THE BATTLE WON

CHAPTER XLVI.

AT LAST !

One morning Johnson, the man servant, came to Nessa and said :

"If you please mum, there's a pusson wants to see you—a female."

"What does she want?" asked Nessa, ever ready to take alarm, despite her resolutions.

"She says it's private affairs mum."

"Where is she?"

"Well, mum, she's on the doorstep at present. She looks such a very shady pusson—if you'll excuse me—that I didn't think it safe to leave her in the hall with the humberellas."

"Did she give any name?"

"Redman—Mrs. Redman I believe she called herself, mum."

Nessa had purposely turned to the table on which she was arranging flowers as she put the question, and it was well she did so, for her face as she heard the reply would have furnished gossip for the kitchen had Johnson seen it.

"Not at home, mum," the man suggested, as Nessa stood silently fingering the flower before her.

With an effort Nessa forced herself to answer with a steady voice—

"I will come down," she said ; "show her into the morning room."

As the door closed behind the man, Nessa turned from the table, the flowers slipping from her fingers and scattering on the floor unnoticed by her.

"At last– at last!" she gasped. "Oh, God, give me strength and guide me, for I am weak, and know not what to do !"

She stood with her chin sunk upon her breast, and her fingers clasped till she heard the door of the morning room close ; then, spurred by the dread of Sweyn returning before she had got the woman out of the house, she started from her attitude of helpless dejection, and with an expression of fixed determination in her face ran down-stairs and entered the morning room. Her step was so light and swift, her entrance so sudden, that Mrs. Redmond was surprised with her hand in the opened drawer of a cabinet.

"I'm looking at the pretty things you've got here," she said, in a hoarse, grating voice, scarcely above a whisper. "What's the matter, chummy? Aren't you glad to see me?" she added, as Nessa shrunk away at her approach.

The woman was inconceivably altered. Her dress, and the remnants of flashy finery upon her, were frayed, mud-stained, faded, and puckered with exposure to rain ; her hair had returned to its natural hue and texture of dull tow ; she had made no attempt to "make up" her face ; there was disease in the dull leaden eyes, the purple orbits, and the yellow folds of skin that hung loose and watery from her prominent cheek bones. But these signs of physical and moral degradation repelled Nessa less than the vindictive sinister expression in her face.

"What do you want?" Nessa asked, with horror in her hushed voice.

"I'll tell you what I want directly, chummy. Give me your hand."

"No ; keep away from me. You are my enemy ; I know it. If you come near me I will——"

"You will have me put out of doors. That's what you meant to say, only you thought better of it. You daren't do it. You're afraid of me, or you wouldn't have let me in your fine house—you sneaking cowardly little devil. You could come to me fast enough when you needed help, but when I need a lift, you can think about turning me out in the street. That's your gratitude for all I've done to help you out of your scrapes. Look at me! I came out of the hospital yesterday. I've spent the night in the streets, and my last coppers went for a glass of spirits to keep body and soul together this morning. Don't imagine I want your pity. I'd sooner be carried to the workhouse than ask you for charity. I come here to take what you owe me."

"What I owe you!"

"That's it. When I gave up my house and everything to help you, I gave you half I had. I saved your life. I saved you from beggary. I put you into the International, and was a willing stepping-stone to your present position. We agreed to share whatever fortune came to us. I have kept my part of the agreement ; now you've got to keep yours."

"You shall have half of my fortune when it is mine to give."

"Oh, that game's up. I've been fool enough to play for those stakes while I thought I could play the game out, but I'm not such a fool as to go on at it now. I shall be dead in six months. They gave me less than that at the hospital; but I'll live six months with care and the money to buy what I know will keep me alive. If you were to offer me the whole of your fortune—when you get it, and signed a paper to bind you to it, which is more—I wouldn't change it for what I mean to get out of you now."

"I have nothing," Nessa said, extending her hands in despair.

"Nothing!" croaked the woman, choking with fury, for she had actually worked herself up to believe in her own false representations. "Nothing! You dare tell me that, with those rings on your fingers. Understand me—I'm not a fool and not to be cheated. You've caught this swell doctor, and I'm going to have my share of the plunder. We go halves—do you hear? halves! And now we'll begin the division. Give me one of those gem rings and that wedding ring. You can replace that with the other one—you don't want two."

