CHAPTER XXIII. THE KISS.

SHE had need of me again. She had claimed me again. I felt all the old love, all the old devotion owning her power once more. Whatever had mortified or angered me at our last interview was forgiven and forgotten now. My whole being still thrilled with the mingled awe and rapture of beholding the Vision of her that had come to me for the second time. The minutes passed--and I stood by the fire like a man entranced; thinking only of her spoken words, "Remember me. Come to me;" looking only at her mystic writing, "At the month's end, In the shadow of Saint Paul's."

The month's end was still far off; the apparition of her had shown itself to me, under some subtle prevision of trouble that was still in the future. Ample time was before me for the pilgrimage to which I was self-dedicated already--my pilgrimage to the shadow of Saint Paul's. Other men, in my position, might have hesitated as to the right understanding of the place to which they were bidden. Other men might have wearied their memories by recalling the churches, the institutions, the streets, the towns in foreign countries, all consecrated to Christian reverence by the great apostle's name, and might have fruitlessly asked themselves in which direction they were first to turn their steps. No such difficulty troubled me. My first conclusion was the one conclusion that was acceptable to my mind. "Saint Paul's" meant the famous Cathedral of London. Where the shadow of the great church fell, there, at the month's end, I should find her, or the trace of her. In London once more, and nowhere else, I was destined to see the woman I loved, in the living body, as certainly as I had just seen her in the ghostly presence.

Who could interpret the mysterious sympathies that still united us, in defiance of distance, in defiance of time? Who could predict to what end our lives were tending in the years that were to come?

Those questions were still present to my thoughts; my eyes were still fixed on the mysterious writing--when I became instinctively aware of the strange silence in the room. Instantly the lost remembrance of Miss Dunross came back to me. Stung by my own sense of self-reproach, I turned with a start, and looked toward her chair by the window.

The chair was empty. I was alone in the room.

Why had she left me secretly, without a word of farewell? Because she was

suffering, in mind or body? Or because she resented, naturally resented, my neglect of her?

The bare suspicion that I had given her pain was intolerable to me. I rang my bell, to make inquiries.

The bell was answered, not, as usual, by the silent servant Peter, but by a woman of middle age, very quietly and neatly dressed, whom I had once or twice met on the way to and from my room, and of whose exact position in the house I was still ignorant.

"Do you wish to see Peter?" she asked.

"No. I wish to know where Miss Dunross is."

"Miss Dunross is in her room. She has sent me with this letter."

I took the letter, feeling some surprise and uneasiness. It was the first time Miss Dunross had communicated with me in that formal way. I tried to gain further information by questioning her messenger.

"Are you Miss Dunross's maid?" I asked.

"I have served Miss Dunross for many years," was the answer, spoken very ungraciously.

"Do you think she would receive me if I sent you with a message to her?"

"I can't say, sir. The letter may tell you. You will do well to read the letter."

We looked at each other. The woman's preconceived impression of me was evidently an unfavorable one. Had I indeed pained or offended Miss Dunross? And had the servant--perhaps the faithful servant who loved her--discovered and resented it? The woman frowned as she looked at me. It would be a mere waste of words to persist in questioning her. I let her go.

Left by myself again, I read the letter. It began, without any form of address, in these lines:

"I write, instead of speaking to you, because my self-control has already been severely tried, and I am not strong enough to bear more. For my father's sake--not for my own--I must take all the care I can of the little health that I have left.

"Putting together what you have told me of the visionary creature whom you saw in the summer-house in Scotland, and what you said when you questioned me in your room a little while since, I cannot fail to infer that the same vision has shown itself to you, for the second time. The fear that I felt, the strange things that I saw (or thought I saw), may have been imperfect reflections in my mind of what was passing in yours. I do not stop to inquire whether we are both the victims of a delusion, or whether we are the chosen recipients of a supernatural communication. The result, in either case, is enough for me. You are once more under the influence of Mrs. Van Brandt. I will not trust myself to tell you of the anxieties and forebodings by which I am oppressed: I will only acknowledge that my one hope for you is in your speedy reunion with the worthier object of your constancy and devotion. I still believe, and I am consoled in believing, that you and your first love will meet again.

