

THE WITCH-QUEEN OF LYON

PART ONE: THE MYSTERIES OF LYON

CHAPTER I *Ritual Murder?*

Wednesday, June 10, 1931.

In the silence of the sleeping big city, a clock somewhere slowly chimed three times... Maybe in the army barracks of La Part-Dieu?¹ The light wind blowing from the north carried the vibrations to the Fort de Villeurbanne, over the yards and buildings of East Lyon station where a train was whistling mournfully. Soon there was the metallic rumbling of a train rolling south, which turned into a roar that faded away, dying sluggishly.

Then a large coupé turned the corner of the Avenue Félix-Faure onto the Boulevard de La Part-Dieu and stopped almost right away at the curb just after the Rue de l'Abondance, in the middle of two streetlamps where a temporary maintenance shed cast a dark shadow. Out of this shadow emerged a man who only had to take two steps to reach the car. The driver was leaning out slightly.

A muffled voice muttered, "Is the below in the above?"

In the same tone the driver answered, "Yes, and the above in the below."

The man shivered, seemed to hesitate, then abruptly stepped back and melted into the shadow.

Nothing appeared to be living in the blacked-out house whose front door was hidden behind the shed. Across the street, a fence and a wall bordered the yards of the East Lyon train station. But down the street, at the corner of the Avenue Félix-Faure, a uniformed police officer was standing under the streetlamp.

This June night was warm and muggy. A failed storm was still plaguing it with clouds even though the north wind was pushing them slowly southward, high over the sweltering city.

The driver was keeping the car idling. It must have been a first-class engine because the quiet hum under the hood could barely be heard or felt.

Less than a minute later...

From the shadows of the shed, human shapes came out again, three this time. Two men, hale and hearty, supporting a third figure who seemed to stagger, drunk or sick. Reaching behind him with his left hand, the driver opened the back door. The two picked up and pushed in the third before climbing in themselves. The door closed and the car drove off silently.

From the light on the corner, the police officer had obviously seen nothing because he stood perfectly still. Moreover, the car had not stayed in sight for long. It drove down the Boulevard de La Part-Dieu for only a few yards. At the next street, it turned left, quickly reached the Place Danton, took the Rue du Pensionnat, which was completely deserted, and crossed the Place Vendôme diagonally and headed down the Avenue Jean-Jaurès.

Driving fast now, it went all the way to the Rue Debourg, which accessed the northern side of the new slaughterhouses and, turning to the right, headed to the Rhône river.

¹ La Part-Dieu is a central district of Lyon, today located in its 3rd arrondissement of Lyon. At the beginning of the 20th century, Édouard Herriot was elected Mayor of Lyon, then the most prominent French city outside Paris due to its dynamic industrial and commercial activity. Influenced by the French *hygiéniste* urban movement, akin to Baron Haussmann's renovation of Paris, Herriot initiated extensive works to improve urban infrastructure and public spaces. The continued expansion of rail and road networks to the east transformed the La Part-Dieu marshalling yards into an urban development inspired by American downtowns.

At this time of the day, there was nowhere more deserted and more dismal than the Place Antonin-Perrier, the huge, empty field between the slaughterhouses and the river. On the Avenue Leclerc, in the square, on the bridge, on the docks, nobody!

The car stopped right in the middle of the bridge. The driver stayed in his seat, leaving the engine running. In one minute, give or take, a double drama took place with quick, precise movements and a few harsh words.

The door opened. Two men got out with a third body between them... A white, naked body that they were holding horizontally, that they were swinging... The body of a woman!

"One, two... go!" a voice murmured.

And the corpse was tossed over the railing.

Before there was a splash in the water the two men had the driver, pinning his arms. One was gagging him while the other pulled out a knife that glinted in the eyes of the driver.

"That's it! You're a spy. You look like Chouki, but you're not him. How do we know? Bad luck for you. The rite was reversed today. When I asked, 'Is the below in the above', you were just supposed to answer 'No'. I'm going to kill you... Unless..."

The man who was talking was the one holding the knife in his right hand. He paused for two seconds and then finished abruptly.

"You going to talk? Tell all? Confess all?"

The other crook took his hand along with the gag away from the driver's mouth. The man did not hesitate. Staring straight ahead he screamed out loud, "Help!"

