DARE HE?

OR, A A SAD LIFE STORY

CHAPTER II.

"There is no reason why we should not go home now; are you ready?" cries Brown, bustling up to his friend, who has not waited for this question to make straight, as the needle to the pole, for the corner where the collected umbrellas stand in their little area of lake.

Burgoyne would probably have laughed at the unconscious irony of this inquiry if he had heard it; but he has not, his attention being otherwise directed. On the same umbrella quest as himself, being helped on with her mackintosh by one of the two men who had accompanied her, a pepper-and-salt-haired, sturdy gentleman of an obviously unacademic cut, is the lady whose face had flashed upon him with that puzzling sense of unfamiliar familiarity. Since they are now in close proximity, and both employed alike in struggling into their wraps, there is nothing more natural than that she should turn her eyes full upon him. They are very fine eyes, though far from young ones. Is it a trick of his imagination, or does he see a look of half-recognition dawn in them, such as must have been born in his own when they first alighted on her? At all events, if there is such a look of half recognition in her eyes, she is determined that it shall not have a chance of becoming a whole one. Either he is mistaken, and she has not recognized him, or she is determined not to acknowledge the acquaintance, for she looks away again at once, nor does she throw another glance in his direction. Indeed, it seems to him that she hurries on her preparations with added speed, and walks out into the night accompanied by her double escort before him.

The weather has changed, and for the better. The rollicking wind has lulled, the pattering rain ceased. Between the ragged, black cloud-sheets star-points shine, and a shimmering moon shows her wet face reflected in the puddles. Talk, which had been impossible on their way to the meeting, is not only possible but easy now, and Brown is evidently greatly inclined for it. Burgoyne, on the other hand, had never felt more disinclined. It is not so much that he is out of humor with his tiresome friend, though he is that, too, as that his whole mind is centred on making his memory give up the secret of that face that has come back to him out of some vague cavern of his past.

Who is the woman whom he knows, and who knows him? For, on reflection, he is sure that that look of hers was one of half—of more than half—recognition, and yet whose place in his history, whose very name he seeks so vainly. She does not belong to his Oxford days, as he has already ascertained. He has learnt from Brown that she does not belong to the Oxford of today, being apparently a stranger, and, with her husband, a visitor to the Warden of —— College, in whose company they had arrived. He explores the succeeding years of his life. In vain; she has no place there; in vain he dives and plunges into the sea of his memory; he cannot fish up the pearl he seeks. He must hark back to earlier days—his school time, the six months he spent in Devonshire with a coach before he came up to New. Ah! he has it—he has it at last! Just as they have reached Brown's door, while he is fumbling with his latch-key for the keyhole, imprecating the moon for withdrawing her shining at the very instant he most needs her, Burgoyne has come up with the shy object of his chase. It is conjured back into his mind by the word Devonshire.

"I have it," he says to himself; "her hair has turned white, that was why I did not recognize her. it used to be raven-black. But it is she—of course it is she! To think of my not knowing her again! Of course it is Mrs. Le Marchant."

What a door into the distance that name has opened!—a door through which he passes into a Devonshire garden, and romps with rosy-faced Devonshire children. The very names of those children are coming back to him. Tom and Charles, those were the schoolboys; Rose and Miriam, and—Elizabeth. He recalls—absurd trick of freakish memory—those children's pets. Tom and Charles had guinea-pigs; Miriam had a white rat; Rose—what had Rose? Rose must have had something; and Elizabeth had a kangaroo. Elizabeth's kangaroo was short-lived, poor beast, and died about hay-time; the guinea-pigs and the white rat have been dead too for ages now of course. And are Tom and Charles, and Rose and Miriam, and bright Elizabeth dead also? Absurd! Why should they be? Nothing more unlikely! Why, it is only ten years ago, after all!

