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Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"BETTER A PEASANT THAN A PEER."

Jeanne scarcely knows herself the meaning of the thrill of wounded pride and sharp pain which runs through her, scarcely knows why she shrank a little way from the broad breast which she has found so comfortable an abiding place. But Vane, much as he loves, has not yet gauged the hidden depths of the nature of the child-woman he has made his wife. Knows nothing or little of the intense pride, the intense independence, for exacting honesty which beats in the breast of the girl whose first maiden love he had won. He hesitated a moment.

"Jeanne," he says, "there shall be no shadow between us, that I swear! I will tell all. I tried love. Among the women who—shame be to them—hung about me—the marquis, mind, not the man—was one whom the world had looked upon, and still deems its purest. She was—yes, she was beautiful. Not with your sweet, fresh young beauty, my darling, but with a loveliness that had dazzled courts and made the world of fashion agape. She was of my own rank and above the petty mercenary motives of most of her sex. I will give her that credit. It was not my rank that she coveted—no." He pauses and absently draws out his cigar case. "I beg your pardon, darling," he says, arousing.

But Jeanne stops his hand ere it can replace the case, and she takes out a cigarette and holds it out to him. He takes it, kissing the little, soft hand as he does, and puffs quiely for a minute or two.

"Jeanne, it did not last long. I brought my whole heart and she—well, she had no heart to throw into the bargain. It was all outside—a lovely hollow shell. Some men would have been satisfied, hollow as it was, but not I, Jeanne. We parted with a few quiet words on both sides. I asked what she could not give, and she thought me unreasonable, a sad sentimentalist, and so on. Then, tired and disgusted, I determined to throw aside the rank which had brought me nothing but disappointment and disillusion, and came to—Newton Regis. I had my art—that was enough for me, and I swore that for that alone I would live the rest of the life which fate—under the guise of good fortune—had made so bitter.

"Jeanne, do you remember the winter night you stood behind the old wall with the snow falling softly down, and the stars beginning to peep out of the clear, blue sky? I had taken leave of the world in the shape of one man who had proved himself the one true, disinterested friend, and I was going to my lonely life of solitude with a heavy, sinking heart.

"What put that madcap freak into your little head? Was it chance? I think not. I remember, as I felt the cold snow falling down my back, that I awoke from my dismal dream and turned to see—what? Only a little, slim girl, with silky hair blown and tumbled about her face, and a pair of soft eyes, bright with childish mischief. I remember the very dress you wore that night, remember the half-defiant, half-fearful curve of the red, pouting lips, as you looked up at me, half boldly, half shyly, and panted out your little impertinences."

Jeanne smiles and blushes.

"It is so long ago—I was a child then!" she murmurs, almost inaudibly.

"Long ago! Yes!" he says, putting the hair from her face and kissing her passionately—"six months! Well, I took that little face home with me against my will. It haunted me! I even asked Mrs. Brown to whom it belonged, and I looked for it the next morning like a hungry man for a morsel of bread. Jeanne, I fell in love with that little, proud, defiant face that night. Then came the days that followed close upon; how I fought against the spell that the little child-face had cast upon me. How I swore that love had passed for me; but how I looked and longed for you. How I hated those gold people—the Lambtons, and that vulgar place that saw so much of you. Why, Jeanne," he says, with a little laugh. "I was even jealous of Fitzjames—my Lord Lane, who was more than half in love with you himself, but you didn't know it, did you?"

Now, Jeanne! There are to be no concealments, no shadows. Speak out.

"I envied Hal—dear old Hal, the truest, bravest boy I had ever seen. I envied him the caress of those little hands, and the kisses of those soft lips—oh, but I may kiss them now as often as I please, little wife," and he kisses her passionately. "Well, Jeanne, what a long story it is. But I like telling it. I loved you more passionately each day. Then came the question—shall I tell her my real name and position? No, I thought. Here is a chance of winning love, if it is to be won by me, for itself alone. Here's Clarence Fitzjames—the Honorable, and there's the Reverend Peter Bell. These are my rivals; now if I, plain Vernon Vane, supposed to be a poor, struggling artist, can win her from these, why, then, I shall have found true love at last. And so I went on, still fighting against my desires, until Fitzjames goaded me one night—it was at the park—into revealing my love. Do you remember?"

Is it likely Jeanne has forgotten—will ever forget?

Vane pauses and draws her other hand into his.

"Then I ought to have told you; but I could not. The greatest happiness I had ever known came to me as Vernon Vane, and Vernon Vane I wished to remain. Jeanne, your love is twice as sweet to me, giving it, as you do, to the poor artist; though you had loved me ten times more than you say you do, I should have been tormented with the demons of suspicion and doubt if I had wooed you as the marquis; some time or other, in one of my black fits——"

Jeanne looks up, with a little smile of incredulity curving her lips. Black fits! He, the most courteous, large-hearted and good-natured man!

"Yes, Jeanne," he says, with a little remorseful smile, in answer to that look of here, "I have my black fits; we all of us have. You haven't heard of the 'Ferndale temper' yet."

Jeanne flushes and starts slightly. Was Lady Lucelle also true in this point too, that Vane was fickle, passionate, capricious and changeful?

"I say, in one of my black fits, the ugly doubt would have crept into my mind. Oh, she loves me for my coronet, and not for myself; she is like the rest. But now," and he takes her face in his hands, and kisses her, "but now, no doubt is possible, for it was Vane you loved, and you had no suspicion that he was anything more than a disagreeable, struggling and out-of-elbows artist. No suspicion!" he laughs, "not the faintest. Jeanne, it was cruel; but I enjoyed, I reveled in——"

But confidences are cut short for the present. The carriage pulls up at the station, the park footman—who has learned the importance of the individuals he is attending—hurries to and fro with unwonted excitement; wraps, books and paraphernalia are arranged in a carriage, and the second stage of the journey is just commencing, when a groom rides a panting and sweating horse into the station yard, swings himself from the saddle, and dashes on to the platform.

