

## ~ The Red Taffeta Scrap ~

---

I settled into my high-backed armchair before the flaming hearth. Partly charred remnants of a log or two and bits of coal deterred me from rising to bank the fire. The old grandfather clock standing in the corner, below the railing of the bedroom balcony, warned of my impending appointment, yet three-quarters of an hour distant.

Behind me, I heard Juekie clearing the table in the dining chamber. The creaky swish of the swinging kitchen door signaled her otherwise silent but oft-repeated passages between those chambers. As my evening's repast settled heavily in my middle, I marveled at her industry. I suppose the old maxim is true, a woman's work is never done. If only for that reason, though I have many more, I am glad that I am not of the female gender. I doubt my constitution could withstand such demands. As it was, the ardor of the past week had eroded my resistance to such extent that I was able only to sag back in my soft chair and rut. Though I wore my best smoking jacket—the satin burgundy with the black velour cuffs, waist sash, collar and pockets—in honor of my very important and much-anticipated guest, I could not muster the energy to fill my pipe.

Alas, the two bowls of fish stew, dozen oysters and half carafe of port I had consumed at sup weighed heavily upon me now. Perhaps, I had overindulged? Despite the gloomy, morbid and harrowing events of the past week, my prodigious appetite remained quite unaffected. In point of fact, now upon studied reflection, it appears that, perhaps quite to the contrary, those recent, unseemly events may have served only to increase my hunger.

*Burrrrrrp!*

Dear me. Could I but emit a few more such eructations, I should be decidedly relieved; yes, decidedly.

The warmth of the blazing hearth, and the soft comfort of my chair's stuffed cushion beneath my backside somewhat mollified my concerns over the dire gravity of my pending appointment. My anxiety over how I should respond to Monsieur Le Constable's formal inquiries receded. The cozy comfort of my rooms was made all the more palatable by the wet, raw, bone-chilling cold, which I knew accompanied the sound of the driving rain, beating heavily against my thick-curtained window panes and high above my head on the vaulted rooftop. The winter storm had begun three nights ago at the onset of this seamy affair. And I feared surcease of storm outside would coincide with the increase of my pressing personal troubles. I awaited the fate of the storm as I awaited my own, with similar apprehension and some little trepidation. Nevertheless, the lazy hiss and spritely crackle of the fire before me, no less its overwhelming warmth, induced slumber, which covered me like a downy quilt.

The clock chimed once on the half hour, sparking me awake but for an instant. I turned into the corner of my high-backed chair, nestling my cheek and grizzled sideburn into the cushioned fabric. Returning to my somnolent state, visions of giant dancing oysters turned the tables upon me. Lively as avaricious tongues in search of satisfaction, they slurped at my being, engulfing me piece by piece, bit by bit, into their shells, which then clamped tight about my pieces. Jonah in his whale could not have been more terrified than I. And yet, I knew the sin that had subjected me to so ghastly a sentence; felt it, weighing heavily upon my being. Indeed, I was hard-pressed to know which weighed more heavily upon me, my evening's heavy repast or my lugubrious guilt.

A noise rescued me from the carnivorous oysters, startling me awake.

« Pardons, mon cher mari. Un morceau du charbon est tombé. »

Snorting, I blinked my eyes open to spy Juekie in her flowing calico servant's dress and grey tignon, scooping a piece of coal from the floor at the forefront of the hearth with the wrought-iron spatula and tossing it into the roaring blaze.

"Ah, you stoked the fire," I murmured, still heavy with slumber. "Yes, yes. Good girl."

I tried to smile but her loving *simper* preceded my own.

« Mon cher mari, qu'est-ce qu'as tu fait? Oh la-la. »

Then, pulling a kerchief from beneath her *basque*, she reached forward, gently dabbing at my cheek and goatee to dry some unattended and, to me, unknown dribble. « Tu t'es bavé encore. » Clucking her tongue, Juekie shook her head in a patronizing manor that I found comforting. Glancing toward the clock, her smile faded. « L'heure s'approche. »

I glanced at the clock. Indeed! 'Twas but a minute before the hour.

"Yes Juekie. You are right." I sat up, straightening my person. "How do I look?"

She reached forward again, this time to press and pat my graying wisps, over and down upon my tonsure. Then she stepped back to study me and said.

