

## **CHAPTER XXXI. THE PHYSICIAN'S OPINION.**

SIX months have elapsed. Summer-time has come again.

The last parting is over. Prolonged by my care, the days of my mother's life have come to their end. She has died in my arms: her last words have been spoken to me, her last look on earth has been mine. I am now, in the saddest and plainest meaning of the words, alone in the world.

The affliction which has befallen me has left certain duties to be performed that require my presence in London. My house is let; I am staying at a hotel. My friend, Sir James (also in London on business), has rooms near mine. We breakfast and dine together in my sitting-room. For the moment solitude is dreadful to me, and yet I cannot go into society; I shrink from persons who are mere acquaintances. At Sir James's suggestion, however, one visitor at the hotel has been asked to dine with us, who claims distinction as no ordinary guest. The physician who first warned me of the critical state of my mother's health is anxious to hear what I can tell him of her last moments. His time is too precious to be wasted in the earlier hours of the day, and he joins us at the dinner-table when his patients leave him free to visit his friends.

The dinner is nearly at an end. I have made the effort to preserve my self-control; and in few words have told the simple story of my mother's last peaceful days on earth. The conversation turns next on topics of little interest to me: my mind rests after the effort that it has made; my observation is left free to exert itself as usual.

Little by little, while the talk goes on, I observe something in the conduct of the celebrated physician which first puzzles me, and then arouses my suspicion of some motive for his presence which has not been acknowledged, and in which I am concerned.

Over and over again I discover that his eyes are resting on me with a furtive interest and attention which he seems anxious to conceal. Over and over again I notice that he contrives to divert the conversation from general topics, and to lure me into talking of myself; and, stranger still (unless I am quite mistaken), Sir James understands and encourages him. Under various pretenses I am questioned about what I have suffered in the past, and what plans of life I have formed for the future. Among other subjects of personal interest to me, the subject of supernatural appearances is introduced. I am

asked if I believe in occult spiritual sympathies, and in ghostly apparitions of dead or distant persons. I am dexterously led into hinting that my views on this difficult and debatable question are in some degree influenced by experiences of my own. Hints, however, are not enough to satisfy the doctor's innocent curiosity; he tries to induce me to relate in detail what I have myself seen and felt. But by this time I am on my guard; I make excuses; I steadily abstain from taking my friend into my confidence. It is more and more plain to me that I am being made the subject of an experiment, in which Sir James and the physician are equally interested. Outwardly assuming to be guiltless of any suspicion of what is going on, I inwardly determine to discover the true motive for the doctor's presence that evening, and for the part that Sir James has taken in inviting him to be my guest.

Events favor my purpose soon after the dessert has been placed on the table.

The waiter enters the room with a letter for me, and announces that the bearer waits to know if there is any answer. I open the envelope, and find inside a few lines from my lawyers, announcing the completion of some formal matter of business. I at once seize the opportunity that is offered to me. Instead of sending a verbal message downstairs, I make my apologies, and use the letter as a pretext for leaving the room.

Dismissing the messenger who waits below, I return to the corridor in which my rooms are situated, and softly open the door of my bed-chamber. A second door communicates with the sitting-room, and has a ventilator in the upper part of it. I have only to stand under the ventilator, and every word of the conversation between Sir James and the physician reaches my ears.

"Then you think I am right?" are the first words I hear, in Sir James's voice.

"Quite right," the doctor answers.

"I have done my best to make him change his dull way of life," Sir James proceeds. "I have asked him to pay a visit to my house in Scotland; I have proposed traveling with him on the Continent; I have offered to take him with me on my next voyage in the yacht. He has but one answer--he simply says No to everything that I can suggest. You have heard from his own lips that he has no definite plans for the future. What is to become of him? What had we better do?"

"It is not easy to say," I hear the physician reply. "To speak plainly, the

man's nervous system is seriously deranged. I noticed something strange in him when he first came to consult me about his mother's health. The mischief has not been caused entirely by the affliction of her death. In my belief, his mind has been--what shall I say?--unhinged, for some time past. He is a very reserved person. I suspect he has been oppressed by anxieties which he has kept secret from every one. At his age, the unacknowledged troubles of life are generally troubles caused by women. It is in his temperament to take the romantic view of love; and some matter-of-fact woman of the present day may have bitterly disappointed him. Whatever may be the cause, the effect is plain--his nerves have broken down, and his brain is necessarily affected by whatever affects his nerves. I have known men in his condition who have ended badly. He may drift into insane delusions, if his present course of life is not altered. Did you hear what he said when we talked about ghosts?"

"Sheer nonsense!" Sir James remarks.

"Sheer delusion would be the more correct form of expression," the doctor rejoins. "And other delusions may grow out of it at any moment."

"What is to be done?" persists Sir James. "I may really say for myself, doctor, that I feel a fatherly interest in the poor fellow. His mother was one of my oldest and dearest friends, and he has inherited many of her engaging and endearing qualities. I hope you don't think the case is bad enough to be a case for restraint?"

"Certainly not--as yet," answers the doctor. "So far there is no positive brain disease; and there is accordingly no sort of reason for placing him under restraint. It is essentially a difficult and a doubtful case. Have him privately looked after by a competent person, and thwart him in nothing, if you can possibly help it. The merest trifle may excite his suspicions; and if that happens, we lose all control over him."

"You don't think he suspects us already, do you, doctor?"

"I hope not. I saw him once or twice look at me very strangely; and he has certainly been a long time out of the room."

Hearing this, I wait to hear no more. I return to the sitting-room (by way of the corridor) and resume my place at the table.

