

CHAPTER I

The Massacre

I

Mr. Kesselbach stopped abruptly on the threshold of his hotel suite's sitting-room and grabbed his secretary's arm.

"Chapman, *someone* was in here again," he whispered, anxiously.

"That's impossible, sir," protested the secretary. "You just unlocked the door yourself, and the key never left your pocket while we were having lunch at the restaurant."

"Chapman, I know that *someone* was in here again," repeated Kesselbach. He pointed to a travel bag on the mantelpiece. "Look, I can prove it. That bag was locked. It is now open."

"Are you sure that you locked it, sir?" Chapman replied. "Besides, it contains nothing of value, only some toiletry articles..."

"That's because I took the precaution of removing my wallet and carrying it with me before we went down. Otherwise... No, Chapman, I tell you again, *someone* was in here while we were having lunch."

There was a telephone hanging on the wall. Kesselbach lifted the receiver.

"Hello! This is Rudolf Kesselbach... Suite 415... That's right, Mademoiselle. Would you please call the Préfecture de Police for me? Yes, the Sûreté... You don't need the number, do you? Excellent! Thank you! Yes, I'll hold..."

A moment later he continued:

"Hello? I'd like a word with Monsieur Lenormand, the Head of the Sûreté. My name is Rudolf Kesselbach... What? Yes, he'll know what this is all about... He asked me to ring him at any time if... Ah, he's not on the premises? To whom have I the honor of speaking then? Inspector Gourel? Yes, I remember you. You were present when I called on Monsieur Lenormand yesterday, weren't you? Well, the very thing that I reported to him yesterday occurred again today. Someone entered my suite when... Yes, if you come at once, you may be able to find some clues... In an hour or two? Excellent! Thank you! Ask for suite 415. Thank you again!"

Currently in Paris, billionaire Rudolf Kesselbach, otherwise known as the "King of Diamonds" or the "Lord of Cape Town", possessed a vast fortune estimated at over one hundred million pounds. For the past week, he had been staying in suite 415, on the fourth floor of the Palace Hotel. The suite consisted of three rooms, of which the larger two, on the right, the sitting-room and the master bedroom, faced the avenue; while the other, on the left, in which his personal secretary, Mr. Chapman, slept, looked out on the Rue de Judée.

Next to it was another suite of five rooms, which had been reserved for Mrs. Kesselbach, who was supposed to leave Monte Carlo, where she vacationing at the moment, to join her husband as soon as he contacted her.

Rudolf Kesselbach paced back and forth for several minutes, looking anxious. He was tall, with a ruddy complexion, but still young. His pale blue eyes, circled by gold-rimmed spectacles, had a faraway look, which gave him an expression of gentle shyness that contrasted curiously with the strength of his square forehead and his powerful jaw.

He went to check the window: it was locked tight. Besides, how could anyone have entered that way? The private balcony that ran around the suite ended on the corner to the right and was separated by a stone cornice from the balconies on the Rue de Judée.

Next, he went into his bedroom: it had no communication with the adjacent rooms. Then, he went to his secretary's bedroom and checked the door that led into the suite reserved for Mrs. Kesselbach. It was locked and bolted.

"I'm stumped, Chapman. As you know, I've noticed some peculiar incidents from time to time... Yes, *peculiar* is the word... Yesterday, my walking-stick was moved... The day before, it was my private papers that were rifled... And yet, how is any of it possible?"

"It's not, sir!" replied Chapman, whose honest and placid features displayed no anxiety. "If you don't mind my saying so, I think you're imagining things. You have no evidence, only vague suspicions... Besides, as you know, there is no way into this suite except through the entrance foyer, and you had a special key made for you on the day of our arrival. The only one with a duplicate is your butler, Edwards. 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 we do. That's a mistake. In the future, he must not go down until we come back."