He is roused from his meditations by Brown's voice, to find himself in Brown's study, where its owner is filling himself a pipe, and festally offering him whisky and water. But it is only an abstracted attention that Burgoyne lends, either to the whisky or the whisky's master; and his answers are sometimes inattentively beside the mark, to talk, which indeed is not without some likeness to the boasted exploits in Clement's Inn, and the affectionate inquiries after Jane Nightwork, of a more famous fool than he.

It is a relief to the guest when, earlier than he had expected—a blessing he, no doubt, owes to Mrs. Brown—his host breaks up the seance, and he is free to retire to his own room. At once he is back in that Devonshire garden, he is there almost all night, between sleep and wake. It is strange that persons and circumstances banished from his memory for ten long years should rush back with such tyrannous insistence now.

Such silly recollected trifles crowd back upon his mind. The day on which Tom nearly choked himself by swallowing a barley beard; the day on which the lop-eared rabbit littered—ah, rabbits of course! Those were what Rose had!—the day on which Tom pushed Miriam into the moat, and Elizabeth fell in, too, in trying to fish her out. Elizabeth, the eldest, the almost grown-up one, embarrassed by her newly-lengthened petticoats, so harrassing at cricket, in races, in climbing apple-trees. Elizabeth was sixteen; he remembers the fact, because her birthday had fallen two days before his own departure. He had given her a gold thimble set with turquoises upon the occasion; it was not a surprise, because he recalls measuring her finger for the size. He can see that small middle finger now. Elizabeth must now be twenty-six years of age. Where is she? What is she—maid, wife or widow?

And why has Mrs. Le Marchand's hair turned snow-white? Had it been merely grey he would not have complained, though he would have deplored the loss of the fine smooth inky sweep he remembers. She has a fair right to be grey; Mrs. Le Marchant must be about forty-six or forty-seven, bien sonne. But white, snow-white—the hue that one connects with a venerable extremity of age. Can it be bleached? He has heard of women bleaching their hair; but not Mrs. Le Marchant, not the Mrs. Le Marchant he remembers. She would have been as incapable of bleach as of dye.

Then why is she snow-haired? Because Providence has so willed it is the obvious answer. But somehow Burgoyne cannot bring himself to believe that she has come fairly by that white head.

With the morning light the might of the Devonshire memories grows weaker; and, as the day advances, the Oxford ones resume their sway. How can it be otherwise, when all day long he strays among the unaltered buildings in the sweet sedate college gardens, down the familiar "High," where six years ago, he could not take two steps without being hailed by a jolly fresh voice, claiming his company for some new pleasure; but where now he walks ungreeted, where the smooth-faced boys he meets, and who strike him as so much more boyish than his own contemporaries had done, pass him by indifferently, unknown to the whole two thousand as he is. He feels a sort of irrational anger with them for not recognizing him, though they have never seen him before.

Yes, there is no place where a man is so quickly superannuated as in Oxford. He is saying this to himself all day, is saying it still as he strolls in the afternoon down Mesopotamia, to fill up the time before the hour for college chapel. Yes, there is no place where men so soon turn into ghosts. He has been knocking up against them all day at every street corner; they have looked out at him from every grey window in the Quad at New—jovial, athletic young ghosts, so much painfuller to meet than rusty, century-worn old ones. They are rather less plentiful in Mesopotamia than elsewhere; perhaps, because in his day, as now, Mesopotamia on Sundays was given over to the mechanic and the perambulator. Oh, that Heaven would put it into the head of some Chancellor of the Exchequer to lay a swinging tax upon that all-accursed vehicle! But not even mechanic and perambulator can hinder Mesopotamia from being fair on a fine February day, when the beautiful floods are out, the floods that the Thames Conservators and the Oxford authorities have combined to put down, as they have most other beautiful things within their reach. But they have not yet quite succeeded. To-day, for instance, the floods are out in might.

