

## **CHAPTER XX. THE GREEN FLAG.**

"I CONGRATULATE you, Mr. Germaine, on your power of painting in words. Your description gives me a vivid idea of Mrs. Van Brandt."

"Does the portrait please you, Miss Dunross?"

"May I speak as plainly as usual?"

"Certainly!"

"Well, then, plainly, I don't like your Mrs. Van Brandt."

Ten days had passed; and thus far Miss Dunross had made her way into my confidence already!

By what means had she induced me to trust her with those secret and sacred sorrows of my life which I had hitherto kept for my mother's ear alone? I can easily recall the rapid and subtle manner in which her sympathies twined themselves round mine; but I fail entirely to trace the infinite gradations of approach by which she surprised and conquered my habitual reserve. The strongest influence of all, the influence of the eye, was not hers. When the light was admitted into the room she was shrouded in her veil. At all other times the curtains were drawn, the screen was before the fire--I could see dimly the outline of her face, and I could see no more. The secret of her influence was perhaps partly attributable to the simple and sisterly manner in which she spoke to me, and partly to the indescribable interest which associated itself with her mere presence in the room. Her father had told me that she "carried the air of heaven with her." In my experience, I can only say that she carried something with her which softly and inscrutably possessed itself of my will, and made me as unconsciously obedient to her wishes as if I had been her dog. The love-story of my boyhood, in all its particulars, down even to the gift of the green flag; the mystic predictions of Dame Dermody; the loss of every trace of my little Mary of former days; the rescue of Mrs. Van Brandt from the river; the apparition of her in the summer-house; the after-meetings with her in Edinburgh and in London; the final parting which had left its mark of sorrow on my face--all these events, all these sufferings, I confided to her as unreservedly as I have confided them to these pages. And the result, as she sat by me in the darkened room, was summed up, with a woman's headlong impetuosity of judgment, in the words that I have just written--"I don't like your Mrs. Van

Brandt!"

"Why not?" I asked.

She answered instantly, "Because you ought to love nobody but Mary."

"But Mary has been lost to me since I was a boy of thirteen."

"Be patient, and you will find her again. Mary is patient--Mary is waiting for you. When you meet her, you will be ashamed to remember that you ever loved Mrs. Van Brandt--you will look on your separation from that woman as the happiest event of your life. I may not live to hear of it--but you will live to own that I was right."

Her perfectly baseless conviction that time would yet bring about my meeting with Mary, partly irritated, partly amused me.

"You seem to agree with Dame Dermody," I said. "You believe that our two destinies are one. No matter what time may elapse, or what may happen in the time, you believe my marriage with Mary is still a marriage delayed, and nothing more?"

"I firmly believe it."

"Without knowing why--except that you dislike the idea of my marrying Mrs. Van Brandt?"

She knew that this view of her motive was not far from being the right one--and, womanlike, she shifted the discussion to new ground.

"Why do you call her Mrs. Van Brandt?" she asked. "Mrs. Van Brandt is the namesake of your first love. If you are so fond of her, why don't you call her Mary?"

I was ashamed to give the true reason--it seemed so utterly unworthy of a man of any sense or spirit. Noticing my hesitation, she insisted on my answering her; she forced me to make my humiliating confession.

"The man who has parted us," I said, "called her Mary. I hate him with such a jealous hatred that he has even disgusted me with the name! It lost all its charm for me when it passed his lips."

I had anticipated that she would laugh at me. No! She suddenly raised her

head as if she were looking at me intently in the dark.

"How fond you must be of that woman!" she said. "Do you dream of her now?"

"I never dream of her now."

"Do you expect to see the apparition of her again?"

"It may be so--if a time comes when she is in sore need of help, and when she has no friend to look to but me."

"Did you ever see the apparition of your little Mary?"

"Never!"

"But you used once to see her--as Dame Dermody predicted--in dreams?"

"Yes--when I was a lad."

"And, in the after-time, it was not Mary, but Mrs. Van Brandt who came to you in dreams--who appeared to you in the spirit, when she was far away from you in the body? Poor old Dame Dermody. She little thought, in her life-time, that her prediction would be fulfilled by the wrong woman!"

To that result her inquiries had inscrutably conducted her! If she had only pressed them a little further--if she had not unconsciously led me astray again by the very next question that fell from her lips--she must have communicated to my mind the idea obscurely germinating in hers--the idea of a possible identity between the Mary of my first love and Mrs. Van Brandt!

