CHAPTER XXII.

VERNON'S MARRIAGE.

Nitho came up to see us the first day after our return and tell us of passing events. It was Sunday morning, and the hush of rest was everywhere. In the privacy of our chambers and the luxury of the common rooms of the block we felt we had a home of our own, and were better off than Robinson Crusoe; for though we were not monarchs of all we surveyed, we had the use of everything we wanted, without the trouble of looking after it, which was more than he could say.

"The marriage is to take place in four weeks," said Nitho. "Duke Hilda is to provide the splendour. What is he like, Frank?"

"He is tall, dark, rather handsome; has a splendid house, and is rather fond of display," I answered.

"That is an unsatisfactory description," declared Nitho, with a pout. "Can't you make me realize the man?"

"I don't know much about him myself. He is the owner of a lot of property and a handsome wife; that is about all I know."

"When I come back from my honeymoon, my husband will talk of a man being owned by his wife," answered Nitho, with demure severity. "But let that pass. He is a relation of Cora's mother, and has only discovered the relationship since Vernon's subjugation by that dear girl. The marriage is to be a thing of splendour and a joy for ever. King Edward of Gurla has even announced his intention of sending a wedding present."

"That shows," said Mary, "that he thinks Duke Dreman may be useful to him if he gets into trouble with the Rodas."

"But he has conquered them, so they are done with," said Nitho, with decision.

"Does that wound on Vernon's temple show much?" I asked.

"Yes," answered Nitho; "very much. He has a long red mark across the forehead, but otherwise doesn't seem much the worse. His house must be perfectly lovely. One drawing-room is white and gold, and the other in two shades of light blue. He wanted to come and live in Ura, but Cora wouldn't let him. She thinks he will be happier amongst his animals and his models,
and that with their apartments in Parliament House they will have all that is necessary."

"Are Cora's notions of necessaries expanding?" I asked.

"No; poor dear! She would like to get married and go quietly back to work as of old; but President Dreman loads her with jewels, and is making lavish preparations to support her through what he calls the 'trials and responsibilities' of a married woman. You seem to bear up under yours pretty well, Mary."

"Duke Dreman," said Mary, ignoring Nitho's last remark, with a smile, "always considers every one. Cora's new position will involve a great deal of work. She will be the leading woman in the country; and instead of only working at a few of Vernon's projects, will take an interest in, and work at, them all, though I expect she will get him to give up a lot of them, as I know she thinks he overworks himself."

Hardly had we settled down to the content of our everyday life and the comforts of home, when we had to leave them to go to Ura, to be present at the marriage of the President and Cora. As Duke Dreeman was not only the leading man in Undara, on account of his official position, but a very wealthy and popular one as well, a number of the leading people of all the cities attended the ceremony.

Our party, consisting of the Duke and Duchess Mura, Nitho, Mary, and I, accepted Vernon's hospitality.

The place had been palatially changed. The white and gold drawing-room was most artistically beautiful, largely brightened by pure white marble and crystal. The furniture was of a light-coloured wood, upholstered with white satin. The walls and ceilings were panelled out and painted to harmonize with the surroundings. The second drawing-room was arranged like the first, but harmonized in two light shades of blue, and in each of the wall panels was a framed picture. Everywhere were signs of artistic improvement and lavish expenditure. Gea Barga and a tall, fair woman who had taken over the secretarial work left by Cora, showed us everything, as we arrived before the President returned.

"The Duchess Dreman will come to the most beautiful home I ever saw," said Gea. "The President has developed a talent for art and loveliness that no one suspected."

"He does everything with his whole heart and brain," said Mary, "and that is the secret of his success. As he thinks nothing too good for his horses and dogs, it is natural he should worship his wife."

"He can never love her as she loves him," said Gea. "She is only part of his life, while he is infallible, perfect, everything to her. She thinks of herself as the queen of the most wonderful man in the world, and has become gracious and regal in her
manner in consequence. I never knew any one to at once change so much and so little. So little, for she is kind and gentle as ever, and has the same love for Vernon's projects; and so much, for while he has bejewelled her till she looks like a Gnome Queen, her exalted belief in her position has made her feel so far above the most influential people as to regard the highest and the lowest virtually on the one level. She is always sweetly self-possessed, and has made every one her friend.

