

## **Chapter XL. Keep Your Temper.**

On the next day but one, Randal arranged his departure for Sydenham, so as to arrive at the hotel an hour before the time appointed for the dinner. His prospects of success, in pleading for a favorable reception of his brother's message, were so uncertain that he refrained--in fear of raising hopes which he might not be able to justify--from taking Herbert into his confidence. No one knew on what errand he was bent, when he left the house. As he took his place in the carriage, the newspaper boy appeared at the window as usual. The new number of a popular weekly journal had that day been published. Randal bought it.

After reading one or two of the political articles, he arrived at the columns specially devoted to "Fashionable Intelligence." Caring nothing for that sort of news, he was turning over the pages in search of the literary and dramatic articles, when a name not unfamiliar to him caught his eye. He read the paragraph in which it appeared.

"The charming widow, Mrs. Norman, is, we hear, among the distinguished guests staying at Buck's Hotel. It is whispered that the lady is to be shortly united to a retired naval officer of Arctic fame; now better known, perhaps, as one of our leading philanthropists."

The allusion to Bennydeck was too plain to be mistaken. Randal looked again at the first words in the paragraph. "The charming widow!" Was it possible that this last word referred to Catherine? To suppose her capable of assuming to be a widow, and--if the child asked questions--of telling Kitty that her father was dead, was, in Randal's estimation, to wrong her cruelly. With his own suspicions steadily contradicting him, he arrived at the hotel, obstinately believing that "the charming widow" would prove to be a stranger.

A first disappointment was in store for him when he entered the house. Mrs. Norman and her little daughter were out driving with a friend, and were expected to return in good time for dinner. Mrs. Presty was at home; she was reported to be in the garden of the hotel.

Randal found her comfortably established in a summerhouse, with her knitting in her hands, and a newspaper on her lap. She advanced to meet him, all smiles and amiability. "How nice of you to come so soon!" she began. Her keen penetration discovered something in his face which

checked the gayety of her welcome. "You don't mean to say that you are going to spoil our pleasant little dinner by bringing bad news!" she added, looking at him suspiciously.

"It depends on you to decide that," Randal replied.

"How very complimentary to a poor useless old woman! Don't be mysterious, my dear. I don't belong to the generation which raises storms in tea-cups, and calls skirmishes with savages battles. Out with it!"

Randal handed his paper to her, open at the right place. "There is my news," he said.

Mrs. Presty looked at the paragraph, and handed her newspaper to Randal.

"I am indeed sorry to spoil your dramatic effect," she said. "But you ought to have known that we are only half an hour behind you, at Sydenham, in the matter of news. The report is premature, my good friend. But if these newspaper people waited to find out whether a report is true or false, how much gossip would society get in its favorite newspapers? Besides, if it isn't true now, it will be true next week. The author only says, 'It's whispered.' How delicate of him! What a perfect gentleman!"

"Am I really to understand, Mrs. Presty, that Catherine--"

"You are to understand that Catherine is a widow. I say it with pride, a widow of my making!"

"If this is one of your jokes, ma'am--"

"Nothing of the sort, sir."

"Are you aware, Mrs. Presty, that my brother--"

"Oh, don't talk of your brother! He's an obstacle in our way, and we have been compelled to get rid of him."

Randal drew back a step. Mrs. Presty's audacity was something more than he could understand. "Is this woman mad?" he said to himself.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Presty. "If you are determined to make a serious business of it--if you insist on my justifying myself--you are to be pitied for not possessing a sense of humor, but you shall have your own way. I am put

on my defense. Very well. You shall hear how my divorced daughter and my poor little grandchild were treated at Sandyseal, after you left us."

Having related the circumstances, she suggested that Randal should put himself in Catherine's place, before he ventured on expressing an opinion. "Would you have exposed yourself to be humiliated again in the same way?" she asked. "And would you have seen your child made to suffer as well as yourself?"

"I should have kept in retirement for the future," he answered, "and not have trusted my child and myself among strangers in hotels."

"Ah, indeed? And you would have condemned your poor little daughter to solitude? You would have seen her pining for the company of other children, and would have had no mercy on her? I wonder what you would have done when Captain Bennydeck paid us a visit at the seaside? He was introduced to Mrs. Norman, and to Mrs. Norman's little girl, and we were all charmed with him. When he and I happened to be left together he naturally wondered, after having seen the beautiful wife, where the lucky husband might be. If he had asked you about Mr. Norman, how would you have answered him?"

"I should have told the truth."

"You would have said there was no Mr. Norman?"

"Yes."

"Exactly what I did! And the Captain of course concluded (after having been introduced to Kitty) that Mrs. Norman was a widow. If I had set him right, what would have become of my daughter's reputation? If I had told the truth at this hotel, when everybody wanted to know what Mrs. Norman, that handsome lady, was--what would the consequences have been to Catherine and her little girl? No! no! I have made the best of a miserable situation; I have consulted the tranquillity of a cruelly injured woman and an innocent child--with this inevitable result; I have been obliged to treat your brother like a character in a novel. I have ship-wrecked Herbert as the shortest way of answering inconvenient questions. Vessel found bottom upward in the middle of the Atlantic, and everybody on board drowned, of course. Worse stories have been printed; I do assure you, worse stories have been printed."

Randal decided on leaving her. "Have you done all this with Catherine's consent?" he asked as he got up from his chair.

"Catherine submits to circumstances, like a sensible woman."

"Does she submit to your telling Kitty that her father is dead?"

For the first time Mrs. Presty became serious.

"Wait a minute," she answered. "Before I consented to answer the child's inquiries, I came to an understanding with her mother. I said, 'Will you let Kitty see her father again?'"

The very question which Randal had promised to ask in his brother's interests! "And how did Catherine answer you?" he inquired.

"Honestly. She said: 'I daren't!' After that, I had her mother's authority for telling Kitty that she would never see her father again. She asked directly if her father was dead--"

"That will do, Mrs. Presty. Your defense is thoroughly worthy of your conduct in all other respects."

"Say thoroughly worthy of the course forced upon me and my daughter by your brother's infamous conduct--and you will be nearer the mark!"

Randal passed this over without notice. "Be so good," he said, "as to tell Catherine that I try to make every possible allowance for her, but that I cannot consent to sit at her dinner-table, and that I dare not face my poor little niece, after what I have heard."

Mrs. Presty recovered all her audacity. "A very wise decision," she remarked. "Your sour face would spoil the best dinner that ever was put on the table. Have you any message for Captain Bennydeck?"

Randal asked if his friend was then at the hotel.

Mrs. Presty smiled significantly. "Not at the hotel, just now."

"Where is he?"

"Where he is every day, about this time--out driving with Catherine and Kitty."

It was a relief to Randal--in the present state of Catherine's relations toward

Bennydeck--to return to London without having seen his friend.

He took leave of Mrs. Presty with the formality due to a stranger--he merely bowed. That incorrigible old woman treated him with affectionate familiarity in return.

"Good-by, dear Randal. One moment before you go! Will it be of any use if we invite you to the marriage?"

Arrived at the station, Randal found that he must wait for the train. While he was walking up and down the platform with a mind doubly distressed by anxiety about his brother and anxiety about Sydney, the train from London came in. He stood, looking absently at the passengers leaving the carriage on the opposite side of the platform. Suddenly, a voice that he knew was audible, asking the way to Buck's Hotel. He crossed the line in an instant, and found himself face to face with Herbert.