LEBLANC MAURICE

THE CRYSTAL STOPPER

Maurice Leblanc
The Crystal Stopper

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34843062
The Crystal Stopper:

Содержание

Maurice Leblanc
The Crystal Stopper

CHAPTER I. THE ARRESTS

The two boats fastened to the little pier that jutted out from the garden lay rocking in its shadow. Here and there lighted windows showed through the thick mist on the margins of the lake. The Enghien Casino opposite blazed with light, though it was late in the season, the end of September. A few stars appeared through the clouds. A light breeze ruffled the surface of the water.

Arsene Lupin left the summer-house where he was smoking a cigar and, bending forward at the end of the pier:

"Growler?" he asked. "Masher?… Are you there?"

A man rose from each of the boats, and one of them answered:

"Yes, governor."

"Get ready. I hear the car coming with Gilbert and Vaucheray."

He crossed the garden, walked round a house in process of construction, the scaffolding of which loomed overhead, and cautiously opened the door on the Avenue de Ceinture. He was not mistaken: a bright light flashed round the bend and a large, open motor-car drew up, whence sprang two men in great-coats, with the collars turned up, and caps.

It was Gilbert and Vaucheray: Gilbert, a young fellow of twenty or twenty-two, with an attractive cast of features and a supple and sinewy frame; Vaucheray, older, shorter, with grizzled hair and a pale, sickly face.

"Well," asked Lupin, "did you see him, the deputy?"

"Yes, governor," said Gilbert, "we saw him take the 7.40 tram for Paris, as we knew he would."

"Then we are free to act?"

"Absolutely. The Villa Marie-Therese is ours to do as we please with."

The chauffeur had kept his seat. Lupin gave him his orders:

"Don't wait here. It might attract attention. Be back at half-past nine exactly, in time to load the car unless the whole business falls through."

"Why should it fall through?" observed Gilbert.

The motor drove away; and Lupin, taking the road to the lake with his two companions, replied:

"Why? Because I didn't prepare the plan; and, when I don't do a thing myself, I am only half-confident."

"Nonsense, governor! I've been working with you for three years now… I'm beginning to know the ropes!"

"Yes, my lad, you're beginning," said Lupin, "and that's just why I'm afraid of blunders… Here, get in with me… And you, Vaucheray, take the other boat… That's it… And now push off, boys… and make as little noise as you can."

Growler and Masher, the two oarsmen, made straight for the

opposite bank, a little to the left of the casino.

They met a boat containing a couple locked in each other's arms, floating at random, and another in which a number of people were singing at the top of their voices. And that was all.

Lupin shifted closer to his companion and said, under his breath:

"Tell me, Gilbert, did you think of this job, or was it Vaucheray's idea?"

"Upon my word, I couldn't tell you: we've both of us been discussing it for weeks."

"The thing is, I don't trust Vaucheray: he's a low ruffian when one gets to know him… I can't make out why I don't get rid of him…"

"Oh, governor!"

"Yes, yes, I mean what I say: he's a dangerous fellow, to say nothing of the fact that he has some rather serious peccadilloes on his conscience."

He sat silent for a moment and continued:

"So you're quite sure that you saw Daubrecq the deputy?"

"Saw him with my own eyes, governor."

"And you know that he has an appointment in Paris?"

"He's going to the theatre."

"Very well; but his servants have remained behind at the Enghien villa...."

"The cook has been sent away. As for the valet, Leonard, who is Daubrecq's confidential man, he'll wait for his master in Paris.

They can't get back from town before one o'clock in the morning. But…"

"But what?"

"We must reckon with a possible freak of fancy on Daubrecq's part, a change of mind, an unexpected return, and so arrange to have everything finished and done with in an hour."

"And when did you get these details?"

"This morning. Vaucheray and I at once thought that it was a favourable moment. I selected the garden of the unfinished house which we have just left as the best place to start from; for the house is not watched at night. I sent for two mates to row the boats; and I telephoned to you. That's the whole story."

"Have you the keys?"

"The keys of the front-door."

"Is that the villa which I see from here, standing in its own grounds?"

"Yes, the Villa Marie-Therese; and as the two others, with the gardens touching it on either side, have been unoccupied since this day week, we shall be able to remove what we please at our leisure; and I swear to you, governor, it's well worth while."

"The job's much too simple," mumbled Lupin. "No charm about it!"

They landed in a little creek whence rose a few stone steps, under cover of a mouldering roof. Lupin reflected that shipping the furniture would be easy work. But, suddenly, he said:

"There are people at the villa. Look… a light."

"It's a gas-jet, governor. The light's not moving."

The Growler stayed by the boats, with instructions to keep watch, while the Masher, the other rower, went to the gate on the Avenue de Ceinture, and Lupin and his two companions crept in the shadow to the foot of the steps.

Gilbert went up first. Groping in the dark, he inserted first the big door-key and then the latch-key. Both turned easily in their locks, the door opened and the three men walked in.

A gas-jet was flaring in the hall.

"You see, governor…" said Gilbert.

"Yes, yes," said Lupin, in a low voice, "but it seems to me that the light which I saw shining did not come from here…"

"Where did it come from then?"

"I can't say… Is this the drawing-room?"

"No," replied Gilbert, who was not afraid to speak pretty loudly, "no. By way of precaution, he keeps everything on the first floor, in his bedroom and in the two rooms on either side of it."

"And where is the staircase?"

"On the right, behind the curtain."

Lupin moved to the curtain and was drawing the hanging aside when, suddenly, at four steps on the left, a door opened and a head appeared, a pallid man's head, with terrified eyes.

"Help! Murder!" shouted the man.

And he rushed back into the room.

"It's Leonard, the valet!" cried Gilbert.

"If he makes a fuss, I'll out him," growled Vaucheray.

"You'll jolly well do nothing of the sort, do you hear, Vaucheray?" said Lupin, peremptorily. And he darted off in pursuit of the servant. He first went through a dining-room, where he saw a lamp still lit, with plates and a bottle around it, and he found Leonard at the further end of a pantry, making vain efforts to open the window:

"Don't move, sportie! No kid! Ah, the brute!"

He had thrown himself flat on the floor, on seeing Leonard raise his arm at him. Three shots were fired in the dusk of the pantry; and then the valet came tumbling to the ground, seized by the legs by Lupin, who snatched his weapon from him and gripped him by the throat:

"Get out, you dirty brute!" he growled. "He very nearly did for me… Here, Vaucheray, secure this gentleman!"

He threw the light of his pocket-lantern on the servant's face and chuckled:

"He's not a pretty gentleman either… You can't have a very clear conscience, Leonard; besides, to play flunkey to Daubrecq the deputy…! Have you finished, Vaucheray? I don't want to hang about here for ever!"

"There's no danger, governor," said Gilbert.

"Oh, really?… So you think that shots can't be heard?…"

"Quite impossible."

"No matter, we must look sharp. Vaucheray, take the lamp and let's go upstairs."

He took Gilbert by the arm and, as he dragged him to the first floor:

"You ass," he said, "is that the way you make inquiries? Wasn't I right to have my doubts?"

"Look here, governor, I couldn't know that he would change his mind and come back to dinner."

"One's got to know everything when one has the honour of breaking into people's houses. You numskull! I'll remember you and Vaucheray… a nice pair of gossoons!…"

The sight of the furniture on the first floor pacified Lupin and he started on his inventory with the satisfied air of a collector who has looked in to treat himself to a few works of art:

"By Jingo! There's not much of it, but what there is is pucka! There's nothing the matter with this representative of the people in the question of taste. Four Aubusson chairs… A bureau signed 'Percier-Fontaine,' for a wager… Two inlays by Gouttieres… A genuine Fragonard and a sham Nattier which any American millionaire will swallow for the asking: in short, a fortune… And there are curmudgeons who pretend that there's nothing but faked stuff left. Dash it all, why don't they do as I do? They should look about!"

Gilbert and Vaucheray, following Lupin's orders and instructions, at once proceeded methodically to remove the bulkier pieces. The first boat was filled in half an hour; and it was decided that the Growler and the Masher should go on ahead and begin to load the motor-car.

Lupin went to see them start. On returning to the house, it struck him, as he passed through the hall, that he heard a voice in the pantry. He went there and found Leonard lying flat on his stomach, quite alone, with his hands tied behind his back:

"So it's you growling, my confidential flunkey? Don't get excited: it's almost finished. Only, if you make too much noise, you'll oblige us to take severer measures… Do you like pears? We might give you one, you know: a choke-pear!…"

As he went upstairs, he again heard the same sound and, stopping to listen, he caught these words, uttered in a hoarse, groaning voice, which came, beyond a doubt, from the pantry:

"Help!… Murder!… Help!… I shall be killed!… Inform the commissary!"

"The fellow's clean off his chump!" muttered Lupin. "By Jove! … To disturb the police at nine o'clock in the evening: there's a notion for you!"

He set to work again. It took longer than he expected, for they discovered in the cupboards all sorts of valuable knick-knacks which it would have been very wrong to disdain and, on the other hand, Vaucheray and Gilbert were going about their investigations with signs of laboured concentration that nonplussed him.

At long last, he lost his patience:

"That will do!" he said. "We're not going to spoil the whole job and keep the motor waiting for the sake of the few odd bits that remain. I'm taking the boat."

They were now by the waterside and Lupin went down the steps. Gilbert held him back:

"I say, governor, we want one more look round five minutes, no longer."

"But what for, dash it all?"

"Well, it's like this: we were told of an old reliquary, something stunning…"

"Well?"

"We can't lay our hands on it. And I was thinking… There's a cupboard with a big lock to it in the pantry… You see, we can't very well…" He was already on his way to the villa. Vaucheray ran back too.

"I'll give you ten minutes, not a second longer!" cried Lupin. "In ten minutes, I'm off."

But the ten minutes passed and he was still waiting.

He looked at his watch:

"A quarter-past nine," he said to himself. "This is madness."

And he also remembered that Gilbert and Vaucheray had behaved rather queerly throughout the removal of the things, keeping close together and apparently watching each other. What could be happening?

Lupin mechanically returned to the house, urged by a feeling of anxiety which he was unable to explain; and, at the same time, he listened to a dull sound which rose in the distance, from the direction of Enghien, and which seemed to be coming nearer… People strolling about, no doubt…

He gave a sharp whistle and then went to the main gate, to take a glance down the avenue. But, suddenly, as he was opening the gate, a shot rang out, followed by a yell of pain. He returned at a run, went round the house, leapt up the steps and rushed to the dining-room:

"Blast it all, what are you doing there, you two?"

