

UNDER A CLOUD.

▲ THRILLING TALE OF HUMAN LIFE.

CHAPTER XXI.

SILENCE GIVES CONSENT.

"Oh, it's you two again, is it?" said Miss Jerrold, in a tone of voice which might have been borrowed from her brother, as Stratton and Guest were shown up into her pretty little drawing room, where she sat ready to preside over her china tea tray with its quaint Sevres cups and saucers and parcel gilt apostle spoons, while a tall stand on her left with its bronze kettle humming and whispering, and uttering a pleasant coo now and then, as it felt the warm kisses of the spirit lamp. Stratton's brows contracted and a look of resentment darted from his eyes as he stopped short, but Guest laughed and said airily:

"Yes; it is your humble servants once again."

"Well, and what do you want?" "Hear that, Stratton?" said Guest. "A lady sends you her cards, 'At home Thursday, four to six;' we go to the expense of new lavender kids—no, come what may, I will be truthful, mine are only freshly cleaned—and new hats—no, truth shall prevail! a gloss over from the latter's iron—drag ourselves all this way west to pay our devoirs—to drink tea out of thimbles, and eat slices of butter thinly sprinkled with bread crumbs, and the lady says, 'What do you want?'"

"Of course I do. There, sit down, both of you, and, Malcolm Stratton, don't put on that wicked, melodramatic frown; it does not become you. You're a prir of impostors. Think I'm blind? You don't come here to call upon a poor old woman like—Quick, Percy, my dear boy! Blow it out; we shall have the room in a blaze."

"No, no, be cool," said Guest, and he made for the spirit kettle, whose lamp had become overheated, and was sending up quite a volume of flame. But Stratton was nearer, and taking out his handkerchief, he turned it into a pad, dabbed it on the lamp and the light was smothered.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Miss Jerrold in tones full of relief, "now, that was very clever. I do like presence of mind. Sugar, Mr. Stratton?"

He bowed stiffly.

"Haven't burned yourself, have you, my dear?"

"Oh, no; my glove protected my hand," said Stratton, looking at the stiff, formal, handsome old body; half amused, half pleased, by the maternal "my dear."

"Ah, now you're smiling at me," she said quickly. "Sugar, Percy?"

"A good deal, please, to take the taste of your harsh words out of my mouth."

"There then—two lumps. I know you take sugar, Malcolm Stratton, and cream. Well, my dear, I'm obliged to speak out; for you really are a pair of impostors, and I cannot have my house made a meeting place for would-be lovers. There—there, Mr. Stratton, don't pray turn like that, and look as if you were going to rush away. Mine is a very delicate position, and I know my brother will be taking me to task some day about all this. Now, do take my advice; and give it all up—Percy Guest, if you break that cup I'll never forgive you. It cannot be mended."

"Would you advise us to go and try our fortunes in Australia, Miss Jerrold?" said Guest quietly, as he replaced the tiny cup in the middle of its saucer, after nearly sending it on the carpet.

"No, I would not, you stupid boy. There, I don't mean you at all. I dare say Edie will be silly enough to let you wheedle her into matrimony some day—a goose."

Guest touched his breast.

"You? No," said the lady sharply, "Edie. But you two are nobodies. I was thinking about Mr. Stratton, here. Now, don't you think, my dear, you had better give it all up?"

She held out her hand with a look of gentle sympathy to him, and he caught it and kissed it.

"Do you think I ever could?" he said, in a low voice, while Guest began to display great interest in the painting of the tea-cup.

"No, I suppose not," said Miss Jerrold, with a sigh. "It's very sad, you see, poor girl, she's going through a curious morbid phase which has completely changed her. All that time she had her ideas that it was her duty to wait and suffer; and I do honestly believe that if that man had behaved himself, been released on a ticket of—ticket of—what do they call those tickets, Percy?"

"Leave," said the young barrister gravely.

"Yes; of course—she would have considered it her duty to go to him if he had come to claim her; and then died of misery and despair in a month."

"Had we not better change the conversation, Miss Jerrold?" said Stratton quietly.

