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[Wilkie Collins](#)

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Chapter 37 - The Two Destinies

I MADE no movement to leave the room; I let no sign of sorrow escape me. At last, my heart was hardened against the woman who had so obstinately rejected me. I stood looking down at her with a merciless anger, the bare remembrance of which fills me at this day with a horror of myself. There is but one excuse for me. The shock of that last overthrow of the one hope that held me to life was more than my reason could endure. On that dreadful night (whatever I may have been at other times), I myself believe it, I was a maddened man.

I was the first to break the silence.

"Get up," I said coldly.

She lifted her face from the floor, and looked at me as if she doubted whether she had heard aright.

"Put on your hat and cloak," I resumed. "I must ask you to go back with me as far as the boat."

She rose slowly. Her eyes rested on my face with a dull, bewildered look.

"Why am I to go with you to the boat?" she asked.

The child heard her. The child ran up to us with her little hat in one hand, and the key of the cabin in the other.

"I'm ready," she said. "I will open the cabin door."

Her mother signed to her to go back to the bed-chamber. She went back as far as the door which led into the courtyard, and waited there, listening. I turned to Mrs. Van Brandt with immovable composure, and answered the question which she had addressed to me.

"You are left," I said, "without the means of getting away from this place. In two hours more the tide will be in my favor, and I shall sail at once on the return voyage. We part, this time, never to meet again. Before I go I am resolved to leave you properly provided for. My money is in my traveling-bag in the cabin. For that reason, I am obliged to ask you to go with me as far as the boat."

"I thank you gratefully for your kindness," she said. "I don't stand in such serious need of help as you suppose."

"It is useless to attempt to deceive me," I proceeded. "I have spoken with the head partner of the house of Van Brandt at Amsterdam, and I know exactly what your position is. Your pride must bend low enough to take from my hands the means of subsistence for yourself and your child. If I had died in England--"

I stopped. The unexpressed idea in my mind was to tell her that she would inherit a legacy under my will, and that she might quite as becomingly take money from me in my life-time as take it from my executors after my death. In forming this thought into words, the associations which it called naturally into being revived in me the memory of my contemplated suicide in the Greenwater lake. Mingling with the remembrance thus aroused, there rose in me unbidden, a temptation so overpoweringly vile, and yet so irresistible in the state of my mind at the moment, that it shook me to the soul. "You have nothing to live for, now that she has refused to be yours," the fiend in me whispered. "Take your leap into the next world, and make the woman whom you love take it with you!" While I was still looking at her, while my last words to her faltered on my lips, the horrible facilities for the perpetration of the double crime revealed themselves enticingly to my view. My boat was moored in the one part of the decaying harbor in which deep water still lay at the foot of the quay. I had only to induce her to follow me when I stepped on the deck, to seize her in my arms, and to jump overboard with her before she could utter a cry for help. My drowsy sailors, as I knew by experience, were hard to wake, and slow to move even when they were roused at last. We should both be drowned before the youngest and the quickest of them could get up from his bed and make his way to the deck. Yes! We should both be struck together out of the ranks of the living at one and the same moment. And why not? She who had again and again refused to be my wife--did she deserve that I should leave her free to go back, perhaps, for the second time to Van Brandt? On the evening when I had saved her from the waters of the Scotch river, I had made myself master of her fate. She had tried to destroy herself by drowning; she should drown now, in the arms of the man who had once thrown himself between her and death!

Self-abandoned to such atrocious reasoning as this, I stood face to face with her, and returned deliberately to my unfinished sentence.

"If I had died in England, you would have been provided for by my will. What you would have taken from me then, you may take from me now. Come to the boat."

A change passed over her face as I spoke; a vague doubt of me began to show itself in her eyes. She drew back a little, without making any reply.

"Come to the boat," I reiterated.

"It is too late." With that answer, she looked across the room at the child, still waiting by the door. "Come, Elfie," she said, calling the little creature by one of her favorite nicknames. "Come to bed."

I too looked at Elfie. Might she not, I asked myself, be made the innocent means of forcing her mother to leave the house? Trusting to the child's fearless character, and her eagerness to see the boat, I suddenly opened the door. As I had anticipated, she instantly ran out. The second door, leading into the square, I had not closed when I entered the courtyard. In another moment Elfie was out in the square, triumphing in her freedom. The shrill little voice broke the death-like stillness of the place and hour, calling to me again and again to take her to the boat.

