

Chapter XLVI. Nil Desperandum.

No horror of her solitude, no melancholy recollections, no dread of the future disturbed Sydney's mind. The one sense left in her was the sense of fatigue. Vacantly, mechanically, the girl rested as a tired animal might have rested. She saw nothing, heard nothing; the one feeling of which she was conscious was a dull aching in every limb. The moon climbed the heavens, brightened the topmost leaves of the trees, found the gloom in which Sydney was hidden, and cheered it tenderly with radiant light. She was too weary to sleep, too weary even to shade her face when the moonbeams touched it. While the light still strengthened, while the slow minutes still followed each other unheeded, the one influence that could rouse Sydney found her at last--set her faint heart throbbing--called her prostrate spirit to life again. She heard a glad cry of recognition in a child's voice:

"Oh, Sydney, dear, is it you?"

In another instant her little pupil and playfellow of former days was in her arms.

"My darling, how did you come here?"

Susan answered the question. "We are on our way back from the Palace, miss. I am afraid," she said, timidly, "that we ought to go in."

Silently resigned, Sydney tried to release the child. Kitty clung to her and kissed her; Kitty set the nurse at defiance. "Do you think I am going to leave Syd now I have found her? Susan, I am astonished at you!"

Susan gave way. Where the nature is gentle, kindness and delicacy go hand-in-hand together, undisturbed by the social irregularities which beset the roadway of life. The nursemaid drew back out of hearing. Kitty's first questions followed each other in breathless succession. Some of them proved to be hard, indeed, to answer truly, and without reserve. She inquired if Sydney had seen her mother, and then she was eager to know why Sydney had been left in the garden alone.

"Why haven't you gone back to the house with mamma?" she asked.

"Don't ask me, dear," was all that Sydney could say. Kitty drew the inevitable conclusion: "Have you and mamma quarreled?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then come indoors with me."

"Wait a little, Kitty, and tell me something about yourself. How do you get on with your lessons?"

"You dear foolish governess, do you expect me to learn my lessons, when I haven't got you to teach me? Where have you been all this long while? I wouldn't have gone away and left you!" She paused; her eager eyes studied Sydney's face with the unrestrained curiosity of a child. "Is it the moonlight that makes you look pale and wretched?" she said. "Or are you really unhappy? Tell me, Syd, do you ever sing any of those songs that I taught you, when you first came to us?"

"Never, dear!"

"Have you anybody to go out walking with you and running races with you, as I did?"

"No, my sweet! Those days have gone by forever."

Kitty laid her head sadly on Sydney's bosom. "It's not the moonlight," she said; "shall I tell you a secret? Sometimes I am not happy either. Poor papa is dead. He always liked you--I'm sure you are sorry for him."

Astonishment held Sydney speechless. Before she could ask who had so cruelly deceived the child, and for what purpose, the nursemaid, standing behind the chair, warned her to be silent by a touch.

"I think we are all unhappy now," Kitty went on, still following her own little train of thought. "Mamma isn't like what she used to be. And even my nice Captain hasn't a word to say to me. He wouldn't come back with us; he said he would go back by himself."

Another allusion which took Sydney by surprise! She asked who the Captain was. Kitty started as if the question shocked her. "Oh dear, dear, this is what comes of your going away and leaving us! You don't know Captain Bennydeck."

The name of her father's correspondent! The name which she vaguely remembered to have heard in her childhood! "Where did you first meet with

him?" she inquired.

"At the seaside, dear!"

"Do you mean at Sandyseal?"

"Yes. Mamma liked him--and grandmamma liked him (which is wonderful)--and I gave him a kiss. Promise me not to tell! My nice Captain is going to be my new papa."

Was there any possible connection between what Kitty had just said, and what the poor child had been deluded into believing when she spoke of her father? Even Susan seemed to be in the secret of this strange second marriage! She interfered with a sharp reproof. "You mustn't talk in that way, Miss Kitty. Please put her off your lap, Miss Westerfield; we have been here too long already."

Kitty proposed a compromise; "I'll go," she said, "if Syd will come with me."

"I'm sorry, my darling, to disappoint you."

Kitty refused to believe it. "You couldn't disappoint me if you tried," she said boldly.

"Indeed, indeed, I must go away. Oh, Kitty, try to bear it as I do!"

Entreaties were useless; the child refused to hear of another parting. "I want to make you and mamma friends again. Don't break my heart, Sydney! Come home with me, and teach me, and play with me, and love me!"

