

## **Chapter XLV. Love Your Enemies.**

She tried to think of Bennydeck.

Her eyes followed him as long as he was in sight, but her thoughts wandered. To look at him now was to look at the little companion walking by his side. Still, the child reminded her of the living father; still, the child innocently tortured her with the consciousness of deceit. The faithless man from whom the law had released her, possessed himself of her thoughts, in spite of the law. He, and he only, was the visionary companion of her solitude when she was left by herself.

Did he remind her of the sin that he had committed?--of the insult that he had inflicted on the woman whom he had vowed to love and cherish? No! he recalled to her the years of love that she had passed by his side; he upbraided her with the happiness which she had owed to him, in the prime and glory of her life. Woman! set that against the wrong which I have done to you. You have the right to condemn me, and Society has the right to condemn me--but I am your child's father still. Forget me if you can!

All thought will bear the test of solitude, excepting only the thought that finds its origin in hopeless self-reproach. The soft mystery of twilight, the solemn silence of the slowly-coming night, daunted Catherine in that lonely place. She rose to return to light and human beings. As she set her face toward the house, a discovery confronted her. She was not alone.

A woman was standing on the path, apparently looking at her.

In the dim light, and at the distance between them, recognition of the woman was impossible. She neither moved nor spoke. Strained to their utmost point of tension, Catherine's nerves quivered at the sight of that shadowy solitary figure. She dropped back on the seat. In tones that trembled she said: "Who are you? What do you want?"

The voice that answered was, like her own voice, faint with fear. It said: "I want a word with you."

Moving slowly forward--stopping--moving onward again--hesitating again--the woman at last approached. There was light enough left to reveal her face, now that she was near. It was the face of Sydney Westerfield.

The survival of childhood, in the mature human being, betrays itself most readily in the sex that bears children. The chances and changes of life show the child's mobility of emotion constantly associating itself with the passions of the woman. At the moment of recognition the troubled mind of Catherine was instantly steadied, under the influence of that coarsest sense which levels us with the animals--the sense of anger.

"I am amazed at your audacity," she said.

There was no resentment--there was only patient submission in Sydney's reply.

"Twice I have approached the house in which you are living; and twice my courage has failed me. I have gone away again--I have walked, I don't know where, I don't know how far. Shame and fear seemed to be insensible to fatigue. This is my third attempt. If I was a little nearer to you, I think you would see what the effort has cost me. I have not much to say. May I ask you to hear me?"

"You have taken me by surprise, Miss Westerfield. You have no right to do that; I refuse to hear you."

"Try, madam, to bear in mind that no unhappy creature, in my place, would expose herself to your anger and contempt without a serious reason. Will you think again?"

"No!"

Sydney turned to go away--and suddenly stopped.

Another person was advancing from the hotel; an interruption, a trivial domestic interruption, presented itself. The nursemaid had missed the child, and had come into the garden to see if she was with her mother.

"Where is Miss Kitty, ma'am?" the girl asked.

Her mistress told her what had happened, and sent her to the Palace to relieve Captain Bennydeck of the charge that he had undertaken. Susan listened, looking at Sydney and recognizing the familiar face. As the girl moved away, Sydney spoke to her.

"I hope little Kitty is well and happy?"

The mother does not live who could have resisted the tone in which that question was put. The broken heart, the love for the child that still lived in it, spoke in accents that even touched the servant. She came back; remembering the happy days when the governess had won their hearts at Mount Morven, and, for a moment at least, remembering nothing else.

"Quite well and happy, miss, thank you," Susan said.

As she hurried away on her errand, she saw her mistress beckon to Sydney to return, and place a chair for her. The nursemaid was not near enough to hear what followed.

"Miss Westerfield, will you forget what I said just now?" With those words, Catherine pointed to the chair. "I am ready to hear you," she resumed--"but I have something to ask first. Does what you wish to say to me relate only to yourself?"

"It relates to another person, as well as to myself."

That reply, and the inference to which it led, tried Catherine's resolution to preserve her self-control, as nothing had tried it yet.

