



Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER XV.
PREPARING FOR THE CEREMONY.

"I declare I've been crying all night!" says Georgina. "It's very foolish, I know, but I can't help it. I am so sensitive. It's ridiculous, as mamma says, but one can't help being sensitive, can one?" and she appeals to Aunt Jane, who, with Maud and Mrs. Lambton, is busy superintending the mystery of the bride's toilet.

"I'm sure I cried all night, too!" says Maud, with a sigh. "and my eyes must be awfully red. Didn't you cry, Jeanne, dear?" she says, looking up at the kneeling at the feet of the graceful, delicate-looking figure, that looks unaccountably tall in its white garments. Jeanne looks down—her nose is not red, neither is any other part of the face white, excepting her lips, which are rather pale.

"No," she says, with a faint smile. "I have not been crying."
"And be sure you don't, my dear," says Mrs. Lambton; "nothing annoys a man so much as to have his bride wiping her eyes and sobbing so that one can't speak when the clergyman asks her. I'm sure when Lambton and me were married I could have cried my heart out; but I dared not, for he would never have let me hear the last of it. Oh, it is a trying time!" and the good lady sighs.

"I'm rather glad," says Aunt Jane, looking up with her mouth full of pins, "that I've escaped such a terrible calamity, if it's so bad as all that. If you're frightened, Jeanne, it isn't too late, you know."

"I don't think I feel very frightened," she says.

"Jeanne has so much confidence," murmurs Maud, with her head on one side. "I'm sure I should be ready to stick into my boots if I stood in her place."

"Jeanne smiles."
"Vernon isn't so very terrible, either," says Aunt Jane, gravely.
"Oh, no, I don't mean that! But fancy standing up in the middle of the church—and, oh, I'm sure I couldn't do it!"

"Wait until you try," says Aunt Jane. "I've always heard that it is the man who is most nervous."

"Oh, they have a little brandy and water," says practical Mrs. Lambton. Jeanne smiles. By no stretch of imagination can she fancy Vernon Vane being nervous or keeping up his courage with brandy and water.
"I remember," says Georgina, "reading in a novel of a bridegroom who actually fainted and knocked the clergyman down!"
"Jeanne laughs in spite of herself."
"I don't think Mr. Bell need be afraid," she says; "and haven't you quite done? I feel like a wax image being dressed for exhibition at Madam Tussaud's."
"You look like an angel!" exclaims Maud.

"And we are going to chain her to earth," says Aunt Jane. "Now, Jeanne, if you've heard enough compliments, you had better come down and take your glass of brandy and water. Ah, I hear the carriage, and this I do know, although I haven't been married, that a bridegroom doesn't like to be kept waiting."

It has been arranged that, Vernon Vane appearing to have no relations, Hal shall be the best man and bridegroom's attendant, and accordingly he has gone down to Vernon Vane's lodgings, and is this moment regaling himself on cake, and waiting for his principle, who is dressing.

Outside the church door, and in the church itself, a small party of villagers and neighbors are congregated, and the grizzled head and weather-beaten face of old Griffin is seen shining from above a front pew in which he sits, looking in a complete new suit, and arranged almost as woebegone as the curate himself.

Maud and Georgina has spent some hours yesterday in the decoration of the altar with its bouquets of flowers, and there is a sweet perfume of roses and lilies about the quaint little edifice. Eleven o'clock strikes, and the sexton assists Mr. Bell into his surplice, and begins arranging the books.

Five minutes afterward, and the tall figure of the bridegroom enters, followed by Hal in the most fashionable and costly apparel which it has ever been his fortune to don. Notwithstanding his hatred of new clothes, the youth looks rather pleased with himself, and the pew opener, after a stare of admiring awe at the noble-looking bridegroom, casts a smile of keen, affectionate admiration at the boy.

Vernon Vane enters the vestry, and shakes hands with Mr. Bell, then turns to Hal.

"Wait outside a moment for me, Hal, will you?" he says, and, as the boy complies, he closes the double door.

"Have you the license—the special license, isn't it, Vane?" asks Mr. Bell, who is a firm friend and admirer of his successful rival.

