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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XLII

"She is ill—very ill!"

"Very ill," replies Weston, with a dry sob.

"I will come," he says, just raising his hand as a sign for her to precede him; and Weston, drawing her shawl round her, leads the way up the road to the cliff and into the hall, with its rare draperies and choice flowers.

Without a word, she motions Sir Herrick to a seat in the hall; but he stands with his hands folded across his broad chest, his eyes watching the sea, now rolling out with a dull, slow, apathetic motion.

Though he has come to see Flossie Hamilton, his old, boyish passion, all his thoughts are of Paula, of her exquisite loveliness, of her dark eyes, with that strange, mystic light in them; of the touch of her soft white hand; and, lastly, of the strange look which she bent on him, as Stancy de Palmer, her future husband, carried her off.

"And that brute in human form will have the right to call her his own!" he mutters, as he stands with bent head and weary, haggard face—"to call her his own, to hold her in his arms, to kiss the lips I have kissed! By Heaven! I am tempted to pick a quarrel with him and shoot him out on the hills there! Oh, my Paula! my beautiful bird, so bright and happy as I found you only a year ago—only a year ago!"

Weston's respectful finger upon his arm recalls him to the situation.

"Will you come in now, Sir Herrick? You"—she hesitates, and a tear grows in her eyes—"you will find her much changed—"

"Is she up?" he asks.

"She has not been to bed all night. Sometimes she lies on the couch by the window all night long—it's so warm and soft-like here. She has

been much worse for a week past, but easier in her mind and more resolute than a young lady called—a young lady she made acquaintance with."

Sir Herrick listens, only half-comprehending; and Weston opens the door of the room and stands aside to let him pass.

The room is so shaded with Indian curtains of a dark hue that it looks dim in comparison with the sunlight in the hall; and the thin, graceful little figure reclining on the couch, and wrapped in a soft cream dressing-gown, appears almost ethereal in the faint light.

Prepared as he has been, Sir Herrick starts as his eyes fall upon the well-known face. Altered indeed it is, and yet how beautiful still—even more beautiful, for the peace which has fallen upon her has subdued the restlessness of the dark-blue eyes; and there is a peaceful smile on the curved lips very different to that which used to sit across them in the old days of the Frivolity and Raglan Street.

For a moment he stands looking down at her, and she meets his eyes with a calm smile; and it is she who speaks first.

"Well, Rick," she says—and he notices how low and feeble the musical voice has grown—"you have come, then. Did you enjoy the ball?"

He is silent for a moment; then he takes the hand she draws from the rug that covers her, and holds it in his own.

"Have you been ill?" he says in a low voice, full of remorse and misery—a man's misery carefully hidden and suppressed.

She nods lightly.

"Yes, I suppose so. You are sorry? Don't be—there is no cause. You think that—that what passed between us was the reason. It is not; I should have been like this if—nothing had happened. They tell me now—why didn't they tell me before, when there was time—that it was bound to come. So don't look so sorry, please. And you will sit down? It hurts me to look up so high."

He sinks into a chair which Weston has put beside the couch, and stares at the carpet.

"Have you grown taller," she says, almost to herself, "or is it because you are thinner? I suppose that is it. You don't look well, Rick; you are pale and haggard. You look as if you had been going the pace. Ah, dear me! And she sighs heavily; then she looks up at him with a strange smile. "But you have not told me how you enjoyed the ball?"

"I have not been to the ball," he says. "You did not send for me to ask me that."

"No," she says. "At any rate, you are not altogether changed; you have the old habit of going to the point. I might have known you were not at the ball."

And she touches the sleeve of his morning-coat with her white, thin forefinger.

"Tell me about yourself," he says in the same low voice. "How—how did you run down like this?" and he

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glances reluctantly at the thin figure and pale face.

She laughs a low, musical laugh.

"It is the old story, Rick. How did it commence? Didn't you hear?"

"I have heard nothing," he says, concisely. "I left England the day after—after I parted from you. I should have left the same day, but that I had to see Major Vericourt"—his lips tighten as he mentions the name, and Flossie notices that he does not say "my uncle!" "I have heard nothing. I have not been in England since then, and reached here only yesterday afternoon."

