

RECIPE FOR MURDER

by C. P. Donnel, Jr.

Just as the villa, clamorous with flowers, was not what he had expected, so was its owner a new quantity in his calculations. Madame Chalon, at forty, fitted no category of murderess; she was neither Cleopatra nor beldame. A Minerva of a woman, he told himself instantly, whose large, liquid eyes were but a shade lighter than the cobalt blue of the Mediterranean twinkling outside the tall windows of the salon where they sat.

"Dubonnet, Inspector Miron?" As she spoke, she prepared to pour. His reflex of hesitation lit a dim glow of amusement in her eyes, which her manners prevented from straying to her lips.

"Thank you." Annoyed with himself, he spoke forcefully.

Madame Chalon made a small, barely perceptible point of drinking first, as though to say, "See, M. Miron, you are quite safe." It was neat. Too neat?

With a tiny smile now: "You have called about my poisoning of my husbands," she stated flatly.

"Madame!" Again he hesitated, nonplused. "Madame, I..."

"You must already have visited the Prefecture. All Villefranche believes it," she said placidly.

He adjusted his composure to an official calm. "Madame, I come to ask your permission to disinter the body of M. Charles Wesser, deceased January 1939, and M. Etienne Chalon, deceased May 1946, for official analysis of certain organs. You have already refused Sergeant Luchaire of the local station this permission. Why?"

"Luchaire is a type without politeness. I found him repulsive. He is, unlike you, without finesse. I refuse the attitude of the man, not the law." She raised the small glass to her full lips. "I shall not refuse you, Inspector Miron." Her eyes were almost admiring.

"You are most flattering."

"Because," she continued gently, "I am quite sure, knowing the methods of you Paris police, that the disinterment has already been conducted secretly." She waited for his color to deepen, affecting not to notice the change. "And the analyses," she went on, as though there had been no break, "completed." You are puzzled. You found nothing. So now you, new to the case, wish to estimate me, my character, my capacity for self-control — incidentally your own chances of maneuvering me into talk that will guide you in the direction of my guilt."¹

So accurately did these darts strike home that it would be the ultimate stupidity to deny the wounds. Better a disarming frankness, Miron decided quickly. "Quite true, Madame Chalon. True to the letter. But" — he regarded her closely — "when one loses two husbands of some age — but not old — to a fairly violent gastric disturbance, each within two years of marriage, each of a substantial fortune and leaving all to the widow...you see...?"

"Of course." Madame Chalon went to the window, let her soft profile, the grand line of her bosom be silhouetted against the blue water. "Would you care for a full confession, Inspector Miron?" She was very much woman, provocative woman, and her tone, just short of caressing, warned Miron to keep a grip on himself.

"If you would care to make one, Madame Chalon," he said, as casually as he could. A dangerous woman. A consumedly dangerous woman.

"Then I shall oblige." Madame Chalon was not smiling. Through the open window a vagrant whiff of air brought him the scent of her. Or was it the scent of the garden? Caution kept his hand from his notebook. Impossible that she would really talk so easily. And yet...

"You know something of the art of food, M. Miron?"

"I am from Paris, you remember?"

"And love, too?"

"As I said, I am from Paris."

"Then" — the bosom swelled with her long breath — "I can tell you that I, Hortense Eugenie Villerois Wesser Chalon, did slowly and deliberately, with full purpose, kill and murder my first husband, M. Wesser, aged 57, and likewise my second, M. Chalon, aged 65.

"For some reason, no doubt." Was this a dream? Or insanity?

"M. Wesser I married through persuasion of family. I was no longer a girl. M. Wesser, I learned within a fortnight, was a pig — a pig of insatiable appetites. A crude man, Inspector; a belcher, a braggart, cheater of the poor, deceiver of the innocent. A gobbler of food, an untidy man of unappetizing habits — in short, with all the revolting faults of advancing age and none of its tenderness or dignity. Also, because of these things, his stomach was no longer strong."

Having gone thoroughly into the matter of M. Wesser in Paris and obtained much the same picture, he nodded. "And M. Chalon?"

"Older — as I was older when I wed him."

With mild irony. "And also with a weak stomach?"

"No doubt. Say, rather a weak will. Perhaps less brutish than Wesser. Perhaps, au fond, worse, for he knew too many among the Germans here. Why did they take pains to see that we had the very best, the most unobtainable of foods and wines, when daily, children fainted in the street? Murderess, I may be, Inspector, but also a Frenchwoman. So I decided without remorse that Chalon should die, as Wesser died."

Very quietly, not to disturb the thread. "How, Madame Chalon?"

She turned, her face illumined by a smile. "You are familiar, perhaps with such dishes as 'Dindonneau Farci aux Marrons'? or 'Supremes de Volaille a l'Indienne? Or, 'Potage Bagration Gras', 'Chaud-Froid de Cailles en Belle Vue',...?"

"Stop, Madame Chalon! I am simultaneously ravenous and smothering in food. Such richness of food! Such..."

You asked my methods, Inspector Miron. I used these dishes and a hundred others. And in each of them, I concealed a bit of..." Her voice broke suddenly.

Inspector Miron, by a mighty effort, steadied his hand as he finished his Dubonnet. "You concealed a bit of what, Madame Chalon?"

"You have investigated me. You know who was my father."

"Jean-Marie Villerois, chef superb, matchless disciple of the matchless Escoffier. Once called Escoffier's sole worthy successor."

"Yes. And before I was twenty-two, my father — just before his death — admitted that outside of a certain negligible weakness in the matter of braising, he would not be ashamed to own me as his equal."

"Most interesting. I bow to you." Miron's nerves tightened at this handsome woman's faculty for irrelevancy. "But you said you concealed in each of these incomparable dishes a bit of...?"

Madame Chalon turned her back to him. Fine shoulders, he noted; a waist not to be ignored; hips that delighted. She addressed the sea: "A bit of my art, and no more. That and no more, Inspector. The art of Escoffier, or Villeriois. What man like Wesser or Chalon could resist? Three, four times a day I fed them rich food of the richest; varied irresistibly. I forced them to gorge to bursting, sleep, gorge again; and drink too much wine that they might gorge still more. How could they, at their ages, live — even as long as they did?"

A silence like the ticking of a far-off clock. "And love, Madame Chalon? Forgive me, but it was you who mentioned it."

"Rich food breeds love — or the semblance of it. What they called love, Inspector. They had me. Nor did I discourage them having also some little friends. And so they died — M. Wesser, aged 57, M. Chalon, aged 65. That is all."

Another silence, one that hummed. Inspector Miron stood up, so abruptly that she started, whirled. She was paler.

"You will come with me to Nice this evening, Madame Chalon."

"To the police station, Inspector Miron?"

"To the Casino, Madame Chalon. For champagne and music. We shall talk some more."

"But Inspector Miron...!"

"Listen to me, Madame. I am a bachelor. Of forty-four. Not too bad to look at, I have been told. I have a sum put away. I am not a great catch, but still, not one to be despised." He looked into her eyes. "I wish to die."

He straightened his shoulders, set his figure at its best as Madame Chalon's eloquent eyes roamed over him in the frankest of frank appraisals.

"The diets," said Madame Chalon finally and thoughtfully, "if used in moderation, are not necessarily fatal. Would you care to kiss my hand, Inspector Miron."

The End