

CHAPTER XVIII. THE DARKENED ROOM.

THE little gentleman advances to my bedside. His silky white hair flows over his shoulders; he looks at us with faded blue eyes; he bows with a sad and subdued courtesy, and says, in the simplest manner, "I bid you welcome, gentlemen, to my house."

We are not content with merely thanking him; we naturally attempt to apologize for our intrusion. Our host defeats the attempt at the outset by making an apology on his own behalf.

"I happened to send for my servant a minute since," he proceeds, "and I only then heard that you were here. It is a custom of the house that nobody interrupts me over my books. Be pleased, sir, to accept my excuses," he adds, addressing himself to me, "for not having sooner placed myself and my household at your disposal. You have met, as I am sorry to hear, with an accident. Will you permit me to send for medical help? I ask the question a little abruptly, fearing that time may be of importance, and knowing that our nearest doctor lives at some distance from this house."

He speaks with a certain quaintly precise choice of words--more like a man dictating a letter than holding a conversation. The subdued sadness of his manner is reflected in the subdued sadness of his face. He and sorrow have apparently been old acquaintances, and have become used to each other for years past. The shadow of some past grief rests quietly and impenetrably over the whole man; I see it in his faded blue eyes, on his broad forehead, on his delicate lips, on his pale shriveled cheeks. My uneasy sense of committing an intrusion on him steadily increases, in spite of his courteous welcome. I explain to him that I am capable of treating my own case, having been myself in practice as a medical man; and this said, I revert to my interrupted excuses. I assure him that it is only within the last few moments that my traveling companion and I have become aware of the liberty which our guide has taken in introducing us, on his own sole responsibility, to the house. Mr. Dunross looks at me, as if he, like the guide, failed entirely to understand what my scruples and excuses mean. After a while the truth dawns on him. A faint smile flickers over his face; he lays his hand in a gentle, fatherly way on my shoulder.

"We are so used here to our Shetland hospitality," he says, "that we are slow to understand the hesitation which a stranger feels in taking advantage of it. Your guide is in no respect to blame, gentlemen. Every house in these

islands which is large enough to contain a spare room has its Guests' Chamber, always kept ready for occupation. When you travel my way, you come here as a matter of course; you stay here as long as you like; and, when you go away, I only do my duty as a good Shetlander in accompanying you on the first stage of your journey to bid you godspeed. The customs of centuries past elsewhere are modern customs here. I beg of you to give my servant all the directions which are necessary to your comfort, just as freely as you could give them in your own house."

He turns aside to ring a hand-bell on the table as he speaks; and notices in the guide's face plain signs that the man has taken offense at my disparaging allusion to him.

"Strangers cannot be expected to understand our ways, Andrew," says The Master of Books. "But you and I understand one another--and that is enough."

The guide's rough face reddens with pleasure. If a crowned king on a throne had spoken condescendingly to him, he could hardly have looked more proud of the honor conferred than he looks now. He makes a clumsy attempt to take the Master's hand and kiss it. Mr. Dunross gently repels the attempt, and gives him a little pat on the head. The guide looks at me and my friend as if he had been honored with the highest distinction that an earthly being can receive. The Master's hand had touched him kindly!

In a moment more, the gardener-groom appears at the door to answer the bell.

"You will move the medicine-chest into this room, Peter," says Mr. Dunross. "And you will wait on this gentleman, who is confined to his bed by an accident, exactly as you would wait on me if I were ill. If we both happen to ring for you together, you will answer his bell before you answer mine. The usual changes of linen are, of course, ready in the wardrobe there? Very good. Go now, and tell the cook to prepare a little dinner; and get a bottle of the old Madeira out of the cellar. You will least, in this room. These two gentlemen will be best pleased to dine together. Return here in five minutes' time, in case you are wanted; and show my guest, Peter, that I am right in believing you to be a good nurse as well as a good servant."

The silent and surly Peter brightens under the expression of the Master's confidence in him, as the guide brightened under the influence of the Master's caressing touch. The two men leave the room together.

We take advantage of the momentary silence that follows to introduce ourselves by name to our host, and to inform him of the circumstances under which we happen to be visiting Shetland. He listens in his subdued, courteous way; but he makes no inquiries about our relatives; he shows no interest in the arrival of the Government yacht and the Commissioner for Northern Lights. All sympathy with the doings of the outer world, all curiosity about persons of social position and notoriety, is evidently at an end in Mr. Dunross. For twenty years the little round of his duties and his occupations has been enough for him. Life has lost its priceless value to this man; and when Death comes to him he will receive the king of terrors as he might receive the last of his guests.

"Is there anything else I can do," he says, speaking more to himself than to us, "before I go back to my books?"

Something else occurs to him, even as he puts the question. He addresses my companion, with his faint, sad smile. "This will be a dull life, I am afraid, sir, for you. If you happen to be fond of angling, I can offer you some little amusement in that way. The lake is well stocked with fish; and I have a boy employed in the garden, who will be glad to attend on you in the boat."

My friend happens to be fond of fishing, and gladly accepts the invitation. The Master says his parting words to me before he goes back to his books.

