

A MAN OF RANK.

"Then you are at home, Eva, and you are neither ill nor busy!" exclaimed Camilla Dunford, in an aggrieved tone, as she came into Mrs. Penley's room and found it tenanted solely by Mrs. Penley's pretty daughter. "I expected to find you in bed, and all the household weeping round you, you spoiled child!—or else stitching your hardest for some bazin, or other."

Eva, who had been standing near the bay-window, peeping through the curtains, came out of their folds to greet her visitor, but went back to them as soon as she had said, half-pettishly:

"What nonsense, Cam! Cannot one spend a morning quietly at home without a fuss being made?"

"I am not going to make a fuss over you, so be pacified; only, if staying indoors in the loveliest of weather is so very enjoyable, you may as well let me share your enjoyment. Does it consist of peeping out, unseeing yourself, at the more commonplace folk who are making the most of the sunshine?"

"Nonsense," said Eva, again. "I stayed at home because—well, because I did not want to go out."

"A very convincing reason. Have you been studying 'Mills on Logic'?" Query the second: Why do you not want to go out? Ever since our two families have been rusticated at Shellsea, you have been the first to suggest strolls on the beach, walks along the cliffs, and rambles to every point of interest within ten miles of this fishy little town. And, if I am not mistaken, it was you who planned the visit to that old abbey from which—just as we were all ready to start—you excused yourself, no one knows why."

"But, dear Camilla, you and your sisters could have gone without me."

"But, dear Eva," was promptly retorted, "it was not a question of what I and my sisters could do, but what my brother would do. You know, without my telling you, that Phil would not care to go to the abbey if you were not of the party."

"I am sorry; I did not intend to spoil your pleasure. The truth was—that is to say, the truth is—I—I—"

But this one particular truth was not easily told; and the young lady, in much embarrassment, was making another effort to explain herself, when the latch of a gate clicked on the other side of the road. The sound was distinctly audible, for the window, veiled with gay flowering plants, was wide open; and, simple though it was, the circumstances seemed to have an electrical effect on Eva Penley, for she blushed, stammered, and, suddenly becoming silent, resumed her watch at her post of observation.

"Is there anything to be seen?" demanded the straightforward Camilla.

"If so, let me have a look at it as well as you."

"Oh, hush, pray!" her friend entreated. "Remember that the window is open, and don't speak so loud! He—someone—might hear you."

"He? Do you mean my brother? But Phil did not come with me. No, no; instead of cooling his heels in the garden till your ladyship deigned to be gracious and show yourself, he has—very wisely, I think—accepted the offer of some young fellows he knows, and gone out for a sail."

"Yes!" said Eva, absently, her eyes fixed on the opposite side of the road. "I daresay he will find it very pleasant."

"No, you don't," cried the provoked Camilla, giving her a little shake.

"Contrary creature that you are! You know, or ought to guess, that Phil has gone off sulky and dissatisfied. Why are you treating him so oddly? Is it possible that after giving him so much encouragement, you have suddenly discovered that you do not like him well enough to join hands and go through life as his partner? Or has he contrived to offend you?"

"Certainly not. I have had no quarrel with your brother," declared Eva. "We are the best of friends."

Why did she lay so much emphasis on the last word in this sentence? Camilla was about to insist on further explanation, when she was silenced with another "hush!" and Eva beckoned her friend to draw nearer.

"Do you see him?" she whispered.

Camilla stood on tip-toe to peep over her shoulder. In her care not to be detected, Eva was holding the folds of the curtains so closely together that it was only through a very narrow slit that a glimpse of the outer world was to be obtained.

"Yes, I suppose I see him. You mean that lad with a harrow, don't you? He is taking home baskets of clean clothes. Is he one of your proteges?"

"How ridiculous!" muttered Eva. "Of course I did not mean that awkward boy. Look across the road at the porch of Mrs. Dobbins' villa."

"Ah! yes; that lovely clematis. I stopped the other day to tell her I quite envied her, but the selfish old thing did not offer me a bunch of the flowers."

"Isn't it the clematis?" she went on, when Eva shook her head angrily. "But you cannot possibly mean the man just coming out of the porch with a bathing towel over his shoulder—the lodger? What can you see in that insignificant-looking fellow?"

"Dear Cam," was the whispered reply, "he is here incognito—he is a nobleman, an earl. Don't smile in that incredulous manner, for it is quite—quite true!"

"And if it is—what then?" retorted Miss Dunford. "He is not on our visiting-list. But, I beg your pardon," and she retreated from the window, "he may be on yours. I saw his upward glance as he passed by."

"I have never spoken to him!" cried Eva, vehemently, "and he cannot have an idea that I feel any interest in him, for I have been most prudent, most cautious."

"Then you do feel an interest in him. This is news for Phil, isn't it!—delightful news!"

Eva drew herself up.

