

CHAPTER XXXII. - MY LAST PIPE.

The night of my last smoke drew near without any demonstration on my part or on that of my friends. I noticed that none of them was now comfortable if left alone with me, and I knew, I cannot tell how, that though they had too much delicacy to refer in my presence to my coming happiness, they often talked of it among themselves. They smoked hard and looked covertly at me, and had an idea that they were helping me. They also addressed me in a low voice, and took their seats noiselessly, as if some one were ill in the next room.

"We have a notion," Scrymgeour said, with an effort, on my second night, "that you would rather we did not feast you to-morrow evening?"

"Oh, I want nothing of that kind," I said.

"So I fancied," Jimmy broke in. "Those things are rather a mockery, but of course if you thought it would help you in any way----"

"Or if there is anything else we could do for you," interposed Gilray, "you have only to mention it."

Though they irritated rather than soothed me, I was touched by their kindly intentions, for at one time I feared my friends would be sarcastic. The next night was my last, and I found that they had been looking forward to it with genuine pain. As will have been seen, their custom was to wander into my room one by one, but this time they came together. They had met in the boudoir, and came up the stair so quietly that I did not hear them. They all looked very subdued, and Marriot took the cane chair so softly that it did not creak. I noticed that after a furtive glance at me each of them looked at the centre-table, on which lay my brier, Romulus and Remus, three other pipes that all had their merits, though they never touched my heart until now, my clay tobacco-jar, and my old pouch. I had said good-by to these before my friends came in, and I could now speak with a comparatively firm voice. Marriot and Gilray and Scrymgeour signed to Jimmy, as if some plan of action had been arranged, and Jimmy said huskily, sitting upon the hearth-rug:

"Pettigrew isn't coming. He was afraid he would break down."

Then we began to smoke. It was as yet too early in the night for my last pipe, but soon I regretted that I had not arranged to spend this night alone. Jimmy was the only one of the Arcadians who had been at school with me, and he was full of reminiscences which he addressed to the others just as if I were not present.

"He was the life of the old school," Jimmy said, referring to me, "and when I shut my eyes I can hear his merry laugh as if we were both in knickerbockers still."

"What sort of character did he have among the fellows?" Gilray whispered.

"The very best. He was the soul of honor, and we all anticipated a great future for him. Even the masters loved him; indeed, I question if he had an enemy."

"I remember my first meeting with him at the university," said Marriot, "and that I took to him at once. He was speaking at the debating society that night, and his enthusiasm quite carried me away."

"And how we shall miss him here," said Scrymgeour, "and in my house-boat! I think I had better sell the house-boat. Do you remember his favorite seat at the door of the saloon?"

"Do you know," said Marriot, looking a little scared, "I thought I would be the first of our lot to go. Often I have kept him up late in this very room talking of my own troubles, and little guessing why he sometimes treated them a little testily."

So they talked, meaning very well, and by and by it struck one o'clock. A cold shiver passed through me, and Marriot jumped from his chair. It had been agreed that I should begin my last pipe at one precisely. Whatever my feelings were up to this point I had kept them out of my face, but I suppose a change came over me now. I tried to lift my brier from the table, but my hand shook and the pipe tapped, tapped on the deal like an auctioneer's hammer.

"Let me fill it," Jimmy said, and he took my old brier from me. He scraped it energetically so that it might hold as much as possible, and then he filled it. Not one of them, I am glad to remember, proposed a cigar for my last smoke, or thought it possible that I would say farewell to tobacco through the medium of any other pipe than my brier. I liked

my brier best. I have said this already, but I must say it again. Jimmy handed the brier to Gilray, who did not surrender it until it reached my mouth. Then Scrymgeour made a spill, and Marriot lighted it. In another moment I was smoking my last pipe. The others glanced at one another, hesitated, and put their pipes into their pockets.

There was little talking, for they all gazed at me as if something astounding might happen at any moment. The clock had stopped, but the ventilator was clicking. Although Jimmy and the others saw only me, I tried not to see only them. I conjured up the face of a lady, and she smiled encouragingly, and then I felt safer. But at times her face was lost in smoke, or suddenly it was Marriot's face, eager, doleful, wistful.

At first I puffed vigorously and wastefully, then I became scientific and sent out rings of smoke so strong and numerous that half a dozen of them were in the air at a time. In past days I had often followed a ring over the table, across chairs, and nearly out at the window, but that was when I blew one by accident and was loath to let it go. Now I distributed them among my friends, who let them slip away into the looking-glass. I think I had almost forgotten what I was doing and where I was when an awful thing happened. My pipe went out!

"There are remnants in it yet," Jimmy cried, with forced cheerfulness, while Gilray blew the ashes off my sleeve, Marriot slipped a cushion behind my back, and Scrymgeour made another spill. Again I smoked, but no longer recklessly.

It is revealing no secret to say that a drowning man sees his whole past unfurl before him like a panorama. So little, however, was I, now on the eve of a great happiness, like a drowning man, that nothing whatever passed before me. I lost sight even of my friends, and though Jimmy was on his knees at my feet, his hand clasping mine, he disappeared as if his open mouth had swallowed the rest of his face. I had only one thought--that I was smoking my last pipe. Unconsciously I crossed my legs, and one of my slippers fell off; Jimmy, I think, slipped it on to my foot. Marriot stood over me, gazing into the bowl of my pipe, but I did not see him.

Now I was puffing tremendously, but no smoke came. The room returned to me, I saw Jimmy clearly, I felt Marriot overhead, and I heard them all whispering. Still I puffed; I knew that my pipe was empty, but still I

puffed. Gilray's fingers tried to draw my brier from my mouth, but I bit into it with my teeth, and still I puffed.

When I came to I was alone. I had a dim consciousness of having been shaken by several hands, of a voice that I think was Scrymgeour's saying that he would often write to me--though my new home was to be within the four-mile radius--and of another voice that I think was Jimmy's, telling Marriot not to let me see him breaking down. But though I had ceased to puff, my brier was still in my mouth; and, indeed, I found it there when William John shook me into life next morning.

My parting with William John was almost sadder than the scene of the previous night. I rang for him when I had tied up all my treasures in brown paper, and I told him to give the tobacco-jar to Jimmy, Romulus to Marriot, Remus to Gilray, and the pouch to Scrymgeour. William John bore up till I came to the pouch, when he fairly blubbered. I had to hurry into my bedroom, but I mean to do something yet for William John. Not even Scrymgeour knew so well as he what my pouch had been to me, and till I die I shall always regret that I did not give it to William John. I kept my brier.