

TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

CHAPTER III.
THE ARRIVAL.

The carriage here began rapidly to descend, and passing under a gateway, and through a wilderness of shrubs and laurels, drew up before a flight of stone steps.

Litton knew, of course, that they had stopped at the front door of the Hall, and was all anxiety to note how his companions were received. The door opened, and an old man servant appeared, and came slowly down the steps, at the top of which, with a lamp in her hand, stood a tall dark woman, gazing at them intently.

"That's my aunt," whispered the captain, jumping out and running up to her. She did not move towards him a hairbreadth, not even hold out her hand. Then a question and answer were, as it seemed, rapidly exchanged—and to Walter's extreme relief, a smile broke out upon the hostess's face, and she came swiftly down to the carriage door. She was only just in time, for poor Lotty, in an agony of grief and shame, had almost fainted away: it had seemed that Mrs. Sheldon was about to refuse her admittance.

"What a journey you have had, my dear, and how tired you must be!" were the lady's first words, uttered in a sweet and sympathetic, though, as it seemed to Walter, a somewhat affected tone. "However, you have reached home at last."

She held out her arms, gracefully, almost theatrically, in welcome, and Lotty fairly threw herself into them, and burst into tears. She had not known till then how much, how very much, she stood in need of womanly countenance and succor.

"Welcome to Penaddon, my dear," said Mrs. Sheldon, this time, as it seemed, with genuine tenderness. "And welcome to you, sir," added she, to Walter, extending to him graciously her unoccupied hand. The pose of her tall, well-rounded figure was magnificent, nor did she seem at all embarrassed by the weeping girl who hung upon her shoulder. "Who is this gentleman, Reginald? You have not introduced us," said she, pointing to Walter.

"Oh, it's only our courier." "Your courier!" exclaimed Mrs. Sheldon, indignantly.

"Yes; our courier, our chaperon, our gooseberry picker, our all. Is he not, Lotty? Mr. Walter Litton."

Even Lotty could not refrain from laughing—though, truth to say, it was in a half hysterical way; and Mrs. Sheldon, not unkindly, perhaps, by Walter's comely looks, took her nephew's mischievous joke in high good humor. As she led the way from the hall into the dining room, with Lotty on her arm, Walter could not help remarking how like aunt and nephew were. She was still young—that is for a married woman—not more than five-and-thirty at the most; but there were lines about her face which spoke of trouble past and present; and now and again her mouth would shape itself, as it seemed, unconsciously, into a painful smile.

"I have provided nothing, Reginald, but tea and coffee and cold chicken," said she pointing to the table, which was laid for supper, "because I knew that this dear girl of yours would have no relish for a heavier meal. What she wants more than anything else are rest and quiet; and as for you two gentlemen, you will find fare more suited to your taste at the inn. You will think me very inhospitable, I fear, Mr. Litton, but—"

"I think you very wise, madam," interrupted Walter earnestly. "In my opinion, Selwyn and myself ought to be off to our quarters at once. We must have kept up the good people at the inn already long past their usual time."

"O bother the good people at the inn!" said the captain disdainfully, as he helped Lotty to a cup of tea.

"Yes; and that is just what you will do, Reginald, if you don't get there till two o'clock in the morning," rejoined the hostess. "Moreover, the later you arrive, the greater will be their surprise, and the more they'll talk about the matter; and for the present, it is just as well that they should not talk about it. I have sent my own maid to bed, lest the spectacle of a young lady's advent without so much as a handbag in the way of luggage, should stimulate her curiosity. Bid her good night, and be off to your inn."

Reginald said his "good-bye" to Lotty accordingly—a very decorous one, and then Walter offered his hand.

"I shall never forget your kindness, Mr. Litton," said she softly. The words, and still more the tone, thrilled through him with a strange pain. How beautiful she looked, and yet how pitiful; far from her home and all, save one, that loved her. Would it ever be his future, he wondered, to be loved, as his friend was, and by such a paragon? No, alas; for there could be no two Lotties in the world.

"Good-night, Mr. Courier." It was his hostess who was addressing him for the second time, and with that pined smile about her lips which is the outward sign of woman's cynicism. "Why, you seem to take parting from your charge almost as much to heart as Reginald himself. I feel as if I were the angel commissioned to turn you both out of Paradise."

