

Chapter V. Randal Writes to New York.

The members of the family at Mount Morven consulted together, before Sydney Westerfield was informed of her brother's disappearance and of her mother's death.

Speaking first, as master of the house, Herbert Linley offered his opinion without hesitation. His impulsive kindness shrank from the prospect of reviving the melancholy recollections associated with Sydney's domestic life. "Why distress the poor child, just as she is beginning to feel happy among us?" he asked. "Give me the newspaper; I shan't feel easy till I have torn it up."

His wife drew the newspaper out of his reach. "Wait a little," she said, quietly; "some of us may feel that it is no part of our duty to conceal the truth."

Mrs. Presty spoke next. To the surprise of the family council, she agreed with her son-in-law.

"Somebody must speak out," the old lady began; "and I mean to set the example. Telling the truth," she declared, turning severely to her daughter, "is a more complicated affair than you seem to think. It's a question of morality, of course; but--in family circles, my dear--it's sometimes a question of convenience as well. Is it convenient to upset my granddaughter's governess, just as she is entering on her new duties? Certainly not! Good heavens, what does it matter to my young friend Sydney whether her unnatural mother lives or dies? Herbert, I second your proposal to tear up the paper with the greatest pleasure."

Herbert, sitting next to Randal, laid his hand affectionately on his brother's shoulder. "Are you on our side?" he asked.

Randal hesitated.

"I feel inclined to agree with you," he said to Herbert. "It does seem hard to recall Miss Westerfield to the miserable life that she has led, and to do it in the way of all others which must try her fortitude most cruelly. At the same time--"

"Oh, don't spoil what you have said by seeing the other side of the question!"

cried his brother "You have already put it admirably; leave it as it is."

"At the same time," Randal gently persisted, "I have heard no reasons which satisfy me that we have a right to keep Miss Westerfield in ignorance of what has happened."

This serious view of the question in debate highly diverted Mrs. Presty. "I do not like that man," she announced, pointing to Randal; "he always amuses me. Look at him now! He doesn't know which side he is on, himself."

"He is on my side," Herbert declared.

"Not he!"

Herbert consulted his brother. "What do you say yourself?"

"I don't know," Randal answered.

"There!" cried Mrs. Presty. "What did I tell you?"

Randal tried to set his strange reply in the right light. "I only mean," he explained, "that I want a little time to think."

Herbert gave up the dispute and appealed to his wife. "You have still got the American newspaper in your hand," he said. "What do you mean to do with it?"

Quietly and firmly Mrs. Linley answered: "I mean to show it to Miss Westerfield."

"Against my opinion? Against your mother's opinion?" Herbert asked. "Have we no influence over you? Do as Randal does--take time, my dear, to think."

She answered this with her customary calmness of manner and sweetness of tone. "I am afraid I must appear obstinate; but it is indeed true that I want no time to think; my duty is too plain to me."

Her husband and her mother listened to her in astonishment. Too amiable and too happy--and it must be added too indolent--to assert herself in the ordinary emergencies of family life, Mrs. Linley only showed of what metal she was made on the very rare occasions when the latent firmness in her nature was stirred to its innermost depths. The general experience of this sweet-tempered and delightful woman, ranging over long intervals of time,

was the only experience which remained in the memories of the persons about her. In bygone days, they had been amazed when her unexpected readiness and firmness of decision presented an exception to a general rule—just as they were amazed now.

Herbert tried a last remonstrance. "Is it possible, Catherine, that you don't see the cruelty of showing that newspaper to Miss Westerfield?"

Even this appeal to Mrs. Linley's sympathies failed to shake her resolution. "You may trust me to be careful," was all she said in reply; "I shall prepare her as tenderly for the sad news from America, as if she was a daughter of my own."

Hearing this, Mrs. Presty showed a sudden interest in the proceedings "When do you mean to begin?" she asked.

"At once, mamma."

Mrs. Presty broke up the meeting on the spot. "Wait till I am out of the way," she stipulated. "Do you object to Herbert giving me his arm? Distressing scenes are not in his line or in mine."

Mrs. Linley made no objection. Herbert resigned himself (not at all unwillingly) to circumstances. Arm in arm, he and his wife's mother left the room.

Randal showed no intention of following them; he had given himself time to think. "We are all wrong, Catherine," he said; "and you alone are right. What can I do to help you?"

She took his hand gratefully. "Always kind! Never thinking of yourself! I will see Miss Westerfield in my own room. Wait here, in case I want you."

After a much shorter absence than Randal anticipated, Mrs. Linley returned. "Has it been very distressing?" he asked, seeing the traces of tears in her eyes.

"There are noble qualities," she answered, "in that poor ill-used girl. Her one thought, as soon as she began to understand my motive in speaking to her, was not for herself, but for me. Even you, a man, must have felt the tears in your eyes, if you had heard her promise that I should suffer no further anxiety on her account. 'You shall see no distressing change in me,' she said, 'when we meet to-morrow.' All she asked was to be left in her room for

the rest of the day. I feel sure of her resolution to control herself; and yet I should like to encourage her if I can. Her chief sorrow (as it seems to me) must be--not for the mother who has so shamefully neglected her--but for the poor little brother, a castaway lost in a strange land. Can we do nothing to relieve her anxiety?"

"I can write," Randal said, "to a man whom I know in New York; a lawyer in large practice."

"The very person we want! Write--pray write by today's post."

The letter was dispatched. It was decided--and wisely decided, as the result proved--to say nothing to Sydney until the answer was received. Randal's correspondent wrote back with as little delay as possible. He had made every inquiry without success. Not a trace of the boy had been found, or (in the opinion of the police) was likely to be found. The one event that had happened, since the appearance of the paragraph in the New York journal, was the confinement of James Bellbridge in an asylum, as a madman under restraint without hope of recovery.