

Chapter L. Forgiveness to the Injured Doth Belong.

Without one word of explanation, Catherine stepped up to him, and spoke first.

"Answer me this," she said--"have you told Captain Bennydeck who I am?"

"Not yet."

The shortest possible reply was the only reply that he could make, in the moment when he first looked at her.

She was not the same woman whom he had last seen at Sandyseal, returning for her lost book. The agitation produced by that unexpected meeting had turned her pale; the overpowering sense of injury had hardened and aged her face. This time, she was prepared to see him; this time, she was conscious of a resolution that raised her in her own estimation. Her clear blue eyes glittered as she looked at him, the bright color glowed in her cheeks; he was literally dazzled by her beauty.

"In the past time, which we both remember," she resumed, "you once said that I was the most truthful woman you had ever known. Have I done anything to disturb that part of your old faith in me?"

"Nothing."

She went on: "Before you entered this house, I had determined to tell Captain Bennydeck what you have not told him yet. When I say that, do you believe me?"

If he had been able to look away from her, he might have foreseen what was coming; and he would have remembered that his triumph over the Captain was still incomplete. But his eyes were riveted on her face; his tenderest memories of her were pleading with him. He answered as a docile child might have answered.

"I do believe you."

She took a letter from her bosom; and, showing it, begged him to remark that it was not closed.

"I was in my bedroom writing," she said, "When my mother came to me and told me that you and Captain Bennydeck had met in my sitting-room. She dreaded a quarrel and an exposure, and she urged me to go downstairs and insist on sending you away--or permit her to do so, if I could not prevail on myself to follow her advice. I refused to allow the shameful dismissal of a man who had once had his claim on my respect. The only alternative that I could see was to speak with you here, in private, as we are speaking now. My mother undertook to manage this for me; she saw the servant, and gave him the message which you received. Where is Captain Bennydeck now?"

"He is waiting in the sitting-room."

"Waiting for you?"

"Yes."

She considered a little before she said her next words.

"I have brought with me what I was writing in my own room," she resumed, "wishing to show it to you. Will you read it?"

She offered the letter to him. He hesitated. "Is it addressed to me?" he asked.

"It is addressed to Captain Bennydeck," she answered.

The jealousy that still rankled in his mind--jealousy that he had no more lawful or reasonable claim to feel than if he had been a stranger--urged him to assume an indifference which he was far from feeling. He begged that Catherine would accept his excuses.

She refused to excuse him.

"Before you decide," she said, "you ought at least to know why I have written to Captain Bennydeck, instead of speaking to him as I had proposed. My heart failed me when I thought of the distress that he might feel--and, perhaps of the contempt of myself which, good and gentle as he is, he might not be able to disguise. My letter tells him the truth, without concealment. I am obliged to speak of the manner in which you have treated me, and of the circumstances which forced me into acts of deception that I now bitterly regret. I have tried not to misrepresent you; I have been anxious to do you no wrong. It is for you, not for me, to say if I have succeeded. Once more, will you read my letter?"

The sad self-possession, the quiet dignity with which she spoke, appealed to his memory of the pardon that she had so generously granted, while he and Sydney Westerfield were still guiltless of the injury inflicted on her at a later time. Silently he took the letter from her, and read it.

She kept her face turned away from him and from the light. The effort to be still calm and reasonable--to suffer the heart-ache, and not to let the suffering be seen--made cruel demands on the self-betraying nature of a woman possessed by strong emotion. There was a moment when she heard him sigh while he was reading. She looked round at him, and instantly looked away again.

He rose and approached her; he held out the letter in one hand, and pointed to it with the other. Twice he attempted to speak. Twice the influence of the letter unmanned him.

It was a hard struggle, but it was for her sake: he mastered his weakness, and forced his trembling voice to submit to his will.

"Is the man whom you are going to marry worthy of this?" he asked, still pointing to the letter.

She answered, firmly: "More than worthy of it."

"Marry him, Catherine--and forget Me."

The great heart that he had so sorely wounded pitied him, forgave him, answered him with a burst of tears. She held out one imploring hand.

His lips touched it--he was gone.