

## XXVII. *The Last Affair*

Our story needs to take a step backwards.

A few hours before the scene we have just recounted—which is to say, shortly before nightfall, at about the time that Edmée Leber, sustained by her fever, was striding away from the Château de Boisrenaud—the trotting horses pulling a graceful calèche came to a halt at the coaching entrance of a pleasant town house. We have entered the house once before, on the heels of Monsieur Lecoq, to make the acquaintance of the respectable old man known as the Colonel and Mademoiselle Fanchette, the little girl who did not like Toulonnais-l’Amitié. That was a long time ago—the day when J.-B. Schwartz, a man worth 400,000 francs, married a beautiful foreigner, Giovanna Maria Reni, in the Eglise Saint-Roch.

Despite the years that had passed since then, the house had not changed at all. It was still the same imposing edifice, cold and calm, reminiscent of certain houses in the Faubourg Saint-Germain built at the end of the 17th century.

The pavement of the Rue Thérèse, extending from the edge of the house’s grounds for a length of 40 or 50 paces, was hidden beneath a thick layer of straw. It is the ultimate privilege, unnecessary and futile: the heart-rending testimony which informs the inattentive crowd that one of the world’s fortunate people is in the process of suffering or dying.

The coachman did not call out. The gate opened silently regardless. A veiled woman, whose figure and lithe movements betrayed her youth, leapt out of the calèche and crossed the threshold with a light step. She was dressed in black, with an entirely Parisian elegance.

The courtyard was silent. Several first-floor windows were illuminated, but the dismal light they emitted drove away any thought of celebration. The concierge, standing in front of his lodge, said: “Welcome, Madame la Comtesse; Monsieur le Colonel has not much time left now.”

The young woman increased her pace and reached the steps to the front door. At the top, an ancient domestic in dark livery with a monastic aspect opened the door whose bell Madame la Comtesse had rung. He raised the candle he held in his hand and said: “Monsieur le Colonel is very low, very low! He won’t last the night.”

“Has he asked for me?” the young woman asked.

“Twice, before and after his confession.”

“Ah!” she said, with a singular expression. “He has confessed!”

“Yes, yes,” replied the domestic, in a tone that was stranger still. He had an indefinable smile and stood aside as he spoke to let the young woman pass by.

“The whole Council must be in the house?” she queried as she went into the hallway.

“The gentlemen have had dinner served in the drawing-room.”

“Who’s there?”

“Monsieur le Duc, the Englishman, a newcomer who has come from Italy, since he gave the sign of the Camorra, the doctor and your husband.”

She shuddered briefly and went up the stairs rapidly. On one side of the broad landing on to which the three first-floor doors opened, muffled voices could be heard, chatting and laughing tranquilly, accompanied by the discreet clinking of cutlery and wine-glasses. It was not an orgy, but an honest meal in which all the diners abandoned themselves to gaiety while discussing business and pleasure. The meal was taking place behind the door to the left. To the right and in the middle there was silence.

“Has Monsieur Lecoq come?” the young woman asked.

“He was the one who brought the priest.”

“Is he still here?”

“No. He said that he would come back.”

“And the priest?”

“The priest remained for half an hour thereafter.”

The young woman stared at the manservant through the lace of her veil. “Was he a real priest?” she asked, in a low voice.

The domestic shrugged his shoulders, and replied “It’s the newcomer—the one who gave the Camorra password. He’s there, at table, with the others. If you want to see for yourself, look.”

The young woman went to the left-hand door and put her eye to the keyhole; she had lifted her veil in order to see better. When she stood up again, the lamp illuminated a singularly beautiful face: pale and

slender, the features clearly-sculpted in spite of the graceful delicacy of their contours. She was about 25 years of age, marked either by pleasure or sorrow, whose stigmata are similar. The principal trait of her physiognomy was the bold but powerful and dominating gaze emanating from two enormous eyes beneath the sculptural neatness of her arched eyebrows—but even that gaze spoke of fatigue and suffering.

