

## 7. A DRAMA AT THE LUNATIC ASYLUM

### *I. A Terrible Malady*

All the talk in New York was of the imminent marriage of the engineer Harry Dorgan and Isidora, the daughter of the billionaire Fred Jorgell, the director of the Lightning Steamship Company. Fred Jorgell was well liked in financial and industrial circles. His Lightning Steamships, constructed with the collaboration of Harry Dorgan, held all the speed records. Thanks to their ultra-light nickel-aluminum hulls and their oil-fired engines, they could make the crossing from Le Havre to New York in four days. Thus, the company's shares, issued at a hundred dollars, were now trading at three hundred dollars in all the stock exchanges in the world.

Even though, because of certain family misfortunes, Isidora's marriage was to be celebrated in the strictest intimacy, that did not affect the innumerable and fabulous gifts addressed to the bride from all over America. Among other marvels, there was said to be a exact replica of the famous "queen's necklace" that Marie-Antoinette was to have bought and which was stolen the Comtesse de Lamotte-Valois; a dressing-table set in solid gold with incrustations of opals and aquamarines; a drawing-room suite in molded quartz, which is to say, in rock crystal; and a silver-plated bicycle—not to mention the old master paintings, the jewels, the precious furs and *objets d'art* of every sort.

Every morning, in company with her reader, the excellent Mrs. MacBarlott, and Fred Jorgell's private secretary, Isidora took pleasure in opening the boxes and jewel-cases that were arriving in abundance at the paternal palace personally.

Only just convalescent from a wound he had received during a nocturnal attack, Fred Jorgell's secretary, a Frenchman named Agénor Marmousier, was still very weak and pale, but Isidora's joy had hastened his recovery and he savored a child-like joy in helping to unwrap the wedding gifts.

"What's this?" asked Mrs. MacBarlott curiously, as she cut the string surrounding the silk paper that contained a jewel-case. "Pooh!" she added, scornfully. "An emerald brooch—we already have seven or eight of them."

In the meantime, Agénor was carefully unwrapping a long cedar-wood box. The box contained another, made of mahogany.

"I wonder what can possibly be in there?" said Isidora, devoured by a feverish curiosity.

"We'll soon see," Agénor replied, drawing back the silver bolt that sealed the mahogany box.

The young woman uttered a cry of surprise on perceiving a silver scale model of the latest steamer that Fred Jorgell had launched, which was named *Isadora*. The slightest details of the vessel had been scrupulously mimicked, but all the copper components were reproduced in gold, the red and green beacon lights were represented by rubies and emeralds, and the portholes by little diamonds. The miniature ship was an enormous gem of fabulous value.

At that moment Isidora felt herself gently seized around the waist; two hands were placed over her eyes and hot lips brushed her forehead. The young woman uttered a little squeal, but she was quickly reassured and smiled on recognizing the author of the affectionate jest as Harry Dorgan, who had come into the drawing room on tiptoe.

"I'm furious," Isidora said, with a radiant smile that was in stark contradiction to her words. "Is that any way for a serious man to behave?"

"Forgive me for my childishness."

"All right, but on one condition—which is that next time, you'll embrace me in a less shocking fashion."

"I'm prepared to do that," said the engineer, and again he applied his lips to the young woman's pure forehead, in a long and tender kiss.

“You’re not staying with us, Master Harry?” asked Agénor. “You can help with opening all these mysterious boxes.”

“Impossible. I only came to wish my dear Isidora good day before going to the office. The launching of three new liners is giving us an awful lot of work.”

“I won’t keep you any longer,” Isidora murmured, shaking her fiancé’s hand with a delicious emotion. “Until later, my dear Harry.”

Once the engineer had gone, the examination of the gifts continued.

“Who can have given Miss Isidora the beautiful silver ship?” asked Agénor.

“Perhaps it was Mr. Jorgell,” Mrs. MacBarlott replied.

