

Chapter XXV. Consultation.

No second letter arrived. But a telegram was received from the lawyer toward the end of the week.

"Expect me to-morrow on business which requires personal consultation."

That was the message. In taking the long journey to Cumberland, Mrs. Linley's legal adviser sacrificed two days of his precious time in London. Something serious must assuredly have happened.

In the meantime, who was the lawyer?

He was Mr. Sarrazin, of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Was he an Englishman or a Frenchman?

He was a curious mixture of both. His ancestors had been among the persecuted French people who found a refuge in England, when the priest-ridden tyrant, Louis the Fourteenth, revoked the Edict of Nantes. A British subject by birth, and a thoroughly competent and trustworthy man, Mr. Sarrazin labored under one inveterate delusion; he firmly believed that his original French nature had been completely eradicated, under the influence of our insular climate and our insular customs. No matter how often the strain of the lively French blood might assert itself, at inconvenient times and under regrettable circumstances, he never recognized this foreign side of his character. His excellent spirits, his quick sympathies, his bright mutability of mind--all those qualities, in short, which were most mischievously ready to raise distrust in the mind of English clients, before their sentiment changed for the better under the light of later experience--were attributed by Mr. Sarrazin to the exhilarating influence of his happy domestic circumstances and his successful professional career. His essentially English wife; his essentially English children; his whiskers, his politics, his umbrella, his pew at church, his plum pudding, his Times newspaper, all answered for him (he was accustomed to say) as an inbred member of the glorious nation that rejoices in hunting the fox, and believes in innumerable pills.

This excellent man arrived at the cottage, desperately fatigued after his long journey, but in perfect possession of his incomparable temper, nevertheless.

He afforded a proof of this happy state of mind, on sitting down to his supper. An epicure, if ever there was one yet, he found the solid part of the refreshments offered to him to consist of a chop. The old French blood curdled at the sight of it--but the true-born Englishman heroically devoted himself to the national meal. At the same time the French vivacity discovered a kindred soul in Kitty; Mr. Sarrazin became her intimate friend in five minutes. He listened to her and talked to her, as if the child had been his client, and fishing from the pier the business which had brought him from London. To Mrs. Presty's disgust, he turned up a corner of the table-cloth, when he had finished his chop, and began to conjure so deftly with the spoons and forks that poor little Kitty (often dull, now, under the changed domestic circumstances of her life) clapped her hands with pleasure, and became the joyous child of the happy old times once more. Mrs. Linley, flattered in her maternal love and her maternal pride, never thought of recalling this extraordinary lawyer to the business that was waiting to be discussed. But Mrs. Presty looked at the clock, and discovered that her grandchild ought to have been in bed half-an-hour ago.

"Time to say good-night," the grandmother suggested.

The grandchild failed to see the subject of bed in the same light. "Oh, not yet," she pleaded; "I want to speak to Mr.--" Having only heard the visitor's name once, and not finding her memory in good working order after the conjuring, Kitty hesitated. "Isn't your name something like Saracen?" she asked.

"Very like!" cried the genial lawyer. "Try my other name, my dear. I'm Samuel as well as Sarrazin."

"Ah, that'll do," said Kitty. "Grandmamma, before I go to bed, I've something to ask Samuel."

Grandmamma persisted in deferring the question until the next morning. Samuel administered consolation before he said good-night. "I'll get up early," he whispered, "and we'll go on the pier before breakfast and fish."

Kitty expressed her gratitude in her own outspoken way. "Oh, dear, how nice it would be, Samuel, if you lived with us!" Mrs. Linley laughed for the first time, poor soul, since the catastrophe which had broken up her home. Mrs. Presty set a proper example. She moved her chair so that she faced the lawyer, and said: "Now, Mr. Sarrazin!"

He acknowledged that he understood what this meant, by a very

unprofessional choice of words. "We are in a mess," he began, "and the sooner we are out of it the better."

"Only let me keep Kitty," Mrs. Linley declared, "and I'll do whatever you think right."

"Stick to that, dear madam, when you have heard what I have to tell you-- and I shall not have taken my journey in vain. In the first place, may I look at the letter which I had the honor of forwarding some days since?"

