LEBLANC MAURICE

THE BLONDE LADY

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The Blonde Lady / Being a Record of the Duel of Wits between Arsène Lupin and the English Detective:

Содержание

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FIRST EPISODE
THE BLONDE LADY

CHAPTER I
NUMBER 514, SERIES 23

On the 8th of December last, M. Gerbois, professor of mathematics at Versailles College, rummaging among the stores at a second-hand dealer's, discovered a small mahogany writing-desk, which took his fancy because of its many drawers.

"That's just what I want for Suzanne's birthday," he thought.

M. Gerbois' means were limited and, anxious as he was to please his daughter, he felt it his duty to beat the dealer down. He

ended by paying sixty-five francs. As he was writing down his address, a well-groomed and well-dressed young man, who had been hunting through the shop in every direction, caught sight of the writing-desk and asked:

"How much for this?"

"It's sold," replied the dealer.

"Oh … to this gentleman?"

M. Gerbois bowed and, feeling all the happier that one of his fellow-men envied him his purchase, left the shop. But he had not taken ten steps in the street before the young man caught him up and, raising his hat, said, very politely:

"I beg a thousand pardons, sir … I am going to ask you an indiscreet question.... Were you looking for this desk rather than anything else?"

"No. I went to the shop to see if I could find a cheap set of scales for my experiments."

"Therefore, you do not want it very particularly?"

"I want it, that's all."

"Because it's old I suppose?"

"Because it's useful."

"In that case, would you mind exchanging it for another desk, quite as useful, but in better condition?"

"This one is in good condition and I see no point in exchanging it."

"Still …"

M. Gerbois was a man easily irritated and quick to take

offense. He replied curtly:

"I must ask you to drop the subject, sir."

The young man placed himself in front of him.

"I don't know how much you paid, sir … but I offer you double the price."

"No, thank you."

"Three times the price."

"Oh, that will do," exclaimed the professor, impatiently. "The desk belongs to me and is not for sale."

The young man stared at him with a look that remained imprinted on M. Gerbois' memory, then turned on his heel, without a word, and walked away.

An hour later, the desk was brought to the little house on the Viroflay Road where the professor lived. He called his daughter:

"This is for you, Suzanne; that is, if you like it."

Suzanne was a pretty creature, of a demonstrative temperament and easily pleased. She threw her arms round her father's neck and kissed him as rapturously as though he had made her a present fit for a queen.

That evening, assisted by Hortense the maid, she carried up the desk to her room, cleaned out the drawers and neatly put away her papers, her stationery, her correspondence, her picture postcards and a few secret souvenirs of her cousin Philippe.

M. Gerbois went to the college at half-past seven the next morning. At ten o'clock Suzanne, according to her daily custom, went to meet him at the exit; and it was a great pleasure to him to

see her graceful, smiling figure waiting on the pavement opposite the gate.

They walked home together.

"And how do you like the desk?"

"Oh, it's lovely! Hortense and I have polished up the brass handles till they shine like gold."

"So you're pleased with it?"

"I should think so! I don't know how I did without it all this time."

They walked up the front garden. The professor said:

"Let's go and look at it before lunch."

"Yes, that's a good idea."

She went up the stairs first, but, on reaching the door of her room, she gave a cry of dismay.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed M. Gerbois.

He followed her into the room. The writing-desk was gone.

What astonished the police was the wonderful simplicity of the means employed. While Suzanne was out and the maid making her purchases for the day, a ticket-porter, wearing his badge, had stopped his cart before the garden, in sight of the neighbours, and rung the bell twice. The neighbours, not knowing that the servant had left the house, suspected nothing, so that the man was able to effect his object absolutely undisturbed.

This fact must be noted: not a cupboard had been broken open, not so much as a clock displaced. Even Suzanne's purse, which she had left on the marble slab of the desk, was found on the

adjacent table, with the gold which it contained. The object of the theft was clearly determined, therefore, and this made it the more difficult to understand; for, after all, why should a man run so great a risk to secure so trivial a spoil?

The only clue which the professor could supply was the incident of the day before:

"From the first, that young man displayed a keen annoyance at my refusal; and I have a positive impression that he left me under a threat."

It was all very vague. The dealer was questioned. He knew neither of the two gentlemen. As for the desk, he had bought it for forty francs at Chevreuse, at the sale of a person deceased, and he considered that he had re-sold it at a fair price. A persistent inquiry revealed nothing further.

But M. Gerbois remained convinced that he had suffered an enormous loss. A fortune must have been concealed in some secret drawer and that was why the young man, knowing of the hiding-place, had acted with such decision.

"Poor father! What should we have done with the fortune?" Suzanne kept saying.

"What! Why, with that for your dowry, you could have made the finest match going!"

Suzanne aimed at no one higher than her cousin Philippe, who had not a penny to bless himself with, and she gave a bitter sigh. And life in the little house at Versailles went on gaily, less carelessly than before, shadowed over as it now was with regret

and disappointment.

Two months elapsed. And suddenly, one after the other, came a sequence of the most serious events, forming a surprising run of alternate luck and misfortune.

On the 1st of February, at half-past five, M. Gerbois, who had just come home, with an evening paper in his hand, sat down, put on his spectacles and began to read. The political news was uninteresting. He turned the page and a paragraph at once caught his eye, headed:

"THIRD DRAWING OF THE PRESS-ASSOCIATION LOTTERY"

"First prize, 1,000,000 francs: No. 514, Series 23."

The paper dropped from his hands. The walls swam before his eyes and his heart stopped beating. Number 514, series 23, was the number of his ticket! He had bought it by accident, to oblige one of his friends, for he did not believe in luck; and now he had won!

He took out his memorandum-book, quick! He was quite right: number 514, series 23, was jotted down on the fly-leaf. But where was the ticket?

He flew to his study to fetch the box of stationery in which he had put the precious ticket away; and he stopped short as he entered and staggered back, with a pain at his heart: the box was not there and—what an awful thing!—he suddenly realized that the box had not been there for weeks.

"Suzanne! Suzanne!"

She had just come in and ran up the stairs hurriedly. He stammered, in a choking voice:

"Suzanne … the box … the box of stationery...."

"Which one?"

"The one I bought at Louvre … on a Thursday … it used to stand at the end of the table."

"But don't you remember, father?… We put it away together...."

"When?"

"That evening … you know, the day before...."

"But where?… Quick, tell me … it's more than I can bear...."

"Where?… In the writing-desk."

"In the desk that was stolen?"

"Yes."

"In the desk that was stolen!"

He repeated the words in a whisper, with a sort of terror. Then he took her hand, and lower still:

"It contained a million, Suzanne...."

"Oh, father, why didn't you tell me?" she murmured innocently.

"A million!" he repeated. "It was the winning number in the press lottery."

The hugeness of the disaster crushed them and, for a long time, they maintained a silence which they had not the courage to break. At last Suzanne said:

"But, father, they will pay you all the same."

"Why? On what evidence?"

"Does it require evidence?"

"Of course!"

"And have you none?"

"Yes, I have."

"Well?"

"It was in the box."

"In the box that has disappeared?"

"Yes. And the other man will get the money."

"Why, that would be outrageous! Surely, father, you can stop the payment?"

"Who knows? Who knows? That man must be extraordinarily clever! He has such wonderful resources.... Remember … think how he got hold of the desk...."

His energy revived; he sprang up and, stamping his foot on the floor.

"No, no, no," he shouted, "he shan't have that million, he shan't! Why should he? After all, sharp as he may be, he can do nothing, either. If he calls for the money, they'll lock him up! Ah, we shall see, my friend!"

"Have you thought of something, father?"

"I shall defend our rights to the bitter end, come what may! And we shall succeed!… The million belongs to me and I mean to have it!"

A few minutes later, he dispatched this telegram:

"Governor,

"Crédit Foncier,
"Rue Capucines,
"Paris.
"Am owner number 514, series 23; oppose by every legal method payment to any other person.
"Gerbois."

At almost the same time, the Crédit Foncier received another telegram:

"Number 514, series 23, is in my possession.
"Arsène Lupin."

Whenever I sit down to tell one of the numberless adventures which compose the life of Arsène Lupin, I feel a genuine embarrassment, because it is quite clear to me that even the least important of these adventures is known to every one of my readers. As a matter of fact, there is not a move on the part of "our national thief," as he has been happily called, but has been described all over the country, not an exploit but has been studied from every point of view, not an action but has been commented upon with an abundance of detail generally reserved for stories of heroic deeds.

Who, for instance, does not know that strange case of the blonde lady, with the curious episodes which were reported under flaring headlines as "NUMBER 514, SERIES 23!" … "THE MURDER IN THE AVENUE HENRI-MARTIN!" … and "THE BLUE DIAMOND!" … What an excitement there was about the intervention of Holmlock Shears, the famous

English detective! What an effervescence surrounded the varying fortunes that marked the struggle between those two great artists! And what a din along the boulevards on the day when the newsboys shouted:

"Arrest of Arsène Lupin!"

My excuse is that I can supply something new: I can furnish the key to the puzzle. There is always a certain mystery about these adventures: I can dispel it. I reprint articles that have been read over and over again; I copy out old interviews: but all these things I rearrange and classify and put to the exact test of truth. My collaborator in this work is Arsène Lupin himself, whose kindness to me is inexhaustible. I am also under an occasional obligation to the unspeakable Wilson, the friend and confidant of Holmlock Shears.

