

## *The Gangsters of La Joliette*

### *I. A Strange Drama*

Marseille was, as usual, lively and fast-paced. In the main streets and on the port of the large city, there were the never-ending comings and goings of a noisy cosmopolitan crowd. A few steps from the Canebière, the main business district, the entry to Thubaneau Street opened, more tranquil, calmer, almost deserted. Only the doors to a famous restaurant and night-club, *Chez Achille*, brilliantly lit, made a bright hole in that small, obscure street.

*Chez Achille* was the meeting place where fashionable Marseille gentry came to party. Men in evening dress sat shoulder to shoulder with women in very low-cut dresses showing off precious gems. Every table held gold-topped, cold champagne bottles. Laughter sparkled throughout the happy, lively conversations. In that beautiful room, the orchestra poured forth slow waltzes, languorous tangos, and exotic rumbas. Couples came together, separated, obeying the jazz rhythms.

Suddenly, the rolling of a tambour, through the noise, caused the dancers to leave the floor. Conversations became suddenly silent; then, the first moment of astonishment past, they continued, even more deafening, like constant whispering. All eyes immediately moved toward a small stage set up in a corner of the room, near the orchestra, accessed from a door opening from an interior corridor. The musicians, with muted instruments, executed the first measures of a fantasy dance. One of the artists, holding a loud-speaker, announced:

“Mesdames, Messieurs, you are going to have the pleasure of admiring our beautiful new dancer, Flora Minuscule, in her fantasy dance.”

The door from the corridor opened almost immediately. Flora Minuscule soon appeared, greeted by wild applause for her beauty. She was a petite woman, supple, thin, and svelte. Beautiful Venetian blonde hair created a ring of light around her young and happy face. Large, clear eyes illuminated a graceful, joyous, attractive expression. Flesh-colored tights molded her slim, shapely legs.

The dancer bowed, thanking her admirers. Then she began her performance. Conversations hushed.

The audience’s attention was centered on the young woman. Her graceful, light as air, dance ended with another stream of wild applause. One couldn’t tell if these testimonies of approval were meant to praise the dancer’s talent or, just simply her beauty.

Faced with the success achieved, Flora Minuscule didn’t hesitate to begin another dance, which was greeted with no less success than the preceding one. Several standing ovations celebrated the end of that number. The dancer bowed, proudly receiving the homage of the spectators. Taking advantage of the pause, which spread through the room, a group of patrons, who had been waiting in the back of the room for the end of the dance, came forward, looking for a free table on the edge of the dance floor. Their passage raised cheerful greetings. They were evidently habitués. Well-trained waiters gathered around those new arrivals. Comments ran from table to table.

“That’s Simon Galetto and his group!”

“He’s burying his bachelor’s life, the smart fellow!”

They pointed to the happy celebrator, who had already put a paper party hat on his head, giving him a grotesquely comic appearance. The orchestra was getting ready to start another dance so as not to let the animation exciting the whole room die down.

Suddenly, a long cry burst out. A horrible cry! A cry that seemed to be a death cry! It seemed to come from the stage at the back of the dance floor. As soon as they heard that scream, the spectators rushed forward. However, they were too late to catch the body of the pretty dancer, Flora Minuscule.

The young woman’s arms beat the air. The dancer fell backward, stretched out on the floor, losing a great deal of blood from a wound located just below the right breast. The artist’s light clothes were already soaked with her blood spreading out in a pool on the stage.

Responding to the dancer's cries, frightened shouts rang through the hall. Women, overcome by fear, without understanding what had just happened, let out terrified clamors. Some men tried to calm their companions, while others rushed forward. The orchestra had immediately suspended its refrain. From the waiters came exhortations for calm. Soon, help was organized. One of the patrons leaned over the body of the pretty dancer. In a commanding voice, he shouted:

"She's seriously wounded; the poor girl must be taken immediately to the hospital!"

