

TWO DAYS IN A LIFETIME.

IN EIGHT CHAPTERS.

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CHAPTER VIII.

Presently the nurse came and carried off Miss Lucy and her doll. Lady Dimsdale rose and joined Mrs. Bowood.

A minute later, a servant came and presented the captain with a card. The latter put on his spectacles, and read what was written on the card aloud: "Mr. Garwood Brooker, Theatre Royal, Ryde." "Don't know him. Never heard of the man before," said the Captain emphatically.

"The gentleman is waiting in the library, sir," said the servant. "Says he wants to see you on very particular business."

"Humph! Too hot for business of any kind. Too many things about. Must see him through, I suppose."

The servant retired; and presently the Captain followed him into the house. Mrs. Bowood and Lady Dimsdale lingered for a few minutes, and then they too went indoors.

As Captain Bowood entered the library, Mr. Brooker rose and made him a profound bow. He was a stoutly-built man, between fifty and sixty years of age. He wore shoes; gray trousers, very baggy at the knees; a tightly buttoned frock-coat, with a velvet collar; and an old-fashioned black satin stock, the ends of which hid whatever portion of his linen might otherwise have been exposed to view. A jet black wig covered his head, the long tangled ends of which floated mazy over his velvet collar behind. His closely shaven face was blue-black round the mouth and chin, where the razor had passed over its surface day after day for forty years. The rest of his face looked yellow and wrinkled, the continual use of pigments for stage purposes having long ago spoiled whatever natural freshness it might once have possessed. Mr. Brooker had a bold aquiline nose and bushy brows, and at one time had been accounted an eminently handsome man, especially when viewed from before the footlights; but his waist had disappeared years ago, and there was a general air about him of running to seed. When Mr. Brooker chose to put on his dignified air, he was very dignified. Finally, it may be said that every one in "the profession" who knew "old Brooker," liked and esteemed him, and that at least he was a thorough gentleman.

Having made his bow, Mr. Brooker advanced one foot a little, buried one hand in the breast of his frock-coat, and let the other rest gracefully on his hip. It was one of his favorite stage attitudes.

"Mr. Brooker!" said the Captain interrogatively, as he came forward with the other's card in his hand.

"At your service, Captain Bowood." The voice was deep, almost sepulchral in its tones, it was the voice of Hamlet in his gloomiest moments.

"Pray, be seated," said the Captain in his offhand way as he took a chair himself.

Mr. Brooker slowly deposited himself upon another chair. He would have preferred saying what he had to say standing as giving more scope for graceful and appropriate gestures; but he gave way to circumstances. He cleared his voice, and then he said: "I am here, sir, this morning as an ambassador on the part of your nephew, Mr. Charles Warden."

"Don't know any such person," said the Captain shortly.

"Pardon me—I ought to have said your nephew, Mr. Charles Summers."

"Then it's a pity that you did not come on a better errand. I want nothing to do with the young vagabond in any way. He and I are strangers. Eh, now?"

"He is a very clever and talented young gentleman; and let me tell you, sir, that you ought to be very proud of him."

"Proud of my nephew, who is an actor!—an actor! Pooh!" The Captain spoke with a considerable degree of contempt.

"I am an actor, sir," was Mr. Brooker's withering reply, in his most sepulchral tones.

The Captain turned red, coughed, and fidgeted. "Nothing personal, sir—nothing personal," he spluttered. "I only spoke in general terms."

"You spoke in depreciating terms, sir, respecting something about which you evidently know little or nothing."

The Captain winced. He was not in the habit of being lectured, and the sensation was not a pleasant one, but he felt the justice of the reproach.

"Ah, sir, the actor's profession is one of the noblest in the world," resumed Mr. Brooker, changing from his Hamlet to his Mercutio voice; "and your nephew bids fair to become one of the shining ornaments in it. I know of few young men who have progressed so rapidly in so short a time, and the press notices he has had are something remarkable. Here are a few of them, sir, only a few of them, which I have brought together. Oblige me by casting your eye over them, sir, and then tell me what you think." Speaking thus, Mr. Brooker produced from his pocket-book three or four sheets of paper, on which had been gummed sundry cuttings from different newspapers and handed them to the Captain.

