DARE HE?

OR, A SAD LIFE STORY

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued).

"You look as if you had a headache, old chap," he says, sitting down upon his friend's bed.

"If you had been going through as many kitchen ranges as i have this morning, perhaps you would have a headache," replies Jim, gravely. "You know that I am going to be married as soon as I get home."

Byng nods; and Burgoyne, while inwardly blessing the tact that spares him any congratulations, takes himself to task for having made the announcement so lugubriously as to render felicitation obviously inapplicable.

"When are you going to introduce me to Miss Wilson?" asks Byng presently. "If you shirk it much longer I shall think that you are ashamed of me."

Jim glances affectionately, yet not quite comfortably, at his young friend, and the thought flashes across his mind that, in his last remark, the latter has put the saddle on the wrong horse.

"You have so large an acquaintance in Florence already," he says, with some stiffness, "that I did not know that you would care to add to it."

"One cannot have too much of a good thing," replies the other joyously. "You know I love my fellow-creatures; and in this case," he adds civilly, "I do care very much."

Burgoyne's eyes are bent on the paper before him, which contains the melancholy enumeration of his firearms—"A 500 double-barrelled express, by Henry, of Edinburgh; a 450 single-barrelled ditto, by same maker," etc., etc.—as he says slowly:

"I shall be very happy."

His acceptance of the proposition can hardly be called eager; but of this Byng appears unaware.

"When shall it be then? To-morrow—this afternoon?"

"No-o-o; not to-day, I think. It has been arranged that we are to go to San Miniato—Amelia, her sister, and I."

"Three of you?" cries Byng, raising his eyebrows. "Then why not four? Why may not I come too?"

There being, in point of fact, no reason why he should not, and Cecilia's morning prayer being still ringing in her future brother-in-law's ears, he gives a dull and lagging assent; so that at about three o'clock the two men present themselves at the door of the Wilson's apartment at the Anglo-American Hotel. That Sybilla is not expecting visitors is evident by the fact that, at the moment of their entrance, she is taking her own temperature—a very favorite relaxation of hers—with a clinical thermometer. She removes the instrument from her mouth without indecent haste, and holds out a languid white hand to Byng.

"So you are going off on a long afternoon's pleasuring?" she says, with a pathetic smile. "I am so glad that neither of my sisters is going to stay at home with me. We invalids must guard against growing selfish, though I think that is perhaps more the danger with malades imaginaires; we real ones have learnt our lesson of suffering better, I hope."

"You do not look so very ill," replies Byng, in his sympathetic voice, letting his eyes rest caressingly on the prostrate figure, which has yet no smallest sign of emaciation about it.

"Ah, that is because of my color," replies Sybilla, with an animation slightly tinged with resentment. "You, too, fall into that common error. My London doctor tells me that there is no such unerring indication of radical delicacy of constitution as a fixed pink color like mine; the more feverish I am, the deeper it grows. It is very hard"—smiling again sadly—"for one gets no pity!"

"Where is Cecilia?" cries Jim, brusquely, and fidgetting in his chair. "Why is not she ready?"

As he speaks, the young lady in question enters—so obviously arrayed for conquest, in so patently new a hat, and such immaculate pale gloves, that across Burgoyne's mind there flashes, in vexed mirth, the recollection of the immortal caution addressed by Major O'Dowd to his friend and comrade, "Moind your oi, Dob, my boy!" Would he not do well to repeat it to his friend?

CHAPTER VIII.

They are off now, there being nothing further to retard them, leaving Sybilla tete-a-tete with her thermometer. They are off, sociably packed in one fiacre.

"Four precious souls, and all agog
To dash through thick and thin."

Not, indeed, that there is much dash about the Florentina cab-horses—saddest among God's many sad creatures—with not a sound leg among them, with staring coats and starting ribs, and poor broken knees; and with their sadness emphasized by the feathers stuck in their tired heads, as if to mock their wretchedness by a sort of melancholy smartness! Sad as they are, it must be owned that they are the only sad things in the cheerful Florentine streets, where no one seems over-busy, where, out of the deep-eaved, green-shuttered houses, people lean, talking to acquaintances on the shadowed pavement below. All the narrow thoroughfares are full of bustling life; but there is no haggard squalor apparently, no dreadful gin-palace gaiety. It does not follow here that a man must be drunk because he sings. And down the straight, colorful streets one looks—down a vista of houses diversely tall, each with its cream yellow face and its green shutters, varied here and there by the towering bulk of some giant-blocked mountain-palace, through whose grim, barred windows a woman peeps, or a little dog shows his pointed nose—looks to where, in dwindling perspective, the view is closed by a narrow picture of lucent purple hill, Fiesole or Bellosguardo—names to which the tongue cleaves lovingly. Through the gay streets, over bridge and Blue Arno, our travellers go; their driver cracking a prodigious whip, and with a tiny red dog, absurdly shaven, and with nothing but a small woolly head and tail left of the original design, seated gravely beside him. Away they go, pleasuring; but pleasure and pleasuring are not always identical.

