

THE NYCTALOPE vs. THE ANTICHRIST

PART ONE: THE DEMON'S CAPTIVE

CHAPTER I

On Saturday, March 13th, 1926, the Cannes post office sent the following telegram:

Have the honor of informing you cargo will leave on Taurus tomorrow March 14. Planned route. Will be on board. Your servant S. M. D.

The next morning, Mademoiselle Sylvie Mac Duhl, a young woman, an orphan and French despite her Scottish name, got on board the big sloop *Taurus* anchored in the small port of Villefranche near Nice.

The day before departure, since the deck boss Fidly had fallen sick, they had to leave him in the Nice hospital and Master Allen, the captain, furious but with no other choice, hired a sailor who claimed to have disembarked from a Spanish vessel laid up because of old age and irreparable damage. The “new guy” was called Pedro Tchicoz and he hit it off right away with the sloop’s shipwright, Pizano, a mixed-blood Spanish and Indian, who, like Tchicoz, was born in Mexico. But they didn’t hang around much with the other two sailors on the *Taurus*, both Scottish like the captain, who were the first mate Jackson and the cook Willis.

Sylvie was put in Master Allen’s cabin and the captain moved into Jackson’s, which had two bunks just in case.

They were first towed out by a dinghy and then they put up the sail to profit from the land breeze. When the sun had set, the wind died down but kept the same heading, which was northeast.

Clear skies lit by a colony of stars, not a cloud in sight, a steady ocean swell—fair weather. On the second night watch Master Allen withdrew to his cabin, leaving Pizano at the helm.

Tchicoz, who was apparently sleeping on the deck at the bow, in a pocket hollowed out of the rigging, got up and came silently up to the wheel.

“Hey, Pizano,” he whispered.

“Hey.”

“Can we talk?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Bueno.” After a moment of silence the deck boss asked, “You know what they’re carrying as cargo?”

“Sure I do,” the mestizo growled with a mute laugh. “I helped load and stow it, pal. Bins of bitter orange rinds to make curaçao.”

The two faces were lit from below by the lantern in the compartment. Pizano saw the apish jaw of Tchicoz come right next to his own and whisper, “Is that all you know?”

“What else is there?”

“This—listen up, amigo. I did a little digging, me, and I started a while ago. It wasn’t easy but I didn’t give up... and in the end I found out. So, I got myself on this boat. You want to know why?”

“Sure I do.”

“Be careful, Pizano! Be careful because it’ll mean death for you if don’t do go along me. And what I’m going to do is a once in a lifetime chance with the risk of hanging! You want in?”

“Sure I do!” he barked back.

“Listen up, then,” Tchicoz continued in the same low, sinister voice. “Listen, you hate Master Allen, I can see it in your eyes when his back is turned and you’re glaring at him, right?”

"I hate him. He humiliated me in front of a woman one godforsaken day... and I'm waiting..."

"I know what you're waiting for," Tchicoz snickered. "Payback. Yeah? Yeah, well, I'm offering it to you. You still want in?"

"I want in! Talk, bandito."

"Here it is." He lowered his voice even more, whispering directly in the shipwright's ear. He said slowly, "The *Taurus* is not going to Barcelona, but it's making the trip around Gibraltar and it won't stop, God willing, ho, ho, until it gets to Ushant off the tip of Brittany. You know where that is?"

"Sure."

"A rowboat will come out at night and they'll pick up the cargo to bring it back to land under cover of darkness."

"Aha."

"Hold on. We're carrying orange rinds, right? But in the back of the hold are other bins stowed there on the night Master Allen gave you leave, since you're not Scottish, and you went and got drunk in a Villefranche dive."

"And these bins?" Pizano hissed.

"Full of gold—100-franc coins from Monaco. And pearls, diamonds, rubies... and gold, millions in gold! Which makes ten or twenty times more in paper money, in cash. Plus the diamonds, rubies and pearls..."

Tchicoz stopped talking and Pizano said nothing in reply. The two men just looked at each other. The light dancing on their brutal faces made their black eyes sparkle. The silence lasted a good three minutes. In the end, Tchicoz spoke up.

"Nobody knows about the gold and precious stones except Mademoiselle Mac Duhl and her Japanese friend, plus the captain, the first mate, the cook... and me! I saw it all and heard everything. So..."

"So?"

"Well, now there's only the captain, the first mate and the cook."

"Yeah, them three. And then no one else knows the secret..."

"Except the Japanese, but he's long gone."

"And the Mac Duhl girl."

"I'll take care of her," Tchicoz assured him. "We won't kill the pretty thing, at least not right off. During the crossing... Get it? You get it?"

"I get it," the other said.

So, Pizano held out his right hand and Tchicoz grasped it with his. Their fingers bent and squeezed and the two men spit hard on the deck, each to his left. Then, for a long time, they discussed how best to carry out the three murders that they figured were absolutely necessary. For the fourth, they would worry about it later."

