

Complete Story.

Maynard's Best Man.

By E. BURROWS.

Maynard stood outside the house, and looked at the flower-filled balconies and red-striped sun-blinds with dubious eyes. He was wondering if it would be any good ringing the bell and inquiring in the usual formula whether Miss Clinton was at home, when someone went up the white steps in front of him and pealed at the great bell with no uncertain hand.

A smile twisted Maynard's gloomy features as his eyes fell on the small figure standing erect and important before the big door.

"Hallo, shaver!" he said. "What are you doing there, eh?"

"Lavin' on Miss Clinton," said he addressed as shaver; "an' my name is not Shaver. It's Montague Wichard Twent!"

"Oh, really!" said Maynard, leaning comfortably on the iron railings, which in their new coat of green paint were twinkling wickedly in the sun. "And you're calling on Miss Clinton, are you? That's just what I was thinking of doing myself, only—"

"I'm asked to tea!" announced Montague Wichard Twent, as he called himself, being unable to wrestle successfully as yet with the letter "r." "She's my sweetheart, and—"

The great doors were flung open, and a butler appeared blandly on the threshold; and with a magnificent wave of a minute hand Montague Wichard Twent vanished into the sacred precincts, and the doors were shut behind him, leaving Maynard outside in the cold—figuratively speaking, for the temperature was anything but chilly in the July afternoon sun.

It was only what he had expected, and he turned away and went down the road, leaving Montague Wichard Twent in possession of the field—and Betty Clinton. He thought of her violet-grey eyes and her bewitching smile, which had flashed into his heart and held it enthralled months ago. Sometimes he wondered dimly whether it would ever be his good fortune to see that smile again, for he had offended her mortally, and the light of her fair countenance had been withdrawn from him for more than a month.

Of course it was all his own fault—he was in a mood when he would have pleaded guilty to any accusation if it would have the desired effect of patching up some sort of peace between them. But nothing of that sort happened. Miss Clinton quite agreed, with deadly civility, that it

was his fault, and then and there dismissed him into outer darkness—again speaking figuratively. The rift within the lute had been caused by some little trivial thing which ought to have passed unnoticed—so he urged blindly, never seeing till it was too late that his very urging only made it worse.

He had asked Miss Clinton the time-nourished question, and she had been on the very verge of saying that one word which would have lifted him from mere earth to highest heaven, when in his impatience and eagerness to know his fate—in his ambition to prove to her that he could give her all her heart's desire, he told her that she should do what she willed with his wealth—if she would only marry him. That fatal urging of a condition—though he did not mean his words to be taken as such—was his doom. Her hot blood fired up—a hasty word slipped from her pretty lips—surprise sealed his—and that was how the whole thing happened, and since then it had never been even patched up.

So while Maynard was stalking gloomily in the opposite direction to the charming house in which but a short time ago he had been a most constant and welcome visitor Miss Clinton was distracting her thoughts—which had a tiresome trick of flying off at a tangent to the what-might-have-been, a fatal habit of which she was doing her best to break herself—with Montague Richard Trent. He was a charming child, with the quaintest of manners and speech, and he looked upon pretty Miss Betty as his own especial property, to be shared with no other living soul.

"More strawberries, Montague?" said Miss Betty.

"Please," said he, never averse to a good offer. "I fink Mister Maynard wished you had asked him in to tea. I seed him outside when I was comin' in here."

Had a bombshell descended at her feet Miss Clinton could hardly have looked more astonished. She almost jumped on her chair. This was the first and only intimation she had received of Maynard's return to the neighbourhood.

"Did you speak to him, Montague?" she inquired with interest.

"He spoke to me first," he said solemnly, after a short interval, which was occupied by strawberries. "an' he asked me where I was going, so I told him you asked me to tea. He was leanin' on the wallings outside,

looking awful mis'able; and then he went away, I fink, after I came in here."

"He went away?" repeated Miss Clinton blankly.

"And the child nodded his little curly head."

"Yes, I fink so, an' I thought it was funny, 'cos I heard mother say once that she knew Mr Maynard was very fond of you."

Miss Clinton started. "Oh, she was joking, dear!" she said faintly. "You must have the rest of the strawberries, you know, Montague: I can't eat any more, and they are so good. Then we'll go out and play with the puppies in the garden."

And Montague obediently finished the strawberries, and then they played on the shady lawns with the most fascinating pair of spaniel puppies, that were the joy of his heart. And then the time came all too soon when nurse was announced, and Montague Wichard Twent was taken home to bed.

His visit had given Miss Clinton fresh food for reflection, and before the day dawned, after a sleepless night, she had gone one step further on the road of her repentance, and acknowledged that she had been a fool to play with her life's happiness—for nothing.

These thoughts, and others of a similar description occupied her for several days and nights, till one never-to-be-forgotten day, when she met him face to face at a garden party at the house of Colonel Trent, the father of Montague Wichard.

Her face was nearly as pale as her dainty white dress, but she held out a friendly little hand, and uttered the conventional greeting with such coolness that Maynard's hopes, which had flown up sky-high as he saw her coming towards him, fell into the bottomless pit of despair.

He suggested that it was extremely hot, and there were ices under the trees. Might he get Miss Clinton an ice?

Miss Clinton assented to the proposition, and they strolled towards the trees in question; but somehow, when they reached them, they did not pause; they went on through a shrubbery, where only the distant strains of the string band playing the "Valse Bleue" came faintly to them on the perfumed air, and where there was no one to be seen—nothing but rows of flower-beds, gorgeous with colour and scent, and in the distance the shimmer of the lake in the wood below.

A silence, more dangerous than any words, had fallen between them, and Miss Clinton found herself getting cold with apprehension. She must say something.

"What a long time you have been away!" she said abruptly; and then could have bitten her tongue out for her rash speech.

Of course, it had seemed a long time to her—an eternity, but he was not to know that.

But he knew it now. The mischief was done apparently, for without more ado Maynard faced round upon her with a roughness which startled her. He had been in the past such a submissive wooer.

"Has it seemed long to you?" he demanded. "And yet you sent me away, Betty, is it possible that you—you care after all?"

"You were so impatient," she said, reproachfully; "or—no, it was I who was that, wasn't it? Well, both of us then, if you like. Will that do?"

"Anything will do if you will only tell me one thing, and that is that you love me, Betty! Dearest heart, won't you tell me that?"

And it is to be presumed that she did, for what happened next was only seen by the flowers and by an indignant pair of blue eyes belonging to a small person in an immaculate white sailor suit, who squeezed himself through a gap in the yew hedge, which was such a kindly shelter to the lovers.

Montague buried himself upon Maynard with fierceness.

"How dare you kiss my Miss Betty?" he demanded, with angry eyes; "she's my sweetheart, not yours!"

"Great Scott! the boy will have everyone in the place upon the scene," said Maynard, with a rueful laugh, as Miss Betty slipped from his arms with a delicious blush, and laid her white hand on Montague's little shoulder.

"Why, Montague," she said with a smile in Maynard's direction, "do you know I belonged to Mr. Maynard long ago, only he didn't quite know it, and I—I am going to marry him."

"Then it was true what mother said, that you were very fond of her," said Montague; "she's always right, you see! But Miss Betty is my sweetheart all the same."

"She's our sweetheart, old chap, and you shall be the best man, Will that do, eh?"

And it was so, for Montague Richard Trent took a prominent part in the wedding ceremony, which took place almost immediately, which transformed pretty Betty Clinton into Mrs. Humphrey Maynard.

And he has been called Maynard's Best Man ever since.

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