

### **Chapter XXXI. Mr. Herbert Linley.**

Of the friends and neighbors who had associated with Herbert Linley, in bygone days, not more than two or three kept up their intimacy with him at the later time of his disgrace. Those few, it is needless to say, were men.

One of the faithful companions, who had not shrunk from him yet, had just left the London hotel at which Linley had taken rooms for Sydney Westerfield and himself--in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert. This old friend had been shocked by the change for the worse which he had perceived in the fugitive master of Mount Morven. Linley's stout figure of former times had fallen away, as if he had suffered under long illness; his healthy color had faded; he made an effort to assume the hearty manner that had once been natural to him which was simply pitiable to see. "After sacrificing all that makes life truly decent and truly enjoyable for a woman, he has got nothing, not even false happiness, in return!" With that dreary conclusion the retiring visitor descended the hotel steps, and went his way along the street.

Linley returned to the newspaper which he had been reading when his friend was shown into the room.

Line by line he followed the progress of the law report, which informed its thousands of readers that his wife had divorced him, and had taken lawful possession of his child. Word by word, he dwelt with morbid attention on the terms of crushing severity in which the Lord President had spoken of Sydney Westerfield and of himself. Sentence by sentence he read the reproof inflicted on the unhappy woman whom he had vowed to love and cherish. And then--even then--urged by his own self-tormenting suspicion, he looked for more. On the opposite page there was a leading article, presenting comments on the trial, written in the tone of lofty and virtuous regret; taking the wife's side against the judge, but declaring, at the same time, that no condemnation of the conduct of the husband and the governess could be too merciless, and no misery that might overtake them in the future more than they had deserved.

He threw the newspaper on the table at his side, and thought over what he had read.

If he had done nothing else, he had drained the bitter cup to the dregs. When he looked back, he saw nothing but the life that he had wasted. When

his thoughts turned to the future, they confronted a prospect empty of all promise to a man still in the prime of life. Wife and child were as completely lost to him as if they had been dead--and it was the wife's doing. Had he any right to complain? Not the shadow of a right. As the newspapers said, he had deserved it.

The clock roused him, striking the hour.

He rose hurriedly, and advanced toward the window. As he crossed the room, he passed by a mirror. His own sullen despair looked at him in the reflection of his face. "She will be back directly," he remembered; "she mustn't see me like this!" He went on to the window to divert his mind (and so to clear his face) by watching the stream of life flowing by in the busy street. Artificial cheerfulness, assumed love in Sydney's presence--that was what his life had come to already.

If he had known that she had gone out, seeking a temporary separation, with his fear of self-betrayal--if he had suspected that she, too, had thoughts which must be concealed: sad forebodings of losing her hold on his heart, terrifying suspicions that he was already comparing her, to her own disadvantage, with the wife whom he had deserted--if he had made these discoveries, what would the end have been? But she had, thus far, escaped the danger of exciting his distrust. That she loved him, he knew. That she had begun to doubt his attachment to her he would not have believed, if his oldest friend had declared it on the best evidence. She had said to him, that morning, at breakfast: "There was a good woman who used to let lodgings here in London, and who was very kind to me when I was a child;" and she had asked leave to go to the house, and inquire if that friendly landlady was still living--with nothing visibly constrained in her smile, and with no faltering tone in her voice. It was not until she was out in the street that the tell-tale tears came into her eyes, and the bitter sigh broke from her, and mingled its little unheard misery with the grand rise and fall of the tumult of London life. While he was still at the window, he saw her crossing the street on her way back to him. She came into the room with her complexion heightened by exercise; she kissed him, and said with her pretty smile: "Have you been lonely without me?" Who would have supposed that the torment of distrust, and the dread of desertion, were busy at this woman's heart?

He placed a chair for her, and seating himself by her side asked if she felt tired. Every attention that she could wish for from the man whom she loved, offered with every appearance of sincerity on the surface! She met him halfway, and answered as if her mind was quite at ease.

"No, dear, I'm not tired--but I'm glad to get back."

"Did you find your old landlady still alive?"

"Yes. But oh, so altered, poor thing! The struggle for life must have been a hard one, since I last saw her."

