



The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XLII.

He leans on her with all his light weight, and they go down to the carriage almost in silence. Then, as she helps him in, he looks at her fixedly, and a strange expression comes into his dim eyes.

"Rick was right after all, and I was wrong," he murmurs. "Rick was right. My dear, you have grown into a very beautiful maiden."

Paula drops him a curtsey, and laughs.

"You have not forgotten how to flatter, major," she says.

The old man shakes his head sadly. "My dear, I have forgotten everything in the world, and the world has forgotten me. And I didn't flatter. Yes, Rick was right," he repeats, and he mutters the same sensible remark even when the carriage is far on its way, and left Paula standing out of his sight.

"Poor old major!" she murmurs, pitifully, no remembrance of the wrong he wrought her racking in her gentle heart. "He has fought Time long and bravely; but the gentleman with the hour-glass and scythe has beaten him at last. Poor major! As if Rick would not be glad to be friends again with him. But as to the money"—and she shakes her head—"I am afraid the major will have to be disappointed."

CHAPTER XLIII.

"Let by-gones be by-gones, I say, I ain't one to bear a grudge against any man, least of all against a young gentleman I respect as I do you, Sir Herrick. And if the young lady preferred to my son Stacey, why, that's her lookout and yours; and a very nice girl she is. I always liked Miss Paula—always; and the way she and my girl hit it off is something extraordinary." And Mr. Palmer leans back and takes a puff at his cigar with good-natured content.

Dinner is over, and Paula and May have retired to the drawing-room, leaving the two gentlemen to smoke the digestive pipe, or, as Mr. Palmer more graphically puts it, "blow a hatter-dinner cloud."

Sir Herrick nods good-humouredly; his attention rather wandering to the terrace on to which the two girls have just stepped to look at the sunset and to talk of Bob.

Sir Herrick can see them; Paula's arm protectingly and consolingly round May's waist.

"Of course you know," continued Mr. Palmer, confidentially, "that there is a screw loose with May?"

"A screw—I beg your pardon," says Rick, bringing his attention to bear suddenly.

"A bee on her bonnet," explains Mr.

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Palmer. "She fancies she is in love with Master Bob."

"Rather a strong fancy, I think, sir," says Sir Herrick, frankly.

"Oh, nonsense," says Mr. Palmer, cheerfully. "She's getting over it. It was a sensible thing for him to cut it. Nothing like habesence, Sir Herrick. They says habesence makes the 'art grow fonder; but it ain't true—"

"It is sometimes," says Sir Herrick, putting in a word for poor May.

"Well, it ain't with my gal," says Mr. Palmer, emphatically. "She's almost forgotten him by this time; and a good job, too, for I knew he wouldn't do any good; a young man, Sir Herrick—gravelly—who can't keep his books straight never does any good."

"I'm afraid there is something in that," assents Sir Herrick. "I feel that I should utterly fail in keeping my books straight."

"You're different," says Mr. Palmer. "You're a baronet and a gentleman—"

"With five hundred a year," murmurs Sir Herrick, inaudibly, and with a smile. "But notwithstanding his incapacity for double entry, Bob is a splendid fellow, sir, and I—I'm going to take a liberty, I'm afraid. I'm sorry you couldn't give your consent to the match. I am sure he loved May, with all his heart."

"'Arts, 'arts, I'm sick of 'arts," says Mr. Palmer. "I go in for pockets. What a man's got in his pocket, that's the thing, and Master Bob hadn't got anything. To tell you the truth, I had other thoughts, and your uncle and I talked it over."

"I'll go and have a gossip with the ladies, sir," says Sir Herrick, rising hastily. "You will have your usual little nap, I hope, and don't make a stranger of me," and he escapes the confession which Mr. Palmer was going to make.

Mr. Palmer looks after him with a sigh. "Ah, there's the man for May! A baronet and a born gentleman! Ah, dear me! If young 'uns could be born with old 'eads on their shoulders." And then he settles himself into his chair and drowns his disappointment in slumber.

Sir Herrick goes out on to the terrace, and is just in time to see May's handkerchief go furtively to her eyes, and he knows they have been talking of Bob; but she comes to greet him with her gentle, kind little smile: he is a great favourite with May.

"Well, Sir Herrick, have you finished your cigar?"

"My dear, he has got it hidden behind his back, and he'll pretend to ask our permission to smoke it, directly," says Paula, promptly, and Rick produces the cigar with a laugh.

"May I?" he says. "What a lovely evening. Let us go into the garden. We shall disturb Mr. Palmer."

"I'll go and get you a shawl, dear," says May, eagerly, and she runs off, notwithstanding Paula's remonstrances.

"May's a good girl," says Sir Herrick, sententiously. "A sensible girl. You don't want a shawl, and she knows it; but I do want you for a few minutes all to myself, and that she knows."

"I'll go in at once," says Paula. "Poor May! Do you know she is so low-spirited about Bob? Last night she had a dream in which she saw him floating on a barrel on the sea—now don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing," says Sir Herrick. "Fancy Bob on a barrel! It would have to be a tolerably big barrel. But, on my word, I'm sorry for May. I have been having a few words with Papa Palmer on the subject, and he is as hard as nails."

"Let us go in," says Paula, unselfishly. "Listen! She is playing the piano."

"Only a few minutes," he pleads. "Come with me to the end of the walk." And he puts his arm round her, entirely indifferent to the fact that there may be peering eyes at a window.

They pace along the walk slowly until they come to the seat on which they sat that moonlight night when first they met. Sir Herrick stops and looks round him and then down into the eyes upturned to his, and he sees in their liquid depths that she is sharing the same thought with him.

