

The Club of the Jack of Hearts

A room serving as a library, opening in the back on another room. To the left, there a door leading to the Marquis de Chamery's room. To the right, facing the door, there is a window opening on a balcony. At the back, part of the library is at the left and, on the right, there is an iron safe set into the wall. In a corner there is a table covered with papers forming a work desk. Near this table there is an armchair of the type used by convalescents. The room, the hangings, the furniture all very stern-looking. A candelabra with two candles is on the table; it is the only source of light in the library.

AT RISE, Gertrude enters from the back, as if she had just escorted someone out. Venture, dressed in a modest livery and affecting an attraction more modest still, is finishing lighting the candles.

GERTRUDE: There, the doctor's gone.

VENTURE: Well done, Gertrude. What did he say?

GERTRUDE: That he found Monsieur de Chamery very ill.

VENTURE: Then, it's bad luck for me. The Marquis will give you a settlement. You've worked for him more than 26 years, whereas I, who only came here six months ago, will have to seek other employment.

(Gertrude sits in the armchair and unwinds a roll of wool which she makes Venture hold while she rewinds it.)

GERTRUDE: Poor man! Hold my wool, will you?

VENTURE: With pleasure.

GERTRUDE: If you must leave us I will miss you, Venture.

VENTURE: That will be a great honor you'll be doing me.

GERTRUDE: You are pleasant and much more clever than that imbecile of a Dominique who left us without saying why he was going. Would you believe that he, a man, was more afraid than I? In this old hotel, Rue de l'Ouest! The Marquis came to live here three months ago and...

VENTURE: What! He was afraid? A strong, ruddy-faced fellow like that?

GERTRUDE: Ah, but he became all pale when they whispered in front of him of the Jack of Hearts!

VENTURE: Oh! That's a good one! He was afraid of a playing card?

GERTRUDE: You don't know what the Jack of Hearts are, do you?

VENTURE: Excuse me, but I am very well versed in the games of *piquet* and *bezigue*.

GERTRUDE: Fool! I am speaking to you of a gang of thieves, who are unfortunately very well-known around the Capital.

VENTURE: My, my...

GERTRUDE: And these rogues do not hesitate to kill to steal!

VENTURE: Ah, that's nasty! But why do they call themselves the Jack of Hearts?

GERTRUDE: Because they always leave that card as their calling card everywhere they've been—inside the safes they've emptied—on the bleeding wound of a man they've just murdered—always a jack of hearts!

VENTURE: That's funny. No, I mean that's horrible. But it sounds quite fanciful. Do you really believe in this tale?

GERTRUDE: Yes, I do!

(A loud ringing is heard. Gertrude lets out a cry and lets her wool fall.)

GERTRUDE: Ah! What's that?

VENTURE *(picking up the ball)*: That? Unless I'm mistaken, that's Monsieur ringing

GERTRUDE: Yes, yes, and he's ringing for me. If I need you, I'll call you. How stupid! I am all atremble!

(Gertrude leaves.)

VENTURE *(watching her go)*: There's a nice old woman who would faint if I told her "I am one of the most active members of the Club of the Jack of Hearts. I've been sent here by Andrea de Felipone, our leader. I know the Marquis de Chamery's illness better than his Doctor, and I know that it can't be cured. The Marquis has written to his Notary regarding his will. I've taken that letter to my master and now await his orders."

(Gertrude returns.)

GERTRUDE: The Marquis is growing impatient because his Notary hasn't come yet. He wants someone to go and fetch him—Maître Aubernon, Rue du Louvre.

VENTURE: Of course. I will go at once. *(aside)* But I won't bring him back.

GERTRUDE: No, not you. The Marquis wants you to stay here. He asked me to send Little Jean instead.

VENTURE: Who?

GERTRUDE: The errand boy outside. *(she goes to the window and looks into the street.)* Great! He's not at his usual place!

VENTURE: Then the Marquis will have to wait... *(a different ringing)* Good Lord—a visitor!

GERTRUDE: Perhaps it's Maître Aubernon?

VENTURE *(aside)*: That would greatly surprise me.

GERTRUDE: Heavens! It's Maman Fipart, our seamstress. Come in, Maman Fipart, come in! I expected you yesterday.

(Maman Fipart, an old crone, enters.)

MAMAN FIPART: True, true, I'm a bit late, but what a state your linen was in! We worked hard, Cerise and I, to fix it.

VENTURE: Cerise?

