LEBLANC MAURICE

THE TEETH OF THE TIGER

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CHAPTER ONE

D'ARTAGNAN, PORTHOS … AND MONTE CRISTO

It was half-past four; M. Desmalions, the Prefect of Police, was not yet back at the office. His private secretary laid on the desk a bundle of letters and reports which he had annotated for his chief, rang the bell and said to the messenger who entered by the main door:

"Monsieur le Préfet has sent for a number of people to see him at five o'clock. Here are their names. Show them into separate waiting-rooms, so that they can't communicate with one another, and let me have their cards when they come."

The messenger went out. The secretary was turning toward the small door that led to his room, when the main door opened once more and admitted a man who stopped and leaned swaying over the back of a chair.

"Why, it's you, Vérot!" said the secretary. "But what's happened? What's the matter?"

Inspector Vérot was a very stout, powerfully built man, with a big neck and shoulders and a florid complexion. He had obviously been upset by some violent excitement, for his face, streaked with red veins and usually so apoplectic, seemed almost pale.

"Oh, nothing. Monsieur le Secrétaire!" he said.

"Yes, yes; you're not looking your usual self. You're gray in the face…. And the way you're perspiring…."

Inspector Vérot wiped his forehead and, pulling himself together, said:

"It's just a little tiredness…. I've been overworking myself lately: I was very keen on clearing up a case which Monsieur Desmalions had put in my hands. All the same, I have a funny sort of feeling—"

"Will you have a pick-me-up?"

"No, no; I'm more thirsty."

"A glass of water?"

"No, thank you."

"What then?"

"I should like—I should like—"

His voice faltered. He wore a troubled look, as if he had suddenly lost his power of getting out another word. But he recovered himself with an effort and asked:

"Isn't Monsieur Desmalions here?"

"No; he won't be back till five, when he has an important meeting."

"Yes … I know … most important. That's what I'm here for. But I should have liked to see him first. I should so much have liked to see him!"

The secretary stared at Vérot and said:

"What a state you're in! Is your message so urgent as all that?"

"It's very urgent, indeed. It has to do with a crime that took place a month ago, to the day. And, above all, it's a matter of preventing two murders which are the outcome of that other crime and which are to be committed to-night. Yes, to-night, inevitably, unless we take the necessary steps."

"Sit down, Vérot, won't you?"

"You see, the whole thing has been planned in such an infernal manner!

You would never have imagined—"

"Still, Vérot, as you know about it beforehand, and as Monsieur le Préfet is sure to give you full powers—"

"Yes, of course, of course. But, all the same, it's terrible to think that I might miss him. So I wrote him this letter, telling him all I know about the business. I thought it safer."

He handed the secretary a large yellow envelope and added:

"And here's a little box as well; I'll leave it on this table. It contains something that will serve to complete and explain the contents of the letter."

"But why don't you keep all that by you?"

"I'm afraid to. They're watching me. They're trying to get rid of me. I shan't be easy in my mind until some one besides myself knows the secret."

"Have no fear, Vérot. Monsieur le Préfet is bound to be back soon.

Meanwhile, I advise you to go to the infirmary and ask for a pick-me-up."

The inspector seemed undecided what to do. Once more he wiped away the perspiration that was trickling down his forehead. Then, drawing himself up, he left the office. When he was gone the secretary slipped the letter into a big bundle of papers that lay on the Prefect's desk and went out by the door leading to his own room.

He had hardly closed it behind him when the other door opened once again and the inspector returned, spluttering:

"Monsieur le Secrétaire … it'd be better if I showed you—"

The unfortunate man was as white as a sheet. His teeth were chattering. When he saw that the secretary was gone, he tried to walk across to his private room. But he was seized with an attack of weakness and sank into a chair, where he remained for some minutes, moaning helplessly:

"What's the matter with me? … Have I been poisoned, too? … Oh, I don't like this; I don't like the look of this!"

The desk stood within reach of his hand. He took a pencil, drew a writing-pad toward him and began to scribble a few characters. But he next stammered:

"Why, no, it's not worth while. The Prefect will be reading my letter…. What on earth's the matter with me. I don't like this at all!"

Suddenly he rose to his feet and called out:

"Monsieur le Secrétaire, we've got … we've got to … It's for to-night. Nothing can prevent—"

Stiffening himself with an effort of his whole will, he made for the door of the secretary's room with little short steps, like an automaton. But he reeled on the way—and had to sit down a second time.

A mad terror shook him from head to foot; and he uttered cries which were too faint, unfortunately, to be heard. He realized this and looked round for a bell, for a gong; but he was no longer able to distinguish anything. A veil of darkness seemed to weigh upon his eyes.

Then he dropped on his knees and crawled to the wall, beating the air with one hand, like a blind man, until he ended by touching some woodwork. It was the partition-wall.

He crept along this; but, as ill-luck would have it, his bewildered brain showed him a false picture of the room, so that, instead of turning to the left as he should have done, he followed the wall to the right, behind a screen which concealed a third door.

His fingers touched the handle of this door and he managed to open it. He gasped, "Help! Help!" and fell at his full length in a sort of cupboard or closet which the Prefect of Police used as a dressing-room.

"To-night!" he moaned, believing that he was making himself heard and that he was in the secretary's room. "To-night! The job is fixed for to-night! You'll see … The mark of the teeth! … It's awful! … Oh, the pain I'm in! … It's the poison! Save me! Help!"

The voice died away. He repeated several times, as though in a nightmare:

"The teeth! the teeth! They're closing!"

Then his voice grew fainter still; and inarticulate sounds issued from his pallid lips. His mouth munched the air like the mouth of one of those old men who seem to be interminably chewing the cud. His head sank lower and lower on his breast. He heaved two or three sighs; a great shiver passed through his body; and he moved no more.

And the death-rattle began in his throat, very softly and rhythmically, broken only by interruptions in which a last instinctive effort appeared to revive the flickering life of the intelligence, and to rouse fitful gleams of consciousness in the dimmed eyes.

The Prefect of Police entered his office at ten minutes to five. M. Desmalions, who had filled his post for the past three years with an authority that made him generally respected, was a heavily built man of fifty with a shrewd and intelligent face. His dress, consisting of a gray jacket-suit, white spats, and a loosely flowing tie, in no way suggested the public official. His manners were easy, simple, and full of good-natured frankness.

He touched a bell, and when his secretary entered, asked:

"Are the people whom I sent for here?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet, and I gave orders that they were to wait in different rooms."

"Oh, it would not have mattered if they had met! However, perhaps it's better as it is. I hope that the American Ambassador did not trouble to come in person?"

"No, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Have you their cards?"

"Yes."

The Prefect of Police took the five visiting cards which his secretary handed him and read:

"Mr. Archibald Bright, First Secretary United States Embassy; Maître Lepertuis, Solicitor; Juan Caceres, Attaché to the Peruvian Legation; Major Comte d'Astrignac, retired."

The fifth card bore merely a name, without address or quality of any kind—

DON LUIS PERENNA

"That's the one I'm curious to see!" said M. Desmalions. "He interests me like the very devil! Did you read the report of the Foreign Legion?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet, and I confess that this gentleman puzzles me, too."

"He does, eh? Did you ever hear of such pluck? A sort of heroic madman, something absolutely wonderful! And then there's that nickname of Arsène Lupin which he earned among his messmates for the way in which he used to boss them and astound them! … How long is it since the death of Arsène Lupin?"

"It happened two years before your appointment, Monsieur le Préfet. His corpse and Mme. Kesselbach's were discovered under the ruins of a little chalet which was burnt down close to the Luxemburg frontier. It was found at the inquest that he had strangled that monster, Mrs. Kesselbach, whose crimes came to light afterward, and that he hanged himself after setting fire to the chalet."

"It was a fitting end for that—rascal," said M. Desmalions, "and I confess that I, for my part, much prefer not having him to fight against. Let's see, where were we? Are the papers of the Mornington inheritance ready for me?"

"On your desk, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Good. But I was forgetting: is Inspector Vérot here?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet. I expect he's in the infirmary getting something to pull him together."

"Why, what's the matter with him?"

"He struck me as being in a queer state—rather ill."

"How do you mean?"

The secretary described his interview with Inspector Vérot.

"And you say he left a letter for me?" said M. Desmalions with a worried air. "Where is it?"

"Among the papers, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Very odd: it's all very odd. Vérot is a first-rate inspector, a very sober-minded fellow; and he doesn't get frightened easily. You might go and fetch him. Meanwhile, I'll look through my letters."

The secretary hurried away. When he returned, five minutes later, he stated, with an air of astonishment, that he had not seen Inspector Vérot.

"And what's more curious still," he added, "is that the messenger who saw him leave this room saw him come in again almost at once and did not see him go out a second time."

"Perhaps he only passed through here to go to you."

"To me, Monsieur le Préfet? I was in my room all the time."

"Then it's incomprehensible."

"Yes … unless we conclude that the messenger's attention was distracted for a second, as Vérot is neither here nor next door."

"That must be it. I expect he's gone to get some air outside; and he'll be back at any moment. For that matter, I shan't want him to start with."

The Prefect looked at his watch.

"Ten past five. You might tell the messenger to show those gentlemen in…. Wait, though—"

M. Desmalions hesitated. In turning over the papers he had found Vérot's letter. It was a large, yellow, business envelope, with "Café du Pont-Neuf" printed at the top.

The secretary suggested:

"In view of Vérot's absence, Monsieur le Préfet, and of what he said, it might be as well for you to see what's in the letter first."

M. Desmalions paused to reflect.

"Perhaps you're right."

And, making up his mind, he inserted a paper-knife into the envelope and cut it open. A cry escaped him.

"Oh, I say, this is a little too much!"

"What is it, Monsieur le Préfet?"

"Why, look here, a blank … sheet of paper! That's all the envelope contains!"

"Impossible!"

"See for yourself—a plain sheet folded in four, with not a word on it."

"But Vérot told me in so many words that he had said in that letter all that he knew about the case."

"He told you so, no doubt, but there you are! Upon my word, if I didn't know Inspector Vérot, I should think he was trying to play a game with me."

"It's a piece of carelessness, Monsieur le Préfet, at the worst."

"No doubt, a piece of carelessness, but I'm surprised at him. It doesn't do to be careless when the lives of two people are at stake. For he must have told you that there is a double murder planned for to-night?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet, and under particularly alarming conditions; infernal was the word he used."

M. Desmalions was walking up and down the room, with his hands behind his back. He stopped at a small table.

"What's this little parcel addressed to me? 'Monsieur le Préfet de Police—to be opened in case of accident.'"

"Oh, yes," said the secretary, "I was forgetting! That's from Inspector Vérot, too; something of importance, he said, and serving to complete and explain the contents of the letter."

"Well," said M. Desmalions, who could not help laughing, "the letter certainly needs explaining; and, though there's no question of 'accident,' I may as well open the parcel."

As he spoke, he cut the string and discovered, under the paper, a box, a little cardboard box, which might have come from a druggist, but which was soiled and spoiled by the use to which it had been put.

He raised the lid. Inside the box were a few layers of cotton wool, which were also rather dirty, and in between these layers was half a cake of chocolate.

"What the devil does this mean?" growled the Prefect in surprise.

He took the chocolate, looked at it, and at once perceived what was peculiar about this cake of chocolate, which was also undoubtedly the reason why Inspector Vérot had kept it. Above and below, it bore the prints of teeth, very plainly marked, very plainly separated one from the other, penetrating to a depth of a tenth of an inch or so into the chocolate. Each possessed its individual shape and width, and each was divided from its neighbours by a different interval. The jaws which had started eating the cake of chocolate had dug into it the mark of four upper and five lower teeth.

M. Desmalions remained wrapped in thought and, with his head sunk on his chest, for some minutes resumed his walk up and down the room, muttering:

"This is queer … There's a riddle here to which I should like to know the answer. That sheet of paper, the marks of those teeth: what does it all mean?"

But he was not the man to waste much time over a mystery which was bound to be cleared up presently, as Inspector Vérot must be either at the police office or somewhere just outside; and he said to his secretary:

"I can't keep those five gentlemen waiting any longer. Please have them shown in now. If Inspector Vérot arrives while they are here, as he is sure to do, let me know at once. I want to see him as soon as he comes. Except for that, see that I'm not disturbed on any pretext, won't you?"

* * * * *

Two minutes later the messenger showed in Maître Lepertuis, a stout, red-faced man, with whiskers and spectacles, followed by Archibald Bright, the Secretary of Embassy, and Caceres, the Peruvian attaché. M. Desmalions, who knew all three of them, chatted to them until he stepped forward to receive Major Comte d'Astrignac, the hero of La Chouïa, who had been forced into premature retirement by his glorious wounds. The Prefect was complimenting him warmly on his gallant conduct in Morocco when the door opened once more.

"Don Luis Perenna, I believe?" said the Prefect, offering his hand to a man of middle height and rather slender build, wearing the military medal and the red ribbon of the Legion of Honour.

The newcomer's face and expression, his way of holding himself, and his very youthful movements inclined one to look upon him as a man of forty, though there were wrinkles at the corners of the eyes and on the forehead, which perhaps pointed to a few years more. He bowed.

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Is that you, Perenna?" cried Comte d'Astrignae. "So you are still among the living?"

"Yes, Major, and delighted to see you again."

"Perenna alive! Why, we had lost all sight of you when I left Morocco! We thought you dead."

"I was a prisoner, that's all."

"A prisoner of the tribesmen; the same thing!"

"Not quite, Major; one can escape from anywhere. The proof stands before you."

The Prefect of Police, yielding to an irresistible attraction to resist, spent some seconds in examining that powerful face, with the smiling glance, the frank and resolute eyes, and the bronzed complexion, which looked as if it had been baked and baked again by the sun.

Then, motioning to his visitors to take chairs around his desk, M. Desmalions himself sat down and made a preliminary statement in clear and deliberate tones:

"The summons, gentlemen, which I addressed to each of you, must have appeared to you rather peremptory and mysterious. And the manner in which I propose to open our conversation is not likely to diminish your surprise. But if you will attach a little credit to my method, you will soon realize that the whole thing is very simple and very natural. I will be as brief as I can."

He spread before him the bundle of documents prepared for him by his secretary and, consulting his notes as he spoke, continued:

"Over fifty years ago, in 1860, three sisters, three orphans, Ermeline, Elizabeth, and Armande Roussel, aged twenty-two, twenty, and eighteen respectively, were living at Saint-Etienne with a cousin named Victor, who was a few years younger. The eldest, Ermeline, was the first to leave Saint-Etienne. She went to London, where she married an Englishman of the name Mornington, by whom she had a son, who was christened Cosmo.

"The family was very poor and went through hard times. Ermeline repeatedly wrote to her sisters to ask for a little assistance. Receiving no reply, she broke off the correspondence altogether. In 1870 Mr. and Mrs. Mornington left England for America. Five years later they were rich. Mr. Mornington died in 1878; but his widow continued to administer the fortune bequeathed to her and, as she had a genius for business and speculation, she increased this fortune until it attained a colossal figure. At her decease, in 1900, she left her son the sum of four hundred million francs."

The amount seemed to make an impression on the Prefect's hearers. He saw the major and Don Luis Perenna exchange a glance and asked:

"You knew Cosmo Mornington, did you not?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet," replied Comte d'Astrignac. "He was in Morocco when Perenna and I were fighting there."

"Just so," said M. Desmalions. "Cosmo Mornington had begun to travel about the world. He took up the practise of medicine, from what I hear, and, when occasion offered, treated the sick with great skill and, of course, without charge. He lived first in Egypt and then in Algiers and Morocco. Last year he settled down in Paris, where he died four weeks ago as the result of a most stupid accident."

"A carelessly administered hypodermic injection, was it not, Monsieur le Préfet?" asked the secretary of the American Embassy. "It was mentioned in the papers and reported to us at the embassy."

"Yes," said Desmalions. "To assist his recovery from a long attack of influenza which had kept him in bed all the winter, Mr. Mornington, by his doctor's orders, used to give himself injections of glycero-phosphate of soda. He must have omitted the necessary precautions on the last occasion when he did so, for the wound was poisoned, inflammation set in with lightning rapidity, and Mr. Mornington was dead in a few hours."

The Prefect of Police turned to the solicitor and asked:

"Have I summed up the facts correctly, Maître Lepertuis?"

"Absolutely, Monsieur le Préfet."

M. Desmalions continued:

"The next morning, Maître Lepertuis called here and, for reasons which you will understand when you have heard the document read, showed me Cosmo Mornington's will, which had been placed in his hands."

While the Prefect was looking through the papers, Maître Lepertuis added:

"I may be allowed to say that I saw my client only once before I was summoned to his death-bed; and that was on the day when he sent for me to come to his room in the hotel to hand me the will which he had just made. This was at the beginning of his influenza. In the course of conversation he told me that he had been making some inquiries with a view to tracing his mother's family, and that he intended to pursue these inquiries seriously after his recovery. Circumstances, as it turned out, prevented his fulfilling his purpose."

Meanwhile, the Prefect of Police had taken from among the documents an open envelope containing two sheets of paper. He unfolded the larger of the two and said:

"This is the will. I will ask you to listen attentively while I read it and also the document attached to it."

The others settled themselves in their chairs; and the Prefect read out:

"The last will and testament of me, Cosmo Mornington, eldest son of Hubert Mornington and Ermeline Roussel, his wife, a naturalized citizen of the United States of America. I give and bequeath to my adopted country three fourths of my estate, to be employed on works of charity in accordance with the instructions, written in my hand, which Maitre Lepertuis will be good enough to forward to the Ambassador of the United States. The remainder of my property, to the value of about one hundred million francs, consisting of deposits in various Paris and London banks, a list of which is in the keeping of Maitre Lepertuis, I give and bequeath, in memory of my dear mother, to her favourite sister Elizabeth Roussel or her direct heirs; or, in default of Elizabeth and her heirs, to her second sister Armande Roussel or her direct heirs; or, in default of both sisters and their heirs, to their cousin Victor Roussel or his direct heirs.

