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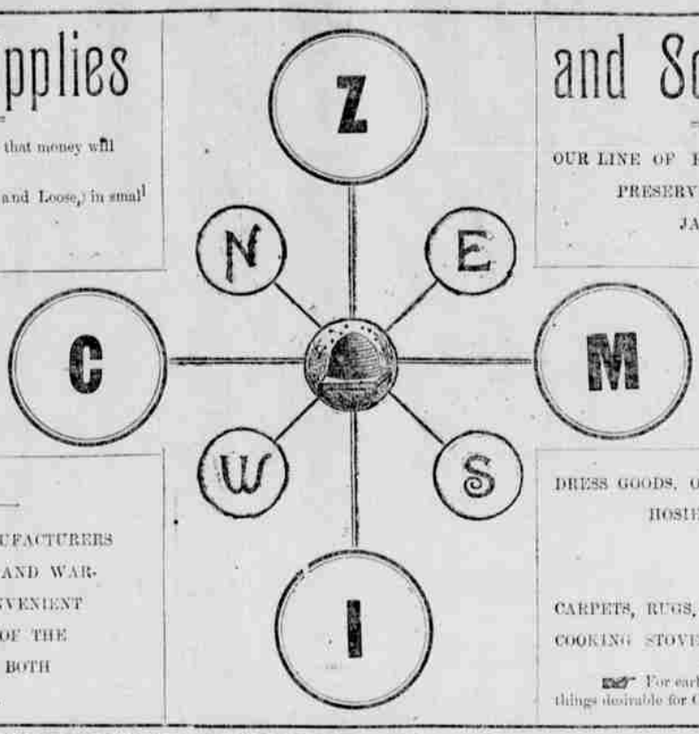

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T. G. WEBBER, Supt.

NICETTE.

"You are a dead man!" said the doctor, looking intently at Anatole.

Anatole staggered.

He had come gaily to pass the evening with his old friend, Dr. Bardale, the illustrious savant whose works on venomous substances are known all over the world, whose nobility of heart and almost paternal goodness Anatole had learned to know better than any other living soul; and now, without the least hesitation or preparation, he heard this terrible prognostication issue from those authoritative lips!

"Unhappy child, what have you done?" continued the doctor.

"Nothing that I know of," stammered Anatole, greatly agitated.

"Tell your memory; tell me what you have eaten or drunk—what you have inhaled."

The last word was a ray of light to Anatole. That very morning he had received a letter from one of his friends who was traveling in India. In the letter was a flower plucked on a bank of the Ganges by the traveler—a strangely formed red flower, the perfume of which—he now recalled the face vividly—had appealed to him to be singularly penetrative. He hastily drew forth his pocket-book and produced the letter and its contents and handed them to the savant.

"No doubt is possible!" cried the doctor; "it is the Pyrameschnots indica—the deadly flower, the flower of blood!"

"Then—you—really—think"——

"Alas! I am sure of it."

"But—it is impossible! I am only five and twenty years of age and feel full of life and health!"

"At what hour did you open that fatal letter?"

"This morning at 9 o'clock."

"Well—tomorrow morning, at the same hour, at the same minute, in full health, as you say, you will feel a pain in your heart—and all will be over."

"And you know of no remedy—no means of"——

"None!" said the doctor.

And covering his face with his hands he sank into a chair overcome by grief.

In face of the profound emotion of his old friend, Anatole understood that he was really condemned.

He hurried from the doctor's house like a madman. His forehead bathed in perspiration, his ideas all confused, going he knew not whither, he sped on and on amid the darkness of the night, taking no heed of the loneliness of the streets he was traversing. For a long time he pursued the blind course, until at length, finding a bench, he sank down upon it.

How many hours had he still to live?

The persistent and distressing sound of a rattling cough brought him back to consciousness. He looked in the direction whence it came and saw, seated upon the same bench, a pale and weak little Savoyard girl—a child not more than eight years old, who, as Francois Coppee says—

"Breed the winter while flowering in the spring."

That verse of the poet's coursed in the mind of Anatole; he felt in his waistcoat pocket and found there two sous and two louis. He was going to give the poor child the two sous, but reflection that he had only a few hours longer to live he gave her the two louis.

This incident did him good.

