Leblanc Maurice

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE TRAGEDY AT THE PALACE HOTEL

Mr. Kesselbach stopped short on the threshold of the sitting-room, took his secretary's arm and, in an anxious voice, whispered:

"Chapman, some one has been here again."

"Surely not, sir," protested the secretary. "You have just opened the hall-door yourself; and the key never left your pocket while we were lunching in the restaurant."

"Chapman, some one has been here again," Mr. Kesselbach repeated. He pointed to a traveling-bag on the mantelpiece. "Look, I can prove it. That bag was shut. It is now open."

Chapman protested.

"Are you quite sure that you shut it, sir? Besides, the bag contains nothing but odds and ends of no value, articles of dress.."

"It contains nothing else, because I took my pocket-book out before we went down, by way of precaution… But for that… No, Chapman, I tell you, some one has been here while we were at lunch."

There was a telephone on the wall. He took down the receiver:

"Hallo!.. I'm Mr. Kesselbach… Suite 415.. That's right… Mademoiselle, would you please put me on to the Prefecture of Police.. the detective department… I know the number.. one second.. Ah, here it is! Number 822.48… I'll hold the line."

A moment later he continued:

"Are you 822.48? I should like a word with M. Lenormand, the chief of the detective-service. My name's Kesselbach… Hullo!.. Yes, the chief detective knows what it's about. He has given me leave to ring him up… Oh, he's not there?.. To whom am I speaking?.. Detective-sergeant Gourel?.. You were there yesterday, were you not, when I called on M. Lenormand? Well, the same thing that I told M. Lenormand yesterday has occurred again to-day… Some one has entered the suite which I am occupying. And, if you come at once, you may be able to discover some clues… In an hour or two? All right; thanks… You have only to ask for suite 415… Thank you again."

Rudolf Kesselbach, nicknamed alternatively the King of Diamonds and the Lord of the Cape, possessed a fortune estimated at nearly twenty millions sterling. For the past week, he had occupied suite 415, on the fourth floor of the Palace Hotel, consisting of three rooms, of which the two larger, on the right, the sitting-room and the principal bedroom, faced the avenue; while the other, on the left, in which Chapman, the secretary, slept, looked out on the Rue de Judée.

Adjoining this bedroom, a suite of five rooms had been reserved for Mrs. Kesselbach, who was to leave Monte Carlo, where she was at present staying, and join her husband the moment she heard from him.

Rudolf Kesselbach walked up and down for a few minutes with a thoughtful air. He was a tall man, with a ruddy complexion, and still young; and his dreamy eyes, which showed pale blue through his gold-rimmed spectacles, gave him an expression of gentleness and shyness that contrasted curiously with the strength of the square forehead and the powerfully-developed jaws.

He went to the window: it was fastened. Besides, how could any one have entered that way? The private balcony that ran round the flat broke off on the right and was separated on the left by a stone channel from the balconies in the Rue de Judée.

He went to his bedroom: it had no communication with the neighboring rooms. He went to his secretary's bedroom: the door that led into the five rooms reserved for Mrs. Kesselbach was locked and bolted.

"I can't understand it at all, Chapman. Time after time I have noticed things here.. funny things, as you must admit. Yesterday, my walking-stick was moved… The day before that, my papers had certainly been touched… And yet how was it possible?.

"It is not possible, sir!" cried Chapman, whose honest, placid features displayed no anxiety. "You're imagining things, that's all… You have no proof, nothing but impressions, to go upon… Besides, look here: there is no way into this suite except through the entrance-lobby. Very well. You had a special key made on the day of our arrival: and your own man, Edwards, has the only duplicate. Do you trust him?"

"Of course I do!.. He's been with me for ten years!.. But Edwards goes to lunch at the same time that we do; and that's a mistake. He must not go down, in future, until we come back."

Chapman gave a slight shrug of the shoulders. There was no doubt about it, the Lord of the Cape was becoming a trifle eccentric, with those incomprehensible fears of his. What risk can you run in an hotel, especially when you carry no valuables, no important sum of money on you or with you?

They heard the hall-door opening. It was Edwards. Mr. Kesselbach called him:

"Are you dressed, Edwards? Ah, that's right!.. I am expecting no visitors to-day, Edwards.. or, rather, one visitor only, M. Gourel. Meantime, remain in the lobby and keep an eye on the door. Mr. Chapman and I have some serious work to do."

The serious work lasted for a few minutes, during which Mr. Kesselbach went through his correspondence, read three or four letters and gave instructions how they were to be answered. But, suddenly, Chapman, waiting with pen poised, saw that Mr. Kesselbach was thinking of something quite different from his correspondence. He was holding between his fingers and attentively examining a pin, a black pin bent like a fish-hook:

"Chapman," he said, "look what I've found on the table. This bent pin obviously means something. It's a proof, a material piece of evidence. You can't pretend now that no one has been in the room. For, after all, this pin did not come here of itself."

"Certainly not," replied the secretary. "It came here through me."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it's a pin which I used to fasten my tie to my collar. I took it out last night, while you were reading, and I twisted it mechanically."

Mr. Kesselbach rose from his chair, with a great air of vexation, took a few steps and stopped.

"You're laughing at me, Chapman, I feel you are.. and you're quite right… I won't deny it, I have been rather.. odd, since my last journey to the Cape. It's because.. well.. you don't know the new factor in my life.. a tremendous plan.. a huge thing.. I can only see it, as yet, in the haze of the future.. but it's taking shape for all that.. and it will be something colossal… Ah, Chapman, you can't imagine… Money I don't care a fig for: I have money, I have too much money… But this, this means a great deal more; it means power, might, authority. If the reality comes up to my expectations, I shall be not only Lord of the Cape, but lord of other realms as well… Rudolf Kesselbach, the son of the Augsburg ironmonger, will be on a par with many people who till now have looked down upon him… He will even take precedence of them, Chapman; he will, take precedence of them, mark my words.. and, if ever I."

He interrupted himself, looked at Chapman as though he regretted having said too much and, nevertheless, carried away by his excitement, concluded:

"You now understand the reasons of my anxiety, Chapman… Here, in this brain, is an idea that is worth a great deal.. and this idea is suspected perhaps.. and I am being spied upon… I'm convinced of it.."

A bell sounded.

"The telephone," said Chapman.

"Could it," muttered Kesselbach, "by any chance be.. ?" He took down the instrument. "Hullo!.. Who? The Colonel? Ah, good! Yes, it's I… Any news?.. Good!.. Then I shall expect you… You will come with one of your men? Very well… What? No, we shan't be disturbed… I will give the necessary orders… It's as serious as that, is it?.. I tell you, my instructions will be positive… my secretary and my man shall keep the door; and no one shall be allowed in… You know the way, don't you?.. Then don't lose a minute."

He hung up the receiver and said:

"Chapman, there are two gentlemen coming. Edwards will show them in.."

"But M. Gourel.. the detective-sergeant… ?"

"He will come later.. in an hour… And, even then, there's no harm in their meeting. So send Edwards down to the office at once, to tell them. I am at home to nobody.. except two gentlemen, the Colonel and his friend, and M. Gourel. He must make them take down the names."

Chapman did as he was asked. When he returned to the room, he found Mr. Kesselbach holding in his hand an envelope, or, rather, a little pocket-case, in black morocco leather, apparently empty. He seemed to hesitate, as though he did not know what to do with it. Should he put it in his pocket or lay it down elsewhere? At last he went to the mantelpiece and threw the leather envelope into his traveling-bag:

"Let us finish the mail, Chapman. We have ten minutes left. Ah, a letter from Mrs. Kesselbach! Why didn't you tell me of it, Chapman? Didn't you recognize the handwriting?"

He made no attempt to conceal the emotion which he felt in touching and contemplating that paper which his wife had held in her fingers and to which she had added a look of her eyes, an atom of her scent, a suggestion of her secret thoughts. He inhaled its perfume and, unsealing it, read the letter slowly in an undertone, in fragments that reached Chapman's ears:

"Feeling a little tired… Shall keep my room to-day… I feel so bored… When can I come to you? I am longing for your wire.."

"You telegraphed this morning, Chapman? Then Mrs. Kesselbach will be here to-morrow, Wednesday."

He seemed quite gay, as though the weight of his business had been suddenly relieved and he freed from all anxiety. He rubbed his hands and heaved a deep breath, like a strong man certain of success, like a lucky man who possessed happiness and who was big enough to defend himself.

"There's some one ringing, Chapman, some one ringing at the hall door. Go and see who it is."

But Edwards entered and said:

"Two gentlemen asking for you, sir. They are the ones.."

"I know. Are they there, in the lobby?"

"Yes, sir."

"Close the hall-door and don't open it again except to M. Gourel, the detective-sergeant. You go and bring the gentlemen in, Chapman, and tell them that I would like to speak to the Colonel first, to the Colonel alone."

Edwards and Chapman left the room, shutting the door after them. Rudolf Kesselbach went to the window and pressed his forehead against the glass.

Outside, just below his eyes, the carriages and motor-cars rolled along in parallel furrows, marked by the double line of refuges. A bright spring sun made the brass-work and the varnish gleam again. The trees were putting forth their first green shoots; and the buds of the tall chestnuts were beginning to unfold their new-born leaves.

"What on earth is Chapman doing?" muttered Kesselbach. "The time he wastes in palavering!."

He took a cigarette from the table, lit it and drew a few puffs. A faint exclamation escaped him. Close before him stood a man whom he did not know.

He started back:

"Who are you?"

The man – he was a well-dressed individual, rather smart-looking, with dark hair, a dark moustache and hard eyes – the man gave a grin:

"Who am I? Why, the Colonel!"

"No, no… The one I call the Colonel, the one who writes to me under that.. adopted.. signature.. is not you!"

"Yes, yes.. the other was only.. But, my dear sir, all this, you know, is not of the smallest importance. The essential thing is that I.. am myself. And that, I assure you, I *am*!"

"But your name, sir?."

"The Colonel.. until further orders."

Mr. Kesselbach was seized with a growing fear. Who was this man? What did he want with him?

He called out:

"Chapman!"

"What a funny idea, to call out! Isn't my company enough for you?"

"Chapman!" Mr. Kesselbach cried again. "Chapman! Edwards!"

"Chapman! Edwards!" echoed the stranger, in his turn. "What are you doing? You're wanted!"

"Sir, I ask you, I order you to let me pass."

"But, my dear sir, who's preventing you?"

He politely made way. Mr. Kesselbach walked to the door, opened it and gave a sudden jump backward. Behind the door stood another man, pistol in hand. Kesselbach stammered:

"Edwards.. Chap."

He did not finish. In a corner of the lobby he saw his secretary and his servant lying side by side on the floor, gagged and bound.

Mr. Kesselbach, notwithstanding his nervous and excitable nature, was not devoid of physical courage; and the sense of a definite danger, instead of depressing him, restored all his elasticity and vigor. Pretending dismay and stupefaction, he moved slowly back to the chimneypiece and leant against the wall. His hand felt for the electric bell. He found it and pressed the button without removing his finger.

"Well?" asked the stranger.

Mr. Kesselbach made no reply and continued to press the button.

"Well? Do you expect they will come, that the whole hotel is in commotion, because you are pressing that bell? Why, my dear sir, look behind you and you will see that the wire is cut!"

Mr. Kesselbach turned round sharply, as though he wanted to make sure; but, instead, with a quick movement, he seized the traveling-bag, thrust his hand into it, grasped a revolver, aimed it at the man and pulled the trigger.

"Whew!" said the stranger. "So you load your weapons with air and silence?"

The cock clicked a second time and a third, but there was no report.

"Three shots more, Lord of the Cape! I shan't be satisfied till you've lodged six bullets in my carcass. What! You give up? That's a pity.. you were making excellent practice!"

He took hold of a chair by the back, spun it round, sat down a-straddle and, pointing to an arm-chair, said:

"Won't you take a seat, my dear sir, and make yourself at home? A cigarette? Not for me, thanks: I prefer a cigar."

There was a box on the table: he selected an Upmann, light in color and flawless in shape, lit it and, with a bow:

"Thank you! That's a perfect cigar. And now let's have a chat, shall we?"

Rudolf Kesselbach listened to him in amazement. Who could this strange person be?.. Still, at the sight of his visitor sitting there so quiet and so chatty, he became gradually reassured and began to think that the situation might come to an end without any need to resort to violence or brute force.

He took out a pocket-book, opened it, displayed a respectable bundle of bank-notes and asked:

"How much?"

The other looked at him with an air of bewilderment, as though he found a difficulty in understanding what Kesselbach meant. Then, after a moment, he called:

"Marco!"

The man with the revolver stepped forward.

"Marco, this gentleman is good enough to offer you a few bits of paper for your young woman. Take them, Marco."

Still aiming his revolver with his right hand, Marco put out his left, took the notes and withdrew.

"Now that this question is settled according to your wishes," resumed the stranger, "let us come to the object of my visit. I will be brief and to the point. I want two things. In the first place, a little black morocco pocket-case, shaped like an envelope, which you generally carry on you. Secondly, a small ebony box, which was in that traveling-bag yesterday. Let us proceed in order. The morocco case?"

"Burnt."

The stranger knit his brows. He must have had a vision of the good old days when there were peremptory methods of making the contumacious speak:

"Very well. We shall see about that. And the ebony box?"

"Burnt."

"Ah," he growled, "you're getting at me, my good man!" He twisted the other's arm with a pitiless hand. "Yesterday, Rudolf Kesselbach, you walked into the Crédit Lyonnais, on the Boulevard des Italiens, hiding a parcel under your overcoat. You hired a safe.. let us be exact: safe No. 16, in recess No. 9. After signing the book and paying your safe-rent, you went down to the basement; and, when you came up again, you no longer had your parcel with you. Is that correct?"

"Quite."

"Then the box and the pocket-case are at the Crédit Lyonnais?"

"No."

"Give me the key of your safe."

"No."

"Marco!"

Marco ran up.

"Look sharp, Marco! The quadruple knot!"

Before he had even time to stand on the defensive, Rudolf Kesselbach was tied up in a network of cords that cut into his flesh at the least attempt which he made to struggle. His arms were fixed behind his back, his body fastened to the chair and his legs tied together like the legs of a mummy.

"Search him, Marco."

Marco searched him. Two minutes after, he handed his chief a little flat, nickel-plated key, bearing the numbers 16 and 9.

"Capital. No morocco pocket-case?"

"No, governor."

"It is in the safe. Mr. Kesselbach, will you tell me the secret cypher that opens the lock?"

"No."

"You refuse?"

"Yes."

"Marco!"

"Yes, governor."

"Place the barrel of your revolver against the gentleman's temple."

"It's there."

"Now put your finger to the trigger."

"Ready."

"Well, Kesselbach, old chap, do you intend to speak?"

"No."

"I'll give you ten seconds, and not one more. Marco!"

"Yes, governor."

"In ten seconds, blow out the gentleman's brains."

"Right you are, governor."

"Kesselbach, I'm counting. One, two, three, four, five, six."

Rudolph Kesselbach made a sign.

"You want to speak?"

"Yes."

"You're just in time. Well, the cypher.. the word for the lock?"

"Dolor."

"Dolor.. Dolor.. Mrs. Kesselbach's name is Dolores, I believe? You dear boy!.. Marco, go and do as I told you… No mistake, mind! I'll repeat it: meet Jérôme at the omnibus office, give him the key, tell him the word: Dolor. Then, the two of you, go to the Crédit Lyonnais. Jérôme is to walk in alone, sign the name-book, go down to the basement and bring away everything in the safe. Do you quite understand?"

"Yes, governor. But if the safe shouldn't open; if the word Dolor."

"Silence, Marco. When you come out of the Crédit Lyonnais, you must leave Jérôme, go to your own place and telephone the result of the operation to me. Should the word Dolor by any chance fail to open the safe, we (my friend Rudolf Kesselbach and I) will have one.. *last*.. interview. Kesselbach, you're quite sure you're not mistaken?"

