

Part One
FROM CAYENNE TO THE PLACE VENDÔME

I. Train 53

At 4:25 a.m. train no. 53, from Paris to Le Havre, had just gone through Holbec and Blait station at top speed, heading for Beuzeville. In a first-class compartment, a passenger, its only occupant, was lying on the cushions, profoundly asleep. As it was winter and glacially cold, he was buried under two thick blankets, with his cap pulled down over his eyes. Above him, an overcoat, hanging by a thread, was swaying back and forth.

At the door to his right, the one opening on to the trackside, a head appeared, wearing a braided cap. After a rapid glance inside, the man in the braided cap opened the door, without making any noise, and came into the compartment.

He considered the sleeper attentively.

“Perfect,” he murmured.

That reflection was motivated by the combination of circumstances, which was fortunate for him. The traveler was occupying the last compartment in the carriage, and in order to ensure his privacy he had used his overcoat to block the little window that served to look from one compartment into the next.

At that moment, the sleeper moved. One of the blankets draped over his shoulders slipped down to his knees. He caught it with a mechanical gesture and wrapped himself in it tightly; then, ensconcing himself against the window, he became still again. Almost immediately, a sonorous snore preceded by a deep sigh attested that he had not really woken up.

The newcomer had immediately hidden, pressing himself tightly against the banquette, his face flattened against the fabric.

“Oof!” he murmured. “What a scare! I was afraid...”

Reassured by the passenger’s regular and noisy breathing, he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and folded it into quarters; then, taking out a little bottle, he emptied its contents on to the cloth. A slight odor of garlic spread through the compartment.

A second later, the handkerchief was abruptly applied to the face of the sleeper, who, after a violent start, fell back on the banquette, his limbs extended and his head limp, with a dull croak.

The other took his arm and shook him violently. He did not move; one might have thought that he was dead.

“That’s the ticket! The boss’s drug has done the trick. It’s better than their filthy chloroform.”

He lowered the window slightly, in order to let in cold air from outside and disperse the insidiously troubling odor that was floating around him.

“No danger that the fellow will wake up just yet—but I mustn’t go to sleep myself; that would be lousy way to finish, and that blessed drug is strong! Let’s get on with it—the boss told me that the effect of ethyl bromide only lasts for ten minutes.”

Taking off his thick overcoat, he took a short stick, a sort of club akin to the truncheons carried by London policemen or the guardians of the peace directing traffic at intersections. He leaned over, taking another close look at the passenger, who was in a coma, almost breathless, his features frozen in a spasmodic grimace.

“Blind and deaf,” he said, with an evil smile, moving the felt cap to cover the eyes and ears with his fingertip. He won’t suffer—won’t even feel a thing. One has to be humane in this wicked world.”

He stood up, moved back, lifted his club and delivered a mighty blow to the sleeper’s head.

The unfortunate twitched, but did not cry out: a dull groan, and that was all.

“Ah,” said the man, with a sigh of satisfaction. “I haven’t lost the old knack...”

Without wasting any time, he removed the blankets from the man he had just killed. He unbuttoned his jacket, searched his pockets, and took out a wallet. By the light of the lamp he examined the wallet’s contents. There were numerous documents and three hundred-franc bills.

The murderer reached out as if to take the bills, but changed his mind and pushed them back into the wallet's interior pocket.

"No stupidity!" he murmured. "That's forbidden...although it's a great pity to lose what one's only just picked up. Since those are the orders, though..."

Passing on to the papers, he examined them carefully without getting them out of order. He ended up discovering one that was tucked protectively into the other pocket, secured to the morocco leather by a pin. That had to be the one he was looking for, because he uttered a sigh of satisfaction. He stuffed it into his pocket, replaced the wallet in his victim's pocket, and set about buttoning up the jacket.

At that moment, however, a characteristic grinding sound made him shiver. The brakes had been applied. The train was arriving at a station and was about to stop. The murderer made haste to lower the little mobile blind over the lamp, which plunged the compartment into darkness.

He was just in time; the train came to a standstill.

"Beuzeville-Bréauté! Five minutes halt!" shouted the crewman responsible for informing the passengers.

