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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"What's this? What the devil—"

Sir Herrick looks from the bloated, insolent face of Paula to the dazed, half-bewildered glance; then he nods to Stancy, and says in his old, cool fashion:

"How do you do?"

But Stancy has taken too much champagne, and is in a jealous rage.

"What's this mean?" he demanded of Paula, ignoring Sir Herrick's civil greeting. "What d'ye mean by sneaking off in this fashion to meet this fellow?"

"Stancy! Stancy!" murmurs May, who has followed him.

"Don't Stancy me!" he snarls. "Mind your own business. She can answer a plain question, I suppose?"

And he glances at Paula.

White and trembling, not with fear of the half-drunken bully who is to be her future husband, but with shame, Paula remains silent, and it is Sir Herrick who answers, in a voice cold and suppressed, yet intense with surprise and scorn, he says:

"Permit me to explain, I met Miss Estcourt—"

"We know that," breaks in Stancy, with an insolent sneer. "We ain't blind. Besides, nobody asked you to speak. She can say what she wants, I suppose?"

Sir Herrick looks at him with an indescribable expression of cold contempt, then he glances down at the bent head so near his heart, and presses the trembling arm encouragingly.

But Paula is still silent. She has forgotten Stancy's presence, is utterly indifferent to his violence; it is of her old lover, the man she still loves, that she is thinking. What must he think of her?

"Oh, very well!" says Stancy, biting his lip and raising his voice. "If you won't speak I can think what I like, I suppose?"

"Think what you like, but suppress it," says Sir Herrick in a stern, warning voice. "Your loud voice has already attracted attention," and he motions toward the table from which several heads are turned with wondering curiosity. "Restrain yourself, sir; this is no place for an exhibition of ill-tamper, especially towards a lady!"

"Curse you impudence!" retorts Stancy, livid with passion. "Mind your own business! Come with me, Paula, this instant!"

Paula draws her hand from Sir Herrick's arm, but he holds it in his hand with a firm clasp.

"Pardon me," he says, with the cold, punctilious politeness which has marked his manner towards Stancy. "By what right do you command Miss Estcourt's company?"

"By what right?" echoes Stancy; then he laughs a coarse, brutal laugh.

"Oh, I see! She has kept you in the dark! By what right! I'll tell you; by the right a man has over his future wife, Sir Herrick Powlis."

Sir Herrick stands silent and motionless for a moment, his eyes looking far beyond the red face confronting him, looking into space, as he struggles with the agony that threatens to overcome him; then he bends his head to Paula, and says in a low whisper:

"Is this true?"

No insult could be more pronounced and deadly, and Stancy actually writhes.

"Is this true?" repeats Sir Herrick, white to the lips.

She does not speak, but she lifts her head and looks at him—a wild, imploring prayer for mercy.

He reads the truth as plainly as if she had spoken; with a bow, cold and courteous, he leads her to Stancy.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Palmer," he says. "Permit me to explain. I met Miss Estcourt in the room a few—say ten minutes ago. The meeting was unexpected on both sides. This is the simple explanation you demanded; if it does not satisfy you, I am staying at the hotel till to-morrow." And he smiles significantly.

Stancy's face goes deadly white, and his craven soul shrinks within him at Sir Herrick's ominous tone.

"I don't care whether you go or stay," he stammers. "I don't want to see any more of you. Come, Paula! Come, May!" And he takes them, one on each arm, and swaggers through.

As they pass into the ball-room, Sir Herrick follows to the door-way, and, holding back the curtains, watches them. Suddenly he sees the downcast head turn and look back, and the awful despair in the dark eyes gleam like a ghost's through the mask and sink into his soul.

With a groan he lets the curtain fall and walks blindly to the wine-table.

"Give—give me some wine," he says. "No," almost fiercely, as the footman offers him some champagne. "Brandy," and filling a glass, he raises it with trembling hands to his white lips.

Then, still almost blindly, he sets the empty glass on the table, and goes slowly out.

CHAPTER XL.

Stancy Powlis swaggers along with cowardice and impotent rage fill-

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ing his mean heart almost to bursting. May leans on his arm trembling, Paula walks by his side calm and deadly cold, now that Sir Herrick is out of sight. Suddenly Stancy sees Alice talking to her partner at the end of the room, and pushes his way to her. Alice is seated on a lounge looking up, all attention, to the major in his court dress, but her keen eyes notice the trio approaching her, and she detects in Stancy's face that something has gone wrong. With an unflinching smile, however, she welcomes them.

"Well, my dear. Isn't this delightful? Have you danced the last, dear May? Stancy, I promised you the next—"

"Never mind that," says Stancy, with suppressed fury. "I want to talk to you. Look here—"

"Hush!" says Alice, holding up her finger warningly. "Remember we are not the only English here. Come into this ante-room if you want to shout; my dear Stancy," she adds, playfully.

Stancy drags May forward, and Paula follows calmly, one would say unconcernedly. The major, with a charming smile, offers her his arm, but she does not appear to see it.

