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**The Romance of a Marriage.**

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Four days, or is it four years, since he went?" This is the question Paula puts to herself as she walks the coil up the hill to the cottage, on the evening of the fourth day since Sir Herrick's departure. It may well be four years instead of so many days, judging by the snail's pace at which they have passed by.

Never in all her experience has time died harder, and she has tried so many ways of killing him, too—has wandered by the stream whose music seems to sing her lover's vows; has taken long walks with Bob over the farm meadows; has even helped Alice in the manufacture of a new dress—for Alice herself, of course—and, lastly, has put on her habit, with its business-like short skirt, and ridden the coil. And the latter mode of killing time seems to be the most effective.

Paula is an admirable horsewoman. Has she not ridden every horse about the farm since she was able to stick on their backs and cling to their manes? And between the coil and her there is a complete understanding and mutual sympathy. When May goes a-riding, a splendid groom follows on a sleek and burnished steed; but Paula needs no groom, and is as fearless as a circus performer. So it comes to pass that she and the coil wander through the green lanes and across the meadows, taking a hedge and a gate or two on their way, very much during those four days. Sometimes she goes at a gallop, skimming across the landscape, a very graceful and pretty figure, causing many a farm labourer working in the fields, or a wayfarer trudging along the roads, to turn and look after her admiringly and wonderingly; and sometimes—oftener, indeed—she lets the coil walk in his own meditative fashion, while her little, graceful figure droops in the saddle, and her sweet face grows dreamily pensive. But, whether galloping or walking, she is ever thinking of her lover up in London, and wondering what that business can be which detains him.

Then another way of spending time—and oh! what an unpleasant one it is—waiting for the postman. Who has not done it, and suffered the inevitable disappointment, the cold feeling of hope deferred? He might write a line, a line only, thinks Paula, as the postman falls each day to hand her a letter among Bob's business ones and Alice's epistles from her London milliner.

"If it were only a line," she thinks; "just a simple 'Dear Paula, I am quite well, and longing to be with you.' That would do." But he does not write.

She tries to console herself with the reflection that such men as Sir Herrick hate and loathe the pen, and ink, and paper, and letter-writing especially; that he is too busy, that he hasn't time; but she is disappointed all the same. Then Alice, whose superior smile has grown into one of sympathy and pity, exasperates Paula almost to madness. Alice never fails to ask her each morning:

"Any news of your truant knight, Paula, dear?" and even Bob says in his curt fashion:

"Got a line from that mad-cap beau of yours, Paula?" and she is obliged to shake her head and say, "No," as calmly and carelessly as she can.

Oh, my sweet rose, with the tender, trustful heart, we speak lightly of those four days, and yet—ah, yet!—who shall tell how much you suffered in silence and patience? Perhaps the coil could, if Heaven had but blessed him with speech: for he hears the faint, wistful sigh that floats from the red, half-parted lips, and feels the drooping hand upon his neck; but if she sighed and crooped out-of-doors she did not sing "willow, willow," at home; her song might not be quite so vigorous and blithesome, perhaps, but sing she did, and only a keen observer could have told that Sir Herrick's silence had affected her.

During those four days, if she had stayed at home, Paula would not have lacked society, for on every one of them Mr. Stancy de Palmer put in an appearance at the cottage.

What he came for was not quite plain; he generally came in just before lunch, sauntering in with his absurd knicker-bocker costume, and his eyeglasses in his eye, and loitered about the place, hindering Bob, and talking to Alice for half an hour, until he found courage enough to ask for Paula, which he did with an affected drawl of careless politeness, the affectation of which Alice detected in a moment.

"Miss Paula seems always out," he says, on the third day, and Alice shrugs her shoulders and leans back in her chair.

"Paula is very fond of the open air—at least I suppose so, for she spends most of her time there. I daresay she is fishing in the stream, or trudging over the fields with Bob, or out on the coil. She would be an invaluable wife for a country gentleman."

"Ah, yes," drawls Stancy, "that's what I call myself, you know."

And Alice smiles.