My readers will remember the Homeric laughter that greeted the publication of the two telegrams. The name of Arsène Lupin alone was a guarantee of originality, a promise of amusement for the gallery. And the gallery, in this case, was the whole world.

An inquiry was immediately set on foot by the Crédit Foncier and it was ascertained that number 514, series 23, had been sold by the Versailles branch of the Crédit Lyonnais to Major Bressy of the artillery. Now the major had died of a fall from his horse; and it appeared that he told his brother officers, some time before his death, that he had been obliged to part with his ticket to a friend.

"That friend was myself," declared M. Gerbois.

"Prove it," objected the governor of the Crédit Foncier.

"Prove it? That's quite easy. Twenty people will tell you that I kept up constant relations with the major and that we used to meet at the café on the Place d'Armes. It was there that, one day, to oblige him in a moment of financial embarrassment, I took his ticket off him and gave him twenty francs for it."

"Have you any witnesses to the transaction?"

"No."

"Then upon what do you base your claim?"

"Upon the letter which he wrote me on the subject."

"What letter?"

"A letter pinned to the ticket."

"Produce it."

"But it was in the stolen writing-desk!"

"Find it."

The letter was communicated to the press by Arsène Lupin. A paragraph inserted in the *Écho de France*—which has the honour of being his official organ and in which he seems to be one of the principal shareholders—announced that he was placing in the hands of Maître Detinan, his counsel, the letter which Major Bressy had written to him, Lupin, personally.

There was a burst of delight: Arsène Lupin was represented by counsel! Arsène Lupin, respecting established customs, had appointed a member of the bar to act for him!

The reporters rushed to interview Maître Detinan, an influential radical deputy, a man endowed with the highest

integrity and a mind of uncommon shrewdness, which was, at the same time, somewhat skeptical and given to paradox.

Maître Detinan was exceedingly sorry to say that he had never had the pleasure of meeting Arsène Lupin, but he had, in point of fact, received his instructions, was greatly flattered at being selected, keenly alive to the honour shown him and determined to defend his client's rights to the utmost. He opened his brief and without hesitation showed the major's letter. It proved the sale of the ticket, but did not mention the purchaser's name. It began, "My dear friend," simply.

"'My dear friend' means me," added Arsène Lupin, in a note enclosing the major's letter. "And the best proof is that I have the letter."

The bevy of reporters at once flew off to M. Gerbois, who could do nothing but repeat:

"'My dear friend' is no one but myself. Arsène Lupin stole the major's letter with the lottery-ticket."

"Tell him to prove it," was Lupin's rejoinder to the journalists.

"But he stole the desk!" exclaimed M. Gerbois in front of the same journalists.

"Tell him to prove it!" retorted Lupin once again.

And a delightful entertainment was provided for the public by this duel between the two owners of number 514, series 23, by the constant coming and going of the journalists and by the coolness of Arsène Lupin as opposed to the frenzy of poor M. Gerbois.

Unhappy man! The press was full of his lamentations! He confessed the full extent of his misfortunes in a touchingly ingenuous way:

"It's Suzanne's dowry, gentlemen, that the villain has stolen! … For myself, personally, I don't care; but for Suzanne! Just think, a million! Ten hundred thousand francs! Ah, I always said the desk contained a treasure!"

He was told in vain that his adversary, when taking away the desk, knew nothing of the existence of the lottery-ticket and that, in any case, no one could have foreseen that this particular ticket would win the first prize. All he did was to moan:

"Don't talk to me; of course he knew!… If not, why should he have taken the trouble to steal that wretched desk?"

"For unknown reasons, but certainly not to get hold of a scrap of paper which, at that time, was worth the modest sum of twenty francs."

"The sum of a million! He knew it.... He knows everything! … Ah, you don't know the sort of a man he is, the ruffian!… He hasn't defrauded you of a million, you see!…"

This talk could have gone on a long time yet. But, twelve days later, M. Gerbois received a letter from Arsène Lupin, marked "Private and confidential," which worried him not a little:

> Dear Sir
>
> "The gallery is amusing itself at our expense. Do you not think that the time has come to be serious? I, for my part, have quite made up my mind.

"The position is clear: I hold a ticket which I am not entitled to cash and you are entitled to cash a ticket which you do not hold. Therefore neither of us can do anything without the other.

"Now you would not consent to surrender *your* rights to *me* nor I to give up *my* ticket to *you*.

"What are we to do?

"I see only one way out of the difficulty: let us divide. Half a million for you, half a million for me. Is not that fair? And would not this judgment of Solomon satisfy the sense of justice in each of us?

"I propose this as an equitable solution, but also an immediate solution. It is not an offer which you have time to discuss, but a necessity before which circumstances compel you to bow. I give you three days for reflection. I hope that, on Friday morning, I may have the pleasure of seeing a discreet advertisement in the agony-column of the *Écho de France*, addressed to 'M. Ars. Lup.' and containing, in veiled terms, your unreserved assent to the compact which I am suggesting to you. In that event, you will at once recover possession of the ticket and receive the million, on the understanding that you will hand me five hundred thousand francs in a way which I will indicate hereafter.

"Should you refuse, I have taken measures that will produce exactly the same result; but, apart from the very serious trouble which your obstinacy would bring upon you, you would be the poorer by twenty-five thousand francs, which I should have to deduct for additional expenses.

"I am, dear sir,

"Very respectfully yours,
"Arsène Lupin."

M. Gerbois, in his exasperation, was guilty of the colossal blunder of showing this letter and allowing it to be copied. His indignation drove him to every sort of folly:

"Not a penny! He shall not have a penny!" he shouted before the assembled reporters. "Share what belongs to me? Never! Let him tear up his ticket if he likes!"

"Still, half a million francs is better than nothing."

"It's not a question of that, but of my rights; and those rights I shall establish in a court of law."

"Go to law with Arsène Lupin? That would be funny!"

"No, but the Crédit Foncier. They are bound to hand me the million."

"Against the ticket or at least against evidence that you bought it?"

"The evidence exists, seeing that Arsène Lupin admits that he stole the desk."

"What judge is going to take Arsène Lupin's word?"

"I don't care, I shall go to law!"

The gallery was delighted. Bets were made, some people being certain that Lupin would bring M. Gerbois to terms, others that he would not go beyond threats. And the people felt a sort of apprehension; for the adversaries were unevenly matched, the one being so fierce in his attacks, while the other was as frightened as a hunted deer.

On Friday, there was a rush for the *Écho de France* and the agony-column on the fifth page was scanned with feverish eyes. There was not a line addressed to "M. Ars. Lup." M. Gerbois had replied to Arsène Lupin's demands with silence. It was a declaration of war.

That evening the papers contained the news that Mlle. Gerbois had been kidnapped.

The most delightful factor in what I may call the Arsène Lupin entertainment is the eminently ludicrous part played by the police. Everything passes outside their knowledge. Lupin speaks, writes, warns, orders, threatens, carries out his plans, as though there were no police, no detectives, no magistrates, no impediment of any kind in existence. They seem of no account to him whatever. No obstacle enters into his calculations.

And yet the police struggle to do their best. The moment the name of Arsène Lupin is mentioned, the whole force, from top to bottom, takes fire, boils and foams with rage. He is the enemy, the enemy who mocks you, provokes you, despises you, or, even worse, ignores you. And what can one do against an enemy like that?

According to the evidence of the servant, Suzanne went out at twenty minutes to ten. At five minutes past ten, her father, on leaving the college, failed to see her on the pavement where she usually waited for him. Everything, therefore, must have taken place in the course of the short twenty minutes' walk which brought Suzanne from her door to the college, or at least quite

close to the college.

Two neighbours declared that they had passed her about three hundred yards from the house. A lady had seen a girl walking along the avenue whose description corresponded with Suzanne's. After that, all was blank.

Inquiries were made on every side. The officials at the railway-stations and the customs-barriers were questioned. They had seen nothing on that day which could relate to the kidnapping of a young girl. However, a grocer at Ville-d'Avray stated that he had supplied a closed motor-car, coming from Paris, with petrol. There was a chauffeur on the front seat and a lady with fair hair—exceedingly fair hair, the witness said—inside. The car returned from Versailles an hour later. A block in the traffic compelled it to slacken speed and the grocer was able to perceive that there was now another lady seated beside the blonde lady whom he had seen first. This second lady was wrapped up in veils and shawls. No doubt it was Suzanne Gerbois.

Consequently, the abduction must have taken place in broad daylight, on a busy road, in the very heart of the town! How? At what spot? Not a cry had been heard, not a suspicious movement observed.

The grocer described the car, a Peugeot limousine, 24 horse-power, with a dark blue body. Inquiries were made, on chance, of Mme. Bob-Walthour, the manageress of the Grand Garage, who used to make a specialty of motor-car elopements. She had, in fact, on Friday morning, hired out a Peugeot limousine for the

day to a fair-haired lady, whom she had not seen since.

"But the driver?"

"He was a man called Ernest, whom I engaged the day before on the strength of his excellent testimonials."