We have seen those large eyes once already in this present location, sparkling beneath ruffled childish tresses, gathered around an unusually large forehead. The child was laughing then, and a thick bunch of damp flowers was insolently hurled from her hand to strike Monsieur Lecoq in the face—the Monsieur Lecoq she had threatened with being dismissed like a lackey. They had been declared enemies then, Monsieur Lecoq and the mischievous girl who was capable of facing up to a bandit. Had they been fighting ever since?

The young woman stayed by the door that separated her from the feast for a moment, thoughtfully. Her face expressed cold scorn mingled with bleak sadness. She went along the corridor without lowering her veil.

“Open it!” she ordered.

The old manservant immediately introduced a key, which he selected from his bunch, into the lock on the right hand door. It gave access into an empty room, which served as an antechamber; in the room beyond, a kind of small drawing-room austere furnished in an outmoded style, a Sister of Charity was keeping vigil next to a table on which two candles illuminated a crucifix. The dying man was in the third room: a bedroom of considerable size, but almost bare, with a single window, giving out on to a balcony above the garden. It was equipped with four doors, of which one remained open—the one to the room where the nun was holding her vigil.

An oak table placed at the head of the bed bore various phials, which supplied the atmosphere with that particular odor which sickrooms have.

The dying man, who was lying on a flat bed surrounded by blue chintz curtains bordered with small white cotton tassels, was generally supposed to be rich. He had funds in the Maison Schwartz. His town house had an expensive exterior and he did good deeds, as the vague expression has it.

In a certain better-informed society, he was assumed to be very rich and everyone there was slightly suspicious of his philanthropy. In this restricted and exclusive circle of people who were fully initiated into the romance of his life and nature, however, he also had the reputation of having hidden a treasure in gold somewhere, and never having been a simple apostle. For the life of the man was, in the final analysis, a profound mystery. Adopting different mores, according to the time and the place, he had played the most difficult of all roles, in broad daylight, in full view of common opinion and beneath the spectacles of the law. He was a great actor. He was dying victorious, his head on a tranquil pillow, in the final hour of that impossible struggle. For 100 years, or more, no one had discovered his secret by means of subtlety or violence.

He had been handsome—very handsome—a reckless gambler, a big spender, a breaker of skulls and hearts; in his youth, he had seen the great carnival of ancient monarchies; later, he had mocked the Republic, laughing as uproariously at glory as at crime; he had made war under the Empire—his own war, an uninterrupted sequence of victories and conquests for which he had rewarded himself by giving himself the rank of colonel. The round dance of imperial government and two Restorations sheltered that dubious promotion. In the era when he had been introduced into this story for the first time as “the Colonel,” his moral reputation had been solidly supported—but his qualifications were a joke. A man like the Colonel never lacks anything that he can fabricate by the skill of his hands. We shall see, however, that he really could have had a high rank. The fair-minded will discover that, for a person like him, the title of Colonel was modest. He had another title, more befitting to him: a title that made him the general-in-chief of his entire rightful army.

And he was dying here, all alone, like a saint or a dog. Where, then, was his general staff? And what good had the booty of his innumerable victories done him?

Years ago, the Colonel had put a check on his fervent existence. Devil or not, he had made a hermit of himself, vegetating peacefully in the easy mediocrity that a molluscan rentier, according to the size of his shell, the nature of his carriage and the scope of his appetites, can obtain in our own day on an income between 30,000 and 50,000 francs. But the *Habit-Noir*—for it was he—had to possess millions, strung like rosary beads! No one in his world or outside it, whether he be among the members of the peninsular Camorra—whose supreme leader he remained—or the affiliate organizations which, in Paris, London and everywhere else, had sworn beneath his hand the mysterious oath of *La Merci*, could have put a figure on the treasure amassed by *Il Padre d’ogni*, the *Père-à-tous*, the Father-of-all.