Presently Vernon returned. His accident had done him no harm. Along his temple was a long scar, but he seemed stouter and stronger than ever. After welcoming us and receiving our congratulations, he said,—

"I hope you like the changes I have made in the house. The future duchess spares herself so little that I have taken every precaution to save her trouble. I am afraid she is not very strong."

"Do not fear for her, Vernon," said the Duchess Mura. "When a woman has the devotion of a man she loves, everything she desires, and a husband who shields her from work and worry, no mental labour can do her any harm."

Presently we went to the President's model room.

"You have succeeded in everything, Vernon," said Duke Mura. "When you are married, leave things more to other men. You have earned ease; happiness has come to you; enjoy them. You have done enough for your fellow-men."

"One can never do enough for one's fellow-men," said Vernon, quietly, "till they are all wise and happy. Every success brings greater power, and with it greater responsibilities. I have risen above the heads of ordinary men. I have a power for good or evil that very few attain. My future wife thinks our duty and happiness are one and the same. We will work on."

The duchess, who was listening in an easy chair, spoke.

"Come to me, Vernon; I have had unjust thoughts of you in my mind. No man can be always perfect and wise. You are brave and fearless for the right."

Vernon stood with bowed head in front of the grave-faced matron's chair.

"Come nearer," she said, her voice mellow with emotion.

He sank on one knee beside her, and kissed her hand.

"You are very kind," he said. "I have done foolish things, but I always meant to do the right."

The white-haired woman took his face in her hands and kissed him.

"You have practised as you preached," she said. "Men should work and conquer; be strong and brave. Women should love and forgive. I have not always forgiven. Forgive me for my unkind thoughts of you."

He kissed her hand and replied, quietly,—
"You are very good. I have deserved worse than you or anyone could think of me. Only a man himself knows his own faults. You are too good."

King Edward of Gurla was represented at the marriage by two delegates, one of whom, General Ance, a man of great ability, subsequently very much distinguished himself. Rather under the middle height, he showed in every movement the highly-drilled soldier. His close-cut grey hair and slight baldness showed a head and face of great ability and decision. His large blue eyes, pleasant smile, and quiet manner, made him appear too prettily womanish for a soldier. But though his voice was low and sweet, and his manner polished almost to effeminacy, under the velvet softness was an iron strength. Though gentle and quiet, as a tiger, in the wars with the Rodas, he had proved himself fierce as a lion and able as Caesar.

"In Gurla," I asked him one day, "you have a monarchical government and hereditary aristocracy, I believe, but otherwise are much the same as the people of Undara, are you not?"

"No," he replied. "Our founder under the Law-giver, Edward Vance, was a petty officer who believed in applying to general life the despotism necessary on board ship. He established himself as king, and his followers as a titled and hereditary aristocracy, which state of things has been continued. King Edward is a direct descendant of Edward Vance, and has inherited his ideas and his throne."

"Are you as prosperous as we at Undara?"

"That would be impossible," he answered, gravely. "At Undara everything is managed for the general good. The son of the poorest labourer has the same chance as the son of the richest duke, except that he has not so many friends to help him. On the other hand, with you, the son of your leading duke may find that he has no mental capacity, and will take to farming or any other occupation for which his taste and abilities fit him. With us this is not so. We have many men of great ability forced to manual labour for a living, and many men of no ability placed in high positions in the military and civil service of the country, where they do incalculable harm. Our titled aristocracy absorb all the ablest men into their ranks, to become one of them, and so maintain their privileges. But enervated with luxury and laziness, their descendants deteriorate, and become a load on the welfare of the community, while our poor people are mere machines, working harder than the animals, but receiving few of their pleasures. The one class are ruined for want of work, and the other for want of rest and leisure to cultivate their faculties."

"You speak strongly," I exclaimed, in extreme surprise. "Would you change the government of Gurla?"
“I have not the power to prevent its changing,” replied the general evasively. “While you have the part of a community only half educated, you can keep them under for the benefit of the favoured few; but directly every member of the community is educated, a change will commence which will end in producing laws for the general good, such as those of Undara.”

“Are you reaching, or have you reached the state of universal education that will beget this change?” I asked.

“We have almost reached it. The change has commenced,” answered Ance, gravely. “Philanthropists are preparing the public mind—a slow and difficult task—for it. Meanwhile, king and noble see its shadow, and strike to prevent its advent. Zara has absorbed Ura at its desire. Next Undara will be joined by the Rodas, at their wish, as Ura was joined to Zara. Then the Gurlas will similarly join the commonwealth. This is inevitable.”

