up a piece of needlework.

The old woman offered to dress Madame Peckett's hair, to fit with the bonnet. 'You look a new person, quite unlike yourself!' exclaimed the old woman, admiring her handiwork.

'You should hurry now, dear,' the old woman said, keeping a nervous eye on the street, bustling with people on their way to gawk at the scene. The police had dispersed onto the streets.

Madame Peckett selected a large sturdy travel bag in haste which she added to her purchase, and took a roundabout way to the bridge, through a back door leading from the shop, and headed for Neuilly.

*

She witnessed him stand and lose his balance and she saw him fall headlong from the carriage, and hit his head on the street curb. The horses neighed and jerked wildly; the fear of an unseen devil having taken them. The postillion shouted frantically, trying with all his might to bring the beasts under control, and the small group of soldiers following the wild chase, barked to a halt. She had darted into a doorway, panicked by the noise, unwilling to soil her new dress.

Oh, Mercy! she heard one soldier shriek. ‘Quick, get him to safety!’ They converged upon the man.

By this time, many people had gathered, and she heard it said that the man was the crown prince himself, Ferdinand Phillippe, Duc d’Orléans. Women cried out in shock and men trembled. The soldiers lifted his limp, broken body, the captain hollering a string of commands.

And hurried toward the nearest dwelling – a greengrocer’s shop. She followed in silence, unnoticed.

‘Fetch the King!’

Madame Peckett crept inside the shop, with not a word said, and made her way to the room where he had been laid. She stood in a corner watching. The greengrocer flapped and fussed. ‘He is not to be attended until the family have been summoned,’ the captain whispered to the greengrocer, ‘for the Prince’s physicians will decide on the treatment best suited to his injuries. Clean the blood from him as best you can, for the Queen’s sake.’ And they left abruptly. Madame Peckett stepped forward.

‘Let me tend him, Monsieur,’ she said, for the grocer had prevented himself from gagging every time he looked at the crushed, mauled face.

He brought her warm water in a bucket and a clean rag with which to wipe the wounds.

Blood seeped from the Prince's eyes and his nose. It rushed from his mouth. His head had been crushed on one side, and his wrist, broken, and too, the bone on the thigh. She touched him. He was tall, with light eyes, turned purple with the blood flowing around his eyeballs, for he had opened his eyes only once while she had spoken to him. His hair was a deep auburn, and wavy where it touched his ears.

She said: 'You will go to a house where angels wait, and perhaps there, you will meet a mother and child taken this day. Tell them ... tell them that they have not fallen in vain, for, Highness, they will meet there, a true and pure heart – a heart that was theirs to have, given freely.'

She took his hand gently. She had never taken a human being's hand tenderly into hers.

‘I am not made to be loved; that is well, and Treachery goes before me, though I will no longer be bent under His ways, Prince. I have inhabited the shadow of a life that has kept me from truth. I fight to reach the warm rays of the sun and feel the fresh air on my face. The reedy, colourless stem of my heart has shriveled; I yearn to be elevated to a better place.’

She'd recited a few lines from *Gaetan and the Shepherdess* — one of Mademoiselle Rachel's great triumphs — for she had never felt more alive than at a deathbed where the angels hovered. She felt the breath of safety and calm upon her. She looked at a man that would not accuse her of pitiless destruction, nor would he reject her for her lack of comeliness. And she thought that she had felt the slightest pressure in his hand, lain in hers.

She could not tell how long she had remained with him, and when she heard the sound of anxious voices, she left her charge, and stood back once more, the bloodied rag still in her hand. She watched his father hold him, and two doctors, one named Pasquier and the other, Baummy, attend to the prince. She watched them administer medicaments, and tear open the fabric, to expose his leg. She watched the Queen sob. He did not wake. He died in his father's arms. And, all the while, Madame Peckett watched.

She heard the Queen agonise: 'If only he had seen us; if only he had spoken...'

Madame Peckett curtsied clumsily.

'Majesté's wish is granted, Majesté.' She wanted to offer this mother a story with which to be consoled. The Queen looked at the girl holding the bloody rag in her hand.

‘What did you say, Mademoiselle?’

She lifted her eyes to look into those of the Queen. She was not a beautiful woman, the Queen, rather a handsome one, with large, hooded eyes, a long nose, and a set mouth.

