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The Romance OF A Marriage.

CHAPTER XII.

"Let me see—what are the moves on the board? On one side an extremely vulgar and awful father, a son whom it would be gross flattery to describe as anything better than a fool, and a daughter; on the other my poor Rick, with his hands in his pockets and his complete indifference to his own prospects. Now for the father. Well, if I know anything of that sort of man, his sole ambition will be to buy with his money a position for his son or daughter. Hem! If Rick were a girl I'd marry him to the fool; but"—the major almost starts, and an eager light comes over the aristocratic face—but, being of the masculine gender, why—he must marry the girl!"

"There is not a shadow of doubt or hesitation in the voice, not the slightest trace of uncertainty; it is almost as if he had but to pronounce the decree to ensure its accomplishment."

"The sugar-baker would be only too delighted to have a baronet for his son-in-law, to have a future baronet for his grandson, and Rick would be master of Powis—I'd make that a part of the bargain. Rick would come into his own again," and the major leaned back and closed his eyes with ineffable satisfaction.

"What a providential thing that I met with them this afternoon. And yet—with a solemn shake of the head—"some persons talk of 'chance'! There isn't such a thing; it is Fate—Fate!" He gets up as he makes this reflection, and looks round. "A pleasant room, with a truly noble aspect, I really think I shall reserve this room for my own when Rick comes into possession. But we shall see—we shall see."

And with a serene and restful smile, but with a busy, scheming brain behind it, the major, once more ascertaining that his wig is all right, makes a brief toilette and goes down-stairs.

And it is just about this time that the two forms are resting on the moss-bank in the plantation. If the astute major could but have known it, the game had already commenced; but if he had known it—if it had been possible for him to have seen and overheard Sir Herrick's passionate confession—it would have made no difference. He was not the man to permit a simple love-affair—a boy-and-girl folly, as he would have called it—to interfere with his plans. Indeed, it needed only a little opposition of this kind to give a zest to the game, and call forth all his powers of intrigue.

The gorgeous Palmer servants had not been idle while the major had been cogitating. The word had gone forth that the famous Major Vericourt, Sir Herrick's uncle, was to dine in the house; and Mr. Palmer had, with a pompous smile hidden the butler "do his best," which meant provide as elaborate a dinner as possible in so short a time, and 'crowd on all the plate available, with the Palmer crest, and light all the wax candles.

Therefore, when the major descends he finds, June evening though it be, the drawing-room brilliantly illuminated, and all that barely concealed fuss and bustle which accompanies a grand dinner at the Court.

"Some of our young people have not yet put in an appearance," says Mr. Palmer, "but they will be here directly; and I've taken the liberty to put the dinner off a little."

The major bows, and insinuates an apology for his morning-dress—his

unexceptionable frock-coat, etc.—but Mr. Palmer waives the apology aside with bland humility.

"Proud to see you at my mahogany in any dress, major," he says. "Looking at the pictures!" he adds, as the major glances round the highly decorated walls, upon which hang some fearful specimens which Mr. Palmer has "collected!"—that is, bought at Wardour Street.

"I was," admits the major, who might more truthfully have replied, "Trying not to see them," and he smiles blandly at the hideous things as if his admiration were too great for words.

"My son Stancy's choice," says Mr. Palmer. "He's got a great taste for that sort of thing. Ought to have been a harlot—that is, of course," hastily, "if there had been any necessity for his being anything; which there ain't."

"Fortunate youth," murmurs the major, with a complacent smile. "Yes, I perceive that he is a young man of taste; inherits it from his father, my dear sir, that is evident," and he levels his eye-glass at the various gaudily coloured articles of glass and china that do not ornament the room.

Mr. Palmer lays his red hand on his waistcoat and makes a bow, while his face grows purple with pleasure. "Well, major," he says, "I was always genteel, I hope; always liked pretty things about me. I think I've made an improvement in this old place. Of course you remember it as it was?"

The major waves his white hand, no trace of the indignant contempt which rises in his bosom traceable in his face.

"I'll show you what I've done when we get an opportunity," says Mr. Pal-

mer. "Eh? Dinner? Very Well. Where are the young people? Oh, here they are," as Stancy and Alice and Bob, the latter looking as if the whole thing were a nuisance, and his dress-clothes in particular a hardship almost too great to be borne.

Alice has found time to don her daintiest dress, and looks as cool and sweet as a garden lily. Paula, on the other hand, has just had time to change her dusty dress for a plain, simple saten of cream, with a big sash; but, strange to say, it is upon her that the major's eye-glass falls, and if he uttered his thoughts aloud he would have said, "There's the promise of a beautiful woman."