"Tell me," she went on. "If you met with your little Mary now, what would she be like? What sort of woman would you expect to see?"

I could hardly help laughing. "How can I tell," I rejoined, "at this distance of time?"

"Try!" she said.

Reasoning my way from the known personality to the unknown, I searched my memory for the image of the frail and delicate child of my remembrance: and I drew the picture of a frail and delicate woman--the most absolute contrast imaginable to Mrs. Van Brandt!

The half-realized idea of identity in the mind of Miss Dunross dropped out of it instantly, expelled by the substantial conclusion which the contrast implied. Alike ignorant of the aftergrowth of health, strength, and beauty which time and circumstances had developed in the Mary of my youthful days, we had alike completely and unconsciously misled one another. Once more, I had missed the discovery of the truth, and missed it by a hair-breadth!

"I infinitely prefer your portrait of Mary," said Miss Dunross, "to your portrait of Mrs. Van Brandt. Mary realizes my idea of what a really attractive woman ought to be. How you can have felt any sorrow for the loss of that other person (I detest buxom women!) passes my understanding. I can't tell you how interested I am in Mary! I want to know more about her. Where is that pretty present of needle-work which the poor little thing embroidered for you so industriously? Do let me see the green flag!"

She evidently supposed that I carried the green flag about me! I felt a little confused as I answered her.

"I am sorry to disappoint you. The green flag is somewhere in my house in Perthshire."

"You have not got it with you?" she exclaimed. "You leave her keepsake lying about anywhere? Oh, Mr. Germaine, you have indeed forgotten Mary! A woman, in your place, would have parted with her life rather than part with the one memorial left of the time when she first loved!"

She spoke with such extraordinary earnestness--with such agitation, I might almost say--that she quite startled me.

"Dear Miss Dunross," I remonstrated, "the flag is not lost."

"I should hope not!" she interposed, quickly. "If you lose the green flag, you lose the last relic of Mary--and more than that, if my belief is right."

"What do you believe?"

"You will laugh at me if I tell you. I am afraid my first reading of your face was wrong--I am afraid you are a hard man."

"Indeed you do me an injustice. I entreat you to answer me as frankly as usual. What do I lose in losing the last relic of Mary?"

"You lose the one hope I have for you," she answered, gravely--"the hope of your meeting and your marriage with Mary in the time to come. I was sleepless last night, and I was thinking of your pretty love story by the banks of the bright English lake. The longer I thought, the more firmly I felt the conviction that the poor child's green flag is destined to have its innocent influence in forming your future life. Your happiness is waiting for you in that artless little keepsake! I can't explain or justify this belief of mine. It is one of my eccentricities, I suppose--like training my cats to perform to the music of my harp. But, if I were your old friend, instead of being only your friend of a few days, I would leave you no peace--I would beg and entreat and persist, as only a woman can persist--until I had made Mary's gift as close a companion of yours, as your mother's portrait in the locket there at your watch-chain. While the flag is with you, Mary's influence is with you; Mary's love is still binding you by the dear old tie; and Mary and you, after years of separation, will meet again!"

The fancy was in itself pretty and poetical; the earnestness which had given expression to it would have had its influence over a man of a far harder nature than mine. I confess she had made me ashamed, if she had done nothing more, of my neglect of the green flag.

"I will look for it the moment I am at home again," I said; "and I will take care that it is carefully preserved for the future."

"I want more than that," she rejoined. "If you can't wear the flag about you, I want it always to be with you--to go wherever you go. When they brought your luggage here from the vessel at Lerwick, you were particularly anxious about the safety of your traveling writing-desk--the desk there on the table. Is there anything very valuable in it?"

"It contains my money, and other things that I prize far more highly--my mother's letters, and some family relics which I should be very sorry to lose. Besides, the desk itself has its own familiar interest as my constant traveling companion of many years past."

Miss Dunross rose, and came close to the chair in which I was sitting.

"Let Mary's flag be your constant traveling companion," she said. "You have spoken far too gratefully of my services here as your nurse. Reward me beyond my deserts. Make allowances, Mr. Germaine, for the superstitious fancies of a lonely, dreamy woman. Promise me that the green flag shall take its place among the other little treasures in your desk!"

It is needless to say that I made the allowances and gave the promise--gave it, resolving seriously to abide by it. For the first time since I had known her, she put her poor, wasted hand in mine, and pressed it for a moment. Acting heedlessly under my first grateful impulse, I lifted her hand to my lips before I released it. She started--trembled--and suddenly and silently passed out of the room.