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A CONSULTATION.

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Poor Marchioness! She was, or rather believed herself ill. For to speak candidly, she looked very well. Save a little pallor, which only made her more interesting, she had never seemed prettier, never had her soft lips been more rosy, never more irresistible her large black eyes.

She was a widow, twenty-five years old, and enjoying an income of one hundred thousand francs. And she wished to be pitied. Poor Marchioness! After all, it may be that excessive happiness leads to suffering? Extremes meet, says the proverb. Ennu is perhaps the worse of ills.

Albeit, the best physicians had been consulted in vain; they had not cured her. There was a last hope; Doctor Muller had not examined her. But it is not every one who can see that eccentric old German. In spite of a very pressing letter he had not yet made his appearance.

The Marchioness was literally overcome by despair. The appearance of the cozy little parlor was consequently gloomy. A single lamp placed in a corner, seemed ready to go out, and we were lighted really only by the red glare of the fire, around which the conversation flagged, notwithstanding the efforts of the guests.

We were discussing the eccentricities of Hoff man. Suddenly a servant announced Doctor Muller, and the celebrated practitioner entered.

A glance rapidly exchanged, convinced us all that each had had the same thought. The Doctor was a sort of fantastical apparition; one of Hoffman's creations stalking suddenly in our midst. A high, bald forehead, an irregular profile; the eye deep set, and flashing like a carbuncle; the lips curling into a malicious smile; the face like old parchment; uncommonly long limbs and extraordinary thinness,—all in Doctor Muller was strange. One looked for the claws at the end of his long, ivory-like hands, and sought the cloven foot in his large shoes ornamented with huge silver buckles.

The doctor was, otherwise, a man of the world; evidently of the most polite world. Although his black coat, with its wide, square flaps, was not cut in the latest style, it was not without a certain retrospective elegance. As much might be said of his waist-coat—a true Louis XV vest. One could not help admiring his ample snow-white ruffles, and his triple frill, fastened with a superb black diamond.

The Marchioness had risen to meet him. 'Oh, doctor,' said she, 'you will save me!' 'I think I will,' he replied, with a singular grimace which seemed to have a double meaning.

'Will you step into my boudoir?' 'It is useless, madam; there is nothing pressing. We are very well here. Will the company continue the conversation as if I were not present?' 'But, doctor, my complaint? this consultation?' 'Be without fear, Marchioness. I do not forget you, I am feeling your pulse.'

A few minutes later, the conversation had become general; and we were quizzing the eccentric old man, who took it all in the best humor. He was called successively Nostradamus, Cagliostro, Mesmer; he smiled at the mention of those names as if recognizing old acquaintances. He was pressed, and one went so far as to ask him to make a complete confession. He replied in a lengthy and very witty speech, although somewhat cloudy, and which tended to present the speaker as a simple physician, neither more nor less than other physicians.

The Marchioness was becoming more and more disappointed. 'So,' she asked ingenuously, 'so, doctor, you are not a sorcerer?' 'Who, I?' 'Yes, something of a sorcerer; acknowledge that you are a little so.'

'Not in the least.' 'Yet, people relate marvellous cures performed by you.'

Upon this last remark which tended to renew the discussion, the Viscount interposed. 'Doctor Muller,' he said, 'has just explained the mystery, if mystery there be. Leaving aside the purely material medication of his colleagues of the old school, he traces the disease back to the mind, where it always originates.—He bleeds a vice, he purges a bad instinct, he operates a passion, he extirpates a sorrow.—Then, in return, he prescribes strong doses of generous impulses, of affectionate inspirations and kind feelings; that is all. This system was formerly resumed in an old Latin proverb. It was, I believe, Mens sana in corpore sano.'

'Perfect, Viscount,' replied the doctor, with a sly giggle; 'perfect! except, however, the first word.'

'Mens?'

'Which means mind, reason, and which, consequently, makes the maxim a little too much tainted with materialism for your humble servant. In its place only put the word anima; for, what I prescribe for is the soul.'

'Doctor,' cried the Marchioness, 'what you practice every day is then simply a system of Christian medication?'

'Precisely, Marchioness. I have disturbed the dust of many libraries, I have thrown myriads of volumes into the scientific crucible; and from all this mass of heteroclitical matter, there remained at the bottom but a single particle of gold. From the ashes of all these printed and manuscript pages, I have extracted but one small volume—the Gospel; but one sentence: love ye one another! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, all is there. In order to be cured, you must begin by curing others. If ignorance, want, and envy, are the usual infirmities of the lowly, we find but too often scorn, idleness and egotism among the great. Such are the principal diseases of mankind. Love ye one another,—such is the universal panacea!'

'This is not a system, Doctor Muller,' cried every one. 'It is a sermon.'

