

CHAPTER XXXVI. LOVE AND PRIDE.

A CRY of terror from the room told me that I had been heard. For a moment more nothing happened. Then the child's voice reached me, wild and shrill: "Open the shutters, mamma! I said he was coming--I want to see him!"

There was still an interval of hesitation before the mother opened the shutters. She did it at last. I saw her darkly at the window, with the light behind her, and the child's head just visible above the lower part of the window-frame. The quaint little face moved rapidly up and down, as if my self-appointed daughter were dancing for joy!

"Can I trust my own senses?" said Mrs. Van Brandt. "Is it really Mr. Germaine?"

"How do you do, new papa?" cried the child. "Push open the big door and come in. I want to kiss you."

There was a world of difference between the coldly doubtful tone of the mother and the joyous greeting of the child. Had I forced myself too suddenly on Mrs. Van Brandt? Like all sensitively organized persons, she possessed that inbred sense of self-respect which is pride under another name. Was her pride wounded at the bare idea of my seeing her, deserted as well as deceived--abandoned contemptuously, a helpless burden on strangers--by the man for whom she had sacrificed and suffered so much? And that man a thief, flying from the employers whom he had cheated! I pushed open the heavy oaken street-door, fearing that this might be the true explanation of the change which I had already remarked in her. My apprehensions were confirmed when she unlocked the inner door, leading from the courtyard to the sitting-room, and let me in.

As I took her by both hands and kissed her, she turned her head, so that my lips touched her cheek only. She flushed deeply; her eyes looked away from me as she spoke her few formal words of welcome. When the child flew into my arms, she cried out, irritably, "Don't trouble Mr. Germaine!" I took a chair, with the little one on my knee. Mrs. Van Brandt seated herself at a distance from me. "It is needless, I suppose, to ask you if you know what has happened," she said, turning pale again as suddenly as she had turned red, and keeping her eyes fixed obstinately on the floor.

Before I could answer, the child burst out with the news of her father's

disappearance in these words:

"My other papa has run away! My other papa has stolen money! It's time I had a new one, isn't it?" She put her arms round my neck. "And now I've got him!" she cried, at the shrillest pitch of her voice.

The mother looked at us. For a while, the proud, sensitive woman struggled successfully with herself; but the pang that wrung her was not to be endured in silence. With a low cry of pain, she hid her face in her hands. Overwhelmed by the sense of her own degradation, she was even ashamed to let the man who loved her see that she was in tears.

I took the child off my knee. There was a second door in the sitting-room, which happened to be left open. It showed me a bed-chamber within, and a candle burning on the toilet-table.

"Go in there and play," I said. "I want to talk to your mamma."

The child pouted: my proposal did not appear to tempt her. "Give me something to play with," she said. "I'm tired of my toys. Let me see what you have got in your pockets."

Her busy little hands began to search in my coat-pockets. I let her take what she pleased, and so bribed her to run away into the inner room. As soon as she was out of sight, I approached the poor mother and seated myself by her side.

"Think of it as I do," I said. "Now that he has forsaken you, he has left you free to be mine."

She lifted her head instantly; her eyes flashed through her tears.

"Now that he has forsaken me," she answered, "I am more unworthy of you than ever!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Why!" she repeated, passionately. "Has a woman not reached the lowest depths of degradation when she has lived to be deserted by a thief?"

It was hopeless to attempt to reason with her in her present frame of mind. I tried to attract her attention to a less painful subject by referring to the strange succession of events which had brought me to her for the third time.

She stopped me impatiently at the outset.

"It seems useless to say once more what we have said on other occasions," she answered. "I understand what has brought you here. I have appeared to you again in a vision, just as I appeared to you twice before."

"No," I said. "Not as you appeared to me twice before. This time I saw you with the child by your side."

That reply roused her. She started, and looked nervously toward the bed-chamber door.

"Don't speak loud!" she said. "Don't let the child hear us! My dream of you this time has left a painful impression on my mind. The child is mixed up in it--and I don't like that. Then the place in which I saw you is associated--" She paused, leaving the sentence unfinished. "I am nervous and wretched to-night," she resumed; "and I don't want to speak of it. And yet, I should like to know whether my dream has misled me, or whether you really were in that cottage, of all places in the world?"