I turned to Mrs. Van Brandt. The stratagem had succeeded. Elfie's mother could hardly refuse to follow when Elfie led the way.

"Will you go with us?" I asked. "Or must I send the money back by the child?"

Her eyes rested on me for a moment with a deepening expression of distrust, then looked away again. She began to turn pale. "You are not like yourself to-night," she said. Without a word more, she took her hat and cloak and went out before me into the square. I followed her, closing the doors behind me. She made an attempt to induce the child to approach her. "Come, darling," she said, enticingly--"come and take my hand."

But Elfie was not to be caught: she took to her heels, and answered from a safe distance. "No," said the child; "you will take me back and put me to bed." She retreated a little further, and held up the key: "I shall go first," she cried, "and open the door."

She trotted off a few steps in the direction of the harbor, and waited for what was to happen next. Her mother suddenly turned, and looked close at me under the light of the stars.

"Are the sailors on board the boat?" she asked.

The question startled me. Had she any suspicion of my purpose? Had my face warned her of lurking danger if she went to the boat? It was impossible. The more likely motive for her inquiry was to find a new excuse for not accompanying me to the harbor. If I told her that the men were on board, she might answer, "Why not employ one of your sailors to bring the money to me at the house?" I took care to anticipate the suggestion in making my reply.

"They may be honest men," I said, watching her carefully; "but I don't know them well enough to trust them with money."

To my surprise, she watched me just as carefully on her side, and deliberately repeated her question:

"Are the sailors on board the boat?"

I informed her that the captain and crew slept in the boat, and paused to see what would follow. My reply seemed to rouse her resolution. After a moment's consideration, she turned toward the place at which the child was waiting for us. "Let us go, as you insist on it," she said, quietly. I made no further remark. Side by side, in silence we followed Elfie on our way to the boat.

Not a human creature passed us in the streets; not a light glimmered on us from the grim black houses. Twice the child stopped, and (still keeping slyly out of her mother's reach) ran back to me, wondering at my silence. "Why don't you speak?" she asked. "Have you and mamma quarreled?"

I was incapable of answering her--I could think of nothing but my contemplated crime. Neither fear nor remorse troubled me. Every better instinct, every nobler feeling that I had once possessed, seemed to be dead and gone. Not even a thought of the child's future troubled my mind. I had no power of looking on further than the fatal leap from the boat: beyond that there was an utter blank. For the time being--I can only repeat it, my moral sense was obscured, my mental faculties were thrown completely off their balance. The animal part of me lived and moved as usual; the viler animal instincts in me plotted and planned, and that was all. Nobody, looking at me, would have seen anything but a dull quietude in my face, an immovable composure in my manner. And yet no madman was fitter for restraint, or less responsible morally for his own actions, than I was at that moment.

The night air blew more freshly on our faces. Still led by the child, we had passed through the last street--we were out on the empty open space which was the landward boundary of the harbor. In a minute more we stood on the quay, within a step of the gunwale of the boat. I noticed a change in the appearance of the harbor since I had seen it last. Some fishing-boats had come in during my absence. They moored, some immediately astern and some immediately ahead of my own vessel. I looked anxiously to see if any of the fishermen were on board and stirring. Not a living being appeared anywhere. The men were on shore with their wives and their families.

Elfie held out her arms to be lifted on board my boat. Mrs. Van Brandt stepped between us as I stooped to take her up.

"We will wait here," she said, "while you go into the cabin and get the money."

Those words placed it beyond all doubt that she had her suspicions of me--suspicions, probably, which led her to fear not for her life, but for her freedom. She might dread being kept a prisoner in the boat, and being carried away by me against her will. More than this she could not thus far possibly apprehend. The child saved me the trouble of making any remonstrance. She was determined to go with me. "I must see the cabin," she cried, holding up the key. "I must open the door myself."

She twisted herself out of her mother's hands, and ran round to the other side of me. I lifted her over the gunwale of the boat in an instant. Before I could turn round, her mother had followed her, and was standing on the deck.

The cabin door, in the position which she now occupied, was on her left hand. The child was close behind her. I was on her right. Before us was the open deck, and the low gunwale of the boat overlooking the deep water. In a moment we might step across; in a moment we might take the fatal plunge. The bare thought of it brought the mad wickedness in me to its climax. I became suddenly incapable of restraining myself. I threw my arm round her waist with a loud laugh. "Come," I said, trying to drag her across the deck--"come and look at the water."

