

## Part One: Clampin, alias Pistolet <sup>i</sup>

### *I. The Murder of a Cat*

The landing was dismal in appearance, but quite broad, lit from above by a little dormer window rendered almost opaque by dust. Three rickety doors gave out on to the landing, which was reached by a tightly wound spiral staircase whose central shaft was sweating damp. The three doors were disposed in a semicircle.

To the right and the left of the narrow staircase, there were two additional recesses, heaped with wooden debris scavenged from demolition sites, faggots of firewood and knotted tree-roots.

Dusk was falling. On the lower floors—of which there were three, including the ground floor—confused noises could be heard, dominated by the clinking of glasses and plates. The strong reek of a tavern drifted up the spiral staircase and had no means of escape.

At the stairhead on the top floor, everything was relatively quiet. From the door to the right, at the bottom of which was a large crack, a murmur of discreet conversation emerged, with a pleasant odor of fresh stew. Behind the middle door, there was absolute silence. What was audible behind the door to the left could not be clearly made out; even the most discriminating ear would have hesitated over the matter of whether the dull and intermittent hammering that made the shaft of the staircase tremble came from there or from somewhere more distant. It seemed to come from that direction, but as if it were muffled and diminished by a great distance. Nevertheless, at each blow, the shaft was subject to a profound shock.

In the recess on the left-hand side of the stairway, there was nothing to be seen but the untidy heap of meager combustibles thrown in at random. In the recess to the right, a thin ray of light, passing through the faggots, illuminated a magnificent stray cat, curled up and comfortably occupied in smoothing its fur.

The first door counting towards the left bore the number 7; that was its only inscription.

The middle door, in addition to its number 8, had a card stuck on by means of four blobs of sealing-wax, on which a name was written in ink: *Paul Labre*.

The third door—the one from which the intermittent and inexplicable noise seemed to come—was marked No. 9.

Down below, a cuckoo-clock sounded five o'clock. It brought forth an almost-imperceptible movement from the left-hand recess. To the right, the cat pricked up its ears within its lair behind the faggots.

In Room No. 7, the conversation became more distinct and the noise of chattering voices came closer. The door opened, letting out the odor of fresh stew that we have already mentioned.

The room was large and much more brightly lit than the landing. Visible within were a round table with a tablecloth laid, and—at the back—a fireplace surrounded by cooking utensils hanging on the wall. A man and a woman, who were in the middle of a conversation, appeared on the threshold.

The woman, who was no longer young, wore very neat working clothes that were somehow reminiscent of the customs and tastes of the countryside. She must have been very beautiful once, and the expression on her face inspired trust. There was a certain gravity and goodwill about her.

Her companion was a man of 35 or 40, short of stature but solidly built for his size. His expressive face seemed both careless and suspicious at the same time, as can often be the case with people whose duties run contrary to their character. His shaven cheeks bore the shadow of a beard; his exceedingly dark eyes, sheltered by his thick eyebrows, were looking straight ahead, with too much intensity. He had an honest smile. His clothes were those of a petty bourgeois.

“So,” said the woman, speaking in a low tone after having looked warily around the landing, “the General is in Paris?” Seeing her companion hesitate, she added: “Don’t hide anything from me, Monsieur Badoît. You know that I’m no gossip.”

"I know that you're the most reliable of servants, Mama Soulas," Monsieur Badoît replied, "but it's hot, you see, and there are things going on down there that would make your hair stand on end. Me, I can smell Toulonnais-l'Amitié<sup>ii</sup> a mile away."

"Monsieur Lecoq! The *Habits Noirs*!" Thérèse Soulas murmured, still with more curiosity than dread in her voice. And she called out, softly: "Mou, mou mou! That pussycat's becoming almost as bad a lot as Monsieur Mégaïgne. Go, treasure!"

Badoît extended his hand. "There's no rush," he said. "I'll be there for the soup, on the stroke of six... It's funny, though, that women are always thinking about bad lots."

