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ROSALBA; OR, FAITHFUL TO TWO LOVES.

An Episode of the Rebellion of 1837-38.

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CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

It is not essential to the interest of our narrative that we should enter into the details of the interview between Rosalba and Edgar. It will suffice to know that they took to each other at once, and, probably without being conscious of it themselves, engaged their affections irrevocably the one to the other. Indeed, it was a case of love at first sight. Edgar obtained permission to renew his visit, and though Belœil is some sixteen or eighteen miles from Varennes, not a Sunday passed without his attendance at the mansion. Of course, this sedulous attention could have only one result, and to it the course of our history leads us at once, leaving aside some intermediary events, which we shall take up further on.

One Sunday in June, about six months after his first visit, Edgar called with the intention of making a declaration to Rosalba. She seems to have anticipated him, for instead of coming forward to meet him, as she used to do, she managed that he should first have a private interview with her father. Edgar improved his opportunity, and after a few common-places, turned the conversation towards Rosalba. The old gentleman, taking the hint at once, responded with characteristic French impetuosity.

"Yes, Edgar, yes. I never imagined that your sole object in coming out to my mansion was to chat with an old foggy like me. I knew you must have an eye on my daughter, and I am glad of it, Edgar, glad of it. She is worthy of you, I believe, and I can't say more than that."

"Far above me," answered Martin, looking a little sheepish, though the glitter of his eye betrayed the immense joy which he felt. "Yet I would venture to ask your assistance in advancing my suit."

"As to that," replied the old man, "I had rather not interfere. It is a matter between you and Rosalba. I managed that business myself when I was young, and so must you. If she asks my advice, I will put in a good word for you, but I must not otherwise influence her will. I presume you would like to see her this very afternoon, so we had better step into the other room where the ladies are waiting for us, with, perhaps, something nice to eat and drink."

"Ah! here you are at last," exclaimed Rosalba, who went forward to receive the two as they entered the large sitting-room. "I thought you would never end discussing your old politics."

"Are you quite sure, Rosie, that we talked politics all the time?" asked her father, playfully pinching her cheek.

"Why, certainly, nothing else could have kept you so long."

"Ask Edgar, then, ask Edgar. He will probably tell you what else we talked about."

Of course Rosalba blushed, and hushed up. Her little game had been betrayed. Edgar, too, drooped his eyes and looked troubled.

The father and the mother glance at each other and smile, knowing all about such things. The rest of the family take no notice of this love scene, and little Agnes—the youngest child—puts everything to rights by rushing up to Martin and asking to be taken into his arms. She is the *enfant gâté* of the whole house, and a great favourite with the young lawyer. When all had been seated at table, she climbed on his knee and was soon busily engaged foraging in his coat and vest pockets. She was of much assistance to him during the light luncheon that followed. Being seated beside Rosalba, he, of course, improved his golden chance as much as he could. Now a compliment, then a question, next an anecdote, all with wonderful effect, as he fondly fancied. But when he ventured on some expression a little warmer or more tender than the rest, he would suddenly duck his head into the white neck of Agnes, as if half ashamed of himself, or else squeeze her plump arms.

"You pinch me, Mr. Edgar," she would cry out.

"Ah! little fairy," he inwardly murmured, "if you knew how sorely I am pinched myself."

Justice was done to mother Varny's nice summer collation. Her creams, her French pastry, her fruit of different varieties received due attention and praise, as they merited, for her dairy, her kitchen, and her orchard were unsurpassed in those days. No wines or liquors were served, owing to the heat, but instead there was a delicious species of drink called *bière d'épinette*, for the brewing of which Madame Varny had a particular receipt.

Several healths were pledged in this delicious beverage, and the last moments of the little feast—usually so irksome, because the guests do not know what to do next—were spent in exchanging philopœnas by the aid of almonds. Of course, Celestine had a philopœna with Edgar to be decided that day month.

"It is rather long to wait," said the young man.

