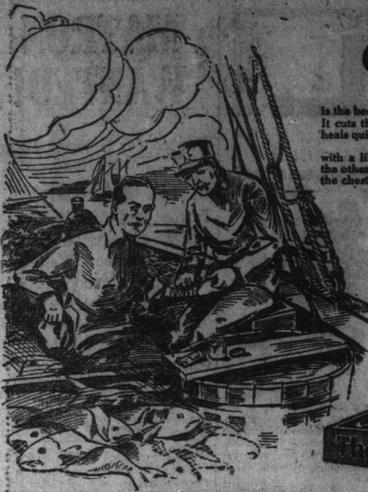


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- "Vaseline" Hair Pomade
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- "Vaseline" Hair Spray

Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER XX. RECEIVED.

Old Mrs. Fleming, Tully, Southall, Willis, any one of them, would know better how to meet this terrible, hard-faced, passionate man than the slight, loving girl who faces him, shrinking and, panting with alarm. Thus they stand and look at each other, the fury blazing in Vane's heart to white heat, rendering him blind to reason or justice—rendering him insensible to love itself.

At last he turns, closes the door, and speaks:

"Jeanne," he says, and how differently the name leaves his lips, that name which he was wont almost to sing, or so it seemed to Jeanne, "Jeanne, you have deceived me."

It is a simple thing to say; said with a smile and a caress, it amounts to nothing, but said as Vernon Vane, Marquis of Ferndale, utters it, it sounds in Jeanne's ears as the accusation against a criminal before a stern, unyielding judge.

She looks at him for a moment questioning, then her eyes droop.

Watching her with a keen agony of fear and hope—the fear lest Lady Lucelle should be right, the hope that Jeanne will meet him with a denial and indignant question—watching her as if his life depended upon the answer her face shall give him, he notes

that sudden droop, and smother's a groan.

"Yes," he says, in a low voice, all the more terrible for its suppressed intensity, "you have deceived me. Are you satisfied?"

Jeanne raises her eyes; her face is very pale, and her lips quivering.

"I—I do not understand. Oh, Vernon, what has happened?" and she clasps her hands in timid entreaty.

"You do not understand?" he repeats. "You are woman enough to know the meaning of a lie—"

Jeanne starts as if he had struck her—as indeed he had, to the heart.

"For all your seeming, child-like innocence, you know how to deceive with the acuteness of your sex. You know the meaning of a lie, and the value of it."

She looks up to speak, to remonstrate, but the words die on her lips, struck dumb by the intense bitterness of his haggard face and flashing eyes.

"Are you satisfied?" he repeats. "You have played your part, you have won your game—are you satisfied?"

Jeanne finds words at last.

"Tell me," she says, and her voice sounds strained and unnatural, "tell me what I have done!"

At this simple prayer, uttered so pathetically, most men's hearts would have melted, most men's anger would have been turned aside, but in the bitterness of his disappointment, in the anguish of his own misery, Vane knows no pity—the Ferndale temper is inexorable.

"I will," he says, "but you know you have sold your soul for the worthless price of a title, you have bartered your honor and your truth for dress, you have lent yourself to deceit with the facility of the most unscrupulous woman of the world—you, the innocent, guileless child I deemed you—to gain your end."

Jeanne's eyes, wide open and bewildered, are raised to his accusing ones.

"Do you wish me to enter into the mean details?" he says, sternly. "Have you forgotten—I do you think I forget what has passed? Do you think that I have lost all remembrance of your feigned surprise and ignorance when that nervous fool blundered out the title of the man you had married?"

Jeanne starts, and puts one hand upon a table which stands near her.

"Do you forget how you humored my whim—as you no doubt deemed it—and allowed me to think that I had carried out that whim successfully? Jeanne, can you look me in the face, and tell me that you did not know that I was other than Vernon Vane, the artist; that you did not know, in marrying me, you would be the Marchioness of Ferndale?"

As she stands, with the subdued lights at the back of her, he cannot see her face distinctly, and as she remains silent, a wild hope rises within him.

"Jeanne!" he says, making a step toward her, and speaking with feverish eagerness, "Jeanne! tell me you did not know it—tell me—"

But he stops suddenly, and the light dies out of his face, for Jeanne lifts her head, and he sees in her eyes that Lady Lucelle is—right.

"You know it?" he says, almost inaudibly.

"Yes," says Jeanne, "but—"

And she looks up eagerly; with a gesture she stops her.

"Spare me!" he says, "spare me and yourself the mockery of some sophistical excuse. What can explain away such deceit as you were guilty of? What can palliate the lie, acted and spoken, which led me to think that you did not know my identity? Fool-fool!" he mutters, pacing to and fro, gnawing at his mustache, and working the fatal letter within the palms of his clenched hand. "Did I not know that there was no such thing for me as a pure, disinterested love? Did I not know it! What curse is it that hangs over me—a curse that, like a two-edged sword, strikes both ways, and tames the deceit I suffer by. Oh, child!" and he turns with outstretched hands toward Jeanne, "do you know what you have done? You have robbed me of my last hope—you have wrecked my life and your own. Your own? Oh, Jeanne, what was there in the hollow bauble of a title and the glittering dress of wealth to tempt you to falsehood and treachery? You were happy until I saw you and tempted you to be false to yourself and me."