The first killed was Willis the cook. Luck alone was the deciding factor. No doubt suffering a bout of insomnia, he showed up on deck, coming out of the big hatch only five minutes after the two conspirators had finished plotting. He went to the back and opened his mouth to say something when he got a fist full in the face that knocked him for loop and made him stagger. But he didn't fall. The thump of his falling body would have been heard by the captain or the first mate whose cabin was just underneath. As he was about to keel over, Tchicoz caught him in his arms, lifted him up, scooted to his left and simply tossed him overboard. The splash in the water was barely audible.

"One down!" Tchicoz chuckled.

"It might not be so easy with the other two," Pizano grumbled but was satisfied. "At dawn Allen and Jackson will come up together as usual. Even when they're not sleeping in the same cabin, the first one to open his eyes goes to wake up the other with a slap on the back."

But Tchicoz' brow was furrowed and he didn't answer right away. With his head lowered he seemed to be consulting the compass. At last, he looked up, shot a fierce, menacing look at his partner and sneered, "I killed one, pal. The two others are yours. I hung a six-shot rifle on my bunk. It's short and handles easy. Leave me the helm and go get it. Then hide wherever you want and do your part like I did mine."

"I was going to suggest that, pal," Pizano groaned. "Didn't I say I wanted to get revenge on the captain?"

There was a cool breeze. Speeding through the water, the sloop was pitching slightly as it jumped smoothly from one wave to the next, almost without a jolt. The milky whiteness of dawn was already breaking through.

Down at the foot of the mast, by the hull of the upside-down rowboat, Pizano was sneaking around. He turned and stopped, rifle in hand.

Other noises could be heard besides the wind whistling through the yardarms and rigging: the water grating over the bow as the ship churned through the sea; and sometimes a thud against the starboard beams from a rogue wave. Daybreak came from the southeast by swiftly turning the whiteness of dawn into a rosy pink.

All of a sudden, Tchicoz at the helm and Pizano by the mast, both of them at the same time heard a noise that drowned out all the usual noises of sea and ship—a rheumy cough under the deck. Tchicoz leaned on the wheel while Pizano stiffened, straightened up, already raising the rifle.

Master Allen was the first to come out. His big, white and red head, his bare neck, his broad shoulders that half covered the turned-down collar of the soft shirt, his powerful chest and huge arms: all this surfaced progressively out of the hatch... Then, up jumped the lower body. And immediately afterward, first mate Jackson emerged, alert and chipper, skin and bones, hatless and shaggy.

Was the mestizo at the foot of the mast trembling with hatred, anger or fear? Three shots were fired without Allen or Jackson being brought down. The captain howled as his ear was blown off and blood ran down his neck and shoulders. The other let out a dreadful gasp as he stumbled back against the starboard gunwale. He held his chest with his right hand while the left waved in the air, blood-spattered.

“Ho, ho!” Tchicoz yelled, the veins in his neck popping out, his whole body craning toward Pizano but not letting go of the rudder.

“You rats!” Allen hollered as the truth dawned on him. And he jumped back to the hatch, probably to get a weapon, but a fourth bullet hit him. Then a fifth. The captain raised his arms, spun around and fell on his side, lifeless.

“Oh ho,” Tchicoz yapped, snickering and twitching, diabolically, bent over the cabin with his arm stretched out to hold the wheel. “Ho, Jackson! In the sea with you! In the sea! Jump!”

“Yeah, yeah, jump, Jackson!” Pizano shouted, with his back against the mast now.

Obviously not seriously wounded in the chest, the bullet probably deflected by a rib, first mate Jackson stood up straight and got some crazy idea in his head because he started running toward the bow so fast that he sped right past Pizano before he had time to react. And he hopped onto the boom, jumped out and hung onto the jib stays. Now he was at the tip of the sloop as it bounded over the waves. With his feet held together on the thin shaft that formed the stay there, he kept his balance only by the strength of his hands, all his muscles straining to the utmost. And when his head turned back, his face wore an expression of ghastly horror.

The murderers were horrified, too. Together, with demented rage, they started screaming, “Jump, damn you! Jump, Jackson! To hell with you! Jump!”

And dropping to one knee and bracing his elbow, Pizano took aim and fired the sixth and final shot. Hit or not, Jackson jumped, dropped and disappeared under the bow in the foam of the parting waters.

In the cabin where, after the tiring day before, Sylvie had been fast asleep, she was woken up only by the last shots. She thought they were the sails flapping in a gust of wind. But the bright daylight filtering through the porthole led her to believe that the sun had risen. After a quick morning wash-up, she climbed up to the deck. She got there just as Tchicoz and Pizano were lifting the bloody body of the captain to heave into the sea. She stood stupefied, petrified with horror, still not understanding what had happened. But Tchicoz saw her.

