

The Countess

by Alexis Puffer

I blushed just then as I wrote that word. I glanced furtively over my desk towards that one dear woman whom it was my privileged happiness to feed and clothe, and turned abashed from the reproachful spectacle of the little stockings and shoes upon the hearth. Heed me not, wife! Spin and weave. O thou pensive Arachne, while I still unravel this tangled web of my past life and count its lost and useless stitches. Sleep on. O Adolphus, my latest born, nor move restlessly in thy slumbers. Better the pangs of colic than the stings of remorse. Haply mayst though never know the day when Godfrey's cordial shall no longer bring balm to thy spirit and paregoric cease to sooth thy repose.

It was twenty years ago this night. I was returning from boarding school. I was sixteen and shy. I had that usual tendency of young bipeds to run to legs and neck and bill. My form was gotten up with distinct reference to my retiring disposition—so economic were its principles that I slipped almost noiselessly through the crowded cars of the H. R. R. Road and slid into a seat beside a portly man with whiskers. There was a lady in the seat opposite me. There is one in this story. They are identical.

I drew a book from the pocket of my sack and abandoned myself to intellectual delights. I do not remember the name of the work. I had bought it from a book peddler. I think on account of the picture of a Countess which adorned, while it explained, the title page. The story referred to a countess. I believe that her husband, notwithstanding his high social position, was addicted to highway robbery and murder. A young man only eighteen years of age had been enticed into his den. He was released by the Countess, who fell passionately in love with him. As she knocked off the fetters from his graceful limbs (having previously removed three obstacles occasionally alluded to throughout the works as “minions,” with her “trusty steel”) she gazed on his ingenuous features with an expression of tender admiration and regard and suddenly shrieked aloud: “Away womanish timidity and shame! Know then O, Rudolph, 'tis thee I love! thee for whom I live and die.” And immediately sank fainting upon his breast!

When I had reached this thrilling climax, I sighed deeply and closed my eyes to allow my soul to dwell freely on the passionate picture, and to permit my lips to murmur again and again the touching and elevated sentiments of the Countess. When I had opened my eyes again, I perceived the sigh had attracted the attention of my companion, who turned her face towards me, and our glances met.

I had a dreadful trick then, which I have not yet gotten over, of staring at people.—It may have been an affecting relic of that touching childish reliance of physiognomy which we so speedily outgrow. It came naturally to me—but it may have been annoying to others. How long I subjected the lady to this mild impertinence I cannot say. But I suddenly became aware that she was smiling encouragingly, at which I blushed violently. In the hope of doing something natural, and half mechanically I extended my book with a bow. As her thin dexterous fingers received the courtesy, and turned carelessly over the leaves, I finished the rest of my stare. She was quite pretty and young. Her lips perhaps were rather thin, so thin that when she laughed they drew up

over her white teeth, and showed another red lip above them. This peculiarity, with her black eyes and white face a little squared at the lower angles, made her look mysterious and foreign. Her voice was low and musically soft.

She handed me the book in return, with another smile. I accepted both timidly. —As I reopened the pages of my interesting romance I discovered, immediately below the thrilling prison scene, a few words in pencil. Again the blood rushed to my cheeks as I read the following:

“I am an unhappy woman, flying from a [brutal] husband. I read sympathy in your thrilling glances. You are noble as you are handsome. Can you not sit beside me?”

What young man oppressed with a doubt of his looks could resist that latter adjective? Glowingly I raised my eyes to hers. Her lashes were cast down; she raised them suddenly with a glance, and again settled the fringed lids demurely. My brain swam round and round. I found myself repeating the beautiful expressions of the robber’s wife. I looked over to her companion. He was gazing out of the window. I shuddered as if with cold and closed the window. As I expected he looked at me with a wrathful expression. I apologized, but “draughts—bronchial affections— would change seats, etc.” The black bearded man smiled and arose. Unutterable bliss! I slid beside the lady.

We drifted into conversation. She was oppressed by bashfulness; what would I think of her? What could I think of her—Ah. Madam!

