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**The Romance of a Marriage.**

CHAPTER XXVII.

"None for you, miss," he says in a tone that plainly indicates that he is sorry to refuse her. "Only one for Mr. Robert."

Bob is Mr. Robert in the country round.

Paula takes the one for Bob—it is in a formidably thick envelope of the legal shape—and puts it in her pocket; she cannot enter the house just yet awhile, with that look of disappointment on her face, and then she wanders round the garden, listless and heavy-hearted. But suddenly the old spirit reasserts itself, and she throws off her foreboding as if it were a garment too heavy for the bright morning.

"I'll go for a ride," she says, addressing no one in particular, though the dogs bark in response. "If—if he should come and find me white and wan, like a forlorn damsel, and this should be false—which of course it is—what should I be able to say in defence of my unbelief? No, the colt and I will go for a gallop, and Black Care shall not sit on the crupper, as he does in the melancholy poem."

She runs upstairs and slips on her habit: the colt is brought round, evidently delighted at the prospect of an outing, and she is in the saddle. Alice stands at the door, with an upraised hand to keep the sunshine from her face.

"Paula, my dear, you'll have an accident with that horse, he is not half broken—I heard Bob say so. Really, it is very imprudent."

Paula's laugh has the first touch of merriment in it that it has had this morning.

"An accident! Imprudent! Why, the dear fellow wouldn't throw me if he could; and I don't think he can. I am as safe as you will be in the rocking-chair."

"It looks like it," retorts Alice, with an ironical smile: for the colt is dancing about impatiently, and pawing up the gravel path—Bob's pet gravel path.

"It is only his fun," says Paula, patting the sleek, shiny neck. "I like him to dance. I wouldn't give a penny for a horse that hadn't some wickedness in him."

Alice smiles.

"Strange, perverted taste," she says. "Do you extend it to mankind?"

Paula feels the keen shaft, but she looks the striker steadily in the eyes.

"I almost think I do," she says, softly. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear," says Alice, sweetly; but she has still another shaft. "If Sir Herrick should arrive, what shall I tell him?"

"Give him my love and something to eat," says Paula, and she calls you off at a sharp whistle.

"Poor Alice," she murmurs, her face flushed, now that she is out of sight. "There must have been two fairy god-mothers at her christening; one made her beautiful, and the other slightly—cruel! Never mind, dear, we must forgive her," and the colt shakes his head and cuts across the meadow, taking the iron hurdle like a bird.

There is no tonic in the wide world, no cure for melancholy and low spirits like a good gallop on a fresh, spirited horse, up to your weight, on a bright, sunny morning. If one could only patent it what a fortune he'd make.

Paula rides almost in a straight line for an hour, the light weight of the slim figure a mere feather on the strong, young horse, and then she pulls up at a small cottage, whose inmates are humble friends of Bob's, and who welcome her advent as if she were a princess. She gets down, and a tottering old man in a smock frock brings some water and a feed of corn for the colt, and the old dame brings a cake and cup of new milk for its mistress, and Paula seats herself on the settle outside the door, and enjoys her simple lunch—"her omely lunch," as Mr. Palmer would say.

There are no doubts and fears left now. They have all vanished; the colt has left them far behind.

She chats with the old people, tells them how Mr. Bob is, and how the grass is looking, and discourses with sweet patience on the subject of the old dame's rheumatic and the old man's deafness, until the colt is rested and shows signs of impatience. Then, with a blessing in front of her, she rides away homewards.

Presently she comes to the spot where Stancy so cleverly upset the coach, and at the sight of it her heart gives a little bound, for there, a short distance in front of her, is the entrance to the woods.

There is only a narrow path, in some places scarcely wide enough to permit of an ordinary horse to pass; but the colt is not an ordinary horse, and Paula, without a moment's hesitation, and notwithstanding that it is high felony at least to take a horse into the woods, puts the colt at a likely opening at the fence and trots in under the shadow of the sweet-smelling pines.

Presently she comes to the bank where they sat, they two, when the old world took unto itself a new beauty for her—when she heard for the first time the srowal of a man's love. For a moment she draws rein and looks round about her as if in a dream: or was that a dream, and is this awakening? Then, with a sigh, she scarcely realises it; is content not to realise it, but to sit silent and heavy with love's unspoken, passionate memories, she touches the colt with her glove and rides on.

But as she does so the colt starts, and looking up she sees a tall figure standing on the bank regarding her, and hears a voice speaking her name. "Paula! Paula!" not loudly, but with a rapt tone of suppressed joy and—ah, is it fear?

"Rick!" bursts from her parted lips, and the next moment he is at her side, and his strong arm is round her.

For a second or two they are silent, their eyes fixed on each other's, their lips parted, the sudden pallor spreading over Paula's face giving place to the blush-rose that generally holds throne there.

It is so sudden, so unexpected, that motionless and accept the fierce joy

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of his presence. He is the first to speak.

"My darling!" he murmurs. "I scarcely dared hope, and yet something drew me here!"

She draws a long-breath and awakens.

"When—" she says.

"I came down this morning," he answers, knowing by lovers' instincts what she would ask, and hastens to reply that she may have time to recover. "Only this morning, I reached the cottage a quarter of an hour after you had left—only a quarter of an hour. I went down to the stream, and not finding you there I came on to the wood—drawn here by magic charms, Paula."

"Didn't—didn't they tell you I was riding?" she asks, with a puzzled smile. "No," he says; "they—Alice; I mean—forgot it, I suppose."

There is silence for a moment, during which his eyes devour her with love-hunger.

