

## The Romance OF A Marriage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Paula wakes next morning with a start. What has happened to her? All night her sleep had been broken by dreams, dreams so sweet and strange that in the first moments of consciousness the blush still hovers on her cheek. What is it, this vague feeling of joy and happiness, such joy and happiness that never till now have visited her?

With heavy eyelids she stares at the morning sun, and wonders, until the remembrance of yesterday flashes upon her and turns the faint blush of sleep to crimson.

It is really true, or is it only a dream? Is she really loved? Loved! The very word almost frightens her. All night the vision of Sir Herrick's handsome face has mingled with her dreams, his deep, musical voice, whose every tone she knows and loves, has rung in her ears. "Is it really true?" she asks herself, "or has she only dreamed it? Ah, if it should only be a dream!"

But before long she realizes that it is more than a dream; she can feel his kisses on her lips, hear his love-voiced in her ears.

She is loved, and by the best, the noblest, the handsomest man in the world. A score of times she pauses in the course of her dressing to recall the passionate look, the tender tones of his voice.

She—the last girl on earth to be worthy of him—is beloved by Sir Herrick Powis, the handsomest, the best of men.

There is no song on her lips as she goes down, and the pigeons that flutter at her feet look up at her sideways in wonder. Even the dear old mastiff creeps up to her amazed at the rapt silence that holds her. A strange silence has fallen upon her, the whole world seems altered and to have taken upon it a new beauty; the trees look greener in their summer bravery, the sun shines more brightly, the soft breeze that fans her cheek is laden with a sweeter perfume, and bears upon its bosom the voice of her beloved. Ah, how hackneyed is that line: "There is nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream!"

And it is Paula's first love. No other has occurred to take off the keen edge of it. Never until now has love been other than a meaningless word. No other lips have touched her own red, ripe ones with love's magic kiss until Sir Herrick's; come what will, he is the first, the only one.

So rapt and enveloped, so hall-marked by this strange love does she seem, that she scarcely finds courage to enter the house and face Alice's steady smile and Bob's conscious glance; and begging a glass of milk from May, she wanders down to the valley to be alone—all alone with her new happiness. So with the old mastiff following at her heels, sorely puzzled by her silence and inattention, she makes her way to the stream, and, wandering by its babbling course, recalls every word her lover, her king, her god, uttered.

And here Sir Herrick finds her. For him, too, the day has broken with a

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new beauty. For him, too, the sun shines with a novel import. It is, let the past be what it may, his first real, genuine love. And as he comes upon her seated by the stump by which they ate the scanty luncheon only two days ago, he holds out his arms with an exclamation of wonder.

"Paula, you here?"

"Yes, I am here," she murmurs, rosy as sunbreak. "But—but are you not very early?"

"Early, my darling!" he says, enfolding her. "I have been awake for hours—hours! I could not sleep for thinking of you!" and he holds her sweet, young face in his hands, and he looks down at it with rapt joy.

"Could you not?" she says, gazing at the bright eyes, all aglow with love, and youth, and hope.

"No," he says, throwing himself down beside her. "All night you have haunted me, Wicked Paula, to rob a man of his rest! All night, darling! And I'll be bound you haven't given a thought to me! Confess!"

She hangs her head.

"I have thought of you!" She pants in his arms. "I have—dreamed of you—all night, Sir Herrick!"

A slight shade crosses his brow.

"Don't call me Sir Herrick!" he says, reproachfully. "Call me Herrick, or Rick, Yes, Rick; that is the name I am known by."

"Rick!" she murmurs, obediently.

"And you thought of me!" he says, gratefully. "And I—Heaven, how I love you! Paula, I don't think you know, understand how dearly I love you!"

She smiles up at him, content to lie in his arms, the sweet sun smiling down at them.

"I wonder," she murmurs, "whether you love me as I love you! I think not. You, who have seen so many beautiful women—so much better than I am—"

"Hush!" he says, chidingly. "There never was a woman more beautiful and better than you, my darling—never."

"Are you sure that you love me?" she whispers, "or is it only a mistake? If it is, tell me now—now, at once; I could not bear it later."

"My Paula!" he whispers. "I am quite sure. You are my queen, my pearl beyond price! See! Look at me! Do you doubt me?"

And she lifts her heavy eyes and looks at him.

"No, I do not doubt," she whispers. "But it is so wonderful—so wonderful!" and she smiles dreamily. "Only a few nights ago and we had never met—did not know each other. I wonder," slowly and softly, as if speaking to herself rather than to him—"I wonder if we had never met until we were old, quite old, whether we should have known that, had we met earlier, we should have loved!"—she breaks off, with a shy smile. "That is nonsense, isn't it? But," suddenly, "how dark the world was before that night we danced outside the Court, Rick!"

Aspirin is quick to understand even the most mystic of his mistress's words, and Sir Herrick understands her; it is the young, pure soul dazed and astounded at the overwhelming force of first love.

"Paula," he says, "I know you cannot know—your whose life has been so quiet, and pure, and peaceful—how dark life can be without love."

Paula looks up at him questioning-ly, an eager light in her eyes.

"Rick," she murmurs, a faint flush on her cheeks, "do you mean that—that you have never loved until—now?"