“I’m sure that it’s him,” said Isidora. “The silver ship is surely the surprise that he mentioned to me yesterday at table. The present is doubly dear to me, because it reminds me of both my father and my fiancé. Wasn’t it Harry—and I’m justly proud of it—who drew up the plans for the ship, the fastest in the world?”

At that moment, two servants carried in a long sandalwood box ornamented with the young woman’s initials. Mrs. MacBarlott opened the box with an impatient hand. “This comes from Paris!” she exclaimed. “Here’s the trademark of the great couturier Worth. It’s doubtless a dress more beautiful than those you’ve already received.”

“Let’s see,” said Isidora. And with a slight fever of coquetry she unfolded the numerous layers of silk paper.

“I suspected as much,” said the governess. “It’s a white satin dress embroidered with pearls.”

“It’s splendid, What do you think, Monsieur Agénor?”

“It’s a pure marvel—a veritable work of art. We need to unfold it so that we can admire it in its entirety.”

Aided by Mrs. MacBarlott, Isidora carefully laid out the luxurious virginal dress on one of the drawing room divans.

Suddenly, however, the young woman uttered a cry of fright. On the corsage, over the heart, a bloody hand was embroidered in little rubies, and that frightful imprint stood out clearly against the immaculate whiteness of the cloth, with silver gleams.

“I’m accursed!” cried the young woman, recoiling with a shiver of horror. “My enemies want to make me understand by this insult that the name I’m bringing to Harry is soiled by a bloody stain and that I’m the sister of Baruch the murderer. Oh, I see now that I’ll never be happy!”

“Pull yourself together, Mademoiselle,” Agénor murmured. “Don’t believe that anyone wants to insult you. I rather fear that this gift comes from the association of the Red Hand, of which your father has always been a determined enemy...”

Isidora was no longer listening. The emotion was too much for her. The young woman had just fainted. Agénor and Mrs. MacBarlott only just had time to catch her as she fell.

The care customary in such cases was lavished upon her. She came round, and, by virtue of ingenious reasoning and kind words, her friends succeeded in reassuring her slightly

The fatal dress was hidden from all gazes, and it was agreed that Fred Jorgell would not be told about the incident—but all the bride’s joy had been spoiled. It was with a languid indifference that she watched the unwrapping of the other gifts. The Red Hand had extinguished the smile from every face and sown anguish in every heart.

Everyone was thinking about the fatal dress, but no one dared talk about it. The governess was the first one who hazarded to say: “Don’t you think, Miss Isidora, that it would be a good idea to tell your fiancé?”

“No,” the young woman murmured. “Not that!”

“If you’re in danger, though, is that gift isn’t just a macabre joke, if it’s a real threat on the part of the redoubtable association...”

“What does it matter? It’s already sufficient that I’m suffering myself, without my dear Harry’s joy and tranquility being troubled by those wretches.”

“But Miss, have you really thought about it?”

“Yes. I tell you once and for all, I don’t want my fiancé to be told, and I’ll be grateful to you, Mrs. MacBarlott, and to you, Monsieur Agenor, never to remind me about that bloody hand.”

After this declaration, the young billionaires, leaving the drawing room where the gifts were piled up, went up to her bedroom to think.

The courageous young woman was possessed of enormous self-control, and when she came down again two hours later to sit down beside her father and her fiancé, her face was utterly serene. She seemed calm, happy and cheerful, as she was every day. Perspicacious as he was, Harry Dorgan could not read the slightest trace of any care or preoccupation in her features.

The engineer was in an excellent mood. He had just discovered a mechanism that would permit a saving of twenty per cent on fuel.

“Everything’s going very well,” he told Fred Jorgell, “and I’m far enough advanced in my work for the leave I’m taking on the occasion of our marriage not to impede the work of the Lightning Steamship Company in any way.”

“You can take as much leave as you wish,” said Fred Jorgell, laughing out loud. “Can’t he, my darling Isidora?”

The young woman only replied with a timid smile, lowering her eyes and blushing.

“This morning,” said the engineer, suddenly, “I received a very interesting letter from an unknown inventor. It concerns a new turbine engine.”

