

### **CHAPTER XIII. NOT CURED YET.**

WE visited France, Germany, and Italy; and we were absent from England nearly two years.

Had time and change justified my confidence in them? Was the image of Mrs. Van Brandt an image long since dismissed from my mind?

No! Do what I might, I was still (in the prophetic language of Dame Dermody) taking the way to reunion with my kindred spirit in the time to come. For the first two or three months of our travels I was haunted by dreams of the woman who had so resolutely left me. Seeing her in my sleep, always graceful, always charming, always modestly tender toward me, I waited in the ardent hope of again beholding the apparition of her in my waking hours--of again being summoned to meet her at a given place and time. My anticipations were not fulfilled; no apparition showed itself. The dreams themselves grew less frequent and less vivid and then ceased altogether. Was this a sign that the days of her adversity were at an end? Having no further need of help, had she no further remembrance of the man who had tried to help her? Were we never to meet again?

I said to myself: "I am unworthy of the name of man if I don't forget her now!" She still kept her place in my memory, say what I might.

I saw all the wonders of Nature and Art which foreign countries could show me. I lived in the dazzling light of the best society that Paris, Rome, Vienna could assemble. I passed hours on hours in the company of the most accomplished and most beautiful women whom Europe could produce--and still that solitary figure at Saint Anthony's Well, those grand gray eyes that had rested on me so sadly at parting, held their place in my memory, stamped their image on my heart.

Whether I resisted my infatuation, or whether I submitted to it, I still longed for her. I did all I could to conceal the state of my mind from my mother. But her loving eyes discovered the secret: she saw that I suffered, and suffered with me. More than once she said: "George, the good end is not to be gained by traveling; let us go home." More than once I answered, with the bitter and obstinate resolution of despair: "No. Let us try more new people and more new scenes." It was only when I found her health and strength beginning to fail under the stress of continual traveling that I consented to abandon the hopeless search after oblivion, and to turn homeward at last.

I prevailed on my mother to wait and rest at my house in London before she returned to her favorite abode at the country-seat in Perthshire. It is needless to say that I remained in town with her. My mother now represented the one interest that held me nobly and endearingly to life. Politics, literature, agriculture--the customary pursuits of a man in my position--had none of them the slightest attraction for me.

We had arrived in London at what is called "the height of the season." Among the operatic attractions of that year--I am writing of the days when the ballet was still a popular form of public entertainment--there was a certain dancer whose grace and beauty were the objects of universal admiration. I was asked if I had seen her, wherever I went, until my social position, as the one man who was indifferent to the reigning goddess of the stage, became quite unendurable. On the next occasion when I was invited to take a seat in a friend's box, I accepted the proposal; and (far from willingly) I went the way of the world--in other words, I went to the opera.

The first part of the performance had concluded when we got to the theater, and the ballet had not yet begun. My friends amused themselves with looking for familiar faces in the boxes and stalls. I took a chair in a corner and waited, with my mind far away from the theater, from the dancing that was to come. The lady who sat nearest to me (like ladies in general) disliked the neighborhood of a silent man. She determined to make me talk to her.

"Do tell me, Mr. Germaine," she said. "Did you ever see a theater anywhere so full as this theater is to-night?"

She handed me her opera-glass as she spoke. I moved to the front of the box to look at the audience.

It was certainly a wonderful sight. Every available atom of space (as I gradually raised the glass from the floor to the ceiling of the building) appeared to be occupied. Looking upward and upward, my range of view gradually reached the gallery. Even at that distance, the excellent glass which had been put into my hands brought the faces of the audience close to me. I looked first at the persons who occupied the front row of seats in the gallery stalls.

Moving the opera-glass slowly along the semicircle formed by the seats, I suddenly stopped when I reached the middle.

My heart gave a great leap as if it would bound out of my body. There was

no mistaking that face among the commonplace faces near it. I had discovered Mrs. Van Brandt!

She sat in front--but not alone. There was a man in the stall immediately behind her, who bent over her and spoke to her from time to time. She listened to him, so far as I could see, with something of a sad and weary look. Who was the man? I might, or might not, find that out. Under any circumstances, I determined to speak to Mrs. Van Brandt.

The curtain rose for the ballet. I made the best excuse I could to my friends, and instantly left the box.

It was useless to attempt to purchase my admission to the gallery. My money was refused. There was not even standing room left in that part of the theater.

But one alternative remained. I returned to the street, to wait for Mrs. Van Brandt at the gallery door until the performance was over.

Who was the man in attendance on her--the man whom I had seen sitting behind her, and talking familiarly over her shoulder? While I paced backward and forward before the door, that one question held possession of my mind, until the oppression of it grew beyond endurance. I went back to my friends in the box, simply and solely to look at the man again.

What excuses I made to account for my strange conduct I cannot now remember. Armed once more with the lady's opera-glass (I borrowed it and kept it without scruple), I alone, of all that vast audience, turned my back on the stage, and riveted my attention on the gallery stalls.

There he sat, in his place behind her, to all appearance spell-bound by the fascinations of the graceful dancer. Mrs. Van Brandt, on the contrary, seemed to find but little attraction in the spectacle presented by the stage. She looked at the dancing (so far as I could see) in an absent, weary manner. When the applause broke out in a perfect frenzy of cries and clapping of hands, she sat perfectly unmoved by the enthusiasm which pervaded the theater. The man behind her (annoyed, as I supposed, by the marked indifference which she showed to the performance) tapped her impatiently on the shoulder, as if he thought that she was quite capable of falling asleep in her stall. The familiarity of the action--confirming the suspicion in my mind which had already identified him with Van Brandt--so enraged me that I said or did something which obliged one of the gentlemen in the box to interfere. "If you can't control yourself," he whispered, "you had

better leave us." He spoke with the authority of an old friend. I had sense enough left to take his advice, and return to my post at the gallery door.

