

# Uncaged

By Anne Swardson

The day he showed up, I was home with Simone, as usual. Papa was at work. Maman was at *le cinéma*.

The apartment across the hall was vacant. Simone often said she wondered why, since housing in Paris was scarce now that the Occupation was over. Some families had to share apartments. Not us.

Just as we were cleaning up the lunch things, there was a tremendous bang in the hall. Then another, as if someone was hitting the wall with a hammer. Simone shuffled to our front door, turned the three locks and opened it.

Standing in front of the other apartment was a man almost as old as she was. He was wearing a rumpled brown suit. A cap sat on his head, the soft brim worn and stained. In one hand he held what looked like a birdcage, with a cloth cover over it. In the other was a worn leather suitcase. With it, he was hitting the door, hard.

When he saw us, he stopped and turned. We were both standing inside our door, our heads sticking out.

*“Excusez-moi, mesdames,”* he said. It was a funny thing to call me since I was only 12, a *mademoiselle*. “I have just discovered that, despite my cash payment of three months upfront, the rental agency cannot manage to give me the right key.”

He turned to face us. That made Simone inhale sharply and put her hand over her mouth as if in shock. I followed her gaze. She was staring at a dark place on the lapel of his jacket. There were a few torn threads around it.

“I am forgetting my manners. My name is Henri Racine,” he said swiftly. “I wonder if you would be kind enough to watch my things while I go back to the agency and sort out this key situation.” Without waiting for Simone's assent, he handed the suitcase to her and the birdcage to me. It was very light.

“Very well,” said Simone, crossly. “Knock when you're back.” She inclined her head at me and we retreated inside.

She set the suitcase down on the hallway floor, in the process sliding her hand over the latch. It didn't move, so it must have been locked. Then she took the cage from me and put it on the side table where we leave the mail.

I tugged on one corner of the cover.

“Take your hand away, child,” Simone snapped. “He could come back any time. Besides, you can tell there's nothing in there. Come, it's time to do the shopping for dinner.”

“I don't want to. I don't feel well, Simone. Feel my head? I have a fever. Can't I stay here? I'll be good, I promise.”

She hesitated. My parents had said she should never leave me alone. Just the other day, they had stood in the kitchen and told her that I was capable of anything. I pretended I didn't know what they were talking about.

This time I tried to just look innocent. Simone hadn't worked for us very long. We went through housekeepers quickly. She needed the job because her son had been killed in the war and her husband was dead.

"I'll just sit here. If that man comes for his things, I'll be here to give them back." I plopped myself into the chair by the door. She nodded, sighed, put on her hat, picked up the string bag and left.

I went to the covered cage and pulled hard. The fabric slid right off.

The smallest bird I ever saw was crouched inside. He was pale yellow and sat on a little swing. He stared silently at me, cocking his head.

I had never seen a bird in a cage before. I reached a finger inside the bars, trying to stroke his feathers. Suddenly, his head darted forward and he bit my thumb, hard. He almost broke the skin with his pincer beak.

The pain was intense.

Red spots appeared before my eyes and the back of my neck started to glow. My ears thrummed as I lost any sense of place and time.

Knock knock! The front door. I came to my senses and found myself standing in front of the cage, its wire door open. A letter opener was in my hand, its tip pointing inside. The bird cowered on his swing.

It must be the man! I put the opener back on the table and, closing the cage door, tried to slide the cover back on. I pulled too hard and a seam opened at the top.

The knocking sound came again. "*Mesdames?*" he called. His voice was muffled behind the door.

I tried to mush the two sides of the cover back together so that the gap didn't show, but it

was no use.

I went to the door and opened it.

The man came in without being invited.

“Thank you,” he said. “My problems are resolved.” He looked at the suitcase on the floor and looked at the cage on the table. He gave the cage a second look. He couldn’t possibly miss the tear in the cover. He looked at me.

I said nothing. I looked straight at his hat.

There was a long pause.

He took his hat off. His thinning hair was pure white and wetly combed against his head.

“Excuse my manners again, *Mademoiselle*. I need to comport myself correctly since I shall be occupying the apartment across from you for the foreseeable future.”

What a strange way to phrase it.

“Do you mean until you die?” I asked.

He smiled ruefully. “You could say that. I have been traveling a great deal. It will be good to stay someplace. Do you think your grandmother could show me where the shops are in this quartier?”

“She’s not my grandmother. Besides, I can do that. They think I don’t leave the apartment by myself, but I do. I know where everything is—the bakery, the butcher shop, the vegetable dealer.”

