

A RICH MAN'S DEATH.

BY EMILE ZOLA.

The count of Vertueil is over 50 years old. He belongs to one of the most illustrious families of France, and possesses a fortune which would enable him to live in any country he pleased. He has spent his life in the study of the sciences, and has been a member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques; he devoted himself to great business speculations, and he has been a successful speculator in the stock market, and in the fine arts. Once he even got himself elected as deputy, and distinguished himself by the violence of his opposition to the government party.

The Countess Mathilde de Vertueil is 38 years of age. She is spoken of as the most adorable blonde in Paris. She has been used to be a little thin; now her shoulders have ripened and taken the roundness of a young girl. Never has she been so beautiful as now. When she enters a drawing-room, with her golden hair and satin skin, she seems like a star at its rising, and women of 20 are jealous of her.

The domestic life of the count and countess is one of those about which people say nothing. They were married after the most ordinary fashion of marriages in the upper circles. It is even said that for six years they lived together in perfect harmony. At that time they had a son, Ferdinand, who is now a captain in the army, and a daughter, Blanche, whom they married last year to M. de Ruvigny, a man of great fortune. Their children occasionally visit them. Long ago their marital relations were broken off; nevertheless, they remain good friends, with immense egotism under the friendship. They consult each other, conduct themselves irreproachably toward each other in society, but when alone, fasten themselves up in their separate apartments, where they receive their intimate friends as they choose.

One night Mathilde returns from a ball at 2 o'clock in the morning. Her waiting maid undresses her, and then, just as she is about to retire, she says to her: "Monsieur the count is a little indisposed this evening."

The countess, already half asleep, lazily turns her head.

"Ah!" she murmurs.

Then she stretches herself and adds: "Wake me to-morrow morning at 10; I am expecting the dressmaker."

Next morning at breakfast, at the count does not make his appearance, the countess first inquires about him; then she finally decides to go up to his room. She finds him in bed, very pale, but irreproachably correct in his bearing. Three doctors were already there; they consulted together in a low voice, and left strict orders; they are to return in the evening. The patient is treated by two domestic physicians, who remain serious and silent, smothering even the sound of their own feet upon the carpet.

The great chamber seems to grow larger in its isolation; not even a bird is out of place, not one article of furniture is disarranged. For this is a cleanly and dignified illness—the ceremonial illness which expects visitors.

"So you are suffering, mon ami?" asks the countess, on entering.

The count makes an effort to smile.

"Oh, just a little fatigued," he answers.

"I need only rest. I thank you for having put yourself to the trouble of coming up."

The days roll by. The chamber remains dignified, stately; everything is in its place; tones disappear without leaving a trace of their presence. The slaves of the domestic do not even permit themselves to wear a shadow of weariness.

Nevertheless, the count knows that he is in danger, of death; he has exacted the truth from the doctors, and has allowed them to do as they please without murmuring. Most generally he remains with eyes closed, often for hours at a time, or else he gazes fixedly before him as though he were reflecting upon his solitude.

In society the countess says that her husband is a little indisposed. She has not altered her course of life in the least; she eats, sleeps and drives out at the usual hours. Every morning and every evening she goes herself to see the count how he is.

"Eh bien! do you feel better, mon ami?"

"Made out a little better, thank you, dear Mathilde."

"If you wish, I will remain with you."

"No; it is useless. Julien and Françoise suffice. What would be the use of fatiguing yourself?"

Privately they understand each other; they have lived all their lives together, and apart.

The count feels that better pleasure of the egoist who wishes to pass away alone, without being annoyed by any consideration of his wife. He wishes to abridge the unpleasantness of the last twilight as much as possible, both for himself and the countess. His last wish is to disappear from the world with propriety, like a man of the world, who does not wish to annoy or disgust anybody with his illness.

At last, however, an evening comes when he can no longer get his breath; he knows he will not be able to live through the night. Mathilde pays her customary visit, and he says to her, with a last feeble smile:

"Do not go away."

He wishes to spare her the remarks of people. She, on her side, was expecting such an announcement. And she sits herself in the room. The physician can no longer leave the bedside of the agonizing man. The two servants finish their duties with the same silent haste. The children, Blanche and Ferdinand, had been sent for. They remain with their mother near the bed. Other relatives are in the next room. Half the night thus passes by in solemn expectation; the ceremonial is fulfilled—the count can die.

But he will not hurry himself; he seems to find strength enough to avoid a convulsive or noisy death. In the vast, severe room his breathing is like the broken sound of a clock out of order. It is a well-brought-up man about to die. And when he has kissed his wife and children he repeats them from him, with a last feeble smile.

Then one of the domestic maids comes down, closes the door of the count's room, and announces in a deep whisper:

"All is over."

