LEBLANC MAURICE

ARSENE LUPIN

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Arsene Lupin:

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CHAPTER I
THE MILLIONAIRE'S DAUGHTER

The rays of the September sun flooded the great halls of the old chateau of the Dukes of Charmerace, lighting up with their mellow glow the spoils of so many ages and many lands, jumbled together with the execrable taste which so often afflicts those whose only standard of value is money. The golden light warmed the panelled walls and old furniture to a dull lustre, and gave back to the fading gilt of the First Empire chairs and couches something of its old brightness. It illumined the long line of pictures on the walls, pictures of dead and gone Charmeraces, the stern or debonair faces of the men, soldiers, statesmen, dandies, the gentle or imperious faces of beautiful women. It flashed back from armour of brightly polished steel, and drew dull gleams from armour of bronze. The hues of rare porcelain, of the rich inlays of Oriental or Renaissance cabinets, mingled with the hues of the pictures, the tapestry, the Persian rugs about the polished floor to fill the hall with a rich glow of colour.

But of all the beautiful and precious things which the sun-rays

warmed to a clearer beauty, the face of the girl who sat writing at a table in front of the long windows, which opened on to the centuries-old turf of the broad terrace, was the most beautiful and the most precious.

It was a delicate, almost frail, beauty. Her skin was clear with the transparent lustre of old porcelain, and her pale cheeks were only tinted with the pink of the faintest roses. Her straight nose was delicately cut, her rounded chin admirably moulded. A lover of beauty would have been at a loss whether more to admire her clear, germander eyes, so melting and so adorable, or the sensitive mouth, with its rather full lips, inviting all the kisses. But assuredly he would have been grieved by the perpetual air of sadness which rested on the beautiful face—the wistful melancholy of the Slav, deepened by something of personal misfortune and suffering.

Her face was framed by a mass of soft fair hair, shot with strands of gold where the sunlight fell on it; and little curls, rebellious to the comb, strayed over her white forehead, tiny feathers of gold.

She was addressing envelopes, and a long list of names lay on her left hand. When she had addressed an envelope, she slipped into it a wedding-card. On each was printed:

> "M. Gournay-Martin has the honour to inform you of the marriage of his daughter Germaine to the Duke of Charmerace."

She wrote steadily on, adding envelope after envelope to the

pile ready for the post, which rose in front of her. But now and again, when the flushed and laughing girls who were playing lawn-tennis on the terrace, raised their voices higher than usual as they called the score, and distracted her attention from her work, her gaze strayed through the open window and lingered on them wistfully; and as her eyes came back to her task she sighed with so faint a wistfulness that she hardly knew she sighed. Then a voice from the terrace cried, "Sonia! Sonia!"

"Yes. Mlle. Germaine?" answered the writing girl.

"Tea! Order tea, will you?" cried the voice, a petulant voice, rather harsh to the ear.

"Very well, Mlle. Germaine," said Sonia; and having finished addressing the envelope under her pen, she laid it on the pile ready to be posted, and, crossing the room to the old, wide fireplace, she rang the bell.

She stood by the fireplace a moment, restoring to its place a rose which had fallen from a vase on the mantelpiece; and her attitude, as with arms upraised she arranged the flowers, displayed the delightful line of a slender figure. As she let fall her arms to her side, a footman entered the room.

"Will you please bring the tea, Alfred," she said in a charming voice of that pure, bell-like tone which has been Nature's most precious gift to but a few of the greatest actresses.

"For how many, miss?" said Alfred.

"For four—unless your master has come back."

"Oh, no; he's not back yet, miss. He went in the car to Rennes

to lunch; and it's a good many miles away. He won't be back for another hour."

"And the Duke—he's not back from his ride yet, is he?"

"Not yet, miss," said Alfred, turning to go.

"One moment," said Sonia. "Have all of you got your things packed for the journey to Paris? You will have to start soon, you know. Are all the maids ready?"

"Well, all the men are ready, I know, miss. But about the maids, miss, I can't say. They've been bustling about all day; but it takes them longer than it does us."

"Tell them to hurry up; and be as quick as you can with the tea, please," said Sonia.

Alfred went out of the room; Sonia went back to the writing-table. She did not take up her pen; she took up one of the wedding-cards; and her lips moved slowly as she read it in a pondering depression.

The petulant, imperious voice broke in upon her musing.

"Whatever are you doing, Sonia? Aren't you getting on with those letters?" it cried angrily; and Germaine Gournay-Martin came through the long window into the hall.

The heiress to the Gournay-Martin millions carried her tennis racquet in her hand; and her rosy cheeks were flushed redder than ever by the game. She was a pretty girl in a striking, high-coloured, rather obvious way—the very foil to Sonia's delicate beauty. Her lips were a little too thin, her eyes too shallow; and together they gave her a rather hard air, in strongest contrast to

the gentle, sympathetic face of Sonia.

The two friends with whom Germaine had been playing tennis followed her into the hall: Jeanne Gautier, tall, sallow, dark, with a somewhat malicious air; Marie Bullier, short, round, commonplace, and sentimental.

They came to the table at which Sonia was at work; and pointing to the pile of envelopes, Marie said, "Are these all wedding-cards?"

"Yes; and we've only got to the letter V," said Germaine, frowning at Sonia.

"Princesse de Vernan—Duchesse de Vauvieuse—Marquess—Marchioness? You've invited the whole Faubourg Saint-Germain," said Marie, shuffling the pile of envelopes with an envious air.

"You'll know very few people at your wedding," said Jeanne, with a spiteful little giggle.

"I beg your pardon, my dear," said Germaine boastfully. "Madame de Relzieres, my fiance's cousin, gave an At Home the other day in my honour. At it she introduced half Paris to me—the Paris I'm destined to know, the Paris you'll see in my drawing-rooms."

"But we shall no longer be fit friends for you when you're the Duchess of Charmerace," said Jeanne.

"Why?" said Germaine; and then she added quickly, "Above everything, Sonia, don't forget Veauleglise, 33, University Street—33, University Street."

"Veauleglise—33, University Street," said Sonia, taking a fresh envelope, and beginning to address it.

"Wait—wait! don't close the envelope. I'm wondering whether Veauleglise ought to have a cross, a double cross, or a triple cross," said Germaine, with an air of extreme importance.

"What's that?" cried Marie and Jeanne together.

"A single cross means an invitation to the church, a double cross an invitation to the marriage and the wedding-breakfast, and the triple cross means an invitation to the marriage, the breakfast, and the signing of the marriage-contract. What do you think the Duchess of Veauleglise ought to have?"

"Don't ask me. I haven't the honour of knowing that great lady," cried Jeanne.

"Nor I," said Marie.

"Nor I," said Germaine. "But I have here the visiting-list of the late Duchess of Charmerace, Jacques' mother. The two duchesses were on excellent terms. Besides the Duchess of Veauleglise is rather worn-out, but greatly admired for her piety. She goes to early service three times a week."

"Then put three crosses," said Jeanne.

"I shouldn't," said Marie quickly. "In your place, my dear, I shouldn't risk a slip. I should ask my fiance's advice. He knows this world."

"Oh, goodness—my fiance! He doesn't care a rap about this kind of thing. He has changed so in the last seven years. Seven years ago he took nothing seriously. Why, he set off on an

expedition to the South Pole—just to show off. Oh, in those days he was truly a duke."

"And to-day?" said Jeanne.

"Oh, to-day he's a regular slow-coach. Society gets on his nerves. He's as sober as a judge," said Germaine.

"He's as gay as a lark," said Sonia, in sudden protest.

Germaine pouted at her, and said: "Oh, he's gay enough when he's making fun of people. But apart from that he's as sober as a judge."

"Your father must be delighted with the change," said Jeanne.

"Naturally he's delighted. Why, he's lunching at Rennes to-day with the Minister, with the sole object of getting Jacques decorated."

"Well; the Legion of Honour is a fine thing to have," said Marie.

"My dear! The Legion of Honour is all very well for middle-class people, but it's quite out of place for a duke!" cried Germaine.

Alfred came in, bearing the tea-tray, and set it on a little table near that at which Sonia was sitting.

Germaine, who was feeling too important to sit still, was walking up and down the room. Suddenly she stopped short, and pointing to a silver statuette which stood on the piano, she said, "What's this? Why is this statuette here?"

"Why, when we came in, it was on the cabinet, in its usual place," said Sonia in some astonishment.

"Did you come into the hall while we were out in the garden, Alfred?" said Germaine to the footman.

"No, miss," said Alfred.

"But some one must have come into it," Germaine persisted.

"I've not heard any one. I was in my pantry," said Alfred.

"It's very odd," said Germaine.

"It is odd," said Sonia. "Statuettes don't move about of themselves."

All of them stared at the statuette as if they expected it to move again forthwith, under their very eyes. Then Alfred put it back in its usual place on one of the cabinets, and went out of the room.

Sonia poured out the tea; and over it they babbled about the coming marriage, the frocks they would wear at it, and the presents Germaine had already received. That reminded her to ask Sonia if any one had yet telephoned from her father's house in Paris; and Sonia said that no one had.

"That's very annoying," said Germaine. "It shows that nobody has sent me a present to-day."

Pouting, she shrugged her shoulders with an air of a spoiled child, which sat but poorly on a well-developed young woman of twenty-three.

"It's Sunday. The shops don't deliver things on Sunday," said Sonia gently.

But Germaine still pouted like a spoiled child.

"Isn't your beautiful Duke coming to have tea with us?" said

Jeanne a little anxiously.

"Oh, yes; I'm expecting him at half-past four. He had to go for a ride with the two Du Buits. They're coming to tea here, too," said Germaine.

"Gone for a ride with the two Du Buits? But when?" cried Marie quickly.

"This afternoon."

"He can't be," said Marie. "My brother went to the Du Buits' house after lunch, to see Andre and Georges. They went for a drive this morning, and won't be back till late to-night."

"Well, but—but why did the Duke tell me so?" said Germaine, knitting her brow with a puzzled air.

"If I were you, I should inquire into this thoroughly. Dukes—well, we know what dukes are—it will be just as well to keep an eye on him," said Jeanne maliciously.

Germaine flushed quickly; and her eyes flashed. "Thank you. I have every confidence in Jacques. I am absolutely sure of him," she said angrily.

"Oh, well—if you're sure, it's all right," said Jeanne.

The ringing of the telephone-bell made a fortunate diversion.