‘Majesté, I tended His Highness, and, I can promise Majesté that his esteemed Highness did speak...’

The Queen steadied herself, for the news shocked her.

‘What did my son say?’

‘He said...he said only this...I will meet the angels on my mother’s good heart as if on a Spring breeze...’

Once the Queen had recovered her wits, steadied by a valet, she asked: ‘What is your name, Mademoiselle?’

‘Madame Peckett,’ she answered.

And that is how she came to live in Neuilly — the substantial monetary gift that the queen had bestowed

on her for service rendered to the Crown, allowed her to live in comfort.

The death of the Prince overshadowed the significance of a crime committed in a crowded, dingy suburb in the Cité. Two attempts had been made on the life of the king that year, and the police had their hands full with political dissidents stirring anti-royalist sentiment.

Madame Peckett travelled South, fearful that her association with an unpopular royal line would endanger her.

The young widow, was, the Queen had said, the bearer of her son's last words, and the keeper of the rag that held the last trickle of the life in his blood. Maria Amalia saw in this act, a picture of religious significance, and sacrificial duty.

*

She enjoyed an existence free of care, travelling, as she would to a seaside town in Provence, where she lived a quiet existence with the income she had taken from Monsieur Peckett's apartment, and embraced the idea of existing as a respectable Bourgeois widow.

By 1860, the funds that had kept her, had dwindled. And her fears arose once more, for she had not forgotten the sting of poverty or the bite of hunger, even though she'd kept her considerable gift from the queen untouched.

She shuddered at the thought of the mindless fiends inhabiting the vast metropolis of degradation she had grown up in, choking to death, the weak, for a few pennies to squander.

PART 3

Madame Dubois points a shaky finger.

‘We need not carry forth this game... I know it is you and that is enough to put you away forever!’

Madame Peckett scowls.

‘Me?’

‘I know it is you because you are the selfsame creature who worked for Monsieur William Peckett and you came in to buy the bonnet; I remember it as clear as day!’

Madame Peckett goes into battle; the stupor having drained from her.

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about, woman! Leave my house this minute!’

Madame Dubois is ashen, her words are slightly slurred. She stands astride, has no intention of leaving.

‘You’ll hear me out! You are the only woman who bears this fictitious name in all Paris...your name is a lie – you have escaped by pure luck!’

‘I think the absinthe has taken your mind with it, Madame Dubois,...’

‘When you are exposed, your lying tongue will bite itself through! You see, the man Peckett came to my grandmother’s shop to discuss a collection of garments made for his wife, and a layette for his baby. And he told us all about her and his child that she had been expecting. He said he was sailing for England and that she would be arriving on the exact day she was murdered, and that, in case of delay, he would instruct her to come in to pay the rest of what he owed. The woman who was burnt to death was her, the *real*

Madame Peckett, with his child! My grandmother prevented me from going to the police, for she dealt in stolen wares and she was afraid!’

Madame Peckett moves her mouth, but nothing emerges. She wonders if she may be dreaming. She gathers her wits.

‘Most likely *who*...who are you talking about?’

‘Well, you had the good sense to strip your victim of her identity, didn’t you...you’re a killer, a cold-blooded killer ... I always knew there was something wicked and cunning about you!’

‘You make no sense, woman. Now leave before I call the constabulary!’

Madame Peckett rises, gripping a letter opener. Her eyes dart to the exit that the woman blocks.

‘I have a better way of sorting this out.’

‘I have no interest in sorting anything out – leave at once!’

She ignores the look of disdain on Madame Peckett’s face.

‘I deserve my just reward,’ she whispers. ‘You owe me for my silence.’

‘Which part of your story deserves to be rewarded, Madame Dubois?’

‘For...protecting you, of course. Velon will back me up and you wouldn’t want to cross *him*.’

‘And who might this person be...why have you not brought him along?’

Madame Dubois heaves.

‘You have the choice, Madame... Peckett; give me what I want, pay or pay the price. This place will suit me nicely...and I’ll take a nice nest egg along with it!’

‘This place?’

‘Surely,’ retorts the woman coyly, ‘for I cannot afford a home like this, or to entertain in the manner you do.’