How beautiful she looks in the dark, close-fitting habit, showing every graceful line and curve of her slim, girlish figure; and her pure, beautiful face, all glowing with the joy of meeting him!

Oh, Heaven! if he were to lose her! if the punishment for his past folly should take that shape, it would be more than he could bear.

"Won't you come down and rest a little while?" he murmurs, his voice just audible. It seems as if he could not speak too tenderly, too softly.

She shakes her head, then she gives him her hand and slips from the saddle. He slings the bridle over his right arm, and puts the other around her.

"You did not expect me—and yet I am beyond my time?" he says.

She gives a start. In the joy of his advent she had clean forgotten that awful letter, and all the horrid doubts and fears it bred.

"Yes," she says. "Why didn't you write?"

The faintest shadow crosses his face.

"No," he answers; "I hoped to get here sooner, and did not write, thinking that I should catch my letter up. But business"—with an inward pang half-sad, half-furious—"business kept me. And are you glad to see me?"

She does not answer, but she looks down.

"And now tell me all the news," he says, brightly, chasing away the hateful memories of the past three days which her words have called up.

"There is none," she says; "there never is any news."

"No news from the Court?" he says. Then he looks at her with sudden enquiry, for her face has flushed hotly. Stancy de Palmer's foolish proposal flashes across her mind.

"No, no," she says, hurriedly, anxious to get rid of the topic.

"And Bob?" he asks.

"Bob's in London," she says.

"In London!" and he laughs. "It is not often he honours the gay metropolis, is it? When did he go? Was he there while I was? I wish I had known it."

Then he stops short, reminded of the danger that Bob's presence would have caused.

"He went last night," says Paula in a low voice.

He looks at her meditatively, unsuspicious.

"And you are left alone?" he murmurs scarcely complimentary to Alice. "I am glad I have come back."

"Are you?" softly.

"Yes, glad is not the word," and he draws a long breath. "Ah, Paula, how have you withered me, that I can't be happy away from you for a few days even? You can tell what a heavy load fell like ice on my heart when they told me you were out. I expected to see you on the terrace, and looked anxiously for a glimpse of the muslin dress. Do you know that I made a vow last night?"

"Did you? What was it?" and she looks up at the handsome face, handsomer than ever in her eyes, now that she has been parted from it for a few days.

"I made a vow that I would never leave you again, my witch! Never, until we were made one and inseparable."

The crimson dyes her face and neck at the thought.

"Vows are made to be broken," she says.

"Not this," he says, with a great firmness. "Paula, never man, I think, was ever so madly in love as I am. It is not love, it is enchantment. Do you know that yesterday I was walking down Regent Street, thinking of you—has there been any moment that I have not thought of you?—and I stopped mechanically to gaze, with the rest of a gaping crowd, at a photographer's window, and there I, gazing without eyes, as they say, saw suddenly a face something like yours; it wasn't much, just a reminiscence, and the blood rushed to my face, and my heart beat—and—ah! you are laughing at me!" and he smiles.

But she is not laughing; instead she is clinging closer to him with an awful fear at her heart, a fear lest he should ever know that she had doubted him; lest he should learn that she had sent Bob to play the spy and detective.

For now, with his passionate words ringing like sweetest music in her ears, she knew that the cruel letter was a libel, and that she was a weak, foolish imbecile to be deceived by it.

Oh, Heaven! if he should ever know that she had believed in it for a moment!

"No, no, I was not laughing," she breathes.

"You shall if you like," he says. "I love to hear you laugh. Have you been very merry while I have been away?"

"No—not very merry," with a guilty shudder.

"Don't I mean you make me vain and wild with happiness by telling me that you have missed me!" he says, laughing, but with a flush on his face.

"Will it make you vain?" she asks.

"Then it must, for"—raising her eyes to his—"I have missed you horribly, terribly. The hours have hung like lead; the time has stopped—actually stopped, and—ah, Rick, keep your vow!" and her head droops against him.

"Keep your vow. I am not fit to be left. I am a stupid, idiotic girl that ought not to be left alone; I am indeed! If you knew—but no, no! But keep your vow, Rick!"

"My darling!" he murmurs, and he bends his head and kisses her. "My darling! Why! Flossie—"

Merciful Heaven! what has he said? What demon of the bottomless pit has put that name into his mouth? Is he mad?

(To be Continued.)

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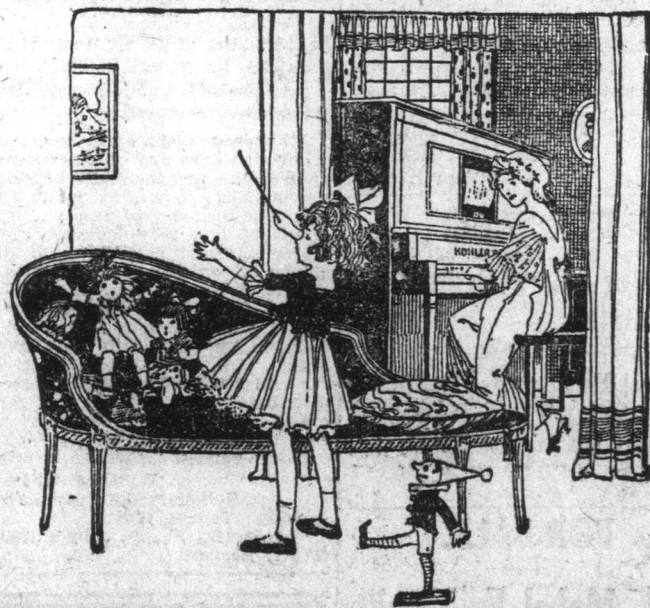
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