

CHAPTER III

THE UNDERWORLD OF PARIS

AS Prefect of Police, perhaps my principal and most important duty was complete control of the policing of the underworld of Paris. Much, too much perhaps, has been written about the criminals of this city, and the nimble pens of feuilletonists have distorted the criminal conditions of the French capital and invested it with a glamour which is purely imaginary.

In these pages, however, will be given fact and fact only, and if some of the revelations I shall make in any way strain credulity I would ask you to remember that every case I shall quote, every name I shall mention, has its record in the archives of the Paris Detective Department, from the multitudinous files of which I have drawn much of the material for this book. The photographs which illustrate it have been lent by the Photographic Department of the Sûreté-Générale.

We claim that our Paris Police Force is one of the finest in Europe. Our Detective Department, known as the Sûreté, has been much fictionalized by romancers. In these pages I shall try to show its inner workings and I think it will be agreed that it is as efficient a machine for the detection of crime as exists in any capital in the world.

Crime, of course, is not limited to one class of society, but there is a stratum in Paris, at the bottom of the social ladder, whence has been evolved an infamous underworld that purveys rascality and fills the prisons.

In the Middle-Ages, when the countryside of France was infested with robber bands, living by rapine and violence, the smaller Paris of those days was ranged by gangs of rogues, who were absolutely unscrupulous, and feared nothing but the hangman's rope.

In those days, the town, lighted only by a few oil lamps at long intervals, was plunged into almost Stygian darkness at nightfall, thus offering a particularly favourable field for scoundrels to work in.

There were rogues of every description—simple thieves, called "night-rats," bullies working with harlots, cut-throats ready to be hired for murder, highway robbers.

Villon and his historians have bequeathed to us such a living picture of the criminals of his period that time has not dimmed it. The history of Villon's companions and that of his own life—his

end remains obscure, and statements about it must be received with reserve—show us that all those who fell by temperament or ill-fortune into that perverted circle were destined in advance to pass into the hands of the executioner.

There were two very different categories of these rogues.

Some lived entirely on the proceeds of audacity and theft. Others preferred—like Villon himself—to live, unshamed, on the trade of some “Margot.”

For a long time this vortex of crime underwent no modification. The rogues of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do not seem to have advanced much on their predecessors, and we must look to the end of the nineteenth century to notice a curious evolution in the manners and customs of this little world. At that time, an extremely interesting class swarmed in the underworld of Paris. It was composed of a number of individuals who, feeling no attraction towards work, gained their daily bread by installing themselves as lords and masters of the ladies of the pavement—their predecessors seem to have been only servants of these women—thus bettering to a great degree the position of their trade.

They added other employments to this, and a supplement was furnished by theft, notably “robbery under arms” practised on late wayfarers.

The true type of *le souteneur* (a bully and pimp living on a woman) dates from this period.

These men used to frequent in wine-shops or obscure hotels given over to immoral purposes. They did not disdain to wear a regular uniform—bell-bottomed trousers and caps of peculiar design—as if they belonged to an honourable calling. Among themselves they formed perfectly organized bands.

Certain night establishments in the *quartier des halles* (the Covent Garden Market of Paris), notably “The Cave,” “The Angel Gabriel,” and above all the “Night Ball,” were the places they habitually frequented; but when it was a matter of combining for a “coup,” they were usually to be found in a distant den on the outskirts of Paris where the police could only venture in force, such as the “Cabaret of Mother Cassefêche” at Saint-Denis, or the “Cabaret du Père de la Lune” in the Ile Saint-Denis, whose lessees were usually ex-convicts who had finished their sentences.

These picturesque spots were used, under good escort, for what was called “The Tour of the Grand Duke,” so named because the authorities once allowed a Russian Grand Duke and near relative of the Czar police protection to gain access to them.

It was towards the end of 1901 that a stormy drama was

enacted there, and one that drew the notice of the public sharply to the existence in Paris of a world of which they had known nothing, and set in the limelight the mentality of the people who composed it.

