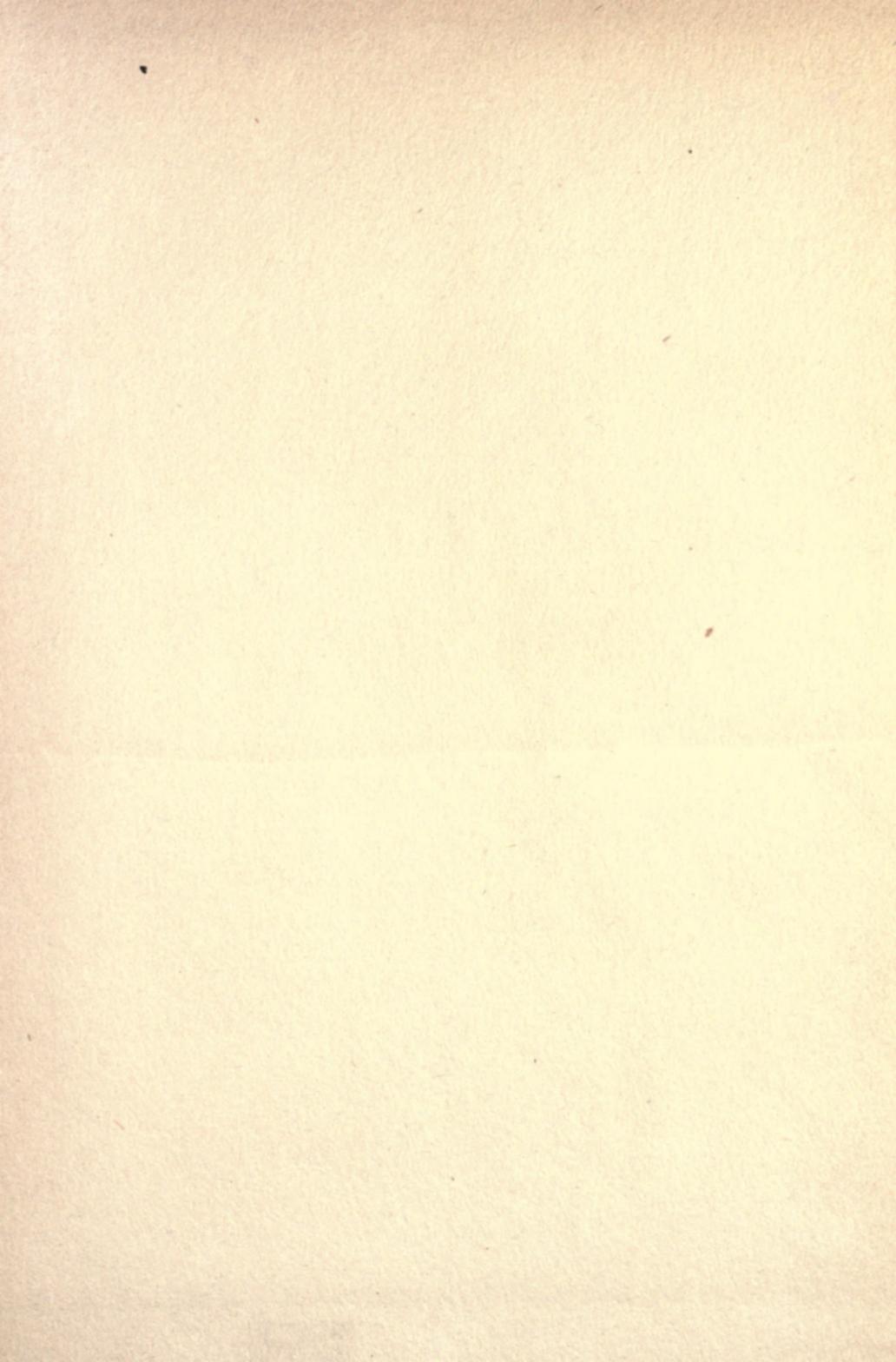


Mrs. C. L. Anderson.



THE
COUNTESS OF MONTE-CRISTO

THE WORKS OF
ALEXANDRE DUMAS

IN THIRTY VOLUMES



THE COUNTESS OF
MONTE-CRISTO

VOLUME TWO



ILLUSTRATED WITH DRAWINGS ON WOOD BY
EMINENT FRENCH AND AMERICAN ARTISTS



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THE COUNTESS OF MONTE-CRISTO

PART II

CHAPTER I

DOUBLE RUIN

IT is time that we return to other persons in our story, whom we have neglected too long.

The malady which had gnawed at the Count de Puysaie's heart a long time had made rapid progress since the flight of his wife, and since Nini Moustache had deserted him.

Nothing remained to buoy him up but the tender yet painful attachment of Cyprienne and the deceptive friendship of Colonel Fritz.

That friendship was distrustful and cautious, such as it only could be with accomplices in crime.

Sooner or later a day comes when accomplices generally have a falling out and hate each other. A shrewd observer would soon have noticed that this was already the case between the count and the colonel.

One morning, as the former had locked himself up in his study, and was thinking over his troubles, a servant begged for admittance to deliver a package, which had just been sent in, and was marked urgent.

The count opened the door, and the servant handed him a large package and a letter.

The count took the package, and with a careless air threw it on the nearest table.

The letter would undoubtedly have followed the package if the count's eyes had not unconsciously glanced at the address.

He trembled, and hurriedly broke the seal.

He had recognized Nini Moustache's handwriting.

The letter comprised four finely-written sheets.

