

## CHAPTER II.

### HOW WE MANAGED OUR WEDDING.

PINETOWN has been called the Cheltenham of Durban, and is allowed by most to give a healthy change from the damp heat of the latter place. It is, I believe, a general resort for invalids from the coast ; but I took up my abode there, not to recover health by quiet enjoyment of rest and fresh air, but to regain life itself—worthy the name—by good hard work, and earnest endeavours to do my duty.

I had never yet been beyond the Durban turnpike road in this direction, for, in my downcast helpless mood, I had not cared to take the trouble ; and now, as we drove rapidly through the fresh air of the early morning, I looked with newly-awakened interest upon the country around us. We were fast leaving the blue sea behind, in its soft haze of morning sun

and mist, and glimmering here and there with white sails and whiter surf. The Bluff with its heavy brush, right to the water's edge, and shining lighthouse tower, and the town, pretty enough at a little distance, were soon lost to view; and, after a couple of hours' rapid driving upon a good road, through tangled bush, amongst which on every side Nature had flung her loveliest garlands in wildest profusion of brilliant and scented blossom, we passed through the long straggling village which calls itself Pinetown, and drew up at the excellent stables belonging to the Colonel as colonial engineer.

Here, as elsewhere in all stables appertaining to the department, I observed the good condition and kind treatment of the beasts. I could not help remarking upon it to the Colonel, who immediately upon his arrival proceeded to inspect every portion and corner of the establishment, while the men in charge seemed to be nervously casting glances round to make sure that all was right. My remark received no immediate reply; for at the moment when I made it the Colonel's eye was caught by a bad gall upon

one of the stalled horses, evidently the result of careless harnessing. Was ever face susceptible of such changes in expression between the extremes of gentleness and severity as that of my Chief! I would not have been the man in fault, who stood shaking in his shoes, for any money. Not that the Colonel lost his temper, stormed, or even raised his voice. On the contrary, he rather dropped it, and spoke as calmly as possible. I never heard a reproof given in a quieter, more courteous manner, nor one which I should less like to receive myself. There could be no doubt as to its effect upon the men, and, for my own part, I began to think that I should feel cooler outside, and was moving off, by no means desiring a reply to my last inopportune remark, when my colonel turned to me with a smooth brow and genial smile, and answered: "Yes, I don't care to see my animals neglected or ill-used; besides, it is always bad economy;" and then we left the place.

This is the Colonel's way. Not that he cannot break out into fiery indignation when occasion comes. No man of my acquaintance has a hotter temper, nor

one under more complete control ; and that, I believe, is the true secret of his undeniable power over those who serve under him. I have heard his voice sound like that of an angry lion, and have seen his eyes blaze, and his face rigid with displeasure ; but only at rare intervals, and under great provocation. As a rule his reproofs are administered in a calm but decided manner, without anger or impatience, while those who receive them look as frightened as though they had seen the devil.

Our next visit was to the quarters of the married couples amongst the liberated slaves, my future charges. These quarters were a row of little rooms, very small, but clean and well-ventilated. The Colonel had just had them put up for the poor creatures, who had not long come into his hands, but were already showing signs of improvement in condition from the miserable skeletons, scarred and starved, who had been rescued from a captured dhow off Zanzibar a short time since.

“ There are ten or twelve women belonging to this party,” said the Colonel to me, after he had inspected

the men, mustered for that purpose near their barracks, about fifty yards from the married people's quarters. "When the Protector of Immigrants first offered them to me with the men I refused the charge altogether; but upon second thoughts it occurred to me that these poor creatures would be much happier if they had some sort of home-life; so I have determined to keep them together. The next thing to do is to marry them all round, as far as the small number of women will go. And that is what I have come here for to-day."

I was about to laugh, thinking it a joke; but I immediately saw by the expression of his countenance that he was perfectly in earnest, so I retained my gravity, and waited for what would come next. "None of them can understand a word of English," continued the Colonel, "so that a religious ceremony, or anything of the sort would be a mere profane farce. It is proper to add that I have consulted with 'my clergy,' and we have come to the conclusion that the more simply the thing is done the better. So now, Wylde, you are going to assist at an extensive wedding."

The scene which followed was the most novel and curious that I ever witnessed. The Colonel and myself, and the principal road-overseer of those parts, stood in the open space before the little houses. On one side of us were the forty men, on the other the girls and young women. These latter were all dressed in neat costumes chosen and ordered for them by the Colonel himself, and consisting of dark blue cotton gowns, with crimson handkerchiefs upon the heads. Each wore a string of large beads, the special gift of my Chief, who evidently aimed, not merely at making the "slaves" useful, but also at rendering them happy, or at least contented, members of society.

When all were assembled the Colonel called up the women, and, with the help of one of the men who had been longer in the colony than the others, and had picked up a little Zulu, and that of the overseer who could talk the latter language, he managed to make them understand what was required of them. Each in turn privately named the man whom she chose as her husband; the names were noted down on a slip of paper, and, with this

in his hand, the Colonel crossed over to the men, who had been kept out of earshot, and required each of those who were down on his list to name his chosen bride. By this method all chance of any one of the girls being taken in marriage against her will was avoided, and it was satisfactory that in every case save one the choice of the men agreed with that of the girls. The one exception was that of the youngest girl,—a mere child indeed,—who named as her selected husband a man who refused to have anything to say to her. She seemed very disconsolate, but she was so young that it could be no great subject for regret. A separate little room was next assigned to each couple. Finally the bridegrooms were marched over towards their brides, and each man in turn was directed to take the object of his choice by the hand and to lead her away. This concluded the marriage ceremony. It was amusing to observe the modest air displayed by these dusky brides. They all covered their eyes and faces with a corner of their dress; yet their smiles showed plainly enough that they were well satisfied.

