

Charley complied, and we proceeded a few paces in silence. Then, facing him, I said—

"My dear boy, I am sailing under false colours. I told you yesterday that I had met your sister in Devonshire, but I did not tell you that I fell in love with her there, that I proposed to her, and was refused."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Charley. "You don't mean it!"

"It is the sober truth," I returned.

Then I told him all—how his own words, that he feared she was unhappy about the future that lay before her, that she was changed since her visit to Torquay, had aroused in me the desire to see her once again, and that I had not been able to resist the temptation of judging for myself how far he had been right in his conjecture.

"Well," said Charley, "and what have you discovered? Was I right or wrong?"

"Do not torture me, Charley; it is a question that I dare not ask myself. I only know that I must go from here at once, for, whether she cares for me or not, I love her madly, and, if I remain near, I shall undoubtedly make an ass of myself."

"Dear old Cavendish, I can't tell you how dreadfully sorry I am to hear this, though it quite confirms me in the idea I expressed to you. I see it all plainly enough now; but of course it's too late to do anything, and I suppose you had better go. I shall hate this Spaniard more bitterly than ever, and with bitter reason, since he has proved such a stumbling-block, not only, as I believe, to poor Stephanie, but also to you."

"If your sister is but happy—and who shall say she is not!—you need not fear for me, Charley. My skin is tough, and a few scratches more or less won't damage it greatly. And now tell me how I can with the best grace offer my excuses to your father."

"Oh, as to that, the plea of immediate business will satisfy him—especially if you can manage to throw in sufficient spice of regret at being recalled so suddenly!"

We walked on to the house in silence; and, as we entered the hall, a servant said—

"If you please, Mr. Charley, the Squire has been asking for you; he is in the study."

"Excuse me a moment, Cavendish. I'll see what my father wants, and be with you again immediately."

I went up-stairs to my room, and began throwing odds and ends into my portmanteau; and then, lighting a cigar, I awaited Charley's reappearance. What a wretched aimless beggar I was! I felt I could not rest, I could not smoke. I pitched the cigar out of the window, and wondered what I had done to Dame Fortune that she should feel it incumbent to deal upon me such a series of vindictive blows.

That Stephanie loved me I felt no doubt. She dissembled well; but her cheek had whitened and kindled beneath my glance, and she had grown livid to the lips when, wishing her good-night on the previous evening, I offered her my congratulations upon her approaching marriage.

Oh, what rapture and what pain this tardy assurance brought me! In a few short hours our lives would be sundered wide as the poles; while I, poor bankrupt wretch, dared not make one struggle for the possession of so dear a prize. Thought was becoming intolerable. Where on earth was Charley? Why did he keep me waiting? I longed to be moving, to be beyond temptation, to put the only safeguard—distance—between myself and my unfortunate love; for at any moment, in my present reckless mood, what might I not do or say if accident placed Stephanie by my side? Her changing cheek and tremulous lip last night had proved almost more than I could bear. Another such scene, and I felt I should give voice to my misery. Then too the Count was hourly expected, and I knew how pleasantly I should smile upon their meeting, how agreeable it would be to me to see him bestow the smallest evidence of his love, or claim in return the slightest recognition to which its acceptance entitled him. I ground my teeth in my impotent rage. No, assuredly it would not do to wait for the Count. I should undoubtedly make an idiot of myself; better to go at once, before I had an opportunity of displaying my talent for melodrama.

"Confound Charley!" I remarked. "Where in the name of common-sense can he be loitering?"

"Cavendish, I'm so sorry."

"Oh, at last! I was just going to look you up. I shall barely catch my train."

"I could not help it, my dear fellow; my father detained me. I have only this moment left him. He is in great difficulty, and he wants to see you directly; so I think your journey must be postponed—at least there is no urgency about it now."

Charley appeared so strangely upset that I could only wonder what had happened; in answer to my inquiries he said he would rather let the governor explain.

"Go to him at once, there's a good fellow—you'll find him in the study. There goes the luncheon-bell. I must put in an appearance, for there is no one to play host to-day."

More and more amazed, I descended to the library. Mr. Maxwell was evidently expecting me.

"Come in, Mr. Cavendish. Come in and close the door. I have something very important to say to you." He was standing by his writing-table, with an open letter in his hand. "I have sent for you," said the old gentleman, motioning me to a chair, "because my son has given me to understand that you purpose leaving Pickering by the express this afternoon. May I ask you to

defer your departure for a few hours after our interview? You can, if you still wish it, reach London by the night-mail."

