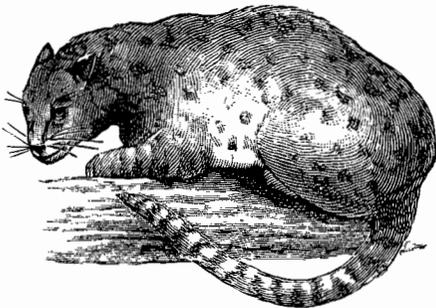


# Mistral

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If you know the South of France (what most people mean by the South of France, that is—the Cote d'Azur), you may know St. Tropez. But maybe not. Users of what is loosely called the Riviera are extraordinarily insular. Even with the autoroute—perhaps because of it—the country west of the Esterel is as foreign to many who favour the region to the east, as Perth is to Penzance.

But not to me. I have seen all I want of the French coast from Marseilles to Menton, and you can have Nice, Monte Carlo and the rest with a pound of tea. They have nothing on St. Tropez.

I am prejudiced, of course. Partly, perhaps, because enjoyment of today's Cote d'Azur is an art, not a choice easily bought by casual application to the tour operators. Nowhere along that expensive littoral is it more essential to exercise that art than in the area of St. Tropez. Where Cannes and Monaco have something to offer at almost all times of the year, St. Tropez demands from the visitor the approach, the reverence, of the connoisseur.

In high summer, for instance—the most popular and unsuitable period—you need to be a rabid *bon vivant*, a truly person person, to endure the sheer excess of humankind in a region offering no outlet for urban

overspill. In the winter, on the other hand, none but a misanthropic masochist with an inordinate concern not to miss the first golden promise of mimosa is going to suffer the bleak desolation of empty streets so often scoured by that most unpleasant of God's varied gifts, the mistral.

"Unpleasant," for many, is putting it mildly. Some, the purists, those likely to hold that the Riviera lies only between Nice and Genoa—say that nowhere west of Cap Ferrat is really habitable, so frightful is that cold dry wind that roars down the Rhone Valley to spread its fury over Provence, proving to pursuers of the *dolce vita* that Nature alone is truly egalitarian. Others, less hysterical, chance wintering in Cannes and Antibes. But further west, beyond the Esterel, there you have to know what you are about. There you have to have some special reason for defying the natural and man-made perils so inadequately repelled by the Massif des Maures.

One of these special reasons, of course, is the concentrated pulchritude of St. Tropez. Not only are its summer girls beautiful and plentiful, but they show a lack of inhibition less apparent in such self-conscious resorts as Cannes and Nice than on the clean beaches and the open waters of St. Tropez. Not for nothing has that delightful little town so long been the haunt of writers, artists and the least stuffy of media persons.

Even a few miles down the coast in Port Grimaud, that pseudo-Venetian aqua-suburb for retired civil



## FICTION

servants and bank managers from Croyden and St. Cloud, nubile girls still with ponies in Surrey meadows bare their breasts the moment they set foot on golfe-bound yacht or motor boat.

Be that as it may, the last person I expected to meet there, even in June, was Ambrose. One of the connoisseur months, June is a little ahead of the worst of the mob, a time when one can sit at a café table in the Place des Lices, enjoying the cool shade below the huge plane trees, listening early and late to the click of boules, watching through the hotter hours those who forsake the quayside and the expensive refreshments at Senequiers to explore the quieter streets and squares. In June, before the French rush like lemmings to the coast, the weather can be exquisite. But in no month of the year can one be sure of avoiding the mistral.

Ambrose had not seen me. His gaze was on the dry brown powdered earth of the square. His shoulders were more stooped than I remembered, his expression verging on the gloomy. Seeing that he was literally attached to the sexiest woman I had seen in years, this seemed odd.

"Hey! Ambrose!" I called.

He looked up.

"Oh, hallo, Charles," he said. His voice lacked animation, let alone surprise. Our last meeting might have been five days back, not five years.

"I didn't know this was your beat and season," I said.

He compressed his lips and wrinkled his brow in a facial shrug. He certainly looked older, but except for an unremembered scar on his neck, much the same dapper, neat little man a head shorter than myself.

"It's not really," he said, "but Angelina likes the warmth."

I smiled, feeling that introduction was called for. On the few times we had met since schooldays, Ambrose had invariably been accompanied by beautiful women, none of whom he had married so far as I knew. I had never known him well—he was too much of a woman's man for that—and if it had not been for the school link I might not have numbered him among remembered acquaintances. As with relations, those one has known at school are not necessarily the people one keeps up with.