Burgoyne sits opposite Amelia; and as for Cecilia, it is to be supposed that her heartache is for the moment dulled, since the same carriage rug covers her knees and those of Byng. Burgoyne does not look at Amelia; nor though his eyes are fixed upon the passing objects, does he at first see aught of them. His vision is turned inwards, and to his own soul he is mechanically repeating in dismal recitative, "A double-barrelled, central-fire, breech-loading gun, by Lancaster; made strong enough at the breech to shoot a spherical bullet."

As for Amelia, her features are not of a build to express any emotion with much brilliancy; but over them lies a deep and brooding content. Amelia has not had much undiluted happiness in her life, but she is exceedingly happy to-day. She is even strangely free from the carking fear which usually assails her, of praising mistakenly, of being enthusiastic in the wrong places, and passing over the right ones unnoticed. If she keep to a vague generality of handsome adjectives, she will surely do well enough; and, on this high holiday that her heart is holding, he cannot be cross to her.

As to Byng, he is emphatically of the school of divinity taught by Tom Moore, nor was he ever known, when lacking "the lips that he loved," to fail to make love to the "lips that are near." His taste is too good for him to have chosen Cecilia for a companion; but, since fate has allotted her to him for the afternoon, he finds no difficulty in making the best of her. Nor, to do her justice, is she destitute of charms of a certain kind, though her face has the inevitable air of commonness incident upon a very short nose and a very long upper lip. But she has a good deal of bloom, and of crisp, showy-colored hair, and a very considerable eye power. Byng's attachment to the fair sex being of far too stout a quality to be blunted by such trifles as an inch too much or too little of nose or lip, he also, like Amelia, is thoroughly prepared to enjoy himself.

Up the turning via Galileo they climb, to the Basilica at the top—stock drive of all tourists—hackneyed as only Yankeydom and Cockneydom, rushing hand in hand through all earth's sacredness, can hackney. But even hackneying is powerless to take off the freshness to the eye that sees it for the first time, of that view when he beholds the Lily City lying close at his feet, so close that it seems he could throw a stone into her Arno.

They have left their fiacre, and, as naturally happens in a partie carree—more especially when one couple are betrothed lovers—have broken into pairs. Burgoyne leans pensively on the terrace parapet, and his sombre eyes rest on the band of sister hills, joining hands in perpetual watch round valley and town; hills over which, in this late spring, there is more a promise than a performance of that green and many colored wealth of verdure and blossom that one associates with Firenze's fair name. But it is a promise that is plainly on the verge of a bounteous fulfilment. Then his look drops slowly to the city herself. In what a little space comparatively does the Florence that is immortal lie! The Duomo, the lily Campanile "made up of dew and sunshine," the Baptistery, Santo Croce, the Palazzo Vecchio; he could compass them in a ten minutes' walk. And around this small nucleus of the undying dead and their work, what a nation of gleaming villas of the polyglot living—a nation of every tongue, and people, and language! All over the hills is the sheen of white walls, the verdure of tended gardens; they steole away almost to where the Apennines raise their cold white fronts against the sky.

He rouses himself to remember that Amelia is beside him, and that he ought to say something to her. So he makes a rather banal observation upon the smallest of the enceinte that encloses so much loveliness.

"Yes, is not it tiny?" replies she, with the eager pleasure of having a remark made to her which she cannot go wrong in answering. "Think of London! Why, the whole thing is not as big as South Kensington or Bayswater!"

He shudders. Must the accursed suburb pursue him even here?

"Let us go into the church," he says, in a tone that a little dulls his companion's buoyancy.

She follows him, crestfallenly, asking herself whether she has answered amiss here also. She does not trust herself to any comment upon the interior.

Byng and Cecilia are standing before the high altar, from over which a mosaic Madonna stiffly beams upon them; and as the other couple approach them, Burgoyne hears the words "drawing-room grate" issue from his future sister-in-law's lips.

"Bravo Cis!" he says, in a dry aside; you are getting on nicely! I did not think that you would have reached the drawing-room grate till to-morrow."

To avoid intruding further on her delicate confidences, and also to escape from two Americans, who are nasally twanging Hare and Horner at each other, varied by trips into Baedeker, he passes into a side chapel made famous by one of the loveliest tombs that ever feigned to simulate in marble death's ugliness. The Yankee's voices are high and shrill, but they had need to be higher and shriller still before they could break the slumber of him whose resting place Jim has invaded in his flight from Cecilia and New York. Was ever rest so beautiful as this of the young sleeper? A priest he was, nay cardinal, and youthful and lovely and chaste! and now in how divine a slumber is he lapt? But how should that four hundred year's slumber not be divine, watched by such a gentle Mary-Mother as is watching his; smiling as if to tell him that he does well to sleep, that sleep is better than waking, that death is better than life! There is a sunken look about his fair eyelids, as if he had gone through suffering to his rest; and his reposeful hands are thin, but below him, as he lies in his spotless marble tranquility, upon his sarcophagus, the rose garlands wave in lovely frieze, and the riotous horses rear and plunge in fulness of life.

