

A Pinch of Snuff

Eric Taylor

ERIC TAYLOR was a frequent, though not prolific, contributor to various pulps in the 1920s and 1930s, notably to *Black Mask*, *Dime Detective*, and the lower-paying *Clues*.

While the seal of approval that came with being published in the Golden Age of *Black Mask*—in the years in which it was publishing Hammett, Whitfield, Cain, Nebel, and its other major stars—would normally have given an author greater opportunity for success, this seems to have eluded Taylor. He never published a novel and never even had a single short story collected in an anthology.

Some of this may be due to the fact that he eschewed the traditional path of most pulp fiction writers, which was to produce a series detective. In the seven stories published in *Black Mask*, for example, three were about different detectives and three were about thieves, including the story collected here.

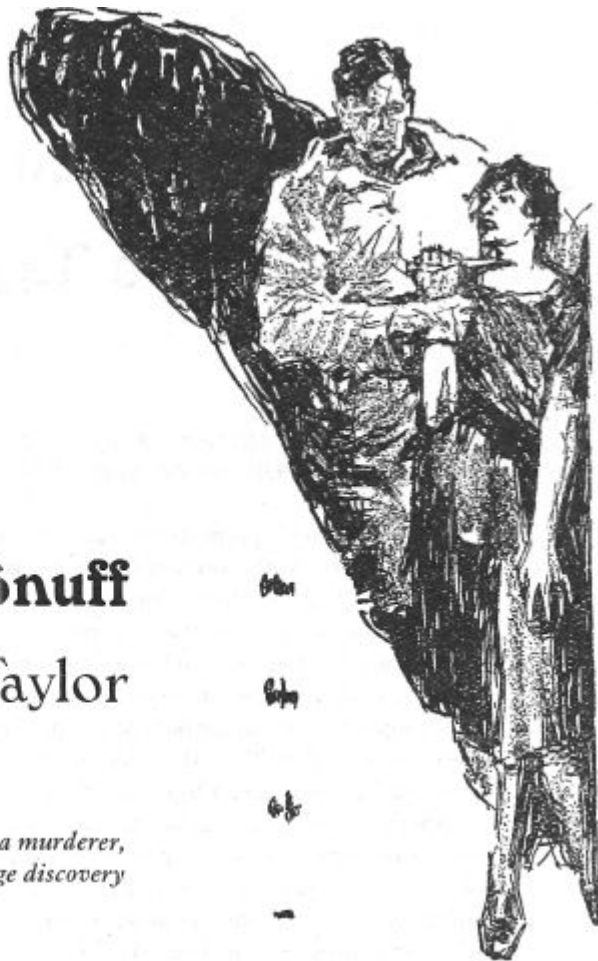
Another reason that Taylor may not have enjoyed the financial and critical success of many of his fellow pulpsters is his melodramatic style. The impossibly pitiful early years of the heroine of “A Pinch of Snuff” would have been an embarrassment to producers of stage plays at the turn of the last century, at which audiences were encouraged to hiss at the villain as he twirled his mustache while throwing a waif out of her home to freeze in the winter snow.

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*A small thing, but it leads to a murderer,
vengeance, and a strange discovery*



IN MONTREAL they like to show you the view from the top of Mont Royal. To the south, church spires like gracile mile posts guide the eye to the green St. Lawrence, panting here from its fierce flight over the Lachine Rapids, widening for its majestic march to the sea. Beyond the river lies a great plain that meets the sky near the hills along the American border. To the north, the Laurentian Mountains hide uncountable lakes that lie like verde antiques, cool and inscrutable as they await a sportsman's rod. To the west, gay red roofs peer through the verdant screen of maples, while to the east... But Montreal might prefer that you didn't look to the east.

A family of five brooded in a single room apartment in an East End flat. The room was

hot, steaming, fetid with the snow that melted on Armand's coat and the baby wash that hung on a length of twine.

Armand sat sullen, his right hand stroking a nearly-empty bottle. He glanced across the room toward his youngest brat and thought it droll that the gin and milk should end simultaneously. His eyes wandered over to Gabrielle. He saw the ugly lines that poverty had etched across the fragile beauty of youth. She had cheated him, he thought. Bony, hollow-chested, with bent shoulders, reproachful eyes, and mute lips—a hag at thirty! Could this be the dancing-eyed, cream-skinned beauty he had wed thirteen years ago?

