

The Count's Millions

By

Emile Gaboriau

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The Count's Millions.....	2
Chapter 1.	3
Chapter 2.	16
Chapter 3.	35
Chapter 4.	48
Chapter 5.	67
Chapter 6.	82
Chapter 7.	94
Chapter 8.	102
Chapter 9.	110
Chapter 10.	119
Chapter 11.	126
Chapter 12.	134
Chapter 13.	143
Chapter 14.	155
Chapter 15.	163
Chapter 16.	174
Chapter 17.	186
Chapter 18.	195
Chapter 19.	204
Chapter 20.	218
Chapter 21.	227

Chapter 1.

It was a Thursday evening, the fifteenth of October; and although only half-past six o'clock, it had been dark for some time already. The weather was cold, and the sky was as black as ink, while the wind blew tempestuously, and the rain fell in torrents.

The servants at the Hotel de Chalusse, one of the most magnificent mansions in the Rue de Courcelles in Paris, were assembled in the porter's lodge, a little building comprising a couple of rooms standing on the right hand side of the great gateway. Here, as in all large mansions, the "concierge" or porter, M. Bourigeau, was a person of immense importance, always able and disposed to make any one who was inclined to doubt his authority, feel it in cruel fashion. As could be easily seen, he held all the other servants in his power. He could let them absent themselves without leave, if he chose, and conceal all returns late at night after the closing of public balls and wine-shops. Thus, it is needless to say that M. Bourigeau and his wife were treated by their fellow-servants with the most servile adulation.

The owner of the house was not at home that evening, so that M. Casimir, the count's head valet, was serving coffee for the benefit of all the retainers. And while the company sipped the fragrant beverage which had been generously tinctured with cognac, provided by the butler, they all united in abusing their common enemy, the master of the house. For the time being, a pert little waiting-maid, with an odious turn-up nose, had the floor. She was addressing her remarks to a big, burly, and rather insolent-looking fellow, who had been added only the evening before to the corps of footmen. "The place is really intolerable," she was saying. "The wages are high, the food of the very best, the livery just such as would show off a good-looking man to the best advantage, and Madame Leon, the housekeeper, who has entire charge of everything, is not too lynx-eyed."

"And the work?"

"A mere nothing. Think, there are eighteen of us to serve only two persons, the count and Mademoiselle Marguerite. But then there is never any pleasure, never any amusement here."

"What! is one bored then?"

"Bored to death. This grand house is worse than a tomb. No receptions, no dinners--nothing. Would you believe it, I have never seen the reception-rooms! They are always closed; and the furniture is dropping to pieces under its coverings. There are not three visitors in the course of a month."

She was evidently incensed, and the new footman seemed to share her indignation. "Why, how is it?" he exclaimed. "Is the count an owl? A man who's not yet fifty years old, and who's said to be worth several millions."

"Yes, millions; you may safely say it--and perhaps ten, perhaps twenty millions too."

"Then all the more reason why there should be something going on here. What does he do with himself alone, all the blessed day?"

"Nothing. He reads in the library, or wanders about the garden. Sometimes, in the evening, he drives with Mademoiselle Marguerite to the Bois de Boulogne in a closed carriage; but that seldom happens. Besides, there is no such thing as teasing the poor man. I've been in the house for six months, and I've never heard him say anything but: 'yes'; 'no'; 'do this'; 'very well'; 'retire.' You would think these are the only words he knows. Ask M. Casimir if I'm not right."

"Our gov'nor isn't very gay, that's a fact," responded the valet.

The footman was listening with a serious air, as if greatly interested in the character of the people whom he was to serve. "And mademoiselle," he asked, "what does she say to such an existence?"

"Bless me! during the six months she has been here, she has never once complained."

"If she is bored," added M. Casimir, "she conceals it bravely."

"Naturally enough," sneered the waiting-maid, with an ironical gesture; "each month that mademoiselle remains here, brings her too much money for her to complain."

By the laugh that greeted this reply, and by the looks the older servants exchanged, the new-comer must have realized that he had discovered the secret skeleton hidden in every house. "What! what!" he exclaimed, on fire with curiosity; "is there really anything in that? To tell the truth, I was inclined to doubt it."

His companions were evidently about to tell him all they knew, or rather all they thought they knew, when the front-door bell rang vigorously.

"There he comes!" exclaimed the concierge; "but he's in too much of a hurry; he'll have to wait awhile."

He sullenly pulled the cord, however; the heavy door swayed on its hinges, and a cab-driver, breathless and hatless, burst into the room, crying, "Help! help!"

The servants sprang to their feet.

