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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXIII.

How dull and dreary the rooms looked, her grimy and commonplace old housekeeper, who came bobbing and curtsying to open the door, and assure him that she had "kept the place tidy, and swept it up and dusted it every morning."

"All right," said Sir Herrick. "No, I shan't want anything to eat. I'll go down to the club. Letters? Oh, all right, put them on the table."

And with a sigh, as the vision of the pretty parlour at Myrtle Cottage rose before him, he went and had a bath and dressed himself in something more suitable for Pall Mall and St. James's Street than the travelling-suit of tweeds, and put on his hat and gloves; but as he passed through the sitting-room he paused a moment to look over the envelopes.

There was a great many; some of the long business shape, having "bills, bills," plainly indicated in the style of writing; there were many of dainty paper and shape, and addressed in the round handwriting which the fair sex have adopted of late, and there were half a dozen amber-coloured ones with "F. H." in a monogram in crimson and gold.

He took them up. They breathed a subtle perfume that he knew as well as the paper, and the monogram, and the handwriting; but he did not open them, and after holding them for a moment, let them fall on the table amidst the others, and went out, the look of resolve on his face tempered with one of regret and troubled doubt.

Then he went down to the club, where he was met with a volley of welcome and enquiries, the latter of which he evaded by stating that he had been doing a little fishing in the west.

"And quite right, too," remarked someone at the table. "London seems played out. If it wasn't for the Frivolity and 'Old King Cole,' life wouldn't be worth living in the Great Dust Hole!" and he shook his head over

his tall collar, and nodded sapiently. It was almost the first word he had heard since he reached London, and Sir Herrick winced as if someone had stuck a pin into him.

"You'll drop in to-night, I suppose?" enquired the same young gentleman.

"Miss Hamilton is splendid! Nevah saw her in such trim, nevah! House crammed every night; no end of encores. Come with me, Powis."

"Not to-night; I'm engaged," said Sir Herrick, rather slowly; and the young gentleman sauntered away, to express his opinion in the smoking-room that "Powis had come back from the country with all his feathers ruffled the wrong way, by Jove!"

It was about three o'clock when Sir Herrick walked up Raglan Street and rang the bell of the little house which Flossie Hamilton had made famous in the fashionable world.

The footman who opened the door received him with a respectful smile, as if he were a welcome guest, and Weston, who happened to be passing up the tiny hall, that was like a bower of ferns and flowers, began a smile, too, but it died away under the gravity of his face. What had happened? She had never seen him otherwise than with a smile in his eyes, and with a word of greeting on his lips.

She opened the door, and Sir Herrick entered the drawing-room.

As he did so, a graceful little figure on the music-stool swung round, and with a low cry of delight came flying to him like a beautiful, tropical bird.

"Rick!" she exclaimed, the colour, the brilliant spot of carmine rushing to her cheek, the bright blue eyes gleaming with delighted surprise.

"Rick! Is it really you?" and she drooped upon his breast.

Then, in an instant, Sir Herrick saw that he had made a mistake, a great mistake; and with the pang of remorse which seized him at her greeting was the conviction that he should not have ventured on seeing her again.

Here was he come to say "good-bye," kindly and quietly, of course, and now she was on his breast, her eyes turned up to him with confiding affection, her clear-cut lips waiting for a kiss. What was he to do? Man is but man; and he would want to have a heart of stone to thrust this little bird-woman, with her brilliant plumage, away from him. Sir Herrick could not, notwithstanding all those resolutions which he manufactured wholesale on his way up to town.

You see, he expected a very different reception; he expected that Flossie would receive him with icy coldness, or with a burst of feminine passion, accusing him of neglect, and demanding to know, with flashing eyes and flaming cheeks, why he had not left his address or answered her letters. Then it would have been easy for him to say, "Flossie, you must write me no more letters. I am going away and shall not return. Let us part in peace."

And he would have had this reception and opportunity, but that the astute major had prepared and schooled Flossie; had, indeed, supplied her with a part which no one in London could play more perfectly.

What was he to do? He did what any other man, unless he were made of iron, would have done: he spoke to her pleasantly; and though he did not

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kiss her—which, be sure, Flossie noticed—he put his arm in hers and allowed her to remain in his embrace, as it were, for the space of a minute or two.

Let those blame him who will; he was weak, if you like, but not disloyal to the trusting heart that loved him so dearly down in Woldshire: for even as he looked down at the curly head and the blue eyes, the vision of Paula's beautiful, pure face crossed before his eyes, and made him feel remorseful and weak, and altogether base.

"Well, Flossie," he said, unloosening her arms and leading her to the sofa.

"Well, Rick," she retorted, mimicking his tone, but quite pleasantly; and with a smile in her eyes, though her heart was beating with suppressed passion and anxiety. "Is that all you have to say to me after being away so long? And where have you been?"

"Down in the country," he replied, looking at the carpet, and wondering that he had never noticed how artificial her voice was, and how forced her attitudes.

Poor Flossie! It was hard upon her, after all. Until his eyes had been opened by that mischief-maker, Love, he had thought her nearly perfect, and had been quite content to take her voice and her attitudes as they were.

"In the country! So I should think," she retorted. "You look awfully well; quite brown. Why, your hands are like a nigger's, sir!"

He looked at them for the sake of doing something and looking somewhere.

"Yes, it has been hot," he said.

"And have you enjoyed yourself, Rick?" she enquired, pleasantly. "Had a good time of it, fishing and all that?"

"Yes," he said; and as the remembrance of the "good time" and all it meant for him came across him, his heart smote him.

"I wrote several times," she went on. "I wanted to see you awfully bad. I've had such a cold, Rick, though I don't suppose you care, as you haven't even asked me how I am!" with a little, plaintive laugh.

He looked at her and saw that she was paler than when he had left, and that round her brilliant eyes—soft enough now, though—there were slight rings, telling of that "little cough" which troubled her at times, and this didn't make him any the more comfortable.

"I am very sorry, Flossie," he said. "It is the east wind and coming out of the theatre." Then a sudden inspiration fell on him. "Flossie," he said. "I don't think you are at all well. You have had that cough some time now. How would it be if you went away for a trip to the south?"

She knew what he meant: he wanted to send her away; but though her

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