

## **CHAPTER XXIX. OUR DESTINIES PART US.**

DESCENDING to the ground-floor of the house, I sent to request a moment's interview with the landlady. I had yet to learn in which of the London prisons Van Brandt was confined; and she was the only person to whom I could venture to address the question.

Having answered my inquiries, the woman put her own sordid construction on my motive for visiting the prisoner.

"Has the money you left upstairs gone into his greedy pockets already?" she asked. "If I was as rich as you are, I should let it go. In your place, I wouldn't touch him with a pair of tongs!"

The woman's coarse warning actually proved useful to me; it started a new idea in my mind! Before she spoke, I had been too dull or too preoccupied to see that it was quite needless to degrade myself by personally communicating with Van Brandt in his prison. It only now occurred to me that my legal advisers were, as a matter of course, the proper persons to represent me in the matter--with this additional advantage, that they could keep my share in the transaction a secret even from Van Brandt himself.

I drove at once to the office of my lawyers. The senior partner--the tried friend and adviser of our family--received me.

My instructions, naturally enough, astonished him. He was immediately to satisfy the prisoner's creditors, on my behalf, without mentioning my name to any one. And he was gravely to accept as security for repayment--Mr. Van Brandt's note of hand!

"I thought I was well acquainted with the various methods by which a gentleman can throw away his money," the senior partner remarked. "I congratulate you, Mr. Germaine, on having discovered an entirely new way of effectually emptying your purse. Founding a newspaper, taking a theater, keeping race-horses, gambling at Monaco, are highly efficient as modes of losing money. But they all yield, sir, to paying the debts of Mr. Van Brandt!"

I left him, and went home.

The servant who opened the door had a message for me from my mother. She wished to see me as soon as I was at leisure to speak to her.

I presented myself at once in my mother's sitting-room.

"Well, George?" she said, without a word to prepare me for what was coming. "How have you left Mrs. Van Brandt?"

I was completely thrown off my guard.

"Who has told you that I have seen Mrs. Van Brandt?" I asked.

"My dear, your face has told me. Don't I know by this time how you look and how you speak when Mrs. Van Brandt is in your mind. Sit down by me. I have something to say to you which I wanted to say this morning; but, I hardly know why, my heart failed me. I am bolder now, and I can say it. My son, you still love Mrs. Van Brandt. You have my permission to marry her."

Those were the words! Hardly an hour had elapsed since Mrs. Van Brandt's own lips had told me that our union was impossible. Not even half an hour had passed since I had given the directions which would restore to liberty the man who was the one obstacle to my marriage. And this was the time that my mother had innocently chosen for consenting to receive as her daughter-in-law Mrs. Van Brandt!

"I see that I surprise you," she resumed. "Let me explain my motive as plainly as I can. I should not be speaking the truth, George, if I told you that I have ceased to feel the serious objections that there are to your marrying this lady. The only difference in my way of thinking is, that I am now willing to set my objections aside, out of regard for your happiness. I am an old woman, my dear. In the course of nature, I cannot hope to be with you much longer. When I am gone, who will be left to care for you and love you, in the place of your mother? No one will be left, unless you marry Mrs. Van Brandt. Your happiness is my first consideration, and the woman you love (sadly as she has been led astray) is a woman worthy of a better fate. Marry her."

I could not trust myself to speak. I could only kneel at my mother's feet, and hide my face on her knees, as if I had been a boy again.

"Think of it, George," she said. "And come back to me when you are composed enough to speak as quietly of the future as I do."

She lifted my head and kissed me. As I rose to leave her, I saw something in the dear old eyes that met mine so tenderly, which struck a sudden fear

through me, keen and cutting, like a stroke from a knife.

The moment I had closed the door, I went downstairs to the porter in the hall.

"Has my mother left the house," I asked, "while I have been away?"

"No, sir."

"Have any visitors called?"

"One visitor has called, sir."

"Do you know who it was?"

The porter mentioned the name of a celebrated physician--a man at the head of his profession in those days. I instantly took my hat and went to his house.

He had just returned from his round of visits. My card was taken to him, and was followed at once by my admission to his consulting-room.

"You have seen my mother," I said. "Is she seriously ill? and have you not concealed it from her? For God's sake, tell me the truth; I can bear it."

The great man took me kindly by the hand.

"Your mother stands in no need of any warning; she is herself aware of the critical state of her health," he said. "She sent for me to confirm her own conviction. I could not conceal from her--I must not conceal from you--that the vital energies are sinking. She may live for some months longer in a milder air than the air of London. That is all I can say. At her age, her days are numbered."

He gave me time to steady myself under the blow; and then he placed his vast experience, his matured and consummate knowledge, at my disposal. From his dictation, I committed to writing the necessary instructions for watching over the frail tenure of my mother's life.

"Let me give you one word of warning," he said, as we parted. "Your mother is especially desirous that you should know nothing of the precarious condition of her health. Her one anxiety is to see you happy. If she discovers your visit to me, I will not answer for the consequences. Make the best

excuse you can think of for at once taking her away from London, and, whatever you may feel in secret, keep up an appearance of good spirits in her presence."

That evening I made my excuse. It was easily found. I had only to tell my poor mother of Mrs. Van Brandt's refusal to marry me, and there was an intelligible motive assigned for my proposing to leave London. The same night I wrote to inform Mrs. Van Brandt of the sad event which was the cause of my sudden departure, and to warn her that there no longer existed the slightest necessity for insuring her life. "My lawyers" (I wrote) "have undertaken to arrange Mr. Van Brandt's affairs immediately. In a few hours he will be at liberty to accept the situation that has been offered to him." The last lines of the letter assured her of my unalterable love, and entreated her to write to me before she left England.

This done, all was done. I was conscious, strange to say, of no acutely painful suffering at this saddest time of my life. There is a limit, morally as well as physically, to our capacity for endurance. I can only describe my sensations under the calamities that had now fallen on me in one way: I felt like a man whose mind had been stunned.

The next day my mother and I set forth on the first stage of our journey to the south coast of Devonshire.