Nessa shook her head in speechless dismay, clasping the rings Sweyn had given her, and which she would not part with for all the world.

"What! you stick at a trifle like that," pursued Mrs. Redmond. "You must be pretty dense if you don't understand me, for I speak plain enough. I tell you I'll have half of everything you have. For convenience, I'll take it in installments, but I won't leave this house till I've got stuff to make up for the weeks and months of misery I've been brought to through you."

Nessa saw no possibility of escape ; she turned to the door in silence. Something in the look of her eyes alarmed Mrs. Redmond.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, stepping forward hastily and setting her foot against the door.

"I am not going to do what you want me to do," Nessa replied, without faltering ; "that is impossible. What shall I do," she added with a dreamy wonder—"what I hall do I know no more than you. But I hall know when Dr. Meredith returns."

"What! does he know you're Anderson's wife?" asked the woman, in her turn dismayed.

Nessa looked at her in silent scorn.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Redmond, impatiently.

"Do you think he would suffer me to live in his house if he knew that I am not his wife?"

"I daresay he could swallow his fine eelings, like the rest of men, if it suited him," Mrs. Redmond sneered. "But I suppose it wouldn't suit him, as he's a doctor, and has to keep up a character for respectability. But he'd make you some sort of allowance, surely."

Nessa turned away in disgust, and covered her face with her hands in shame.

"He must give you something, he's a gentleman, I suppose."

"He's a gentleman, and could not insult even an enemy. He will not offer to pay me——"

The passionate sentence ended there, and she burst into tears.

Mrs. Redmond looked on for a moment in vexed perplexity. Delicate sensibilities were quite beyond her comprehension; but she had the sense to see that she had gone too far in her furious determination to extort blackmail, and that if she did not restore hope and confidence to Nessa, her own gain would be of an unpleasant kind. She had a pretty sound conception that Dr. Meredith would not content himself with merely turning her out of his house ; he would more likely detain her until the police took her in charge for further examination.

"Look here, chummy ; don't talk on like this," she said, endeavoring to soften her grating voice to a soothing murmur as she laid her hand on Nessa s arm.

Nessa shrank away from that repulsive touch, and dashed the tears from her eyes.

"Come, chummy, come," whined the woman, setting her head aside with abject entreaty in her unhealthy face, "don't look at me like that. I know I've gone too far, and said things I didn't mean ; but you must make some allowance for my misery and need. You see what a poor, miserable wretch I am," she pleaded, catching at the pity that dawned in the girl's face. "Lord knows I don't want to upset you, and part you from this nice, kind doctor—why should I? My only hope of escaping from the workhouse and living a few months depends on my getting a little help from you. Why, I hung about the corner of the street over an hour not to call on you till I saw the doctor was well out of the way in his carriage. Look here, chummy, don't you think of telling him, if it's to put an end to your happiness and bring you to shame. Why should you? You were only half married to Anderson, and that half can't be legal, as he was out of his mind. I take my oath I didn't know it then. Look at me— its such misery as mine you plunge yourself into by giving way to this foolish impulse. You always were impulsive—you know you were—and repented it afterwards. And if you are really fond of this doctor, you may think that it won't be a very pleasant thing for him——"

"I am thinking of him," Nessa said.

"Well, look how it would damage him in his profession—a scandal of this sort!"

Nessa assented, but she was not thinking of the scandal or professional position ; but of how he would sit alone in his room at night, and the grief that would wring his heart.

"Then why should you do such a foolish thing for nothing, when you may both live happily till the end of your lives? Hexham's taken Anderson back to America; Cummings has got a berth in Scotland ; and not another soul in the world is living to trouble you. For it isn't likely I shall bother you. All I want is a little bit now and then." She looked round the room greedily. "There's such a lot of things in a house like this—plate and one thing and another—one article or two would never be missed out of so many."

"No, no! that is impossible," said Nessa, in horror ; "nothing shall persuade me to rob him."

Mrs. Redmond at a loss how to manage the squeamish girl, bit her lips in silence for a moment, then :

"You don't mean to say you've got nothing," she said. "Look here, doesn't he allow you money for housekeeping?"