"You may safely trust my man Peter to wait on you, Mr. Germaine, while you are so unfortunate as to be confined to this room. He has the advantage (in cases of illness) of being a very silent, undemonstrative person. At the same time he is careful and considerate, in his own reserved way. As to what I may term the lighter duties at your bedside such as reading to you, writing your letters for you while your right hand is still disabled, regulating the temperature in the room, and so on--though I cannot speak positively, I think it likely that these little services may be rendered to you by another person whom I have not mentioned yet. We shall see what happens in a few hours' time. In the meanwhile, sir, I ask permission to leave you to your rest."

With those words, he walks out of the room as quietly as he walked into it, and leaves his two guests to meditate gratefully on Shetland hospitality. We both wonder what those last mysterious words of our host mean; and we exchange more or less ingenious guesses on the subject of that nameless "other person" who may possibly attend on me--until the arrival of dinner turns our thoughts into a new course.

The dishes are few in number, but cooked to perfection and admirably served. I am too weary to eat much: a glass of the fine old Madeira revives me. We arrange our future plans while we are engaged over the meal. Our return to the yacht in Lerwick harbor is expected on the next day at the latest. As things are, I can only leave my companion to go back to the vessel, and relieve the minds of our friends of any needless alarm about me. On the day after, I engage to send on board a written report of the state of my health, by a messenger who can bring my portmanteau back with him.

These arrangements decided on, my friend goes away (at my own request) to try his skill as an angler in the lake. Assisted by the silent Peter and the well-stocked medicine-chest, I apply the necessary dressings to my wound, wrap myself in the comfortable morning-gown which is always kept ready in the Guests' Chamber, and lie down again on the bed to try the restorative virtues of sleep.

Before he leaves the room, silent Peter goes to the window, and asks in fewest possible words if he shall draw the curtains. In fewer words still--for I am feeling drowsy already--I answer No. I dislike shutting out the cheering light of day. To my morbid fancy, at that moment, it looks like resigning myself deliberately to the horrors of a long illness. The hand-bell is on my bedside table; and I can always ring for Peter if the light keeps me from sleeping. On this understanding, Peter mutely nods his head, and goes out.

For some minutes I lie in lazy contemplation of the companionable fire. Meanwhile the dressings on my wound and the embrocation on my sprained wrist steadily subdue the pains which I have felt so far. Little by little, the bright fire seems to be fading. Little by little, sleep steals on me, and all my troubles are forgotten.

I wake, after what seems to have been a long repose--I wake, feeling the bewilderment which we all experience on opening our eyes for the first time in a bed and a room that are new to us. Gradually collecting my thoughts, I find my perplexity considerably increased by a trifling but curious circumstance. The curtains which I had forbidden Peter to touch are drawn--closely drawn, so as to plunge the whole room in obscurity. And, more surprising still, a high screen with folding sides stands before the fire, and confines the light which it might otherwise give exclusively to the ceiling. I am literally enveloped in shadows. Has night come?

In lazy wonder, I turn my head on the pillow, and look on the other side of my bed.

Dark as it is, I discover instantly that I am not alone.

A shadowy figure stands by my bedside. The dim outline of the dress tells me that it is the figure of a woman. Straining my eyes, I fancy I can discern a wavy black object covering her head and shoulders which looks like a large veil. Her face is turned toward me, but no distinguishing feature in it is visible. She stands like a statue, with her hands crossed in front of her, faintly relieved against the dark substance of her dress. This I can see--and this is all.

There is a moment of silence. The shadowy being finds its voice, and speaks first.

"I hope you feel better, sir, after your rest?"

The voice is low, with a certain faint sweetness or tone which falls soothingly on my ear. The accent is unmistakably the accent of a refined and cultivated person. After making my acknowledgments to the unknown and half-seen lady, I venture to ask the inevitable question, "To whom have I the honor of speaking?"

The lady answers, "I am Miss Dunross; and I hope, if you have no objection to it, to help Peter in nursing you."

This, then, is the "other person" dimly alluded to by our host! I think directly of the heroic conduct of Miss Dunross among her poor and afflicted neighbors; and I do not forget the melancholy result of her devotion to others which has left her an incurable invalid. My anxiety to see this lady more plainly increases a hundred-fold. I beg her to add to my grateful sense of her kindness by telling me why the room is so dark "Surely," I say, "it cannot be night already?"

"You have not been asleep," she answers, "for more than two hours. The mist has disappeared, and the sun is shining."

I take up the bell, standing on the table at my side.

"May I ring for Peter, Miss Dunross?"

"To open the curtains, Mr. Germaine?"

"Yes--with your permission. I own I should like to see the sunlight."

"I will send Peter to you immediately."

The shadowy figure of my new nurse glides away. In another moment, unless I say something to stop her, the woman whom I am so eager to see will have left the room.

"Pray don't go!" I say. "I cannot think of troubling you to take a trifling message for me. The servant will come in, if I only ring the bell."

She pauses--more shadowy than ever--halfway between the bed and the door, and answers a little sadly:

"Peter will not let in the daylight while I am in the room. He closed the curtains by my order."

The reply puzzles me. Why should Peter keep the room dark while Miss Dunross is in it? Are her eyes weak? No; if her eyes were weak, they would be protected by a shade. Dark as it is, I can see that she does not wear a shade. Why has the room been darkened--if not for me? I cannot venture on asking the question--I can only make my excuses in due form.

"Invalids only think of themselves," I say. "I supposed that you had kindly darkened the room on my account."

She glides back to my bedside before she speaks again. When she does answer, it is in these startling words:

"You were mistaken, Mr. Germaine. Your room has been darkened--not on your account, but on mine."