"A special license," said Vernon Vane, and he takes a paper and hands it to him.

"Er—er—let me see," he says. "Is there any other Christian name? I like to know beforehand in case I don't catch it at the altar. Oh, I shall see on the license, shall I?" and he opens that document again.

"Don't trouble," says Vernon Vane. "I can hear the carriages. I'll tell you the names—there are an absurd number: Vernon Francis Edsworth Fortescue Vane."

Mr. Bell stares.
"Edsworth," he says confusedly. "That's one of the Ferndale family names, isn't it?"
Vernon Vane nods.
"Never mind," he says. "Here they

are. I will speak distinctly at the altar."

CHAPTER XVI.
THE SECRET OUT.

Mr. Bell was certainly far too nervous to examine the special license, and, indeed, there was no time to do so, for as Vane spoke, they could hear the rattle of the bride's carriage, and the clerk knocked at the vestry door.

Vane followed the curate to the altar, with Hal by his side; and presently there was the rustle of silk and satin, and just giving the finishing touch to the pretty interior of the old self on cake, and waiting for his principle, who is dressing.

Now, there are brides and brides; for instance, there is the tearful bride, whose face assumes for the occasion a swollen and distressed appearance, owing to the quantity of brine which she has expended, and whose frame is shaken by intermittent sobs. Of such would be Maud and Georgina. Then there is the nervous bride, who trembles as if she were being led to execution, and who leans limply upon the arm of the individual who is to give her away, and who is, no doubt, delighted to do so. Then there is the matter-of-fact, strong-minded bride, who advances to the hymnical altar with firm step and composed countenance, and who delivers the responses at the proper time, and in a calm, clear voice which makes even the bridegroom's tones seem faltering and hesitating. Now, Jeanne was like unto none of these. She had not been crying for her eyes were as clearly defined as ever, and the long lashes were anything but swollen rivers; she was pale, but not nervously white; and the little hand that rested on Uncle John's arm was light as a feather. Only a keen observer would have detected the slight quiver of the sweet lips, and the faint little touch of color which ever and again flitted across her face as she moved toward the stalwart figure awaiting her.

Once, and only once, did she raise the long, sweeping lashes, and then it was to glance at the handsome face which was turned toward her with a half-suppressed smile of pride and impatience.

There was cause for such pride on his part, for Jeanne, as she stood in the subdued light of the stained window, with the tattered battle-flags over her head, with her beautiful face set in its framework of soft, antique lace, looked a fitting bride for a prince.

Poor Mr. Bell sighed as he turned over the leaves of his prayerbook, and his eyes were dim; it was rather hard to have to forge the chain which should bind her to another, and his not at any time strong voice sounded woefully weak as he commenced the service which was to make Vane and Jeanne man and wife for better or for worse.

Of course the opening words were the signal for Georgina and Maud to commence crying, which they did in an openly covert way, to the utter ruin of their bouquets, and the still further swelling of their already crimson eyelids.

Mr. Bell read on, scarcely lifting his

eyes from his book; Vane stood straight and stalwart, half turned toward Jeanne; Jeanne herself stood with downcast eyes, the faint flutter of color coming and going upon her face. Vane's responses came promptly in his deep, musical voice, Jeanne's promptly, yet audibly, and presently his grave voice was heard:

"I, Vernon Francis Edsworth Fortescue Vane, take thee, Jeanne Bertram, to be my wedded wife."

At the long list of names, in place of the simple Vernon Vane, every one looked up excepting Jeanne, and there was a slight rustle eloquent of surprise; but Vane's face was calm and composed, and Jeanne's turn came to make the usual assertion. Only for a moment did she pause as he held out his hand, and in that moment she looked up at him, a look which he never lifted his eyes, and a glance at once appealing and confiding; a glance which he could not understand then, but which, in the momentous after-time, he credited with a mistaken significance.

She did not look up again, not even when, with the usual blundering, he slipped the wedding ring on the wrong finger.

It was a trifling mistake, and not an uncommon one, but Mrs. Lambton shuddered, and Maud and Georgina sobbed.

