

PART ONE: THE INVISIBLE MAN

I. A Mysterious Departure

In the elegant apartment occupied by the Comtesse de Villerville, on the first floor of a modern building in the Avenue Marigny, the large drawing room, which had been resonating with the sound of conversations, the discreet laughter and little stifled exclamations of socialites a little while before, was now quiet under the gleam of chandeliers. A warm mist was floating persistently, as if to testify to the agitation that had reigned a moment before.

The Comte and Comtesse had received their intimate friends, as they did every Friday. They had just escorted the last couple to the elevator, and an evident satisfaction was legible in their faces.

They were alone!

In a corner, on a side-table, a Boulle clock¹ marked two-thirty.

"Finally," sighed the Comte, a man of tall stature with a fan-like black beard, in whose eyes an uncommon energy was visible. "Finally! I thought they'd never leave!"

As if she had divined her husband's thought, the young woman asked, in a slightly emotional one: "You've given your orders to Jim?"

"Yes, everything's ready. I've told him to prepare the limousine.

The Comtesse paraded one final proprietorial glance over the scattered furniture. She was a splendid creature, blonde, supple and svelte, in whom a certain casualness of gesture and an imperceptible hint of accent in the voice betrayed a foreign origin.

She returned to the door and turned the electric light-switch herself. The drawing room was plunged into darkness. As the Comte pulled the oak batten ornamented with gold toward him, his wife's hand weighed upon his arm and gripped it forcefully.

"I'm afraid," the Comtesse murmured.

"Why? And of what?"

They took a few paces together in the antechamber; a smile wandered over the Comte's lips. "Child," he said.

The young woman became animated. "It's that Revel with his stories...no one's more stupid than that chatterbox."

"Revel is a deadpan humorist... he likes getting on the nerves of the women who listen to him."

"I'd like to believe you, but it's inept and also in poor taste. A few days ago, I wouldn't have taken any notice of his stories, but now you're going away, and I'll be on my own, Raoul, it seems to me..."

"Come on, calm down Dianah."

The Comtesse smiled, and looked at her husband fixedly. "And yet," she said "What if all that were true?"

"What?"

"You weren't listening, then? These murdered people were found tied up in their own homes, without any evidence of a break-in, with no clue revealing the presence of a malefactor. It's frightening, that!"

"No, Dianah, it's stupid, as you said just now...fanciful tales, nothing more. Burglars and murderers aren't yet spirits that can pass through doors."

"But it's exactly that mystery that's alarming."

¹ André-Charles Boulle (1642-1732) was the French cabinetmaker who is generally considered to be the preeminent artist in the field of marquetry. His fame led to his name being given to the fashion he perfected of inlaying brass and tortoiseshell, known as Boulle.

“Revel’s a practical joker who takes pleasure in terrorizing women.”

The young couple had arrived at the Comtesse’s bedroom. She opened the door, and then immediately closed it behind her and turned the key twice.

“What are you doing, Dianah?” said the astonished Comte. “Why lock it, since I’m going out? I don’t have a minute to lose.”

“Excuse me, Raoul...it’s all these stories. I’m no longer in control of myself. I think I see bandits behind every door.”

Beside the large Louis VI bed that occupied the middle of the room, another, smaller one, was positioned. The Comtesse approached it. A child was asleep, in an aureole of blond hair. With a thousand precautions, the young woman leaned over and deposited a kiss on the child’s forehead.

“Teddy...Teddy!” she murmured. “To think that the future of our house rests on such a frail head.”

The Comte de Villerville approached the sleeper in his turn and considered him momentarily.

“Yes,” he said, as if talking to himself, “and we’ve done well, Dianah, to collect that little being. You were right to insist...you’re better than I am, and now we’re going to receive the recompense of that good deed. Watch over him during my absence.”

“Who are you talking to? I love him as if he were my own son...and you do too, Raoul, don’t you?”

“Certainly.” The Comte made an abrupt movement. “It’s because of him that it’s necessary for me to leave. Let’s go...*au revoir*, Dianah. I have to be at Le Havre for the departure of the *Provence*; if not, it will be impossible for me to reach Baltimore before the date fixed by the dispatch. No train could get me to Le Havre at this hour, but our auto is fast and Jim is a marvelous chauffeur.”

“So you’re leaving me alone?”

“I have to, my love, as you know very well. You were the first to tell me that I shouldn’t hesitate. All our arrangements are made, and I don’t think any of our friends has any suspicion of my departure. There’s still Jim, but when he gets back from Le Havre the steamer will have reached the open sea long ago.”

“So everything’s in a safe place?” asked the anxious Comtesse.

“Everything. The receipt is in the interior drawer of your writing-desk. Remember that, Dianah. Let’s go—adieu! Or rather, no, *au revoir... à bientôt*.”

