

To do the first would be wrong— to do the second might be woefully unjust. The true course was to find out the truth; to go to Calcutta and learn for himself; and if he were wrong, to publicly make acknowledgment. If he were right, he could remain silent if it were for the best.

Two months afterward, Will Sheridan returned from Calcutta to Shanghai. He had found out the truth. He proceeded at once to Western Australia to join his ship, and from that time he wrote no more to England. One part of his life, the sweet and tender part, without fault of his, had suffered woefully, and had died before his eyes. It was shrouded in his memory and buried in his heart. Like a brave man, he would not sit and moan over the loss. He set his face to his duty, hoping and praying that time would take the gnawing pain from his heart.

III.

THE SANDALWOOD AGENCY.

About a year after his trip to Calcutta, while his ship lay in Shanghai, Sheridan received an invitation to dinner from the chief owner, a wealthy and acute old Scotlman, whose palatial residence and beautiful grounds overlooked the town. He was surprised at the courtesy, and showed the invitation to the captain, a kind old sailor, who had formed an affection for Will from the first.

'Go, go, my lad,' said Captain Mathews. 'It's a piece of luck, no doubt. I've heard that the old man has a daughter, or a niece, though I believe she's rather tough; but what's that, when she has a shipload of money? You're in luck, youngster; of course you'll go, and in your best rig. I'll lend you my old claw-hammer coat.'

'Thank you, Captain,' said Will, smiling inwardly, as his eye took in the short but portly dimensions of his old friend; 'but I think I'll go as a plain sailor, without any pretence of society dress.'

'Well, I don't know but you're right, Sheridan,' responded the captain; 'a sailor's jacket is fit for any man or any place, when he who wears it loves his profession, and is worthy of it.'

That evening saw Will Sheridan enter Mr. MacKay's drawing-room, as handsome and gentlemanly a fellow as ever gave an order through a trumpet.

'Mr. Sheridan,' said the kind old merchant, coming forward to meet him, 'you are welcome for your own sake, and for that of a dear old friend. You are not aware, I think, that your father and I were midshipmen together forty years ago.'

Will was surprised, but gratified. He had half expected to be patronised, and indeed was more than half prepared to resent such treatment.

Mr. MacKay presented Will to his family—Mrs. MacKay, an invalid, and his step-daughter, Miss Gifford, a handsome, buxom, good-natured maiden lady of a certain age.

They were all very kind, and they treated Will as an old and privileged friend. He forgot all about the patronage, and enjoyed himself immensely. Such an evening of home life, after years of rugged seafaring, was delightfully restful.

At dinner, Mr. MacKay recalled story after story of the time when he and Will's father were careless youngsters on his Majesty's ship Cumberland. Will was still more surprised to find that Mr. MacKay had recently been in communication with his father.

'I saw your papers, Mr. Sheridan,' exclaimed Mr. MacKay; 'and knowing that my old friend was in the Coastguard Service in England, I wrote to him. I found I was right in my conclusion; but I thought I would say nothing about the matter for some time. You will pardon me when I tell you that I have been observing you closely since you entered the service of our Company.'

This was the first reference to their relative positions which had been made. Will did not know what to answer.

'You have seen a good deal of our sandalwood trade,' said Mr. MacKay, changing the subject; 'what do you think of its prospects, Mr. Sheridan?'

This was too extensive a question for Will, and he faltered in his reply. He had, he said, only considered his own duties in the trade, and they offered a limited scope for observation.

The old merchant, however, returned to the point.

'Captain Mathews tells me that you have expressed to him your dissatisfaction at the management of our affairs in Western Australia.'

'No, sir,' answered Will with a smile, 'not with the management, but with the mismanagement.'

'Ah, just so,' said Mr. MacKay; 'we will talk more about this by-and-by.'

When the ladies had retired, Mr. MacKay again took up the subject.

'You think our affairs in Australia are mismanaged, then?'

'Well, sir, it appears to me there is no system whatever on the other side, so far as the Company's interests are concerned.'

'How is that?' asked the keen business man, craning his eyes. 'Does not our agent purchase and ship the sandalwood?'

'Yes, he certainly does, and that's all he does—and that's nothing,' said blunt Will, 'at least for the Company's benefit.'

'Please explain,' said Mr. MacKay, nervously.

'Well,' said Will, in his earnest way when interested, 'as you know, the sandalwood is cut away in the bush, from sixty to a hundred miles from the shipping-station at Bumbury. It is cut by ticket-of-leave men. From them it is bought by speculators, who team it to Bumbury; and from these fellows, who manage to control the wood, your agent buys it at the wharf, paying whatever price is asked.'

'You would have him do more?' asked MacKay.

'I would change the whole plan, sir, if it were my concern. First, I would lease all, or as much as I could, of the sandalwood land direct from the Government, then I would set my hired cutters to work, and then carry the wood in my own teams to the wharf. The original cost can be decreased at least 50 per cent. And besides this, there are other valuable substances, such as gum, tan-bark, and skins, that could be carried and shipped at the same time.'

The merchant listened attentively to the broad outline of Will's plans, which he spoke about quite freely, as one outside the matter, but familiar with it.

'Mr. Sheridan,' said Mr. MacKay at length, 'our Company has decided to change our agent in Western Australia, and it gives me great pleasure to offer you the position. I will see,' he added, interrupting Will's surprised exclamation, 'that you shall have sufficient power at your disposal to carry out your ideas with regard to the extension of the trade.'

Will hardly heard another word for the rest of the evening. His mind scarcely took in the change, from the poor and unknown sailor, at one step, to a man of large influence and position, for such would be the Australian agent of so wealthy a Company.

When he returned to the ship, his face flamed with excitement, as he related the wonderful story to his old friend Captain Mathews, who became even more excited than Will—and declared many times over his glass of 'Old Tom' that 'they were beginning to see things right at last,' and that 'no man could do land business so well as him who was trained at sea,' and divers other sentences filled with wisdom drawn from personal pride and marine philosophy.

(To be continued.)

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