

UNDER A CLOUD

THRILLING TALE OF HUMAN LIFE

CHAPTER XLIX.

A PLACE OF REST.

"Well, if ever two strange gentlemen did live in inns it's Mr. Stratton and Mr. Brettison," said Mrs. Brado as she reluctantly went back to her lodge. "Nice state their rooms must be in; and him once so civil and polite as awkward and gruff as you please."

She had some cause for complaint, Brettison having dismissed her with a request not to talk quite so much.

In spite of the woman's declaration of Stratton's absence, the old man felt that he must be there; and after knocking twice, each time with his heart sinking more and more with dread, he applied his lips to the letter box after forcing open the spring flap.

"Stratton, if you are there, for Heaven's sake open at once!" he whispered loudly.

There was a rustling sound directly, the bolt was shot back, and Stratton admitted him, afterward taking a letter from the box, glancing at it, and thrusting it into his pocket.

"That woman said you had gone out," said Brettison eagerly. "I was alarmed. I thought—how is he?"

Stratton pointed to the chair where the man lay as if asleep.

"Why, how haggard you look," said Brettison excitedly. "Has there been anything the matter?"

"Nothing much; only I have had a struggle with a madman who tried to murder me."

"My dear boy!"

"It's a fact," said Stratton. "I found him with that piece of rock in his hand, and about to strike me down."

He pointed to the massive stone lying on the table, and then said, smiling:

"I was just in time to save myself."

"Good Heavens! Was he dangerous for long?"

"For long enough. We had a short struggle, and he went down with a crash. One moment he was tremendously strong; the next helpless as a child, and he has been like that ever since. Our plans must be altered."

"No, not now," said Brettison decisively. "The man has been over excited to-day. Your presence seems to have roused up feelings that have been asleep. I ought not to have left you alone with him. Come, it is getting late. We have very few minutes to spare."

"Then you mean to go?"

"Yes, I mean to go. You shall see us to the station. I have no fear of him; he will be calm enough with me."

"Very well," said Stratton, "anything to get him away from here. If he keeps on turning violent he must be placed under restraint." Stratton opened the door, placed his traveling bag outside, and came back.

"What does that mean?" said Brettison, pointing to the bag.

"Mine. You do not suppose I shall let you go alone."

"You cannot go now. I have managed him so long and I can manage him still."

"We shall miss the train," said Stratton quietly; and taking the man's arm he drew it quickly through his, and after pausing to secure the door, walked with him down to the cab, Brettison following with the little valise.

They reached the station within five minutes of the time, and soon after were rattling down to Southampton, Stratton throwing himself back in a corner to draw a deep breath of relief as they left the busy town behind, and taking out his letter, but only to glance at the handwriting, and thrust it back.

Their prisoner sank back to sleep heavily, and he was still in a drowsy state as they went on board, lying down quietly enough in his berth, where they left him and went on deck as soon as they were well out of the dock.

"Safe!" said Stratton exultingly. "Now, Brettison, that man must never see England again."

They reached Jersey in due time, and next morning were in St. Malo, where they stayed two days, making inquiries which resulted in their taking a boat and being landed twenty miles along the coast at a picturesque—old-world fishing village—St. Gervais—where lodgings being found, they both drew breath more freely, feeling at ease now—their companion having settled down into a calm, apathetic state, apparently oblivious of all that went on around him.

It was hard to believe that the dull vacant-looking man was the same being as the one with whom Stratton had had his late terrible encounter; for in spite of the light, indifferent way in which he had treated it to his friend, none knew better than he that he had been within an inch of losing his life. It was hard even to Stratton, and as the days glided by in the peaceful calm of the tiny bay, with its groups of fishermen and women on the soft white sands, or wading into the clear blue water to reach their boats, the surroundings made the place a pleasant oasis in the desert of his life. The rest was sweet and languorous, and he passed his time now strolling out on the dry, warm sands, thinking, now high up on the grassy top of the cliff, where he could look down on people enjoying their seaside life.

