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CHAPTER XXIX.  
 SYMPATHETIC CONFIDANCE.

Hal is a true Englishman, characteristic of his race even in the matter of falling in love.

When you Frenchman, or Italian, is attacked by the tender passion, he utters loud complaints (generally in verse), and neglects his dinner. Hal, as an Englishman, and more especially as a Bertram, buries his secret in his own bosom, excepting from Jeanne, does not attend to it, and never for a moment loses his always remarkably good appetite. As to writing poetry, Hal could as easily be as compose verse.

The only outward and visible signs of his attack, are a sudden and novel attention to his dress, and a marked preference for sitting at the window, or walking to and fro smoking, to going to bed.

Strange to say, this neglect of his virtuous crown does not in any way lessen the brown on his cheeks, or make him look "sleazy," and notwithstanding the additional disquietude of Bell's midnight visit and gloomy forebodings, Hal rises almost with the lark, and goes down, towel in hand, to the river, putting in an appearance at breakfast, apparently as "fresh as paint," as he would term it, and with an appetite to match.

He has certainly earned his share of the meal by a contribution of silver trout, which, as Charlie Nugent says, are "fit tackle for a king."

Fresh and blooming as himself sits Jeanne at the head of the table. If there is one thing for which her friends of her own sex are mostly given to envying Jeanne, it is the girlish appearance which clings to her, making even the youngest belle look yellow beside her.

Breakfast at the castle is, as is usual now, a free and open meal, conducted on the principle of "some when you like, have what you like, go when you like."

It begins at eight and ends at twelve. No absence is remarked, no one's arrival is waited for.

When you come down, you find the butler is instantly in attendance with his list—fish, fowl, and fruit—there is the selection, make your choice, and in a few minutes your breakfast, quite distinct and apart from any other person's, is before you. If you like to talk, you may talk; if you prefer to read the paper or your letters, no one will deem you a boor. You can get up without attracting observation, and go where you please, and do what you please, fully understanding that your presence will be expected at the seven o'clock dinner.

Vane himself sets the example of perfect freedom. He takes his breakfast at half-past eight, whether in Germany or England, and goes through to his studio. By a curious chance, Jeanne, however early she may arise, does not enter the breakfast-room until nine, when Vane has left it for the day; and by another curious coincidence, that is the hour at which Clarence seems to prefer his morning meal; so it comes to pass that Jeanne and he usually take it together; and together Hal finds them when he comes in.

There is only Nugent and Bell at the table; the rest have either breakfasted and departed, or have not yet arisen.

Among the latter is Lady Lucelle, who generally breaks her fast in the seclusion of her own apartments, but who is duly and fully informed of all that goes on, by the maid, a French-woman, blessed with a large supply of brains and a limited quantity of scruples.

"What will I have?" says Hal to the butler, after killing Jeanne and nodding to the rest. "Oh, bring me a steak, thick, with a bit of fat, and a tankard of beer."

"My dear Hal," says Lord Nugent, "are you training for a race?"

"No," says Hal; "and I can't say, as the man did in answer to the same question, that I am going to race for a train. No, I like something substantial for my breakfast, that's all. There's some trout if anybody likes them—oh, you've got some."

"And now, what is the order of the day?" asks Charlie. "I have been informed that I may go to Jericho, if I like, until dinner time; but I don't mean to be shelled in that style. Hal, we look to you for guidance, you know the place and its capabilities."

"Hem!" says Hal. "There's the museum."

"Horror!" exclaims Charlie. "There's the ruins of another castle."

"Thanks, I prefer them in a tenable state like this."

"And there's a hideous monument to some one or other."

"I loathe and abhor monuments," says Charlie, emphatically.

Jeanne laughs.

"Let us have a sensible proposal, Hal."

"Isn't Baden near here?" says Clarence, with his eyes fixed on Jeanne.

"Capital! Bravo, Clarence!" says Charlie. "That's a good idea."

