

# *The Major's Wife*

---

## CHAPTER I

Major Mellish in sitting in his bachelor lodgings in Duke street in no enviable state of mind. After ten years' hard and perilous service in India, during which he had almost miraculously passed safely through some of the most dangerous work of the great mutiny of 1856, he had obtained a twelve months' leave of absence on urgent private affairs, and is now waiting the arrival of a detective, whom he has employed to discover the whereabouts of one who was, and who is even still very dear to him.

When his regiment lay at country quarters shortly before its hurried departure from England for India, the Major, then only a Lieutenant, had fallen deeply in love with a charming girl, who, though beneath him in the social scale, was in every other respect, worthy of becoming any honest man's wife; for, although now reduced to the sad necessity of occupying a situation behind the counter of a Manchester mercer, Ellen Willmore had been well brought up and well educated.

The death of her only surviving parent had left her with a limited income, and the intemperate extravagance and gambling propensities of an elder brother soon afterward stripped her of every farthing of it. Their father had bequeathed to them an equal share in the little property of which he had died possessed; but unluckily the will was so loosely worded that no legal restriction prevented Ellen from parting with the half of her two thousand pounds of which it consisted; and after the reckless spendthrift had wasted his own moiety, his sister had not sufficient strength of mind to refuse his mingled menaces and entreaties, but advanced him hundreds after hundreds, fifties after fifties, and tens after tens, until, by degrees, all save a few pounds, had banished, and she found herself comparatively penniless.

Ruin stared poor Ellen in the face, and no other course seemed open to her but to take a subordinate position in the establishment of which her father had, until his retirement from trade, been the sole and respected proprietor.

It was in this position that she was first seen by Lieutenant Mellish, when he one day happened to go into the shop to purchase a box of gloves and Ellen chanced to serve him. Very much struck with her great beauty and really refined good manners, he several times repeated his visit, and bought neckties and collars, and other bachelor matters, enough to stock a whole regiment of officers.

This by degrees led to an intimacy which, not very long afterward resulted in a declaration of love, with an offer of his hand, and the young Lieutenant's suit having, after some maidenly hesitation, been favorably received, the affair culminated in a private marriage.

He could not, he truly said, inform his family of their attachment, or dare to lead her publicly to the altar; inasmuch as he was at present almost wholly dependent on his father, a wealthy old Baronet of ancient lineage and indomitable pride of birth; but meanwhile she should become his

wife, and they would trust to time and circumstances to smooth over all difficulties, and gain the paternal consent to their union.

Every means were taken, and taken successfully, to keep the matter a profound secret.

Ellen, of course, left her situation, and retired to a small secluded cottage a few miles off, where her husband was able to visit her two or three times a week; and their wedded life was supremely happy until his regiment was suddenly ordered abroad to take part in the Chinese war, and on its passage thither was detained at Singapore, and despatched to Calcutta to assist in quelling the Sepoy outbreak.

She could not, of course, accompany him, for that would have involved a disclosure of their secret marriage; but, before he embarked, the Lieutenant made every needful arrangement for his wife's comfortable subsistence by placing £200 a year to her credit, at Cox & Greenwood's his military agents, payable to her order every three months; at the same time taking and furnishing a small house for her, in the immediate neighborhood of London, to which she removed only a few days before he started with his regiment from Southampton.

From mingled feelings of pride and of shame she had never mentioned to him the disgraceful conduct of that elder brother by whom she had been so recklessly deprived of well nigh the whole of the thousand pounds bequeathed to her by her father. She never even told him that she had a brother living; for as, after obtaining well-nigh her last ten pounds the reprobate had suddenly disappeared from the neighborhood, and had not been heard of since, she shrank from making him acquainted with the fact that so degrading a relationship existed.