"Having written so far, I leave the subject--not to return to it, except in my own thoughts.

"The necessary preparations for your departure to-morrow are all made. Nothing remains but to wish you a safe and pleasant journey home. Do not, I entreat you, think me insensible of what I owe to you, if I say my farewell words here.

"The little services which you have allowed me to render you have brightened the closing days of my life. You have left me a treasury of happy memories which I shall hoard, when you are gone, with miserly care. Are you willing to add new claims to my grateful remembrance? I ask it of you, as a last favor--do not attempt to see me again! Do not expect me to take a personal leave of you! The saddest of all words is 'Good-by': I have fortitude enough to write it, and no more. God preserve and prosper you--farewell!

"One more request. I beg that you will not forget what you promised me, when I told you my foolish fancy about the green flag. Wherever you go, let Mary's keepsake go with you. No written answer is necessary--I would rather not receive it. Look up, when you leave the house to-morrow, at the center window over the doorway--that will be answer enough."

To say that these melancholy lines brought the tears into my eyes is only to acknowledge that I had sympathies which could be touched. When I had in some degree recovered my composure, the impulse which urged me to write to Miss Dunross was too strong to be resisted. I did not trouble her with a long letter; I only entreated her to reconsider her decision with all the art of

persuasion which I could summon to help me. The answer was brought back by the servant who waited on Miss Dunross, in four resolute words: "It can not be." This time the woman spoke out before she left me. "If you have any regard for my mistress," she said sternly, "don't make her write to you again." She looked at me with a last lowering frown, and left the room.

It is needless to say that the faithful servant's words only increased my anxiety to see Miss Dunross once more before we parted--perhaps forever. My one last hope of success in attaining this object lay in approaching her indirectly through the intercession of her father.

I sent Peter to inquire if I might be permitted to pay my respects to his master that evening. My messenger returned with an answer that was a new disappointment to me. Mr. Dunross begged that I would excuse him, if he deferred the proposed interview until the next morning. The next morning was the morning of my departure. Did the message mean that he had no wish to see me again until the time had come to take leave of him? I inquired of Peter whether his master was particularly occupied that evening. He was unable to tell me. "The Master of Books" was not in his study, as usual. When he sent his message to me, he was sitting by the sofa in his daughter's room.

Having answered in those terms, the man left me by myself until the next morning. I do not wish my bitterest enemy a sadder time in his life than the time I passed during the last night of my residence under Mr. Dunross's roof.

After walking to and fro in the room until I was weary, I thought of trying to divert my mind from the sad thoughts that oppressed it by reading. The one candle which I had lighted failed to sufficiently illuminate the room. Advancing to the mantel-piece to light the second candle which stood there, I noticed the unfinished letter to my mother lying where I had placed it, when Miss Dunross's servant first presented herself before me. Having lighted the second candle, I took up the letter to put it away among my other papers. Doing this (while my thoughts were still dwelling on Miss Dunross), I mechanically looked at the letter again--and instantly discovered a change in it.

The written characters traced by the hand of the apparition had vanished! Below the last lines written by Miss Dunross nothing met my eyes now but the blank white paper!

My first impulse was to look at my watch.

When the ghostly presence had written in my sketch-book, the characters had disappeared after an interval of three hours. On this occasion, as nearly as I could calculate, the writing had vanished in one hour only.

Reverting to the conversation which I had held with Mrs. Van Brandt when we met at Saint Anthony's Well, and to the discoveries which followed at a later period of my life, I can only repeat that she had again been the subject of a trance or dream, when the apparition of her showed itself to me for the second time. As before, she had freely trusted me and freely appealed to me to help her, in the dreaming state, when her spirit was free to recognize my spirit. When she had come to herself, after an interval of an hour, she had again felt ashamed of the familiar manner in which she had communicated with me in the trance--had again unconsciously counteracted by her waking-will the influence of her sleeping-will; and had thus caused the writing once more to disappear, in an hour from the moment when the pen had traced (or seemed to trace) it.

