

seemed to radiate joy, became acrimonious and impatient every time his game of Preference went badly; it was the one and only, but the daily game of cards he played. He did not get angry out of stinginess--he was not a miser; on the contrary, he was open-handed, that was his nature.

If it happened that he "entered" twice in succession, or if he got irritated with his partners, he grew furious. Everything seemed wrong to him; the jam was sour, the coffee too sweet, the water too cold, the lamp too dim, the chalk was not sharp enough; he shouted at the boy who served him; he changed his chair because it squeaked; he hammered upon the table with his fists until the candlesticks jumped; he looked daggers over his spectacles at anyone who made a joke--I assure you, he was in a vile temper, as vile a temper as a man could be in, when he had no other place in which to give vent to it.

His partners knew him, and were aware that five minutes after the game was over he would become once more kind, amiable, and amusing Conu Costache.

If you were sitting near him when he was playing Preference, you should get up the first time he "entered"; shouldn't wait for him to say to you: "Can't you get away, my good fellow; you spoil my luck!" One day, after two "entries," he said to a person with whom he had only just become acquainted and who would not move away from his side:

"Excuse me, sir, but I believe in birds of ill omen. This game is a question of faces. I can scarcely compose my own face; I certainly cannot compose yours. Kindly move a little farther off! Thank you. Don't be offended."

Ever since that day, the onlookers at the game have been given the name of birds of ill omen, and they swarmed in the room where Conu Costache played; if the game went well he was affable and they listened to him with pleasure--if the game went badly, they moved away from him and made fun of his ill humour.

One evening the Prefect gave a party. The young people danced in the drawing-room; their elders assembled in the other rooms; Conu Costache sat at a table playing Preference with three other people; among them was the attorney, a cunning player with a special talent for making him lose his temper; a large audience had gathered round.

Conu Costache was losing; he was angry, but controlled himself--he could not give vent to his annoyance, for there were ladies present. Conu and his friends were playing in the middle of the room; he had barely scored six, and had entered the pool with thirteen.

At this moment an old lady approached. She was a Moldavian, the mother of Dr. Ionashcu. She took a chair, seated herself by Conu Costache with the calm serenity of the aged, who neither see nor hear well.

There she remained.

From time to time she gently put a question to Conu Costache; it had the same effect upon his agitation as does oil upon a fire of coals.

"How beautiful it must be at your country-house now, Mr. Costache!"

"Beautiful, Mrs. Raluca," he replied, forcing himself to smile--and chalking himself another eighteen in the pool.

"I expect you often go there, as it is so close."

"I went to-day, Mrs. Raluca."

No words can describe the contrast between the placidity with which Mrs. Raluca told her beads, and the fury with which Conu Costache shuffled his cards.

"Is it a good harvest, Mr. Costache?"