Irene moved across the room toward the table. Armand scowled. A doctor down at the clinic had informed Armand that Irene was undernourished. A thin arm crossed Armand's

vision and raised the cover of a thin metal box. A savage blasphemy burst from Armand's lips. His hand struck out. One of Irene's pale cheeks flushed crimson as she jumped back. Gabrielle turned with a furious protest on her lips. But something she saw in her husband's eyes choked back the words.

"She knows there is no bread in the box," Armand said after a minute.

At nine o'clock Armand went out. At a corner grocery, where his credit had been stopped, Armand halted to beg an empty sack. With this beneath an arm he struck south to a district of small wholesale produce merchants.

Before a window, Armand stood in deep thought for a long time. The flakes of snow that were falling grew larger. A few drops of rain fell, and Armand's decision was made. This mild winter was starving the poor. Mid-January and the river was still unfrozen despite the supplications of a thousand women who prayed for cold that their men might work at the ice-cutting.

Armand broke the window and crawled into a small warehouse. A few minutes later Armand thrust the filled sack through the window he had broken. He dropped to the street and raised the sack to his shoulder.

But recently there had been other raids on the wholesale provision houses. A keen-eyed detective with a reputation to make was watching the district.

At the detective's first cry to halt, Armand threw down the sack and ran. Armand was lean and fleet, and the detective had less at stake. At the detective's third cry, Armand's heart lifted. He was escaping the law. Then the detective fired. Something reached up from behind and gripped Armand's leg. He staggered forward painfully, dragging this leg that seemed to be caught in a trap. He turned down an alley.

His leg felt free now, but very heavy. He climbed a fence, fell to the ground and lurched forward. Twenty minutes later he reached his room weak and panting.

Gabrielle cried out her fear when she saw him. She ran to lock the door. Irene raised a small head from a heap of blankets that lay on the floor. Panic stifled her crying as a heavy pounding shook the door.

Armand glanced down and saw the blood that dripped from his soaked trousers. The hammering on the door increased. Gabrielle was holding him close. She was sobbing her anguish and kissing him. He must not leave her. For God's sake, no! She and the little ones—they would starve!

The soft wood door seemed to bellow inward. Armand kissed her once. He bent for an instant to drop a tear on the face of Irene. Then he seized an empty gin bottle and slid to the door.

The door crashed and Armand struck. The bottle shattered. The detective fell forward into Armand's arms. Armand's fingers closed on the man's throat. The detective tried to speak, but Armand choked back his words. And then a great blast shook the room. The low jet of gas was blown out.

The room was heavy with rancid smoke and escaping gas. Someone came in who shut off the gas and later lighted it. There were two men on the floor. One of them, the detective, rose slowly.

Gabrielle crossed the floor to her man. She stood above him—ominously calm, immobile. Then a long-drawn scream echoed the anguish of the woman in despair. She clutched at her breast and pitched forward across the body of Armand.

Neighbors and strangers swarmed into the room. Irene's frail little body shook with the chill of terror. The detective, with a gun in his hand, shouted fierce orders.

Irene crept from her blankets. The detective angrily waved back the intruders pressing in the doorway. The child slipped into the throng and was pushed with the rest from the room.

She stood in the doorway watching when the ambulance attendants brought stretchers into the room. She saw the doctor bend over her mother and heard him pronounce her dead. She saw him turn from her father and shake his head hopelessly. She was jostled roughly out of the way when the stretchers were carried from the room.

Irene shrank back further as a giant policeman carried her two baby sisters, one in each arm, from the room.

The dark hall was a swirling vortex of the morbidly curious. Men and women swarmed the place and fought for a glimpse into the room of tragedy. Police threw them back roughly. Children clung to their mothers' skirts crying out their fear. Irene shrank from sight in a corner.

In time the police herded the neighbors into their own quarters, and quiet reclaimed the building.

Irene crept fearfully down the hall. A policeman guarded the door to Armand's room. Irene stood there for a minute gazing dully, dry-eyed, at the door. The policeman waved an enormous nightstick and ordered her to be gone.

Irene walked slowly to the street door. She flung a last startled glance over her shoulder and fled down the street. Her spindling

legs revealed amazing fortitude and carried her miles from that East End flat.

That night she fell in with a crippled beggar. Outcast, nearly helpless, the discovery of a bit of humanity more wretched than himself was flattering. The beggar took Irene to a basement. She made peasoup for him, and he rewarded her with two blankets.