After much perplexing consideration with regard to procuring some thoroughly reliable person, who would be at once a sort of humble companion and servant to his dearly loved Ellen, the Lieutenant finally determined to make one person in the regiment a confidant of their union; and that was a staid, sober, honest old sergeant, whose wife as she was not going abroad with them, would, he thought, gladly accept the offer of a good home and liberal wages during the absence of the regiment in foreign service.

And so it was arranged; and after an affectionate leave-taking between the married lovers—for though married, they were lovers still—Lieutenant Mellish sailed with his regiment from Southampton, on what he and every one else thought would be an expedition of only a few months; but from which he did not return until after the lapse of ten long years, only three days previous to the opening of this story.

He left England, a slim, fair-haired, boyish-looking lieutenant; but came back a stout, bushy-bearded grim-looking Major. So much for good health and the fortune of war.

He is in deep mourning, too; for, on his arrival in England, he found that the proud old Baronet, his father, had died suddenly only three weeks before he had landed. This has given him a grand step upward in life, inasmuch as he was an only son, and is now, therefore, Sir Herbert Mellish.

The entailed estates alone are worth more than six thousand a year, beside a vast amount of personal property; but he would gladly give up the whole of this princely income, and fall back on his Major's pay, could he but restore the happy home he left when he went on foreign service.

As it is — his wife, his dearly loved Ellen, whom he left in England, has mysteriously disappeared in his absence, and all the search which he has caused to be made has as yet failed to discover the slightest clue to the cause of her disappearance, some nine months ago, or the smallest trace of her present whereabouts.

It was in this frame of mind that the Major sat smoking a veritable Trictinoply cheroot, and impatiently waiting for the advent of the [astute] detective for whose services he had applied at Scotland Yard on the very afternoon of his arrival in London, and immediately set to work to ascertain whatever was possible with regard to the strange and unaccountable flight of the darling wife from whom he had been so long separated.

## CHAPTER II

A soft, but still distinct and decided sort of single-double knock, though it is neither exactly single or double, is heard at the street door. It is a kind of peculiar percussion, which none but a well practiced, hybrid gentleman postman could ever hope to imitate, and none but a first-class detective could produce; and, two minutes afterward, Mr. Jonas Holden, of Scotland Yard, is ushered into the apartment.

“Well,” said the Major, “any further news? Take a glass of wine and a biscuit. You'll find port, claret and sherry on that sideboard. Now, sit down. I see you have heard something.”

“I have, Sir Herbert,” said the detective, sitting down and sipping his sherry with infinite gusto, as if he didn't some across each a vintage every day; “I have heard something that I think will surprise you a little.”

“Good news or bad?”

“Of that you'll be the best judge, Major.”

“Proceed.”

“In the first place I have traced the sergeant's wife who was so long in your good lady's service.”

“Indeed! that is a great point gained! Well?”

“She is living in the first floor of a small house in Belwell Terrace, Lambeth Walk.”

“Go on.”

“And she seems as far as I can judge, an honest woman, who is quite ready to give us every information in her power.”

“Good! Well?”

“She was, and is, evidently greatly attached to your wife.”

“Ah, my poor darling Ellen! Everybody who came near her loved her!” exclaimed the Major, in a burst of uncontrollable agitation. “But I won’t interrupt you. Proceed.”

“She spoke in the highest possible terms of her lady’s exemplary conduct in every respect.”

“No doubt.”

“Until about twelve months ago.”

“Twelve months ago? What does she mean by that? Did any alteration occur then?”

“Yes.”

“Does she know the cause of that alteration?”

“She does not know,” replied the detective, very slowly and markedly; “but she seems to have formed an opinion about it.”

“What is her opinion? What does she think was the cause?” demanded the Major, forcibly struck with Mr. Holden’s altered and peculiar mode of replying to his last question. “Home quarrel? some neglect of duty on the woman’s part?”

“No, Major, but—”

“Speak out, man, speak out.”

“You must pardon me, Sir Herbert; it is my duty to speak plainly!” said the detective with considerable hesitation.

