

## **Chapter XLII. Try to Excuse Her.**

The weather had been unusually warm. Of all oppressive summers a hot summer in London is the hardest to endure. The little exercise that Sydney could take was, as Randal knew, deferred until the evening. On asking for her, he was surprised to hear that she had gone out.

"Is she walking?" he asked, "on a day such as this?"

No: she was too much overcome by the heat to be able to walk. The landlady's boy had been sent to fetch a cab, and he had heard Miss Westerfield tell the driver to go to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The address at once reminded Randal of Mr. Sarrazin. On the chance of making a discovery, he went to the lawyer's office. It had struck him as being just possible that Sydney might have called there for the second time; and, on making inquiry, he found that his surmise was correct. Miss Westerfield had called, and had gone away again more than an hour since.

Having mentioned this circumstance, good Mr. Sarrazin rather abruptly changed the subject.

He began to talk of the weather, and, like everybody else, he complained of the heat. Receiving no encouragement so far, he selected politics as his next topic. Randal was unapproachably indifferent to the state of parties, and the urgent necessity for reform. Still bent, as it seemed, on preventing his visitor from taking a leading part in the conversation, Mr. Sarrazin tried the exercise of hospitality next. He opened his cigar-case, and entered eagerly into the merits of his cigars; he proposed a cool drink, and described the right method of making it as distinguished from the wrong. Randal was not thirsty, and was not inclined to smoke. Would the pertinacious lawyer give way at last? In appearance, at least, he submitted to defeat. "You want something of me, my friend," he said, with a patient smile. "What is it?"

"I want to know why Miss Westerfield called on you?"

Randal flattered himself that he had made a prevaricating reply simply impossible. Nothing of the sort! Mr. Sarrazin slipped through his fingers once more. The unwritten laws of gallantry afforded him a refuge now.

"The most inviolate respect," he solemnly declared, "is due to a lady's

confidence--and, what is more, to a young lady's confidence--and, what is more yet, to a pretty young lady's confidence. The sex, my dear fellow! Must I recall your attention to what is due to the sex?"

This little outbreak of the foreign side of his friend's character was no novelty to Randal. He remained as indifferent to the inviolate claims of the sex as if he had been an old man of ninety.

"Did Miss Westerfield say anything about me?" was his next question.

Slippery Mr. Sarrazin slid into another refuge: he entered a protest.

"Here is a change of persons and places!" he exclaimed. "Am I a witness of the court of justice--and are you the lawyer who examines me? My memory is defective, my learned friend. Non mi ricordo. I know nothing about it."

Randal changed his tone. "We have amused ourselves long enough," he said. "I have serious reasons, Sarrazin, for wishing to know what passed between Miss Westerfield and you--and I trust my old friend to relieve my anxiety."

The lawyer was accustomed to say of himself that he never did things by halves. His answer to Randal offered a proof of his accurate estimate of his own character.

"Your old friend will deserve your confidence in him," he answered. "You want to know why Miss Westerfield called here. Her object in view was to twist me round her finger--and I beg to inform you that she has completely succeeded. My dear Randal, this pretty creature's cunning is remarkable even for a woman. I am an old lawyer, skilled in the ways of the world--and a young girl has completely overreached me. She asked--oh, heavens, how innocently!--if Mrs. Norman was likely to make a long stay at her present place of residence."

Randal interrupted him. "You don't mean to tell me you have given her Catherine's address?"

"Buck's Hotel, Sydenham," Mr. Sarrazin answered. "She has got the address down in her nice little pocketbook."

"What amazing weakness!" Randal exclaimed.

Mr. Sarrazin cordially agreed with him. "Amazing weakness, as you say. Pretty Miss Sydney has extracted more things, besides the address. She

knows that Mrs. Norman is here on business relating to new investments of her money. She knows besides that one of the trustees is keeping us waiting. She also made sensible remarks. She mentioned having heard Mrs. Norman say that the air of London never agreed with her; and she hoped that a comparatively healthy neighborhood had been chosen for Mrs. Norman's place of residence. This, you see, was leading up to the discovery of the address. The spirit of mischief possessed me; I allowed Miss Westerfield to take a little peep at the truth. 'Mrs. Norman is not actually in London,' I said; 'she is only in the neighborhood.' For what followed on this, my experience of ladies ought to have prepared me. I am ashamed to say this lady took me completely by surprise."

