

## **CHAPTER XXX. THE PROSPECT DARKENS.**

THREE days after my mother and I had established ourselves at Torquay, I received Mrs. Van Brandt's answer to my letter. After the opening sentences (informing me that Van Brandt had been set at liberty, under circumstances painfully suggestive to the writer of some unacknowledged sacrifice on my part), the letter proceeded in these terms:

"The new employment which Mr. Van Brandt is to undertake secures to us the comforts, if not the luxuries, of life. For the first time since my troubles began, I have the prospect before me of a peaceful existence, among a foreign people from whom all that is false in my position may be concealed--not for my sake, but for the sake of my child. To more than this, to the happiness which some women enjoy, I must not, I dare not, aspire.

"We leave England for the Continent early tomorrow morning. Shall I tell you in what part of Europe my new residence is to be?

"No! You might write to me again; and I might write back. The one poor return I can make to the good angel of my life is to help him to forget me. What right have I to cling to my usurped place in your regard? The time will come when you will give your heart to a woman who is worthier of it than I am. Let me drop out of your life--except as an occasional remembrance, when you sometimes think of the days that have gone forever.

"I shall not be without some consolation on my side, when I too look back at the past. I have been a better woman since I met with you. Live as long as I may, I shall always remember that.

"Yes! The influence that you have had over me has been from first to last an influence for good. Allowing that I have done wrong (in my position) to love you, and, worse even than that, to own it, still the love has been innocent, and the effort to control it has been an honest effort at least. But, apart from this, my heart tells me that I am the better for the sympathy which has united us. I may confess to you what I have never yet acknowledged--now that we are so widely parted, and so little likely to meet again--whenever I have given myself up unrestrainedly to my own better impulses, they have always seemed to lead me to you. Whenever my mind has been most truly at peace, and I have been able to pray with a pure and a penitent heart, I have felt as if there was some unseen tie that was drawing us nearer and nearer together. And, strange to say, this has always happened (just as my dreams of you have always come to me) when I have been separated from Van Brandt. At such times, thinking or dreaming, it has always appeared to me

that I knew you far more familiarly than I know you when we meet face to face. Is there really such a thing, I wonder, as a former state of existence? And were we once constant companions in some other sphere, thousands of years since? These are idle guesses. Let it be enough for me to remember that I have been the better for knowing you--without inquiring how or why.

"Farewell, my beloved benefactor, my only friend! The child sends you a kiss; and the mother signs herself your grateful and affectionate

"M. VAN BRANDT."

When I first read those lines, they once more recalled to my memory--very strangely, as I then thought--the predictions of Dame Dermody in the days of my boyhood. Here were the foretold sympathies which were spiritually to unite me to Mary, realized by a stranger whom I had met by chance in the later years of my life!

Thinking in this direction, did I advance no further? Not a step further! Not a suspicion of the truth presented itself to my mind even yet.

Was my own dullness of apprehension to blame for this? Would another man in my position have discovered what I had failed to see?

I look back along the chain of events which runs through my narrative, and I ask myself, Where are the possibilities to be found (in my case, or in the case of any other man) of identifying the child who was Mary Dermody with the woman who was Mrs. Van Brandt? Was there anything left in our faces, when we met again by the Scotch river, to remind us of our younger selves? We had developed, in the interval, from boy and girl to man and woman: no outward traces were discernible in us of the George and Mary of other days. Disguised from each other by our faces, we were also disguised by our names. Her mock-marriage had changed her surname. My step-father's will had changed mine. Her Christian name was the commonest of all names of women; and mine was almost as far from being remarkable among the names of men. Turning next to the various occasions on which we had met, had we seen enough of each other to drift into recognition on either side, in the ordinary course of talk? We had met but four times in all; once on the bridge, once again in Edinburgh, twice more in London. On each of these occasions, the absorbing anxieties and interests of the passing moment had filled her mind and mine, had inspired her words and mine. When had the events which had brought us together left us with leisure enough and tranquillity enough to look back idly through our lives, and calmly to compare the recollections of our youth? Never! From first to last, the course

of events had borne us further and further away from any results that could have led even to a suspicion of the truth. She could only believe when she wrote to me on leaving England--and I could only believe when I read her letter--that we had first met at the river, and that our divergent destinies had ended in parting us forever.