“Speak out, I tell you!” exclaimed the Major in great agitation.

“It appears, then, that just about the time that this sudden occasional alteration in your wife’s temper and general kind conduct to her two servants took place, she began to be visited by a strange gentleman.”

“Is it possible?”

“A gentleman,” continued the detective, “whom, during all the nine previous years, she had never seen at the cottage before. Indeed, she avers that up to that period Lady Mellish had not, to her knowledge, received any male visitors whatever.”

“Well— go on!”

“This visitor generally called about once a fortnight, and Lady Mellish (Mrs. Mellish, the woman called her) always received his visits in private; I mean, that neither the servant nor the page-boy were permitted to be present for more than a few moments together while he stayed.”

“How long did he remain?”

“Sometimes for only a few minutes—at others for half an hour—sometimes for two or three hours— and once he remained all night.”

“He slept there?”

“In the spare bed—yes.”

“So, so! And was nothing overheard at any time as to the nature of their conversation?”

“Well, yes. The sergeant’s wife, on more than one occasion, thought she heard expostulations and reproaches in a suppressed but affectionate tenderness of tone, which led her to suppose that great intimacy must exist between them; she also heard more than once the jingling of money, which, from its sound, she fancied was gold.”

“Money? Was Ellen— was my wife extravagant?”

“Oh, no; I asked that question. The house was liberally supplied, but with the strictest regard to reasonable economy. The tradesmen were periodically paid; and Lady Mellish, though she dressed well and becomingly, was very careful of her wardrobe. Not a shilling was spent in waste.”

“But did the woman never by any chance hear the name of this strange visitor?”

“Never!”

“Then how was he announced?”

“He was not announced at all. Whenever he was about to call, Lady Mellish told the page that she expected a gentleman to pay a visit at a certain hour, and that, when he came he was to be shown into the drawing-room, where, the servant added, she was always prepared to receive him.”

“Then she must have had accurate foreknowledge of the time of his arrival.”

“No doubt of that. And, moreover, my informant also said, that during the period when she was receiving this stranger’s visits, letters not unfrequently came to the cottage with the English post-mark, which had seldom, or never, been the case in previous years, when her sole

correspondence seemed to be with you in India. She also remarked that one of these letters invariably came a day or two before the advent of this visitor.”

“Did the man ever dine or take any refreshment at the cottage?”

“He more than once dined there, and always took refreshment— sometimes in very large quantities. Once or twice he came evidently somewhat intoxicated.”

“What sort of a man was he— young or old?”

“About five-and-thirty, or perhaps forty years of age, she thinks.”

“Good looking?”

“Yes; but of dissipated appearance.”

“Well dressed?”

“Tolerably; sometimes better than at other times, but always respectably dressed.”

“At what hour did he usually come?”

“About mid-day. But on the occasion when he slept there, he came late at night; and that was the visit on which the sergeant’s wife more particularly noticed that he appeared to be slightly intoxicated.”

“Did she describe his features to you?”

“Yes; he had dark eyes, heavy eyebrows, an aquiline nose, very bad and discolored teeth, dark, curly hair, large whiskers, and sometimes wore a moustache.”

“Only sometimes?”

“No. The very last time she saw him at the cottage it had been removed or shaved off; and that was only three days before Lady Mellish so unaccountably disappeared.”

“Does this woman seem to think she took any pleasure in his society?”

“On the contrary; whenever she received one of those letters of which I have spoken—and which, by-the-by, she thinks seemed to be all in the same handwriting as far as she could judge from a casual glance at their addresses— she invariably got into a dreadful state of flurried, snappish ill temper, which continued up to the time of her visitor’s arrival, and until after his departure; and then all became comfortable, and calm and quiet, and her usual kindliness of manner seemed to return as if by magic. These were her very words.”

“And what did you gather about the time and mode of my wife’s disappearance?”

“It must have taken place between five and six o’clock in the evening of Monday, the fourth of January last.”

