

Chapter XXXII. Miss Westerfield.

She locked the door of her bedchamber, and threw off her walking-dress; light as it was, she felt as if it would stifle her. Even the ribbon round her neck was more than she could endure and breathe freely. Her overburdened heart found no relief in tears. In the solitude of her room she thought of the future. The dreary foreboding of what it might be, filled her with a superstitious dread from which she recoiled. One of the windows was open already; she threw up the other to get more air. In the cooler atmosphere her memory recovered itself; she recollected the newspaper, that Herbert had taken from her. Instantly she rang for the maid. "Ask the first waiter you see downstairs for today's newspaper; any one will do, so long as I don't wait for it." The report of the Divorce--she was in a frenzy of impatience to read what he had read--the report of the Divorce.

When her wish had been gratified, when she had read it from beginning to end, one vivid impression only was left on her mind. She could think of nothing but what the judge had said, in speaking of Mrs. Linley.

A cruel reproof, and worse than cruel, a public reproof, administered to the generous friend, the true wife, the devoted mother--and for what? For having been too ready to forgive the wretch who had taken her husband from her, and had repaid a hundred acts of kindness by unpardonable ingratitude.

She fell on her knees; she tried wildly to pray for inspiration that should tell her what to do. "Oh, God, how can I give that woman back the happiness of which I have robbed her!"

The composing influence of prayer on a troubled mind was something that she had heard of. It was not something that she experienced now. An overpowering impatience to make the speediest and completest atonement possessed her. Must she wait till Herbert Linley no longer concealed that he was weary of her, and cast her off? No! It should be her own act that parted them, and that did it at once. She threw open the door, and hurried half-way down the stairs before she remembered the one terrible obstacle in her way--the Divorce.

Slowly and sadly she submitted, and went back to her room.

There was no disguising it; the two who had once been husband and wife were parted irrevocably--by the wife's own act. Let him repent ever so

sincerely, let him be ever so ready to return, would the woman whose faith Herbert Linley had betrayed take him back? The Divorce, the merciless Divorce, answered:--No!

She paused, thinking of the marriage that was now a marriage no more. The toilet-table was close to her; she looked absently at her haggard face in the glass. What a lost wretch she saw! The generous impulses which other women were free to feel were forbidden luxuries to her. She was ashamed of her wickedness; she was eager to sacrifice herself, for the good of the once-dear friend whom she had wronged. Useless longings! Too late! too late!

She regretted it bitterly. Why?

Comparing Mrs. Linley's prospects with hers, was there anything to justify regret for the divorced wife? She had her sweet little child to make her happy; she had a fortune of her own to lift her above sordid cares; she was still handsome, still a woman to be admired. While she held her place in the world as high as ever, what was the prospect before Sydney Westerfield? The miserable sinner would end as she had deserved to end. Absolutely dependent on a man who was at that moment perhaps lamenting the wife whom he had deserted and lost, how long would it be before she found herself an outcast, without a friend to help her--with a reputation hopelessly lost--face to face with the temptation to drown herself or poison herself, as other women had drowned themselves or poisoned themselves, when the brightest future before them was rest in death?

If she had been a few years older, Herbert Linley might never again have seen her a living creature. But she was too young to follow any train of repellent thought persistently to its end. The man she had guiltily (and yet how naturally) loved was lord and master in her heart, doubt him as she might. Even in his absence he pleaded with her to have some faith in him still.

She reviewed his language and his conduct toward her, when she had returned that morning from her walk. He had been kind and considerate; he had listened to her little story of the relics of her father, found in the garret, as if her interests were his interests. There had been nothing to disappoint her, nothing to complain of, until she had rashly attempted to discover whether he was free to make her his wife. She had only herself to blame if he was cold and distant when she had alluded to that delicate subject, on the day when he first knew that the Divorce had been granted and his child had been taken from him. And yet, he might have found a kinder way of reproving a sensitive woman than looking into the street--as if he had

forgotten her in the interest of watching the strangers passing by! Perhaps he was not thinking of the strangers; perhaps his mind was dwelling fondly and regretfully on his wife?

Instinctively, she felt that her thoughts were leading her back again to a state of doubt from which her youthful hopefulness recoiled. Was there nothing she could find to do which would offer some other subject to occupy her mind than herself and her future?

Looking absently round the room, she noticed the packet of her father's letters placed on the table by her bedside.

The first three letters that she examined, after untying the packet, were briefly written, and were signed by names unknown to her. They all related to race-horses, and to cunningly devised bets which were certain to make the fortunes of the clever gamblers on the turf who laid them. Absolute indifference on the part of the winners to the ruin of the losers, who were not in the secret, was the one feeling in common, which her father's correspondents presented. In mercy to his memory she threw the letters into the empty fireplace, and destroyed them by burning.

