

MISS MUSKETEER

PART ONE *THIRSTING FOR THE LIGHT*

CHAPTER I *What You Find in an Old Newspaper*

“Of course, Sir John, I’m grateful for your kindness. But between that and making my heart flutter sweetly like a fiancée’s there’s a wide gap, wider than the Thames.”

“Won’t you at least give me some hope?”

“I think I’ve given you...”

“You’ve asked for the impossible.”

“I don’t agree. I said, ‘My wealth, my pile of banknotes, bores me.’ Your wealth does too. When I exclaim, ‘I want this, or maybe I want that,’ all it takes is opening a checkbook to buy it. I can’t spend even a tiny moment wishing for anything—and I’m angry that I can’t wish for anything. So I suggested that, using your imagination, you find something I’ll consider interesting and that my pounds or guineas couldn’t buy. I repeat, find a way to interest me, and then I’ll be your fiancée.”

This odd conversation was taking place in a murmur on the terrace of the Hôtel Mirific in Nice, between Miss Violet Musketeer and Sir John Lobster. Both of them had been born in England, but any resemblance ended there.

Violet was of medium height, but her aristocratic slenderness made her look taller. She had the slightly loose-hipped charm of athletic Englishwomen. She was very pretty—tawny blonde hair, a bright complexion, large gray-blue eyes that looked innocent and bold at the same time—and she had all of the somewhat stiff gracefulness from across the Channel that was so different from French grace, though it was no less captivating. Her white wristwatch, her matching blouse, and her tennis shoes suggested that she’d just come from the arena of British lawn sports. She might’ve been twenty years old.

Sir John, ten years older, crammed his short, prematurely plump body into a white flannel vest with wide pink stripes; trousers of the same fabric imprisoned his thick legs but let escape two long feet shod in yellow calfskin. In one hand he held a lightweight straw boater decorated with a green ribbon, thus exposing his red hair and scarlet face—so red, so scarlet, that the select company gathered on the Côte d’Azur had to wonder whether Lobster was his real name or his nickname. This fat man, in any case, was a Member of Parliament and was listed in the London and County directory as one of the richest landowners in the United Kingdom.

On her side, Violet was the sole heiress of the late John Musketeer, who when he was alive had been a prominent manufacturer of tinned meats in Brisbane, Australia. We all remember the origins of that bold speculator’s wealth. Leaving England with a small fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds, he’d gone to Australia—where at first he’d been taken for a madman. Indeed, how else to describe a man who used most of his capital to build enormous sheds filled with strange and expensive machinery? The most amazing thing was that, when people inquired, he answered with a smile, “I’m not yet sure what business I’ll settle on... But so as to be ready I’ve built the factory anyway.”

Surely he was a madman to talk that way. But a madman who noticed that the whole of Australia suffered from a terrible scourge—the proliferation of rabbits. Those countless rodents devastated farms and harvests. Farmers howled, legislatures were moved. One fine day it was decided by law to destroy the four-footed foe. An enormous beat was organized. Over five hundred thousand hunters rushed to join the slaughter. In six days they wiped out more than a hundred million rabbits.

That was all John Musketeeer was waiting for. Brokers he'd hired long since scoured the country, buying at wholesale—skin and meat—all the rabbits, which because of their abundance had dropped to a ridiculously low price. In a month, Musketeeer's factory turned thirty million of those fascinating rodents into rabbit pâté, with a net profit of about sixpence apiece, and the manufacturer's fortune rose by six hundred and twenty-five thousand francs, to eighteen million.

His former detractors now wore themselves out in cries of enthusiasm. The "John" brand competed successfully against the best-known American tinned meats; and when Sir John Musketeeer, Privy Councilor of New South Wales, recipient of forty-three decorations from both England and abroad, baronet, etcetera, etcetera, rendered his admirable soul to the Lord, he left to his heiress—educated at the finest schools in England—the trifling sum of two hundred and seventy-five million.

The "Rabbit King" had done very well. A number of gentlemen hoped to do even better, by redirecting that honorably acquired fortune to their own profit. Violet's hand was asked for by three lords, a hereditary German duke, a pretender to one of the Balkan thrones... Even a Russian grand duke, frightened by the approach of revolution in Muscovy, didn't hesitate to get in line.

Violet refused all aspirants to her lovely, long, slender, pink-nailed hand. Did she think she deserved better than those self-serving sighs? No. All those gentlemen bored her, that's all. She dreamt of wanting something money couldn't buy. What? She had no idea. And not knowing what it was that would guarantee her happiness, she'd decided irrevocably that she'd marry only a man who could make her feel something novel, unknown, sought in vain until that moment—a man gifted with a mind original enough to reveal to her eyes some joy, some pleasure, that gold couldn't provide.

