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Better a Peasant Than a Peer.

CHAPTER I
"Oh, Ha, how glad I was to see you. They would have stayed for another hour, I feel as if I had been choked. Hal, let us go out; I want to breathe."

"Come on," says Hal. "Aunt has another mile of sausage skins to fill, and Mr. Bell."
"Well, Mr. Bell won't be here for another half-hour. Let's go and have a snowball."
"Come on, then," cries Jeanne, springing to the door, her lately serene eyes lighting up and dancing. "Mind, you are to play fair, Hal."

"All right," he responds, snatching up his cap. "Come around to the front; aunt can't see us from the kitchen window."
Jeanne looks around eagerly for her hat (it is at the present moment lying under the sofa), and the place of it, catches up a dark-blue shawl. With a quick jerk of the white wrists, she ties this around her head, and, with a bound, is out in the open air, and the next moment is scraping up the snow.

"Wait—wait!" she cries, in suppressed eagerness; "you said you would play fair—wait till I get four—no, five!" for Hal's only reply to her appeal is a round ball of snow which flies past her head. "Well, then, there!" and raising her arms, she hurries back to Jeanne.

Flushed with excitement, the full, hot blood of youth blushing in her cheeks, and dancing in her eyes, lithe and graceful as a young savage, she bounds forward to attack, and darts aside to avoid the answering missile. Suppressed laughter ripples between her half-parted lips, snow spots her dark dress and clings to the bronzed-gold hair and blue shawl. Jeanne is happy!

"This girl—this tomboy—how old is she? you ask. I wish for Jeanne's sake I could answer—oh, a mere child! But Jeanne—Jeanne making and flinging snowballs with appalling precision, Jeanne flushed, and radiant, and altogether disheveled is—seventeen!"

CHAPTER II
A SNOWBALL AND ITS MARK.
At the moment the pillmaker's daughter was entering the Gate House, two gentlemen were marching up and down Marly Station, that being the nearest railway station to Newton Regis, and just three miles distant. Both gentlemen were wrapped up and both were smoking; one, the shorter of the two, a cigar, the other a well-seasoned short briar pipe.

"It wanted some ten minutes to the title for the starting of the train, and besides themselves and a sleep-looking porter, the station appeared deserted."

With regular tramp—tramp, the two men marched up and down the frozen platform in silence for some moments, then the shorter of the two spoke.
"And you have quite made up your mind?" he said, as if following up some recent topic of conversation; "nothing I can say will persuade you to come with me and turn this up?"

"I am quite resolved," replied his companion, quietly, but gravely. "I don't think you could turn me, Charlie."

"If you've quite resolved, I'm sure I can't," retorted the other, knocking the ash off his cigar, and looking up at the impassive and handsome face of the speaker with a touch of irritation in his voice. "You always were an obstinate beggar since I've known you, and that's a good many years now, eh, Vane?"

The man addressed as Vane nodded, with a grave smile.
"Yes, a long while now, Charlie," he said, puffing at his pipe.

"Just so; and the length of our friendship gives me, you'll admit, some right to remonstrate with you. I feel that I am privileged to tell you that a more infernally contrary bit of nonsense than this even you couldn't invent."

"All right!" assents the other, nodding; "go on. You've said all this before, but say it all over again if you like, Charlie."

"Well, if it's of no use, it eases my mind to abuse you," is the candid admission. "Joking apart, it's the queerest start ever you made, old fellow, and take my word for it, mischief of some sort or other will come of it."

"Don't see it," said Vane, coolly, "and if I did, it wouldn't shake me. I know what you think, Charlie—that I am a little touched. Don't apologise. I can't help it if you do. At least, there's some method in my madness—you'll admit that?"

"Confounded little that I see!" mutters the other, discontentedly. "If you want rest—"

"Which I do."
"If you want rest, why don't you take a change?"

"I am doing so."
"Bah! Why don't you go to Paris—to Egypt?"

"I've been. Don't you see, that's just it. If I could shake this off by trotting about the continent, and starting in out-of-season hotels, or climbing the Matterhorn, I'd go; but I can't. What I want is rest. There's no rest to be got scrambling up the Pyramids, or yawning about the Paris clubs. I've done all that, and I'm sick of it. What is there I haven't done? I might go to Africa, but I do not care a button for Africa and the regeneration of the negroes. Besides, one can't go to Africa alone, and—forgive me, Charlie—I want to be alone."

"The train will be here in five minutes," retorts Charlie, "and then you will be alone. And candidly, old fellow, much as I like you, I couldn't stand this hole."

"It isn't a hole, and if it were, no matter. It suits me. I want a good, comfortable tomb for a time."

