

**Chapter XXXIII. Mrs. Romsey.**

The one hotel in Sandyseal was full, from the topmost story to the ground floor; and by far the larger half of the landlord's guests were invalids sent to him by the doctors.

To persons of excitable temperament, in search of amusement, the place offered no attractions. Situated at the innermost end of a dull little bay, Sandyseal--so far as any view of the shipping in the Channel was concerned--might have been built on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean. Vessels of any importance kept well out of the way of treacherous shoals and currents lurking at the entrance of the bay. The anchorage ground was good; but the depth of water was suited to small vessels only--to shabby old fishing-smacks which seldom paid their expenses, and to dirty little coasters carrying coals and potatoes. At the back of the hotel, two slovenly rows of cottages took their crooked course inland. Sailing masters of yachts, off duty, sat and yawned at the windows; lazy fishermen looked wearily at the weather over their garden gates; and superfluous coastguards gathered together in a wooden observatory, and leveled useless telescopes at an empty sea. The flat open country, with its few dwarf trees and its mangy hedges, lay prostrate under the sky in all the desolation of solitary space, and left the famous restorative air free to build up dilapidated nerves, without an object to hinder its passage at any point of the compass. The lonely drab-colored road that led to the nearest town offered to visitors, taking airings, a view of a low brown object in the distance, said to be the convent in which the Nuns lived, secluded from mortal eyes. At one side of the hotel, the windows looked on a little wooden pier, sadly in want of repair. On the other side, a walled inclosure accommodated yachts of light tonnage, stripped of their rigging, and sitting solitary on a bank of mud until their owners wanted them. In this neighborhood there was a small outlying colony of shops: one that sold fruit and fish; one that dealt in groceries and tobacco; one shut up, with a bill in the window inviting a tenant; and one, behind the Methodist Chapel, answering the double purpose of a post-office and a storehouse for ropes and coals. Beyond these objects there was nothing (and this was the great charm of the place) to distract the attention of invalids, following the doctor's directions, and from morning to night taking care of their health.

The time was evening; the scene was one of the private sitting-rooms in the

hotel; and the purpose in view was a little tea-party.

Rich Mrs. Romsey, connected with commerce as wife of the chief partner in the firm of Romsey & Renshaw, was staying at the hotel in the interests of her three children. They were of delicate constitution; their complete recovery, after severe illness which had passed from one to the other, was less speedy than had been anticipated; and the doctor had declared that the nervous system was, in each case, more or less in need of repair. To arrive at this conclusion, and to recommend a visit to Sandyseal, were events which followed each other (medically speaking) as a matter of course.

The health of the children had greatly improved; the famous air had agreed with them, and the discovery of new playfellows had agreed with them. They had made acquaintance with Lady Myrie's well-bred boys, and with Mrs. Norman's charming little Kitty. The most cordial good-feeling had established itself among the mothers. Owing a return for hospitalities received from Lady Myrie and Mrs. Norman, Mrs. Romsey had invited the two ladies to drink tea with her in honor of an interesting domestic event. Her husband, absent on the Continent for some time past, on business connected with his firm, had returned to England, and had that evening joined his wife and children at Sandyseal.

Lady Myrie had arrived, and Mr. Romsey had been presented to her. Mrs. Norman, expected to follow, was represented by a courteous note of apology. She was not well that evening, and she begged to be excused.

"This is a great disappointment," Mrs. Romsey said to her husband. "You would have been charmed with Mrs. Norman--highly-bred, accomplished, a perfect lady. And she leaves us to-morrow. The departure will not be an early one; and I shall find an opportunity, my dear, of introducing you to my friend and her sweet little Kitty."

Mr. Romsey looked interested for a moment, when he first heard Mrs. Norman's name. After that, he slowly stirred his tea, and seemed to be thinking, instead of listening to his wife.

"Have you made the lady's acquaintance here?" he inquired.

"Yes--and I hope I have made a friend for life," Mrs. Romsey said with enthusiasm.

"And so do I," Lady Myrie added.

Mr. Romsey went on with his inquiries.

"Is she a handsome woman?"

Both the ladies answered the question together. Lady Myrie described Mrs. Norman, in one dreadful word, as "Classical." By comparison with this, Mrs. Romsey's reply was intelligible. "Not even illness can spoil her beauty!"

"Including the headache she has got to-night?" Mr. Romsey suggested.

"Don't be ill-natured, dear! Mrs. Norman is here by the advice of one of the first physicians in London; she has suffered under serious troubles, poor thing."

