

# The Man Who Lay Asleep

By Maurice Level

Worn out with fatigue, half dead with hunger, Ferrou got to the gates of Paris as night was falling. For eight days he had dragged himself from village to village, getting strength from the desire to see once again, now he was out of prison, the great city with its broad streets and the narrow roads which night suddenly peoples with moving and silent forms. For five years he had thought of nothing but his return, storing up hate and a desire for murder strong enough to make his first action the purchase of a knife he had sharpened in the dark on the stone edge of a well. As he walked along, his fingers were constantly on the handle.

Lights were appearing in the windows of some houses that stood in their own gardens. One of these remained dark, and but for the smoke that rose from a chimney, it might have been empty. The rare passers-by hurried along; here and there in the distance streetlamps flickered. It was quite dark now, a cold, dreary winter's night. Ferrou stood still: push on to Paris? he had not the strength; sleep where he was, in the cutting wind, with no covering but his rags? Impossible. He had left behind him the country stables where the straw makes a warm bed for vagabonds; there were no more village inns . . . and even if there were? . . . he had not a halfpenny in his pocket. For a second time the little house without lights attracted his attention. He was alone, he was cold, he was hungry, this shelter was as good as any other . . . He walked through the garden, listened, drew back a window shutter and found that the window was unfastened. He opened it, and at a bound was in the house. The window shut, he felt about in the dark, touching a bed, a small table; the drapery of a hanging wardrobe gave way to his hand; he raised it, felt the clothes beneath it, let it fall again. Then he found a door, opened it, and a savory smell of cooking tempted his nostrils.

"No good," he thought, "there's some one in the house. I must clear out . . ."

He turned to go, then stopped. Go where? To die of hunger on the road? If any one came in, he could hide. Then, his thoughts running off into another channel, he said to himself:

"You are cold, and it is warm here; you are hungry, and hot food will soon be ready; you have no money, and there is sure to be a full stocking hidden somewhere. You will probably have time to do all you want before any one disturbs you, and if you are disturbed . . ."

He opened his knife, tried the point on the palm of his hand, the edge on his nail, and murmuring: "The first who tries to stop me! . . ." went into the kitchen, lifted the lid of the pan, pricked the meat, and sneered:

"Not cooked enough; I will come back . . . But as he turned away there was a sound of steps outside. He heard the latch of the garden-gate lifted, the crunching of the gravel, and quickly, just as a key turned in the door, he slipped into the other room, raised the wardrobe-hanging and crouched down among the clothes. Not too soon: a man was coming into the house. This man lit a lamp, threw his coat over a chair, and began to pace the room. From his hiding place Ferrou saw him coming and going. He was a big man with large hands and square shoulders; his heavy, measured steps gave an impression of strength.

"The devil!" thought Ferrou, "It's not when the stomach has been empty for a week that a man is in a state to attack a lump like that!"

The man sat down and, his head resting on his hands, seemed to be thinking deeply. The bell sounded; he rose, saying:

“Is it you, Marie?”

“Yes. I went to bring the boy home from school. He hadn’t taken his waterproof, and it’s snowing.”

The man took the child on his knee, stroking his hair. From the kitchen the woman said:

“I didn’t hurry. You are earlier than usual; it’s only half-past six. You didn’t find your friends at the café?”

“Yes. But we had special work this afternoon, and to-night I must go out.”

“Well, everything’s ready. We can begin at once.”

“Go on without me; I’m not hungry. I will lie down on my bed; you must wake me at eleven o’clock.”

“All right. Come, little one, supper’s ready. Let your father rest, he is tired.”

The child went out of the room, and the man stretched himself on the bed.

“It is half-past six,” thought Ferrou, “and he doesn’t clear out till eleven. Five hours of this!”

Through the half-open door came the clatter of plates and the sound of the two voices. Now and again Ferrou was tempted to leave his hiding-place, to spring on the sleeping man, to stab him; then, imagining the unequal struggle, the noise, the too long and dangerous massacre of three beings, the woman and child clinging to his arm like cats, paralyzing his movements, he decided to wait. Once the man was gone, it would be easy to settle the woman and child. He had abandoned all idea of a quiet robbery. His stomach was too empty and his heart too full of hate to be satisfied with so little. His weakness made him ferocious; he had a knife, and it was there to be used.

