

A LADY OF QUALITY.*

A crowd of curious townspeople were collected round one coach larger and more sumptuous than the others, and our two young men, catching sight of a face through the window, perceived at once that they were in the presence of a grande dame upon her progress.

"Poor lady," said the Freiherr, with ready sympathy; "she has been caught by one bridge just as we have been caught by the other."

The consciousness of common misfortune quickly brushes ceremony aside, and the further consciousness that one is not wholly unfamiliar with the other's face leads swiftly to speech.

"Madam," said the Freiherr, pushing through the crowd of gaping countrymen, "it is evident that we are involved in a common catastrophe."

The lady bowed graciously through the open window. She looked at him with much directness and composure, and met his advances unaffectedly and with no loss of time.

"A catastrophe less serious, perhaps, for me, sir, than for you. For I am now correcting the defects of my early training—I am systematically combating the idea of the importance of time. There is another wagon bridge five miles above, I learn; but I shall be in no haste to take it."

"You are travelling as I should have liked to travel," sighed the Freiherr.

"You pass the night here, then?" asked Bruno, emboldened on his part, too, by a consciousness of having seen the lady's face before.

"Yes. My courier and my maids are now inside"—she waved her hand backward toward the opposite window and

the inn door—"trying to arrange accommodations for me."

"Your courier?" repeated von Kaltenau, involuntarily.

"Yes. Despite the fact that we seem—and, indeed, are—a large party, I have the company of no men save those whose services are paid for. When I travel, I leave my male relatives at home—it is the custom of my country."

"Ah!" murmured Bruno.

"I suppose," the lady went on, "that, in your eyes, I may seem somewhat detached. Yet I am not altogether without domestic ties; I have a husband and three grown sons."

"And they," inquired the Freiherr, "they are at—"

"Yes, they are at home, following their respective industries, while their wife and mother pursues her travels abroad, with the aim of a general expanding and uplifting. Incidentally I explain the customs of my country and expatiate upon the peculiarities of the national temperament."

"Most interesting, most unusual!" murmured Bruno.

"But you are standing. Pray sit on my carriage-step—one of you, at least. The other shall have a chair. Pietro! Cesare! will nobody—"

"Never mind, madam," said Bruno, motioning von Kaltenau toward the step; "I can stand with perfect ease."

The lady scrutinized the two young men carefully. "I am sure you do not understand me even yet," she said. "But you shall. Drive some of these annoying country-folk away, and then, to beguile the tedium of the hours, I will relate to you the story of my life."

"That will be charming, indeed," declared the Freiherr.

The crowd now thinned, and the oc-

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cupant of the coach, abating no jot in her majestic port, began her recital.

"I am a Lady of Quality.

"Though born in a remote and unimportant quarter of the globe, I was conscious of my quality almost from the start—I enjoyed an intuitive sense of it.

"The town where I first saw the light of day was very new and very small, and not, from any point of view, particularly choice. The population, almost exclusively male, had its peculiarities. Most of the men wore their trousers in their boots and carried their pistols in their trousers. Others wore feathers in their hair, and others still wore their hair tied in queues."

"Delightful!" interjected the Freiherr.

"I will waste no further words upon my native town," pursued the Lady of Quality. "I soon came to feel it no place for such as I, and at seventeen I left it never to return.

"I set my face eastward, and having traversed an interval of many hundred miles, I reached a town that represented the best I then knew, and realized the highest ideals I had been able, thus far, to form. But I soon exhausted the educational and social possibilities of this frontier community—it was really little more—and moved on, still eastward, to a vast city built in a swamp and composed of many towering steel cages.

"Here I was married; here worldly prosperity first overtook me, and here I came to feel still more strongly the stirring of ambition for better things—an ambition that has ever been my propelling power, and has, indeed, brought me where you meet me to-day.

"As I say, we prospered there; we came to own two or three of the steel cages, and own them yet.

