

Chapter XXXV. Captain Bennydeck.

For some time, Catherine and her mother had been left together undisturbed.

Mrs. Presty had read (and destroyed) the letters of Lady Myrie and Mrs. Romsey, with the most unfeigned contempt for the writers--had repeated what the judge had really said, as distinguished from Lady Myrie's malicious version of it--and had expressed her intention of giving Catherine a word of advice, when she was sufficiently composed to profit by it. "You have recovered your good looks, after that fit of crying," Mrs. Presty admitted, "but not your good spirits. What is worrying you now?"

"I can't help thinking of poor Kitty."

"My dear, the child wants nobody's pity. She's blowing away all her troubles by a ride in the fresh air, on the favorite donkey that she feeds every morning. Yes, yes, you needn't tell me you are in a false position; and nobody can deny that it's shameful to make the child feel it. Now listen to me. Properly understood, those two spiteful women have done you a kindness. They have as good as told you how to protect yourself in the time to come. Deceive the vile world, Catherine, as it deserves to be deceived. Shelter yourself behind a respectable character that will spare you these insults in the future." In the energy of her conviction, Mrs. Presty struck her fist on the table, and finished in three audacious words: "Be a Widow!"

It was plainly said--and yet Catherine seemed to be at a loss to understand what her mother meant.

"Don't doubt about it," Mrs. Presty went on; "do it. Think of Kitty if you won't think of yourself. In a few years more she will be a young lady. She may have an offer of marriage which may be everything we desire. Suppose her sweetheart's family is a religious family; and suppose your Divorce, and the judge's remarks on it, are discovered. What will happen then?"

"Is it possible that you are in earnest?" Catherine asked. "Have you seriously thought of the advice that you are giving me? Setting aside the deceit, you know as well as I do that Kitty would ask questions. Do you think I can tell my child that her father is dead? A lie--and such a dreadful lie as that?"

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Presty..

"Nonsense?" Catherine repeated indignantly.

"Rank nonsense," her mother persisted. "Hasn't your situation forced you to lie already? When the child asks why her father and her governess have left us, haven't you been obliged to invent excuses which are lies? If the man who was once your husband isn't as good as dead to you, I should like to know what your Divorce means! My poor dear, do you think you can go on as you are going on now? How many thousands of people have read the newspaper account of the trial? How many hundreds of people--interested in a handsome woman like you--will wonder why they never see Mr. Norman? What? You will go abroad again? Go where you may, you will attract attention; you will make an enemy of every ugly woman who looks at you. Strain at a gnat, Catherine, and swallow a camel. It's only a question of time. Sooner or later you will be a Widow. Here's the waiter again. What does the man want now?"

The waiter answered by announcing:

"Captain Bennydeck."

Catherine's mother was nearer to the door than Catherine; she attracted the Captain's attention first. He addressed his apologies to her. "Pray excuse me for disturbing you--"

Mrs. Presty had an eye for a handsome man, irrespective of what his age might be. In the language of the conjurers a "magic change" appeared in her; she became brightly agreeable in a moment.

"Oh, Captain Bennydeck, you mustn't make excuses for coming into your own room!"

Captain Bennydeck went on with his excuses, nevertheless. "The landlady tells me that I have unluckily missed seeing Mr. Randal Linley, and that he has left a message for me. I shouldn't otherwise have ventured--"

Mrs. Presty stopped him once more. The Captain's claim to the Captain's rooms was the principle on which she took her stand. She revived the irresistible smiles which had conquered Mr. Norman and Mr. Presty. "No ceremony, I beg and pray! You are at home here--take the easy-chair!"

Catherine advanced a few steps; it was time to stop her mother, if the thing could be done. She felt just embarrassment enough to heighten her color,

and to show her beauty to the greatest advantage. It literally staggered the Captain, the moment he looked at her. His customary composure, as a well-bred man, deserted him; he bowed confusedly; he had not a word to say. Mrs. Presty seized her opportunity, and introduced them to each other. "My daughter Mrs. Norman--Captain Bennydeck." Compassionating him under the impression that he was a shy man, Catherine tried to set him at his ease. "I am indeed glad to have an opportunity of thanking you," she said, inviting him by a gesture to be seated. "In this delightful air, I have recovered my health, and I owe it to your kindness."