Gilbert and Vaucheray, locked in a furious embrace, were rolling on the floor, uttering cries of rage. Their clothes were dripping with blood. Lupin flew at them to separate them. But already Gilbert had got his adversary down and was wrenching out of his hand something which Lupin had no time to see. And Vaucheray, who was losing blood through a wound in the shoulder, fainted.

"Who hurt him? You, Gilbert?" asked Lupin, furiously.

"No, Leonard."

"Leonard? Why, he was tied up!"

"He undid his fastenings and got hold of his revolver."

"The scoundrel! Where is he?"

Lupin took the lamp and went into the pantry.

The man-servant was lying on his back, with his arms outstretched, a dagger stuck in his throat and a livid face. A red stream trickled from his mouth.

"Ah," gasped Lupin, after examining him, "he's dead!"

"Do you think so?… Do you think so?" stammered Gilbert, in a trembling voice.

"He's dead, I tell you."

"It was Vaucheray… it was Vaucheray who did it…"

Pale with anger, Lupin caught hold of him:

"It was Vaucheray, was it?… And you too, you blackguard, since you were there and didn't stop him! Blood! Blood! You know I won't have it… Well, it's a bad lookout for you, my fine fellows… You'll have to pay the damage! And you won't get off cheaply either… Mind the guillotine!" And, shaking him violently, "What was it? Why did he kill him?"

"He wanted to go through his pockets and take the key of the cupboard from him. When he stooped over him, he saw that the man unloosed his arms. He got frightened… and he stabbed him…"

"But the revolver-shot?"

"It was Leonard… he had his revolver in his hand… he just had strength to take aim before he died…"

"And the key of the cupboard?"

"Vaucheray took it...."

"Did he open it?"

"And did he find what he was after?"

"Yes."

"And you wanted to take the thing from him. What sort of thing was it? The reliquary? No, it was too small for that.... Then what was it? Answer me, will you?…"

Lupin gathered from Gilbert's silence and the determined expression on his face that he would not obtain a reply. With a threatening gesture, "I'll make you talk, my man. Sure as my

name's Lupin, you shall come out with it. But, for the moment, we must see about decamping. Here, help me. We must get Vaucheray into the boat…"

They had returned to the dining-room and Gilbert was bending over the wounded man, when Lupin stopped him:

"Listen."

They exchanged one look of alarm… Some one was speaking in the pantry … a very low, strange, very distant voice… Nevertheless, as they at once made certain, there was no one in the room, no one except the dead man, whose dark outline lay stretched upon the floor.

And the voice spake anew, by turns shrill, stifled, bleating, stammering, yelling, fearsome. It uttered indistinct words, broken syllables.

Lupin felt the top of his head covering with perspiration. What was this incoherent voice, mysterious as a voice from beyond the grave?

He had knelt down by the man-servant's side. The voice was silent and then began again:

"Give us a better light," he said to Gilbert.

He was trembling a little, shaken with a nervous dread which he was unable to master, for there was no doubt possible: when Gilbert had removed the shade from the lamp, Lupin realized that the voice issued from the corpse itself, without a movement of the lifeless mass, without a quiver of the bleeding mouth.

"Governor, I've got the shivers," stammered Gilbert.

Again the same voice, the same snuffling whisper.

Suddenly, Lupin burst out laughing, seized the corpse and pulled it aside:

"Exactly!" he said, catching sight of an object made of polished metal. "Exactly! That's it!… Well, upon my word, it took me long enough!"

On the spot on the floor which he had uncovered lay the receiver of a telephone, the cord of which ran up to the apparatus fixed on the wall, at the usual height.

Lupin put the receiver to his ear. The noise began again at once, but it was a mixed noise, made up of different calls, exclamations, confused cries, the noise produced by a number of persons questioning one another at the same time.

"Are you there?… He won't answer. It's awful… They must have killed him. What is it?… Keep up your courage. There's help on the way… police… soldiers…"

"Dash it!" said Lupin, dropping the receiver.

The truth appeared to him in a terrifying vision. Quite at the beginning, while the things upstairs were being moved, Leonard, whose bonds were not securely fastened, had contrived to scramble to his feet, to unhook the receiver, probably with his teeth, to drop it and to appeal for assistance to the Enghien telephone-exchange.

And those were the words which Lupin had overheard, after the first boat started:

"Help!… Murder!… I shall be killed!"

And this was the reply of the exchange. The police were hurrying to the spot. And Lupin remembered the sounds which he had heard from the garden, four or five minutes earlier, at most:

"The police! Take to your heels!" he shouted, darting across the dining room.

"What about Vaucheray?" asked Gilbert.

"Sorry, can't be helped!"

But Vaucheray, waking from his torpor, entreated him as he passed:

"Governor, you wouldn't leave me like this!"

Lupin stopped, in spite of the danger, and was lifting the wounded man, with Gilbert's assistance, when a loud din arose outside:

"Too late!" he said.

At that moment, blows shook the hall-door at the back of the house. He ran to the front steps: a number of men had already turned the corner of the house at a rush. He might have managed to keep ahead of them, with Gilbert, and reach the waterside. But what chance was there of embarking and escaping under the enemy's fire?

He locked and bolted the door.

"We are surrounded… and done for," spluttered Gilbert.

"Hold your tongue," said Lupin.

"But they've seen us, governor. There, they're knocking."

"Hold your tongue," Lupin repeated. "Not a word. Not a

movement."

He himself remained unperturbed, with an utterly calm face and the pensive attitude of one who has all the time that he needs to examine a delicate situation from every point of view. He had reached one of those minutes which he called the "superior moments of existence," those which alone give a value and a price to life. On such occasions, however threatening the danger, he always began by counting to himself, slowly—"One… Two… Three… Four.... Five… Six"—until the beating of his heart became normal and regular. Then and not till then, he reflected, but with what intensity, with what perspicacity, with what a profound intuition of possibilities! All the factors of the problem were present in his mind. He foresaw everything. He admitted everything. And he took his resolution in all logic and in all certainty.

After thirty or forty seconds, while the men outside were banging at the doors and picking the locks, he said to his companion:

"Follow me."

Returning to the dining-room, he softly opened the sash and drew the Venetian blinds of a window in the side-wall. People were coming and going, rendering flight out of the question.

Thereupon he began to shout with all his might, in a breathless voice:

"This way!… Help!… I've got them!… This way!"

He pointed his revolver and fired two shots into the tree-tops.

Then he went back to Vaucheray, bent over him and smeared his face and hands with the wounded man's blood. Lastly, turning upon Gilbert, he took him violently by the shoulders and threw him to the floor.

"What do you want, governor? There's a nice thing to do!"

"Let me do as I please," said Lupin, laying an imperative stress on every syllable. "I'll answer for everything… I'll answer for the two of you… Let me do as I like with you… I'll get you both out of prison … But I can only do that if I'm free."

Excited cries rose through the open window.

"This way!" he shouted. "I've got them! Help!"

And, quietly, in a whisper:

"Just think for a moment… Have you anything to say to me? … Something that can be of use to us?"

Gilbert was too much taken aback to understand Lupin's plan and he struggled furiously. Vaucheray showed more intelligence; moreover, he had given up all hope of escape, because of his wound; and he snarled:

"Let the governor have his way, you ass!… As long as he gets off, isn't that the great thing?"

Suddenly, Lupin remembered the article which Gilbert had put in his pocket, after capturing it from Vaucheray. He now tried to take it in his turn.

"No, not that! Not if I know it!" growled Gilbert, managing to release himself.

Lupin floored him once more. But two men suddenly

appeared at the window; and Gilbert yielded and, handing the thing to Lupin, who pocketed it without looking at it, whispered:

"Here you are, governor… I'll explain. You can be sure that…"

He did not have time to finish… Two policemen and others after them and soldiers who entered through every door and window came to Lupin's assistance.

Gilbert was at once seized and firmly bound. Lupin withdrew:

"I'm glad you've come," he said. "The beggar's given me a lot of trouble. I wounded the other; but this one…"

The commissary of police asked him, hurriedly:

"Have you seen the man-servant? Have they killed him?"

"I don't know," he answered.

"You don't know?…"

"Why, I came with you from Enghien, on hearing of the murder! Only, while you were going round the left of the house, I went round the right. There was a window open. I climbed up just as these two ruffians were about to jump down. I fired at this one," pointing to Vaucheray, "and seized hold of his pal."

How could he have been suspected? He was covered with blood. He had handed over the valet's murderers. Half a score of people had witnessed the end of the heroic combat which he had delivered. Besides, the uproar was too great for any one to take the trouble to argue or to waste time in entertaining doubts. In the height of the first confusion, the people of the neighbourhood invaded the villa. One and all lost their heads.

They ran to every side, upstairs, downstairs, to the very cellar. They asked one another questions, yelled and shouted; and no one dreamt of checking Lupin's statements, which sounded so plausible.

However, the discovery of the body in the pantry restored the commissary to a sense of his responsibility. He issued orders, had the house cleared and placed policemen at the gate to prevent any one from passing in or out. Then, without further delay, he examined the spot and began his inquiry. Vaucheray gave his name; Gilbert refused to give his, on the plea that he would only speak in the presence of a lawyer. But, when he was accused of the murder, he informed against Vaucheray, who defended himself by denouncing the other; and the two of them vociferated at the same time, with the evident wish to monopolize the commissary's attention. When the commissary turned to Lupin, to request his evidence, he perceived that the stranger was no longer there.

Without the least suspicion, he said to one of the policemen:

"Go and tell that gentleman that I should like to ask him a few questions."

They looked about for the gentleman. Some one had seen him standing on the steps, lighting a cigarette. The next news was that he had given cigarettes to a group of soldiers and strolled toward the lake, saying that they were to call him if he was wanted.

They called him. No one replied.

But a soldier came running up. The gentleman had just got

into a boat and was rowing away for all he was worth. The commissary looked at Gilbert and realized that he had been tricked:

"Stop him!" he shouted. "Fire on him! He's an accomplice! …"

He himself rushed out, followed by two policemen, while the others remained with the prisoners. On reaching the bank, he saw the gentleman, a hundred yards away, taking off his hat to him in the dusk.

One of the policemen discharged his revolver, without thinking.

The wind carried the sound of words across the water. The gentleman was singing as he rowed:

> "Go, little bark,
> Float in the dark…"

But the commissary saw a skiff fastened to the landing-stage of the adjoining property. He scrambled over the hedge separating the two gardens and, after ordering the soldiers to watch the banks of the lake and to seize the fugitive if he tried to put ashore, the commissary and two of his men pulled off in pursuit of Lupin.

