DARE HE?

OR, A SAD LIFE STORY

CHAPTER XII.

"A merry going out bringeth often a mournful return home; and a joyful evening makes many times a sad morning."

The return drive, as it is quicker, being all down hill, so is it a more silent one than that to the villa had been. Byng indeed is as gaily willing to be fondled by Cecilia as he was on his way up; but there is a mixture of maidenly reserve and sub-tender reproach in her manner which makes their relations somewhat strained. The afternoon's pleasuring has had a jading effect upon Amelia's spirits, as, after having been sucked dry on the subject of Sybilla's maladies, and afterwards at once shaken off by her female acquaintance, she has not been fortunate enough to meet with any one else to exchange talk with, and has sat in disconsolate yet patient loneliness on a stone bench, afraid to stir from the spot where he had left her, lest she might miss her lover, of whom, however, she has unaccountably seen nothing, until when the Angelus is ringing, and the shadows spreading, he has come to give her curt notice, with half-averted face, that the fiacre is at the door. In point of fact he has been too conscious of the disorder of his features to dare to expose them sooner than he can help to her fond scrutiny. He would give anything to be able to sit beside, instead of opposite to her during their drive home, as a profile is a much less tell-tale and more governable thing than a full face, and he is painfully conscious that as often as she imagines she can do it without being detected by him, she is stealing looks of inquiring anxiety at him. He tries to put her off the scent by spasmodic comments upon the entertainment that they have just quitted; and she does her best to keep up the ball of conversation, since she sees that it is his wish. But in vain. Each forced remark falls still-born, leading to nothing. It is Cecilia who at last succeeds in giving a fillip to the languid talk.

"I did not know that Mrs. Roche was a cousin of your beauty, Miss Le Marchant," she says, suddenly, growing tired of her pensive attitude, and addressing herself to Jim.

He starts guiltily. "Did not you?"

He must look odd; for even Cecilia's large and preoccupied cow eyes rest upon him with an expression of surprise.

"I wonder why she was not there today."

It is not exactly a question, yet her great shallow orbs do not seem to be going to leave his face until he makes some response. He forces himself to do so.

"I understood Miss Le Marchant to say that they are not going out just now."

"And why are not they, pray?" inquires Cecilia, in an injured voice, as if the retirement from the world of the two ladies in question were a personal injury to herself; "they are not in mourning, all their gowns are colored ones, and they do not look as if they had bad health—perhaps, however" (after a moment's thoughtful attempt to find a solution)—"perhaps, however, they may have something—one never knows—people have such unexpected diseases nowadays—hysteria perhaps or fits."

At this ingenious suggestion Jim is conscious of a writhing motion passing over the stalwart form of Byng beside him. In his own train, if there is room for anything but the desire to evade Amelia's eyes, is a dim sense of relief at a suggestion so grotesquely wide of the mark as that made by the younger Miss Wilson. In perfect innocence of the effect produced upon her companions by her bright hypothesis, Cecilia goes on to remind her sister of the parallel case of a very handsome girl whom they had once reckoned among their acquaintance, and who was periodically being found by her family with her head under the fender. But Amelia rises but faintly to the reminiscence, and the remainder of the drive is accomplished in a general silence.

The next day is the one which had been fixed upon for the expedition to Certosa. It was only with a very large admixture of wormwood in his prospective pleasure that Jim had ever looked forward to this party, but now he anticipates it with absolute dread. How can he face Elizabeth and her mother with that ominous phrase of the "screw loose" still ringing in his ears? He feels a traitor towards them, in that he has, however unwillingly, overheard it. To add to his mental uneasiness is the fact of his having as yet not broken to Amelia his intentions with regard to the disposal of his afternoon. Amelia's eyes have for years had the habit of covertly watching him to read his wishes almost before they rose, but in their gaze yesterday he had, unless misled by his guilty conscience, detected a new quality, a quality of alarm and enlightenment. He will get over the communication of his piece of news as early in the day as may be; so, having finished breakfast before Byng has put in his, as usual, tardy appearance, he takes his hasty way to the Anglo-American. He finds the family there in a more placid frame of mind than that which they had presented on one or two of his recent visits. Sybilla is expecting her doctor, on which occasion she always likes to have a more lacy coverlet than usual thrown over her languid feet; a greater efflorescence of pink ribbons about her thin throat, and a disposition of pots of lilies about her wan head. Amelia, active and long-suffering as usual, is moving about in patient execution of her vain and tiresome whimsies. Cecilia sits tranquilly in the window, knitting an elaborate pair of men's woollen gloves, not, indeed,—to do her justice—for any one in particular, but with a wise forethought for the accidents and possibilities of life. Since, on this occasion, his sweetheart shows no inclination to draw him away into the dining-room for a tete-a-tete, Jim has to take the bull by the horns, and rush into his subject in a more public manner than he had intended. But the one desire to get it over outbalances all minor considerations.

