

MAJOR HERVEY'S WEDDING; OR THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER.

"SO the Colonel's daughter has come, and is, they say, stunning."

"Trust you to find out a pretty girl, Vivian," laughed a brother soldier. "Now I've seen her, too, and I don't agree with you; she's too white and lackadaisical for stunning to express. Stunning, as I take it, means a jolly, larky, don't-care sort of girl, who'll dance you down in the *deux temps*, ride you down in the hunting field, and box your ears if you are impertinent."

"That's the sort of girl you cultivate in Yorkshire," said a handsome, light-haired man, whose half-closed eyes and down drooping moustache were quite in character with his languid drawl, and loose lazy motion of his limbs. "When we were quartered in York I was nearly married by one of your stunning girls; and only escaped by running away with a girl from a boarding-school. Fact, I assure you. She and I struck up an acquaintance at a Christian propagation meeting. What the deuce are you fellows laughing at? They have meetings very often in York—a lot of parsons talk, and a lot of old women and boarding-schools come to listen. I went for a lark, and got sold. The girl was lovely. She—By Jove! who's that?" He was sitting by the open window, and past it a party were riding.

"Beatrice Meynell!" said Vivian; the very girl we've been talking of."

"By Jove! repeated the fair man, a crimson tide of colour rushing to his face. The other stared.

"Well, what's up, Carter? Going to have a fit of apoplexy? or struck with love at first sight?"

But Carter did not seem to see the joke. He neither answered nor laughed. The flush passed away again, leaving him pale as a ghost, and rising, he stammered—

"I'm out of sorts; that champagne Croft gave us poisoned me. I'll turn in to the mess and get some brandy. No, no, Topham, stay there. I am all right; only shaky." And waving Mr. Topham back, he walked off, leaving the men he had been talking to looking after him gloomily enough, for in an Indian climate death dogs a man like a shadow; and any unusual signs hoisted by Dame Nature are apt to beget a proportionate amount of apprehension.

"He lives too hard," said Topham. "Poor fellow! No man could last at the pace. He'd much better go in for leave and cut this beastly country, or it'll give him what it's given many a good fellow, six foot of landed property."

"Nonsense! he's as strong as you are. Take a couple of pipes off him, and he'll be as steady as a judge. I don't know what you fellows are going to do; I'll go and leave a card at the Chief's."

The others laughed; and Mr. Topham, putting his arm through Vivian's, said—

"All right; a fair start and no favour. Come along, old boy. She sits her horse like a brick, in spite of her die-away face."

There was a poor gathering that evening at mess. A dinner at the Colonel's thinned their ranks, and Carter was reported to be ailing, some one added, "A touch of fever," which turned out to be the case, for the Doctor being called away, came back in about half an hour, and, with a grave face, announced the Adjutant decidedly ill, and just in a way that might become dangerous, or even worse, at any moment. Carter was a popular man; and a gloom settled down upon those who heard the sad news, two or three going to the door of his quarters with the Doctor and waiting there for another report. This, unhappily, was worse. Delirium had come on; the poor fellow was raving, and death was fighting for his prey.

"Run over and ask the Colonel to come and take charge of his papers, whispered the Doctor to one of the men; he won't last six hours."

The Colonel came and sealed up some letters lying about, placed them in a desk, the key of which he put in his pocket.

"Is there no hope, Doctor?" he asked, looking at Carter, who was lying, muttering incessantly, shuddering, and clutching with his hands.

"I never say that, sir," said Dr. Lewis; "but I'm afraid to hope here."

"Poor young fellow!" and the Colonel laid his hand on the sick man's burning forehead. "A fine, young, soldier-like man, too; only one who knew his work. A more infernal set of bunglers I never came across. Poor lad, poor lad!"

The Colonel took his departure; but in crossing the compound bethought him, that these same bunglers might not know the funeral service; so, stopping a soldier, he sent him for a sergeant on duty, and ordered the men to be told off for funeral parade.

The man hesitated.

"Well, what is it?" asked the Colonel, impatiently. "Don't they know their work?"

"Well, sir, I am afraid—"

"D—your afraid," growled his commanding officer. "Call them out now and parade them, drums and fifes, too. By Jove! I'll teach them to know their duty before I've done with them," and the Colonel walked home and turned in, pretty considerably "riled," as our Yankee friends would say.

Meantime the fever had worn itself out; and the sick man was lying prostrate, exhausted, and with a weak, fluttering pulse, just tottering upon the brink of that bourne from which no traveller returns.

The night was like most nights in the hot season, intensely still, the sulky growl of a Pariah dog now and then only breaking the silence.

The Doctor had taken off his coat, and opened every available aperture to let in air; the punkas were moving steadily, but noiselessly, and Carter lay stretched on his back, his face pallid and drawn, his eyes closed, and no sound of life issuing from his parched lips.

