

Chapter XXX. The Lord President.

Mrs. Linley's application for a Divorce was heard in the first division of the Court of Session at Edinburgh, the Lord President being the judge.

To the disappointment of the large audience assembled, no defense was attempted on the part of the husband--a wise decision, seeing that the evidence of the wife and her witnesses was beyond dispute. But one exciting incident occurred toward the close of the proceedings. Sudden illness made Mrs. Linley's removal necessary, at the moment of all others most interesting to herself--the moment before the judge's decision was announced.

But, as the event proved, the poor lady's withdrawal was the most fortunate circumstance that could have occurred, in her own interests. After condemning the husband's conduct with unsparing severity, the Lord President surprised most of the persons present by speaking of the wife in these terms:

"Grievously as Mrs. Linley has been injured, the evidence shows that she was herself by no means free from blame. She has been guilty, to say the least of it, of acts of indiscretion. When the criminal attachment which had grown up between Mr. Herbert Linley and Miss Westerfield had been confessed to her, she appears to have most unreasonably overrated whatever merit there might have been in their resistance to the final temptation. She was indeed so impulsively ready to forgive (without waiting to see if the event justified the exercise of mercy) that she owns to having given her hand to Miss Westerfield, at parting, not half an hour after that young person's shameless forgetfulness of the claims of modesty, duty and gratitude had been first communicated to her. To say that this was the act of an inconsiderate woman, culpably indiscreet and, I had almost added, culpably indelicate, is only to say what she has deserved. On the next occasion to which I feel bound to advert, her conduct was even more deserving of censure. She herself appears to have placed the temptation under which he fell in her husband's way, and so (in some degree at least) to have provoked the catastrophe which has brought her before this court. I allude, it is needless to say, to her having invited the governess--then out of harm's way; then employed elsewhere--to return to her house, and to risk

(what actually occurred) a meeting with Mr. Herbert Linley when no third person happened to be present. I know that the maternal motive which animated Mrs. Linley is considered, by many persons, to excuse and even to justify that most regrettable act; and I have myself allowed (I fear weakly allowed) more than due weight to this consideration in pronouncing for the Divorce. Let me express the earnest hope that Mrs. Linley will take warning by what has happened; and, if she finds herself hereafter placed in other circumstances of difficulty, let me advise her to exercise more control over impulses which one might expect perhaps to find in a young girl, but which are neither natural nor excusable in a woman of her age."

His lordship then decreed the Divorce in the customary form, giving the custody of the child to the mother.

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As fast as a hired carriage could take him, Mr. Sarrazin drove from the court to Mrs. Linley's lodgings, to tell her that the one great object of securing her right to her child had been achieved.

At the door he was met by Mrs. Presty. She was accompanied by a stranger, whose medical services had been required. Interested professionally in hearing the result of the trial, this gentleman volunteered to communicate the good news to his patient. He had been waiting to administer a composing draught, until the suspense from which Mrs. Linley was suffering might be relieved, and a reasonable hope be entertained that the medicine would produce the right effect. With that explanation he left the room.

While the doctor was speaking, Mrs. Presty was drawing her own conclusions from a close scrutiny of Mr. Sarrazin's face.

"I am going to make a disagreeable remark," she announced. "You look ten years older, sir, than you did when you left us this morning to go to the Court. Do me a favor--come to the sideboard." The lawyer having obeyed, she poured out a glass of wine. "There is the remedy," she resumed, "when something has happened to worry you."

"'Worry' isn't the right word," Mr. Sarrazin declared. "I'm furious! It's a most improper thing for a person in my position to say of a person in the Lord President's position; but I do say it--he ought to be ashamed of himself."

"After giving us our Divorce!" Mrs. Presty exclaimed. "What has he done?"

Mr. Sarrazin repeated what the judge had said of Mrs. Linley. "In my opinion," he added, "such language as that is an insult to your daughter."

