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**The Romance of a Marriage.**

CHAPTER XLIII.

"That is true, Rick," she murmurs, meekly. "Forgive me. But—but it is so much for you to give up—you who have never known what it is to be poor. Five hundred a year seems so much to me; but to you—"

He gets up and bends over her.

"You forget," he says in the half-whisper which Paula loves to hear, "that it is five hundred a year with you—a million without you would be of no use. My darling, I know something of life; you'll admit that? Well, then, if I am not mistaken, I am about to begin life, if to be happy is to live. Up till now I have only existed. I am going now. The carpenter—an awful man, who scratches his head at every other word—is to meet me at the cottage respecting some repairs; and then I am going into the town to look up the man about the furniture. I suppose—wisely—you won't give me any lunch?"

"Certainly not," she retorts, laughing. "We must respect the conveniences. Wait till Alice comes home."

"Very well," he says, resignedly. "At any rate, you will be ready at six o'clock. I'll come up for you. Will you give me a kiss?"

She says "No" emphatically enough; but when he bends down and takes her in his arms, her lips meet his.

He goes, reluctantly enough, and Paula stands, shading her eyes and watching him, till the tall figure vanishes in the distance; then, with a smile of perfect happiness on her face, she turns to enter the house. As she does so a voice speaks her name, and looking back, she sees someone keeping discreetly behind the rose-bush that trails over the verandah.

For a moment she can scarcely believe her eyes; but as the figure comes forward cautiously, she stands, and stares, and exclaims, "Major Vericourt!" in a tone of startled astonishment.

"Hush! My dear young lady, control your surprise!" he says, with a hurried, nervous glance round the terrace. "I am not a ghost, I assure you."

Though he is certainly not a ghost, the exquisite major is scarcely more than a shadow of his former self.

A change, a marvellous change, has come over him. With awed surprise Paula sees that the once upright figure is bent, and that the hand which used to finger the gold-headed cane with juvenile gracefulness, now grasps it as if for support. The wig, the faultless wig, too, no longer hides the ravages of time, and the thin face, formerly so admirably got up, is marked with wrinkles. In short, old age, which the major has kept at bay so long, has refused to remain at arm's length any longer, and has fallen upon him like a relentless enemy upon a beleaguered town. There is no disputing the awful fact: the major is, at last, an old man!

"I—I beg your pardon," says Paula, gently, but still with a fixed stare of astonishment; "but—I did not know you were in Fowls. Will you come and sit down?"

He came slowly, leaning—actually leaning—upon his stick, and sinks into the chair with a sigh, as of one overcome with fatigue.

Paula notices it.

"Have you walked far, Major Vericourt?" she asks.

"No, my dear young lady, no," he replies, wiping his face with a handkerchief; "no, my good friend Lord Hurstley, with whom I am staying, kindly lent me his landau to bring me here. I—I left it at the end of the lane." Then he starts nervously, and adds, with an alarm that is almost comical, "I hope he won't see it."

"He—who?" asks Paula.

"Rick, my dear, my nephew Rick," he answers, with a tremulous mixture of pride and fear. "He has gone, my dear, you are sure he has gone?" gazing nervously about him.

"Yes, oh, yes," says Paula. "He has been gone some moments. Did you want to see him?"

"No, no," he answers, then he begins to whimper. "It's a dreadful thing that an old man can't see his only nephew, the boy he has worked and toiled for all his life. Dreadful!" Then he recovers himself, and turns apologetically. "My dear, I'm an old man; you must forgive me, I didn't want to annoy you."

"You don't annoy me," says Paula, compassionately. "Let me get you some refreshment; you need not be afraid, Sir Herrick is not coming back," for the old man still peers about his apprehensively.

"Thank you, my dear. A glass of water, if you will be so good."

Paula goes in and brings him a glass of weak brandy-and-water, and he takes it from the salver with a faint imitation of his old, courtly air.

"Thanks, my dear; a glass of water from your fair hands is pectar indeed!" he says, piteously, "much changed. This year has—has played the deuce with me. But Rick—my nephew's conduct—has been far worse than this awful climate."

Paula flushes.

"Sir Herrick and I are—are to be married, major," she says, resolutely. "You must not say anything against him to me."

"I know, I know, my dear young lady," he responds, with the eagerness of an old man. "And—and I am delighted it should be so; I am indeed! Not that—I evidently wandering for a moment, and forgetting to whom he is speaking—"not that I hadn't higher views for the boy. But, after all, one must not be too particular; the girl is a lady, and 'pon my honour, sir, she made a grand sensation at that place—Nouville-sur-Mere; appeared

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Paula laughs softly.

"But I tell him everything, Major Vericourt," she says, gently. "And I—I don't think he would accept your kind offer; and it is kind, very kind, and I am very grateful. You had better let us try love in a cottage," she adds, naively.

The major shakes his head, and wipes his eyes despairingly.

"It's not to be done, my dear," he says. "Love never did exist, for people like Rick, in a cottage. Besides—and his thin voice begins to tremble—"I don't like the state of things. It's very absurd, I know; but I've been used to having Rick for so long that I can't get on without him. I'm an old man, a very old man," and he whimpers—fancy the exquisite Major Vericourt whimpering!—"I've aged a great deal during this last year, and—and things don't amuse me as they used. I don't know why it is the world alters so; people aren't so nice as they used to be. I'm a lonely old man!" and a tear trickles down the wrinkled cheek.

Paula's heart aches for the old man, so utterly changed, so broken and brought to the dust. It is almost incredible that the bent and trembling figure should be that of the only so lately spruce and exquisite man of the world, that this weak, thin, querulous voice should be all that is left of the fascinating tones which, in season and out, were always smooth and heartless.

"I'm a miserable, lonely old man," he repeats, "and there's nothing left for me but the grave. I beg your pardon, my dear, for mentioning such an unpleasant subject, but it is quite true."

"Don't be downhearted," says Paula, laying her hand on his arm. "I'll speak to Rick; he is too kind and good to refuse to be reconciled."

"Do you think he would be friends?" says the old man, with childish eagerness. "Do you really think he would? He was so extremely violent last time we met. Dreadful, really dreadful, and—and—I'm quite afraid of him—afraid of my own nephew, my dear. It's very sad, isn't it?" and he wipes away a tear.

"If—if he was so angry," says Paula, rather tremulously, "perhaps you gave him cause, major? But"—blushing—"we won't go back to that. I'll speak to Rick, and break it to him gently."

"Break it gently, that's it," he says, approvingly. "Don't let him fly into one of his tempers; they are so awful. It isn't that he storms and swears; I could stand that, but it's the hard things he says in that dreadfully cold voice of his. And—and—now I'll go, my dear."

"Won't you stay?"

"No, no," he says, timidly. "He might come back. If you'll send somebody down to the carriage with me—I—there's something the matter with my legs lately; most ridiculous."

"I'll come with you," says Paula, and she helps him to rise, and takes the weak arm firmly within hers.

(To be continued.)

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