He inhaled deeply and licked his lips. “Yes, I would like that. Will you take me tomorrow morning? Or are you in school?”

“I don’t go to school,” I said. “I’m just here.”

“How do you do your lessons?”

“I read a lot.”

It was a lie, of course. I hated reading. But the war hadn't been over for long, and few noticed who was at school and who wasn't.

“Very well. I'll meet you downstairs at 10 o'clock tomorrow.” He picked up his bags and left, pretending not to notice that the cover on the birdcage was falling off.

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The next day, I climbed through my bedroom window onto the balcony. Our apartment was on the fifth floor, looking down onto the Rue de la Tour, but I wasn't afraid of heights. It was nothing to skootch along the balcony and scale a grilled divider to the next section, then enter the main hall through a window. I could even have kept going to Monsieur Racine's apartment, since the balcony ran all along the front of the building.

I ran down the stairs. It was October, but the markets were bright: the green string beans, the red fall apples, the yellow chickens hanging from the butchers' window. I remembered that a year or two ago only a few potatoes and some stringy beef could be found for sale.

Maman and Papa didn't leave the apartment much in those days. Papa just talked a lot on the phone. Our then-housekeeper had wanted to take me out with her to watch Charles de Gaulle parade down the Champs-Élysées with the Army of the Liberation. But Papa said no.

I didn't mind staying at home. There were lots of places to hide. And we ate well. Papa knew people who knew people. That's what he said at the dinner table. Maman always looked away, but I was so proud of him for providing for us.

“Why do you have that little bird?” I asked M. Racine when he came down. He was

wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

He didn't ask how I knew what was in the cage.

"Mathilde is a symbol of what I do," he said as we started walking.

"What do you do?"

He gave me a sideways look. "I find bad people."

"With a canary?" I didn't understand.

"I find them on my own, but I keep her to help me remember how easy it is for evil creatures to appear innocent. Despite her gentle appearance, she hates people and bites at the slightest provocation."

I knew that.

Just then we came to the bakery. M. Tourquemin, the proprietor, came out and greeted me. He was fat and had a red face, and held out a pain au chocolat.

"Ah *Mademoiselle*, it is such a pleasure to see you." I kept my arms folded and didn't take the pastry. He humphed a bit and stammered: "Please give my very best regards to your father, and tell Simone to come by this afternoon. We will have a special apple tart that I want her to have, free of charge."

I hurried M. Racine on to the other shops. I didn't like it when the shopkeepers did favors for us. My companion seemed to pay no attention.

His purchases were small and spare—half a baguette, a few apples, some roast chicken. He put them in a string bag that was dirtier and more worn than Simone's. As far as I could tell, he was buying for one.

"Do you have a wife?" I asked as we walked back to the building.

"I did once, and children. Not any more." He spoke very softly.

“Did they die or did they leave you?” I asked.

That made him stop.

“Do you always ask questions of this nature?” I didn’t know what he meant, and told him so.

“Never mind. We’re here.” He didn’t say anything else as we walked up the stairs to our apartments. I got a peek inside as he opened his door. It was a lot smaller than ours.

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“Who is that man who moved in across the hall?” Papa asked as he served himself a portion of *boeuf bourguignon*, shooting his arm out of his cuffed sleeve to keep his white shirt clean.

“Simone says he’s old,” Maman said, ignoring the fact that Simone was right there, holding the tureen of stew.

“He has a bird in a cage,” I said. “He says he finds bad people.”

Papa swiveled his face to me. “How do you know that? What kind of bad people?”

“Yes, child, when did you speak to him again?” Simone asked.

I had been so eager to impress Papa that I’d lost control.

“He was on his balcony,” I lied. “That’s all he said.”

Papa’s face turned red. “I told you never to go out there!”

“I didn’t, *cher* Papa! I was just sticking my head out the window to see the cloud shapes, you know, like you explained to me! Cirrus, cumulus....” I couldn’t remember the third one.

I often thought about the day Papa took me to the big park on the edge of Paris and showed

me the kinds of clouds. How he held my hand and brought me to a café afterward for an ice cream. It was on one of the first days Maman started going to *le cinéma*. He never took me again, even though I asked him many times.

“Stratus,” he said, slightly more warmly. “But I don’t want you talking to him. That goes for you too, Simone. For one thing, he looks like a Jew. I can’t imagine how he was allowed to rent that apartment, in this neighborhood.”

“*Oui* Papa.” Simone brought out the apple tart that the baker had provided, and we ate it in silence. I tried to think of what a Jew might be.