‘Look at the fine dress you wear, pah, and so la-di-da, full of your own self-importance, what...you were the laughing-stock, with your put-on accent...and delusions of finery?!’

‘Madame,’ says Madame Peckett emphatically, ‘leave my home this instant!’

‘I’ll be back with my man...’ says the woman, ominously, ‘and he’ll see you right if you refuse to leave quietly.’

‘You leave me no choice but to see my lawyer who will have to appeal to the very highest authority,’ replies Madame Peckett, calmly.

‘You don’t have to be seeing anyone ‘cept the road to wherever.’

‘I am one of Neuilly’s more prominent inhabitants. You might not be aware, but I am a personal friend to our dear queen of a time, Maria Amalia, who still holds a great deal of influence within our social milieu.’

‘This treasured home was granted to me personally by the sovereign. I think you have made a grave error of judgement, and it is well for you to leave.’

For the first time, the woman appears panicked. She did not see that coming, thinks Madame Peckett, and she does not understand anything beyond her futile existence. Nothing has changed.

‘Oh...’ continues Madame Peckett, ‘a visit to the bank is mandatory, too. I am obliged to arrange to have the money you have demanded withdrawn, with the permission of the Minister who will consult with the sovereign to release funds to you and your man since every cent has to be accounted for...’

The woman stands up abruptly.

‘Forget I came here and forget you saw me!’

‘Madame,’ coos Madame Peckett, ‘do not feel badly that you might have mistaken me for someone else...’

‘You’re mad!’ hisses the woman. ‘I might have had more trouble than not, but you’re touched...everyone always said so...even your mother!’

She makes for the door.

‘Your bag, dear, don’t forget your bag.’ And Madame Peckett hands over the shabby item to the flushed woman.

Madame accomplishes two tasks that she sets herself to achieve. Inspector Légris, with whom she is acquainted, receives Madame graciously.

He listens to her tale with concern. “This woman, a complete stranger, threatened you, Madame?”

“This is why one feels so anxious. The woman is obviously a confidence trickster, think you not, Monsieur l’Inspecteur and deliberately sought to gain access to my home under false pretenses?”

‘Possibly...that is a possibility...do you know where she resides, Madame Peckett?’

‘I have an address that she provided, but I am not well-acquainted with the city ... she has run off with the

solid gold letter opener that our former queen, Maria Amalia, bequeathed me, and I am distraught...’ She turns her head, holds a kerchief to her nose.

The Inspector rises. ‘Fear not, Madame, hand over the woman’s address; we’ll look into this.’

She makes her way swiftly toward Monsieur Marchon’s property, swings open the rickety metal gate, and stomps to where Grinard sits, perched on a plank held up by scaffolding, chipping away at a piece of plaster covering the façade.

‘Grinard!’ The man catches such a fright that he almost loses his balance.

‘Y...es, Ma...dame?’ he stutters, his body turned toward her, leg dangling.

‘Come down here at once!’

He slides down with the agility of a cat. Madame has watched him closely over the time that he has been foreman.

He is dedicated, often staying late to complete the day's work himself. He stands, cap in hand.

‘How much do you earn?’

He stares, open-mouthed. Madame Peckett intimidates him. ‘Well, Grinard...’ she adds, impatiently.

‘Less than three francs a day, Madame...’

‘A pittance! What will you do if you are expelled here?’

He shrugs.

‘I am to finish the plastering on one section by next week, and I do not know if that will be possible...’

‘You will not find a new commission if Monsieur Marchon is unable to be convinced.’

‘His lawyer has threatened to prepare my dismissal?’
he chokes.

‘I have a small errand that I’d like you to run, and if you manage to gain the information I need, I will see to it that you find a placement should you face dismissal.’

She gives him a month’s wage as a reward for carrying out the instruction. She will offer him a position as school handyman at five francs a day when the time comes.

*

Agnès had asked whether Madame Dubois had proved a suitable applicant, upon her return that evening.

Madame had sent her to place an order for linen.

‘I am afraid I will have to take the search for our new teacher upon myself, Agnès,’ she answers, ‘for I, myself, found you, did I not?’

‘I did not think much of Madame Dubois, Madame, but, I did not think it my place to say.’

