

Chapter XLVII. Better Do It Than Wish It Done.

More than once, on one and the same day, the Captain had been guilty of a weakness which would have taken his oldest friends by surprise, if they had seen him at the moment. He hesitated.

A man who has commanded ships and has risked his life in the regions of the frozen deep, is a man formed by nature and taught by habit to meet emergency face to face, to see his course straight before him, and to take it, lead him where it may. But nature and habit, formidable forces as they are, find their master when they encounter the passion of Love.

At once perplexed and distressed by that startling change in Catherine which he had observed when her child approached her, Bennydeck's customary firmness failed him, when the course of conduct toward his betrothed wife which it might be most becoming to follow presented itself to him as a problem to be solved. When Kitty asked him to accompany her nursemaid and herself on their return to the hotel, he had refused because he felt reluctant to intrude himself on Catherine's notice, until she was ready to admit him to her confidence of her own free will. Left alone, he began to doubt whether delicacy did really require him to make the sacrifice which he had contemplated not five minutes since. It was surely possible that Catherine might be waiting to see him, and might then offer the explanation which would prove to be equally a relief on both sides. He was on his way to the hotel when he met with Sydney Westerfield.

To see a woman in the sorest need of all that kindness and consideration could offer, and to leave her as helpless as he had found her, would have been an act of brutal indifference revolting to any man possessed of even ordinary sensibility. The Captain had only followed his natural impulses, and had only said and done what, in nearly similar cases, he had said and done on other occasions.

Left by himself, he advanced a few steps mechanically on the way by which Sydney had escaped him--and then stopped. Was there any sufficient reason for his following her, and intruding himself on her notice? She had recovered, she was in possession of his address, she had been referred to a person who could answer for his good intentions; all that it was his duty to do, had been done already. He turned back again, in the direction of the hotel.

Hesitating once more, he paused half-way along the corridor which led to Catherine's sitting-room. Voices reached him from persons who had entered the house by the front door. He recognized Mrs. Presty's loud confident tones. She was taking leave of friends, and was standing with her back toward him. Bennydeck waited, unobserved, until he saw her enter the sitting-room. No such explanation as he was in search of could possibly take place in the presence of Catherine's mother. He returned to the garden.

Mrs. Presty was in high spirits. She had enjoyed the Festival; she had taken the lead among the friends who accompanied her to the Palace; she had ordered everything, and paid for nothing, at that worst of all bad public dinners in England, the dinner which pretends to be French. In a buoyant frame of mind, ready for more enjoyment if she could only find it, what did she see on opening the sitting-room door? To use the expressive language of the stage, Catherine was "discovered alone"--with her elbows on the table, and her face hidden in her hands--the picture of despair.

Mrs. Presty surveyed the spectacle before her with righteous indignation visible in every line of her face. The arrangement which bound her daughter to give Bennydeck his final reply on that day had been well known to her when she left the hotel in the morning. The conclusion at which she arrived, on returning at night, was expressed with Roman brevity and Roman eloquence in four words:

"Oh, the poor Captain!"

Catherine suddenly looked up.

"I knew it," Mrs. Presty continued, with her sternest emphasis; "I see what you have done, in your face. You have refused Bennydeck."

"God forgive me, I have been wicked enough to accept him!"

Hearing this, some mothers might have made apologies; and other mothers might have asked what that penitential reply could possibly mean. Mrs. Presty was no matron of the ordinary type. She welcomed the good news, without taking the smallest notice of the expression of self-reproach which had accompanied it.

"My dear child, accept the congratulations of your fond old mother. I have never been one of the kissing sort (I mean of course where women are concerned); but this is an occasion which justifies something quite out of the common way. Come and kiss me."

Catherine took no notice of that outburst of maternal love.

"I have forgotten everything that I ought to have remembered," she said. "In my vanity, in my weakness, in my selfish enjoyment of the passing moment, I have been too supremely happy even to think of the trials of my past life, and of the false position in which they have placed me toward a man, whom I ought to be ashamed to deceive. I have only been recalled to a sense of duty, I might almost say to a sense of decency, by my poor little child. If Kitty had not reminded me of her father--"

Mrs. Presty dropped into a chair: she was really frightened. Her fat cheeks trembled like a jelly on a dish that is suddenly moved.

"Has that man been here?" she asked.

"What man?"

"The man who may break off your marriage if he meets with the Captain. Has Herbert Linley been here?"

"Certainly not. The one person associated with my troubles whom I have seen to-day is Sydney Westerfield."

Mrs. Presty bounced out of her chair. "You--have seen--Sydney Westerfield?" she repeated with emphatic pauses which expressed amazement tempered by unbelief.

"Yes; I have seen her."

"Where?"

"In the garden."

"And spoken to her?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Presty raised her eyes to the ceiling. Whether she expected our old friend "the recording angel" to take down the questions and answers that had just passed, or whether she was only waiting to see the hotel that held her daughter collapse under a sense of moral responsibility, it is not possible to decide. After an awful pause, the old lady remembered that she

had something more to say--and said it.

"I make no remark, Catherine; I don't even want to know what you and Miss Westerfield said to each other. At the same time, as a matter of convenience to myself, I wish to ascertain whether I must leave this hotel or not. The same house doesn't hold that woman and ME. Has she gone?"

"She has gone."

Mrs. Presty looked round the room. "And taken Kitty with her?" she asked.