She released herself by a sudden effort of strength that astonished me. With a faint cry of horror, she turned to take the child by the hand and get back to the quay. I placed myself between her and the sides of the boat, and cut off her retreat in that way. Still laughing, I asked her what she was frightened about. She drew back, and snatched the key of the cabin door out of the child's hand. The cabin was the one place of refuge now left, to which she could escape from the deck of the boat. In the terror of the moment, she never hesitated. She unlocked the door, and hurried down the two or three steps which led into the cabin, taking the child with her. I followed them, conscious that I had betrayed myself, yet still obstinately, stupidly, madly bent on carrying out my purpose. "I have only to behave quietly," I thought to myself, "and I shall persuade her to go on deck again."

My lamp was burning as I had left it; my traveling-bag was on the table. Still holding the child, she stood, pale as death, waiting for me. Elfie's wondering eyes rested inquiringly on my face as I approached them. She looked half inclined to cry; the suddenness of the mother's action had frightened the child. I did my best to compose Elfie before I spoke to her mother. I pointed out the different objects which were likely to interest her in the cabin. "Go and look at them," I said, "go and amuse yourself."

The child still hesitated. "Are you angry with me?" she asked.

"No, no!"

"Are you angry with mamma?"

"Certainly not." I turned to Mrs. Van Brandt. "Tell Elfie if I am angry with you," I said.

She was perfectly aware, in her critical position, of the necessity of humoring me. Between us, we succeeded in composing the child. She turned away to examine, in high

delight, the new and strange objects crowded her. Meanwhile her mother and I stood together, looking at each other by the light of the lamp, with an assumed composure which hid our true faces like a mask. In that horrible situation, the grotesque and the terrible, always together in this strange life of ours, came together now. On either side of us, the one sound that broke the sinister and threatening silence was the lumpish snoring of the sleeping captain and crew.

She was the first to speak.

"If you wish to give me the money," she said, trying to propitiate me in that way, "I am ready to take it now."

I unlocked my traveling-bag. As I looked into it for the leather case which held my money, my overpowering desire to get her on deck again, my mad impatience to commit the fatal act, became too strong to be controlled.

"We shall be cooler on deck," I said. "Let us take the bag up there."

She showed wonderful courage. I could almost see the cry for help rising to her lips. She repressed it; she had still presence of mind enough to foresee what might happen before she could rouse the sleeping men.

"We have a light here to count the money by," she answered. "I don't feel at all too warm in the cabin. Let us stay here a little longer. See how Elfie is amusing herself!"

Her eyes rested on me as she spoke. Something in the expression of them quieted me for the time. I was able to pause and think. I might take her on deck by force before the men could interfere. But her cries would rouse them; they would hear the splash in the water, and they might be quick enough to rescue us. It would be wiser, perhaps, to wait a little and trust to my cunning to delude her into leaving the cabin of her own accord. I put the bag back on the table, and began to search for the leather money-case. My hands were strangely clumsy and helpless. I could only find the case after scattering half the contents of the bag on the table. The child was near me at the time, and noticed what I was doing.

"Oh, how awkward you are!" she burst out, in her frankly fearless way. "Let me put your bag tidy. Do, please!"

I granted the request impatiently. Elfie's restless desire to be always doing something, instead of amusing me, as usual, irritated me now. The interest that I had once felt in the charming little creature was all gone. An innocent love was a feeling that was stifled in the poisoned atmosphere of my mind that night.

The money I had with me was mostly composed of notes of the Bank of England. Carefully keeping up appearances, I set aside the sum that would probably be required to take a traveler back to London; and I put all that remained into the hands of Mrs. Van Brandt. Could she suspect me of a design on her life now?

"That will do for the present," I said. "I can communicate with you in the future through Messrs. Van Brandt, of Amsterdam."

She took the money mechanically. Her hand trembled; her eyes met mine with a look of piteous entreaty. She tried to revive my old tenderness for her; she made a last appeal to my forbearance and consideration.

"We may part friends," she said, in low, trembling tones. "And as friends we may meet again, when time has taught you to think forgivingly of what has passed between us, to-night."

She offered me her hand. I looked at her without taking it. I penetrated her motive in appealing to my old regard for her. Still suspecting me, she had tried her last chance of getting safely on shore.

