

CHAPTER XIV. MRS. VAN BRANDT AT HOME.

As I lifted my hand to ring the house bell, the door was opened from within, and no less a person than Mr. Van Brandt himself stood before me. He had his hat on. We had evidently met just as he was going out.

"My dear sir, how good this is of you! You present the best of all replies to my letter in presenting yourself. Mrs. Van Brandt is at home. Mrs. Van Brandt will be delighted. Pray walk in."

He threw open the door of a room on the ground-floor. His politeness was (if possible) even more offensive than his insolence. "Be seated, Mr. Germaine, I beg of you." He turned to the open door, and called up the stairs, in a loud and confident voice:

"Mary! come down directly."

"Mary"! I knew her Christian name at last, and knew it through Van Brandt. No words can tell how the name jarred on me, spoken by his lips. For the first time for years past my mind went back to Mary Dermody and Greenwater Broad. The next moment I heard the rustling of Mrs. Van Brandt's dress on the stairs. As the sound caught my ear, the old times and the old faces vanished again from my thoughts as completely as if they had never existed. What had she in common with the frail, shy little child, her namesake, of other days? What similarity was perceivable in the sooty London lodging-house to remind me of the bailiff's flower-scented cottage by the shores of the lake?

Van Brandt took off his hat, and bowed to me with sickening servility.

"I have a business appointment," he said, "which it is impossible to put off. Pray excuse me. Mrs. Van Brandt will do the honors. Good morning."

The house door opened and closed again. The rustling of the dress came slowly nearer and nearer. She stood before me.

"Mr. Germaine!" she exclaimed, starting back, as if the bare sight of me repelled her. "Is this honorable? Is this worthy of you? You allow me to be entrapped into receiving you, and you accept as your accomplice Mr. Van Brandt! Oh, sir, I have accustomed myself to look up to you as a high-minded man. How bitterly you have disappointed me!"

Her reproaches passed by me unheeded. They only heightened her color; they only added a new rapture to the luxury of looking at her.

"If you loved me as faithfully as I love you," I said, "you would understand why I am here. No sacrifice is too great if it brings me into your presence again after two years of absence."

She suddenly approached me, and fixed her eyes in eager scrutiny on my face.

"There must be some mistake," she said. "You cannot possibly have received my letter, or you have not read it?"

"I have received it, and I have read it."

"And Van Brandt's letter--you have read that too?"

"Yes."

She sat down by the table, and, leaning her arms on it, covered her face with her hands. My answers seemed not only to have distressed, but to have perplexed her. "Are men all alike?" I heard her say. "I thought I might trust in his sense of what was due to himself and of what was compassionate toward me."

I closed the door and seated myself by her side. She removed her hands from her face when she felt me near her. She looked at me with a cold and steady surprise.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I am going to try if I can recover my place in your estimation," I said. "I am going to ask your pity for a man whose whole heart is yours, whose whole life is bound up in you."

She started to her feet, and looked round her incredulously, as if doubting whether she had rightly heard and rightly interpreted my last words. Before I could speak again, she suddenly faced me, and struck her open hand on the table with a passionate resolution which I now saw in her for the first time.

"Stop!" she cried. "There must be an end to this. And an end there shall be."

Do you know who that man is who has just left the house? Answer me, Mr. Germaine! I am speaking in earnest."

There was no choice but to answer her. She was indeed in earnest--vehemently in earnest.

"His letter tells me," I said, "that he is Mr. Van Brandt."

She sat down again, and turned her face away from me.

"Do you know how he came to write to you?" she asked. "Do you know what made him invite you to this house?"

I thought of the suspicion that had crossed my mind when I read Van Brandt's letter. I made no reply.

"You force me to tell you the truth," she went on. "He asked me who you were, last night on our way home. I knew that you were rich, and that he wanted money. I told him I knew nothing of your position in the world. He was too cunning to believe me; he went out to the public-house and looked at a directory. He came back and said, 'Mr. Germaine has a house in Berkeley Square and a country-seat in the Highlands. He is not a man for a poor devil like me to offend; I mean to make a friend of him, and I expect you to make a friend of him too.' He sat down and wrote to you. I am living under that man's protection, Mr. Germaine. His wife is not dead, as you may suppose; she is living, and I know her to be living. I wrote to you that I was beneath your notice, and you have obliged me to tell you why. Am I sufficiently degraded to bring you to your senses?"

I drew closer to her. She tried to get up and leave me. I knew my power over her, and used it (as any man in my place would have used it) without scruple. I took her hand.

"I don't believe you have voluntarily degraded yourself," I said. "You have been forced into your present position: there are circumstances which excuse you, and which you are purposely keeping back from me. Nothing will convince me that you are a base woman. Should I love you as I love you, if you were really unworthy of me?"

