

Chapter XXXIV. Mrs. Presty.

Belonging to the generation which has lived to see the Age of Hurry, and has no sympathy with it, Mrs. Presty entered the sitting-room at the hotel, two hours before the time that had been fixed for leaving Sandyseal, with her mind at ease on the subject of her luggage. "My boxes are locked, strapped and labeled; I hate being hurried. What's that you're reading?" she asked, discovering a book on her daughter's lap, and a hasty action on her daughter's part, which looked like trying to hide it.

Mrs. Norman made the most common, and--where the object is to baffle curiosity--the most useless of prevaricating replies. When her mother asked her what she was reading she answered: "Nothing."

"Nothing!" Mrs. Presty repeated with an ironical assumption of interest. "The work of all others, Catherine, that I most want to read." She snatched up the book; opened it at the first page, and discovered an inscription in faded ink which roused her indignation. "To dear Catherine, from Herbert, on the anniversary of our marriage." What unintended mockery in those words, read by the later light of the Divorce! "Well, this is mean," said Mrs. Presty. "Keeping that wretch's present, after the public exposure which he has forced on you. Oh, Catherine!"

Catherine was not quite so patient with her mother as usual. "Keeping my best remembrance of the happy time of my life," she answered.

"Misplaced sentiment," Mrs. Presty declared; "I shall put the book out of the way. Your brain is softening, my dear, under the influence of this stupefying place."

Catherine asserted her own opinion against her mother's opinion, for the second time. "I have recovered my health at Sandyseal," she said. "I like the place, and I am sorry to leave it."

"Give me the shop windows, the streets, the life, the racket, and the smoke of London," cried Mrs. Presty. "Thank Heaven, these rooms are let over our heads, and out we must go, whether we like it or not."

This expression of gratitude was followed by a knock at the door, and by a voice outside asking leave to come in, which was, beyond all doubt, the voice of Randal Linley. With Catherine's book still in her possession, Mrs. Presty

opened the table-drawer, threw it in, and closed the drawer with a bang. Discovering the two ladies, Randal stopped in the doorway, and stared at them in astonishment.

"Didn't you expect to see us?" Mrs. Presty inquired.

"I heard you were here, from our friend Sarrazin," Randal said; "but I expected to see Captain Bennydeck. Have I mistaken the number? Surely these are his rooms?"

Catherine attempted to explain. "They were Captain Bennydeck's rooms," she began; "but he was so kind, although we are perfect strangers to him--"

Mrs. Presty interposed. "My dear Catherine, you have not had my advantages; you have not been taught to make a complicated statement in few words. Permit me to seize the points (in the late Mr. Presty's style) and to put them in the strongest light. This place, Randal, is always full; and we didn't write long enough beforehand to secure rooms. Captain Bennydeck happened to be downstairs when he heard that we were obliged to go away, and that one of us was a lady in delicate health. This sweetest of men sent us word that we were welcome to take his rooms, and that he would sleep on board his yacht. Conduct worthy of Sir Charles Grandison himself. When I went downstairs to thank him, he was gone--and here we have been for nearly three weeks; sometimes seeing the Captain's yacht, but, to our great surprise, never seeing the Captain himself."

"There's nothing to be surprised at, Mrs. Presty. Captain Bennydeck likes doing kind things, and hates being thanked for it. I expected him to meet me here to-day."

Catherine went to the window. "He is coming to meet you," she said. "There is his yacht in the bay."

"And in a dead calm," Randal added, joining her. "The vessel will not get here, before I am obliged to go away again."

Catherine looked at him timidly. "Do I drive you away?" she asked, in tones that faltered a little.

Randal wondered what she could possibly be thinking of and acknowledged it in so many words.

"She is thinking of the Divorce," Mrs. Presty explained. "You have heard of it,

of course; and perhaps you take your brother's part?"

"I do nothing of the sort, ma'am. My brother has been in the wrong from first to last." He turned to Catherine. "I will stay with you as long as I can, with the greatest pleasure," he said earnestly and kindly. "The truth is, I am on my way to visit some friends; and if Captain Bennydeck had got here in time to see me, I must have gone away to the junction to catch the next train westward, just as I am going now. I had only two words to say to the Captain about a person in whom he is interested--and I can say them in this way." He wrote in pencil on one of his visiting cards, and laid it on the table. "I shall be back in London, in a week," he resumed, "and you will tell me at what address I can find you. In the meanwhile, I miss Kitty. Where is she?"

Kitty was sent for. She entered the room looking unusually quiet and subdued--but, discovering Randal, became herself again in a moment, and jumped on his knee.

