

another sprig of nobility had come up to London from Winchester without leave in order to attend a famous glove contest between heavyweights, and there had been wigs on the green before an irate head master would even deign to flog them. That had happened twelve years ago, almost to a day. Since then he had fought through a great war, had circled the globe, had sought the wild places of earth and its monsters in their lairs. He knew men and matters as his father had never known them. A Prime Minister had urged him to adopt a political career, and had virtually promised him a colonial under secretaryship as soon as he entered parliament. He held the D. S. O. and had been thanked by the Royal Geographical Society for a paper on Kilimanjaro.

The absurdity of a family conclave in which he should again be treated as a small boy and admonished to apologize and be flogged, while it brought a smile to his lips, banished any notion of angry remonstrance.

"You don't mean to say you have married her!" shouted the Earl.

"I have not even asked the lady yet," he said quietly. "I hope—I think—that the idea will not be disagreeable to her; but a future Countess of Fairholme is not to be carried by storm in that fashion. We must get to know her people—"

"Deny take her people!" broke in the older man. "Have you taken leave of your wits, George, to stand there and talk such interminable nonsense?"

"Steady, Dad, steady!" and the quiet voice grew still more calm, though the forehead wrinkled a little and there was an ominous tightening of the lips. "You must take that back. Peter Vanrenen is quite as great a man in the United States as you are in England,—may I even say, without disrespect, a man who has won a more commanding position,—and his daughter Cynthia is better fitted to adorn a coronet than a great many women now entitled to wear one."

The Earl laughed, with an immoderate display of amusement he was far from feeling. "Are these Wiggy Devar's credentials? By gad, that shabby little wretch is flying high when she tries to bag my son for her pretty prodigal!"

"Don't you think it would be wiser, sir, if you allowed me to tell you exactly what has taken place since we last met?"

"What great purpose will that serve? I have heard the whole story from Lady Porthcawl, from Dale, from that Frenchman—and Heaven knows I have been well coached in Mrs. Devar's antecedents by your Aunt Susan! George, I am surprised that a man of your sound commonsense should permit himself to be bamboozled so egregiously! Yes, yes, I am aware that an accident led you to take command's place in the first instance; but can't you see that the Devar creature must have gone instantly on her bended knees—she ever does pray, which I doubt—and thanked Providence for the chance that enabled her to dispose of an Earl's son? At a pretty stiff price too, I'll be bound, if the truth were told. Really, George, notwithstanding your very extensive travels and wide experiences, you are nothing but a kid in the hands of a managing woman of the Devar variety."

"I am not being given in marriage by Mrs. Devar, I assure you," said Medenham.

"No, I will take care of that."

"But are you treating me quite fairly? Why should the distorted version of my affairs given by Lady Porthcawl, a woman whom Cynthia Vanrenen could not possibly receive in her house, and by Count Edouard Marigny, a disappointed fortune hunter, be accepted without cavil, while my own story is not listened to? I leave Dale out of it. I am sure he told you the truth."

"By the way, where is he now?"

"Somewhere in the neighborhood of Chester, I believe."

"Have you discharged him?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Because I wish it."

"Why in the world are you so unreasonable, Dad?"

"Unreasonable! By gad! I like that! Have I been gallivanting round the country with some—"

"Stop! You are going too far. This conversation must cease here and now. If you have any respect for yourself, you must adjourn the discussion till after you have met Miss Vanrenen and her father."

For the first time in his life the Earl of Fairholme realized his limitations; he was actually cowed for a few fleeting seconds. But the arrogant training of the county bench, the signory of a vast estate, the un-

questioning deference accorded to his views by thousands of men who tacitly admitted that what he said must be right because he was a Lord,—these excellent stays of self conceit came to his help, and he snorted:

"I refuse to meet either of them!"

"That disposes of the whole difficulty for the hour," said Medenham, turning to leave. "Wait, George! I insist—"

"PERHAPS a clearer glimpse of a new and, to him, utterly unsuspected force in his son's character withheld the imperious command that trembled on the Earl's lips. He fidgeted with his collar, which seemed to have grown tight for his neck.

"Come, come, let us not leave a friendly argument in this unsettled state," he said after an awkward pause. "My only thought is for your interests, you know. Your life-long happiness is at stake, to say nothing of the future of our house."

"I recognize these considerations so fully that I am going now in order to shirk even the semblance of a quarrel between us."

"Why not thresh things out? Your aunt will be here in a couple of hours—"

"You refuse to hear a word. You argue with a hammer, sir. I shall send a note to Lady St. Maur telling her that she has done mischief in plenty without adding fuel to the fire by coming here to-day—unless you wish to consult her, that is."

The Earl, already afraid of his sister, was rapidly learning to fear his son. "Dash it all! Don't tell me you are off on this confounded motoring trip once more?" he cried passionately.

Medenham smiled, even in his anger. "See how wilfully you misunderstand me," he said. "I came away from Miss Vanrenen solely because matters had gone far enough under rather absurd conditions. She knows me only as Fitzroy the chauffeur. It is time to drop masquerading; for none of us can afford to play knight errant too long. So when next I meet Cynthia it will be as a man who occupies a social position that renders our marriage at least possible."

Lord Fairholme threw out his hands in a gesture of sheer bewilderment. "And do you honestly believe that?" he exclaimed.

"I am quite sure of it. I may have to jump a very big fence indeed when she learns the harmless deception I have practised on her; but I do hope most devoutly that she will look at the facts more calmly than you."

The Earl took a turn or two on the hearth-rug, from which wisdom had temporarily taken flight. He thought now he could see a way to avoid open rupture, and he believed, quite rightly, that his son was in no mood to accept further disillusionment.

"At any rate," he grumbled, "you are cutting a discred—sorry, I didn't quite mean that—you are not rushing away from town again in pursuit of the young lady?"

"No."

"When is she due back in London?"

"On Sunday."

"And you will not see her before then?"

"I believe not. In fact, Mrs. Leland joined her at Chester last night; so there should be no curtailment of the tour."

The Earl started. "Mrs. Leland! Not the Mrs. Leland of Paris and San Remo?"

"Yes."

"Dear me, dear me! This is a beastly muddle! Look here, George, promise me you won't do anything stupid for a day or so. I have been so pestered by people, I don't know which way to turn. Why not stay and meet your aunt?"

"Because I might lose my temper with her."

"Ah, she is somewhat trying when it comes to family matters. Still, I may tell her—"

"That she ought to mind her own business? By all means. And oblige me too by telling her that she would confer a boon on humanity if she persuaded Lady Porthcawl to go to—Jericho—or Tokio—or wherever that fool Porthcawl may happen to be."

"Well, well—there's no accounting for tastes. I suppose you realize, George, that I am keeping back a good deal of the tittle-tattle that reached me during your absence. I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"Thank you. The absurdity of the present position lies in the fact that I shall have all my work cut out to hold your wrath against these people within bounds when once you have met Cynthia."

"Oh, I have no doubt she is pretty and fascinating and all that sort of thing," growled the Earl in a grudging access of good humor. "Confound it! that is why we are putty in their hands, George. Don't forget I've had fifty-five years of 'em. Gad! I could tell you things— All right, let us chuck the dispute for the time. Shall I see you at dinner?"

"Yes, if you are alone."

"There will be no women. I'll take good care of that!"

To be continued next Sunday



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