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The Marriage of a Ghost!

The stage-coach which ran between Paris and Marseilles had just reached Grenoble, when the young Baron de Saint-André climbed up to the front seat.

Here he found a good looking young fellow of his own age, and straightway the two became great friends. At the end of an hour they began exchanging confidences after the manner of youth.

The scion of noble stock was on his way to Paris to buy an officer's brevet, so as to serve his country as his ancestors had done before him; the other, who was the son of a rich tradesman was also bound for Paris for the purpose, however, of marrying an heiress, the daughter of an old friend of his father.

"It is an even thing!" cried the young baron laughing. "A mere money matter for each of us. The little god Cupid has no more concern in your business than in mine!"

"There you mistake," returned the other. "I have never seen Sylvia, but I fell in love with her, once and forever, the first time I laid eyes upon her portrait. Judge for yourself."

He opened a tortoise-shell case and Saint-André examined admiringly.

"What an angel! Indeed my dear fellow you are very fortunate to have that charming, dainty creature picked out for you."

"I do not complain," said the bridegroom-elect, and now I am going to go to sleep if this miserable, jolting concern will allow me. I am expected to breakfast at my future father-in-law's as soon as I reach Paris, and I shall then be presented to my betrothed, I was to look as well as possible.

At the end of three days and two nights the heavy stage coach lumbered into the metropolis, and the two travellers went to the nearest hotel and engaged two rooms intending to take a little rest. Saint-André had just thrown himself upon the bed, when he heard deep groans in the next room, on rushing in, found his late companion rolling on the floor in the agonies of pain. The servants were summoned, a physician was brought in, and the latter declared that the patient was suffering from acute colic, which had probably been contracted before he left home and had been aggravated by the fatigue of the journey. He pronounced the malady a very serious one, and it so proved, for in spite of every care the youth expired.

Saint-André was overwhelmed by the catastrophe, and when he found that he could do nothing more for his friend, he stood sadly looking at the lifeless clay which lay on the narrow bed in the bare hotel room. Poor fellow! So young, so gay, looking forward to a bright future and now snatched away without warning! What would the fair bride-elect say when she heard of the tragedy?

Saint-André dreaded the bearing of the sad news to the family, but there was no one else to perform the errand, and so he set off, carrying with him the dead youth's satchel.

When he reached the stately mansion, the front door flew open and two footmen in livery came to meet him. One relieved him of his satchel, the other of his hat and cloak, and a voice was heard exclaiming joyfully:

"Monsieur, here is your son-in-law at last!"

"Dear fellow!" cried a little, fat, white haired man, rushing into the hall, "let me embrace you!" and he clasped the newcomer rapturously to his heart.

As soon as he could get his breath Saint André said hurriedly:

"Pardon me, Sir, but—"

"I pardon you for being late," interrupted the other. "Look, it is twelve o'clock, and the breakfast is growing cold. Come and see my daughter. The little puss has been watching the clock for hours, and is all impatience to meet you."

He pulled the young man into the breakfast-room as he spoke, and without pausing an instant added, "My wife; Uncle Dorival, Aunt Dolarice, here is the son-in-law at last; Sylvia my child, bid him welcome—"

"I beg pardon, Sir," cried Saint-André, but again his host interrupted him.

"Don't tell me you wish to draw back at the last moment my dear fellow! Everything has been arranged by my esteemed friend your father, but if you have any objection to urge I will hear it later; bad news can always keep. Now let us sit down to breakfast at once and be merry. Sit by me son-in-law, and give me your opinion of this pigeon-bisque."

The visitor was very young and very hungry, having fasted since midnight. The shock of his companion's sudden death had unnerved him somewhat, and so for the time being he yielded to the force of circumstances.

"Come what will," he said to himself, I cannot bear to put a dampener upon the joy of these good people; at least not until they have had their breakfast."

