THE CRYSTAL STOPPER

MAURICE LEBLANC

translated by
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ABOUT AUTHOR



Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941)

"The Mastermind Behind the Gentleman-Burglar"

Maurice Marie Émile Leblanc was a profound French novelist and short story writer whose creation of the charming, elusive master thief Arsène Lupin left an indelible mark on world detective fiction. Operating during the vibrant era of Belle Époque France, Leblanc redefined the boundaries of crime literature by introducing a protagonist who was not a defender of the law, but a brilliant outlaw with a strict moral code.

Early Life and Literary Ambitions:

Born on December 11, 1864, in Rouen, Normandy, Leblanc was the son of a wealthy Italian ship-owner. Growing up in a prosperous household, he was deeply influenced by the rich cultural atmosphere of 19th-century France. Although his father strongly pushed him to pursue a practical career in the local manufacturing industry, Leblanc's heart belonged entirely to literature.

In his twenties, he abandoned his studies and moved to Paris to immerse himself in the bohemian literary scene. His early works consisted of psychological novels and short stories heavily influenced by masters of French realism, such as Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. While these early efforts earned him critical praise and respect from fellow intellectuals, they achieved very little commercial success, leaving Leblanc struggling financially for nearly two decades.

The Birth of Arsène Lupin:

Leblanc's destiny changed forever in 1905. Pierre Lafitte, the editor of the newly launched popular magazine *Je sais tout*, approached Leblanc with a specific request: to write a crime story modeled after the immense British success of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

Instead of creating another brilliant detective, Leblanc turned the concept completely on its head. In July 1905, he published ***The Arrest of Arsène Lupin*** (*L'Arrestation d'Arsène Lupin*). The story introduced a charismatic, aristocratic thief who stole only from the corrupt, rich, and elite, using wit, disguise, and immaculate manners instead of violence. The character was an instant, overwhelming sensation. Readers demanded more, and what was meant to be a single short story quickly transformed into a lifelong literary phenomenon.

The Literary World of Lupin:

Leblanc's writing perfectly captured the spirit of his time. The *Arsène Lupin* universe combined the romance of the fading 19th century with the rapid technological advances of the early 20th century, featuring automobiles, wireless telegraphs, and modern steamships.

Leblanc famously blurred the lines between fictional universes by introducing Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective into his stories. Following legal threats from Doyle's lawyers, Leblanc cleverly rearranged the letters to create **"Sherlock Holmes"**, turning the British detective into a brilliant but frequently outsmarted rival to Lupin.

Over the course of nearly thirty years, Leblanc dedicated his career to expanding this universe, writing over twenty novels and numerous short story collections featuring the gentleman-burglar.

In recognition of his immense contributions to French literature and cultural export, Maurice Leblanc was awarded the prestigious *Légion d'honneur* by the French government.

Most Notable Works:

While Leblanc wrote several standalone science-fiction and mystery novels, his legacy rests primarily on the following masterpieces:

- ***The Extraordinary Adventures of Arsène Lupin, Gentleman-Burglar*** **(1907)**: The foundational collection of the first nine short stories that introduced Lupin’s genius, disguises, and daring escapes to the world.
- ***Arsène Lupin versus Sherlock Holmes*** **(1908)**: A legendary battle of wits between the world’s greatest detective and France's most elusive thief.
- ***The Hollow Needle*** **(1909)**: Widely considered Leblanc's finest novel, where Lupin uncovers a historic secret chamber used by the kings of France, hidden inside a famous rock formation in Normandy.
- ***813*** **(1910)**: A darker, epic, and complex masterpiece that sees Lupin entangled in international politics, secret treaties, and a mysterious murder plot.
- ***The Crystal Stopper*** **(1912)**: A high-stakes

political thriller where a vulnerable Lupin must use every ounce of his intellect to save his accomplices from the guillotine.

Later Years and Legacy:

As the years progressed, Leblanc grew somewhat resentful of his creation, feeling that Lupin had completely overshadowed his serious psychological fiction. Yet, he continued to write for his millions of devoted fans worldwide. In 1939, following the outbreak of World War II, Leblanc fled Paris and moved to the safety of Perpignan in southern France. He passed away there from pneumonia on November 6, 1941, at the age of 76.

Today, Maurice Leblanc is celebrated as a pioneer of the caper story and the anti-hero archetype. His creation, Arsène Lupin, remains an immortal pop-culture icon, continuously adapted into global television series, anime, movies, and video games, proving that the charm of the gentleman-burglar is truly timeless.

PREFACE

A Failed Heist. A Ticking Guillotine.

The Most Perilous Challenge of Arsène Lupin's Career.

When a seemingly routine burglary at the villa of the corrupt Deputy Daubrecq goes horribly wrong, Arsène Lupin finds himself facing a disaster. A man is murdered, and two of Lupin's most loyal accomplices are captured by the police. Sentenced to death, their fates are sealed unless the gentleman-burglar can orchestrate an impossible rescue. But the key to their salvation—and to bringing down the ruthless Daubrecq—lies hidden within a trivial object that vanishes into thin air: a simple crystal stopper.

For the first time in his life, Lupin has met an adversary who can outsmart him at every turn. Deputy Daubrecq is a brutal blackmailer who holds the infamous "List of Twenty-Seven"—a document capable of toppling the French government. Somehow, the missing crystal stopper contains the final clue to this explosive secret. As the countdown to the execution ticks away, Lupin must navigate a treacherous web of political conspiracies,

deceptive allies, and deadly traps in a desperate bid to save his friends from the blade of the guillotine.