It is an unwise question to ask, a question that a woman of the world would have carefully shunned; but Paula is not a woman of the world; only a little country lass, as ignorant of the world as a village maiden could well be, and she sees no danger in the question.

For a moment Sir Herrick's dark eyes fall before the eager light in hers, and his brow contracts. He is silent for a moment, and a faint shadow of disappointment gathers in Paula's eyes; but suddenly, though slowly, he looks up and smiles. He has been thinking. After all, why should he not give her the answer her heart longs for? The ignoble passions, the whims and follies of his past life cannot be dignified with the name of love. No, they were not love, only the clumsy counterfeit thereof. Of a surety he knew not love until he saw her in the moonlight three nights ago.

So he smiles, and leans his hand aside to the shell-like ear—as he answers:

"No, Paula, I have never loved until now. Never until I saw my little witch-maid, who stole my heart from me by wicked magic and black art; never until now."

Paula draws a long breath, and her face pales with excess of joy.

"It is possible!" she murmurs, gazing up at him. "Of all the beautiful women you must have known, of all the young girls, fair and dark—"

"Fat and forty," he murmurs, with a smile; but she is not to be moved from her subject by a light blow from the bladder of mirth.

"You must have walked, and driven, and danced with, was there not one you could love?"

"No," he says; and he does not mean to lie. He is thinking of pure, Heaven-sent love, such as burns in his heart, for the heart nestling against it; and from that view his reply is Gospel truth.

"No," she echoes. "It—it is almost too sweet to be true. Rick, it seems almost as if we had been waiting for each other, doesn't it?" solemnly.

"Yes," he says, touched by her simplicity and trust. "Matches, they say, are made in heaven, Paula; ours must have been," and his head droops until his lips touch the chestnut hair.

Suddenly she looks up.

"I wonder," she says, and the old, naive look comes into her eyes, the sudden flash of light which is like the sun on rippling water—"I wonder whether the major will think so?"

Sir Herrick doesn't start, and smiles on still; but it is rather the smile of a man prepared for the worst.

"I don't know," he says. "It doesn't matter."

"Does it not?" she asks, her brows coming together with a half-doubt, her eyes fixed on his face. "You are sure it doesn't matter, Rick?"

"Not a bit," he says, pushing his hat from his forehead with the peculiar trick of manner habitual with him. "Not a bit; we—or at least I am not a child. My uncle, the major, does not rule the universe."

"I—I thought," falters Paula, "that you said—I don't like to go on." And she looks prettily troubled.

"Go on," he says, laughing. "You mean that my uncle holds the purse-strings."

"I'm shocked, of course," he says. "You ought, to be anything like the young lady of the present day, to wish for a palace, or certainly a house in Park Lane, a set of Howell & James's diamonds, and a pair of ponies. But, by George, Paula! I'm glad you don't! I'm glad you like the other idea, because—with a little, grave smile—"it's more likely to come to pass. But you'll be dull, my darling, woefully dull and bored alone with me—"

"Yes, I shall," she says, and her eyes brim over with the tears of a heart even too full of love.

Then he lifts her to her feet, and draws her arm through his.

"Now for duty," he says, with a smile.

"Duty?"

He nods.

"I am going to face brother Bob and sister Alice, and with hat in hand, or on bended knees, if necessary, beg them to bestow the pearl of their race upon their unworthy servant. I wonder what they'll say?"

A bright blush creeps over Paula's face.

"I've—I've told Bob already," she says.

"You did!" he says, with an air of relief. "What a dear, good girl it is! And sister Alice?"

Paula shakes her head.

"No, not Alice; but I think she will be very glad. She will be awfully surprised."

"Surprised?"

"Surprised that anyone should be so bereft of their senses as to wish to—as to want to—as to like such a miserable girl as myself."

"It is surprising!" he says. "Her astonishment is natural." And he laughs. "Stay outside," he whispers, as they step on to the terrace. "Stay here"—and he seats her on the rustic bench—"while I go and know my fate. I'll come back and tell you the verdict," he adds, and he goes into the house with his light, self-possessed step.

Bob is seated at the table making up his accounts—a weekly trial which is the great curse of poor Bob's life. He looks up from the piles of bills and the open account-books—a smudge of ink across his nose, his eyes vacant with much confused calculation.

"Hallo!" he says, getting up and nearly upsetting the ink. "How do you do? Here!"—and he clears a chair by the simple process of tilting the books off it on to the floor—"sit down. Glad to see you."

"I'm disturbing you?" says Sir Herrick, glancing at the ledgers.

"Not a bit," says Bob, with suspicious alacrity. "I'm only too glad of an excuse. I'm delighted to see anybody. Are you good at accounts?"

(To be continued.)

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strings. Well, so he does, but not altogether. I have a little purse of my own, as I told you, I think. You won't mind being poor, Paula?" And he smiles down at her.

She meets him with smile for smile.

"I like it," she says; "oh, I like it! Do you know what I should really choose if I had my way?"

"Tell me."

"I should like to live in that old inn with all the funny people—the barristers and the poor young man out-at-elbows—and enter into their life. There!"—breaking off suddenly—

"I've shocked you; I know I should."

He laughs.

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