He took an envelope from his pocket, which contained a square piece of card covered on both sides with microscopic handwriting. Fred Jorgell darted a glance over the missive and handed it back to Harry Dorgan.

“Those letters are too small for my eyesight,” he murmured. “It will be simpler if you give me a brief explanation.”

Harry put the letter back in his pocket. “In fact, he said, “those fly-specks are almost indecipherable. It took me a good half-hour to read them.”

At that moment Isidora noticed that the engineer had two red patches at the tips of his thumb and forefinger, which resembled burns. “What’s that?” she asked, taking the young man’s hand. “Have you hurt yourself, my dear Harry?”

“No. It’s a slight irritation of the skin; I don’t know what to attribute it to, but it’s causing me a certain discomfort.”

“You didn’t have that redness this morning, did you?”

“No. It started suddenly while I was reading my mail. Bah! It will go of its own accord, just as it came.”

The incident was forgotten, and after a rapid lunch, the engineer went back to his office and plunged himself into absorbing work. By the evening post, he received a further letter from the unknown inventor of the turbine engine.

The text, and even the signature, were as barely legible as those in the first missive, and Harry spent a good deal of time deciphering them. When he had finished reading, he suddenly perceived that his fingers were very swollen, and then felt a strange malaise, a kind of vertigo.

He left his office sooner than usual, convinced that the fresh air would dissipate the headache, which he attributed to his recent overwork. Once in the street, however, the illness, instead of getting better, only increased and got worse. His legs became unsteady beneath him; he saw flashes of light, his eyes were buzzing.

He felt so weak that instead of going home on foot, as he had intended, he was obliged to take a cab.

At dinner, he scarcely touched his food. An ardent thirst was devouring him and he could see myriads of black dots dancing before his eyes, as happens in certain kinds of fever. Finally, he felt weighed down by a terrible fatigue. In order not to worry Isidora, however, he stiffened himself against the pain and succeeded in taking part in the conversation, as usual.

Isidora, however, had not failed to take note of his pallor, and she had observed that the suspect red patches at the tips of the thumb and index finger were surrounded by violet rings and hollowed out in the center like two small wounds. On the young woman’s insistence, he promised to attend to what he

referred to as an insignificant scratch, and under the pretext of having urgent work to do, went back to the furnished apartment he rented a short distance away from his future father-in-law's house.

Once he was alone in his room, Harry was gripped by tremors and afflicted by stabbing pains in his abdomen. He felt so ill that he was obliged to go to bed, sending his manservant to fetch a doctor.

After examining the invalid, the practitioner declared that his condition was not serious and must be attributable to a fever caused by fatigue. He advised sleep, rest, a warm bath and sedatives.

Soon after the doctor's departure, Harry fell into a leaden sleep. He did not wake up until late the next morning.

"What!" he stammered, darting a glance at the electric clock set beside his bed. "Nine-thirty already! But I should have been at the office an hour ago!"

He made an abrupt movement to get up, but he was unable to do so. His limbs were numb, and he had a dull pain in all his joints. With difficulty, he raised himself up on to his elbow and his gaze went to the large looking-glass opposite the bed, in which his image was reflected. He uttered a cry of surprise.

His face, lividly pale, was dotted with violet spots; his lips were white and his eyelids red and swollen.

"I'm ill," he stammered. "Very ill. What will Isidora say?"

He extended his hand to the electric bell-push situated above his bed-head. A few minutes later, the manservant came into the room. At the sight of Harry Dorgan he stepped back, vaguely fearful.

"What's wrong, Master?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

"Yes," stammered the engineer, in a weak voice. "Will you go inform Mr. Fred Jorgell that I won't be in the office this morning and that I won't be able to come to lunch. But don't exaggerate. Say that I'm slightly indisposed, and that I'll doubtless be better this evening..."

The manservant hastened to carry out this instruction.

