

The Story Teller.

THE MYSTERIOUS MARRIAGE.

A Danish Tale.

BY H. STEPHENS.

The north-western part of the isle of Zealand has a very bleak and lonely appearance. No plant can grow in the quicksand. Moveable sandhills, the play of the winds constantly shifting their places, arise and disappear, to arise again at some distance. When traveling through the island, I spent an hour here, which impressed me with the idea of loneliness and desolation. While I slowly rode along on horseback, a storm arose in the north from the sea-shore. The river rose up, the clouds were driven along in the firmament, the sky grew darker and darker, the sand began to move in larger and larger masses under the hoofs of my horse, it was whirled about by the wind and filled the air. The horse sank deep into the loose sand. Sky and earth and sea were mixed up with each other, and everything was wrapped in clouds of dust and sand, so that I found it utterly impossible to see my way or to know in which direction to go. There was no trace of life or vegetation—the storm howled through the air—thunder rolled at a distance—and the flashes of lightning could scarcely penetrate the thick clouds of dust around me. The danger was apparent, when a sudden violent rain brought the sand to rest, and rendered it possible for me, wet to the skin, to find my way to the next little town.

In this dreary neighborhood there was, a hundred years ago, a village at a distance of about a mile from the sea-shore. The quicksands have buried the village; the inhabitants, most of whom were sailors or fishermen, have erected their cottages closer to the shore. Only the church, built on the top of a hill, is still in the same place, surrounded by the dreary moveable wilderness. It is in this church that the event took place which I am going to relate.

The venerable old country parson sat in his lonely room, being absorbed in pious contemplation. It was about midnight. The house was at the end of the village; its door was not locked, the patriarchal simplicity of the inhabitants being so great that lock and key were almost unknown to them. The parson's lamp shone dimly, while the sullen silence of the house was only disturbed by the rushing of the waves. He heard that the door was opened, and heard many steps approaching on the staircase; he expected that he should be summoned to give spiritual comfort to a dying man in his agonies. Two unknown men, wrapped in white cloaks, stepped into the room. One of them said, while approaching in a civil manner: "Sir, you must officiate at the marriage. Bride and bridegroom are waiting in the distant church. This sum," said he, pointing to a filled purse, "will sufficiently make up for your trouble and for your being startled by the unexpected summons." The old man stared at the foreigners, whose appearance seemed to him strange and fearful—nay, even ghostlike. The man repeated his demand in a pressing and commanding manner. After having recovered from his astonishment, the clergyman began mildly to remonstrate that his office did not allow him to dispense with the due formalities, or to perform the sacred duty without knowing the bridal couple. The men the second of the strangers stepped forth in a threatening attitude. "Sir," said he, "you can choose. You follow us, and take the offered sum of money, or you remain; but then you are a dead man." He raised a pistol to his forehead, and waited for the answer. The old parson grew pale, rose up in fear and silence, dressed himself and said: "I am ready." The strangers had spoken Danish, but in such a way that there could be no mistake as to their being foreigners.

So they crossed the village in the silence of a dark autumnal night. When leaving it, the clergyman perceived with horror, that his church was brilliantly lit up. And forth in silence marched his companions over the lonely sandy plain, while he, absorbed in his reflections, with difficulty followed them. When arrived at the church door, they bound up his eyes; he heard a well known side-door opening with a creaking noise, and was pushed forward into a dense crowd. All around through the whole church he heard a whispering murmur; in his neighborhood, discourse in an unknown language, which he took for Huguenot. While thus standing in utter perplexity, with closed eyes, and pressed from all sides, his hand was taken hold of and he was forcibly pulled through the crowd. At last the people gave way, the ties were taken off, and he found himself standing before the altar. It was adorned by a long row of wax candles, in magnificient silver candlesticks; the whole church was so well lit up by a great many candles, that the most distant matter could be distinctly recognized. The silent silence of the great multitude filled now his soul with horror, as shortly before had done their masters. Sideways and pews were occupied by the crowd, but the middle passage was clear, and the minister saw deep before himself a fresh dug grave. The stone, that before had served to cover it, stood leaning against a pew. The minister saw nothing but men, except one woman, whom he could dimly recognize in a distant view. The stillness lasted some minutes. No one moved.

