

## Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER XXV.  
IN LOVE WITH A PRINCESS.  
"Carlo, come here, sir!" says the princess, and Carlo, with a side glance at the count, goes to her. "For shame, sir, for shame, to treat an old friend so!" she says. "He is good now, count—

—he is very obedient."  
"Who would not be to such a mistress, your highness?" says the count, with another smile. "Carlo and I have not forgotten our old quarrels. Come hither, my good friend."

But Carlo firmly refuses to be cajoled, and Hal, now that peace is restored, turns to depart.

"Adieu," says the count.

"Good-by," says the princess, and Hal, with a subdued tone, goes up to the dog and pats him on the head; he couldn't tell why he does it, but he is rewarded by a gentle smile from the dark eyes; and, gathering up his two baskets, he takes his departure.

As Hal went down the long avenue he looked about him with a faint feeling of surprise. The sun seemed to have gone in, but it had not—it was just as bright as when he was in the garden, brighter, perhaps; and yet the day seemed suddenly dark and gloomy, as if the best part had gone out of it.

Poor Hal did not understand; until yesterday he had no more idea of love than a native of India has of ice, if any one had told him he was in love he would have been divided between the desire to laugh at the person and—if he were a man—to knock him down.

He tried to persuade himself that it was only a feeling of pity for such a bright, lovely creature leading a dull life which made him loath to leave her presence, and a desire to see her and hear her speak.

"I wonder," he muttered, as he went up the street, "I wonder who the dickens the old Russian mummy is? Her uncle, I suppose; that can't be, though. Must be a relation, or he wouldn't have the cheek to kiss her hand—found his impudence! These blessed foreigners have monopolized all the brass in the world! Must be a relation—perhaps her grandfather; no, not quite old enough for that. Confound him, whoever he is! That's a sensible dog, that Carlo. By George! if I hadn't held him tight, he would have made mincemeat of the count, wrinkles and all!"

Arrived at the hotel door, Hal hesitates and looks down at his precious basket of camellias.

"Old Bell will badger me to death!" he mutters; "want to know where I got 'em, and scold for an hour. I'll go around the back way."

But, unfortunately for love's shy reserve, "Old Bell" is taking exercise under the shadow of the balcony in the yard itself, and stands open-mouthed, nearly dropping his book at Hal's treasure.

"My dear Hal! what exquisite flowers. Where?"

"Had 'em given me!" says Hal. "Fine, aren't they? I'll take them upstairs," and he hurries up the broad wooden steps.

With a selfishness never to be much condemned, he doesn't put the great white blossoms in the dusty saloon, where they would refresh the eyes of the hungry tourists, nor does he place them, as he should do, on the table of his own little room, and, having placed them with the utmost care in the milk-jug belonging to the washing-stand, puts them on the table, and sits and stares at them.

Presently a knock at the door, which rouses Hal, and causes him to blushing remove the jug to a remote corner.

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It is Bell, and he has a letter in his hand.

"Reading, my dear Hal? Am I disturbing you? Here is a letter from—the marchioness."

Hal takes it, and Bell goes to the window, shyly lingering.

"Any—any news, Hal?" he asks, timidly.

"Eh?" says Hal, with knitted brows. "I can scarcely make it out. Jeanne seems to have forgotten how to write since she became a great swell. Oh, look here, they're coming to the castle a week sooner than they expected; that will be pleasant news for your friend, the major-domo, and make him hurry up pretty considerably; and, look here, here's something about you."

"About me?" says Bell, blushing.

"Yes, but hang me if I can make it out. Here, spell it over, will you?"

Bell takes the letter almost reverentially.

"Will you ask Bell if he will be so kind as to tell them at the castle that there will be three more visitors that the list contains? You—you careless boy—would forget all about it, but Mr. Bell will not."

"That's one for me and ten for you, Bell," says Hal, with a grin.

"They are the Countess Stanhope, Lord Lane and Lord Nugent. The Countess must have a room with a southernly aspect. Shall I read any more?"

"Yes, go on," says Hal.

ter; Bell has gone over to the castle to encourage the major-domo, who is almost distracted by the shortening of the time left him for preparation, and by the news that three more suites of rooms are required. Hal has waited until Bell's back is fairly turned, and is now trying to convince the stable-keeper that the aforesaid Gothic specimen of the animal kingdom will not serve his, Hal's, turn.

"You don't surely call that a horse!" says Hal, speaking very slowly and loudly, as is an Englishman's wont when addressing foreigners, as if deaf. "It isn't a horse—it's a cathedral or a scaffold, or an animated skeleton from a museum—anything you like, except a horse!"

"But, my lord!" expostulates the man, gesticulating, "it is indeed a horse; a good, a grand horse!"

"Then he's a little too grand for me!" says Hal, scornfully. "Something with fewer bones, and more flesh and hair, is good enough for me. Is there such a thing as a horse in this confounded place?"

"The man raises his eyebrows and shakes his head.

"If mildred," he says, stroking the Gothic structure with an extravagant gaze of admiration, "if mildred is not satisfied with that charming quadruped, I do not know what mildred will do for another."

"Well, I'm not satisfied with that charming quadruped," says Hal. "In fact, I'd rather die the death than be seen on such a heap of bones. Take him back to the marine store shop you call a stable. He won't—he won't do; and here's something for your trouble."

At the sight of the silver, the man's face grows a trifle more intelligent.