"Now, then," says Alice, sinking into a chair in a corner of the dimly lit little room, "what is it? Has Paula been fainting, or what? For of course she has been in mischief or you wouldn't look at her in that grumpy way," and she laughs a playful little laugh.

"Mischief!" echoes Stancy, with a coarse sneer. "She knows best about that. Judge for yourself if I haven't cause to complain," and he flings out his red hands. "You know I missed her; you know I've been looking for her for the last half hour. That isn't nice, is it, considering—"

"That you are to be man and wife, and that you are the most jealous monster in the world," says Alice, smilingly, and making a playful dab at him with her fan. "Well! what have you to say, Miss Truant?" and she nods her head at Paula.

Paula stands with her hand resting on a pedestal which supports a dancing faun, but she makes no answer; looks as rapt and lifeless, indeed, as the marble faun itself. If she hears the question it has no meaning for her. "Oh, my darling! my lost darling! is ringing in her ears like a knell.

"What has she to say? Nothing!" snarls Stancy. "I've asked her to explain twenty times—"

"Explain what?" demands Alice, sweetly.

"How is it that I find her closeted with that idiot Sir Herrick Powlis?"

Alice starts, and glances at the statue-like figure.

"With Herrick Powlis!" repeats Stancy, furiously. "Closeted with him in the card-room! She—she can't deny it. She gives me the slip—me, the man she is to be married to—on purpose to meet him, on purpose!"

"Oh, Stancy!" murmurs May, reproachfully, "you know they met by accident—"

"Of course!" breaks in Alice, eagerly, and with a little laugh. "How ridiculously you are, Stancy! Where are you going, Major Vericourt? Don't go till this lovers' quarrel is made up!" for the major, at the sound of Herrick's name, had actually started, and was making for the door.

He pulls up and shakes his head, and, for the first time in his life, his face betrays a true emotion—fear, positive fear.

"My dear young lady," he says, and his lips tremble, though they manage a smile, "if it is true that my nephew is in this place, it is no place for me. You will permit me to depart in—peace!" and with a nervous bow all round, he hurries, actually hurries out, and an hour later he and his valet are driving by Royal Post from Nouvelle as fast as they can go.

"Never mind that old fool," says Stancy, impatiently, "attend to me. I saw him with my own eyes; they were arm in arm, weren't they, May? I appeal to May."

"Nonsense!" says Alice, abruptly. "This is a pretty lovers' quarrel; but it has run long enough. I tell you they met quite accidentally. I know that she did not know he was here; did you, Paula?"

"No answer; but the dark eyes look down vacantly."

"Of course she did not," says Alice, as if she had got her reply; "and so there's an end of it. If you are so unreasonably jealous about that unfortunate young man, I'll undertake that he leaves Nouvelle to-morrow. He's too much of a gentleman, with all his faults, to make mischief between you and Paula, who are so really devoted to each other. Come, shake hands—you can't kiss her, you know!"—with a little nervous laugh, for the intense stillness of the figure at her side is beginning to alarm her—"and make it up."

Stancy stammers and grumbles: "I'm willing, if that stuck-up idiot leaves the place at once, mind—I'm willing."

"Then come, Paula," says Alice, "shake hands. I insist upon that old-fashioned form of reconciliation—with a laugh—and be friends."

And she takes one of Paula's hands and drags it forward.

At the touch Paula seems to awake. With a slow, half-dazed air, she takes off her mask, revealing her white face and bloodless lips, and looks round. Then she looks at Stancy for a moment, and then at Alice.

"Have you told him?" she says in a low, strained voice.

"Told him—what?" says Alice, awed in spite of herself.

"That it is impossible."

"Impossible! What is impossible?"

"That I can—marry him. Why does he not go?"

"Paula"—and Alice strains at the cold hand in her grasp—"are you out of your senses?"

"Out of her senses, no," says Stancy, livid with passion, "not she! She is only too wide awake! It's me that has been out of my senses. She's got the money—got what she wanted—and now it's time to shuffle out of it! Oh, she is wide awake enough!"

"The money!" says Paula, with a dazed stare. Then she remembers the thousand pounds sent to Bob, and with a cry she covers her face with her hands.

"You see," says Alice, with feverish eagerness, "she scarcely knows what she is talking about. The heat, the excitement, and your jealous nonsense have upset her. Don't, for heaven's sake, let us have a scene in a place like this! Let us go home now. Get the fly for us, there's a good boy. Wait until to-morrow."

But Stancy stands glaring sullenly at the tall figure, with its hidden face. "I've been sold!" he says, with a snarl. "She never meant it from the first. All she wanted was the money. I suppose that went to that cursed lover of hers. I can see it all now. Well, let her go—a thousand pounds won't break me."

A low moan of shame and agony breaks from Paula's white lips.

"Hush!" implores commanding Alice; while May, pale and trembling, kneels at Paula's feet, murmuring words of soothing endearment. "Let us go now—it will all come right in the morning."

(To be continued.)

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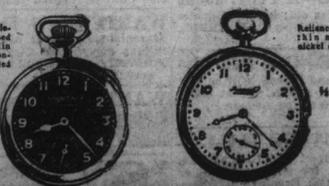
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