

Chapter XXVI. Decision.

Punctual to his fishing appointment with Kitty, Mr. Sarrazin was out in the early morning, waiting on the pier.

Not a breath of wind was stirring; the lazy mist lay asleep on the further shore of the lake. Here and there only the dim tops of the hills rose like shadows cast by the earth on the faint gray of the sky. Nearer at hand, the waters of the lake showed a gloomy surface; no birds flew over the colorless calm; no passing insects tempted the fish to rise. From time to time a last-left leaf on the wooded shore dropped noiselessly and died. No vehicles passed as yet on the lonely road; no voices were audible from the village; slow and straight wreaths of smoke stole their way out of the chimneys, and lost their vapor in the misty sky. The one sound that disturbed the sullen repose of the morning was the tramp of the lawyer's footsteps, as he paced up and down the pier. He thought of London and its ceaseless traffic, its roaring high tide of life in action--and he said to himself, with the strong conviction of a town-bred man: How miserable this is!

A voice from the garden cheered him, just as he reached the end of the pier for the fiftieth time, and looked with fifty-fold intensity of dislike at the dreary lake.

There stood Kitty behind the garden-gate, with a fishing-rod in each hand. A tin box was strapped on one side of her little body and a basket on the other. Burdened with these impediments, she required assistance. Susan had let her out of the house; and Samuel must now open the gate for her. She was pleased to observe that the raw morning had reddened her friend's nose; and she presented her own nose to notice as exhibiting perfect sympathy in this respect. Feeling a misplaced confidence in Mr. Sarrazin's knowledge and experience as an angler, she handed the fishing-rods to him. "My fingers are cold," she said; "you bait the hooks." He looked at his young friend in silent perplexity; she pointed to the tin box. "Plenty of bait there, Samuel; we find maggots do best." Mr. Sarrazin eyed the box with undisguised disgust; and Kitty made an unexpected discovery. "You seem to know nothing about it," she said. And Samuel answered, cordially, "Nothing!" In five minutes more he found himself by the side of his young friend--with his hook baited, his line in the water, and strict injunctions to keep an eye on the float.

They began to fish.

Kitty looked at her companion, and looked away again in silence. By way of encouraging her to talk, the good-natured lawyer alluded to what she had said when they parted overnight. "You wanted to ask me something," he reminded her. "What is it?"

Without one preliminary word of warning to prepare him for the shock, Kitty answered: "I want you to tell me what has become of papa, and why Syd has gone away and left me. You know who Syd is, don't you?"

The only alternative left to Mr. Sarrazin was to plead ignorance. While Kitty was instructing him on the subject of her governess, he had time to consider what he should say to her next. The result added one more to the lost opportunities of Mr. Sarrazin's life.

"You see," the child gravely continued, "you are a clever man; and you have come here to help mamma. I have got that much out of grandmamma, if I have got nothing else. Don't look at me; look at your float. My papa has gone away and Syd has left me without even saying good-by, and we have given up our nice old house in Scotland and come to live here. I tell you I don't understand it. If you see your float begin to tremble, and then give a little dip down as if it was going to sink, pull your line out of the water; you will most likely find a fish at the end of it. When I ask mamma what all this means, she says there is a reason, and I am not old enough to understand it, and she looks unhappy, and she gives me a kiss, and it ends in that way. You've got a bite; no you haven't; it's only a nibble; fish are so sly. And grandmamma is worse still. Sometimes she tells me I'm a spoiled child; and sometimes she says well-behaved little girls don't ask questions. That's nonsense--and I think it's hard on me. You look uncomfortable. Is it my fault? I don't want to bother you; I only want to know why Syd has gone away. When I was younger I might have thought the fairies had taken her. Oh, no! that won't do any longer; I'm too old. Now tell me."

Mr. Sarrazin weakly attempted to gain time: he looked at his watch. Kitty looked over his shoulder: "Oh, we needn't be in a hurry; breakfast won't be ready for half an hour yet. Plenty of time to talk of Syd; go on."

Most unwisely (seeing that he had to deal with a clever child, and that child a girl), Mr. Sarrazin tried flat denial as a way out of the difficulty. He said: "I don't know why she has gone away." The next question followed instantly: "Well, then, what do you think about it?" In sheer despair, the persecuted friend said the first thing that came into his head.

"I think she has gone to be married."

Kitty was indignant.

"Gone to be married, and not tell me!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean by that?"

Mr. Sarrazin's professional experience of women and marriages failed to supply him with an answer. In this difficulty he exerted his imagination, and invented something that no woman ever did yet. "She's waiting," he said, "to see how her marriage succeeds, before she tells anybody about it."

This sounded probable to the mind of a child.

"I hope she hasn't married a beast," Kitty said, with a serious face and an ominous shake of the head. "When shall I hear from Syd?"

