DARE HE?

OR, A SAD LIFE STORY

CHAPTER XXIX.—(Continued).

In the course of the past week each member of the family has confided to him separately how far more she or he misses Amelia than can be possible to either of the others. Upon this head Sybilla's lamentations are the loudest and most frequent. She had at first refused to admit that there was anything at all the matter with her sister, but has now fallen into the no less trying opposite extreme of refusing to allow that there is any possibility of her recovery, talking of her as if she were almost beyond the reach of human aid. Sybilla's grief for her sister is perfectly genuine; none the less so that it is complicated by irritation at her own deposition from her post as first invalid, at having been compelled to confess the existence in the bosom of her own family of a traitor, with an indisputably higher temperature and more wavering pulse than she.

"It is ridiculous to suppose that a person in such rude health as Cecilia can miss her as I do," she says querulously; "I was always her first object, she always knew by instinct when I was more suffering than usual; who cares now"—breaking into a deluge of self-compassionating tears—"whether I am suffering or not?"

Then when next he happens to be alone with Cecilia, it is her turn to assert her right to a superiority of woe; a superiority claimed with still more emphasis the next half hour by the father. With a patience which would have surprised those persons who had seen him only in his former relations with the family of his betrothed he tries to soothe the sorrow of each—even that of Sybilla—in turn; but to his own heart he says that not one of their griefs is worthy to be weighed in the balance with his. In the case of none of theirs is the woof crossed by the hideous warp of self-reproach that is woven inextricably into his. They have worked her to death, they have torn her to pieces by their conflicting claims; their love has been exacting, selfish, inconsiderate; but at least it has been love; they have prized her almost her full worth while they had her.

In the intervals—neither long nor many—between his ministrations at the Anglo-Americain, Burgoyne hurries back to the Minerva to see that Byng has not blown his brains out. In the present state of mind of that young gentleman this catastrophe does not appear to be among the least likely ones. He has refused to leave Florence, always answering the suggestion with the same question, "Where else should I go?" and if pressed, adding invariably in the same words as those employed by him on the first day of his loss, when his friend had urged the advisability of his removing his countenance from the beaded stool—"Where shall I find such recent and authentic traces of her as here?"

He passes his time either on the Lung Arno, staring at the water, or stretched face downwards upon his bed. He walks about the town most of the night, and Jim suspects him of beginning to take chloral. Occasionally he rouses up into a quick and almost passionate sympathy with his friend's trouble, asking for nothing better than to be sent on any errand, however trivial, or however tiresome, in Amelia's behalf. But no sooner have the immediate effects of the appeal to his kind-heartedness died away than he sinks back into his lethargy, and Jim is at once too much occupied and too miserable to use any very strenuous endeavors to shake him out of it. But yet the consciousness of the tacit engagement under which he lies to the young man's mother to look after him, coupled with the absolute impossibility, under his present circumstances, of fulfilling that engagement, and his uneasiness as to what new form the insanity of Byng's grief may take on, from day to day, add very perceptibly to the weight of his own already sufficiently ponderous burden.

It is the ninth day since Amelia fell sick, that ninth day which, in maladies such as hers, is, or is at least reckoned to be, the crisis and turning-point of the disease. Jim has been up all night, and has just rushed back to the Minerva for the double purpose of taking a bath, and of casting an uneasy eye upon his charge. He finds the latter not in his room, but leaning over the little spiky balcony, out of his window, hanging over it so far, and so absorbedly, that he does not hear his friend's approach, and starts violently when Jim lays a hand on his shoulder.

"What are you looking at?"

"I? oh—nothing particular! What should I be looking at? What is there to look to? I was only—only—wondering, as a mere matter of curiosity, how many feet it is from here to the pavement? Sixteen? eighteen? twenty?"

Jim's only answer is to look at him sadly and sternly; then he says coldly:

"I do not recommend it: it would be a clumsy way of doing it."

"What matter how clumsy the way so that one attains the end?" asks Byng extravagantly, throwing off even the thin pretence he had at first assumed; "who cares how bad the road is, so that it leads him to the goal?"

