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Chapter 21 - She Comes Between Us

WHAT emotion had I thoughtlessly aroused in Miss Dunross? Had I offended or distressed her? Or had I, without meaning it, forced on her inner knowledge some deeply seated feeling which she had thus far resolutely ignored?

I looked back through the days of my sojourn in the house; I questioned my own feelings and impressions, on the chance that they might serve me as a means of solving the mystery of her sudden flight from the room.

What effect had she produced on me?

In plain truth, she had simply taken her place in my mind, to the exclusion of every other person and every other subject. In ten days she had taken a hold on my sympathies of which other women would have failed to possess themselves in so many years. I remembered, to my shame, that my mother had but seldom occupied my thoughts. Even the image of Mrs. Van Brandt--except when the conversation had turned on her--had become a faint image in my mind! As to my friends at Lerwick, from Sir James downward, they had all kindly come to see me--and I had secretly and ungratefully rejoiced when their departure left the scene free for the return of my nurse. In two days more the Government vessel was to sail on the return voyage. My wrist was still painful when I tried to use it; but the far more serious injury presented by the reopened wound was no longer a subject of anxiety to myself or to any one about me. I was sufficiently restored to be capable of making the journey to Lerwick, if I rested for one night at a farm half-way between the town and Mr. Dunross's house. Knowing this, I had nevertheless left the question of rejoining the vessel undecided to the very latest moment. The motive which I pleaded to my friends was--uncertainty as to the sufficient recovery of my strength. The motive which I now confessed to myself was reluctance to leave Miss Dunross.

What was the secret of her power over me? What emotion, what passion, had she awakened in me? Was it love?

No: not love. The place which Mary had once held in my heart, the place which Mrs. Van Brandt had taken in the after-time, was not the place occupied by Miss Dunross. How could I (in the ordinary sense of the word) be in love with a woman whose face I had never seen? whose beauty had faded, never to bloom again? whose wasted life hung by a thread which the accident of a moment might snap? The senses have their share in all love between the sexes which is worthy of the name. They had no share in the feeling with which I regarded Miss Dunross. What _was_ the feeling, then? I can only answer the question in one way. The feeling lay too deep in me for my sounding.

What impression had I produced on her? What sensitive chord had I ignorantly touched, when my lips touched her hand?

I confess I recoiled from pursuing the inquiry which I had deliberately set myself to make. I thought of her shattered health; of her melancholy existence in shadow and solitude; of the rich treasures of such a heart and such a mind as hers, wasted with her wasting life; and I said to myself, Let her secret be sacred! let me never again, by word or deed, bring the trouble which tells of it to the surface! let her heart be veiled from me in the darkness which veils her face!

In this frame of mind toward her, I waited her return.

I had no doubt of seeing her again, sooner or later, on that day. The post to the south went out on the next day; and the early hour of the morning at which the messenger called for our letters made it a matter of ordinary convenience to write overnight. In the disabled state of my hand, Miss Dunross had been accustomed to write home for me, under my dictation: she knew that I owed a letter to my mother, and that I relied as usual on her help. Her return to me, under these circumstances, was simply a question of time: any duty which she had once undertaken was an imperative duty in her estimation, no matter how trifling it might be.

The hours wore on; the day drew to its end--and still she never appeared.

I left my room to enjoy the last sunny gleam of the daylight in the garden attached to the house; first telling Peter where I might be found, if Miss Dunross wanted me. The garden was a wild place, to my southern notions; but it extended for some distance along the shore of the island, and it offered some pleasant views of the lake and the moorland country beyond. Slowly pursuing my walk, I proposed to myself to occupy my mind to some useful purpose by arranging beforehand the composition of the letter which Miss Dunross was to write.

To my great surprise, I found it simply impossible to fix my mind on the subject. Try as I might, my thoughts persisted in wandering from the letter to my mother, and concentrated themselves instead--on Miss Dunross? No. On the question of my returning, or not returning, to Perthshire by the Government vessel? No. By some capricious revulsion of feeling which it seemed impossible to account for, my whole mind was now absorbed on the one subject which had been hitherto so strangely absent from it--the subject of Mrs. Van Brandt!

My memory went back, in defiance of all exercise of my own will, to my last interview with her. I saw her again; I heard her again. I tasted once more the momentary rapture of our last kiss; I felt once more the pang of sorrow that wrung me when I had parted with her and found myself alone in the street. Tears--of which I was ashamed, though nobody was near to see them--filled my eyes when I thought of the months that had passed since we had last looked on one another, and of all that she might have suffered, must have suffered, in that time. Hundreds on hundreds of miles were between us--and yet she was now as near me as if she were walking in the garden by my side!

This strange condition of my mind was matched by an equally strange condition of my body. A mysterious trembling shuddered over me faintly from head to foot. I walked without feeling the ground as I trod on it; I looked about me with no distinct consciousness of what the objects were on which my eyes rested. My hands were cold--and yet I hardly felt it. My head throbbed hotly--and yet I was not sensible of any pain. It seemed as if I were surrounded and enwrapped in some electric atmosphere which altered all the ordinary conditions of sensation. I looked up at the clear, calm sky, and wondered if a thunderstorm was coming. I stopped, and buttoned my coat round me, and questioned myself if I had caught a cold, or if I was going to have a fever. The sun sank below the moorland horizon; the gray twilight trembled over the dark waters of the lake. I went back to the house; and the vivid memory of Mrs. Van Brandt, still in close companionship, went back with me.

The fire in my room had burned low in my absence. One of the closed curtains had been drawn back a few inches, so as to admit through the window a ray of the dying light. On the boundary limit where the light was crossed by the obscurity which filled the rest of the room, I saw Miss Dunross seated, with her veil drawn and her writing-

case on her knee, waiting my return.

I hastened to make my excuses. I assured her that I had been careful to tell the servant where to find me. She gently checked me before I could say more.

"It's not Peter's fault," she said. "I told him not to hurry your return to the house. Have you enjoyed your walk?"

She spoke very quietly. The faint, sad voice was fainter and sadder than ever. She kept her head bent over her writing-case, instead of turning it toward me as usual while we were talking. I still felt the mysterious trembling which had oppressed me in the garden. Drawing a chair near the fire, I stirred the embers together, and tried to warm myself. Our positions in the room left some little distance between us. I could only see her sidewise, as she sat by the window in the sheltering darkness of the curtain which still remained drawn.

"I think I have been too long in the garden," I said. "I feel chilled by the cold evening air."

"Will you have some more wood put on the fire?" she asked. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. I shall do very well here. I see you are kindly ready to write for me."

"Yes," she said, "at your own convenience. When you are ready, my pen is ready."

The unacknowledged reserve that had come between us since we had last spoken together, was, I believe, as painfully felt by her as by me. We were no doubt longing to break through it on either side--if we had only known how. The writing of the letter would occupy us, at any rate. I made another effort to give my mind to the subject--and once more it was an effort made in vain. Knowing what I wanted to say to my mother, my faculties seemed to be paralyzed when I tried to say it. I sat cowering by the fire--and she sat waiting, with her writing-case on her lap.