

The Romance of Marriage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"I'm afraid I never tried 'em," says Sir Herrick; "but I'm sure if I had, I should find that I was awfully bad."

"Cie," he worse than I am," says Bob, carefully. "I can't add up a column of figures without muddling them. If you'll believe me, I've made—I have tried it three times—it comes to 128, 248, and 376. I've given it up now. Have you had any breakfast? Yes? Oh, I say, speaking of breakfast, you don't happen to have seen Paula anywhere, do you? She has cut off somewhere." Then he stops, arrested by the look on Sir Herrick's face.

"Your sister is outside," he says. "No, don't call her. Bob—yet don't mind me calling you Dick, I hope?"

"Not a bit. Well?"

Sir Herrick pauses a moment; then he looks straight into Bob's honest eyes.

"I've come to ask you if you have any objection to my marrying your sister Paula," he says, simply and calmly. Then, as Bob sits silent, he adds, with infinite grace, "I love her very dearly!"

Bob colours.

"I—I think we'd better ask Alice," he says, stammering. "Alice generally manages these sort of affairs; not that I mean Paula has ever had any, but that my sister manages everything. I'll ask her to come."

But Alice spares him the trouble of calling, and enters the room at the instant almost—really—as if she had been listening outside.

Sir Herrick bows over her hand, she gives him with her sweetest smile; she looks charmingly cool and nice in her new morning-dress, which she slipped on when she saw him crossing the meadow.

"How kind of you to call so early," she says, "and what a lovely—"

"Alice," cuts in Bob, speedily, "Sir Herrick wants to marry Paula."

Alice gives an admirably feigned start, one that would have done credit to the best of London actresses, and utters a little "Oh!"

"Yes, Miss Estcourt, your brother has spoken truly. What have you to say? Wait a moment. If I were speaking to her father I should have to tell him how I stand in the world; I must tell you. I am afraid that I have not much to offer her. I might almost say nothing. I am awfully poor; but I think you know that?"

Alice sighs and casts her eyes down.

"Does she—does Paula—"

"Paula says 'yes,'" replies Sir Herrick, calmly, but with a sudden light in his eyes.

"And—and your uncle, Major Vericourt?" murmured Alice.

"There is a moment's silence; then, as Sir Herrick is about to reply, the door opens, and Mary says:

"Major Vericourt, miss," and they turn to see the major, posed in his most graceful attitude in the doorway, and regarding them with a benevolent smile.

CHAPTER XIX.

Speak of an angel, and you hear the rustle of its wings. The appearance of the major could not have produced a greater sensation in the little group if he had taken the guise of a ghost, instead of standing there exqu岸itely dressed, his fur cloak falling in graceful folds around him; his speckless, aristocratic face wreathed in its finest, most polished smile—the smile, indeed.

Bob stares, and Alice utters a pretty little cry of surprise; but their astonishment is as nothing compared with that of Sir Herrick—he who knows the major's, the Honourable Francis Vericourt's, habits so well, fully appreciates the fact of his being twenty miles from home at noonday.

As a rule the major does not face the living day until twelve o'clock, when he comes from his valet's hand, a thing of beauty and a joy which lasts until midnight. The major gives them a moment to recover from their surprise with highbred politeness, and then advances, hat in hand, and with his matchless bow.

"A thousand pardons!" he says. "More than a thousand! Don't say that I don't intrude, because I am quite conscious that I do; but you must forgive me, dear young lady!" and he takes Alice's hand and holds it with reverential tenderness.

"Has anything happened?" asks Sir Herrick, drily.

"Happened?" echoes the major, suavely. "Do you allude to the un-naturally early hour of my appearance? No, my dear boy, no! I could not resist the beauty of the morning, that is all; and my steps—or, rather, that of Hursley's admirable horse—naturally turned in this direction. Pardon an old man's anxiety to renew the acquaintance so charmingly, so romantically commenced yesterday," and he bows to Alice. "I do trust that you are not unduly fatigued after the excitement, and, may I say, perils of the day?"

By this time Bob has recovered sufficiently to permit of his closing his mouth, and allowing his eyes to look a little less like saucers, and hands a little less like saucers, and hands

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his guest a chair; while Alice, with her gentlest smile, insists upon relieving him of his gold-headed cane and hat.

"Will you have anything to drink?" says Bob. "It's very warm."

"It is very warm," admits the major, suppressing the shudder which runs through him at the bluntness of so abrupt a question. "If I might venture to ask for a glass of milk—may I, really?"

Bob rings the bell. Sir Herrick leans against the mantelshelf, "smiling inwardly," as the French say, "A glass of milk! The major asking for a glass of milk!"

"Do you want to see me?" he says in his calm fashion.

The major smiles.