“Three days after she had drawn her usual quarterly allowance of fifty pounds from Cox & Greenwood’s.”

“Indeed, I was not aware of that.”

“Yes; it is so. I forgot to mention it in our former interview.”

“It is a very important fact,” said the detective, taking out his note-book and jotting it down.

“Most certainly it is; and the close coincidence of time is remarkable. But tell me can this old woman not give the time of her departure more nearly than that?”

“No, she was not at home. She had gone out for her usual monthly holiday for the day; and, unluckily, I have not yet been able to find the boy who acted as page.”

“Do you suppose he had anything to do with the affair?”

“It is impossible to say at present; but if you mean to ask whether I suspect that he had any hand in the abduction or flight of Lady Mellish, I should say decidedly no. When the female servant returned from her holiday as usual at eight in the evening, she found him at the cottage in a state of wonder and alarm at the prolonged absence of his mistress, who, he said had sent him about five o’clock on an errand from which he did not get back until nearly six, and on his arrival, the garden gate was unlocked, and the house was perfectly empty. Nothing in the place was disarranged, and there was not the slightest sign of any struggle having taken place.”

“Did the sergeant’s wife ever see or hear anything which would lead her to suspect that there was any impropriety in this stranger’s visits?”

“Never, Sir Herbert. At least, so she said, and I thoroughly believe her.”

“I cannot understand it. My wife, after ten years unexceptional conduct during my absence, suddenly disappears, vanishes, without leaving a single trace of her flight, or the faintest clue to her discovery.”

“I should mention that though everything else in the cottage was left intact, all Lady Mellish’s jewels and trinkets disappeared at the same time.”

“I fancy she had few that were of much intrinsic value; very little, if anything, more than she would have been in the constant habit of wearing. I don’t think that fact is of much importance, Mr. Holden.”

“Has she any relations?”

“None, that I ever heard of; and if she had, I feel certain I should have known of it. The more I hear and the more I reflect on this mysterious matter, the greater is my grief — the more intense is my astonishment. Tell me — what is your present opinion on the subject?”

“I—I fear, Sir Herbert, that there is some...some unhappy entanglement in connection with this strange gentleman visitor.”

“I do not. Notwithstanding all that you have told me, nothing will ever make me believe my wife was false to her vows, or unfaithful to her husband. But enough of that; we do not meet to discuss opinions, but facts. Have you any further particulars to communicate?”

“I have. This old servant, who lives, as I mentioned, in Bolwell Terrace, has twice, within the last fortnight, seen Lady Mellish’s strange visitor pass down the street at dusk in the evening.”

“Indeed!”

“And I have with her full permission, taken a lodging for a trusty spy in the same house, so that if she is so lucky as to see the man pass again, he may be traced and run to earth.”

“That is the most reassuring piece of news which you have yet brought me,” said the Major eagerly. “I declare it makes me — though I don’t know why — feel quite hopeful. Take another glass of sherry, Mr. Holden, and I’ll join you this time.”

“Thank ye, Sir Herbert,” replied the detective, placing the decanter and glasses on the table with much unction.

“That man,” continued the Baronet, “is, I feel certain, a great scoundrel in any case; and if we only succeed in ferreting him out, take my word for it, we shall soon get to the bottom of this mystery, whatever it may turn out to be.”

“I think so too, Sir Herbert.”

“Hark ye, I’ve an idea! I should like very much to see this old sergeant’s wife, and put a question or two to her myself.”

“Very well, Sir Herbert; we’ll go whenever you please.”

“Say to-night at dusk.”

“Certainly!”

“It is somewhere over Westminster Bridge, I think.”



“Exactly so.”

“Then, suppose we meet in the Palace Yard at six o’clock.”

“I will be there, to the minute, Sir Herbert.”

“Egad! I feel quite a presentiment that, somehow or other, everything will shortly be at right.”