"Yes."

"That means that you rely upon the futility of the search. We shall see. Be off, Marco!"

"What about you, governor?"

"I shall stay. Oh, I'm not afraid! I've never been in less danger than at this moment. Your orders about the door were positive, Kesselbach, were they not?"

"Yes."

"Dash it all, you seemed very eager to get that said! Can you have been trying to gain time? If so, I should be caught in a trap like a fool.." He stopped to think, looked at his prisoner and concluded, "No.. it's not possible.. we shall not be disturbed."

He had not finished speaking, when the door-bell rang. He pressed his hand violently on Rudolf Kesselbach's mouth:

"Oh, you old fox, you were expecting some one!"

The captive's eyes gleamed with hope. He could be heard chuckling under the hand that stifled him.

The stranger shook with rage:

"Hold your tongue, or I'll strangle you! Here, Marco, gag him! Quick!.. That's it!"

The bell rang again. He shouted, as though he himself were Kesselbach and as though Edwards were still there:

"Why don't you open the door, Edwards?"

Then he went softly into the lobby and, pointing to the secretary and the manservant, whispered:

"Marco, help me shift these two into the bedroom.. over there.. so that they can't be seen."

He lifted the secretary. Marco carried the servant.

"Good! Now go back to the sitting-room."

He followed him in and at once returned to the lobby and said, in a loud tone of astonishment:

"Why, your man's not here, Mr. Kesselbach… No, don't move.. finish your letter… I'll go myself."

And he quietly opened the hall-door.

"Mr. Kesselbach?"

He found himself faced by a sort of jovial, bright-eyed giant, who stood swinging from one foot to the other and twisting the brim of his hat between his fingers. He answered:

"Yes, that's right. Who shall I say.. ?"

"Mr. Kesselbach telephoned… He expects me.."

"Oh, it's you… I'll tell him… Do you mind waiting a minute?.. Mr. Kesselbach will speak to you."

He had the audacity to leave the visitor standing on the threshold of the little entrance-hall, at a place from which he could see a portion of the sitting-room through the open door, and, slowly, without so much as turning round, he entered the room, went to his confederate by Mr. Kesselbach's side and whispered:

"We're done! It's Gourel, the detective.."

The other drew his knife. He caught him by the arm:

"No nonsense! I have an idea. But, for God's sake, Marco, understand me and speak in your turn. Speak *as if you were Kesselbach*… You hear, Marco! You *are* Kesselbach."

He expressed himself so coolly, so forcibly and with such authority that Marco understood, without further explanation, that he himself was to play the part of Kesselbach. Marco said, so as to be heard:

"You must apologize for me, my dear fellow. Tell M. Gourel I'm awfully sorry, but I'm over head and ears in work… I will see him to-morrow morning, at nine.. yes, at nine o'clock punctually."

"Good!" whispered the other. "Don't stir."

He went back to the lobby, found Gourel waiting, and said:

"Mr. Kesselbach begs you to excuse him. He is finishing an important piece of work. Could you possibly come back at nine o'clock to-morrow morning?"

There was a pause. Gourel seemed surprised, more or less bothered and undecided. The other man's hand clutched the handle of a knife at the bottom of his pocket. At the first suspicious movement, he was prepared to strike.

At last, Gourel said:

"Very well… At nine o'clock to-morrow… But, all the same.. However, I shall be here at nine to-morrow.."

And, putting on his hat, he disappeared down the passage of the hotel.

Marco, in the sitting-room, burst out laughing:

"That was jolly clever of you, governor! Oh, how nicely you spoofed him!"

"Look alive, Marco, and follow him. If he leaves the hotel, let him be, meet Jérôme at the omnibus-office as arranged.. and telephone."

Marco went away quickly.

Then the man took a water-bottle on the chimneypiece, poured himself out a tumblerful, which he swallowed at a draught, wetted his handkerchief, dabbed his forehead, which was covered with perspiration, and then sat down beside his prisoner and, with an affectation of politeness, said:

"But I must really have the honor, Mr. Kesselbach, of introducing myself to you."

And, taking a card from his pocket, he said: "Allow me… Arsène Lupin, gentleman-burglar."

The name of the famous adventurer seemed to make the best of impressions upon Mr. Kesselbach. Lupin did not fail to observe the fact and exclaimed:

"Aha, my dear sir, you breathe again! Arsène Lupin is a delicate, squeamish burglar. He loathes bloodshed, he has never committed a more serious crime than that of annexing other people's

property.. a mere peccadillo, eh? And what you're saying to yourself is that he is not going to burden his conscience with a useless murder. Quite so… But will your destruction be so useless as all that? Everything depends on the answer. And I assure you that I'm not larking at present. Come on, old chap!"

He drew up his chair beside the arm-chair, removed the prisoner's gag and, speaking very plainly:

"Mr. Kesselbach," he said, "on the day when you arrived in Paris you entered into relations with one Barbareux, the manager of a confidential inquiry agency; and, as you were acting without the knowledge of your secretary, Chapman, it was arranged that the said Barbareux, when communicating with you by letter or telephone, should call himself 'the Colonel.' I hasten to tell you that Barbareux is a perfectly honest man. But I have the good fortune to number one of his clerks among my own particular friends. That is how I discovered the motive of your application to Barbareux and how I came to interest myself in you and to make a search or two here, with the assistance of a set of false keys.. in the course of which search or two, I may as well tell you, I did not find what I was looking for."

He lowered his voice and, with his eyes fixed on the eyes of his prisoner, watching his expression, searching his secret thoughts, he uttered these words:

"Mr. Kesselbach, your instructions to Barbareux were that he should find a man hidden somewhere in the slums of Paris who bears or used to bear the name of Pierre Leduc. The man answers to this brief description: height, five feet nine inches; hair and complexion, fair; wears a moustache. Special mark: the tip of the little finger of the left hand is missing, as the result of a cut. Also, he has an almost imperceptible scar on the right cheek. You seem to attach enormous importance to this man's discovery, as though it might lead to some great advantage to yourself. Who is the man?"

"I don't know."

The answer was positive, absolute. Did he know or did he not know? It made little difference. The great thing was that he was determined not to speak.

"Very well," said his adversary, "but you have fuller particulars about him than those with which you furnished Barbareux."

"I have not."

"You lie, Mr. Kesselbach. Twice, in Barbareux's presence, you consulted papers contained in the morocco case."

"I did."

"And the case?"

"Burnt."

Lupin quivered with rage. The thought of torture and of the facilities which it used to offer was evidently passing through his mind again.

"Burnt? But the box?.. Come, own up.. confess that the box is at the Crédit Lyonnais."

"Yes."

"And what's inside it?"

"The finest two hundred diamonds in my private collection."

This statement did not seem to displease the adventurer.

"Aha, the finest two hundred diamonds! But, I say, that's a fortune!.. Yes, that makes you smile… It's a trifle to you, no doubt… And your secret is worth more than that… To you, yes.. but to me?."

He took a cigar, lit a match, which he allowed to go out again mechanically, and sat for some time thinking, motionless.

The minutes passed.

He began to laugh:

"I dare say you're hoping that the expedition will come to nothing and that they won't open the safe?.. Very likely, old chap! But, in that case, you'll have to pay me for my trouble. I did not come here to see what sort of figure you cut in an arm-chair… The diamonds, since diamonds there appear to be.. or else the morocco case… There's your dilemma." He looked at his watch. "Half an hour… Hang it all!.. Fate is moving very slowly… But there's nothing for you to grin at, Mr. Kesselbach. I shall not go back empty-handed, make no mistake about that!.. At last!"

It was the telephone-bell. Lupin snatched at the receiver and, changing the sound of his voice, imitated the rough accent of his prisoner:

"Yes, Rudolf Kesselbach.. you're speaking to him… Yes, please, mademoiselle, put me on… Is that you, Marco?.. Good… Did it go off all right?.. Excellent!.. No hitch?.. My best compliments!.. Well, what did you pick up?.. The ebony box?.. Nothing else?.. No papers?.. Tut, tut!.. And what's in the box?.. Are they fine diamonds?.. Capital, capital!.. One minute, Marco, while I think… You see, all this… If I were to tell you my opinion… Wait, don't go away.. hold the line.."

He turned round.

"Mr. Kesselbach, are you keen on your diamonds?"

"Yes."

"Would you buy them back of me?"

"Possibly."

"For how much? Five hundred thousand francs?"

"Five hundred thousand.. yes."

"Only, here's the rub: how are we to make the exchange? A cheque? No, you'd swindle me.. or else I'd swindle you… Listen. On the day after to-morrow, go to the Crédit Lyonnais in the morning, draw out your five hundred bank-notes of a thousand each and go for a walk in the Bois, on the Auteuil side… I shall have the diamonds in a bag: that's handier… The box shows too much.."

Kesselbach gave a start:

"No, no.. the box, too… I want everything.."

"Ah," cried Lupin, shouting with laughter, "you've fallen into the trap!.. The diamonds you don't care about.. they can be replaced… But you cling to that box as you cling to your skin… Very well, you shall have your box.. on the word of Arsène.. you shall have it to-morrow morning, by parcel post!"

He went back to the telephone:

"Marco, have you the box in front of you?.. Is there anything particular about it?.. Ebony inlaid with ivory… Yes, I know the sort of thing… Japanese, from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine… No mark?.. Ah, a little round label, with a blue border and a number!.. Yes, a shop-mark.. no importance. And is the bottom of the box thick?.. Not very thick… Bother! No false bottom, then?.. Look here, Marco: just examine the ivory inlay on the outside.. or, rather, no, the lid." He reveled with delight. "The lid! That's it, Marco! Kesselbach blinked his eyes just now… We're burning!.. Ah, Kesselbach, old chap, didn't you see me squinting at you? You silly fellow!" And, to Marco, "Well, what do you see?.. A looking-glass inside the lid?.. Does it slide?.. Is it on hinges?.. No!.. Well, then, break it… Yes, yes, I tell you to break it… That glass serves no purpose there.. it's been added since!" He lost patience. "Mind your own business, idiot!.. Do as I say!."

He must have heard the noise which Marco made at the other end of the wire in breaking the glass, for he shouted, in triumph.

"Didn't I tell you, Mr. Kesselbach, that we should find something?.. Hullo! Have you done it?.. Well?.. A letter? Victory! All the diamonds in the Cape and old man Kesselbach's secret into the bargain!"

He took down the second receiver, carefully put the two discs to his ears and continued:

"Read it to me, Marco, read it to me slowly… The envelope first… Good… Now, repeat." He himself repeated, "'Copy of the letter contained in the black morocco case.' And next? Tear the

envelope, Marco… Have I your permission, Mr. Kesselbach? It's not very good form, but, however.. Go on, Marco, Mr. Kesselbach gives you leave… Done it?.. Well, then, read it out."

He listened and, with a chuckle:

"The deuce! That's not quite as clear as a pikestaff! Listen. I'll repeat: a plain sheet of paper folded in four, the folds apparently quite fresh… Good… At the top of the page, on the right, these words: 'Five feet nine, left little finger cut.' And so on… Yes, that's the description of Master Pierre Leduc. In Kesselbach's handwriting, I suppose?.. Good… And, in the middle of the page, this word in printed capitals: 'APOON.' Marco, my lad, leave the paper as it is and don't touch the box or the diamonds. I shall have done with our friend here in ten minutes and I shall be with you in twenty… Oh, by the way, did you send back the motor for me? Capital! So long!"

He replaced the instrument, went into the lobby and into the bedroom, made sure that the secretary and the manservant had not unloosed their bonds and, on the other hand, that they were in no danger of being choked by their gags. Then he returned to his chief prisoner.

He wore a determined and relentless look:

"We've finished joking, Kesselbach. If you don't speak, it will be the worse for you. Have you made up your mind?"

"What about?"

"No nonsense, please. Tell me what you know."

"I know nothing."

"You lie. What does this word 'APOON' mean?"

"If I knew, I should not have written it down."

"Very well; but whom or what does it refer to? Where did you copy it? Where did you get it from?"

Mr. Kesselbach made no reply. Lupin, now speaking in nervous, jerky tones, resumed:

"Listen, Kesselbach, I have a proposal to make to you. Rich man, big man though you may be, there is not so much difference between us. The son of the Augsburg ironmonger and Arsène Lupin, prince of burglars, can come to an understanding without shame on either side. I do my thieving indoors; you do yours on the Stock Exchange. It's all much of a muchness. So here we are, Kesselbach. Let's be partners in this business. I have need of you, because I don't know what it's about. You have need of me, because you will never be able to manage it alone. Barbareux is an ass. I am Lupin. Is it a bargain?"

No answer. Lupin persisted, in a voice shaking with intensity:

"Answer, Kesselbach, is it a bargain? If so, I'll find your Pierre Leduc for you in forty-eight hours. For he's the man you're after, eh? Isn't that the business? Come along, answer! Who is the fellow? Why are you looking for him? What do you know about him?"

He calmed himself suddenly, laid his hand on Kesselbach's shoulder and, harshly:

"One word only. Yes or no?"

"No!"

He drew a magnificent gold watch from Kesselbach's fob and placed it on the prisoner's knees. He unbuttoned Kesselbach's waistcoat, opened his shirt, uncovered his chest and, taking a steel dagger, with a gold-crusted handle, that lay on the table beside him, he put the point of it against the place where the pulsations of the heart made the bare flesh throb:

"For the last time?"

"No!"

"Mr. Kesselbach, it is eight minutes to three. If you don't answer within eight minutes from now, you are a dead man!"

The next morning, Sergeant Gourel walked into the Palace Hotel punctually at the appointed hour. Without stopping, scorning to take the lift, he went up the stairs. On the fourth floor he turned to the right, followed the passage and rang at the door of 415.

Hearing no sound, he rang again. After half-a-dozen fruitless attempts, he went to the floor office. He found a head-waiter there:

"Mr. Kesselbach did not sleep here last night. We have not seen him since yesterday afternoon."

"But his servant? His secretary?"

"We have not seen them either."

"Then they also did not sleep in the hotel?"

"I suppose not."

"You suppose not? But you ought to be certain."

"Why? Mr. Kesselbach is not staying in the hotel; he is at home here, in his private flat. He is not waited on by us, but by his own man; and we know nothing of what happens inside."

"That's true… That's true.."

Gourel seemed greatly perplexed. He had come with positive orders, a precise mission, within the limits of which his mind was able to exert itself. Outside those limits he did not quite know how to act:

"If the chief were here," he muttered, "if the chief were here.."

He showed his card and stated his quality. Then he said, on the off-chance:

"So you have not seen them come in?"

"No."

"But you saw them go out?"

"No, I can't say I did."

"In that case, how do you know that they went out?"

"From a gentleman who called yesterday afternoon."

"A gentleman with a dark mustache?"

"Yes. I met him as he was going away, about three o'clock. He said: 'The people in 415 have gone out. Mr. Kesselbach will stay at Versailles to-night, at the Reservoirs; you can send his letters on to him there.'"

"But who was this gentleman? By what right did he speak?"

"I don't know."

Gourel felt uneasy. It all struck him as rather queer.

"Have you the key?"

"No. Mr. Kesselbach had special keys made."

"Let's go and look."

Gourel rang again furiously. Nothing happened. He was about to go when, suddenly, he bent down and clapped his ear to the keyhole:

"Listen… I seem to hear.. Why, yes.. it's quite distinct… I hear moans.."

He gave the door a tremendous blow with his fist.

"But, sir, you have not the right."

"Oh, hang the right!"

He struck the door with renewed force, but to so little purpose that he abandoned the attempt forthwith:

"Quick, quick, a locksmith!"

One of the waiters started off at a run. Gourel, blustering and undecided, walked to and fro. The servants from the other floors collected in groups. People from the office, from the manager's department arrived. Gourel cried:

"But why shouldn't we go in though the adjoining rooms? Do they communicate with this suite?"