The Captain regained his self-possession. Expressions of gratitude had been addressed to him which, in his modest estimate of himself, he could not feel that he had deserved.

"You little know," he replied, "under what interested motives I have acted. When I established myself in this hotel, I was fairly driven out of my yacht by a guest who went sailing with me."

Mrs. Presty became deeply interested. "Dear me, what did he do?"

Captain Bennydeck answered gravely: "He snored."

Catherine was amused; Mrs. Presty burst out laughing; the Captain's dry humor asserted itself as quaintly as ever. "This is no laughing matter," he resumed, looking at Catherine. "My vessel is a small one. For two nights the awful music of my friend's nose kept me sleepless. When I woke him, and said, 'Don't snore,' he apologized in the sweetest manner, and began again. On the third day I anchored in the bay here, determined to get a night's rest on shore. A dispute about the price of these rooms offered them to me. I sent a note of apology on board--and slept peacefully. The next morning, my sailing master informed me that there had been what he called 'a little swell in the night.' He reported the sounds made by my friend on this occasion to have been the awful sounds of seasickness. 'The gentleman left the yacht, sir, the first thing this morning,' he said; 'and he's gone home by railway.' On the day when you happened to arrive, my cabin was my own again; and I can honestly thank you for relieving me of my rooms. Do you make a long stay, Mrs. Norman?"

Catherine answered that they were going to London by the next train. Seeing Randal's card still unnoticed on the table, she handed it to the Captain.

"Is Mr. Linley an old friend of yours?" he asked, as he took the card.

Mrs. Presty hastened to answer in the affirmative for her daughter. It was plain that Randal had discreetly abstained from mentioning his true connection with them. Would he preserve the same silence if the Captain spoke of his visit to Mrs. Norman, when he and his friend met next? Mrs. Presty's mind might have been at ease on that subject, if she had known how to appreciate Randal's character and Randal's motives. The same keen sense of the family disgrace, which had led him to conceal from Captain Bennydeck his brother's illicit relations with Sydney Westerfield, had compelled him to keep secret his former association, as brother-in-law, with the divorced wife. Her change of name had hitherto protected her from discovery by the Captain, and would in all probability continue to protect her in the future. The good Bennydeck had been enjoying himself at sea when the Divorce was granted, and when the newspapers reported the proceedings. He rarely went to his club, and he never associated with persons of either sex to whom gossip and scandal are as the breath of their lives. Ignorant of these circumstances, and remembering what had happened on that day, Mrs. Presty looked at him with some anxiety on her daughter's account, while he was reading the message on Randal's card. There was little to see. His fine face expressed a quiet sorrow, and he sighed as he put the card back in his pocket.

An interval of silence followed. Captain Bennydeck was thinking over the message which he had just read. Catherine and her mother were looking at him with the same interest, inspired by very different motives. The interview so pleasantly begun was in some danger of lapsing into formality and embarrassment, when a new personage appeared on the scene.

Kitty had returned in triumph from her ride. "Mamma! the donkey did more than gallop--he kicked, and I fell off. Oh, I'm not hurt!" cried the child, seeing the alarm in her mother's face. "Tumbling off is such a funny sensation. It isn't as if you fell on the ground; it's as if the ground came up to you and said--Bump!" She had got as far as that, when the progress of her narrative was suspended by the discovery of a strange gentleman in the room.

The smile that brightened the captain's face, when Kitty opened the door, answered for him as a man who loved children. "Your little girl, Mrs. Norman?" he said.

"Yes."

(A common question and a common reply. Nothing worth noticing, in either the one or the other, at the time--and yet they proved to be important

enough to turn Catherine's life into a new course.)

In the meanwhile, Kitty had been whispering to her mother. She wanted to know the strange gentleman's name. The Captain heard her. "My name is Bennydeck," he said; "will you come to me?"

Kitty had heard the name mentioned in connection with a yacht. Like all children, she knew a friend the moment she looked at him. "I've seen your pretty boat, sir," she said, crossing the room to Captain Bennydeck. "Is it very nice when you go sailing?"

"If you were not going back to London, my dear, I should ask your mamma to let me take you sailing with me. Perhaps we shall have another opportunity."

The Captain's answer delighted Kitty. "Oh, yes, tomorrow or next day!" she suggested. "Do you know where to find me in London? Mamma, where do I live, when I am in London?" Before her mother could answer, she hit on a new idea. "Don't tell me; I'll find it for myself. It's on grandmamma's boxes, and they're in the passage."