"In the event of my dying without discovering the surviving members of the Roussel family, or of the cousin of the three sisters, I request my friend Don Luis Perenna to make all the necessary investigations. With this object, I hereby appoint him the executor of my will in so far as concerns the European portion of my estate, and I beg him to undertake the conduct of the events that may arise after my death or in consequence of my death to consider himself my representative and to act in all things for the benefit of my memory and the accomplishment of my wishes. In gratitude for this service and in memory of the two occasions on which he saved my life, I give and bequeath to the said Don Luis Perenna the sum of one million francs."

The Prefect stopped for a few seconds. Don Luis murmured:

"Poor Cosmo! … I should not have needed that inducement to carry out his last wishes."

M. Desmalions continued his reading:

"Furthermore, if, within three months of my death, the investigations made by Don Luis Perenna and by Maître Lepertuis have led to no result; if no heir and no survivor of the Roussel family have come forward to receive the bequest, then the whole hundred million francs shall definitely, all later claims notwithstanding, accrue to my friend Don Luis Perenna. I know him well enough to feel assured that he will employ this fortune in a manner which shall accord with the loftiness of his schemes and the greatness of the plans which he described to me so enthusiastically in our tent in Morocco."

M. Desmalions stopped once more and raised his eyes to Don Luis, who remained silent and impassive, though a tear glistened on his lashes. Comte d'Astrignac said:

"My congratulations, Perenna."

"Let me remind you, Major," he answered, "that this legacy is subject to a condition. And I swear that, if it depends on me, the survivors of the Roussel family shall be found."

"I'm sure of it," said the officer. "I know you."

"In any case," asked the Prefect of Police of Don Luis, "you do not refuse this conditional legacy?"

"Well, no," said Perenna, with a laugh. "There are things which one can't refuse."

"My question," said the Prefect, "was prompted by the last paragraph of the will: 'If, for any reason, my friend Perenna should refuse this legacy, or if he should have died before the date fixed for its payment, I request the Ambassador of the United States and the Prefect of Police for the time being to consult as to the means of building and maintaining in Paris a university confined to students and artists of American nationality and to devote the money to this purpose. And I hereby authorize the Prefect of Police in any case to receive a sum of three hundred thousand francs out of my estate for the benefit of the Paris Police Fund.'"

M. Desmalions folded the paper and took up another.

"There is a codicil to the will. It consists of a letter which Mr. Mornington wrote to Maître Lepertuis some time after and which explains certain points with greater precision:

"I request Maître Lepertuis to open my will on the day after my death, in the presence of the Prefect of Police, who will be good enough to keep the matter an entire secret for a month. One month later, to the day, he will have the kindness to summon to his office Maître Lepertuis, Don Luis Perenna, and a prominent member of the United States Embassy. Subsequent to the reading of the will, a cheque for one million francs shall be handed to my friend and legatee Don Luis Perenna, after a simple examination of his papers and a simple verification of his identity. I should wish this verification to be made as regards the personality by Major Comte d'Astrignac, who was his commanding officer in Morocco, and who unfortunately had to retire prematurely from the army; and as regards birth by a member of the Peruvian Legation, as Don Luis Perenna, though retaining his Spanish nationality, was born in Peru.

"Furthermore, I desire that my will be not communicated to the Roussel heirs until two days later, at Maitre Lepertuis's office. Finally—and this is the last expression of my wishes as regards the disposal of my estate and the method of proceeding with that disposal—the Prefect of Police will be good enough to summon the persons aforesaid to his office, for a second time, at a date to be selected by himself, not less than sixty nor more than ninety days after the first meeting. Then and not till then will the definite legatee be named and proclaimed according to his rights, nor shall any be so named and proclaimed unless he be present at this meeting, at the conclusion of which Don Luis Perenna, who must also attend it, shall become the definite legatee if, as I have said, no survivor nor heir of the Roussel sisters or of their cousin Victor have come forward to claim the bequest."

Replacing both documents in the envelope the Prefect of Police concluded:

"You have now, gentlemen, heard the will of Mr. Cosmo Mornington, which explains your presence here. A sixth person will join us shortly: one of my detectives, whom I instructed to make the first inquiries about the Roussel family and who will give you the result of his investigations. But, for the moment, we must proceed in accordance with the testator's directions.

"Don Luis Perenna's papers, which he sent me, at my request, a fortnight ago, have been examined by myself and are perfectly in order. As regards his birth, I wrote and begged his Excellency the Peruvian minister to collect the most precise information."

"The minister entrusted this mission to me," said Señor Caceres, the Peruvian attaché. "It offered no difficulties. Don Luis Perenna comes of an old Spanish family which emigrated thirty years ago, but which retained its estates and property in Europe. I knew Don Luis's father in America; and he used to speak of his only son with the greatest affection. It was our legation that informed the son, three years ago, of his father's death. I produce a copy of the letter sent to Morocco."

"And I have the original letter here, among the documents forwarded by Don Luis Perenna to the Prefect of Police. Do you, Major, recognize Private Perenna, who fought under your orders in the Foreign Legion?"

"I recognize him," said Comte d'Astrignac.

"Beyond the possibility of a mistake?"

"Beyond the possibility of a mistake and without the least feeling of hesitation."

The Prefect of Police, with a laugh, hinted:

"You recognize Private Perenna, whom the men, carried away by a sort of astounded admiration of his exploits, used to call Arsène Lupin?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet," replied the major sharply, "the one whom the men called Arsène Lupin, but whom the officers called simply the Hero, the one who we used to say was as brave as d'Artagnan, as strong as Porthos…."

"And as mysterious as Monte Cristo," said the Prefect of Police, laughing. "I have all this in the report which I received from the Fourth Regiment of the Foreign Legion. It is not necessary to

read the whole of it; but it contains the unprecedented fact that Private Perenna, in the space of two years' time, received the military medal, received the Legion of Honour for exceptional services, and was mentioned fourteen times in dispatches. I will pick out a detail here and there."

"Monsieur le Préfet, I beg of you," protested Don Luis. "These are trivial matters, of no interest to anybody; and I do not see the reason…."

"There is every reason, on the contrary," declared M. Desmalions. "You gentlemen are here not only to hear a will read, but also to authorize its execution as regards the only one of its clauses that is to be carried out at once, the payment of a legacy of a million francs. It is necessary, therefore, that all of you should know what there is to know of the personality of the legatee. Consequently, I propose to continue …"

"In that case, Monsieur le Préfet," said Perenna, rising and making for the door, "you will allow me …"

"Right about turn! Halt! … Eyes front!" commanded Major d'Astrignac in a jesting tone.

He dragged Don Luis back to the middle of the room and forced him into a chair.

"Monsieur le Préfet," he said, "I plead for mercy for my old comrade-in-arms, whose modesty would really be put to too severe a test if the story of his prowess were read out in front of him. Besides, the report is here; and we can all of us consult it for ourselves. Without having seen it, I second every word of praise that it contains; and I declare that, in the course of my whole military career, I have never met a soldier who could compare with Private Perenna. And yet I saw plenty of fine fellows over there, the sort of demons whom you only find in the Legion and who will get themselves cut to bits for the sheer pleasure of the thing, for the lark of it, as they say, just to astonish one another.

"But not one of them came anywhere near Perenna. The chap whom we nicknamed d'Artagnan, Porthos, and de Bussy deserved to be classed with the most amazing heroes of legend and history. I have seen him perform feats which I should not care to relate, for fear of being treated as an impostor; feats so improbable that to-day, in my calmer moments, I wonder if I am quite sure that I did see them. One day, at Settat, as we were being pursued—"

"Another word, Major," cried Don Luis, gayly, "and this time I really will go out! I must say you have a nice way of sparing my modesty!"

"My dear Perenna," replied Comte d'Astrignac, "I always told you that you had every good quality and only one fault, which was that you were not a Frenchman."

"And I always answered, Major, that I was French on my mother's side and a Frenchman in heart and temperament. There are things which only a Frenchman can do."

The two men again gripped each other's hands affectionately.

"Come," said the Prefect, "we'll say no more of your feats of prowess, Monsieur, nor of this report. I will mention one thing, however, which is that, after two years, you fell into an ambush of forty Berbers, that you were captured, and that you did not rejoin the Legion until last month."

"Just so, Monsieur le Préfet, in time to receive my discharge, as my five years' service was up."

"But how did Mr. Cosmo Mornington come to mention you in his will, when, at the time when he was making it, you had disappeared from view for eighteen months?"

"Cosmo and I used to correspond."

"What!"

"Yes; and I had informed him of my approaching escape and my return to Paris."

"But how did you manage it? Where were you? And how did you find the means? …"

Don Luis smiled without answering.

"Monte Cristo, this time," said M. Desmalions. "The mysterious Monte Cristo."

"Monte Cristo, if you like, Monsieur le Préfet. In point of fact, the mystery of my captivity and escape is a rather strange one. It may be interesting to throw some light upon it one of these days. Meanwhile, I must ask for a little credit."

A silence ensued. M. Desmalions once more inspected this curious individual; and he could not refrain from saying, as though in obedience to an association of ideas for which he himself was unable to account:

"One word more, and one only. What were your comrades' reasons for giving you that rather odd nickname of Arsène Lupin? Was it just an allusion to your pluck, to your physical strength?"

"There was something besides, Monsieur le Préfet: the discovery of a very curious theft, of which certain details, apparently incapable of explanation, had enabled me to name the perpetrator."

"So you have a gift for that sort of thing?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet, a certain knack which I had the opportunity of employing in Africa on more than one occasion. Hence my nickname of Arsène Lupin. It was soon after the death of the man himself, you know, and he was much spoken of at the time."

"Was it a serious theft?"

"It was rather; and it happened to be committed upon Cosmo Mornington, who was then living in the Province of Oran. That was really what started our relations."

There was a fresh silence; and Don Luis added:

"Poor Cosmo! That incident gave him an unshakable confidence in my little detective talents. He was always saying, 'Perenna, if I die murdered'—he had a fixed notion in his head that he would meet with a violent death—'if I die murdered, swear that you will pursue the culprit,'"

"His presentiment was not justified," said the Prefect of Police. "Cosmo Mornington was not murdered."

"That's where you make a mistake, Monsieur le Préfet," said Don Luis.

M. Desmalions gave a start.

"What! What's that? Cosmo Mornington—?"

"I say that Cosmo Mornington did not die, as you think, of a carelessly administered injection, but that he died, as he feared he would, by foul play."

"But, Monsieur, your assertion is based on no evidence whatever!"

"It is based on fact, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Were you there? Do you know anything?"

"I was not there. A month ago I was still with the colours. I even admit that, when I arrived in Paris, not having seen the newspapers regularly, I did not know of Cosmo's death. In fact, I learned it from you just now, Monsieur le Préfet."

"In that case, Monsieur, you cannot know more about it than I do, and you must accept the verdict of the doctor."

"I am sorry, but his verdict fails to satisfy me."

"But look here, Monsieur, what prompts you to make the accusation? Have you any evidence?"

"Yes."

"What evidence?"

"Your own words, Monsieur le Préfet."

"My own words? What do you mean?"

"I will tell you, Monsieur le Préfet. You began by saying that Cosmo Mornington had taken up medicine and practised it with great skill; next, you said that he had given himself an injection which, carelessly administered, set up inflammation and caused his death within a few hours."

"Yes."

"Well, Monsieur le Préfet, I maintain that a man who practises medicine with great skill and who is accustomed to treating sick people, as Cosmo Mornington was, is incapable of giving himself a hypodermic injection without first taking every necessary antiseptic precaution. I have seen Cosmo at work, and I know how he set about things."

"Well?"

"Well, the doctor just wrote a certificate as any doctor will when there is no sort of clue to arouse his suspicions."

"So your opinion is—"

"Maître Lepertuis," asked Perenna, turning to the solicitor, "did you notice nothing unusual when you were summoned to Mr. Mornington's death-bed?"

"No, nothing. Mr. Mornington was in a state of coma."

"It's a strange thing in itself," observed Don Luis, "that an injection, however badly administered, should produce such rapid results. Were there no signs of suffering?"

"No … or rather, yes…. Yes, I remember the face showed brown patches which I did not see on the occasion of my first visit."

"Brown patches? That confirms my supposition Cosmo Mornington was poisoned."

"But how?" exclaimed the Prefect.

"By some substance introduced into one of the phials of glycero-phosphate, or into the syringe which the sick man employed."

"But the doctor?" M. Desmalions objected.

"Maître Lepertuis," Perenna continued, "did you call the doctor's attention to those brown patches?"

"Yes, but he attached no importance to them."

"Was it his ordinary medical adviser?"

"No, his ordinary medical adviser, Doctor Pujol, who happens to be a friend of mine and who had recommended me to him as a solicitor, was ill. The doctor whom I saw at his death-bed must have been a local practitioner."

"I have his name and address here," said the Prefect of Police, who had turned up the certificate. "Doctor Bellavoine, 14 Rue d'Astorg."

"Have you a medical directory, Monsieur le Préfet?"

M. Desmalions opened a directory and turned over the pages. Presently he declared:

"There is no Doctor Bellavoine; and there is no doctor living at 14 Rue d'Astorg."

CHAPTER TWO

A MAN DEAD

The declaration was followed by a silence of some length. The Secretary of the American Embassy and the Peruvian attaché had followed the conversation with eager interest. Major d'Astrignac nodded his head with an air of approval. To his mind, Perenna could not be mistaken.

The Prefect of Police confessed:

"Certainly, certainly … we have a number of circumstances here … that are fairly ambiguous…. Those brown patches; that doctor…. It's a case that wants looking into." And, questioning Don Luis Perenna as though in spite of himself, he asked, "No doubt, in your opinion, there is a possible connection between the murder … and Mr. Mornington's will?"

"That, Monsieur le Préfet, I cannot tell. If there is, we should have to suppose that the contents of the will were known. Do you think they can have leaked out, Maître Lepertuis?"

"I don't think so, for Mr. Mornington seemed to behave with great caution."

"And there's no question, is there, of any indiscretion committed in your office?"

"By whom? No one handled the will except myself; and I alone have the key of the safe in which I put away documents of that importance every evening."

"The safe has not been broken into? There has been no burglary at your office?"

"No."

"You saw Cosmo Mornington in the morning?"

"Yes, on a Friday morning."

"What did you do with the will until the evening, until you locked it away up your safe?"

"I probably put it in the drawer of my desk."

"And the drawer was not forced?"

Maître Lepertuis seemed taken aback and made no reply.

"Well?" asked Perenna.

"Well, yes, I remember … there was something that day … that same Friday."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. When I came in from lunch I noticed that the drawer was not locked, although I had locked it beyond the least doubt. At the time I attached comparatively little importance to the incident. To-day, I understand, I understand—"

Thus, little by little, were all the suppositions conceived by Don Luis verified: suppositions resting, it is true, upon just one or two clues, but yet containing an amount of intuition, of divination, that was really surprising in a man who had been present at none of the events between which he traced the connection so skilfully.

"We will lose no time, Monsieur," said the Prefect of Police, "in checking your statements, which you will confess to be a little venturesome, by the more positive evidence of one of my detectives who has the case in charge … and who ought to be here by now."

"Does his evidence bear upon Cosmo Mornington's heirs?" asked the solicitor.

"Upon the heirs principally, because two days ago he telephoned to me that he had collected all the particulars, and also upon the very points which—But wait: I remember that he spoke to my secretary of a murder committed a month ago to-day…. Now it's a month to-day since Mr. Cosmo Mornington—"

M. Desmalions pressed hard on a bell. His private secretary at once appeared.

"Inspector Vérot?" asked the Prefect sharply.

"He's not back yet."

"Have him fetched! Have him brought here! He must be found at all costs and without delay."

He turned to Don Luis Perenna.

"Inspector Vérot was here an hour ago, feeling rather unwell, very much excited, it seems, and declaring that he was being watched and followed. He said he wanted to make a most important statement to me about the Mornington case and to warn the police of two murders which are to be committed to-night … and which would be a consequence of the murder of Cosmo Mornington."

"And he was unwell, you say?"

"Yes, ill at ease and even very queer and imagining things. By way of being prudent, he left a detailed report on the case for me. Well, the report is simply a blank sheet of letter-paper.

"Here is the paper and the envelope in which I found it, and here is a cardboard box which he also left behind him. It contains a cake of chocolate with the marks of teeth on it."

"May I look at the two things you have mentioned, Monsieur le Préfet?"

"Yes, but they won't tell you anything."

"Perhaps so—"

Don Luis examined at length the cardboard box and the yellow envelope, on which were printed the words, "Café du Pont-Neuf." The others awaited his words as though they were bound to shed an unexpected light. He merely said:

"The handwriting is not the same on the envelope and the box. The writing on the envelope is less plain, a little shaky, obviously imitated."

"Which proves—?"

"Which proves, Monsieur le Préfet, that this yellow envelope does not come from your detective. I presume that, after writing his report at a table in the Café du Pont-Neuf and closing it, he had a moment of inattention during which somebody substituted for his envelope another with the same address, but containing a blank sheet of paper."

"That's a supposition!" said the Prefect.

"Perhaps; but what is certain, Monsieur le Préfet, is that your inspector's presentiments are well-grounded, that he is being closely watched, that the discoveries about the Mornington inheritance which he has succeeded in making are interfering with criminal designs, and that he is in terrible danger."

"Come, come!"

"He must be rescued, Monsieur le Préfet. Ever since the commencement of this meeting I have felt persuaded that we are up against an attempt which has already begun. I hope that it is not too late and that your inspector has not been the first victim."

"My dear sir," exclaimed the Prefect of Police, "you declare all this with a conviction which rouses my admiration, but which is not enough to establish the fact that your fears are justified. Inspector Vérot's return will be the best proof."

"Inspector Vérot will not return."

"But why not?"

"Because he has returned already. The messenger saw him return."

"The messenger was dreaming. If you have no proof but that man's evidence—"

"I have another proof, Monsieur le Préfet, which Inspector Vérot himself has left of his presence here: these few, almost illegible letters which he scribbled on this memorandum pad, which your secretary did not see him write and which have just caught my eye. Look at them. Are they not a proof, a definite proof that he came back?"

The Prefect did not conceal his perturbation. The others all seemed impressed. The secretary's return but increased their apprehensions: nobody had seen Inspector Vérot.

"Monsieur le Préfet," said Don Luis, "I earnestly beg you to have the office messenger in."

