

The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XX.

"What a pretty locket!" says Paula, holding it between her finger and thumb.

"Yes," he says, and a sudden faint flush comes into his face; "it is not bad."

"Bad! I think it is sweetly pretty," she says, rebukingly; and she turns it over. There is a monogram on this side formed of the letters F. H. and H. P., but so jumbled after the approved fashion that no one but the initiated could decipher them. "And this is your monogram?" she says.

"What a confusion it is," she laughs. "I suppose, like all the Powells, you have a dozen Christian names. Some day you shall tell them to me."

"I will," he says, and he laughs; but there is a touch of anxiety in the laugh, and his hand goes down to the locket as if he would take it out of her hand.

"Good-night, little locket," she says, and, with a girlish, innocent gesture, she touches it with her lips before she slips it into the pocket.

A spasm seems to pass through him, and his lips twitch, and it seems as if he meant to snatch the locket from the chain and fling it behind him; but instead he puts his arm round her.

"Good-night, my darling," he says, hoarsely, as if moved by some intense emotion. "Good-night. Heaven—!" Then he breaks off with a sudden laugh. "My uncle's little tricks are catching," he says. "I was just going to say, 'Heaven bless you!' like an old man—"

But she does not echo his laugh; indeed she looks up at him, holding her head back and her hands pressed against his breast.

"Heaven has blessed me," she says, very quietly; "has it not given me your love?"

CHAPTER XXI.

Who was Flossie Hamilton? A great number of persons asked that question, and there were numerous answers to it.

Some said that her mother was a green-grocer, and that her father was a small coalman; others that she had spent the early years of her childhood selling oranges and pipe-lights, and others again, that she was the daughter of a nobleman, left at the Foundling Hospital in Gower Street.

But, however much the accounts of her origin differed, there was no dispute as to what she is. Flossie Hamilton is the principal actress and attraction at the Frivolity Theatre, where she draws crowds nightly; crowds that go to see and enjoy her dancing and singing in the successful burlesque of "Old King Cole."

Report says that Flossie Hamilton was one of the chorus singers or supernumeraries at the Frivolity, and that one of the minor actresses having fallen ill, Flossie was picked out by a discerning stage-manager to fill her place, and that from taking third-class parts, Flossie achieved first-rate ones, and so became the leading attraction at the theatre in London at which the sacred lamp of burlesque is always kept burning.

Be that as it may, Flossie was an important member of London society. Her name was on every man's lips—every man, that is, who moved in fashionable society—her photograph could be seen and admired in fifty different attitudes in every fancy shop in the fashionable thoroughfares.

Flossie had the best-appointed brougham in London; she had—and wore also—the best suite of diamonds of any professional on the boards.

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She had a lady's-maid who attended her at the theatre, dressed her, and accompanied her home, in the store-said brougham to Raglan Street, Chelsea, where Flossie resided.

Flossie was, in a word, the rage. The crutch and tooth-pick brigade, the young gentlemen with nothing to do and plenty of money to do it on, filled the stalls of the Frivolity nightly with the sole object of seeing and hearing Flossie.

Her quick, smart sayings, the "gag" in which leading actresses of her type indulge, became the fashionable slang of London; when she appeared in the park, which she did pretty frequently, ladies—ladies born and bred—copied her costume and imitated her sunshade.

Her songs, trilled by Flossie in the most beautiful of stage costumes, were sung by immaculate ladies in the drawing-rooms of May Fair. To know Flossie, to be on bowing terms with her, was an honour which men valued above rank and learning. To be seen in her neatly appointed victoria, bestowed a rank and position which the noblest of our gilded youth coveted and ran after.

In a word, Flossie was one of the artificial hot-house products of our age, and we write of her here because it is simply impossible to ignore her; because she and her kind exert so much influence in the world that it is impossible to write a story of fashionable life that does not contain her.

If it had been possible, believe me, I would have kept Flossie Hamilton in the background and out of sight; but she is so much mixed up with the life of dear, pure Paula, down in Woldshire, that it is simply impossible to ignore her.

Besides, why should I ignore her when royal princes sat in their box at the Frivolity and applauded her, when ladies of rank copied her costumes, and cabinet ministers laughed at her jokes. Flossie was a power in the land, a household word, a proverb, and much too conspicuous a person to be ignored or passed over with a word or two.

Let us go to Flossie's house in Raglan Street.

Everybody knows Raglan Street; a quiet street in quiet, historic Chelsea,

a street celebrated for its respectability and its high rents.

The merest box in Raglan Street fetches a couple of hundred a year; and Flossie's well-kept house was the merest of boxes.

But it was a beautiful little box. Nosotti had decorated, Gilroy had furnished it. The dining-room, a tiny apartment, eighteen by eighteen, was a model of what such a room should be. A small, old oak sideboard, old oak chairs, a Turkey carpet, half a dozen good pictures, and a cellaret always well stocked with the choicest brands of champagne and Madeira.

