

TRUE TO HIS WORD.

A NOVEL.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. SHELDON'S REVENGE.

On Walter's return to the Wheatheaf he found the captain just descended from his room, and looking very handsome, but haggard. He had not slept well, he said, for his "confounded arm" had troubled him. At this spectacle, his companion's heart was instantly moved to pity, and smote him sore for its late severe judgment upon that hero. He had taken this man to task for selfishness, yet here he was maimed, or, at all events, disabled, in the performance of his duty: it could not have been a pleasant thing, however glorious, to have crossed and recrossed that Crimean valley, with the cannon-balls hurtling over it, and the grave gaping before every stride of his horse.

"My dear fellow, can I not do something to ease the pain? A cold-water bandage, a—"

"No, no; you might as well blow upon it," answered the captain impatiently. "But I tell you what, if you'll sit down, while the breakfast is getting ready, and write an application for the Special License—that will be really doing me a service. I'll sign it, of course, but writing is as hard a job for me just now as when I first learned pot-hooks and hangers."

This was another stick to be fetched for the schoolmaster; but Walter obeyed with a smothered sigh; and the missive was despatched at once by messenger, in order to catch the mid-day mail from Falmouth.

In spite of his wounds and his love, the captain made a much better breakfast than Litton, though he had been out for hours in the sea-breeze.

"Gad," said the former, without notice of this circumstance, "this Penaddon air is first-rate for the appetite; and now that that license is sent for, and one has nothing on one's mind, one feels inclined to eat forever."

Litton thought within himself, that that poor girl up at the Hall, for the first time separated from home and friends, and having for her sole companion a lady so well acquainted with the law of the land as respected clandestine marriages, might not be so fortunate in having "nothing on her mind," but he kept that conviction to himself.

It was near eleven o'clock before the meal was concluded; and the captain, putting an immense cigar in his mouth, expressed his conviction that they were "due up yonder," and led the way to his aunt's residence by the footpath through the corn.

The two ladies were walking in the wall-garden of the Hall, standing on a lower level than the spot where the young men stood, was completely commanded by it. The walls of the garden were crumbling to the touch of time, but moss and lichen covered them; the fruit-trees had escaped from the touch of rust, but their branches looked not less fair as they hung heavily down, and even trailed upon the ground; and though it might be difficult to tell flower from weed, so rankly did they grow together, the garden-plots blazed with color.

This wildered Eden was bordered by a swift and brawling stream, and beside it paced Lotty and her hostess, apparently in earnest talk, and quite unconscious of the admiring eyes that were fixed upon them. The outlook to seaward had been well worthy of the captain's encomiums, but Walter thought this home-picture even still more charming, and one fair figure in the foreground worth them both.

"How very, very beautiful!" cried he in a rapture.

"It's a pretty spot, ain't it?" assented the captain, "though one can't say much for the garden. The fact is, my aunt is as poor as Job, though she has not his patience (if her husband's testimony is to be relied on), and the whole place is tumbling to pieces."

"But why does she live there, then?" was Walter's not unnatural inquiry.

"Well, you see, she has had a quarrel with Society, and it is better to live at a place where there is nobody to visit one than where there are plenty of fine folks about who won't. I shall have to talk to her a bit this morning about family matters—urgent private affairs, as we say in the Crimea—and must leave you and Lotty to get on together as you can. Young women that are 'bespoken' are not, I know, very lively companions; but she looks upon you, I'm sure, already as an old friend. It is true the friend of the husband," added the captain, laughing, "is rather a dangerous acquaintance; but if I can't trust 'ur chaperon,' there is no faith to be placed in man."

Litton laughed, as he was expected to do, but the color came into his cheek in spite of himself: it was not the blush of shame, for his nature was loyal to the core, and yet he was conscious that he was not so completely qualified for the post assigned to him as the captain imagined.

The rims of Lotty's eyes were a little red, but that did not detract from her charms: for that she had been weeping only proved the tenderness of her heart. She had been somewhat overtired with her journey, she said, in answer to his inquiries, but was well enough in health. As to her spirits, she could not help being anxious about those she had left at home. That was only natural, Walter allowed, yet expressed his confident expectation that, in a week or two, she would, as the captain's bride, be as cherished a member of her family as ever.

