

The Count's Revenge
by Bertha E. Peck

In the year 183— there was enacted a tragedy in France that caused a great deal of wonder and comment; not on account of the tragedy, for similar were of frequent occurrence, but because the affair remained a profound mystery.

On a night in the fall of the year above mentioned, an Englishman and a Frenchman—the latter well known as a famous duelist and gambler—were engaged in card playing at a quiet saloon in Bordeaux.

The Englishman had been drinking very freely, and, carried away by success at first, he played higher and higher. After a time his luck changed, and he lost far more than he had gained.

One by one the lookers-on at the game dispersed, and only the two men remained in the room.

Cool and calm, the Frenchman saw his opponent growing more desperate, till, as a last chance, the latter placed his watch at stake, and it, like the rest of his valuables, was lost.

The French gambler arose, and as he coolly placed his gains in his pocket, the Englishman rushed at him, and, in a frenzy of despair and madness, clutched him by the throat, and in a threatening voice demanded fair play.

The Frenchman quickly drew a pistol, and aimed it at the Englishman's head. At the same instant the latter released his hold, and drawing a like weapon they fired simultaneously.

Without a word the Frenchman, as if dead, fell heavily to the floor.

Struck dumb with horror the Englishman, only slightly wounded, gazed on the ghastly sight before him.

“Dead? Oh, heaven forgive me!” he cried in a voice of deepest anguish, and the next instant fled through a window, and his retreating form was lost in the darkness.

A few words will describe this Englishman. His name was Gordon Dumont. He was a tall, vigorous and active man, about thirty-five years of age.

Not many days before the above tragedy he had left his home in London for Paris, where he went on business.

With fond kisses and bright hopes he parted from his young wife and beautiful child—a daughter about six years old. By an accident he had been compelled to visit and remain for some hours at Bordeaux; to kill time he had looked on at a few games of cards, but so fascinating became the

sight that he, too, soon became engaged in the fatal amusement, with the above consequences.

As Dumont fled from his fallen foe, he did not notice a dark figure spring across his path; but, filled with terror, he rushed on without one backward glance.

The figure, much startled by the hasty exit of Dumont, hurried into the room the latter had just left, and stood over the prostrate gambler. Noticing a slight quiver about the closed eyelids of the wounded man, he placed his hand over his heart, and with a smothered exclamation the newcomer ejaculated:

“He is *not* dead, as the Englishman believed—but he soon shall be!” and suiting the action to the word he thrust a double-edged stiletto twice through the gambler’s heart.

“The Englishman may answer for this; but, wait—what have we here?” and as he muttered he emptied the pockets of the dead gambler of their contents. The Englishman’s watch he seized also; and hearing footsteps in the hall without, the thief and assassin bounded through the window and was in the street outside before the waiters, startled by the pistol shots, entered the room.

Consternation and horror were on the men’s faces as they beheld the shocking sight. Search was immediately begun for the missing Englishman, as it was certain that he alone had murdered and then robbed the gambler.

For months the search after Dumont was long and vigilant—no trace of him was ever found.

As we know, the assassin had taken the Englishman’s watch, and the hiding of that clew saved his name from being known, and finally the murder became a mystery never to be solved. Thus time fled on till the sequel we are about to relate occurred.

Twelve years after the mysterious assassination, Claude de Gaston, a young French noble, fell deeply in love with a most beautiful English girl. At the time of which we write they were together in an elegant apartment in Paris. They were in earnest conversation. Claude was intensely excited, and spoke hurriedly, while his companion replied in deepest sadness. Claude at last exclaimed:

“Estelle, you little dream what you do. To cast aside my love is a crime! You have professed to love me—you *do* love me! Then why discard me? Ah, tell me, darling—give me a reason! or I must believe by your actions that you prefer my cousin to me!”

Receiving no reply he continued in a bitter tone:

“Perhaps his greater wealth and title tempt you; but remember, Estelle, I am not a man to forget a love so soon, or forgive a woman who could treat a passion like mine with such lightness!”

The girl made no reply, but tears fell like purest gems from her violet eyes, and gaining hope from her silence and tears, the young man continued in a pleading tone:

“Oh, think once again before you give your final answer! For, oh! darling, sweet Estelle, my own, say this has all been a cruel joke! You are mine, heart and mind—you must marry me or I shall die!”

