

Chapter XXIX. Mr. Sarrazin.

As a lawyer, Randal's guest understood that a narrative of events can only produce the right effect, on one condition: it must begin at the beginning. Having related all that had been said and done during his visit to the cottage, including his first efforts in the character of an angler under Kitty's supervision, he stopped to fill his glass again--and then astonished Randal by describing the plan that he had devised for escaping from the spies by crossing the lake in the fog.

"What did the ladies say to it?" Randal inquired. "Who spoke first?"

"Mrs. Presty, of course! She objected to risk her life on the water, in a fog. Mrs. Linley showed a resolution for which I was not prepared. She thought of Kitty, saw the value of my suggestion, and went away at once to consult with the landlady. In the meantime I sent for the gardener, and told him what I was thinking of. He was one of those stolid Englishmen, who possess resources which don't express themselves outwardly. Judging by his face, you would have said he was subsiding into a slumber under the infliction of a sermon, instead of listening to a lawyer proposing a stratagem. When I had done, the man showed the metal he was made of. In plain English, he put three questions which gave me the highest opinion of his intelligence. 'How much luggage, sir?' 'As little as they can conveniently take with them,' I said. 'How many persons?' 'The two ladies, the child, and myself.' 'Can you row, sir?' 'In any water you like, Mr. Gardener, fresh or salt'. Think of asking Me, an athletic Englishman, if I could row! In an hour more we were ready to embark, and the blessed fog was thicker than ever. Mrs. Presty yielded under protest; Kitty was wild with delight; her mother was quiet and resigned. But one circumstance occurred that I didn't quite understand--the presence of a stranger on the pier with a gun in his hand."

"You don't mean one of the spies?"

"Nothing of the sort; I mean an idea of the gardener's. He had been a sailor in his time--and that's a trade which teaches a man (if he's good for anything) to think, and act on his thought, at one and the same moment. He had taken a peep at the blackguards in front of the house, and had recognized the shortest of the two as a native of the place, perfectly well aware that one of the features attached to the cottage was a boathouse. 'That chap is not such a fool as he looks,' says the gardener. 'If he mentions the boat-house, the other fellow from London may have his suspicions. I

thought I would post my son on the pier--that quiet young man there with the gun--to keep a lookout. If he sees another boat (there are half a dozen on this side of the lake) putting off after us, he has orders to fire, on the chance of our hearing him. A little notion of mine, sir, to prevent our being surprised in the fog. Do you see any objection to it?' Objection! In the days when diplomacy was something more than a solemn pretense, what a member of Congress that gardener would have made! Well, we shipped our oars, and away we went. Not quite haphazard--for we had a compass with us. Our course was as straight as we could go, to a village on the opposite side of the lake, called Brightfold. Nothing happened for the first quarter of an hour--and then, by the living Jingo (excuse my vulgarity), we heard the gun!"

"What did you do?"

"Went on rowing, and held a council. This time I came out as the clever one of the party. The men were following us in the dark; they would have to guess at the direction we had taken, and they would most likely assume (in such weather as we had) that we should choose the shortest way across the lake. At my suggestion we changed our course, and made for a large town, higher up on the shore, called Tawley. We landed, and waited for events, and made no discovery of another boat behind us. The fools had justified my confidence in them--they had gone to Brightfold. There was half-an-hour to spare before the next train came to Tawley; and the fog was beginning to lift on that side of the lake. We looked at the shops; and I made a purchase in the town."

"Stop a minute," said Randal. "Is Brightfold on the railway?"

"No."

"Is there an electric telegraph at the place?"

"Yes."

"That was awkward, wasn't it? The first thing those men would do would be to telegraph to Tawley."

"Not a doubt of it. How would they describe us, do you think?"

Randal answered. "A middle-aged gentleman--two ladies, one of them elderly--and a little girl. Quite enough to identify you at Tawley, if the station-master understood the message."

"Shall I tell you what the station-master discovered, with the message in his hand? No elderly lady, no middle-aged gentleman; nothing more remarkable than one lady--and a little boy."

Randal's face brightened. "You parted company, of course," he said; "and you disguised Kitty! How did you manage it?"

"Didn't I say just now that we looked at the shops, and that I made a purchase in the town? A boy's ready-made suit--not at all a bad fit for Kitty! Mrs. Linley put on the suit, and tucked up the child's hair under a straw hat, in an empty yard--no idlers about in that bad weather. We said good-bye, and parted, with grievous misgivings on my side, which proved (thank God!) to have been quite needless. Kitty and her mother went to the station, and Mrs. Presty and I hired a carriage, and drove away to the head of the lake, to catch the train to London. Do you know, Randal, I have altered my opinion of Mrs. Presty?"

