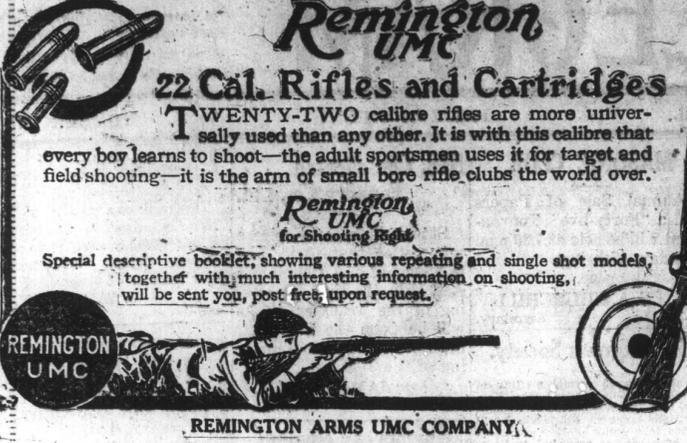


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CHAPTER XI
 HUMANITY.

My Dear Vane:—I write this, though not feeling at all sure, with my knowledge of your sublime indifference to correspondence, whether you will read it, or indeed, if it will reach you; for, if I know my man, you have, I fancy, grown heartily sick of playing the recluse and the mysterious visitor of Newton Regis, and have left that delightful but dreary spot for fresh fields and pastures new. Where are you now, I wonder? the Nile, the Hartz mountains, or up on the lochs with a salmon-rod glued to your wrist?

I am still in this confounded Paris for the best of all reasons—that I don't see any use, at present, of going anywhere else.

Don't pitch this letter into the fire, under the fearful impression that I am going to bore you with an account of all my doings, good and bad. Seriously, I have been trying to amuse myself, and should have succeeded better if I had not misused your sweet, granting, cynical growl. I am like a man who has grown fond of dancing bear and lost him. We've had a pretty good gathering lately, and among 'em—who do you think? None other than the divine Lucelle herself! The last captive of her bow and spear, the old duke, accompanied her, and remained just a month. He has gone no one knows where. They parted, it is said, in a rage, and all is broken off; whether that is true or not, I don't say.

It is rumored that the divine Lucelle flew into one of her rages, told him she was tired of him, and that she could not marry a man, even a duke, with false teeth! He has gone, at any rate, and here she is, as beautiful and as popular as ever. There are three Italian counts, a French marquis, and an English baronet, at words drawn on her account, and as usual she looks as innocent and serene as a sucking dove. I tell you this, not because I think you are at all interested in her—oh, dear, no, "we have cured that wound," of course, but because her ladyship mentioned to me—to whom she is sweeter than honey—that she was going next month to Leigh's. If I remember rightly—I won't be sure—you know my sublime ignorance of my native land—that the Leigh's place is within a score of miles of

your present hermitage, and you might run against her.

Perhaps it would not be convenient to have your real identity proclaimed to the simple and confiding inhabitants of Muddum-sloper—I beg your pardon, I mean Newton Regis. She leaves here in about five weeks' time, so you have plenty of time to pack up your traps and decamp, that is if you do not care to remain in the near vicinity of the divine Lucelle.

Seriously, there is still danger, old man! She has mentioned your name once or twice, in that deliberately careless tone which means mischief with her. Of course I don't know where you are any more than the man in the moon. But she doesn't believe me. If you are not quite cured, run for it, or by the living Jingo, she'll have you yet! This is a long letter, and has nearly killed me; but I'll be sworn you won't give me a "thank you" for it! Such is friendship! If you decide to run, come over here, and we'll go on to Germany for some fishing. Can't write any more.

CHARLIE HAMILTON.

This was the letter, and Vernon Vane eyed it very gravely, and with a decided touch of annoyance, he folded it sharply and thrust it in his pocket.