“Claude, Claude! have pity on me! If you do truly love me you will not force me to repeat what makes me more than miserable! I can never marry you! *Fate!*—neither love, fame, or fortune—has bound me to your cousin! I love only you, and that more than life; but I cannot marry you, nor can I tell you why!”

Overcome with grief and excitement the speaker buried her tearful face in her hands, and moaned aloud as she sank to a seat. Her attitude was one of deepest supplication and agony; but no pity was in the face of the proud man, who stood with his arms tightly folded across his breast, while his eyes flashed scorn and bitterness on the beautiful head bowed in sorrow before him. Coldly he said:

“Estelle, I have loved you as only a strong, passionate nature could love; my faith in you has been intense; but now, both love and faith—sweet jewels—are lost, and my happiness has turned to ashes, like dead-sea fruit, on my lips!”

With these bitter and cruel words he slowly left her presence. She heard his footsteps die into silence, but still the wretched girl restrained her desire to rush after him and cling to him forever.

“Gone—and forever!” she sobbed. “Can I let him leave me? No, no! Love! —life! —my darling, Claude, come back!”

But only the echo of her own sad voice replied to her appeal.

Hours passed before Estelle Dumont moved from where Claude de Gaston left her. At last she was aroused by the entrance of her father. He was an old man of seventy in appearance, this *Gordon Dumont*, but Time was not the hand that had aged him so. Mental agony had in twelve short years made a wreck of a once noble and handsome man.

Twelve years before we saw him fleeing into the darkness—a fugitive from justice—a murderer he believed he was. For weeks and months he had lain hidden, nor dared to show himself by day. He hourly expected to be caught, and greatly wondered that he had escaped so long that sleuth-hound—the secret police of Paris. This may be explained, as the search for him was carried to England. The police imagined he had fled for his native land, and, therefore, the search in France had been far less vigilant than it was in England, and by this good fortune Dumont was enabled to escape.

When he and his wife met, after months of separation, neither would have recognized the other had they met on the street, so changed had they both grown. The wife had passed a living death. To know that her dearly-loved husband was in danger of his life, and not be able to communicate with him, though she received letters from him at rare intervals, had nearly killed her, and she grew to be a mere shadow of her once beautiful self.

And he? Remorse, grief, terror and anguish of soul had turned his hair and beard to a snowy whiteness, while his broad shoulders had become bowed as with the weight of three-score years.

Two years after their reunion, the unhappy man was left a widower, with only his little daughter Estelle to love and live for.

And now, after twelve years, we see father and daughter together.

Estelle was a beautiful and fascinating woman, and her adoring father almost worshipped her. She loved him as intensely, and as she knew that only her devotion kept him alive, she would have made any sacrifice for his safety or happiness.

Wealthy, beautiful and brilliant, her admirers and suitors were numerous. Among them was De Gaston and his cousin, the Comte D'Arches.

For two months Estelle had accepted and returned Claude's ardent love. With no thought of aught that could disturb them, they reveled in the joy of their new-found happiness, till they were rudely awakened from their dream of bliss by the proposal of the Comte D'Arches for Estelle's hand, and the result of the proposal was the cause of the sad parting of the lovers.

When the comte proposed to Mr. Dumont, the latter, knowing well the reputation of the comte as a *roué*, politely refused the proffered honor. He had an undefinable dread of the comte, and was only too glad that Estelle's heart was already occupied, so that when the comte asked a reason for the refusal he gave it.

Mortified, but not surprised, the comte determined to have his wish at every risk, and he prepared to carry out a plot he had already arranged in case he was refused by Mr. Dumont. He knew that Estelle did not prefer him to his cousin, but that fact caused him little uneasiness, as he felt sure that, once his wife, the lovely woman could not withhold her love.

The plot of the comte was successful, as we shall see. He took all Gordon Dumont said to him with a scornful smile, but soon he began to speak, and his eyes glittered when he saw the effect his words had on the old man.