"Not too long for my purpose," replied the girl with a bright smile.

"Humph!" thought Edgar, "she has a purpose in it. Well, so have I. I must win that pledge, by all means, and ask a mighty boon for its redemption."

Saying which, he thrust the kernel into his waistcoat pocket for a remembrance.

The rest of the evening was spent on the gallery fronting the river. The summer air was deliciously cool, and a faint moonlight vaguely revealed the most prominent features of the landscape. Rosalba and Edgar sat a little apart from the rest, half hidden among the convolvi that clambered up to the roof. Though they took part in the general conversation, yet the young lawyer found ample opportunities to press his suit with the girl, who fought shy indeed, and never departed even once from the instinctive modesty of her nature, but was unable, in spite of herself, to dissimulate her pleasure at the attention she received. Martin, too, was highly satisfied with the progress which he fancied his courtship was making.

The tall French clock on the first stair-landing struck eleven.

"Eleven!" exclaimed Edgar. "I must be off."

"I did not imagine it was so late. We did not feel the time passing," murmured Rosalba.

"Stay over night, Edgar, stay over night," said the host. "We shall light another cigar."

"Thank you, Mr. Varny. It is impossible. I have far to go and must be at my office early in the forenoon."

Edgar remained sitting while he spoke, for Agnes was fast asleep on his knees. One arm was thrown around his neck, another lay hanging by her side, and her white baby face was shielded from the moonlight by the folded calyx of a morning-glory. Mother Varny had tried once or twice to ease Martin of his little burden, but he would not consent. Now, however, when Rosalba bent over the child to receive her from her lover, he whispered in her ear:

"May I meet you one moment, before I go?"

Rosalba held back, a little surprised. The young man understood her hesitation, and immediately added:

"Not alone, Miss Varny. In presence of your father?"

"In that case, yes," was the timid reply.

She then snatched up her little sister and retreated into the interior of the house.

It is wonderful what changes the soul can go through in a trifling space of time. The feminine heart, especially so sensitive, delicate and impressionable, often runs through a scale of transitions, with every beat of an excited pulse. These changes, too, frequently affect character and mark the most important crises of life.

When Rosalba appeared again at the threshold of the hall, her features betrayed a transformation of the kind. She looked serious, anxious, and almost frightened. There was the same sweet smile as ever, but her mouth was slightly compressed and the corners of her lips were indented, a clear sign that she was endeavouring to master her emotion.

As soon as he saw her, Edgar bade good-night to the family and turned to the front walk in her company and that of her father. The old man took the lead, pretending to be very anxious about his young friend's horse. The groom was just coming out of the stable with the animal, and he went forward to meet them, keeping in sight, but out of hearing of the two lovers.

Edgar understood that now was his chance. "Miss Varny," said he, "this is altogether a day of happiness for me. Yet, I have one difficulty, which you only can remove."

"How so?"

"I would wish to speak to you unreservedly and yet hardly dare to ask your permission to do it."

Rosalba expected this, but was not yet thoroughly prepared for it. She answered not a word, for she was too violently agitated, and looked at the young man with an expression of utter sadness.

"May I speak?" he resumed boldly.

"You may," she whispered, almost inaudibly, her eyes fixed on the gravelled walk, and her cheek pale as death.

"My words will be few. I have them graven in my heart and have no others to say. I loved you from the moment I first saw you. I love you still with adoration, and no one can love you as much."

No lawyer's tricks about that. A plain, blunt, point-blank declaration of love. Yes! too plain; almost cruel in its bluntness, for the frail form of the girl swayed like a broken lily stalk in the moonshine, her eyes streamed with tears, her lovely head drooped, and she had to lean against a maple for support in her faintness. Let not cynics scoff, nor rigid moralists cry fie. God made the girlish heart

and it is well. The love-arrow is planted in it now and it bleeds. No foolery in that, O wise philosopher, no, nor sin either, but one of the purest, the most exquisite, the most ecstatic torments of life. That one moment in woman's history compensates for all future disappointments, sanctifies the joys and sorrows of maturity, and sheds a halo even on the grim approaches of premature death.