And, as soon as the messenger was there, he asked him, without even waiting for M. Desmalions to speak:

"Are you sure that Inspector Vérot entered this room a second time?"

"Absolutely sure."

"And that he did not go out again?"

"Absolutely sure."

"And your attention was not distracted for a moment?"

"Not for a moment."

"There, Monsieur, you see!" cried the Prefect. "If Inspector Vérot were here, we should know it."

"He is here, Monsieur le Préfet."

"What!"

"Excuse my obstinacy, Monsieur le Préfet, but I say that, when some one enters a room and does not go out again, he is still in that room."

"Hiding?" said M. Desmalions, who was growing more and more irritated.

"No, but fainting, ill—dead, perhaps."

"But where, hang it all?"

"Behind that screen."

"There's nothing behind that screen, nothing but a door."

"And that door—?"

"Leads to a dressing-room."

"Well, Monsieur le Préfet, Inspector Vérot, tottering, losing his head, imagining himself to be going from your office to your secretary's room, fell into your dressing-room."

M. Desmalions ran to the door, but, at the moment of opening it, shrank back. Was it apprehension, the wish to withdraw himself from the influence of that astonishing man, who gave his orders with such authority and who seemed to command events themselves?

Don Luis stood waiting imperturbably, in a deferential attitude.

"I cannot believe—" said M. Desmalions.

"Monsieur le Préfet, I would remind you that Inspector Vérot's revelations may save the lives of two persons who are doomed to die to-night. Every minute lost is irreparable."

M. Desmalions shrugged his shoulders. But that man mastered him with the power of his conviction; and the Prefect opened the door.

He did not make a movement, did not utter a cry. He simply muttered:

"Oh, is it possible!—"

By the pale gleam of light that entered through a ground-glass window they saw the body of a man lying on the floor.

"The inspector! Inspector Vérot!" gasped the office messenger, running forward.

He and the secretary raised the body and placed it in an armchair in the Prefect's office.

Inspector Vérot was still alive, but so little alive that they could scarcely hear the beating of his heart. A drop of saliva trickled from the corner of his mouth. His eyes were devoid of all expression. However, certain muscles of the face kept moving, perhaps with the effort of a will that seemed to linger almost beyond life.

Don Luis muttered:

"Look, Monsieur le Préfet—the brown patches!"

The same dread unnerved all. They began to ring bells and open doors and call for help.

"Send for the doctor!" ordered M. Desmalions. "Tell them to bring a doctor, the first that comes—and a priest. We can't let the poor man—"

Don Luis raised his arm to demand silence.

"There is nothing more to be done," he said. "We shall do better to make the most of these last moments. Have I your permission, Monsieur le Préfet?"

He bent over the dying man, laid the swaying head against the back of the chair, and, in a very gentle voice, whispered:

"Vérot, it's Monsieur le Préfet speaking to you. We should like a few particulars about what is to take place to-night. Do you hear me, Vérot? If you hear me, close your eyelids."

The eyelids were lowered. But was it not merely chance? Don Luis went on:

"You have found the heirs of the Roussel sisters, that much we know; and it is two of those heirs who are threatened with death. The double murder is to be committed to-night. But what we do not know is the name of those heirs, who are doubtless not called Roussel. You must tell us the name.

"Listen to me: you wrote on a memorandum pad three letters which seem to form the syllable Fau…. Am I right? Is this the first syllable of a name? Which is the next letter after those three? Close your eyes when I mention the right letter. Is it 'b?' Is it 'c?'"

But there was now not a flicker in the inspector's pallid face. The head dropped heavily on the chest. Vérot gave two or three sighs, his frame shook with one great shiver, and he moved no more.

He was dead.

The tragic scene had been enacted so swiftly that the men who were its shuddering spectators remained for a moment confounded. The solicitor made the sign of the cross and went down on his knees. The Prefect murmured:

"Poor Vérot!… He was a good man, who thought only of the service, of his duty. Instead of going and getting himself seen to—and who knows? Perhaps he might have been saved—he came back here in the hope of communicating his secret. Poor Vérot!—"

"Was he married? Are there any children?" asked Don Luis.

"He leaves a wife and three children," replied the Prefect.

"I will look after them," said Don Luis simply.

Then, when they brought a doctor and when M. Desmalions gave orders for the corpse to be carried to another room, Don Luis took the doctor aside and said:

"There is no doubt that Inspector Vérot was poisoned. Look at his wrist: you will see the mark of a puncture with a ring of inflammation round it."

"Then he was pricked in that place?"

"Yes, with a pin or the point of a pen; and not as violently as they may have wished, because death did not ensue until some hours later."

The messengers removed the corpse; and soon there was no one left in the office except the five people whom the Prefect had originally sent for. The American Secretary of Embassy and the Peruvian attaché, considering their continued presence unnecessary, went away, after warmly complimenting Don Luis Perenna on his powers of penetration.

Next came the turn of Major d'Astrignac, who shook his former subordinate by the hand with obvious affection. And Maître Lepertais and Perenna, having fixed an appointment for the payment of the legacy, were themselves on the point of leaving, when M. Desmalions entered briskly.

"Ah, so you're still here, Don Luis Perenna! I'm glad of that. I have an idea: those three letters which you say you made out on the writing-table, are you sure they form the syllable Fau?"

"I think so, Monsieur le Préfet. See for yourself: are not these an 'F,' an 'A' and a 'U?' And observe that the 'F' is a capital, which made me suspect that the letters are the first syllable of a proper name."

"Just so, just so," said M. Desmalions. "Well, curiously enough, that syllable happens to be—But wait, we'll verify our facts—"

M. Desmalions searched hurriedly among the letters which his secretary had handed him on his arrival and which lay on a corner of the table.

"Ah, here we are!" he exclaimed, glancing at the signature of one of the letters. "Here we are! It's as I thought: 'Fauville.' … The first syllable is the same…. Look, 'Fauville,' just like that, without Christian name or initials. The letter must have been written in a feverish moment: there is no date nor address…. The writing is shaky—"

And M. Desmalions read out:

"MONSIEUR LE PRÉFET:

"A great danger is hanging over my head and over the head of my son. Death is approaching apace. I shall have to-night, or to-morrow morning at the latest, the proofs of the abominable plot that threatens us. I ask leave to bring them to you in the course of the morning. I am in need of protection and I call for your assistance.

"Permit me to be, etc. FAUVILLE."

"No other designation?" asked Perenna. "No letter-heading?"

"None. But there is no mistake. Inspector Vérot's declarations agree too evidently with this despairing appeal. It is clearly M. Fauville and his son who are to be murdered to-night. And the terrible thing is that, as this name of Fauville is a very common one, it is impossible for our inquiries to succeed in time."

"What, Monsieur le Préfet? Surely, by straining every nerve—"

"Certainly, we will strain every nerve; and I shall set all my men to work. But observe that we have not the slightest clue."

"Oh, it would be awful!" cried Don Luis. "Those two creatures doomed to death; and we unable to save them! Monsieur le Préfet, I ask you to authorize me—"

He had not finished speaking when the Prefect's private secretary entered with a visiting-card in his hand.

"Monsieur le Préfet, this caller was so persistent…. I hesitated—"

M. Desmalions took the card and uttered an exclamation of mingled surprise and joy.

"Look, Monsieur," he said to Perenna.

And he handed him the card.

Hippolyte Fauville,

Civil Engineer.

14 bis Boulevard Suchet.

"Come," said M. Desmalions, "chance is favouring us. If this M. Fauville is one of the Roussel heirs, our task becomes very much easier."

"In any case, Monsieur le Préfet," the solicitor interposed, "I must remind you that one of the clauses of the will stipulates that it shall not be read until forty-eight hours have elapsed. M. Fauville, therefore, must not be informed—"

The door was pushed open and a man hustled the messenger aside and rushed in.

"Inspector … Inspector Vérot?" he spluttered. "He's dead, isn't he? I was told—"

"Yes, Monsieur, he is dead."

"Too late! I'm too late!" he stammered.

And he sank into a chair, clasping his hands and sobbing:

"Oh, the scoundrels! the scoundrels!"

He was a pale, hollow-cheeked, sickly looking man of about fifty. His head was bald, above a forehead lined with deep wrinkles. A nervous twitching affected his chin and the lobes of his ears. Tears stood in his eyes.

The Prefect asked:

"Whom do you mean, Monsieur? Inspector Vérot's murderers? Are you able to name them, to assist our inquiry?"

Hippolyte Fauville shook his head.

"No, no, it would be useless, for the moment…. My proofs would not be sufficient…. No, really not."

He had already risen from his chair and stood apologizing:

"Monsieur le Préfet, I have disturbed you unnecessarily, but I wanted to know…. I was hoping that Inspector Vérot might have escaped…. His evidence, joined to mine, would have been invaluable. But perhaps he was able to tell you?"

"No, he spoke of this evening—of to-night—"

Hippolyte Fauville started.

"This evening! Then the time has come!… But no, it's impossible, they can't do anything to me yet…. They are not ready—"

"Inspector Vérot declared, however, that the double murder would be committed to-night."

"No, Monsieur le Préfet, he was wrong there…. I know all about it…. To-morrow evening at the earliest … and we will catch them in a trap…. Oh, the scoundrels!"

Don Luis went up to him and asked:

"Your mother's name was Ermeline Roussel, was it not?"

"Yes, Ermeline Roussel. She is dead now."

"And she was from Saint-Etienne?"

"Yes. But why these questions?"

"Monsieur le Préfet will tell you to-morrow. One word more." He opened the cardboard box left by Inspector Vérot. "Does this cake of chocolate mean anything to you? These marks?"

"Oh, how awful!" said the civil engineer, in a hoarse tone. "Where did the inspector find it?"

He dropped into his chair again, but only for a moment; then, drawing himself up, he hurried toward the door with a jerky step.

"I'm going, Monsieur le Préfet, I'm going. To-morrow morning I'll show you…. I shall have all the proofs…. And the police will protect me…. I am ill, I know, but I want to live! I have the right to live … and my son, too…. And we will live…. Oh, the scoundrels!—"

And he ran, stumbling out, like a drunken man.

M. Desmalions rose hastily.

"I shall have inquiries made about that man's circumstances…. I shall have his house watched. I've telephoned to the detective office already. I'm expecting some one in whom I have every confidence."

Don Luis said:

"Monsieur le Préfet, I beg you, with an earnestness which you will understand, to authorize me to pursue the investigation. Cosmo Mornington's will makes it my duty and, allow me to say, gives me the right to do so. M. Fauville's enemies have given proofs of extraordinary cleverness and daring. I want to have the honour of being at the post of danger to-night, at M. Fauville's house, near his person."

The Prefect hesitated. He was bound to reflect how greatly to Don Luis Perenna's interest it was that none of the Mornington heirs should be discovered, or at least be able to come between him and the millions of the inheritance. Was it safe to attribute to a noble sentiment of gratitude, to a lofty conception of friendship and duty, that strange longing to protect Hippolyte Fauville against the death that threatened him?

For some seconds M. Desmalions watched that resolute face, those intelligent eyes, at once innocent and satirical, grave and smiling, eyes through which you could certainly not penetrate their owner's baffling individuality, but which nevertheless looked at you with an expression of absolute frankness and sincerity. Then he called his secretary:

"Has any one come from the detective office?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet; Sergeant Mazeroux is here."

"Please have him shown in."

And, turning to Perenna:

"Sergeant Mazeroux is one of our smartest detectives. I used to employ him together with that poor Vérot when I wanted any one more than ordinarily active and sharp. He will be of great use to you."

* * * * *

Sergeant Mazeroux entered. He was a short, lean, wiry man, whose drooping moustache, heavy eyelids, watery eyes and long, lank hair gave him a most doleful appearance.

"Mazeroux," said the Prefect, "you will have heard, by this time, of your comrade Vérot's death and of the horrible circumstances attending it. We must now avenge him and prevent further crimes. This gentleman, who knows the case from end to end, will explain all that is necessary. You will work with him and report to me to-morrow morning."

This meant giving a free hand to Don Luis Perenna and relying on his power of initiative and his perspicacity. Don Luis bowed:

"I thank you, Monsieur le Préfet. I hope that you will have no reason to regret the trust which you are good enough to place in me."

And, taking leave of M. Desmalions and Maître Lepertuis, he went out with Sergeant Mazeroux.

As soon as they were outside, he told Mazeroux what he knew. The detective seemed much impressed by his companion's professional gifts and quite ready to be guided by his views.

They decided first to go to the Café du Pont-Neuf. Here they learned that Inspector Vérot, who was a regular customer of the place, had written a long letter there that morning. And the waiter remembered that a man at the next table, who had entered the café at almost the same time as the inspector, had also asked for writing-paper and called twice for yellow envelopes.

"That's it," said Mazeroux to Don Luis. "As you suspected, one letter has been substituted for the other."

The description given by the waiter was pretty explicit: a tall man, with a slight stoop, wearing a reddish-brown beard cut into a point, a tortoise-shell eyeglass with a black silk ribbon, and an ebony walking-stick with a handle shaped like a swan's head.

"That's something for the police to go upon," said Mazeroux.

They were leaving the café when Don Luis stopped his companion.

"One moment."

"What's the matter?"

"We've been followed."

"Followed? What next? And by whom, pray?"

"No one that matters. I know who it is and I may as well settle his business and have done with it. Wait for me. I shall be back; and I'll show you some fun. You shall see one of the 'nuts,' I promise you."

He returned in a minute with a tall, thin man with his face set in whiskers. He introduced him:

"M. Mazeroux, a friend of mine, Señor Caceres, an attaché at the Peruvian Legation. Señor Caceres took part in the interview at the Prefect's just now. It was he who, on the Peruvian Minister's instructions, collected the documents bearing upon my identity." And he added gayly: "So you were looking for me, dear Señor Caceres. Indeed, I expected, when we left the police office—"

The Peruvian attaché made a sign and pointed to Sergeant Mazeroux.

Perenna replied:

"Oh, pray don't mind M. Mazeroux! You can speak before him; he is the soul of discretion. Besides, he knows all about the business."

The attaché was silent. Perenna made him sit down in front of him.

"Speak without beating about the bush, dear Señor Caceres. It's a subject that calls for plain dealing; and I don't mind a blunt word or two. It saves such a lot of time! Come on. You want money, I suppose? Or, rather, more money. How much?"

The Peruvian had a final hesitation, gave a glance at Don Luis's companion, and then, suddenly making up his mind, said in a dull voice:

"Fifty thousand francs!"

"Oh, by Jove, by Jove!" cried Don Luis. "You're greedy, you know! What do you say, M. Mazeroux? Fifty thousand francs is a lot of money. Especially as—Look here, my dear Caceres, let's go over the ground again.

"Three years ago I had the honour of making your acquaintance in Algeria, when you were touring the country. At the same time, I understood the sort of man you were; and I asked you if you could manage, in three years, with my name of Perenna, to fix me up a Spanish-Peruvian identity, furnished with unquestionable papers and respectable ancestors. You said, 'Yes,' We settled the price: twenty thousand francs. Last week, when the Prefect of Police asked me for my papers, I came to see you and learned that you had just been instructed to make inquiries into my antecedents.

"Everything was ready, as it happened. With the papers of a deceased Peruvian nobleman, of the name of Pereira, properly revised, you had faked me up a first-rate civic status. We arranged what you were to say before the Prefect of Police; and I paid up the twenty thousand. We were quits. What more do you want?"

The Pervian attaché did not betray the least embarrassment. He put his two elbows on the table and said, very calmly:

"Monsieur, when treating with you, three years ago, I thought I was dealing with a gentleman who, hiding himself under the uniform of the Foreign Legion, wished to recover the means to live respectably afterward. To-day, I have to do with the universal legatee of Cosmo Mornington, with a man who, to-morrow, under a false name, will receive the sum of one million francs and, in a few months, perhaps, the sum of a hundred millions. That's quite a different thing."

The argument seemed to strike Don Luis. Nevertheless, he objected:

"And, if I refuse—?"

"If you refuse, I shall inform the solicitor and the Prefect of Police that I made an error in my inquiry and that there is some mistake about Don Luis Perenna. In consequence of which you will receive nothing at all and very likely find yourself in jail."

"With you, my worthy sir."

"Me?"

"Of course: on a charge of forgery and tampering with registers. For you don't imagine that I should take it lying down."

The attaché did not reply. His nose, which was a very big one, seemed to lengthen out still farther between his two long whiskers.

Don Luis began to laugh.

"Come, Señor Caceres, don't pull such a face! No one's going to hurt you. Only don't think that you can corner me. Better men than you have tried and have broken their backs in the process. And, upon my word, you don't cut much of a figure when you're doing your best to diddle your fellowmen.

"You look a bit of a mug, in fact, Caceres: a bit of a mug is what you look. So it's understood, what? We lay down our arms. No more base designs against our excellent friend Perenna. Capital, Señor Caceres, capital. And now I'll be magnanimous and prove to you that the decent man of us two is—the one whom any one would have thought!"

He produced a check-book on the Crédit Lyonnais.

"Here, my dear chap. Here's twenty thousand francs as a present from Cosmo Mornington's legatee. Put it in your pocket and look pleasant. Say thank you to the kind gentleman, and make

yourself scarce without turning your head any more than if you were one of old man Lot's daughters. Off you go: hoosh!"

This was said in such a manner that the attaché obeyed Don Luis Perenna's injunctions to the letter. He smiled as he pocketed the check, said thank you twice over, and made off without turning his head.

"The low hound!" muttered Don Luis. "What do you say to that, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Mazeroux was looking at him in stupefaction, with his eyes starting from his head.

"Well, but, Monsieur—"

"What, Sergeant?"

"Well, but, Monsieur, who are you?"

"Who am I?"

"Yes."

"Didn't they tell you? A Peruvian nobleman, or a Spanish nobleman, I don't know which. In short, Don Luis Perenna."

"Bunkum! I've just heard—"

"Don Luis Perenna, late of the Foreign Legion."

"Enough of that, Monsieur—"

"Medaled and decorated with a stripe on every seam."

"Once more, Monsieur, enough of that; and come along with me to the Prefect."

