

TWO DAYS IN A LIFETIME.

A STORY IN EIGHT CHAPTERS

BY T. W. SPEIGHT.

CHAPTER VI.

Five minutes later, Miss Brandon burst into the room in her usual impulsive fashion. Lady Dimsdale was standing at one of the windows. It was quite enough for Elsie to find there was some one to talk to—more especially when that some one was Lady Dimsdale, whom she looked upon as the most charming woman in the world. At once she began to rattle on after her usual fashion. "Thank goodness, those hateful exercises are over for to-day. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. Arma virumque cano. How I do detest Latin! My grandmother didn't know a word of it, and she was the most delightful old lady I ever knew. Besides, where's the use of it? When Charley and I are married, I can't talk to him in Latin—the even to the butcher's boy nor the fishmonger. Perhaps, if I were to speak to my poodle in dog-Latin, he might understand me." Then, with a sudden change of manner, she said: "Dear Lady Dimsdale, what is the matter?" for Laura had turned, and the traces of tears were still visible around her eyes. "Why, I do believe you have been—"

"Yes, crying—that's the only word for it," answered Laura with a smile.

"Do tell me what it is. Nothing serious?"

"Nothing more serious than the last chapter of a foolish love-story." She had taken up a book instinctively.

"I'm awfully glad it's nothing worse. Love-stories that make one cry are delicious. I always feel better after a good cry." Her sharp eyes were glancing over the title of the book in Lady Dimsdale's hand. "'Buchan's Domestic Medicine,'" she read out aloud. "Dear Lady Dimsdale, surely this is not the book that—" She was suddenly silent. The room had a bow-window, the easement of which stood wide open this sunny morning. Elsie had heard voices on the terrace outside. "That dear old nunky's voice," she said. "And—yes—no—I do believe it is though!" She crossed to the window and peeped out from behind the curtains.

Stumping slowly along the terrace, assisted by a thick Malacca, came Captain Bowood. By his side marched a dark-bearded military-looking inspector of police, dressed in the regulation blue braided frock-coat and peaked cap. They were engaged in earnest conversation.

"An inspector of police! What can be the matter? I do believe they are coming here." So spoke Elsie; but when she looked round, expecting a response, she found herself alone. Lady Dimsdale had slipped out of the room.

The voice came nearer. Elsie seated herself at the table, ruffled her hair, and pretended to be poring over her lessons.

The door opened, and Captain Bowood followed by the inspector, entered the room. "Pheugh! Enough to fizzle a nigger," ejaculated the former, as he mopped his forehead with his yellow bandana handkerchief. Then perceiving Elsie, he said, as he pinched one of her ears, "Ha, Poppit, you're here!"

"Yes, nunky; and dreadfully puzzled I am. I want to find out what year the Great Pyramid was built. Do, please, tell me."

"Ha, ha!—Listen to that, Mr. Inspector!—If you had asked me the distance from here to New York, now. Great Pyramid, eh?"

The inspector, pencil and notebook in hand was examining the fastenings of the window. "Very insecure," Captain Bowood, he said; "very insecure indeed. A burglar would make short work of them."

Miss Brandon was eying him furtively. There was a puzzled look on her face. "I

could almost swear it was Charley's voice; and yet!"

"Come, come; you'll frighten us out of our wits, if you talk like that," answered the Captain.

"Many burglaries in this neighbourhood of late," remarked the inspector sententiously.

"Just so, just so." This was said a little unceasingly.

"Best to warn you in time, sir."

"O Charley, you naughty, naughty boy!" remarked Miss Brandon under her breath. "Even I did not know him at first."

"But if Mr. Burglar chooses to pay us a visit, who is to hinder him?" asked the Captain.

The inspector shrugged his shoulders and smiled an inscrutable smile.

"You don't mean to say that they intend to pay us a visit to-night? Come now."

"Every reason to believe so, Captain."

"But, confound it! how do you know all this?"

"Secret information. Know many things. Mrs. Bowood keeps her jewel-case in top-left-hand drawer in her dressing room. Know that."

"Bless my heart! How did you find that out?"

"Secret information. Gold chronometer with inscription on it hidden away at the bottom of your writing-desk. Know that."

