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THE COUNTESS VAN OSTROEM.

A FRAGMENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE ORATORY.

It was in the month of September. The night was fierce and furious. The city of Rotterdam was enveloped in a thick and misty darkness, from time to time illuminated by the frequent and vivid flashes of lightning, with its accompanying peals of thunder.—Not a window on that terrific night hazarded a single ray of light; not a blind remained undrawn in the long line of houses and palaces that border the quays. All was dark and dismal as a tomb.

At the extremity of the grand Boulevard, which extends from one extremity to the other of the harbor, in a sumptuous villa, known to all the aristocracy of Holland by the brilliant *fetes* of which it had been the theatre for the last two years—was a woman, still young, and of exquisite beauty, notwithstanding her extreme paleness, and who three days before had been the queen of her first autumnal ball, now given up to the most frightful agony.

The room which the Countess Van Ostroem had chosen for her sleeping apartment since her widowhood, was on the ground floor of the pavillion, looking upon a vast and voluptuous garden. This room had been originally appropriated to an oratory, and still preserved several of the ornaments consequent upon its first destination. The walls were clothed with tapestry, enriched with religious paintings from the most celebrated artists of the Flemish school, and the floor was faced with the most beautiful marble of Carara. Few changes had taken place in the decorations.

The curtains of the bed and windows were of sky blue damask, fringed with gold of the richest pattern; and save a few articles of female furniture, and the costly couch, nothing in that chamber would lead you to believe that it was aught but an oratory.

A large fire place, the heath of which was two degrees higher than the remainder of the room was hid in a moment by sliding pannels, artfully disguised, and presented the appearance of an elegant altar, which was surmounted by a marble statue representing the Virgin and child.

But why had this woman, young and brilliant, surrounded by the homage, and mixed up with pleasure of the highest and best society in Rotterdam, contrary to all usage, and perhaps in opposition to her own taste, selected this oratory for a sleeping apartment? * * That is what we hope to inform our readers of.

CHAPTER II.

THE FAITHFUL WIDOW.

The Countess Van Ostroem was married at eighteen, and in two years after became a widow. Her grief was inconsolable at the death of her husband. She shut herself up for entire days in the oratory we have described, without allowing even her waiting maid to enter. She soon manifested a determined resolution not again to leave it, and thus cloistered herself in the midst of this smiling villa, so renowned for its former brilliant *fetes.*

A bed and a few indispensable articles of furniture were brought down, and from this period the daily cares which that chamber required were confided to an old and trusty servant named Brigitte, who having been the nurse of the Countess, had obtained more than ordinary favour in her service. But even Brigitte herself never entered alone into this mysterious oratory. The Countess overlooked all her movements there, and watched even her very looks; and after the old woman would leave the room, the Countess would herself lock the door with extreme care, and never let for a moment out of her own possession the key.

This strange and unaccountable conduct continued for six years, yet in the minds of those by whom she was surrounded, a single suspicion unfavourable to the Countess had never arisen. If it at first appeared somewhat extraordinary, all was soon accounted for by the extreme grief of their young mistress; and having accounted for it thus, they thought no more upon the subject.

The beautiful widow continued immersed in a profound sorrow. Time, that infallible remedy for healing the wounds of the heart, was powerless with her. For ten years was she clothed in the deepest mourning, and separated from that world she had sworn never again to mix with; she contemplated each day with deeper grief the image of the Count, pressed it to her heart, and bathed it with tears. For ten years she had lived it might be said only with the dead, when all on a sudden upon the perusal of the gazette when chance had thrown into her hands, she tremblind as if she had received an electric shock, passed her hand across her brow, looked joyous and happy, and rang the bell with haste and impetuosity.

Her attendants attentive to her slightest signal, hastened to answer the appeal; and in obedience to the Countess's order, withdrew from her wardrobe her mourning habiliments, and replaced them with dresses rich and elegant.

The villa, which had been for so many years sad and silent, was suddenly to be enlivened; flowers and *fetes,* pleasure and folly, light and loveliness, shone around and about it.

This sudden return to the pleasures of the world might appear strange to those surrounding the Countess Van Ostroem, who had for the last ten years shut herself up so impenetrably in her mysterious oratory; but we easily account for that which gives us pleasure, without too minutely inquiring into the cause; thus her faithful servants beheld with joy and delight this unhoped for change.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURN TO PLEASURE.