"It is *his* money."

"Oh, bother!" Mrs. Redmond was losing temper again in this trying exercise of finding excuses for Nessa as well as for herself. "He can't expect you to account for every farthing. He must allow you something over for little expenses of your own—pin money, and so on. And if he didn't, certainly you could economize, and so save something for me."

Nessa received money for housekeeping; more than she needed. With pride she had shown Sweyn the surplus left after paying all the week's bills, and he had told her to put it by for a rainy day. Well, surely, she thought, he could not object, if he knew it, to her giving what she had to supply the needs of this woman. She put her hand in her pocket and produced the purse in which she kept this surplus.

"I think I may give you this ; it is all I have." Mrs. Redmond snatched it hastily.

"At present—but you'll save some more for me, won't you?" she said, opening the purse. There was gold inside. "Don't look frightened. I shan't come again for a long time; not till this is all gone. And I shall take precious good care to come when it's quite safe. That reminds me that I'd better go before the servants get curious. You can tell your husband in their hearing that I'm an old servant of yours. Now I'll be off." And as she opened the door, she croaked loud enough to be heard by any listening servant, and with a wink at Nessa, "I'm deeply grateful for your kindness, Mrs. Meredith, ma'am. And if ever you should want any one to help in the house, I shall be only too glad to come: you know I was never above a bit of honest, hard work."

Round the corner of the street she joined Cummings. He stood there waiting for her, seedy and down at heel, with his hands in his pockets and a hang-dog look on his face.

"Well, how did you get on—what have you screwed out of her?" he saked, falling in with her quick pace.

"Four or five shillings—that't all, "she answered, gloomily, "It's no go screwing her."

"She'll have to be screwed."

"I'll tell you what will happen then. She'll tell the doctor everything, and bolt without a penny. She's likely enough to do it without screwing."

"Well, what's to be done? I've ruined myself through this cursed job."

"I'll tell you what must be done. We must go for the big stakes. You know—we must do what he were talking about last night. Have you been round to the mansions?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Hexham's still there."

"And the madman?"

"Yes."

"Then we must do it!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE LAST ATTEMPT.

When Sweyn returned from his round that afternoon, Nessa met him in the hall, and leading him into his own room, said :

"I want to tell you at once, love, something that has happened while you were away. The woman I lived with at the time of my accident——"

"Mrs. Merrivale?"

"Yes ; she called upon me. She is very ill, very poor, and she has no friends or occupation. She wanted money, and I gave her all I had."

"And so you need some more to go on with, eh?" he suggested, cheerfully.

"Oh, no, no, no! The money you let me have for the week is upstairs. I only had my purse with the savings I have made in my pocket. I gave her that."

"Well?" he said, interrogatively.

"That is all I can tell you, love," she answered, nervously, stroking his hand as she looked into his face with sad, serious eyes.

He laughed and hugged her to his side.

"Why, you dear, mysterious little soul, that's nothing. I thought you had something terrible to relate ; that solemn, grave, beautiful face filled me with all sorts of apprehensions. You don't regret giving your savings, do you?"

"No; but I felt that I must tell you all—all that I could tell you."

"Believe me, I want to know no more than that, dear wife. But we will not dismiss this subject without another word I should think Mrs. Merrivale would call on you again. It's natural she should, you know." His eye twinkled with suppressed mirth. "That sort of thing is liable to become tedious to you, and it must be uncomfortable to her whenever she calls to accept gifts. Now, don't you think it would be more pleasant for all parties if we lent her a certain sum to invest in a small business that would give her occupation and restore a feeling of independence?"

"Sweyn, Sweyn—dear, generous Sweyn!" she sobbed, winding her arms round his neck, and with closed eyes drawing his face downs to hers.

She was exuberantly gay after this little scene. It seemed as if forgiving Heaven were smiling upon her, and all the clouds rolling away over the horizon. Her husband, Hexham and Cummings all gone ; Mrs. Redmond settled and content as she must be with the liberal provision promised by Sweyn—what was there to fear? Nothing could trouble her peace ; no shadow fall upon this happy future.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Redmond did not know of the good fortune awaiting her. By ignoring the good policy of truth and candor, she could not foresee the happy turn taken through Nessa's departure from her counsel.

