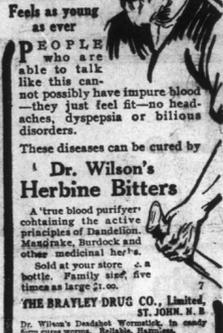


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**The Romance of a Marriage.**

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Yes, I was crying. It was foolish; but I could not help it. I heard your pardon. The last time I heard that waltz I was—ah, so happy! and now—"

"Go on!" says Flossie, looking up at her, her own face pale and strained.

Paula gazes down at her as if she did not see her.

"When I heard that waltz last I was a girl, scarcely knowing what love meant. Now I know! It touched me to hear it, that is all. Go on playing, please."

"No!" says Flossie, with a strange smile. "I am not used to seeing people cry when I play or sing. And this waltz reminded you—"

Paula forces a laugh. "Of the time when I was very young and very foolish, and believed that happiness was possible in the world! I must have been very young and foolish, you see!"

"And he—" says Flossie, with a long-drawn breath.

"He!" says Paula, smiling through her tears. "Oh, it is the same old story: he loved someone else better, far better, and—and that is all."

Flossie looks up at the lovely face, so full of purity and dignity, so full of patience and long-suffering, and she rises slowly, painfully.

"Will you give me your arm to the sofa?" she says. "I have sung my last song, played my last waltz. I—I who used to make them laugh, have made you cry. Help me to the sofa!"

Paula almost carries the slight, frail form to the couch, and Flossie leans back for a moment in silence; then she raises herself and looks at Paula.

"You must have suffered much," she says in a strange voice.

Paula smiles. "Suffered!" she says, lightly. "Everybody suffers, sooner or later."

"And suffer!" says Flossie, with a

wise shake of the head. "You are not of the kind who forget."

Paula smiles. "Does anyone ever really forget?" she says, absently turning over the books on the table. "I think not. We sometimes flatter ourselves that we do, but, sometimes, when we are least expecting it, the great sorrow, or, perhaps, the great joy, comes back to us; and of the two—with a reflective light in her deep eyes, and a pensive smile on her lips—"of the two, I think the memory of the great joy is the harder to bear."

Flossie leans back and looks up at her, a look of intense, strained attention in her eyes, her pretty, Grecian face pale and wan. That some sort of struggle was going on within her bosom anyone might have seen, but Paula was lost in the past and blind.

A heavy sigh broke from Flossie's lips, and she put her jewelled fingers to her lips with a gesture of hesitation and wistful weakness.

"Perhaps you will say, too, that it is impossible for us to—forget?" she murmurs in so low a voice that it scarcely breaks the stillness of the room.

Paula sighs and shakes her head. "Oh, no. I think it is easy to forgive."

"Easy!" and the blue eyes open wide.

Paula laughs softly. "Yes, easy. What does it matter, once the wrong is done? If you cannot repair it, and cannot forget it, at least you can forgive. Besides, one cannot hate what one scorns or what one loves. Do you understand?"

Flossie's face grows paler. "I—I think I understand," she says, and her fingers close on to the palms of her hands. "Yes"—gazing at the lovely face so calm and serene in its purity and nobleness, gazing up at it with a childish kind of wonder as if it were the face of a superior being—"you, you are noble, while I—I— I—"

"And the red lips open and show a line of white ivory. "If I hate, I hate to the death! While you"—she stops—"would you be very angry if I asked you a question?" falteringly.

"Ask me twenty," says Paula, and she moves and leans against the couch, and looks dreamily down at Flossie's multitudinous trinkets and rings which glitter in the sunlight like rain-drops on a marble statue.

Flossie's heart beats fast. "You say that you can forgive those who have wronged you if you love them, because of your love, and forgive those whom you scorn because of your scorn? Have I got it right?"

Paula nods. "How serious you are," she says. "And her hand strays to the short curls. The tone of her voice, the caressing gesture, were just such as she would have used to a wayward child.

"Then you have forgiven him? You are not angry?"

For she feels Paula's hand suddenly clasp hers and motionless.

"No," says Paula. "But why do you speak of it?"

"You said you would answer me," pleads Flossie. "You have forgiven him, I suppose?"

"Yes, oh, yes," says Paula, as calmly as she can. "He knows—he knew

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that at once, when we parted." Flossie's breath comes fast. "You forgive him! It is wonderful! I—I should have hated him. No, even if I had loved him, I could not have forgiven him. But she—she who came between you—you could not forgive her? Suppose, for instance—it's absurd, of course—she raises herself on her elbow, and gives a faint, sickening laugh, while her eyes fix themselves on Paula's dreamy ones—"suppose she came to you and—and told you that she was sorry—of course she would not! It's absurd, no woman ever did or would; but, just for argument's sake, supposing she came and went on her knees to you, and asked you to forgive her, what would you say?"