"But, let me finish, hang it! I was saying, late private in the Foreign Legion…. Late hero…. Late prisoner of the Sureté…. Late Russian prince…. Late chief of the detective service…. Late—"

"But you're mad!" snarled the sergeant. "What's all this story?"

"It's a true story, Sergeant, and quite genuine. You ask me who I am; and I'm telling you categorically. Must I go farther back? I have still more titles to offer you: marquis, baron, duke, archduke, grand-duke, petty-duke, superduke—the whole 'Almanach de Gotha,' by Jingo! If any one told me that I had been a king, by all that's holy, I shouldn't dare swear to the contrary!"

Sergeant Mazeroux put out his own hands, accustomed to rough work, seized the seemingly frail wrists of the man addressing him and said:

"No nonsense, now. I don't know whom I've got hold of, but I shan't let you go. You can say what you have to say at the Prefect's."

"Don't speak so loud, Alexandre."

The two frail wrists were released with unparalleled ease; the sergeant's powerful hands were caught and rendered useless; and Don Luis grinned:

"Don't you know me, you idiot?"

Sergeant Mazeroux did not utter a word. His eyes started still farther from his head. He tried to understand and remained absolutely dumfounded.

The sound of that voice, that way of jesting, that schoolboy playfulness allied with that audacity, the quizzing expression of those eyes, and lastly that Christian name of Alexandre, which was not his name at all and which only one person used to give him, years ago. Was it possible?

"The chief!" he stammered. "The chief!"

"Why not?"

"No, no, because—"

"Because what?"

"Because you're dead."

"Well, what about it? D'you think it interferes with my living, being dead?"

And, as the other seemed more and more perplexed, he laid his hand on his shoulder and said:

"Who put you into the police office?"

"The Chief Detective, M. Lenormand."

"And who was M. Lenormand?"

"The chief."

"You mean Arsène Lupin, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, Alexandre, don't you know that it was much more difficult for Arsène Lupin to be Chief Detective—and a masterly Chief Detective he was—than to be Don Luis Perenna, to be decorated in the Foreign Legion, to be a hero, and even to be alive after he was dead?"

Sergeant Mazeroux examined his companion in silence. Then his lacklustre eyes brightened, his drab features turned scarlet and, suddenly striking the table with his fist, he growled, in an angry voice:

"All right, very well! But I warn you that you mustn't reckon on me. No, not that! I'm in the detective service; and in the detective service I remain. Nothing doing. I've tasted honesty and I mean to eat no other bread. No, no, no, no! No more humbug!"

Perenna shrugged his shoulders:

"Alexandre, you're an ass. Upon my word, the bread of honesty hasn't enlarged your intelligence. Who talked of starting again?"

"But—"

"But what?"

"All your maneuvers, Chief."

"My maneuvers! Do you think I have anything to say to this business?"

"Look here, Chief—"

"Why, I'm out of it altogether, my lad! Two hours ago I knew no more about it than you do. It's Providence that chucked this legacy at me, without so much as shouting, 'Heads!' And it's in obedience to the decrees of—"

"Then—?"

"It's my mission in life to avenge Cosmo Mornington, to find his natural heirs, to protect them and to divide among them the hundred millions that belong to them. That's all. Don't you call that the mission of an honest man?"

"Yes, but—"

"Yes, but, if I don't fulfil it as an honest man: is that what you mean?"

"Chief—"

"Well, my lad, if you notice the least thing in my conduct that dissatisfies you, if you discover a speck of black on Don Luis Perenna's conscience, examined under the magnifying glass, don't hesitate: collar me with both hands. I authorize you to do it. I order you to do it. Is that enough for you?"

"It's not enough for it to be enough for me, Chief."

"What are you talking about?"

"There are the others."

"Explain yourself."

"Suppose you're nabbed?"

"How?"

"You can be betrayed."

"By whom?"

"Your old mates."

"Gone away. I've sent them out of France."

"Where to?"

"That's my secret. I left you at the police office, in case I should require your services; and you see that I was right."

"But suppose the police discover your real identity?"

"Well?"

"They'll arrest you."

"Impossible!"

"Why?"

"They can't arrest me."

"For what reason?"

"You've said it yourself, fat-head: a first-class, tremendous, indisputable reason."

"What do you mean?"

"*I'm dead*!"

Mazeroux seemed staggered. The argument struck him fully. He at once perceived it, with all its common sense and all its absurdity. And suddenly he burst into a roar of laughter which bent him in two and convulsed his doleful features in the oddest fashion:

"Oh, Chief, just the same as always!… Lord, how funny!… Will I come along? I should think I would! As often as you like! You're dead and buried and put out of sight!… Oh, what a joke, what a joke!"

* * * * *

Hippolyte Fauville, civil engineer, lived on the Boulevard Suchet, near the fortifications, in a fair-sized private house having on its left a small garden in which he had built a large room that served as his study. The garden was thus reduced to a few trees and to a strip of grass along the railings, which were covered with ivy and contained a gate that opened on the Boulevard Suchet.

Don Luis Perenna went with Mazeroux to the commissary's office at Passy, where Mazeroux, on Perenna's instructions, gave his name and asked to have M. Fauville's house watched during the night by two policemen who were to arrest any suspicious person trying to obtain admission. The commissary agreed to the request.

Don Luis and Mazeroux next dined in the neighbourhood. At nine o'clock they reached the front door of the house.

"Alexandre," said Perenna.

"Yes, Chief?"

"You're not afraid?"

"No, Chief. Why should I be?"

"Why? Because, in defending M. Fauville and his son, we are attacking people who have a great interest in doing away with them and because those people seem pretty wide-awake. Your life, my life: a breath, a trifle. You're not afraid?"

"Chief," replied Mazeroux, "I can't say if I shall ever know what it means to be afraid. But there's one case in which I certainly shall never know."

"What case is that, old chap?"

"As long as I'm by your side, Chief."

And firmly he rang the bell.

CHAPTER THREE

A MAN DOOMED

The door was opened by a manservant. Mazeroux sent in his card.

Hippolyte received the two visitors in his study. The table, on which stood a movable telephone, was littered with books, pamphlets, and papers. There were two tall desks, with diagrams and drawings, and some glass cases containing reduced models, in ivory and steel, of apparatus constructed or invented by the engineer.

A large sofa stood against the wall. In one corner was a winding staircase that led to a circular gallery. An electric chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Mazeroux, after stating his quality and introducing his friend Perenna as also sent by the Prefect of Police, at once expounded the object of their visit.

M. Desmalions, he said, was feeling anxious on the score of very serious indications which he had just received and, without waiting for the next day's interview, begged M. Fauville to take all the precautions which his detectives might advise.

Fauville at first displayed a certain ill humour.

"My precautions are taken, gentlemen, and well taken. And, on the other hand, I am afraid that your interference may do harm."

"In what way?"

"By arousing the attention of my enemies and preventing me, for that reason, from collecting proofs which I need in order to confound them."

"Can you explain—?"

"No, I cannot … To-morrow, to-morrow morning—not before."

"And if it's too late?" Don Luis interjected.

"Too late? To-morrow?"

"Inspector Vérot told M. Desmalions's secretary that the two murders would take place to-night. He said it was fatal and irrevocable."

"To-night?" cried Fauville angrily. "I tell you no! Not to-night. I'm sure of that. There are things which I know, aren't there, which you do not?"

"Yes," retorted Don Luis, "but there may also be things which Inspector Vérot knew and which you don't know. He had perhaps learned more of your enemies' secrets than you did. The proof is that he was suspected, that a man carrying an ebony walking-stick was seen watching his movements, that, lastly, he was killed."

Hippolyte Fauville's self-assurance decreased. Perenna took advantage of this to insist; and he insisted to such good purpose that Fauville, though without withdrawing from his reserve, ended by yielding before a will that was stronger than his own.

"Well, but you surely don't intend to spend the night in here?"

"We do indeed."

"Why, it's ridiculous! It's sheer waste of time! After all, looking at things from the worst—And what do you want besides?"

"Who lives in the house?"

"Who? My wife, to begin with. She has the first floor."

"Mme. Fauville is not threatened?"

"No, not at all. It's I who am threatened with death; I and my son Edmond. That is why, for the past week, instead of sleeping in my regular bedroom, I have locked myself up in this room. I

have given my work as a pretext; a quantity of writing which keeps me up very late and for which I need my son's assistance."

"Does he sleep here, then?"

"He sleeps above us, in a little room which I have had arranged for him.

The only access to it is by this inner staircase."

"Is he there now?"

"Yes, he's asleep."

"How old is he?"

"Sixteen."

"But the fact that you have changed your room shows that you feared some one would attack you. Whom had you in mind? An enemy living in the house? One of your servants? Or people from the outside? In that case, how could they get in? The whole question lies in that."

"To-morrow, to-morrow," replied Fauville, obstinately. "I will explain everything to-morrow —"

"Why not to-night?" Perenna persisted.

"Because I want proofs, I tell you; because the mere fact of my talking may have terrible consequences—and I am frightened; yes, I'm frightened—"

He was trembling, in fact, and looked so wretched and terrified that Don Luis insisted no longer.

"Very well," he said, "I will only ask your permission, for my comrade and myself, to spend the night where we can hear you if you call."

"As you please, Monsieur. Perhaps, after all, that will be best."

At that moment one of the servants knocked and came in to say that his mistress wished to see the master before she went out. Madame Fauville entered almost immediately. She bowed pleasantly as Perenna and Mazeroux rose from their chairs.

She was a woman between thirty and thirty-five, a woman of a bright and smiling beauty, which she owed to her blue eyes, to her wavy hair, to all the charm of her rather vapid but amiable and very pretty face. She wore a long, figured-silk cloak over an evening dress that showed her fine shoulders.

Her husband said, in surprise

"Are you going out to-night?"

"You forget," she said. "The Auverards offered me a seat in their box at the opera; and you yourself asked me to look in at Mme. d'Ersingen's party afterward—"

"So I did, so I did," he said. "It escaped my memory; I am working so hard."

She finished buttoning her gloves and asked:

"Won't you come and fetch me at Mme. d'Ersingen's?"

"What for?"

"They would like it."

"But I shouldn't. Besides, I don't feel well enough."

"Then I'll make your apologies for you."

"Yes, do."

She drew her cloak around her with a graceful gesture, and stood for a few moments, without moving, as though seeking a word of farewell. Then she said:

"Edmond's not here! I thought he was working with you?"

"He was feeling tired."

"Is he asleep?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to kiss him good-night."

"No, you would only wake him. And here's your car; so go, dear. Amuse yourself."

"Oh, amuse myself!" she said. "There's not much amusement about the opera and an evening party."

"Still, it's better than keeping one's room."

There was some little constraint. It was obviously one of those ill-assorted households in which the husband, suffering in health and not caring for the pleasures of society, stays at home, while the wife seeks the enjoyments to which her age and habits entitle her.

As he said nothing more, she bent over and kissed him on the forehead. Then, once more bowing to the two visitors, she went out. A moment later they heard the sound of the motor driving away.

Hippolyte Fauville at once rose and rang the bell. Then he said:

"No one here has any idea of the danger hanging over me. I have confided in nobody, not even in Silvestre, my own man, though he has been in my service for years and is honesty itself."

The manservant entered.

"I am going to bed, Silvestre," said M. Fauville. "Get everything ready."

Silvestre opened the upper part of the great sofa, which made a comfortable bed, and laid the sheets and blankets. Next, at his master's orders, he brought a jug of water, a glass, a plate of biscuits, and a dish of fruit.

M. Fauville ate a couple of biscuits and then cut a dessert-apple. It was not ripe. He took two others, felt them, and, not thinking them good, put them back as well. Then he peeled a pear and ate it.

"You can leave the fruit dish," he said to his man. "I shall be glad of it, if I am hungry during the night…. Oh, I was forgetting! These two gentlemen are staying. Don't mention it to anybody. And, in the morning, don't come until I ring."

The man placed the fruit dish on the table before retiring. Perenna, who was noticing everything, and who was afterward to remember every smallest detail of that evening, which his memory recorded with a sort of mechanical faithfulness, counted three pears and four apples in the dish.

Meanwhile, Fauville went up the winding staircase, and, going along the gallery, reached the room where his son lay in bed.

"He's fast asleep," he said to Perenna, who had joined him.

The bedroom was a small one. The air was admitted by a special system of ventilation, for the dormer window was hermetically closed by a wooden shutter tightly nailed down.

"I took the precaution last year," Hippolyte Fauville explained. "I used to make my electrical experiments in this room and was afraid of being spied upon, so I closed the aperture opening on the roof."

And he added in a low voice:

"They have been prowling around me for a long time."

The two men went downstairs again.

Fauville looked at his watch.

"A quarter past ten: bedtime, I am exceedingly tired, and you will excuse me—"

It was arranged that Perenna and Mazeroux should make themselves comfortable in a couple of easy chairs which they carried into the passage between the study and the entrance hall. But, before bidding them good-night, Hippolyte Fauville, who, although greatly excited, had appeared until then to retain his self-control, was seized with a sudden attack of weakness. He uttered a faint cry. Don Luis turned round and saw the sweat pouring like gleaming water down his face and neck, while he shook with fever and anguish.

"What's the matter?" asked Perenna.

"I'm frightened! I'm frightened!" he said.

"This is madness!" cried Don Luis. "Aren't we here, the two of us? We can easily spend the night with you, if you prefer, by your bedside."

Fauville replied by shaking Perenna violently by the shoulder, and, with distorted features, stammering:

"If there were ten of you—if there were twenty of you with me, you need not think that it would spoil their schemes! They can do anything they please, do you hear, anything! They have already

killed Inspector Vérot—they will kill me—and they will kill my son. Oh, the blackguards! My God, take pity on me! The awful terror of it! The pain I suffer!"

He had fallen on his knees and was striking his breast and repeating:

"O God, have pity on me! I can't die! I can't let my son die! Have pity on me, I beseech Thee!"

He sprang to his feet and led Perenna to a glass-fronted case, which he rolled back on its brass castors, revealing a small safe built into the wall.

"You will find my whole story here, written up day by day for the past three years. If anything should happen to me, revenge will be easy."

He hurriedly turned the letters of the padlock and, with a key which he took from his pocket, opened the safe.

It was three fourths empty; but on one of the shelves, between some piles of papers, was a diary bound in drab cloth, with a rubber band round it. He took the diary, and, emphasizing his words, said:

"There, look, it's all in here. With this, the hideous business can be reconstructed…. There are my suspicions first and then my certainties…. Everything, everything … how to trap them and how to do for them…. You'll remember, won't you? A diary bound in drab cloth…. I'm putting it back in the safe."

Gradually his calmness returned. He pushed back the glass case, tidied a few papers, switched on the electric lamp above his bed, put out the lights in the middle of the ceiling, and asked Don Luis and Mazeroux to leave him.

Don Luis, who was walking round the room and examining the iron shutters of the two windows, noticed a door opposite the entrance door and asked the engineer about it.

"I use it for my regular clients," said Fauville, "and sometimes I go out that way."

"Does it open on the garden?"

"Yes."

"Is it properly closed?"

"You can see for yourself; it's locked and bolted with a safety bolt.

Both keys are on my bunch; so is the key of the garden gate."

He placed the bunch of keys on the table with his pocket-book and, after first winding it, his watch.

Don Luis, without troubling to ask permission, took the keys and unfastened the lock and the bolt. A flight of three steps brought him to the garden. He followed the length of the narrow border. Through the ivy he saw and heard the two policemen pacing up and down the boulevard. He tried the lock of the gate. It was fastened.

"Everything's all right," he said when he returned, "and you can be easy.

Good-night."

"Good-night," said the engineer, seeing Perenna and Mazeroux out.

Between his study and the passage were two doors, one of which was padded and covered with oilcloth. On the other side, the passage was separated from the hall by a heavy curtain.

"You can go to sleep," said Perenna to his companion. "I'll sit up."

"But surely, Chief, you don't think that anything's going to happen!"

"I don't think so, seeing the precautions which we've taken. But, knowing Inspector Vérot as you did, do you think he was the man to imagine things?"

"No, Chief."

"Well, you know what he prophesied. That means that he had his reasons for doing so. And therefore I shall keep my eyes open."

"We'll take it in turns, Chief; wake me when it's my time to watch."

Seated motionlessly, side by side, they exchanged an occasional remark. Soon after, Mazeroux fell asleep. Don Luis remained in his chair without moving, his ears pricked up. Everything was quiet

in the house. Outside, from time to time, the sound of a motor car or of a cab rolled by. He could also hear the late trains on the Auteuil line.

He rose several times and went up to the door. Not a sound. Hippolyte Fauville was evidently asleep.

"Capital!" said Perenna to himself. "The boulevard is watched. No one can enter the room except by this way. So there is nothing to fear."

At two o'clock in the morning a car stopped outside the house, and one of the manservants, who must have been waiting in the kitchen, hastened to the front door. Perenna switched off the light in the passage, and, drawing the curtain slightly aside, saw Mme. Fauville enter, followed by Silvestre.

She went up. The lights on the staircase were put out. For half an hour or so there was a sound overhead of voices and of chairs moving. Then all was silence.

And, amid this silence, Perenna felt an unspeakable anguish arise within him, he could not tell why. But it was so violent, the impression became so acute, that he muttered:

"I shall go and see if he's asleep. I don't expect that he has bolted the doors."

He had only to push both doors to open them; and, with his electric lantern in his hand, he went up to the bed. Hippolyte Fauville was sleeping with his face turned to the wall.

Perenna gave a smile of relief. He returned to the passage and, shaking Mazeroux:

"Your turn, Alexandre."

"No news, Chief?"

"No, none; he's asleep."

"How do you know?"

"I've had a look at him."

"That's funny; I never heard you. It's true, though, I've slept like a pig."

He followed Perenna into the study, and Perenna said:

"Sit down and don't wake him. I shall take forty winks."

He had one more turn at sentry duty. But, even while dozing, he remained conscious of all that happened around him. A clock struck the hours with a low chime; and each time Perenna counted the strokes. Then came the life outside awakening, the rattle of the milk-carts, the whistle of the early suburban trains.

People began to stir inside the house. The daylight trickled in through the crannies of the shutters, and the room gradually became filled with light.