"It only wants the moonlight," he murmurs, pressing her to him. "Here is where you stood when I first saw you; you were a slip of a girl then, with a graceful, slim little figure—"

"Have I grown fat, sir?" softly, hesitatingly.

"—A mere slip of a girl; and as I watched I could almost have persuaded myself that it was some fay that had lent the fairy ring on the lawn to dance nearer the music."

"You took me for a servant, Mr. Impertinence," she whispers.

"Ay, little thinking that I should one day take you for a wife," he retorts, lovingly; and he draws her head to his breast and kisses her.

As he does so, Paula hears a step on the gravel path, and springs from him as a tall gentleman, with a bronzed face and a luxurious beard, bears down upon them.

Sir Herrick looks over his shoulder and knocks the ash off his cigar in his self-possessed way, then starts and utters an ejaculation as the bearded, stranger coolly takes Paula in his arms and gives her a hearty kiss.

"Oh, Bob! Bob! Is it really you?" she asks, half-frightenedly.

"I think so," says Bob, disengaging a hand, and holding it out to Sir Herrick. "How do you do, Sir Herrick? Let me look at you, Paula. Jove!" And he whistles with proud admiration.

"Oh, Bob! I don't know what to do! I feel as if I must shriek out! How dare you come so suddenly? Why didn't you write? How changed you are! What makes you wear that beard? It is very handsome, though, dear. And how big you've grown! And oh, Bob, how did you know we were here?"

"Which will you have answered first?" says Bob, with the old, short laugh—"the last? Well, a little bird told me where to find you—a bird by the name of Major Vericourt. I met him driving down to Lord Hurstley's. He said he had been to the cottage. Hallo! what's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing. I'll tell you another time," says Paula. "And—oh, I don't know what to ask first. But May, Bob! She will be so glad! But you mustn't frighten her."

"I shan't frighten her," says Bob, just in his old, blunt fashion. "May's got more sense than you give her credit for, doesn't her heart? How is she? Where is she?"

"Listen!" says Paula, holding up her finger.

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Bob stands with his bronzed face turned to the open window, through which the strains of music are floating.

"My darling!" he murmurs. "I must go to her."

"Stop!" says Paula, holding his arm. "Haden't I better prepare them—Mr. Palmer? Oh, Bob, I wish I could give you better news!"

He smiles.

"I'm not afraid of Mr. Palmer," he says. "In fact, I've got news for him!" He smiles rather curiously. "You don't ask after Alice, Bob?" says Paula.

"You don't, you mean; and I've seen her since you have, I reckon."

"Seen Alice!" exclaims Paula. He nods.

"Yes, I met her last night in London, quite by accident, and spent an hour with her. So I've heard all the news," and he looks at Sir Herrick significantly.

Paula colours and draws nearer to Bob, while Rick steps back delicately.

"It—it is all right, Bob, dear. We—we are to be married soon, and I am so happy. I only wanted you, you dear, old, stupid Bob, to make my happiness complete."

"I know," he nods. "I've heard all about it from Alice; and now—I can't keep out here any longer while she is so near. Let us go in."

"Stop!" says Paula. "Wait here, and I'll go and bring her to you. Oh, Bob! she'll read the truth in my face!" And she springs up the steps and into the drawing-room.

"May, dear, will you come out into the garden?" she says, bending over and encircling her with her arm. "And, dear, I've been thinking over that dream of yours, and I'm inclined to believe that it's a good omen. Dreams go by contraries, you know. If you saw Bob on a barrel on the sea, I'm sure he's on land. Perhaps he's in—England at this moment."

"Something in her voice makes May's heart leap, and she looks up half-frightenedly.

"Paula—"

"I say perhaps," says Paula, quietly. "And if he were in England you know where he would be—not far from you, dear, he sure. And—and—now come with me, dear, and—you're not going to faint!" lovingly.

May stands for a moment steadying herself, then she looks into the dark eyes bent with such tender joy upon her, and smiles.

"No, Paula, I shan't faint, though Bob should be out there—as he is."

"Come and see," says Paula, and she takes her hand.

They have not to go far; before they have reached the bottom of the steps, May is caught in Bob's arms.

"We'd better efface ourselves," says Sir Herrick, drawing Paula away into the shrubbery. Then he stands and looks at her with upraised eyebrows and pursed lips. "All very nice and pretty, Pauline mine; but I think I see a storm brewing! Papa Palmer will awake directly, and them—"

"Then you must stand up for them—you will, Rick, won't you?" and half-laughing and crying, she nestles against him coaxingly. "He thinks so much of you, the absurd man, and you must coax him into consenting!"

"Hem!" says Sir Herrick, pretending to hold out. "It will end in Papa Palmer taking advantage of his grey hairs and knocking me down. Never mind—Hello! the battle has been begun!" He breaks off as Mr. Palmer's loud voice is heard, using the strongest of language and growling like an infuriated bear.

Sir Herrick makes for the spot, Paula clinging to his arm, and they come upon what is called in theatrical language, "a very effective picture."

Bob, stalwart as a young forest tree, stands facing the master of the house, with May drooping on his breast, and Mr. Palmer, almost dancing with rage, confronts them with furious and menacing gestures.

"What's the matter, sir?" asks Sir Herrick, coolly.

"Matter!" retorts Mr. Palmer, stultifying in his rage. "Well, well, Sir Herrick, here's a pretty thing for a father to have to put up with. Look at that, sir, look at that! Is a man to be allowed to sneak into another man's garden, and—steal his child? In the garden, sir, while I'm asleep—and—come away, May, d'ye hear? I won't permit it! What the devil do you mean, sir?" to Bob. "Do you call this honourable conduct? Didn't you promise me that you wouldn't come back?"

(To be continued.)

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