"The less we say of the past, the better," I answered, with ironical politeness. "It is getting late. And you will agree with me that Elfie ought to be in her bed." I looked round at the child. "Be quick, Elfie," I said; "your mamma is going away." I opened the cabin door, and offered my arm to Mrs. Van Brandt. "This boat is my house for the time being," I resumed. "When ladies take leave of me after a visit, I escort them to the deck. Pray take my arm."

She started back. For the second time she was on the point of crying for help, and for the second time she kept that last desperate alternative in reserve.

"I haven't seen your cabin yet," she said, her eyes wild with fear, a forced smile on her lips, as she spoke. "There are several little things here that interest me. Give me another minute or two to look at them."

She turned away to get nearer to the child, under pretense of looking round the cabin. I stood on guard before the open door, watching her. She made a second pretense: she noisily overthrew a chair as if by accident, and then waited to discover whether her trick had succeeded in waking the men.

The heavy snoring went on; not a sound of a person moving was audible on either side of us.

"My men are heavy sleepers," I said, smiling significantly. "Don't be alarmed; you have not disturbed them. Nothing wakes these Dutch sailors when they are once safe in port."

She made no reply. My patience was exhausted. I left the door and advanced toward her. She retreated in speechless terror, passing behind the table to the other end of the cabin. I followed her until she had reached the extremity of the room and could get no further. She met the look I fixed on her; she shrunk into a corner, and called for help. In the deadly terror that possessed her, she lost the use of her voice. A low moaning, hardly louder than a whisper, was all that passed her lips. Already, in imagination, I stood with her on the gunwale, already I felt the cold contact of the water--when I was startled by a cry behind me. I turned round. The cry had come from Elfie. She had apparently just discovered some new object in the bag, and she was holding it up in admiration, high above her head. "Mamma! mamma!" the child cried, excitedly, "look at this pretty thing! Oh, do, do ask him if I may have it!"

Her mother ran to her, eager to seize the poorest excuse for getting away from me. I followed; I stretched out my hands to seize her. She suddenly turned round on me, and a woman transformed. A bright flush was on her face, an eager wonder sparkled in her eyes. Snatching Elfie's coveted object out of the child's hand, she held it up before me. I saw it under the lamp-light. It was my little forgotten keepsake--the Green Flag!

"How came you by this?" she asked, in breathless anticipation of my reply. Not the slightest trace was left in her face of the terror that had convulsed it barely a minute since! "How came you by this?" she repeated, seizing me by the arm and shaking me, in the ungovernable impatience that possessed her.

My head turned giddy, my heart beat furiously under the conflict of emotions that she had roused in me. My eyes were riveted on the green flag. The words that I wanted to speak were words that refused to come to me. I answered, mechanically: "I have had it since I was a boy."

She dropped her hold on me, and lifted her hands with a gesture of ecstatic gratitude. A lovely, angelic brightness flowed like light from heaven over her face. For one

moment she stood upright. The next she clasped me passionately to her bosom, and whispered in my ear: "I am Mary Dermody! I made it for You!"

The shock of discovery, following so closely on all that I had suffered before it, was too much for me. I sank, fainting, in her arms.

When I came to myself I was lying on my bed in the cabin. Elfie was playing with the green flag, and Mary was sitting by me with my hand in hers. One long look of love passed silently from her eyes to mine--from mine to hers. In that look the kindred spirits were united; The Two Destinies were fulfilled.

THE END OF THE STORY.

The Finale.

THE WIFE WRITES, AND CLOSES THE STORY.

THERE was a little introductory narrative prefixed to "The Two Destinies," which you may possibly have forgotten by this time.

The narrative was written by myself--a citizen of the United States, visiting England with his wife. It described a dinner-party at which we were present, given by Mr. and Mrs. Germaine, in celebration of their marriage; and it mentioned the circumstances under which we were intrusted with the story which has just come to an end in these pages. Having read the manuscript, Mr. and Mrs. Germaine left it to us to decide whether we should continue our friendly intercourse with them or not.

At 3 o'clock P.M. we closed the last leaf of the story. Five minutes later I sealed it up in its cover; my wife put her bonnet on, and there we were, bound straight for Mr. Germaine's house, when the servant brought a letter into the room, addressed to my wife.

She opened it, looked at the signature, and discovered that it was "Mary Germaine." Seeing this, we sat down side by side to read the letter before we did anything else.

