

THREE MAIDENS MARRIED.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. MUFF DREAMS, AND THE DREAM COMES OUT MORE THAN DREAMS GENERALLY DO.

Again, reader, six months have elapsed for time, as I told you, slipped on at Ebury, as fast as it does at other places. No medical opponent had started, so Mr. Castone, had the professional swing of the whole place and was getting on in it at railway speed. We are now in the cold, drizzly month of February, and it is a drizzling, dirty wretched day. In the bright kitchen, however, of Mr. Castonel, little signs are seen of the outside weather. The fire burns clear, and the kettle sings on it, the square of carpet, never but down till the cooking is over, extends itself before the hearth, and good Mrs. Muff is presiding over all, her feet on a warm footstool, and her spectacles on her nose, for she has drawn the stand before her on which rests her Bible. Presently a visitor came in, a figure clothed in travelling attire, limp and moist, introduced by the tiger, John, who had encountered it at the door, as he was going out on an errand for his master.

'My goodness me, Hannah! it's never you?'

'Yes ma'am, it is,' was Hannah's reply, with a very low obeisance to Mrs. Muff.

'And why did you not come yesterday, as was agreed upon?'

'It rained so hard with us, mother said I had better wait; but as to-day turned out a little better, I came through it. She'd have paid for an inside place, ma'am, but the coach was full, so I came outside.'

'Well, get off your wet things, and we'll have a cup of tea,' said Mrs. Muff, rising, and setting the tea-things.

'Mother sends her duty to you, ma'am,' said Hannah, as she sat down to the teatable, after obeying directions, 'and bade me say she was kindly obliged to you for thinking of me and getting me a place under you again.'

'Ah! we little thought some months back that we should ever be serving Mr. Castonel.'

'Nothing was ever further from my thoughts, ma'am.'

'I wished to come and live with Miss Caroline; I had my own reasons for it,' resumed Mrs. Muff; 'and as luck had it, she had a breeze with the maids here, after she came home, and gave them both warning. I fancy they had done as they liked too long, under Mr. Castonel, to put up with the control of a mistress, and Miss Caroline, if put out, can be pretty sharp and hasty. However, they were leaving, and I heard of it, and came after the place. Miss Caroline—dear! I mean Mrs. Castonel—thought I ought to look out for a superior one to hers, but said she should be too glad to take me if I did not think so. So here I came, and here I have been; and when; a week ago, the girl under me misbehaved herself, I thought of you and spoke to mistress, so we sent for you. Now you know how it has all happened, Hannah.'

'Yes, ma'am, and thank you. Is Miss Caroline well?'

'Mrs. Castonel,' interrupted the house-keeper. 'Did you not hear me correct myself? She is getting better.'

'Has she been ill?' returned Hannah.

'Ill! I believe you. It was a near touch Hannah, whether she lived or died.'

'What has been the matter, ma'am?'

'A mis—Never you mind what,' said the old lady, arresting her speech before the ominous word popped out, 'she has been ill, but is getting better; and that's enough. I'll step up and ask if she wants any thing.'

Hannah cast her eyes around the kitchen: it looked a very comfortable one, and she thought she should be happy enough in her new abode. Every thing was bright and clean to a fault, betokening two plain facts, the presiding genius of Mrs. Muff, and plenty of work for Hannah, who knew she should have to keep things as she found them.

'Mrs. Castonel will have some tea presently, not just yet,' said Mrs. Muff, returning. 'How ill she does look! Her face has no more color in it than a corpse. It put me in mind of my dream.'

'Have you had a bad dream lately, ma'am?' inquired Hannah. 'For there was not a more inveterate dreamer, or interpreter of dreams, than Mrs. Muff, and nothing loth was she to find a listener for them.'

'Indeed I have,' she answered, 'and a dream that I don't like. It was just three nights ago. I had gone to bed, dead asleep, having been up part of several back nights with my mistress, and I undressed in no time and was asleep as quick. All on a sudden, for I remembered no event that seemed to

lead to it, I thought I saw my old master—'

'The squire?' interrupted Hannah.

'Not the squire: what put him in your head? Mr. Winninton. I thought I saw him standing at the foot of the bed, and after looking at me fixedly, as if to draw my attention, he turned his head slowly towards the door. I heard the stairs creaking, as if somebody was coming up, step by step, and we both kept our eyes on the door, waiting in expectation. It began to move on its hinges, very slowly, and I was struck with horror, for who should appear at it but—'

'A-h-a-a-a-h!' shrieked Hannah, whose feelings being variously wrought up to a shrieking pitch, received their climax, for at that very moment a loud noise was heard outside the kitchen door, which was only pushed to, not closed.

'What a simpleton you be!' wrathfully exclaimed Mrs. Muff, who, however, had edged her own chair into close contact with Hannah's. 'I dare say it is only master in his laboratory.'

After the lapse of a few reassuring seconds, Mrs. Muff, moved towards the door, looked out, and then went toward a small room contiguous to it.

'It is as I thought,' she said, coming back and closing the door; 'it is master in his laboratory. But now that's an odd thing,' she added, musingly.