He was lying on his back; his body already had the attitude of a cadaver. The outline of his limbs was hardly discernible beneath the sagging coverlet. A fortnight-old beard, still very thick and as white as a layer of frost, covered his bony face. It was from the next room that his charitable guardian monitored his halting and painful breathing. Perhaps he had ordered that himself, for his death was like his life: bizarrely cold. In the solitude of his dying, he was sometimes able to think, making plans for the future that he no longer had, and he sometimes gave way to sudden delirium—but a calm sort of delirium, devoid of transports.

Everyone knows the astonishing sensory subtlety that is sometimes mingled with the powerlessness of the final hours. At the very moment that the young woman crossed the threshold of the entrance door, the moribund man said to himself: *Here's Fanchette coming—I knew that Fanchette would come!* A smile almost formed on his withered features. But these lucid moments pass in a flash. An instant afterwards, the dying man wandered off very gently, muttering about projects, calculations, journeys.

The young woman, already close to him, stood and studied him with an indefinable expression, although he was no longer conscious of her presence. The newcomer's gaze simultaneously betrayed a wild curiosity, compassion, the vague remains of a tenderness that seemed long past, and horror. While she stood there silently, lost in meditation, the dying man's lips opened slightly by means of some stiff and awkward mechanism.

"Which of us is the Master, l'Amitié," he pronounced, quite clearly, "you or me? That's the only question..." Then, in a less assured voice: "The pear is ripe in the Schwartz household. Have you the sheaf of banknotes? This will be my last affair..."

The end of the sentence remained within his lips.

The woman that had been addressed as Comtesse Corona put her hand on his forehead, and the contact with that dead flesh made her shiver. She withdrew her fingers as if she had touched the skin of a serpent,

"Is that finally you, Toulonnais-l'Amitié?" asked the old man, in a wheedling tone, half-opening his blind eyes.

"No, grandfather, it's me," the young woman replied, in a low voice.

He seemed to collect his thoughts, with difficulty, and said: "Oh, yes! It's true. My little Fanchette, who loves her Grandpapa so much!" Then, gritting his teeth, he added: "Madame la Comtesse Bozzo-Corona!"

The young woman smiled bitterly. "Have you nothing to say to me, grandfather?" she asked.

For the first time, the old man made a slight movement. His fleshless hands tried to clutch the folds of his sheets, as if to catch hold of something. That instinctive gesture, a symptom of extreme distress, always frightens those who are not used to seeing death. The Comtesse looked away, shivering.

"Indeed, indeed!" the sick man pronounced, laboriously. "I have many things to tell you...and my strength has not yet given out. How I resist! Don't think that I suffer much—no, life is fading within me without a spasm. I've lived wisely and I've had the benefit of it. There are moments when I think that I might last a long time yet...at present, for example, the blood seems to be warming in my veins. I love you very much, my girl. When you were a child, I gave you everything you wanted. I should have had you brought up far away, outside our atmosphere; you would not have known anything; you'd be rich and happy...and the wife of an honest man."

"If you had only done that!" murmured the Comtesse, whose large eyes gleamed darkly.

"Of course, of course!" the Colonel went on. "But your mother knew everything you knew, and still went to church. She died with her hands joined together; we're a sect, like the thugs of India. You can see that I die tranquil. I've never insulted God myself, and in the course of my long life, I've seen every sort of man—the small, the medium and the great—steal, pillage and murder, according to various formulas which, it's true, disguise theft, pillage and murder. Can you tell me, my girl, which is the better man: the thug who strangles the English opium-merchant or the English opium-merchant who poisons that thug? One is a monster, though, in the stupid eyes of the crowd, the other an honorable businessman, as long as he doesn't go bankrupt. None of us sells opium, but they do worse. I've lived well, since I've lived for more than 100 years, rich, respected and tranquil. In commerce, only the bankrupt forces the law out of its sheath. I've never been bankrupt and the law doesn't know me. What have you to complain about, you proud and ungrateful girl?"

These words were pronounced fluently, and even with a certain force. His head had turned on the pillow, in such a manner that the hollow eyes aimed a fixed stare obliquely at the Comtesse.