On reflection, it strikes me that you may do well to read it, too. Mrs. Germaine is surely by this time a person in whom you feel some interest. And she is on that account, as I think, the fittest person to close the story. Here is her letter:

"DEAR MADAM (or may I say- 'dear friend?')--Be prepared, if you please, for a little surprise. When you read these lines we shall have left London for the Continent.

"After you went away last night, my husband decided on taking this journey. Seeing how keenly he felt the insult offered to me by the ladies whom we had asked to our table, I willingly prepared for our sudden departure. When Mr. Germaine is far away from his false friends, my experience of him tells me that he will recover his tranquillity. That is enough for me.

"My little daughter goes with us, of course. Early this morning I drove to the school in the suburbs at which she is being educated, and took her away with me. It is needless to say that she was delighted at the prospect of traveling. She shocked the schoolmistress by waving her hat over her head and crying 'Hooray,' like a boy. The good lady was very careful to inform me that my daughter could not possibly have learned to cry 'Hooray' in _her_ house.

"You have probably by this time read the narrative which I have committed to your care. I hardly dare ask how I stand in your estimation now. Is it possible that I might have seen you and your good husband if we had not left London so suddenly? As things are, I must now tell you in writing what I should infinitely have preferred saying to you with your friendly hand in mine.

"Your knowledge of the world has no doubt already attributed the absence of the ladies at our dinner-table to some report affecting my character. You are quite right. While I was taking Elfie away from her school, my husband called on one of his friends who dined with us (Mr. Waring), and insisted on an explanation. Mr. Waring referred him to the woman who is known to you by this time as Mr. Van Brandt's lawful wife. In her intervals of sobriety she possesses some musical talent; Mrs. Waring had met with her at a concert for a charity, and had been interested in the story of her wrongs, as she called them. My name was, of course, mentioned. I was described as a 'cast-off mistress' of Van Brandt, who had persuaded Mr. Germaine into disgracing himself by marrying her, and becoming the step-father of her child. Mrs. Waring thereupon communicated what she had heard to other ladies who were her friends. The result you saw for yourselves when you dined at our house.

"I inform you of what has happened without making any comment. Mr. Germaine's narrative has already told you that I foresaw the deplorable consequences which might follow our marriage, and that I over and over again (God knows at what cost of misery to myself) refused to be his wife. It was only when my poor little green flag had revealed us to each other that I lost all control over myself. The old time on the banks of the lake came back to me; my heart hungered for its darling of happier days; and I said Yes, when (as you may think) I ought to have still said No. Will you take poor old Dame Dermody's view of it, and believe that the kindred spirits, once reunited, could be parted no more? Or will you take my view, which is simpler still? I do love him so dearly, and he is so fond of me!

"In the meantime, our departure from England seems to be the wisest course that we can adopt. As long as this woman lives she will say again of me what she has said already, whenever she can find the opportunity. My child might hear the reports about her mother, and might be injured by them when she gets older. We propose to take up our abode, for a time at least, in the neighborhood of Naples. Here, or further away yet, we may hope to live without annoyance among a people whose social law is the law of mercy. Whatever may happen, we have always one last consolation to sustain us--we have love.

"You talked of traveling on the Continent when you dined with us. If you should wander our way, the English consul at Naples is a friend of my husband's, and he will have our address. I wonder whether we shall ever meet again? It does seem hard to charge the misfortunes of my life on me, as if they were my faults.

"Speaking of my misfortunes, I may say, before I close this letter, that the man to whom I owe them is never likely to cross my path again. The Van Brandts of Amsterdam have received certain information that he is now on his way to New Zealand. They are determined to prosecute him if he returns. He is little likely to give them the opportunity.

"The traveling-carriage is at the door: I must say good-by. My husband sends to you both his kindest regards and best wishes. His manuscript will be quite safe (when you leave London) if you send it to his bankers, at the address inclosed. Think of me sometimes--and think of me kindly. I appeal confidently to _your_ kindness, for I don't forget that you kissed me at parting. Your grateful friend (if you will let her be your friend),

"MARY GERMAINE."

We are rather impulsive people in the United States, and we decide on long journeys by sea or land without making the slightest fuss about it. My wife and I looked at each other when we had read Mrs. Germaine's letter.

"London is dull," I remarked, and waited to see what came of it.

My wife read my remark the right way directly.

"Suppose we try Naples?" she said.

That is all. Permit us to wish you good-by. We are off to Naples.

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