That gentleman having put on his glasses, read the extracts through deliberately and carefully. "Bless my heart! this is most extraordinary!" he remarked when he had done. "And do all these fine words refer to that graceless young scamp of a nephew of mine?"

"Every one of them, sir; and he deserves all that's said of him."

Like many other people, Captain Bowood had a great respect for anything that he saw in print, more especially for any opinion enunciated by the particular daily organ whose political views happened to coincide with his own, and by whose leading articles he was, metaphorically, led by the nose. When, therefore, he came across a laudatory notice anent his nephew's acting extracted from his favourite *Telephone*, he felt under the necessity of taking out his handkerchief and rubbing his spectacles vigorously.

"There must be something in the lad after all," he muttered to himself, "or the *Telephone* wouldn't think it worth while to make such a fuss about him. But why didn't he keep to tea-broking?"

"I am much obliged to you, sir," said the Captain, as he handed the extracts back to Mr. Brooker.

"I am afraid that I make but a poor envoy, sir," said the latter, "seeing that as yet I have furnished you with no reason for venturing to intrude upon you this morning."

"You have a message for me?" remarked the Captain.

"I have, sir; and I doubt not you can readily guess from whom. Sir, I have the honour of being the manager of the travelling theatrical company of which your nephew forms a component part. I am old enough to be the young man's father, and that may be one reason why he chose to confide his troubles to me. In any case, I have taken the liberty of coming here to intercede for him. There are two points, sir, that he wishes me to lay before you. The first is his desire—I might, without exaggeration, say his intense longing—to be reconciled to you, who have been to him as a second father, since his own parents died. He acknowledges and regrets that in days gone by he was a great trouble to you—a great worry and a great expense. But he begs me to assure you that he has now sown his wild- oats, that he is working hard in his profession and that he is determined

to rise in it; and that he will yet be a credit to you and every one connected with him—all of which I fully endorse. But he cannot feel happy, sir, till he has been reconciled to you—till you have accorded him your forgiveness, and—"

Here the Captain sneezed violently, and then blew his nose. "I know it—I said so," he remarked aloud. "Those confounded draughts—give everybody cold. Why not?" Then addressing himself directly to Mr. Brooker, he said: "Well, sir, well. I have listened to your remarks with a considerable degree of patience, and I am glad to find that my graceless nephew has some sense of compunction left in him. But as for reconciliation and forgiveness and all that nonsense—pooh, pooh!—not to be thought of—not to be thought of!"

"I am sorry to hear that Captain Bowood—very sorry indeed."

"You made mention of some other point, sir, that Mr. Summers wished you to lay before me. Eh, now?"

"I did sir. It is that of his attachment to a young lady at present staying under your roof—Miss Brandon by name."

"Ah, I guessed as much!"

"He desires your sanction to his engagement to the young lady in question, not with any view to immediate marriage, Miss Brandon being a ward in Chancery, but—"

"Confound his impudence, sir!" burst out the Captain irately. "How dare he, sir—how dare he make love to a young lady who is placed under my charge by her nearest relative? What will Miss Hoskyns say and think, when she comes back and finds her niece over head and ears in love with my worthless nephew? Come now?"

"It may perchance mitigate to some extent the severity of your displeasure, sir," remarked Mr. Brooker in his blandest tones, "when I tell you that in my pocket I have a letter written by Miss Hoskyns, in which that lady sanctions your nephew's engagement to Miss Brandon."

The Captain stared in open mouthed wonder at the veteran actor. This was the strangest turn of all. He felt that the situation was getting beyond his grasp, so he did to-day what he always did in cases of difficulty—he sent for his wife.

Mrs. Bowood was almost as much surprised as her husband when she heard the news. Mr. Brooker produced Miss Hoskyns's letter, the genuineness of which could not be disputed; but she was still as much at a loss as before to imagine by what occult means Master Charley had succeeded in causing such a document to be written. Nor did she find out till some time afterwards.