"What did she do?"

"Fell on her knees, poor dear--and said: 'Oh, Mr. Sarrazin, be kinder to me than you have ever been yet; tell me where Mrs. Norman is!--I put her back in her chair, and I took her handkerchief out of her pocket and I wiped her eyes."

"And then you told her the address?"

"I was near it, but I didn't do it yet. I asked what you had done in the matter. Alas, your kind heart has led you to promise more than you could perform. She had waited to hear from you if Mrs. Norman consented to see her, and had waited in vain. Hard on her, wasn't it? I was sorry, but I was still obdurate. I only felt the symptoms which warned me that I was going to make a fool of myself, when she let me into her secret for the first time, and said plainly what she wanted with Mrs. Norman. Her tears and her entreaties I had resisted. The confession of her motives overpowered me. It is right," cried Mr. Sarrazin, suddenly warming into enthusiasm, "that these two women should meet. Remember how that poor girl has proved that her repentance is no sham. I say, she has a right to tell, and the lady whom she has injured has a right to hear, what she has done to atone for the past, what confession she is willing to make to the one woman in the world (though she is a divorced woman) who is most interested in hearing what Miss Westerfield's life has been with that wretched brother of yours. Ah, yes, I know what the English cant might say. Away with the English cant! it is the worst obstacle to the progress of the English nation!"

Randal listened absently: he was thinking.

There could be little doubt to what destination Sydney Westerfield had betaken herself, when she left the lawyer's office. At that moment, perhaps,

she and Catherine were together--and together alone.

Mr. Sarrazin had noticed his friend's silence. "Is it possible you don't agree with me?" he asked.

"I don't feel as hopefully as you do, if these two ladies meet."

"Ah, my friend, you are not a sanguine man by nature. If Mrs. Norman treats our poor Sydney just as a commonplace ill-tempered woman would treat her, I shall be surprised indeed. Say, if you like, that she will be insulted--of this I am sure, she will not return it; there is no expiation that is too bitter to be endured by that resolute little creature. Her fine nature has been tempered by adversity. A hard life has been Sydney's, depend upon it, in the years before you and I met with her. Good heavens! What would my wife say if she heard me? The women are nice, but they have their drawbacks. Let us wait till tomorrow, my dear boy; and let us believe in Sydney without allowing our wives--I beg your pardon, I mean my wife--to suspect in what forbidden directions our sympathies are leading us. Oh, for shame!"

Who could persist in feeling depressed in the company of such a man as this? Randal went home with the influence of Mr. Sarrazin's sanguine nature in undisturbed possession of him, until his old servant's gloomy face confronted him at the door.

"Anything gone wrong, Malcolm?"

"I'm sorry to say, sir, Mr. Herbert has left us."

"Left us! Why?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Where has he gone?"

"He didn't tell me."

"Is there no letter? No message?"

"There's a message, sir. Mr. Herbert came back--"

"Stop! Where had he been when he came back?"

"He said he felt a little lonely after you went out, and he thought it might cheer him up if he went to the club. I was to tell you where he had gone if you asked what had become of him. He said it kindly and pleasantly--quite like himself, sir. But, when he came back--if you'll excuse my saying so--I never saw a man in a worse temper. 'Tell my brother I am obliged to him for his hospitality, and I won't take advantage of it any longer.' That was Mr. Herbert's message. I tried to say a word. He banged the door, and away he went."

Even Randal's patient and gentle nature rose in revolt against his brother's treatment of him. He entered his sitting-room in silence. Malcolm followed, and pointed to a letter on the table. "I think you must have thrown it away by mistake, sir," the old man explained; "I found it in the waste-paper basket." He bowed with the unfailing respect of the old school, and withdrew.