She traveled a great deal. Only Sir John Lobster had been determined enough to follow her. The Member of Parliament had sworn to himself that Violet would be his wife and the charming keeper of his hearth. And as a man who'd managed to win the votes of his fellow citizens, he had no doubt that one day he'd win the lovely heiress's vote too. He strove therefore to satisfy her slightest whim. Even now, on the terrace of the Hôtel Mirific, overlooking the garden—in bloom in spite of it being winter—and the palm trees along the promenade bordering the blue sea glittering under the bright sun, he seemed to be laden with a multitude of small parcels.

He enumerated them as he set them down on a small garden table. "I say! Your words bring sorrow to the ears of a lover and a suitor, Violet, but I believe my attentions will make you change your mind. Here's the silver and tortoiseshell lorgnette you looked at yesterday... and the new tennis balls invented by the brilliant Strible... and the tickets for the box at the theater... Plus which, here's your missing tennis racket. It was Prince Nielsa, you know—who's staying at the Buckingham Palace in Monte Carlo with that charming, witty Madame Norès—who sent a bellboy to bring the racket back with his apologies and this bouquet."

Violet murmured distractedly, "All of this is just a matter of money. Is there really nothing that can't be bought?"

"Poor Violet. Still dreaming that dream?"

"Always."

"You're seeking the impossible."

"That's all that attracts me."

"Well then—an unfulfillable desire already exists, by Jove! Ask for the moon, and you won't get it."

Her lovely eyebrows gathered in a frown. "An Englishwoman isn't mad. She wouldn't express a wish like that."

"That's honest, anyway. But if you reject follies, I really don't see a way to satisfy you."

Sadly, she shook her charming head. "Me neither, alas! Hence my boredom. Oh, for something difficult, yet feasible... something to bring a little crumb of interest, a hint of excitement, to my monotonous existence!"

She rested her elbows on the terrace balustrade, turning her back to the packages piled on the table—and also to Sir John, who was redder than ever. That stubborn suitor studied her with an indulgent smile, exposing long teeth: a patch of yellow in the middle of his purple face, that brought to mind unbidden the multicolored gewgaws of a Spanish medal.

Suddenly he stopped smiling and listened. Violet too had lifted her head and was looking down into the garden. At the low gate leading to the promenade had just appeared a man of twenty-seven or twenty-eight—neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, neither handsome nor ugly, and dressed in white flannels with a yachtsman's cap—who was humming while he read with great attention a crumpled newspaper wrapped around a large bunch of pale violets.

It was the newcomer's voice that had drawn the notice of the two English people.

"Monsieur Max Soleil," whispered Violet.

"Pff. That French writer—an insignificant person. His writing brings in barely twenty thousand francs a year..."

Violet firmly cut short Sir John's thought. "Yes, but a happy man, always smiling. He's alone and he's singing. He's interested in so many things. Shh! Don't answer; he doesn't need to hear that we're talking about him."

Her suggestion was to the point. Max Soleil, since that was his name, had stopped reading, and with a brisk, lively stride he was following the sandy path leading to the hotel terrace, still humming as he went. He took the twelve steps in three bounds and stopped short at the top.

A lovely voice had just said, "Good morning. You've already been for a walk?" Violet came toward him, her hand outstretched.

Max cordially shook the multi-millionairess's hand, followed by Sir John's much heavier hand. Then, tossing his cap onto the side table, he said, "Yes, I went out, because I'm melancholy."

"Melancholy—you who are always so cheerful?"

"Oh, I'm in despair! I've been forced to kill Marthe Lussan."

Violet and Sir John started. "You killed someone?" they stammered.

"Oh, rest assured—only in my imagination. Marthe Lussan is the heroine of the novel the *Morning News* is publishing right now. But I worked so hard on that character, took such care over details, that I developed a little crush on Marthe. It took a huge effort for me to decide to follow the dictates of logic that led her to the grave."

Sir John let out a loud guffaw. Violet didn't even smile. She was observing the writer, noticing the wide, well-shaped brow that rose to his short brown hair; the clear, limpid, gray-green eyes that expressed both sincerity and firmness—as well as an indefinable something else that clouded them when he looked at her. Then she felt that the bright spark they threw out went straight into her, penetrating all the way to the secret places where her true thoughts were hidden.

