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CHAPTER XXXI.
THE GAME OF LIFE.

At the mention of the count, Verona's face fell again.

"Yes, we will go down," she says, with a very different sigh this time.

Jeanne and the princess go down the front staircase and into the small drawing-room, but the count has not returned.

"The fact is that they are quite delighted with him in the billiard-room. Does not some one say that your well-bred Russian is the most polished gentleman civilization has produced?"

"The count's manner is perfect; just as he charmed Hal at the hotel, so he charms Nugent and the rest of them in the billiard-room. He can play—there are many names of skill which a Russian cannot play—and they find that he can not only play, but play well. While Veruca is pouring her new and strange confidence into Jeanne's sympathetic bosom, the count is winning half-sovereigns with the most charming skill; he is the life and soul of the party, full of anecdotes and courtly stories, which he tells even when he is making the most brilliant shots, his face wrinkled into a smile all the while. Oh, a most charming man!"

And as he likes winning half-sovereigns better than anything else in life, he is in no hurry to return and look after his beautiful betrothed. It was a lucky chance which led Jeanne to think of the billiard-room—perhaps it was instinct.

"Not come back yet!" says Jeanne. "Let us go out into the grounds."

No sooner have they descended from the terrace, and gone down the first green alley of lines, than they come upon a solitary figure, seated on a bench which commands a view of the principal drive. He is smoking a cigarette, and is apparently watching most eagerly.

"It is Hal. With a sudden, vivid crimson mantling over his brown face, he jumps up, and, flinging away his cigarette, comes toward them with an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, Hal!" says Jeanne, "are you composing a poem?"

"How did you come?" says Hal, holding Verona's hand and taking notice of Jeanne. "I've been watching the drive," he says, innocently; then he stops as Verona blushes.

"We've come up the sidewalk under the trees," she explains.

"That's how I missed you then," re-

marks Hal, naively. "How kind of you to come. And where's—"

"The count?" says Jeanne, demurely. "He is in the billiard-room. The princess and I are going to walk around to the south gardens; you may come, if you like."

I am afraid Hal wouldn't have waited for any permission. They go on some little way talking commonplace, the princess very shy, Hal very eager and shy, too. Then gradually Jeanne lags behind, stopping to pick some flowers by the way, and Hal draws a little closer, and says, in a low voice:

"I haven't seen you lately, princess—haven't you been for your usual drive?"

"She looks around timidly, and drops her eyes from his eager, wistful ones. "No," she says, softly.

"Nor by the stream?" says Hal.

"Haf' you been ill?"

"No I am never ill," she answers.

"Have I—have I offended you?" asks Hal.

"Offended me!" she echoes, raising her glorious eyes with a world of wonder and innocent reproach. "Oh, no—no! why should you think so?"

"I didn't know," says Hal, anxiously.

"You—you seemed to avoid me. I feared that I had perhaps said or done something."

"Oh, not how should you?" she interrupts, with unconscious naivete.

"How could he offend her, or do, or any, anything wrong?"

"I have not avoided you! Why should I? But the count—"

Hal turns his head aside, and sets his teeth hard at that hated title.

"The count thinks that I ought not to ride alone, or go out; and—ah! were you much hurt by your fall?" and she looks around at his forehead anxiously.

"Hurt? Not a bit," says Hal; "it did me good!"

"I can see the mark of the cut now," she said, regretfully; "I was so sorry, and—and I would have run to inquire, but—"

"But they wouldn't let you—I understand," says Hal, so savagely that he frightens her, and instantly tries to reassure her by adding: "But there was no occasion; I was all right; a good tumble does me good, as a rule. And my sister, Jeanne, how do you like her?"

"I—love her!" says Verona, with a warm flush; "I have never seen any one like her! so beautiful and gentle-hearted. Oh, I think you are to be envied, and her husband, the great marquis," as they call him, must be a very, very happy man!"

"Vane?" says Hal, looking rather puzzled. "Oh, yes; he is very happy. I dare say; we don't see much of him;

he's a famous painter as well as a marquis, and spends most of his time in his studio. You have not seen him yet—you will directly—"

"Perhaps," says the princess, rather sadly, and looking around for Jeanne; "I must be going now—the count. Jeanne comes up and meets Hal's eager, imploring glance.

"The princess is not going, Jeanne, surely."

"No," says Jeanne, confidently; "the princess and the count will stay to dinner, will you not, your highness?"

Verona starts, and looks up with a sudden flush of pleasure at Jeanne.

"If I may," she says, "I should be so pleased. But," she adds, putting her hand on Jeanne's arm, imploringly; "you must not call me 'princess' or 'your highness.' I do not like it—from you. Would you be so kind as to call me Verona?"

Jeanne takes the tiny hand, and draws her toward her.

"May I? I will, then—sometimes!" And she kisses her.

Hal's feelings, as he witnesses this, are more easily imagined than described; but he conceals them by vigorously picking some flowers, and making a bouquet—the clumsiest that ever was made, probably—hands them to her.

"Will you take them?" he asks.

Verona takes them with a blush as vivid as his own.

