

shook hands with the famous dramatist outside the inquest room, "and there it will end."

Eugène Ericsen shrugged his shoulders in reply; but to himself he said:

"Will it?"

CHAPTER IV.

CECIL RENA.

In the foreground the muddy, turbid Scheldt, the wharf, the crowd led shipping: in the background the picturesque roofs, and the glorious spire of Antwerp Cathedral.

The Steam Navigation Company's London boat was just about to swing off from the quay—another half-minute and the gangway would be up—when a young man, tall, slight, strikingly handsome and well-dressed, came along at an easy stride, and without the least appearance of hurrying himself, crossed the gangway, and went on board.

The word was given the gangway swung aside, the last rope was flung to the man on the wharf, and the "Cygnets" steamed slowly out into the sluggish waters.

It was spring-time—a lovely April day—and there were not a great many passengers on board. The young man went aft, and seating himself on a huge coil of rope—few seats are more comfortable, by the way—took out a letter, which had evidently been opened before, and read it over again. It was dated from "16, Mervyn Street, Brompton, London," ran as follows:

"DEAR MR. ERICSEN,

"I am delighted with your comedy, and should like to see you about it, if you will give me a call when you return to London.

"Yours truly,

"WALTER MAITLAND."

Pleasant reading this, for a young dramatist only just turned twenty-one: for Walter Maitland had a few months ago taken the management of the Corinthian Theatre, a leading West-end house. He was known to be a thorough man of business, and one, also, who usually did more than he said; in any case, the approbation of so experienced and able a man meant much.

"I wonder what will come of it?" said Ericsen to himself, pulling his silky moustache, thoughtfully. "If he would take the piece for the country, it's more than I expected; not likely he would mount it at the Corinthian. But, then, it's hardly the kind of thing for the country. However, whether it leads to nothing, or to something, I am bound to return in response to this letter."

From which soliloquy it will be seen that Mr. Eugène Ericsen possessed an almost cynical philosophy for twenty-one.

Most men, years older, would have at once sprung to the most ambitious conclusions, and seen, in prospects, the new comely crowded houses at the Corinthian.

He was roused from a further reverie into which he drifted, his face turned towards the quaint old city fast disappearing behind the bend in the river, by a light touch on his knee, like the touch of a child's hand, and, starting, looked round quickly.

A little child stood there, looking up at him with wide-open smiling eyes.

In all his after life Eugène Ericsen's mind retained in its primeval vividness the memory of this vision, for vision it was—the loveliest fairy an artist could picture—a soft, brickdust skin, superb violet eyes, set wide apart, under straight brows, and shadowed by long upward-curling black lashes, delicate nose, beautifully cut; and perfectly moulded lips, and the hatless head crowned with curling masses of chestnut hair.

The child who seemed about three years old, though she was tall for that, was daintily dressed, in foreign fashion; but in rags she would have looked a young aristocrat. She was not fat or "lumpy," as such young things usually are, but slenderly made, and the more lovely than that ethereal look which, to a mother's eye, may mean lack of robust health.

For a moment the child's beauty took the young man's breath, the next he bent down to her, putting his own hand on the tiny hand that still rested fearlessly on his knee.

"Well, Fairy," he said, in his soft, rich voice, "what can I do for you? Have you come to make friends with me?"

The fairy shook her curly head, and began, in the sweetest of childish trebles, a long sentence, in broken Italian, from which Ericsen made out that he was handsome, and she thought she would like him, and so she had come.

Italian, however, was as familiar to him as English—it was only the little one's broken, baby language that puzzled him, as he replied at once.

"Come, then, and let us have a talk together."

Fairy laughed, and clapped her hands gleefully, as the young man lifted her on his knee, and she nestled within his arm with the coaxing manner which is fascinating even in a plain child.

Ericsen, who knew no more what to do with a baby than any other

young man, was quite at home with a child of this age. It was no new experience to him to have children run up to him and make friends with the delightful frankness of innocence; but he had never yet encountered so bewitching a specimen of young humanity as this.

