The CRYSTAL STOPPER

MAURICE LEBLANC

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THE
CRYSTAL STOPPER

An Arsène Lupin Mystery

BY

MAURICE LEBLANC
AUTHOR OF
Arsène Lupin Super-Sleuth

THE MACAULAY COMPANY
NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I

THE ARRESTS

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

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

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

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

"Yes, governor."

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

He crossed the garden, walked round a house in process of construction, the scaffolding of which loomed overhead, and cautiously opened the door on the Avenue de Ceinture. He was not mistaken: a bright light flashed round the bend and a large, open motor-car drew

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up, whence sprang two men in great-coats, with the collars turned up, and caps.

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

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

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

"Then we are free to act?"

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

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

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

"Why should it fall through?" observed Gilbert.

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

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

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

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

Growler and Masher, the two oarsmen, made straight for the opposite bank, a little to the left of the casino.

They met a boat containing a couple locked in each

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other's arms, floating at random, and another in which a number of people were singing at the top of their voices. And that was all.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, governor!"

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

He sat silent for a moment and continued:

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

"Saw him with my own eyes, governor."

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

"He's going to the theatre."

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

"The cook has been sent away. As for the valet, Léonard, who is Daubrecq's confidential man, he'll wait for his master in Paris. They can't get back from town before one o'clock in the morning. But . . ."

"But what?"

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

"And when did you get these details?"

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

"Have you the keys?"

"The keys of the front-door."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A gas-jet was flaring in the hall.

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"You see, governor . . ." said Gilbert.

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

"Where did it come from then?"

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

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

"And where is the staircase?"

"On the right, behind the curtain."

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

"Help! Murder!" shouted the man.

And he rushed back into the room.

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

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

"You'll jolly well do nothing of the sort, do you hear, Vaucheray?" said Lupin, peremptorily.

And he darted off in pursuit of the servant. He first went through a dining-room, where he saw a lamp still lit, with plates and a bottle around it, and he found Léonard at the further end of a pantry, making vain efforts to open the window:

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

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

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who snatched his weapon from him and gripped him by the throat:

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

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

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

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

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

"Quite impossible."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"By Jingo! There's not much of it, but what there is is pucka! There's nothing the matter with this rep-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At long last, he lost his patience:

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

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

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

"But what for, dash it all?"

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

"Well?"

"We can't lay our hands on it. And I was thinking . . . There's a cupboard with a big lock to it in the pantry. . . . You see, we can't very well . . ."

He was already on his way to the villa. Vaucheray ran back too.

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

But the ten minutes passed and he was still waiting.

He looked at his watch:

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

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

Lupin mechanically returned to the house, urged by

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

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

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

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

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

"No, Léonard."

"Léonard? Why, he was tied up!"

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

"The scoundrel! Where is he?"

Lupin took the lamp and went into the pantry.

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

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

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

"He's dead, I tell you."

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"It was Vaucheray . . . it was Vaucheray who did it . . ."

Pale with anger, Lupin caught hold of him:

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

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

"But the revolver-shot?"

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

"And the key of the cupboard?"

"Vaucheray took it . . ."

"Did he open it?"

"Yes."

"And did he find what he was after?"

"Yes."

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

Lupin gathered from Gilbert's silence and the determined expression on his face that he would not obtain a reply. With a threatening gesture, he said:

"I'll make you talk, my man. Sure as my name's Lupin, you shall come out with it. But, for the moment,

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we must see about decamping. Here, help me. . . . We must get Vaucheray into the boat . . ."

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

"Listen."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again the same voice, the same snuffling whisper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Help! . . . Murder! . . . I shall be killed! . . ."

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

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

"What about Vaucheray?" asked Gilbert.

"Sorry, can't be helped!"

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

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

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

"Too late!" he said.

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

He locked and bolted the door.

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

"Hold your tongue," said Lupin.

