

The Man in Purple

By
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QUICK



Oh, yes, he was handsome, compelling—and utterly evil!

Heading by
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IT WAS early morning when we arrived in Paris. Somehow in those pre-war days it always seemed to be between one and four in the morning when the train slid into the station, no matter how you planned. So, here were we, at 4 a. m.,

surrounded with luggage in a taxi, on our way to the Albion, the little hotel where Godfrey and I always stayed.

It was a charming hotel, quite unknown to the general public, found for us by some French friends. Godfrey and I were crazy

about it. This was the first time we'd come without reservations. Godfrey had no doubt they'd take us in, but I was not so sanguine. I didn't mind picking up things at a moment's notice and running off with Godfrey—he loved the excitement of doing the unexpected and I loved him—but I usually wired ahead for rooms wherever we were going. This time there literally had been no opportunity to do so and as the taxi drew up before the Albion and honked its horn with the pathos only a French cab can manage, I was worried.

It soon appeared that my forebodings were justified. The clerk, Raoul, whom we knew extremely well, was glad to see us, but not overjoyed as he ordinarily would have been. He was full of apologies and lamentations. "But there is nothing for Madame and Monsieur. Not a single room in the hotel. I am desolate, but it is so. If you had only wired ahead . . ."

I took the bull by the horns. "But, we did, Raoul! Do you mean you didn't get the telegram? We sent it two days ago."

Two days ago we had been in London without the slightest idea of Paris in our, or rather Godfrey's head. But I always believe if one is going to lie, it might as well be wholeheartedly.

Raoul wrung his hands. "Oh, Madame, I am devastated. But there is nothing . . ."

"But surely," Godfrey's calm English voice broke in, "you've got some corner you can tuck us in for the night. You can't turn us out at this hour! Then tomorrow you can fix us up."

A kind of struggle went on in Raoul's face. It was plain to see he was in an agony of indecision. Finally one side of his problem won. But it was obvious, with great reluctance on his part. "There is a suite, on the garden side, perhaps—just for tonight—or what is left of the night—"

"Splendid. And I assure you we won't mind the extra charge," added my practical husband.

Raoul turned to the combination key and letter rack behind him, extracted a key, and called to the bellboy, "Here Pierre. Take Monsieur and Madame to No. 217."

"217?" The boy, half awake, seemed incredulous.

"217," Raoul repeated with an emphasis

that stopped whatever the boy had been going to say. Silently he picked up our bags and led the way to the elevator that had been installed in the well of the stairway—one of those open-cage affairs the French delight in, but which my American remembrance of what an elevator can be, dislikes intensely.

As we ascended Raoul called out, "*Dormez bien,*" and Pierre made a sound that up in the Bronx they call a cheer. Evidently he thought we wouldn't sleep well, and I wondered if he had labeled us as bride and groom. He was a new addition to the Albion. He didn't know we'd been coming there for over five years.

He threw open the door of No. 217, turned on the light, sidled the bags in, and was off so quickly that he missed the silver Godfrey had ready to give him. "Remarkable," I exclaimed. Then, as I took in the really charming room, added, "Godfrey, this is the real thing."

IT WAS. Boiseric of an elegance and charm that went with powdered hair, bright silks, and jeweled hands. The delicately carved wood was painted that soft shade of grayish blue which no modern materials can quite achieve. The room had probably been a card room in the time of Marie Antoinette. I could picture the gay scene that had been reflected in the lovely old mirror that was set into the wall above the fireplace. The furniture was gilt and covered in a salmon-pink damask. The whole effect was exquisite.

"This stuff must be worth a great deal," again my practical husband was speaking. "It's genuine—the whole room is a museum piece. Don't wonder they don't like to rent it. Let's look at the bedroom—" He threw open the door and switched on the light.

It was charming, too, but in an utterly different way. It was completely modern, ivory paint, a gay flowered wallpaper of pale yellow with red and blue flowers and a matching chintz for curtains, bedspreads, and slip covers. It sounds wild, but the effect was a sunshiny bower of roses. The furniture was ivory. It was all sweetness and light before I stepped over the threshold. The instant I was in the room, I felt differently. Despite the gayety and the wink-

ing brightness of a crystal chandelier, obviously converted from candles to electricity, I felt a sense of gloom. It was as though a mantle of depression had been flung over my spirit.

