

# The Clique of Gold

By

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# Chapter 1

There is not in all Paris a house better kept or more inviting-looking than No. 23 in Grange Street. As soon as you enter, you are struck by a minute, extreme neatness, which reminds you of Holland, and almost sets you a-laughing. The neighbors might use the brass plate on the door as a mirror to shave in; the stone floor is polished till it shines; and the woodwork of the staircase is varnished to perfection.

In the entrance-hall a number of notices, written in the peculiar style which owners of houses affect, request the tenants to respect the property of others, without regard to the high price they pay for their share. "Clean your feet, if you please," they say to all who come in or go out. "No spitting allowed on the stairs." "Dogs are not allowed in the house."

Nevertheless, this admirably-kept house "enjoyed" but a sorry reputation in the neighborhood. Was it worse than other houses,--No. 21, for instance, or No. 25? Probably not; but there is a fate for houses as well as for men.

The first story was occupied by the families of two independent gentlemen, whose simplicity of mind was only equalled by that of their mode of life. A collector, who occasionally acted as broker, lived in the second story, and had his offices there. The third story was rented to a very rich man, a baron as people said, who only appeared there at long intervals, preferring, according to his own account, to live on his estates near Saintonge. The whole fourth story was occupied by a man familiarly known as Papa Ravinet, although he was barely fifty years old. He dealt in second-hand merchandise, furniture, curiosities, and toilet articles; and his rooms were filled to overflowing with a medley collection of things which he was in the habit of buying at auctions. The fifth story, finally, was cut up in numerous small rooms and closets, which were occupied by poor families or clerks, who, almost without exception, disappeared early in the morning, and returned only as late as possible at night.

An addition to the house in the rear had its own staircase, and was probably in the hands of still humbler tenants; but then it is so difficult to rent out small lodgings!

However this may have been, the house had a bad reputation; and the lodgers had to bear the consequences. Not one of them would have been trusted with a dollar's worth of goods in any of the neighboring shops. No one, however, stood, rightly or wrongly, in as bad repute as the doorkeeper, or concierge, who lived in a little hole near the great double entrance-door, and watched over the safety of the whole house. Master Chevassat and his wife were severely "cut" by their colleagues of adjoining houses; and the most atrocious stories were told of both husband and wife.

Master Chevassat was reputed to be well off; but the story went that he lent out money, and did not hesitate to charge a hundred per cent a month. He acted, besides, it was said, as agent for two of his tenants,--the broker, and the dealer in second-hand goods, and undertook the executions, when poor debtors were unable to pay. Mrs. Chevassat,

however, had even graver charges to bear. People said she would do anything for money, and had aided and encouraged many a poor girl in the house in her evil career.

It was also asserted that the estimable couple had formerly lived in the fashionable Faubourg St. Honore, but had been compelled to leave there on account of several ugly occurrences. They were, finally, reported to have a son called Justin, a handsome fellow, thirty-five years old, who lived in the best society, and whom they nearly worshipped; while he was ashamed of them, and despised them, although he came often at night to ask them for money. No one, it must, however, be confessed, had ever seen this son; and no one knew him.

The two Chevassats shrugged their shoulders, and said it would be absurd if they should trouble themselves about public opinion, as long as their consciences were clear, and they owed nobody anything.

Towards the end of last December, however, on a Saturday afternoon, towards five o'clock, husband and wife were just sitting down to dinner, when the dealer in old clothes, Papa Ravinet, rushed like a tempest into their room.

He was a man of middle size, clean shaven, with small, bright, yellowish eyes, which shone with restless eagerness from under thick, bushy brows. Although he had lived for years in Paris, he was dressed like a man from the country, wearing a flowered silk vest, and a long frock-coat with an immense collar.

"Quick, Chevassat!" he cried, with a voice full of trouble. "Take your lamp, and follow me; an accident has happened upstairs."

He was so seriously disturbed, although generally very calm and cool, that the two Chevassats were thoroughly frightened.

"An accident!" exclaimed the woman; "that was all that was wanting. But pray, what has happened, dear M. Ravinet?"

"How do I know? This very moment, as I was just coming out of my room, I thought I heard the death-rattle of a dying person. It was in the fifth story. Of course I ran up a few steps, I listened. All was silent. I went down again, thinking I had been mistaken; and at once I heard again a sighing, a sobbing--I can't tell you exactly what; but it sounded exactly like the last sigh of a person in agony, and at the point of death."

"And then?"

"Then I ran down to tell you, and ask you to come up. I am not sure, you understand; but I think I could swear it was the voice of Miss Henrietta,--that pretty young girl who lives up there. Well, are you coming?"