Chapman gave a slight shrug. He thought to himself that his employer, the so-called "Lord of Cape Town," was becoming a little too eccentric lately, with these strange fears of his. What risk could one run in a hotel like this one, especially when one carried no valuables, no important sums of money, on one's person?

They heard the entrance foyer door opening. It was Edwards returning from lunch. Kesselbach called him.

"I see that you're wearing your uniform, Edwards. Excellent! I'm not expecting any visitors today... No, strike that. I'm expecting one visitor: Inspector Gourel. So you might as well remain in the foyer and keep an eye on the door. Chapman and I have some serious work to do..."

The "serious work" lasted for a few minutes, during which Kesselbach went through his correspondence, read three or four letters, and gave instructions on how they were to be answered. But, suddenly, Chapman, waiting with his pen poised, saw that his employer was thinking of something other than his correspondence.

He was holding a black pin, bent like a fish-hook, between his fingers and attentively examining it.

"Chapman," he said, "look at what I've found on my desk. This bent pin obviously means something. It's proof, a material piece of evidence! You can't pretend that no one has been in here anymore. After all, this pin didn't come here by itself."

"Certainly not, sir," replied the secretary. "It came with me."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a pin that I used to fasten my tie to my collar. I took it out last night, while you were reading, and twisted it absent-mindedly."

Kesselbach rose from his chair, vexed, took a few steps and stopped.

"I see you laughing at me, Chapman. Don't bother denying it—and you're quite right," he said. "I accept that I've been behaving rather oddly since we left Cape Town. It's because... Well, I've kept you in the dark about it, but there is this new project of mine... A new enterprise... A huge thing, a great scheme... I can't quite describe it to you yet, because most of it is still in the future, but it's slowly taking shape, and it will be something... formidable! You can't imagine it, Chapman... It's got nothing to do with money—I don't care a fig about money, I have too much of it already... No, this is a great deal more. It's about power, control... If the

reality lives up to my expectations, I shan't be only the Master of Cape Town, but also the Master of other realms... Rudolf Kesselbach, the son of a humble ironmonger from Augsburg, will be the equal of many people who, so far, have looked down upon him... He will even be above them, Chapman... Above them, mark my words... And if I ever..."

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

"You now understand the reasons for my anxiety, Chapman. Here, in my brain, is an idea that's worth a great deal, and I fear that *someone* suspects the nature of this idea... I'm being spied upon... I'm convinced of it!"

Suddenly, they heard a ring.

"It's the telephone, sir," said Chapman.

"Could it be...?" muttered Kesselbach. "It would be..."

He took the instrument.

"Hello? Who's speaking? The Colonel? Ah, good! Yes, it's I. Any news? Excellent! Then I shall be expecting you... You will come with one of your men? Very well. What? No, we won't be disturbed. I will give the necessary orders. It's as serious as that, is it? I assure you that my orders will be crystal clear: my secretary and my butler shall keep an eye on the door, and no one else will be allowed in. You know the way, don't you? Then don't waste a minute."

He hung up the receiver.

"Chapman, two gentlemen are on their way. Edwards will show them in."

"But what about Inspector Gourel, sir?"

"He's scheduled to come later, in an hour... Anyway, there's no harm in his meeting them. Send Edwards down to reception to tell them that I am not to be disturbed, except for these two gentlemen, the Colonel and his friend, and Inspector Gourel. They must take down the names and admit no one else."

Chapman did as he was asked. When he returned to the suite, he found Kesselbach holding in his hand a file, or rather, a small black Moroccan leather folder, apparently empty. He seemed to be hesitating, as if he did not know what to do with it. Was he going to put it in his pocket, or lay it down somewhere?

Finally, he went to the mantelpiece and threw the leather folder into his travel bag.

"Let's finish the mail now, Chapman. We've got ten minutes left. Ah, there's a letter from Mrs. Kesselbach! Why didn't you tell me it was here earlier, Chapman? Didn't you recognize her handwriting?"