"I certainly will stay, sir, since you desire it, though my reason for leaving so abruptly is still most urgent."

"Thanks; that's right. And now what will you think if I tell you that I am acquainted with your motive in deserting us, and that, with a full knowledge of the circumstances, I say to you, stay?"

"Sir—Mr. Maxwell," I cried, "are you serious? What do you wish me to conclude from your words?"

"Wait, wait—not so fast," he replied, seating himself. "Before I explain matters further, permit me to ask you one or two questions. In the first place, tell me truly—were you quite in earnest respecting the attachment for Stephanie which you confessed to Charles this morning?"

"Most deeply in earnest, sir; it is because that I love her so hopelessly that I am anxious to leave her at once."

"You proposed to her at Torquay?"

"Yes."

"And she refused you? Forgive my asking; but it is, I assure you, from no idle curiosity that I question you."

"I am sure it is not, sir; and I have no hesitation in answering any inquiries you consider it necessary to make. I proposed to Miss Gonzala last August, and she rejected me."

"You still love her?"

"If possible, more than ever."

"If she were free, would you try your fortune again?"

"Mr. Maxwell," I cried, "I have answered all your questions, though I cannot guess your motive in putting them; but please to remember, when I offered my hand to your daughter, I believed I was in a position to establish my wife suitably. Charley has this morning told you how thoroughly my uncle's promises deceived me in this matter; and, therefore, my position being altered, were Miss Gonzala free, I would scorn to seek her favor now. I trust, Mr. Maxwell, you have not credited me with any such dastardly intent?"

"Most certainly I have not," returned the old gentleman, laying his hand kindly on my shoulder. On the contrary, Hardy Cavendish, I believe you to be a thoroughly honorable young man; and it is because I feel this confidence in your character that I am now addressing you, and that I confide to you the fact of my daughter's engagement with the Count de Gonzala being at an end."

At an end, Mr. Maxwell?"

"Yes. In this letter, received two hours back, the Count rejects the alliance."

"Then she is free?"

"Perfectly free, my young friend. And now I give you my full permission to win her if you can."

"My dear sir—my dear Mr. Maxwell, how can—how shall I thank you? Still it may be years before I can urge my suit. I am fearfully involved; but I will work, I will slave to make myself worthy of her love, if she will only give me a hope that I shall find my reward at last."

"That is very good, and, in ordinary circumstances, it would, to a certain extent, be the proper thing to do; but it is not, for all that, precisely what the present crisis demands. However, first look at the Count's letter. After you have read it, I will explain my views more fully." And he placed the following communication in my hands.

"San Lúcar de Guadiana, Nov. 3, 18—

"Dear Sir,—Though deeply regretting the penalty which is involved to Mademoiselle de Gonzala, I am compelled to renounce the honor which the Count, her father, proposed for me when he suggested an alliance between his daughter and myself. It is after much searching self-examination that I have found this painful step to be a necessity. For a considerable period I have had serious misgivings as to the advisability of my contracting marriage, and these doubts—which time has but strengthened—have pressed so heavily upon me that I have felt it incumbent to consult my spiritual advisers. By them I am instructed that, when my conscience protests against an undertaking, to enter upon it becomes a grievous sin; and, thus convinced that I am being spiritually led to a higher and better life, I have encircled myself by the supports and aids which the Holy Mother Church provides for her children, I have for ever cast from me the chains of Satan; I have taken priestly orders; and in this loving farewell to my relatives I bid a last adieu to the world with all its vain cares and idle frivolities."

"PEDRO DE GONZALA."

"There," exclaimed Mr. Maxwell—"did you ever read such a sickening hypocritical tissue of rubbish! And yet, unless we can circumvent them, these shaven monks will suck up the whole of Stephanie's fortune."

"How, sir?" I asked; but I added quickly, "I remember—Charley told me—"

"Did he tell you that, although the Count has refused the contract, Stephanie forfeits the property unless she is herself married within the given period?"

"Yes," I replied excitedly; "he told me so, though it failed to impress me at the time."

"It is perfectly true. To-morrow, before twelve, unless these conditions are fulfilled, her father's fortune goes from her to the Church."

