

## **CHAPTER XXVI. CONVERSATION WITH MY MOTHER.**

I REACHED my own house in time to snatch two or three hours of repose, before I paid my customary morning visit to my mother in her own room. I observed, in her reception of me on this occasion, certain peculiarities of look and manner which were far from being familiar in my experience of her.

When our eyes first met, she regarded me with a wistful, questioning look, as if she were troubled by some doubt which she shrunk from expressing in words. And when I inquired after her health, as usual, she surprised me by answering as impatiently as if she resented my having mentioned the subject. For a moment, I was inclined to think these changes signified that she had discovered my absence from home during the night, and that she had some suspicion of the true cause of it. But she never alluded, even in the most distant manner, to Mrs. Van Brandt; and not a word dropped from her lips which implied, directly or indirectly, that I had pained or disappointed her. I could only conclude that she had something important to say in relation to herself or to me--and that for reasons of her own she unwillingly abstained from giving expression to it at that time.

Reverting to our ordinary topics of conversation, we touched on the subject (always interesting to my mother) of my visit to Shetland. Speaking of this, we naturally spoke also of Miss Dunross. Here, again, when I least expected it, there was another surprise in store for me.

"You were talking the other day," said my mother, "of the green flag which poor Dermody's daughter worked for you, when you were both children. Have you really kept it all this time?"

"Yes."

"Where have you left it? In Scotland?"

"I have brought it with me to London."

"Why?"

"I promised Miss Dunross to take the green flag with me, wherever I might go."

My mother smiled.

"Is it possible, George, that you think about this as the young lady in Shetland thinks? After all the years that have passed, you believe in the green flag being the means of bringing Mary Dermody and yourself together again?"

"Certainly not! I am only humoring one of the fancies of poor Miss Dunross. Could I refuse to grant her trifling request, after all I owed to her kindness?"

The smile left my mother's face. She looked at me attentively.

"Miss Dunross seems to have produced a very favorable impression on you," she said.

"I own it. I feel deeply interested in her."

"If she had not been an incurable invalid, George, I too might have become interested in Miss Dunross--perhaps in the character of my daughter-in-law?"

"It is useless, mother, to speculate on what might have happened. The sad reality is enough."

My mother paused a little before she put her next question to me.

"Did Miss Dunross always keep her veil drawn in your presence, when there happened to be light in the room?"

"Always."

"She never even let you catch a momentary glance at her face?"

"Never."

"And the only reason she gave you was that the light caused her a painful sensation if it fell on her uncovered skin?"

"You say that, mother, as if you doubt whether Miss Dunross told me the truth."

"No, George. I only doubt whether she told you all the truth."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't be offended, my dear. I believe Miss Dunross has some more serious reason for keeping her face hidden than the reason that she gave you."

I was silent. The suspicion which those words implied had never occurred to my mind. I had read in medical books of cases of morbid nervous sensitiveness exactly similar to the case of Miss Dunross, as described by herself--and that had been enough for me. Now that my mother's idea had found its way from her mind to mine, the impression produced on me was painful in the last degree. Horrible imaginings of deformity possessed my brain, and profaned all that was purest and dearest in my recollections of Miss Dunross. It was useless to change the subject--the evil influence that was on me was too potent to be charmed away by talk. Making the best excuse that I could think of for leaving my mother's room, I hurried away to seek a refuge from myself, where alone I could hope to find it, in the presence of Mrs. Van Brandt.