Burgoyne is pacing along a brown walk, like a raised causeway, with a sheet of white water on either hand, rolling strong ripples to the bank. Gnarled willows stand islanded in the coldly argent water. A blackbird is flying out of the bushes, with a surprised look at finding himself turned into a sea-bird. No sun; an even sweep of dull silver to right and left. No sun; and yet as he looks, after days of rain, the "grand decorateur," as some one happily called him, rides out in royalty on a cleared sky-field, turning the whole drenched country into mother-of-pearl—a sheet of opal stretched across the drowned meadows; the distance opal too, a delicate, dainty, evanescent loveliness snatched from the ugly brown jaws of winter.

Burgoyne is leaning over the wooden bridge beneath which, in its normal state, the water of the lasher rushes down impetuously; but is now raised to such a height that it lies level, almost flush with the planking. He is staring across the iridescent water plain to where, in the poetic atmosphere of sun and mist, dome, and schools, and soaring spires stand etherealized.

"Dear old place!" he says, under his breath, "everybody is dead; and I am dead; and Brown is deader than any one. I am glad that you, at least, are still alive!"

Are these more ghosts coming round the corner? A man and a woman ghost strolling along, and looking about them as strangers look. When they are within a pace or two of him the woman says something—something about the floods—to her companion, and at the sound Burgoyne starts.

"She did not speak last night; if she had spoken I should have known her at once. She always had such a sweet voice."

He raises his arms from the bridge-top, and turning, meets them face to face, eye to eye, and in an instant he has seen that both recognize him. At the same instant he is aware of a simultaneous inclination on the part of man and wife to avert their heads, and pass him without claiming his acquaintance. Perhaps, if he had had time to reflect, he would have allowed them to do so, but the impulse of the moment forbids it. Why should they wish to cut him? What has he done to deserve it? Ten years ago they were his very good friends, and he was the familiar comrade of their children, the daily guest at their table. What has the unavoidable lapse of those years done to make him less fit for their company at twenty-nine than he was at nineteen? There must be some misconception, which a moment will set right.

"I am afraid that you do not remember me, Mrs. Le Marchant," he says, lifting his hat.

This is not quite true, as he is perfectly convinced that they are as much aware of his identity as he is of theirs. But what formula has a man to employ in such a case? They both look back at him with a sort of irresolution To his astonishment, in their eyes is a velleity of flight, but apparently she—women's minds moving more quickly than men's—is the first to realize that flight is out of the question.

"I am sure that you have no intention of cutting me," Jim goes on, with a smile, seeing that she is apparently struggling with a difficulty in utterance; "at least, you must be very much changed from what you were ten years ago if you have. My name is——"

"I know—I know!" she interrupts, finding speech at last—speech low and hurried. "I remember perfectly. You are Mr. Burgoyne."

Her confusion—she always used to be such a placid, even-mannered woman—is so patent, born of whatever unaccountable feeling it may be, that he now heartily wishes he had let the poor woman pass unmolested. But such repentance is too late. He has arrested her; she is standing on the gravel path before him, and though he feels that her extraordinary shyness — mauvaise honte, whatever it may be—has infected himself, he must make some further remark to her. Nothing better occurs to him than the obvious one—

"It is a long time—it is ten years since we met."

"Yes, ten years; it must be quite ten years," she assents, evidently making a great effort to regain her composure.

She does not feign the slightest pleasure in the meeting, and Burgoyne feels that the one thought that occupies her mind is how she can soonest end it. But his roused curiosity, together with the difficulty of parting without further observation after having forced his presence upon them, combine to prevent her succeeding.

"And how is the Moat?" he asks, reflecting that this, at least, is a safe question; a brick and mortar house, at all events, cannot be dead. "How is Devonshire?"

Apparently it is not so harmless a question as he had imagined; at least Mrs. Le Marchant is obviously quite incapable of answering it. Her husband, for the first time, comes to her rescue.

"The Moat is let," he says, in a dry voice; "we have left Devonshire a long while—nine, nine and a half years ago."

The Moat let! Judging by the light of that Windsor Castle had been turned into a Joint Stock Company Hotel. It is probably, then, some money trouble that has turned Mrs. Le Marchant's hair white—snow-white, as he now sees it to be. But no, he rejects the explanation as insufficient. She is not the woman to have taken a diminished income so much to heart.