At the beginning of this notorious history, we find, as in the Iliad, the rape of a woman, and, also as in the Iliad, pitched battles of which she was the stake.

The first episode—I was going to write the first “canto”—of this criminal epic had, as a scene, the Rue Popincourt.

On the 15th December, 1901, the inhabitants of this quarter were sleeping peacefully when about midnight the street re-echoed with loud voices and bandied insults: “Thief, hound, robber—take that!”

Revolver shots sounded, followed by a confused and desperate struggle, mingled with the cries of the wounded. There was a wild rush in the street—and two men were seen, closely followed by several others, to dart into an hotel bearing the number 39, the door of which they barricaded behind them.

Their pursuers, numbering half a dozen, rushed at the door, which they tried to break in, and one of them, remarkable for his size and strength, tried to force it with his shoulder, uttering deep grunts the while in the manner of a wood-cutter striking at the base of an oak.

This lasted for several minutes; then the besiegers stopped for lack of breath, and hurled invectives at the men in the hotel. The words, “You shall give her back—we want her,” were reiterated angrily.

A fresh uproar arose. At an order the men had drawn revolvers from their pockets; and all, taking aim at the same time at a hotel window on the first floor, delivered a heavy fire through it.

Riddled with bullets the panes splintered with a crash, when suddenly a piercing whistle sounded, and the band, turning to the left, ran off at full speed. The Police were entering on the scene.

The *agents*, arriving at a run, found themselves in a deserted street, the only signs of anything having happened being that the windows of the houses beside the attacked hotel were full of craning heads.

The Police inquiry on the spot yielded little. The two individuals assaulted by the band were “Leca” and “Delbord.” They declared—lying stoutly—that they did not know their aggressors at all, nor why they had been attacked. Delbord was slightly wounded by a knife in the shoulder.

Leca, who had had a room in the hotel in the Rue Popincourt for a few days only, in company with a girl—“Elie Amélie,”

aged 22—left the next day to take up his abode in the Rue Godefroy Cavaignac.

Then, on the 15th January, a veritable battle took place at midnight in the Rue d'Avron ; the same bands were engaged, but this time on terms of equality—three against three.

A number of revolver shots were exchanged, accompanied by the same insults, and they faced each other till, the Police arriving, they took to their heels by common consent, and all managed to escape, though Leca had been wounded in the arm and left leg.

The Police still knew nothing of the fighters, and it was only later they learned that on this night, Leca, accompanied by his two lieutenants, Erbe and Schmidt, had been attacked by a man named Plaigneur, alias " Manda," who had also been accompanied by two " pals."

Manda, on running off, replaced a hatchet which he had just drawn from his belt and called out : " Leca, I'll have you yet, all the same."

A further development was not slow in taking place. In fact, four days later, on the 9th January, Leca, Erbe, and the girl called Elie, having decided to take an airing, were out driving in an open carriage. Leca—it is not known why—sat by the driver whilst Erbe and the girl were inside.

The vehicle was going along the Rue de Bagnolet in the direction of the Place de la Réunion, when suddenly two men dashed out of the carriage-entrance of a house and leapt on the steps of the victoria. The blade of a huge knife gleamed in the hand of one of them ; his raised arm fell, burying it to the haft in Leca's chest.

Jumping off, the two aggressors fled. The attack had been so rapid that Erbe had not time to intervene ; but he fired several shots at the fleeing men.

Leca, held by the driver, had crumpled up on his face. He was taken down from the driving seat, and laid out inside the " fiacre," which then proceeded in the direction of the Charonne police station.

The arrival of a man, stabbed in full daylight, and with such savagery, created a sensation. Leca was taken straight to the Hospital Tenon, whilst Erbe and the girl Elie were cross-examined ; but nothing could be obtained from them ; they persisted in their statement that they knew nothing and did not recognize the man who had struck the blow. They took good care not to speak of the events that had led up to this.

An inquiry pushed with vigour by the Police Inspector of the district, Monsieur Deslandes, in conjunction with the Detective

Department, succeeded in lifting a corner of the veil that screened this affair. The truth was coming to light.