I was at a loss to understand the embarrassment which she appeared to feel in putting her question. There was nothing very wonderful, to my mind, in the discovery that she had been in Suffolk, and that she was acquainted with Greenwater Broad. The lake was known all over the county as a favorite resort of picnic parties; and Dermody's pretty cottage used to be one of the popular attractions of the scene. What really surprised me was to see, as I now plainly saw, that she had some painful association with my old home. I decided on answering her question in such terms as might encourage her to take me into her confidence. In a moment more I should have told her that my boyhood had been passed at Greenwater Broad--in a moment more, we should have recognized each other--when a trivial interruption suspended the words on my lips. The child ran out of the bed-chamber, with a quaintly shaped key in her hand. It was one of the things she had taken out of my pockets and it belonged to the cabin door on board the boat. A sudden fit of curiosity (the insatiable curiosity of a child) had seized her on the subject of this key. She insisted on knowing what door it locked; and, when I had satisfied her on that point, she implored me to take her immediately to see the boat. This entreaty led naturally to a renewal of the disputed question of going, or not going, to bed. By the time the little creature had left us again, with permission to play for a few minutes longer, the conversation between Mrs. Van Brandt and myself had taken a new direction. Speaking now of the child's health, we were led naturally to the kindred subject of the child's connection with her mother's dream.

"She had been ill with fever," Mrs. Van Brandt began; "and she was just getting better again on the day when I was left deserted in this miserable place. Toward evening, she had another attack that frightened me dreadfully. She became perfectly insensible--her little limbs were stiff and cold. There is one doctor here who has not yet abandoned the town. Of course I sent for him. He thought her insensibility was caused by a sort of cataleptic seizure. At the same time, he comforted me by saying that she was in no immediate danger of death; and he left me certain remedies to be given, if certain symptoms appeared. I took her to bed, and held her to me, with the idea of keeping her warm. Without believing in mesmerism, it has since struck me that we might unconsciously have had some influence over each other, which may explain what followed. Do you think it likely?"

"Quite likely. At the same time, the mesmeric theory (if you could believe in it) would carry the explanation further still. Mesmerism would assert, not only that you and the child influenced each other, but that--in spite of the distance--you both influenced me. And in that way, mesmerism would account for my vision as the necessary result of a highly developed sympathy between us. Tell me, did you fall asleep with the child in your arms?"

"Yes. I was completely worn out; and I fell asleep, in spite of my resolution to watch through the night. In my forlorn situation, forsaken in a strange place, I dreamed of you again, and I appealed to you again as my one protector and friend. The only new thing in the dream was, that I thought I had the child with me when I approached you, and that the child put the words into my mind when I wrote in your book. You saw the words, I suppose? and they vanished, as before, no doubt, when I awoke? I found the child still lying, like a dead creature, in my arms. All through the night there was no change in her. She only recovered her senses at noon the next day. Why do you start? What have I said that surprises you?"

There was good reason for my feeling startled, and showing it. On the day and at the hour when the child had come to herself, I had stood on the deck of the vessel, and had seen the apparition of her disappear from my view.

"Did she say anything," I asked, "when she recovered her senses?"

"Yes. She too had been dreaming--dreaming that she was in company with you. She said: 'He is coming to see us, mamma; and I have been showing him the way.' I asked her where she had seen you. She spoke confusedly of more places than one. She talked of trees, and a cottage, and a lake; then of

fields and hedges, and lonely lanes; then of a carriage and horses, and a long white road; then of crowded streets and houses, and a river and a ship. As to these last objects, there is nothing very wonderful in what she said. The houses, the river, and the ship which she saw in her dream, she saw in the reality when we took her from London to Rotterdam, on our way here. But as to the other places, especially the cottage and the lake (as she described them) I can only suppose that her dream was the reflection of mine. I had been dreaming of the cottage and the lake, as I once knew them in years long gone by; and--Heaven only knows why--I had associated you with the scene. Never mind going into that now! I don't know what infatuation it is that makes me trifle in this way with old recollections, which affect me painfully in my present position. We were talking of the child's health; let us go back to that."

It was not easy to return to the topic of her child's health. She had revived my curiosity on the subject of her association with Greenwater Broad. The child was still quietly at play in the bedchamber. My second opportunity was before me. I took it.