There might have been something ludicrous in this performance had it been managed by any one else. But there was something in the simple earnestness and quiet dignity with which it was conducted, which took away all desire to make a joke of it. I could not have felt less inclined to laugh at my own wedding than I did at this.

I must confess, however, that the impressiveness of the ceremony received no addition from the beauty of the brides. I have since seen many Kaffir girls with graceful forms, and not a few with pretty faces ; but amongst these poor freedwomen there was not one who could boast of any such charms. Whether it is that the east-coast negroes are naturally inferior to their southern brethren, or whether generations of cruel slavery have degraded them to their present low type, I know not. But at all events, as far as I can judge, there is no comparison between them and the Zulu-Kaffirs of Natal, who are a far better-looking and more intelligent race.

The freedwomen of Pinetown were neat and clean, thanks to the Colonel's care in providing an English

matron to take charge of and teach them; but I cannot say much more for them. They were of a singularly low type, with heavy, underhung features, and remarkably awkward figures. There was, however, an occasional gleam of grateful affection upon the dark faces of both men and women when the Colonel spoke to them which lighted them up wonderfully.

We went into the schoolroom of the establishment before we left. It was but a narrow slip of an apartment in the row of tiny sleeping-rooms, but in perfect order with its white table and two benches. Here presided the matron who showed us some very creditable work done by her pupils, sewing, ironing, and writing upon slates. The Colonel inspected everything with interest, and I followed him wherever he went. He inquired of the matron which was the best-behaved pupil, and which the second, and gave each a little present proportionate to her merits, after which we left the place.

There were still two of the slaves captured from the dhow, whose recovery from the effects of the

ill-usage which they had received was doubtful. I saw them, and wondered how such mere skeletons could exist at all. I heard the Colonel give his directions concerning them, ordering wine for them, and perpetual strong beef-tea. No other treatment could have saved their lives I feel sure ; and, if life is a blessing, as I suppose it is, they were fortunate to fall into the hands that received them.

One other little episode of the day must be recorded. While the Colonel was inspecting the schoolroom and scholars, the matron complained to him that her charges were sometimes very refractory, and that she should like to have some way of enforcing discipline. As she could not talk to them, nor understand what they said to her, she thought that the best and shortest way would be for her to use the rod at her own discretion. Here was a knotty point ! The Colonel considered it ; while I, who had been watching the matron's face over his shoulder, hoped that he would not grant her request. That she was a clean and active woman was evident, and the Colonel had confidence in her

honesty; but, like so many clean and active *poor* women, she evidently had a temper of her own, and I did not like the notion of these poor creatures being committed to her tender mercies free of restraint. Probably the expression of her face, and the resentful way in which she spoke of her charges' delinquencies, struck my Chief as well as me, for he seemed unwilling to agree to her suggestion; nevertheless it was plain that there was some justice in her demand. How was she to manage all these young women if she had no power of punishing them for misconduct? In this dilemma the Colonel turned to me and asked me if I could suggest any way out of it. I was glad of the opportunity, for, as it happened, I *had* an idea. I ventured to remark that the very fact of the matron's being unable to speak to or to understand her pupils\* might lead to her thinking them ill-behaved; when, could they interchange ideas, she might possibly find that it was not so. But I suggested that a system of slight fines might meet the exigencies of the case. Suppose the girls were

\* The language of the east-coast natives is almost unknown in Natal.

allowed some small pocket-money, which might be kept back in case of gross misconduct ?

I confess that I was gratified that the Colonel adopted my suggestion instantly and without hesitation.

“Yes,” he said, “that is a capital idea of yours, Atherton. They shall each have an allowance of sixpence a week, and anyone who disobeys her mistress shall be deprived of her week’s money.”

A few months later, by the way, when the women had each accumulated a small sum, they all went to spend their money in Pinetown according to their own taste. The result of their purchases was that, upon the following day, in each little room without a single exception hung a *sunshade* of some description or other. In one there appeared a large green umbrella, in the next a small brown parasol, in a third a middle-sized white ditto, and so on along the line. Why they should all have fallen in love with this particular, and, to them one would have imagined most useless product of civilisation, it is hard to say, seeing that their complexions are not much affected

by the rays of the sun, and their heads are well protected from its power by a thick woolly crop. But so it was. I have since observed, however, that the African, as a rule, dislikes exposing himself to the heat of the mid-day sun, and suffers more in doing so than we Europeans are in the habit of imagining; while, as for their love of useless articles of costume, I have seen a native attired in what the ladies some years ago used to call a "skeleton crinoline," and nothing else! This last, however, was a Kaffir, and further advanced in civilisation than my Pinetown "slaves."

I did not see much more of the women during the short time that I remained at Pinetown; but, as far as the men are concerned, I can freely assert that they were a very well-behaved and manageable set, and worked well under my superintendence. True, I was exceedingly anxious to give satisfaction to my Chief, and spared no pains to that end. The hardening of that portion of the main road to Pietermaritzburg progressed rapidly during the time I spent on it, and I honestly did my best to carry out my Chief's wishes in the

spirit which he exercised towards these poor people, rescued from a life of horrible slavery indeed, but set down to work amongst a strange people, with whom they had no means of communication, and without any certainty in their own minds that the flogging, torture, and starvation, to which they had so long been exposed, might not any day begin again for them under their new masters. I had never any serious trouble with them; and I have often thought since that, in whatever small disagreements took place between me and my men, possibly the same reasoning applied to me as to the matron in charge of the women. Could I have talked to them in their own language, and have understood what they said, perhaps I should have had no difficulties with them at all.