Germaine rushed to it, clapped the receiver to her ear, and cried: "Hello, is that you, Pierre? … Oh, it's Victoire, is it? … Ah, some presents have come, have they? … Well, well, what are they? … What! a paper-knife—another paper-knife! … Another Louis XVI. inkstand—oh, bother! … Who are they from? … Oh, from the Countess Rudolph and the Baron de Valery." Her

voice rose high, thrilling with pride.

Then she turned her face to her friends, with the receiver still at her ear, and cried: "Oh, girls, a pearl necklace too! A large one! The pearls are big ones!"

"How jolly!" said Marie.

"Who sent it?" said Germaine, turning to the telephone again. "Oh, a friend of papa's," she added in a tone of disappointment. "Never mind, after all it's a pearl necklace. You'll be sure and lock the doors carefully, Victoire, won't you? And lock up the necklace in the secret cupboard.... Yes; thanks very much, Victoire. I shall see you to-morrow."

She hung up the receiver, and came away from the telephone frowning.

"It's preposterous!" she said pettishly. "Papa's friends and relations give me marvellous presents, and all the swells send me paper-knives. It's all Jacques' fault. He's above all this kind of thing. The Faubourg Saint-Germain hardly knows that we're engaged."

"He doesn't go about advertising it," said Jeanne, smiling.

"You're joking, but all the same what you say is true," said Germaine. "That's exactly what his cousin Madame de Relzieres said to me the other day at the At Home she gave in my honour —wasn't it, Sonia?" And she walked to the window, and, turning her back on them, stared out of it.

"She HAS got her mouth full of that At Home," said Jeanne to Marie in a low voice.

There was an awkward silence. Marie broke it:

"Speaking of Madame de Relzieres, do you know that she is on pins and needles with anxiety? Her son is fighting a duel today," she said.

"With whom?" said Sonia.

"No one knows. She got hold of a letter from the seconds," said Marie.

"My mind is quite at rest about Relzieres," said Germaine. "He's a first-class swordsman. No one could beat him."

Sonia did not seem to share her freedom from anxiety. Her forehead was puckered in little lines of perplexity, as if she were puzzling out some problem; and there was a look of something very like fear in her gentle eyes.

"Wasn't Relzieres a great friend of your fiance at one time?" said Jeanne.

"A great friend? I should think he was," said Germaine. "Why, it was through Relzieres that we got to know Jacques."

"Where was that?" said Marie.

"Here—in this very chateau," said Germaine.

"Actually in his own house?" said Marie, in some surprise.

"Yes; actually here. Isn't life funny?" said Germaine. "If, a few months after his father's death, Jacques had not found himself hard-up, and obliged to dispose of this chateau, to raise the money for his expedition to the South Pole; and if papa and I had not wanted an historic chateau; and lastly, if papa had not suffered from rheumatism, I should not be calling myself in a

month from now the Duchess of Charmerace."

"Now what on earth has your father's rheumatism got to do with your being Duchess of Charmerace?" cried Jeanne.

"Everything," said Germaine. "Papa was afraid that this chateau was damp. To prove to papa that he had nothing to fear, Jacques, en grand seigneur, offered him his hospitality, here, at Charmerace, for three weeks."

"That was truly ducal," said Marie.

"But he is always like that," said Sonia.

"Oh, he's all right in that way, little as he cares about society," said Germaine. "Well, by a miracle my father got cured of his rheumatism here. Jacques fell in love with me; papa made up his mind to buy the chateau; and I demanded the hand of Jacques in marriage."

"You did? But you were only sixteen then," said Marie, with some surprise.

"Yes; but even at sixteen a girl ought to know that a duke is a duke. I did," said Germaine. "Then since Jacques was setting out for the South Pole, and papa considered me much too young to get married, I promised Jacques to wait for his return."

"Why, it was everything that's romantic!" cried Marie.

"Romantic? Oh, yes," said Germaine; and she pouted. "But between ourselves, if I'd known that he was going to stay all that time at the South Pole—"

"That's true," broke in Marie. "To go away for three years and stay away seven—at the end of the world."

"All Germaine's beautiful youth," said Jeanne, with her malicious smile.

"Thanks!" said Germaine tartly.

"Well, you ARE twenty-three. It's the flower of one's age," said Jeanne.

"Not quite twenty-three," said Germaine hastily. "And look at the wretched luck I've had. The Duke falls ill and is treated at Montevideo. As soon as he recovers, since he's the most obstinate person in the world, he resolves to go on with the expedition. He sets out; and for an age, without a word of warning, there's no more news of him—no news of any kind. For six months, you know, we believed him dead."

"Dead? Oh, how unhappy you must have been!" said Sonia.

"Oh, don't speak of it! For six months I daren't put on a light frock," said Germaine, turning to her.

"A lot she must have cared for him," whispered Jeanne to Marie.

"Fortunately, one fine day, the letters began again. Three months ago a telegram informed us that he was coming back; and at last the Duke returned," said Germaine, with a theatrical air.

"The Duke returned," cried Jeanne, mimicking her.

"Never mind. Fancy waiting nearly seven years for one's fiance. That was constancy," said Sonia.

"Oh, you're a sentimentalist, Mlle. Kritchnoff," said Jeanne, in a tone of mockery. "It was the influence of the castle."

"What do you mean?" said Germaine.

"Oh, to own the castle of Charmerace and call oneself Mlle. Gournay-Martin—it's not worth doing. One MUST become a duchess," said Jeanne.

"Yes, yes; and for all this wonderful constancy, seven years of it, Germaine was on the point of becoming engaged to another man," said Marie, smiling.

"And he a mere baron," said Jeanne, laughing.

"What? Is that true?" said Sonia.

"Didn't you know, Mlle. Kritchnoff? She nearly became engaged to the Duke's cousin, the Baron de Relzieres. It was not nearly so grand."

"Oh, it's all very well to laugh at me; but being the cousin and heir of the Duke, Relzieres would have assumed the title, and I should have been Duchess just the same," said Germaine triumphantly.

"Evidently that was all that mattered," said Jeanne. "Well, dear, I must be off. We've promised to run in to see the Comtesse de Grosjean. You know the Comtesse de Grosjean?"

She spoke with an air of careless pride, and rose to go.

"Only by name. Papa used to know her husband on the Stock Exchange when he was still called simply M. Grosjean. For his part, papa preferred to keep his name intact," said Germaine, with quiet pride.

"Intact? That's one way of looking at it. Well, then, I'll see you in Paris. You still intend to start to-morrow?" said Jeanne.

"Yes; to-morrow morning," said Germaine.

Jeanne and Marie slipped on their dust-coats to the accompaniment of chattering and kissing, and went out of the room.

As she closed the door on them, Germaine turned to Sonia, and said: "I do hate those two girls! They're such horrible snobs."

"Oh, they're good-natured enough," said Sonia.

"Good-natured? Why, you idiot, they're just bursting with envy of me—bursting!" said Germaine. "Well, they've every reason to be," she added confidently, surveying herself in a Venetian mirror with a petted child's self-content.

CHAPTER II
THE COMING OF THE CHAROLAIS

Sonia went back to her table, and once more began putting wedding-cards in their envelopes and addressing them. Germaine moved restlessly about the room, fidgeting with the bric-a-brac on the cabinets, shifting the pieces about, interrupting Sonia to ask whether she preferred this arrangement or that, throwing herself into a chair to read a magazine, getting up in a couple of minutes to straighten a picture on the wall, throwing out all the while idle questions not worth answering. Ninety-nine human beings would have been irritated to exasperation by her fidgeting; Sonia endured it with a perfect patience. Five times Germaine asked her whether she should wear her heliotrope or her pink gown at a forthcoming dinner at Madame de Relzieres'. Five times Sonia said, without the slightest variation in her tone, "I think you look better in the pink." And all the while the pile of addressed envelopes rose steadily.

Presently the door opened, and Alfred stood on the threshold.

"Two gentlemen have called to see you, miss," he said.

"Ah, the two Du Buits," cried Germaine.

"They didn't give their names, miss."

"A gentleman in the prime of life and a younger one?" said

Germaine.

"Yes, miss."

"I thought so. Show them in."

"Yes, miss. And have you any orders for me to give Victoire when we get to Paris?" said Alfred.

"No. Are you starting soon?"

"Yes, miss. We're all going by the seven o'clock train. It's a long way from here to Paris; we shall only reach it at nine in the morning. That will give us just time to get the house ready for you by the time you get there to-morrow evening," said Alfred.

"Is everything packed?"

"Yes, miss—everything. The cart has already taken the heavy luggage to the station. All you'll have to do is to see after your bags."

"That's all right. Show M. du Buit and his brother in," said Germaine.

She moved to a chair near the window, and disposed herself in an attitude of studied, and obviously studied, grace.

As she leant her head at a charming angle back against the tall back of the chair, her eyes fell on the window, and they opened wide.

"Why, whatever's this?" she cried, pointing to it.

"Whatever's what?" said Sonia, without raising her eyes from the envelope she was addressing.

"Why, the window. Look! one of the panes has been taken out. It looks as if it had been cut."

"So it has—just at the level of the fastening," said Sonia. And the two girls stared at the gap.

"Haven't you noticed it before?" said Germaine.

"No; the broken glass must have fallen outside," said Sonia.

The noise of the opening of the door drew their attention from the window. Two figures were advancing towards them—a short, round, tubby man of fifty-five, red-faced, bald, with bright grey eyes, which seemed to be continually dancing away from meeting the eyes of any other human being. Behind him came a slim young man, dark and grave. For all the difference in their colouring, it was clear that they were father and son: their eyes were set so close together. The son seemed to have inherited, along with her black eyes, his mother's nose, thin and aquiline; the nose of the father started thin from the brow, but ended in a scarlet bulb eloquent of an exhaustive acquaintance with the vintages of the world.

Germaine rose, looking at them with an air of some surprise and uncertainty: these were not her friends, the Du Buits.

The elder man, advancing with a smiling bonhomie, bowed, and said in an adenoid voice, ingratiating of tone: "I'm M. Charolais, young ladies—M. Charolais—retired brewer—chevalier of the Legion of Honour—landowner at Rennes. Let me introduce my son." The young man bowed awkwardly. "We came from Rennes this morning, and we lunched at Kerlor's farm."

"Shall I order tea for them?" whispered Sonia.

"Gracious, no!" said Germaine sharply under her breath; then, louder, she said to M. Charolais, "And what is your object in calling?"

