

# The Unfortunate Lover.

Being Some Incidents in the Amorous Career of Mr. Horace Bennerton.

By F. MORTON HOWARD, in "London Opinion."

## IV.—IN THE MATTER OF MARJORIE.

WITH all the outward appearance of a perfectly-equipped man-about-town, and with all the inward sensations of an early Christian martyr about to figure in the "star" animal turn on the arena programme, Mr Horace Bennerton was ushered into the study of Colonel Scaforth (retired).

"Good afternoon, Bennerton! Sit down. What can I do for you, eh?" rasped the colonel in the voice which, in former years, he had reserved exclusively for courts-martial.

He stood staring grimly at his caller, awaiting a reply. Under his scrutiny Bennerton became limply apologetic in expression.

"You see, colonel, the fact is—" he began. "I mean—"

He stopped uneasily. His bearing had much in common with that of a small boy discovered in the larder.

"Well, sir?" prompted the colonel explosively.

Bennerton's nerves resented the sudden exclamation. He started back, and the single glass, dropping from his eye, rolled away and tinkled ridiculously to a standstill under a distant chair. Bennerton vaguely wondered, as he gazed unhappily at the colonel, whether there could be any more ludicrous sight in all the world than a well-dressed young man on his knees, wildly groping for a monocle under a chair.

"You see, colonel, the fact is—" stammered Bennerton. "I mean—"

"My time is valuable, if yours isn't," the colonel reminded him. "Come, what do you wish to speak to me about?"

"Well, then, if you insist on knowing," replied Bennerton desperately, "I want to marry Marjorie."

For a moment there was an unpropitious silence. The colonel appeared to be having some difficulty with his breath.

"Oh, you want to marry my daughter, do you?" he said at length. "Well, you can put the idea right out of your head at once. Of all the audacity, the presumption, the—the—"

"But we've fallen in love with each other."

"Then fall out again!"

"But, I say!" pleaded Bennerton. "I mean—"

"Don't argue with me, sir. The idea's preposterous, I tell you! I wouldn't dream of it for a moment! Good afternoon, sir!"

"But why do you object to me, colonel?"

"For about fifty reasons—each of 'em fatal!"

The colonel sat down and picked up a newspaper, and Bennerton gazed accurately that the interview was at an end. Dejectedly he rose and walked from the room.

"Bennerton!" called the colonel just before the door closed.

"He's related!" thought the young man, and joyously skipped back into the study.

"Your eyeglass is still under that chair."

"Oh—er—thanks!" said Bennerton flabbily, and was about to stoop to retrieve his property when a sudden suspicion assailed him. "Er—promise you won't move!" he stipulated.

With the colonel watching him in scornful silence, he lapsed into an undignified attitude on hands and knees, and hunted round till he found his monocle. Then he quitted the room again.

"Well, dear?" queried a tense little voice in the hall outside.

"If he weren't your father—" whispered Bennerton.

"Oh!" The monosyllable was replete with comprehension.

"Never mind, little girl. Never despair. —what? It'll all roll out flat yet."

"If only we could get on the right side of mother," she sighed, "she could manage it for us."

"Marjorie!" roared the colonel's voice from the study.

"Au revoir!" said Bennerton swiftly, and the front door shut very, very quietly.

For the next week or two Mr Bennerton gave his whole mind to making strategic moves towards obtaining the goodwill of Mrs Scaforth. Whenever that lady expressed an intention of attending any place of friendly meeting, Marjorie duly apprised him of it over the telephone, and he bobbed up there accordingly. Mrs Scaforth, either with or without Marjorie, was always encountering him at concerts and receptions; the marked attention he paid her caused several of her dearest friends to take it upon themselves to contradict sinister rumours of which no one else had heard.

Bennerton realised the value of gaining Mrs Scaforth's favour. If only he could secure her as an ally, the colonel became as a bursted drum. She, after all, was the master of the house, ruling her husband not so much with a rod of iron as a jar of vinegar. However assertive he might be when she was absent, in her presence he figuratively gave up the conductor's baton and took his place in the second violin's seat.

