

"G--g--good, Mrs. Raluca," he replied, thrusting both hands inside the neck of his shirt to loosen the collar.

The game began, the attorney played below the ace, Conu Costache named the suit for the second time.

"Have you got a good road along there now?"

"Y--y--yes, Mrs. Raluca."

It was a wonder his handkerchief did not rub the skin off his forehead, he mopped it with such vigour. His partners and the onlookers shook with laughter; the attorney did not give way at all, he saw how furious he was; he bid with nothing in his hand, and passed just in time to make him "enter" a second time.

And at this moment Mrs. Raluca's questions fell one after the other as fast as the beads of a rosary. She did not hear the rustling of the cards nor the choking in Conu Costache's throat, she did not see his misery nor the amusement of the others.

"But they have cut down the lovely wood on the right, haven't they, Mr. Costache?"

"Th--th--they have cut it down, Mrs. Raluca," he answered, gazing at the ceiling and pressing his temples between his hands.

He bid and came in, said "Play"--and found two clubs in the talon which he did not want. Such a collection of cards you have never seen; it might have been done on purpose. If you had tried to arrange them so, you could not have done it. It was a regular "walk-over": one cut four honours, the other cut the spades, and out of the eight games won five.

All he cut was an ace, and a pair. He put forty-eight in the pool.

"But the little lake still lies on the left, doesn't it, Mr. Costache?"

"St--st--still, Mrs. Raluca."

With a small brush he violently effaced the whole row of his stakes chalked on the cloth and wrote down a total of ninety-four in huge figures.

"But I must ask you, the inn----"

Conu Costache turned his chair right round.

"Mrs. Raluca, to-morrow afternoon my wife and I are going to our country-house--we will come and pick you up. In this way you will see how they cut down the wood on the right; you will see how the storks walk by the lake on the left; you will see how they have repaired the bridges; you will see how they have renovated the inn at the cross-gates; you will see what a nice house Ionitza Andrescu from Ulmi has built; you will see what big reservoirs the Aurora factory have erected by the road...."

Mrs. Raluca understood and took her departure, telling her beads as she went, but even when she had passed into the third room Conu Costache still continued, while the others were convulsed with laughter:

"You will see how illegible the figures on the 76 milestone have become; you will see how the boys have broken the insulators on the telegraph posts by throwing stones at them; you will see how the geese hiss when the carriage passes by; you will see----"

Then, turning back to his partners, who laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks, he groaned:

"Terrible bird of ill omen!"