Max Soleil was in fact no ordinary person. At eighteen he'd managed to get into the École Polytechnique. He'd graduated ninth in his class, giving him the choice of a career in either civil or military engineering. With a peace of mind that stunned his friends and acquaintances, he'd chosen... literature. Abandoning the engineering career open to him, he'd thrown himself into journalism, publishing news articles, human-interest stories, pieces on science—whatever turned up. Two years later a light comedy he wrote was a huge hit at the Théâtre des Variétés. Six months after that, he published a pitch-perfect tragic serial novel, then a four-act comedy that had all Paris rushing to the Théâtre du Gymnase. By the age of twenty-seven Max Soleil was famous. Publishers, theater producers, magazine editors all wanted to work with him, and—as Sir John had observed so disdainfully—he was earning at least twenty thousand francs a year.

Perhaps Violet was thinking about all that.

"So I wanted to shake off my sorrows," Max went on cheerfully. "I watched Miss Ladscheff and Miss Hurtington play golf on the links, then—a little restored by the sight of other people exercising—I

was strolling back, when I met a flower seller laden with violets. The flowers naturally made me think of you. I bought some to give to you—which made me the happiest of men.”

She interrupted him with a shake of her finger. “Oh, you Frenchman, you composer of gallantries, you’re going to court me too.”

“Like everybody, here and elsewhere,” muttered Sir John.

Max paid no attention to him. He gestured with vexation at her words. “Mademoiselle, we’ve been acquaintances at this hotel for two weeks now, and I hope I’ve come across to you as neither conceited nor greedy.”

“Conceited? Greedy?” echoed Violet in surprise. “I don’t understand.”

“No doubt. To court you would be to assume that I could inspire love in you: conceit! Or else that I’d have designs on your fortune—which is far too great for me: greed!”

“Or else that you’re just a flirt,” exclaimed Sir John, still smiling.

“I never flirt,” replied Max curtly. “Flirtation is a parody of real feeling—something done by heartless, witless people.”

He stopped short. Sweet Violet was holding out her hand to him. “Shake hands, I beg you. I spoke without thinking, and I apologize.”

He ungrudgingly pressed her hand in his. “Thank you. Now I’ll be able to go away with the memory of a dear companion, almost a friend.”

“What? You’re going away?”

“This evening. That’s the happiness I mentioned.”

“Happiness! But you were to stay here another two weeks!”

“True.”

“And the way you described your life the other evening: eleven months of work, of simple and methodical existence, then a month of vacation in Nice, living like a millionaire... I’ll admit, I don’t understand what kind of happiness could cut short your month of reward.”

“You mean what could increase it?”

“You’re speaking in riddles.”

“The most interesting thing possible!”

She threw up her hands. “Have you really found something interesting?” She had a worried look in her gentle eyes.

“At least to me. It’s the premise for an extraordinary novel—a mystery that the police of France, England, and Russia have been powerless to solve—a mystery that I want to unravel.”

“But you said you were made happy by buying those violets!”

“Exactly. Here, Mademoiselle, take them.”

And as he put the bouquet into her hands, he showed her the sheet of newspaper in which they were wrapped. “Here’s my happiness... given to me as a bonus by the flower seller.”

“That newspaper?”

“A *Petit Marseillais* from four months ago.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“This newspaper is from last October,” he continued. “My flower seller no doubt bought it as part of a bundle meant to wrap bouquets. How it came into her possession doesn’t matter. The lucky thing—as good old Capus¹ says—the lucky thing is that my attention was drawn to this evocative subhead.” Then, chanting the words as if to magnify their effect, he read, “*Strange case of ‘folie à deux’: the Marseilles mystery. Are they nihilists? The conundrum deepens.*”

“*Folie à deux?*”—“Nihilists?”—exclaimed his two listeners.

Max bowed slightly, motioned for silence, then went on reading. “*Yesterday—meaning last October 23rd—‘Officers Peyral and Barbon, making their rounds on the Corniche promenade...*”

“In Marseilles?”

¹ Alfred Capus (1858-1922), French journalist, playwright, and novelist; member of the Académie française.

“Yes... *Officers Peyral and Barbon found two young women, dressed alike, sunk in a deep sleep. They tried calling to them, even shaking them, but in vain: the unresponsive sleepers didn't open their eyes.*”

“Oh, pooh!” exclaimed Violet, but her rosy cheeks and shining eyes expressed her interest.

“Wait, wait. That's nothing yet. Going on: *Tiring of their pointless efforts, the officers concluded that the unknown women's sleep was unnatural. Thereupon Barbon went to requisition stretcher-bearers and stretchers, and the mysterious sleeping beauties were carried to nearest police station.*”

“Oh!” murmured Violet. “To the police station! Shocking!”