She struggled to free her hand; I still held it. She tried to change the subject. "There is one thing you haven't told me yet," she said, with a faint, forced smile. "Have you seen the apparition of me again since I left you?"

"No. Have you ever seen me again, as you saw me in your dream at the inn in Edinburgh?"

"Never. Our visions of each other have left us. Can you tell why?"

If we had continued to speak on this subject, we must surely have recognized each other. But the subject dropped. Instead of answering her question, I drew her nearer to me--I returned to the forbidden subject of my love.

"Look at me," I pleaded, "and tell me the truth. Can you see me, can you hear me, and do you feel no answering sympathy in your own heart? Do you really care nothing for me? Have you never once thought of me in all the time that has passed since we last met?"

I spoke as I felt--ferently, passionately. She made a last effort to repel me, and yielded even as she made it. Her hand closed on mine, a low sigh fluttered on her lips. She answered with a sudden self-abandonment; she recklessly cast herself loose from the restraints which had held her up to this time.

"I think of you perpetually," she said. "I was thinking of you at the opera last night. My heart leaped in me when I heard your voice in the street."

"You love me!" I whispered.

"Love you!" she repeated. "My whole heart goes out to you in spite of myself. Degraded as I am, unworthy as I am--knowing as I do that nothing can ever come of it--I love you! I love you!"

She threw her arms round my neck, and held me to her with all her strength. The moment after, she dropped on her knees. "Oh, don't tempt me!" she murmured. "Be merciful--and leave me."

I was beside myself. I spoke as recklessly to her as she had spoken to me.

"Prove that you love me," I said. "Let me rescue you from the degradation of living with that man. Leave him at once and forever. Leave him, and come with me to a future that is worthy of you--your future as my wife."

"Never!" she answered, crouching low at my feet.

"Why not? What obstacle is there?"

"I can't tell you--I daren't tell you."

"Will you write it?"

"No, I can't even write it--to you. Go, I implore you, before Van Brandt comes back. Go, if you love me and pity me."

She had roused my jealousy. I positively refused to leave her.

"I insist on knowing what binds you to that man," I said. "Let him come back! If you won't answer my question, I will put it to him."

She looked at me wildly, with a cry of terror. She saw my resolution in my face.

"Don't frighten me," she said. "Let me think."

She reflected for a moment. Her eyes brightened, as if some new way out of the difficulty had occurred to her.

"Have you a mother living?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you think she would come and see me?"

"I am sure she would if I asked her."

She considered with herself once more. "I will tell your mother what the obstacle is," she said, thoughtfully.

"When?"

"To-morrow, at this time."

She raised herself on her knees; the tears suddenly filled her eyes. She drew me to her gently. "Kiss me," she whispered. "You will never come here again. Kiss me for the last time."

My lips had barely touched hers, when she started to her feet and snatched up my hat from the chair on which I had placed it.

"Take your hat," she said. "He has come back."

My duller sense of hearing had discovered nothing. I rose and took my hat to quiet her. At the same moment the door of the room opened suddenly and softly. Mr. Van Brandt came in. I saw in his face that he had some vile motive of his own for trying to take us by surprise, and that the result of the experiment had disappointed him.

"You are not going yet?" he said, speaking to me with his eye on Mrs. Van Brandt. "I have hurried over my business in the hope of prevailing on you to stay and take lunch with us. Put down your hat, Mr. Germaine. No ceremony!"

"You are very good," I answered. "My time is limited to-day. I must beg you and Mrs. Van Brandt to excuse me."

I took leave of her as I spoke. She turned deadly pale when she shook hands with me at parting. Had she any open brutality to dread from Van Brandt as soon as my back was turned? The bare suspicion of it made my blood boil. But I thought of her. In her interests, the wise thing and the merciful thing to do was to conciliate the fellow before I left the house.

"I am sorry not to be able to accept your invitation," I said, as we walked together to the door. "Perhaps you will give me another chance?"

His eyes twinkled cunningly. "What do you say to a quiet little dinner here?" he asked. "A slice of mutton, you know, and a bottle of good wine. Only our three selves, and one old friend of mine to make up four. We will have a rubber of whist in the evening. Mary and you partners--eh? When shall it be? Shall we say the day after to-morrow?"

She had followed us to the door, keeping behind Van Brandt while he was speaking to me. When he mentioned the "old friend" and the "rubber of whist," her face expressed the strongest emotions of shame and disgust. The next moment (when she had heard him fix the date of the dinner for "the day after to-morrow") her features became composed again, as if a sudden sense of relief had come to her. What did the change mean? "To-morrow" was the day she had appointed for seeing my mother. Did she really believe, when I had heard what passed at the interview, that I should never enter the house again, and never attempt to see her more? And was this the secret of her composure when she heard the date of the dinner appointed for "the day after to-morrow"?

