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The Romance of Marriage.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"I thought—" He looks round at the Frenchman and back at her. "Pardon me, but have you not come from the ball-room? It is a pity for you to lose all the dancing because your companion happens to have—deserted you for the fascinating rouge-et-noir. Allow me to conduct you back to your proper sphere," and he offers his arm; then he laughs. "I beg your pardon, I am not in proper trim," and he looks down at his morning-suit with a smile.

They are almost the same words he used when they met outside the Court so long, so long ago.

Paula tries to speak, but her lips are dry and wordless.

"At any rate," he says, with the same ghost of a smile, "I can conduct you to the door-way."

Paula rises and puts her fingers on his arm, and carefully keeping out of the circle of light, he takes her towards the door. Suddenly her hand closes on his arm; the faintness with which she has been wrestling threatens to master her. He looks down and notices, for the first time, the marble whiteness of the face below the mask, and stops.

"You are faint," he says in a gentler, more considerate tone. "Perhaps you had better rest for a few minutes," and he leads her, putting his hand protectively on hers, which rests on his arm, to one of the numerous recesses with which the room abounds.

"I will leave you for a moment only," he says in a low voice, and she sees him go quickly but quietly to a footman, and take a glass of wine from him. He brings it to her himself, and stands before her as if to shield her from any chance observer.

"Drink this," he says, and Paula recognises the old, masterful tone, and her heart responds obediently as of old. She takes the glass with a quivering hand and raises it to her lips.

"There is nothing like champagne for sudden faintness," he says in the same low tone, and evidently talking to cover any embarrassment she may feel. "It is better than water. Please drink it all."

Paula obeys, and he takes the glass and sits down beside her silently to give her time to recover.

"And now," he says, after a minute, during which he has been looking at the group around the table with absent, indifferent gaze, "are you better?"

"Yes," she says in a low voice, "much better; it was the heat. I have been dancing some time, and am not used to it."

She stops suddenly, for his eyes have darted round from the table to

her with a strange, almost a startled look, and she sees the danger; he has almost recognised her voice, strained and altered though it is by her weakness.

"Have you been staying here long—here at Nouville?" he asks, his eyes fixed on hers with deep attention, with suppressed eagerness and intense watchfulness.

"No."

"Not long? Pardon me if I seem impertinent, but something in your voice reminded me of—of a friend I have not seen for a long, long time."

It is of no use to struggle longer. With a slow, trembling movement of her white hand, Paula slips off the mask and turns her pale, lovely face to him.

The champagne-glass falls to the velvet-pile carpet, and he springs to his feet, his eyes distended, his lips white and quivering.

"Paula!" he breathes, and so stands devouring her for a moment, motionless.

Then, as if with a gigantic effort, he masters himself, and seating himself by her side, covers his face with his hands.

She knows what is going on in his mind. She knows the agony and nature of the shock. Has she not endured them herself? And she sits with clasped hands, her eyes brimming with unshed tears, through which she looks at him as through a veil.

At last he raises his head, and just glancing at her, as if he could scarcely trust himself, says in a dry, hoarse whisper:

"What does this mean? How is it that you are here?"

Paula does not stop to ask herself what right he has to question her.

"I am staying here with Alice," she says, almost meekly, her hands clasped tightly over each other, her heart seeming to stand still. How white, and thin, and worn is the hand which he still holds over his eyes.

"With—with Alice?" he says in the dazed voice of a man who has not recovered from an overwhelming shock.

"With Alice? Your brother—"

"Bob is out of England," she replies.

"You two here alone?" with significant emphasis. Then his face flushes and grows white again. "Are—are you married?"

Paula could almost laugh with bitter mockery at the question; but suddenly she remembers Stancy de Palmer, and that, if not married yet, she is to be, and her head droops.

"No."

His hand drops to his side, and something like a breath of relief escapes his lips. Then he looks at her in silence for a moment, drinking in the new loveliness in her face, the sad light of her dark eyes, the whole beauty of which has become perfected since he left her, a bud of girlhood, now a glorious blossom of womanhood.

"Did—did you know me?" he asks, his voice scarcely above a whisper, as if he were communing with the spirit of his lost love rather than with her actual being.

"Yes," she says, with a deep sigh. "I knew you the moment I saw you," and there is almost a touch of reproach in her voice.

"And I," he says, with hidden bitterness, "I did not know you; did not expect to see what I see," and his eyes take in the magnificent dress, the jewels, the mask lying in her lap.

"It—it is the first time I have been to a ball since—for a long time," she says, almost apologetically.

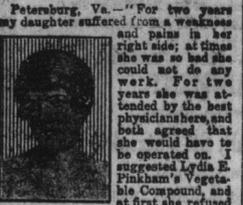
"I did not mean to express surprise," he says. "Why should I? What right have I? You—this dress is meant to represent Moonlight, is it not? It is you, then, of whom I have heard so much to-night, though I did not hear your name."

She colours faintly.

"Tell me about yourself," she says in a low voice.

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"Myself?" vacantly, bitterly.

"Yes. Have you been here long?" He shakes his head.