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

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

He himself remained unperturbed, with an utterly calm face and the pensive attitude of one who has all the time that he needs to examine a delicate situation from every point of view. He had reached one of those minutes which he called the "superior moments of existence," those which alone give a value and a price to life. On such occasions, however threatening the danger, he always began by counting to himself, slowly — "One. . . . Two. . . . Three. . . . Four. . . . Five. . . . Six" — until the beating of his heart became normal and regular. Then and not till then, he reflected, but with what intensity, with what perspi-

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cacity, with what a profound intuition of possibilities! All the factors of the problem were present in his mind. He foresaw everything. He admitted everything. And he took his resolution in all logic and in all certainty.

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

"Follow me."

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

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

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

He pointed his revolver and fired two shots into the tree-tops. Then he went back to Vaucheray, bent over him and smeared his face and hands with the wounded man's blood. Lastly, turning upon Gilbert, he took him violently by the shoulders and threw him to the floor.

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

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

Excited cries rose through the open window.

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

And, quietly, in a whisper:

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

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

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

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

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

Lupin floored him once more. But two men suddenly appeared at the window; and Gilbert yielded and, handing the thing to Lupin, who pocketed it without looking at it, whispered:

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

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

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

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

The commissary of police asked him, hurriedly:

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

"I don't know," he answered.

"You don't know? . . ."

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

How could he have been suspected? He was covered with blood. He had handed over the valet's murderers. Half a score of people had witnessed the end of the heroic combat which he had delivered.

Besides, the uproar was too great for any one to take the trouble to argue or to waste time in entertaining doubts. In the height of the first confusion, the people of the neighbourhood invaded the villa. One and all lost their heads. They ran to every side, upstairs, downstairs, to the very cellar. They asked one another questions, yelled and shouted; and no one dreamt of checking Lupin's statements, which sounded so plausible.

However, the discovery of the body in the pantry restored the commissary to a sense of his responsibility. He issued orders, had the house cleared and placed policemen at the gate to prevent any one from passing in or out. Then, without further delay, he examined the spot and began his inquiry.

Vaucheray gave his name; Gilbert refused to give his, on the plea that he would only speak in the presence of a lawyer. But, when he was accused of the murder, he informed against Vaucheray, who defended himself by denouncing the other; and the two of them vociferated at the same time, with the evident wish to monopolize the commissary's attention. When the commissary turned to Lupin, to request his evidence, he perceived that the stranger was no longer there.

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

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

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

They called him. No one replied.

But a soldier came running up. The gentleman had just got into a boat and was rowing away for all he was worth. The commissary looked at Gilbert and realized that he had been tricked:

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

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

One of the policemen discharged his revolver, without thinking.

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

"Go, little bark,
Float in the dark . . ."

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

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It was not a difficult matter, for they were able to follow his movements by the intermittent light of the moon and to see that he was trying to cross the lake, while bearing toward the right—that is to say, toward the village of Saint-Gratien. Moreover, the commissary soon perceived that, with the aid of his men and thanks perhaps to the comparative lightness of his craft, he was rapidly gaining on the other. In ten minutes he had decreased the interval between them by one half.

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

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

"Halt!" cried the commissary.

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

"Surrender!" shouted the commissary.

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

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

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The commissary growled:

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

No reply.

The enemy did not budge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he was very much surprised. It was a decanter-stopper, a little crystal stopper, like those used for the bottles in a liqueur-stand. And this crystal stopper had nothing particular about it. The most that Lupin observed was that the knob, with its many facets, was gilded right down to the indent. But, to tell the truth, this detail did not seem to him of a nature to attract special notice.

"And it was this bit of glass to which Gilbert and

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Vaucheray attached such stubborn importance!" he said to himself. "It was for this that they killed the valet, fought each other, wasted their time, risked prison . . . trial . . . the scaffold! . . ."

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

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

"Help! . . . Help!" they cried.

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

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

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

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CHAPTER II

EIGHT FROM NINE LEAVES ONE

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

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

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

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

"Help! . . . Murder! . . . I shall be killed! . . ."

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

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

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

"One definite fact, to begin with, is that Gilbert and Vaucheray humbugged me. The Enghien expedition, undertaken ostensibly with the object of robbing the

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

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

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

But there was something much stranger still. Admitting that they had been able to force the doors of his flat — and this he was compelled to admit, though there was no mark to show it — how had they succeeded in entering the bedroom? He turned the key and pushed the bolt as he did every evening, in accordance with a habit from which he never departed. And, nevertheless — the fact was undeniable — the crystal stopper had disappeared without the lock or the bolt having been touched. And, although Lupin flattered himself that

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he had sharp ears, even when asleep, not a sound had waked him!