He joined therefore in their general merriment, smiled sweetly upon blushing Sylvia, the bride-elect, and replied unhesitatingly to his supposed future father-in-law's inquiries.

"How is your Aunt Armande, my son?" asked the old man suddenly. "I remember her as a charming young woman;

when I was twenty, I came near falling in love with her! We must keep in her good graces, for she will leave a snug little fortune to her nephew."

"Dear Aunt!" exclaimed the youth in a tone of deep affection, "I hope she will enjoy life for many, many years longer," and his pious wish was rewarded with a tender glance from Sylvia's dark eyes. Aunt Dolarice also listened to him with delight.

"He has the instincts, as well as the bearing of a born gentleman," she whispered to her brother. "Who would think that his ancestors had always sold cinnamon and nutmegs!"

Uncle Dorival, who had read cyclopedias and was thought very learned, retorted quickly:

"And why should he not have as fine sentiments as a nobleman! Away with your absurd notions sister! All men are equal!"

The clock struck two, and Saint-André suddenly felt a pang of remorse for the part he was playing, as he recollected that he had to arrange for his friend's burial and would be expected at the hotel. He therefore rose from the table, and announcing that he had important business to attend to, prepared to leave. His host protested in vain, Sylvia looked in blank amazement, and every one entreated him to remain.

"I do not understand," began the old man, following his visitor to the door. The young man interrupted him saying solemnly:

"I will explain. At eleven o'clock this morning I died, after a short and sudden attack of colic, and I gave the hotel proprietor my word of honor that my body should be removed this afternoon. You see, therefore, if I were to absent myself any longer, it would be very awkward." With these words he disappeared, leaving the old father overwhelmed with amazement.

When the rest of the family heard what had been said, they decided that the youth was joking.

"He has humor," said Uncle Dorival. I shall congratulate him the next time I see him. He will be here in time for supper.

But the supper time passed, and there was no sign of the son-in-law. The family became anxious and alarmed, and toward eight o'clock they sent a messenger to the hotel to inquire for the passenger who had arrived there, by coach that morning. The proprietor sent back word that the gentleman named had died at eleven o'clock of colic, and that the body had been taken away for burial in the afternoon. This news was received with unbounded astonishment, and little Sylvia burst into tears as she declared that she would wear mourning as if she were a widow.

"It was his ghost that came here," said the girl's mother in a tone of awe, but Uncle Dorival shrugged his shoulders.

"Do ghosts eat and drink as he did?" he asked. "That fellow was merely some young scapegrace, who wanted to play a trick on us and get a good meal at the same time." Nevertheless the ghost story went the round of the servants' hall and footmen boasted having seen a spirit in broad daylight. The tale spread, until it became a subject of wonder in boudoirs and drawing rooms, and the fair young widow who had never been married wore a black gown and veil, and shed passionate tears for the affianced husband whom she had but once seen.

Two weeks later, she was wandering about the garden one evening, listening sadly to the songs of the nightingales. The stars were shining brilliantly, but the sight of their beauty only served to increase her sorrow.

"Alas!" she sighed, if he were but here to stroll with me along these pathways!"

As she spoke, a cracking of boughs near her made her start with terror, and in another instant a man broke through the flowering shrubs and knelt at her feet. The stars were shining to some purpose then, for by their light she recognized the face for which she had been longing, and in a voice of mingled joy and dread, she cried:

"Then you are not dead!"

"No indeed, sweetheart," he answered softly, "I am alive and I hope to live and love you for many a long day yet."

When the two young people entered the drawing-room, the family were playing backgammon. A look of amazement greeted the appearance of Saint-André, and every one being dumbfounded, the young baron had no difficulty in telling his story, which he concluded by asking for Sylvia's hand.

The marriage took place as soon as the proper period of mourning had elapsed, and Aunt Dolarice was triumphant.

"Did I not tell you he had the bearing of a nobleman?" she cried.

"All's well that ends well, and a baron is as good as a grocer," said Uncle Dorival.

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