There was a reproach in that. Thérèse Soulas laughed politely and took hold of the hand he was offering.

"Do you know who I'm thinking about?" she murmured. "That poor lad who's so pale. I have... had... a daughter about the same age." She looked sadly at the middle door, marked No. 8.

"Ah!" Badoît replied, good-humoredly. "I'm not jealous of Monsieur Paul! If that one had a taste for the bright lights, he'd go far. His business with the General was settled with one blow... but that's shame and prejudice talking. See you soon, Madame Soulas; I'm on the track, and I've got the Devil in me!"

He went slowly down the staircase. Madame Soulas remained on her doorstep for a moment, pensively.

"The General!" she said to herself. "My daughter is happy in his house. I know that he loves her as much as his other daughter. It's strange; I don't know his other daughter myself, but I love her almost as much as my own!" She lowered her voice to call out again: "Mou! Mou! Mou! You scalawag! Mou! Mou!"

But the obstinate tomcat was enjoying himself under the faggots, and turned a deaf ear.

Madame Soulas went back in and closed the door. Throughout the time she had been on the landing, the dull and regular sound from Room No. 9 had ceased, but as soon as she disappeared, it began again.

She sat down next to her fireplace, staring at the large copper pot in which her stew was cooking.

"As for me," she thought, "he doesn't know that I exist, and what does it matter? I've never asked him for anything for myself." She had brought out a little locket from beneath her lapel, which she opened. It contained a portrait of an exceptionally handsome young man wearing a lancer's uniform and a squadron-leader's insignia. Beneath the portrait the words "*To Thérèse*" were legible. Madame Soulas looked at it. It would have been difficult to interpret the emotion in her smile; there was no sort of love in it.

"They say that Revolutions have changed the world," she murmured. "A handsome man, rich and powerful, passes through a poor region; he finds a beautiful woman, he gets to know her and has his way with her; he goes happily on his way, she stays miserably behind. When did things go any other way? Oh, I've known so much tenderness and so much anger! But I have nothing now, save for the thought of my daughter. Ysole is happy in his house; everything that I can do for her, I shall do willingly."

The pot was boiling vigorously, emitting a profusion of the sort of effluvia that offend a full stomach but excite the humble appetite of the poet to ecstasy. Madame Soulas got up to lay the table: Half a dozen plates, each one with its bottle wrapped in a serviette, like a turban.

Here we have a *table d'hôte*.

There was a knock on the door. Two regulars came in: Monsieur Mégaïgne, the *bad lot*, and Monsieur Chopand, an orderly man.

The time has come to tell you that you have met no one since the commencement of this story but agents of the Police. Madame Soulas ran an eatery for Inspectors. Badoît was an Inspector; Monsieur Mégaïgne, a self-appointed epicurian, was an Inspector; and this Chopand, who had the appearance of a man of means but the heart of a book-keeper, was an Inspector, too.

Only Paul Labre, unseen by us so far, is the single blade of grass through which we can cling—barely, alas!—to poetry...

This mysterious landing belonged to a historic dwelling, the history of which we shall soon give you. We are in the Rue de Jérusalem, in the very heart of the Sûreté.<sup>iii</sup> The noises and perfumes of the tavern that spiraled upwards by way of the staircase came from the establishment of Père Boivin, who had two houses and a tower on the riverbank, also known as the Tardieu Tower or the "tower of crime."

Room No. 9, from which emerged the enigmatic and patiently extended noise that seemed to come from so far away, occupied the topmost floor of the tower.

Monsieur Mégaïgne wore a blue coat with black buttons: Don Juan with the perverse taste of an undertaker's underling. Monsieur Chopand was wearing a cheap and badly-lined coat; he was small, thin, sallow and wrinkled, but shone nevertheless by virtue of his coolness and his clear-cut voice.

