

## VI. THE SEVEN OF HEARTS

I am frequently asked this question: "How did you make the acquaintance of Arsène Lupin?"

My connection with Arsène Lupin was well known. The details that I gather concerning that mysterious man, the irrefutable facts that I present, the new evidence that I produce, the interpretation that I place on certain acts of which the public has seen only the exterior manifestations without being able to discover the secret reasons or the invisible mechanism, all establish, if not an intimacy, at least amicable relations and regular confidences.

But how did I make his acquaintance? Why was I selected to be his historiographer? Why I, and not some one else?

The answer is simple: chance alone presided over my choice; my merit was not considered. It was chance that put me in his way. It was by chance that I was participant in one of his strangest and most mysterious adventures; and by chance that I was an actor in a drama of which he was the marvelous stage director; an obscure and intricate drama, bristling with such thrilling events that I feel a certain embarrassment in undertaking to describe it.

The first act takes place during that memorable night of 22 June, of which so much has already been said. And, for my part, I attribute the anomalous conduct of which I was guilty on that occasion to the unusual frame of mind in which I found myself on my return home. I had dined with some friends at the Cascade

restaurant, and, the entire evening, whilst we smoked and the orchestra played melancholy waltzes, we talked only of crimes and thefts, and dark and frightful intrigues. That is always a poor overture to a night's sleep.

The Saint-Martins went away in an automobile. Jean Daspry—that delightful, heedless Daspry who, six months later, was killed in such a tragic manner on the frontier of Morocco—Jean Daspry and I returned on foot through the dark, warm night. When we arrived in front of the little house in which I had lived for a year at Neuilly, on the boulevard Maillot, he said to me:

“Are you afraid?”

“What an idea!”

“But this house is so isolated.... no neighbors.... vacant lots.... Really, I am not a coward, and yet—”

“Well, you are very cheering, I must say.”

“Oh! I say that as I would say anything else. The Saint-Martins have impressed me with their stories of brigands and thieves.”

We shook hands and said good-night. I took out my key and opened the door.

“Well, that is good,” I murmured, “Antoine has forgotten to light a candle.”

Then I recalled the fact that Antoine was away; I had given him a short leave of absence. Forthwith, I was disagreeably oppressed by the darkness and silence of the night. I ascended the stairs on tiptoe, and reached my room as quickly as possible; then, contrary to my usual habit, I turned the key and pushed the bolt.

The light of my candle restored my courage. Yet I was careful to take my revolver from its case—a large, powerful weapon—and place it beside my bed. That precaution completed my reassurance. I laid down and, as usual, took a book from my

twenty thousand francs.”

“Twenty thousand francs! The checks of Mon. Andermatt?” I exclaimed, when he had given me the paper to read.

“Exactly. It was quite right that Varin should redeem his treachery.”

And that is how I made the acquaintance of Arsène Lupin. That is how I learned that Jean Daspry, a member of my club, was none other than Arsène Lupin, gentleman-thief. That is how I formed very agreeable ties of friendship with that famous man, and, thanks to the confidence with which he honored me, how I became his very humble and faithful historiographer.

the arrangement of the seven spots on the mosaic was changed.”

“Parbleu!”

“Of course, parbleu! But a person has to think of those things.”

“There is something else: you did not know the history of those letters until Madame Andermatt—”

“Spoke of them before me? No. Because I found in the safe, besides the casket, nothing but the correspondence of the two brothers which disclosed their treachery in regard to the plans.”

“Then it was by chance that you were led, first, to investigate the history of the two brothers, and then to search for the plans and documents relating to the sub-marine?”

“Simply by chance.”

“For what purpose did you make the search?”

“Mon Dieu!” exclaimed Daspry, laughing, “how deeply interested you are!”

“The subject fascinates me.”

“Very well, presently, after I have escorted Madame Andermatt to a carriage, and dispatched a short story to the ‘Echo de France,’ I will return and tell you all about it.”

He sat down and wrote one of those short, clear-cut articles which served to amuse and mystify the public. Who does not recall the sensation that followed that article produced throughout the entire world?

“Arsène Lupin has solved the problem recently submitted by Salvator. Having acquired possession of all the documents and original plans of the engineer Louis Lacombe, he has placed them in the hands of the Minister of Marine, and he has headed a subscription list for the purpose of presenting to the nation the first submarine constructed from those plans. His subscription is

night-table to read myself to sleep. Then I received a great surprise. Instead of the paper-knife with which I had marked my place on the preceding, I found an envelope, closed with five seals of red wax. I seized it eagerly. It was addressed to me, and marked: “Urgent.”

A letter! A letter addressed to me! Who could have put it in that place? Nervously, I tore open the envelope, and read:

“From the moment you open this letter, whatever happens, whatever you may hear, do not move, do not utter one cry. Otherwise you are doomed.”

I am not a coward, and, quite as well as another, I can face real danger, or smile at the visionary perils of imagination. But, let me repeat, I was in an anomalous condition of mind, with my nerves set on edge by the events of the evening. Besides, was there not, in my present situation, something startling and mysterious, calculated to disturb the most courageous spirit?

My feverish fingers clutched the sheet of paper, and I read and re-read those threatening words: “Do not move, do not utter one cry. Otherwise, you are doomed.”

“Nonsense!” I thought. “It is a joke; the work of some cheerful idiot.”

I was about to laugh—a good loud laugh. Who prevented me? What haunting fear compressed my throat?

At least, I would blow out the candle. No, I could not do it. “Do not move, or you are doomed,” were the words he had written.

These auto-suggestions are frequently more imperious than the most positive realities; but why should I struggle against them? I had simply to close my eyes. I did so.

At that moment, I heard a slight noise, followed by crackling sounds, proceeding from a large room used by me as a library. A small room or antechamber was situated between the library and my bedchamber.

The approach of an actual danger greatly excited me, and I felt a desire to get up, seize my revolver, and rush into the library. I did not rise; I saw one of the curtains of the left window move. There was no doubt about it: the curtain had moved. It was still moving. And I saw—oh! I saw quite distinctly—in the narrow space between the curtains and the window, a human form; a bulky mass that prevented the curtains from hanging straight. And it is equally certain that the man saw me through the large meshes of the curtain. Then, I understood the situation. His mission was to guard me while the others carried away their booty. Should I rise and seize my revolver? Impossible! He was there! At the least movement, at the least cry, I was doomed.