“Hold on,” he groaned and he dropped the corpse that Pizano kept holding by the arms.

He ran up to the girl, pulled out of his pea coat a big Browning and threatened her, “You, stay calm! Go to the rudder and steer her straight for Spain. And watch out, Jackson and Willis are dead and in the water. The captain’s corpse is going after them. Make sure the coast is always clear. If you don’t want to join the crew in the sea, do as I say.”

As Sylvie, in a flash of revolt, looked ready to run back to the cabin, probably to look for a weapon, Tchicoz grabbed her arm and sneered, “No need to go down there. Yesterday I checked both cabins and took the bullets out of all the guns. So, no way to fight. Now to the helm! Go! And no funny business. I know the coast that we should always be in sight of. Day after tomorrow, if the wind is good, we’ll be

by the Spanish Pyrenees. And I know where to land. As for you, I repeat, your life depends on your obedience.”

The monster was sincerely tempted to hug the girl and kiss her hard on the lips, but his prudence was stronger than his passion. After waving his Browning at her, she looked submissive and went to take the wheel. Tchicoz went back to the corpse, which he and Pizano tossed into the water. Then they got busy cleaning up the deck to erase any evidence of foul play.

They sailed all day long. Night fell. Sylvie didn't refuse to eat the bread and cold meat Pizano brought her. She didn't want to drink the wine but she accepted several glasses of water.

Since the breeze turned really cold after sunset, the two murderers secured the sail. Tchicoz went to the helm and threatened to kill Sylvie if she left the wheel. Then he and Pizano went down to the hold because they wanted to get a look at the gold. It had been haunting them all day. They could resist no longer.

Feverishly, silently, half-dressed, they worked like madmen. They had to lift all the bins full of orange rinds, carry them out of the hold and line them up so they could put them back later to cover up the secret cargo again.

They had lit a lantern because it was the middle of night when they finally got to the last row of bins. Bundles of orange rinds surrounded and hid the wooden boxes and thick canvas sacks. They sliced open one of the bags with a sword and gold came pouring out. They both spent a few minutes digging their hands into the gutted bag and groping the gold.

The boat rocked and threw them against each other. They fell on the bags of gold, hitting the lantern, which toppled over and went out. Now they were lit only by the pale moon casting its dull rays through the covered hatch. In an instinctive gesture of greedy brutes, the two men stuffed their pockets with gold and felt their way back up to the deck.

The wind was raging, the clouds racing through the moonlit sky. Pizano and Tchicoz tightened the rigging on the two jibs and reefed the mainsail.

Then, while Tchicoz went over by the helm and sneered at stone-faced Sylvie who was lit eerily by the lantern in the cabin below, Pizano went to the galley and was soon back with an armful of food and drinks.

Sitting on the helm, the two men drank and ate heartily, laughing all the while. Tchicoz gave a bottle, a biscuit and an open can of food to Sylvie who ate, still stone-faced and somber, and drank calmly, never letting go of the wheel. But a swell heaved and the sloop lurched. The two men rushed off to deal with the sails while the young lady stayed at her post.

Hours passed like this until daybreak when all of a sudden, a storm broke out. The sloop was so battered and so aslant that the two liquored up men went rolling over the deck and smashed into the port side railing where foamy water was sloshing through the scuppers. They fought, accusing each other of being clumsy. Then Tchicoz guffawed. He had an idea that he shared right away.

“After all, what's the point of you living. I can very well put down the girl and spend the gold all by myself.”

And brandishing the knife he had pulled out of his pocket, he lunged at his accomplice. The other tried to use the revolver he had kept on him, managed to draw and aim it, but it was too late. The knife slit his throat and he staggered back to the helm where he collapsed, still gripping the revolver.

Sylvie had observed the unexpected fight between the two rogues with passionate interest. When Pizano fell dead near her feet, she no longer cared about the dangers of a boat left rudderless in a storm-tossed sea. She abandoned the wheel and jumped on the corpse, trying to pry the gun out of its hand.

At first, a little stunned by his quick and easy victory, Tchicoz stood there for a few seconds unsure of what to do, struggling to keep his balance on the reeling boat. But on seeing Sylvie bend over Pizano, he understood and rushed at her with his knife raised. Just when he was about to pounce on the girl, she snatched up the gun and skidded away, agile and alert, and escaped the bandit's blade.

But a gust of wind hit the unpowered sloop, which spun around 90 degrees and ripped the mainsail.

Sylvie realized the peril and ran to grab the wheel with her left hand. With her right she kept the revolver aimed at Tchicoz and ordered, “Get to work, you wretch, or I'll kill you.”