"If you want a decent glass of Madeira," Lord Fozzie went to say, "you must go to Flossie."

It was in the dining-room that Flossie gave those exquisite little suppers at which she used to entertain, say half a dozen picked guests, a duke or an earl, sometimes a scion of royalty itself, one or two newspaper men—they are always so useful, you see. Flossie would explain—and a fellow-actress or two.

She had a good cook, and, in addition to the select cellar of wine, had such choice animal spirits of her own—spirits that expressed themselves in song and laughter, fresh and unforced as a child's—that these little suppers were much sought after; and if a man could stroll down to his club in the morning, and, while calling for a brandy-and-oda, remarked casually, "I had a bit of supper at Flossie's last night," he was regarded with admiration and envy.

Was she beautiful? Some said there was nothing in her; others raved about her, and talked in poetic frenzy of the spirit of Greek comedy and Greuze's celebrated picture of the "Dancing Girl."

She was very small—quite petite, with the daintiest, nattiest of figures, supple by nature, and rendered still more supple by the dancing-master's art. She had light blue eyes, that she had learnt to open or shut, to stare or twinkle with, as no other woman could stare or twinkle. Her nose was very small, and slightly turned up, and round her small, shapely head ran a crop of half-curly, yellow, and not dyed—let Flossie's enemies say what they will.

Of course she was beautifully dressed. There was no lady in the land whom Worth or Redfern were more anxious to please than Flossie; and she had, what many of the titled costumers of these gentlemen have not—exquisite taste.

Where she got it from, seeing that her early days were spent in an alley—but taste is born in us, says philosopher, and it must have been born in Flossie.

Then her voice—it was a wonderful voice, soft and "pretty," when she liked to make it so, and capable of changing from soft and pretty to shrill and crisp like a street-boy's.

There was no doubt about her being clever. The manager of the Frivolity was not the sort of man to pay a young lady forty guineas a week for nothing, and Flossie drew that amount from the Frivolity treasury every Saturday.

Yes, Flossie was one of the artificial productions of this artificial age, and she ought to have been very happy, if the possession of most of the good things of this life confers happiness.

But there was one thing which a great many, even of Flossie's most devout and staunch admirers, declared she lacked. They said that Flossie, pretty little Flossie, with her blue eyes, and golden curls, and dainty, supple little figure, wanted just one thing to make her perfect, and that one thing was—a heart.

She lacked all sensibility. In the very midst of the laughter which her saucy, fishy face had raised at the Frivolity, she could suddenly and without warning strike into some little, pathetic song, and make the laughter glide swiftly into tears; she could bring the tears to her own eyes, indeed, and stand looking at the gallery with quivering lips until one's heart ached to see her. But it was, so they declared, all acting, all outward show, and, like sounding brass and tinkling cymbal, quite unsatisfactory.

Sir Herrick asked his admirable uncle, the Honourable Francis, if he had ever been in love, and the major had replied with pious horror in the negative; and Flossie would have made the same reply; but no, she would not. She would have said that she had, a thousand times—meaning not at all—and boxed your ears for asking her.

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But perhaps the world wronged her, and those young gentlemen, budding earls and marquises whom she had ruined; but the word is too harsh and hard a one to be used in connection with such a soft, bewitching, little thing as Flossie; let us pass on.

On the night of the day upon which the major had given his consent to Sir Herrick's engagement, and had bestowed his blessing on Paula, Flossie had a little supper at the box in Raglan Street.

She was more "select" even than usual. There were Lord Fozzie and Colonel Everleigh, two of the acressees from the Frivolity, and a prince of the blood, an enthusiastic admirer of Flossie's.

She came home from the theatre in her brougham with her maid. She was comfortably clad in fine satins worth a king's ransom; the applause, almost deafening, which had rewarded her last song, still rang in her ears; a prince was to honour her miniature dining-room, but notwithstanding all this, there was a slight cloud in Flossie's blue eyes which Weston, the faithful maid, who knew all her mistress's moods as well as a Eton boy knows the Latin grammar, noticed at once, and she bent forward and drew the fur wrap round her mistress's throat.

"Don't do that," said Flossie, rather irritably. "I'm burning already, and yet I feel cold. I'm out of sorts."

"It's the draught, miss," said Weston, respectfully. "There's an awful draught in that last set scene; and the costume is really trying. I do hope you haven't caught cold."

"Oh, Lor', no, I hope not!" responded Flossie, with alarm; then she sighed. "I wish you'd speak to the stage-manager about it to-morrow, will you?"

Flossie was far too grand a lady to mention the matter herself.

"Yes, miss, I will," said the faithful Weston. "I'm sure you ought to get to bed to-night."

"I can't, can I?" asked Flossie. "Aren't there some people coming?"

"Yes, miss," and Weston went over the names.

(To be continued.)

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