

THE OMNIBUS MURDER

I. Death in the Omnibus

In the evening, about midnight, have you ever missed the last omnibus on the line which passes by your house? If you're not on a budget and don't have to strictly watch expenditures, you have only to take a cab. But, if, on the contrary, your modest fortune forbids such a small extra expense, you have to return home on foot, going across Paris, sloshing in the mud, sometimes in a driving rain. You've grumbled a hundred times about the Company. After sixteen hours of work, it gave its horses and its employees a little rest. It couldn't do anything else.

There are several ways to miss it, that helpful vehicle, the last hope of people who're late. When you try to catch it, standing on the street corner, having hailed the coachman with fruitless signals, you see the dreaded, hopeless word full appear in white letters standing out against a blue background, you're furious. But, after all, you half expected it. You accepted fate with good will and continued to walk. You vaguely flattered yourself that another one would pass by. Sustained by that illusion, you finally arrived, on foot, at your lodgings without being too aware of fatigue.

The worst way is to go to the station, the first vehicle in line, just at the moment when the only outbound omnibus has just filled up. There is no way to make a mistake. It really is the last one. The clerk who is turning the handle to close the office ticket window has answered you that there are no more. The travelers who came before you laugh in your face when you politely ask if there isn't one single little place left.

There is no way out of the situation. You have no other means of transportation but your legs. They have to carry you all the way to your destination, because you won't catch up with it on the way, that damned vehicle you were counting on to avoid a long walk.

Thus it was that on one evening of this winter at a quarter to midnight at the corner of the Boulevard St. Germain and the Rue du Cardinal Lemoine, at the exact moment that the coachman of the green omnibus which goes from the wine shops of the Halles to the Place Pigalle was climbing up to his seat, a woman, properly dressed and still young, as well as you could tell by her get-up, because a thick veil covered her face, arrived out of breath. She came from the direction of the Jardin des Plantes, by way of the Quay St. Bernard, and she must have run a long time, because she was exhausted. She had some trouble articulating the question people who're late anxiously ask the employee charged with giving the signal to depart.

"Everything is full, Madame, and there's none after this," said the conductor, who was busy looking over his papers.

"Ah! *Mon Dieu*. I'm going to Montmartre! I'll never get there."

And, really, at that hour and at that season, a trip on foot of four to five kilometers could certainly frighten a person belonging to the weak sex. There was a dry cold and a north wind which made this cold even more piercing. There was snow in the air. The streets in this area were deserted; no one passing by on the wide sidewalks, not a *fiacre* on the horizon. The inside of the omnibus was full, but no one had dared brave the temperature by mounting to the upper level, where, for three *sous* you were almost sure of catching a big cold.

The lady lifted her eyes toward the "seats in the air," as they're called by the conductors. She must've had a very great desire to take advantage of the last departure, because a gesture she made indicated clearly that she regretted not being able to climb up on the top despite the wind and freezing

temperature. Then, knowing that such a climb is not permitted to ladies, and that the employees did not compromise with the rules, she stuck her head into the long carriage where there was no longer room for her. Probably she wasn't without hope of making some gallant traveler take pity on her situation and give over his right as first occupant of a seat. There was a very faint chance, because there was hardly anyone but women travelers. Women don't willingly give up a privilege. However, she had the much unexpected good fortune to interest someone in her fate. A gentleman seated at the back got up and slipped toward the exit door.

"Get in, Madame," he said, jumping lightly to the pavement.

"Oh! Monsieur! You're too good. I can't take advantage of your kindness," exclaimed the woman.

"Not at all! Not at all! Don't give it a thought. I'm going to get myself installed up on top. It's not warm, but I have thick skin."

"Truly, Monsieur, I don't know how to thank you."

"It's nothing. It's not worth mentioning."

"Let's go, Madame, let's go, please," said the employee. "We're leaving."

The lady already had her foot on the step. She didn't need to be asked any more; but instead of relying on the conductor for the step up, she accepted the help graciously offered her by the man who had just rendered her a service. She put her hand in his, and perhaps left it there a few seconds more than was necessary. That was certainly the least she could do for such a polite gentleman. This contact wasn't at all compromising. Both of them wore gloves. They were wearing heavy fur-lined gloves with a leather exterior.

