

THE MAKER OF MADWOMEN

Chapter One THE ENIGMATIC STRANGER

In the laboratory of the scientist Oronius a loudspeaker vibrated and resounded. A Stentorian voice spoke.

“We’re on the track... but in what a strange land!”

Abruptly, the voice was interrupted; a sizzling sound followed, disappointing the breathless Oronius.

The scientist had just recognized the voice of his faithful servant Victor Laridon, who had departed some weeks before in the company of his acolyte Julep, the piebald Congolese, in search of Jean and Cyprienne Chapuis, the scientist’s son-in-law and daughter, who had disappeared in the course of an aerial voyage. The sound of the familiar voice had given an instant of joy and hope to the anguished father. Finally, he was about to know!

And now the communication was interrupted, manifestly cut or “blurred” on that enigmatic exclamation, well designed to stimulate parental anguish.

In what a strange land!

From that to concluding that Jean Chapuis and Cyprienne were engaged in a terrifying adventure and were running dangers was only a short step, already taken by the scientist’s imagination.

What alarmed and disquieted him most of all, since he had been without news of his children, was the inexplicable impotence of his ordinary mean of psychic investigation. Aided by his marvelous discoveries, his powerful mind ordinarily radiated in space, traveling at the behest of his will and sufficient to all investigations; but this time, he had not discovered anything... he could not see anything.

Jean Chapuis and Cyprienne seemed to have disappeared from the terrestrial world and entered a zone beyond the reach of Oronius’ power.

Now, at the very moment when he was chagrined by having nearly obtained the key to the enigma and when he was striving, by means of an effort of concentration of his will at least to enter into cerebral communication with Laridon, the loudspeaker, activated by Hertzian waves, resounded again, this time bringing the amplified echo of the cherished voice of Cyprienne.

“Beloved Father,” cried the young woman, “I’m taking advantage of a unique opportunity to cry my despair to you. A prisoner, separated from my Jean, whom I have serious reasons to believe to be dead, I’m enduring an atrocious torture... I’m prey to a terrible menace... help me, Father!”

Like Laridon’s, the anguished voice fell silent, and the same bizarre sound succeeded it. For a second time, the communication as troubled, doubtless by the young woman’s mysterious enemy—by whoever was keeping her prisoner in the “strange land.”

Oronius uttered a dolorous groan. A stupefying phenomenon: he suddenly felt devoid of strength, disarmed by a destiny that had only made him superior to the rest of mortals in order to crush him more forcefully when the time came.

That blow broke him.

His son-in-law dead! His daughter in the power of hostile beings of whom the father knew nothing. Was that not too many misfortunes at once?

He folded up; his shoulders slumped.

“Who to fight? In what direction to launch myself?” he murmured, despairingly. “I can’t see anything... nothing...”

His hands extended, groping, he turned round like a blind man lost in his eternal night..

A precursory shudder of the loudspeaker stopped him dead.

For the third time, a voice reached him.

“Courage! Nothing is lost... if you want to help us, depart for the land of typhoons. You’ll pick up our trail there. Wait there in silence... in the silence of your thought!”

At those words, which doubtless he alone could comprehend, Oronius’ eyes darted a glimmer of joy.

Reanimated, he murmured: “Turlurette! Turlurette is awake!”

Specifying the frame of that alarming adventure would perhaps furnish the police of the strange land of which we are about to speak with precious information that would finally permit certain previously inexplicable events finally to be understood... but the individuals whom these revelations might compromise have no right to pity. On the other hand, it is not in anyone’s power to arrest the vengeful had of fatality.

Let us say, then, that one evening, in a certain dwelling, which the inhabitants of a particular point in space will easily be able to identify by virtue of certain details, there was a very emotional young woman. She was climbing on tiptoe the steps of an interminable staircase, for the said dwelling had a lot of floors.

She was a pretty young woman twenty or twenty-two years of age, supple and lively, with laughing eyes and a pert mouth. In the silent and somber stairwell, the russet curls of her hair made a bright patch.