"And where's Sir Herrick?" says Mr. Palmer, with a marked air of disappointment. "I do hope he's coming." There is silence for a moment, then Bob says, bluntly:

"Paula saw him last. Is he coming, Paula?"

All eyes go to her face, and for a second a vivid blush burns there, then it fades, and she says, quietly enough:

"Yes, he said he would come; but he had to go to the inn first."

"Oh, we'll wait; of course we'll wait," says Mr. Palmer.

Paula raises her eyes.

"He wishes me to ask you not to wait," she says, as carelessly as she can.

"Oh, but—" begins Mr. Palmer, protestingly; but the major breaks in with a smile—the major wants his dinner:

"I really think, if you will allow me, that Herrick would rather we did not wait."

"As you please, of course, major," assents Mr. Palmer. "Will you give your arm to Miss Estcourt?"

With courtesy grace the major leads Alice in, and the rest follow. Paula finds herself by chance sitting next the empty chair reserved for Sir Herrick, with Stancy on the other side; that estimable young gentleman has, with the change of clothes, regained all his old confidence and self-satisfaction, and inwardly rejoicing at the absence of Sir Herrick begins to pay Paula immediate attention.

"So glad you weren't hurt this morning," he says, affectedly.

"Well, I don't know yet," responds Paula, mischievously; "one doesn't discover at once whether one is injured or not, you know."

"Awful nuisance," he says. "It really

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wasn't my fault, you know; if Sir Herrick hadn't interfered I should have pulled them round."

"I thought you'd say so," says Paula, looking at him with an innocent face.

"Oh, yes, anyone could see that," he says, confidently. "Stupid thing to interfere with a man who's got the reins. I expect you've tried out, walking all that way. Dreadful bore for you."

The faintest flush comes into Paula's face as she thinks of that homeward walk and all its delicious ecstasy.

"I wasn't much bored," she says, quietly.

"I suppose Sir Herrick is quite knocked out, as he doesn't put in an appearance?" he goes on, with a sneer. "Got a shock, perhaps; he seems awfully nervous."

"I don't know," says Paula. "You must let me give you a ride in the new dog-cart," he says, condescendingly. "Tandem, you know. We shan't have anybody to interfere with us there."

Paula colours angrily. What does he mean by it? Hitherto he has confined his attentions to Alice. Alice can ride in the dog-cart if she likes, but as for her—Something like an angry refusal rises to her lips, when the door opens and the footman announces Sir Herrick.

Paula keeps her eyes down, and bends over her plate, determined to crush down the blush which threatens to rise to her face, determined also that she will not look up. But the temptation is irresistible, and when she lifts her eyes slowly, and with forced carelessness, she almost starts.

Is this tall, patrician-looking figure the indolent young man, dressed in a suit of cords, she parted with scarcely an hour ago!

The sensation of surprise and awe were girlish and unsophisticated, of course, but scarcely without reason, for Sir Herrick was one of those men who, distinguished-looking in any dress, look particularly so in evening attire. As he stood in the doorway, his glance slowly travelling round—stood in the assured, easy attitude peculiar to a well-bred, highly bred man—the difference between him and Stancy was marvellous.

Stancy, with all his Poole-cut clothes and gorgeous jewellery, seemed to shrink into a commonplace young man disguised as a gentleman, and Mr. Palmer appeared twice as red and common-looking; the major alone bore the comparison.

The feeling of pride that shot through Paula's heart as she thought, "and this prince among men belongs to me," was girlish, too, but equally reasonable.

With just a smile and a little bow that comprehends them all, Sir Herrick follows the butler to the empty chair and takes his place, and the butler brings him his soup.

"Hope you'll forgive us for going on, Sir Herrick," says Mr. Palmer, apologetically. "Your uncle thought you'd prefer that we didn't wait."

"My uncle is always right," says Sir Herrick, calmly. "I should have been sorry if you had waited."

Then he goes on with his soup, and not a word does he speak; but Paula is satisfied, for, as he takes his seat, his hand just touches her arm, lightly as a feather, but as distinct a caress as if he had kissed it.

(To be Continued.)

Fashion Plates.

A PRETTY FROCK IN OVER-
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3039. This dress could be developed in brown charmeuse andorgette, or in black velvet and satin; figured silk and gabardine, or other combinations may be used. The sleeve is a new style feature.

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