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**The Romance OF A Marriage.**

CHAPTER XXXVI.

But for all his glory of raiment, his face flushes as he sees Paula, and he comes forward with a marked awkwardness. Her beauty dazzles and frightens him—the calm, steadfast gaze of her dark eyes sets him trembling, and he wishes that he had taken a nip of brandy before coming down, just to keep his courage up.

"Give your arm to Miss Paula, Stancy," says Mr. Palmer, and they go in to dinner.

Of course Mr. Palmer has brought the family plate with him. It is a question whether he could dine with comfort without the huge candelabra and epergne, and the massive salt-cellars and side dishes. The room is one blaze of light; the air is heavy and thick with the perfume of flowers, and the dinner is of its kind overdone.

But though her head seems to swim and her heart to have stood still, Paula neither faints nor goes into hysterics. She sits with the same set smile on her lips, the same cold, strained expression in her eyes. She can even reply to Stancy's remarks, which come from him with marked embarrassment and timidity at first; but presently, when the champagne has passed round several times, they grow more familiar and self-confident, and once, as he takes the bottle of the servant's hands to fill her glass, he ventures to lay his hand upon her arm. Paula does not snatch her arm away, though the touch of his hot and seems to have burnt her. She scarcely shudders, indeed, but looks straight before her with the same set, impassive look.

It is all a hideous nightmare to her, the gaudy rooms, the glaring light, Alice's continual ripple of sham laughter, Mr. Palmer's coarse, vulgar voice, and Stancy's hated presence. A hideous nightmare from which she will never, while life lasts, be free: for is she not going to be Stancy's wife; to sit out many and many such dinners? Then May gets up and leads

the way to the drawing-room; Paula raises, with the same mechanical, mirthless smile, and Stancy, as he opens the door, looks at her with pointed admiration without causing her to move a muscle.

"Stancy, my boy," says Mr. Palmer, as the hope of the house swaggers back to the take and pours out for himself another glass of champagne. "Don't be too liberal with the liquor. You've got your work cut out for you to-night, and you'll want a clear brain. You're still set upon it, I suppose?" with a sigh.

"Set upon it? I'm keener than ever," responds Stancy, with an unsteady laugh.

"Well, well. You might do so much better, you know. You ought to try at 'higher game, my boy."

"So's high enough for me," retorts Stancy, his face flushed, his voice thick and tremulous. "We don't want money, and as for a title, and all that, I don't want my wife to be looking down upon me; perhaps if I married one of these swells, she'd think me a snob."

"Perhaps so," says Mr. Palmer, innocently.

"Very well, then, this one won't; though, mind you, she's a real lady, if ever there was one. Kean! I should think I was! Ain't she beautiful? Hang me if she hasn't grown lovelier than ever? I never saw her look so stunning as she does to-night."

"Yes, she's a beautiful girl," assents Mr. Palmer; "that ain't there something strange in the look of her here? A scared kind o' look?"

"I didn't notice it," says Stancy.

"Perhaps she is a bit nervous. Didn't you say Alice had prepared her for what's coming?"

Mr. Palmer nodded.

"Yes, perhaps that's it. I wish you'd let the wine alone Stancy, you've had more than enough already."

"Oh, I'm all right," says Stancy, with a laugh. "Let's go in now."

Mr. Palmer rises.

"We'll give you a chance, Stancy," he says. "I'll take Alice and May to look at the sea from the balcony. Understand?"

Stancy nods and wipes his forehead with a shaky hand, and they pass into the drawing-room.

Alice is playing at the piano. May sits near Paula, at her feet almost, and is looking up at her with an admiring worship, and talking in low tones, which Paula seems scarcely to hear, though now and then she looks down at the pretty, eager face with a strange expression of pity and protection. Is it not for this gentle little creature as well as Bob that she is about to sacrifice herself?