Filled with consternation Dumont listened while *the comte* declared that he had been *present* at the *killing* of the *French gambler* at Bordeaux, *twelve years before!*

“Yes, I was outside of the latticed window,” the comte narrated. “I had my own reasons for watching the game without being seen. I was not greatly astonished to see it end as it did, for the man had been robbing you mercilessly, and *I* do not blame you for shooting him. But,” with a shrug of his shoulders, “the *criminal courts* have a way of making such an act appear bad—in fact, *villainous!*”

As he finished speaking, his wicked, though handsome face, wore a smile of triumph. He saw the terror that seized Dumont at the thought of having his long-buried secret brought to light and justice, and exulted accordingly.

“But you dare not accuse me openly! No one will believe you—you have no proofs!” cried the wretched man in despair, yet hoping what he said might be true.

“Ah! but I will dare, and I *have* proofs! Deny me your daughter, and I shall not rest till you are convicted as a *murderer!*”

He hurled the threat with such venom and determination that Gordon Dumont did not dare brave the plotting comte’s vengeance.

“But surely, you would not marry Estelle when you know she loves your cousin, Claude de Gaston! Oh! Comte, have pity—have mercy on us both!”

“Bah! What do I care for a slight fancy felt for my boyish cousin? I love Estelle, and after we are married she will love *me*—or no one! As to mercy, I have said! and unless your daughter becomes my wife in a month’s time, you will feel what it is to cross the purposes of Comte D’Arches!”

So saying he left Gordon Dumont to cogitate over his threatening words. Estelle was a most loving daughter, as we have said, and after her father confessed in agony and tears the crime he had committed, and how that crime had found him out—for he never called his act of self-defence by a milder name—she was overwhelmed with grief that her darling and dearly loved father had suffered, and must still suffer, if she did not consent to sacrifice love and self; thus, without a murmur of reproach, the glorious girl consented to marry the hated comte.

To a proud and adoring heart like that of Claude de Gaston’s, such an end to his love was most bitter. He determined not to be a witness of the comte’s success, and in twenty-four hours after his parting from Estelle he had quitted Paris.

Though the comte knew that Estelle despised more than loved him, he was furious when he began to realize that she still loved his cousin, even after she had become his wife.

As time passed the comte’s jealousy increased, and learning that Claude was about to return from

his travels abroad, he determined to be revenged on his young wife and cousin; to better carry out this, his second plot against them, he left France.

Fortune seemed to favor his designs; for the steamer on which he attempted to cross the Channel was lost, and all on board were supposed to have perished.

With almost joy, Estelle heard that the comte was among the missing of the steamer *Antwerp*.

A feeling of new-found freedom came to her, and she hastened to leave a city where she had known such bitter disappointment. She and her father had reached Italy, where they intended to spend a short time. It seemed a most fortunate step, for they had been in Florence but a few days when Estelle saw her beloved Claude, as, with eyes turned to the ground, he passed her on the street.

With impulsive joy she cried:

“Claude! Claude! Have you forgotten me?”

With a startled glance, he beheld the woman of whom he had that moment been thinking, and most harshly, too; but at the sound of her voice, and the loving echo of his name, all his bitterness fled; they were powers he could not resist, and with a tender light in his passionate eyes he clasped her outstretched hands.

An answering glance from her eyes, flashing with intense love, told Claude that the woman before him had never been false in her love for him, let circumstances be what they might, and in the ecstasy of that discovery he forgot that to him still she was his cousin’s wife.

“Forgotten you? Oh! my glorious darling, your image has been too vividly stamped on my heart and soul since the first hour we met for the memory of it to have left me for a moment. My love has never grown less, but increases each hour of my life. Oh, heaven forgive me! What right have I to love my cousin’s wife?” he exclaimed, in a voice of agony.

“Oh, Claude, I am no longer the wife of Comte D’Arches. He was lost with all the passengers at the *Antwerp* disaster!” Estelle said with a saddened voice.

Claude noticed the change, and asked her quickly if she was sorry her husband was no longer able to separate them.

“No, Claude, not sorry for that. I thank Heaven that nothing on earth can now deprive me of your love. But I pity him; his death was sudden, and must have been terrible.”

He had taken a seat in Estelle’s carriage, and they were soon on their way to her father’s house. At first a gloom seemed to have fallen over their new-found happiness; but the sweet magnetism

of each other's presence soon dispelled all shadows, and tenderly they listened as each whispered how fondly their love had been cherished.

