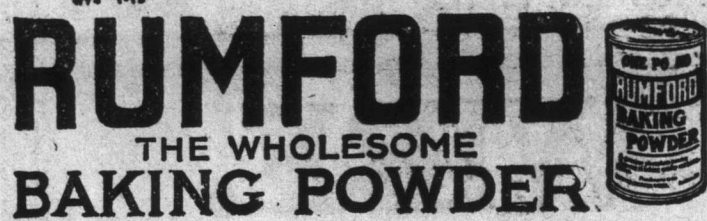


"Are you always successful on baking day? Are your cakes light and spongy and your biscuits white and flaky? If not, let us help you with



### The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXIV.  
"It doesn't matter whether it's long or short," he retorts, sullenly. "I am in love with you, and I want you to be my wife—there!" and he nods his head with a self-assured smile. After all, she cannot refuse him—him, the heir to Powis Court and the Palmer wealth.

Paula looks at the colt's head, looks at the whip, then, at last, looks down at the sutor.

"Mr. Stancy, I'm very sorry," she says. "You have evidently been labouring under a mistake."

"A mistake?" he echoes, with a smile of surprise.

"Yes," says Paula, nodding. "Quite a mistake. I see, by your tone, that you thought I should be glad to—to accept your offer. But it is not so. Permit me, respectfully—and she inclines her head almost to the colt's neck—"to decline."

He stands for a moment speechless, staring at her; then all his mean nature shines in his colourless eyes, and lurks about his mouth.

"Do you mean that you say 'No'?" he asks, insolently.

"I mean 'No!' the plainest of 'Noes!' says Paula, stung by his tone.

"Do you—do you understand what it is you are doing?" asks Stancy.

"I thought I was declining the honour of Mr. Stancy de Palmer's hand!" says Paula, with keen sarcasm. "Was I mistaken?"

"You—you refuse me—the heir to Powis Court?" he says, his voice thick and heavy.

Paula draws herself up, and gathers the reins in her hand preparatory to riding off.

"Stop!" he says, flushed and agitated. "There must be some mistake."

"There is a very great one," says Paula, her eyes flashing. "And it is this: that Mr. Stancy de Palmer considers that he has only to ask and to have anything that he has set his heart on."

He forces his surprise and indignation down, and stares up at her.

"Don't be in such a hurry. Listen to me, Miss Paula. There must be some reason for your refusing me, you know?"

"There is," says Paula, with grim irony. "And it is because I am not desirous of becoming—Mrs. Stancy de Palmer."

The tone of irony rouses what little spirit Stancy de Palmer possesses.

"It isn't that," he says, between his clenched teeth. "That isn't the reason. It's that stuck-up beast, Sir Herrick—that's the reason! You were pleasant and friendly enough till he came, and—and turned you from me."

Paula laughs an ominous laugh.

"I never was turned towards you," she says. "Why, Mr. Stancy de Palmer, you never addressed a word, scarcely, to me until the other day."

"I don't care," he says, sullenly. "It's all his fault. If it wasn't for him you wouldn't treat me like this."

"But I should," says Paula, firmly. "If you had come and said what you say now a month ago, I would have said the same. No, no, a thousand times no."

"I don't believe it," he retorts, his ugly, commonplace face distorted with evil passion. "I'm Stancy de Palmer, of the Court, and it isn't likely that you would have refused to be the mistress of Powis Court."

The name "Powis" moves her, and her lips quiver.

"Mr. Stancy," she says, almost meekly, "listen to me. If you had come a month ago and told me what you tell me now, I should have made the same reply, simply because I do not love you."

"That will come in time," he growls.

Paula smiles. "I think not," says Paula, with a still more pronounced smile and a shake of the head.

"Yes, it would," he says, doggedly. "It is only this fine swell, this Sir Herrick, who—"

"Take care, Mr. Stancy!" breaks in Paula with a smile, half-contemptuous, half-defiant. "You force me to give you the real reason for my response to your generous offer. I am engaged to Sir Herrick Powis."

Stancy de Palmer looks up at her, his face crimson, and then white with jealous envy.

"Oh," he says, "that's it, is it? Well, I wish you joy."

"Thanks," says Paula, with a smile, as if the wish were genuine.

"I wish you joy," he repeated. "I thought that was it. Engaged to him. To a penniless beggar."

"Has he ever begged of you, Mr. Stancy?" demands Paula, with suspicious sweetness.

"It doesn't matter," he retorts, sullenly. "He hasn't got a penny to bless himself with. And besides—"

"Besides what?" demands Paula, gathering the reins in her hand, and holding her whip ready to urge the colt onwards.

"Besides, he's no better than he should be," says Stancy, desperately. "Better take me than a fellow like that, that can't be depended upon for two days together. Why, he's like a sailor, got a wife in every town."

"Has he?" retorts Paula, her gentle eyes all ablaze. "Then listen to me, Mr. Stancy. I'd sooner take my chance with Sir Herrick, the beggar, than marry Mr. Stancy de Palmer, the millionaire. Is that plain enough? If I have been hard and unkind, that is your fault; you forced me to it. Let go my horse's head, please, and she raises her whip, her eyes sparkling.

