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**The Romance
OF A
Marriage.**

CHAPTER XIII.

"How does the scheme strike you, my dear sir?"

"Very good, very good," says Mr. Palmer, red and eager. "But—but—"

"But what?" asks the major.

"But the young man—Sir Herrick," says Mr. Palmer, slowly. "He doesn't seem to put too fine a point on it—he hasn't seem to have taken to May."

"No," says the major, with a smile.

"No," says Mr. Palmer, thoughtfully. "I don't think he has spoken half a dozen words to her. Indeed, now I come to think of it, he seems quite taken up with Paula—the young Estcourt girl—you know."

The major smiles a significant smile.

"Well?" he says.

Mr. Palmer stares.

"Well, you know, young men have their fancies. If Sir Herrick fancies this Miss Paula—"

The major laughs. Not a pleasant laugh, for all it is smooth and musical; and his thin lips curve with something like a sneer.

"Who is this Miss Paula Estcourt?" he asks.

Mr. Palmer stretches himself pompously.

"They live in a little cottage near the estate," he says. "They were of consequence, but—"

And he waved his hand in imitation of the major's inimitable gesture.

"I understand," murmurs the major. "Believe me, Rick is too sensible to compromise himself with a young lady in that position. Trust to me. Only say the word and I will undertake that

your charming daughter shall be the future Lady Powis."

"I—I—" and Mr. Palmer seems to swell. "I shall only be too delighted. Nothing I should like better. But—"

"But," says the major, with a fine smile on his delicate face, "as a man of business you want to know the terms. My dear sir, I don't complain. I admire a man of business. The terms—if we can use so coarse an expression in regard to the love-affair of two young people—are simply these: You hand over Powis Court to your daughter, and I bequeath my money to my nephew. Is that plain enough?"

"My dear major," ejaculates Mr. Palmer, "it's a bargain. Your hand!" and he extends his red fist.

The major takes it in his slim white one and presses it.

"That is a bargain," he says. "But remember, my dear sir, you must leave everything to me."

"Quite so," says Mr. Palmer.

"I," says the major, smiling at the table-clothes, "I understand my dear Rick so well that I can influence him more than anyone else could. Yes, I think you had better leave it to me."

Mr. Palmer nods with emphatic consent.

"Certainly, major," he says. "You know better how to manage the young gentleman. As for May, why, with a self-satisfied smile, "she's a good girl, and will do just as I tell her. Besides, bless my soul, what more could a girl wish for than Sir Herrick? He's handsome and a real aristocrat, and a baronet."

"Yes," murmurs the major, "Rick is good-looking; he takes after his mother, my sister; if I may be permitted to say so, the Verlocourts were always famed for their personal appearance."

Mr. Palmer inclines his head thoughtfully.

"Look here, major," he says, as if

he had come to a sudden decision. "I'm not a man to do things by halves. It's of no use giving the young people the Court, if they don't have enough to keep it going on!"

"Very true; beautifully put," murmure the major.

"Therefore, I'll tell you what I'll do," says Mr. Palmer. "I'll give 'em something to begin. I'm a rich man, and I've only got those two to look after. I'll give May forty thousand pounds the day she marries your nephew."

The major seems for a moment quite affected by such noble liberality, and puts his fine cambric handkerchief to his eyes carefully, to wipe away an imaginary tear before responding.

"Most generous!" he says, holding out his hand. "Most magnanimous! My dear sir, your liberality does credit alike to your head and your heart!"

"I don't know about my head," says Mr. Palmer, shaking that member.

"I referred to the admirable common-sense which dictated your offer, my dear sir," says the major, with his fine smile. "Of course they couldn't live at the Court for nothing; and my little savings—but let us say no more. Shall we join the young people?"

And carefully removing the smell of the cigarette from his hand by washing the white tips in the finger-glass, the major, with a smile of ineffable peace and satisfaction, rises with a gentle sigh, and the two men of the world go arm-in-arm to the drawing-room.

While the two elders have been comfortably arranging the future of at least two of the young people, the young people had been spending, or at least some of them, an extremely pleasant half-hour.