"Stupid," the man with the knife hissed.

With that, the other bandit gagged the driver again and pulled back his head.

Into the now-exposed neck the knife was stuck up to the hilt and a jet of blood spurted out. Swiftly, strongly and skillfully, the two murderers picked up the gasping body, carried it to the railing and the one man yanked out the knife and tossed it into the river just as the body was tipping over...

Now, at the exact time that this two-fold drama of the tragic and macabre was taking place, another scene was unfolding.

As soon as the car had stopped, its trunk slowly opened, held by a man who cautiously sat up. He stuck his head out and listened. He heard a splash and then a hoarse, muffled voice. From the right pocket of his coat he pulled out a Browning, which he held at the ready. And he swung his leg over the edge of the trunk. The car was low to the ground. His foot hit the ground. Straddling like this, the man leaned over to get a look. In front of the car he saw only the lower half of a man standing on the sidewalk dealing with the driver. He heard a loud cry for help. Straightening up, he tried to lift his other leg to get out of the trunk completely, but his foot was stuck in a strap running along the inside wall. To free himself he had to turn back and use his left hand.

As he was untangling his foot he heard a gasp and then a splash in the water. And he was finally crawling out when the car suddenly shot off. The edge of the trunk hit his knee, which knocked him to the ground.

When he was back on his feet he saw the red lights of the car disappear around the corner of the Cours Charlemagne.

A frightful thought crossed his mind and made him groan.

Automatically putting the Browning back in his pocket he ran over to the railing and leaned over. But he saw only the dark water of the river where waves were flashing reflections from the lights along the bank and the bridge.

Over by the slaughterhouses a dog was barking furiously and then started howling like mad.

Trembling, with a cold sweat trickling down his back, the man turned away from the railing and looked down at the sidewalk. But no! Not a single sign, not even a drop of blood.

"Well, we'll see," he declared out loud. "If they killed him, they'll pay dearly for it or my name's not Alec Maury! We've got the license plate number and the address of the house and with everything we suspect."

Then Alec Maury heard cries coming from the left bank.

He muttered, "Oh, the comrades, I'd forgotten them."

He started running toward the slaughterhouses. He noticed that a taxi was coming straight at him. All of a sudden, he was blinded by its headlights, utterly blindly. He stopped instinctively and closed his eyes. And he felt that the taxi had stopped as well.

At that very instant, he was punched on the chin. Knocked for a loop, wobbling, but still conscious, he was seized by two strong hands. Then he was shoved into a car. He felt a soft, wet gag stuffed into his mouth and plug up his nostrils. He wanted to rip out the chloroformed wad but his wrists were gripped tightly. He stopped struggling, knowing that in a few seconds he would be sleeping... Instinctively, a cry for help rose in his throat:

“Boss! Boss!”

But it was barely a hiccup. And that was all.

He was aware that he was coming back to his senses by the fact that he felt he was lying on a very hard surface and that he heard the sounds of a loud, rough, male voice. Then a very soft female voice responded. He put all his revived energy into listening and understanding. But even though he could hear perfectly, he did not understand a single word—they were speaking a language he did not know.

Only then did he decide to look. And he opened his eyes.

The only light came from a fat, blue, porcelain lamp whose bulb was hidden under a pale blue, silk shade. Sitting on a low table this lamp looked tiny in the space around it that was both huge and cluttered. Huge because the light faded away on all sides and into the ceiling; cluttered because it was mostly a jumble of disparate furniture, rugs, carpets, tapestries and paintings piled up, shelves of books against the wall, all kinds of knickknacks and curios on the furniture and in glass cases, chandeliers made of Venetian glass, wrought iron and gilded brass hanging from the unseen ceiling.

“I’m in an antique shop,” Alec Maury told himself. “But who are the man and woman who are talking?”

He wanted to move, but he realized that they had bound his hands and feet. Simultaneously, he knew that he was lying on an Empire lounge chair. He could only move his head, very little but just enough to change his line of sight. And he saw. But the slight movement of his head made the chair creak. The speakers went quiet and looked at him.

Alec Maury was dazzled by the extraordinary beauty of the woman whom his eyes devoured.