"And yet," Mrs. Presty repeated, "he has given us our Divorce." She returned to the sideboard, poured out a second dose of the remedy against worry, and took it herself. "What sort of character does the Lord President bear?" she asked when she had emptied her glass.

This seemed to be an extraordinary question to put, under the circumstances. Mr. Sarrazin answered it, however, to the best of his ability. "An excellent character," he said--"that's the unaccountable part of it. I hear that he is one of the most careful and considerate men who ever sat on the bench. Excuse me, Mrs. Presty, I didn't intend to produce that impression on you."

"What impression, Mr. Sarrazin?"

"You look as if you thought there was some excuse for the judge."

"That's exactly what I do think."

"You find an excuse for him?"

"I do."

"What is it, ma'am?"

"Constitutional infirmity, sir."

"May I ask of what nature?"

"You may. Gout."

Mr. Sarrazin thought he understood her at last. "You know the Lord President," he said.

Mrs. Presty denied it positively. "No, Mr. Sarrazin, I don't get at it in that way. I merely consult my experience of another official person of high rank, and apply it to the Lord President. You know that my first husband was a Cabinet Minister?"

"I have heard you say so, Mrs. Presty, on more than one occasion."

"Very well. You may also have heard that the late Mr. Norman was a remarkably well-bred man. In and out of the House of Commons, courteous almost to a fault. One day I happened to interrupt him when he was absorbed over an Act of Parliament. Before I could apologize--I tell you this in the strictest confidence--he threw the Act of Parliament at my head. Ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have thrown it back again. Knowing his constitution, I decided on waiting a day or two. On the second day, my anticipations were realized. Mr. Norman's great toe was as big as my fist and as red as a lobster; he apologized for the Act of Parliament with tears in his eyes. Suppressed gout in Mr. Norman's temper; suppressed gout in the Lord President's temper. He will have a toe; and, if I can prevail upon my daughter to call upon him, I have not the least doubt he will apologize to her with tears in his eyes."

This interesting experiment was never destined to be tried. Right or wrong, Mrs. Presty's theory remained the only explanation of the judge's severity. Mr. Sarrazin attempted to change the subject. Mrs. Presty had not quite done with it yet. "There is one more thing I want to say," she proceeded. "Will his lordship's remarks appear in the newspapers?"

"Not a doubt of it."

"In that case I will take care (for my daughter's sake) that no newspapers enter the house to-morrow. As for visitors, we needn't be afraid of them. Catherine is not likely to be able to leave her room; the worry of this miserable business has quite broken her down."

The doctor returned at that moment.

Without taking the old lady's gloomy view of his patient, he admitted that she was in a low nervous condition, and he had reason to suppose, judging by her reply to a question which he had ventured to put, that she had associations with Scotland which made a visit to that country far from agreeable to her. His advice was that she should leave Edinburgh as soon as possible, and go South. If the change of climate led to no improvement, she would at least be in a position to consult the best physicians in London. In a day or two more it would be safe to remove her--provided she was not permitted to exhaust her strength by taking long railway journeys.

Having given his advice, the doctor took leave. Soon after he had gone, Kitty made her appearance, charged with a message from Mrs. Linley's room.

"Hasn't the physic sent your mother to sleep yet?" Mrs. Presty inquired.

Kitty shook her head. "Mamma wants to go away tomorrow, and no physic will make her sleep till she has seen you, and settled about it. That's what she told me to say. If I behaved in that way about my physic, I should catch it."

Mrs. Presty left the room; watched by her granddaughter with an appearance of anxiety which it was not easy to understand.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Sarrazin asked. "You look very serious to-day."

Kitty held up a warning hand. "Grandmamma sometimes listens at doors," she whispered; "I don't want her to hear me." She waited a little longer, and then approached Mr. Sarrazin, frowning mysteriously. "Take me up on your knee," she said. "There's something wrong going on in this house."

Mr. Sarrazin took her on his knee, and rashly asked what had gone wrong. Kitty's reply puzzled him.