"She will be sure to be in at dinner-time," says Alice. "Paula's appetite never fails to point her homeward at six o'clock."

But when it comes to the point, Stancy seems to draw back.

"Oh, I only enquired after her," he says, weakly; and he goes back to the Court sullen and out of humour.

As has been remarked, Stancy and the dog in the manger are very nearly related; he doesn't want Paula particularly, but he hates the thought of her becoming the property of Sir Herrick. Stancy is the sort of man who would envy a beggar a bone, even though he himself should be sitting before a dinner of five courses.

On this, the evening of the fourth day after Sir Herrick's departure "on business," Paula rides along the road through the Court park—rides slowly, the coil walking at his own pace and his beloved mistress drooping meditative-ly in the saddle, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her thoughts with her truant knight, a tinge of sadness lending a spiritual cast to her beautiful face, which but adds to its beauty—when from a side-path Stancy de Palmer emerges, and raising his hat, stands, eyeglass in eye, regarding her.

Paula looks at him vacantly for a moment, as if he were but a lay figure; then she pulls up the coil and nods with an absent smile; Stancy de Palmer, in her present frame of mind, being less than nothing.

But, instead of passing on, he comes to the coil's head, and looks up at the mistress with a wavering eye and a sad countenance.

"Good-evening, Miss Paula," he says. "I—I thought I should meet you."

"Did you?" says Paula, with provoking carelessness. "Yes; it's nearly tea-time, isn't it?"

And her clear eyes met his embarrassed glance with an absent fixedness.

"I—I suppose it is?" he says. "Where have you been? I hope you've enjoyed your ride."

"Thanks," says Paula. "Where have I been? I scarcely know; the coil generally settles that. He is looking well, isn't he? You should have seen him take the gate at the end of the park. He will make a splendid hunter."

"Yes," drawls Stancy, edging away from the coil, who makes a grip at his sleeve. "I daresay. I say, haven't you taken to riding a great deal lately?"

"Have I?" replies Paula. "I suppose I have. I'm fond of it, you see."

"I know, because you are never in when I call at the cottage," he says, with a lackadaisical sigh.

"Paula looks down at him innocently.

"Have you been at the cottage often, then?" she asks.

"Every day," he responds, rather sullenly. "Didn't you know?"

"I think Alice did mention it," says Paula, with bland indifference. "How are Mr. Palmer and May?"

"Oh, very well, I suppose," he says. "But I didn't wait for you to talk about them."

"Were you waiting for me?" asks Paula, with faint astonishment.

He nods, and his eyeglass falls from his eye.

"Yes," he says, nervously. "I have been waiting for you. I thought you'd pass this way."

"Seeing that it is the only road to the cottage, it wasn't unlikely," says Paula, with a smile.

"Now, don't begin to laugh at me," he remonstrates, with a little whine. Paula stares down at him. There is a singular earnestness in his tone, which is as amusing as it is singular.

"I wasn't laughing, Mr. Stancy," she says. "But what is it that you want?"

"Can't you guess?" he says, edging with the bridle and causing the coil to edget likewise.

"I can't, indeed," says Paula, with a smile. "Don't touch his head; he won't like it."

"I—I beg your pardon; but I thought you'd guess, Miss Paula; it would make it so much easier for me, don't you know?"

"I can't guess, and I don't know," says Paula, starting down at him with an ominous impatience; "and what do you want made easier for you, Mr. Stancy?"

"Well, you know," he says, looking down and avoiding her clear, frank gaze, and kicking the dusty sand with his gaitered foot. "A fellow naturally feels awkward when he is doing this kind of thing for the first time."

Paula laughs.

"But what are you doing for the first time?" she asks. "You are making a tremendous dust."

"There you go again," he says, reproachfully. "I knew you'd laugh at me. But I'm serious, I am, I give you my word."

Paula settles into her saddle, and flicks a fly off the coil's ear.

"I haven't the least idea what you mean," she says. "Try and speak out. What is this business? Won't Bob do?"

"Bob!" he says, sullenly. "What's Bob got to do with it?"

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