"Stop! stop!" gasps Stancy. "Let us part friends."

"Friends—by all means," said Paula, with a smile. "Good-bye," and she bites her lip.

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the whip comes down within an inch or two of Stancy's fingers, and the colt leaps forward at a gallop.

But suddenly compunction seizes her, and the gentle, forgiving mood, which waits hard upon all Paula's little outbursts, takes the place of the anger and indignation which have overwhelmed Mr. Stancy. With a firm hand she pulls up the colt, and, swinging round, comes back at a trot to where Stancy still stands staring after her.

Seeing her turn, a sudden, swift crimson suffuses his plain face, and his lack-lustre eyes dilate. She is going to change her mind—she has come to her senses, he thinks; but his face falls again as she came up and he sees the expression in her eyes.

"Mr. Stancy," she says, slowly, falteringly, "that was a forgiving request you made just now, and I'm afraid I didn't meet it as I ought. But indeed I want to be friends, as we used to say at school. I'm afraid we both lost our temper, didn't we?" and a bright smile breaks on the sweet face. "After all, it was a great compliment you have paid me—I mean asking me to be your wife; and if I can't be—which I can't—there is no reason why we should quarrel. Let us be friends and forget anything that has been said on either side," and she holds out her little, gloved hand with a persuasive smile that would melt the heart of a stone.

Stancy de Palmer looks up at her with a sullen, shifty glance.

"Oh, yes, just so," he says, trying to speak easily. "I'm quite willing, I'm sure—ah. Er—er—I suppose you won't mention this—I mean there's no occasion—" and he breaks off stammeringly.

Paula's eyes lighten down upon him with a smile of scornful amusement.

"No, I shall not mention it, Mr. Stancy. I am not one to trumpet my conquests abroad, however proud I may be of them; and of course I am awfully proud of this particular one."

He glances up at her askance, but breathes a sigh of relief.

"Thanks," he says, with an affectation of languid melancholy. "Awfully cut up, and all that; but suppose I shall get over it."

"You will 'get over it' easier than if it were—the measles," says Paula, with a good-humoured laugh. "Believe me, I'm not worth caring for."

He glances up at her.

"Sir Herrick doesn't think so," he says, sullenly.

The crimson floods Paula's face, and she bites her lip.

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"We agreed, didn't we, not to mention Sir Herrick's name? Better not, if we are to remain friends, Mr. Stancy. Good-bye," and with a nod and a smile she turns the colt and rides away for good this time.

### CHAPTER XXV.

"He's like a sailor; got a wife in every port."

These words flash across Paula's mind as she gallops the colt away from the corner where Stancy de Palmer stands looking after her.

It is just the vulgar, backbiting kind of slander that might be expected to fall from that exquisite gentleman's lips, and surely should be the last of all his caustic impudence to stick to her.

But it does stick; and even as she laughs scornfully, and tosses her head with amused contempt at the recollection of the taunt, it sticks to her and rings in her ears.

"Some day," she thinks, with a sudden flush on her sweet face, and a gleam of mischief in her eyes—"some day in the far future, she will tell Rick what was said of him, and they will have a good laugh over it."

The colt trots up to the door, and Paula looks eagerly at the chair under the verandah; she feels sure that if Sir Herrick has arrived, he will be there waiting for her; but the chair is occupied by Alice, leaning back, with her feet luxuriously perched on a stool, and a yellow-covered novel hanging listlessly in her white fingers.

"Well, my dear," she says, glancing up curiously through her half-closed lids at the little figure in its close-fitting habit and the bright, flushed face, "have you enjoyed your scamper?"

"Very much," says Paula. "Is there—is there any letter for me?" she asks, with affected carelessness, which doesn't impose upon Alice for a moment.

"Not one," she answers, with a slight curve of the thin lips. "I'm afraid Sir Herrick is not much of a correspondent, my dear."

Paula laughs rather ruefully.

"I suppose he isn't; very few men are, are they?"

"Don't appeal to me," responds Alice, with a shrug. "My experience of the other sex is no more extensive than your own; in fact, less so. It seems to me, dear child, that yours threatens to be almost too extensive."

"What do you mean?" asks Paula, absently.

Alice laughs softly.

"I mean that your conquests are thickening. Like Alexander, you will be complaining that there are no more worlds to conquer. Did you meet Mr. Stancy?"

"Oh, I see," says Paula, a quick flush of annoyance tingeing her face. "Has he—did he? What an absurd creature he is!"

"Has he told me in so many words that he has surrendered to your all-powerful charms?" says Alice, still smiling, but with rather an unpleasant curve on her lips. "Not in so many words; but seeing that he has haunted the place like a ghost or a bullfinch, and asked for you at least half a dozen times in half-an-hour, I have been able to make a shrewd guess at the state of his mind. Upon my word, dear, I congratulate you."

(To be continued.)

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