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THE WHOLESOME



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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XVI.

"I should have thought one of 'em would have been enough for you, and you such a kid, too!"

"What on earth do you mean?" demands Paula, screwing round and facing him now.

Bob emits a groan at her duplicity, and puffs at his pipe.

"Why, you know, of course. I mean the way you have been leading that idiot Stancy on, trying to cut Alice out. Look here, Paula, if you want to keep the house from being blown to pieces I should advise you to drop it."

"Drop what?" demands Paula, her dark eyes wide open, her lips apart with a puzzled smile.

"Bah!" he says, impatiently. "Fooling with Stancy, I mean. You know Alice has marked him for her own."

Then he stops and stares, indignant and astonished as Paula leans back and laughs loud and freely.

Then she stops suddenly and looks up at him.

"You dear, simple, old wooden head! Do you think I was flirting with Stancy de Palmer?"

"Think!" he retorts, slowly; "why, it was palpable."

"Oh, Bob," and she laughs again.

"Why—why, I hate him! 'No'—correcting herself—"I don't hate him, because he is so amusing. No one could hate him, unless he fell in love with one; and he hasn't done that with me."

"Oh, hasn't he?" gruffly.

"No," with a smile. "Stancy de Palmer is the acknowledged captive to Alice's bow and spear. And you thought that he was flirting with me?"

"It looked uncommonly like it," says Bob, curtly.

Paula laughs again.

"Don't let's talk of Stancy de Palmer," she says, impatiently; "I can't even think of him to-night. Bob—"

"Well?"

"Do you like Sir Herrick?" a shy blush creeping over her face, and her eyes growing tender and dreamy.

"Sir Herrick?" he says, carelessly. "Yes; not at all a bad sort of fellow. A good sportsman, I should say."

"You like him, Bob?" pleadingly.

"Yes, oh, yes," carelessly. "I don't know much of him. I know he saved me an awkward upset this morning. DA, yes, Sir Herrick is the sort of fellow a man would get to like."

"Could you ever," says Paula, hesitatingly—"could you ever like him as a brother, Bob?"

Bob leans back and laughs.

"By George!" he says; "it sounds like a tract, a man and a brother. How the deuce can I tell? What a question! Why—suddenly—"what do you mean?" and he looks down at the scarlet face now pressed against his knee.

"Bob," very softly and timidly, "I hope you'll grow to like him as a brother, for Sir Herrick—asked me to be his wife to-day."

Bob gapes, open-mouthed, holding his pipe far away from him, his eyes fixed on the little bit of face that is perceptible on his knee.

"What!" he exclaims. Then in a deeper base, "By George! I say!"

Silence for a moment; then faintly, timidly:

"Well, Bob? You aren't angry?"

"Angry? No," he says, rubbing his short curls. "Angry? No. But—"

"But what?" demands Paula, her eyes glistening impatiently. "How I do hate 'but'; it is the most detestable word in the English language. If a man is going to refuse you anything, he always says 'but'; if a man wants to break bad news, he always says 'but'; and if a man wants to say anything against another man, he invariably says 'but.'"

"But I haven't said anything against him," says Bob, but rather evasively.

"No, but you mean to," says Paula, the dark eyes glistening. "What is it, Bob? I haven't forgotten what you said when I told you he was coming. Oh, what is it?"

Bob is silent for a moment. Then he knocks the ashes out of his pipe.

"And so he has asked you to marry him?" he says, rubbing his curls, thoughtfully. "Lor', who would have thought it!"

"What do you mean, Bob?" demands Paula, her eyes filling. "Am I so hideous, so—so—quite too unattractive a man to marry?"

Bob still looks down at her, still wrapt in wonder.

"Good heavens!" he says, with true brotherly candour. "Sir Herrick, too! The fastest man about town, if reports is true—"

"Report always lies," says Paula, defiantly.

"I hope it does—about him, at least," says Bob, grimly.

"And is that all you have to say to me, Bob?" asks Paula, her dark eyes threatening tears. "Only that? Nothing more?"

Bob smokes in silence for a moment.

"And what did you say to him?" he asks.

Paula flushes, but she does not remove her eyes from his face.

"What did I say? I said 'yes,' and I would have added, 'Thank you kindly, sir,' if I had spoken all my heart. Oh, Bob," and her head sinks on to his knee. "I love him so dearly."

Bob leans forward, and his brown hand falls on her head.

"Poor little kid!" he says, and he sighs.

"What do you mean?" demands Paula, indignantly. "Why do you pity me?"

Bob colours, and avoids her eyes.

"Look here, Paula," he says, candidly, "it's all very fine; but—but we do not know much of this Sir Herrick, and what we do know—"

"Well!" he defiantly.

"Doesn't redound to his credit?"

A long, deep-drawn sigh.

"But," says Bob, puffing at his pipe, "that may be all past and gone, and if it is, why—why—I hope you will be happy, Paula."

At this she lifts her head and looks at him.

"Happy!" she says, with a long-drawn breath. "Why, Bob, I feel so happy to-night that it overcomes, oppresses me. Bob, did you ever know what it is to love?"

A brick-dust red sets on Bob's face.

