

with whom precisely Mr. Brant was anxious to stand well. He made up his mind that his second wife should be an Englishwoman, and although it was not more than a year since Mrs. Brant's death, he was, just at this time, exceedingly anxious to replace her. There were uncomfortable rumours as to Mr. Brant's financial position: he was known to be always engaged in gigantic speculations, and some of these had certainly proved failures of late, so that it had even been said he must be on the verge of ruin; but he himself carried matters with a high hand, and declared his successes so far exceeded his losses that they were a matter of perfect indifference to him. Nevertheless, persons watched him and his house very narrowly, with a view to discover how his affairs really stood, as the reputation of his colossal fortune had gained him unlimited credit, and if it should ever happen that Richard Brant became really bankrupt it would involve the ruin of thousands. It was, therefore, for many reasons a matter of the deepest importance to him that the public mind should be reassured on the subject of his solvency, and he could not better do so, as he imagined, than by keeping open house, and launching out into a still more profuse style of expenditure; but he was childless, and the immense business transactions in which he was always engaged rendered it impossible for him to enter so much into society as would be necessary for the attainment of his object. It was necessary, therefore, that he should have a wife to represent him at the *fetes* he intended to give, and at the houses of others, and it was mainly with the view of finding a suitable lady for this position that he was making the journey to England, though he had not the least idea that he was taking quite the most favourable step for the accomplishment of his purpose when he agreed to perform a commission for Bertrand Lisle in London.

It was, however, in the performance of his promise to him whom he had known as the English *charge d'affaires*, that he now found his way to the house of the Wyndhams. Sally, who had accompanied them to London, and whose rustic manners did not quite meet the requirements of civilized life, went on before him to the drawing-room door, which she opened, and then, standing back, she made him a sign to go in, and closed it upon him when he had obeyed her, without having dreamt of announcing him. In consequence of this proceeding Mr. Brant stood for two or three minutes within the room, before the only person who occupied it was aware of his presence. He was by no means sorry to have an opportunity of contemplating at his leisure the most beautiful vision he had ever beheld.

Lurline, with all her shining hair floating loose on her shoulders, was standing before a little toilet mirror, which was placed on the table in front of her, and she was engaged in trying on, one after another, various wreaths of artificial flowers, which she intended should form part of her *trousseau*. At the moment when Brant entered the room she was twisting a long spray of ivy among her bright curls, with crystals gleaming on its leaves in guise of dewdrops. It suited well with her fantastic beauty—the dark glossy leaves enhancing the effect of her dazzling fairness and brilliant eyes. She was in a graceful attitude, with her white hands raised above her head, holding the green glittering wreath, and her bewitching face lit up with smiles at the sight of her own successful loveliness, while the position showed her lithe slender figure to the best advantage. She wore a charming summer dress of light muslin, set off with ribbons and white lace, and all

around her were scattered gay coloured silks and other materials, from which she had apparently been making a selection. Richard Brant had a keen eye for beauty in any shape, and he took in at a glance the peculiar charms of Laura's appearance in all its effective brilliancy. "What a sensation she would have made in our *salons* if Lisle had brought her out to us!" he said to himself; "but there is an end to any chance of that of course." Probably he made some movement which attracted Lurline's attention, for suddenly she turned round and brought the light of her flashing eyes full on his face. She started when she saw a stranger, and stood for a moment looking at him, still with her hands upraised, and the long locks of her burnished hair straying over them in picturesque confusion. He came forward instantly, and, with perfect ease of manner, apologised for what seemed to be an intrusion, as the servant had left him to introduce himself, which he did by giving her his name.

"But I have my credentials here, Miss Wyndham," he continued, taking out a letter and a small parcel from the breast of his coat; "Mr. Lisle charged me to deliver these to you, and to give you all such further explanations of his present position as you may wish to have."

"Is he not coming? is he not here?" she exclaimed, with breathless impatience.

"No, indeed; I fear he is in a much less safe and satisfactory place."

"You do not mean that he has gone to this odious war, after all?" she exclaimed.

