

A HAPPENING AT THE BALL.

BY MAARTIN MAARTINS.

The big rooms were full of music and movement, of many mingling perfumes and overheated air. It was the usual unwholesome, but not unpleasant atmosphere of a big entertainment at a big house in a very big city. Everything was big; and biggest of all, even bigger than the rooms, was the crowd.

Affection was there, and official boredom, and dead, done world weariness, and also youth, good looks, bright girl vanity, the vast happiness of utter self-contentment, complete satisfaction at some twenty or thereabouts, with one's self, one's appearance, one's clothes.

Of the many who could show cause for such self-approval none stood out more prominently than Margaret. Yet none seemed less conscious of the notice a pretty girl always willingly attracts. Throughout her success in society she has retained that simplicity of manner, I believe, by those who can distinguish, it is considered her principal charm.

I cannot distinguish it. To me she has always been all charm.

She was talking to Maxwell that evening, when I saw her—to Maxwell the South African millionaire. Two or three paces behind them, in an irregular half-circle, waited the usual little crowd of her admirers, moodily looking on.

The next waltz was mine, and I went up and claimed it. Maxwell, fell back with a scowl. He is not accustomed to anybody getting in his way.

"My turn next," he said, and threw into his accent a great deal of extra meaning.

"Is Nellie here?" asked Margaret, as we glided away.

"No; she went to the opera. She is coming on later."

"Alone?"

"Sclater is with her."

We took half a dozen steps before Margaret rejoined:

"Why didn't you go with your wife, Guy?"

And half a dozen more before I answered laughing lightly:

"Because she preferred to go with Sclater."

Margaret dropped the subject with the same manifest little effort with which she had raised it. A thoughtful frown settled on her exquisite brow.

"Nobody knows my step as you do," she said; "I wish I could always waltz with you."

"And not with Mr. Maxwell?"

"Never with Mr. Maxwell."

"My dear cousin, I hope we shall waltz together at many a ball yet, for many a year."

"I—I am not so sure."

"Why? Are you going to marry somebody who will carry you off to India?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I am going to marry nobody. But father was talking this evening, very seriously, of definitely giving up London and retiring into Inverness-shire for good."

"He has said that sort of thing ever since I can remember."

"Yes, but this evening he seemed quite in earnest."

"More bills, or worse, duns, than usual."

"You may laugh."

"Indeed, I am quite serious!"

"But Guy, it is a horrible thing to be poor."

"Do you think I have forgotten? Only three years ago I was a great deal poorer than your father."

She was silent again. Then she said: "Somehow, I believe this time it is quite serious. I shall have to go and milk cows in the wilds of Inverness."

"Happy cows!"

"You are quite mistaken," she answered demurely. "Unintelligent milking disagrees with cows. But even were it not so, they would know I was cross. I hate Inverness-shire. I am always cross up there."

"You malign yourself. Ever since you were a baby you have been contented to do what you believed to be your duty. And so now you are going to dance—cheerfully—with Mr. Maxwell."

Half way through the next dance, which I was lounging out by a doorway, she suddenly stood before me. Her face had gone white.

"Can you spare me five minutes' conversation?" she said.

I should have laughed at the formal words had her manner not betrayed the extremest agitation.

"I am always at your service, as you know," I replied; and I led the way circumspectly into a little side room, or alcove, with a good deal of greenery. Margaret dropped my arm and sank down on a settee, against a background of palms.

"Mr. Maxwell has asked me to be his wife!" she gasped.

"That sort of thing will happen to a charming woman," I answered gravely.

"Oh Guy, talk sense for once! Talk sense!" There was such a heartrending note in her voice that I changed my whole manner at once.

"My dear Meg, whatever's the matter. The man has asked you to be his wife. Well, you can accept him, if you like, or refuse him and there's an end to it."

"No, no! That is not the end, not the end!"

I would have taken her hand, but she hastily withdrew it.

"Come," I said "we are cousins. We have been intimate friends ever since we were babies. You must be more explicit. What's the row?"

She smiled. The lighter words seemed to steady her nerves. She opened her lips to speak. "If you don't want the fellow refuse him, and there's an end," I interposed simultaneously. But she said:

"He has given me to understand that I cannot refuse him."

"What folly!"

"Father is mixed up it appears, in some South African speculations of his. The ruin we have always been expecting all my life long, is come at last, unless—"

"Unless you consent to be Mrs. Maxwell?"

"He did not say that," she objected eagerly. "He did not say it."

"But he implied it?"

She sank back. "I understood it to be so."

I waited and thought it out, and gave her time. Yet my question, when it came, was the one that would always have turned uppermost.

"Do you want to marry this Maxwell, Meg?"

She hesitated, faltered. "I want to marry nobody," she said.

"So I have sometimes presumed, judging from your attitude through these three seasons. Are you sure,—forgive me venturing on a subject I have always carefully avoided, but now you grant me permission—are you sure your attitude is a sensible one?"

"You mean because I have refused people?"

"You have refused half a dozen, to my knowledge, some of whom I, a humble person like myself, would most certainly have accepted."

"You!" she spoke quickly, a little bitterly. "It is pretty of you to say that."