"I've never reproached you, grandfather."

"No, but you've suffered!" exclaimed the sick man, in the grip of some mysterious, passionate caprice. "That's a reproach in itself! Listen, Fanchette—you shall be rich! Toulonnais accuses you of siding with our enemies, but what does that matter? I love you; you're all that I have. You have it already, because I'm a dead man. I shall never see the great chestnut woods again, out there on our island, nor the myrtle-thickets, nor the blue sea, nor the paving-stones of my own street, covered with straw so that I won't hear the sound of wheels any longer..." He stopped suddenly. "Can you remember?" he went on. "Tell l'Amitié that the pear is ripe in the house he knows well—perfectly ripe. It needs picking. If he gets a move on, I shall still see it and it will be my last affair."

The Comtesse had a hint of disdain on her lips. "You've had the priest, though!" she murmured.

"I've had him," the sick man replied. "It's fitting, and good for the quarter."

"What did you say?"

"My girl," the Colonel replied, with grave severity, "I'm from a land of believers and of time of believers. I've seen Calabrian bandits and Encyclopedists; they talk loudly while they have a sure foothold and a good eye, but neither one nor the other was proud enough to die. I said exactly what it was necessary to say."

"But your thoughts are still sinful!"

"Quiet—there's a holy nun out there...why are you laughing, girl? Man is always a sinner and repents incessantly: that's what conscience means!" He closed his tired eyes and drew a hoarse breath, but his strength was far from exhaustion, for he twisted his sheets as he asked: "How many are down there, waiting for me to die, so that they may unmake my bed and ransack my mattress?"

"You know them well," Fanchette said, coldly. "They are, indeed, there, waiting to do exactly that."

"If I wanted to," the Colonel murmured, "I would die surrounded by guards, like a king." The Comtesse's reply troubled him, though; he must have hoped for a contradiction, for he said: "You don't like them, Fanchette. How many are there?"

"Five. The Duc, the Doctor, Milord and Comte Corona."

"And l'Amitié?"

"L'Amitié's already spending your inheritance. He's a lazy and ungrateful swine."

"He's my pupil," the old man said, so softly that the Comtesse could hardly hear him. "If you'd taken him for a husband, my girl, you'd never have wanted anyone to make you a widow!"

"I don't want that now," she said. "I know how to suffer."

"When I'm no longer here, if you change your mind, you're from Sartène and you're very beautiful. Someone will love you enough to hate him..."

Tears came to the young woman's eyes. "I'm in love, but I'm not loved," she stammered.

"Who do you love, then, girl?" This was said with childish curiosity.

"Michel," the Comtesse confessed, in a murmur.

The Colonel opened his eyes wide. "Michel!" he repeated. "Maynotte's son! That business keeps on coming back, still." Then, shaking off an unwelcome thought, he said: "You only gave me four names, girl. Who's the fifth jackal?"

"It's your confessor, the Abbé," the Comtesse replied, icily. She thought that he would lift himself up on his elbow as that reply struck him violently. His head left the pillow, but fell back immediately. "Did they do that?" the old man continued, his voice weakening as his anger increased. "That's an unforgivable crime—that's sacrilege! Have they forced me into sacrilege? Oh, the accursed rogues! Oh, the wretches! That Duc—a heartless debauché. That lord—a pickpocket! That doctor—a charlatan! And that Comte, your husband—a true bandit! Do you see...do you see that I did well not to tell the priest everything? The secret remains with me. God is good! God is just! I've always believed in God, I swear!"

"So there is a secret?" the young woman queried, with an irresistible avidity.

The Colonel's anger faded away and his bleak gaze enveloped the Comtesse. "Yes," he said, with an emphasis shot through with sarcasm, "there is a secret. Have you ever heard the name pronounced that I wore when I marched at the head of all the Camorras?"

"Indeed," the Comtesse replied.

"That name had a high ring!" the old man went on. "It won't be written on my tomb. And have you ever heard mention of the *Scapular of La Merci*?"