Paula's face is quite pale, and she stands silent for a moment. "I hope she would not," she says, very quietly. "I do not think she would—the happy so seldom need forgiveness. She is happy with him—"

Flossie starts, and raises her hand to her lips just in time to stop the exclamation that nearly sprang from them.

"Ah, I see," she says. "You think he went from you to her, of course—I suppose he must have done—and they were happy, while you—" She stops. She is trembling visibly, and the two spots glow like red camellias on her pale cheeks. "I thought you would break down," she says, with a laugh. "A saint—and you are nearly one, I think—couldn't forgive her!"

Paula is silent for a moment; then she says: "I am not the least bit of a saint, but I could forgive her."

Flossie utters no word of comment, either of unbelief or surprise; but her eyes close and her hands clasp each other very tightly.

Paula looks down at her with tender concern. "I think I must go now," she says. "I have tired you again."

Flossie shakes her head, and two big tears fall from under her closed lids.

"But yes," says Paula. "You are far too weak to bear even the mild excitement of a psychological discussion."

"Weak! Yes, I am weak!" murmurs Flossie, with bitter self-scorn. "But perhaps—wistfully—"I shall be strong some day, and then—then—will you come and see me, again? It is very slow for you—"

"I will come," says Paula, "and very often, if you will let me."

"Yes, I will let you," says Flossie, with a strange smile.

"Don't trouble to ring," says Paula. "I can find my hat and jacket. Good-bye!" and, moved to infinite pity for the pale, beautiful face, she stoops to kiss it; but with a sudden gesture, Flossie puts up her thin hands and puts them against Paula's bosom to ward her off.

"No!" she pants. "Not—not yet!" Then seeing Paula's face crimson with surprise, she catches her hand, and holding it tightly. "You—you don't think it is because I do not like you that I will not let you kiss me? Don't think that! You will know some day why—why I will not. Some day I shall tell you, but not yet—not yet!" Then seeing Paula's face still perplexed and troubled, she adds, with a nervous, forced laugh that rings sad and thin. "Haven't you heard of the superstition about kissing? You have not? I am very superstitious. So much so as

to believe that those I kiss I must injure."

Paula stares, then her lips open, and she laughs softly, incredulously.

"Yes, that is right, laugh!" says Flossie, eagerly, still clinging to her hand. "I—I like to hear you. Of course it is only a weak girl's fancy. But as the doctors say, 'We must humour it.' Good-bye!" and with a strange gesture of suppressed emotion she turns her head away, so that it is hidden from Paula's gaze, and Paula goes quietly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Oh, it was awful!" exclaims Alice, the tears standing in her eyes for the first time in the course of this narrative. "It was awful!" and she extends and looks down at the pretty galatea dress, which, so crisp and smart in the morning, is now a limp and shapeless rag, besmirched with tar and grimed with sand. "Look at me! I was ashamed to walk up the parade! And I have so few decent dresses! I could sit down and cry; and I feel so ill, too!"

"But what has happened?" says Paula, staring at her with that mixture of astonishment and sympathy with which one regards the misfortunes of others. "You left this morning in the best of spirits—"

"This morning—yes!" retorts Alice, impatiently, as she makes a vain attempt to rub the tar marks out of her dress, and thereby rubs them still further in. "This morning was fine, the sea was like a piece of glass; you know it was!"

"Yes, yes," says Paula, kneeling down and examining the wrecked finery. "Well, and hasn't it been all day?"

"All day! Where have you been?" demands Alice, snappishly. "Have you been asleep, or lying with your head buried in the sand?"

"My dear," says Paula, gently, "you look as if you had been entirely buried!"

"That's right; soot at me!" says Alice, the tears of angry irritation springing to her eyes. "That is like selfish people all over; one sacrifices one's self for them and they—jeer. Paula, I think you are the most selfish creature in existence!"

"Perhaps I am," says Paula, placably; "but how have you sacrificed yourself for me?"

"How? You know I went in the wretched yacht for your sake—to to keep the thing together—"

"The yacht?" says Paula, puzzled. "The yacht! Paula, you are a fool! I can't help it, I really can't! The yacht! No! The Palmers. Do you think I don't care what becomes of you? Do you think I mean you to miss a chance like this, that has turned up for the second time?"

"I wish you'd leave me and my 'chances' alone," says Paula in a low voice. "But tell me about the trip."

"The trip!" echoes Alice, scornfully. "It has been the most awful 'trip' I ever shared in!"

"Worse than the coach drive to Sir Wolfert's tomb?" says Paula. "And it looked so fine, too, when you started!" (To be continued.)

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