MAMAN FIPART: My niece, my only consolation in my old age! Without her, I don't know what would become of me. Without her, I couldn't work. My eyes aren't what they used to be. Too many tears!

GERTRUDE: Yes, I know. You lost your husband four years ago. He was a good man.

MAMAN FIPART: Ah, Madame Gertrude! He was the very incarnation of honor and honesty—and a hard worker, too! A model artisan, he was. He earned good wages, we had savings, we were happy. God took him from me.

GERTRUDE: But you still have a son. Although I've heard...

MAMAN FIPART: What?

GERTRUDE *(embarrassed)*: Well, that he's been kicked from many a job, and that if he desires something of yours, it's as good as stolen.

MAMAN FIPART: No, Madame Gertrude, don't call my son a thief. 'Tis true that he took some money from us, but my God, that money was his, too! If my husband had lived, Joseph might have turned out better. Perhaps it's my fault. Then, you know, they always make things worse than they are. Joseph was lazy and that's been his misfortune. He likes to have fun and he's made

some bad acquaintances. But inside, he was ashamed. He didn't tell these villains his real name, no, he didn't! To them, he was known only as "Rocamboles." And these men dragged him down no further than he wished. The memory of his father has always protected him from committing the worst crimes... I gave him a talisman!

VENTURE AND GERTRUDE: A talisman?

MAMAN FIPART: One day—a beautiful day, that was—the master of the workshop where my husband worked gave him a silver medallion, to honor him as the best and more honest of all his workers. My husband always wore it on a chain around his neck, with a lock of my hair—it was his badge of honor! After he died, I took that medallion and gave it to Joseph, and made him swear to always wear it as his father had done, in his memory and as an example.

VENTURE: I bet the scamp pawned it, right?

MAMAN FIPART: No, sir, he kept it, but—

GERTRUDE: —But ignored its meaning. You're a good woman, Madame Fipart. Whatever happens, I will always send you my business. Here's your money. It's late and it's far to Belleville—that's where you live, no?

MAMAN FIPART: Yes, Rue des Moulins, No. 27, the house of Mademoiselle Tulipe Hubert.

VENTURE: Tulipe?

MAMAN FIPART: Yes, she's my landlady. Goodbye, Madame Gertrude! Monsieur Venture! 'Til another time.

(She leaves.)

GERTRUDE: Now, there's a *good* woman.

VENTURE: With a "promising" son. A name like that! Rocamboles! It speaks volumes!

GERTRUDE: It's not for us to judge. *(going to window)* Ah! The errand boy is back at his post. *(shouting)* Hey, little fella! Come up, come up quick! We've got need of your services!

VENTURE *(who has been looking)*: I don't know that lad.

GERTRUDE: He was sick for the last two months and didn't return until today. Let me open the door for him.

(She opens the door. Jean Guignon enters. He is dressed as an errand boy. He has a good and honest face and a naïve expression.)

JEAN GUIGNON *(to Gertrude)*: I'm well enough to serve you today, Madame Gertrude, and your master, too. I got out of the hospital this morning and I haven't had any work yet.

GERTRUDE: Good. You'll take a letter that is still being written to.... By the way, what did happen to you? The last time I saw you down there, you didn't seem sick at all. Did a roof tile fall on your head?

JEAN GUIGNON: No. A man fell on my arms.

VENTURE: A man?

JEAN GUIGNON: You may find that surprising, Monsieur, but me, when I get up in the morning, I always ask myself what catastrophe is going to happen to me that day. You see, when I was little, my friends nicknamed me Jean "Guignon," which means "bad luck," because I really had bad luck! First, I'm my mother's tenth child. I was born on Friday the 13th in the first quarter of an April moon. Those are evil portents. I soured the milk of five nurses, three from Burgundy, one from Picardy and a goat. When the Draft was reinstated, I drew No. 1. I had a girl friend who swore she'd wait for me. Finally, after four years, a minor injury got me out of the Army. So I went home, all the while telling myself, "Sweetums—that was my girlfriend—Sweetums' gonna be real happy 'cuz I'm home three years early." But what do you think happened when I got back to my village? The bells were ringing. The whole village was at the church. I rushed there and what do you think I saw?

VENTURE: Sweetums getting married?