There was a moment of terrible anxiety. Five minutes, during which a passenger might board the train or a guard might glance through the window or open the door!

The murderer pressed himself into the corner, his left hand on the door to the corridor and his right armed with his terrible cudgel, ready to strike down anyone who showed himself and then flee into the dark night—but all remained calm, and after an interval that seemed to last for centuries, he heard the station-master's whistle giving the signal to depart.

The bandit straightened up again, filling his oppressed lungs with air.

As soon as the train moved off, he finished buttoning the dead man's jacket. Then he opened the door to the outside, grabbed the cadaver around the waist and, after swinging it around, hurled it on to the trackside.

Everyone on the train was asleep. No one heard the sound of the body's fall, covered as it was by the rattle of the carriages.

The man raised the blind again and inspected the cushion. Not a single drop of blood had stained it. Thanks to the thick cap on the head, none had leaked out.

With a sigh of relief, the murderer got down on to the footplate and, leaving the door open, moved along the carriage.

Just as no one had heard anything, no one saw him. In any case, the braided cap would not have attracted attention; he would have been taken for an inspector making his round.

Having arrived at an empty third-class compartment, he opened the door, went in, got rid of his stick and his cap, which he wrapped in a newspaper, and took a soft cap out of his overcoat pocket, which he put on. Then he lit a cigarette and waited for the journey to end,

At five past five, train 53 drew into Le Havre station. Only five or six people were waiting for the train at that excessively early hour. There were, in any case, only a few passengers.

The murderer leapt down briskly from his carriage, handed his ticket to the guard and disappeared into the shadows of the streets.

One by one, the travelers emerged and the waiting-room emptied. Only one young woman, about twenty-five years old, still remained, gazing at the deserted track.

When the guard closed the door she went over to him. "This is the Paris train, isn't it, Monsieur?" he asked, in a strained voice.

"Yes, Madame."

"The one that left at ten past eleven?"

"Indeed. You were expecting someone by that train?"

"My husband. He sent me a telegram to say that he would take that train. I don't know what this means..."

"He'll have missed it. He'll arrive by the next train."

"You think so?"

"Of course! We see it all the time. It's nothing to get upset about."

And the guard, shrugging his shoulders, made as if to leave. The young woman held him back. "And there are other trains soon?"

“Certainly. The 61 arrives at seven forty. You’ll find that your husband has taken it—unless he waited for the express, which will only get here at eleven. Come back in two hours, though; I’m sure he’ll be on the 61—that’s what people who miss the 53 do.”

“Thank you, Monsieur; I’ll wait.”

Wrapping herself up in her mantle, garnished with wretched furs, the young woman went to sit down in a corner.

The wait was long and uncomfortable, interrupted by the arrival of two suburban trains, which, in her impatience, the young woman mistook for the Paris train.

Finally, the 61 was signaled. She hurried forward, gluing her face to the window of the waiting-room, examining all the passengers getting out of the carriages one by one.

Alas, the one for whom she was waiting did not appear.

On the other hand, the train brought bad news. A traveler had been found dead beside the track some distance from Beuzeville-Bréauté station, doubtless the victim of some accident.

“It’s him!” cried the unfortunate woman, going pale.

People crowded around her. They tried to reason with her, even to persuade her otherwise...all in vain.

“It’s him!” she said. “I’m sure it’s him! I want to go and see!”

And no matter how hard they tried to stop her, she took the eight o’clock train to go to Beuzeville.

The public prosecutor, the examining magistrate and his clerk got off the train with her, having been alerted by the Company. Accompanied by a policeman in plain clothes, they were coming to make their investigation.

The poor woman was not mistaken. It was indeed her husband who lay there, bloody and disfigured, on a camp-bed in a room at the station. The papers found on the corpse had revealed his identity: Charles-Louis Lavardens, former non-commissioned officer in the third marine infantry regiment, now a commercial traveler.

The inquest concluded that it was an accident. In fact, no theft had been committed; the dead man still had his coin-purse, his wallet and his watch with a gold chain. The purse contained twelve francs in silver, the wallet three hundred-franc bills. A thief would not have left that behind.