He was too smart and too quickly sobered up not to see that duty was calling if he wanted to live. For a few minutes there was a united battle of the young lady and the salty dog against the storm. The former struggled to keep the boat leeward and the other pulled down and threw overboard the ripped

sail that was flying and flapping dangerously in the wind. He succeeded, but with the immediate danger averted, he dove down into the forward hatch.

“Ah, the wretch,” Sylvie snarled. “He’s going to get a gun.”

With the erratic state of the storm in which gales were blowing from all points of the compass, the wheel could not be abandoned and an eye had to be kept on the sails, someone had to be ready to do the necessary maneuvers.

Braced against the wheel and putting all her strength into her left hand to hold it steady, Sylvie leaned over to look into the holds, both closed now because after jumping down Tchicoz had shut the hatches to keep the water out. Sylvie was ready to shoot first if the man popped up out of either hatch.

But already from the crew’s quarters Tchicoz had grabbed a rifle, the same one Pizano had used to kill Allen and Jackson. He loaded it, put some extra ammunition in the right pocket of his peacoat and got ready to climb the ladder out of the hatch. Since he first had to slide open the cover, however, he figured that if the “girl” was on her toes, he could easily be greeted with a bullet from the Browning when he showed his head. Therefore, he stood there on the ladder in a quandary.

After a moment’s reflection he went back down and over to the porthole that was high above the waterline and even higher over the sea when the boat was leaning in the other direction. This porthole was right where an anchor hung. After opening it, Tchicoz leaned out and saw, as he hoped, that he could grab onto one of the arms of the anchor, shimmy up the shank and hoist himself over the ring to reach the gunwale. Then he just had to sneak up to the foredeck.

“I’ll be hidden by the rowboat stowed on deck” he told himself, “and then I can just show the girl the barrel of the rifle while I make my demands.”

And that was what he did. The acrobatics were hard, especially with the turbulent pitching of the *Taurus*, but in the end, with the rifle slung over his shoulder and all his muscles straining, adroitly, boldly, determined to succeed, Tchicoz managed to get on deck. He was soaked from head to toe, but he didn’t care.

Kneeling behind the rowboat, in a voice muffled by the wind and waves, he yelled, “Mademoiselle Mac Duhl! Mademoiselle Mac Duhl!” Protecting both his head and arm, he raised the rifle barrel over the rowboat. To make sure he was understood, he pulled the trigger.

The shout and the shot got Sylvie’s attention. She understood and she winced a little. “I’m lost,” she said. But right away reacting against the desperate threat she blurted out, “No! No!”

An instinct made her look at the sky, the sails and the sea. She frowned, hesitated a few moments, then smiled defiantly.

“The wind is less strong,” she said in a low voice, “the sea a little calmer. Besides, the *Taurus* isn’t loaded enough to sink. The worst that can happen is a gale will blow down the mast and sails and the sloop will turn into a pontoon. These waters get busy and now that the storm is passing, a boat is bound to pass by. I’ll have to kill this guy. I’ve got more to fear from him than from the sea.”

She had finished her internal monologue when Tchicoz spoke again, faintly in the wind blowing against him, but still clear enough. He shouted, “Throw your gun into the sea or I’ll shoot, got it? Throw your gun into the sea or I’ll shoot!”

With amazing speed, Sylvie fastened the wheel with a rope hanging nearby and dropped down behind it to protect herself. It was a good thing, too, because when Tchicoz saw her tie down the wheel, he took quick aim and fired.

The bullet cut clean off one of the handles but Sylvie had already left her refuge. She was sneaking behind one of the piles of rigging, then, keeping hold of her gun, she ran toward the middle of the boat. Tchicoz couldn’t see what was happening but wanted to, so he risked a peek over the dinghy. Out of Sylvie’s Browning flew a bullet that grazed the keel of the rowboat, a hair’s breadth from the man’s head.

Thus started the perilous game of hide-and-seek.

With the mainsail and the boom sail now gone, the sloop was sailing with only the jibs and the staysail, catching the wind from all quarters. But with the wind dying down and leveling off, the boat ran no risk of being cast adrift since the rudder was solid and, for the time being, correctly positioned.

On deck, now that the hatch was closed, the only shelter was the low deckhouse on the stern, the foot of the mast, the base of the cockpit and the ship’s wheel. There was also the upturned, solidly fastened rowboat and a few coils of rigging.

Now the boat was listing to starboard and frothy water was gurgling in the scuppers.

Sylvie figured that if she could hold out as long as possible against the port side, she could keep an eye on all the visible parts of the deck. She spied a coil of ropes between her and the wall, big enough for her to crouch behind and so providing her with an excellent shield against gunfire as well... She watched the rowboat and when the sloop was tossed hard enough that Tchicoz in his hideout certainly had to grab onto something to keep from tumbling overboard, she made her daring leap. She calculated her momentum perfectly—she dropped directly inside the rigging, got on her knees and hunched over.