When he went into Fred Jorgell's study Isidora was with her father. On hearing about her fiancé's illness she was overtaken by a funereal presentiment. Immediately, she thought about the bloody hand embroidered on the bridal gown.

"My God!" she murmured. "Harry is ill! I'm trembling in anticipation of a catastrophe. And I didn't want my father or my fiancé to know about the terrible threat suspended over their heads!"

Isidora felt remorse tormenting her heart. Exaggerating her fault, she regarded herself as the cause of the engineer's illness. "I should have warned him!" she repeated.

She resolved to repair the error and immediately told her father the truth.

The billionaire was deeply affected by what she had told him, but he tried to reassure his daughter. "Evidently," he said, "you were wrong not to warn me, but I'm convinced that there's no correlation between Harry's illness and yesterday's insulting gift."

But Isidora had risen to her feet. "I want to see Harry!" she cried, impetuously. "My place is at my husband's bedside!"

"I'll go with you," said Fred Jorgell, agitatedly, "but before then, I'll give orders to notify the chief of the New York Police and have my house put under special surveillance, guarded if necessary by twenty robust detectives. Anyway, perhaps you're wrong to worry. The servant only talked about a slight indisposition."

"No, Harry is seriously ill. I feel it, I know it, I'm sure of it.

A quarter of an hour later, the billionaire and his daughter went into the invalid's room. On perceiving Harry's disfigured features, Isidora uttered a heart-rending cry.

"My presentiments weren't mistaken," she murmured, dejectedly. "Harry's very ill! Since that's the case, I shan't leave his side; I'll care for him, watch over him and cure him myself!"

Making a supreme effort to summon up all his energy, the engineer had straightened up, smiling—but it was a heart-rending smile. "I'm not as ill as you think," he stammered, in a voice as faint as a breath. "I assure you, my dear Isidora, that I already feel much better..."

"I want to look after you myself. Isn't it as if I'm already your wife—and I won't I be, in a few days?"

The sick man made a swift gesture of negotiation. "No," he articulated, painfully. "I don't want that. The malady from which I'm suffering might be contagious, and it's already an imprudence for you to have come here and shaken my hand."

Fred Jorgell had drawn near. "Harry," he said, "I already consider you to be part of the family. I approve entirely of Isidora and find her devotion quite natural. Anyway, you're not as gravely ill as you think, and I've already taken measures to have the most celebrated physicians in New York brought here. Your malady would have to be very serious indeed not to yield to science."

"Besides," added Isidora, "when one fights disease energetically, it goes away. It's a battle like any other. It's a matter of being victorious."

"Energy I have," the invalid murmured, in a feeble voice.

"And we shall add ours to yours, if necessary. I'm not going to be deprived of a collaborator whose services are so valuable to me, damn it!" And the billionaire, even though he was seriously alarmed, laughed cordially, as if did not believe that the engineer's illness was serious.

Leaving Isidora at her fiancé's bedside, Fred Jorgell left, having observed that Harry was mentally reassured by his visit. The billionaire intended to return soon afterwards, accompanied by the physicians he had summoned by telephone. He had just left the furnished house when a man dressed as a domestic came into it.

"I'd like to see Mr. Harry Dorgan," he said to the doorman.

"Unfortunately," was the reply, "Mr. Dorgan is very ill. He's confined to bed, awaiting several physicians who have been called to a consultation. On whose behalf have you come?"

"On behalf of Mr. Fred Jorgell."

"But he's just left," replied the doorman, suspiciously.

"Our paths must have crossed. I'll run to catch him up." And the man went away without asking for further explanations.

A hundred yards away, he went into the back room of a bar that was almost deserted at present, where two men were waiting for him. They were Joe Dorgan, the engineer's brother, and a physician famous in New York, where he was known as the sculptor of human flesh, Dr. Cornelius Kramm. The man gave them a rapid account of his mission and withdrew.

Once they were alone, Cornelius and Joe Dorgan exchanged diabolical smiles. "I believe," said Cornelius, "that Miss Isidora's marriage is not ready to be concluded. The charming young lady might well be widowed before the wedding."