It was not a difficult matter, for they were able to follow his movements by the intermittent light of the moon and to see that he was trying to cross the lakes while bearing toward the right

—that is to say, toward the village of Saint-Gratien. Moreover, the commissary soon perceived that, with the aid of his men and thanks perhaps to the comparative lightness of his craft, he was rapidly gaining on the other. In ten minutes he had decreased the interval between them by one half.

"That's it!" he cried. "We shan't even need the soldiers to keep him from landing. I very much want to make the fellow's acquaintance. He's a cool hand and no mistake!"

The funny thing was that the distance was now diminishing at an abnormal rate, as though the fugitive had lost heart at realizing the futility of the struggle. The policemen redoubled their efforts. The boat shot across the water with the swiftness of a swallow. Another hundred yards at most and they would reach the man.

"Halt!" cried the commissary.

The enemy, whose huddled shape they could make out in the boat, no longer moved. The sculls drifted with the stream. And this absence of all motion had something alarming about it. A ruffian of that stamp might easily lie in wait for his aggressors, sell his life dearly and even shoot them dead before they had a chance of attacking him.

"Surrender!" shouted the commissary.

The sky, at that moment, was dark. The three men lay flat at the bottom of their skiff, for they thought they perceived a threatening gesture.

The boat, carried by its own impetus, was approaching the other.

The commissary growled:

"We won't let ourselves be sniped. Let's fire at him. Are you ready?" And he roared, once more, "Surrender… if not…!"

No reply.

The enemy did not budge.

"Surrender!… Hands up!… You refuse?… So much the worse for you… I'm counting… One… Two…"

The policemen did not wait for the word of command. They fired and, at once, bending over their oars, gave the boat so powerful an impulse that it reached the goal in a few strokes.

The commissary watched, revolver in hand, ready for the least movement. He raised his arm:

"If you stir, I'll blow out your brains!"

But the enemy did not stir for a moment; and, when the boat was bumped and the two men, letting go their oars, prepared for the formidable assault, the commissary understood the reason of this passive attitude: there was no one in the boat. The enemy had escaped by swimming, leaving in the hands of the victor a certain number of the stolen articles, which, heaped up and surmounted by a jacket and a bowler hat, might be taken, at a pinch, in the semi-darkness, vaguely to represent the figure of a man.

They struck matches and examined the enemy's cast clothes. There were no initials in the hat. The jacket contained neither papers nor pocketbook. Nevertheless, they made a discovery which was destined to give the case no little celebrity and which had a terrible influence on the fate of Gilbert and Vaucheray: in

one of the pockets was a visiting-card which the fugitive had left behind… the card of Arsene Lupin.

At almost the same moment, while the police, towing the captured skiff behind them, continued their empty search and while the soldiers stood drawn up on the bank, straining their eyes to try and follow the fortunes of the naval combat, the aforesaid Arsene Lupin was quietly landing at the very spot which he had left two hours earlier.

He was there met by his two other accomplices, the Growler and the Masher, flung them a few sentences by way of explanation, jumped into the motor-car, among Daubrecq the deputy's armchairs and other valuables, wrapped himself in his furs and drove, by deserted roads, to his repository at Neuilly, where he left the chauffeur. A taxicab brought him back to Paris and put him down by the church of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule, not far from which, in the Rue Matignon, he had a flat, on the entresol-floor, of which none of his gang, excepting Gilbert, knew, a flat with a private entrance. He was glad to take off his clothes and rub himself down; for, in spite of his strong constitution, he felt chilled to the bone. On retiring to bed, he emptied the contents of his pockets, as usual, on the mantelpiece. It was not till then that he noticed, near his pocketbook and his keys, the object which Gilbert had put into his hand at the last moment.

And he was very much surprised. It was a decanter-stopper, a little crystal stopper, like those used for the bottles in a liqueur-

stand. And this crystal stopper had nothing particular about it. The most that Lupin observed was that the knob, with its many facets, was gilded right down to the indent. But, to tell the truth, this detail did not seem to him of a nature to attract special notice.

"And it was this bit of glass to which Gilbert and Vaucheray attached such stubborn importance!" he said to himself. "It was for this that they killed the valet, fought each other, wasted their time, risked prison… trial… the scaffold!…"

Too tired to linger further upon this matter, exciting though it appeared to him, he replaced the stopper on the chimney-piece and got into bed.

He had bad dreams. Gilbert and Vaucheray were kneeling on the flags of their cells, wildly stretching out their hands to him and yelling with fright:

"Help!… Help!" they cried.

But, notwithstanding all his efforts, he was unable to move. He himself was fastened by invisible bonds. And, trembling, obsessed by a monstrous vision, he watched the dismal preparations, the cutting of the condemned men's hair and shirt-collars, the squalid tragedy.

"By Jove!" he said, when he woke after a series of nightmares. "There's a lot of bad omens! Fortunately, we don't err on the side of superstition. Otherwise…!" And he added, "For that matter, we have a talisman which, to judge by Gilbert and Vaucheray's behaviour, should be enough, with Lupin's help, to frustrate bad luck and secure the triumph of the good cause. Let's have a look

at that crystal stopper!”

He sprang out of bed to take the thing and examine it more closely. An exclamation escaped him. The crystal stopper had disappeared…

CHAPTER II. EIGHT FROM NINE LEAVES ONE

Notwithstanding my friendly relations with Lupin and the many flattering proofs of his confidence which he has given me, there is one thing which I have never been quite able to fathom, and that is the organization of his gang.

The existence of the gang is an undoubted fact. Certain adventures can be explained only by countless acts of devotion, invincible efforts of energy and powerful cases of complicity, representing so many forces which all obey one mighty will. But how is this will exerted? Through what intermediaries, through what subordinates? That is what I do not know. Lupin keeps his secret; and the secrets which Lupin chooses to keep are, so to speak, impenetrable.

The only supposition which I can allow myself to make is that this gang, which, in my opinion, is very limited in numbers and therefore all the more formidable, is completed and extended indefinitely by the addition of independent units, provisional associates, picked up in every class of society and in every country of the world, who are the executive agents of an authority with which, in many cases, they are not even acquainted. The companions, the initiates, the faithful adherents—men who play the leading parts under the direct command of Lupin—move to

and fro between these secondary agents and the master.

Gilbert and Vaucheray evidently belonged to the main gang. And that is why the law showed itself so implacable in their regard. For the first time, it held accomplices of Lupin in its clutches—declared, undisputed accomplices—and those accomplices had committed a murder. If the murder was premeditated, if the accusation of deliberate homicide could be supported by substantial proofs, it meant the scaffold. Now there was, at the very least, one self-evident proof, the cry for assistance which Leonard had sent over the telephone a few minutes before his death:

"Help!… Murder!… I shall be killed!…"

The desperate appeal had been heard by two men, the operator on duty and one of his fellow-clerks, who swore to it positively. And it was in consequence of this appeal that the commissary of police, who was at once informed, had proceeded to the Villa Marie-Therese, escorted by his men and a number of soldiers off duty.

Lupin had a very clear notion of the danger from the first. The fierce struggle in which he had engaged against society was entering upon a new and terrible phase. His luck was turning. It was no longer a matter of attacking others, but of defending himself and saving the heads of his two companions.

A little memorandum, which I have copied from one of the note-books in which he often jots down a summary of the situations that perplex him, will show us the workings of his

brain:

"One definite fact, to begin with, is that Gilbert and Vaucheray humbugged me. The Enghien expedition, undertaken ostensibly with the object of robbing the Villa Marie-Therese, had a secret purpose. This purpose obsessed their minds throughout the operations; and what they were looking for, under the furniture and in the cupboards, was one thing and one thing alone: the crystal stopper. Therefore, if I want to see clear ahead, I must first of all know what this means. It is certain that, for some hidden reason, that mysterious piece of glass possesses an incalculable value in their eyes. And not only in theirs, for, last night, some one was bold enough and clever enough to enter my flat and steal the object in question from me."

This theft of which he was the victim puzzled Lupin curiously.

Two problems, both equally difficult of solution, presented themselves to his mind. First, who was the mysterious visitor? Gilbert, who enjoyed his entire confidence and acted as his private secretary, was the only one who knew of the retreat in the Rue Matignon. Now Gilbert was in prison. Was Lupin to suppose that Gilbert had betrayed him and put the police on his tracks? In that case, why were they content with taking the crystal stopper, instead of arresting him, Lupin?

But there was something much stranger still. Admitting that they had been able to force the doors of his flat—and this he was compelled to admit, though there was no mark to show it—how had they succeeded in entering the bedroom? He turned the

key and pushed the bolt as he did every evening, in accordance with a habit from which he never departed. And, nevertheless —the fact was undeniable—the crystal stopper had disappeared without the lock or the bolt having been touched. And, although Lupin flattered himself that he had sharp ears, even when asleep, not a sound had waked him!

He took no great pains to probe the mystery. He knew those problems too well to hope that this one could be solved other than in the course of events. But, feeling very much put out and exceedingly uneasy, he then and there locked up his entresol flat in the Rue Matignon and swore that he would never set foot in it again.

And he applied himself forthwith to the question of corresponding with Vaucheray or Gilbert.

Here a fresh disappointment awaited him. It was so clearly understood, both at the Sante Prison and at the Law Courts, that all communication between Lupin and the prisoners must be absolutely prevented, that a multitude of minute precautions were ordered by the prefect of police and minutely observed by the lowest subordinates. Tried policemen, always the same men, watched Gilbert and Vaucheray, day and night, and never let them out of their sight.

Lupin, at this time, had not yet promoted himself to the crowning honour of his career, the post of chief of the detective-service,[1] and, consequently, was not able to take steps at the Law

[1] See 813, by Maurice Leblanc, translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos.

Courts to insure the execution of his plans. After a fortnight of fruitless endeavours, he was obliged to bow.

He did so with a raging heart and a growing sense of anxiety.

"The difficult part of a business," he often says, "is not the finish, but the start."

Where was he to start in the present circumstances? What road was he to follow?

His thoughts recurred to Daubrecq the deputy, the original owner of the crystal stopper, who probably knew its importance. On the other hand, how was Gilbert aware of the doings and mode of life of Daubrecq the deputy? What means had he employed to keep him under observation? Who had told him of the place where Daubrecq spent the evening of that day? These were all interesting questions to solve.

Daubrecq had moved to his winter quarters in Paris immediately after the burglary at the Villa Marie-Therese and was now living in his own house, on the left-hand side of the little Square Lamartine that opens out at the end of the Avenue Victor-Hugo.

