

Cousin Laura was a very pretty girl at sixteen, and in those days my taste had not been formed. She threw me over sensibly enough for a better fellow."

He rises as he speaks, turns as if about to go, and pauses, as if a thought had struck him.

"You are sure there are no prior engagements? I wouldn't care to poach on another man's manor. You are sure they will not object? It would be unpleasant for me to fall deliberately in love only to be a blighted being for the rest of my life."

She looks at him quickly to see if he is jesting. It is sometimes difficult for her to tell whether her favourite is in jest or earnest. His countenance at least is quite grave.

"I presume so," she answers, rather haughtily; "they would hardly come to me as they did come if prior attachments or engagements existed."

"And you will drop them a hint of this little arrangement. It will only be fair to give them a voice in the matter, you know."

"Well—if you wish it, certainly; but —"

"I decidedly wish it," he interrupts, coolly, "a fair field and no favour on both sides. By the by, you don't restrict me to Mademoiselle Marie, I hope? A man naturally likes freedom of choice, and as I told you before, tastes differ. If by any chance——"

She looks at him in unfeigned surprise.

"Could you really think of that small, silent, dark, rather plain girl? I cannot believe it. I should certainly, for your own sake, prefer it to be Marie —"

"My dear lady, how are we to tell that either will condescend to think of me twice? As to Mademoiselle Reine, I have it from her own lips that she hates me, that she always intends to hate me, that she thinks me insufferably priggish and Pecksniffian, and for all I know she may be right. But it is my whim to have freedom of choice—with your permission."

"Mr. Laurence Longworth," says Mrs. Windsor, half amused, half annoyed, "my opinion is that you are laughing at me all this while, and mean to have nothing to say to either. You

know perfectly well that for the success of our scheme it would be much better not to say a word about it. Girls are proverbially perverse. Tell them they are to do a certain thing, and they immediately go and do the reverse. But you shall please yourself. I will speak to them if you desire it."

"I do. And believe me I am more in earnest than you give me credit for. Here comes Mrs. Longworth. I resign in her favour."

Marie and Frank pass at the same moment, and she smiles upon him. They both seem well amused; it would be a pity to spoil sport. A little farther down he sees Reine, no longer alone. O'Sullivan is by her side, and Mrs. Sheldon and a few more, and this group he leisurely joins. Mr. O'Sullivan appears to have the floor, and is expatiating on the purity of Hibernian lineage and the desirability of the capital letter "O" by way of prefix.

"It's the equivalent of the German *von* or French *de*—a patent of nobility in itself. Sure anyone that ever took the trouble to read Irish history——"

"A trouble which nobody ever does take, my prince" says Longworth.

"Know," continues the O'Sullivan, "that 'O' and 'Mac' are the prefix of all the kings of the country from time immemorial."

The town clocks are striking ten as they land, and all are weary and glad to be home. They have toasted their next merry meeting in claret cups, they have lauded Mr. Francis Dexter, to the heavens, and so, a brilliant success from first to last, Mr. Dexter's picnic comes to an end.

"It has been the happiest, the very happiest day of my life," he murmurs to Miss Landelle at parting, and he lifts her hand as he says it in right knightly fashion and kisses it.

On Reine's table, when she enters her room, a letter lies—a letter in a man's hand, and post-marked London. Her tired face flushes as she sees it; she tears it open and reads it eagerly, and kisses with shining eyes the words which are its last—

"Thine for ever and ever,

"LEONCE."