Irene told him her story and the beggar reciprocated with the tale of a thrilling flight from a crime that had ended when a freight train ground off his two legs. He told her further tales of glorious days and nights in the underworld. He promised to learn the name of the detective who had killed Armand and murder him.

Irene took courage from his brave tales.

"*Non!*" she exclaimed passionately, "you find the name, and I will kill him!"

There were no truant officers to evade. Irene cooked peasoup for "Sticks" Grady until he died of acute alcoholism three years later.

Irene was sixteen, but looked twenty. She was tall, too thin, but pretty in a hard way. Her eyes were smoldering bits of repressed hate. Her cheek bones were too prominent, and her lips were thin and straight. Sticks Grady had trained her well, and Irene was ready for crime.

She experimented with shop-lifting, snatching purses, and picking pockets, then tried burglary and found it most profitable. She could move through a house with the fleet grace of a shadow. Against the hazards of capture she carried a small stiletto—a weapon essentially feminine, but with the deadly possibilities of a cobra. The blade was a scant three inches in length and came to the point of a needle. Irene meant one day to strike that point to the heart of a detective named Jean

Duret, who, Sticks Grady had informed her, was the slayer of her father.

In time her life drew Irene into contact with other thieves. She was cunning and ambitious and organized a band. Irene lived with her companions in an old three-story stone building on St. Paul Street. The house was two hundred years old and ran back to an ancient cobbled street named St. Amable. The windows were few and narrow. They had originally been protected with thick iron shutters to withstand the arrows and bullets of the Iroquois. Fragments of these shutters still clung to rusted hinges.

Irene rented the two upper floors and professed to run a lodging house for sailors. For fifty years the ground floor had been occupied by a snuff manufacturer, but now that part of the building stood vacant, giving Irene's band the run of the whole place. The cellar was a deep, dark pit that smelled foully of the river. A small section of the flagged floor of the cellar was a trapdoor that opened down into a tunnel which Irene had heard was once part of the early fortifications of the city. Irene marked that tunnel for the tomb of the detective, Jean Duret.

Her band of thieves held up ships' officers on the dimly-lighted streets leading to the river. They occasionally lured drunken seamen to the grim, iron-shuttered house on St. Amable; robbed them, and threw their senseless bodies into deserted alleyways or abandoned warehouses. With one or two of the more skillful, Irene swept uptown on forays on the rich. She was surprisingly lucky, and the gang prospered.

It was on a night that Irene sat in her room weaving mental webs to ensnare the detective, Jean Duret, that a stranger hammered on the St. Amable Street door.

Irene's eyes peered through the perforations in a rust-eaten iron shutter. She saw a big man, wide of shoulders, but not stout. He was dressed in a pair of cord trousers and a blue flannel shirt. She could not see his face.

A frown of perplexity crossed Irene's forehead. It was not some fool thinking to rent a room, because the only lodging sign was an inconspicuous one on the St. Paul Street side of the house. The knocking on the door persisted. Irene was alone. She drew the stiletto from her breast and swiftly descended the foot-worn stairs.

"Who is there?" she demanded.

"It is I, Le Loup. I come from Desfarges!"

" 'Le Loup,' " Irene repeated. "I don't know you."

"You know Desfarges. Desfarges, of the Black Water Tavern?"

"Yes."

"Then open this cursed door! Is it not enough that Desfarges has sent me?"

Irene opened the door doubtfully. The tall stranger entered and closed and locked the door. "My card, miss!"

Irene looked deep into the man's eyes. Her glance dropped uncomfortably. The lines of that long, lean face were ruthlessly hard. A knife slash that began near the right ear ended at the fellow's mouth. There was a sardonic twist to the other side of his mouth. Thick cords stood out upon his neck. His cleft chin was outthrust in swaggering bravado. "My card, miss!" he repeated with a distorted grin.

Irene reached forward and accepted a sheet of folded paper. She opened the paper slowly, her eyes still more upon her curious

visitor than upon what he had offered as his card.

"Read," the man laughed.

Irene's eyes dropped to the paper. She drew back startled, then a smile flitted across her lips. He was droll, this Apache. What he offered as his card was a police bulletin from Paris bearing his photograph, his fingerprint classification, and his Bertillon measurements. Beneath these details was the printed information that Emil Desjardins, alias Le Loup, was wanted for the savage murder of an old woman.

Irene glanced from the photograph to the man. "The scar?" she asked.

"It was acquired since that episode," Le Loup laughed.