From mouth to mouth, the verdict had already reached the depth of the hall. Alerted to the emergency, the bouncer ran out into Thubaneau Street and raced to Saint-Louis Square to hail a taxi. The vehicle soon arrived and stopped in front of the door of the establishment. During this time, two spectators, aided by two waiters, had, with many precautions, lifted the body of the unfortunate girl and carried it toward the vehicle. Almost at the same time, a strong voice said:

"Let nobody leave!"

The drama had been so sudden, and had taken place so fast, that no one could furnish the least information. No one had, as yet, thought of taking measures to prevent the escape of the criminal who had so savagely wounded the pretty dancer. Besides, there had been no movement toward the exit door, the only access to the building. Soon, coming from nowhere, a new order rang out:

"Call the police!"

These orders had been given in the midst of the most total confusion. Standing spectators had rushed to get a glimpse of the dancer while she was being transported to the taxi. Just as the vehicle started off, despite the orders, a man quickly left the hall. He very quickly brushed aside the waiter placed at the door and, taking several leaps forward, he reached the taxi, which was just beginning to move away. He jumped on the running board. He opened the door. Then, pushing aside the two patrons sitting beside the poor Flora, he broke down in tears over the wounded girl's body.

The transport of the victim to the hospital didn't calm the excitement. The most diverse accounts soon were circulating from table to table. But, in reality, it must be admitted, no one knew exactly what had happened. A single fact remained certain: Flora Minuscule had been seriously wounded. From the appearance of the wound, it was supposed that the pretty dancer had been stabbed.

Where was the guilty person? A mystery!

Shortly after the departure of the taxi which was carrying the victim to the hospital, the police arrived. They gathered only confused testimony. Soon, the Commissioner himself made the first inquiries. The manager of the night club, who, at the time of the drama, was in his office on the second floor, hurried to serve as a guide to the officer and give him all the information he desired.

As soon as the taxi arrived at the hospital, the body of the wounded girl was quickly placed on a stretcher and transported to the emergency room, where the intern on duty quickly began to administer the urgent care her condition required. Standing and waiting, his face contracted with worry, the unknown man who had taken over the taxi with such authority, stayed near the stretcher, seeming to want to anticipate the words the doctor was going to pronounce.

## *II. The Investigation*

The diagnosis was serious; an immediate operation was necessary. When this news was reported to the three men waiting in the Emergency waiting room, the mysterious individual, who had remained silent and seemed to be suffering the greatest anxiety, suddenly left like a madman, before anyone could stop him or question his strange behavior. In the street, the enigmatic character continued on his way and ran back in the direction of Thubaneau Street. The news of the attack had spread rapidly, drawing an excited crowd to *Chez Achille* that commented upon the events and gave way to many suppositions. The police had set up a barrier in front of the night club. The only entrance was guarded by two policemen. During this time, inside, the Commissioner continued his investigation amid general excitement.

The mysterious individual, still running, arrived at Thubaneau Street and threw himself against the cordon of police prohibiting access to *Chez Achille*.

“Monsieur! Monsieur!” One of the policemen called out. “Where are you going? You can’t go through here!”

Pretending not to hear, the strange individual continued to move forward toward the door of the night club. The officer moved to hold him back, just as he reached the entry, shouting:

“No one can enter!”

In an abrupt movement, the unknown man broke loose from the officer and went inside. As he entered the night club, he uttered this explanation:

“Leave me alone! I’m Marius Pégomas, the fiancé of Flora Minuscule!”

The Commissioner was questioning the clients closest to the stage. But the investigation was going slowly. The spectators, despite their good will, and their obvious desire to help the police, couldn’t furnish the slightest fact capable of giving a direction to the investigation. In reality, no one knew anything. No one had seen anything. Those who wanted to appear knowledgeable invented hypotheses which complicated what the investigators needed.

The Commissioner searched among the patrons for those who had entered last. It appeared to the officer that the criminal must not have stayed very long in the night club before committing his crime. As all the evidence pointed to a premeditated act, the guilty man must have had complete control. In order not to raise attention by seeming nervous, which would have seriously compromised his chances of not getting caught, he must, apparently, have arrived just before committing his act.