« C'est bien. »

At that precise moment, the door bell chimed and the knocker resounded twice. We paused to look at one another. We both knew what we must do. Juekie inquired as to whether she should remain in the room after she answered the door. I suggested it may be better if she sat at the dining table and busied herself in some manner. But that she should keep an ear out for my conversation with Monsieur Le Constable. She nodded.

Juekie stole swiftly but silently to the front door. Upon reaching the portal, she paused to watch me pad noiselessly in my felt slippers, following in her footsteps part way across the throw rug carpeting the room. When I stopped, she nodded and opened the door.

« Bon soir, Monsieur et bien venue. » Juekie smiled graciously at our new arrival. « Entrez, entrez s'il vous plait. La nuit, méchante de l'it par, n'est ce pas? »

The guest responded, « Mais oui, Mademoiselle, bien sur. Merci. »

Juekie accepted his wet top hat and cloak, shaking them off in the foyer as Monsieur Le Constable closed the door on the wretched night behind him. Smiling, Juekie nodded toward me. I stepped across the room to greet our much-anticipated guest.

"Ah, Monsieur Valois," said I. "It is good to see you, sir."

I took his cold wet hand in both of my own and shook heartily, while Juekie hung his wet garments next to my things in the old family chifferobe next to my storm gear.

"And it is good to see you Monsieur," he replied with equal fervor. I glanced toward Juekie. "You know my servant Juekie, do you not, Monsieur Valois?"

"Michel, why so formal? I know this is official business, but we still are old acquaintances, are we not? Please, Jean will do."

"Yes, of course, Jean."

"Certainly, I remember Mademoiselle Morceau-Exquis. How could I forget one so young and attractive? It's my pleasure, Mademoiselle." He smiled and bowed his head.

Returning his smile, Juekie said, « Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur. Le plaisir est toute pour moi. » She curtsied.

I offered the constable a beverage. He said warm tea would be fine, if we had any. I turned to Juekie, who nodded and was off on her mission of service. I escorted the

constable across my rooms to the two armchairs awaiting us by the fire. Monsieur Le Constable strode straight to the hearth, where he extended his hands to the blaze.

“Upon my word,” he said, “but this weather is devilish nasty, even for winter.”

I agreed heartily and offered him the chair near mine where a small French provincial table made of stout rosewood resided between the two high-backed armchairs. Rubbing his hands profusely, the detective apologized for the necessity of his visit offering that he had no good news pertaining to this unseemly affair. He said that he regretted that the few outstanding clues he had uncovered concerning my ward’s disappearance had uncovered nothing of substance.

Juekie returned carrying a tray that supported a pitcher of steaming hot tea, a pair of cups and saucers and spoons, a smaller pitcher of milk, a bowl of sugar and a dainty, linen towel. She set the tray down on the table between my guest and me, before she bowed and retreated quietly to her strategic station at the dining table as I had previously instructed her. The normally brisk rustle of her skirts was subdued by the silky stealth of her silent stride.

My friend the constable eyed me sadly, though he would not meet my gaze directly.

“Professor Joubert,” he intoned rather somberly, “it is with great tristesse, or distress, that I must report ... we have been unable to discover the whereabouts of your cherished ward Mademoiselle Wichtiguerin.” He glanced at me before hanging his head in shame.

I attempted to match his sincere distress, while at the same time relieving him of the tremendous burden of failure that he obviously felt, which I observed in his bowed head and sagging shoulders.

“Monsieur Valois—Jean:” I reached over the small stand between us to touch his forearm that rested rigidly over his bent knee. “Please do not distress yourself, my friend. It has been but three days. Surely, some good tidings will yet bear out.”

When he slowly raised his head, I smiled to encourage him. The constable raised his hands in despair before lowering them to his lap.

“I should like to hope so, Monsieur. But, in my experience, if no clues of substance are ascertained in the first forty-eight hours of a disappearance, the odds of a successful resolution to such cases are highly unfavorable. Though I regret to confess my shortcomings in this instance, I find that the path of honesty to be the more prudent way when relating such matters to the relatives of the missing party. False hope can be a prolonged and most cruel master in these sad affairs.”

I nodded gravely, as gravely as I could under the circumstances. And in an unusually, most atypical exchange of perspective, I offered him my sincerest condolences. Upon pronouncing a prolonged but deleterious sigh, he stared into the crackling fire but a few feet distant and fell silent. We sat thus, peering into the blazing hearth, listening to the persistent tating of the storm upon my chambers for some time with the comforting hiss and crackle of the warming blaze before us. At last I took tea cup in hand and, after a prolonged sip, set the cup back on its saucer on the tabletop next to me.