She pulled desperately at Sydney's dress; she called to Susan to help her. With tears in her eyes, the girl did her best to help them both. "Miss Westerfield will wait here," she said to Kitty, "while you speak to your mamma.--Say Yes!" she whispered to Sydney; "it's our only chance."

The child instantly exacted a promise. In the earnestness of her love she even dictated the words. "Say it after me, as I used to say my lessons," she insisted. "Say, 'Kitty, I promise to wait for you.'"

Who that loved her could have refused to say it! In one form or another, the horrid necessity for deceit had followed, and was still following, that first, worst act of falsehood--the elopement from Mount Morven.

Kitty was now as eager to go as she had been hitherto resolute to remain. She called for Susan to follow her, and ran to the hotel.

"My mistress won't let her come back--you can leave the garden that way." The maid pointed along the path to the left and hurried after the child.

They were gone--and Sydney was alone again.

At the parting with Kitty, the measure of her endurance was full. Not even the farewell at Mount Morven had tried her by an ordeal so cruel as this. No kind woman was willing to receive her and employ her, now. The one creature left who loved her was the faithful little friend whom she must never see again. "I am still innocent to that child," she thought--"and I am parted from her forever!"

She rose to leave the garden.

A farewell look at the last place in which she had seen Kitty tempted her to indulge in a moment of delay. Her eyes rested on the turn in the path at which she had lost sight of the active little figure hastening away to plead her cause. Even in absence, the child was Sydney's good angel still. As she turned away to follow the path that had been shown to her, the relief of tears came at last. It cooled her burning head; it comforted her aching heart. She tried to walk on. The tears blinded her--she strayed from the path--she would have fallen but for a hand that caught her, and held her up. A man's voice, firm and deep and kind, quieted her first wild feeling of terror. "My child, you are not fit to be by yourself. Let me take care of you--let me comfort you, if I can."

He carried her back to the seat that she had left, and waited by her in merciful silence.

"You are very young to feel such bitter sorrow," he said, when she was composed again. "I don't ask what your sorrow is; I only want to know how I can help you."

"Nobody can help me."

"Can I take you back to your friends?"

"I have no friends."

"Pardon me, you have one friend at least--you have me."

"You? A stranger?"

"No human creature who needs my sympathy is a stranger."

She turned toward him for the first time. In her new position, she was clearly visible in the light. He looked at her attentively. "I have seen you somewhere," he said, "before now."

She had not noticed him when they had passed each other at Sandyseal. "I think you must be mistaken," she answered. "May I thank you for your kindness? and may I hope to be excused if I say good-night?"

He detained her. "Are you sure that you are well enough to go away by yourself?" he asked anxiously.

"I am quite sure!"

He still detained her. His memory of that first meeting at the seaside hotel reminded him that he had seen her in the company of a man. At their second meeting, she was alone, and in tears. Sad experience led him to form his own conclusions. "If you won't let me take care of you," he said, "will you consider if I can be of any use to you, and will you call at that address?" He gave her his card. She took it without looking at it; she was confused; she hardly knew what to say. "Do you doubt me?" he asked--sadly, not angrily.

"Oh, how can I do that! I doubt myself; I am not worthy of the interest you feel in me."

"That is a sad thing to say," he answered. "Let me try to give you confidence in yourself. Do you go to London when you leave this place?"

"Yes."

"To-morrow," he resumed, "I am going to see another poor girl who is alone in the world like you. If I tell you where she lives, will you ask her if I am a person to be trusted?"

He had taken a letter from his pocket, while he was speaking; and he now tore off a part of the second leaf, and gave it to her. "I have only lately," he said, "received the address from a friend."

As he offered that explanation, the shrill sound of a child's voice, raised in

anger and entreaty, reached their ears from the neighborhood of the hotel. Faithful little Kitty had made her escape, determined to return to Sydney had been overtaken by the maid--and had been carried back in Susan's arms to the house. Sydney imagined that she was not perhaps alone in recognizing the voice. The stranger who had been so kind to her did certainly start and look round.

The stillness of the night was disturbed no more. The man turned again to the person who had so strongly interested him. The person was gone.

In fear of being followed, Sydney hurried to the railway station. By the light in the carriage she looked for the first time at the fragment of the letter and the card.

The stranger had presented her with her own address! And, when she looked at the card, the name was Bennydeck!