“I’m good here in this hole,” she figured. “I’ll just stay put.”

She rearranged the top coils of the ropes a little to create a kind of narrow, horizontal slit. Wedged in against the sudden jolts of the boat, protected against enemy fire, she observed the rowboat.

But she was thinking, “The sea was rough. The thug had to worry about not falling overboard and couldn’t have seen me jump in here. He must think I’m behind the deckhouse. I’ll wait and see... let him find out for himself...”

On her left wrist she had a watch set in a strong leather bracelet. She checked it. The hands showed 8:42. At 8:50 her hunch proved correct: Tchicoz used a lull in the wind and sea to creep around the side of the dinghy. He crawled on his knees with his left side hugging the rounded hull of the rowboat, holding the rifle with both hands.

Sylvie felt her heart racing. A kind of smile twisted the pretty features of her slightly thinned face. “He thinks I’m behind the deckhouse. If I was really there, the bulge of that boat would still be hiding him from me. If he has one atom of common sense, he’ll stay there... Good, he stopped. He has some common sense, but unfortunately, this time, it will do him no good.”

While Tchicoz was cautiously sticking his head out to verify the distance to the starboard side of the deckhouse, Sylvie Mac Duhl braced her legs, took careful aim and fired...

“Demonios!” Tchicoz swore.

The keen eyes of the young warrior woman saw the effects of her shot right away: the man wasn’t hit, but his rifle was in two pieces, the butt on one side and the barrel on the other. The magazine was bent, the weapon useless.

Sylvie stood up straight with her Browning raised. “Your knife—in the sea!” she shouted.

He knew “the pretty girl” now. He knew that she would kill him like a rabid dog if he didn’t obey. So, he obeyed instantly. His big pocketknife went overboard.

“To the helm!” she ordered. “And stay there! And watch out because the slightest false move and I’ll kill you. Anyway, I have an idea. Get going!”

With that balancing talent that sailors have on the deck of a ship tilted 45 degrees and bobbing through the waves, Pedro Tchicoz passed by Mademoiselle Mac Duhl, who stepped after him. When they were at the wheel, she gave him cold and somewhat scornful orders.

“Unfasten the wheel... Give me the rope. Keep your hands on the wheel if you want to live.”

She was behind him. She kneeled down. Keeping a wary eye on him, she quickly and skillfully attached the rope tightly to his left ankle, then to the right, leaving only 10 or 11 inches of play. Then she tied it to an iron ring bolted to the deck about three feet behind the man.

When this was done, and done well, she got up and in the same cold, scornful voice said, “It’ll take you at least five minutes to untie all this. You’ll have to let go of the wheel first, and step away... If you do this, I’ll kill you as soon as I see it. I warn you, too, that I won’t stay more than three minutes down below when I have to get something to eat or drink...”

She stopped talking, pondered for a moment, then stared straight into the shifty eyes of the man who was captured but not crushed.

“You know the Spanish coast really well, you said?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled.

“If I’m not mistaken, that’s the Cap de Creus over there?”

He turned his head in the direction indicated by the white hand holding the black gun. He squinted to see better and farther. Over in the cloudy, tragic sky, a black line was jutting out into the gray sea.

“Cap de Creus,” he grumbled.

“Spain,” she muttered. “Spain when the *Taurus* ought to be sailing east of the Balearic Islands.”

She pondered for a moment, instinctively staying on guard.

Then she said, “If I were sure I could reach Barcelona alone, I’d kill you, Tchicoz, because you’ve earned more than your share of death. But I can’t sail this sloop alone in bad weather. So, I need you. The two of us will make a pact and I’d untie you so that we can both get some sleep, but I don’t trust

you on your word. You'd betray me and run the boat aground on the coast even if it meant leaving behind some of the gold."

"I swear that..."

"Be quiet. I'll never believe you, so I'll keep you like this. I give the orders and you obey, or else I'll kill you no matter the consequences. Behind the Cap de Creus is the Bay of Roses, which is well sheltered. Let's go. We'll drop anchor there. We'll put up the spare mainsail and then we can head to Barcelona where I'll hire a new crew. I'll worry about getting through the formalities and I'll spare your life. But I'll bring you with me to drop you off where I know we're going to land. In the meantime, however, I'll lock you in a secret compartment on the sloop where you'll stay bound and gagged while I go ashore and afterward until I kick you off the boat. I'll be bringing you food at night and dealing with any problems you might have. It'll be utterly detestable because you disgust me, but I can do anything to accomplish what I set out to do. There you have it. Now you know what I want. Obey or you die."

He mumbled like he knew he was beaten, "I'll obey, but I..."

She cut him off, "No need to say anything. Do it if you value your life." And after a brief pause, "So, to the Bay of Roses."

"We're on our way, mademoiselle."