"We asked to see your father," said M. Charolais, smiling with broad amiability, while his eyes danced across her face, avoiding any meeting with hers. "The footman told us that M. Gournay-Martin was out, but that his daughter was at home. And we were unable, quite unable, to deny ourselves the pleasure of meeting you." With that he sat down; and his son followed his example.

Sonia and Germaine, taken aback, looked at one another in some perplexity.

"What a fine chateau, papa!" said the young man.

"Yes, my boy; it's a very fine chateau," said M. Charolais, looking round the hall with appreciative but greedy eyes.

There was a pause.

"It's a very fine chateau, young ladies," said M. Charolais.

"Yes; but excuse me, what is it you have called about?" said Germaine.

M. Charolais crossed his legs, leant back in his chair, thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, and said: "Well, we've come about the advertisement we saw in the RENNES ADVERTISER, that M. Gournay-Martin wanted to get rid of a motor-car; and my son is always saying to me, 'I should like a motor-car which rushes the hills, papa.' He means a sixty horse-power."

"We've got a sixty horse-power; but it's not for sale. My father

is even using it himself to-day," said Germaine.

"Perhaps it's the car we saw in the stable-yard," said M. Charolais.

"No; that's a thirty to forty horse-power. It belongs to me. But if your son really loves rushing hills, as you say, we have a hundred horse-power car which my father wants to get rid of. Wait; where's the photograph of it, Sonia? It ought to be here somewhere."

The two girls rose, went to a table set against the wall beyond the window, and began turning over the papers with which it was loaded in the search for the photograph. They had barely turned their backs, when the hand of young Charolais shot out as swiftly as the tongue of a lizard catching a fly, closed round the silver statuette on the top of the cabinet beside him, and flashed it into his jacket pocket.

Charolais was watching the two girls; one would have said that he had eyes for nothing else, yet, without moving a muscle of his face, set in its perpetual beaming smile, he hissed in an angry whisper, "Drop it, you idiot! Put it back!"

The young man scowled askance at him.

"Curse you! Put it back!" hissed Charolais.

The young man's arm shot out with the same quickness, and the statuette stood in its place.

There was just the faintest sigh of relief from Charolais, as Germaine turned and came to him with the photograph in her hand. She gave it to him.

"Ah, here we are," he said, putting on a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez. "A hundred horse-power car. Well, well, this is something to talk over. What's the least you'll take for it?"

"*I* have nothing to do with this kind of thing," cried Germaine. "You must see my father. He will be back from Rennes soon. Then you can settle the matter with him."

M. Charolais rose, and said: "Very good. We will go now, and come back presently. I'm sorry to have intruded on you, young ladies—taking up your time like this—"

"Not at all—not at all," murmured Germaine politely.

"Good-bye—good-bye," said M. Charolais; and he and his son went to the door, and bowed themselves out.

"What creatures!" said Germaine, going to the window, as the door closed behind the two visitors. "All the same, if they do buy the hundred horse-power, papa will be awfully pleased. It is odd about that pane. I wonder how it happened. It's odd too that Jacques hasn't come back yet. He told me that he would be here between half-past four and five."

"And the Du Buits have not come either," said Sonia. "But it's hardly five yet."

"Yes; that's so. The Du Buits have not come either. What on earth are you wasting your time for?" she added sharply, raising her voice. "Just finish addressing those letters while you're waiting."

"They're nearly finished," said Sonia.

"Nearly isn't quite. Get on with them, can't you!" snapped

Germaine.

Sonia went back to the writing-table; just the slightest deepening of the faint pink roses in her cheeks marked her sense of Germaine's rudeness. After three years as companion to Germaine Gournay-Martin, she was well inured to millionaire manners; they had almost lost the power to move her.

Germaine dropped into a chair for twenty seconds; then flung out of it.

"Ten minutes to five!" she cried. "Jacques is late. It's the first time I've ever known him late."

She went to the window, and looked across the wide stretch of meadow-land and woodland on which the chateau, set on the very crown of the ridge, looked down. The road, running with the irritating straightness of so many of the roads of France, was visible for a full three miles. It was empty.

"Perhaps the Duke went to the Chateau de Relzieres to see his cousin—though I fancy that at bottom the Duke does not care very much for the Baron de Relzieres. They always look as though they detested one another," said Sonia, without raising her eyes from the letter she was addressing.

"You've noticed that, have you?" said Germaine. "Now, as far as Jacques is concerned—he's—he's so indifferent. None the less, when we were at the Relzieres on Thursday, I caught him quarrelling with Paul de Relzieres."

"Quarrelling?" said Sonia sharply, with a sudden uneasiness in air and eyes and voice.

"Yes; quarrelling. And they said good-bye to one another in the oddest way."

"But surely they shook hands?" said Sonia.

"Not a bit of it. They bowed as if each of them had swallowed a poker."

"Why—then—then—" said Sonia, starting up with a frightened air; and her voice stuck in her throat.

"Then what?" said Germaine, a little startled by her panic-stricken face.

"The duel! Monsieur de Relzieres' duel!" cried Sonia.

"What? You don't think it was with Jacques?"

"I don't know—but this quarrel—the Duke's manner this morning—the Du Buits' drive—" said Sonia.

"Of course—of course! It's quite possible—in fact it's certain!" cried Germaine.

"It's horrible!" gasped Sonia. "Consider—just consider! Suppose something happened to him. Suppose the Duke—"

"It's me the Duke's fighting about!" cried Germaine proudly, with a little skipping jump of triumphant joy.

Sonia stared through her without seeing her. Her face was a dead white—fear had chilled the lustre from her skin; her breath panted through her parted lips; and her dilated eyes seemed to look on some dreadful picture.

Germaine pirouetted about the hall at the very height of triumph. To have a Duke fighting a duel about her was far beyond the wildest dreams of snobbishness. She chuckled again and

again, and once she clapped her hands and laughed aloud.

"He's fighting a swordsman of the first class—an invincible swordsman—you said so yourself," Sonia muttered in a tone of anguish. "And there's nothing to be done—nothing."

She pressed her hands to her eyes as if to shut out a hideous vision.

Germaine did not hear her; she was staring at herself in a mirror, and bridling to her own image.

Sonia tottered to the window and stared down at the road along which must come the tidings of weal or irremediable woe. She kept passing her hand over her eyes as if to clear their vision.

Suddenly she started, and bent forward, rigid, all her being concentrated in the effort to see.

Then she cried: "Mademoiselle Germaine! Look! Look!"

"What is it?" said Germaine, coming to her side.

"A horseman! Look! There!" said Sonia, waving a hand towards the road.

"Yes; and isn't he galloping!" said Germaine.

"It's he! It's the Duke!" cried Sonia.

"Do you think so?" said Germaine doubtfully.

"I'm sure of it—sure!"

"Well, he gets here just in time for tea," said Germaine in a tone of extreme satisfaction. "He knows that I hate to be kept waiting. He said to me, 'I shall be back by five at the latest.' And here he is."

"It's impossible," said Sonia. "He has to go all the way round

the park. There's no direct road; the brook is between us."

"All the same, he's coming in a straight line," said Germaine.

It was true. The horseman had left the road and was galloping across the meadows straight for the brook. In twenty seconds he reached its treacherous bank, and as he set his horse at it, Sonia covered her eyes.

"He's over!" said Germaine. "My father gave three hundred guineas for that horse."

CHAPTER III
LUPIN'S WAY

Sonia, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, in a reaction from her fears, slipped back and sat down at the tea-table, panting quickly, struggling to keep back the tears of relief. She did not see the Duke gallop up the slope, dismount, and hand over his horse to the groom who came running to him. There was still a mist in her eyes to blur his figure as he came through the window.

"If it's for me, plenty of tea, very little cream, and three lumps of sugar," he cried in a gay, ringing voice, and pulled out his watch. "Five to the minute—that's all right." And he bent down, took Germaine's hand, and kissed it with an air of gallant devotion.

If he had indeed just fought a duel, there were no signs of it in his bearing. His air, his voice, were entirely careless. He was a man whose whole thought at the moment was fixed on his tea and his punctuality.

He drew a chair near the tea-table for Germaine; sat down himself; and Sonia handed him a cup of tea with so shaky a hand that the spoon clinked in the saucer.

"You've been fighting a duel?" said Germaine.

"What! You've heard already?" said the Duke in some surprise.

"I've heard," said Germaine. "Why did you fight it?"

"You're not wounded, your Grace?" said Sonia anxiously.

"Not a scratch," said the Duke, smiling at her.

"Will you be so good as to get on with those wedding-cards, Sonia," said Germaine sharply; and Sonia went back to the writing-table.

Turning to the Duke, Germaine said, "Did you fight on my account?"

"Would you be pleased to know that I had fought on your account?" said the Duke; and there was a faint mocking light in his eyes, far too faint for the self-satisfied Germaine to perceive.

"Yes. But it isn't true. You've been fighting about some woman," said Germaine petulantly.

"If I had been fighting about a woman, it could only be you," said the Duke.

"Yes, that is so. Of course. It could hardly be about Sonia, or my maid," said Germaine. "But what was the reason of the duel?"

"Oh, the reason of it was entirely childish," said the Duke. "I was in a bad temper; and De Relzieres said something that annoyed me."

"Then it wasn't about me; and if it wasn't about me, it wasn't really worth while fighting," said Germaine in a tone of acute disappointment.

The mocking light deepened a little in the Duke's eyes.

"Yes. But if I had been killed, everybody would have said, 'The Duke of Charmerace has been killed in a duel about

Mademoiselle Gournay-Martin.' That would have sounded very fine indeed," said the Duke; and a touch of mockery had crept into his voice.

"Now, don't begin trying to annoy me again," said Germaine pettishly.

"The last thing I should dream of, my dear girl," said the Duke, smiling.

"And De Relzieres? Is he wounded?" said Germaine.

"Poor dear De Relzieres: he won't be out of bed for the next six months," said the Duke; and he laughed lightly and gaily.

"Good gracious!" cried Germaine.

"It will do poor dear De Relzieres a world of good. He has a touch of enteritis; and for enteritis there is nothing like rest," said the Duke.

Sonia was not getting on very quickly with the wedding-cards. Germaine was sitting with her back to her; and over her shoulder Sonia could watch the face of the Duke—an extraordinarily mobile face, changing with every passing mood. Sometimes his eyes met hers; and hers fell before them. But as soon as they turned away from her she was watching him again, almost greedily, as if she could not see enough of his face in which strength of will and purpose was mingled with a faint, ironic scepticism, and tempered by a fine air of race.

He finished his tea; then he took a morocco case from his pocket, and said to Germaine, "It must be quite three days since I gave you anything."

