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The Romance OF A Marriage.

CHAPTER XXXII

"Good-bye," she says. "Perhaps we shall meet again."

"Perhaps," said Floeste in a low voice. "Good-bye," and as she speaks the words in a tone of exquisite music, her blue eyes grow dim with unshed tears.

At a sign from Paula the old man, who has stood by during the scene as unmoved as if he were a block of wood, lays his hand on the chair and trundles it away.

Paula stands looking after them, a strange sensation taking possession of her. The peculiar fascination which had drawn her to speak to this Miss Hamilton has increased instead of declined during the interview, and the interest she felt has become heightened and transformed into pity.

Like a true woman, all Paula's heart had gone out to the slender, wasted girl lying upon her bosom, so beautiful, so helpless.

And yet—and yet, mingled with the pity and attraction, she was conscious of a feeling of repulsion. Suppose one went to pluck a beautiful flower, and yet suspected that the touch were poisonous, and still felt compelled to pluck and caress it; that would describe her feeling to a nicety, and the sensation puzzled and annoyed her.

"Florence Hamilton!" Had she heard that name before? She ransacked her memory as she sat upon the bench, but could not recall the name or the delicate features.

"I am getting as fanciful, and nervous, and worried as an old woman her sixth cup of green tea!" she murmurs, with a laugh. "Poor girl! So beautiful and so young! How like death she looked as she lay in my arms? Who could help pitying her? And she looked so unhappy, too! I wonder whether she has had any great sorrow. Perhaps some miserable love-affair!" with a bitter laugh. "Here is just the nature to go down under such trouble. I am glad," with a smile, "that Alice was not here."

The next moment that young lady comes tripping up the steps. Her yellow hair is falling like a golden cat-act down her back, she is enveloped in a loose dolman of soft, sheeny silk; her bathing costume—which folds into a very small space—is in her hand.

"My dear," she says, with her thin smile, "you have missed a treat. The water was as warm and as soft as new milk. What have you been doing with yourself? What is the meaning of that long confab with the bath-chair? Have you discovered some rheumatic old idler to pet and commiserate?"

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"No," says Paula, "it was not an old lady."

"Really! One of the consumptive young gentlemen, I suppose. That's better, especially if he happened to be of the notabilities. They tell me that there are no less than half a dozen young noblemen, to say nothing of a couple of millionaires, down here with weak chests."

Paula laughs absently.

"It was a young girl," she says, curtly.

Alice shrugs her shoulders with contemptuous indifference.

"I can't get up an interest in the invalids of my own sex," she says. "I don't believe in half of them. I'm half-inclined to go in for a bath-chair myself. One would look so interesting."

Paula, with that pale face in her mind's eye, rises with an expression of impatience.

"Let us go home," she says.

"I am quite ready," says Alice, with a yawn. "I hope that old hag will do the sweetbreads properly to-day. I could fancy a sweetbread if it were nicely browned," and she gathers her dolman round her, and trips off, her sunshade nicely balanced so that it throws its pink shade on her pretty face.

Paula walks by her side rapt in thought. But she looks up suddenly.

"Where are you going, Alice?" she says. "You have entered the gardens of the Casino, and is walking towards that palace of the Goddess Chance."

"This is the best way," is the reply. "I like to peep in at the doors. I wish to goodness we had a gentleman to chaperon us and take us in."

"I do not," says Paula, laconically.

"My dear, you are a prude. The best people go," emphatically. "Even the most stiff of our compatriots. Everybody looks in and stokes a little on the green cloth; everybody but you and I. You, because you are a prude, my dear, and I because I can't go alone. It is enough to make one go stark, staring mad, the position in which we are placed. Alone in this place where everybody has some friend, some cavalier to attend them."

"I am quite content," says Paula, absently.

"You!" with a sneer. "You would be content in your present frame of mind, in a convict cell; but permit me to remind you that we have not all been jilted—"

"Jilted!" and a red flush suffuses Paula's face for a moment, but the next she laughs indifferently.

It is Alice's only amusement to stab her sister with these little conversational pin-pricks.

"Well, deceived, betrayed, what you will," says Alice, coolly. "If we could only meet someone we know; even those Palmers would be something. Listen to the band. They say that the band of the Casino is the best in France."

She stops as she speaks, then moves in the open door of the great gambling-saloon and looks in eagerly, hungrily.

"Come," says Paula, curtly, "someone will see us. I hate this place, and the people who frequent it. It is a vulgar, disreputable den."

"Great heavens!" exclaims Alice in a tone of surprise and delight, "it can't be! Yes, it is," and she takes a step forward as an elaborately-got-up young man comes swaggering in.

"Mr. Stancy!"

Stancy de Palmer—for it is he—stops short, and puts up his eyeglass, and then, with an exclamation of genuine amazement and interest:

"Miss Alice! Good heavens! then his eyes falls upon the tall, slim figure behind her, and his eyeglass tumbles from his place, and his face grows crimson. "And—and Miss Paula, too!" and he shambles forward and takes the hand slowly extended to him. "Good gracious!" he exclaims, with the under-bred stare and stammer.

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mer. "Who'd have thought of seeing you here. Why, by Jingo! I thought you were in England. 'Pon my honour, I did!"