“My dear fellow,” I remarked. “You must not take it all upon yourself so grandly. I know you as a stalwart in your profession. If you have done your utmost to untangle the mystery of my missing step-niece, as I am most certain you have, then I feel quite assured there is none other who could have fared better by securing any more positive results.”

He nodded wistfully.

I begged him, "Have a sip of tea, my friend. It will do you good."

He followed my instructions to the letter. Indeed, he more than surmounted my advice, by draining his cup. I poured him another. And this time, he spooned some sugar into his tea, stirred the brew three times round, whereupon he tapped the teaspoon on the edge of the cup, before setting the spoon alongside the cup on the saucer. He sipped twice before he returned cup, spoon and saucer to the tray on the tabletop between us.

"You see," he said rather hesitantly, "we do have one outstanding clue, a tip actually, that your ward may have sailed to Vera Cruz with a gentleman, a gambler I'm afraid, by the name of Cart—Carter Sharpe. I don't suppose you would know of him, Professor. I regret to say he is not of the upper crust."

"No," I replied in deep thought, "I regret I am not familiar with that name."

"Mademoiselle Wichtiguerin never mentioned him then? This Cart Sharpe?"

"No sir. She did not. Upon my word, I find it difficult to believe that she could even have made the introduction of a gambling man. Where would she meet him? We, that is Juekie and I, have done our utmost best to shelter our beloved Flirtice from such ruffraff. Indeed, our protective custody of her has proved to be a minor source of consternation among us."

Monsieur Le Constable leaned forward with a faint glimmer enter his cold, grey eyes.

"Ah," he said. "Is that so? Did the young mademoiselle demonstrate decided objections?"

"Well," replied I. "It was nothing of consequence I can assure you; truly—certainly, nothing worthy of note. I dare say that our minor consternation was no greater and, I believe, much less than that which accompanies the households of other families harboring adolescents; particularly, those with only children, that is to say, those without benefit of the company, consolation and familiar rivalry of other siblings. Though, I regret to say, my dear Flirtice could, on occasion, proved to be quite obstinate."

"Yes, yes of course. In any case, I am quite certain that you maintained a harmonious home for the young mademoiselle. Still Michel, at seventeen, and with great beauty such as she possesses, her fairness of face, form and manner, one could hardly call her child, or even adolescent. She has grown into a striking, strident young woman. Though I admit freely, it is most difficult for those closest to a young woman, such as you Michel with your step-niece, to see, to observe such growth and—ahem—maturity—of nature. That is to say, the closeness and lengthy familiarity accrued over the years by, uh, close relatives and guardians tend to obscure rather than accentuate, or even reveal, a young woman's, uh... Shall we say, blossoming? Right before your very eyes, as it were."

The constable turned his head somewhat toward the fire, looking at me askance. Yet, unlike earlier, he held my gaze out of the corner of his eye. I nodded wistfully, as had he earlier, agreeing with his keen observation. Still, I wondered aloud, how he had learned that Vera Cruz was a possible destination in this instance.

"Oh well, young Mortimer DuMasse, the student of yours whom you aforementioned during our initial interview, had occasion to visit Mademoiselle Flirtice, as you no doubt are aware. He condescended to relate to me of the chance meeting between this Sharpe fellow and you're young mademoiselle in the streets during Mardis Gras."

I slammed my hand and forearm atop the arm of my chair, hoping to display the right tincture of frustraion mixed with surprised disdain that I hoped would meet with his approval.

“Mardis Gras!” I spit out the words as though they fouled my mouth. “A superstitious practice,” I nearly raged, “that I initially found both amusing and delightful when first it made its unsolicited way into our fair village. Yet now I believe sincerely that true evil lurks behind those nocturnal masks. It is a harbinger—I say a precursor to a debauched perversity I tell you that may yet take advantage of and ruin more than one fair damsel, if the practice be permitted to continue in so unrestrained a manner as it is at present.”

Sighing, the constable flung back his head of salt and peppered locks. He replied.

“You are so right my friend. The natives have come to view what I most wholeheartedly agree began as a quaint and pleasant ritual and have turned it into a night of horrors, as we at the prefect have learned all too well in recent years. But, to complete my answer to your question about the destination of Vera Cruz ...”

He paused to sip his tea. Following the deliberate swallow of the warm beverage, he continued.

