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Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER VI. THE SOUL OF THE PIANO.

"She takes the pencil sketch from the boy's hands, and looks at Vernon Vanne. "Is he getting on—does he learn?" Vernon Vanne nods. "Yes." Jeanne's eyes soften. "How kind of you to take so much trouble with him—you, whose time is so valuable!" "I can well spare the time," he says, quietly.

Then he rises and wipes his brushes; Hal jumps to his feet to assist, and then they turn from the easel. "One forgets that it is winter on a day like this, until the evening comes," says Vernon Vanne, looking back at the clear sunset sky. "Are you well wrapped up, Hal?"

Hal laughs. "Yes, sir; I've got my gaiters on. Cold can't get through that. It's better than a great-coat, though aunt says I look like the London oostermongers, or one of the fishermen here at the Cliff."

Vernon Vanne rests his hand on the boy's shoulder with a smile, and Hal rattles on from one subject to another; Jeanne walks in silence by their side, occasionally glancing from the hand, some face of the man to the frank face of the boy.

As they near the village one or two persons pass them, greet Jeanne, and touch their hats to the artist. Mr. Vernon Vanne has been a fortnight in Newton Regis, and is still an unsolved enigma. He has made one friend only, and that is the boy by his side; all attempts at making his acquaintance have been met by a grave courtesy much more effectual than the most bizarre rudeness.

He is to be seen, almost at all hours of the day, either upon the cliff or in the woods, sometimes sitting on a felled tree or bowlder, sketching, or striding along with his pipe in his mouth, and apparently lost in thought.

Hal is the only one who has been able to approach him, and within the boy's heart has sprung up that worshipping kind of love which only a boy's heart is capable of.

Newton Regis has, of course, occupied itself with conjectures and surmises, but they have all resolved themselves into this: That the stranger who has come among them is an artist, and means to live to himself.

"That he is poor is also evident. He lives, as Mrs. Brown says, with uplifted hand, like a monk; and many a plowman has seen him breaking a crust of bread for his luncheon, eating it as he walked up and down before the small sketching-easel to keep himself warm.

The children knew most of him, for he rarely passed a group of them in his walks but he would stop and exchange a word with them, always striding on, however, if any grown-up person came in sight.

Jeanne, as she walks by his side, ponders over all this, as she has pondered for many an hour during the last fortnight, until, though she said, they have met so few times, she seems almost to know him.

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ready to have known him for some time past. Presently they turn into the village street, and Hal catching Vernon Vanne's arm, exclaims: "You will come in to-night, sir, won't you? Jeanne," he says, eagerly looking across at her—"Jeanne! try and persuade Mr. Vanne to come in to tea with us. He always refuses me—now you try."

Jeanne looks up. "Will you come in with us?" she says, earnestly. He hesitates. "Do!" pleads Hal. Jeanne's face flushes slightly. "You should not worry Mr. Vanne too much, Hal; perhaps he dislikes being asked."

"I dislike refusing," he says. "I will come, and thank you." Hal casts a glance of delight at Jeanne, but Jeanne does not respond. Just as Hal opens the gate, a mail phaeton comes rattling down the street.

Jeanne looks around in time to see the Honorable Fitzjames driving, and he, seeing her, whips off his hat; and evidently tries to pull up the spirited bays; but before he can do so Jeanne has followed and closed the gate.

Vernon Vanne's quiet eyes note the frown of surprise and annoyance which darkens Mr. Fitzjames' face, and the artist looks at Jeanne; but her face betrays nothing as she opens the glass door in the hall and holds it for him to enter.

"Welcome to the Gate House, Mr. Vanne!" said Hal, delightedly. Jeanne utters no welcome, but ushers him into the drawing-room, all radiant with the fire.

Hal sniffs the air critically. "You must be prepared for some strange smells, sir," he says. "You know Uncle John goes in for chemistry; it's nothing when you're used to it, but a stranger might think he had strayed into a chemist's shop."

"I don't notice it," said Vernon Vanne. "Then uncle's got his double door shut. He has been better lately. Oh, Mr. Vanne, mind you don't let him talk to you on electricity and anything of that kind—Uncle John will talk all night else."

Vernon Vanne smiled, and the next moment Uncle John entered. "Glad to see you, sir; glad to see you," he said, shaking the strong hand which clasped his thin, white one. "You've made the boy happy at last."

"Quite happy," said Aunt Jane. "I am glad to have an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness to him, Mr. Vanne. My brother has called at the cottage twice, but you were out."

"And very rudely neglected to repay the visit until now," said the artist, with his grave smile.

