

Chapter XXXVI. Mr. and Mrs. Herbert.

The stealthy influence of distrust fastens its hold on the mind by slow degrees. Little by little it reaches its fatal end, and disguises delusion successfully under the garb of truth.

Day after day, the false conviction grew on Sydney's mind that Herbert Linley was comparing the life he led now with the happier life which he remembered at Mount Morven. Day after day, her unreasoning fear contemplated the time when Herbert Linley would leave her friendless, in the world that had no place in it for women like herself. Delusion--fatal delusion that looked like truth! Morally weak as he might be, the man whom she feared to trust had not yet entirely lost the sense which birth and breeding had firmly fastened in him--the sense of honor. Acting under that influence, he was (if the expression may be permitted) consistent even in inconsistency. With equal sincerity of feeling, he reproached himself for his infidelity toward the woman whom he had deserted, and devoted himself to his duty toward the woman whom he had misled. In Sydney's presence--suffer as he might under the struggle to maintain his resolution when he was alone--he kept his intercourse with her studiously gentle in manner, and considerate in language; his conduct offered assurances for the future which she could only see through the falsifying medium of her own distrust.

In the delusion that now possessed her she read, over and over again, the letter which Captain Bennydeck had addressed to her father; she saw, more and more clearly, the circumstances which associated her situation with the situation of the poor girl who had closed her wasted life among the nuns in a French convent.

Two results followed on this state of things.

When Herbert asked to what part of England they should go, on leaving London, she mentioned Sandysal as a place that she had heard of, and felt some curiosity to see. The same day--bent on pleasing her, careless where he lived now, at home or abroad--he wrote to engage rooms at the hotel.

A time followed, during which they were obliged to wait until rooms were free. In this interval, brooding over the melancholy absence of a friend or relative in whom she could confide, her morbid dread of the future decided her on completing the parallel between herself and that other lost creature of whom she had read. Sydney opened communication anonymously with

the Benedictine community at Sandyseal.

She addressed the Mother Superior; telling the truth about herself with but one concealment, the concealment of names. She revealed her isolated position among her fellow-creatures; she declared her fervent desire to repent of her wickedness, and to lead a religious life; she acknowledged her misfortune in having been brought up by persons careless of religion, and she confessed to having attended a Protestant place of worship, as a mere matter of form connected with the duties of a teacher at a school. "The religion of any Christian woman who will help me to be more like herself," she wrote, "is the religion to which I am willing and eager to belong. If I come to you in my distress, will you receive me?" To that simple appeal, she added a request that an answer might be addressed to "S.W., Post-office, Sandyseal."

When Captain Bennydeck and Sydney Westerfield passed each other as strangers, in the hall of the hotel, that letter had been posted in London a week since.

The servant showed "Mr. and Mrs. Herbert" into their sitting-room, and begged that they would be so good as to wait for a few minutes, while the other rooms were being prepared for them.

Sydney seated herself in silence. She was thinking of her letter, and wondering whether a reply was waiting for her at the post-office.

Moving toward the window to look at the view, Herbert paused to examine some prints hanging on the walls, which were superior as works of art to the customary decorations of a room at a hotel. If he had gone straight to the window he might have seen his divorced wife, his child, and his wife's mother, getting into the carriage which took them to the railway station.

"Come, Sydney," he said, "and look at the sea."

She joined him wearily, with a faint smile. It was a calm, sunny day. Bathing machines were on the beach; children were playing here and there; and white sails of pleasure boats were visible in the offing. The dullness of Sandyseal wore a quiet homely aspect which was pleasant to the eyes of strangers. Sydney said, absently, "I think I shall like the place." And Herbert added: "Let us hope that the air will make you feel stronger." He meant it and said it kindly--but, instead of looking at her while he spoke, he

continued to look at the view. A woman sure of her position would not have allowed this trifling circumstance, even if she had observed it, to disturb her. Sydney thought of the day in London when he had persisted in looking out at the street, and returned in silence to her chair.

Had he been so unfortunate as to offend her? And in what way? As that doubt occurred to Herbert his mind turned to Catherine. She never took offense at trifles; a word of kindness from him, no matter how unimportant it might be, always claimed affectionate acknowledgment in the days when he was living with his wife. In another moment he had dismissed that remembrance, and could trust himself to return to Sydney.

"If you find that Sandyseal confirms your first impression," he said, "let me know it in time, so that I may make arrangements for a longer stay. I have only taken the rooms here for a fortnight."

"Thank you, Herbert; I think a fortnight will be long enough."

"Long enough for you?" he asked.

Her morbid sensitiveness mistook him again; she fancied there was an undertone of irony in his tone.

"Long enough for both of us," she replied.

He drew a chair to her side. "Do you take it for granted," he said, smiling, "that I shall get tired of the place first?"

She shrank, poor creature, even from his smile. There was, as she thought, something contemptuous in the good-humor of it.

"We have been to many places," she reminded him, "and we have got tired of them together."

"Is that my fault?"

"I didn't say it was."

He got up and approached the bell. "I think the journey has a little over-tired you," he resumed. "Would you like to go to your room?"

"I will go to my room, if you wish it."

He waited a little, and answered her as quietly as ever. "What I really wish," he said, "is that we had consulted a doctor while we were in London. You seem to be very easily irritated of late. I observe a change in you, which I willingly attribute to the state of your health--"

She interrupted him. "What change do you mean?"

