

Chapter XX. The Mother-in-Law.

Strong as the impression was which Captain Bennydeck had produced on Randal, Mrs. Presty's first words dismissed it from his mind. She asked him if he had any message for his brother.

Randal instantly looked at the clock. "Has Catherine not sent to the farm, yet?" he asked in astonishment.

Mrs. Presty's mind seemed to be absorbed in her daughter. "Ah, poor Catherine! Worn out with anxiety and watching at Kitty's bedside. Night after night without any sleep; night after night tortured by suspense. As usual, she can depend on her old mother for sympathy. I have taken all her household duties on myself, till she is in better health."

Randal tried again. "Mrs. Presty, am I to understand (after the plain direction Herbert gave) that no messenger has been sent to the farm?"

Mrs. Presty held her venerable head higher than ever, when Randal pronounced his brother's name. "I see no necessity for being in a hurry," she answered stiffly, "after the brutal manner in which Herbert has behaved to me. Put yourself in my place--and imagine what you would feel if you were told to hold your tongue."

Randal wasted no more time on ears that were deaf to remonstrance. Feeling the serious necessity of interfering to some good purpose, he asked where he might find his sister-in-law.

"I have taken Catherine into the garden," Mrs. Presty announced. "The doctor himself suggested--no, I may say, ordered it. He is afraid that she may fall ill next, poor soul, if she doesn't get air and exercise."

In Mrs. Linley's own interests, Randal resolved on advising her to write to her husband by the messenger; explaining that she was not to blame for the inexcusable delay which had already taken place. Without a word more to Mrs. Presty, he hastened out of the room. That inveterately distrustful woman called him back. She desired to know where he was going, and why he was in a hurry.

"I am going to the garden," Randal answered.

"To speak to Catherine?"

"Yes."

"Needless trouble, my dear Randal. She will be back in a quarter of an hour, and she will pass through this room on her way upstairs."

Another quarter of an hour was a matter of no importance to Mrs. Presty! Randal took his own way--the way into the garden.

His silence and his determination to join his sister-in-law roused Mrs. Presty's ready suspicions; she concluded that he was bent on making mischief between her daughter and herself. The one thing to do in this case was to follow him instantly. The active old lady trotted out of the room, strongly inclined to think that the Evil Genius of the family might be Randal Linley after all!

They had both taken the shortest way to the garden; that is to say, the way through the library, which communicated at its furthest end with the corridor and the vaulted flight of stairs leading directly out of the house. Of the two doors in the drawing-room, one, on the left, led to the grand staircase and the hall; the other, on the right, opened on the backstairs, and on a side entrance to the house, used by the family when they were pressed for time, as well as by the servants.

The drawing-room had not been empty more than a few minutes when the door on the right was suddenly opened. Herbert Linley, entered with hurried, uncertain steps. He took the chair that was nearest to him, and dropped into it like a man overpowered by agitation or fatigue.

He had ridden from the farm at headlong speed, terrified by the unexplained delay in the arrival of the messenger from home. Unable any longer to suffer the torment of unrelieved suspense, he had returned to make inquiry at the house. As he interpreted the otherwise inexplicable neglect of his instructions, the last chance of saving the child's life had failed, and his wife had been afraid to tell him the dreadful truth.

After an interval, he rose and went into the library.

It was empty, like the drawing-room. The bell was close by him. He lifted his hand to ring it--and drew back. As brave a man as ever lived, he knew what fear was now. The father's courage failed him before the prospect of summoning a servant, and hearing, for all he knew to the contrary, that his

child was dead.

How long he stood there, alone and irresolute, he never remembered when he thought of it in after-days. All he knew was that there came a time when a sound in the drawing-room attracted his attention. It was nothing more important than the opening of a door.

The sound came from that side of the room which was nearest to the grand staircase--and therefore nearest also to the hall in one direction, and to the bed-chambers in the other.

Some person had entered the room. Whether it was one of the family or one of the servants, he would hear in either case what had happened in his absence. He parted the curtains over the library entrance, and looked through.

The person was a woman. She stood with her back turned toward the library, lifting a cloak off a chair. As she shook the cloak out before putting it on, she changed her position. He saw the face, never to be forgotten by him to the last day of his life. He saw Sydney Westerfield.