"Nay, Mr. Litton, you do not know my father," answered she tearfully; "I am afraid I shall have offended him past forgiveness."

Reginald does not like to look upon the dark side of things, I know, far less to talk of it; but papa will be very, very angry, I know; and Lily, oh, so sad!"

Here she hung her pretty head, and a sob was heard, which wrung Walter's heart. "But it is better to talk about it," said he softly, "than to let a woe unuttered prey upon your mind. I cannot fancy that any one who knows you—far less who loves you, as your father must do—can very long hold out against your pleading. Selwyn is a gentleman, well-born, well-bred, a soldier who has distinguished himself in action, one any man might be proud to call his son-in-law. It is not as though you had married, I do not say beneath you—for you could never have stooped to that—but a mere nobody—like myself, for instance."

"No, no," sighed she; "it is not that; but my father has set his heart upon his daughters making what are called 'good matches,' he wishes us to marry rich men. And now that I have chosen Reginald, it will be all the worse for poor dear Lily. Papa will choose for her himself some odious creature who has money, and she will be made miserable all through me."

"Nay, it is surely wrong to harass yourself with the fear of so remote a contingency," urged Walter; "for having lost one daughter—or dreaming for the present that he has lost her—your father will be slow to part with the other; he will keep her at home to comfort him, and be won through her, in the end, to a reconciliation with you and your's. It must be so, I feel confident, and especially (here Litton gave a little bow) "if your sister Lillian is like yourself."

The bow was quite thrown away, indeed it was doubtful whether Lotty observed it, but, to his question, she replied with simplicity: "Oh, Lillian is worth a thousand of me! She is wise, and dutiful, and good—oh, so good, Mr. Litton! And I know she is breaking her heart for me, though I am so unworthy of her love;" and she put up her little hands before her face and sobbed anew.

"If all the rest you have told me," said Walter earnestly, "is not more true than that—I mean that you are unworthy of her love—I must be excused for not sharing your fears."

That was the last effort which Litton made to intrude his own personality, where, it must be acknowledged, it had no rightful place. He was content to be a brother to Lotty, if she would have regarded him in that light; but even that, as it seemed, was not to be. She was so wrapped up in others, in her Reginald, and in her own belongings, that she had shown herself scarcely conscious of his existence; and with that acknowledgment of his services of the previous day, as it seemed, he must be content for evermore. As Mr. Litton's delicate attentions were to Lotty, so were those of Mrs. Sheldon to Mr. Litton.

There were doubtless good points about the character of his hostess, but she was not so much above the average of her sex as to take this insensibility in good part: that a young man of two-and-twenty, no fool, indeed, but of a frank and simple nature, should have such opportunities of a little flirtation with her, and neglect them; that she should put forth all her strength to make him captive, and yet fail, was a circumstance that she exceedingly resented. She knew something of his own art, and went out sketching with him to the most picturesque and romance-inspiring spots, in vain; she sang to him to the music of the wave, yet shewed herself no siren; she told him her own touching history—so much of it, that is, as suited her to tell him—without evoking a single spark of sympathy more than the barest civility demanded. It was long since she had made a conquest, and that made her all the more eager to bring this young gentleman to her feet: her weapons, she flattered herself, were as formidable as ever, and she had certainly not forgotten how to use them. Yet he was as invulnerable as Achilles. Why she wanted to wound him, she probably did not know herself, nor what she would have done with the poor wretch, had she succeeded. Mrs. Sheldon was simply obeying an instinct of nature; and just as a sportsman who delights in shooting, though the contents of the game-bag are not to be his own, is annoyed at missing, so was she annoyed, and even ashamed, at her ill-success.

On the day when the stick which poor Walter had been set to fetch was used upon his own back—when the license arrived, that is, and he had "given" Lotty "away" to Reginald, and the happy pair had departed for the honeymoon, and the fly that was to take himself to the railway stood at the Hall door, Mrs. Sheldon made him a farewell present: not a piece of plate, but a piece of her mind.

"I will not say I am glad you are going, Mr. Litton," said she, as she held out her hand, "yet I honestly confess it seems to me that you have been here long enough, for your own happiness and for that of another."