"Is he here?"

"No, he brought back the car and has not been here since."

"Can't we get hold of him?"

"Certainly, by applying to the people who recommended him. I will give you the addresses."

The police called on these persons. None of them knew the man called Ernest.

And every trail which they followed to find their way out of the darkness led only to greater darkness and denser fogs.

M. Gerbois was not the man to maintain a contest which had opened in so disastrous a fashion for him. Inconsolable at the disappearance of his daughter and pricked with remorse, he capitulated. An advertisement which appeared in the *Écho de France* and aroused general comment proclaimed his absolute and unreserved surrender. It was a complete defeat: the war was over in four times twenty-four hours.

Two days later, M. Gerbois walked across the courtyard of the Crédit Foncier. He was shown in to the governor and handed him number 514, series 23. The governor gave a start:

"Oh, so you have it? Did they give it back to you?"

"I mislaid it and here it is," replied M. Gerbois.

"But you said.... There was a question...."

"That's all lies and tittle-tattle."

"But nevertheless we should require some corroborative document."

"Will the major's letter do?"

"Certainly."

"Here it is."

"Very well. Please leave these papers with us. We are allowed a fortnight in which to verify them. I will let you know when you can call for the money. In the meanwhile, I think that you would be well-advised to say nothing and to complete this business in the most absolute silence."

"That is what I intend to do."

M. Gerbois did not speak, nor the governor either. But there are certain secrets which leak out without any indiscretion having been committed, and the public suddenly learnt that Arsène Lupin had had the pluck to send number 514, series 23, back to M. Gerbois! The news was received with a sort of stupefied admiration. What a bold player he must be, to fling so important a trump as the precious ticket upon the table! True, he had parted with it wittingly, in exchange for a card which equalized the chances. But suppose the girl escaped? Suppose they succeeded in recapturing his hostage?

The police perceived the enemy's weak point and redoubled their efforts. With Arsène Lupin disarmed and despoiled by himself, caught in his own toils, receiving not a single sou of the coveted million … the laugh would at once be on the other side.

But the question was to find Suzanne. And they did not find her, nor did she escape!

"Very well," people said, "that's settled: Arsène has won the first game. But the difficult part is still to come! Mlle. Gerbois is in his hands, we admit, and he will not hand her over without the five hundred thousand francs. But how and where is the exchange to take place? For the exchange to take place, there must be a meeting; and what is to prevent M. Gerbois from informing the police and thus both recovering his daughter and keeping the money?"

The professor was interviewed. Greatly cast down, longing only for silence, he remained impenetrable:

"I have nothing to say; I am waiting."

"And Mlle. Gerbois?"

"The search is being continued."

"But Arsène Lupin has written to you?"

"No."

"Do you swear that?"

"No."

"That means yes. What are his instructions?"

"I have nothing to say."

Maître Detinan was next besieged and showed the same discretion.

"M. Lupin is my client," he replied, with an affectation of gravity. "You will understand that I am bound to maintain the most absolute reserve."

All these mysteries annoyed the gallery. Plots were evidently hatching in the dark. Arsène Lupin was arranging and tightening the meshes of his nets, while the police were keeping up a watch by day and night round M. Gerbois. And people discussed the only three possible endings: arrest, triumph, or grotesque and pitiful failure.

But, as it happened, public curiosity was destined to be only partially satisfied; and the exact truth is revealed for the first time in these pages.

On Thursday, the 12th of March, M. Gerbois received the notice from the Crédit Foncier, in an ordinary envelope.

At one o'clock on Friday, he took the train for Paris. A thousand notes of a thousand francs each were handed to him at two.

While he was counting them over, one by one, with trembling hands—for was this money not Suzanne's ransom?—two men sat talking in a cab drawn up at a short distance from the main entrance. One of these men had grizzled hair and a powerful face, which contrasted oddly with his dress and bearing, which was that of a small clerk. It was Chief-Inspector Ganimard, old Ganimard, Lupin's implacable enemy. And Ganimard said to Detective-Sergeant Folenfant:

"The old chap won't be long … we shall see him come out in five minutes. Is everything ready?"

"Quite."

"How many are we?"

"Eight, including two on bicycles."

"And myself, who count as three. It's enough, but not too many. That Gerbois must not escape us at any price … if he does, we're diddled: he'll meet Lupin at the place they have agreed upon; he'll swap the young lady for the half-million; and the trick's done."

"But why on earth won't the old chap act with us? It would be so simple! By giving us a hand in the game, he could keep the whole million."

"Yes, but he's afraid. If he tries to jockey the other, he won't get his daughter back."

"What other?"

"Him."

Ganimard pronounced this word "him" in a grave and rather awe-struck tone, as though he were speaking of a supernatural being who had already played him a nasty trick or two.

"It's very strange," said Sergeant Folenfant, judiciously, "that we should be reduced to protecting that gentleman against himself."

"With Lupin, everything is upside down," sighed Ganimard.

A minute elapsed.

"Look out!" he said.

M. Gerbois was leaving the bank. When he came to the end of the Rue des Capucines, he turned down the boulevard, keeping to the left-hand side. He walked away slowly, along the shops, and looked into the windows.

"Our friend's too quiet," said Ganimard. "A fellow with a million in his pocket does not keep so quiet as all that."

"What can he do?"

"Oh, nothing, of course.... No matter, I mistrust him. It's Lupin, Lupin...."

At that moment M. Gerbois went to a kiosk, bought some newspapers, took his change, unfolded one of the sheets and, with outstretched arms, began to read, while walking on with short steps. And, suddenly, with a bound, he jumped into a motor-cab which was waiting beside the curb. The power must have been on, for the car drove off rapidly, turned the corner of the Madeleine and disappeared.

"By Jupiter!" cried Ganimard. "Another of his inventions!"

He darted forward and other men, at the same time as himself, ran round the Madeleine. But he burst out laughing. The motor-car had broken down at the beginning of the Boulevard Malesherbes and M. Gerbois was getting out.

"Quick, Folenfant … the driver … perhaps it's the man called Ernest."

Folenfant tackled the chauffeur. It was a man called Gaston, one of the motor-cab company's drivers; a gentleman had engaged him ten minutes before and had told him to wait by the newspaper-kiosk, "with steam up," until another gentleman came.

"And what address did the second fare give?" asked Folenfant.

"He gave me no address.... 'Boulevard Malesherbes … Avenue

de Messine … give you an extra tip': that's all he said."

During this time, however, M. Gerbois, without losing a minute, had sprung into the first passing cab:

"Drive to the Concorde tube-station!"

The professor left the tube at the Place du Palais-Royal, hurried into another cab and drove to the Place de la Bourse. Here he went by tube again, as far as the Avenue de Villiers, where he took a third cab:

"25, Rue Clapeyron!"

No. 25, Rue Clapeyron, is separated from the Boulevard des Batignolles by the house at the corner. The professor went up to the first floor and rang. A gentleman opened the door.

"Does Maître Detinan live here?"

"I am Maître Detinan. M. Gerbois, I presume?"

"That's it."

"I was expecting you. Pray come in."

When M. Gerbois entered the lawyer's office, the clock was striking three and he at once said:

"This is the time he appointed. Isn't he here?"

"Not yet."

M. Gerbois sat down, wiped his forehead, looked at his watch as though he did not know the time and continued, anxiously:

"Will he come?"

The lawyer replied:

"You are asking me something, sir, which I myself am most curious to know. I have never felt so impatient in my life. In any

case, if he comes, he is taking a big risk, for the house has been closely watched for the past fortnight.... They suspect me."

"And me even more," said the professor. "I am not at all sure that the detectives set to watch me have been thrown off my track."

"But then...."

"It would not be my fault," cried the professor, vehemently, "and he can have nothing to reproach me with. What did I promise to do? To obey his orders. Well, I have obeyed his orders blindly: I cashed the ticket at the time which he fixed and came on to you in the manner which he ordered. I am responsible for my daughter's misfortune and I have kept my engagements in all good faith. It is for him to keep his." And he added, in an anxious voice, "He will bring back my daughter, won't he?"

"I hope so."

"Still … you've seen him?"

"I? No. He simply wrote asking me to receive you both, to send away my servants before three o'clock and to let no one into my flat between the time of your arrival and his departure. If I did not consent to this proposal, he begged me to let him know by means of two lines in the *Écho de France*. But I am only too pleased to do Arsène Lupin a service and I consent to everything."

M. Gerbois moaned:

"Oh, dear, how will it all end?"

He took the bank-notes from his pocket, spread them on the

table and divided them into two bundles of five hundred each. Then the two men sat silent. From time to time, M. Gerbois pricked up his ears: wasn't that a ring at the door-bell?… His anguish increased with every minute that passed. And Maître Detinan also experienced an impression that was almost painful.

For a moment, in fact, the advocate lost all his composure. He rose abruptly from his seat:

"We shan't see him.... How can we expect to?… It would be madness on his part! He trusts us, no doubt: we are honest men, incapable of betraying him. But the danger lies elsewhere."

And M. Gerbois, shattered, with his hands on the notes, stammered:

"If he would only come, oh, if he would only come! I would give all this to have Suzanne back."

The door opened.

"Half will do, M. Gerbois."