"Twenty miles from here," he muttered; "it would not be safe to risk it. A word from her would spoil—well, my whim, and I have set my heart upon carrying it out. I wonder if they would give me my Jeanne so soon—ah!" and at the thought an eager light fell on his face. "Strange how impatient I feel to make her my own—and yet I would trust her for a lifetime—my poor little Jeanne!"

So he tried to dismiss the letter, and started again, and again was stopped—this time by the appearance of the new viscount, who was pelting down the street on his bay horse, when, catching sight of Vernon Vane's stalwart figure, he pulled up at the gate, as if struck by a sudden idea. Only a few hours ago, Vernon Vane had felt very much tempted to pitch the Honorable Clarence over a balcony; but during those few hours things had happened which had softened his heart even to the Honorable Clarence, and instead of the usual curt, grim nod, he looked actually amiable, as the new viscount got off his horse, and held out his hand.

"Good-morning, Vane," he said. And Vane noticed, as Jane had done, the difference in his voice and manner. "How do you do?—I wanted to have a word with you."

"With me?" said Vane. "You have been out early this morning?"

"Yes—yes," assented Lord Lane.

looking rather embarrassed for a moment. "I've been for a ride, that is—I say, Vane, I've heard bad news."

"I'm sorry for that," said Vane.

"Yes," continued Lord Lane. "Fact is, I've just had a letter—we get them an hour earlier up at the park than you, you know—saying that my brother Lane has met with an accident, and is dead."

Vernon Vane had been listening rather absently, but those hesitating, hurried words caused him to start.

"Lano—dead!" he exclaimed.

The new Lord Lane nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Did you know him?"

Vernon Vane's usual reserved manner enveloped him immediately.

"I have met him," he said, coldly. "And he is dead!"

"Yes—was pitched out of his dog-cart; always was too fond of driving risky cattle. Knew how it would be some day—poor Lane!"

Vernon Vane looked absent for a moment, then he said:

"I am sorry to hear this, Lord Lane. Can I do anything for him?"

Lord Lane started slightly at his title; it was the first time he had been addressed, and commenced kicking the gravel with his foot.

"Thank's; it's—it's very kind of you, and—well, you could do something if you would."

"What is it?" asked Vane, with his usual directness.

"Well, you see I've only just heard the news, and they don't know anything about it up at the park, and to tell you the truth, I rather shirk going through the whole story, and the regular good-by," and—Vernon Vane eyed him quietly; "and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind walking up and letting them know. I'm anxious to get to town, and can catch the first train if I don't have to go back to the park, you know."

"And what about the young ladies? Have you any special message for them?" asked Vane, with his old, cynical smile.

"Message?—no—no—of course not. Only the usual thing. Obligated to go—sorry to leave so suddenly, and all that. Hang it, Vane!" he broke out abruptly, "you don't suppose that anything of that kind can go on now; things are changed, and my people would go mad."

"What is sauce for Mr. Fitzjames is not sauce for Viscount Lane, I see," said Vane, grimly, and with quiet scorn. "Well, you want to catch your train; I will go up for you to the park—anything else?"

"No, nothing, and 'pon my life I'm much obliged to you," said his lordship, gratefully. "It would have been a terrible bore, you know. Awfully obliged, I'm sure."

"Don't speak of it," said Vane, coldly. "Good-morning, Lord Lane."

"Oh—half a moment," said his lordship; "I say, Vane, just one thing more, you—of course you won't think anything about our chat last night—about the other little lady, you know?"

Vernon Vane's lips tightened.

"Are you alluding to Miss Bertam?" he asked, grimly.

Lord Lane nodded, and gathered up his reins.

"Yes, of course, that was all nonsense. No more to be thought of than the other young ladies. You understand a fellow, of course. Wouldn't do, you know, eh? Don't mention it; there's a good fellow."

"No," said Vane, "I am not likely to mention it," and without another word he strode off.

Lord Lane drew a long breath of relief.