"How the!"

"Secret information. O Charley, Charley, you artful darling!"—This sotto voce from Miss Brandon.

The Captain looked bewildered, as well he might. "This is really most wonderful," he said. "But about those rascals who, you say, are going to visit us to-night?"

"Give 'em a warm reception, Captain. Leave that to me."

"Yes, yes. Warm reception. Good. Have some of your men in hiding, eh Mr. Inspector?"

"Half a dozen of 'em, Captain."

"Just so, just so. And I'll be in hiding too. I've a horse-pistol up-stairs nearly as long as my arm."

"Shan't need that sir."

"No good having a horse-pistol if one doesn't make use of it now and then."

"Half-a-dozen men—three inside the house, and three out," remarked the inspector as he wrote down the particulars in his book.

"And I'll make the seventh—don't forget that?" cried the Captain looking as fierce as some buccaner of bygone days.

"If there's one among the burglars more savage than the rest, leave him for me to tackle."

"My poor, dear nunky, if you only knew!" murmured Elsie under her breath.

"Perhaps I had better lend you a pair of these, Captain; they might prove useful in a scuffle," remarked the inspector as he produced a pair of handcuffs from the tail-pocket of his coat. "The simplest bracelets in the world. The easiest to get on, and the most difficult to get off—till you know how. Allow me. This is how it's done. What could be more simple?"

Nothing apparently could be more simple, seeing that, before Captain Bowood knew what had happened, he found himself securely handcuffed.

"Ha, ha—just so. Queer sensation—very," he exclaimed, turning redder in the face than usual. "But I don't care how soon you take them off, Mr. Inspector."

"No hurry, Captain, no hurry."

"Confound you! what do you mean by no hurry? What?—But here the Captain came to a sudden stop.

The inspector's black wig and whiskers had vanished, and the laughingly impudent features of his peccant nephew were revealed to his astonished gaze.

"Good-afternoon, my dear uncle. This is the second time to-day that I have had the pleasure of seeing you." Then he called: "Elsie, dear!"

"Here I am, Charley," came in immediate response.

"Come and kiss me."

"Yes, Charley." And with that Miss Brandon rose from her chair, and with a slightly heightened colour and the doimest air possible, came down the room and allowed her lover to lightly touch her lips with his. It was a pretty picture.

"What—what! Why—why," spluttered the Captain. For a little while words seemed to desert him.

"My dear uncle, pray, do not allow yourself to get quite so red in the face; at your time of life you really alarm me."

"You—you vile young jackanapes! You—you cockatrice!—And you miss, you shall smart for this. I'll—I'll—Oh!"

"Patience, good uncle; prithee, patience."

"Patience! O for a good horsewhip!"

"When I called upon you this evening, sir," resumed Charles the imperturbable, "I left unsaid the most important part of that which I had come to say; it therefore became needful that I should see you again."

"O for a horsewhip! Are you going to take these things off me, or are you not?"

"The object of my second visit, sir, is to inform you that Miss Brandon and I are engaged to be married, and to beg of you to give us your consent and blessing, and make two simple young creatures happy."

"Handcuffed like a common poacher on his way to jail! Oh, when once I get free!"

"We have made up our minds to get married; haven't we, Elsie?"

"We have—or else to die together," replied Miss Brandon, as she struck a little tragic attitude.

"Think over what I have said, my dear uncle and accord us your consent."

"Or our deaths will lie at your door."

"Every night as the clock struck twelve, you would see us by your side."

"You would never more enjoy your rum-and-water and your pipe."

"I should tickle your ear with a ghostly feather, and wake you in the middle of your first sleep."

"I shall go crazy—crazy!" spluttered the Captain. He would have stamped his foot, only he was afraid of the gout.

"Not quite, sir, I hope," replied young Summers, with a sudden change of manner; and next moment, and without any action of his own in the matter, the Captain found himself a free man. The first thing he did was to make a sudden grasp at his cane; but Elsie was too quick for him, or it might have fared ill with her sweetheart.

Master Charley laughed. "I am sorry, my dear uncle, to have to leave you now; but time is pressing. You will not forget what I have said, I feel sure. I shall look for your answer to my request in the course of four days; or would you prefer, sir, that I would wait upon you for it in person?"