The indignation that I feel--naturally enough, I think, under the circumstances--makes a good actor of me for once in my life. I invent the

necessary excuse for my long absence, and take my part in the conversation, keeping the strictest guard on every word that escapes me, without betraying any appearance of restraint in my manner. Early in the evening the doctor leaves us to go to a scientific meeting. For half an hour or more Sir James remains with me. By way (as I suppose) of farther testing the state of my mind, he renews the invitation to his house in Scotland. I pretend to feel flattered by his anxiety to secure me as his guest. I undertake to reconsider my first refusal, and to give him a definite answer when we meet the next morning at breakfast. Sir James is delighted. We shake hands cordially, and wish each other good-night. At last I am left alone.

My resolution as to my next course of proceeding is formed without a moment's hesitation. I determine to leave the hotel privately the next morning before Sir James is out of his bedroom.

To what destination I am to betake myself is naturally the next question that arises, and this also I easily decide. During the last days of my mother's life we spoke together frequently of the happy past days when we were living together on the banks of the Greenwater lake. The longing thus inspired to look once more at the old scenes, to live for a while again among the old associations, has grown on me since my mother's death. I have, happily for myself, not spoken of this feeling to Sir James or to any other person. When I am missed at the hotel, there will be no suspicion of the direction in which I have turned my steps. To the old home in Suffolk I resolve to go the next morning. Wandering among the scenes of my boyhood, I can consider with myself how I may best bear the burden of the life that lies before me.

After what I have heard that evening, I confide in nobody. For all I know to the contrary, my own servant may be employed to-morrow as the spy who watches my actions. When the man makes his appearance to take his orders for the night, I tell him to wake me at six the next morning, and release him from further attendance.

I next employ myself in writing two letters. They will be left on the table, to speak for themselves after my departure.

In the first letter I briefly inform Sir James that I have discovered his true reason for inviting the doctor to dinner. While I thank him for the interest he takes in my welfare, I decline to be made the object of any further medical inquiries as to the state of my mind. In due course of time, when my plans are settled, he will hear from me again. Meanwhile, he need feel no anxiety about my safety. It is one among my other delusions to believe that I am still perfectly capable of taking care of myself. My second letter is addressed to

the landlord of the hotel, and simply provides for the disposal of my luggage and the payment of my bill.

I enter my bedroom next, and pack a traveling-bag with the few things that I can carry with me. My money is in my dressing-case. Opening it, I discover my pretty keepsake--the green flag! Can I return to "Greenwater Broad," can I look again at the bailiff's cottage, without the one memorial of little Mary that I possess? Besides, have I not promised Miss Dunross that Mary's gift shall always go with me wherever I go? and is the promise not doubly sacred now that she is dead? For a while I sit idly looking at the device on the flag--the white dove embroidered on the green ground, with the golden olive-branch in its beak. The innocent love-story of my early life returns to my memory, and shows me in horrible contrast the life that I am leading now. I fold up the flag and place it carefully in my traveling-bag. This done, all is done. I may rest till the morning comes.

No! I lie down on my bed, and I discover that there is no rest for me that night.

Now that I have no occupation to keep my energies employed, now that my first sense of triumph in the discomfiture of the friends who have plotted against me has had time to subside, my mind reverts to the conversation that I have overheard, and considers it from a new point of view. For the first time, the terrible question confronts me: The doctor's opinion on my case has been given very positively. How do I know that the doctor is not right?

This famous physician has risen to the head of his profession entirely by his own abilities. He is one of the medical men who succeed by means of an ingratiating manner and the dexterous handling of good opportunities. Even his enemies admit that he stands unrivaled in the art of separating the true conditions from the false in the discovery of disease, and in tracing effects accurately to their distant and hidden cause. Is such a man as this likely to be mistaken about me? Is it not far more probable that I am mistaken in my judgment of myself?

When I look back over the past years, am I quite sure that the strange events which I recall may not, in certain cases, be the visionary product of my own disordered brain--realities to me, and to no one else? What are the dreams of Mrs. Van Brandt? What are the ghostly apparitions of her which I believe myself to have seen? Delusions which have been the stealthy growth of years? delusions which are leading me, by slow degrees, nearer and nearer to madness in the end? Is it insane suspicion which has made me so angry with the good friends who have been trying to save my reason? Is it

insane terror which sets me on escaping from the hotel like a criminal escaping from prison?

These are the questions which torment me when I am alone in the dead of night. My bed becomes a place of unendurable torture. I rise and dress myself, and wait for the daylight, looking through my open window into the street.

The summer night is short. The gray light of dawn comes to me like a deliverance; the glow of the glorious sunrise cheers my soul once more. Why should I wait in the room that is still haunted by my horrible doubts of the night? I take up my traveling-bag; I leave my letters on the sitting-room table; and I descend the stairs to the house door. The night-porter at the hotel is slumbering in his chair. He wakes as I pass him; and (God help me!) he too looks as if he thought I was mad.

"Going to leave us already, sir?" he says, looking at the bag in my hand.

Mad or sane, I am ready with my reply. I tell him I am going out for a day in the country, and to make it a long day, I must start early.

The man still stares at me. He asks if he shall find some one to carry my bag. I decline to let anybody be disturbed. He inquires if I have any messages to leave for my friend. I inform him that I have left written messages upstairs for Sir James and the landlord. Upon this he draws the bolts and opens the door. To the last he looks at me as if he thought I was mad.

Was he right or wrong? Who can answer for himself? How can I tell?