At times he would go out with some of the fishermen, who readily welcomed the English stranger, and talked to him in a formal, grave way, and in French, that he found it hard to follow.

Meanwhile Brettison had hunted out a brawny pleasant-faced fisherman's wife, who had been pointed out to him as an able nurse, and placed their charge in her care—the ex-convict obeying her slightest sign at giving little trouble, suffering himself

to be led to some nook or other at the foot of the high cliffs, where he would sit down, watched by his attendant—the Breton woman—while Brettison busied himself on the cliffs collecting.

There was no trouble; the man grew more apathetic day by day, and Brettison took care that his companion should not come in contact with him, for fear of reviving some memory of the past and causing a scene.

"And he is so good and patient, m'sieu," the nurse would say, looking up from the knitting over which she was busy; "and he is growing well and strong, oh, so fast. It is our beautiful bay, monsieur. Yes, everyone grows strong and well here."

She nodded as if there was no contradicting this, and Brettison went in search of Stratton with a bunch of plants in his hand, and curiously puzzled look in his eyes.

"Suppose he does get well and strong," he thought to himself. "I ought to be glad, but am not."

He found Stratton sitting back, with his shoulders against the cliff, dreaming of the future, more at rest than he had been for months, and as Brettison drew near he brightened a little, and smiled. For the nurse's words applied to his friend as well, and he was certainly growing stronger and better. A healthy brown was coming into his face, and in spite of the dreamy reverie into which he plunged, a more even balance was coming to his mind.

"One must reckon one against the other," Brettison said to himself.

As the days glided by, and they gained confidence from their charge's dull, dreamy condition, Brettison proposed, and Stratton readily agreed, to make little excursions with him inland, or along the coast to some of the quaint villages, or antique—so-called Druidical—remains; and after each trip they returned to find nurse and patient just as they had left them. The confidence increased, and it became evident that Stratton had only to keep away from their charge to go on his old vacant manner from day to day. His habits were simple and full of self-indulgence, if there could be any enjoyment to a mind so blank. He rose late, and went to bed soon after sundown, and the evenings were looked forward to by Stratton and Brettison for their quiet dinner at the little inn where Stratton stayed.

Here, as they sat over their wines and had cigars, watching the evening skies and the glorious star-studded sea, a feeling of restfulness came over them, and they leaned back with the feeling of convalescents whose wounds were healing fast after they had been very nearly to the gates of death.

It was a marvel to Stratton as he recalled the past, and as he sat gazing from the open window or strolled out upon the dusty sands, he wondered that he could feel so well. In fact a sensation of annoyance attacked him, for he felt guilty and faithless, a traitor to the past, and strove to resume his old cloak of sadness, but it would not come.

"Malcolm, my lad," said Brettison one evening as he leaned forward and laid his hand upon the young man's arm, "we are going to have rest and peace again. Thank Heaven, you are growing like your old self."

"Rest and peace with that man yonder," said Stratton bitterly.

"Hah! That will not do. Now you're gone back to the old style. Let that be, and wait for the future to unfold itself. The man does not trouble us, and seems hardly likely to, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are working for someone else's peace of mind. You must not destroy what it is that has given you the rest you enjoy."

Stratton was silent for a few moments, and sat gazing out to sea, where the lanterns of the passing boat and yacht sively rose and fell on the gently heaving sea.

"And who could help feeling restless in such a place as this? Even I, old and worn out as I am, enjoy the calm, languorous, peaceful sensation which steals over me. Very disloyal, my dear boy—un-English to a degree—but there is something in these places that one cannot get at home."

"Yes, I own to it," said Stratton after a pause; "one feels safe ashore after the perils of a mental wreck; but there are moments, old fellow, when I shrink and shiver, for it is as if a wave were noiselessly approaching to curl over and sweep one back into the dark waters."

