

Chapter XXXVII. Mrs. Norman.

With a heart lightened by reconciliation (not the first reconciliation unhappily), with hopes revived, and sweet content restored, Sydney's serenity of mind was not quite unruffled. Her thoughts were not dwelling on the evil life which she had honestly deplored, or on the wronged wife to whom she had been eager to make atonement. Where is the woman whose sorrows are not thrown into the shade by the bright renewal of love? The one anxiety that troubled Sydney was caused by remembrance of the letter which she had sent to the convent at Sandyseal.

As her better mind now viewed it, she had doubly injured Herbert--first in distrusting him; then by appealing from him to the compassion of strangers.

If the reply for which she had rashly asked was waiting for her at that moment--if the mercy of the Mother Superior was ready to comfort and guide her--what return could she make? how could she excuse herself from accepting what was offered in kindly reply to her own petition? She had placed herself, for all she knew to the contrary, between two alternatives of ingratitude equally unendurable, equally degrading. To feel this was to feel the suspense which, to persons of excitable temperament, is of all trials the hardest to bear. The chambermaid was still in her room--Sydney asked if the post-office was near to the hotel.

The woman smiled. "Everything is near us, ma'am, in this little place. Can we send to the post-office for you?"

Sydney wrote her initials. "Ask, if you please, for a letter addressed in that way." She handed the memorandum to the chambermaid. "Corresponding with her lover under her husband's nose!" That was how the chambermaid explained it below stairs, when the porter remarked that initials looked mysterious.

The Mother Superior had replied. Sydney trembled as she opened the letter. It began kindly.

"I believe you, my child, and I am anxious to help you. But I cannot correspond with an unknown person. If you decide to reveal yourself, it is only right to add that I have shown your letter to the Reverend Father who, in temporal as in spiritual things, is our counselor and guide. To him I must refer you, in the first instance. His wisdom will decide the serious question

of receiving you into our Holy Church, and will discover, in due time, if you have a true vocation to a religious life. With the Father's sanction, you may be sure of my affectionate desire to serve you."

Sydney put the letter back in the envelope, feeling gratefully toward the Mother Superior, but determined by the conditions imposed on her to make no further advance toward the Benedictine community.

Even if her motive in writing to the convent had remained unchallenged, the allusions to the priest would still have decided her on taking this step. The bare idea of opening her inmost heart, and telling her saddest secrets, to a man, and that man a stranger, was too repellent to be entertained for a moment. In a few lines of reply, gratefully and respectfully written, she thanked the Mother Superior, and withdrew from the correspondence.

The letter having been closed, and posted in the hotel box, she returned to the sitting-room free from the one doubt that had troubled her; eager to show Herbert how truly she believed in him, how hopefully she looked to the future.

With a happy smile on her lips she opened the door. She was on the point of asking him playfully if he had felt surprised at her long absence--when the sight that met her eyes turned her cold with terror in an instant.

His arms were stretched out on the table; his head was laid on them, despair confessed itself in his attitude; grief spoke in the deep sobbing breaths that shook him. Love and compassion restored Sydney's courage; she advanced to raise him in her arms--and stopped once more. The book on the table caught her eye. He was still unconscious of her presence; she ventured to open it. She read the inscription--looked at him--looked back at the writing--and knew the truth at last.

The rigor of the torture that she suffered paralyzed all outward expression of pain. Quietly she put the book back on the table. Quietly she touched him, and called him by his name.

He started and looked up; he made an attempt to speak to her in his customary tone. "I didn't hear you come in," he said.

She pointed to the book, without the slightest change in her face or her manner.

"I have read the inscription to your wife," she answered; "I have seen you

while you thought you were alone; the mercy which has so long kept the truth from me is mercy wasted now. Your bonds are broken, Herbert. You are a free man."

He affected not to have understood her. She let him try to persuade her of it, and made no reply. He declared, honestly declared, that what she had said distressed him. She listened in submissive silence. He took her hand, and kissed it. She let him kiss it, and let him drop it at her side. She frightened him; he began to fear for her reason. There was silence--long, horrid, hopeless silence.

She had left the door of the room open. One of the servants of the hotel appeared outside in the passage. He spoke to some person behind him. "Perhaps the book has been left in here," he suggested. A gentle voice answered: "I hope the lady and gentleman will excuse me, if I ask leave to look for my book." She stepped into the room to make her apologies.

Herbert Linley and Sydney Westerfield looked at the woman whom they had outraged. The woman whom they had outraged paused, and looked back at them.