"You look like the angel," observed the captain gallantly, "and I leave my Lotty with confidence under your fostering wings. Good-night."

"Good night, irreverent boy; and remember, we do not receive company to-morrow morning before eleven o'clock, at earliest. This poor child is utterly done up," she added in a whisper: "girls took to elopements in my time very differently."

"Like ducklings to water, eh?" laughed the captain.

"Go away, sir; for sh-me. Good-night, Mr. Courier."

"I tell you what, Litton," said Selwyn, when they had re-entered the carriage, and it was moving rapidly towards the inn; "you've regularly 'fetched' Aunt Sheldon."

"Fetched your Aunt Sheldon?" "Yes; made a conquest of her, man, I mean. If you had not been with us, I doubt if she would have been half as civil."

"Upon my life, Selwyn, I thought she was not going to be civil at all, when you first spoke to her on the steps. What cake did you throw to Cerberus that made things at once so pleasant? She knew you had eloped of course!"

"Yes; but she didn't know with whom." "But you couldn't have explained everything in that quarter of a minute—who the young lady was, and all that?"

"Oh, she knew about Lotty well enough; but she was not certain that it was Lotty."

"But who else could it have been?" inquired Walter, aghast.

"I am sure I don't know," laughed the captain; "no more did she. That was her little difficulty. She would never have countenanced the affair, you see, unless she had approved of my choice for material reasons. She has a very sharp eye to the main chance—has Aunt Sheldon."

Litton remained silent: he was stricken dumb by the thought of the risk that Lotty's reputation had incurred; of the chance, however small, that had existed of her finding the doors of Penaddon Hall closed against her. From one point of view, indeed, now that all had turned out right, this was satisfactory, since it showed that Mrs. Sheldon did draw the line of propriety somewhere. But what a hard and fast line it was! What misery and disgrace might have resulted from this woman's "No!" And she looked quite capable of saying "No!" upon occasion, and of sticking to it. How shocking, how cruel, would be the verdict passed even now upon this sweet innocent creature for that indiscretion; and once more he shuddered to think of what it would have been had Mrs. Sheldon refused her countenance to her. He felt as though he could have laid down his life, if that might have shielded her from the breath of evil report, for those gracious words of parting that still rang in his tingling ears: "I shall never forget your kindness, Mr. Litton," seemed to have paid him, as it were, in advance, for any sacrifice.

Oh, great and wonderful is the power of woman's beauty over the heart of man! Old or young, married or single—for though it blooms not for ourselves, it is still passing sweet—we all alike acknowledge its sway. Man has no social gift to compare with it; for man's comeliness is not, in woman's eyes, what woman's comeliness is in man's.

"Here is the Wheatsheaf at last," exclaimed Selwyn, as the carriage stopped. "Did you ever see such a jolly inn?" By the adjective "jolly" the captain was wont to describe anything that was good of its kind—a jolly girl, a jolly row, a jolly lobster—but in this particular case he used it in an artistic sense.

The Wheatsheaf was undeniably picturesque. So entirely had the plant of which he had spoken taken possession of the whole edifice with its spreading branches, that it looked more like a house in a tree, than a dwelling overgrown with vegetation. The purple blossoms, that covered it as thickly as peaches grow on a sunny wall, had a beautiful, though weird, effect in the moonlight; and so protected was the nook in which the little inn was situated, that not a blossom stirred, though the wind could be heard still roaring on the moor above, almost as fiercely as the waves beat upon the neighboring shore.

The visitors were ushered to their apartments—small and plainly furnished rooms enough, but of exquisite cleanliness—and presently came down to supper, for which they by no means manifested the disrelish which their fair companion had shown. When the table had been cleared, the two young men sat over their tobacco—the captain, as before, smoking his cigar, the painter his pipe—and discussed the day's events.

"If my dear Lotty has a fault," said the captain, complacently, "it is indecision, and it is most fortunate that circumstances have thus decided for her. In a few days, we shall be married; and even as it is, matters have gone too far, thank goodness, for any interference of her family with her happiness. If old Brown himself should come to Penaddon, she would now become Mrs. Selwyn in spite of him. Let us drink the old curmudgeon's health, and a speedy reconciliation with his offspring."

