

Chapter XLIX. Keep the Secret.

The Captain's attention was first attracted by the visitor whom he found in the room. He bowed to the stranger; but the first impression produced on him did not appear to have been of the favorable kind, when he turned next to Mrs. Presty.

Observing that she was agitated, he made the customary apologies, expressing his regret if he had been so unfortunate as to commit an intrusion. Trusting in the good sense and good breeding which distinguished him on other occasions, Mrs. Presty anticipated that he would see the propriety of leaving her alone again with the person whom he had found in her company. To her dismay he remained in the room; and, worse still, he noticed her daughter's absence, and asked if there was any serious cause for it.

For the moment, Mrs. Presty was unable to reply. Her presence of mind--or, to put it more correctly, her ready audacity--deserted her, when she saw Catherine's husband that had been, and Catherine's husband that was to be, meeting as strangers, and but too likely to discover each other.

In all her experience she had never been placed in such a position of embarrassment as the position in which she found herself now. The sense of honor which had prompted Catherine's resolution to make Bennydeck acquainted with the catastrophe of married life, might plead her excuse in the estimation of a man devotedly attached to her. But if the Captain was first informed that he had been deceived by a person who was a perfect stranger to him, what hope could be entertained of his still holding himself bound by his marriage engagement? It was even possible that distrust had been already excited in his mind. He must certainly have heard a man's voice raised in anger when he approached the door--and he was now observing that man with an air of curiosity which was already assuming the appearance of distrust. That Herbert, on his side, resented the Captain's critical examination of him was plainly visible in his face. After a glance at Bennydeck, he asked Mrs. Presty "who that gentleman was."

"I may be mistaken," he added; "but I thought your friend looked at me just now as if he knew me."

"I have met you, sir, before this." The Captain made the reply with a courteous composure of tone and manner which apparently reminded

Herbert of the claims of politeness.

"May I ask where I had the honor of seeing you?" he inquired.

"We passed each other in the hall of the hotel at Sandysal. You had a young woman with you."

"Your memory is a better one than mine, sir. I fail to remember the circumstance to which you refer."

Bennydeck let the matter rest there. Struck by the remarkable appearance of embarrassment in Mrs. Presty's manner--and feeling (in spite of Herbert's politeness of language) increased distrust of the man whom he had found visiting her--he thought it might not be amiss to hint that she could rely on him in case of necessity. "I am afraid I have interrupted a confidential interview," he began; "and I ought perhaps to explain--"

Mrs. Presty listened absently; preoccupied by the fear that Herbert would provoke a dangerous disclosure, and by the difficulty of discovering a means of preventing it. She interrupted the Captain.

"Excuse me for one moment; I have a word to say to this gentleman." Bennydeck immediately drew back, and Mrs. Presty lowered her voice. "If you wish to see Kitty," she resumed, attacking Herbert on his weak side, "it depends entirely on your discretion."

"What do you mean by discretion?"

"Be careful not to speak of our family troubles--and I promise you shall see Kitty. That is what I mean."

Herbert declined to say whether he would be careful or not. He was determined to find out, first, with what purpose Bennydeck had entered the room. "The gentleman was about to explain himself to you," he said to Mrs. Presty. "Why don't you give him the opportunity?"

She had no choice but to submit--in appearance at least. Never had she hated Herbert as she hated him at that moment. The Captain went on with his explanation. He had his reasons (he said) for hesitating, in the first instance, to present himself uninvited, and he accordingly retired. On second thoughts, however, he had returned, in the hope--

"In the hope," Herbert interposed, "of seeing Mrs. Presty's daughter?"

"That was one of my motives," Bennydeck answered.

"Is it indiscreet to inquire what the other motive was?"

"Not at all. I heard a stranger's voice, speaking in a tone which, to say the least of it, is not customary in a lady's room and I thought--"

Herbert interrupted him again. "And you thought your interference might be welcome to the lady! Am I right?"

"Quite right."

"Am I making another lucky guess if I suppose myself to be speaking to Captain Bennydeck?"