"Well, have a drink," I said.

Ambrose introduced me. "This is Charles Massingham. Charles, meet Angelina." He gave her no second name.

Angelina offered me a slim, brown hand. Her wrists bore several thin bangles and her nails were painted the tawny brown of dried blood. She did not grip my

hand, yet I felt through her fingers a strange, urgent strength, and this was apparent in the way she moved. Her figure was perfect, her body extraordinarily supple. I wondered if she was a dancer. She wore a bronze-gold jump-suit that fitted her perfectly, emphasizing the spareness, the alert animality of her body. Her long legs—like me, she was inches taller than Ambrose—were flattered by fine high-heeled gold sandals that must have cost the earth, and her black hair was drawn back from a face that was more feline than human, though of exquisite delicacy and proportion. The only imperfection, though it detracted nothing from her sensuality, was a slightly over-full lower lip, imparting a faint air of smouldering challenge. She reminded me of one of the great cats—a cheetah, perhaps. This impression was strengthened by the fine chain leash that was attached to her left wrist and held by Ambrose, for all the world as though he were walking an Afghan or saluki.

I carefully avoided a second glance at the gold leash. Ambrose had always enjoyed getting reactions from those more unimaginative and staid than himself. Even at school, in the days when I was far more interested in the Boys' Own Paper and the egg-laying habits of peewit and sparrow-hawk than in the thin dark ice of human relationships, Ambrose was a living legend to the older boys. In fact, his precocity did little for his formal education, for having made it in the shrubbery with St. Bartholomew's singularly pretty matron, he was expelled without a moment's hesitation by the matron's husband, who as it happened was the headmaster, and never got round to taking the exams that might have channelled his energies toward university, a solid job, and a more serious lifestyle. To make matters worse, his father died about then, leaving investments and property that provided his son with an all too adequate income for the rest of his life. Riches and randiness: a heady combination few survive.

I had reached that time of life when, meeting a beautiful woman, I could take or leave her, so to speak. Well, leave her, then, without actually taking. You know what I mean. But I had to admit that Angelina was something special. She sat at the table almost gingerly, as though unaccustomed to a chair, so lightly in contact with it that I felt she might have sprung away through the plane trees at the slightest provocation—had it not been, of course, for that slender golden leash. Her eyes were watchful, never still; alert, restless, seeking. Yet seeking what?

"Well," I said unimaginatively, "this is quite a surprise."

"For me too," said Ambrose. "I didn't suppose you still came out here."

"I'm flattered you've considered the matter," I said.

The waiter appeared.

"What will you have?" I asked.

"Angelina likes orange juice. The real thing. I'll have the same."

Angelina seemed to accept his choice.

"What do you want in it?" I asked Ambrose.

"Nothing. Just as it comes."

I blinked. I had never known Ambrose drink anything nonalcoholic. Even at school he had a reputation for rather good wines. "Clarets, dear boy," I remember him saying as we waited to bat in some house match, "are really the best for your digestion. Go for the Medocs and you will have little trouble." It never struck me in those days that his sophistication could be anything but innate.

"Right," I said, and ordered.

Angelina stroked Ambrose's arm with her free hand and looked into his eyes. Except for a murmured "'Allo" when we shook hands, I had not heard her speak.

"I mus' go hawaii for lily time," she said mysteriously.

"Must you?" Ambrose replied. "Very well, then; come straight back."

I had noticed the small key on the fine chain round his neck, and now he used this to unfasten the little padlock that held the leash to the lowest and most robust of the bangles on Angelina's wrist. She slid silently from her chair and disappeared into the cool depths of the cafe.

"Italian?" I asked.

"Hungarian with a dash of Spanish."

"Some mix!"

I clenched my fist, grimacing, and punched the air, holding my forearm rigid in a gesture familiar to men, but one I had not used for many years. Ambrose nodded. The old animation had definitely gone.

"I know what you're thinking. She's not all body, though."

"No?"

"No. You may not believe it, but she has a lovely nature. Very tender-hearted. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Loves animals. We were with Brigitte only yesterday."

"Bardot?"

He nodded. "She's intelligent, too. Quite a thinker. Angelina, I mean."

"Well, you never know," I said.

"She's very environmentally sensitive."

"Really? Low technology? Alternatives?"