"Yes; but the communicating doors are always bolted on both sides."

"Then I shall telephone to the detective-office," said Gourel, to whose mind obviously there existed no salvation without his chief.

"And to the commissary of police," observed some one.

"Yes, if you like," he replied, in the tone of a gentleman who took little or no interest in that formality.

When he returned from the telephone, the locksmith had nearly finished trying the keys. The last worked the lock. Gourel walked briskly in.

He at once hastened in the direction from which the moans came and hit against the bodies of Chapman the secretary, and Edwards the manservant. One of them, Chapman, had succeeded, by dint of patience, in loosening his gag a little and was uttering short, stifled moans. The other seemed asleep.

They were released. But Gourel was anxious:

"Where's Mr. Kesselbach?"

He went into the sitting-room. Mr. Kesselbach was sitting strapped to the back of the arm-chair, near the table. His head hung on his chest.

"He has fainted," said Gourel, going up to him. "He must have exerted himself beyond his strength."

Swiftly he cut the cords that fastened the shoulders. The body fell forward in an inert mass. Gourel caught it in his arms and started back with a cry of horror:

"Why, he's dead! Feel.. his hands are ice-cold! And look at his eyes!"

Some one ventured the opinion:

"An apoplectic stroke, no doubt.. or else heart-failure."

"True, there's no sign of a wound.. it's a natural death."

They laid the body on the sofa and unfastened the clothes. But red stains at once appeared on the white shirt; and, when they pushed it back, they saw that, near the heart, the chest bore a little scratch through which had trickled a thin stream of blood.

And on the shirt was pinned a card. Gourel bent forward. It was Arsène Lupin's card, bloodstained like the rest.

Then Gourel drew himself up, authoritatively and sharply:

"Murdered!.. Arsène Lupin!.. Leave the flat… Leave the flat, all of you!.. No one must stay here or in the bedroom… Let the two men be removed and seen to elsewhere!.. Leave the flat.. and don't touch a thing.

"*The chief is on his way!*."

CHAPTER II
THE BLUE-EDGED LABEL

"Arsène Lupin!"

Gourel repeated these two fateful words with an absolutely petrified air. They rang within him like a knell. Arsène Lupin! The great, the formidable Arsène Lupin. The burglar-king, the mighty adventurer! Was it possible?

"No, no," he muttered, "it's not possible, *because he's dead*!"

Only that was just it.. was he really dead?

Arsène Lupin!

Standing beside the corpse, he remained dull and stunned, turning the card over and over with a certain dread, as though he had been challenged by a ghost. Arsène Lupin! What ought he to do? Act? Take the field with his resources? No, no.. better not act.. He was bound to make mistakes if he entered the lists with an adversary of that stamp. Besides, the chief was on his way!

The chief was on his way! All Gourel's intellectual philosophy was summed up in that short sentence. An able, persevering officer, full of courage and experience and endowed with Herculean strength, he was one of those who go ahead only when obeying directions and who do good work only when ordered. And this lack of initiative had become still more marked since M. Lenormand had taken the place of M. Dudouis in the detective-service. M. Lenormand was a chief indeed! With him, one was sure of being on the right track. So sure, even, that Gourel stopped the moment that the chief's incentive was no longer behind him.

But the chief was on his way! Gourel took out his watch and calculated the exact time when he would arrive. If only the commissary of police did not get there first, if only the examining-magistrate, who was no doubt already appointed, or the divisional surgeon, did not come to make inopportune discoveries before the chief had time to fix the essential points of the case in his mind!

"Well, Gourel, what are you dreaming about?"

"The chief!"

M. Lenormand was still a young man, if you took stock only of the expression of his face and his eyes gleaming through his spectacles; but he was almost an old man when you saw his bent back, his skin dry and yellow as wax, his grizzled hair and beard, his whole decrepit, hesitating, unhealthy appearance. He had spent his life laboriously in the colonies as government commissary, in the most dangerous posts. He had there acquired a series of fevers; an indomitable energy, notwithstanding his physical weariness; the habit of living alone, of talking little and acting in silence; a certain misanthropy; and, suddenly, at the age of fifty-five, in consequence of the famous case of the three Spaniards at Biskra, a great and well-earned notoriety.

The injustice was then repaired; and he was straightway transferred to Bordeaux, was next appointed deputy in Paris, and lastly, on the death of M. Dudouis, chief of the detective-service. And in each of these posts he displayed such a curious faculty of inventiveness in his proceedings, such resourcefulness, so many new and original qualities; and above all, he achieved such correct results in the conduct of the last four or five cases with which public opinion had been stirred, that his name was quoted in the same breath with those of the most celebrated detectives.

Gourel, for his part, had no hesitation. Himself a favourite of the chief, who liked him for his frankness and his passive obedience, he set the chief above them all. The chief to him was an idol, an infallible god.

M. Lenormand seemed more tired than usual that day. He sat down wearily, parted the tails of his frock-coat – an old frock-coat, famous for its antiquated cut and its olive-green hue – untied

his neckerchief – an equally famous maroon-coloured neckerchief, rested his two hands on his stick, and said:

"Speak!"

Gourel told all that he had seen, and all that he had learnt, and told it briefly, according to the habit which the chief had taught him.

But, when he produced Lupin's card, M. Lenormand gave a start:

"Lupin!"

"Yes, Lupin. The brute's bobbed up again."

"That's all right, that's all right," said M. Lenormand, after a moment's thought.

"That's all right, of course," said Gourel, who loved to add a word of his own to the rare speeches of a superior whose only fault in his eyes was an undue reticence. "That's all right, for at last you will measure your strength with an adversary worthy of you… And Lupin will meet his master… Lupin will cease to exist… Lupin."

"Ferret!" said M. Lenormand, cutting him short.

It was like an order given by a sportsman to his dog. And Gourel ferreted after the manner of a good dog, a lively and intelligent animal, working under his master's eyes. M. Lenormand pointed his stick to a corner, to an easy chair, just as one points to a bush or a tuft of grass, and Gourel beat up the bush or the tuft of grass with conscientious thoroughness.

"Nothing," said the sergeant, when he finished.

"Nothing for you!" grunted M. Lenormand.

"That's what I meant to say… I know that, for you, chief, there are things that talk like human beings, real living witnesses. For all that, here is a murder well and duly added to our score against Master Lupin."

"The first," observed M. Lenormand.

"The first, yes… But it was bound to come. You can't lead that sort of life without, sooner or later, being driven by circumstances to serious crime. Mr. Kesselbach must have defended himself.."

"No, because he was bound."

"That's true," owned Gourel, somewhat disconcertedly, "and it's rather curious too… Why kill an adversary who has practically ceased to exist?.. But, no matter, if I had collared him yesterday, when we were face to face at the hall-door."

M. Lenormand had stepped out on the balcony. Then he went to Mr. Kesselbach's bedroom, on the right, and tried the fastenings of the windows and doors.

"The windows of both rooms were shut when I came in," said Gourel.

"Shut, or just pushed to?"

"No one has touched them since. And they are shut, chief."

A sound of voices brought them back to the sitting-room. Here they found the divisional surgeon, engaged in examining the body, and M. Formerie, the magistrate. M. Formerie exclaimed:

"Arsène Lupin! I am glad that at last a lucky chance has brought me into touch with that scoundrel again! I'll show the fellow the stuff I'm made of!.. And this time it's a murder!.. It's a fight between you and me now, Master Lupin!"

M. Formerie had not forgotten the strange adventure of the Princesse de Lamballe's diadem, nor the wonderful way in which Lupin had tricked him a few years before.[1] The thing had remained famous in the annals of the law-courts. People still laughed at it; and in M. Formerie it had left a just feeling of resentment, combined with the longing for a striking revenge.

"The nature of the crime is self-evident," he declared, with a great air of conviction, "and we shall have no difficulty in discovering the motive. So all is well… M. Lenormand, how do you do?.. I am delighted to see you.."

[1] See *Arsène Lupin*. By Edgar Jepson and Maurice Leblanc. (Doubleday, Page & Co.).

M. Formerie was not in the least delighted. On the contrary, M. Lenormand's presence did not please him at all, seeing that the chief detective hardly took the trouble to disguise the contempt in which he held him. However, the magistrate drew himself up and, in his most solemn tones:

"So, doctor, you consider that death took place about a dozen hours ago, perhaps more!.. That, in fact, was my own idea… We are quite agreed… And the instrument of the crime?"

"A knife with a very thin blade, Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction," replied the surgeon. "Look, the blade has been wiped on the dead man's own handkerchief.."

"Just so.. just so.. you can see the mark… And now let us go and question Mr. Kesselbach's secretary and man-servant. I have no doubt that their examination will throw some more light on the case."

Chapman, who together with Edwards, had been moved to his own room, on the left of the sitting-room, had already recovered from his experiences. He described in detail the events of the previous day, Mr. Kesselbach's restlessness, the expected visit of the Colonel and, lastly, the attack of which they had been the victims.

"Aha!" cried M. Formerie. "So there's an accomplice! And you heard his name!.. Marco, you say?.. This is very important. When we've got the accomplice, we shall be a good deal further advanced.."

"Yes, but we've not got him," M. Lenormand ventured to remark.

"We shall see… One thing at a time… And then, Mr. Chapman, this Marco went away immediately after M. Gourel had rung the bell?"

"Yes, we heard him go."

"And after he went, did you hear nothing else?"

"Yes.. from time to time, but vaguely… The door was shut."

"And what sort of noises did you hear?"

"Bursts of voices. The man."

"Call him by his name, Arsène Lupin."

"Arsène Lupin must have telephoned."

"Capital! We will examine the person of the hotel who has charge of the branch exchange communicating with the outside. And, afterward, did you hear him go out, too?"

"He came in to see if we were still bound; and, a quarter of an hour later, he went away, closing the hall-door after him."

"Yes, as soon as his crime was committed. Good… Good… It all fits in… And, after that?"

"After that, we heard nothing more… The night passed… I fell asleep from exhaustion… So did Edwards… And it was not until this morning."

"Yes, I know… There, it's not going badly.. it all fits in.."

And, marking off the stages of his investigation, in a tone as though he were enumerating so many victories over the stranger, he muttered thoughtfully:

"The accomplice.. the telephone.. the time of the murder.. the sounds that were heard… Good… Very good… We have still to establish the motive of the crime… In this case, as we have Lupin to deal with, the motive is obvious. M. Lenormand, have you noticed the least sign of anything being broken open?"

"No."

"Then the robbery must have been effected upon the person of the victim himself. Has his pocket-book been found?"

"I left it in the pocket of his jacket," said Gourel.

They all went into the sitting-room, where M. Formerie discovered that the pocket-book contained nothing but visiting-cards and papers establishing the murdered man's identity.

"That's odd. Mr. Chapman, can you tell us if Mr. Kesselbach had any money on him?"

"Yes. On the previous day – that is, on Monday, the day before yesterday – we went to the Crédit Lyonnais, where Mr. Kesselbach hired a safe."

"A safe at the Crédit Lyonnais? Good… We must look into that."

"And, before we left, Mr. Kesselbach opened an account and drew out five or six thousand francs in bank-notes."

"Excellent.. that tells us just what we want to know."

Chapman continued:

"There is another point, Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction. Mr. Kesselbach, who for some days had been very uneasy in his mind – I have told you the reason: a scheme to which he attached the utmost importance – Mr. Kesselbach seemed particularly anxious about two things. There was, first, a little ebony box, which he put away safely at the Crédit Lyonnais; and, next, a little black morocco note-case, in which he kept a few papers."

"And where is that?"

"Before Lupin's arrival, he put it, in my presence, into that travelling-bag."

M. Formerie took the bag and felt about in it. The note-case was not there. He rubbed his hands:

"Ah, everything fits in!.. We know the culprit, the conditions and the motive of the crime. This case won't take long. Are we quite agreed upon everything, M. Lenormand?"

"Upon not one single thing."

There was a moment of stupefaction. The commissary of police had arrived: and, behind him, in spite of the constables keeping the door, a troop of journalists, and the hotel staff had forced their way in and were standing in the entrance-lobby.

Notorious though the old fellow was for his bluntness – a bluntness which was not without a certain discourtesy and which had already procured him an occasional reprimand in high quarters – the abruptness of this reply took every one aback. And M. Formerie in particular appeared utterly nonplussed:

"Still," he said, "I can see nothing that isn't quite simple. Lupin is the thief.."

"Why did he commit the murder?" M. Lenormand flung at him.

"In order to commit the theft."

"I beg your pardon; the witnesses' story proves that the theft took place before the murder. Mr. Kesselbach was first bound and gagged, then robbed. Why should Lupin, who has never resorted to murder, choose this time to kill a man whom he had rendered helpless and whom he had already robbed?"

The examining-magistrate stroked his long, fair whiskers, with the gesture customary to him when a question seemed incapable of solution. He replied in a thoughtful tone:

"There are several answers to that.."

"What are they?"

"It depends.. it depends upon a number of facts as yet unknown… And, moreover, the objection applies only to the nature of the motives. We are agreed as to the remainder."

"No."

This time, again, the denial was flat, blunt, almost impolite; so much so that the magistrate was absolutely nonplussed, dared not even raise a protest, and remained abashed in the presence of this strange collaborator. At last he said:

"We all have our theories. I should like to know yours."

"I have none."

The chief detective rose and, leaning on his stick, took a few steps through the room. All the people around him were silent… And it was rather curious, in a group in which, after all, his position was only that of an auxiliary, a subordinate, to see this ailing, decrepit, elderly man dominate the others by the sheer force of an authority which they had to feel, even though they did not accept it. After a long pause he said:

"I should like to inspect the rooms which adjoin this suite."

The manager showed him the plan of the hotel. The only way out of the right-hand bedroom, which was Mr. Kesselbach's, was through the little entrance-hall of the suite. But the bedroom on the left, the room occupied by the secretary, communicated with another apartment.

"Let us inspect it," said M. Lenormand.

M. Formerie could not help shrugging his shoulders and growling:

"But the communicating door is bolted and the window locked."

"Let us inspect it," repeated M. Lenormand.

He was taken into the apartment, which was the first of the five rooms reserved for Mrs. Kesselbach. Then, at his request, he was taken to the rooms leading out of it. All the communicating doors were bolted on both sides.

"Are not any of these rooms occupied?" he asked.

"No."

"Where are the keys?"

"The keys are always kept in the office."

"Then no one can have got in?."

"No one, except the floor-waiter who airs and dusts the rooms."

"Send for him, please."

The man, whose name was Gustave Beudot, replied that he had closed the windows of five rooms on the previous day in accordance with his general instructions.

"At what time?"

"At six o'clock in the evening."

"And you noticed nothing?"

"No, sir."

"And, this morning.. ?"

"This morning, I opened the windows at eight o'clock exactly."

"And you found nothing?"

He hesitated. He was pressed with questions and ended by admitting:

"Well, I picked up a cigarette-case near the fireplace in 420… I intended to take it to the office this evening."

"Have you it on you?"

"No, it is in my room. It is a gun-metal case. It has a space for tobacco and cigarette-papers on one side and for matches on the other. There are two initials in gold: an L and an M.."

"What's that?"

Chapman had stepped forward. He seemed greatly surprised and, questioning the servant:

"A gun-metal cigarette-case, you say?"

"Yes."

"With three compartments – for tobacco, cigarette-papers, and matches… Russian tobacco, wasn't it, very fine and light?"

"Yes."

"Go and fetch it… I should like to see it for myself.. to make sure.."

At a sign from the chief detective, Gustave Beudot left the room.

M. Lenormand sat down and his keen eyes examined the carpet, the furniture and the curtains. He asked:

"This is room 420, is it not?"

"Yes."

The magistrate grinned:

"I should very much like to know what connection you establish between this incident and the tragedy. Five locked doors separate us from the room in which Mr. Kesselbach was murdered."