Nessa was anxious to impart the good news to her—to make known her dear Sweyn's generosity. A fortnight passed ; Mrs. Redmond made no sign. Nessa took that as a sign of the woman's moderation and became more and more convinced that her peril was past—poor fool!

She had a room of her own, but she preferred Sweyn's study when she was not puzzling very hard over some self-imposed task. She was now forever striving to "improve" herself. In her husband's study she could feast her eyes on the evidence of his prodigious acquirements in the rows of scientific books he understood, and the curious cases of instruments on the shelf which at one time she shuddered to look at, and where there was a prevalent odor of tobacco which she loved because tobacco was dear to him. She was seated in his chair one afternoon when Johnson came in by the door from the passage.

"If you please, mum, there are two pussons to see the doctor—males ; and they wish to know how long it will be before he's in."

"He will be in by five o'clock," Nessa replied, looking at the timepiece. It was now a quarter-past four. "Did you say they were gentlemen?"

"Males, mum. Patients, appearantly. One of them looks very po'rly—a gentleman ; the other looks like a messenger, or something of that, sent to take care of him. Had to help him by the arm."

"Show them in the consulting-room if they choose to wait."

"I have done so, mum. They are in there now."

They were there—Cummings, the "messenger or something of that," with his ear to the door at the end of the room which opened into the doctor's study ; his hand on the arm of the gentleman, James Anderson. When Johnson entered by the other door to tell them the doctor would be home in three-quarters of an hour both were seated on the couch, the gentleman with his eyes closed.

Cummings nodded, with a glance at Anderson, to signify that they would wait, and Johnson withdrew.

"It's all right," whispered Cummings. "You've got three-quarters of an hour to get rid of the devil."

Anderson was on the alert in a moment.

"He's in there—the devil you sold your soul to, you know," Cummings continued.

Anderson nodded eagerly.

"The one I've been hunting for ever since I got out of hell?" he asked, putting his lips close to Cummings's ear.

"Yes. He's at his old tricks again—taken the shape of a beautiful woman."

Anderson nodded and winked, a cunning grin bareing his clenched teeth.

"It's no good trying the long game again," said Cummings.

Anderson pursed up his lips and shook his head vehemently.

"You failed last time through being too slow."

Anderson assented with a nod and furious scowl.

"You'll have to do it sharp. Hexham will never let you out of the waistcoat if he catches you before it's done."

Anderson started to his feet and dipped his hand in his pocket with desperate haste.

Cummings rose, also, laying a hand upon his arm, sharply.

"Don't be a fool and lose your last chance by want of caution. You can be sharp without being rash ; you must get your opportunity."

Anderson snatched his arm away impatiently.

"Let me alone," he muttered ; "do you think I don't know all that?"

"Wait a bit ; there may be more than one in the next room. The right one may not be there. If she's gone we may have to wait for another chance."

He went to the door opening into the study, and laying hold firmly of the handle, turned it by imperceptible degrees till the catch was withdrawn from the lock and the door, yielding to the slight pull, slowly gaped. With the same noiseless movement he turned the handle back to its original position as he perceived Nessa through the opening seated before the fireplace with her back to the door. He saw her face mirrored in the inclined glass over the chimney-piece. Anderson, craning over his shoulder, saw it also, and with instant perception that the glass which revealed her to them would reveal them to her if she chanced to look up, quickly crouched down, drawing Cummings back with an agony of apprehension in his face. The two bending low nodded to each other significantly.

"Are you ready?" breathed Cummings, livid with horror of the thing he was doing.

Anderson replied by a nod, and slid silently down on all fours.

"Wait until I'm outside before yon begin. I must bolt the street door for fear of Hexham," Cummings whispered.

Anderson took no notice of the caution, but with cat-like stealth drew the door wider open to permit of his passing in. At the last glance back, as he slipped out into the hall, Cummings saw that Anderson was already half through the door. With a rapid step he crossed the hall, opened the street door, and without pausing to close it, ran down the street.

It was Mrs. Redmond who waited round the corner this time. His face told the tale the moment he came in sight. Without waiting for him to join her she hurried on in the direction he was taking. Coming to her side, he dropped into a rapid walk, which she with difficulty accommodated her pace to.

