

CHAPTER XXXIV. BY LAND AND SEA.

IT mattered little to me to what port the vessel was bound. Go where I might, I knew that I was on my way to Mrs. Van Brandt. She had need of me again; she had claimed me again. Where the visionary hand of the child had pointed, thither I was destined to go. Abroad or at home, it mattered nothing: when I next set my foot on the land, I should be further directed on the journey which lay before me. I believed this as firmly as I believed that I had been guided, thus far, by the vision of the child.

For two nights I had not slept--my weariness overpowered me. I descended to the cabin, and found an unoccupied corner in which I could lie down to rest. When I awoke, it was night already, and the vessel was at sea.

I went on deck to breathe the fresh air. Before long the sensation of drowsiness returned; I slept again for hours together. My friend, the physician, would no doubt have attributed this prolonged need of repose to the exhausted condition of my brain, previously excited by delusions which had lasted uninterruptedly for many hours together. Let the cause be what it might, during the greater part of the voyage I was awake at intervals only. The rest of the time I lay like a weary animal, lost in sleep.

When I stepped on shore at Rotterdam, my first proceeding was to ask my way to the English Consulate. I had but a small sum of money with me; and, for all I knew to the contrary, it might be well, before I did anything else, to take the necessary measures for replenishing my purse.

I had my traveling-bag with me. On the journey to Greenwater Broad I had left it at the inn in the market-town, and the waiter had placed it in the carriage when I started on my return to London. The bag contained my checkbook, and certain letters which assisted me in proving my identity to the consul. He kindly gave me the necessary introduction to the correspondents at Rotterdam of my bankers in London.

Having obtained my money, and having purchased certain necessaries of which I stood in need, I walked slowly along the street, knowing nothing of what my next proceeding was to be, and waiting confidently for the event which was to guide me. I had not walked a hundred yards before I noticed the name of "Van Brandt" inscribed on the window-blinds of a house which appeared to be devoted to mercantile purposes.

The street door stood open. A second door, on one side of the passage, led into the office. I entered the room and inquired for Mr. Van Brandt. A clerk who spoke English was sent for to communicate with me. He told me there were three partners of that name in the business, and inquired which of them I wished to see. I remembered Van Brandt's Christian name, and mentioned it. No such person as "Mr. Ernest Van Brandt" was known at the office.

"We are only the branch house of the firm of Van Brandt here," the clerk explained. "The head office is at Amsterdam. They may know where Mr. Ernest Van Brandt is to be found, if you inquire there."

It mattered nothing to me where I went, so long as I was on my way to Mrs. Van Brandt. It was too late to travel that day; I slept at a hotel. The night passed quietly and uneventfully. The next morning I set forth by the public conveyance for Amsterdam.

Repeating my inquiries at the head office on my arrival, I was referred to one of the partners in the firm. He spoke English perfectly; and he received me with an appearance of interest which I was at a loss to account for at first.

"Mr. Ernest Van Brandt is well known to me," he said. "May I ask if you are a relative or friend of the English lady who has been introduced here as his wife?"

I answered in the affirmative; adding, "I am here to give any assistance to the lady of which she may stand in need."

The merchant's next words explained the appearance of interest with which he had received me.

"You are most welcome," he said. "You relieve my partners and myself of a great anxiety. I can only explain what I mean by referring for a moment to the business affairs of my firm. We have a fishing establishment in the ancient city of Enkhuizen, on the shores of the Zuyder Zee. Mr. Ernest Van Brandt had a share in it at one time, which he afterward sold. Of late years our profits from this source have been diminishing; and we think of giving up the fishery, unless our prospects in that quarter improve after a further trial. In the meantime, having a vacant situation in the counting-house at Enkhuizen, we thought of Mr. Ernest Van Brandt, and offered him the opportunity of renewing his connection with us, in the capacity of a clerk. He is related to one of my partners; but I am bound in truth to tell you that he is a very bad man. He has awarded us for our kindness to him by

embezzling our money; and he has taken to flight--in what direction we have not yet discovered. The English lady and her child are left deserted at Enkhuizen; and until you came here to-day we were quite at a loss to know what to do with them. I don't know whether you are already aware of it, sir; but the lady's position is made doubly distressing by doubts which we entertain of her being really Mr. Ernest Van Brandt's wife. To our certain knowledge, he was privately married to another woman some years since; and we have no evidence whatever that the first wife is dead. If we can help you in any way to assist your unfortunate country-woman, pray believe that our services are at your disposal."

