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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Instantly, as if by magic, the scene is changed. Behind them the ball-room, brilliant and restless, filled with a moving crowd, heavy with an atmosphere of perfume; before them a saloon, dimly lit, and quiet, full of repose and air that, by contrast, is fresh. Paula draws a long breath, and looks round her.

The saloon they have entered is beautifully decorated, lit by wax candles, and furnished in a tasteful though luxurious fashion. A large table stands in the centre, round which are seated a circle of men and women. She is wondering why they are seated there so silently, when suddenly there sounds the voice of the croupier, calling in a monotone in French, "Ladies and gentlemen, the game is made!"

Then it strikes her suddenly that they have entered the gaming-room of the saloon. It comes home to the young Frenchman at the same moment, and he makes a half-turn; but Paula does not respond, and they stand looking on for a minute in silence.

The usual group surrounds the table. Old men and young, painted women, and women with grey hair, are seated, eagerly watching the revolving needle as it spins round the red-and-black table.

Gamblers of the most pronounced type sit elbow to elbow with novices who have just dropped in to try their luck and stake a few gold pieces.

They are all so intent on the game that they scarcely look up at the two figures who have intruded on their domain. Fascinated by the silence, Paula slips her hand from her cavalier's arm and draws nearer the table. As she does so a door at the end of the room opens noiselessly, the footmen make way, and a tall, stalwart figure enters.

With slow, listless step it approaches the table, stands for a moment looking at the game, then drops a handful of coin upon the red and sinks into a chair.

The red wins, and the new-comer takes up his winnings. As he does so he lifts his face, and the light of the wax candles falls upon it. A handsome, haggard face, marked with heavy lines of sorrow and the worst of all cares—ennui; a face prematurely old, pale, and weary, and bitterly sad; a face that the gods might weep over, so hopeless, so youthless is it.

Paula, standing opposite it, feels attracted by it with an awful kind of attraction, and gradually lets her eyes fall upon it.

As she does so the dark eyes, which lend a strange, mournful beauty to the haggard face, rise and meet hers, and with a sudden thrill, an awful shock, as if something had laid a cold hand on her heart, she knows that it is Sir Herriek.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

It is Sir Herriek! And yet, is it? Is it not, rather, a wild, improbable dream? Paula stands motionless, her eyes fixed upon his face, downcast now as he bends over the table; her heart throbs so that she fears the young Frenchman by her side must hear it and wonder at the cause; her face—so much of it as the mask leaves exposed to view—is pale even to the lips, and her dark eyes gleam through the holes in the mask, so that it seems to her strange that he upon whom they rest does not feel them and look up.

Hungry, steadily she regards him. It is so long since she has seen him in living reality, though not a day or night has passed but she has kept him in her mind's eye; and now a wild kind of gladness, a subtle sort of delight, takes possession of her at the thought that he is within reach of her outstretched hand. What would he do if she were to bend forward and whisper his name—if she were to murmur in the midst of the silence, "Rick, look up, I am here!"

Then the joy and delight give place to sadness as the haggard weariness of the pale face grows upon her. Beautiful still—it would be beautiful in her eyes though scarred and twisted out of shape—beautiful still is the face she has loved so dearly and passionately; but, ah, how changed! What months of wild, reckless, desperate dissipation stand recorded in those deep lines about the dark eyes and clean-cut, mobile lips! What a story of wasted time and futile regrets and remorse in the shadows of the eyes themselves!

Oh, Rick! is it you, or but the wreck of the stalwart, glorious youth who wandered by the stream just a year ago?

The voice of the Frenchman recalls her to the present and the situation. "Will mademoiselle wish to return?" he asks in a deferential whisper.

Paula starts and looks at him as if she had indeed awakened from a dream, then she puts her hand upon his arm; but suddenly an idea strikes her, and she bends her head and whispers:

"Have you ever played?"

He shrugs his shoulders; but his eyes, fixed upon the fascinating table, answer for him.

Paula smiles.

"I—I have a fancy to 'try my luck' isn't that the proper expression? Will you stake a napoleon for me?"

He nods, with nicely concealed eagerness. It is what he has been longing to do.

"To please you, mademoiselle," he says, with a smile of devotion, and he takes a napoleon from her purse and leads her towards the table; but Paula hangs back.

"No, no," she says, still in a whisper, "I will keep here in the shadow, there is an empty place. Let me stand here and watch you."

"But I shall leave you unprotected," Paula smiles and gently touches his arm with her gloved finger, and with a bow of implicit obedience he takes the empty chair, and throwing a whispered "I play for you, mademoiselle," he lays a coin on the black.

