

THE COMTESSE'S DILEMMA.

That Spring morning, unable to sleep on account of the light which came through the windows and curtains—that stupid Rosette had forgotten to close the blinds—the Comtesse Valentine resolved to take a walk through the woods and meadows. It would be charming, an escapade among the wet leaves, in the high grass where diamond-like drops shone here and there. She had nothing to say against the guests of the chateau who, without exception, old or young, paid court to her with the most flattering persistency, rivaling each other all day in singing her praises; but an hour of solitude in the freedom of the air, in the sunny mystery of the trees, is not displeasing, even to a Parisienne; one may well wish after having heard all the men say about it, to listen to the little tattle of the birds.

She sprung out of bed, did not ring for her femme de chambre, was dressed in the twinkling of an eye—her costume was the most simple in the world—and went down the stairway with the slight clac-clac of her heels on the steps, amid the silence of the slumbering habitation.

She began to run because a bird flew. She crossed the down, mixing with the transparent mist the transparency of her skirt, sprang over the brook, penetrated among the tall trees; and, as when beside the flower-bed she had believed herself a flower, she thought in the wood that she was a dryad. She was out of breath and delighted. Remembrances of an idyl came to her, with a desire to be its nymph or its shepherdess. Were there no longer young fauns watching in ambush behind the bushes, ready to bound, little bare feet which hasten toward the springs—she would have willingly taken off her boots as a concession to mythology—or young goat herds playing the flute while their goats crop the bitter moss?

But what charmed her above all was the coolness of the breeze. Puffs, coming from she knew not where, caressed her forehead, her eyes, her lips, her neck, imitating the furtive kisses of a somewhat cold mouth, raised her sleeves, made her corsage gape, dared to glide, like an invisible kneeling, beneath her flying skirts. Ah! the lovely shiver, from head to foot, over all her skin yet moist with the warmth of her bed! She breathed the morning air, offered herself to the breeze with the pleasure of an opening sail, she smiled, she laughed—she sneezed!

She grew serious, for the case was grave. Surely she was catching cold; and for a lady who, with reason, was proud of her slight and delicate nose, a trifle pink toward the tip, never red—to have a red nose, just Heaven!—there is nothing more absurd than to have a cold. See what one gets by going out early in the morning! It would have been so easy for her to have prudently remained in bed. And the evil was certain; she would have an influenza which would last the whole week; she felt in her nostrils a continuous, maddening, insupportable tickling.

A cold! She have a cold like an ugly woman! While stamping her foot on the grass and moss from which the dew scattered like a shower of diamonds, she hunted in her pocket. Ill-luck heaped on ill-luck! She had dressed herself with such haste, she had come out so quickly, that she had forgotten to get a handkerchief! Now the little tickling at the tip of her nose had become sharper. There was nothing to be said; she must blow her nose, must blow it that very instant, and as she had walked very rapidly, then run, she was at least a good league from the bureau in Portugal wood in which so many perfumed, crest snow-white cambrics lay, one upon the other, like the wings of loving doves.

Fate brings us to the hardest extremities! Valentine thought of her underskirt, edged with valenciennes! But to lift up her underskirt in open day, in the country—great Heaven! She could never make up her mind to do that. Some one would certainly pass at the very moment she had raised the light material to her nose. She would be surprised in that ridiculous attitude, and that would be enough to make her die of shame. No, no, never! Rather—rather what? What means should she employ? How was she to get out of her embarrassing situation?

Ach! ach! that continual tickling! Valentine tore off a leaf. The leaf, too slight, too slippery, got away from her, obstinately refused to render the unforeseen service which was exacted of it. Valentine picked a flower; the flower, applied to her sensitive nostrils, seemed only to redouble the intolerable tickling. In truth, an extraordinary thing was about to happen.

Some one, a peasant, seated at the low door of a forest hut, had just sneezed and drawn from his

pocket a red cotton handkerchief, clean and still folded.

"Ah! monsieur," cried Valentine, "wait an instant. I supplicate you to lend me your handkerchief! Give it to me, sell it to me; at no matter what price, sell it to me, I beg of you."

It was a very young man, almost a child, small, puny, with a sickly look and freckles all over his face. He wore a ragged blue blouse, open at the breast, which displayed the thinness of his bust; his bare feet were thrust into big, down-at-the-heel shoes, without strings, a miserable lad, without doubt too weak to be employed in the toil of the farm house or the fields, and who, through fear of marauders, had been charged with watching sawed wood corded up in the clearing.

He raised his head, the handkerchief in his hand, and said, in a drawing voice:

"I know you well. You are the lady of the chateau down there. You often pass along the road in the paths on horseback with gentlemen. As soon as I hear the horses' hoofs I hide behind the trees; and I look at you until you have disappeared. You are pretty in a riding habit! You are very pretty also in that dress this morning! You have asked me for my handkerchief! Why? Haven't you a handkerchief, you who are rich?"

"Oh, yes!" said she, "I have one. Don't trouble yourself about that. Give me yours immediately."

"I am willing," he replied, "but what shall I get in exchange?"

"Whatever you want!"

"Money?"

"Yes, money. Fix the sum yourself. You have only to come to the chateau; you will be paid what you ask for."

He looked at her.

"I don't need money," said he. "Well, what do you want?"

"Speak, but for mercy's sake make haste!"

"If you want my handkerchief, promise to send me another, one of yours. I lodge in this hut; I can be found here all day and all night."

She did not fail to notice the singularity of this demand, though the tickling in her pink nostrils was exasperating her more and more.

"Yes, yes, it's agreed! Rosette will bring you what you want this very day."

"Thank you," said he.

And he gave her the red cotton handkerchief in which, without losing a minute, she buried her nose with a little buzzing sound like that made by a wasp when it settles.

Valentine got off with her fear. Destiny spared her the disaster of catching a cold! But amid the joy of not having a red nose she took care not to forget her promise.

It seemed to her tolerably strange—after reflection—that a peasant should have preferred such a vain recompense to a sum of money. Good! He had, without doubt, taken it into his head to make a present to some girl of the neighboring village with whom he was in love! Well, no matter; a pretty perfumed handkerchief of valenciennes, with a crown embroidered on it, was brought by Rosette to the young lad of the forest, and the Comtesse thought no more of the matter.

One evening, when she was walking in the wood, not alone, but with her head bent toward the shoulder of the man she loved, she noticed between the branches a tiny point of light. She stopped and recognized the forest hut. Curious, she approached.

She saw, through the half-open door, the puny lad sitting on the door, bent over and holding in his clasped hands something light and white, which he sometimes kissed, and with which he occasionally wiped his eyes, which were full of tears.

At the sound of footsteps on the moss he gave a start, arose and with all speed hid the handkerchief beneath his blouse, against his flesh; then he blew out his candle, left the hut without speaking, as if he knew not that any one was there, and plunged into the forest, which was very dark and very melancholy.

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