"Stuff! that's all past," said Brettison, lighting a fresh cigar. "Here we are in a lovely place, and with only one care—which we devote to a nurse. Let's eat and drink our fill of the peace that has come to us."

"But it cannot go on, Brettison," said Stratton solemnly. "It must have an end."

"Yes; an end comes to all things, boy. I shall die before long, but why should I sit and brood upon that? Let's thankfully accept the good with the ill—no, not the ill," he said solemnly; "death is not an evil. It is only made so by man."

"But we cannot go on staying here, said Stratton with energy.

"Why not?"

"Oh, there are a dozen reasons. My work, for one."

"Nonsense! Sink your pride and grow strong and well. I have pity for both of us, my boy."

"And do you think I shall settle down to such a life as that, Brettison? No; you know me better."

The old man was silent for a few minutes.

"Yes," he said at last; "I expected you to speak like this, but it is only absurd pride."

"I have not much left me in life," said Stratton quietly as he rose from the seat he had occupied. "Let me enjoy that."

Brettison made no reply. He was pained and yet pleased as he sat back and saw through the smoke of his cigar the dim figure of his companion pass and go down toward the sea, gradually growing more indistinct, till the darkness swallowed him.

CHAPTER L.

A NIGHT ALARM.

There was a feeling in the air along that dark shore which accorded well with

Stratton's sensations. The solemn melancholy of the place was calming; and as he watched the sheet of spangled gold before him softly heaving and appearing to send the star reflections sweeping at last in a golden stream upon the sands, life seemed; after all, worth living, and his cares and sufferings petty and contemptible.

He wandered on close by the sea, where it broke gently in phosphorescent spray, till he was abreast of the cottage under the cliff where Brettison lodged with their charge. There was a feeble light burning, and it shed out its glow through the open door, while lamps glistened from higher up the cliff, where three or four miniature chateaux, the property of Parisians—let to visitors to the lovely little fishing village—were snugly ensconced in the sheltering rocks.

There were voices just above the cottage, and a woman's speaking volubly, and he fancied he recognized that of the nurse, but felt that she would hardly have left her patient, though there was no reason why she should not, for Barron would have been in bed an hour or two, and it was absurd to expect her to be always on the watch.

Stratton felt a strong desire, almost irresistible, as he gazed at the light from the cottage door, to go up, enter, and gaze at the man who had come between him and happiness. He took a few steps forward under the influence upon him, but only to stop and think, as the voluble voice above still went on in its peculiar French.

"It would not be safe," he thought, with a shudder. His presence had influenced the man imperceptibly when waking, might it not also be asleep?

Stratton drew back, and contended his walk along the shore, enjoying the coolness of the fiery looking water which washed over and about his feet, fall, as it were, of phosphorescent creatures, while here and there to his right, where the sea lay calm amid the rocks, the water was covered with what resembled a golden, luminous oil, which flashed softly at times with a bluish tint.

"Brettison is right," he said to himself. "Life is grand, and it is our petty cares which spoil it. Not petty, though, mine," he added, with a sigh. "Ah! what it might be if I could but hope."

He drew a long, deep breath, and then made an effort to forget the past in the glory of the present. He bared his head to the soft, warm night air, and walked slowly on, gazing up into the depths of the vast arch above his head, where stars innumerable shone on and on till they resembled golden dust. The grandeur of the scene impressed him, and, feeling his own littleness more and more, he resolved to cast his despondency aside and make a fresh start from that moment, accepting all his worries as the share apportioned to him, and cease to nurse them to the exclusion of the good.

He could not help a bitter smile crossing his lips the next minute as he stopped short; for there, dimly seen before him, were two figures gazing out to sea, and so occupied by their own thoughts that they had not noticed his approach. They were talking in a low voice of the sea and the phosphorescence—nothing more; but the tone of their voices!

The old, old story breathed in every modulation, and Stratton sighed and drew silently away among the rocks farther from the sea, unnoticed by the pair, who turned and began to retrace their steps toward the lights he had left behind.