“Your servant makes delicious tea, Monsieur le Professeur. It must be a blessing to have her serve you.”

“Indeed it is, Monsieur. I find Juekie to be a most capable servant, adept at a variety of tasks, and of a most pleasant demeanor. And I flatter myself—” (I could not suppress a deep chuckle) “—to think that she takes no little pleasure in serving this household. Her assiduous industry no less her extreme affability promotes in me a delicacy of mind in my old age that I find prodigiously and, may I add, most comfortingly invaluable.”

As the detective looked toward Juekie, I followed his gaze across my rooms and through the archway into the dining chamber. We found her seated at the foot of the dining table in Flirtice’s place, visible through the archway by the candelabra above the table, doubled over her cards in complete concentration, apparently oblivious to our conversation. Yet, I knew differently, knew that Juekie had the keen senses of a wild animal hunting its prey. Indeed, when it came to the musings of my mind, she seemed to possess a sixth sense, knowing my moods, needs and desires, better than I did myself.

“Yes. I agree,” added Monsieur Le Constable. “You are very blessed to have so dedicated and capable a servant, one who, I am quite certain, would make any sacrifice to fulfill even your simplest needs.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, speaking from the side of his mouth: “Though her low station cannot conceal she is handsome both of face and figure, which are features that I have noted are shared among many mulattoes of this city.”

I lowered both my head and voice to match his. Leaning over the table, I replied.

“My dear Monsieur Le Constable, you are quite correct in your observations, though Juekie is mostly Creole by birth, more so than Cajun, being a negress by only an eighth and Choctaw by a quarter.”

“She is indeed a most handsome, young woman.” He nodded slyly. “And she resides here with you full time, does she not?”

His question startled me, though I tried to maintain a veneer of cordial reserve. I replied yet in whisper, “She does indeed Sir, and has so since birth, unlike my step-niece, whom

you know I acquired from her home in Switzerland when she was orphaned at the tender age of five and at such tender age have made the child my ward.”

“Yes,” he whispered. “And your servant Juekie, I believe, is of what age?”

“Let me see ... Juekie will be twenty-six—no, no—twenty-seven, yes twenty-seven come the seventh of May.”

The constable fairly sneered but continued in whisper.

“Yes, of course. She must be a comfort to you in your advanced years. You are fifty-nine, are you not Monsieur le Professeur?”

“Alas, yes. Now Jean, what about this knowledge you possess pertaining to my ward’s alleged abduction to Vera Cruz by a local ne’er-do-well?”

He turned back round to face me.

The constable feigned bewilderment. And for the first time, suspicion signaled a grave warning. The dire sense quickly stole over me, pervaded my very being. Hair rose upon the nape of my neck and a chill passed through me, striking me cold to the bone, as cold as the winter storm that had penetrated me to the marrow upon my way home from the university earlier this evening. Could this policeman be acting the part of a guileless, doddering dupe for me, as I was for him?

I turned my gaze away from the detective down towards the fire, where my eyes were drawn, as if by a magnet, to spy a small fragment of a garment—red taffeta! The singed scrap was no more than an inch—certainly, less than two—in diameter and resided just inside the right corner of the hearth; yet outside, the reach of the fire. Though my heart leapt into my throat, I concealed my shocked dismay as best as I could under the circumstances. How could I have overlooked it? The alert policeman noticed the change in my demeanor.

“I say, my dear fellow, are you quite all right?” said he. “You look as though you’ve observed a ghost lurking in those flames.”

Clearing my throat, replied I: “Nonsense, tis but a chill. Upon my word, as my years advance, I seem to collect them quite regularly, even in fairer weather at times.”

“Have you seen a doctor? Certainly, the University affords a variety of medical specialists I would think who would be only too happy to treat you; probably, at a reduced fee for so distinguished a faculty fellow such as yourself.”

“Quite so, quite so. But tis merely an echo, a chilling reminder you may say, of a bout with malaria I suffered many years ago as a young man. My physician at the time warned me these ‘gentle reminders’ would increase with age. Tis nothing to warrant your apprehension, I assure you. Though I thank you for your concern.”

“Very well,” replied he. “Certainly you would know best how to care for your health in any case.”

He reached for his cup and saucer to sip his sweetened tea. For my part, I was relieved to have diverted him from my faux-pas, but grew anxious for the scorched scrap of taffeta. If he made that same discovery, I would be hard-pressed to explain its presence. Yet, I dare not rise to slide the bit into the fire with my foot, lest I draw his attention to the cloth. I thought the better course to return to the primary topic of our discourse.