"Yes, of course. I'm a very stupid old woman, I suppose; but Myra does worry me a great deal. One moment and I've done, and I suppose things must take their course. But all this treating herself as a widow and—there—there—I have done. I suppose I need not tell you they are coming here to-day?"

"I did hope to see Miss—"

"Hush! Don't call her that, my dear. It must be Mrs. Barron, or she will consider herself insulted. Ah, she's a strange girl, Mr. Stratton, but we can't help liking her all the same, can we?"

She held out her hand to him with a pleasant smile and a nod; and Guest saw his friend's eyes brighten, and then noted his passionate, eager look, as there was a ring and a knock.

But the ladies who came up were strangers; and it was not until quite the last that Myra and her cousin arrived, the former in black, and with a calm, resigned look in her pale face, which had grown very thoughtful and dreamy during the six

months which had elapsed since that morning at breakfast, when the news came of James Dale's tragic end.

And now her eyes softened as she greeted Stratton, and she sat talking to him in a quiet subdued way, till the gentlemen took their leave, and made their way back to Benchers' Inn.

Hardly a word was spoken till they were in Stratton's room, where Guest rushed at his hat and umbrella down impatiently, walked straight to the door on the left of the fireplace, opened it, went in, and returned with a cigar box, which he set down, and then went back to fetch out the spirit lamp and a siphon from another shelf, while, dreamy looking and thoughtful, Stratton sat back in an easy-chair watching his friend's free and easy, quite at home ways, but thinking the while of Myra.

"Might have troubled yourself to get the glasses," said Guest ill-humoredly, as he fetched a couple of tall, green Venice cups from a cabinet, poured out some whisky, frothed it up from the siphon, and drank.

"That's better," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Aren't you going to have one?"

"Presently." "Presently? Bah! It's always presently with you. I'm tired of presently. Edie would say 'Yes,' directly, and I could get Aunt Jerrold to coax the old man round if he wanted coaxing. But it's always the same. Look here; if you don't keep your cigars somewhere else, and not on a shelf over that damp bath, I won't smoke 'em. Hardly ever get 'em to light. Here," he continued, thrusting a cigar and a match-box into Stratton's hands, "do smoke and talk, you give a fellow the blues with your dismal looks."

"I'm very sorry, old fellow," said Stratton, lighting the cigar. "I am not dismal. I feel very happy and contented."

"Then you're easily satisfied," cried Guest.

"Yes; because I hope and believe that if I am patient, my time will come."

"Not it. It's too bad of Myra."

"No; I would not have her change," said Stratton dreamily. "It is a hard and long probation, but I can wait, and I love her all the more dearly for her true womanly behavior. There, hold your tongue, you miserable selfish reviler of one whom in your heart you look up to as a pattern of womanhood. The joy would be almost greater than I could bear if she said 'Yes'; but she is right, and I will patiently wait, for some day the time will come."

"There you go again. Presently. It's all very well for you with your calm worship of your ideal woman, and your high-falutin talk about womanhood, etcetera, but I love my little Edie in a non-aesthetic, Christianlike, manly way; and it's maddening to be always kept off by the little thing with 'No, not till I see poor Myra happy. Then, perhaps, you may begin to talk.' Perhaps and presently makes poor food for a fellow like me."

Stratton smiled at him gravely.

"That's right—laugh at me. Tell you what, Mal, you're a poor lover, why don't you ask her plump and plain?"

Stratton made no reply but sat back smoking, and his friend said no more for a time. At last, quietly:

"Not such a bad cigar after all, Mal."

Stratton did not reply for a few moments. Then, in a low voice, full of emotion:

Percy, lad, you must bear with me; it is all too deep for words. If we could change places you would do as I do. Speak to her? pray to her? Have I not done all this till now when her eyes gaze in mine with their gentle, pleading calm, and say to me—'Bear with me; be patient. If you love me, give me time till all these sorrows of the past have grown blurred and faint with distance.' Guest, old fellow, she gives me no hope. There is no verbal promise, but there is a something in her gentle, compassionate look which says to me—'Wait; if ever I can forget the past—if ever I marry a man—it will be you.'"

There was a deep silence in the room, and faintly heard came the roar of the great city street.

Stratton was the first to break the silence by saying softly to himself:

"Yes; wait; the time will come."