"Let's go away," said Sergeant Mazeroux. "It would be better for him not to find us here."

"Hold your tongue!" said Don Luis, with an imperious gesture.

"Why?"

"You'll wake him up."

"But you can see I'm not waking him," said Mazeroux, without lowering his tone.

"That's true, that's true," whispered Don Luis, astonished that the sound of that voice had not disturbed the sleeper.

And he felt himself overcome with the same anguish that had seized upon him in the middle of the night, a more clearly defined anguish, although he would not, although he dared not, try to realize the reason of it.

"What's the matter with you, Chief? You're looking like nothing on earth.

What is it?"

"Nothing—nothing. I'm frightened—"

Mazeroux shuddered.

"Frightened of what? You say that just as he did last night."

"Yes … yes … and for the same reason."

"But—?"

"Don't you understand? Don't you understand that I'm wondering—?"

"No; what?"

"If he's not dead!"

"But you're mad, Chief!"

"No…. I don't know…. Only, only … I have an impression of death—"

Lantern in hand, he stood as one paralyzed, opposite the bed; and he who was afraid of nothing in the world had not the courage to throw the light on Hippolyte Fauville's face. A terrifying silence rose and filled the room.

"Oh, Chief, he's not moving!"

"I know … I know … and I now see that he has not moved once during the night. And that's what frightens me."

He had to make a real effort in order to step forward. He was now almost touching the bed.

The engineer did not appear to breathe.

This time, Perenna resolutely took hold of his hand.

It was icy cold.

Don Luis at once recovered all his self-possession.

"The window! Open the window!" he cried.

And, when the light flooded the room, he saw the face of Hippolyte Fauville all swollen, stained with brown patches.

"Oh," he said, under his breath, "he's dead!"

"Dash it all! Dash it all!" spluttered the detective sergeant.

For two or three minutes they stood petrified, stupefied, staggered at the sight of this most astonishing and mysterious phenomenon. Then a sudden idea made Perenna start. He flew up the winding staircase, rushed along the gallery, and darted into the attic.

Edmond, Hippolyte Fauville's son, lay stiff and stark on his bed, with a cadaverous face, dead, too.

"Dash it all! Dash it all!" repeated Mazeroux.

Never, perhaps, in the course of his adventurous career, had Perenna experienced such a knockdown blow. It gave him a feeling of extreme lassitude, depriving him of all power of speech or movement. Father and son were dead! They had been killed during that night! A few hours earlier, though the house was watched and every outlet hermetically closed, both had been poisoned by an infernal puncture, even as Inspector Vérot was poisoned, even as Cosmo Mornington was poisoned.

"Dash it all!" said Mazeroux once more. "It was not worth troubling about the poor devils and performing such miracles to save them!"

The exclamation conveyed a reproach. Perenna grasped it and admitted:

"You are right, Mazeroux; I was not equal to the job."

"Nor I, Chief."

"You … you have only been in this business since yesterday evening—"

"Well, so have you, Chief!"

"Yes, I know, since yesterday evening, whereas the others have been working at it for weeks and weeks. But, all the same, these two are dead; and I was there, I, Lupin, was there! The thing has been done under my eyes; and I saw nothing! I saw nothing! How is it possible?"

He uncovered the poor boy's shoulders, showing the mark of a puncture at the top of the arm.

"The same mark—the same mark obviously that we shall find on the father…. The lad does not seem to have suffered, either…. Poor little chap! He did not look very strong…. Never mind, it's a nice face; what a terrible blow for his mother when she learns!"

The detective sergeant wept with anger and pity, while he kept on mumbling:

"Dash it all!… Dash it all!"

"We shall avenge them, eh, Mazeroux?"

"Rather, Chief! Twice over!"

"Once will do, Mazeroux. But it shall be done with a will."

"That I swear it shall!"

"You're right; let's swear. Let us swear that this dead pair shall be avenged. Let us swear not to lay down our arms until the murderers of Hippolyte Fauville and his son are punished as they deserve."

"I swear it as I hope to be saved, Chief."

"Good!" said Perenna. "And now to work. You go and telephone at once to the police office. I am sure that M. Desmalions will approve of your informing him without delay. He takes an immense interest in the case."

"And if the servants come? If Mme. Fauville—?"

"No one will come till we open the doors; and we shan't open them except to the Prefect of Police. It will be for him, afterward, to tell Mme. Fauville that she is a widow and that she has no son. Go! Hurry!"

"One moment, Chief; we are forgetting something that will help us enormously."

"What's that?"

"The little drab-cloth diary in the safe, in which M. Fauville describes the plot against him."

"Why, of course!" said Perenna. "You're right … especially as he omitted to mix up the letters of the lock last night, and the key is on the bunch which he left lying on the table."

They ran down the stairs.

"Leave this to me," said Mazeroux. "It's more regular that you shouldn't touch the safe."

He took the bunch, moved the glass case, and inserted the key with a feverish emotion which Don Luis felt even more acutely than he did. They were at last about to know the details of the mysterious story. The dead man himself would betray the secret of his murderers.

"Lord, what a time you take!" growled Don Luis.

Mazeroux plunged both hands into the crowd of papers that encumbered the iron shelf.

"Well, Mazeroux, hand it over."

"What?"

"The diary."

"I can't Chief."

"What's that?"

"It's gone."

Don Luis stifled an oath. The drab-cloth diary, which the engineer had placed in the safe before their eyes, had disappeared.

Mazeroux shook his head.

"Dash it all! So they knew about that diary!"

"Of course they did; and they knew plenty of other things besides. We've not seen the end of it with those fellows. There's no time to lose. Ring up!"

Mazeroux did so and soon received the answer that M. Desmalions was coming to the telephone. He waited.

In a few minutes Perenna, who had been walking up and down, examining different objects in the room, came and sat down beside Mazeroux. He seemed thoughtful. He reflected for some time. But then, his eyes falling on the fruit dish, he muttered:

"Hullo! There are only three apples instead of four. Then he ate the fourth."

"Yes," said Mazeroux, "he must have eaten it."

"That's funny," replied Perenna, "for he didn't think them ripe."

He was silent once more, sat leaning his elbows on the table, visibly preoccupied; then, raising his head, he let fall these words:

"The murder was committed before we entered the room, at half-past twelve exactly."

"How do you know, Chief?"

"M. Fauville's murderer or murderers, in touching the things on the table, knocked down the watch which M. Fauville had placed there. They put it back; but the fall had stopped it. And it stopped at half-past twelve."

"Then, Chief, when we settled ourselves here, at two in the morning, it was a corpse that was lying beside us and another over our heads?"

"Yes."

"But how did those devils get in?"

"Through this door, which opens on the garden, and through the gate that opens on the Boulevard Suchet."

"Then they had keys to the locks and bolts?"

"False keys, yes."

"But the policemen watching the house outside?"

"They are still watching it, as that sort watch a house, walking from point to point without thinking that people can slip into a garden while they have their backs turned. That's what took place in coming and going."

Sergeant Mazeroux seemed flabbergasted. The criminals' daring, their skill, the precision of their acts bewildered him.

"They're deuced clever," he said.

"Deuced clever, Mazeroux, as you say; and I foresee a tremendous battle.

By Jupiter, with what a vim they set to work!"

The telephone bell rang. Don Luis left Mazeroux to his conversation with the Prefect, and, taking the bunch of keys, easily unfastened the lock and the bolt of the door and went out into the garden, in the hope of there finding some trace that should facilitate his quest.

As on the day before, he saw, through the ivy, two policemen walking between one lamp-post and the next. They did not see him. Moreover, anything that might happen inside the house appeared to be to them a matter of total indifference.

"That's my great mistake," said Perenna to himself. "It doesn't do to entrust a job to people who do not suspect its importance."

His investigations led to the discovery of some traces of footsteps on the gravel, traces not sufficiently plain to enable him to distinguish the shape of the shoes that had left them, yet distinct enough to confirm his supposition. The scoundrels had been that way.

Suddenly he gave a movement of delight. Against the border of the path, among the leaves of a little clump of rhododendrons, he saw something red, the shape of which at once struck him. He stooped. It was an apple, the fourth apple, the one whose absence from the fruit dish he had noticed.

"Excellent!" he said. "Hippolyte Fauville did not eat it. One of them must have carried it away —a fit of appetite, a sudden hunger—and it must have rolled from his hand without his having time to look for it and pick it up."

He took up the fruit and examined it.

"What!" he exclaimed, with a start. "Can it be possible?"

He stood dumfounded, a prey to real excitement, refusing to admit the inadmissible thing which nevertheless presented itself to his eyes with the direct evidence of actuality. Some one had bitten into the apple; into the apple which was too sour to eat. And the teeth had left their mark!

"Is it possible?" repeated Don Luis. "Is it possible that one of them can have been guilty of such an imprudence! The apple must have fallen without his knowing … or he must have been unable to find it in the dark."

He could not get over his surprise. He cast about for plausible explanations. But the fact was there before him. Two rows of teeth, cutting through the thin red peel, had left their regular, semicircular bite clearly in the pulp of the fruit. They were clearly marked on the top, while the lower row had melted into a single curved line.

"The teeth of the tiger!" murmured Perenna, who could not remove his eyes from that double imprint. "The teeth of the tiger! The teeth that had already left their mark on Inspector Vérot's piece of chocolate! What a coincidence! It can hardly be fortuitous. Must we not take it as certain that the same person bit into this apple and into that cake of chocolate which Inspector Vérot brought to the police office as an incontestable piece of evidence?"

He hesitated a second. Should he keep this evidence for himself, for the personal inquiry which he meant to conduct? Or should he surrender it to the investigations of the police? But the touch of the object filled him with such repugnance, with such a sense of physical discomfort, that he flung away the apple and sent it rolling under the leaves of the shrubs.

And he repeated to himself:

"The teeth of the tiger! The teeth of the wild beast!"

He locked the garden door behind him, bolted it, put back the keys on the table and said to Mazeroux:

"Have you spoken to the Chief of Police?"

"Yes."

"Is he coming?"

"Yes."

"Didn't he order you to telephone for the commissary of police?"

"No."

"That means that he wants to see everything by himself. So much the better. But the detective office? The public prosecutor?"

"He's told them."

"What's the matter with you, Alexandre? I have to drag your answers out of you. Well, what is it? You're looking at me very queerly. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"That's all right. I expect this business has turned your head. And no wonder…. The Prefect won't enjoy himself, either, … especially as he put his faith in me a bit light-heartedly and will be called upon to give an explanation of my presence here. By the way, it's much better that you should take upon yourself the responsibility for all that we have done. Don't you agree? Besides, it'll do you all the good in the world.

"Put yourself forward, flatly; suppress me as much as you can; and, above all—I don't suppose that you will have any objection to this little detail—don't be such a fool as to say that you went to sleep for a single second, last night, in the passage. First of all, you'd only be blamed for it. And then … well, that's understood, eh? So we have only to say good-bye.

"If the Prefect wants me, as I expect he will, telephone to my address, Place du Palais-Bourbon. I shall be there. Good-bye. It is not necessary for me to assist at the inquiry; my presence would be out of place. Good-bye, old chap."

He turned toward the door of the passage.

"Half a moment!" cried Mazeroux.

"Half a moment?… What do you mean?"

The detective sergeant had flung himself between him and the door and was blocking his way.

"Yes, half a moment … I am not of your opinion. It's far better that you should wait until the Prefect comes."

"But I don't care a hang about your opinion!"

"May be; but you shan't pass."

"What! Why, Alexandre, you must be ill!"

"Look here, Chief," said Mazeroux feebly. "What can it matter to you?

It's only natural that the Prefect should wish to speak to you."

"Ah, it's the Prefect who wishes, is it?… Well, my lad, you can tell him that I am not at his orders, that I am at nobody's orders, and that, if the President of the Republic, if Napoleon I himself were to bar my way … Besides, rats! Enough said. Get out of the road!"

"You shall not pass!" declared Mazeroux, in a resolute tone, extending his arms.

"Well, I like that!"

"You shall not pass."

"Alexandre, just count ten."

"A hundred, if you like, but you shall not…."

"Oh, blow your catchwords! Get out of this."

He seized Mazeroux by both shoulders, made him spin round on his heels and, with a push, sent him floundering over the sofa. Then he opened the door.

"Halt, or I fire!"

It was Mazeroux, who had scrambled to his feet and now stood with his revolver in his hand and a determined expression on his face.

Don Luis stopped in amazement. The threat was absolutely indifferent to him, and the barrel of that revolver aimed at him left him as cold as could be. But by what prodigy did Mazeroux, his former accomplice, his ardent disciple, his devoted servant, by what prodigy did Mazeroux dare to act as he was doing?

Perenna went up to him and pressed gently on the detective's outstretched arm.

"Prefect's orders?" he asked.

"Yes," muttered the sergeant, uncomfortably.

"Orders to keep me here until he comes?"

"Yes."

"And if I betrayed an intention of leaving, to prevent me?"

"Yes."

"By every means?"

"Yes."

"Even by putting a bullet through my skin?"

"Yes."

Perenna reflected; and then, in a serious voice:

"Would you have fired, Mazeroux?"

The sergeant lowered his head and said faintly:

"Yes, Chief."

Perenna looked at him without anger, with a glance of affectionate sympathy; and it was an absorbing sight for him to see his former companion dominated by such a sense of discipline and duty. Nothing was able to prevail against that sense, not even the fierce admiration, the almost animal attachment which Mazeroux retained for his master.

"I'm not angry, Mazeroux. In fact, I approve. Only you must tell me the reason why the Prefect of Police—"

The detective did not reply, but his eyes wore an expression of such sadness that Don Luis started, suddenly understanding.

"No," he cried, "no!… It's absurd … he can't have thought that!… And you, Mazeroux, do you believe me guilty?"

"Oh, I, Chief, am as sure of you as I am of myself!… You don't take life!… But, all the same, there are things … coincidences—"

"Things … coincidences …" repeated Don Luis slowly.

He remained pensive; and, in a low voice, he said:

"Yes, after all, there's truth in what you say…. Yes, it all fits in…. Why didn't I think of it? … My relations with Cosmo Mornington, my arrival in Paris in time for the reading of the will, my

insisting on spending the night here, the fact that the death of the two Fauvilles undoubtedly gives me the millions…. And then … and then … why, he's absolutely right, your Prefect of Police!… All the more so as…. Well, there, I'm a goner!"

"Come, come, Chief!"

"A dead-goner, old chap; you just get that into your head. Not as Arsène Lupin, ex-burglar, ex-convict, ex-anything you please—I'm unattackable on that ground—but as Don Luis Perenna, respectable man, residuary legatee, and the rest of it. And it's too stupid! For, after all, who will find the murderers of Cosmo, Vérot, and the two Fauvilles, if they go clapping me into jail?"

"Come, come, Chief—"

"Shut up! … Listen!"

A motor car was stopping on the boulevard, followed by another. It was evidently the Prefect and the magistrates from the public prosecutor's office.

Don Luis took Mazeroux by the arm.

"There's only one way out of it, Alexandre! Don't say you went to sleep."

"I must, Chief."

"You silly ass!" growled Don Luis. "How is it possible to be such an ass!

It's enough to disgust one with honesty. What am I to do, then?"

"Discover the culprit, Chief."

"What! … What are you talking about?"

Mazeroux, in his turn, took him by the arm and, clutching him with a sort of despair, said, in a voice choked with tears:

"Discover the culprit, Chief. If not, you're done for … that's certain … the Prefect told me so. … The police want a culprit … they want him this evening…. One has got to be found…. It's up to you to find him."

"What you have, Alexandre, is a merry wit."

"It's child's play for you, Chief. You have only to set your mind to it."

"But there's not the least clue, you ass!"

"You'll find one … you must … I entreat you, hand them over somebody…. It would be more than I could bear if you were arrested. You, the chief, accused of murder! No, no…. I entreat you, discover the criminal and hand him over…. You have the whole day to do it in…and Lupin has done greater things than that!"

He was stammering, weeping, wringing his hands, grimacing with every feature of his comic face. And it was really touching, this grief, this dismay at the approach of the danger that threatened his master.

M. Desmalions's voice was heard in the hall, through the curtain that closed the passage. A third motor car stopped on the boulevard, and a fourth, both doubtless laden with policemen.

The house was surrounded, besieged.

Perenna was silent.

Beside him, anxious-faced, Mazeroux seemed to be imploring him.

A few seconds elapsed.

Then Perenna declared, deliberately:

"Looking at things all round, Alexandre, I admit that you have seen the position clearly and that your fears are fully justified. If I do not manage to hand over the murderer or murderers of Hippolyte Fauville and his son to the police in a few hours from now, it is I, Don Luis Perenna, who will be lodged in durance vile on the evening of this Thursday, the first of April."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CLOUDED TURQUOISE

It was about nine o'clock in the morning when the Prefect of Police entered the study in which the incomprehensible tragedy of that double murder had been enacted.

He did not even bow to Don Luis; and the magistrates who accompanied him might have thought that Don Luis was merely an assistant of Sergeant Mazeroux, if the chief detective had not made it his business to tell them, in a few words, the part played by the stranger.

M. Desmalions briefly examined the two corpses and received a rapid explanation from Mazeroux. Then, returning to the hall, he went up to a drawing-room on the first floor, where Mme. Fauville, who had been informed of his visit, joined him almost at once.

Perenna, who had not stirred from the passage, slipped into the hall himself. The servants of the house, who by this time had heard of the murder, were crossing it in every direction. He went down the few stairs leading to a ground-floor landing, on which the front door opened.

There were two men there, of whom one said:

"You can't pass."

"But—"

"You can't pass: those are our orders."

"Your orders? Who gave them?"

"The Prefect himself."

"No luck," said Perenna, laughing. "I have been up all night and I am starving. Is there no way of getting something to eat?"

The two policemen exchanged glances and one of them beckoned to Silvestre and spoke to him. Silvestre went toward the dining-room, and returned with a horseshoe roll.

"Good," thought Don Luis, after thanking him. "This settles it. I'm nabbed. That's what I wanted to know. But M. Desmalions is deficient in logic. For, if it's Arsène Lupin whom he means to detain here, all these worthy plain-clothesmen are hardly enough; and, if it's Don Luis Perenna, they are superfluous, because the flight of Master Perenna would deprive Master Perenna of every chance of seeing the colour of my poor Cosmo's shekels. Having said which, I will take a chair."