'And,' added some, 'whilst applauding the excellence of those fraternal feelings, we cannot believe in their omnipotence when prescribed in lieu of pills.'

'Yet, it is the exact truth,' insisted the old man with gentle gravity: 'I could, if needs be, prove it by more than one example.'

'Silence,' exclaimed our hostess. 'The doctor is going to tell us a story.'

'Ah, why not, Marchioness?'

'Tell us the story of Mrs. de C——, to day the happiest, most lively, blooming young woman, who proclaims every where that some fifteen years ago, she was almost to the tomb, and you raised her from the dead like another Lazarus.'

'I could not have selected a more convincing proof: and, faith, since you permit me—'

'I do more, I beg you to tell it.'

Every chair was drawn closer to the doctor's, every voice hushed, and every ear prepared to listen.

Mrs. de C——, the young lady of whom the Marchioness has spoken, commenced Doctor Muller, was then only sixteen years old, and was named Edith Van-Oven.

She was the daughter of the celebrated Dutch banker, whose immense fortune and patriarchal goodness have become so universally notorious.

Van-Oven's marriage had been simply a commercial transaction, and his wife died soon after the birth of her only child. In all his long career, the banker had known but one joy, one poetical feeling, one love—his daughter.

As he could imagine no other ideal of perfect happiness, than the possession of wealth, the good man had worn out body and soul to make Edith the wealthiest heiress in Europe.

This life dream realized, Van-Oven ingenuously believed that his daughter would be the happiest of young girls—she had so many millions.

Imagine, if you can, the astonishment, the despair of this poor rich man. All at once, on the very morrow of some triumphant operation, which had almost doubled the banker's capital, Edith became sad, languishing—sick.

The entire faculty is assembled at the hotel of the Dutch Cresus. Scientific speeches cross with courtesies ejusdem farinae. A hundred annoying questions worry daily the poor dying girl; and, finally and unanimously, the disease is pronounced uncomprehensible, hieroglyphical, and incurable.

Then, and only then, they applied to me. Although I already enjoyed some reputation at that time, I was looked upon as a fanciful physician, at whose door people knocked only in extreme cases, when all hope had fled.

I hastened to answer Van-Oven's summons.—The porter was awaiting my coming at the gate; I found another footman in the yard, a third under the peristyle, a fourth at the top of the stairs, and so on, to the parlor adjoining the patient's room.

In this parlor Van-Oven was pacing the floor with hasty strides. The porter, on perceiving me, had cried out: 'Here he is!' 'Here he is! Here he is! Here he is!' had successively repeated the second footman to the third, the third to the fourth, etc., etc. A real Russian telegraph.

All this with a great slamming of doors, and unnecessary fuss and flurry.

At last, I was in presence of the banker. His face was purple, his looks haggard; he was going mad.

'Doctor!' he cried, throwing himself, all in tears, in my arms. 'Doctor, my daughter is dying! Doctor, save my child!'

'Hush!' I whispered, with provoking coolness; 'Hush! she might overhear you.'

'Yes, yes, you are right!' stammered the poor father, much disconcerted, and with a nervous attempt at suppressing his sobs. 'But, doctor, I have lost my head! I don't think I could make an addition, I, a banker! Do not be uneasy, however; I shall be prudent.—Yes, yes, I understand you. She is there; we must speak low. Let us go in!'

And he opened the door. We entered. It was a charming little room, artistically decorated with white satin and sky-blue hangings at the bed and windows; it was filled with pretty furniture of delicate workmanship, and numerous little objects of art, such as young girls delight in. The nest of a sylph among flowers; a fairy's boudoir in an iridescent cloud.

But the piano, made of ivory and mother-of-pearl, looked as if it had not been opened for many weeks; the easel, so coquettishly light, bore an unfinished sketch, abandoned long ago; the flowers in the gothic stand, bent, languid and dying, on their withered stems; all the little gilt doors of the Chinese aviary, swung freely to the morning breeze—canaries and doves had taken their flight unheeded.

Near the open window, the youthful patient was reclining on a sofa, her eyes half-closed, her head thrown back, and her face so pale, that she looked like a white statue, or a corpse.

The creaking noise made by the door did not wake her; we approached; she moved not.

Van-Oven's glance seemed to say to me: 'You see how it is.'

Then, forcing himself to smile, the distressed old man squatted on his heels, near the sofa, clasped his hands on his knees, and whispered three times with a feigned gaiety, painful to behold: 'Edith! Edith! Edith!'

At the sound of her father's voice, Edith's large blue eyes opened at last.

As her eye-lids parted, they let roll a tear on each of her cheeks, so thin and pale.

At this sight Van-Oven turned away quickly, to smother his sobs.