Mrs. Presty gave him Herbert Linley's letter. He read it with the closest attention, and tapped the breast-pocket of his coat when he had done.

"If I didn't know what I have got here," he remarked, "I should have said: Another person dictated this letter, and the name of the person is Miss Westerfield."

"Just my idea!" Mrs. Presty exclaimed. "There can't be a doubt of it."

"Oh, but there is a very great doubt of it, ma'am; and you will say so too when you know what your severe son-in-law threatens to do." He turned to Mrs. Linley. "After having seen that pretty little friend of mine who has just gone to bed (how much nicer it would be for all of us if we could go to bed too!), I think I know how you answered your husband's letter. But I ought perhaps to see how you have expressed yourself. Have you got a copy?"

"It was too short, Mr. Sarrazin, to make a copy necessary."

"Do you mean you can remember it?"

"I can repeat it word for word. This was my reply: I refuse, positively, to part with my child."

"No more like that?"

"No more."

Mr. Sarrazin looked at his client with undisguised admiration. "The only time in all my long experience," he said, "in which I have found a lady's letter capable of expressing itself strongly in a few words. What a lawyer you will make, Mrs. Linley, when the rights of women invade my profession!"

He put his hand into his pocket and produced a letter addressed to himself.

Watching him anxiously, the ladies saw his bright face become overclouded with anxiety. "I am the wretched bearer of bad news," he resumed, "and if I fidget in my chair, that is the reason for it. Let us get to the point--and let us get off it again as soon as possible. Here is a letter, written to me by Mr. Linley's lawyer. If you will take my advice you will let me say what the substance of it is, and then put it back in my pocket. I doubt if a woman has influenced these cruel instructions, Mrs. Presty; and, therefore, I doubt if a woman influenced the letter which led the way to them. Did I not say just now that I was coming to the point? and here I am wandering further and further away from it. A lawyer is human; there is the only excuse. Now, Mrs. Linley, in two words; your husband is determined to have little Miss Kitty; and the law, when he applies to it, is his obedient humble servant."

"Do you mean that the law takes my child away from me?"

"I am ashamed, madam, to think that I live by the law; but that, I must own, is exactly what it is capable of doing in the present case. Compose yourself, I beg and pray. A time will come when women will remind men that the mother bears the child and feeds the child, and will insist that the mother's right is the best right of the two. In the meanwhile--"

"In the meanwhile, Mr. Sarrazin, I won't submit to the law."

"Quite right, Catherine!" cried Mrs. Presty. "Exactly what I should do, in your place."

Mr. Sarrazin listened patiently. "I am all attention, good ladies," he said, with the gentlest resignation. "Let me hear how you mean to do it."

The good ladies looked at each other. They discovered that it is one thing to set an abuse at defiance in words, and another thing to apply the remedy in deeds. The kind-hearted lawyer helped them with a suggestion. "Perhaps you think of making your escape with the child, and taking refuge abroad?"

Mrs. Linley eagerly accepted the hint. "The first train to-morrow morning starts at half-past seven," she said. "We might catch some foreign steamer that sails from the east coast of Scotland."

Mrs. Presty, keeping a wary eye on Mr. Sarrazin, was not quite so ready as her daughter in rushing at conclusions. "I am afraid," she acknowledged, "our worthy friend sees some objection. What is it?"

"I don't presume to offer a positive opinion, ma'am; but I think Mr. Linley and his lawyer have their suspicions. Plainly speaking, I am afraid spies are set to watch us already."

"Impossible!"

"You shall hear. I travel second-class; one saves money and one finds people to talk to--and at what sacrifice? Only a hard cushion to sit on! In the same carriage with me there was a very conversable person--a smart young man with flaming red hair. When we took the omnibus at your station here, all the passengers got out in the town except two. I was one exception, and the smart young man was the other. When I stopped at your gate, the omnibus went on a few yards, and set down my fellow-traveler at the village inn. My profession makes me sly. I waited a little before I rang your bell; and, when I could do it without being seen, I crossed the road, and had a look at the inn. There is a moon to-night; I was very careful. The young man didn't see me. But I saw a head of flaming hair, and a pair of amiable blue eyes, over the blind of a window; and it happened to be the one window of the inn which commands a full view of your gate. Mere suspicion, you will say! I can't deny it, and yet I have my reasons for suspecting. Before I left London, one of my clerks followed me in a great hurry to the terminus, and caught me as I was opening the carriage door. 'We have just made a discovery,' he said; 'you and Mrs. Linley are to be reckoned up.' Reckoned up is, if you please, detective English for being watched. My clerk might have repeated a false report, of course. And my fellow-traveler might have come all the way from London to look out of the window of an inn, in a Cumberland village. What do you think yourselves?"