Two men, rival professional "bullies," had each raised followers to wage this war, of which the "heroine" was a girl.

Rivalry, not in love but in possession and profit, was at the bottom of it, the woman having the task of providing a daily sum by the traffic of her body.

The two men were Leca and Manda.

The girl, whose real name was Elie Amélie, was only known under her sobriquet of "Casque d'Or" (Golden Helmet).

This Casque d'Or, who had set alight the torch of war between the band of Leca and that of Manda, would have been an ordinary-looking girl but for her reddish gold hair, which, extremely abundant and wavy, made for her a natural helmet of gold.

Her green eyes were more striking than beautiful, and the nose with its large nostrils gave her a rather brutal aspect. Her pallid complexion was marked with reddish stains.

She had no pretensions to real beauty, but her appearance was certainly arresting. Such as she was, she awakened desire in men, and was an appreciable source of profit to her protector.

For two years her master had been Manda, a big fellow, well set-up, with broad shoulders and bestial face. Then she met Leca, a small thin man, all muscle, black-haired and black-eyed, with an olive complexion, and a cunning and feline expression—but with a taking voice. He knew much better than Manda how to talk to women.

He spoke; he seduced her; he carried her off.

Casque d'Or would probably never have followed him if he had been on his own. But, like Manda, he headed a band of ruffians. She thought she had nothing to fear in placing herself under his protection.

Summoned by Manda to return the woman he had carried off, Leca refused. Then followed the events we already know. But now, the ravisher was in agony in the hospital. To the surprise of the doctors, he had not died at once from his terrible wound, but there was little hope of recovery.

At the instance of his father, an old retired policeman, and having no longer reason to keep silent, he told the whole story.

Some of the accomplices of Manda were arrested at once, but he himself remained at large. Nearly every night now shots awakened the district. Leca's partisans and Manda's continued to fight with no great damage to each other, and henceforth there was in the capital a new spectacle: "The Nights of Charonne."

Conscientious journalists were always to be met there, even in

pouring rain, tramping the quarter in hopes of events developing. Amateurs of the curious and picturesque, and men of the world came there in hopes of witnessing a sensational battle.

A witness of one of the scenes that took place described it thus :

“ Suddenly, in the silence of the night, disquieting shadows passed, shod with white canvas shoes, hugging the walls.

“ The troop was formed of four men, preceded and followed by two skirmishers.

“ The road was perfectly still as if deserted, when suddenly at another and distant point, a new shadow was thrown abruptly on the left-hand pavement, at the angle of the Rue Buzenval, which crosses at this point the Rue des Haies. A whistle shrilled. Another half-dozen shadowy forms dashed from the corner and bounded forward. The sharp crack of six discharges broke the silence. Bullets pattered against the right-hand wall where the stealthy troop was passing in file, and it at once deployed across the road. A second fusillade answered the first.

“ For a good five minutes we could hear the bullets whistle by and ricochet in all directions. Then the roadway rang with the sound of heavy running : the police were coming by way of the Rue des Pyrénées. Thereupon, with complete accord, the two bands took to flight, and there only remained in the hands of the Police one cap picked up on the footway.”

Those were the happy days of the old-fashioned revolvers, which were hardly effective at a target more than twenty yards away, and when fifty shots had to be fired to wound one man. The armament of the modern bandit is (unfortunately for the Police) somewhat better.

In the following days, Manda and the chief members of his gang were arrested, and calm settled down again in the Charonne quarter.

It did not last long, however.

On the 15th April following, Leca, almost miraculously cured of his terrible wound, came out of hospital at the same time as his lieutenant Erbe, *alias* “ Son Pied.”

Leca, who had lost Casque d'Or, was anxious to avenge himself and to win her back by some startling deed. Erbe heartily endorsed this sentiment, because during his sojourn in hospital a member of the adverse gang, Koch, had carried off his mistress, or “ marmite,” which is the slang word in vogue for a bully's prostitute. He also wanted to get back his fair one. Without losing time both set to work to mark down their enemies. A new night battle took place on the public road at the first moment

they met. Revolvers barked, and the battle, started in the road, was continued in a wine-shop held by a man named Quedeney.