He made no attempt at concealing the emotion he felt touching and contemplating that paper, which his wife had held in her fingers, and to which she had added a hint of her secret thoughts. He inhaled its perfume and, unsealing it, read it slowly, whispering fragments which Chapman couldn't help but overhear:

"Feeling a little tired.... Keeping to my room... So bored... When can I join you?... Longing for your cable..."

"You sent a telegram this morning, Chapman, didn't you? Then Mrs. Kesselbach will arrive tomorrow, Wednesday."

Kesselbach seemed suddenly quite happy, as if his burden had been lightened and he was freed of all anxiety. He rubbed his hands and exhaled, like a strong man certain of success, or a lucky man who possesses happiness and will do anything to protect it.

"I hear someone ringing at the door, Chapman. Go and see who it is."

It was Edwards who entered.

“Two gentlemen asking for you, sir. They’re the ones you were expecting.”

“Excellent! Are they here, in the lobby?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then, close the door and don’t open it again, except to let in Inspector Gourel when he arrives. Chapman, go and escort the gentlemen in, but 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 behind them. Kesselbach went to the window and pressed his forehead against the glass.

Outside, he could see carriages and motor-cars as they rolled along in parallel rows. A bright spring sun made the brasses and the varnish gleam. 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 palavering!”

He took a cigarette from the table, lit it and drew a few puffs. Suddenly, a faint exclamation escaped him. Just in front of him stood a man whom he did not recognize.

Kesselbach took a couple steps back.

“Who are you?” he asked.

The stranger was well dressed, rather smart-looking, with dark hair, a dark moustache and hard eyes.

“Who am I? Why, I am the Colonel!” he replied, grinning.

“No! The one whom I call the Colonel, who writes to me using that title, is not you!”

“Well, yes. The other is... But, my dear sir, none of this is of the least importance. The only thing that matters is that I am myself. And promise you that I am, indeed, I”

“But what is your name?”

“Why don’t you just use ‘Colonel’ until further notice?”

Kesselbach was seized by a growing fear. Who was this man? What did he want?

“Chapman!” he called out.

“Why do you feel the need to call your secretary! Isn’t my company enough for you?”

“Chapman!” Kesselbach cried again. “Chapman! Edwards!”

“Chapman! Edwards!” echoed the stranger, mockingly. “Come at once, my friends! You’re wanted!”

“Monsieur, I order you to let me pass.”

“But, my dear sir, who’s preventing you?”

The stranger politely stepped aside. Kesselbach walked to the door, opened it and suddenly jumped backwards. Behind the door stood another man, gun in hand.

“Edwards... Chap...” Kesselbach stammered:

He did not finish. In a corner of the foyer, he had seen the bodies of his butler and his secretary lying side by side on the floor, bound and gagged.

Despite his nervous and excitable nature, Kesselbach did not lack physical courage. The presence of danger, instead of depressing him, restored his full vigor. Pretending dismay and stupefaction, he moved slowly back towards the mantelpiece and leaned against the wall. His hand felt for the electric bell. He found it and pressed the button without lifting his finger.

“Really?” asked the stranger.

Kesselbach stayed silent and continued to press the button.

“Come now! Do you really expect that someone will come to your rescue? That the whole hotel will be thrown into a commotion because you are pressing that bell? My dear sir, you only have to look behind you to see that the wire has been cut!”

Kesselbach turned around sharply, as if he wanted to check the stranger’s assertion, but, instead, with a quick movement, he grabbed the travel bag, thrust his hand into it, grasped a revolver, aimed it at the man, and pulled the trigger.

“Impressive!” said the stranger. “So you load your weapons with nothing but air and silence?”

The cock clicked a second time, then a third, but there was no gunfire.

“Three more shots from the Master of Cape Town! You won’t be satisfied until you’ve lodged six air bullets into my poor carcass. What! You give up? That’s a pity! You were an excellent shot!”

The stranger took hold of the back of a chair, spun it around, and sat down straddling it.