"Has eh done it?" she asked.

"It's all over by this time," he answered.

They said no more, but hurried on, panting for breath. There was a 'bus passing the end of the street. Cummings hailed it hoarsely, and both ran to overtake it. No other passengers were on the top. When she had recovered breath, Mrs. Redmond asked for particulars, and Cummings gave them in brief. She was discontented, even though accident had favored their design beyond expectation.

"Supposing he doesn't do it after all?" she said, petulantly.

"Then we shall be no worse off than we were before. It was only an experiment, and it turned out ever so much better than I thought it would. What else did you want?"

"You shouldn't have come away so soon. Time enough to bolt when he'd done it."

"And been caught."

"There was no danger of that. It would be seen that he was a maniac ; his name wouldn't be known."

"And Hexham, when the thing got in the papers?"

"He wouldn't have stirred in the matter, to take the responsibility for having let the man get out of his hands twice."

"I wasn't going to risk that. Besides, I tell you, she can't escape."

"For all you know. If she does, we've lost our tool, and shan't get him again ; that's sure. Much better have looked about, and brought him away, saying you'd call another day. You might have found out her room, and got him in there next time, if you hadn't the courage to see it through. Or if you'd followed my plan of drawing her into some hotel, and shutting her in a room with him."

"Oh, shut up, you croaking old—Wait till the evening papers come out, then you'll see whether I'm a fool or not. Get down. We'll take that other 'bus."

Nessa, bending over her German Grammar, heard a movement in the direction of the consulting room ; but knowing patients were awaiting the return of Sweyn she disregarded the sound—only it seemed to her that the movement was particularly distinct considering that the door was closed. She heard the street door shut, another door open—the further door of the consulting room. But when she heard a rap at the door behind her, she raised her head, and, turning round, saw Johnson, with a look of perplexity in his face, in the entrance.

"I beg pardon, mum, but I was going to ask you if you had seen anything of the two pussons."

"No ; I have seen nobody," said Nessa, rising, and laying down her book.

"I thought you might, as this door is half open."

"Are the gentlemen gone?" she asked in astonishment, going to the door of the consulting-room.

"Clean gone, mum. I heard the street door open, and ran upstairs at once, and they must have heard me and took to their heels, for I see not a sign of any one when I looked down the street."

"What can it mean?"

"Thieves, mum : that's what it means. I didn't like the look of the one in the long black cloak—looked like one of those pussons that preaches in the parks, and the other was shamming sick for an excuse. They know the doctor goes out after lunch, and reckoned on getting his instruments or something out of the study ; but seeing you they were baulked in their puppos, and gave up the job. It's frequently done. My last master was robbed in that way, and he took care afterwards to lock the door of the study inside before he went out."

The explanation was conclusive. Nessa left Johnson examining the periodicals on the table of the consulting room, with a view to seeing if any had been taken, and, withdrawing into the study, turned the key in the lock as a precaution for the future. She glanced at the clock ; in a quarter of an hour, at the furthest, Sweyn would be home. There was just time to put her books away and set the room straight. The books packed on the shelf above Sweyn's beloved pipes, his chair pushed back in its customary place, she glanced round to see if anything else needed arranging. Then her eyes falling on the shelf in the case beyond the screen, she noticed with surprise that the velvet-lined lid of a box of instruments stood open. Crossing the room to examine more closely, she discovered that one of the long dissecting knives was gone from its place. Was it possible that one of the thieves had passed behind her, opened the box, and taken the knife, she asked herself? It seemed hardly possible. Another supposition—that the thief, alarmed by the sound of Johnson entering the adjoining room, had found no time to escape, and had armed himself with the knife for defence—caused her to turn her eyes toward the recess behind the screen.

With a horror-stifled cry, she drew back on perceiving the dim figure of a man in the shadow of the screen, crouching as if to spring upon her with the gleaming knife in his hand. Breathless with terror, she drew back step by step toward the door of the consulting room—the door into the passage lying beyond the screen—keeping her face toward the man, who like a cat hesitating to spring upon the prey it is uncertain of reaching, shifted his position, and stole upon her step by step.

