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The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XXVII.

With a start—and yet not a start, but a sudden shrinking of her whole being—Paula draws from him, her eyes dilating with a wild horror, her face paling.

"Flouise!" drops slowly from her lips. "Flouise!"

He puts his hand to his brow, confused—pained—stricken by the name. Is he—*is he* mad?

She looks at him—looks at the sudden terror on his face, and her heart seems to shrink as if his big hand had suddenly gripped it.

"Whose name is that?" she says, almost inaudibly, with fear, actual fear in her face.

"Whose?" he stammers, hoarsely, for the first time in his life utterly embarrassed and at a loss.

"Yes!" she retorts, not angrily, but with a dead, dull persistence. "My name is Paula; you spoke to me as—Flouise, I ask you, whose is it? Can you—can you not answer me?"

"I—I—" he says, his tongue clearing to the roof of his mouth.

With a sudden catching of the breath she slips back, and leans her arm on the coat, and faces him, her eyes fixed on his; then suddenly they fall to his locket—the locket that it has never occurred to him to remove, for the simple reason that it was so worthless in his sight that he has never thought of it.

"Is—*is* her portrait in there?" she demands in metallic tones. "Is it? Is it? Can you not answer me?"

He had gone to the locket, and with a clutch of steel he tears it from the chain, Paula, to whom every look, every gesture of his is full of meaning, reads the significance of the action.

"Is it?" she says. "Oh, Heaven, it is! Then—then it is true."

"True! What is true?" he says, hoarsely. "For Heaven's sake don't be—*—*—Paula."

"Flouise!" she says, with the most awful irony. "It is true, true; and I—I was right when I doubted. Oh, Heaven! Don't—*—*—don't touch me!" for he has drawn nearer as she leans against the coat.

"Paula," he says, and his voice is thick and heavy, the drops of perspiration

standing on his brow, "before Heaven—"

She shudders, and puts up her hands.

"No, no; no vows! Answer my plain—plain questions, or remain silent. A light, an awful light is breaking in upon me. Answer me at once, if—if you have any mercy."

He bows his head, smitten to the heart. It has come, this that he has dreaded. Like a nightmare it has loomed before him, and now it is here to be faced.

"Where"—she pauses and wets her dry lips—"where have you spent the last three days? Have you been with her?"

If he could lie, a lie would save him; but, with all his faints and follies, this hero of ours is a gentleman, and a lie will not come to his lips, though he would give half a world for it.

He hangs his head. His silence is answer enough.

Paula hides her face for a moment, then, as if ashamed of her weakness, she raises her head and looks at him standing bareheaded before her, for some blind instinct has caused him to take off his hat.

"And that—that locket holds her portrait! Oh, Heaven! And when I asked you the other night you lied—you lied to me!"

"Paula, listen to me!"

"Not one word!" she says, desperately. "If I listen to you I am lost. I want only simple, plain answers to my questions. That locket contains the portrait of—the girl you loved, and still love, or why have you left me for her?"

"Paula, listen to me!" he says, desperately, his face white and working; "you do not understand—"

"No, no, I can never understand, I shall never understand how a man—I do not say an honourable man—can have acted as you have done. And she—I understand now how she could write as she has done."

He looks up, a sudden fierce suspicion in his eyes, and a fierce, angry curve about his lips.

"Has she dared—" he says.

"Dared!" echoes Paula. "And why should she not dare? Was I not robbing her of what she valued above all the world holds? Was I not a new-comer, a new fancy"—oh, the bitterness of that reflection!—"coming between her and her happiness? Dared! If I had been in her place I would have done the same."

"Show—show me the letter," he says, almost inaudibly.

"No, no—a thousand times no!" she answers, passionately. "It was the appeal of one wronged woman to another, and I will not show it to you."

"Paula!" he says, and he tries to speak calmly, coolly. "Will you listen to me? Will you try and understand? Heaven knows, I would spare you if I could; but I must speak plainly. This girl—"

"Silence!" she says, passionately. "How dare you speak contemptuously of her? Dare you tell me that you do not love her?"

He is silent. How can he explain to her—the embodiment of purity—how matters really stand?

"Will you tell me that? No, you cannot with her portrait in your locket, and remembering that you have just come from her. Sir Herrick—his heart at the formal title—"Sir Herrick, you have wronged both her and me—her by leaving her, me by protesting vows of love when your heart belonged to another. There is nothing

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more to be said but—oh, why, why did you do it!" and the sweet voice breaks into a sob.

"Paula, listen to me!" he says, desperate and frenzied. "You do not understand. Before Heaven I swear that I have loved only you!"

"And yet you carried her portrait in your locket! You let me for her! How can you ask me to understand?"

"By Heaven! I don't know," he says, in despair. "I never can hope to get you to understand or forgive me!"

