

Chapter XIX. The Captain.

The fair complexion of the Captain's youthful days had been darkened by exposure to hard weather and extreme climates. His smooth face of twenty years since was scored by the telltale marks of care; his dark beard was beginning to present variety of color by means of streaks of gray; and his hair was in course of undisguised retreat from his strong broad forehead. Not rising above the middle height, the Captain's spare figure was well preserved. It revealed power and activity, severely tested perhaps at some former time, but capable even yet of endurance under trial. Although he looked older than his age, he was still, personally speaking, an attractive man. In repose, his eyes were by habit sad and a little weary in their expression. They only caught a brighter light when he smiled. At such times, helped by this change and by his simple, earnest manner, they recommended him to his fellow-creatures before he opened his lips. Men and women taking shelter with him, for instance, from the rain, found the temptation to talk with Captain Bennydeck irresistible; and, when the weather cleared, they mostly carried away with them the same favorable impression: "One would like to meet with that gentleman again."

Randal's first words of welcome relieved the Captain of certain modest doubts of his reception, which appeared to trouble him when he entered the room. "I am glad to find you remember me as kindly as I remember you." Those were his first words when he and Randal shook hands.

"You might have felt sure of that," Randal said.

The Captain's modesty still doubted.

"You see, the circumstances were a little against me. We met at a dull dinner, among wearisome worldly men, full of boastful talk about themselves. It was all 'I did this,' and 'I said that'--and the gentlemen who were present had always been right; and the gentlemen who were absent had always been wrong. And, oh, dear, when they came to politics, how they bragged about what they would have done if they had only been at the head of the Government; and how cruelly hard to please they were in the matter of wine! Do you remember recommending me to spend my next holiday in Scotland?"

"Perfectly. My advice was selfish--it really meant that I wanted to see you again."

"And you have your wish, at your brother's house! The guide book did it. First, I saw your family name. Then, I read on and discovered that there were pictures at Mount Morven and that strangers were allowed to see them. I like pictures. And here I am."

This allusion to the house naturally reminded Randal of the master. "I wish I could introduce you to my brother and his wife," he said. "Unhappily their only child is ill--"

Captain Bennydeck started to his feet. "I am ashamed of having intruded on you," he began. His new friend pressed him back into his chair without ceremony. "On the contrary, you have arrived at the best of all possible times--the time when our suspense is at an end. The doctor has just told us that his poor little patient is out of danger. You may imagine how happy we are."

"And how grateful to God!" The Captain said those words in tones that trembled--speaking to himself.

Randal was conscious of feeling a momentary embarrassment. The character of his visitor had presented itself in a new light. Captain Bennydeck looked at him--understood him--and returned to the subject of his travels.

"Do you remember your holiday-time when you were a boy, and when you had to go back to school?" he asked with a smile. "My mind is in much the same state at leaving Scotland, and going back to my work in London. I hardly know which I admire most--your beautiful country or the people who inhabit it. I have had some pleasant talk with your poorer neighbors; the one improvement I could wish for among them is a keener sense of their religious duties."

This was an objection new in Randal's experience of travelers in general.

"Our Highlanders have noble qualities," he said. "If you knew them as well as I do, you would find a true sense of religion among them; not presenting itself, however, to strangers as strongly--I had almost said as aggressively--as the devotional feeling of the Lowland Scotch. Different races, different temperaments."

"And all," the Captain added, gravely and gently, "with souls to be saved. If I sent to these poor people some copies of the New Testament, translated into

their own language, would my gift be accepted?"

Strongly interested by this time, in studying Captain Bennydeck's character on the side of it which was new to him, Randal owned that he observed with surprise the interest which his friend felt in perfect strangers. The Captain seemed to wonder why this impression should have been produced by what he had just said.

"I only try," he answered, "to do what good I can, wherever I go."

"Your life must be a happy one," Randal said.

Captain Bennydeck's head drooped. The shadows that attend on the gloom of melancholy remembrance showed their darkening presence on his face. Briefly, almost sternly, he set Randal right.

"No, sir."

"Forgive me," the younger man pleaded, "if I have spoken thoughtlessly."

"You have mistaken me," the Captain explained; "and it is my fault. My life is an atonement for the sins of my youth. I have reached my fortieth year--and that one purpose is before me for the rest of my days. Sufferings and dangers which but few men undergo awakened my conscience. My last exercise of the duties of my profession associated me with an expedition to the Polar Seas. Our ship was crushed in the ice. Our march to the nearest regions inhabited by humanity was a hopeless struggle of starving men, rotten with scurvy, against the merciless forces of Nature. One by one my comrades dropped and died. Out of twenty men there were three left with a last flicker in them of the vital flame when the party of rescue found us. One of the three died on the homeward journey. One lived to reach his native place, and to sink to rest with his wife and children round his bed. The last man left, out of that band of martyrs to a hopeless cause, lives to be worthier of God's mercy--and tries to make God's creatures better and happier in this world, and worthier of the world that is to come."

Randal's generous nature felt the appeal that had been made to it. "Will you let me take your hand, Captain?" he said.

They clasped hands in silence.

Captain Bennydeck was the first to speak again. That modest distrust of himself, which a man essentially noble and brave is generally the readiest of

men to feel, seemed to be troubling him once more--just as it had troubled him when he first found himself in Randal's presence.

"I hope you won't think me vain," he resumed; "I seldom say so much about myself as I have said to you."

"I only wish you would say more," Randal rejoined. "Can't you put off your return to London for a day or two?"

The thing was not to be done. Duties which it was impossible to trifle with called the Captain back. "It's quite likely," he said, alluding pleasantly to the impression which he had produced in speaking of the Highlanders, "that I shall find more strangers to interest me in the great city."

"Are they always strangers?" Randal asked. "Have you never met by accident with persons whom you may once have known?"

"Never--yet. But it may happen on my return."

"In what way?"

"In this way. I have been in search of a poor girl who has lost both her parents: she has, I fear, been left helpless at the mercy of the world. Her father was an old friend of mine--once an officer in the Navy like myself. The agent whom I formerly employed (without success) to trace her, writes me word that he has reason to believe she has obtained a situation as pupil-teacher at a school in the suburbs of London; and I am going back (among other things) to try if I can follow the clew myself. Good-by, my friend. I am heartily sorry to go!"

"Life is made up of partings," Randal answered.

"And of meetings," the Captain wisely reminded him. "When you are in London, you will always hear of me at the club."

Heartily reciprocating his good wishes, Randal attended Captain Bennydeck to the door. On the way back to the drawing-room, he found his mind dwelling, rather to his surprise, on the Captain's contemplated search for the lost girl.

Was the good man likely to find her? It seemed useless enough to inquire--and yet Randal asked himself the question. Her father had been described as an officer in the Navy. Well, and what did that matter? Inclined to laugh

at his own idle curiosity, he was suddenly struck by a new idea. What had his brother told him of Miss Westerfield? She was the daughter of an officer in the Navy; she had been pupil-teacher at a school. Was it really possible that Sydney Westerfield could be the person whom Captain Bennydeck was attempting to trace? Randal threw up the window which overlooked the drive in front of the house. Too late! The carriage which had brought the Captain to Mount Morven was no longer in sight.

The one other course that he could take was to mention Captain Bennydeck's name to Sydney, and be guided by the result.

As he approached the bell, determining to send a message upstairs, he heard the door opened behind him. Mrs. Presty had entered the drawing-room, with a purpose (as it seemed) in which Randal was concerned.