He resumed his seat in the passage and awaited events.

Through the open door of the study he saw the magistrates pursuing their investigations. The divisional surgeon made a first examination of the two bodies and at once recognized the same symptoms of poisoning which he himself had perceived, the evening before, on the corpse of Inspector Vérot.

Next, the detectives took up the bodies and carried them to the adjoining bedrooms which the father and son formerly occupied on the second floor of the house.

The Prefect of Police then came downstairs; and Don Luis heard him say to the magistrates:

"Poor woman! She refused to understand…. When at last she understood, she fell to the ground in a dead faint. Only think, her husband and her son at one blow!… Poor thing!"

From that moment Perenna heard and saw nothing. The door was shut. The Prefect must afterward have given some order through the outside, through the communication with the front door offered by the garden, for the two detectives came and took up their positions in the hall, at the entrance to the passage, on the right and left of the dividing curtain.

"One thing's certain," thought Don Luis. "My shares are not booming. What a state Alexandre must be in! Oh, what a state!"

At twelve o'clock Silvestre brought him some food on a tray.

And the long and painful wait began anew.

In the study and in the house, the inquiry, which had been adjourned for lunch, was resumed. Perenna heard footsteps and the sound of voices on every side. At last, feeling tired and bored, he leaned back in his chair and fell asleep.

* * * * *

It was four o'clock when Sergeant Mazeroux came and woke him. As he led him to the study, Mazeroux whispered:

"Well, have you discovered him?"

"Whom?"

"The murderer."

"Of course!" said Perenna. "It's as easy as shelling peas!"

"That's a good thing!" said Mazeroux, greatly relieved and failing to see the joke. "But for that, as you saw for yourself, you would have been done for."

Don Luis entered. In the room were the public prosecutor, the examining magistrate, the chief detective, the local commissary of police, two inspectors, and three constables in uniform.

Outside, on the Boulevard Suchet, shouts were raised; and, when the commissary and his three policemen went out, by the Prefect's orders, to listen to the crowd, the hoarse voice of a newsboy was heard shouting:

"The double murder on the Boulevard Suchet! Full particulars of the death of Inspector Vérot! The police at a loss!—"

Then, when the door was closed, all was silent.

"Mazeroux was quite right," thought Don Luis. "It's I or the other one: that's clear. Unless the words that will be spoken and the facts that will come to light in the course of this examination supply me with some clue that will enable me to give them the name of that mysterious X, they'll surrender me this evening for the people to batten on. Attention, Lupin, old chap, the great game is about to commence!"

He felt that thrill of delight which always ran through him at the approach of the great struggles. This one, indeed, might be numbered among the most terrible that he had yet sustained.

He knew the Prefect's reputation, his experience, his tenacity, and the keen pleasure which he took in conducting important inquiries and in personally pushing them to a conclusion before placing them in the magistrate's hands; and he also knew all the professional qualities of the chief detective, and all the subtlety, all the penetrating logic possessed by the examining magistrate.

The Prefect of Police himself directed the attack. He did so in a straightforward fashion, without beating about the bush, and in a rather harsh voice, which had lost its former tone of sympathy for Don Luis. His attitude also was more formal and lacked that geniality which had struck Don Luis on the previous day.

"Monsieur," he said, "circumstances having brought about that, as the residuary legatee and representative of Mr. Cosmo Mornington, you spent the night on this ground floor while a double murder was being committed here, we wish to receive your detailed evidence as to the different incidents that occurred last night."

"In other words, Monsieur le Préfet," said Perenna, replying directly to the attack, "in other words, circumstances having brought about that you authorized me to spend the night here, you would like to know if my evidence corresponds at all points with that of Sergeant Mazeroux?"

"Yes."

"Meaning that the part played by myself strikes you as suspicious?"

M. Desmalions hesitated. His eyes met Don Luis's eyes; and he was visibly impressed by the other's frank glance. Nevertheless he replied, plainly and bluntly:

"It is not for you to ask me questions, Monsieur."

Don Luis bowed.

"I am at your orders, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Please tell us what you know."

Don Luis thereupon gave a minute account of events, after which M. Desmalions reflected for a few moments and said:

"There is one point on which we want to be informed. When you entered this room at half-past two this morning and sat down beside M. Fauville, was there nothing to tell you that he was dead?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Préfet. Otherwise, Sergeant Mazeroux and I would have given the alarm."

"Was the garden door shut?"

"It must have been, as we had to unlock it at seven o'clock."

"With what?"

"With the key on the bunch."

"But how could the murderers, coming from the outside, have opened it?"

"With false keys."

"Have you a proof which allows you to suppose that it was opened with false keys?"

"No, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Therefore, until we have proofs to the contrary, we are bound to believe that it was not opened from the outside, and that the criminal was inside the house."

"But, Monsieur le Préfet, there was no one here but Sergeant Mazeroux and myself!"

There was a silence, a pause whose meaning admitted of no doubt.

M. Desmalions's next words gave it an even more precise value.

"You did not sleep during the night?"

"Yes, toward the end."

"You did not sleep before, while you were in the passage?"

"No."

"And Sergeant Mazeroux?"

Don Luis remained undecided for a moment; but how could he hope that the honest and scrupulous Mazeroux had disobeyed the dictates of his conscience?

He replied:

"Sergeant Mazeroux went to sleep in his chair and did not wake until Mme.

Fauville returned, two hours later."

There was a fresh silence, which evidently meant:

"So, during the two hours when Sergeant Mazeroux was asleep, it was physically possible for you to open the door and kill the two Fauvilles."

The examination was taking the course which Perenna had foreseen; and the circle was drawing closer and closer around him. His adversary was conducting the contest with a logic and vigour which he admired without reserve.

"By Jove!" he thought. "How difficult it is to defend one's self when one is innocent. There's my right wing and my left wing driven in. Will my centre be able to stand the assault?"

M. Desmalions, after a whispered colloquy with the examining magistrate, resumed his questions in these terms:

"Yesterday evening, when M. Fauville opened his safe in your presence and the sergeant's, what was in the safe?"

"A heap of papers, on one of the shelves; and, among those papers, the diary in drab cloth which has since disappeared."

"You did not touch those papers?"

"Neither the papers nor the safe, Monsieur le Préfet. Sergeant Mazeroux must have told you that he made me stand aside, to insure the regularity of the inquiry."

"So you never came into the slightest contact with the safe?"

"Not the slightest."

M. Desmalions looked at the examining magistrate and nodded his head. Had Perenna been able to doubt that a trap was being laid for him, a glance at Mazeroux would have told him all about it. Mazeroux was ashen gray.

Meanwhile, M. Desmalions continued:

"You have taken part in inquiries, Monsieur, in police inquiries. Therefore, in putting my next question to you, I consider that I am addressing it to a tried detective."

"I will answer your question, Monsieur le Préfet, to the best of my ability."

"Here it is, then: Supposing that there were at this moment in the safe an object of some kind, a jewel, let us say, a diamond out of a tie pin, and that this diamond had come from a tie pin which belonged to somebody whom we knew, somebody who had spent the night in this house, what would you think of the coincidence?"

"There we are," said Perenna to himself. "There's the trap. It's clear that they've found something in the safe, and next, that they imagine that this something belongs to me. Good! But, in that case, we must presume, as I have not touched the safe, that the thing was taken from me and put in the safe to compromise me. But I did not have a finger in this pie until yesterday; and it is impossible that, during last night, when I saw nobody, any one can have had time to prepare and contrive such a determined plot against me. So—"

The Prefect of Police interrupted this silent monologue by repeating:

"What would be your opinion?"

"There would be an undeniable connection between that person's presence in the house and the two crimes that had been committed."

"Consequently, we should have the right at least to suspect the person?"

"Yes."

"That is your view?"

"Decidedly."

M. Desmalions produced a piece of tissue paper from his pocket and took from it a little blue stone, which he displayed.

"Here is a turquoise which we found in the safe. It belongs, without a shadow of a doubt, to the ring which you are wearing on your finger."

Don Luis was seized with a fit of rage. He half grated, through his clenched teeth:

"Oh, the rascals! How clever they are! But no, I can't believe—"

He looked at his ring, which was formed of a large, clouded, dead turquoise, surrounded by a circle of small, irregular turquoises, also of a very pale blue. One of these was missing; and the one which M. Desmalions had in his hand fitted the place exactly.

"What do you say?" asked M. Desmalions.

"I say that this turquoise belongs to my ring, which was given me by Cosmo Mornington on the first occasion that I saved his life."

"So we are agreed?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet, we are agreed."

Don Luis Perenna began to walk across the room, reflecting. The movement which the two detectives made toward the two doors told him that his arrest was provided for. A word from M. Desmalions, and Sergeant Mazeroux would be forced to take his chief by the collar.

Don Luis once more gave a glance toward his former accomplice. Mazeroux made a gesture of entreaty, as though to say:

"Well, what are you waiting for? Why don't you give up the criminal?

Quick, it's time!"

Don Luis smiled.

"What's the matter?" asked the Prefect, in a tone that now entirely lacked the sort of involuntary politeness which he had shown since the commencement of the examination.

"The matter? The matter?—"

Perenna seized a chair by the back, spun it round and sat down upon it, with the simple remark:

"Let's talk!"

And this was said in such a way and the movement executed with so much decision that the Prefect muttered, as though wavering:

"I don't quite see—"

"You soon will, Monsieur le Préfet."

And, speaking in a slow voice, laying stress on every syllable that he uttered, he began:

"Monsieur le Préfet, the position is as clear as daylight. Yesterday evening you gave me an authorization which involves your responsibility most gravely. The result is that what you now want, at all costs and without delay, is a culprit. And that culprit is to be myself. By way of incriminating evidence, you have the fact of my presence here, the fact the door was locked on the inside, the fact that Sergeant Mazeroux was asleep while the crime was committed, and the fact of the discovery of the turquoise in the safe. All this is crushing, I admit. Added to it," he continued, "we have the terrible presumption that I had every interest in the removal of M. Fauville and his son, inasmuch as, if there is no heir of Cosmo Mornington's in existence, I come into a hundred million francs. Exactly. There is therefore nothing for me to do, Monsieur le Préfet, but to go with you to the lockup or else—"

"Or else what?"

"Or else hand over to you the criminal, the real criminal."

The Prefect of Police smiled and took out his watch.

"I'm waiting," he said.

"It will take me just an hour, Monsieur le Préfet, and no more, if you give me every latitude. And the search of the truth, it seems to me, is worth a little patience."

"I'm waiting," repeated M. Desmalions.

"Sergeant Mazeroux, please tell Silvestre, the manservant, that Monsieur le Préfet wishes to see him."

Upon a sign from M. Desmalions, Mazeroux went out.

Don Luis explained his motive.

"Monsieur le Préfet, whereas the discovery of the turquoise constitutes in your eyes an extremely serious proof against me, to me it is a revelation of the highest importance. I will tell you why. That turquoise must have fallen from my ring last evening and rolled on the carpet.

"Now there are only four persons," he continued, "who can have noticed this fall when it happened, picked up the turquoise and, in order to compromise the new adversary that I was, slipped it into the safe. The first of those four persons is one of your detectives, Sergeant Mazeroux, of whom we will not speak. The second is dead: I refer to M. Fauville. We will not speak of him. The third is Silvestre, the manservant. I should like to say a few words to him. I shall not take long."

Silvestre's examination, in fact, was soon over. He was able to prove that, pending the return of Mme. Fauville, for whom he had to open the door, he had not left the kitchen, where he was playing at cards with the lady's maid and another manservant.

"Very well," said Perenna. "One word more. You must have read in this morning's papers of the death of Inspector Vérot and seen his portrait."

"Yes."

"Do you know Inspector Vérot?"

"No."

"Still, it is probable that he came here yesterday, during the day."

"I can't say," replied the servant. "M. Fauville used to receive many visitors through the garden and let them in himself."

"You have no more evidence to give?"

"No."

"Please tell Mme. Fauville that Monsieur le Préfet would be very much obliged if he could have a word with her."

Silvestre left the room.

The examining magistrate and the public prosecutor had drawn nearer in astonishment.

The Prefect exclaimed:

"What, Monsieur! You don't mean to pretend that Mme. Fauville is mixed up—"

"Monsieur le Préfet, Mme. Fauville is the fourth person who may have seen the turquoise drop out of my ring."

"And what then? Have we the right, in the absence of any real proof, to suppose that a woman can kill her husband, that a mother can poison her son?"

"I am supposing nothing, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Then—?"

Don Luis made no reply. M. Desmalions did not conceal his irritation.

However, he said:

"Very well; but I order you most positively to remain silent. What questions am I to put to Mme. Fauville?"

"One only, Monsieur le Préfet: ask Mme. Fauville if she knows any one, apart from her husband, who is descended from the sisters Roussel."

"Why that question?"

"Because, if that descendant exists, it is not I who will inherit the millions, but he; and then it will be he and not I who would be interested in the removal of M. Fauville and his son."

"Of course, of course," muttered M. Desmalions. "But even so, this new trail—"

Mme. Fauville entered as he was speaking. Her face remained charming and pretty in spite of the tears that had reddened her eyelids and impaired the freshness of her cheeks. But her eyes expressed the scare of terror; and the obsession of the tragedy imparted to all her attractive personality, to her gait and to her movements, something feverish and spasmodic that was painful to look upon.

"Pray sit down, Madame," said the Prefect, speaking with the height of deference, "and forgive me for inflicting any additional emotion upon you. But time is precious; and we must do everything to make sure that the two victims whose loss you are mourning shall be avenged without delay."

Tears were still streaming from her beautiful eyes; and, with a sob, she stammered:

"If the police need me, Monsieur le Préfet—"

"Yes, it is a question of obtaining a few particulars. Your husband's mother is dead, is she not?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Am I correct in saying that she came from Saint-Etienne and that her maiden name was Roussel?"

"Yes."

"Elizabeth Roussel?"

"Yes."

"Had your husband any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"Therefore there is no descendant of Elizabeth Roussel living?"

"No."

"Very well. But Elizabeth Roussel had two sisters, did she not?"

"Yes."

"Ermeline Roussel, the elder, went abroad and was not heard of again. The other, the younger —"

"The other was called Armande Roussel. She was my mother."

"Eh? What do you say?"

"I said my mother's maiden name was Armande Roussel, and I married my cousin, the son of Elizabeth Roussel."

The statement had the effect of a thunderclap. So, upon the death of Hippolyte Fauville and his son Edmond, the direct descendants of the eldest sister, Cosmo Mornington's inheritance passed to the other branch, that of Armande Roussel; and this branch was represented so far by Mme. Fauville!

The Prefect of Police and the examining magistrate exchanged glances and both instinctively turned toward Don Luis Perenna, who did not move a muscle.

"Have you no brother or sister, Madame?" asked the Prefect.

"No, Monsieur le Préfet, I am the only one."

The only one! In other words, now that her husband and son were dead, Cosmo Mornington's millions reverted absolutely and undeniably to her, to her alone.

Meanwhile, a hideous idea weighed like a nightmare upon the magistrates and they could not rid themselves of it: the woman sitting before them was the mother of Edmond Fauville. M. Desmalions had his eyes on Don Luis Perenna, who wrote a few words on a card and handed it to the Prefect.

M. Desmalions, who was gradually resuming toward Don Luis his courteous attitude of the day before, read it, reflected a moment, and put this question to Mme. Fauville:

"What was your son Edmond's age?"

"Seventeen."

"You look so young—"

"Edmond was not my son, but my stepson, the son of my husband by his first wife, who died,"

"Ah! So Edmond Fauville—" muttered the Prefect, without finishing his sentence.

In two minutes the whole situation had changed. In the eyes of the magistrates, Mme. Fauville was no longer the widow and mother who must on no account be attacked. She had suddenly become a woman whom circumstances compelled them to cross-examine. However prejudiced they might be in her favour, however charmed by the seductive qualities of her beauty, they were inevitably bound to ask themselves, whether for some reason or other, for instance, in order to be alone in the enjoyment of the enormous fortune, she had not had the madness to kill her husband and to kill the boy who was only her husband's son. In any case, the question was there, calling for a solution.

The Prefect of Police continued:

"Do you know this turquoise?"

She took the stone which he held out to her and examined it without the least sign of confusion.

"No," she said. "I have an old-fashioned turquoise necklace, which I never wear, but the stones are larger and none of them has this irregular shape."

"We found this one in the safe," said M. Desmalions. "It forms part of a ring belonging to a person whom we know."

"Well," she said eagerly, "you must find that person."

"He is here," said the Prefect, pointing to Don Luis, who had been standing some way off and who had not been noticed by Mme. Fauville.

She started at the sight of Perenna and cried, very excitedly:

"But that gentleman was here yesterday evening! He was talking to my husband—and so was that other gentleman," she said, referring to Sergeant Mazeroux. "You must question them, find out why they were here.

You understand that, if the turquoise belonged to one of them—"

The insinuation was direct, but clumsy; and it lent the greatest weight to Perenna's unspoken argument:

"The turquoise was picked up by some one who saw me yesterday and who wishes to compromise me. Apart from M. Fauville and the detective sergeant, only two people saw me: Silvestre, the manservant, and Mme. Fauville. Consequently, as Silvestre is outside the question, I accuse Mme. Fauville of putting the turquoise in the safe."

M. Desmalions asked:

"Will you let me see the necklace, Madame?"

"Certainly. It is with my other jewels, in my wardrobe. I will go for it."

"Pray don't trouble, Madame. Does your maid know the necklace?"

"Quite well."

"In that case, Sergeant Mazeroux will tell her what is wanted."

* * * * *

Not a word was spoken during the few minutes for which Mazeroux was absent. Mme. Fauville seemed absorbed in her grief. M. Desmalions kept his eyes fixed on her.

The sergeant returned, carrying a very large box containing a number of jewel-cases and loose ornaments.

M. Desmalions found the necklace, examined it, and realized, in fact, that the stones did not resemble the turquoise and that none of them was missing. But, on separating two jewel cases in order to take out a tiara which also contained blue stones, he made a gesture of surprise.