Light brown, almost delicately golden skin, a small, somewhat aquiline nose, a very oval face with slightly prominent cheekbones, sharply lined lips and voluptuous curves, she had gorgeous, black eyes, widely almond-shaped, whose gaze was alluringly powerful. The white fabric clinging to her slender body exposed her long, full shape. She showed none of her hair. A golden veil worn above her eyebrows like a nun’s coif, created two solemn creases on her forehead while diamond fringes, falling straight down, hid her ears and brushed against her bare, round shoulders.

With abandoned and disquieting suppleness the woman—an Asian certainly—this incarnated goddess sat in a tall, medieval bishop’s chair, her legs crossed, her bare, magnificent legs with her bare feet in white leather buskins. Her slender fingers sparkling with rings and golden nails were laced around one knee, gracefully rounded with a kind of sensual smoothness.

“My God!” Maury exclaimed internally, deeply affected, “My God, this woman is so beautiful!”

But at that very moment he stopped seeing her. She was completely hidden by a man stepping in between her and the lamp.

Well dressed in a gray suit, hatless, he was the classic example of a tall, young, Dutch blond, but his hands and his face were tanned like someone who had recently been living in the tropics.

He walked up to the lounge chair, leaned over, and with a German accent he spoke calmly in fluent French:

“Why the hell would you and your comrade stick your noses into someone else’s business? Your comrade’s dead and you’re probably next. Who are you and what’s your business?”

His tranquil voice, with no anger or bitterness, was so at odds with the murderous intent of his words that Maury recovered all his composure.

Able to respond with the same serenity, he said, “Untie me. The straps are hurting me and there’s no need for them.”

“Very well,” the Dutch said.

He put two fingers in his coat pocket and took out a pocketknife, which he opened. The small, sharp blade sliced cleanly through the straps. The captive sprang up and instinctively leaned over to look behind the man at the sitting woman. The Dutchman smiled and stepped back. Alec Maury stared at the enigmatic face, those disquieting dark eyes, the statuesque body...

But the tall blond pressed on, still calm and unemotional, “Look, monsieur, don’t try to stall. Who are you and what do you want?”

Alec Maury stood up, stretched and looked at the Dutchman straight in the face, “What do you care since you’ve already sentenced me to death?”

“Me? No,” the man denied. “It’s our bylaws. You’ve seen things that no uninitiated should see. For that, you’ve been sentenced. But we are justifiably curious about your motive and purpose. Tell us and it’s possible that you’ll be pardoned.”

Maury shuddered. The calm and self-assured voice, the explicit words, the hard, fixed gaze of those cold, blue eyes—he understood what it all meant. If he said nothing, the sentence would be carried out... But he felt sure that if he talked, if his tongue betrayed his boss, his mission, he would appear even more dangerous to this puzzling Dutchman who would hate him and do worse than just kill him.

His internal debate was short. He had been in the Great War. In a prison camp in Germany he had secretly plotted a revolt and had gone before a military court of the spiked helmets. He had toyed with death twenty times and twenty times he had won. But inevitably, one is bound to lose.

He thought to himself, “*This time I’ve lost.*”

And out loud he simply said, “Do with me as you will. I won’t talk.”

Right away, to show that he no longer cared about his fate, he went and sat in a beautiful Louis XV armchair that he saw nearby and realized that they had left his tobacco pouch in his pocket along with his pipe and lighter. And he concentrated on stuffing his pipe.

He was sad, not for himself but for his partner whom they had thrown in the Rhône after beating or strangling or stabbing him. Suddenly he wanted to know how, just to know with certainty how he had died.

When his pipe was full he looked up at the Dutchman, who had not moved an inch while staring at him severely.

In a barely controlled voice he asked, “My partner, what did you do to him?”

The tall blond answered directly, “Sliced his throat and then drowned him.”

A sudden and violent fury shook Maury’s hands and voice, “Bloody hell! Who are you that you can murder people like that? First a woman, I suppose from the tip we got... then my partner... Why?”

The Dutchman smiled and replied, “I asked you the same question. Why? You answer mine and maybe I’ll answer yours.”

Maury felt the pall of doom descend upon him. He lowered his head and, stoically resigned, uttered, “No.”

He struck the lighter, lit his pipe, settled back into the armchair and started smoking, looking at the beautiful woman whom the Dutchman, standing a little to the right was no longer hiding.