"Population control especially. She thinks our numbers should be drastically reduced until we have small communities living only in suitable climatic areas."

"Not the kind of thing the politicians would want to follow up," I said.

The waiter brought their orange juices.

"Are you quite sure you'd like nothing stronger?" I said. "Before Angelina returns. A little gin, perhaps?"

He shook his head. "I've made a deal."

"Who with? Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"With Angelina."

"She doesn't look the type to exert a reforming influence."

"As you said, 'you never know'."

"Well," I agreed, "it's probably no bad idea to watch things a bit once one's in sight of one's fifties."

"That's what Angelina says. She says she wants me fit or not at all."

"You don't think," I said, "that in this climate, with a girl like that, at our sort of age...?"

Ambrose gestured, a little impatiently.

"It's an attitude of mind, Charles. You've given up too soon."

"Not given up exactly," I replied. "I'm still married to Christine."

"Well, there you are. We make our beds."

I changed the subject.

"Are you ever in London?"

"Seldom. Last July, for two weeks, but we move around. Angelina won't winter in Europe. It has to be the Caribbean, the Seychelles—that kind of thing."

"An expensive girl."

"But worth it. I could tell you..."

"Don't. I may have given up, as you put it, but the heat still turns one on a little."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ambrose said. "Angelina thrives on heat. She says we were intended for sub-tropical temperatures. That was what I was about to tell you. She really has a most enquiring mind."

"But the other side...?" I inquired. "Surely...?"

"Of course. That too. But there's another face to the coin, you know, Charles. Sex isn't everything."

"No," I said. "No, indeed. How true."

The conversation flagged. The waiter, hopeful, handed me the menu. I looked at my watch. Ambrose look at his, then toward the dark interior of the cafe.

"Seeing to her face," he said.

"It's getting on. How about lunch here? It's adequate." Ambrose glanced at the menu.

"I don't know there's much for us."

"Steak?" I suggested. "Veal? The fish isn't bad."

"We...I...don't eat like that any longer," he said. "Problems?"

I'd had some myself. All part of the aging process. Mushrooms and sweet corn seemed immune to the digestive juices.

"Not really. More a...reorientation."

"You could have an omelette."

"Do they do a good salad?"

"I'm sure they could," I said. "What about the cold plate?"

Ambrose came out with it.

"We don't eat meat."

My memory was that he ate little else.

"There really have been some changes," I said.

"Angelina feels it's for our own good. Meat doesn't suit her. She's for whole food, grains, fruit, nuts—that kind of thing. She says it's as necessary we eat the right things as that we don't live in cold climates."

"Why so much concern about the cold? Do you catch chills easily?"

"No, but Angelina is—how shall I say—better adjusted in the heat. Warmth and a bland diet is what she needs. The cold prompts her to eat things that, well, disagree with her. When the mistral blows, we stay indoors."

"It all sounds a trifle restricting," I said.

A worried look crossed his face.

"It can be a bit of a strain, actually. Angelina needs constant encouragement to...be herself."

"Nasty wind, the mistral," I agreed, not quite knowing what to say about his last remark. "Gets into the bones. The sirocco can be unpleasant, too, and I'm told people can go potty in that wind they get on the northern slopes of the Alps."

"The fohn," Ambrose said. "They call it the chinook in the Rockies. It cools at the saturated adiabatic lapse rate as it reaches the peaks, then dries as it descends on the leeward side, gaining heat."

"I've never heard it better put," I said.

He nodded. "Mind you, 'it's an ill wind...' Angelina really turns on in the mistral."

"You mean...?"

He nodded again. All I can handle until it gets warmer again."

"Here she comes," I said.

Angelina's jump-suit was more open than before, exposing a delicious area of brown skin and just enough of each plump breast to...well, never mind: it was one o'clock and very warm indeed. She approached slowly, like a cautious cat not wanting to draw attention to herself. As she sat down she extended her arm submissively toward Ambrose who attached the chain to her wrist. I wondered what the women's libbers would have thought about it all. I noticed that her nostrils were dilating and contracting gently, like an animal scenting its prey. Although she had walked only a few yards, she was panting quietly, her small pink tongue a bit extended. She was wildly beautiful—and I mean "wildly" despite that submissive act to Ambrose. Old and almost forgotten tremors threatened to disturb my peace of mind. I shifted on my chair.

"So how long are you here, Charles?" Ambrose enquired, toying with the *crudités* the waiter had brought with a promptness suggesting no special preparation.