However, the gentleman who had just given up his seat was neither handsome nor young. He could have been forty years old and even more. His mustache and his sideburns cut in the military fashion were very heavily grey. He was wearing a loose-fitting overcoat made by a cheap tailor and a derby hat of hard felt, the hat of an independent man who made no effort to follow the fashion. He had, in addition, rather regular, but hard, features, as if carved out with hatchet strokes.

He climbed to the top of the bus with remarkable agility, and he took a position at the entrance on the first seat, very near the exit stairs. While he was getting himself situated there, raising the collar of his overcoat, the woman he had just helped slid into the vacated seat at the back of the omnibus, on the right, between an old woman totally covered with a wool hood and a young girl very simply dressed. Further on, against the back window, there was an old gossip in a bonnet that should have paid for two because she literally overflowed on her neighbor to the left.

Across was seated a man, the only one in the vehicle: a tall boy, thin and brunet with lively eyes and a smiling mouth, the true head of an artist, but a successful artist. He had neither the slovenly dress nor the aggressive behavior of the young art students who haunt the brasseries of the outlying boulevard. The other travelers belonged to the different categories of those who take the omnibus, middle class women returning home after an evening spent at the home of relatives living at the other end of Paris, mothers carrying a child wrapped in a blanket, women returning from night work, collapsing with sleep.

The heavy vehicle moved off. The silver bell rang sixteen times for the interior and once for the upper deck. The conductor called for ticket payment, and the *sous* passed from hand to hand. The tall brunet began to examine the travel companions that chance had given him. He found only two there that were worth his trouble to study their face and their appearance, and those two were exactly across from him. He hadn't forgotten anything of the little scene that had preceded the departure. To do him justice, he was about to offer his seat when the man in the derby hat had stood to give up his. He had certainly noticed the hand squeeze exchanged between the lady and the kind gentleman. He told himself that could be the beginning of an affair, and, if he couldn't hope to see the end of it, he promised himself to at least observe the incidents which might happen during the trip. It already seemed to him that the two people of this traveling drama formed a rather badly contrasting couple. The woman, who had agreed a little too quickly to become indebted to an unknown man, evidently wasn't from the same social class as her second-hand knight, because her dress was almost elegant. She seemed to have a pretty figure and her eyes shone through the dark blonde veil that she stubbornly refused to lift. It didn't take anything more for an inquisitive mind to occupy itself with her, and the artist seated in front of that mysterious person

had an inquisitive mind.

He divided his attention between the veiled lady and the young woman seated beside her. That person also had lowered the veil attached to her maroon velvet cap, and one could hardly see anything but the lower part of her face, a dimpled chin with a somewhat wide mouth, but with a very clean outline, and pale cheeks of a lusterless pallor.

“A Spanish complexion,” the tall brunet said to himself. *“I’m sure she’s charming. What a pity the cold keeps her from showing the tip of her nose. However little the thermometer descends, they all now have the mania to mask themselves when they go out. When you want to meet a pretty face you have to wait for summer. Still, if there was light in this devil of an omnibus, but one of the lanterns is out and the other is smoking like a tallow candle burned out. You can’t see a thing. We’re in a rolling cave. You could commit crimes here that nobody would know about.”*

Continuing to observe, the tall brunet recognized that the young girl couldn’t be rich. In the middle of January she was wearing a little short coat without sleeves, called *une visite*, of a black material so thin and so worn out that you froze just looking at it, an alpaca dress, Corinth grape-colored, that long wear had made shiny. She was hiding her hands in a skimpy muff which had lost some of its outside cover, a muff that in the past must have been bought for a twelve-year-old girl.

“Who is she? Where does she come from? Where is she going?” the young man wondered. *“And why is the woman sitting next to her looking at her out of the corner of her eyes. Does she know her? No, because she’s not speaking to her.”*

However, the omnibus had made good time. It was now rolling along the Pont Neuf, and the coachman, who was in a hurry to finish his day, whipped up his horses to a fast trot up the incline which descends toward the Quai du Louvre. Public transportation vehicles don’t have such good suspension as the eight-spring *calèches*, and this sudden movement had the effect of greatly bouncing the travelers about. The young woman was thrown against her neighbor, the one last arrived, and clung to her arm, uttering a weak cry that was followed by a deep sigh.

“Lean against me, if you aren’t feeling well, Mademoiselle,” said the veiled lady.

