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CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGER IN EDEN.

Her ladyship takes in everything—the old-fashioned piano, the little satin-lined work-basket, the great china bowl of June roses, which fill the house with their perfume, and, lastly, a portfolio of sketches yawning on a distant table.

Jeanne is some time gone; to tell the truth, she is hunting high and low for Aunt Jane, who is at this moment in the park carriage. Jeanne is long, and her ladyship listlessly seats herself near the portfolio and opens it.

As she does so, before she has turned over a single sketch, Jeanne enters, followed by Mary, carrying refreshment.

"I am sorry to find that my aunt is out," says Jeanne; "will you come up to my room and take off your things?"

"No, thanks," says her ladyship, and as she speaks she looks up at Jeanne with an increase of interest, for Jeanne has thrown off her hat, and her loveliness is fully revealed. Her ladyship stares from her face to her hands as they pour out a glass of wine; they are small and well-shaped, if not as white as her ladyship's own.

"And this girl can be happy buried down here! Then there must be a man in the case," she thinks, but she says, instead:

"What a sweet little room this is, and those roses. May I take one?"

Jeanne jumps up and chooses a Marshal Niel.

"That is the prettiest, I think," she says, shaking the water from the stem, and offering it.

"There is a prettier one than this," says her ladyship.

Jeanne looks at the vase critically.

"Look at the glass," says her ladyship, with a smile.

Jeanne blushes.

"Why, one would think you were unused to compliments," says her ladyship, "to blush at one from a woman! Forgive me if I am anxious to know such a rare flower. My name is Lucelle Stanford; and yours?"

"Jeanne—Jeanne Bertram," says Jeanne.

"Jeanne! It is a pretty name; Norman, too! Our meeting is quite romantic. Still more so if one of us had been a man instead of both being women. Unmarried?"

There is a question in the last word, and Jeanne answers it frankly.

"I am unmarried," she says, with a flush.

"And I—worse, or better luck," says her ladyship, with a smile and a little shrug. "I am going to Leigh Court—it is not very far, you say; perhaps we shall meet again. May I drive over and thank you again?"

"Aunt will be very glad," says Jeanne, hesitatingly. "I—I am afraid I shall not be here."

"You are going away," says her ladyship. "Poor Rawton Megis!"

Jeanne smiles.

"It will be duller than ever when you are gone," says Lady Lucelle. "And you can honestly tell me you are happ! Merci! it looked to me like the very last place left dry after the deluge. Tell me—you don't think me rude and gauche, do you?" and Lady Lucelle lays her stately white hand upon Jeanne's arm, gleaming softly through the muslin. "Tell me what you do to support an existence, which I, who can scarcely endure my ever-changing one—would imagine anything but supportable. You sing and play?"

"No," says Jeanne, smiling, and greatly amused and interested by the high-bred audacity of the beautiful aristocrat.

"No? You paint then? No? What on earth do you do?—is there a garrison here?"

Jeanne looks puzzled.

"A garrison! No."

Her ladyship smiles.

"Do you really mean to intimate that you don't understand me? Who do you flirt with?"

A sudden flush of crimson dyes Jeanne's face, and she feels half-inclined to resent this impertinence, but it is impossible to be angry with so lovely a face, so languidly placid save for its arched eyebrows, daintily arched with curiosity.

"I don't flirt with any one," she says, at last.

"Then I cannot conjecture why you live!" says her ladyship, solemnly. "Ah, wait, though," she says, her drooping eyes having rested upon the portfolio; "you play at painting—watercolors; I hate dirty oil-tubes and turpentine! Yes, that is it. May I look?"

Jeanne says "Yes," and rises to assist her with the portfolio.

Lady Lucelle spoils her remaining glove in a moment wiht the dust, but is too much struck with sketch number one to remark the destruction.

"Why, child, you are an artist!" she exclaims, looking up. "Oh, don't shake your head, and talk about flattery, and all that. I'm sorry to say I know what I am talking about when I pronounce upon a picture; I've listened to too much art jargon not to know something about it. Besides, I really do understand, and these are more than good—they are almost masculine, too!"

"But——" says Jeanne, hastening to repudiate.

"But I say they are!" says her ladyship—"they are really beautiful! 'Newton Regis'—'The Church.' Yes, sketches of the place, of course. And here's a delicious little bit of seascape and a boat. What's it called?—the Nancy Bell. Very pretty. My dear child, I can understand why you're happy—you're art mad, and—ah!"

What makes her ladyship suddenly start as if something had reached a hand from the portfolio and struck at her fair, dainty face?

CHAPTER XIII.

A CREATURE OF FANCY.

Jeanne stops abruptly in the attempt to arrest her mistake about the pictures, and stares instead at the suddenly-whitened face and the startled eyes, staring, in a question, bewildered fashion at a sketch in her hand.

"Are you ill?" asked Jeanne, thinking with dismay that her ladyship is going to faint. "Can I get you anything—can I——"

Her ladyship looks up with an abstracted, questioning air, and puts her delicate fingers to her lips.

"No," she says; "it is the heat, I think, and the dust——"

"Let me open the other window!" says Jeanne, and hurriedly threw back a casement.

