

Chapter XVII. The Husband.

Mrs. Linley's first impulse in ordering the carriage was to use it herself. One look at the child reminded her that her freedom of action began and ended at the bedside. More than an hour must elapse before Sydney Westerfield could be brought back to Mount Morven; the bare thought of what might happen in that interval, if she was absent, filled the mother with horror. She wrote to Mrs. MacEdwin, and sent her maid with the letter.

Of the result of this proceeding it was not possible to entertain a doubt.

Sydney's love for Kitty would hesitate at no sacrifice; and Mrs. MacEdwin's conduct had already answered for her. She had received the governess with the utmost kindness, and she had generously and delicately refrained from asking any questions. But one person at Mount Morven thought it necessary to investigate the motives under which she had acted. Mrs. Presty's inquiring mind arrived at discoveries; and Mrs. Presty's sense of duty communicated them to her daughter.

"There can be no sort of doubt, Catherine, that our good friend and neighbor has heard, probably from the servants, of what has happened; and (having her husband to consider--men are so weak!) has drawn her own conclusions. If she trusts our fascinating governess, it's because she knows that Miss Westerfield's affections are left behind her in this house. Does my explanation satisfy you?"

Mrs. Linley said: "Never let me hear it again!"

And Mrs. Presty answered: "How very ungrateful!"

The dreary interval of expectation, after the departure of the carriage, was brightened by a domestic event.

Thinking it possible that Mrs. Presty might know why her husband had left the house, Mrs. Linley sent to ask for information. The message in reply informed her that Linley had received a telegram announcing Randal's return from London. He had gone to the railway station to meet his brother.

Before she went downstairs to welcome Randal, Mrs. Linley paused to consider her situation. The one alternative before her was to acknowledge at the first opportunity that she had assumed the serious responsibility of

sending for Sydney Westerfield. For the first time in her life, Catherine Linley found herself planning beforehand what she would say to her husband.

A second message interrupted her, announcing that the two brothers had just arrived. She joined them in the drawing-room.

Linley was sitting in a corner by himself. The dreadful discovery that the child's life (by the doctor's confession) was in danger had completely overwhelmed him: he had never even lifted his head when his wife opened the door. Randal and Mrs. Presty were talking together. The old lady's insatiable curiosity was eager for news from London: she wanted to know how Randal had amused himself when he was not attending to business.

He was grieving for Kitty; and he was looking sadly at his brother. "I don't remember," he answered, absently. Other women might have discovered that they had chosen their time badly. Mrs. Presty, with the best possible intentions, remonstrated.

"Really, Randal, you must rouse yourself. Surely you can tell us something. Did you meet with any agreeable people, while you were away?"

"I met one person who interested me," he said, with weary resignation.

Mrs. Presty smiled. "A woman, of course!"

"A man," Randal answered; "a guest like myself at a club dinner."

"Who is he?"

"Captain Bennydeck."

"In the army?"

"No: formerly in the navy."

"And you and he had a long talk together?"

Randal's tones began to betray irritation. "No," he said "the Captain went away early."

Mrs. Presty's vigorous intellect discovered an improbability here. "Then how came you to feel interested in him?" she objected.

Even Randal's patience gave way. "I can't account for it," he said sharply. "I only know I took a liking to Captain Bennydeck." He left Mrs. Presty and sat down by his brother. "You know I feel for you," he said, taking Linley's hand. "Try to hope."

The bitterness of the father's despair broke out in his answer. "I can bear other troubles, Randal, as well as most men. This affliction revolts me. There's something so horribly unnatural in the child being threatened by death, while the parents (who should die first) are alive and well--" He checked himself. "I had better say no more, I shall only shock you."

The misery in his face wrung the faithful heart of his wife. She forgot the conciliatory expressions which she had prepared herself to use. "Hope, my dear, as Randal tells you," she said, "because there is hope."

His face flushed, his dim eyes brightened. "Has the doctor said it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why haven't I been told of it before?"

"When I sent for you, I heard that you had gone out."

The explanation passed by him unnoticed--perhaps even unheard. "Tell me what the doctor said," he insisted; "I want it exactly, word for word."

She obeyed him to the letter.

The sinister change in his face, as the narrative proceeded was observed by both the other persons present, as well as by his wife. She waited for a kind word of encouragement. He only said, coldly: "What have you done?"

