

## PROUD PEARL'S CAPRICE.

I  
IN THE BALL-ROOM.

The blaze of countless wax-lights, the scented air of sweet flowers and their rival perfumes, the hum of many voices, the fluttering of gauze and silks, the gliding of hundreds of feet, some shod in lacquer and others in daintiest satin; the sparkle of innumerable gems, the more bewildering sparkling of human eyes, the important whispers of sweet lips, the laughter of light hearts—perhaps the heaviest ones laugh the loudest, who can tell?—and above all this is the moving spirit of the giddily-gay scene—music!—Strauss' dance music, bewildering strains, played with so wonderful a power that they seem to force even the most lethargic of men and the most affected of women on to their feet, eager to join the whirling, festive throng.

The ball is given by Madame la Comtesse de Monteferrata, and celebrates the twenty-first birthday of Victor, her only son, the pride and joy of his widowed mother. Madame is an Englishwoman who has grand relations and great personal wealth. In her young, enthusiastic girlhood she married a noble Spaniard, moved by the eloquence of his melting eyes, his graceful dancing, and above all, by that charming fashion he had of serenading her before the windows of the British embassy in Madrid. Oh! those wonderful moonlit nights when she leaned from her balcony and rewarded him with a rose she had worn, and which he pressed so ardently to his lips. But all that happened many years ago; it would have been forgotten now, but those are just the episodes of life that women do not forget. It is over a score of years since the "noble senor" has been gathered to his ancestors, but Mme. la Comtesse has by no means forgotten his dark eyes and bright smile even now. After her husband's death the countess returned to England to live among her own people, and devoted her days and all her thoughts to her two children. Victor—fair-haired, blue-eyed—is essentially an English-looking lad, the very son of his mother; while Inez seems the gentle counterpart of the handsome dark senor, her father.

"What a charming assembly you have here to-night, Mme. la Comtesse! It gladdens even the eyes of an old soldier, who goes to-morrow to look on very different scenes." So says, with a profound bow of greeting, a venerable-looking Frenchman, one every inch a soldier from his keen black eyes and heavy white moustache down to the extra polish on his square-toed boots.

"Are things really looking so serious with you, general?" asks the countess with sympathy.

"Serious, madame? Heavens! but we shall have war—absolute hand-to-hand war, and they shall learn to tremble in Berlin when they know us better. We will teach them. Ah! there goes my noble young friend Victor. Would he were in my regiment. Of such stuff are heroes made."

"Pray, general, do not let him hear you."

"Not for worlds, madame, if it should cause you a moment's anxiety."

"Young men are so enterprising, so enthusiastic," says the fond mother; "they are always eager to rush into danger, and any novelty attracts them. I should not like Victor to be led away by wild emulation in this cause, which to me, I must confess the fact, appears a veritable chimera."

"On that point we will not argue, madame, and as to Monsieur Victor, the mother's fears are surely uncalled for," says the general, dryly. "The young man seems far too much engrossed at present to give heed to the remarks of any outsider. Well, I don't wonder! his companion is very lovely. Who is she?"

"Oh! a little nobody—my daughter's companion. An orphan we have partly adopted; I knew her poor mother well. She is rather pretty, as you say; and dear Victor is so considerate, and thinks it is his duty to dance with all, as far as possible. Remember he is host to-night!"

"And a host in himself, Lady Monteferrata," says an influential Englishman, coming up at the moment; on which these three immediately plunge into the great war question again, which at this time is beginning to agitate Europe, and threatens soon to convulse the Continent.

Meanwhile Victor and "the little nobody" have a subject of more vital import to themselves to discuss than general questions concerning empires and dynasties.

"Come into the conservatory, Pearl, I must talk to you away from this maddening, noisy crowd," and as he speaks Victor draws her little hand close within his arm. She leaves it passively, and walks on silently by his side, through a long, dimly-lighted corridor, which leads to the furthest entrance of the great glass-house.

II.

IN THE CONSERVATORY.

The conservatory is very large—it is built along one entire side of the house. It contains magnificent plants of tropical growth. Huge palms and graceful ferns form a verdant and shading screen. Entering at the last door, Victor feels secure from the prying eyes of visitors. He places Pearl in a low rustic seat, and stands before her in silent contemplation.

"I thought you wished to talk to me, Monsieur le Comte!" she says presently, and as she speaks she lifts her clear gray eyes steadily to his.