The other woman didn’t answer, but she let herself fall on the shoulder of the compassionate woman who offered to support her.

“That young woman is not well,” exclaimed the tall brunet man. “The bus must stop, and I’m going...”

“Not at all, Monsieur; she’s sleeping,” the veiled lady said calmly.

“Pardon! I thought...”

“She was already sleeping when the jolts suddenly woke her up. But she’s already going back to sleep. Let’s let her rest.”

“Leaning on you, Madame! Aren’t you afraid...”

“That she’ll tire me? Oh! Not at all. And she won’t fall, I’ll answer for it, because I’m going to hold on to her,” continued the lady, passing her right arm around the sleeping girl.

The tall brunet man bowed without insisting. He had good manners and he thought he had already done too much in getting mixed up in what didn’t concern him.

“Young girls today, they’re pitiful,” the fat woman in the bonnet said between her teeth. “Me, I’ve pushed my cart all evening selling oranges, and, if it was necessary, I still have legs strong enough to climb on foot right to the top of Montmartre. Ah! If that girl there was going dancing at the *Boule Noir* or at the *Elysée*, that would wake her up. But to go home to mama, *bernique!* There isn’t anybody who can do that anymore.”

She didn’t get any reaction to her comments. The young girl she was talking about didn’t move at all. The neighbor whose shoulder served as her pillow pretended not to have heard, and the artist, seated in front of the two women, didn’t say a word, although he really wanted to rebuke that badly informed old gossip somewhat sharply.

He began to observe again and he was almost softened when he saw the veiled lady gently take hold of the naked hands of the sleeping girl and put them back in the worn muff that poor girl carried tied to her shoulder by a frayed string.

“A mother couldn’t have taken better care of her child,” he thought. And me, who took that excellent woman for someone trying to start an affair. Why? I wonder. Because she accepted a gentleman’s seat? Because she thanked him by letting him squeeze the tips of her fingers? Well, that’s what the gallant man got for his politeness and maybe a chest cold, because he must be freezing up there. So much for that. I’d really like to see the face of that girl who’s sleeping so soundly. The lines at the bottom of the face are perfect. She must not be rolling in gold, that little girl, to judge by her clothes. I would bet she would willingly consent to a head pose. If she stops on the way, I’ll amuse myself by following her. But as we get off, if she goes as far as the Place Pigalle, I’ll suggest to her that she sit for me some time. Let’s hope she opens her eyes before the end of the ride.”

The omnibus was still traveling at a speed which would put *fiacres* to shame. The two vigorous Percheron horses pulling it outdistanced all the nags that those who rent vehicles on the street harness up as soon as the sun goes down. When no passenger is pulling the bell to get off they go even faster. The coachman, who doesn’t have to hold them back to let someone descend, pushes them as much as he can. He hardly halts at the required stops. There was no one to pick up on the Rue du Louvre; nobody either at the office on the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs. But the Place de la Bourse there was some change. Three women seated at the entrance of the vehicle were replaced by a middle-class family, a father, a mother, and a little boy. But the travelers at the back didn’t budge.

The young girl was still sleeping, leaning against her charitable neighbor. The woman who sold oranges had finally dozed off. Some other women were dozing too. After the station on the Rue de Chateaudun, when the team, reinforced by a third horse, began to climb the hard side of the Rue des Martyrs, the inside of the omnibus resembled a dormitory. The massive machine was rolling along like a ship balanced on a swell. It rocked the passengers so gently that almost all of them, little by little, let their head nod and closed their eyes. There was hardly anyone but the tall brunet who was sitting upright. The conductor walked up and down to stretch his legs and the coachman cracked his whip to get warm.

At the last third of the ascent, the fat gossip woke up with a start, and shouted that she wanted to get off. The spot was not convenient to stop because the slope is so steep that the horses slide and go backwards as soon as they stop going forward. Women who insist on putting their feet on the ground before getting to the top of the escarpment must have the conductor’s help. This is what the obese woman did, not without grumbling, using not very gracious words to the good employee who didn’t come quickly enough to catch her in his arms. She rushed toward the exit, crushing her neighbors’ toes. When she had touched the pavement she started to yell out that she had gotten off too soon, that she should have waited until the Avenue Trudaine because she lived on the Clignancourt carriageway, and 100 other recriminations which didn’t move anyone.

