

(CONTINUED FROM FIFTH PAGE.)

'Ah, Brooke, you've come to ask me to join you in a walk, I suppose.' 'May I step inside?' asked Brooke, 'Certainly,' said the major. He laid his hand on the door of the parlor.

It was locked, and there was no key in it.

'Come in by all means,' he said, genially 'but it will have to be in the kitchen for Mrs. Parker seems to have taken away the key of the parlor. She knows I never use it.'

The two men turned to go to the kitchen but at that moment Estelle came swiftly into the house, her face expressive of horror.

'Miss Montfort!' exclaimed the major in surprise, and he would have said more, but she stopped him with a haughty gesture.

'Don't speak to me!' she panted. 'Don't dare to speak to me until you have explained your conduct.'

Danzil, Annette is under this roof at this very moment! She is in that room!

And she indicated the locked door with a sweep of her arm.

The major was indignant.

'Is the young lady mad?' he asked.

'I am not mad,' retorted Estelle. 'It is you who must be mad, Major Hommersley to have done such a wicked thing! Danzil, you will believe me. Annette is in that room. I saw her through the window.'

'For the sake of Miss Stanley's fair fame—not for my own—I condescend to disprove this vile assertion,' said the major coldly.

He looked at the door, gauged its strength, and then hurled himself against it.

In a moment it was broken open.

'Look for yourself, Mr. Danzil Brooke!' he cried, in a voice which trembled with passionate indignation; but, even as he spoke, an ashen greenness overspread his face, and he staggered backwards, for Annette, pale and wild-eyed, rose from an easy chair and stood before them.

'I must have fallen asleep without knowing it,' she said, and with a look of distress. 'Mrs. Parker wanted to see me. She sent a letter asking me to come to her here. She didn't come, and I think—I suppose I fell asleep.'

'Did you also lock the door on the outside?' said Estelle, with cruel significance.

'Fortunately, I see Mrs. Parker coming through the field. She will tell us whether she sent you a note or not.'

Mrs. Parker was indeed coming through the field which led to the village.

She stared in surprise to see a group of people at the lodge.

'Mrs. Parker, we desire you to answer one question,' said Estelle. 'Did you write a letter to Miss Stanley, asking her to come to see you here last night?'

'No, miss; I didn't.'

'You hear?' said Estelle, turning with proud disdain to Danzil Brooke. 'It is not for me to pass judgment. You have seen, and you have heard. You must judge for yourself.'

Brooke stepped forward, and was about to speak out in Annette's defence, when the major stopped him with a gesture that was at once imperative, proud and stern.

'Mr. Brooke, let me speak. This affair is mine—not yours. I regard myself as the protector of this lady, and the guardian of her honor. By what vile scheming she was decoyed to that room and locked in it I cannot say. I only know she is innocent of the very thought of evil. Annette, my dearest, I think you know I love you. I am certain you can trust me. Come with me. I am old enough to be your father. Come with me, and let me make you a home away from those who have dared to traduce you because they envy you your perfect innocence.'

'Major Hommersley,' said Brooke, 'you must not go away under the impression that I have the slightest doubt of your honor or of this lady's innocence.'

The major gave him scant thanks for his assurance.

'You, sir, had better not meddle in this matter,' he said coldly. 'I fail to see how it concerns you, saving as it affects the lady you are about to make your wife. Annette my dearest, come.'

And he marched proudly away, with erect head and martial step, Annette leaning on his arm.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MARRIAGE

It was the eleventh of March. In the drawing room at Danby Croft an unusual scene might have been witnessed.

A clergyman stood on an improvised dais; before him stood Danzil Brooke and Estelle, she in the white robes and wreath and veil of a bride.

A few days since she had taken a serious cold, and the doctor had declared it might be highly dangerous for her to leave the house on the eventual eleven.

It was impossible for the marriage to be postponed; any postponement would mean the loss of Brooke's estate.