"Phew!" he muttered; "I'm well out of it all. The sight of the pillmaker would finish me after this morning's work; I feel upset, decidedly upset, and—wagh to Heaven I was in town," and he made for the station.

By the time Vernon Vane had reached the gate to the wall which, by the way, he had opened pretty often of late, the cynical expression had left his face, and the eager look of the lover had returned.

He paused a moment in the court to look up at the red house which held his treasure, and recalled the evening of his first visit, when he had watched his starting in the midst of

her home life, as she had knelt in the freight and turned her face to him with the tears in her eyes which his music had called up. Then he went in, to find the house apparently deserted. But presently, as he stood looking from the open doorway into the garden, there was a light foot-step behind him, and there stood Jeanne with her hand held out, and her eyes downcast, but a tall-tale blush on her face.

Without a word he drew her toward him with a murmured word of endearment.

"It is like the sleeping palace!" he said, with his quiet smile.

"Where are they all?" said Jeanne, shyly. "I was upstairs, Hal is out, and aunt—"

"Am I so early?" he said; "I should have been here before, but have been detained," and as he spoke, he drew her into the garden.

Jeanne was very silent and very shy as she walked by his side, but every now and then, as he stopped to pick one or other of the spring flowers, she stole a glance at the handsome face—a glance of mingled love and pride. For what girl—even a princess of the blood—would not be proud of the love of this stalwart, handsome artist and musician.

To Jeanne he has been from the first a hero of romance. Can he not paint, and sing, and sail a boat, and does he not look like a king? And he loves her.

Suddenly she scatters her feticious reverie by putting his arms around her—they have reached one of the twisting, sheltering walks in which the old garden abounds—and drawing her to him.

"Well, my darling," he says, in the low, softened voice which has haunted Jeanne during the night, "and have you repented? Are you going to tell me this morning that the fairies had bewitched you last night, and that you had recovered your senses with the morning? You see, I can scarcely believe in my good luck—my happiness!"

Jeanne smiled through her tears.

"Are you laughing at me? I am such a poor, insignificant little thing—"

"Hush!" he says, taking her hand and putting it to her lips and then to his own; "not a word more of such dark treason. Bear with me, Jeanne; it is so hard for me to realize that I have such happiness in my grasp. Why, my darling, I shall have to keep you in my sight for the next few days to persuade myself that it is real, and that you aren't flown away, like a dream-child! Jeanne!" he says, suddenly, with a half-serious, wholly tender smile lurking under his mustache, "what will Aunt Jane say when I go in and tell her I want her ewe lamb?"

Jeanne looks up for a second bravely.

"What can she say?"

Vernon Vane shakes his head.

"Poor men, and struggling artists in particular, do not meet with an effusive welcome when they come with the request I am going to make. And Jeanne," he says, taking both her hands, and holding them tightly as he looks with loving, longing scrutiny into her downcast face, "are you sure of yourself? A poor man's wife—fancy!"

"Are you so very good?" asks Jeanne, eagerly. "I am—so glad!" she says, drawing a long breath; "I am so glad!"

"Why—why?" he asks, keeping back the swift, glad light which flashes to his eyes.

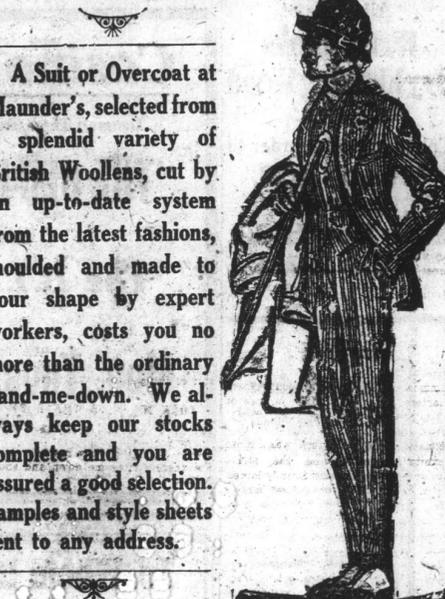
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