

Chapter XXXIX. Listen to Reason.

Not having heard from Captain Bennydeck for some little time, Randal thought it desirable in Sydney's interests to make inquiries at his club. Nothing was known of the Captain's movements there. On the chance of getting the information that he wanted, Randal wrote to the hotel at Sandyseal.

The landlord's reply a little surprised him.

Some days since, the yacht had again appeared in the bay. Captain Bennydeck had landed, to all appearance in fairly good health; and had left by an early train for London. The sailing-master announced that he had orders to take the vessel back to her port--with no other explanation than that the cruise was over. This alternative in the Captain's plans (terminating the voyage a month earlier than his arrangements had contemplated) puzzled Randal. He called at his friend's private residence, only to hear from the servants that they had seen nothing of their master. Randal waited a while in London, on the chance that Bennydeck might pay him a visit.

During this interval his patience was rewarded in an unexpected manner. He discovered the Captain's address by means of a letter from Catherine, dated "Buck's Hotel, Sydenham." Having gently reproached him for not writing to her or calling on her, she invited him to dinner at the hotel. Her letter concluded in these words: "You will only meet one person besides ourselves--your friend, and (since we last met) our friend too. Captain Bennydeck has got tired of the sea. He is staying at this hotel, to try the air of Sydenham, and he finds that it agrees with him."

These lines set Randal thinking seriously.

To represent Bennydeck as being "tired of the sea," and as being willing to try, in place of the breezy Channel, the air of a suburb of London, was to make excuses too perfectly futile and absurd to deceive any one who knew the Captain. In spite of the appearance of innocence which pervaded Catherine's letter, the true motive for breaking off his cruise might be found, as Randal concluded, in Catherine herself. Her residence at the sea-side, helped by the lapse of time, had restored to her personal attractions almost all they had lost under the deteriorating influences of care and grief; and her change of name must have protected her from a discovery of the Divorce which would have shocked a man so sincerely religious as Bennydeck. Had

her beauty fascinated him? Was she aware of the interest that he felt in her? and was it secretly understood and returned? Randal wrote to accept the invitation; determining to present himself before the appointed hour, and to question Catherine privately, without giving her the advantage over him of preparing herself for the interview.

In the short time that passed before the day of the dinner, distressing circumstances strengthened his resolution. After months of separation, he received a visit from Herbert.

Was this man--haggard, pallid, shabby, looking at him piteously with bloodshot eyes--the handsome, pleasant, prosperous brother whom he remembered? Randal was so grieved, that he was for a moment unable to utter a word. He could only point to a seat. Herbert dropped into the chair as if he was reduced to the last extremity of fatigue. And yet he spoke roughly; he looked like an angry man brought to bay.

"I seem to frighten you," he said.

"You distress me, Herbert, more than words can say."

"Give me a glass of wine. I've been walking--I don't know where. A long distance; I'm dead beat."

He drank the wine greedily. Whatever reviving effect it might otherwise have produced on him, it made no change in the threatening gloom of his manner. In a man morally weak, calamity (suffered without resisting power) breaks its way through the surface which exhibits a gentleman, and shows the naked nature which claims kindred with our ancestor the savage.

"Do you feel better, Herbert?"

He put down the empty glass, taking no notice of his brother's question.

"Randal," he said, "you know where Sydney is."

Randal admitted it.

"Give me her address. My mind's in such a state I can't remember it; write it down."

"No, Herbert."

"You won't write it? and you won't give it?"

"I will do neither the one nor the other. Go back to your chair; fierce looks and clinched fists don't frighten me. Miss Westerfield is quite right in separating herself from you. And you are quite wrong in wishing to go back to her. There are my reasons. Try to understand them. And, once again, sit down."

He spoke sternly--with his heart aching for his brother all the time. He was right. The one way is the positive way, when a man who suffers trouble is degraded by it.

The poor wretch sank under Randal's firm voice and steady eye.

"Don't be hard on me," he said. "I think a man in my situation is to be pitied--especially by his brother. I'm not like you; I'm not accustomed to live alone. I've been accustomed to having a kind woman to talk to me, and take care of me. You don't know what it is to be used to seeing a pretty creature, always nicely dressed, always about the room--thinking so much of you, and so little of herself--and then to be left alone as I am left, out in the dark. I haven't got my wife; she has thrown me over, and taken my child away from me. And, now, Sydney's taken away from me next. I'm alone. Do you hear that? Alone! Take the poker there out of the fireplace. Give me back Sydney, or knock out my brains. I haven't courage enough to do it for myself. Oh, why did I engage that governess! I was so happy, Randal, with Catherine and little Kitty."

He laid his head wearily on the back of his chair. Randal offered him more wine; he refused it.

"I'm afraid," he said. "Wine maddens me if I take too much of it. You have heard of men forgetting their sorrows in drink. I tried it yesterday; it set my brains on fire; I'm feeling that glass I took just now. No! I'm not faint. It eases my head when I rest like this. Shake hands, Randal; we have never had any unfriendly words; we mustn't begin now. There's something perverse about me. I didn't know how fond I was of Sydney till I lost her; I didn't know how fond I was of my wife till I left her." He paused, and put his hand to his fevered head. Was his mind wandering into some other train of thought? He astonished his brother by a new entreaty--the last imaginable entreaty that Randal expected to hear. "Dear old fellow, I want you to do me a favor. Tell me where my wife is living now?"

"Surely," Randal answered, "you know that she is no longer your wife?"

"Never mind that! I have something to say to her."

"You can't do it."

"Can you do it? Will you give her a message?"

"Let me hear what it is first."

Herbert lifted his head, and laid his hand earnestly on his brother's arm. When he said his next words he was almost like his old self again.

"Say that I'm lonely, say that I'm dying for want of a little comfort--ask her to let me see Kitty."

His tone touched Randal to the quick. "I feel for you, Herbert," he said, warmly. "She shall have your message; all that I can do to persuade her shall be done."

"As soon as possible?"

"Yes--as soon as possible."

"And you won't forget? No, no; of course you won't forget." He tried to rise, and fell back again into his chair. "Let me rest a little," he pleaded, "if I'm not in the way. I'm not fit company for you, I know; I'll go when you tell me."

Randal refused to let him go at all. "You will stay here with me; and if I happen to be away, there will be somebody in the house, who is almost as fond of you as I am." He mentioned the name of one of the old servants at Mount Morven, who had attached himself to Randal after the breakup of the family. "And now rest," he said, "and let me put this cushion under your head."

Herbert answered: "It's like being at home again"--and composed himself to rest.