However, she decided to walk and the omnibus, which was almost at the top, continued its climb.

At this moment, the artist, who was still thinking about the two women seated in front of him, was brusquely distracted from his reverie by a noise which came from the top of the omnibus, the noise of three boot heel taps, three successive vigorous blows separated by a short interval.

“Well!” he said to himself, “that’s the traveler on the upper deck who’s giving foot signals like a master at arms. It seems he’s still there. There’s one that ten degrees below zero doesn’t bother. Ah! But he’s had enough because he’s deciding to come down.”

In fact, the boots which had just brought about this rumbling appeared on the upper stairway, the legs followed, then the torso, and finally the man, after having thrown a rapid glance into the inside of the omnibus, jumped down to the pavement. The painter, who had watched these movements, saw him walk away hurriedly down the Rue de la Tour-d’Auvergne.

“So,” he thought, “That good man with such heavy boots doesn’t have the intention that I thought he had. I was supposing that he’d wait at the exit for the lady who’d accepted his seat and that he’d almost try to make her accept his arm. Not at all. He’s going quietly away, alone. He’s right, because that lady doesn’t seem to me to be in the mood to become friendly with gentlemen of his type.”

While he was holding this judicious discourse with himself, the omnibus reached the point where the Rue des Martyrs crosses two other very busy streets, the Rue de Laval on the left, and the Rue Condorcet on the right. It always stops there in order to unhitch the extra horse, and also because on that stretch of

the line, it often happens that the carriage empties. The male travelers, and above all the female travelers, get off en masse. And that evening it was exactly the same. Almost all the women stood up at the same time, and it was a question of who would get out first. There was such a general and complete rush to the outside that no one remained in the interior but the tall brunet and the two women seated in front of him. Still, the woman supporting the sleeping girl seemed to be getting ready to leave also.

“Monsieur,” she said quickly, “That poor child that was leaning on me is having such a good sleep. I would reproach myself if I woke her. However, I have to get off. I live near here and it’s late. Do I dare ask you to take my place in my function as an altar of rest?”

“With the greatest pleasure,” answered the young man, sitting down in the seat the fat orange merchant had just left.

“Wait just a moment, please,” cried out the charitable lady to the conductor, who was about to give the signal to depart.

At the same time she lifted, with infinite precautions, the head of the young girl who was leaning on her shoulder. She placed it gently on the shoulder of the tall brunet, ready to receive it. The sleeping girl let this be done without giving a sign of life and collapsed so completely that the neighbor to whom she was confided thought it necessary to hold her by the waist.

“I thank you, sir,” said the veiled lady. “I don’t like to leave her alone, but since you’re going to the end of the line, I can leave her. If you could take her right to the door of the house where she’s going, you’ll surely do a good deed, because, at this hour this neighborhood is dangerous for a young girl.”

And without waiting for an answer from the man to whom she directed the request, she slid rapidly out of the omnibus, which had just started up the Rue de Laval. The conductor was leaning in the corner, at the entry to the vehicle, above the ticket meter, and he was busy verifying, by the fleeting gas light, the last checks on his list. The painter remained then completely alone with the beautiful sleeper. No one could have kept him from saying sweet things to her or asking her to sit for a portrait, but to do that, it was first necessary to wake her, and he wanted to behave properly. He pulled her discretely against his chest and he hoped that increasing that decent pressure a little he would manage to bring her out of her torpor. He was wrong. In vain he pressed a little more. His hand couldn’t feel the heartbeat of that child, who, nevertheless, must not have been, accustomed to letting herself be hugged in this way. Then the thought came to this bad boy that she was not so much asleep as she wanted to appear, that she wouldn’t ask anything better than to become obligated to him. He was a Parisian. He had experience and intuition. So he believed very little in the virtue of young girls who get in omnibuses all alone at a quarter to midnight, and who go, at that untimely hour, toward the outside boulevards.

He wanted to know how he should act. He leaned forward a little to see the face of that stubbornly sleeping girl up close. But the last lantern, the one that had been sputtering since the departure, had finally gone out, and the interior of the vehicle was plunged in complete darkness. He leaned forward close enough to almost touch the young girl’s face. He saw that she was pale as alabaster and that no breath was coming out of her partially open mouth. He took one of her hands which had remained in the muff, and he found that hand was icy.

“She has fainted,” he murmured. “She needs help.”