He opened the case, disclosed a pearl pendant, and handed it to her.

"Oh, how nice!" she cried, taking it.

She took it from the case, saying that it was a beauty. She showed it to Sonia; then she put it on and stood before a mirror admiring the effect. To tell the truth, the effect was not entirely desirable. The pearls did not improve the look of her rather coarse brown skin; and her skin added nothing to the beauty of the pearls. Sonia saw this, and so did the Duke. He looked at Sonia's white throat. She met his eyes and blushed. She knew that the same thought was in both their minds; the pearls would have looked infinitely better there.

Germaine finished admiring herself; she was incapable even of suspecting that so expensive a pendant could not suit her perfectly.

The Duke said idly: "Goodness! Are all those invitations to the wedding?"

"That's only down to the letter V," said Germaine proudly.

"And there are twenty-five letters in the alphabet! You must be inviting the whole world. You'll have to have the Madeleine enlarged. It won't hold them all. There isn't a church in Paris that will," said the Duke.

"Won't it be a splendid marriage!" said Germaine. "There'll be something like a crush. There are sure to be accidents."

"If I were you, I should have careful arrangements made," said the Duke.

"Oh, let people look after themselves. They'll remember it better if they're crushed a little," said Germaine.

There was a flicker of contemptuous wonder in the Duke's eyes. But he only shrugged his shoulders, and turning to Sonia, said, "Will you be an angel and play me a little Grieg, Mademoiselle Kritchnoff? I heard you playing yesterday. No one plays Grieg like you."

"Excuse me, Jacques, but Mademoiselle Kritchnoff has her work to do," said Germaine tartly.

"Five minutes' interval—just a morsel of Grieg, I beg," said the Duke, with an irresistible smile.

"All right," said Germaine grudgingly. "But I've something important to talk to you about."

"By Jove! So have I. I was forgetting. I've the last photograph I took of you and Mademoiselle Sonia." Germaine frowned and shrugged her shoulders. "With your light frocks in the open air, you look like two big flowers," said the Duke.

"You call that important!" cried Germaine.

"It's very important—like all trifles," said the Duke, smiling. "Look! isn't it nice?" And he took a photograph from his pocket, and held it out to her.

"Nice? It's shocking! We're making the most appalling faces," said Germaine, looking at the photograph in his hand.

"Well, perhaps you ARE making faces," said the Duke seriously, considering the photograph with grave earnestness. "But they're not appalling faces—not by any means. You shall

be judge, Mademoiselle Sonia. The faces—well, we won't talk about the faces—but the outlines. Look at the movement of your scarf." And he handed the photograph to Sonia.

"Jacques!" said Germaine impatiently.

"Oh, yes, you've something important to tell me. What is it?" said the Duke, with an air of resignation; and he took the photograph from Sonia and put it carefully back in his pocket.

"Victoire has telephoned from Paris to say that we've had a paper-knife and a Louis Seize inkstand given us," said Germaine.

"Hurrah!" cried the Duke in a sudden shout that made them both jump.

"And a pearl necklace," said Germaine.

"Hurrah!" cried the Duke.

"You're perfectly childish," said Germaine pettishly. "I tell you we've been given a paper-knife, and you shout 'hurrah!' I say we've been given a pearl necklace, and you shout 'hurrah!' You can't have the slightest sense of values."

"I beg your pardon. This pearl necklace is from one of your father's friends, isn't it?" said the Duke.

"Yes; why?" said Germaine.

"But the inkstand and the paper-knife must be from the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and well on the shabby side?" said the Duke.

"Yes; well?"

"Well then, my dear girl, what are you complaining about? They balance; the equilibrium is restored. You can't have

everything," said the Duke; and he laughed mischievously.

Germaine flushed, and bit her lip; her eyes sparkled.

"You don't care a rap about me," she said stormily.

"But I find you adorable," said the Duke.

"You keep annoying me," said Germaine pettishly. "And you do it on purpose. I think it's in very bad taste. I shall end by taking a dislike to you—I know I shall."

"Wait till we're married for that, my dear girl," said the Duke; and he laughed again, with a blithe, boyish cheerfulness, which deepened the angry flush in Germaine's cheeks.

"Can't you be serious about anything?" she cried.

"I am the most serious man in Europe," said the Duke.

Germaine went to the window and stared out of it sulkily.

The Duke walked up and down the hall, looking at the pictures of some of his ancestors—somewhat grotesque persons—with humorous appreciation. Between addressing the envelopes Sonia kept glancing at him. Once he caught her eye, and smiled at her. Germaine's back was eloquent of her displeasure. The Duke stopped at a gap in the line of pictures in which there hung a strip of old tapestry.

"I can never understand why you have left all these ancestors of mine staring from the walls and have taken away the quite admirable and interesting portrait of myself," he said carelessly.

Germaine turned sharply from the window; Sonia stopped in the middle of addressing an envelope; and both the girls stared at him in astonishment.

"There certainly was a portrait of me where that tapestry hangs. What have you done with it?" said the Duke.

"You're making fun of us again," said Germaine.

"Surely your Grace knows what happened," said Sonia.

"We wrote all the details to you and sent you all the papers three years ago. Didn't you get them?" said Germaine.

"Not a detail or a newspaper. Three years ago I was in the neighbourhood of the South Pole, and lost at that," said the Duke.

"But it was most dramatic, my dear Jacques. All Paris was talking of it," said Germaine. "Your portrait was stolen."

"Stolen? Who stole it?" said the Duke.

Germaine crossed the hall quickly to the gap in the line of pictures.

"I'll show you," she said.

She drew aside the piece of tapestry, and in the middle of the panel over which the portrait of the Duke had hung he saw written in chalk the words:

ARSENE LUPIN

"What do you think of that autograph?" said Germaine.

"'Arsene Lupin?'" said the Duke in a tone of some bewilderment.

"He left his signature. It seems that he always does so," said Sonia in an explanatory tone.

"But who is he?" said the Duke.

"Arsene Lupin? Surely you know who Arsene Lupin is?" said Germaine impatiently.

"I haven't the slightest notion," said the Duke.

"Oh, come! No one is as South-Pole as all that!" cried Germaine. "You don't know who Lupin is? The most whimsical, the most audacious, and the most genial thief in France. For the last ten years he has kept the police at bay. He has baffled Ganimard, Holmlock Shears, the great English detective, and even Guerchard, whom everybody says is the greatest detective we've had in France since Vidocq. In fact, he's our national robber. Do you mean to say you don't know him?"

"Not even enough to ask him to lunch at a restaurant," said the Duke flippantly. "What's he like?"

"Like? Nobody has the slightest idea. He has a thousand disguises. He has dined two evenings running at the English Embassy."

"But if nobody knows him, how did they learn that?" said the Duke, with a puzzled air.

"Because the second evening, about ten o'clock, they noticed that one of the guests had disappeared, and with him all the jewels of the ambassadress."

"All of them?" said the Duke.

"Yes; and Lupin left his card behind him with these words scribbled on it:"

"'This is not a robbery; it is a restitution. You took the Wallace collection from us.'"

"But it was a hoax, wasn't it?" said the Duke.

"No, your Grace; and he has done better than that. You

remember the affair of the Daray Bank—the savings bank for poor people?" said Sonia, her gentle face glowing with a sudden enthusiastic animation.

"Let's see," said the Duke. "Wasn't that the financier who doubled his fortune at the expense of a heap of poor wretches and ruined two thousand people?"

"Yes; that's the man," said Sonia. "And Lupin stripped Daray's house and took from him everything he had in his strong-box. He didn't leave him a sou of the money. And then, when he'd taken it from him, he distributed it among all the poor wretches whom Daray had ruined."

"But this isn't a thief you're talking about—it's a philanthropist," said the Duke.

"A fine sort of philanthropist!" broke in Germaine in a peevish tone. "There was a lot of philanthropy about his robbing papa, wasn't there?"

"Well," said the Duke, with an air of profound reflection, "if you come to think of it, that robbery was not worthy of this national hero. My portrait, if you except the charm and beauty of the face itself, is not worth much."

"If you think he was satisfied with your portrait, you're very much mistaken. All my father's collections were robbed," said Germaine.

"Your father's collections?" said the Duke. "But they're better guarded than the Bank of France. Your father is as careful of them as the apple of his eye."

"That's exactly it—he was too careful of them. That's why Lupin succeeded."

"This is very interesting," said the Duke; and he sat down on a couch before the gap in the pictures, to go into the matter more at his ease. "I suppose he had accomplices in the house itself?"

"Yes, one accomplice," said Germaine.

"Who was that?" asked the Duke.

"Papa!" said Germaine.

"Oh, come! what on earth do you mean?" said the Duke. "You're getting quite incomprehensible, my dear girl."

"Well, I'll make it clear to you. One morning papa received a letter—but wait. Sonia, get me the Lupin papers out of the bureau."

Sonia rose from the writing-table, and went to a bureau, an admirable example of the work of the great English maker, Chippendale. It stood on the other side of the hall between an Oriental cabinet and a sixteenth-century Italian cabinet—for all the world as if it were standing in a crowded curiosity shop—with the natural effect that the three pieces, by their mere incongruity, took something each from the beauty of the other. Sonia raised the flap of the bureau, and taking from one of the drawers a small portfolio, turned over the papers in it and handed a letter to the Duke.

"This is the envelope," she said. "It's addressed to M. Gournay-Martin, Collector, at the Chateau de Charmerace, Ile-et-Vilaine."

The Duke opened the envelope and took out a letter.

"It's an odd handwriting," he said.

"Read it—carefully," said Germaine.

It was an uncommon handwriting. The letters of it were small, but perfectly formed. It looked the handwriting of a man who knew exactly what he wanted to say, and liked to say it with extreme precision. The letter ran:

> "DEAR SIR,"
>
> "Please forgive my writing to you without our having been introduced to one another; but I flatter myself that you know me, at any rate, by name."
>
> "There is in the drawing-room next your hall a Gainsborough of admirable quality which affords me infinite pleasure. Your Goyas in the same drawing-room are also to my liking, as well as your Van Dyck. In the further drawing-room I note the Renaissance cabinets—a marvellous pair—the Flemish tapestry, the Fragonard, the clock signed Boulle, and various other objects of less importance. But above all I have set my heart on that coronet which you bought at the sale of the Marquise de Ferronaye, and which was formerly worn by the unfortunate Princesse de Lamballe. I take the greatest interest in this coronet: in the first place, on account of the charming and tragic memories which it calls up in the mind of a poet passionately fond of history, and in the second place—though it is hardly worth while talking about that kind of thing—on account of its intrinsic value. I reckon indeed that the stones in your coronet are, at the very lowest, worth half

a million francs."

