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### The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXV.

What will he say? How will he address her? Will he say, "My own Paula?" or "My darling?" She can almost hear his beloved voice speaking to her as she gazes at the envelope.

How strangely he writes, too; it is a round hand, almost like that which ladies favour nowadays, but a little cramped and hard. It is addressed to Miss Pauline Estcourt, too. He has never, she thinks, called her Pauline.

For another minute—fully a minute—she dallies with it as one dallies with a sure and certain delight, hoarding it up, and revelling in anticipation.

At last she tears the envelope open. As she does so a faint perfume seems to arise from the inside, and she smiles with a little wonder that Sir Herrick should use scented stationery.

Then she takes out the note and unfolds it, and a great blank falls upon her face; a bitter sense of disappointment that makes her wince and quiver.

It is not from Sir Herrick. It is—she stares open-eyed and pale for a moment, then with a low cry of amazement—only amazement at present; there is no time as yet for any other emotion—she reads on.

This is what the note contains, written in a plain hand, that, for all its roundness, is a woman's:

"Miss Estcourt—When two women are being wronged and deceived, it is the duty of the one that discovers it to reveal it to the other. Duty and something more prompts me to address you. By this time you have turned to the foot of this letter to learn my name—do not cast my warning aside because I choose to hide that name. I am told that she to whom I write and appeal is an honest, simple-natured country girl, with no

thought of guile or suspicion of evil. If that be so, then I shall not appeal in vain. Miss Estcourt, you and I have been deceived and wronged by Sir Herrick Powis, if it be true that he has offered you his love, and promised to make you his wife. That love he had given to me long, long before he saw you. That love, I believe, is still mine. How can I think otherwise when he has spent the last three days by my side, as he has spent many and many others before; when he has just left me without a word or look of coldness? I could not credit that he has behaved so dishonourable towards both of us; but that I have heard it from an undeniable source. He cannot love both of us. I cannot think that he has forgotten me or ceased to love me, else, why has he left you so soon to return to me? I am told that you are very beautiful; that you have fascinated him; that you will steal him from me; but something, I know not what, whispers to me that you are too good, too pure and true for that. Am I not right? Do not think meanly of me that I write thus; you will not think so when I confess, confess with tears of bitter humiliation, that I love him, love him very dearly, notwithstanding his falsity. Miss Estcourt, let him come back to me! He cannot be so much to you as he is to me; you have known him such a little time, while I have known and loved him, so long! I implore you to listen to me, and to grant my prayer, for his, for yours, for my sake! Oh, let him come back to me! I know that by writing to you I am placing my fate in your hands, but I feel that I can trust it there. You will not betray me, will you? It is not I who have wronged you; it is you, though unthinkingly, who have injured me. I cannot write any more; I scarcely know what I have written, but I will send it; I will trust you.

"P.S.—You may doubt what I have said—it is possible; I should if I were in your place. Well, then, ask him whose portrait was contained in the locket he has worn for the last two years; ask him where he has spent these last three days; ask him why he left you so suddenly, and he will tell you if there be any truth left in him."

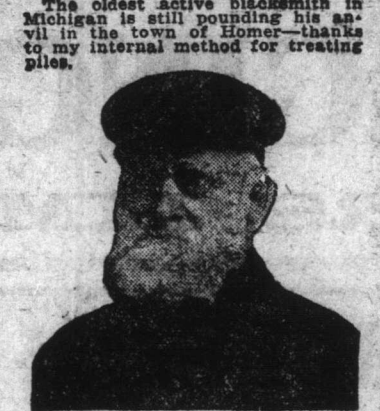
That is all; no signature, no trace as to whence the blow has come, no sign of the hand that has thrust the dagger at Paula's quivering heart.

Motionless she sits staring at the letter, but seeing it not; a great thick veil seems to have dropped before her eyes, shutting out the good heaven—the golden sky; an intense stillness and awful hush seem to have fallen on the world, and only the pleading words ring in her ears, as though she could actually hear the fearful, imploring voice of this other unknown girl. So she sits, stunned and helpless, while one could count fifty; then a sudden revulsion seizes her, and dropping the letter as if it were a poisonous reptile, she looks up and laughs, hoarsely:

"It is a lie—a cruel, wicked lie! Yes, that is what it must, it must be; and—and she laughs again with infinite self-scorn—"I was taken in by it—actually taken in by it!" she ex-

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claims, stretching out her hands as if to a palpable listener. "I was, indeed, but only for the moment. Oh, how could she, whoever she is, do it? Who can it be? Whom have I wronged that she should play me such a cruel trick? Who—"

Swiftly, suddenly, the question seems to demand an answer. Yes, who can have done it? Some woman, that for a certainty. Then—As she feels the doubt growing upon her, an awful, shuddering horror falls upon her, and she puts up her hands as if to ward it off.