"Make haste!" continued the driver. "I was bringing a gentleman here--you must know him. He's outside, in my vehicle----"

Without pausing to listen any longer, the servants rushed out, and the driver's incoherent explanation at once became intelligible. At the bottom of the cab, a roomy four-wheeler,

a man was lying all of a heap, speechless and motionless. He must have fallen forward, face downward, and owing to the jolting of the vehicle his head had slipped under the front seat.

"Poor devil!" muttered M. Casimir, "he must have had a stroke of apoplexy." The valet was peering into the vehicle as he spoke, and his comrades were approaching, when suddenly he drew back, uttering a cry of horror. "Ah, my God! it is the count!"

Whenever there is an accident in Paris, a throng of inquisitive spectators seems to spring up from the very pavement, and indeed more than fifty persons had already congregated round about the vehicle. This circumstance restored M. Casimir's composure; or, at least, some portion of it. "You must drive into the courtyard," he said, addressing the cabman. "M. Bourigeau, open the gate, if you please." And then, turning to another servant, he added:

"And you must make haste and fetch a physician--no matter who. Run to the nearest doctor, and don't return until you bring one with you."

The concierge had opened the gate, but the driver had disappeared; they called him, and on receiving no reply the valet seized the reins and skilfully guided the cab through the gateway.

Having escaped the scrutiny of the crowd, it now remained to remove the count from the vehicle, and this was a difficult task, on account of the singular position of his body; still, they succeeded at last, by opening both doors of the cab, the three strongest men uniting in their efforts. Then they placed him in a large arm-chair, carried him to his own room, and speedily had him undressed and in bed.

He had so far given no sign of life; and as he lay there with his head weighing heavily on the pillow, you might have thought that all was over. His most intimate friend would scarcely have recognized him. His features were swollen and discolored; his eyes were closed, and a dark purple circle, looking almost like a terrible bruise, extended round them. A spasm had twisted his lips, and his distorted mouth, which was drawn on one side and hung half open imparted a most sinister expression to his face. In spite of every precaution, he had been wounded as he was removed from the cab. His forehead had been grazed by a piece of iron, and a tiny stream of blood was trickling down upon his face. However, he still breathed; and by listening attentively, one could distinguish a faint rattling in his throat.

The servants, who had been so garrulous a few moments before, were silent now. They lingered in the room, exchanging glances of mute consternation. Their faces were pale and sad, and there were tears in the eyes of some of them. What was passing in their minds? Perhaps they were overcome by that unconquerable fear which sudden and unexpected death always provokes. Perhaps they unconsciously loved this master, whose

bread they ate. Perhaps their grief was only selfishness, and they were merely wondering what would become of them, where they should find another situation, and if it would prove a good one. Not knowing what to do, they talked together in subdued voices, each suggesting some remedy he had heard spoken of for such cases. The more sensible among them were proposing to go and inform mademoiselle or Madame Leon, whose rooms were on the floor above, when the rustling of a skirt against the door suddenly made them turn. The person whom they called "mademoiselle" was standing on the threshold.

Mademoiselle Marguerite was a beautiful young girl, about twenty years of age. She was a brunette of medium height, with big gloomy eyes shaded by thick eyebrows. Heavy masses of jet-black hair wreathed her lofty but rather sad and thoughtful forehead. There was something peculiar in her face--an expression of concentrated suffering, and a sort of proud resignation, mingled with timidity.

"What has happened?" she asked, gently. "What is the cause of all the noise I have heard? I have rung three times and the bell was not answered."

No one ventured to reply, and in her surprise she cast a hasty glance around. From where she stood, she could not see the bed stationed in an alcove; but she instantly noted the dejected attitude of the servants, the clothing scattered about the floor, and the disorder that pervaded this magnificent but severely furnished chamber, which was only lighted by the lamp which M. Bourigeau, the concierge, carried. A sudden dread seized her; she shuddered, and in a faltering voice she added: "Why are you all here? Speak, tell me what has happened."

M. Casimir stepped forward. "A great misfortune, mademoiselle, a terrible misfortune. The count----"

And he paused, frightened by what he was about to say.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite had understood him. She clasped both hands to her heart, as if she had received a fatal wound, and uttered the single word: "Lost!"

The next moment she turned as pale as death, her head drooped, her eyes closed, and she staggered as if about to fall. Two maids sprang forward to support her, but she gently repulsed them, murmuring, "Thanks! thanks! I am strong now."

She was, in fact, sufficiently strong to conquer her weakness. She summoned all her resolution, and, paler than a statue, with set teeth and dry, glittering eyes, she approached the alcove. She stood there for a moment perfectly motionless, murmuring a few unintelligible words; but at last, crushed by her sorrow, she sank upon her knees beside the bed, buried her face in the counterpane and wept.