Nini Moustache wrote:

“MONSIEUR LE COMTE—I know how painful my separation from you must have been, yet am not vain about it. If it were in my power to console you I swear to you that I would not hesitate a moment, even though it were to cost me my life.

“Since a short while I have reflected, and I feel that many things about which I have laughed till now are, nevertheless, the most painful and serious in life.

“As I have firmly resolved never to see you again, I write in order to exclaim from the depths of my solitude and sadness:

“‘I have done great harm to you, Loredan! Forgive me.’

“Forgive me, for I was led astray, and am not bad. While I prepared sorrows for you, I suffered myself, and to-day an unconsolable heart comes to confess its torture to an unconsoled man.

“Ah, my friend, why did we ever become acquainted?

“Why did fate make me the instrument of your misfortune? Why did you prefer me, the unworthy, to the saint who would have made your life happy, your mind calm, and your heart as noble as she is herself?

“Our story is a very sad one, Loredan, although it is not new.

“We are both dead to love, but have not even the consolations of recollection; for in all the days when we swore we loved each other, there is probably not one in which we really and truly loved.

“Your love for me was never free from contempt, mine to you was never free from shame.

“If you had loved me after the fashion of the others, something like loving a handsome dog or a handsome horse, from caprice or vanity, I would no doubt have remained what I was when you first made my acquaintance.

“I would perhaps have ruined you then too, but at least we would not have tortured each other.

“Unfortunately you loved me sincerely and truly, and at the same time, frightened and humbled, I measured the impassable abyss which separated us.

“I felt a new being awake in me, and just in proportion as I became better through you, the certainty that you would lose me became greater.

“On the day, therefore, that I love you as you deserve, I separate from you.

“Yes, Loredan, to-day, when I know that you will never see me again, when I do not fear a weakness from your side or mine, I can say it—I love you.

“I love you for the sake of the grief which you made me feel, a noble grief, which in my own eyes gives me back my honor.

“I love you, because in making the sacrifice which separates us, I feel myself to be a better woman, and almost worthy of you.

“And now listen to me, my friend.

"You will never hear of me again. Think of me as a dear departed one who still thinks of you, and loves you from the depth of her grave.

"Look upon this letter, which I send you, as a holy will, and swear to me to follow the instructions contained in it.

"Your generosity made me rich. This wealth burns my hands. Besides, dead people do not need any diamonds, do they?

"I therefore return to you everything you sent me, and beg you on my knees to take it back again.

"In making you my heir, and returning what I owe to your generosity, I have a favor to ask of you, a favor which would be doubly dear to me if done by you.

"I have a sister, a poor girl, who occupies that half of my heart which does not belong to you.

"Loredan, I leave my sister to you.

"Make her pure and good, and love her as she will love you, for she will only have you to be thankful to for everything, and I do not desire her to know even of my existence.

"She is still a child. Vice has not, even from a distance, stained her pure soul.

"Until to-day she passed her childhood with a good woman, named Madame Gosse, who lives in the Rue Rambuteau.

"My sister's name is Lila.

"Oh, you will love her, Loredan, will you not? You will love her in memory of her who will bless your name even in death.

"I have taken everything from you, my friend, except your honor. To-day, however, I have the consciousness

of restoring your lost happiness to you, by sending you this angel.

"Perhaps you will find out some time—but no, it is better if you do not find out. Oh, my friend, if you only knew how happy I am at this moment, what new confidence fills my heart, and how strong and submissive I feel! Oh, how good it is to do one's duty. CELINE."

Three times the count read this letter.

No egotistical thought marred his joy.

He resolved at once to fulfil Celine's last wish. Yes, Lila would find a home with him. He already thought he pressed her to his heart and heard her call him father.

What joy the future had in store for him now!

While he was thus walking up and down the room in joyous excitement, Colonel Fritz entered.

Loredan clasped his hand as if he desired to crush it.

He was happy; he felt no more hate.

He then exclaimed, after he had pulled the bell, to the servant who entered, and without answering his friend's questions:

"My coach! Quick! At once!"

In the hallway he met Cyprienne and clasped her in his arms with a tenderness she had not believed him capable of.

He pressed his lips to her cheeks and softly murmured:

"You will not be jealous, Cyprienne, if I give you a sister, will you?"

"A sister?" asked Cyprienne in surprise.

"Yes," replied the count, mysteriously: "do not say anything to anybody yet. Her name is Lila—a sweet name, eh?"

The servant announced that the carriage was ready. The count laughingly slipped from Cyprienne's grasp. "Do not detain me!" he said. "I hurry to fetch her." With these words he hurried away.

Cyprienne, as we know, knew her mother's secrets, and the announcement of Lila's forthcoming arrival and the count's joy must have appeared like a miracle to her—a miracle for which she had her unknown protectors alone to thank.

CHAPTER II

THE SECRETS OF THE GOSSES

PECULIAR, unheard-of things which bothered the gossiping neighbors had occurred in the house in the Rue Rambuteau.

Among these things was, in the first place, the simultaneous disappearance of Pippiona and Ursula, and secondly the extraordinary change in the relations between Monsieur and Madame Bebelle.

The "dear little husband" had become transformed into a monster over night, and if the "worshipped Bebelle" still remained the "worshipped Bebelle," there was nevertheless a touch of bitterness in the tone with which Monsieur Gosse pronounced the words now.

He had changed in other ways too.

Formerly he came and went with the regularity of an automaton, but now nothing more of this regularity was to be seen.

Sometimes he not only came home two hours late, but very drunk besides.

Sometimes his office remained closed the whole day.

There was no doubt about it, the dear little fellow was on the road to ruin.

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