

CHAPTER XXXII. A LAST LOOK AT GREENWATER BROAD.

MY spirits rose as I walked through the bright empty streets, and breathed the fresh morning air.

Taking my way eastward through the great city, I stopped at the first office that I passed, and secured my place by the early coach to Ipswich. Thence I traveled with post-horses to the market-town which was nearest to Greenwater Broad. A walk of a few miles in the cool evening brought me, through well-remembered by-roads, to our old house. By the last rays of the setting sun I looked at the familiar row of windows in front, and saw that the shutters were all closed. Not a living creature was visible anywhere. Not even a dog barked as I rang the great bell at the door. The place was deserted; the house was shut up.

After a long delay, I heard heavy footsteps in the hall. An old man opened the door.

Changed as he was, I remembered him as one of our tenants in the by-gone time. To his astonishment, I greeted him by his name. On his side, he tried hard to recognize me, and tried in vain. No doubt I was the more sadly changed of the two: I was obliged to introduce myself. The poor fellow's withered face brightened slowly and timidly, as if he were half incapable, half afraid, of indulging in the unaccustomed luxury of a smile. In his confusion he bid me welcome home again, as if the house had been mine.

Taking me into the little back-room which he inhabited, the old man gave me all he had to offer--a supper of bacon and eggs and a glass of home-brewed beer. He was evidently puzzled to understand me when I informed him that the only object of my visit was to look once more at the familiar scenes round my old home. But he willingly placed his services at my disposal; and he engaged to do his best, if I wished it, to make me up a bed for the night.

The house had been closed and the establishment of servants had been dismissed for more than a year past. A passion for horse-racing, developed late in life, had ruined the rich retired tradesman who had purchased the estate at the time of our family troubles. He had gone abroad with his wife to live on the little income that had been saved from the wreck of his fortune; and he had left the house and lands in such a state of neglect that no new purchaser had thus far been found to take them. My old friend, "now past

his work," had been put in charge of the place. As for Dermody's cottage, it was empty, like the house. I was at perfect liberty to look over it if I liked. There was the key of the door on the bunch with the others; and here was the old man, with his old hat on his head, ready to accompany me wherever I pleased to go. I declined to trouble him to accompany me or to make up a bed in the lonely house. The night was fine, the moon was rising. I had supped; I had rested. When I had seen what I wanted to see, I could easily walk back to the market-town and sleep at the inn. Taking the key in my hand, I set forth alone on the way through the grounds which led to Dermody's cottage.

Again I followed the woodland paths along which I had once idled so happily with my little Mary. At every step I saw something that reminded me of her. Here was the rustic bench on which we had sat together under the shadow of the old cedar-tree, and vowed to be constant to each other to the end of our lives. There was the bright little water spring, from which we drank when we were weary and thirsty in sultry summer days, still bubbling its way downward to the lake as cheerily as ever. As I listened to the companionable murmur of the stream, I almost expected to see her again, in her simple white frock and straw hat, singing to the music of the rivulet, and freshening her nosegay of wild flowers by dipping it in the cool water. A few steps further on and I reached a clearing in the wood and stood on a little promontory of rising ground which commanded the prettiest view of Greenwater lake. A platform of wood was built out from the bank, to be used for bathing by good swimmers who were not afraid of a plunge into deep water. I stood on the platform and looked round me. The trees that fringed the shore on either hand murmured their sweet sylvan music in the night air; the moonlight trembled softly on the rippling water. Away on my right hand I could just see the old wooden shed that once sheltered my boat in the days when Mary went sailing with me and worked the green flag. On my left was the wooden paling that followed the curves of the winding creek, and beyond it rose the brown arches of the decoy for wild fowl, now falling to ruin for want of use. Guided by the radiant moonlight, I could see the very spot on which Mary and I had stood to watch the snaring of the ducks. Through the hole in the paling before which the decoy-dog had shown himself, at Dermody's signal, a water-rat now passed, like a little black shadow on the bright ground, and was lost in the waters of the lake. Look where I might, the happy by-gone time looked back in mockery, and the voices of the past came to me with their burden of reproach: See what your life was once! Is your life worth living now?