When the meal was finished, the woman put the child to bed and washed up the crockery. In the silence that followed nothing could be heard but the tic-tac of the clock and the irregular breathing of the sleeper, who turned and tossed on his bed. It struck ten; he arranged his plan of attack. In an hour the man would go . . . Afterwards, he would be master of the place.

The thought of the coming massacre gave him more joy than the hope of the plunder. All was still. The man and the woman, the one sleeping, the other reading, had no suspicion that in the shadow a man lay in wait. Gradually a drowsiness stole over him, and he started when a voice said:

“It’s eleven o’clock.”

He rubbed his eyes and slowly stretched himself. The man got up, put on his shoes and thrust his arms through the sleeves of his coat.

“Above all, don’t catch cold,” said the woman. “I have heated some coffee; will you have it?”

“Yes.”

While he was sipping it, the woman went on:

“Won’t you put on your other overcoat?” Ferrou felt that she was stretching her hand towards the hanging and started. But when the man replied: “No, this one will do very well,” he breathed again, and still shaking with fright, said to himself:

“You, you hell cat, you shall pay for that presently! . . .”

She went on:

“You haven’t forgotten anything? What time will you be back?”

“About seven or eight o’clock as usual.”

He was ready. Standing up, the collar of his overcoat buttoned up, he seemed bigger and stronger than before. Behind his curtain Ferrou was growing unnerved: “You are never going then! . . .” The man, his hand on the handle of the door, turned back.

“Don’t forget to fasten the bars of the shutters and bolt the door.”

The sound of wheels grated on the road and stopped.

“Here they are,” said the man.

He went out and began to talk to the newcomers in the garden.

“You, haven’t forgotten anything?—Yes—The coach-house properly shut?—Yes, yes.—Let’s be off then. Go in Marie; it’s snowing, it’s a very bad night.”

“Worse than you think!” snarled Ferrou.

His knife was burning his fingers; he longed to have done with it all. But the man still lingered. His voice rang clear through the cold air:

“Pass me the lantern. Let me see if everything is in its place.”

Suddenly his voice, till then very kind, rose angrily:

“Just look how you have fastened that! The sheath is not even buckled. And it’s badly balanced. In less than a quarter of an hour half the blade would be on the ground. You’d have mud in the slides and on the posts. Come, give a hand!”

Ferrou listened, mocking:

“The finest porcelain, at least, to need so much care.”

The man went on:

“What have you been thinking about? At the first jolt, the tub would have tipped off.”

Ferrou ceased sneering. A cold shiver ran down his back. The Blade . . . the Posts . . . the Tub . . . Separately, these words meant nothing. . . Put together . . . they suggested, might mean a terrible thing . . . Where was he? . . . Who was this man who had lain sleeping there and was now saying these words to the other man?

The voice softened:

“There, that will do. It would have been a fine thing if you had blunted the knife of the guillotine.”

Trembling, Ferrou repeated: “The knife of the guillotine! . . .” and his teeth began to chatter. In a flash, these last words had brought the whole of the awful thing before him. He seemed to hear the mysterious noises that come in the night to wake those who are condemned to death, the hammer-knocks of the sinister carpenter; he seemed to see the pale faces of the assistants who enter the cell; the big red posts set up outside in the gray dawn of the morning . . .”

“Ready,” said a voice—the voice of the man.

Then Ferrou, gasping with fear, biting his fingers to stop himself from shrieking, stammered, forgetting that he might be heard:

“The executioner! I have been watching the executioner sleep!”

The cart had set off at a good pace and the woman was just going to shut the door, but forgetting that he had crouched there for hours waiting to kill, he flung away his knife, knocked her out of his way with a thrust of his shoulder, rushed into the garden, leaped over the fence and began to run blindly down the road, fleeing from Paris whose distant noises and familiar odors would soon be augmented by the sound of cracking bone and crushed flesh and the fusty smell of blood.