With a little blush Jeanne held out her hand, and Vane transferred the ring to the right finger.

The little accident took only a moment or so in the transaction, but it upset Mr. Bell, and the rest of the service was almost inaudible.

Then, with her hand on her husband's arm, Jeanne retraced her steps to the vestry. Vestries, as a rule, are never large enough for the swinging of a cat, without imminent peril to that domestic animal, and Bell, when he came in, could scarcely make his way to the table for the little crowd of satin and lace.

But when he did, he held out his hand timidly to Jeanne, and grasped hers.
"I—hope you'll be happy, Jeanne," he stammered, and with an amount of daring which astonished him for the remainder of his life, he raised her hand and kissed it.

Jeanne blushed, but crimsoned as Vane, putting his arm around her, drew her toward him, and kissed her.

"This, of course, was the signal for the rest of them, and Jeanne's bouquet and lace were considerably crushed.

"It's rather nice being married—for the bride," said Hal, in a stage whisper.

"Will you sign the register?" he said.

Vane made his way up to the table and signed, and Jeanne followed. The rest crowded forward also.

"I say, Vane," said Hal, "what a lot of names you've got. Liberal kind of people your godfathers and godmothers must have been."

"Vane smiled.
"Some of them are purely ornamental, Hal," he said. "Are we ready?"

There was a general move toward the door. Jeanne, on Vernon's arm, leading the way.
Then the group of children, who had been impatiently waiting, threw down a shower of flowers, and upon these Jeanne, with a sudden tremulous smile, stepped into the carriage. The other carriages followed close after, and in a few minutes, Hal, who was full of his novel dignity, had arranged the guests around the table, and the wedding breakfast commenced.

Georgina and Maud had dried their tears by this time, and were radiant with smiles as they fussed about Jeanne and arranged her veil. Uncle John and Mr. Lambton looking on approvingly. The latter gentleman was in great form that morning, and looked, in his new blue coat and brass buttons, as if he had never seen London in his life.

It was quite a treat to see him bustling about the room, to the imminent danger of the elaborately-laid tablecloth, and making his old-English-gentleman-laugh ring among the glasses. Bustling about, he made his way up to Vane, and in bluff and properly-condescending tones, exclaimed, as he shook him by the hand:

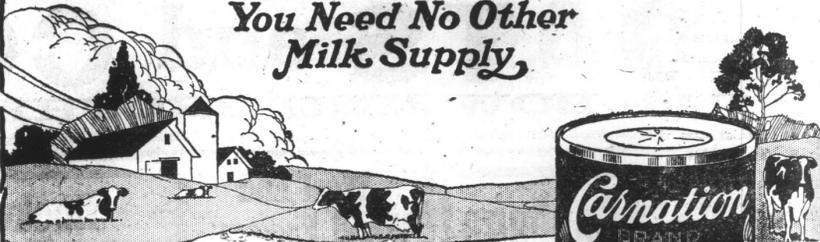
"By Jove, sir, you're a lucky dog! you ought to be a happy man! You've got a treasure, sir, a perfect treasure! And I say, look here," he added, drawing Vane a little aside by a buttonhole, but speaking so that every one in the room could hear, "if you ever want a friend, don't forget the old squire. I dare say I can find room for a picture or two—half a dozen of 'em—up at the Park. And good prices for 'em, too. Dang it, I like to encourage 'art! and give a 'elping 'and to strugglin' gentles. When you want a friend, don't forget me, Mr. Vane; I can't say more, eh, can I?"

"No, indeed," said Vane, shaking hands; "and I am very much obliged to you."
"And as for Jeanne—Mrs. Vane, eh?" he corrects himself, with a chuckle, and a sly dig at the side of Vane's frock coat. "why, I look upon her as one of my own darters, always have, by George. I wish you joy," and with a benevolent old-English-gentleman chuckle, Mr. Lambton sank into his chair, delighted with himself, and in consequence, everybody else.

"Mark my words," whispers Hal to Vane, "the old boy is going to make a speech! I can see it in his face."
(To be continued.)

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