Reading her farewell letter in later days by the light of my matured experience, I note how remarkably Dame Dermody's faith in the purity of the tie that united us as kindred spirits was justified by the result.

It was only when my unknown Mary was parted from Van Brandt--in other words, it was only when she was a pure spirit--that she felt my influence over her as a refining influence on her life, and that the apparition of her communicated with me in the visible and perfect likeness of herself. On my side, when was it that I dreamed of her (as in Scotland), or felt the mysterious warning of her presence in my waking moments (as in Shetland)? Always at the time when my heart opened most tenderly toward her and toward others--when my mind was most free from the bitter doubts, the self-seeking aspirations, which degrade the divinity within us. Then, and then only, my sympathy with her was the perfect sympathy which holds its fidelity unassailable by the chances and changes, the delusions and temptations, of mortal life.

I am writing prematurely of the time when the light came to me. My narrative must return to the time when I was still walking in darkness.

Absorbed in watching over the closing days of my mother's life, I found in the performance of this sacred duty my only consolation under the overthrow of my last hope of marriage with Mrs. Van Brandt. By slow degrees my mother felt the reviving influences of a quiet life and a soft, pure air. The improvement in her health could, as I but too well knew, be only an improvement for a time. Still, it was a relief to see her free from pain, and innocently happy in the presence of her son. Excepting those hours of the day and night which were dedicated to repose, I was never away from her. To this day I remember, with a tenderness which attaches to no other memories of mine, the books that I read to her, the sunny corner on the seashore where I sat with her, the games of cards that we played together, the little trivial gossip that amused her when she was strong enough for nothing else. These are my imperishable relics; these are the deeds of my life that I shall love best to look back on, when the all-infolding shadows of death are closing round me.

In the hours when I was alone, my thoughts--occupying themselves mostly

among the persons and events of the past--wandered back, many and many a time, to Shetland and Miss Dunross.

My haunting doubt as to what the black veil had really hidden from me was no longer accompanied by a feeling of horror when it now recurred to my mind. The more vividly my later remembrances of Miss Dunross were associated with the idea of an unutterable bodily affliction, the higher the noble nature of the woman seemed to rise in my esteem. For the first time since I had left Shetland, the temptation now came to me to disregard the injunction which her father had laid on me at parting. When I thought again of the stolen kiss in the dead of night; when I recalled the appearance of the frail white hand, waving to me through the dark curtains its last farewell; and when there mingled with these memories the later remembrance of what my mother had suspected, and of what Mrs. Van Brandt had seen in her dream--the longing in me to find a means of assuring Miss Dunross that she still held her place apart in my memory and my heart was more than mortal fortitude could resist. I was pledged in honor not to return to Shetland, and not to write. How to communicate with her secretly, in some other way, was the constant question in my mind as the days went on. A hint to enlighten me was all that I wanted; and, as the irony of circumstances ordered it, my mother was the person who gave me the hint.

We still spoke, at intervals, of Mrs. Van Brandt. Watching me on those occasions when we were in the company of friends and acquaintances at Torquay, my mother plainly discerned that no other woman, whatever her attractions might be, could take the place in my heart of the woman whom I had lost. Seeing but one prospect of happiness for me, she steadily refused to abandon the idea of my marriage. When a woman has owned that she loves a man (so my mother used to express her opinion), it is that man's fault, no matter what the obstacles may be, if he fails to make her his wife. Reverting to this view in various ways, she pressed it on my consideration one day in these words:

"There is one drawback, George, to my happiness in being here with you. I am an obstacle in the way of your communicating with Mrs. Van Brandt."

"You forget," I said, "that she has left England without telling me where to find her."

"If you were free from the incumbrance of your mother, my dear, you would easily find her. Even as things are, you might surely write to her. Don't mistake my motives, George. If I had any hope of your forgetting her--if I saw you only moderately attracted by one or other of the charming women whom

we know here--I should say, let us never speak again or think again of Mrs. Van Brandt. But, my dear, your heart is closed to every woman but one. Be happy in your own way, and let me see it before I die. The wretch to whom that poor creature is sacrificing her life will, sooner or later, ill-treat her or desert her and then she must turn to you. Don't let her think that you are resigned to the loss of her. The more resolutely you set her scruples at defiance, the more she will love you and admire you in secret. Women are like that. Send her a letter, and follow it with a little present. You talked of taking me to the studio of the young artist here who left his card the other day. I am told that he paints admirable portraits in miniatures. Why not send your portrait to Mrs. Van Brandt?"