"Has it ever happened that I do not want to talk to you? Oh! why have you so utterly withdrawn yourself from me of late, Pearl? I scarcely ever see you at all, and never alone. You avoid me as though you hate me—you, Pearl—who are my very life! How I have longed, hoped, prayed, for to-night! I could scarcely await its coming. But I thank God I have had my reward. I have held you in my arms, and we have danced together; you, the loveliest of women, and I, the happiest, the very happiest, of men." He pauses for a moment. She is no longer looking up at him, and sits motionless.

He catches at her hand and presses it fervently; she meets his eyes again, and a faint smile comes to her lips. In truth, she is a very lovely woman. Her hair is of that wonderful chestnut colour in the waves of which golden light seems to play at hide-and-seek; her clear gray eyes are shadowed by dark lashes, the firm chin is cleft by a delicious dimple, and it was for the tinting of her wondrous skin that her romantic mother called her "Pearl."

"Dearest," says Victor, with renewed tenderness, "do my eyes betray me? does my voice move you? does my heart speak to yours of its passionate adoration? Pearl—you pearl beyond price, I have done your bidding, I have waited in silence for a whole year! To-day I have attained my majority. I am my own master, I know no will but my own, and I get possession of a fortune that even you might deign to accept. And all this—will—fortune—absolute command of myself, and all that ever may be mine, I lay at your feet. Will you bless me? Pearl, will you be my wife?" As he speaks his passion overpowers him. He says no further words, but throws himself a suppliant upon the ground at her feet.

She is strangely quiet, and hesitates a long minute before she answers him. Of all her charms perhaps the greatest is Pearl's voice. In its low musical tones she now speaks to her lover, and he hears her to the end; but as he listens he is thrilled by a measureless pain. He himself scarcely knows which emotion is keenest.

"Monsieur le Comte," she says, "believe me, I value truly the great honour you are doing me, and more still the true love, which, as you have now proved, lives in your heart for me. I have learned it well ere this. You have indeed bravely kept your word. For a whole long year you have been silent on this subject, on which just twelve months ago you first spoke to me. And now you come to repeat your question, and not having changed your mind, expect an answer. You are rich, handsome, noble. You can hold up your head with the highest in the land, and you come to me who have nothing—am nobody—a poor dependent, living on your mother's charity, befriended by your gentle sister—you come to me and ask me to be your wife! Oh! if only you were poor! If we might work and live together! If you were an artist like my poor dead father, who struggled so hard—and to whom a wife was a right hand—a help and a blessing!—how I could glory in helping you, in watching you rise, as rise you surely would, aye, and assert yourself, your own true noble self, among men. I am very proud, Victor! Is that a fault? Think how proud I should be of you and of your success! Now you have no need to work, no desire to distinguish yourself. Your father's title and your mother's wealth make you an object of admiration and envy to your little world. Such a little world after all! Your whole life has been one of indulgence; flattery has surrounded you. There has never been need for you to lift your little finger, or endeavour to be useful to yourself or others. I like you much, Victor, but I can never marry you. I am no fitting wife for the Comte de Monteferrata. I must look up to my life's lord with veneration, and he must have won something for himself and by his own merits—something no money can buy. Then I could sit at his feet in absolute content, admire, worship and obey my hero!" She rises, and with gentle movement withdraws the hem of her dress, on which he is kneeling. He has scarcely realized all she has said, but he feels she is going, going from him, who, alas! has no laurel crown to lay at the feet of this proud, ambitious, lovely, lovable woman. He also starts up now and seizes her arms almost roughly.

"You mean to leave me, Pearl—is this to be our farewell?"

"It is best to part at once, as it must be for all time. I cannot marry the Comte de Monteferrata."

"Because to his mother and father alone he owes his position?" he cries.

"You have said it!" she answers quietly.

"There is no other shadow dividing us? There is not graven in that deep heart of yours the picture, the thought even, of any other man?"

"Great heaven, no!"

"If I—for you—unaided—alone—can win honour and renown—prove myself a man among men, fight my way upward if I can—thus win distinction for you, will you deem me worthy? Will you then be my wife?"

"I will."

"You promise faithfully, on your honour?"

"I swear it," she pauses for a moment, then flings her arms about his neck and looks into his eyes. "I swear it, Victor, by the love that in my heart of hearts I gave to you, even before you asked it." And she lifts

her head and seals her bond with a kiss upon his lips.

III.

IN THE COUNTESS' BOUDOIR.

