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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Two Destinies](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 12 - The Disasters Of Mrs. Van Brandt

A MAN who passes his evening as I had passed mine, may go to bed afterward if he has nothing better to do. But he must not rank among the number of his reasonable anticipations the expectation of getting a night's rest. The morning was well advanced, and the hotel was astir, before I at last closed my eyes in slumber. When I awoke, my watch informed me that it was close on noon.

I rang the bell. My servant appeared with a letter in his hand. It had been left for me, three hours since, by a lady who had driven to the hotel door in a carriage, and had then driven away again. The man had found me sleeping when he entered my bed-chamber, and, having received no orders to wake me overnight, had left the letter on the sitting-room table until he heard my bell.

Easily guessing who my correspondent was, I opened the letter. An inclosure fell out of it--to which, for the moment, I paid no attention. I turned eagerly to the first lines. They announced that the writer had escaped me for the second time: early that morning she had left Edinburgh. The paper inclosed proved to be my letter of introduction to the dressmaker returned to me.

I was more than angry with her--I felt her second flight from me as a downright outrage. In five minutes I had hurried on my clothes and was on my way to the inn in the Canongate as fast as a horse could draw me.

The servants could give me no information. Her escape had been effected without their knowledge.

The landlady, to whom I next addressed myself, deliberately declined to assist me in any way whatever.

"I have given the lady my promise," said this obstinate person, "to answer not one word to any question that you may ask me about her. In my belief, she is acting as becomes an honest woman in removing herself from any further communication with you. I saw you through the keyhole last night, sir. I wish you good-morning."

Returning to my hotel, I left no attempt to discover her untried. I traced the coachman who had driven her. He had set her down at a shop, and had then been dismissed. I questioned the shop-keeper. He remembered that he had sold some articles of linen to a lady with her veil down and a traveling-bag in her hand, and he remembered no more. I circulated a description of her in the different coach offices. Three "elegant young ladies, with their veils down, and with traveling-bags in their hands," answered to the description; and which of the three was the fugitive of whom I was in search, it was impossible to discover. In the days of railways and electric telegraphs I might have succeeded in tracing her. In the days of which I am now writing, she set investigation at defiance.

I read and reread her letter, on the chance that some slip of the pen might furnish the clew which I had failed to find in any other way. Here is the narrative that she addressed to me, copied from the original, word for word:

"DEAR SIR--Forgive me for leaving you again as I left you in Perthshire. After what took place last night, I have no other choice (knowing my own weakness, and the influence that you seem to have over me) than to thank you gratefully for your kindness, and to bid you farewell. My sad position must be my excuse for separating myself from you in this rude manner, and for venturing to send you back your letter of introduction. If I use the letter, I only offer you a means of communicating with me. For your sake, as well as for mine, this must not be. I must never give you a second opportunity of saying that you love me; I must go away, leaving no trace behind by which you can possibly discover me.

"But I cannot forget that I owe my poor life to your compassion and your courage. You, who saved me, have a right to know what the provocation was that drove me to drowning myself, and what my situation is, now that I am (thanks to you) still a living woman. You shall hear my sad story, sir; and I will try to tell it as briefly as possible.

"I was married, not very long since, to a Dutch gentleman, whose name is Van Brandt. Please excuse my entering into family particulars. I have endeavored to write and tell you about my dear lost father and my old home. But the tears come into my eyes when I think of my happy past life. I really cannot see the lines as I try to write them.

"Let me, then, only say that Mr. Van Brandt was well recommended to my good father before I married. I have only now discovered that he obtained these recommendations from his friends under a false pretense, which it is needless to trouble you by mentioning in detail. Ignorant of what he had done, I lived with him happily. I cannot truly declare that he was the object of my first love, but he was the one person in the world whom I had to look up to after my father's death. I esteemed him and respected him, and, if I may say so without vanity, I did indeed make him a good wife.

"So the time went on, sir, prosperously enough, until the evening came when you and I met on the bridge.