Randal smiled. "You too have found something in that old woman," he said, "which doesn't appear on the surface."

"The occasion seems to bring that something out," the lawyer remarked. "When I proposed the separation, and mentioned my reasons, I expected to find some difficulty in persuading Mrs. Presty to give up the adventurous journey with her daughter and her grandchild. I reminded her that she had friends in London who would receive her, and got snubbed for taking the liberty. 'I know that as well as you do. Come along--I'm ready to go with you.' It isn't agreeable to my self-esteem to own it, but I expected to hear her say that she would consent to any sacrifice for the sake of her dear daughter. No such clap-trap as that passed her lips. She owned the true motive with a superiority to cant which won my sincerest respect. 'I'll do anything,' she said, 'to baffle Herbert Linley and the spies he has set to watch us.' I can't tell you how glad I was that she had her reward on the same day. We were too late at the station, and we had to wait for the next train. And what do you think happened? The two scoundrels followed us instead of following Mrs. Linley! They had inquired no doubt at the livery stables where we hired the carriage--had recognized the description of us--and had taken the long journey to London for nothing. Mrs. Presty and I shook hands at the terminus the best friends that ever traveled together with the best of motives. After that, I think I deserve another glass of wine."

"Go on with your story, and you shall have another bottle!" cried Randal. "What did Catherine and the child do after they left you?"

"They did the safest thing--they left England. Mrs. Linley distinguished herself on this occasion. It was her excellent idea to avoid popular ports of departure, like Folkestone and Dover, which were sure to be watched, and to get away (if the thing could be done) from some place on the east coast. We consulted our guide and found that a line of steamers sailed from Hull to Bremen once a week. A tedious journey from our part of Cumberland, with some troublesome changing of trains, but they got there in time to embark. My first news of them reached me in a telegram from Bremen. There they waited for further instructions. I sent the instructions by a thoroughly capable and trustworthy man--an Italian courier, known to me by an experience of twenty years. Shall I confess it? I thought I had done rather a clever thing in providing Mrs. Linley with a friend in need while I was away from her."

"I think so, too," said Randal.

"Wrong, completely wrong. I had made a mistake--I had been too clever, and I got my reward accordingly. You know how I advised Mrs. Linley?"

"Yes. You persuaded her, with the greatest difficulty, to apply for a Divorce."

"Very well. I had made all the necessary arrangements for the trial, when I received a letter from Germany. My charming client had changed her mind, and declined to apply for the Divorce. There was my reward for having been too clever!"

"I don't understand you."

"My dear fellow, you are dull to-night. I had been so successful in protecting Mrs. Linley and the child, and my excellent courier had found such a charming place of retreat for them in one of the suburbs of Hanover, that 'she saw no reason now for taking the shocking course that I had recommended to her--so repugnant to all her most cherished convictions; so sinful and so shameful in its doing of evil that good might come. Experience had convinced her that (thanks to me) there was no fear of Kitty being discovered and taken from her. She therefore begged me to write to my agent in Edinburgh, and tell him that her application to the court was withdrawn.' Ah, you understand my position at last. The headstrong woman was running a risk which renewed all my anxieties. By every day's post I expected to hear that she had paid the penalty of her folly, and that your brother had succeeded in getting possession of the child. Wait a little before you laugh at me. But for the courier, the thing would have really happened a

week since."

Randal looked astonished. "Months must have passed," he objected. "Surely, after that lapse of time, Mrs. Linley must have been safe from discovery."

"Take your own positive view of it! I only know that the thing happened. And why not? The luck had begun by being on one side--why shouldn't the other side have had its turn next?"

"Do you really believe in luck?"

"Devoutly. A lawyer must believe in something. He knows the law too well to put any faith in that: and his clients present to him (if he is a man of any feeling) a hideous view of human nature. The poor devil believes in luck--rather than believe in nothing. I think it quite likely that accident helped the person employed by the husband to discover the wife and child. Anyhow, Mrs. Linley and Kitty were seen in the streets of Hanover; seen, recognized, and followed. The courier happened to be with them--luck again! For thirty years and more, he had been traveling in every part of Europe; there was not a landlord of the smallest pretensions anywhere who didn't know him and like him. 'I pretended not to see that anybody was following us,' he said (writing from Hanover to relieve my anxiety); 'and I took the ladies to a hotel. The hotel possessed two merits from our point of view--it had a way out at the back, through the stables, and it was kept by a landlord who was an excellent good friend of mine. I arranged with him what he was to say when inquiries were made; and I kept my poor ladies prisoners in their lodgings for three days. The end of it is that Mr. Linley's policeman has gone away to watch the Channel steam-service, while we return quietly by way of Bremen and Hull.' There is the courier's account of it. I have only to add that poor Mrs. Linley has been fairly frightened into submission. She changes her mind again, and pledges herself once more to apply for the Divorce. If we are only lucky enough to get our case heard without any very serious delay, I am not afraid of my client slipping through my fingers for the second time. When will the courts of session be open to us? You have lived in Scotland, Randal--"

"But I haven't lived in the courts of law. I wish I could give you the information you want."