The young woman remained silent, but her ardent eyes were pleading. The old man lifted his trembling hand to his eyelids, as if he wished to push aside a veil and read the Comtesse's thoughts in her gaze—but the weary hand fell back. "I can no longer see!" he murmured. "I didn't recognize the rogue who

stole my confession. But I have someone...one faithful servant remains to me...they won't have the secret! Toulonnais-l'Amitié wasn't mixed up in that impious treason. He's my pupil. I'll give him the Scapular."

"He's the one who brought the false priest," said the young woman, dryly.

The sick man's eyes glimmered faintly. "Don't tease me, girl!" he said. "This is my final hour and I'm your grandfather!" He made a gesture, whose significance she knew, for she uncorked a phial that was on the night-table and poured a few drops of its contents into a rose-red spoon. She put the spoon between the invalid's teeth, which clicked against the metal.

"You love me, Fanchette," he murmured, after having drunk. "Thank you."

"I love you, grandfather," the Comtesse replied. "If l'Amitié becomes the Master, he'll do me harm."

"You're only a woman—you can't be the Master."

"Look at me," she said. She drew her lithe and muscular figure up to its full height. She had the beauty of a queen.

The old man addressed an admiring nod of the head to her, and murmured: "You're stronger than a man, it's true...and we have the time."

Perhaps it was the effect of the potion. A little blood returned to his wan cheeks. Suddenly, he seemed to hear a noise that was inaudible to his companion's ears; his eyes, recovering their radiance, made a tour of the room and paused successively on the three closed doors, and then the window.

"They're not at the dining-table," he said. And, as the Comtesse interrogated him with her gaze, he added: "Go and see!"

She obeyed immediately. During her absence, the sister who was keeping vigil in the next room came to the threshold and darted an attentive glance at the bed. The sick man watched her from beneath his half-closed eyelids.

When the Comtesse returned, she resumed her place beside the bed and whispered: "They've gone."

The invalid gestured, bidding her to come closer. His shriveled lips sketched a bitter smile. Rapidly and quite distinctly, he said: "They're there—I can feel them. I can see them through the doors; every one of those panels conceals a carnivore in ambush—the window too. I heard footsteps on the balcony. Don't move...don't look...I know them. If they find out what I'm about to tell you, they'll kill you!"

She knew them too, for a chill ran through her veins.

"They're trying to cheat one another," the old man went on. "That's their instinct. Society, to them, is a war of all against all. But for that, there'd be no limits to their power. Each one of them has withdrawn overtly in order to creep back on the sly. They smell my end..."

"But they're of very little account, grandfather," the Comtesse put in, astonished by the manifest symptoms of vitality that seemed reborn in his body, as in his intelligence. "You're better than them."

"Within a quarter of an hour," the Colonel replied, coldly, "I'll be dead. Everything will be yours, Fanchette; the secret of the *Habits Noirs*, the Scapular of La Merci and the key to the treasure. You're blushing, your eyes are shining, you don't love me. *Will it be light tomorrow?* No—not for me, not here. Elsewhere, I don't know. You can't take anything with you where I'm going...wherever that is."

A brief shudder agitated his meager limbs beneath the sheets. His voice was still distinct, but internally, calm was giving way to dull distress. His eyes rolled, dull and haggard in their hollow orbits.

"*Will it be light tomorrow?*" he repeated. "Why are memories of the past rising up within me like a flood? My eyes were keener than an eagle's, my voice rose above the roar of torrents, out there in the mountains where the thousand heads of the Camorra bowed before one alone: mine! We fought armies then... *Will it be light tomorrow?* Do you know where that phrase comes from? It was joyous, it was warlike; it promised peril and plunder. I was the one who always responded to that question, asked by my tenebrous soldiers. After weeks of orgiastic feasting in the sumptuous night of our subterranean retreats, the hour would come to see daylight again and to do battle. *Will it be light tomorrow?* Will there be blood and gold? Shall we hear the concert of gunfire? Shall we look down from our saddles upon the disheveled and white-faced captives? Yes, it will be light tomorrow...then, there would be a long drunken cheer. The women seemed more beautiful and the wine ran more freely. And it was true! The following day, it was light. The somber horsemen rode along the mountain paths...or the bold lords displayed the velvet of their cloaks even in the towns...and there was a name: mine, resounding like thunder..."