M. Lenormand did not condescend to reply.

Time passed. Gustave did not return.

"Where does he sleep?" asked the chief detective.

"On the sixth floor," answered the manager. "The room is on the Rue de Judée side: above this, therefore. It's curious that he's not back yet."

"Would you have the kindness to send some one to see?"

The manager went himself, accompanied by Chapman. A few minutes after, he returned alone, running, with every mark of consternation on his face.

"Well?"

"Dead!"

"Murdered?"

"Yes."

"Oh, by thunder, how clever these scoundrels are!" roared M. Lenormand, "Off with you, Gourel, and have the doors of the hotel locked… Watch every outlet… And you, Mr. Manager, please take us to Gustave Beudot's room."

The manager led the way. But as they left the room, M. Lenormand stooped and picked up a tiny little round piece of paper, on which his eyes had already fixed themselves.

It was a label surrounded with a blue border and marked with the number 813. He put it in his pocket, on chance, and joined the others..

A small wound in the back, between the shoulder-blades..

"Exactly the same wound as Mr. Kesselbach's," declared the doctor.

"Yes," said M. Lenormand, "it was the same hand that struck the blow and the same weapon was used."

Judging by the position of the body, the man had been surprised when on his knees before the bed, feeling under the mattress for the cigarette-case which he had hidden there. His arm was still caught between the mattress and the bed, but the cigarette-case was not to be found.

"That cigarette-case must have been devilish compromising!" timidly suggested M. Formerie, who no longer dared put forward any definite opinion.

"Well, of course!" said the chief detective.

"At any rate, we know the initials: an L and an M. And with that, together with what Mr. Chapman appears to know, we shall easily learn.."

M. Lenormand gave a start:

"Chapman! But where is he?"

They looked in the passage among the groups of people crowded together. Chapman was not there.

"Mr. Chapman came with me," said the manager.

"Yes, yes, I know, but he did not come back with you."

"No, I left him with the corpse."

"You left him!.. Alone?"

"I said to him, 'Stay here.. don't move.'"

"And was there no one about? Did you see no one?"

"In the passage? No."

"But in the other attics?.. Or else, look here, round that corner: was there no one hiding there?"

M. Lenormand seemed greatly excited. He walked up and down, he opened the doors of the rooms. And, suddenly, he set off at a run, with an agility of which no one would have thought him capable. He rattled down the six storeys, followed at a distance by the manager and the examining-magistrate. At the bottom, he found Gourel in front of the main door.

"Has no one gone out?"

"No, chief."

"What about the other door, in the Rue Orvieto?"

"I have posted Dieuzy there."

"With firm orders?"

"Yes, chief."

The huge hall of the hotel was crowded with anxious visitors, all commenting on the more or less accurate versions that had reached them of the crime. All the servants had been summoned by telephone and were arriving, one by one. M. Lenormand questioned them without delay. None of them was able to supply the least information. But a fifth-floor chambermaid appeared. Ten minutes earlier, or thereabouts, she had passed two gentlemen who were coming down the servants' staircase between the fifth and the fourth floors.

"They came down very fast. The one in front was holding the other by the hand. I was surprised to see those two gentlemen on the servants' staircase."

"Would you know them again?"

"Not the first one. He had his head turned the other way. He was a thin, fair man. He wore a soft black hat.. and black clothes."

"And the other?"

"Oh, the other was an Englishman, with a big, clean-shaven face and a check suit. He had no hat on."

The description obviously referred to Chapman.

The woman added:

"He looked.. he looked quite funny.. as if he was mad."

Gourel's word was not enough for M. Lenormand. One after the other, he questioned the under-porters standing at the two doors:

"Did you know Mr. Chapman?"

"Yes, sir, he always spoke to us."

"And you have not seen him go out?"

"No, sir. He has not been out this morning."

M. Lenormand turned to the commissary of police: "How many men have you with you, Monsieur le Commissaire?"

"Four."

"That's not sufficient. Telephone to your secretary to send you all the men available. And please be so good as yourself to organize the closest watch at every outlet. The state of siege, Monsieur le Commissaire.."

"But I say," protested the manager, "my customers?"

"I don't care a hang, sir, for your customers! My duty comes before everything; and my duty is at all costs to arrest.."

"So you believe." the examining-magistrate ventured to interpolate.

"I don't *believe*, monsieur.. I am sure that the perpetrator of both the murders is still in the hotel."

"But then Chapman."

"At this moment, I cannot guarantee that Chapman is still alive. In any case, it is only a question of minutes, of seconds… Gourel, take two men and search all the rooms on the fourth floor… Mr. Manager, send one of your clerks with them… As for the other floors, I shall proceed as soon as we are reënforced. Come, Gourel, off with you, and keep your eyes open… It's big game you're hunting!"

Gourel and his men hurried away. M. Lenormand himself remained in the hall, near the office. This time, he did not think of sitting down, as his custom was. He walked from the main entrance to the door in the Rue Orvieto and returned to the point from which he had started. At intervals he gave instructions:

"Mr. Manager, see that the kitchens are watched. They may try to escape that way… Mr. Manager, instruct your young lady at the telephone not to put any of the people in the hotel into communication with outside subscribers. If a call comes from the outside, she can connect the caller with the person asked for, but she must take a note of that person's name… Mr. Manager, have a list made out of all your visitors whose name begins with an L or an M."

The tension caught the spectators by the throat, as they stood clustered in the middle of the hall, silent and gasping for breath, shaking with fear at the least sound, obsessed by the infernal image of the murderer. Where was he hiding? Would he show himself? Was he not one of themselves: this one, perhaps.. or that one?.

And all eyes were turned on the gray-haired gentleman in spectacles, an olive-green frock-coat and a maroon-colored neckerchief, who was walking about, with his bent back, on a pair of shaky legs.

At times, one of the waiters accompanying Sergeant Gourel on his search would come running up.

"Any news?" asked M. Lenormand.

"No, sir, we've found nothing."

The manager made two attempts to induce him to relax his orders regarding the doors. The situation was becoming intolerable. The office was filled with loudly-protesting visitors, who had business outside, or who had arranged to leave Paris.

"I don't care a hang!" said M. Lenormand again.

"But I know them all."

"I congratulate you."

"You are exceeding your powers."

"I know."

"The law will decide against you."

"I'm convinced of that."

"Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction himself.."

"M. Formerie had better not interfere. He can mind his own business, which is to examine the servants, as he is doing now. Besides, it has nothing to do with the examining-magistrate, it has to do with the police. It's my affair."

Just then a squad of police burst into the hotel. The chief detective divided them into several sections which he sent up to the third floor. Then, addressing the commissary of police:

"My dear commissary, I leave the task of watching the doors to you. No weakness, I entreat you. I will take the responsibility for anything that happens."

And, turning to the lift, he had himself conveyed to the second floor.

It was a difficult business and a long one, for they had to open the doors of the sixty bedrooms, to inspect all the bathrooms, all the recesses, all the cupboards, every nook and corner.

And it was also fruitless. An hour later, on the stroke of twelve, M. Lenormand had just done the second floor; the other parties had not yet finished the upper floors; and no discovery had been made.

M. Lenormand hesitated: had the murderer retreated to the attics?

He was deciding, however, to go downstairs, when he was told that Mrs. Kesselbach had just arrived with her lady-companion. Edwards, the old confidential man-servant, had accepted the task of informing her of Mr. Kesselbach's death.

M. Lenormand found her in one of the drawing rooms, overcome by the unexpected shock, dry-eyed, but with her features wrung with grief and her body trembling all over, as though convulsed with fever. She was a rather tall, dark woman; and her black and exceedingly beautiful eyes were filled with gold, with little gold spots, like spangles gleaming in the dark. Her husband had met her in Holland, where Dolores was born of an old family of Spanish origin, the Amontis. He fell in love with her at first sight; and for four years the harmony between them, built up of mutual affection and devotion, had never been interrupted.

M. Lenormand introduced himself. She looked at him without replying; and he was silent, for she did not appear, in her stupor, to understand what he said. Then, suddenly, she began to shed copious tears and asked to be taken to her husband.

In the hall, M. Lenormand found Gourel, who was looking for him and who rushed at him with a hat which he held in his hand:

"I picked this up, chief… There's no doubt whom it belongs to, is there?"

It was a soft, black felt hat and resembled the description given. There was no lining or label inside it.

"Where did you pick it up?"

"On the second-floor landing of the servants' staircase."

"Nothing on the other floors?"

"Nothing. We've searched everywhere. There is only the first floor left. And this hat shows that the man went down so far. We're burning, chief!"

"I think so."

At the foot of the stairs M. Lenormand stopped:

"Go back to the commissary and give him my orders: he must post two men at the foot of each of the four staircases, revolver in hand. And they are to fire, if necessary. Understand this, Gourel: if Chapman is not saved and if the fellow escapes, it means my resignation. I've been wool-gathering for over two hours."

He went up the stairs. On the first floor he met two policemen leaving a bedroom, accompanied by a servant of the hotel.

The passage was deserted. The hotel staff dared not venture into it. Some of the permanent visitors had locked themselves in their rooms; and the police had to knock for a long time and proclaim who they were before they could get the doors opened.

Farther on, M. Lenormand saw another group of policemen searching the maid's pantry and, at the end of a long passage, he saw some more men who were approaching the turning, that is to say, that part of the passage which contained the rooms overlooking the Rue de Judée.

And, suddenly, he heard these men shouting; and they disappeared at a run.

He hurried after them.

The policemen had stopped in the middle of the passage. At their feet, blocking their way, with its face on the carpet, lay a corpse.

M. Lenormand bent down and took the lifeless head in his hands:

"Chapman," he muttered. "He is dead."

He examined the body. A white knitted silk muffler was tied round the neck. He undid it. Red stains appeared; and he saw that the muffler held a thick wad of cotton-wool in position against the nape of the neck. The wad was soaked with blood.

Once again there was the same little wound, clean, frank and pitiless.

M. Formerie and the commissary were at once told and came hastening up.

"No one gone out?" asked the chief detective. "No surprise?"

"No," said the commissary. "There are two men on guard at the foot of each staircase."

"Perhaps he has gone up again?" said M. Formerie.

"No!.. No!."

"But some one must have met him.."

"No… This all happened quite a long time ago. The hands are cold… The murder must have been committed almost immediately after the other.. as soon as the two men came here by the servants' staircase."

"But the body would have been seen! Think, fifty people must have passed this spot during the last two hours.."

"The body was not here."

"Then where was it?"

"Why, how can I tell?" snapped the chief detective. "Do as I'm doing, look for yourself! You can't find things by talking."

He furiously patted the knob of his stick with a twitching hand; and he stood there, with his eyes fixed on the body, silent and thoughtful. At last he spoke:

"Monsieur le Commissaire, be so good as to have the victim taken to an empty room. Let them fetch the doctor. Mr. Manager, would you mind opening the doors of all the rooms on this passage for me?"

On the left were three bedrooms and two sitting-rooms, forming an empty suite, which M. Lenormand inspected. On the right were four bedrooms. Two were occupied respectively by a M. Reverdat and an Italian, Baron Giacomini, who were both then out. In the third room they found an elderly English maiden lady still in bed; and, in the fourth, an Englishman who was placidly reading and smoking and who had not been in the least disturbed by the noises in the passage. His name was Major Parbury.

No amount of searching or questioning led to any result. The old maid had heard nothing before the exclamations of the policeman: no noise of a struggle, no cry of pain, no sound of quarreling; and Major Parbury neither.

Moreover, there was no suspicious clue found, no trace of blood, nothing to lead them to suppose that the unfortunate Chapman had been in one of those rooms.

"It's queer," muttered the examining-magistrate, "it's all very queer.." And he confessed, ingenuously, "I feel more and more at sea… There is a whole series of circumstances that are partly beyond me. What do you make of it, M. Lenormand?"

M. Lenormand was on the point of letting off one of those pointed rejoinders in which he was wont to give vent to his chronic ill-temper, when Gourel appeared upon the scene, all out of breath.

"Chief," he panted, "they've found this.. downstairs.. in the office.. on a chair.."

It was a parcel of moderate dimensions, wrapped up in a piece of black serge.

"Did they open it?" asked the chief.

"Yes, but when they saw what the parcel contained, they did it up again exactly as it was.. fastened very tight, as you can see.."

"Untie it."

Gourel removed the wrapper and disclosed a black diagonal jacket and trousers, which had evidently been packed up in a hurry, as the creases in the cloth showed. In the middle was a towel, covered with blood, which had been dipped in water, in order, no doubt, to destroy the marks of the hands that had been wiped on it. Inside the napkin was a steel dagger, with a handle encrusted with gold. This also was red with blood, the blood of three men stabbed within the space of a few hours by an invisible hand, amid the crowd of three hundred people moving about in the huge hotel.

Edwards, the man-servant, at once identified the dagger as belonging to Mr. Kesselbach. He had seen it on the table on the previous day, before the assault committed by Lupin.

"Mr. Manager," said the chief detective, "the restriction is over. Gourel, go and give orders to leave the doors free."

"So you think that Lupin has succeeded in getting out?" asked M. Formerie.

"No. The perpetrator of the three murders which we have discovered is in one of the rooms of the hotel, or, rather, he is among the visitors in the hall or in the reception-rooms. In my opinion, he was staying in the hotel."

"Impossible! Besides, where would he have changed his clothes? And what clothes would he have on now?"

"I don't know, but I am stating a fact."

"And you are letting him go? Why, he'll just walk out quietly, with his hands in his pockets!"

"The one who walks away like that, without his luggage, and who does not return, will be the criminal. Mr. Manager, please come with me to the office. I should like to make a close inspection of your visitors' book."

In the office, M. Lenormand found a few letters addressed to Mr. Kesselbach. He handed them to the examining-magistrate. There was also a parcel that had just come by the Paris parcel-post. The paper in which it was packed was partly torn; and M. Lenormand saw that it held a small ebony box, engraved with the name of Rudolf Kesselbach. Feeling curious, he opened the parcel. The box contained the fragments of a looking-glass which had evidently been fixed to the inside of the lid. It also contained the card of Arsène Lupin.

But one detail seemed to strike the chief detective. On the outside, at the bottom of the box, was a little blue-edged label, similar to the label which he had picked up in the room on the fourth floor where the cigarette-case was found, and this label bore the same number, 813.

CHAPTER III
M. LENORMAND OPENS HIS CAMPAIGN

"Auguste, show M. Lenormand in."

The messenger went out and, a few seconds later, announced the chief of the detective-service.

There were three men in the prime minister's private room on the Place Beauvau: the famous Valenglay, leader of the radical party for the past thirty years and now president of the council and minister of the interior; the attorney-general, M. Testard; and the prefect of police, Delaume.

The prefect of police and the attorney-general did not rise from the chairs which they had occupied during their long conversation with the prime minister. Valenglay, however, stood up and, pressing the chief detective's hand, said, in the most cordial tones:

"I have no doubt, my dear Lenormand, that you know the reason why I asked you to come."

"The Kesselbach case?"

"Yes."

The Kesselbach case! Not one of us but is able to recall not only the main details of this tragic affair, the tangled skein of which I have set myself to unravel, but even its very smallest incidents, so greatly did the tragedy excite us all during these recent years. Nor is there one of us but remembers the extraordinary stir which it created both in and outside France. And yet there was one thing that upset the public even more than the three murders committed in such mysterious circumstances, more than the detestable atrocity of that butchery, more than anything else; and that was the reappearance – one might almost say the resurrection – of Arsène Lupin.

Arsène Lupin! No one had heard speak of him for over four years, since his incredible, his astounding adventure of the Hollow Needle,[2] since the day when he had slunk away into the darkness before the eyes of Holmlock Shears and Isidore Beautrelet, carrying on his back the dead body of the woman whom he loved, and followed by his old servant, Victoire.