"Oh, Uncle Randal, I'm so glad to see you!" She checked herself, and looked at her mother. "May I call him Uncle Randal?" she asked. "Or has he changed his name, too?"

Mrs. Presty shook a warning forefinger at her granddaughter, and reminded Kitty that she had been told not to talk about names. Randal saw the child's look of bewilderment, and felt for her. "She may talk as she pleases to me," he said "but not to strangers. She understands that, I am sure."

Kitty laid her cheek fondly against her uncle's cheek. "Everything is changed," she whispered. "We travel about; papa has left us, and Syd has left us, and we have got a new name. We are Norman now. I wish I was grown up, and old enough to understand it."

Randal tried to reconcile her to her own happy ignorance. "You have got your dear good mother," he said, "and you have got me, and you have got your toys--"

"And some nice boys and girls to play with," cried Kitty, eagerly following the new suggestion. "They are all coming here directly to dine with me. You will stay and have dinner too, won't you?"

Randal promised to dine with Kitty when they met in London. Before he left the room he pointed to his card on the table. "Let my friend see that message," he said, as he went out.

The moment the door had closed on him, Mrs. Presty startled her daughter by taking up the card and looking at what Randal had written on it. "It isn't a letter, Catherine; and you know how superior I am to common prejudices." With that defense of her proceeding, she coolly read the message:

"I am sorry to say that I can tell you nothing more of your old friend's daughter as yet. I can only repeat that she neither needs nor deserves the help that you kindly offer to her."

Mrs. Presty laid the card down again and owned that she wished Randal had been a little more explicit. "Who can it be?" she wondered. "Another young hussy gone wrong?"

Kitty turned to her mother with a look of alarm. "What's a hussy?" she asked. "Does grandmamma mean me?" The great hotel clock in the hall struck two, and the child's anxieties took a new direction. "Isn't it time my little friends came to see me?" she said.

It was half an hour past the time. Catherine proposed to send to Lady Myrie and Mrs. Romsey, and inquire if anything had happened to cause the delay. As she told Kitty to ring the bell, the waiter came in with two letters, addressed to Mrs. Norman.

Mrs. Presty had her own ideas, and drew her own conclusions. She watched Catherine attentively. Even Kitty observed that her mother's face grew paler and paler as she read the letters. "You look as if you were frightened, mamma." There was no reply. Kitty began to feel so uneasy on the subject of her dinner and her guests, that she actually ventured on putting a question to her grandmother.

"Will they be long, do you think, before they come?" she asked.

The old lady's worldly wisdom had passed, by this time from a state of suspicion to a state of certainty. "My child," she answered, "they won't come at all."

Kitty ran to her mother, eager to inquire if what Mrs. Presty had told her could possibly be true. Before a word had passed her lips, she shrank back, too frightened to speak.

Never, in her little experience, had she been startled by such a look in her mother's face as the look that confronted her now. For the first time Catherine saw her child trembling at the sight of her. Before that discovery,

the emotions that shook her under the insult which she had received lost their hold. She caught Kitty up in her arms. "My darling, my angel, it isn't you I am thinking of. I love you!--I love you! In the whole world there isn't such a good child, such a sweet, lovable, pretty child as you are. Oh, how disappointed she looks--she's crying. Don't break my heart!--don't cry!" Kitty held up her head, and cleared her eyes with a dash of her hand. "I won't cry, mamma." And child as she was, she was as good as her word. Her mother looked at her and burst into tears.

Perversely reluctant, the better nature that was in Mrs. Presty rose to the surface, forced to show itself. "Cry, Catherine," she said kindly; "it will do you good. Leave the child to me."

With a gentleness that astonished Kitty, she led her little granddaughter to the window, and pointed to the public walk in front of the house. "I know what will comfort you," the wise old woman began; "look out of the window." Kitty obeyed.

"I don't see my little friends coming," she said. Mrs. Presty still pointed to some object on the public walk. "That's better than nothing, isn't it?" she persisted. "Come with me to the maid; she shall go with you, and take care of you." Kitty whispered, "May I give mamma a kiss first?" Sensible Mrs. Presty delayed the kiss for a while. "Wait till you come back, and then you can tell your mamma what a treat you have had." Arrived at the door on their way out, Kitty whispered again: "I want to say something"--"Well, what is it?"--"Will you tell the donkey-boy to make him gallop?"--"I'll tell the boy he shall have sixpence if you are satisfied; and you will see what he does then." Kitty looked up earnestly in her grandmother's face. "What a pity it is you are not always like what you are now!" she said. Mrs. Presty actually blushed.