On seeing the precautions that she was taking in order to avoid making any sound, and also seeing her cheeks slightly crimsoned and the palpitation of her young breast, one would divine that she was infringing a prohibition and deceiving an inconvenient surveillance.

She had emerged—or rather, she had slipped away, in an entirely mysterious manner—from a second-floor apartment. After having leaned over the banisters and listened for a moment, she had flown toward the upper floors, lightly and graciously.

The silence was so complete that it was oppressive; it weighed heavily upon the young woman’s shoulders and gripped her throat, because it did not seem natural. It was the silence that reigns on the edge of traps, the silence of shadows with eyes; one might have thought that in that house someone was perpetually on watch, holding his breath in order to hear better.

But the young woman’s footsteps were so light!

She reached the seventh landing, that of the mansards, without the slightest creak having denounced her.

On the final steps, however, she almost uttered a cry, and stopped still, tremulously, mechanically raising a dainty hand to her heart, which was beating too loudly. She thought she had seen—perhaps it was pure imagination—a human form, bent over in front of one of the doors, straightening up abruptly and leaping backwards into a dark corner, where, for a second, the terrified young woman distinguished two phosphorescent dots, which were immediately extinguished.

Then, after a brief hesitation, the courageous young woman climbed the last five steps and advanced directly toward the dark corner; but it was in vain that she scrutinized its darkness, even passing her fingers over the wall. She found nothing.

“I’m mad!” she murmured. “I see him everywhere. It’s turning to obsession.” But in spite of those words—pronounced in a language that we will specify in due course—the expression of suspicion that was painted in her physiognomy did not fade away.

Parading her gaze, now habituated to the semi-darkness of the landing, over the different doors, the pretty redhead examined them successively. Then, shaking her head, she returned to the one next to which her suggestive imagination had shown her the suspect silhouette.

On that door a card was pinned indicating the name of the tenant.

We shall translate the indications, depicted in hieroglyphs that bore no resemblance to our writing, and give the French equivalent of their significance:

*Azur Coeur-Exalté, Incarnator.*¹

¹ Azure Exalted-Heart.

Let us explain right away that the latter epithet, characterizing the profession of Monsieur Azur, was equivalent to what we call an actor. The lyrical Azur Coeur-Exalté was a stage-performer.

Does nor such a profession speak to a feminine imagination? That doubtless explained the visible emotion of the young woman while she brushed the wood of the door with her slender fingers.

Tap... tap...

That was so timid and discreet that, in order for it to be heard, it required the ear of a lover.

And, as if to prove that a lover was really behind it, doubtless lying in wait for the visitor, the door immediately opened, softly... softly...

“Good evening, lovely demoiselle,” murmured, in a bizarre language, a masculine voice.

“Similar favor of Destiny, Seigneur Azur,” replied the young woman, in the same language, in a tone that was not as low, but just as caressant.

The silent door had finished opening, unmasking the interior of a mansard room, very sparsely furnished, although it had the pretension of serving as a drawing room.

Where vanity goes to nest!

The one that the incarnator Azur Coeur-Exalté inhabited under the eaves was manifestly not very fortunate. The costume, perhaps picturesque but more threadbare, in which he was clad, implied that the artiste did not know the fabulous salary of tenors.

Of, course, he was not ugly. Far from it! Of medium height, but broad-shouldered and very lithe, he must have practiced, for distraction, almost all sports, so much trained flexibility and solid energy did his movements testify. Small, active, mischievous eyes brightened a face that, without being ordinary or vulgar, bore stereotyped in all its features the expression of mockery and impudent self-assurance of which the Parisian street-urchin has always had the monopoly. But in the alert physiognomy of the incarnator, that note, doubtless originating from a distant atavism, was corrected by a glimmer of intelligence, which he had acquired or had adapted from the frequentation of some genius.