Some one was standing on the threshold—a young man, fashionably dressed—and M. Gerbois at once recognized the person who had accosted him outside the curiosity-shop. He leapt toward him:

"And Suzanne? Where is my daughter?"

Arsène Lupin closed the door carefully and, quietly unbuttoning his gloves, said to the lawyer:

"My dear maître, I can never thank you sufficiently for your kindness in consenting to defend my rights. I shall not forget it."

Maître Detinan could only murmur:

"But you never rang.... I did not hear the door...."

"Bells and doors are things that have to do their work without ever being heard. I am here all the same; and that is the great thing."

"My daughter! Suzanne! What have you done with her?" repeated the professor.

"Heavens, sir," said Lupin, "what a hurry you're in! Come, calm yourself; your daughter will be in your arms in a moment."

He walked up and down the room and then, in the tone of a magnate distributing praises:

"I congratulate you, M. Gerbois, on the skilful way in which you acted just now. If the motor hadn't had that ridiculous accident we should simply have met at the Étoile and saved Maître Detinan the annoyance of this visit.... However, it was destined otherwise!"

He caught sight of the two bundles of bank-notes and cried:

"Ah, that's right! The million is there!… Let us waste no time.... Will you allow me?"

"But," said Maître Detinan, placing himself in front of the table, "Mlle. Gerbois is not here yet."

"Well?"

"Well, isn't her presence indispensable?"

"I see, I see! Arsène Lupin inspires only a partial confidence. He pockets his half-million, without restoring the hostage. Ah, my dear maître, I am sadly misunderstood! Because fate has obliged me to perform acts of a rather … special character,

doubts are cast upon my good faith … mine! I, a man all scruples and delicacy!… However, my dear maître, if you're afraid, open your window and call out. There are quite a dozen detectives in the street."

"Do you think so?"

Arsène Lupin raised the blind:

"I doubt if M. Gerbois is capable of throwing Ganimard off the scent.... What did I tell you? There he is, the dear old chap!"

"Impossible!" cried the professor. "I swear to you, though...."

"That you have not betrayed me?… I don't doubt it, but the fellows are clever. Look, there's Folenfant!… And Gréaume!… And Dieuzy!… All my best pals, what?"

Maître Detinan looked at him in surprise. What calmness! He was laughing with a happy laugh, as though he were amusing himself at some child's game, with no danger threatening him.

This carelessness did even more than the sight of the detectives to reassure the lawyer. He moved away from the table on which the bank-notes lay.

Arsène Lupin took up the two bundles one after the other, counted twenty-five notes from each of them and, handing the lawyer the fifty bank-notes thus obtained, said:

"M. Gerbois' share of your fee, my dear maître, and Arsène Lupin's. We owe you that."

"You owe me nothing," said Maître Detinan.

"What! After all the trouble we've given you!"

"You forget the pleasure it has been to me to take that trouble."

"You mean to say, my dear maître, that you refuse to accept anything from Arsène Lupin. That's the worst," he sighed, "of having a bad reputation." He held out the fifty thousand francs to the professor. "Monsieur, let me give you this in memory of our pleasant meeting: it will be my wedding-present to Mlle. Gerbois."

M. Gerbois snatched at the notes, but protested:

"My daughter is not being married."

"She can't be married if you refuse your consent. But she is dying to be married."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know that young ladies often cherish dreams without Papa's consent. Fortunately, there are good geniuses, called Arsène Lupin, who discover the secret of those charming souls hidden away in their writing-desks."

"Did you discover nothing else?" asked Maître Detinan. "I confess that I am very curious to know why that desk was the object of your attentions."

"Historical reasons, my dear maître. Although, contrary to M. Gerbois' opinion, it contained no treasure beyond the lottery-ticket, of which I did not know, I wanted it and had been looking for it for some time. The desk, which is made of yew and mahogany, decorated with acanthus-leaf capitals, was found in Marie Walewska's discreet little house at Boulogne-sur-Seine and has an inscription on one of the drawers: '*Dedicated to Napoleon I., Emperor of the French, by his most faithful servant,*

Mancion.' Underneath are these words, carved with the point of a knife: '*Thine, Marie.*' Napoleon had it copied afterward for the Empress Josephine, so that the writing-desk which people used to admire at the Malmaison and which they still admire at the Garde-Meuble is only an imperfect copy of the one which now forms part of my collection."

M. Gerbois sighed:

"Oh, dear! If I had only known this at the shop, how willingly I would have let you have it!"

Arsène Lupin laughed:

"Yes; and you would, besides, have had the appreciable advantage of keeping the whole of number 514, series 23, for yourself."

"And you would not have thought of kidnapping my daughter, whom all this business must needs have upset."

"All what business?"

"The abduction …"

"But, my dear sir, you are quite mistaken. Mlle. Gerbois was not abducted."

"My daughter was not abducted!"

"Not at all. Kidnapping, abduction implies violence. Now Mlle. Gerbois acted as a hostage of her own free will."

"Of her own free will!" repeated the professor, in confusion.

"And almost at her own request! Why, a quick-witted young lady like Mlle. Gerbois, who, moreover, harbours a secret passion at the bottom of her heart, was hardly likely to refuse the

opportunity of securing her dowry. Oh, I assure you it was easy enough to make her understand that there was no other way of overcoming your resistance!"

Maître Detanin was greatly amused. He put in:

"You must have found a difficulty in coming to terms. I can't believe that Mlle. Gerbois allowed you to speak to her."

"I didn't. I have not even the honour of knowing her. A lady of my acquaintance was good enough to undertake the negotiations."

"The blonde lady in the motor-car, I suppose?" said Maître Detinan.

"Just so. Everything was settled at the first interview near the college. Since then, Mlle. Gerbois and her new friend have been abroad, have visited Belgium and Holland in the most agreeable and instructive manner for a young girl. However, she will tell you everything herself...."

The hall-door bell rang: three rings in quick succession, then a single ring, then another single ring.

"There she is," said Lupin. "My dear maître, if you would not mind...."

The lawyer ran to open the door.

Two young women entered. One of them flung herself into M. Gerbois' arms. The other went up to Lupin. She was tall and shapely, with a very pale face, and her fair hair, which glittered like gold, was parted into two loosely waved bandeaux. Dressed in black, wearing no ornament beyond a five-fold jet necklace,

she nevertheless struck a note of elegance and refinement.

Arsène Lupin spoke a few words to her and then, bowing to Mlle. Gerbois, said:

"I must apologize to you, mademoiselle, for all this annoyance; but I hope, nevertheless, that you have not been too unhappy...."

"Unhappy! I should even have been very happy, if it had not been for my poor father."

"Then all is for the best. Embrace him once more and take the opportunity—you will never have a better—of speaking to him about your cousin."

"My cousin?… What do you mean?… I don't understand...."

"Oh, I think you understand.... Your cousin Philippe … the young man whose letters you kept so preciously...."

Suzanne blushed, lost countenance and then, taking Lupin's advice, threw herself once more into her father's arms.

Lupin looked at them both with a melting eye:

"Ah, we are always rewarded for doing good! What a touching sight! Happy father! Happy daughter! And to think that this happiness is your work, Lupin! Those two beings will bless you later.... Your name will be piously handed down to their children and their children's children.... Oh, family life!… Family life!…" He turned to the window. "Is our dear Ganimard there still?… How he would love to witness this charming display of affection! … But no, he is not there.... There is nobody … they're all gone.... By Jove, the position is growing serious!… I shouldn't wonder if they were in the gateway by now … or by the porter's lodge …

or even on the stairs!"

M. Gerbois made an involuntary movement. Now that his daughter was restored to him, he began to see things in their true light. The arrest of his adversary meant half a million to him. Instinctively, he took a step toward the door.... Lupin barred his way, as though by accident:

"Where are you going, M. Gerbois? To defend me against them? You are too kind! Pray don't trouble. Besides, I assure you they are more perplexed than I." And he continued, reflectively: "What do they know, when all is said? That you are here … and, perhaps, that Mlle. Gerbois is here too, for they must have seen her come with an unknown lady. But they have no idea that I am here. How could I have entered a house which they searched this morning from cellar to garret? No, in all probability they are waiting for me to catch me on the wing … poor fellows! … Unless they have guessed that the unknown lady was sent by me and presume that she has been commissioned to effect the exchange.... In that case, they are preparing to arrest her when she leaves...."

The bell rang.

Lupin stopped M. Gerbois with an abrupt gesture and, in a harsh and peremptory voice, said:

"Stay where you are, sir! Think of your daughter and be reasonable; if not.... As for you, Maître Detinan, I have your word."

M. Gerbois stood rooted to the floor. The lawyer did not

move.

Lupin took up his hat without the least show of haste. There was a little dust on it; he brushed it with the back of his coat-sleeve:

"My dear maître, if I can ever be of use to you.... My best wishes, Mlle. Suzanne, and kind regards to M. Philippe." He took a heavy gold hunter from his pocket. "M. Gerbois, it is now eighteen minutes to four: I authorize you to leave this room at fourteen minutes to four.... Not a moment before fourteen minutes to four.... Is it understood?"

"But they'll enter by force!" Maître Detinan could not help saying.