The Comte kissed his wife, took one last look at little Teddy, and went out in haste.

Five minutes later, the purr of an auto resonated in the courtyard, and then the dull sound of the battens of the coaching entrance shook the house and resounded strangely in Comtesse Dianah’s heart.

Alone! She was alone! Undoubtedly, it was necessary. Comte Raoul had to go to Baltimore. The entire fortune of the Villervilles depended on that voyage, but that was exactly what increased the young woman’s anxiety. However much care she had taken to keep the departure secret, might not an indiscretion have been committed? Might she not be under surveillance? Malefactors have so many means of penetrating the best guarded secrets.

II. A Night of Anguish

Ordinarily, Comtesse Dianah was very energetic; that evening, however, contrary to her habit, she rapped twice of the communicating door placed near her bed.

“Are you there, Edith?” she asked.

Not receiving any reply, she repeated; “Edith, are you in bed?”

A woman’s voice replied. “What is it? Is that you, Madame?”

“Nothing, Edith...it’s nothing. I simply wanted to know...”

Then, reassured by the presence of her faithful housekeeper, Madame de Villerville went to bed.

An electric night-light placed on the night-table bathed the room with a soft light, filtered by a pink silk lampshade.

For a long time, the young woman remained pensive, seeking sleep in vain.

She had closed her eyes in order not to see the shadows with which the faint light populated the room, and neither the proximity of Edith nor the regular breathing of little Teddy was sufficient to procure her calm.

Involuntarily she relived the horrible scenes with which her guest, Monsieur Revel, had taken pleasure in frightening her. Raoul’s assurances that it was nothing but stories had not succeeded in convincing her. Had not other people, in any case, certified the facts related by the talkative Revel? Strange crimes were multiplying in Paris; a new one came along continually to interrupt the investigation of the last, and, curiously, all the crimes presented a frightful analogy with one another.

Huddled in her bedclothes, Comtesse Dianah could not help shivering with fear.

How long did she remain in that state? How many minutes...perhaps hours?

At length, she became drowsy, finally vanquished by fatigue and the extraordinary tension of her poor nerves.

The Comte was doubtless far away by now, rolling along the road to Le Havre. Afterwards, there would be the sea...a seven day crossing...then New York...Baltimore, and out there, finally...a fortune!

Comtesse Dianah was asleep.

Suddenly, she woke up with a start and sat up in bed, as if moved by a spring, her eyes strangely open, dilated by fear.

She was still dazzled by the sudden light that had woken her.

There was nothing, however...nothing but darkness!

The obscurity was profound...the night-light was extinct.

Had the young woman been dreaming? In her fearful heart, a dolorous beating took on the intensity of a sonorous and poignant echo.

Any yet...the parquet had creaked, she was sure, at the very moment when the light had sprung forth.

At first, she had but one idea: light! And her hand, with a mechanical movement, extended toward the switch

She turned the commutator, rapidly. Nothing! The electricity was no longer functioning.

Then, at the same moment, the parquet creaked again, and this time, very close by.

The Comtesse had the very clear sensation that a man was approaching her bed, string at her in the darkness.

For a second—a century—she lived the horror of divining eyes fixed upon her face, sensing warm breath brushing her hair.

She wanted to scream; her voice caught in her throat, and, instinctively she put her hands to her neck.

Horror! Her hands had touched two other hands!

At the same time, something enveloped her head. An invisible cord choked her, and cut off her respiration.

The unfortunate woman understood that she was going to die, and fell back on her bed, her head jerking backwards, with an agonized gasp.

Nevertheless, in a semi-conscious state, she still perceived, as if through a black veil, the same light shine and run through the obscurity. She perceived muffled footfalls. The light passed in front of her again, and then went out. Afterwards, a lock grated and a door closed again, gently.

With a strength multiplied tenfold by anguish, the Comtesse's fingers tore at the horrible thing squeezing her neck.

A providential hazard had permitted the two tresses of hair that she habitually braided for the night to be caught in the cord, and had prevented immediate strangulation. An uncommon presence of mind, or perhaps an instinctive defensive movement had made her slide her fingers into the gap formed by that obstacle, and she tugged at the murderous thread with all her exasperated vigor.

Abruptly, the cord snapped, and, at the same time as an exclamation of deliverance escaped her, the Comtesse freed her head from the terrible mask that imprisoned it, leapt out of bed and rushed toward her housekeeper's door.

"Edith! Edith!" she shouted. "Help! Help! There's a man in my room!"

Shaken out of her sleep, the housekeeper only made one bound. "A man?" she stammered. And with the same instinctive gesture that her mistress had made a short while before, she turned the light-switch.

The obscurity remained complete.

