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Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER VII.
IN A STIFF BREEZE.

"Sit quiet," says Jeanne; "Mr. Vane does not want to swim back to the cliffs."

The warning is not altogether unnecessary, for every moment the wind grows more fierce and the sky more threatening.

Now, indeed, the Nancy Bell cleaves through the water, riding over the crested waves and splitting the foam into two hissing, angry currents. Suddenly a big drop of rain falls into Vane's pipe; it is the commencement of the shower. With the rain comes darkness, and then both are swept away by a sudden gust of wind, which reveals the cliffs frowning before them.

"Take care!" says Jeanne; "shorten the sail!"

"Aye-aye!" says Vane, quietly, and then he rests his head on his arm and looks at her. He knows that they are now driving at a fearful pace straight for the most dangerous coast in England. One false turn of the helm, one falter of the little hands that grasp it so firmly, and over they go on to one of the jagged rocks over which the sea breaks unceasingly. But Jeanne's eye does not quail, nor her hands falter. With her soft, red lips set firmly, and her eyes aflame with excitement, she sticks to her post.

"The channel must be narrow here," says Vane, crawling nearer to her. Jeanne nods.

"I know it. I am steering for that point there," and she nods toward the cliff opening.

But the next instant he calls to Hal: "Look to the sail!" and lays his strong hand over hers. "We are drawing too near on," he says. "If that is the point, let me help you."

Jeanne does not refuse, and shifts her hands, but his are still touching them, and his face is close to her heart. Once, as she stoops down, her hair, blown loosely by the wind, sweeps lightly against his cheek, and she feels his hand press more tightly on hers. She knows, too, that his eyes are fixed on hers, although she does not look toward him, and there is a strange throbbing at her heart which troubles and bewilders her, even in this intense moment, and she grows pale.

"Jeanne—Jeanne!" she hears him whisper; "you are not afraid?"

"Afraid? No," she replies, half turning her face to him with a wistful look. "No, not afraid."

"What then?" he asks.

Jeanne looks around with dreamy eyes, in which there is something of the startled expression of a wild animal when it first hears the cry of its hunters, and feels that it will soon be at bay.

"I do not know," she says, tremulously. "I cannot hold the helm."

"Leave it to me, Jeanne!" he says, and as he grasps the tiller with one strong hand, he draws her downward with the other. "Leave it to me, Jeanne."

"Make for the point," she murmurs, in her ear, then sits with lowered head that nearly touches his breast.

Straight on her course rushes the Nancy Bell, watched by anxious eyes from the shore, which strive to get a glimpse at Jeanne, and marvel at missing her from her place. It is the first time Jeanne has flinched from her post! What ails her? Is it fear that caused her hands to slip from the helm—that forces her to sit so meekly where he bade her?

Is it fear? Jeanne cannot tell. Before her the cliffs loom as if in a dream all she feels is the warm, firm, yet tender grasp of the strong arm—all she hears above the wind is the musical "Jeanne—Jeanne!"

So she sits, drooping like a rose bent by the storm, until the Nancy Bell, with one impetuous leap, rushes her keel upon the shore. Then, as he lifts her in his arms, she hears his voice softly in her ears:

"Jeanne, we are ashore!"

And she awakes.

"Mr. Vane, they've nearly drowned you!" cries Aunt Dostrell, above the wind. "I'm terrified out of my life—"

"You've no call to be, ma'am," grunts old Griffin, nodding approvingly at the stalwart figure in the rough fisher garb. "There was 'em on 'em as knew how to manage the Nancy Bell. It ain't the first time this gentleman have brought a boat in under a heavy wind. Get on home, Miss Jeanne—you be wet through!"

"Come home, all of you—you, Mr. Vane, too," says Aunt Dostrell, looking back.

And Vernon Vane hesitates—and follows.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE SON OF AN EARL.

It is three weeks since the Nancy Bell ran into the cliffs with the wind howling after her, and the spring—the real spring—has come with soft steps upon the land.

It is eight o'clock in the evening, and the drawing-room of Mr. Lambton's huge brand new mansion is ablaze with light, flung down from a monster crystal chandelier, from branches springing from the walls, from wax candles on the gypsy tables. Mr. Lambton and his family generally like light and plenty of it. They are, indeed, rather too fond of light things, and the room is gorgeous and dazzling in mirrors and gilt frames, ornaments in ormolu, and crimson plush. Even the great pianoforte is of white enameled wood, lined out and decorated with gold. The yellow metal is everywhere, from the ceiling to the floor, and the result is, if gorgeous and splendid, rather trying to the eyes.

In this magnificent apartment are collected the Lambton family and their guests, to-wit, the Honorable Mr. Fitzjames, Mr. Bell, Jeanne and Hal, and lastly, none other than Vernon Vane.

How it has come to pass that he is here, leaning against a carved mantel piece and listening to Maud Lambton's falsetto, he himself would have been puzzled to explain.

At a little distance from him sits Georgina, listening to Mr. Fitzjames' spicing story of fashionable life, and not very distant is Jeanne, Maud and Georgina are in full evening dress, looking very thin and very showy; Jeanne wears a plain frock of some soft material, covered by a simple muslin, through which her white neck and rounded arms gleam softly. Maud and Georgina's hair are arranged in the latest Parisian fashion, and frizzled and puffed; Jeanne's soft, silken bands are tightly coiled, and as smooth as the natural ripple will permit. It is the same Jeanne, and yet not the same Jeanne, who crouched in the bow of the Nancy Bell, and quivered beneath the touch and the whispered words of the fisher-clad man who now leans, so stalwart and distinguished-looking, listening to the last new ballad as weakly sung by Miss Maud. Three weeks is not a lengthy period in one's life, and yet Jeanne is changed. She is more silent even than of old, and more dreamy, and the wistful, questioning look which visited her face for the first time when Vernon Vane played that song without words, is upon it now.

