

"You have heard him tell thee?" said Eugene, somewhat embarrassed.

"Yes, certainly," replied Mrs. Courtenay—"have not you, Laura? But I always fancied he was alone when it occurred."

The face of Picciolini became of a bright scarlet, as it had done before on the balcony, which, being noticed by Laura, caused her to think to herself, "How cruel of mamma! It seems like throwing a doubt on what dear Eugene says, and foreigners are always so sensitive." She however said nothing, but dear Eugene managed to recover his usual *sang froid*.

"Sir Cecil was not always so awkward in telling his adventures as he might be," said he quietly, his strong foreign accent very distinct; "his merriment was so *vera bad—vera bad indeed*."

"Yes, that is true," assented Mrs. Courtenay, who noticed the colour rise to the temples of her guest, and imagined she had wounded his ultra-sensitive feelings. "Or very likely I may have been mistaken, you know."

"That is true, dear madame," said Eugene, apparently much relieved at this half apology; and the subject dropped, the party shortly retiring.

When "the count" appeared on the following morning he was anxious for Laura to fix the happy day; and after much pressing the matter, he obtained her consent for the ceremonial to be performed that day three weeks. The only thing needed, therefore, was Mrs. Courtenay's approval, the obtaining of which was hardly so easy a task as the fond pair had imagined, for she positively declined to say "yes" until a day had been allowed her for consideration of the question. She was too wise to rush headlong into a corner, which did not allow of an easy retreat in case of necessity.

"Then to-morrow morning," said Picciolini, smiling bewitchingly; "to-morrow morning you shall tell me?"

"To-morrow I shall certainly have decided," replied Mrs. Courtenay, discreetly, "but it is rash to be too precipitate in these matters."

"That is your view, dear madame," exclaimed the enthusiastic Eugene; "but to the young heart it sees death long to wait."

Laura thoroughly concurred in this poetically expressed idea; but Mrs. Courtenay was obdurate, so the affair remained undecided, the ultimate arrangement being that mamma's answer should be given on the following evening, till which time the happy young lovers must live on hope.

CHAPTER V.

On the following morning Mrs. Courtenay was down early, and sat in the drawing-room with her daughter, glancing over the papers, and fancying herself profitably employed.

"Does Eugene come this morning, Laura?" she asked; "or will he be too much overpowered to appear till the evening?"

"No, mamma, he is not so cruel as to stay away," replied Laura, hardly relishing her mother's half bantering tone, "he will be here shortly."

"Oh, indeed," said her mamma, drily, resuming her occupation.

At this moment there was the sound of a light footstep coming gaily up the stairs, two or three steps at a time, and Laura, springing to her feet, ran towards the door with the exclamation, "There he is, mamma!"

And he was there; but not Eugene the expected. Laura has been too eager.

The door swung open, and a bronzed and bearded stranger entered the room—a young man, handsome, and evidently belonging to the highest *ton*.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Laura, with a little startled shriek, as he seized her hand and wrung it warmly, laughing merrily the while.

Mrs. Courtenay was also taken very much by surprise at first. She seemed highly inclined to resent such a familiarity on the part of this stranger, who rushed unannounced into her room; but quickly recognising the bearded one, she rose to her feet, and came over with both hands extended to meet her greatest favourite—Sir Cecil Haughton.

"Dear me, Cecil, how brown you are!" said Mrs. Courtenay, as she shook both his hands warmly in hers.

Cecil laughed heartily, as though brownness were the finest joke in the world.

"Am I?" said he; "and well I may be, after roasting for two months or so on the plains and in the cities, and then refrigerating myself on the mountain-tops for another month. But you look very well, Mrs. Courtenay, and younger every day, I declare."

Mrs. Courtenay laughed almost as heartily as her guest, for she was vastly pleased, first at seeing him, secondly at his compliment.

"Hardly that, Cecil," said she, "but this air agrees with me. But, come, sit down and let me hear what makes you turn up thus unexpectedly, and let me hear your excuses for not answering my letter."

"So you shall," replied the baronet. "But, in the first place, Laura, why so sad? I thought—but oh! I know you are disappointed. You expected some one else when I came in—Monsieur with the big name."

Laura blushed, which was ample confirmation of Sir Cecil's words; but she made no reply.

"Wait a bit, Laura, and if I don't bother you into speaking, blame me," said the cheerful baronet, whose sarcastic mood had completely changed to natural, easy, and graceful good humour.

"Well now, Mrs. Courtenay," he went on, "the truth of the matter is this. I did not recognise the name of your esteemed foreign acquaintance, and as I flattered myself that I might be more welcome in *propria persona* than my letter would have been, I thought I would run over and see if I recognised the man himself, as I could not recall his name. What is it—Picciolorini? So, you forgive me?"

"Picciolini," replied Mrs. Courtenay. "Yes, I amply forgive you, you naughty boy."

"So he is no Russian after all, but an Italian with a Frenchman's Christian or un-Christian name, whichever you like," said the baronet. "But I beg pardon, Laura; I forgot you admired the name."