Then came a terrific noise that shook the house; this was followed by lighter sounds, two or three together, like those of a hammer that rebounded. At least, that was the impression formed in my confused brain. These were mingled with other sounds, thus creating a veritable uproar which proved that the intruders were not only bold, but felt themselves secure from interruption.

They were right. I did not move. Was it cowardice? No, rather weakness, a total inability to move any portion of my body, combined with discretion; for why should I struggle? Behind that man, there were ten others who would come to his assistance. Should I risk my life to save a few tapestries and bibelots?

Throughout the night, my torture endured. Insufferable torture, terrible anguish! The noises had stopped, but I was in constant fear of their renewal. And the man! The man who was guarding me, weapon in hand. My fearful eyes remained cast in his direction. And my heart beat! And a profuse perspiration oozed from every pore of my body!

Suddenly, I experienced an immense relief; a milk-wagon,

simple enough! But the simplest things are the ones that usually escape our notice.” Then, showing me the seven-of-hearts, he added: “Of course I had guessed that, in order to open the larger safe, this card must be placed on the sword of the mosaic king.”

“How did you guess that?”

“Quite easily. Through private information, I knew that fact when I came here on the evening of 22 June—-”

“After you left me—-”

“Yes, after turning the subject of our conversation to stories of crime and robbery which were sure to reduce you to such a nervous condition that you would not leave your bed, but would allow me to complete my search uninterrupted.”

“The scheme worked perfectly.”

“Well, I knew when I came here that there was a casket concealed in a safe with a secret lock, and that the seven-of-hearts was the key to that lock. I had merely to place the card upon the spot that was obviously intended for it. An hour’s examination showed me where the spot was.”

“One hour!”

“Observe the fellow in mosaic.”

“The old emperor?”

“That old emperor is an exact representation of the king of hearts on all playing cards.”

“That’s right. But how does the seven of hearts open the larger safe at one time and the smaller safe at another time? And why did you open only the larger safe in the first instance? I mean on the night of 22 June.”

“Why? Because I always placed the seven of hearts in the same way. I never changed the position. But, yesterday, I observed that by reversing the card, by turning it upside down,

Andermatt had carried away.

“Here are your letters, Madame. These are the genuine letters.”

“But.... the others?”

“The others are the same, rewritten by me and carefully worded. Your husband will not find anything objectionable in them, and will never suspect the substitution since they were taken from the safe in his presence.”

“But the handwriting—”

“There is no handwriting that cannot be imitated.”

She thanked him in the same words she might have used to a man in her own social circle, so I concluded that she had not witnessed the final scene between Varin and Arsène Lupin. But the surprising revelation caused me considerable embarrassment. Lupin! My club companion was none other than Arsène Lupin. I could not realize it. But he said, quite at his ease:

“You can say farewell to Jean Daspry.”

“Ah!”

“Yes, Jean Daspry is going on a long journey. I shall send him to Morocco. There, he may find a death worthy of him. I may say that that is his expectation.”

“But Arsène Lupin will remain?”

“Oh! Decidedly. Arsène Lupin is simply at the threshold of his career, and he expects—”

I was impelled by curiosity to interrupt him, and, leading him away from the hearing of Madame Andermatt, I asked:

“Did you discover the smaller safe yourself—the one that held the letters?”

“Yes, after a great deal of trouble. I found it yesterday afternoon while you were asleep. And yet, God knows it was

whose sound was familiar to me, passed along the boulevard; and, at the same time, I had an impression that the light of a new day was trying to steal through the closed window-blinds.

At last, daylight penetrated the room; other vehicles passed along the boulevard; and all the phantoms of the night vanished. Then I put one arm out of the bed, slowly and cautiously. My eyes were fixed upon the curtain, locating the exact spot at which I must fire; I made an exact calculation of the movements I must make; then, quickly, I seized my revolver and fired.

I leaped from my bed with a cry of deliverance, and rushed to the window. The bullet had passed through the curtain and the window-glass, but it had not touched the man—for the very good reason that there was none there. Nobody! Thus, during the entire night, I had been hypnotized by a fold of the curtain. And, during that time, the malefactors....Furiously, with an enthusiasm that nothing could have stopped, I turned the key, opened the door, crossed the antechamber, opened another door, and rushed into the library. But amazement stopped me on the threshold, panting, astounded, more astonished than I had been by the absence of the man. All the things that I supposed had been stolen, furniture, books, pictures, old tapestries, everything was in its proper place.

It was incredible. I could not believe my eyes. Notwithstanding that uproar, those noises of removal...I made a tour, I inspected the walls, I made a mental inventory of all the familiar objects. Nothing was missing. And, what was more disconcerting, there was no clue to the intruders, not a sign, not a chair disturbed, not the trace of a footstep.

“Well! Well!” I said to myself, pressing my hands on my bewildered head, “surely I am not crazy! I hear something!”

Inch by inch, I made a careful examination of the room. It

was in vain. Unless I could consider this as a discovery: Under a small Persian rug, I found a card—an ordinary playing card. It was the seven of hearts; it was like any other seven of hearts in French playing-cards, with this slight but curious exception: The extreme point of each of the seven red spots or hearts was pierced by a hole, round and regular as if made with the point of an awl.

Nothing more. A card and a letter found in a book. But was not that sufficient to affirm that I had not been the plaything of a dream?

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Throughout the day, I continued my searches in the library. It was a large room, much too large for the requirements of such a house, and the decoration of which attested the bizarre taste of its founder. The floor was a mosaic of multicolored stones, formed into large symmetrical designs. The walls were covered with a similar mosaic, arranged in panels, Pompeiian allegories, Byzantine compositions, frescoes of the Middle Ages. A Bacchus bestriding a cask. An emperor wearing a gold crown, a flowing beard, and holding a sword in his right hand.

Quite high, after the style of an artist's studio, there was a large window—the only one in the room. That window being always open at night, it was probable that the men had entered through it, by the aid of a ladder. But, again, there was no evidence. The bottom of the ladder would have left some marks in the soft earth beneath the window; but there were none. Nor were there any traces of footsteps in any part of the yard.

