

## CHAPTER VIII

### CRIMES OF THE HALF-WORLD

#### EASY VICTIMS

**T**HOUGH murder is met with everywhere—Society does not escape from it, nor is any class immune—it must be allowed that certain persons, through the very conditions of their lives, are more exposed to it than others. These victims are particularly :

1. Old people.
2. Prostitutes.
3. The vicious.

The first through their age—the others by reason of frequenting places where they offer the greatest temptation to criminals lurking in the shadows and awaiting the right moment to strike at a prey.

It will be readily understood why the aged figure first in this martyrology. Their means of self-defence having diminished, they are easier to despoil than those who are vigorous. They have no longer strength, nor nimbleness. Their sight is not the same as in former years, nor their hearing quick to notice sounds. They are truly a tempting prey.

If one drew up a list of crimes committed on the aged only for the last fifty years, one would find it very moving and more amazing.

It is especially in rural districts that murders of old people take place, because every chance of success is present, as we shall show—to which another advantage is often added, which is of great importance to the criminal : isolation.

Silence reigns over the country, and that accomplice, Night, drops her dark veil over the cottage of an old couple who have some savings—real or supposed. If they are a little deaf they hear nothing of the criminal's approach. Once he, or in some cases she, has forced an entry, it is no more than a game—this "business" of murder and robbery.

Sometimes the murderer is already inside : a servant who may be principal or accomplice.

All these crimes are very similar ; their brutal commonplaceness—if one may use such a word—is such that their narration offers only a secondary interest. Such crimes are of almost monthly occurrence. Their execution is so sordid that only those against well-known persons obtain publicity to any great degree.

It is otherwise with crimes committed on prostitutes. "There is," wrote M. Goron, "a class of women on whom certain criminals

seem to take pleasure in working off their sanguinary instincts : these are the prostitutes. They pay with their lives for the easy way in which they offer themselves to all. For the assassins it is only a question of choice, and over this their tastes are strangely different."

The Egyptian Pranzini and the Italian Prado sought for leading courtesans who frequented the Champs Elysées and the Bois de Boulogne. That is how they met the girls Marie Regnault and Marie Aguetant, who were stars in the world of gallantry.

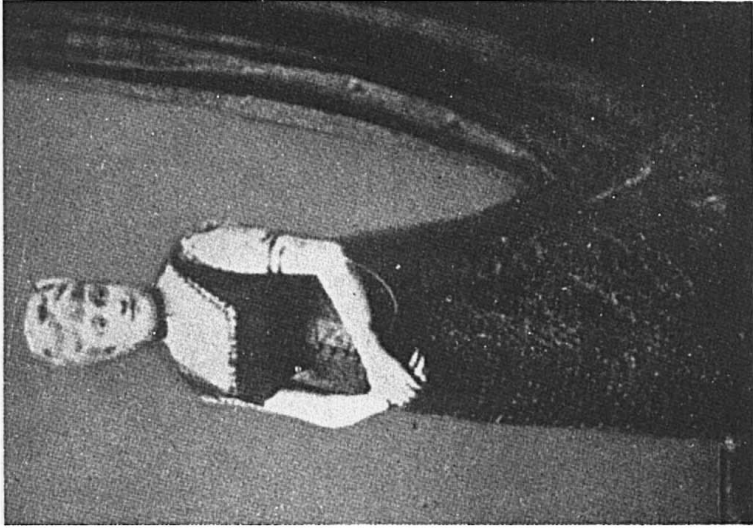
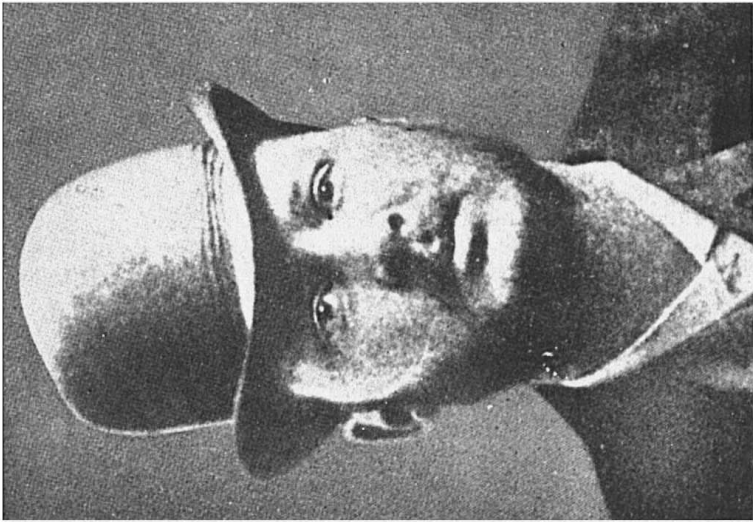
Another suppressed by choice fair and fallen women of advanced age who had money. This was Baltazard Grimm. He looked for members of the " Old Guard " and, in the middle of an intimate conversation, would cut their throats so cleverly that they could not utter a cry.

