

"But how can I advise you?"

"Simply by telling me what you think I ought to do. Should I, for instance, talk it over with my mother, or speak to Colonna first? He is her oldest friend, and his opinion has great weight with her. There lies my chief hope. If he were with me, I do not think she would persist in any lengthened opposition. Besides, I would do anything to make up for Olympia's want of fortune. I know I could work my way in parliament, if I chose to read up facts, and study home-questions. Or I would cultivate my influential friends, and try to get some foreign diplomatic appointment. In short, give me but the motive, and I will do anything!"

"But these are matters of which I know nothing," said Saxon.

"I am not asking you how I shall push my way in the future, my dear fellow," replied the Earl, eagerly, "but how you think I ought to act in the present. What would you do yourself, if you were in my position?"

Saxon, sitting a little away from the light, with his elbow resting on the table and his head supported by his hand, looked down thoughtfully, and hesitated before replying. His friend had given him a hard problem to solve—a bitter task to perform.

"Are you sure that you love her?" he said, presently, speaking somewhat slowly.

"As sure as that yonder sun is now shining in the heavens! Why, Trefalden, she was the ideal of my boyhood: and for the last four years, since she has been staying with us so often, and for so many months at a time, I have loved her with the deepest love that man can give to woman."

"And do you think that—that she loves you?"

Do what he would, Saxon could not quite keep down the tremor in his voice as he asked this question; but the Earl was too intensely preoccupied to observe it.

"A year ago—nay, three months ago," said he, "I was certain of it. Latterly, I cannot tell why, there has been a constraint—a coldness—as if she were trying to crush out the feeling from her own heart, and the hope from mine. And yet, somehow, I feel as if the change went no deeper than the surface."

"You believe, in short, that Miss Colonna loves you still?"

"By Heaven, Trefalden, I do!" replied the Earl, passionately.

"You have not asked her?"

"Certainly not. She was my guest."

Saxon covered his eyes for a moment with his hand, as if in profound thought. It was an eventful moment—a cruel moment—the first moment of acute suffering that he had ever known. No one but himself ever knew how sharp a fight he fought while it lasted—a fight from which he came out wounded and bleeding, but a conqueror. When he lifted up his face, it was pale to the very lips, but steady and resolved.

"Then, Castletowers," he said—and his voice had no faltering in it—"I will tell you what I would do if—I were in your place. I would learn the truth from her own lips, first of all."

"But my mother—"

"Lady Castletowers will acquiesce when she knows that your happiness is involved. It is but a question of fortune, after all."

The Earl sprang to his feet, and began pacing to and fro.

"It is welcomed counsel," said he. "If I only dared—if I were but sure—and yet, is it not better to know the worst at once?"

"Far better," replied Saxon drearily.

Lord Castletowers went over to the window, and leaned out into the sunshine.

"Why should I not?" he mused, half aloud. "If I fail, I shall be no longer poorer than I am now—except in hope. Except in hope! But if I succeed—Ah! if I succeed!"

His face grew radiant at the thought.

"Yes, Trefalden," he exclaimed, "you are right. Why set myself to overcome so many obstacles if, when all is done, I am to find that I have had my toiling for nothing? I will ask her, I will ask her this very day—this very hour, if I can find her alone. It will be no breach of hospitality

to do so now. Thanks, my dear fellow—thanks a thousand times!"

Saxon shook his head.

"You have nothing to thank me for, Castletowers," he replied.

"For your counsel," said the Earl.

"Which may bring you sorrow, remember."

"Then for your friendship!"

"Well, yes—for my friendship. You have that, if it is worth your thanks."

"Time will show what value I place upon it," replied the Earl. "And now, for the present, adieu. I know you wish me success."

With this, he grasped Saxon warmly by the hand, and hurried from the room. When the last echo of his foot had died away on stair and corridor, the young man went over to the door, locked it, and sat quietly down, alone with his trouble.

And it was, in truth, no light or imaginary trouble. He saw, clearly enough, that he must accept one of two things—both equally bitter. Either Olympia Colonna had never loved him, or he had supplanted his friend in her affections. Which was it? His heart told him

CHAPTER LIV. HOW THE EARL SPED IN HIS WOOING.

It was a hurried, uncomfortable afternoon at Castletowers, and Signor Colonna's visitor had brought nothing but confusion to the house. The news was really important news to those whom it concerned; but there was nothing which Lady Castletowers disliked so much as excitement, nothing in her eyes so undignified as haste, and she was therefore not a little displeased by this sudden breaking up of her party. It was nothing to her that Garibaldi was in occupation of Palermo. It was nothing to her that an armistice had been concluded with the Neapolitan government, or that the army would be likely to march next in the direction of Messina. She only knew that the Walkingshaws and Miss Hatherton were coming to dine with her that very day; that Signor Montecuculi would make one too many at the table; and that the departure of the Colonnas immediately after dinner would spoil the evening.