Furthermore, the corpse did not bear a single wound that had apparently been produced by a weapon: a single blow to the head—produced, according to all the evidence, by the fall from a height on to the trackside—had caused the death. Having fallen outside the rails, the body had neither been dragged nor crushed by the subsequent trains.

Finally, before leaving, the magistrates had received the report from the senior guard on train 53. That report mentioned that, on arrival at Le Havre, the door of one compartment had been found open; in that compartment were two blankets, an overcoat and various trivial objects that testified to the presence of a passenger. That passenger had disappeared, without taking his luggage and blankets; the guard had revealed that fact to the policeman. It was just as the functionary was going to make enquiries that he had learned about the discovery of the body at Beuzeville-Bréauté.

The accident was easily reconstituted. For some reason, perhaps misled by the guard’s call and thinking that he had arrived, the passenger had wanted to get off; opening the door, he had leaned out, had lost his balance when there was a jolt, and had fallen, head first...

That was the formal judgment of the physician who accompanied the magistrates in their legal inquest. It was, naturally, also the judgment of the station-master, whose only concern was to relieve the Company of any responsibility.

“But I tell you that he’s been murdered!” cried Madame Lavardens, confronting them.

The doctor, a tall, thin old man, widened his eyes in alarm behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. No less amazed, the public prosecutor stared at the woman who was behaving so audaciously. He was struck by the character of her physiognomy. Of medium height, but with a good figure and poise, Madame Lavardens had the tanned complexion of a southerner, and the graceful oval face that gives Spanish and Pyrenean women an appearance that is both child-like and impertinent. Her mouth, contracted by pain, was small and red as a grenadine. Her eyes were shining beneath her tears like two black diamonds.

“He’s been murdered, I tell you!” she repeated, violently. “And I know who murdered him!”

II. The Denunciation

The public prosecutor drew nearer to the unfortunate woman, whose face was wracked by pain, and said, with a softness imprinted with great compassion: "Calm down Madame. The work of the law is delicate, but it's necessary not to let despair lead you astray. Friend or relative of the deceased?"

"His wife, Monsieur."

The magistrate bowed. "Whatever our conviction is, Madame, it is our duty to hear you."

Oliva Ossona, Lavardens' widow, did not appear to hear what the prosecutor was saying. Prey to one of those violent crises that the strongest will cannot resist, she fell to her knees beside her husband's corpse, and in a hoarse voice, through her sobs, cried: "Oh, poor Charles! So good, so trusting...the wretch has killed you! It's over...finished..."

Deeply moved, the prosecutor hastened to follow the young woman. "Madame," he murmured, "you can't stay here. Come, I beg you..." And as Oliva looked at him with haggard eyes, grimly crouched over her husband's body, he added: "You mentioned murder. Come, Madame—we're ready to listen to you." He turned to the examining magistrate and the doctor. "We ought not to neglect any means of information in order to discover the truth—isn't that so, Messieurs?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and snorted skeptically. "The truth...an accident, of course! Perhaps a suicide..."

Madame Lavardens heard that. Quivering, she stood up in front of the physician. "Oh, no! No! That's a lie! He loved me too much for that—that's an insult to his memory..."

She had a handkerchief in her hand, which she passed over her face; a sigh escaped her lips...and, pulling herself together, overcoming her weakness, she said: "I'll go with you, Messieurs. I have a duty to fulfill in your regard. I want my beloved Charles to be avenged..."

The magistrates and the doctor went into the office that the station-master had obligingly lent them; the clerk accompanied them.

As soon as the door was closed, the prosecutor asked the young woman to sit down. "We're listening, Madame," he said. "Would you care to justify the suspicion you expressed just now?"

"Take notes, Jacquier," the magistrate ordered his clerk. The latter sat down at the station-master's desk, beside the plain clothes policeman—who, for his part, was compiling an official report.

Madame Lavardens wiped her tearful eyes and began: "My husband, the son of petty provincial shopkeepers, had naturally been intended by his parents to be a great success in business. They wanted to make a ship-owner of him, one of those great merchants who has branches in all five continents.

"With that aim, they sent him to London when he left school, in order to learn English and familiarize himself with British commercial practices, which are said to be more practical than ours.

