

The Romance OF A Marriage.

CHAPTER VI.

"You are very kind," says Sir Herrick, "but—"

"Oh, come; we can't take any refusal," says Mr. Palmer, with an oleaginous smile. "Can't, indeed. You must make the Court your 'headquarters. Come up and have luncheon with us. Take us as we are, Sir Herrick. If we'd known you'd been coming we'd have had a decent spread; but you must take pot-uck, you know."

"But we have had our lunch," says Sir Herrick.

Mr. Palmer looks round with an air of disappointment; but seeing no trace of a picnic basket, brightens up again.

"Oh, a mere sandwich!" he says. "That's nothing! Come, Miss Paula, persuade your friend to join our 'umbrella meal.'"

Paula looks up with a smile at the handsome face, and the smile says so plainly, "Go. It will be more fun," that Sir Herrick inclines his head, and, smothering a sigh, says:

"Thanks, I shall be very glad, if Miss Paula doesn't mind. It wasn't much of a lunch, was it?"

Paula shakes her head. "That's right," says Mr. Palmer, trying to slap Sir Herrick on the back; but aiming short, and nearly losing his balance. "Come along, young people. Stancy, just run on ahead, will you, and tell them Sir Herrick Powis is going to join us!"

Stancy de Palmer colours, and looks rather sullen; but there is nothing for it but to obey; and sticking his eye-glass in his eye, and trying to look as dignified as he can under the circumstances, he sets off.

Sir Herrick stands for a moment watching the erstwhile languid figure scudding across the meadows in the many-coloured knickerbocker suit, then he bends down with a smile and picks up his basket.

"Allow me," says Mr. Palmer, obsequiously. "Let me carry something. I've got empty 'ands."

But Sir Herrick slings his basket over his shoulder and picks up his rod with a polite "No, thanks." Then he looks at the stream and the sky rather longingly, and sets off beside the sugar-baker. Once he turns to glance at Paula, almost bosochtingly asking for permission to back out of it; but Paula carefully evades his glance, and, with a sigh, he walks on beside Mr. Palmer.

Paula walks behind with the gentle daughter of the house, and for a few minutes they are silent; but as the other two step out of hearing, May says in a low voice:

"Oh, Paula!"

"What's the matter?" says Paula, her dark eyes twinkling.

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"Oh, it is dreadful!" says May.

"Is it?" remarked Paula. "How?"

"Oh, I'm sure you understand!" says the sugar-baker's daughter. "To think that papa and Stancy should talk to him as they did."

"Oh, he didn't mind it," says Paula, carelessly. "I think he enjoyed it. You see, he was taking a rise out of them."

May lifts her blue eyes, gentle and innocent as a child's, to the darkly beautiful face above her.

"But, Paula!"

"Well!"

"Don't you see what I mean? To think that he should be a Powis, and that his people owned all this, and that he should be insulted because he happened to be fishing here on what would have been his own land."

"My dear," says Paula, calmly, "he doesn't mind in the slightest; he doesn't mind anything. He'd-ho'd-gone on his grandmother's trap."

"Oh, Paula!"

Paula laughed.

"It would, indeed. He is the picture of calm self-possession. Oh! but wasn't it delightful the way in which he met your brother!" and she laughs.

"I beg your pardon, my dear; but if you had been behind that stump, and heard it all, and every all the while who he was, you'd have enjoyed it as much as I did."

"And all this once belonged to his people," says May, looking round at the fine stretching meadows and the Court that rises grandly before her.

"Yes," says Paula, with a curious intonation. "But he doesn't care. You'll see, he'll take everything as coolly as if he had never heard of the Court before."

"And how long have you known him, Paula?" asks May.

Paula colours and hesitates a moment.

"Not long," she says, feeling guilty.

"He came to the cottage to see Bob about the fishing, and Bob, being busy, ordered me to accompany him. You know Bob?"

It was a simple question, but somehow it brings a blush to the gentle face.

"I'm sure, Bob—your brother—would do 'at as right."

"Oh, of course," says Paula, with gentle sarcasm. "Bob, like the king, can do no wrong. But come on; I

want to see how he enters the Court.

