

The Romance OF A Marriage.

CHAPTER IX.

But his hat is raised to the empty air; for Stancy, though he tugs at the reins, cannot pull the horses up, and the coach is carried past the inn a hundred yards or so before he can succeed in bringing it to a stand.

"Pull up, Stancy! pull up! Sir Herrick will have to walk after us!" exclaims Mr. Palmer, anxiously. "Pray, pull up!"

"I'm pulling up as hard as I can," mutters Stancy, sullenly. "Whoa, you brutes!" And he grows red and shame-faced.

"All right," says Sir Herrick's clear voice, "don't stop them; I can get up." And he puts a hand on a rail and climbs up as if he had spent the days of his youth in mounting coaches.

"Take care, pray take care, dear young sir," implores Mr. Palmer. "How do you do? how do you do? Now this is really very kind of you, very kind indeed. I hope we haven't kept you waiting?"

"Oh, no," says Sir Herrick, looking round for a seat.

"Come to the back, Sir Herrick," says Mr. Palmer; but Sir Herrick, with a glance, shakes his head.

"Keep your seat, sir," he says. "I'll sit here," and with a nod to Bob, he seats himself beside Paula.

"What a lovely morn— What's the matter now, Stancy?" breaks off Mr. Palmer: for the near leader has begun to prance and gallop and tug playfully at the pole.

"Nothing, nothing," mutters Stancy, peevishly. "I wish you would sit down."

Sir Herrick stands up and looks at the horse and the driver for a moment, then he sinks back with his impassive countenance, and turns to Paula as if they were sitting on the stump beside the stream.

"Good-morning, Miss Paula," he says, and he holds out his hand and takes hers in his ungloved palm; "I'm glad you've come. I didn't feel quite sure—"

"Let me introduce you to my sister," says Paula, feeling rather than seeing Alice's eyes upon them.

"Alice, this is Sir Herrick Blossom. Alice's finest, mildest smile blossoms like the rose, and she extends her hand graciously, "in the Queen of Sheba style," as Bob would put it—the smile that has rarely been known to fall, as the advertisements of patent medicines says, in dealing destruction to the youths of the country.

But Sir Herrick doesn't appear to go down before it. He bends over the hand with a touch of knightly courtesy; but his face does not flush, and his voice does not falter in his remarks that it is a fine day for driving, and that he doesn't think there will be any rain.

"I hope not," says Bob from behind. "I'm getting my grass down—at least, I hope there won't be much rain."

"Never mention the weather when you are in Bob's company," says

Paula, warningly. "It's a dangerous topic, upon which he can hold forth for a week or a year. The weather, the crops, and the price of sheep are subjects carefully avoided by all Bob's friends who are not, like himself, agriculturally mad."

Sir Herrick laughs, and he glances at Bob with a nod; but his eyes come back to the beautiful face looking so bright and fresh under the sunburnt hat.

"Thanks," he says. "I'll take warning; but I can't talk about crops and sheep."

"How I wish you lived near us," says Paula, innocently enough; but the next instant, made conscious of the significance of the remark by the ominous silence that follows, she flushes up to the roots of her red-brown hair. "I mean," she says, "that it would be such a relief to have someone who never mentioned those subjects."

"But then I should bore you on something else," says Sir Herrick, easily, and laughing to hide her momentary confusion. "Where are we going to-day?"

"To Crawford Hospital," murmurs Paula.

"Well, we thought you would like to see the ruins of the Habby, Sir Herrick," says Mr. Palmer, twisting round cautiously as if he feared that any sudden movement would upset the coach.

Sir Herrick inclines his head, but glances at the ladies.

"Wherever the ladies please," he says, disclaiming any inclination on his part.

"The Habby," says Mr. Palmer, "is full of historic interest. Sir Wolfert de Bernard was buried there."

"Yes," says Herrick, wondering who Sir Wolfert was when he was alive.

"And there is some fine Norman architecture stuck up about twenty years ago," murmurs Paula.

Sir Herrick smiles.

"Besides," adds Mr. Palmer, "it's a sheltered spot, and out of the sun, which makes it pleasant for luncheon."

"Oh, that's more in my way," says Sir Herrick. "You know," in a low voice to Paula, "I haven't a spark of romance in my character."

Paula smiles.

"If you want to know all about Sir Wolfert," she says, "ask my sister Alice; she'll tell you, and shed tears in the recital. My sister is the soul of sentiment."

He glances at the delicately beautiful face, which its owner is carefully guarding from the sun, and smiles; but he doesn't ask any particulars respecting Sir Wolfert.

Indeed, the moment is not the most fitting for a recital of old legends, for they were now descending a stiffish hill, and the horses, being quite beyond Mr. Stancy de Palmer's control, are galloping down in a free-and-easy fashion, which though very pleasant for them, is pregnant with danger to the coach, especially as Stancy cannot succeed in keeping them in a straight line.

Mr. Palmer, clutching tightly his seat, and staring at the galloping horses, gasps a little, and rolls his eyes towards his son.

"Ain't they going a little—a little too fast, Stancy?" he asks, nervously.

"Oh, no," replies Stancy, but fumbling at the reins anxiously.

"We seem to be going at a tremendous pace," murmurs Alice, with a troubled but apologetic tone. Paula looks at Sir Herrick with a bright smile of interrogation.

"Is there any immediate danger?" she says in an undertone.

He shakes his head, but eyes the fumbling hands of the helpless driver with a slight amused attention.