"I was out alone in our garden, trimming the shrubs, when the maid-servant came and told me there was a foreign lady in a carriage at the door who desired to say a word to Mrs. Van Brandt. I sent the maid on before to show her into the sitting-room, and I followed to receive my visitor as soon as I had made myself tidy. She was a dreadful woman, with a flushed, fiery face and impudent, bright eyes. 'Are you Mrs. Van Brandt?' she said. I answered, 'Yes.' 'Are you really married to him?' she asked me. That question (naturally enough, I think) upset my temper. I said, 'How dare you doubt it?' She laughed in my face. 'Send for Van Brandt,' she said. I went out into the passage and called him down from the room upstairs in which he was writing. 'Ernest,' I said, 'here is a person who has insulted me. Come down directly.' He left his room the moment he heard me. The woman followed me out into the passage to meet him. She made him a low courtesy. He turned deadly pale the moment he set eyes on her. That frightened me. I said to him, 'For God's sake, what does this mean?' He took me by the arm, and he answered: 'You shall know soon. Go back to your gardening, and don't return to the house till I send for you.' His looks were so shocking, he was so unlike himself, that I declare he daunted me. I let him take me as far as the garden door. He squeezed my hand. 'For my sake, darling,' he whispered, 'do what I ask of you.' I went into the garden and sat me down on the nearest bench, and waited impatiently for what was to come.

"How long a time passed I don't know. My anxiety got to such a pitch at last that I could bear it no longer. I ventured back to the house.

"I listened in the passage, and heard nothing. I went close to the parlor door, and still there was silence. I took courage, and opened the door.

"The room was empty. There was a letter on the table. It was in my husband's handwriting, and it was addressed to me. I opened it and read it. The letter told me that I was deserted, disgraced, ruined. The woman with the fiery face and the impudent eyes was Van Brandt's lawful wife. She had given him his choice of going away with her at once or of being prosecuted for bigamy. He had gone away with her--gone, and left me.

"Remember, sir, that I had lost both father and mother. I had no friends. I was alone in the world, without a creature near to comfort or advise me. And please to bear in mind that I have a temper which feels even the smallest slights and injuries very keenly. Do you wonder at what I had it in my thoughts to do that evening on the bridge?"

"Mind this: I believe I should never have attempted to destroy myself if I could only have burst out crying. No tears came to me. A dull, stunned feeling took hold like a vise on my head and on my heart. I walked straight to the river. I said to myself, quite calmly, as I went along, 'There_ is the end of it, and the sooner the better.'

"What happened after that, you know as well as I do. I may get on to the next morning--the morning when I so ungratefully left you at the inn by the river-side.

"I had but one reason, sir, for going away by the first conveyance that I could find to take me, and this was the fear that Van Brandt might discover me if I remained in Perthshire. The letter that he had left on the table was full of expressions of love and remorse, to say nothing of excuses for his infamous behavior to me. He declared that he had been entrapped into a private marriage with a profligate woman when he was little more than a lad. They had long since separated by common consent. When he first courted me, he had every reason to believe that she was dead. How he had been deceived in this particular, and how she had discovered that he had married me, he had yet to find out. Knowing her furious temper, he had gone away with her, as the one means of preventing an application to the justices and a scandal in the neighborhood. In a day or two he would purchase his release from her by an addition to the allowance which she had already received from him: he would return to me and take me abroad, out of the way of further annoyance. I was his wife in the sight of Heaven; I was the only woman he had ever loved; and so on, and so on.

"Do you now see, sir, the risk that I ran of his discovering me if I remained in your neighborhood? The bare thought of it made my flesh creep. I was determined never again to see the man who had so cruelly deceived me. I am in the same mind still--with this difference, that I might consent to see him, if I could be positively assured first of the death of his wife. That is not likely to happen. Let me get on with my letter, and tell you what I did on my arrival in Edinburgh.

"The coachman recommended me to the house in the Canongate where you found me lodging. I wrote the same day to relatives of my father, living in Glasgow, to tell them where I was, and in what a forlorn position I found myself.

"I was answered by return of post. The head of the family and his wife requested me to refrain from visiting them in Glasgow. They had business then in hand which would take them to Edinburgh, and I might expect to see them both with the least possible delay.