In the meanwhile Signor Colonna was deep in consultation with the new comers; Olympia, assisted by one of the maids, was busy packing her father's books and papers; the Earl was wandering disconsolately to and fro, seeking his opportunity; and Saxon Trefalden, mounted on his swiftest thorough-bred, was galloping towards the hills, determined to leave a clear field for his friend, and not to come back till the first dinner-bell should be ringing.

At length, as the afternoon wore on, the Earl grew tired of waiting about the drawing-rooms and staircase, and sought Olympia in her father's quarters. There he found her, not in Colonna's own den, but in the room immediately beneath it, kneeling before a huge army trunk more than half filled with pamphlets, letters, despatches, maps, and documentary lumber of every description. More books and papers littered the floor and table, and these the servant was dusting previous to their being sorted and tied up by Miss Colonna.

"Can I be of any service?" asked the Earl, as he peeped in through the half-opened door.

Olympia looked up with a pleasant smile.

"Are you really in want of something to do?" said she.

"Greatly."

"Then you may help to sort these papers. Among them are some dozens of last year's reports. You can arrange those according to date, and tie them up in parcels of about eighteen or twenty."

The Earl set about his task with much seeming alacrity.

"We owe Montecuculi a grudge for this," he said presently. "Who would have thought this morning at breakfast that you would strike your tents and flee away into the great London desert before night?"

"Who would have thought that we should have such glorious cause for breaking up our camp?" retorted Olympia, with enthusiasm.

"No one, indeed. And yet I wish the news had not travelled quite so quickly."

"Good news cannot fly too fast," replied Olympia. "I scarcely dare trust myself to think what the next may be."

"At least, do not hope too much."

"Nay, I have desponded long enough. Hope has been for so many years a forbidden luxury, that I feel as if I could not now drink of it too deeply. I hope all things. I expect all things. I believe that the hour is come at last, and that miracles will be accomplished within the next few months."

The Earl, thinking more of his own hopes and fears at that moment than of Italy or the Italians, wished with all his heart that a miracle could be accomplished then and there for the translation of the housemaid to any convenient planet.

"I should not be surprised," continued Olympia, "if I heard to-morrow that Garibaldi was in Messina—or that he had crossed the straits, and carried Naples by a coup de main!"

"Nor I," replied Castletowers, abstractedly.

And then for a few moments they were both silent. In the midst of their silence, a bell rang long and loudly in some part of the offices below.

"What bell is that?" asked the Earl, who had heard it thousands of times in the course of his home-life, and knew its import perfectly.

"It's the servants' hall bell, my lord," replied the housemaid.

And what does it mean, then—the servants' tea?"

"Yes, my lord."

Olympia took the Earl's little bait immediately. "You need not mind the rest of those papers now, Jane," she said, good naturedly. "Go down at once, and come back when you have had tea."

Whereupon the housemaid, duly grateful, left the room.

And now Lord Castletowers had only to speak. The coveted opportunity was his at last; but it was no sooner his than he lost his presence of mind, and found himself without a word to say.

Presently Olympia looked up, and spoke again.

"How hard a thing it is," said she, "to be a woman—a mere woman! How hard to sit down tamely, day after day, listening to the echoes of the battle-field—listening and waiting!"

"I am very glad you are listening from so safe a distance."

"And I pray that that distance may soon be lessened," she retorted, quickly. "We shall undoubtedly go to Genoa in the course of the next fortnight; and if my father crosses to Sicily, I do not mean to be left behind."

"But the Mediterranean swarms with Neapolitan war-steamer!" exclaimed the Earl.

Olympia smiled.

"Besides, of what service could you be when there? You will perhaps say that you can do hospital work, but the hospitals do not want you. Ten per cent of our volunteers are medical men, and I will venture to say that every woman in Sicily is a willing nurse."

"I would do any work that my head or hands could be trusted to perform," said she; whether it were at the desk or the bedside. Oh, that I could give my blood for the cause!"

"Men give their blood," replied the Earl; but women the tears that make death sweet, and the smiles that make victory worth achieving."

Olympia's lip curled scornfully.

"Our soldiers have nobler ends at stake than woman's smiles!" said she.

The Earl was in despair. Nothing that he had said seemed to find favour with Miss Colonna, and all this time the minutes were slipping away—the precious minutes for which there would be no recall.

"True friend to the cause as I am, Olympia," said he, desperately, "if I were to go out, it would be as much for your sake as for the sake of your country; but I hope you would not scorn my sword for that reason."

Miss Colonna was taken by surprise. She had never been blind to the young man's admi-