Again the silence was broken, this time by a strange hurrying, rustling sound behind the wainscot, followed by a dull thud.

"What's that?" said Guest sharply.

"That! Oh, only the rats. There are plenty in this old house."

"Ugh! Brutes."

"They only have runs behind the paneling. They never come into the rooms."

There was another silence before Guest spoke.

"Mal, old chap," he said, "I'm a miserable, impatient beast. You are quite right; I'm in my ordinary senses once more. Edie speaks just as you do, and she's as wise a little thing as ever stepped. We must wait, old man; we must wait."

Malcolm Stratton waited till one evening, when fortune favored him for the moment once again. It was by accident he found Myra alone. He had heard the tones of the piano as he went up to the drawing room in Bourne Square, and his heart had begun to beat wildly and then its pulsation grew to throbs and bounds, as he went in, to find her alone and playing softly in the half light.

She did not cease, but her fingers strayed over the keys, and once more as his arm rested upon the piano, the chords thrilled through his very being; and when, without a word, his hands were outstretched to take her to his breast, she sank upon it with a sigh of relief. At that moment steps were heard upon the landing, and Edie and Miss Jerrold entered the room dressed to go to some concert, Sir Mark following directly after, from the dining room with Guest.

Myra did not shrink from Stratton till all had seen what had taken place. Then, gravely crossing to her father, she laid her hands together upon his breast, while he waited for her to speak.

The words came at last:

"Father, dear, Malcolm has asked me to be his wife."

Sir Mark drew her tightly to him, and held out his hand to Stratton.

"Soon, dear, very soon, but it must be very quiet, and not from here."

"Anything, my darling, to see you happy once again."
The butler just then brought in a lamp, and they could see the love light beaming from her eyes.

CHAPTER XXII.

AT THE SILENT DOOR.

Even as Percy Guest rushed at his friend's door to bring one foot against the lock with all his might, he felt the futurity of the proceeding. For he knew how solid the old oak outer panels had been made; but he did not pause, and as his foot struck against it there was a dull sound—nothing more.

Guest drew back again, fully impressed by the hopelessness of his proceedings, for the outer door opened toward him, and the effect of his next thrust was only to drive it against the jamb.

He was recoiling again, with his muscles quivering from the violence of his efforts, when Miss Jerrold caught his arm.

"Mr. Guest," she said firmly, "this is madness. You will bring a crowd of people about us, and only workmen could open that door."

Guest hesitated a moment or two.

"Stop!" he said. "His friend, Mr. Brettson, is in the next chambers, perhaps. I'll go and see."

"Come, Rebecca," said the admiral scornfully; we have no business here."

He held out his arm, but his sister thrust it away.

"Yes; we have business here," she said. "If, as Mr. Guest suspects, some accident has befallen Malcolm Stratton, would you care to meet Myra without having been there?"

She whispered this to her brother while Guest had gone to Brettson's door, at which he knocked sharply.

The admiral turned fiercely upon his sister, but she did not shrink.

"You know it's right," she said. "Be reasonable, Mark. Malcolm Stratton could not have insulted us all like this."

"I can't make him hear," said Guest, after a second sharp summons at Brettson's door. "I must fetch up a carpenter and make him force open this door."

"You have no right to proceed to such violent measures, Mr. Guest."

"Then I shall assume the right, sir. I believe that my friend lies behind that door wounded or murdered for the sake of the money he had ready for his wedding trip, and do you think I am going to stand on punctilio at a time like this?"

Miss Jerrold looked very white and faint as she said quietly:

"He is quite right, Mark."

"Get workmen, then, in Heaven's name, sir, or the police."

Guest took a step toward the stairs but turned again. "I don't like the expose, sir," he said sharply. "There might be reasons why I should repent going."

"But you must have the door opened at once," cried Sir Mark, now once more growing excited, as if Guest's manner was contagious.

Guest drew his hand over the door in search of a hold to try and drag it toward him, ending by thrusting it in by the letter slit and giving it a vigorous shake.

He withdrew it, shaking his head, and paused, for steps were heard. But they passed the doorway at the bottom of the building and died away, while, as he listened, all seemed to be silent upstairs and down.