"The detested Harry will finally disappear," murmured Joe, with a hateful contraction of his features.

"As to that, have no fear. With the microbe that I've inoculated him, which is only known to a few rare scientists, Harry Dorgan only has a week to live, at the most."

The two bandits chatted for a little longer, and then went back to the automobile that was waiting for them a short distance away.

The Red Hand had triumphed yet again. Harry Dorgan was about to die.

## *II. Green Leprosy*

The engineer Antoine Paganot and his fiancée, Mademoiselle Andrée de Maubreuil, were taking tea in the company of Oscar Tournesol in a small drawing room at the Preston Hotel. Their friends, Roger Ravenel and Frédérique, had gone out to make some purchases.

All three were plunged in sadness and discouragement.

“We’ve had nothing but bad luck since our arrival in New York,” said the young woman. “First there was the attempted murders by the Knights of Chloroform, to which we almost fell victim. We were counting on Fred Jorgell’s aid to find Monsieur Bondonnat, but now the billionaire’s future son-in-law has fallen ill, and all our plans have been adjourned, put off until an indefinite date.

The hunchbacked Oscar reflected. “I can’t get rid of the idea,” he murmured softly, “that the strange malady from which Harry is suffering is due to poisoning. The most famous physicians have been unable to identify the strange infection, and that patient is at the last ditch.”

“Have you had news this morning?” Andrée asked.

“The engineer is dying. It’s only a matter of days, perhaps hours.”

“There’s certainly something inexplicable about it,” said Antoine Paganot.

“Three days ago,” Oscar went on, “Harry was full of life and health. Today, he’s almost a cadaver. His face is livid, blotched with violet patches, his eyelids swollen with blood. The patient has a horror of food and is experiencing intolerable pain in his head and abdomen. All his limbs are agitated by a convulsive tremor.”

“That’s odd,” said the engineer. “Those symptoms are strangely similar to those caused by a little-known malady that caused frightful ravages in Russia and Poland during the Middle Ages, when it was known as green leprosy.<sup>1</sup> I’d be very interested to see the invalid at close range.”

“Who knows,” said Oscar, clutching at the hope, “whether you might not be able to discover the cause of the sickness?”

“Go see Mr. Dorgan,” Andrée approved. “I’d be very happy if you could save him. How Miss Isidora must be suffering! I can imagine myself in her shoes. What chagrin I would endure if I saw you attained by a frightful disease!”

“Well then, we’ll go.”

Oscar Tournesol and the engineer had already risen to their feet.

Half an hour later, they presented themselves at the billionaire’s house, where everyone was plunged in consternation. Oscar went straight to the study occupied by Agénor, Fred Jorgell’s private secretary.

Agénor listened to the hunchback’s explanations attentively and applauded his initiative. He knew Paganot, who was as renowned as a physician as he was as an inventor.

“That’s an excellent idea, my dear compatriot,” he said. “Come with me—let’s not lose a moment, for in the lamentable state that poor Harry is in, hours, and even minutes are precious.”

All three of them jumped into the automobile that was stationed in the courtyard night and day, and arrived at the furnished house in which Harry’s apartment was located. After Agénor had said a few words to Fred Jorgell, they were introduced without difficulty into the sick man’s room. There, they found themselves in the presence of a heart-rending spectacle. Somber, his face hollowed out by chagrin and aged by ten years, Fred Jorgell was standing in a corner. Nearby, Isidora was weeping silently. Nothing could be heard but the sound of her sobs and the hoarse gasps escaping the throat of the dying man.

“What use are my billions?” murmured the old man, clenching his fists with a dull rage. “All these physicians are donkeys, only good for extracting dollars from the naïve. They can’t even tell me the name of the disease from which my daughter’s fiancé is in the process of dying.”

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<sup>1</sup> Le Rouge improvised this term for an imaginary disease; he was not to know that it would be coined for application to a kind of algal blight attacking cave paintings.