There is terrible trouble and confusion in the house of Madame la Comtesse the morning after the ball. Victor has gone. He has fled from his home in the early dawn and has left only a few lines addressed to his mother. The note runs thus: "Mother, forgive me. I dared not speak to you before I left, for you would have bid me stay. Pray do not seek me; it is my earnest wish not to be found, and I shall take every precaution against discovery. My resolve is to quit the life of luxury and idleness I have hitherto led. I feel that my better self is getting ignobly lost—I must work—must learn to assert myself. Thus and thus only can I honour the woman who has promised (when such success is achieved) to be my wife. I have long loved Pearl Turquand, and all my hopes of happiness centre in her. When I am gone, dear mother, love her for me, this I pray of both you and of Inez—dear gentle sister Inez. You have both reason to be proud of my Pearl. For she will give you cause to be proud of your son, and it is she who has raised the spirit of emulation within me, and I mean to prove myself worthy of the love of the three best women in the world, whom I leave under this roof to-night."

Roused to unknown fury by the passion of motherly love and despair, by wild anger against Pearl, and wilder fears for her first-born, Madame la Comtesse summons "Miss Turquand." "You have lived with my daughter and been her constant companion, Pearl," says the countess, striving hard to speak calmly, considerately. "I believe, I hope I have never failed in my duty toward an honoured guest. Is that so?"

Gravely sweet Pearl bows her head. Her heart is heavy within her, and her cheeks, her very lips, are pale; but her voice does not tremble as she replies:

"No lady could have treated a trusted friend with more uniform courtesy and kindness, madame, than you have invariably shown to me. Believe me, I am deeply grateful."

Her humble tone, her downcast looks, exasperate the countess, and arouse a feeling of burning anger in her maternal bosom. Her usual pale face flushes hotly as she cries: "And do you dare to speak of me of trust and gratitude, wretched, miserable girl—you, who have broken my heart? You, who have stolen my beautiful boy from me? You, who have crept with your sly looks and your sly words into his lower nature and made yourself mistress there! That is the empire you have obtained! Truly a cause for pride! Do not dare to answer me! I thought I could bring myself to speak quietly to you—to you. But nature will assert herself—the mother's nature—and you shall be punished. I will punish you, and you shall suffer—if you can suffer. To think that I, his most unhappy mother, should stand here to be defied by you—you pale-faced girl—by you, who have robbed me of my son, my joy, my pride. Where has he gone? Where have you bid him go? You know his secret—he has trusted it to you, for you have driven him away, while I, his mother, am left desolate, in utter ignorance of what has become of my son. Oh, it is hard—too hard."

"Indeed, Madame, I know nothing, truly nothing. Your son has honoured me too much. He sought to make me his wife, and I, intensely proud of him, for him, besought him to distinguish himself, to win a name to—"

"Enough! cruel, cruel girl. Perhaps you cannot realize the awful thing you have done. You have ruined my peace of mind; you have robbed me of my joy, my hope and pride, for you have sent him to his death!"

"God forbid!" cried the girl, and a gleam of terror dilated her eyes.

"Pearl, you must have some pity, some feeling for me. Oh! tell me where he has gone! Let me go after him, kneel to him, pray him to come back, even as I now implore you; I implore you! If you have given him your promise to keep his intentions secret, break that promise, break it for his mother's sake. Pearl, let us go together to pray him come back." Her haughty spirit was quelled, and the wretched mother, forgetful of all but her love and her fears for her boy, actually knelt a suppliant at the feet of trembling Pearl.

"I give you my true word I know nothing, absolutely nothing, of your son's movements," says Pearl in utter consternation. "We parted last night without his saying one word to me beyond his expressed intention of earning distinction for himself. He vowed he would win a name apart from his title, and prove his manhood among men. These were his words! How he has gone, or where, I cannot tell you, for I do not know."

"Then you defy me and refuse me; is that so?" cried the countess fiercely.

"Indeed, madame, I do neither."

"Shall I tell you where you have driven him? He had been talking to you during that lengthened absence from the ball-room. He was pale and flurried on his return. I saw it. Ah, me, how little I guessed the truth! Then he entered into an animated discussion with my old friend the general, who left immediately after. Victor conveyed to me the general's parting words, and told me that the valiant old soldier intended starting for Paris at daybreak. Thither, no doubt, in some ignoble disguise, Victor has followed also."