It seemed to be easier to dispute the law than to dispute Mr. Sarrazin's conclusions.

"Suppose I choose to travel abroad, and to take my child with me," Mrs. Linley persisted, "who has any right to prevent me?"

Mr. Sarrazin reluctantly reminded her that the father had a right. "No person--not even the mother--can take the child out of the father's custody," he said, "except with the father's consent. His authority is the supreme authority--unless it happens that the law has deprived him of his privilege, and has expressly confided the child to the mother's care. Ha!" cried Mr. Sarrazin, twisting round in his chair and fixing his keen eyes on Mrs. Presty, "look at your good mother; she sees what I am coming to."

"I see something more than you think," Mrs. Presty answered. "If I know

anything of my daughter's nature, you will find yourself, before long, on delicate ground."

"What do you mean, mamma?"

Mrs. Presty had lived in the past age when persons occasionally used metaphor as an aid to the expression of their ideas. Being called upon to explain herself, she did it in metaphor, to her own entire satisfaction.

"Our learned friend here reminds me, my dear Catherine, of a traveler exploring a strange town. He takes a turning, in the confident expectation that it will reward him by leading him to some satisfactory result--and he finds himself in a blind alley, or, as the French put it (I speak French fluently), in a cool de sack. Do I make my meaning clear, Mr. Sarrazin?"

"Not the least in the world, ma'am."

"How very extraordinary! Perhaps I have been misled by my own vivid imagination. Let me endeavor to express myself plainly--let me say that my fancy looks prophetically at what you are going to do, and sincerely wishes you well out of it. Pray go on."

"And pray speak more plainly than my mother has spoken," Mrs. Linley added. "As I understood what you said just now, there is a law, after all, that will protect me in the possession of my little girl. I don't care what it costs; I want that law."

"May I ask first," Mr. Sarrazin stipulated, "whether you are positively resolved not to give way to your husband in this matter of Kitty?"

"Positively."

"One more question, if you please, on a matter of fact. I have heard that you were married in Scotland. Is that true?"

"Quite true."

Mr. Sarrazin exhibited himself once more in a highly unprofessional aspect. He clapped his hands, and cried, "Bravo!" as if he had been in a theater.

Mrs. Linley caught the infection of the lawyer's excitement. "How dull I am!" she exclaimed. "There is a thing they call 'incompatibility of temper'--and married people sign a paper at the lawyer's and promise never to trouble

each other again as long as they both live. And they're readier to do it in Scotland than they are in England. That's what you mean--isn't it?"

Mr. Sarrazin found it necessary to reassume his professional character.

"No, indeed, madam," he said, "I should be unworthy of your confidence if I proposed nothing better than that. You can only secure the sole possession of little Kitty by getting the help of a judge--"

"Get it at once," Mrs. Linley interposed.

"And you can only prevail on the judge to listen to you," Mr. Sarrazin proceeded, "in one way. Summon your courage, madam. Apply for a divorce."

There was a sudden silence. Mrs. Linley rose trembling, as if she saw--not good Mr. Sarrazin--but the devil himself tempting her. "Do you hear that?" she said to her mother.

Mrs. Presty only bowed.

"Think of the dreadful exposure!"

Mrs. Presty bowed again.

The lawyer had his opportunity now.

"Well, Mrs. Linley," he asked, "what do you say?"

"No--never!" She made that positive reply; and disposed beforehand of everything that might have been urged, in the way of remonstrance and persuasion, by leaving the room. The two persons who remained, sitting opposite to each other, took opposite views.

"Mr. Sarrazin, she won't do it."

"Mrs. Presty, she will."