Deeply moved by the sight of this despair, the servants held their breath, wondering how it would all end. It ended suddenly. The girl sprang from her knees, as if a gleam of hope had darted through her heart. "A physician!" she said, eagerly.

"I have sent for one, mademoiselle," replied M. Casimir. And hearing a voice and a sound of footsteps on the staircase, he added: "And fortunately, here he comes."

The doctor entered. He was a young man, although his head was almost quite bald. He was short, very thin, clean-shaven, and clad in black from head to foot. Without a word, without a bow, he walked straight to the bedside, lifted the unconscious man's eyelids, felt his pulse, and uncovered his chest, applying his ear to it. "This is a serious case," he said at the close of his examination.

Mademoiselle Marguerite, who had followed his movements with the most poignant anxiety, could not repress a sob. "But all hope is not lost, is it, monsieur?" she asked in a beseeching voice, with hands clasped in passionate entreaty. "You will save him, will you not--you will save him?"

"One may always hope for the best."

This was the doctor's only answer. He had drawn his case of instruments from his pocket, and was testing the points of his lancets on the tip of his finger. When he had found one to his liking: "I must ask you, mademoiselle," said he, "to order these women to retire, and to retire yourself. The men will remain to assist me, if I require help."

She obeyed submissively, but instead of returning to her own room, she remained in the hall, seating herself upon the lower step of the staircase near the door, counting the seconds, and drawing a thousand conjectures from the slightest sound.

Meanwhile, inside the room, the physician was proceeding slowly, not from temperament however, but from principle. Dr. Jodon--for such was his name--was an ambitious man who played a part. Educated by a "prince of science," more celebrated for the money he gained than for the cures he effected, he copied his master's method, his gestures, and even the inflections of his voice. By casting in people's eyes the same powder as his teacher had employed, he hoped to obtain the same results: a large practice and an immense fortune. In his secret heart he was by no means disconcerted by his patient's condition; on the contrary, he did not consider the count's state nearly as precarious as it really was.

But bleeding and cupping alike failed to bring the sick man to consciousness. He remained speechless and motionless; the only result obtained, was that his breathing became a trifle easier. Finding his endeavors fruitless, the doctor at last declared that all immediate remedies were exhausted, that "the women" might be allowed to return, and that nothing now remained but to wait for the effect of the remedies he was about to prescribe, and which they must procure from the nearest chemist.

Any other man would have been touched by the agony of entreaty contained in the glance that Mademoiselle Marguerite cast upon the physician as she returned into the room; but it did not affect him in the least. He calmly said, "I cannot give my decision as yet."

"My God!" murmured the unhappy girl; "oh, my God, have mercy upon me!"

But the doctor, copying his model, had stationed himself near the fireplace, with his elbow leaning on the mantel-shelf, in a graceful, though rather pompous attitude. "Now," he said, addressing his remarks to M. Casimir, "I desire to make a few inquiries. Is this the first time the Count de Chalusse has had such an attack?"

"Yes, sir--at least since I have been in attendance upon him."

"Very good. That is a chance in our favor. Tell me--have you ever heard him complain of vertigo, or of a buzzing in his ears?"

"Never."

Mademoiselle Marguerite seemed inclined to volunteer some remark, but the doctor imposed silence upon her by a gesture, and continued his examination. "Is the count a great eater?" he inquired. "Does he drink heavily?"

"The count is moderation itself, monsieur, and he always takes a great deal of water with his wine."

The doctor listened with an air of intent thoughtfulness, his head slightly inclined forward, his brow contracted, and his under lip puffed out, while from time to time he stroked his beardless chin. He was copying his master. "The devil!" he said, sotto voce. "There must be some cause for such an attack, however. Nothing in the count's constitution predisposes him to such an accident----" Then, suddenly turning toward Mademoiselle Marguerite: "Do you know, mademoiselle, whether the count has experienced any very violent emotion during the past few days?"

"Something occurred this very morning, which seemed to annoy him very much."

"Ah! now we have it," said the doctor, with the air of an oracle. "Why did you not tell me all this at first? It will be necessary for you to give me the particulars, mademoiselle."

The young girl hesitated. The servants were dazed by the doctor's manner; but Mademoiselle Marguerite was far from sharing their awe and admiration. She would have given anything to have had the regular physician of the household there instead of him! As for this coarse examination in the presence of all these servants, and by the bedside of a man who, in spite of his apparent unconsciousness, was, perhaps, able to hear and to comprehend, she looked upon it as a breach of delicacy, even of propriety.

"It is of the most urgent importance that I should be fully informed of these particulars," repeated the physician peremptorily.

