

## The Romance of a Marriage.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Come, my dear boy," murmurs the major, "be reasonable. You know that I have your interest at heart. You know that when—and the silky voice falters—"when I go to that bourne whence no traveller returns, that I intend—or shall I say intended?—leaving you—the shall I say cross?"—he pauses, and shoots a glance up at the handsome face, so set and determined. "My dear Rick, I don't think you can afford to quarrel with me! It sounds coarse, I am aware, and I beg your pardon; but I really don't think you can afford to quarrel with me. For instance, supposing that we do quarrel—which the gods forbid!—and you consummate this ridiculous—and too utterly absurd marriage, I say—what do you intend to live upon?"

Sir Herrick smiles calmly. "I am not quite quite penniless," he says.

"Worse, a thousand times, my dear boy," retorts the major, impressively. "What are a few hundreds a year to a man in your position when he is single? Does your income suffice to purchase the flowers in your coat, the glove on your hand, your stall at the opera?"

Sir Herrick shrugs his shoulders. "I never calculated, sir," he says.

"Exactly. You never have, you never needed. You know, my dear Rick, that there was—is no occasion to while you and I are friends. Well, how far would that miserable hundred or two go with a wife, and—pardon me—a large family?" pathetically. "I have always noticed that the poorer a man is the larger his family. Pray forgive me!"

Sir Herrick nods, his face darker and more set.

"I have thought of it all," he says; "but—"

"Stop," says the major, "hear me out. On the one hand is this truly absurd and too ridiculous love-affair; on the other a match, my dear Rick, which will just give you back your own. Think of it! Come, my dear boy, be sensible. You will bless me in years to come if you yield now, I assure you you will; and so will the charming little girl with the red hair. Think of it! Draw back while there is time. You will, Rick," he pleads. "Real-

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use this unwanted energy; but the occasion warrants it. Draw back, my dear Ric, from the precipice which, lined though it be with flowers, leads to an abyss which—which—by god! is too awful to contemplate," and the major shudders.

Sir Herrick is silent for a moment, then he looks down at the worldly face with all its little tricks of expression and feminine graces.

"I'm sorry, sir," he says. "For my soul, I'm sorry; I knew you would cut up rough, but I cannot help it. Were you ever in love?"

"Never, my dear Rick," murmurs the major, with pious horror; "never in this excessively foolish and unbecoming manner, believe me!"

"I don't think you ever were," says Sir Herrick, with a curl of the lip, "so you cannot understand. If you had ever been so, you would know that all the advice in the world is thrown away upon a man in my condition. Besides," with a gesture of relief, "it's too late."

The major gasps and turns to him, his face suddenly pale and set.

"What!"

"It is too late," says Sir Herrick, calmly, but gravely. "I have just made a formal proposal."

The major rises, his hands clenched, his keen eyes shooting angry fire.

"You—you—" he stammers, then suddenly his manner changes, and as he sinks into the seat his colour comes back and a faint copy of his sweet smile wreathes his lips. "Really too late!" he murmurs, sweetly. "Real-

ly?" Well, well, it is idiotic, I suppose, my dear Rick. Dear me! Tut, tut! Quite too late?"

"Quite too late!" says Sir Herrick, emphatically. "I'm sorry, sir, that you and I should quarrel. Don't think that I am insensible to, or ingrateful to, all you have done for me, but a man must choose and decide for himself when he comes to this point, and—and—for Heaven's sake let us part friends!" and he holds out his hand.

But the major does not offer to take it; instead, he smiles up in the handsome, resolute face.

"My dear Rick," he says, "impulsive as usual. What nonsense this is, as if you and I could quarrel! It is impossible. And it is too late, is it? Well, then, my dear boy, we must make the best of it."

To say that Sir Herrick gasped would be to assert too much. But he stares, and his hand falls to his side.

"Then you—you consent?" he says.

The major smiles up at him—a curious smile, on which there is a hidden irony which is almost sardonic.

"I consent!" he echoes. "My dear Rick, what is a poor old man to do when he is so pressed? If you have set your mind on it, of course I give way. Age must give way to youth, you know. It is the law of Nature, and—"

placably—"Heaven forbid that I should set myself against the law of Nature!" Still Sir Herrick stares, half-doubtful, not to say incredulous.