"What are these two keys?" he asked, pointing to two keys identical in shape and size with those which opened the lock and the bolt of the garden door.

Mme. Fauville remained very calm. Not a muscle of her face moved. Nothing pointed to the least perturbation on account of this discovery. She merely said:

"I don't know. They have been there a long time."

"Mazeroux," said M. Desmalions, "try them on that door."

Mazeroux did so. The door opened.

"Yes," said Mme. Fauville. "I remember now, my husband gave them to me.

They were duplicates of his own keys—"

The words were uttered in the most natural tone and as though the speaker did not even suspect the terrible charge that was forming against her.

And nothing was more agonizing than this tranquillity. Was it a sign of absolute innocence, or the infernal craft of a criminal whom nothing is able to stir? Did she realize nothing of the tragedy which was taking place and of which she was the unconscious heroine? Or did she guess the terrible accusation which was gradually closing in upon her on every side and which threatened her with the most awful danger? But, in that case, how could she have been guilty of the extraordinary blunder of keeping those two keys?

A series of questions suggested itself to the minds of all those present.

The Prefect of Police put them as follows:

"You were out, Madame, were you not, when the murders were committed?"

"Yes."

"You were at the opera?"

"Yes; and I went on to a party at the house of one of my friends, Mme. d'Ersingen."

"Did your chauffeur drive you?"

"To the opera, yes. But I sent him back to his garage; and he came to fetch me at the party."

"I see," said M. Desmalions. "But how did you go from the opera to Mme. d'Ersingen's?"

For the first time, Mme. Fauville seemed to understand that she was the victim of a regular cross-examination; and her look and attitude betrayed a certain uneasiness. She replied:

"I took a motor cab."

"In the street?"

"On the Place de l'Opéra."

"At twelve o'clock, therefore?"

"No, at half-past eleven: I left before the opera was over."

"You were in a hurry to get to your friend's?"

"Yes … or rather—"

She stopped; her cheeks were scarlet; her lips and chin trembled; and she asked:

"Why do you ask me all these questions?"

"They are necessary, Madame. They may throw a light on what we want to know. I beg you, therefore, to answer them. At what time did you reach your friend's house?"

"I hardly know. I did not notice the time."

"Did you go straight there?"

"Almost."

"How do you mean, almost?"

"I had a little headache and told the driver to go up the Champs Elysées and the Avenue du Bois—very slowly—and then down the Champs Elysées again—"

She was becoming more and more embarrassed. Her voice grew indistinct.

She lowered her head and was silent.

Certainly her silence contained no confession, and there was nothing entitling any one to believe that her dejection was other than a consequence of her grief. But yet she seemed so weary as to give the impression that, feeling herself lost, she was giving up the fight. And it was almost a feeling of pity that was entertained for this woman against whom all the circumstances seemed to be conspiring, and who defended herself so badly that her cross-examiner hesitated to press her yet further.

M. Desmalions, in fact, wore an irresolute air, as if the victory had been too easy, and as if he had some scruple about pursuing it.

Mechanically he observed Perenna, who passed him a slip of paper, saying:

"Mme. d'Ersingen's telephone number."

M. Desmalions murmured:

"Yes, true, they may know—"

And, taking down the receiver, he asked for number 325.04. He was connected at once and continued:

"Who is that speaking?… The butler? Ah! Is Mme. d'Ersingen at home?… No?… Or Monsieur?… Not he, either?… Never mind, you can tell me what I want to know. I am M. Desmalions, the Prefect of Police, and I need certain information. At what time did Mme. Fauville come last night?… What do you say?… Are you sure?… At two o'clock in the morning?… Not before?… And she went away?… In ten minutes time?… Good … But you're certain you are not mistaken about the time when she arrived? I must know this positively: it is most important…. You say it was two o'clock in the morning? Two o'clock in the morning?… Very well…. Thank you."

When M. Desmalions turned round, he saw Mme. Fauville standing beside him and looking at him with an expression of mad anguish. And one and the same idea occurred to the mind of all the onlookers. They were in the presence either of an absolutely innocent woman or else of an exceptional actress whose face lent itself to the most perfect simulation of innocence.

"What do you want?" she stammered. "What does this mean? Explain yourself!"

Then M. Desmalions asked simply:

"What were you doing last night between half-past eleven in the evening and two o'clock in the morning?"

It was a terrifying question at the stage which the examination had reached, a fatal question implying:

"If you cannot give us an exact and strict account of the way in which you employed your time while the crime was being committed, we have the right to conclude that you were not alien to the murder of your husband and stepson—"

She understood it in this sense and staggered on her feet, moaning:

"It's horrible!… horrible!"

The Prefect repeated:

"What were you doing? The question must be quite easy to answer."

"Oh," she cried, in the same piteous tone, "how can you believe!… Oh, no, no, it's not possible! How can you believe!"

"I believe nothing yet," he said. "Besides, you can establish the truth with a single word."

It seemed, from the movement of her lips and the sudden gesture of resolution that shook her frame, as though she were about to speak that word. But all at once she appeared stupefied and dumfounded, pronounced a few unintelligible syllables, and fell huddled into a chair, sobbing convulsively and uttering cries of despair.

It was tantamount to a confession. At the very least, it was a confession of her inability to supply the plausible explanation which would have put an end to the discussion.

The Prefect of Police moved away from her and spoke in a low voice to the examining magistrate and the public prosecutor. Perenna and Sergeant Mazeroux were left alone together, side by side.

Mazeroux whispered:

"What did I tell you? I knew you would find out! Oh, what a man you are!

The way you managed!"

He was beaming at the thought that the chief was clear of the matter and that he had no more crows to pluck with his, Mazeroux's, superiors, whom he revered almost as much as he did the chief. Everybody was now agreed; they were "friends all round"; and Mazeroux was choking with delight.

"They'll lock her up, eh?"

"No," said Perenna. "There's not enough 'hold' on her for them to issue a warrant."

"What!" growled Mazeroux indignantly. "Not enough hold? I hope, in any case, that you won't let her go. She made no bones, you know, about attacking you! Come, Chief, polish her off, a she-devil like that!"

Don Luis remained pensive. He was thinking of the unheard-of coincidences, the accumulation of facts that bore down on Mme. Fauville from every side. And the decisive proof which would join all these different facts together and give to the accusation the grounds which it still lacked was one which Perenna was able to supply. This was the marks of the teeth in the apple hidden among the shrubs in the garden. To the police these would be as good as any fingerprint, all the more as they could compare the marks with those on the cake of chocolate.

Nevertheless, he hesitated; and, concentrating his anxious attention, he watched, with mingled feelings of pity and repulsion, that woman who, to all seeming, had killed her husband and her husband's son. Was he to give her the finishing stroke? Had he the right to play the part of judge? And supposing he were wrong?

* * * * *

Meantime, M. Desmalions had walked up to him and, while pretending to speak to Mazeroux, was really asking Perenna:

"What do you think of it?"

Mazeroux shook his head. Perenna replied:

"I think, Monsieur le Préfet, that, if this woman is guilty, she is defending herself, for all her cleverness, with inconceivable lack of skill."

"Meaning—?"

"Meaning that she was doubtless only a tool in the hands of an accomplice."

"An accomplice?"

"Remember, Monsieur le Préfet, her husband's exclamation in your office yesterday: 'Oh, the scoundrels! the scoundrels!' There is, therefore, at least one accomplice, who perhaps is the same as the man who was present, as Sergeant Mazeroux must have told you, in the Café du Pont-Neuf when Inspector Vérot was last there: a man with a reddish-brown beard, carrying an ebony walking-stick with a silver handle. So that—"

"So that," said M. Desmalions, completing the sentence, "by arresting Mme. Fauville to-day, merely on suspicion, we have a chance of laying our hands on the accomplice."

Perenna did not reply. The Prefect continued, thoughtfully:

"Arrest her … arrest her…. We should need a proof for that…. Did you receive no clue?"

"None at all, Monsieur le Préfet. True, my search was only summary."

"But ours was most minute. We have been through every corner of the room."

"And the garden, Monsieur le Préfet?"

"The garden also."

"With the same care?"

"Perhaps not…. But I think—"

"I think, on the contrary, Monsieur le Préfet, that, as the murderers passed through the garden in coming and going, there might be a chance—"

"Mazeroux," said M. Desmalions, "go outside and make a more thorough inspection."

The sergeant went out. Perenna, who was once more standing at one side, heard the Prefect of Police repeating to the examining magistrate:

"Ah, if we only had a proof, just one! The woman is evidently guilty. The presumption against her is too great! … And then there are Cosmo Mornington's millions…. But, on the other hand, look at her … look at all the honesty in that pretty face of hers, look at all the sincerity of her grief."

She was still crying, with fitful sobs and starts of indignant protest that made her clench her fists. At one moment she took her tear-soaked handkerchief, bit it with her teeth and tore it, after the manner of certain actresses.

Perenna saw those beautiful white teeth, a little wide, moist and gleaming, rending the dainty cambric. And he thought of the marks of teeth on the apple. And he was seized with an extreme longing to know the truth. Was it the same pair of jaws that had left its impress in the pulp of the fruit?

Mazeroux returned. M. Desmalions moved briskly toward the sergeant, who showed him the apple which he had found under the ivy. And Perenna at once realized the supreme importance which the Prefect of Police attached to Mazeroux's explanations and to his unexpected discovery.

A conversation of some length took place between the magistrates and ended in the decision which Don Luis foresaw. M. Desmalions walked across the room to Mme. Fauville. It was the catastrophe. He reflected for a second on the manner in which he should open this final contest, and then he asked:

"Are you still unable, Madame, to tell us how you employed your time last night?"

She made an effort and whispered:

"Yes, yes…. I took a taxi and drove about. … I also walked a little—"

"That is a fact which we can easily verify when we have found the driver of the taxi. Meanwhile, there is an opportunity of removing the somewhat … grievous impression which your silence has left on our minds."

"I am quite ready—"

"It is this: the person or one of the persons who took part in the crime appears to have bitten into an apple which was afterward thrown away in the garden and which has just been found. To put an end to any suppositions concerning yourself, we should like you to perform the same action."

"Oh, certainly!" she cried, eagerly. "If this is all you need to convince you—"

She took one of the three apples which Desmalions handed her from the dish and lifted it to her mouth.

It was a decisive act. If the two marks resembled each other, the proof existed, assured and undeniable.

Before completing her movement, she stopped short, as though seized with a sudden fear…. Fear of what? Fear of the monstrous chance that might be her undoing? Or fear rather of the dread weapon which she was about to deliver against herself? In any case nothing accused her with greater directness than this last hesitation, which was incomprehensible if she was innocent, but clear as day if she was guilty!

"What are you afraid of, Madame?" asked M. Desmalions.

"Nothing, nothing," she said, shuddering. "I don't know…. I am afraid of everything…. It is all so horrible—"

"But, Madame, I assure you that what we are asking of you has no sort of importance and, I am persuaded, can only have a fortunate result for you. If you don't mind, therefore—"

She raised her hand higher and yet higher, with a slowness that betrayed her uneasiness. And really, in the fashion in which things were happening, the scene was marked by a certain solemnity and tragedy that wrung every heart.

"And, if I refuse?" she asked, suddenly.

"You are absolutely entitled to refuse," said the Prefect of Police. "But is it worth while, Madame? I am sure that your counsel would be the first to advise you—"

"My counsel?" she stammered, understanding the formidable meaning conveyed by that reply.

And, suddenly, with a fierce resolve and the almost ferocious air that contorts the face when great dangers threaten, she made the movement which they were pressing her to make. She opened her mouth. They saw the gleam of the white teeth. At one bite, the white teeth dug into the fruit.

"There you are, Monsieur," she said.

M. Desmalions turned to the examining magistrate.

"Have you the apple found in the garden?"

"Here, Monsieur le Préfet."

M. Desmalions put the two apples side by side.

And those who crowded round him, anxiously looking on, all uttered one exclamation.

The two marks of teeth were identical.

Identical! Certainly, before declaring the identity of every detail, the absolute analogy of the marks of each tooth, they must wait for the results of the expert's report. But there was one thing which there was no mistaking and that was the complete similarity of the two curves.

In either fruit the rounded arch was bent according to the same inflection. The two semicircles could have fitted one into the other, both very narrow, both a little long-shaped and oval and of a restricted radius which was the very character of the jaw.

The men did not speak a word. M. Desmalions raised his head. Mme. Fauville did not move, stood livid and mad with terror. But all the sentiments of terror, stupor and indignation that she might simulate with her mobile face and her immense gifts as an actress, did not prevail against the compelling proof that presented itself to every eye.

The two imprints were identical! The same teeth had bitten into both apples!

"Madame—" the Prefect of Police began.

"No, no," she cried, seized with a fit of fury, "no, it's not true…. This is all just a nightmare…. No, you are never going to arrest me? I in prison! Why, it's horrible!… What have I done? Oh, I swear that you are mistaken—"

She took her head between her hands.

"Oh, my brain is throbbing as if it would burst! What does all this mean? I have done no wrong…. I knew nothing. It was you who told me this morning…. Could I have suspected? My poor husband … and that dear Edmond who loved me … and whom I loved! Why should I have killed them? Tell me that! Why don't you answer?" she demanded. "People don't commit murder without a motive…. Well?… Well?… Answer me, can't you?"

And once more convulsed with anger, standing in an aggressive attitude, with her clenched hands outstretched at the group of magistrates, she screamed:

"You're no better than butchers … you have no right to torture a woman like this…. Oh, how horrible! To accuse me … to arrest me … for nothing! … Oh, it's abominable! … What butchers you all are! … And it's you in particular," addressing Perenna, "it's you—yes, I know—it's you who are the enemy.

"Oh, I understand! You had your reasons, you were here last night…. Then why don't they arrest you? Why not you, as you were here and I was not and know nothing, absolutely nothing of what happened…. Why isn't it you?"

The last words were pronounced in a hardly intelligible fashion. She had no strength left. She had to sit down, with her head bent over her knees, and she wept once more, abundantly.

Perenna went up to her and, raising her forehead and uncovering the tear-stained face, said:

"The imprints of teeth in both apples are absolutely identical. There is therefore no doubt whatever but that the first comes from you as well as the second."

"No!" she said.

"Yes," he affirmed. "That is a fact which it is materially impossible to deny. But the first impression may have been left by you before last night, that is to say, you may have bitten that apple yesterday, for instance—"

She stammered:

"Do you think so? Yes, perhaps, I seem to remember—yesterday morning—"

But the Prefect of Police interrupted her.

"It is useless, Madame; I have just questioned your servant, Silvestre. He bought the fruit himself at eight o'clock last evening. When M. Fauville went to bed, there were four apples in the dish. At eight o'clock this morning there were only three. Therefore the one found in the garden is incontestably the fourth; and this fourth apple was marked last night. And the mark is the mark of your teeth."

She stammered:

"It was not I … it was not I … that mark is not mine."

"But—"

"That mark is not mine…. I swear it as I hope to be saved…. And I also swear that I shall die, yes, die…. I prefer death to prison…. I shall kill myself…. I shall kill myself—"

Her eyes were staring before her. She stiffened her muscles and made a supreme effort to rise from her chair. But, once on her feet, she tottered and fell fainting on the floor.

While she was being seen to, Mazeroux beckoned to Don Luis and whispered:

"Clear out, Chief."

"Ah, so the orders are revoked? I'm free?"

"Chief, take a look at the beggar who came in ten minutes ago and who's talking to the Prefect. Do you know him?"

"Hang it all!" said Perenna, after glancing at a large red-faced man who did not take his eyes off him. "Hang it, it's Weber, the deputy chief!"

"And he's recognized you, Chief! He recognized Lupin at first sight. There's no fake that he can't see through. He's got the knack of it. Well, Chief, just think of all the tricks you've played on him and ask yourself if he'll stick at anything to have his revenge!"

"And you think he has told the Prefect?"

"Of course he has; and the Prefect has ordered my mates to keep you in view. If you make the least show of trying to escape them, they'll collar you."

"In that case, there's nothing to be done?"

"Nothing to be done? Why, it's a question of putting them off your scent and mighty quickly!"

"What good would that do me, as I'm going home and they know where I live?"

"Eh, what? Can you have the cheek to go home after what's happened?"

"Where do you expect me to sleep? Under the bridges?"

"But, dash it all, don't you understand that, after this job, there will be the most infernal stir, that you're compromised up to the neck as it is, and that everybody will turn against you?"

"Well?"

"Drop the business."

"And the murderers of Cosmo Mornington and the Fauvilles?"

"The police will see to that."

"Alexandre, you're an ass."

"Then become Lupin again, the invisible, impregnable Lupin, and do your own fighting, as you used to. But in Heaven's name don't remain Perenna! It is too dangerous. And don't occupy yourself officially with a business in which you are not interested."

"The things you say, Alexandre! I am interested in it to the tune of a hundred millions. If Perenna does not stick to his post, the hundred millions will be snatched from under his nose. And, on the one occasion when I can earn a few honest centimes, that would be most annoying."

"And, if they arrest you?"

"No go! I'm dead!"

"Lupin is dead. But Perenna is alive."

"As they haven't arrested me to-day, I'm easy in my mind."

"It's only put off. And the orders are strict from this moment onward.

They mean to surround your house and to keep watch day and night."

"Capital. I always was frightened at night."

"But, good Lord! what are you hoping for?"

"I hope for nothing, Alexandre. I am sure. I am sure now that they will not dare arrest me."

"Do you imagine that Weber will stand on ceremony?"

"I don't care a hang about Weber. Without orders, Weber can do nothing."

"But they'll give him his orders."

"The order to shadow me, yes; to arrest me, no. The Prefect of Police has committed himself about me to such an extent that he will be obliged to back me up. And then there's this: the whole affair is so absurd, so complicated, that you people will never find your way out of it alone. Sooner or later, you will come and fetch me. For there is no one but myself able to fight such adversaries as these: not you nor Weber, nor any of your pals at the detective office. I shall expect your visit, Alexandre."

On the next day an expert examination identified the tooth prints on the two apples and likewise established the fact that the print on the cake of chocolate was similar to the others.