"And what do you want of me?" Irene demanded.

"Desfarges told me that I could trust you—else I would not have offered my *card*. I have placed my life in your hands. I want shelter. The police may be looking for me here; though I got clean away from France." He leaned close to Irene. "Desfarges told me of your cellar; he told me, too, of the old tunnel that leads to the fortifications. I want shelter, protection, Miss, and a chance to escape if necessary. But I expect to earn it!"

Desfarges was the gang's fence. Irene was under obligations to him. She dared not send this Apache away.

She took Le Loup through the house. She showed him the two-foot thickness of the stone walls. With a flashlight she guided him to the cellar and showed him the trap in the flagged floor that opened into the tunnel.

Le Loup and Irene stood silent while the Apache gazed approvingly at the closed trap. There was not a sound in the cellar but their breathing. Then from beneath their feet came the faint squeal of rats.

Le Loup grinned, but Irene drew back with a shudder. "The tunnel is alive with them," she explained. "New wharves of cement are being built and the rats have been driven back from the waterfront. They have little chance to find food now, and Jules, one of my men, tells me they will eat each other until none but a few remain. It is not a nice place, down there, but it is better than the gallows, or the guillotine, eh! And there is small danger that you will have to use it."

At first Irene's band received Le Loup with suspicion. But he was a spectacular figure and his endless bragging caught the fancy of these unimaginative rouges. By day the Apache amused himself in the practice of knife-throwing in the old quarters of the snuff manufacturer. He appeared to be a careless braggart, but Irene noticed he was always careful to wipe away the particles of dust or snuff that might have clung to his knife during this sport. At night Le Loup drank enormous quantities of gin and talked. He swaggered about the hideout, voicing opinions and offering advice in a manner that alarmed Irene.

A night when he and Irene happened to be alone in the house, Le Loup threw open her door without knocking.

Irene jumped to her feet and faced the Apache. He stood on the threshold, his great body filling the doorway. His eyes glittered menace; his torn mouth was distorted in a grin.

Irene struck a hand to her breast. "Get to your quarters!" she cried.

Le Loup stepped toward her. A stiletto flashed into Irene's hand. Her arm swept

downward and struck. But Le Loup was swifter. His hand shot forward. Blood spurted from his palm, but he held Irene's wrist. Le Loup laughed hysterically. His teeth ground in a frenzy. Irene felt an enormous pressure on her wrist. Her arm was bending at the elbow. The stiletto came up in her hand guided by the powerful arm of Le Loup. Irene's eyes dilated with horror. Her face was a mask of fear. But she uttered no cry.

Le Loup forced her wrist backward until the stiletto was a scant inch from her throat. Irene's left hand shot forward and her nails clawed at Le Loup's eyes. The Apache grinned and gripped that wrist in his left hand. Irene retreated until her back was pressed hard against the wall. Still the stiletto drew nearer. She felt its sharp point graze on her flesh. Her skin was pierced, Irene screamed when she felt a short, hot flash in her throat. Le Loup laughed and dropped her wrist.

"Another time, my vixen, it will not be a scratch!"

He reached down and tore a great piece of silk from her dress. This he bound around his bleeding palm.

Irene stood silent, the stiletto dangling from her limp hand. Le Loup looked contemptuously from the dagger to Irene's eyes. But Irene had forgotten the stiletto. She was looking at Le Loup with new interest. For in the Apache, Irene suddenly saw the weapon with which she would destroy Jean Duret, the killer of her father.

Two of the band entered the house and the tension was broken. Le Loup walked from her room and Irene closed and locked her door.

She could hear Le Loup and the others laughing in another room. Their talk grew boisterous and Irene knew they were drinking. A loud scraping of chairs reached Irene's ears, then came the clump of heavy feet descending

the stairs. Le Loup had gone out for the first time since his arrival.

It was hours later when Irene was awakened by a soft rap on her door.

"Who is there?" she called quietly.

"Joe."

Irene arose and opened the door. A pale, trembling wretch slid into her room.

"*Mon Dieu*, Joe, what is it?"

"Le Loup," Joe whispered hoarsely. "Godin and I drank with him. We went out at midnight. There was a lone sailor on St. Paul Street. We crept into a doorway. When he passed, I stepped out with my gun. He raised his hands and Godin emptied his pockets. Le Loup stepped forward and counted the haul. 'Here, young fellow,' Le Loup shouted, 'let this be a warning to you to carry a fuller pocket in the next world!' With that he struck the sailor to the heart. It was awful. Then as we came home, the madman boasted that he kills on every job. We must flee, Irene, or he will hang us all!"