"By all means, my dear Selwyn," said Walter, filling his glass. "But suppose he refuses to be reconciled, and disinherits her?"

"Let us hope better things," answered the captain.

"I do hope them, most sincerely, most warmly, my dear fellow; but one must not shut one's eyes to what may happen, merely because it is very unpleasant. It is much better to look the worst in the face—while there is yet time to avert the worst."

"I don't understand you, Litton," said the captain, speaking with the unnecessary distinctness which suggests that particular state of mind which ladies call "temper." "I am sure that you do not intend to imply that there is a possibility of my retracting this step. If I were inclined to think of such a thing on my own account—to sacrifice, that is, my own happiness to this old man's will, to forego the advantage I have gained, and once more put myself in the position of a suppliant to him—I say, if I were inclined to humiliate myself to that extent (which is not to be thought of), still, it is wholly out of the question that Lotty can return to her home, after what has taken place to-day, unless as my wife."

"But can you maintain her as your wife—that is, as your wife ought to be maintained,

my good fellow? I know your circumstances.

The question is: 'How are you to live?' "That is our look-out—or at least mine, my good friend. And, at all events, the question—though I grant it is a pertinent one—comes a little late."

"That is true, Selwyn. All that I meant was, would it not be easier to conciliate your future father-in-law before you have absolutely set him at defiance? His daughter is at your aunt's house—the match is so far countenanced by your family; is not that a vantage-ground from which you could treat with this old gentleman with a better grace, than after having utterly cast off his authority?"

"No, Litton," returned the other positively; "you don't know this old fellow as I do. He is as hard as nails, where he can be hard; but he has sufficient common-sense, I think, to make the best of a bad job—which is the term he will no doubt apply to my becoming his son-in-law. Of course, the present position is very unpleasant for us all round. People will say hard things even of yourself, to whose friendly help we are both so much indebted, for having 'aided and abetted' this young lady to leave the paternal roof. You will be like the second in a duel, who gets all the odium, and none of the glory."

"Oh, never mind me," said Walter impatiently. "I was thinking of somebody else. I was thinking," added he hastily, his face growing crimson as he spoke one of the few falsehoods his lips had ever uttered, "of your aunt, who will certainly come in for her share of discredit."

"Oh, never mind my aunt," returned the captain contemptuously. "Beatty Sheldon (her name is Beatty) is not unaccustomed to the censure of society, and cares about it as little as any one I know. She is a real good plucked one, whatever her faults, and not likely to give way to clamor. By Jove, I wish we had her at the Horse Guards, instead of some other woman I could mention."

Walter sighed, and took up his bed-candle: there was nothing more to be said, he knew. Whatever slender hope he might have entertained of inducing his friend to make an effort, even now, to gain his intended father-in-law's consent to his marriage, it had utterly died away. What Selwyn had hinted too, of Mrs. Sheldon's past not calculated to dispel his doubts as to the suitability of that lady for a young girl's chaperon, in the present circumstances.

CHAPTER IV.
PENADDON.

In spite of his long travel of the previous day, Walter Litton was up betimes on the morning after his arrival at Penaddon. Not so the captain, who, since the sight of his destined bride had been forbidden to him till eleven o'clock, thought himself justified in indulging in one of his favorite weaknesses—that of rising late. He was not a man to set a fancy value upon his time under any circumstances, nor had he much appreciation of the beauties of nature, never so charming, fresh and inspiring as when the day is young. Litton, on the contrary, was ordinarily much impressed by them; and never had a fairer scene awaited him than that which met his eyes when, having unfastened the door of the Wheatsheaf with his own hands (for no one in the house was yet stirring but himself), he stood in the roadway, which at a few paces from the inn, was lost in the shelving sand of the sea-shore. The tiny waves were lapping softly upon it, for the storm of the previous night had spent itself, and the gulls, which it had blown about like foam, were sliding noiselessly through the sunny air. To the north and east lay the illimitable ocean; but southward the view was interrupted by a small projecting promontory, upon which, and not on the shore, as he had imagined, from his friend's description, stood the ruined church.

