

CHAPTER XXXIII. A VISION OF THE NIGHT.

RETURNING to the cottage parlor, I took a chair by the window and opened my pocket-book at a blank page. I had certain directions to give to my representatives, which might spare them some trouble and uncertainty in the event of my death. Disguising my last instructions under the commonplace heading of "Memoranda on my return to London," I began to write.

I had filled one page of the pocket-book, and had just turned to the next, when I became conscious of a difficulty in fixing my attention on the subject that was before it. I was at once reminded of the similar difficulty which I felt in Shetland, when I had tried vainly to arrange the composition of the letter to my mother which Miss Dunross was to write. By way of completing the parallel, my thoughts wandered now, as they had wandered then, to my latest remembrance of Mrs. Van Brandt. In a minute or two I began to feel once more the strange physical sensations which I had first experienced in the garden at Mr. Dunross's house. The same mysterious trembling shuddered through me from head to foot. I looked about me again, with no distinct consciousness of what the objects were on which my eyes rested. My nerves trembled, on that lovely summer night, as if there had been an electric disturbance in the atmosphere and a storm coming. I laid my pocket-book and pencil on the table, and rose to go out again under the trees. Even the trifling effort to cross the room was an effort made in vain. I stood rooted to the spot, with my face turned toward the moonlight streaming in at the open door.

An interval passed, and as I still looked out through the door, I became aware of something moving far down among the trees that fringed the shore of the lake. The first impression produced on me was of two gray shadows winding their way slowly toward me between the trunks of the trees. By fine degrees the shadows assumed a more and more marked outline, until they presented themselves in the likeness of two robed figures, one taller than the other. While they glided nearer and nearer, their gray obscurity of hue melted away. They brightened softly with an inner light of their own as they slowly approached the open space before the door. For the third time I stood in the ghostly presence of Mrs. Van Brandt; and with her, holding her hand, I beheld a second apparition never before revealed to me, the apparition of her child.

Hand-in-hand, shining in their unearthly brightness through the bright

moonlight itself, the two stood before me. The mother's face looked at me once more with the sorrowful and pleading eyes which I remembered so well. But the face of the child was innocently radiant with an angelic smile. I waited in unutterable expectation for the word that was to be spoken, for the movement that was to come. The movement came first. The child released its hold on the mother's hand, and floating slowly upward, remained poised in midair--a softly glowing presence shining out of the dark background of the trees. The mother glided into the room, and stopped at the table on which I had laid my pocket-book and pencil when I could no longer write. As before, she took the pencil and wrote on the blank page. As before, she beckoned to me to step nearer to her. I approached her outstretched hand, and felt once more the mysterious rapture of her touch on my bosom, and heard once more her low, melodious tones repeating the words: "Remember me. Come to me." Her hand dropped from my bosom. The pale light which revealed her to me quivered, sunk, vanished. She had spoken. She had gone.

I drew to me the open pocket-book. And this time I saw, in the writing of the ghostly hand, these words only:

"Follow the Child."

I looked out again at the lonely night landscape.

There, in mid-air, shining softly out of the dark background of the trees, still hovered the starry apparition of the child.

Advancing without conscious will of my own, I crossed the threshold of the door. The softly glowing vision of the child moved away before me among the trees. I followed, like a man spellbound. The apparition, floating slowly onward, led me out of the wood, and past my old home, back to the lonely by-road along which I had walked from the market-town to the house. From time to time, as we two went on our way, the bright figure of the child paused, hovering low in the cloudless sky. Its radiant face looked down smiling on me; it beckoned with its little hand, and floated on again, leading me as the Star led the Eastern sages in the olden time.

I reached the town. The airy figure of the child paused, hovering over the house at which I had left my traveling-carriage in the evening. I ordered the horses to be harnessed again for another journey. The postilion waited for his further directions. I looked up. The child's hand was pointing southward, along the road that led to London. I gave the man his instructions to return to the place at which I had hired the carriage. At

intervals, as we proceeded, I looked out through the window. The bright figure of the child still floated on before me gliding low in the cloudless sky. Changing the horses stage by stage, I went on till the night ended--went on till the sun rose in the eastern heaven. And still, whether it was dark or whether it was light, the figure of the child floated on before me in its changeless and mystic light. Mile after mile, it still led the way southward, till we left the country behind us, and passing through the din and turmoil of the great city, stopped under the shadow of the ancient Tower, within view of the river that runs by it.

The postilion came to the carriage door to ask if I had further need of his services. I had called to him to stop, when I saw the figure of the child pause on its airy course. I looked upward again. The child's hand pointed toward the river. I paid the postilion and left the carriage. Floating on before me, the child led the way to a wharf crowded with travelers and their luggage. A vessel lay along-side of the wharf ready to sail. The child led me on board the vessel and paused again, hovering over me in the smoky air.

I looked up. The child looked back at me with its radiant smile, and pointed eastward down the river toward the distant sea. While my eyes were still fixed on the softly glowing figure, I saw it fade away upward and upward into the higher light, as the lark vanishes upward and upward in the morning sky. I was alone again with my earthly fellow-beings--left with no clew to guide me but the remembrance of the child's hand pointing eastward to the distant sea.

A sailor was near me coiling the loosened mooring-rope on the deck. I asked him to what port the vessel was bound. The man looked at me in surly amazement, and answered:

"To Rotterdam."