"But we're not, you see," says Alice, gaily, her colour coming, her eyes flashing. "We can enjoy ourselves as well as other people, Mr. Stancy. Is it very naughty to be seen at Nouvelle-by-the-Sea?"

"Naughty? If it's naughty, it's nice," he says, with a vulgar leer. "Eh, Miss Paula?"

Paula murmurs something coldly and with no responsive smile; but he is too delighted by the meeting to be rebuffed.

"This is—how a really delightful surprise," he says, putting on his affected manner. "By Jove! quite too jolly! The gov. will be delighted, assure you."

"Is your father here?" asks Alice.

"Ya—as, and May, too. May's best queer, you know, and ordered here. We're staying at the Golden Eagle, of course."

"Of course," says Alice, meekly.

"Only decent hotel in the place," says Mr. Stancy, pulling at his feeble moustache. "Where are you staying?"

"Oh, we are in lodgings; we couldn't go to a hotel, you know," says Alice, hurriedly. "At the first white house on the cliff."

"Haw—I'll tell the gov. and May; she'll be delighted. We must come and see you, By Jove! they'll be surprised!"

"When did you come?" asks Alice, turning and walking by his side, as if loath to leave him, although it is in an opposite direction to their house.

"Yesterday," he says. "Splendid place, ain't it? No end of fun inside there," and he jerks his finger towards the casino. "Much better than slow old Brighton, and that sort of thing. I have spent nearly all the time I've been here inside that place; lost a lot the first night, but pulled it in to-day."

"I'm afraid you won't find much time to bestow on our poor society," says Alice, and Paula colours with shame at the soft, insinuating tone she uses.

"Shan't I?" he returns, gallantly.

"I shall, though, you'll see—that is, if you'll have me," and he smiles at Paula, whose eyes are steadfastly fixed on the sea.

"We shall be only too glad," says Alice. "We are a couple of solitary, you know!"

"Haw!" he says. "I'll run up with the gov. and May this evening."

"Do," says Alice, eagerly. "We can hear the evening band from our drawing-room."

"All right," he says, patronisingly. And Alice reluctantly stops short.

"Au revoir," says Mr. Stancy, fumbling at his eyeglass. "Au revoir, Miss Paula."

Alice returns his adieu with an effusive smile, but Paula merely bows; and with a little smile of self-complacency, the exquisite swaggers off.

Alice breathes a long sigh.

"What a goddess!" she says, as they turn in the direction of their lodgings, "a perfect goddess! To meet them here, where they know no one, and where they'll be thrown upon us so completely. Oh, what a chance! What a chance!"

"What do you mean?" says Paula, quietly, but with a cold shivering at her heart.

Alice looks at her with undisguised contempt.

"What do I mean?" she says. "Oh, I forget—I beg your pardon. Of course you wouldn't know what I mean; you are so unworshipful, so absorbed. What do I mean?" with a metallic little laugh. "My good, Paula, I mean that you have got the main chance, and I won't believe that even you will be such an imbecile as to let it slip!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

"Jane, light all the candles," says Alice, as she bustles into the sitting-room of their lodgings, "and make the wretched room look as comfortable as you can. Some old friends are coming, Jane—the Palmers, of the Court. Put that arm-chair by the window for Mr. Palmer; and, Jane, ask the landlady to get some brandy and soda-water. Am I not thoughtful?" she says, swinging round to Paula, who stands by the window looking out at the moon rising over the sea, and thinking, not of the coming guests, but of Bob-of-Bob, struggling somewhere under this same moon.

Paula starts and turns to look at her, and smiles with faint amusement; for Alice has suddenly become transformed from a peevish, languid individual, into a brisk, hopeful schemer.

The appearance of Stancy de Palmer is like a break in the clouds that have loomed so darkly over the fortunes of the house of Estcourt. If Paula will but nerve herself and prove equal to the emergency—what may not happen!

"Aren't you going to change your dress, Paula?" she asks; she herself has donned her prettiest gown and rearranged her hair.

Paula looks down carelessly at the plain, dark merino, and shakes her head; but Alice is not to be denied.

"Nonsense!" she says. "Why shouldn't you look your best—for once?" with a little, sarcastic smile. "I'm quite tired of that stuff thing. You may be sure May will have the latest things from Paris."

"Poor May!" says Paula, absently.

"Why 'poor May'?" she asks, putting a vase of flowers on the table, and artfully arranging the antimaccassars so that they cover the worn and silt parts of the red-covered furniture.

"What's the matter with May? Pray reserve all your sympathy for ourselves. If anybody deserves pity, we do; such a life as we have been leading would kill a cat with sheer ennui. It was bad enough at the cottage; but we weren't quite penurious there, and we did get some amusement; but here—"

"Mr. Palmer, Mr. Stancy de Palmer, and Miss Palmer," announces Jane, and Alice turns, all smiles, with her hands outstretched.

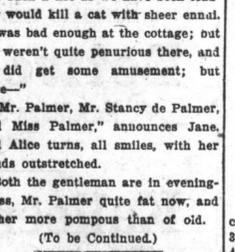
Both the gentlemen are in evening-dress, Mr. Palmer quite fat now, and rather more pompous than of old.

(To be Continued.)

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