"If you choose to be mischievous, you can repeat to your brother

what I have said; but in justice to me, please add that I have too much common-sense to fancy I should ever be sought in marriage by a peer of the realm."

"I do not believe that he is an earl," said Camilla, dogmatically. "Men of rank do not take apartments in little eight roomed villas in obscure seaside towns like Shellsea. They go to hotels at Brighton or Scarborough."

"In ordinary cases, yes; but this is not an ordinary case. He—the earl, I mean, has been feeling overwrought with the business of the House, and has come down here to be quiet and take a thorough rest."

"Couldn't he have had that at his own castle? I suppose he has one or two somewhere about. Or gone on a voyage in his yacht; earls always have yachts, don't they? Or taken a tour, or done something more lordly than lodging at Mrs. Dobbins', and regaling on the greasy mutton chops and tough steaks she sets before her victims? We rented her rooms three seasons ago, so I speak from experience."

"Perhaps," said Eva, "the earl is too much absorbed in matters of more importance to take notice of petty discomforts. Mrs. Dobbins told our landlady last evening that he leaves everything to her."

"What a nice little bill he will have at the end of the week," murmured Camilla, but her friend went on without noticing the interruption.

"He told her his stay was uncertain; he might be recalled to town at any moment, for an eventful crisis was at hand, and he would have to take the reins. But then he stopped, as if he felt that he was saying too much. He writes and receives an immense number of letters."

"Bah! he is only some foreign conspirator; a Fenian or Nihilist, or some other dreadful creature from the continent. Mrs. Dobbins must take care he doesn't blow her up."

"My dear Camilla, he is an English nobleman; how can you impute such shocking things to him?"

"But how do you know he is an earl?" asked Miss Dunford, incredulously. "Has he given Mrs. Dobbins any references? No! I thought not."

"Indeed he did! He referred her to his banker; and more than that, he paid in advance for his rooms, telling her frankly that, to enable him to avoid receiving or returning visits, he should call himself Mr. Smith. You know Camilla, they all resort to the same plan. Even the Queen travels under another name, and prefers to be known simply as the Countess of Rothesay."

"He does not look like an earl," Camilla persisted.

"He has his title printed on his cards," Eva told her. "I know this is true, for Mrs. Dobbins found his card case on the table one morning, and peeped into it."

"Well," queried Miss Dunford, looking steadily at her friend, "we will suppose that he is an English nobleman; but if so, what is he to us? We do not want to make the acquaintance of a man who is not in the same position as ourselves."

"Perhaps not; but it is the first time we have come in contact with a peer of the realm—"

"And it flatters our vanity to see that he admires us—oh, Eva? How very much gratified my brother will be when he knows that you broke faith with us and spoiled our morning that you might stand at your window and exchange glances with Mrs. Dobbins' lodger."

The blood rushed into Eva's cheeks.

"You speak as I had given Mr. Philip Dunford a right to dictate to me."

"So you have morally, for you have accepted attentions which Phil would not have paid had he suspected that you were a flirt."

"You are impertinent, Camilla, and unjust. I refuse to be lectured by you."

"That is tantamount to saying, go away and leave me to dream of my earl," said Miss Dunford, rising. "I can do so. When you are the peeress of this mysterious peer we will renew our intimacy—till then, adieu, Miss Penley. My compliments to your mamma."

Eva cried with vexation when her hot-tempered friend had departed, and debated ruefully whether Philip would take the same view of her conduct as his sister was doing.

She did not want to lose her lover, for Phil Dunford was a manly, energetic young fellow, with excellent prospects; and Mrs. Penley, who was in bad health, had said more than once that she should be content to leave her child in such good hands; but it was no use attempting to deny it, Eva was immensely flattered by the admiring glances cast upon her by her opposite neighbour.

It was true that they had not spoken, but Mrs. Dobbins had betrayed that he had made several inquiries respecting the young lady with the magnificent auburn hair; and only the previous evening, when the wind tore from her hands the papers she was carrying, the earl, then smoking a cigar in the porch, had vaulted over the low palings and restored them to her with a smile and a bow that had haunted her ever since.

"Where are your young friends?" asked Mrs. Penley, when a couple of days elapsed and she missed the interchange of notes and visits, and saw that her daughter looked pale and dispirited. "Is anything amiss?"

"Not much, mamma," and Eva spoke as cheerfully as she could. "Camilla and I have had a wrangle, that is all."

"And Philip? He has not been here since last Monday."

"I suppose he is waiting till I express my penitence and ask to be forgiven. Don't worry yourself mamma, I am quite content with my society."

"You are losing your color, my love, and your spirits," replied Mrs. Penley, anxiously. "I cannot have you penned in-doors so closely."

"I drove with you yesterday," she was reminded.

"But that is not enough. Remember what long walks you have been in the habit of taking. You must go out this afternoon. I am quite well enough to spare you for a couple of hours or longer."