First disguising himself as an old gentleman of private means, strolling about, cane in hand, Lupin spent his time in the neighbourhood, on the benches of the square and the avenue. He made a discovery on the first day. Two men, dressed as workmen, but behaving in a manner that left no doubt as to their aims, were watching the deputy's house. When Daubrecq went out, they set off in pursuit of him; and they were immediately

behind him when he came home again. At night, as soon as the lights were out, they went away.

Lupin shadowed them in his turn. They were detective-officers.

"Hullo, hullo!" he said to himself. "This is hardly what I expected. So the Daubrecq bird is under suspicion?"

But, on the fourth day, at nightfall, the two men were joined by six others, who conversed with them in the darkest part of the Square Lamartine. And, among these new arrivals, Lupin was vastly astonished to recognize, by his figure and bearing, the famous Prasville, the erstwhile barrister, sportsman and explorer, now favourite at the Elysee, who, for some mysterious reason, had been pitchforked into the headquarters of police as secretary-general, with the reversion of the prefecture.

And, suddenly, Lupin remembered: two years ago, Prasville and Daubrecq the deputy had had a personal encounter on the Place du Palais-Bourbon. The incident made a great stir at the time. No one knew the cause of it. Prasville had sent his seconds to Daubrecq on the same day; but Daubrecq refused to fight.

A little while later, Prasville was appointed secretary-general.

"Very odd, very odd," said Lupin, who remained plunged in thought, while continuing to observe Prasville's movements.

At seven o'clock Prasville's group of men moved away a few yards, in the direction of the Avenue Henri-Martin. The door of a small garden on the right of the house opened and Daubrecq appeared. The two detectives followed close behind him and,

when he took the Rue-Taitbout train, jumped on after him.

Prasville at once walked across the square and rang the bell. The garden-gate was between the house and the porter's lodge. The portress came and opened it. There was a brief conversation, after which Prasville and his companions were admitted.

"A domiciliary visit," said Lupin. "Secret and illegal. By the strict rules of politeness, I ought to be invited. My presence is indispensable."

Without the least hesitation he went up to the house, the door of which had not been closed, and, passing in front of the portress, who was casting her eyes outside, he asked, in the hurried tones of a person who is late for an appointment:

"Have the gentlemen come?"

"Yes, you will find them in the study."

His plan was quite simple: if any one met him, he would pretend to be a tradesman. But there was no need for this subterfuge. He was able, after crossing an empty hall, to enter a dining-room which also had no one in it, but which, through the panes of a glass partition that separated the dining-room from the study, afforded him a view of Prasville and his five companions.

Prasville opened all the drawers with the aid of false keys. Next, he examined all the papers, while his companions took down the books from the shelves, shook the pages of each separately and felt inside the bindings.

"Of course, it's a paper they're looking for," said Lupin. "Bank-notes, perhaps…"

Prasville exclaimed:

"What rot! We shan't find a thing!"

Yet he obviously did not abandon all hope of discovering what he wanted, for he suddenly seized the four bottles in a liqueur-stand, took out the four stoppers and inspected them.

"Hullo!" thought Lupin. "Now he's going for decanter-stoppers! Then it's not a question of a paper? Well, I give it up."

Prasville next lifted and examined different objects; and he asked:

"How often have you been here?"

"Six times last winter," was the reply.

"And you have searched the house thoroughly?"

"Every one of the rooms, for days at a time, while he was visiting his constituency."

"Still… still…" And he added, "Has he no servant at present?"

"No, he is looking for one. He has his meals out and the portress keeps the house as best she can. The woman is devoted to us…"

Prasville persisted in his investigations for nearly an hour and a half, shifting and fingering all the knick-knacks, but taking care to put everything back exactly where he found it. At nine o'clock, however, the two detectives who had followed Daubrecq burst into the study:

"He's coming back!"

"On foot?"

"Yes."

"Have we time?"

"Oh, dear, yes!"

Prasville and the men from the police-office withdrew, without undue haste, after taking a last glance round the room to make sure that there was nothing to betray their visit.

The position was becoming critical for Lupin. He ran the risk of knocking up against Daubrecq, if he went away, or of not being able to get out, if he remained. But, on ascertaining that the dining-room windows afforded a direct means of exit to the square, he resolved to stay. Besides, the opportunity of obtaining a close view of Daubrecq was too good to refuse; and, as Daubrecq had been out to dinner, there was not much chance of his entering the dining-room.

Lupin, therefore, waited, holding himself ready to hide behind a velvet curtain that could be drawn across the glazed partition in case of need.

He heard the sound of doors opening and shutting. Some one walked into the study and switched on the light. He recognized Daubrecq.

The deputy was a stout, thickset, bull-necked man, very nearly bald, with a fringe of gray whiskers round his chin and wearing a pair of black eye-glasses under his spectacles, for his eyes were weak and strained. Lupin noticed the powerful features, the square chin, the prominent cheek-bones. The hands were brawny and covered with hair, the legs bowed; and he walked with a stoop, bearing first on one hip and then on the other, which gave

him something of the gait of a gorilla. But the face was topped by an enormous, lined forehead, indented with hollows and dotted with bumps.

There was something bestial, something savage, something repulsive about the man's whole personality. Lupin remembered that, in the Chamber of Deputies, Daubrecq was nicknamed "The Wild Man of the Woods" and that he was so labelled not only because he stood aloof and hardly ever mixed with his fellow-members, but also because of his appearance, his behaviour, his peculiar gait and his remarkable muscular development.

He sat down to his desk, took a meerschaum pipe from his pocket, selected a packet of caporal among several packets of tobacco which lay drying in a bowl, tore open the wrapper, filled his pipe and lit it. Then he began to write letters.

Presently he ceased his work and sat thinking, with his attention fixed on a spot on his desk.

He lifted a little stamp-box and examined it. Next, he verified the position of different articles which Prasville had touched and replaced; and he searched them with his eyes, felt them with his hands, bending over them as though certain signs, known to himself alone, were able to tell him what he wished to know.

Lastly, he grasped the knob on an electric bell-push and rang. The portress appeared a minute later.

He asked:

"They've been, haven't they?"

And, when the woman hesitated about replying, he insisted:

"Come, come, Clemence, did you open this stampbox?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I fastened the lid down with a little strip of gummed paper. The strip has been broken."

"But I assure you,…" the woman began.

"Why tell lies," he said, "considering that I myself instructed you to lend yourself to those visits?"

"The fact is…"

"The fact is that you want to keep on good terms with both sides… Very well!" He handed her a fifty-franc note and repeated, "Have they been?"

"Yes."

"The same men as in the spring?"

"Yes, all five of them… with another one, who ordered them about."

"A tall, dark man?"

"Yes."

Lupin saw Daubrecq's mouth hardening; and Daubrecq continued:

"Is that all?"

"There was one more, who came after they did and joined them… and then, just now, two more, the pair who usually keep watch outside the house."

"Did they remain in the study?"

"Yes, sir."

"And they went away when I came back? A few minutes before, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will do."

The woman left the room. Daubrecq returned to his letter-writing. Then, stretching out his arm, he made some marks on a white writing-tablet, at the end of his desk, and rested it against the desk, as though he wished to keep it in sight. The marks were figures; and Lupin was able to read the following subtraction-sum:

"9 – 8 = 1"

And Daubrecq, speaking between his teeth, thoughtfully uttered the syllables:

"Eight from nine leaves one… There's not a doubt about that," he added, aloud. He wrote one more letter, a very short one, and addressed the envelope with an inscription which Lupin was able to decipher when the letter was placed beside the writing-tablet:

"To Monsieur Prasville, Secretary-general of the Prefecture of Police."

Then he rang the bell again:

"Clemence," he said, to the portress, "did you go to school as a child?"

"Yes, sir, of course I did."

"And were you taught arithmetic?"

"Why, sir…"

"Well, you're not very good at subtraction."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you don't know that nine minus eight equals one. And that, you see, is a fact of the highest importance. Life becomes impossible if you are ignorant of that fundamental truth."

He rose, as he spoke, and walked round the room, with his hands behind his back, swaying upon his hips. He did so once more. Then, stopping at the dining-room, he opened the door:

"For that matter, there's another way of putting the problem. Take eight from nine; and one remains. And the one who remains is here, eh? Correct! And monsieur supplies us with a striking proof, does he not?"

He patted the velvet curtain in which Lupin had hurriedly wrapped himself:

"Upon my word, sir, you must be stifling under this! Not to say that I might have amused myself by sticking a dagger through the curtain. Remember Hamlet's madness and Polonius' death: 'How now! A rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!' Come along, Mr. Polonius, come out of your hole."

It was one of those positions to which Lupin was not accustomed and which he loathed. To catch others in a trap and pull their leg was all very well; but it was a very different thing to have people teasing him and roaring with laughter at his expense. Yet what could he answer back?

"You look a little pale, Mr. Polonius… Hullo! Why, it's the respectable old gentleman who has been hanging about the

square for some days! So you belong to the police too, Mr. Polonius? There, there, pull yourself together, I sha'n't hurt you! … But you see, Clemence, how right my calculation was. You told me that nine spies had been to the house. I counted a troop of eight, as I came along, eight of them in the distance, down the avenue. Take eight from nine and one remains: the one who evidently remained behind to see what he could see. Ecce homo!"

"Well? And then?" said Lupin, who felt a mad craving to fly at the fellow and reduce him to silence.

"And then? Nothing at all, my good man… What more do you want? The farce is over. I will only ask you to take this little note to Master Prasville, your employer. Clemence, please show Mr. Polonius out. And, if ever he calls again, fling open the doors wide to him. Pray look upon this as your home, Mr. Polonius. Your servant, sir!…"

Lupin hesitated. He would have liked to talk big and to come out with a farewell phrase, a parting speech, like an actor making a showy exit from the stage, and at least to disappear with the honours of war. But his defeat was so pitiable that he could think of nothing better than to bang his hat on his head and stamp his feet as he followed the portress down the hall. It was a poor revenge.

"You rascally beggar!" he shouted, once he was outside the door, shaking his fist at Daubrecq's windows. "Wretch, scum of the earth, deputy, you shall pay for this!… Oh, he allows himself…! Oh, he has the cheek to…! Well, I swear to you, my

fine fellow, that, one of these days…"

He was foaming with rage, all the more as, in his innermost heart, he recognized the strength of his new enemy and could not deny the masterly fashion in which he had managed this business. Daubrecq's coolness, the assurance with which he hoaxed the police-officials, the contempt with which he lent himself to their visits at his house and, above all, his wonderful self-possession, his easy bearing and the impertinence of his conduct in the presence of the ninth person who was spying on him: all this denoted a man of character, a strong man, with a well-balanced mind, lucid, bold, sure of himself and of the cards in his hand.