‘I knew a woman much like her, once,’ replies Madame Peckett, wistfully, ‘it is preferable for one such to fling herself into the river.’

*

‘Did you enquire at the dressmaker’s, Grinard?’ she asks, having arranged to meet the man at the crack of dawn the following morning.

‘Yes, Madame – there’s a woman who owns the shop; Madame Lefèvre...she bought it from the old lady who owned it first, but she died a long time ago. She says

the granddaughter of the old woman, the woman
Madame wanted to know about, Èlise, is a criminal.’

‘Did you remember to say that you had fought
alongside the woman Èlise’s husband in the army, and
that is how you know of her? Did you pay her the
amount I offered, Grinard?’

He nods.

‘She said that the woman Èlise has gone about with a
dangerous thug since her young days; she says
everyone in Paris who knows about them, is afraid of
them; there was never a husband, none she knows
about.’

Madame Peckett asks: ‘The woman Èlise’s child...did
you ask after it?’

‘The proprietress said that a girl, her child, works as a
flower seller at Le Marché aux Fleurs.’

‘How does Madame Lefèvre know this, did you think to ask?’ He nods again.

‘The woman said that she came looking for her mother a while back; and the mother, because Madame Lefèvre had told her when she saw her, said she wanted nothing to do with the girl.’

‘What is the girl’s name, do you know?’

‘I did not ask’ he says.

Madame Peckett stiffens in the next moment.

‘Do not speak a word to me until such time as you have finished with Marchon’s work, is that clear?’

‘Yes...Madame...Madame is a saviour...’

‘Good day to you, Monsieur Grinard.’

*

The Inspector confirms that the woman, Élise, had been found in the company of a notorious felon that the police had been searching for, a man that had been connected to a series of housebreaks, and given to violent assault. He had been found in possession of illegal and stolen goods. The dressmaker had provided them with some information, and police informants had been deployed. Eventually, the couple were tracked to a hideout in the Eastern suburbs of the city. The Inspector has summoned Madame Peckett to the Constabulary a week after she reported the woman.

The couple had been found in possession of Madame's precious letter opener, and the police had held them for questioning, and imprisoned both.

‘Madame, her threat or attempt at blackmail is founded on a number of serious accusations. Why did Madame not communicate the nature of the threats?’

‘Because I was so confused by the babble this woman was spewing after helping herself to three glasses of absinthe, that I could not make head or tail of what she was trying to elicit, Monsieur l’Inspecteur. I feared for my life?’

‘Élise Dubois made a number of allegations against Madame. She claims to have known Madame; she claims that Madame carries fraudulently the name of Peckett, and she claims that Madame murdered the man by name of William Peckett’s wife and child...I requested the file from a colleague in the Parisian precinct, and it was, by all account, a brutal case...the child had its skull bashed in with a poker found near the bodies, as was the case with its mother...of course, the fire, which is believed to be arson, rendered both bodies unidentifiable.’

‘It’s inconceivable, Monsieur l’Inspecteur! I am in possession of a marriage certificate!’ replies Madame

Peckett in an alarmed tone, clasping her breast. ‘Which name am I to be exposed for bearing, if not Marie-Louise Peckett?! And a murderess at that...a murderess bearing a false name!’

A flush coats the Inspector’s face.

‘She...ahem...cannot recall Madame’s baptismal name. She claims that Madame was Monsieur Peckett’s maid.’ Her eyes spit a comic kind of contempt.

‘Indeed! This woman has made an accusation against a person whose name she cannot remember yet claims to know!’

Legris purses his lips.

‘Please, could you recount the details of your marriage to Monsieur Peckett?’

‘We were married in Calais in the year 1840, at the Church of Our Lady of the Angels. He died of a fever and received a burial at sea. I have never been introduced to his relatives. I know that they disapproved of his marriage to a foreigner, and have never wanted to meet with me. He kept an apartment in Paris because he had business there, but I had never been there myself. I cannot say who this woman is or why she might have been there, or why a crime was committed against her and her child.’

The Inspector holds up his hands.