"I go to mamma's room every morning when I wake," the child began. "I get into her bed, and I give her a kiss, and I say 'Good-morning'--and sometimes, if she isn't in a hurry to get up, I stop in her bed, and go to sleep again. Mamma thought I was asleep this morning. I wasn't asleep--I was only quiet. I don't know why I was quiet."

Mr. Sarrazin's kindness still encouraged her. "Well," he said, "and what happened after that?"

"Grandmamma came in. She told mamma to keep up her spirits. She says, 'It will all be over in a few hours more.' She says, 'What a burden it will be off your mind!' She says, 'Is that child asleep?' And mamma says, 'Yes.' And grandmamma took one of mamma's towels. And I thought she was going to wash herself. What would you have thought?"

Mr. Sarrazin began to doubt whether he would do well to discuss Mrs. Presty's object in taking the towel. He only said, "Go on."

"Grandmamma dipped it into the water-jug," Kitty continued, with a grave face; "but she didn't wash herself. She went to one of mamma's boxes. Though she's so old, she's awfully strong, I can tell you. She rubbed off the luggage-label in no time. Mamma says, 'What are you doing that for?' And grandmamma says--this is the dreadful thing that I want you to explain; oh, I can remember it all; it's like learning lessons, only much nicer--"

grandmamma says, 'Before the day's over, the name on your boxes will be your name no longer.'

Mr. Sarrazin now became aware of the labyrinth into which his young friend had innocently led him. The Divorce, and the wife's inevitable return (when the husband was no longer the husband) to her maiden name--these were the subjects on which Kitty's desire for enlightenment applied to the wisest person within her reach, her mother's legal adviser.

Mr. Sarrazin tried to put her off his knee. She held him round the neck. He thought of the railway as a promising excuse, and told her he must go back to London. She held him a little tighter. "I really can't wait, my dear," he got up as he said it. Kitty hung on to him with her legs as well as her arms, and finding the position uncomfortable, lost her temper. "Mamma's going to have a new name," she shouted, as if the lawyer had suddenly become deaf. "Grandmamma says she must be Mrs. Norman. And I must be Miss Norman. I won't! Where's papa? I want to write to him; I know he won't allow it. Do you hear? Where's papa?"

She fastened her little hands on Mr. Sarrazin's coat collar and tried to shake him, in a fury of resolution to know what it all meant. At that critical moment Mrs. Presty opened the door, and stood petrified on the threshold.

"Hanging on to Mr. Sarrazin with her arms and her legs!" exclaimed the old lady. "You little wretch, which are you, a monkey or a child?"

The lawyer gently deposited Kitty on the floor.

"Mind this, Samuel," she whispered, as he set her down on her feet, "I won't be Miss Norman."

Mrs. Presty pointed sternly at the open door. "You were screaming just now, when quiet in the house is of the utmost importance to your mother. If I hear you again, bread and water and no doll for the rest of the week."

Kitty retired in disgrace, and Mrs. Presty sharpened her tongue on Mr. Sarrazin next. "I'm astonished, sir, at your allowing that impudent grandchild of mine to take such liberties with you. Who would suppose that you were a married man, with children of your own?"

"That's just the reason, my dear madam," Mr. Sarrazin smartly replied. "I romp with my own children--why not with Kitty? Can I do anything for you in London?" he went on, getting a little nearer to the door; "I leave

Edinburgh by the next train. And I promise you," he added, with the spirit of mischief twinkling in his eyes, "this shall be my last confidential interview with your grandchild. When she wants to ask any more questions, I transfer her to you."

Mrs. Presty looked after the retreating lawyer thoroughly mystified. What "confidential interview"? What "questions"? After some consideration, her experience of her granddaughter suggested that a little exercise of mercy might be attended with the right result. She looked at a cake on the sideboard. "I have only to forgive Kitty," she decided, "and the child will talk about it of her own accord."