

IV

The soldier was silent during two or three double bars of the tune. 'When were you to have been married to the said Mr. Bartholomew Miller?' he inquired.

'Quite soon.'

'How soon?'

'Next week--O yes--just the same as it was with you and me. There's a strange fate of interruption hanging over me, I sometimes think! He had bought the licence, which I preferred so that it mightn't be like--ours. But it made no difference to the fate of it.'

'Had bought the licence! The devil!'

'Don't be angry, dear John. I didn't know!'

'No, no, I'm not angry.'

'It was so kind of him, considering!'

'Yes . . . I see, of course, how natural your action was--never thinking of seeing me any more! Is it the Mr. Miller who is in this dance?'

'Yes.'

Clark glanced round upon Bartholomew and was silent again, for some little while, and she stole a look at him, to find that he seemed changed. 'John, you look ill!' she almost sobbed. "'Tisn't me, is it?'

'O dear, no. Though I hadn't, somehow, expected it. I can't find fault with you for a moment--and I don't . . . This is a deuce of a long dance, don't you think? We've been at it twenty minutes if a second, and the figure doesn't allow one much rest. I'm quite out of breath.'

'They like them so dreadfully long here. Shall we drop out? Or I'll stop the fiddler.'

'O no, no, I think I can finish. But although I look healthy enough I have never been so strong as I formerly was, since that long illness I had in the hospital at Scutari.'

'And I knew nothing about it!'

'You couldn't, dear, as I didn't write. What a fool I have been altogether!' He gave a twitch, as of one in pain. 'I won't dance again when this one is over. The fact is I have travelled a long way to-day, and it seems to have knocked me up a bit.'

There could be no doubt that the sergeant-major was unwell, and Selina made herself miserable by still believing that her story was the cause of his ailment. Suddenly he said in a changed voice, and she perceived that he was paler than ever: 'I must sit down.'

Letting go her waist he went quickly to the other room. She followed, and found him in the nearest chair, his face bent down upon his hands and arms, which were resting on the table.

'What's the matter?' said her father, who sat there dozing by the fire.

'John isn't well . . . We are going to New Zealand when we are married, father. A lovely country! John, would you like something to drink?'

'A drop o' that Schiedam of old Owlett's, that's under stairs, perhaps,' suggested her father. 'Not that nowadays 'tis much better than licensed liquor.'

'John,' she said, putting her face close to his and pressing his arm.

'Will you have a drop of spirits or something?'

He did not reply, and Selina observed that his ear and the side of his face were quite white. Convinced that his illness was serious, a growing dismay seized hold of her. The dance ended; her mother came in, and learning what had happened, looked narrowly at the sergeant-major.

'We must not let him lie like that, lift him up,' she said. 'Let him rest in the window-bench on some cushions.'

They unfolded his arms and hands as they lay clasped upon the table, and on lifting his head found his features to bear the very impress of death itself. Bartholomew Miller, who had now come in, assisted Mr. Paddock to make a comfortable couch in the window-seat, where they stretched out Clark upon his back.

Still he seemed unconscious. 'We must get a doctor,' said Selina. 'O, my dear John, how is it you be taken like this?'

'My impression is that he's dead!' murmured Mr. Paddock. 'He don't breathe enough to move a tomtit's feather.'

There were plenty to volunteer to go for a doctor, but as it would be at least an hour before he could get there the case seemed somewhat hopeless. The dancing-party ended as unceremoniously as it had begun; but the guests lingered round the premises till the doctor should arrive. When he did come the sergent-major's extremities were already cold, and there was no doubt that death had overtaken him almost at the moment that he had sat down.

The medical practitioner quite refused to accept the unhappy Selina's theory that her revelation had in any way induced Clark's sudden

collapse. Both he and the coroner afterwards, who found the immediate cause to be heart-failure, held that such a supposition was unwarranted by facts. They asserted that a long day's journey, a hurried drive, and then an exhausting dance, were sufficient for such a result upon a heart enfeebled by fatty degeneration after the privations of a Crimean winter and other trying experiences, the coincidence of the sad event with any disclosure of hers being a pure accident.

This conclusion, however, did not dislodge Selina's opinion that the shock of her statement had been the immediate stroke which had felled a constitution so undermined.