I had no idea of informing the police, because the facts I had before me were so absurd and inconsistent. They would laugh at me. However, as I was then a reporter on the staff of the 'Gil Blas,' I wrote a lengthy account of my adventure and it was published in the paper on the second day thereafter. The article attracted

“One thing more: your name?”

“You ask that with an idea of seeking revenge.”

“Parbleu! The tables may be turned. Today, you are on top. To-morrow—”

“It will be you.”

“I hope so. Your name?”

“Arsène Lupin.”

“Arsène Lupin!”

The man staggered, as though stunned by a heavy blow. Those two words had deprived him of all hope.

Daspry laughed, and said:

“Ah! did you imagine that a Monsieur Durand or Dupont could manage an affair like this? No, it required the skill and cunning of Arsène Lupin. And now that you have my name, go and prepare your revenge. Arsène Lupin will wait for you.”

Then he pushed the bewildered Varin through the door.

“Daspry! Daspry!” I cried, pushing aside the curtain. He ran to me.

“What? What's the matter?”

“Madame Andermatt is ill.”

He hastened to her, caused her to inhale some salts, and, while caring for her, questioned me:

“Well, what did it?”

“The letters of Louis Lacombe that you gave to her husband.”

He struck his forehead and said:

“Did she think that I could do such a thing!...But, of course she would. Imbecile that I am!”

Madame Andermatt was now revived. Daspry took from his pocket a small package exactly similar to the one that Mon.

Daspry seized his arm so forcibly, that Varin uttered a cry of pain. Daspry continued:

“Now, you can go. The air will do you good. Perhaps you want me to show you the way. Ah! yes, we will go together to the vacant lot near here, and I will show you a little mound of earth and stones and under it—”

“That is false! That is false!”

“Oh! no, it is true. That little iron plate with the seven spots on it came from there. Louis Lacombe always carried it, and you buried it with the body—and with some other things that will prove very interesting to a judge and jury.”

Varin covered his face with his hands, and muttered:

“All right, I am beaten. Say no more. But I want to ask you one question. I should like to know—”

“What is it?”

“Was there a little casket in the large safe?”

“Yes.”

“Was it there on the night of 22 June?”

“Yes.”

“What did it contain?”

“Everything that the Varin brothers had put in it—a very pretty collection of diamonds and pearls picked up here and there by the said brothers.”

“And did you take it?”

“Of course I did. Do you blame me?”

“I understand.... it was the disappearance of that casket that caused my brother to kill himself.”

“Probably. The disappearance of your correspondence was not a sufficient motive. But the disappearance of the casket....Is that all you wish to ask me?”

some attention, but no one took it seriously. They regarded it as a work of fiction rather than a story of real life. The Saint-Martins rallied me. But Daspry, who took an interest in such matters, came to see me, made a study of the affair, but reached no conclusion.

A few mornings later, the door-bell rang, and Antoine came to inform me that a gentleman desired to see me. He would not give his name. I directed Antoine to show him up. He was a man of about forty years of age with a very dark complexion, lively features, and whose correct dress, slightly frayed, proclaimed a taste that contrasted strangely with his rather vulgar manners. Without any preamble, he said to me—in a rough voice that confirmed my suspicion as to his social position:

“Monsieur, whilst in a café, I picked up a copy of the ‘Gil Blas,’ and read your article. It interested me very much.

“Thank you.”

“And here I am.”

“Ah!”

“Yes, to talk to you. Are all the facts related by you quite correct?”

“Absolutely so.”

“Well, in that case, I can, perhaps, give you some information.”

“Very well; proceed.”

“No, not yet. First, I must be sure that the facts are exactly as you have related them.”

“I have given you my word. What further proof do you want?”

“I must remain alone in this room.”

“I do not understand,” I said, with surprise.

“It’s an idea that occurred to me when reading your article. Certain details established an extraordinary coincidence with

another case that came under my notice. If I am mistaken, I shall say nothing more. And the only means of ascertaining the truth is by my remaining in the room alone.”

What was at the bottom of this proposition? Later, I recalled that the man was exceedingly nervous; but, at the same time, although somewhat astonished, I found nothing particularly abnormal about the man or the request he had made. Moreover, my curiosity was aroused; so I replied:

“Very well. How much time do you require?”

“Oh! three minutes—not longer. Three minutes from now, I will rejoin you.”

I left the room, and went downstairs. I took out my watch. One minute passed. Two minutes. Why did I feel so depressed? Why did those moments seem so solemn and weird? Two minutes and a half....Two minutes and three quarters. Then I heard a pistol shot.

I bounded up the stairs and entered the room. A cry of horror escaped me. In the middle of the room, the man was lying on his left side, motionless. Blood was flowing from a wound in his forehead. Near his hand was a revolver, still smoking.

But, in addition to this frightful spectacle, my attention was attracted by another object. At two feet from the body, upon the floor, I saw a playing-card. It was the seven of hearts. I picked it up. The lower extremity of each of the seven spots was pierced with a small round hole.

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A half-hour later, the commissary of police arrived, then the coroner and the chief of the Sûreté, Mon. Dudouis. I had been careful not to touch the corpse. The preliminary inquiry was very brief, and disclosed nothing. There were no papers in

touch those cursed letters that he had sought so eagerly. Then, with a nervous movement, he took them. Close to me, I heard a moan. I grasped Madame Andermatt’s hand. It was cold.

“I believe, monsieur,” said Daspry to the banker, “that our business is ended. Oh! no thanks. It was only by a mere chance that I have been able to do you a good turn. Good-night.”

Mon. Andermatt retired. He carried with him the letters written by his wife to Louis Lacombe.

“Marvelous!” exclaimed Daspry, delighted. “Everything is coming our way. Now, we have only to close our little affair, comrade. You have the papers?”

“Here they are—all of them.”

Daspry examined them carefully, and then placed them in his pocket.

“Quite right. You have kept your word,” he said.

“But—”

“But what?”

“The two checks? The money?” said Varin, eagerly.

“Well, you have a great deal of assurance, my man. How dare you ask such a thing?”

“I ask only what is due to me.”