But what were those cards? What game was he playing? Who held the stakes? And how did the players stand on either side? Lupin could not tell. Knowing nothing, he flung himself headlong into the thick of the fray, between adversaries desperately involved, though he himself was in total ignorance of their positions, their weapons, their resources and their secret plans. For, when all was said, he could not admit that the object of all those efforts was to obtain possession of a crystal stopper!

One thing alone pleased him: Daubrecq had not penetrated his disguise. Daubrecq believed him to be in the employ of the police. Neither Daubrecq nor the police, therefore, suspected the intrusion of a third thief in the business. This was his one and only trump, a trump that gave him a liberty of action to which he attached the greatest importance.

Without further delay, he opened the letter which Daubrecq

had handed him for the secretary-general of police. It contained these few lines:

> "Within reach of your hand, my dear Prasville, within reach of yourhand! You touched it! A little more and the trick was done… Butyou're too big a fool. And to think that they couldn't hit uponany one better than you to make me bite the dust. Poor old France!"Good-bye, Prasville. But, if I catch you in the act, it will be abad lookout for you: my maxim is to shoot at sight.
> *"DAUBRECQ"*

"Within reach of your hand," repeated Lupin, after reading the note. "And to think that the rogue may be writing the truth! The most elementary hiding-places are the safest. We must look into this, all the same. And, also, we must find out why Daubrecq is the object of such strict supervision and obtain a few particulars about the fellow generally."

The information supplied to Lupin by a private inquiry-office consisted of the following details:

> "ALEXIS DAUBRECQ, deputy of the Bouches-du-Rhone for the past twoyears; sits among the independent members. Political opinions notvery clearly defined, but electoral position exceedingly strong,because of the enormous sums which he spends in nursing hisconstituency.
>
> No private income. Nevertheless, has a house inParis, a villa at Enghien and another at Nice and loses heavily atplay, though no one knows where the money comes from. Has greatinfluence and obtains all he wants without

making up to ministersor, apparently, having either friends or connections in politicalcircles."

"That's a trade docket," said Lupin to himself. "What I want is a domestic docket, a police docket, which will tell me about the gentleman's private life and enable me to work more easily in this darkness and to know if I'm not getting myself into a tangle by bothering about the Daubrecq bird. And time's getting short, hang it!"

One of the residences which Lupin occupied at that period and which he used oftener than any of the others was in the Rue Chateaubriand, near the Arc de l'Etoile. He was known there by the name of Michel Beaumont. He had a snug flat here and was looked after by a manservant, Achille, who was utterly devoted to his interests and whose chief duty was to receive and repeat the telephone-messages addressed to Lupin by his followers.

Lupin, on returning home, learnt, with great astonishment, that a woman had been waiting to see him for over an hour:

"What! Why, no one ever comes to see me here! Is she young?"

"No… I don't think so."

"You don't think so!"

"She's wearing a lace shawl over her head, instead of a hat, and you can't see her face… She's more like a clerk… or a woman employed in a shop. She's not well-dressed…"

"Whom did she ask for?"

"M. Michel Beaumont," replied the servant.

"Queer. And why has she called?"

"All she said was that it was about the Enghien business… So I thought that…"

"What! The Enghien business! Then she knows that I am mixed up in that business… She knows that, by applying here…"

"I could not get anything out of her, but I thought, all the same, that I had better let her in."

"Quite right. Where is she?"

"In the drawing-room. I've put on the lights."

Lupin walked briskly across the hall and opened the door of the drawing-room:

"What are you talking about?" he said, to his man. "There's no one here."

"No one here?" said Achille, running up.

And the room, in fact, was empty.

"Well, on my word, this takes the cake!" cried the servant. "It wasn't twenty minutes ago that I came and had a look, to make sure. She was sitting over there. And there's nothing wrong with my eyesight, you know."

"Look here, look here," said Lupin, irritably. "Where were you while the woman was waiting?"

"In the hall, governor! I never left the hall for a second! I should have seen her go out, blow it!"

"Still, she's not here now…"

"So I see," moaned the man, quite flabbergasted.

"She must have got tired of waiting and gone away. But, dash

it all, I should like to know how she got out!"

"How she got out?" said Lupin. "It doesn't take a wizard to tell that."

"What do you mean?"

"She got out through the window. Look, it's still ajar. We are on the ground-floor… The street is almost always deserted, in the evenings. There's no doubt about it."

He had looked around him and satisfied himself that nothing had been taken away or moved. The room, for that matter, contained no knick-knack of any value, no important paper that might have explained the woman's visit, followed by her sudden disappearance. And yet why that inexplicable flight?

"Has any one telephoned?" he asked.

"No."

"Any letters?"

"Yes, one letter by the last post."

"Where is it?"

"I put it on your mantel-piece, governor, as usual."

Lupin's bedroom was next to the drawing-room, but Lupin had permanently bolted the door between the two. He, therefore, had to go through the hall again.

Lupin switched on the electric light and, the next moment, said:

"I don't see it…"

"Yes… I put it next to the flower-bowl."

"There's nothing here at all."

"You must be looking in the wrong place, governor."

But Achille moved the bowl, lifted the clock, bent down to the grate, in vain: the letter was not there.

"Oh blast it, blast it!" he muttered. "She's done it… she's taken it… And then, when she had the letter, she cleared out… Oh, the slut!…"

Lupin said:

"You're mad! There's no way through between the two rooms."

"Then who did take it, governor?"

They were both of them silent. Lupin strove to control his anger and collect his ideas. He asked:

"Did you look at the envelope?"

"Yes."

"Anything particular about it?"

"Yes, it looked as if it had been written in a hurry, or scribbled, rather."

"How was the address worded?… Do you remember?" asked Lupin, in a voice strained with anxiety.

"Yes, I remembered it, because it struck me as funny…"

"But speak, will you? Speak!"

"It said, 'Monsieur de Beaumont, Michel.'"

Lupin took his servant by the shoulders and shook him:

"It said 'de' Beaumont? Are you sure? And 'Michel' after 'Beaumont'?"

"Quite certain."

"Ah!" muttered Lupin, with a choking throat. "It was a letter from Gilbert!"

He stood motionless, a little pale, with drawn features. There was no doubt about it: the letter was from Gilbert. It was the form of address which, by Lupin's orders, Gilbert had used for years in corresponding with him. Gilbert had at last—after long waiting and by dint of endless artifices—found a means of getting a letter posted from his prison and had hastily written to him. And now the letter was intercepted! What did it say? What instructions had the unhappy prisoner given? What help was he praying for? What stratagem did he suggest?

Lupin looked round the room, which, contrary to the drawing-room, contained important papers. But none of the locks had been forced; and he was compelled to admit that the woman had no other object than to get hold of Gilbert's letter.

Constraining himself to keep his temper, he asked:

"Did the letter come while the woman was here?"

"At the same time. The porter rang at the same moment."

"Could she see the envelope?"

"Yes."

The conclusion was evident. It remained to discover how the visitor had been able to effect her theft. By slipping from one window to the other, outside the flat? Impossible: Lupin found the window of his room shut. By opening the communicating door? Impossible: Lupin found it locked and barred with its two inner bolts.

Nevertheless, a person cannot pass through a wall by a mere operation of will. To go in or out of a room requires a passage; and, as the act was accomplished in the space of a few minutes, it was necessary, in the circumstances, that the passage should be previously in existence, that it should already have been contrived in the wall and, of course, known to the woman. This hypothesis simplified the search by concentrating it upon the door; for the wall was quite bare, without a cupboard, chimney-piece or hangings of any kind, and unable to conceal the least outlet.

Lupin went back to the drawing-room and prepared to make a study of the door. But he at once gave a start. He perceived, at the first glance, that the left lower panel of the six small panels contained within the cross-bars of the door no longer occupied its normal position and that the light did not fall straight upon it. On leaning forward, he saw two little tin tacks sticking out on either side and holding the panel in place, similar to a wooden board behind a picture-frame. He had only to shift these. The panel at once came out.

Achille gave a cry of amazement. But Lupin objected:

"Well? And what then? We are no better off than before. Here is an empty oblong, eight or nine inches wide by sixteen inches high. You're not going to pretend that a woman can slip through an opening which would not admit the thinnest child of ten years old!"

"No, but she can have put her arm through and drawn the bolts."

"The bottom bolt, yes," said Lupin. "But the top bolt, no: the distance is far too great. Try for yourself and see."

Achille tried and had to give up the attempt.

Lupin did not reply. He stood thinking for a long time. Then, suddenly, he said:

"Give me my hat… my coat…"

He hurried off, urged by an imperative idea. And, the moment he reached the street, he sprang into a taxi:

"Rue Matignon, quick!…"

As soon as they came to the house where he had been robbed of the crystal stopper, he jumped out of the cab, opened his private entrance, went upstairs, ran to the drawing-room, turned on the light and crouched at the foot of the door leading to his bedroom.

He had guessed right. One of the little panels was loosened in the same manner.

And, just as in his other flat in the Rue Chateaubriand, the opening was large enough to admit a man's arm and shoulder, but not to allow him to draw the upper bolt.

"Hang!" he shouted, unable any longer to master the rage that had been seething within him for the last two hours. "Blast! Shall I never have finished with this confounded business?"

In fact, an incredible ill-luck seemed to dog his footsteps, compelling him to grope about at random, without permitting him to use the elements of success which his own persistency or the very force of things placed within his grasp. Gilbert gave

him the crystal stopper. Gilbert sent him a letter. And both had disappeared at that very moment.

And it was not, as he had until then believed, a series of fortuitous and independent circumstances. No, it was manifestly the effect of an adverse will pursuing a definite object with prodigious ability and incredible boldness, attacking him, Lupin, in the recesses of his safest retreats and baffling him with blows so severe and so unexpected that he did not even know against whom he had to defend himself. Never, in the course of his adventures, had he encountered such obstacles as now.

And, little by little, deep down within himself, there grew a haunting dread of the future. A date loomed before his eyes, the terrible date which he unconsciously assigned to the law to perform its work of vengeance, the date upon which, in the light of a wan April morning, two men would mount the scaffold, two men who had stood by him, two comrades whom he had been unable to save from paying the awful penalty…

CHAPTER III. THE HOME LIFE OF ALEXIS DAUBRECQ

When Daubrecq the deputy came in from lunch on the day after the police had searched his house he was stopped by Clemence, his portress, who told him that she had found a cook who could be thoroughly relied on.