‘The facts are verified, Madame. The Commissioner has dismissed the claim. Élise’s lover admitted that she knew the said victim would be arriving to pay a large sum of money for clothes, for an adult and an infant, that had been ordered from her grandmother’s shop, and she referred to the victim as one Marie-Louise Peckett as detailed by Monsieur Peckett himself. We

cannot verify this assertion. Too much time has passed and her grandmother's accounts are no longer available to view. But, according to Velon — that is the lover's name, he recalls her interest in the case and her anger that the bill would remain unpaid because the woman's possessions had been destroyed.'

'A tragic affair, Monsieur.'

Madame Peckett lets out a heave. Her eyes cloud. Legris reaches for his handkerchief.

'I'm sorry,' the woman whimpers, reaching for it, 'what am I to think? Was I cuckolded? Was there another woman I had no idea existed? How silly, after all these years...'

'Now, now, Madame, let us not speculate unnecessarily. There might have been many reasons for the woman's appearance. She might have been

assaulted and shoved into an empty apartment. We simply do not know, and will never know.’

The inspector sighs, his eyes fixed to the small, stricken woman.

‘We assume guilt, Madame. Velon knew enough about the incident to convince the Commissioner and the Prosecutor that the woman Élise had every reason to have had an unnatural interest in the case. He has betrayed their association, it seems. And there is no one to provide an alibi.’

‘Why would she accuse me...I cannot imagine why? Because of my surname?’

His eyes drift to a pile of papers on his desk. ‘She admits to having seen the advertisement in the newspaper that Madame had placed, to engage a teacher, and she thought to confront Madame. I imagine that to be the case, yes.’

‘She left her ploy for an inordinate amount of time, then...my husband died nearly fifteen years ago. I have been in the public eye since, having been with his Highness at his deathbed.’

Her comment causes him to shrug.

‘Élise is an opiate, and, according to the record, had been committed to an asylum with an affliction of the mind a few years ago. Often, the condition re-surfaces, and delusion takes hold once more. The past becomes muddled with the present...so the esteemed doctor is led to believe...I have asked Madame here this day to have Madame lay an official charge of theft. She has also claimed that Madame had planted the letter opener on her person. Of course, should Madame wish, Madame may lay a charge, too, of extortion...uh, and so forth.’

‘The doctor has the correct perspective on the matter. What will be the outcome for the woman on the charges she faces already?’ Madame Peckett asks.

‘The gallows,’ he replies, ‘there is no doubt. She is Velon’s accomplice in crimes we have witnesses to that are prepared to testify, among them, murder.’

‘I...well, it seems trite, to contribute to the list of accusations, since the letter opener is recovered and returned to me...and how does one hold a lunatic accountable? Poor, wretched soul...I hope there are no children that will suffer because of her wrongdoing...’

‘As far as we know, there is a grown daughter that appears to be an upstanding citizeness, a girl of eighteen, raised by the father, or shall we say, a decent man who believed the child to have been his.’

‘Thank goodness for small mercies.’

‘There is something else...the dressmaker, the owner of the shop Madame gave as Èlise’s address, seems to have had a visit from a man whose accent she said was provincial...he asked a number of unusual questions in relation to Èlise...’

‘Ah, why is that unusual, Monsieur l’Inspecteur?’

‘For the reason, Madame...that he, too, asked after a child?’

‘Perhaps, he presumes to be the child’s sire...?’

‘Too young, too young by half...’

‘Odd, yes,’ she mutters, holding her chin, ‘but, let us speak on more pleasant matters...Monsieur l’Inspecteur is soon to be pensioned off, Madame Légris informs me...’

He clasps his hands.

‘Yes; we will join our eldest on the coast...he is involved with creating a boat that travels under water, believe it or not that such things exist...did Madame know that Monsieur Marchon, Madame’s neighbour, is married to my dearest and youngest sister?’

‘How opportune, Monsieur l’Inspecteur,’ she flitters, ‘for I will ingratiate myself with my neighbour when I am introduced finally...’

‘Yes, yes...they return from Vienna three months hence...Madame, before you leave — how did Madame come by the address for the dressmaker’s shop? Élise provided another address on her application, she claims. The Education Ministry has confirmed that the address Madame provided is not the address she provided them.’

‘Monsieur l’Inspecteur, I am sure that she knows not her whereabouts from one day to the next. That must

be the address on her reference letter. Unfortunately, I have already destroyed the document with the false information.'