"We must have a carpenter," he cried aloud; and, once more placing his ear to the letter slit, he listened, and then came away to where Sir Mark stood.

"I'm certain I heard something within there," he whispered. "Someone is listening, and I'm sure there is something wrong; but I don't like to leave you here alone, Sir Mark."

"Why?"

"In case some scoundrel should make a sudden rush out and escape."

"Fetch a policeman," said Sir Mark sturdily. "Let him try it while you are gone."

At that moment, Guest uttered an eager cry, and thrust his hand into his pocket.

"I'd forgotten that," he said, in answer to Miss Jerrold's inquiring look; "and I don't know now that it will fit."

He had taken out his latchkey on the chance of that which fitted the lock of one set of chambers fitting that of another, and, thrusting it into the keyhole, he was in the act of turning it when, as if someone had been listening to every word and act, a bolt was suddenly shot back, and the door thrown open against Guest's chest.

He started back in astonishment, for there, in the dark opening, stood Malcolm Stratton, his face of a sickly sallow, a strange look in his eyes, and a general aspect of his have suddenly turned ten years older, startling all present.

"What do you want?" he said harshly. The question was so sudden that Guest was stunned into muteness, but the admiral stepped forward fiercely.

"You—you despicable scoundrel!" he roared; and as Stratton stepped back the old man followed him quickly into the room, and caught him by the throat.

"Mark! Mark! cried Miss Jerrold, following to seize her brother's arm, while Guest, relieved beyond measure at finding his friend in the flesh, instead of his murderer, hurriedly entered and closed the outer door.

"Stand aside, woman!" cried the admiral, fiercely wrestling himself free in ungovernable rage on seeing the man who had caused the morning's trouble standing there unharmed. The fact of Stratton being uninjured and making so insulting a demand half maddened him, and, seizing his collar, he was bearing him back, when Guest interposed, and separated them.

"This will do no good, Sir Mark," he cried. "For everybody's sake, sir, be calm."

"Calm!" roared the old sailor furiously. "Yes, Mark, calm," whispered his sister, clinging to him firmly. "Is it the act of an officer and a gentleman to behave like this?"

"You don't know—you cannot feel as I do," he raged.

"For Myra's sake," whispered Miss Jerrold quickly; and the old man made an effort and calmed down.

"Let him explain then. Let him say what it means. A public insult. To be degraded like this. And after what is past."

Meanwhile Stratton was looking wildly about him. The sweat stood in great drops upon his haggard face, and he trembled violently, though it was apparent to

his friend that he was fighting hard to be composed.

Guest turned to Sir Mark.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "There must, as I have said, be good reasons for poor Stratton's actions. Pray be patient with him. You see, sir—you see, Miss Jerrold, he is ill and suffering. Now, Stratton, for Heaven's sake, speak out. You must explain. Tell Sir Mark what it is."

"Take them away," said Stratton in a hoarse whisper; "take them away."

"Yes, yes, but say something. What is it—some sudden attack?" Come, man, don't look at me in that ghastly way; are you ill?"

"No—no. I don't know," faltered Stratton.

"Then you must have some explanation to make."

"No—no. None. Go!"

"Mark—my dear brother," whispered Miss Jerrold.

"Flesh and blood can't stand it, girl," he panted, with the veins in his temples purple; and snatching himself away, he thrust Guest aside and once more seized Stratton—this time by the arms.

"Now, sir," he said hoarsely, "I know I ought to leave you in contempt for your cursed shilly-shallying, pusillanimous conduct, but with my poor child's agonized past before me, I can't behave as a polished gentleman should."

Stratton glared at him in silence, with the pallor increasing, and his face assuming a bluish-gray tinge.

"I came here believing—no, trying to believe—that you had been taken ill; that there was good reason for my child being once more exposed to a cruel public shame that must make her the byword of society. I ask you for an explanation, and in this cursedly cool way you say you have none to offer. You are not ill; you have not, as we feared, been attacked for your money, for there it lies on the table. There is nothing wrong, then, with you, and—good God! what's this?"