Looking up and down the platform, he sees Vane standing by the carriage talking to the guard, and hurrying up, he, with a touch of the hat, held out a letter. Vane took it and glanced at it, and his face darkened. With a curt nod he dropped the letter into the huge pocket of his traveling jacket, and as if with an effort, cleared his brow.

"Are you ready, my lord?" asks the guard—it is wonderful how soon a man's title is known—Vane jumps in, and the train starts.

CHAPTER XIX.

QUEEN JEANNE.

"Oh, Vernon, look! What a pretty station!" exclaims Jeanne, leaning forward to the open window, through which the innumerable perfumes of a summer evening are wafted, as the train puffs into a rural station, as if it were dropped from the clouds, amid the Surrey hills. They had been traveling all day, and it is nearly eight o'clock when Jeanne gives tongue to her admiration. A long journey is a wearisome thing generally, but there are exceptions, and this is one of them. Jeanne is dusty and slightly—only slightly—stiff, but she is deliciously and bewilderingly happy, and owns to a slight reluctance to arriving at their destination.

They have halted midway and partaken of luncheon—whose luxuries had been prepared for them at the railway hotel—and where, though unknown to Jeanne, some of the castle servants had come down expressly to wait upon them. With each mile my lord marquis had grown more thoughtfully attentive, and deliciously loving and tender; sometimes being prevailed upon to light a fragrant cigarette, and once, actually once insisted upon Jeanne's lying at full length and resting her silky head upon him for a pillow. Yes, notwithstanding the heat, and the dust, and the slight stiffness, Jeanne is happy, and it is with a certain pang that she hears Vane reply:

"Pretty, is it? Well, this is Exton, and our station."

"Ours?" says Jeanne. "Look, Vernon! isn't that a magnificent carriage! I wonder——"

Before she can finish, two footmen, in handsome liveries of almost a royal kind, come forward to the railway carriage, and opening the door, stand for a moment with their hands to their hats, then lead the way to the grand traveling carriage outside.

Jeanne starts and pulls down her veil to hide the sudden blush. The carriage is hers!

"All well, James?" inquires Vane.

"Yes, my lord," is the respectful reply, as the man closes the carriage door.

"Home, quickly," says Vane, and in another minute, as a wagon, with more handsome liveries drives up for the luggage, the magnificent bays dash along the road.

"Now, my Jeanne," says Vane, "look out to the left—see, there's the village. I wonder how long it is since they've had these bays out? We are going pretty quickly. There's the village; pretty, isn't it? That's the river running under that hedge, and there's——"

Jeanne breaks in with a sudden exclamation, wrung from her by the sudden vision of a palatial castle, its Gothic turrets and battlemented walls gleaming brightly in the setting sun, and looking down from a greenly-clothed hill. It is a sight that many an artist has exclaimed at, and yet it is only one of the many noblemen's seats with which the little island is studded. What was it the shah said to the prince, when he was being shown over a certain nobleman's vast estate?

"Your highness should behead this duke, he's too powerful."

And what was the prince's laughing reply?

"Your majesty, there are too many as powerful as he to make it worth while to behead one."

A faint smile of satisfaction sets upon Vane's face as he looks at the rapturous admiration on Jeanne's.

"Oh, Vernon!" she says. "What a vision! Is it Windsor Castle?"

"No," he says; "it is the palace of another queen, however."

"Another queen!" says Jeanne, musingly, her eyes fixed on the fairy-like towers. "I didn't know there was more than one queen in England."

"Queen Jeanne!" he says, tenderly.

"Queen Jea——" Then she sinks back and turns pale. "Is—is that——" She is too overpowered, too bewildered and amazed to conclude the question.

"That is Ferndale Castle," he says, lightly, and adds more tenderly: "Your future home, if you should take to it, Jeanne—if not—well, we will try some other."

"Our future home—yes," says Jeanne. "But it seems all so unreal."

"It has stood for a good many centuries, too," says Vane, trying to laugh her awe away.

The next moment Jeanne sees a huge pair of gates fly open, the mellow notes of a horn arise upon the summer evening, and Vane says, cheerily:

"We have just passed the lodge gates."

Then, in a brilliant panorama, passes velvety lawns, with glittering beds of flowers set, jewel-like, in their midst; the ground rises, with terraces of white marble and statuary, tier on tier; then, with a sweep, the road winds around to the front of Ferndale Castle itself.

(To be continued.)

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Goods of Passing Fashion, Odd Goods and Goods of which we have an overstock are now offered without any regard to cost price of same We need room for Spring Stock and Money to put into Summer Goods. For the Spring is coming and also the Summer.

Ladies' and Children's Winter Hats at Half Price And Less than Half Price Now.

There is no economy in spoiling your whole appearance by wearing an old hat when you can now get a Smart Hat here for only a dollar or two.

Ladies' Black Velvet Hats

only $1.00, $2.25 and $2.90 each and upwards, in large variety.

We have also still a fair number of Women's Coloured Velvet and Felt Hats left which at prices asked will clear quickly. See them early!

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Values up to $3.00 each. Now only $1.00 each to clear.

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We find we have run into a very large stock, and though they are really bought well and priced low, we are making Drastic Reductions to more quickly turn them into cash. We offer:—

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The smallest reduction we have made here is
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LADIES' $30.00 COATS are now $20.00
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