Nor was she the only person who held him in subjection. Her brother, the rector of Upper Brentleyford, Cambs, and his wife, also domineered him. The brother was a man whose austerity, yoked with the acidity of the rectoresse, did much to make the colonel regret the irremediable days of his bachelorhood.

Fortunately it was but rarely that the rector and his wife came up from Upper Brentleyford to London, but when they did they always seemed to bring with them an appreciable fall of the temperature. However, Mrs Scaforth was an industrious letter-writer, and she kept them well-informed of the colonel's doings. In short, the triumvirate ruled the retired warrior relentlessly, and to escape their condemnations, criticisms, and advice was always a source of the keenest anxiety to him.

Although Bennerton did his best to gain Mrs. Scaforth's regard, he was entirely unsuccessful. Seeing that she was a firm believer in everybody being non-everything-really-enjoyable, his failure is not surprising. Though he temporarily became a non-smoker and a non-drinker in his efforts to curry favour with her, she still looked upon him with the hard eye of suspicion.

For once she agreed with her henpecked husband in the matter of Marjorie. On Bennerton venturing into the open, after his prolonged course of conciliation, and explaining to her exactly why he was soliciting her vote and interest, she immediately took up the same uncompromising attitude as the Colonel. After a spirited lecture to Bennerton on his more glaring disqualifications for the post of son-in-law, she rewarded his persistence by dispatching Marjorie to stay for six months with some old friends in Dusseldorf.

At first Marjorie wrote frequently to the bereaved Bennerton, but gradually her letters grew fewer. Finally, after six weeks, they ceased altogether. It seemed that she had belatedly remembered that she had promised her mother not to write to him.

But still Bennerton declined to lose all hope. Still, by adopting an expression of stern melancholy, he strove to intimidate the girl, and he was attaining to Mrs. Scaforth, whenever he had great heights of morality. Still he ventured to falter out respectful greetings to the Colonel whenever he encountered him, in the hope that his spirit of patient forgiveness might touch the Colonel's heart.

But the Colonel, beyond snorting at the horizon, took no heed of Mr. Bennerton's greetings; and Mrs. Scaforth con-

tinued to regard that misguided young man as a brand too far consumed to be worth snatching from the burning.

It was about three months after Marjorie's translation to the Fatherland had been effected that Mr. Bennerton, turning into the club late one evening, found the Colonel there, surrounded by a general group.

The Colonel, it seemed, had been doing himself well that evening. He had dined at Frascati's, met some old friends, and gone with them to a music-hall. The fact that he had not stayed till the end of the programme was solely due to the arbitrary behaviour of the management.

Whatever annoyance the incident may have caused him at the moment, it was clear that the Colonel had now already forgotten it. He was in an eminently jovial mood, and was doing his best, in his capacity of host to his old friends, to set an example of hilarious conviviality.

Indeed, so genial was the Colonel that not only did he respond to Bennerton's greeting, but, further, he insisted on that young man joining in the festivities.

With some alacrity Bennerton accepted the invitation.

"See what I mean?" laughed the Colonel. "We're all joll' pals here. Join in! No need to rake up the beasty past. That's all over and done with. Forgive and forget. See? I had my duty to do, and I did it. Start fresh—goo' friends again; simply that and nothing more."

Delighted at this opportunity for a new start, Bennerton concurred heartily in the sentiment. The guests, applauding the Colonel's magnanimity, drank to the rapprochement. It was a feat for which they encored themselves several times, and when the excuse had worn a bit threadbare, the company toasted each other in the same unstinted manner.

But just about 2 o'clock the Colonel's mood suddenly veered round to one of extreme acerbity. After professing an earnest desire to combat each of his guests, either individually or in a lump, the Colonel rose unsteadily from his chair, and, sitting down on a remote sofa, took no further interest in the gathering. One by one his guests approached him, said "Good night," and went off, till only Bennerton was left.

"I'd better keep an eye on the old sport," reflected Bennerton sagely. "I'll do the Good Samaritan act, if necessary, and see him home. Nothing like putting a man under an obligation to you if you want a favour from him."