The information gathered by the Commissioner established that three individuals had entered at the same time as the celebrating band of late-comers who had surrounded Simon Galetto. Several friends of Simon had noticed these three individuals who seemed to stick together to cross the threshold, so as not to be noticed by the employees. Simon Galetto’s friend, who had entered last, even specified that the three individuals had left their overcoats in the vestibule. Next, without entering the ballroom, they had gone immediately to the lavatories. That constituted a second strange fact. It isn’t, in fact, normal, on entering a night club, to go to the restrooms even before having chosen a table. And the fact was so much more unusual in that the three men went there together. It also had to be noted that the only door allowing access to the corridors opened from the lavatories. The layout of the building was such that, in order to get onto the stage through the door at the back of the room, it was absolutely necessary to go through the restrooms.

The woman who worked in the vestry coat room, interrogated by the Commissioner, Monsieur Valbert Santelli, stated that the three individuals in question really had gone into the restrooms together, but seemed to be accompanied by a fourth person who, himself, had gone directly into the ballroom following the entry of Galetto’s friends.

What had become of those individuals? The witnesses could not furnish information sufficiently precise. And there were contradictions in the declarations of Simon’s friends. The doorman, working outside, couldn’t furnish the slightest fact. He had seen some ten people enter together, following the celebrating Galetto party, but he had paid no attention to the faces of those clients. He hadn’t even noticed that all those who arrived weren’t together and, in reality, formed two groups: the Simon Galetto party and the group of the three-or- four unknown persons.

The vestry hat and coat check woman pointed out to Commissioner Santelli that the overcoats of the suspects had stayed in the vestry. It would, therefore, be easy to identify them because the ticket receipts were given out in the order of arrival. It would be enough to find the overcoats assigned the highest numbers to be certain to have the coats of those who had entered last.

The Commissioner asked all the clients to go retrieve their overcoats. They did so in a very orderly way. Then, when all the patrons had obeyed the order, four overcoats bearing the highest numbers, that is, the four coats deposited last in the vestry, remained unclaimed. A rapid examination by the Commissioner, showed, however, that all the male clients were in possession of their overcoats. It had, then, to be deduced that the four suspected individuals had left the ballroom, leaving their coats behind. However, the woman employee in the vestry, before whom every person entering or leaving the ballroom had, of necessity, to pass by, stated that after the attack, no one had left, even before the order to close the

doors had been given. Only the doorman had gone inside the building and had immediately come out again to look for a taxi to carry the unfortunate dancer to the hospital.

Next, only one individual, who hadn't been prevented from leaving the building, his departure having been so rapid, had passed in front of the vestry woman. So, evidently, that individual was the owner of one of the four unclaimed overcoats. Faced with these facts, the Commissioner decided to go through the pockets of the coats in order to discover, perhaps, some paper which would establish the identity of their owners. The search produced no results. The pockets were empty of anything that would lead to any kind of identification. The officer also noted that the coats had been bought readymade in one of the large department stores of the town. The least hope of getting any information from a tailor capable of helping the investigation was lost.

"The important point," declared the disappointed Commissioner, "is to establish the exact facts which followed the attack, to determine the identity of the persons who left the establishment... and how they managed to leave without being seen either by the doorman or by the hat check woman posted in the vestry. These two persons must, necessarily, have seen the entry and exit of the guilty person... I'm going to interrogate them about that matter."

He called in the woman from the vestry. But, intimidated by the officer, upset by the recent attack, she didn't answer the questions posed to her with all the precision hoped for, and her recollections were rather vague.

"Don't be upset! Try to remember!" the questioner insisted. "We are in perfect agreement about the arrival of the suspects. Didn't one of them attract your attention? Don't you remember something in particular, some sort of detail?"

"No, Monsieur, nothing at all!"

"That's regrettable! Really! Now let's go on to the minutes which followed the attack. When the victim's cry rang out, did you hear it?"

"I heard a cry, but without being able to say exactly where it came from, not knowing if it had come from the dancer. I thought it was some incident in the ballroom, some argument, as sometimes happens between clients who have drunk a little more than is reasonable," the employee explained.

"So, you heard the cry," Santelli continued. "What did you do?"

