

COUNT WALDEMAR.

(Continued.)

I said I did not think that I should be in Hyères very long, but that Mrs. Clifford, I believed, intending remaining for several months; after which I could hardly avoid adding that I hoped soon to have the pleasure of introducing my wife to Mrs. Seymour.

The truth is that my satisfaction at meeting with that lady was tempered by some misgivings as to the probable nature of her reception by Mrs. Clifford, who is not a little particular in the matter of chance acquaintances, and who has never had any confidence at all in her husband's powers of discernment. In the present instance, however, my fears proved to be groundless; for when Mrs. Seymour came to call, it transpired, in the course of conversation, that before her marriage she had been one of the Warwickshire Greys (whoever they may be), and that, of course, made it all right. My wife pronounced her to be a really delightful person, and declared emphatically that she already felt a sincere interest in her future welfare.

The full significance of the latter phrase, which at the time I thought rather uncalled for, did not strike me until a few days later. It had happened that, upon our arrival at the Hotel d'Orient we had found already installed there a certain young man named Balfour, a budding diplomatist with whom I am upon tolerably intimate terms, and whom I had been much astonished to discover spending his leave in a spot so remote from the charms of society. It was not until I had found out that he was in the habit of passing the greater part of his days and the whole of his evenings at Mrs. Seymour's pretty villa on the wooded hillside that my sagacity led me to suspect what Mrs. Clifford, with her finer feminine wit, had divined from the outset. Now, as this young man was a prime favorite with my wife—for indeed he was connected with I know not how many noble houses—and as, owing to an unfortunate tardiness of birth for which he was in no way responsible, he had but a poor share of this world's gear, it was not difficult to understand that lady's benevolent anxiety with regard to Mrs. Seymour's prospective happiness.

I solemnly declare that I had no objection in the world to the scheme hinted above. I simply took no interest in it at all, one way or the other. It had nothing to do with me, and I make it a rule never to interfere in my neighbors' affairs. And yet Mrs. Clifford avers to this day that I consistently opposed it: that I did so merely with the object of annoying her, and that certain vexatious events which subsequently occurred would never have taken place at all but for me. Of the injustice, not to say the absurdity, of these accusations, I will leave those to judge who shall have the patience to pursue this narrative to the close. One thing, at all events, I can conscientiously affirm; that it never so much as entered my head to think of Count Waldemar in connection with the subject: for how could I possibly foresee that a lieutenant of German hussars, quartered in remote Stuttgart, would appear in the extreme south of France without a moment's notice, and create all manner of discord and unpleasantness in our midst? This, however, is precisely what happened.

It was a bitter cold evening in December. All day long a furious and icy *mistral* had been sweeping over the bare hills, driving clouds of dust before it, ripping branches from the olives and evergreen-oaks, chilling the poor exotic palms, hursting open windows, slamming doors, and irritating beyond all bearing the nerves of luckless strangers. I was sitting in the smoking-room of the hotel with young Balfour, cowering over a wood-fire, and bewailing the inclemency of this quasi-southern climate.

"Is it for this," I moaned, "that we have left our comfortable London home at the mercy of a crew of unprincipled servants? Is it for this that I have sacrificed my club, and my rubber of whist, and the improving society of my friends? Is it for this that we have crossed the Channel in a gale of wind, and faced the miseries of the most comfortless railway journey in the whole world? Is it for this—"

"There's the omnibus come in from the station," interrupted Balfour. "More deluded unfortunates in search of warmth, I suppose. How they must be cursing their doctors!"

The front door was flung open, letting in a gust of cold air from without. A heavy trunk was let down with a bang upon the stone porch. Some noisy, cheerful person came stumping in, laughing and talking with the landlord.

"And fragments of his mighty voice
Came rolling on the wind."

"Not much wrong with his lungs, anyhow," remarked Balfour.

Could I doubt for a moment the origin of that tremendous ho-ho-ho? It needed not the landlord's smiling announcement that "*un ami à monsieur*," had arrived, it needed not the sight of a stalwart, fur-enveloped figure following closely upon his heels to prepare me for the agonizing grip of both hands whereby Count Waldemar evinced his joy and surprise at this unexpected renewal of our friendly relations.

He sat down before the fire, stretched out his interminable legs, and explained that he had got a month's leave of absence from his regiment. He entered at once into conversation with Balfour, and would have divulged the cause of his journey to Hyères in the course of the first five minutes if I had not contrived to catch his eye, and check him by a succession of hideous grimaces. He acknowledged these signals by a wink of surpassing craftiness, and a laughing ejaculation of "*Schon schon! Werde nicht mehr plaudern*," which, seeing that Balfour speaks German as well as he does English, was not exactly calculated to allay any suspicions that might have begun to trouble that young gentleman's mind. Still, the evening passed

off without any untoward incident, and that was really more than I had ventured to hope for at first.