'What is odd, ma'am?'

'Why, how master could have come down and gyne in there without my hearing him—I left him sitting with mistress. Perhaps she has dozed off, she does sometimes at dusk, and he crept down softly, for fear of disturbing her.'

'But what was the noise?' asked Hannah, breathlessly.

'Law, child! d'ye fear it was a ghost? It was only Mr. Castonel let fall one of the little drawers and it went down with a clatter. And that another odd thing, now I come to think of it, for I always believed that top drawer to be a dummy drawer. It has no lock and no knob, like the others.'

'What is a dummy drawer?' repeated Hannah.

'A false drawer, child, one that won't open. John thinks so too, for last Saturday, when he was cleaning the laboratory, I went in for some string to tie up the beef olives I was making for dinner. He was on the steps, stretching up his duster to that very drawer, and he called out, 'This here drawer is just like your head, Madam Muff.'

'How so?' asked I.

'Cause he has got nothing in the inside of him,' said he, in his impudent way, and rushed of the steps into the garden, fearing I should box his ears. But it is this very drawer master has now let fall, and there were two or three little papers and phials, I saw, scattered on the floor. I was stepping in, asking if I could help him to pick them up, but he looked at me as black as thunder, and roared out, 'No. Go away and mind your own business.' Didn't you hear him?'

'I heard a man's voice,' replied Hannah; 'I did not know it was Mr. Castonel's. But about the dream, ma'am: you did not finish it.'

'True, and it's worth finishing,' answered the housekeeper, settling herself in her chair. 'Where was I? Oh—I thought at the foot of the bed stood Mr. Winninton, and when the footsteps came close, and the door opened—so slowly, Hannah, and we watching in suspense all the time—who should it be but Mr. and Mrs. Castonel. She was in her grave-cloths, a flannel dress and cap, edged with white quilled ribbon, and she looked, for all the world, as she looks this night. He had got hold of her hand, and he handed her in, remaining himself at the door, and my old master bent forward and took her by the other hand. Mr. Winninton looked at me, as much as to say, Do you see this? and then they both turned and gazed after Mr. Castonel. I heard his footsteps descending the stairs, and upon looking again at the foot of the bed, they were both gone. I woke up in a dreadful fright, and could not get to sleep again for two hours.'

'It's a mercy it wasn't me that dreamt it,' observed Hannah. 'I should have rose the house, screeching.'

'It was a nasty dream,' added Mrs. Muff, and if mistress had not been out of all danger, and getting better as fast as she can get, I should say it betokened—something not over pleasant.'

She was interrupted by Mrs. Castonel's bell. It was for a cup of tea; and Mrs. Muff took it up. As she passed the laboratory she saw that Mr. Castonel was in it still. Mrs. Castonel was seated in an arm-chair by her bedroom fire.

'Then, you have not been asleep, ma'am?' observed Mrs. Muff, perceiving that her mistress had the candles lighted and was reading.

'No, I have not felt sleepy this evening. Let Hannah come up when I ring next. I should like to see her.'

Scarcely had Mrs. Muff regained the kitchen when the bell rang again, so she sent up Hannah.

'Ah, Hannah, how d'ye do?' said Mrs. Castonel.

'I am nicely, thank you miss—ma'am answered Hannah, who did not stand in half the awe of 'Miss Caroline' that she did of the formidable Mrs. Muff. 'I am sorry to find you are not well, ma'am.'

'I have been ill, but I am much better. So much better that I should have gone down-stairs to-day, had it not been so damp and chilly.'

Hannah never took her eyes off Mrs. Castonel as she spoke; she was thinking how very much she was changed; apart from her paleness and aspect of ill health. Her eyes appeared darker, and there was a look of care in them. She wore a cap, and her dark hair was nearly hidden under it.

'Now Hannah, she said, 'I hope you have made up your mind to do your work well, and help Mrs. Muff all that you can. There is a deal more work to be done here than there was at my uncle's.'

'Yes ma'am,' answered Hannah.

'Especially in running up and down stairs you must say: Mrs. Muff; your legs are younger than hers. Let me see that you do, and then I shall be very highly pleased with you.'

'I'll try,' repeated Hannah. 'Shall I take your cup for some more tea, my dear ma'am?'

'I should like some,' was Mrs. Castonel's reply, 'but I don't know that I may have it. This morning Mr. Castonel said it was bad for me, and made me nervous, and would not let me then drink a second cup.'

Hannah stood waiting, not knowing whether to take the cup or not.

'Is Mr. Castonel in his study?'

'If you please, ma'am, which place is that?'

'The front room on the left hand side, opening opposite to the dining parlor,' said Mrs. Castonel.

'I don't think it is there then,' replied Hannah. 'He is in the little room where the bottles are, next the kitchen. I forget, ma'am, what Mrs. Muff called it.'

'Oh, is he there? Set this door open, Hannah.'

The girl obeyed, and Mrs. Castonel called to him—

'Gervase!'