But fifteen minutes later the wind shifted from east to west. They had to tack hard. The Bay was far. The sloop didn't get there until nightfall. The lights from the town were scattered over a low hill. Not a boat was in the wide, deep bay because the fishing boats in these areas were brought to shore at night.

As tough and tenacious as she was, Sylvie Mac Duhl was worn out. She had been up for two days and one night, fighting or guarding, without an hour of sleep, without a minute's rest. She had to make painful efforts to drop anchor. Then she ate and drank and brought food and drink to Tchicoz, who was still attached to the iron ring at the helm.

When he had his fill, he lowered his head and said, "Mademoiselle, I'm sleepy."

"Wait!" She fetched a mattress and blanket, threw them at his feet and barked, "Sleep!"

He lay down.

She checked that his ropes were still tight and thought, "If I bind his hands as well, I can get some sleep." She ran off to find a suitable rope and came back. "Your wrists!"

He understood, sneered, but held out his hands crossed. She didn't let go of the Browning as she very deftly wrapped the wrists and pulled tight. Then calmly, putting the gun in her pocket, she fiddled with the improvised handcuffs to secure them.

"Go to bed now... and sleep."

Still standing, she mulled it over. All of a sudden, "No, I'll never sleep knowing you're out here in the open. I've known people to get free from harder shackles than these. But I have to sleep too. Otherwise, tomorrow I'll nod off for sure. You're going to get up, Tchicoz."

During the day she had buckled on a holster for her Browning and strapped a sword around her waist as well. The blade was sharpened on one edge. Sylvie used it to cut the ropes around his wrists and ankles in three quick strokes. Tchicoz got up, slowly, as if he felt stiff.

"Walk in front of me," she ordered, "and go into the deckhouse."

He obeyed. But as he was slipping around the wheel, he jumped to the side, bent down, spun around and like a whiplash sprang up and over the gunwale. Two shots rang out. Then there was a splash. Sylvie leaned overboard and scrutinized the calm water that was as dark as the sky where a low dome of clouds loomed... Trying to control her racing heart and the blood rushing to her head, she listened... To see him, just hear him, then shoot and kill him... Because she had the very clear impression that she had missed when he jumped... Would she have to chase him in the water...

But she saw and heard nothing that broke the monotonous rumble of the surf on the distant beach and against the rocks...

"Could I have killed him? Wounded him? Did he sink?"

She stayed there for more than an hour, ears pricked up and eyes zeroed in. Finally, the silence and the monotonous lullaby of the surf, the gentle rocking of the boat in the soft, rolling waves and the fatigue, the immense fatigue, the irresistible need to lie down, close her eyes and sleep, sleep... Almost unconscious, Sylvie staggered over to the mattress she had brought up for Tchicoz and collapsed onto it, stretched her limbs, sighed... and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

It could not have been more than an hour and a half, all was calm, the sky heavy, the sea black, the land invisible, the boat motionless, Sylvie Mac Duhl out cold...

All was calm except for Tchicoz and five other men. They were in a rowboat that had shoved off from the shore and was nearing the *Taurus*. Four of them were manning the oars slowly in a lazy, soundless rhythm. Two were in the back. The one with the rudder in his hand was Tchicoz. The other with his sombrero pulled down and wrapped in a cape was completely incognito. He was listening to what Tchicoz was whispering. But soon he stopped talking altogether. Without breaking the silence any more than would a wisp of straw on the current, the rowboat pulled up under the jib-boom, a couple of feet from the bow. Hanging from the stay, Tchicoz reached the boom, swung up on deck and crouched down. After him came the man with the sombrero. Then two rowers, leaving the other two in the rowboat.

The four goons crept down along the deck. When they shouted out, Sylvie Mac Duhl woke up with a start, but her feet were already bound. She fought and they held her to tie her hands behind her back. Someone stuffed a silk scarf into her mouth. Two men picked her up and carried her off. An authoritative but even-tempered voice spoke calmly. The young lady knew Castilian. She heard and understood:

"Tchicoz, go get some sleep. I'll take care of the rest with my men. Tomorrow we'll continue our conversation."

But first, Tchicoz showed the two men to the cabin that the late Master Allen had relinquished to the young lady. The Mexican led the way with a pocket flashlight. In the cabin he struck a match and lit the candleholder hanging from the ceiling. Only then did he leave, snickering as he went, "This time, Mademoiselle Mac Duhl, I am going to sleep well for sure. I hope you can too."

The two men dropped the girl on the bunk, covered her with a blanket, made sure the porthole was closed, unhooked the candleholder and left. The prisoner heard them lock the bolt from the outside... and leave the key in the lock...