He looked strangely into my face. I rose to my feet; so did he. Then, grasping my hand in his, he said—

"Cavendish, you love her. Will you do your utmost to stand in his place to-morrow? Never

mind your want of fortune. You are worthy of her; and she will have enough for both."

What could I say? What did I say? I'm sure I don't know. I only remember shaking him wildly by the hand. I only remember the dear old gentleman sitting down quite exhausted and wiping his eyes—or, as he pretended, his spectacles—and saying—

"There, there—that will do; we have no time to lose. We must consider what is to be done next, for, Hardy, my dear boy, even if she loves you—which I do believe, you lucky dog; she does, or I should not be proposing so daring a remedy—she will be troublesome. She will say, 'Never mind the property, papa; Hardy and I can wait,' or something equally pretty and nonsensical."

This was all bewilderingly delicious to me; but I managed to ask—

"What did Miss Gonzala say, sir? How did she take the Count's withdrawal?"

"She does not know it yet. His letter came by special messenger soon after breakfast this morning. Charles was out with you somewhere when I received it; consequently it was some time before I could consult with him. At first he and I were both completely knocked over by the situation—bridesmaids in the house, guests invited, hour for ceremony fixed. I could not decide how to act, when presently Charley said, 'Anyhow, it's an ill wind that brings no one any good; and old Cavendish will have a chance now. He loves her awfully, and is going away this afternoon rather than see his own and, I believe, her misery consummated.' I saw the whole thing in an instant. I saw, if Charley had read his sister's heart aright, that there was still a way by which we might upset the Count Gonzala's well-laid scheme. And, if his conjecture is true, and she does really reciprocate your feelings, I do believe, my dear fellow, we shall succeed. Now, having told you all the facts, and having prepared you for a small amount of opposition at the outset, I will go and show her the Count's letter."

He went out, and I was left to myself. Some anxious moments followed. How would she receive the strange proposition? Of course she would not hear of it; of course, in any circumstances she would utterly refuse to comply with such hastily-formed wishes. No; I did not allow myself to hope for one instant that we should win her consent to the arrangement. But what then? I could afford to wait if she would give me the right to hope for success in the future. In the meanwhile, how I longed to know what the answer would be! Already I pictured her scorn, her contempt for a wooer who appeared in such haste to secure her fortune. And yet, if she could but read my heart—

Charley came in, and in a few words I told him how matters stood.

"It will come all right, Cavendish; never you fear. 'Faint heart'—You know the proverb, old boy; but wait—here is my father."

Mr. Maxwell came in.

"Well?" cried Charley.

"I have told her, but only of the Count's letter," he replied, "for she is so indignant at his treatment that I felt it would be useless to say anything further at present." Mr. Maxwell sat down. "Charley, go and get me some sherry or something, and a biscuit; I am fairly overcome. And, Hardy, you too must be weary."

"Of course you must both be famished. Wait a moment, sir! I had better ring, and they will bring a tray in here; there's not much good in biscuits," and Charley rang.

Lower though I was, and an anxious one to boot, I did not despise a glass of bitter ale and a slice from a cold sirloin.

"Now," said Charley, "I propose to pay Stephanie a visit myself; but, before going, I should like to give a toast. Father, let me replenish your glass. Cavendish, try this Burgundy. Now! Happiness to Stephanie, success to Cavendish!"—and he was gone.

"That is the dearest boy in the world," said Mr. Maxwell fondly, as the door closed.

"He is indeed, sir," I replied warmly.

"There is not a man living who has a truer heart than Charley Maxwell."

"And you, Cavendish, have been his best friend. Remember that, whatever comes of our present wish, Hardy, I shall always have your interests at heart. From this time you are to me as another son."

I thanked him sincerely, for I was greatly touched by his goodness; and I told him that I would endeavor by deeds more than by words to show my appreciation of his generous kindness. Then silence fell upon us; and neither of us attempted to hide the anxiety we felt.

"Dear me," cried Mr. Maxwell at last, "this is really becoming very serious! There is a lot of company in the house, and not one of the family present."

"It is very awkward undoubtedly, sir. Don't you think you had better show yourself, and, if Charley has not already done so, make some excuse for Miss Gonzala—a headache would not be *mal à propos* perhaps?"

"That is an excellent idea! I will go and join the ladies at once," said Mr. Maxwell, starting up.

"Do so, sir, while I wait for Charley here; then, with your permission, if Miss Gonzala will see me, I will try to put an end to this suspense."