It would appear that our two young people had fallen in love with each other during the month they had spent at Rosemount the preceding summer, and that during the ensuing winter, Charley had contrived to worm his way into the good graces of Miss Hoskyns by humouring her weaknesses and playing on her foibles, of which the worthy lady had an ample stock-in-trade. But no one could have been more surprised than the young man himself was, when in answer to his letter, which he had written without the remotest hope of its being favourably considered, there came a gracious response, sanctioning his engagement to Miss Brandon. The fact was that, while in Italy, Miss Hoskyns had allowed her elderly affections to become entangled with a good-looking man some years younger than herself, to whom she was now on the point of being married. The first perusal of Charley's letter had thrown her into a violent rage; but at the end of twenty-four hours her views had become considerably modified. After all, as she argued to herself, why shouldn't young Summers and her niece make a match of it? He came of a good family, and would incontestably be his uncle's heir; and Captain Bowood was known to be a very

rich man. And then came in another argument, which had perhaps more weight than all the rest. Would it be wise, would it be advisable, to keep herself hampered with a niece who was fast developing into a really handsome young woman, when she, the aunt, was about to take a good-looking husband so much younger than herself? No; she opined that such a course was neither wise nor advisable. Hence it came to pass that the letter was written which was such a source of surprise to every one at Rosemount.

"What am I to do now?" asked the Captain a little helplessly, as Mrs. Bowood gave back the letter to Mr. Brooker.

That lady's mind was made up on the instant. "There is only one thing for you to do," she said with decision, "and that is to forgive the boy all his past faults and follies, and sanction his engagement to Elsie Brandon."

"What—what! Eat my own words—swallow my own leek—when I've said a hundred times that!"

"Remember, dear, what you said in the drawing-room last evening," interposed Mrs. Bowood in her quietest tones.

Then the Captain called to mind how, in conversation the previous evening with his wife and Lady Dimsdale, he had chuckled over the tricks played by his nephew, and had admitted that that young gentleman's falling in love with Miss Brandon was the very thing he would have wished for, had he been consulted in the matter.

The Captain was crestfallen when these things were brought to his mind.

Mrs. Bowood gave him no time for further reflection. Rightly assuming that the young people were not far away, she opened a door leading to an inner room, and there found them in close proximity to each other on the sofa. "Come along you naughty children," she said, "and receive the sentence due for your many crimes."

They came forward shamefacedly enough. Master Charles looked a little paler than ordinary; on Elsie's face there was a lovely wildrose blush.

Mr. Brooker rose to his feet, ran the fingers of one hand lightly through his wig, and posed himself in his favorite attitude. He felt that just at this point a little slow music might have been effectively introduced.

The Captain also rose to his feet.

Charley came forward quickly and grasped one of the old man's hands in both of his. "Uncle!" he said, looking straight into his face through eyes that swam in tears.

For a moment or two the Captain tried to look fierce, but failed miserably. Then bending his white head, and laying a hand on his nephew's shoulder, he murmured in a broken voice: "M—m—my boy!"

Sir Frederick Pinkerton was slowly pacing the sunny south terrace, smoking one cigarette after another in a way that with him was very unusual. He was only half satisfied with himself—only half satisfied with the way in which he had treated Lady Dimsdale. The instincts of a gentleman were at work within him, and those instincts whispered to him that he had acted as no true gentleman ought to act. And yet his feelings were very bitter. Had not Lady Dimsdale rejected him?—had she not scorned him?—had she not treated him with a contumely that was only half veiled? Still more bitter was the thought that if he acted as his conscience told him he ought to act, he would release Lady Dimsdale from the promise he had imposed upon her, and stand quietly on one side, while another snatched the prize which, only a few short hours ago, he had fondly deemed would be all his own. But this was a sacrifice which he felt that he was not magnanimous enough to make. "I have done the man a great—an inestimable