"In a French establishment in London, he met a man whose life is a veritable novel. That man, whose extraordinary life-story has been told in all the newspapers, was Gaston Rozen..."

At that name, the prosecutor and the examining magistrate started, and exchanged knowing glances.

"You've heard of him, haven't you?"

"Yes, Madame, but please continue."

"Gaston Rozen was himself placed by his family in a particular institution. Finding his plebeian name insufficiently chic, he called himself *de Rozen*. He lived the high life, like the son of the family to which he claimed to belong. He had his own hansom cab, went to grand theaters, socialized with rich people, or people who passed for such, gambled and had mistresses.

"Charles did not really become his friend; the difference in their lives was too great, but in the capacity of a compatriot, he often saw him, and his features remained engraved in his memory.

"In his twentieth year, Lavardens, who had just left England, met me in Biarritz, where I was a milliner. We fell in love—but his mother, already a widow, thinking that he was too young and that my status was too modest for him, refused her consent to our marriage. It was then that, although exempt from military service, he joined the third regiment of the marine infantry and was sent to a garrison in Guiana.

“There, the newspapers arrive in bundles, and late. Lavardens learned about the fantastic adventures of his former companion in London, concluded by a condemnation to hard labor. The newspapers announced his imminent arrival in the *bagne*.¹

“By virtue of a residue of sympathy, he watched out for his arrival, recognized him, kept track of him and, insofar as the strictness of the rules permitted, tried to make his captivity more comfortable. Rozen seemed to be grateful to him—but how can one know what was happening in the depths of that perverse soul?

“The four years of his military engagement went by. Returned to civilian life, Charles succeeded in overcoming his mother’s resistance. We were married, and, taking advantage of his sojourn in Guiana and the knowledge he had acquired there, he left as the agent of a rubber manufacturer to make purchases in Venezuela, where he set up a branch office.

“His services were very satisfactory, and it was decided, on his return to France, that he would continue them—and he did in fact, undertake several voyages. It was during one of them that he learned about Rozen’s escape.”

“Pardon me, Madame,” the examining magistrate interrupted. “I believe I understand that it’s to Rozen that you’re attributing your husband’s death...”

“Yes, Monsieur!” exclaimed the widow. “And I’ll tell you why!”

“I respect your grief,” the magistrate went on, “but it’s impossible to leave you in error any longer. The man you’re accusing, who was certainly the most audacious of bandits, is no longer alive. He perished while trying to escape from Cayenne.”

“People believe so...my husband believed it, like everyone else...but I’m sure, myself, that Rozen is alive.”

“The Minister, however,” the prosecutor declared, “has received official confirmation of his death.”

“And what proof is there that it is not mistaken?”

The doctor made a sign to the examining magistrate, who shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps you think I’m mad,” Madame Lavardens exclaimed. “You’re wrong.” In spite of all her efforts, she could not suppress an explosion of grief. “Oh, my God! They don’t believe me!” Joining her hands in ardent prayer, she implored them: “Messieurs, I beg you, in the name of justice, in the name of truth...listen to me!”

“Speak, Madame,” said the prosecutor, generously. Turning to his companions, he added, in a low voice: “Let her continue; it’s a question of humanity.”

The magistrate and the physician, visibly irritated, made no protest.

“First, I must bring you up to date with our current situation,” Oliva went on. “My husband, in the position he occupied, made a good living for us both. We even had a few savings, which enabled us to decide, in order to avoid a long and painful separation, that I would accompany him on his next voyage to America—but we were struck by a bolt from the blue. The business my husband represented went bankrupt. My husband found himself out of work.

“He started looking for a new job, but it was difficult. He had lost all his connections. Then he got the idea of starting a company, not only to resume the exploitation of rubber, but also, and in particular, that of ironwood and mahogany, in which the forests out there are so rich. In his opinion, with an insignificant capital, one could make considerable profits within a few years.”

“If one doesn’t catch yellow fever,” muttered the doctor.

“That was what most of the people he approached replied. Time passed. The little money we had was spent. I saw my poor Charles becoming desperate...I was afraid that he might go mad...every day he got more depressed.