Burgoyne has not perceived that Amelia did not follow him. She has, in point of fact, remained in the body of the church, immersed in her guide-book steadily working through the marble screen and pulpit, and still five good minutes off the side chapel in which her lover stands in so deeply brown a study, that he is not aware of the intrusion upon his solitude of two women, until he is roused with a leap by the voice of one of them addressing—not him, of whose presence she is obviously as unaware as was he of hers, until this moment—but her companion.

"Oh, mother! am I not a fool, at my age, too? but I cannot help it, it makes me cry so!"

Burgoyne does not need the evidence of his eyes. His ears and his startled heart have enough assured him whose are the tears called forth by that indeed most touching effigy at which he himself has been so pensively staring.

The mother's answer is inaudible; and then again comes the voice of Elizabeth Le Marchant, tearful and vibrating.

"You know I have seen so few beautiful things in my life, I shall get used to them presently; it is only sheer happiness that makes me——"

She stops abruptly, having evidently discovered for herself, or been made aware by her mother of his vicinity; and even if she had not done so, he feels that he must lose no time in announcing himself.

"Florence is a place that does make one often choky," he says, eagerly taking the hand, which she hesitatingly, and with some confusion, offers him.

It is not quite true; Florence has never made him feel choky; and, if he is experiencing that sensation now, it is certainly not the dead cardinal of Portugal who is giving it to him.

"I am a fool, a perfect fool!" replies Elizabeth, hastily and shamefacedly wiping away her tears.

To give her time to recover herself, and also because he has not yet greeted the girl's mother, Jim turns to her.

"Did not I tell you that we should meet here?"

There is such undisguised joy and triumph in his tone, that perhaps Mrs. Le Marchant has not the heart to dash his elation; at all events, he is conscious in her tone of a less resolute determination to keep him at arm's length, than on their two last meetings.

"I do not think that I contradicted you," she answers, smiling.

He may steal another look at Elizabeth now. She is not crying any longer. Indeed, despite the real moisture on her cheeks, she strikes him as looking happier than at their last meeting; and though the interval between now and then is too short for any such alteration to have taken place in reality, yet he cannot help imagining that the hollows in those very cheeks are less deep than when they stood together before the great Vandyke in the Brignoli Sala Palace.

"And the Entresol? is it all you fancy painted it?" he asks quickly, feeling a sort of panic fear, that if he stops putting questions for one minute, they will slip out of his grasp again, as they did in the Genoese Palace.

Elizabeth's face breaks into a soft bright smile. She has a dimple in one cheek and not in the other. She must have had it ten years ago; how comes he to have forgotten so sweet and strange a peculiarity?

"It is delightful—perfectly delightful!"

"Large enough to receive your friends in, after all?"

But the moment that the words are out of his mouth, he perceives that he has made a false step, and is somehow treading dangerous ground. Elizabeth's smile goes out, like a light blown into nothingness by a sudden wind.

"We have not many friends," she murmurs, "we—we are not going out at all."

He hastens to change his cue.

"Byng and I are at the Minerva," he says, beginning to talk very fast; "I wonder if, by any chance, you are in our neighborhood; have I forgotten or did you never tell me where the Entresol lies? Where is it, by-the-bye?"

Ensnared by the wily and brazen suddenness of this demand Miss Le Marchant has evidently no evasion ready, and, after an almost imperceptible pause of hesitation, answers:

"We are at 12 Bis, Piazza d'Azeglio."

She is looking doubtfully and half uneasily in his face, as she gives him this answer, but he has scarcely time for a flash of self-congratulation at having obtained the information, which he had never realized the eagerness of his desire for until this moment, before he becomes aware that his interlocutor's eyes are no longer meeting his, but have wandered to some object over his shoulder. What that object is he is not long left in doubt. Whether it is a genuine accident, or one of those spurious ones, of which those who profit by them are the artificers, Jim does not know; and, as he is at the time, and will be when he thinks of the circumstance to the end of his life, too angry to question Byng on the subject, it is pretty certain that he never will know; but so it is that at this moment, the voice of his protege breaks upon his ear.

"You are not going to give us the slip like this, old chap—oh, I beg your pardon!"

But begging pardon ever so sweetly does not alter the fact that he has rushed, like a bull in a china shop, into the middle of the dialogue. All four look at each other for a second; then, since there is no help for it, Jim presents his disciple, and the next moment the latter has slid into talk with Elizabeth, and she is responding with an ease and freedom from embarrassment such as had never marked her sparse and hardly won utterances to the elder man.