At last a man arose, whose magnificent garments distinguished him from the rest, and manifested his high rank. He stepped resolutely through the empty passage, his steps resounding through the church, while stared at by the multitude. The man was of middle size; broad-shouldered, his gait proud, his countenance of a brownish-yellow color, his hair black, his features hard and severe, the lips spitefully closed, bold aquiline nose increasing his commanding appearance; his little black eyes burning with a wild fire, overshadowed by a long dark bushy eyebrow. He wore a green coat, trimmed with broad gold lace, and a star above on his breast. The bride, who kneeled at his side, was dressed carefully and magnificently. An asure robe richly trimmed with silver surrounded her slender figure. A diadem glittering with jewels adorned her fair hair. Her features were graceful and handsome, although dimmed by anxiety. Her pale lips had a delicate appearance, her eyes were dim with tears.

The clergyman, paralysed by terror, remained for some time dumb in his position, when a savage glance of the bridegroom reminded him of the ceremony. A new perplexity for him was his doubt whether the bridal couple would under-

stand his language. He composed himself, and asked the bridegroom what were their names.

"Neander, Feodora," answered he, in a coarse voice.

The clergyman began now to read the formula of marriage. His voice trembled. He was often obliged to repeat his words, but no one seemed to perceive his perplexity, whereby he was confirmed in his supposition that no one in his congregation perfectly understood his language, when he now proceeded to ask—

"Neander, will you recognize Feodora, who kneels beside you, for your lawful wife?"

He thought that, from ignorance of the language, the bridegroom might not answer the question; but the answer, "yes," was given in a loud, shrill, yelling sound, which resounded through the whole church. Deep sighs coming forth everywhere from the surrounding congregation accompanied this terrible "yes," and a convolution, like the dash of distant lightning, agitated for a moment the pale features of the bride. Directing his words to the bride, he said—

"Feodora, will you recognize Neander, who kneels beside you, for your lawful husband?"

He answered with a perceptible "yes." The half eyelid bride awoke, as it were, from a deep dream, her pale lips shivered, her eyes flashed with a momentary fire, her breast waved up and down, a violent shower of tears extinguished again the light of her eyes, and her "yes" was heard like anxious moan of a dying person, and found a willing echo in the multitude, expressed in voluntary sounds of sympathy, that came forth from all parts of the church. Some minutes passed in dreadful silence. Then, seeing the pale bride kneeling in her place again, the minister finished the service. His companions came forth again, tied his eyes up, pulled him with some difficulty through the crowd, pushed him out of the church door, which was bolted inside, and left him in the open air.

Standing there in the dark, lonely night, he was for a moment uncertain whether the horrible event, with all its dreadful particulars, had not been only an anxious dream. As soon, however, as he had torn the ties from his eyes, saw the church brilliantly lit up, and heard the murmur of the multitude, he could not help being convinced of the dreadful reality. In order to direct the issue, he concealed himself on the opposite side of the church. The murmur increased, a violent alteration followed, he thought he heard the rough voice of the bridegroom imposing silence in a commanding manner; then a long pause; a shot was fired, the cry of a woman's voice was heard; another long pause followed; a noise like shuffling and digging ensued, that lasted almost a quarter of an hour. The lights were extinguished, the murmur rose anew, and the whole crowd rushed out of the church and hastened with a humming noise to the sea-shore.

The parson returned to his village, and heard many steps approaching on the staircase; he expected that he should be summoned to give spiritual comfort to a dying man in his agonies. Two unknown men, wrapped in white cloaks, stepped into the room. One of them said, while approaching in a civil manner: "Sir, you must officiate at the marriage. Bride and bridegroom are waiting in the distant church. This sum," said he, pointing to a filled purse, "will sufficiently make up for your trouble and for your being startled by the unexpected summons." The old man stared at the foreigners, whose appearance seemed to him strange and fearful—nay, even ghostlike. The man repeated his demand in a pressing and commanding manner. After having recovered from his astonishment, the clergyman began mildly to remonstrate that his office did not allow him to dispense with the due formalities, or to perform the sacred duty without knowing the bridal couple. The men the second of the strangers stepped forth in a threatening attitude. "Sir," said he, "you can choose. You follow us, and take the offered sum of money, or you remain; but then you are a dead man." He raised a pistol to his forehead, and waited for the answer. The old parson grew pale, rose up in fear and silence, dressed himself and said: "I am ready." The strangers had spoken Danish, but in such a way that there could be no mistake as to their being foreigners.

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