

Extract from:

THE PREDATOR OF BATIGNOLLES

The train deposited a dozen punters in striped pullovers and straw boaters on the platform before letting out a long jet of steam. The passengers clogged the exit for a moment before setting off towards the riverbank, where families dressed in their Sunday best and a podgy man in a checked bowler hat, were also headed.

The man made a beeline for Pont de Chatou without so much as a glance towards the shimmering water, which was dotted with boats in the unseasonably warm spring weather. A barge whistled. The man dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief and paused to light a cigar before shuffling off again.

Meanwhile an imposing-looking fellow sat sipping a glass of beer at a table outside Cabaret Fournaise in the middle of the island. His eyes were fixed on the potbellied figure in the checked bowler. He was momentarily distracted by the couples dancing beneath the poplars to a lively polka being played by three musicians on a nearby bandstand; tapping his foot to the music, he admired a narrow skiff as it darted out from behind the bend in the Seine. But his attention soon turned back to the portly chap, who was making the floorboards creak as he approached.

'Right on time! You certainly don't keep people waiting,' he said, stretching nonchalantly.

'This blasted heat! The sweat's dripping off me. Is there somewhere quieter where we can talk?'

'I've reserved a private room upstairs.'

They crossed the restaurant where waiters were busy bringing plates of fried smelts, sautéed potatoes and jugs of white wine to the tables. A flight of stairs took them up to a landing and they entered a room at the end. They sat down, face to face, and studied each other. The man in the bowler had puffy eyes and broken veins on his fleshy face, which was framed by a mop of curly hair and grizzled whiskers. He looked like a shaggy dog.

No wonder they call him the Spaniel, thought his companion, who had an aquiline nose and a jauntily turned up blond moustache.

He himself had a cat-like physique. His expression was half mocking, half disdainful, and he looked constantly on the verge of laughter. He exuded an innate charm, which made him very successful with women, but so far had failed to win over his sullen companion.

'Call the waiter, I'm in a hurry,' grumbled the Spaniel, crushing his cigar stub underfoot.

'Don't worry, Monsieur, they know we're here. I'm a regular. We'll get the royal treatment. While we're waiting, tell me how much I'll be getting.'

'Two hundred. It's an easy job.'

'What do I have to do?'

'Purloin a few cigar holders.'

'You're pulling my leg, Monsieur! Two hundred francs for some cigar holders?'

'They're made of amber. Will you do it, Daglan?'

'How many do you need?'

'About fifty – more if possible.'

'And where do I find this junk?'

'Bridoire's Jeweller's. Rue de la Paix, on the corner of Rue Daunou. If you pocket any trinkets, put them on ice, you can fence them later.'

The door opened and two waiters came in, one carrying a roast turkey, the other a bottle of Muscadet, glasses, plates and a bowl of frites on a tray. The waiters laid the table, carved the bird, served the wine and left.

'Enjoy, Monsieur.'