"I won't distress you," I began. "I will only ask leave, before we change the subject, to put one question to you about the cottage and the lake."

As the fatality that pursued us willed it, it was her turn now to be innocently an obstacle in the way of our discovering each other.

"I can tell you nothing more to-night," she interposed, rising impatiently. "It is time I put the child to bed--and, besides, I can't talk of things that distress me. You must wait for the time--if it ever comes!--when I am calmer and happier than I am now."

She turned to enter the bed-chamber. Acting headlong on the impulse of the moment, I took her by the hand and stopped her.

"You have only to choose," I said, "and the calmer and happier time is yours from this moment."

"Mine?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Say the word," I replied, "and you and your child have a home and a future before you."

She looked at me half bewildered, half angry.

"Do you offer me your protection?" she asked.

"I offer you a husband's protection," I answered. "I ask you to be my wife."

She advanced a step nearer to me, with her eyes riveted on my face.

"You are evidently ignorant of what has really happened," she said. "And yet, God knows, the child spoke plainly enough!"

"The child only told me," I rejoined, "what I had heard already, on my way here."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

"And you still ask me to be your wife?"

"I can imagine no greater happiness than to make you my wife."

"Knowing what you know now?"

"Knowing what I know now, I ask you confidently to give me your hand. Whatever claim that man may once have had, as the father of your child, he has now forfeited it by his infamous desertion of you. In every sense of the word, my darling, you are a free woman. We have had sorrow enough in our lives. Happiness is at last within our reach. Come to me, and say Yes."

I tried to take her in my arms. She drew back as if I had frightened her.

"Never!" she said, firmly.

I whispered my next words, so that the child in the inner room might not hear us.

"You once said you loved me!"

"I do love you!"

"As dearly as ever?"

"More dearly than ever!"

"Kiss me!"

She yielded mechanically; she kissed me--with cold lips, with big tears in her eyes.

"You don't love me!" I burst out, angrily. "You kiss me as if it were a duty. Your lips are cold--your heart is cold. You don't love me!"

She looked at me sadly, with a patient smile.

"One of us must remember the difference between your position and mine," she said. "You are a man of stainless honor, who holds an undisputed rank in the world. And what am I? I am the deserted mistress of a thief. One of us must remember that. You have generously forgotten it. I must bear it in mind. I dare say I am cold. Suffering has that effect on me; and, I own it, I am suffering now."

I was too passionately in love with her to feel the sympathy on which she evidently counted in saying those words. A man can respect a woman's scruples when they appeal to him mutely in her looks or in her tears; but the formal expression of them in words only irritates or annoys him.

"Whose fault is it that you suffer?" I retorted, coldly. "I ask you to make my life a happy one, and your life a happy one. You are a cruelly wronged woman, but you are not a degraded woman. You are worthy to be my wife, and I am ready to declare it publicly. Come back with me to England. My boat is waiting for you; we can set sail in two hours."

She dropped into a chair; her hands fell helplessly into her lap.

"How cruel!" she murmured, "how cruel to tempt me!" She waited a little, and recovered her fatal firmness. "No!" she said. "If I die in doing it, I can still refuse to disgrace you. Leave me, Mr. Germaine. You can show me that one kindness more. For God's sake, leave me!"

I made a last appeal to her tenderness.

"Do you know what my life is if I live without you?" I asked. "My mother is dead. There is not a living creature left in the world whom I love but you. And you ask me to leave you! Where am I to go to? what am I to do? You talk of cruelty! Is there no cruelty in sacrificing the happiness of my life to a miserable scruple of delicacy, to an unreasoning fear of the opinion of the world? I love you and you love me. There is no other consideration worth a

straw. Come back with me to England! come back and be my wife!"

She dropped on her knees, and taking my hand put it silently to her lips. I tried to raise her. It was useless: she steadily resisted me.

"Does this mean No?" I asked.

"It means," she said in faint, broken tones, "that I prize your honor beyond my happiness. If I marry you, your career is destroyed by your wife; and the day will come when you will tell me so. I can suffer--I can die; but I can not face such a prospect as that. Forgive me and forget me. I can say no more!"

She let go of my hand, and sank on the floor. The utter despair of that action told me, far more eloquently than the words which she had just spoken, that her resolution was immovable. She had deliberately separated herself from me; her own act had parted us forever.