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ACME MAKE

The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER VII.

"You must just take pot-luck, Sir Herrick," says Mr. Palmer, waving his fat hand towards the table, which "groans" beneath an elaborate, cold collation, set off by all the Palmer plate, every article bearing the Palmer crest—an ostrich standing on one leg and holding a palm branch with the other—an impossible attitude for anything but an heraldic fowl. The crest is everywhere: on the centre of the plates, on the chair-backs, on the candelabra, and on every article of Stancy de Palmer's jewellery, and the corner of his handkerchiefs.

How they came by it, who invented it for them, were mysteries; but there it was—conspicuous and obtrusive.

"A little 'omely meal,'" says Mr. Palmer, as they take their seats; "but you must take the will for the deed, Sir Herrick. I hope both you and Miss Paula are rather hungry after your exertions."

Paula smiles.

"I am always hungry," says Sir Herrick, calmly. "I'm afraid Miss Paula must be famished. Your arrival was providential, for it's my opinion she was just on the point of sinking for want of food," and he glances at Paula, who sits opposite him, a little gleam of amusement in her dark eyes.

"I believe I had more than half of the sandwiches," she says.

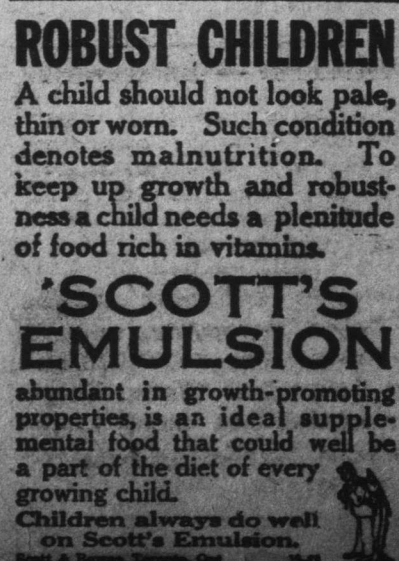
"You did," he says, solemnly, but with such a quaint curve of the clear-cut lips that, for the life of her, Paula cannot help laughing. Mr. Palmer, upon whom a joke is worse than lost, stares and smiles vaguely, and the two gorgeous footmen, who stalk about waiting during the "omely" meal, gaze vacantly into space.

May, the daughter of the house, looked from one to the other timidly, and with a little air of wonderment at Paula's courage in daring to laugh at the tall, distinguished Sir Herrick; and Mr. Palmer, clearing his throat pompously, and nodding at the empty

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chair at the end of the table, asked where Mr. Stancy was.

The door opened as he spoke, and Mr. Stancy entered. Short as had been the time, he had exchanged his many-coloured coat for one of a different hue, and had got on another necktie. Mr. Stancy de Palmer was rather given to changing his coat, and never missed an opportunity of washing his hands.

He comes in now, with a languid, sauntering gait, and a too palpable air of being very much at his ease, which is a dismal failure. But Sir Herrick scarcely appears to notice his advent, and seems quite absorbed in his plate. So the heir of the Palmers sinks into his seat, and glances round with rather a sullen look in his fair face.

"Stancy, give Sir Herrick some of that pie. Try some pie, Sir Herrick," says his father. "Are you looking at that omelette, Sir Herrick? Handsome piece of work, eh?"

Sir Herrick, who was looking at his plate, glances at the silver ostrich balancing a palm-shaped fruit-dish, and says, "Yes."

"Our family crest," continued Mr. Palmer. "Perhaps you may have heard of the Palmer that came over with the Conqueror?"

"Can't say I remember," says Sir Herrick, carefully avoiding the twinkling eyes opposite him.

"Yes," says Mr. Palmer, "our great ancestor. I'll show you his portrait in the gallery, after lunch."

Sir Herrick looks rather alarmed, but inclines his head politely.

"And so you're stopping at the King's Arms," continues Mr. Palmer—"that is, you were stopping: for I hope you will make the Court headquarters. We shall be very much honoured if you will. We are a 'omely family."