The young woman went in, rosy and smiling, half-intimidated and half-enraptured by the exceedingly tender gaze of the lover.

The latter, having closed the door with solicitude, took one of his visitor's hands in his own and bore it to his lips, asking: “What's new, my little gazelle?”

“Are you truly interested in the local news, Seigneur Azur?”

A strange couple! Singular lovers! Each of them seemed to be observing the other and striving to discover a secret.

What secret?

Certainly, neither of them could doubt the very tender interest that they had in one another. A subtle emanation of the soul, love enveloped them and it was its flame that gave their eyes that caressant gleam. But if they no longer had to watch out, in one or the other, for the appearance of that delectable emotion, the precursor of the confession that their lips did not dare to speak, and which their hearts had confided, why were they spying on one another thus? What other motive for embarrassment, and perhaps for mistrust, existed between them?

After the exchange of those two remarks, quite insignificant, and above all very far from the unique subject that occupied their hearts, they remained mute, facing one another, smiling, and, at the same time, interesting one another with their gaze.

Was that silence weighing upon them?

They broke it simultaneously.

“I've come...,” the young woman began.

“I wanted to ask you...,” said Azur.

They stopped, and uttered, simultaneously, a slight burst of laughter, immediately stifled.

Then the young redhead continued alone.

“I've come to see whether... whether you need anything, because in sum, it would be natural that... that I propose to carry out your commissions, since you're our tenant... only, I'm not very free.”

She must have wanted to say something else, but did not know how to express it.

Azur Coeur-Exalté paid no heed to that; his personal thoughts were following another course.

"I'm your tenant," he repeated. "I rejoice, in that case, in having such a lovely landlady, even though I'm unaware of the relationship that links you to Monsieur... or Madame... in sum, to the person who has rented this apartment to me. Don't smile. It isn't me who fixed the rent, and I'll be hanged if I know who my landlord or landlady is."

All that was said in the bizarre language that we mentioned, but the sounds appeared to emerge with great difficulty from Seigneur Azur's throat. What defective pronunciation that incarnator had!

The young woman must have noticed that; to suppose the contrary it would have been necessary to admit that the legendary blindfold of love was partially blocking her dainty ears, or—something just as admirable—that her secret sentiments were triumphing over her national susceptibility and preventing her from being scandalized by the fashion in which Azur Coeur-Exalté was mangling her mother tongue.

She responded gravely: "You want to talk about Dona Astaroth?"

"That's our landlady? Your... mother?"

"Oh, no!" cried the young woman, with an involuntary grimace.

"A relative, though?"

"A relative... distant... as distant as can be," Seigneur Azur's visitor riposted, in a singular tone.

"Bah! No, not so distant, since you live with her."

She uttered a little mocking laugh. That laughter and that response did not appear to indicate a great sympathy for the relative in question.

Azur Coeur-Exalté must have judged it thus; he murmured: "That's bizarre."

"Everything is bizarre here," replied the young woman.

"Isn't it?" insisted the incarnator. "My presence for example..."

"And so many other things!"

"So many others...! If I made you certain confidences, you'd marvel at what is happening to me... I could believe that I'm in an ensorcelled dwelling; everything in it is extraordinary: the fashion in which we met... the conduct in my regard of Dona Astaroth and the other inhabitants of these lodgings... everything! Everything!"

The young woman nodded her head and her expression became grave and anxious.

As for the actor, his mime was singular. He must have been exuberant by nature; one sensed that he was impulsive and sincere, often transported by bursts of enthusiasm; but he must have broached a dangerous subject, for his remarks, released in disorder, impetuously, stopped suddenly, as if he were afraid of having said too much."

In sum, he was torn between the sympathetic attraction that the young woman exercised upon him and a mistrust. That could only be the result of the proximity of a danger.

Adopting a jovial tone, he continued: "There are mysteries, of course, that seem to me to be very explicable. This, I suspect that a certain demoiselle, who has come to apologize for not being able to carry out my commissions, of having secretly assumed the role of petty providence."