Irene laughed softly. "You are upset, Joe. Here is money. Take Godin and go to the country for a rest. Stay away for some weeks, and when you return go to Desfarges before you come here. Where did you leave this sailor?"

"We dragged him into the passage by Dionne's warehouse."

Irene dressed quickly, then waited in her room until she heard Godin and Joe steal down the stairs. She slipped on a pair of kid gloves and stepped into the hall. She paused at Le Loup's door and heard him deep in an alcoholic sleep. Irene laughed softly and went downstairs.

She paused in the old snuff factory long enough to scoop up a pinch of dust from a corner, then she stepped out into St. Amable Street. The narrow, cobbled street was silent and deserted. Irene skirted the block and came to St. Paul Street. The old stone buildings, old as the city, and once the homes of early adventurers from Old France, loomed up in great black shadows. Irene moved swiftly under the protecting shield of the darkness. Soon she came to the passage by Dionne's warehouse. She listened for a full minute, then crept toward the victim of Le Loup's knife.

They had placed him in a doorway and he sat with knees drawn up and head thrown forward. He looked like a drunken man asleep, but the flesh on his face was cold to the touch.

Irene bent over him and found the wound where his coat was wet. She opened his coat, then drew her stiletto and dipped its point into the pinch of dust she had taken from the snuff factory. She threw a startled glance along the passage. Her breath came in short gasps. The stiletto point sank easily into the open wound. Irene withdrew the blade and wiped it carefully on the man's coat. Again she dipped its point in the dust in her gloved hand, and this time touched the blade lightly along the rent Le Loup's knife had made in the sailor's coat.

Half an hour later the dagger was washed clean, the gloves were destroyed, and Irene was back in her room.

In the morning she told her band singly of Le Loup's killing and warned them to scatter.

It was noon when Le Loup, sullen and dishevelled, came from his room. "Where are the others?" he demanded abruptly.

"Pah!" Irene exclaimed in disgust. "The cowards have run! They are fools. This is the safest place in the city—in the country, for that matter. What detective would look for a

murderer within a hundred yards of the murder?"

Le Loup winced at the word murderer. He seemed to have lost some of his bravado. "What about this detective Duret? Joe was telling me something of him."

Irene laughed lightly. "*Mon brave*, you are nervous this morning. Does Le Loup fear Duret? Come have a drink!"

"I fear no one!" Le Loup blustered. "But they tell me—"

"I will tell you of Duret," Irene said quickly. "He is gun-shy. There was an episode years ago. Duret killed an innocent. Since that day he has been gun-shy. When he gets into a tight corner, he will draw his pistol, but he will hesitate and hold his fire. I tell you Duret is not to be feared. He is ambitious. He has been on homicides for three years now. When he can, Duret will work alone to gather all the glory. And other detectives do not care about working with him because in a corner, he is uncertain. Why are you afraid? Last night you were so strong—so heroic."

Le Loup's face broke into a smirk. Like a mask removed, the fear was struck from his countenance.

"But come," Irene said. "I must watch at the windows so that if Duret should come you will have time to hide."

Irene left Le Loup with a bottle of gin and spent the afternoon moving between the windows on St. Amable and St. Paul streets.

As five o'clock drew near Irene's vigilance increased. The body of the sailor, she knew, must have been discovered at seven o'clock when Dionne's warehouse was opened. At nine it would have been placed in the hands of the coroner. Before that time the

enterprising Duret would be engaged on the case. Duret and the coroner would discover the dust in and about the dead man's wound. Dr. Leclaire the famous *medicin-legiste*, would take the dust to his laboratory. Some hours later he would pronounce the dust to be snuff.

Duret's theory would be that the murderer was addicted to snuff. But then the clever Leclaire would point out that from the depth and width of the wound it was obvious that the weapon was too large to be a clasp knife, therefore it was improbable that the knife was carried in a pocket. Leclaire would offer the suggestion that the murder was committed in some place where there was a large quantity of snuff, and that later the body was carried to the passage where it was found. From that point it would be a matter of minutes until Duret appeared at the old snuff factory. And Irene knew that Duret would make his first investigation of the old stone house alone.

It would have been simpler for Irene to have lured Duret to the house with a telephone call notifying him of the whereabouts of Le Loup. But then Duret would have descended on the place in force.