The next morning I had to introduce the count to Mrs. Clifford, and to this hour I cannot imagine how I could have been so insane as to tell her privately, beforehand, that he was related to the Grand Duke of Halbacker.

Sometimes I am almost tempted to think that even white lies—and this one, I do maintain, was of the most harmless order—never prosper. My sole aim was to give my young friend a chance of securing Mrs. Clifford's good will; but, alas! the result achieved was the exact contrary of this. For Balfour, who, as I ought to have remembered, had served as *attaché* at more than one German court, assured her that the grand duke had no such connections, and my lame explanation that I was always making mistakes about people, and that I must have been thinking of somebody else, did not avail to prevent her from setting down poor Count Waldemar as an impostor, and openly speaking about him as such to the other inmates of the hotel. Altogether it was a most unfortunate occurrence, and did me much harm in the estimation of those about me.

I have neither space nor desire to speak of the botheration which ensued; of the solemn warning which my wife thought fit to address to Mrs. Seymour; of the latter's appeal to the person principally concerned, and of my own clumsy attempts to get out of an awkward predicament. The upshot of it all was that I believe I was looked upon, for some time, as more or less of a detected swindler by everybody, except, indeed, by my dear and excellent count, who would never have understood the mean feeling which had led me to make him out a greater man than he was. Now the Von Ravensburgs were of just as good descent as the Grand Dukes of Halbacker, he said: and if I had made a little mistake, who was the worse for it? "Tell me, my dear Mrs. Seymour, why does Mrs. Clefford go out of the room whenever I enter? Does she take me perhaps for a *peech-pocket*?" He roared with laughter at this funny notion.

The matter-of-course way in which Mrs. Seymour had taken Count Waldemar's sudden appearance upon the scene puzzled me so much that at last I felt impelled to ask her whether she had not been rather astonished to see him again.

"Oh, no," she answered quietly. "He has written to me several times since we parted at Homburg, and he always spoke in his letters of paying us a flying visit in the course of the winter."

"Oh, really," said I. "I didn't know," and then I changed the subject.

A man does not reach my time of life, nor spend the best part of half a century principally in cultivating the society of his fellow-creatures, to be scandalized by the flirtations of a pretty woman. Consciousness of my own many infirmities has ever imposed upon me a large measure of toleration for those of others; and when all is said and done, flirting, taken in the abstract, is no very heinous offence. Nevertheless, Mrs. Seymour's conduct in the present instance disappointed me. I had given her credit for less vanity and more consideration for the feelings of her neighbors. Was it worth while to inflict an expensive and fruitless journey upon this innocent young German, to set a hitherto harmonious party by the ears, and to get me into trouble with Mrs. Clifford, merely for the amusement of playing off one admirer against another? I was really vexed with Mrs. Seymour, and all the more so because I had seen a good deal of her during my sojourn at Hyères, and had discovered the existence of many excellent qualities beneath her somewhat conventional exterior.

At the same time I could not but admire the skill with which she contrived to receive both the young men every day, and yet so to arrange matters as that their visits should not clash. I myself, having so few sources of amusement at command in the place, strolled up to her villa pretty frequently, and invariably found one or other of the rivals there, but never the two of them together. There was always some pretext, directly traceable to Mrs. Seymour's influence, for the dismissal of the absentee. Now it was Balfour who had taken Miss Grey out for a ride; now it was Count Waldemar who had kindly undertaken to execute a few commissions at Toulon, and who was to be driven back from the station by Mrs. Seymour in her pony carriage. Sometimes the German, sometimes the Englishman, was sent down to the sea-shore, three miles away, to pick up the many colored shells which abound on that coast. I happen to have an elementary knowledge of conchology, and I had the curiosity to put a few questions to Mrs. Seymour on the subject, thereby convincing myself that if she knew a crustacean from a mollusk it was about as much as she did. She laughed when I taxed her with deliberate deceit, and frankly admitted that she had found it advisable to keep her friends as much as possible apart.

"They did not get on well together from the first," she said; "and I think it is always so much better not to try and make people like each other unless they are inclined that way. Count Waldemar is much too good-natured to quarrel with anybody, but he has a way of criticising you to your face, and of contradicting you flatly if you do not happen to agree with him, which people who do not know him are sometimes apt to take amiss. And then, you know, he does rather monopolize the conversation. When he is in the room nobody else gets much chance of making himself heard, and Mr. Balfour, who is very well-informed and clever, and all that, is accustomed to be listened to."

"Precisely so; and that, of course, is quite enough to account for two good fellows hating one another like poison," said I, with delicate irony.

"Well, you know, Englishmen and foreigners hardly ever do manage to hit off," she answered, in the most innocent manner in the world; "but I should not say that they hated one another."

They did, though, or something very like it. Although, owing to the able tactics above alluded to, they seldom or ever met at Mrs. Seymour's, every day brought them together half a dozen times at the Hotel d'Orient; and, to use Mrs. Clifford's epigrammatical expression, they never fell in with