"Thanks, dear—thanks!" says Lady Lucelle, "that is better. I—I don't think Rexton Regis air would agree with me, do you know——"

"Drink a little wine, pray do!" says Jeanne, all gentle anxiety. "Let me get you a little spirits—a glass of water."

"My dear," says her ladyship, smiling sweetly, and regarding Jeanne with quite a new expression in her blue eyes, "I am quite well now. Don't think any more of it. I am used to these little attacks. And you are an artist."

"But I am not," says Jeanne. "I have been trying to explain. These sketches are not mine—they were not painted by me."

"Really!" says Lady Lucelle, with well-feigned surprise; "are they not? And whose are they—your brother's?"

"No," says Jeanne; "they are Mr. Vane's."

"Vane's! What, Vernon Vane's, the great artist, whose pictures they are all talking about?"

"Yes," says Jeanne, softly, with a thrill of pride.

"Ah, so I see!" says her ladyship, examining a sketch. "The name is in the corner. And this," she says, taking up with interest the sketch at which she had been looking when taken by her little fainting attack—"and this is his, too? All his? This is very pretty. Two young people sailing in a boat—the Nancy Bell, it says on the stern. The girl has a lovely face—why, it is yourself."

Jeanne smiles assent.

"And the man, he is handsome enough, too, in that rough guernsey and fisherman's nightcap—very handsome. May I dare to ask who he is?"

"That is Mr. Vane," says Jeanne, trying hard to keep the color out of her face, and to look calm and self-possessed.

"The artist himself," says Lady Lucelle. "How charming! And he is a great friend of yours, Miss Bertram?"

"Yes," says Jeanne, the warm color dyeing her face and neck.

Lady Lucelle's own color fluctuates strangely.

"Ah," she says, "your face tells tales too readily, my dear Jeanne—may I call you so?—it is such a sweet name. Your Mr. Vane is votre tres cher ami, is he not?"

Jeanne looks bravely.

"I am engaged to Mr. Vane," she says, in a low voice.

Her ladyship's lips twitch, but she smiles so sweetly that surely if Vane were here he would go on his knees, if necessary, to be allowed to put it on canvas.

"I guessed it," she murmurs, looking at the Nancy Bell riding over the bar, with Jeanne at the helm and Vernon lying at her feet with his chin on his hands and his handsome face upturned to hers—"I guessed it; and where is Mr. Vane now—does he live here?"

"Yes," says Jeanne. "He also finds Newton Regis supportable."

It is her first bit of sarcasm under so much provocation.

"He is not at home to-day."

"I am so sorry," says Lady Lucelle. "You think me rude and impertinent, I know; oh, don't deny it, dear—but one is naturally anxious to see some of the famous men of the day. Well, I may come over and see you—and him—next week; may I?"

"I am afraid," says Jeanne, "that we both—that he—that is——"

She tries hard to be cool, to keep the color down, but the blue eyes are so keenly fixed on her face that the attempt fails.

Lady Lucelle smiles—it is a queer, uneasy, apprehensive smile.

"I see," she says; "tell me—you are going to be married—isn't that so?"

"Yes," says Jeanne, regaining her composure.

Lady Lucelle smiles harder than ever.

"When, dear? Am I not curious and unpardonably intrusive? When, dear?"

"To-morrow," says Jeanne.

Lady Lucelle's lips twitch, as if again some one struck her across the face, which turns white; but she smiles—oh, she smiles as sweetly as ever.

"To-morrow," she says, lightly, but with a harder ring in her voice, "and I have come on the marriage eve. Let me look at his face again; it is a romance. Why," and she pauses, "do you know, I think I know your lover, Jeanne?"

Jeanne opens her eyes to their widest.

"You!" she says.

"Yes, I; oh, it is not so strange," said Lady Lucelle. "I told you I was used to artists; I went in for that sort of thing myself for a time, until the smell of the turpentine made me feel faint, and the paint spoiled all my dresses. But Mr. Vane—how long has he been here?—I should like to know if it is my Vernon Vane."

"Six months," says Jeanne, smiling, as she thinks how well she remembers their first meeting.

"Six months," muses her ladyship. "Yes! and what's he like—silent and grim sometimes, and does he play and sing like a musician, and—there is the scar of a saber-cut just above the temple—ah!" for Jeanne's face has suddenly grown pale with surprise and mute wonder.

How should any other woman know of that scar, which cannot be seen until the thick, half-curling hair is lifted as Jeanne has smoothed it aside often and often.

"Ah," says her ladyship, and she leans forward, with her delicate hands clasped tightly on the table, and her eyes fixed on Jeanne's. "Six months! It is not long—it is commendably short, even for a woman," and she laughs, not sweetly now.

"What do you mean?" says Jeanne, pale and questioning.

"My dear," says Lady Lucelle, "do you mean to tell me that you—you who are going to be married to the man, do not know who and what he is?"

"No," says Jeanne, boldly, and with a touch of the besetting pride and temper in her eyes. "I have not said so, Lady Stanford."

Her ladyship holds up her white hand plaintively.

"Don't call me that, or I shall have to call you Miss Bertram, and I can't do that to one who is my foe—I mean my friend. And so, Jeanne, you take part in the little comedy of mystery! and what is the plot, and why is all this concealment?"

"Plot—concealment!" echoes Jeanne, her eyebrows knitted perplexedly. "I don't in the least know what you mean."

(To be continued.)

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