

MY COUNTESS.

(From the Family Herald.)

We passed the time most agreeably together, although of course I did not see so much of her as in Paris, for she was looked upon evidently as a woman of some position, and had social duties to attend to, which took up her time.

The Countess had a deep love of art; and we spent hours roaming about the grand old monuments with which Rouen abounds. One thing however annoyed me very much. It was the constant appearance of a keen-eyed middle-aged man who wore the button of the Legion of Honor on his coat. He seemed to dog our footsteps, for wherever we went there was he—not actually in our presence, but lurking about at a distance, sauntering behind pillars and loitering within archways, walking on one side of the street when we were upon the other. I never saw his eyes fixed upon us, but I had an instinctive knowledge that he was watching us. I mentioned the fact one day to the Countess.

"Tell me, madame," I said, "is he an admirer of yours?"

"Ah," she replied, "how can I tell? I perhaps have hundreds of admirers whom I do not know; but I think I know who he is. He is one of the parties in the law-suit, and it's a mania of his to follow me about. I think he's mad."

"But," I said, "surely he can be got rid of! The next time I see him I shall tell him how very unpleasant it is to be dogged and watched wherever we go."

The Countess started, and replied with great energy—

"No, no, my dear friend; don't do that! You might do me harm. It is to my interest to keep friendly with all who are concerned in my case. You see, mine is an uphill fight—and poor little Achille is alone in the world against a crowd of hungry claimants. If you hear anything bad about me, you know to what it can be put down—malice and narrow-mindedness on the part of folk who are angry at seeing one of their own flesh and blood whose only mistake was marrying a man of whom they did not approve."

The Countess spoke so touchingly and so earnestly that I felt I could have gone to the end of the world to serve her. She continued—

"I have but one man in the world to console and advise me."

"And he is?" I interposed.

"Yourself," she replied.

I fell upon my knees and covered her hand with kisses. Should I declare my passion now? I thought. I was at her feet, and we were alone—I might not get such another opportunity. Should I offer there and then to take her away from this land of persecution and annoyance and settle down with her as my wife in my own land of liberty?

I thought, first of all, of what my relatives would say, and then of my position in the world. I decided that by still further improving it I should render myself independent of them, and that I would keep my love pent up for a year longer. So blind was my devotion to the beautiful Countess that I did not observe at the time how changed her manner became, what a forced air her gaiety assumed after my mention of the gentleman with the Legion of Honor button. Subsequent events however showed me the alteration.

The next day I received a note. It was from the Countess, who wished to see me upon a matter of great importance. I lost no time in hastening to Mount Saint Catherine. I found the Countess bathed in tears, the little Achille beside her, trying to console her.

"Ah, my good monsieur," she said, as I entered, "you have indeed come to me as a comforter in my desolation and misery! Had I not you to console me, and my little Achille to live for, I would willingly quit this life."

"Do not say that," I said. "Tell me what has happened; and, if it is in my power to help you, you may depend upon it that I will."

"But you will scorn me so if I tell you," she said. "And now I am sorry that I gave you the trouble to come here."

"No," I said with fervor, "I could never scorn you! Tell me, madame, I pray of you."

"It is an affair of money," she said. "When I was poor and in trouble, I borrowed twelve thousand francs of one of those relatives of whom I spoke to you. He insists upon immediate payment, and I cannot put my hand upon the money until the end of the quarter. I have perhaps been a little extravagant, and my little Achille's schooling has cost me a great deal of money; but I thought that I was beyond the reach of claimants, and could afford to support my title as it has always been supported."

I was in ecstasies. My debt of gratitude to the woman I loved most on earth for her care of me during my illness in Paris could now to some extent be repaid.

"Madame," I said, rising, "if you can put your creditor off for a few days, I will arrange matters. I have not the money here; but I will go now, telegraph to London, and by the day after to-morrow, at the latest it shall be at your service."

The Countess burst into a flood of tears, called me her only friend, her deliverer, and was so affected that I feared she would get delirious with joy. Then I hastened away and telegraphed for the money. It arrived in due course; I placed it in her hands, and, as my holiday-time was up, I bade her good-bye.

"I shall go to Baden-Baden," she said; "and if you could spare the time, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see you there. I would then pay you the money—by that time I am sure my case will have

been gained—and you would see how the Comtesse de Chateau Rouge can show her gratitude."

I returned home, and set to work with redoubled vigor. Luck favored me, for not only did my pictures sell well, but a long-forgotten uncle died, and left me a good sum of money invested in the best securities. I made up my mind that I would go to Baden-Baden, seek out the Countess, and ask her there and then to be my bride.