On the 27th February 1882, he killed Cécile Renoux, living in the Rue Mercier, in this fashion. She was his last victim. Before he was guillotined he confessed to no less than some twenty such murders.

The most curious point in this affair was the discovery of a letter, sent by the murderer to a receiver, which contained this astounding passage : " We rob the girls who rob us. To kill such creatures is to render a service to public morality."

I may further mention, as a killer of prostitutes in low life, " Phillip," who between 1862 and 1865, murdered and robbed, on each occasion in less than a quarter of an hour, five of the girls he had accosted. It would but be repetition for me to set down the stories of all the crimes of " Phillip," but it may be interesting to relate something of his methods. The name of " Phillip " was a byeword among street-walkers.

Etienne, a wonderful blond-haired girl, slim and boyish in appearance, had by her vivacity attracted the attention of " Phillip," and her possession of a boyish name drew to her more than the usual clientèle of the prostitute. There is little doubt that, had she possessed as fine a brain as she did a figure, she would have gone far and made her name known in more spacious places than the Boulevard de Clichy, her favourite hunting-ground. Lacking in mental power but oversexed, Etienne found it easy to make her 100 francs in the afternoon and her 500 francs in the evening. Months passed by, and the savings of the slender Etienne mounted until she had perhaps 5000 francs in the care of her wily concierge, but the day came when in a depressed mood she fell for the obvious glances of the killer " Phillip," and after tea with him she was found brutally murdered, having half an hour before obtained her savings from her concierge, much



PRANZINI AND HIS VICTIM, MARIE REGNAULT

against the latter's advice. Evidence proved that he had been with the girl, but it was not until 1865 that he was finally caught and executed on the 24th July 1866.

I will not enter into the details of all these commonplace affairs, but I will relate two, because they are particularly interesting on account of the circumstances which belong only to the "atmosphere" of that type of crime I am at this moment considering. The two crimes I will set down are the triple murders in the Rue Montaigne and the affair at Aix-les-Bains.

### THE CRIME OF PRANZINI

The most notorious example of the murder of a courtesan is certainly that which is labelled "The Crime of the Rue Montaigne."

Marie Regnault, called "Régine de Montille," lived at 17 Rue Montaigne on the third storey, in apartments that were furnished with some taste. There was furniture of the Louis XVI period and pictures signed with celebrated names—names which would cause a stir in Society to-day. In the bedroom, upholstered in red satin, was a large ebony bed.

Régine de Montille was living in state, and had had for a long period and at the same time, three lovers, each of whom believed himself to be paying all the expenses of his beloved.

Unluckily for her, the one she liked best having left her, she no longer contented herself with serious liaisons. She changed, for the sake of distraction, her quiet manner of living, took home chance acquaintances, drank much absinthe, and frequented places of ill-repute.

On the 17th March 1887, her general help, who lived out, told the concierge that the chambermaid, Annette Gremret, had not replied either to her calls nor answered the bell.

In her turn she mounted to the flat, and after hammering at the door, all the reply she got was the dismal howling of two dogs inside.

The Police Commissaire was warned and at once had the door forced open. The carpet of the ante-room was stained with blood. In the passage was found the body of the chambermaid Annette Gremret, lying face down in her nightdress in a welter of blood. A terrible knife-thrust had cut her throat and reached the vertebræ of the neck.

In the room of the unhappy servant another body was found—that of her daughter—whose head was only attached to her body by a little flesh.