"But mere material success was not enough—there are other needs that one must meet and other ambitions that

one must gratify. Your seat is comfortable?"—to the Freiherr.

"Perfectly," he responded. "Pray proceed."

"Rumors reached me of another city, larger and grander still, that rose a thousand miles eastward upon the borders of the sea—a city where social eminence was worth its cost indeed! I journeyed to that city and took my family with me. They are there now."

"The husband?"

"Yes."

"And the three sons?"

"Two of them. The third—"

"The third?"

"He has gone back to my birthplace—"

"Ah, filial devotion!"

—"which is now quite other than it was—"

"C'est dommage!"

—"and there he is the sole owner of a mountain of gold—"

"Ah, ciel!"

—"which will soon enable his wife to live as I am living now. But let me move on with my narrative. My eyes had been turned eastward so long that I found it impossible to turn them in any other direction. But, in truth, many of the eyes in this city by the sea had the same slant. We all looked eastward together. We looked across the sea toward the capital of a great empire, where an aristocracy and a court were in full operation, and where, as it was said, a warm welcome awaited those from my quarter of the world. It was but a matter of five days upon a very comfortable ship, and I took the journey."

"Alone? Without your family?"

"Without my family. I was outgrowing them, and felt that a separation must come sooner or later. It came just here. Do you know London?"

"Alas, no," replied the Freiherr.

"You have lost less than you imagine. I found the aristocracy in trade. Some of them sold wines; others of them

made bonnets. Half of the boxes at the opera were owned by Hebrew bankers and Australian sheep-breeders, and South African diamond-miners, and wealthy compatriots of my own. I was far from pleased. I saw that London would not do."

"A most shocking situation," observed Bruno.

"I heard of Vienna, where a real and exclusive aristocracy was said still to exist. I packed my boxes and—I am not wearying you?"

"Please go on," begged the Freiherr; "we have all the time in the world."

"I found Vienna much better. Sixteen quarterings were none too many, and access to court depended upon something more than the complaisance of a weak-kneed ambassador."

"Thank you," said the Freiherr von Kaltenau, impressively. "Your observation is very just."

"I found the Viennese nobility, she went on carefully, "exclusive enough in point of character, but not remote enough in point of origin. When they told me of Rome, with families going back to the earliest Consuls, I felt that I must make one move more. It is with society just as it is with banks and beliefs and beverages—the best is none too good."

"True."

"Rome received me and satisfied me. I think the most magnificent entertainment I ever attended in my life—"

"Madam!" cried the two men together.

"Gentlemen!" cried the lady in return.

"We saw you there!"

"And I saw both of you!"

"You wore a petticoat of quilted blue satin!" cried Bruno, glad to appease his

heart-hunger by reverting to the ball where he had first seen Donna Violante.

"And carried a gilded crook tied with a blue satin ribbon," contributed the Freiherr.

"And wore a diamond necklace of many strands upon—"

"You remember me, indeed. Yes, I appeared as a mere shepherdess—and pray why should not the great be simple? What could be more simple, more primitive, I might say, than my present mode of travel? What value has time? What charm has pomp? I am resolved to reconquer leisure and simplicity together."

"But Rome," the Freiherr reminded her.

"The rage for perfection came upon me; the momentum gathered by long-continued motion was too strong to be withstood. Word came to me of some Sicilian city where a strain older than that of the oldest Roman blood yet lingered; a city whose palaces reflect the immemorial East upon their fronts and even in their names; a city that mingles with the strain of the primeval and mysterious Orient the blood of the Norman race that has imposed itself as an aristocracy upon every people with which it has come in contact. This city is my goal. There I shall be satisfied at last. Time is flying, the years are accumulating upon me, the sea begins to set its limitations, the range over which a lone woman may pursue her solitary way with safety has been almost covered; and within this city, if anywhere, my ambitions must be appeased. For me," she ended, with a tone of blended hope and fear, "it is the Last Refuge."