She looks at him thoughtfully, and once more the pale lips murmur, "Poor Rick!" Then she goes on:

"Well, it is a short story. After you left, I—I stumbled over something, and the shock caused me to break a blood vessel—don't start and look like that!—I tell you I fell! I didn't appear at the Frivolity again—they never heard that great song of mine any more, Rick. Wasn't it a loss?" And she laughs—a laugh more sad to hear than a groan. "Then—and let me see—oh, I saw doctors—ever so many; they made me—and I came here—I have been to Nice, and all sorts of places, and each has done me a wonderful deal of good, as you see, and she holds up her arm with a gently sarcastic smile, "and here I am. That's all!"

He is silent, his eyes fascinated by the thin arm, which has dropped heavily on the dark fur.

"But—but something can be done," he murmurs, hoarsely.

"Oh, yes, a great deal!" she says in the same tone of high banter. "I am better, much better than I have been. But if I didn't send for you to ask you about the ball, neither did I talk about my most insignificant self. You say you only came yesterday afternoon?"

He nods.

"Then you haven't heard from other lips the story I sent for you to tell you?"

He stares at her absently.

"What do you mean?" he asks, wearily.

She puts her hand to her lips and coughs, panting softly afterwards with a weary gesture.

"It is a short story, Rick. It will amuse you, even though you haven't been to bed all night. Sit where I can see you."

He moves his chair almost in front of her, and draws the muslin curtains so that they shade the delicate loveliness of her face.

"Thanks. I cannot bear much light, I who used to face the gas foals at the Frivolity. This is the story, Rick. It is about a young girl—I have met her here! Such a beautiful girl, Rick! The loveliest, in my eyes, it is possible to imagine! As straight as an arrow, tall and graceful, with the most beautiful eyes; they could make you laugh or cry just as they liked."

She pauses, struggling for breath, and strives to hide it by pressing a blossom to her lips.

"You are tired out," he says in the stern tone one assumes to hide their pity. "Don't talk any more now; I will come later on."

She smiles and shakes her head.

"Better wait now, Rick," she says. "This girl—I should like you to see her! In all my life I have never seen such hair. I know golden hair when I see it, and this girl's is real golden hair—"

He doesn't start, but his eyes fix

themselves on her down-cast ones with intense attention.

"You might coin it into sovereigns. They say she is the most beautiful girl in Noville; but that goes for little"—with gentle contempt—"and yet, with all her beauty, she is dreadfully unhappy; almost as—more unhappy than I am. Don't interrupt me! She has a story—most beautiful girls have. It seems that she was once engaged to be married to a man she was decidedly attached to—bahi! she loved him! that is better. Loved him as a woman only can love men don't know what that means!"

He smiles bitterly, wearily.

"They were to be married when—when suddenly she heard that this man had been false to her—"

He moves his hand, fast clenched on his knee.

"So he had been; but not to the extent she thought. You see, she was a pure, innocent-minded, unworried country girl, and didn't understand"—bitterly—"how a man can have two sorts of love. Don't speak! The fact was that this lover of hers had got entangled—that is the word—with a wretched, unprincipled, worthless actress—"

He moves and opens his lips, but she puts up both hands with a gesture of entreaty.

"Hear me out. One of those creatures of the hour which, as the good people declare, are the cause of nearly all the bad in the world. No doubt they are right; but—but these creatures suffer sometimes; they suffer when they happen to have hearts—most of them have not. This actress, this creature had. In a weak moment she yielded to temptation and stepped in between this country girl and her lover, and—separated them. It was a vile business; the creature sees and understands it now; but she suffered, she was punished, and"—the voice breaks for a moment, a moment only—"she was very sorry."

Silence for a moment; then he says, hoarsely:

"She need not have been. This pure, innocent, unsophisticated girl soon recovered from her loss, and replaced the false lover who was poor by another who was rich. My poor Flossie! We have both been great fools, and suffered in vain. Paula Estcourt forgot my unworthy self long ago."

"That is false," says the low voice, calmly.

He starts, and looks at her under his brows, knit together by suppressed emotion.

"How do I know it? Because I have seen her, yes, seen her, and talked with her, and learnt to love her—to love her!" she repeats, her face flushing, and then growing deadly pale again. "And why not? Am I not fit to love her? She did not think so! She—she would have kissed me the last time we met"—the hands go up to her face, and a sob shakes the thin frame—"but I didn't let her—I could not! Some day, when she knows who I am, and what I did—ah, but there will be cursing instead of kissing!"

And the tears run through her fingers.

"Hush!" he says, hoarsely. "I tell you she has forgotten me and you, everything; she has sold herself to a man, a brute named Stancy de Palmer—"

The hands drop, and clasp pityingly.

"Oh, poor girl! Poor girl!"

"You pity her?" with a sneer.

(To be Continued.)

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