"You forget the law, my dear maître! Ganimard would never dare to violate the sanctity of a Frenchman's home. We should have time for a pleasant rubber. But forgive me, you all three seem a little upset and I would not for the world abuse...."

He placed the watch on the table, opened the door of the room and, addressing the fair-haired lady, said:

"Shall we go, dear?"

He stood back for her to pass, made a parting and very respectful bow to Mlle. Gerbois, walked out and closed the door after him. And they heard him, in the hall, saying aloud:

"Good-afternoon, Ganimard, how are you? Remember me very kindly to Mme. Ganimard.... I must drop in on her to lunch one of these days.... Good-bye, Ganimard!"

The bell rang again, sharply, violently, followed by repeated

knocks and by the sound of voices on the landing....

"A quarter to four," stammered M. Gerbois.

After a few seconds, he stepped boldly into the hall. Arsène Lupin and the fair-haired lady were not there.

"Father!… You mustn't!… Wait!" cried Suzanne.

"Wait? You're mad!… Show consideration to that scoundrel! … And what about the half-million?…"

He opened the door.

Ganimard rushed in:

"Where's that lady?… And Lupin?"

"He was there … he is there now."

Ganimard gave a shout of triumph:

"We've got him!… The house is surrounded."

Maître Detinan objected:

"But the servants' staircase?"

"The servants' staircase leads to the courtyard and there's only one outlet, the front door: I have ten men watching it."

"But he did not come in by the front door.... He won't go out that way either...."

"Which way, then?" jeered Ganimard. "Through the air?"

He drew back a curtain. A long passage was revealed, leading to the kitchen. Ganimard ran down it and found that the door of the servants' staircase was double-locked.

Opening the window, he called to one of the detectives:

"Seen any one?"

"No, sir."

"Then," he exclaimed, "they are in the flat!… They are hiding in one of the rooms!… It is physically impossible for them to have escaped.... Ah, Lupin, my lad, you did me once, but I'm having my revenge this time!…"

At seven o'clock in the evening, astonished at receiving no news, the head of the detective-service, M. Dudouis, called at the Rue Clapeyron in person. He put a few questions to the men who were watching the house and then went up to Maître Detinan, who took him to his room. There he saw a man, or rather a man's two legs struggling on the carpet, while the body to which they belonged was stuffed up the chimney.

"Hi!… Hi!…" yelped a stifled voice.

And a more distant voice, from right above, echoed:

"Hi!… Hi!…"

M. Dudouis laughed and exclaimed:

"Well, Ganimard, what are you playing sweep for?"

The inspector withdrew his body from the chimney. He was unrecognizable, with his black face, his sooty clothes and his eyes glowing with fever.

"I'm looking for him," he growled.

"For whom?"

"Arsène Lupin.... Arsène Lupin and his lady friend."

"But what next? You surely don't imagine they're hiding up the chimney?"

Ganimard rose to his feet, put his five soot-covered fingers on the sleeve of his superior's coat and, in a hollow, angry voice,

said:

"Where would you have them be, chief? They must be somewhere. They are beings of flesh and blood, like you and me; they can't vanish into thin air."

"No; but they vanish for all that."

"Where? Where? The house is surrounded! There are men on the roof!"

"What about the next house?"

"There's no communication."

"The flats on the other floors?"

"I know all the tenants. They have seen nobody. They have heard nobody."

"Are you sure you know them all?"

"Every one. The porter answers for them. Besides, as an additional precaution, I have posted a man in each flat."

"We must find them, you know."

"That's what I say, chief, that's what I say. We must and we shall, because they are both here … they can't be anywhere else. Be easy, chief; if I don't catch them to-night, I shall to-morrow.... I shall spend the night here!… I shall spend the night here!…"

He did, in fact, spend the night there and the next night and the night after that. And, when three whole days and three nights had elapsed, not only had he failed to discover the elusive Lupin and his no less elusive companion, but he had not even observed the slightest clue upon which to found the slightest supposition.

And that is why he refused to budge from his first opinion:

"Once there's no trace of their flight, they must be here!"

It is possible that, in the depths of his mind, he was less firmly convinced. But he refused to admit as much to himself. No, a thousand times no: a man and a woman do not vanish into space like the wicked genii in the fairy-tales! And, without losing courage, he continued his searchings and investigations, as though he hoped to discover them hidden in some impenetrable retreat, bricked up in the walls of the house.

CHAPTER II
THE BLUE DIAMOND

In the evening of the twenty-seventh of March, old General Baron d'Hautrec, who had been French Ambassador in Berlin under the Second Empire, was sleeping comfortably in an easy-chair in the house which his brother had left him six months before, at 134, Avenue Henri-Martin. His lady companion continued to read aloud to him, while Sœur Auguste warmed the bed and prepared the night-light.

As an exceptional case, the sister was returning to her convent that evening, to spend the night with the Mother Superior, and, at eleven o'clock, she said:

"I'm finished now, Mlle. Antoinette, and I'm going."

"Very well, sister."

"And don't forget that the cook is sleeping out to-night and that you are alone in the house with the man-servant."

"You need have no fear for monsieur le baron: I shall sleep in the next room, as arranged, and leave the door open."

The nun went away. A minute later, Charles, the man-servant, came in for his orders. The baron had woke up. He replied himself:

"Just the same as usual, Charles. Try the electric bell, to see if it rings in your bedroom properly, and, if you hear it during the night, run down at once and go straight to the doctor."

"Are you still anxious, general?"

"I don't feel well.... I don't feel at all well. Come, Mlle. Antoinette, where were we in your book?"

"Aren't you going to bed, monsieur le baron?"

"No, no, I don't care to go to bed till very late; besides, I can do without help."

Twenty minutes later, the old man dozed off again and Antoinette moved away on tip-toe.

At that moment, Charles was carefully closing the shutters on the ground floor, as usual. In the kitchen, he pushed the bolt of the door that led to the garden and, in the front hall, he not only locked the double door, but put up the chain fastening the two leaves. Then he went up to his attic on the third floor, got into bed and fell asleep.

Perhaps an hour had elapsed when, suddenly, he jumped out of bed: the bell was ringing. It went on for quite a long time, seven or eight seconds, perhaps, and in a steady, uninterrupted way.

"That's all right," said Charles, recovering his wits. "Some fresh whim of the baron's, I suppose."

He huddled on his clothes, ran down the stairs, stopped before the door and, from habit, knocked. No answer. He entered the room:

"Hullo!" he muttered. "No light.... What on earth have they put the light out for?" And he called, in a whisper, "Mademoiselle!…"

No reply.

"Are you there, mademoiselle?… What's the matter? Is monsieur le baron ill?"

The same silence continued around him, a heavy silence that ended by impressing him. He took two steps forward: his foot knocked against a chair and, on touching it, he perceived that it was overturned. And thereupon his hand came upon other objects on the floor: a small table, a fire-screen. Greatly alarmed, he went back to the wall and felt for the electric switch. He found it and turned on the light.

In the middle of the room, between the table and the looking-glass wardrobe, lay the body of his master, the Baron d'Hautrec.

"What!" he stammered. "Is it possible?"

He did not know what to do and, without moving, with his eyes starting from his head, he stood gazing at the general disorder of the room: the chairs upset, a great crystal candlestick smashed into a thousand pieces, the clock lying on the marble hearth-stone, all signs of a fierce and hideous struggle. The handle of a little steel dagger gleamed near the body. The blade was dripping with blood. A handkerchief stained with red marks hung down from the mattress.

Charles gave a yell of horror: the body had suddenly stretched itself in one last effort and then shrunk up again.... Two or three convulsions; and that was all.

He stooped forward. Blood was trickling from a tiny wound in the neck and spotting the carpet with dark stains. The face still wore an expression of mad terror.

"They've killed him," he stammered, "they've killed him!"

And he shuddered at the thought of another probable crime: was not the companion sleeping in the next room? And would not the baron's murderer have killed her too?

He pushed open the door: the room was empty. He concluded that either Antoinette had been carried off or that she had gone before the crime.

He returned to the baron's room and, his eyes falling upon the writing-desk, he observed that it had not been broken open. More remarkable still, he saw a handful of louis d'or on the table, beside the bunch of keys and the pocketbook which the baron placed there every evening. Charles took up the pocketbook and went through it. One of the compartments contained bank-notes. He counted them: there were thirteen notes of a hundred francs each.

Then the temptation became too strong for him: instinctively, mechanically, while his thoughts did not even take part in the movement of his hand, he took the thirteen notes, hid them in his jacket, rushed down the stairs, drew the bolt, unhooked the chain, closed the door after him and fled through the garden.

Charles was an honest man at heart. He had no sooner pushed back the gate than, under the influence of the fresh air, with his face cooled by the rain, he stopped. The deed of which he had been guilty appeared to him in its true light and struck him with sudden horror.

A cab passed. He hailed the driver:

"Hi, mate! Go to the police-station and bring back the commissary.... Gallop! There's murder been done!"

The driver whipped up his horse. But, when Charles tried to go in again, he could not: he had closed the gate himself and the gate could not be opened from the outside.

On the other hand, it was of no use ringing, for there was no one in the house. He therefore walked up and down along the gardens which, at the La Muette end, line the avenue with a pleasant border of trim green shrubs. And it was not until he had waited for nearly an hour that he was at last able to tell the commissary the details of the crime and hand him the thirteen bank-notes.