At twenty minutes to six Irene's heart quickened as she glimpsed the familiar figure of the man who had killed her father. The detective was on the opposite side of St. Paul Street. A shadow crossed Irene's face as she saw Duret walk casually down the block without a side glance. In a moment he had passed beyond her vision and Irene regretted that she had not made some signal to attract him. But then he might have called for help before entering the place.

When Duret disappeared, Irene crossed the building and watched through the perforations of a rusty iron shutter on St. Amable Street.

In a few minutes the detective loomed into sight. Irene's face glowed. Duret had stopped. A bell jangled noisily.

"Le Loup! Le Loup!" Irene called quickly, "to the cellar and into the tunnel! Duret has come. He is alone! You can work the trap?"

"Yes," Le Loup answered, as he stole down the stairs.

The bell rang again. Irene descended the stairs and opened the street door. Duret, tall, handsome, well-fed, stood upon the threshold. Irene's eyes met his. She swayed uncertainly for an instant while a little room fetid with the smell of drying clothes swam before her eyes. She saw Armand her father limp into that room, his foot dripping blood. She saw this man who stood before her burst in and grapple with her father. She heard again the screams of her mother. Her ears seemed to burst with the crash of gunfire. Then her nostrils were drenched with the stench of powder and the room was dark.

As though through a mist she saw Duret again. She recovered with a start.

Duret was gripping her arm; he was searching deep into her eyes. He relinquished his hold slowly. "Pardon, madame, I thought you were about to faint."

Irene smiled weakly. "You remind me of my father!" she said.

Duret bowed gravely and said nothing.

"What do you wish. It cannot be that you want one of my rooms," Irene said, glancing significantly at Duret's well-fitting clothes.

"No, madame, I came to look over this factory, but the doors are locked. I thought perhaps there might be an entrance from your hall."

"There is," Irene admitted readily, "and it is open because I have permission to use the cellar beneath to store my lodgers' boxes. You have seen the agent?"

"Of course, madame."

"Then come in."

Irene opened the door that led into the old snuff factory. Duret stepped into the large room. His eyes searched into dark corners and satisfaction glowed on his face. He turned abruptly to Irene. "I understood the place has not been used for some time, yet upon the floor I see signs of recent occupancy."

"It is my lodgers, *m'sieu*. Some of them have been with me for years and they keep their boxes in the cellar. They have to pass through here to reach the cellar stairs."

"What do your lodgers do, madame?"

"They work on the docks—that is, all but one!" Irene leaned toward Duret and her voice grew guarded. "That one is a strange fellow. I have considered mentioning the matter to the police. He has been with me only a week. He does not work and he does not leave the house—at least during the day. Today, whenever the bell rang, he went to the cellar before I had time to open the door. Do you think I should report him to the police, *m'sieu*?"

Duret looked shrewdly into Irene's eyes. She returned his gaze evenly.

"Listen, madame, I come from the police. Where is this fellow now?"

"You are a detective?" Irene asked with awe in her voice. "Come, *m'sieu*, I will show

you. He went down the cellar as I came to answer your ring."

Irene led the detective across the snuff factory to the cellar door. She descended the stairs boldly. Duret thought for a second that perhaps he should call for assistance. But this woman went so coolly, he drew his revolver and flashlight and followed.

They saw no one in the cellar. Duret peered behind rubbish-filled packing cases and small trunks. The detective noticed a piece of strange mechanism. He was about to speak of it when Irene gestured toward a mark on the flagged floor. "See, *m'sieu*, is that not a footprint?"

Duret stepped forward. He reached the spot on the floor Irene had indicated. He turned suddenly as he heard a subdued laugh behind him. Then the floor dropped beneath his feet and Duret was plunging through space.

Irene ran to the edge of the trap. She flashed a torch into the black pit. The detective was on his feet now, groping for the torch he had dropped in falling.

The dark shape of Le Loup appeared suddenly in the zone of light. Irene switched off the torch and left them in darkness. A red glow flashed from the tunnel three times and the floor rocked with the concussion of shots. Irene heard a sharp scream that did not come from Le Loup. She knew then that the Apache's knife had found its mark in the dark. "Papa! Papa!" she cried hysterically.

The killer of her father was dead! But Irene was reminded suddenly of the second object of her vengeance. She ran forward to the short lever that controlled the trapdoor. Her moment of ecstasy over Duret's scream had cost her dear. The lever stuck in her hands when



the trap was half closed. Irene threw her weight wildly against the iron bar. A gasp of exhaustion escaped her lips. Suddenly the lever moved freely. Irene jammed it home with a cry of exhaltation. And then she heard the mocking laugh of Le Loup at her side.

