



PROCESSION FROM THE THAMES RAILWAY STATION.

THE PECULIAR CASE OF MAJOR HALES.

The good folk of Newton Pynes were nothing if not hospitable, and although the majority of the better class residents were far from wealthy, still on the arrival of new-comers they quarrelled vigorously as to who should be the first to offer to entertain them. Had Major Hales and his wife been conquerors returning from a well-fought field they could not have been more often 'dined,' and both sighed with relief as they drove on their way to Whiddon Park.

'It's the last, thank goodness,' Mrs Hales said, 'and I think I should have got out of this one if it hadn't been for one thing.'

'What's that?' grumbled her husband.

'I heard that Sir Allan Karshlake is to be there, and I'm most anxious to meet him. They say that he knows more of the secrets of nature than anyone else—unburnt—and you know, Henry, what I want to ask him.'

Major Hales looked out through the mist-covered window pane and his face twitched, and he bit his lips to keep down an irritable oath, 'For God's sake, Kate, do drop that nonsensical idea of yours. Surely you have forgiven all that long since.'

She slipped her arm into his and gave it a tender squeeze. 'Don't be cross, Henry. It's not that I don't love you dearly, as you know, but I can never forget poor Dick's dead face as it looked up at me. 'Revenge me,' it seemed to say, and what have I done to find out his murderer? Instead of devoting my life to hunting down the man who did it I married you.'

'Our lives were always in our hands in the Kyber,' he muttered. 'A Pathan lurking behind a rock with his jezail pots us at five hundred yards, and—there it ends.'

'Yes,' she said softly, 'but a Pathan who shoots with a dum-dum bullet in peace time has a motive, which I crave to find out.' She saw his moody face, and leaped forward and kissed him. 'There, smile, Henry. Forgive my wild talk. I'm happier with you than, perhaps, I should have been with Dick. Come, smile.'

Captain Vane was an ideal host, and possessed, as if by instinct, the knack of sorting his guests well. People at his table found themselves sitting next to congenial spirits, and as a result thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Mrs Hales flushed with pleasure as she found Karshlake on her left hand, and she shyly studied his mask-like face.

'I never give dinners, Mrs Hales,' he bent forward and said in a low tone, 'but if you have anything to ask me, pray do so. I am at your service.'

She crimsoned, for she had imagin-

ed he was ignorant of her scrutiny, and she half turned away. A grim smile curled his lip, for he was a keen student of human nature.

'There's a skeleton in that cupboard, he thought as he went on with his dinner. 'It will come out sooner or later.'

'Sir Allan,' the soft voice exclaimed, and he courteously bent forward, 'will you listen to a story if I tell it you?'

'Certainly,' he replied, just glancing up and noticing the anxious look of Major Hales, as he endeavoured to catch his wife's eye. 'Your husband could see you if I moved that chrysanthemum. Shall I do so?'

'No, no,' she whispered. 'He doesn't approve of what I am going to ask you.'

Karshlake, from under his heavy eyelids, watched the big, bluff soldier trying to hide his annoyance under a smiling face. The sleepy eyes took in every detail of the heavy and perhaps brutal face staring across at him.

'The man's afraid,' he thought. 'Oh what, I wonder? Of his wife? No. Of me—possibly yes. No claret, thank you,' he murmured. 'Now, Mrs Hales, I am all attention.'

'I was married ten years ago,' she began, 'to my first husband, Captain Dick Bonham, who was in the Guides. You've heard of the regiment, I'm sure?'

'Yes,' he blandly added. 'That regiment looted my father's palace after an emene. Yes, I know the Guides. Won't you try these meringues. They are excellent?' His voice had not a trace of venom in it, and yet she shivered.

'We were quartered at Malakand, and I had obtained permission from the general to be with my husband. So we were as happy as one could expect to be there. Major Hales, then a lieutenant, was in charge of a detachment at a small fort six miles off, and it was my late husband's duty to visit this party every week. One fatal day he was riding home in front of his escort when he fell from his horse and died almost before he reached the ground.'

'Yes,' said Karshlake, still watching the major. 'I remember the case now. Go on.'

'The escort had heard no noise,' she resumed, 'and yet my poor husband had been shot, proving that the range must have been a long one. The wind was, it is true, blowing strongly against the party, so that helped the assassin no doubt, but when the bullet was examined it proved to be a Government one of the latest pattern. Oh, Sir Allan, when I saw my darling's face I thought I would have died, and on his body I swore revenge! But no inquiry discovered the murderer, and no doubt he was, as Major Hales declares, a 'snipper' who saw his chance. But I heard you knew many things,' she dropped her voice still lower, 'magical things, and so I wanted to meet you.'

She was a singularly lovely woman, and Karshlake, as he looked first at her and then at the man across the table, mentally mapped out the whole grisly tragedy.

'Oh you women,' he thought, 'what crimes you have caused. There's that man drinking too much wine and working himself up to row with me because he dreads what I may say.'

'Was Major Hales a friend of yours at that time?' he asked casually, ignoring the burning blush which reddened her face.

'Yes, he was an old friend,' she replied simply. 'In fact I knew him before I ever met my first husband.'

At that moment Captain Vane's sister rose, and the ladies left the table, whilst the men drew closer to one another.

Hales rather unsteadily came over to Karshlake and began angrily:

'I saw you talking to my wife during dinner! May I enquire what the subject was? His whole bearing was so insolent that several of the guests looked up in surprise. Karshlake's cool insouciance rarely deserted him, and although he saw that a fracas was about to commence, he went on cracking a walnut as though he was not the central figure in it.

'Certainly you may; we were discussing whether it would be possible after all these years to discover the murderer of her first husband.' He looked up suddenly at Hales.

'And what the devil has her late hos-



AT THE RANFURLY MEETING, PARAWAI RACECOURSE, THAMES.



THE CROWD AT THE THAMES RECEPTION.