“Won’t you take a seat, my dear Mr. Kesselbach, and make yourself at home?” he said, pointing to an armchair. “Would you like a cigarette? Me, I prefer cigars.”

There was a box on the table. He selected an Upmann, pale in color and flawless in shape, and lit it.

“Thank you! That’s a perfect cigar,” he said, with a slight bow of the head. “Now, let’s chat, shan’t we?”

Kesselbach listened to him in amazement. Who could this strange man be? Still, seeing him sitting there, so relaxed and so amiable, he was gradually reassured and began to think that the situation might be resolved without violence. He took out his wallet, opened it, and displayed a respectable bundle of banknotes.

“How much?” he asked.

The other man looked at him surprised, as if he found it difficult to understand what Kesselbach meant. Then, after a moment, he called:

“Marco!”

The man with the revolver stepped forward.

“Marco, this gentleman is kind enough to offer you a few bits of paper for your girlfriend. Take them, Marco.”

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

“Now that this matter is settled according to your wishes,” resumed the stranger, “let us come to the purpose of my visit. I will be brief and to the point. I want two things. First, a small, black, Moroccan leather folder, which you usually carry on your person. Second, the small, ebony box that was in that travel bag yesterday. Let’s proceed in order. The leather folder?”

“I burned it.”

The stranger frowned. It looked as if he briefly—and fondly—remembered the good old days when there were plenty of useful methods to make the uncooperative talk.

“Fine. We’ll get back to that later. What about the ebony box?”

“I burned that, too.”

“I see,” the stranger growled. “You’re testing me, Mr. Kesselbach...”

He twisted the other’s arm mercilessly.

“Yesterday, you, Rudolf Kesselbach, entered the Crédit Lyonnais on Boulevard des Italiens. You were hiding a parcel under your coat. There, you rented a safe deposit box—to be exact, box

No. 16, aisle 9. After you signed and paid for the box, you went down to the basement. When you came up again, you no longer had that parcel with you. Am I right?"

"You are."

"Then the box and the folder must be at Crédit Lyonnais?"

"No."

"Give me the key to that safe deposit box."

"No."

"Marco!"

Marco ran in.

"Go, Marco! The quadruple knot!"

Before he had even time to move, Kesselbach was tied up in a network of ropes that cut into his flesh whenever he made any attempt to struggle. His arms were tied behind his back, his body fastened to the chair, and his legs tied together like a mummy's.

"Search him, Marco."

Marco searched the prisoner. Two minutes later, he handed his boss a small flat, nickel-plated key, bearing the numbers 16 and 9.

"Perfect. No Moroccan black leather folder?"

"No, boss."

"It must be in the box. Mr. Kesselbach, will you tell me its secret combination?"

"No."

"You refuse?"

"Yes."

"Marco!"

"Yes, boss?"

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

"It's there."

"Now put your finger to the trigger."

"Done."

"Well, Kesselbach, old pal, are you ready to talk?"

"No."

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

"Yes, boss?"

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

"Right, boss."

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

Rudolf Kesselbach made a sign.

"You're ready to talk?"

"Yes."

"Just in time. So, what is the combination, the secret word?"

"*Dolor*."

"*Dolor*... Mrs. Kesselbach's first name is Dolores, I believe? Such a good husband! Marco, go and do as I told you... No mistake, understood? I'll repeat my instructions: meet Jérôme at the prearranged spot, give him the key, tell him the word *Dolor*. Then, the two of you go to Crédit Lyonnais. Jérôme is to go in alone, sign the register, go down to the basement, and bring back everything in the safe deposit box. Do you understand?"

"Yes, boss. But what if the box don't open with *Dolor*?"

“Shut up, Marco! When you come out of Crédit Lyonnais, leave Jérôme, go back home and call me with the results of the operation. If by any chances, *Dolor* failed to open the box, my friend Rudolf and I will have one *final* conversation. Kesselbach, are you quite sure you’re not mistaken?”