“What makes you think so?” I asked, amazed at the immense comprehension of this aristocrat.

“Because you have on the one side, striving for this, all those who have the sense to realize what is for their own good, and are not of those very few who are benefited by hereditary titles or hereditary wealth. These are aided by those amongst the favoured few who have ability and are unbiased by class interest, so that against this change is only the selfish ability, and those who are blinded by prejudice, of a section that does not include one per cent. of the community, and those their money can hire, or their show dazzle. The change is coming like a distant sleigh. You can barely see it. It does not seem to move, but the nearer it comes the faster it will seem to approach, yet its speed will not vary, and only when it is on us will we understand that all along it has been irresistibly and rapidly nearing us.”

His big blue eyes were soft, but his erect figure and firm face showed the working of his mighty mind. He was one of those noble aristocrats who work first for humanity and then for their order. Did we all do this, how happy would the world be.

“Had you much difficulty in subduing the Rodas?” I asked, to change the course of our conversation.

“A good deal,” he replied. “Not on account of their strength, but on account of our disunion. There are large and increasing numbers amongst us who wish to reduce the expenditure on the army and federate with Undara. These people are untiring in their attacks on our decaying institutions, and did we leave our cities unguarded might seize them and make civil war—which God forbid. The Rodas are like us, one section wishing for the laws of Undara and the general good, the other only for the maintenance of their favoured order. Eventually we will join with the Rodas, and either adopt your laws or try and force our institutions on you. I think it will be the latter, and that we
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will fail. What chance have a disunited nation against a united one?"

King Edward's present consisted of a tall silver epergne. Three huntsmen, back to back, supported in their upraised hands a silver bowl, fashioned like a three-faced head of a tusked seal, in each of which were natural polished tusks. They stood on a fern-grown island, in a sea of smooth polished silver, the whole thing resting on feet like those of an eagle. The football teams had sent a present cunningly devised to reach the heart of a man who had done so much for their interest. A statue of Cora in marble, with one foot on a football, stood on a pedestal on which were engraved the words: "Thy Queen and Ours," and underneath hung shields, each giving the names and colours of the team from which it came. Of all the presents, this most deeply touched Duke Dreman. In complimenting his darling they had doubly complimented him. Till the day of his death, football and its players were his especial care and pride.

The senators of Zara and Ura had sent two large models, one of Parliament House at Zara and the other of the Parliament House at Ura. Each of them in metal, glass, and wood, were perfect in every detail, and large enough to nearly fill a medium-sized room. From everywhere came presents. Vases, statuettes, jewellery, skins of wild animals, and artificial flowers.

Parson Tona Hamer arrived to assist at the ceremony, and brought as his present an illuminated hymn book, containing amongst others several hymns composed by Vernon Dreman.

In the church the notabilities had gathered through a private entrance, so that when the doors were opened there was little room for the outer public.

Parson Hamer and two other church leaders took their places at the altar. President Dreman came next, with his two grooms- men. He and nearly all the men wore a dress like the English Court suit. The close-fitting coat, buttoned across the breast, and the knickerbockers and silk hose, setting off the shapely men to advantage.

The crowd were eagerly watching. A minute went, then another. Time does seem so long when you are on the tip-toe of expectation. The organ sounded, and the air vibrated with music, so we knew the bride had come. She came in sight, on the arm of a tall, black-bearded man—Duke Hilda—and followed by six bridesmaids, of whom Nitho was one. Her white dress sparkled with gems. Each of her maids wore a diamond brooch, the gift of the bridegroom. Under the gaze of many hundreds of admiring eyes, through a murmur of admiration from many hushed voices, she came with flushed cheeks and bright eyes, like a queen to claim a kingdom. The music ceased and the ceremony began. Most beautiful of all contracts and oftenest violated. Most important of all yet least regarded, often not even comprehended
by either party, yet if it were observed as all other contracts are, and carried out as all contracts should be, misery, vice, sin, shame, and all evil would leave the world. That the concentrated wisdom of all the law-givers since the time of Christ should be rated at by fools, and those who give their tongue double work, and their brain holiday is, alas, not unusual, though it is sadly pernicious and fruitful of evil. The man promised to love, comfort and honour the woman. The woman to obey, serve, love, and honour the man. The man fulfilled his promise—it was his life-long joy to do so. The woman kept her word—well, very nearly. Sometimes when the man told her to go into the sunshine and sit amongst the flowers, idle as a butterfly, she would sit in the shade and do work for him, as she used before she took his name and her throne in his heart. This was not keeping to the letter of the agreement to obey, but it was keeping to the spirit of the bond, which is much better. She loved him first, everything else after.