At this time the German Government had not yet been seized by that sudden fit of morality which led to the suppression of all the gaming tables within its dominions. Baden-Baden was then in the full flush of her glory. The ball rattled merrily round the magic circle on the *rouge-et-noir* table; wealth, fashion and beauty crowded into the pleasant little wood-buried town, and balls, theatrical representations, and concerts took place daily in the famous "Conversationshaus." I discovered my Countess at the Hotel de Londres, and there of course I took up my quarters.

She was delighted to see me, and the first thing she did after our first greetings was to write me a cheque for the amount I had paid her, drawn upon her Paris bankers.

We passed a very pleasant time together, and amused ourselves to our heart's content; and I never had been so full of genuine happiness in my life. We took long drives together beneath the pleasant shade of the pines of the Black Forest; we pick-nicked at the "Chateau Favori," and at the "Alte Schloss." We went to Strasburg, we rambled about the beautiful copses and glades round the Hill of Mercury and the Russian Chapel, we gambled—yes, we gambled, for, although I cared but little for the pastime, the Countess, woman-like, was an intense lover of all games of chance, and, as a rule, was lucky. In fact, we were so inseparable that the principal item of gossip in this hot-bed of gossip was the match which the young Englishman had made with the dashing young Comtesse de Chateau Rouge. Achille had grown into a fine handsome boy; and his continual presence with us served to dissipate all scandalous rumors, which would surely have been spread abroad had we been alone.

The great closing event of the year—for it was now early autumn—was to be the *bal masque*, at the "Conversationshaus." Every one in Baden-Baden with the smallest pretension to position or distinction would be there; so of course we decided to go.

For some days preceding the affair the promenade and spa were comparatively deserted, for every one was engaged in preparing his or her costume for the ball. Costumiers from Paris and Berlin flocked in by every train, and the usual topics of conversation at the dinner-tables were for once abandoned in favor of the all-absorbing subject in hand. The Countess decided to go as Marie-Antoinette, a personification which eminently suited her commanding figure and her soft gentle features. I, as a dark man, set to work to convert myself into a matador.

Abler pens than mine have described times without number the *bals masques* of Baden-Baden. It is sufficient therefore to say that the costumes were as magnificent as they were varied, that the music—despatched expressly for the occasion from Paris—was perfect, and that the entire arrangements, to quote the usual description, "reflected the highest credit upon the management."

There were beauties from every nation in Europe—fresh-faced English blondes, lively laughing French brunettes, graceful dark-eyed Spanish belles, square-faced but pleasing Teutons in crowds, dazzling fair ones from New York and Boston, Italians, Poles, Norwegians, Russians, and of course Jewesses.

There were peasant-women, heroines, maids of honor, queens—in fact, the usual representatives of women of all countries, ages and degrees; but in the opinion of a good many there was but one star—and she was Marie-Antoinette.

Heroes, kings, grandees of all sorts saluted her incessantly; but, as a rule, she kept to me. Only one thing marred my enjoyment, and this was the constant—not to be repulsed—attention shown to her by a certain mask who wore the costume of a gentleman of the Court of Louis the Fourteenth. He seemed to follow us everywhere, and by no stratagem could we shake him off. He was our *vis-a-vis* in half a dozen quadrilles, he sat next to us at the supper-table, he lounged behind a pillar if we selected a quiet corner for a few minutes' conversation and rest.

I had made up my mind that I would seize the opportunity afforded me of escaping for a few moments from the giddy whirl of the dancing-room to propose to my Countess. I led her on to the verandah outside, ostensibly to get a breath of fresh air.

"He surely won't be cad enough to follow us there!" I thought.

But he did; and I could stand it no longer. So, leaving the Countess on a seat, I walked up to him.

"Monsieur," I said, "if you are a gentleman, you must know that the lady of whom I have the honor to be the chaperon to-night is very much annoyed at your persistent and unencouraged attentions to her. Unless you cease your rude intrusions, I shall be under the painful necessity of presenting you with my card."

This was a rash thing for me to say, as, in common with most modern Englishmen, I knew rather less about fencing than about Hindustani; but I thought to intimidate him, knowing that, as a rule, these pesterers of women are bullies and cowards.

To my surprise, he removed his mask, and I recognised our constant attendant upon our Rouen expeditions.

"Monsieur," he said, without moving a muscle of his countenance, "I am here on business."

"No one has a right to introduce business of any kind into a place like this unless—"

"Unless," interrupted the stranger, "he is an agent of

police;" and, so saying, he drew from his pocket a card upon which was inscribed—

"Petier, Commissaire de Police, Rue Drouot, Paris."