His voice weakened, exhausted by the futile effort. The Comtesse seized his hand. "Grandfather," she said. "You don't have much time!"

He looked at her with his dead eyes.

"*Will it be light tomorrow?*" he intoned, once more. "I don't know. Who knows that? I believe in God, but one can be mistaken. I've lived more than 100 years. Perhaps there's something to do beyond the

tomb—that remains to be seen. Don't be afraid, girl, I'll have time to tell you everything. I won't be in want of a minute at the end of so long a life. Lean towards me, as if to embrace me with all your heart. There's a ribbon around my neck—cut through it with your teeth and you'll have the Scapular. How your eyes shine! Embrace me again—you don't love me!"

"I have the Scapular," said the Comtesse, with frightful self-possession.

"Then you needn't embrace me any longer. The secret of the *Habits Noirs* is sewn inside it..."

She put her lips to the sick man's forehead one more time.

"Thank you," the murmured. "That's a bonus. As for the treasure—ah, the treasure! It has cost me dear! Listen carefully; the pear is ripe in the home of Baron Schwartz. I think I'll live to see that affair through: it will be my last. There's nothing more for me...have I told you where the Camorra's treasure is? Go to the ruins of La Merci...you'll find it in..."

A second, more abrupt, shudder agitated his limbs.

"I'll find it," repeated the Comtesse, "in what? Where?"

The Colonel did not reply. His eyes and mouth were wide open. She felt his heart. Then she made the sign of the cross before unhooking a little ebony crucifix suspended on the wall. She placed the crucifix on the coverlet. That duty accomplished, she crossed the room with a firm tread and said to the nun keeping vigil in the next room: "Colonel Bozzo-Corona is dead, sister."

A few moments later, the calèche was rolling noiselessly over the straw scattered in front of the house.

Just as the nun got up to go into the dead man's room, a hand wrapped in a silk handkerchief broke a pane in the balcony window and reached in to turn the catch. It was a nimble hand that knew its business. The window opened and a masked man leapt from the balcony on to the floor. He went to the bed and ripped off the button securing the dead man's chemise around his thin neck, uncovering his chest and shoulders.

During the few seconds required by this task, executed with skill and assurance, the three closed doors swung quietly on their hinges. Two men showed themselves at each of the first two; the false priest appeared at the third. It was the complete set of those who had been at the dining-table a short while before; the dying man had guessed correctly. All five were armed.

At the fourth door—that of the room where the vigil was held, which had remained open all the time—the avid faces of the nun and the old manservant in monastic dress could be seen. All these people were watching curiously as the masked man accomplished his task. The latter threw the sheet back over the dead man's face with an angry gesture. There was a sound of contained laughter.

"You're too late, l'Amitié!" said the nun.

The masked man stood up straight, displaying neither alarm nor surprise. He folded his arms across his chest and moved his gaze over the people surrounding him. They had come closer and were forming a circle.

There were two young men among them, one of whom—a Bourbon type resembling medallions of the adolescent Louis XV—was particularly remarkable in his almost feminine beauty. Abundant curly black hair framed his soft and delicate face; this was the Duc. The other young man, the one they called Milord, had reddish-blond hair brushed in the English style.

There was a man with strong features and a cold, hard, accusing stare, about 40 years of age, dressed with rigorous decency; this was the Doctor. The others seemed to be afraid of him. There were two people in whom longer and more profound degradation had left more apparent stigmata: Comte Corona, an Italian with the handsome clean-shaven face of an angel, and the Abbé, his face ravaged by vice, but brightened by a diabolical intelligence. His cheeks and the surrounds of his eyes still bore the vestiges of expertly-applied theatrical make-up, with the aid of which he had been able to deceive the eyes of the dying man. Finally, there was the nun—a pretty young woman with a raucous voice and a brutal and insulting laugh—and the old domestic, who retained, by force of habit, the greater part of his hypocritical attitude.