“One day, he came back to the house and I saw—with great joy!—that he was smiling. He kissed me effusively. ‘We’re saved!’ he told me—and when I questioned him, curious to know what had

¹ In translating the title of the novel I have rendered *bagne* as “penitentiary,” but the term has no exact equivalent in English, so I have retained it here. French convicts sentenced to hard labor rather than mere confinement were sent to special establishments designed for that purpose, called *bagnes*; these were originally located in France—there was a notorious one in Toulon—but during the 19th century prison colonies were set up in far-flung locations like Guiana and New Caledonia, and became an integral part of the project of colonization, much as Botany Bay did in the English colonization of Australia.

made him so happy, he went on: 'I ran into a friend of my youth, whom I would never have recognized if he hadn't told me who he was himself, so changed is he, physically and morally. Oh, I knew that, with regard to an intelligence like his, one should never despair...'

"I tried to find out who the individual was that Charles had met. 'I can't tell you that, my love...'
And my husband, who had never had any secrets from me until then, evaded all my questions. 'You'll be astonished,' he said, finally, in the face of my persistence. 'You'll know in time...it's a man whom everyone believes to be dead...and he really is, in fact, for no one could suspect him of being the man who disappeared. Oh, if he's committed sins, he's redeemed them by means of his intelligence...he now has an important position...to name him would be to ruin him...and you wouldn't want me to betray him, when he came to me of his own accord, and enquired about my distress, and I left me with the promise that I'd be leaving for Venezuela within a week, with an investment of a hundred thousand francs, advanced without guarantees, with only my honesty as a pledge.'

"While Charles was saying all that to me, I was racking my brains, thinking back, seeking among the comrades that I knew him to have. 'Why trouble your mind, darling?' Charles went on, gaily. 'We're going to be happy. Tomorrow, I'll obtain a check for a hundred thousand francs from the Cr dit Lyonnais.'"

Madame Lavardens paused momentarily. "I don't know why," she continued, "but one name came to mind obstinately. I stared at my husband. 'The man you met isn't the one whose adventures you told me about...that Rozen?' I saw Charles shiver. He got up to hide his embarrassment.

"'Oh, if it's him,' I cried, 'I'll die...he's afraid that you'll recognize him, that you'll denounce him...'

"'Go on—you're crazy,' Lavardens said.

"'Oh, my love, be careful—if it's a trap that's being set for you...'

"'Shut up! Don't question me anymore; I have nothing more to say to you but this: tomorrow, I'll have a hundred thousand francs, and we'll recover our fortunes. But I've sworn to keep my partnership secret—even to you, the confidante of my most intimate thoughts, I won't betray the secret.'

"I had to keep my suspicions and anxieties to myself. We left for Le Havre. For a wee, we've been staying at the Hotel Frascati, waiting. The steamer leaves today. Charles went to Paris to obtain the promised investment."

"Do you think the promise was serious, then? That your husband wasn't deluded by a vain hope?"

"This is the telegram I received yesterday evening," the young woman replied, simply, holding out a blue slip of paper to the magistrate, who read it aloud.

Madame Lavardens, Hotel Frascati, Le Havre.

Business concluded. Will arrive by seven forty-one train. Pack for departure.

Love, Charles.

"And my poor husband took that train!" cried Madame Lavardens, sobbing. "He was coming back to meet me, full of joy, to make the voyage that we hoped would make our fortune—but the bandit's generosity concealed a trap. He was murdered *en route* in order to get back the check given to him out of fear."

While she remained plunged in her grief, the three men conferred.

"It's curious, all the same," the prosecutor murmured, pensively.

"Yes, but is it really true?" murmured the examining magistrate, in a whisper.

"With a bandit like Gaston Rozen, anything is possible."

"Who says so? During and after the trial, fantastic rumors went around...the legends of Cartouche, Mandrin and Jack Sheppard all rolled into one."

"Then what the poor woman had told us..."

"Perhaps true, perhaps false. It would certainly be a great coup to recapture the bandit, if he really were still alive..."

"Fantasy!" said the doctor, stubbornly.

"It's certainly confused, vague. It doesn't give us any indication of the position held by the ghost. For lack of the name, that might give us a clue."