“I hope so, I am sure,” replied the detective, rising to depart.

“Take another glass of wine, Holden, before you go.”

“No, thank ye, Sir Herbert; I have business to attend to,” said Mr. Holden, looking wistfully at the decanter.

“Nonsense, man alive! It will do you good. I insist. Come, I’ll join you again.”

When thus pressed, of course the detective quaffed off another glass of the Baronet’s excellent brown sherry; after which they renewed their appointment for six, sharp, that evening in the Palace Yard, and Mr. Holden departed.

### CHAPTER III

At the appointed hour of six, the Baronet and his detective met in Palace Yard; and, although it was a very foggy evening, immediately proceeded over Westminster Bridge, and straight onward, until they came to a broad road, which branched off to the right. At the corner of the road stood a large tavern, before which Mr. Holden suddenly stopped.

“I have a little business connected with your affairs, Sir Herbert, to transact here,” said he; “it won’t detain me above three or four minutes, and, upon the whole, we had better not be seen together inside this public house. Will you, therefore, walk slowly down this road, which is Hercules Buildings, and wait for me at the bottom of it, if I have not rejoined you before.”

“Certainly,” said the Baronet; and he sauntered on.

The fog had much thickened since they started, and there were no shops in that side road. Even the street gas lamps, which were somewhat sparsely distributed, were scarcely discernible until the passer by was almost close beneath them; but this was not noticed by Sir Herbert, who walked leisurely onward, deep in thought about his coming interview with the old servant, who could tell him more than any one else in the world about his dear Ellen; for he never for one moment faltered in his firm faith in her unceasing truth and love.

Having arrived at the bottom of the Buildings, he came to a full stop; and after pausing for a few moments, and turning round to see if he could catch sight of his guide through the fog, which was every minute becoming thicker than ever, he began to retrace his route.

He had not however advanced above half a dozen footsteps, when he was suddenly seized upon from behind by a truculent ruffian, who, clasping one burly arm like a vise round his neck, so tightly that it well nigh amounted to strangulation, gave a low whistle, which instantly brought a confederate to his side.

“All right, Jem— I have him safe! Be quick about it.”

“Ay, ay, mate; but the coast’s clear of the bobbies for ten minutes; and if there was one of ‘em within three yards of us, I’ll be shot if he could see us!” replied the other.

“But the fellow struggles like a Hercules! He ought to have been born in these Buildings; he’s the strongest colt I ever tackled.”

“Jem Smasher, you’re my prisoner!” coolly said Mr. Jonas Holden, emerging like some ghost, revolver in hand, front the fog, as he gripped the first of the robbers firmly by the collar, and clapped the death-dealing fire-arm close to the villain’s head; while the other bolted and disappeared in the now thick, dense mist that surrounded them.

“Jem Smasher,” continued the detective, while he kept firm hold of the struggling ruffian, “you ought to know me, and you ought to know that I’m a man of my word. Now if you don’t surrender quietly, and let me put the bracelets on you like a well-bred gentleman, as I’ve more than once heard you boast that you are, I’ll blow your brains out as surely as my name is Jonas Holden, whose headquarters are in Scotland Yard, Whitehall, S. W., as the postman says.”

On hearing this dreaded, well-known name the cowardly garroter (for such ruffians are always cowards) collapsed like a windbag. He did not make the smallest further effort to free himself, but [let] the celebrated detective place the handcuffs on his wrists as accommodatingly as if he were a fine lady holding out her pretty arms while her lover clasped on his first gift of betrothal.

“I’m starving, Mr. Holden,” he whimpered. “There’s no harm done this time; won’t you let me off this once? I’ll never attempt such a thing any more.”

“Humph! you’re a dreadful sneak, Jem! I thought you had more pluck in you!” said the detective, thoroughly disgusted with the villain’s abject cowardice. “But come; I never had you before, so I’ll give you one chance, as I generally do with my new customers, if I can. Your intended victim shall be your judge, here on the spot. What say you, Sir Herbert Mellish? This fellow wants you to forgive him this once, and says he’ll never do so again.”