"I don't know whether I'll be any luckier than my colleagues," said Antoine Paganot, modestly, "but I'll try."

Isidora looked up, her beautiful face bathed with tears. "Oh, Monsieur," she stammered, joining her hands together in supplication. "Save my beloved Harry, and my father's entire fortune is yours!"

"Yes, my entire fortune," repeated Fred Jorgell.

"It's not a matter of that," said Paganot. "Let's see the patient."

He approached the bed on which Harry Dorgan was lying, plunged into a kind of coma, his head tilted backwards, his eyes turned up. His lower lip was slack and his nostrils were already pinched like those of a dying man.

Isidora felt her heart beats furiously in her breast while Antoine Paganot, in the midst of a tragic silence, proceeded to examine the invalid.

"I wasn't mistaken!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "It really is green leprosy."

"Is it a curable disease?" asked the young woman, palpitating with anguish.

"Sometimes," replied Antoine Paganot, reflecting anxiously, wondering by what hazard the microbe of green leprosy, only cultivated as a curiosity in a few European and American laboratories, could have infected Harry Dorgan.

Suddenly, Paganot's attention was attracted by the patient's right hand, the thumb and index finger of which bore tumorous swellings forming a hideous wound.

*Those, he thought, are singularly located scratches. Might it not have been by that route that the microbe was introduced into his body?*

His gaze wandered distractedly around the room. Suddenly, it fell upon a card covered with delicate handwriting, at the corner of which there was a clearly-marked imprint of a thumb. He picked it up and looked at the other side. A fingerprint was marked there—doubtless that of the index finger, for the natural way of holding a card while lading it is between those two digits.

Now, it was precisely the invalid's thumb and index finger that bore wounds corresponding to the imprints. That observation gave the young man pause for thought. He remained silent while he felt a strange prickling at the tips of his own thumb and index finger, in which he was holding the card, mechanically. He looked at his fingers; they already bore traces of a slight redness. He could not help going pale and throwing the card away precipitately. Then, perceiving a bottle of Lysol on a shelf, he rapidly made use of it to disinfect his right hand.

Isidora and Fred Jorgell had followed all his actions with poignant curiosity. They understood that the moment was decisive.

"What is it?" demanded Fred Jorgell, feverishly. "What have you discovered?"

"Harry Dorgan has been poisoned," Antoine Paganot declared, gravely.

"The Red Hand's threat!" murmured Isidora, shivering.

Silence and consternation reigned for a few more moments, while Antoine Paganot searched the corners of the room nervously. Suddenly, he spotted a second card covered in the same tiny and illegible handwriting. Like the first, it bore two imprints disposed in the same fashion, but of a different color.

"When did Harry receive these cards?" he demanded, curtly.

"The day before he fell ill."

"That's it—I can explain everything. Those two cards must have reached him at an interval of a few hours."

"Which means," said Isidora, "that one of them arrived in the morning post and the other in the evening post."

"I know enough now," said Antoine, "to be sure of the method the criminals employed. I'll explain that later; the most urgent thing is to combat the disease."

Rapidly, he scribbled a prescription and handed it to the hunchback, who ran out in order to get it filled.

"Now," the young man continued, "You can have the explanation. The first card was impregnated with a vesicant substance, something akin to cantharides, contact with which, even for a short time, produces excoriations and blisters. I've just provided an example myself." He showed them the tips of his

fingers. "It's in order the person to whom the letter was addressed would be obliged to hold it for a long time that the handwriting is so tiny, so dense and so difficult to read."

"Yes," Fred Jorgell reflected. "Harry told us that it took him more than half an hour to decipher it."

"The second card had been dipped in a culture of the microbe of green leprosy, which found in a ready-prepared terrain the slight wounds in the thumb and index finger—a comfortable entrance that allowed it to intrude into the body."

"I'll punish the poisoners!" exclaimed Fred Jorgell, clenching his fists with a menacing expression.

"I think you'll have great difficulty discovering them. The means they've employed shows that they're highly intelligent individuals—and the address on the card must be false, of course, just as the signature is illegible.