And he called the conductor, who answered him without moving.

“We’re coming to the station. It’s not worth stopping for such a small thing.”

In fact, driven rapidly by a coachman in a hurry to go to bed and by horses that smelled the stable, the omnibus has gone down the Rue Frochot in a wink and was coming into the Place Pigalle. Frightened, the young man tried to lift the unfortunate child who had collapsed in his arms, but she fell back, inert, and only then did he understand that life had flown out of that poor body.

“Here we are, Monsieur,” said the conductor, who took them for two lovers. “I’m very sorry to wake your lady. But we don’t go any further. You have to get off, unless she wants to sleep in the carriage.”

“It’s in the grave where she’ll sleep,” the tall brunet called out to him. “Don’t you see that she’s dead?”

“So! You’re joking to amuse yourself. Well, there, really, that isn’t lucky, you know, that kind of joke. You should never laugh about death!”

"I have no desire to laugh. I tell you that woman has flesh as cold as marble, and she's no longer breathing. Come help me get her out of the omnibus. I can't carry her by myself."

"She shouldn't be very heavy. Nevertheless, if she's really sick, I'm going to give you a hand. We can't leave her there, that's for sure."

With that conclusion, the conductor grudgingly decided to get into the vehicle, where the tall brunet was doing his best to support the unfortunate child. The employee got in also and with the three of them they had no trouble lifting the frail body. The station waiting room hadn't yet closed. They carried her there and stretched her out on a bench. With a trembling hand, the young man lifted the veil which hid half of the dead girl's face. She was wonderfully beautiful, with the true face of a Raphael virgin. Her large black eyes no longer had any luster, but they were still open and her contracted features expressed an unspeakable pain. She must have suffered horribly.

"It really is true that she's passed on," murmured the conductor.

"During the trip! And you didn't notice it?" exclaimed the employee.

"No, and the lady sitting next to her didn't see anything either. That's strange, but that's how it was."

"Apoplexy, then...or it could be something gave way in her chest. "

"As for me, I think someone killed her," said the tall brunet.

"Killed!" repeated the conductor, "what do you mean! There's not a drop of blood on her."

"And then," added the employee, "if someone had struck her in the carriage, the other travelers would certainly have seen it."

"She's eighteen years old, at most. At that age you don't die suddenly," said the young man.

"Are you a doctor?"

"No, but..."

"Well, then, you don't know any more about it than we do. And instead of useless talking, you should go look for the police. We can't keep a dead woman in the office."

"There're two of them coming."

And in fact, two policemen making their rounds were approaching with measured steps. The employee called to them and they came forward without very much haste, because they thought the case was hardly worth getting in a hurry. And when they saw what it was about, they were not unusually upset. They let the conductor tell them about the situation, and the older of the two gravely pronounced that these sorts of accidents weren't unusual.

"However, there's a gentleman who claims that somebody murdered her in the omnibus," said the man wearing a helmet with a capital O affixed.

"I'm not claiming anything at all," said the tall brunet. "I only swear that that death is most extraordinary. I was at first sitting across from that poor girl, and I..."

"Then you'll be called tomorrow to the police station and you'll tell what you know. Give me your name."

"Paul Freneuse. I'm a painter and I live in that big house that you can see from here."

"That one where there are nothing but artists. Good! I know it."

"What's more, here's my card."

"That's enough, Monsieur."

"The Commissioner will hear you tomorrow morning, but you can't stay here. They're going to close the office while my colleague goes to alert the post so they can send a stretcher. Fortunately it's not the kind of weather to sit outside in front of the cafes on the Place Pigalle. If it were summer, we would already have a crowd at the door."

That old soldier spoke with such assurance, and he must have had similar experience with tragic events, that Paul Freneuse began to doubt the validity of his own judgment. The thought of a crime had come to mind without his knowing very well why. He had to recognize that the facts absolutely contradicted it. The cadaver bore no apparent wound. Nothing had happened during the trip which allowed the supposition that the unfortunate child had been attacked.