From that day onward he had been generally believed to be dead. This was the version put about by the police, who, finding no trace of their adversary, were content purely and simply to bury him.

Some, however, believing him to be saved, described him as leading a placid, Philistine existence. According to them, he was living with his wife and children, growing his small potatoes; whereas others maintained that, bent down with the weight of sorrow and weary of the vanities of this world, he had sought the seclusion of a Trappist monastery.

And here he was once more looming large in the public view and resuming his relentless struggle against society! Arsène Lupin was Arsène Lupin again, the fanciful, intangible, disconcerting, audacious, genial Arsène Lupin! But, this time, a cry of horror arose. Arsène Lupin had taken human life! And the fierceness, the cruelty, the ruthless cynicism of the crime were so great that, then and there, the legend of the popular hero, of the chivalrous and occasionally sentimental adventurer, made way for a new conception of an inhuman, bloodthirsty, and ferocious monster. The crowd now loathed and feared its former idol with more intensity than it had once shown in admiring him for his easy grace and his diverting good-humor.

And, forthwith, the indignation of that frightened crowd turned against the police. Formerly, people had laughed. They forgave the beaten commissary of police for the comical fashion in which he allowed himself to be beaten. But the joke had lasted too long; and, in a burst of revolt and fury, they now called the authorities to account for the unspeakable crimes which these were powerless to prevent.

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[2] See *The Hollow Needle*. By Maurice Leblanc. Translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos and published by Doubleday, Page & Co.

In the press, at public meetings, in the streets and even in the tribune of the Chamber of Deputies there was such an explosion of wrath that the government grew alarmed and strove by every possible means to allay the public excitement.

It so happened that Valenglay, the premier, took a great interest in all these police questions and had often amused himself by going closely into different cases with the chief of the detective-service, whose good qualities and independent character he valued highly. He sent for the prefect and the attorney-general to see him in his room, talked to them and then sent for M. Lenormand.

"Yes, my dear Lenormand, it's about the Kesselbach case. But, before we discuss it, I must call your attention to a point which more particularly affects and, I may say, annoys Monsieur le Préfet de Police. M. Delaume, will you explain to M. Lenormand.. ?

"Oh, M. Lenormand knows quite well how the matter stands," said the prefect, in a tone which showed but little good-will toward his subordinate. "We have talked it over already and I have told him what I thought of his improper conduct at the Palace Hotel. People are generally indignant."

M. Lenormand rose, took a paper from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"What is this?" asked Valenglay.

"My resignation, Monsieur le Président du Conseil."

Valenglay gave a jump:

"What! Your resignation! For a well-meaning remark which Monsieur le Préfet thinks fit to address to you and to which, for that matter, he attaches no importance whatever – do you, Delaume? No importance whatever – and there you go, taking offence! You must confess, my dear Lenormand, that you're devilish touchy! Come, put that bit of paper back in your pocket and let's talk seriously."

The chief detective sat down again, and Valenglay, silencing the prefect, who made no attempt to conceal his dissatisfaction, said:

"In two words, Lenormand, the thing is that Lupin's reappearance upon the scene annoys us. The brute has defied us long enough. It used to be funny, I confess, and I, for my part, was the first to laugh at it. But it's no longer a question of that. It's a question of murder now. We could stand Lupin, as long as he amused the gallery. But, when he takes to killing people, no!"

"Then what is it that you ask, Monsieur le Président?"

"What we ask? Oh, it's quite simple! First, his arrest and then his head!"

"I can promise you his arrest, some day or another, but not his head."

"What! If he's arrested, it means trial for murder, a verdict of guilty, and the scaffold."

"No!"

"And why not?"

"Because Lupin has not committed murder."

"Eh? Why, you're mad, Lenormand! The corpses at the Palace Hotel are so many inventions, I suppose! And the three murders were never committed!"

"Yes, but not by Lupin."

The chief spoke these words very steadily, with impressive calmness and conviction. The attorney and the prefect protested.

"I presume, Lenormand," said Valenglay, "that you do not put forward that theory without serious reasons?"

"It is not a theory."

"What proof have you?"

"There are two, to begin with, two proofs of a moral nature, which I at once placed before Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction and which the newspapers have laid stress upon. First and foremost, Lupin does not kill people. Next, why should he have killed anybody, seeing that the object which he set out to achieve, the theft, was accomplished and that he had nothing to fear from an adversary who was gagged and bound?"

"Very well. But the facts?"

"Facts are worth nothing against reason and logic; and, moreover, the facts also are on my side. What would be the meaning of Lupin's presence in the room in which the cigarette-case was discovered? On the other hand, the black clothes which were found and which evidently belonged to the murderer are not in the least of a size to fit Lupin."

"You know him, then, do you?"

"I? No. But Edwards saw him, Gourel saw him; and the man whom they saw is not the man whom the chambermaid saw, on the servants' staircase, dragging Chapman by the hand."

"Then your idea."

"You mean to say, the truth, M. le Président. Here it is, or, at least, here is the truth as far as I know it. On Tuesday, the 16th of April, a man – Lupin – broke into Mr. Kesselbach's room at about two o'clock in the afternoon.."

M. Lenormand was interrupted by a burst of laughter. It came from the prefect of police.

"Let me tell you, M. Lenormand, that you are in rather too great a hurry to state your precise facts. It has been shown that, at three o'clock on that day, Mr. Kesselbach walked into the Crédit Lyonnais and went down to the safe deposit. His signature in the register proves it."

M. Lenormand waited respectfully until his superior had finished speaking. Then, without even troubling to reply directly to the attack, he continued:

"At about two o'clock in the afternoon, Lupin, assisted by an accomplice, a man named Marco, bound Mr. Kesselbach hand and foot, robbed him of all the loose cash which he had upon him and compelled him to reveal the cypher of his safe at the Crédit Lyonnais. As soon as the secret was told, Marco left. He joined another accomplice, who, profiting by a certain resemblance to Mr. Kesselbach – a resemblance which he accentuated that day by wearing clothes similar to Mr. Kesselbach's and putting on a pair of gold spectacles – entered the Crédit Lyonnais, imitated Mr. Kesselbach's signature, emptied the safe of its contents and walked off, accompanied by Marco. Marco at once telephoned to Lupin. Lupin, as soon as he was sure that Mr. Kesselbach had not deceived him and that the object of his expedition was attained, went away."

Valenglay seemed to waver in his mind:

"Yes, yes.. we'll admit that… But what surprises me is that a man like Lupin should have risked so much for such a paltry profit: a few bank-notes and the hypothetical contents of a safe."

"Lupin was after more than that. He wanted either the morocco envelope which was in the traveling-bag, or else the ebony box which was in the safe. He had the ebony box, because he has sent it back empty. Therefore, by this time, he knows, or is in a fair way for knowing, the famous scheme which Mr. Kesselbach was planning, and which he was discussing with his secretary a few minutes before his death."

"What was the scheme?"

"I don't exactly know. The manager of Barbareux's agency, to whom he had opened his mind about it, has told me that Mr. Kesselbach was looking for a man who went by the name of Pierre Leduc, a man who had lost caste, it appears. Why and how the discovery of this person was connected with the success of his scheme, I am unable to say."

"Very well," said Valenglay. "So much for Arsène Lupin. His part is played. Mr. Kesselbach is bound hand and foot, robbed, but alive!.. What happens up to the time when he is found dead?"

"Nothing, for several hours, nothing until night. But, during the night, some one made his way in."

"How?"

"Through room 420, one of the rooms reserved by Mr. Kesselbach. The person in question evidently possessed a false key."

"But," exclaimed the prefect of police, "all the doors between that room and Mr. Kesselbach's flat were bolted; and there were five of them!"

"There was always the balcony."

"The balcony!"

"Yes; the balcony runs along the whole floor, on the Rue de Judée side."

"And what about the spaces in between?"

"An active man can step across them. Our man did. I have found marks."

"But all the windows of the suite were shut; and it was ascertained, after the crime, that they were still shut."

"All except one, the secretary's window, Chapman's, which was only pushed to. I tried it myself."

This time the prime minister seemed a little shaken, so logical did M. Lenormand's version seem, so precise and supported by such sound facts. He asked, with growing interest:

"But what was the man's object in coming?"

"I don't know."

"Ah, you don't know!"

"Any more than I know his name."

"But why did he kill Mr. Kesselbach?"

"I don't know. This all remains a mystery. The utmost that we have the right to suppose is that he did not come with the intention of killing, but with the intention, he too, of taking the documents contained in the morocco note-case and the ebony box; and that, finding himself by accident in the presence of the enemy reduced to a state of helplessness, he killed him."

Valenglay muttered:

"Yes, strictly speaking, that is possible… And, according to you, did he find the documents?"

"He did not find the box, because it was not there; but he found the black morocco note-case. So that Lupin and.. the other are in the same position. Each knows as much as the other about the Kesselbach scheme."

"That means," remarked the premier, "that they will fight."

"Exactly. And the fight has already begun. The murderer, finding a card of Arsène Lupin's, pinned it to the corpse. All the appearances would thus be against Arsène Lupin.. therefore, Arsène Lupin would be the murderer."

"True.. true," said Valenglay. "The calculation seemed pretty accurate."

"And the stratagem would have succeeded," continued M. Lenormand, "if in consequence of another and a less favorable accident, the murderer had not, either in coming or going, dropped his cigarette-case in room 420, and if the floor-waiter, Gustave Beudot, had not picked it up. From that moment, knowing himself to be discovered, or on the point of being discovered."

"How did he know it?"

"How? Why, through M. Formerie, the examining-magistrate, himself! The investigation took place with open doors. It is certain that the murderer was concealed among the people, members of the hotel staff and journalists, who were present when Gustave Beudot was giving his evidence; and when the magistrate sent Gustave Beudot to his attic to fetch the cigarette-case, the man followed and struck the blow. Second victim!"

No one protested now. The tragedy was being reconstructed before their eyes with a realism and a probable accuracy which were equally striking.

"And the third victim?" asked Valenglay.

"He himself gave the ruffian his opportunity. When Beudot did not return, Chapman, curious to see the cigarette-case for himself, went upstairs with the manager of the hotel. He was surprised by the murderer, dragged away by him, taken to one of the bedrooms and murdered in his turn."

"But why did he allow himself to be dragged away like that and to be led by a man whom he knew to be the murderer of Mr. Kesselbach and of Gustave Beudot?"

"I don't know, any more than I know the room in which the crime was committed, or the really miraculous way in which the criminal escaped."

"Something has been said about two blue labels."

"Yes, one was found on the box which Lupin sent back; and the other was found by me and doubtless came from the morocco note-case stolen by the murderer."

"Well?"

"I don't think that they mean anything. What does mean something is the number 813, which Mr. Kesselbach wrote on each of them. His handwriting has been recognized."

"And that number 813?"

"It's a mystery."

"Then?"

"I can only reply again that I don't know."

"Have you no suspicions?"

"None at all. Two of my men are occupying one of the rooms in the Palace Hotel, on the floor where Chapman's body was found. I have had all the people in the hotel watched by these two men. The criminal is not one of those who have left."

"Did no one telephone while the murders were being committed?"

"Yes, some one telephoned from the outside to Major Parbury, one of the four persons who occupied rooms on the first-floor passage."

"And this Major Parbury?"

"I am having him watched by my men. So far, nothing has been discovered against him."

"And in which direction do you intend to seek?"

"Oh, in a very limited direction. In my opinion, the murderer must be numbered among the friends or connections of Mr. and Mrs. Kesselbach. He followed their scent, knew their habits, the reason of Mr. Kesselbach's presence in Paris; and he at least suspected the importance of Mr. Kesselbach's plans."

"Then he was not a professional criminal?"

"No, no, certainly not! The murder was committed with extraordinary cleverness and daring, but it was due to circumstances. I repeat, we shall have to look among the people forming the immediate circle of Mr. and Mrs. Kesselbach. And the proof is that Mr. Kesselbach's murderer killed Gustave Beudot for the sole reason that the waiter had the cigarette-case in his possession; and Chapman for the sole reason that the secretary knew of its existence. Remember Chapman's excitement: at the mere description of the cigarette-case, Chapman received a sudden insight into the tragedy. If he had seen the cigarette-case, we should have been fully informed. The man, whoever he may be, was well aware of that: and he put an end to Chapman. And we know nothing, nothing but the initials L and M."

He reflected for a moment and said:

"There is another proof, which forms an answer to one of your questions, Monsieur le Président: Do you believe that Chapman would have accompanied that man along the passages and staircases of the hotel if he did not already know him?"

The facts were accumulating. The truth or, at least, the probable truth was gaining strength. Many of the points at issue, the most interesting, perhaps, remained obscure. But what a light had been thrown upon the subject! Short of the motives that inspired them, how clearly Lenormand's hearers now perceived the sequence of acts performed on that tragic morning!

There was a pause. Every one was thinking, seeking for arguments, for objections. At last, Valenglay exclaimed:

"My dear Lenormand, this is all quite excellent. You have convinced me… But, taking one thing with another, we are no further than we were."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. The object of our meeting is not to clear up a portion of the mystery, which, one day, I am sure, you will clear up altogether, but to satisfy the public demand as fully as we possibly

can. Now whether the murderer is Lupin or another; whether there are two criminals, or three, or only one: all this gives us neither the criminal's name nor his arrest. And the public continues under the disastrous impression that the law is powerless."

"What can I do?"

"Give the public the definite satisfaction which it demands."

"But it seems to me that this explanation ought to be enough.."

"Words! The public wants deeds! One thing alone will satisfy it: an arrest."

"Hang it all! Hang it all! We can't arrest the first person that comes along!"

"Even that would be better than arresting nobody," said Valenglay, with a laugh. "Come, have a good look round! Are you sure of Edwards, Kesselbach's servant?"

"Absolutely sure. Besides.. No, Monsieur le Président, it would be dangerous and ridiculous; and I am sure that Mr. Attorney-General himself.. There are only two people whom we have the right to arrest: the murderer – I don't know who he is – and Arsène Lupin."

"Well?"

"There is no question of arresting Arsène Lupin, or, at least, it requires time, a whole series of measures, which I have not yet had the leisure to contrive, because I looked upon Lupin as settled down.. or dead."

Valenglay stamped his foot with the impatience of a man who likes to see his wishes realized on the spot:

"And yet.. and yet, my dear Lenormand, something must be done.. if only for your own sake. You know as well as I do that you have powerful enemies.. and that, if I were not there.. In short, Lenormand, you can't be allowed to get out of it like this. What are you doing about the accomplices? There are others besides Lupin. There is Marco; and there's the rogue who impersonated Mr. Kesselbach in order to visit the cellars of the Crédit Lyonnais."

"Would you be satisfied if you got him, Monsieur le Président?"

"Would I be satisfied? Heavens alive, I should think I would!"

"Well, give me seven days."

"Seven days! Why, it's not a question of days, my dear Lenormand! It's a question of hours!"

"How many will you give me, Monsieur le Président?"

Valenglay took out his watch and chuckled:

"I will give you ten minutes, my dear Lenormand!"

The chief took out his, and emphasizing each syllable, said calmly:

"That is four minutes more than I want, Monsieur le Président."

Valenglay looked at him in amazement.

"Four minutes more than you want? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Monsieur le Président, that the ten minutes which you allow me are superfluous. I want six, and not one minute more."

"Oh, but look here, Lenormand.. if you imagine that this is the time for joking."

The chief detective went to the window and beckoned to two men who were walking round the courtyard.

Then he returned:

"Mr. Attorney-General, would you have the kindness to sign a warrant for the arrest of Auguste Maximin Philippe Daileron, aged forty-seven? You might leave the profession open."

He went to the door:

"Come in, Gourel. You, too, Dieuzy."

Gourel entered, accompanied by Inspector Dieuzy.

"Have you the handcuffs, Gourel?"

"Yes, chief."