"Twelve miles," said Hal, oracularly; "hour and a quarter's drive. Two mail phaetons, or a wagnette—or a motor van like a Sunday school treat, or a Noah's ark on wheels. Depends upon how many go."

Jeanne laughs.

"We must see," she says. "I am afraid many of us will be too tired to go."

"Will you?" asks Clarence, quietly.

"I answers Jeanne's "amusement depicted on every feature. "Suppose," suggests Charlie, "that we send some one around with a bell to shout: 'Any one for Baden-Baden? Just a-going to start. Baden!'"

"Not a bad idea," says Hal. "Especially if you started the moment afterward and gave 'em no time. Now, Jeanne, what are you going to do? Look here, there is no pride about me. I'll offer to drive one phaeton!"

"And I another," says Charlie.

"And I," says Clarence, then stops, with his eyes upon Jeanne.

"I should like to go," she says, "but not in the vehicle which Hal controls; he upset us coming down the Bracken."

"Nonsense," says Hal; "I was young and foolish then"—(it is only three short weeks ago!)—"and the horses had double-jointed knees—fell in both ways."

"Well," says Jeanne, rising, "I will go and make up a party, while you, Hal, and Lord Nugent see to the carriages. I will send word to the stables what we shall want."

"I will wait here till you come back, and take their word," says Clarence.

Jeanne goes into the hall and up the broad staircase to the first floor, and pauses for a moment at a closed door covered with green baize, then passes it, hesitates, and at last comes back and knocks.

"Come in," says Vane's voice, and she enters, leaving the door open behind her.

It is the studio; and on a tall easel is already placed a clean canvas. Around the room are hung studies and sketches, armor and the usual properties; but Vane is not at work. He is sitting at the open window, his head resting on his hand, smoking moodily.

As Jeanne enters, a sudden recollection flashes on her memory.

It is only of a certain loving converse she and Vane had in the sweet time, long ago; it was planning how he should work, with him sitting beside her at her work—he was never to be alone, never to be without her to turn to and speak to!

Alas for human proposals! Never once has Jeanne got beside him at his work; but once or twice has she entered his studio; and now she stands like a stranger, coldly reserved and self-contained.

Vane looks around, and seeing the graceful figure, in its plain morning dress, rise and fling the cigar away—courteous, fearfully courteous!

"I am sorry to disturb you," she says, quietly.

"You do not disturb me."

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"But we think of driving to Baden; will you care to go?"

Not a very pressing invitation, this; he can scarcely declare with alacrity his intention of accepting it.

"To Baden?" he says. "Who are going?"

"I do not know yet," says Jeanne; "Hal, Lord Nugent, Mr. Bell and Lord Lane."

At the last name Vane turns aside to pick up a brush.

"I am going to ask Lady Lucelle and the others," continued Jeanne.

"If I am wanted—if I can be of any use—"

"There is no occasion for you to come," she says, coldly. "There will be plenty to drive, and Hal knows the way, thanks."

How can he go in the face of this? And yet if he knew how she is longing for him to say, stoutly, sternly, "I will go," he would not hesitate; but he does hesitate, and loses the chance.

"Thanks," he says; "if you are quite sure I shall not be needed, I will remain at my work."

"Very well," she says, simply, and goes out as he holds the door for her with a slow, heavy step, and meets Mrs. Fleming.

The old lady stops, and with a courtesy, stoops to pick a crumb from her mistress's dress—perhaps there was no crumb there! and looks up at her with wistful affection.

"Oh, Fleming!" she says, languidly, "some of us are going to Baden; will you go around for me, and see who would care to go? We start in half an hour or thereabouts."

"Yes, my lady," says Mrs. Fleming; "shall I go and ask my lord?"

"No," says Jeanne, quietly; "the matquis will not go. Come to my room afterward," and she goes on.

The old lady looks after her with the old troubled look.