"*Obviously, I have too much imagination,*" he said to himself as he left to obey the wise injunction of the policeman. "*I see a mystery in a situation which happens every day. That little girl had a heart*

disease..., an aneurysm which broke and she was struck down. That was a pity because she was admirably beautiful. I can't do anything about it. I'd be very good and noble to waste my time opening an investigation about a simple short newspaper article. I have my painting for the Exposition at the Salon to finish. It's already too much that I interfered so as to be interrogated by a police commissioner to whom I have nothing serious to say. He'll very probably make fun of my extravagant ideas if I should decide to speak to him about the possibility of a murder...committed by whom, Bon Dieu? By that charitable lady I replaced at the corner of the Rue de Laval...and how?

Without a doubt by breathing on her young neighbor...That's absurd! Life isn't snuffed out like a candle."

The employee was already closing the shutters and the younger of the policemen was running to find some men to carry the body. The other one had placed himself in front of the office door to send away the curious, if any presented themselves. The conductor, who was talkative, was explaining to him how at the departure he had noticed that the young girl already looked sick. The coachman had remained on his seat, and he was having a great deal of trouble holding back his horses, impatient to return to the company's depot.

"Do you need me any more?" asked Freneuse.

And as the policeman made him a sign indicating no, he started on his way to his dwelling, which wasn't far away. He hadn't taken three steps when he remembered having let his cane fall in the carriage. That cane was a pretty rattan one that one of his friends, an officer in the navy, had brought him from China, and he was fond of it. The omnibus was still there. He climbed in, and, as you could scarcely see, he lit a match so as not to have to feel about with his hands. The cane had rolled under the bench. In stooping down to pick it up, he saw a paper which had also fallen and a golden pin, one of those women use to hold on their hat.

"Well, look here!" he muttered, "The poor dead girl lost this. I'll have something left to remember her."

Paul Freneuse picked up the cane, the paper and the pin, put the cane under his arm, the paper and the pin in the pocket of his overcoat, slowly got out of the omnibus and went away without turning around, for fear the policeman might decide to call him back. He now thought no more about getting involved in the following events of that sad adventure. He was promising himself to rest easy if the Commissioner didn't require his testimony.

Paul Freneuse had talent and a great many likeable qualities, but he somewhat lacked continuity in ideas. His head got fired up too easily and grew cold again even more quickly. He constantly threw himself into the most risky conjectures, a little like children chase after all the butterflies that fly in front of them; but he soon tired of chasing wild dreams. When he had become himself again, he thought only about his art, about his work, and also a little about his pleasures, although he led a rather regular life.

So that evening he had just gone through very lively emotions and he was already calmer. He had constructed a whole novel about the death of a young girl, and this novel grew dimmer and dimmer in his mind.

He was eager to get home, to see his studio, and he was going straight there, when, in a café which stood out like a cape of land between the Rue Pigalle and the Rue Frochot, he saw one of his friends, an artist like himself, sitting at a table in front of an empty glass and a stack of saucers. The saucers indicated the number of beers absorbed by that thirsty painter. That friend was alone in the first section of the café, a sort of glass cage, where you were as much in view as if you were drinking outside. You had a perfect view of the people passing by. He recognized Freneuse. He began to make telegraphic signs to call him and Freneuse decided to go in, knowing full well that if he dared to continue on his way, comrade Binos was going to run after him.

His name was Binos, that beer amateur, mediocre artist, but incomparable talker, practical philosopher, lazy as a dormouse, busy with everything except painting, although he always had two or three paintings in progress; in short, the best fellow in the world, the most helpful, the most disinterested, and above all the most amusing.

Freneuse, who never agreed with him on any point, couldn't do without him, and gladly consulted

him for the pleasure of hearing him contradict everything and go off into bizarre paradoxes.

"There you are!" Binos yelled to him. "I've been chasing you all evening. Where're you coming from?"

"From an expensive neighborhood. I had dinner at the house of one of my cousins who's an intern at the Piété and who lives on the Rue Lacépède," answered Freneuse.

"And you got off the bus at the Halles wine market, when you should've come back on foot through a wonderful freeze. You will never be anything but a bourgeois."

"A bourgeois if you like, but a strange thing has just happened to me."

"In the omnibus? I see what it was. You missed the connecting omnibus."

"Don't joke. This is very serious. Look down there at what's happening."

"Well, what? The conductor is holding forth in the middle of five or six loiterers in front of the office door."

"There is a dead woman in that office...a ravishing young woman who was traveling with me...across from me at first and then beside me."

"Did she give up the ghost in your arms?" asked Binos still joking.

"Almost. And nobody was aware that she'd died."