As Walter climbed the stile that led into this deserted sanctuary, a partridge whirred from beneath his feet, and flew towards a neighboring wood; his eyes mechanically followed it, and perceived through the trees the glint of a white house, which he rightly conjectured to be Penaddon Hall. In an instant the church, the castle, and the fair scene which was on all sides spread before him, were forgotten, and his thoughts returned to the subject from which they had won him, and from which he had been glad to be won—Lotty. He had never called her by that name, of course, but he had heard her called so, and never thought of her under any other. He did not resent the fact that his friend had secured her affections; he bowed before it, as before any other harsh decree of destiny; but he did, without quite acknowledging it to himself, resent in his heart the complacency with which the captain took his good fortune, and the small store he apparently set by it. It was not exactly that he did not value his prize as it deserved, but that he seemed to value it for what were not its rarest and most precious attributes, but for such as were common to other girls. Litton was hard upon his friend, no doubt, but it was because his heart was poured out like water in tenderness for this friendless girl; nor was he selfish in his indignation. If the captain had not existed, he could still not have hoped to make Lotty his own. He had no position in the world, and no money to be called "money;" that is to say, he had just enough to live upon in a very sparing and Spartan-like manner. His brush had as yet earned him little or nothing, scarce enough to pay for his canvas and the paints, with an occasional share of a model. And though so young, and really clever with his fingers, he did not believe that his genius would give him an independence for many a year to come. His parents had long been dead; he had been left to the care of a distant relative, who had all but declined the trust bequeathed to him, and had only let him have his way in embracing Art as a profession, because it was less trouble than to oppose him.

At this moment, however, as he walks up and down the deserted churchyard, gazing mechanically, and not as usual with a keen eye to "effects," at earth, and sea, and sky, his thoughts were mainly of his own position, present and future. How long was he doomed to live in those dreary lodgings in Beech street, practising his art, while the short light lasted, drawing "studies" that had to be rubbed out again to make room for others, but little better, or painting likenesses of which even the hired sitters did not always express their admiration? Jack Pelter, who lived on the floor below him, and went halves

in his models, was a good fellow enough, it is true, and said "Poor devil" really as if he felt it, when Walter's picture came back from the Gallery in Pall Mall last month rejected by the committee; but that was not the sort of consolation for which he yearned. He did not relish the prospect of becoming in time like Jack himself, though that agreeable veteran had plenty of accepted pictures, some of which were even marked with that charming St. Andrew's cross in the catalogue; red nosed, hoarse voiced Jack, given to singing ballads "amatory and bacchanalian," as the old song books term them, late into the night, and rising in the morning with a relish for beer. Walter was no milksop, but the prospect of such a future had no charms for him, and yet it seemed the best he had to look to. He was not envious of the captain's good fortune, but he could not forbear contrasting it with his own. "When could he ever hope to possess—indeed, was it possible that the world held another like her for him or any man—such a paragon of loveliness as this young girl, whom he had seen for the first time but yesterday, but whose charms would never, while memory—"

At this point in his soliloquy, Walter instinctively glanced towards the Hall, and coming down towards him through the trees, he caught the flutter of a petticoat. For a moment he became rose color—not from motives of delicacy, for the petticoat was a long way off, but from the force and suddenness of an emotion that he could not resist. Lotty was about to join him, to take his hand, to speak with him. He felt inclined to flee to the inn, and bid the captain come—for whom, and not for him, this visit was obviously designed. He was prepared to take any course that would please her most; to shield, to praise—but here she came in sight again, much nearer, and he perceived with mingled relief and chagrin, that it was not Lotty at all, but Mrs. Sheldon? She was a tall, fine woman, and of a graceful carriage, yet he felt aggrieved with himself that distance should have lent such enchantment to her that he had taken her for her lovely guest. Good morning, I felt sure that it was you, Mr. Litton, who had come out to enjoy this beautiful morning, and not that sluggish Reggie. I do believe that he was secretly rejoiced last night when I forbade him to call upon his innumerate before eleven o'clock this morning. The dear fellow has made a charming choice, has he not?"

"Yes, indeed. Miss Brown is very beautiful, and, as it seems to me, has a disposition calculated to make any man happy."

"How long have you known her?"