"If that other person," she began, "means Mr. Herbert Linley--"

Sydney interrupted her, in words which she was entirely unprepared to hear.

"I shall never see Mr. Herbert Linley again."

"Has he deserted you?"

"No. It is I who have left him."

"You!"

The emphasis laid on that one word forced Sydney to assert herself for the first time.

"If I had not left him of my own free will," she said, "what else would excuse me for venturing to come here?"

Catherine's sense of justice felt the force of that reply. At the same time her

sense of injury set its own construction on Sydney's motive. "Has his cruelty driven you away from him?" she asked.

"If he has been cruel to me," Sydney answered, "do you think I should have come here to complain of it to You? Do me the justice to believe that I am not capable of such self-degradation as that. I have nothing to complain of."

"And yet you have left him?"

"He has been all that is kind and considerate: he has done everything that a man in his unhappy position could do to set my mind at ease. And yet I have left him. Oh, I claim no merit for my repentance, bitterly as I feel it! I might not have had the courage to leave him--if he had loved me as he once loved you."

"Miss Westerfield, you are the last person living who ought to allude to my married life."

"You may perhaps pardon the allusion, madam, when you have heard what I have still to say. I owe it to Mr. Herbert Linley, if not to you, to confess that his life with me has not been a life of happiness. He has tried, compassionately tried, to keep his secret sorrow from discovery, and he has failed. I had long suspected the truth; but I only saw it in his face when he found the book you left behind you at the hotel. Your image has, from first to last, been the one living image in his guilty heart. I am the miserable victim of a man's passing fancy. You have been, you are still, the one object of a husband's love. Ask your own heart if the woman lives who can say to you what I have said--unless she knew it to be true."

Catherine's head sank on her bosom; her helpless hands lay trembling on her lap. Overpowered by the confession which she had just heard--a confession which had followed closely on the thoughts inspired by the appearance of the child--her agitation was beyond control; her mind was unequal to the effort of decision. The woman who had been wronged--who had the right to judge for herself, and to speak for herself--was the silent woman of the two!

It was not quite dark yet. Sydney could see as well as hear.

For the first time since the beginning of the interview, she allowed the impulse of the moment to lead her astray. In her eagerness to complete the act of atonement, she failed to appreciate the severity of the struggle that was passing in Catherine's mind. She alluded again to Herbert Linley, and

she spoke too soon.

"Will you let him ask your pardon?" she said. "He expects no more."

Catherine's spirit was roused in an instant. "He expects too much!" she answered, sternly. "Is he here by your connivance? Is he, too, waiting to take me by surprise?"

"I am incapable, madam, of taking such a liberty with you as that; I may perhaps have hoped to be able to tell him, by writing, of a different reception--" She checked herself. "I beg your pardon, if I have ventured to hope. I dare not ask you to alter your opinion--"

"Do you dare to look the truth in the face?" Catherine interposed. "Do you remember what sacred ties that man has broken? what memories he has profaned? what years of faithful love he has cast from him? Must I tell you how he poisoned his wife's mind with doubts of his truth and despair of his honor, when he basely deserted her? You talk of your repentance. Does your repentance forget that he would still have been my blameless husband but for you?"

Sydney silently submitted to reproach, silently endured the shame that finds no excuse for itself.

Catherine looked at her and relented. The noble nature which could stoop to anger, but never sink to the lower depths of malice and persecution, restrained itself and made amends. "I say it in no unkindness to you," she resumed. "But when you ask me to forgive, consider what you ask me to forget. It will only distress us both if we remain longer together," she continued, rising as she spoke. "Perhaps you will believe that I mean well, when I ask if there is anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing!"

All the desolation of the lost woman told its terrible tale in that one word. Invited to rest herself in the hotel, she asked leave to remain where she was; the mere effort of rising was too much for her now. Catherine said the parting words kindly. "I believe in your good intentions; I believe in your repentance."

"Believe in my punishment!" After that reply, no more was said.

Behind the trees that closed the view at the further extremity of the lawn the

moon was rising. As the two women lost sight of each other, the new light, pure and beautiful, began to dawn over the garden.