"I shall be glad to hear, sir, how you have arrived at the knowledge of my name."

"Shall we say, Captain, that I have arrived at it by instinct?"

His face, as he made that reply, alarmed Mrs. Presty. She cast a look at him, partly of entreaty, partly of warning. No effect was produced by the look. He continued, in a tone of ironical compliment: "You must pay the penalty of being a public character. Your marriage is announced in the newspapers."

"I seldom read the newspapers."

"Ah, indeed? Perhaps the report is not true? As you don't read the newspapers, allow me to repeat it. You are engaged to marry the 'beautiful widow, Mrs. Norman.' I think I quote those last words correctly?"

Mrs. Presty suddenly got up. With an inscrutable face that told no tales, she advanced to the door. Herbert's insane jealousy of the man who was about to become Catherine's husband had led him into a serious error; he had driven Catherine's mother to desperation. In that state of mind she recovered her lost audacity, as a matter of course. Opening the door, she turned round to the two men, with a magnificent impudence of manner which in her happiest moments she had never surpassed.

"I am sorry to interrupt this interesting conversation," she said; "but I have stupidly forgotten one of my domestic duties. You will allow me to return, and listen with renewed pleasure, when my household business is off my

mind. I shall hope to find you both more polite to each other than ever when I come back." She was in such a frenzy of suppressed rage that she actually kissed her hand to them as she left the room!

Bennydeck looked after her, convinced that some sinister purpose was concealed under Mrs. Presty's false excuses, and wholly unable to imagine what that purpose might be. Herbert still persisted in trying to force a quarrel on the Captain.

"As I remarked just now," he proceeded, "newspaper reports are not always to be trusted. Do you seriously mean, my dear sir, to marry Mrs. Norman?"

"I look forward to that honor and that happiness. But I am at a loss to know how it interests you."

"In that case allow me to enlighten you. My name is Herbert Linley."

He had held his name in reserve, feeling certain of the effect which he would produce when he pronounced it. The result took him completely by surprise. Not the slightest appearance of agitation showed itself in Bennydeck's manner. On the contrary, he looked as if there was something that interested him in the discovery of the name.

"You are probably related to a friend of mine?" he said, quietly.

"Who is your friend?"

"Mr. Randal Linley."

Herbert was entirely unprepared for this discovery. Once more, the Captain had got the best of it.

"Are you and Randal Linley intimate friends?" he inquired, as soon as he had recovered himself.

"Most intimate."

"It's strange that he should never have mentioned me, on any occasion when you and he were together."

"It does indeed seem strange."

Herbert paused. His brother's keen sense of the disgrace that he had

inflicted on the family recurred to his memory. He began to understand Randal's otherwise unaccountable silence.

"Are you nearly related to Mr. Randal Linley?" the Captain asked.

"I am his elder brother."

Ignorant on his part of the family disgrace, Bennydeck heard that reply with amazement. From his point of view, it was impossible to account for Randal's silence.

"Will you think me very inquisitive," Herbert resumed, "if I ask whether my brother approves of your marriage?"

There was a change in his tone, as he put that question which warned Bennydeck to be on his guard. "I have not yet consulted my friend's opinion," he answered, shortly.

Herbert threw off the mask. "In the meantime, you shall have my opinion," he said. "Your marriage is a crime--and I mean to prevent it."

The Captain left his chair, and sternly faced the man who had spoken those insolent words.

"Are you mad?" he asked.

Herbert was on the point of declaring himself to have been Catherine's husband, until the law dissolved their marriage--when a waiter came in and approached him with a message. "You are wanted immediately, sir."

"Who wants me?"

"A person outside, sir. It's a serious matter--there is not a moment to lose."

Herbert turned to the Captain. "I must have your promise to wait for me," he said, "or I don't leave the room."

"Make your mind easy. I shall not stir from this place till you have explained yourself," was the firm reply.

The servant led the way out. He crossed the passage, and opened the door of a waiting-room. Herbert passed in--and found himself face to face with his divorced wife.