"What tale are you telling me there?"

"I'm telling the truth. It's the most extraordinary thing, so extraordinary that a while ago I had almost come to believe that the death was not natural."

"A mystery to solve. That's my business. I was born to be a policeman. I would show the cleverest Sûreté police a thing or two. Tell me the story and I'll give you my conclusions as soon as I know the facts."

"The facts! But there aren't any. Everything happened the simplest way in the world. When I arrived at the Boulevard St. Germain station, the young girl was already in the car. I noticed that she was pretty and I sat down facing her. A fat woman was seated to her right, a gentleman to her left...a gentleman if you want to call him that...he looked like a former national guard drummer."

"Good! That's already one suspicious man."

"Suspicious or not, before the omnibus left, he gave his seat to a lady who'd arrived late...a real lady, that one...elegantly dressed and not at all ugly, as well as I could judge through her little veil."

"If she didn't raise it, that was because she had a reason to hide herself. And she accepted, without hesitating, the courtesy of the individual you've just described to me? Do you know what that proves? That they know each other and that the thing was agreed on between them in advance. The man was holding the seat. The woman took it and she's the one who struck the blow."

"But there was no blow," Freneuse cried out.

"You think that because you didn't see anything," said Binos, who was following his idea with imperturbable persistence. "I maintain once more that that exchange of seats isn't natural. Now I have a basis; that's enough for me. Continue. It was the last bus, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I ran from the Rue Lacépède in order not to miss it."

"One more reason that the man didn't get off. If he stayed, it was because he didn't want to leave."

"He didn't stay. He climbed to the upper level."

"Several degrees below zero make a cold wind that cuts the face. I get the picture now; he perched himself up there because he wanted to be sure that his accomplice completed the operation."

"Not at all. The man stepped to ground at the entry to the Rue de la Tour-d'Auvergne, and the woman a little further on...at the corner of the Rue de Laval."

"That is to say, three minutes afterward. They wouldn't have had any trouble rejoining each other. I am sure that in getting off the man stopped an instant on the pavement so that the woman could see that he was leaving."

"No, but I noticed..."

"What?"

"That before coming down from the upper level the man gave three or four taps with his heel so strong that everybody in the interior heard them."

“*Parbleu!* That was the signal.”

“I admit that thought came to me.”

“Ah! You see very well that you suspected them! Only you don’t have the courage of your opinions.”

“And you, when you start to ride an idea, you go a great deal too far. I admit, if you wish, that these people were in agreement, but not to kill an unfortunate girl they didn’t know.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m at least certain that she didn’t know them, because she didn’t do them the honor of looking at them. I’m rather inclined to think that the man was hoping at the beginning that the woman would pay him back for his courtesy by allowing him to accompany her. In getting on, she let her hand be squeezed.”

“Better and better. I don’t have the shadow of a doubt. That handshake meant: *Kill her!*”

“But you’re crazy! I told you there wasn’t the least incident during the trip.”

“Well, the girl who’s dead was living when she got in the omnibus, wasn’t she?”

“Oh! Very much alive. She was wearing a veil too, but her eyes were shining through the veil like two black diamonds.”

“Good! And when she got here they were extinguished. When was it noticed that she had passed on?”

“I was the one who noticed it, at the moment when we arrived at the station in the Place Pigalle. For a short while she had been leaning her head on my shoulder, and I thought she was sleeping. I wanted to wake her, and...”

“What! On your shoulder! Then you were seated beside her? I thought that you were sitting across from her.”

“The veiled lady who was her neighbor on her left supporting her from the Pont Neuf, thought as I did, that she was sleeping. When that lady got off on the Rue de Laval, she asked me to take her place. I didn’t mind at all serving as a pillow for a young and pretty girl. The bench on her right was empty. I took it and the lady passed me a burden which seemed sweet to me.”

“And you didn’t find this sleep that nothing interrupted stupendous? Paul, my boy, you can dash off a genre painting quickly; but your naiveté goes beyond limits.”

“I admit it; and, however,...”

“The lady knew perfectly well that she was putting a cadaver in your care, and she wasn’t holding her except to keep her from falling. She had judged by your face that you weren’t aware of anything. As soon as she could, she left you to get out of it by yourself. That was pretty daring, what she did there, and she might have played you a very bad trick. How did you get out of it when you arrived?”