“There,” went on Max, talking right through the interruption, “*it took more than three hours to bring those mysterious women back to consciousness. Captain Bellugga, the kind-hearted police chief, therefore concluded that the ladies were under the influence of a powerful sedative.*”

“Oh! A sedative!”

“It's like an Ann Radcliffe² novel!”

“All that's still nothing,” said Max with a smile. “Listen to the next part: *When the unknown women had come to, Captain Bellugga questioned them. One, a pretty blonde barely twenty years old, answered only with incoherent phrases: 'Night is the accomplice... Toward the light... Over there... The Orient... Brightness...' The other woman said she was the Duchess of La Roche-Sonnaille and the wife of a well-known member of Parisian society. She said her companion was named Mona Labianov and was the daughter of the general who had the honor to represent the Russian government at the last Peace Conference. Then the young woman told a strange story—so strange that Monsieur Bellugga immediately notified the magistrates.*

“It concerned a vast pan-Asian conspiracy against Europe, involving kidnapping Monsieur and Madame de la Roche-Sonnaille on their honeymoon and dragging them into an astonishing plot against all the European governments maintaining a presence in the Far East. It was like an episode of recent history brought to life, because certain facts about which we've informed our readers when necessary, such as those concerning the German concession at Shandong or the Kilua Pass in French Tonkin, surfaced in her gripping account.

“With admirable clarity and precision, the duchess added that she and her companion had arrived from Calcutta on the steamer Oxus, of the Messageries Maritimes shipping line; and that as soon as they disembarked they'd gone to see Dr. Rodel at his villa, called Loursinade, on the road to Aubagne. She claimed that there they'd witnessed a terrible scene, which had caused her companion to lose her mind. But an investigation immediately set in motion revealed that Dr. Rodel had been dead for more than a year—and that since then the Loursinade villa had stood vacant. Our reporter got into the house and confirmed the report: the loose floorboards covered in dust and the damp walls oozing saltpeter left no doubt: like her young friend, Madame de la Roche-Sonnaille has been struck by madness. Though she seems to be fully in her senses when she speaks on any other subject, she falls back into her distressing hallucination whenever the Loursinade villa is mentioned in her presence.

“In any case, telegrams were soon dispatched to the Roche-Sonnaille and Lillois families in Paris, and to His Excellency General Labianov in St. Petersburg. All of the telegrams produced the same astonishing reply: 'Vanished without leaving an address.'

“What is the heartrending mystery that has robbed two young women of their reason—women who certainly appear to be, as they claim, one the Duchess of La Roche-Sonnaille, who disappeared about eighteen months ago, along with her husband, during their honeymoon along the Rhine, and the other the only daughter of General Labianov?

“The connection to the Russian envoy raises the concern that Russian revolutionaries, nihilists, have a hand in all this. It's high time the government took steps against that violent faction, to which this

² (née Ward) (1764-1823) English author and a pioneer of Gothic fiction who was hugely popular in France. Her technique of explaining apparently supernatural elements in her novels has been credited with gaining Gothic fiction respectability in the 1790s.

country has been too hospitable. If nihilists wreak havoc in Russia, that's their business and doesn't concern us; but for them to come here and attack French citizens is unacceptable."

Max fell silent for a moment. His shining eyes fell on Violet. She hadn't moved. Her eyes wide with surprise, her rosy mouth open, she seemed to be waiting for more. For once she seemed to feel the interest that half an hour earlier she'd been complaining that she never experienced.

"Well?" he asked finally.

She seemed to come out of a dream. In a hesitant voice she said, "It's extraordinary."

"Don't you think it'd be fascinating to solve the case?"

She nodded.

"Besides presumably finding the plot of a true-life novel, I'm sure I'd be carrying out a good deed."

"A good deed?"

Max raised his arms eloquently. "I was forgetting..." He turned the page of the newspaper. "Here, in the late-breaking news. Listen: *Given their mental state, Madame de La Roche-Sonnaille and Mademoiselle Mona Labianov have been taken to Dr. Ellevioussé's asylum. We're all familiar with that eminent psychiatric practitioner's miraculous cures and with his books that have revolutionized the theory of madness. We've all, if not read, then at least heard of his 'Essays on the Loss of Reason and its Causes.'*

"We visited his asylum and had the good fortune to meet the scientist in his laboratory, where he is pursuing his research into 'the effect of beams of colored light on the progress of insanity.' Dr. Ellevioussé, like all superior beings, is a saint. His exposure to the insane has not jaded him to their suffering. It was with deep sadness that he confirmed the genuine madness of his new residents, and his faint hope of curing them.