"Another week. July and August are unbearable. Besides I hate to miss the English summer in our cottage. The scabious will be flowering on the Downs soon—the most beautiful colour in the world. With the corn ripening, the real woods to walk in ...."

"You were always a one for nature," Ambrose said. "At your own level."

"Well, here it's all over. Nature is resting. Don't you miss England in spring and summer? The larks? The cowslips?"

He nodded. "I suppose so. One certainly knows where one is with cowslips."

"I can't think what one would do out here," I said, "once everything dries up and the trippers descend like locusts. The sailing fraternity tests the *savoir vivre* of the most gregarious."

"I read a lot," Ambrose said.

"That's another change in you, then," I said. "You were always too busy doing...other things."

"One matures," Ambrose said.

"What do you read? Bond stories? Agatha Christie?"

"Not often. More, reincarnation, Eastern religious thought."

"Good God!" I said.

A sudden swirl of air swept through the Place des Lices, a welcome disturbance of the almost solid heat, yet a warning of less pleasant things to come. I looked up from my plate at Angelina, for I thought I had

heard a sharp indrawing of breath. She was gazing up at the rustling leaves of the plane trees, her fork poised above her plate, her nostrils contracting and dilating again, but more forcefully than before. Her food looked so dull—just raw vegetables and a small portion of cream cheese.

“Do you never eat meat?” I asked her.

She shook her head slowly.

“She hasn’t for a very long time,” Ambrose said. “She probably couldn’t even keep it down.”

“Is that right?” I asked Angelina. “It would make you sick?”

She shrugged and grimaced, a half smile making her face even more enchanting.

“Here,” I said, “see if Ambrose is right.”

I sliced a corner off my steak and offered it to her on the knife’s point. It was rarer than I really enjoy. She allowed me to place it between her parted lips, and I noticed how sharp and slightly retracted her white teeth were as they closed on the meat. I felt she was being polite rather than of a mind to undergo the test, but she chewed obediently, reflectively, finishing it sooner than I expected. I cut another piece.

“More?” I said.

She took it willingly enough, then another. At the fifth piece Ambrose looked alarmed.

“Steady. That’s enough. You know it’s not good for you, Angelina.”

Her eyes turned from mine to his, her smile disappearing. She chattered at him, fast, in what I took was Hungarian, her eyes burning, her lips hardly moving.

“It’s still appallingly hot,” I said. “Why don’t you come back to my villa for coffees? It’s cooler up in Gassin. I’m due for drinks on a gin palace in the port, so I can run you back later.”

“I’d like that,” Ambrose said.

His instant acceptance surprised me. As I say, we had never been close, yet I felt he was quite glad we had met up again. Angelina seemed less keen. She stroked his arm and looked into his eyes, speaking with her own rather than in words, though from her throat came a strange pleading noise that was almost a purr. But all he said was: “Just for a little while.”

In the car he started to talk about reincarnation, asking me my views on transmigration and karma. I said I had not thought much about them, which was true. I noticed the scar on his neck reddened as he warmed to his subject.

I had taken the villa from friends who escape the mixed blessings of the Cote d’Azur from June until September. It was beautifully situated to the west of the village, with a fine view of the main range of the Massif. The terrace was a mass of oleanders and geraniums, with nothing beyond but the far hills across the falling wasteland of ilex, cork-oak, pine and scrub. The breeze was more positive and cooler than in town, but as yet not too strong to be uncomfortable. I sat Ambrose and Angelina in the cushioned chairs and went inside to make coffee.

When I reappeared with the tray, all was clearly not well. They were quarrelling in low tones and Angelina was pulling against her leash, her eyes flashing, her extraordinary nostrils registering more than her words, which were unintelligible.

“Charles, I’m sorry, but I think we’ll have to leave,” Ambrose said. “Angelina’s rather unhappy about this wind.”

“I hoped you’d enjoy the coolness,” I said.

“That’s the problem. Below a certain temperature she’s never quite herself, and the mistral demands certain measures...I think we really must get back. Our villa’s very warm and sheltered.”

“Of course,” I said. “I’m sorry you have this difficulty.”

“And we’re sorry about the coffees.”

“I tell you what,” I said. “Take my car. I’ve friends in Gassin who are going into St. Trop this afternoon, and I’ve some shopping to do before the party. They can pick me up. If you leave the car in the Place des Lices, I can collect it later. I’ll show you where to leave the keys.”

