

LIVELY AND ECCENTRIC STORIES.

No. V.

AN UNDERGROUND ADVENTURE.

"The lady dressed in deep mourning would like to thank the tall gentleman, who so kindly helped her in her distress at Victoria Station on the evening of the 15th inst. Will he oblige her by meeting her outside the booking-office of the Victoria Underground Station at 6 p.m., on Friday, the 21st."

I am fond of looking through the agony columns of the leading daily organs, partly with the vague hope of seeing some day that if I call at such and such a place I shall hear of something to my advantage, and partly because I have an inherent, almost feminine, curiosity, and delight in anything in the shape of a mystery.

I saw the above about a week ago, and if you care to read further, you will see the result of my, rather to be deplored, little weakness.

A widowed lady who wished to meet a tall, kind gentleman at an underground station, suggested plots of shilling dreadfuls, and set me wondering what they had to say to each other. A brilliant idea came into my head. To-morrow evening, being the 21st, I would go to Victoria Station, and satisfy my curiosity by watching this interesting couple.

My father has instilled many excellent morals and maxims into my head. One of them is to eschew all manner of wine, tobacco, play-houses, and ball-rooms.

Consequently, I depend upon my own imagination and my childish love of adventure for my amusement, in the intervals when I am not sitting at a high desk, with my nose nearly in the ink-bottle, adding up figures for bare life.

At 5.30 the next evening I turned my face towards Victoria Station, in light-hearted anticipation of an adventure.

The time of year was November, and as a matter of course, it was damp, dark, cold, and foggy, and the station looked drear enough, both inside and out. I took up my position not far from the ticket-office, in a dark corner, where I should not be much seen. The hand of the clock pointed to three minutes to six, so I pricked up my ears and opened my eyes. A few men were loitering about, some newspaper-boys and shoe-blacks were making a commotion near the door, and a little stream of people were taking their tickets in a silent, hurried manner.

Suddenly a smartly dressed young woman strolled in, and catching sight of one of the loitering men, rushed at him. The greetings were long and loud. She was so glad to see her "dear Dick" again! What did he mean by not turning up last Sunday? and Dear Dick was pleased to see Dear Susie. Why it was ages since they'd met! It made no difference to their effusions their being in the middle of a noisy thoroughfare, quite half-a-dozen people looking on and listening.

I began to fear, with a sinking of my spirits, that this might be the beginning and the end of my adventure, when I felt a touch at my elbow, and looking round, I saw a tall, somewhat stout, well-dressed, mournful-looking, middle-aged widow lady at my side.

"I knew you would see that advertisement I put in the paper, and I knew that I could depend upon you to come to me."

She spoke in clear, deliberate tones, with a slightly foreign accent. I confess my breath was completely taken

away. I did not take in the situation at once. I gazed at her dumbly, and bowed, and raised my hat. Then I saw it all, and opened my mouth to try and explain the mistake, but no words came to my help.

She went on quite calmly without heeding my embarrassment—

"I recognized you at once, I have a good memory for faces. You are not so quick. You did not see me coming down the steps. But you have changed a little since I saw you;" and here she scrutinized my face with a pair of tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. "There is a difference in you. What is it? Ah! I have it. You have shaved off your whiskers. Is that not so?"

I acquiesced.

Heaven knows, I never had any! I grew alternately hot and cold. I blushed and smiled nervously. I looked at the door, and thought desperately—Can I make a rush for it? The next moment I boldly thought, I will tell her I am not the man. But she gave me no opportunity. She talked on without a pause, sometimes sighing, sometimes smiling. I was thinking too much of my dilemma to take in what she was saying.

"Come into the waiting-room," she said, at last, in a business-like voice. "I have something of importance to say to you, which cannot be said in public." I was in for it now, and no mistake. I followed her down the long underground passage to the Great Junction waiting-room. Her quiet commanding manner made me quake in my shoes. She showed the way into the first-class waiting-room, which was quiet and deserted. There was a table in the middle of the room. She drew a chair to it, and sat down, and signed to me to take the other. An uncomfortable silence reigned for a minute or two. At last, the widow gave a deep sigh. I did the same, and wondered what was coming next.

"I have told you enough of my history to show you that a lonely, disconsolate life mine has been. Some women might envy me my position; but they have no conception what I have suffered. I am the Marquise de B—. You know the name well, no doubt?" (I did not, but no matter, I pretended I did). "Since my husband's death I have been pestered with suitors—all idle, good-for-nothing fellows, the most persistent of whom is that young wretch out of whose hands you rescued me the other evening at the station. I have given him large sums of money two or three times, and entreated him to go away and torment me no longer, but he always comes back."

I was growing intensely interested, and a little less alarmed. Perhaps I really had been at the station the other evening and rescued this stout marchioness, and for a few seconds I wondered vaguely and wildly whether I was myself or some one else. The Marquise went on talking. Her voice grew, little by little, louder and more excited. Now and then she brought down her fist on the table with a thump.

I said something intended to soothe her. She looked at me with a smile, and said:

"Ah, you have a good face, and you have many noble qualities! Do not try to deny it. I am a good judge of faces, and I saw from the first that I could trust you, and that you would make me happy."

What was all this leading to? I asked myself blankly. She was looking at me with great attention, and I began to shift uneasily about on my chair.

"Are you married?" she asked, abruptly.

"No," I said, taken aback.

"Engaged?" she went on.

"No, nor engaged," I replied.

"Have you any prospect of being married?"

"None, at all, at present," I said, a little nettled by this questioning.

She gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. "I have told you that I have had an unhappy life. I have been seeking since my husband's death for some one—some kindred spirit—whom I may devote my life to making happy, and who, in his turn, will dispel the gloom of my life. I am wealthy. I am a marchioness. You are poor and lowly. I am willing to devote all to you, to lay all at your feet—to give—"

"Good heavens! Do you want to marry me?" I blurted out, jumping to my feet aghast.

"Young man," she said, sternly, "think before you speak, do not rashly refuse my offer. You do not know what you are throwing away. Say yes, and you will be the happiest man on earth. Say no, and you will repent it all your life, and will make me the most miserable of women."

I tried to make for the door, and signed wildly to her to stop, but she would not heed me. Her voice rose higher and higher.

"Do not try to stop me. I will say all I have to say, for you are the only young man I have ever set my heart upon."

I was growing desperate. "I will never marry you, not if I live to be a hundred!" I shouted. Ask me to do anything but that."

I was in terror lest an official, hearing the commotion, might appear upon the scene. She gave a little scream, and turned crimson with fury, and I saw her totter to a chair, and sink on to it, and glare at me with an expression which frightened me. It was only for a second; the next moment I had turned and bolted. I took to my heels as soon as I was fairly outside, and fled homewards; but I looked back every few seconds with a fearful night-mare-dread of seeing the widow marchioness pursuing me.

This is the first time a lady has proposed to me, and that I have had to refuse. Heaven grant that it may be the last!

The result has been an undermining and general collapse of my whole constitution.