"And now," says the major, with a cheerful smile, "let us go and set the minds of our friends at rest. You, my dear Rick, go and tell the dear child, whose dress I caught sight of on the other side of the terrace, that the obstinate old uncle has given way, and that you are at liberty to marry and be happy afterwards. Like the folks in a fairy tale; and I—I will go and get another glass of milk."

And with the same curious smile, the major waves him airily away.

For a moment Sir Herrick is too astonished to move, but stares down at him with silent wonder.

"You are surprised at the suddenness with which I have struck my colours," murmurs the major, smiling. "My dear Rick, every wise man knows when he is beaten, and when to cry 'I surrender.' After all, how can I contend against the ardour of a youthful passion? It was weak to think and dream of doing so. So, you see, my dear boy, I surrender. I say, like the heavy father in the old-fashioned drama that is dead and gone, thank Heaven! I say, 'Bless you, my children; may you be happy!' Are you satisfied?"

And the worldly face screws itself into a pleasant, bantering laugh.

"I am more than satisfied," said Sir Herrick, his hand resting on the padded shoulder of the major's perfect frock-coat. "I am very grateful, sir. Candidly, I didn't think—well, that you would have given way, and I was prepared—"

"To be cut off with the proverbial shilling, and to marry, and bring up a large family on—two-pence a week!" says the major, with a soft little laugh.

"Stupid boy! Ah, well, well, youth has its day!" with a shake of the head and a rustle of the white pocket-handkerchief. "By the way, Rick—"

"Yes," says Sir Herrick, still inwardly struggling against incredulity. "There must be no hurry, you know, Rick; no hasty marriage. Bless my soul, of course the idea is absurd! You are both too young—both. As for her, dear me!"—pathetically—"I thought she was a school-girl home for the holidays!"

Sir Herrick laughs. "There shall be no undue haste, sir," he says; "but I don't think Paula is so young as she looks."

The major starts with horror. "What a fearful thing to say of a lady!" he says, with mock indignation. "There, go to her, Rick, and tell her that you have softened the heart of the old bear, and that he has given his consent to one of the most imprudent and insane matches that—but, perhaps, you'd better not say that."

"I don't think I will," says Sir Herrick, as he turns away with a smile.

The major looks after him, until the tall, slim figure has sauntered out of sight, round to the white dress awaiting him; then the polished, veneered smile of good-natured resignation gives place to a grin of suppressed impatience and irritation.

"I never should have thought that Rick would have been such a fool," he murmurs—"never! and all over a little bit of a girl with red hair! And to think that I should have had this

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fearful journey in the middle of the night, so to speak, for nothing! Perhaps, if I had appeared on the scene a quarter of an hour earlier, I should have been in time to stop the actual formal declaration, and so spare those foolish young people—to say nothing of myself—a considerable amount of trouble. Now, the first thing to do is to come to an understanding with Miss Alice. Now, there's a girl who was born for a great world. If I can get her on my side all the rest will be easy. Poor young people! I really feel for them, but what can one do? One can't let a young fellow of Rick's promise go to the dogs and ruin his prospects by marrying a little red-headed girl without a penny, and the hardened man of the world settled his hat upon his wig with a delicate touch of the slim finger, and quickly donned the smile as Alice's footstep was heard coming out at the door.

At sight of the major, he was for retreating again; but the major rose and raised his hat with an inviting gesture.

"One moment, my dear Miss Estcourt," he says.

"I beg your pardon," says Alice, "I saw Sir Herrick pass, and I was afraid that, your interview being over, you had gone—"

"Without taking my leave of you!" exclaims the major, horrified. "My dear young lady, what have I done that you should deem me capable of so much savagery? No, no! I was just about to seek you for that purpose."

"But you will stay and have some lunch?" says Alice, her blue eyes fixed unconsciously on the smiling face, while she wonders whether he has given his consent or not.

"Thank you very much indeed," says the major; "I shall be delighted."

"Then he has," thinks Alice; "I should scarcely have thought it."

"Will you deem me impertinent, my dear Miss Estcourt," murmurs the major, "if I entertain a few minutes' conversation with you?" and, bare-headed, he moves his hand with Old World courtesy to the bench.

"Certainly," replies Alice; and she seats herself, and looks up at him with a child-like, trustful glance, which the old cynic, who has taken Miss Alice's measure pretty accurately, is not at all deceived by.

"My dear Miss Estcourt—may I say Miss Alice? An old man's privilege," Alice smiles sweetly.

"I'm always called Alice," she murmurs. "Do, please."

(To be continued.)

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