The gentle-faced bride was the centre of interest. The parson's questions seemed a homage to break the music of her voice. When occasion required the bridegroom spoke, which rather broke the concentration of admiration on the bride. He was a necessary figure, so he was pardoned. Two bridesmaids being married would be far prettier, but they would divide attention, and detract from each other's charms, whereas a bridegroom acts as a sort of background to set off the bride.

The bride spoke the responses clearly and distinctly, even the "obey" didn't seem to frighten her. Like most women—nearly all women—she knew her own powers, and so preferred to reign and let the man govern. In ninety-nine cases she would have her own way, and obey in the hundredth. Alas, that proceeding so beautiful should not be allowed to end in the regular manner. A thing occurred—the vergers called it an outrage. The women smiled, and nodded their heads, though very very slightly. The men grinned broadly, and nudged each other. The bridesmaids only looked, if possible, sweeter than ever, and the ceremony proceeded. Had Parson Hamer not been a friend of Vernon's the first President of Undara might have been doomed to celibacy for ever. This is how it happened. The priest gave the man the ring. He gently put it on the bride's finger, and then—never before did such a thing occur—stooped and kissed the token of eternity in its resting place. Whether the ring or the finger got most of the kiss no one could tell, but that the finger deserved the lion's share there was no doubt. It was done. Two lives were joined. A woman had given herself to her hero. A man his life to his queen.

Again the organ sounded, and the people's hearts danced to the music, as the President Duke and his Duchess passed out of the church on a path strewn with pink and white daisies,
gathered by the children from the fields and the hedgerows. At
the threshold of the church a child from the School for Orphans
stood with a basket full of flowers; these she gave to the bride,
who kissed her, and then turned to go, but something impelled
the child. She stopped, walked up to Vernon, and—alas, that
she was not taught better—held up her mouth to be kissed.
Next there came a child, a pretty pale-faced child with golden
hair and pink sash, with another bouquet for the bride, which she
duly gave, and then—so strong is the force of bad example—
offered her lips to the president duke, which was certainly not in
order. Somehow people had got to know that he valued the
prayers of children and good women, and so these orphans, in
remembering him in their supplications, had got to love him, and
so gave him their lips and their kisses.
Occasionally in history there comes a great opportunity, and
some lucky man seizes it, and is borne on to success and good
fortune. Frequently he forgets the many others as worthy or
worthier than himself, who came and found no place, but who
have generally prepared the way for his visiting. Generally
these men who get famous and wealthy, get blind to the
happiness of doing good, and so lose the chief joys in their reach.
Duke Dreman had been worthy and fortunate, but he made
wisely and gave well, so that he was a power that was loved and
worshipped. If only rich men would be wisely generous, it would
be easier for them to enter the kingdom of heaven, and have a
kingdom of joy on earth.
At Ura the horse traffic, though disappearing, was still in force,
and instead of an air or electric carriage, as at Zara, all the
vehicles were drawn by horses.
The carriage which was to take back the bride and bridegroom
had been seized, the horses taken out, and in their stead were
workers, students, and football players.
The mines, trades, professions, and every calling of any
standing had each two representatives to help to do all the horses'
work.
As the carriage slowly progressed, flowers, wreaths and
bouquets of all descriptions were handed up to the bride, till by
the time Hilda Towers—the residence of Duke Hilda—was
reached, the carriage was filled with a load of scent and beauty.
The carriage drawers were thanked by Duke Dreman, who had
the rare faculty of clothing his thoughts in appropriate words, on
behalf of the duchess and himself.
The unharnessing of the horses and taking their place, the
flowers that would fade and die ere the sun had twice run his
course, were things of small moment, but the thought that causes
this act and these offerings would remain and bear fruit which
would reproduce for ever.
In the great hall of the mansion the wedding breakfast was
spread with splendour, and floral and artistic profusion never before or since witnessed in Fregida.

The bride-cake was cut, the breakfast and speeches over, and the bride had disappeared and re-appeared in a travelling costume of French grey and pink. At the door stood a travelling carriage with two grey horses.

The duke and duchess took their seats, and, amidst a shower of flowers, started on their honeymoon trip.