"Amelia," he begins suddenly, and even to himself his voice sounds discourteous and abrupt, "shall you want me this afternoon?"

The moment that the words are out of his mouth it strikes him that the form into which he has thrown his question is more than necessarily unkender. She stops in the patting of Sybilla's smart pillows, and perhaps there is something a little abrupt too in her monosyllabic "Why?"

"Because"—standing before the fireplace, with his back to the three women, and throwing the words over his shoulder, "because if you do not, Byng and I were thinking of going to Certosa."

There is a pause. He hears that Cecilia's needles have stopped clicking; her work has dropped into her lap. In another moment she will have proposed to come too. "With the Le Marchants," he goes on, shooting out the fateful words like bullets; "a partie carree."

Still silence behind him. He cannot go on staring for ever at the billets of wood of the unlit fire. He has to turn round and face his companions. The only one of them whose pleasure or displeasure in his announcement he at all heeds—Amelia—is stooping over Sybilla, rearranging in a high, picturesque tier behind the invalid's long back, three cushions, and her face is almost entirely hidden from him by her attitude.

"Of course if it is in the least inconvenient, if you have made any other plans for me—if, in fact, you want me," he continues in a tone that is at once apologetic and dogged.

"But I do not," cries she at last, and with a distinct laugh in her voice, a laugh into whose quality he is not anxious too curiously to inquire. "You must not be so conceited as to think that I always want you! In point of fact you could not have hit upon a day that suited me better. I am really rather 'throng' to-day, as they say in Yorkshire. I have quite a hundred things to do, and father wants me to help him to correct the proofs of his sermon, the sermon he preached at Mr. Moffat's church on the Holy Innocents' Day. He has been asked to publish it—is not that flattering? Poor father, I believe he will end by being a popular preacher—in fact" (laughing again), "the whole family is going up in the world!"

There is such a forced mirth in her tone that Jim feels much more guiltily uncomfortable than if she had treated him to hysterics or sulks. Nor does his satisfaction with himself increase when, upon his rising to depart, she runs out of the room after him, to say to him, while her homely face twitches against her will, how much she hopes that he will enjoy himself; how perfectly happy she shall be without him; and how eagerly she shall look forward to hearing all about it from him to-marrow. "It will be almost better than going to Certosa herse...," she ends.

But against the unnatural attitude of this last flight of abnegation nature revolts, and becoming conscious of a break in her voice, she hastily retreats and gets back into the salon, in time to see Cecilia shaking her elaborate head and to hear her remarking with slow emphasis, "Mark my words! There is something odd about those people, and it is not hysteria!"

With spirits sensibly worsened by his interview, Burgoyne returns to the Minerva, and, mounting to Byng's bedroom, finds that young gentleman stretched upon his bed, gloom in his usually jocund eye, and an open letter lying on the floor beside him. But Jim is far too preoccupied to notice anybody's gloom but his own.

"I came to ask at what hour we are to set off this afternoon?" he says with a sort of flat moroseness in his tone.

"We, indeed!" rejoins the other with a groan, and rolling over with a sort of petulance on the bed, disheveling the neatly-smoothed pillow by burrowing his ruffled head in it—"we!"

There is such a heart-rent woe in the accent with which the last monosyllable is pronounced that for a moment Burgoyne has no other idea but that his young friend too has become aware of the "screw loose," has heard, perhaps, in detail, that story from before whose ominous opening he himself had fled. The thought sends his heart into his throat, so as to render him incapable of asking an explanation of the other's affliction.

"We!" repeats Byng for the third time., and very indistinctly, as he is now lying entirely on his face.

"Why do you go on saying 'we' in that idiotic way?" asks Jim at last, recovering his voice—recovering it only to employ it in imitating the younger man's accents, in a manner which displays more exasperation than natural talent for mimicry. It is not a politely worded inquiry, but it has the desired result of acting as a tonic on him at whom it is aimed, making him not only roll over once again, but actually sit up.

"Why do I say we?" repeats he, his young eyes looking lamentably out from under the fall of his tumbled hair—"because it is not we! it is you! You lucky dog, you will have her all to yourself!"

Jim heaves an inaudible sigh of relief. Whatever may be the cause of his companion's enigmatical conduct, it is evidently not what he had feared. There is, however, no evidence of relief or any other mild quality in his next remark.

"If you would talk less like an ass, I should have a better chance of knowing what you are driving at!"