M. Lenormand went up to Valenglay:

"Monsieur le Président, everything is ready. But I entreat you most urgently to forego this arrest. It upsets all my plans; it may render them abortive; and, for the sake of what, after all, is a very trifling satisfaction, it exposes us to the risk of jeopardizing the whole business."

"M. Lenormand, let me remark that you have only eighty seconds left."

The chief suppressed a gesture of annoyance, strode across the room and, leaning on his stick, sat down angrily, as though he had decided not to speak. Then, suddenly making up his mind:

"Monsieur le Président, the first person who enters this room will be the man whose arrest you asked for.. against my wish, as I insist on pointing out to you."

"Fifteen seconds, Lenormand!"

"Gourel.. Dieuzy.. the first person, do you understand?.. Mr. Attorney, have you signed the warrant?"

"Ten seconds, Lenormand!"

"Monsieur le Président, would you be so good as to ring the bell?"

Valenglay rang.

The messenger appeared in the doorway and waited.

Valenglay turned to the chief:

"Well, Lenormand, he's waiting for your orders. Whom is he to show in?"

"No one."

"But the rogue whose arrest you promised us? The six minutes are more than past."

"Yes, but the rogue is here!"

"Here? I don't understand. No one has entered the room!"

"I beg your pardon."

"Oh, I say… Look here, Lenormand, you're making fun of us. I tell you again that no one has entered the room."

"There were six of us in this room, Monsieur le Président; there are seven now. Consequently, some one has entered the room."

Valenglay started:

"Eh! But this is madness!.. What! You mean to say."

The two detectives had slipped between the messenger and the door. M. Lenormand walked up to the messenger, clapped his hand on his shoulder and, in a loud voice:

"In the name of the law, Auguste Maximin Philippe Daileron, chief messenger at the Ministry of the Interior, I arrest you."

Valenglay burst out laughing.

"Oh, what a joke! What a joke! That infernal Lenormand! Of all the first-rate notions! Well done, Lenormand! It's long since I enjoyed so good a laugh."

M. Lenormand turned to the attorney-general:

"Mr. Attorney, you won't forget to fill in Master Daileron's profession on the warrant, will you? Chief messenger at the Ministry of the Interior."

"Oh, good!.. Oh, capital!.. Chief messenger at the Ministry of the Interior!" spluttered Valenglay, holding his sides. "Oh, this wonderful Lenormand gets hold of ideas that would never occur to anybody else! The public is clamoring for an arrest… Whoosh, he flings at its head my chief messenger.. Auguste.. the model servant! Well, Lenormand, my dear fellow, I knew you had a certain gift of imagination, but I never suspected that it would go so far as this! The impertinence of it!"

From the commencement of this scene, Auguste had not stirred a limb and seemed to understand nothing of what was going on around him. His face, the typical face of a good, loyal, faithful serving-man, seemed absolutely bewildered. He looked at the gentlemen turn and turn about, with a visible effort to catch the meaning of their words.

M. Lenormand said a few words to Gourel, who went out. Then, going up to Auguste and speaking with great decision, he said:

"There's no way out of it. You're caught. The best thing to do, when the game is lost, is to throw down your cards. What were you doing on Tuesday?"

"I? Nothing. I was here."

"You lie. You were off duty. You went out for the day."

"Oh, yes.. I remember.. I had a friend to see me from the country… We went for a walk in the Bois."

"Your friend's name was Marco. And you went for a walk in the cellars of the Crédit Lyonnais."

"I? What an idea!.. Marco!.. I don't know any one by that name."

"And these? Do you know these?" cried the chief, thrusting a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles under his nose.

"No.. certainly not… I don't wear spectacles.."

"Yes, you do; you wear them when you go to the Crédit Lyonnais and when you pass yourself off as Mr. Kesselbach. These come from your room, the room which you occupy, under the name of M. Jérôme, at No. 50 Rue du Colisee."

"My room? *My* room? I sleep here, at the office."

"But you change your clothes over there, to play your parts in Lupin's gang."

A blow in the chest made him stagger back. Auguste reached the window at a bound, climbed over the balcony and jumped into the courtyard.

"Dash it all!" shouted Valenglay. "The scoundrel!"

He rang the bell, ran to the window, wanted to call out. M. Lenormand, with the greatest calm, said:

"Don't excite yourself, Monsieur le Président."

"But that blackguard of an Auguste."

"One second, please… I foresaw this ending.. in fact, I allowed for it… It's the best confession we could have.."

Yielding in the presence of this coolness, Valenglay resumed his seat. In a moment, Gourel entered, with his hand on the collar of Master Auguste Maximin Philippe Daileron, *alias* Jérôme, chief messenger at the Ministry of the Interior.

"Bring him, Gourel!" said M. Lenormand, as who should say, "Fetch it! Bring it!" to a good retriever carrying the game in its jaws. "Did he come quietly?"

"He bit me a little, but I held tight," replied the sergeant, showing his huge, sinewy hand.

"Very well, Gourel. And now take this chap off to the Dépôt in a cab. Good-bye for the present, M. Jérôme."

Valenglay was immensely amused. He rubbed his hands and laughed. The idea that his chief messenger was one of Lupin's accomplices struck him as a most delightfully ludicrous thing.

"Well done, my dear Lenormand; this is wonderful! But how on earth did you manage it?"

"Oh, in the simplest possible fashion. I knew that Mr. Kesselbach was employing the Barbareux agency and that Lupin had called on him, pretending to come from the agency. I hunted in that direction and discovered that, when the indiscretion was committed to the prejudice of Mr. Kesselbach and of Barbareux, it could only have been to the advantage of one Jérôme, a friend of one of the clerks at the agency. If you had not ordered me to hustle things, I should have watched the messenger and caught Marco and then Lupin."

"You'll catch them, Lenormand, you'll catch them, I assure you. And we shall be assisting at the most exciting spectacle in the world: the struggle between Lupin and yourself. I shall bet on you."

The next morning the newspapers published the following letter:

"Open Letter to M. Lenormand, Chief of the Detective-service

"All my congratulations, dear sir and dear friend, on your arrest of Jérôme the messenger. It was a smart piece of work, well executed and worthy of you.

"All my compliments, also, on the ingenious manner in which you proved to the prime minister that I was not Mr. Kesselbach's murderer. Your demonstration was clear, logical, irrefutable and, what is more, truthful. As you know, I do not kill people. Thank you for proving it on this occasion. The esteem of my contemporaries and of yourself, dear sir and dear friend, are indispensable to my happiness.

"In return, allow me to assist you in the pursuit of the monstrous assassin and to give you a hand with the Kesselbach case, a very interesting case, believe me: so interesting and so worthy of my attention that I have determined to issue from the retirement in which I have been living for the past four years, between my books and my good dog Sherlock, to beat all my comrades to arms and to throw myself once more into the fray.

"What unexpected turns life sometimes takes! Here am I, your fellow-worker! Let me assure you, dear sir and dear friend, that I congratulate myself upon it, and that I appreciate this favor of destiny at its true value.
"Arsène Lupin.

"P.S. – One word more, of which I feel sure that you will approve. As it is not right and proper that a gentleman who has had the glorious privilege of fighting under my banner should languish on the straw of your prisons, I feel it my duty to give you fair warning that, in five weeks' time, on Friday, the 31st of May, I shall set at liberty Master Jérôme, promoted by me to the rank of chief messenger at the Ministry of the Interior. Don't forget the date: Friday, the 31st of May.
"A. L."

CHAPTER IV
PRINCE SERNINE AT WORK

A ground-floor flat, at the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann and the Rue de Courcelles. Here lived Prince Sernine: Prince Sernine, one of the most brilliant members of the Russian colony in Paris, whose name was constantly recurring in the "Arrivals and Departures" column in the newspapers.

Eleven o'clock in the morning. The prince entered his study. He was a man of thirty-eight or forty years of age, whose chestnut hair was mingled with a few silver threads on the temples. He had a fresh, healthy complexion and wore a large mustache and a pair of whiskers cut extremely short, so as to be hardly noticeable against the fresh skin of his cheeks.

He was smartly dressed in a tight-fitting frock-coat and a white drill waistcoat, which showed above the opening.

"Come on!" he said, in an undertone. "I have a hard day's work before me, I expect."

He opened a door leading into a large room where a few people sat waiting, and said:

"Is Varnier there? Come in, Varnier."

A man looking like a small tradesman, squat, solidly built, firmly set upon his legs, entered at the summons. The prince closed the door behind him:

"Well, Varnier, how far are you?"

"Everything's ready for this evening, governor."

"Good. Tell me in a few words."

"It's like this. After her husband's murder, Mrs. Kesselbach, on the strength of the prospectuses which you ordered to be sent to her, selected as her residence the establishment known as the Retreat for Gentlewomen, at Garches. She occupies the last of the four small houses, at the bottom of the garden, which the management lets to ladies who prefer to live quite apart from the other boarders, the house known as the Pavillon de l'Impératrice."

"What servants has she?"

"Her companion, Gertrude, with whom she arrived a few hours after the crime, and Gertrude's sister Suzanne, whom she sent for to Monte Carlo and who acts as her maid. The two sisters are devoted to her."

"What about Edwards, the valet?"

"She did not keep him. He has gone back to his own country."

"Does she see people?"

"No. She spends her time lying on a sofa. She seems very weak and ill. She cries a great deal. Yesterday the examining-magistrate was with her for two hours."

"Very good. And now about the young girl."

"Mlle. Geneviève Ernemont lives across the way.. in a lane running toward the open country, the third house on the right in the lane. She keeps a free school for backward children. Her grandmother, Mme. Ernemont, lives with her."

"And, according to what you wrote to me, Geneviève Ernemont and Mrs. Kesselbach have become acquainted?"

"Yes. The girl went to ask Mrs. Kesselbach for a subscription for her school. They must have taken a liking to each other, for, during the past four days, they have been walking together in the Parc de Villeneuve, of which the garden of the Retreat is only a dependency."

"At what time do they go out?"

"From five to six. At six o'clock exactly the young lady goes back to her school."

"So you have arranged the thing?"

"For six o'clock to-day. Everything is ready."

"Will there be no one there?"

"There is never any one in the park at that hour."

"Very well. I shall be there. You can go."

He sent him out through the door leading to the hall, and, returning to the waiting-room, called:

"The brothers Doudeville."

Two young men entered, a little overdressed, keen-eyed and pleasant-looking.

"Good morning, Jean. Good morning, Jacques. Any news at the Prefecture?"

"Nothing much, governor."

"Does M. Lenormand continue to have confidence in you?"

"Yes. Next to Gourel, we are his favorite inspectors. A proof is that he has posted us in the Palace Hotel to watch the people who were living on the first-floor passage at the time of Chapman's murder. Gourel comes every morning, and we make the same report to him that we do to you."

"Capital. It is essential that I should be informed of all that happens and all that is said at the Prefecture of Police. As long as Lenormand looks upon you as his men, I am master of the situation. And have you discovered a trail of any kind in the hotel?"

Jean Doudeville, the elder of the two, replied:

"The Englishwoman who occupied one of the bedrooms has gone."

"That doesn't interest me. I know all about her. But her neighbor, Major Parbury?"

They seemed embarrassed. At last, one of them replied:

"Major Parbury, this morning, ordered his luggage to be taken to the Gare du Nord, for the twelve-fifty train, and himself drove away in a motor. We were there when the train left. The major did not come."

"And the luggage?"

"He had it fetched at the station."

"By whom?"

"By a commissionaire, so we were told."

"Then his tracks are lost?"

"Yes."

"At last!" cried the prince, joyfully.

The others looked at him in surprise.

"Why, of course," he said, "that's a clue!"

"Do you think so?"

"Evidently. The murder of Chapman can only have been committed in one of the rooms on that passage. Mr. Kesselbach's murderer took the secretary there, to an accomplice, killed him there, changed his clothes there; and, once the murderer had got away, the accomplice placed the corpse in the passage. But which accomplice? The manner of Major Parbury's disappearance goes to show that he knows something of the business. Quick, telephone the good news to M. Lenormand or Gourel. The Prefecture must be informed as soon as possible. The people there and I are marching hand in hand."

He gave them a few more injunctions, concerning their double rôle as police-inspectors in the service of Prince Sernine, and dismissed them.

Two visitors remained in the waiting-room. He called one of them in:

"A thousand pardons, Doctor," he said. "I am quite at your orders now. How is Pierre Leduc?"

"He's dead."

"Aha!" said Sernine. "I expected it, after your note of this morning. But, all the same, the poor beggar has not been long.."

"He was wasted to a shadow. A fainting-fit; and it was all over."

"Did he not speak?"

"No."

"Are you sure that, from the day when the two of us picked him up under the table in that low haunt at Belleville, are you sure that nobody in your nursing-home suspected that he was the Pierre Leduc whom the police were looking for, the mysterious Pierre Leduc whom Mr. Kesselbach was trying to find at all costs?"

"Nobody. He had a room to himself. Moreover, I bandaged up his left hand so that the injury to the little finger could not be seen. As for the scar on the cheek, it is hidden by the beard."

"And you looked after him yourself?"

"Myself. And, according to your instructions, I took the opportunity of questioning him whenever he seemed at all clear in his head. But I could never get more than an inarticulate stammering out of him."

The prince muttered thoughtfully:

"Dead!.. So Pierre Leduc is dead?.. The whole Kesselbach case obviously turned on him, and now he disappears.. without a revelation, without a word about himself, about his past… Ought I to embark on this adventure, in which I am still entirely in the dark? It's dangerous… I may come to grief.."

He reflected for a moment and exclaimed:

"Oh, who cares? I shall go on for all that. It's no reason, because Pierre Leduc is dead, that I should throw up the game. On the contrary! And the opportunity is too tempting! Pierre Leduc is dead! Long live Pierre Leduc!.. Go, Doctor, go home. I shall ring you up before dinner."

The doctor went out.

"Now then, Philippe," said Sernine to his last remaining visitor, a little gray-haired man, dressed like a waiter at a hotel, a very tenth-rate hotel, however.

"You will remember, governor," Philippe began, "that last week, you made me go as boots to the Hôtel des Deux-Empereurs at Versailles, to keep my eye on a young man."

"Yes, I know… Gérard Baupré. How do things stand with him?"

"He's at the end of his resources."

"Still full of gloomy ideas?"

"Yes. He wants to kill himself."

"Is he serious?"

"Quite. I found this little note in pencil among his papers."

"Ah!" said Sernine, reading the note. "He announces his suicide.. and for this evening too!"

"Yes, governor, he has bought the rope and screwed the hook to the ceiling. Thereupon, acting on your instructions, I talked to him. He told me of his distress, and I advised him to apply to you: 'Prince Sernine is rich,' I said; 'he is generous; perhaps he will help you.'"

"All this is first-rate. So he is coming?"

"He is here."

"How do you know?"

"I followed him. He took the train to Paris, and he is walking up and down the boulevard at this minute. He will make up his mind from one moment to the other."

Just then the servant brought in a card. The prince glanced at it and said to the man:

"Show M. Gérard Baupré in."

Then, turning to Philippe:

"You go into the dressing-room, here; listen and don't stir."

Left alone, the prince muttered:

"Why should I hesitate? It's fate that sends him my way.."

A few minutes later a tall young man entered. He was fair and slender, with an emaciated face and feverish eyes, and he stood on the threshold embarrassed, hesitating, in the attitude of a beggar who would like to put out his hand for alms and dares not.

The conversation was brief:

"Are you M. Gérard Baupré?"

"Yes.. yes.. that is my name."

"I have not the honor."

"It's like this, sir… Some one told me."

"Who?"

"A hotel servant.. who said he had been in your service.."

"Please come to the point.."

"Well!."

The young man stopped, taken aback and frightened by the haughty attitude adopted by the prince, who exclaimed:

"But, sir, there must be some."

"Well, sir, the man told me that you were very rich.. and very generous… And I thought that you might possibly."

