

tion, I understand), and don't ask the girl for more than she can be expected to promise at present. Unless I am much mistaken, she may be expected to accept you, and before you have been married a month she will be as devoted to you as you can desire. It is a mere question of not being too proud or too humble—whichever you like to call it—this evening."

"I am afraid I must be one or the other, for I don't feel at all tempted to take your advice," said Jack.

"Then the impossible Austrian will somehow or other be converted into possibility, that's all. I have known Mary Hamilton for many years and I can gauge the length of her foot to a nicety. She will give in, not because she believes that it will be for her daughter's happiness—which it won't—to marry a foreigner whose people are pretty certain to object to the match, but because she has never been able to deny the girl anything without providing some equivalent. You are more than an equivalent. You know you are, and so does she, and so, in due season, will Daphne. Only I suspect that there is no time to be lost. You had better, as I told you just now, assume that this is your last chance. If you let it slip I believe, upon my honour and conscience, that you will be selfish as well as foolish. These are words of wisdom and truth. Ponder them during dinner."

He pondered them during dinner, which accounted for a taciturnity on his part somewhat provoking to the lady of the house. Mrs Bingham's counsel was, of course, based upon insufficient knowledge of the case. Yet there was, or there might be, something in it. In the abstract, Daphne would doubtless do better for herself by espousing an English gentleman who adored her than by linking her fortunes with those of a rather flighty young Austrian, whose uncle would very probably evince displeasure by keeping him on short commons. Perhaps, too—though this was a little difficult to admit he could without treachery to Otto ascertain the girl's own views. Perhaps he would neither injure her nor anybody else by avowing that he loved her.

Every facility for making that avowal was, it need scarcely be said, granted to him. The grand piano in the back drawing-room, at which Daphne seated herself later in the evening, was capable of dominating any conversation that might be held in its neighbourhood, and, to make assurance doubly sure, Mrs Hamilton and Mrs Bingham went off to the former's bedroom for the ostensible purpose of inspecting certain newly-purchased articles of apparel. Thereupon Daphne ceased playing, while her companion, with abrupt promptitude, came to the point.

"I shouldn't wonder if you knew," he began, "why your mother asked me to dine to-night?"

She laughed apologetically. "I am afraid I do. Poor mother! It is rather ridiculous, isn't it? Kindly meant, though."

"Rather ridiculous! Well, yes; inasmuch as she pronounced it ridiculous, it inevitably became so. Nevertheless, he could not, now that he had made a start, choose but persevere.

"Whatever it may be," said he, "it is a thing to be taken seriously. You don't know, but I want you to know, that I should have asked you to marry me long ago if I hadn't seen that there wasn't the faintest hope of your accepting me. What I want to say now is that here I am, and here—in a metaphorical sense—I shall always be. There is no need to tell me that you don't care for me as I care for you; I am very well aware of that, and Mrs Bingham is of opinion that it doesn't matter. Personally, I should have thought that it did; but—"

"Oh, but you know it does!" exclaimed Daphne. "I quite understand why you are making me this offer, and I am grateful to you for your generosity, and it is possible—I don't say it is likely, still it is just possible—that I might hesitate, but for the one absolutely fatal objection that you know of—which is that I care for somebody else."

"To whom also there are certain objections. Not necessarily fatal ones, I admit."

"Oh, they are fatal. I have been thinking them over, and I see that they must be, and ought to be, fatal, notwithstanding my poor dear mother's reluctant wavering, which was quite as evident to me as it was to you and him yesterday. That only means that she can't bear to break my heart. But

she won't break my heart, and I should never forgive myself if I were to break hers by marrying the son of a man whom she is persuaded that my father murdered."

The survival of Herr von Pardowitz remained a secret to Daphne, then. This did not surprise Jack, who was cognizant of reasons for her having been kept in ignorance; but he deemed himself entitled to say:

"Setting that aside, other objections exist. The difference of nationality and religion, for one; the not improbable hostility of old Count von Kahlenburg, for another."

Daphne dismissed these with a wave of her hand. "They are nothing! they don't count!"

"As little, I suppose, as my love for you; though perhaps that might count, some day, for what it is worth. It has, I think, a sort of value as a pis-aller. At any rate, as I told you just now, here it will always be, ready for you to fall back upon, and entirely, unreservedly, at your service."

"Captain Clough," said Daphne gravely. "I don't like you to make such statements. It sounds odious of me to say that they are not true, when you are making them, as I firmly believe you are, out of pure kindness and a wish to spare me other troubles which you foresee; but don't you understand that I should be much more unhappy than I am if I thought that they were true?"

Jack smiled. "Let us assume that they are false then. From the moment that they make you unhappy, they lose their raison d'être."

"Didn't I tell you so!" cried the girl triumphantly. "Of course you only wanted to provide me with a loophole, and though it stands to reason that I can't accept, I don't appreciate your extraordinary disinterestedness any the less. But for a minute you really frightened me!"

"Did I? Well, at the risk of frightening you again, I must repeat that if ever you should feel the need of such a person as a devoted husband, who labours under the disadvantage of not being Otto von Kahlenburg, you will find him in my skin. That, at all events, is a true statement, and I don't see why it should be considered either an alarming or a disinterested one."

"Thank you," answered Daphne hesitatingly; "but you see—I shall never feel the need of such a person."

"Who knows? It is most unlikely that you ever will, though. And as for your mother's wavering, let me just say that, in my humble opinion, she does well to waver. No sane human being could suppose that your father was really a murderer; so it is to be hoped, and I believe it may be expected, that she will shake off that delusion."

If Mrs Hamilton had believed or expected that Jack Clough would succeed in the forlorn hope which he had been invited to undertake, his precipitate departure must at least have enabled her to shake off that delusion.

"And a good thing too!" he muttered to himself, as he left the house. "Now that I am finally and irrevocably out of it, the way is clear, and we may proceed to the concluding act of the comedy."

(To be continued.)

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