

### **Chapter XXIII. Separation.**

In a cottage on the banks of one of the Cumberland Lakes, two ladies were seated at the breakfast-table. The windows of the room opened on a garden which extended to the water's edge, and on a boat-house and wooden pier beyond. On the pier a little girl was fishing, under the care of her maid. After a prevalence of rainy weather, the sun was warm this morning for the time of year; and the broad sheet of water alternately darkened and brightened as the moving masses of cloud now gathered and now parted over the blue beauty of the sky.

The ladies had finished their breakfast; the elder of the two--that is to say, Mrs. Presty--took up her knitting and eyed her silent daughter with an expression of impatient surprise.

"Another bad night, Catherine?"

The personal attractions that distinguished Mrs. Linley were not derived from the short-lived beauty which depends on youth and health. Pale as she was, her face preserved its fine outline; her features had not lost their grace and symmetry of form. Presenting the appearance of a woman who had suffered acutely, she would have been more than ever (in the eyes of some men) a woman to be admired and loved.

"I seldom sleep well now," she answered, patiently.

"You don't give yourself a chance," Mrs. Presty remonstrated. "Here's a fine morning--come out for a sail on the lake. To-morrow there's a concert in the town--let's take tickets. There's a want of what I call elastic power in your mind, Catherine--the very quality for which your father was so remarkable; the very quality which Mr. Presty used to say made him envy Mr. Norman. Look at your dress! Where's the common-sense, at your age, of wearing nothing but black? Nobody's dead who belongs to us, and yet you do your best to look as if you were in mourning."

"I have no heart, mamma, to wear colors."

Mrs. Presty considered this reply to be unworthy of notice. She went on with her knitting, and only laid it down when the servant brought in the letters which had arrived by the morning's post. They were but two in number--and both were for Mrs. Linley. In the absence of any correspondence of her own,

Mrs. Presty took possession of her daughter's letters.

"One addressed in the lawyer's handwriting," she announced; "and one from Randal. Which shall I open for you first?"

"Randal's letter, if you please."

Mrs. Presty handed it across the table. "Any news is a relief from the dullness of this place," she said. "If there are no secrets, Catherine, read it out."

There were no secrets on the first page.

Randal announced his arrival in London from the Continent, and his intention of staying there for a while. He had met with a friend (formerly an officer holding high rank in the Navy) whom he was glad to see again--a rich man who used his wealth admirably in the interest of his poor and helpless fellow-creatures. A "Home," established on a new plan, was just now engaging all his attention: he was devoting himself so unremittingly to the founding of this institution that his doctor predicted injury to his health at no distant date. If it was possible to persuade him to take a holiday, Randal might return to the Continent as the traveling-companion of his friend.

"This must be the man whom he first met at the club," Mrs. Presty remarked. "Well, Catherine, I suppose there is some more of it. What's the matter? Bad news?"

"Something that I wish Randal had not written. Read it yourself--and don't talk of it afterward."

Mrs. Presty read:

"I know nothing whatever of my unfortunate brother. If you think this is a too-indulgent way of alluding to a man who has so shamefully wronged you, let my conviction that he is already beginning to suffer the penalty of his crime plead my excuse. Herbert's nature is, in some respects, better known to me than it is to you. I am persuaded that your hold on his respect and his devotion is shaken--not lost. He has been misled by one of those passing fancies, disastrous and even criminal in their results, to which men are liable when they are led by no better influence than the influence of their senses. It is not, and never will be, in the nature of women to understand this. I fear I may offend you in what I am now writing; but I must speak what I believe to be the truth, at any sacrifice. Bitter repentance (if he is not

already feeling it) is in store for Herbert, when he finds himself tied to a person who cannot bear comparison with you. I say this, pitying the poor girl most sincerely, when I think of her youth and her wretched past life. How it will end I cannot presume to say. I can only acknowledge that I do not look to the future with the absolute despair which you naturally felt when I last saw you."

Mrs. Presty laid the letter down, privately resolving to write to Randal, and tell him to keep his convictions for the future to himself. A glance at her daughter's face warned her, if she said anything, to choose a new subject.

The second letter still remained unnoticed. "Shall we see what the lawyer says?" she suggested--and opened the envelope. The lawyer had nothing to say. He simply inclosed a letter received at his office.

Mrs. Presty had long passed the age at which emotion expresses itself outwardly by a change of color. She turned pale, nevertheless, when she looked at the second letter.

The address was in Herbert Linley's handwriting.