"I beg you, my dear sir, to have these different objects properly packed up, and to forward them, addressed to me, carriage paid, to the Batignolles Station. Failing this, I shall Proceed to remove them myself on the night of Thursday, August 7th."

"Please pardon the slight trouble to which I am putting you, and believe me,"

"Yours very sincerely,"

"ARSENE LUPIN."

"P.S.—It occurs to me that the pictures have not glass before them. It would be as well to repair this omission before forwarding them to me, and I am sure that you will take this extra trouble cheerfully. I am aware, of course, that some of the best judges declare that a picture loses some of its quality when seen through glass. But it preserves them, and we should always be ready and willing to sacrifice a portion of our own pleasure for the benefit of posterity. France demands it of us.—A. L."

The Duke laughed, and said, "Really, this is extraordinarily funny. It must have made your father laugh."

"Laugh?" said Germaine. "You should have seen his face. He took it seriously enough, I can tell you."

"Not to the point of forwarding the things to Batignolles, I hope," said the Duke.

"No, but to the point of being driven wild," said Germaine. "And since the police had always been baffled by Lupin, he

had the brilliant idea of trying what soldiers could do. The Commandant at Rennes is a great friend of papa's; and papa went to him, and told him about Lupin's letter and what he feared. The colonel laughed at him; but he offered him a corporal and six soldiers to guard his collection, on the night of the seventh. It was arranged that they should come from Rennes by the last train so that the burglars should have no warning of their coming. Well, they came, seven picked men—men who had seen service in Tonquin. We gave them supper; and then the corporal posted them in the hall and the two drawing-rooms where the pictures and things were. At eleven we all went to bed, after promising the corporal that, in the event of any fight with the burglars, we would not stir from our rooms. I can tell you I felt awfully nervous. I couldn't get to sleep for ages and ages. Then, when I did, I did not wake till morning. The night had passed absolutely quietly. Nothing out of the common had happened. There had not been the slightest noise. I awoke Sonia and my father. We dressed as quickly as we could, and rushed down to the drawing-room."

She paused dramatically.

"Well?" said the Duke.

"Well, it was done."

"What was done?" said the Duke.

"Everything," said Germaine. "Pictures had gone, tapestries had gone, cabinets had gone, and the clock had gone."

"And the coronet too?" said the Duke.

"Oh, no. That was at the Bank of France. And it was doubtless to make up for not getting it that Lupin stole your portrait. At any rate he didn't say that he was going to steal it in his letter."

"But, come! this is incredible. Had he hypnotized the corporal and the six soldiers? Or had he murdered them all?" said the Duke.

"Corporal? There wasn't any corporal, and there weren't any soldiers. The corporal was Lupin, and the soldiers were part of his gang," said Germaine.

"I don't understand," said the Duke. "The colonel promised your father a corporal and six men. Didn't they come?"

"They came to the railway station all right," said Germaine. "But you know the little inn half-way between the railway station and the chateau? They stopped to drink there, and at eleven o'clock next morning one of the villagers found all seven of them, along with the footman who was guiding them to the chateau, sleeping like logs in the little wood half a mile from the inn. Of course the innkeeper could not explain when their wine was drugged. He could only tell us that a motorist, who had stopped at the inn to get some supper, had called the soldiers in and insisted on standing them drinks. They had seemed a little fuddled before they left the inn, and the motorist had insisted on driving them to the chateau in his car. When the drug took effect he simply carried them out of it one by one, and laid them in the wood to sleep it off."

"Lupin seems to have made a thorough job of it, anyhow,"

said the Duke.

"I should think so," said Germaine. "Guerchard was sent down from Paris; but he could not find a single clue. It was not for want of trying, for he hates Lupin. It's a regular fight between them, and so far Lupin has scored every point."

"He must be as clever as they make 'em," said the Duke.

"He is," said Germaine. "And do you know, I shouldn't be at all surprised if he's in the neighbourhood now."

"What on earth do you mean?" said the Duke.

"I'm not joking," said Germaine. "Odd things are happening. Some one has been changing the place of things. That silver statuette now—it was on the cabinet, and we found it moved to the piano. Yet nobody had touched it. And look at this window. Some one has broken a pane in it just at the height of the fastening."

"The deuce they have!" said the Duke.

CHAPTER IV
THE DUKE INTERVENES

The Duke rose, came to the window, and looked at the broken pane. He stepped out on to the terrace and looked at the turf; then he came back into the room.

"This looks serious," he said. "That pane has not been broken at all. If it had been broken, the pieces of glass would be lying on the turf. It has been cut out. We must warn your father to look to his treasures."

"I told you so," said Germaine. "I said that Arsene Lupin was in the neighbourhood."

"Arsene Lupin is a very capable man," said the Duke, smiling. "But there's no reason to suppose that he's the only burglar in France or even in Ile-et-Vilaine."

"I'm sure that he's in the neighbourhood. I have a feeling that he is," said Germaine stubbornly.

The Duke shrugged his shoulders, and said a smile: "Far be it from me to contradict you. A woman's intuition is always—well, it's always a woman's intuition."

He came back into the hall, and as he did so the door opened and a shock-headed man in the dress of a gamekeeper stood on the threshold.

"There are visitors to see you, Mademoiselle Germaine," he

said, in a very deep bass voice.

"What! Are you answering the door, Firmin?" said Germaine.

"Yes, Mademoiselle Germaine: there's only me to do it. All the servants have started for the station, and my wife and I are going to see after the family to-night and to-morrow morning. Shall I show these gentlemen in?"

"Who are they?" said Germaine.

"Two gentlemen who say they have an appointment."

"What are their names?" said Germaine.

"They are two gentlemen. I don't know what their names are. I've no memory for names."

"That's an advantage to any one who answers doors," said the Duke, smiling at the stolid Firmin.

"Well, it can't be the two Charolais again. It's not time for them to come back. I told them papa would not be back yet," said Germaine.

"No, it can't be them, Mademoiselle Germaine," said Firmin, with decision.

"Very well; show them in," she said.

Firmin went out, leaving the door open behind him; and they heard his hob-nailed boots clatter and squeak on the stone floor of the outer hall.

"Charolais?" said the Duke idly. "I don't know the name. Who are they?"

"A little while ago Alfred announced two gentlemen. I thought they were Georges and Andre du Buit, for they promised to come

to tea. I told Alfred to show them in, and to my surprise there appeared two horrible provincials. I never—Oh!"

She stopped short, for there, coming through the door, were the two Charolais, father and son.

M. Charolais pressed his motor-cap to his bosom, and bowed low. "Once more I salute you, mademoiselle," he said.

His son bowed, and revealed behind him another young man.

"My second son. He has a chemist's shop," said M. Charolais, waving a large red hand at the young man.

The young man, also blessed with the family eyes, set close together, entered the hall and bowed to the two girls. The Duke raised his eyebrows ever so slightly.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen," said Germaine, "but my father has not yet returned."

"Please don't apologize. There is not the slightest need," said M. Charolais; and he and his two sons settled themselves down on three chairs, with the air of people who had come to make a considerable stay.

For a moment, Germaine, taken aback by their coolness, was speechless; then she said hastily: "Very likely he won't be back for another hour. I shouldn't like you to waste your time."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said M. Charolais, with an indulgent air; and turning to the Duke, he added, "However, while we're waiting, if you're a member of the family, sir, we might perhaps discuss the least you will take for the motor-car."

"I'm sorry," said the Duke, "but I have nothing to do with it."

Before M. Charolais could reply the door opened, and Firmin's deep voice said:

"Will you please come in here, sir?"

A third young man came into the hall.

"What, you here, Bernard?" said M. Charolais. "I told you to wait at the park gates."

"I wanted to see the car too," said Bernard.

"My third son. He is destined for the Bar," said M. Charolais, with a great air of paternal pride.

"But how many are there?" said Germaine faintly.

Before M. Charolais could answer, Firmin once more appeared on the threshold.

"The master's just come back, miss," he said.

"Thank goodness for that!" said Germaine; and turning to M. Charolais, she added, "If you will come with me, gentlemen, I will take you to my father, and you can discuss the price of the car at once."

As she spoke she moved towards the door. M. Charolais and his sons rose and made way for her. The father and the two eldest sons made haste to follow her out of the room. But Bernard lingered behind, apparently to admire the bric-a-brac on the cabinets. With infinite quickness he grabbed two objects off the nearest, and followed his brothers. The Duke sprang across the hall in three strides, caught him by the arm on the very threshold, jerked him back into the hall, and shut the door.

"No you don't, my young friend," he said sharply.

"Don't what?" said Bernard, trying to shake off his grip.

"You've taken a cigarette-case," said the Duke.

"No, no, I haven't—nothing of the kind!" stammered Bernard.

The Duke grasped the young man's left wrist, plunged his hand into the motor-cap which he was carrying, drew out of it a silver cigarette-case, and held it before his eyes.

Bernard turned pale to the lips. His frightened eyes seemed about to leap from their sockets.

"It—it—was a m-m-m-mistake," he stammered.

The Duke shifted his grip to his collar, and thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat. Bernard, helpless in his grip, and utterly taken aback by his quickness, made no resistance.

The Duke drew out a morocco case, and said: "Is this a mistake too?"

"Heavens! The pendant!" cried Sonia, who was watching the scene with parted lips and amazed eyes.

Bernard dropped on his knees and clasped his hands.

"Forgive me!" he cried, in a choking voice. "Forgive me! Don't tell any one! For God's sake, don't tell any one!"

And the tears came streaming from his eyes.

"You young rogue!" said the Duke quietly.

"I'll never do it again—never! Oh, have pity on me! If my father knew! Oh, let me off!" cried Bernard.

The Duke hesitated, and looked down on him, frowning and pulling at his moustache. Then, more quickly than one would have expected from so careless a trifler, his mind was made up.

"All right," he said slowly. "Just for this once … be off with you." And he jerked him to his feet and almost threw him into the outer hall.

"Thanks! … oh, thanks!" said Bernard.

The Duke shut the door and looked at Sonia, breathing quickly.

"Well? Did you ever see anything like that? That young fellow will go a long way. The cheek of the thing! Right under our very eyes! And this pendant, too: it would have been a pity to lose it. Upon my word, I ought to have handed him over to the police."

