

CHAPTER XXVIII. LOVE AND MONEY.

FEELING the embarrassment of the moment most painfully on her side, Mrs. Van Brandt spoke first.

"You have said nothing to me about yourself," she began. "Is your life a happier one than it was when we last met?"

"I cannot honestly say that it is," I answered.

"Is there any prospect of your being married?"

"My prospect of being married still rests with you."

"Don't say that!" she exclaimed, with an entreating look at me. "Don't spoil my pleasure in seeing you again by speaking of what can never be! Have you still to be told how it is that you find me here alone with my child?"

I forced myself to mention Van Brandt's name, rather than hear it pass her lips.

"I have been told that Mr. Van Brandt is in prison for debt," I said. "And I saw for myself last night that he had left you helpless."

"He left me the little money he had with him when he was arrested," she rejoined, sadly. "His cruel creditors are more to blame than he is for the poverty that has fallen on us."

Even this negative defense of Van Brandt stung me to the quick.

"I ought to have spoken more guardedly of him," I said, bitterly. "I ought to have remembered that a woman can forgive almost any wrong that a man can inflict on her--when he is the man whom she loves."

She put her hand on my mouth, and stopped me before I could say any more.

"How can you speak so cruelly to me?" she asked. "You know--to my shame I confessed it to you the last time we met--you know that my heart, in secret, is all yours. What 'wrong' are you talking of? Is it the wrong I suffered when Van Brandt married me, with a wife living at the time (and living still)?"

Do you think I can ever forget the great misfortune of my life--the misfortune that has made me unworthy of you? It is no fault of mine, God knows; but it is not the less true that I am not married, and that the little darling who is playing out there with her doll is my child. And you talk of my being your wife--knowing that!"

"The child accepts me as her second father," I said. "It would be better and happier for us both if you had as little pride as the child."

"Pride?" she repeated. "In such a position as mine? A helpless woman, with a mock-husband in prison for debt! Say that I have not fallen quite so low yet as to forget what is due to you, and you will pay me a compliment that will be nearer to the truth. Am I to marry you for my food and shelter? Am I to marry you, because there is no lawful tie that binds me to the father of my child? Cruelly as he has behaved, he has still that claim upon me. Bad as he is, he has not forsaken me; he has been forced away. My only friend, is it possible that you think me ungrateful enough to consent to be your wife? The woman (in my situation) must be heartless indeed who could destroy your place in the estimation of the world and the regard of your friends! The wretchedest creature that walks the streets would shrink from treating you in that way. Oh, what are men made of? How can you--how can you speak of it!"

I yielded---and spoke of it no more. Every word she uttered only increased my admiration of the noble creature whom I had loved, and lost. What refuge was now left to me? But one refuge; I could still offer to her the sacrifice of myself. Bitterly as I hated the man who had parted us, I loved her dearly enough to be even capable of helping him for her sake. Hopeless infatuation! I don't deny it; I don't excuse it--hopeless infatuation!

"You have forgiven me," I said. "Let me deserve to be forgiven. It is something to be your only friend. You must have plans for the future; tell me unreservedly how I can help you."

"Complete the good work that you have begun," she answered, gratefully. "Help me back to health. Make me strong enough to submit to a doctor's estimate of my chances of living for some years yet."

"A doctor's estimate of your chances of living?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"I hardly know how to tell you," she said, "without speaking again of Mr. Van Brandt."

"Does speaking of him again mean speaking of his debts?" I asked. "Why need you hesitate? You know that there is nothing I will not do to relieve your anxieties."

She looked at me for a moment, in silent distress.

"Oh! do you think I would let you give your money to Van Brandt?" she asked, as soon as she could speak. "I, who owe everything to your devotion to me? Never! Let me tell you the plain truth. There is a serious necessity for his getting out of prison. He must pay his creditors; and he has found out a way of doing it--with my help."

"Your help?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. This is his position, in two words: A little while since, he obtained an excellent offer of employment abroad, from a rich relative of his, and he had made all his arrangements to accept it. Unhappily, he returned to tell me of his good fortune, and the same day he was arrested for debt. His relative has offered to keep the situation open for a certain time, and the time has not yet expired. If he can pay a dividend to his creditors, they will give him his freedom; and he believes he can raise the money if I consent to insure my life."

To insure her life! The snare that had been set for her was plainly revealed in those four words.

In the eye of the law she was, of course, a single woman: she was of age; she was, to all intents and purposes, her own mistress. What was there to prevent her from insuring her life, if she pleased, and from so disposing of the insurance as to give Van Brandt a direct interest in her death? Knowing what I knew of him--believing him, as I did, to be capable of any atrocity--I trembled at the bare idea of what might have happened if I had failed to find my way back to her until a later date. Thanks to the happy accident of my position, the one certain way of protecting her lay easily within my reach. I could offer to lend the scoundrel the money that he wanted at an hour's notice, and he was the man to accept my proposal quite as easily as I could make it.

"You don't seem to approve of our idea," she said, noticing, in evident perplexity, the effect which she had produced on me. "I am very unfortunate; I seem to have innocently disturbed and annoyed you for the second time."

"You are quite mistaken," I replied. "I am only doubting whether your plan for relieving Mr. Van Brandt of his embarrassments is quite so simple as you suppose. Are you aware of the delays that are likely to take place before it will be possible to borrow money on your policy of insurance?"

"I know nothing about it," she said, sadly.

"Will you let me ask the advice of my lawyers? They are trustworthy and experienced men, and I am sure they can be of use to you."

Cautiously as I had expressed myself, her delicacy took the alarm.

"Promise that you won't ask me to borrow money of you for Mr. Van Brandt," she rejoined, "and I will accept your help gratefully."

I could honestly promise that. My one chance of saving her lay in keeping from her knowledge the course that I had now determined to pursue. I rose to go, while my resolution still sustained me. The sooner I made my inquiries (I reminded her) the more speedily our present doubts and difficulties would be resolved.

She rose, as I rose--with the tears in her eyes, and the blush on her cheeks.

"Kiss me," she whispered, "before you go! And don't mind my crying. I am quite happy now. It is only your goodness that overpowers me."

I pressed her to my heart, with the unacknowledged tenderness of a parting embrace. It was impossible to disguise the position in which I had now placed myself. I had, so to speak, pronounced my own sentence of banishment. When my interference had restored my unworthy rival to his freedom, could I submit to the degrading necessity of seeing her in his presence, of speaking to her under his eyes? That sacrifice of myself was beyond me--and I knew it. "For the last time!" I thought, as I held her to me for a moment longer--"for the last time!"

The child ran to meet me with open arms when I stepped out on the landing. My manhood had sustained me through the parting with the mother. It was only when the child's round, innocent little face laid itself lovingly against mine that my fortitude gave way. I was past speaking; I put her down gently in silence, and waited on the lower flight of stairs until I was fit to face the world outside.