

Chapter XLI. Make the Best of It.

For a moment the two men looked at each other without speaking. Herbert's wondering eyes accurately reflected his brother's astonishment.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. Suspicion overclouded his face as he put the question. "You have been to the hotel?" he burst out; "you have seen Catherine?"

Randal could deny that he had seen Catherine, with perfect truth--and did deny it in the plainest terms. Herbert was satisfied. "In all my remembrance of you," he said, "you have never told me a lie. We have both seen the same newspaper, of course--and you have been the first to clear the thing up. That's it, isn't it?"

"I wonder who this other Mrs. Norman is; did you find out?"

"No."

"She's not Catherine, at any rate; I, for one, shall go home with a lighter heart." He took his brother's arm, to return to the other platform. "Do you know, Randal, I was almost afraid that Catherine was the woman. The devil take the thing, and the people who write in it!"

He snatched a newspaper out of his pocket as he spoke--tore it in half--and threw it away. "Malcolm meant well, poor fellow," he said, referring to the old servant, "but he made a miserable man of me for all that."

Not satisfied with gossip in private, the greedy public appetite devours gossip in print, and wants more of it than any one editor can supply. Randal picked up the torn newspaper. It was not the newspaper which he had bought at the station. Herbert had been reading a rival journal, devoted to the interests of Society--in which the report of Mrs. Norman's marriage was repeated, with this difference, that it boldly alluded to Captain Bennydeck by name. "Did Malcolm give you this?" Randal asked.

"Yes; he and the servant next door subscribe to take it in; and Malcolm thought it might amuse me. It drove me out of the house and into the railway. If it had driven me out of mind, I shouldn't have been surprised."

"Gently, Herbert! Supposing the report had been true--?"

"After what you have told me, why should I suppose anything of the sort?"

"Don't be angry; and do pray remember that the Divorce allows you and Catherine to marry again, if you like."

Herbert became more unreasonable than ever. "If Catherine does think of marrying again," he said, "the man will have to reckon first with me. But that is not the point. You seem to have forgotten that the woman at Buck's Hotel is described as a Widow. The bare doubt that my divorced wife might be the woman was bad enough--but what I wanted to find out was how she had passed off her false pretense on our child. That was what maddened me! No more of it now. Have you seen Catherine lately?"

"Not lately."

"I suppose she is as handsome as ever. When will you ask her to let me see Kitty?"

"Leave that to me," was the one reply which Randal could venture to make at the moment.

The serious embarrassments that surrounded him were thickening fast. His natural frank nature urged him to undeceive Herbert. If he followed his inclinations, in the near neighborhood of the hotel, who could say what disasters might not ensue, in his brother's present frame of mind? If he made the disclosure on their return to the house, he would be only running the same risk of consequences, after an interval of delay; and, if he remained silent, the march of events might, at any moment, lead to the discovery of what he had concealed. Add to this, that his confidence in Catherine had been rudely shaken. Having allowed herself to be entrapped into the deception proposed by her mother, and having thus far persevered in that deception, were the chances in favor of her revealing her true position--especially if she was disposed to encourage Bennydeck's suit? Randal's loyalty to Catherine hesitated to decide that serious question against the woman whom he had known, trusted, and admired for so many years. In any event, her second marriage would lead to one disastrous result. It would sooner or later come to Herbert's ears. In the meantime, after what Mrs. Presty had confessed, the cruel falsehood which had checked poor Kitty's natural inquiries raised an insuperable obstacle to a meeting between father and child.

If Randal shrank from the prospect which thus presented itself to him, in

his relations with his brother, and if his thoughts reverted to Sydney Westerfield, other reasons for apprehension found their way into his mind.

He had promised to do his best toward persuading Catherine to grant Sydney an interview. To perform that promise appeared to be now simply impossible. Under the exasperating influence of a disappointment for which she was not prepared, it was hard to say what act of imprudence Sydney might not commit. Even the chance of successfully confiding her to Bennydeck's protection had lost something of its fair promise, since Randal's visit to Sydenham. That the Captain would welcome his friend's daughter as affectionately as if she had been his own child, was not to be doubted for a moment. But that she would receive the same unremitting attention, while he was courting Catherine, which would have been offered to her under other circumstances, was not to be hoped. Be the results, however, what they might, Randal could see but one plain course before him now. He decided on hastening Sydney's introduction to Bennydeck, and on writing at once to prepare the Captain for that event.

Even this apparently simple proceeding required examination in its different bearings, before he could begin his letter.

Would he be justified in alluding to the report which associated Bennydeck with Catherine? Considerations of delicacy seemed to forbid taking this liberty, even with an intimate friend. It was for the Captain to confirm what Mrs. Presty had said of him, if he thought it desirable to touch on the subject in his reply. Besides, looking to Catherine's interest--and not forgetting how she had suffered--had Randal any right to regard with other than friendly feelings a second marriage, which united her to a man morally and intellectually the superior of her first husband? What happier future could await her--especially if she justified Randal's past experience of all that was candid and truthful in her character--than to become his friend's wife?

Written under the modifying influence of these conclusions, his letter contained the few words that follow:

"I have news for you which I am sure you will be glad to hear. Your old friend's daughter has abandoned her sinful way of life, and has made sacrifices which prove the sincerity of her repentance. Without entering into particulars which may be mercifully dismissed from notice, let me only assure you that I answer for Sydney Westerfield as being worthy of the fatherly interest which you feel in her. Shall I say that she may expect an early visit from you, when I see her to-morrow? I don't doubt that I am free

already to do this; but it will encourage the poor girl, if I can speak with your authority."

He added Sydney's address in a postscript, and dispatched his letter that evening.

On the afternoon of the next day two letters were delivered to Randal, bearing the Sydenham postmark.

The first which he happened to take up was addressed to him in Mrs. Presty's handwriting. His opinion of this correspondent was expressed in prompt action--he threw the letter, unopened, into the waste-paper basket.

The next letter was from Bennydeck, written in the kindest terms, but containing no allusion to any contemplated change in his life. He would not be able (he wrote) to leave Sydenham for a day or two. No explanation of the cause of this delay followed. But it might, perhaps, be excusable to infer that the marriage had not yet been decided on, and that the Captain's proposals were still waiting for Catherine's reply.

Randal put the letter in his pocket and went at once to Sydney's lodgings.