He had, therefore, procured a special license, so that the marriage might take place in Mrs. Montfort's drawing room.

Before the day came she was better, almost quite well; but the arrangement was adhered to.

She looked very beautiful in her white robes, but not happy, not content.

A look akin to fear clouded her brow, and there was all the brilliance of unrest in her dark eye.

The bridegroom, too, looked strangely gloomy.

He knew he was about to take to his bosom a woman he did not love.

He had never seen Annette since she swept past him in the lodge on the major's arm; but her image was for ever before his mental eye.

What had become of her he knew not. She and the major had disappeared completely, leaving no clue behind.

Not only did he feel deep grief on her account, but he was also tortured by a doubt as to the truth and sincerity of Estelle.

Major Hommersley had seemed to accuse her of plotting to ruin Annette, and although she had striven by every means in her power to convince him that this was not so, still, lurking doubts remained and tortured him.

The ceremony began. There were few witnesses.

Only Mrs. Montfort and her husband, and that cousin of Brooke's to whom the estate would pass if Danzil were unmarried when the morrow dawned.

He had come down to Somerset to see for himself that the marriage really did take place in time.

The clergyman reached the solemn charge which requires the declaration of any impediment, and was passing on, when suddenly the door was thrown open, a firm ringing voice cried 'Stop!' and Estelle, turning round in wild alarm, saw Major Hommersley and Annette.

All eyes were turned upon the major. He did not wait to be asked for an explanation, but addressed himself to Danzil Brooke.

'Sir!' he said in tones which rang clear and trumpet-like in the hushed stillness. 'I announce to you an impediment to your marriage in the unworthiness of Estelle, Montfort. She obtained proposals of marriage from you by a base deceit. She stole the letter and the pearls which ought to have reached Miss Stanley on St. Valentine's morning.'

Brooke uttered an inarticulate exclamation of amazement.

He looked at Estelle, and read her guilt in her face.

Taken thus by surprise, she had not the presence of mind or the audacity to so much as attempt a denial of the terrible charge.

But the major had not done. He had more to say, and his voice grew deeper and sterner as he said it.

'Not content with that base act, she proceeded to one still more base. She endeavoured to stain the honour of this innocent girl—here he drew Annette forward—but happily, I have discovered and baffled her treachery and deceit.'

For a moment or two all stood in dead silence—all waited for the explanation he had to give; but none dreamed how strange a form that explanation was to take.

He suddenly wheeled round and faced the Honourable Reginald Montfort.

'Reginald Montfort,' he said in a deep impressive voice, 'it is time to throw off all disguises. I am your Uncle Matthew!'

If a bombshell had burst in their midst, the Montforts could not have been more horrified than they were by this announcement.

'The Nabob! Great Scott!' said the Honourable Reginald, in a tone of the most ludicrous dismay, then he subsided into a chair and sat staring in helpless wonderment at his relative.

Estelle turned pale as death; poor Mrs. Montfort looked terribly alarmed.

'Yes,' said the major. 'I am Matthew Montfort. I came to England determined to know something of my relatives; especially was I interested in this dear girl, who is not only my cousin, but also the grand daughter of the woman I once loved. I found her treated with disdain and duplicity, and that she was being made the victim of a base plot, in which my own honour also was attacked. Estelle Montfort, and I now he turned his sternly accusing gaze on the wretched schemer—I have abundant proofs that you conspired to lure your cousin to the lodge, and leave her there that night. I have found the lad whom you employed to take a forged letter to her. I can guess what drug you used—an Indian one sent to your father by myself—to throw her into unconsciousness.'

'More than that, I have the evidence of a person who saw you go into the lodge almost immediately after Annette entered it. You may deny your guilt or not as you choose. It is enough for me to know I can proclaim and prove this dear girl's innocence to all the world.'

No thought of denial had the wretched Estelle.

Her courage deserted her; she threw herself on her knees before the Nabob with clasped hands.

'Forgive me!' she wailed. 'I confess it all. Forgive me!'