Mr. Sarrazin tried another prevarication--with better results this time. "You will be the first person she writes to, of course." As that excusable lie passed his lips, his float began to tremble. Here was a chance of changing the subject--"I've got a fish!" he cried.

Kitty was immediately interested. She threw down her own rod, and assisted her ignorant companion. A wretched little fish appeared in the air, wriggling. "It's a roach," Kitty pronounced. "It's in pain," the merciful lawyer added; "give it to me." Kitty took it off the hook, and obeyed. Mr. Sarrazin with humane gentleness of handling put it back into the water. "Go, and God bless you," said this excellent man, as the roach disappeared joyously with a flick of its tail. Kitty was scandalized. "That's not sport!" she said. "Oh, yes, it is," he answered--"sport to the fish."

They went on with their angling. What embarrassing question would Kitty ask next? Would she want to be told why her father had left her? No: the last image in the child's mind had been the image of Sydney Westerfield. She was still thinking of it when she spoke again.

"I wonder whether you're right about Syd?" she began. "You might be mistaken, mightn't you? I sometimes fancy mamma and Sydney may have had a quarrel. Would you mind asking mamma if that's true?" the affectionate little creature said, anxiously. "You see, I can't help talking of Syd, I'm so fond of her; and I do miss her so dreadfully every now and then; and I'm afraid--oh, dear, dear, I'm afraid I shall never see her again!" She let her rod drop on the pier, and put her little hands over her face and burst

out crying.

Shocked and distressed, good Mr. Sarrazin kissed her, and consoled her, and told another excusable lie.

"Try to be comforted, Kitty; I'm sure you will see her again."

His conscience reproached him as he held out that false hope. It could never be! The one unpardonable sin, in the judgment of fallible human creatures like herself, was the sin that Sydney Westerfield had committed. Is there something wrong in human nature? or something wrong in human laws? All that is best and noblest in us feels the influence of love--and the rules of society declare that an accident of position shall decide whether love is a virtue or a crime.

These thoughts were in the lawyer's mind. They troubled him and disheartened him: it was a relief rather than an interruption when he felt Kitty's hand on his arm. She had dried her tears, with a child's happy facility in passing from one emotion to another, and was now astonished and interested by a marked change in the weather.

"Look for the lake!" she cried. "You can't see it."

A dense white fog was closing round them. Its stealthy advance over the water had already begun to hide the boathouse at the end of the pier from view. The raw cold of the atmosphere made the child shiver. As Mr. Sarrazin took her hand to lead her indoors, he turned and looked back at the faint outline of the boathouse, disappearing in the fog. Kitty wondered. "Do you see anything?" she asked.

He answered that there was nothing to see, in the absent tone of a man busy with his own thoughts. They took the garden path which led to the cottage. As they reached the door he roused himself, and looked round again in the direction of the invisible lake.

"Was the boat-house of any use now," he inquired--"was there a boat in it, for instance?" "There was a capital boat, fit to go anywhere." "And a man to manage it?" "To be sure! the gardener was the man; he had been a sailor once; and he knew the lake as well as--" Kitty stopped, at a loss for a comparison. "As well as you know your multiplication table?" said Mr. Sarrazin, dropping his serious questions on a sudden. Kitty shook her head. "Much better," she honestly acknowledged.

Opening the breakfast-room door they saw Mrs. Presty making coffee. Kitty at once retired. When she had been fishing, her grandmamma inculcated habits of order by directing her to take the rods to pieces, and to put them away in their cases in the lumber-room. While she was absent, Mr. Sarrazin profited by the opportunity, and asked if Mrs. Linley had thought it over in the night, and had decided on applying for a Divorce.

"I know nothing about my daughter," Mrs. Presty answered, "except that she had a bad night. Thinking, no doubt, over your advice," the old lady added with a mischievous smile.

"Will you kindly inquire if Mrs. Linley has made up her mind yet?" the lawyer ventured to say.

"Isn't that your business?" Mrs. Presty asked slyly. "Suppose you write a little note, and I will send it up to her room." The worldly-wisdom which prompted this suggestion contemplated a possible necessity for calling a domestic council, assembled to consider the course of action which Mrs. Linley would do well to adopt. If the influence of her mother was among the forms of persuasion which might be tried, that wary relative maneuvered to make the lawyer speak first, and so to reserve to herself the advantage of having the last word.

Patient Mr. Sarrazin wrote the note.

He modestly asked for instructions; and he was content to receive them in one word--Yes or No. In the event of the answer being Yes, he would ask for a few minutes' conversation with Mrs. Linley, at her earliest convenience. That was all.

The reply was returned in a form which left Yes to be inferred: "I will receive you as soon as you have finished your breakfast."