"Thanks," says Sir Herrick, a little more quickly than is usual with him; "but—I'm afraid I shall have to get back to town."

"Oh, come! you mustn't desert us, just as we've getting friendly," says Mr. Palmer. "But think it over—think it over. Stancy, Sir Herrick will take a little more pie."

And a footman takes a plate.

"No, thanks," says Sir Herrick.

Mr. Palmer calls his attention to the Burgundy, the champagne, "or perhaps a glass of dry sherry," and meeting with no success, suggests an adjournment.

"We gentlemen will go and have a cigar in the billiard-room," he says, "while the ladies do a little gossip."

Sir Herrick rises and looks at his watch; and Paula, who is watching, sees that he is ardently longing to escape.

"I'm afraid we ought to be moving to the stream again," he says, and he glances at Paula; but Paula will not help him.

"Oh, just a cigar," says Mr. Palmer. "Mustn't run away directly, you know, Sir Herrick!"

And so Sir Herrick is led off, Stancy de Palmer following up with a sullen, dog-in-the-string kind of fashion.

Paula looks after them with a smile of intense enjoyment, then she puts her strong arm round May's waist.

"Let us go into the open air, May," she says; she almost adds, "out of hearing of those gorgeous nuisances," but remembers herself in time.

They go out on the lawn, smooth as the billiard-table upon which the gentlemen have gone to play, and "Oh, Paula!" exclaims May, piteously.

"What is the matter now?" says Paula, looking down at the gentle, timid face, with its upturned eyes.

"Paula, it is dreadful! How could you sit there and laugh as if you enjoyed it? It—it made me turn cold."

"What did—the claret?" says Paula, teasingly, though she fully understands.

"The claret! No, of course not; but—the way he went on. It was wonderful that he shouldn't have remembered that Sir Herrick was actually born here, and that—that he must have been thinking about the old place all the time."

"Do you think so?" says Paula, with her head on one side. "If he was, he concealed it with admirable art. But I don't think he was. No; pity would be thrown away upon Sir Herrick. Pity, May. He doesn't feel anything."

"Are you sure?" says May, doubtfully. "Of course I don't understand him. He is so different to anyone I have ever seen—so cool and quiet and self-possessed. And, Paula, don't you think he is wonderfully handsome, in



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an awfully commanding, princely sort of way?"

Paula stoops to pick a flower, and smirks at it with careful criticism.

"Handsome? Yes. But his beauty hasn't filled me with any particular awe," she says.

May looks at her admiringly.

"That's because you are so cruel and self-possessed yourself, Paula!" she says. "I wish," with a sigh, "I were like you."

"Don't wish anything so foolish," says Paula, swiftly. "You are the prettiest—"

"—The sweetest little bit of Dresden china in the world, while I am a red-headed savage, with no manners, and no—nothing! Wish yourself like me! Have you broken all the looking-glasses in the house, May?" and she laughs.

May sighs.

"That's all nonsense, Paula," she says, wistfully. "Everyone knows how beautiful you are. Papa says that you will be a Cleopatra!"

"I'm much obliged," says Paula, laughing. "If I remember right, Cleopatra wasn't much of a woman—no better than she ought to be. I don't take that as a first-class compliment, May. But never mind. And so you had a nice evening, last night?"

"Oh, beautiful!" says May, "but," wistfully, "I did so wish you could have been here! And did you choose Alice's dress? It was so much admired. She was the prettiest girl in the room. Stancy said so himself."

"And Mr. Stancy ought to know," says Paula.

"Simply lovely," goes on May, upon whom the ironical comment is lost. "I suppose Sir Herrick admires her very much, doesn't he?"

"I don't know," says Paula. "I don't see how he can, considering that he hasn't seen her."

"But he is sure to admire her," says May, confidently.

"Quite sure," assents Paula. "I never knew a man who didn't Alice's method is very killing; they generally fall at the first shot. I have no doubt that he will fall at her feet and die on the spot," and she laughs.