"Believe me, my dear Mrs. Sheldon," stammered he, "I shall never forget these days at Penaddon, and all that, thanks to you, I have enjoyed during my visit."

"Endeavor rather to forget them," answered she gravely, "and especially what you have missed. I know your secret, and I will keep it, Mr. Litton; but I cannot but express a sense of relief that Lotty has left my roof, and with her husband."

With that Partisan shaft, she withdrew into her sitting-room, closing the door behind her, and leaving him standing in the hall, transfixed!

How wretched was that weary drive over the moor to Falmouth, which, unhappily too, he could not but contrast with what it must have been to the pair who had preceded him! How desolate was the sea, how barren the land, to his eyes, how bright and glorious to theirs! For them was love, and the fruition of it! For him too was love—he confessed it; how could he ignore it, when another had read it written on his heart, through all the armor of duty, friendship, honor, which he had put on in vain, and with which he had striven to hide it from himself! For him was love, alas! and loneliness. The spring of his life was broken, for hope was gone. If

fame had been that day within his reach, he would not have cared to put forth his hand to grasp it. Oh, evil hour, in which he had consented to accompany his friend to the fair south, and tend him! Penaddon was hateful to him. He would return to town and work—would work his fingers off, and his brains away, would kill himself with work, if possible; for the grave itself seemed welcome to him!

CHAPTER VI.

IN BEECH STREET.

If there is any panacea for wretchedness in this useful world, it is work, and work only. If all the suicides, and the motives that led to them, could be tabulated, it is certain that the want of work—incapacity for it, or inability to obtain it—would be found, in nine cases out of ten, under the column "Cause;" even the hopeless—those who work without prospect of reward in any form—do not commonly leave the sunshine for "the sunless land" while hand or brain can still find employment. The uttermost misery of human life is probably expressed by that vulgar phrase which we read every day applied to some starving wretch, in our newspapers, with careless eyes, or at most with a shrug of our shoulders—"out of work." Walter Litton was so far wise that he knew this. Left to himself, while still a lad, in the great Babylon, amid temptations against which no common virtue is of avail, he had not succumbed to them, mainly because he had set himself to work; while others of his age, though under taskmasters, had shirked it. His nature was wholesome, and he kept it so, by this simple means: in an atmosphere of vice and pollution, he carried about with him this purifier, this antidote, this disinfectant. He had faith, it is true, for his mind was reverent, and he had had a good mother; but faith without work would not have saved him. Among other marvellous virtues which employment confers upon him who has his heart in it is a respect for others who likewise toil. The honest worker, no matter in what guild he is a craftsman, feels no contempt for those who labor in a humbler sphere. It is the idler, useless to others, and a burden to himself, who seeks to justify his own indolence by despising these. We have seen a state fall to pieces mainly from its own rottenness, wherein to work was held to be shameful and a badge of servitude; and the condition of the mere pleasure-seeker is like unto it. At the least stroke of misfortune, he collapses; though, while prosperity lasts, he sits above the thunder like a god, and smiles contemptuously upon the busy hands that supply his needs.

To those who are acquainted with artist-life, there is nothing more characteristic than the behavior of a painter to his paid sitters; in this are found the extremes of rudeness and refinement, of selfishness and consideration, of coarseness and chivalry. When the model happens to be of the female sex, the case becomes all the more significant.

Mr. Jack Pelter, for example, who, as we have mentioned, was wont to go halves in his models of both sexes with his fellow-lodger, Mr. Litton, was exceedingly gruff and tyrannous with the "Imogens"—a system which he had at first adopted from prudential motives; it had kept him heart-whole while that organ had been young and impressionable; and now that it was tough and leathery, and his soul defied enchantment, he was gruff from habit.

"You're a precious deal too civil, young fellow," he would growl to Litton, who, to a woman, and a poor one, could not be otherwise than the very pink of politeness; "and some day or another, you'll repent it."

But no entanglement of the kind his mentor had suggested had happened to Litton, and it was less likely to happen now than ever.