Modern fashion has decreed that it is not at all impolite to talk while another person is singing, and Mr. Lambton, in a scarcely subdued voice, is talking now.

"Glad to see you at the Hall, Mr. Vane," he says, in what he deems the old English gentleman tone.

Vernon Vane, who has been looking absently at the quiet Jeanne, awakes, and rather suddenly, but composedly, murmurs that Mr. Lambton is very kind.

"Not at all—not at all," returns that gentleman, condescendingly. "Always pleased to make the acquaintance of clever men, I'm an admirer of art, Mr. Vane, and like to encourage it when I get a chance."

Vernon Vane inclines his head.

"Bought a good many pictures in my time," goes on Mr. Lambton, looking around the gorgeous room. "Some of 'em rather valuable, too. I flatter myself that there are Rubens, or instances," and he nods to a hideous copy of one of that master's best known works, which hangs upon the glittering wall, and has been torturing Vane during the whole of the time he has been in the room. "That's a genuine Rubens; cost me a small fortune, though I say it. What do you say of that now?"

"A remarkable picture," he says, grimly.

"Jes' so," assents Mr. Lambton, complacently. "A remarkable picture, as you say; I've got lots of 'em stuck about the place. Money ain't no object with me when I take a fancy to a thing. Let's have the best money can buy, I say. If it's pictures or saucepans—the best that money can buy. That's my principle, Mr. Vane, and when I heard from my daughters that you were an artist, I said: 'Invite him to the 'All; let's encourage art, we as can do it without hurting ourselves.'"

"Very kind," says Vernon Vane again, his eyes wandering from the commonplace face of his vulgar host to the quiet figure by the table.

"And," continues Mr. Lambton, "if you've got any pictures on your hands that's worth buying, I'll look at 'em. I know a good picture when I see it, Mr. Vane," he adds, nodding his head confidently. "You won't see no bad ones in my house."

Vernon Vane glances around the walls, and takes in the hideous copies and still more awful originals, with which the apartment is stored, and maintains a discreet silence. Maud, having arrived at the end of her hal-lad, rises with a modest smile, a-

waiting applause; and Vernon Vane walks over to the table at which Hal is turning over the pages of a scrap-book.

The boy looks up and welcomes him eagerly. To tell the truth, Hal has been dragged to the Hall against his will, and has endured martyrdom since dinner time. It is his, as it is Vernon Vane's first dinner there, and Hal is mentally vowing that it shall be the last; the gaudy room dazzles him. Maud's ballads bore him, Georgina's patronizing attentions madden him. But his sulky face lightens as Vernon Vane bends over him and looks down at the scrap-book.

"Well, Hal," he says, with a quiet smile. "What are you so absorbed in?"

"Nothing," says Hal, in a grave half-whisper; "but anything is better to look at than to sit listening to this stupid music. Aren't you sorry you came, Mr. Vane? You can't care for this sort of thing?"

"I am not sorry I came, Hal," says Vernon Vane, and he glances at Jeanne, who is talking to Mr. Fitzjames.

"Then I am," retorts Hal; "I'm bored to death! It's worse than the Latin grammar. Why don't they do something—play speculation, or something?"

"Cards are tabooed on these occasions," says Vernon Vane, with a smile.

"All the better for the cards, then," responds Hal. "All I say is that if this sort of thing comes of being rich, I'm glad we're poor, for all Jeanne may say."

Vernon Vane bends lower, and turns over the pages of the sketchbook.

"Does Jeanne wish to be rich?" he asked, quietly.

"I suppose so. She is always talking about what one could do with money—where you could go and what you could see. I tell her she ought to marry Mr. Fitzjames and try it."

"And what does she say to that?" asks Vernon Vane.

"Oh, I don't know," says Hal, carelessly. "Look at him now, Mr. Vane. Isn't he an idiot?"

At this moment the Honorable Fitzjames is bending over Jeanne with his most insinuating smile, his white hand resting with his mustache, and Jeanne is looking up, listening intently. Vernon Vane looks across at them and smiles grimly.

"Your sister does not seem to think so, Hal."

Hal grunts.

"Women will forgive any amount of stupidity in the son of an earl!" he says, with preconscious wisdom.

"So it seems," says Vernon Vane.

"Look here!" exclaims Hal, under his breath, "here's Georgina going to play now! She'll strom away for a quarter of an hour! It's awful! I say, Mr. Vane, why don't you play or sing? Do! It would be such a relief. I'll ask Mrs. Lambton to ask you."

"Not for a kingdom!" says Vernon Vane, emphatically, and he lays his hand upon the boy's arm. There is a moment's struggle, and Jeanne, attracted by it, rises and comes toward them, leaving Mr. Fitzjames dangling his eyeglass.

"What is the matter?" she says, dropping her white hand upon Hal's shoulder.

"We're both bored to death, Jeanne," says Hal, in a whisper, "and I want Mr. Vane to play or sing, and he won't!"

Jeanne looks up, and then down again at Hal.

"Are you so bored?" she says, addressing Vernon Vane.

"I did not say so," he replies.

"You are sorry you came?" she says.

(To be continued.)

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(To be continued.)

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