

Barrack-Room Incident

(Continued from page 8.)

"What 'poor devil,' Tumpy?" she repeated.

The Major sat with his finger-tips joined looking rather foolish, but withal a pleased expression on his face, such as middle-aged husbands display when being cajoled by pretty young wives.

This was an agreeable phase of Madeline's many-sided disposition, and the Major liked it. There were other moods, say after a surfeit of chocolate and cigarettes, when she was morose and sullen.

"Come, Madeline, give me my pipe," urged Hereward with a hollow assumption of severity.

"When you have told me all about the 'poor devil,'" she replied, with the confidence of former victories.

The poor Major held out for some time, and then like many another good man purchased peace—and his pipe—at the price of a disclosure.

He told her.

Madeline sitting on the hearthrug was stricken with astonishment.

"Arthur Mordaunt!" she gasped—

"Arthur Mordaunt!"

The Major rose and mixed half a whiskey and soda, then handed it to his wife.

"It has been too much for you, Madeline," he said; "drink this, you are as white as a sheet."

He patted her kindly on the cheek, as if he remembered her liking for as if he remembered her liking for Mordaunt twelve months before. There was nothing unkind or vindictive about Major Hereward. When he forgave he forgave altogether.

"To think of Arthur Mordaunt doing such a thing," she said in a voice of astonishment, as she drank the whiskey and soda. "Whatever did he do it for?"

"That's the very question I asked him myself," replied her husband.

Mrs. Hereward raised herself on her knees and turned a tearful face towards him.

"He will go, I suppose," she said; "he won't mind that much, will he? Do you think there is any woman in the case, Harold?" she added.

HE shrugged his shoulders, and gave her a hand to rise, then led her to a seat and put his arm round her.

"This seems to have knocked you up a bit, darling," he said. "I am sorry I told you, after all."

She made a gesture with her hand. "Between husband and wife there should be no secrets," she replied. Then, as if a sudden thought had struck her she seized her husband's hand.

"What would you think of me, Harold, if I kept anything from you?"

The expression on her face was so spirituelle, and showed such grief for their friend's downfall, that the kind-hearted Major was deeply touched. Her question he regarded as too preposterous to answer.

"You're too sensitive and too full of kindly feeling, my dear," he said, "you had better go to bed and try and get a good night's rest. You are a foolish girl to have forced me to tell you."

He gently raised her, and led her to the door of their bedroom, leaving it open at her request.

"I feel a bit lonely to-night, Tumpy," she said as she went, "and like to know you are near."

The Major made up the fire, and went back to his seat for a quiet smoke and a whiskey and soda. He filled his pipe in a leisurely way, with the satisfaction engendered by the comfort of the last pipe of the day, and he finally leaned back in his chair absorbed in thoughts of Mordaunt and what his future might be.

"Poor devil!" he muttered again softly in his iron grey moustache.

He had sat thus for perhaps ten minutes, when there came a sharp knock at the outer door of the quarters.

The servants had gone to bed long ago, the Major rose and went to the door himself.

An obvious soldier in plain clothes, with the appearance of an officer's servant, was standing outside.

"What on earth brings you here

at this time of night, Watson?" the Major asked in a tone of surprise.

The man stood to attention.

"I'm on pass till one o'clock, sir," he answered. "I've been to the theatre, sir, and I looked in at Captain Mordaunt's quarters, before I went to bed, to make up the fire and see if there was anything he wanted, knowing it was a guest night at the mess and he would be late, I found this note lying on his table, sir, marked 'deliver at once,' and I thought I'd better bring it round as I saw a light in your quarters."

He held out a sealed envelope.

"It's addressed to Mrs. Hereward, sir," he added.

"Was Captain Mordaunt there?" the Major asked.

"No, sir, he had gone out. His cloak was gone."

The Major took the note, looked at it, and started.

"All right, Watson," he said abruptly, pulling himself together. "Thanks for bringing it."

The white face of his wife met him as he came back into the room.

"What's the matter?" she asked from the door of her room.

He did not answer her at once, but walked through into the bedroom.

SHE went back to her seat by the dressing table, where she had been brushing her long fair hair.

"This letter," began the Major slowly, "has just been delivered by Watson, Mordaunt's man, and it is addressed to you."

"To me? Why to me?"

She held out her hand for it, and he gave it to her.

The Major was a gentleman all the way through, he did not wait to watch her read it, but quietly went back to his chair in the drawing-room, and his pipe; but about him there was an air of uneasiness. He heard the crackling of the paper as his wife turned the letter in reading it, and then there was silence.

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1739

He waited for perhaps five minutes, and nothing happened but the sound of what he took to be the moving of a chair. At last he got up and walked into his wife's room again; she had slid from her chair to the floor, and lay there in a faint. Across her breast lay the open letter, just as it had fluttered as she fell.

The Major took it up, and put it in his pocket, then lifted her on the bed, and ran to the end of the passage to a little room where her maid slept, and aroused her.

He went back to his seat by the fire when the maid had come, and after a few moments' hesitation took the letter from his pocket. This is what he read:

"Madeline,
"When you asked me to cash a cheque for you at your husband's bankers that day last week when I went to London, and told me not to mention it to Major Hereward, lest it should awaken 'old recollections,' I did it in good faith, not knowing that the signature on the cheque was a forgery. I quite appreciate now, too, why you also asked me on my return to change the notes into gold for you at Cox's agents here."

"You has ruined me. I am done for, but believe me I am thinking more of you and how to save you than I am of myself. There appears only one thing to be done to cover it all up, and that I intend to do to-night. When you receive this in the morning, it will be done and over. Good-bye. A.M."

Major Hereward sprang to his feet, white and trembling, and made a dash for his wife's door, closing it again, as he caught sight of the maid bending over her. Then after a moment's pause with his hand on the door, he ran out into the night just as he was.

First across the parade ground to the main guard.

Had Captain Mordaunt left the barracks?

"Yes, sir," answered the sergeant,

"he went out about an hour ago, but he's back again."

"Where did he go?"

"Across to his quarters, sir."

In a few moments the Major was at Mordaunt's door.

He knocked and waited, but no answer came.

He knocked again, and then entered. The room was in darkness. Some minutes elapsed before he found the matches by groping, and then he lit a candle, standing on the mantelpiece. Arthur Mordaunt fully dressed lay on the bed, and the Major gave a gasp as he saw the intense whiteness of his face.

Then to his intense relief the Junior Captain opened his eyes and looked at him.

"THANK God!" cried Hereward, then seizing Mordaunt's hand, and tears in his eyes he added, "forgive me, Arthur, I know all."

Mordaunt sat up.

"How do you know all?"

"Watson came in here to-night, and seeing your letter delivered it at once."

Mordaunt buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

"Don't be hard on her, Major, don't be hard on her. She's only a girl."

Hereward's face hardened.

"Where did you go to-night?"

Mordaunt dropped his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"I went down by the river, and might have made an end of it there, but a good impulse came over me, and I pitched the revolver in the water, and made up my mind to face the music."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the Major.

Hereward left him in a few minutes, and went out on to the dark parade ground, and walked up and down to the astonishment of the sentry for nearly an hour, his soul was full of bitterness and shame.

The lights still burned in his quarters, and presently he saw the maid, candle in hand, go back to her room.