JEAN GUIGNON: No. Sweetums baptizing her third child! Then, from despair, I rushed to Paris and took the job of errand boy. Here, I made all new acquaintances. My luck seemed to change; I met a good girl, a hard worker, pretty and fresh like her name—Cerise. That's a sweet name, isn't it? I'd like to marry her, so I went down to her place to ask for her hand. As I was passing through the Rue de Varennes, I saw a crowd looking up at a man beating capers on his balcony. It gave you gooseflesh just to look at him up there! He was, perhaps, a student of Leotard. Finally, he tried a last pirouette, but this time, his head twisted and he missed his footing. Everybody recoiled. Like an idiot, I extended my arms forward! And he fell on me straight from the third floor.

GERTRUDE: The poor man!

JEAN GUIGNON: No, poor me!

GERTRUDE: Why? Didn't he kill himself?

JEAN GUIGNON: No! He dislocated my shoulder, that's what he did.

(Ringing from the left.)

GERTRUDE: Ah! Monsieur has finished writing his letter. Come take it, then leave by the service stairs.

(Gertrude leads Jean to the Marquis' room, unwittingly placing her hand on his shoulder.)

JEAN GUIGNON: Ouch!

GERTRUDE: What's wrong?

JEAN GUIGNON *(rubbing his shoulder)*: Just a souvenir from Leotard's student.

(They go into the Marquis' room.)

VENTURE: Uh-oh. Maître Aubernon mustn't be informed. He mustn't come. Oh, my word, too bad for that poor Guignon, but he can't be allowed to go to the Notary's. A flower pot is less heavy than a man—I'd rather not kill this poor devil, but I must stop him. *(looking at the window)* There he comes.

(Venture grabs a flower pot and drops it.)

JEAN GUIGNON *(outside)*: Ouch! Oh my head! My head! *(sound of a collapse)*

VENTURE *(still looking)*: They're picking him up... taking him to the wine seller's. He doesn't seem too badly injured—that makes me feel better—and he won't do his errand. We won't see Maître Aubernon.

GERTRUDE *(entering from the back)*: Come in, sir, come in.

VENTURE *(turning)*: Huh?

(Gertrude enters with a man dressed in black with a white tie and white frill, grey wig and bluish glasses. He has a respectable air.)

GERTRUDE: Someone's just left to fetch you.

VENTURE *(aside)*: Who was it who told him to come?

GERTRUDE: I'll announce you to Monsieur le Marquis.

VENTURE: Excuse me, Monsieur. Are you Maître Aubernon, the Notary?

ANDREA *(for it is he)*: No, my friend, I'm one of his clerks and it's he who has sent me with this letter for the Marquis de Chamery. *(He hands a letter to Gertrude.)*

VENTURE: Shouldn't you tell us—

ANDREA: My name? Of course. Forgive me. Nothing could be more proper. Here's my card.
(*He hands a card to Venture—a playing card!*)

VENTURE (*aside*): A jack of hearts!

ANDREA (*low*): Imbecile.

VENTURE (*low*): The master!

GERTRUDE: Well?

VENTURE: Oh, go ahead, announce him. The gentleman is a proper Notary.

ANDREA: Go, my good woman, go.

(*Exit Gertrude. Andrea takes off his glasses and goes to sit in an armchair.*)

VENTURE: I can see how you are able to deceive just about anyone, seeing how you just fooled me, your oldest—associate.

ANDREA: You flatter me, my poor lad, you flatter me greatly. Let's get down to business. I've learned, through my network of spies in the provinces, that a Marquis de Chamery, old and without family, had just sold his vast estate in Brittany, and that, after having collected the sale price, had come to live alone in this modest house, accompanied only by his trusted governess and a servant. This Marquis is a miser who hoards a treasure that I fancy to possess. First, it was necessary to place someone on the inside. The governess was too loyal and the servant a nincompoop who could not be trusted. So I arranged to scare him away, and you were put in his place. That was six weeks ago...

VENTURE: God knows if, during that time, I haven't listened at the doors, spied on the old man and tried to wrest confidences from the old woman.

ANDREA: And yet, you still haven't figured out where the money is?

VENTURE: Well, there's a safe in here. I've seen rolls of gold coins inside, that I haven't touched of course. The real treasure is hidden elsewhere, but I've searched the house from top to bottom and...

ANDREA: ...And you haven't found a thing. You no longer even try. Still, you did find something of importance. A week ago, the Marquis received a letter... An important letter...

VENTURE: Yes! It almost transformed him. Now, he speaks of leaving Paris, of traveling—

ANDREA: That's why I decided to rush our business. Thanks to your skills with poison, the Marquis is now gravely ill; so, he naturally wants to put his affairs in order and wrote to Maître Aubernon, his Notary, to notify him that he wishes to draw up a new will... It was very easy for me to take the place of the Notary and I've come here to receive that will that will finally tell us where he's hidden his millions.