"She didn't recognize you, of course?"

"Oh! no. She looked at me and my dress in great surprise and said her lodgings were hardly fit for a young lady like me. It was too sad. I said I had known her lodgings well, many years ago--and, with that to prepare her, I told her who I was. Ah, it was a melancholy meeting for both of us. She burst out crying when I kissed her; and I had to tell her that my mother was dead, and my brother lost to me in spite of every effort to find him. I asked to go into the kitchen, thinking the change would be a relief to both of us. The kitchen used to be a paradise to me in those old days; it was so warm to a half-starved child--and I always got something to eat when I was there. You have no idea, Herbert, how poor and how empty the place looked to me now. I was glad to get out of it, and go upstairs. There was a lumber-room at the top of the house; I used to play in it, all by myself. More changes met me the moment I opened the door."

"Changes for the better?"

"My dear, it couldn't have changed for the worse! My dirty old play-room was cleaned and repaired; the lumber taken away, and a nice little bed in one corner. Some clerk in the City had taken the room--I shouldn't have known it again. But there was another surprise waiting for me; a happy surprise this time. In cleaning out the garret, what do you think the landlady found? Try to guess."

Anything to please her! Anything to make her think that he was as fond of her as ever! "Was it something you had left behind you," he said, "at the time when you lodged there."

"Yes! you are right at the first guess--a little memorial of my father. Only some torn crumpled leaves from a book of children's songs that he used to teach me to sing; and a small packet of his letters, which my mother may have thrown aside and forgotten. See! I have brought them back with me; I mean to look over the letters at once--but this doesn't interest you?"

"Indeed it does."

He made that considerate reply mechanically, as if thinking of something else. She was afraid to tell him plainly that she saw this; but she could venture to say that he was not looking well. "I have noticed it for some time past," she confessed. "You have been accustomed to live in the country; I am afraid London doesn't agree with you."

He admitted that she might be right; still speaking absently, still thinking of the Divorce. She laid the packet of letters and the poor relics of the old song-book on the table, and bent over him. Tenderly, and a little timidly, she put her arm around his neck. "Let us try some purer air," she suggested; "the seaside might do you good. Don't you think so?"

"I daresay, my dear. Where shall we go?"

"Oh, I leave that to you."

"No, Sydney. It was I who proposed coming to London. You shall decide this time."

She submitted, and promised to think of it. Leaving him, with the first expression of trouble that had shown itself in her face, she took up the songs and put them into the pocket of her dress. On the point of removing the letters next, she noticed the newspaper on the table. "Anything interesting to-day?" she asked--and drew the newspaper toward her to look at it. He took it from her suddenly, almost roughly. The next moment he apologized for his rudeness. "There is nothing worth reading in the paper," he said, after begging her pardon. "You don't care about politics, do you?"

Instead of answering, she looked at him attentively.

The heightened color which told of recent exercise, healthily enjoyed, faded from her face. She was silent; she was pale. A little confused, he smiled uneasily. "Surely," he resumed, trying to speak gayly, "I haven't offended you?"

"There is something in the newspaper," she said, "which you don't want me to read."

He denied it--but he still kept the newspaper in his own possession. Her voice sank low; her face turned paler still.

"Is it all over?" she asked. "And is it put in the newspaper?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the Divorce."

He went back again to the window and looked out. It was the easiest excuse that he could devise for keeping his face turned away from her. She followed him.

"I don't want to read it, Herbert. I only ask you to tell me if you are a free man again."

Quiet as it was, her tone left him no alternative but to treat her brutally or to reply. Still looking out at the street, he said "Yes."

"Free to marry, if you like?" she persisted.

He said "Yes" once more--and kept his face steadily turned away from her. She waited a while. He neither moved nor spoke.

Surviving the slow death little by little of all her other illusions, one last hope had lingered in her heart. It was killed by that cruel look, fixed on the view of the street.

"I'll try to think of a place that we can go to at the seaside." Having said those words she slowly moved away to the door, and turned back, remembering the packet of letters. She took it up, paused, and looked toward the window. The streets still interested him. She left the room.