“Ah, that. Are you insinuating that they could’ve accused me of murdering the woman beside me?”

“He! He! More extraordinary things have happened.”

“Come now! I’ve just spoken with the police who verified the death. The body didn’t have even a scratch.”

“Well! There come some men from the police station with a stretcher to take her away.”

“They asked me my name, that’s all.”

“They asked you for your name, and you gave it?”

“No doubt about it. Why would I’ve hidden it? Besides, I couldn’t do anything else.”

“That’s a reason. It’s certain that if you’d refused to say who you were, your refusal would’ve seemed shady. They would’ve suspected you.”

“Suspected of what? I’ve already told you that girl died with a ruptured aneurism. Everybody who saw her had no doubt in that regard. The police, the station employee, the conductor...”

“All these people are as competent, one as well as the other, in matters of death! Don’t say stupid things. You know as well as I do that a doctor will examine the corpse and that only he can settle the question. And whatever he decides, you can expect to be called to the commissioner’s office.”

“All right, I’ll go. And I’ll be sure not to take you with me. With the things you imagine and with your logic, you would upset the head of the most sensible man. Ah! You would make a terrible Investigating Magistrate! You see crimes everywhere.”

"I see them where there are some, my friend. You've just witnessed a perfectly good murder, cleverly set-up and masterly executed. There'd be enough in that to supply newspaper copy for all the Paris newspapers for three months."

"You're crazy. Tomorrow the newspapers will print that a young girl died suddenly in an omnibus, and after tomorrow nothing more will be said of it."

"If the public is no longer interested in it, I'll make it my business."

"You want to act like the police for your amusement! You didn't need anything more than that. That does it."

"You have to use your free time to do something, and I have some time to spare."

"And your painting, wretched man, your painting, which should be ready for the Exposition and which is hardly begun!"

"I'll enter it for the spring. In the winter I'm never in the mood. So I have two months ahead of me, and inside of two months I'll have found the woman who pulled off this wicked deed."

"You mean the woman who was sitting beside the poor child?"

"Naturally."

"Pardon. There were two of them, one on the right, the other on the left of the poor little thing."

"The one who stayed on the bus right up to the Rue de Laval, and who so cleverly passed the cadaver to you."

"Will you please be good enough to explain to me how she was able to kill her neighbor without anyone noticing it."

"Gladly...as soon as you answer the question I'm going to ask you. You told me the girl was leaning against the veiled lady..."

"Yes. I even think the lady was holding her by the waist."

"Just when did she start to charitably put her arm around her?"

"Well, it seems to me it was after the downward incline of the Pont Neuf. The omnibus was going very fast, and a wheel must have gone over a big rock, because there was a very violent jolt. The little girl uttered a cry... oh! a very weak cry. She put her hand on her heart; she fell backward... probably the shock broke a vessel in her chest. She died without suffering...and almost without moving."

"That, in fact, couldn't be more like reality," Binos said ironically. "And then, after this light spasm, her head fell down...the good lady offered her shoulder...she put her arm like a belt around the child who no longer moved."

"You're describing the scene exactly as if you'd seen it."

"And you, who did see it, you just thought that young girl had suddenly gone to sleep and hadn't waked up."

"At first I didn't pay a great deal of attention. You couldn't see very well at the back of the carriage. The lanterns had almost gone out."

"*Parbleu!* I was sure of it. That rascal counted on the obscurity."

"But, once again, what method did she use to send into the next world, in less than ten seconds, a girl less than twenty-years-old and who could be expected to live? You're not going to maintain to me, I suppose, that she stabbed her?"

"Stabbed, oh! no. There are surer and less noisy methods."

"Which?"

"Well...poison, for example...with a drop of cyanide you can strike down the healthiest man."

"When you pour it in his eyes, or on his tongue, yes..."

"Or on a simple scratch on the skin. You're shrugging...All right! I don't claim I'll convince you this evening. Maybe tomorrow you'll realize I'm right. I'll come up to your studio in the afternoon. Until then, I'm going to leave you. There are the stretcher-bearers carrying away the body. I'm going to stroll around outside the station to find out a little concerning what they're saying about this story. I know the police sergeant. He'll tell me what he knows."

And the policeman by calling dashed out of the café, yelling out to his friend: "You can pay for my drinks. I had only fourteen beers."