This is still the one explanation that I can offer. At the time when the incident happened, I was far from being fully admitted to the confidence of Mrs. Van Brandt; and I was necessarily incapable of arriving at any solution of the mystery, right or wrong. I could only put away the letter, doubting vaguely whether my own senses had not deceived me. After the distressing thoughts which Miss Dunross's letter had roused in my mind, I was in no humor to employ my ingenuity in finding a clew to the mystery of the vanished writing. My nerves were irritated; I felt a sense of angry discontent with myself and with others. "Go where I may" (I thought impatiently), "the disturbing influence of women seems to be the only influence that I am fated to feel." As I still paced backward and forward in my room--it was useless to think now of fixing my attention on a book--I fancied I understood the motives which made men as young as I was retire to end their lives in a monastery. I drew aside the window curtains, and looked out. The only prospect that met my view was the black gulf of darkness in which the lake lay hidden. I could see nothing; I could do nothing; I could think of nothing. The one alternative before me was that of trying to sleep. My medical knowledge told me plainly that natural sleep was, in my nervous condition, one of the unattainable luxuries of life for that night. The medicine-chest which Mr. Dunross had placed at my disposal remained in the room. I mixed for myself a strong sleeping draught, and sullenly took refuge from my troubles in bed.

It is a peculiarity of most of the soporific drugs that they not only act in a totally different manner on different constitutions, but that they are not

even to be depended on to act always in the same manner on the same person. I had taken care to extinguish the candles before I got into my bed. Under ordinary circumstances, after I had lain quietly in the darkness for half an hour, the draught that I had taken would have sent me to sleep. In the present state of my nerves the draught stupefied me, and did no more.

Hour after hour I lay perfectly still, with my eyes closed, in the semi-sleeping, semi-wakeful state which is so curiously characteristic of the ordinary repose of a dog. As the night wore on, such a sense of heaviness oppressed my eyelids that it was literally impossible for me to open them--such a masterful languor possessed all my muscles that I could no more move on my pillow than if I had been a corpse. And yet, in this somnolent condition, my mind was able to pursue lazy trains of pleasant thought. My sense of hearing was so acute that it caught the faintest sounds made by the passage of the night-breeze through the rushes of the lake. Inside my bed-chamber, I was even more keenly sensible of those weird night-noises in the heavy furniture of a room, of those sudden settlements of extinct coals in the grate, so familiar to bad sleepers, so startling to overwrought nerves! It is not a scientifically correct statement, but it exactly describes my condition, that night, to say that one half of me was asleep and the other half awake.

How many hours of the night had passed, when my irritable sense of hearing became aware of a new sound in the room, I cannot tell. I can only relate that I found myself on a sudden listening intently, with fast-closed eyes. The sound that disturbed me was the faintest sound imaginable, as of something soft and light traveling slowly over the surface of the carpet, and brushing it just loud enough to be heard.

Little by little, the sound came nearer and nearer to my bed--and then suddenly stopped just as I fancied it was close by me.

I still lay immovable, with closed eyes; drowsily waiting for the next sound that might reach my ears; drowsily content with the silence, if the silence continued. My thoughts (if thoughts they could be called) were drifting back again into their former course, when I became suddenly conscious of soft breathing just above me. The next moment I felt a touch on my forehead--light, soft, tremulous, like the touch of lips that had kissed me. There was a momentary pause. Then a low sigh trembled through the silence. Then I heard again the still, small sound of something brushing its way over the carpet; traveling this time from my bed, and moving so rapidly that in a moment more it was lost in the silence of the night.

Still stupefied by the drug that I had taken, I could lazily wonder what had happened, and I could do no more. Had living lips really touched me? Was the sound that I had heard really the sound of a sigh? Or was it all delusion, beginning and ending in a dream? The time passed without my deciding, or caring to decide, those questions. Minute by minute, the composing influence of the draught began at last to strengthen its hold on my brain. A cloud seemed to pass softly over my last waking impressions. One after another, the ties broke gently that held me to conscious life. I drifted peacefully into perfect sleep.

Shortly after sunrise, I awoke. When I regained the use of my memory, my first clear recollection was the recollection of the soft breathing which I had felt above me--then of the touch on my forehead, and of the sigh which I had heard after it. Was it possible that some one had entered my room in the night? It was quite possible. I had not locked the door--I had never been in the habit of locking the door during my residence under Mr. Dunross's roof.

After thinking it over a little, I rose to examine my room.