After such an assertion, further hesitation was out of the question. Mademoiselle Marguerite seemed to collect her thoughts, and then she sadly said: "Just as we sat down to breakfast this morning, a letter was handed to the count. No sooner had his eyes fallen upon it, than he turned as white as his napkin. He rose from his seat and began to walk hastily up and down the dining-room, uttering exclamations of anger and sorrow. I spoke to him, but he did not seem to hear me. However, after a few moments, he resumed his seat at the table, and began to eat---"

"As usual?"

"He ate more than usual, monsieur. Only I must tell you that it seemed to me he was scarcely conscious of what he was doing. Four or five times he left the table, and then came back again. At last, after quite a struggle, he seemed to come to some decision. He tore the letter to pieces, and threw the pieces out of the window that opens upon the garden."

Mademoiselle Marguerite expressed herself with the utmost simplicity, and there was certainly nothing particularly extraordinary in her story. Still, those around her listened with breathless curiosity, as though they were expecting some startling revelation, so much does the human mind abhor that which is natural and incline to that which is mysterious.

Without seeming to notice the effect she had produced, and addressing herself to the physician alone, the girl continued: "After the letter was destroyed, M. de Chalusse seemed himself again. Coffee was served, and he afterward lighted a cigar as usual. However, he soon let it go out. I dared not disturb him by any remarks; but suddenly he said to me: 'It's strange, but I feel very uncomfortable.' A moment passed, without either of us speaking, and then he added: 'I am certainly not well. Will you do me the favor to go to my room for me? Here is the key of my escritoire; open it, and on the upper shelf you will find a small bottle which please bring to me.' I noticed with some surprise that M. de Chalusse, who usually speaks very distinctly, stammered and hesitated considerably in making this request, but, unfortunately, I did not think much about it at the time. I did as he requested, and he poured eight or ten drops of the contents of the vial into a glass of water, and swallowed it."

So intense was Dr. Jodon's interest that he became himself again. He forgot to attitudinize. "And after that?" he asked, eagerly.

"After that, M. de Chalusse seemed to feel much better, and retired to his study as usual. I fancied that any annoyance the letter had caused him was forgotten; but I was wrong, for in the afternoon he sent a message, through Madame Leon, requesting me to join him in the garden. I hastened there, very much surprised, for the weather was extremely disagreeable. 'Dear Marguerite,' he said, on seeing me, 'help me to find the fragments of

that letter which I flung from the window this morning. I would give half my fortune for an address which it must certainly have contained, but which I quite overlooked in my anger.' I helped him as he asked. He might have reasonably hoped to succeed, for it was raining when the scraps of paper were thrown out, and instead of flying through the air, they fell directly on to the ground. We succeeded in finding a large number of the scraps, but what M. de Chalusse so particularly wanted was not to be read on any one of them. Several times he spoke of his regret, and cursed his precipitation."

M. Bourigeau, the concierge, and M. Casimir exchanged a significant smile. They had seen the count searching for the remnants of this letter, and had thought him little better than an idiot. But now everything was explained.

"I was much grieved at the count's disappointment," continued Mademoiselle Marguerite, "but suddenly he exclaimed, joyfully: 'That address--why, such a person will give it to me--what a fool I am!'"

The physician evinced such absorbing interest in this narrative that he forgot to retain his usual impassive attitude. "Such a person! Who--who was this person?" he inquired eagerly, without apparently realizing the impropriety of his question.

But the girl felt indignant. She silenced her indiscreet questioner with a haughty glance, and in the driest possible tone, replied: "I have forgotten the name."

Cut to the quick, the doctor suddenly resumed his master's pose; but all the same his imperturbable sang-froid was sensibly impaired. "Believe me, mademoiselle, that interest alone--a most respectful interest--"

She did not even seem to hear his excuse, but resumed: "I know, however, monsieur, that M. de Chalusse intended applying to the police if he failed to obtain this address from the person in question. After this he appeared to be entirely at ease. At three o'clock he rang for his valet, and ordered dinner two hours earlier than usual. We sat down to table at about half-past four. At five he rose, kissed me gayly, and left the house on foot, telling me that he was confident of success, and that he did not expect to return before midnight." The poor child's firmness now gave way; her eyes filled with tears, and it was in a voice choked with sobs that she added, pointing to M. de Chalusse: "But at half-past six they brought him back as you see him now----"

An interval of silence ensued, so deep that one could hear the faint breathing of the unconscious man still lying motionless on his bed. However, the particulars of the attack were yet to be learned; and it was M. Casimir whom the physician next addressed. "What did the driver who brought your master home say to you?"

"Oh! almost nothing, sir; not ten words."

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