

CHAPTER XXV. I KEEP MY APPOINTMENT.

THE poverty-stricken aspect of the street when we entered it, the dirty and dilapidated condition of the house when we drew up at the door, would have warned most men, in my position, to prepare themselves for a distressing discovery when they were admitted to the interior of the dwelling. The first impression which the place produced on my mind suggested, on the contrary, that the boy's answers to my questions had led me astray. It was simply impossible to associate Mrs. Van Brandt (as I remembered her) with the spectacle of such squalid poverty as I now beheld. I rang the door-bell, feeling persuaded beforehand that my inquiries would lead to no useful result.

As I lifted my hand to the bell, my little companion's dread of a beating revived in full force. He hid himself behind me; and when I asked what he was about, he answered, confidentially: "Please stand between us, sir, when mother opens the door!"

A tall and truculent woman answered the bell. No introduction was necessary. Holding a cane in her hand, she stood self-proclaimed as my small friend's mother.

"I thought it was that vagabond of a boy of mine," she explained, as an apology for the exhibition of the cane. "He has been gone on an errand more than two hours. What did you please to want, sir?"

I interceded for the unfortunate boy before I entered on my own business.

"I must beg you to forgive your son this time," I said. "I found him lost in the streets; and I have brought him home."

The woman's astonishment when she heard what I had done, and discovered her son behind me, literally struck her dumb. The language of the eye, superseding on this occasion the language of the tongue, plainly revealed the impression that I had produced on her: "You bring my lost brat home in a cab! Mr. Stranger, you are mad."

"I hear that you have a lady named Brand lodging in the house," I went on. "I dare say I am mistaken in supposing her to be a lady of the same name whom I know. But I should like to make sure whether I am right or wrong. Is it too late to disturb your lodger to-night?"

The woman recovered the use of her tongue.

"My lodger is up and waiting for that little fool, who doesn't know his way about London yet!" She emphasized those words by shaking her brawny fist at her son--who instantly returned to his place of refuge behind the tail of my coat. "Have you got the money?" inquired the terrible person, shouting at her hidden offspring over my shoulder. "Or have you lost that as well as your own stupid little self?"

The boy showed himself again, and put the money into his mother's knotty hand. She counted it, with eyes which satisfied themselves fiercely that each coin was of genuine silver--and then became partially pacified.

"Go along upstairs," she growled, addressing her son; "and don't keep the lady waiting any longer. They're half starved, she and her child," the woman proceeded, turning to me. "The food my boy has got for them in his basket will be the first food the mother has tasted today. She's pawned everything by this time; and what she's to do unless you help her is more than I can say. The doctor does what he can; but he told me today, if she wasn't better nourished, it was no use sending for him. Follow the boy; and see for yourself if it's the lady you know."

I listened to the woman, still feeling persuaded that I had acted under a delusion in going to her house. How was it possible to associate the charming object of my heart's worship with the miserable story of destitution which I had just heard? I stopped the boy on the first landing, and told him to announce me simply as a doctor, who had been informed of Mrs. Brand's illness, and who had called to see her.

We ascended a second flight of stairs, and a third. Arrived now at the top of the house, the boy knocked at the door that was nearest to us on the landing. No audible voice replied. He opened the door without ceremony, and went in. I waited outside to hear what was said. The door was left ajar. If the voice of "Mrs. Brand" was (as I believed it would prove to be) the voice of a stranger, I resolved to offer her delicately such help as lay within my power, and to return forthwith to my post under "the shadow of Saint Paul's."

The first voice that spoke to the boy was the voice of a child.

"I'm so hungry, Jemmy--I'm so hungry!"

"All right, missy--I've got you something to eat."

"Be quick, Jemmy! Be quick!"

There was a momentary pause; and then I heard the boy's voice once more.

"There's a slice of bread-and-butter, missy. You must wait for your egg till I can boil it. Don't you eat too fast, or you'll choke yourself. What's the matter with your mamma? Are you asleep, ma'am?"

I could barely hear the answering voice--it was so faint; and it uttered but one word: "No!"

The boy spoke again.

"Cheer up, missus. There's a doctor outside waiting to see you."