Here was the idea of which I had been vainly in search! Quite superfluous as a method of pleading my cause with Mrs. Van Brandt, the portrait offered the best of all means of communicating with Miss Dunross, without absolutely violating the engagement to which her father had pledged me. In this way, without writing a word, without even sending a message, I might tell her how gratefully she was remembered; I might remind her of me tenderly in the bitterest moments of her sad and solitary life.

The same day I went to the artist privately. The sittings were afterward continued during the hours while my mother was resting in her room, until the portrait was completed. I caused it to be inclosed in a plain gold locket, with a chain attached; and I forwarded my gift, in the first instance, to the one person whom I could trust to assist me in arranging for the conveyance of it to its destination. This was the old friend (alluded to in these pages as "Sir James") who had taken me with him to Shetland in the Government yacht.

I had no reason, in writing the necessary explanations, to express myself to Sir James with any reserve. On the voyage back we had more than once spoken together confidentially of Miss Dunross. Sir James had heard her sad story from the resident medical man at Lerwick, who had been an old companion of his in their college days. Requesting him to confide my gift to this gentleman, I did not hesitate to acknowledge the doubt that oppressed me in relation to the mystery of the black veil. It was, of course, impossible to decide whether the doctor would be able to relieve that doubt. I could only venture to suggest that the question might be guardedly put, in making the customary inquiries after the health of Miss Dunross.

In those days of slow communication, I had to wait, not for days, but for weeks, before I could expect to receive Sir James's answer. His letter only reached me after an unusually long delay. For this, or for some other reason

that I cannot divine, I felt so strongly the foreboding of bad news that I abstained from breaking the seal in my mother's presence. I waited until I could retire to my own room, and then I opened the letter. My presentiment had not deceived me.

Sir James's reply contained these words only: "The letter inclosed tells its own sad story, without help from me. I cannot grieve for her; but I can feel sorry for you."

The letter thus described was addressed to Sir James by the doctor at Lerwick. I copy it (without comment) in these words:

"The late stormy weather has delayed the vessel by means of which we communicate with the mainland. I have only received your letter to-day. With it, there has arrived a little box, containing a gold locket and chain; being the present which you ask me to convey privately to Miss Dunross, from a friend of yours whose name you are not at liberty to mention.

"In transmitting these instructions, you have innocently placed me in a position of extreme difficulty.

"The poor lady for whom the gift is intended is near the end of her life--a life of such complicated and terrible suffering that death comes, in her case, literally as a mercy and a deliverance. Under these melancholy circumstances, I am, I think, not to blame if I hesitate to give her the locket in secret; not knowing with what associations this keepsake may be connected, or of what serious agitation it may not possibly be the cause.

"In this state of doubt I have ventured on opening the locket, and my hesitation is naturally increased. I am quite ignorant of the remembrances which my unhappy patient may connect with the portrait. I don't know whether it will give her pleasure or pain to receive it, in her last moments on earth. I can only decide to take it with me, when I see her to-morrow, and to let circumstances determine whether I shall risk letting her see it or not. Our post to the South only leaves this place in three days' time. I can keep my letter open, and let you know the result.

"I have seen her; and I have just returned to my own house. My distress of mind is great. But I will do my best to write intelligibly and fully of what has happened.

"Her sinking energies, when I first saw her this morning, had rallied for the moment. The nurse informed me that she had slept during the early hours

of the new day. Previously to this, there were symptoms of fever, accompanied by some slight delirium. The words that escaped her in this condition appear to have related mainly to an absent person whom she spoke of by the name of 'George.' Her one anxiety, I am told, was to see 'George' again before she died.

"Hearing this, it struck me as barely possible that the portrait in the locket might be the portrait of the absent person. I sent her nurse out of the room, and took her hand in mine. Trusting partly to her own admirable courage and strength of mind, and partly to the confidence which I knew she placed in me as an old friend and adviser, I adverted to the words which had fallen from her in the feverish state. And then I said, 'You know that any secret of yours is safe in my keeping. Tell me, do you expect to receive any little keepsake or memorial from 'George'?'

"It was a risk to run. The black veil which she always wears was over her face. I had nothing to tell me of the effect which I was producing on her, except the changing temperature, or the partial movement, of her hand, as it lay in mine, just under the silk coverlet of the bed.