"Madame!" gasped Edith. "The electricity's cut off!"

Then, prey to a mad terror, the two women clutched one another.

They pulled themselves together, however, groped their way into the antechamber and opened the entrance door, filling the entire house with their desperate clamors.

"Help! Help!"

Soon, from the top to the bottom of the stairway, doors were banging. Appeals intersected; women uttered shrill screams.

Someone suddenly said: "Light! Light!"

There was a small click, and all the electric bulbs in the stairwell came on at once.

An indescribable scene was then revealed: men in night-shirts tumbling down the stairs four at a time, women in nightgowns leaning over the banisters.

The first arrivals perceived the Comtesse de Villerville and her housekeeper. A gray-haired man advanced toward them, revolver in hand,

Edith recovered her composure first. "Monsieur," she said, breathlessly, "there's someone in our apartment—a malefactor...he tried to strangle my mistress. The electricity in the apartment is no longer working...we need a light."

Almost immediately, little flames trembled in the hands of a dozen tenants.

A young man, a friend of the Villervilles, ran forward, cleaving through the crowd. Having arrived before the two women, he bowed courteously, "Madame! What's happened, then? Can you explain?"

With a fearful gesture, the Comtesse indicated the dark vestibule. "There," she said. "There's a malefactor...he tried to murder me."

Ten men ran into the apartment, followed by Madame de Villerville and her housekeeper.

The crowd of tenants, increasing by the minute, gathered outside the door. At the same time, domestics awakened by the racket came down from the sixth floor.

The Comtesse's valet, chambermaid and cook, distressed by the news of the crime committed against their masters, frayed a passage and went into the apartment.

"Where's the Comte?" asked a tenant.

The domestics interrogated one another with their eyes. Where, in fact, was their master? No one had seen him. Were they about to find him murdered?

An indescribable anguish gripped the assembly.

Someone asked the Comtesse: "What's become of your husband, Madame?"

The Comtesse seized her interlocutor's wrist fervently. "He's gone," she murmured, in a low voice. "Don't worry—he's not in any danger."

Although she had spoken quietly, the domestics had overheard. They looked at one another.

“Gone! Monsieur le Comte has gone without informing anyone?”

Already, Madame de Villerville was drawing those who were following her toward her bedroom.

The man armed with a revolver went in first.

By the light of candles, they perceived the large bed in disorder, the sheets overturned, and cutting through their whiteness, the frightful black mask that the Comtesse had hurriedly thrown down after ridding herself of it.

“Look under the bed,” said one of the group.

At the same moment, a strident scream rang out. Comtesse Dianah fainted in the arms of her housekeeper, and, while her outstretched hand designated the little bed placed beside her own, she stammered with sobs in her voice: “Teddy! Teddy!”

The child’s bed was empty.

Little Teddy had disappeared.

III. Gustave Parizot, alias the Ferret

The tenants of the building, accompanied by the domestics, had spread out in all directions in the hope of discovering the mysterious malefactor, when an appeal sudden rose up from the ground floor:

“Quickly! Quickly. This way! The concierge has been murdered!”

There was an immediate panic.

The women who had ventured as far as the first floor ran back upstairs uttering cries of fright.

The men, more self-controlled, invaded the lodge.

On the bed, a woman was lying motionless, her head covered by a black hood.

The body was still warm and the limbs flexible, but the cord that held the mask tight around the neck was profoundly embedded in the flesh.

When the cord was cut and the hood removed, the concierge’s face appeared, horrible blue and blotted.

“Quickly! Fetch a doctor!” someone said.

“And the police,” added another tenant.

Domestics left at a run and their precipitate footsteps were soon heard on the sidewalk of the street.

It was not long before two policemen appeared, accompanied by a gentleman dressed in black. He was the doctor.

The concierge, still motionless on the bed, was indicated to him by a gesture.

He could only observe the commencement of asphyxia and carry out artificial respiration, with tractions of the tongue.

“The heart is beating,” he said, finally. “The woman will recover, I think, unless here are complications I can’t foresee.”

While everyone pressed around the wounded woman, Madame de Villerville had been forgotten momentarily.

The policemen, brought up to date with what had happened, refused to go up to the apartment until the Commissaire had arrived.

“If he murderer is still in the house,” one of them said, “He can’t escape, since we’re guarding the door.”

There was a silence.

Everyone was staring at the doctor and the victim.

A faint sigh suddenly passed between the unfortunate woman’s livid lips.

“Saved!” murmured the doctor. “Above all, no noise. Any emotion might be fatal.”

The concierge finally opened her eyes, and uttered a sigh that resembled a croak.

“Air! Give her air!” ordered the doctor. “There are too many people here.”

The policemen hastened to drive the curious into the vestibule. They were suddenly seen making a military salute.