“Can you ask pay for returning papers that you stole? Well, I think not!”

Varin was beside himself. He trembled with rage; his eyes were bloodshot.

“The money.... the twenty thousand....” he stammered.

“Impossible! I need it myself.”

“The money!”

“Come, be reasonable, and don’t get excited. It won’t do you any good.”



“So I see. Then, my brother has taken out the letters.”

Daspry stepped down from the chair, approached Varin, and said:

“Now, no more nonsense with me. There is another hiding-place. Where is it?”

“There is none.”

“Is it money you want? How much?”

“Ten thousand.”

“Monsieur Andermatt, are those letters worth ten thousand francs to you?”

“Yes,” said the banker, firmly.

Varin closed the safe, took the seven of hearts and placed it again on the sword at the same spot. He thrust the awl into each of the seven holes. There was the same clicking sound, but this time, strange to relate, it was only a portion of the safe that revolved on the pivot, disclosing quite a small safe that was built within the door of the larger one. The packet of letters was here, tied with a tape, and sealed. Varin handed the packet to Daspry. The latter turned to the banker, and asked:

“Is the check ready, Monsieur Andermatt?”

“Yes.”

“And you have also the last document that you received from Louis Lacombe—the one that completes the plans of the sub-marine?”

“Yes.”

The exchange was made. Daspry pocketed the document and the checks, and offered the packet of letters to Mon. Andermatt.

“This is what you wanted, Monsieur.”

The banker hesitated a moment, as if he were afraid to

the pockets of the deceased; no name upon his clothes; no initial upon his linen; nothing to give any clue to his identity. The room was in the same perfect order as before. The furniture had not been disturbed. Yet this man had not come to my house solely for the purpose of killing himself, or because he considered my place the most convenient one for his suicide! There must have been a motive for his act of despair, and that motive was, no doubt, the result of some new fact ascertained by him during the three minutes he was alone.

What was that fact? What had he seen? What frightful secret had been revealed to him? There was no answer to these questions. But, at the last moment, an incident occurred that appeared to us of considerable importance. As two policemen were raising the body to place it on a stretcher, the left hand thus being disturbed, a crumpled card fell from it. The card bore these words: “Georges Andermatt, 37 Rue de Berry.”

What did that mean? Georges Andermatt was a rich banker in Paris, the founder and president of the Metal Exchange which had given such an impulse to the metallic industries in France. He lived in princely style; was the possessor of numerous automobiles, coaches, and an expensive racing-stable. His social affairs were very select, and Madame Andermatt was noted for her grace and beauty.

“Can that be the man’s name?” I asked. —————

The chief of the Sûreté leaned over him.

“It is not he. Mon. Andermatt is a thin man, and slightly grey.”

“But why this card?”

“Have you a telephone, monsieur?”

“Yes, in the vestibule. Come with me.”

He looked in the directory, and then asked for number

“Is Mon. Andermatt at home?...Please tell him that Mon. Dudouis wished him to come at once to 102 Boulevard Maillot. Very important.”

Twenty minutes later, Mon. Andermatt arrived in his automobile. After the circumstances had been explained to him, he was taken in to see the corpse. He displayed considerable emotion, and spoke, in a low tone, and apparently unwillingly:

“Etienne Varin,” he said.

“You know him?”

“No.... or, at least, yes.... by sight only. His brother....”

“Ah! he has a brother?”

“Yes, Alfred Varin. He came to see me once on some matter of business....I forget what it was.”

“Where does he live?”

“The two brothers live together—rue de Provence, I think.”

“Do you know any reason why he should commit suicide?”

“None.”

“He held a card in his hand. It was your card with your address.”

“I do not understand that. It must have been there by some chance that will be disclosed by the investigation.”

A very strange chance, I thought; and I felt that the others entertained the same impression.

I discovered the same impression in the papers next day, and amongst all my friends with whom I discussed the affair. Amid the mysteries that enveloped it, after the double discovery of the seven of hearts pierced with seven holes, after the two inscrutable events that had happened in my house, that visiting card promised to throw some light on the affair. Through it, the truth may be revealed. But, contrary to our expectations, Mon. Andermatt

“I haven’t got them.”

“Where are they, Varin?”

“I don’t know. My brother had charge of them.”

“They are hidden in this room.”

“In that case, you know where they are.”

“How should I know?”

“Was it not you who found the hiding-place? You appear to be as well informed.... as Salvator.”

“The letters are not in the hiding-place.”

“They are.”

“Open it.”

Varin looked at him, defiantly. Were not Daspry and Salvator the same person? Everything pointed to that conclusion. If so, Varin risked nothing in disclosing a hiding-place already known.

“Open it,” repeated Daspry.

“I have not got the seven of hearts.”

“Yes, here it is,” said Daspry, handing him the iron plate. Varin recoiled in terror, and cried:

“No, no, I will not.”

“Never mind,” replied Daspry, as he walked toward the bearded king, climbed on a chair and applied the seven of hearts to the lower part of the sword in such a manner that the edges of the iron plate coincided exactly with the two edges of the sword. Then, with the assistance of an awl which he introduced alternately into each of the seven holes, he pressed upon seven of the little mosaic stones. As he pressed upon the seventh one, a clicking sound was heard, and the entire bust of the King turned upon a pivot, disclosing a large opening lined with steel. It was really a fire-proof safe.

“You can see, Varin, the safe is empty.”

“Are these the copies or the originals?”

“I have the originals.”

“How much do you want for them?”

“One hundred thousand francs.”

“You are crazy,” said Daspry. “Why, the major gave you only twenty thousand, and that was like money thrown into the sea, as the boat was a failure at the preliminary trials.”

“They didn’t understand the plans.”

“The plans are not complete.”

“Then, why do you ask me for them?”

“Because I want them. I offer you five thousand francs—not a sou more.”

“Ten thousand. Not a sou less.”

“Agreed,” said Daspry, who now turned to Mon. Andermatt, and said:

“Monsieur will kindly sign a check for the amount.”

“But....I haven’t got—”

“Your check-book? Here it is.”

Astounded, Mon. Andermatt examined the check-book that Daspry handed to him.

“It is mine,” he gasped. “How does that happen?”