Mr. Romsey persisted in being ill-natured. "Connected with her husband?" he asked.

Lady Myrie entered a protest. She was a widow; and it was notorious among her friends that the death of her husband had been the happiest event in her married life. But she understood her duty to herself as a respectable woman.

"I think, Mr. Romsey, you might have spared that cruel allusion," she said with dignity.

Mr. Romsey apologized. He had his reasons for wishing to know something more about Mrs. Norman; he proposed to withdraw his last remark, and to put his inquiries under another form. Might he ask his wife if anybody had seen Mr. Norman?

"No."

"Or heard of him?"

Mrs. Romsey answered in the negative once more, and added a question on her own account. What did all this mean?

"It means," Lady Myrie interposed, "what we poor women are all exposed to--scandal." She had not yet forgiven Mr. Romsey's allusion, and she looked at him pointedly as she spoke. There are some impenetrable men on whom looks produce no impression. Mr. Romsey was one of them. He turned to his wife, and said, quietly: "What I mean is, that I know more of Mrs. Norman than you do. I have heard of her--never mind how or where. She is a lady

who has been celebrated in the newspapers. Don't be alarmed. She is no less a person than the divorced Mrs. Linley."

The two ladies looked at each other in blank dismay. Restrained by a sense of conjugal duty, Mrs. Romsey only indulged in an exclamation. Lady Myrie, independent of restraint, expressed her opinion, and said: "Quite impossible!"

"The Mrs. Norman whom I mean," Mr. Romsey went on, "has, as I have been told, a mother living. The old lady has been twice married. Her name is Mrs. Presty."

This settled the question. Mrs. Presty was established, in her own proper person, with her daughter and grandchild at the hotel. Lady Myrie yielded to the force of evidence; she lifted her hands in horror: "This is too dreadful!"

Mrs. Romsey took a more compassionate view of the disclosure. "Surely the poor lady is to be pitied?" she gently suggested.

Lady Myrie looked at her friend in astonishment. "My dear, you must have forgotten what the judge said about her. Surely you read the report of the case in the newspapers?"

"No; I heard of the trial, and that's all. What did the judge say?"

"Say?" Lady Myrie repeated. "What did he not say! His lordship declared that he had a great mind not to grant the Divorce at all. He spoke of this dreadful woman who has deceived us in the severest terms; he said she had behaved in a most improper manner. She had encouraged the abominable governess; and if her husband had yielded to temptation, it was her fault. And more besides, that I don't remember."

Mr. Romsey's wife appealed to him in despair. "What am I to do?" she asked, helplessly.

"Do nothing," was the wise reply. "Didn't you say she was going away to-morrow?"

"That's the worst of it!" Mrs. Romsey declared. "Her little girl Kitty gives a farewell dinner to-morrow to our children; and I've promised to take them to say good-by."

Lady Myrie pronounced sentence without hesitation. "Of course your girls

mustn't go. Daughters! Think of their reputations when they grow up!"

"Are you in the same scrape with my wife?" Mr. Romsey asked.

Lady Myrie corrected his language. "I have been deceived in the same way," she said. "Though my children are boys (which perhaps makes a difference) I feel it is my duty as a mother not to let them get into bad company. I do nothing myself in an underhand way. No excuses! I shall send a note and tell Mrs. Norman why she doesn't see my boys to-morrow."

"Isn't that a little hard on her?" said merciful Mrs. Romsey.

Mr. Romsey agreed with his wife, on grounds of expediency. "Never make a row if you can help it," was the peaceable principle to which this gentleman committed himself. "Send word that the children have caught colds, and get over it in that way."

Mrs. Romsey looked gratefully at her admirable husband. "Just the thing!" she said, with an air of relief.

Lady Myrie's sense of duty expressed itself, with the strictest adherence to the laws of courtesy. She rose, smiled resignedly, and said, "Good-night."

Almost at the same moment, innocent little Kitty astonished her mother and her grandmother by appearing before them in her night-gown, after she had been put to bed nearly two hours since.

"What will this child do next?" Mrs. Presty exclaimed.

Kitty told the truth. "I can't go to sleep, grandmamma."

"Why not, my darling?" her mother asked.

"I'm so excited, mamma."

"About what, Kitty?"

"About my dinner-party to-morrow. Oh," said the child, clasping her hands earnestly as she thought of her playfellows, "I do so hope it will go off well!"