He had been like a man stunned by a blow on the head; his bewilderment was overcome now and he began to reassemble his dispersed ideas.

"My situation," he said to himself, "is that of a man condemned to death. A man in that position may still, however, hope for pardon—many of that sort are pardoned in our days. In past times even some have been cured from the ex ar the cord to devote themselves to some difficult or dangerous piece of work—the launching of a ship, for example, or as in the time of Louis XI to marry an old woman. If I were consulted in the matter I should prefer to launch a ship. Unfortunately I shall not be consulted during the short interval of time that remains to me. But, by the way, how long have I got to live?"

He looked at his watch.

"Three o'clock in the morning—it is time to go to bed. To bed—waste in sleep my last six hours! Not if I know it. I have certainly something better than that to do. But what? Of course—to make my will."

A restaurant—one of those which keep open all night—was not far off. Anatole entered it.

"Garcon, a bottle of champagne—and ink and paper."

He drank a glass of Clicquot and looked thoughtfully at the sheet of paper before him.

"To whom shall I bequeath my 6,000 francs a year? I have neither father nor mother—happily for them! Among the persons who interest me, I see only one—Nicette."

Nicette was a charming girl of eighteen, with blond tresses and large black eyes; an orphan like himself—a community in misfortune which had long established between them a secret and complete sympathy.

He last will and testament was speedily drawn up; universal legatee, Nicette.

That done he drank a second glass of champagne.

"Poor Nicette!" he mused; "she was very sad when I last saw her. Her guardian, who knows nothing of the world outside his class of wind instruments at the Conservatoire de Musique, had taken upon himself to promise her hand to a brute of an amateur of trombone—the more so because she has given her heart to somebody else. Who is that happy mortal? I haven't the least idea, but he is certainly worthy of her, or she would never have chosen him. Good, gentle, beautiful, loving Nicette deserves the ideal of inalienable happiness. Ah! she is the very wife that would have suited me to—if——

"By Jove, it's an infamy to compel her to destroy her life—to sacrificing such a treasure to such a brute! I have never before so well understood the generous order which fired the breasts of the wandering knights and spurred them on to the deliverance of oppressed beauty! And now I come to think of it, why leaders are from becoming the knight errant of Nicette! My fate is settled—at 9 o'clock—after that it will be too late; now therefore is the time for action. The hour is a little unusual for visiting people, but when I reflect that five hours hence I shall be no more I conclude that I have no time for standing on etiquette. Forward—my life for Nicette!"

Anatole rose, and then perceiving that his hail no money he gave his gold watch to the waiter in payment for the champagne—a watch worth 500 francs.

The garcon took the chronometer and examined it closely—weighed it in his hand, opened it and finally put it in his pocket doubtfully and without thanking Anatole.

It was 4 o'clock in the morning when he rang at the door of M. Bouvard, the grandfather of M. Nicette. He rang once, twice, and at the third ring broke the bell wire. At length M. Bouvard himself, in his nightdress and in great alarm, came and opened the door.

"What is the matter—is the house on fire?"

"No, my dear M. Bouvard," said Anatole. "I have only just you a little visit."

"At this hour!"

"It is pleasant to see you at any hour, my dear M. Bouvard! But you are so hastily dressed—pray get into bed again."

"I am going to do so. But I suppose, monsieur, that it was not simply to trouble me in this way that you have come at such an hour! You have something of importance to say to me?"

"Very important, M. Bouvard! It is to tell you that you must renounce the idea of marrying my cousin Nicette to M. Capleonc."

"What do you say?"

"You must renounce that project."

"Never, monsieur! never!"

"Don't fly in the face of Providence by using such language!"

"My resolution is fixed, monsieur; this marriage will take place."

"It will not, monsieur!"

"We will see about that. And now that you have had my answer, monsieur, I'll not detain you."

"A speech none too polite, M. Bouvard; but, as I am as good natured as I am tenacious, I will pass over it, and—remain."

That done he drank a second glass of champagne.

"Poor Nicette!" he mused; "she was very sad when I last saw her. Her guardian, who knows nothing of the world outside his class of wind instruments at the Conservatoire de Musique, had taken upon himself to promise her hand to a brute of an amateur of trombone—the more so because she has given her heart to somebody else. Who is that happy mortal? I haven't the least idea, but he is certainly worthy of her, or she would never have chosen him. Good, gentle, beautiful, loving Nicette deserves the ideal of inalienable happiness. Ah! she is the very wife that would have suited me to—if——

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"You seem—excuse me—a little tipsy."