His right arm wound around Irene's side, binding her arms as he drew her against his body with the strength of a boa constrictor. Le Loup's left hand manipulated the trap lever. He turned swiftly, raised Irene in his two arms and tossed her into the tunnel.

Irene struck hard on the tunnel floor. She lay stunned for an instant but came to quickly with Le Loup's mad laughter in her ears. She looked up and light dazzled her eyes. Le Loup had found the flashlight Irene had dropped. Irene was conscious of a writhing movement at her feet. She glanced down and saw Duret clutching at a knife that was buried in his thigh. The knife came from the wound and Le Loup backed from the edge of the trap. The detective arose on one knee.

Irene saw the head and shoulders of Le Loup as he bent over the lever to close the trap. She screamed and grasped frantically at the edge of the lifting door. The trap was closing. With horror in her heart Irene saw she would be pinned by her hands between the closed trap and the cellar floor. She released her hold and dropped back into the tunnel. As she fell a faint breath of air struck her gently on the cheek. Something that gleamed bright whizzed past her head. Scream after scream came from Le Loup above. Then the trapdoor dropped. The tunnel was in utter darkness and the cries from Le Loup came faintly as from a great distance.

Irene stood listening. Slowly the cries of Le Loup receded into silence. Irene could see nothing. But now she could hear the sharp squealing of many rats.

"Duret! Duret! You killed him?"

The detective did not answer.

Panic seized Irene and she crawled about the tunnel groping for the detective. Her hand struck something and she heard a soft moan.

"Duret! Duret!"

She wondered fearfully if the detective were dead. Her hands went into his pockets and at last found a box of matches. She struck one and looked into the detective's face. He was ghastly in the wan light of the match. She clutched at his wrist and cried out her joy when she felt the beat of life. The match end burnt her fingers and she struck another. Off to one side Irene caught a gleam of nickel. She reached out and found the flashlight the detective had dropped.

Irene switched on the light and looked at the detective's leg. She ripped off lengths of her skirt and fastened a tourniquet above the wound. Then she bound the wound itself. She worked over the detective with frenzied solicitude. The ironic thought that this was the man she had sought to kill did not cross her mind. She knew only that she was in terror of being alone. When she had bound Duret's wound, Irene sat down beside him.

She thought of the flashlight battery. That must be conserved.



OURS later, it seemed, Duret recovered consciousness and asked for water. Irene recalled him to their predicament.

The detective looked at her strangely, but said nothing. He ran a hand to his bandaged leg and looked more mystified than before. "Tell

me," he said at last, "is there a way to raise the trap from below?"

Irene shook her head hopelessly. "No. The trap can be worked only from above. Once open, it may be set to close itself, but there is no way to raise it. One of my—my lodgers told me that arrangement was a precaution against thieves or an enemy getting into the tunnel. The tunnel is as old as Montreal. Most of it has been blocked up and built over. I suppose there was once some central place where the trap could be worked from below. I have never been down here before, but I understand there is only a small section of the tunnel now in existence."

"Then come," Duret said, "we will investigate. I can walk on one foot if you will permit me to lean a little upon your shoulder."

They moved slowly down the littered passage. Rats scuttled beyond the range of their flashlight. As the light advanced, the squealing of the rats increased. Then in a few more minutes, they heard no more of the rats and the tunnel ended abruptly against a cement wall.

Duret stood in deep thought. "The rats have gone," he said slowly. "And they did not pass through this wall of cement!"

The detective lowered himself to the ground and crawled back along the tunnel, examining the walls. The rats had dug many galleries, but they were nothing more than black holes.

He was nearly halfway back to the trapdoor beneath the stone house when he shouted to Irene.

She ran forward and dropped to her knees beside him.

"Look!" he cried.

Irene peered through a rat hole and saw twilight ahead. The detective put his mouth to the hole and shouted for help. He called until he was exhausted. But there was no answering cry from the world beyond.

Irene drew the detective aside. "It is nearly night," she said, "there is no one about these streets. It can be only a short distance. I can dig."

Irene went to work on the wall with her stiletto. The earth flew back from the rapid knife thrusts, but it was tedious work and at the end of an hour, though her fingers were raw from tearing away the loosened earth, she had progressed only a short distance.