In proportion as she appeared reserved, I grew bold. I ventured to cross my legs, and even reknotted the black ribbon of my Byron collar with greater ease and gracefulness. Overcome by my subdued, yet gallant manner, she related her painful history.

I cannot remember it all. In the long retrospect of the past I fear it is somehow mixed with the fiction of the Countess and Rudolph. I knew only that she was flying from one whom she did not love; that she feared her late companion was a spy in the service of her husband. That she was unhappy and lone until she saw a face that she—Oh dear me!

We dashed under a long bridge, and its darkness favored a bold design, which I had been framing for the last five minutes. I possessed myself of her small hand. I pressured it. The pressure was returned. I raised her glove respectfully to my lips. When we dashed out into the world again I felt distraught and changed. It was like closing the pages of that thrilling romance.

By degrees day changed to twilight and twilight to darkness. In the partial gloom, her beautiful head sank on my shoulder. I whispered something to her, in an agitated voice. Her reply was, “Anywhere with thee—‘tis thee alone, I love!” or words to that effect. I started, the words were so like the Countess.

The conductor approached to collect the fare. I fumbled in my pockets nervously. I had but enough to pay my own fare—all that was left of my scanty pittance. How could I be her moneyless protector? With feminine delicacy she slipped a purse into my hand, and smiled sweetly. I blushed as I opened the purse. It was filled with bank bills—they were all of large

denominations. I paid the fare. She accepted the change, but begged I would take charge of the purse during the rest of the journey. I appreciated her lady-like delicacy. I gazed fondly upon her. She was a real Countess!

The train still sped on, and station after station was passed. We were to proceed as fast as steam could carry us, to Philadelphia and thence to St. Louis. I had settled in my mind that I would dispatch a letter, at New York, to my expectant parents, bidding them farewell—stating vaguely that I was in the hands of Love and Destiny. In the meantime, at each station, I procured little luxuries for her, recklessly, with her own money, encouraged by her gratefulness at these attentions, and giving her regularly the change. At Poughkeepsie a singular event took place.

Weave and spin, O, Arachne! Sleep on O, Adolphus!

She wanted a railway rug, to keep her small feet warm. I would have preferred of course, that they should have nestled near my own, as they had done for the last half hour. But her wishes were paramount, and—it was her own money. I ran to a store near the station. I procured the rug and handed the clerk a \$50 bill, the smallest denomination in the purse. It was on the Poughkeepsie Bank. I rolled up the rug and was re-entering the car, when a hand was laid upon my shoulder. I turned. It was the clerk breathless with running.

“If you please sir, will you stop back with me a moment to the store?”

“Yes, but make haste, we have but five minutes before the train starts.”

We reached the store; the proprietor was at the door. A silence ensued, during which he closed the door, and carefully reproduced the \$50 bill and handed it to me. “That’s a counterfeit bill, sir!”

I looked at him with one of my long honest stares, which made him look aside a moment and blush as I thought, and then took out my purse. I handed him another bill, amid a profound silence, while I looked haughtily around.

“That is like the other, and *counterfeit* too!” he replied after a moment’s survey.

I hastily unrolled the bills on the counter. They were all on the Poughkeepsie Bank!

“They are not mine—that is,” I said hurriedly—“I can explain all in a few moments,” and I started toward the door. He anticipated me in a moment, and stood before me.

I felt alarmed. I could not as a gentleman mention the name of the lady,—in fact I didn’t know it, but I begged that one of the gentlemen would accompany me to the station, and—

“The cars are gone already,” said the clerk, “and here is Mr. —, Cashier, and M—, of the Town police force.”

I had a long conversation with Mr. —, Cashier of the Poughkeepsie Bank— to whom as a gentleman and man of gallantry I secretly confided my troubles. In company with Mr. —, of the Town police force, I sat down and wrote that letter to my parents, but altered the names of the parties in whose hands I had fallen. The next day my paternal guardian arrived from New York in company with the gentleman with black whiskers who had been the companion of the lady and probable spy of her husband. The gentleman with black whiskers identified me at once, and corroborated my statement to the Cashier. I found out afterwards that he was Detective —, the lady was—not a Countess.

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