"You've got flowers in your own garden a thousand times better than these, Hal tells me," says Jeanne.

"But I would like to have these," says the princess.

And she looks at her rough poey as though it were the most beautiful collection of rare exotics in the world.

They get back to the drawing-room, and there is the count, all smiles and polish, talking to Nugent, and the member of Parliament. He looks up as the three young people enter—how young they all look against his wrinkles—and his keen eyes rest on the princess' face, but he greets Hal as if he were the dearest friend he possessed.

"You and the princess will dine with us to-night, count?" says Jeanne. "The prince never leaves home, or I would include him."

"Most delighted," murmurs the count. "But—"

And he looks at his faultless morning coat.

"Oh, there is plenty of time to make your toilet," says Jeanne. "And will you please beg Senora Titella to accompany you?"

The count bows. It is an artificial stroke of Jeanne's, and throws off suspicion.

"Thanks," he says, "I will return at once, if you are ready, princess."

And with a multitude of bows and with courtly grace, he bears off his beautiful prize.

"What a splendid fellow," says Nugent, "most amusing man I've met for years. Can't be play, too! Lane, I thought you were a good hand at pool, but the count could give you long odds. But isn't he rather odd, eh? I suppose not, though."

"Old!" says Hal, savagely, "he's as old as Methusalem!"

And he goes out, muttering.

Nugent looks after him, and emits a low whistle, but it is apparently lost on Clarence, for he is bending low over Jeanne, and talking earnestly in his rapt, absorbed manner. Nugent looks at his watch.

"We'll better all get into civilized clothing," he says, but as Lane apparently doesn't hear him, he saunters out alone, and goes to his room. It is in the same corridor as Vane's studio, and as he passes, seeing the door ajar, he pushes it open and looks in.

Vane is seated at a table with writing materials, but evidently not writing, for he is leaning back with his hand shading his eyes.

Something about the figure sitting there so solitary, so silent, so despondent, gives Charlie—he is Vane's oldest friend—a sudden chill.

"Asleep, man?" he says, cheerily. Vane starts and looks round.

"No," he says. "Is that you, Charlie? Come in."

"What are you doing—writing?"

"No," says Vane, with a smile, and with an effort at cheerfulness; "no, I was enjoying a think."

"Rather given to that, lately, aren't you, old man?" says Charlie, laying his hand on the broad shoulder.

"How's the work getting on? What not commenced yet? I thought you'd finished it, you have shut yours' up here so much."

"Vane smiles, and stares at the canvas musily.

"No, I'm not in the humor for work, Charlie," he says; "it seems to go against the grain. I don't know why, but I can't work lately."

Charlie takes him by the shoulders, and turns the handsome face to the light.

"Vane, old man," he says, "you are out of sorts. You don't look the thing. What's the matter? Confound it, you ought to be the happiest man in creation. You have got everything a man can want—money, one of the oldest titles, the garter, genius, and the love—the best young creature for a wife! Oh, hang it, old man, what's the matter? Is it one of the old black fits?"

Vane smiles bitterly.

"No," he says, "I haven't had one since—since the day of my marriage."

"No, I should think not, with such a sweet girl as Jeanne by your side!" says Charlie. "Vane," he goes on, with a sudden gravity, "you used to come to me in all your old troubles; not

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that I've half the brain you have, but somehow I used to try and help you. Is there anything wrong now? Can I help you. I'd do anything—but there, you know that!"

Vane paced up and down the room, pulling at his mustache, then he stopped and held out his hand.

"No, Charlie," he says, "you can't do anything for me; no man alive can. Where is Jeanne?" he asks, suddenly.

"Jeanne" I left her in the drawing-room talking to Clarence.

Vane starts slightly—not so slightly but Charlie sees it.

"Good Heaven, Vane!" he says, hotly. "you don't mean to say—"

"What?" demands Vane, with a pale, anxious face.

"That you are fool enough—yes, fool enough—to be jealous of—of anybody."

"Why don't you say of Clarence Lane?" says Vane, with a reckless smile.

"Well, of Clarence, or of anybody else," raves Charlie, energetically. "You can't be so blind—why, anybody can see with half an eye that Jeanne thinks of nobody else but you—is devoted to him, and, besides, I'd stake my life, my honor, on her single-mindedness and absolute truth—"

Vane looks at him sadly.

"You go too far, Charlie," he says, in a low voice. "Defense is not needed when there is no accusation—"

"I beg your pardon, old man," says Nugent, wiping his forehead. "I've taken a liberty, I know, but it's impossible to be in the same house with that wife of yours and not to—well, to love her."

Vane holds out his hand—it is hot and dry.

"I know it," he says. "All excepting Clarence, eh? You see, you can answer for Jeanne, but will you answer for him?"

"For Clarence? He's an ass!" says Charlie, hotly. "Good Heaven, why don't you send him away—a word, will do it?"

"And let the world say I was afraid of him and—my wife?" says Vane, smiling bitterly.

Charlie begins to pace up and down now, and Vane looks against the mantelpiece, watching him absentely. (To be continued.)

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