The cook arrived a few minutes later and produced first-rate characters, signed by people with whom it was easy to take up her references. She was a very active woman, although of a certain age, and agreed to do the work of the house by herself, without the help of a man-servant, this being a condition upon which Daubrecq insisted.

Her last place was with a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Comte Saulevat, to whom Daubrecq at once telephoned. The count's steward gave her a perfect character, and she was engaged.

As soon as she had fetched her trunk, she set to work and cleaned and scrubbed until it was time to cook the dinner.

Daubrecq dined and went out.

At eleven o'clock, after the portress had gone to bed, the cook cautiously opened the garden-gate. A man came up.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"Yes, it's I, Lupin."

She took him to her bedroom on the third floor, overlooking the garden, and at once burst into lamentations:

"More of your tricks and nothing but tricks! Why can't you leave me alone, instead of sending me to do your dirty work?"

"How can I help it, you dear old Victoire? [*] When I want a person of respectable appearance and incorruptible morals, I think of you. You ought to be flattered."

* See The Hollow Needle by Maurice Leblanc, translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, and later volumes of the Lupin series.

"That's all you care about me!" she cried. "You run me into danger once more; and you think it's funny!"

"What are you risking?"

"How do you mean, what am I risking? All my characters are false."

"Characters are always false."

"And suppose M. Daubrecq finds out? Suppose he makes inquiries?"

"He has made inquiries."

"Eh? What's that?"

"He has telephoned to the steward of Comte Saulevat, in whose service you say that you have had the honour of being."

"There, you see, I'm done for!"

"The count's steward could not say enough in your praise."

"He does not know me."

"But I know him. I got him his situation with Comte Saulevat.

So you understand…"

Victoire seemed to calm down a little:

"Well," she said, "God's will be done… or rather yours. And what do you expect me to do in all this?"

"First, to put me up. You were my wet-nurse once. You can very well give me half your room now. I'll sleep in the armchair."

"And next?"

"Next? To supply me with such food as I want."

"And next?"

"Next? To undertake, with me and under my direction, a regular series of searches with a view…"

"To what?"

"To discovering the precious object of which I spoke to you."

"What's that?"

"A crystal stopper."

"A crystal stopper… Saints above! A nice business! And, if we don't find your confounded stopper, what then?"

Lupin took her gently by the arm and, in a serious voice:

"If we don't find it, Gilbert, young Gilbert whom you know and love, will stand every chance of losing his head; and so will Vaucheray."

"Vaucheray I don't mind… a dirty rascal like him! But Gilbert…"

"Have you seen the papers this evening? Things are looking worse than ever. Vaucheray, as might be expected, accuses Gilbert of stabbing the valet; and it so happens that the knife

which Vaucheray used belonged to Gilbert. That came out this morning. Whereupon Gilbert, who is intelligent in his way, but easily frightened, blithered and launched forth into stories and lies which will end in his undoing. That's how the matter stands. Will you help me?"

Thenceforth, for several days, Lupin moulded his existence upon Daubrecq's, beginning his investigations the moment the deputy left the house. He pursued them methodically, dividing each room into sections which he did not abandon until he had been through the tiniest nooks and corners and, so to speak, exhausted every possible device.

Victoire searched also. And nothing was forgotten. Table-legs, chair-rungs, floor-boards, mouldings, mirror- and picture-frames, clocks, plinths, curtain-borders, telephone-holders and electric fittings: everything that an ingenious imagination could have selected as a hiding-place was overhauled.

And they also watched the deputy's least actions, his most unconscious movements, the expression of his face, the books which he read and the letters which he wrote.

It was easy enough. He seemed to live his life in the light of day. No door was ever shut. He received no visits. And his existence worked with mechanical regularity. He went to the Chamber in the afternoon, to the club in the evening.

"Still," said Lupin, "there must be something that's not orthodox behind all this."

"There's nothing of the sort," moaned Victoire. "You're

wasting your time and we shall be bowled out."

The presence of the detectives and their habit of walking up and down outside the windows drove her mad. She refused to admit that they were there for any other purpose than to trap her, Victoire. And, each time that she went shopping, she was quite surprised that one of those men did not lay his hand upon her shoulder.

One day she returned all upset. Her basket of provisions was shaking on her arm.

"What's the matter, my dear Victoire?" said Lupin. "You're looking green."

"Green? I dare say I do. So would you look green…"

She had to sit down and it was only after making repeated efforts that she succeeded in stuttering:

"A man… a man spoke to me… at the fruiterer's."

"By jingo! Did he want you to run away with him?"

"No, he gave me a letter…"

"Then what are you complaining about? It was a love-letter, of course!"

"No. 'It's for your governor,' said he. 'My governor?' I said. 'Yes,' he said, 'for the gentleman who's staying in your room.'"

"What's that?"

This time, Lupin had started:

"Give it here," he said, snatching the letter from her. The envelope bore no address. But there was another, inside it, on which he read:

"Monsieur Arsene Lupin,
c/o Victoire."

"The devil!" he said. "This is a bit thick!" He tore open the second envelope. It contained a sheet of paper with the following words, written in large capitals:

"Everything you are doing is useless and dangerous… Give it up."

Victoire uttered one moan and fainted. As for Lupin, he felt himself blush up to his eyes, as though he had been grossly insulted. He experienced all the humiliation which a duellist would undergo if he heard the most secret advice which he had received from his seconds repeated aloud by a mocking adversary.

However, he held his tongue. Victoire went back to her work. As for him, he remained in his room all day, thinking.

That night he did not sleep.

And he kept saying to himself:

"What is the good of thinking? I am up against one of those problems which are not solved by any amount of thought. It is certain that I am not alone in the matter and that, between Daubrecq and the police, there is, in addition to the third thief that I am, a fourth thief who is working on his own account, who knows me and who reads my game clearly. But who is this fourth thief? And am I mistaken, by any chance? And… oh, rot!… Let's get to sleep!…"

But he could not sleep; and a good part of the night went in this way.

At four o'clock in the morning he seemed to hear a noise in the house. He jumped up quickly and, from the top of the staircase, saw Daubrecq go down the first flight and turn toward the garden.

A minute later, after opening the gate, the deputy returned with a man whose head was buried in an enormous fur collar and showed him into his study.

Lupin had taken his precautions in view of any such contingency. As the windows of the study and those of his bedroom, both of which were at the back of the house, overlooked the garden, he fastened a rope-ladder to his balcony, unrolled it softly and let himself down by it until it was level with the top of the study windows.

These windows were closed by shutters; but, as they were bowed, there remained a semi-circular space at the top; and Lupin, though he could not hear, was able to see all that went on inside.

He then realized that the person whom he had taken for a man was a woman: a woman who was still young, though her dark hair was mingled with gray; a tall woman, elegantly but quite unobtrusively dressed, whose handsome features bore the expression of weariness and melancholy which long suffering gives.

"Where the deuce have I seen her before?" Lupin asked himself. "For I certainly know that face, that look, that

expression."

She stood leaning against the table, listening impassively to Daubrecq, who was also standing and who was talking very excitedly. He had his back turned to Lupin; but Lupin, leaning forward, caught sight of a glass in which the deputy's image was reflected. And he was startled to see the strange look in his eyes, the air of fierce and brutal desire with which Daubrecq was staring at his visitor.

It seemed to embarrass her too, for she sat down with lowered lids. Then Daubrecq leant over her and it appeared as though he were ready to fling his long arms, with their huge hands, around her. And, suddenly, Lupin perceived great tears rolling down the woman's sad face.

Whether or not it was the sight of those tears that made Daubrecq lose his head, with a brusque movement he clutched the woman and drew her to him. She repelled him, with a violence full of hatred. And, after a brief struggle, during which Lupin caught a glimpse of the man's bestial and contorted features, the two of them stood face to face, railing at each other like mortal enemies.

Then they stopped. Daubrecq sat down. There was mischief in his face, and sarcasm as well. And he began to talk again, with sharp taps on the table, as though he were dictating terms.

She no longer stirred. She sat haughtily in her chair and towered over him, absent-minded, with roaming eyes. Lupin, captivated by that powerful and sorrowful countenance,

continued to watch her; and he was vainly seeking to remember of what or of whom she reminded him, when he noticed that she had turned her head slightly and that she was imperceptibly moving her arm.

And her arm strayed farther and farther and her hand crept along the table and Lupin saw that, at the end of the table, there stood a water-bottle with a gold-topped stopper. The hand reached the water-bottle, felt it, rose gently and seized the stopper. A quick movement of the head, a glance, and the stopper was put back in its place. Obviously, it was not what the woman hoped to find.

"Dash it!" said Lupin. "She's after the crystal stopper too! The matter is becoming more complicated daily; there's no doubt about it."

But, on renewing his observation of the visitor, he was astounded to note the sudden and unexpected expression of her countenance, a terrible, implacable, ferocious expression. And he saw that her hand was continuing its stealthy progress round the table and that, with an uninterrupted and crafty sliding movement, it was pushing back books and, slowly and surely, approaching a dagger whose blade gleamed among the scattered papers.

It gripped the handle.

Daubrecq went on talking. Behind his back, the hand rose steadily, little by little; and Lupin saw the woman's desperate and furious eyes fixed upon the spot in the neck where she intended

to plant the knife:

"You're doing a very silly thing, fair lady," thought Lupin.

And he already began to turn over in his mind the best means of escaping and of taking Victoire with him.

She hesitated, however, with uplifted arm. But it was only a momentary weakness. She clenched her teeth. Her whole face, contracted with hatred, became yet further convulsed. And she made the dread movement.

At the same instant Daubrecq crouched and, springing from his seat, turned and seized the woman's frail wrist in mid-air.

Oddly enough, he addressed no reproach to her, as though the deed which she had attempted surprised him no more than any ordinary, very natural and simple act. He shrugged his shoulders, like a man accustomed to that sort of danger, and strode up and down in silence.

She had dropped the weapon and was now crying, holding her head between her hands, with sobs that shook her whole frame.

He next came up to her and said a few words, once more tapping the table as he spoke.

She made a sign in the negative and, when he insisted, she, in her turn, stamped her foot on the floor and exclaimed, loud enough for Lupin to hear:

"Never!… Never!…"

Thereupon, without another word, Daubrecq fetched the fur cloak which she had brought with her and hung it over the woman's shoulders, while she shrouded her face in a lace wrap.

And he showed her out.