Otherwise, parents and guardians, all one's female relatives, and men of the world generally (who know everything, and yet believe in nothing), would have thought it a dangerous thing for him to be painting Nellie Neale for two hours per diem in an attitude of supplication. What made it more dangerous for her, they would have thought (and also for him, if such young persons were worth thinking of at all), was that Miss Ellen Neale was not a professional model. She was the daughter of "a cobbler who lived"—or at least labored—"in a stall" at the corner of a neighboring street, and had never before "sat" to an artist. Litton, who was far from being a dandy, had business relations with her father; and while bidding him send for a pair of boots that wanted mending, had seen this pretty little creature bring him his mid-day meal from home, wrapped neatly up in a basket; from which circumstance he had christened her on the spot Red Riding-hood, and she had learned in time to call him grandmamma. The honest young fellow perhaps adopted this latter title to give him a reverence in her eyes, which—his years and looks might well have failed to extort from her; and if that blood-relationship had actually existed between them, his behavior towards her could not have been more exemplary. Walter had been taking portraits since his return from Penaddon; and though not disposed of at a very high figure, these had furnished him with funus for more than his needs, as well as provided him with this excellent counterfeit presentment of Philippa, Edward's queen, in the act of beseeching that monarch to spare the lives of the citizens of Calais.

"A very uncommon subject, truly," said Jack Pelter, in his usual character of cynical, but friendly critic. "But why not strike out something perfectly original, my dear fellow—such as the Finding of Harold's Body after Hastings?"

"Because I mean to show," returned the other with equal gravity, "how a great artist can appropriate a story, however often pictured, and make it his own on canvas, just as Shakespeare has done in literature."

So every afternoon, from two until the wintry dusk closed in, Philippa of Hainault knelt upon a soft cushion of Utrecht velvet (or something like it), on the second floor of No. 99 Beech street, and held up prayerful hands to the stern Edward, who thus replied to her supplications: "The head a shade more to the right—the hands a little lower—just the faintest smile, as if you saw the ruffian was yielding. Thank you; that's beautiful" (which it was). "If you are getting to feel stiff or tired, Red Riding-hood, be sure to mention it."

"I do just a little, grandmamma." "Then get up, and trot about." This happened many times during each sitting, if Queen Philippa's position could be called so; and on one occasion, just after one of these trottings about, and when Nellie had fallen on her knees again, and was about to supplicate for the poor citizens with renewed vigor, there was a knock at the door, and in walked Captain Reginald Selwyn. Many months had elapsed since the marriage of which he had himself been the aider and abettor, but not a line had the captain written to him from the day they had parted at Penaddon Hall; nor could his wounded arm have been an excuse for so long a silence, for there he stood in the doorway, with all his limbs like other people's, except that they looked more shapely and strong than most, which indeed they were. His face had lost its pallor, but also, or so it seemed to Walter's attentive eyes, much of its gaiety and brightness.

"Why, Litton, my good fellow, you must have thought me dead, as well as 'done for.' Matri"—Here his glance lit upon Philippa, Edward's queen, who had risen hastily from her cushion, and was regarding the newcomer with much embarrassment. It was the first time that her sittings had been intruded upon by any one, save Mr. Pelter, whom she did not "mind," and looked upon as another "grandmamma."

"I think we will finish for to-day, Miss Neale," said Walter quickly, "as our time is nearly up, and this is an old friend whom I have not seen for long."

"I hope the young lady will not go on my account," said the captain gallantly. But Nellie had already exchanged her high-peaked head-gear for the bonnet of every-day life, and thrown over her medieval robes her warm winter cloak; and while Walter was once more explaining that the sitting had been nearly over in any case, she slipped through the door, which Selwyn held open for her, and, with a hurried bow, in acknowledgment of that civility, was gone.

"By Jove!" said the captain gravely, "this is what you artists call the pursuit of your profession, is it? I don't wonder that portrait-painting is so popular."

"My dear Selwyn, you don't suppose that that poor girl comes here to have her portrait taken, do you?"

"No; by jingo! I don't," answered the captain sententiously.

"I mean," continued Walter, with resolute sedateness, "that though my patrons are not unhappy in the highest position in society, Miss Neale is not one of them. She is a good honest girl, who helps her father by sitting to me as a model for a few shillings an hour."