Captain Bennydeck's eyes followed her, as she left the room, with an expression of interest which more than confirmed the favorable impression that he had already produced on Catherine. She was on the point of asking if he was married, and had children of his own, when Kitty came back, and declared the right address to be Buck's Hotel, Sydenham. "Mamma puts things down for fear of forgetting them," she added. "Will you put down Buck?"

The Captain took out his pocketbook, and appealed pleasantly to Mrs. Norman. "May I follow your example?" he asked. Catherine not only humored the little joke, but, gratefully remembering his kindness, said: "Don't forget, when you are in London, that Kitty's invitation is my invitation, too." At the same moment, punctual Mrs. Presty looked at her watch, and reminded her daughter that railways were not in the habit of allowing passengers to keep them waiting. Catherine rose, and gave her hand to the Captain at parting. Kitty improved on her mother's form of farewell; she gave him a kiss and whispered a little reminder of her own: "There's a river in London--don't forget your boat."

Captain Bennydeck opened the door for them, secretly wishing that he could follow Mrs. Norman to the station and travel by the same train.

Mrs. Presty made no attempt to remind him that she was still in the room. Where her family interests were concerned, the old lady was capable (on very slight encouragement) of looking a long way into the future. She was looking into the future now. The Captain's social position was all that could be desired; he was evidently in easy pecuniary circumstances; he admired Catherine and Catherine's child. If he only proved to be a single man, Mrs. Presty's prophetic soul, without waiting an instant to reflect, perceived a dazzling future. Captain Bennydeck approached to take leave. "Not just yet," pleaded the most agreeable of women; "my luggage was ready two hours ago. Sit down again for a few minutes. You seem to like my little granddaughter."

"If I had such a child as that," the Captain answered, "I believe I should be the happiest man living."

"Ah, my dear sir, all isn't gold that glitters," Mrs. Presty remarked. "That proverb must have been originally intended to apply to children. May I presume to make you the subject of a guess? I fancy you are not a married man."

The Captain looked a little surprised. "You are quite right," he said; "I have never been married."

At a later period, Mrs. Presty owned that she felt an inclination to reward him for confessing himself to be a bachelor, by a kiss. He innocently checked that impulse by putting a question. "Had you any particular reason," he asked, "for guessing that I was a single man?"

Mrs. Presty modestly acknowledged that she had only her own experience to help her. "You wouldn't be quite so fond of other people's children," she said, "if you were a married man. Ah, your time will come yet--I mean your wife will come."

He answered this sadly. "My time has gone by. I have never had the opportunities that have been granted to some favored men." He thought of the favored man who had married Mrs. Norman. Was her husband worthy of his happiness? "Is Mr. Norman with you at this place?" the Captain asked.

Serious issues depended on the manner in which this question was answered. For one moment, and for one moment only, Mrs. Presty hesitated. Then (in her daughter's interest, of course) she put Catherine in the position of a widow, in the least blamable of all possible ways, by honestly owning the truth.

"There is no Mr. Norman," she said.

"Your daughter is a widow!" cried the Captain, perfectly unable to control his delight at that discovery.

"What else should she be?" Mrs. Presty replied, facetiously.

What else, indeed! If "no Mr. Norman" meant (as it must surely mean) that Mr. Norman was dead, and if the beautiful mother of Kitty was an honest woman, her social position was beyond a doubt. Captain Bennydeck felt a little ashamed of his own impetuosity. Before he had made up his mind what to say next, the unlucky waiter (doomed to be a cause of disturbance on that day) appeared again.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said; "the lady and gentleman who have taken these rooms have just arrived."

Mrs. Presty got up in a hurry, and cordially shook hands with the Captain. Looking round, she took up the railway guide and her knitting left on the table. Was there anything else left about? There was nothing to be seen. Mrs. Presty crossed the passage to her daughter's bedroom, to hurry the packing. Captain Bennydeck went downstairs, on his way back to the yacht.

In the hall of the hotel he passed the lady and gentleman--and, of course, noticed the lady. She was little and dark and would have been pretty, if she had not looked ill and out of spirits. What would he have said, what would he have done, if he had known that those two strangers were Randal Linley's brother and Roderick Westerfield's daughter?