Experience a breathless, high-stakes psychological thriller that showcases a different side of literature's greatest thief. Driven to the edge of despair, Lupin cannot rely merely on charm or easy tricks; he must fight for his survival and honor in a spectacular game of misdirection where the ultimate truth is hidden in plain sight.

I

THE ARRESTS

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

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

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

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

"Yes, governor."

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

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

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

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

"Yes, governor," said Gilbert, "we saw him take the 7:40 train for Paris, as we knew he would."

"Then we are free to act?"

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

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

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

"Why should it fall through?" observed Gilbert.

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

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

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

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

Growler and Masher, the two oarsmen, made straight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, governor!"

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

He sat silent for a moment and continued:

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

"Saw him with my own eyes, governor."

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

"He's going to the theatre."

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

"The cook has been sent away. As for the valet, Léonard,

who is Daubrecq's confidential man, he'll wait for his master in Paris. They can't get back from town before one o'clock in the morning. But …"

"But what?"

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

"And when did you get these details?"

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

"Have you the keys?"

"The keys of the front-door."

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

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

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

They landed in a little creek whence rose a few stone steps, under cover of a mouldering roof. Lupin reflected that

shipping the furniture would be easy work. But, suddenly, he said:

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

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

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

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

A gas-jet was flaring in the hall.

"You see, governor …" said Gilbert.

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

"Where did it come from then?"

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

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

"And where is the staircase?"

"On the right, behind the curtain."

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

“Help! Murder!” shouted the man.

And he rushed back into the room.

“It’s Léonard, the valet!” cried Gilbert.

“If he makes a fuss, I’ll out him,” growled Vaucheray.

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

“Don’t move, sportie! No kid! Ah, the brute!”

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

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

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

“He’s not a pretty gentleman either … You can’t have a very clear conscience, Léonard; besides, to play flunkey to Daubrecq the deputy … ! Have you finished, Vaucheray? I don’t want to hang about here forever!”

“There’s no danger, governor,” said Gilbert.

“Oh, really? … So you think that shots can’t be heard? …”

“Quite impossible.”

“No matter, we must look sharp. Vaucheray, take the lamp and let’s go upstairs.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At long last, he lost his patience:

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

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

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

“But what for, dash it all?”

“Well, it’s like this: we were told of an old reliquary, something stunning …”

“Well?”

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

“I’ll give you ten minutes, not a second longer!” cried Lupin. “In ten minutes, I’m off.”

But the ten minutes passed and he was still waiting.

He looked at his watch:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, Léonard."

"Léonard? Why, he was tied up!"

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

"The scoundrel! Where is he?"

Lupin took the lamp and went into the pantry.

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

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

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

"He's dead, I tell you."

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

Pale with anger, Lupin caught hold of him:

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

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

“But the revolver-shot?”

“It was Léonard … he had his revolver in his hand … he just had strength to take aim before he died …”

“And the key of the cupboard?”

“Vaucheray took it. …”

“Did he open it?”

“And did he find what he was after?”

“Yes.”

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

Lupin gathered from Gilbert’s silence and the determined expression on his face that he would not obtain a reply. With a threatening gesture, “I’ll make you talk, my man. Sure as my name’s Lupin, you shall come out with it. But, for the moment, we must see about decamping. Here, help me.

We must get Vaucheray into the boat …"

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

"Listen."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again the same voice, the same snuffling whisper.

Suddenly, Lupin burst out laughing, seized the corpse and

pulled it aside:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

earlier, at most:

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

"What about Vaucheray?" asked Gilbert.

"Sorry, can't be helped!"

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

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

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

"Too late!" he said.

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

He locked and bolted the door.

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

"Hold your tongue," said Lupin.

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

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

He himself remained unperturbed, with an utterly calm face and the pensive attitude of one who has all the time

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

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

“Follow me.”

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

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

“This way! … Help! … I’ve got them! … This way!”

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

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

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

Excited cries rose through the open window.

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

And, quietly, in a whisper:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that …"

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

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

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

The commissary of police asked him, hurriedly:

"Have you seen the manservant? Have they killed him?"

"I don't know," he answered.

"You don't know? …"

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

How could he have been suspected? He was covered with blood. He had handed over the valet's murderers. Half a score of people had witnessed the end of the heroic combat which he had delivered. Besides, the uproar was too great for anyone to take the trouble to argue or to waste time in entertaining doubts. In the height of the first confusion, the people of the neighbourhood invaded the villa. One and all lost their heads. They ran to every side, upstairs, downstairs, to the very cellar. They asked one another questions, yelled and shouted; and no one dreamt of

checking Lupin's statements, which sounded so plausible.

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

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

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

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

They called him. No one replied.

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

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

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

One of the policemen discharged his revolver, without thinking.

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

"Go, little bark,

Float in the dark …"

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

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

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

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

“Halt!” cried the commissary.

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

“Surrender!” shouted the commissary.

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

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

The commissary growled:

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

No reply.

The enemy did not budge.

“Surrender! … Hands up! … You refuse? … So much the worse for you … I’m counting … One … Two …”

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

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

“If you stir, I’ll blow out your brains!”

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

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

At almost the same moment, while the police, towing the captured skiff behind them, continued their empty search and while the soldiers stood drawn up on the bank,

straining their eyes to try and follow the fortunes of the naval combat, the aforesaid Arsène Lupin was quietly landing at the very spot which he had left two hours earlier.

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

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

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

scaffold! …”

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

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

“Help! … Help!” they cried.

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

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

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

II

EIGHT FROM NINE LEAVES ONE

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

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

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