"By Jove, you've got what you want, then!" retorts Charlie, looking around, with a shudder. "A more dead-and-alive place I never wish to see."
"I like it," responds the other. "It struck me the moment I saw it. But, by Jove, this isn't the village of Newton Regis!"

"Newton Regis!" groans his companion. "Who ever heard of it? There isn't a pack of hounds within twenty miles; there isn't a decent house in the place; there's a ditch—a river, then, if you like—but you can't fish in the middle of the winter, and what on earth you are to do with yourself. Heaven only knows!"

"I shall sleep—rest," said the other, with a grim smile. "Besides, you forget; I can amuse myself with my brush. There's the sea, too, within a couple of miles, that will make work for the eases!"

"In winter!" retorts the other, flinging his cigar away, contemptuously. "You can't go on painting snow pieces and storm-beaten rocks for three months!"

"Why not?"
"I don't know—I don't care! I'm out of my mind over your obstinacy, and that's a fact. Here! when you can go and spend your Christmas like a Christmas, where you like, you come and bury yourself in this hole!"

"I want to be buried," breaks in the other, fiercely; "I am sick of life as I have found it; I have tried it thoroughly, you'll admit."
"You have gone the pace, yes," asserts the other.

"I have drained the cup to its dregs, and am sick of the wine to loathing. Perhaps it's because I have drained it. Some fellows sip and sip and never tire—you are one of those, Charlie, but I—well, I snatched the cup brim-

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ming over—and drained it. I now fling it from me and retire. I efface myself, wipe myself out. I have only one desire, and that is to go to sleep, mentally and physically, like Rip Van Winkle."

"And, like him, to wake and find yourself gray-bearded—and aged, a stranger in a strange world that knows you not, and which you do not know. Good gracious, Vane, you're enough to drive a sane man mad."

"Just so," asserts the other, quietly, "and that proves I am not fit companion for sane men. That is why I will not go with you, Charlie. Leave me—leave me alone. Call me obstinate, pig-headed, what you will; I am resolved."

"So it seems," retorts Charlie, ruefully.
"And that being so, you will help me, old fellow," continues the other, more gently than he had hitherto spoken. "Take this whim, as you have taken many a worse one of mine, in good part."

"It's all very well, but you can't be expected to look on cheerfully at your friend's suicide," grumbles Charlie. His friend laughs a short laugh, not unpleasant, though curt and reluctant.

"Tut," he says, "go back and forget me; I'm not worth remembering! Believe me, Charlie, if any one could move me from this—well, mad idea if you like—you could do it, but I have made up my mind. I and the world are out of friends, as the children say; I have played with it, eaten with it, trusted it, and have found it hollow and bitter as Dead Sea apples. Man, Dead Sea apples. Man delights me, delights me not, nor woman either."

"I hope my train won't be late."
"Forgive me, Charlie, and bear with me. I do not mean to wound you."
"All right," grumbled Charlie.

"To you alone I can speak without concealment. To you alone I have confided the secret of my hiding-place, my living tomb; I can trust you and know—I have trusted you—"

"Confound it, yes," broke in his companion. "And you impose on my stupidity, sneaking fondness for you. Seriously, old fellow, I'm awfully—awfully sorry for you. I had no idea you were so hard hit. How should I have known?"

"How, indeed, seeing the manner of life I lead," responded the other. "No, he went on, "you were right to doubt, knowing what you knew, whether there was any heart left in me. But through it all I believed in the purity of women. It was the only faith I had left, and I centered it in her."

"Confound her," muttered his companion.
"Why? Why expect her to be above her kind? I believed with all the blind, trusting faith of a devotee; I tested her—thanks to you, Charlie—and found that my idol was like the rest, hollow as a fool's bauble, and footed with clay—like the rest—like the rest. One thing I have learned in this school in which fools alone will learn—experience—and that is—"

"And that is?" repeated his friend, as the train drew up to the platform.
"That woman is as false as she is fair, and that a man had better expect to make a hearty meal of Dead Sea fruit, as expect to win a pure, disinterested woman's heart. Good-by, old fellow! Forget me, if you can. If you can't, think of me as a harmless lunatic who is as tired of the world as the world is tired of him."

The two friends stood hand in hand until the porter grew frantic with impatience, then they parted. The one called Charlie got into the already moving train, and the other, after standing for a minute, absently watching the disappearing line of smoke, turned and left the platform, and strode toward Newton Regis.

With long, regular steps he made toward the village, his thick boots ringing on the frost-bound road, the smoke from his pipe leaving a fragrant track behind him.
(To be continued.)

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