With what breathless interest I listened to these words it is needless to say. Van Brandt had deserted her! Surely (as my poor mother had once said) "she must turn to me now." The hopes that had abandoned me filled my heart once more; the future which I had so long feared to contemplate showed itself again bright with the promise of coming happiness to my view. I thanked the good merchant with a fervor that surprised him. "Only help me to find my way to Enkhuizen," I said, "and I will answer for the rest."

"The journey will put you to some expense," the merchant replied. "Pardon me if I ask the question bluntly. Have you money?"

"Plenty of money."

"Very good. The rest will be easy enough. I will place you under the care of a countryman of yours, who has been employed in our office for many years. The easiest way for you, as a stranger, will be to go by sea; and the Englishman will show you where to hire a boat."

In a few minutes more the clerk and I were on our way to the harbor.

Difficulties which I had not anticipated occurred in finding the boat and in engaging a crew. This done, it was next necessary to purchase provisions for the voyage. Thanks to the experience of my companion, and to the hearty good-will with which he exerted it, my preparations were completed before night-fall. I was able to set sail for my destination on the next day.

The boat had the double advantage, in navigating the Zuyder Zee, of being large, and of drawing very little water; the captain's cabin was at the stern; and the two or three men who formed his crew were berthed forward, in the bows. The whole middle of the boat, partitioned off on the one side and on the other from the captain and the crew, was assigned to me for my cabin. Under these circumstances, I had no reason to complain of want of space;

the vessel measuring between fifty and sixty tons. I had a comfortable bed, a table, and chairs. The kitchen was well away from me, in the forward part of the boat. At my own request, I set forth on the voyage without servant or interpreter. I preferred being alone. The Dutch captain had been employed, at a former period of his life, in the mercantile navy of France; and we could communicate, whenever it was necessary or desirable, in the French language.

We left the spires of Amsterdam behind us, and sailed over the smooth waters of the lake on our way to the Zuyder Zee.

The history of this remarkable sea is a romance in itself. In the days when Rome was mistress of the world, it had no existence. Where the waves now roll, vast tracts of forest surrounded a great inland lake, with but one river to serve it as an outlet to the sea. Swelled by a succession of tempests, the lake overflowed its boundaries: its furious waters, destroying every obstacle in their course, rested only when they reached the furthest limits of the land.

The Northern Ocean beyond burst its way in through the gaps of ruin; and from that time the Zuyder Zee existed as we know it now. The years advanced, the generations of man succeeded each other; and on the shores of the new ocean there rose great and populous cities, rich in commerce, renowned in history. For centuries their prosperity lasted, before the next in this mighty series of changes ripened and revealed itself. Isolated from the rest of the world, vain of themselves and their good fortune, careless of the march of progress in the nations round them, the inhabitants of the Zuyder Zee cities sunk into the fatal torpor of a secluded people. The few members of the population who still preserved the relics of their old energy emigrated, while the mass left behind resignedly witnessed the diminution of their commerce and the decay of their institutions. As the years advanced to the nineteenth century, the population was reckoned by hundreds where it had once been numbered by thousands. Trade disappeared; whole streets were left desolate. Harbors, once filled with shipping, were destroyed by the unresisted accumulation of sand. In our own times the decay of these once flourishing cities is so completely beyond remedy, that the next great change in contemplation is the draining of the now dangerous and useless tract of water, and the profitable cultivation of the reclaimed land by generations that are still to come. Such, briefly told, is the strange story of the Zuyder Zee.

