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"Well, Chief, there 's a 'but,' namely; that the three detectives had this list in their hands when the guests arrived and that they still had it when the guests left. Sixty-three came in and sixty-three went away. And it was n't the servants or the detectives."

"But, still," said the Chief, impatiently, "if the robbery was committed from the inside . . ."

"That is beyond dispute," declared the inspector. "My conviction gradually became so positive that I ended, one day, by drawing up this startling axiom: in theory and in fact, the robbery can only have been committed with the assistance of an accomplice staying in the house. Whereas, there was no accomplice!"

"That 's absurd," said Dudouis. "Quite absurd," said Ganimard. "But, at the very moment when I uttered that absurdity, the truth flashed upon me."

M. Dudouis sat silent. The same phenomenon that had taken place in Ganimard was evidently taking place in him. He muttered:

"If it 's not o. o of the guests, nor the servants, nor the private detectives, then there 's no one left . . ."

"Yes, Chief, there 's one left . . ."

M. Dudouis started as if he had received a shock; and, in a voice that betrayed his excitement:

"It 's preposterous! How can Sparmiento have been Lupin's accomplice?"

Ganimard gave a little chuckle:

"Exactly, Arsène Lupin's accomplice!"

That explains everything. During the night, while the three detectives were downstairs watching—or sleeping rather, for Colonel Sparmiento had given them champagne to drink and perhaps doctored it beforehand—the said colonel took down the hangings and passed them out through the window of his bedroom. The room is on the second floor and looks out on another street, which was not watched, because the lower windows are walled up."

M. Dudouis reflected, and then shrugged his shoulders:

"If the colonel had been Arsène Lupin's accomplice, he would not have committed suicide after achieving his success," he muttered.

"Who says he committed suicide?"

"Mme. Sparmiento identified the body."

"I thought you would say that, Chief. Her identification worried me, too."

Ganimard took a bundle of newspapers, untied it and handed one of them to M. Dudouis.

"You remember, Chief, last time you were here, I was looking through the papers . . . I wanted to see if something had not happened then that might bear upon the case and confirm my supposition. Please read this paragraph."

M. Dudouis took the paper and read aloud:

"Our Lille correspondent informs us that a curious incident has occurred there. A corpse has disappeared from the local Morgue, the corpse of an unknown man who threw himself under the wheels of a steam car on the day before. No one is able to suggest a reason for the disappearance."

M. Dudouis sat thinking and then asked:

"So . . . you believe . . .?"

"I have just come from Lille," replied Ganimard, "and my inquiries leave no doubt in my mind. The corpse was removed on the same night on which Colonel Sparmiento gave his housewarming. It was taken straight to Ville d'Avray by automobile; and the car remained near the tunnel until evening."

"So that the body which was found in the tunnel was the stolen corpse, dressed in Colonel Sparmiento's clothes; and Colonel Sparmiento is not dead?"

"No more dead than you or I."

"But then why all these complications? Why the theft of one tapestry, followed by its recovery, followed by the theft of the twelve? Why that housewarming? Why that disturbance? Why everything? Your story won't hold water, Ganimard."

"Only because you have stopped halfway; because we must go still farther, very much farther, in the direction of the improbable and the astounding. Remember that we are dealing with Arsène Lupin. With him, is it not always just

the improbable and the astounding that we must look for? Now, consider: Confederates only betray you. Why employ confederates, when it is so easy and so natural to act for yourself, by yourself, with your own hands and by the means within your own reach?"

"What are you saying?" cried M. Dudouis.

GANIMARD gave a fresh chuckle: "Takes your breath away, Chief, doesn't it? So it did mine, when the notion was beginning to grow upon me. But it is quite possible and quite logical and quite normal. A schoolboy would solve the problem in a minute, by a simple process of elimination. Take away the dead man: there remains Sparmiento and Lupin. Take away Sparmiento . . ."

"There remains Lupin," muttered the chief-detective.

"Yes, Chief, Lupin transferred, for the past six months, into Colonel Sparmiento, traveling in Brittany, hearing of the discovery of the twelve tapestries, buying them, planning the theft of the best of them, so as to draw attention to himself, Lupin, and divert it from himself, Sparmiento. Next, he brings about, in full view of the gaping public, a noisy contest between Lupin and Sparmiento or Sparmiento and Lupin, plots and realizes the housewarming party, terrifies his guests and, when everything is ready, arranges for Lupin to steal Sparmiento's tapestries and for Sparmiento, Lupin's victim, to disappear from sight and to die unsuspected, unsuspectable, regretted by his friends, pitied by the public and leaving behind him, to pocket the profits of the swindle . . . a disconsolate widow."

"Mme. Sparmiento! But the profits, it seems to me, lie in the sale of the tapestries which Lupin himself will effect in America or elsewhere."

"First of all, yes. But Colonel Sparmiento could have effected that sale just as well. And even better. So there 's something more . . . Nothing less than the insurance money."

M. Dudouis was staggered. The whole business suddenly became clear to him, with its real meaning. He muttered:

"That 's true! . . . That 's true!"

The colonel had insured his tapestries . . ."

"Very much so! For eight hundred thousand francs; in five different companies."

"And has Mme. Sparmiento had the money?"

"She got a hundred and fifty thousand francs yesterday and two hundred thousand today, while I was away. The remaining payments are to be made in the course of this week."

THE chief-detective was silent for some time. Then, he mumbled: "Lupin is a wonderful rogue."

"Yes, Chief," said Ganimard impressively. "For his plan to succeed, all the indignation and all the inquiries had to be concentrated upon Lupin alone. And after the 'suicide,' every one pitied the beautiful, mourning widow, poor Edith Swan-Neck. Why, the gentlemen of the insurance-companies were almost glad to place something in her hands to relieve her poverty and her grief."

The two men were close together and did not take their eyes from each other.

"Who is the woman?" the Chief snapped out.

"Sonia Kritchhoff, the Russian girl whom I arrested last year, at the time of the theft of the coronet, and whom Lupin helped to escape."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I was put off the scent, like everybody else, by Lupin's machinations and had paid no particular attention to her. But, when I realized the part she was playing, I remembered. She is certainly Sonia, metamorphosed into an Englishwoman; Sonia, the most innocent-looking and the trickiest of actresses; Sonia, who would not hesitate to face death for love of Lupin."

"A good catch, Ganimard," said M. Dudouis, approvingly.

"I 've something better still for you, Chief! Lupin's old foster-mother has been here since Mme. Sparmiento began playing the widow; she 's the cook."

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