"Just so; of course it must be decided soon whether the guests are to be dismissed or retained."

"Exactly. You go the drawing-room, sir, and Charley or I will soon let you know how matters are."

I sat down and did my best to regain a little composure. Never in my life had I felt so completely unlike myself. I really could not concentrate my ideas; they worked in a circle the centre of which was Stephanie. What would she do? What would she say?

At last Charley came rushing in.

"I have broken the ice, Cavendish, and she takes it pretty quietly. I have told her how you are longing to speak to her—and I can see that she doesn't care a rush for the Count, while she has a soft place in her heart for you—but she says that nothing will induce her to see you yet—that, if it is true you love her still, you must feel the impropriety of pressing your suit now while she is suffering from the annoyance and shame of the Count's cruel behaviour. You see her pride is terribly hurt—she looks quite crushed."

"Of course, Charley. Is it surprising? The dear girl has been shamefully used by that scoundrel."

"It is natural enough that she should feel so, I know," said Charley; "still, if her heart is untouched, her pride need not suffer long."

"If, Charley, she would only let me speak a word to her! Do go to her again, there's a good fellow, and tell her I entreat her to see me, if it is only for five minutes."

"No—it's of no use; she has said 'No,' and she means 'No.' But I'll tell you what; while I was talking to her, she was getting out her walking things. She said she had a headache—and I believe she means to walk it off; she generally does. Now, if she goes out, she is pretty certain to leave the house by the little glass door which opens into the cedar walk, and we shall see her from this window. Then you can slip out here into the shrubbery and take the first path to the right, which will bring you face to face with her in a jiffy."

"Charley, you are a diplomatist—you are a capital fellow! I will do as much for you some day, old chap. But look there!"—and, as I spoke, we both saw the sheen of a silver-gray dress disappearing through the shadows of the cedar walk.

"Now, Hardy," cried Charley breathlessly, opening the window, "mind, the first turning to the right! Be quick, old fellow!"

I wanted no second admonition, but was off on the wings of love and hope. In a few seconds I gained her side. She stopped in grave surprise.

"Why are you here, Mr. Cavendish?"

"I saw you leave the house, and have ventured to follow you. Will you not forgive me?"

"If there is anything to forgive, certainly. But I beg you will not think me unkind or rude if I say that at present I would rather be alone. I am suffering from a terrible headache, and rather hope fresh air and quiet may relieve me a little."

"I cannot express to you, my dear Miss Gonzala, how much it pains me to disregard even your slightest wish; but indeed I must speak to you. Perhaps you will resent my persistence less if I tell you that I am here at your father's desire as well as at my own."

"Then of course, Mr. Cavendish, I can say no more; still I wish you could have spared me to-day, for I am not quite myself."

And in truth the dear girl's pale cheek, tearful eyes, and trembling manner attested the reality of her words.

"Stephanie, I am grieved to see you so unwell. But can the idea of what I am about to say be so painful to you? Is my love so distasteful that you shrink thus from its avowal?"

"Oh, no—pray do not think it is that! I faltered. "But why must you speak of it now? It is cruel to press me again upon this subject at such a moment."

"I know it, dear. I feel how presumptuous you must think me. And, if it rested with myself—which it does not—rather than distress you further, believe me, darling, I would leave you now—even when for the first time your own sweet lips have dropped a half-admission of your love. Oh, Stephanie, I will explain everything presently, only first tell me that I am not mad in thinking that you care for me—tell me that I am not asking for your love in vain!"

I waited for an instant; and when she answered softly, "Not quite in vain, Hardy," I took my darling in my arms.

"Oh, Stephanie, to think that, but for those two or three accidental words of Charley's I might have lost you for ever! Whisper it once more that I may know I do not dream. Say again those sweet words, 'I love you.'"

"I do, Hardy—I do indeed. I love you with all my heart."

"My own dear girl!"

"When I sent you away before, I knew that with you would go all the happiness of my life—that I was shaping for myself a miserable future; but I could not help it. The promise had been made for me by my dear mother, and I could not disregard her wishes."

"Dear Stephanie, I know all your story now. Only the night before I arrived here I learned from Charley that my lost love was his sister, and that she was betrothed to one for whom he feared she had little affection. This was enough for me. I felt I must see you at any cost."

"Oh, Hardy, I thought at the time that it was a very cruel step you had taken! You do not know what I have suffered since you came."

"My darling, what can I say! I know it