"No, no!" cried Sonia. "You did quite right to let him off—quite right."

The Duke set the pendant on the ledge of the bureau, and came down the hall to Sonia.

"What's the matter?" he said gently. "You're quite pale."

"It has upset me … that unfortunate boy," said Sonia; and her eyes were swimming with tears.

"Do you pity the young rogue?" said the Duke.

"Yes; it's dreadful. His eyes were so terrified, and so boyish. And, to be caught like that … stealing … in the act. Oh, it's hateful!"

"Come, come, how sensitive you are!" said the Duke, in a soothing, almost caressing tone. His eyes, resting on her charming, troubled face, were glowing with a warm admiration.

"Yes; it's silly," said Sonia; "but you noticed his eyes—the hunted look in them? You pitied him, didn't you? For you are

kind at bottom."

"Why at bottom?" said the Duke.

"Oh, I said at bottom because you look sarcastic, and at first sight you're so cold. But often that's only the mask of those who have suffered the most.... They are the most indulgent," said Sonia slowly, hesitating, picking her words.

"Yes, I suppose they are," said the Duke thoughtfully.

"It's because when one has suffered one understands.... Yes: one understands," said Sonia.

There was a pause. The Duke's eyes still rested on her face. The admiration in them was mingled with compassion.

"You're very unhappy here, aren't you?" he said gently.

"Me? Why?" said Sonia quickly.

"Your smile is so sad, and your eyes so timid," said the Duke slowly. "You're just like a little child one longs to protect. Are you quite alone in the world?"

His eyes and tones were full of pity; and a faint flush mantled Sonia's cheeks.

"Yes, I'm alone," she said.

"But have you no relations—no friends?" said the Duke.

"No," said Sonia.

"I don't mean here in France, but in your own country.... Surely you have some in Russia?"

"No, not a soul. You see, my father was a Revolutionist. He died in Siberia when I was a baby. And my mother, she died too—in Paris. She had fled from Russia. I was two years old when

she died."

"It must be hard to be alone like that," said the Duke.

"No," said Sonia, with a faint smile, "I don't mind having no relations. I grew used to that so young … so very young. But what is hard—but you'll laugh at me—"

"Heaven forbid!" said the Duke gravely.

"Well, what is hard is, never to get a letter … an envelope that one opens … from some one who thinks about one—"

She paused, and then added gravely: "But I tell myself that it's nonsense. I have a certain amount of philosophy."

She smiled at him—an adorable child's smile.

The Duke smiled too. "A certain amount of philosophy," he said softly. "You look like a philosopher!"

As they stood looking at one another with serious eyes, almost with eyes that probed one another's souls, the drawing-room door flung open, and Germaine's harsh voice broke on their ears.

"You're getting quite impossible, Sonia!" she cried. "It's absolutely useless telling you anything. I told you particularly to pack my leather writing-case in my bag with your own hand. I happen to open a drawer, and what do I see? My leather writing-case."

"I'm sorry," said Sonia. "I was going—"

"Oh, there's no need to bother about it. I'll see after it myself," said Germaine. "But upon my word, you might be one of our guests, seeing how easily you take things. You're negligence personified."

"Come, Germaine … a mere oversight," said the Duke, in a coaxing tone.

"Now, excuse me, Jacques; but you've got an unfortunate habit of interfering in household matters. You did it only the other day. I can no longer say a word to a servant—"

"Germaine!" said the Duke, in sharp protest.

Germaine turned from him to Sonia, and pointed to a packet of envelopes and some letters, which Bernard Charolais had knocked off the table, and said, "Pick up those envelopes and letters, and bring everything to my room, and be quick about it!"

She flung out of the room, and slammed the door behind her.

Sonia seemed entirely unmoved by the outburst: no flush of mortification stained her cheeks, her lips did not quiver. She stooped to pick up the fallen papers.

"No, no; let me, I beg you," said the Duke, in a tone of distress. And dropping on one knee, he began to gather together the fallen papers. He set them on the table, and then he said: "You mustn't mind what Germaine says. She's—she's—she's all right at heart. It's her manner. She's always been happy, and had everything she wanted. She's been spoiled, don't you know. Those kind of people never have any consideration for any one else. You mustn't let her outburst hurt you."

"Oh, but I don't. I don't really," protested Sonia.

"I'm glad of that," said the Duke. "It isn't really worth noticing."

He drew the envelopes and unused cards into a packet, and

handed them to her.

"There!" he said, with a smile. "That won't be too heavy for you."

"Thank you," said Sonia, taking it from him.

"Shall I carry them for you?" said the Duke.

"No, thank you, your Grace," said Sonia.

With a quick, careless, almost irresponsible movement, he caught her hand, bent down, and kissed it. A great wave of rosy colour flowed over her face, flooding its whiteness to her hair and throat. She stood for a moment turned to stone; she put her hand to her heart. Then on hasty, faltering feet she went to the door, opened it, paused on the threshold, turned and looked back at him, and vanished.

CHAPTER V
A LETTER FROM LUPIN

The Duke stood for a while staring thoughtfully at the door through which Sonia had passed, a faint smile playing round his lips. He crossed the hall to the Chippendale bureau, took a cigarette from a box which stood on the ledge of it, beside the morocco case which held the pendant, lighted it, and went slowly out on to the terrace. He crossed it slowly, paused for a moment on the edge of it, and looked across the stretch of country with musing eyes, which saw nothing of its beauty. Then he turned to the right, went down a flight of steps to the lower terrace, crossed the lawn, and took a narrow path which led into the heart of a shrubbery of tall deodoras. In the middle of it he came to one of those old stone benches, moss-covered and weather-stained, which adorn the gardens of so many French chateaux. It faced a marble basin from which rose the slender column of a pattering fountain. The figure of a Cupid danced joyously on a tall pedestal to the right of the basin. The Duke sat down on the bench, and was still, with that rare stillness which only comes of nerves in perfect harmony, his brow knitted in careful thought. Now and again the frown cleared from his face, and his intent features relaxed into a faint smile, a smile of pleasant memory. Once he rose, walked round the fountains frowning, came back

to the bench, and sat down again. The early September dusk was upon him when at last he rose and with quick steps took his way through the shrubbery, with the air of a man whose mind, for good or ill, was at last made up.

When he came on to the upper terrace his eyes fell on a group which stood at the further corner, near the entrance of the chateau, and he sauntered slowly up to it.

In the middle of it stood M. Gournay-Martin, a big, round, flabby hulk of a man. He was nearly as red in the face as M. Charolais; and he looked a great deal redder owing to the extreme whiteness of the whiskers which stuck out on either side of his vast expanse of cheek. As he came up, it struck the Duke as rather odd that he should have the Charolais eyes, set close together; any one who did not know that they were strangers to one another might have thought it a family likeness.

The millionaire was waving his hands and roaring after the manner of a man who has cultivated the art of brow-beating those with whom he does business; and as the Duke neared the group, he caught the words:

"No; that's the lowest I'll take. Take it or leave it. You can say Yes, or you can say Good-bye; and I don't care a hang which."

"It's very dear," said M. Charolais, in a mournful tone.

"Dear!" roared M. Gournay-Martin. "I should like to see any one else sell a hundred horse-power car for eight hundred pounds. Why, my good sir, you're having me!"

"No, no," protested M. Charolais feebly.

"I tell you you're having me," roared M. Gournay-Martin. "I'm letting you have a magnificent car for which I paid thirteen hundred pounds for eight hundred! It's scandalous the way you've beaten me down!"

"No, no," protested M. Charolais.

He seemed frightened out of his life by the vehemence of the big man.

"You wait till you've seen how it goes," said M. Gournay-Martin.

"Eight hundred is very dear," said M. Charolais.

"Come, come! You're too sharp, that's what you are. But don't say any more till you've tried the car."

He turned to his chauffeur, who stood by watching the struggle with an appreciative grin on his brown face, and said: "Now, Jean, take these gentlemen to the garage, and run them down to the station. Show them what the car can do. Do whatever they ask you—everything."

He winked at Jean, turned again to M. Charolais, and said: "You know, M. Charolais, you're too good a man of business for me. You're hot stuff, that's what you are—hot stuff. You go along and try the car. Good-bye—good-bye."

The four Charolais murmured good-bye in deep depression, and went off with Jean, wearing something of the air of whipped dogs. When they had gone round the corner the millionaire turned to the Duke and said, with a chuckle: "He'll buy the car all right—had him fine!"

"No business success of yours could surprise me," said the Duke blandly, with a faint, ironical smile.

M. Gournay-Martin's little pig's eyes danced and sparkled; and the smiles flowed over the distended skin of his face like little ripples over a stagnant pool, reluctantly. It seemed to be too tightly stretched for smiles.

"The car's four years old," he said joyfully. "He'll give me eight hundred for it, and it's not worth a pipe of tobacco. And eight hundred pounds is just the price of a little Watteau I've had my eye on for some time—a first-class investment."

They strolled down the terrace, and through one of the windows into the hall. Firmin had lighted the lamps, two of them. They made but a small oasis of light in a desert of dim hall. The millionaire let himself down very gingerly into an Empire chair, as if he feared, with excellent reason, that it might collapse under his weight.

"Well, my dear Duke," he said, "you don't ask me the result of my official lunch or what the minister said."

"Is there any news?" said the Duke carelessly.

"Yes. The decree will be signed to-morrow. You can consider yourself decorated. I hope you feel a happy man," said the millionaire, rubbing his fat hands together with prodigious satisfaction.

"Oh, charmed—charmed," said the Duke, with entire indifference.

"As for me, I'm delighted—delighted," said the millionaire.

"I was extremely keen on your being decorated. After that, and after a volume or two of travels, and after you've published your grandfather's letters with a good introduction, you can begin to think of the Academy."

"The Academy!" said the Duke, startled from his usual coolness. "But I've no title to become an Academician."

"How, no title?" said the millionaire solemnly; and his little eyes opened wide. "You're a duke."

"There's no doubt about that," said the Duke, watching him with admiring curiosity.

"I mean to marry my daughter to a worker—a worker, my dear Duke," said the millionaire, slapping his big left hand with his bigger right. "I've no prejudices—not I. I wish to have for son-in-law a duke who wears the Order of the Legion of Honour, and belongs to the Academie Francaise, because that is personal merit. I'm no snob."

A gentle, irrepressible laugh broke from the Duke.

"What are you laughing at?" said the millionaire, and a sudden lowering gloom overspread his beaming face.

"Nothing—nothing," said the Duke quietly. "Only you're so full of surprises."