"If you ever dare to set foot inside my door again, I'll—I'll spifflicate you—yes, sir, spifflicate you!"

"To what a terrible fate you doom me, good my lord!—Come Elsie, you may as well walk with me through the shrubbery."

Miss Brandon, going up suddenly to Captain Bowood, flung her arms round his neck and kissed him impulsively. "You dear, crusty, cantankerous, kind-hearted old thing, I can't help loving you!" she cried.

"Go along, you baggage. As bad as he is—every bit. Go along."

"At your most courteous stage bow. We shall meet again—at Philippi."

A moment later, Captain Bowood found himself alone. "There's impudence!" he exclaimed. "It's worse than that; it's cheek—downright cheek. Never bamboozled like it before. Handcuffed! What an old nincompoop I must have looked! Good thing Sir Frederick or any of the others didn't see me. I should never have heard the last of it." With that, the last trace of ill-humour vanished, and he burst into a hearty, sailor-like guffaw. "Just the sort of trick I should have

gloried in when I was a young spark!" He rose from his chair, took his cane in his hand, and limped as far as the window, his gout being rather troublesome this afternoon. "So, so. There they go, arm in arm. Who would have thought of Don Carlos falling in love with Miss Saucebox? But I don't know that he could do better. She's a good girl—a little flighty just now; but that will cure itself by and by—and she will have a nice little property when she comes of age. Must pretend to set my face against it, though, and that will be sure to make them fonder of one another. Ha, ha! We old sea-dogs know a thing or two." And with that the Captain winked confidentially to himself two or three times and went about his business.

When Sir Frederick Pinkerton followed Mrs. Bowood and Mrs. Boyd out of the room where the interview had taken place and left Lady Dimsdale sitting there alone he quitted the house at once, and sauntered in his usual gingerly fashion through the flower-garden to an unfrequented part of the grounds known as the Holly Walk, where there was not much likelihood of his being interrupted. Like Lady Dimsdale, he wanted to be alone. Just then, he had much to occupy his thoughts. To and fro he paced the walk slowly and musingly, his hands behind his back, his eyes bent on the ground.

"What tempts me to do this thing?" he asked himself, not once, but several times. "That I dislike the man is quite certain; why, then, take upon myself to interfere between this woman and him? Certainly I have nothing to thank Oscar Boyd for; why, then, mix myself up in a matter that concerns me no more than it concerns the man in the moon? If he had not appeared on the scene just when he did, I might perhaps have won Lady Dimsdale for my wife. But now? Too late—too late! Even when he and this woman shall have gone their way, he will live in my lady's memory, never probably to be forgotten. He is her hero of romance. That he made love to her in years gone by, when they were young together, there is little doubt; that he made love to her this morning, and met with no such rebuff as I did, seems equally clear; and though she knows now that he can never become her husband, yet she on her side will never forget him. In what way, then, am I called upon to interfere in his affairs? Should I not be a fool for my pains? And yet to let that woman claim him as her own, when a word from me would—No! *Noblesse oblige*. What should I think of myself in doing to come, if I were to permit this man's life to be blasted by so cruel fraud? The thought would hardly be a pleasant one on one's deathbed." He shrugged his shoulders, and went on slowly pacing the Holly Walk. At length he raised his head and said half aloud: "I will do it, and at once; but it shall be on my own conditions, Lady Dimsdale—on my own conditions."

There was a gardener at work some distance away. He called the man to him, and sent him with a message to the house. Ten minutes later, Lady Dimsdale entered the Holly Walk.

Sir Frederick approached her with one of his most elaborate bows.

"You wish to see me, Sir Frederick?" she said inquiringly, but a little doubtfully. She hoped that he was not about to re-open the subject that had been discussed between them earlier in the day. "I have taken the liberty of asking you to favour me with your company for a few minutes—here, where we shall be safe from interruption. The matter I am desirous of consulting you upon admits of no delay."

She bowed, but said nothing. His words reassured her on one point, while filling her with a vague uneasiness. The sunshade she held over her head was lined with pink; it served its purpose in preventing the Beacon from detecting how pale and wet was the face under it.

They began to pace the walk slowly side by side.