'I forgive you on one condition,' said the major; 'that is, that your parents take you away from England, and never vex me with the sight of you again.'

He turned from her and addressed his nephew.

'Reginald, I think you know I made a vow years ago never to touch you a penny of my money at my death, and to adhere to that resolution. Annette Stanley is my heir. I would also remind you that this house and all in it belongs to me by virtue of the advances made you by my agents. I desire to take possession of it at once. If you choose to respect my wishes by withdrawing now—and taking your wife and daughter with you, I shall make you an allowance during my life of a thousand a year. If not, I have done with you.'

'Do you mean us to go at this moment?' asked the Honourable Reginald, with a look of mingled relief and dismay.

'This moment,' said the inexorable Nabob. 'That is to say, I desire you to quit this room at this moment, and the house within an hour.'

Come, then, said the Honourable Reginald and taking his weeping wife upon his arm he slouched out of the room followed by Estelle.

The Nabob smiled a little grimly then he turned to Brooke, who had stood an amazed and silent spectator of the scene.

'I owe you a little fuller explanation, Mr. Brooke. To you I may say that the late Major Hommersley was my friend. He had a bad leg, so far as he knew, a relative in the world; and when he died of fever in the hill-country, I knew I might easily come to

England under his name. He was fifty-three, and I am sixty-four; but I flatter myself I do not look my age.'

'Indeed, you do not!' ejaculated Brooke.

'Well now, sir, I am going to speak very plainly to you. When you first came here, I fancied you had a liking for my little cousin, Annette, I hoped she might be so, but was not sure. On St. Valentine's Day I was in the hall when the letters were put into the hall-bag. Afterwards, I saw Estelle come and take away the two packets sent by you. After a delay of quite half an hour, she brought one back. I did not then know what had happened; but I have since heard, from Annette, that her cousin got a pearl necklace, while she got nothing but a book which she was surprised at your sending her. When I heard that, I felt sure Estelle had confiscated the necklace.'

'She did,' said Brooke quietly. 'She also took the letter which accompanied it. That letter contained a declaration of love from me. There was no name in it, but, here he looked full and earnestly at Annette, 'I intended it for you Miss Stanley. Of course I thought it had miscarried by accident, and I felt bound as a man of honour to marry Estelle, as she affected to believe the letter was intended for herself, and professed to care for me. What else could I do?'

'Nothing better than you have done,' said the Nabob warmly, as he took his hand. 'But something remains for you to do. You were to have been married today. What is there to prevent you from marrying today, even as it is?'

Brooke was still gazing at Annette. Her fair face was crimson.

Her eyes were timidly downcast.

'This is my valentine,' went on the major laying his hand with fatherly fondness on her shoulder, 'and I have a mind to part with her to none but yourself. I have robbed you of one bride, it is only fair I should give you another. Now Brooke speak for yourself!'

'Annette, you know I love you. Will you—can you care for me?' asked Brooke, stepping up to her with glowing eyes, and speaking with a manly fervour that became him well.

The clergyman, who, if the truth must be told, was in the secrets of the Nabob, and so prepared for this remarkable denouement, looked discreetly away.

Not so Mr. Robert Brooke, Danzil's cousin.

He stepped forward with a look of ill-concealed vexation on his face.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said sharply, 'but I think you are going a little too fast. I have a right to speak in this matter, for it is my cousin is not married today, his estate falls to me. I say he cannot be married today—at any rate, not to this young lady. The marriage would not be legal. You have no license.'

The Nabob's eyes positively twinkled as he drew forth an imposing sheet of parchment and handed it to Robert Brooke.

'Sir, I foresaw your objection, and took pains to remove it. Here is a special license. Now, Annette, my dear, times press. All rests with you.'

Danzil Brooke had taken her to the far end of the room, and with his arm still round her waist, was pleading with her earnestly.