"Well, then, refuse Mr. Maxwell. He is the richest offer you will ever get. Every girl in these rooms would jump at him."

"My father—you forgot about my father."

"By no means. But even you, Meg, must not marry to please your father."

"I do not think it is merely a matter of pleasing. As I understand the matter, it is a question of salvation or ruin."

"Hush! Calm yourself, I beg you. I will."

"How can I be calm? Father, no matter what he may say, could not live away from London. He mopes fit to die, at the old place in Inverness-shire. And yet the place is nice enough."

"I know, dear, I know. It is he who grows cross there, not you. You would be happy anywhere."

"Not cross, Guy. He is never cross. Don't say that. But his health is so bad, and the winds—"

"Margaret—excuse my interrupting you—but I know Maxwell; I—I think you must have mistook. I can't imagine his wanting to influence in the way you describe. It don't look like him."

"Why not?" she quivered nervously.

I gazed down at the point of my shoe. "Well, you see, he's a business man, I answered awkwardly, "and it doesn't look to me like good business. It isn't the way to get a wife this knife-at-your-throat manner—and he'll want the best wife that money can buy."

"Then he wouldn't have come to me."

I turned my slow gaze full upon her. Our eyes met.

I did not speak, for I could not. Her long lashes sank.

"There is no hurry," I said at last. "You can take time to consider."

"No, that would be useless."

"Do you mean that you dislike him?"

"Oh, no! Not more than other men. I—I rather like him. I like him very well, as men go."

"You are hard on men."

"No, by no means. Only, I do not want to marry—I don't care about marrying, Guy."

"You intend to remain an old maid?"

"I don't know. I don't think I care about marrying, Guy. Her manner was agitated, she half hid her face behind her fan. She shrank away as if she was anxious to escape from me, after having called me to her aid.

There came to me a sudden intuition of what I ought to do. I rose from my place beside her.

"I will seek out Maxwell and ask what he really meant," I said. She did not attempt to restrain me, but before she could have done so I was gone.

I found Maxwell irritably quaffing champagne at the buffet. He smiled in a painfully careless manner as I approached.

"You won't mind my talking about my uncle's affairs?" I asked straight away.

"Why not say your cousin's at once?" he replied.

I laughed frankly into his face. "So much the better," I said. "Let us call things exactly as they are. I like that."

"By all means."

"You have made my cousin an offer of marriage."

"I have. You are the last man who has a right to object to that."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, annoyed.

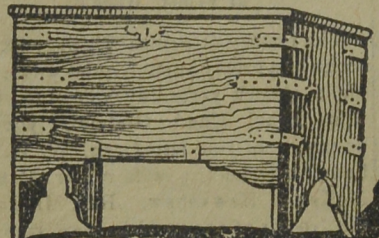
"Let us speak of things exactly as they are," he replied. He set down his glass. "But we have no need to enlarge," he added, walking away.

I followed him. "She believes you to have said that you would ruin her father unless she accepted you."

Then he turned in the full light of

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a dozen candles in a corner. His bronzed face grew brown.

"I never said anything" of the kind!" he cried.

"I know you did not. That's why I came."

His manner toward me changed.

"I told her that her father's affairs were in a bad way," he said, genially. "So much she must surely have known."

"Since her birth," I put in.

"And I told her that as far as his South African affairs were concerned, I could probably be instrumental in staving off an impending crash."

"That sounds like what she told me."

"There's no connection between the two matters," he answered, stiffening. "Your uncle came to me this morning in despair. I have promised to help him, whatever occurs."

"All the same the combination gives you an unfair advantage over the girl," I protested, irritably.

He bit his lip. "Go back," he said, weighing each word, "and tell her: I have just received other advice from Johannesburg. Her father can sell out at par. Will she understand that?" he added, with a wry smile.

I would have thrust out my hand, but drew it back with a man's dread of melodrama. "Oh, hang it!" he said, hastily, "although I have made my money in South Africa, you may still give me credit for a decent instinct here and there." As he said so, he gave me the clear outline of his shoulder, and I, realizing that our interview was over, pushed back through the brilliant crowd to the quiet corner, where I still found Margaret. A young man had been talking to her. She sent him away as I approached.

"You are quite mistaken," I said.

"You have altogether misunderstood him. The South African imbroglio it coming right of itself. Your father can sell at par."

She caught her breath and, as I again took the vacant seat by her side, she drew away the white clouds of her dress.

"And now," I continued, laying hold of my courage and steadying my voice, "what are you going to do? Here is this offer of marriage, free and untrammelled—a 'yes' or a 'no'?"

"Leave me," she said.

"And let some fellow come up and talk nonsense?"

(Concluded tomorrow.)

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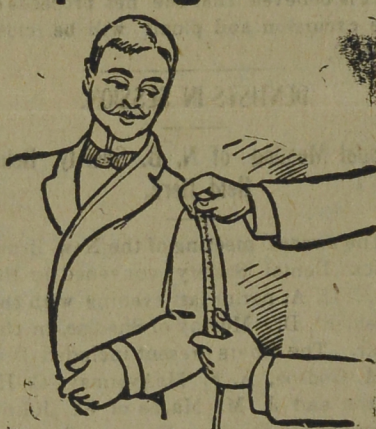
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