"It's quite possible I may be mistaken, Sydney. But I have more than once, as I think, seen something in your manner which suggests that you distrust me."

"I distrust the evil life we are leading," she burst out, "and I see the end of it coming. Oh, I don't blame you! You are kind and considerate, you do your best to hide it; but you have lived long enough with me to regret the woman whom you have lost. You begin to feel the sacrifice you have made--and no wonder. Say the word, Herbert, and I release you."

"I will never say the word!"

She hesitated--first inclined, then afraid, to believe him. "I have grace enough left in me," she went on, "to feel the bitterest repentance for the wrong that I have done to Mrs. Linley. When it ends, as it must end, in our parting, will you ask your wife--?"

Even his patience began to fail him; he refused--firmly, not angrily--to hear more. "She is no longer my wife," he said.

Sydney's bitterness and Sydney's penitence were mingled, as opposite emotions only can be mingled in a woman's breast. "Will you ask your wife to forgive you?" she persisted.

"After we have been divorced at her petition?" He pointed to the window as he said it. "Look at the sea. If I was drowning out yonder, I might as well ask the sea to forgive me."

He produced no effect on her. She ignored the Divorce; her passionate remorse asserted itself as obstinately as ever. "Mrs. Linley is a good woman," she insisted; "Mrs. Linley is a Christian woman."

"I have lost all claim on her--even the claim to remember her virtues," he answered, sternly. "No more of it, Sydney! I am sorry I have disappointed you; I am sorry if you are weary of me."

At those last words her manner changed. "Wound me as cruelly as you please," she said, humbly. "I will try to bear it."

"I wouldn't wound you for the world! Why do you persist in distressing me? Why do you feel suspicion of me which I have not deserved?" He stopped, and held out his hand. "Don't let us quarrel, Sydney. Which will you do? Keep your bad opinion of me, or give me a fair trial?"

She loved him dearly; she was so young--and the young are so ready to hope! Still, she struggled against herself. "Herbert! is it your pity for me that is speaking now?"

He left her in despair. "It's useless!" he said, sadly. "Nothing will conquer your inveterate distrust."

She followed him. With a faint cry of entreaty she made him turn to her, and held him in a trembling embrace, and rested her head on his bosom. "Forgive me--be patient with me--love me." That was all she could say.

He attempted to calm her agitation by speaking lightly. "At last, Sydney, we are friends again!" he said.

Friends? All the woman in her recoiled from that insufficient word. "Are we Lovers?" she whispered.

"Yes!"

With that assurance her anxious heart was content. She smiled; she looked out at the sea with a new appreciation of the view. "The air of this place will do me good now," she said. "Are my eyes red, Herbert? Let me go and bathe them, and make myself fit to be seen."

She rang the bell. The chambermaid answered it, ready to show the other rooms. She turned round at the door.

"Let's try to make our sitting-room look like home," she suggested. "How dismal, how dreadfully like a thing that doesn't belong to us, that empty table looks! Put some of your books and my keepsakes on it, while I am away. I'll bring my work with me when I come back."

He had left his travelers' bag on a chair, when he first came in. Now that he was alone, and under no restraint, he sighed as he unlocked the bag. "Home?" he repeated; "we have no home. Poor girl! poor unhappy girl! Let me

help her to deceive herself."

He opened the bag. The little fragile presents, which she called her "keepsakes," had been placed by her own hands in the upper part of the bag, so that the books should not weigh on them, and had been carefully protected by wrappings of cotton wool. Taking them out, one by one, Herbert found a delicate china candlestick (intended to hold a wax taper) broken into two pieces, in spite of the care that had been taken to preserve it. Of no great value in itself, old associations made the candlestick precious to Sydney. It had been broken at the stem and could be easily mended so as to keep the accident concealed. Consulting the waiter, Herbert discovered that the fracture could be repaired at the nearest town, and that the place would be within reach when he went out for a walk. In fear of another disaster, if he put it back in the bag, he opened a drawer in the table, and laid the two fragments carefully inside, at the further end. In doing this, his hand touched something that had been already placed in the drawer. He drew it out, and found that it was a book--the same book that Mrs. Presty (surely the evil genius of the family again!) had hidden from Randal's notice, and had forgotten when she left the hotel.

Herbert instantly recognized the gilding on the cover, imitated from a design invented by himself. He remembered the inscription, and yet he read it again:

"To dear Catherine, from Herbert, on the anniversary of our marriage."

The book dropped from his hand on the table, as if it had been a new discovery, torturing him with a new pain.

His wife (he persisted in thinking of her as his wife) must have occupied the room--might perhaps have been the person whom he had succeeded, as a guest at the hotel. Did she still value his present to her, in remembrance of old times? No! She valued it so little that she had evidently forgotten it. Perhaps her maid might have included it among the small articles of luggage when they left home, or dear little Kitty might have put it into one of her mother's trunks. In any case, there it was now, abandoned in the drawer of a table at a hotel.

"Oh," he thought bitterly, "if I could only feel as coldly toward Catherine as she feels toward me!" His resolution had resisted much; but this final trial of his self-control was more than he could sustain. He dropped into a chair--his pride of manhood recoiled from the contemptible weakness of crying--he tried to remember that she had divorced him, and taken his child from him.

In vain! in vain! He burst into tears.