"And now you have broken the ice you must come often—come just when you like. We are very homely people, but there shall be an extra knife and fork and cup of tea; the latter you'll be glad of how, I dare say. You must find it very cold sketching in the open air. Hal, go and take off that horrible thing, and tell Jeanne tea is ready," she adds, as the maid brought in the old-fashioned tea tray, with its old-fashioned service.

Then a gleaming copper tea-kettle was placed upon the hob, where it commenced to sing; Aunt Jane insisted upon her guest taking an easy-chair by the fire, and commenced to pour out the tea.

Then the door opened, and Jeanne entered. She still wore the plain blue serge, but looked thinner and stiffer without her jacket.

Vernon Vanne had not seen her without her hat, and as she came into the firelight, and the soft, silken hair, bound in its light curls, turned golden, the artist's eyes lit up with that sympathy with the beautiful which is the artist's chief possession.

With light, graceful steps she came across the room, knelt before the fire, and began to toast some slices of bread, which Aunt Jane had already cut.

"Let me help you," said Vernon Vanne, bending down. Jeanne smiled and shook her head. "I am afraid you are not skilled in the art of making toast, Mr. Vanne; Jeanne ought to be by this time; she has made it for her uncle since she was old enough to hold the toasting-fork. Of course, it could be made in the kitchen, but my brother would think the toast unsteady unless Jeanne made it."

"I like to see her do one useful thing a day," chuckled Uncle John, whereat they all laughed heartily. "That's one for you, Jeanne," said Hal, already through a slice of bread and butter. Jeanne looked up with a smile. "There goes my character for industry. Shall I make you some toast?" "If you will let me make you some in return."

Jeanne shook her head and sprang upright. "Don't they say that bakers never eat a bun? I can't eat toast!" There was a low chair beside the old gentleman's, which was evidently Jeanne's accustomed seat. She took it, and, in the artist's eye, completed the picture.

It was such a picture as he, who had been through so many phases of life, in silence he looked at the fire, with his teacup in hand and the dreamy look upon his face. Jeanne, opposite, watched him, while she listened to Hal chatting to his aunt—watched him, and saw the set gravity of his face slowly soften and relax, and suddenly, as he looked up, her eyes, full of her earnest, almost wistful regard, met his, and though they were lowered immediately, a strange, undefined feeling of shyness stole over her. It was only for a moment, and he broke the spell—if spell there was—by rising and walking across for her cup.

As she gave it to him his hand touched hers, and once again the sudden thrill, as of some new-born feeling, runs through her, and this time she looked up at him with a self-puzzled and almost appealing gaze, as if she would ask him what it meant.

"Jeanne!" cried Hal with his head on one side, "that's the wind through the chestnut, just in the right quarter for a sail. Hurrah for the Nancy Bell to-morrow!"

"Poor old boat," says Jeanne. "I went down to look at her yesterday, and she looked so dejected and forlorn; she'll hear the breeze to-night and rattle her ropes for joy."

"Listen to the girl!" exclaims Aunt Jane to Vanne, laughing, with a touch of annoyance; "would you not think that she was a fisher girl to hear her talk? I wish she could tumble to pieces."

"She won't do that, aunt, for many a year," says Hal, with deep satisfaction. "You haven't seen her yet, Mr. Vanne; we haven't had a run since you came to Newton Regis. It belonged to a fisherman, who got the rheumatism too bad to go in her, so Jeanne and I bought her. You must see her. Oh—she broke off, as a sudden happy thought seized him, "would you care to come for a sail to-morrow? It is a day like this it will be glorious—won't it, Jeanne? so come, Mr. Vanne."

Vane looked across at Jeanne. "I might be in the way," he said. "There's plenty of room, if you would care to come," says Jeanne. "I should not be surprised if Mr. Vanne is too sensible to care for sailing out in the bay in winter."

"Winter! To-day is spring," says Jeanne, quietly. "You think we are mad to allow these young people to risk a watery grave, eh?" said Uncle John.

"Why, Uncle John!" exclaimed Hal, "when you know Captain Sparks, at the fort, said he'd sooner trust Jeanne with the yawl than the best man in the Cliffs."

"You see," said Aunt Jane, "they fight in couples, and overcome." "We are quite safe," said Jeanne, quietly.

"Come!" said Hal. Vane glanced at Jeanne again. "Thank you," he said; "I shall be very glad."

"We'll teach you how to bring her over the bar," said Hal, buoyantly. "Why shouldn't you have a boat of your own?" he went on; "it's the best fun in the world, and it wouldn't cost much—fifteen pounds wouldn't be much."

Vane looked grave. "But there!" said Hal, "you can have the Nancy Bell when ever you like." "What does your partner say to that?" said Vane, with a smile. (To be continued.)