“Let’s try,” said the prosecutor, and asked: “Are you quite sure, Madame, that your husband didn’t leave any piece of paper on which we might find Rozen’s name?”

“Absolutely sure, unfortunately.”

“But at least you know what the escapee is doing—what kind of position he holds?”

“Alas, no—nothing!”

“Not even the place where your husband met him?”

“Not even that.”

“Hmm,” said the magistrate. “As a trail, it’s poor—and the telegram was sent from the Bourse; that doesn’t tell us anything.”

“Then you think...?” asked the prosecutor.

“I think,” said the skeptical magistrate, “that we’d be wasting our time and intelligence looking for something. You don’t even have any idea of Rozen’s description?”

“The man Lavardens met bore no resemblance either to the Rozen of London, the Rozen of France or that of Cayenne. Go and make something of that!”

“It’s vague, indeed,” the physician sniggered, “and only Monsieur Bertillon, who has a theory of description,² would be anything to do anything with it, assuming that the theory isn’t one of those hoaxes that people in Paris make up to make fun of provincials...” He shrugged his shoulders, and added: “Who nevertheless believe them.”

“In that case,” said the prosecutor, “your opinion, doctor...”

“It’s not an opinion—I’m certain, absolutely certain, that this man wasn’t murdered. The body has no other contusions than those necessarily resulting from his fall. There was no struggle. He fell from the carriage by accident, and that’s the truth.”

“He might have been pushed.”

“I’d like to think so—but then, the door would have to have been open, and he would have had to have been in the right place.”

“Indeed,” observed the examining magistrate, “it’s scarcely admissible otherwise.”

“And another thing,” the physician went on, implacably. “His money was found in the dead man’s pockets; to get it, the murderer would have had to jump out of the carriage after him. Now that murderer, if there was a murderer, would have broken his arms or legs...not to mention that he’d have touched down half a kilometer from where he’d thrown the body. Get away! Fairy tales, all of it! Personally, I reconstitute the scene in a simpler fashion. The passenger hadn’t closed the door properly. He leaned on it; the door gave way and he fell, head first. It’s simple...elementary: child’s play.”

And as the two magistrates looked at him, still undecided, the old doctor exclaimed, violently: “Those are my conclusions, which I’m telling you in the name of science, in the name of my twenty years’ experience, in the name of my conscience as a physician and an honest man! If you don’t believe me, if you don’t trust me, if you think me incapable or biased...”

“There, there, my dear doctor, don’t get upset,” said the prosecutor, clapping him on the shoulder amicably. “We don’t doubt your observations, but our duty is to examine the affair in all its facets, and we’re permitted to make enquiries.”

“Make all the enquiries you wish. Get another expert if you want. I have no objection. We’ll see whether he offers an opinion different from mine.”

The magistrate thought it futile to continue the discussion with such a sensitive adversary.

“We give in,” he said. “Jacquier, conclude your official report with the doctor’s conclusions: a pure and simple accident.”

“What, Monsieur!” cried the widow, bursting into sobs again. “After what I’ve just told you, you still think...”

² Alphonse Bertillon devised “Bertillonage,” or anthropometry, in the 1880s, which pioneered the use of police “mug shots,” accompanied by elaborate descriptions based on carefully-taken measurements. Goron must have known him, as the director of an “Anthropometric Service” set up by the Prefecture of Police during his tenure. Bertillon blotted his copybook in 1894 when he gave evidence against Alfred Dreyfus that assisted in his wrongful conviction, and his anthropometric methods of identification were soon overtaken and replaced by fingerprints, but they were a significant contribution to forensic science in their day.

“I am obliged to, Madame,” said the prosecutor, gently. “All I can do is to assure you that if you can discover some serious evidence to support your allegation, I’ll always be ready to listen to you. I make that a formal promise.”

“Oh, thank you, Monsieur, thank you!” the widow cried. “and I’ll succeed, be sure of it—for even if everyone in the world abandons me, even if I remain alone, without support, without resources, without food, I shall devote my entire life, all my strength, I swear, to discover the murderer and to avenge my poor husband’s death!”