Very seriously wounded in the head and stomach, Koch crumpled up, whilst Erbe, nearly as badly wounded as his rival, took to flight and hid in a cubby-hole in a shop in which he had occasionally worked.

There he would certainly have died of his wounds if the Police had not found him on the second day. The circumstances attending this arrest are strange enough to merit a place here. This vagabond, the Hercules of the gang, had in the course of the fight received three bullets in his body, of which one was in the stomach. In the hole where he had taken to earth, he meant to die in peace. To ensure his defence in case his den was discovered, he placed by his side two loaded revolvers and an iron bar. Guided by someone who knew his retreat, the Police burst abruptly into his lair, forty-eight hours after the fight. The betrayer having opened the door, the terrible "Son Pied" was promptly seized before he could put himself on the defensive and he had no chance to use his arms.

He made, however, a desperate resistance, and the Police had to engage in a violent struggle with him to get him to the hospital.

He was strong and brutal, of a height above the average, short-necked, with a broad flat face, snub nose, and little furtive eyes.

After cursing the *agents* savagely during the fight, he kept his teeth clenched when he was arrested.

He was taken to hospital in the course of the afternoon. At ten o'clock at night, the Police Commissary at Charonne was called up on the telephone by the Director of the Tenon Hospital, who asked him for help in a shaking voice. The wounded man consigned there by the Police for medical care had stated his intention of going out, and when the nurses tried to prevent him, he had wrenched an iron bar from his bed for a weapon, and threatened to kill anyone who tried to stop his passage. All the doors had been shut, and they were waiting for the Police. They soon came to the rescue and he was removed to the Depot Infirmary, where he was operated on, and in time completely cured.

A few days later, Leca in his turn was arrested. The juries, properly severe, put an end to this dangerous rivalry between Manda and Leca, by sending them with their chief lieutenants to hard labour.

All this furnished a great volume of "copy" for the newspapers, and it was to describe the members of these gangs that the word "apache" was invented.

As often happens when a stormy publicity gives a certain person great notoriety, so the example of the apaches of Charonne incited many imitators. It was "good form" to be an apache or to play the apache, and for a considerable time the Police were very actively employed in suppressing these wastrels.

For one of them to become too prominent in the public eye meant his energetic removal from the scene.

The next year, Parliament decided to modify the law of 27th April, 1885. This law, which related to vagabonds, defined in the last paragraph of Article IV as "individuals who make their living entirely by practising, or rendering possible, in the public streets the prostitution of others," had met in practice such difficulties that it was rendered inoperative.

In order to constitute a breach of law three conditions were necessary: Firstly, the man must have practised or helped another in prostitution, notably by recruiting or engaging girls who handed over to him the proceeds of that prostitution. Secondly, the incriminating act must have been accomplished in a public road; and this requirement must be extended to mean that not only must the prostitution be done in such a place, but also that any assistance given by the man must also have been extended by him in public. Thirdly, the act must be habitual, repetition being necessary.

In practice, the "bully" used to remain in the shelter of a bar, or in an hotel, whence he surveyed what his girl was doing, and where he waited for her to bring him the money. Therefore in most cases he could not be arrested.

The law promulgated on the 3rd April, 1903, was devised to put an end to this situation.

In Article II, paragraph 2, it states: "All persons who have acted as *souteneurs* (i.e. lived on immoral women) will be punished with imprisonment of from three months to two years, with a fine of 100 to 1000 francs and *interdiction de séjour* of from five to ten years. Those are considered as *souteneurs* who help, assist, or protect the prostitution of others in public places, and share the profits." (Note.—*Interdiction de séjour* is something like ticket-of-leave. The liberated prisoner must report himself at intervals to the police as directed.)

In terms of paragraph 4, of the same law, the sentence might in certain cases be extended to five years of prison, and ten years of *interdiction de séjour*.