I was so startled that at first I could say nothing; so Petier continued—

"I have been watching your movements longer than you think."

"But surely," I said, "you have no business with me."

"No, sir," replied the commissary; but I have business, and very unpleasant business, with the lady there."

Then he walked over to where the Countess was sitting, and whispered a few words in her ear.

She gave a shriek, and fell to the ground. Leaving me with her, the commissary disappeared into the ball-room, and returned presently with two other men dressed as he was, as gentlemen of the Court of Louis the Fourteenth.

When the *soi-disant* Countess recovered, they took her off between them; and that was the last I saw of my charming *incognita*. Then the commissary came to me.

"Young gentleman," he said, "you have just had as narrow an escape of being ruined as any man ever had. What does that lady call herself?"

I told him, and he burst into a fit of laughter.

"That is at least the twentieth title under which she has passed," he said at length. "She is one of the most notorious swindlers in Europe, and has been the ruin of more young men than she has fingers on her hands; and I dare say she has told you the same story that she told them. Tell me—does she owe you any money?"

I told him of the Rouen debt, and added that she had given me a cheque for the amount but a few days before.

"May I see the cheque?" asked Petier.

"Certainly," I said, "if you will come to my hotel."

So we went thither together; and on the way I related the whole history of my acquaintance with her. When I told him about the cash-box that I had lost, he said—

"Of course she took it!"

And, when I came to the present evening, and informed him that in a few minutes we should have been plighted man and wife, he gave a long whistle, and said—

"Then, sir, all I can say is that your escape has been even greater than I imagined. I saw that you were pretty intimate; but I never thought that matters would have gone so far as that."

When we got to the hotel, I showed him the cheque; he quietly tore it into pieces, and threw them into the grate.

"That is what it is worth," he said as he did so. "It's a very clever attempt; but it's a forgery for all that. However, I've got sufficient against her without that to get her at least twenty years."

"But what will her poor little boy do?" I asked.

"Her little boy!" the commissary said contemptuously.

"He's only hired because of his good looks and the air of respectability he gives her. He'll be sent back to his haunts, and, unless some one takes care of him, will be let out to some one else in her line."

How I thanked the commissary need not be told here; but I added ten years' experience to my life with the denouement of my little romance with MY COUNTESS.

[THE END.]

F. A.

RESCUING A GIRL FROM A LEOPARD'S GRASP.

The crowd assembled in Blanc's menagerie in the Piazza dei Termini at Rome one evening last week witnessed an occurrence of a very thrilling and terrible kind. M. Blanc's daughter Marguerite, a little girl of 13, after having assisted her father in his performance with the lions, accompanied him—against his wish it is stated—into the leopard's cage. The savage brute no sooner saw the child than he sprang upon her, threw her down, and, crouching upon her prostrate form, buried his claws in her neck. The lion-tamer rushed upon the beast to save his child, while the horror-stricken spectators fled in every direction. The attack of the unhappy father, who was unnerved, and armed with no heavier weapon than a whip, made no impression on the leopard who still kept the child in his awful grip. Happily at the moment when matters looked most critical, the lion-tamers son, Baptiste, having been apprised of what was going on, entered the cage. He is a remarkably powerful young man, and has always been able to keep the animal in control. Dealing a terrific blow at the brute, he forced him to relinquish his prey; and the child was extricated from her perilous position, while her brother remained behind and administered a vigorous castigation to the now cowed and trembling leopard. The little girl, who was removed from the den in a state of complete insensibility, sustained, strange to say, very little hurt, and her wounds, the doctors say, will not even leave a scar.

SOMEBODY SLIPPED IN A JOKE.—Trenton, N. J., March 17.—A rural member of the New Jersey Assembly introduced a bill some time ago "to prevent the spread of contagious diseases of animals," which provided that poultry dying of a contagious disease should be buried within twenty-four hours, not less than two feet under ground, and imposed a heavy penalty for violations of the law. The bill slumbered in a committee until a day or two ago, when some wag managed to get inserted in it the following section, which appeared in the printed bill on the members' desks to night:—"SECTION 2. And be it enacted that there shall be erected over the grave, tomb or sepulchre of such deceased hen, cat, goose, duck, dog, drake, peacock, rat, polecat, or other fowl, a suitable tombstone, tablet, or monument, not to exceed fifty feet in height, or to cost more than \$13.50, upon which shall be inscribed the species, sex, and age of said deceased, and what knocked him out, with suitable poetical finish."