

It was his intention, in order to escape from all the difficulties which would necessarily arise immediately after his marriage, to remain attached to his foreign post for a few years, and then, rich in experience and in remembrances, return to his country, there to work on its soil.

It all seemed so simple and clear now, and life offered itself to him in the most varied forms of outward enjoyment and of inward content, so that he often let his thoughts rest upon it in ecstasy. His mind was organised for a higher field of action than that contained in the narrow horizon of his own individual circumstances; and he felt that with Nora he could spread out its wings and enjoy dear liberty. For the present, he turned his whole interest towards the country and the people he was living amongst, and he thoroughly enjoyed visiting all those sights which are sacred to science or full of pious memories. He thus spent much of his time making excursions in the neighborhood, often remaining a few weeks absent.

He had just returned from one of these interesting tours, and presented himself before his chief, who gave him a whole packet of letters which had that day arrived for him. "Quite a volume!" said the old gentleman, smiling good-naturedly as he gave him the packet with his mother's handwriting. "Ah, yes! Young men rejoice at getting letters, whilst we old ones tremble beforehand at what their contents may bring. Life has not much good news for us. . . . But now go and study your home-chronicle."

Curt went, and was joined at the door of the Embassy by a young French colleague, who walked home with him, being, as he declared, just on the way to calling at his rooms. With French animation and loquacity, he chattered on so rapidly that he did not notice how preoccupied Curt was. The unusually large envelope made him feel anxious, he hardly knew the reason why.

Arrived at his rooms, Curt threw the parcel impatiently down upon the table, so that the Frenchman with characteristic tact at once said:

"Ah! Letters from your country, I see! Pardon! I ought not to have disturbed you, *cher comte*. Pray satisfy your curiosity, whilst I wander about the beautiful realm of flowers you have here. I am somewhat of a botanist," he added, and entered at once into the conservatory which adorns every apartment in Pera, and where fresh green leaves, the scent of flowers, and the gentle splashing of a fountain, compensate for the unpleasant smells which reign in the streets.

"My mother seems to be studying from the Press," cried Curt's voice merrily after him. "Stay, dear vicomte, the parcel only contains bits of newspapers and advertisements; come and have a cigar first."

The vicomte did not come at once; he was lost in admiration before a plant which was new to him. Suddenly a strange and agonising cry of pain made him rapidly turn. Through the open glass-doors he could see Curt, his head sunk upon the table and his arms spread out before him, as if he had suddenly fainted. The open letter lay at his feet, and in his hand was a newspaper which he still unconsciously clutched.

"Count! for God's sake! What is the matter with you?" cried the Frenchman, rushing to his friend's side.

A second cry of anguish burst from the poor fellow's breast, but his head still lay heavily upon the table, so that the features were not discernible.

"Degenthal! I beseech of you, do be calm!" said the vicomte. "Have you had any bad news? Are you ill? Shall I call your servant?"

Curt slightly moved his hand with a depreciating gesture. "Only a headache, a little giddiness . . . the heat . . . please, fetch me some water."

The vicomte rushed out and dipped his handkerchief in the fountain in order to place it upon the sufferer's head. He had only required a minute to do this in; but when he returned, the newspaper-cuttings had disappeared.

"It was a sharp and horrible pain which suddenly seized hold of me," said Curt, supporting his head on his hand whilst the vicomte pressed the wet handkerchief to his forehead. "I evidently over-tired myself during this last tour."

The polite Frenchman did not contradict him, but he remembered that Curt had not looked in the least overtired when he had met him at the Embassy, and he consequently came to the conclusion that some piece of bad news had thus overpowered him. Anyhow, he did not wish to communicate his sorrow, that was evident, and so he wisely asked no more questions.

"Your forehead is burning," he said, after a few moments of silence, during which Curt stared unconsciously before him. "I strongly advise you to go to bed and to send for the doctor. In this climate there is no joking with such symptoms."

"I think I shall soon be better," said Curt, staggering with difficulty to his feet. "Does the fever of this country make one delirious?" he asked.

"It depends," said the Frenchman with a smile; "but I hope it will not come to that if you take care of yourself at once."

"Oh, perhaps a regular attack of raging fever would do one more good than harm," said Curt as if to himself. "One often feels as if one had been delirious all one's life . . . excuse me, vicomte, I feel that I am wretched bad company . . . A doctor, you think? I'd rather not, but *visits*; oh, keep them away! I hate them so when I am ill!"

"As you choose, you stubborn German! But now allow me to send at once for the doctor. Your interdiction of visits does not extend to me, I hope."

The Frenchman had spoken with his accustomed volubility; and he was not quite sure that he had been understood, for Curt was staring before him with a fixed and absent look.

Taking up his hat, the vicomte hurried away to fetch the doctor. He had hardly gone a few steps, when he heard his name called out, and turning, he saw Curt who had followed him with faltering steps.

"My dear fellow," he said hastily, "please render me a service. This letter must be at once sent to the post . . . it is . . . it is evidently," he said stammering, "not

meant for me. It must be sent back," he added impatiently.

He gave him the letter, upon which the words "*Deutschland retour*" were written in a trembling hand. The vicomte promised to do as he wished.

"You must, however, go to bed," he said again anxiously, for Curt's evident agitation began seriously to alarm him. "Let me go back with you."

Curt thanked him and hastened back alone.

The Frenchman followed him with his eyes, and then, looking at the letter, he shook his head, for the handwriting was unmistakably that of a lady. "I am strangely mistaken if a *belle dame* is not as usual at the bottom of it," he thought to himself; "evidently her missive has not been received with pleasure. Not even opened! That's a sort of thing one ought never to do in a moment of over-excitement. Who knows if he would not give a great deal later on to have read that letter? But those Germans are so pig-headed! Anyhow, let us do as he wishes. Ah, *les femmes, les femmes!* They always have a finger in the pie when a misfortune happens," and the little vicomte heaved a deep sigh, as much as to say that he also had had his experience in that quarter.

If poor Nora had waited many a weary long week without one word from Curt, whilst her letter lay quietly in his mother's hands, it was now the countess's turn to taste of the bitter cup she had given another to drink. She had calculated exactly when her letter would reach Constantinople, and when she could receive an answer; but time passed and no letter came.

She wrote again and again, and gave herself up to the wildest conjectures. Ought she, perhaps, to have announced the event to him with more precaution? To have prepared him more gradually? Had she treated his love too lightly? Then her thoughts quite ran away with her, and she fancied he had placed himself in direct communication with Nora, and that, notwithstanding all, he would appear one day and present her as his wife. Anything seemed easier to bear than this dreadful silence. At last a letter came, but not from Curt. It was the old ambassador, who detailed to her in the most minute manner her son's illness. He supposed it to have been caused by the frequent and prolonged excursions Curt had undertaken in the interior of the country, and for which he had evidently overrated his strength. A pang shot across the mother's heart on reading the date of the day upon which he had fallen ill, as it accorded with the probable arrival of her letter.

She would have started off at once, had not the writer alluded to her son's positive wish that she should not undertake such a journey, and added that the doctors also thought it better that every kind of emotion should be avoided. Contrarily to her usual mode of proceeding, the countess did what she was told, and remained at home; for she well knew how agitating their meeting would be.

During many a week after the arrival of this first letter, the vicomte, who had entirely devoted himself to the care of his

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