Randal's first resolve was to dismiss his brother from further consideration. "Kindness is thrown away on Herbert," he thought; "I shall treat him for the future as he has treated me."

But his brother was still in his mind. He opened Mrs. Presty's letter--on the chance that it might turn the current of his thoughts in a new direction.

In spite of Mrs. Presty, in spite of himself, his heart softened toward the man who had behaved so badly to him. Instead of reading the letter, he was now trying to discover a connection between his brother's visit to the club and his brother's angry message. Had Herbert heard something said, among gossiping members in the smoking-room, which might account for his conduct? If Randal had belonged to the club he would have gone there to make inquiries. How could he get the information that he wanted, in some other way?

After considering it for a while, he remembered the dinner that he had given to his friend Sarrazin on his return from the United States, and the departure of the lawyer to his club, with a purpose in view which interested them both. It was the same club to which Herbert belonged. Randal wrote at once to Mr. Sarrazin, mentioning what had happened, and acknowledging the anxiety that weighed on his mind.

Having instructed Malcolm to take the letter to the lawyer's house, and, if he was not at home, to inquire where he might be found, Randal adopted the readiest means of composing himself, in the servant's absence, by lighting his pipe.

He was enveloped in clouds of tobacco-smoke--the only clouds which we can trust never to prove unworthy of our confidence in them--when Mrs. Presty's letter caught his attention. If the month had been January instead of July, he would have thrown it into the fire. Under present circumstances, he took it up and read it:

"I bear no malice, dear Randal, and I write to you as affectionately as if you had kept your temper on the occasion when we last met.

"You will be pleased to hear that Catherine was as thoroughly distressed as you could wish her to be, when it became my disagreeable duty to mention what had passed between us, by way of accounting for your absence. She was quite unable to rally her spirits, even with dear Captain Bennydeck present to encourage her.

"'I am not receiving you as I ought,' she said to him, when we began dinner, 'but there is perhaps some excuse for me. I have lost the regard and esteem of an old friend, who has cruelly wronged me.' From motives of delicacy (which I don't expect you to understand) she refrained from mentioning your name. The prettiest answer that I ever heard was the answer that the Captain returned. 'Let the true friend,' he said, 'take the place in your heart which the false friend has lost.'

"He kissed her hand. If you had seen how he did it, and how she looked at him, you would have felt that you had done more toward persuading my daughter to marry the Captain than any other person about her, myself included. You had deserted her; you had thrown her back on the one true friend left. Thank you, Randal. In our best interests, thank you.

"It is needless to add that I got out of the way, and took Kitty with me, at the earliest opportunity--and left them by themselves.

"At bed-time I went into Catherine's room. Our interview began and ended in less than a minute. It was useless to ask if the Captain had proposed marriage; her agitation sufficiently informed me of what had happened. My one question was: 'Dearest Catherine, have you said Yes?' She turned shockingly pale, and answered: 'I have not said No.' Could anything be more encouraging? God bless you; we shall meet at the wedding."

Randal laid down the letter and filled his pipe again. He was not in the least exasperated; he was only anxious to hear from Mr. Sarrazin. If Mrs. Presty had seen him at that moment, she would have said to herself: "I forgot the wretch was a smoker."

In half an hour more the door was opened by Malcolm, and Mr. Sarrazin in person answered his friend.

"There are no such incorrigible gossips," he said, "as men in the smoking-room of a club. Those popular newspapers began the mischief, and the editor of one of them completed it. How he got his information I am not able to say. The small-talk turned on that report about the charming widow; and the editor congratulated himself on the delicacy of his conduct. 'When the paragraph reached me,' he said, 'the writer mentioned that Mrs. Norman was that well-known lady, the divorced Mrs. Herbert Linley. I thought this rather too bad, and I cut it out.' Your brother appears to have been present--but he seldom goes to the club, and none of the members knew him even by sight. Shall I give you a light? Your pipe's out."

Randal's feelings, at that moment, were not within reach of the comforting influence of tobacco.

"Do you think your brother has gone to Sydenham?" Mr. Sarrazin asked.

Randal answered: "I haven't a doubt of it now."