During this time, a locksmith was sent for who, with great difficulty, succeeded in forcing the gate of the garden and the front door. The commissary went upstairs and, at once, at the first glance, said to the servant:

"Why, you told me that the room was in the greatest disorder!"

He turned round. Charles seemed pinned to the threshold, hypnotized: all the furniture had resumed its usual place! The little table was standing between the two windows, the chairs were on their legs and the clock in the middle of the mantel-piece. The shivers of the smashed candlestick had disappeared.

Gaping with stupor, he articulated:

"The body.... Monsieur le baron …"

"Yes," cried the commissary, "where is the victim?"

He walked up to the bed. Under a large sheet, which he drew

aside, lay General the Baron d'Hautrec, late French Ambassador in Berlin. His body was covered with his general's cloak, decorated with the cross of the Legion of Honour. The face was calm. The eyes were closed.

The servant stammered:

"Someone must have come."

"Which way?"

"I can't say, but someone has been here during my absence.... Look, there was a very thin steel dagger there, on the floor.... And then, on the table, a blood-stained handkerchief.... That's all gone.... They've taken everything away.... They've arranged everything...."

"But who?"

"The murderer!"

"We found all the doors closed."

"He must have remained in the house."

"Then he would be here still, as you never left the pavement."

The man reflected and said, slowly:

"That's so … that's so … and I did not go far from the gate either.... Still …"

"Let us see, who was the last person you saw with the baron?"

"Mlle. Antoinette, the companion."

"What has become of her?"

"I should say that, as her bed was not even touched, she must have taken advantage of Sœur Auguste's absence to go out also. It would only half surprise me if she had: she is young … and

pretty...."

"But how could she have got out?"

"Through the door."

"You pushed the bolt and fastened the chain!"

"A good deal later! By that time, she must have left the house."

"And the crime was committed, you think, after she went?"

"Of course."

They searched the house from top to bottom, from the garrets to the cellars; but the murderer had fled. How? When? Was it he or an accomplice who had thought proper to return to the scene of the crime and do away with anything that might have betrayed him? Those were the questions that suggested themselves to the police.

The divisional surgeon came upon the scene at seven o'clock, the head of the detective-service at eight. Next came the turn of the public prosecutor and the examining magistrate. In addition, the house was filled with policemen, inspectors, journalists, Baron d'Hautrec's nephew and other members of the family.

They rummaged about, they studied the position of the body, according to Charles's recollection, they questioned Sœur Auguste the moment she arrived. They discovered nothing. At most, Sœur Auguste was surprised at the disappearance of Antoinette Bréhat. She had engaged the girl twelve days before, on the strength of excellent references, and refused to believe that she could have abandoned the sick man confided to her care, to go running about at night alone.

"All the more so," the examining magistrate insisted, "as, in that case, she would have been in before now. We therefore come back to the same point: what has become of her?"

"If you ask me," said Charles, "she has been carried off by the murderer."

The suggestion was plausible enough and fitted in with certain details. The head of the detective service said:

"Carried off? Upon my word, it's quite likely."

"It's not only unlikely," said a voice, "but absolutely opposed to the facts, to the results of the investigation, in short, to the evidence itself."

The voice was harsh, the accent gruff and no one was surprised to recognize Ganimard. He alone, besides, would be forgiven that rather free and easy way of expressing himself.

"Hullo, is that you, Ganimard?" cried M. Dudouis. "I hadn't seen you."

"I have been here for two hours."

"So you do take an interest in something besides number 514, series 23, the Rue Clapeyron mystery, the blonde lady and Arsène Lupin?"

"Hee, hee!" grinned the old inspector. "I won't go so far as to declare that Lupin has nothing to do with the case we're engaged on.... But let us dismiss the story of the lottery-ticket from our minds, until further orders, and look into this matter."

Ganimard is not one of those mighty detectives whose proceedings form a school, as it were, and whose names will

always remain inscribed on the judicial annals of Europe. He lacks the flashes of genius that illumine a Dupin, a Lecoq or a Holmlock Shears. But he possesses first-rate average qualities: perspicacity, sagacity, perseverance and even a certain amount of intuition. His greatest merit lies in the fact that he is absolutely independent of outside influences. Short of a kind of fascination which Arsène Lupin wields over him, he works without allowing himself to be biased or disturbed.

At any rate, the part which he played that morning did not lack brilliancy and his assistance was of the sort which a magistrate is able to appreciate.

"To start with," he began, "I will ask Charles here to be very definite on one point: were all the objects which, on the first occasion, he saw upset or disturbed put back, on the second, exactly in their usual places?"

"Exactly."

"It is obvious, therefore, that they can only have been put back by a person to whom the place of each of those objects was familiar."

The remark impressed the bystanders. Ganimard resumed:

"Another question, Mr. Charles.... You were woke by a ring.... Who was it, according to you, that called you?"

"Monsieur le baron, of course."

"Very well. But at what moment do you take it that he rang?"

"After the struggle … at the moment of dying."

"Impossible, because you found him lying, lifeless, at a spot

more than four yards removed from the bell-push."

"Then he rang during the struggle."

"Impossible, because the bell, you told us, rang steadily, without interruption, and went on for seven or eight seconds. Do you think that his assailant would have given him time to ring like that?"

"Then it was before, at the moment when he was attacked."

"Impossible. You told us that, between the ring of the bell and the instant when you entered the room, three minutes elapsed, at most. If, therefore, the baron had rung before, it would be necessary for the struggle, the murder, the dying agony and the flight to have taken place within that short space of three minutes. I repeat, it is impossible."

"And yet," said the examining magistrate, "some one rang. If it was not the baron, who was it?"

"The murderer."

"With what object?"

"I can't tell his object. But at least the fact that he rang proves that he must have known that the bell communicated with a servant's bedroom. Now who could have known this detail except a person belonging to the house?"

The circle of suppositions was becoming narrower. In a few quick, clear, logical sentences, Ganimard placed the question in its true light; and, as the old inspector allowed his thoughts to appear quite plainly, it seemed only natural that the examining magistrate should conclude:

"In short, in two words, you suspect Antoinette Bréhat."

"I don't suspect her; I accuse her."

"You accuse her of being the accomplice?"

"I accuse her of killing General Baron d'Hautrec."

"Come, come! And what proof…?"

"This handful of hair, which I found in the victim's right hand, dug into his flesh by the points of his nails."

He showed the hair; it was hair of a brilliant fairness, gleaming like so many threads of gold; and Charles muttered:

"That is certainly Mlle. Antoinette's hair. There is no mistaking it." And he added, "Besides … there's something more.... I believe the knife … the one I didn't see the second time … belonged to her.... She used it to cut the pages of the books."

The silence that followed was long and painful, as though the crime increased in horror through having been committed by a woman. The examining magistrate argued:

"Let us admit, until further information is obtained, that the baron was murdered by Antoinette Bréhat. We should still have to explain what way she can have taken to go out after committing the crime, to return after Charles's departure and to go out again before the arrival of the commissary. Have you any opinion on this subject, M. Ganimard?"

"No."

"Then…?"

Ganimard wore an air of embarrassment. At last, he spoke, not without a visible effort:

"All that I can say is that I find in this the same way of setting to work as in the ticket 514-23 case, the same phenomenon which one might call the faculty of disappearance. Antoinette Bréhat appears and disappears in this house as mysteriously as Arsène Lupin made his way into Maître Detinan's and escaped from there in the company of the blonde lady."

"Which means…?"

"Which means that I cannot help thinking of these two coincidences, which, to say the least, are very odd: first, Antoinette Bréhat was engaged by Sœur Auguste twelve days ago, that is to say, on the day after that on which the blonde lady slipped through my fingers. In the second place, the hair of the blonde lady has precisely the same violent colouring, the metallic brilliancy with a golden sheen, which we find in this."

"So that, according to you, Antoinette Bréhat …"

"Is none other than the blonde lady."

"And Lupin, consequently, plotted both cases?"

"I think so."

There was a loud burst of laughter. It was the chief of the detective-service indulging his merriment:

"Lupin! Always Lupin! Lupin is in everything; Lupin is everywhere!"

"He is just where he is," said Ganimard, angrily.

"And then he must have his reasons for being in any particular place," remarked M. Dudouis, "and, in this case, his reasons seem to me obscure. The writing-desk has not been broken open

nor the pocketbook stolen. There is even gold left lying on the table."

"Yes," cried Ganimard, "but what about the famous diamond?"

"What diamond?"

"The blue diamond! The celebrated diamond which formed part of the royal crown of France and which was presented by the Duc d'Alais to Léonide Latouche and, on her death, was bought by Baron d'Hautrec in memory of the brilliant actress whom he had passionately loved. This is one of those recollections which an old Parisian like myself never forgets."

"It is obvious," said the examining magistrate, "that, if the blue diamond is not found, the thing explains itself. But where are we to look?"

"On monsieur le baron's finger," replied Charles. "The blue diamond was never off his left hand."

"I have looked at that hand," declared Ganimard, going up to the corpse, "and, as you can see for yourselves, there is only a plain gold ring."

"Look inside the palm," said the servant.