"She said nothing at first. Her hand turned suddenly from cold to hot, and closed with a quick pressure on mine. Her breathing became oppressed. When she spoke, it was with difficulty. She told me nothing; she only put a question:

"'Is he here?' she asked.

"I said, 'Nobody is here but myself.'

"'Is there a letter?'

"I said 'No.'

"She was silent for a while. Her hand turned cold; the grasp of her fingers loosened. She spoke again: 'Be quick, doctor! Whatever it is, give it to me, before I die.'

"I risked the experiment; I opened the locket, and put it into her hand.

"So far as I could discover, she refrained from looking at it at first. She said, 'Turn me in the bed, with my face to the wall.' I obeyed her. With her back turned toward me she lifted her veil; and then (as I suppose) she looked at the portrait. A long, low cry--not of sorrow or pain: a cry of rapture and

delight--burst from her. I heard her kiss the portrait. Accustomed as I am in my profession to piteous sights and sounds, I never remember so completely losing my self-control as I lost it at that moment. I was obliged to turn away to the window.

"Hardly a minute can have passed before I was back again at the bedside. In that brief interval she had changed. Her voice had sunk again; it was so weak that I could only hear what she said by leaning over her and placing my ear close to her lips.

"Put it round my neck,' she whispered.

"I clasped the chain of the locket round her neck. She tried to lift her hand to it, but her strength failed her.

"Help me to hide it,' she said.

"I guided her hand. She hid the locket in her bosom, under the white dressing-gown which she wore that day. The oppression in her breathing increased. I raised her on the pillow. The pillow was not high enough. I rested her head on my shoulder, and partially opened her veil. She was able to speak once more, feeling a momentary relief.

"Promise,' she said, 'that no stranger's hand shall touch me. Promise to bury me as I am now.'

"I gave her my promise.

"Her failing breath quickened. She was just able to articulate the next words:

"Cover my face again.'

"I drew the veil over her face. She rested a while in silence. Suddenly the sound of her laboring respiration ceased. She started, and raised her head from my shoulder.

"Are you in pain?' I asked.

"I am in heaven!" she answered.

"Her head dropped back on my breast as she spoke. In that last outburst of joy her last breath had passed. The moment of her supreme happiness and



the moment of her death were one. The mercy of God had found her at last.

"I return to my letter before the post goes out.

"I have taken the necessary measures for the performance of my promise. She will be buried with the portrait hidden in her bosom, and with the black veil over her face. No nobler creature ever breathed the breath of life. Tell the stranger who sent her his portrait that her last moments were joyful moments, through his remembrance of her as expressed by his gift.

"I observe a passage in your letter to which I have not yet replied. You ask me if there was any more serious reason for the persistent hiding of her face under the veil than the reason which she was accustomed to give to the persons about her. It is true that she suffered under a morbid sensitiveness to the action of light. It is also true that this was not the only result, or the worst result, of the malady that afflicted her. She had another reason for keeping her face hidden--a reason known to two persons only: to the doctor who lives in the village near her father's house, and to myself. We are both pledged never to divulge to any living creature what our eyes alone have seen. We have kept our terrible secret even from her father; and we shall carry it with us to our graves. I have no more to say on this melancholy subject to the person in whose interest you write. When he thinks of her now, let him think of the beauty which no bodily affliction can profane--the beauty of the freed spirit, eternally happy in its union with the angels of God.

"I may add, before I close my letter, that the poor old father will not be left in cheerless solitude at the lake house. He will pass the remainder of his days under my roof, with my good wife to take care of him, and my children to remind him of the brighter side of life."

So the letter ended. I put it away, and went out. The solitude of my room forewarned me unendurably of the coming solitude in my own life. My interests in this busy world were now narrowed to one object--to the care of my mother's failing health. Of the two women whose hearts had once beaten in loving sympathy with mine, one lay in her grave and the other was lost to me in a foreign land. On the drive by the sea I met my mother, in her little pony-chaise, moving slowly under the mild wintry sunshine. I dismissed the man who was in attendance on her, and walked by the side of the chaise, with the reins in my hand. We chatted quietly on trivial subjects. I closed my eyes to the dreary future that was before me, and tried, in the intervals of the heart-ache, to live resignedly in the passing hour.