Mr. Sarrazin looked at his watch. "For all I know to the contrary," he said, "we may be wasting precious time while we are talking here. Will you excuse me if I go away to my club?"

"Are you going in search of information?"

"Yes. We have some inveterate old whist-players who are always to be found in the card-room. One of them formerly practiced, I believe, in the Scotch courts. It has just occurred to me that the chance is worth trying."

"Will you let me know if you succeed?" Randal asked.

The lawyer took his hand at parting. "You seem to be almost as anxious about it as I am," he said.

"To tell you the truth, I am a little alarmed when I think of Catherine. If there is another long delay, how do we know what may happen before the law has confirmed the mother's claim to the child? Let me send one of the servants here to wait at your club. Will you give him a line telling me when the trial is likely to take place?"

"With the greatest pleasure. Good-night."

Left alone, Randal sat by the fireside for a while, thinking of the future. The prospect, as he saw it, disheartened him. As a means of employing his mind on a more agreeable subject for reflection, he opened his traveling desk and took out two or three letters. They had been addressed to him, while he was in America, by Captain Bennydeck.

The captain had committed an error of which most of us have been guilty in our time. He had been too exclusively devoted to work that interested him to remember what was due to the care of his health. The doctor's warnings had been neglected; his over-strained nerves had given way; and the man whose strong constitution had resisted cold and starvation in the Arctic wastes, had broken down under stress of brain-work in London.

This was the news which the first of the letters contained.

The second, written under dictation, alluded briefly to the remedies suggested. In the captain's case, the fresh air recommended was the air of the sea. At the same time he was forbidden to receive either letters or telegrams, during his absence from town, until the doctor had seen him again. These instructions pointed, in Captain Bennydeck's estimation, to sailing for pleasure's sake, and therefore to hiring a yacht.

The third and last letter announced that the yacht had been found, and described the captain's plans when the vessel was ready for sea.

He proposed to sail here and there about the Channel, wherever it might please the wind to take him. Friends would accompany him, but not in any number. The yacht was not large enough to accommodate comfortably more than one or two guests at a time. Every now and then, the vessel would come to an anchor in the bay of the little coast town of Sandyseal, to accommodate friends going and coming and (in spite of medical advice) to receive letters. "You may have heard of Sandyseal," the Captain wrote, "as one of the places which have lately been found out by the doctors. They are recommending the air to patients suffering from nervous disorders all over England. The one hotel in the place, and the few cottages which let lodgings, are crammed, as I hear, and the speculative builder is beginning his operations at such a rate that Sandyseal will be no longer recognizable in a few months more. Before the crescents and terraces and grand hotels turn the town into a fashionable watering-place, I want to take a last look at scenes familiar to me under their old aspect. If you are inclined to wonder at my feeling such a wish as this, I can easily explain myself. Two miles inland from Sandyseal, there is a lonely old moated house. In that house I was born. When you return from America, write to me at the post-office, or at the hotel (I am equally well known in both places), and let us arrange for a speedy meeting. I wish I could ask you to come and see me in my birth-place. It was sold, years since, under instructions in my father's will, and was purchased for the use of a community of nuns. We may look at the outside, and we can do no more. In the meantime, don't despair of my recovery; the sea is my old friend, and my trust is in God's mercy."

These last lines were added in a postscript:

"Have you heard any more of that poor girl, the daughter of my old friend Roderick Westerfield--whose sad story would never have been known to me but for you? I feel sure that you have good reasons for not telling me the name of the man who has misled her, or the address at which she may be found. But you may one day be at liberty to break your silence. In that case, don't hesitate to do so because there may happen to be obstacles in my way. No difficulties discourage me, when my end in view is the saving of a soul in peril."

Randal returned to his desk to write to the Captain. He had only got as far as the first sentences, when the servant returned with the lawyer's promised message. Mr. Sarrazin's news was communicated in these cheering terms:

"I am a firmer believer in luck than ever. If we only make haste--and won't I make haste!--we may get the Divorce, as I calculate, in three weeks' time."