"I remained at my post. I am responsible for all the objects deposited in the vestry. Whatever happens, I must not leave..."

"Perfect!" rejoiced the Commissioner. "Therefore, Mademoiselle Ménouille, after the attack, you didn't leave your post. You stayed where you were..."

"Yes... Yes, Monsieur," answered the upset woman, astonished at the Commissioner's insistence on going over the facts so minutely.

"Therefore, if you remained at your post, as you have just stated, you would have seen the guilty party or parties leave since no one can leave the club without passing in front of your work station during the evening. Then, who did you see leave? Think back... try to remember..."

After a short silence, still very troubled, Mademoiselle Ménouille explained:

"I only saw the two clients who were helping transport the body of the victim to the taxi... those two clients who left without their overcoats."

"Good. But before that, Mademoiselle, you saw the doorman pass by, and yet you didn't tell me that. Pay attention, please! You must not neglect anything. Let's go back: The doorman passed by you twice: the first time, to go into the ballroom, then a second time to go look for a taxi. But between the doorman passing by and the exit of the victim carried by the two clients, did you see anyone else?" Santelli insisted.

"At that moment, Commissioner, no one left; I'm certain of it. It was only some moments later, after the victim's departure, that an individual left the ballroom in a hurry and rushed outside."

"Good. Under these conditions, theoretically, we have traced the three clients who left the establishment without carrying their overcoats. However, Madame, four overcoats remained the vestry. Therefore, a fourth person, to whom the extra overcoat belongs, must have passed in front of you."

“But I didn’t see anyone pass by,” Mademoiselle Ménouille maintained, and in her local accent exclaimed: “*Vai!* I’m telling you the truth, Commissioner.”

“Then, to whom does this fourth overcoat belong?” the Commissioner asked impatiently.

The poor woman stammered: “But, Commissioner, I don’t know!”

To himself, Monsieur Santelli summed up: “That fourth overcoat, without a doubt, belongs to the guilty man. But how was its owner able to leave the ballroom without being seen by you?” he insisted.

“I... I don’t know,” said Mademoiselle Ménouille, more and more troubled.

“Come on! You must know! You must have seen him... since it’s impossible that he didn’t pass in front of you.”

Once again, the woman from the vestry told the same story, protesting her good faith. Convinced that he couldn’t get any further useful information from the increasingly troubled employee, Santelli concluded:

“That’s all right, Mademoiselle. We’ll talk to you again later. You may leave now, but don’t go far. We’ll still need you later.”

Then, the Commissioner had the doorman called. Going back over his own recollections, this employee managed to furnish some vague information regarding the persons who had helped in the transfer of the dancer:

“...Medium tall men in evening attire, that’s all. Nothing in particular. You can’t put a photograph in your memory of all the clients!” he remarked. “You don’t have time! Car doors to open, taxis to call, cigarettes to sell... For me, those two gentlemen were clients just like all the others...”

“But that’s exactly it, they were not like the others!” exploded the Commissioner exasperated.

“I understand that, sir.”

“You don’t know how to watch! You’re not a physiognomist, or, else you too are not telling me the truth!”

However, the vague information furnished by the doorman agreed with that given by Mademoiselle Ménouille, without the two witnesses having collaborated.

The Commissioner summarized again:

“Flora Minuscule was transported in the taxi by two of the three individuals who went immediately toward the lavatories. According to the testimony of the witness in the vestry, none of the three men had left the lavatories and had not been in the ballroom at the time of the attack... Nevertheless, they were certainly found in the ballroom, since they came to the aid of the victim...”

At that point, the manager of the night club stepped in:

“That’s easy to explain, Commissioner, since going down the corridor that opens on to the restrooms, you can reach the door that opens onto the stage. Thus, the three men who went directly into the lavatories, were able in that way to enter the ballroom without passing by Eulalie Ménouille.”

Very interested in this detail, the Commissioner said:

“This proves that the suspects knew the premises.”

So he immediately went to get confirmation of that possibility. But no spectator could confirm that he had seen the door situated behind the stage open. From the time of the attack, the stage had been literally invaded by dancers who had quickly come forward to help the wounded artist.