Just think! It belonged to his people for ages, ever since it was built. And he is going back to it—you know he was born there!"

"No," murmurs May.

"Yes, actually born there; and he's going back to it as a stranger and a guest."

"I don't think it's right," says May, piteously. "I don't think anyone ought to be able to get rid of their inheritance. I mean they ought not to be able to sell it to the first comer; and, Paula—"

"Well?"

"I'm sure that it is of no use such people as ourselves living in a place like Powis Court. We were much happier at Clapton."

"Oh, nonsense!" says Paula, emphatically. "But do walk a little faster. It will be such fun. I want to see him when he goes in."

May quickens the pace, and they catch up the other two as they enter the Court grounds by one of the lodges that stands by a pair of tall, iron gates.

Mr. Palmer is evidently making the most of his opportunity, and, quite forgetful of the fact that his companion was the heir to the place, is enlarging on the improvements he has made.

"There was an old pond here," he says, waving his hand over the spot where Sir Herrick used to fish, with a piece of cotton and a bent pin, in his childhood; "but I filled it in—I don't like ponds about a place; they make it damp. New lodge, Sir Herrick—my own plan."

Sir Herrick stares at the ugly lodge, and nods, with a smile.

"No expense spared," says Mr. Palmer.

mer, using his favourite formula, "Money no object with me, when I set my mind on a thing."

"So I perceive," says Sir Herrick.

"No, Sir Herrick; I know the value of money, but I don't mind spending it when I see it's necessary. Now, when I took the Court—as offence—"

"Not in the slightest," assents Sir Herrick, pulling out his cigarette-case and glancing round at Paula.

"When I took the Court it was a ramshackled place, very much out of repair, and all to pieces, as one might say."

Sir Herrick nods.

"There's a lot of money to be spent," says I. Well, I spent it. You won't know the place, Sir Herrick."

"Very probably not," says Sir Herrick, drily.

"No, Sir Herrick, I set about making alterations regardless of expense, and I think I've improved it. Look there," and he points a fat, red finger to a mass of red brick-work which has been added on to one of the wings of the old place—a mass of brick-work which utterly spoils that portion on to which it has been grafted, and is hideous enough to draw tears from the whole Society of Antiquarians.

Sir Herrick looks at it, with a smile.

"There, Sir Herrick," says the sugar-baker, with an air of self-satisfaction. "There's a billiard-room and smoking-room, and a boocoor for the ladies. Oh, I haven't spared any expense, I assure you."

"So I see," says Sir Herrick.

"And I've added a ball-room and a dining-room. I wanted it, you know. There was only the old banquet-hall, as they called it—a barn of a place, hung with old fags and coats-of-arms. Took 'em all down, sir, and had the room papered; there was only a dark, gloomy kind of oak panelling—"

"I remember," says the last of the Powises.

"You do? Ah, well, you'll be surprised. But money, Sir Herrick, money can do anything."

"So it appears," says Sir Herrick; and he adds, mentally, "Even spoil an old place like Powis Court."

"Come, Sir Herrick," says the sugar-baker, "welcome to the Court," and he ascends the old stone steps, up which even a crowned king had stepped, and rings a bell.

Suddenly the door is opened by a footman in gorgeous livery of canary plush, with crimson trimmings; and another makes his appearance, and two stand opposite each other like a guard of honour, and between them Mr. Palmer, the sugar-baker, and Sir Herrick Powis enter.

Paula runs up the steps to be in time to witness the entrance, and stands panting a little, watching the handsome face.

"There, sir," says Mr. Palmer, waving his hand round the "hold all"; "rather different, I think, from what it was. Had it papered and gilded. None of your dismal old oak for me. Rather different, ain't it? Improvement, eh?"

Sir Herrick looks round at the transmogrified hall, shorn of its time-eaten banners, with its black oak hidden beneath a gaudy paper, with its historic furniture replaced by modern tables and chairs. Looks round with an amused smile, with no expression of regret, let him feel what he may; and Paula, watching him closely, and listening with all her ears, hears him say:

"Yes, it is quite different, Mr. Palmer."

And so the last of the Powises enters the old house of his ancestors. (To be continued.)

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