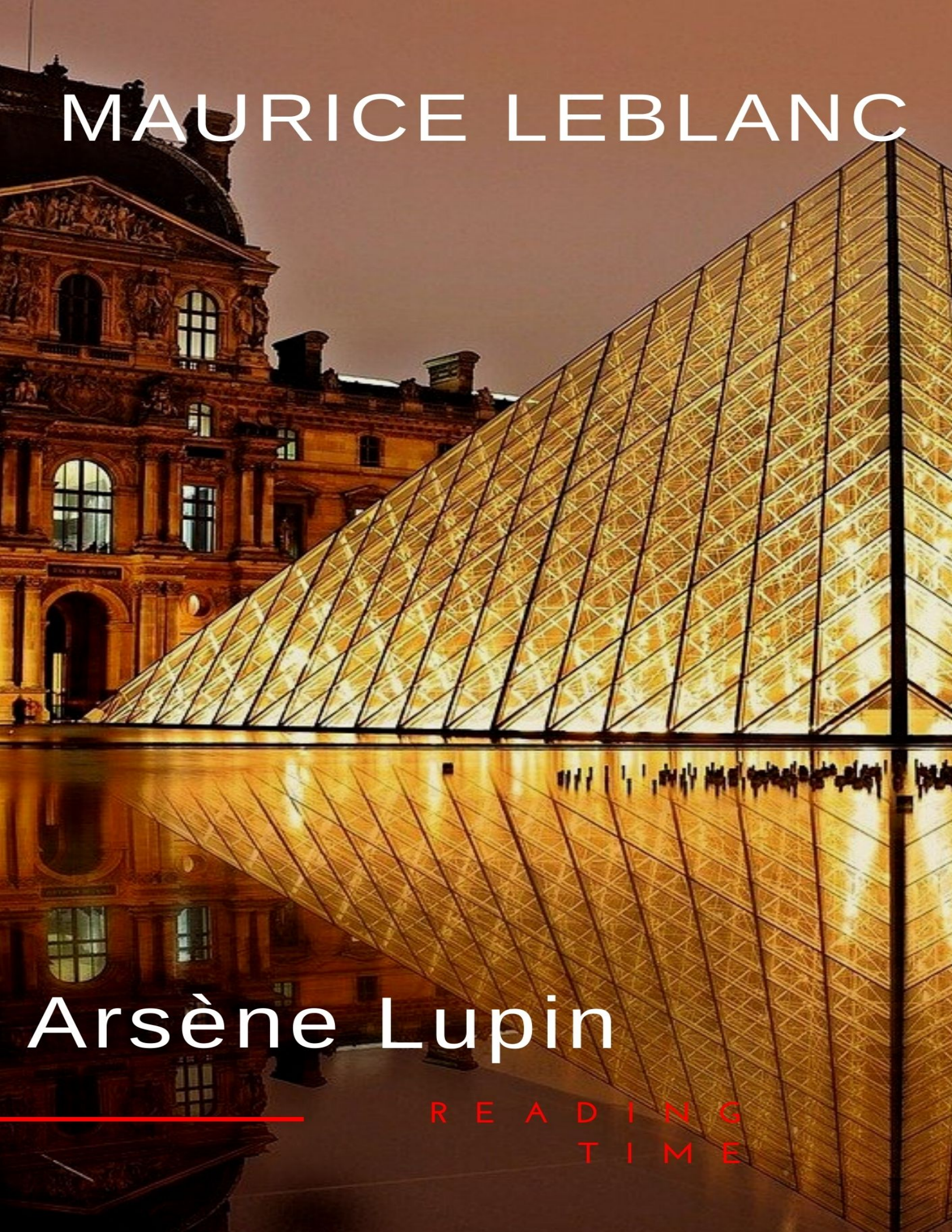




MAURICE LEBLANC

Arsène Lupin

READING
TIME

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Arsène Lupin

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Chapter 1

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 Vealeglise, 33, University Street—33, University Street."

"Vealeglise—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 Vealeglise 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 Veauglisse 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 Veauglisse 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 to-day," 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 2

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 3

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