“Sir Herbert Mellish!” exclaimed the scamp, while his eyes lighted up, and his whole manner was transformed.

“Yes, Sir Herbert Mellish — late Major Mellish,” said Herbert eagerly, for his beating heart half told him that it might relate to his darling Ellen.

“I know all about your wife! I know where she is confined and kept a prisoner.”

“I thought I was right!” muttered Mr. Holden to himself.

“Speak, man, and I will not only consent that you shall be set free, but give you five hundred pounds into the bargain, to keep you honest.”

“Which will be just as long as the money lasts,” again muttered the detective.

“I take you at your word, Sir Herbert; and what’s more, I can and will set her free if you make it a thousand,” whispered the robber.

“Now, now, Jem, this is really coming it rather too strong!” said Mr. Holden interfering.

“I should like to speak to him!” replied this precious specimen of humanity.

“Very well, Jem; speak on,” said the detective.

“Content!” whispered he to Sir Herbert. “I have my reasons.”

“Speak, degraded man!” said the Baronet, who had scarcely yet recovered from the robber’s throttling embrace.

“I—I’m in possession of a secret, sir, that you would give your life to know.”

“A secret; Of what nature?” inquired the Baronet, in a pitiable state of agitation.

“Stay, stay!” replied Mr. Holden. “Pray let us do everything calmly and coolly; five minutes can make no possible difference. The lady is perfectly safe, I have no doubt, eh, Jem?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Holden—safe as the apple of my eye.”

“Of course—of course! Now, Sir Herbert, please to look at this fellow’s features carefully. Don’t you recognize the dark eyes, heavy eyebrows, aquiline nose, very bad and discolored teeth, dark, curly hair, large whiskers, and, at present, no moustache?”

“The strange visitor at the cottage,” faltered the Baronet.

“Exactly so,” replied the detective.

“Yes; and more than that, I am Ellen’s brother,” chimed in this rascal, determined to clinch the matter, and get into his brother-in-law’s good graces by some means or other.

“Pheugh! I never suspected that!” said Mr. Holden. “That explains all.”

“Wretched man!” replied the Baronet, “if it, indeed, prove to be so, you must leave this country at once and forever. I will give you ample means to emigrate.”

“I’m very glad to hear it, for I’m heartily tired of England, and everything and everybody in it,” replied Mr. Samuel Willmore, for he was, really and truly, the extravagant, gambling spendthrift whose arts had stripped his sister of well-nigh her last penny.

It is scarcely necessary to proceed further with the denouement of this story.

Ellen was speedily released from the miserable den in which she had for some months been confined by the machinations of her brother, and watched over by a gang of the vile men and women who almost exclusively inhabited the low street in which her prison-house was situated.

Her abduction from the cottage had been silently effected during the old servant’s absence, by the aid of chloroform and the agency of a cabman who was one of the gang.

It was part of a long-meditated scheme to obtain money; but the actors in the plot (and there were several) had not counted on her courage and firmness. They had calculated that she would be too glad to comply with their extortionate demands after the detention of a day or two; but they were woefully disappointed.

Since her determination has brought peace to the lot of the constant and self-sacrificing Ellen, who, true to her affection for her husband — her first and only love — endured all the indignities heaped upon her by her malicious and designing reprobate brother who, for the gratification of his own base designs was ready to dishonor her.

The death of the old Baronet had set the Major free to acknowledge and make public their hitherto secret union, and from that time they have passed their days in happiness.

Mr. Samuel Willmore was shipped off to the other side of the world, and has never been heard of since.

Mr. James Holden still continues to labor in his perilous vocation, and always with success. He is still A 1 at Scotland Yard, Whitehall, S.W.

*Daily Alta Californian*, July 20, 1876