What is it the woman says? Ask him whose is the portrait he wears in his locket? Ask him where he spent the last three days? Ask him why he left her—Paula—so suddenly? Why—why—this woman knows that he has some such portrait—knows where he has been—knows that he left her! She must, or she would not dare to write thus.

With a low, inarticulate cry, she covers against the stump and hiding her face in her hands, struggles against the horrid suggestions, the awful audacity of the writer.

Oh, Heaven! If it should be true! If it should—what was it Bob said about him when first he heard Sir Herrick's name? What was it that idiot Stacey de Palmer dared to breathe. "A wife in every port!"

"No; it's a monstrous lie!" she cries, springing to her feet. "It cannot be true, not a single word of it. Oh, Rick, Rick! come back to me, and tell me that it is a cruel joke you have played to test my love for you; tell me that I am not to believe it! Oh, come back to me!" and with a cry she sinks down and bursts into hysteric sobs.

Poor little Paula, poor little, simple soul!

How long she lies thus, prostrate with her struggle against doubt and despair, she does not know. Time passes on unheeded; the birds sing their last song, the trout take their last fly and sink into the depths, a star peeps out in the heavens, and Bob's manly tread comes on the path and stops beside her.

"Hallo, Paula! what are you doing here?" he demands. "What—why?" stooping down and shaking her gently, "have you gone to sleep, actually to sleep? You could have done that indoors, you know. Pretty interesting kind of letter that must be. Good as a sermon—"

Then he stops suddenly, smitten with a consciousness that all

is not well with her. "Are you ill?" he demands.

"Ill—no," she says, and she turns her white face to him with a sickly smile. "I am—tired."

"Tired!" he says, with kindly roughness. "Tired! Why—what's the matter? What is it? Has anything happened? Is it this letter?" and he stoops and picks it up from where it lies like a snake in the grass.

"No, no!" she says, extending a trembling hand. "Give it me."

"But it is—it is!" he says. "What is it? Who is it from? Sir Herrick? Look here, Paula!"

"Give it me!" she says, feverishly.

Bob looks at her with grave earnestness.

"I can't have this, you know. If there's any trouble, I must know of it. There's nobody else in the world you've got, young'un! Come, what is it? Is it from Sir Herrick? Confound him, if he—"

"No, no! It is not from him!" she pants. Then she stands up and puts the rouged hair from her face and laughs—a laugh in which the merriment is of a ghastly kind. "Don't—don't look so fierce, Bob! It's nothing."

"Nothing, is it?" he says, ironically.

"And it only takes nothing to cut you up like this, eh? That's nonsense, Paula. Look here, I'm—I'm a sort of father to you, you know—at any rate you haven't got anybody else to look after you—and, though I hate reading other people's letters, I'm going to read this."

"No, no!" she says, with a gasp. Then she laughs wildly. "Well, read it, and laugh as I do. I declare I was laughing when you came up; didn't you hear me, Bob? It is too ridiculous. Anonymous, too! Why, everybody knows that anonymous letters lie, don't they? There, read it—and—we'll laugh together."

But she doesn't laugh as she stands and watches him—watches him with fearsome, covert glance and trembling lips.

Bob reads for a moment in silence, then he growls—a deep, low growl, not unlike that of a faithful dog when he sees his master threatened with an attack from some cowardly tramp. Then he finishes it, and folds it, and puts it in his pocket.

"Well!" says Paula, with feverish impatience. "Why don't you speak? What do you stand there like a—dummy for?"

Then he moves his eyes to her face and looks at her.

"Do you believe it?" he says, and there is a shamefaced look in his honest eyes.

"It" retorts Paula, wildly. "Not a word of it! Do you? But of course you don't," and she laughs, widely.

He is silent for a moment. Then he says:

"I don't know. Be quiet. I don't know. It's very likely a lie—it's anonymous, you see. But I shall soon know."

"But—what do you mean? How can you know?"

"I'll go and enquire," he says in that quiet tone of resolution which Paula knows so well. "I'll go to-night. I was going to-morrow, you know. I'll find out what she—this woman tells us to find out, and—"

"Bob!" and she seizes his arm, her whole face filled with terror. "You—you will not do anything—you will not hurt him if—"

Bob smiles a smile of rough scorn.

"Don't fear," he says, curtly. "The days for that sort of thing are over. No, I sha'n't hurt him."

"Promise me—"

He pauses a moment. Then he looks at her with a darkening brow.

"Come in," he says.

"Not till you promise," she gasps.

"Bob, I—I love him still!"

A dark shadow comes over his face.

"Well, I promise," he says. "Come in now. And—don't let Alice see you. You look like—like a ghost."

"A ghost?" she says, her mournful, frenzied eyes raised to his with a haggard smile. "I feel as if everything had died within me! Oh, Bob! if this—this be true, I wish that I were dead!"

(To be Continued.)

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