"I grieve to have to tell it to you, Miss Wyndham, but it is only too true," said Brant, gently, expecting to see her overcome with distress; and instead of that a scarlet flush of indignation flamed into her cheek, and she stamped her dainty little foot on the ground as she said, with unmistakable irritation, "What utter folly! what moonstruck madness! he ought to be put in a lunatic asylum! it is too bad. I declare I won't read his silly letter, full of sentimental rubbish about France, no doubt!" and she flung it out of her hand on to the table with a scornful gesture. Lurline never gave herself the trouble to conceal her sentiments where no end was to be gained by doing so, and it was evident to Mr. Brant, who knew the world well, that she was speaking with entire frankness now.

"It does indeed seem madness to leave so fair a bride for any cause whatever," he said, aloud; "Mr. Lisle shows more self-denying patriotism than I could have done in his place."

"Patriotism! bah! what does patriotism mean? it is a mere name; and he never considers me, who was to have been married to him next week, and off to gay Italy; and now I suppose it will never be. It is odious conduct, and I feel inclined to hate him for it. Of course he has resigned his post?"

"Naturally; it was not in his power to retain it under the circumstances. That was done a fortnight since, and he started for the seat of war even before his successor was appointed, for which he will undoubtedly be censured; he can never take office under the English Government again."

"No, I should think not; it is the most irretrievable senselessness I ever heard of. I suppose he has not left himself a loop-hole of escape?" and she took up the letter and tore it open. It was long, and she sat down to read it, making a sign to Mr. Brant to take a seat also. Poor Bertrand had written a noble, manly, touching letter, which must have melted any heart less cased in selfishness than Laura Wynd-

ham's. He told her all that he had felt as day by day brought in the reverses of the French army, and how, dearly as he loved her, he felt that he must not sacrifice, even to her, his duty and his honour. He was a Frenchman, and he could not remain at a luxurious post in the service of another country while France was bleeding at the heart, and requiring the help of every arm to which she had a right. He must go, and his Lurline need not doubt what it cost him to postpone his marriage, and how it wrung his heart to give both her and himself the pain of even temporary separation; but in presence of such gigantic disasters and miseries as those which had fallen on his native land, it would indeed be cowardly and selfish to give any weight to private sorrows, and after all he trusted their happiness was only delayed a little time. It was said on all sides that the war could not last long, and unless he lost his life he would return to claim his darling Lorelei the very first moment it was possible to do so. It was true he should no longer be able to offer her the position she would have graced by her beauty, but they would have a pittance which would enable them to live, though in a very humble manner, and love such as theirs could brave poverty and privation. Perhaps they might live at Chiverley with her father; anyhow, if he survived the war he should very speedily come to claim the promise she made to him in happier days.

Lurline's lip curled scornfully as she flung down the letter, and she turned to Mr. Brant, detecting at once that he was watching her with undisguised admiration.

"Mr. Bertrand Lisle makes a little too sure of his prize," she said; "he asks me to marry him when he can offer me a suitable position and a prospect of a happy life, and then when he has impoverished himself and ruined all his prospects, he coolly tells me that if he comes alive out of the butchery into which he has plunged for no reason whatever, he shall come and claim my promise to marry him, and thereby enter on an existence of pauperism and degradation; he will find himself mistaken."

"He has indeed made a great mistake," said Mr. Brant, softly. "Although I have only the honour of so short an acquaintance with you, I can see that you are one fitted to shine in society, and to be at once its ornament and its delight; our brilliant city would have been the very place for you; life is indeed made joyous there."

"Yes, I know; and, oh, how I longed to go! it is enough to drive one wild to be disappointed at the last! You live there always, do you not?"

"Yes, it is my home, and I think I may say, without vanity, that I possess one of the finest of the old palaces as my abode, fitted up of course in modern style."

"It must be charming," said Lurline; "those grand old Italian houses seem made for *fetes* and receptions."

"Yes, mine is especially adapted for them, as it has splendid gardens attached to it. We gave many successful entertainments there when my late wife was alive, but since I have had no lady to act as mistress of the revels, I have been unable to do so." He looked at Lurline as he spoke, and met the full gaze of her keen bright eyes. He put up his hand to conceal a smile, and in order to change the conversation, he said, "All this time you have not looked at your jewels, Miss Wyndham."

"Jewels! has Bertrand sent them? I am glad of that, anyhow!" and snatching up the parcel, which she had forgotten, she opened it hastily, and found a case con-