Edgar did not presume to lay a finger on Rosalba to support her. He was lost in amazement at sight of her, and regretted his abrupt discourse, but his grief was soon turned to joy, on seeing that she gradually rallied and stood upright. Just then a puff of cloud that had obscured the moon floated away, and the soft, silver light fell full on the face of the girl. It was supremely beautiful. It was a transfiguration. There was a bright tinge on her cheek, her eyes gleamed through her tears with vivacity, and an ineffable smile trembled on her lips. The crisis was past—the dream was over. The words which had riven her like lightning flashes had been pondered and understood every one. The wild passionateness was gone; the calm felicity remained.

Did Rosalba speak? Not a word. Did Edgar? No, not he. He would not have broken that thrilling stillness for the world. He understood her—she understood him—that was enough. The communion of hearts is deeper and subtler than any words. They might have remained there under the maples till the glare of day had broken through the gossamer web that bound them, had not the old French clock been there to bring them back to their senses. It struck twelve. They were further restored to their consciousness by a loud laugh at the front gate. It was M. Varny making game of them.

"Your horse is n.arily asleep, Edgar, but I am not."

Martin suddenly took out of his watch-pocket a small box which he placed in the hand of Rosalba.

"Open that this day month," said he, "and as that is the date of our philopœna, I give you that long to reflect on an answer."

Saying which he ventured to kiss the tips of Rosalba's fingers and hurried down the walk. She followed.

"Were you talking politics all the time, eh, Rosie?" asked the old man, as he placed his arm round his daughter's neck.

She looked a little abashed and he laughed very heartily.

Edgar mounted into the saddle and moved away.

"Good night!"

"Good night!"

"*Bon voyage!*" exclaimed Rosalba, as the horse hoofs resounded on the stones.

On going up the walk the girl paused a moment under the maples, and pressing her lips on the little box which Edgar had given her, she hid it in her bosom.

Before parting for the night, the affectionate old father took his daughter's head in his hands, looked long into her large blue eyes, and then kissed her tenderly, saying:

"Happy dreams, my dear!"

CHAPTER V.

THE SILVER OAR.

We must return a moment to the events of that terrible night when Rosalba rescued the stranger from a watery grave. It will be remembered that both he and she were transported to the Varny mansion in a state of insensibility. Medical aid was immediately summoned, and the verdict was that the girl's condition required as much attention and nursing as that of the man, because her nervous system was very much shattered, and there were indications of brain fever.

Things turned out for the best, however, and after a few anxious days, the heroic girl entered into full convalescence. The rumour of the brave action which she had done having spread rapidly through the parish, public sympathy was aroused in her behalf, and all the young girls of the neighbourhood vied with each other for the privilege of watching at her bedside. This renewal of friendship contributed perhaps more than anything else to revive the patient.

As to the unknown man, next to the anxiety for his safe recovery, was the curiosity to discover who he was and whence he came. He himself was unable to furnish the information, for, although on the following morning he had regained his consciousness, he was far too feeble to speak. Neither were there any indications about his person of his name. However, Mr. Varny was not left long in suspense. On that day the mails from Montreal were delayed, owing to the danger of crossing the river, but on the next he received *La Minerve*, containing a long account of the disasters of the ice-shove. Among other details he read that the loss of life had been small, but that it was as yet impossible to give the names of those who had perished. It appeared certain, however, that Mr. Walter Phipps, a wealthy young merchant of the city, was of the number. He had left his office on the evening of April with the intention of witnessing the breaking up of the ice, and had not been seen or heard of since. It was supposed that he had ventured on the river, either out of curiosity,

or to render assistance, and had been swept away. Then followed an editorial eulogy of the supposed deceased.