This question rather staggered Walter. Brought face to face with the facts, by Mrs. Sheldon's inquiry, he answered evasively: "Oh, only very recently; but I have seen her during such a trying time, that I seem to know more about her than I should have learnt in months of ordinary acquaintance."

"I see," said Mrs. Sheldon dryly. "Well, I too have seen her under exceptional circumstances, and though I quite agree with you as to her good looks, her character appears to me to be a little weak."

"You must remember, Mrs. Sheldon," answered Walter quickly, "that the circumstances are not only exceptional, but, in her case, are not altogether favorable. Up to the moment of your reception of her, she was not quite certain that it would be a kind one; that she was utterly alone—nay, worse than alone—till you held out your arms to her; and had really no opportunity of showing any strength of character, even if she possessed it. Moreover, she is so devoted to your nephew, that her individuality is, for the present, as it were, lost in his."

"For the present, you say, Mr. Litton: you do not think this devotion of hers, then, is likely to stand the test of matrimony?" "Nay; indeed, I implied nothing of the kind," said Walter earnestly. "I only meant that the young lady is placed just now in a most difficult and embarrassing situation, and needs the most charitable construction to be put on her words as well as actions."

"I see you are a true knight-errant, Mr. Litton, and happy should be the lady whose colors you elect to wear upon your helm," answered Mrs. Sheldon with a scarce perceptible sigh. "She is fortunate in having so disinterested an advocate."

Walter felt not only uncomfortable, but even abashed; he was not unconscious that he had been somewhat enthusiastic in his praise of the object of his friend's choice, and that it was no more his place to be so—nor, indeed, so much—than it was Mrs. Sheldon's. "I still, however, think that Lotty is weak," continued that lady, musing; "not only born to be led rather than to lead, which is the fate of our sex, but, what is not so usual with us, well content with that dependent position. However, that is the less to be regretted, since Reggie has will enough for two. I don't think he would stand much opposition in a wife, after the honeymoon days were over; what do you say, Mr. Litton?"

"I think Selwyn likes to have his way, like most of us men," answered Walter. "You are virtuous," said Mrs. Sheldon, smiling, "for you withstand the temptation of criticising an absent friend. Well, I am his aunt, you know—though it seems rather ridiculous perhaps?"

"It seems incredible," said Walter gallantly. "When I first saw you, I thought Selwyn had been playing one of his jokes upon us in saying that he was your nephew." "But it really is so," said Mrs. Sheldon; "my father and Reginald's were always taken for brothers, so nearly were they of an age, and yet they belonged to different generations. Well, as I was saying, I am his near relative, and privileged to speak the truth about Reggie. I think this young lady very suitable for him in many respects; but, of course, he runs a tremendous risk. I mean, of course," added she, in answer to Walter's questioning look, "as to the money. I am not a mercenary person, I hope, but I know men can't live upon air."

"Nor young ladies either, I conclude," said Walter dryly.

"Well, yes; they can live upon love, which comes to the same thing, my dear Mr. Litton. If his love is not meat, drink and clothing to her, it is all beside those three essentials; and possessing it, she can dispense with almost everything else." The change in Mrs. Sheldon's manner, as she thus spoke, was very remarkable; her lively, yet somewhat cynical air had wholly disappeared, and was replaced by a certain passionate earnestness. "It is possible," was

Walter's involuntary thought, "that society may have judged this woman harshly, after all; she may herself have married one who did not continue to be the man he had seemed, or whom she discovered, perhaps, to be the lover of somebody else." His heart, always tender toward woman-kind, was moved with pity, and his face betrayed it.

"I am speaking of men and women generally, Mr. Litton," said she, in a softened tone, "for there are women as hard as nails (as Reginald would say), and men more noble than the best of women; and in this particular case there will be love enough, and on the right side, to make it no hardship to dispense with luxuries. It is the vulgar meat, drink and clothing question that is the present problem. If Brown pere refuses to be reconciled, how are the young folks to live?"

"That is the very inquiry that I ventured to put to Selwyn last night," observed Walter gravely, "but one which he was either unable or disinclined to answer. He has his pay, of course."

"That is nothing," answered Mrs. Sheldon. "He has always looked upon it as so much pocket-money, to be spent in cigars and sodas and brandy. The inheritance he received from his parents was to a great extent anticipated before it came to him, and he has been living on it—that is on the principal—ever since. I should be surprised, even, if he could show a fair balance sheet, and start in life to-day with anything to the good, if all his debts were paid."