"It is a pity!" he says, eyeing the horse regretfully, "a thousand pities that mildred doesn't like the horse, but—"

"Ah," says Hal, "let's have it. When one of you Germans begin to 'but' there's something behind."

The man smiles. He remembers, quite by accident, that there is still another horse in Forbach; by a strange chance it belongs to his, the man's, wife's brother, who would doubtless be willing to lend it to mildred for a consideration.

"All right," says Hal, "fetch him around—this is, if he is no relation to the charming quadruped."

After a decent interval the man appears, leading a horse which he has brought from another part of the stable, and which, being an improvement upon the first grand animal, Hal accepts, carelessly agreeing to pay about twice as much as the proper rate. "My wife's brother" having urgently required him for his own use, and only consented to lend him at the aforesaid increased tariff. Hal has a dim suspicion that he is being cheated, but is so elated at getting a horse of anything like a decent appearance that he throws the man two or three coins into the bargain, for his trouble is going around to the stable. Mounted on this steed, and inwardly groaning that he isn't his own shapely, well-groomed cob, Hal trots down the street and into the valley.

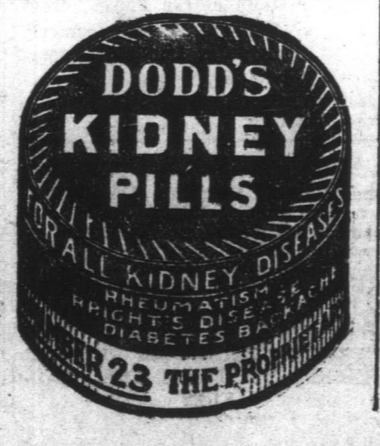
As he approaches the avenue leading to the Villa Verona, he pulls up into a walk, and, with a fine affectation of admiring the view, casts an anxious scrutiny up the drive; but there is on a gardener at work among the rhododendrons.

Hal proceeds, keeping a wary eye in every direction. He seems to know every stone in the stream by heart; he spent all yesterday afternoon fishing and fiddling by its banks, waiting and hoping for a glimpse of the white dress and straw hat, which did not make their appearance, however. He returned to the hotel in a very bad humor, and quite ready to pick a quarrel with the count, if he should make his appearance, and, in default of that highly-polished noblemen's presence, amused himself by teasing Bell, which he could always do by pretending disbelief in the existence of Homer, concerning which ancient poet Bell was enthusiastic.

And now, as he rode along, it seemed ages since he saw her yesterday, quite centuries since she looked up into his face and fastened the camellia in his buttonhole.

"I expect she won't ride this morning," he uttered; "or else she's had her gallop and gone home. Just my luck, and, if I were to see her, I don't know what I should say to her. I can't go on making her presents of fish. I might give her my penknife, just to create a bit of conversation. Oh, I'm making an idiot of myself."

But he still rode on, and still watched, meeting with nothing human excepting a boy driving cows, all through the valley and up the hill, the ascent of which caused his steed to puff and groan like a grampus.



"I'm glad I don't meet her with this beast roaring like a bull of Bashan," he grumbled; "and now, old man, we'll have a gallop along the top, just to see if you can bend your legs."

Any one less preoccupied would have turned to admire the scenery, but the grand expanse of fir-clad hills gets not a glance from Hal. Even his brother-in-law's castle, stretched out below him, grandly majestic in the sunlight, scarcely attracts his attention, and he rides on, with his eyes fixed before him, until suddenly, much to the astonishment of his horse, he pulls up.

Right before him, revealed by a sharp curve of the mountain land, is a girl on horseback. So motionless the steed and rider stand that they might be an equestrian statue.

But the noblest statue in the Vatican, could not bring the blood to Hal's face as the sight of the slim, habit-clad girl on her thoroughbred horse.

He becomes motionless, too, but presently Carlo bounds from among the trees with a deep bay, and the princess turns her head and sees him.

Hal rides up bare-headed, and is greeted with an innocent smile of surprise, and with as innocent a light of pleasure in her dark eyes.

"And you have taken my advice!" she says; "and so soon; and is it not beautiful?"

Hal looks around for the first time, but his eyes come back to her face almost instantly.

"Yes, very fine," she says, scarcely noticing the view. "Very fine."

"And the castle, do you see that?" she asks. "We are all in Forbach so proud of the castle! It is grand, is it not?"

"Yes," says Hal, throwing a swift glance at the noble pile.

"Our poor little villa looks an ant-hill in comparison," she says, with a smile.

"I don't think so," says Hal. "Stand still, you brute!" This was to the horse, of course.

"He is frightened at Carlo," says the princess. "Carlo, come here. Is he your horse?"

"Thank Heaven, no!" says Hal; "I got him in the village after a vast amount of trouble. He is the prize stud of Forbach. I wish you could have seen the animal they first offered me. Stand still, will you? I give you my word, I have had the greatest trouble to get him along when I wanted to go, and now—stand still!"

"Let us get down," says the princess; "I always walk to the point. It is dangerous to ride so near. This is a beautiful view."

Hal drops from the saddle, and goes to help her to dismount.

With a light touch on his arm, she floats down to the ground, and, gathering her habit-skirt, leads the way, Hal leading the two horses.

"Oh, you may leave Florida," she says; "she will wait anywhere for me for hours, if I wanted her to."

"And I'll tie my brute up here," says Hal, and he hitches the bridle to a tree.

"There," says the princess, extending her tiny hand, clothed in its white glove, and lets it drop upon her lap as she sits on the edge of the hill.

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