"Ignoble? impossible," says Pearl, raising her head for the first time during this painful interview. "Do you really believe this, madame?"

"I am convinced of it," says the countess, "and this is your doing. Now, I think it will scarcely be necessary for me to point out to you, after what has occurred, that my roof can shelter you no longer. Pearl Turquand, I hope, I pray, I shall never have to look upon your face again."

"I will leave you this day, madame."

"Yes, go now at once, it is the least you can do."

Pearl makes an attempt to touch the countess's hand, which is hastily withdrawn. Then poor Pearl, with bent head and tear-filled eyes, makes her way to the door. On the threshold Inez meets her.

"You will not leave me, Pearl? You will not forsake me also! Victor loves you! I love you both, dearly. Let us wait for him together. Be my sister still, as you have ever been, and when Victor returns he will draw the loving tie between us closer still." So speaks Inez, and laying her hands carressingly on the shoulders of Pearl, seeks to detain her.

"Inez, my daughter," cries the countess, "I have bidden the false girl go. Do not attempt to detain her. She and I can breathe the same air no longer." With a stifled cry the countess sinks back in her chair, half closing her eyes. Inez flies to her mother in tender compassion. Pearl goes from the room, and a little time after from the house.

IV.

BEFORE PARIS.

It is midnight. Such a night! The ground frozen hard as iron, every sound, every movement reverberating with a metal clang through the cold stillness. The sky has been showing a brooding, ominous blackness for hours past. If only that threatening snow would begin to fall! Any change must be for the better; any down-coming, any drops, hail or snow, must bring less cruel bitterness into that cutting, biting air.

Outside the walls of Paris the brave "Garde Nationale" is on the watch. Here and there camp-fires are cracking and blazing, and attracting as closely as possible to their welcome warmth such of the men as dare leave their appointed beat. These soldiers who have been on outpost duty for the last twelve hours, keeping incessant and wearisome watch, have now stretched themselves wearily enough on the bosom of mother earth. She is a cold, unnatural mother to-night, and gives but scant welcome to her overwrought children.

To a stranger there is something appalling in the great boom of the iron messengers that send startling reminders of their hideous power through the silent night. But to those watchers without the gates, the horrid sounds have become familiar by perpetual repetition, and Monts Valerien and Bicetre may send forth their deadly minute messages of massacre unheeded.

Neither the boom of the guns nor the heavy breathing of his wearied companions, who are asleep in the cold, lying without tent or other shelter, appear to disturb the meditations of a young sentinel who steadily continues to step to and fro on his limited beat. His heavy gray coat is closely buttoned up to his chin, his small kepi is pressed well down over his forehead, but his fair hair, curly in spite of its close clipping, peeps out underneath. No head-gear could possibly hide or disguise the straight outline of profile, or the gaze of those blue eyes which had been to that young soldier's mother the most welcome and beautiful sight in the world—the sight for which she is now longing and praying, how wearily!

It was thus Pearl's lover had determined to "distinguish" himself. Here, he believed, was a chance of winning, unknown, and without the influence of high-born relations, that laurel crown which he had resolved to earn, to take home and lay at the feet of the proud woman whom he loved! To-morrow will be his first chance. To-morrow he goes into action, to-morrow he will strike his first blow. Fired by Pearl's ambitious words, and by the answering throb in his own breast, he will rush into the thick of the battle—dare greatest dangers joyfully, likely thus to secure greatest success—and all for the sake of Pearl—proud Pearl! Oh! she shall have cause to be proud of him yet! He holds her plighted word, and she with her own sweet lips has told him how she loved him—long ago—and she gave him her promise, and sealed it, too, with a kiss! a soft, lingering, intoxicating, bewildering kiss. \* \* \* Even now his heart beats wildly at the delicious recollection, and the remembrance sends the blood tingling hotly through every vein. Present cold, privation, most uncongenial companionship, are all forgotten for the time being, and Victor in imagination is once again in that shady nook, behind the great fern screen, in the conservatory. Close to his heart he holds the one woman he adores beyond her kind, he feels her kisses—Pearl's kisses—for whose caprice he has now proved himself willing to risk his very life. And fervently he prays, "God bless and keep my darling, and let me come home to her victorious!"

And in the chamber, far away over the sea, his mother on her knees is also praying, "God bless and keep my darling, and let him come back to me soon and safe."

She little guesses, poor mother, where her curly-haired darling is at that moment; still less does she dream of the spirit of joyful enterprise with which he intends to rush into the