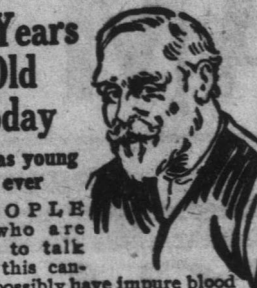


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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Men come round her in the intervals of the dancing, eager and anxious to get a chair, an ice, to lead her to the cool alcoves, to hold her fan, to pay her any attention, however small. All the room but herself sees that she has been elected belle of the ball, and envy fills the hearts of her sex accordingly. Angry glances shoot from the eyes of the fair maskers, and low, spiteful whispers breathe from red lips; but Paul, with calm smile and absent, dreamy eyes, is all unconscious and ignorant of giving offence.

She is so surrounded at this period of the night by her court that Alice finds some difficulty in approaching her, and when she does can scarcely get an opportunity of whispering the warning she has come to bestow.

"Well, my dear," she says, "I should think you are enjoying yourself!"

"It is very amusing," says Paula, quietly, taking her fan, as she speaks, from a French count, who hands it with a bow almost to the ground.

"For you," says Alice, meaningly.

"What do you mean?" asks Paula, innocently.

"Look there," answers Alice; and Paula, following the direction of Alice's eyes, sees Stancy, standing at a distance, glowering at the group of which she is the centre with a sulky frown.

"It is very amusing, doubtless," says Alice, with an iron-rod smile. "But take care. It would scarcely be wise to make our young friend and be-trothed too jealous."

Paul colours.

"I cannot help these gentlemen

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crowding round me. I wish they would not; it is quite warm enough. I am quite ready to go home," coldly.

"Nonsense!" laughs Alice, taking fright. "Don't look like that, pray. But give poor Stancy another dance if you can."

"There is the card," says Paula, handing her the dainty programme.

"It is quite full," says Alice, with a shrug of her white shoulders. "Happy girl! Well, I will go and pacify him, and you must talk to him between the dances, poor fellow!"

Paula turns her head away coldly, but when the next partner comes to claim his waltz she pleads weariness and begs to be excused.

He is a young Frenchman, and too polite to press his claims.

"Mademoiselle may well be weary of so much homage," he says in excellent English, and with a polished bow. "Permit me to conduct you to a quieter spot; the music, charming though it be, warms the air after a time. Supper will be announced very soon. Permit me, mademoiselle," and he leads her out of the crowd into a recess deserted for a moment.

"Now," he says, humbly and reverently and fully aware that envious eyes are fixed on him, "allow me to obtain an ice, a drink of water, to refresh you."

"Thank you; a glass of water," says Paula, gratefully.

He makes a profound bow, hands her her fan and domino, and disappears, his crimson cloak—he is a Mephistopheles—gleaming amidst the crowd, and Paula leans back and rests.

Apparently a glass of water is not easily procured, for he is gone some time, and Paula has given him up for lost, and is looking for Alice or Mr. Palmer—she is quite alone for a wonder—when she sees a tall, thin gentleman in a court costume of Louis XIV. thread his way through the crowd and approach her.

Something in the delicate, mincing gait, in the carriage of the silver-tipped cane which he holds in his hands, strikes Paula as being familiar to her, and she watches the figure as it comes nearer; but she does not recognise it until it stands before her and says in the soft, insinuating voice she remembered so well:

"Dare I believe my eyes! Is this too much happiness, or is it—Miss Paula?" and he takes off his mask and extends his hand.

It is the Honourable Major Ver-court, his smooth face, on which not a wrinkle shows, not a day older; nay, a year younger, if anything; the smile sweeter, more ingratiating even than of yore. It is the ever-green major himself.

Paula stares as if a ghost has arisen, as, indeed, one has, from that past which never leaves her, and she gives him her hand with a breathless amazement.

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says the major, seating himself beside her, and raising his thin, white fingers with a gesture of surprise and delight. "To think that we should meet here in this corner of the world! And yet it but fulfils my prophecy. You would ask what that is? My dear Miss Paula, the first time I saw you, at the house of our esteemed friend Mr. Palmer, I said to that worthy gentleman himself, if I remember rightly, 'That young lady is too beautiful, too charming, not to have a great career,' and you see I was right. Months elapse, time flies by, and we meet again; I the prophet, you the belle of this brilliant assembly."

Paula smiles faintly, ironically; but he shakes his powdered head.

"No, no, it is quite true. You are the belle, the reigning queen. My dear child—pardon an old man's familiarity—your name is on every lip, the women envy you, the men are mad about you. I left a group of young men in the refreshment-room a few minutes ago, and they were employed—how? 'Toasting you in champagne—to the fair Moonlight, the most lovely of her sex!' I assure you."

And he lays his white hand on his satin-covered and artistically padded bosom.

Paula looks at him with the same quiet, incredulous smile.

"Do not think I flatter," he says in the soft, insinuating, mock-earnest tones she remembered so well; "I but speak the plain, vulgar truth—you have the world at your feet to-night, Miss Paula."

Paula laughs, and there is a bitter tone in the laugh. The world! But a year ago she had one man whom she counts more than all the world at her feet, and where is he?

"Have you seen my sister Alice?" she says, for the sake of saying something.

"Yes," says the old courtier; "and she, too, has her triumphs. But it is you who have won the world by storm."

"It would be rude to contradict you," says Paula, wearily; "but the world is easily won!"

And she sighs.

"It is always so," he says, toying with the laced hat he holds in his left hand—"always so. 'I came, I saw, I conquered!' That is your story, my child. Ah, how happy and proud my dear young friend—if he will permit me to call him so—must be."

Paula is silent.

"Happy Mr. Palmer!" he says, laying his hand on his heart, and eyeing her with a gallant smile.

Paula looks down gravely.

"Now," he goes on, with a light air of persiflage, "if I did my duty I should go and congratulate him on his good fortune, which I have heard of to-night for the first time; but I cannot. In simple truth, I envy him too much. But, my dear Miss Paula, I wish you every happiness."

Some impulse she cannot resist compels Paula to retort:

"You did that on a former occasion, Major Vercourt."

He looks at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"I do not forget, my dear child; but I did it with compunction. You allude to my poor Rick. My dear child, I knew, I even ventured to say, that he was not worthy of you."

Paula is silent, but her eyes fix themselves on the false face.

"No!" he says, emphatically; "not half worthy of you. Poor Rick! A good fellow! I, his uncle, may be permitted to say so much for him, but worthy of you! Never! Let us forget him!"

"Where is he?" says Paula, abruptly; a curious way of acceding to the major's request that they should forget him.

The major waves a thin hand in the air.

"Echo answers 'Where!'" he says.

"My dear Miss Paula, I do not know,

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