“No idle words, monsieur, if you please. You have merely to sign.”

The banker took out his fountain pen, filled out the check and signed it. Varin held out his hand for it.

“Put down your hand,” said Daspry, “there is something more.” Then, to the banker, he said: “You asked for some letters, did you not?”

“Yes, a package of letters.”

“Where are they, Varin?”

furnished no explanation. He said:

“I have told you all I know. What more can I do? I am greatly surprised that my card should be found in such a place, and I sincerely hope the point will be cleared up.”

It was not. The official investigation established that the Varin brothers were of Swiss origin, had led a shifting life under various names, frequenting gambling resorts, associating with a band of foreigners who had been dispersed by the police after a series of robberies in which their participation was established only by their flight. At number 24 rue de Provence, where the Varin brothers had lived six years before, no one knew what had become of them.

I confess that, for my part, the case seemed to me so complicated and so mysterious that I did not think the problem would ever be solved, so I concluded to waste no more time upon it. But Jean Daspry, whom I frequently met at that period, became more and more interested in it each day. It was he who pointed out to me that item from a foreign newspaper which was reproduced and commented upon by the entire press. It was as follows:

“The first trial of a new model of submarine boat, which is expected to revolutionize naval warfare, will be given in presence of the former Emperor at a place that will be kept secret until the last minute. An indiscretion has revealed its name; it is called ‘The Seven-of-Hearts.’”

The Seven-of-Hearts! That presented a new problem. Could a connection be established between the name of the submarine and the incidents which we have related? But a connection of what nature? What had happened here could have no possible relation with the sub-marine.

“What do you know about it?” said Daspry to me. “The

most diverse effects often proceed from the same cause.”

Two days later, the following foreign news item was received and published:

“It is said that the plans of the new sub-marine ‘Seven-of-Hearts’ were prepared by French engineers, who, having sought, in vain, the support of their compatriots, subsequently entered into negotiations with the British Admiralty, without success.”

I do not wish to give undue publicity to certain delicate matters which once provoked considerable excitement. Yet, since all danger of injury therefrom has now come to an end, I must speak of the article that appeared in the ‘Echo de France,’ which aroused so much comment at that time, and which threw considerable light upon the mystery of the Seven-of-Hearts. This is the article as it was published over the signature of Salvator:

“THE AFFAIR OF THE SEVEN-OF-HEARTS.

“A CORNER OF THE VEIL RAISED.

“We will be brief. Ten years ago, a young mining engineer, Louis Lacombe, wishing to devote his time and fortune to certain studies, resigned his position he then held, and rented number 102 boulevard Maillot, a small house that had been recently built and decorated for an Italian count. Through the agency of the Varin brothers of Lausanne, one of whom assisted in the preliminary experiments and the other acted as financial agent, the young engineer was introduced to Georges Andermatt, the founder of the Metal Exchange.

“After several interviews, he succeeded in interesting the banker in a sub-marine boat on which he was working, and it was agreed that as soon as the invention was perfected, Mon. Andermatt would use his influence with the Minister of Marine to obtain a series of trials under the direction of the government.

Both of them looked at him, surprised. Then he turned to the banker, and said:

“I beg your pardon, monsieur, for meddling in your business; but, really, you play a very poor game. Let me hold the cards.”

Turning again to Varin, Daspry said:

“It’s between us two, comrade, and play fair, if you please. Hearts are trumps, and I play the seven.”

Then Daspry held up, before Varin’s bewildered eyes, the little iron plate, marked with the seven red spots. It was a terrible shock to Varin. With livid features, staring eyes, and an air of intense agony, the man seemed to be hypnotized at the sight of it.

“Who are you?” he gasped.

“One who meddles in other people’s business, down to the very bottom.”

“What do you want?”

“What you brought here tonight.”

“I brought nothing.”

“Yes, you did, or you wouldn’t have come. This morning, you received an invitation to come here at nine o’clock, and bring with you all the papers held by you. You are here. Where are the papers?”

There was in Daspry’s voice and manner a tone of authority that I did not understand; his manner was usually quite mild and conciliatory. Absolutely conquered, Varin placed his hand on one of his pockets, and said:

“The papers are here.”

“All of them?”

“Yes.”

“All that you took from Louis Lacombe and afterwards sold to Major von Lieben?”

“Yes.”

“Nonsense! You wanted the letters. You knew that as soon as you had the letters in your possession, you could denounce us. Oh! no, I couldn’t part with them!”

He laughed heartily, but stopped suddenly, and said:

“But, enough of this! We are merely going over old ground. We make no headway. We had better let things stand as they are.”

“We will not let them stand as they are,” said the banker, “and since you have referred to the letters, let me tell you that you will not leave this house until you deliver up those letters.”

“I shall go when I please.”

“You will not.”

“Be careful, Mon. Andermatt. I warn you—.”

“I say, you shall not go.”

“We will see about that,” cried Varin, in such a rage that Madame Andermatt could not suppress a cry of fear. Varin must have heard it, for he now tried to force his way out. Mon. Andermatt pushed him back. Then I saw him put his hand into his coat pocket.

“For the last time, let me pass,” he cried.

“The letters, first!”

Varin drew a revolver and, pointing it at Mon. Andermatt, said:

“Yes or no?”

The banker stooped quickly. There was the sound of a pistol-shot. The weapon fell from Varin’s hand. I was amazed. The shot was fired close to me. It was Daspry who had fired it at Varin, causing him to drop the revolver. In a moment, Daspry was standing between the two men, facing Varin; he said to him, with a sneer:

“You were lucky, my friend, very lucky. I fired at your hand and struck only the revolver.”

For two years, Louis Lacombe was a frequent visitor at Andermatt’s house, and he submitted to the banker the various improvements he made upon his original plans, until one day, being satisfied with the perfection of his work, he asked Mon. Andermatt to communicate with the Minister of Marine. That day, Louis Lacombe dined at Mon. Andermatt’s house. He left there about half-past eleven at night. He has not been seen since.

“A perusal of the newspapers of that date will show that the young man’s family caused every possible inquiry to be made, but without success; and it was the general opinion that Louis Lacombe—who was known as an original and visionary youth—had quietly left for parts unknown.