As for Madame de Montille, she was found nearly naked, stretched out at the foot of her bed, with her face in a pool of blood. The murderer's blow had been so strong that, at the same time that he had cut off the head, he had nearly severed the right shoulder.

Her wide-open eyes retained even after this horrible death an expression of terror.

The keys of the safe were in the lock, at whose combination the murderer had been unable to arrive.

A torn portfolio was found on the ground, a broken cash-box, a cuff, and a man's belt, on which was printed in marking-ink the name "Gaston Geissler."

I will not relate the steps taken to trace the pseudo-Geissler, these articles having been left purposely in the room by the murderer with the object of leading the Police astray. Such an adroit proceeding was to prove useless, because the criminal showed himself in the sequel to be much less circumspect.

In fact, three days later, on the 20th March, the permanent Police Commissaire at Marseilles received, about eight o'clock one evening, a visit from the proprietor of a brothel in the Rue Ventemagy. She told him that a client had given one of her girls a watch set with diamonds and a pair of ear-rings—which she in turn had passed on to her—articles which aroused her suspicion as to their origin.

The Commissaire, who had just received a description of the jewellery stolen from Marie Regnault, was struck by the resemblance between these jewels—given away with such great liberality—and those stolen from the demi-mondaine. He had a search made for the generous unknown, who was found and brought before him; and as he refused to explain how he had come by them, he was detained.

He was a big man, breezy in manner, very dark, with the air of an adventurer from the Orient. Flat-featured, lean, he looked like a Levantine, and gave the impression of a bird of prey. One could divine after considering him that he had muscles of iron.

Despite the precise statements of the complaisant persons to whom he had given the jewellery, he denied point-blank that he had ever given such presents. He was at once locked up.

Taken back to Paris, he tried to establish an alibi by calling for the evidence of a mistress who, unfortunately for him but fortunately for Justice, was an honest woman. Her sincere statement showed up his lies, and took him aback.

But he could not be made to confess.

The inquiry established that this strange man, who had

travelled over most of the world and followed in succession nearly every trade: supernumerary in the Egyptian postal service, interpreter at Constantinople, director of a caravan in India, guide at Marseilles, waiter, valet, and labourer—was a veritable corsair, always in search of feminine prey whom he could hold to ransom.

It was to be able to marry in his own country a young and rich American woman of excellent family—who had in a way been hypnotized by him—that he had committed the horrible crime of the Rue Montaigne.

He was ready to take any risk to obtain the money to get to her.

His choice had been to find someone easy to kill, but he had not foreseen that, once the crime was committed, he would be foiled by a strong safe, whose combination he did not know. Only getting some jewels that he could not sell without risk of arrest, he had—strange topsy-turviness of things here below—given them to other prostitutes of a lower order. This return to prostitutes of jewels which were earned by prostitution proved his downfall.

He continued, however, calmly to deny everything, but besides the jewels found in his possession, other charges began to pile up against him.

Under pretence of calming the jealousy of his honest mistress, on whose blind devotion he counted, but in reality to provide a back door of escape in case of danger, he had told her that he had been present—shut up in a cupboard and helpless—at the murder of Madame de Montille, at whose house he had been taking tea on the night of the crime.

Before the judge, he said that in making the statements, which he acknowledged were lies, he had wished to avoid compromising a married woman of the world with whom he had passed the night of the 16th–17th March, and whom he refused to drag into the case, no matter what the result might be to him.

Before the Assize Court, he persisted in this convenient manner of defence. His counsel, Maitre Demange, tried to paint his client as a real chevalier who preferred to risk his life rather than give away his lady, and affirmed that he would continue to act so, even if it cost him his life.

The verdict of the jury—indifferent to such loftiness of soul—having declared Pranzini guilty of murder, and having refused to add extenuating circumstances, the penalty of death was pronounced.

On the 1st September 1887, a hooting crowd waited impatiently

in the Place de la Roquette for this criminal of widespread operations.

He who had been called "The Magnificent Darling," in a certain world in which he had moved and made—without killing—so many victims, played his part to the end.

His last words were : " I die innocent."

#### THE MURDER OF EUGENIE FOUGÈRE

She was a woman of free life, shrewd and circumspect. Her natal district was La Creuse, where she had worked in a brewery, and which she left in 1893.