Ambrose didn’t let Angelina off her leash, even in the driving seat. Because of my car’s right-hand drive, he had to switch wrists so that she could sit beside him. He made sure the passenger door was locked, then told her to get in across the driver’s seat. She was very restless, almost fearful, and made sounds from her throat that were even less like speech than those she made before. I could see that Ambrose was tense and worried. It was quite a relief when they drove off down the winding minor road toward the N98.

Tony and Janet Turner seemed glad to give me a lift. They had their own problems, mostly of trying to keep together an unsatisfactory marriage by a frequent change of geography. They were rich enough to keep four small properties in different parts of the world, and they spent about three months in each. Others’ company broke up

their bickering. As we drove toward St. Tropez, the car rocking in the wind that now howled between the hills, I told them something about Ambrose and Angelina.

"I think we've met them," Janet said. "Yes, I'm sure we have. In Grimaud, at the Brothertons'. He's short, very smooth."

"Bit of a lady-killer," Tony said. "I remember. The girl was absolutely terrific."

Janet sniffed. She did a lot of sniffing. "That depends on your taste in such matters."

I was sideways on and slightly to the rear of Tony's grin.

"I think she could be quite a handful," I said.

"Mmmmm," Tony agreed lasciviously, gripping the steering wheel hard enough to drive the blood from his fingers.

"There's something almost...untamed about her," I said.

Janet sniffed again. "Pretty near to the jungle, if you ask me."

I leaned forward from the rear seat, peering through the windscreen.

"My God!" I said. "That's my car."

It had been, anyway. What I now owned looked destined for the scrap-yard. It was piled up against the concrete wall of a storm pipe that ran under the road, on a nasty little bend.

Janet paled. "Maybe they're still in it. Maybe no one's been along."

"Then for Christ's sake, woman," Tony said, "we must do something about it."

The car was empty, the steering wheel bent, the windscreen shattered, the bonnet concertinad. Some drops of blood on the dashboard and the driver's seat were still tacky.

"If police or ambulance had been, they'd have left warning notices," I said. "Or someone on guard until the recovery truck arrived."

Janet frowned. "Then where are they?"

"God knows," I said. "They only left forty minutes ago. Look, I'm sorry, I think you'd better go on without me. I feel I should make a search. They may have been injured and wandered off in a daze."

"We'll help," Tony said. "Of course."

"Then perhaps Janet could stay in the car in case anyone comes by," I said.

The road was steep and the land sloped away from it, a maze of wild scrub and underbrush with occasional pines and outcrops of rock.

"It's no spot to be lying out with injuries," Tony said. "Least of all in this bloody wind."

"If you'll take the area to the south," I said, "I'll work north from the cars. Perhaps if we cover the ground in parallel strips..."

After twenty minutes I found a piece of Ambrose's shirt. A little further on I found Ambrose. I recognized him by his shoes, much the same price bracket as Angelina's. Where his nose and eyes had been was a fly-inviting quagmire of blood and torn skin. A missing ear had left an untidy hole that oozed gently into the mica-speckled shale of the rocky hollow in which he lay. His light clothing seemed to have been torn from his body, and I saw that all the smaller (I don't say minor) extremities were missing. As for his throat, it was simply not there; only a hideous gape of raw flesh with a protuberance of gristle I took to be his Adam's apple. I am not a squeamish man but the undigested remains of my *Place des Lices* luncheon ended up in the scrub-oak near Ambrose's mangled left hand. Of Angelina and the leash there was nothing to be seen.

Nor was she ever found. I have often pondered on the incident, wondering what it was that Ambrose might have told me had we had longer together; recalling his untypical interest in Eastern beliefs, his apparent knowledge of the strange winds that can wreak such changes in human temperament; Angelina's animal restlessness, those glimpses of something not susceptible to normal explanation.

But then mine is not a psychic or complicated nature. I prefer rational explanations to over-imaginative speculation. Nevertheless, when the wind gets up and I am alone—and that is most of the time now that Christine has died and I come out to Gassin more often—I go out on to the terrace and look across to the distant hills of the Maures. And something in me tells me to walk off into the scrub in search of Angelina, who I know cannot possibly still be there. And something else in me, which invariably wins, tells me to come indoors, to close the windows and the shutters, and to lose myself in my books until the mistral has blown itself out.

I've become quite absorbed in Eastern ideas, incidentally. Reincarnation, karma, that kind of thing. From a purely intellectual standpoint, of course.

