

III

He was a good specimen of the long-service soldier of those days; a not unhandsome man, with a certain undemonstrative dignity, which some might have said to be partly owing to the stiffness of his uniform about his neck, the high stock being still worn. He was much stouter than when Selina had parted from him. Although she had not meant to be demonstrative she ran across to him directly she saw him, and he held her in his arms and kissed her.

Then in much agitation she whispered something to him, at which he seemed to be much surprised.

'He's just put to bed,' she continued. 'You can go up and see him. I knew you'd come if you were alive! But I had quite gi'd you up for dead. You've been home in England ever since the war ended?'

'Yes, dear.'

'Why didn't you come sooner?'

'That's just what I ask myself! Why was I such a sappy as not to hurry here the first day I set foot on shore! Well, who'd have thought it--you are as pretty as ever!'

He relinquished her to peep upstairs a little way, where, by looking through the ballusters, he could see Johnny's cot just within an open door. On his stepping down again Mr. Miller was preparing to depart.

'Now, what's this? I am sorry to see anybody going the moment I've come,' expostulated the sergeant-major. 'I thought we might make an evening of it. There's a nine gallon cask o' "Phoenix" beer outside in the trap, and a ham, and half a rawmil' cheese; for I thought you might be short o' forage in a lonely place like this; and it struck me we might like to ask in a neighbour or two. But perhaps it would be taking a liberty?'

'O no, not at all,' said Mr. Paddock, who was now in the room, in a judicial measured manner. 'Very thoughtful of 'ee, only 'twas not necessary, for we had just laid in an extry stock of eatables and drinkables in preparation for the coming event.'

'Twas very kind, upon my heart,' said the soldier, 'to think me worth such a jocund preparation, since you could only have got my letter this morning.'

Selina gazed at her father to stop him, and exchanged embarrassed glances with Miller. Contrary to her hopes Sergeant-Major Clark plainly did not know that the preparations referred to were for something quite other than his own visit.

The movement of the horse outside, and the impatient tapping of a whip-handle upon the vehicle reminded them that Clark's driver was still in waiting. The provisions were brought into the house, and the cart dismissed. Miller, with very little pressure indeed, accepted an invitation to supper, and a few neighbours were induced to come in to make up a cheerful party.

During the laying of the meal, and throughout its continuance, Selina, who sat beside her first intended husband, tried frequently to break the news to him of her engagement to the other--now terminated so suddenly, and so happily for her heart, and her sense of womanly virtue. But the talk ran entirely upon the late war; and though fortified by half a horn of the strong ale brought by the sergent-major she decided that she might have a better opportunity when supper was over of revealing the situation to him in private.

Having supped, Clark leaned back at ease in his chair and looked around. 'We used sometimes to have a dance in that other room after supper, Selina dear, I recollect. We used to clear out all the furniture into this room before beginning. Have you kept up such goings on?'

'No, not at all!' said his sweetheart, sadly.

'We were not unlikely to revive it in a few days,' said Mr. Paddock. 'But, howsomever, there's seemingly many a slip, as the saying is.'

'Yes, I'll tell John all about that by and by!' interposed Selina; at which, perceiving that the secret which he did not like keeping was to be kept even yet, her father held his tongue with some show of testiness.

The subject of a dance having been broached, to put the thought in practice was the feeling of all. Soon after the tables and chairs were borne from the opposite room to this by zealous hands, and two of the villagers sent home for a fiddle and tambourine, when the majority began to tread a measure well known in that secluded vale. Selina naturally danced with the sergent-major, not altogether to her father's satisfaction, and to the real uneasiness of her mother, both of whom would have preferred a postponement of festivities till the rashly anticipated relationship between their daughter and Clark in the past had been made fact by the church's ordinances. They did not, however, express a positive objection, Mr. Paddock remembering, with self-reproach, that it was owing to his original strongly expressed disapproval of Selina's being a soldier's wife that the wedding had been delayed, and finally hindered--with worse consequences than were expected; and ever since the misadventure brought about by his government he had allowed events to steer their own courses.

