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Chapter 22 - She Claims Me Again

THE moments passed; the silence between us continued. Miss Dunross made an attempt to rouse me.

"Have you decided to go back to Scotland with your friends at Lerwick?" she asked.

"It is no easy matter," I replied, "to decide on leaving my friends in this house."

Her head drooped lower on her bosom; her voice sunk as she answered me.

"Think of your mother," she said. "The first duty you owe is your duty to her. Your long absence is a heavy trial to her--your mother is suffering."

"Suffering?" I repeated. "Her letters say nothing--"

"You forget that you have allowed me to read her letters," Miss Dunross interposed. "I see the unwritten and unconscious confession of anxiety in every line that she writes to you. You know, as well as I do, that there is cause for her anxiety. Make her happy by telling her that you sail for home with your friends. Make her happier still by telling her that you grieve no more over the loss of Mrs. Van Brandt. May I write it, in your name and in those words?"

I felt the strangest reluctance to permit her to write in those terms, or in any terms, of Mrs. Van Brandt. The unhappy love-story of my manhood had never been a forbidden subject between us on former occasions. Why did I feel as if it had become a forbidden subject now? Why did I evade giving her a direct reply?

"We have plenty of time before us," I said. "I want to speak to you about yourself."

She lifted her hand in the obscurity that surrounded her, as if to protest against the topic to which I had returned. I persisted, nevertheless, in returning to it.

"If I must go back," I went on, "I may venture to say to you at parting what I have not said yet. I cannot, and will not, believe that you are an incurable invalid. My education, as I have told you, has been the education of a medical man. I am well acquainted with some of the greatest living physicians, in Edinburgh as well as in London. Will you allow me to describe your malady (as I understand it) to men who are accustomed to treat cases of intricate nervous disorder? And will you let me write and tell you the result?"

I waited for her reply. Neither by word nor sign did she encourage the idea of any future communication with her. I ventured to suggest another motive which might induce her to receive a letter from me.

"In any case, I may find it necessary to write to you," I went on. "You firmly believe that I and my little Mary are destined to meet again. If your anticipations are realized, you will expect me to tell you of it, surely?"

Once more I waited. She spoke--but it was not to reply: it was only to change the subject.

"The time is passing," was all she said. "We have not begun your letter to your mother yet."

It would have been cruel to contend with her any longer. Her voice warned me that she was suffering. The faint gleam of light through the parted curtains was fading fast. It was time, indeed, to write the letter. I could find other opportunities of speaking to her before I left the house.

"I am ready," I answered. "Let us begin."

The first sentence was easily dictated to my patient secretary. I informed my mother that my sprained wrist was nearly restored to use, and that nothing prevented my leaving Shetland when the lighthouse commissioner was ready to return. This was all that it was necessary to say on the subject of my health; the disaster of my re-opened wound having been, for obvious reasons, concealed from my mother's knowledge. Miss Dunross silently wrote the opening lines of the letter, and waited for the words that were to follow.

In my next sentence, I announced the date at which the vessel was to sail on the return voyage; and I mentioned the period at which my mother might expect to see me, weather permitting. Those words, also, Miss Dunross wrote--and waited again. I set myself to consider what I should say next. To my surprise and alarm, I found it impossible to fix my mind on the subject. My thoughts wandered away, in the strangest manner, from my letter to Mrs. Van Brandt. I was ashamed of myself; I was angry with myself--resolved, no matter what I said, that I would positively finish the letter. No! try as I might, the utmost effort of my will availed me nothing. Mrs. Van Brandt's words at our last interview were murmuring in my ears--not a word of my own would come to me!

Miss Dunross laid down her pen, and slowly turned her head to look at me.

"Surely you have something more to add to your letter?" she said.

"Certainly," I answered. "I don't know what is the matter with me. The effort of dictating seems to be beyond my power this evening."

"Can I help you?" she asked.

I gladly accepted the suggestion. "There are many things," I said, "which my mother would be glad to hear, if I were not too stupid to think of them. I am sure I may trust your sympathy to think of them for me."

That rash answer offered Miss Dunross the opportunity of returning to the subject of Mrs. Van Brandt. She seized the opportunity with a woman's persistent resolution when she has her end in view, and is determined to reach it at all hazards.

"You have not told your mother yet," she said, "that your infatuation for Mrs. Van Brandt is at an end. Will you put it in your own words? Or shall I write it for you, imitating your language as well as I can?"

In the state of my mind at that moment, her perseverance conquered me. I thought to myself indolently, "If I say No, she will only return to the subject again, and she will end (after all I owe to her kindness) in making me say Yes." Before I could answer her she had realized my anticipations. She returned to the subject; and she made me say Yes.

"What does your silence mean?" she said. "Do you ask me to help you, and do you refuse to accept the first suggestion I offer?"

"Take up your pen," I rejoined. "It shall be as you wish."

"Will you dictate the words?"

"I will try."

I tried; and this time I succeeded. With the image of Mrs. Van Brandt vividly present to my mind, I arranged the first words of the sentence which was to tell my mother that my "infatuation" was at an end!

"You will be glad to hear," I began, "that time and change are doing their good work."

Miss Dunross wrote the words, and paused in anticipation of the next sentence. The light faded and faded; the room grew darker and darker. I went on.