Mr. Dumont was no less happy than they in their reunion, and weeks soon melted into months, and the lovers were nearing their wedding-day.

Unutterably happy, Estelle and Claude had no presentiment of the terrible blow that a revengeful hatred was preparing for them.

Comte D'Arches, it is true, had taken passage on board the *Antwerp*; but he was not a passenger. Some incident had just prevented him, and being left, he determined to cloud his exit from Paris with entire mystery. When he heard of the wreck he flattered himself that fate had favored him, and he concluded to let his wife believe he had been drowned. He had made arrangements with his bankers, and about his property, so that it would not be necessary to show himself for five years if it took so long for him to achieve his intentions. These intentions were to lead his wife and cousin into a trap, which he knew his supposed death would be sure to do. We have seen how well his plan worked. He kept secret agents watching the slightest movements of his wife and cousin, and when he learned that the eve of their marriage was approaching he hastened to the scene of action, ready to strike his deadening blow to all their hopes.

Exulting in his expected revenge the comte prepared to reach Paris just at the hour when he could make his blow bitterest and most humiliating.

Estelle, Claude, and Mr. Dumont had returned to Paris—Claude's home—for the marriage; but they all intended to quit that city immediately after the two were united. As Comte D'Arches sped on his way he soliloquized:

“*They* are to be married tomorrow eve. I reach there tonight, keep myself concealed till they stand before the altar, and *then*—”

The sentence was never concluded, for at that instant a terrible crash and explosion took place, tearing the carriage to splinters. The comte was thrown with fearful force on his head, and when discovered among the *debris* of the cars, some time after the shock, he was still unconscious.

He was carried to a hospital and became sensible when his wounds were being dressed. When told that he was dying he became frantic. Maddening thoughts of his cousin and wife tortured his mind while his body was racked with pain from his hurts.

“Can no one save me? I will not die! They shall not marry!” he groaned with increased agony.

“Be calm; you only injure yourself more by such excitement. We will do all we can to save you,” a physician soothingly said, although he knew the injured man was dying.

Giving him an opiate, the physician returned after an hour to find that the comte had just awakened and was more calm.

Two Sisters of Mercy were persuading him to have a priest, and receive the consolation of the church. He was at last prevailed on to have the priest; but would not listen to a hint of his dying. He did not for a moment forget his determination to thwart his wife and cousin, and he sent for a messenger to receive dictations for a telegram to be sent to them.

The priest came; but before the confession was entirely made the comte became too exhausted to dictate the telegram.

Finally he rallied enough to tell them his name, and the Comtess Estelle's address; but before he finished the dictation death claimed him, and instead of telegraphing that the comte *lived*, a dispatch left to say that he had that hour *died*.

Mr. Dumont received and opened the telegram, and seeing what an awful calamity had threatened his darling daughter, had determined not to let a shadow of what had happened reach her knowledge. He telegraphed to learn all the particulars of the comte's death, and making arrangements for his burial, kept silent about the whole affair till Estelle and Claude were safely married. Not till several days after did they learn how near they had come to a second separation. From what the attendants and physician related of the dying comte's ravings, they discovered that his death by the *Antwerp* had been a pretence, and that he was on his way to crush them in malignant triumph.

Months after the comte's death, Mr. Dumont received a strange letter, written by one who had been supposed insensible while Comte D'Arches made his confession; but though he was too weak to speak at the time, he had heard and remembered it all, and as soon as he was able, wrote to them, believing that it would be but just to let him and Estelle know what the dying man had confessed.

By this strange letter they learned that the Comte D'Arches, and not Gordon Dumont, gave the French gambler at Bordeaux his death-blow. For some revengeful motive he had sworn to kill him, and the affair with the Englishman had given him the long looked-for chance.

The comte confessed also that he had pretended death, to be revenged on his wife and cousin, as he was sure they would marry as soon as they believed him dead.

Among the comte's papers was found a box sealed, and in it was Gordon Dumont's watch; the comte had kept it hidden ever since the murder at Bordeaux. It was the only good thing he ever did, for by its concealment Gordon Dumont escaped execution as a murderer.

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