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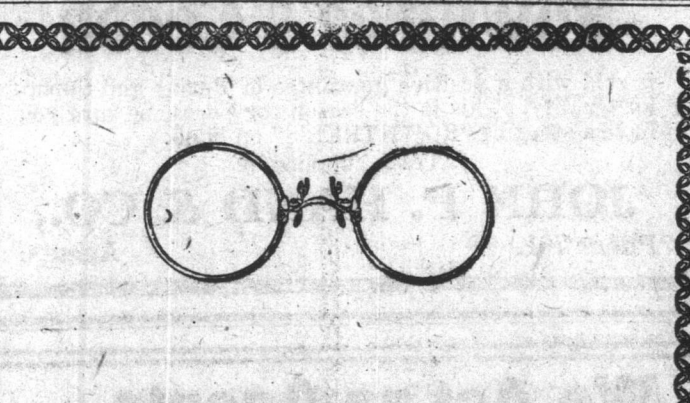
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The children vacated their nurseries in favour of the Royal children, and went to a farm, where they had very cramped quarters. The change was deeply resented by the author's second brother, who refused to be placated.

So annoyed was he that when he and his sisters and brother, all dressed in kilts, were presented to her Majesty, his conduct was alarming.

"And this, your Majesty, is my second boy. Make your bow, dear," said my mother; but my brother, his heart still hot within him at being expelled from his nursery, instead of bowing, stood on his head in his kilt, and remained like that, an accomplishment of which he was very proud. The Queen was very angry, but when the boy was brought back the next day to make his apologies, he stood on his head again.

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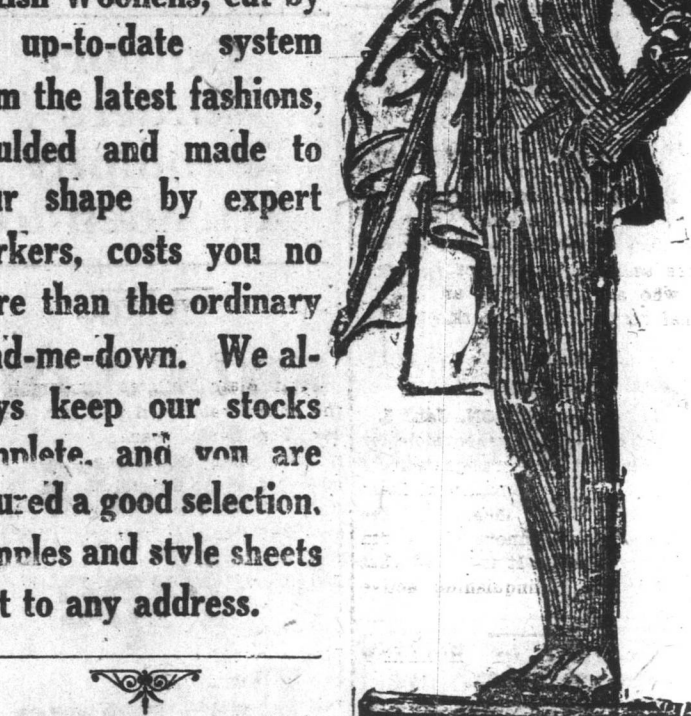
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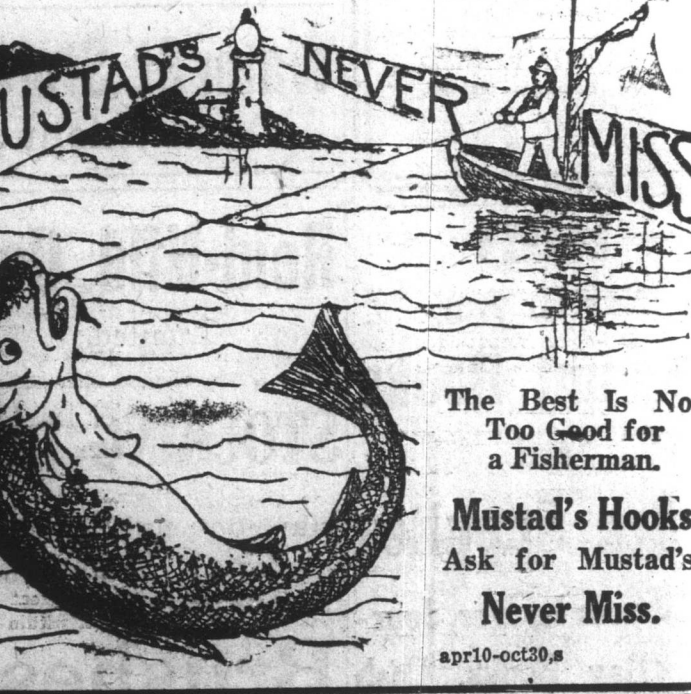
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