Right after dinner he and Maman retired to the *salon*. If they weren’t entertaining, they didn’t go to that room much. Just when they wanted to talk alone.

They didn’t know that I could crouch behind the curtain at the entrance to the dining room and hear every word they said. As usual, they were talking about me.

“She has got to go back to school,” Papa said. “She can get in too much trouble here. And Simone is doing a terrible job of watching her.”

“You know Sister Jeanne said she couldn’t possibly be readmitted. Not after what she did to little Claude. He was in the hospital for six weeks!” Maman said. “And do you suppose the other schools in the *quartier* don’t know what happened?”

“All right, she’ll go to boarding school. She’ll get the discipline she needs, and she’ll be surrounded by sisters who know how to handle .... people like her.”

What did he mean, people like me? Is that what I was to him? My heart felt like it was breaking.

“Oh please, darling, I don’t think we should. She belongs at home.”

“With you? You’re never here. And I know where you are when you say you’re at the

movies. Surely you don't want me to tell her that!"

There was a long pause.

"Do you think there's a school that will take her?" Maman asked softly.

"I think there are many that would like having a truck drive up to the kitchen each week with a load of baguettes and fresh meat. You get me a list of schools and I'll take it from there."

I was being sent to boarding school with a bribe of beef. And it was all because of M. Racine. If he hadn't turned up with that bird, none of this would have happened.

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The knock on our front door later was quiet, discreet. It was near dinnertime, so Maman was home. She called out to Simone to continue cooking and went to answer it.

As I had expected, it was him. Even though I was hiding behind the living-room curtain, I could tell.

"*Bonsoir*, Madame," he said. "I am very sorry to disturb you at this hour. I am your neighbor, Henri Racine. May I come in?"

She shrank back. "My husband isn't home. May I ask what this is about?"

"It is a domestic matter. It won't take long."

He stepped into the room and I got a glimpse. He was wearing that same brown suit. It was quite a contrast with Maman, who was in Chanel. Unlike many Paris women, her ensemble still had the real gold buttons. Papa often boasted about how she hadn't had to sell them during the Occupation.

There was a soft creak as he sat down.

“I am missing something important,” he said. “When I came back from my work this afternoon, the door to the birdcage was open and Mathilde—my canary—was gone. The window was also open. It had been closed when I left. I wondered if anyone in your family might have any information.”

“Your.... canary?” She spoke in a whisper.

“Yes. Your daughter had expressed an interest in the bird.”

A soft gasp came from Maman. I could hear her shifting in the red stuffed chair.

Before she could reply, the front door opened and Papa came in. If he knew I was behind the curtain, he didn’t show it.

“Oh, *chéri*, this is M. Racine from across the hall. He is missing his canary and wonders if...”

Papa didn’t give her a chance to finish.

“Monsieur. You have entered my home to ask about a lost bird?” There was a clear edge of irritation in his voice.

In a calm voice, M. Racine asked: “And to whom do I have the honor of speaking?”

Papa’s voice was even more on edge. “What is your business, *s’il vous plait*?”

“As I said, my canary, Mathilde, is missing. I am visiting various neighbors to inquire. Given that your daughter was asking some questions about her, here seemed like a good place to start.” Pause. “This is a lovely apartment you have, by the way.” I could imagine him looking around at the claw-leg stuffed chairs, the red velvet curtains and the antique bureau.

“Monsieur, we know nothing of a bird. I really have nothing else to say.”

“May I question your daughter?”

“Certainly not.” I had never heard Papa sound so cold.

“Very well then, I bid you *adieu*.” Footsteps, and the door opened and closed.

Then Maman’s furious whisper: “What do you think he’s talking about?”

“Maybe his bird flew out the window. But I don’t like the questions he asks, and especially the way he inspected the place. Let me talk to the building owner. Perhaps there is a way to have this Racine evicted, with or without his damn bird.”

Papa had protected me. He loved me after all. Maybe if I could make M. Racine go away, he would love me even more. Maybe he would change his mind about sending me to boarding school.

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Papa didn’t succeed in getting rid of M. Racine, but he did get me into a boarding school, in Normandy. Because it was so far into the fall semester, I would start in January.

That gave me some time. I began to follow M. Racine.

He left each day about 10 a.m. As soon as I heard his door shut in the hall, I used the balcony route to get out. My hands were small enough to unjam the window latch, then secure it after passing through.

I walked about 10 paces behind him; he never seemed to notice. He went to two places each day: The *préfecture* of our district, which Papa always said was useless unless you needed to have a document stamped. And the Café Chalet, just down the street. I could watch him through one of the side windows.