Good manners forbid him to ask, "Why is the Moat let?" So all that he says is, "Nine and a half years ago? Why, that must have been very soon after I left Devonshire."

He addresses his remark involuntarily rather to the wife than to the husband, but she does not answer it. Her eyes are fixed upon the bubbles sailing so fast upon the swollen river, which is distinguishable only by its current from the sameness of the surrounding water. A lark—there is always a lark in Mesopotamia—a tiny, strong-throated singer, that never seems to have to stop to take breath, fills up the silence, shouting somewhere out of sight among the black clouds, in and out of which the uncertain sun is plunging. Whether of a moneyed nature or not, there is evidently something very unpleasant connected with their leaving their native country and their immemorial home, so he had better get away from the subject as fast as possible.

"Anyhow," he says, with a rather nervous smile, "I hope that the world has been treating you kindly—that things have gone well with you since those dear old days when you were so good to me."

There is an instant's pause—perhaps he would not have noticed it had not his suspicions been already aroused—before the husband, again taking upon him the task of replying, answers, with a sort of labored carelessness—

"Oh, yes, thanks; we do not complain. It has not been a very rosy time for landlords lately, as you are aware."

"And you?" cries the wife, striking in with a species of hurry in her voice—a hurry due, as his instinct tells him, to the fact of the fear of his entering into more detailed inquiries. "And you? We must not forget you. Have you been well, flourishing, all this long time? Do you still live with your——"

She stops abruptly. It is apparent that she has entirely forgotten what was the species of relation with whom he lived. There is a little tinge of bitterness in his heart, though not in his tone, as he supplies the missing word "aunt." And, after all, he had forgotten her name; why should not she forget his aunt?

"With my aunt? Well, I never exactly lived with her; I made, and make my headquarters there when I am in England, which is not very often. I have been a rolling stone; I have rolled pretty well round the world since we parted."

They do not care in the least where he has rolled, nor how much nor how little moss he has collected in the process. They are only thinking how they can best get rid of him. But the past is strong upon him; he cannot let them slide out of his life again for another ten—twenty years perhaps, without finding out from them something about his five merry playmates. His inquiry must needs be a vague one. Who dares ask specifically after this or that man, woman, or even child, when ten years have rolled their tides between?

"And you are all well?" he says, with a certain wistfulness lurking in the different banal phrase. "Dear me, what a jolly party we used to be! I suppose that—that they are all out in the world now?"

His eyes are fixed apprehensively upon the mother of those young comrades, to whom he thus cautiously alludes. Perhaps, carefully as he has worded his question, he may have touched some terrible raw. Her face is turned aside, presenting only its profile to him, but she answers almost at once—

"Yes; we are all scattered now. Charlie is planting oranges in Florida—he does not mind the heat; you know he always said no weather could be too hot for him; and Tom has an ostrich farm in Australia, and Rose has been married two years—she has a dear little baby; and Miriam is married, too; we have just come down from her wedding."

"Miriam married!" repeats Burgoyne in a tone of wonder. "Miriam with a husband instead of a white rat!"

The mother laughs. It is the first time that he has heard her laugh, and she used to laugh so often.

"I think she likes the exchange."

There is another little pause, again filled by the lark's crowding notes. There are two words battering against the gate of Burgoyne's lips for egress—two words that he dares not utter.

"And Elizabeth?" She was the eldest. She would naturally have been mentioned first; but neither first nor last is there any speech of her. She must, then, be dead—dead long ago, too; for there is no trace of mourning in her perents' dress. Elizabeth is dead—bright Elizabeth, the beauty and the pet!

Is it only fancy that he sees in the eye of Elizabeth's mother a dread lest he shall ask tidings of her, as she says, hastily, and with a smile, "Well, I am afraid we must be going; it has been very pleasant meeting you again, but I am afraid that the Warden will be expecting us?"

She adds to her parting hand-shake no wish for a repetition of that meeting, and he watches them down the Willow Walk with a sort of sadness in his heart.