"Good heavens!" cried Litton, "this is terrible. I knew Selwyn called himself a poor man; but I thought that was considering his position in a crack cavalry regiment; poor, compared with such a man as myself, for instance. I felt that it was indiscreet of him to marry; but if what you say is true?"

Walter hesitated, for he was about to say something harsh. "If what I say is true, and it is true," said Mrs. Sheldon, "this marriage is madness, you were about to observe. It is worse than madness—unless he has good cause to reckon upon the forgiveness of this young girl's father—it is suicide. It is upon this very matter that I came down here this morning to have a few words with you. I wanted to know, from a really trustworthy source, what chance there was of a reconciliation."

"My dear Mrs. Sheldon, I know less of that even than yourself. I cannot, will not think that matters are quite so bad with Selwyn as you describe. If they are, how did he himself look forward to extricate himself from his difficulties, supposing this—this running-away had never happened?"

"By a lucky marriage," observed Mrs. Sheldon coolly. "Reggie has no expectations in the way of money at all; but there is an Irish cousin of his, a baronet, to whose title, although to nothing else, for he has nothing to leave, he is the heir. This man is both old and ailing, and in all probability my nephew will soon become 'Sir Reginald.' He flattered himself, and with reason, that with a handle to his name, his good looks would procure him a rich wife, when it should become absolutely necessary, to him to redeem his fortunes by matrimony. With such personal advantages, aided by the glitter of his Crimean medal, he could hardly, indeed, have failed. But now, if he has over-rated the strength of father Brown's affection for his off-spring, he has done for himself altogether."

"He has done for somebody else, also, it appears to me," said Walter bitterly.

Mrs. Sheldon shrugged her plump shoulders and threw out her little hands: "That goes without saying, Mr. Litton; man and wife are one; such, at least, is the view of the law."

"And I suppose they must now be man and wife," observed Walter mournfully. "There was nothing of selfishness in his thought, only commiseration for what seemed the wretchedness of Lotty's future; but it was with a sarcastic smile that his companion answered: 'The alternative would be even worse, under the circumstances, my good sir, for the 'somebody else,' for whom you express so disinterested a solicitude. Matters have gone too far, in the eyes of the world, to admit of retreat, even if Reginald would listen to such a proposition. The girl is of age, and even if she were not, the law is not so paternal as it is (perhaps fortunately) supposed to be by young ladies and their would-be swains. If she were a ward in Chancery, then, indeed, even Reginald's will would have to give way for once. You must never run away with a ward in Chancery, remember—unless she is somebody else's wife;" and Mrs. Sheldon broke into a light musical laugh that startled Walter not a little.

"You are shocked," said she, "at my want of gravity; but what would you have? The mischief is done, and there is nothing left but to make the best of it. She will be up by this time, and looking for her hostess, so I must say 'au revoir.'"

"One moment," said Walter, earnestly. "May I ask how long—I mean, how soon will the marriage take place?"

"Well, doubtless as soon as the law will permit it. In a case of special license—you will think I have these things at my fingertips, but I was married myself," here she gaily touched her marriage-ring, "under these very circumstances—the period of residence is of no consequence. I hope we may succeed in preventing you from being bored to death at Penaddon for the very short time that will be necessary to get the document from Doctors' Commons."

"I thought of going back home—that is, to town," said Walter hesitatingly. "I, only came down to look after Selwyn, and now, of course, I shall be no longer necessary to him."

"My dear Mr. Little, you are more necessary to him than ever," replied his companion gravely; "your presence, indeed, is absolutely indispensable at the marriage itself."

"How so?" inquired Walter, with amazement.

"Why, you will act, of course, as the deputy of father Brown. You will have to give Lotty away."

Mrs. Sheldon had turned upon her heel, and was half over the churchyard stile (exhibiting a very charming foot and ankle) before he could recall his senses, scattered by this bombshell of a reply. Give Lotty away! So inhuman a command had never been laid upon him since his first schoolmaster had bid him fetch the stick which was designed to be the instrument of his own correction.

(To be Continued.)