



Learn English Through Stories

B1 Novels and Stories

Pre-Intermediate Level

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THE COUNT AND THE WEDDING GUEST

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The Count and the Wedding Guest

By O Henry

At dinner one night in the boarding house where Andy Donovan lived, near Second Avenue, his landlady introduced him to a new paying guest - Miss Conway.

'Nice to meet you, Mr Donovan,' said Miss Conway quietly, and then she went back to her meal.

She was an uninteresting young woman in a boring brown dress. Andy gave her a smile, and forgot her at once.

Two weeks later, Andy was smoking a cigar outside the front door when he heard someone coming out. He turned to see who it was, and was pleasantly surprised.

There was Miss Conway - all in black from her head to her feet. With her bright gold hair, her grey eyes, and her sad face, she looked lovely. Mourning clothes can make any woman look beautiful, and are sure to make any man look twice.

Andy immediately decided not to forget Miss Conway. He dropped his half-finished cigar on the ground and said, 'It's a fine evening, Miss Conway.'

'For those with the heart to enjoy it, Mr Donovan,' she replied sadly, looking down.

'I hope there hasn't been a death in the family,' he said.

'Not really in the family,' she replied. 'But I won't worry you with my troubles.'

'Worry me? But I'd really like to hear all about them Miss Conway. I mean, please feel free to speak to a true friend in your time of need.'

Miss Conway smiled sadly at this.

'I feel so lonely in New York,' she said. 'I have no friends here. But you have been kind to me, Mr Donovan. Thank you for that.'

It was true. Andy sometimes passed the salt to her at the dinner table.

'You're right,' he said. 'It's hard when you're alone. But why don't you take a walk in the park? That'll make you feel better, I'm sure. I'll go along with you if you want.'

'Thank you, Mr Donovan. I'd like that. If you're happy to take a walk with someone like me who has a sad and heavy heart.'

'He was my fiance,' said Miss Conway after an hour in the park. 'We wanted to get married. He was a real Italian Count, with a big old house in Italy. Count Fernando Mazzini was his name, and he was a great dresser. Father didn't agree to it, of course. When we ran away together, he came after us and found us.'

'In the end, when he learned how rich Fernando was, father agreed to a spring wedding. Fernando wanted to give me a wedding present of seven thousand dollars - for the dress, the flowers, the dinner and all. But father was proud and said "no". So when the Count went back to Italy to get his big old house ready for us, I got myself a job in a candy store to help pay for the wedding.'

'Then three days ago, I got a letter from Italy, saying that Fernando was dead. It was a terrible gondola accident that killed him they said.'

'So that explains my mourning, Mr Donovan. I'll never forget Fernando, you see. And after losing him, I'm afraid I just can't look at any other man.'

'I'm really sorry for you,' said Andy. 'And I'm your true friend. I want you to know that.'

'I have his picture here in my locket,' said Miss Conway tearfully. 'And because you're a true friend, Mr Donovan, I'll show it to you.'

For some time Andy studied the photograph in the locket that Miss Conway opened for him. The man's face was young, bright and clever. It was the face of a strong man that other people are always ready to follow.

'I have a larger photograph in my room,' said Miss Conway. 'I'll show you later. They're the only things that I have of Fernando now. But he'll always be in my heart.'

Andy decided there and then to try to win Miss Conway's heart from the Count. He took her to have an ice cream, but her grey eyes still looked sad.

That evening, she brought down the larger photograph and showed it to Andy. He looked at it silently.

'He gave this to me the night that he left for Italy,' said Miss Conway.

'A fine-looking man,' said Andy. 'Now would you like to come out with me again next Sunday afternoon?'

A month later, they told the landlady and the other guests at the boarding house of their plans to get married. Miss Conway stayed in mourning.

A week after that, they were sitting in the park near the boarding house. Andy's usually smiling face was dark with worry, and he was strangely silent.

'What's the matter, Andy?' asked Miss Conway.

'Well, you've heard of Big Mike Sullivan, haven't you?' said Andy, after a while.

'No, I haven't. Who is he?'

'He's a great New York politician, and a friend of mine. I met him today, and he wants to come to our wedding. I'd really like him to come.'

'OK. So he can be our guest.'

'Right, but before we can have our wedding I need to know something. Do you still prefer Count Mazzini over me?'

Suddenly Miss Conway started crying.

'Oh, Andy, there never was a Count. All the other girls had boyfriends - but I didn't. And you know how good I look in black. So I bought a big photograph of a man that I didn't know at a photograph store, and got a small one, too, for my locket. Then I thought up the story of the Count's death and put on my black clothes. I'm just a big fake. And now you won't marry me because of it, I'm sure. And you're the only man that I've ever loved!'

Smiling, Andy took her in his arms.

'Do you still want to marry me after what I've done?' she asked in surprise.

'Of course,' he replied. 'You were very good to explain it all to me. Now we can forget the Count, there's nothing to stop us becoming man and wife.'

'Andy,' Miss Conway went on, 'Did you really think that my stories about the Count were true?'

'Not really,' he replied, taking out a cigar, 'Mostly because that photograph in your locket is of my friend Mike Sullivan.'

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