"Will not go?" she murmurs. "Oh, blind—blind!" and in this cheerful frame of mind proceeds to make up the party.

In a quarter of an hour afterward Mrs. Fleming enters her mistress's dressing room to find her seated, with her hands beside her, as if there was no such place as Baden.

"Lady Gordon, Mrs. Smithers and Lady Purfleet will be glad to go, my lady."

"Go—where? To Baden; ah, yes! and Lady Lucelle?"

"Lady Lucelle has promised to drive with the marquis, my lady."

Jeanne looks around quickly.

That was the reason why he would not go! But she says nothing—does not even change color.

"Are you going, my lady?" asks Mrs. Fleming.

"Yes, of course!" says Jeanne, curtly; "I will get ready at once."

Half an hour afterward a group composed of the ladies mentioned by Mrs. Fleming, the original proposers of the trip, and one or two other men, are gathered in the court-yard, discussing how they shall go; while Hal, anxious to start, listens to the various proposals with thinly concealed impatience.

"Look here," he says, in an undertone to Charlie, "bundle 'em somewhere—these boys won't stand fooling here much longer. Jeanne, you'll come with me! There's one seat left—who'll have it?"

Clarence is standing near, and comes nearer.

"I'll risk my neck, Hal," he says, with affected carelessness.

But Bell is on the other side of the phaeton.

"I can't permit that, Lord Lane," he says, in his mild voice; "my neck is of less consequence."

And without waiting for any discussion, without waiting to render assistance to the ladies, Bell climbs into the vacant seat.

Clarence Lane's face darkens, he bites his lip angrily as he turns away, and finds himself sandwiched between two middle-aged ladies and the member of Parliament.

"Started at last!" says Hal, with a sigh of relief. "If I don't get rid of some of them it shan't be my fault, and it won't be the boys'. Observe,

my lady marchioness, that I have appropriated the best pair. It is a good thing to be the brother of the Marchioness of Bermuda; I believe any of Vane's people would do anything for me. There's a short cut a little higher up the road, through the forest. It is a good road, and as by that time these cattle will have got rid of their superfluous spirits, you shall, if you are a good girl, take the ribbons, and I will smoke a cigar. I know you don't mind, because Vane smokes all day, don't he?"

"I—I don't know," says Jeanne, rather awkwardly.

"He used to," says Hal. "At any rate, you won't mind. Every one smokes here."

"But Bell!" says Jeanne.

"He likes it—he is never happy when out of the reach of tobacco-smoke. He smokes, himself, in secret—don't you, Bell?"

"What did you say, Hal?" asks Bell, leaning over the hood, and smiling happily.

"Fine view!" shouts Hal. "Now, Jeanne, you can take the ribbons. Keep that near side mare to her work. She is inclined, woman-like, to shirk it. And now for a cigar. Steady! hold them in, or they will get the upper hand! They are not a pair of children's ponies, you know."

Jeanne, full of delight, laughs joyously; the air is clear and rare, the horses dash along full of mettle, Hal is by her side; Jeanne is almost happy, would be quite happy—but that the solitary figure sitting with its head in its hand, in the great studio, rises before her eyes; then she thinks suddenly:

"By this time he is driving about with Lady Lucelle," and her lips twitch, and she bestows a little out on the mare.

"Steady," says Hal; "a little of that will go a very—very great way with that young lady. Think of Bell's neck, if you haven't any regard for mine."

Jeanne meekly promises obedience, and they go on for some time in silence, then Jeanne draws a little closer, and whispers:

"Hal!"

"You can speak up," he says, quietly; "Bell is talking to the groom about his bedridden grandmother. What is it?"

For all his nonchalance, it is evident that Hal has something on his mind which his affected cheerfulness is meant to hide.

"Hal," says Jeanne, "I have been thinking about what you told me last night, and oh, Hal! I am so sorry. Are you sure it is so—so serious? You—you are such a boy, Hal!"

(To be continued.)

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