"It's a very gay room," my husband said.

"Gay looking," I amended. Then I voiced my thoughts. "Don't you think it's odd Raoul held out on us. He was all ready to turn us away—with this up his sleeve."

"Faker! Probably so he can overcharge—"

Godfrey was most likely right. I was silly to go imagining things because of circumstances—the odd glance between Raoul and Pierre, and my own sudden depression. The latter wasn't due to the room. It could not be—it was my own fatigue catching up with me.

GODFREY lugged in the bags, grumbling against Pierre's laziness. I started to say, "Maybe the boy didn't want to come in here," but I caught the words back, and went about my preparations for bed. It was when I was in the bathroom cleaning my teeth that I heard the first knock!

I thought Pierre might have had a troubling conscience and come back. When it came again, I called out: "Why don't you go to the door, Godfrey?"

"Why?" his matter-of-fact voice came back.

"Knocking—"

"Didn't hear anything," but he went through to the living room and I heard him open the door. When he came back he was laughing. "Must be hearing things, old girl."

My twenty-two years always shrink away from Godfrey's "old girl," even though I know it's meant as a form of endearment.

"Didn't you hear anything?" I asked, when reluctantly I returned to the gay room.

"No." Godfrey was bland.

Just at that moment the knocking started again. From Godfrey's start I knew he heard it too. That was a relief! I didn't want to hear noises no one else did.

"People next door," Godfrey said.

"At this hour?"

"Paris is noted for the hours it keeps. They've probably been sampling champagne

from *boite* to *boite*, and are now returning from making a night of it."

I wasn't up to arguing. I kissed Godfrey goodnight, and went over to my own twin bed, Godfrey already having made himself comfortable in the other. As I shed by negligée, he turned out the light. Presently I heard his even breathing. I counted his respirations to drown out the knocks which were coming more frequently now. They obviously didn't bother him, but they did things to me. The linen sheets were cold and clammy. So was I, but not because of them. I was afraid!

There was something strange about these rooms. Raoul wouldn't have held out on us without a good reason. He had obviously given them to us with great reluctance. I was beginning to understand why. The knocking was getting louder now. It seemed to be coming from everywhere—all around my head. If it were the people next door, they were bowling on the wall behind my bed. It was only because I was completely exhausted that I fell asleep. Or, was it sleep? One minute I was exasperated at the knocking and afraid of something, I didn't know what. The next minute the knocking ceased and I was afraid—afraid of the man in purple!

HE STOOD in the doorway, very tall, very elegant, with a purple moiré waistcoat lavishly embroidered in heavy gold thread. He wore it over a lavender vest, and he had on purple satin trousers that ended below his knee. A diamond buckle fastened them and they undoubtedly served as garters for his elegant purple hose. He wore black slippers with diamond buckles. There was a flash of the same stones on the vest and real lace cascaded down his front and from his sleeves. His hair was powdered, and his face was utterly evil. The Marquis de Sade must have looked like that about midway in his career, when the good looks nature had endowed him with were being superseded by the ideas and practices that were essentially his own.

The man in purple was handsome. I could see him plainly by the light coming through the transom. A truly elegant figure of a man, but his lips were sensuous and cruel, his eyes cold, yet compelling in some

strange, fascinating way. He looked toward me and I turned cold in my innermost veins. "If he speaks to me, I shall die," I thought.

But he didn't. His black malicious eyes held mine and he came nearer.

I couldn't move. If he'd been a snake charmer and I the snake, I couldn't have been more in his power, although the illustration was twisted, for it was he who resembled the snake, not I. Even his powdered wig didn't disguise the fact his head was shaped like an adder's head. He came up to the bed, close to me, while I lay completely paralyzed with fear beyond anything I could describe. Then he put his arms up, shook the lace back from his wrists and reached for my throat!

