

CHAPTER XXVII. CONVERSATION WITH MRS. VAN BRANDT.

THE landlady was taking the air at her own door when I reached the house. Her reply to my inquiries justified my most hopeful anticipations. The poor lodger looked already "like another woman"; and the child was at that moment posted on the stairs, watching for the return of her "new papa."

"There's one thing I should wish to say to you, sir, before you go upstairs," the woman went on. "Don't trust the lady with more money at a time than the money that is wanted for the day's housekeeping. If she has any to spare, it's as likely as not to be wasted on her good-for-nothing husband."

Absorbed in the higher and dearer interests that filled my mind, I had thus far forgotten the very existence of Mr. Van Brandt.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Where he ought to be," was the answer. "In prison for debt."

In those days a man imprisoned for debt was not infrequently a man imprisoned for life. There was little fear of my visit being shortened by the appearance on the scene of Mr. Van Brandt.

Ascending the stairs, I found the child waiting for me on the upper landing, with a ragged doll in her arms. I had bought a cake for her on my way to the house. She forthwith turned over the doll to my care, and, trotting before me into the room with her cake in her arms, announced my arrival in these words:

"Mamma, I like this papa better than the other. You like him better, too."

The mother's wasted face reddened for a moment, then turned pale again, as she held out her hand to me. I looked at her anxiously, and discerned the welcome signs of recovery, clearly revealed. Her grand gray eyes rested on me again with a glimmer of their old light. The hand that had lain so cold in mine on the past night had life and warmth in it now.

"Should I have died before the morning if you had not come here?" she asked, softly. "Have you saved my life for the second time? I can well believe it."

Before I was aware of her, she bent her head over my hand, and touched it tenderly with her lips. "I am not an ungrateful woman," she murmured-- "and yet I don't know how to thank you."

The child looked up quickly from her cake. "Why don't you kiss him?" the quaint little creature asked, with a broad stare of astonishment.

Her head sunk on her breast. She sighed bitterly.

"No more of Me!" she said, suddenly recovering her composure, and suddenly forcing herself to look at me again. "Tell me what happy chance brought you here last night?"

"The same chance," I answered, "which took me to Saint Anthony's Well."

She raised herself eagerly in the chair.

"You have seen me again--as you saw me in the summer-house by the waterfall!" she exclaimed. "Was it in Scotland once more?"

"No. Further away than Scotland--as far away as Shetland."

"Tell me about it! Pray, pray tell me about it!"

I related what had happened as exactly as I could, consistently with maintaining the strictest reserve on one point. Concealing from her the very existence of Miss Dunross, I left her to suppose that the master of the house was the one person whom I had found to receive me during my sojourn under Mr. Dunross's roof.

"That is strange!" she exclaimed, after she had heard me attentively to the end.

"What is strange?" I asked.

She hesitated, searching my face earnestly with her large grave eyes.

"I hardly like speaking of it," she said. "And yet I ought to have no concealments in such a matter from you. I understand everything that you have told me--with one exception. It seems strange to me that you should only have had one old man for your companion while you were at the house in Shetland."

"What other companion did you expect to hear of?" I inquired.

"I expected," she answered, "to hear of a lady in the house."

I cannot positively say that the reply took me by surprise: it forced me to reflect before I spoke again. I knew, by my past experience, that she must have seen me, in my absence from her, while I was spiritually present to her mind in a trance or dream. Had she also seen the daily companion of my life in Shetland--Miss Dunross?

I put the question in a form which left me free to decide whether I should take her unreservedly into my confidence or not.

"Am I right," I began, "in supposing that you dreamed of me in Shetland, as you once before dreamed of me while I was at my house in Perthshire?"

"Yes," she answered. "It was at the close of evening, this time. I fell asleep, or became insensible--I cannot say which. And I saw you again, in a vision or a dream."

"Where did you see me?"

"I first saw you on the bridge over the Scotch river--just as I met you on the evening when you saved my life. After a while the stream and the landscape about it faded, and you faded with them, into darkness. I waited a little, and the darkness melted away slowly. I stood, as it seemed to me, in a circle of starry lights; fronting a window, with a lake behind me, and before me a darkened room. And I looked into the room, and the starry light showed you to me again."

"When did this happen? Do you remember the date?"

"I remember that it was at the beginning of the month. The misfortunes which have since brought me so low had not then fallen on me; and yet, as I stood looking at you, I had the strangest prevision of calamity that was to come. I felt the same absolute reliance on your power to help me that I felt when I first dreamed of you in Scotland. And I did the same familiar things. I laid my hand on your bosom. I said to you: 'Remember me. Come to me.' I even wrote--"

She stopped, shuddering as if a sudden fear had laid its hold on her. Seeing this, and dreading the effect of any violent agitation, I hastened to suggest that we should say no more, for that day, on the subject of her dream.