He broke off short, incapable of uttering the word of prayer and humiliation.

Sernine went up to him.

"M. Gérard Baupré, did you not publish a volume of poetry called *The Smile of Spring*?"

"Yes, yes," cried the young man, his face lighting up. "Have you read it?"

"Yes… Very pretty, your poems, very pretty… Only, do you reckon upon being able to live on what they will bring you?"

"Certainly.. sooner or later.."

"Sooner or later? Later rather than sooner, I expect! And, meantime, you have come to ask me for the wherewithal to live?"

"For the wherewithal to buy food, sir."

Sernine put his hand on the young man's shoulder and, coldly:

"Poets do not need food, monsieur. They live on rhymes and dreams. Do as they do. That is better than begging for bread."

The young man quivered under the insult. He turned to the door without a word.

Sernine stopped him:

"One thing more, monsieur. Have you no resources of any kind?"

"None at all."

"And you are not reckoning on anything?"

"I have one hope left: I have written to one of my relations, imploring him to send me something. I shall have his answer to-day. It is my last chance."

"And, if you have no answer, you have doubtless made up your mind, this very evening, to."

"Yes, sir."

This was said quite plainly and simply.

Sernine burst out laughing:

"Bless my soul, what a queer young man you are! And full of artless conviction, too! Come and see me again next year, will you? We will talk about all this.. it's so curious, so interesting.. and, above all, so funny!.. Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

And, shaking with laughter, with affected bows and gestures, he showed him the door.

"Philippe," he said, admitting the hotel-servant, "did you hear?"

"Yes, governor."

"Gérard Baupré is expecting a telegram this afternoon, a promise of assistance.."

"Yes, it's his last hope."

"He must not receive that telegram. If it comes, intercept it and tear it up."

"Very well, governor."

"Are you alone at your hotel?"

"Yes, with the cook, who does not sleep in. The boss is away."

"Good. So we are the masters. Till this evening, at eleven. Be off."

Prince Sernine went to his room and rang for his servant:

"My hat, gloves, and stick. Is the car there?"

"Yes, sir."

He dressed, went out, and sank into a large, comfortable limousine, which took him to the Bois de Boulogne, to the Marquis and Marquise de Gastyne's, where he was engaged for lunch.

At half-past two he took leave of his hosts, stopped in the Avenue Kléber, picked up two of his friends and a doctor, and at five minutes to three arrived at the Parc des Princes.

At three o'clock he fought a sword duel with the Italian Major Spinelli, cut his adversary's ear in the first bout, and, at a quarter to four, took a bank at the Rue Cambon Club, from which he retired, at twenty minutes past five, after winning forty-seven thousand francs.

And all this without hurrying, with a sort of haughty indifference, as though the feverish activity that sent his life whizzing through a whirl of tempestuous deeds and events were the ordinary rule of his most peaceful days.

"Octave," he said to his chauffeur, "go to Garches."

And at ten minutes to six he alighted outside the old walls of the Parc de Villeneuve.

Although broken up nowadays and spoilt, the Villeneuve estate still retains something of the splendor which it knew at the time when the Empress Eugénie used to stay there. With its old trees, its lake and the leafy horizon of the woods of Saint-Cloud, the landscape has a certain melancholy grace.

An important part of the estate was made over to the Pasteur Institute. A smaller portion, separated from the other by the whole extent of the space reserved for the public, forms a property contained within the walls which is still fairly large, and which comprises the House of Retreat, with four isolated garden-houses standing around it.

"That is where Mrs. Kesselbach lives," said the prince to himself, catching sight of the roofs of the house and the four garden-houses in the distance.

He crossed the park and walked toward the lake.

Suddenly he stopped behind a clump of trees. He had seen two ladies against the parapet of the bridge that crossed the lake:

"Varnier and his men must be somewhere near. But, by Jove, they are keeping jolly well hidden! I can't see them anywhere.."

The two ladies were now strolling across the lawns, under the tall, venerable trees. The blue of the sky appeared between the branches, which swayed in the peaceful breeze, and the scent of spring and of young vegetation was wafted through the air.

On the grassy slopes that ran down to the motionless water, daisies, violets, daffodils, lilies of the valley, all the little flowers of April and May stood grouped, and, here and there, formed constellations of every color. The sun was sinking on the horizon.

And, all at once, three men started from a thicket of bushes and made for the two ladies.

They accosted them. A few words were exchanged. The ladies gave visible signs of dread. One of the men went up to the shorter of the two and tried to snatch the gold purse which she was carrying in her hand. They cried out; and the three men flung themselves upon them.

"Now or never!" said the prince.

And he rushed forward. In ten seconds he had almost reached the brink of the water. At his approach, the three men fled.

"Run away, you vagabonds," he chuckled; "run for all you are worth! Here's the rescuer coming!"

And he set out in pursuit of them. But one of the ladies entreated him:

"Oh, sir, I beg of you.. my friend is ill."

The shorter lady had fallen on the grass in a dead faint.

He retraced his steps and, anxiously:

"She is not wounded?" he asked. "Did those scoundrels."

"No.. no.. it's only the fright.. the excitement… Besides you will understand.. the lady is Mrs. Kesselbach.."

"Oh!" he said.

He produced a bottle of smelling-salts, which the younger woman at once applied to her friend's nostrils. And he added:

"Lift the amethyst that serves as a stopper… You will see a little box containing some tabloids. Give madame one of them.. one, no more.. they are very strong.."

He watched the young woman helping her friend. She was fair-haired, very simply dressed; and her face was gentle and grave, with a smile that lit up her features even when she was not smiling.

"That is Geneviève," he thought. And he repeated with emotion, "Geneviève.. Geneviève.."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Kesselbach gradually recovered consciousness. She was astonished at first, seemed not to understand. Then, her memory returning, she thanked her deliverer with a movement of the head.

He made a deep bow and said:

"Allow me to introduce myself… I am Prince Sernine.."

She said, in a faint voice:

"I do not know how to express my gratitude."

"By not expressing it at all, madame. You must thank chance, the chance that turned my steps in this direction. May I offer you my arm?"

A few minutes later, Mrs. Kesselbach rang at the door of the House of Retreat and said to the prince:

"I will ask one more service of you, monsieur. Do not speak of this assault."

"And yet, madame, it would be the only way of finding out."

"Any attempt to find out would mean an inquiry; and that would involve more noise and fuss about me, examinations, fatigue; and I am worn out as it is."

The prince did not insist. Bowing to her, he asked:

"Will you allow me to call and ask how you are?"

"Oh, certainly.."

She kissed Geneviève and went indoors.

Meantime, night was beginning to fall. Sernine would not let Geneviève return alone. But they had hardly entered the path, when a figure, standing out against the shadow, hastened toward them.

"Grandmother!" cried Geneviève.

She threw herself into the arms of an old woman, who covered her with kisses:

"Oh, my darling, my darling, what has happened? How late you are!.. And you are always so punctual!"

Geneviève introduced the prince:

"Prince Sernine.. Mme. Ernemont, my grandmother.."

Then she related the incident, and Mme. Ernemont repeated:

"Oh, my darling, how frightened you must have been!.. I shall never forget your kindness, monsieur, I assure you… But how frightened you must have been, my poor darling!"

"Come, granny, calm yourself, as I am here.."

"Yes, but the fright may have done you harm… One never knows the consequences… Oh, it's horrible!."

They went along a hedge, through which a yard planted with trees, a few shrubs, a playground and a white house were just visible. Behind the house, sheltered by a clump of elder-trees arranged to form a covered walk, was a little gate.

The old lady asked Prince Sernine to come in and led the way to a little drawing-room or parlor. Geneviève asked leave to withdraw for a moment, to go and see her pupils, whose supper-time it was. The prince and Mme. Ernemont remained alone.

The old lady had a sad and a pale face, under her white hair, which ended in two long, loose curls. She was too stout, her walk was heavy and, notwithstanding her appearance and her dress, which was that of a lady, she had something a little vulgar about her; but her eyes were immensely kind.

Prince Sernine went up to her, took her head in his two hands and kissed her on both cheeks:

"Well, old one, and how are you?"

She stood dumfounded, wild-eyed, open-mouthed. The prince kissed her again, laughing.

She spluttered:

"You! It's you! O mother of God!.. O mother of God!.. Is it possible!.. O mother of God!."

"My dear old Victoire!"

"Don't call me that," she cried, shuddering. "Victoire is dead.. your old servant no longer exists.[3] I belong entirely to Geneviève." And, lowering her voice, "O mother of God!.. I saw your name in the papers: then it's true that you have taken to your wicked life again?"

"As you see."

"And yet you swore to me that it was finished, that you were going away for good, that you wanted to become an honest man."

"I tried. I have been trying for four years… You can't say that I have got myself talked about during those four years!"

"Well?"

"Well, it bores me."

She gave a sigh and asked:

"Always the same… You haven't changed… Oh, it's settled, you never will change… So you are in the Kesselbach case?"

"Why, of course! But for that, would I have taken the trouble to arrange for an attack on Mrs. Kesselbach at six o'clock, so that I might have the opportunity of delivering her from the clutches of my own men at five minutes past? Looking upon me as her rescuer, she is obliged to receive me. I am now in the heart of the citadel and, while protecting the widow, can keep a lookout all round. Ah, you see, the sort of life which I lead does not permit me to lounge about and waste my time on little questions of politeness and such outside matters. I have to go straight to the point, violently, brutally, dramatically.."

She looked at him in dismay and gasped:

"I see.. I see.. it's all lies about the attack… But then.. Geneviève."

"Why, I'm killing two birds with one stone! It was as easy to rescue two as one. Think of the time it would have taken, the efforts – useless efforts, perhaps – to worm myself into that child's friendship! What was I to her? What should I be now? An unknown person.. a stranger. Whereas now I am the rescuer. In an hour I shall be.. the friend."

She began to tremble:

"So.. so you did not rescue Geneviève… So you are going to mix us up in your affairs.." And, suddenly, in a fit of rebellion, seizing him by the shoulders, "No, I won't have it, do you understand? You brought the child to me one day, saying, 'Here, I entrust her to you.. her father and mother are dead.. take her under your protection.' Well, she's under my protection now and I shall know how to defend her against you and all your manœuvers!"

Standing straight upright, in a very determined attitude, Mme. Ernemont seemed ready for all emergencies.

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[3] See *Arsène Lupin*, by Edgar Jepson and Maurice Leblanc, and *The Hollow Needle*, by Maurice Leblanc, translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos.

Slowly and deliberately Sernine loosened the two hands, one after the other, that held him, and in his turn, took the old lady by the shoulders, forced her into an arm-chair, stooped over and, in a very calm voice, said:

"Rot!"

She began to cry and, clasping her hands together, implored him:

"I beseech you, leave us in peace. We were so happy! I thought that you had forgotten us and I blessed Heaven every time a day had passed. Why, yes .. I love you just the same. But, Geneviève.. you see, there's nothing that I wouldn't do for that child. She has taken your place in my heart."

"So I perceive," said he, laughing. "You would send me to the devil with pleasure. Come, enough of this nonsense! I have no time to waste. I must talk to Geneviève."

"You're going to talk to her?"

"Well, is that a crime?"

"And what have you to tell her?"

"A secret.. a very grave secret.. and a very touching one.."

The old lady took fright:

"And one that will cause her sorrow, perhaps? Oh, I fear everything, I fear everything, where she's concerned!."

"She is coming," he said.

"No, not yet."

"Yes, yes, I hear her… Wipe your eyes and be sensible."

"Listen," said she, eagerly, "listen. I don't know what you are going to say, what secret you mean to reveal to this child whom you don't know. But I, who do know her, tell you this: Geneviève has a very plucky, very spirited, but very sensitive nature. Be careful how you choose your words… You might wound feelings.. the existence of which you cannot even suspect.."

"Lord bless me! And why not?"

"Because she belongs to another race than you, to a different world… I mean, a different moral world… There are things which you are forbidden to understand nowadays. Between you and her, the obstacle is insurmountable… Geneviève has the most unblemished and upright conscience.. and you."

"And I?"

"And you are not an honest man!"

Geneviève entered, bright and charming:

"All my babies have gone to bed; I have ten minutes to spare… Why, grandmother, what's the matter? You look quite upset… Is it still that business with the."

"No, mademoiselle," said Sernine, "I believe I have had the good fortune to reassure your grandmother. Only, we were talking of you, of your childhood; and that is a subject, it seems, which your grandmother cannot touch upon without emotion."

"Of my childhood?" said Geneviève, reddening. "Oh, grandmother!"

"Don't scold her, mademoiselle. The conversation turned in that direction by accident. It so happens that I have often passed through the little village where you were brought up."

"Aspremont?"

"Yes, Aspremont, near Nice. You used to live in a new house, white all over.."

"Yes," she said, "white all over, with a touch of blue paint round the windows… I was only seven years old when I left Aspremont; but I remember the least things of that period. And I have not forgotten the glare of the sun on the white front of the house, nor the shade of the eucalyptus-tree at the bottom of the garden."

"At the bottom of the garden, mademoiselle, was a field of olive-trees; and under one of those olive-trees stood a table at which your mother used to work on hot days.."

"That's true, that's true," she said, quite excitedly, "I used to play by her side.."

"And it was there," said he, "that I saw your mother several times… I recognized her image the moment I set eyes on you.. but it was a brighter, happier image."

"Yes, my poor mother was not happy. My father died on the very day of my birth, and nothing was ever able to console her. She used to cry a great deal. I still possess a little handkerchief with which I used to dry her tears at that time."

"A little handkerchief with a pink pattern."

"What!" she exclaimed, seized with surprise. "You know."

"I was there one day when you were comforting her… And you comforted her so prettily that the scene remained impressed on my memory."

She gave him a penetrating glance and murmured, almost to herself:

"Yes, yes… I seem to.. The expression of your eyes.. and then the sound of your voice.."

She lowered her eyelids for a moment and reflected as if she were vainly trying to bring back a recollection that escaped her. And she continued:

"Then you knew her?"

"I had some friends living near Aspremont and used to meet her at their house. The last time I saw her, she seemed to me sadder still.. paler.. and, when I came back again."

"It was all over, was it not?" said Geneviève. "Yes, she went very quickly.. in a few weeks.. and I was left alone with neighbors who sat up with her.. and one morning they took her away… And, on the evening of that day, some one came, while I was asleep, and lifted me up and wrapped me in blankets.."

"A man?" asked the prince.

"Yes, a man. He talked to me, quite low, very gently.. his voice did me good.. and, as he carried me down the road and also in the carriage, during the night, he rocked me in his arms and told me stories.. in the same voice.. in the same voice."

She broke off gradually and looked at him again, more sharply than before and with a more obvious effort to seize the fleeting impression that passed over her at moments. He asked:

"And then? Where did he take you?"

"I can't recollect clearly.. it is just as though I had slept for several days… I can remember nothing before the little town of Montégut, in the Vendée, where I spent the second half of my childhood, with Father and Mother Izereau, a worthy couple who reared me and brought me up and whose love and devotion I shall never forget."

"And did they die, too?"

"Yes," she said, "of an epidemic of typhoid fever in the district.. but I did not know that until later… As soon as they fell ill, I was carried off as on the first occasion and under the same conditions, at night, by some one who also wrapped me up in blankets… Only, I was bigger, I struggled, I tried to call out.. and he had to close my mouth with a silk handkerchief."

"How old were you then?"

"Fourteen.. it was four years ago."

"Then you were able to see what the man was like?"

"No, he hid his face better and he did not speak a single word to me… Nevertheless, I have always believed him to be the same one.. for I remember the same solicitude, the same attentive, careful movements.."

"And after that?"

"After that, came oblivion, sleep, as before… This time, I was ill, it appears; I was feverish… And I woke in a bright, cheerful room. A white-haired lady was bending over me and smiling. It was grandmother.. and the room was the one in which I now sleep upstairs."