After one thing and another she had progressively climbed the ladders which sometimes bring such women to an easy position.

She occupied in Paris, at 138 Rue des Courcelles, apartments which cost, at the time we are speaking of, a rent of 4200 francs. She had also at Aix-les-Bains, in the smart and exclusive Avenue de Treserves, a sumptuous villa.

Her jewels were well known in her circle : a great necklace of pearls ; a diamond bracelet ; solitaire rings ; brooches of brilliants and sapphires. She loved to go out with all this display. Frequenters of every gambling-room had seen them glitter with a thousand fires under their lights, and many murmurs of envy followed her as she passed.

She was preparing this year to grace Aix-les-Bains with her presence, when an old comrade of her former years, Victorine Gariat, otherwise known as "The Nubian," visited her. The poor woman badly dressed had no doubt lacked in "circumspection" as she had failed in life.

Softened by the distress of this companion of earlier days, moved also perhaps by the desire to show off before her, Eugenie Fougère outfitted her completely in every way and engaged her as maid.

"La Nubienne" overflowed with thanks and protestations of devotion. "Truly 'Fou-Fou,'" as Eugenie was called by her companions and intimates, "is the best of all girls," said she.

The position of Eugenie Fougère, so brilliant in appearance—and to which she struggled essentially to give that illusion—was, however, diminished. She had lost the brightest jewel in her crown in the person of a Grand Duke, who had lately renounced the protection he had given her. But what did that matter ? She trusted to the future. A woman like her could not fail to find very easily a successor to her wealthy lover.

The season at Aix-les-Bains was finishing, however, without

her finding anyone to replace her vanished Grand Duke, when, on the 20th September, about eight o'clock in the morning, her hairdresser, knocking at the door of the villa "Solms," was astonished at no one answering his call. The door being open, he entered. There was absolute silence in the house. He called out. Neither Madame Gariat the companion, nor the chambermaid Madame Maire, answered him. He went up to the first storey, found the door of his client wide open, looked in, and recoiled in horror.

At the foot of the bed, Eugenie Fougère, with feet and hands tied, her face bruised, lay strangled and already cold.

The hairdresser cried out for help. Some neighbours and, after them, Police ran up. They looked through the house. They found then, under the gables, Madame Maire strangled, and Madame Gariat, gagged and bound, in a faint.

Theft had evidently been the motive of the crime: all the jewellery of Eugenie Fougère had disappeared.

At first the search seemed to be at a loss, but a month later Victorine Gariat, "The Nubian," who had been congratulated because she seemed to have escaped by a miracle from a seemingly evident attempt at strangulation, and for whom a collection had been made in town—was arrested and taken to the office of M. Hamard, Chef-de-Police, whose mind was already made up about her share in the crime. At first she denied everything, and then changed her mind and confessed.

Her statement went like this:

She had nothing much to reproach herself with. She had only talked, and confided to a man she was in love with and who was not perhaps quite an angel, that her employer had a great deal of jewellery. This lover—Henri Bassot—who had always lived by gambling, on women, and by coining—had insisted right off that she should tell him all about the place where her mistress kept her jewels, and then had hastened to carry out the affair. As he was unable to do it by himself, he had brought in another, a man of strength, César Ladermann, a working tailor at Lyon, who took charge of the business. This man, having entered the Villa Solms about ten o'clock at night, had begun by strangling the maid. Then, hidden in the garden, he had awaited the return of the mistress. About 1 a.m. Eugenie Fougère returned accompanied by her (Victorine).

Ladermann had shortly afterwards entered the house, gagged and bound her mistress, stolen the jewels and money, and—to save herself—had left her tied as she had been found.

An hour after this confession, Bassot was arrested in the Rue



la Bruyère at the house of one of his mistresses. As for César Ladermann, at the moment the Head of the Detective Department at Lyon, M. Briottet, came to arrest him, he called through the door : " Wait ! I am opening," and then blew out his brains.

A letter was found in his room addressed to M. Hamard, in which he stated that Bassot had very little to do with the affair ; Giriat alone was his accomplice, not only in indicating to him what to do, but how to do it.