At that moment, Oscar came back carrying an assortment of bottles and a Pravaz syringe.

"I hope that I've arrived while there's still time," said Antoine Paganot. "I'm going to try hypodermic injections to combat the blood poisoning, but I need to be alone to carry out that operation. In half an hour, I'll be able to tell you whether you can still conserve any hope."

Everyone left the room.

Isidora was the last to leave; she turned round to dart a glance charged with mute supplication at Paganot. "You'll save him, won't you?" she murmured.

"I'll do everything possible, Miss, but it doesn't depend on me, alas. If only I'd been called a day earlier."

The half hour wait went by, for Fred Jorgell and his daughter, and for their friends, in all the horrors of anguish. Taking refuge in a small drawing room in the furnished house, they watched the march of the hands on the dial of a pendulum clock anxiously, the minutes seeming as long as years.

"It's ten minutes since the half hour passed!" Isidora exclaimed, getting to her feet impatiently. "Let's go and see."

"No," said Fred Jorgell. "Let's wait a little longer."

At that moment, however, Paganot came into the room abruptly. The young man's features were radiant. "My friends," he said, in voice tremulous with emotion, "A salutary reaction has taken place in the patient's condition, and I now believe that I can answer for his life. There's nothing more to do than to continue the treatment I've begun. In two days' time, the improvement will be manifest. I'll watch over him myself, to see that my prescriptions are followed in every detail."

Too emotional to thank the engineer in any other manner, Fred Jorgell crushed his hand with an energetic handshake. Isidora stammered vague words of thanks, but the pallor had disappeared from her face and a gleam of hope was alight again in her beautiful eyes.

The energetic treatment applied by Paganot was, indeed, a complete success. That evening, the invalid came out of the coma in which he had been plunged. The blue-tinted patches on his face improved, and he spent a tranquil night.

The next day, his general condition was further improved, and two days after that, Harry Dorgan could be considered conclusively out of danger.

In the meantime, the billionaire's house and the furnished house where the engineer was being cared for were visibly guarded by elite detectives. The cards were analyzed by an expert chemist and Antoine Paganot's assertions were completely verified. The first card had been dipped into a vesicant mixture of extraordinary activity, and the other, examined under a microscope, allowed the bacilli of green leprosy with which it was impregnated to be clearly discerned.

Needless to say, the police searched in vain for the sender of the poisoned missives. The only things that seemed certain was that they emanated from affiliates of the Red Hand. As Fred Jorgell said to his daughter, however, there was nothing to be done, for the moment, against the ungraspable bandits. The best thing to do was to be very wary, and wait for the police finally to get their hands on the leaders of the association—which could not be long delayed, because a group of capitalists, headed by Fred Jorgell, had offered considerable rewards that ought to stimulate the zeal of the detectives.

Meanwhile, Harry Dorgan's recovery made rapid progress. He was entering into convalescence. Isidora resolved to take advantage of the fact that Harry no longer had any immediate need for her



presence to pay a visit of thanks to Antoine Paganot. She therefore went to the Preston Hotel, accompanied by Agénor, who was old enough and serious enough to serve as her chaperon.

As she went up in the elevator that was to deposit her on the landing of the floor on which the French guests were staying, Isidora could not suppress a strange emotion. Was she not, perhaps, about to find herself in the presence of the woman whose father had been murdered by Baruch? In her haste to thank Antoine Paganot, she had not thought about that eventuality, but it was too late to turn back. Already, a bellboy was introducing her and Agénor into a small drawing room in which Mademoiselle de Maubreuil and the engineer were sitting.

On seeing the American woman come in, Andrée rose to her feet. Without ever having seen her before, she recognized Isidora from the description she had been given. In spite of all her self-control, she went pale, all her blood flowing back to her heart. She was in the presence of the sister of the father's murderer.