"By and by, dear Rick. Yes, a little matter of business has come upon the tapis which I wished to discuss with you; but—as Alice and Bob prepare to fly the apartment—"pray, pray do not go. My dear young lady, I should never forgive myself if I drove you from your charming apartment. Ah, do not let me have to reproach myself, in my old age, with driving beauty from my bower."

Alice may be a beauty, but the parlor is scarcely "a bower," but no one smiles; the most extravagant phrases fall from the major's honeyed lips, with such apparent sincerity, that they pass for truth.

"No, don't go," says Sir Herrick, putting his hand on Bob's arm. "We'll go down to the inn—"

"My dear Rick, I would not tempt your anger by tearing you away from your friends!" exclaims the major. "If Miss Alice will permit us to wander to the verandah—"

"Very well," says Sir Herrick, coolly, and he leads the way out, the major following, with his smile "turned full on," and his deprecatory bow nicely distributed between Bob and Alice.

"Wonder what that old humbug means?" says Bob, almost before the old humbug has scarcely got out of hearing.

Alice looks thoughtful.

"Don't you see?" she says. "It is as plain as a pikestaff. He means to stop the match, and posted over in the hope of getting here before the formal declaration. Poor Paula, and she smiles with a keen sense of amusement.

Bob grunts indignantly.

"Confound his impudence! Why can't he say so? What does he want to come smirking and smiling like a Cheshire cat? I tell you what—"

"Tell me what you please," says Alice in a cold whisper, "but don't shout it."

"I don't care," says Bob; "Paula's a hundred times too good for him," and he goes out and bangs the door.

The major follows out on to the terrace, over to the side away from that on which Paula sits waiting patiently, wrapt in her love-dream. Herrick can just see the edge of her white skirt, and doubtless the major sees it, too; but he appears quite ignorant of her nearness.

"Well, sir," says Sir Herrick, "what is it?"

The major sinks down gracefully into a garden-seat, and puts up his eyelids.

"What a charming view, my dear Rick; so truly pastoral. Why is it, I wonder, that the beauties of Nature have such power to move us? This scene, so peaceful, so—so Arcadian, quite touches me—touches me, I assure you, my dear boy."

Sir Herrick leans against a pillar, and thrusts his hands in his pockets, and an impatient, not to say angry, light comes into his eyes.

"I hope you haven't made the journey for the simple object of admiring the view, sir," he says, with quiet irony, "or, fine as it is, I am afraid you will deem your trouble poorly compensated."

The major smiles up at him, and covers one daintily gloved hand over the other on his stick.

"My dear Rick, how impetuous you are, it is such a pity. But there, dear boy, you cannot help it, I suppose. But I wish it were otherwise. Why, now, Rick, did you not inherit the exquisite calm of your sainted mother—of my side of the family? Ah! Rick, Rick, that old Powis impetuosity! What harm it has wrought!"

Sir Herrick is silent, but his foot moves impatiently.

"It is the dread that this impetuosity of yours may have led you to commit a folly which might be irreparable, that has not only brought me here at this unreasonable hour, but has kept me awake all night—yes, all

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night. I assure you, my dear boy," he adds, pathetically.

Sir Herrick glances at him, fully aware that nothing under the moon would keep his exquisite uncle awake, unless it were something that touched his very self.

"Awake all night, dear, Rick!" murmurs the Honourable Francis, almost tearfully. "But I do not regret it if I can save you. My dear Rick, surely you were jesting last night—our good friend Mr. Palmer's wine was exceedingly strong and fruity—you were jesting when you made that really too ridiculous assertion that you intended to offer your hand to the pretty little girl with the red hair—I forget her name."

"Allow me to recall it," says Sir Herrick. "Paula. No, sir, I was not jesting. I don't think I was ever more serious in my life."

"God bless my soul!" murmurs the major, raising his fingers and his eyebrows. "It was really earnest. Then I have not taken my trouble for nothing. My dear Rick, have you fully considered this—awful piece of tomfoolery you say you contemplate?"

Sir Herrick frowns.

"Fully, sir," he says.

"Are you aware—I really cannot believe that you are, until I hear it confessed by your own lips—that this young lady is absolutely penniless?"

Sir Herrick shrugs his shoulders, and the major groans.

"Absolutely penniless—and worse—a mere nobody!"

"The Estcourts—"

"Spare me—spare me, my dear boy!" murmurs the major, sneeringly. "Did you ever know people in the position of our charming friend who were not descended from great people, or who had not seen better days?"

"I was only going to say," says Sir Herrick, coolly, "that in all probability the Estcourts were descended from Noah. I suppose the Powises—but certainly the Vericourts—go further back than that. What does it matter, sir?" impatiently.

"Nothing; not a whit," admits the major, "if she had money; but she hasn't, Rick—she hasn't!"

Sir Herrick nods.

(To be continued.)

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