The first *soiree* the Countess gave after her protracted mourning, reunited together all the fashion and elegance of Holland. All that was noble and *elite,* all that was elegant and distinguished, formed together their congress under the auspices of pleasure.

Never was *fete* more brilliant. Never did the queen of loveliness receive greater homage; yet the Countess did not find in all this triumph the happiness she had promised herself. Of all the invitations she had sent out, one remained unanswered—the Marquis de la Mainerie, Colonel of the French Hussars, whose return to Amsterdam, the Gazette had a week before announced. This man, whose name alone had operated so powerfully upon the mind of the inconsolable widow, and caused a change which was at once sudden and marvellous—this man, for whom this brilliant *fete* was given, had not deigned to respond to the invitation. His cruel and unlooked for absence poisoned all her joy, but yet nothing in her graceful manner and expressive countenance betrayed the inward misery of the soul.

Women of fashion have the tact of making their gracious smiles an impenetrable mask—it is the privilege of their education.

Poignant as was the disappointment of the Countess, she yet contracted not a feature, but pressed on through the throng, followed, admired, and courted, wherever she went.

Other *fetes* still more splendid than the former were given, and still the French Colonel was invited, but appeared not.

This state of things continued for two years, when upon a night three days prior to the one we have endeavoured to describe in our first chapter, the villa was even more than usually brilliant. The garlands appeared fresher, the exoticis more rare and beautiful, the carpets more magnificent, and the paintings more exquisite. All bespoke the palace of luxury and opulence.

A swarm of beautiful women and youthful dancers invaded at an early hour the splendid suite of rooms appropriated to the ball.—The orchestra was artistically concealed behind a beautifully constructed mass of verdure and flowers, and threw upon the crowd, intoxicated with harmony and joy, its magic sound.

The light which fell in white cascades from twenty lustres of chrystal and gold, added its perfumed brilliancy to the elegance and exquisite taste displayed by entranced and enchanting votaries of pleasure. The shight was truly a brilliant one—the young—the beautiful, the gay, vieing with each other in grace and agility; and so voluptuous was the scene, that a beholder would have imagined that he was suddenly transported into an ideal world, or that it was the realization of one of those gorgeous fairy tales, by which the mind of youth is amused.

The quadrilles had just ceased, and the fair and panting girls were about being led to a seat by their enamored partners, when a slight movement, accompanied by a stifled whisper, drew the attention of the jealous joyous multitude towards the door of the drawing room.

The Countess, who had according to usage, opened the ball herself, directed her footsteps towards the entrance, and had scarcely proceeded as far as the middle of the apartment, when a French officer, of noble and commanding appearance, apparently about thirty years of age, and wearing the uniform of a Colonel of Hussars, appeared at the door. A lady of about nineteen was leaning proudly on his arm, whose exquisite grace and beauty at once struck the beholder.

The Countess, who had at first only perceived the Colonel, darted forward eagerly to receive him, when the servant announced,

'The Marquis and Marchioness de la Mainerie.'

These last words crushed for ever a hope fondly cherished, and struck as a thunderbolt upon the beautiful widow. She became pale as death, staggered, and fell senseless on the ground, before a friendly arm could be stretched out to receive her.

Five minutes afterwards the villa was deserted and the Countess, in her robe embroidered in gold, and the choicest flowers gracefully entwined in her raven hair, was extended without sense or motion, upon the bed in the oratory.

The Colonel, who was married scarcely a month, and had long withstood the Countess' invitations, but was forced to accept the one we have above described to gratify his youthful bride, fled hastily into France, in order to avoid the scandalous reports circulated by those who had witnessed the Countess' agitations.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARBLE MAN.

At length arrived the dreaded third day, and with it an increase of bad symptoms.—The unhappy patient, worn out by suffering, was lying motionless, the eyes fixed and glassy—the hair stiff and clammy—the mouth dry and contracted—and each aspiration appeared to be her last.

The storm which that night raged in Rotterdam, was now at its height; heavy rain, with accompanied by large hail stones, struck violence against the stained windows of the oratory. Bright and vivid flashes of forked lightning illuminated for seconds together