'I doubt very much that anyone with that address would be able to engage a governess.'

'I am not acquainted with the Cité. I wouldn't know better.'

He watches her leave the Constabulary, follows the quick, nervous gait that characterizes her with his eyes.

*

'Should I suggest that Christophe and Célestine join us in La Rochelle, dear, instead of making a home here...he will get a fine price for his new house, when the work is done?'

Madame Légris looks up from her embroidery.

‘Something has happened, Albert,’ she observes, for she knows her husband well.

‘It is just that...perhaps, some things are better left alone. It would be easy to prove the least credible person correct in this instance, but, I lack the desire to justify a villain, and the ambition to catch a criminal.’

She does not press the matter, sensing his discomfort.

‘Write to Marchon, and ask his consideration in the matter,’ she replies, her eyes fixed on the wall. ‘I will write to your sister.’

*

The young lady behind the stall smiles at the well-dressed Bourgeoise that approaches her.

‘What is your name, Mademoiselle?’ she asks, raising a rose to smell it.

‘Rachel, Madame.’

Madame Peckett is speechless for a moment, before saying:

‘Such a lovely name; how did you come by it?’

‘My father named me. He was a musician in the theatre...’

‘Are you content working amongst the flowers, Mademoiselle Rachel?’

‘I eat, Madame,’ she responds firmly, ‘and in these uncertain times, that is enough; how can I assist Madame today?’

‘You can tell me whether you able to read and write while you put together a posy for me...a display of your choice.’

The girl gets to work. First, she selects six white roses.

‘Oh, indeed, Madame, my father sent me to school, and then, the lyc ee, but, after his death, I hastened to take the work I was offered.’

Madame fingers a length of ribbon.

‘Where is your mother?’

‘I have no mother, Madame, at least, the woman who birthed me is to stand trial, I have been informed, and is sure to meet with death for her crimes,’ replies the girl in a desolate tone. ‘May I add a lily or two?’

Madame Peckett nods.

‘You have been allowed to visit this unfortunate?’

‘I dearly wish to console her, for she is my mother...and she has expressed a desire to see me; we have not met since I was an infant.’

‘Have you considered, Mademoiselle, that such a tragedy will mark you, for it will follow you, and you will bear the taint of association?’

The girl stops for a moment.

‘I...it is not something that has occurred to me...’

‘But, it will! You are fortunate this very day, for I am in need of a teacher to fulfil the task of providing my pupils, eight young ladies between thirteen and eighteen, with lessons in history, mythology, domestic economy, geography and drawing. Do you presume that you might qualify to offer sound instruction in any or all of these subjects, for my academy is due to open in a month’s time? Add irises too, Mademoiselle; are they not of the most vivid hue?’

‘Indeed...I...am sure I could...but, why me, Madame?’

‘I pay well, apart from offering comfortable lodgings within my premises, meals included. You have an endearing innocence about you, for I am a superb judge of character. How much for the posy, dear?’

‘Uh...one franc, seventy centimes, Madame...’

‘My academy is situated outside the city, Mademoiselle, and you understand that, should you take on a position with my establishment, you will drop the pursuit of fraternizing with your poor mother — I cannot afford to have scandal darken my endeavour?’ says Madame Peckett, inspecting the contents of her purse. ‘It is entirely up to you to choose a better way.’

The young woman holds out the posy, which has turned into a small bouquet. Madame Peckett hands her the exact amount.

‘I do understand, but, I fear that I shall admonish myself as an unworthy, treacherous daughter should I desert her in this, her darkest hour.’

‘And, the newspaper men will seek you out, Mademoiselle, and make your image known once the court gathers to convict this woman. They will dog you and bring to the Prosecutor’s attention that you have been an accomplice, for why else will you lend support to a criminal...and, as a consequence, any chance that you might have to improve your circumstances will be damned? Innocence walks alongside Tragedy, Mademoiselle. Discover this at your peril. Nor should you mourn for those who dabble in their own demise and care not for yours; mourn only if you are foolish enough to follow in the shadow of Treachery.’

The girl stares, wide-eyed, at the small citizeness, her gait hurried — an angel, a good-hearted angel has appeared out of nowhere on this fine Spring day.