Two minutes later, the garden-gate was locked again. “Pity I can’t run after that strange person,” thought Lupin, “and have a chat with her about the Daubrecq bird. Seems to me that we two could do a good stroke of business together.”

In any case, there was one point to be cleared up: Daubrecq the deputy, whose life was so orderly, so apparently respectable, was in the habit of receiving visits at night, when his house was no longer watched by the police.

He sent Victoire to arrange with two members of his gang to keep watch for several days. And he himself remained awake next night.

As on the previous morning, he heard a noise at four o’clock. As on the previous morning, the deputy let some one in.

Lupin ran down his ladder and, when he came to the free space above the shutters, saw a man crawling at Daubrecq’s feet, flinging his arms round Daubrecq’s knees in frenzied despair and weeping, weeping convulsively.

Daubrecq, laughing, pushed him away repeatedly, but the man clung to him. He behaved almost like one out of his mind and, at last, in a genuine fit of madness, half rose to his feet, took the deputy by the throat and flung him back in a chair. Daubrecq struggled, powerless at first, while his veins swelled in his temples. But soon, with a strength far beyond the ordinary, he regained the mastery and deprived his adversary of all power of movement. Then, holding him with one hand, with the other

he gave him two great smacks in the face.

The man got up, slowly. He was livid and could hardly stand on his legs. He waited for a moment, as though to recover his self-possession. Then, with a terrifying calmness, he drew a revolver from his pocket and levelled it at Daubrecq.

Daubrecq did not flinch. He even smiled, with a defiant air and without displaying more excitement than if he had been aimed at with a toy pistol.

The man stood for perhaps fifteen or twenty seconds, facing his enemy, with outstretched arm. Then, with the same deliberate slowness, revealing a self-control which was all the more impressive because it followed upon a fit of extreme excitement, he put up his revolver and, from another pocket, produced his note-case.

Daubrecq took a step forward.

The man opened the pocketbook. A sheaf of banknotes appeared in sight.

Daubrecq seized and counted them. They were thousand-franc notes, and there were thirty of them.

The man looked on, without a movement of revolt, without a protest. He obviously understood the futility of words. Daubrecq was one of those who do not relent. Why should his visitor waste time in beseeching him or even in revenging himself upon him by uttering vain threats and insults? He had no hope of striking that unassailable enemy. Even Daubrecq's death would not deliver him from Daubrecq.

He took his hat and went away.

At eleven o'clock in the morning Victoire, on returning from her shopping, handed Lupin a note from his accomplices.

He opened it and read:

"The man who came to see Daubrecq last night is Langeroux the deputy, leader of the independent left. A poor man, with a large family."

"Come," said Lupin, "Daubrecq is nothing more nor less than a blackmailer; but, by Jupiter, he has jolly effective ways of going to work!"

Events tended to confirm Lupin's supposition. Three days later he saw another visitor hand Daubrecq an important sum of money. And, two days after that, one came and left a pearl necklace behind him.

The first was called Dachaumont, a senator and ex-cabinet-minister. The second was the Marquis d'Albufex, a Bonapartist deputy, formerly chief political agent in France of Prince Napoleon.

The scene, in each of these cases, was very similar to Langeroux the deputy's interview, a violent tragic scene, ending in Daubrecq's victory.

"And so on and so forth," thought Lupin, when he received these particulars. "I have been present at four visits. I shall know no more if there are ten, or twenty, or thirty… It is enough for me to learn the names of the visitors from my friends on sentry-go outside. Shall I go and call on them?… What for? They have

no reason to confide in me… On the other hand, am I to stay on here, delayed by investigations which lead to nothing and which Victoire can continue just as well without me?"

He was very much perplexed. The news of the inquiry into the case of Gilbert and Vaucheray was becoming worse and worse, the days were slipping by, and not an hour passed without his asking himself, in anguish, whether all his efforts—granting that he succeeded—would not end in farcical results, absolutely foreign to the aim which he was pursuing.

For, after all, supposing that he did fathom Daubrecq's underhand dealings, would that give him the means of rescuing Gilbert and Vaucheray?

That day an incident occurred which put an end to his indecision. After lunch Victoire heard snatches of a conversation which Daubrecq held with some one on the telephone. Lupin gathered, from what Victoire reported, that the deputy had an appointment with a lady for half-past eight and that he was going to take her to a theatre:

"I shall get a pit-tier box, like the one we had six weeks ago," Daubrecq had said. And he added, with a laugh, "I hope that I shall not have the burglars in during that time."

There was not a doubt in Lupin's mind. Daubrecq was about to spend his evening in the same manner in which he had spent the evening six weeks ago, while they were breaking into his villa at Enghien. To know the person whom he was to meet and perhaps thus to discover how Gilbert and Vaucheray had learnt

that Daubrecq would be away from eight o'clock in the evening until one o'clock in the morning: these were matters of the utmost importance.

Lupin left the house in the afternoon, with Victoire's assistance. He knew through her that Daubrecq was coming home for dinner earlier than usual.

He went to his flat in the Rue Chateaubriand, telephoned for three of his friends, dressed and made himself up in his favourite character of a Russian prince, with fair hair and moustache and short-cut whiskers.

The accomplices arrived in a motor-car.

At that moment, Achille, his man, brought him a telegram, addressed to M. Michel Beaumont, Rue Chateaubriand, which ran:

> "Do not come to theatre this evening. Danger of your intervention spoiling everything."

There was a flower-vase on the chimney-piece beside him. Lupin took it and smashed it to pieces.

"That's it, that's it," he snarled. "They are playing with me as I usually play with others. Same behaviour. Same tricks. Only there's this difference…"

What difference? He hardly knew. The truth was that he too was baffled and disconcerted to the inmost recesses of his being and that he was continuing to act only from obstinacy, from a sense of duty, so to speak, and without putting his ordinary good humour and high spirits into the work.

"Come along," he said to his accomplices.

By his instructions, the chauffeur set them down near the Square Lamartine, but kept the motor going. Lupin foresaw that Daubrecq, in order to escape the detectives watching the house, would jump into the first taxi; and he did not intend to be outdistanced.

He had not allowed for Daubrecq's cleverness.

At half-past seven both leaves of the garden-gate were flung open, a bright light flashed and a motor-cycle darted across the road, skirted the square, turned in front of the motor-car and shot away toward the Bois at a speed so great that they would have been mad to go in pursuit of it.

"Good-bye, Daisy!" said Lupin, trying to jest, but really overcome with rage.

He eyed his accomplices in the hope that one of them would venture to give a mocking smile. How pleased he would have been to vent his nerves on them!

"Let's go home," he said to his companions.

He gave them some dinner; then he smoked a cigar and they set off again in the car and went the round of the theatres, beginning with those which were giving light operas and musical comedies, for which he presumed that Daubrecq and his lady would have a preference. He took a stall, inspected the lower-tier boxes and went away again.

He next drove to the more serious theatres: the Renaissance, the Gymnase.

At last, at ten o'clock in the evening, he saw a pit-tier box at the Vaudeville almost entirely protected from inspection by its two screens; and, on tipping the boxkeeper, was told that it contained a short, stout, elderly gentleman and a lady who was wearing a thick lace veil.

The next box was free. He took it, went back to his friends to give them their instructions and sat down near the couple.

During the entr'acte, when the lights went up, he perceived Daubrecq's profile. The lady remained at the back of the box, invisible. The two were speaking in a low voice; and, when the curtain rose again, they went on speaking, but in such a way that Lupin could not distinguish a word.

Ten minutes passed. Some one tapped at their door. It was one of the men from the box-office.

"Are you M. le Depute Daubrecq, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," said Daubrecq, in a voice of surprise. "But how do you know my name?"

"There's a gentleman asking for you on the telephone. He told me to go to Box 22."

"But who is it?"

"M. le Marquis d'Albufex."

"Eh?"

"What am I to say, sir?"

"I'm coming… I'm coming…"

Daubrecq rose hurriedly from his seat and followed the clerk to the box-office.

He was not yet out of sight when Lupin sprang from his box, worked the lock of the next door and sat down beside the lady.

She gave a stifled cry.

"Hush!" he said. "I have to speak to you. It is most important."

"Ah!" she said, between her teeth. "Arsene Lupin!" He was dumbfounded. For a moment he sat quiet, open-mouthed. The woman knew him! And not only did she know him, but she had recognized him through his disguise! Accustomed though he was to the most extraordinary and unusual events, this disconcerted him.

He did not even dream of protesting and stammered:

"So you know?… So you know?…"

He snatched at the lady's veil and pulled it aside before she had time to defend herself:

"What!" he muttered, with increased amazement. "Is it possible?"

It was the woman whom he had seen at Daubrecq's a few days earlier, the woman who had raised her dagger against Daubrecq and who had intended to stab him with all the strength of her hatred.

It was her turn to be taken aback:

"What! Have you seen me before?…"

"Yes, the other night, at his house… I saw what you tried to do…"

She made a movement to escape. He held her back and, speaking with great eagerness:

"I must know who you are," he said. "That was why I had Daubrecq telephoned for."

She looked aghast:

"Do you mean to say it was not the Marquis d'Albufex?"

"No, it was one of my assistants."

"Then Daubrecq will come back?…"

"Yes, but we have time… Listen to me… We must meet again… He is your enemy… I will save you from him…"

"Why should you? What is your object?"

"Do not distrust me… it is quite certain that our interests are identical… Where can I see you? To-morrow, surely? At what time? And where?"

"Well…"

She looked at him with obvious hesitation, not knowing what to do, on the point of speaking and yet full of uneasiness and doubt.

He pressed her:

"Oh, I entreat you… answer me just one word… and at once… It would be a pity for him to find me here… I entreat you…"

She answered sharply:

"My name doesn't matter… We will see each other first and you shall explain to me… Yes, we will meet… Listen, to-morrow, at three o'clock, at the corner of the Boulevard…"

At that exact moment, the door of the box opened, so to speak, with a bang, and Daubrecq appeared.

"Rats!" Lupin mumbled, under his breath, furious at being caught before obtaining what he wanted.

Daubrecq gave a chuckle:

"So that's it… I thought something was up… Ah, the telephone-trick: a little out of date, sir! I had not gone half-way when I turned back."

He pushed Lupin to the front of the box and, sitting down beside the lady, said:

"And, now my lord, who are we? A servant at the police-office, probably? There's a professional look about that mug of yours."

He stared hard at Lupin, who did not move a muscle, and tried to put a name to the face, but failed to recognize the man whom he had called Polonius.