Duret lapsed into unconsciousness after his violent shouting for help and Irene toiled on alone. She stopped from time to time for a brief rest, and during one of these intervals tightened the tourniquet and replaced the sodden bandage on Duret's leg.

At last the wall before her crumbled and the dislodged earth fell outward. A great rush of fresh air nearly overwhelmed Irene. She widened the opening quickly and crawled through.

The sky was lightening in the east and Irene saw that she was in the excavation for a new building that was being erected two blocks from the house on St. Amable Street.

She was free. And with her safety her mind recalled the motive that had led up to this adventure in the tunnel. The primitive tourniquet and bandage she had wrapped around Duret's wound would not stanch the flow of blood much longer. She had only to



abandon him and her vengeance would be complete.

Strangely enough, the thought gave Irene little satisfaction. Some subtle change had come over her in those first moments of terror in the tunnel. She recalled suddenly the throb of joy that had pulsed through her when she felt the feeble stirring of life in Duret's wrist when she had believed him dead.

Her mind reverted across the years to that night in the East End flat. For the first time she saw clearly the inevitability of the whole affair. Duret, her father, and her mother, all toys of the same malignant fate. Her father wrought up to insane resistance by the hysterical fears of her mother. Duret, entering the house to make a simple arrest, suddenly struck upon the head and seized in a death grip. With amazing clarity she saw the ruin the lust for vengeance had made of her own life. And now that it lay within the hollow of her hand, what an empty mockery that vengeance was.

Irene dropped slowly to her knees and crawled back through the hole. She tried to rouse Duret. Failing this, she began to drag him through the narrow passage. The pain of movement, or the rush of fresh air to his lungs, aroused the detective to consciousness as Irene drew him clear of the hole.

Duret looked about him in surprise. His eyes turned up to look deep into Irene's. Her gaze dropped.

"You came back for me," he said tenderly. His tone changed. "Listen, go to the cellar. And go with caution. See if Le Loup is there. Put on a coat to cover your torn dress, then come back to me."

Irene ran up the ramp to the sidewalk and went swiftly to the hideout. She climbed the stairs and procured a coat and flashlight from her room. Back downstairs, she crept into

the cellar. She saw Le Loup doubled over the lever by the trapdoor, the handle of his own great knife protruding from his stomach.

Irene ran back to Duret. The detective seemed surprised, and smiled at her return.

"He is dead!" she said quietly.

The detective nodded. He lifted his eyes whimsically. "Now tell me, why did you do that thing to me?"

She flushed and turned away.

"And why did you later save my life?" he added.

Irene laughed harshly. Words surged from her heart and she told him of her band of thieves. She told him, too, of her identity, of the pinch of snuff, and of her plot to kill him.

"Then why did you not let me bleed to death?" Duret demanded.

"Ah, give me no credit for that. Alone I would have gone mad in that place!"

"Why did you wander off from your father's room that night?" Duret asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "My mother was dead; my father was dead; the police took away my two baby sisters, and I was afraid they would come back and take me. I went far that night. I was in St. Henri shivering on a corner when a crippled beggar came upon me. He took me to his cellar. Later this beggar told me it was a detective named Duret who had shot my father. I swore to kill this Duret."

Duret's face blazed with anger. "This beggar, what did he want of you?"

"Nothing. He was kind to me. He provided me with food, shelter, and clothes,

and he taught me the tricks of the underworld. I cooked for him. He was old, and I relieved his loneliness."

"He did you an awful wrong!" Duret said fiercely. "There is a pencil and notebook in my pocket. Thank you."

Duret wrote rapidly. "Go now to the hotel in the market-place and telephone for help to be sent me. Then go to this address. There you will find your father and your sisters. He was not killed, but dangerously wounded that night..."

A convulsive sob shook Irene. She cried, "Papa! Papa!" and swayed upon her feet.

Duret looked alarmed. "Get help for me quickly!" he said in a sharp voice. Irene steadied, and Duret continued. "Later, we found your father steady work; he is well and prosperous. We combed the city for you at that time, but your beggar had hid you well!"

"Stay with your father and say nothing of this business. The police will not question you. My report will deal only with the snuff factory and the cellar. Later I shall come to see you and we may discuss your future. Now leave me and send help quickly. I am weak and tired."

"And you mean, Duret, that you do not arrest me?"

Duret smiled whimsically. "Arrest you over a trifling pinch of snuff? Hardly!"