“Let us accept that theory—improbable, though it be,—and let us consider another question, which is a most important one for our country: What has become of the plans of the sub-marine? Did Louis Lacombe carry them away? Are they destroyed?”

“After making a thorough investigation, we are able to assert, positively, that the plans are in existence, and are now in the possession of the two brothers Varin. How did they acquire such a possession? That is a question not yet determined; nor do we know why they have not tried to sell them at an earlier date. Did they fear that their title to them would be called in question? If so, they have lost that fear, and we can announce definitely, that the plans of Louis Lacombe are now the property of foreign power, and we are in a position to publish the correspondence that passed between the Varin brothers and the representative of that power. The ‘Seven-of-Hearts’ invented by Louis Lacombe has been actually constructed by our neighbor.

“Will the invention fulfill the optimistic expectations of those who were concerned in that treacherous act?”

And a post-script adds:

“Later.—Our special correspondent informs us that the preliminary trial of the ‘Seven-of-Hearts’ has not been satisfactory. It is quite likely that the plans sold and delivered by the Varin brothers did not include the

final document carried by Louis Lacombe to Mon. Andermatt on the day of his disappearance, a document that was indispensable to a thorough understanding of the invention. It contained a summary of the final conclusions of the inventor, and estimates and figures not contained in the other papers. Without this document, the plans are incomplete; on the other hand, without the plans, the document is worthless.

“Now is the time to act and recover what belongs to us. It may be a difficult matter, but we rely upon the assistance of Mon. Andermatt. It will be to his interest to explain his conduct which has hitherto been so strange and inscrutable. He will explain not only why he concealed these facts at the time of the suicide of Etienne Varin, but also why he has never revealed the disappearance of the paper—a fact well known to him. He will tell why, during the last six years, he paid spies to watch the movements of the Varin brothers. We expect from him, not only words, but acts. And at once. Otherwise—”

The threat was plainly expressed. But of what did it consist? What whip was Salvator, the anonymous writer of the article, holding over the head of Mon. Andermatt?

An army of reporters attacked the banker, and ten interviewers announced the scornful manner in which they were treated. Thereupon, the ‘Echo de France’ announced its position in these words:

“Whether Mon. Andermatt is willing or not, he will be, henceforth, our collaborator in the work we have undertaken.”

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Daspry and I were dining together on the day on which that announcement appeared. That evening, with the newspapers spread over my table, we discussed the affair and examined it from every point of view with that exasperation that a person feels when walking in the dark and finding himself constantly falling over the same obstacles. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, the door opened and a lady entered. Her face was hidden behind

“What a question! As if I knew anything about him!”

“You do know! You and your brother were his constant companions, almost lived with him in this very house. You knew all about his plans and his work. And the last night I ever saw Louis Lacombe, when I parted with him at my door, I saw two men slinking away in the shadows of the trees. That, I am ready to swear to.”

“Well, what has that to do with me?”

“The two men were you and your brother.”

“Prove it.”

“The best proof is that, two days later, you yourself showed me the papers and the plans that belonged to Lacombe and offered to sell them. How did these papers come into your possession?”

“I have already told you, Mon. Andermatt, that we found them on Louis Lacombe’s table, the morning after his disappearance.”

“That is a lie!”

“Prove it.”

“The law will prove it.”

“Why did you not appeal to the law?”

“Why? Ah! Why—,” stammered the banker, with a slight display of emotion.

“You know very well, Mon. Andermatt, if you had the least certainty of our guilt, our little threat would not have stopped you.”

“What threat? Those letters? Do you suppose I ever gave those letters a moment’s thought?”

“If you did not care for the letters, why did you offer me thousands of francs for their return? And why did you have my brother and me tracked like wild beasts?”

“To recover the plans.”

“I never wrote to you,” declared Mon. Andermatt.

“You did not write to me!”

Instinctively, Varin was put on his guard, not against the banker, but against the unknown enemy who had drawn him into this trap. A second time, he looked in our direction, then walked toward the door. But Mon. Andermatt barred his passage.

“Well, where are you going, Varin?”

“There is something about this affair I don’t like. I am going home. Good evening.”

“One moment!”

“No need of that, Mon. Andermatt. I have nothing to say to you.”

“But I have something to say to you, and this is a good time to say it.”

“Let me pass.”

“No, you will not pass.”

Varin recoiled before the resolute attitude of the banker, as he muttered:

“Well, then, be quick about it.”

One thing astonished me; and I have no doubt my two companions experienced a similar feeling. Why was Salvator not there? Was he not a necessary party at this conference? Or was he satisfied to let these two adversaries fight it out between themselves? At all events, his absence was a great disappointment, although it did not detract from the dramatic strength of the situation.

After a moment, Mon. Andermatt approached Varin and, face to face, eye to eye, said:

“Now, after all these years and when you have nothing more to fear, you can answer me candidly: What have you done with Louis Lacombe?”

a thick veil. I rose at once and approached her.

“Is it you, monsieur, who lives here?” she asked.

“Yes, madame, but I do not understand—-”

“The gate was not locked,” she explained.

“But the vestibule door?”

She did not reply, and it occurred to me that she had used the servants’ entrance. How did she know the way? Then there was a silence that was quite embarrassing. She looked at Daspry, and I was obliged to introduce him. I asked her to be seated and explain the object of her visit. She raised her veil, and I saw that she was a brunette with regular features and, though not handsome, she was attractive—principally, on account of her sad, dark eyes.

“I am Madame Andermatt,” she said.

“Madame Andermatt!” I repeated, with astonishment.

After a brief pause, she continued with a voice and manner that were quite easy and natural:

“I have come to see you about that affair—you know. I thought I might be able to obtain some information—-”

“Mon Dieu, madame, I know nothing but what has already appeared in the papers. But if you will point out in what way I can help you....”

“I do not know....I do not know.”

Not until then did I suspect that her calm demeanor was assumed, and that some poignant grief was concealed beneath that air of tranquility. For a moment, we were silent and embarrassed. Then Daspry stepped forward, and said:

“Will you permit me to ask you a few questions?”

“Yes, yes,” she cried. “I will answer.”

“You will answer.... whatever those questions may be?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know Louis Lacombe?” he asked.

