The Two Destinies

Wilkie Collins

Chapter 24 - In The Shadow Of St. Paul's

In ten days I was at home again--and my mother's arms were round me.

I had left her for my sea-voyage very unwillingly--seeing that she was in delicate health. On my return, I was grieved to observe a change for the worse, for which her letters had not prepared me. Consulting our medical friend, Mr. MacGlue, I found that he, too, had noticed my mother's failing health, but that he attributed it to an easily removable cause--to the climate of Scotland. My mother's childhood and early life had been passed on the southern shores of England. The change to the raw, keen air of the North had been a trying change to a person at her age. In Mr. MacGlue's opinion, the wise course to take would be to return to the South before the autumn was further advanced, and to make our arrangements for passing the coming winter at Penzance or Torquay.

Resolved as I was to keep the mysterious appointment which summoned me to London at the month's end, Mr. MacGlue's suggestion met with no opposition on my part. It had, to my mind, the great merit of obviating the necessity of a second separation from my mother--assuming that she approved of the doctor's advice. I put the question to her the same day. To my infinite relief, she was not only ready, but eager to take the journey to the South. The season had been unusually wet, even for Scotland; and my mother reluctantly confessed that she "did feel a certain longing" for the mild air and genial sunshine of the Devonshire coast.

We arranged to travel in our own comfortable carriage by post--resting, of course, at inns on the road at night. In the days before railways it was no easy matter for an invalid to travel from Perthshire to London--even with a light carriage and four horses. Calculating our rate of progress from the date of our departure, I found that we had just time, and no more, to reach London on the last day of the month.

I shall say nothing of the secret anxieties which weighed on my mind, under these circumstances. Happily for me, on every account, my mother's strength held out. The easy and (as we then thought) the rapid rate of traveling had its invigorating effect on her nerves. She slept better when we rested for the night than she had slept at home. After twice being delayed on the road, we arrived in London at three o'clock on the afternoon of the last day of the month. Had I reached my destination in time?

As I interpreted the writing of the apparition, I had still some hours at my disposal. The phrase, "at the month's end," meant, as I understood it, at the last hour of the last day in the month. If I took up my position "under the shadow of Saint Paul's," say, at ten that night, I should arrive at the place of meeting with two hours to spare, before the last stroke of the clock marked the beginning of the new month.

At half-past nine, I left my mother to rest after her long journey, and privately quit the house. Before ten, I was at my post. The night was fine and clear; and the huge shadow of the cathedral marked distinctly the limits within which I had been bid to wait, on the watch for events.

The great clock of Saint Paul's struck ten--and nothing happened.

The next hour passed very slowly. I walked up and down; at one time absorbed in my own thoughts; at another, engaged in watching the gradual diminution in the number of foot passengers who passed me as the night advanced. The City (as it is called) is the most populous part of London in the daytime; but at night, when it ceases to be the center of commerce, its busy population melts away, and the empty streets assume the appearance of a remote and deserted quarter of the metropolis. As the half hour after ten struck--then the quarter to eleven--then the hour--the pavement steadily became more and more deserted. I could count the foot passengers now by twos and threes; and I could see the places of public refreshment within my view beginning already to close for the night.

I looked at the clock; it pointed to ten minutes past eleven. At that hour, could I hope to meet Mrs. Van Brandt alone in the public street?

The more I thought of it, the less likely such an event seemed to be. The more reasonable probability was that I might meet her once more, accompanied by some friend--perhaps under the escort of Van Brandt himself. I wondered whether I should preserve my self-control, in the presence of that man, for the second time.

While my thoughts were still pursuing this direction, my attention was recalled to passing events by a sad little voice, putting a strange little question, close at my side.

"If you please, sir, do you know where I can find a chemist's shop open at this time of night?"

I looked round, and discovered a poorly clad little boy, with a basket over his arm, and a morsel of paper in his hand.

"The chemists' shops are all shut," I said. "If you want any medicine, you must ring the night-bell."

"I dursn't do it, sir," replied the small stranger. "I am such a little boy, I'm afraid of their beating me if I ring them up out of their beds, without somebody to speak for me."

The little creature looked at me under the street lamp with such a forlorn experience of being beaten for trifling offenses in his face, that it was impossible to resist the impulse to help him.

"Is it a serious case of illness?" I asked.

"I don't know, sir."

"Have you got a doctor's prescription?"

He held out his morsel of paper.

"I have got this," he said.

I took the paper from him, and looked at it.

It was an ordinary prescription for a tonic mixture. I looked first at the doctor's signature; it was the name of a perfectly obscure person in the profession. Below it was written the name of the patient for whom the medicine had been prescribed. I started as I read it. The name was "Mrs. Brand."

The idea instantly struck me that this (so far as sound went, at any rate) was the English equivalent of Van Brandt.

"Do you know the lady who sent you for the medicine?" I asked.

" Oh yes, sir! She lodges with mother--and she owes for rent. I have done everything she told me, except getting the physic. I've pawned her ring, and I've bought the bread and butter and eggs, and I've taken care of the change. Mother looks to the change for her rent. It isn't my fault, sir, that I've lost myself. I am but ten years old--and all the chemists' shops are shut up!"

Here my little friend's sense of his unmerited misfortunes overpowered him, and he began to cry.

"Don't cry, my man!" I said; "I'll help you. Tell me something more about the lady first. Is she alone?"

"She's got her little girl with her, sir."

My heart quickened its beat. The boy's answer reminded me of that other little girl whom my mother had once seen.

"Is the lady's husband with her?" I asked next.

"No, sir--not now. He was with her; but he went away--and he hasn't come back yet."

I put a last conclusive question.

"Is her husband an Englishman?" I inquired.

"Mother says he's a foreigner," the boy answered.

I turned away to hide my agitation. Even the child might have noticed it!

Passing under the name of "Mrs. Brand"--poor, so poor that she was obliged to pawn her ring--left, by a man who was a foreigner, alone with her little girl--was I on the trace of her at that moment? Was this lost child destined to be the innocent means of leading me back to the woman I loved, in her direst need of sympathy and help? The more I thought of it, the more strongly the idea of returning with the boy to the house in which his mother's lodger lived fastened itself on my mind. The clock struck the quarter past eleven. If my anticipations ended in misleading me, I had still three-quarters of an hour to spare before the month reached its end.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

The boy mentioned a street, the name of which I then heard for the first time. All he could say, when I asked for further particulars, was that he lived close by the river--in which direction, he was too confused and too frightened to be able to tell me.

While we were still trying to understand each other, a cab passed slowly at some little distance. I hailed the man, and mentioned the name of the street to him. He knew it perfectly well. The street was rather more than a mile away from us, in an easterly direction. He undertook to drive me there and to bring me back again to Saint Paul's (if necessary), in less than twenty minutes. I opened the door of the cab, and told my little friend to get in. The boy hesitated.

"Are we going to the chemist's, if you please, sir?" he asked.

"No. You are going home first, with me."

The boy began to cry again.

"Mother will beat me, sir, if I go back without the medicine."

"I will take care that your mother doesn't beat you. I am a doctor myself; and I want to see the lady before we get the medicine."

The announcement of my profession appeared to inspire the boy with a certain confidence. But he still showed no disposition to accompany me to his mother's house.

"Do you mean to charge the lady anything?" he asked. "The money I've got on the ring isn't much. Mother won't like having it taken out of her rent."

"I won't charge the lady a farthing," I answered.

The boy instantly got into the cab. "All right," he said, "as long as mother gets her money."

Alas for the poor! The child's education in the sordid anxieties of life was completed already at ten years old!

We drove away.