“The Commissaire,” someone said.

The magistrate made his entrance. He was a small thin man with hard and piercing blue eyes. He pushed the people in his path aside brusquely and came straight to the concierge’s bed.

“The woman has just come round,” said the doctor. “I’ll answer for her, on condition that no one torments her and no one asks her any questions.”

The functionary made a gesture of acquiescence and said, in a low voice: “No one has been arrested?”

“No one,” replied a policeman.

“Who discovered this woman?”

“Me,” said a domestic.

“When?”

“About twenty minutes ago.”

“You didn’t see anything?”

“No. The malefactor has been seen, it appears in the first floor apartment, and the alarm was raised by the woman who lives in that apartment.”

“But it’s there that it’s necessary to go first!” exclaimed the magistrate.

The Commissaire, who had emerged from the lodge, searched with his gaze for the policemen—but they seemed to be engaged in a struggle in the corridor against someone that he could not see.

A child’s voice, with a suburban accent, suddenly went up: “Since I’ve told you that I’ve seen something, don’t manhandle me like that. I’m not an evildoer, me...I can talk to the law, perhaps?”

“What is it?” demanded the Commissaire, advancing.

He found himself face to face with a young boy, an apprentice of fourteen or fifteen, dressed in a blue smock and a leather bonnet.

“Speak,” said the magistrate. “I’m the Commissaire.”

The boy, who had darted a rapid glance into the lodge, shook his head briefly.

“Damn!” he cried. “I suspected something bad had happened. The parishioner didn’t look right to me.”

“Come on, explain! Speak!” said the Commissaire, impatiently.

“Right, m’sieur. I was going home about three-quarters of an hour ago...we’d been working late at the workshop, and I was trotting, to tell the truth. I arrived in front of this house, and I suddenly saw the coaching entrance open and let out a well-dressed chap in a suit and top hat. A toff, right! The fellow looks to the right and left first, then comes out on to the sidewalk. At that point I saw that he had something under his arm...yes, no possible mistake, it was a kid he was carrying...a kid wrapped up in a heap of clothes. ‘Uh oh,’ I say to myself, ‘there’s something shady about this...it’s not an hour for taking kids for a walk.’ I slip into a doorway and continue watching my man. There was an auto waiting for him, a big red limousine. He gets in, and I climb on to the trunk. I’m curious by nature, me, M’sieur le Commissaire, and that’s why my mates call me the Ferret.

“In brief, I roll with the auto, and when it stops, I jump off.”

“Where did it stop?”

“Out there, on the far side of Neuilly.”

“Did you look at the name of the street?”

“Impossible—the auto was going like the wind, and it was as black as an oven. I’m sure that I can find the house again, though. It’s in a long avenue bordered by trees...in the direction of the Seine.”

“That’s good. Your information might be very useful to us. Stay here—I’ll need you shortly.”

“To tell the truth, M’sieur le Commissaire, I really need to go. Maman’s expecting me, and she must be worried, poor woman! Give me time to warn her and I’ll come back.”

“Do you live far away?”

“No, a few steps—Rue Duras. My mother keeps the little haberdasher’s shop at the corner of the Rue Montalivet.”

“Go, but hurry, and above all, don’t try to deceive us.”

“Why would I tell you lies?”

“All right, go. I’ll wait for you here.”

“See you soon, M’sieur le Commissaire,” said the gamin, sketching a pirouette. “I don’t have my card on me, but it doesn’t matter. My name’s Gustave Parizot, known as the Ferret, and I’m a margin-setter at the Dartois print-shop.”

“Accompany that child,” the Commissaire ordered a policeman standing at the coaching entrance.

“An escort!” said the boy. “I like that! At least Maman will see that it’s serious.”

When the apprentice had disappeared, the Commissaire went back into the lodge before going up to Madame de Villerville’s apartment. Perhaps he hoped to obtain some information from the concierge before proceeding to interrogate the Comtesse.

“Well, doctor?” he asked.

“It’s going well. She’ll be able to answer questions shortly.”

Abruptly, the Commissaire went to the bed. His eyes had just encountered the black silk mask that was lying on the floor. He bent down, picked it up and started examining it attentively.

After a few moments he turned to the policeman who was still in the vestibule. "Cordier," he said, "telephone the Sûreté and ask Monsieur Bouvard to come immediately."

The policeman ran to the telephone situated near the lodge, while the Commissaire continued looking at the black silk mask.

He finally replaced it where he had found it, and as the doctor interrogated him with his gaze he murmured: "This affair will be difficult to clear up."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Why is that?"

"Because the bandit who came here tonight is the most skillful and the most cunning of malefactors."

"You know him, then?"

"Yes...or at least, I know the name that public terror has given him: he's called *Tenebras!*"