“Good lady,” said Mégaigne, politely lifting his shiny hat two feet above his head, “I don’t know why you deign to interest yourself in the General Comte de Champmas, but I am able to tell you that he has been extracted from Mont Saint-Michel and brought to Paris, where he will give evidence in the matter of a political conspiracy.”

“Where he is giving evidence,” Chopand corrected. “The case is proceeding as we speak.”

“The General has been good to my family,” Madame Soulas said, simply. Then she added: “So what’s this famous story that’s set you all abuzz?”

“Well!” Mégaigne exclaimed. “Badoît’s talked! What a gossip! It’s not much. It’s just a rumor that has neither head nor tail, and put about by a Gendarme too. Gendarmes hear everything that’s going round—that’s the rule!”

Chopand burst out laughing. There is no love lost between Gendarmes and Inspectors.

“During the journey from Mont Saint-Michel to Paris,” Mégaigne went on, “at some stop along the way, a man contrived to get close to the General—a man in a workman’s blouse—and said something to him, of which the brave Gendarme only caught a little bit: *Gautron in yellow chalk*...”

“Whatever that means,” Chopand put in. “So here’s all our undercover operators running around. *Gautron in yellow chalk*, hey! What a conundrum!”

“*Gautron in yellow chalk*!” Monsieur Mégaigne repeated, shrugging his shoulders. “Is it a shop-sign?”

“Or something Gautron’s in,” Monsieur Chopand guessed, “as one might say *Gautron’s in the soup*”

“And that’s where my Badoît’s gone,” Monsieur Mégaigne continued. “He can always do better than the others. His informer, little Pistolet, who kills cats and roams all over the city, has been prowling around the Palais all morning. Look out! Me, I say: *Gautron in yellow chalk* or *Gautron in white sauce*, someone will sell it to the Government, and the plot will easily be foiled. No need to fret, that’s my opinion.”

When six o’clock chimed, five guests were seated around the table. Two places remained empty: Monsieur Badoît’s, and that of the neighbor in No. 8, Paul Labre, who had already been called several times.

At that moment, even though the light was still fading on the landing, it would have been possible to see something vague stirring in the recess to the right of the staircase. In the hole to the left, the cat stopped polishing its muzzle and assumed a wary pose.

“What?” said a sharp and exceedingly hoarse voice. “I can’t stand them myself—tomcats, that is. And Monsieur Badoît won’t give me anything for having heard banging, close by or far away, with the Devil only knows what sort of pick-axe. There’s been no sign of a single cat, and I need my 20 *sous*. Mèche, my Andalusian, is waiting for me at Bobino<sup>iv</sup> with all those young ladies; Mama Thérèse’s darling will have to do! I’ll settle down some day, that’s for sure, but until I’ve settled down for food, it’s still the age of pleasure and folly!”

A human form, thin and hunched, slowly emerged from the darkness. It was just possible, by the last rays of twilight, to make out jutting bones beneath a faded blue smock, and a narrow head with an enormous shock of flaxen hair. He took a step forward and stretched. This was Clampin, alias Pistolet—a young man, and free, but not without employment, since he worked for Monsieur Badoît, for the petty restaurateurs of la Cité and many others besides.

The cat crouched down beneath the faggots, sensing an enemy.

Pistolet, who seemed to be walking barefoot so silent were his footfalls, turned into the shaft of the staircase. In his hand he had a little rag-picker’s hook, a veritable child’s toy, which he had had to make for himself with a piece of firewood and a nail.

“Mou, mou, mou!” he called out softly, mimicking the voice of Madame Soulas.

The faggots rustled as the tomcat recoiled, making every effort to get deeper into the heap.

“Innocent!” Pistolet said to him. “Don’t be like that: you won’t feel a thing. And you can’t say that I haven’t given Mama Soulas every chance. If the least little gutter-rabbit had come along... but no! That’s the way it goes. When one arrives late at Bobino, you know, there’s a hailstorm. Don’t move!”

The tomcat’s eyes shone like two glowing embers, indicating the exact position of his head. There are great hunters, and nearly all great hunters have a little of the surgeon in them. Clampin, alias Pistolet, took aim and stabbed. The two embers were extinguished.