Speaking coldly on her side, she answered: "I have sent the carriage to fetch Miss Westerfield."

There was a pause. Mrs. Presty whispered to Randal: "I knew she would come back again! The Evil Genius of the family--that's what I call Miss Westerfield. The name exactly fits her!"

The idea in Randal's mind was that the name exactly fitted Mrs. Presty. He made no reply; his eyes rested in sympathy on his sister-in-law. She saw, and felt, his kindness at a time when kindness was doubly precious. Her tones trembled a little as she spoke to her silent husband.

"Don't you approve of what I have done, Herbert?"

His nerves were shattered by grief and suspense; but he made an effort this time to speak gently. "How can I say that," he replied, "if the poor child's life depends on Miss Westerfield? I ask one favor--give me time to leave the house before she comes here."

Mrs. Linley looked at him in amazement.

Her mother touched her arm; Randal tried by a sign to warn her to be careful. Their calmer minds had seen what the wife's agitation had prevented her from discovering. In Linley's position, the return of the governess was a trial to his self-control which he had every reason to dread: his look, his voice, his manner proclaimed it to persons capable of quietly observing him. He had struggled against his guilty passion--at what sacrifice of his own feelings no one knew but himself--and here was the temptation, at the very time when he was honorably resisting it, brought back to him by his wife! Her motive did unquestionably excuse, perhaps even sanction, what she had done; but this was an estimate of her conduct which commended itself to others. From his point of view--motive or no motive--he saw the old struggle against himself in danger of being renewed; he felt the ground that he had gained slipping from under him already.

In spite of the well-meant efforts made by her relatives to prevent it, Mrs. Linley committed the very error which it was the most important that she should avoid. She justified herself, instead of leaving it to events to justify her. "Miss Westerfield comes here," she argued, "on an errand that is beyond reproach--an errand of mercy. Why should you leave the house?"

"In justice to you," Linley answered.

Mrs. Presty could restrain herself no longer. "Drop it, Catherine!" she said in a whisper.

Catherine refused to drop it; Linley's short and sharp reply had irritated her. "After my experience," she persisted, "have I no reason to trust you?"

"It is part of your experience," he reminded her, "that I promised not to see Miss Westerfield again."

"Own it at once!" she broke out, provoked beyond endurance; "though I may be willing to trust you--you are afraid to trust yourself."

Unlucky Mrs. Presty interfered again. "Don't listen to her, Herbert. Keep out of harm's way, and you keep right."

She patted him on the shoulder, as if she had been giving good advice to a boy. He expressed his sense of his mother-in-law's friendly offices in language which astonished her.

"Hold your tongue!"

"Do you hear that?" Mrs. Presty asked, appealing indignantly to her daughter.

Linley took his hat. "At what time do you expect Miss Westerfield to arrive?" he said to his wife.

She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Before the half-hour strikes. Don't be alarmed," she added, with an air of ironical sympathy; "you will have time to make your escape."

He advanced to the door, and looked at her.

"One thing I beg you will remember," he said. "Every half-hour while I am away (I am going to the farm) you are to send and let me know how Kitty is--and especially if Miss Westerfield justifies the experiment which the doctor has advised us to try."

Having given those instructions he went out.

The sofa was near Mrs. Linley. She sank on it, overpowered by the utter destruction of the hopes that she had founded on the separation of Herbert and the governess. Sydney Westerfield was still in possession of her husband's heart!

Her mother was surely the right person to say a word of comfort to her. Randal made the suggestion--with the worst possible result. Mrs. Presty had not forgotten that she had been told--at her age, in her position as the widow of a Cabinet Minister--to hold her tongue. "Your brother has insulted me," she said to Randal. He was weak enough to attempt to make an explanation. "I was speaking of my brother's wife," he said. "Your brother's wife has allowed me to be insulted." Having received that reply, Randal could only wonder. This woman went to church every Sunday, and kept a New Testament, bound in excellent taste, on her toilet-table! The occasion

suggested reflection on the system which produces average Christians at the present time. Nothing more was said by Mrs. Presty; Mrs. Linley remained absorbed in her own bitter thoughts. In silence they waited for the return of the carriage, and the appearance of the governess.