With this law the Police had in their hands an effective weapon. They used it. Hunted for many years, subjected to rigorous sentences, this class of criminal has progressively diminished.

But another criminal fraternity occupies the stage in its place. It has abandoned old methods that won't work, and practises the same trade with less risk. It has shed the "uniform" that marked it too clearly to the watchful police. A well-dressed youth has succeeded the apache who worked from the barriers of Paris. He is well housed; is unafraid to live in a palace. He has a superficial plaster of respectability; he passes as the representative of a commercial house, a business man—one cannot enumerate all the cloaks he uses for his real "profession."

The army of crime is no longer composed of a cohort of ill-doers easy to distinguish by their marks, but consists of a numerous confraternity whose members are difficult to distinguish because they work in secret.

This underworld consists, in the first place, of those who live by illegal trades—trafficking in white-slaves, merchants dealing in degradation: then all those who, behind a pretence, do not in reality exercise any trade, and live in idleness and pleasure. The first are the direct heirs of the old apaches; the hidden trade they follow exacts neither instruction nor education, and can be exercised from day to day without any special preparation.

Then there are others who have taken the wrong path, sometimes sons of good family, satiated with pleasure, perverted or inverted. The profession they prefer is that of professional dancer at public balls, combined with that of a master-blackmailer, and they are very difficult to arrest, because their victims nearly always recoil before the scandal that would arise from their complaint, and so keep secret their misadventure.

I have often been called, in the course of duty, to intervene in such affairs, in which the victims were in general persons very honourably placed in Parisian Society, who had let themselves be seduced in a moment of weakness by one of these apaches of the new order.

I will relate one or two of these experiences in the hope that they may put on their guard imprudent ladies, often belonging to the foreign colony, who frequent, at first from curiosity, and later from a taste for them, places whose pleasures are of a very dangerous kind, as we shall see.

The first might be called: "The Society Woman and the Handsome Dancer."

She was a woman of the world, rich, still young and fresh, whose husband, pursuing other loves, neglected her.

She was bored, and for distraction visited, from time to time, a public ball in the Champs Elysées.

Intelligent and mistrustful, she only half listened to the passionate declarations of handsome partners.

The day came, however, when one of them aroused response. He was a tall and handsome young man of dark complexion, not yet thirty. He made love to her, and to his declarations she was not insensible. Man of the world, he had no occupation, he told her; simply to have a little something to do, he was the owner of a garage.

She asked no more. One afternoon, yielding to the solicitation of the handsome dancer, she followed him into his bachelor flat, and the idyll began.

Three days later, at the end of the afternoon, her lover tore himself brusquely from her arms, pulled out his watch and cried: "Five o'clock, and the bank shuts at four! What shall I do? I must pay off before six o'clock!"

The lady asked what was the matter. He answered: "I have twenty thousand francs to pay this evening, and I ought to have gone to the bank to get the money." Now, she herself, in coming to the rendezvous, had been to her own bank to cash 50,000 francs' worth of dividend coupons. She opened her hand-bag, counted out 20,000 francs and offered them to him, saying: "Don't worry. Here they are. You can repay me to-morrow."

He paid back nothing, neither the next day, nor the day after, and when, three days later, the lady arrived at the usual rendezvous, she found a sombre and preoccupied lover. She questioned him. Gloomy and reticent, he at first refused to explain. She insisted, and he finally acknowledged he was a trifle embarrassed in his business.

The money he had put into it had not produced the effect he had expected, and he was in need of 50,000 francs.

Was that all? She didn't like to see his face so dark. She would bring the 50,000 francs next day. He thanked her effusively and protested that he would pay her all that he owed at the end of the month—a date when he would have large receipts. Love's song was sung again, and everything was forgotten.

The month was at an end ten days later. Before it was over the dancer confessed to his mistress that his situation was more critical than he had thought, and that he wanted a lump sum of 100,000 francs to get out of his mess.