"I've startled you, have I? I thought I should. It's true that I'm full of surprises. It's my knowledge. I understand so much. I understand business, and I love art, pictures, a good bargain, bric-a-brac, fine tapestry. They're first-class investments. Yes, certainly I do love the beautiful. And I don't want to boast, but I

understand it. I have taste, and I've something better than taste; I have a flair, the dealer's flair."

"Yes, your collections, especially your collection in Paris, prove it," said the Duke, stifling a yawn.

"And yet you haven't seen the finest thing I have—the coronet of the Princesse de Lamballe. It's worth half a million francs."

"So I've heard," said the Duke, a little wearily. "I don't wonder that Arsene Lupin envied you it."

The Empire chair creaked as the millionaire jumped.

"Don't speak of the swine!" he roared. "Don't mention his name before me."

"Germaine showed me his letter," said the Duke. "It is amusing."

"His letter! The blackguard! I just missed a fit of apoplexy from it," roared the millionaire. "I was in this very hall where we are now, chatting quietly, when all at once in comes Firmin, and hands me a letter."

He was interrupted by the opening of the door. Firmin came clumping down the room, and said in his deep voice, "A letter for you, sir."

"Thank you," said the millionaire, taking the letter, and, as he fitted his eye-glass into his eye, he went on, "Yes, Firmin brought me a letter of which the handwriting,"—he raised the envelope he was holding to his eyes, and bellowed, "Good heavens!"

"What's the matter?" said the Duke, jumping in his chair at the sudden, startling burst of sound.

"The handwriting!—the handwriting!—it's THE SAME HANDWRITING!" gasped the millionaire. And he let himself fall heavily backwards against the back of his chair.

There was a crash. The Duke had a vision of huge arms and legs waving in the air as the chair-back gave. There was another crash. The chair collapsed. The huge bulk banged to the floor.

The laughter of the Duke rang out uncontrollably. He caught one of the waving arms, and jerked the flabby giant to his feet with an ease which seemed to show that his muscles were of steel.

"Come," he said, laughing still. "This is nonsense! What do you mean by the same handwriting? It can't be."

"It is the same handwriting. Am I likely to make a mistake about it?" spluttered the millionaire. And he tore open the envelope with an air of frenzy.

He ran his eyes over it, and they grew larger and larger—they grew almost of an average size.

"Listen," he said "listen:"

> "DEAR SIR,"
>
> "My collection of pictures, which I had the pleasure of starting three years ago with some of your own, only contains, as far as Old Masters go, one Velasquez, one Rembrandt, and three paltry Rubens. You have a great many more. Since it is a shame such masterpieces should be in your hands, I propose to appropriate them; and I shall set about a respectful acquisition of them in your Paris house

tomorrow morning."

"Yours very sincerely,"

"ARSENE LUPIN."

"He's humbugging," said the Duke.

"Wait! wait!" gasped the millionaire. "There's a postscript. Listen:"

> "P.S.—You must understand that since you have been keeping the coronet of the Princesse de Lamballe during these three years, I shall avail myself of the same occasion to compel you to restore that piece of jewellery to me.—A. L."

"The thief! The scoundrel! I'm choking!" gasped the millionaire, clutching at his collar.

To judge from the blackness of his face, and the way he staggered and dropped on to a couch, which was fortunately stronger than the chair, he was speaking the truth.

"Firmin! Firmin!" shouted the Duke. "A glass of water! Quick! Your master's ill."

He rushed to the side of the millionaire, who gasped: "Telephone! Telephone to the Prefecture of Police! Be quick!"

The Duke loosened his collar with deft fingers; tore a Van Loo fan from its case hanging on the wall, and fanned him furiously. Firmin came clumping into the room with a glass of water in his hand.

The drawing-room door opened, and Germaine and Sonia, alarmed by the Duke's shout, hurried in.

"Quick! Your smelling-salts!" said the Duke.

Sonia ran across the hall, opened one of the drawers in the Oriental cabinet, and ran to the millionaire with a large bottle of smelling-salts in her hand. The Duke took it from her, and applied it to the millionaire's nose. The millionaire sneezed thrice with terrific violence. The Duke snatched the glass from Firmin and dashed the water into his host's purple face. The millionaire gasped and spluttered.

Germaine stood staring helplessly at her gasping sire.

"Whatever's the matter?" she said.

"It's this letter," said the Duke. "A letter from Lupin."

"I told you so—I said that Lupin was in the neighbourhood," cried Germaine triumphantly.

"Firmin—where's Firmin?" said the millionaire, dragging himself upright. He seemed to have recovered a great deal of his voice. "Oh, there you are!"

He jumped up, caught the gamekeeper by the shoulder, and shook him furiously.

"This letter. Where did it come from? Who brought it?" he roared.

"It was in the letter-box—the letter-box of the lodge at the bottom of the park. My wife found it there," said Firmin, and he twisted out of the millionaire's grasp.

"Just as it was three years ago," roared the millionaire, with an air of desperation. "It's exactly the same coup. Oh, what a catastrophe! What a catastrophe!"

He made as if to tear out his hair; then, remembering its scantiness, refrained.

"Now, come, it's no use losing your head," said the Duke, with quiet firmness. "If this letter isn't a hoax—"

"Hoax?" bellowed the millionaire. "Was it a hoax three years ago?"

"Very good," said the Duke. "But if this robbery with which you're threatened is genuine, it's just childish."

"How?" said the millionaire.

"Look at the date of the letter—Sunday, September the third. This letter was written to-day."

"Yes. Well, what of it?" said the millionaire.

"Look at the letter: 'I shall set about a respectful acquisition of them in your Paris house to-morrow morning'—to-morrow morning."

"Yes, yes; 'to-morrow morning'—what of it?" said the millionaire.

"One of two things," said the Duke. "Either it's a hoax, and we needn't bother about it; or the threat is genuine, and we have the time to stop the robbery."

"Of course we have. Whatever was I thinking of?" said the millionaire. And his anguish cleared from his face.

"For once in a way our dear Lupin's fondness for warning people will have given him a painful jar," said the Duke.

"Come on! let me get at the telephone," cried the millionaire.

"But the telephone's no good," said Sonia quickly.

"No good! Why?" roared the millionaire, dashing heavily across the room to it.

"Look at the time," said Sonia; "the telephone doesn't work as late as this. It's Sunday."

The millionaire stopped dead.

"It's true. It's appalling," he groaned.

"But that doesn't matter. You can always telegraph," said Germaine.

"But you can't. It's impossible," said Sonia. "You can't get a message through. It's Sunday; and the telegraph offices shut at twelve o'clock."

"Oh, what a Government!" groaned the millionaire. And he sank down gently on a chair beside the telephone, and mopped the beads of anguish from his brow. They looked at him, and they looked at one another, cudgelling their brains for yet another way of communicating with the Paris police.

"Hang it all!" said the Duke. "There must be some way out of the difficulty."

"What way?" said the millionaire.

The Duke did not answer. He put his hands in his pockets and walked impatiently up and down the hall. Germaine sat down on a chair. Sonia put her hands on the back of a couch, and leaned forward, watching him. Firmin stood by the door, whither he had retired to be out of the reach of his excited master, with a look of perplexity on his stolid face. They all watched the Duke with the air of people waiting for an oracle to deliver its message. The

millionaire kept mopping the beads of anguish from his brow. The more he thought of his impending loss, the more freely he perspired. Germaine's maid, Irma, came to the door leading into the outer hall, which Firmin, according to his usual custom, had left open, and peered in wonder at the silent group.

"I have it!" cried the Duke at last. "There is a way out."

"What is it?" said the millionaire, rising and coming to the middle of the hall.

"What time is it?" said the Duke, pulling out his watch.

The millionaire pulled out his watch. Germaine pulled out hers. Firmin, after a struggle, produced from some pocket difficult of access an object not unlike a silver turnip. There was a brisk dispute between Germaine and the millionaire about which of their watches was right. Firmin, whose watch apparently did not agree with the watch of either of them, made his deep voice heard above theirs. The Duke came to the conclusion that it must be a few minutes past seven.

"It's seven or a few minutes past," he said sharply. "Well, I'm going to take a car and hurry off to Paris. I ought to get there, bar accidents, between two and three in the morning, just in time to inform the police and catch the burglars in the very midst of their burglary. I'll just get a few things together."

So saying, he rushed out of the hall.

"Excellent! excellent!" said the millionaire. "Your young man is a man of resource, Germaine. It seems almost a pity that he's a duke. He'd do wonders in the building trade. But I'm going to

Paris too, and you're coming with me. I couldn't wait idly here, to save my life. And I can't leave you here, either. This scoundrel may be going to make a simultaneous attempt on the chateau—not that there's much here that I really value. There's that statuette that moved, and the pane cut out of the window. I can't leave you two girls with burglars in the house. After all, there's the sixty horse-power and the thirty horse-power car—there'll be lots of room for all of us."

"Oh, but it's nonsense, papa; we shall get there before the servants," said Germaine pettishly. "Think of arriving at an empty house in the dead of night."

"Nonsense!" said the millionaire. "Hurry off and get ready. Your bag ought to be packed. Where are my keys? Sonia, where are my keys—the keys of the Paris house?"

"They're in the bureau," said Sonia.

"Well, see that I don't go without them. Now hurry up. Firmin, go and tell Jean that we shall want both cars. I will drive one, the Duke the other. Jean must stay with you and help guard the chateau."

So saying he bustled out of the hall, driving the two girls before him.

CHAPTER VI
AGAIN THE CHAROLAIS

Hardly had the door closed behind the millionaire when the head of M. Charolais appeared at one of the windows opening on to the terrace. He looked round the empty hall, whistled softly, and stepped inside. Inside of ten seconds his three sons came in through the windows, and with them came Jean, the millionaire's chauffeur.

"Take the door into the outer hall, Jean," said M. Charolais, in a low voice. "Bernard, take that door into the drawing-room. Pierre and Louis, help me go through the drawers. The whole family is going to Paris, and if we're not quick we shan't get the cars."

"That comes of this silly fondness for warning people of a coup," growled Jean, as he hurried to the door of the outer hall. "It would have been so simple to rob the Paris house without sending that infernal letter. It was sure to knock them all silly."

"What harm can the letter do, you fool?" said M. Charolais. "It's Sunday. We want them knocked silly for to-morrow, to get hold of the coronet. Oh, to get hold of that coronet! It must be in Paris. I've been ransacking this chateau for hours."