"Don't speak of Kitty!" Catherine cried in the greatest distress. "I have had to keep the poor innocent affectionate child apart from Miss Westerfield by force. My heart aches when I think of it."

"I'm not surprised, Catherine. My granddaughter has been brought up on the modern system. Children are all little angels--no punishments--only gentle remonstrance--'Don't be naughty, dear, because you will make poor mamma unhappy.' And then, mamma grieves over it and wonders over it, when she finds her little angel disobedient. What a fatal system of education! All my success in life; every quality that endeared me to your father and Mr. Presty; every social charm that has made me the idol of society, I attribute entirely to judicious correction in early life, applied freely with the open hand. We will change the subject. Where is dear Bennydeck? I want to congratulate him on his approaching marriage." She looked hard at her daughter, and mentally added: "He'll live to regret it!"

Catherine knew nothing of the Captain's movements. "Like you," she told her mother, "I have something to say to him, and I don't know where he is."

Mrs. Presty still kept her eyes fixed on her daughter. Nobody, observing Catherine's face, and judging also by the tone of her voice, would have supposed that she was alluding to the man whose irresistible attractions had won her. She looked ill at ease, and she spoke sadly.

"You don't seem to be in good spirits, my dear," Mrs. Presty gently suggested. "No lovers' quarrel already, I hope?"

"Nothing of the kind."

"Can I be of any use to you?"

"You might be of the greatest use. But I know only too well, you would

refuse."

Thus far, Mrs. Presty had been animated by curiosity. She began now to feel vaguely alarmed. "After all that I have done for you," she answered, "I don't think you ought to say that. Why should I refuse?"

Catherine hesitated.

Her mother persisted in pressing her. "Has it anything to do with Captain Bennydeck?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Catherine roused her courage.

"You know what it is as well as I do," she said. "Captain Bennydeck believes that I am free to marry him because I am a widow. You might help me to tell him the truth."

"What!!!"

That exclamation of horror and astonishment was loud enough to have been heard in the garden. If Mrs. Presty's hair had been all her own, it must have been hair that stood on end.

Catherine quietly rose. "We won't discuss it," she said, with resignation. "I knew you would refuse me." She approached the door. Her mother got up and resolutely stood in the way. "Before you commit an act of downright madness," Mrs. Presty said, "I mean to try if I can stop you. Go back to your chair."

Catherine refused.

"I know how it will end," she answered; "and the sooner it ends the better. You will find that I am quite as determined as you are. A man who loves me as he loves me, is a man whom I refuse to deceive."

"Let's have it out plainly," Mrs. Presty insisted. "He believes your first marriage has been dissolved by death. Do you mean to tell him that it has been dissolved by Divorce?"

"I do."

"What right has he to know it?"

"A right that is not to be denied. A wife must have no secrets from her husband."

Mrs. Presty hit back smartly.

"You're not his wife yet. Wait till you are married."

"Never! Who but a wretch would marry an honest man under false pretenses?"

"I deny the false pretenses! You talk as if you were an impostor. Are you, or are you not, the accomplished lady who has charmed him? Are you, or are you not, the beautiful woman whom he loves? There isn't a stain on your reputation. In every respect you are the wife he wants and the wife who is worthy of him. And you are cruel enough to disturb the poor man about a matter that doesn't concern him! you are fool enough to raise doubts of you in his mind, and give him a reproach to cast in your teeth the first time you do anything that happens to offend him! Any woman--I don't care who she may be--might envy the home that's waiting for you and your child, if you're wise enough to hold your tongue. Upon my word, Catherine, I am ashamed of you. Have you no principles?"

She really meant it! The purely selfish considerations which she urged on her daughter were so many undeniable virtues in Mrs. Presty's estimation. She took the highest moral ground, and stood up and crowed on it, with a pride in her own principles which the Primate of all England might have envied.

But Catherine's rare resolution held as firm as ever. She got a little nearer to the door. "Good-night, mamma," was the only reply she made.

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"I am tired, and I must rest. Please let me go."

Mrs. Presty threw open the door with a bang.

"You refuse to take my advice?" she said. "Oh, very well, have your own way! You are sure to prosper in the end. These are the days of exhibitions and

gold medals. If there is ever an exhibition of idiots at large, I know who might win the prize."

Catherine was accustomed to preserve her respect for her mother under difficulties; but this was far more than her sense of filial duty could successfully endure.

"I only wish I had never taken your advice," she answered. "Many a miserable moment would have been spared me, if I had always done what I am doing now. You have been the evil genius of my life since Miss Westerfield first came into our house."

She passed through the open doorway--stopped--and came back again. "I didn't mean to offend you, mamma--but you do say such irritating things. Good-night."

Not a word of reply acknowledged that kindly-meant apology. Mrs. Presty--vivacious Mrs. Presty of the indomitable spirit and the ready tongue--was petrified. She, the guardian angel of the family, whose experience, devotion, and sound sense had steered Catherine through difficulties and dangers which must have otherwise ended in utter domestic shipwreck--she, the model mother--had been stigmatized as the evil genius of her daughter's life by no less a person than that daughter herself! What was to be said? What was to be done? What terrible and unexampled course of action should be taken after such an insult as this? Mrs. Presty stood helpless in the middle of the room, and asked herself these questions, and waited and wondered and found no answer.

An interval passed. There was a knock at the door. A waiter appeared. He said: "A gentleman to see Mrs. Norman."

The gentleman entered the room and revealed himself.

Herbert Linley!