Isidora had divined what was passing through her mind, and, advancing toward her, she murmured in a voice tremulous with emotion: "Mademoiselle, I know that I ought not to be here, and that my presence must reawaken cruel memories in your heart, but I had to thank Monsieur Paganot, to whom I owe my fiancé's life. It's necessary that I express all my gratitude to him, and also that I ask him, on my father's behalf, what recompense he desires for the inestimable service that he has rendered to us. Mademoiselle, can you not forgive me for having come?"

"Miss Isidora," Andrée de Maubreuil replied, effortfully, "I know that you are honest and generous. I cannot hold you responsible for someone else's crime. Let there never again be any mention between us of that bloody past..." While speaking, Andrée held out her hand to Isidora.

The young woman took it and shook it, but they were both so emotional that they had tears in their eyes. There was a moment of sad silence.

Agénor was the first to resume the conversation. "Don't forget, Miss Isidora," he said, "that we've come to ask Monsieur Paganot what honorarium he desires for the miraculous cure he has just achieved."

"There can't be any question between us of any recompense whatsoever," he engineer declared. "I'm only too glad to have been able to help the protector of our friend Oscar."

"Do you know," said Andrée suddenly, "what would give Monsieur Paganot the greatest pleasure?"

"Tell me," said Isidora. "It's granted in advance."

"Well," said the young woman, "find the father of my friend Frédérique Monsieur Bondonnat, and we'll be handsomely recompensed for the service that my fiancé has rendered you."

"We'll find him," said Isidora, gravely, her hand extended as if she were swearing an oath. "We'll find him, if my father has to spend his entire fortune to do it."

At that moment, Frédérique came into the room, not knowing that there were visitors. Paganot made the introductions, and the billionaire's daughter and the newcomer took an instant liking to one another.

"Excuse me for having come in like that without warning," she said, "but I've brought good news."

"What is it?"

"I've just received a letter from my father. Here it is—I'll read it to you." She took a crumpled envelope out of her corsage. Everyone came closer as Frédérique read.

*My dear child,*

*I am, fortunately, alive and well. I am, it's true, sequestered and closely guarded in a place about which it's impossible for me to give you any information, but I'm not in any danger. I'm in the hands of rich capitalists who are forcing me—somewhat reluctantly, I admit—to work on certain discoveries, but they ought to compensate me and, which is much more important to me, eventually set me free.*

*My jailers have forbidden me to give you any more details, but don't worry about me; I shall soon return.*

*Give my other daughter Andrée a big hug on my behalf, and be patient.*

*A thousand kisses from your old father.*

*Prosper Bondonnat*

*P. S. My compliments to my excellent collaborators, Roger Ravenel and Antoine Paganot.*

“A strange letter!” exclaimed Agénor, when Frédérique had finished reading.

“Oh,” the young woman replied, “it’s definitely my father’s handwriting. He has a particular way of crossing his *ts*, forming his *fs* and adding a flourish to his signature that are typical of him. I’d recognize it among a thousand.

“Let’s see the envelope,” said the engineer. “This letter has been addressed to Brittany, and then forwarded to New York.”

“But where did it come from—that’s what we need to know.”

“America,” said Paganot, examining the postmarks attentively. “That proves one thing, which is that Monsieur Bondonnat really is in America and that we were right to come to search for him here. The letter was posted in New Orleans.”

“Well then,” declared Andrée and Frédérique, with one voice, “we’ll go to New Orleans. We’ll leave as soon as possible.”

“My father has numerous correspondents in New Orleans,” Isidora said, “who will put themselves at your disposal for any information imaginable. Tomorrow, I’ll give Oscar a dozen letters of introduction, which will, I’m sure, be very useful to you.”

Andrée and Frédérique thanked Isidora, who took her leave of them, renewing the promise she had made to aid them, with all the power of her father’s billions, in the search that they were undertaking.

That day was happy for everyone. The little clan of French travelers was glad finally to have news of Monsieur Bondonnat, and Isidora and her father saw with indescribable satisfaction that Harry Dorgan was convalescing well.

As for the threats of the Red Hand, no one wanted, or dared, to think about them.