"No," she answered, firmly. "There is nothing to be gained by giving me time. My dream has left one horrible remembrance on my mind. As long as I live, I believe I shall tremble when I think of what I saw near you in that darkened room."

She stopped again. Was she approaching the subject of the shrouded figure, with the black veil over its head? Was she about to describe her first discovery, in the dream, of Miss Dunross?

"Tell me one thing first," she resumed. "Have I been right in what I have said to you, so far? Is it true that you were in a darkened room when you saw me?"

"Quite true."

"Was the date the beginning of the month? and was the hour the close of evening?"

"Yes."

"Were you alone in the room? Answer me truly!"

"I was not alone."

"Was the master of the house with you? or had you some other companion?"

It would have been worse than useless (after what I had now heard) to attempt to deceive her.

"I had another companion," I answered. "The person in the room with me was a woman."

Her face showed, as I spoke, that she was again shaken by the terrifying recollection to which she had just alluded. I had, by this time, some difficulty myself in preserving my composure. Still, I was determined not to let a word escape me which could operate as a suggestion on the mind of my companion.

"Have you any other question to ask me?" was all I said.

"One more," she answered. "Was there anything unusual in the dress of your companion?"

"Yes. She wore a long black veil, which hung over her head and face, and dropped to below her waist."

Mrs. Van Brandt leaned back in her chair, and covered her eyes with her hands.

"I understand your motive for concealing from me the presence of that miserable woman in the house," she said. "It is good and kind, like all your motives; but it is useless. While I lay in the trance I saw everything exactly as it was in the reality; and I, too, saw that frightful face!"

Those words literally electrified me.

My conversation of that morning with my mother instantly recurred to my memory. I started to my feet.

"Good God!" I exclaimed, "what do you mean?"

"Don't you understand yet?" she asked in amazement on her side. "Must I speak more plainly still? When you saw the apparition of me, did you see me write?"

"Yes. On a letter that the lady was writing for me. I saw the words afterward; the words that brought me to you last night: 'At the month's end, In the shadow of Saint Paul's.'"

"How did I appear to write on the unfinished letter?"

"You lifted the writing-case, on which the letter and the pen lay, off the lady's lap; and, while you wrote, you rested the case on her shoulder."

"Did you notice if the lifting of the case produced any effect on her?"

"I saw no effect produced," I answered. "She remained immovable in her chair."

"I saw it differently in my dream. She raised her hand--not the hand that was nearest to you, but nearest to me. As I lifted the writing-case, she lifted her hand, and parted the folds of the veil from off her face--I suppose to see more clearly. It was only for a moment; and in that moment I saw what the veil hid. Don't let us speak of it! You must have shuddered at that frightful sight in the reality, as I shuddered at it in the dream. You must have asked

yourself, as I did: 'Is there nobody to poison the terrible creature, and hide her mercifully in the grave?'"

At those words, she abruptly checked herself. I could say nothing--my face spoke for me. She saw it, and guessed the truth.

"Good heavens!" she cried, "you have not seen her! She must have kept her face hidden from you behind the veil! Oh, why, why did you cheat me into talking of it! I will never speak of it again. See, we are frightening the child! Come here, darling; there is nothing to be afraid of. Come, and bring your cake with you. You shall be a great lady, giving a grand dinner; and we will be two friends whom you have invited to dine with you; and the doll shall be the little girl who comes in after dinner, and has fruit at dessert!" So she ran on, trying vainly to forget the shock that she had inflicted on me in talking nursery nonsense to the child.

Recovering my composure in some degree, I did my best to second the effort that she had made. My quieter thoughts suggested that she might well be self-deceived in believing the horrible spectacle presented to her in the vision to be an actual reflection of the truth. In common justice toward Miss Dunross I ought surely not to accept the conviction of her deformity on no better evidence than the evidence of a dream? Reasonable as it undoubtedly was, this view left certain doubts still lingering in my mind. The child's instinct soon discovered that her mother and I were playfellows who felt no genuine enjoyment of the game. She dismissed her make-believe guests without ceremony, and went back with her doll to the favorite play-ground on which I had met her--the landing outside the door. No persuasion on her mother's part or on mine succeeded in luring her back to us. We were left together, to face each other as best we might--with the forbidden subject of Miss Dunross between us.