"What queer things you say!" exclaims May, laughing herself now. "I don't think you are afraid of anything or anybody, Paula."

"Only of the footmen and the butler inside there," says Paula. "But, May, I think I shall have to run for it. If I know anything of Alice, there is a storm brewing, at this moment, up at Myrtle Cottage, which will take off the roof. I expect it is all descending on poor Bob's defenceless head, which is scarcely fair, though it is all his fault that I am wandering about with a strange young gentleman."

May looks up at her with a quaint mixture of awe and admiration.

"Yes," she says. "I wonder you weren't afraid. I couldn't have done it."

"Well," responds Paula, blowing a thistle-down from her fingers, and watching it as it sails through the air, "he hasn't eaten me, up to now."

"I shouldn't know what to say to him," says May, with a sigh.

Paula laughs.

"He has done the greater part of the 'saying,'" she says, "and that is not much."

"Is he married?" asks May, after a pause.

Paula is silent for a moment, her dark eyes fixed on the fleecy clouds drifting across the bright June sky.

"I don't know," she says, quite gravely. "By some mischance I omitted to ask him. I'll do so when he comes out."

"Paula!" exclaims May, clutching her arm, "you wouldn't do—" then she laughs, as she sees the smile on Paula's face.

"Why shouldn't I?" says Paula, calmly. "I wonder whether he would be surprised? I don't think so. I don't think anything would surprise him, or, at any rate, he wouldn't own it. Here they come; shall I ask him?" and May's face grows so horror-stricken that Paula burst into a loud, rippling laugh of enjoyment.

The three men come down the steps, Stancy de Palmer still in the rear, and still sullen and wrapt in a haughty cloak of silence.

"Here we are, Miss Paula!" says Mr. Palmer in his most affable manner, "and we've come with a little proposal."

"For me or May?" says Paula, with an admirable air of innocent curiosity.

Mr. Palmer stares, unconscious of the joke; but Sir Herrick laughs with his lips and eyes.

"What's the matter, eh?" enquires Mr. Palmer, blandly. "Have I got black on my face, Miss Paula?" and he wipes his red countenance with a huge silk handkerchief.

"No, oh, no!" says Paula. "What is the proposal, Mr. Palmer?"

"A little outing, my dear young lady," says the sugar-baker, waving his handkerchief. "I was saying to Sir Herrick that we ought to make his visit as pleasant as we can; and I thought we'd bet up a little himproo-pter picnic to-morrow—just a 'omely little affair; bit of bread-and-cheese in the hopen air, you know."

"That would be very nice," says Paula. "If there is enough bread-and-cheese."

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PROVISIONS OF HOME RULE BILL
LONDON, Dec. 22.

Premier Lloyd George addressed the House of Commons this evening on the Irish question. The Premier last week announced his purpose of presenting to the Commons on this occasion the details of the Government's Irish Home Rule Bill. In opening his address to-day, Lloyd George remarked upon the extreme difficulty of his task, difficulty, indeed, he said, after such a discreditable outrage as has just been perpetrated. The Premier said Parliament must get the fact right into its mind that in existing circumstances no possible scheme for Irish Home Rule was universally acceptable. Therefore, he continued, Parliament must assume responsibility and propose what it thinks fair and just. A settlement would be found not in the enactment of a Home Rule scheme, but in its working. Ireland, said the Premier, was the only country in Europe, except Russia, where the classes, who elsewhere were on the side of law and order, were out of sympathy with the ministry of Government. While Ireland was never so alienated from the British rule as to-day, any attempt at secession, the Premier announced, would be fought with the same determination, force and resolution as had been shown by the Northern States in America. The Premier said it was proposed to establish self-government over the whole of Ireland and to create two Parliaments, one in the north and one in the south. Every opportunity would be given Ireland to establish unity to be established at the outset selected by the two Legislatures to form a connecting link between the two parts of the country. The two Legislatures to be created in Ireland, the Premier

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