“Yes, through my husband.”

“When did you see him for the last time?”

“The evening he dined with us.”

“At that time, was there anything to lead you to believe that you would never see him again?”

“No. But he had spoken of a trip to Russia—in a vague way.”

“Then you expected to see him again?”

“Yes. He was to dine with us, two days later.”

“How do you explain his disappearance?”

“I cannot explain it.”

“And Mon. Andermatt?”

“I do not know.”

“Yet the article published in the ‘Echo de France’ indicates—”

“Yes, that the Varin brothers had something to do with his disappearance.”

“Is that your opinion?”

“Yes.”

“On what do you base your opinion?”

“When he left our house, Louis Lacombe carried a satchel containing all the papers relating to his invention. Two days later, my husband, in a conversation with one of the Varin brothers, learned that the papers were in their possession.”

“And he did not denounce them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because there was something else in the satchel—something besides the papers of Louis Lacombe.”

“What was it?”

The clock struck nine. A few minutes later, the garden gate creaked upon its hinges. I confess that I was greatly agitated. I was about to learn the key to the mystery. The startling events of the last few weeks were about to be explained, and, under my eyes, the last battle was going to be fought. Daspry seized the hand of Madame Andermatt, and said to her:

“Not a word, not a movement! Whatever you may see or hear, keep quiet!”

Some one entered. It was Alfred Varin. I recognized him at once, owing to the close resemblance he bore to his brother Etienne. There was the same slouching gait; the same cadaverous face covered with a black beard.

He entered with the nervous air of a man who is accustomed to fear the presence of traps and ambushes; who scents and avoids them. He glanced about the room, and I had the impression that the chimney, masked with a velvet portière, did not please him. He took three steps in our direction, when something caused him to turn and walk toward the old mosaic king, with the flowing beard and flamboyant sword, which he examined minutely, mounting on a chair and following with his fingers the outlines of the shoulders and head and feeling certain parts of the face. Suddenly, he leaped from the chair and walked away from it. He had heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Mon. Andermatt appeared at the door.

“You! You!” exclaimed the banker. “Was it you who brought me here?”

“I? By no means,” protested Varin, in a rough, jerky voice that reminded me of his brother, “on the contrary, it was your letter that brought me here.”

“My letter?”

“A letter signed by you, in which you offered—”



“Ma foi!” exclaimed Daspry, laughing, “you are right, and I shall stay with you. I shouldn’t like to miss it.”

We were interrupted by the sound of the door-bell.

“Here already?” said Daspry, “twenty minutes ahead of time! Incredible!”

I went to the door and ushered in the visitor. It was Madame Andermatt. She was faint and nervous, and in a stammering voice, she ejaculated:

“My husband.... is coming.... he has an appointment.... they intend to give him the letters....”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“By chance. A message came for my husband while we were at dinner. The servant gave it to me by mistake. My husband grabbed it quickly, but he was too late. I had read it.”

“You read it?”

“Yes. It was something like this: ‘At nine o’clock this evening, be at Boulevard Maillot with the papers connected with the affair. In exchange, the letters.’ So, after dinner, I hastened here.”

“Unknown to your husband?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think about it?” asked Daspry, turning to me.

“I think as you do, that Mon. Andermatt is one of the invited guests.”

“Yes, but for what purpose?”

“That is what we are going to find out.”

I led the men to a large room. The three of us could hide comfortably behind the velvet chimney-mantle, and observe all that should happen in the room. We seated ourselves there, with Madame Andermatt in the centre.

She hesitated; was on the point of speaking, but, finally, remained silent. Daspry continued:

“I presume that is why your husband has kept a close watch over their movements instead of informing the police. He hoped to recover the papers and, at the same time, that compromising article which has enabled the two brothers to hold over him threats of exposure and blackmail.”

“Over him, and over me.”

“Ah! over you, also?”

“Over me, in particular.”

She uttered the last words in a hollow voice. Daspry observed it; he paced to and fro for a moment, then, turning to her, asked:

“Had you written to Louis Lacombe?”

“Of course. My husband had business with him—”

“Apart from those business letters, had you written to Louis Lacombe.... other letters? Excuse my insistence, but it is absolutely necessary that I should know the truth. Did you write other letters?”

“Yes,” she replied, blushing.

“And those letters came into the possession of the Varin brothers?”

“Yes.”

“Does Mon. Andermatt know it?”

“He has not seen them, but Alfred Varin has told him of their existence and threatened to publish them if my husband should take any steps against him. My husband was afraid.... of a scandal.”

“But he has tried to recover the letters?”

“I think so; but I do not know. You see, after that last interview with Alfred Varin, and after some harsh words between me and my husband in which he called me to account—we live as strangers.”

“In that case, as you have nothing to lose, what do you fear?”

“I may be indifferent to him now, but I am the woman that he has loved, the one he would still love—oh! I am quite sure of that,” she murmured, in a fervent voice, “he would still love me if he had not got hold of those cursed letters——”

“What! Did he succeed?...But the two brothers still defied him?”

“Yes, and they boasted of having a secure hiding-place.”

“Well?”

“I believe my husband discovered that hiding-place.”

“Well?”

“I believe my husband has discovered that hiding-place.”

“Ah! where was it?”

“Here.”

“Here!” I cried in alarm.

“Yes. I always had that suspicion. Louis Lacombe was very ingenious and amused himself in his leisure hours, by making safes and locks. No doubt, the Varin brothers were aware of that fact and utilized one of Lacombe’s safes in which to conceal the letters.... and other things, perhaps.”

“But they did not live here,” I said.

“Before you came, four months ago, the house had been vacant for some time. And they may have thought that your presence here would not interfere with them when they wanted to get the papers. But they did not count on my husband, who came here on the night of 22 June, forced the safe, took what he was seeking, and left his card to inform the two brothers that he feared them no more, and that their positions were now reversed. Two days later, after reading the article in the ‘Gil Blas,’ Etienne Varin came here, remained alone in this room, found the safe

“Monsieur,

“The drama, the first act of which transpired on the night of 22 June, is now drawing to a close. Force of circumstances compel me to bring the two principal actors in that drama face to face, and I wish that meeting to take place in your house, if you will be so kind as to give me the use of it for this evening from nine o’clock to eleven. It will be advisable to give your servant leave of absence for the evening, and, perhaps, you will be so kind as to leave the field open to the two adversaries. You will remember that when I visited your house on the night of 22 June, I took excellent care of your property. I feel that I would do you an injustice if I should doubt, for one moment, your absolute discretion in this affair. Your devoted,

“SALVATOR.”