But they did not stir.

"Miss Henrietta is not in her room," said Mrs. Chevassat coldly. "She went out just now, and told me she would not be back till nine o'clock. My dear M. Ravinet, you must have been mistaken; you had a ringing in your ears, or"--

"No, I am sure I was not mistaken! But never mind; we must see what it is."

During this conversation, the door of the room had been open; and several of the lodgers, hearing the voice of the merchant and the exclamations of the woman as they crossed the hall, had stopped and listened.

"Yes, we must see what it is," they repeated.

Master Chevassat dared no longer oppose the general desire so peremptorily expressed,--

"Let us go then, since you will have it so," he sighed.

And, taking up his lamp, he began to ascend the stairs, followed by the merchant, his wife, and five or six other persons.

The steps of all these people were heard all over the house; and from story to story the lodgers opened their doors to see what was going on. And, when they heard that something was likely to happen, they almost all left their rooms, and followed the others.

So that Master Chevassat had nearly a dozen curious persons behind him, when he stopped on the fifth floor to take breath.

The door to Miss Henrietta's room was the first on the left in the passage. He knocked at first gently, then harder, and at last with all his energy, till his heavy fists shook the thin partition-walls of all the rooms. Between each blow he cried,--

"Miss Henrietta, Miss Henrietta, they want you!"

No reply came.

"Well!" he said triumphantly, "you see!"

But, whilst the man was knocking at the door, M. Ravinet had knelt down, and tried to open the door a little, putting now his eye, and now his ear, to the keyhole and to the slight opening between the door and the frame.

Suddenly he rose deadly pale.

"It is all over; we are too late!"

And, as the neighbors expressed some doubts, he cried furiously,--

"Have you no noses? Don't you smell that abominable charcoal?"

Everybody tried to perceive the odor; and soon all agreed that he was right. As the door had given way a little, the passage had gradually become filled with a sickening vapor.

The people shuddered; and a woman's voice exclaimed,--

"She has killed herself!"

As it happens strangely enough, but too frequently, in such cases, all hesitated.

"I am going for the police," said at last Master Chevassat.

"That's right!" replied the merchant. "Now there is, perhaps, a chance yet to save the poor girl; and, when you come back, it will of course be too late."

"What's to be done, then?"

"Break in the door."

"I dare not."

"Well, I will."

The kind-hearted man put his shoulder to the worm-eaten door, and in a moment the lock gave way. The bystanders shrank instinctively back; they were frightened. The door was wide open, and masses of vapors rolled out. Soon, however, curiosity triumphed over fear. No one doubted any longer that the poor girl was lying in there dead; and each one tried his best to see where she was.

In vain. The feeble light of the lamp had gone out in the foul air; and the darkness was frightful.

Nothing could be seen but the reddish glow of the charcoal, which was slowly going out under a little heap of white ashes in two small stoves. No one ventured to enter.

But Papa Ravinet had not gone so far to stop now, and remain in the passage.

"Where is the window?" he asked the concierge.

"On the right there."

"Very well; I'll open it."

And boldly the strange man plunged into the dark room; and almost instantly the noise of breaking glass was heard. A moment later, and the air in the room had become once more fit for breathing, and everybody rushed in.

Alas! it was the death-rattle which M. Ravinet had heard.

On the bed, on a thin mattress, without blankets or bedclothes, lay a young girl about twenty years old, dressed in a wretched black merino dress, stretched out at full-length, stiff, lifeless.

The women sobbed aloud.

"To die so young!" they said over and over again, "and to die thus."

In the meantime the merchant had gone up to the bed, and examined the poor girl.

"She is not dead yet!" he cried. "No, she cannot be dead! Come, ladies, come here and help the poor child, till the doctor comes."

And then, with strange self-possession, he told them what to do for the purpose of recalling her to life.

"Give her air," he said, "plenty of air; try to get some air into her lungs. Cut open her dress; pour some vinegar on her face; rub her with some woollen stuff."

He issued his orders, and they obeyed him readily, although they had no hope of success.

"Poor child!" said one of the women. "No doubt she was crossed in love."

"Or she was starving," whispered another.

There was no doubt that poverty, extreme poverty, had ruled in that miserable chamber: the traces were easily seen all around. The whole furniture consisted of a bed, a chest of drawers, and two chairs. There were no curtains at the window, no dresses in the trunk, not a ribbon in the drawers. Evidently everything that could be sold had been sold, piece by piece, little by little. The mattresses had followed the dresses,--first the wool, handful by handful, then the covering.