He would sit in the back for hours, meeting with people. Sometimes there were four or five of them, sitting around the table. They passed papers back and forth, mostly, and talked intensely.

Some of the people had the same dark, torn places on their jackets or sleeves as he did.

I had followed him for about a week when I got a surprise. He was sitting in the back of the café, alone, leafing through a newspaper. A *café express* sat in front of him. A woman entered, a little hunched over, carrying a pocketbook. Her hair was gray.

Then she sat across from him and I saw: It was Simone.

She didn't give him any documents, but at one point she handed him what looked like a picture in a frame. He pulled a small camera from his bag and took several photos of it, then gave it back.

It must have come from our apartment. Now was the best time to find out where, while she was still at the café. I ran home. Maman didn't usually return for another hour or so; I had some time.

I headed first to Simone's dark little room behind the kitchen. Her narrow bed was against the wall; a crucifix and a candle sat on the plain dresser. There was a framed photo of her with a young man, I presume her dead son. If anything was missing, I couldn't tell what it was.

Then to the living room and the sitting room, where I saw nothing. It was in the narrow hall leading to the dining room that I found a bare place on the wall and an empty hook. The spot looked to be about the size of the frame in Simone's hand.

The handle of the front door clicked. I rushed to my room, closed the window from which I'd entered and jumped onto the bed, grabbing a book. I heard footsteps moving about the flat.

Simone opened my door and asked how I was. I glanced up from my book and said fine, then looked down again. There was a pause. Then she closed the door and shuffled off to the kitchen.

I bounced up and tiptoed to the hall. The picture had been replaced. I remembered it as

soon as I saw it: A photo of Papa, posing with three pudgy men in military uniforms, wide belts around their waists, brimmed caps low on their heads. They all were smiling.

I went to the kitchen. She was just standing there, not cooking or cleaning, gazing into space. Her apron was untied.

“Why did you meet with Monsieur Racine? Why did you show him the picture?”

Very slowly, she took her apron off.

“There is so much you don’t know, child. Maybe you don’t want to know. But I will say this: My beloved Jean-Louis, my darling son, was taken from me because of people like your father. Gunned down on the rue de Rivoli along with the other *Résistants* by Nazis fattened on the beef and bread they bought from black marketeers. Monsieur Racine deserved to know that for his search.”

She went into her room and came back out a few minutes later with her coat on, hat on her head, a small suitcase in her hand.

“You can tell your parents what I said or not, I don’t care. I can’t work here anymore. I’m going to go live with my sister in Brittany, and I hope I never see or hear from any of you again.”

And with that she was gone. I went back to my room, opened the window and stepped out on the balcony. Looking down, I could see her making her way slowly along the sidewalk, changing the suitcase from one hand to another. I didn’t care if I ever saw her again, either.

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I didn’t tell my parents what Simone had said. She clearly thought Papa was one of the “bad people” M. Racine was looking for.

I knew what needed to be done, and it took only a few days to figure out how.

It was Sunday evening. Maman and Papa weren't home, and Simone hadn't been replaced yet. Dusk was just beginning to fall. I went into Papa's study and found a large envelope. I stuffed it with blank papers from his desk. Then I went out on my balcony.

It was harder than usual climbing over the grillwork while holding the envelope, but I managed. Soon I was in front of M. Racine's window. There was only one, because his apartment was so small.

He was inside, sitting by a small table reading what looked to be old newspaper clippings. As I watched, he reached up and turned on the lamp sitting on the table.

I tapped on the window. He looked up, startled, then came over and opened it.

"What are you doing here?"

"Monsieur Racine, I must talk to you, it's urgent!"

He opened the window wider. "Of course, *Mademoiselle*, please come in."

"Oh no, I can't, Papa told me not to go in your apartment. I'm so sorry, I know he is such a bad man." I started crying. Before he could say anything, I went on: "I want to give you some papers about him that I found. Maybe they will help you." I held out the envelope, but pulled my hand back as he reached for it.

"Come out, please, please. I'm leaving for boarding school tomorrow and I really want you to have this."

He stepped out onto the balcony. The rail was a little below waist-high. He said: "Do you understand my work? Do you understand what this could mean for your father? Collaboration with the enemy is a crime." He couldn't take his eyes off the envelope.

I took a step back, still proffering the papers. "Bad people should be punished. I want you

to have it.”

And then, he reached even farther, and I did what I had to do. It only took a second, because I had watched carefully for the moment when he would be most off-balance. It went just as I planned.

But it wasn't like with the bird. Mathilde had flown away.