"We were allowed to see those unfortunate victims of a mystery that seems likely never to be solved. Mademoiselle Mona Labianov, as lovely as a tormented angel, as blonde as wheat, continues to utter meaningless phrases: 'The Orient... The light...' In the asylum garden, it's as if a secret attraction forces her always to look east.

"As for the Duchess of La Roche-Sonnaille, one of the most charming representatives of the French nobility, she conversed with us at first with great good sense. Unfortunately our professional duty and our wish to keep our readers informed led us to bring up the subject of the Loursinade villa—which we regretted immediately, because the poor woman gave way to delusion babbling, repeating the far-fetched story that investigation has shown to be impossible. It was with an aching heart that we departed Dr. Ellevioussé's asylum, leaving those poor women the victims of an inexplicable fate."

Max added calmly, "Now you understand why I used that expression: a good deed. Either a terrible shock unbalanced those women's wits—in which case tracing the matter back to the culprit is an act of justice—or that duchess, who's so sane in all other respects, is perhaps just as sane when she talks about the Loursinade villa."

"What? You don't think she's mad?"

"No, I don't. I'm in search of the truth. I therefore have to consider both hypotheses."

"You don't favor either one?"

"Honestly, I do. My intuition is to lean toward believing that she's perfectly in her right mind."

"But then how awful to be locked up in a madhouse!" Kind-hearted Violet clasped her hands, and her whole attitude expressed her horror.

"Well, don't get too upset. It's not a certainty. I'd even like to begin my investigation by letting go of that idea. Logic alone must guide me."

"When will you begin your investigation?"

"I already have."

"How?"

"A little while ago I sent a telegram to Dr. Ellevioussé, asking him to see me tomorrow. My pretext is that I'm writing a thriller. As soon as I hear from him I'm off to Marseilles."

With unaccustomed energy, Violet cried, "Oh, I hope you succeed! I make wishes, you know. I can't tell you how interested I am in those poor dear madwomen."

A loud guffaw made her jump. Sir John was bent over in spasms of noisy laughter. "Come on now. Pull up! Here you are—interested! Not for long, because with a little cash..."

"Cash?"

"Yes! I'll send a telegram to the chief of police in Marseilles. I'll offer a reward of two thousand pounds sterling to whatever officer brings in the solution to the mystery. And I'll soon get results—without inconveniencing myself in the least." And he concluded mockingly, "This still isn't something money can't buy."

Violet's face fell, but Max protested, "I think you're mistaken."

"No, I'm not."

"I beg your pardon. The Russian government generously offered a reward of a hundred thousand rubles, and still nothing's been learned."

Those words reassured Violet—but Sir John, stung, cried, "If that reward produced nothing, why do you think you'll have better luck?"

"Because I'm diving into this case, not to earn a certain sum of money, but to bring satisfaction to two things I value a hundred times more."

"And what might they be, if you please?"

"My heart and my mind."

The Member of Parliament didn't have time to answer: Violet clapped her hands together with delight. "That's exactly right! Will you set off today, Monsieur Max?"

"As soon as I hear from Dr. Elleviouse."

"Why so soon, since you're not meeting him until tomorrow?"

"I want to try a few experiments that'll show me whether Madame de La Roche-Sonnaille is insane."

"I say!" grumbled Sir John. "Since the most eminent doctors have decided she is..."

But Violet cut him off. "It's just that... Monsieur Max... if you wait until tomorrow... I'd so much like to see those ladies too..." She coaxed and pleaded. This young woman, so bored not long ago, had truly become captivated by the Marseilles mystery.

Max gently shook his head. "It'd be a pleasure to accompany you tomorrow, but I'm leaving today."

"Why?"

"I'll explain it to you at the Hotel Cosmopolitan, where I'll be staying."

"Well then, tomorrow at what time?"

"Dr. Elleviouse will let me know by telegram."

"All right!" And with a charming smile Violet concluded, "It's very odd: for the last half hour I've felt alive. Oh, those dear ladies, those sweet dear things! I hope it'll be very challenging to work on their behalf—so I don't fall too quickly back into boredom."

Sir John, redder than ever, growled with irritation, "Oh, you'll fall back!"

"You're unbearable!"

"No, I'm being logical too—just as much as Mr. Soleil." With a sweep of his hand he settled his green-ribboned boater back onto his flaming red hair and headed briskly toward the stairs to the garden. "I'm off to draft that telegram to the chief of police in Marseilles. I'm offering a reward of ten thousand pounds: I'm buying you the investigation you want."

Wheezing, muttering under his breath, Sir John went down the steps as fast as his short legs could carry him—leaving Violet Musketeer perfectly furious at his insistence on preventing her from being interested in something for once in her life.