This time there was no audible reply. The boy showed himself to me at the door. "Please to come in, sir. I can't make anything of her."

It would have been misplaced delicacy to have hesitated any longer to enter the room. I went in.

There, at the opposite end of a miserably furnished bed-chamber, lying back feebly in a tattered old arm-chair, was one more among the thousands of forlorn creatures, starving that night in the great city. A white handkerchief was laid over her face as if to screen it from the flame of the fire hard by. She lifted the handkerchief, startled by the sound of my footsteps as I entered the room. I looked at her, and saw in the white, wan, death-like face the face of the woman I loved!

For a moment the horror of the discovery turned me faint and giddy. In another instant I was kneeling by her chair. My arm was round her--her head lay on my shoulder. She was past speaking, past crying out: she trembled silently, and that was all. I said nothing. No words passed my lips, no tears came to my relief. I held her to me; and she let me hold her. The child, devouring its bread-and-butter at a little round table, stared at us. The boy, on his knees before the grate, mending the fire, stared at us. And the slow minutes lagged on; and the buzzing of a fly in a corner was the only sound in the room.

The instincts of the profession to which I had been trained, rather than any active sense of the horror of the situation in which I was placed, roused me

at last. She was starving! I saw it in the deadly color of her skin; I felt it in the faint, quick flutter of her pulse. I called the boy to me, and sent him to the nearest public-house for wine and biscuits. "Be quick about it," I said; "and you shall have more money for yourself than ever you had in your life!" The boy looked at me, spit on the coins in his hand, said, "That's for luck!" and ran out of the room as never boy ran yet.

I turned to speak my first words of comfort to the mother. The cry of the child stopped me.

"I'm so hungry! I'm so hungry!"

I set more food before the famished child and kissed her. She looked up at me with wondering eyes.

"Are you a new papa?" the little creature asked. "My other papa never kisses me."

I looked at the mother. Her eyes were closed; the tears flowed slowly over her worn, white cheeks. I took her frail hand in mine. "Happier days are coming," I said; "you are my care now." There was no answer. She still trembled silently, and that was all.

In less than five minutes the boy returned, and earned his promised reward. He sat on the floor by the fire counting his treasure, the one happy creature in the room. I soaked some crumbled morsels of biscuit in the wine, and, little by little, I revived her failing strength by nourishment administered at intervals in that cautious form. After a while she raised her head, and looked at me with wondering eyes that were pitiably like the eyes of her child. A faint, delicate flush began to show itself in her face. She spoke to me, for the first time, in whispering tones that I could just hear as I sat close at her side.

"How did you find me? Who showed you the way to this place?"

She paused; painfully recalling the memory of something that was slow to come back. Her color deepened; she found the lost remembrance, and looked at me with a timid curiosity. "What brought you here?" she asked. "Was it my dream?"

"Wait, dearest, till you are stronger, and I will tell you all."

I lifted her gently, and laid her on the wretched bed. The child followed us,

and climbing to the bedstead with my help, nestled at her mother's side. I sent the boy away to tell the mistress of the house that I should remain with my patient, watching her progress toward recovery, through the night. He went out, jingling his money joyfully in his pocket. We three were left together.

As the long hours followed each other, she fell at intervals into a broken sleep; waking with a start, and looking at me wildly as if I had been a stranger at her bedside. Toward morning the nourishment which I still carefully administered wrought its healthful change in her pulse, and composed her to quieter slumbers. When the sun rose she was sleeping as peacefully as the child at her side. I was able to leave her, until my return later in the day, under the care of the woman of the house. The magic of money transformed this termagant and terrible person into a docile and attentive nurse--so eager to follow my instructions exactly that she begged me to commit them to writing before I went away. For a moment I still lingered alone at the bedside of the sleeping woman, and satisfied myself for the hundredth time that her life was safe, before I left her. It was the sweetest of all rewards to feel sure of this--to touch her cool forehead lightly with my lips--to look, and look again, at the poor worn face, always dear, always beautiful, to my eyes. change as it might. I closed the door softly and went out in the bright morning, a happy man again. So close together rise the springs of joy and sorrow in human life! So near in our heart, as in our heaven, is the brightest sunshine to the blackest cloud!