'You must have known it was you I loved,' he whispered. 'You, and you only, from the first hour of our meeting. Oh, my dearest, if you would only consent to let me marry you first and woo you afterwards!'

His honest eyes were alight with love.

She turned to him with the sweetest blush and smile, and put her hand in his. He knew that moment consent; and led to where the clergyman stood.

'I give her away!' said the major. 'She belongs to me. She is my adopted daughter—and my Valentine.'

QUEER ABOUT DRINKING.

A Saloonkeeper's Criticism of a Boston Judge's D. Antion.

That Boston Judge who decided the other day that in order to be drunk a man must be overcome, stupefied, or frenzied from the effects of alcoholic liquor may be a learned man in questions of law, but it doesn't appear as if he knew a great lot about the drinking of rum remarked the experienced proprietor of a downtown Broadway saloon. I have known men to be drunk for years at a stretch, without their giving any indication whatever that they were overcome, stupefied or frenzied from the effects of their drinking.

I have in mind, particularly, the case of a big insurance man who was a customer of mine, and a mighty valuable one, for twelve years. He would come in here on his way to his office at 10 o'clock in the morning and drink seven or eight big drinks of whiskey right off the reel inside of fifteen minutes, and they never teased him a particle. He would go on to his office and get down to business, and very few of his employees knew he drank a drop.

Every hour or so he would come in here by the side door, slip into one of the alcoves and drink half a dozen hookers of whiskey. Then, after office hours, he would come in and drink nearly a quart of his brand before going away. I used often to run across this man at uptown cafes after nightfall, and always found him drinking liquor in the same quantities that he drank it at my plant. He was a very quiet individual who rarely spoke unless he was addressed, but who always had the pat answer when a question was put to him by his friends and employees. This man had a 'still' on for years at a jolip.

Well, he suddenly, stopped drinking. The way I heard the story was that his

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wife on her deathbed asked him to promise to give up liquor and that he had promised. Anyhow he stopped. He didn't taper off gradually, but he simply passed it up suddenly, once and for ever.

You may believe it or not, but that man acted more like a drunken individual during the remainder of his sober days—he only lasted a year after he quit—than he had ever acted while he was a heavy drinker. In fact, a quintessence who had never known that he was a drinker began to judge from his conduct when he quit that he had just taken to drink. Several of his employees formed the same opinion.

He was absent minded, extremely nervous and irascible, inclined to be gruff with friends with whom he had previously been on the best of terms and what is more to the point, his speech actually became thick-tongued and more or less difficult to understand. That man had been virtually drunk for so many years that drunkenness gradually but surely came to be his normal estate, and in that state he was a kindly, peaceable, good natured person, a fine business man and a pretty exemplary citizen so far as his relations with the world were concerned.

His sudden and voluntary deprivation by himself of a stimulant that he had been using for so long was to violent a change and it made a strange and a hard man of him. He died, as I said only about a year after he quit, of nervous prostration. I believe that he worried himself to death over an acute appreciation of his queer state. But there was never anything over come, still, find or trace of that man.

odd as it is bound to seem, until he had passed all alcoholic indulgence.

No fixed rule can be framed up by a Judge or anybody else as to this drinking business, because drink has so many different ways of affecting different persons. I know a man 5 feet 4 in height, and with almost the strength of a Banagel tiger—he was as fine a trial lawyer as ever practiced before the criminal bar of New York—who, from a genial, laughing, witty friend and companion would be converted into nothing but a raging mad man, a howling Balaamite, after taking one stiff drink of brandy. He was as hard to handle after taking that one drink as a runaway freight train on a down grade. He knew this and tried to beat the game by trying it on every once in a while, but the one drink invariably had the same effect upon him, and the finally gave up trying to conquer his peculiarity.

One the other hand, I have known scores of chippy, scrappy, brusque spoken and generally unamiable individuals who would melt into an actual excess of geniality, into such extreme manifestations of friendliness and liberality as to render them positive nuisances to their companions, and this after partaking of only a few drams of liquor?

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