He started away in horror, for the hand he had in his anger shifted to Stratton's shoulder was wet, and, as he held it out, Miss Jerrold uttered a faint cry, for it was red with blood; and, released from the fierce grasp which had held him up, Stratton swayed forward, reeled, and fell with a crash on to the carpet.

"He's hurt. Wounded," cried Guest, dropping on one knee by his friend's side, but only to start up and dash into the adjoining room, to come back directly with basin, sponge, and water.

"D—n!" raged the admiral, "what a brutal temper I have. Poor lad! poor lad! Fetch a doctor, Guest. No. That's right, sponge his temples, 'Becca. Good girl. Don't fetch a doctor yet, Guest. I am a bit of a quack. Let me see."

He went behind the prostrate man, who lay perfectly insensible, and kept on talking hurriedly as he took out a penknife and used it freely to get at the injury in the shoulder.

"Why didn't he speak? You were right, then, Guest. Some scoundrel has been here. Curse him! We'll have him hung. To be sure—a bullet gone right through here—no; regularly plowed his flesh. Thank Heaven; not a dangerous wound. I can bandage it. But too much for a bridegroom. Poor lad! poor lad!"

He tore up his own handkerchief and made a pad of his sister's, but these were not enough. Look here, Rebecca," he said; "you'd better go and leave us."

"Nonsense!" said the lady sternly. "Go on with your work, and then a doctor must be fetched."

"Very well, then, if you will stay. There, don't try to revive him yet. Let's finish. Guest, my lad, take that knife and slit one of the sheets in the next room; then tear off a bandage four inches wide and as long as you can. Let's stop the bleeding, and he won't hurt."

All was done as he ordered, and the bandage roughly fixed, Stratton perfectly insensible the while.

"Becca, my dear—Guest, my lad," said the admiral huskily. "Never felt so sorry in my life." Then, taking Stratton's hand between both his own, he said, in a low voice, "I beg your pardon, my lad, humbly."

"I don't like this long insensibility, Mark," said Miss Jerrold.

"No; it's too long. Has he any rum or brandy in the place?"

"Yes," said Guest eagerly, and he hurried to the door of the bath closet, and turned the handle, but it was locked.

"How tiresome!" he muttered. "Here, I know."

He dropped quickly on one knee by his friend, and thrust a hand into his coat pocket for his bunch of keys; when his hand came in contact with something, which he drew out with an ejaculation, and looked up at Sir Mark.

"A pistol!" said the latter, and they stared in each other's eyes, just as Stratton began to show signs of recovery.

"Why has he a pistol?" whispered Miss Jerrold; and her brother's whole manner changed.

"I was thinking that you ought to have fetched the police at once, my lad," he said; "but it's as well you did not. There are things men like hushed up."

"I—I—don't know what you mean," faltered Miss Jerrold, while Guest slowly laid the weapon on the table, looking ghastly pale, and feeling a sensation of heart sickness and despair.

"Plain enough," said the admiral coldly. "There is something more, though, behind. Do you know what?" he cried sternly, as he fixed Guest with his eyes.

"On my honor, no, Sir Mark."

"It does not matter to us."

"But it does, Mark," cried Miss Jerrold piteously; "and I am confused. What does it all mean?"

"Heaven and the man himself alone know."

"But, Mark, dear; I cannot understand."

"Not with this before you plainly stamped," said the admiral bitterly. "Some old trouble—a lady, I suppose—men are all alike—there was an expose imminent, I expect, and he sought a way out of it—the coward's way, and was too great a cur to take aim straight."

They all looked down in horror at Stratton, where he lay, to see that he was now sensible to their words, and glaring wildly from face to face.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Mush-and-milk surprise parties are popular in the Southern States. A candy pull is one of the sports at them, and the festivities close with a dance.

THE FIELD OF COMMERCE.

Some Items of Interest to the Man of Business.

The world's visible supply of wheat increased 3,600,000 bushels the past week. The price of silver is declining, having got down to 27 7-16d. per ounce in London and 79¢ in New York.

Canadian securities are firm. Canada 3½ per cent. are quoted in London at 106. Montreal 3½'s at 93, and Toronto 3½'s at 94. Hamilton 4's at 105.

The lumber trade is dull, the indications of increased activity at the beginning of the season have not so far materialized. Many of our large firms report less cutting going on in the woods than last year, owing to the large stocks of lumber on hand.