Jim shudders. Death has been so near to him for the last nine days, that the terrific realism of Constance's apostrophe seems to be almost more than he can bear.

"It is silliness to live when to live is a torment, and then, have we a prescription to die, when death is our physician!" continues Byng loudly and wildly, clasping his hands above his head, and apparently perfectly indifferent as to whether the other inmates of the hotel, or passers-by on the piazza, overhear him.

"If you stay here much longer you will spare yourself the trouble of putting an end to your existence," replies Jim, glancing at the other's head, exposed hatless to the scorch of the Tuscan sun, "for you will certainly get a sunstroke."

So saying, he takes him quietly, yet decidedly, by the arm, and leads him within the room. Either his matter-of-fact manner, or the sight of his face, upon which, well-seasoned as it is, vigil and sorrow have begun to write their unavoidable marks, brings the young madman back to some measure of sense and self-control.

"I had no fixed intention," he says, apologetically, still looking white and wild; "you must not think I meant anything, but, even if I had—do you know—have you ever happened to read anything about the statistics of suicide? Do you know what an increasing number of people every year find life intolerable?"

"I know that you are fast making my life intolerable," answers Jim, fixing his tired, sleepless eyes with melancholy severity upon his companion. "Amelia is—you are as well aware of it as I am—probably dying, and yet even now, thanks to you, into my thoughts of her is continually pushing the fear that I may have to tell your mother that you have had the colossal selfishness to rush out of the world, because, for the first time in your pampered life, the toy you cried for has not been put into your hand."

Burgoyne's hopes have not been high, as to any salutary result of his own philippic while uttering it. But our words, sometimes, to our surprise, turn from wooden swords to steel daggers in our hands. For a moment Byng stands as if stunned; then he breaks up into a tornado of sobs and tears, such tears as have often before angered his friend, but which now he welcomes the sight of, as perhaps precursors of a saner mood.

"Oh, my dear old chap!" he cries, catching at Jim's unresponsive hand, and wringing it hard, "she is not dying really? You do not mean it? You are only saying it to frighten me? Oh! dear, kind Amelia. Not dying? not dying?"

"I do not know, to-day is the turning point, they say; even now it may have come."

"And why are not you with her? Why do not you go back to her?" cries Byng, in a broken voice of passionate excitement, the tears still racing down his face.

"And leave you to go lomfooling out there again," asks Jim, with a nod of his head towards the balcony, seen from where they stand, grilling in the midday blaze.

The verb employed, if closely looked into, bears a ludicrous proportion to the intended action indicated, but neither of the men see anything ridiculous in it.

"I will not!" cries Byng, in eager asseveration, "I give you my word of honor I will not; if you do not believe me, take me with you! Keep me with you all day! Do you think that I, too, do not want to know how Amelia is? Do you think that I am indifferent as to whether she lives or dies? Poor, good Amelia! When I think of that drive to Vallombrosa, only ten days ago! They two sitting side by side, so happy, laughing and making friends with each other!"

He covers his face with his hands, and through them the scalding drops trickle; but only for a moment. In the next, he has dashed them away, and is moving restlessly about the room, looking for his hat.

"Let us go this instant," he says urgently; "my poor old man, do you think I would willingly add a feather-weight to your burden? I should never forgive myself if I kept you a second longer from her at such a time; let us go at once."

Burgoyne complies; but, under pretext of making some change in his dress, escapes from his friend for just the few minutes necessary to write and despatch a telegram to the young man's mother. It runs thus:

"No cause for alarm, but come at once. He is perfectly well, but needs you."

If, as it is hoped, Mrs. Byng is still in London, reaping the succession to the old relative, whose death-bed she had quitted Florence to attend, his message will bring her hither within forty-eight hours, and the burden of responsibility, now grown so insupportable, will be shifted from his shoulders. Until those forty-eight hours have elapsed, he must not again let Byng out of his sight.

The day rolls by, the critical ninth day rolls by on its torrid wheels to eventide, and when that eventide comes it finds Cecilia Wilson running down from Amelia's room, to give the last news of her to the three men and one woman waiting below.