I picked up a stone and threw it into the lake. I watched the circling ripples round the place at which it had sunk. I wondered if a practiced swimmer

like myself had ever tried to commit suicide by drowning, and had been so resolute to die that he had resisted the temptation to let his own skill keep him from sinking. Something in the lake itself, or something in connection with the thought that it had put into my mind, revolted me. I turned my back suddenly on the lonely view, and took the path through the wood which led to the bailiff's cottage.

Opening the door with my key, I groped my way into the well-remembered parlor; and, unbarring the window-shutters, I let in the light of the moon.

With a heavy heart I looked round me. The old furniture--renewed, perhaps, in one or two places--asserted its mute claim to my recognition in every part of the room. The tender moonlight streamed slanting into the corner in which Mary and I used to nestle together while Dame Dermody was at the window reading her mystic books. Overshadowed by the obscurity in the opposite corner, I discovered the high-backed arm-chair of carved wood in which the Sibyl of the cottage sat on the memorable day when she warned us of our coming separation, and gave us her blessing for the last time. Looking next round the walls of the room, I recognized old friends wherever my eyes happened to rest--the gaudily colored prints; the framed pictures in fine needle-work, which we thought wonderful efforts of art; the old circular mirror to which I used to lift Mary when she wanted "to see her face in the glass." Whenever the moonlight penetrated there, it showed me some familiar object that recalled my happiest days. Again the by-gone time looked back in mockery. Again the voices of the past came to me with their burden of reproach: See what your life was once! Is your life worth living now?

I sat down at the window, where I could just discover, here and there between the trees, the glimmer of the waters of the lake. I thought to myself: "Thus far my mortal journey has brought me. Why not end it here?"

Who would grieve for me if my death were reported to-morrow? Of all living men, I had perhaps the smallest number of friends, the fewest duties to perform toward others, the least reason to hesitate at leaving a world which had no place in it for my ambition, no creature in it for my love.

Besides, what necessity was there for letting it be known that my death was a death of my own seeking? It could easily be left to represent itself as a death by accident.

On that fine summer night, and after a long day of traveling, might I not naturally take a bath in the cool water before I went to bed? And, practiced

as I was in the exercise of swimming, might it not nevertheless be my misfortune to be attacked by cramp? On the lonely shores of Greenwater Broad the cry of a drowning man would bring no help at night. The fatal accident would explain itself. There was literally but one difficulty in the way--the difficulty which had already occurred to my mind. Could I sufficiently master the animal instinct of self-preservation to deliberately let myself sink at the first plunge?

The atmosphere in the room felt close and heavy. I went out, and walked to and fro--now in the shadow, and now in the moonlight--under the trees before the cottage door.

Of the moral objections to suicide, not one had any influence over me now. I, who had once found it impossible to excuse, impossible even to understand, the despair which had driven Mrs. Van Brandt to attempt self-destruction--I now contemplated with composure the very act which had horrified me when I saw it committed by another person. Well may we hesitate to condemn the frailties of our fellow-creatures, for the one unanswerable reason that we can never feel sure how soon similar temptations may not lead us to be guilty of the same frailties ourselves. Looking back at the events of the night, I can recall but one consideration that stayed my feet on the fatal path which led back to the lake. I still doubted whether it would be possible for such a swimmer as I was to drown himself. This was all that troubled my mind. For the rest, my will was made, and I had few other affairs which remained unsettled. No lingering hope was left in me of a reunion in the future with Mrs. Van Brandt. She had never written to me again; I had (forgiven) her for having forgotten me. My thoughts of her and of others were the forbearing thoughts of a man whose mind was withdrawn already from the world, whose views were narrowing fast to the one idea of his own death.

I grew weary of walking up and down. The loneliness of the place began to oppress me. The sense of my own indecision irritated my nerves. After a long look at the lake through the trees, I came to a positive conclusion at last. I determined to try if a good swimmer could drown himself.