"And what is your name, Fairy?" he said, caressing the silky curls.

"Cecil Rena," replied she, promptly. "Mamma says Cecil, but Rosetta says 'Chechil.'"

"Is mamma with you?"

"No; only papa. Were are you going?"

It is not to be supposed that Miss Cecil spoke as distinctly as the above; but as her language was broken Italian, that is hardly adequately rendered by broken English.

"I am going home—to London."

"You live in London?"

"Yes, I live in London."

"I shall come and see you," said the tiny lady, confidently.

"I hope you will; we must ask papa, mustn't we?" said Ericsen, kissing the rosy lips.

To his surprise a half-frighted look came into the large eyes; the child nestled closer to him.

"What is it, Fairy?" he said, tenderly.

"Papa doesn't want me!" said the child her sensitive lips quivering.

"Could mortal man help loving such a creature as this?" thought Ericsen, in wonder.

But the instincts of children—especially a child of Cecil's temperament—are too keen to be deceived. They know, unerringly, if they are not loved.

"Oh! but papa loves his little one," said the young man, brightly. But Cecil shook her head.

"No, no; mamma does, not papa. Oh! how pretty!"

Her fancy was caught by a diamond-ring Ericsen wore. She turned the ring round and round, and examined it with intense interest then his watch, of course must come out, and be examined in its turn, with many exclamations and sighs of delight, and questions about this and that; and finally the signorina's own pretty fingers must restore the watch to its pocket, and then the child laid her curly head on the young man's breast, and laughed softly, in that supreme happiness of childhood which has in it so much of pathos, for we know how short-lived it is.

"Carissima!" said he, tenderly, looking down on the exquisite little face, and involuntarily he folded the fragile form closer to him, and kissed the rosy sinless lips, with a pang of passionate longing to possess a winsome creature like this, whom he could love and cherish.

For he had a nature brimming over with capacity to love—in absolute need for love, that had never been satisfied.

An only son, his parents had died almost before he could remember them, and his early childhood had been passed with relations who misunderstood him, and had their own preformed interests. So he had speedily struck out his own path, being haughty, independent, and gifted far above his fellows.

He made friends, but perhaps they loved him better than he loved them; he was a man formed to win loved; but, impressionable and imaginative though he was, he was not quick to give it. He had not even yet fancied himself in love!

Presently missey intimated to her handsome young cavalier that she wanted to look over into the river; so Ericsen carried her to the side and seated her on the bulwark, keeping his arm firmly round her—a necessary precaution, for she was an exceedingly vivacious damsel, and by no means disposed to sit still.

Suddenly the look of fear he had seen once before flashed into the child's eyes, and she clung tightly to her companion.

Instinctively he looked round, and saw a gentleman, a fair, good-looking man, apparently about thirty-five, between whom and the little one there was not a particle of resemblance. Ericsen, whose perceptions were exceedingly keen, was not favourably impressed by the countenance of the stranger, who approaching, said, with a kind of apologetic smile:

"My little one has quite made herself at home with you, sir. I hope you don't allow her to bother you."

"No fear of that," returned Ericsen. "I am very fond of children, and your wee daughter is the loveliest child I ever saw."

"Yes, she is a beauty; everybody notices her," returned the gentleman; but there was a shade of annoyance in his tone, instead of the fatherly pride that might have been expected. He frowned, glancing at the child, who had hidden her face against her new friend; and then he looked searchingly into the striking face of her new protector, and smiled.

"I am not surprised children take to you," he said. "Well, you must not let Cecil trouble you." He raised his hat slightly, and turned away, and Ericsen caught a fleeting expression which gave him no special impression at the time, but which he recalled very distinctly a few hours later.

"He must be a heartless wretch!" thought the young man, "to make a child that anyone else would worship tremble like this. So!