Too proud to complain, and cut off from society by bashfulness, the poor girl who was lying there had evidently gone through all the stages of suffering which the shipwrecked mariner endures, who floats, resting on a stray spar in the great ocean.

Papa Ravinet was thinking of all this, when a paper lying on the bureau attracted his eye. He took it up. It was the last will of the poor girl, and ran thus:--

"Let no one be accused; I die voluntarily. I beg Mrs. Chevassat will carry the two letters which I enclose to their addresses. She will be paid whatever I may owe her. Henrietta."

There were the two letters. On the first he read,--

Count Ville-Handry, Rue de Varennest 115. And, on the other,--

M. Maxime de Brevan, 62 Rue Laffitte.



A sudden light seemed to brighten up the small yellowish eye of the dealer in old clothes; a wicked smile played on his lips; and he uttered a very peculiar, "Ah!"

But all this passed away in a moment.

His brow grew as dark as ever; and he looked around anxiously and suspiciously to see if anybody had caught the impression produced upon him by the letters.

No, nobody had noticed him, nobody was thinking of him; for everybody was occupied with Miss Henrietta.

Thereupon he slipped the paper and the two letters into the vast pocket of his huge frock-coat with a dexterity and a rapidity which would have excited the envy of an accomplished pickpocket. It was high time; for the women who were bending over the bed of the young girl were exhibiting signs of intense excitement. One of them said she was sure the body had trembled under her hand, and the others insisted upon it that she was mistaken. The matter was soon to be decided, however.

After, perhaps, twenty seconds of unspeakable anguish, during which all held their breath, and solemn stillness reigned in the room, a cry of hope and joy broke forth suddenly.

"She has trembled, she has moved!"

This time there was no doubt, no denial possible. The unfortunate girl had certainly moved, very faintly and feebly; but still she had stirred.

A slight color returned to her pallid cheeks; her bosom rose painfully, and sank again; her teeth, closely shut, opened; and with parted lips she stretched forth her neck as if to draw in the fresh air instinctively.

"She is alive!" exclaimed the women, almost frightened, and as if they had seen a miracle performed,--"she is alive!"

In an instant, M. Ravinet was by her side.

One of the women, the wife of the gentleman in the first story, held the head of the girl on her arm, and the poor child looked around with that blank, unmeaning eye which we see in mad-houses. They spoke to her; but she did not answer; evidently she did not hear.

"Never mind!" said the merchant, "she is saved; and, when the doctor comes, he will have little else to do. But she must be attended to, the poor child, and we cannot leave her here alone."

The bystanders knew very well what that meant; and yet hardly any one ventured timidly to assent, and say, "Oh, of course!"

This reluctance did not deter the good man. "We must put her to bed," he went on; "and, of course, she must have a mattress, bedclothes and blankets. We want wood also (for it is terribly cold here), and sugar for her tea, and a candle."

He did not mention all that was needed, but nearly so, and a great deal too much for the people who stood by. As a proof of this, the wife of the broker put grandly a five-franc piece on the mantelpiece, and quietly slipped out. Some of the others followed her example; but they left nothing. When Papa Ravinet had finished his little speech, there was nobody left but the two ladies who lived on the first floor, and the concierge and his wife. The two ladies, moreover, looked at each other in great embarrassment, as if they did not know what their curiosity might cost them. Had the shrewd man foreseen this noble abandonment of the poor girl? One would have fancied so; for he smiled bitterly, and said,--

"Excellent hearts--pshaw!"

Then, shrugging his shoulders, he added,--

"Luckily, I deal in all possible things. Wait a minute. I'll run down stairs, and I'll be back in a moment with all that is needed. After that, we shall see what can be done."

The face of the concierge's wife was a picture. Never in her life had she been so much astonished.

"They have changed Papa Ravinet, or I am mad."

The fact is, that the man was not exactly considered a benevolent and generous mortal. They told stories of him that would have made Harpagon envious, and touched the heart of a constable.

Nevertheless, he re-appeared soon after, almost succumbing under the weight of two excellent mattresses; and, when he came back a second time, he brought much more than he had mentioned.

Miss Henrietta was breathing more freely, but her face was still painfully rigid. Life had come back before the mind had recovered; and it was evident that she was utterly unconscious of her situation, and of what was going on around her. This troubled the two ladies not a little, although they felt very much relieved, and disposed to do everything, now that they were no longer expected to open their purses.

"Well, that is always the way," said Papa Ravinet boldly. "However, the doctor will bleed her, if there is any necessity."

And, turning to Master Chevassat, he added,--

"But we are in the way of these ladies; suppose we go down and take something? We can come back when the child is comfortably put to bed."

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