It would have been a great deal more pleasant for Sir Herrick, for instance, if Mr. Stancy de Palmer had not chosen to hang about Paula quite so much, and Alice shared his feeling of disappointment and annoyance. The wine had given Stancy courage to overcome his awe of Sir Herrick and recommence his attentions. He insisted on getting Paula's cup of tea, and sank down beside her on the settee in a fairly good imitation of Sir Herrick's calm, self-possessed manner; and, hugging his knees, began a long, prosy, and self-conceited account of his college days, to which poor Paula listened with one ear, as the Spanish say—her other bent to catch the tones of Sir Herrick's voice as he leans against the mantel-shelf, tea-cup in hand, and talks to Alice.

As to the other two, May and Bob, the first had to attend to her tea-service, and Bob—to whom it never occurred for a moment that he might make himself useful in handing the cups, or make himself agreeable—wandered up and down the room, staring at the pictures, and listlessly turning the leaves of the insipid books of elegant extracts with which the drawing-room of Powis Court was littered.

Presently May, having poured out the last cup of tea and dismissed the footman, turned to Alice.

"Won't you sing something for us, dear?" she asks.

"Pray do," echoes Sir Herrick, with a little air of waking up, his eyes withdrawing themselves slowly from the couple seated on the settee: Paula, vacant-faced and intensely bored, and Stancy drawing on with monotonous lip, occasionally broken by a con-cited laugh. Alice goes to the piano and plays something, the last piece of drawing-room fireworks, then looks round.

"I'm afraid I'm not in voice to-night," she says, pathetically; "the accident has made me quite nervous. Perhaps Mr. Stancy will sing something for us."

"Ah, perhaps he will," says Sir Herrick, straightening himself, and he strides to the sofa.

"Miss Estcourt wishes you to sing," he says in his calm, self-possessed—"Insolent," Stancy mentally calls it—tone.

But insolent though it may be, there is something in it that awes him, and he looks up suddenly.

"Oh, please do," says Paula, rousing, and putting the request as if the one thing her soul thirsted for was to hear Mr. Stancy's weak voice.

"Oh, if you'd like it," he says, with a killing glance, for which Sir Herrick feels that he should like to kick him. "What shall I sing?"

"Oh, anything," says Paula. "We should be pleased with anything."

"I'll sing 'When I am Dead and Gone, Love,'" says Stancy, with a

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sentimental air. "Do you know it? It's quite new."

"No; but I should like to hear it," says Paula, and Stancy drags himself to the piano, and, after the usual parley, Alice begins the accompaniment of this latest of sentimental drawing-room ditties, and Stancy, whose voice is of the weakest and feeblest, begins to warble the maudlin words and worse than maudlin music. Sir Herrick sinks down into the place vacated by the singer, and leans back so that he can speak directly into Paula's ear.

"What has that elegant extract from the fashion plates been talking about all this while?" he says, his eyes resting lovingly on the shell-tinted ear and the deep golden brown of the closely plaited hair.

"I don't know," she says, without looking round; "I don't think I have heard a word. Something about his college days. I wish he wouldn't."

"So do I," assents Sir Herrick, devoutly. "I have been spending the last ten minutes in the vain attempt to invent some excuse for dislodging him."

"Have you?" she says; and a faint colour comes into her face as she glances over her shoulder at him.

"Yes," he says. "Doesn't every minute he takes up of yours distinctly rob me?"

The faint colour changes to crimson, and the dark eyes melt and glow at the masterful speech.

"Would you like me to have a ticket on my back, 'Gentlemen are requested not to speak to this young lady. By order, Sir Herrick Powis'?"

"I think I should," he says, with a low laugh. "I should like all the world to know that I've the right to order trespassers off. What an awful catering-waiting that fellow is making! Is there no escape?"

Paula looks down shyly.

"There's the armoury," she says in a low voice.

"If there is anything in the world I take an interest in," he says, "it is armour. Where is it?"

Paula looks round at him.

"You don't remember?"

He shakes his head.

"No."

She raises her eyebrows.

"I don't know whether we ought," she says, rather doubtfully; "but I'll show you, if you like."

"I like very much, especially if it is quite sound-proof. A very little of 'When I am dead and gone, love,' satisfies me."

And he gets up.

Paula crosses the room softly, taking care not to attract the singer's attention, and bends over May.

(To be continued.)

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Plates.**

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