Ganimard unfolded the clenched fingers. The bezel was turned inward and, contained within the bezel, glittered the blue diamond.

"The devil!" muttered Ganimard, absolutely nonplussed. "This is beyond me!"

"And I hope that you will now give up suspecting that

unfortunate Arsène Lupin?" said M. Dudouis, with a grin.

Ganimard took his time, reflected and retorted, in a sententious tone:

"It is just when a thing gets beyond me that I suspect Arsène Lupin most."

These were the first discoveries effected by the police on the day following upon that strange murder, vague, inconsistent discoveries to which the subsequent inquiry imparted neither consistency nor certainty. The movements of Antoinette Bréhat remained as absolutely inexplicable as those of the blonde lady, nor was any light thrown upon the identity of that mysterious creature with the golden hair who had killed Baron d'Hautrec without taking from his finger the fabulous diamond from the royal crown of France.

Moreover and especially, the curiosity which it inspired raised the murder above the level of a sordid crime to that of a mighty, if heinous trespass, the mystery of which irritated the public mind.

Baron d'Hautrec's heirs were obliged to benefit by this great advertisement. They arranged an exhibition of the furniture and personal effects in the Avenue Henri-Martin, in the house itself, on the scene of the crime, prior to the sale at the Salle Drouot. The furniture was modern and in indifferent taste, the knicknacks had no artistic value … but, in the middle of the bedroom, on a stand covered with ruby velvet, the ring with the blue diamond sparkled under a glass shade, closely watched by two detectives.

It was a magnificent diamond of enormous size and incomparable purity and of that undefined blue which clear water takes from the sky which it reflects, the blue which we can just suspect in newly-washed linen. People admired it, went into raptures over it … and cast terrified glances round the victim's room, at the spot where the corpse had lain, at the floor stripped of its blood-stained carpet and especially at the walls, those solid walls through which the criminal had passed. They felt to make sure that the marble chimney-piece did not swing on a pivot, that there was no secret spring in the mouldings of the mirrors. They pictured yawning cavities, tunnels communicating with the sewers, with the catacombs....

The blue diamond was sold at the Hôtel Drouot on the thirtieth of January. The auction-room was crammed and the bidding proceeded madly.

All Paris, the Paris of the first nights and great public functions, was there, all those who buy and all those who like others to think that they are in a position to buy: stockbrokers, artists, ladies in every class of society, two members of the Government, an Italian tenor, a king in exile who, in order to reëstablish his credit, with great self-possession and in a resounding voice, permitted himself the luxury of running up the price to a hundred thousand francs. A hundred thousand francs! His Majesty was quite safe in making the bid. The Italian tenor was soon offering a hundred and fifty thousand, an actress at the Français a hundred and seventy-five.

At two hundred thousand francs, however, the competition became less brisk. At two hundred and fifty thousand, only two bidders remained: Herschmann, the financial magnate, known as the Gold-mine King; and a wealthy American lady, the Comtesse de Crozon, whose collection of diamonds and other precious stones enjoys a world-wide fame.

"Two hundred and sixty thousand … two hundred and seventy thousand … seventy-five … eighty," said the auctioneer, with a questioning glance at either competitor in turn. "Two hundred and eighty thousand for madame.... No advance on two hundred and eighty thousand…?"

"Three hundred thousand," muttered Herschmann.

A pause followed. All eyes were turned on the Comtesse de Crozon. Smiling, but with a pallor that betrayed her excitement, she stood leaning over the back of the chair before her. In reality, she knew and everybody present knew that there was no doubt about the finish of the duel: it was logically and fatally bound to end in favour of the financier, whose whims were served by a fortune of over five hundred millions. Nevertheless, she said:

"Three hundred and five thousand."

There was a further pause. Every glance was now turned on the Gold-mine King, in expectation of the inevitable advance. It was sure to come, in all its brutal and crushing strength.

It did not come. Herschmann remained impassive, with his eyes fixed on a sheet of paper which he held in his right hand, while the other crumpled up the pieces of a torn envelope.

"Three hundred and five thousand," repeated the auctioneer. "Going … going.... No further bid…?"

No one spoke.

"Once more: going … going...."

Herschmann did not move. A last pause. The hammer fell.

"Four hundred thousand!" shouted Herschmann, starting up, as though the tap of the hammer had roused him from his torpor.

Too late. The diamond was sold.

Herschmann's acquaintances crowded round him. What had happened? Why had he not spoken sooner?

He gave a laugh:

"What happened? Upon my word, I don't know. My thoughts wandered for a second."

"You don't mean that!"

"Yes, some one brought me a letter."

"And was that enough…?"

"To put me off? Yes, for the moment."

Ganimard was there. He had watched the sale of the ring. He went up to one of the porters:

"Did you hand M. Herschmann a letter?"

"Yes."

"Who gave it you?"

"A lady."

"Where is she?"

"Where is she?… Why, sir, there she is … the lady over there, in a thick veil."

"Just going out?"

"Yes."

Ganimard rushed to the door and saw the lady going down the staircase. He ran after her. A stream of people stopped him at the entrance. When he came outside, he had lost sight of her.

He went back to the room, spoke to Herschmann, introduced himself and asked him about the letter. Herschmann gave it to him. It contained the following simple words, scribbled in pencil and in a handwriting unknown to the financier:

> "The blue diamond brings ill-luck. Remember Baron d'Hautrec."

The tribulations of the blue diamond were not over. Already famous through the murder of Baron d'Hautrec and the incidents at the Hôtel Drouot, it attained the height of its celebrity six months later. In the summer, the precious jewel which the Comtesse de Crozon had been at such pains to acquire was stolen.

Let me sum up this curious case, marked by so many stirring, dramatic and exciting episodes, upon which I am at last permitted to throw some light.

On the evening of the tenth of August, M. and Madame de Crozon's guests were gathered in the drawing-room of the magnificent château overlooking the Bay of Somme. There was a request for some music. The countess sat down to the piano, took off her rings, which included Baron d'Hautrec's, and laid them on a little table that stood beside the piano.

An hour later, the count went to bed, as did his two cousins,

the d'Andelles, and Madame de Réal, an intimate friend of the Comtesse de Crozon, who remained behind with Herr Bleichen, the Austrian consul, and his wife.

They sat and talked and then the countess turned down the big lamp which stood on the drawing-room table. At the same moment, Herr Bleichen put out the two lamps on the piano. There was a second's darkness and groping; then the consul lit a candle and they all three went to their rooms. But, the instant the countess reached hers, she remembered her jewels and told her maid to go and fetch them. The woman returned and placed them on the mantel-piece. Madame de Crozon did not examine them; but, the next morning, she noticed that one of the rings was missing, the ring with the blue diamond.

She told her husband. Both immediately came to the same conclusion: the maid being above suspicion, the thief could be none but Herr Bleichen.

The count informed the central commissary of police at Amiens, who opened an inquiry and arranged discreetly for the house to be constantly watched, so as to prevent the Austrian consul from selling or sending away the ring. The château was surrounded by detectives night and day.

A fortnight elapsed without the least incident. Then Herr Bleichen announced his intention of leaving. On the same day, a formal accusation was laid against him. The commissary made an official visit and ordered the luggage to be examined. In a small bag of which the consul always carried the key, they found

a flask containing tooth-powder; and, inside the flask, the ring!

Mrs. Bleichen fainted. Her husband was arrested.

My readers will remember the defense set up by the accused. He was unable, he said, to explain the presence of the ring, unless it was there as the result of an act of revenge on the part of M. de Crozon:

"The count ill-treats his wife," he declared, "and makes her life a misery. I had a long conversation with her and warmly urged her to sue for a divorce. The count must have heard of this and revenged himself by taking the ring and slipping it into my dressing-bag when I was about to leave."

The count and countess persisted in their charge. It was an even choice between their explanation and the consul's: both were equally probable. No new fact came to weigh down either scale. A month of gossip, of guess-work and investigations, failed to produce a single element of certainty.

Annoyed by all this worry and unable to bring forward a definite proof of guilt to justify their accusation, M. and Madame de Crozon wrote to Paris for a detective capable of unravelling the threads of the skein. The police sent Ganimard.

For four days the old inspector rummaged and hunted about, strolled in the park, had long talks with the maids, the chauffeur, the gardeners, the people of the nearest post-offices, and examined the rooms occupied by the Bleichen couple, the d'Andelle cousins and Madame de Réal. Then, one morning, he disappeared without taking leave of his hosts.

But, a week later, they received this telegram:

"Please meet me five o'clock to-morrow, Friday afternoon at Thé Japonais, Rue Boissy-d'Anglas.

"Ganimard."

At five o'clock to the minute, on the Friday, their motor-car drew up in front of 9, Rue Boissy-d'Anglas. The old inspector was waiting for them on the pavement and, without a word of explanation, led them up to the first-floor of the Thé Japonais.

In one of the rooms they found two persons, whom Ganimard introduced to them.

"M. Gerbois, professor at Versailles College, whom, you will remember, Arsène Lupin robbed of half a million.... M. Léonce d'Hautrec, nephew and residuary legatee of the late Baron d'Hautrec."

The four sat down. A few minutes later, a fifth arrived. It was the chief of the detective-service.