“There!” he said. “It wasn’t as hard as all that!”

The last word had hardly passed his lips when a grating sound became audible behind the door of No. 9. The noise of hammering had ceased a few moments earlier.

Pistolet let himself fall on the faggots without regard for the warm body of his victim, and remained quite still.

The door of No. 9 opened and Pistolet saw something strange.

The room's interior was still illuminated. The door, which opened outwards, displayed its other side. It was covered in thick padding.

*So that no one can hear the blows of the pick-axe*, Pistolet thought. *Not stupid!*

A man of Herculean proportions, lit from behind, appeared on the threshold. He looked around and listened. Then he came out and applied a piece of chalk to the boards of the door.

*He's writing his name*, thought Pistolet. *We'll see.*

That was all. The man went back in and slid the bolt on the inside of the door. In order to go back, though, he had to put his hidden features into the light and Pistolet—with profound surprise and some anxiety mingled in his voice—murmured: “Monsieur Coyatier! The marchef!”<sup>v</sup> Then he added: “Let's see what label he's stuck on his shop!”

A phosphorus match scraped and caught alight. Pistolet raised the flame to the door of No. 9 so that he could read the name: *Gautron*.

The name was written in yellow chalk.

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<sup>i</sup> The literal meaning of *pistolet* is pistol, but I have left it untranslated because it is a proper name. The term also has a colloquial meaning in French, roughly equivalent to the Anglo-American “oddball,” which is presumably how Clampin acquired the nickname.

<sup>ii</sup> Toulon is a French Mediterranean port not far from Marseilles, while *L'Amitié* means friendship. In the early 19th century (and long thereafter), Toulon was the site of a large prison facility whose inmates were put to hard labor, so the phrase implies a kind of bond formed between seasoned criminals. Its fictional prisoners included Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables* and *Rocambole*. Lecoq presumably owes his underworld nickname of “Toulonnais-l'Amitié” to being a veteran of the establishment in question, although it might also be worth bearing in mind that the *Union Corse*—the organized crime network that operated along the Mediterranean coast throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—acquired its name from the same picaresque legends that Féval drew upon in characterizing the *Habits Noirs*.

<sup>iii</sup> Féval writes *sûreté publique*, uncapitalized, but he is obviously referring to the specific sector of the multifaceted Parisian police force popularized by Vidocq's *Memoirs*. The Préfecture de Police was created in 1800 and, until 1871, was housed on the Ile de la Cité in the former Hotel des Premiers Présidents du Parlement, located at the end of the narrow Rue de Jérusalem. The street owed its name to the pilgrims who, during the Middle Ages, stayed there before going to, or returning from, the Holy Lands. In 1844, the Préfecture was allowed to expand and take over the former Hotel of the Cour des Comptes and acquired the nickname of *Tour Pointue* because the corner house of the Rue de Jérusalem and the Quai des Orfèvres was topped with a conical tower. In 1871, the Communards burned down the old Rue de Jerusalem building and, soon after, the Préfecture moved to the adjacent Caserne de la Cité built by Baron Haussmann in 1863 on the Quai des Orfèvres. It is still there today.

<sup>iv</sup> As noted in the introduction, Bobino was a theater in Montparnasse, deemed in the 1830s to be distinctly downmarket; it was a significant pioneer of the tradition of popular post-Gothic melodrama whose most famous home in a later era was the Grand Guignol. In spite of Féval's derisive attitude, it is still in business—unlike most of the establishments that staged Féval's plays.

<sup>v</sup> The word *marchef*, as Féval explains in Chapter XIV, is an abbreviation of *maréchal des logis chef*, a French military rank equivalent to that of a quartermaster sergeant in the British army; it implies a senior N.C.O., one step short of a commission. As it is a nickname, I have left it untranslated, even though it is not capitalized as all the other nicknames are.

## Chapter II