"Elizabeth is dead! Elizabeth is undoubtedly dead!"

(To be continued).

Howell: "Rowell is always borrowing trouble." Powell: "He's the kind of fellow who, if he thought he was going to get fat, would go out and walk off the weight before he got it!"

GENERAL INFORMATION.

Little Bits of Knowledge About Most Everything.

A Russian does not become of age until he is twenty-six.

Some of the railway lines in Russia have smoking cars for ladies.

In the Indian Ocean only 370 out of 16,300 islands are inhabited.

Every square mile of the ocean is believed to have a population of 120,000,000 fish.

Kangaroos readily leap from 60 feet to 70 feet. The greatest recorded leap of a horse is 37 feet.

Licenses issued to certain French ladies to wear male attire cost 50 fr. ($10) yearly. Six have been issued.

In 1875 the number of cigarettes smoked per head of the population in Austria has two. In 1905 it was 140.

In Bohemia courtships are abnormally long. In that country engagements frequently last from fifteen to twenty years.

Conscience-money received yearly by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in default of unpaid taxes averages $30,000.

The Republic of Panama boasts of only one railway, forty-seven miles in length, though the area of the country is 31,500 square miles.

Probably the owner of the largest number of dogs in the world is a Russian cattle king, who has 35,000 shepherd dogs to look after 1,500,000 sheep.

The new harness which the Khedive of Egypt ordered in England some months ago is the most costly ever made for four horses. It is valued at $10,000.

New South Wales is just two and a half times the size of the British Isles. Queensland is equal to three times the German Empire and Belgium put together.

The reindeer has greater power of endurance than any other draught animal except a camel. A reindeer has been known to pull 200 pounds at ten miles an hour for twelve hours on end.

When a fortnight old the oyster is not much larger than the head of a pin. At the end of four years' growth it is fit for the market. Oysters live to the age of from twelve to fifteen years.

On the premises of a brick-making firm situate on the Surrey Canal, North Camberwell, the kiln fire has never been permitted to go out since it was first set alight, a hundred years ago.

The elementary school authorities at Crediton, England, have ordered that the girls must have their hair plaited and tied behind their heads. The parents will appeal to the Board of Education in the matter.

A wonderful large double-bass viol has been made, and is intended for use in a Chicago orchestra. It is 14 feet high, and its body about 7 feet. The top part of the body is 3 feet 4 inches across, the lower part 5 feet.

The Emperor of China has a household consisting of 500 persons, including thirty bearers of State umbrellas, an equal number of fan-bearers, thirty physicians and surgeons, seventy-five astrologers, seventy-six cooks, and sixty priests.

Compared with the citizens of other French cities, Parisians are remarkably sober people. Each Parisian drinks 310 pints of wine annually, and only thirteen pints of spirits. Nice drinks 514 pints of wine a year, St. Etienne 340, and Boulogne 335.

Mrs. Betty Brookes has just celebrated her ninety-third birthday in the house in which she was born and has lived all her life, at Edgefield, Walkden, Manchester. She was taken down the local coal-mines to work by her father at eight years of age.

King John of Abyssinia has decreed that the nose of any one of his subjects found taking snuff shall be cut off, while smoking and chewing tobacco forfeits life. In Morocco, persons disobeying the Sultan's decree of prohibition of smoking are imprisoned and flogged through the streets.

Berlin University is the most numerously attended seat of learning in the world. It contains 7,774 matriculated and 1,330 non-matriculated students. All the States of Germany and every country in Europe, from Norway to Sicily, from Ireland to Russia, are represented in its class-rooms.

The remains of all the Czars of Russia since Peter the Great are interred in a Memorial Chapel built on one of the islands of the Neva. All the cenotaphs are exactly alike, each being a block of white marble, without any decoration whatever, bearing only the name of the deceased Emperor.

1st Boy—Is that pie good?
2nd Boy—Naw!
"Den why yer eating it?"
"Ter aggravate de other kids! Dey imagine dat it's delicious."—Life.