Before the Great War, all the inhabitants of Monte Carlo knew George Mac Duhl. Perhaps the best but certainly the calmest and most regularly gratified of gamblers. Whether at roulette or baccarat or trente et quarante, the noble Scotsman never played for more than two hours in the afternoon and an hour after dinner. And he always left with winnings that varied between 10 and 1,000 louis. Mr. Mac Duhl had become legendary from Menton to Cannes. A few well-informed gossips knew that this mild, dependable and very rich favorite of Lady Luck lived in Cap Ferrat in a small Italian château deep in the wild woods full of pine trees, cork oak, eucalyptus and cypress trees—it was known in that region as the Château des Nopals.

He made the roundtrip between Cap Ferrat and Monte Carlo on a regular basis in his four-seater torpedo sports car, fast and powerful, which was driven by his Japanese mechanic, named Gnô, a curious man, servant and factotum, with a rare and remote dignity, unwavering discretion and the impassivity of the buddha.

And the cleverest professional informants could say nothing more about the "Scotsman" Gregor Mac Duhl, the lucky gambler.

At the start of the Great War, Gregor didn't change his habits. Six afternoons and six nights a week, routinely, he could be found in a casino. But suddenly nobody saw him, not at all, not for an hour, not for a minute, not for an instant. He had vanished as completely as if he had died.

Since most of the former staff was in the war and the players had dwindled by two-thirds, almost totally different people than before August 1914 as well, the sudden disappearance of the legendary Scotsman made nobody particularly concerned or curious. Besides, so many men were disappearing in those Apocalyptic times!

Nobody even remarked on this one thing, a peculiar and very strange coincidence. Nobody, really? Yes, one man, only one...

Destiny has some dreadful quirks. A man was observing out of simple curiosity. In a flash of inspiration, a man recognized the coincidence that was if nothing else weird and, in any case, memorable: It was that the Scotsman stopped showing up in Monte Carlo on the day when officially and permanently the 100 franc gold pieces with the figure of the Prince of Monaco were replaced at the tables by simple chips and at the cashiers by paper money.

The man who noticed this coincidence, the only man, was neither exceptionally intelligent nor unusually observant. Just an average man really, whose vague and vacillating will doomed to bad luck and, if the opportunity arose, to shady affairs and even to crime.

This man was Pedro Tchicoz. He was Mexican, in his forties and worked as a mechanic in a garage in Monte Carlo. He had lived in the Principality since 1907. A gambler and a rake, he loved his job, however, with a kind of passion and he gained experience, skill and an uncommon ingenuity. His boss, who treasured this top-notch worker, paid him very well. But more than the exorbitant wages, it was the gambling kept Tchicoz in Monte Carlo. He played every night, sometimes winning, sometimes losing, which kept him going without ever being too discouraged or satisfied. And this Mexican took a lively interest in Gregor Mac Duhl who had been in Monte Carlo since 1900...

People who don't believe in destiny can say, "It was this daily and long-standing interest that made Tchicoz take note of the coincidental disappearance of the Scotsman and the gold coins at the same time."

Whatever the case, Pedro Tchicoz was struck by the coincidence. He spent three days and two nights thinking about it after waiting a week to verify it. Then, with cold determination and something savage, mean and ruthless deep down inside the man, he told himself, "I want to clear up this matter."

What was he thinking? What did he suspect? What was he planning? Nothing precise, nothing that could be put in words, but he had the irresistible desire to clear up the matter, as he kept repeating to himself...

And he took the tramway to Cap Ferrat one evening, the evening—and not another, surely—that was stamped by destiny.

That day, in the dining room of the Chateau des Nopals, when the midday meal was over, Gregor Mac Duhl stood and said spoke seriously to his daughter. "Sylvie, today is your 21st birthday. Come down to the cellar with me."

Sylvie Mac Duhl was a pretty young lady whose face and demeanor would lead you to believe that she could endure great emotional upheavals without losing her spirit or strength. Not that she looked manly! She was gorgeous and charming—her unfathomable blue-green eyes with dark pupils and her dazzling golden hair, everything about her showed a young lady turning into an exquisite and seductive woman, but an athletic young lady and a woman of character as a result of physical training and moral education, the two enemies of all weaknesses.

And it was this amazon (the word is fitting for anyone seeing her riding her black steed on the roads between the Alps and the sea) who blushed at her father's words. Then she turned a little pale and leaned against the oak wainscoting and in a choked voice stammered, "The cellar, you say? The cellar..."

The Chateau des Nopals was rectangular, flanked by two square towers. Under the entire extent of these three buildings the architect had installed three tanks to catch all the rainwater that fell on the vast surface of the roof: a wise precaution because there was no spring on the property and drilling for a well at 100 feet around had proved futile.

In May, 1899, Gregor Mac Duhl, coming from Scotland, had moved to Villefranche and got his French citizenship. He bought the Nopals property. It had been abandoned and left to rot. The new occupant organized and directed the work that in two months made the chateau comfortably inhabitable. The tanks, for instance, had been drained, cleaned and refurbished. While waiting for the first heavy rain in the fall, a small tanker truck came every day with a supply of water for Nopals.