"I think he seems quite satisfied," she says, in answer to the silent hungry looks of question addressed to her, and alluding to the doctor, who is still with the patient; "the strength is maintained; the temperature lower." What a dreadful parrot-sound the two phrases, so familiar to us all in the newspaper bulletins of distinguished men on their death-beds, have, during the last week, assumed in Burgoyne's ears; "you can speak to him yourself when he comes down, of course, Jim; but I am sure he is satisfied."

"She is better!—she is saved?" cries Byng, rushing forward and snatching both Cecilia's hands—"do you say that she is really saved?"

"Oh, are you here still, Mr. Byng? haw very kind of you!" replies Cecilia, a tinge of color rushing over her mealy face—that face, ten days ago, clothed in so many roses—"well, I am afraid he does not go quite so far as that, but he says it is as much as we can expect, and even I can see that she is not nearly so restless."

"Thank God!—thank God!"

In the ardor of his thanksgiving he presses her hands closer, instead of dropping them, a fact of which he is entirely unaware, but so is not she, and who knows, even at that serious moment, what tiny genial hope may slide into her plump heart.

Again this night Burgoyne does not go to bed, from a superstitious fear that if he does, if he seems to take for granted an improvement, that very taking for granted may annul it—may bring on a relapse. But when the nexte morning finds no such backslidings to have taken place, when each hour through the cheerfully broadening day brings falling fever and steadying pulse, then indeed he cautiously opens the door of his heart to let a tiny rose-pinioned hope creep in—then at last, on the third night, he stretches his tired limbs in deep slumber upon his bed.

He has received a brief telegram from Mrs. Byng to announce her arrival as fast as boat and train can bring her; relapse. But when the next morning—he having sent his despatch to her on the previous Wednesday—finds him pacing the platform of the railway station, awaiting the incoming of the morning express from Turin. He is pacing it alone, for he has thought it best not to reveal to her son the fact of her expected return, not being at all sure in what spirit he will receive it, nor whether indeed the news of it might not even drive him, in his present unsound state of mind, to fly from the place at her approach.

The morning air, in its early clear coolness, blows sweet here, under the station-roof, unconquered even by engine smoke, and on Jim's face as he walks up and down—careworn as it still is—there comes, now and again, a half-born smile. He is never one to hope very easily, but surely now—now that yet another night has been prosperously tided over, there can, even to him, seem no reasonable ground for doubt that Amelia has turned the corner. Amelia, with the corner turned—Byng, in five minutes wholly off his hands! The only wonder is, that the small smile never comes quite to the birth.

The train is punctual, and almost at its due moment draws up in dusty length at the platform. Its pasengers are comparatively few; for at this latening season most of the English are winging home to their rooky woods; and he has no difficulty in at once discovering among them the tall smart figure—smart even after forty-eight hours of the unluxurious luxury of a Wagon-Lit—of the lady he is awaiting. As he gives her his hand to help her down the high step, the admiring thought crosses his mind of what a large quantity of fatigue, dust, and uneasiness of mind a radically good-looking Englishwoman, in radically good clothes, can undergo without seeming much the worse for them. Before her neat narrow foot has touched the pavement, a brace of eager questions shoots out of her mouth.

"Am I in time? Am I too late?"

"In time for what? Too late for what?"

"Has he—has he done anything—anything irrevocable? Is he—is he? I suppose that horrid woman has got hold of him? I suppose that is why you sent for me!"

By this time she is safely landed at his side, which is possibly the reason why he at once lets fall her hand.

"I am not aware that there is any 'horrid woman' in the case."

"Oh, what does it matter what I call her?" cries the mother, fast becoming frantic at the delay in answering her passionate questions. "I will call her what you please; you know perfectly whom I mean; she has got hold of him, I suppose. I always knew she would. Did not I tell you so? but is it too late? is there no way of getting him off?"