"I hope I shall cause you no more anxiety, my dear mother, on the subject of Mrs. Van Brandt."

In the deep silence I could hear the pen of my secretary traveling steadily over the paper while it wrote those words.

"Have you written?" I asked, as the sound of the pen ceased.

"I have written," she answered, in her customary quiet tones.

I went on again with my letter.

"The days pass now, and I seldom or never think of her; I hope I am resigned at last to the loss of Mrs. Van Brandt."

As I reached the end of the sentence, I heard a faint cry from Miss Dunross. Looking instantly toward her, I could just see, in the deepening darkness, that her head had fallen on the back of the chair. My first impulse was, of course, to rise and go to her. I had barely got to my feet, when some indescribable dread paralyzed me on the instant. Supporting myself against the chimney-piece, I stood perfectly incapable of advancing a step. The effort to speak was the one effort that I could make.

"Are you ill?" I asked.

She was hardly able to answer me; speaking in a whisper, without raising her head.

"I am frightened," she said.

"What has frightened you?"

I heard her shudder in the darkness. Instead of answering me, she whispered to herself: "What am I to say to him?"

"Tell me what has frightened you?" I repeated. "You know you may trust me with the truth."

She rallied her sinking strength. She answered in these strange words:

"Something has come between me and the letter that I am writing for you."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can you see it?"

"No."

"Can you feel it?"

"Yes!"

"What is it like?"

"Like a breath of cold air between me and the letter."

"Has the window come open?"

"The window is close shut."

"And the door?"

"The door is shut also--as well as I can see. Make sure of it for yourself. Where are you? What are you doing?"

I was looking toward the window. As she spoke her last words, I was conscious of a change in that part of the room.

In the gap between the parted curtains there was a new light shining; not the dim gray twilight of Nature, but a pure and starry radiance, a pale, unearthly light. While I watched it, the starry radiance quivered as if some breath of air had stirred it. When it was still again, there dawned on me through the unearthly luster the figure of a woman. By fine and slow gradations, it became more and more distinct. I knew the noble figure; I knew the sad and tender smile. For the second time I stood in the presence of the apparition of Mrs. Van Brandt.

She was robed, not as I had last seen her, but in the dress which she had worn on the memorable evening when we met on the bridge--in the dress in which she had first appeared to me, by the waterfall in Scotland. The starry light shone round her like a halo. She looked at me with sorrowful and pleading eyes, as she had looked when I saw the apparition of her in the summer-house. She lifted her hand--not beckoning me to approach her, as before, but gently signing to me to remain where I stood.

I waited--feeling awe, but no fear. My heart was all hers as I looked at her.

She moved; gliding from the window to the chair in which Miss Dunross sat; winding her way slowly round it, until she stood at the back. By the light of the pale halo that encircled the ghostly Presence, and moved with it, I could see the dark figure of the living woman seated immovable in the chair. The writing-case was on her lap, with the letter and the pen lying on it. Her arms hung helpless at her sides; her veiled head was now bent forward. She looked as if she had been struck to stone in the act of trying to rise from her seat.

A moment passed--and I saw the ghostly Presence stoop over the living woman. It lifted the writing-case from her lap. It rested the writing-case on her shoulder. Its white fingers took the pen and wrote on the unfinished letter. It put the writing-case back on the lap of the living woman. Still standing behind the chair, it turned toward me. It looked at me once more. And now it beckoned--beckoned to me to approach.

Moving without conscious will of my own, as I had moved when I first saw her in the summer-house--drawn nearer and nearer by an irresistible power--I approached and stopped within a few paces of her. She advanced and laid her hand on my bosom. Again I felt those strangely mingled sensations of rapture and awe, which had once before filled me when I was conscious, spiritually, of her touch. Again she spoke, in the low, melodious tones which I recalled so well. Again she said the words: "Remember me. Come to me." Her hand dropped from my bosom. The pale light in which she stood quivered, sunk, vanished. I saw the twilight glimmering between the curtains--and I saw no more. She had spoken. She had gone.

I was near Miss Dunross--near enough, when I put out my hand, to touch her.

She started and shuddered, like a woman suddenly awakened from a dreadful dream.

"Speak to me!" she whispered. "Let me know that it is you who touched me."

I spoke a few composing words before I questioned her.

"Have you seen anything in the room?"

She answered. "I have been filled with a deadly fear. I have seen nothing but the writing-case lifted from my lap."

"Did you see the hand that lifted it?"

"No."

"Did you see a starry light, and a figure standing in it?"

"No."

"Did you see the writing-case after it was lifted from your lap?"

"I saw it resting on my shoulder."

"Did you see writing on the letter, which was not your writing?"

"I saw a darker shadow on the paper than the shadow in which I am sitting."

"Did it move?"

"It moved across the paper."

"As a pen moves in writing?"

"Yes. As a pen moves in writing."

"May I take the letter?"

She handed it to me.

"May I light a candle?"

She drew her veil more closely over her face, and bowed in silence.

I lighted the candle on the mantel-piece, and looked for the writing.

There, on the blank space in the letter, as I had seen it before on the blank space in the sketch-book--there were the written words which the ghostly Presence had left behind it; arranged once more in two lines, as I copy them here:

At the month's end, In the shadow of Saint Paul's.