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MAURICE LEBLANC

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By Maurice Leblanc

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 saferent, 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.