"I expected all of you to be here," said the masked man. "It's appropriate that the High Council of the *Habits Noirs*, in its entirety, should surround the deathbed of our *Père-à-tous*..."

"Three are missing," said the Doctor. "There are 12 of us in the first rank, counting the Master."

The masked man replied: "I am now the Master. Counting me, we remain eleven. Fanchette, Monsieur Bruneau and Trois-Pattes are absent. Fanchette will be judged; Monsieur Bruneau distrusts me; Trois-Pattes is my slave. We may deliberate."

A murmur had greeted the declaration "I am now the Master," but the masked man continued: "It is necessary that the funeral be worthy of the one who is no more. No one should miss it—not you, nor those of

the second degree, nor the army of simple companions. *It will be light tomorrow*, and the brotherhood will display itself in broad daylight to the eyes of the profane.”

“Well said, L’Amitié,” replied Comte Corona, sniggering. “And it was to preach to us thus that you jumped in through the window?”

“With a carnival mask,” added the nun, who, having peeled off her habit, was adjusting her dress in front of a mirror.

“I knew that the Comtesse would come,” the masked man replied. Then, addressing the Italian, he added: “You owe us something in that regard and you have not settled the account.”

Corona shrugged his shoulders, saying: “But for that old Devil the Père, I’d have been a widow the day after my wedding!”

“Did he reveal anything in his confession?” the masked man asked the false priest.

“He recounted a few peccadilloes,” the Abbé replied, “but regarding the essentials, nothing. He died like a saint, word of honor!”

“He was a man and he was the Père!” Toulonnais-l’Amitié pronounced, emphatically, thus encapsulating the funeral oration of the deceased Master in a few words. “My brothers,” he went on, changing his tone, “I was told a few minutes ago that I had arrived too late. That’s true, so far as you’re concerned—but with respect to myself, it’s not significant. Several days have already passed since I received the secret of the *Habits Noirs* from the Père’s hands, with his final instructions.”

“What were you looking for inside his chemise,” the Doctor demanded, rudely, “if you have the Scapular?”

“Show us the Scapular!” added Comte Corona.

“I will show the Scapular,” l’Amitié replied, “at the assembly that will come together to recognize me as the new Master; at the same time, I shall read the Père’s last will and I shall give details of the immense operation whose plan occupied his last waking moments. I alone can do that; does anyone wish to call me a liar?”

“What were you looking for inside the chemise?” the Doctor repeated.

“I was looking for a letter, about which I had been told, but which I did not find. The Père has given me the secret that can only belong to one person, and which belongs to me, but his money will be divided between all of you—and he was reluctant to part with his gold. There is a child within a man about to die. The Père did not want to release the key to the treasure while he was alive.”

“That must be true,” said the Abbé. “He conserved a vague hope of living.”

“I was looking for the key,” l’Amitié went on, “and I was looking for the explanatory letter that would put us—all of you—in possession of your inheritance. But there was a woman here just now. We were watching her, it’s true; all our eyes were upon her. It made no difference; she has Bohemian blood in her Corsican veins; she’s skillful; she’s bold...didn’t you see how she leaned over to embrace the Père?”

“That’s right!” The words came from all sides. “We saw that.”

“That woman has been against us since the days of her childhood.”

The voices replied again: “That’s true! That’s true! Her father and mother weren’t with us!”

“That woman has taken your wealth to give it to our enemies; she has stolen that which would have made you rich at a stroke. The Père is no longer here to put his love between her and punishment. She must die.”

The six replied with one voice: “That’s justice; she shall die.”

And Comte Corona, laughing cynically, added: “I’m jealous—don’t get mixed up in that; I’ll take care of it.”