Jean opened the door of the outer hall half an inch, and glued his eyes to it. Bernard had done the same with the door

opening into the drawing-room. M. Charolais, Pierre, and Louis were opening drawers, ransacking them, and shutting them with infinite quickness and noiselessly.

"Bureau! Which is the bureau? The place is stuffed with bureaux!" growled M. Charolais. "I must have those keys."

"That plain thing with the brass handles in the middle on the left—that's a bureau," said Bernard softly.

"Why didn't you say so?" growled M. Charolais.

He dashed to it, and tried it. It was locked.

"Locked, of course! Just my luck! Come and get it open, Pierre. Be smart!"

The son he had described as an engineer came quickly to the bureau, fitting together as he came the two halves of a small jemmy. He fitted it into the top of the flap. There was a crunch, and the old lock gave. He opened the flap, and he and M. Charolais pulled open drawer after drawer.

"Quick! Here's that fat old fool!" said Jean, in a hoarse, hissing whisper.

He moved down the hall, blowing out one of the lamps as he passed it. In the seventh drawer lay a bunch of keys. M. Charolais snatched it up, glanced at it, took a bunch of keys from his own pocket, put it in the drawer, closed it, closed the flap, and rushed to the window. Jean and his sons were already out on the terrace.

M. Charolais was still a yard from the window when the door into the outer hall opened and in came M. Gournay-Martin.

He caught a glimpse of a back vanishing through the window,

and bellowed: "Hi! A man! A burglar! Firmin! Firmin!"

He ran blundering down the hall, tangled his feet in the fragments of the broken chair, and came sprawling a thundering cropper, which knocked every breath of wind out of his capacious body. He lay flat on his face for a couple of minutes, his broad back wriggling convulsively—a pathetic sight!—in the painful effort to get his breath back. Then he sat up, and with perfect frankness burst into tears. He sobbed and blubbered, like a small child that has hurt itself, for three or four minutes. Then, having recovered his magnificent voice, he bellowed furiously: "Firmin! Firmin! Charmerace! Charmerace!"

Then he rose painfully to his feet, and stood staring at the open windows.

Presently he roared again: "Firmin! Firmin! Charmerace! Charmerace!"

He kept looking at the window with terrified eyes, as though he expected somebody to step in and cut his throat from ear to ear.

"Firmin! Firmin! Charmerace! Charmerace!" he bellowed again.

The Duke came quietly into the hall, dressed in a heavy motor-coat, his motor-cap on his head, and carrying a kit-bag in his hand.

"Did I hear you call?" he said.

"Call?" said the millionaire. "I shouted. The burglars are here already. I've just seen one of them. He was bolting through the

middle window."

The Duke raised his eyebrows.

"Nerves," he said gently—"nerves."

"Nerves be hanged!" said the millionaire. "I tell you I saw him as plainly as I see you."

"Well, you can't see me at all, seeing that you're lighting an acre and a half of hall with a single lamp," said the Duke, still in a tone of utter incredulity.

"It's that fool Firmin! He ought to have lighted six. Firmin! Firmin!" bellowed the millionaire.

They listened for the sonorous clumping of the promoted gamekeeper's boots, but they did not hear it. Evidently Firmin was still giving his master's instructions about the cars to Jean.

"Well, we may as well shut the windows, anyhow," said the Duke, proceeding to do so. "If you think Firmin would be any good, you might post him in this hall with a gun to-night. There could be no harm in putting a charge of small shot into the legs of these ruffians. He has only to get one of them, and the others will go for their lives. Yet I don't like leaving you and Germaine in this big house with only Firmin to look after you."

"I shouldn't like it myself, and I'm not going to chance it," growled the millionaire. "We're going to motor to Paris along with you, and leave Jean to help Firmin fight these burglars. Firmin's all right—he's an old soldier. He fought in '70. Not that I've much belief in soldiers against this cursed Lupin, after the way he dealt with that corporal and his men three years ago."

"I'm glad you're coming to Paris," said the Duke. "It'll be a weight off my mind. I'd better drive the limousine, and you take the landaulet."

"That won't do," said the millionaire. "Germaine won't go in the limousine. You know she has taken a dislike to it."

"Nevertheless, I'd better bucket on to Paris, and let you follow slowly with Germaine. The sooner I get to Paris the better for your collection. I'll take Mademoiselle Kritchnoff with me, and, if you like, Irma, though the lighter I travel the sooner I shall get there."

"No, I'll take Irma and Germaine," said the millionaire. "Germaine would prefer to have Irma with her, in case you had an accident. She wouldn't like to get to Paris and have to find a fresh maid."

The drawing-room door opened, and in came Germaine, followed by Sonia and Irma. They wore motor-cloaks and hoods and veils. Sonia and Irma were carrying hand-bags.

"I think it's extremely tiresome your dragging us off to Paris like this in the middle of the night," said Germaine pettishly.

"Do you?" said the millionaire. "Well, then, you'll be interested to hear that I've just seen a burglar here in this very room. I frightened him, and he bolted through the window on to the terrace."

"He was greenish-pink, slightly tinged with yellow," said the Duke softly.

"Greenish-pink? Oh, do stop your jesting, Jacques! Is this a

time for idiocy?" cried Germaine, in a tone of acute exasperation.

"It was the dim light which made your father see him in those colours. In a bright light, I think he would have been an Alsatian blue," said the Duke suavely.

"You'll have to break yourself of this silly habit of trifling, my dear Duke, if ever you expect to be a member of the Academie Francaise," said the millionaire with some acrimony. "I tell you I did see a burglar."

"Yes, yes. I admitted it frankly. It was his colour I was talking about," said the Duke, with an ironical smile.

"Oh, stop your idiotic jokes! We're all sick to death of them!" said Germaine, with something of the fine fury which so often distinguished her father.

"There are times for all things," said the millionaire solemnly. "And I must say that, with the fate of my collection and of the coronet trembling in the balance, this does not seem to me a season for idle jests."

"I stand reproved," said the Duke; and he smiled at Sonia.

"My keys, Sonia—the keys of the Paris house," said the millionaire.

Sonia took her own keys from her pocket and went to the bureau. She slipped a key into the lock and tried to turn it. It would not turn; and she bent down to look at it.

"Why—why, some one's been tampering with the lock! It's broken!" she cried.

"I told you I'd seen a burglar!" cried the millionaire

triumphantly. "He was after the keys."

Sonia drew back the flap of the bureau and hastily pulled open the drawer in which the keys had been.

"They're here!" she cried, taking them out of the drawer and holding them up.

"Then I was just in time," said the millionaire. "I startled him in the very act of stealing the keys."

"I withdraw! I withdraw!" said the Duke. "You did see a burglar, evidently. But still I believe he was greenish-pink. They often are. However, you'd better give me those keys, Mademoiselle Sonia, since I'm to get to Paris first. I should look rather silly if, when I got there, I had to break into the house to catch the burglars."

Sonia handed the keys to the Duke. He contrived to take her little hand, keys and all, into his own, as he received them, and squeezed it. The light was too dim for the others to see the flush which flamed in her face. She went back and stood beside the bureau.

"Now, papa, are you going to motor to Paris in a thin coat and linen waistcoat? If we're going, we'd better go. You always do keep us waiting half an hour whenever we start to go anywhere," said Germaine firmly.

The millionaire bustled out of the room. With a gesture of impatience Germaine dropped into a chair. Irma stood waiting by the drawing-room door. Sonia sat down by the bureau.

There came a sharp patter of rain against the windows.

"Rain! It only wanted that! It's going to be perfectly beastly!" cried Germaine.

"Oh, well, you must make the best of it. At any rate you're well wrapped up, and the night is warm enough, though it is raining," said the Duke. "Still, I could have wished that Lupin confined his operations to fine weather." He paused, and added cheerfully, "But, after all, it will lay the dust."

They sat for three or four minutes in a dull silence, listening to the pattering of the rain against the panes. The Duke took his cigarette-case from his pocket and lighted a cigarette.

Suddenly he lost his bored air; his face lighted up; and he said joyfully: "Of course, why didn't I think of it? Why should we start from a pit of gloom like this? Let us have the proper illumination which our enterprise deserves."

With that he set about lighting all the lamps in the hall. There were lamps on stands, lamps on brackets, lamps on tables, and lamps which hung from the roof—old-fashioned lamps with new reservoirs, new lamps of what is called chaste design, brass lamps, silver lamps, and lamps in porcelain. The Duke lighted them one after another, patiently, missing none, with a cold perseverance. The operation was punctuated by exclamations from Germaine. They were all to the effect that she could not understand how he could be such a fool. The Duke paid no attention whatever to her. His face illumined with boyish glee, he lighted lamp after lamp.

Sonia watched him with a smiling admiration of the childlike

enthusiasm with which he performed the task. Even the stolid face of the ox-eyed Irma relaxed into grins, which she smoothed quickly out with a respectful hand.

The Duke had just lighted the twenty-second lamp when in bustled the millionaire.

"What's this? What's this?" he cried, stopping short, blinking.

"Just some more of Jacques' foolery!" cried Germaine in tones of the last exasperation.

"But, my dear Duke!—my dear Duke! The oil!—the oil!" cried the millionaire, in a tone of bitter distress. "Do you think it's my object in life to swell the Rockefeller millions? We never have more than six lamps burning unless we are holding a reception."

"I think it looks so cheerful," said the Duke, looking round on his handiwork with a beaming smile of satisfaction. "But where are the cars? Jean seems a deuce of a time bringing them round. Does he expect us to go to the garage through this rain? We'd better hurry him up. Come on; you've got a good carrying voice."

He caught the millionaire by the arm, hurried him through the outer hall, opened the big door of the chateau, and said: "Now shout!"

The millionaire looked at him, shrugged his shoulders, and said: "You don't beat about the bush when you want anything."

"Why should I?" said the Duke simply. "Shout, my good chap —shout!"

The millionaire raised his voice in a terrific bellow of "Jean! Jean! Firmin! Firmin!"

There was no answer.

CHAPTER VII
THE THEFT OF THE MOTOR-CARS

The night was very black; the rain pattered in their faces.

Again the millionaire bellowed: "Jean! Firmin! Firmin! Jean!"

No answer came out of the darkness, though his bellow echoed and re-echoed among the out-buildings and stables away on the left.

He turned and looked at the Duke and said uneasily, "What on earth can they be doing?"

"I can't conceive," said the Duke. "I suppose we must go and hunt them out."

"What! in this darkness, with these burglars about?" said the millionaire, starting back.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.