

the earth like "I forget the beggars' names," he added, "but you know the chaps I mean"; and so the pair came unmolested to the eastern base of the Great Pyramid; and he helped her over broken stones up a step or two, where they sat together facing the distant Nile and the still more distant moon. He sat very near to her and tried to capture her hand, but at that moment came the necessity of gathering her wraps more closely about her, and he gave up the quest for the moment. Even so blase a man as Lord Warlingham never had a better setting for a proposal than was his fortune in this case. The glamour of the moon filled the lustrous eyes of the lady beside him. Behind them rose this great monument of Egypt's power; Egypt, whose queen was a very goddess of love; Egypt, at one time the treasury of the world, and, before his Lordship's mind, even at that moment floated the golden glow of fifteen thousand sovereigns per annum. In front of them stretched the languorous East. Every requirement of situation was satisfied; and, after all, she was deucedly pretty, as his Lordship admitted when he glanced sideways at her as she sat near him on the elevated fifth step of the Great Pyramid. The influence of past ages was upon her. She gazed to the East as the Sphinx gazed to the North, and as silently. Hitherto she had spoken almost pertly, one might say, were not such a saying inexcusable when she held the rank she did. A real countess cannot speak pertly; a king can do no wrong. Lord Warlingham drew a deep breath as he recognized the perfection of his stage management—a deep breath as he recognised the pender sigh. He wished he knew the girl's Christian name, so that he might begin tenderly; but as he was ignorant on that point, he was compelled to use her title, which he recognised was bad form, as if a friend had addressed him as "your Lordship."

"Countess," he began solemnly, "on our first meeting you held that our relationship was a very distant one."

She almost gasped, and the enchantment of the Orient faded from her face as she turned it upon him. A humorous Western twinkle came into her eyes and somewhat chilled the sentimentality so well portrayed by his deep, tremulous voice.

"Well, if we are relations, we are certainly very close ones at this moment." Whereat she shifted a little further along the fifth step toward the south. "To tell the truth, I had forgotten you were here." She laughed lightly.

This might have discouraged a less adept lover, but it merely proclaimed to Lord Warlingham that he must put his best foot forwards. It also banished from his mind those two words on the cablegram in his pocket, "Wait letter," which had been rather haunting him during the evening.

"Countess, I was never more serious in my life. We have known each other but a short time, yet this brief period has been to me a—a—"

"An interval of bliss hitherto undreamed in my—in my intercourse with your siren sex." Is that what you wish to say? My dear cousin Warlington, is this—is this a proposal that is on the way?"

The lady clasped her hands and leaned towards him, the witchery of mischief in her dancing eyes. Lord Warlingham was aghast. He had never met anything like this before. Yet, to his credit be it said that he held himself well in hand, and did not take quite justifiable offence at the flippant reception of what he knew was a great honour on his part.

"Cousin," he said, with a solemnity equal to that of the Pyramid behind him, "you are pleased to laugh at me.

To me, however, it is the most fateful moment of my existence. I freely admit that I have led a somewhat aimless life. This has doubtless been my own fault. Yet not entirely. If a man has a guiding star, his course through—"

"Oh! I read somewhere that one corner of this Pyramid points to the North Star. Do you know if that is true?"

"I must confess I have not the slightest idea."

"Let us find out. It must be one of the southern corners, of course."

She was about to spring from the fifth step, but he laid a restraining hand upon hers, which, in this instance, had not the opportunity to seek refuge in adjusting the wraps.

"Never mind the North Star," he said.

"But it is a fixed star; just the one to be a reliable guide for an erratic man. Are you sure it isn't the star you are longing for?"

"I am quite sure. The star I am longing for shines from your eyes. As I said in the beginning, you spoke of our distant relationship. I wish to make our relationship the closest bond that can bind two human beings together."

"You speak a great deal about our mythical relationship, Lord Warlingham. I have lived all my life in Devonshire; you have lived much of your life in London. Well, the Great Western Railway has a speedy and excellent service. Why did you never look up your lone cousin before?"

"How could I know?"

"How could you know what? Did you think we had nothing to eat in the house? Or do you mean that I am so transcendently beautiful and charming. You ought to know that people say I am decidedly eccentric. Some give it a harsher term. What is it you could not know?"

"I could not know that you were the one of all this world to me, until I had met you."

"I see." The lady nodded several times, while he gazed at her with unconcealed apprehension. "This, then, is a proposal, as I suspected. Well, I have never had a proposal, and naturally I am somewhat at a loss how to act. I am, nevertheless, delighted to think that the first time I have appeared, as it were, in public, I have been honoured by so distinguished a person as Lord Warlingham."

"I ask you to be my wife. What is your answer?" His Lordship was piqued by her nonchalant reception of what she had described as an honour, and not being a schoolboy, as has been remarked, he thought it best to bring the question to a definite issue.

"Should a person answer immediately? It is so important you know. In penny novelettes they always ask for time. Do you ever read penny novelettes?"

"No," he replied gruffly.

"They are very interesting."

"I suppose they are." For the first time during this unsatisfactory conversation, the fear penetrated through his Lordship's armour of self-conceit that this accursed dam-builder had won the fortune while he was waiting for information regarding its extent. He leaned over towards her and said in a low voice—

"Am I too late?"

"I don't think so," she replied brightly, glancing up at the moon, which had risen perceptibly since they had taken their seats. "It cannot be more than half-past ten, or perhaps eleven. But don't you think it is getting more and more chilly?"

"Yes," said his Lordship, with a sigh that was genuine. "It has been chilly from the first."

The Countess laughed merrily.

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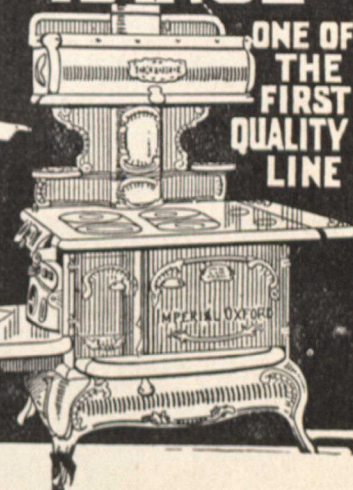
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