Asking myself these questions, I accepted my invitation, and left the house with a heavy heart. That farewell kiss, that sudden composure when the day of the dinner was fixed, weighed on my spirits. I would have given twelve years of my life to have annihilated the next twelve hours.

In this frame of mind I reached home, and presented myself in my mother's sitting-room.

"You have gone out earlier than usual to-day," she said. "Did the fine weather tempt you, my dear?" She paused, and looked at me more closely. "George!" she exclaimed, "what has happened to you? Where have you been?"

I told her the truth as honestly as I have told it here.

The color deepened in my mother's face. She looked at me, and spoke to me with a severity which was rare indeed in my experience of her.

"Must I remind you, for the first time in your life, of what is due to your mother?" she asked. "Is it possible that you expect me to visit a woman, who, by her own confession--"

"I expect you to visit a woman who has only to say the word and to be your daughter-in-law," I interposed. "Surely I am not asking what is unworthy of you, if I ask that?"

My mother looked at me in blank dismay.

"Do you mean, George, that you have offered her marriage?"

"Yes."

"And she has said No?"

"She has said No, because there is some obstacle in her way. I have tried vainly to make her explain herself. She has promised to confide everything to you."

The serious nature of the emergency had its effect. My mother yielded. She handed me the little ivory tablets on which she was accustomed to record her engagements. "Write down the name and address," she said resignedly.

"I will go with you," I answered, "and wait in the carriage at the door. I want

to hear what has passed between you and Mrs. Van Brandt the instant you have left her."

"Is it as serious as that, George?"

"Yes, mother, it is as serious as that."

CHAPTER XV. THE OBSTACLE BEATS ME.

HOW long was I left alone in the carriage at the door of Mrs. Van Brandt's lodgings? Judging by my sensations, I waited half a life-time. Judging by my watch, I waited half an hour.

When my mother returned to me, the hope which I had entertained of a happy result from her interview with Mrs. Van Brandt was a hope abandoned before she had opened her lips. I saw, in her face, that an obstacle which was beyond my power of removal did indeed stand between me and the dearest wish of my life.

"Tell me the worst," I said, as we drove away from the house, "and tell it at once."

"I must tell it to you, George," my mother answered, sadly, "as she told it to me. She begged me herself to do that. 'We must disappoint him,' she said, 'but pray let it be done as gently as possible.' Beginning in those words, she confided to me the painful story which you know already--the story of her marriage. From that she passed to her meeting with you at Edinburgh, and to the circumstances which have led her to live as she is living now. This latter part of her narrative she especially requested me to repeat to you. Do you feel composed enough to hear it now? Or would you rather wait?"

"Let me hear it now, mother; and tell it, as nearly as you can, in her own words."

"I will repeat what she said to me, my dear, as faithfully as I can. After speaking of her father's death, she told me that she had only two relatives living. 'I have a married aunt in Glasgow, and a married aunt in London,' she said. 'When I left Edinburgh, I went to my aunt in London. She and my father had not been on good terms together; she considered that my father had neglected her. But his death had softened her toward him and toward me. She received me kindly, and she got me a situation in a shop. I kept my situation for three months, and then I was obliged to leave it.'"

My mother paused. I thought directly of the strange postscript which Mrs. Van Brandt had made me add to the letter that I wrote for her at the Edinburgh inn. In that case also she had only contemplated remaining in her employment for three months' time.

"Why was she obliged to leave her situation?" I asked.

"I put that question to her myself," replied my mother. "She made no direct reply--she changed color, and looked confused. 'I will tell you afterward, madam,' she said. 'Please let me go on now. My aunt was angry with me for leaving my employment--and she was more angry still, when I told her the reason. She said I had failed in duty toward her in not speaking frankly at first. We parted coolly. I had saved a little money from my wages; and I did well enough while my savings lasted. When they came to an end, I tried to get employment again, and I failed. My aunt said, and said truly, that her husband's income was barely enough to support his family: she could do nothing for me, and I could do nothing for myself. I wrote to my aunt at Glasgow, and received no answer. Starvation stared me in the face, when I saw in a newspaper an advertisement addressed to me by Mr. Van Brandt. He implored me to write to him; he declared that his life without me was too desolate to be endured; he solemnly promised that there should be no interruption to my tranquillity if I would return to him. If I had only had myself to think of, I would have begged my bread in the streets rather than return to him--'"

I interrupted the narrative at that point.

"What other person could she have had to think of?" I said.

"Is it possible, George," my mother rejoined, "that you have no suspicion of what she was alluding to when she said those words?"

