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Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER V.
ON THE ICE.

"Especially when one is an honorable," says Hal, with a grin. Jeanne laughs shortly.

"I'd forgotten the honorable. Don't be ruder to him than you can help, Hal."

"All right, I won't," he responds, candidly. "But, Jeanne, you don't expect me to be waiting attendance on the Lambtons all the afternoon?"

"I expect you to be a good, polite boy," says Jeanne, with fearful solicitude, "and I'm afraid I'm expecting too much."

"I'm afraid you are," he assents, candidly. "But no, Jeanne, I will put on my company manners; you shall see how I can behave—oh you just shh! I'll take Maud's hand, if you like, and drag her about, and teach Georgina to cut eights."

"Hal!" cries Jeanne, with well-founded apprehension, "no tricks, if you throw them down, you might—"

"Break their heads! No fear, Jeanne—they're too thick. Hush! here they are."

And as they step out of the park onto the edge of the lake Hal's face assumes an unwonted solemnity, and he raises his cap.

"Here you are at last!" exclaims Maud Lambton, skating up to them rather unsteadily; "we thought you were never coming. How do you do, Hal? I'll call one of the servants to put on your skates, Jeanne."

"Hal will do it, thanks!" says Jeanne, and seats herself on a chair. At a little distance is a group of men and women fitting to and fro with the aimlessness which pertains to the exercise. Jeanne recognizes Georgina moving toward her gingerly, the doctor's wife striking out boldly, and one or two others of the Newton Regis notabilities skimming about. On the edge of the lake stands Mrs. Lambton, clad in multitudinous furs, and looking exceedingly chilly and uncomfortable, and behind her, like a great pillar, Mr. Lambton, the great pillar himself, balancing on his skates, and trying to look as if he enjoyed it.

While Hal is fastening the last strap of the skates, a gentleman glides out from the group. He is neither tall nor short, neither handsome nor plain, is dressed with the utmost care, and looks perfectly satisfied with himself. All this Jeanne takes in at a glance, as he skims toward her; then, with a little affected start of surprise, Maud exclaims:

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Fitzjames? You quite frightened me!"

He smiles a well-satisfied smile. "Very sorry," he says, in the laudatory tone of his class. "Can I be of any assistance?" and he scans Jeanne's face fleetly.

"This is Miss Bertram, whom we had been expecting," said Maud. "Isn't it wicked of her to be so late?"

"Better late than never," is Mr. Fitzjames' original remark. "Got your skates on, Miss Bertram?"

"Yes, thanks!" says Jeanne, and Mr. Fitzjames' hand drops to his side. "I will go and speak to Mrs. Lambton," and off she goes like an arrow.

"Dear Jeanne!" murmurs Maud, looking after her with a smile of pity on her rapid face. "Such a strange girl, Mr. Fitzjames—so very peculiar, and yet such a dear creature. You mustn't mind her."

"No, of course not," draws the Honorable Mr. Fitzjames. "Skates well, by Jove!"

"Oh, yes," says Miss Maud, rather sharply. "Jeanne can skate very well. You know mamma—it is really too bad—call her a tomboy!"

"Really," draws Mr. Fitzjames, and he stares through his glass at the graceful figure skimming along the ice.

"Got a gimlet?" breaks in Hal, already forgetting his manners in his eagerness to be on the ice.

The Honorable Mr. Fitzjames looks down on the boy struggling with his skates, and deigns no reply, but giving his hand to the eldest Miss Lambton, moves on.

Jeanne meanwhile makes her way to Mrs. Lambton, shivering on the bank, and shakes hands with that patient and suffering hostess.

"Won't you come on, Mrs. Lambton?" she asks.

"Not for worlds, my dear!" answers that lady, with a shudder. "I can't bear the ice; I should fall and break my neck. Besides, I'm all of a tremble lest it should give way."

Jeanne laughs. "Not much fear of that."

"Well, go on and enjoy yourself," says the poor lady, as if she were leading Jeanne perforce for execution.

"Yes, go on and enjoy yourself, Miss Jeanne!" echoes Mr. Lambton, rubbing his hands. "You're not afraid of a tumble, I can see. 'Ow your huncle and aunt!"

Mr. Lambton is a little man, very round, and rather inclined to fatness. His one great ambition is to figure as a country squire, and accordingly he dresses for the part, blue coat, Melton cords, gaiters, all complete. But alas, the cockney accent in his speech, the cockney shrewdness in his face, betrays him, and he is as unlike an old English squire as the lion in the den of the Zoological Gardens is unlike the monarch of the forest.

"Go and enjoy yourself, Miss Jeanne," he repeats, waving a hunting whip, without which he never stirs out of doors; "and when you're tired, come on to the park. Go on, my dear."

Thus absolved, Jeanne skates off, and files down the lake. Jeanne can skate, swim, ride, sail the Nancy Bell, and walk to an extent that would put to shame many an able-bodied man; and as she skates along at full speed, graceful as a swan floating with the tide, all eyes follow her, notably the eyes of the Honorable Mr. Fitzjames through his eyeglasses.

For a time Jeanne is left to herself, but presently she finds a companion. It is none other than the Honorable Fitzjames.

One cannot account for antipathies, and of a surety Jeanne has no reasonable excuse for entertaining an antipathy to the Honorable Mr. Fitzjames; but her antipathy is there, and when she finds him close to her side, she tries to wheel off. But Mr. Fitzjames can skate, and keeps up beside her.

"Will you take my hand, Miss Bertram?" he says, with very much less than his usual drawl.

Jeanne cannot very well refuse, and, in sight of the Lambtons, he holds her small hands crosswise, and states off with her.

Neither Maud nor Georgina had bargained for this, and for a moment they stand looking after the flying pair rather ruefully.

"How short Jeanne wears her skirts; really, she is something more than a child," mutters Maud.

"Old enough to know how to flirt," responds Georgina, with a compression of the lips which instantly disappears as the mild voice of the curate at her elbow, and she is all smiles.

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Bell. We were quite in despair. Isn't the ice in beautiful condition?"

"Very nice indeed," answers Mr. Bell, beaming around benevolently. "I must put on my skates at once."

"I'll help you, sir," says Hal, who has skated up, and is not by any means a selfish boy.

"Thank you, Hal, thank you," bleats the tutor. "You're here then, and where—where is your sister?"

"Oh, Jeanne," says the incorrigible boy, aloud; "Jeanne's gone off down the lake with the swell."

Mr. Bell looks up anxiously, and his face pales.

"Ah, yes," he says. "I'll go and ask her to show me that figure she was cutting last winter. Thank you, Hal, thank you." And he prepares to start off, quite forgetful of the two Miss Lambtons, but Maud is too quick for him.

"Would you mind giving me a hand on to the snow, Mr. Bell?"

"Not at all," responds the amiable curate, and he takes her in tow, but his eyes are turned wistfully to the other end of the lake, from which the two figures are coming slowly and tackingly. Both are talking, apparently with earnestness, and it looks as if Jeanne was flirting, but she is not. This is what she is saying:

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