This time she began to understand, looked at the man and answered evasively: "I will do what I can about it. I cannot dispose of so much money without awakening my husband's suspicions."

Cynically he replied: "You astonish me, when you had twenty or thirty millions of 'dot'—I don't know how much exactly—but what is a hundred thousand to that?"

When she returned to her house, this "woman of the world" telephoned her lover to say he must not expect her next day. She said "good-bye" to the 70,000 francs she had already handed out, but she did not propose to carry on in the same way any longer.

But the handsome dancer had other ideas about it. When she came no more to the rendezvous, he insisted several times over the telephone that she should do so.

Five days later he called at her house.

Astonished by his audacity, she consented to receive him, after having first placed a confidential maid in the next room.

The dancer played openly and cynically for his great stake: he consented to break with her, but demanded the 100,000 francs of which he was in need, against the return of three short notes which she had had the imprudence to write to him.

He added that if she did not agree, he would send them to her husband.

The stricken lady's brain was swimming, and she asked for twenty-four hours for reflection. He generously accorded them.

After his departure she sought anxiously for means of extricating herself from this evil pass—the notes had not been very compromising, but they afforded grounds for suspicion. Then she noticed with stupefaction that, during his visit, this modern "Knight of the Road" had stolen her photograph—thus adding a new proof to his possessions.

Her maid who, from the adjoining room, had heard the whole conversation, urged her to go to the Police Commissary of the district for advice.

This officer took down her complaint, together with the evidence of the maid, and asked that he might be given *carte blanche* to deal with the matter. The poor woman acceded to his request, trembling. At ten o'clock that evening the blackmailing rogue was stopped at his door as he was going out.

The stolen photograph, and the three notes written to him by the complainant, were found on his person. An hour later, threatened with immediate arrest, he signed a confession, consented to return the photograph and letters, and engaged not to molest Madame X, who in her turn, to avoid a scandal whose possible effects filled her with fear, withdrew her complaint. To save the honour of the lady the handsome dancer was released.

Lucky also are those lonely souls in search of love who do not come across a Landru or a Rey.

It does not follow always that the victims of these modern swindler-murderers have been their mistresses.

There are expert master-blackmailers to whom the slightest slip gives a chance to put the screw on their victims.

Such was one young American of good appearance and living in palatial quarters in the Champs Elysées, who, after having "lifted" from a rich compatriot jewels to the value of some hundreds of thousands of francs, secured her silence, although she had never had the slightest weakness for him, by saying: "You won't want to make a complaint against a man whom you allowed to enter your bedroom to amuse you, and to whom you gave tea there." She replied: "I only received you because you were in the company of Madame X, my friend. We both took you for a man of the world." He answered victoriously: "I know what kind of man your husband is, and he would never pardon you for having received a man who had not been properly introduced."

The lady not being in a position to defend herself, this nice blackguard is still at large.

Finally, to show still more completely the position held to-day by these suave successors to the old "Knights of the Road," here is another little anecdote. One of our Chief Inspectors met lately, in a luxurious flat, in the company of an immensely wealthy foreign Princess, a young waster whom he had arrested about ten years before, when he was clumsily entering on the career of a *souteneur*.

The Inspector thought at first that he was at his old trade, having simply changed the scene to one higher up in the world. The real truth astounded him, but he was finally obliged to submit to the evidence. . . . The young apache had become the authentic husband of the foreign Princess!

These things do not constitute crimes, properly so-called. But I have thought fit to find a place for them in these pages because the surroundings amid which they were born may be styled "The Antechamber of Crime."

Operators in crime on a large scale, also, have considerably altered their methods of attack of late years; we find them less and less taking chances, but working with specialized preparation.

Modern burglars have become veritable master-workmen, provided both with natural aptitude and with all the weapons that science can put at their disposal. They possess perfect

outfits for their work, powerful automobiles, and even aeroplanes.

The struggle of the Police with the bandit army, so admirably equipped, becomes every day more difficult, but success nearly always is ours. The international gangs, forever watched over and tracked by expert specialized *agents*, almost invariably end by succumbing.