From somewhere I got strength enough to scream. The next second the man in purple had gone, and Godfrey was beside me. "What on earth—?" he was saying.

"I had a dream," I gasped. "A horrible dream—" but even while I said the words, I knew it hadn't been a dream. The man in purple had been real.

Eventually Godfrey went back to bed and to sleep. Nothing disturbed him. This time I went to sleep, but the man in purple was in my dreams, coming to me, freeing his wrists from the lace, reaching for my throat—finding it!

I woke up gasping for air, with actual pressure on my windpipe. It was more than a dream. The man in purple had come again.

I couldn't stand any more of this. I knew now it was a ghost. The man in purple had to be a ghost. There was no other explanation possible. I was quite sure, and further, positive that was the reason Raoul hadn't wanted us to stay. He *knew* about that man in purple.

I had two alternatives—to wake Godfrey, or get away from this room. Unfortunately for me, I chose the latter. Godfrey looked so comfortable I hated to rouse him again, and besides, I knew he'd laugh at the idea of a ghost. So I got out of bed, took the inevitable taffeta-covered eiderdown quilt always to be found on French beds, and tiptoed into the sitting room. I curled up in the eiderdown on the couch.

Again, I couldn't sleep. The man in purple was in my thoughts. I couldn't

shake him off. I kept seeing him and his gesture of freeing his hands from encumbrances so that he would be free to murder. I kept feeling his hands reaching for my throat. But at long, long last, with the assistance of at least two hundred and fifty sheep that I laboriously counted, I fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion that comes when one is worn out mentally as well as physically.

A whispering woke me up—a whispering in French—French of the old style. If I hadn't spoken the language like a native I wouldn't have understood the whisperings. As it was, it was difficult—just as strange as listening to the talk of our Founding Fathers would be to modern ears.

The whispers said over and over, "Bring her here, Pierre. Bring her here to me and then go. Do not return no matter what you hear." And then there was a pause—a silence, while I heard a door shut and footsteps walk away. Then the whispers began again. "Soon, soon she will come," repeated a voice which had a hard quality underneath the softness of its tone and an underlying cruelty, and I knew that it was the voice of the man in purple, but I could not see him. I knew fear again and shrank into the eiderdown. Suppose those hands found my throat again—suppose—I wanted to scream, to run to Godfrey, but I couldn't move, and in the strange nightmare of events I know I shouldn't, and the knowledge was horrible.

The whisperings were gaining strength and volubility. It was an ordinary voice that spoke now in that antiquated French. "She is coming—she is here." As he mouthed the last word I could see him. It was the man in purple standing by the carved mantelpiece, watching the door. He was quite tangible, there was nothing ghost-like about him—no transparency, no luminosity—just a man out of another world. An evil man—his lips strained back from his teeth as a dog's do at the kill.

The door swung open, and I gasped. For there coming into the room was myself! Not the American Helen married to the English Godfrey, but a French *Helène*. Not the frightened girl crouching on the sofa in her own time, but a frightened girl from some other age. The two entities were sepa-

rate, yet she was part of me just as I was part of her. I had been that girl, and I was looking at my own past—!

She was in the room now, sweeping low to the floor in a curtsy of the utmost grace. "Monsieur," she said, gently, but because she and I were one, I knew the effort she made to keep her voice steady. I felt the chill of her finger-tips, the frantic beating of her heart.

He raised her cold fingers to his lips. She shrank away from his touch. "So, Mademoiselle la Comtesse, you hate me for what I have done?"

She made no answer except with her eyes which justified his statement.

He let go her hand. "Yet I saved your father—"

"At a price, Monsieur." There was scorn in her voice.

He bowed. "As you say—at a price. Still, he is safe in England. That should be a fair exchange."

"My father would not think so—" There was color in her pale cheeks as she spoke, but it faded rapidly away.

"Nor do you—" his lips curved back from his teeth again in a gesture that was completely feline. "And what is more, you do not let me forget it. Your hatred for me is a wall between us. Your scorn is sharp knives that cut my flesh. Yes, great though I am, I feel small before you, and that is not to be endured."