“Now Jean, you were about to provide me with some intelligence about the abduction of my ward by this, this—this gigolo.”

His brows arched, as he reset both cup and saucer in their previous station.

“*Abduction by a gigolo?*” He chuckled. “No, no my dear friend. I don’t believe I mentioned either of those terms. If I misled you, I apologize sincerely. No, we have an unsubstantiated allegation that Mademoiselle Wichtiguerin departed, *voluntarily*, with that moderately successful, gambling gentleman I aforementioned on the clipper ship *La Femme Fatale* bound for Vera Cruz at dawn on Wednesday last. Though I must confess, the gentleman does appear to be a man of dubious repute.”

“An unsubstantiated allegation, you say? By whom?”

“Why, by one of your students, a close friend of the young Mademoiselle as he related to me—the same Mortimer DuMasse whom I aforementioned.”

Mortimer DuMasse was a student of mine, a poor one at that—an individual from a family of little reputation, from across the great river in our sister state of Mississippi I believe, who possessed the spine of a jellyfish. DuMasse was hopelessly in love with my willful Flirtice and too much the fool to see that she strung him along, toying with him for her own perverse amusement.

“Yes, I know the young man,” replied I. “He has been courting Flirtice with little success for the past several months.”

“Do you trust him—his word, I mean?”

I replied, “Though he is not particularly accomplished, I believe him honest. Though somewhat gullible, I do not believe he would lie or attempt to mislead you, even though to do so should profit him. However, I fear he may be susceptible to gossip, taking on most any unverified fact or assertion as gospel.”

“Quite so. My discernment of the young man’s character coincides precisely with your own. Yet, I believe that I may state with some great assurance that the young man, in this instance anyway, proves true to his word. And that he is not passing mere, idle gossip.”

“Oh? How so?”

“During your initial report to me four days ago on the disappearance of your ward, you mentioned that Monsieur DuMasse had been her escort during the Mardi Gras celebration. Based on your information, I sought out Monsieur DuMasse to solicit his knowledge in the matter of your ward’s mysterious and abrupt disappearance. He confirmed your observations completely.

“So Jean, you fear my niece may have eloped to Mexico with this gambling gentleman? Is that your supposition?”

The detective’s jaw tightened, as he paused in raising cup and saucer to his chin. He peered over his raised cup to say quite distinctly, “No Michel, *that* is not my fear.”

After deliberately sipping his tea, the detective replaced his cup and saucer on the rosewood table standing between us. He said, “May I?” He lifted his cup to the yet steaming teapot.

“Why, by all means,” I assured him. “Help yourself as it pleases you.” I smiled.

As he helped himself to more tea, filling his cup, he said, “Yes that is certainly what young DuMasse believes. But I have pursued his theory to the utmost limits and I cannot agree. I have made extensive inquiries on the docks of the harbor master, stevedores, etcetera, etcetera.” He replaced the teapot upon the tray.

“And ...?”

He arched his brow.

“And, I have learned that, while the gambler Cart Sharpe did indeed depart with the tide Wednesday last, Mademoiselle Wichtiguerin was not listed on the ship’s manifest. In fact, only five female travelers were listed on the passenger manifest of *La Femme Fatale*. Two were a pair of elderly sisters. A third was a wealthy young woman from Boston, travelling with her widowed father. The fourth was a Mexican señora returning home with her husband and three children, one of whom at ten-years of age completed the list as the fifth of the five and could hardly be mistaken for your ward.

Groping for a solution, I stammered.

“Well—well, pa-pa-perhaps ... Perhaps Flirtice travelled incognito, pa-pa-possibly posing as a man? Or perchance, she boarded the ship unobtrusively, by some contrivance of stealth or subterfuge?”

The detective calmly sipped his tea then replaced cup and saucer on the tabletop next to the teapot. Looking down and placing his hands on his knees, the constable shook his head doggedly. He pushed himself off his armchair to step towards the hearth, where he extended his hands outward to the warmth of the crackling blaze. Warming himself thusly, the detective clucked and shook his head. His long, greying locks jiggled and swayed down over his starched collar.

“No, no my dear friend,” he stated quite assertively. “I fear those cases cannot be.”