They were silent now; but just as they passed him—their figures looking like one shadow between him and the luminous sea—the man said softly:

"I often feel as if it were a sin to be so happy when I think of them."

"Yes."

They passed on, while Stratton felt as if he had suddenly received a tremendous blow, and he staggered back a step or two with his hands to his brow.

Guest and Edie there! Had he gone mad?

He remained for a few seconds, as if paralyzed, before he could collect himself and follow the figures, which had now passed on and been swallowed up in the darkness. A cold perspiration broke out upon his face, and he walked on to overtake them—hurriedly now; but by degrees as he drew near enough to make out their silent, shadowy figures, seeming to glide over the soft sand, he grew a little more calm.

For he felt that the fact of his dwelling so much upon the Jerrold family had made him ready to jump at the conclusion that this was Edie and her lover. He could not distinguish face or figure in the gloom, and he had only had the man's voice to suggest the idea—the woman's was but a whisper. They were English, of course; but what of that? It was a foolish mistake; for it was utterly impossible that Guest and Edie could be alone there that night upon those sands.

All the same, he followed to see where they went, shrinking from going closer, now that he felt less sure, in dread lest he should seem to be acting the part of spy upon two strangers; while if it were they it would be madness to speak. There was only one thing to be done: warn Brettison, and get their charge away at once.

There before him walked the pair so slowly and leisurely that he had to be careful not to overtake them. They were nearing the cottage with the open door, but the loud voice he had heard in passing was silent now, and the stillness was oppressive—the beating of his own heart and the soft whispering "whish" of the feet on the loose sand being all that was audible to his ears.

It now occurred to him that, by a little management, he would be able to convince himself that this was only a mad fancy; for the couple must pass the open door, and if he struck off a little to his left, so as to get nearer to the sea, he could hurry on unseen, and get opposite to the door, so that when they passed the light he would have them like silhouettes for a moment or two, quite long enough to make out their profiles.

He set about carrying his plan into effect, and in a minute or so was abreast of the pair, but they were quite invisible now; and, feeling that he had gone too far, as soon as he was opposite to the lighted door he began to advance slowly, expecting moment by moment to see the two figures move into the light; but they did not come.

They must pass the door, he felt, for he could recall no way up the cliff, the house perched up there being approached by a broad step-like path from the rough roadway leading up the vine which came

down to the shore with its stream, beside which, on either side, many of the cottages were built.

Still they did not come, but Stratton waited patiently, for, lover-like, they might be hanging back for a few moments before approaching the light.

At last a dark figure in front of the doorway was plainly enough seen, and Stratton leaned forward with eyes dilated, but only to utter a muttered interjection, for the figure he saw was undoubtedly Brettison, as he stood there apparently peering about in the darkness.

Another moment or two, and still no sign of the figures he sought, and wondering whether they could have passed through some miscalculation on his part, he stepped forward quickly to make sure, when he became visible to Brettison who joined him at once.

"There you are, then. I was getting uneasy. One of the fishermen saw you go along in this direction, and I was beginning to think that I must get some of them to come and help me search for you."

"Why?" said Stratton harshly.

"Because the coast is dangerous, and there is always the risk of anyone being surrounded by the advancing tide."

"Tide is going down," said Stratton quietly. "See anybody pass?" he continued as he debated whether he should take Brettison into his confidence, while all the time he kept a sharp look about him.

"No, not a soul. The most solitary place a man could select for a stay."

"Is there a way up into the village beyond the cottage here?" said Stratton quietly.

"Yes, but it is only a sort of flight of steps used by the people here. It would be farther round, too. Better keep to the beach."

As he spoke Brettison walked by his side, and tried to edge him away from the light, speaking in quite a whisper the while, as if afraid that their voices might reach the occupant of the cottage.

And meanwhile Stratton was still debating within himself as to whether he should tell his companion of the startling adventure he had had. But feeling more and more that the idea was only colored by his imagination, and knowing in his heart that the old man would smile and point out impossibility of such an encounter, he determined to be silent till the morning—if he could not learn anything about any visitors who might be staying there.