She had resumed her happy face, her sweet, radiant expression; and she ended, with a smile:

"That was how she became my grandmother and how, after a few trials, the little Aspremont girl now knows the delights of a peaceful life and teaches grammar and arithmetic to little girls who are either naughty or lazy.. but who are all fond of her."

She spoke cheerfully, in a tone at once thoughtful and gay, and it was obvious that she possessed a reasonable, well-balanced mind. Sernine listened to her with growing surprise and without trying to conceal his agitation:

"Have you never heard speak of that man since?" he asked.

"Never."

"And would you be glad to see him again?"

"Oh, very glad."

"Well, then, mademoiselle."

Geneviève gave a start:

"You know something.. the truth perhaps."

"No.. no.. only."

He rose and walked up and down the room. From time to time, his eyes fell upon Geneviève; and it looked as though he were on the point of giving a more precise answer to the question which she had put to him. Would he speak?

Mme. Ernemont awaited with anguish the revelation of the secret upon which the girl's future peace might depend.

He sat down beside Geneviève, appeared to hesitate, and said at last:

"No.. no.. just now.. an idea occurred to me.. a recollection."

"A recollection?.. And."

"I was mistaken. Your story contained certain details that misled me."

"Are you sure?"

He hesitated and then declared:

"Absolutely sure."

"Oh," said she, greatly disappointed. "I had half guessed.. that that man whom I saw twice.. that you knew him.. that."

She did not finish her sentence, but waited for an answer to the question which she had put to him without daring to state it completely.

He was silent. Then, insisting no further, she bent over Mme. Ernemont:

"Good night, grandmother. My children must be in bed by this time, but they could none of them go to sleep before I had kissed them."

She held out her hand to the prince:

"Thank you once more.."

"Are you going?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, if you will excuse me; grandmother will see you out."

He bowed low and kissed her hand. As she opened the door, she turned round and smiled. Then she disappeared. The prince listened to the sound of her footsteps diminishing in the distance and stood stock-still, his face white with emotion.

"Well," said the old lady, "so you did not speak?"

"No.."

"That secret."

"Later… To-day.. oddly enough.. I was not able to."

"Was it so difficult? Did not she herself feel that you were the stranger who took her away twice… A word would have been enough.."

"Later, later," he repeated, recovering all his assurance. "You can understand.. the child hardly knows me… I must first gain the right to her affection, to her love… When I have given her the life which she deserves, a wonderful life, such as one reads of in fairy-tales, then I will speak."

The old lady tossed her head:

"I fear that you are making a great mistake. Geneviève does not want a wonderful life. She has simple tastes."

"She has the tastes of all women; and wealth, luxury and power give joys which not one of them despises."

"Yes, Geneviève does. And you would do much better."

"We shall see. For the moment, let me go my own way. And be quite easy. I have not the least intention, as you say, of mixing her up in any of my manœuvers. She will hardly ever see me… Only, we had to come into contact, you know… That's done… Good-bye."

He left the school and walked to where his motor-car was waiting for him. He was perfectly happy:

"She is charming.. and so gentle, so grave! Her mother's eyes, eyes that soften you.. Heavens, how long ago that all is! And what a delightful recollection! A little sad, but so delightful!" And he said, aloud, "Certainly I shall look after her happiness! And that at once! This very evening! That's it, this very evening she shall have a sweetheart! Is not love the essential condition of any young girl's happiness?"

He found his car on the high-road:

"Home," he said to Octave.

When Sernine reached home, he rang up Neuilly and telephoned his instructions to the friend whom he called the doctor. Then he dressed, dined at the Rue Cambon Club, spent an hour at the opera and got into his car again:

"Go to Neuilly, Octave. We are going to fetch the doctor. What's the time?"

"Half-past ten."

"Dash it! Look sharp!"

Ten minutes later, the car stopped at the end of the Boulevard Inkerman, outside a villa standing in its own grounds. The doctor came down at the sound of the hooter. The prince asked:

"Is the fellow ready?"

"Packed up, strung up, sealed up."

"In good condition?"

"Excellent. If everything goes as you telephoned, the police will be utterly at sea."

"That's what they're there for. Let's get him on board."

They carried into the motor a sort of long sack shaped like a human being and apparently rather heavy. And the prince said:

"Go to Versailles, Octave, Rue de la Vilaine. Stop outside the Hôtel des Deux-Empereurs."

"Why, it's a filthy hotel," observed the doctor. "I know it well; a regular hovel."

"You needn't tell me! And it will be a hard piece of work, for me, at least… But, by Jove, I wouldn't sell this moment for a fortune! Who dares pretend that life is monotonous?"

They reached the Hôtel des Deux-Empereurs. A muddy alley; two steps down; and they entered a passage lit by a flickering lamp.

Sernine knocked with his fist against a little door.

A waiter appeared, Philippe, the man to whom Sernine had given orders, that morning, concerning Gérard Baupré.

"Is he here still?" asked the prince.

"Yes."

"The rope?"

"The knot is made."

"He has not received the telegram he was hoping for?"

"I intercepted it: here it is."

Sernine took the blue paper and read it:

"Gad!" he said. "It was high time. This is to promise him a thousand francs for to-morrow. Come, fortune is on my side. A quarter to twelve… In a quarter of an hour, the poor devil will take a leap into eternity. Show me the way, Philippe. You stay here, Doctor."

The waiter took the candle. They climbed to the third floor, and, walking on tip-toe, went along a low and evil-smelling corridor, lined with garrets and ending in a wooden staircase covered with the musty remnants of a carpet.

"Can no one hear me?" asked Sernine.

"No. The two rooms are quite detached. But you must be careful not to make a mistake: he is in the room on the left."

"Very good. Now go downstairs. At twelve o'clock, the doctor, Octave and you are to carry the fellow up here, to where we now stand, and wait till I call you."

The wooden staircase had ten treads, which the prince climbed with definite caution. At the top was a landing with two doors. It took Sernine quite five minutes to open the one of the right without breaking the silence with the least sound of a creaking hinge.

A light gleamed through the darkness of the room. Feeling his way, so as not to knock against one of the chairs, he made for that light. It came from the next room and filtered through a glazed door covered with a tattered hanging.

The prince pulled the threadbare stuff aside. The panes were of ground glass, but scratched in parts, so that, by applying one eye, it was easy to see all that happened in the other room.

Sernine saw a man seated at a table facing him. It was the poet, Gérard Baupré. He was writing by the light of a candle.

Above his head hung a rope, which was fastened to a hook fixed in the ceiling. At the end of the rope was a slip-knot.

A faint stroke sounded from a clock in the street.

"Five minutes to twelve," thought Sernine. "Five minutes more."

The young man was still writing. After a moment, he put down his pen, collected the ten or twelve sheets of paper which he had covered and began to read them over.

What he read did not seem to please him, for an expression of discontent passed across his face. He tore up his manuscript and burnt the pieces in the flame of the candle.

Then, with a fevered hand, he wrote a few words on a clean sheet, signed it savagely and rose from his chair.

But, seeing the rope at ten inches above his head, he sat down again suddenly with a great shudder of alarm.

Sernine distinctly saw his pale features, his lean cheeks, against which he pressed his clenched fists. A tear trickled slowly down his face, a single, disconsolate tear. His eyes gazed into space, eyes terrifying in their unutterable sadness, eyes that already seemed to behold the dread unknown.

And it was so young a face! Cheeks still so smooth, with not a blemish, not a wrinkle! And blue eyes, blue like an eastern sky!.

Midnight.. the twelve tragic strokes of midnight, to which so many a despairing man has hitched the last second of his existence!

At the twelfth stroke, he stood up again and, bravely this time, without trembling, looked at the sinister rope. He even tried to give a smile, a poor smile, the pitiful grimace of the doomed man whom death has already seized for its own.

Swiftly he climbed the chair and took the rope in one hand.

For a moment, he stood there, motionless: not that he was hesitating or lacking in courage. But this was the supreme moment, the one minute of grace which a man allows himself before the fatal deed.

He gazed at the squalid room to which his evil destiny had brought him, the hideous paper on the walls, the wretched bed.

On the table, not a book: all were sold. Not a photograph, not a letter: he had no father, no mother, no relations. What was there to make him cling to life?

With a sudden movement he put his head into the slip-knot and pulled at the rope until the noose gripped his neck.

And, kicking the chair from him with both feet, he leapt into space.

Ten seconds, fifteen seconds passed, twenty formidable, eternal seconds..

The body gave two or three jerks. The feet had instinctively felt for a resting-place. Then nothing moved..

A few seconds more… The little glazed door opened.

Sernine entered.

Without the least haste he took the sheet of paper to which the young man had set his signature, and read:

> "Tired of living, ill, penniless, hopeless, I am taking my own life. Let no one be accused of my death.
> *"Gérard Baupré.*
>
> "30 *April.*"

He put back the paper on the table where it could be seen, picked up the chair and placed it under the young man's feet. He himself climbed up on the table and, holding the body close to him, lifted it up, loosened the slip-knot and passed the head through it.

The body sank into his arms. He let it slide along the table and, jumping to the floor, laid it on the bed.

Then, with the same coolness, he opened the door on the passage:

"Are you there, all the three of you?" he whispered.

Some one answered from the foot of the wooden staircase near him:

"We are here. Are we to hoist up our bundle?"

"Yes, come along!"

He took the candle and showed them a light.

The three men trudged up the stairs, carrying the sack in which the "fellow" was tied up.

"Put him here," he said, pointing to the table.

With a pocket-knife, he cut the cords round the sack. A white sheet appeared, which he flung back. In the sheet was a corpse, the corpse of Pierre Leduc.

"Poor Pierre Leduc!" said Sernine. "You will never know what you lost by dying so young! I should have helped you to go far, old chap. However, we must do without your services… Now then, Philippe, get up on the table; and you, Octave, on the chair. Lift up his head and fasten the slip-knot."

Two minutes later, Pierre Leduc's body was swinging at the end of the rope.

"Capital, that was quite simple! Now you can all of you go. You, Doctor, will call back here to-morrow morning; you will hear of the suicide of a certain Gérard Baupré: you understand, Gérard Baupré. Here is his farewell letter. You will send for the divisional surgeon and the commissary; you will arrange that neither of them notices that the deceased has a cut finger or a scar on one cheek.."

"That's easy."

"And you will manage so as to have the report written then and there, to your dictation."

"That's easy."

"Lastly, avoid having the body sent to the Morgue and make them give permission for an immediate burial."

"That's not so easy."

"Try. Have you examined the other one?"

He pointed to the young man lying lifeless on the bed.

"Yes," said the doctor. "The breathing is becoming normal. But it was a big risk to run.. the carotid artery might have."

"Nothing venture, nothing have… How soon will he recover consciousness?"

"In a few minutes."

"Very well. Oh, by the way, don't go yet, Doctor. Wait for me downstairs. There is more for you to do."

The prince, when he found himself alone, lit a cigarette and puffed at it quietly, sending little blue rings of smoke floating up to the ceiling.

A sigh roused him from his thoughts. He went to the bed. The young man was beginning to move; and his chest rose and fell violently, like that of a sleeper under the influence of a nightmare. He put his hands to his throat, as though he felt a pain there; and this action suddenly made him sit up, terrified, panting..

Then he saw Sernine in front of him:

"You?" he whispered, without understanding. "You?."

He gazed at him stupidly, as though he had seen a ghost.

He again touched his throat, felt round his neck… And suddenly he gave a hoarse cry; a mad terror dilated his eyes, made his hair stand on end, shook him from head to foot like an aspen-leaf! The prince had moved aside; and he saw the man's corpse hanging from the rope.

He flung himself back against the wall. That man, that hanged man, was himself! He was dead and he was looking at his own dead body! Was this a hideous dream that follows upon death? A hallucination that comes to those who are no more and whose distracted brain still quivers with a last flickering gleam of life?.

His arms struck at the air. For a moment, he seemed to be defending himself against the squalid vision. Then, exhausted, he fainted away for the second time.

"First-rate," said the prince, with a grin. "A sensitive, impressionable nature… At present, the brain is out of gear… Come, this is a propitious moment… But, if I don't get the business done in twenty minutes.. he'll escape me.."

He pushed open the door between the two garrets, came back to the bed, lifted the young man and carried him to the bed in the other room. Then he bathed his temples with cold water and made him sniff at some salts.

This time, the swoon did not last long.

Gérard timidly opened his eyes and raised them to the ceiling. The vision was gone. But the arrangement of the furniture, the position of the table and the fireplace, and certain other details all surprised him.. And then came the remembrance of his act, the pain which he felt at his throat..

He said to the prince:

"I have had a dream, have I not?"

"No."

"How do you mean, no?" And, suddenly recollecting, "Oh, that's true, I remember… I meant to kill myself.. and I even." Bending forward anxiously, "But the rest, the vision."

"What vision?"

"The man.. the rope.. was that a dream?."

"No," said Sernine. "That also was real."

"What are you saying? What are you saying?.. Oh, no, no!.. I entreat you!.. Wake me, if I am asleep.. or else let me die!.. But I am dead, am I not? And this is the nightmare of a corpse!.. Oh, I feel my brain going!.. I entreat you.."

Sernine placed his hand gently on the young man's head and, bending over him:

"Listen to me.. listen to me carefully and understand what I say. You are alive. Your matter and your mind are as they were and live. But Gérard Baupré is dead. You understand me, do you not? That member of society who was known as Gérard Baupré has ceased to exist. You have done

away with that one. To-morrow, the registrar will write in his books, opposite the name you bore, the word 'Dead,' with the date of your decease."

"It's a lie!" stammered the terrified lad. "It's a lie! Considering that I, Gérard Baupré, am here!"

"You are not Gérard Baupré," declared Sernine. And, pointing to the open door, "Gérard Baupré is there, in the next room. Do you wish to see him? He is hanging from the nail to which you hooked him. On the table is a letter in which you certify his death with your signature. It is all quite regular, it is all final. There is no getting away from the irrevocable, brutal fact: Gérard Baupré has ceased to exist!"

The young man listened in despair. Growing calmer, now that facts were assuming a less tragic significance, he began to understand:

"And then." he muttered.

"And then.. let us talk."

"Yes, yes.. let us talk.."

"A cigarette?" asked the prince. "Will you have one? Ah, I see that you are becoming reconciled to life! So much the better: we shall understand each other; and that quickly."

He lit the young man's cigarette and his own and, at once, in a few words uttered in a hard voice, explained himself:

"You, the late Gérard Baupré, were weary of life, ill, penniless, hopeless… Would you like to be well, rich, and powerful?"

"I don't follow you."

"It is quite simple. Accident has placed you on my path. You are young, good-looking, a poet; you are intelligent and – your act of despair shows it – you have a fine sense of conduct. These are qualities which are rarely found united in one person. I value them.. and I take them for my account."

"They are not for sale."

"Idiot! Who talks of buying or selling? Keep your conscience. It is too precious a jewel for me to relieve you of it."

"Then what do you ask of me?"

"Your life!" And, pointing to the bruises on the young man's throat, "Your life, which you have not known how to employ! Your life, which you have bungled, wasted, destroyed and which, I propose to build up again, in accordance with an ideal of beauty, greatness and dignity that would make you giddy, my lad, if you saw the abyss into which my secret thought plunges.." He had taken Gérard's head between his hands and he continued, eagerly: "You are free! No shackles! You have no longer the weight of your name to bear! You have got rid of that number with which society had stamped you as though branding you on the shoulder. You are free! In this world of slaves where each man bears his label you can either come and go unknown, invisible, as if you owned Gyges' ring.. or else you can choose your own label, the one you like best! Do you understand the magnificent treasure which you represent to an artist.. to yourself, if you like? A virgin life, a brand-new life! Your life is the wax which you have the right to fashion as you please, according to the whims of your imagination and the counsels of your reason."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.