The query seems only to renew and deepen the other's tribulation. He falls back into his former attitude.

"You will hold the white wonder of dear Juliet's hand!" begroans. "No, do not go" (with a sudden and startling change of tone, springing off the bed, as he becomes aware that his friend is making for the door, unable to bear those rhapsodies, whose full distastefulness to their hearer the utterer little conjectures). "I'll tell you! I'll explain! Why are you in such a deuce of a hurry? I cannot go to Certosa because I have just heard from my mother that she is to arrive to-day. She will be here in another hour."

Jim's fingers are already on the door-handle, but this piece of news arrests him.

"Your mother? I did not know that she was coming abroad."

"No more did I!"

"It must have been a very sudden thought!"

"Very!"

"What a delightful surprise for you!"

"Delightful!" There is so ludicrous a discrepancy between the adjective and the accent with which it is rendered that Jim bursts into a bitter laugh.

"She would be flattered if she could see your elation at the prospect of meeting her!"

Byng's blood rushes up under his clear smooth skin at his friend's jeer, but he answers, with some dignity:

"I do not think you have any right to imply that I am not always glad to see my mother; I do not deny that, if it had been equally convenient to her, I had rather she should have come twenty-four hours later."

Jim feels ashamed of himself, though, being an Anglo-Saxon, he has far too much false shame to confess it directly, and what he means for an amende, when it comes, is of an oblique nature.

"I think far the best plan will be to put off the excursion altogether; I am sure that I am not particularly keen about it."

The indignant red has rapidly died out of Byng's face; his placability being only to be surpassed by his slowness to take offence.

"Is it possible?" he asks, in a tone of stupefaction; then, with a sudden tardy recollection of the rosy fetters in which his friend is held by another lady, he adds—"But, of course, you are not—I was forgetting!"

Jim winces.

"As it is your party you had better send up a note at once to the Piazza d'Azeglio."

"No, do not let us both throw them over!" cries Byng, eagerly. "Heaven knows it was hard enough to persuade them to accept in the first instance. If you go we shall at all events keep our communications open; and you—you will say something to her for me?"

"What kind of something?" inquires the older man, carpingly. "Am I to tell her only what a fine fellow you are in general, or anything more circumstantial?"

"Tell her," begins Byng, in a rapt voice; but apparently the sight of his companion, who has somewhat ostentatiously pulled out a note-book and pencil, and assumed the patient air of one about to write to dictation, dries the stream of his young eloquence; "tell her—nothing."

"'Nothing speaks our grief like to speak nothing!'"

replies Jim, leaving the room with the quotation on his lips, rather hastily, for fear lest the other should change his mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

It is five o'clock, the hour fixed for the expedition to Certosa, and in the entresol of 12 Bis, Piazza d'Azeglio, Mrs. and Miss Le Marchant are sitting—hatted, gloved, and en-tout-cas-ed—in expectation of the arrival of their double escort. Elizabeth's afternoon has, so far, not been a lazy one, as her little cousin Bertie and his dog have again been good enough to pay her a lengthy visit and the former has insisted upon a repetition of them usical performance of the other day, though with truncated rites. Without the powerful aid of Byng, Elizabeth has found it a task considerably beyond her strength to hold a large collie poised on his hind legs, on a music-stool. He has jumped down repeatedly, and now lies on his back—an attitude in which experience has taught him he is less attackable than in any other—sawing the air with his fore-paws, and lifting his lip in a deprecating grin.

"Where is Mr. Byng?" cries Bertie fretfully, baulked in his efforts to make his wily victim resume the perpendicular. "I want Mr. Byng! Why does not Mr. Byng come?"

"Perhaps if you went to the window," suggests Mrs. Le Marchant, in that patiently coaxing voice in which we are wont to address a tiresome child on a visit, instead of the buffet which we should bestow upon it were it a resident—"perhaps if you went to the window and looked out, you would see him coming round the corner of the Piazza."

The suggestion is at once accepted, and the child, balancing his fidgety body on a chair, and craning his neck over the window-ledge, is shouting shrill pieces of information as to the passers-by to his friends within the room. Presently he shrieks out in triumph:

"I see him! He is just coming into sight! He is walking so fast! No!"—a moment later, with a changed and disgusted note, as a nearer view corrects the first impression—"it is not he at all! It is only the other one!"

(To be continued).

Mrs. Society—"Mercy on me! Don't you know that man your daughter is going to marry?" Mr. Meek—"No-o. I've been afraid to ask her." Mrs. Society—"He's a prize-fighter—a regular tough. He's fought a score of men and half killed a dozen women." Mr. Meek (much relieved)—"Oh! Then he's all right. I was afraid he was some poor lamb like myself."

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