Immediately on reading this, Mr. Varny thought he had the clue which he sought. Throwing aside the paper, he took a slate that was lying on a table beside him, and wrote WALTER PHIPPS in large letters upon it, then entered gently into the sick man's apartment. Finding him lying easy and with eyes open, he put the slate before him, with an enquiring look. The patient gazed a moment, smiled sweetly and gave a slight nod.

"Rest easy," whispered Varny. "*C'est bien!*"

Stepping out of the room, he quickly summoned his eldest son, and directed him to depart at once for Longueuil, cross there and drive to the *Minerve* office with the account of Mr. Phipps' fortunate rescue. If he could learn from the editor where the sick man's family lived, he should proceed to them and communicate the same facts.

That evening Phipps' business partner and other of his friends arrived from Montreal. They undertook the nursing of the patient, and did so with so much intelligence and assiduity that, in a week's time, he was able to leave his bed and rest in an easy chair. As the last traces of winter had disappeared by this time, and the weather was very favourable, preparations were made to transport the convalescent to Montreal. To this arrangement he readily consented, being anxious to relieve the family of the trouble which his presence and that of his friends necessarily occasioned, but he felt that he had a solemn duty to accomplish, and could not think of departing before he had fulfilled it. He seized the occasion of Varny's usual morning visit to break the subject to him.

"This is going to be a beautiful day, Mr. Varny, and I think I cannot do better than profit by it to set out on my journey home."

The farmer repeated, as he had done several times before, that there was no hurry, and that the fair weather would benefit his friend much more in the country than in the city.

"Thank you," replied Phipps. "I can never sufficiently acknowledge your generosity, but I have delayed too long already and must really go. How is Miss Varny this morning?"

"Always improving, but still feeble." This had been the answer to Phipps' repeated enquiries, for several days back, and it discouraged him.

"Must it be so, then?" muttered he to himself. "Shall I have to go without speaking to her? Will I not be allowed to see the angel who saved my life, fall at her feet, press her hand, and pour out before her the gratitude of my heart? When I heard what she had done for me, I could not believe it, and now the mystery returns upon me from the impossibility of meeting her before I depart. No, it cannot be so. I shall ask the favour of herself."

And rousing himself, he addressed the farmer again:

"Will you humour a sick man, sir?" said he.

"Anything to please you," answered Mr. Varny, with a smile.

"Will you ask your daughter to grant me a brief interview?"

"I fear . . .," said the farmer, hesitatingly.

"I will not be able to leave her, unless she does."

"Then stay with us," said the old man, gaily. "No one dismisses you."

"Nor will I recover my health and spirits fully."

"Ah! that is another matter. I will, then, go and see."

The reader will readily understand why Phipps was so desirous of seeing Rosalba. He will understand, too, that there was literally no exaggeration in the declaration that he could not thoroughly rally unless he did see her. What, perhaps, will be more difficult to account for, is the fact that the young girl was not desirous of seeing Phipps. Nay, she was afraid to meet him. It is characteristic of certain high natures—and Rosalba's was of the highest—that when two lines of duty, seemingly antagonistic, cross themselves in their heart, such natures make it their religion to be faithful to both, and, because this is an exquisitely difficult thing to do, they try to prevent or postpone as much as possible the meeting of these sentiments. This is a weakness it is true, but it is excusable in view of the fidelity which it is intended to safeguard.

It would be too much to say that Rosalba loved Walter. Love is a definite feeling, and under the circumstances, no such feeling could be defined in her heart. But next to that, Walter could not be otherwise than very dear to her. Did she not save his life at the peril of her own? Thenceforth, even in spite of herself, he was more to her than any other, one only excepted.

And then, Rosalba was a perspicacious girl. She knew instinctively what must be Walter's sentiments towards her. Judging him by her own standard, she was certain that he was ready to devote himself entirely to her—sacrificing himself, if need be, in the discharge of his gratitude. In other words—though she hardly represented it to herself thus crudely—he loved her and only awaited the occasion of their first meeting to declare it.