Paula stands just outside the ring of light that falls from the round, shaded candelabra; but she does not watch her cavalier; her eyes are fixed on the haggard face of her old lover opposite. The Frenchman wins and looks back over his shoulder at her with a smile as he places a fresh stake; but Paula does not notice the look or the action. She is watching Rick with an absorbing interest. He wins occasionally, loses occasionally, but ever with the same impassive, un-

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Interested expression. A lady, painted and masked, who sits near him, drops her fan; he picks it up and restores it to her as heedless of her bewitching smile as if she were an animated doll; every now and then he forgets to place his stake, and sits lost in thought, his lips tightly compressed, his brows knit. It is quite evident that he cares nothing for the game; that the great goddess Chance has no charm for him; and that he is simply striving to kill the time that hangs so heavily on his hands.

Presently, gradually, the desire that possesses every woman to be near the man she loves takes hold of Paula. She feels drawn towards that motionless figure with the pale, sorrowful face; she looks at her partner and cavalier. He is absorbed in the game, and like a true gambler has forgotten her, at least for the present.

Noislessly she glides in the shadow round the table and stands behind Rick. Now, indeed, she could touch him. In fact the outline of her dress does float against his elbow, and if he were to move he could not fail to be aware of her presence.

An awful audacity has taken possession of Paula; like a guardian angel she stands over him, one hand clasping her fan, the other holding her mask as if she fears it may slip from its place and betray her.

All unconscious of her nearness, he plays on; the man who rakes in the stakes, or pays the winnings, chants his monotonous cry, "The game is made, ladies and gentlemen; make the game." The music of the saloon floats through the half-open doorway, the coins chink, the bank-notes rustle, and still Paula stands, her hand within an inch of her lost lover's face, her breath fanning his hair.

Suddenly, so suddenly that Paula starts frightfully, he turns his head and makes a signal to a footman.

"Bring me some champagne."

The footman brings a glass and a bottle; wine and food of the choicest and daintiest kind are supplied gratis to the players by the establishment, and Sir Herriek drinks a glassful and returns to the play.

Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour elapse. Paula glances over at her willow guardian; he is deep in the game, and oblivious of her and everything else but rouge-et-noir; his nice, pretty little face is all aglow, his eyes are shining with excitement; there are—though Paula notices them not—a pile of gold pieces and rolls of notes in front of him. Fortune has favoured him in Paula's behalf. Suddenly, but with slow, mechanical movement, Sir Herriek pushes his last piece on the table and rises, waits until it is swept away by the croupier, then moves his chair back, and turns to leave the table.

His movement has been so unexpected

ed by Paul—did she think he would sit forever—that she is powerless to draw back, to move; and he turns full upon her, his arm knocking the fan from her weak, uncertain grasp.

He looks surprised at the apparition of a masked lady so close behind him; then, concluding that she is one of the usual idle spectators, he stoops, picks up her fan and hands it, with a simple: "Pardon, mademoiselle."

Paula holds out her hand with averted face; she feels as if the mask were useless to conceal her, not knowing, in her inexperience, that the little ban of satin, simple as it looks, and though it hides but the upper part of her face, is one of the most effective of disguises, and murmurs a: "Thank you."

He would have bowed and passed on; but with her murmur she glances across at the young Frenchman, and Sir Herriek, following her eyes, takes in the state of affairs in a moment. Her attendant and escort has forgotten her, deserted her for the more fascinating goddess—Chance.

Then he pauses and looks at her. The tall, graceful figure, so exquisitely dressed in its poetical Moonlight costume, tells its own story—she has strayed from the adjoining ball-room. He looks at her with faint interest—feels it rather a bore that she should make any call upon his attention; but he is too much of a gentleman to leave her alone in her predicament.

"Mademoiselle is waiting for someone!" he says in French, for he takes her for a Frenchwoman—remember she is in a worth costume.

Paula inclines her head and glances across at the Frenchman.

Sir Herriek looks at the young fellow with a half-amused, half-bitter smile.

"Shall I—" he says; then, as Paula shakes her head, he says: "Perhaps you will permit me the honour of attending you until your friend has finished his game?"

Paula does not speak. She knows that a word will betray her; and taking her silence for consent, he offers her his arm, and indicates a seat behind the chair.

She puts a quivering finger on his arm. Heaven, how the touch thrills through her! And he leads her calmly, absently to the table.

She is no more to him than the painted lady to whom he restored the fan a few minutes ago.

Trembling, she sinks upon the satin couch, longing, yet dreading, that he should leave her. For if he should go, when—ah, when! shall she see him again? And even to have him near her, to hear his voice is so precious.

He leans against the wall of white paint and gliding, watching the young Frenchman's absorbed face with a sardonic smile.

The minutes pass; they seem hours, days, months to Paula. A mist seems to fill the room and envelop the players. Is she going to faint? The horror the dread creates causes her to move and draw a long breath.

"I beg your pardon," he says, with a slight start; "did you speak? I am afraid you are tired of waiting. I will tell your friend," and he brings himself to an upright position.

"No," says Paula, forgetting herself and speaking in English.

He stops and looks down at her with absent surprise.

"You are English?" he says, almost to himself.

(to be continued.)

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