Signs and sobs break the silence. The countess, Ferdinand and Blanche are kneeling down. They are weeping through their hands; their faces cannot be seen. Then they retire; the two children leading their mother, who, on reaching the door, balances her waist in a final effort to steady her steps. And from that moment the dead is abandoned to the pomp of his obsequies.

The doctors have departed, rounding their backs and trying to look vaguely sad. A priest has been sent for in all haste to the parish church, to watch with the body. The two servants remain with the priest; this is the last service expected of them. One sees a spoon that had been forgotten on the mantelpiece; he rises and slides it into his pocket in order that the perfect order of the room may not be disturbed.

Early at dawn a noise of hammers is heard in the great drawing-room on the mantelpiece; the two upholsterers, who are converting this salon into a mortuary chapel, with a monumental catafalque

in the centre of it. The whole day is taken up with the work of embalming; the doors are locked; the embalmer and his assistants are left alone. Next day when the count is brought downstairs and exposed upon the catafalque, he is in full dress, with the fresh color of youth upon his face.

Upon the morning of the funeral, from the hour of ten, the house is filled with the low murmur of discreet voices. The sons and son-in-law of the deceased receive the crowd in the parlor of the ground floor; they bow silently; they maintain the dumb politeness of afflicted persons. All upper society is represented here—the nobility, the army, the magistracy—there are even the senators and the academicians.

At last, about ten o'clock, the procession takes the way to the church. The hearse is a first-class vehicle, planned with noble feathers, draped with silver-fringed hangings. The cords of the pall are held by a marshal of France; a duke, who was an old friend of the deceased; an ex-minister and a member of the academy. Ferdinand de Vertueil and M. de Busac are chief mourners. Then comes the cortege, a stream of persons all gloved and cravated with black, all highly-important personages who breathe hard at being obliged to walk upon the pavement, and who march with the dull tread of a flock of sheep suddenly turned loose.

The whole curious population of the quarter is at its windows; people stand back upon the sidewalks, take off their hats and shake their heads as if they saw the triumphal hearse go by. Traffic is interrupted by the interminable procession of mourning, carriages, nearly all empty; omnibuses, cabs, cars are blocked at the cross-roads; the swearing of drivers and the impatient cracking of whips is heard.

And during all this time the Countess de Vertueil remains locked up in her room, in order that people may say she is broken down with grief. Lying upon an extension chair, she is really playing with the tassels of her belt, and with eyes fixed upon the ceiling, finds comfort in happy reveries.

The ceremony at the church lasts nearly two hours. In the centre of the nave, all hung with black, flame the lights of a mortuary chapel; the processions, the hearse, is seated—the women on the left, the men on the right; and the organ rolls out the lamentation, the singers move in undertones, the choir-boys sing with sharply sobbing quivers and trills, while in the cressets tall, green flames are burning, adding their funeral light to the pomp of the ceremony.

"Is not Faure going to sing?" asks a deputy of his neighbor.

"Yes, I believe so," replies the latter, an ex-prefect and super-looking man, who smiles at the ladies from afar off.

And then the voice of the great singer quivers through the vibrating nave.

"Ah! what a style! What volume there is in that voice—the ex-prefect adds in a whisper, nodding his head in ecstasy. The congregation is ravished. The ladies, with a vague smile upon their lips, dream of opera nights. That Faure has real talent. A friend of the deceased goes so far as to say:

"He never sang better. It is unfortunate poor Vertueil cannot hear him now; he was so fond of him!"

The chancel, in black caps, pass around the catafalque; a score of priests chanting the ceremonial, bowing, reiterating Latin phrases, waving aspergillums. Finally the mourners do before the coffin, passing the holy water sprinklers from one to the other. And all leave the church after shaking hands with the family. The daylight without almost blinds the crowd.

It is a beautiful June day. Gossamer threads float in the open air. Before the church there is pushing and crowding. Those who do not wish to remain with the mourners disappear. It is long before the procession can reform. Far off, at the end of the street, one can see the planes of the horses waving, nodding his head in ecstasy, the distance, although the square is still all blocked up with carriages. One can hear the noise of carriage-doors clapped to, and the rapid clatter of horses trotting over the pavement. Nevertheless, the carriages at last go into line, and the conveyance moves to the cemetery.

The folks in the carriage roll back at their ease. One might suppose they were going to the Bois, slowly, through verdant Paris. At the house is no longer visible, the funeral has already been forgotten; and conversations begin. The ladies talk about the summer season; the men about their business affairs.

"Tell me, love, will you go to Dieppe again this year?"

"Yes, perhaps; but certainly not before August. We leave on Saturday for our country seat in the Loire."

"Then, mon cher, he interrupted the latter, and they fought—oh, not very desperately, but a little hotly. He wishes to abridge the unpleasantness of the last twilight as much as possible, both for himself and the countess. His last wish is to disappear from the world with propriety, like a man of the world, who does not wish to annoy or disgust anybody with his illness.

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