VENTURE: Here's the Marquis.

(*The Marquis enters, supported by Gertrude. He is old and frail, but broken more by sorrow than by age. He's dressed in a long white robe, over white pajamas and slippers. Andrea and Venture stand up and bow.*)

VENTURE (*low to Andrea*): You see that the dose was very well measured.

(*With a gesture, the Marquis sends away Gertrude and Venture, and lets himself fall into an armchair while inviting the phony Notary to take a seat.*)

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: I am a stranger to Paris, Monsieur. I used Maître Aubernon's services purely because his office is near this house.

ANDREA: Maître Aubernon is himself very ill and begged me to—

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: I understand, Monsieur. Your official function is a guarantee of honorability. I will tell you the secret I wanted to confide to your employer. Please sit down, Monsieur, nearer to me—closer—for my voice is growing tired. My strength is going and I have a long story to tell you.

ANDREA: I am listening, Monsieur le Marquis.

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Very well. I was once married to a woman much younger than I. The Marquise was a beautiful lady. I was very jealous, and yet during the first three years of our marriage, she gave me no reason to feel that way, not even the most innocent flirtation, never once besmirching the name she now bore. But then, a diplomatic mission from Spain brought one of her distant relatives—a Monsieur de Sallandrera.

ANDREA: Would you be speaking of the Duke de Sallandrera, who was for a long time the Spanish Ambassador to Brazil?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: The same. It was precisely to go to Rio de Janeiro that he left us. The Duke was still a young man. He couldn't see his charming cousin without falling in love with her. I soon had written proof of their love—their affair! When the Marquise later gave birth to a son, I suspected at once that the child was but the fruit of adultery and I swore that the bastard would neither inherit my fortune nor my name. But I was fearful of scandal. So I insisted that the child, entrusted to a nurse named Marianne, be raised far from my chateau. When he reached his third year, the Marquise begged me to return her son to her but I hesitated. I wanted to punish the mother—but I also pitied the child. Still, I was forced to make a decision. One night, a fire devoured Marianne's house. The next day, the firemen searched in vain throughout the ashes for the remains of the woman and child who surely had perished in that fire.

ANDREA: A fire lit by your orders?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Yes.

ANDREA: So, you had condemned an innocent woman and child to death?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: You are mistaken, Monsieur. I didn't want the bastard to die, merely to disappear. That very night, Marianne, whom I had bribed, embarked on a ship with the child. Later, she resettled in Ireland in a little farm purchased with my money.

ANDREA: The firemen must have been surprised to not to find any evidence of bodies—

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Indeed, but no one doubted their deaths. My wife wept for 23 years for her son. Poor woman. *(stops and starts crying)*

ANDREA: What's wrong, Monsieur?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY *(getting hold of himself)*: Nothing. I'll continue. After the death of the Marquise, I resolved to change my life. I sold everything I owned. Thus, I realized a considerable sum of money...

ANDREA: Which you have kept in your home? That's extremely careless.

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: In Brittany, I had no fear of thieves. Here, I have deposited it at the Banque de France.

ANDREA *(aside)*: Ah! The Devil! It will be difficult to get it out of there. *(aloud)* And to whom do you wish to will this fortune?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: To the child—to my son.

ANDREA: Ah! I'm afraid, I no longer understand...

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Let me explain. Eight days ago, I received a letter from the Duke de Sallandrera. This letter informed me that Marianne, the nurse, tortured with remorse, had confessed to him that, following my instructions, she had set fire to her house and, later, used the pension I paid her to resettle in Ireland. There, she had raised young Albert—that's his name—who became handsome just like his mother. Faithful to my orders, she kept him ignorant of the name of his father. Albert applied himself to the arts, especially painting. Lately, he began to travel. His last letter to Marianne was posted from Madras. The poor woman didn't want to take his secret to her grave so she confessed to the Duke, whom she knew was a relative. She also sent him a few of my letters which she had kept. The Duke understood all too well my motives. Appraised of the

situation for the first time, he decided to give me proof—irrefutable proof—of the Marquis's innocence and thus of Albert's legitimate birth. "When the young man returns to France," he wrote me, "let you, his true father, give him back his name and his fortune and I, Duke de Sallandrera, swear on my honor as a Grandee of Spain and on my faith as a Christian, to give Albert, Marquis of Chamery, my daughter, Concepcion de Sallandrera, to be his wife." I could no longer doubt his words. I wanted to leave, to find this son I had cast out—but ill as I am, I no longer have the time. So, in this holographic last will and testament, I have written out what I just confessed to you. I hereby recognize that Albert, the child raised by Marianne, is indeed my son. My only son! I will never see him. I won't be able to say to him: "Forgive me for all the wrongs I've done to you; forgive me for all the wrongs I did to your mother."