But in spite of this precaution, his daughter heard him; for, rising with an impetuosity that seemed impossible in her state of weakness she threw herself on the breast of the old millionaire.

'Bravo!' I cried, showing myself suddenly, 'Bravissimo! and good morning!'

Surprised and confused, Edith looked askance at her father.

'It is the doctor, a great doctor!' said the banker in explanation.

'Ah!' exclaimed the young girl; and her pretty pouting lips seemed to say: 'Still another! And letting herself drop on the sofa, she allowed me to take one of her almost transparent hands, whilst the other played abstractedly with her golden curls.

Van-Oven commenced describing minutely how, during the last twelve months, his daughter had been growing weaker; how for the past six weeks, she had refused to leave her chamber, where nothing seemed to please her any more, and where she allowed herself to be pining away, without complaint or regret, without pain, but as if some invisible and unknown attraction slowly detached her from life. There was no familiar symptoms of disease, in her case, but debility, but exhaustion, but an unaccountable disgust of life.

And she was only sixteen!

'And,' resumed the banker, 'she has here all that charms youth, all that wealth can give. My daughter is really a little queen, doctor; I spoil her so much, that it is the general talk in our financial circle. She knows that she has but to speak, to see realized everything her fancy could imagine. Well, it is of no use! she will not even express a wish. It is true that I scarcely give her time to desire anything.'

The old man could have continued to speak uninterrupted, until the hour of 'change;' I heard him not, I was listening to the young girl's anxiety, and its feeble pulsations had already told me all I wanted to know.

Yes, Marchioness, I had discovered why this charming creature, so admirably gifted, loved neither the country nor the town; why balls and parties had no longer any charms for her; why she cared not for her piano and her easel, for her books and flowers, not even for those poor birds which she had set free.

She felt that there was too much splendid uniformity in her own gilt cage; no secret voice sang in her youthful heart; she wearied of her happiness. In the midst of this material luxury, she was dying for want of some nourishment for her soul, of some struggle for her intellect, of some obstacle to conquer. For want of a few tears to shed; for want of space, of work, of usefulness; for want of charity and love.

'Yes; for Van-Oven having exclaimed, as a last argument, 'Will you believe it, doctor? I wished her to marry young Storfus & Co., of Frankfurt, a young and charming banker—'

The young girl's pulse had suddenly fluttered,

as if with indignation, at the mention of this name. It protested, evidently, against such a match.

'Very well,' said I rising; 'the case is heard.' Van-Oven hastened to get writing materials.

'It is useless,' I remarked, pushing back the proffered pen; I shall not give a written prescription.'

Then turning to Edith: 'Miss Edith,' said I, 'have you not, among your bonnets, something plain? some little straw hat?'

'Yes, doctor, but—'

'And a plain shawl or scarf, that you can throw over your present *deshabille*?'

'I have, certainly; but why?'

'In short, I wish you to put on some neat and simple attire, in which you can go anywhere; and to be ready in five minutes.'

'You wish me to dress; but what for?'

'Hey! why simply to go out with me.'

'With you?' she muttered, straightening up, half aroused by curiosity.

'And where do you want to take her to?'

'That is my secret.'

'Ah!'

'Miss Edith, I shall wait for you—five minutes.'

And, to conquer entirely her indecision, I whispered in her ear this big falsehood: 'The life of your father is at stake!'

She sprang from her seat.

'Come,' I said, addressing Van-Oven; 'let us leave mademoiselle to her toilet.'

And I dragged him, stupefied with amazement into the adjoining parlor.

'Come, now!' he exclaimed, as soon as the door was shut. 'I hope you will explain, at last—'

'Nothing at all!'

'But—'

'Van-Oven, your daughter is sick, very sick, in danger.'

'Alas! I am but too well aware of it.'

'Then, do not question me, and let me save her.'

'You promise to cure her?'

'Yes, if you will trust me blindly; if you will give me full power to act as I please.'

'What is it that you require?' speak.'

'Edith must go out with me, every other day.'

'Alone?'

'Yes, alone; in the morning and during three hours.'

'But, tell me at least—'

'Not a word. Her safety is at that price; do you wish me to save her? say yes or no.'

'But she? she will not consent.'

'See if she does not.'

The door opened, and Edith stood on the threshold.

A crape shawl of a dark lilac tint fell in graceful folds over her white muslin dress, and a neat little bonnet, of the same color as the shawl, shaded her angelic features.

I think I see her now, dear Edith! she was charming in her simple attire.

'Yes or no?' I asked pitilessly, turning to Van-Oven.

The old banker hesitated, kissed his daughter passionately, and threw her into my arms.

Then, feeling, already, almost certain that she would live, he hastened to the Bourse, to gain another million for her.