'My tails will surely catch in your spurs, John!' murmured the daughter of the house, as she whirled around upon his arm with the rapt soul and look of a somnambulist. 'I didn't know we should dance, or I would have put on my other frock.'

'I'll take care, my love. We've danced here before. Do you think your father objects to me now? I've risen in rank. I fancy he's still a little against me.'

'He has repented, times enough.'

'And so have I! If I had married you then 'twould have saved many a misfortune. I have sometimes thought it might have been possible to rush the ceremony through somehow before I left; though we were only in the second asking, were we? And even if I had come back straight here when we returned from the Crimea, and married you then, how much happier I should have been!'

'Dear John, to say that! Why didn't you?'

'O--dilatatoriness and want of thought, and a fear of facing your father after so long. I was in hospital a great while, you know. But how familiar the place seems again! What's that I saw on the beaufet in the other room? It never used to be there. A sort of withered corpse of a cake--not an old bride-cake surely?'

'Yes, John, ours. 'Tis the very one that was made for our wedding three years ago.'

'Sakes alive! Why, time shuts up together, and all between then and now

seems not to have been! What became of that wedding-gown that they were making in this room, I remember--a bluish, whitish, frothy thing?'

'I have that too.'

'Really! . . . Why, Selina--'

'Yes!'

'Why not put it on now?'

'Wouldn't it seem--. And yet, O how I should like to! It would remind them all, if we told them what it was, how we really meant to be married on that bygone day!' Her eyes were again laden with wet.

'Yes . . . The pity that we didn't--the pity!' Moody mournfulness seemed to hold silent awhile one not naturally taciturn. 'Well--will you?' he said.

'I will--the next dance, if mother don't mind.'

Accordingly, just before the next figure was formed, Selina disappeared, and speedily came downstairs in a creased and box-worn, but still airy and pretty, muslin gown, which was indeed the very one that had been meant to grace her as a bride three years before.

'It is dreadfully old-fashioned,' she apologized.

'Not at all. What a grand thought of mine! Now, let's to't again.'

She explained to some of them, as he led her to the second dance, what the frock had been meant for, and that she had put it on at his request. And again athwart and around the room they went.

'You seem the bride!' he said.

'But I couldn't wear this gown to be married in now!' she replied, ecstatically, 'or I shouldn't have put it on and made it dusty. It is really too old-fashioned, and so folded and fretted out, you can't think. That was with my taking it out so many times to look at. I have never put it on--never--till now!'

'Selina, I am thinking of giving up the army. Will you emigrate with me to New Zealand? I've an uncle out there doing well, and he'd soon help me to making a larger income. The English army is glorious, but it ain't altogether enriching.'

'Of course, anywhere that you decide upon. Is it healthy there for Johnny?'

'A lovely climate. And I shall never be happy in England . . . Aha!' he concluded again, with a bitterness of unexpected strength, 'would to

Heaven I had come straight back here!

As the dance brought round one neighbour after another the re-united pair were thrown into juxtaposition with Bob Heartall among the rest who had been called in; one whose chronic expression was that he carried inside him a joke on the point of bursting with its own vastness. He took occasion now to let out a little of its quality, shaking his head at Selina as he addressed her in an undertone--

'This is a bit of a topper to the bridegroom, ho ho! 'Twill teach en the liberty you'll expect when you've married en!

'What does he mean by a "topper," the sergeant-major asked, who, not being of local extraction, despised the venerable local language, and also seemed to suppose 'bridegroom' to be an anticipatory name for himself. 'I only hope I shall never be worse treated than you've treated me to-night!

Selina looked frightened. 'He didn't mean you, dear,' she said as they moved on. 'We thought perhaps you knew what had happened, owing to your coming just at this time. Had you--heard anything about--what I intended?'

'Not a breath--how should I--away up in Yorkshire? It was by the merest accident that I came just at this date to make peace with you for my

delay.'

'I was engaged to be married to Mr. Bartholomew Miller. That's what it is! I would have let 'ee know by letter, but there was no time, only hearing from 'ee this afternoon . . . You won't desert me for it, will you, John? Because, as you know, I quite supposed you dead, and--and--'

Her eyes were full of tears of trepidation, and he might have felt a sob heaving within her.