As we advanced on our voyage, and left the river, I noticed the tawny hue of the sea, caused by sand-banks which color the shallow water, and which

make the navigation dangerous to inexperienced seamen. We found our moorings for the night at the fishing island of Marken--a low, lost, desolate-looking place, as I saw it under the last gleams of the twilight. Here and there, the gabled cottages, perched on hillocks, rose black against the dim gray sky. Here and there, a human figure appeared at the waterside, standing, fixed in contemplation of the strange boat. And that was all I saw of the island of Marken.

Lying awake in the still night, alone on a strange sea, there were moments when I found myself beginning to doubt the reality of my own position.

Was it all a dream? My thoughts of suicide; my vision of the mother and daughter; my journey back to the metropolis, led by the apparition of the child; my voyage to Holland; my night anchorage in the unknown sea--were these, so to speak, all pieces of the same morbid mental puzzle, all delusions from which I might wake at any moment, and find myself restored to my senses again in the hotel at London? Bewildered by doubts which led me further and further from any definite conclusion, I left my bed and went on deck to change the scene. It was a still and cloudy night. In the black void around me, the island was a blacker shadow yet, and nothing more. The one sound that reached my ears was the heavy breathing of the captain and his crew sleeping on either side of me. I waited, looking round and round the circle of darkness in which I stood. No new vision showed itself. When I returned again to the cabin, and slumbered at last, no dreams came to me. All that was mysterious, all that was marvelous, in the later events of my life seemed to have been left behind me in England. Once in Holland, my course had been influenced by circumstances which were perfectly natural, by commonplace discoveries which might have revealed themselves to any man in my position. What did this mean? Had my gifts as a seer of visions departed from me in the new land and among the strange people? Or had my destiny led me to the place at which the troubles of my mortal pilgrimage were to find their end? Who could say?

Early the next morning we set sail once more.

Our course was nearly northward. On one side of me was the tawny sea, changing under certain conditions of the weather to a dull pearl-gray. On the other side was the flat, winding coast, composed alternately of yellow sand and bright-green meadow-lands; diversified at intervals by towns and villages, whose red-tiled roofs and quaint church-steeple rose gayly against the clear blue sky. The captain suggested to me to visit the famous towns of Edam and Hoorn; but I declined to go on shore. My one desire was to reach the ancient city in which Mrs. Van Brandt had been left deserted. As we

altered our course, to make for the promontory on which Enkhuizen is situated, the wind fell, then shifted to another quarter, and blew with a force which greatly increased the difficulties of navigation. I still insisted, as long as it was possible to do so, on holding on our course. After sunset, the strength of the wind abated. The night came without a cloud, and the starry firmament gave us its pale and glittering light. In an hour more the capricious wind shifted back again in our favor. Toward ten o'clock we sailed into the desolate harbor of Enkhuizen.

The captain and crew, fatigued by their exertions, ate their frugal suppers and went to their beds. In a few minutes more, I was the only person left awake in the boat.

I ascended to the deck, and looked about me.

Our boat was moored to a deserted quay. Excepting a few fishing vessels visible near us, the harbor of this once prosperous place was a vast solitude of water, varied here and there by dreary banks of sand. Looking inland, I saw the lonely buildings of the Dead City--black, grim, and dreadful under the mysterious starlight. Not a human creature, not even a stray animal, was to be seen anywhere. The place might have been desolated by a pestilence, so empty and so lifeless did it now appear. Little more than a hundred years ago, the record of its population reached sixty thousand. The inhabitants had dwindled to a tenth of that number when I looked at Enkhuizen now!

I considered with myself what my next course of proceeding was to be.

The chances were certainly against my discovering Mrs. Van Brandt if I ventured alone and unguided into the city at night. On the other hand, now that I had reached the place in which she and her child were living, friendless and deserted, could I patiently wait through the weary interval that must elapse before the morning came and the town was astir? I knew my own self-tormenting disposition too well to accept this latter alternative. Whatever came of it, I determined to walk through Enkhuizen on the bare chance of meeting some one who might inform me of Mrs. Van Brandt's address.

First taking the precaution of locking my cabin door, I stepped from the bulwark of the vessel to the lonely quay, and set forth upon my night wanderings through the Dead City.