Suddenly, shrill and inexpressibly sad, the notes of the funeral march rang out on the still air, rising, falling, note by note, in solemn measure.

For a while no change came over Carter's face, no symptom that the sound had reached his ears; and, after watching for a few seconds, the Doctor drew back, fully impressed with the conviction that death was there at last, and he was turning away, when a bright idea struck him. If he could only excite the sinking pulse, and induce Nature to exert herself, she might yet have a tussle with Death, so, going up to the bed, he said, cheerily,—

"D'ye hear the music, Carter, old boy?"

Carter's eyes opened, but with such a weak, perplexed looked in them that the Doctor, thinking delirium was returning, half regretted his experiment; still he was in for it, and went boldly on.

"It's your funeral they're parading for, Dick; sure, if you don't make an effort, they'll bury you in spite of me. The Colonel was here just now, and took leave of you. Indeed now, you must rouse up and turn the tables on the old fool; he's given us cheek enough since he joined."

The expression on the sick man's face changed, a faint smile quivered across his lips, followed by a look of inexpressible relief.

"I thought it was all over," he whispered almost inaudibly; "but we'll cheat them yet."

And sure enough he did.

"What hour did the Adjutant go off?" asked the Colonel, in a subdued voice, as Vivian sauntered in to early tea.

"He began to mend at midnight, sir, and was sitting up walking into cold chicken and sherry, when I left him ten minutes since. It's not often a man can say he's listened to his own funeral parade."

Then there was plenty of laughing, and the Colonel was the only one who did not relish the joke, and heartily glad was he when Carter applied for leave to England, sending up his requisition with a strong recommendation; for he hoped that by thus getting rid of the principal actor, he might banish the story from men's mouths.

Carter never showed his face out of his quarters until he got into his palanquin, to be conveyed away "on furlough."

"You've left us without a sight of the Beauty," sighed Vivian, who, according to his wont, had been going through the various phrases of love fever, and had just then reached its zenith. "She's perfect, and quite interested in you!"

"The devil she is!" gasped Carter. "Bearer, go on. Good-bye, old fellows, God bless you all. You won't catch me among the jungles and jompans again in a hurry. Hurrah for old England! may we all meet there soon."

"Good-bye, good luck to you! and three cheers for old England, God bless her!" cried several voices. So with kind words, ringing cheers, and no small amount of envy, Dick Carter turned his face away from Meerut, devoutly hoping he might never hear more of his life there than was pleasant.

CHAPTER II.

There was a dinner party at the Resident Magistrate's that night, and of course the Colonel and his daughter were there, the latter the centre of attraction. Vivian, who had, according to his own mind, been making some progress with the pale, quiet beauty, was thrown into despair; a brother of the Judge's wife, a certain Major Hervey, had just returned to India after a long leave, and had taken Meerut on his way to the headquarters of his regiment. Hervey was one of those modern Crichtons one meets with now and then, perfect, or as nearly perfect as human nature can be, in everything he undertook. A hero in the service, irresistible, so gossip, affirmed, in the drawing-room, a dead shot in the jungle, well read and accomplished, good-looking and rich. What would you have more? With all these things one might conclude Hervey's a happy lot, but there is no life without its alloy. Hervey had been touched in the most vulnerable point, he had married, but the marriage had been unfortunate, and after three years' separation, he had gone home just in time to stand by the unhappy woman's death-bed, and forgive her the wrong she done him; one child only she left, and this boy he had brought out to India, to share his sister's nursery.

When Beatrice Meynell reached the station, Mrs. Masters at once settled that she was the very wife for her brother, and never rested until she had secured the girl's friendship, interesting her as much as possible in her brother, by telling, with all a sister's prejudice, the sad story of his marriage.

Indian society is much more of a family sort than English, and the most private affairs soon leak out; so it was well known in the station that Beatrice was booked for Major Hervey. Much speculation was afloat; and when they met in the Judge's drawing-room, many eyes watched them with no small amount of envy.

"Do you like India, Miss Meynell?" asked Hervey, when, the introduction having been made, he took a vacant chair by her side.

"Not yet," was the answer, and the sad eyes rose to meet his, with a world of feeling lying hid in their brown depths, feeling totally separate and unconnected with the words that were spoken almost mechanically. Eyes that were full of unshed tears, and hid themselves away under their long thick veil of lashes, as if afraid lest they might betray some secret. They had a strange effect upon Hervey as he looked back into them, and he scarcely heard the commonplace answer the lips gave to his commonplace question. "Not yet, but I may do so. It is so different, and I led such a quiet, lonely life in England."

"Do you ride?"

"Oh, yes! it is the only thing I care for," and there came a faint flush over her face. "But I do not think riding along what you call the Mall worth mounting for."

"You like going across the country, perhaps?" The major looked at the slender wrists and wondered what power they could exercise over a bride; as he looked he was conscious that a deep crimson rushed over the girl's face, and that her eyes fixed themselves on him with an expression of intense fear. He was interested