

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORY MOVES ON AT LAST.

BERNARDINE was playing chess one day with the Swedish Professor. On the Kurhaus terrace the guests were sunning themselves, warmly wrapped up to protect themselves from the cold, and well provided with parasols to protect themselves from the glare. Some were reading, some were playing cards or Russian dominoes, and others were doing nothing. There was a good deal of fun, and a great deal of screaming amongst the Portuguese colony. The little danseuse and three gentlemen acquaintances were drinking coffee, and not behaving too quietly. Pretty Fraulein Muller was leaning over her balcony carrying on a conversation with a picturesque Spanish youth below. Most of the English party had gone sledging and tobogganing. Mrs. Reffold had asked Bernardine to join them, but she had refused. Mrs. Reffold's friends were anything

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but attractive to Bernardine, although she liked Mrs. Reffold herself immensely. There was no special reason why she should like her; she certainly had no cause to admire her every-day behavior, nor her neglect of her invalid husband, who was passing away, uncared for in the present, and not likely to be mourned for in the future. Mrs. Reffold was gay, careless, and beautiful. She understood nothing about nursing, and cared less. So a trained nurse looked after Mr. Reffold, and Mrs. Reffold went sledging.

"Dear Wilfrid is so unselfish," she said. "He will not have me stay at home. But I feel very selfish." That was her stock remark. Most people answered her by saying: "Oh no, Mrs. Reffold, don't say that." But when she made the remark to Bernardine, and expected the usual reply, Bernardine said instead:

"Mr. Reffold seems lonely."

"Oh, he has a trained nurse, and she can read to him," said Mrs. Reffold hurriedly. She seemed ruffled.

"I had a trained nurse once," replied Bernardine; "and she could read; but she would not. She said it hurt her throat."

"Dear me, how very unfortunate for you," said Mrs. Reffold. "Ah, there is Captain Graham calling. I must not keep the sledges waiting."

That was a few days ago, but to-day, when Bernardine was playing chess with the Swedish Professor, Mrs. Reffold came to her. There was a curious mixture of shyness and abandon in Mrs. Reffold's manner.

"Miss Holme," she said, "I have thought of such a splendid idea. Will you go and see Mr. Reffold this afternoon? That would be a nice little change for him."

Bernardine smiled.

"If you wish it," she answered.

Mrs. Reffold nodded and hastened away, and Bernardine continued her game, and, having finished it, rose to go.

The Reffold's were rich, and lived in a suite of apartments in the more luxurious part of the

Kurhaus. Bernardine knocked at the door, and the nurse came to open it.

"Mrs. Reffold asks me to visit Mr. Reffold," Bernardine said; and the nurse showed her into the pleasant sitting-room.

Mr. Reffold was lying on the sofa. He looked up as Bernardine came in, and a smile of pleasure spread over his wan face.

"I don't know whether I intrude," said Bernardine; "but Mrs. Reffold said I might come to see you."

Mr. Reffold signed to the nurse to withdraw.

She had never before spoken to him. She had often seen him lying by himself in the sunshine.

"Are you paid for coming to me?" he asked eagerly.

The words seemed rude enough, but there was no rudeness in the manner.

"No, I am not paid," she said gently; and then she took a chair and sat near him.

"Ah, that's well!" he said, with a sigh of

relief. "I'm so tired of paid service. To know that things are done for me because a certain amount of francs are given so that those things may be done—well, one gets weary of it; that's all!"

There was bitterness in every word he spoke. "I lie here," he said, "and the loneliness of it—the loneliness of it!"

"Shall I read to you?" she asked kindly. She did not know what to say to him.

"I want to talk first," he replied. "I want to talk first to some one who is not paid for talking to me. I have often watched you, and wondered who you were. Why do you look so sad? No one is waiting for you to die?"

"Don't talk like that!" she said; and she bent over him and arranged the cushions for him more comfortably. He looked just like a great lank tired child.

"Are you one of my wife's friends?" he asked.

"I don't suppose I am," she answered gently;

"but I like her, all the same. Indeed, I like her very much. And I think her beautiful."

"Ah, she is beautiful!" he said eagerly. "Doesn't she look splendid in her furs? By Jove, you are right! She is a beautiful woman. I am proud of her."

Then the smile faded from his face.

"Beautiful," he said half to himself, "but hard."

"Come now," said Bernardine; "you are surrounded with books and newspapers. What shall I read to you?"

"No one reads what I want," he answered peevishly. "My tastes are not their tastes. I don't suppose you would care to read what I want to hear."

"Well," she said cheerily, "try me. Make your choice."

"Very well, the *Sporting and Dramatic*," he said. "Read every word of that. And about that theatrical divorce case. And every word of that too. Don't you skip, and cheat me."

She laughed and settled herself down to amuse him. And he listened contentedly.

"That is something like literature," he said once or twice. "I can understand papers of that sort going like wild-fire."