Stancy comes up to them and hovers about, his eyes fitfully staring at Paula's face; but she does not appear to notice him: not even when Mr. Palmer's voice is heard inviting May and Alice to look at the sea from the balcony, and she knows that the moment has come, does she show any sign of the horror and loathing that fill her heart and benumb her.

They go out, and Alice, with a deft movement, swings the glass door behind her so that the two are left alone and out of hearing.

Stancy stands for a moment fingering his heavy watchguard and star-

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ing at the richly coloured carpet, then he comes up to her and leans over a chair in an awkwardly attempted attitude of easy carelessness.

"Paula," he says, and his voice is thick with agitation and champagne. She raises her eyes steadily.

"I—er—I've got something to say to you," he says, clearing his throat. "I hope it won't offend you. Last time—but perhaps I'd better not say anything about last time."

"Do not," says the low, icy voice.

"No," he says, "I—I was a bit too soon then, or—with a hideous grin—"too late. But that affair with Sir Herrick is over, ain't it?" eyes do not flinch.

"Yes, it is over," she says, still in the same passionless voice.

"Yes, so I heard," he says; "and that made me hope that there was a chance for me. I needn't tell you that—that I love you; that I haven't left off loving you, though you were hard upon me, and many a fellow would, Paula's face grows whiter, but her you know; but I haven't, I give you my word I'm fonder of you now than ever I was; and—and if you say you'll be my wife, I—you—we shall both be very happy, you know."

Paula looks straight before her for a moment. Has her heart quite stopped beating? There seems no life, no warmth, no feeling in all her being. "You wish me to marry you?" she says.

Stancy, staggered for a moment by the cold, expressionless voice, stammers an affirmative.

Paula looks up at him.

"You do not ask me if—if I love you?"

"I—hope you do," he says. "Of course any fellow would; but—quickly—"I don't much care; I mean"—still more hurriedly—"I'm sure you will."

"Are you?" she asks, with cold wonder.

"Oh, yes," he says, with the confidence of conceit and champagne nicely balanced, "that will come in time. I'm fond of you, and that is the principal thing."

"I suppose so," says the cold voice.

"I'm sure to make you happy, and all that," he says, beginning to feel that he is gaining ground. "You won't have such a bad time of it with me, I hope, that you'll repent it!"—with a self-assured laugh. "And the gover-

nor has promised to do the proper thing. I mean—of course I know you don't care about money"—reddening and fidgeting on the chair—"I've heard you say so often and often."

"Have you?" she breaks in, slowly, intently. "Then I have changed my opinion. I do care for money very much."

He laughs confidently.

"Well, though I say it that shouldn't, there'll be plenty. Perhaps Alice told you what the governor intends to do if—if you said 'yes!'"

"Yes," says Paula, as calmly as if she were talking about taxes or the price of coals.

"Three thousand a year settled on you, and a thousand down for—oh, for pins and needles," and he laughs at his choice wit. "If that isn't enough, I dare say you've only got to say so to have just what you want."

"It is quite enough," says Paula, slowly, deliberately.

"Then—then you consent?" he says, bending over her, his face flushed, his eyes fixed eagerly on her face.

"Yes, I consent," she says. "Wait!" for he has come off the chair and gone down on one knee as if to embrace her. He pauses with his arm outstretched. "Yes, I consent," she says; "but only on one condition."

"What is it?" he says, eagerly.

"That is"—for the first time her voice falters—"that I have this—this thousand pounds at once—to-morrow."

He stares and reddens with amazement.

"What—what do you want it for?" A flush crimsoned Paula's face for a moment, but leaves it paler and more strained.

"I cannot tell you. I have need of it—or I should not ask for it."

"All right," he says, confidently and with a nod. "I understand. I'm to ask no questions. Very well. Of course you shall have the money. Why"—with a grin and a leer meant to be expressive of his adoration—"you should have it if I had to sell every diamond I'd got," and he puts his arm round her and draws her to him.

And Paula, with a shudder running through her, feels his hot lips touch her cheek.

(To be Continued.)

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