"Forgive!" she says, I can forgive! Thank Heaven, I can do that. But I cannot forget, not yet. I cannot forget, Sir Herrick!"

He raises his head, bent low before her,

"If—if you have done me a grievous wrong, and I think you have, grant me this prayer."

He looks up with lack-lustre eyes.

"Do not let us meet again. From henceforth let us be strangers. I—I have suffered much, spare me for the future. That is my only prayer. If I dared venture another, it would be that you should make happy, that other—the girl called Flouise."

He makes a contemptuous gesture, but his eyes still cling to her.

"Make her happy, for I think she loves you. As for me, I am but a wail and stray in the stream of your pleasant, lightsome life, and I—I shall soon be forgotten."

"Paula!" he cries, with all a strong man's passionate soul in his cry. "Listen to me. I swear that I love you only. That there is a great, an awful mistake—if you only knew—"

"I only know that you loved another before you saw me; that you must love her now, or why did you leave me? that you carried her very portrait where mine, if you had loved me, should have rested. I know only this, but it is enough, Sir Herrick, I—I cannot forget, but I forgive. And—and I wish you every happiness. Good—Good-bye!"

And before he can put forth a hand to stop her, she slips into the saddle and rides off.

He stands looking after her—stands dumb and motionless, as benumbed as a statue.

It has all been so sudden—think how, five minutes ago she rested on his breast with frank, trustful love!—that he has scarcely realised what has befallen him. And it is this: that he has seen the last of, exchanged the last word with, the only girl in all the world he can ever love.

He stands and looks after her as a man might look who sees the fairy promise of a life's longing and a life's happiness vanishing from him; then he starts and rushes forward, for the slight figure bent over the colt has wavered in the saddle and is falling.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Sir Herrick is only just in time to save her; as it was, but for the intelligence of the colt, who, feeling her hand relax its hold upon the rein, stops short, she would have been under the horse's heels.

Sir Herrick receives her literally in his arms, and catches the bride with his left hand.

For a moment he thinks that she is dead; so white is the beautiful face, so still and lifeless the little, girlish form.

"Oh, Heaven!" he murmurs, "I have killed her—killed her!"

But almost before the dreadful words have left his lips, she opens

her eyes and looks up at him vacantly.

"Bob," she murmurs, "it is quite true!" and the dull agony in the tone goes straight to his heart like a knife.

"Paula," he murmurs, hoarsely, as he sinks on to his knees, still holding her—"Paula, my darling, speak to me. It is Rick, not Bob."

Slowly his voice reaches her, and with a pitiable gesture she puts up her hand as if to push him from her.

"Don't—don't touch me!" she murmurs, quickly, and with an actual shudder. "Have you not gone? Where am I? It is—*is* it morning? Have I been dreaming? Ah!"—a full consciousness rushes back upon her and she remembers all—"no, I remember"—with an awful look of misery—"I remember," and as she speaks she gently but firmly puts his arm from her and rises, her hand, cold and trembling, seeking the colt who stands eyeing them with a grave, stolid stare.

Sir Herrick stands for a moment silent as she puts her hand to her quivering lips and struggles, with heaving breast, for mental and physical strength.

Then he says in a low, imploring voice:

"Paula, you will let me take your hand to the gate?"

She shakes her head.

"No, I am—an quite well now. It—it was the heat. If you will go, I will rest here for a little while."

He raises his head sadly.

"I cannot go and leave you here alone and ill. Oh, Paula!"—piteously—"have some mercy on me; the worst criminal, the vilest sinner—there is mercy for all," and his voice grows inaudible.

She looks at him with an awful touching sadness in her eyes that is more hopeless than the most fiery anger.

"Have I—have I been too hard," she says, faintly. "I am sorry. Yes, I am sorry. I did not mean to be. I will ask you to forgive me," and the tears rise to her gentle eyes.

"For Heaven's sake do not speak to me like that," he exclaims, remorsefully. "Hard! No, you have not been hard enough. No punishment could be too hard for me. I deserve all, all you can say. And yet, Paula, if you would but listen to me, I would try and show you that I have not been quite so vile as you—you deem me."

"Do not ask me," she says, as a big tear falls down her cheek unnoticed. "I cannot—dare not listen."

"Dare not!" he breathes, sudden hope rising within him.

"Dare not," she repeats, faintly; "if I listened I should yield. No, no, do not move, do not come near me. I should yield now and hate myself, and you, afterwards!" Her head falls. "Do you not see," she says, her eyes fixed vacantly on the trees behind him, as if she were communing with herself, "that all is over; that no explanation you could offer would alter the facts—the hard, cruel facts? Even if—if you still loved me."

"Still loved you!" he echoes, with bitter irony.

"If, as you say, you still loved me, then the dream is broken, the vase shattered. I could never trust you again so forgive me—I do not mean to be hard. No, no; I do not wish to say another hard word; it is you who force me."

(To be continued.)

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