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The Romance OF A Marriage.

CHAPTER XVII.

The major didn't enjoy his drive by any means. The moonlight that flooded hill and vale possessed no charm sufficient to soothe or console him, as, wrapping his cloak round him, he lay back, and setting his lips tightly, muttered, "The idiot! The stupid, senseless, young idiot!"

It was strong language for the major, who detested strong language just as he detested tobacco and bad wine; but if he called his handsome nephew an idiot once he called him an idiot twenty times during the remainder of that tedious journey.

"And just when I had prepared the way to a really eligible and advantageous match!—just when I had arranged matters with that awful sugar-baker! And he might have had the old place back again and renewed the line of Powis! It is too bad—too bad! Lord! If one could only give young men brains in addition to their youth, what a fine thing it would be. The idiot!" and he actually groaned.

But it was not a groan of resignation. The major was not the man to set his heart upon a thing and be easily turned aside from the path to it without an effort. Before many miles had slipped from under the pair of good horses, the major's keen brain was hard at work trying to hit upon some scheme—some plan to upset Sir Herrick's love-affair.

Never had the major, the pink of insolent ease and selfishness, thought harder than he did to-night.

"If the fool were like other boys, it would be easy, quite easy," he muttered. "I should only have to set my lace hard, and pronounce the usual threat of cutting him off with a shilling, to stop the affair. But that wouldn't do with Rick. I am afraid. No; I know Rick too well to suppose that anything like the stern parent or guardian business would be of any avail. Confound him! With the Powis pride and self-will, it would only make more obstinate. Rick's just the sort of idiot to do it out of sheer ob-

stinacy and contradiction. He'll marry the girl on his own few beggarly hundreds a year, and laugh at me. What on earth can I do? Argument? You might as well argue with a stone wall as argue with Rick when his mind's made up and he's set upon a thing. And so to appealing to his common sense; a man in love never has any common sense, I'm surprised at Rick; I'm shocked, positively shocked!" and he leans back and strokes his aristocratic head with a positive sense of shame for Sir Herrick.

For the first time he felt—this man of the world—that Sir Herrick had done something to be ashamed of. He had done many wild things, some few bad ones, had Sir Herrick; but the major had never felt ashamed of him—had been ready to make excuses for him; and while paying his gambling debts, and listening to the stories of his wild exploits, had always been able to murmur in the midst of voices the old excuse, "Boys will be boys; youth, my dear madame—youth will have its day!" But now that Sir Herrick proposed to marry a girl without rank or wealth, the major felt that the young man had indeed sinned; and if allowed to carry out his crime, would sin beyond the reach of pardon. "It simply means ruin!" he murmured. "Social ruin! Something must be done to prevent it!"

But he could not exactly see what that something should be, and he arrived at Lord Hurstley's still puzzling his brains, and looking so weary and exhausted that Lord Hurstley and a select few of the guests, who were awaiting his return in the card-room, were quite appalled; it was so strange a sight to see the major anything but fresh, and youthful, and smiling.

"I've had a very trying day, my dear Hurstley," he explained to his host, who remarked on his appearance—"very trying. I think there must be something peculiarly exhausting in the—er—moonlight. Besides, I have made the acquaintance of some very strange people; quite—er—I might say, savages, and the experience, though novel, has been rather trying. I think—with a bland smile, distributed freely round the group of listeners—"I think I will really go to bed."

"Do," said Lord Hurstley, and he rang for the major's valet. "It's a long ride. What on earth made you stay? The ladies were inconsolable."

The major made his beautiful bow and kissed the tips of his hands in acknowledgment.

"The fact is," he said, with something like a sigh—not quite, for the major never sighed—"I met my nephew—Herrick, you know."

"Really!" said Lord Hurstley, while one or two of the men murmured an ejaculation of surprise, "Where?"

"At the house of the savages," replied the major, with a smile. "He is staying, you know," looking round with an apologetic smile, "you all know Rick's eccentricity—he is staying at—actually—at a wayside inn."

A smile ran round the group, and a friend of Sir Herrick's, who was dealing, laughed outright.

"Just like Rick," he said.

"At a wayside inn," said the major, sadly, as if he had said that his nephew was in a jail.



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"What's he doing there?" asked Lord Hurstley, sorting his cards.

"I believe he explained that he was fishing," murmured the major, idly. "Fishing!"

The man who had dealt the cards laughed.

"Fishing, eh? Just like Rick. Well, major, we sympathise with you."

"Bring him here," said Lord Hurstley, good-naturedly.

"Would to Heaven he'd come!" thought the major, as he said, aloud: "Thanks, dear Hurstley; I'll convey your kind invitation."

"So Rick is wandering in the wilds with a fly-rod," said the dealer. "I wonder what Flossie thinks of it," he added in an under-tone; but the major, though his face did not proclaim it, heard him.

"Good-night," he said, with sweet sadness; "I will go to bed. If I stayed I should only bore you. Good-night!"

And he went up to his bedroom—the most comfortable room in the house, by the way—where his valet was waiting for him.

For the first time since he had entered his master's service the man—one of the best valets in the kingdom, "a treasure," as the major admitted—silent, discreet, and an artist in "making up"—for the first time this admirable servant found the major restless and uneasy.

"I wish you wouldn't pull my arm," Morgan, he moaned, as the man gently rid him of his coats; "and don't speak about the room so. Have you got new boots on? There's draught somewhere, I'm sure. And they told me this room faced south!"

And he continued grumbling in this vein, to the amazement of the man, who never uttered a word until the last office had been done, and the long-suffering "treasure" was leaving the room, when suddenly, without reason, the major brought his white hand down upon the dressing-table and exclaimed:

"I've got it!"

"Beg pardon, sir, what did you say?" said the valet, pausing.

"Nothing, nothing, Morgan," replied the major, with his usual bland smile. "Good-night. Stop, Morgan."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm afraid I have been very irritable, and—trying to-night, Morgan."

"Indeed, no, major," returned Morgan in his subdued voice.

"But I have," murmured the major in his meekest tones. "I beg you will overlook it, Morgan. I have been very much tried, and—yes, worried. But,"

with a bland smile of triumph on his face, "I'm all right now. I am better. Good-night, Morgan. Oh! by the way, I shall have to get up quite early to-morrow. And give my compliments to his lordship, and ask if I can have something to take me over to Powis to-morrow. Good-night. I am all right now, Morgan."

Then as the man departed, inwardly amazed and wondering, the major leaned back in his chair and smiled with ineffable satisfaction.

"I quite forgot Flossie!" he murmured. "All is not lost yet. How did I come to forget Flossie?" and with a sigh and a smile of positive relief, the hardened man of the world sought his repose.

(To be Continued.)

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