"O, indeed! she is a model, is she!" returned the captain, still very incredulously.

"A model of what?"

"Oh, of anything, according to the subject, you know!"

Nothing would have been easier, or more convincing, one would have thought, than to have shown his friend the picture of Philippa—which was already advanced towards completion—in corroboration of this statement; but Walter's first act, on seeing the captain, had been to throw a large piece of linen over the work in question, and rapidly ply his brush on another piece of canvas, which, as it so happened, did not represent the female face divine at all.

"Why, that's the old church at Penaddon, surely!" exclaimed Selwyn, whose attention was easily diverted from one subject to another. "It's just as well you should have sketched it when you did, for my aunt writes me that these stormy seas have eaten into it worse than ever this winter, so that there is hardly any of it left."

"Well, never mind the church," said Walter; "I want to hear of your own affairs. How are you, old fellow, and—Mrs. Selwyn?"

He felt that he was blushing, hesitating, and making a mess of his kind inquiries generally, for the idea had struck him, it was just possible that Mrs. Sheldon might have written to her nephew about something else beside the encroachments of the sea, might, out of spite and malice, have communicated to him that suspicion about himself, which had overwhelmed him with such confusion on his departure from Penaddon.

"Oh, I'm well enough, and Lotty too," said the captain—"that is, in health; but that old nuns, her father, will not have a word to say to us, and what is of much more consequence, will not help us with so much as a sixpenny-piece. We are having a very rough time of it, I can tell you."

"I am very, very sorry to hear it," said Walter earnestly, his mind reverting to the fate his apprehensions had prefigured for Lotty, exposed to the keen bite of poverty, and short of all the comforts that had by use become necessities to her—a beautiful and tender flower fading and falling for want of light and air.

"Yes; it is an ugly story, Litton, and likely to be uglier. It was a risky thing, that marriage of mine, of course, but I never dreamt that things would have gone so damned hard with me. My sick-leave cannot last for ever, and yet I can't go back to my regiment as a married man. We couldn't live—no, not even in barracks—and that's the short and long of it."

"But, surely, my dear friend, other people who are captains in the army—"

"Yes, yes; but they don't owe a couple of thousand pounds to start with," broke in the other impatiently. "It's no use crying over spilt milk, but the fact is, I have made a precious mess of it. There will be nothing for it but to sell my commission, and then to cut and run, before the Jews can get hold of me. Talk about the miseries of human life; I don't believe there's any one of them to compare with the want of ready-money!"

"How very, very sorry I am," repeated Walter.

"Yes; I am sure you are; but I wish I could make old Brown sorry. Lillian does her best to move him, she says, and perhaps she does; but no doubt there is a great temptation to her to keep us out of the old man's favor. He has a hundred thousand pounds to leave, if he has a penny; and that is a much better thing than a hundred thousand pounds divided by two, you see; for there is no doubt about it that Lotty was to have been Lily's co-heiress."

"But surely your sister-in-law would never be actuated by such a base motive! Your wife, I know, has the greatest affection for her, and confidence in her goodness."

"So she had in mine, for that matter," observed the captain with a sneer; "yet, I suppose, I was not much better than other people. I say nothing against Lillian; only it does seem strange that she can't do anything for us with the old fellow. He has some natural affection, I suppose, in spite of his treatment of Lotty, and a woman can always bring a man round, if she will take the trouble."

"How old is your father-in-law?" inquired Walter.

"Oh, there's no chance of his popping off the books, if you mean that. He's no chicken, it is true; but he's one of those City fogies who are as tough as gutta-percha, and take a deal of care of themselves into the bargain."

"I was not alluding to his death," observed Walter thoughtfully; "but I have noticed, even in my guardian of late, and much more in other old men, that, with increasing age, the character softens."

"The brain may do so," answered the captain contemptuously, "but not—at least, I'll answer for it in old Brown's case—the disposition. He's as hard as nails. If I could get the commander-in-chief, or some tremendous swell, to intercede for us with him, instead of his own daughter, something might be done, I believe, for he's a snob to the backbone. He would grovel on all-fours, I understand, before a peer of the realm."