Speculation is very quiet, and no activity is expected until after the holidays. Assurance stocks are higher on reports of good earnings, and Commercial Cable is firm on report that the company has surplus of over \$200,000 after payment of dividends for the year.

The United States Treasury gold reserve stands \$8,500,000 below the reserve limit of \$100,000,000. Since November 24, the day on which bids for the new bonds were opened, the Treasury has lost \$2,500,000 in gold by withdrawals, two-thirds of which has probably been exported.

At Washington, on Tuesday, Mr. Daniels, (Rep.), New York, introduced in the House a bill authorizing the construction of a bridge across Niagara River at Grand Island. The bill modifies the one before introduced for the same purpose by eliminating certain objectionable features.

Both raw and refined sugar declined last week in the United States market, the change in the latter being most important. At the lower prices many delayed orders were in, and a fair business transacted. Raw sugar is not in large supply, and holders are not anxious to sell at the lower list price.

Wheat markets are dull, with very little trading. Cables weak. In the United States and Canada the stocks in store increased over 2,000,000 bushels last week, and the amount afloat to Europe increased 1,256,000 bushels. Manitoba hard wheat, however, is in good demand, selling at 75c. west for No. 1 hard.

By mail received from Yokohama, information comes that all the tea houses in Japan have signed a circular stating that in consequence of enhanced cost of labor and tea-packing material, they will find it necessary to increase firing charges 50c. per pecul, and should the war continue a still further increase may become necessary.

The leather market in the United States is quite active with increased demand, in part to anticipate future requirements. Sales of hemlock sole exceed receipts, and the stocks of Union crop are reduced. The tone is generally stronger for all grades, though lower goods are in most demand and get relatively higher prices than the better grades, but because of their scarcity the sales of the better grades have somewhat increased.

No very definite information regarding details of the suspension in St. Johns, Newfoundland, can be obtained until the arrival of a steamer here with mails, which may not be for a few days. So far all information received has been through telegraphic despatches. The Commercial and Union banks of Newfoundland have suspended, but it is supposed that in the case of the latter at least the stoppage will be but temporary and that arrangements will be made to continue its business.

A contest for the control of the small visible supply of petroleum between the Standard Oil Company and the independent refiners, seems to be a partial solution of the rise last week. The activity, however, was entirely at Oil City, as only a nominal quotation existed here. Refined oil has advanced from 5.15 to about 5.45 in sympathy with the boom in crude certificates. There is a natural reason for some advance in price at this season, for while the demand increases, the weather interrupts the opening of new wells. Reports from the field state that stocks continue to decrease.

The struggle to obtain an advance in prices in boots and shoes does not yet result satisfactorily in the United States. While nearly all makers ask 2½ to 7½ cents more per pair, and show good reason in the higher price of leather, jobbers are disposed to give very limited orders at the advance, holding that consumers are not ready to pay more. In consequence, while large orders for next season have been taken, there is still uncertainty what part of them will be executed or cancelled on account of the advance desired. Nevertheless, the orders received are on the whole better than a week ago, and the shipments from Boston, according to the Shoe & Leather Reporter, have been 135,899 cases in December against 93,502 last year.

A recent test at Schenectady, N. Y., according to The Electrical Age, showed that an electric locomotive can pull a steam locomotive—advantage of condition being all in favor of the latter—with ease and without apparent effort. The improvements since the World's Fair test have done this. Next in importance to the Baltimore and Ohio tunnel electric-motor work, which is being pushed rapidly to completion, is the use of these electric motors on the Metropolitan Railroad of Chicago, which will soon be in operation. Many railway managers are watching this test with a view to adoption. It is now expected that electric motors will be sold to locomotive builders as headlights are sold, which would enable any of the larger builders to construct according to their own designs. Electric motors are being rapidly simplified to that end.

The two fields of Waterloo and Linden are each covered with a crop of crimson poppies every year.

A new project for the sanitation of the sewers of the city of Mexico, at a cost of about \$25,000, calls for the building of some twenty-five windmills in different parts of the city, to rotate paddle wheels in the sewers and quicken the current to one metre per second.