Now that Burgoyne has a nearer view of Mrs. Byng, he sees that she has a more fagged and travel-worn air than he had at first supposed, and her dusty eyes are fastened upon him with such a hunger of interrogation, that, angered and jarred as he is by her tone, he has not the heart any longer to keep her in suspense.

"If you are alluding to Miss Le Marchant, I may as well tell you at once that she has left Florence."

"Left Florence! Do you mean to say that she has run away with some one else?"

She puts the question in all good faith her lively imagination having easily made the not very wide jump from the fact already established in her own mind of Elizabeth being an adventuress, to the not much more difficult one to swallow of her having devoured another fils de famille, as well as Mrs. Byng's own.

For a moment, Burgoyne turns away, voice and countenance alike beyond his control. He has by no means perfectly recovered either, when he answers—

"Yes, with some one else—she has reached the pith of turpitude of leaving Florence with her mother."

"She is gone?" cries Mrs. Byng, with an accent of the highest relief and joy; "gone away altogether, do you mean?—oh, thank God!"—then, with a sudden lapse into affright, she adds rapidly—"and he is gone after her?—he is not here?"

"No, he is here."

"Then why has not he come to meet me?"—suspiciously.

"He did not know you were expected."

"You did not tell him?"

"No."

"Why did not you tell him?"

"I did not know how he would take it."

"Do you mean to say"—falling from her former rapidity of utterance to a dismayed incredulous slowness—"that he will not be glad to see me?—that Willy will not be glad to see me?"

"I mean to say that I am afraid you will not find him very much in sympathy with you; I do not think he will find it easy to hear you speak of Miss Le Marchant in the terms, and make the implication about her that you did just now," replies Jim, avenging by this sentence the wrongs done to Elizabeth, and doing it so well, that a moment later a feeling of compunction comes over him at the success of his own attempt at retributive justice.

Mrs. Byng turns pale.

"Then she has got hold of him?" she says under her breath.

"Got hold of him?" repeats Jim, his ire aroused again no sooner than allayed by this mode of expression; "you certainly have the most extraordinary way of misconceiving the situation! Got hold of him? when she had to leave Florence at a moment's notice to escape his importunities!"

(To be continued).

VICTIM OF RUSSIAN TYRANNY.

Tragedy of a Young Woman Held Without Trial.

The suicide in the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, St. Petersburg, of a young woman named Dorofieff, who had been imprisoned there for nearly six months without trial, has caused as painful an impression as that of the girl Vietrova, who committed suicide in the same place about eight or ten years ago by pouring over herself the oil of the lamp with which her cell was provided and setting herself on fire. Dorofieff strangled herself by tying her hair round her neck, fastening the end of the plait to the foot of the bed and then leaning back till death released her.

She was a young married woman, barely 22 years of age, who came to St. Petersburg with her husband in the spring of last year. The two lived a quiet, simple life, and attracted little notice from their neighbors, until shortly after a revolutionary outrage, when they disappeared. The police made a descent upon their apartment and left a few men in permanent ambush. When, two days later, the husband returned alone, he had hardly entered the hall when they rushed out with loaded revolvers and arrested him. Two days later he was executed in accordance with the verdict of a field court-martial.

The following day the woman Dorofieff was arrested. She was immediately incarcerated in the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, and since then, according to the newspaper accounts, she was kept in complete ignorance as to the fate of her husband, the jailors not being allowed to reply to any of her questions. The news of her husband's death, it is said, was conveyed to her on the eve of her suicide.

She had been dead for several hours before it was discovered that she had put an end to her life. She was buried secretly at night time in the Preobajensky Cemetery, where are the graves of many of those who fell during the shooting on Red Sunday. Who she was and who her husband remains a mystery. Those who knew her during her stay in St. Petersburg describe her as an exceptionally beautiful and attractive woman of superior intelligence and education.

MEANINGLESS WORD.

"I'll sue the scoundrel!" exclaimed Algy in a terrible rage. "He calls me a blithering idiot!"

"I wouldn't pay any attention to it," counselled Percy. "'Blithering' doesn't really mean anything, you know."

Any man can be happy if he only has sense enough not to let troubles worry him unnecessarily.