So Bennerton sat down and watched the Colonel. After 20 minutes the Colonel suddenly woke up and wanted to know where all the others were. Bennerton explained.

"More fools them!" laughed the Colonel gleefully. "It's their loss, not ours. I'm making a regular night of it. I don't get the chance often."

So reckless did he seem that Bennerton risked a word of warning.

"Oh, she's all right!" smiled the Colonel. "When the old cat's away, the mice have a devil of a time, you know. And the cat's in Cambridgeshire just at present."

"Oh, Mrs Scaforth's not at home, then?" said Bennerton, relieved.

"Can't you see she isn't?" retorted the Colonel, winking. "She's down at the Rectory, Upper Beasley Brentleyford."

"Quite sure? She won't come back unexpectedly, or anything like that?"

"She's safe as houses. Fact is, she's in bed down there with a bad cold. No, my boy, she's fixed up there—and jolly good job, too. Here, let's drink to her enjoying herself! We haven't used that yet, have we?"

Fully, they did the toast honour. In the middle of the fourth repetition the Colonel suddenly rose with the intention of showing Bennerton how they danced the cancan. Instead, he sat down again and incontinently went off to sleep once more.

With the assistance of the porter, Bennerton got the slumbersome Colonel into a cab, and, 20 minutes later, woke him tenderly.

"I've brought you home, Colonel," said Bennerton. "All you've got to do now is get out and go upstairs to bed."

The Colonel, after his brief nap, was in the best of humours.

"Devilish good of you, Bennerton!" he declared. "What's the time?"

Learning that it was a quarter to three, the Colonel evinced a desire to go for a walk, saying that it scarcely seemed worth while going to bed. Bennerton, however, persuaded him to get out of the cab, and, on the pavement, the gallant warrior insisted on doing a few steps of a breakdown just to prove how well he felt.

"Got your latchkey?" asked Bennerton.

The Colonel, after a prolonged search, shook his head. It was, he said vaguely, the best joke he'd heard for a long time.

Fortunately Bennerton found one of the dining-room windows unlatched. Pushing it up, he hurried round to open the front door for the Colonel. His particular reason for haste lay in the fact that the Colonel was standing on the doorstep, serenading the neighbours in tones that were effective more on account of their power than their music.

Bennerton lit the gas in the hall and coaxed the Colonel indoors.

"Sure you can find the way upstairs all right?" he asked.

"Father!" affirmed the Colonel. "Good ni', my dear old boy."

Resuming his interrupted song, the Colonel laboriously mounted the stairs. With each upward step his voice swelled louder in triumph. Several times he stumbled noisily, and then he ceased his chant for a few moments to chuckle amusedly.

He passed round the landing out of Bennerton's sight. Then there was a long pause, and a hat, a boot, and a collar rolled down the stairs. At last the song broke out afresh with extreme gusto. Hearing him open a door upstairs, Bennerton left the house.

At noon next morning the Colonel visited Bennerton in his rooms. The veteran had a haggard, drawn face, and seemed ill at ease.

"I've got a sort of vague idea you saw me home last night," he said to Bennerton.

"I did. But surely a little thing like that—"

"It wasn't so little," said the Colonel.

"You don't mean to say your wife had returned?" queried Bennerton anxiously, caught by something in the Colonel's look.

"No, she hadn't returned. She knows nothing of this—yet."

"Good!"

"Oh, you don't deceive me! Do you mean to say you didn't know that I was up in London on business, and had booked a room at an hotel for last night?"

"At an hotel?" asked Bennerton, puzzled.

"Oh, it's no use pretending! You did it on purpose," roared the Colonel. "You took advantage of me—you took advantage of me to pay me out for refusing Marjorie to you."

"Really, Colonel, I don't understand!"

"You blithering idiot, do you mean to say you didn't know that we've swapped houses with the Rectory people for a month? You interfering meddler, can't you see what's happened now? We're stopping at Upper Brentleyford, and they're staying in our house in London! And of course they were there last night!"

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