Twice over as they walked he was on the point of speaking, but checked himself, and then the opportunity was gone, for Brettison held out his hand.

"Good-night, my boy," he said; "you are tired. There, go to the inn and have a good night's rest."

"One moment, Brettison," said Stratton, arresting him. "You do not think it possible that—"

He stopped short: he could not say it. The idea was absurd.

"Well, think what possible?" said Brettison, smiling.

"That he is likely to turn dangerous?"

"I have no fear of him whatever," said the old man. "There, don't fidget; good-night."

Stratton went on to the inn, wishing that he had spoken to Brettison, after all; and he had hardly taken his seat before he sprang up again to go back to him. Before starting he summoned the landlady to question her about visitors to the place, but only to find in a few minutes that her knowledge was confined to those who came to her hotel. There were people who let their houses and took in lodgers, she knew—yes, but she had no patience with people who played at keeping an hotel.

Stratton went out once more into the night with the intention of going straight to Brettison, telling him his suspicions, and asking his advice; but he shrank from the task; and on the impulse of the moment turned off to go and explore the village on the chance of happening upon something which would give him a clue.

Five minutes devoted to his task was sufficient to satisfy him of the hopelessness of the task, and he turned to the inn agitated, weary, and trying to make some plan as to his proceedings as soon as it was light.

"The post?" he said to himself. He would be able to leave there; and half disposed to hire some vehicle and go across ten miles to the town, he entered the doorway, to start once more, this time with a thrill of certainty.

For, as he advanced, he saw at the end of the passage a man in conversation with the landlady. He was making inquiries about a boat for a sail next day. The next minute he turned to leave, and came face to face with Guest.

"Great Heavens!" cried the latter hoarsely; "you or your ghost. O Mal, old man, if it is you how could you be so mad?"

"Mad? Mad?" stammered Stratton.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, as to follow me?"

"I—I did not know you were here."

"Oh, hang that, man. I told you in my letter."

"What letter?"

"The one I wrote and pushed into your letter box after coming twice to tell you."

"Letter?"

"Why, of course. You had it or you couldn't have come here."

Stratton's hand went to his breast, and the next minute he drew out a soiled letter doubled up into three from the pressure of his pocket-book.

"You wrote this letter to me to tell me you were coming here?" said Stratton in slow, strange accents.

"Of course I did, and I tell you that you have done a mean, cruel thing in following me. It can do no good; Sir Mark will be furious, and it is cruel to Myra."

"Myra—Myra here?" gasped Stratton as he recoiled against the wall.

"Don't make a scene, man," said Guest in a low whisper. "Of course; I told you she was coming, and how the old man insisted upon my coming too. Why, you haven't opened the letter!"

"No," said Stratton in a hoarse whisper.

"Then how came you here?"

"I—Heaven only knows!" said Stratton. "It is beyond me."

Guest looked at him curiously, as if he doubted his word.

"We only came to-day. Had to stop at place after place; Myra is so weak and ill."

Stratton groaned.

"Yes," said Guest; "that's better. Now look here. You and I will start off at day-break for home. It's hard on me, but it must be done."

"Yes. I saw you two—on the sands last night. I was not sure. But tell me where are they staying?"

"At a little chateau-like place on the cliff; they got it through a woman they knew at St. Malo a couple or three years ago. She was servant there. She is nurse now to an invalid gentleman staying at a cottage just below."

Stratton stood gazing at his friend as if he had been turned to stone.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

TRAITS OF THE NEW CZAR.

Carefully Educated, With a Lively Disposition and Easily Amused.

