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Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER XXI.

"By George, they do! Wentworth—he's here—was melted almost to tears last night. He's been staying at Ferndale, hasn't he?"

Vane nodded.

"Who else have you got here, Charlie?"

"Oh, a houseful," replied Lord Nugent, laughing. "The mother thought the marchioness wouldn't like it if we didn't have a crowd to do honor to the marchioness, and I let her have her way. There's Wentworth, and Dallington, and Lady Caroline; and I say, Vane, I ought to tell you—Lady Lucelle is here——"

Vane changed color for a moment, then he said, quietly enough:

"Is she?"

"Yes. I'm awfully sorry, but it wasn't my fault, the mother had asked her with the rest, and I couldn't do anything without making a fuss——"

"Why should you?" said Vane; "I shall be very glad to see her."

"Oh, all right," said Charlie, with a little sigh of relief; "didn't know, you know; I'm not over fond of her myself, but she keeps a house going, you know, and there can't be much mischief about her at present, for just now she is setting her cap at Lane."

Vane started, and irretrievably spoiled the white necktie he was putting on.

"Lane—Clarence, you mean; is he here?"

Charlie nodded.

"Yes, and not a bad fellow, either. They tell me he is much improved upon what he was before his brother went over the majority; maybe he has; I didn't know him when he was only Fitzjames. But he is a decent fellow now, and a good shot. There's rather a joke against him just now. Seems he was rather hard hit last year, somewhere in the country, don't know where or the lady's name; he's awfully quiet on these points, but Lady Lucelle will take him in hand, I expect, and if he resists her he'll be the only man who ever did."

Vane seemed scarcely to be listening; two white neckties had joined the first, and were lying all crumpled and ruined.

"I shall have to call Willis, after all," he said, quietly. "I can never tie those confounded things."

"All right," said Charlie. "I'll send him. I must go and get cleaned myself. Ta-ta, old fellow. Sparks knows you're here, and will let us have some of the yellow seal for dinner. Confound the fellow, I believe he's saving the rest of the bin for you!" and, with a light laugh, he sauntered out, shouting for Willis as he went.

But when Willis came in the necktie was tied, and his services were not required. Indeed, it seemed as if Vane had given up all thought of concluding his toilet, for he dropped into a chair, and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, fell into a brown study; and certainly if his old chum had seen him at that moment, he would have declared that he looked anything but "chippy." At last, with a sigh, he reached for his waistcoat, and fixed his watchguard; as he did so his fingers played with the locket attached, and half-absently he opened it, and discovered the portrait of as sweet a face as man would wish to look upon. It was remarkably like Jeanne. After looking at it long and wistfully, my lord marquis raised it to his lips and kissed it. Not with the demure, placid affection of a husband, but with the passionate wistfulness of a lover. Then he sighed, put on his coat, and, going into the corridor, knocked at the door.

It was opened by Mrs. Fleming.

"Her ladyship says if you are ready, will your lordship please go down?"

Vane nodded, and went on without a word. Most husbands would have gone in—we are afraid—grumbled at the delay, while they admired their wife's dress; but Vane receives her ladyship's command and obeys.

Mrs. Fleming closes the door and goes back to where Jeanne stands, clasping a diamond bracelet on her round white arm. A diamond tiara sparkles in her silken, wavy hair, diamonds on her taper fingers, diamonds clasp her white, slender throat.

As she stands robed in one of Worth's masterpiece, she looks so tall and stately that she scarcely recognizes in the marchioness the slim little girl who leaped from bowlder to bowlder, or crouched at the helm of the Nancy Bell.

But as she turns, one sees it is the same face, the same sweet, fresh loveliness, not one whit hardened or dimmed by her sudden rise. There is the old little curl of the soft, expressionable lips, the old natural trick of the eyelashes drooping over the dark eyes, and it is not until she scans the beautiful face critically that she detects a certain something that is strange, that the old light-hearted girl lacked. Is it sadness, pride, regret? What is it that gives the dark eyes, and the red, mobile lips, an undefinable expression of wistfulness?

It is not always there. It is not there now that Mrs. Fleming comes back, and fastens the armlet, but it was there when Vane's step was heard at the door.

It is three months since Vane, Marquis of Ferndale, brought his bride to his ancestral home; three months since, mad with passion and disappointment, he charged her with being false and dishonorable, and declared that they should be apart, and they are apart still.

To the outward world, to those immediately about them, they are a pattern couple. No servant, no one of the many guests, has ever heard a harsh or unkind word spoken between them.

A Spanish hidalgo could not be more courteously polished than is Vane when he addresses his wife, no lady of Castile more superbly bred than Jeanne while receiving those courtesies. That it is a love-match pure and simple, the many who have hung about her with adoring admiration, are all positively convinced. It is only too palpable that his word is her law, and that she has only to express a desire, and he knows no rest until he has satisfied it.

Have not the whole side of the Ferndale grounds been replanned, because Jeanne once remarked that she did not care for landscape gardening? Were not fifty men working night and day in gangs, cutting a glade through the home wood, that she might get a glimpse of the river from her room? Was not my lord himself in the saddle for three days, looking far a match pair for her pony-carriage? And did he not, the night when her ladyship cut her little finger in the conservatory, go through the pelting rain for the doctor, because no one could ride Kaiser—the swiftest horse in the stable—but himself?