"Not at present," he answers in the same tone. "It is all right while they have their own way; they'll keep straight; but if he begins to pull them about—" and he stops significantly.

Paula laughs.

"I've often wondered what a broken arm feels like," she says. "I suppose I sha'n't wonder long."

"Paula!" murmurs Alice, reprovingly.

Sir Herrick laughs.

"You'll make your sister nervous," Nature," says Paula, blandly, "has spared me that trouble" as if she were testifying to a fine quality worthy of commendation. "Alice is deliciously nervous; aren't you, Alice?"

"I'm not very fond of horses," she says, turning her sweetest, most pleasing smile on Sir Herrick.

"Or cows, or dogs, or cats, or any living thing that barks, or bites, or makes a noise," say Paula.

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Sir Herrick suppresses a smile. "And you are afraid of nothing?" he says, suggestively.

"Not much," says Paula, "or I shouldn't be here."

"I wonder," says Bob from the back, where he has been stretched at full length, contemplating the scenery with half-closed eyes, "if there would be anything calculated to shock the senses of propriety if one smoked?"

It is the first remark he has made to May, excepting one respecting the weather. May has been seated quietly beside him, scarcely speaking since Sir Herrick shook hands with her, and she almost starts now.

"Why don't you smoke?" she says. "Everybody smokes on a coach, don't they?"

"I don't know," says Bob, wistfully, "that is just what I was asking."

Sir Herrick takes out his cigar-case and offers it.

"Try one of these, Estcourt," he says.

"Thanks," says Bob, with a sigh of relief.

Sir Herrick gets up and leans forward.

"Will you have acigar?" he says to Stancy.

Stancy looks over his shoulder.

"Haw—thanks!" he says, then wishes to goodness he hadn't accepted, for he doesn't quite know how to hold the reins, and the whip, and the cigar.

"Let me hold the ribbons," says Sir Herrick, "while you get a light."

Stancy delivers up the ribbons with a thinly concealed air of relief, and Sir Herrick, leaning forward, guides the horses, who, suddenly finding themselves in the hands of a master, fall into a decent trot.

"Haw—thanks," says Stancy. "Pond of driving?"

Sir Herrick nods.

"Haw—of course," says Stancy, with a man-of-the-world air. "Very fond of it myself, especially four-in-hand."

"Yes," says Sir Herrick. "Take care," he adds, as they turn a corner so short that the coach swerves, causing Mr. Palmer to utter a "Bless my soul!" and clutch hold of Sir Herrick, and Alice to squeal.

"That was a near shave," says Bob, calmly. "You aren't nervous, are you?" he adds, to May.

She looks up at him with a gentle little smile in her eyes.

"Yes, I am, very," she says; "but—" "But what?" he says in his direct fashion.

May looks down at him—he has gone quite full length now, and lies staring up at her, enjoying his cigar.

"But I don't feel so nervous as when we started. There can't be any danger if you can lie there so comfortably."

And she laughs timidly.

Bob raises himself on his elbow. "Oh, as for that," he says, "what's the use of fussing? That wouldn't do any good. But don't you be nervous. Enjoy yourself."

"I will, I am," says May, obediently. "How happy Paula looks," she adds, glancing at her admiringly.

"Oh, yes, this just suits Paula," says Bob, with a brother's indifference. "Anything with a little excitement fits that young lady."

"What do you do that for?" he says. "You are very well as you are."

Now, this, from Bob, is praise indeed. The gentle face flushes, and the tender, appealing eyes rest on his frank ones gratefully.

"Oh, but I'm not," she says. "I'm not at all like Paula—not clever and ready—"

"That child of Nature is sometimes too ready," says Bob, critically. May shakes her head.

"I think her all that is beautiful and clever," she says. "I'd try to be like her if it wasn't use—"

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" says Bob. "One Paula in the country is enough!" And he laughs. "Do you know what she is thinking of now and longing for?"

"No," says May, looking at the two, Paula and Sir Herrick, laughing and talking together as if they had known each other for years. "No. What is she thinking and longing for?"

"What Paula is longing for, if I know her," says Bob, with some conviction, "is an upset."

"Oh!"

"Yes, but she is," he repeats, calmly. "She has made up her mind for it, and if we could all be shied off this coach, without any broken limbs, she'd be happy."

May laughs rather doubtfully.

"I do hope Stancy won't have an accident," she says, timidly.

"So do I," says Bob. "Just the hay-making time, you know."

"Tell me about the hay," says May, leaning forward with an interested smile. "How delightful it must be to be a farmer!"

"Oh, very," says Bob, "especially just now. It's almost as good as being a manufacturer of smoked glass for witnessing eclipses!"

May laughs; then she sighs.

"I'd rather be a farmer than anything," she says.

And Bob, led thus gently and unconsciously to his favourite topic, begins to unbosom himself.

(to be continued.)

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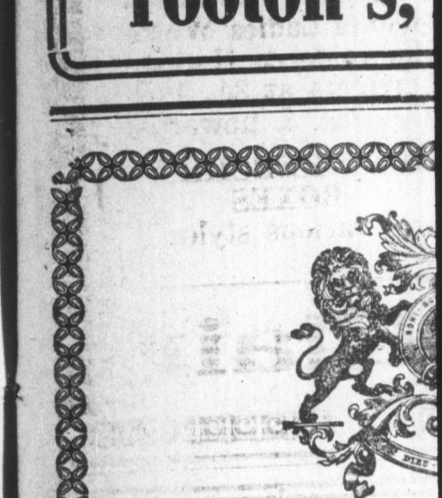
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