"False!" echoes Jeanne, and her voice quivers with anguish, "false!"

"Yes, false!" he says, vehemently; "you were false when you silently pretended to think that I was no other than I am. You were false when you led me to think you other than you were. I thought you loved the unknown, struggling artist, but you loved the marquis."

Jeanne's color comes and goes. Gradually his meaning is dawning upon her.

Hitherto she has stood overwhelmed by the passion of his accusation, scarcely knowing of what and how much she is charged, but slowly she realizes how base and ignoble and mercenary he deems her. Her color rises and falls; her eyes, open to their fullest, stare at him wildly.

"The marquis!" he repeats, passionately, "the marquis that was the magic word that won you; the penniless artist might have wooed in vain! You were cold enough until you knew the value of the prize—you scarcely threw me a word when we met; your smiles were reserved for Clarence Fitzjames until you knew that there was game worthier of your attention. You are all alike, old and young, gentle and

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simple. Heaven gives you fair faces and sweet child-looks, and hearts that are old from your babyhood! Do you wonder that I am bitter? Am I too hard? Look at me! think how great a prize I have lost—I who thought to have got the pure, unselfish love of a heart unstained by one ignoble thought—and consider how cruel the disappointment must be.

"Can you understand? I scarcely think you can. Think then, how you would feel if you had learned that the title you had married for was but a sham—that there was no Marquis of Ferndale, and that the man you had so well feigned to love was simple Vernon Vane! That is within the grasp of your imagination. I doubt not; child as you are, you can understand that I tell you, then, that my disappointment is a thousand times more than yours would be in such a case, for I have lost the quest of a life; at the moment when I conceived that I held it within my grasp. Yes, look upon your handwork, and be satisfied!"

With the violence of a mountain torrent pours out the passionate volume of accusation and reproach; scarcely remembering to whom he is speaking, commencing with his own tortured heart rather than addressing the beautiful girl who stands speechless, watching him with distraught eyes and white face.

Stopped for want of breath, he turns to her:

"Did you ever pause to think upon what a perilous undertaking you had set out? Did you hope that the truth would never reach me, that I should not discover how hollow a joy I had won? Did you ever look forward to this moment, when the mask stripped from that child-face of yours, you would stand with your falsehood discovered, your treachery revealed? Or did you lay the flattering unction to your soul that my foolish passion would blind me to your deceit, and that the trick you had played would be condoned by a passing word and forgotten? You deceived yourself. Yes, you deceived yourself. She whom I loved was Jeanne, the pure-hearted, frank-faced girl whom I found playing with the careless heart of a child in the little fishing village; not the girl who, to gain title and wealth, lent herself to deceit and a lie! The Jeanne whom I loved has gone, vanished forever, and in her place stands the Marchioness of Ferndale, with whom I have no part or lot. Not you were but half wise, but half taught; your woman's instinct of guile and cunning was only half matured, or you would have shrunk from this, Jeanne, and have married that other fool—Clarence Fitzjames—"

Jeanne starts, and finds her voice.

"Marry him!" she says, almost inaudibly.

He stops and fronts her, the light of passion blazing in his eyes.

"Ah," he says, "that touches you. You see I know all. Will you deny that he loved you, that he offered to make you his wife?"

Jeanne looks at him steadily; her face is very pale, but her eyes are flashing.

"No!" she says, not inaudibly now, though not loudly.

"No!" she repeats, and as she does so the Jeanne of the last few moments—yielding, gentle, loving and softened—seems to give place to the old frank, independent girl in whom lies latent if you will—the pride of a lofty race.

It is the old Jeanne that speaks, Jeanne before love came and conquered her, and the passion and pride in that "No!" are as intense and marked as his own.

"Do you not deny it?" he says, maddened more by the very absence of the denial, for he has hoped that at least that part of my Lady Lucelle's letter is false. "You do not deny it, and not one word of this did you tell me. Heaven! what fools you make of me! I who demanded that I had won the love of one utterly ignorant of the meaning of the word. You came to me with his love vows ringing in your ears. Came to me with the placid smile and winning artlessness of a child—Heaven! that deceit should wear so sweet a face!"

(To be continued.)

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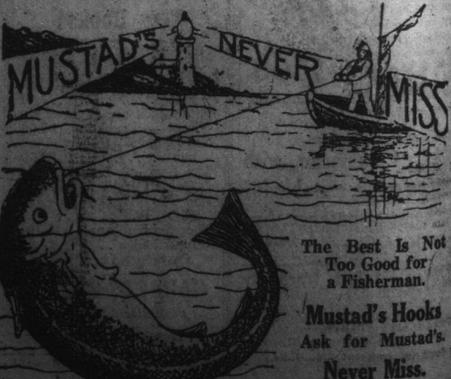
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