The baronet turned to the younger lady, who sat silently at the open window, gazing listlessly at the passers. But Laura was too much pre-occupied to have heard him, his observation therefore, remained unacknowledged.

After a few moments more of desultory conversation with Mrs. Courtenay, Sir Cecil passed over and stood beside the passive figure at the window, awakening her from her reverie by making some commonplace remarks on the weather, and so forth, to which she replied in like manner.

"Charming view from here, Laura," said the baronet, who seemed just the smallest bit uncomfortable.

"Yes," replied the lady, absently.

"Great many boats in sight, it strikes me," Cecil went on, slightly embarrassed in manner—for what reason is uncertain.

"Yes, a great many," replied Laura.

"Hardly so many promenaders as usual, I think, are there?" said Cecil desperately.

"No," responded Laura.

The baronet gave up in despair; Laura's monosyllables had overcome him, and he relapsed into silence. She was evidently too much pre-occupied to pay any attention to her mother's visitor, being engaged in the entertaining occupation of watching for some known form among the loiterers; so Cecil contented himself with joining this ocular search, occasionally varying the monotony of the proceedings by twirling the ends of his moustache.

Laura did not seek much longer in vain. In a few minutes, a form appeared among the passers, which was apparently well known to Miss Courtenay, and on which her eyes resting, she blushed vividly.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir Cecil, also recognising somebody; "there's that scoundrel—," but he checked himself, and the curious expression breaking over his countenance, he burst into a loud peal of laughter, which for the moment seemed utterly beyond his control.

"What now?" asked Mrs. Courtenay, who,

having approached, had observed what had attracted her daughter's attention, but of course could not understand what caused so much amusement to the baronet.

"Nothing," replied Sir Cecil, slyly, "except that I have had the honour, unless I am very much mistaken, of beholding your distinguished foreign friend, and that I do recognise him, although I had (hem!) forgotten his name."

Mrs. Courtenay opened her eyes in wonder, and yet there was something in the baronet's tone not altogether displeasing to her; and Laura became as pale as the whitest marble: Sir Cecil's words to her sounded like a sentence of doom.

"You don't mean to say—?" commenced Mrs. Courtenay, with some eagerness in her voice.

"No, certainly not: nothing of the kind," replied Sir Cecil, readily; "but dear Mrs. Courtenay, and you too Laura, are you prepared for a surprise?"

Mrs. Courtenay looked from the face of the baronet, which now wore an expression of grave severity, to that of her daughter, and gave her assent by a gesture, rather than by the words she spoke.

"I hardly—," she began. "Yes, I am."

"Will you allow me to speak the first word to your friend?" asked Sir Cecil.

Mrs. Courtenay bowed her head in silence, while her daughter stood mutely by; and the next moment the baronet, most inexplicably, it seemed, slipped to the other side of the room, and took up a position behind the door.

In another moment there was a light footstep on the stairs; and the door opening, Monsieur Eugene Picciolini entered the room with a brilliant smile on his face, and a cheerful—"Good morning, Madame Courtenay, I am *vera*—"

He stopped suddenly in the middle of the sentence, for the door banged loudly behind him, and another voice took up the burthen of the song.

"*Bon matin, Gaspodin Picciolini, wie geht's, amigo mio*," said Sir Cecil Haughton, in fierce, polyglot badinage; "really, I hardly know in what language to address so distinguished a foreigner; perhaps English may be the best."

Eugene's smile had departed; his face had assumed a curious leaden hue, and the power of movement had apparently deserted him, for he stood, as it were, rooted to the spot.

"Ladies," continued Sir Cecil, advancing a few steps, and motioning with his hand towards "the count," "I have the honour of presenting to you Mr. James Smith—at least, if I mistake not, for really the salubrious air of Brighton has so altered the appearance of my—"

"I never did you an injury, Sir Cecil," interrupted the pseudo-count, weakly, but in unexceptionable English, "and—"

"And I never allowed my *valet* to address me as you are doing at present, sir," interrupted Sir Cecil; "allow me to remark, that is the door, and as I happen to know the locality of the police station, permit me to offer as a suggestion that, for your personal safety, it would be well for you to leave, not only this house, but this town also, at once."

At the conclusion of his sentence Sir Cecil turned his back on the *ci-devant* Eugene Picciolini, considering that his words conveyed all the meaning desirable, and indeed there was no necessity to say more, for, without uttering a syllable, the ex-valet turned on his heel and left the room.

CHAPTER VI.

"And a very lucky escape for us," said Mr. Courtenay, speaking from the bottom of her heart; "but in future I shall know how to treat distinguished foreigners." Laura, my darling, I can only congratulate you, and with heartfelt gratitude thank dear Cecil."

Laura was as yet too much exhausted to speak, having only just recovered from a fainting fit, but her eyes showed that she appreciated to the full her mother's sentiments, though, for the present, she felt deeply the loss of her dear Eugene."