A little before midnight the performance ended. The audience began to pour out of the theater.

I drew back into a corner behind the door, facing the gallery stairs, and watched for her. After an interval which seemed to be endless, she and her companion appeared, slowly descending the stairs. She wore a long dark cloak; her head was protected by a quaintly shaped hood, which looked (on her) the most becoming head-dress that a woman could wear. As the two passed me, I heard the man speak to her in a tone of sulky annoyance.

"It's wasting money," he said, "to go to the expense of taking you to the opera."

"I am not well," she answered with her head down and her eyes on the ground. "I am out of spirits to-night."

"Will you ride home or walk?"

"I will walk, if you please."

I followed them unperceived, waiting to present myself to her until the crowd about them had dispersed. In a few minutes they turned into a quiet by-street. I quickened my pace until I was close at her side, and then I took off my hat and spoke to her.

She recognized me with a cry of astonishment. For an instant her face brightened radiantly with the loveliest expression of delight that I ever saw on any human countenance. The moment after, all was changed. The charming features saddened and hardened. She stood before me like a woman overwhelmed by shame--without uttering a word, without taking my offered hand.

Her companion broke the silence.

"Who is this gentleman?" he asked, speaking in a foreign accent, with an under-bred insolence of tone and manner.

She controlled herself the moment he addressed her. "This is Mr. Germaine," she answered: "a gentleman who was very kind to me in Scotland." She raised her eyes for a moment to mine, and took refuge, poor soul, in a

conventionally polite inquiry after my health. "I hope you are quite well, Mr. Germaine," said the soft, sweet voice, trembling piteously.

I made the customary reply, and explained that I had seen her at the opera. "Are you staying in London?" I asked. "May I have the honor of calling on you?"

Her companion answered for her before she could speak.

"My wife thanks you, sir, for the compliment you pay her. She doesn't receive visitors. We both wish you good-night."

Saying those words, he took off his hat with a sardonic assumption of respect; and, holding her arm in his, forced her to walk on abruptly with him. Feeling certainly assured by this time that the man was no other than Van Brandt, I was on the point of answering him sharply, when Mrs. Van Brandt checked the rash words as they rose to my lips.

"For my sake!" she whispered, over her shoulder, with an imploring look that instantly silenced me. After all, she was free (if she liked) to go back to the man who had so vilely deceived and deserted her. I bowed and left them, feeling with no common bitterness the humiliation of entering into rivalry with Mr. Van Brandt.

I crossed to the other side of the street. Before I had taken three steps away from her, the old infatuation fastened its hold on me again. I submitted, without a struggle against myself, to the degradation of turning spy and following them home. Keeping well behind, on the opposite side of the way, I tracked them to their own door, and entered in my pocket-book the name of the street and the number of the house.

The hardest critic who reads these lines cannot feel more contemptuously toward me than I felt toward myself. Could I still love a woman after she had deliberately preferred to me a scoundrel who had married her while he was the husband of another wife? Yes! Knowing what I now knew, I felt that I loved her just as dearly as ever. It was incredible, it was shocking; but it was true. For the first time in my life, I tried to take refuge from my sense of my own degradation in drink. I went to my club, and joined a convivial party at a supper table, and poured glass after glass of champagne down my throat, without feeling the slightest sense of exhilaration, without losing for an instant the consciousness of my own contemptible conduct. I went to my bed in despair; and through the wakeful night I weakly cursed the fatal evening at the river-side when I had met her for the first time. But revile her

as I might, despise myself as I might, I loved her--I loved her still!

Among the letters laid on my table the next morning there were two which must find their place in this narrative.

The first letter was in a handwriting which I had seen once before, at the hotel in Edinburgh. The writer was Mrs. Van Brandt.

"For your own sake" (the letter ran) "make no attempt to see me, and take no notice of an invitation which I fear you will receive with this note. I am living a degraded life. I have sunk beneath your notice. You owe it to yourself, sir, to forget the miserable woman who now writes to you for the last time, and bids you gratefully a last farewell."

Those sad lines were signed in initials only. It is needless to say that they merely strengthened my resolution to see her at all hazards. I kissed the paper on which her hand had rested, and then I turned to the second letter. It contained the "invitation" to which my correspondent had alluded, and it was expressed in these terms:

"Mr. Van Brandt presents his compliments to Mr. Germaine, and begs to apologize for the somewhat abrupt manner in which he received Mr. Germaine's polite advances. Mr. Van Brandt suffers habitually from nervous irritability, and he felt particularly ill last night. He trusts Mr. Germaine will receive this candid explanation in the spirit in which it is offered; and he begs to add that Mrs. Van Brandt will be delighted to receive Mr. Germaine whenever he may find it convenient to favor her with a visit."

That Mr. Van Brandt had some sordid interest of his own to serve in writing this grotesquely impudent composition, and that the unhappy woman who bore his name was heartily ashamed of the proceeding on which he had ventured, were conclusions easily drawn after reading the two letters. The suspicion of the man and of his motives which I naturally felt produced no hesitation in my mind as to the course which I had determined to pursue. On the contrary, I rejoiced that my way to an interview with Mrs. Van Brandt was smoothed, no matter with what motives, by Mr. Van Brandt himself.

I waited at home until noon, and then I could wait no longer. Leaving a message of excuse for my mother (I had just sense of shame enough left to shrink from facing her), I hastened away to profit by my invitation on the very day when I received it.