Also, the driver of a taxicab came and gave evidence that a lady engaged him as she left the opera, told him to drive her straight to the end of the Avenue Henri Martin, and left the cab on reaching that spot.

Now the end of the Avenue Henri Martin was within five minutes' walk of the Fauvilles' house.

The man was brought into Mme. Fauville's presence and recognized her at once.

What had she done in that neighbourhood for over an hour?

Marie Fauville was taken to the central lockup, was entered on the register, and slept, that night, at the Saint-Lazare prison.

That same day, when the reporters were beginning to publish details of the investigation, such as the discovery of the tooth prints, but when they did not yet know to whom to attribute them, two of the leading dailies used as a headline for their article the very words which Don Luis Perenna had employed to describe the marks on the apple, the sinister words which so well suggested the fierce, savage, and so to speak, brutal character of the incident:

"THE TEETH OF THE TIGER."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE IRON CURTAIN

It is sometimes an ungrateful task to tell the story of Arsène Lupin's life, for the reason that each of his adventures is partly known to the public, having at the time formed the subject of much eager comment, whereas his biographer is obliged, if he would throw light upon what is not known, to begin at the beginning and to relate in full detail all that which is already public property.

It is because of this necessity that I am compelled to speak once more of the extreme excitement which the news of that shocking series of crimes created in France, in Europe and throughout the civilized world. The public heard of four murders practically all at once, for the particulars of Cosmo Mornington's will were published two days later.

There was no doubt that the same person had killed Cosmo Mornington, Inspector Vérot, Fauville the engineer, and his son Edmond. The same person had made the identical sinister bite, leaving against himself or herself, with a heedlessness that seemed to show the avenging hand of fate, a most impressive and incriminating proof, a proof which made people shudder as they would have shuddered at the awful reality: the marks of his or her teeth, the teeth of the tiger!

And, in the midst of all this bloodshed, at the most tragic moment of the dismal tragedy, behold the strangest of figures emerging from the darkness!

An heroic adventurer, endowed with astounding intelligence and insight, had in a few hours partly unravelled the tangled skeins of the plot, divined the murder of Cosmo Mornington, proclaimed the murder of Inspector Vérot, taken the conduct of the investigation into his own hands, delivered to justice the inhuman creature whose beautiful white teeth fitted the marks as precious stones fit their settings, received a cheque for a million francs on the day after these exploits and, finally, found himself the probable heir to an immense fortune.

And here was Arsène Lupin coming to life again!

For the public made no mistake about that, and, with wonderful intuition, proclaimed aloud that Don Luis Perenna was Arsène Lupin, before a close examination of the facts had more or less confirmed the supposition.

"But he's dead!" objected the doubters.

To which the others replied:

"Yes, Dolores Kesselbach's corpse was recovered under the still smoking ruins of a little chalet near the Luxemburg frontier and, with it, the corpse of a man whom the police identified as Arsène Lupin. But everything goes to show that the whole scene was contrived by Lupin, who, for reasons of his own, wanted to be thought dead. And everything shows that the police accepted and legalized the theory of his death only because they wished to be rid of their everlasting adversary.

"As a proof, we have the confidences made by Valenglay, who was Prime Minister at the time and whom the chances of politics have just replaced at the head of the government. And there is the mysterious incident on the island of Capri when the German Emperor, just as he was about to be buried under a landslip, was saved by a hermit who, according to the German version, was none other than Arsène Lupin."

To this came a fresh objection:

"Very well; but read the newspapers of the time: ten minutes afterward, the hermit flung himself into the sea from Tiberius' Leap." And the answer:

"Yes, but the body was never found. And, as it happens, we know that a steamer picked up a man who was making signals to her and that this steamer was on her way to Algiers. Well, a few days later, Don Luis Perenna enlisted in the Foreign Legion at Sidi-bel-Abbes."

Of course, the controversy upon which the newspapers embarked on this subject was carried on discreetly. Everybody was afraid of Lupin; and the journalists maintained a certain reserve in their articles, confined themselves to comparing dates and pointing out coincidences, and refrained from speaking too positively of any Lupin that might lie hidden under the mask of Perenna.

But, as regards the private in the Foreign Legion and his stay in Morocco, they took their revenge and let themselves go freely.

Major d'Astrignac had spoken. Other officers, other comrades of Perenna's, related what they had seen. The reports and daily orders concerning him were published. And what became known as "The Hero's Idyll" began to take the form of a sort of record each page of which described the maddest and unlikeliest of facts.

At Médiouna, on the twenty-fourth of March, the adjutant, Captain Pollex, awarded Private Perenna four days' cells on a charge of having broken out of camp past two sentries after evening roll call, contrary to orders, and being absent without leave until noon on the following day. Perenna, the report went on to say, brought back the body of his sergeant, killed in ambush. And in the margin was this note, in the colonel's hand:

"The colonel commanding doubles Private Perenna's award, but mentions his name in orders and congratulates and thanks him."

After the fight of Ber-Réchid, Lieutenant Fardet's detachment being obliged to retreat before a band of four hundred Moors, Private Perenna asked leave to cover the retreat by installing himself in a *kasbah*.

"How many men do you want, Perenna?"

"None, sir."

"What! Surely you don't propose to cover a retreat all by yourself?"

"What pleasure would there be in dying, sir, if others were to die as well as I?"

At his request, they left him a dozen rifles, and divided with him the cartridges that remained. His share came to seventy-five.

The detachment got away without being further molested. Next day, when they were able to return with reinforcements, they surprised the Moors lying in wait around the *kasbah*, but afraid to approach. The ground was covered with seventy-five of their killed.

Our men drove them off. They found Private Perenna stretched on the floor of the *kasbah*. They thought him dead. He was asleep!

He had not a single cartridge left. But each of his seventy-five bullets had gone home.

What struck the imagination of the public most, however, was Major Comte d'Astrignac's story of the battle of Dar-Dbibarh. The major confessed that this battle, which relieved Fez at the moment when we thought that all was lost and which created such a sensation in France, was won before it was fought and that it was won by Perenna, alone!

At daybreak, when the Moorish tribes were preparing for the attack, Private Perenna lassoed an Arab horse that was galloping across the plain, sprang on the animal, which had no saddle, bridle, nor any sort of harness, and without jacket, cap, or arms, with his white shirt bulging out and a cigarette between his teeth, charged, with his hands in his trousers-pockets!

He charged straight toward the enemy, galloped through their camp, riding in and out among the tents, and then left it by the same place by which he had gone in.

This quite inconceivable death ride spread such consternation among the Moors that their attack was half-hearted and the battle was won without resistance.

This, together with numberless other feats of bravado, went to make up the heroic legend of Perenna. It threw into relief the superhuman energy, the marvellous recklessness, the bewildering

fancy, the spirit of adventure, the physical dexterity, and the coolness of a singularly mysterious individual whom it was impossible not to take for Arsène Lupin, but a new and greater Arsène Lupin, dignified, idealized, and ennobled by his exploits.

One morning, a fortnight after the double murder in the Boulevard Suchet, this extraordinary man, who aroused such eager interest and who was spoken of on every side as a fabulous and more or less impossible being: one morning, Don Luis Perenna dressed himself and went the rounds of his house.

It was a comfortable and roomy eighteenth-century mansion, situated at the entrance to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, on the little Place du Palais-Bourbon. He had bought it, furnished, from a rich Hungarian, Count Malonyi, keeping for his own use the horses, carriages, motor cars, and taking over the eight servants and even the count's secretary, Mlle. Levasseur, who undertook to manage the household and to receive and get rid of the visitors—journalists, bores and curiosity-dealers—attracted by the luxury of the house and the reputation of its new owner.

After finishing his inspection of the stables and garage, he walked across the courtyard and went up to his study, pushed open one of the windows and raised his head. Above him was a slanting mirror; and this mirror reflected, beyond the courtyard and its surrounding wall, one whole side of the Place du Palais-Bourbon.

"Bother!" he said. "Those confounded detectives are still there. And this has been going on for a fortnight. I'm getting tired of this spying."

He sat down, in a bad temper, to look through his letters, tearing up, after he had read them, those which concerned him personally and making notes on the others, such as applications for assistance and requests for interviews. When he had finished, he rang the bell.

"Ask Mlle. Levasseur to bring me the newspapers."

She had been the Hungarian count's reader as well as his secretary; and Perenna had trained her to pick out in the newspapers anything that referred to him, and to give him each morning an exact account of the proceedings that were being taken against Mme. Fauville.

Always dressed in black, with a very elegant and graceful figure, she had attracted him from the first. She had an air of great dignity and a grave and thoughtful face which made it impossible to penetrate the secret of her soul, and which would have seemed austere had it not been framed in a cloud of fair curls, resisting all attempts at discipline and setting a halo of light and gayety around her.

Her voice had a soft and musical tone which Perenna loved to hear; and, himself a little perplexed by Mlle. Levasseur's attitude of reserve, he wondered what she could think of him, of his mode of life, and of all that the newspapers had to tell of his mysterious past.

"Nothing new?" he asked, as he glanced at the headings of the articles.

She read the reports relating to Mme. Fauville; and Don Luis could see that the police investigations were making no headway. Marie Fauville still kept to her first method, that of weeping, making a show of indignation, and assuming entire ignorance of the facts upon which she was being examined.

"It's ridiculous," he said, aloud. "I have never seen any one defend herself so clumsily."

"Still, if she's innocent?"

It was the first time that Mlle. Levasseur had uttered an opinion or rather a remark upon the case. Don Luis looked at her in great surprise.

"So you think her innocent, Mademoiselle?"

She seemed ready to reply and to explain the meaning of her interruption. It was as though she were removing her impassive mask and about to allow her face to adopt a more animated expression under the impulse of her inner feelings. But she restrained herself with a visible effort, and murmured:

"I don't know. I have no views."

"Possibly," he said, watching her with curiosity, "but you have a doubt: a doubt which would be permissible if it were not for the marks left by Mme. Fauville's own teeth. Those marks, you see,

are something more than a signature, more than a confession of guilt. And, as long as she is unable to give a satisfactory explanation of this point—"

But Marie Fauville vouchsafed not the slightest explanation of this or of anything else. She remained impenetrable. On the other hand, the police failed to discover her accomplice or accomplices, or the man with the ebony walking-stick and the tortoise-shell glasses whom the waiter at the Café du Pont-Neuf had described to Mazeroux and who seemed to have played a singularly suspicious part. In short, there was not a ray of light thrown upon the subject.

Equally vain was all search for the traces of Victor, the Roussel sister's first cousin, who would have inherited the Mornington bequest in the absence of any direct heirs.

"Is that all?" asked Perenna.

"No," said Mlle. Levasseur, "there is an article in the *Echo de France*—"

"Relating to me?"

"I presume so, Monsieur. It is called, 'Why Don't They Arrest Him?'"

"That concerns me," he said, with a laugh.

He took the newspaper and read:

"Why do they not arrest him? Why go against logic and prolong an unnatural situation which no decent man can understand? This is the question which everybody is asking and to which our investigations enable us to furnish a precise reply.

"Two years ago, in other words, three years after the pretended death of Arsène Lupin, the police, having discovered or believing they had discovered that Arsène Lupin was really none other than one Floriani, born at Blois and since lost to sight, caused the register to be inscribed, on the page relating to this Floriani, with the word 'Deceased,' followed by the words 'Under the alias of Arsène Lupin.'

"Consequently, to bring Arsène Lupin back to life, there would be wanted something more than the undeniable proof of his existence, which would not be impossible. The most complicated wheels in the administrative machine would have to be set in motion, and a decree obtained from the Council of State.

"Now it would seem that M. Valenglay, the Prime Minister, together with the Prefect of Police, is opposed to making any too minute inquiries capable of opening up a scandal which the authorities are anxious to avoid. Bring Arsène Lupin back to life? Recommence the struggle with that accursed scoundrel? Risk a fresh defeat and fresh ridicule? No, no, and again no!

"And thus is brought about this unprecedented, inadmissible, inconceivable, disgraceful situation, that Arsène Lupin, the hardened thief, the impenitent criminal, the robber-king, the emperor of burglars and swindlers, is able to-day, not clandestinely, but in the sight and hearing of the whole world, to pursue the most formidable task that he has yet undertaken, to live publicly under a name which is not his own, but which he has incontestably made his own, to destroy with impunity four persons who stood in his way, to cause the imprisonment of an innocent woman against whom he himself has accumulated false evidence, and at the end of all, despite the protests of common sense and thanks to an unavowed complicity, to receive the hundred millions of the Mornington legacy.

"There is the ignominious truth in a nutshell. It is well that it should be stated. Let us hope, now that it stands revealed, that it will influence the future conduct of events."

"At any rate, it will influence the conduct of the idiot who wrote that article," said Lupin, with a grin.

He dismissed Mlle. Levasseur and rang up Major d'Astrignac on the telephone.

"Is that you, Major? Perenna speaking."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Have you read the article in the *Echo de France*?"

"Yes."

"Would it bore you very much to call on that gentleman and ask for satisfaction in my name?"

"Oh! A duel!"

"It's got to be, Major. All these sportsmen are wearying me with their lucubrations. They must be gagged. This fellow will pay for the rest."

"Well, of course, if you're bent on it—"

"I am, very much."

* * * * *

The preliminaries were entered upon without delay. The editor of the *Echo de France* declared that the article had been sent in without a signature, typewritten, and that it had been published without his knowledge; but he accepted the entire responsibility.

That same day, at three o'clock, Don Luis Perenna, accompanied by Major d'Astrignac, another officer, and a doctor, left the house in the Place du Palais-Bourbon in his car, and, followed by a taxi crammed with the detectives engaged in watching him, drove to the Parc des Princes.

While waiting for the arrival of the adversary, the Comte d'Astrignac took Don Luis aside.

"My dear Perenna, I ask you no questions. I don't want to know how much truth there is in all that is being written about you, or what your real name is. To me, you are Perenna of the Legion, and that is all I care about. Your past began in Morocco. As for the future, I know that, whatever happens and however great the temptation, your only aim will be to revenge Cosmo Mornington and protect his heirs. But there's one thing that worries me."

"Speak out, Major."

"Give me your word that you won't kill this man."

"Two months in bed, Major; will that suit you?"

"Too long. A fortnight."

"Done."

The two adversaries took up their positions. At the second encounter, the editor of the *Echo de France* fell, wounded in the chest.

"Oh, that's too bad of you, Perenna!" growled the Comte d'Astrignac. "You promised me—"

"And I've kept my promise, Major."

The doctors were examining the injured man. Presently one of them rose and said:

"It's nothing. Three weeks' rest, at most. Only a third of an inch more, and he would have been done for."

"Yes, but that third of an inch isn't there," murmured Perenna.

Still followed by the detectives' motor cab, Don Luis returned to the Faubourg Saint-Germain; and it was then that an incident occurred which was to puzzle him greatly and throw a most extraordinary light on the article in the *Echo de France*.

In the courtyard of his house he saw two little puppies which belonged to the coachman and which were generally confined to the stables. They were playing with a twist of red string which kept catching on to things, to the railings of the steps, to the flower vases. In the end, the paper round which the string was wound, appeared. Don Luis happened to pass at that moment. His eyes noticed marks of writing on the paper, and he mechanically picked it up and unfolded it.

He gave a start. He had at once recognized the opening lines of the article printed in the *Echo de France*. And the whole article was there, written in ink, on ruled paper, with erasures, and with sentences added, struck out, and begun anew.

He called the coachman and asked him:

"Where does this ball of string come from?"

"The string, sir? Why, from the harness-room, I think. It must have been that little she-devil of a Mirza who—"

"And when did you wind the string round the paper?"

"Yesterday evening, Monsieur."

"Yesterday evening. I see. And where is the paper from?"

"Upon my word, Monsieur, I can't say. I wanted something to wind my string on. I picked this bit up behind the coach-house where they fling all the rubbish of the house to be taken into the street at night."

Don Luis pursued his investigations. He questioned or asked Mlle. Levasseur to question the other servants. He discovered nothing; but one fact remained: the article in the *Echo de France* had been written, as the rough draft which he had picked up proved, by somebody who lived in the house or who was in touch with one of the people in the house.

The enemy was inside the fortress.

But what enemy? And what did he want? Merely Perenna's arrest?

All the remainder of the afternoon Don Luis continued anxious, annoyed by the mystery that surrounded him, incensed at his own inaction, and especially at that threatened arrest, which certainly caused him no uneasiness, but which hampered his movements.

Accordingly, when he was told at about ten o'clock that a man who gave the name of Alexandre insisted on seeing him, he had the man shown in; and when he found himself face to face with Mazeroux, but Mazeroux disguised beyond recognition and huddled in an old cloak, he flung himself on him as on a prey, hustling and shaking him.

"So it's you, at last?" he cried. "Well, what did I tell you? You can't make head or tail of things at the police office and you've come for me! Confess it, you numskull! You've come to fetch me! Oh, how funny it all is! Gad, I knew that you would never have the cheek to arrest me, and that the Prefect of Police would manage to calm the untimely ardour of that confounded Weber! To begin with, one doesn't arrest a man whom one has need of. Come, out with it! Lord, how stupid you look! Why don't you answer? How far have you got at the office? Quick, speak! I'll settle the thing in five seconds. Just tell me about your inquiry in two words, and I'll finish it for you in the twinkling of a bed-post, in two minutes by my watch. Well, you were saying—"

"But, Chief," spluttered Mazeroux, utterly nonplussed.

"What! Must I drag the words out of you? Come on! I'll make a start. It has to do with the man with the ebony walking-stick, hasn't it? The one we saw at the Café du Pont-Neuf on the day when Inspector Vérot was murdered?"

"Yes, it has."

"Have you found his traces?"

"Yes."

"Well, come along, find your tongue!"

"It's like this, Chief. Some one else noticed him besides the waiter. There was another customer in the cafe; and this other customer, whom I ended by discovering, went out at the same time as our man and heard him ask somebody in the street which was the nearest underground station for Neuilly."

"Capital, that. And, in Neuilly, by asking questions on every side, you ferreted him out?"

"And even learnt his name, Chief: Hubert Lautier, of the Avenue du Roule. Only he decamped from there six months ago, leaving his furniture behind him and taking nothing but two trunks."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.