"I cannot change my feelings, Monsieur." There was triumph on her face, all the more intense because it was restrained.

"But I can change your feelings, Mademoiselle! I can allow them the expanse of heaven, where the priests tell us there is only love, where I shall not be able to see them." He raised his hands in that familiar gesture, shaking back the lace to leave them free, and advanced toward her.

I felt the terror sweep over her, the loneliness, the pain. "Never to see my father again," she thought. "To have brought him to safety and not to share it. I would be glad to die were it not for him, but he needs me." Then as the man in purple advanced toward her, she sank down on her knees.

"Oh, Monsieur, I beg you spare my life. You promised once my father was safe,

I could go to him. Surely you will not go back on your word. See, I who are proud, kneel before you."

I could have told her there was no use. I could see the inexorable purpose in those uplifted hands.

The man in purple laughed. It was a horrible laugh, deadly in intent. "So, the Comtesse de Trèves begs—and for once there is no sneer in her voice. Too late, my dear. Too late, Mademoiselle. Hate rouses hate."

She looked up at him then. "You are right, Monsieur. Hate rouses hate. It feeds upon it too, and I tell you now that my hate will live on down through the centuries until we two meet again, and the tables are turned."

"I will conquer then as I conquer now." He was almost within reach of her.

"Then I will come back again and again—age after age, and in the end, the score will be evened. I vow it so, Monsieur. Here and now, with death staring me in the face. And I curse you as no man has ever been cursed before. Here you shall stay and wait until I come again and then—"

THE hands of the man in purple flashed downwards to her throat, choking the words back into it, exerting more and more pressure until only her eyes blazed hate. Then he let go.

I was gasping — struggling and everything was growing black. There were fingers on my throat. Was I feeling the sensations of my ancient self that realistically?

This time the man in purple hadn't been touching me. It was the Comtesse de Trèves whose throat he held between those strong white hands, into whose windpipe the iron fingers pressed. And yet, with a tremendous effort I opened my eyes. There was no Comtesse de Trèves. There was no man in purple. But there *were* fingers around my throat—exerting such pressure that I could hardly breath—strong, white, deadly fingers — Godfrey's fingers! And everything was growing black. There were fingers on my throat, and I was feeling the sensations of my ancient self—but, Godfrey's fingers were dispensing death! His

face had no expression whatsoever. It was the face of a sleep-walker or a zombie, but his fingers were alive.

I tried to break their hold. I tried to scream, to pull those hands away from my throat—but I couldn't.

If it hadn't been for the eiderdown I should have been dead already. But I had drawn it up close around me and it was between my throat and those terrible fingers of Godfrey's. Even in the haze that was coming over me, I couldn't reconcile my thoughts to their being Godfrey's. The comforter prevented the fingers getting an absolute hold. It was slippery and the fact of it being there enabled me to breath a little. I saw that soon Godfrey's fingers would get a strangle hold. I had only a minute. There was a table beside the couch with an old porcelain vase on it. Somehow I managed to reach it with one hand, struggling all the time with what seemed to be Godfrey's superhuman strength. Still I got the vase in my hand, clasped its narrow neck, pulled it around and shattered it on Godfrey's head.

His fingers loosened. For one second his eyes held a startled expression, then he slumped down to the floor.

From somewhere I heard a soft voice, like the whisper of a sigh, "The score is evened."

I pulled myself together. Godfrey lay crumpled on the floor. I couldn't see any sign of life. I got to the telephone, and lifted off the instrument. Through my tortured throat I somehow got out the words, "Help! Help!" Then I fainted.

When I came to, Raoul was there and a doctor. Evidently a guest of the hotel as he had on a bathrobe over his pajamas. I was in the bedroom. I tried to talk and found I couldn't make a sound, but I mouthed the word, "Godfrey?"

"Madame, you must prepare yourself for a shock. Your husband . . . is dead. The burglar who choked you, hit him on the head with a vase when he came to your rescue. A very gallant gentleman, your husband. It is to be regretted that some nothing of a sneak thief should be the cause of terminating his life."

