

Chapter XLVIII. Be Careful!

The divorced husband looked at his mother-in-law without making the slightest sacrifice to the claims of politeness. He neither offered his hand nor made his bow. His frowning eyebrows, his flushed face, betrayed the anger that was consuming him.

"I want to see Catherine," he said.

This deliberate rudeness proved to be the very stimulant that was required to restore Mrs. Presty to herself. The smile that always meant mischief made its threatening appearance on the old lady's face.

"What sort of company have you been keeping since I last saw you?" she began.

"What have you got to do with the company I keep?"

"Nothing whatever, I am happy to say. I was merely wondering whether you have been traveling lately in the south part of Africa, and have lived exclusively in the society of Hottentots. The only other explanation of your behavior is that I have been so unfortunate as to offend you. But it seems improbable--I am not your wife."

"Thank God for that!"

"Thank God, as you say. But I should really be glad (as a mere matter of curiosity) to know what your extraordinary conduct means. You present yourself in this room uninvited, you find a lady here, and you behave as if you had come into a shop and wanted to ask the price of something. Let me give you a lesson in good manners. Observe: I receive you with a bow, and I say: How do you do, Mr. Linley? Do you understand me?"

"I don't want to understand you--I want to see Catherine."

"Who is Catherine?"

"You know as well as I do--your daughter."

"My daughter, sir, is a stranger to you. We will speak of her, if you please, by the name--the illustrious name--which she inherited at her birth. You wish

to see Mrs. Norman?"

"Call her what you like. I have a word to say to her, and I mean to say it."

"No, Mr. Linley, you won't say it."

"We'll see about that! Where is she?"

"My daughter is not well."

"Well or ill, I shan't keep her long."

"My daughter has retired to her room."

"Where is her room?"

Mrs. Presty moved to the fireplace, and laid her hand on the bell.

"Are you aware that this house is a hotel?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter to me what it is."

"Oh yes, it does. A hotel keeps waiters. A hotel, when it is as large as this, has a policeman in attendance. Must I ring?"

The choice between giving way to Mrs. Presty, or being disgracefully dismissed, was placed plainly before him. Herbert's life had been the life of a gentleman; he knew that he had forgotten himself; it was impossible that he could hesitate.

"I won't trouble you to ring," he said; "and I will beg your pardon for having allowed my temper to get the better of me. At the same time it ought to be remembered, I think, in my favor, that I have had some provocation."

"I don't agree with you," Mrs. Presty answered. She was deaf to any appeal for mercy from Herbert Linley. "As to provocation," she added, returning to her chair without asking him to be seated, "when you apply that word to yourself, you insult my daughter and me. You provoked? Oh, heavens!"

"You wouldn't say that," he urged, speaking with marked restraint of tone and manner, "if you knew what I have had to endure--"

Mrs. Presty suddenly looked toward the door. "Wait a minute," she said; "I

think I hear somebody coming in."

In the silence that followed, footsteps were audible outside--not approaching the door, however, but retiring from it. Mrs. Presty had apparently been mistaken. "Yes?" she said resignedly, permitting Herbert to proceed.

He really had something to say for himself, and he said it with sufficient moderation. That he had been guilty of serious offenses he made no attempt to deny; but he pleaded that he had not escaped without justly suffering for what he had done. He had been entirely in the wrong when he threatened to take the child away from her mother by force of law; but had he not been punished when his wife obtained her Divorce, and separated him from his little daughter as well as from herself? (No: Mrs. Presty failed to see it; if anybody had suffered by the Divorce, the victim was her injured daughter.) Still patient, Herbert did not deny the injury; he only submitted once more that he had suffered his punishment. Whether his life with Sydney Westerfield had or had not been a happy one, he must decline to say; he would only declare that it had come to an end. She had left him. Yes! she had left him forever. He had no wish to persuade her to return to their guilty life; they were both penitent, they were both ashamed of it. But she had gone away without the provision which he was bound in honor to offer to her.

"She is friendless; she may be in a state of poverty that I tremble to think of," Herbert declared. "Is there nothing to plead for me in such anxiety as I am suffering now?" Mrs. Presty stopped him there; she had heard enough of Sydney already.

"I see nothing to be gained," she said, "by dwelling on the past; and I should be glad to know why you have come to this place to-night."

"I have come to see Kitty."

"Quite out of the question."

"Don't tell me that, Mrs. Presty! I'm one of the wretchedest men living, and I ask for the consolation of seeing my child. Kitty hasn't forgotten me yet, I know. Her mother can't be so cruel as to refuse. She shall fix her own time, and send me away when she likes; I'll submit to anything. Will you ask Catherine to let me see Kitty?"

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"For private reasons."

"What reasons?"

"For reasons into which you have no right to inquire."

He got up from his chair. His face presented the same expression which Mrs. Presty had seen on it when he first entered the room.

"When I came in here," he said, "I wished to be certain of one thing. Your prevarication has told me what I wanted to know. The newspapers had Catherine's own authority for it, Mrs. Presty, when they called her widow. I know now why my brother, who never deceived me before, has deceived me about this. I understand the part that your daughter has been playing--and I am as certain as if I had heard it, of the devilish lie that one of you--perhaps both of you--must have told my poor child. No, no; I had better not see Catherine. Many a man has killed his wife, and has not had such good reason for doing it as I have. You are quite right to keep me away from her."

He stopped--and looked suddenly toward the door. "I hear her," he cried, "She's coming in!"

The footsteps outside were audible once more. This time, they were approaching; they were close to the door. Herbert drew back from it. Looking round to see that he was out of the way, Mrs. Presty rushed forward--tore open the door in terror of what might happen--and admitted Captain Bennydeck.