"If you did, you would know what I feel to-night. But you cannot. Oh, Bob, wish me joy and happiness! I want to hear you say it. Even if you don't feel it, say it, Bob!"

Sentiment is not much in Bob's way; but something, something strangely touching in the tones of the sweet, trembling voice goes to his heart, and he lets his hand fall on the ruffled hair, with its shades of bronze glistening in the lamp-light, and his eyes soften.

"Poor little kid!" he says. "Of course I wish you every joy and happiness. Didn't I say so just now?"

"But as if you didn't think it possible," murmurs Paula, reproachfully.

"Well, I wish it you again," says Bob, more cheerily. "And, by George! Sir Herrick is a lucky fellow, and—"

I say, Paula," with a sudden start, "what about the major?"

Paula looks up at him questioningly.

"The major, Bob?"

"Yes," he nods. "You know—it's no secret—our friend Sir Herrick is considerably poor, and looks to that exquisite humbug—I beg pardon for speaking disrespectfully of your future relative, young 'un, but he is a humbug, isn't he?—Sir Herrick looks to him for the coin. What will the major say?"

Paula's face winces a little; but she smiles bravely.

"I don't know. I don't care, if Herrick doesn't. What does it matter? I don't want his money. I'd rather be poor."

"Exactly," says Bob. "Very pretty sentiment; does you credit. Love in a cottage, and all that. But Sir Herrick—oh, of course he doesn't care either; he'd rather like living in a cottage and dining off an Abernethy biscuit and a glass of milk."

Paula laughs.

"Don't be absurd, Bob; but—but—do you think the major will mind? What can it matter to him? I know I'm not worthy to be Sir Herrick's wife. I can't tell why he asked me—"

Bob whistles softly.

"But as he has done so, why, it's his affair, isn't it? I don't want the major to marry me," and she smiles as if her argument were unanswerable.

"Well, we shall see," remarks Bob, oracularly; "and Sister Alice—humph!—there won't be much difficulty there, I expect, especially if the old humbug—I beg your pardon—Major Verlocourt, agrees. Alice's only regret will be that she isn't going to be Lady Powis."

Paula starts and leans back from him.

"Lady Powis! I forgot, Bob. I never thought of that," she says, under her breath, with almost a frightened quiver in her voice. "I shall be Lady Powis!"

"Yes," said Bob, patting her hair. "Quite one of the swells, Lord! as the man in the song says. 'Who'd-a-thought it?' Let's go to bed now."

"Very well," she says, and as she slides her arm round his neck and kisses him. "I feel happier than ever, now you've wished me joy, Bob. Yes, I'll go to bed, but I feel as if I never wanted to sleep any more."

"Poor little kid!" says Bob, with a smile, and he laughs; but there is the faintest suggestion of pity in his

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laugh. "There, go and dream, and be happy. By George! Lady Powis!" and as he lights her candle he chuckles.

Paula creeps upstairs and steals to her room noiselessly, so as not to disturb the slumber of the gentle Alice. As she said, she feels as if sleep had left her forever, and she goes to the window and pulls the blind aside that she may look out towards the village—towards the Powis Arms, where the last of the Powises—her lover—is asleep by this time.

"Good-night, my darling!" she murmurs, holding out her round, white arms, and blushing rosy-red, her eyes gleaming with a tender, passionate light. "Good-night, Oh, I am so happy! So happy!"

Then she went to the glass and looked long and anxiously at the reflection of her sweet, young face, that looked out at her with great, solemn eyes and parted lips.

"Why did he love me, he who has seen and known so many beautiful women? Why did he? He called me beautiful, but I'm not. I wish I was. I wish I was the loveliest girl that lived, then I might feel surer that he really loved me. But still I am sure—yes, he said so, and his eyes looked it. And this is love!" she murmured, clasping her hands behind her head, and looking out at the night, "this is love! Oh! how could I have gone on living it? How could I?"

(To be continued.)

Pleasures of Brussels.

A friend who has been in Brussels for some time writes most tantalizing accounts of the delicious cakes and pastries which may be consumed with cups of chocolate and cream in the popular rendezvous there, says a writer in London Evening News. None of the custard or crumb-filled confections we have become accustomed to here, but cakes coated with icing accompanied by almond paste, etc. He tells me that many of the improvements made in the city by the Germans during their occupation are of the costly and permanent type, which illustrates the German view that they would keep Brussels. Drainage systems were altered, electric lighting was installed in parts which had hitherto been devoid of it, and dancing halls were provided.

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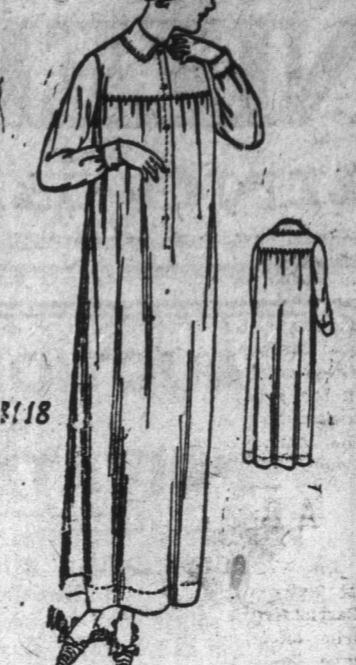
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