Byng had the advantage of him, as he somewhat bitterly thinks. Byng has no connection with "old times;" those poor old times which she and her mother have so unaccountably taken en grippe. He seems suddenly relegated, as by some natural affinity, to the mother. On their two last meetings the eagerness to converse has been all on his side; yet now he has nothing to say to her. It is she who addresses him.

"I hope that you found your young lady flourishing," she says civilly.

He gives a slight inward start, though—as he is thankful to feel—his body is quiet. "His young lady!" Yes, of course he has a young lady! Has there been any danger during the last five minutes of his forgetting that fact? and has Mrs. Le Marchant done him an unnecessary service in recalling it?

"Oh, yes, thanks, she is all right!"

"Is she still in Florence?"

"Yes, she is here; by-the-bye"—looking round with a sudden sense that he ought to have missed her—"what has become of her? Oh, here she is!"

For even while the words are on his lips, Amelia and Cecilia come into sight. Amelia with a shut Baedeker, and the serene look of an easy conscience and a thoroughly performed duty on her amiable face; Cecilia with a something of search and disquiet in her large rolling eye, which would have made him laugh at another time.

(To be continued.)

POMPEII'S PATHETIC END.

Lady (at book store)—"I want to get a good novel to read on the train—something rather pathetic."

Salesman—"Let me see . . . . .How would "The Last Days of Pompeii do '

Lady—"Pompeii? I never heard of him. What did he die of?"

Salesman—"I'm not quite sure, ma'am—some kind of an eruption, I've heard."

BRITAIN'S GREAT RECORD

BUILDING THE GREAT BATTLESHIP DREADNOUGHT.

Can Turn Out Warship in Half the Time Any Other Nation Would Take.

The English naval authorities have built in one short year the most powerful ship in the world. Their most speedy rival, they believe, could not do what they have done in double the time, and so they can build two ships while that rival is building one, even supposing her plant to be larger. "Engineering," London, says: "We can now afford to begin the construction of a ship almost a year later than any foreign nation, with the advantage of full knowledge of their design, and still have it ready for war as soon as they.

MANY FIRMS READY.

"There are eight or nine British firms willing to complete a ship of the Dreadnought class in two years and three months; four or five could quite readily undertake to repeat the performance of completing a Dreadnought in eighteen months. This is especially the case with the firms who themselves manufacture the armor, guns and gun-mountings, as well as the machinery and the hull.

"While Germany continues what is regarded by some as a 'menace' to British naval supremacy, we may wait for such full knowledge of her designs as our Naval Intelligence Department will provide, as we may then not only produce ships superior in fighting qualities, but in greater numbers, and within a much shorter period of time.

WHAT THEY CAN DO.

"The prospects, therefore, are that in 1908 no continental nation will have in fighting condition one single ship of the Dreadnought type, whereas if the British Admiralty continue the rate of construction attained with the ship to be tried next week, they then have one squadron made up of six Dreadnoughts, and, in addition, a squadron composed of eight ships of the King Edward VII. class and two Lord Nelsons. The first squadron will have sixty 12-inch guns, with the enormous advantage of a short and easily manipulated fighting line, while the second squadron will have forty 12-inch guns, and fifty-two 9.2-inch guns. Both will be enormously superior to any squadron of an equal number of ships of any other navy.

MAKES FOR PEACE.

"By 1908, too, the British nation will know whether foreign nations accept the olive-branch which it has held out in this year's naval policy, by a relaxation of naval expenditure, without any diminution of determination of determination to ultimately maintain mastery of the sea. If this desire for limiting armaments is not reciprocated, then there will be equal unanimity in continuing building operations to maintain our supremacy at all costs. There should be no mistake about this view. The Sea Lords who, after all, have the confidence of the nation, will not waver as to the vital principle of supremacy. Foreign nations, and notably the German people, may realize that their continuance in the development of their naval programme—involving as it does in their case not only an enormous sum for ships, but something like ten million sterling for the widening of the Kiel canal—cannot win even the mastery of the German ocean—the ambition of the 'Admiral of the Atlantic.'

AMERICANS BEATEN.

"Where the Americans stand in this matter may be seen from the fact that in the constructive speed-trial between the Louisiana and Connecticut these two battleships occupied not far from three years in building. We are evidently not yet in a position to compete with the English in this kind of contest."

It was at a charity dinner that a careless waiter spilt a plate of soup over one of the clergymen present. "What——" he commenced. Then, remembering himself, he turned to his neighbor and asked: "Will some layman kindly say a few words appropriate to the occasion?"

DIDN'T BELIEVE IN SIGNS.

"How many times have I told you, Lena, that you should always stand at the left of your guest in serving?"

"Lor', mum. I'm not so superstitious!"