The question passed by me unheeded: my thoughts were dwelling bitterly on Van Brandt and his advertisement. "She answered the advertisement, of course?" I said.

"And she saw Mr. Van Brandt," my mother went on. "She gave me no detailed account of the interview between them. 'He reminded me,' she said, 'of what I knew to be true--that the woman who had entrapped him into marrying her was an incurable drunkard, and that his ever living with her again was out of the question. Still she was alive, and she had a right to the name at least of his wife. I won't attempt to excuse my returning to him, knowing the circumstances as I did. I will only say that I could see no other

choice before me, in my position at the time. It is needless to trouble you with what I have suffered since, or to speak of what I may suffer still. I am a lost woman. Be under no alarm, madam, about your son. I shall remember proudly to the end of my life that he once offered me the honor and the happiness of becoming his wife; but I know what is due to him and to you. I have seen him for the last time. The one thing that remains to be done is to satisfy him that our marriage is impossible. You are a mother; you will understand why I reveal the obstacle which stands between us--not to him, but to you.' She rose saying those words, and opened the folding-doors which led from the parlor into a back room. After an absence of a few moments only, she returned."

At that crowning point in the narrative, my mother stopped. Was she afraid to go on? or did she think it needless to say more?

"Well?" I said.

"Must I really tell it to you in words, George? Can't you guess how it ended, even yet?"

There were two difficulties in the way of my understanding her. I had a man's bluntness of perception, and I was half maddened by suspense. Incredible as it may appear, I was too dull to guess the truth even now.

"When she returned to me," my mother resumed, "she was not alone. She had with her a lovely little girl, just old enough to walk with the help of her mother's hand. She tenderly kissed the child, and then she put it on my lap. 'There is my only comfort,' she said, simply; 'and there is the obstacle to my ever becoming Mr. Germaine's wife.'"

Van Brandt's child! Van Brandt's child!

The postscript which she had made me add to my letter; the incomprehensible withdrawal from the employment in which she was prospering; the disheartening difficulties which had brought her to the brink of starvation; the degrading return to the man who had cruelly deceived her--all was explained, all was excused now! With an infant at the breast, how could she obtain a new employment? With famine staring her in the face, what else could the friendless woman do but return to the father of her child? What claim had I on her, by comparison with him? What did it matter, now that the poor creature secretly returned the love that I felt for her? There was the child, an obstacle between us--there was his hold on her, now that he had got her back! What was my hold worth? All social

proprieties and all social laws answered the question: Nothing!

My head sunk on my breast; I received the blow in silence.

My good mother took my hand. "You understand it now, George?" she said, sorrowfully.

"Yes, mother; I understand it."

"There was one thing she wished me to say to you, my dear, which I have not mentioned yet. She entreats you not to suppose that she had the faintest idea of her situation when she attempted to destroy herself. Her first suspicion that it was possible she might become a mother was conveyed to her at Edinburgh, in a conversation with her aunt. It is impossible, George, not to feel compassionately toward this poor woman. Regrettable as her position is, I cannot see that she is to blame for it. She was the innocent victim of a vile fraud when that man married her; she has suffered undeservedly since; and she has behaved nobly to you and to me. I only do her justice in saying that she is a woman in a thousand--a woman worthy, under happier circumstances, to be my daughter and your wife. I feel for you, and feel with you, my dear--I do, with my whole heart."

So this scene in my life was, to all appearance, a scene closed forever. As it had been with my love, in the days of my boyhood, so it was again now with the love of my riper age!

Later in the day, when I had in some degree recovered my self-possession, I wrote to Mr. Van Brandt--as she had foreseen I should write!--to apologize for breaking my engagement to dine with him.

Could I trust to a letter also, to say the farewell words for me to the woman whom I had loved and lost? No! It was better for her, and better for me, that I should not write. And yet the idea of leaving her in silence was more than my fortitude could endure. Her last words at parting (as they were repeated to me by my mother) had expressed the hope that I should not think hardly of her in the future. How could I assure her that I should think of her tenderly to the end of my life? My mother's delicate tact and true sympathy showed me the way. "Send a little present, George," she said, "to the child. You bear no malice to the poor little child?" God knows I was not hard on the child! I went out myself and bought her a toy. I brought it home, and before I sent it away, I pinned a slip of paper to it, bearing this inscription: "To your little daughter, from George Germaine." There is nothing very pathetic, I suppose, in those words. And yet I burst out crying when I had

written them.

The next morning my mother and I set forth for my country-house in Perthshire. London was now unendurable to me. Traveling abroad I had tried already. Nothing was left but to go back to the Highlands, and to try what I could make of my life, with my mother still left to live for.