When he was tired of being read to, she talked to him in a manner that would have astonished the Disagreeable Man; not of books nor learning, but of people she had met and of places she had seen; and there was fun in everything she said. She knew London well, and she could tell him about the Jewish and the Chinese quarters, and about her adventures in company with a man who took her here, there and every where.

She made him some tea, and she cheered the poor fellow as he had not been cheered for months.

"You're just a little brick!" he said, when she was leaving. Then once more he added eagerly:

"And you're not to be paid, are you?"

"Not a single sou!" she laughed. "What a strange idea of yours!"

"You are not offended?" he said anxiously. "But you can't think what a difference it makes to me. You are not offended?"

"Not in the least!" she answered. "I know quite well how you mean it. You want a little kindness with nothing at the back of it. Now, good-bye!"

He called her when she was outside the door.

"I say, will you come again soon?"

"Yes, I will come to-morrow."

"Do you know you've been a little brick. I hope I haven't tired you. You are only a bit of a thing yourself. But by Jove, you know how to put a fellow in a good temper!"

When Mrs. Reffold went down to *table-d'hote* that night, she met Bernardine on the stairs, and stopped to speak with her.

"We've had a splendid afternoon," she said; "and we've arranged to go again to-morrow at the same time. Such a pity you don't come! Oh,

by the way, I thank you for going to see my husband. I hope he didn't tire you. He is a little querulous, I think. He so enjoyed your visit. Poor fellow ! it is sad to see him so ill, isn't it ? ”

CHAPTER IX.

BERNARDINE PREACHES.

AFTER this, scarcely a day passed but Bernardine went to see Mr. Reffold. The most inexperienced eye could have known that he was becoming rapidly worse. Marie, the chambermaid, knew it, and spoke of it frequently to Bernardine.

“The poor lonely fellow !” she said, time after time.

Every one, except Mrs. Reffold, seemed to recognize that Mr. Reffold's days were numbered. Either she did not or would not understand. She made no alteration in the disposal of her time; sledging parties and skating picnics were the order of the day; she was thoroughly pleased with herself, and received the attentions of her admirers as a matter of course.

The Petershof climate had got into her head; and it is a well-known fact that this glorious air has the effect on some people of banishing from their minds all inconvenient notions of duty and devotion, and all memory of the special object of their sojourn in Petershof. The coolness and calmness with which such people ignore their responsibilities, or allow strangers to assume them, would be an occasion for humor, if it were not an opportunity for indignation; though indeed it would take a very exceptionally sober-minded spectator not to get some fun out of the blissful self-satisfaction and unconsciousness which characterize the most negligent of "caretakers."

Mrs. Reffold was not the only sinner in this respect. It would have been interesting to get together a tea-party of invalids alone, and set the ball rolling about the respective behaviors of their respective friends. Not a pleasing chronicle: no very choice pages to add to the book of real life; still valuable items in their

way, representative of the actual as opposed to the ideal. In most instances there would have been ample testimony to that cruel monster known as Neglect.

Bernardine spoke once to the Disagreeable Man on this subject. She spoke with indignation, and he answered with indifference, shrugging his shoulders.

"These things occur," he said. "It is not that they are worse here than everywhere else; it is simply that they are together in an accumulated mass, and, as such, strike us with tremendous force. I myself am accustomed to these exhibitions of selfishness and neglect. I should be astonished if they did not take place. Don't mix yourself up with anything. If people are neglected, they *are* neglected, and there is the end of it. To imagine that you or I are going to do any good by filling up the breach, is simply an insanity leading to unnecessarily disagreeable consequences. I know you go to see Mr. Reffold. Take my advice, and keep away."

"You speak like a Calvinist," she answered rather ruffled, with the quintessence of self-protectiveness; and I don't believe you mean a word you say."

"My dear young woman," he said, "we are not living in a poetry book bound with gilt edges. We are living in a paper-backed volume of prose. Be sensible. Don't ruffle yourself on account of other people. Don't even trouble to criticize them; it is only a nuisance to yourself. All this simply points back to my first suggestion: fill up your time with some hobby, cheese-mites or the influenza bacillus, and then you will be quite content to let people be neglected, lonely, and to die. You will look upon it as an ordinary and natural process."

She waved her hand as though to stop him.

"There are days," she said, "when I can't bear to talk with you. And this is one of them."

"I am sorry," he answered, quite gently for him. And he moved away from her, and started for his usual lonely walk

Bernardine turned home, intending to go to see Mr. Reffold. He had become quite attached to her, and looked forward eagerly to her visits. He said her voice was gentle and her manner quiet; there was no bustling vitality about her to irritate his worn nerves. He was probably an empty-headed, stupid fellow; but it was none the less sad to see him passing away.