The investigation was at this stage when Marius Pégomas arrived at the hospital where he had rushed on learning that the victim’s condition was serious and needed immediate surgery. As we saw, he then returned to the night club.

As soon as Commissioner Santelli saw him, he said:

“Obviously, *he has no overcoat.*”

Then after a rapid examination, he continued:

“His description corresponds perfectly with the description furnished by the doorman and the woman in the vestry! The description of someone not out of the ordinary! And all these people have been lying to me...!”

Marius Pégomas seemed to be the third of the unknown persons who had gone into the lavatories.

“And, after the attack, he left the nightclub by way of the dance floor,” reasoned Santelli. “It must be concluded that he entered the dance floor by using the corridor to the lavatories and the door which opens behind the stage.”

After thinking a moment, the Officer went to meet Marius Pégomas. When he was a few feet from Flora Minuscule’s fiancé, Santelli started to ask:

“Monsieur, could you tell me if you are the owner of one of the four overcoats that are right now in the vestry?”

Marius Pégomas looked at the Commissioner in astonishment. In several seconds, his face showed the most varied expressions: fear, pain, doubt, uncertainty. Then, as a response, turning around, he dashed out full speed toward the exit.

“Stop him!” shouted the Commissioner.

But before that order was given, Marius Pégomas had roughly brushed aside the Inspector standing in the corridor, moving at top speed into Thubaneau Street, upsetting the surveillance of the police agents who, while holding back the crowd near *Chez Achille*, were discussing the events with the loiterers.

Rumors immediately broke out as Marius Pégomas ran by:

“*Vai!* The murderer is getting away!”

“Be careful! He’s armed!”

“*Péchère! Bouffre!* To be running away so fast, he’s sure to be the guilty man!”

The shouts were lost amid other exclamations from the curious who were being jostled about. The policemen gave chase, but caught in the middle of the crowd, they didn’t manage to break free until after Marius Pégomas had disappeared in the distance.

Having once more gone from *Chez Achille* to the hospital, Marius Pégomas arrived at the Emergency Room that he had left so rapidly. The strange fiancé of the little dancer learned that Flora Minuscule had been operated on and was now resting. The wounded girl’s condition remained serious. The doctors were reserving their diagnosis. However, if no post-operative complication occurred, it could be hoped that the pretty artist would survive her terrible wound.

Satisfied with that news, Marius Pégomas asked about the two men who had accompanied the victim and who, after his departure, had stayed in the waiting room. One of the nurses furnished him the following information:

“After your departure, the two gentlemen talked a long time in a low voice. Then, for no reason, without asking anything, they left the waiting room.”

“They have left?”

“Yes, sir.”

Seeing Marius Pégomas’s worried look, the nurse helpfully added:

“They have only five minutes’ head start, and if you hurry, you can probably catch up with them. I left the waiting room right behind them. I went across the street to get cigarettes. I saw them going in the direction of the Old Port.”

“Thank you,” Marius Pégomas threw out, leaving at a gallop.

“*Vé*, that must be a fellow in training for a foot race,” the nurse remarked, smiling.

Flora’s fiancé took the direction of the Old Port. On the quay, he continued on his way without slowing down. He soon reached the celebrated Basso restaurant, still running, and was going to turn into the intersection of the Canebière. Suddenly, a taxi stopped several feet away. Two men, coming from the opposite direction, and who seemed harmless pedestrians, jumped on him. The door of the taxi, which had stopped, opened from inside the vehicle.

Pulled, pushed, Marius Pégomas crossed the few meters that separated him from the vehicle. Two arms from the inside of the car pulled in the dancer’s fiancé. Following their prisoner, the two men pushed themselves rapidly into the taxi. The door closed immediately and, picking up speed, the auto followed the quay, going toward the Hôtel de Ville.

The scene had taken place so quickly that the pedestrians, still numerous in that frequented corner of Marseille, hadn’t had time to intervene. And, according to all likelihood, no one had suspected the audacious kidnapping of which Marius Pégomas had just been the victim.