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

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

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

Lupin, at this time, had not yet promoted himself to the crowning honour of his career, the post of chief of the detective-service,* and, consequently, was not able to take steps at the Law Courts to insure the execution of his plans. After a fortnight of fruitless endeavours, he was obliged to bow.

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

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

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

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*See *813*, by Maurice Leblanc, translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos.

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

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

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

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

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

But, on the fourth day, at nightfall, the two men were joined by six others, who conversed with them in the darkest part of the Square Lamartine. And, among these new arrivals, Lupin was vastly astonished to recognize, by his figure and bearing, the famous Prasville, the erstwhile barrister, sportsman and explorer, now

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favourite at the Élysée, who, for some mysterious reason, had been pitchforked into the headquarters of police as secretary-general, with the reversion of the prefecture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Have the gentlemen come?"

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

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

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

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

Prasville exclaimed:

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

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

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

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

"How often have you been here?"

"Six times last winter," was the reply.

"And you have searched the house thoroughly?"

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

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

"No, he is looking for one. He has his meals out and

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the portress keeps the house as best she can. The woman is devoted to us . . ."

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

"He's coming back!"

"On foot?"

"Yes."

"Have we time?"

"Oh, dear, yes!"

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

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

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

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

The deputy was a stout, thickset, bull-necked man, very nearly bald, with a fringe of gray whiskers round

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his chin and wearing a pair of black eye-glasses under his spectacles, for his eyes were weak and strained. Lupin noticed the powerful features, the square chin, the prominent cheek-bones. The hands were brawny and covered with hair, the legs bowed; and he walked with a stoop, bearing first on one hip and then on the other, which gave him something of the gait of a gorilla. But the face was topped by an enormous, lined forehead, indented with hollows and dotted with bumps.

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

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

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

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

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

He asked:

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

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

"Come, come, Clémence, did you open this stamp-box?"

"No, sir."

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

"But I assure you, . . . " the woman began.

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

"The fact is . . ."

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

"Yes."

"The same men as in the spring?"

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

"A tall, dark man?"

"Yes."

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

"Is that all?"

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

"Did they remain in the study?"

"Yes, sir."

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

"Yes, sir."

"That will do."

The woman left the room. Daubrecq returned to his letter-writing. Then, stretching out his arm, he

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made some marks on a white writing-tablet, at the end of his desk, and rested it against the desk, as though he wished to keep it in sight.

The marks were figures; and Lupin was able to read the following subtraction-sum:

"9 — 8 = 1."

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

"Eight from nine leaves one. . . . There's not a doubt about that," he added, aloud.

He wrote one more letter, a very short one, and addressed the envelope with an inscription which Lupin was able to decipher when the letter was placed beside the writing-tablet:

"*To Monsieur Prasville,*

"*Secretary-general of the Prefecture of Police.*"

Then he rang the bell again:

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

"Yes, sir, of course I did."

"And were you taught arithmetic?"

"Why, sir . . ."

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

"What makes you say that?"

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

He rose, as he spoke, and walked round the room, with his hands behind his back, swaying upon his hips.

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He did so once more. Then, stopping at the dining-room, he opened the door:

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And then? Nothing at all, my good man. What

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more do you want? The farce is over. I will only ask you to take this little note to Master Prasville, your employer. Clémence, please show Mr. Polonius out. And, if ever he calls again, fling open the doors wide to him. Pray look upon this as your home, Mr. Polonius. Your servant, sir! . . ."

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

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

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

But what were those cards? What game was he playing? Who held the stakes? And how did the

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

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

Without further delay, he opened the letter which Daubrecq had handed him for the secretary-general of police. It contained these few lines:

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

"DAUBRECQ."

"'Within reach of your hand,'" repeated Lupin, after reading the note. "And to think that the rogue may be writing the truth! The most elementary hiding-places are the safest. We must look into this, all the same. And, also, we must find out why Daubrecq is the

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