"I'm what?"

"I say you seem—"

"To renounce the idea of that marriage!"

"Monsieur, I cannot!"

"Then—come"——

"M. Capleonc!"——

"Perhaps!"——

"Is a terrible man to deal with!"

"Perhaps!"——

"If I were to offer him such an affront he would kill me."

"Is that the only reason which stops you?"

"That—and several others."

"In that case leave the matter to me. I only swear to me that if I obtain M. Capleonc's renunciation my cousin shall be free to choose a husband for herself."

"Really, monsieur, you alone"——

"Cause, forsooth, flirt, hermit"——

"Monsieur, monsieur—she shall be free!"

"Swear! I have your word. Will you swear? Are you retired? By the way, where does your Capleonc live?"

"One hundred Rue des Deux-Ripes."

"I fly thither! Until we meet again!"

"You are going to throw yourself into the lion's mouth, and he will teach you a lesson you deserve," said M. Bouvard as Anatole hurried from the bedchamber and shut the door after him.

Without a moment's hesitation Anatole betook himself to the address of the fire eating fellow. It was just 6 o'clock when he arrived there. He rang the doorbell.

"Who is there?" demanded a rough voice behind the door.

"Open—very important communication, M. Bouvard."

The sounds of a night chain and the turning of a key in a heavy lock were heard.

"Here is a man who does not forget to protect himself against unwelcome visitors!" remarked Anatole to himself.

The door opened at length. Anatole found himself in the presence of a gentleman with a mustache fiercely upturned, whose nightdress appeared to be the complete costume of the fencing school.

"You are always ready! it's my motto."

The walls of the swordsman's antechamber were completely covered with panoplies of arms of all descriptions; yatagans, pointed arrows, sabers, rapiers, one and two handed swords, pistols—a regular arsenal—enough to terrify any timid minded observer.

"Bah!" thought Anatole, "what do I now risk? At most two hours and a half!"

"Monsieur," said Capleonc, "may I be allowed to know"——

"Monsieur," replied Anatole, "you want to marry Nicette?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Monsieur, you will not marry her!"

"Ah, thunder—blood! Who will prevent me?"

"I shall, monsieur!"

Capleonc stared at Anatole, who was not very big, but appeared to be very decided.

"Ah! Young man, you are very lucky to have found me in one of my placable moments. Take advantage of it—save yourself while you have time; otherwise I will not answer for your life!"

"For I for yours."

"A duel—in the—Capleonc!"

"Well, what is there little cowardly in that? Do you—the remembrance of your hand by M. Capleonc, and the resolution of your worthy guardian to leave it on the face of your cheeks—the rare you live."

"Do you really wish me to marry the whole guardian?"

"Offer!" cried Anatole, his breath nearly taken away.

"Since I love you, cousin!"

At that moment Anatole felt his heart beat violently. Was it a pleasure from the unexpected interest under Nicette, or was it the sense, the death sponge so pendent to the contact?

"Unfortunate that I am!" he sighed; "the lover, too—I can wish truly a happiness, and am to die without attaining it!"

Then, taking the hands of Nicette fervently within his own, he told her all about the letter, the venomous flower, he had sensed, the prognostication of his old friend, the will he had written and the plan he had successfully taken to release her from the claim of Capleonc.

"And now," he said, in conclusion, "I have only to go home and die!"

"But this is impossible," cried Nicette. "This doctor must have mistaken; who is he?"

"A man who is never in error, Nicette—Dr. Bardale!"

"Bardale! Bardale!" cried Bouvard, bursting into laughter. "Listen to what my newspaper here says: 'The learned Dr. Bardale has been suddenly seized with mental alienation. The madness with which he has been stricken is of a peculiar character. It is well known he was absolutely engaged in an inquiry into the nature of venomous substances, and latterly he had fallen into the delusion that everybody he met was under the influence of poison, and endeavored to persuade them that such was their condition. He was last night transported to the Maison de Santé of Dr. Blanche.'"

"Absurd!"

"Anatole!"

The two young persons fell into each other's arms.—Gilbert Magazine.

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