The hotel servant was surprised at their not speaking to each other. He was a stupid man; he thought the gentlefolks were strangely unlike gentlefolks in general; they seemed not to know what to say. Herbert happened to be standing nearest to him; he felt that it would be civil to the gentleman to offer a word of explanation.

"The lady had these rooms, sir. She has come back from the station to look for a book that has been left behind."

Herbert signed to him to go. As the man turned to obey, he drew back. Sydney had moved to the door before him, to leave the room. Herbert refused to permit it. "Stay here," he said to her gently; "this room is yours."

Sydney hesitated. Herbert addressed her again. He pointed to his divorced wife. "You see how that lady is looking at you," he said; "I beg that you will not submit to insult from anybody."

Sydney obeyed him: she returned to the room.

Catherine's voice was heard for the first time. She addressed herself to Sydney with a quiet dignity--far removed from anger, further removed still from contempt.

"You were about to leave the room," she said. "I notice--as an act of justice to you--that my presence arouses some sense of shame."

Herbert turned to Sydney; trying to recover herself, she stood near the table. "Give me the book," he said; "the sooner this comes to an end the better for her, the better for us." Sydney gave him the book. With a visible effort, he matched Catherine's self-control; after all, she had remembered his gift! He offered the book to her.

She still kept her eyes fixed on Sydney--still spoke to Sydney.

"Tell him," she said, "that I refuse to receive the book."

Sydney attempted to obey. At the first words she uttered, Herbert checked her once more.

"I have begged you already not to submit to insult." He turned to Catherine. "The book is yours, madam. Why do you refuse to take it?"

She looked at him for the first time. A proud sense of wrong flashed at him its keenly felt indignation in her first glance. "Your hands and her hands have touched it," she answered. "I leave it to you and to her."

Those words stung him. "Contempt," he said, "is bitter indeed on your lips."

"Do you presume to resent my contempt?"

"I forbid you to insult Miss Westerfield." With that reply, he turned to Sydney. "You shall not suffer while I can prevent it," he said tenderly, and approached to put his arm round her. She looked at Catherine, and drew back from his embrace, gently repelling him by a gesture.

Catherine felt and respected the true delicacy, the true penitence, expressed in that action. She advanced to Sydney. "Miss Westerfield," she said, "I will take the book--from you."

Sydney gave back the book without a word; in her position silence was the truest gratitude. Quietly and firmly Catherine removed the blank leaf on which Herbert had written, and laid it before him on the table. "I return your inscription. It means nothing now." Those words were steadily pronounced; not the slightest appearance of temper accompanied them. She moved slowly to the door and looked back at Sydney. "Make some allowance for

what I have suffered," she said gently. "If I have wounded you, I regret it." The faint sound of her dress on the carpet was heard in the perfect stillness, and lost again. They saw her no more.

Herbert approached Sydney. It was a moment when he was bound to assure her of his sympathy. He felt for her. In his inmost heart he felt for her. As he drew nearer, he saw tears in her eyes; but they seemed to have risen without her knowledge. Hardly conscious of his presence, she stood before him--lost in thought.

He endeavored to rouse her. "Did I protect you from insult?" he asked.

She said absently: "Yes!"

"Will you do as I do, dear? Will you try to forget?"

She said: "I will try to atone," and moved toward the door of her room. The reply surprised him; but it was no time then to ask for an explanation.

"Would you like to lie down, Sydney, and rest?"

"Yes."

She took his arm. He led her to the door of her room. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked.

"Nothing, thank you."

She closed the door--and abruptly opened it again. "One thing more," she said. "Kiss me."

He kissed her tenderly. Returning to the sitting-room, he looked back across the passage. Her door was shut.

His head was heavy; his mind felt confused. He threw himself on the sofa--utterly exhausted by the ordeal through which he had passed. In grief, in fear, in pain, the time still comes when Nature claims her rights. The wretched worn-out man fell into a restless sleep. He was awakened by the waiter, laying the cloth for dinner. "It's just ready, sir," the servant announced; "shall I knock at the lady's door?"

Herbert got up and went to her room.

He entered softly, fearing to disturb her if she too had slept. No sign of her was to be seen. She had evidently not rested on her bed. A morsel of paper lay on the smooth coverlet. There was only a line written on it: "You may yet be happy--and it may perhaps be my doing."

He stood, looking at that last line of her writing, in the empty room. His despair and his submission spoke in the only words that escaped him:

"I have deserved it!"