He called her "Little Brick." He said that no other epithet suited her so exactly. He was quite satisfied now that she was not paid for coming to see him. As for the reading, no one could read the *Sporting and Dramatic News* and the *Era* so well as Little Brick. Sometimes he spoke with her about his wife, but only in general terms of bitterness, and not always complainingly. She listened, and said nothing.

"I'm a chap that wants very little," he said once. "Those who want little, get nothing."

That was all he said, but Bernardine knew to whom he referred.

To-day, as Bernardine was on her way back to

the Kurhaus, she was thinking constantly of Mrs. Reffold, and wondering whether she ought to be made to realize that her husband was becoming rapidly worse. Whilst engrossed with this thought, a long train of sledges and toboggans passed her. The sound of the bells and the noisy merriment made her look up, and she saw beautiful Mrs. Reffold amongst the pleasure-seekers.

"If only I dared tell her now," said Bernardine to herself, "loudly and before them all."

Then a more sensible mood came over her.

"After all, it is not my affair," she said.

And the sledges passed away out of hearing.

When Bernardine sat with Mr. Reffold that afternoon she did not mention that she had seen his wife. He coughed a great deal, and seemed to be worse than usual, and complained of fever. But he liked to have her, and would not hear of her going.

"Stay," he said. "It is not much of a pleasure to you, but it is a great pleasure to me."

There was an anxious look on his face, such

a look as people wear when they wish to ask some question of great moment, but dare not begin.

At last he seemed to summon up courage.

"Little Brick," he said, in a weak, low voice, "I have something on my mind. You won't laugh, I know. You're not the sort. I know you're clever and thoughtful, and all that; you could tell me more than all the parsons put together. I know you're clever; my wife says so. She says only a very clever woman would wear such boots and hats."

Bernardine smiled.

"Well," she said kindly, "tell me."

"You must have thought a good deal, I suppose," he continued, "about life and death, and that sort of thing. I've never thought at all. Does it matter, Little Brick? It's too late now, I can't begin to think. But speak to me; tell me what you think. Do you believe we get another chance, and are glad to behave less like curs and brutes? Or is it all ended in that lonely little churchyard here? I've never trou-

bled about these things before, but now I know I am so near that gloomy little churchyard—well, it makes me wonder. As for the Bible, I never cared to read it. I was never much of a reader, though I've got through two or three firework novels and sporting stories. Does it matter, Little Brick?"

"How do I know?" she said gently. "How does any one know. People say they know; but it is all a great mystery—nothing but a mystery. Everything that we say can be but a guess. People have gone mad over their guessing, or they have broken their hearts. But still the mystery remains; and we cannot solve it."

"If you don't know anything, Little Brick," he said, "at least tell me what you think; and and don't be too learned; remember I'm only a brainless fellow."

He seemed to be waiting eagerly for her answer.

"If I were you," she said, "I should not worry. Just make up your mind to do better

when you get another chance. One can't do more than that. That is what I shall think of: that God will give each of us another chance, and that each one of us will take it and do better—I and you and every one. So there is no need to fret over failure, when one hopes one may be allowed to redeem that failure later on. Besides which, life is very hard. Why, we ourselves recognize that. If there be a God, some intelligence greater than human intelligence, he will understand better than ourselves that life is very hard and difficult, and he will be astonished not *because we are not better, but because we are not worse*. At least, that would be my notion of a God. I should not worry if I were you. Just make up your mind to do better if you get the chance, and be content with that."

"If that is what you think, Little Brick," he answered, "it is quite good enough for me. And it does not matter about prayers and the Bible, and all that sort of thing?"

"I don't think it matters," she said. "I never

have thought such things mattered. What does matter, is to judge gently, and not to come down like a sledge-hammer on other people's failings. Who are we, any of us, that we should be hard on others?"

"And not come down like a sledge-hammer on other people's failings," he repeated slowly. "I wonder if I have ever judged gently."

"I believe you have," she answered.

He shook his head.

"No," he said; "I have been a paltry fellow. I have been lying here, and elsewhere too, eating my heart away with bitterness, until you came. Since then I have sometimes forgotten to feel bitter. A little kindness does away with a great deal of bitterness."

He turned wearily on his side.

"I think I could sleep, Little Brick," he said, almost in a whisper. "I want to dream about your sermon. And I'm not to worry, am I?"

"No," she answered, as she stepped noiselessly across the room; "you are not to worry."

CHAPTER X.

THE DISAGREEABLE MAN IS SEEN IN A NEW LIGHT.

ONE specially fine morning a knock came at Bernardine's door. She opened it, and found Robert Allitsen standing there trying to recover his breath.

"I am going to Loschwitz, a village about twelve miles off," he said. "And I have ordered a sledge. Do you care to come too?"

"If I may pay my share," she said.

"Of course," he answered; "I did not suppose you would like to be paid for any better than I should like to pay for you."

Bernardine laughed.

"When do we start?" she asked.

"Now," he answered. "Bring a rug, and also that shawl of yours which is always falling down, and come at once without any fuss. We shall be