One ground for hope that Nicholas II. will turn out to be a reformer is that, judging from Russian history of the last 100 years, it is now the turn of a liberal czar, Reactionary and liberal rulers have alternated in Russia. The mad despot, Paul, was succeeded by the enlightened and sentimental Alexander I., who in his turn gave place to the reactionary autocrat, Nicholas. Nicholas was then succeeded by the emancipator, Alexander II., and by his son, who lately expired at Livadia, and whose reign was marked by the persecution of the Jews and Stundists, by a determined resistance to reform and by the reassertion of the principle of autocracy. The pendulum should now swing in the other direction. The personal character of no other living man is a matter of such interest and importance to the world as that of the youthful Nicholas II. The world is therefore grateful for any information regarding him. Charles Lowe, in his life of Alexander III., has a chapter upon his successor, which gives what is known of the young man.

IN PHYSIQUE

he is, of course, a marked contrast to his gigantic father. He is short, slight and frail, and has never shown any of the exuberant vitality of youth. His eyes are fine, but he has a nervous twitch in them, in which he resembles Paul I., who was also short.

He has been very carefully educated, and unlike his father, with a special view to the requirements of the place he now holds. It is said also that his education has not been such as to encourage prejudices. Although it is true that one of his preceptors was Katkoff, the famous Moscow editor and Pan-Slavist leader, his education has been mainly under the charge of General Danilovitch, who has discharged his duty conscientiously. Even when the anti-German feeling was at its height in Russia he was not taught to hate the Germans. His scientific instruction was excellent. His father's wish was that he should give more attention to modern sciences than to the classics. Strange to say he appears to know no Greek or Latin at all, but is well grounded in the literature of his own country and of Germany, France and England. He knows the necessary mathematics, and has a very thorough knowledge of geography. The prince was well instructed in constitutional law, finance and history, although a good deal of Muscovite history and much that pertains to the rise of his own family has been kept back from him. It is said by Russians who know him well that he is in all respects the son of his amiable mother. Like her, he is extremely fond of music and dancing, has a lively disposition and is easily amused.

ONE OF HIS JOKES

as a youth was that, if he ever had to join the kings in exile, he should be in request for his musical talents and tenor voice. He does not care for sculpture or painting. To a French author who recently visited Russia he showed himself a great reader of French novels, speaking of Daudet as "exquisite," but remarking that Zola "overdid description." He reads and writes English, French and German fluently. In athletic matters his taste is for shooting, riding and rowing, all of which he is said to do very well.

With an impressionable character, such as the Czar seems to have, the qualities of his wife become a matter of special importance. It was the boast of the late czar that he never told anything to women nor asked advice of them. But Nicholas is probably not that kind of a man, and there is every reason to hope that the influence of his wife will be beneficial. The Princess Alice is the daughter of the Princess Alice, the most beloved of the daughters of the Queen of England. That she refused to comply with the requirement which compels converts to the orthodox creed in Russia to abjure and curse the faith of their fathers is an evidence that she has strength of will and principle. Little is known of what the political opinions of the prince are or of what are the qualities of mind and will which he will bring to their support.

Vaccinating a Fire Brigade.

The other morning an outbreak of fire occurred in one of the wards of the small hospital in Parkhill road, and information was sent to the central fire station, says the Liverpool Mercury. Superintendent Willis and a contingent of firemen and members of the salvage corps went to the institution, and the fire, which was not of a serious character, was soon extinguished. Mr. Willis and Inspector Smith, of the salvage corp, and the men were about to return to headquarters when they were told that they could not leave the hospital until all had been vaccinated. The operation was duly carried out and fresh clothes were sent for, in order that those the men were wearing at the time might be thoroughly disinfected.

Humoring a Guest.

Miss De Thumper (impatiently)—I can't make my music sound right on your piano. Miss De Pounder (quietly)—Wait a moment, my dear, and I will lay some papers on the strings.

Looked Like It.

Caller—Is Miss Sweetie at home? New Girl—Yes, sor. Caller—Is she engaged? New Girl—Well, from th' crushed-up look thim big sleeves had phwin Oi writ in to stir th' foire, Oi shud say she wuz.