As he peered into the crackling hiss of fire, I offered that perhaps this gambler fellow was in colleague with one of the dock workers whom he had paid off to help him spirit away my dear Flirtice against her will. Yet, Monsieur Le Constable merely shook his head, warming himself before the comforting blaze in my stone and masonry hearth. I betook myself from my cozy abode to stride forward to meet him, whereupon I leaned to him, strenuously redoubling my contentions. As he turned toward me with his head bowed, I implored him.

“But surely sir, can it be beyond the realm of possibility that—”

“—Ho! Ho!” interjected the detective. “—*What* have we here?”

He stooped down to his right and, kneeling close to the flames, collected the errant scrap of red taffeta I had spied earlier. He turned the scorched piece over in his hand from front to back, scrutinizing the fabric with the utmost concentration. Rubbing the cloth between his thumb and forefinger, he gauged the coarseness of texture. He repeated softly, more to himself than to me, “Yes, what have we here?”

He glanced up to me as I stepped toward his discovery. Rising from his stooped position on my left, the detective proffered me the bit of red taffeta.

“My dear fellow, this bit of material strikes me as being similar, if not identical, to the fabric comprising the costume dress your ward was wearing during Mardi Gras at the time of her mysterious disappearance. Is it not? The one you so clearly described to me during our initial interview upon this distasteful business?”

I patted my person in search of my spectacles; finally, locating them in my left jacket pocket. Carefully placing the pince-nez upon the bridge of my nose, I took the red bit in hand to make my own inspection by the light of the flaming hearth. Turning the piece over and back, as had he, I made a thorough study of the red taffeta scrap knowing full well that he was undoubtedly, exactly correct in his surmise. Yet I did not immediately confirm his assertion.



“Perhaps,” I said, “perhaps— Ah, but Juekie would know better than I, for tis she who made the inimitable gown. Turning my head toward the dining chamber, I called loudly for her.

Juekie responded to my behest, springing back from her cards on the dining table to scurry through the archway and across the rooms to where we stood by the hearth.

When she arrived to stand almost between Monsieur le Constable and myself, I proffered her the red taffeta scrap to inquire if that was not unlike the taffeta she had used in sewing Flirtice’s costume. Juekie took the material in hand. She had hardly glanced at it, when she said << Oui, c’est ca. >>. Then, stepping deftly between the constable and myself with the back of her hand, she flicked the scrap into the fire with disdain.

The detective’s face flushed as his jaw tightened. His hands rose while his fists clenched, as if he were trying with a supreme effort to restrain his bestirred emotions.

He said sternly, “I regret keenly that you saw fit to do that Mademoiselle. That bit was a salient piece of evidence that may have proved most instructive in resolving the mysterious disappearance of your mistress, young Mademoiselle Wichtiguerin.”

He stared hard at Juekie. His grey eyes enflamed like red hot coals burning into her as if poor Juekie were a piece of kindling wood. Juekie dropped her gaze, followed by her head, melting in shame. The lower, loose end of her tignon bumped about her left cheek against her chin. She begged the pardon of Monsieur Le Constable. In her defense, she protested that she was merely completing a task heretofore unfinished by tossing the fragment into the flames, as she had done with the other waste leavings from the costume. She pleaded that she had not intended any harm to come from her careless actions. Her following silence and downcast eyes bespoke loudly of her humble shame.

When the constable turned his frosty attentions upon me, I merely shrugged in response. The disapproving scowl of frustration melted slowly from the detective’s visage. I tapped Juekie on her left shoulder and told her that she may go. She left us.

“Surely,” I said, “that insignificant scrap could have no significant bearing upon the weighty matter of such a nefarious nature before us.”

The detective replied in a patronizing tone.

“In dark matters such as these Monsieur, any least bit of physical evidence may be of the greatest import. I have known cases to turn, and men hung, on lesser evidence!”

“Dear me,” said I. “Surely, it cannot be as serious as all that?”

The constable frowned.

“Unfortunately,” said he, intoning each syllable quite distinctly, “*now* we will never know.”

Through the archway, I noticed Juekie had returned to her cards at the foot of the dining table. The detective peered into the fire without speaking. The flames seemed to mesmerize him. At last, he muttered, more to himself than to me.

“I suppose a search warrant would be of no use now.”

“Search warrant?” asked I. “Why Jean. You and your compatriots have scoured these premises twice since Tuesday last. And on neither occasion, did I require a search warrant of you.”

Almost chuckling, I extended my arms to add.