"They arrived, as they had promised, and they expressed themselves civilly enough. Moreover, they did certainly lend me a small sum of money when they found how poorly my purse was furnished. But I don't think either husband or wife felt much for me. They recommended me, at parting, to apply to my father's other relatives, living in England. I may be doing them an injustice, but I fancy they were eager to get me (as the common phrase is) off their hands.

"The day when the departure of my relatives left me friendless was also the day, sir, when I had that dream or vision of you which I have already related. I lingered on at the house in the Canongate, partly because the landlady was kind to me, partly because I was so depressed by my position that I really did not know what to do next.

"In this wretched condition you discovered me on that favorite walk of mine from Holyrood to Saint Anthony's Well. Believe me, your kind interest in my fortunes has not been thrown away on an ungrateful woman. I could ask Providence for no greater blessing than to find a brother and a friend in you. You have yourself destroyed that hope by what you said and did when we were together in the parlor. I don't blame you: I am afraid my manner (without my knowing it) might have seemed to give you some encouragement. I am only sorry--very, very sorry--to have no honorable choice left but never to see you again.

"After much thin king, I have made up my mind to speak to those other relatives of my father to whom I have not yet applied. The chance that they may help me to earn an honest living is the one chance that I have left. God bless you, Mr. Germaine! I wish you prosperity and happiness from the bottom of my heart; and remain, your grateful servant,

"M. VAN BRANDT.

"P.S.--I sign my own name (or the name which I once thought was mine) as a proof that I have honestly written the truth about myself, from first to last. For the future I must, for safety's sake, live under some other name. I should like to go back to my name when I was a happy girl at home. But Van Brandt knows it; and, besides, I have (no matter how innocently) disgraced it. Good-by again, sir; and thank you again."

So the letter concluded.

I read it in the temper of a thoroughly disappointed and thoroughly unreasonable man. Whatever poor Mrs. Van Brandt had done, she had done wrong. It was wrong of her, in the first place, to have married at all. It was wrong of her to contemplate receiving Mr. Van Brandt again, even if his lawful wife had died in the interval. It was wrong of her to return my letter of introduction, after I had given myself the trouble of altering it to suit her capricious fancy. It was wrong of her to take an absurdly prudish view of a stolen kiss and a tender declaration, and to fly from me as if I were as great a scoundrel as Mr. Van Brandt himself. And last, and more than all, it was wrong of her to sign her Christian name in initial only. Here I was, passionately in love with a woman, and not knowing by what fond name to identify her in my thoughts! "M. Van Brandt!" I might call her Maria, Margaret, Martha, Mabel, Magdalen, Mary--no, not Mary. The old boyish love was dead and gone, but I owed some respect to the memory of it. If the "Mary" of my early days were still living, and if I had met her, would she have treated me as this woman had treated me? Never! It was an injury to "Mary" to think even of that heartless creature by her name. Why think of her at all? Why degrade myself by trying to puzzle out a means of tracing her in her letter? It was sheer folly to attempt to trace a woman who had gone I knew not whither, and who herself informed me that she meant to pass under an assumed name. Had I lost all pride, all self-respect? In the flower of my age, with a handsome fortune, with the world before me, full of interesting female faces and charming female figures, what course did it become me to take? To go back to my country-house, and mope over the loss of a woman who had deliberately deserted me? or to send for a courier and a traveling carriage, and forget her gayly among foreign people and foreign scenes? In the state of my temper at that moment, the idea of a pleasure tour in Europe fired my imagination. I first astonished the people at the hotel by ordering all further inquiries after the missing Mrs. Van Brandt to be stopped; and then I opened my writing desk and wrote to tell my mother frankly and fully of my new plans.

The answer arrived by return of post.

To my surprise and delight, my good mother was not satisfied with only formally approving of my new resolution. With an energy which I had not ventured to expect from her, she had made all her arrangements for leaving home, and had started for Edinburgh to join me as my traveling companion. "You shall not go away alone, George," she wrote, "while I have strength and spirits to keep you company."

In three days from the time when I read those words our preparations were completed, and we were on our way to the Continent.