It was a long, elegantly phrased speech, typical of the French mind. The news

wasn't a shock to me. I had known Godfrey was dead when I saw him crumpled on the floor. Twice, while the doctor was talking, I tried to break in to tell him that he was wrong—there had been no burglar, but I couldn't speak. My throat seemed paralyzed. Then, through my chaotic thoughts came some common sense. The truth was too incredible to be believed. With a rush of panic I remembered the tales I had heard of the French police and their endless red tape. I decided it was better to leave it as it was. They seemed to have built up a good explanation of events. What if they weren't quite true. It would be better that way. I would let it go.

Raoul was saying, "We have had several times trouble with sneak thieves already. He had picked the lock of your suite. The door was open."

Needless to tell him that Godfrey never locked doors. Everything was fitting in to support their story.

The doctor was telling me a nurse was coming to put cold compresses on my throat. I was not to worry—they would attend to all details. He also said he had given me a hypodermic for the pain. I managed to indicate that I did not want to stay where I was.

He looked bewildered, but Raoul understood. "It is light, now, Madame." He pointed to the window and I could see the first thin slivers of sunlight. Raoul went on. "You will be quite all right, Madame, and later in the day—long before it is dark—I will see you are moved."

It was with that assurance that I went to sleep.

When I woke, I had been moved as promised. Through the days that followed I didn't let myself think. It wasn't until I was leaving to go back to England that I pinned him down.

"Raoul," I said, "those rooms you gave us that night—they are haunted."

Shamefacedly he answered. "Yes, Madame. This hotel once was the home of a French noble, a very great nobleman, who managed to survive the Revolution because of his friendship with Phillipe L'Egalité. He maintained his power in the days of that gory holocaust. That has always stained

the white fingers of France. He was not a nice man. There are rumors of the things he did that I would not repeat to Madame. He was responsible for many deaths. Those rooms are in the oldest part of the building. They were his. People have seen him . . . dressed in purple. At first we tried to rent the rooms, ignoring the ghost-talk as old wives tales, but the guests complained. They saw him, they said, and he was evil. They felt the evil if they did not see it. One woman who was very psychic, said she saw him strangling someone. She was quite ill afterwards. . . ."

"Had he ever strangled anyone?" I broke in.

"Yes, Madame. So I have heard. He was proud of his strong hands. I once saw a picture of a young Comtesse he was supposed to have killed because she did not return his love. She looked rather like you, Madame. We haven't rented those rooms for a long time. Did you see anything, Madame, before the burglar came?"

So, we were to carry on with the burglar to the bitter end. It was too late now to do anything else when the authorities had concurred with the story so readily. "Yes, Raoul. I saw—the man in purple," I said slowly."

THE Man in Purple! Godfrey! Had they been one and the same? Certainly the Comtesse de Trèves was myself. I hadn't needed Raoul's talk of the resemblance to the picture to know that. The Man in Purple had killed her, but before she died

she had cursed him—had condemned him to wait for her until she evened the score. Had that happened when I had, to save myself, killed Godfrey? Had Godfrey been the re-incarnation of the Man in Purple? Had he used him to try to conquer me?—The re-incarnation of the girl he had murdered.

Had he in some strange way taken possession of Godfrey's body for his own unholy purposes? Was Godfrey the man I loved?

Or was he the evil person whom I still regarded with horror? Had fate brought us to the rooms to work out destiny's pattern, or was it—? The questions were endless and they had been rotating in my mind for days. Ever since the night Godfrey died.

"It's a strange thing, Madame," Raoul was saying, "the room is no longer haunted. First the maid tells me she does not hear the knocking any more. Then the floorman tells me the same. So I spent a night there myself, and there was—nothing! Absolutely nothing. Not even a feeling of evil. This last week I have rented the rooms and there have been no complaints. Is it not strange, Madame?"

"Yes, Raoul." I couldn't say more. I had the answer to my questions now. Godfrey *had* been the Man in Purple. I no longer felt grief or guilt over his death. The Comtesse de Trèves had made good her promise. She had evened the score. The pendulum had swung wide and then gone back into place. The cycle was complete.