As for me, I took Edith's arm, and helped her to descend step by step, the broad marble stairs. I lifted her gently into my little green chariot, and we drove off.

III.

Doctor Muller's elegant auditory has listened so far, without interrupting the speaker.

Having reached this part of his narrative, he made a pause, and the interested listeners drew their chairs closer to the old man.

'Doctor,' said the Marchioness with impatient curiosity; 'do tell us quick where you wanted to take Miss Van-Oven every morning?'

'Where?' he replied with mischievous slowness; 'where? why, simply to accompany me in my daily round among the poor!'

She could find there, I can assure you, something to interest and move her, something to make her weep, to make her act, to make her live.

Oh, I did not spare her a single distress, a single sorrow, a single real drama. Noble and generous child. Oh, how well I had judged her heart. At the first house where we stopped, I had almost to carry her in my arms, up the five flights of stairs.

She went up alone to the next garret. At the third she ran up before me. But her little purse was now empty.

'I shall lend you some money,' said I; 'you need not fear, we shall not ruin Van-Oven. Besides, there are other means to console and assist the unfortunate.'

'What are they?'

'Let us go on, you will see.'

Indeed, we were remarkably lucky on this, our first excursion. A poor old man, of three score and ten, solicited in vain admittance into a public asylum.

'Yesterday,' he remarked, 'I wrote for the twentieth time to the Minister of the Interior.'

'The minister is a relative of ours,' whispered the young girl thoughtfully.

In another house, we found, near the bedside of his sick wife, a man thrown out of employment by the failure of the firm whose clerk he had been during ten years.

'This concerns Mr. Van-Oven,' spoke distinctly Edith, with something like a will.

Further on, were some poor girls, virtuous and pious, asking nothing more than honest work; but, alas, work was scarce and ill-paid.

Unfortunately, Edith had her seamstress her dressmaker, etc., etc. But, still further on, we met some poor little children, almost naked.—The last born, a wee baby, was wrapped in an old shawl. Here was plenty of work for the girls, and a godmother for the baby. After this, we called on some of my 'artists.' There, our mission was different. A few encouragements, proffered with delicacy, would create great men. One, especially,—but we will return to this by and by.

Our last visit was for a family a prey to sickness and dire want. The eldest son had become a soldier five years ago. The death of his brother had left him the only support of an aged mother and three sisters, but he had made useless efforts to obtain his discharge. The colonel of his regiment, then on garrison duty at Grenoble, refused obstinately to sign his petition.

'At Grenoble,' exclaimed Edith joyfully.—'But this colonel. I know him; he is my father's intimate friend. How luckily this happens.'

'My child,' I replied, kissing her brow, 'when, like you, one possesses wealth, position, youth and beauty, such lucky coincidences frequently happen.'

On our way back to the banker's mansion, Edith took possession of my memorandum book, and, glancing over her shoulder, I read:

1. Speak to my father to day about the poor clerk.

2. Write by this evening's mail to the colonel at Grenoble.

3. To-morrow morning, at my cousin the minister's.

4. Purchases for the little ones.

5. Ditto, at 'my artists,' in company with father.

She understood already that one who is sixteen years of age, and possesses a fortune of as many millions, has no right to remain idle—much less to die of ennui. She felt that she was useful. The passion of good deeds was taking possession of her heart; she was changed; hope had replaced despondency; she was saved.

When I called, according to agreement, on the day after the next, I found Edith ready, impatient to go. At the end of the week, she was duly enrolled in a charming regiment, whose unworthy recruiting sergeant I am, and which our good curate designates 'the Angels of Paris.'

A month later, Edith was so completely restored to health, so lively and gay, that Van-Oven, besides himself with joy, exclaimed: 'Now is the time to send for Storfus & Co., of Frankfurt.'

Edith's bright color fled.

'No,' I cried hastily. Leave Storfus & Co. on the other side of the Rhine.'

'Good heavens, doctor, do you forbid my daughter—'

'Marriage, no; but the husband—that one, at least. We shall think of it by and by. That is my look out.'

'How your look out?'

'Is she not my child too, to some extent?'

'Yes, yes, I don't deny it.'

Effectively, three years after this, I called one morning on Van-Oven, and told him: 'It is time our Edith should be married.'

'Indeed, and to whom?'

'To Lucien de C——.'

'How, that artist, whose first picture my daughter made me purchase?'

'Say a noble gentleman, who, after voluntarily reducing himself to poverty, in order to pay his father's debts, has worked out another fortune by his talent.'

'An artist's fortune?'

'I shall add one million to it.'

'One million, where the deuce will you find it?'

'In your cash box.'

'Ah.'

'Do you not owe me for my professional services. Have you not repeated a hundred times, when I refused to make a hundred times, when I refused to make out my bill: 'Very well, then;'