M. Dudouis appeared to be in a rather bad temper. He bowed and said:

"Well, what is it, Ganimard? They gave me your telephone message at headquarters. Is it serious?"

"Very serious, chief. In less than an hour, the last adventures in which I have assisted will come to an issue here. I considered that your presence was indispensable."

"And does this apply also to the presence of Dieuzy and Folenfant, whom I see below, hanging round the door?"

"Yes, chief."

"And what for? Is somebody to be arrested? What a melodramatic display! Well, Ganimard, say what you have to say."

Ganimard hesitated for a few moments and then, with the evident intention of impressing his hearers, said:

"First of all, I wish to state that Herr Bleichen had nothing to do with the theft of the ring."

"Oh," said M. Dudouis, "that's a mere statement … and a serious one!"

And the count asked:

"Is this … discovery the only thing that has come of your exertions?"

"No, sir. Two days after the theft, three of your guests happened to be at Crécy, in the course of a motor-trip. Two of them went on to visit the famous battlefield, while the third hurried to the post-office and sent off a little parcel, packed up and sealed according to the regulations and insured to the value of one hundred francs."

M. de Crozon objected:

"There is nothing out of the way in that."

"Perhaps you will think it less natural when I tell you that, instead of the real name, the sender gave the name of Rousseau and that the addressee, a M. Beloux, residing in Paris, changed his lodgings on the very evening of the day on which he received the parcel, that is to say, the ring."

"Was it one of my d'Andelle cousins, by any chance?" asked

the count.

"No, it was neither of those gentlemen."

"Then it was Mme. de Réal?"

"Yes."

The countess, in amazement, exclaimed:

"Do you accuse my friend Mme. de Réal?"

"A simple question, madame," replied Ganimard. "Was Mme. de Réal present at the sale of the blue diamond?"

"Yes, but in a different part of the room. We were not together."

"Did she advise you to buy the ring?"

The countess collected her memory:

"Yes … as a matter of fact.... I think she was the first to mention it to me."

"I note your answer, madame," said Ganimard. "So it is quite certain that it was Mme. de Réal who first spoke to you of the ring and advised you to buy it."

"Still … my friend is incapable...."

"I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon, Mme. de Réal is only your chance acquaintance and not an intimate friend, as the newspapers stated, thus diverting suspicion from her. You have only known her since last winter. Now I can undertake to prove to you that all that she has told you about herself, her past, her connections is absolutely false; that Mme. Blanche de Réal did not exist before she met you; and that she has ceased to exist at this present moment."

"Well?" said M. Dudouis, "what next?"

"What next?" echoed Ganimard.

"Yes, what next?… This is all very interesting; but what has it to do with the case? If Mme. de Réal took the ring, why was it found in Herr Bleichen's tooth-powder? Come, Ganimard! A person who takes the trouble to steal the blue diamond keeps it. What have you to answer to that?"

"I, nothing. But Mme. de Réal will answer."

"Then she exists?"

"She exists … without existing. In a few words, here it is: three days ago, reading the paper which I read every day, I saw at the head of the list of arrivals at Trouville, 'Hôtel Beaurivage, Mme. de Réal,' and so on.... You can imagine that I was at Trouville that same evening, questioning the manager of the Beaurivage. According to the description and certain clues which I gathered, this Mme. de Réal was indeed the person whom I was looking for, but she had gone from the hotel, leaving her address in Paris, 3, Rue du Colisée. On Wednesday, I called at that address and learnt that there was no Madame de Réal, but just a woman called Réal, who lived on the second floor, followed the occupation of a diamond-broker and was often away. Only the day before, she had come back from a journey. Yesterday, I rang at her door and, under a false name, offered my services to Mme. de Réal as an intermediary to introduce her to people who were in a position to buy valuable stones. We made an appointment to meet here to-day for a first transaction."

"Oh, so you expect her?"

"At half-past five."

"And are you sure?…"

"That it is Mme. de Réal of the Château de Crozon? I have indisputable proofs. But … hark!… Folenfant's signal!…"

A whistle had sounded. Ganimard rose briskly:

"We have not a moment to lose. M. and Madame de Crozon, go into the next room, please. You too, M. d'Hautrec … and you also, M. Gerbois.... The door will remain open and, at the first sign, I will ask you to intervene. Do you stay, chief, please."

"And, if anyone else comes in?" asked M. Dudouis.

"No one will. This is a new establishment and the proprietor, who is a friend of mine, will not let a living soul come up the stairs … except the blonde lady."

"The blonde lady? What do you mean?"

"The blonde lady herself, chief, the friend and accomplice of Arsène Lupin, the mysterious blonde lady, against whom I have positive proofs, but against whom I want, over and above those and in your presence, to collect the evidence of all the people whom she has robbed."

He leant out of the window:

"She is coming.... She has gone in.... She can't escape now: Folenfant and Dieuzy are guarding the door.... The blonde lady is ours, chief; we've got her!"

Almost at that moment, a woman appeared upon the threshold, a tall, thin woman, with a very pale face and violent

golden hair.

Ganimard was stifled by such emotion that he stood dumb, incapable of articulating the least word. She was there, in front of him, at his disposal! What a victory over Arsène Lupin! And what a revenge! And, at the same time, that victory seemed to him to have been won with such ease that he wondered whether the blonde lady was not going to slip through his fingers, thanks to one of those miracles which Lupin was in the habit of performing.

She stood waiting, meanwhile, surprised at the silence, and looked around her without disguising her uneasiness.

"She will go! She will disappear!" thought Ganimard, in dismay.

Suddenly, he placed himself between her and the door. She turned and tried to go out.

"No, no," he said. "Why go?"

"But, monsieur, I don't understand your ways. Let me pass...."

"There is no reason for you to go, madame, and every reason, on the contrary, why you should stay."

"But …"

"It's no use, you are not going."

Turning very pale, she sank into a chair and stammered:

"What do you want?"

Ganimard triumphed. He had got the blonde lady. Mastering himself, he said:

"Let me introduce the friend of whom I spoke to you, the one

who would like to buy some jewels … especially diamonds. Did you obtain the one you promised me?"

"No … no.... I don't know.... I forget...."

"Oh, yes.... Just try.... Someone you knew was to bring you a coloured diamond.... 'Something like the blue diamond,' I said, laughing, and you answered, 'Exactly. I may have what you want.' Do you remember?"

She was silent. A little wristbag which she was holding in her hand fell to the ground. She picked it up quickly and pressed it to her. Her fingers trembled a little.

"Come," said Ganimard. "I see that you do not trust us, Madame de Réal. I will set you a good example and let you see what I have got to show."

He took a piece of paper from his pocketbook and unfolded it:

"Here, first of all, is some of the hair of Antoinette Bréhat, torn out by the baron and found clutched in the dead man's hand. I have seen Mlle. de Gerbois: she has most positively recognized the colour of the hair of the blonde lady … the same colour as yours, for that matter … exactly the same colour."

Mme. de Réal watched him with a stupid expression, as though she really did not grasp the sense of his words. He continued:

"And now here are two bottles of scent. They are empty, it is true, and have no labels; but enough of the scent still clings to them to have enabled Mlle. Gerbois, this very morning, to recognize the perfume of the blonde lady who accompanied her

on her fortnight's excursion. Now, one of these bottles comes from the room which Mme. de Réal occupied at the Château de Crozon and the other from the room which you occupied at the Hôtel Beaurivage."

"What are you talking about?… The blonde lady … the Château de Crozon...."

The inspector, without replying, spread four sheets of paper on the table.

"Lastly," he said, "here, on these four sheets, we have a specimen of the handwriting of Antoinette Bréhat, another of the lady who sent a note to Baron Herschmann during the sale of the blue diamond, another of Mme. de Réal, at the time of her stay at Crozon, and the fourth … your own, madame … your name and address given by yourself to the hall-porter of the Hôtel Beaurivage at Trouville. Now, please compare these four handwritings. They are one and the same."

"But you are mad, sir, you are mad! What does all this mean?"

"It means, madame," cried Ganimard, with a great outburst, "that the blonde lady, the friend and accomplice of Arsène Lupin, is none other than yourself."

He pushed open the door of the next room, rushed at M. Gerbois, shoved him along by the shoulders and, planting him in front of Mme. Réal:

"M. Gerbois, do you recognize the person who took away your daughter and whom you saw at Maître Detinan's?"

"No."

There was a commotion of which every one felt the shock. Ganimard staggered back:

"No?… Is it possible?… Come, just think...."

"I have thought.... Madame is fair, like the blonde lady … and pale, like her … but she doesn't resemble her in the least."

"I can't believe it … a mistake like that is inconceivable.... M. d'Hautrec, do you recognize Antoinette Bréhat?"

"I have seen Antoinette Bréhat at my uncle's … this is not she."

"And madame is not Mme. de Réal, either," declared the Comte de Crozon.

This was the finishing stroke. It stunned Ganimard, who stood motionless, with hanging head and shifting eyes. Of all his contrivances, nothing remained. The whole edifice was tumbling about his shoulders.

M. Dudouis rose:

"I must beg you to forgive us, madame. There has been a regrettable confusion of identities, which I will ask you to forget. But what I cannot well understand is your agitation … the strangeness of your manner since you arrived...."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.