Nothing in the shape of a discovery rewarded me, until I reached the door. Though I had not locked it overnight, I had certainly satisfied myself that it was closed before I went to bed. It was now ajar. Had it opened again, through being imperfectly shut? or had a person, after entering and leaving my room, forgotten to close it?

Accidentally looking downward while I was weighing these probabilities, I noticed a small black object on the carpet, lying just under the key, on the inner side of the door. I picked the thing up, and found that it was a torn morsel of black lace.

The instant I saw the fragment, I was reminded of the long black veil, hanging below her waist, which it was the habit of Miss Dunross to wear. Was it her dress, then, that I had heard softly traveling over the carpet; her kiss that had touched my forehead; her sigh that had trembled through the silence? Had the ill-fated and noble creature taken her last leave of me in the dead of night, trusting the preservation of her secret to the deceitful appearances which persuaded her that I was asleep? I looked again at the fragment of black lace. Her long veil might easily have been caught, and torn, by the projecting key, as she passed rapidly through the door on her way out of my room. Sadly and reverently I laid the morsel of lace among the treasured memorials which I had brought with me from home. To the end of her life, I vowed it, she should be left undisturbed in the belief that her secret was safe in her own breast! Ardently as I still longed to take her hand

at parting, I now resolved to make no further effort to see her. I might not be master of my own emotions; something in my face or in my manner might betray me to her quick and delicate perception. Knowing what I now knew, the last sacrifice I could make to her would be to obey her wishes. I made the sacrifice.

In an hour more Peter informed me that the ponies were at the door, and that the Master was waiting for me in the outer hall.

I noticed that Mr. Dunross gave me his hand, without looking at me. His faded blue eyes, during the few minutes while we were together, were not once raised from the ground.

"God speed you on your journey, sir, and guide you safely home," he said. "I beg you to forgive me if I fail to accompany you on the first few miles of your journey. There are reasons which oblige me to remain with my daughter in the house."

He was scrupulously, almost painfully, courteous; but there was something in his manner which, for the first time in my experience, seemed designedly to keep me at a distance from him. Knowing the intimate sympathy, the perfect confidence, which existed between the father and daughter, a doubt crossed my mind whether the secret of the past night was entirely a secret to Mr. Dunross. His next words set that doubt at rest, and showed me the truth.

In thanking him for his good wishes, I attempted also to express to him (and through him to Miss Dunross) my sincere sense of gratitude for the kindness which I had received under his roof. He stopped me, politely and resolutely, speaking with that quaintly precise choice of language which I h ad remarked as characteristic of him at our first interview.

"It is in your power, sir," he said, "to return any obligation which you may think you have incurred on leaving my house. If you will be pleased to consider your residence here as an unimportant episode in your life, which ends--absolutely ends--with your departure, you will more than repay any kindness that you may have received as my guest. In saying this, I speak under a sense of duty which does entire justice to you as a gentleman and a man of honor. In return, I can only trust to you not to misjudge my motives, if I abstain from explaining myself any further."

A faint color flushed his pale cheeks. He waited, with a certain proud resignation, for my reply. I respected her secret, respected it more resolutely

than ever, before her father.

"After all that I owe to you, sir," I answered, "your wishes are my commands." Saying that, and saying no more, I bowed to him with marked respect, and left the house.

Mounting my pony at the door, I looked up at the center window, as she had bidden me. It was open; but dark curtains, jealously closed, kept out the light from the room within. At the sound of the pony's hoofs on the rough island road, as the animal moved, the curtains were parted for a few inches only. Through the gap in the dark draperies a wan white hand appeared; waved tremulously a last farewell; and vanished from my view. The curtains closed again on her dark and solitary life. The dreary wind sounded its long, low dirge over the rippling waters of the lake. The ponies took their places in the ferryboat which was kept for the passage of animals to and from the island. With slow, regular strokes the men rowed us to the mainland and took their leave. I looked back at the distant house. I thought of her in the dark room, waiting patiently for death. Burning tears blinded me. The guide took my bridle in his hand: "You're not well, sir," he said; "I will lead the pony."

When I looked again at the landscape round me, we had descended in the interval from the higher ground to the lower. The house and the lake had disappeared, to be seen no more.