The next letter which she picked out from the little heap was of some length, and was written in a clear and steady hand. By comparison with the blotted scrawls which she had just burned, it looked like the letter of a gentleman. She turned to the signature. The strange surname struck her; it was "Bennydeck."

Not a common name, and not a name which seemed to be altogether unknown to her. Had she heard her father mention it at home in the time of her early childhood? There were no associations with it that she could now call to mind.

She read the letter. It addressed her father familiarly as "My dear Roderick," and it proceeded in these words:--

"The delay in the sailing of your ship offers me an opportunity of writing to you again. My last letter told you of my father's death. I was then quite unprepared for an event which has happened, since that affliction befell me. Prepare yourself to be surprised. Our old moated house at Sandyseal, in which we have spent so many happy holidays when we were schoolfellows, is sold.

"You will be almost as sorry as I was to hear this; and you will be quite as surprised as I was, when I tell you that Sandyseal Place has become a Priory of English Nuns, of the order of St. Benedict.

"I think I see you look up from my letter, with your big black eyes staring straight before you, and say and swear that this must be one of my mystifications. Unfortunately (for I am fond of the old house in which I was born) it is only too true. The instructions in my father's will, under which Sandyseal has been sold, are peremptory. They are the result of a promise made, many years since, to his wife.

"You and I were both very young when my poor mother died; but I think you must remember that she, like the rest of her family, was a Roman Catholic.

"Having reminded you of this, I may next tell you that Sandyseal Place was my mother's property. It formed part of her marriage portion, and it was settled on my father if she died before him, and if she left no female child to survive her. I am her only child. My father was therefore dealing with his own property when he ordered the house to be sold. His will leaves the purchase money to me. I would rather have kept the house.

"But why did my mother make him promise to sell the place at his death?

"A letter, attached to my father's will, answers this question, and tells a very sad story. In deference to my mother's wishes it was kept strictly a secret from me while my father lived.

"There was a younger sister of my mother's who was the beauty of the family; loved and admired by everybody who was acquainted with her. It is needless to make this long letter longer by dwelling on the girl's miserable story. You have heard it of other girls, over and over again. She loved and trusted; she was deceived and deserted. Alone and friendless in a foreign country; her fair fame blemished; her hope in the future utterly destroyed, she attempted to drown herself. This took place in France. The best of good women--a Sister of Charity--happened to be near enough to the river to rescue her. She was sheltered; she was pitied; she was encouraged to return to her family. The poor deserted creature absolutely refused; she could never forget that she had disgraced them. The good Sister of Charity won her confidence. A retreat which would hide her from the world, and devote her to religion for the rest of her days, was the one end to her wasted life that she longed for. That end was attained in a Priory of Benedictine Nuns, established in France. There she found protection and peace--there she

passed the remaining years of her life among devoted Sister-friends--and there she died a quiet and even a happy death.

"You will now understand how my mother's grateful remembrance associated her with the interests of more than one community of Nuns; and you will not need to be told what she had in mind when she obtained my father's promise at the time of her last illness.

"He at once proposed to bequeath the house as a free gift to the Benedictines. My mother thanked him and refused. She was thinking of me. 'If our son fails to inherit the house from his father,' she said, 'it is only right that he should have the value of the house in money. Let it be sold.'

"So here I am--rich already--with this additional sum of money in my banker's care.

"My idea is to invest it in the Funds, and to let it thrive at interest, until I grow older, and retire perhaps from service in the Navy. The later years of my life may well be devoted to the founding of a charitable institution, which I myself can establish and direct. If I die first--oh, there is a chance of it! We may have a naval war, perhaps, or I may turn out one of those incorrigible madmen who risk their lives in Arctic exploration. In case of the worst, therefore, I shall leave the interests of my contemplated Home in your honest and capable hands. For the present good-by, and a prosperous voyage outward bound."

So the letter ended.

Sydney dwelt with reluctant attention on the latter half of it. The story of the unhappy favorite of the family had its own melancholy and sinister interest for her. She felt the foreboding that it might, in some of its circumstances, be her story too--without the peaceful end. Into what community of merciful women could she be received, in her sorest need? What religious consolations would encourage her penitence? What prayers, what hopes, would reconcile her, on her death-bed, to the common doom?

She sighed as she folded up Captain Bennydeck's letter and put it in her bosom, to be read again. "If my lot had fallen among good people," she thought, "perhaps I might have belonged to the Church which took care of that poor girl."

Her mind was still pursuing its own sad course of inquiry; she was wondering in what part of England Sandyseal might be; she was asking herself if the Nuns at the old moated house ever opened their doors to women, whose one claim on their common Christianity was the claim to be pitied--when she heard Linley's footsteps approaching the door.

His tone was kind; his manner was gentle; his tender interest in her seemed to have revived. Her long absence had alarmed him; he feared she might be ill. "I was only thinking," she said. He smiled, and sat down by her, and asked if she had been thinking of the place that they should go to when they left London.