In pronouncing those words, the voice of the actor trembled slightly, revealing a sentimentality, an emotion that his words did not justify.

The young woman seemed astonished, almost anxious. "I don't understand," she said.

"Hmm! You don't want to understand... but my little finger had confided many things. It claims that there exists under this roof a maid, an adorable little fay. She comes, I don't know when or how, probably while we're asleep, to deposit provisions here secretly... and know that I'm touched because of the intention... of the clairvoyance of two pretty eyes... by their pity... their...."

He became confused, searching for tender words to express the sentiments that were swelling his heart.

The roses in the young woman's cheeks became lilies. Anxiously, she exclaimed: "But that isn't me... it can't be me, Seigneur Azur! You can't think so. How would I do it? I never go out... never!"

"Then it's even more incomprehensible... I've made an error... excuse me... I thought I'd divined, sensed a solicitude, a sweet and tender sentiment. One readily imagines that, when one is in a certain situation, and when one senses oneself..."

While listening, the pretty young woman became pink again, as rosy as the perfumed flowers of sunlit gardens.

"The sympathy is real," she murmured, observing her companion covertly.

"Little friend! Dear little friend...!"

The actor's hand imprisoned one of hers, in order to draw the young woman gently toward him; swiftly, she escaped.

"Let me finish, Seigneur Azur," she continued, firmly. "Sympathy comes quickly when a soft voice, which one believes one has heard before, solicits it. I imagine that we've already encountered one another in another existence, in another world...but I don't want to respond lightly to a grave question, for it would cost me too much to close my heart again after having opened it. That's why I'm begging you to respond to me frankly...and without reticence. Are you really a man of this city, Seigneur Azur? Were you born in this country?"

Azur Coeur-Exalté shuddered, as if he had felt an unexpected touch. A brief hesitation suspended his response, and his gaze fixed upon the clear and frank eyes of the young woman.

"I, too," he murmured, "experience the same mysterious impression: that of having known you... and loved you... elsewhere, in another life. That's what attracts me to you and incites me to confess to you that I'm not entirely an inhabitant of this city, nor what Dona Astaroth could call a compatriot. But would you have much sympathy for a veritable compatriot of Dona Astaroth?"

Anxiously, he waited for the response.

"No," replied the young redhead, curtly.

"No?" Azur Coeur-Exalté seemed no longer to be able to breathe. Something was stifling him: a question that he wanted to ask but prudence retained on his lips.

"Tell me your name," he begged finally.

It was the turn of the young woman to hesitate; then she replied, in an ambiguous one: "*Here* I'm named Fleur-Sauvage."²

"You don't have another?"

"It's not the local custom."

"Who are you, really?"

Fleur-Sauvage looked the amorous Azur squarely in the face. "You haven't answered my question clearly," she said. "Why should I answer yours? In truth, you're right to hesitate and to be prudent; we're in the house, not of Dona but of Seigneur Astaroth... of Professor Astaroth. That name doesn't tell you anything?"

"Nothing at all," Azur confessed.

"Evidently, it's necessary to pronounce it differently. But that would be the whole secret unveiled, and you and I would be taking a big risk. So let me give you some advice and tell you what I can: when one inhabits a strange house... the private house of Professor Astaroth, the rival of Satan... if one doesn't know very well where one is, or what one has come to do... if one has only come by chance, it's necessary to depart, to depart very quickly, without worrying about knowing who a certain Fleur-Sauvage might be, and whether she is truly a subject of the black demon."

"Depart! Why are you advising me to depart, little friend? Why do you want me to quit the land outside the world, before having deciphered its prettiest secret?"

And, attracted irresistibly to his visitor, Azur exclaimed heatedly: "No! I won't go! I now have a double motive for remaining in this land outside the world, I who am from the other... the true world of the living... from Paris... from Pantruche... in order to serve you, my darling with the eyes that I believe I recognize...!"

² Wild Flower.