I was amused at the facetious tone of his letter and also at the whimsical nature of his request. There was a charming display of confidence and candor in his language, and nothing in the world could have induced me to deceive him or repay his confidence with ingratitude.

I gave my servant a theatre ticket, and he left the house at eight o’clock. A few minutes later, Daspry arrived. I showed him the letter.

“Well?” said he.

“Well, I have left the garden gate unlocked, so anyone can enter.”

“And you—are you going away?”

“Not at all. I intend to stay right here.”

“But he asks you to go—-”

“But I am not going. I will be discreet, but I am resolved to see what takes place.”

urged me on. His ardor was as strong as ever.

At last, Daspry's pickaxe unearthed some bones—the remains of a skeleton to which some scraps of clothing still hung. Suddenly, I turned pale. I had discovered, sticking in the earth, a small piece of iron cut in the form of a rectangle, on which I thought I could see red spots. I stooped and picked it up. That little iron plate was the exact size of a playing-card, and the red spots, made with red lead, were arranged upon it in a manner similar to the seven-of-hearts, and each spot was pierced with a round hole similar to the perforations in the two playing cards.

“Listen, Daspry, I have had enough of this. You can stay if it interests you. But I am going.”

Was that simply the expression of my excited nerves? Or was it the result of a laborious task executed under a burning sun? I know that I trembled as I walked away, and that I went to bed, where I remained forty-eight hours, restless and feverish, haunted by skeletons that danced around me and threw their bleeding hearts at my head.

Daspry was faithful to me. He came to my house every day, and remained three or four hours, which he spent in the large room, ferreting, thumping, tapping.

“The letters are here, in this room,” he said, from time to time, “they are here. I will stake my life on it.”

On the morning of the third day I arose—feeble yet, but cured. A substantial breakfast cheered me up. But a letter that I received that afternoon contributed, more than anything else, to my complete recovery, and aroused in me a lively curiosity. This was the letter:

empty, and.... killed himself.”

After a moment, Daspry said:

“A very simple theory....Has Mon. Andermatt spoken to you since then?”

“No.”

“Has his attitude toward you changed in any way? Does he appear more gloomy, more anxious?”

“No, I haven't noticed any change.”

“And yet you think he has secured the letters. Now, in my opinion, he has not got those letters, and it was not he who came here on the night of 22 June.”

“Who was it, then?”

“The mysterious individual who is managing this affair, who holds all the threads in his hands, and whose invisible but far-reaching power we have felt from the beginning. It was he and his friends who entered this house on 22 June; it was he who discovered the hiding-place of the papers; it was he who left Mon. Andermatt's card; it is he who now holds the correspondence and the evidence of the treachery of the Varin brothers.”

“Who is he?” I asked, impatiently.

“The man who writes letters to the ‘Echo de France’.... Salvator! Have we not convincing evidence of that fact? Does he not mention in his letters certain details that no one could know, except the man who had thus discovered the secrets of the two brothers?”

“Well, then,” stammered Madame Andermatt, in great alarm, “he has my letters also, and it is he who now threatens my husband. Mon Dieu! What am I to do?”

“Write to him,” declared Daspry. “Confide in him without reserve. Tell him all you know and all you may hereafter learn.

Your interest and his interest are the same. He is not working against Mon. Andermatt, but against Alfred Varin. Help him.”

“How?”

“Has your husband the document that completes the plans of Louis Lacombe?”

“Yes.”

“Tell that to Salvator, and, if possible, procure the document for him. Write to him at once. You risk nothing.”

The advice was bold, dangerous even at first sight, but Madame Andermatt had no choice. Besides, as Daspry had said, she ran no risk. If the unknown writer were an enemy, that step would not aggravate the situation. If he were a stranger seeking to accomplish a particular purpose, he would attach to those letters only a secondary importance. Whatever might happen, it was the only solution offered to her, and she, in her anxiety, was only too glad to act on it. She thanked us effusively, and promised to keep us informed.

In fact, two days later, she sent us the following letter that she had received from Salvator:

“Have not found the letters, but I will get them. Rest easy. I am watching everything. S.”

I looked at the letter. It was in the same handwriting as the note I found in my book on the night of 22 June.

Daspry was right. Salvator was, indeed, the originator of that affair.

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We were beginning to see a little light coming out of the darkness that surrounded us, and an unexpected light was thrown on certain points; but other points yet remained obscure—for instance, the finding of the two seven-of-hearts. Perhaps I was

unnecessarily concerned about those two cards whose seven punctured spots had appeared to me under such startling circumstances! Yet I could not refrain from asking myself: What role will they play in the drama? What importance do they bear? What conclusion must be drawn from the fact that the submarine constructed from the plans of Louis Lacombe bore the name of ‘Seven-of-Hearts’?

Daspry gave little thought to the other two cards; he devoted all his attention to another problem which he considered more urgent; he was seeking the famous hiding-place.

“And who knows,” said he, “I may find the letters that Salvator did not find—by inadvertence, perhaps. It is improbable that the Varin brothers would have removed from a spot, which they deemed inaccessible, the weapon which was so valuable to them.”

And he continued to search. In a short time, the large room held no more secrets for him, so he extended his investigations to the other rooms. He examined the interior and the exterior, the stones of the foundation, the bricks in the walls; he raised the slates of the roof.

One day, he came with a pickaxe and a spade, gave me the spade, kept the pickaxe, pointed to the adjacent vacant lots, and said: “Come.”

I followed him, but I lacked his enthusiasm. He divided the vacant land into several sections which he examined in turn. At last, in a corner, at the angle formed by the walls of two neighboring proprietors, a small pile of earth and gravel, covered with briars and grass, attracted his attention. He attacked it. I was obliged to help him. For an hour, under a hot sun, we labored without success. I was discouraged, but Daspry