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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Well, I shall see," she said; then she jumped up. "I am so glad you have come in now, for I was just going for a drive, and was wishing you were here to go with me; it is slow with Weston. I'll order the victoria. Will you have some wine, Rick, dear, or wait for tea when we come back?"

"No, no wine," he said, hurriedly; "and I don't think I can go with you this afternoon, Flossie."

"Oh, but you must," she retorted, laughing softly. "Why, look what ages you have been away; and I have had to drive by myself with only Weston all the time. You must go. Don't be unkind, Rick."

"I don't want to be unkind, my child," he said, almost sadly, he pitied her so; "but I'm engaged—" he stopped short, the words were so fearfully appropriate. "I want to see about some harness—"

"Then we'll drive to the saddler's," she said, quietly. "I've made up my mind that you shall come, and you know how dreadfully disappointed I shall be if you don't. Do come, Rick!" and she went behind him and put her tiny hands upon his shoulders.

It was more than he could bear. He felt that he was acting like a brute rather than a man.

"Very well," he said, rising. "We will go to the saddler's."

After all it was not so bad as going to the park, where everyone would see them. Perhaps, too, while they were out, he could hit upon some way of breaking it to her.

Oh, good resolutions, where have you all flown to?

"I shan't be a minute or two," she said, fitting out of the room. "Look over the new songs; there are one or two goods ones there, and there's the prince's last portrait; he gave it to me the other night. I felt so lonely that I asked a few of them to supper."

Sir Herrick paced the room, his arms folded, a dark shadow on his face. These chains held him so tightly, and were not so easily knocked off.

He walked to the piano and looked at the songs absently, stared at the portrait, which stood on a cabinet beside one of himself, and amidst numerous ones of Flossie in ladies' ordinary attire; you would not find in any

room of the house one of her in theatrical costume.

"When I'm at the theatre I'm an actress; when I'm at home I'm a lady like anyone else," she used to say.

What would Paula think and say if she could see this room and its owner, with his portrait in that cabinet, with his books lying about the table, with evidence of his presence in every direction.

He covered his face with his hands, like something driven to bay. What should he do?

"Here I am," said Flossie, and she came in, beautifully dressed in her long sealskin—to guard her against the wind that did not exist—with her neat and lady-like hat; in fact as well and quietly dressed as any of the leaders of fashion could be.

There was no fault to be found; absolutely none, he thought.

"Here I am. Been looking at the songs? I'll sing them to you to-night after dinner. I've told Weston to tell them to have some red mullet and saute for you."

"I can't dine with you to-night," he said.

"Oh, nonsense!" she retorted, smiling. "You must. You want to go to that horrid club, I suppose? Well, so you shall—afterwards. But you must dine with me to-night. You don't want to break my heart, Rick," and she laid her face on his arm.

"Well, well," he said, biting his lip, "we'll see."

"Come along," she said, with the voice of a happy child, delighted at the return of a beloved one, and he followed her into the victoria.

The coachman drove straight for the park as usual; but Sir Herrick, lost in thought and mental trouble, did not notice it until they had entered the gates; then he looked-up with a start.

"You said you were going to the saddler's, Flossie?"

"So we are; but we can go round the drive first, can't we? There is plenty of time, isn't there?"

He was silent for a moment; then he leaned back with a sigh. Fate and Flossie were too many for him.

The victoria entered the line; it was the hour at which the park is most crowded, and every minute a carriage passed containing someone who knew him; the ladies carefully and markedly looked in another direction and avoided him—the gentlemen gave him a smiling nod of recognition. All along the path, the favoured promenade of our gilded youth, were familiar faces, and hats flew off to Flossie, and nods were sent to Sir Herrick.

Presently they came to where Lord Fossie leant against the rail, his eyes in his eye, his chin resting on his knobbed stick, and at a sign from Flossie the victoria drew up.

"How do you do, Powis?" said his lordship. "How are you, Miss Hamilton? Back again, eh, Powis? What on earth made you leave town in June?"

Sir Herrick made some suitable reply. The sight of Lord Fossie was hateful to him in his present mood.

"I pulled up," said Flossie, leaning forward, "to ask you and the rest not to come to-night. I shall be engaged. Come some other time; you don't mind?"

"Not at all," said Lord Fossie, who was not easily offended. "Coming down to dine at the club, Powis?"

"No, he is not," said Flossie; "he is going to dine with me. I hate that horrid club."

Lord Fossie laughed, and showed his teeth good-naturedly.

"Tell my man to drive on, will you?" said Flossie, and they drove on.

Like the prisoners whom the Romans dragged at their chariot wheels, Sir Herrick felt himself driven in hers. But what could he do? Inwardly chafing as he was, he could scarcely resent it. It was what he had done, and been content to do, a hundred times before now, and she was not to know that he disliked it.