“Yes.”

“That means you think the search will be futile... Well, we’ll see... Off with you, Marco!”

“What about you, boss?”

“I’ll stay here. I’m not afraid! I’ve never been in less danger than now. Your orders about admitting no one still stand, Kesselbach, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do.”

“Hmm, you seemed very eager for me to believe you... Can it be that you’re trying to gain time? I shouldn’t want to be caught here like a fool...”

He stopped to think, looked at his prisoner, and concluded:

“No, it’s not possible... We shan’t be disturbed.”

He had barely finished speaking when the doorbell rang. He pressed his hand violently on Kesselbach’s mouth.

“Oh, you sly fox! You were expecting someone!”

Kesselbach’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! Marco, gag him! Quick! Good!”

The bell rang again.

The stranger shouted, as if he were Kesselbach and Edwards were still at his post in the foyer:

“Why don’t you open the door, Edwards?”

Then he went softly into the foyer and, pointing to the secretary and the butler, whispered:

“Marco, help me move these two to the bedroom so they can’t be seen.”

He lifted the secretary. Marco carried the butler.

“Good! Now go back to the sitting-room.”

He followed him in and returned to the foyer while saying in his own voice, loudly and with a tone of astonishment:

“I’ll be darned! Your butler’s not here, Mr. Kesselbach. No, don’t bother yourself! Finish your letter. I’ll open the door myself.”

Then he quietly opened the entrance door.

“Is this Mr. Kesselbach’s suite?” the newcomer asked.

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

“Yes, that’s right. Who shall I say...?” he replied.

“Mr. Kesselbach telephoned me. He’s expecting me.”

“Oh, it’s you! I’ll tell him. Do you mind waiting a minute? Mr. Kesselbach will be with you shortly.”

The stranger boldly left the visitor standing on the threshold of the foyer, at a spot from which he could see a portion of the sitting-room through the open door. Slowly, without so much as turning around, he reentered the room, went to Marco who was standing by Mr. Kesselbach’s side, and whispered:

“We’re done! It’s Inspector Gourel from the Sûreté.”

Marco drew his knife, but the stranger caught his arm.

“No nonsense! I have an idea. But, for God’s sake, Marco, listen to me, you must respond to me *just as if you were Kesselbach*. You hear, Marco! You *are* Kesselbach.”

He expressed himself with such coolness, force and authority that Marco understood, without further explanation, that he was to play the part of Kesselbach.

“You must apologize for me, my dear fellow,” he said, so as to be heard: “Please tell the Inspector that I’m awfully sorry, but I’m buried in paperwork. I will see him tomorrow morning at nine. Yes, nine o’clock on the dot.”

“Good!” whispered the other. “Now, don’t move.”

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

“Mr. Kesselbach begs you to excuse him. He is finishing important business. Would it be you possible for you to return tomorrow at nine o’clock sharp?”

There was a pause. Gourel seemed surprised, and possibly a little concerned. The other man’s hand made a fist inside his pocket. At the Inspector’s first suspicious move, he was prepared to knock him out.

But, finally, Gourel said:

“Very well. Tomorrow, nine o’clock. Still... Well, I’ll be here at nine, you can count on me.”

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

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

“That was mighty clever of you, boss! Oh, how perfectly you tricked him!”

“Follow him, Marco. Make sure he leaves the hotel. Then, meet Jérôme as arranged and call me when you’re done.”

Marco went away quickly.

Then the stranger took a water decanter from the mantelpiece and poured himself a glass, which he swallowed at once. He wetted his handkerchief, dabbed his forehead, which was covered with perspiration, and then sat down beside his prisoner.

“Now I must really have the honor, Mr. Kesselbach, of introducing myself,” he said, with an affectation of politeness.

Taking a card from his pocket, he added:

“*Arsène Lupin, gentleman-burglar.*”