For a few minutes the vast and eerie antiques shop was absolutely silent. The woman had closed her eyes, the only sign of life coming from the slow heaving of her chest. With his hands in his pocket the Dutchman was staring into the distance, thinking. From the outside came a faint rumble—the constant drone of the big city where they were surrounded but isolated by rooms and hallways and closed doors and windows. Lyon was bustling with its daily activities. But where were they that the noise of this activity was so faint and muffled?

Intrigued by this too, Maury was wondering, “In the maze of little streets in La Guillotière, between the Avenue Jean-Jaurès and the Fort de La Motte, there are shops with more than one entrance and with huge basements. I don’t see any doors or windows here in this dim light. It feels stuffy... and with all these antiques... Unless we’re at the foot of Fourvière, in old Lyon? Just recently the Society of Theurgist Optimates had their secret headquarters on the Rue Saint-Georges in the basement of a big bookstore that also sold ancient prints. I definitely think this is some kind of Satanic cult. I’m sure of it. Dorlange put us on the right track. But how can I tell him. Duffau’s dead. And I’m not much good for anything. If they had left me my Browning, however...”

With a careless gesture he felt his coat pockets. Empty. No possible resistance. He had lowered his head and was keeping it down.

All of a sudden he felt as if he were stung by a warm ray. Magnetically attracted, he stared at the woman at the same time as he heard her say, slowly, warmly, melodiously, very femininely and without a trace of an accent:

“I think, Van Osting, that it might be good for me to save this man for the blood transfusion.”

Stunned, Maury looked at the Dutchman whom the woman was obviously addressing. He was smiling, nodding his head and with restrained enthusiasm he replied:

“Your Grace is right as always. Indeed, this man has a brave and noble soul, warm blood and a strong body. He’s young and should be in good health. We’ll get the X-rays later along with a bacteria test. But we must...”

He broke off, paused, smiled again and turned to the woman before talking again. Unfortunately for Maury, burning with curiosity, it was in a language he did not know and could not even recognize except it was the same as he had heard when he woke up.

When the Dutchman was finished, the woman nodded solemnly.

Then Van Osting announced, “Monsieur, Your life is saved. I’ll take you to a house in the countryside. Your captivity, perhaps only temporary, will be mild and comfortable. But if you don’t want to suffer any immediate harm, you’ll have to submit to a few formalities.”

Suspicious, bewildered, but relieved, Maury asked, “Like what?”

“Little things: let me tie your wrists, blindfold and gag you. Then you stay next to me while I guide you. Once we’re in the car I’ll tie your legs. That’s all. In less than an hour you’ll be free to enjoy a nice room, a library and garden... All the comforts you could want.”

“And if I refuse?” Maury challenged.

The Dutchman smiled again and said, “I say the word and two men will come who will have you tied up in two seconds.”

Maury shrugged, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and pocketed it as he said, “That’s fine, I’ll do as you ask.”

He looked at the woman while Van Osting himself tied his hands behind his back and gagged him. She had lowered her long eyelashes and become a portrait of detachment and mystery. Suddenly he no longer saw her face because Van Osting had put the blindfold on him.

Then a thought flashed through his mind: A blood transfusion? After which they might free me? And what good is being free if they suck all the blood out of my heart?”

But the Dutchman was clutching his arm, pulling him along.

Soon after, rendered unable not only to move but to see and hear, he was driven through the city in a car whose windows must have been covered up with some material.

And he thought of the police officers, of the passers-by, of the curious rubberneckers, of the whole modern, ordered life of the big city, of all the police stations, the courts, the army bases and barracks, the cavalry, the infantry, the artillery—while in the very heart of this city there were, alive and active, occult sects of some remote, satanic cult using murder and bloody rites for mysterious and criminal ends that had so many and such broad ramifications that they “blanketed the earth” as Leo Saint-Clair, a.k.a. the Nyctalope, would say, “with an ever-mutating spider’s web”.

Saying this to himself struck Alec Maury with terror.

He shuddered thinking, “The spider first sucks the blood of living insects that are stuck in its web. My blood... And this mysterious woman... And the other woman they threw into the Rhône before they did the same with Duffau... Ritual murder? If so, I’m a goner.”