“My dear Jean, you are free to search these rooms again and again, if you believe such efforts could uncover some clue, no matter how trivial, which may in some way, seen or unforeseen, lead to the return of my dear, departed Flirtice.”

Monsieur Le Constable arched his grizzled brow, saying: “And if I should choose to douse this fire and scour your hearth, do you believe my investigation would bear reward?”

“By all means necessary, please do as you think best Jean. Though I dare say, the house will take on a devilish, nasty chill before the fire may be restored to its present warming blaze.”

“Of course, you are correct in that Monsieur.”

He stared back into the flame. And then, it seemed as if an ember must have entered his eye for his entire countenance alighted, as if he had made some great discovery.

“By the deuce! Dare I not recall that upon my several visits paid to your rooms these last few days, did I not notice your hearth blazing like a locomotive furnace stoked full with burning coals? I seriously doubt any inspection now could promote any significant discovery. By gads, sir! Your hearth must have consumed a forest or, perhaps, a mountain full of coal since Mardis Gras. And yet, not long after each of my arrivals, did I note the banking of the fire, the closing of the hearth doors. How blind could I have been? What a fool. Tis too late now ... far too late, much to my regret.”

I dropped my shoulders and my head then reached forward to pat his arm, and, in so doing, hoping to offer him no little consolation.

“As you wish, my dear fellow.” I repeated, “As you wish.”

Yet he would not accept my condolences. Upon my word, he ignored me and slapped hard upon his thigh. Then did he turn sharply upon his heel. He strode from me around the armchairs across the room with great haste towards the front foyer.

His newly exhibited ill temper was such a sudden departure from his previous affable, good humor that it took me quite by surprise. Though I must confess, I felt somewhat relieved. Nay, dare I say—elated? By his misfortunes.

The ever vigilant Juekie hustled from her perch in the dining chambers to fetch the constable’s storm gear from the chifforobe. Juekie’s youth affords her a certain lightness of foot, which I, in my advanced years, can only but admire. Yet, she was hard-pressed to beat the strident detective to the front door. She managed to reach the closet ahead of Monsieur Le Constable, to snatch his cloak, top hat and umbrella from the chifforobe’s dark interior and parlay these vestments to him as was her dutiful service. As he stepped hurriedly into his winter clothes, I asked him in all manner of delicacy what might be his next plan of action toward effecting a successful resolution to the matter of my niece-gone-missing.

Replied he rather tersely to my entreaty, “To await the responses to my inquiries from the Mexican authorities in Vera Cruz, Monsieur!”

“I see,” said I before inquiring, “and if you cannot obtain a favorable report from our neighbors to the south, what then?”

He replied rather coldly, “Then monsieur, I shall await her corpse to dredge up upon the river bank or be found floating in Lake Pontchartrain, if not in some gutter of Le Quartier Français! That is to say if it may surface at all, having not already been consumed by wild beasts or—or in some other hideous fashion.”

Nodding smugly I replied in as delicate a tone as I could muster beneath arched brow. “Ah, destroyed by fire perhaps?”

All trace of gentlemanly forbearance vanished completely from his visage. The detective’s glare transformed into a glower. “Quite so!” He replied tersely.

Having finished dunning his storm gear, he turned to face the door, whereupon Juekie opened the portal for him and stood aside. As he stepped across the threshold into the unrelenting storm, the policeman opened and hoisted his umbrella against the drive of the pelting, gusty winter rain. But before he could leave, I reached across the portal to place a firm hand upon his cloaked shoulder. Shielding himself from the driving storm beneath his umbrella, the detective twisted his head and torso, so as to incline his ear toward me, while I remained yet dry and safe within my residence.

“Take heart, my dear friend,” said I over the storm. “You never know when or where the decisive clue may yet lie. Why, it may very well be likely to turn up right at your feet, perchance directly under your very nose. We can never foreordain the dictates of Providence in mysterious matters such as these.”

The storm dripped rapidly off his raised and battered umbrella onto the shroud of his all-encompassing cloak.

“Indeed sir!” He spat through clenched teeth. “Be warned. You walk a fine line Monsieur. John Law is none to be trifled with. And, I can assure you most vehemently that neither am I.”

He tapped the brim of his top hat. And without bidding me adieu, Monsieur Le Constable pivoted upon his heel then stalked off into the stormy night under the partial protection of his umbrella. As I closed the door it occurred to me that I should bank the fire before retiring with Juekie to our bedchamber. Yet, I could not bear the thought of poking my poor, dearly departed Flirtice.