Suddenly it flashed upon Nessa's recollection that she had locked the door ; to open it she must turn her back upon this man, and expose herself to his attack. The quivering of the knife showed her that the man was nerving himself for the spring. She strove to scream ; but the horror which prompted the cry silenced it in her paralyzed throat. There was a long table in the middle of the room ; she thought of it in this last extremity ; and just as the man bent suddenly down to spring, she turned, and in a moment placed herself upon the further side of it.

As she reached this temporary barrier she looked back. The man had come from the shadow of the screen, and stood now facing the light. She recognized him, distorted as his face was with demoniacal fury, and faintly gasped :

"My husband!"

He seemed to perceive the paralyizing fascination he exercised upon her, and drew stealthily upon her until he reached the table, and there again he stood, undetermined whether to chase her round it or to vault across. In that moment the street door closed, and Nessa's strained perception recognized Sweyn's step in the passage.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Behring Sea Negotiations.

The want of success which attended their former negotations on the Behring sea controversy has not discouraged Sir Julian Pauncefote, the British Minister, from making another attempt at solving the difficult problem. His latest proposal is that Russia be asked to unite in negotiating a settlement, and that the agreement have respect to the whole of the waters lying north of the 50th parallel of north latitude and between America and Asia. In his scheme provision is made for a convention, to be called the North American seal fishing convention, in which Great Britain, Russia and the United States shall be represented, and which shall deal with the fur seal fisheries in the Behring sea, the sea of Otschotsk and adjoining waters.

The articles of agreement provide that the high contracting parties agree to appoint a mixed commission of experts, who shall enquire into the subject and report within two years from the date of the convention on the propriety and the advisability of regulations looking to the preservation of the fur seal species. After this report has been submitted a further convention is to be held, and in case the high contracting parties are unable to agree upon regulations, if any are necessary, the questions of difference shall be referred to the arbitration of an impartial government, whose award shall be final. Pending the report of the commission and four months after the date of such report, a temporary measure shall be put into effect, prohibiting the subjects and cstizens of the high contracting parties from engaging in the fur seal fishery, and taking of seals by land or sea, north of the 50th degree of north latitude which shall be considered the seal fishery line, from the 1st of May to the 30th of June and also from the 1st of October to the 30th of December. During the intervening period sealing vessels belonging to the high contracting parties shall not be permitted to approach these islands within a radius of ten miles. Every vessel found engaged in fishing contrary to these prohibitions shall be liable to forfeit and her captain and crew subject to fine or imprisonment, the nation to which the vessel belongs alone having jurisdiction over such cases.

Whatever else may be said of this scheme it is, at least, comprehensive, and if agreed to by the parties specified would doubtless settle this vexed question for all time to come. Moreover, it meets the demands of the United States government that the seals be protected from wanton destruction by unprincipled sealers who care nothing for the interests of others so long as they are making gain. This, it will be remembered, was the principal vindication of the policy pursued by that country during 1889. It remains to be seen how Secretary Blaine, who has not shown himself to be perfectly reasonable in these negotiations, will regard this new plan of settlement.

A Lock-Out in the Shipping Trade.

According to the London *Times* a genera lockout is being discussed by the shippers of that city. These men complain that, what with arbitrary interference on the part of unionist leaders, what with paying double wages for work half done, and what with frequent fines of $500 a day for ships that cannot get unloaded, their business is at present being carried on at a heavy loss. They declare that the consequence to them of a general lockout would be less serious than the present piecemeal destruction of their property and business. They recognize, too, that such a step would seriously effect the business of the whole country, and that were they to lay up their ships many innocent persons might be made to suffer. Consequently, they propose this drastic measure only as a last resort to free themselves from what they consider an unjust and intolerable dictation. Says the secretary of the shipper's federation: "Such a step could only be taken after most mature consideration. At the same time it is becoming evident, from some special cases to-day, that it may have to be taken in the near future. This Federation must be prepared to make such a stand as will effectually meet the federation of all trades against free labor, which has already been partly accomplished." It is to be hoped that wiser counsels will prevail among those who are responsible for the existing trouble, and that the threatened lockout, which would mean inconvenience, suffering, and probably starvation, to many, may be averted.