"Then he ought to be at least tolerably civil to the heir-presumptive of a baronetcy."

"Well, ridiculous as it seems, Litton, that is the one hope I have of circumventing the old fellow. If my first-cousin was to die—and I hear he is in a very ticklish state—I honestly believe that my self-made father-in-law would not shew himself so utterly inexorable to me as Sir Reginald; it is not in his British nature. No, no; my cousin will come round, if it is but to spite me, and I shall starve to death as plain Reginald Selwyn."

"When you speak of starving, my dear Reginald, you are, of course, merely using a very violent metaphor," said Walter with anxiety.

"I don't know about a metaphor," answered the captain; "but this half-sovereign," and he took one out of his waistcoat pocket, and held it between his finger and thumb, "is the very last of all the Mohicans; and when that's gone, I shall not know where to turn for another."

"I regret, indeed," said Walter, blushing exceedingly as his manner was when embarrassed, "that you should have allowed yourself to come to such straits, without applying to an old friend. I have been taking portraits wholesale, and have quite a balance at my banker's. Come, let me lend you fifty pounds," and he pulled out his cheque-book.

"You are the best fellow out," said the captain; "but it is a deuced unpleasant thing to borrow of one's friends. Now, what is Lillian's in Lotty's, or ought to be so; so in that case I feel no compunctions—"

"Then you should feel them still less with me," interrupted Walter, thrusting the cheque into his hand. "You would borrow my umbrella, if it rained, I suppose, and I had no occasion to go out; then why not my money when I don't want it? What a fuss is made in the world about borrowing or lending a few pounds! You may ask for a shilling to pay your cab-fare, if you have no change, but gold is a sacred commodity, it appears."

"It's a commodity that it is precious inconvenient to be without, old fellow," said the captain, putting the cheque in his empty purse. "I won't give you an I. O. U., for that would be waste paper, but I will pay you when I can, upon my honor. You don't suppose, I hope, that I came here to-day, Litton, with any expectation of becoming your debtor?"

"Good heavens, Selwyn, how you talk!" exclaimed Walter; "of course I suppose nothing of the kind. I took it for granted that you came to see me, as one of your oldest friends; when I come to see you, it will not be concluded, I hope, that I come as a creditor?"

"Don't be savage with me, my good Litton," returned the captain gravely. "I dare say I don't express myself very prettily, but the fact is, I'm soured."

Walter did not reply; he pitied Selwyn, but he pitied Lotty infinitely more. What a life must she be leading, destitute of material comforts, and exposed to the outbreaks of her husband's temper, "soured," as he confessed himself to be, by disappointment, and "savaged with everybody!"

"There's another thing," continued Selwyn bitterly, "which poverty—the test of virtue, the tonic biters of life, as fools have called it—does for me—it makes one as proud as Lucifer. Nothing, for example, would seem more natural to you than that I should say: 'Well, our home is a very humble one at present; but that will make no difference to you, old friend, so come and see us.' I know it would make no difference to you, and yet I don't want to see you there."

"Is it worse than this?" asked Walter, laughing.

"Well, no; our London lodgings are not so bare as my barrack-rooms, perhaps, to which you have been always welcome; but they are not such lodgings as are fit for my wife to receive company in."

"You are the best judge of that," said Walter quietly.

"You shall come and see Sir Reginald and his lady," said the captain, laughing, "and be invited, as their friend, to dine with the great Brown. That old villain has got some particular Madeira, the thought of which makes me still more impatient of my position, since every day by which our reconciliation is postponed (for he drinks it daily) makes an iron rod on the bin.—How hard you must have been working lately, Litton!" Here the captain began to look about him for the first time, his whole attention having been previously occupied in twirling and flattening his moustaches, a sure sign that he had been ill at ease. "I wonder if I've had any of your pictures from old Levi: he always gives half in pictures, and I've got quite a gallery of them, ancient and modern.—Why, what's this?" and he threw aside the linen cloth that hung over the portrait of Philippa, Edward's queen.

"Oh, that's unfinished!" said Walter hastily, "and I hate my pictures to be looked at till they are finished."

"O nonsense, man, you don't mind me!" said the captain, persisting as usual in the indulgence of his own whim. "Why, this is