He heard her, and came immediately to the foot of the stairs. 'What is it?' he asked.

'May I have another cup of tea?'

He ran up stairs and entered the room.

'Have you taken your tea already?' he said, in an accent of surprise and displeasure. 'I told you to wait until seven o'clock.'

'I was so thirsty. Do say I may have another cup, Gervase. I am sure it will not hurt me.'

'Bring up half a cup,' he said to the servant, 'and some more bread-and-butter. If you drink, Caroline, you must eat.'

Hannah went down stairs. She procured what was wanted, and was carrying it from the kitchen again, when Mr. Castonel came out of the laboratory, to which, it appeared, he had returned.

'Give it me,' he said to Hannah, 'I will take it myself to your mistress.'

So he proceeded up stairs with the little waiter, and Hannah returned to the kitchen. 'How much she's altered!' was her exclamation, as she closed the door.

'What did she say to you?' questioned Mrs. Muff.

'Well, ma'am, she told me to be attentive, and save your legs,' returned Hannah. 'I never knew Miss Caroline so thoughtful before. I thought it was not in her.'

'And that has surprised me, that she should evince so much lately,' assented Mrs. Muff. 'Thoughtfulness does not come to the young suddenly. It's a thing that only comes with years—or sorrow.'

'Sorrow!' echoed Hannah. 'Miss Caroline can't have any sorrow.'

'Not—not that I know of,' somewhat dubiously responded the house-keeper.

'Is Mr. Castonel fond of her? Does he

make her a good husband?' asked Hannah, full of woman's curiosity on such points.

'What should hinder him?' testily retorted Mrs. Muff.

'Has that—that strange lady left the place?' was Hannah's next question. 'She that, people said, had something to do with Mr. Castonel.'

'What to do with him?' was the sharp demand.

'Was his cousin, ma'am, or his sister-in-law, or some relation of that sort,' explained Hannah, with a face demure enough to disarm the anger of the fastidious Mrs. Muff.

'I believe she has not left,' was the stiff response; 'I know nothing about her.'

'Do you suppose Miss Caroline does?' added Hannah.

'Of course she does, all particulars,' returned Mrs. Muff, with a peculiar sniff, which she invariably gave when forcing her tongue to an untruth. 'But it is not your business, so you may just put it out of your head, and never say any more about it. And you may begin and wash up the tea things. John don't deserve any tea for not coming in, and I have a great mind to make him go without. He is always stopping in the street to play.'

Hannah was rising to obey, when the bedroom bell rang most violently, and Mr. Castonel was heard bursting out of the room, and calling loudly for assistance.

'Whatever can be the matter?' was the terrified exclamation of Mrs. Muff. 'Mistress has never dropped asleep, and fallen off her chair into the fire! Follow me up stairs, girl. And that lazy tiger a playing truant!'

Not for many a year had the house-keeper flown up stairs so quickly. Hannah followed more slowly from a vague consciousness of dread—of what she might see; the dream she had shuddered at, being before her mind in vivid colors. Mrs. Castonel was in convulsions.

About the same hour, or a little later, Mr. Leicester returned to his home, having been absent since morning. 'Well,' he cheerily said, as he took his seat by the fire, 'have you any news? A whole day from the parish seems a long absence to me.'

'I think not,' answered Mrs. Leicester. 'Except that I went to see Caroline Castonel to-day, and she is getting on nicely.'

'I am glad to hear it. Is she quite out of danger?'

'Completely so.'

'She told mamma that she would be at church on Sunday,' added Ellen.

'Yes, but I told them that would be imprudent,' returned Mrs. Leicester. 'However, she will soon be well now.'

At that moment the church bell rang out with its three times two, denoting the recent departure of a soul. The church, situated at the end of the village street, was immediately opposite the parsonage, the main road dividing them. The sound struck upon their ears loud and full; very solemnly in the stillness of the winter's night.

Consternation fell upon all. No one was ill in the village, at least, ill enough for death. Could a sister—for they knew, by the strokes, it was not a male—have been called away suddenly?

'The passing bell!' uttered the rector, rising from his seat in agitation. 'And I to have been absent! Have I been summoned out?' he hurriedly asked of Mrs. Leicester.

'No; I assure you, no. Not any one has been for you. Neither have we heard speak of any illness.'

Mr. Leicester touched the bell-rope at his elbow. A maid servant answered it. Benjamin was attending to his horse. 'Step over,' said the rector, 'and inquire who is dead.'

She departed. A couple of minutes at the most would see her back again. They had all risen from their seats, and stood in an expecting, almost a reverent attitude.—The bell was striking out fast strokes now. The girl returned, looking terrified.

'It is the passing-bell, sir, for Mrs. Castonel.'

The morning was cold and misty, and the Reverend Mr. Leicester felt a strange chill and lowness of spirit, for which he could not account, when he stepped into the chariot that was to convey him to Mr. Castonel's.

Mrs. Chavasse and Frances came into the parsonage. Ostensibly for the purpose of inviting Ellen to spend the following day with them; in reality to see the funeral.—They had not long to wait.