

The Crystal Stopper

By

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1. 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.

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

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

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

"Yes, governor."

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

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

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

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

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

"Then we are free to act?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A gas-jet was flaring in the hall.

"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 Leonard, 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 Leonard 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 Leonard 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, Leonard; besides, to play flunkey to Daubrecq the deputy... ! Have you finished, Vaucheray? I don't want to hang about here for ever!"

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

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

"Quite impossible."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"By Jingo! There's not much of it, but what there is is pukka! 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 Gouttieres... A genuine Fragonard and a sham Nattier which any American millionaire will swallow for the asking: in short, a fortune... And there are curmudgeons who pretend that there's nothing but faked stuff left. Dash it all, why don't they do as I do? They should look about!"

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

Lupin went to see them start. On returning to the house, it struck him, as he passed through the hall, that he heard a voice in the pantry. He went there and found Leonard 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 knick-knacks 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, Leonard."

"Leonard? Why, he was tied up!"

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

"The scoundrel! Where is he?"

Lupin took the lamp and went into the pantry.

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

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

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

"He's dead, I tell you."

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

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

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