Lupin, without taking his eyes from Daubrecq either, reflected. He would not for anything in the world have thrown up the game at that point or neglected this favourable opportunity of coming to an understanding with his mortal enemy.

The woman sat in her corner, motionless, and watched them both.

Lupin said:

"Let us go outside, sir. That will make our interview easier."

"No, my lord, here," grinned the deputy. "It will take place here, presently, during the entr'acte. Then we shall not be disturbing anybody."

"But…"

"Save your breath, my man; you sha'n't budge."

And he took Lupin by the coat-collar, with the obvious intention of not letting go of him before the interval.

A rash move! Was it likely that Lupin would consent to remain in such an attitude, especially before a woman, a woman to whom he had offered his alliance, a woman—and he now thought of it for the first time—who was distinctly good-looking and whose grave beauty attracted him. His whole pride as a man rose at the thought.

However, he said nothing. He accepted the heavy weight of the hand on his shoulder and even sat bent in two, as though beaten, powerless, almost frightened.

"Eh, clever!" said the deputy, scoffingly. "We don't seem to be swaggering quite so much."

The stage was full of actors who were arguing and making a noise.

Daubrecq had loosened his grasp slightly and Lupin felt that the moment had come. With the edge of his hand, he gave him a violent blow in the hollow of the arm, as he might have done with a hatchet.

The pain took Daubrecq off his guard. Lupin now released himself entirely and sprang at the other to clutch him by the throat. But Daubrecq had at once put himself on the defensive and stepped back and their four hands seized one another.

They gripped with superhuman energy, the whole force of the two adversaries concentrating in those hands. Daubrecq's were of

monstrous size; and Lupin, caught in that iron vise, felt as though he were fighting not with a man, but with some terrible beast, a huge gorilla.

They held each other against the door, bending low, like a pair of wrestlers groping and trying to lay hold of each other. Their bones creaked. Whichever gave way first was bound to be caught by the throat and strangled. And all this happened amid a sudden silence, for the actors on the stage were now listening to one of their number, who was speaking in a low voice.

The woman stood back flat against the partition, looking at them in terror. Had she taken sides with either of them, with a single movement, the victory would at once have been decided in that one's favour. But which of them should she assist? What could Lupin represent in her eyes? A friend? An enemy?

She briskly made for the front of the box, forced back the screen and, leaning forward, seemed to give a signal. Then she returned and tried to slip to the door.

Lupin, as though wishing to help her, said:

"Why don't you move the chair?"

He was speaking of a heavy chair which had fallen down between him and Daubrecq and across which they were struggling.

The woman stooped and pulled away the chair. That was what Lupin was waiting for. Once rid of the obstacle, he caught Daubrecq a smart kick on the shin with the tip of his patent-leather boot. The result was the same as with the blow which

he had given him on the arm. The pain caused a second's apprehension and distraction, of which he at once took advantage to beat down Daubrecq's outstretched hands and to dig his ten fingers into his adversary's throat and neck.

Daubrecq struggled. Daubrecq tried to pull away the hands that were throttling him; but he was beginning to choke and felt his strength decreasing.

"Aha, you old monkey!" growled Lupin, forcing him to the floor. "Why don't you shout for help? How frightened you must be of a scandal!"

At the sound of the fall there came a knocking at the partition, on the other side.

"Knock away, knock away," said Lupin, under his breath. "The play is on the stage. This is my business and, until I've mastered this gorilla…"

It did not take him long. The deputy was choking. Lupin stunned him with a blow on the jaw; and all that remained for him to do was to take the woman away and make his escape with her before the alarm was given.

But, when he turned round, he saw that the woman was gone.

She could not be far. Darting from the box, he set off at a run, regardless of the programme-sellers and check-takers.

On reaching the entrance-lobby, he saw her through an open door, crossing the pavement of the Chaussee d'Antin.

She was stepping into a motor-car when he came up with her.

The door closed behind her.

He seized the handle and tried to pull at it.

But a man jumped up inside and sent his fist flying into Lupin's face, with less skill but no less force than Lupin had sent his into Daubrecq's face.

Stunned though he was by the blow, he nevertheless had ample time to recognize the man, in a sudden, startled vision, and also to recognize, under his chauffeur's disguise, the man who was driving the car. It was the Growler and the Masher, the two men in charge of the boats on the Enghien night, two friends of Gilbert and Vaucheray: in short, two of Lupin's own accomplices.

When he reached his rooms in the Rue Chateaubriand, Lupin, after washing the blood from his face, sat for over an hour in a chair, as though overwhelmed. For the first time in his life he was experiencing the pain of treachery. For the first time his comrades in the fight were turning against their chief.

Mechanically, to divert his thoughts, he turned to his correspondence and tore the wrapper from an evening paper. Among the late news he found the following paragraphs:

> "THE VILLA MARIE-THERESE CASE"
>
> "The real identity of Vaucheray, one of the allegedmurderers of Leonard the valet, has at last been ascertained.He is a miscreant of the worst type, a hardened criminal whohas already twice been sentenced for murder, in default, underanother name.
>
> "No doubt, the police will end by also discovering the real nameof his accomplice, Gilbert. In any event, the examining-magistrateis determined to commit the prisoners

for trial as soon as possible.

"The public will have no reason to complain of the delays of the law."

In between other newspapers and prospectuses lay a letter. Lupin jumped when he saw it. It was addressed:

"Monsieur de Beaumont, Michel."

"Oh," he gasped, "a letter from Gilbert!"

It contained these few words:

"Help, governor!… I am frightened. I am frightened…"

Once again, Lupin spent a night alternating between sleeplessness and nightmares. Once again, he was tormented by atrocious and terrifying visions.

CHAPTER IV. THE CHIEF OF THE ENEMIES

"Poor boy!" murmured Lupin, when his eyes fell on Gilbert's letter next morning. "How he must feel it!"

On the very first day when he saw him, he had taken a liking to that well-set-up youngster, so careless, gay and fond of life. Gilbert was devoted to him, would have accepted death at a sign from his master. And Lupin also loved his frankness, his good humour, his simplicity, his bright, open face.

"Gilbert," he often used to say, "you are an honest man. Do you know, if I were you, I should chuck the business and become an honest man for good."

"After you, governor," Gilbert would reply, with a laugh.

"Won't you, though?"

"No, governor. An honest man is a chap who works and grinds. It's a taste which I may have had as a nipper; but they've made me lose it since."

"Who's they?"

Gilbert was silent. He was always silent when questioned about his early life; and all that Lupin knew was that he had been an orphan since childhood and that he had lived all over the place, changing his name and taking up the queerest jobs. The whole thing was a mystery which no one had been able to fathom; and it

did not look as though the police would make much of it either.

Nor, on the other hand, did it look as though the police would consider that mystery a reason for delaying proceedings. They would send Vaucheray's accomplice for trial—under his name of Gilbert or any other name—and visit him with the same inevitable punishment.

"Poor boy!" repeated Lupin. "They're persecuting him like this only because of me. They are afraid of his escaping and they are in a hurry to finish the business: the verdict first and then… the execution.

"Oh, the butchers!… A lad of twenty, who has committed no murder, who is not even an accomplice in the murder…"

Alas, Lupin well knew that this was a thing impossible to prove and that he must concentrate his efforts upon another point. But upon which? Was he to abandon the trail of the crystal stopper?

He could not make up his mind to that. His one and only diversion from the search was to go to Enghien, where the Growler and the Masher lived, and make sure that nothing had been seen of them since the murder at the Villa Marie-Therese. Apart from this, he applied himself to the question of Daubrecq and nothing else.

He refused even to trouble his head about the problems set before him: the treachery of the Growler and the Masher; their connection with the gray-haired lady; the spying of which he himself was the object.

"Steady, Lupin," he said. "One only argues falsely in a fever. So hold your tongue. No inferences, above all things! Nothing is more foolish than to infer one fact from another before finding a certain starting-point. That's where you get up a tree. Listen to your instinct. Act according to your instinct. And as you are persuaded, outside all argument, outside all logic, one might say, that this business turns upon that confounded stopper, go for it boldly. Have at Daubrecq and his bit of crystal!"

Lupin did not wait to arrive at these conclusions before settling his actions accordingly. At the moment when he was stating them in his mind, three days after the scene at the Vaudeville, he was sitting, dressed like a retired tradesman, in an old overcoat, with a muffler round his neck, on a bench in the Avenue Victor-Hugo, at some distance from the Square Lamartine. Victoire had his instructions to pass by that bench at the same hour every morning.

"Yes," he repeated to himself, "the crystal stopper: everything turns on that… Once I get hold of it…"

Victoire arrived, with her shopping-basket on her arm. He at once noticed her extraordinary agitation and pallor:

"What's the matter?" asked Lupin, walking beside his old nurse.

She went into a big grocer's, which was crowded with people, and, turning to him:

"Here," she said, in a voice torn with excitement. "Here's what you've been hunting for."

And, taking something from her basket, she gave it to him.

Lupin stood astounded: in his hand lay the crystal stopper.

"Can it be true? Can it be true?" he muttered, as though the ease of the solution had thrown him off his balance.

But the fact remained, visible and palpable. He recognized by its shape, by its size, by the worn gilding of its facets, recognized beyond any possible doubt the crystal stopper which he had seen before. He even remarked a tiny, hardly noticeable little scratch on the stem which he remembered perfectly.

However, while the thing presented all the same characteristics, it possessed no other that seemed out of the way. It was a crystal stopper, that was all. There was no really special mark to distinguish it from other stoppers. There was no sign upon it, no stamp; and, being cut from a single piece, it contained no foreign object.

"What then?"

And Lupin received a quick insight into the depth of his mistake. What good could the possession of that crystal stopper do him so long as he was ignorant of its value? That bit of glass had no existence in itself; it counted only through the meaning that attached to it. Before taking it, the thing was to be certain. And how could he tell that, in taking it, in robbing Daubrecq of it, he was not committing an act of folly?

It was a question which was impossible of solution, but which forced itself upon him with singular directness.

"No blunders!" he said to himself, as he pocketed the stopper.

“In this confounded business, blunders are fatal.”

He had not taken his eyes off Victoire. Accompanied by a shopman, she went from counter to counter, among the throng of customers. She next stood for some little while at the pay-desk and passed in front of Lupin.

He whispered her instructions:

“Meet me behind the Lycee Janson.”

She joined him in an unfrequented street:

“And suppose I’m followed?” she said.

“No,” he declared. “I looked carefully. Listen to me. Where did you find the stopper?”

“In the drawer of the table by his bed.”

“But we had felt there already.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на Литрес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.