So the charges against Bassot became lighter. But he had a " past " and a " present " so heavy that he benefited little by the dying statements of his accomplice. Despite his strenuous denials and his statement that he was the victim of a woman's revenge, he was none the less condemned at the same time as Giriat to ten years' hard labour.

As the principal actor in the deed was dead, the jury attributed an even share in the crime to him.

It remains for me to speak of those victims who, blinded by their passions, become incapable of taking the most elementary precautions for their personal safety, and march with eyes fixed on the ground towards their fate.

In most cases, the people who meet with prey of this kind do not go as far as murder, theft and blackmailing rewarding them enough. And another reason that restrains them from the extreme measure is that they don't want to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

I could tell many stories to illustrate this, having known personally a great number of women and men who fell easy victims to cunning and predatory rogues, and even after being mercilessly bled, still felt themselves attracted by their persecutors.

Let me evoke, at this point, some memories.

The first is that of a woman royally beautiful who had lived like a queen (which she really had been on the sinister side) and who had become old and plain, perhaps even ugly, but had retained a propensity for amours.

She did not, of course, seek partners of her own age or anything approaching it. Such courtship was not to her liking. She wanted the illusion of being loved by young men.

Her last " lover " having extorted some hundreds of thousands of francs from her in less than a month and threatened her with death if she did not continue to supply him with all the money he wanted, she came to me, stricken, to tell me her disgraceful tale.

When I asked her how she could have let herself enter into such relations, she replied with touching ingenuousness: "He loved me! He loved me much!"

And when I cried out in astonishment, she repeated with force: "I am sure of it! He kissed my footprints!"

Curiosity led me to ask where this touching scene had taken place, and she replied with the same simplicity: "On my drawing-room carpet."

I shall simply remark that I disembarassed the unfortunate woman of a lover who pushed the delicacy of his actions to such a point.

I have known also among the same kind of impassioned people, an old Countess who, near her eightieth year, took as a lover her groom who robbed and bled her without mercy. Now and again she had moments of revolt, and came to ask for legal protection against her sorry lover. But seized again with her mad passion, some hours later she faced about and begged the official who had taken down her declaration to annul it. The groom became once more reinstated in the world.

Here finally is the case of an old seigneur, always very dignified, who, at the age of seventy-five, conceived an irresistible passion for a young girl of seventeen, who was adorably attractive and possessed a keen intelligence. The man had been a great traveller in his time.

He had already put some millions of francs into the hands of this shrewd harpy, when, pressed by her for some hundreds of thousands more and being threatened with blackmail if he refused, he came to ask me to intervene.

I can still see this poor man, whose voice quavered as he told me his story and who wept with fright at the thought that his wife, aged 73, "might visit on him the extremes of jealousy, if his betrayal of her was denounced by his mistress."

He also had naive simplicity. He had been, he averred, passionately loved by this girl with no morals!

I had the satisfaction of bringing peace back to the soul of this old man. I only hope he has not begun again.

. . . . .

If, in most cases, these slaves to passion manage to get out of their silly scrapes at the expense of much trouble and much money, there are others of that sort who lose their lives.

This occurs especially to those who, instead of forming liaisons which have some duration, are always looking for new partners to satisfy their vice. The victim is often an elderly woman,

because, alas ! there are women who are growing old who do not hesitate to take at once no matter what kind of chance companion. Such adventures frequently have a bad ending.

I will quote as an example an affair, already some years old, which I shall tell without naming place or people, the victim belonging to an old and honourable family and having descendants who occupy prominent social positions.

The lady of whom I wish to speak was then eighty years old, and lived alone without servants in a comfortable little house. A housekeeper was always there throughout the day. She sent her away in the evening to have more liberty.

Two or three times a week she used to go out at night on foot, heavily veiled, and would return an hour or two later with a very young man.

I shall not attempt to describe the rose boudoir nor the mirrored bedroom where she took her young lovers. I can only say that one morning, one of them to whom she had doubtless given no hope of any renewal of relations murdered her. She was found strangled at the foot of her bed.

. . . . .

Finally there is a class of slaves to passion, particularly liable to be victims of theft, blackmail, and murder. I speak of perverts. I only mention their case, the nature of their debasing vice not allowing me to relate their sad adventures in full.