The servants' hall and the smoking-room are full of these and similar stories of my lord's passionate devotion to the beautiful young marchioness.

But no one has ever heard one word of love, one touch of tenderness, exchanged between them.

And no such word has been spoken.

The last word, the last touch of love, was given before Vane opened the fatal letter.

She is the Marchioness of Ferndale, the most popular and sought-after woman in the country; but for the rest, she might as well be sailing the Nancy Bell or snowballing Hal, and Vane might still be climbing the Pyramids or lounging about the Paris clubs.

Jeanne had kept her vow, and played her part well. To the world she is the loving wife of Vane, Marquis of Ferndale. To him she is the proud, insulted woman, who keeps him at arm's length, behind a barrier of injured pride which he is as powerless to break down as he is to remove the hill upon which his castle stands.

"I am quite ready, am I not?" says Jeanne.

"Quite, my lady," says Mrs. Fleming, eyeing her with affectionate admiration. "Monsieur Worth knows what suits your ladyship," she adds, giving these last, lingering touches to the exquisite dress.

Jeanne laughs. It is the old, sweet laugh, with just a little trace of melancholy.

"Are you going to say, as usual, that it suits me better than anything else?" she said. "You're a stupid old thing, after all, for you haven't learned to flatter properly."

"I don't flatter, my lady," says Mrs. Fleming. "I'm not the only one who thinks you beautiful, my lady," and she looks up with a certain timid wistfulness.

"That's worse still," says Jeanne, smiling. "Are you going to repeat all the nonsense you heard that foolish old duke simpering the other night?"

"No, my lady. I wasn't thinking of the duke—though Tully overheard him say that you were the loveliest woman he'd ever seen. I was thinking of my lord, the marquis."

A soft flush stole over Jeanne's face, and she bent down to arrange a flower at her bosom.

"If you were a young girl I should tell you not to repeat everything you hear," she says, quietly; "but you are past mending, I am afraid. Where's my fan?"

"Here, my lady; but won't you take the bouquet my lord sent up for you? He went straight to the conservatory and cut most of the flowers himself."

Jeanne glanced at an exquisite posy of hothouse flowers which had been lying on the dressing-table, and if old Mrs. Fleming's eyes had been sharper, she might have seen a wistful look cross the sweet face, but Jeanne shook her head.

"No," she said; "give me my fan, please," and passed out.

Charlie only spoke the truth when he said that the house was full—only Charlie's mother, the countess, could have told how eagerly invitations had been sought for.

People were always anxious to meet the great marquis, the musician, artist and traveler, about whom so many stories were told that his presence gave a smack of romance to any house which he visited. Added to this, the fame of his bride's beauty had spread abroad, and made people curious to see the woman who had at last conquered and tamed the eagle. That she did not belong to the exclusive world, only added a piquancy to the curiosity.

"She was a dairy maid, wasn't she, dear?"

"No, a fisherman's daughter, I believe, and Lord Ferndale used to help her mend the nets. So eccentric and romantic, isn't it?"

This is the sort of thing that had gone on.

There was one who could have revealed the truth, Lady Lucelle; but she professed as profound an ignorance of the marquis' bride as any one.

Jeanne swept down the stairs in her lace and diamonds, calm and composed, just the Jeanne of old, with the additional confidence which three months of admiring homage and popularity will give any one.

Swept down the stairs to find a tall, stalwart figure standing like a sentinel in the hall. It was Vane.

Jeanne raised her eyes for a moment, and a slight, just a slight touch of color swept over her face as she came forward.

"I thought you would like me to wait for you," he said, and Jeanne noticed a certain significance in the tone.

"Thanks," she said, simply, and laid her finger tips on his arm.

He glanced at her, taking in the beautiful whole with a thrill of admiration; but not a word more was said. Merely that cold "Thanks."

Bowing low, the footman ushered them into the drawing-room. The hum ceased as if at a signal. Serenely Jeanne looked around; the room was full of handsomely-dressed women and distinguished-looking men. An old lady in velvet and lace came up and took her hand—it was the countess, Charlie's mother—and welcomed her in kindly, stately fashion.

"I would have come up to your room, Lady Ferndale, but thought you would be tired. Marquis, how many years is it since me met?"

"I am ashamed to say," said Vane, with his grave smile.

"It is to be hoped he hasn't forgotten us all!" says a soft, sweet-voice at his elbow, and Jeanne is almost guilty of an uncourtly stare, for there, in front of her, smiling sweetly and gently waving her fan with a subtle, placid serenity, is—Lady Lucelle.

Jeanne is about to hold out her hand—as to an old acquaintance, but Lady Lucelle, smiling still, and with the most perfect composure, looks at Vane, and waits for an introduction.

With a face as grave as a judge, Vane bows.

"Lady Lucelle, permit me to introduce my wife."

Then her ladyship, with the sweetest smile, extends her hand, gloved with innumerable buttons.

(To be continued.)

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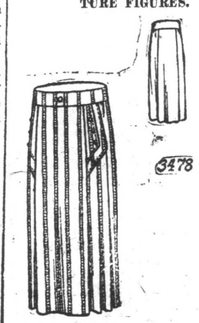

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