But when the rain started, only two tanks were catching the water from the roofs—the middle one and the one to the east. As for the one to the west, Gregor and Gnô had cut it off, either by plugging up or rerouting the pipes. But they had put in a pipe connecting the west tank to the middle one with a double valve closure. With this, it would take only a few minutes for the dry tank to be flooded three quarters full of water. In Gregor's bedroom they had carefully hidden the operating lever.

Moreover, the inspection window and access door of the dry tank had been fitted with a very thick, solid-wood panel with a strong, secret lock. The ground-floor room of the tower where the door opened in the tile, was transformed into a plush and formal office-library. And Gregor's huge American desk was placed over the door to hide it from view. Plus, they nailed a thick rug on the door and then laid a carpet over it. All this work was done by Mac Duhl and Gnô themselves in secret during the month of August, 1901, when they were alone. Then Gregor left the Japanese there and went to Paris. He came back at the end of September with Madame Mac Duhl, a very pretty French woman, along with two

servants: a cook and a chambermaid. Three years later, the young woman died in childbirth. She left behind a daughter whom Gregor baptized Sylvie and whom he loved with all his heart and soul. He alone took responsibility for educating, training and refining her mind and body.

Nevertheless, the young Mac Duhl knew nothing about the existence of a secret cellar until she had turned 19.

On her 19th birthday, at 10 o'clock sharp, Sylvie went into her father's bedroom as usual to kiss him good morning, prepare the tea and toast for his breakfast and talk with him privately for twenty minutes or so. But when she was about to leave, for the first time in six years of this daily routine, Gregor held her back. Very gravely he revealed to her the existence of the cellar, the lever, the trapdoor and explained the simple but secret trick to open and close it.

Then he concluded, "If ever I die, my dear, before I've reached my goal, you will go into the cellar after reading my will, which I've handed over to Monsieur Aubépin, a notary in Nice, and you follow the instructions I've laid out. Promise me."

Emotionally touched, she promised.

But her father said nothing more, ever, on the subject. And the young lady lived for two more years without knowing what was in the cellar or what her father and Gnô were doing down there every Sunday afternoon. See, she had found out—oh, not on purpose since she had too much self-respect to be indiscreet—that every Sunday, between 2 and 3 pm, Gregor and the Japanese spent around forty minutes in the mysterious cellar.

And it was in this cellar that she was being invited to see today on her 21st birthday! Over the past two years Sylvie had thought so much about the cellar. Whenever she did, she felt deeply anxious. And now she was about to go down there! The mystery was about to be revealed to her!

But the source of her emotional affliction was not the revelation in itself. No, it was that she was living through a prediction made to her in total secrecy by a very mysterious friend of her father, an odd man who lived all year long on Ushant Island off the farthest tip of Finistère and who came to Nopals once only for one day: that Gregor would die in the year he revealed the mystery of the cellar to his daughter...

The prophecy came true.

Three months to the day after bringing Sylvie down to the cellar, Gregor died suddenly of an embolism.

And that was when Sylvie Mac Duhl started to really live since she started to advance, with her moral character and physical strength, on the extraordinary path laid out by the mysterious will of her father.

Gregor had died on Friday, March 13th, 1925. He was buried on the 14th in the small cemetery of Villefranche. On Sunday the 15th Sylvie spent all day with Gnô making a kind of inventory of papers left behind by the deceased, filing some of them away but burning most of them. On Monday the 16th, accompanied by Gnô who left the car at the door in Julien's care, Sylvie went to Monsieur Aubépin's office to hear her father's will.

After that, she lived at Nopals, served by Gnô and her young chambermaid, another Japanese called Mâh, and an old Italian cook. She lived alone and quiet, beautiful and somber, staying away from people, avoiding curiosities, doing things just for herself, playing the organ in the big salon, racing her horse at breakneck speed, speeding over the roads on the Côte d'Azur in her father's car with herself or Gnô at the wheel or making short trips across the Mediterranean in her sloop the *Taurus*.

But on March 13, 1926, the first anniversary of Gregor Mac Duhl's death, Gnô went to the Cannes post office with this telegram:

Have the honor of informing you cargo will leave on Taurus tomorrow March 14. Planned route. Will be on board. Your servant S. M. D.

The next morning, Sylvie got on board the *Taurus*, which was anchored in the small Villefranche port, while Gnô and Mâh took the car to Brest. A second valet and the cook stayed at Nopals to guard and maintain it.

Three days later, in the Bay of Roses in Spain, Sylvie Mac Duhl, the *Taurus* and her cargo fell into the hands of the crook Pedro Tchicoz and five mysterious cohorts.