ANDREA: I see. So you would like me to safekeep the will and these accompanying letters?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Not quite. I will place them under lock in this safe, built into this wall, the key of which never leaves my person. When I am no more, you will know where to find the will and you will undertake to execute it.

(The Marquis rises, goes to open the safe and places the will and documents inside. Then, he hides the key in his pajamas. Feeling suddenly weak, he leans against the wall.)

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: There is a fortune of five millions there for my son, Monsieur.

ANDREA *(aside)*: Five millions!

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: I feel weak suddenly. Would you ring the bell?

(Andrea rings. Gertrude and Venture appear.)

GERTRUDE: Ah! My God! Monsieur, are you feeling ill?

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Yes, I can no longer get to my room alone. *(to Andrea)* Goodbye, Monsieur. If I never see you again—remember—remember!

(The Marquis waves a weak goodbye to Andrea and returns to his room supported by Gertrude and Venture.)

ANDREA *(alone)*: Hmm. Stealing the money is impossible. One can't easily deceive the Banque de France. The Marquis' millions will only leave its vaults to pass into the hands of his Heir... Hmm. This suggests another tack... Whosoever possesses the will and is its beneficiary will eventually become the sole owner of the Chamery gold... I'd wage that a poor, starving artist, presently without name or fortune, won't refuse to share the millions that I, alone, can give him.

(Venture emerges from the Marquis' room.)

VENTURE: The Marquis is dying. He didn't even feel my hand when I slid it into his robe and pinched the key.

ANDREA: The governess?

VENTURE: She ran off like a madwoman to fetch the doctor.

ANDREA: The entire Faculty of Medicine of Paris couldn't save the life of a man whom I have condemned to death. His hour has come. Give me the key and keep an eye on what's going on.

(Venture runs to the back to make sure no one comes from outside. Andrea takes the key and attempts to open the safe.)

(At this moment, the Marquis enters through the doorway on the left. He is pale, weak, more a ghost than a man. He sees Andrea turn the key in the lock of the safe. He drags himself, or rather hurls himself, forward and, in a supreme effort of will, grabs Andrea.)

MARQUIS DE CHAMERY: Ah! Infamy!

(Upon seeing the Marquis, Venture recoils in shocked. Even Andrea appears momentarily troubled. Suddenly, the wind blows out the candles. Andrea has regained his calm. With Venture's help, he takes the old man, now barely conscious, back to his room.)

(The stage remains empty and dark for a moment. Then we see an arm come in through the half-opened window on the right and raises the latch. A young man, rattily dressed, opens the window and stealthily jumps into the room. It is Rocambole.)

ROCAMBOLE: An open window, that is to say: an invitation. Nothing but a small balcony to scale. No lights. No one in the street. No sounds from the house. How could one resist the temptation? A sick, old man, an old woman, a single servant—and a hidden treasure. That's what I heard on the street. So I said to myself: Rocambole, my boy, there's an opportunity here. You can't go back to Maman Fipart. You sleep either on hot coals or icy-cold cobbles, and your wardrobe is dismal. That's no life for one with your talents. So the notion of snatching a pretty stash and beating it to another country and starting over becomes very appealing—and I think I might just be able to do it here. But first, let there be light! *(lights a match)* Now I can look around. *(he does)* Heavens, what do I see but a safe with the key still in its lock! The gods are smiling on me!

(Rocambole goes to the safe, opens it and starts rifling through its contents. Suddenly, Andrea emerges from the Marquis' room. Upon seeing Rocambole, he stops.)

ANDREA: By the Devil! Who's this man? Where did he come from?

(Andrea pulls a dagger from his pocket and hurls himself at Rocambole. The young man, surprised, tries to resist but Andrea has the advantage. The older man soon has Rocambole trapped under his knees and is about to stab him when Venture appears, holding a candle. The light lights up the face of Rocambole. Andrea's arm remains suspended in mid-air.)

ROCAMBOLE: Trapped! Ah, you've got a good grip—word of Rocambole.

VENTURE: Rocambole! *(stopping Andrea's arm)* One moment, master! I know who he is....

CURTAIN