With his handsome face graver and sterner, and more troubled and perplexed, he leant back. The handsome equipages, with their brilliantly dressed women, passed by him unnoticed. Through all the garish show, the sweet, girlish face of Paula rose before him meekly triumphant.

"Fool, fool!" he murmured, "to have relied on good resolutions. If Paula only knew of this! Oh, my darling; what a weak, broken reed is this lover of yours."

Though she saw the cloud darkening on his brow, Flossie's cheerfulness did not abate one jot; in fact, she never was in a better and more good-natured mood, and when the victoria, having made its journey to the saddler's, reached Raglan Street, she jumped out like a school-girl.

"And we will have a cup of tea and some dinner. You needn't go home to dress, Rick. I'll forgive you for once. You shall sit down in your morning-coat. Afterwards, when I am gone to that miserable Frivolity, you can dress, and if you want to be a really good boy, you can come down and see me play."

He went into the drawing-room, where the tea was already standing on one of the pretty gipsy tables, and began pacing the room again.

It should not go on, he resolved. He would tell her now, at once. Then he thought of the scene it would produce, and his heart failed him. It would be cruel to let her go down to her work heart-broken; he would wait until to-morrow. Then he would write to her. Yes, that was what he would do. And with a sigh he resigned himself to his fate. After all, he had another day. In three days he had promised to be back. Oh, Heaven, if Paula should ever learn how these three days had been spent!

Flossie came down in a few minutes. She was an adept at quick dressing, and she had managed in this exceedingly short time to change her morning-dress for an exquisite costume which she knew suited her, and which Sir Herrick himself had praised. She stood in the door-way a minute, a vision of miniature prettiness; the cheeks lit up by the hectic flush, her eyes flashing almost defiantly, her graceful figure clad in the Worth masterpiece, herself irresistible to all but him who stood like ice and snow, transformed by his newly born love.

But even he could not help admiring her.

"Why all this war-paint, Flossie?" he said, with a slight smile.

"Why?" she retorted, gliding to the tea-table, and seating herself, crushing the costly, embossed satin as if it were mere cotton. "Why, in honour of my prodigal's return. I would kill a fatted calf, only I haven't got it."

She poured him out a cup of tea; but he put it aside and began to walk the room.

Why not tell her now? He felt as if he could not carry out the deception any longer.

"Flossie," he said, gravely.

"Now you are going to read me a lecture!" she exclaimed, pointing.

"The first day of your return, too. It is too bad! I will not listen! You shall not say anything disagreeable to-night. Wait till to-morrow. To-

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night you are my guest and must make yourself agreeable. Do sit down! You give me the fidgets! Won't you have your tea? Never mind; dinner will be ready in a few minutes. I take a cup of tea because I'm used to it; it strings me up for the night's work. There, now I'm going to sing to you. You shall hear the new songs. Some of them are not bad, and they suit me," and she jumped up—jumped up easily and gracefully, which she had learnt to do under the ballet-master and the stage-manager—and going to the piano struck into a song.

Sir Herrick listened, and through the well-trained voice which charmed hundreds nightly and called forth thunders of applause, he heard the clear tones of Paula's voice; so distinctly that he stood confused and absent, his thoughts far away beside the rippling stream along the bank of which he had wandered yesterday, only yesterday, with the woman he loved with a love beyond telling.

In the middle of the song, the footman announced dinner, and Sir Herrick, with a start, gave Flossie his arm.

It was a beautiful dinner; if Lord Fossie and the prince had been dining there it could not have been better. Poor Flossie had killed the fatted calf.

The dinner is simply perfection, chosen with the taste of an artist, and cooked—well, there are few better cooks than Flossie's—and Sir Herrick is but a man, after all, and men, the strongest of them, are softened by a good dinner. And Flossie is at her best. Never has she exerted herself as she exerts herself to-night. She is full of story and anecdote, and in spite of himself Sir Herrick is amused.

At times the ripple of the brook sounds in his ears, at times Paula's face rises before him, but the vision is less clear than it was, the voice less distinct than it was.

Weston—the footman never waits when Sir Herrick is present—brings in the coffee, and the time approaches for Flossie to put on her sealskin and go to work, but she looks at the clock reluctantly.

"For two pins," she says, defiantly, "I would send word that I am ill. They've got someone who'll take my place."

"Don't do that," says Sir Herrick, rising and looking at his watch. "There is plenty of time."

"Will you go down to the theatre with me, then?" she says. "You haven't seen the new piece."

He hesitates a moment, and is lost.

"Very well," he says.

She gets up at once, and calling Weston, runs upstairs.

Then she seats herself at the writing-table in her tiny boudoir, and pens a short note.

"Dear Major—I've done what you told me. He has driven in the park and dined with us, and is going to the theatre with me. I leave it all to you; I don't let him marry that half-bred girl. FLOSSIE."

(To be continued.)

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