"No. I came here this afternoon from"—he thinks—"from Italy."

His tone—the air of indifference—clearly proclaims the utter joylessness of his life. "I came here because—I do not know. I shall be gone to-morrow."

"So soon?" she says, unthinkingly.

"Why should I stay?" he says, wearily. "Two nights in a place like me. Since—since I saw you last I have been wandering nearly the whole time."

Paula sighs.

"Alone?" she says, almost inaudibly.

He stares at her.

"Alone. Yes."

A thrill of miserable satisfaction throbs through Paula's heart. At least he is not married, then.

"Of course, alone," he repeats. "I am not—with a little smile—"such good company that anyone would desire to cast in his lot with me as fellow-traveller. And you are here with Alice?"

"Yes," says Paula again, with down-cast eyes, for she feels him dwelling on her face with wistful scrutiny.

"At the hotel? No, or I should have seen you."

"No, at a little villa on the cliff. You—you will come and see—Alice?" she falters.

He is silent for a moment, then he says in a low, hoarse voice:

"No, I shall go to-morrow by the first train." Silence for a moment. Then, "You are looking pale. You are well?" anxiously.

"Quite well," she says. "I am never ill."

"And—pardon me, I am an old friend—with a curve of the lips—"and happy?"

Paula looks at him steadily.

"And happy," she says.

He inclines his head.

"At least I shall have something to carry with me from Nouville," he says, speaking at most to himself—"the memory of a glorious vision. Forgive me. Let me be presumptuous and impertinent for the short time we are together. I shall remember you, as you look to-night, the queen of the ball. You look every inch a queen!" he says, devouring her. "You have altered; if it were possible, you have grown—more beautiful."

Silence. She does not rise with offended wrath.

"More beautiful," he repeats, "and yet—and yet—do you remember the stream through the valley?"

"No, no," she says, hurriedly, her hands clasped tightly. "I remember—nothing!"

He looks at her.

"Well, it is best," he says. "Yes, it is best to forget—if you can," gravely, and his head droops low.

Paula looks at him, at the downcast head with its close-cropped—were those streaks of grey in it? Impossible! He is too young, and yet—

"Best so," he says. "I envy you. I cannot forget. There is not a night that I do not go back, in my sleep, to those days. But—with a mirthless smile—"I have a good memory. And you are here with Alice? You see I can hardly realize it. To-morrow or the day after, when I am—say a hundred miles away, I shall not believe

that I have seen you. I shall think it is one of my dreams." And he smiles up at her, his dark eyes full of a solemn sadness and self-mockery.

The tears brim over in Paula's eyes. Her whole being seems drawn towards him. Her heart cries aloud to him, her lips almost form the unspoken prayer, "Oh, my love! my love! do not leave me! Come back to me! Let the past bury the past, let everything go, but let you and me be happy as of old!"

But it cannot be. Between them there is not only the old barrier, but the new one which she has set up. There is Stancy de Palmer, her future husband.

With a trembling hand she puts up her mask.

He starts and sighs.

"That is to remind me that our conference is at an end," he says, calmly, but very sadly. "Thank you for staying so long. It was kind of you. This young fellow—" nodding his head towards her partner at the table.

Paula shakes her head.

"I know nothing of him. Do not disturb him."

"No," he says, contemptuously. "It would be a pity. I will take you to the door and watch you till you are safe with your friends. Good-bye," and he holds out his hand.

Paula puts hers into it—into the hand that she remembers so strong and brown, but which is now so thin and white.

"Good-bye," she says.

He holds her hand, looking straight into her eyes with fixed intensity, then his lips move, perhaps without his knowing it, and he murmurs:

"Oh, my darling! my beautiful, sweet darling!"

Low as is the exclamation, Paula hears it, and her eyes are blinded with tears.

"Good-bye," he says. "You see, I find it hard to part with—an old friend!"

And his fingers close over hers as if he could not let them go.

Slowly Paula takes her hand from him, and he offers her his arm.

"To the door-way," he murmurs; "let me see you to the last."

And, with trembling limbs, Paula walks by his side.

But before they have reached the door-way a loud voice on the other side says:

"Perhaps she has gone in here. That young Frenchman looked fool enough for anything; he may have taken her."

It is Stancy de Palmer's voice, louder than usual, and with that peculiar thickness which indicates champagne behind it.

Paula starts, and Sir Herrick, feeling her start, looks quickly at her, and then fixedly at the curtain, and stands waiting.

A big hand—Stancy's—pushes the curtain aside, and that gentleman himself swaggers through.

He stops short at the sight of Paula, and not recognising Sir Herrick in the dim light, exclaims:

"Hallo, Paula! Where have you been hiding? What are you doing here? Ah—"

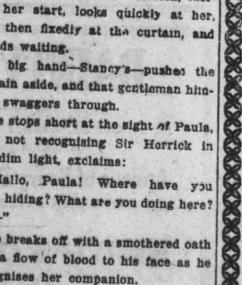
He breaks off with a smothered oath and a flow of blood to his face as he recognises her companion.

(To be Continued.)

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